

# TAIAMOORA

CHANDRA K. CLARKE





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# TAIAMOORA

Chandra K. Clarke

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ISBN: 0-9733386-2-8

Published by Literati Library, 153 Harvey St., Chatham, ON, Canada, N7M 1M6

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## Table of Contents

PROLOGUE .....	3
CHAPTER ONE .....	19
CHAPTER TWO .....	41
CHAPTER THREE .....	63
CHAPTER FOUR.....	83
CHAPTER FIVE .....	105
CHAPTER SIX.....	115
CHAPTER SEVEN .....	133
CHAPTER EIGHT .....	151
CHAPTER NINE.....	171
CHAPTER TEN.....	192
CHAPTER ELEVEN.....	196
CHAPTER TWELVE.....	215
CHAPTER THIRTEEN.....	232
CHAPTER FOURTEEN .....	249
CHAPTER FIFTEEN .....	272
CHAPTER SIXTEEN.....	277
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN .....	296
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN.....	315
CHAPTER NINETEEN.....	320
CHAPTER TWENTY .....	340
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE.....	359
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO.....	377
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE .....	396
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR .....	408
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE .....	410
CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX.....	429
CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN .....	444
CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT .....	449
CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE.....	469
CHAPTER THIRTY.....	482
CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE .....	485
CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO .....	510
CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE .....	521
CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR.....	532
CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE .....	545

## **PROLOGUE**

It was well past true dawn when the bright sun of Taiamoora finally peered out from behind the towering Okama Mountains. As it edged upward, a thin shaft of light crept over the summit to tumble down the mountainside into the valley below. It grew larger and chased the shadows through the lush vegetation, following them to the edge of a small, primitive village nestled between the mountains and a dense forest that extended far into the west. All was quiet.

The sun rose higher and the light moved stealthily through the collection of small but tidy huts. It illuminated the neat footpaths that connected each hut to the next; it warmed the air and banished the dew on the sweet grass to vapour. The light spilled out past the village boundaries and started a gentle assault on the forest. The leaves of the trees seemed to rustle in welcome, greedily soaking in the sun. Darkness slid away over the horizon, gracefully.

Adara Cohili did not welcome the light when it came

through the cracks in the thatched roof and stole across her eyes. She sleepily mumbled a protest, rolled over and buried her face in the dried grass that made up her bed. She was still dozing when her brother poked his head past the partition that separated her sleeping area from the rest of the hut.

"Get up you lazy taka beast. Rise and shine." He came in and shook her roughly.

"Go away, Ekulic," Adara groaned.

"Come on, let's go." Ekulic yanked off the soft fur covers that Adara had curled about her. "You'll be late if you don't move and the Tasker will give you double chores again."

"I won't be late. You're just being miserable. Give me back my covers so I can have a few more minutes." Adara lunged for them, but Ekulic, who was older and taller than her 10 years, simply held the covers over his head. He waited there, smirking, until she sighed and gave him a rude push toward the partition. Whistling smugly, he tossed the pelts and left.

*Stupid brother*, she thought groggily, *I hope he's the one who gets double work today*. Adara staggered over to her wash bowl and knelt in front of it. She giggled at her reflection in the water. Her long, dark hair was tangled and it sat up in strange places. She rubbed her eyes and then began combing out her hair with her fingers.

Adara leaned closer to the water and peered at herself.

A streak of mud from last night's wrestling match with Ekulic darkened her chin, so she rubbed it vigorously, hoping her mother wouldn't make her wash her whole face. Satisfied, she grabbed her clothes and wrinkled her nose as she pulled the simple tunic and breeches over her small body - new *taka* hides smelled awful. She sighed and wished for the thousandth time that she had something different to wear. She took one last look at herself and then pulled aside the partition.

The aromas of a hot breakfast assailed her nose as she sat in the cooking area in the center of the hut. Her mother greeted her with a smile. "Good morning, daughter. Sleep well?"

"Not as well as I could have," she lied. She had slept like a log, but she couldn't resist a chance to complain. "Mattresses or anti-gravs would be good."

"Don't be silly," Sivlee fixed her with a stern glare. "How often have I told you that we can't bring modern conveniences down from the Base? Nothing like that at all, for any reason." Sivlee handed her a clay bowl of steaming broth. "Don't let me hear anything else on this subject ever again - what would happen if the villagers had heard you?" She turned back to the breakfast pot.

Adara had expected that response. She knew her parents would never give in, because modern conveniences would jeopardize their position on Taiamoora. She sighed loudly and decided to sulk.

Sivlee and her husband, Drevek, were doing research on cultural development. Taiamoorans were primitive humanoids and Adara's parents, along with twelve other researchers at the Exosciences Institute, had eagerly volunteered to live among the natives for a first hand account of their society. It was to be the first project of its kind and the whole family had entered an intensive cultural immersion program.

*Lucky me*, Adara thought.

Ekulic, who had been fourteen when they transferred from Interstellar Base 1275, was far more enthusiastic about the move than his sister. But then he'd also seen some native girls and was eager to make their acquaintance.

Adara liked the people on Taiamoora well enough, but still preferred the comforts of a space station - soft beds, roboservs and holoshows every other night. *The clothes fit better too*, she thought irritably, tugging at a tight spot in her tunic. *And they never, ever smelled.*

Ekulic came through the hut doorway and tossed a pebble into her soup.

"Hey!" she yelled, jumping to avoid the hot splash. Angrily, she fished the stone out of the broth and pulled back her arm for a throw. Then she saw her mother's expression and it was enough to make her drop the stone on the floor.

Ekulic missed his mother's glare. He was still laughing

when she came up behind him and smacked him with her stone ladle. "Ow!" he yelped.

Adara tried to smother her giggles.

"What's so funny?" Drevek came into the hut and frowned at his son, who scowled and rubbed the back of his head.

"Mother was just testing her new spoon," Adara snickered. She finished her soup and took over serving so Sivlee could eat.

Drevek grinned. "Then I think I'll behave today." He gave his wife a wink as she sat next to him. They began to talk quietly. Ekulic took the opportunity to stick out his tongue. She ignored him and started work on their noon meal.

Cutting the meat was hard work. She frowned at the sharp stone knife she was wielding and wished that Taiamooran civilization would hurry up. She wouldn't mind her grass bed so much, if only things had advanced enough for metal tools. She hacked away at the meat, trying to cut it into small pieces for stew.

". . . when we could expect it to arrive?" Sivlee said. Adara looked up.

Drevek saw the movement and grinned again. "Late tonight," he replied and winked again. "I thought you said she wasn't listening?" Ekulic, who had been staring out the door and sulking, looked up at the sudden shift in conversation.



"What? What are you guys talking about?" Adara asked. She forgot the knife and meat in her excitement. "What's arriving late tonight?"

Sivlee tried to look serious, but failed miserably. "Oh, nothing you'd be interested in, dear. There's a trader headed this way with a load of cured hides, that's all."

"No there isn't, you can't fool me!" Adara raced over and sat on the floor between her parents. Throwing an arm around each of them, she said, "Come on, you can tell me! I promise I won't tell anyone about it. I'll even go to the Tasker this morning without complaining!"

"Huh. Don't make promises you can't keep," Drevek said dryly. He looked over Adara's head at his wife. "Should we tell her?"

Sivlee broke out laughing at her daughter's pained expression. "We'd better - she looks like she's going to cry! Honey, do you remember what your score was on your last science test?"

Adara looked puzzled for a moment. The move from the base had not meant total isolation. They maintained contact with family and friends by using a transceiver hidden in a chamber below their hut. The Institute kept them current and sent educational material so that Adara and Ekulic would not be behind their peers when they eventually returned home. It had to be used carefully, to avoid detection.

"I think I only missed two questions," Adara replied

after some thought.

"Are you still interested in those crystal experiments I was doing? Remember the ones we did in the Okama-Alpha region?"

Adara nodded, remembering. Geology had always fascinated her mother and she had found some peculiar crystals on a trek up the mountainside three weeks ago. Her mother's enthusiasm had been infectious and Adara had gone searching for samples of her own.

"Well, how would you like to follow up on that? By yourself? With some of Interstellar's best equipment?" Sivlee's eyes twinkled as she looked expectantly at her daughter.

Adara's eyebrows creased suddenly. "You're sending me back to the Base? All alone?" As much as she complained about the conditions on Taiamoora, she had hoped to go skyward *with* her family, not by herself. She loved them too much - even Ekulic - to want to leave them.

"No, no," Drevek frowned. "The President was pleased with your test performance. Very pleased in fact. Your results, combined with a great deal of badgering from your mother," he paused to look admiringly at Sivlee, "got the academic bureaucrats moving. The Institute President is sending down two lab stations. One for your mother and one especially for you."

Adara grinned from ear to ear and looked back at her

mother, who looked back with pride. Ekulic slouched and attempted a wounded look.

Although her eyes were on her daughter, Sivlee did not miss her son's movement. "Your brother, whenever he gets around to acting a little more mature," she said, "will start his medical training. They're sending down a biocorder field kit and a bunch of assignments." Ekulic had the good grace to look momentarily ashamed and then cheered up.

Adara wasn't listening anymore. "I didn't even know you knew the Institute President!" She grew more excited as understanding dawned. "That means . . . that means that the test wasn't just a test, it was an exam! I scored that well? They liked it? I'm getting a whole lab to myself? When do we get it? What do we do to hide this stuff from the natives? When do I . . ."

"Whoa, slow down there!" Sivlee laughed. "Yes, it was an exam, yes, you scored that well and yes silly, they liked it. Your brother's stuff is coming because he did so well on his humanoid physiology and genetics courses." Although Adara didn't think it was possible, Sivlee's eyes shone even more. "Congratulations to both of you. You make your father and me proud. However, you still have your assigned roles with the villagers and if you don't hurry up and get out of here, you'll be late to the Tasker!"

Ekulic and Adara raced out together, almost running over each other in their haste. *I love this place*, Adara

thought triumphantly. Happiness surged through her as she and her brother half-ran, half-wrestled their way to the Tasker's hut. *I love labs! I love Mom and Dad! I even love chores and Ekulic . . .*

\*

Later that night, the happy but exhausted children slid down into the small transceiver chamber underneath the hut and waited with their parents for the transmission that would tell them where to pick up their new things. As they sat on the dirt floor waiting, they talked excitedly of possibilities and theories and what they wanted to do.

The night wore on into early morning and they lapsed into companionable but expectant silence, broken only by sighs of impatience. Time dragged and still no word from Interstellar 1275.

"This is ridiculous. Let's give them a call," Sivlee finally said, "Knowing the Institute, they've mislaid the transport order and have forgotten all about this."

Drevek stood and stretched and then walked over to the transceiver. He checked the large power unit that supplied it and tapped a few controls. "This is Taia-6 to Interstellar 1275, please respond. Request information on shipment to planet. Night cover hours running out." He sat back to wait for the return signal.

"They've likely sent it to Aurion or Deaga," Sivlee said

disgustedly. "You know how organized that lot is." The minutes ticked by and in spite of their determination, the two children began to fall asleep.

After half an hour had passed, Drevek reached forward again to fiddle with the transceiver. "I don't understand this," he said sleepily. "This thing was working fine yesterday." He examined the transceiver, removing the cover and inspecting the circuits. "It looks okay, but maybe they haven't heard a word I've said. I wonder if I should be boost—" He stopped and cocked his head, listening. Then he heard it again - a long, low, muffled scream.

Casting a worried look at his wife, he started toward the hole in the ceiling. "Stay here," he instructed and scrambled up.

Less than five seconds later, a massive explosion sounded nearby. Sivlee threw herself over the children as dirt came raining down on them. Another explosion rocked the ground and part of the ceiling collapsed. Choking in the dust, Sivlee pulled Adara up from the ground and pushed her toward the hole. Ekulic struggled to his feet.

"Go, go," Sivlee urged. "We'll be smothered."

Adara poked her head through the floor and cried out. The hut roof was missing and the explosion had scattered and broken the few pieces of furniture they owned. There was no sign of Drevek.

“Daddy! Where’s Daddy?”

She scrambled out of the hole and reached down to help up her brother. There was more screaming, clearer now, from outside the hut and Ekulic sniffed the air as he stood up. "Fire," he said. "I smell smoke."

A third explosion boomed - this time impossibly close - and a blast of air ripped through the hut, taking half the wall with it. The force of it threw Adara and Ekulic backward and pushed Sivlee down into the collapsing tunnel. Ekulic crawled back to her and tried to pull her out before the dirt covered her completely.

Adara, gasping for breath, rolled over . . . and froze. With an open mouth she stared, her eyes wide and unbelieving. The sky was filled with dozens of shiny black ovals, flying through the air at breakneck speeds. As one dipped lower and raced toward the ground, a bolt of light streaked out from the front of the disc and smashed into a nearby hut. The building exploded in a ball of flame. *We're being attacked!*

She jumped up and ran back into her own tattered hut and crashed into her mother. "Adara!" Sivlee yelled, trying to make herself heard over the growing din of explosions and screaming. "Adara! What's going on?" Adara started to answer, but Ekulic yelled and pointed. The roof was on fire and falling in. Sivlee grabbed her children and half ran, half dragged them outside.

The village was in chaos. Everyone was running, panic-

stricken, in any direction. Somewhere, Adara thought she could hear the Tasker yelling to direct people to the safety of the mountains. Several nearby natives stopped momentarily as if they'd heard and then began running toward the Okamas.

It was the worst possible choice. The concentrated stream of people attracted attention from above and three black ovals veered to attack. The sight sent waves of terror through Adara's small body.

The ovals were the bottoms of flat flying platforms, their edges bristling with weaponry and death. At the front end of the oval, there was a tall tubular structure, which connected to a gleaming silver crossbar . . . and gripping that bar, standing in the middle of the platform.

It was huge, at least two and a half meters tall, but thin and sinewy. Although it had a humanoid form, it was nothing Adara recognized. It was hairless and nearly naked and she could see that its skin was bluish and horribly stretched over muscle and bone. She couldn't see its feet, but the creature had long, powerful legs. It wore a metallic loincloth and a short, bloody sword tucked in a steel belt. Its chest and arms were covered in scars. The hands that curled over the crossbar were long and gnarled, claw-like.

But the head, the head was the worst part . . . skeletal and square-jawed with bat-like ears. Blue skin lay over where the eyes should have been, pulled tight over a

flattened nose ridge, leaving two tiny slits for breathing. Two predatory teeth shot up from the lower jaw.

"Get down!" Ekulic screamed, trying to warn the villagers. "Get down, they're coming!" Yet the villagers, past reason, kept running. Ekulic bolted from his mother's side and ran into the fray, trying to drag people down as they ran.

"Ekulic! Ekulic!" Sivlee grabbed Adara by the shoulders and thrust her back into the shadow of their burning hut. "Stay here, please don't move," Sivlee's face was pale, her eyes wide. Adara had never seen her so scared. "I've got to go get your brother. Don't move!" Sivlee darted toward Ekulic.

Then the black flyers swooped and let loose a barrage of deadly laser fire. Screams of terror became screams of agony. Blast after blast came from the ovals; bodies flew everywhere, lacerated and burnt beyond recognition. Through the crossfire and rising smoke she could just barely see her mother grab Ekulic and pull him down. Adara started to whimper. *Let them come back here! Get me out of this awful place! Please, please, please. Let this be a bad dream, please, oh please . . .*

The ovals completed their sweep and arced upward, turned and came in for another pass. All alone, Adara strained to see through the smoke, nearly gagging on the stench of burnt flesh. Many of the trees had caught fire and the heat was creating a breeze all its own, fanning the



flames.

"Adara! Adara, look out!" Adara whirled at the sound of her father's voice and screamed. A blue creature had jumped off its platform and was crashing through the burning hut toward her. Behind it, her father, black and bloody, raced after the creature. Not knowing what else to do, she turned and ran headlong into the oncoming fire from the flyers.

The thick, black smoke blinded her, but she plunged in anyway, desperately hoping that the sporadic shots from above wouldn't hit her. She ran and ran forever, her little legs pumping harder than they ever had before. *Help me, help me, help me!* Through the haze she could just make out the shadow of her mother, lying prone in the dirt.

A huge hand clapped down on her shoulder and smashed her brutally to the ground. Before she had time to take a breath, that same hand curled around her arm and yanked her off the ground. Thrashing and twisting, Adara tried to break the thing's iron grip, averting her gaze from the face with no eyes that looked at her.

"*Help me!*" Adara screamed. "Daddy, help me!"

A blade flashed and Adara felt cold steel bite into her arm. She jerked back in pain as the creature raised its gore-slicked sword. Adara watched in helpless fascination as the creature flicked an incredibly pink tongue over its mouth and teeth. The sword flashed up and whipped down toward her.

Suddenly the creature arched its back and dropped her. Drevek smashed into the beast, sending the two of them sprawling into the dirt. Adara hit the ground hard and screamed in pain. She couldn't move. The thing hissed angrily and stood up, easily tossing her father off its back. In one swift, fluid motion, it picked up its sword and swung the curved blade at Drevek's neck and face, once, twice. Two deep red gashes opened up on his throat. Drevek fell. He rolled over, gagging, desperately trying to breathe as the air whistled out of the gaping wound on his throat. He collapsed, subsiding with a hideous, wet, sucking sound.

The monster spun around. Desperately Adara willed herself to be still, hoping the thing would think she was already dead. *Daddy! Daddy, get up!* Out of the corner of her eye she could see the blue-skinned beast twitching this way and that, trying to catch her scent. Pain seared her arm and throbbed through her ruined shoulder. Distantly, over the pounding in her head, Adara could hear the flyers coming back for their next sweep and she felt the laser blasts slam into the ground. There were bodies everywhere.

Fear and agony allowed unconsciousness to slip its terrible black shroud over her. *Why did they do this? What did we do? I never asked for the lab. I just want my Mommy and Daddy and my brother . . .*

\*

When the bright sun of Taiamoora finally rose past the towering peaks of the mountain range, its golden rays did nothing to illuminate the valley below. Between the blackened sides of the Okamas and the blazing forest, the desolate remains of a tiny village burned, billowing black smoke and stink toward the sky.

Part way up the mountain, a little girl stood watching the blaze. In her bloodied and blistered hand she gripped a broken stone axe. A dirty taka hide bandage, soaked in blood, covered her right arm; her clothes were filthy with soot and mud. Tears coursed down her cheeks and she clenched her tiny fists every few seconds. She stood like that for hours, until the fiery conflagration changed into a few smouldering acres.

Then she gathered up her few precious belongings and started up the mountain, going deeper into the rocks. As the shadows enveloped her, the little girl swore revenge.

## CHAPTER ONE

Two silver AeroDarts flashed over the treetops, weaving and bobbing in almost perfect time. They were sleek craft, slicing through the air with such speed that the tree branches barely had time to dip and snap before they were gone.

"*Beep*. That makes two now. How many did the report say were on this hunk of rock? *Beep*."

The Dart rider gunned his ship and jumped ahead. "*Beep*. Twelve all together. No signs of life, at least from what they could tell from primary orbit. *Beep*."

Stavin listened as his partner's words echoed inside his helmet. The faint static gave them a whispery, ethereal quality. "*Beep*. Tell me again Marcus, why they didn't just descend into a lower orbit and find out for themselves? Didn't we have enough to do? *Beep*."

Marcus brought his Dart back into flight sync with a flick of a gloved finger. The Darts were incredibly responsive, built for speed and lightning fast manoeuvrability. "*Beep*. Well, if you believe the top

brass at *Mat-1*, it's because sensors won't work very well on this planet. Something about high reflectivity. But I think we're just here to test out the Darts. You know, quietly. *Beep.*"

Stavin nodded to himself. He glanced over his craft with a critical eye, examining the design with the air of a professional. It was a slim, bullet-shaped vehicle, with two razor-like fins jutting out from both the front and back sections. The middle section was where the rider crouched low over the body, keeping his head below the level of the windshield. His feet tucked into neat aerodynamic pockets along the sides, while his arms and hands were placed down and forward, so his fingers could grasp the controls of the ship. He looked like he was hugging the shaft and tip of a speeding arrow.

"*Beep.* I can see I'm going to have to drag any worthwhile conversation out of you piece by piece today." Marcus sounded faintly annoyed. "So, what do you think of these things? You're the expert. *Beep.*"

Stavin arched his back and felt the wind push down on him. "*Beep.* Not bad. They handle like anything. I'm not sure what good they're going to be though. No armament, no room for a second passenger and no protection for the rider. We're completely exposed in the open air like this. What's the point? *Beep.*"

Marcus smirked. He'd been thinking the same thing. "*Beep.* My best guess is that Dart riders will provide

distraction during rescue ops, or maybe they'll just be used for scouting missions like this one. I think that our research teams would be better off trying to improve our bulk transport shields. We lost six of those damn things last month. Six, Stavin! That's six of our best pilots and four loader teams. Not to mention the poor bastards who were passengers." He paused, looking at small display screen just below the windshield. "Bank left, 2.6 degrees. We're coming up to the third settlement." Another pause. "So where's this Taurrii place you're always talking about? *Beep.*"

They continued flying, Stavin happily regaling his partner with details of his home planet's moon. They slowed to circle over a deserted human settlement long enough to confirm that there were no signs of life. From there they veered sharply right and checked over two more areas. As they finished with the second, Stavin halted his travelogue and glanced over at his companion, who was less than two meters away. "*Beep.* Hey, I'm bored," he said, "why don't we put these things to the test? The next area is a long way off. Set your course now and I'll race you. *Beep.*"

"*Beep.* No, I don't think we should. Heck, with my luck I'll break the thing and this is just the prototype. Why don't we . . ." Marcus looked up to see Stavin shrinking into a tiny speck on the horizon. "Why that sneaky son of a- *Beep.*" Marcus punched a button and raced after him.

The land below streaked by in one continuous stream of green and brown. Marcus could feel his black biosuit compensating for the wind-chill and bone-crushing G-force. He checked the Dart's flight screen and swore again, unsure of what his course was supposed to be. Scanning the horizon, he spotted Stavín to the far left. He twitched the left control and the craft snapped sideways.

Stavín, confident of his lead, slowed and glanced at his screen. "Comptrol," he spoke into his helmet, "proximity monitor on. Search pattern: AeroDart Two." Light flickered across the screen and a three-dimensional image of the landscape formed just above it. A second later, a miniature picture of an AeroDart appeared in the lower portion of the image. Stavín's Dart appeared at the top. "Comptrol," he ordered, "verbalize."

"Relative distance from specified parameter 343 kilometres and closing." The computer's voice intoned from a speaker just above Stavín's ear. "Speed of AeroDart Two increasing exponentially. Sensors show similar proximity probe being done by AeroDart Two. Further instructions?"

"Comptrol, continue monitoring and open continuous communications." Stavín waited until a small red light went on above his eye. "Hey Terran, get a move on! What's the matter - didn't you get your course in right?"

"No thanks to you, wiseass!" Marcus shouted back. "You'd better hope *Mat-1* isn't watching this flight, or

we'll both be permanently grounded!" His eyes on his own screen, Marcus saw the image of Stavin's Dart rise, arch upward and disappear. Marcus swore, loudly. "Comptrol! Find AeroDart One using omni-directional scans. Give me an intercept course! And," he added, "jam his damn sensors! Two can play at this game!"

"Complying." The computer paused for a fraction of a second and then yanked the Dart straight up. Marcus grunted in pain and nearly blacked out before his biosuit kicked in. The ship continued hurtling upward for several minutes and then levelled abruptly. "Target changing course, compensating," it said calmly and the Dart jerked left into a barrel roll. Marcus groaned and gripped the craft tightly as the world spun into a blur. Suddenly the roll stopped and Stavin's ship swam into view. "In pursuit," the voice reported. "Increasing speed accordingly."

Now only a few minutes ahead, Stavin risked removing his hand from the controls to hit his viewing screen. "Comptrol, I said continue to monitor! Where in Taurii is my display?"

"Display information is being scrambled. Attempting to decode. Physical abuse of the screen will not simplify the process. Would suggest rider devote 100 percent of attention span to manual control of aircraft to prevent negative impact."

"No kidding." He twisted his head around and saw his



partner bearing down on him. "Comptrol, AeroDart Two is directly behind us. Calculate from that!"

"Directly behind is a relative term. Comptrol requires specific data. Would suggest rider dev-"

"All right! I'm concentrating! Comptrol, return the favour and scramble him." Stavin flicked a button and dropped like a rock. He grinned in satisfaction as Marcus shot overhead seconds later. Stavin halted his descent, bounced on the air current for a moment and veered right.

"Reconstruction of scrambled information now beginning," the voice announced. Stavin looked at his display to see a mountain range forming in the upper half of the image. "Attention: these elevations are within two kilometres from fifth settlement as specified in mission parameters." If he didn't know better, he would have claimed the computer sounded surprised that he'd found the right place by himself. "Would suggest rider decrease speed to allow for proper sc-"

"Nice try hot shot! Old stunts never work more than once on Terrans!" Marcus raced by him and wheeled around, heading straight for Stavin. Stavin rolled sideways just in time and dipped lower to fly just above the approaching forest. Marcus came by for another pass and Stavin circled back, the two of them looking like flies buzzing over the treetops.

"Yeah, well, I had to do something," Stavin replied after regaining his breath. "Who said anything about using

scan jams?"

"Anything goes in air tag and you know it. You started it."

"Just because you're slow," Stavín pulled his Dart into a tight downward spiral, "you think you can resort to dirty tricks and-"

"Scans show a life form in forest below," the computer interrupted. "Would suggest rider decrease speed to initiate proper scans."

"Sure, fine. Comptrol, begin the- Taurii help me!" A tree seemed to surge upward from the confines of the forest. Unable to slow down, Stavín smashed into the thick branches, with Marcus close behind. The Dart plowed into the foliage, snapping and breaking limbs. A large branch reached out to flip him off his seat and send him crashing down to the ground. Everything went black.

\*

As night crept over the land, the campfire made the short, young trees look as though they were dancing with their shadows. Twisted bits of AeroDart littered the forest floor. The two unconscious riders lay a safe distance from the flames, their feet and hands carefully bound. Both were badly bruised and Stavín had a thin strip of hide wrapped around his head.

On the other side of the fire, a young woman sat

regarding the two men warily. Dressed in a plain leather tunic, she had dark brown hair that had been hacked short. She was thin - her cheeks were sunken and her facial features were unnaturally angular. She toyed with a blackened stick as she waited for her captives to come around. It was silent except for the crackle and pop of the fire.

Finally, Stavín twitched and opened his eyes. Gingerly he raised his head, and looked around. He saw the mangled remains of his Dart, the soft ground and his partner lying to his left. He twisted to find the source of light and discovered the young woman watching him. He bolted upright in surprise and then paled, raising his bound hands to his bandaged head. He swayed, fell backward and threw up.

The nauseating sound of retching roused Marcus. He moaned and then cracked open his eyes. He raised his hands to his face to examine the bonds of dried sinew that encircled his wrists. Feeling battered and ill, he let his hands drop back onto his chest, waited a moment, then sat up slowly. He gave his surroundings a careful examination and was not surprised when he saw the woman. Stavín continued to vomit.

Marcus waited until his partner stopped heaving before he spoke. "This is probably a wasted effort, 'cause you won't understand a word I'm saying, but . . . who are you?"

The woman flinched as though hit and closed her eyes. "I can," she paused, opening them again, "I can unnerstand you."

Marcus' eyes widened and his eyebrows came together in a frown. "Well, there's hope for this situation yet." He glanced over at Stavin who was wiping his mouth and gingerly coming to a sitting position. Returning his gaze to the woman, he asked "Okay, so where are we, and why are we trussed up?"

The woman simply looked at him for a moment, and then got up and disappeared into the darkness behind the fire. She returned with two slabs of charred meat, which she dumped in front of them. She sat back down.

Stavin, steadfastly ignoring the food, spoke up for the first time. "Er, thanks. Okay, we'll try a different route. My name is Stavin. This is Marcus. We are from," he hesitated, "er, far away. Yes, the other side of this world. Very far away."

The woman smiled bitterly. "There is no one else on this planet," she said slowly.

"Sure there is, just far away. You're people probably haven't traveled far enough to meet us yet." Stavin pushed the meat away carefully. "How far are we from your village?"

"I have no people," the woman replied.

"Must be some kind of tribal outcast," Marcus muttered to Stavin. "Look," he said, "we are, or we were, looking

for a settlement of some kind. How close are we? Can we talk with your . . . talk with the people there?"

"There is no one else on this planet. You are from space, not the other side of this world." The woman got up and picked up a piece of AeroDart and waved it at them. "The people . . . the people that I lived with on this planet were not even out of the st-stone age."

Stavin looked over at Marcus with bewilderment. "That you lived with? You're not a native?"

"I came from," she stumbled over the next word, "Interstellar 1275."

Marcus puffed out his breath in frustration. "Impossible. The Karaash destroyed that base over nine years ago."

"The Karaash," the woman repeated, closing her eyes for the second time. She murmured it twice more to herself, like a litany and when her eyes opened, they glinted like hard jewels in the firelight. "My family and I came here from the Base. We were living here with the natives to st-study them. We had been here for a year when the . . . Karaash destroyed the Base."

"So you and your family was stranded in this part of the universe for Taurii knows how long," Stavin shook his head. "So where are they now?"

The stick she'd been gripping tightly snapped in half suddenly, causing both men to jump. "There is *no one else* on this planet," she said between gritted teeth.

"My God," Marcus said, realization dawning. "They

attacked the planet too. They killed everyone, didn't they? You're all alone here." He looked at her with awe. The woman said nothing and averted her gaze to stare into the fire. "No wonder those settlements looked as bad as they did. They weren't abandoned. They were destroyed." He looked at Stavín. "Maybe this is why Rilken was so keen to check this place out. Maybe he suspected?" A thought occurred to him. "Where are the remains?" Stavín reached over and kicked him. "Sorry," he muttered. "It's just that we haven't found any."

She tossed the two halves of the stick into the fire. It flared and illuminated the harsh expression on her face. "Eaten, at the other villages. Burned here. Bodies attract taka." She indicated the carcass of a dead animal, lying nearby. "Taka eat survivors."

Stavín shuddered and looked at her with compassion. "I'm so sorry."

She jerked her head up to glare at him fiercely. "I do *not* want your sympathy."

There was an uncomfortable silence. Marcus picked the meat up and sniffed it. Wrinkling his nose in distaste, he regarded the woman thoughtfully for a moment. "All right, we know who you are and where we are. Why are we tied up, but bandaged and, um, given food?"

"I tied you up in case you are an enemy. You have food in case you are not." She shrugged and looked at Stavín. "He is bandaged because his head cover was ripped off

before he hit ground. He is lucky it is not worse."

Marcus nodded. "Er," he paused. "Are you going to let us go?"

She let her gaze wander a moment before focusing on her captives. "I want off this planet." There was venom in her voice.

He gave her a long appraising look. "Get me my helmet then." The woman stood and walked to a place beyond the reach of the warm firelight. When she returned, she handed Marcus his helmet and cut his wrist bonds with a sharp stone knife. "They'll want some information to start checking your story. I'll need your name and your age at the time of the attack."

"A-dara," she said curtly. "Adara Cohili. I was ten."

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The ship they called *Mat-1* was a big, bleak affair and little more than a giant carrier ship. It screamed 'functional.' All the raw materials that had gone into its manufacture had been left in their original state, unfinished, unpolished. The ship looked like the designers had put it together hastily, on some barren rock of a planet, by a race of people with no concept of design and possibly four thumbs. It was incredibly ugly.

The look of the place did nothing to help Adara's mood as she stood waiting for her rescuers to unload the shuttle

that had picked them up from the planet's surface. The trip skyward had been almost silent, broken only by the occasional monotone voice of flight computers. Marcus and Stavín had kept quiet the whole time, trying to recover from the angry blast that had come from their commander when they had explained the situation. They were anxiously waiting for further repercussions. Nothing in the quiet cockpit of the shuttle had prepared her for the mother ship.

*It's so noisy*, Adara thought, shifting from one foot to the other uneasily. *So many people*. There seemed to be hundreds of them in the huge docking bay, coming and going, making repairs or unloading things. Not all of them were human either; there were ghost-like wraiths, large furry things, and small little insect-like creatures. Roboservs accompanied some of them - that at least was distantly recognizable. The din was unbearable. Worst of all, she thought that they all were glancing at her, *looking at her* with curiosity.

She looked down at her torn tunic, her red and roughened hands and remembered how she'd chopped at her hair to keep it short. Unfamiliar feelings of self-consciousness assailed her. She knew she was filthy; she smelled like wood smoke and taka hide and they all kept *looking* at her. Their eyes bored into her from every direction; furtive glances, long hard stares, quizzical peeks. Adara felt surrounded, enclosed - an alien among



aliens. She felt her breathing quicken, her heart pound and saw the walls close in on her . . .

"73rd Classers! Stand forward!" The sudden shout made Adara jump. Unnoticed, another human had appeared beside her to bark orders at the two men who had rescued her. Caught off guard, she shook herself angrily. *Stares won't kill*, she thought. *Karaash kill. Remember that.* Something within in her hardened and she stood taller.

Marcus and Stavín hurried up and stood to attention. The man who had called them had a ruddy face and an air of authority. He was also obviously furious.

"This is the one?" The man stabbed a finger at Adara, who raised her chin a notch.

"Yes sir," Stavín replied. "Sir, if I may explain further about the Darts, Marcus had nothing to-"

"No you may not! I've heard all I want to hear about Darts! My engineers are howling, my treasurers are screaming and my superiors are howling *and* screaming! I fail to see how anything you say could possibly help the situation! You," he turned a flushed face to Adara, "will follow me to my office. You two finish here and get to your quarters. You're being grounded and confined until further notice." He turned on his heel and stomped away. Adara had no choice but to hurry after him.

He led her across the large bay, through a large door and down several long corridors, turning corners and dodging people at a quick pace. The scenery went by in a

blur. By the time they had reached his office door, Adara was out of breath and thoroughly lost.

He ushered her in with a curt gesture and bade her sit in a chair across from a large desk. The officer did not sit right away, but paced the room for a few minutes, trying to bring himself under control. Adara watched him go back and forth. Although he was short, he was well proportioned. He was lean and trim and he obviously took care of himself. His hair was dark, but shot through with a few silver-grey streaks and his eyes had a careworn look to them. His hands, clasped behind his back as he paced, were broad and rough and they twitched with every step. He looked more suited to fighting than administrating.

After a few minutes of walking, he sat himself down in his own chair and groaned. "If it's not one thing, it's another. First the damn Selortians back out of their contract and then the Meldans. Then the fail-safes decide to fail and then those two irresponsible idiots try to defoliate half a dozen trees with expensive equipment." He rubbed his eyes wearily and then focused his attention on Adara.

"My apologies," he said gruffly. "That could not have been the best reintroduction into society. They said your name was Adara?"

She nodded. "A-dara . . . Adara Cohili."

"Commander Matthew Rilken, 4th Classer,

Commander of the ISR ship *Mat-1*, at your service." He stood up and offered her his hand, which she shook awkwardly. As he sat back down, he smiled. "Although I'm sure the name and rank don't mean much to you right now." He paused, looking her over. "Adara, we have a great deal to talk about. Would you prefer to do this now, or would you like to wait until after you've had a chance to rest? Do you need medical attention?"

*I have been waiting nine years, she thought. No longer. I have things to do now.* "Now is fine. Talk."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Good," he said. "Someone who gets down to business right off. I like that." He punched a button on a computer console on his desk. The screen flashed and lit up his face. He examined it for a second and then leaned forward with his hands before him, his position earnest, urgent. "Adara, I am anxious to hear your whole story. I want to record it, do you mind?"

"No."

He tapped the console again and then looked at her kindly. "Forgive me for remarking on this, but you seem to be having difficulty with the language. Would you prefer to talk in your native tongue? I have a translator."

"This is my language. I have not used it for nine years. Taka beasts do not talk much." Adara said harshly.

Rilkens was taken aback. "I see. Perhaps we'd better start at the beginning then. Tell me everything about yourself and your situation. Leave out nothing." He

leaned back in his chair to listen.

She recounted her story in a flat, unemotional voice, although a muscle beat in her cheek whenever she paused.

When she was finished, Rilkens let out a low whistle. "Incredible," he said. He looked at her apologetically. "My earlier remark must have sounded thoughtless. I hadn't realized you'd been down there so long. What did you do during that time?"

"Hunting and cooking took up most of each day. At night I made writing tools to keep a diary. Other nights I would have to rebuild my shelter."

"Rebuild?"

"Sometimes the animals would destroy it."

Rilkens pursed his lips. "A diary you said? What did you put in it?"

Adara shrugged. "What I did every day. Everything I could remember about the natives. Everything I could remember about my studies. When I was done with each entry, I would read it out loud so I would not forget words."

Rilkens had a sudden image of a young girl, hidden away in the forest, alone except for the demons in the woods and the sound of her own voice. If it had been me, he thought, I would have gone stark, raving mad. He shivered.

"Did you bring the diary with you?" he asked. "That and

the records at Interstellar would be excellent evidence."

"No," she said. "It is still down there. It is useless to me now." She looked at him closely. "What do you need ... evidence for?"

Rilkens shook his head. "I'm sorry, I guess it's my turn to answer some questions. Do you know who we are? Did Marcus and Stavín tell you anything?"

"No."

"Well then," he leaned back, placing his hands behind his head. "You've been picked up by 'Interplanetary Search and Rescue.' Hardly a glamorous name, but, as you can see, we are not a particularly glamorous outfit. We are a small, but mobile and widely dispersed group established about six years ago, with a mandate to deal with the Karaash problem."

Adara glanced around the room, which was spacious, but looked as badly put together as the rest of the ship.

"I know what you're thinking and you're right." Rilkens shifted in his chair uncomfortably. "It's awful. A disgrace, I think, but that's the way it is." He sighed. "Where to begin? ISR is funded by a group known as the Interplanetary Union. The Union was founded about eight years ago by a woman named Byel Marsalei. She wanted to unite the interplanetary governments and work toward peace. Dealing with the Karaash is the Union's first real problem. So far, we haven't handled them very well."

"What does ISR do?" Adara asked, impatient to move on.

"Exactly what the name says. Search and rescue. We fly right in during a Karaash attack - if we know about it - and pull out as many people as we can. Usually all we have to do is evacuate them to a nearby moon, or sometimes just to another area of the planet. For some reason, the Karaash never pursue. Once the Karaash pull out, we help with clean up and restoration."

"That is all you do?" Adara was disgusted.

"That is all we are *allowed* to do," Rilken corrected. "The Union is made up of more than five hundred member governments. All of them have different cultures, customs, religions, and languages. None of them trust each other." He snorted. "From what I understand, it's hard enough just to get them talking to one another, much less agree on anything."

"So you do not fight the Karaash?"

"Adara, we can't even carry weapons," he said, with no small amount of bitterness. "The pacifists faction in the Union would regard it as war-mongering and everyone else is afraid that ISR might become some kind of archaic galactic armada - a threat to their sovereignty." He ran a quick hand through his hair. "Not that we'd put up much of a fight if we were allowed weapons anyway. We know virtually nothing about the Karaash. Union members are so damn secretive. Half the time we're lucky to be invited

in to do an evacuation. What we do know, confuses us," he added.

He got up and began pacing again. "They physically *attack* places," Rilken said, wonder in his voice. "They fly in and shoot people. We haven't fought wars like that in years. They don't do anything we are used to, like satellite hijacking, or economic sabotage. They don't even appear to *want* anything, even something simple like land. They've never made any demands as far as we know. We don't know how to fight them. We had to go back into the history books to figure out how to set up this much." He indicated the ship with a broad gesture. "They even use swords. Brutal, horrible blades. Just for . . . just for butchery."

Adara touched her arm lightly, not conscious of the movement. Rilken noticed and came over to her.

"They wounded you? Yes, you did say that. May I see?"

Adara stiffened, but drew up her sleeve to allow Rilken to look at her arm. A long, white, jagged line marked her forearm.

"This will help," Rilken murmured, almost to himself. "The Karaash sword leaves a specific kind of wound, which is very distinctive." He scowled. "Although, until now I have never seen a Karaash wound that has healed and gone to scar. You'll need an examination."

He returned to his desk. "Adara, would you be willing to tell your story to the Union? Personally testify, I mean.

It will probably be gruelling. You don't have to answer right away-

"Why?"

"Well, ISR High Command is trying to get more funding. The Karaash problem is getting worse. We know that much, because we're getting called to more places for evacuation. Casualty rates are higher each time too and that's just at the places we know about. If we don't do something soon, we may not be able to stop them."

Adara was edgy. The closeness of the room was beginning to bother her. "Why do I have to testify?"

"Your planet - Taiamoora I think you called it - is in an area that has been neutral territory for a few years. Your story won't sound like a Selortian takeover plot and it might convince the Union that the problem is serious and needs more attention-

"This is the only group there is that's doing anything about the Karaash?" Adara asked. "There are no others?"

The question surprised Rilken. "Ah, yes. That's right. To the best of my knowledge, we're the only group."

"I will testify. On one condition."

He frowned. "What's that?"

"I want in."

"What, into ISR? Surely you'll want to do some catching up first? Travel perhaps, finish your education? This is dangerous work. You should be out enjoying



yourself, after all, nine years is a long time to-

Adara gave him a fierce glare. "I want in."

"All right," Rilkens said reluctantly. He reached for his computer. "Let's see what I can do."

## CHAPTER TWO

At Rilken's request, someone came to his office to take her to a temporary room. Her escort was a tall young man, with short, dark hair and he wore the same two-piece black outfit as Rilken and the others did; it seemed to be the ISR uniform. He smiled at her and tried to look friendly. She ignored him.

He took her down a level in the ship and steered her through the narrow corridors of the living area. To Adara, this section seemed even more cramped and chaotic. People were walking everywhere, into their rooms, out of their rooms, back and forth in the halls. Some of them gave her curious looks as they rushed by.

They stopped at a door. "Here we are," the man said. "Touch your hand to this panel to the left there," he indicated the spot. She did so and the door slid open. "That panel will only open the door for you now. If you move out of this room, touch the panel and say 'release access.' The computer will reset the lock for the next occupant."

They stepped inside the small room. To the right of the door, a single bed was jammed up against the wall. Directly in front of them, a small hatch-type door took up most of the center of the far wall. To the left of that, a cubicle stretched from floor to ceiling. A tiny chair, table and computer console occupied the corner just left of the doorway.

The man gestured to the computer. "You can use that for communication, access to the Nets, ordering food, clothes, control the lights and temperature in here, whatever. You can eat here or on the Rec Level, if you like. Um," he pointed to the hatch-door, "if you order stuff for here, it'll show up in the Fetcher – a little roboserv will pick it up from Manufacture & Supply and drop it off. You're lucky, you've got one of the newer quarters that has one of these things installed. Otherwise you'd have to go get your stuff yourself. Just like us low-lifers in the bottom ten-class have to do," he grinned and winked. He got no response. "The cubicle is for washing up and stuff and you know what the bed is for. If you need any help with anything, my name is-"

"I will need no help," Adara said flatly.

"O-kay," he laughed. "Whatever you say. See you around." He turned and left.

The closed door cut off the noise from the hallway. Adara leaned back against the door and closed her eyes. Her heart, which had been pounding incessantly since she

had been picked up, sounded loud in the silence. She took a few deep, slow breaths to steady herself.

After a few moments, she opened her eyes and decided the first thing she had to do was figure out the computer. She went to the table and sat down. The screen flickered to life almost immediately. She stared at it for a moment, unsure of how to go on.

"Command mode is on," the computer said suddenly. "Please specify a request."

"How do I use this computer?" she asked.

"There are three main methods of input," the computer replied. "User may give commands vocally anytime, from any position in this room, if prefixed by the word `Comptrol.' Commands may be given by touch input on a table surface when touch input mode is on. Commands may be given by keyboard input when a preconfigured species-specific keyboard is installed."

Adara nodded to herself. That sounded familiar enough. The computers at the Base had used similar controls; different people and races needed different systems.

"Comptrol, I need clothes."

"The prefix `Comptrol' is unnecessary while seated at this console. Please specify clothing needs."

Adara thought about it. For hunting and hiding, her tunic had served as camouflage on the surface; now it made her stand out. "An ISR uniform."

"Use of the ISR uniform is not authorized unless they

register you as a member."

She twitched. "Fine. Black pants. Black shirt."

"Please specify style."

"What styles?" *How hard is this?* she thought. "Black pants. Black shirt."

The computer took her first statement as a command and displayed several shirts on the screen. The variety astounded Adara. After several long moments, she chose a shirt that was nearly identical to the ISR uniform shirt. She did the same for the pants and footwear.

Finally, the computer said: "Please specify desired quantity of items selected. Comptrol has already logged your dimensions."

"Two," Adara answered. "I need food."

"Please specify."

"Display choices."

The variety of food choices seemed even more bewildering. She glowered at the screen. Apparently she had forgotten more than she had realized. She chose a simple dish of meat and greens, with water to drink.

"Please remove clothing from unit. Please keep hands well back from receiving area when unit is in operation."

Leaving the table, Adara went over the wall and popped open the hatch to reveal a cube-shaped niche that was half a meter wide. A pile of black clothing was already waiting there. A green light glowed above the niche. When she pulled away the clothes the Fetcher hummed,

the light turned red and roboserv zipped into view. It dropped off with her meal along with some eating utensils. It exited the niche through the Fetch tube hole in the niche, and light turned green again.

She took the food back to the table and poked at it cautiously. It was the first meal in a long time that she hadn't had to kill first.

Her stomach, as though it sensed her hesitation, rumbled loudly in encouragement. She wolfed the food, handling the utensils clumsily. Not knowing what else to do with them, she replaced the plate and her water glass in the niche. It was the right thing to do; the dishes vanished.

She asked the computer some more questions. Adara found out she could use the ship's databases from the console; she could play games, order text readers, listen to music, talk with people on board and send messages off the ship. She could even look at different views of the ship, inside and outside and the space surrounding it. The choices seemed endless.

She stopped when she could think of no more questions. All at once she felt exhausted. The room was still brightly lit, but for Adara, it was late at night. She longed to wash, to scrub the dirt of the forest off her body, but she felt too drained to tackle the cubicle controls. She stripped off the brown hides and pulled on her new shirt and pants. She pulled back the covers on the bed; the

mattress felt soft and spongy and didn't smell like leaves or grass. She got in.

A second later, she got out and picked up the taka hides from the floor. Slowly and very deliberately, she tore them into thin strips and then stuffed them into the Fetcher. The unit hummed and a roboserv dropped in, grabbed the strips and whisked away again. She climbed back into bed. "Comptrol, lights off," she said.

The room was plunged into darkness. Within a few minutes she was sound asleep.

\*

The sound of the computer beeping woke her up a few hours later. It took her several minutes to remember where she was.

"Comptrol, stop that," she mumbled.

"You have a message from 4th Classer Matthew Rilken. It is time sensitive."

She eased out from underneath the covers. She felt stiff. The mattress had been softer than what she was used to. "What is the message?" she asked.

Rilken's head and shoulders appeared on the screen. "Adara, I hope I haven't set this too early for you. We're on standard ship's time cycle, but it shouldn't be too far off from what you'd be used to. Anyway, High Command really wants to get a move on with your testimony. They

have no problem with you becoming a member and they're even willing to give you special access for off-ship communications, so you can do some catching up. Right now though, they want you to report to the sickbay for examinations. I'll be around at 0800 to pick you up."

"Comptrol, what time is it now?"

"The time is standard 0730 hours."

Adara groaned and slid off the bed. Still groggy, she staggered over to the cubicle and opened the door. She froze in surprise. A stranger was staring at her.

A full-length mirror surface hung on the back of the cubicle door and it wasn't until she moved her hand that Adara realized that she was looking at her own reflection. She rubbed her eyes.

Gone was the small, flat-chested girl she remembered. In her place was a full-grown woman. She looked underfed; she was too thin and there were dark areas under her eyes. There were smudges of dirt here and there on her face and her hair was tangled and matted. But the basic shape of her body was well defined and there could be no doubt. She was an adult.

The sight stunned her. She had gone to the streams often for water, but had never seen more than a brief outline of her face in the swift current.

She stood like that for several minutes, looking herself up and down and then pressed her lips firmly together. Rilkens would arrive soon. She had to get used to a



schedule again.

After finishing a quick breakfast, Adara requested some grooming equipment from the Fetcher and got to work. She washed herself from head to toe, scrubbing herself raw and changed into the other set of clothes. She attacked her hair with vicious abandon, yanking out the knots until it sat properly. It still looked badly cut, but it would do. She was pulling a pair of black boots on when the computer announced she had a visitor.

She stepped outside before Rilken could even smile in greeting. He looked pleased with her appearance.

"Well, you're settling right in, aren't you? Did you have any trouble with the equipment?"

"No."

Rilken appeared to be expecting a lengthier reply. "Well, good. Shall we go?"

Adara nodded and he led the way. She did not attempt a conversation, so Rilken settled for pointing out various areas of the ship as they walked to the sickbay. She committed every detail to memory.

They arrived at sickbay and Rilken led her directly into a private office. A middle-aged woman with red hair and bright eyes stood up to greet them. Her movements were quick, economical.

"Hello," she said warmly. "You must be Adara. Everyone has been talking about you. Did you sleep well last night?"

"Yes." Adara thought the question was useless.

The medic cast a glance at Rilken, who shrugged. She picked a few instruments from her desk and set Adara up on an examination bench. She began to check Adara, taking her time, doing each reading twice before moving on. As she worked, she recorded everything she did, conscious of Rilken watching her.

After about twenty minutes of this silent, but thorough inspection, she returned to her desk and arranged her instruments in front of her. She addressed both of them, but turned to Adara when she spoke. "Frankly, I'm quite surprised. You're in remarkably good condition. When I first saw you, I suspected that malnutrition might have affected your development, but that doesn't seem the case. Did you eat well?"

"Most of the time, yes. But the last . . ." she paused, trying to remember how long it had been, "two months were hard."

"Hmm," the medic consulted her instruments. "Well, I'll prescribe a diet for you that should bring you up to your proper weight. There's also a minor problem with your shoulder musculature. It is a little weak. I'll give you a compound that will help rebuild the tissue in that area and I'll also program a rehabilitation sequence for you. Tomorrow, just go down to the physical activity section of the Rec Level and ask the computer for," she tapped her datapad, "Rehab-Cohili-1. Do that for about two

weeks and then report here for another examination. If all goes well and you're still on board, then I'll just put you on the regulation fitness program after that."

"You will include all of that in your report? The verification of the scarring?" asked Rilken, eyeing Adara's forearm.

"Of course," the medic replied. "And it will all be notarized."

"Good," he said with satisfaction. "High Command has placed a high priority on this." He gestured to the door. "Adara, if you'd like, I'll show you how to get to the Rec Level."

As they walked, he glanced over at her and asked. "When do you think you'll be ready to testify?"

"Now," she said shortly. "Whenever I have to."

"Somehow I had a feeling you'd say that," he said. "Are you sure though? It's going to be a pretty big ordeal. The Union members love publicity and will no doubt have plenty of NetFilers there to capture your testimony. Don't you want some time to prepare? You've been a long time away."

"What is there to prepare?" she asked, irritably.

"Well, it's just that . . ." he began and then stopped. "Never mind. It's just as well I suppose. The Union members have been waiting for a new spectacle like this and can't wait to get it underway. There's a panel set up and en route already." He sighed deeply. "Although how

they managed to agree on the composition so fast, I'll never know." They turned a corner. "We will rendezvous with the *Teegara-6* in about four hours. We're supposed to transfer you there and hold our position until we receive further orders from High Command."

"Fine," she said.

"Well *I'd* like some time to prepare," he said, clasping his hands behind his back. He tensed and released his shoulders as though trying to throw off an invisible weight. "Since I'll be expected to give my own report on the matter. So, if you don't mind, I'll show you to the Rec Level and then retire to my quarters. At the rendezvous time, ask someone to show you to the BT, I mean, bulk transport bay and I'll meet you there."

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The *Teegara-6* looked nearly identical to Rilken's ship, except that it was much more crowded.

They had disembarked from the small transport ship in relative peace, but when Rilken, Adara and their four escorts stepped out into the corridor, they were mobbed. The passageway teemed with NetFilers, every one of them brandishing an image catcher of some kind. They jostled and shoved each other rudely, trying to get the best shot. Some hustled away after just a few seconds, each trying to be the first to upload their images onto the

NewsNets.

Four more escorts from the *Teegara* crew joined them. They formed a tight circle around Rilkens and Adara and began forcing their way through the crowd. Adara heard Rilkens muttering angrily under his breath. "What a disgrace. No regard for the rules, no attention to protocol. I don't see why they allow this." She kept her eyes on his back, trying to ignore the shouted questions.

The NetFilers followed them through the corridors and into a large hall where another crowd had already gathered. The escorts guided Rilkens and Adara to a large U-shaped table where two men in ISR uniforms were waiting.

Rilkens straightened his already upright posture. "Commanders," he said. "Allow me to present Adara Cohili. Adara, this is Marsalis Marsalei and Michael Hamilton, 1st Classers, of ISR High Command."

Marsalis extended a hand to Adara and the NetFilers scattered to get the right angle. "A pleasure to meet you," he said. A dark-skinned man, he had deep brown eyes and a gentle manner. "Thank you so much for doing this, especially this early. This means a great deal to us."

Michael also offered his hand. He shook hers with the same quick, efficient style that the medic had moved with earlier. "Commander Rilkens tells us you want to join ISR. Let me be the first to welcome you aboard. Please sit down."

They directed her to the center seat of the U-shape. The table faced a gallery that was filling fast. Adara noticed that none of the NetFilers attempted to grab a place there; instead they competed for space on the floor between the table and the gallery.

Marsalis sat to one side of her, Rilken the other. Rilken leaned over with a smile that looked too pleasant. "Tell me, Commander, will *every* representative from the Union be joining us today?"

"Unfortunately no," Marsalis replied, keenly aware of the image catchers just centimetres away. He glanced at Adara and his look implied gratitude. "Because Adara was willing to testify right away, most of the representatives were too far away to get to this tribunal in time, although most were extremely eager to take part. Some delegates here today will be representing four or five Union members each. At last count, only about two hundred will be joining us."

*Two hundred!* Adara looked at the gallery and gripped her chair arms tightly. The din was already intolerable.

"Four or five each?" Rilken continued. "That must have taken a great deal of, ah, organization."

Michael sat beside Marsalis. "Oh, we talked about the logistics well into the night," he said casually. "It seems to have worked out."

The three of them chatted for a few more minutes, until Marsalis, noting that the gallery was full, stood up. He

handed Adara a small device, which he motioned she should put in her ear. The NetFilers immediately went silent. The gallery occupants took a little longer.

"I trust everyone can understand me?" he began. "We have arranged for translation to work the same way it would in the Union Assembly hall. Just talk as you would normally. The sim hall computer will pick it up and patch the translations through to your respective devices. Is that all right with everyone?"

There was a general rumble of assent.

"We'll begin by showing you the official transcript of Commander Rilken's first interview with Adara. Please direct your attention to the center of the hall."

A life-size image of the interior of Rilken's office appeared in the air above the sprawling NetFilers. Watching her own image recount her story gave her a curious sense of detachment - until she looked at the gallery. She had never seen such a diverse group of life forms. Most were humanoid, some were even human, but the others were unlike anything she'd ever seen. An orange coloured tree that sparkled occasionally occupied one seat. Another seat, near the front, looked empty until you looked carefully at the back of the chair; the little white creature was no bigger than Adara's hand. The NetFilers aimed their devices at the gallery, the interview image and Adara, shifting position constantly. She gripped her chair harder.

The image finished replaying and vanished. One gallery member immediately shot out of her chair and snarled. "This is what you rushed us out here to see Marsalis? You expect us to believe this pieced-together holoshow is real?"

The tree sparkled frantically. The translation was delayed by a second. "Sit down you idiot," it said, "let the human finish."

The woman would not subside. "This is another demand for funding, isn't it Marsalis? A sad little story to stir up donations?"

"Sit down!" yelled a black-haired human from the middle of the gallery.

Marsalis smiled gently. "Well, Por'ch'an'an," he said, addressing the angry woman. "I won't turn down any funding that's for sure." Some gallery members laughed, or did something that Adara took to be laughing. "But for today, I'm just trying to keep the Union informed. As for the validity of the recording, I've distributed a copy to each of your respective governments and they can test it for tampering. We've recovered the diary from the surface and there are copies included with the images you just saw. As you can see, Adara has graciously agreed to appear in person for questioning."

All eyes focused on her. She forced herself not to shrink back in the chair. *Stares don't kill*, she reminded herself. Her chest tightened.



"You confirm you are the same human in the image?"  
Por'ch'an'an demanded.

Adara had to swallow once to try to moisten her suddenly dry throat. "Yes," she managed, finally.

The tree sparkled again. "Do you have medical scans to back up this story?"

Marsalis nodded solemnly. He beckoned to Rilken, who stood up and gave his report on what had been done when Adara had been found and he gave a summary of her exam results. He spoke firmly, but kept his hands clasped behind his back, where they twitched.

"*Powsha!*" A huge, oval-shaped alien in the back row spat. The next few words were also untranslatable. "How can we trust your scans? I'm well aware of the Meldan influence on High Command. You!" He pointed a blunt appendage. "Would you agree to be scanned by somebody else?"

She looked at Marsalis, who nodded almost imperceptibly. "Yes," she said again.

To her horror, the creature leapt out of its chair and raced down to the table. Several others followed, nearly trampling the hapless NetFilers in their path. They swarmed around Adara. Marsalis tensed but did not move to interfere. They shoved half a dozen instruments at her, whirring, clicking, beeping. At one point something sharp poked her in the back; she held herself rigidly and bit down hard on her lower lip.

As suddenly as they had gotten up, they all returned to their seats. The room buzzed with conversation as they compared results.

"Now," Marsalis said, raising his voice to be heard over the din. "If we could get to the matter of-"

"I wish to cross examine her!" someone yelled. Several others agreed. Marsalis nodded reluctantly.

"How old were you at the time of the attack?" Adara didn't see the creature that asked.

"Ten."

"How many in your family?"

"Three and myself."

"Where were you hurt?"

"Left shoulder. Right forearm. Several cuts and bruises."

The gallery members threw questions at her, one right after another. They reviewed every minute detail of her story, going over and over each point, trying to find flaws. They grilled her on her daily life, before and after the attack. The NetFilers shoved and pushed with increased energy, as they whipped their catchers back and forth between the gallery and the table. Adara began to get hot and the pounding of her heart sounded so loud in her ears that she had to struggle to hear the translator.

"Enough!" The black-haired human in the middle row screeched suddenly. "Enough!" The gallery subsided. "Surely even the most suspicious and paranoid members

of this Union must have enough evidence to verify this account by now."

Marsalis winced at the man's choice of adjectives, but no one seemed to object this time. He looked at Adara and noticed that she was breathing hard and that her knuckles showed white. He took a few moments to congratulate the Union on their efforts to be thorough and he gave a short speech on the need for cooperation. When he saw that Adara had recovered a little, he continued.

"Would the representatives agree that the sector of space surrounding the Taiamooran system and the Base is considered neutral territory?" he asked.

Some grumbled a bit at this, but they all agreed.

"Adara, our scans showed that there were about twelve hundred areas that we could classify as settlements on your planet. From your knowledge of Taiamooran society and customs, how many people would be in each settlement? On average."

She thought for a moment. "No more than five hundred in each village. They did not like living in groups larger than that. The average would be about two hundred."

There was a brief, stunned silence while everyone did the math. Marsalis' face became grim. "Added to the population on the star base and that brings the death toll to an estimated 300,000 or more people does it not?"

Por'ch'an'an bolted out of her chair again. "Now I know this is an appeal for more funding! You're trying to scare

us!"

"Not at all," Marsalis replied easily. "As I said, I'm just trying to keep you all informed of our discoveries. However, it does cross my mind that the Karaash problem is perhaps a little larger than we thought at first. This took place nine years ago and the number of such incidents has increased over the years."

The tiny creature in the front squeaked indignantly. "I for one am not going to hand over any more money until they change the entire structure of ISR to better accommodate my people. The entire thing is biased toward humans and species of humanoid form!"

The tree sparkled agreement, as did several others. "We are looking after that as quickly as possible," Marsalis said. "For example, two full ships - part of this very fleet in fact - are having their sickbays outfitted to allow your people to contribute their excellent medical knowledge to the cause."

The oval alien roared. "Why are they getting special attention before we are? Triaks are known all over the galaxy for their superior mathematical talents. We could be contributing immensely to the ISR system!"

"Everyone, please!" Marsalis tried to control the group. A tall, gaunt looking being stood up politely at the front. "You have something to add?"

"Yes," it said slowly. "Can we forget the details for just a moment? Let us all look at what we know. We know

that there is sufficient evidence to suggest that there is at least a little bit of truth in this human's story. We also know that all of us have been having more problems with the Karaash over the past standard year period. Marsalis has not asked us to do anything. He has asked us to listen. Now let us go and talk to our people to see what they say."

"Hmph," Por'ch'an'an grunted. "Your people will say run and hide. That's what they always say."

The gallery erupted into shouting. Adara sat in her seat, shaking with anger. She simply could not believe what the thin creature had said. She couldn't believe any of what she was hearing. *The Karaash have killed*, she thought furiously. *The Karaash are killing. What more do they need?*

Marsalis allowed them to argue for nearly twenty minutes and then brought the meeting to order again, with considerable effort. "You all have the information we have gathered and you have all witnessed this for your people. Take your data packets, let your governments know what has happened. Run all the tests you like. Perhaps we can reconvene in the Assembly Hall in two weeks time?"

The gallery seats emptied quickly, as the representatives poured down to the floor to talk to the NetFilers. The eight-person escort encircled the table to protect Adara and the officers.

Marsalis looked cheerful. "Well done, Adara. Very well done. You've been a tremendous help."

Adara didn't see how. They hadn't needed her presence at all, except to use her as an excuse to argue over something new. She glared at Marsalis.

Michael clapped Rilken's on the back. "Thanks for your good work. We'll send the *Mat-1* her orders in two days time. Until then, your crew can take some time off. You've been working hard since the Deaga evacuation and this is a good area for vacation time. Send them all planetside or something."

"Thank you Commander, I will," Rilken said. He gave Adara a curt nod. "Let's go."

They headed for the door. Half the NetFilers abandoned the hall and chased after them. They were surrounded immediately and didn't push free until they were back in the *Teegara* BT bay.

Inside the small shuttlecraft, Rilken fidgeted in his chair. "Outrageous. An outrage. A waste of time." Adara silently agreed with him. She felt dizzy and her head hurt. He muttered during the whole flight.

Just after they got off the shuttle, back in on the *Mat-1*, he turned to her with sudden decisiveness. "You handled that whole fiasco incredibly well. High Command is going to be inclined to feel grateful to this crew. I'm going to use that. Things are going to change on *this* ship at least." He went to leave, but stopped and added "I hope

you'll take an assignment here. You'd be an asset."

## CHAPTER THREE

More than a week later, Adara stirred and shivered in her tiny bed. The room they had finally assigned her was nearly identical to her first temporary quarters, except this one had very little heat. It wasn't much more than a converted storage compartment, deep in the hull of the ship. This far below, the icy fingers of space traced along the walls, constantly pulling the warmth out into the blackness.

*So quiet.* Adara almost sighed in relief. The lack of heat was a small price to pay for solitude. The past few days had been hell. Hundreds of people, all talking to her, talking around her, talking about her. Nothing but noise. She supposed it was normal for a ship this size, but she still didn't like it.

Adara wrapped the covers more tightly about her. They had assigned her to *Mat-1* and she was to begin basic training under the command of Matthew Rilken. She was supposed to have reported in for duty shortly after everyone's shore leave had finished, but Rilken had



postponed the training until today, so he could finish wrangling with High Command. What he was after, Adara didn't know. She didn't really care either; she spent her time either at the computer, sleeping or doing her rehabilitation routine. She avoided contact with the others as much as possible.

Adara dozed for a while, but came awake when she heard a thud outside. The door to her room came open. Adara sat upright and threw the covers off, immediately tense and alert. A figure, silhouetted in the doorway, halted in mid-entry and peered through the darkness at Adara.

"Gosh, I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd be in here. I didn't mean to scare you. Goodness you seem tense. Watch your eyes." The voice addressed the ceiling. "Comptrol. Lights on, please." The lights flared, revealing a slim, young and curly-haired humanoid female. Her eyes flashed with good humour and her smiling face seemed cherubic. Adara flinched and blinked several times. "I warned you," the girl admonished, then looked closer. "Hey wow. It's you. They never told me who I was bunking with. It's great to meet you." She extended her hand.

Adara looked up at the person talking to her. *But it had been so quiet.* She scowled and shook the hand.

"My name's Meeja. Don't bother introducing yourself. I already know who you are. Read all about you, saw you

on my holoviewer. Hey, is it true that you learned all the ancient mystic rites of the Taiamoorans when you were a kid? That was one of the things I read about you but I didn't think that one was true. That'd be really neat though. I like mysticism and mystic stuff. Don't you? Which bunk do you want?"

Adara kept scowling and looked about the small room. "What other bunk is there?" One benefit - the only one for Adara - from the events of the last week, was that she found it easier to pronounce words now. They sounded nearly perfect.

"This one," Meeja replied cheerfully and went out into the hallway. She came back, struggling with a stiff mattress and a bunch of blankets, which she dropped in the middle of the floor. "I guess we get a drill or something and attach it to the wall." She pointed to the space above Adara's bed. "But then, they never really specified. They just told me to report here and not to forget to show up for the training session at 1300 hours. I just joined up! My parents said it was a bad idea and they didn't know I had joined until yesterday when I got called up, but they took it in stride. But then my parents are like that." Meeja bent over from the waist to scoop up her blankets, never missing a beat. "My sisters had a fit, but my sisters are like that too. Have you done any training yet? I'm really excited about it. I can't wait to get out there and do something. Sitting at home was so

frustrating. Especially after watching your trial on the Nets. Hey, don't you ever talk?"

Adara had stopped scowling and simply reverted to staring. "Do you have a last name?"

"Nope. I'm an amphoid," she answered, straightening and holding up her hand, spreading her fingers to expose the webbed skin between them. She pointed to an area on the side of her neck. "I had the gills cosmetically disguised before I came, so I wouldn't scare any of the other humanoids, but I guess I shouldn't have bothered. Gosh! I've never seen so many different types in one area! What are those big, tall hairy things? I wouldn't want to get one of those things angry. Though I'm told they're a pacifist race. I suppose if you're that big, you can afford to be pacifist! They must be handy in a corner, or on a rescue mission. Why, I'll bet they could lift a whole transport ship full of people. What do you think?"

Adara was still staring. "Amphoids don't have last names?" she said weakly.

"Goodness, you're such a conversationalist. No, silly, no last names. Each of us, on my home planet at least, has a completely unique name. No duplications. We don't need last names, but that's on my planet. I've been told that on other amphoid planets they are given two names to designate lineage. But that would be unnecessary on my planet. With the high air moisture on land and the rest of our planet covered in plain old water, it's easier to talk

with the mind. Equipment is so hard to design for damp environments, don't you see? Naturally, lineage information is always connected with your mind transmissions, as everyone knows, so we don't need two names. Yes, with an almost completely watery planet, all conversations take place through the mind - and so most people think we are a very quiet race."

Adara coughed at this, but her face was expressionless. "You're my roommate? How did you get in?" she asked.

"Mmm-hmm. Yup. We're roommates all right. The lock panels down here are set for two people, so I just tried my luck and *tada*, here I am. Training partners too, I think. I didn't know your name, but I do recall that we've got the double assignment. Let me get my copy of the official database access chip." She dropped her blankets on the floor again and stepped out into the hallway. As Adara waited, she could hear Meeja accost someone outside to ask them what to do about the bed. A few minutes later, Meeja came back in with her arms full of boxes. She dropped them on the blankets and began sorting through them. "I picked up your new stuff at Manufacture 'cause I noticed that you hadn't picked them up. Although it looks like we're lucky 'cause we've got a Fetcher in our room. You'll have to teach me how to use it. Here," she said and began tossing some smaller boxes toward Adara. "This'll be your uniform and equipment set I think. Ah ha! Here it is!" She reached into a larger

box and rummaged through it. She pulled out a small round disk, which she took over to the computer and popped it in a slot at the side. The screen lit up with a list of names and numbers.

"Yup. Training partners. Isn't that great? Not many get double assignment like that. We'll be really good friends I'll bet. Wow, look at the time. I'm going to go request a drill like that guy said and then I'll come back here to get straightened up before we have to report. Hey, would you mind if I do the decorating in here? It's so plain. Wait, don't answer - let me go first. Don't worry. I'll be back in time for training. We're going to be great friends, I just know it!" With that, she beamed and whisked outside again.

Adara stared after her, frowning. She looked at the mess on the floor. Then she got back into bed and pulled the covers over her head.

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"When I say stand forward, I mean stand forward! I do not mean stand three inches behind the rest of the line! Now pull even!" Rilken's shouted directly into the face of one new recruits, two down from where Adara and Meeja stood stiffly at attention. There were thirty of them in the large training hall, all in a single line. Rilken's moved on to his next victim. "You! You're out of uniform! What

the hell do you call this thing?"

The man next to Meeja trembled and glanced down at the long golden sash that dangled from where it was tied at his waist. "It is a representation of the ancient symbol of the house I belong to on my home planet, sir. Tradition dictates that I wear it always. I have not removed it since birth. Sir."

"Oh yeah? Well I dictate that you take it off." Rilkens reached out and yanked off the sash. "You get out on the field wearing one of these stupid things and a Karaash will string you up with it. If you don't get it caught in the machinery first! Of all the dumb, lame-brained . . ." He shook his head in disgust. He peered behind the man's head and inspected the long black hair that was bound by a single gold ribbon. "That will do for now, since you'll get helmets. What's your name?"

"Sark, sir."

"Well Sark, get it right next time! And you're to address any Classer with a higher rank than you as Commander, got it? It saves trying to figure out whether you're talking to a he, she, it, or all of the above!" Rilkens moved over to inspect Meeja. "Now this is more like it. Forward once! Face the lines!" Meeja took one sharp step toward the commander and spun smartly on her heel to face the line of recruits. "This," Rilkens shouted, addressing the group, "is the way you idiots are supposed to look!" He pointed at her uniform. "No stupid sashes and everything

is clean! Did you all take note of the way she came about? Practice it until your feet fall off! Return to your position." Meeja did as she was instructed.

Rilkens sidestepped and examined Adara. He shook his head angrily. "I said stand forward! That means both shoulders are pulled back straight and even. Stop slouching and move that shoulder up!" Adara didn't move. Rilkens looked at her incredulously. "I said move that shoulder up!" He bellowed.

"I can't, Commander," Adara turned her head to look Rilkens in the eye.

He stepped closer and screamed, "Don't ever tell me you can't do something! Now raise that shoulder!"

Adara was facing forward, face burning and eyes glistening. "I can't."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because I am still rehabilitating the shoulder. Commander."

He rolled his eyes. "That's your excuse? Well it doesn't wash with me. I hope you're not planning on receiving special status because of it." Rilkens lowered his voice. Everyone strained to hear him. "I selected each of you personally for this ship. I'm even taking a hand in your training, which I don't normally do. Everyone is going to be a top player in this unit. Do you know why, Cohili?"

"No, Commander," she said.

"Because they will all follow procedure and obey every

order to the letter! No excuses!" he yelled. He turned to the company in general. "From now on, everything on this ship is going to be done right! No half-measures! You've all have access to the procedural data base and the next time we meet, I expect you to know it inside and out!" He turned back to Adara. "You'd better get that shoulder in better condition than it is!"

"Yes, Commander," she said. Her eyes shone and she trembled with fury, but she kept to rigid attention.

Rilkens moved down the line, throwing out insults and issuing orders. When he got far enough away, Meeja cautiously reached over and gave Adara's hand a quick squeeze of support. Adara jerked it away and gave her bunkmate a vicious glare. *I don't want your sympathy!*

Meeja just smiled and winked. "It's all show," she whispered. "Just keep your eyes to the front and follow orders, even the stupid ones. They'll leave you alone after a while. My great-grandfather was in a military you know. I remember his stories." She winked again and then made her face as blank and expressionless as possible.

Adara looked over Meeja's stance carefully for a moment, then adjusted her own to match. *If this is what it takes, then this is what I'll do.* She schooled her face to look empty, but a gleam of defiant anger still shone in her eyes.

Rilkens harangued them for another fifteen minutes and



then tried to teach them how to march. They bumped and crashed into each other and stepped on each other's feet. He kept them going for what seemed like an eternity and then finally brought them to a stumbling halt. "That will have to do for now. You have a fifteen-minute break before you will be split up for your first simulations. Dismissed!"

When the door closed behind him, the line broke up. Meeja wheeled to face Adara, her chest heaving. "Whoa! Did you know we've been marching for over an hour? I didn't think I could do it, did you? That was incredible! Left, right, left, right. He's pretty good don't you think? I bet he's proud of us, although he tried not to show it. I think we did really well for our first time! It was almost, well you know, it got mystical didn't it? You, me, all of us were a part of each other almost. That was really neat! But tiring, wow! My heart is going like anything and my feet are killing me! Aren't yours?"

Adara looked down at her feet and shrugged.

Meeja looked at her in exasperation and put her webbed hands on her hips. "Gosh and you're such a complainer too. Can't get you to shut up, really." She sat on the ground. "Come on and sit down, we'll try and catch our breath before we have to go to these simulation thingies."

Adara sat on the ground beside her bunkmate, but didn't bother talking to her. Instead she concentrated on slowing her breathing, keeping her mouth closed and taking long

deep breaths through her nose, nostrils flaring. After she returned to normal, she closed her eyes and concentrated on her muscles. Slowly, she willed them to relax and stop shaking. When she opened her eyes, Meeja was staring at her in wonder.

"How did you do that?" She was still breathing hard. "You were going as hard as I was!"

"Practice. Control."

Meeja glared at her. "Is everything with you like that? I noticed you were pretty closed up during your appearance on the Nets." Adara shrugged again. "Don't you ever break loose occasionally?"

"No." She knew better, from experience. *Breaking loose usually results in a broken leg. Or worse.*

"You should really like this stuff then. It's all rules, regulations, plenty of control."

"This stuff is stupid," Adara grumbled.

"Sort of, but it's sort of good too. My great-grandfather told me all about it. These are old methods, to try and get us to learn how to work together. To teach us how to take orders and do things we might not want to do. I imagine it's pretty useful considering how many different species there are here."

"It's still stupid."

"Oh lighten up a little," she teased. She gave Adara a mock glare. Adara returned the stare, her face void of emotion. Meeja blinked and looked away.

Adara looked around the room at the other recruits. There *were* a variety of races present, some humanoid, and some not. The only common feature among them was the uniform and even that varied in proportion from creature to creature. As she looked about, struggling to identify the different aliens around her, she spied a young man bending down to pick something off the floor.

It was a golden sash. Adara recognized Sark from the inspection. As he reverently gathered it up in his hands, she could see that it was trampled beyond repair. Sark had sharp, angular features and grey eyes that were moist with emotion. He rolled the remains of the cloth carefully and glanced up suddenly, as if sensing he was being watched. He spotted Adara looking at him and his face suddenly suffused with hatred. He stood up and turned his back on her.

Adara watched his back, feeling confused. *Why is he mad at me? I didn't step on it any more than anyone else here.*

Meeja had seen the whole thing. "Wow, what'd you do to Sark?" she asked.

Adara shook her head. "Nothing. I don't even know him."

"Weird. Sure you don't know him? Oh well, don't take it personally. I hear he has a Selortian temper - although he isn't from that area - which means breathing the wrong way could set him off. Nasty bunch, the Selortians."

Meeja sighed and laid back to relax.

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When the door opened again, it was not Rilken, but two new officers that came into the room. Everyone scrambled to attention.

One of the officers counted out fifteen soldiers. Meeja and Adara were among them. "You folks come with me," he said. "I'm going to take you to the sim hall across the way so we'll have some room to play. The rest of you will stay here."

The small group followed him out of the hall, across the corridor and into another hall. It looked the same as the one they had been in and it seemed to Adara to be little more than an empty room. The only thing that broke the monotony of the bare walls was the entrance, a few vents and a computer.

"Please," the officer said, "just have a seat on the floor for the moment." He waited until everyone settled. He was young, blonde and blue-eyed. He carried a computer pad with him and he grinned easily. "Okay, for the record, my name is Jonathan Smith. I'm a 70th Classer and a true Terran to boot. Raised on the home soil, unlike all you poor humans here who can lay claim only to Terran ancestry." A few people laughed.

"Have you had much chance to get into the procedural

data base?" Nobody answered. "I didn't think so. Commander Rilken likes to throw you into training before you know all the rules. Hmm," he paused to consult his pad, "there isn't a lot to learn, to be honest, but we'll start with the basics. Since you're all new, you're all ranked as 100th Classers. What we usually call you is either 'hunnie', which probably sounds funnier if you don't need a translation, or 'low-lifers.'"

Jonathan set his pad down on the floor and crossed his arms. "All hunnies start as what we call Unloaders. Your job is simple. When they call in ISR to do an evacuation, we station Unloaders at our offsite. The offsite is anywhere the Karaash aren't," he grinned, "a moon, usually, because it's easier to head straight up to orbit and beyond than to try to find a safe haven on the planet being attacked. The offsite is where we take evacuees - using bulk transports. At the offsite Unloaders set up a receiving area, clear out the incoming BT's as quickly as possible and get the wounded to our medical field units. It's relief work on a massive scale and we quite often have to set up temporary housing until the attack site can be restored. That's it. Questions so far?"

"Yes," someone said. It was Sark. "Why are the job names and ranks so simple? They sound stupid."

Jonathan laughed. "You're right, they do. Almost everyone complains about that. It's for translation purposes. Because the language structures of some of our

more interesting members are so different, we sometimes run into problems when the computer tries to translate. So we try to make the terminology simple and with as little abstraction as possible. Anyone else?"

"What else is there to do?" Adara said.

"Bored already?" Jonathan joked. Adara didn't laugh; in fact, she was bored. "Well, there are a couple of ways to go. You can continue as an Unloader for the rest of your time with ISR if you like. If you have expertise in the medical field, we encourage you to become a field medic - we can always use those. The same goes for scientific expertise, as we need new blood in our research and development department."

He scratched the back of his head. "Other than that, you move on to being a Loader. It's far more dangerous work, because you are onsite, the scene of the attack. You have to search for wounded and get them safely to a BT. You have to get civilians, who are usually in a state of panic, to a BT, or at least to relative safety. Depending on how bad the attack is, you may find that you have to deal with collapsed structures, damaged defence systems, power failures, all while under heavy fire from the Karaash."

Adara didn't waste any time thinking about what she wanted to be. Loaders were closer to the Karaash. That's where she was going.

"I have a question," someone said.

"Okay," Jonathan said. "Your name?"

"Janice," the woman said. She was tall and thin and she looked timid. "Um, how do we get promotions and things?"

"Ah, the important stuff!" Jonathan said. "How do I stop being a low-lifer?" That drew another round of laughter. "That's not that hard. You receive an automatic step up every time you gain experience, that is, when you complete a mission. If they called you out tomorrow, after the mission, you'd be a 99th - a `double-niner.'"

"Wow," Meeja leaned over to whisper into Adara's ear. "That means he's been through thirty rescues." Adara nodded mutely. She was astounded. *How often have they called out ISR?*

"There are other ways to be promoted," Jonathan continued. "If you do something stupid, I mean, brave," he dead-panned, "you'll be awarded with a jump in rank. Usually, it boosts you by five steps."

"Has High Command boosted you?" Meeja asked.

"Well, I've been given the boot a couple of times, but I don't think that's what you meant." Meeja smiled. "Yes, I did receive a promotion for something I did onsite. High Command also gave me another promotion because they thought I had some aptitude for training hunnies. Those kinds of promotions are harder to get of course."

He picked up his pad. "Rank does have its privileges in ISR. Upper ten Classers coordinate the lower-ranked leaders." He gave them a conspiratorial wink. "For

example, when you're smart enough to get really high up, like 4th Classer, you command an entire ship. 3rd Classers act as aides to 2nd Classers and they're Fleet Commanders. They also form the Lower Assembly, while 1st Classers form the Upper Assembly of our glorious High Command." He dropped his voice to a whisper. "I said all that in case Rilken was listening."

He walked to the computer on the wall while everyone smirked and nudged each other. "Okay, let's get down to business. Stand up and grab a partner. The odd one out will partner with me." He checked the data on his pad and gave the computer some instructions. The walls shimmered and the sim hall disappeared.

It was replaced with a beautiful rolling meadow. It was a nearly perfect simulation. There was sunlight, a gentle breeze and even the scent of dry plants and soft dirt.

"Gosh," Meeja said. "It's so real." She glanced around with something akin to glee. "We don't have anything like this on my home planet, but I've heard about it. I didn't realize it was so good."

"This is Enseech," Jonathan said. "It's a moon we used a couple of years ago for an evacuation. It's the probably nicest environment you'll ever be thrown into." He touched the computer again. Several meters away, a BT appeared in front of them. "Okay, here's the scenario. We've dropped you at this offsite. Your team leader, me, has chosen a spot just behind the BT landing site as a



holding area for civilians. I chose you two," he pointed at Sark and Janice, "to go to the back hatch of the BT and help the civilians off the ship. Remember this: the civilians must stay in the holding area no matter what. They have to be kept out of the way of the landing and the medical area until they are sent back to their homeworld or assigned temporary shelter. The rest of you, over here."

He led them to the holding area and instructed the simulation to go ahead. Sark and Janice helped the civilians off the ship; then Jonathan showed the Unloaders how to guide them away from the landing site and organize them so they stayed away.

"Simple, right?" Jonathan asked. Everyone agreed. "Okay, now you've handled civilians - or civs as we call them. Let's do the wounded. They usually station the field medical units on the opposite side of the BT landing site." As if on cue, a couple of makeshift structures appeared. "So that the BT's are landing in the middle of things. We like to keep the holding area and field units back a bit from the landing site for safety reasons. We take the wounded out through the side hatch. You and you," he pointed at Adara and Meeja, "come here."

He led them to the side of the BT and directed the others to follow. He requested another image from the computer and a large board appeared. "This is an anti-grav platform." He motioned at Adara and Meeja. "Pick

it up at either end, go in through the side hatch and lay the casualties out on it. Then take them to the field hospital. There will be a medic stationed aboard the BT and several of them at the field unit. Follow their orders. Take the casualties they want you to take, put them where they need them. Do it fast. Go."

The pair grabbed the board and went into the BT. The casualties were dead weights and they struggled to transfer them from the floor to the board. The board came to life immediately. It hovered about a meter off the ground and they ran with it, guiding it with their hands. They slid their passengers on to a table at the field unit and ran back.

"Good stuff," he said. He nodded at Adara. "You still bored?"

"Yes," she said truthfully.

"That's what I needed to hear," he said. "Let's make this a full-blown simulation. You eight will look after civs. The rest of you are on casualty detail. I'm going to throw every possible contingency in the book at you. I'm also going to change the scenery on you every three minutes. Stick to this landing site and don't wander off," he added. "Comptrol, begin Smith-hunny-one please."

Suddenly, the scene changed and the hall was alive with movement. The BT was hovering above the ground, cycling through the final stages of its landing process. A hundred simulated ISR recruits joined them and swarmed

toward the BT. In the distance, Adara could see a long line of additional BT's in their final approaches and the frenzied movement of the Unloaders there.

Meeja hopped from one foot to the other in excitement. "Wow," she said. She got a better grip on the anti-grav board they were still carrying. "Real action. Let's go."

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

Adara and Meeja were the first inside the BT when the side hatch popped open. The ship was crammed full, with the casualties near the front of the ship, stretched out on the floor. They were large creatures this time, not humans, and they looked heavy. They had craggy features and skin that looked like the surface of a rock. The unhurt civilians milled around at the back of the ship.

A medic approached them. Her uniform was torn in places and her shoulder oozed blood. "Take them in the order that I release them from the stasis fields," she instructed, "and move fast. These are Teetlos and they fade quickly."

She bent and touched a small black rectangle on the floor near a Teetlo's head. The air around it wavered as though it was hot and then cleared. The creature moaned and shifted.

Adara and Meeja worked to get the Teetlos on the board; only two would fit at a time. As they worked,

more people came in with their own boards and began loading up.

Adara led the board through the hatch, with Meeja following. They reached the medics quickly and left the Teetlos in a unit that was already buzzing with activity. They were halfway back to the BT when the meadow they were working in changed into a barren, red desert. Both stumbled in the soft, shifting sand.

Meeja coughed in the suddenly dusty air. "Blech," she grumbled. "This stuff is thick enough to eat."

They ran back to the BT as fast as they could, their feet churning in the sand. They picked up another two Teetlos inside the ship and came back outside. It was slower going this time and the medical units seemed farther away. They began to sweat.

They were just a few meters away when the landscape changed again and Adara cursed to herself. She slipped and dropped her end of the anti-grav board, cracking her knees on what was now ice-covered ground. Meeja struggled to keep the platform steady. They were now on a steep slope and a fierce wind began to howl down the hillside, causing the board to bob up and down dangerously.

Adara recovered, grabbed the board and signalled to Meeja to go ahead so that they were walking single file up the slope. They heaved and shoved the platform up the hill, trembling with exertion. When they reached the

wind-blasted top, two medics ran out from the makeshift hospital to greet them.

"I got a case of shock over here," one of them shouted over the wind as she examined the creatures they'd brought him. "I need a stabilizer."

"This other one is too far gone," the other medic reported as he handed over a small vial. He signalled to Meeja and Adara. "Take it around the back and leave it, but bring the other one inside first."

Meeja looked at the creature. "But he's still alive!"

The medic shook his head. "Not for long. He's been cut here and here," he pointed at the wounds, "and won't last more than five minutes in the warmth. There's no room in here."

"But we can't just leave him outside!"

The second medic shrugged. "So haul him down the mountain again for all I care! But first get this other casualty into the unit so we can save it. Move it!"

They took the first Teetlo into the hospital and then took the second around the back; a pile of bodies covered a large patch of ground. Meeja looked over at Adara, who shrugged and bent to remove the dying creature from the board. Meeja hesitated for a moment and then with obvious reluctance, moved to help. It moaned piteously, bubbles of blood forming on its lips. Meeja bent to comfort it, but Adara walked away without even looking around. Meeja hurried to catch up.

"How can you stand to leave it like that?" she said as they lifted the board again and moved around the hospital. "It'll die out there in the cold!"

"Very likely." They ducked past the building and made their way down the slope, trying not to slip.

"But don't you care?"

Adara didn't answer until they got past a particularly icy patch. "It'll die in the hospital too. Orders are orders. Besides, it's only a simulation."

Meeja stared at her companion in disbelief. "That's not the point," she muttered.

Jonathan and a lizard-like creature met them at the bottom of the hill. Adara recognized the lizard as being real - he'd marched with them earlier. "I'm having everyone trade roles," Jonathan said. "Give me your board. Disk and I will do casualties. You do civilians."

The landscape changed again, this time into lush green rolling hills. Bright sunshine replaced the wind and clouds. They approached the BT site, where the first ship was taking off to make room for another incoming BT. She shook her head in disgust. *Some rescue operations, she thought. Stuff as many civilians and wounded in a BT as you can and ship them elsewhere.*

Adara ran to the back of the ship and jumped inside, leaving Meeja and the others to direct the Teetlos as she pushed, shoved and bullied the bewildered creatures out of the cargo area.

Outside the ship, two other Unloaders raced by with a board of wounded Teetlos. One of the civilians caught sight of the platform and howled, spinning around to crash through the crowd in hot pursuit. The other Teetlos stopped dead in their tracks and added their own mournful cries.

Meeja was at the front of the group and the baying Teetlos blocked her path. "Adara! Don't let it get away!" she yelled.

Adara pelted after the runaway alien, who was bearing down on the Unloaders with incredible speed. Adara muttered under her breath. Teetlos looked like walking lumps of rock, but could obviously move when they had to.

It reached the platform before she did and struck an Unloader in the back of the head. He crumpled to the ground with a cry and dropped his end of the board. The Teetlo circled to get to the other Unloader and was just about to smash him, when Adara dove into a flying tackle.

It was like hitting a brick wall. She aimed for the beast's mid-section, hoping to knock it off balance, but the thing didn't seem to notice. She slid to the ground and rolled in front of the beast. It moved to step over her, slammed its foot into her stomach and pitched forward. It landed heavily on Adara who grunted, but wrapped her arms around its leg.



"Go!" she yelled. The Unloader who'd been hit tottered to his feet and grabbed the board. He yelled at his partner and the pair took off at a run. The beast howled again and tried to get up, but Adara wouldn't let it go. It turned angrily on Adara and slammed a fist into her face.

Suddenly, she was lying on a cold steel floor. She lay there a moment, dazed and confused. Meeja walked over to help her up and started laughing.

"You're going to end up with a good bruise from that one! Give me your hand."

Adara sat up and looked around. Others were looking around in temporary confusion too. They were 'back' in the simulation hall and obviously the day's training was over. Adara scowled and ignoring Meeja's outstretched hand, stood up.

She rubbed her stomach gently. "They could give us a warning," she muttered.

Meeja laughed again. "It'd be nice. You should have seen the two you rescued. They were running when the sim ended and they crashed right into the wall. Talk about embarrassing!"

Jonathan called out to them. "Over here, please. Everyone over here."

They gathered in a circle around Jonathan. "Sorry about the surprise ending. It's supposed to give three warnings, but there must be a glitch. Real life evacuations do seem to end abruptly though and you'll never know how long

they'll last, so pace yourself. The Karaash seem to like densely populated areas, cities mostly, or a stretch of continuous farm settlements. Once the number of available victims drops off to a certain level, they leave. We're not sure why - maybe it's too much work to pursue individuals. To minimize casualties we have to evacuate massively and quickly. A mission might last a few hours, or it might last a few days." He paused, to let them absorb this. "So, how'd you like your first taste of ISR operations?" Everyone groaned.

He chortled. "Well, they're not usually that confusing. For one thing, the environment doesn't change like that all the time. We do that here to get you used to working under extreme conditions. You'll also have better equipment: a biosuit to regulate temperature so you don't freeze or fry and a helmet and gloves for protection and communications purposes. You'll also get a stunner. It's the closest thing we've got to a weapon and it's the only thing we're allowed. It's for knocking out and controlling passengers who get hysterical on us."

"Are the hospitals always at the top of the hill?" someone asked.

Jonathan grinned. "Nine times out of ten, no. When we're called in to do an evacuation, we can't get picky. Our priority is to get the victims away from the Karaash and sometimes our choice of offsites isn't always the best. Get used to it. Next time we'll practice assembling

the temporary shelters and holding units. Anything else?"

No one said anything and Jonathan looked satisfied.

"Good. Go get cleaned up. Take some time to use the procedural database, because Rilken's will want you to memorize the information there. Other than that, you have the rest of the day off. See you all here tomorrow!"

He left them to chatter among themselves. The trainees began to leave the hall.

"We're done here," Adara said. It was more of a statement than a question.

Meeja looked around. "I guess so. We've been standing here for a bit and no one has come in to order us around. How about . . . hey! Where are you going?"

Adara was halfway to the exit of the sim hall. "Sickbay. Then my . . . our quarters," she called back over her shoulder.

Meeja hurried to catch up. "Want me to go with you? Then we could head to the Rec Level for a while to unwind. I don't know about you, but these sims give me the creeps. You could probably use a drink of something."

"I'm fine." Adara kept walking.

"So, I'm not. And I'm not going to let you spend the entire night in front of that stupid computer screen or sleeping in bed. You strike me as a person who needs to get out more."

"I'm fine. Go ahead."

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am."

"No, you are not."

Adara stopped walking to glare at Meeja. *This is ridiculous*, she thought. Meeja glared back with equal ferocity.

"I don't have time for the Rec Level," Adara protested. "I have too much to do."

"You've probably never been and it's time to take a night off. Play some games. Have some fun."

"Why do you care?"

"Because you are my bunkmate and training partner and because I'm weird. In spite of the fact you are silent, moody and pretty depressing, I like you. I've liked you since I met you. Now do I have to get a 99th to order you to take a break?"

"I have no use for games. They are a waste of time."

Meeja gave her a considering look. "That depends on the game," she said. "There are some games that are really good for improving coordination and reflexes. We can even eat while we're there, so that will be done and out of the way."

Adara continued to glare, but thought about what Meeja said. Improved reflexes and coordination couldn't hurt. In fact, it would probably help. *And*, Adara thought, *if I don't go, she'll probably follow me back to our quarters and chatter all night*. She sighed.

Meeja took it as surrender. "Great!" she slapped Adara on the back and began walking her out. "We can get to know all the other hunnies. That's a great name for us, don't you think? Let's go to sickbay first so we can get checked out. Do you want to change your clothes or should we just go in our uniform? Probably our uniform would be best. Come on, come on, let's go!"

\*

The Rec Level took up one full deck. Toward the front of the ship, the Rec Level consisted of physical activity equipment. Spacious and carefully laid out, the area provided enough machines, sports and adjustable environments to provide for the fitness needs of the more than fifteen hundred personnel aboard the *Mat-1*.

Toward the back of the ship, the Rec Level was split up into many different sections. There was one for eating and drinking, one for gaming, another for strictly musical pursuits. There were botanical gardens and dance rooms and some sections that were combinations of all of those elements. While an outsider may have considered the Rec Level a waste of space, especially after looking at the cramped living quarters, High Command had found it to be an absolutely vital part of each ship. For one thing, it provided stress relief between assignments. It also gave the varied members of ISR something to do other than

argue over politics and culture. In fact, arguments were strictly forbidden on this level.

Adara still found it too noisy.

Meeja led them to a large, unoccupied table near the front of a dining area and sat down. The surface glowed at them.

"Hello, patrons," the table intoned. "Do you wish to make an order at this time?"

Meeja rubbed her hands together. "Boy, am I starved. What are the featured selections tonight?"

Within seconds, a holographic projection of three kinds of meals appeared in the air in front of them. "Hmm," Meeja debated the choices. "That looks too boring and I can't eat this. I've never tried this other stuff, but, I'm feeling adventurous." She passed her hand through the projection and the table thanked her. "What are you having?"

Adara put her hand through the image closest to her. Meeja frowned. "Isn't that the same thing I saw you eating at lunch? Before training, I mean."

"I don't know," Adara replied. "Is it?"

"I didn't think you were paying attention," Meeja smiled. "You were glued to that computer screen like it was your best friend. What were you working on? I know a lot of people who concentrate, but I don't think I've seen anyone who can-"

"Standard Interstellar Base educational curriculum,"

Adara interrupted. It seemed the only way to halt the flow of words.

"Oh, well, I suppose that makes sense. You'd be wanting to catch up on whatever you've missed in the last few years. I imagine just reviewing all your previous work would take a long time to do. I bet you have a lot of stuff left to review before you could even begin to get on with the new stuff. If it were up to-"

"No."

Meeja looked at her and waited. "No, what?" she said patiently.

"I don't have a lot to review. I did that already."

"Already?" Meeja looked dubious. "You should teach me your technique. I can never seem to focus well on academic work. Used to drive my parents crazy, because they'd try and try to get me to work harder and I did okay and all but-" she paused for breath and at that moment a roboserv hovered to the table with their meals. "Oh good. I'm so hungry. I love the way they get the roboservers in the Fetchers; don't you? That's so cute! It's really too bad we can't use these guys on the field. Somebody told me it had to do with religious objections from the Selortians but I don't . . . um," she stopped. "I don't mean to be rude or anything, but you're holding that wrong."

Adara blinked. Meeja gestured with her spoon. "Move your thumb up and allow the stem to rest on your forefinger, like this." She modeled the proper method. "I

normally wouldn't mention something that, because of different cultures and customs and stuff, but I thought considering your background maybe you'd like to know. I hope I didn't offend you or anything, did I?"

Adara was still looking at her spoon. She adjusted her grip and the utensil immediately felt more comfortable in her hand. *When did I forget that?* she wondered.

"Did I?" Meeja asked again.

Adara began eating her meal. "No," she said, between bites. "I don't get offended."

"Oh, good," Meeja said, with obvious relief. "Seeing as I have to live with you and all. Oh look," she pointed to a group who had just entered. "There's some hunnies from this afternoon. Hey, over here!" she shouted. Adara groaned inwardly as the group moved to join them. Meeja was bad enough. Adara recognized only Disck, the lizard creature and Janice, the shy girl.

"Hi," Meeja said. "You're from our unit, aren't you?"

"Yeah, that's right," one of them replied. He was a young man, probably about twenty-three or twenty-four years old. He had curly red hair and a set of freckles that made him look almost boyish. "I'm Dirk Johnson," he said and pointed to his left. "This is Brad Manter and beside him is Ziki. That's Disck at the end of the table, Janice Scader and those are Pilfer." He pointed to three tall, hairy beasts that looked identical. "That's Chang Kwak next to Pilfer."



"Well, I'm Meeja and this is my bunkmate, Adara Cohili." Adara gave them a brief nod. "Have you eaten yet? Go ahead and order something. This is good, I'll tell you that."

Everyone made their orders and talked about the afternoon's training until the food arrived. Since Meeja was nearly done her own meal, she directed the conversation to the matter of origins.

"I know you can't tell by just looking at me, but I'm an amphoid. Adara here, well if you pay *any* attention to the NewsNets you have to know where she's from. What about the rest of you?"

"Well," Dirk began, taking a moment to wash down his food with a glass of juice. "We were just talking about that. Disck was tellin' us his full name and none of us could say it."

The lizard creature pulled back its lips in what Adara assumed was the equivalent of a smile. "It's not that hard when you have a tongue like mine," he said and stuck it out.

"I'm from Idieh Minor," Ziki said. She looked about the same age as Dirk; she wore her hair straight but cut so it swooped to one side. It was also a striking color - a pale, yet luminous pink. Her golden eyes flashed with something close to defiance when she said: "I'm here against the wishes of my family, my religion and my government."

"Wow," Meeja said. "That's neat. My parents didn't want me to be here either."

Ziki was taken aback. "Really?" She relaxed her posture a bit and smiled. "Sorry for sounding so defensive. I guess that I've been fighting to get here for so long, I didn't realize others had trouble joining up. I keep expecting everyone to yell at me."

"Don't worry about it," Meeja said casually. "My parents didn't want me to join because they thought it was too dangerous. But I couldn't sit around and do nothing, especially after seeing Adara on the nets." Adara kept her full attention on the food, trying to ignore the looks she knew that comment would get her.

"We understand, Ziki," Disck said. "As for myself, there was no question but that I should be here. There is a long, proud tradition of service to others in my home pod. They expected it of me."

"That's the same for me," Janice said and then hesitated, as though surprised at her own boldness. She had quiet brown eyes and she wore her soft hair in a conservative bun. "I thought it was the right thing to do. To join ISR."

"Well, Brad and me," Dirk said, blushing, "we're SaTerrans. One reason I joined was to get away from there."

There was a moment of embarrassed, but sympathetic silence. Adara glared down at her spoon. She had no idea what was significant about being SaTerran. She made a

mental note to ask Meeja later.

"To be perfectly honest," Chang said in mock seriousness, "I came aboard for the adventure. And the games. Weren't we going to try the one that guy Sark mentioned?"

"Right," Dirk nodded and slurped the rest of his drink. "Wanna join us?" he asked Meeja.

"Sure," she said and grabbed Adara by the shoulders as the others gulped down their food and stood up. "Let's go. This could be fun."

Adara didn't want to leave the rest of her meal, but found she didn't have much choice. They passed through two rooms before they came to one that was brimming with people. Dirk looked around for a moment and then spotted Sark and a few others by a table in the corner. They gathered around him.

A glowing orange grid lined the tabletop. As they watched, a blue energy ball popped up from one of the squares. Sark, standing with feet spread apart, grabbed it and gave it a quick squeeze so that it vanished with a snapping noise. When it had disappeared, another blue ball popped up from another square and he grabbed it with his other hand.

"This is the game?" Meeja asked Dirk.

He nodded. "He said it was a new twist on an old classic."

The balls started appearing more rapidly. A red ball

bounced up, but he avoided it, going instead for the blue ball that came up beside it. Another blue sphere went high and he had to jump to catch it. Three more came up in quick succession and then the fourth, a red sphere popped up close to his body. He touched it accidentally and it snapped out of existence with a blinding flash and a loud bang. Meeja jumped and gasped.

Sark heard her and stopped the game. He turned to Meeja. "Want to try it? I need a break."

"He's setting you up to look bad against his high score," someone said. Sark laughed.

"You're still sore because I've beaten you three times running," he said. He reset the game and told Meeja, "It starts slow, but gets faster. You can't miss any blues. Touch three reds and you're out."

"Got it," she said.

The first ball to pop up was red and Meeja grabbed for it. It flashed and scared her and she collapsed against the table in laughter.

"Blue, Meeja," Dirk called. "He said *don't* touch the reds!"

She tried it again. She caught three blues before she smushed another red ball. This time everyone laughed. She got a little further her third time and came away rubbing her eyes.

"Gosh, I can see spots," she giggled to Adara. "Those red ones are terrible."

Dirk stepped up for a turn. Adara watched the balls pop up one by one and began to notice a pattern as he played. Although the sequence seemed random, the game lulled the player into a steady rhythm, only to throw something too high, too low, or red. The quick change startled the person into making a mistake.

Disck moved in. He did quite well and Adara could feel the tension in the crowd build as the game began to pick up speed. Nearly everyone jumped when he grabbed his first red.

He continued to play well for a few minutes more, but he lost control after the game picked up speed again. There was a polite round of applause when he stepped away. Meeja took the opportunity to shove Adara up to the game. "Go on," she said. "Give it a try."

Adara tried to protest, but Meeja insisted. Adara frowned at her and reset the game. She stood like Sark had, with feet braced apart for stability. Adara held her hands up near her chest.

The first ball went up to her shoulder level. She grabbed and squeezed it away. A second and third came up and she took those with her left hand. She brought her hands back to her chest after each grab. Four more popped out, at various levels. The next was red and she ignored it.

The game picked up the pace. *Blue low, blue low, blue back, blue forward, blue high, red low, red low, blue back and high.* Her hands flashed out over the grid.

The crowd became tense again, as she surpassed what Disck had done. A chime went off, indicating she'd played past the first level. Her hands kept whipping out and back in, as though she were boxing and she treated each ball as a new variable. She refused to be drawn into a rhythm.

Four blues went up and she grabbed them. Just as she was pulling back, a red popped up and hit the bottom of her arm. The crowd flinched as one and groaned in sympathy.

She blinked rapidly to clear the flash spots from her eyes. *Up, down, back, up, no, down, down, up, high, no, no, back, low.* She hit her second red, but this time no one groaned. They were eager to see how much farther she could take it.

She played for another five minutes before the third red exploded in front of her. The crowd erupted into applause.

Adara stepped away from the table and rubbed at her eyes. "That was really good," Ziki said admiringly. "You've got incredible reflexes. I think you wiped Sark's score off the map."

Adara turned. Sure enough, Sark was standing beside the table, arms crossed and a sour expression on his face.

\*

"I'm . . . I'm sorry," Meeja staggered and fell to the floor. "Those Aspan Meteors were a lot stronger than I thought."

It was late and they were walking down the long corridor that led to their quarters. Adara sighed, grabbed Meeja by the arm and picked her up. That only served to make her companion giggle uncontrollably. "Ooooo, here comes Ms. Serious and Sober!"

"What was in those things anyway?"

Meeja burped quietly. "Um. Water. Sugar. Aspan flavouring. Lemon."

Adara raised an eyebrow and began half-walking, half-dragging Meeja. "Then what happened to you?"

"Silly!" Meeja teetered to the right. "Everyone knows that amphoids are allergic to citrus juice. Wrrrose, wosre, worse than alcohol." She began giggling again.

"Then why did you drink them?"

"Didn't know what was in them until I'd had five. Computer said there were no intocis. . . intorx, drunken effects."

"It probably mistook your profile for human. You should have your gills exposed again."

They reached the door to their room. "You are probably right." Meeja reached out and made a stab for the access panel. After the third miss, Adara brushed her hand away and touched it herself. The door slid open.

They walked over to the bunks and Adara picked Meeja

up and put her in the bottom bed. Meeja patted the blankets and motioned for Adara to come closer. Adara looked longingly at the computer screen for a moment, then sat down.

"So," Meeja tried to sit up, but gave up after the second attempt. "Tell me, did you have a good time? I mean before I went out of my mind? Did you enjoy the music? You did really well on that hologame - what was your score? What did you think of Dirk? He's cute, isn't he? So's the other one don't you think . . . "

Adara groaned and reached for the bed covers, dragging them up to tuck underneath Meeja's chin. She moved to go and Meeja grabbed her wrist.

"Wait. This is important. I promise I'll leave you alone if you'll answer one question. I mean it, this is really important to me. See, you seem so gloomy and I understand that and all, with what you've been through, so I wanted to make you seem a little happier. I've joked with you, smiled at you and everything and I really want you to lighten up a little bit. You work so hard and you're so serious all the time. I was hoping that tonight I might get you to loosen up or something, but then I went and drank those stupid Meteors and got stupid - I've never ever done that before believe me and I'll never do it again because my stomach is going to kill me tomorrow morning I can feel it but," she took a deep breath, "please tell me that you had a good time tonight. Please?" She



looked up with mournful eyes.

Adara stared at the drunken amphoid in her bunk. She had to admit the game had been good; it would be great for improving her reflexes and she'd even stopped noticing the noise. So she nodded to Meeja.

Meeja hiccuped. "Good," she smiled. "'Cause I put all those drinks on your bill."

Adara couldn't help it. It was so outrageous that she had to smile.

## CHAPTER FIVE

He hit the rocky floor and rolled over, screeching in satisfaction when he heard the blade hit the rock with a loud *clang!* In one fluid movement, he rolled to his feet and thrust his own sword out. The weapon hummed with the impact and stopped - just for a fraction of a second - as the flesh and bone resisted. Then it slid forward with a wet, sucking noise. His nostrils flared; he smelled blood.

He went wild and shrieked in triumph. His hand shot out and raked sideways, tearing into skin. In the same instant, he kicked out with his foot, heard the *thud* as it connected and felt his blade come free. He swung left and let the weapon carry his arm backward and then brought it up and over his head, his right hand grasping the handle to slice downward with unforgiving force. *Kachunk.* A body hit the ground.

He dropped his sword and went down on his knees, edging along and feeling the ground with his hands. When he found the writhing body, he pinned it with his own, reached for the short dagger at his belt and hacked

off his victim's arm. Standing, he swung it above his head, letting the blood from the severed appendage spray in all directions. It splattered the audience he knew was there, waiting, sensing.

He waited until they began chittering and squeaking in excitement and then threw the arm onto the ground. He hissed his name at them: *K'Saka!* and plunged the dagger into the body. There was a long, horrible, gurgling scream. The chittering became frantic and was accompanied by the sound of a hundred bare hands rapidly slapping hot stone; the Karaash were acknowledging their king.

K'Saka stood there for a moment in the darkness of the cave, savouring the taste of blood on his lips, his chest heaving. He listened carefully and decided the crowd sounded small; he guessed that there were less than ten hands worth of listeners around him. But then, the challenge from Sill had been a surprise.

K'Saka shook with excitement as he remembered how Sill had dropped down on him from the high ceiling above. It had been almost perfect. The stalactites had hidden Sill completely and the drop had been well timed. Almost perfect. All except that quiet little hiss of excitement, gore anticipation, that gave him away just seconds before he landed . . .

It had been an easy kill after that. Sill was fast, but small and K'Saka was larger, more vicious. He felt the

wall behind him and hissed to himself - the location for the attempt had obviously been chosen for a quick, brutal, kill. These walls were multifaceted; the corridor could only be negotiated by touch, because the squeaky navigation sounds his subjects used would bounce around crazily in this chamber. Who had time to feel the walls in combat? The fight had gone so fast, yes, so gloriously fast.

K'Saka felt his legs begin to convulse even as he heard the crowd edge toward the body. He tucked himself into a crevice in the wall; he knew that he'd be safe for the next few minutes at least, while they fought over the remains of Sill the pretender. He shuddered once and crumpled to the ground, giving himself to the *Saisiss*, the After-Blood. Spasms wracked his body; his arms twisted and jerked and his legs kicked the wall. His head lolled and blood ran out of his mouth from where he had bitten his forked tongue. Wave after wave of pain and pleasure crashed into him and he lost consciousness.

\*

When he came to, it was silent. Instantly on the alert, he jumped up and flattened himself against the wall. K'Saka turned his head this way and that, straining to hear any sign of movement. He was at his most vulnerable now, as the After-Blood released him, because he was

disoriented, weaponless and had no memory of where he was.

For a brief moment, K'Saka got the vague feeling that was somehow wrong, that it shouldn't be that way. But a drop of water fell from ceiling to floor; the noise exploded into the quiet, into his mind and the thought was gone.

Satisfied that there were no others around, K'Saka dropped down again and felt the floor for his weapons. He came across a shattered jawbone. He remembered the fight and realized that the bone was probably Sill's. He pulled his lipless mouth into a tight, ghastly grin and tucked the bone into his belt. They would likely need it at the Duplicants, he thought.

He retrieved his weapons and began edging his way out of the chamber. K'Saka wondered how Sill had known he'd be coming through this way. It wasn't a popular route. Perhaps Sill had gathered enough followers to have a network of informants throughout the tunnels. Yes, that was it. That had to be it.

Sill had followers, all keeping tabs on the king, tracking him, waiting for him, passing messages back and forth. How many were there? Dozens, maybe hundreds? Too many. It would be best to start killing some of them now, right after Sill's death. He would instruct his own followers accordingly. Kill. All of them.

He reached the entrance to the chamber and risked

emitting a short squeak. It did not bounce back and K'Saka nodded to himself. He was at the far end of the Path, the longest continuous tunnel on this barren hunk of rock. The planet was a mass of tunnels, twisting and curling their way through crust and core. An abandoned mining world, it had long since been raped of its rich supply of ores and minerals. The surface was barren and desolate; there were no plants to harvest and there wasn't any more game to hunt.

*Hunting!* The very thought made K'Saka's stomach growl loudly and the rumbling noise echoed in the cave and in the tunnel, making it sound as though he was surrounded by dozens of hungry Karaash. K'Saka wished he'd snatched a piece of Sill. He hoped the expedition he'd sent out earlier returned with fresh meat. It was getting harder and harder to come by and the further out a ship had to go, the more likely it was that the members of the expedition would hoard the catch. That would not do.

The hunt took time away from the Search.

K'Saka squeezed into the tunnel and crept forward. He paused at every offshoot of the tunnel to sniff the air. If Sill had been having him followed, then there was no telling where his people would be hidden. There were probably hundreds, or perhaps even thousands of them, he thought. Hiding everywhere. Yes. Best to be careful.

There was a scrabbling noise directly in front of him. In less than a second, he twisted himself onto his back,

yanked out his dagger and thrust it forward repeatedly. There was a surprised hiss of pain and the scrabbling stopped. Cautiously, K'Saka reached out with his hand to feel the neck ridge of the Karaash he'd just stabbed to death.

Sich. One of his own followers. K'Saka slapped the wall in frustration. Sich had been his fourth in command - no, that wasn't right. He had killed someone else two days ago, making him third in line. Yes, he had been good, strong, easily controllable. K'Saka slapped the wall repeatedly. A fierce fighter, reliable, loyal . . .

Or was he? What was he doing here? Did he know about Sill's assassination attempt? Was he part of it? He must have been . . . yes, that's why he was coming down the Path, to see if the job had been finished. Traitor! Or worse . . . K'Saka felt along the creature's belt. Armed! He was going to try and kill the king! He could now see their foolish scheme, he was sure. Two assassination attempts in one day! K'Saka felt the fury consume him. He picked up his dagger again and began stabbing the twitching body over and over and over again . . .

\*

By the time the Saisiss let him go this time, two hours had passed. He crawled over the corpse and heard the gaping wounds suck and whistle as he trampled it.

K'Saka ripped a hand off the body and stuffed it in his mouth. He continued down the tunnel, chewing and spitting out the bones as he went. It took him another half an hour to reach the right exit hole. It opened into a huge, airy chamber, close to the surface of the planet.

He went through the hole and slid down the wall to the floor. Squeaking and chattering noises suddenly overwhelmed him. He could smell and hear hundreds of others here - this was the Great Hall. It was the second biggest space in the planet's structure, with high vaulted ceilings and a vast, flat floor. It would often take half a day to walk to the other side, longer if it was crowded. It connected many short routes to the Path, like some sort of circular intersection.

K'Saka started through the press of bodies. He didn't intend to walk all the way across, at least not yet. He headed to the left, where he could hear the clinking and rattling of metal. The sounds came from the Up-Downs, the long, thick chains dangling through a hole in the ceiling of the chamber. They led to the surface and to the ships parked there. The Great Hall was the largest of the exit holes, but not the only one.

The crowd bumped and jostled him constantly as he squeezed his way through. Most days, this hall was more disorienting than the multifaceted ones down below. The room was usually far too crowded to be able to crouch down and feel the patterns in the floor. Sonar bounced



and careened, cancelling one signal, distorting another. K'Saka twitched his ears as he walked. It suddenly occurred to him that there were very few places left that a Karaash could use sonar. There were even rumours that certain Karaash could no longer use it above ground either. Nobody could explain why. Nobody was even sure if it was true. The vague, uneasy feeling of before returned to K'Saka and stayed with him. *It should not be this way*, he thought.

He reached the Up-Downs and began feeling his way through the jungle of metal vines. He grabbed each of them, one by one, hoping to find one that wasn't in use. When he found one that wasn't jerking and spinning, he began climbing upward.

He had barely climbed a few meters when the chain dangling next to his began swinging erratically. There was the sound of snarling from just above him on the chain. *Fight!* It happened so often on the Up-Downs, when two or more Karaash accidentally chose the same chain. K'Saka gripped his own links tightly and swung to the left - just in time. There was a shrieking cry and a rush of air - a body brushed his arm as it hurtled to the ground. K'Saka's keen ears detected the squishy sound of impact. It had no doubt crushed at least two others, or knocked off a few on the way down. No matter.

K'Saka continued climbing, feeling the air cooling as he neared the top. It took him nearly twenty minutes to

climb the length of the chain and another ten to haul himself over the edge of the hole. He hissed his name and heard the slapping hands reply. Their king had arrived. He screeched a question and the reply pointed him to his expedition ship. It had just landed, they told him. But no one had heard or felt the passengers yet.

He hurried to the ship's entrance, that same ship he'd sent out earlier in search of new game. He felt the outer plating, still hot from its journey. He found the control panel next to the access door and pounded it with his fist. The door slid open, but there were no sounds from the inside. No welcome. No warning.

K'Saka walked inside and nearly tripped over something on the floor. He felt the object - a body. His hand traveled up to the neck ridge, which identified the dead Karaash as Soah, the captain. K'Saka continued to feel the body, searching for wounds or broken bones. Had someone dared to attack his people? His hands stopped over the stomach. It felt bloated and distended. K'Saka screeched and searched the rest of the ship and found the rest of the crew the same way. He ran to the cargo hold, where he tore open the door. The hold was empty, save for a few bits of putrid meat.

It all became clear. The crew had set the ship on autopilot, disconnected themselves from the crude navigational interfaces and gorged themselves to death. K'Saka dropped to his knees and began pounding the

floor in rage.

*This should not be.*

## CHAPTER SIX

The computer beeped loudly, urgently, into the darkness.

Adara rolled over in her bunk and glared down at the console. "Comptrol, is there a message?"

"All personnel are to report to launch stations immediately. This is not a drill. You are assigned to Bulk Transport 21-B. Repeat. This is not a drill."

Adara sat up quickly and without stopping to think, jumped down off the bed to pull on her biosuit, gloves and boots. Behind her, Meeja stirred, bumped her head on the upper bunk and moaned. She was very groggy. She lurched out of bed and picked up her clothes. "What time is it? What's going on?"

"Maybe 0400," Adara replied. "We've been called up."

"For real?" Meeja said, suddenly wide-awake. "This isn't another simulation call?"

"You heard what Commander Smith said yesterday. We've been doing the simulation training for two weeks now. We're about as qualified as we're likely to get, so

we're available."

"Geez, I wish it wasn't in the night. I hate being up in the middle of the night like this."

Adara went to their storage shelf. She grabbed a helmet and tucked it under her arm, then picked up a small stunner and fixed it to her belt. Meeja struggled with her own suit and then turned to catch the helmet that Adara tossed to her. She caught the stunner that followed with one hand. They had practiced this routine together often in the past two weeks.

"Ready?" Adara asked. Meeja nodded and they hurried out the door and ran to the BT bay. They found their transport and ducked inside. As fast as they had been, the ship was nearly full. Several more people came in and then the door closed.

The pilot, a female 88th Classer, walked in from the cockpit.

"We're headed to the third planet of system 119," she said. "ISR received word that the Karaash attacked there two hours ago and it's a bad one. The area is heavily populated, so we're going to need all the manpower we can muster. Our only evac site is a nearby moon that registers high storm activity, so heads up. The victims are Sargeng and they're big. *Toar* fleet has already dispatched two ships and we should be getting help from *Mat-8* and *17* shortly after we land. Any questions?" No one had any. "Good, helmets on, seal your suits, set your

stunners on level eight and get your boards."

The ship shuddered to life almost immediately after the 88th disappeared. They hurried to their assigned positions on the BT deck floor and pulled their helmets on. "Comptrol," Adara said, "seal suit."

The suit closed itself at her ankles, wrists and collar, pulling snug in a way that made Adara's skin crawl. Although she knew she was safer in the protective environment of the suit, it still felt like another living thing had just swallowed her.

Meeja opened a communication link. Her voice crackled as it came over the speaker inside Adara's helmet. "Did you hear that? Level eight? Stunners on level eight? How big are these Sargeng anyway?"

"Very," Adara replied. She ran a hand over the stunner on her belt. "Stand clear if you need to use the thing."

"You don't have to tell *me* twice," Meeja said.

There was a sudden jolt and the BT cleared the dock. Underneath their feet, they could feel the ship's engines whine as they accelerated. The movement shocked everyone into silence. Tension crackled through the air.

The minutes crawled by. Here and there in the crowd, Adara would see someone twitch anxiously. One checked and rechecked her stunner several times. Another pulled furtively on the sleeve of his uniform. Meeja stayed perfectly still, but Adara could hear her breathing hard through the open comm link.

Her own breathing was deep and even, although it took some effort to keep it that way. Her blood sang and she was eager, anxious, and ready to begin. On the field she would be one step closer to where she wanted to be.

A yellow light at the front of the ship flashed, signalling that they had reached orbit. A few seconds later, the ship lurched violently and everyone stumbled. The air inside the BT began to hum strangely and the speaker inside Adara's helmet buzzed into her ear. The lights dimmed.

Something smashed the tough metal of the BT and the ceiling buckled, the plating screaming as it bent inward. The transport bounced hard, as though a giant hand had swatted the BT. Bodies went flying everywhere, landing heavily and then sliding forward as the nose of the craft dipped to point straight down. Meeja and Adara were thrown into the group and crushed against the back of the cockpit chamber. Then the noise of the engines stopped and the lights went out, plunging the BT into darkness.

"Stand by," the copilot's voice said into the comm link. His voice was steady, but Adara could detect a note of strain. "Attempting to correct. Stand by," he said again.

The nose pulled up, held in that position for a moment and dropped again. Adara could feel the craft enter free fall and begin spinning around. The sensation was sickening. She clenched her stomach in an effort not to vomit into her helmet.

The temperature inside began to rise rapidly, too fast for

her biosuit to compensate. Hull plates began to vibrate faintly in response to the turbulence and then started to shudder in earnest. Just as Adara thought the metal would begin tearing apart, the front of the ship heaved upward, sending everyone flying backward. The lights flared back on and the stasis fields grabbed them seconds before they smashed into the back wall. One caught Adara in an awkward sprawl, face down and held her there.

The BT levelled and through the deck plates, she could feel the engines come back online. After a few moments, the stasis fields dissipated. It was like having a sheet of paralyzing ice melt away.

Meeja slowly turned to face Adara, her chest heaving. ". . . ey, are yo. kay?" Static broke up her sentence. Her hands shook.

Adara nodded and stood up. "Comptrol, access outside environment."

"Access granted," her environment control replied. A small vent opened along the protected underside of her helmet. The air smelled acrid and felt hot. She looked up at the buckled ceiling. It was now black and it looked as though the metal had melted and hardened, giving it an odd swirled pattern. She reached down to help Meeja up and pointed to the damage. "I think lightning hit us."

Meeja turned to study the ceiling. "...bably. I..ope its..ot li.. that on .he surface!" she said through the static.

There was a soft thud as the BT landed. The cabin



depressurized with a loud hiss and the light turned green as the loading door popped open. Adara checked her stunner, picked up a stray anti-grav board and led Meeja through the crowd to the door. She was anxious to be out in the open.

When they could see the landscape, Adara regretted her haste. It was worse than any simulation ISR could come up with. The air felt heavy with moisture and the sky was thick with clouds. Dark craters pitted the ground where huge tracts of land had been torn up by lightning strikes. What little vegetation there was between the rocks and debris was either yellow from lack of sun, or burnt black. The wind was calm where they had landed, but Adara could see darker storm clouds gathering in the distance. And it was cold. She grimaced inside her helmet.

*They picked a winner with this one,* she thought. "Comptrol, close access." The vent in her helmet closed again.

"Access closed."

The 88th jogged past them. "Get a move on hunnies," she barked into the link. "Help the medical teams get this field unit set up. We have less than ten minutes before the first casualties arrive."

They hastened to follow her. The field units were large, boxy structures, made up of a lightweight, tough plastic-metal alloy. Everything was prefabricated, designed for quick assembly and shipped planetside by

bulk transport. The fastening tie-rods and clips were reconstructed onsite with the help of a manufacturing unit; a miniature version of the Manufacture & Supply section on board ship. It would also produce medical supplies as needed.

They worked quickly, repetition and long hours of practice making them efficient. They had just finished with the last of the installations when the first BT flew in.

They could see it struggle through the coming storm, bobbing and weaving in the violent winds. It held its course, but just barely and nearly everyone who stopped to watch it breathed a sigh of relief when it touched down.

Adara and Meeja ran the distance between the field unit and the BT to join the line-up of Unloaders. The side door flew open and there was a flurry of activity at the front of the line. There was a break in the crowd and the first pair dashed out carrying a board of casualties.

Adara had to stare as they went by. *They're huge!* The creatures, vaguely humanoid, were over seven feet tall. They had thick arms and legs and massive torsos. Adara double-checked her stunner.

Meeja and Adara made it to the front of the line. The BT was stuffed full of casualties, with no room for civilians. Four Unloaders working at the back of the transport unceremoniously dumped a creature onto their board. It dipped ominously before the anti-grav kicked in

and brought the board up to hover just half a meter above the ground.

The Sargeng took up most of the board. It was slashed about the head and face, the deep gouges running parallel to one another. Its left arm ended in a charred, stringy stump. Adara was glad she could not smell the burnt flesh.

She moved to pull the board away but the Unloaders stopped her. "Make room," one of them said. They put another casualty on the board. Its arm and leg overlapped with that of the other Sargeng. A great, glistening gash showed where a blade had nearly severed the leg above the knee - a portable stasis unit was the only thing holding the leg together.

Meeja grabbed her end and guided it through the crowd. A few drops of rain hit the ground just as they made it to the field unit. A medic guided them to the back and had them slide the creatures onto operating tables. He gave them a quick glance and nodded to himself. "Stretch them flat." He turned to tap a few keys on a computer console, to order medicine.

An ear-splitting roar made everyone jump. Adara whirled just in time to see another Sargeng lunge from its table and backhand the medic who was treating it. Frightened, angry and in pain, it jumped to the ground, flipped over a shelf of equipment and made another swing for the staggering doctor. She caught the blow in

the stomach and doubled over. The Sargeng ran to a corner of the building and began clawing at its leg, which was already torn and bleeding.

Meeja and Adara ran in to help the wounded medic. "I was about to patch up the leg," she gasped. "It broke the stasis! It was unconscious and it broke the stasis!" She was bleeding heavily from the mouth and her eye was swelling shut. Meeja moved to steady her and Adara took a step toward the Sargeng.

It roared and swung a huge arm around, but it connected with a table leg, smashing it to pieces. It stumbled toward her to try again.

Adara drew her stunner and fired. The gun jumped in her hand and let loose a sizzling bolt of energy. She hit the Sargeng dead center and it grunted in surprise. It took another wobbly step, did a graceful three-quarter turn and crashed to the ground.

The medic leaned heavily on Meeja and spat out a bloody tooth. "I hate it when that happens," she said. "I really, really hate it." She tucked the tooth into a pocket. "Help me to the computer," she said to Meeja, "and then get that thing back on the table. Quickly, before it comes to."

They helped her over to the computer where she requested something to take down the swelling in her face. While they heaved the Sargeng up to the table, she shouted an order to the rest of the medics. "Double the

power on those stasis fields. I don't care how much juice it takes!" She waved Meeja and Adara out. "Thanks. Now get out of my way." She felt around her mouth with her tongue and spat out two more teeth.

Back outside, the gentle rain was quickly turning into a downpour, turning the solid ground into a sea of mud. The sky flashed and thunder rumbled closer. Another BT was coming down. They half slid, half ran to the landing site and got a load of Sargengs. The ground sucked at their boots, making them strain just to lift their feet. They made four more trips before Adara pulled Meeja to a halt.

"This is stupid," she panted. "We can't even walk in this, much less run." She could hear feedback in her helmet and guessed that the static interference had returned. She pointed to a group of Unloaders that were just leaving the field unit. "Grab them. I've got an idea."

Meeja flagged down the group and waved them over. Adara could tell by the way they struggled that they were tiring as fast as she was. "Form a line," she said, gesturing to make sure they understood her. "We'll pass the boards back and forth so we don't have to run."

The others nodded and readily formed a line between the BT and the field hospital. Within minutes they had a steady flow of anti-grav platforms moving down and then back up the line.

The rain was coming down harder. It fell in big, heavy drops, sending plumes of water up from the puddles on

the ground. It poured down on their helmets, so that not even the padding and insulation inside could completely muffle the irritating pattering. It became hard to see.

Adara was groping for the edge of a board when she heard a loud, searing noise. Before she had time to think, a blinding flash lit up the sky and everything around it. The searing turned into a sharp crack and everyone instinctively hit the ground.

A sea of boiling mud and water engulfed her and Adara lost sight of her surroundings. Thunder exploded and the ground shook with the force of the sound. She rolled to her feet and tried to scrape the mud from her visor. Through the curtain of rain, she thought she could see a few others struggling to their feet. She had no idea what happened to the board she'd been reaching for.

"Meeja!" she shouted into her helmet. The air crackled and there was no answer. "Meeja!"

She saw the second one coming. A bolt of electricity streaked up from the ground, forking and splitting up to the clouds. The air overheated and boomed, knocking her flat again. The thunderclap made her teeth rattle and her helmet vibrate.

When the noise died away, she tried calling her partner again. "Meeja! Where are you?"

Her commlink speaker crackled with static and emitted a long high-pitched whine. The sound made Adara's eyes water and she grunted in pain. There was more static,

followed by a voice. "Adara . . . I . . . re. Where . . . ?"

*Sounds like Meeja*, she thought, although she could barely hear over the ringing in her ears. *Where is everyone?* She got up and tried to reorient herself in the downpour. She bumped into another Unloader.

It was Ziki. She tried talking through the commlink, but gave up, opened the vent in her helmet and bent close to Adara. "Where's your partner?" She had to yell to be heard over the sound of the rain hitting the mud.

Adara shook her head in answer. Ziki produced her anti-grav and said "Come on then. We've got to get the lost Sargengs up before we get hit again."

They sloshed through the mud until they found Sargeng bodies. Unsure whether they were dead or alive, they heaved the slick creatures onto their platform and began moving toward what they hoped was the hospital. The wind blew the rain in sheets, changing directions every few seconds. The storm was moving fast. Lightning flashed again, this time illuminating the way.

They had been turned around - they were within meters of a BT. They swung about and started the other way, half-running, half-falling. They found the hospital and dumped the Sargeng.

The rain stopped abruptly and another explosion sounded behind them. They ducked and covered their heads. Expecting to see lightning again, Adara turned in time to see a flaming BT crash into the transport they had

just left. The grounded BT disappeared from view and sparks flew everywhere. The wreckage was immediately engulfed in fire. They could hear screams from inside the topmost ship.

Adara swore and ran to the site, Ziki close behind. They were the first to arrive. Adara could see at once that there was nothing left of the first ship. The flaming BT had crashed into it full length, crushing it completely. The back door of the fiery ship had burst open on impact, but flames rippled around it and the metal had twisted to block the entrance.

Adara turned off their anti-grav board and handed one end to Ziki. "In the water," she shouted and pointed. "Scoop it onto the door." They stepped into a deep puddle and swung the board through it so that it sliced into the surface and sent gouts of water onto the hot metal. The sudden cooling effect made the door crack and buckle; steam rose into the air.

They beat the flames back until Adara could get closer to the door. A small gap between the door and the frame allowed her to poke her head and shoulders inside and she risked a glance.

The sight was horrifying. The stasis fields had engaged in mid-flight, pinning everyone to the floor. But because the BT was now on its side, the floor was now a wall and the fire was spreading, eating away at the inside the ship. Wherever the flames touched, the stasis failed, but only



by degrees. A limb was freed only to be seared to blackness. The passengers were being roasted alive.

Adara squeezed in through the gap and into the ship. Her biosuit expanded and contracted, trying to deal with the extreme heat. The Sargeng screeched in mortal terror, wide-eyed and frothing; they could do nothing else. Those closest to the ground let out agonized screams as the fire bit into them. She stepped over the ripped up bulkhead and forced her way into the cockpit.

The flames had not reached here yet, but it didn't matter. The pilot was dead; impaled, stabbed neatly through the small of his back and out the abdomen by the collapsing structure of the cabin. The copilot was still alive, struggling weakly to get out from underneath her chair.

Adara strained to move the chair and pulled the copilot up roughly. "The stasis fields," she said. "Turn them off. The passengers are trapped."

She helped the pilot reach for the proper controls. There was a crashing noise in the back of the ship and the stasis fields released the Sargeng. They bellowed and made for the door, rocking the entire ship in their mad scramble.

Adara pulled the pilot out of the cockpit and into the flaming hold. The Sargeng pounded the door, trying to open it; outside Adara could hear the shouted orders of an officer trying to co-ordinate an effort to do the same. Between the two groups, the metal started to come away with a horrible grating noise.

The inrush of air fanned the flames to twice their height. Her biosuit failed and began to overheat, making Adara dizzy. She shoved the copilot ahead of her and dropped to her knees to crawl the last few meters. Hands grabbed her and dragged her out into the open air and blessed coolness. She rolled onto her back, tore off her helmet and gasped for air.

Adara looked up into the sky. Oblivious to the total confusion and destruction of a few moments ago, four more transports were descending from orbit.

\*

Adara sat by herself in the BT bay on *Mat-1*, near the entrance, waiting.

Her bio-suit was soaked with sweat and rain. She'd discovered that the seal had been broken when she'd torn open the pant leg in the wreck. It was no wonder that it had failed. She'd also torn open most of her leg, but the medics at the offsite had patched it temporarily.

Her helmet had disappeared, perhaps kicked aside in the confusion. Her arms felt as though they'd been stretched out of their sockets and her back was a mass of agonized muscles. Adara wasn't sure how long they'd been down on the surface. It felt like weeks.

It had seemed like there would be no end to the influx of casualties and civilians. The transports kept coming

and coming, but the evacuation had ended about as abruptly as Jonathan's simulations did. First there was overwhelming action and then there was nothing. The extra help from the other *Mat* fleet ships had been diverted to the onsite, leaving the Unloaders to cope as best they could.

In spite of her weariness, she couldn't go back to her quarters. The adrenaline that had kept her going throughout the evacuation and the storm was still within her. It coursed through her body and made her limbs tremble in reaction. She had decided to wait for Meeja, to hear what she had to say about their first mission. *If nothing else, she'll wear me out with her talk*, she thought.

The door opened beside her and a few Unloaders filed out. She waited until the last one came through before she spoke. "How many more to come up?"

A squat creature with a pronounced limp turned to face her. "We're it," he hissed. "We were the last. Are you waiting for someone?"

Frowning, she stood up. "I must have dozed. I'll check the computer to see where she is." The creature nodded and walked away.

She went back into the bay. Technicians were already hard at work, piecing together damaged BT's and mutilated boards. Adara glanced over the whole bay and

shook her head in wonder. They had their work cut out for them.

She found a computer terminal that was unoccupied and accessed it. "Comptrol," she said, trying to remember the correct command for what she wanted to do. "Personnel location request."

"Please specify name and rank."

"Meeja, 99th Classer."

"There is no one aboard this ship by that name and rank."

Adara was puzzled until she realized that their new ranks wouldn't be registered yet. They probably still listed Meeja and the rest of the new recruits as hunnies.

"Meeja, 100th Classer."

The computer was silent for a second while it searched through its records. "The personnel known as Meeja, 100th Classer is listed as killed in action."

Adara looked at the computer in stunned disbelief. It was a moment before she could say anything. "Killed?"

The computer took the word as a command. "That is correct. The preliminary report shows that Meeja, 100th Classer was probably involved in a transport crash. A further investigation will follow a general debriefing of all involved personnel tomorrow. According to ISR procedure the full report that results from that investigation will be loaded into this database then."

Adara said nothing. She tried to work out how Meeja

could have been involved in the crash. The whole evacuation suddenly seemed like it happened a lifetime ago.

"Further requests?" asked the computer.

She stared at the screen and did not move.

After a while, a technician noticed her and laid a gentle hand on her arm. "Are you okay? Did you just come up from the surface? Here, let me contact sickbay for you, get somebody to pick you up."

A crack in her being, a tiny, minuscule fissure that had been carefully teased open over the past two weeks, sealed shut. Something dark and hard and cold, closed around her.

"I'm fine," she said tersely. "Don't bother. I don't need help." She spun on her heel and walked out.

She arrived back in her quarters and dismantled the top bunk. Methodically, she stripped the room of all of Meeja's belongings and shoved them and the bunk out into the hall. She disposed of her own biosuit and fell onto the bed.

She did not think about Meeja. Life had taught her that lesson once already; she did not need to learn it again. She turned her face to the wall and let exhaustion take over.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Adara stomped down the hallway, limping badly, muttering regulations to herself like a litany.

*Control*, she told herself. She tried to slow down, restraining her pace. There were plenty of other people in the corridor. Those who saw her face instinctively got out of her way. *Keep it under control*, she thought. *This place is your only option. It has to work.*

The morning had not gone well. It seemed like she had just fallen asleep when the computer told her she was to report to sickbay. She had hurried across the ship, only to have to wait in line. The medics had spent the night treating the emergency cases and were just getting to the minor injuries. The wait seemed to last forever.

When it was finally her turn, they gave her leg a cursory examination and she was directed to lie on a table to have the cut healed. In the middle of her treatment, the entire sickbay got hit with a power surge. Two diagnostic machines went up in smoke and the device she'd been hooked up to overloaded, sending her leg into violent,

uncontrollable spasms. It had taken the medic ten minutes to get Adara's leg to stop twitching.

Already overworked from the night before, her leg went limp with exhaustion. With half the equipment in the sickbay now useless, the medic could do nothing but give Adara a chemical stimulant to allow her to walk.

"Why isn't there any protective shielding for the power supply here?" Adara had asked.

"Why aren't there more doctors?" The medic snapped back. She had been up all night and was obviously feeling it. "Why isn't there more room? Why don't you go to your debriefing?" She walked away from the table. "Come back at 1900 hours," she said. "If you're lucky, the techs will be done by then."

Adara limped to Jonathan's quarters for her scheduled debriefing. Several other members of her unit were already there, waiting. Some looked better than she did, others looked worse. They all looked tired. She leaned up against a wall to take the weight off her leg.

"Excuse me," someone said.

Adara opened her eyes. Ziki was standing in front of her. She wore an expression that Adara didn't quite recognize.

"Yes?"

"Sorry to disturb you, Commander," she said. "I just want to tell you that I'm sorry for what happened to your bunkmate."

Adara kept her face impassive, motionless, but her eyes flicked over Ziki's rank insignia. She was still a 100th Classer, but then, so was Adara. They had not been issued new badges yet, so what was this business about 'Commander?'

"It happens," Adara said brusquely. The bunk and Meeja's personal items had been taken from the hall overnight. She had deliberately put the whole thing out of her mind.

The look on Ziki's face seemed to intensify, just a fraction. "I also wanted to tell you that I thought what you did was incredible."

Adara frowned and tried to figure out what she was getting at.

"The way you just ran into that wreck," Ziki said, "and freed the Sargeng. You could have been killed. Well, you almost were," she amended. "It was very hot in there. I don't think," she took a short breath, "I honestly don't think I could have done it. I think it took all I've got just to get myself here."

Adara shifted her stance, suddenly very uncomfortable. *What do I need to know this for? Why is she telling me this?* She studied Ziki's face carefully and realized that the expression was one of admiration. The notion was foreign to her and she wasn't sure what to do about it. Her own face darkened.

"It was nothing," she said, hoping to douse the light in



Ziki's eyes, end the conversation. "I was there first. I did what had to be done."

The words had the opposite effect. Ziki's eyes brightened a little. "You're being too modest," she said, but didn't press the point. "I look forward to working with you in the future, Commander."

Adara opened her mouth to make a denial, but Ziki turned around smartly and marched away as though Rilken had ordered her.

Just then, the door to Jonathan's quarters opened and Disk stepped out. He nodded politely to the group. "I believe the word you humans would use is 'next'," he said.

Before anyone else could move, Adara shot up to the head of the group and through the door. *I am not waiting forever to do this*, she thought. No one protested, but she didn't notice.

The door closed behind her and Jonathan greeted her with a smile. "Hi there. Please, sit down."

The room was larger than Adara's own. A folding partition obscured the bed and cubicle area; in front of the partition, Jonathan sat at a desk. A few small pieces of artwork adorned the walls, but otherwise the room was uncluttered and very neat. It contrasted sharply with Jonathan's relaxed, casual manner.

Jonathan called up some information on the computer. "I'm glad that it's your turn," he said. "Normally,

debriefing doesn't take long. You'll remember from training that *Mat-1* monitors the action as closely as it can, depending on how far away it has to stay from the action to be safe." He leaned back, stretching casually. "To tell you the truth, I think that the main reason we have one-on-one debriefings is to make sure everyone feels consulted," he grinned.

Adara nodded, hoping he would hurry. She wanted to go back to sleep.

"Your case is going to take a little extra time though," he continued. Adara felt like cursing him. "Since you were involved in two major incidents." He rubbed an eye and tried to stifle a yawn. "Excuse me," he said apologetically. "I didn't get away from the onsite until late and I didn't get much sleep."

"What incidents?" Adara asked.

"Well, the first of course, concerns 100th Classer Meeja. Are you aware of what happened?"

"Yes," she said.

"I guess that's good, " he said. "I hate to be the one to break bad news. How do you feel about it?"

Adara wished that everyone would quit harping on the subject. "It was an accident."

Jonathan mistook her meaning. "Oh, I know," he said hastily. "No one is blaming you or anyone else. The lightning strikes killed one person and the crash killed three pilots and two people on the ground. She was in the

wrong place at the wrong time. We expect partners to look out for one another as much as possible, but no one holds them responsible for injury unless there is evidence of misconduct or something." He looked at her kindly. "Have you been to see one of the counselling staff?" he asked.

"Why?"

"Well," he said, "I've never had any use for them myself, but a lot of our members like to get psychiatric assistance to deal with something like this. It gets pretty rough sometimes and some of the different races aboard need death rituals, or spiritual help. Beyond what the funeral service can provide, I mean. I thought since she was your training partner and your-

"Am I being ordered to go?" Adara interrupted.

"Absolutely not," he chuckled. "Evaluations like that aren't mandatory, not even to gain admittance to ISR. The Union wouldn't stand for such a breach of privacy. Besides, I can't imagine how they would set the testing standards. What's considered irrational or deviant in one culture might be perfectly normal in another." He tapped the desk restlessly with his hand. "I take it you won't be going to one?"

"No."

He smiled. "You're a real tough trooper." He touched his computer screen and watched some information scroll by. "Okay, moving on. It says here you made some

unauthorized changes to the procedure. You wanna fill me in on this?"

Adara blinked. "I don't know what you mean."

"The bit with the line of Unloaders. What was all that about?"

Adara had to think hard to remember what he was talking about. It seemed so insignificant; a minor detail in the mad confusion of the evacuation.

"You mean before the lightning strike? What about it?"

"Well, did you have permission to set that line up?"

"I didn't think I needed to."

"Why did you do it?"

"The mud of course," she said. "It was getting too hard to move through and we were getting too tired."

"So you didn't have permission from anyone to do that? No one gave orders?"

Adara was stunned. She felt like she was on trial again, only this time for a crime. "No," she said, with some force. "I had no orders."

"Well, you can't make changes like that without permission, particularly at your level," he said.

"What was I supposed to do?" she burst out. "Run and find a 99th?"

Jonathan's brows creased, ever so slightly. "You are supposed to follow the procedure we taught you. If you have any suggestions, make them in your personal report and flag them for special attention. *After* the assignment."

He leaned forward a little. "I'll be straight with you, Cohili. I'm trying to get ahead in this force. I want a higher position. A position where I have some real power." He grinned again. "I'm a climber. Rilken, on the other hand, has already done a bunch of climbing. He's a stickler for regulations. Frankly, it doesn't look good when one of mine flouts them."

"I wasn't flouting them," she growled. "We were getting too tired, too fast. If I hadn't-

"Take it easy," he said, laughing. "Let's not get into `ifs' okay? The fact is, rules are rules. This isn't going on your record or anything. Just remember it for next time. Okay?"

Adara was beyond irritated. The fact that Jonathan was so pleasant about the whole thing just made it all that much worse.

"Permission to speak candidly, Commander?"

"I kind of thought you had been," Jonathan said without rancour. "But with me, you can. Always."

"The evacuation procedures are stupid. Wasteful. Inefficient."

Jonathan puffed out a breath that ended in a surprised laugh. "That's pretty harsh, don't you think 99th?" he said, emphasizing the rank. "You haven't been at this long. We have this procedure for a reason."

Adara ticked off the points on her fingers. "The line should be there for every mission, not just in difficult

terrain. It's faster and would keep the Unloaders fresher, longer. Stasis fields should be on at all times during a flight, not just kick in during an emergency. They should also shut off automatically when a BT comes within three meters of ground level."

"Look," Jonathan said gently, "I know you had a bad first experience. Losing a partner is never easy . . ."

"That," Adara ground out, "has nothing to do with it."

"Okay," he said, holding up his hands. "But as I mentioned, we have these procedures for a reason. A hand-off line is impractical because it keeps too many people near the BT landing site. We like to keep that clear for safety reasons."

"There are at least twenty-five people running by, or around a BT site when an evacuation is full swing," Adara reminded him. "Civilians are cleared, Unloaders are not."

"You had time to notice this during your first mission?"

Adara shook her head. "No, it's in the simulations, but it's the same in reality."

"Well," he said slowly, "as far as the stasis fields go, they take up too much power during flight. That's why they're not on at all times."

"Then put them on at half strength. Have them go off at three meters, to prevent the death trap situation we had yesterday," Adara said firmly. "That way, whether the ship makes a safe landing, or a crash, the fields will be

off."

Jonathan opened his mouth to reply, but then changed his mind. He was silent for a few moments. Adara had the impression he was measuring her.

Finally, he said "Place those suggestions in your report then and make sure they're highlighted."

"That's it?" Adara said. "That's all?"

"Procedural changes aren't simple things," he said with a shrug. "We'll see. But just remember not to go changing things on your own. We can't have everyone running around doing there own thing or we'd have chaos."

Adara nearly screamed in frustration. *We already have chaos!* she felt like saying. Her face remained expressionless though; Jonathan did not perceive anything in her face except fatigue. "Will there be anything else?" she asked.

"Nope," he replied. "Unless you have anything to add?"

"When can I change positions?"

"Ah, to what?"

"Loader, BT pilot, whatever."

He thought for a moment. "Well, there's no fixed rule on it, to my knowledge, but usually not until you're a 95th."

"When can I start training?"

"Not until then," he smiled. "Resources are thin and even my time is limited. Which reminds me, I've got a whole crew out there to debrief. If there's anything else-"

"I'll put it in my report and flag it," Adara finished for

him.

Jonathan didn't miss the sarcasm. "Dismissed," he said with a grin.

She walked out, rounded a corner and nearly walked into someone. The sudden stop put pressure on her injured leg and she had to stifle a gasp. The leg throbbed and nearly gave out.

The 87th clucked in sympathy. "That sounded painful," he said. "Perhaps you should go to sickbay."

"I *did*," she muttered. She caught the eye of the 87th and added, "Commander."

She stomped past him, through the hallway, limping badly. She knew her pace was just making it worse.

*Control*, she told herself.

\*

Sometime later, Rilkens was waiting in his office, watching the door, fidgeting. Several items flashed at him on the computer screen, but he was too distracted to pay much attention to them. Finally, the door opened.

Rilkens stood to attention immediately. Second Classer Teshwa Zig smirked and waved him back into his seat. "For goodness sake, relax will you?" She sat in the interview chair in front of his desk.

He sighed and sat down. "I really wish you would allow me to greet you as you disembark at the BT bay," he said,



irritably. "That's what the regulations say a ship's commander is supposed to do when his fleet commander comes on board."

"You and your blessed regulations," she said. "I could have done without the escort to your door too, but I thought if I turned that down you would probably pass out."

Rilkens pretended to look miffed, but inside he smiled. If the truth were known, he enjoyed being teased about his need for rules, just as he knew she enjoyed being teased about her near-complete disregard for them.

She pulled out a portable computer and consulted it. "Just give me a second to check my memo list, would you?"

"Sure," he said. He watched her as she prepared for their meeting and decided that she hadn't changed much since he'd first met her. She was a few years older and wiser of course, but still, the basic qualities were still there. He was glad of that.

Both he and Teshwa had joined ISR simultaneously; they had been the first citizens of their respective homeworlds to do so. Their differences lay in their backgrounds. He had escaped to ISR from a strife-ridden planet where governments changed almost weekly and turmoil was a way of life. He'd hated the uncertainty of his childhood and so if he liked rules, there was a reason for it. He was quite prepared to change if need be;

adaptability came easily after such an upbringing. But always his decisions and thoughts were tinged with a deep-seated conservatism.

Teshwa had taken the first ship out of a repressive, xenophobic society that offered very few opportunities for someone with her characteristics. She was aggressive, hard driving, impatient and on occasion, flamboyant and daring. She could work within the rules, but preferred to call them 'guidelines.' And she was always testing limits.

Their similarities lay in their values and their goals. Both believed in hard work, study, duty and service to a greater cause. They were both appalled at the Karaash and their mindless destructiveness. They feared the threat they posed, but they feared the lack of a cohesive response to the threat even more.

Teshwa and Rilken had become instant friends the first time they met. They had trained together, taken the same assignments and challenged each other for promotions to the top; a place where they could try to change things. They'd followed each other up the ladder, neck and neck, until only recently: Teshwa's recent jump to High Command had left Rilken two steps behind.

Not that he minded. He knew his turn was coming. Besides, they still met frequently and talked daily. Which was good, because Rilken knew he'd miss her company - perhaps for more reasons than he'd like to admit.

Of all the different races represented in the ISR, Teshwa

belonged to one of the most striking. She was an Albus, a "white one." All of her hair - from the long strands pulled into a loose coil on her head, to the fine dusting of body hairs on her bare forearms - was a bright white. Her skin was very pale, with a delicate, pinkish cast. Her lips were a little darker, a gentle blush. Her paleness was a sharp contrast to the blackness of the uniform that she wore casually, sleeves pushed up, collar loose, shirt bagging.

But her most intriguing feature had to be her eyes. Instead of being a pale pink, as one would expect on an albino Terran, they were silver - and they flashed like shiny coins in the snow. Although he would never admit it to himself and certainly never to her, the eyes of his fleet commander fascinated him.

Those eyes were on him now, as Teshwa looked up to find the reason for silence. "Did a zishta cut your vocals, Matt?" she asked, "or have you just had a long day?"

He smiled. "Neither really," he said. "I was just thinking."

"Are the results from the system 119 evacuation that bad?"

"No," he said, glancing at his screen. "No, they're about average. A higher casualty rate at the offsite, but that blasted storm activity is to blame for that." His hand curled into a loose fist on the table. "I wish we'd had a better spot to go to for that one."

"Hmm. You and me also," she agreed. "But the only

other spot was twice the distance away." She gestured in a way that implied she was consigning it to fate. "So then, what's on your mind?"

"I was just looking over the preliminary reports from one of my seventy level Classers," he said. "You remember Jonathan Smith?"

"Of course."

"Well, apparently one of his trainees has begun agitating for a change in evacuation procedure. I haven't read the specifics of it, but Smith has already noted that he's in favour of her suggestions. She's also asking to be moved up to another position."

"A troublemaker," Teshwa said. "And pushy too. I like her already. Who is she?"

"Adara Cohili."

Teshwa recognized the name. "Isn't that the one Marsalis paraded in front of the Union three weeks ago?"

"The same."

She looked thoughtful. "You know, I had the feeling when I saw the tribunal that she'd be a catalyst. Although goodness knows, she didn't change any opinions at the Union level."

Rilkens snorted. "I saw that. You could tell the minute that group reconvened that it wasn't going to go anywhere. I'm glad to see though that at least a couple of member planets coughed up some more resources."

"It will come in handy," Teshwa admitted. "What's

Cohili's record like?"

"Short," he chuckled. "But exemplary thus far. She'll be getting a citation for bravery for her first real action." His eyebrows lowered. "She's not very social though, from what I hear. And she doesn't appear to have much regard for the system, or regulations."

"I'll forgive her that much, considering her background," Teshwa said dryly.

Rilkens relaxed his expression. "I suppose. I just hope she'll fit in with her training unit. If I can get them working together well, they'll be a good example to the rest of the fleet. To the rest of ISR for that matter."

"I'm glad you brought that up. Would you like a few additions to that unit? Jane

Kilady has a few too many in her fleet right now and she's trying to spread them out. One of them sounds almost like Cohili - unusual background, ambitious, shows a great deal of promise."

He shook his head in wonder. "I don't know how you keep all the records and names straight, fleet-to-fleet like that. I have enough trouble just keeping tabs on this group here on one ship." He wiggled his eyebrows. "Maybe I'd better just skip 2nd Class and go straight to 1st. Forget all that fleet stuff."

Now it was Teshwa's turn to snort. "In your dreams," she scoffed. "For your information, this guy started here, but got transferred to the *Sargentus* fleet when we were

trying to balance out species quotas. He wants to come back here, I understand."

Rilkens mulled it over. When he didn't respond right away, Teshwa raised a shoulder and dropped it again, saying: "Well, if you feel you can't handle another troublemaker, I'll see what Bine needs."

He rolled his eyes. "One of these days I swear I'm going to take you fishing. You bait like a pro."

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that," she said. "Does that mean you'll take him?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"No," she said promptly. "I'm glad you took him Matt. Bine will be miffed that he didn't get a chance to grab this one."

"Oh really?" Rilkens crossed his arms and cocked an eye at her. "The Assembly of High Command is so bored that it's into personnel one-upmanship?"

"Competition is a wonderful thing," she said. "It helps produce the best."

"Good point," he conceded. "Some intra-fleet rivalry can't hurt."

"Exactly." She made a notation on her portable. "Give it some time before you expect the transfers. I'll have to get Marsalis to get the Union off the topic of quotas for a while so they don't notice my mix and match work. Now, how about something to eat? I'm starved."

Rilkens stood and gestured to the door. "I was hoping

you would say that. It's your turn to treat.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The days and weeks that followed passed by in a blur. Adara fulfilled her duties as required, but otherwise kept to herself as much as possible. When she wasn't on active duty - practicing in the sim halls, working at her studies, or following her physical activity program - she stayed in her quarters.

The monotony was broken only by the call to action. The *Mat* fleet hit a spell of unusual activity and she got the rank of 95th Classer quite quickly. After every mission she wrote a lengthy report, flagged her suggestions from before and asked for a change in position.

No one else had come to bunk with her. Adara didn't know why. She wasn't aware of the fire and thunder that blazed out of her eyes whenever she worked; nor the intensity with which she attacked each task. She didn't notice that people were still watching her; not because she was that odd humanoid dressed in animal skins, but because she seemed to have recast herself into an iron



tower of silent, strong commitment. In the short time she'd been a part of ISR, she had developed an incredible reputation.

Adara was oblivious to all of this and even if she had known, she probably wouldn't have cared anyway. She didn't mind the lack of company in her quarters; in fact, she relished her solitude. Since her first mission, she had made a point of picking a different partner for every practice run and every real-life evacuation. It wasn't until yesterday, while in the sim hall, that she noticed she was getting the same sequence of partners in rotation. Furthermore, they were all people from her original training unit, although they were higher in rank now and were supposed to be mixing with the other Unloaders on the *Mat-1*. Adara wondered if Rilken had anything to do with it.

Walking swiftly down the hall, Adara lifted a hand to tug irritably at her uniform collar. She knew Rilken had everything to do with her current assignment and she despised him for it. She'd received a direct order from him last night to report to the Rec Level daily: starting tonight, she was to go every other day for a minimum of two hours.

"It's come to my attention you don't spend much time there," Rilken had said, when he'd stopped her just outside the BT bay. "Why is that?"

"I do not need recreation, Commander."

He smiled. "Everybody needs recreation now and then. It keeps your mind off work."

"I have no desire to do that."

"Oh," he said. "And why is that?"

"Because I have too much to do, Commander. Recreation would be a waste of my time."

"Is that so? Well, in my experience, taking a break now and then helps to keep the mind and body fresh. More to the point, engaging in recreational activities with your comrades helps foster friendships and makes teams more cohesive."

Adara was unconvinced. "With all due respect, why would you want that? From what I've observed, friendships only serves to make things difficult for military structure."

Rilkens gave her a small frown. "Well, it's true that we discourage relationships between the junior and more senior ranks. But other types of relationships help make people work well together."

"Yes Commander, but-"

"No arguments, 95th. You will go to the Rec Level and you will enjoy yourself. That's an order."

So, Adara had finished her day's work and decided to go directly to the eating area. She'd eat slowly if need be, to use up the time. *The sooner I get this over with, she thought, the better.*

The atmosphere on the Rec Level was positively festive.

The lounges were packed from wall to wall with happy creatures - dancing, pouring drinks, laughing and smiling. There were at least six different kinds of music being played all at once. The holoshow booths were crammed full and people surrounded the gaming tables.

Adara worked her way through the throng to a promising spot - a single chair and table, tucked away in a dark, shadowed corner. She sat down and the surface of the table flickered to life.

"Good evening," a voice intoned. A holographic image of a strange drink appeared just above the tabletop. "This is tonight's featured selection. It is a Kilthian Spear." The image rotated slowly. "If you would like to sample a Kilthian Spear, pass your hand through the image. If you would like to see your regular menu, place your hand on the surface for identification."

Impatiently, Adara placed her hand on the table. "Subject identified. Adara Cohili, 95th Classer. No menu registered. Instructions?"

Adara thought for a minute. Perhaps this two-hour restriction didn't have to be a total loss after all. "Access personal log, today's date. Display in two dimensional form, text based, in this location and bring me some water.

There was a pause, as the Rec Level computer processed her request. "Personal log is now available. Requested beverage is en route. Further requests, patron

Cohili?"

"No." Adara and glanced at her personal log, now displayed on the surface of the table. She allowed herself to feel smug for a moment. Fortunately, the various systems aboard the *Mat-1* were linked and there weren't any regulations regarding what you *did* while you were on the Rec Level. Now she could get some work done and yet obey Rilken's orders.

A roboserv floated up to her table with a glass of water. "Good evening," it said cheerfully. "Here is your order! Should I come back after a suitable interval for your refill?"

"No. Get lost." Adara took her glass and batted the thing away. She eyed the crowds dourly as she took a sip. She couldn't quite figure out why everyone was in such a good mood lately. Granted, the latest infusion of resources from the Union had been good news, but Adara knew enough about ISR to know that it wasn't going to help much. By the time it was divided among the fleets and then spread out to the individual ships, *Mat-1* would be lucky to get an extra anti-grav board out of the deal.

*Perhaps it's the rumours,* Adara thought. As detached as she was from the rest of the crew, even she hadn't missed the latest gossip: that ship-to-ship transfers were way up. There was speculation that the force was losing people too fast and that High Command was shuffling numbers to keep up a good front. Others were hoping that it meant

a major reorganization, with a chance for more promotions.

*Still*, Adara thought as she glared into the depths of her drink, *that's no reason to get stupid. This is not important news*. There was an eruption of laughter from the other side of the room. Adara looked up and frowned. *Yet here we are, wasting time*. Adara could think of a dozen things that needed doing. They needed a database on hospitable environments for one thing, to make finding evacuation sites easier. They needed to know more about the Karaash. As far as Adara could tell, no one even seemed to know where they came from.

She set her drink down on the far side of the table and began reviewing her files, touching the illuminated surface now and then to advance to a new section.

A shadow fell over the table. "Excuse me, ma'am?"

She wrenched her attention away from her log to find Ziki looking at her tentatively. Dirk, Brad, Disck and the three Roikans were with her. "Yes?" she said.

"Sorry to disturb you," she began, "um, but we wanted to congratulate you."

"Why?"

"On getting your system put in. A friend of mine just got moved to the *Bir-Bir-12* and she says they're using it over there."

Adara blinked in bewilderment. "My system? You mean that hand-to-hand thing?"

"Yes, that's it," Ziki looked pleased. "Congratulations."

"How did you know that was my idea?"

Now it was Ziki's turn to look surprised. "It's in your personal reports, ma'am. The whole ship knows it's your idea. Everybody does."

Adara nodded, remembering. Once the higher level officers reviewed the information, they released it for general use. The Union members were fanatical about privacy, so ISR High Command was trying to be as open as possible, hoping to set an example. So far, it wasn't working; the Union was as distrustful as ever.

"Oh yes, I see." Adara was about to thank them and go back to work, but an image of Rilkens' disapproving face passed through her mind. So instead, she gritted her teeth and said "Thank you. Would you care to have a seat?" She watched them pull up chairs - nervously - and arrange themselves around the table. She cast about for something to say.

A Roikan saved her. "Fforgif me ffor thaying tho, but you don'th them to be ennoyeeing the pawty," he said, as he cast a surreptitious glance down at the display.

The Roikan's words startled her. Roikans were large bipedal beasts, tall and very strong, with thick torsos and broad shoulders. They had long, thick, silver-grey fur all over their face and body - except their back, which was covered with flexible bone plating, a natural armour. An extra opposable digit on either hand gave them a fierce

grip, while their red slotted eyes and double row of teeth gave them a ferocious appearance.

Roikans also had two separate tongues, which, when combined with a mouthful of fur, gave them a ridiculous lisp when they tried to speak any language but their own.

"No, I'm not." Adara struggled to find a diplomatic way to say she was bored out of her mind. She gave up. "I resent the time it takes away from my work."

"Youwr wok? But you awre off duthy!"

"Yes I know. I spend my off duty hours trying to catch up on my education and analyzing things within ISR."

Dirk spoke up. "Why bother studying now? You're set for life here in ISR."

Ziki chimed in. "If ISR is set for life. If our supplies get cut off, or the Union dissolves, who knows? Besides, I can't see her wanting to spend the rest of her life here."

Adara wondered how Ziki had come to that conclusion, having never told her so.

"Tho what awre you thtudying? What do you wantt to do awfther you get owt of aye-eth-awr?" Pilfer asked.

Adara hadn't given any thought to life after Search and Rescue. She wasn't leaving until there was no longer a reason for its existence. "I have to finish my Fundamentals. I'm also going over current weapons technology."

The Roikan seemed to look surprised, but it was hard to tell under all the hair. "Owh weawly? Why?"

"Pilfer!" Ziki admonished. "Don't be so nosy. It's none of your business."

Adara was inclined to agree, but decided to answer anyway. "I want to see what we can do to start fighting the Karaash."

Brad, who'd been ignoring the group and staring out at the crowd, suddenly fixed his eyes on Adara. "You think we should fight them? Like, start shooting back?"

"Why not?"

"No reason. I mean, we should start shooting, that is . . . well, no one at our level has said that before. Out loud, I mean. At least not officially, or to our commanding officers or-"

Ziki rolled her eyes. "What Brad is trying to say is that a lot of us think that we should be taking a more offensive role, but no one really talks about it openly. It is a taboo subject. There are some lot people who think that would be just asking for more trouble. Or that the Union would fall apart completely." She brightened. "But, if you were to start pushing for it, we might have a chance! Get more support for it from the bottom up instead of waiting for the Union. What do you think, Commander?" They all looked at her expectantly.

Adara raised an eyebrow. "What makes you think I can do anything?"

"You fixed the Unloader section already," said Dirk. "And you've got Rilken's ear. He listens to what you tell



him. And a lot of people around here would support you." The others nodded.

Adara was faintly amused to hear that she could tell Rilken what to do. But she felt excited by the prospect of change. "If it's a taboo subject, I doubt I'd get much support," she said, testing their reaction.

"You have my support and that of my family," Pilfer indicated his Roikan companions, who nodded in unison.

"Hell, Pilfer, our whole unit would be behind it for sure. And there are others." Dirk began counting on his fingers. "I can think of at least ten others right off the mark."

Someone suddenly pulled away from the crowd, approached the table and slapped Dirk on the back, hard. "Sure, sounds good to me! Let's start shooting at those bloody blue things so they can really get mad! Then they'll start killing us too!"

It was Sark. He glared down at Adara, his face flushed, his jaw tight. "So you're trying to take over another department now? Messing with this one not good enough for you?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said, what other department doesn't measure up to your high standards? Has Rilken authorized you to start piloting this ship now? Or are you going to just go straight to High Command now that you have shown the rest of us the proper way of doing things?"

Adara felt herself getting angry, but she clamped down on the rising tide of emotion. "I won't be piloting any ships any time soon, Sark. All I did is make a few suggestions."

He shoved between Dirk and Pilfer, leaned over the table and brought his face within centimetres of hers. His breath stank of alcohol, real alcohol, and not the imitation stuff that was standard issue on the Rec Level. "Just a few suggestions? Everybody makes suggestions. Only *you* got yours made into policy." He stood up straight and stabbed a finger into her shoulder. "You, the celebrity survivor, you the bravery citation from 119!" He sneered. "You're High Command's pet! Let me tell you something: where I come from, you wouldn't stand a chance. Status is *earned* where I come from!" He was getting louder with each remark.

Dirk stood up and placed a gentle hand on Sark's shoulder. He caught a whiff of his breath. "Sark, I don't know where you found the juice, but I think you've had too much of it. You should go back to your quarters before you get into trouble."

The confrontation was beginning to attract attention. Some people - Sark's friends - broke away from the crowd and came closer to the table. Others kept their distance, but began to listen closely.

Sark slapped away Dirk's hand. "Get your hand off me you filthy, stupid SaTerran! I'll decide how I am without

any help from you." Dirk backed away with hands raised in a gesture of peace.

Brad clenched his fists and seethed at the insult. "I think Sark, you're jealous because you didn't have those ideas yourself." Ziki laid a cautioning hand on his arm, but he ignored her. "That's what I think. What does everyone else think?"

"What would you know?" Sark snarled. "Maybe I don't want to see everyone killed or put out of a job!" He whirled back to face Adara. "Which is exactly what's going to happen if you start shouting about offensive strategy!"

Adara regarded Sark coolly. "You're the only one shouting, Sark."

"Don't push me Cohili!" he said. He swayed a little and then righted himself. "I won't take anything from a power-hungry, glory-seeking, lying little fake like you!"

Ziki stood up angrily, restraint gone. "Now that's going too far! Back off, Sark and go sleep it off!"

Adara suddenly became aware that the entire room had gone silent. The party atmosphere had disappeared, replaced by a palpable tension. People from other portions of the Rec Level were peering in through the doors. Out of the corner of her eye she could see that several more people had quietly shifted to get closer to her table. Some were glaring openly at Sark. Others directed furious looks at her.

*This is getting out of hand.* She stood up, her hands raised like Dirk's had been. "Look, I don't know what I've done to --"

She saw the first punch coming. Sark took advantage of her open stance and swung wildly at her face with his left hand. She ducked, but caught his right fist in her stomach.

Even as she felt the air rushing out of her, something clicked inside Adara. Dropping with the sucker punch, she rolled under the table and kicked at Sark's shins. Sark's legs went out from under him and he toppled forward. His chin cracked hard against the table and Adara's drink went flying. She rolled out from under the table and was on her feet before he hit the ground.

The room erupted into violence. Some of Sark's supporters made a grab for Dirk, while Ziki looked about for something to swing. All three Roikans stood up and roared, their red slot-eyes bulging. Several people backed away hastily.

Sark snarled and stood up, bleeding from the mouth. He threw a third punch at Adara, which she blocked and countered with a quick, devastating snap kick to his groin. Sark doubled over and she brought her left knee up into his face. There was an audible crunch as she connected. He howled and blood spurted from his nose and spattered his shirt. He collapsed onto his side, clutching his face and groin, writhing in pain.

She looked around. Ziki was holding her own, evenly matched in a nasty fight with another Unloader. The Roikans were milling through the crowd, picking up people bodily and tossing them out of the melee. A couple were foolish enough to try and come back.

Dirk was flailing like a madman, trying to throw off three people and hit a fourth. Adara ran up to one of them and swept her foot between his legs to trip him. As he fell, she grabbed his arm and yanked it up to expose his side. With her middle knuckle protruding from her clenched fist, Adara hit him in the ribs with two lightning fast punches. He went white and gasped in pain.

Part of a gaming table sailed overhead. Something hard smashed into her lower back, sending her sprawling onto the floor. Before she could react, someone picked her up and pinned her arms behind her.

"Well now," a voice in her ear sneered. "Let's see how tough you are without daddy Rilken's to help you." A woman stepped in front of her and punched her in the jaw. The blow was powerful and Adara saw stars.

Her vision cleared just as her antagonist drew back for another swing. Adara jerked back instinctively and accidentally hit her captor's face with the back of her head. He grunted and loosened his grip. Adara seized the opportunity and let her whole body go limp, so that she slid straight down through his arms to floor level.

The woman shrieked and pounced, her knees digging

deep into Adara's chest. Adara tried to push her away, but she slipped backward, unable to get enough leverage. She took another jarring hit to the side of her face.

The woman yelped suddenly and was airborne. Pilfer - one of them anyway - held her with one hand, half a meter above the floor and let her dangle there momentarily.

"Weawly," he scolded. "Two agaitht won. Thath hawdly ffaiwr." He flicked his wrist and sent her flying toward the back of the room.

Adara swayed with sudden dizziness and she felt the throbbing in her cheek and around her eye. Another table fell over with a crash, scattering glasses, drinks and food everywhere. A forgotten stunner rolled away from the debris. Fighting the ringing in her ears, Adara pushed through the fight to get it.

The room was a swirling mass of violence. She increased the setting on the stunner and shot three times into the air. The charges hit the ceiling, impacting with a loud *crack!* and sizzled away until they dispersed along the support beams. The action in the room ground to a slow halt.

It was then that the *Mat-1* security detail arrived.

\*

Rilkens sighed heavily. "You sure you weren't born on

Selort? "

"Pardon me?"

"Well Cohili, it's just that the Selortians and the Tironis seem hell bent on wrecking ISR and *you* sure aren't making my life easier."

"No, I'm not from either planet."

Rilkens eyed her sourly. "Be seated 95th." Adara moved stiffly into the chair in front of Rilkens desk and held her posture rigidly. Her eyes were ringed with black bruises and a bright purple contusion sat up on her chin. Rilkens got up to pace the room. "Is it your intent to destroy this organization?"

"No, Commander."

"Then why is it that the first major incident that has *ever* occurred on the Rec Level during my command has you right in the thick of it? In all my days, I don't think I've ever seen that many people involved in a fight all at once."

"If you believe I am a problem to ISR, I will resign first thing tomorrow morning."

Rilkens stopped pacing and gave her an appraising look. "You would too, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, Commander."

"What would you do?"

"Find another group, or go out on my own."

"What, up against the Karaash? All by yourself?"

"If necessary."

"That would be extremely foolish," he admonished, looking scornful. "Not to mention a good waste of a lifetime. No one accepts your resignation."

Adara continued to stare at a point on the wall, motionless. "If you say so, Commander."

Rilkens sat down again. "Yes, I say so." He leaned forward on the desk, his hands crossed in front of him. "I also say this: things seemed a lot more peaceful here before you arrived."

"You mean, sir, besides the occasional Karaash attack?" Adara answered, unable to stop the remark.

Rilkens' fist crashed into the desk. "Watch your tone 95th! My name is not Sark!"

Adara didn't flinch. "Yes, Commander."

"Now would you please tell me what the hell happened down there? It's bad enough that an incident like this requires a personal interview by me, but it's even worse when no one will tell me the truth and now I have to spend extra time digging for it." He gave his computer screen an angry swat. "I've interviewed nine people so far. All of them are claiming either they started it, or that Sark did. All of them swear that you had nothing to do with it, although how that explains those beauty marks on your face, I don't know. Nobody will say why it started. How'd you make so many friends so fast, Cohili?"

"I don't know, Commander," she said and it was the truth.



"Then tell me what happened. Exactly."

She told him of the discussion, Sark's appearance and the resulting fight.

Rilkens rubbed his hands over his face. "Did it ever occur to you, anytime, that your topic of choice might be just a *little* sensitive? A bit controversial? Not to mention a trifle *political*?" He heard his own voice rising and paused for a minute to collect himself. "Look, you saw the Union tribunal. You saw how divided it was. One of my top priorities is to make sure that kind of thing doesn't filter down to our level. It's too dangerous. Mixing races and species is damn hard work, Cohili, especially when cultures clash. Fortunately, most of the people who join ISR have an overriding purpose: to help others in need. There are many of us who want to pursue that goal more offensively, but for now, our orders are to evacuate, not attack. So *shut up* will you?"

"Yes, Commander."

Rilkens looked at her suspiciously, trying to decide if she were sincere. He sighed. "Now I've got to figure out what to do with all of you. Fighting and arguing on the Rec Level is strictly forbidden. Strictly. The person who brought that stunner into the Rec area is going to hear about it too!"

"I respectfully remind the Commander that I did not throw the first punch."

"I know," he said irritably. "Sark did. But you were the

one who was talking about an obviously explosive issue. The point is, the rules say that everyone involved should get an automatic five-rank demotion and a minimum two days in the detention area."

"Commander-"

Rilkens overrode her. "But if I do that, if I come down that hard on everyone, especially over this issue, it's likely to divide the entire ship. At this point, it's still mainly just the Unloader complement that's involved." He drummed his fingers on the table. "But I can't ignore the incident, which means something has to be done."

"Then I suggest Commander, that you transfer me," Adara interjected.

Rilkens nodded. "Sure, except that's still too divisive. It will look like you're being tossed out because you dared to support a popular opinion. I can't transfer Sark, for the same reason. He's a good air tech designer and a decent Unloader and he's got a lot of friends. Besides which, I wouldn't want to inflict you two on any other fleet," he muttered.

He stared morosely at the computer, deep in thought. At length, his face cleared and he scrolled through a list of names on the screen. "That's the key," he said, almost to himself. "It's mostly that unit and a couple dozen individuals. I'll move the whole lot of you."

He turned back to Adara. "Providing your version of the story is true, then I'm just going to transfer everyone

involved to the Loader decks. It's not a demotion, but it's not a promotion, as most of you are due for the change anyway. You'll be in with the new transfers from off-ship." He tried not to look pleased with himself. "Hopefully, your new jobs and the training that goes along with them will keep you occupied until everyone cools down." He glared at her. "And everyone better be able to cool down. That means forgetting the incident and the issue that provoked it."

"Understood, Commander."

"Good. That solves, at least temporarily, one problem. As for involvement in the brawl, I'll skip the detention area." He pondered the situation. "A week's tour on guard and escort duty. The most boring detail ISR has to offer. Unless you hear otherwise in the next few hours, your tour begins immediately. Report to 65th Damians for your posting. Enjoy. Dismissed, 95th."

Adara got up to leave. "Oh and another thing," he said. Adara stopped. "Although I may regret this, my other orders about the Rec Level?" He let the question hang until she nodded acknowledgement. "They still stand."

## CHAPTER NINE

The floor felt weird underneath her feet.

Adara's footsteps rang out in the empty corridor as she walked. It was early in the morning and there weren't many people about. It wasn't until she was about halfway there that she realized that it felt different because the floor wasn't vibrating.

It was something she'd become used to, on the lower decks. That close to the mighty engines of *Mat-1*, the bottom three layers of the ship resonated constantly, pulsating with controlled energy. It had been grating on the nerves at first, just like the appearance of the ship had been, but after a while Adara had become accustomed to it. Now, lacking the low humming noise, the halls echoed. She wasn't sure she liked it.

The sound of a door opening and then closing nearby interrupted her thoughts. She continued to walk and soon saw Jonathan Smith standing in the hallway, apparently waiting.

"I was hoping you'd be up and about this early. How are

you?" he said, as she came closer. He noted that she was wearing a pair of black pants and a black shirt and not her uniform. "Going to the gym are you?"

"Yes, Commander."

"How's guard duty?" he asked mischievously. He fell into step beside her.

"Boring."

Jonathan laughed. "It is, isn't it? Not that *I* would know of course," he grinned. "I have to tell you, I'm really happy about this whole thing. It's going to do my career a lot of good to have had a hand in teaching the famed 'crack unit' from the lower decks."

"Crack unit?"

He grinned at her. "Ya, you know - bone cracking? Everybody's been talking about the fight up here. Thought it was hilarious. It's already gaining legendary proportions. You know how it is when people talk." He sobered. "I asked Rilken's whether I could continue working with your unit. I figured it couldn't hurt for me to hitch my ship to your rising star so to speak. I'm still working on that position in High Command, you see."

Adara looked carefully at Jonathan and wondered why he felt she should know this. "Is that so, Commander?"

He shrugged nonchalantly. "Yes. It's no secret to anyone who knows me. I figure I'd be good in High Command. They trained me as a diplomat you know. My mother and my grandmother before her were the best Terran

ambassadors of their time," he said, with a touch of pride in his voice. "My father was a trader and so between the two of them, they dragged me all over the universe. It was good experience." He shrugged again. "I guess I want to impress them a little too, my mother especially." A slight frown marred his features. "I joined ISR because it was something neither one were involved in."

Adara was unsure how she was supposed to reply to this. They took a lift down to the Rec Level and started to the front of the ship. It was quiet for a few minutes until she came up with a question. "Was there a reason why you wanted to see me in particular, Commander?"

Jonathan came out of his private reverie. "Yes, I need to set a few assignments up before your training. Do you know anything of how an onsite situation works?"

Adara nodded and began reciting from memory. "We send loaders down in teams of ten, plus one medic to a preassigned area. Under the direction of the team leader, they find a safe, but accessible pickup point and bring all wounded and uninjured persons in the immediate area to that location. They are to keep them there until a BT arrives. Should the location become unsafe, for whatever reason, or the pickup delayed, they are to move to another safe point. After a successful pickup, they move along in their assigned area, repeating the procedure until the area has been cleared, or until we call the evacuation off."

"Somebody's been reading the database," Jonathan smiled. "Very good. So do you want it?"

Adara was puzzled. "Want what, Commander?"

"A team leader position. There's about forty of you in this new group, so I'll need at least four. Do you want one?" he asked again.

A chance to make some decisions, however small. Adara didn't hesitate. "Yes."

"Great!" Jonathan looked pleased. "Do you have any preferences for your second-in-line?"

Adara thought for a moment, going over the people in the unit. "Ziki. Then Dirk. The Roikan next if you need it."

"Which one?"

"Does it matter?"

"No, I don't suppose so." He stopped walking. They were at the entrance to one of the Rec Level gymnasiums. "Thanks trooper, that makes my job easier. I'll go ask my other candidates for the other three lead positions and then divide everyone up from there. See you in the sim hall."

He shook her hand and left. Alone again, she walked into the gymnasium, only to find Pilfer and his two friends there already. She cursed to herself. She preferred to be able to work out by herself, which is why she was always here early.

"Goowod mourning to you," Pilfer greeted her.

"Morning," she replied. This gymnasium was divided into several different workstations, three of which the Roikans occupied. They were doing exercises to strengthen their legs.

As she moved to take a station for herself, she noticed that every move Pilfer made, his two companions copied exactly and almost instantly. At first she thought that they were just doing a specific program together. She observed them out of the corner of her eye while she prepared her station. If he scratched his nose, the other two scratched their own. As Pilfer moved to adjust his ill-fitting uniform, so did they. She hadn't planned to talk to him, but now her curiosity got the better of her.

"Excuse me," she said. "I have a question for you." Pilfer nodded his silver-grey head enthusiastically. "I know very little about your species. I was wondering why your friends seem to do the same things you do?"

Pilfer laughed. It was an odd sound, like a chuckle that they had divided in two. "My fweinds, Commanderr? Doo they not wook wike mythelff?" He enunciated carefully, to make sure she understood what he was saying through his thick fur.

Adara looked them over. "Well, yes I suppose they do. But all members of a foreign species tend to look very similar until you learn enough about them to be able to pick out distinguishing features."

The Roikan nodded wisely. "Awh. That ith vevy troo.



Howevah, you wiwll nevah be abwle to pick ouwt any diffwent feetchurth in thith cathe. They awre afther awll, mythelff agaein and agaein."

Adara looked dubious. "How is that possible?"

"We Woikans awre bowrn in theth of thwee. I belieff you woud call uth twipletth."

"All three are identical then?" she asked. Pilfer nodded. "Do you have any idea why?"

"Off courth. Owur home wowld ith a vevy thcary pwace, compwared to otherth. Vevy dangewouth. We awre bowrn thwee at a time to enthure the thurvival off each new gene vawiation. If owne of uth ith kiwled, then the otherth cawwy onn the genes."

In spite of Pilfer's careful enunciation, it took Adara a second or two to grasp what he said. "If the whole point is to ensure that at least one of you survives, then why are all three of you here in the same place? That doesn't make sense to me."

"It doth on owur home wowld. On my pwanet, which ith mothly twees and vines, owur pawents weave us at a vevy young age. The thwee of uth thtick togetherr to thurvive. When we huntt, we wok togetherr to kiwl the pwey. The pwey cannot hitith uth all at ownce, in theowy." Pilfer indicated the gym with a huge paw/hand. "Ath forr mythelff and my ffamilials, we pwobabwy thouldn't be hewre. We do nott haf thingth wike thpace thips on my pwanet, tho we awre nott adaptted for

wokking hewre. But we fewlt it wath impordant to ffight the Karaath."

Something occurred to Adara. "Wouldn't the population on your planet get out of hand fairly soon, if all of you were having three children at a time?"

"Yeth, exthept that only one of my ffamilials will haf chiwldwen. When we awre owld enouf for chiwldwen, we wiwl chose a mate. All thwee of uth will mate with all thwee of her. The firth couple to contheive wiwl cawy the chiwldwen to term. The otherth wiwl thtop twying and kiwl themthelveth."

Adara was horrified. "Whatever for?"

"It ith owur cuthom. To pwevent overpopwulation and to pwevent the gene pool fwom cwosing in on itthelf."

She considered this as she looked over the Roikan intently. She had to admit, the practice made sense, to a degree. But how would you feel if you were the one who didn't produce a child in time and had to commit ritual suicide? Adara imagined that Roikan triplets would be something like soul mates. How would the remaining Roikan feel without his other two selves around? Would it be like losing a part of yourself? Or would you even notice a difference, seeing as "you" were still there? The idea fascinated her.

Then a shadow crossed her face. What happened when a Roikan was killed before its time? She imagined a dark, wooded planet, thick with trees and creeper vines.

Roikans, hunting in the night. Karaash swooping out of the sky, laying waste to the planet, jumping off platforms to reach for Roikan bodies with a huge hand . . .

*... a huge hand that clapped onto her shoulder and smashed her brutally down to the ground. Before she even had time to breathe, that same hand curled around her arm and jerked her to the beast's eye level. Turning and twisting, Adara tried to break the thing's iron grasp, averting her gaze from the face with no eyes that looked at her. A blade flashed and Adara felt cold steel slide into her arm. She jerked back in pain as the blue being raised its gore-slicked sword. Adara watched in helpless fascination as the creature flicked an incredibly pink tongue over its lipless mouth and teeth. The sword flashed up and whipped back down toward her . . .*

"Doth the conthept dithturb you that much, Commanderr?" Pilfer asked.

Adara jumped violently and came back to the present. Pilfer was squinting at her from under his big bushy eyebrows. She slowly exhaled and tried to slow her pounding heart.

"Commanderr?" Pilfer asked again.

Pilfer. The vision of the Karaash had caught her off guard. Adara suddenly became furious with herself for allowing her thoughts to get so far away from her. *Serves you right* she berated herself. *Roikan suicide rituals! Skip the anthropology and get back to it.*

Pilfer was still staring at her. "No," she said bluntly. "The concept did not disturb me. Thank you for sharing your culture with me. Now I think I'd better get to work."

The Roikan bowed his head. "Ath you with, Commanderr." If Pilfer was startled at the sudden change of mood, he didn't show it. He and his siblings returned to their routine.

Adara adjusted the settings in her workstation and waited for its environment to shift. Within a few seconds, she felt the hard pull of double gravity. She began stretching to warm up.

She worked for an hour, ignoring Pilfer, or anything else outside her station. She pushed herself, going a little bit harder than the day before. By the time she was finished, her clothes were soaked and her muscles burned pleasantly. She did a few warm-down stretches and then stood still for a moment to catch her breath.

The gym had filled while she was working. Pilfer had gone, but others had taken his place. Janice Scader was working in the station across from Adara, while Disck used his own closed-in station to deftly bat a ball around with his long tail. Brad was just getting set up in his.

Adara turned to look at the other stations and frowned. Here was someone she didn't recognize. He was human, tall, lean and broad-shouldered. He dressed in a skin-tight, red physical training outfit and he had dark brown hair, cut short at the back, but longer in the front,

so the bangs swooped low over his forehead. His face was clear and open, with strong lines softened by luminous blue eyes. He was working systematically, building each group of muscles before moving to the next.

Adara continued to observe him, fascinated. His body seemed to have a natural grace, a smoothness of movement that intrigued her. She couldn't place him, but she had the feeling she should know him somehow, or that she'd met him at some point or another.

"Oh hi, Commander. I thought you would have been through by now."

Adara turned and saw that Ziki had just come in. "Why would you think that?"

Ziki shrugged. "You usually are."

"You keep track of my training schedule?" Adara said, perplexed.

Ziki smiled. "Well no, it's just that I've noticed that you're in here every morning for about an hour or so."

"I see."

"Can I help you with anything right now?"

Adara stood straighter, mopped away some perspiration with the back of her sleeve. "No, go ahead with what you are doing." Ziki nodded and had started to move away, when Adara changed her mind. "Wait," she said. "There is something. Do you know who that person is over there?" She indicated the station with a quick gesture.

Ziki, happy to be helping, cast her eyes over the whole gym before returning her gaze to Adara. She grinned. "Cute isn't he?" she asked. "That's Colm Patrick. He's just been transferred over from the *Sargentus* fleet. I think he's going to be in with our group."

Adara stored the information away for future reference. "Thank you."

\*

Back in her quarters, Adara stripped out of her clothes and stuffed them into the Fetcher niche. After she'd washed, she put on her regular uniform and accessed her computer. The computer took a few minutes to find the personnel files. It took a few minutes more to skim through the section she wanted.

Colm Patrick was a 93rd Classer, aged twenty-three. He had been through eight evacuations and had received two citations: one for bravery and one for exceptional performance of duty. His last assignment was Unloader, *Sargentus-12*. Before that, he'd been an Unloader-trainee, *Mat-1*.

Adara glowered at the screen. Besides the fact that he'd spent some time on the ship, there was nothing to suggest that she should recognize him. She racked her brain, the memory mocking her.

Then it dawned on her. He'd escorted her to her

quarters, on her first night aboard the ship. It seemed a lifetime ago.

Suddenly restless, she went over to her cubicle to look at herself in the mirror. She looked a great deal different now. Although still slim, she had lost the malnourished appearance. Her muscles were toned, her features well defined. Her hair had grown in and was now cropped into a short, practical hairstyle, which wasn't altogether unattractive. She wondered if Patrick would recognize her now.

Adara was abruptly annoyed with herself. *Who cares?* she told the reflection. *You've got work to do.* She slammed the cubicle door shut and left to report for her morning's guard duty posting.

\*

"This meeting will now come to order."

Teshwa Zig looked up from her computer and watched as everyone shuffled toward the table. She was tense. She didn't like to see all of ISR's top brass in one room.

There were fifteen members in the Assembly. Five were 1st Classers and strictly speaking, they formed High Command. They took ideas from the lower ranks, shaped them into policies and presented them back to the Assembly for debate and a democratic vote. They were also the ones responsible for keeping ISR's supporting

body - the Interplanetary Union - convinced of the need for a search and rescue force. The other ten Assemblants were 2nd Classers, like Teshwa and they were fleet commanders. Although they helped decide policy and acted as advisors to High Command, their jobs were more organizational than political in nature.

Now, with this meeting on board the *Teegara-6*, the entire command structure was at risk. She had almost kicked in her computer console, back on her own ship, when she had received the summons. A single Karaash continent could wipe them all out! Teshwa wondered what was so important that it required a face-to-face meeting of the Assembly.

She focussed her attention on 1st Classer Marsalis Marsalei, who was patiently waiting for the Assemblants to arrange themselves around the table. Teshwa noticed, not for the first time, that he looked a lot like his late mother, Byel. The Union and also ISR, had been his mother's idea, inspired by an attack on her home planet some twelve, maybe thirteen years ago - one of the first recorded, proven Karaashi aggressions. It had taken her four long years to cobble together the Original Hundred, the first members of the Union, and set up ISR's basic structure.

In a cruel twist of fate, she had been killed four years ago, trampled to death in a panicked rush in some long-forgotten evacuation. As good as she was at diplomacy



and negotiations, she had never stopped venturing into the field. Her death crushed Marsalis, her only son. Now he was desperate to keep her dream and memory alive.

He cleared his throat. "Greetings, everyone. First, let me commend you all for your haste and stealth in arriving here." Teshwa smiled. He was the perfect diplomat, she had to admit. Only he would think to congratulate his junior officers for obeying direct orders from High Command.

Marsalis continued. "Before we get on with the main purpose of the meeting, I'd like to find out what the latest news is. Current deployments anyone?"

2nd Classer Bine Flayder stood up. He always reminded Teshwa of a walking whale. "Yes sir. Right now I have four ships from the *Tonmassa* fleet assigned to a planet in System 57-c. An attack started there about three hours ago." He consulted his pad. "The last report I got seems to show that it's a small one and those ships seem to have the situation under control. You may have to excuse me however, if the scene deteriorates and I have to send in more reinforcements."

"Of course," Marsalis nodded. "Who else?"

Teshwa examined her own pad. The constant stream of status reports from her ship commanders scrolled by steadily. All was quiet.

Marsalis waited a moment longer, but no one stood up. "Quiet day," he murmured and then squared his

shoulders. His face became grim as he prepared to make his next statement.

"I'm not going to waste any time then," he said. "I've convened this meeting, in this way, because I have some disturbing news. I didn't wish to risk the chance that the news could get out to our general force until we have handled it in some way. There has been a significant change in our casualty statistics. Yesterday, four bulk transports were lost to Karaash inflicted damage." He paused for dramatic effect. "At an Unloading site."

There was a surprised gasp from the Assemblants. Teshwa was immediately concerned. "You mean they attacked the teams offsite?"

"That's exactly what I mean," Marsalis replied. "2nd Classer Jane Kilady, would you care to make your report?"

Kilady rose from her seat. She pushed a wayward strand of black hair from her eyes. "Yesterday, at 0845 hours, I received a request for help from the Velos system: their fifth planet was under attack. The information coming from the planet was sketchy, so I dispatched seven ships: two from my own *Sargentus* fleet were asked to go in and I asked for standby from two out of *Alexei* fleet and three from *Teegara*. At first, the attack seemed to fit the standard Karaash pattern." She ticked the points off on her fingers. "The Karaash had chosen to concentrate on one specific area, jammed all communications links to

that area just before the attack and they did not seem to make any demands for material goods, money, prisoners, or whatever.

"My people went in and performed as per usual. We found a suitable moon and set it up as the offsite. The Loader teams went into the thick of the attack and began clearing it. Casualty rates were about average. All else was standard. As the rescue progressed, it looked like things were under control. I was tempted to put back the standby request, but something told me to hold off."

"And?" Marsalis prompted.

"It's a good thing I did," Kilady said. "As the Karaash moved in further at the onsite, some of them broke off their attack and pursued bulk transports. 4th Classer Donovan's BT pilots are well trained and they reacted well to this turn of events. However, four BT's went down. They demolished two in transit from the planet to the moon; the other two were shot down within the moon's atmosphere. All hands were lost. Six other BT's suffered major and minor damage. Seven members of an Unloading team also died because of the attack."

Everyone was silent for a moment, as they tried to absorb the news. Finally, a 2nd named Loysa spoke up. "What happened then?" he asked quietly.

Kilady sighed. "Once the news reached me, I asked the standby ships to move in. With double the normal evacuation complement available, I put half of them to

moving all the victims; the other half acted as decoys. It seemed to work. For some reason, although the decoy BT's flew all over Creation, the Karaash never seemed to catch on to the fact we were duping them." She shrugged helplessly. "After a while, they fell back into the pattern. Once the number of civilians in the area had thinned out to a certain number, they withdrew. Everything after that was . . . well, standard cleanup and relief work."

"Thank you, Kilady." Marsalis addressed the entire group. "Kilady informed me right away and I put a gag order out until we could convene. Comments?"

Flayder rapped a set of scaly knuckles against the table in frustration. "Obviously, we are no closer to understanding these things than before. They seem to come at us from all directions, there isn't any discernible pattern in their target choices, they haven't stated any reason for their aggression and no system has successfully fended them off," he said. "Now, just when we think we, at least, have some sort of fix on their assault methods, they do this!"

"Perhaps they are just testing things out," Loysa said. Loysa was a dark, ugly creature, from a dark, ugly world. The others found him hard to look at, but they respected him and his opinions.

Flayder shook his head. "Testing what? They've been making these hit-and-runs for years now!"

Loysa smiled patiently. "Think about it. When the

Karaash first started making hits, they didn't come around too often. Over the years though, the frequency of their assaults has increased. So much so, that today," he inclined his head toward Marsalis, "High Command considers it a very quiet afternoon if only part of one fleet is engaged."

"So what's your point?" Flayder sounded almost belligerent.

"I think they've been gearing up."

"Spell it out Loysa," said Marsalis.

Loysa took a deep breath. "I believe they're gearing up for an all-out attack. War. The hits until now have been practice runs."

No one responded to that. Looking around the room, Loysa knew that he had only put into words what the others had long suspected.

Marsalis confirmed that notion. "I think we all agree on that point. The question is now, what are our options?"

"We don't have any options," Teshwa said dryly. "We never have. What we've been doing until now is putting off the inevitable." She stood up to get a better view of her audience. "We've always known that a full-blown war was a possibility. Before now though, we haven't had enough backing to start some kind of offensive. Perhaps this incident will give us some fresh ammunition to use at the Union." She pinned Marsalis with a glare. "We're going to have to start striking back and soon, because if

we don't start looking for a way to do some of our own damage, it will be too late."

Marsalis waved the idea away. "I've been lobbying for supplies for an offensive division for ages," he said, "and you all know how far I've gotten with it. So far, we have a bunch of AeroDart prototypes and some experimental armaments."

From his chair beside Marsalis, 1st Classer Michael Hamilton cut in. "What we're working with Teshwa, is a Union of self-serving, egotistical governments. Heck, half of them are only in the Union because it makes them look good to their neighbours. It's the 'We're taking part in the Defence of the Universe, how about you?' bit. Most of them are strapped for material goods and don't want to spend any more than they absolutely have to."

"That's right," Marsalis agreed. "The only reason they contribute as much as they do, is that they get scared by the numbers sometimes."

Teshwa regarded them both for a minute, carefully weighing words in her mind. "So," she said slowly, "it's time to start changing the numbers."

The room erupted in anger. "Impossible! What happens when the Union finds out we've been playing with the stats?" Flayder demanded.

Teshwa held up a placating hand. "We won't have to make significant changes. Just a few minor increases across the board." She leaned forward, placing both

hands across the table. "The number of attacks can remain true, but we can report more damage than we sustain. That will serve two purposes: first, the damage increase will begin to worry the Union a little more. Second, we can quietly divert the surplus resources into developing offence strategy."

Some of the Assemblants nodded in agreement. Marsalis didn't like the idea. "The news will get out and we'll lose more than we stand to gain. This has to be handled delicately."

"Come on, Commander!" Teshwa shouted. She regained control and changed the tone of her voice. "If you report this incident to the Union, what are they likely to do about it? Really?"

Marsalis appeared to consider the matter, but then he gave up the pretence. "They'll argue over it for hours and eventually decide to do nothing, as it was likely just an isolated case," he said wearily.

"Exactly. So we mention it to them, make a case for an offensive division and watch it fail. We keep pushing the Union, but in the meantime we start collecting materials from our new surplus. Quickly. We push the Union hard. So that when we finally get permission to become more aggressive, we have something already prepared. Then we start fighting back."

Marsalis was clearly uncomfortable with the idea. "What about promoting openness and honesty? Aren't we

supposed to be leading by example?

"Yes," Loysa said. "But perhaps now is the time to concentrate more on the leading and less on the example, yes?"

"I don't like this," Flayder grumbled. "One mistake, one close look at stats or whatever and the Union will have our heads."

"Up front, nothing changes Marsalis," Teshwa said, knowing she could provoke a decision if she tried hard enough. "We're still just squeezing for more funding. What we do with it remains our business until the time is right."

Marsalis looked at each face in front of him, gauging opinions, spoken and unspoken. "What is the will of the Assembly? Do we do as Teshwa suggests?"

Teshwa remained standing. "I am in favour."

Four more Assemblants stood up. Three more followed. Two more stood up after that, more slowly.

Marsalis counted heads. "The majority has spoken then." He sat back and began mending the slight rift the vote had caused. "Let's get down to the business of planning surplus use. Opinions please?"



## **CHAPTER TEN**

K'Saka hissed angrily at the departing members of the Council of the Two Hands.

The meeting had not gone well. K'Saka had called the meeting to tell his Council about the disappearance of the Sah, the fifteenth ship he'd sent out in search of a food supply. He had been going to ask for their advice. Five of the ten members had told him they didn't care.

Another two got into a vicious, snarling fight over a dagger - K'Saka himself had to break it up. The other three had accused him of blasphemy because of his concern.

K'Saka bit at the air in a gesture of frustration and rage. It was outrageous! To suggest that he, the king of the Karaash, the High Seeker himself, was engaging in heresy was unbelievable. No one knew better than K'Saka that their ultimate purpose was to find the Placer. After all, hadn't it been his predecessors, tracing all the way back to the Ancient Times, that had been among those who passed the First Test? Who better than he to

lead the way through the Second Test to find the Placer?

He slapped at the arms of his ancient, crude, carved-rock throne. The fools, he thought. We can never hope to find the Placer if we can't even feed our own miserable bodies. K'Saka felt the now familiar sense of foreboding grow heavier upon him. What had happened to the Council? K'Saka searched through the murky depths of his brain, looking for scraps of memory. When he had first taken the throne eight hundred years ago, the Council had not been so thoughtless. The wisdom of the Ancients had still shown itself in brief flashes. He could not believe that the Council had expressed such disdain for the issue - especially when K'Saka's chambers had echoed with the sounds of rumbling stomachs during the meeting.

Nevertheless, it had happened. So had the accusations and they had to be dealt with too. K'Saka got down off his throne and began crawling on all fours to the back of his chamber. He would have to convene the Council of the Fist, his loyal guards, to deal with the matter, he was sure. He would dispatch Sal and Sich to kill his accusers. Their remains could be Duplicated later, when he needed the full Council again. Yes.

K'Saka chortled and licked his lips when he reached the rear wall. Ah yes, they would learn! He was smart, smarter than them all. He reached up the wall and found the hidden rock panel he was looking for. Part of the wall

slid away and a whiff of cool air tickled his face. The sound of angry chittering reached his ears.

K'Saka grinned to himself in the darkness. Here was proof of his intelligence, his cunning! For in this hidden room, in a cage of the strongest alloy the Ancient Ones had ever forged, K'Saka kept a copy of himself.

The caged K'Saka slammed itself against the bars of the cage and tried to grab him. The king grinned again and pulled back, pleased with both of himself. Oh yes, this one was just as strong and vicious as he was. If someone was foolish enough to assassinate him, the device he wore under his belt would send a signal to the lock of this cage and release his impatient successor.

This, this was his secret - the key to his long reign. The current K'Saka was the fiftieth version of his mind and body to hold the crown. The original K'Saka had won the first throne in a brutal, gory assassination centuries ago; since then, no one had usurped him. No one knew why becoming king was impossible for any other Karaash.

A thought flickered across his mind, one that displeased him. He might have to kill this one soon. Too many things had happened in the last few months and this version would not have any memories of them. Yes, there were too many things to let slip: the accusations of the Council, the failure of so many expeditions, the treachery of Sill . . .

K'Saka let out a loud shriek of triumph. Sill! There was

the answer to their problems! He felt around his belt until he found the jawbone he had tucked away so long ago and forgotten. He'd have the treacherous assassin Duplicated for food! The perfect punishment for a usurper and a way to provide for his people. K'Saka licked the jawbone excitedly and trembled with anticipation. He'd eat the first copy himself.

## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

"Red Team Leader, please respond."

"71st Cohili here."

"Prepare to disembark," the BT pilot said. "Go to section 313 on your area map and clear."

"Understood."

The BT tilted gently and descended into the atmosphere. Adara double-checked the setting on her stunner and smoothed the front of her uniform. Everything was in place. After two months as a Team Leader, she had the routine down cold.

"Comptrol," Adara said into her helmet. "Display an area map. Highlight section 313."

"Complying," the computer responded. The inner surface of her visor flickered and a line map of Denra City, Korvalis, appeared. The Red Team assignment section flashed twice.

"Blue Team Leader, please respond."

"Patrick here, go ahead."

"Prepare to disembark. Go to section 311 on your area

map and clear."

On the other side of the BT, across from Adara, Colm Patrick nodded. "Gotcha," he said into the open link. "Gear up blue guys."

The BT bounced lightly and touched down. The side hatch blasted open.

"Red Team," Adara barked. "Move out!"

Gripping her anti-grav board, Adara stepped out of the ship. The others on her team followed quickly.

Adara did a quick examination of her new milieu. Short, glassy buildings surrounded her on all sides. They were arranged on a grid system, with the spaces between each building joining to become the straight lines and right angles of the pattern. The structures continued off into the distance for as far as the eye could see.

"Cohili to onsite coordinator, status report please," she said.

The speaker crackled. "Karaash are hitting the central part of the city hard. They are levelling the structures in an attempt to get at the inhabitants and may be working to your section," the coordinator said from his safe haven't-*I*. "You'll have to move fast."

"Understood," she said. "Comptrol, close comm circuit to Red Team members only, with one auxiliary link to onsite coordinator."

"Complying. All outside links closed, onsite excepted."

The voices on the open channels faded, replaced by the

sounds of a city under siege. "We'll start with that building over there," Adara said to her team, indicating the structure nearest them.

They advanced on the building, spread out and circled it quickly. It was tall and rectangular and the light from the sky reflected brightly from its polished surface. Adara searched her section of the structure thoroughly, but its smooth surface gave no hint about how to get inside. The seconds ticked by and Adara began to get impatient. Conscious of the sounds of laser fire in the distance, she was about to give the order to move on, when a voice cut into the silence within her helmet.

"Commander, this is 77th Ziki. We've found something, but it's not on the building. I think it's a trap door in the ground. East side."

Adara hurried to the other side of the building. Ziki and two Pilfers were prying open the door, grunting and straining with the effort. It appeared to be the entrance they were looking for. She peered into the square hole. A series of hand and footholds on either side of the tunnel led downward into the blackness.

"All right," Adara said. "This looks like this is our only option. Dirk and one Pilfer stay topside. The rest of us will go down. Dirk?"

"Yes, Commander?"

"Check in with the coordinator every two minutes and let us know what's going on. If we start sending

casualties up, I'm leaving it up to you to decide when to call the BT's in for a pickup. If the Karaash get too close, follow us or move out."

"Yes, Commander."

Without hesitation, Adara handed her board off, lowered herself into the hole and started down. As the distance between her and the surface increased, the light faded. It was a moment before the lenses in her helmet adjusted, but soon the tunnel looked to Adara's eyes as though a searchlight illuminated it. She had gone down about twenty meters when suddenly her foot couldn't find the next rung.

"Stop where you are everyone," she ordered. Slowly, she lowered herself to the last handhold and hung there for a moment, not wanting to risk letting go until she knew what she was dropping into. Apparently the tunnel opened up into a small room. She switched the position of her hands to turn around. There was a door on the wall opposite Adara.

She let go, but misjudged the distance to the floor and landed badly. The fall jarred her stomach and wrenched her ankle and she had to suck in her breath to keep herself from calling out.

"Commander, are you all right?" It was Disk.

"I'm fine, just a little winded." She waited until the pain subsided before speaking again. "Continue, people. There's a nasty drop at the bottom, so watch yourselves."



After the first two came down, they set themselves up to catch the others and the boards. Adara waited until everyone was safely out of the tunnel before she moved to test the door.

Ziki came over to stand beside Adara. "Gives a new meaning to the order 'fall in' doesn't it, Commander?"

"Mmm," she replied, preoccupied. She found the handle she was looking for, low on the door and tested it. "Good, it's open. Stand aside."

No sooner had she opened the door then a laser bolt sizzled into the room. The Loaders scrambled for cover on either side of the entrance.

Adara tried to peer around the entrance, but another shot forced her to pull back. "Can anyone see what that is?"

"Just a minute, Commander," replied Brad, who was further back. He changed position and looked down the corridor. "Okay, I see it. It's a short thing, about a meter high. It looks like a small version of those buildings outside, only with about six or eight legs, spider-like, at the bottom." It fired again and everyone flinched. "My scanner just told me it's the species we're supposed to be rescuing, a Korval. There might be two, maybe three of them there behind it."

Pilfer snorted indignantly. "Why are they shooting at us?"

Disck laughed. "Considering ISR's reputation, they must assume that they will be better off without us." The

others laughed too, although their reaction had more to do with their tension than the light joke.

"It's more likely that they think we're the attackers," Adara cut in dryly.

Dirk chose that moment to call down from the surface. Adara cut the other links so Dirk could report to her alone. "Commander, the Karaash are just coming into sight. They are moving slowly and it looks like they're trying to take down one building at a time. But whatever you're doing, you'd better speed it up, or you'll be trapped."

"Understood." Adara ducked as several more shots flew through the door. "I've had just about enough of this," she said, and instructed her computer to amplify and translate her words. "Cease fire! This is Interplanetary Search and Rescue. The people attacking you are Karaash. We're here to help you. Stop firing!"

The Korvals fired a few more times and then stopped. One of them replied, its language reminding Adara of the sound of pebbles dropping onto a hard surface. She could not figure out where the sounds were coming from on the compact body.

The computer translated the reply. "Have you come to defend us?"

"No," Adara said. "We cannot do that. We want to move you somewhere safe."

The Korval danced from side to side. "Not right. We

must stay here and defend the Stands."

"I'm sorry, but the weapons you have won't stop the Karaash. They didn't stop us and the Karaash are a lot stronger. You don't have a chance."

"We must stay here and defend the Stands. Our children are there."

Behind Adara, Brad groaned in exasperation and said something nasty under his breath. Adara tried a different method. "Do you have anyone who can't defend these Stands? Anyone who is too old, too young, maybe sick or wounded?"

The Korval stopped its little jigging movements and appeared to consider this. "You would take them away?"

"Yes."

"You would bring them back again?"

"When the Karaash are gone, yes."

"We would stay here and defend the Stands?"

"If you want. Or you can come with us too."

"No," the Korval replied. "We will stay here and defend the Stands. Come with me and I will take you to those who cannot."

"Please tell your friends not to shoot at us."

"Yes. Follow."

They hurried down the corridor as the Korval sidled into a larger room. It was filled with Korvals, some standing normally, other obviously badly hurt. A few made pitiful attempts to raise their unwieldy guns. Their guide

chattered to the others, gesturing wildly.

There were several exits to this room, two or three per wall. More injured Korvals were trickling into the room from the westerly exits.

Adara questioned the Korval. "Are all these rooms interconnected?"

"Yes, they are all attached by corridors like the one you came through. Some rooms have tunnels that lead up to the Stands."

"Pilfer, Disck and Chang," Adara said quickly. "Start getting these casualties to the surface. Try and convince the healthy ones to go to, if you can, or get them to help you. Notify Dirk of the incoming and Pilfer, you're in charge here."

"Yeth, Commanderr."

"The rest of you follow me."

Adara pushed her way into the western tunnels and shoved her way through the oncoming stream of Korvals. The remaining unassigned Loaders scrambled after her.

Ziki hurried up beside her. "What are we going to do?"

"We're going as close to the edge of our section as possible and then start working our way backward. If we can't convince these stubborn blocks to run for it, at least we can start carting and directing the wounded away from the action. The sooner we thin out the population, the sooner the Karaash will break off."

Adara increased her speed to a jog. A low rumbling

resonated through the corridor and cracks appeared in the walls.

"Dirk here, Commander, we're starting to pull the Korvals out of the tunnel now." His tone changed; he allowed worry to creep into his voice. "The Karaash are much closer now. From what we can see, these Korvals aren't slowing them, although there might be fewer Karaash flying around on those disks."

"I suspect that's because they're going below ground, Dirk. Maintain your position for if you can, but don't risk anything for our sake. Relay our status to the BT's."

"Yes, Commander."

They jogged for a few more minutes. Adara could hear the sound of sporadic laser fire and Korvals crying for help. She ignored the wailing and tried to concentrate.

There was another rumbling sound - this time much louder. The tunnel suddenly filled with thick, choking dust. A Korval, running at full speed, ran into Adara and knocked them both into the wall. Panic-stricken, it righted itself and tried to run off. Adara caught it by the leg.

"What's happening up there?" she asked, pointing into the dust. "Are there any survivors?"

The Korval tried desperately to pull away. Its voice was loud, urgent: frantic granite scraping against metal.

"The Stands! They've collapsed some Stands! Our children, our children! All is lost!" It heaved and broke

away.

The dust cleared, exposing the destruction ahead. A few dozen meters of the tunnel ceiling were now on the floor in a huge pile and daylight streamed in from overhead. There were two Karaash on top of the rubble, rummaging through the stone pieces. One of them hissed in triumph and pulled up a broken Korval body. The pair fell on it immediately, using their long arms and vicious hands to tear at it. It was a bloody, pulpy mess in seconds. In the sky, Karaash flew around on platforms, firing their lasers indiscriminately.

Bile rose in Adara's throat and she thought she could hear someone stifling a retch over her comm link. *You've seen this before,* she told herself *and you'll see it again. Remember it.* She tore her eyes away from the gruesome scene. She tried to be unconcerned about their presence; experience had taught her that they would not come after the team unless they strayed too close, or attracted their attention somehow.

"Computer, scan for life forms other than Karaash," she said.

The computer in her helmet did a quick examination of the area. "There are forty-eight non-Karaash life forms 7.5 meters from this location. They are to the right, 45.6 degrees from your current orientation."

The entire area in front of Adara was blocked by the fallen stone chunks. The mound was high in the area in

front of her, but angled down sharply on the right side, as though the debris had fallen into a hole. "That must be another tunnel entrance," she said to the rest of her crew. "Ziki stand guard and watch those things," she pointed at the Karaash. "This area is just at the end of our section. Help me clear these rocks."

They dropped their boards and set to work moving stone. The pieces were heavy and hard to handle. Twice the pile shifted underneath them suddenly. The second time, Janice lost her balance and was sucked into the moving tide.

"Ah!" she cried out in sudden pain. "My legs! I'm stuck!"

Adara bent over her. "Can you move them?"

"Only one," she panted. "The other hurts too much." She cast a frightened glance at the nearby Karaash. "Don't leave me here," she pleaded. "Not here, not with them."

"Brad, help here please," Adara said.

They cleared more rock and pulled her free. Brad gently felt her legs. "One's broke, Janice. The other prob'ly hurts, but it's okay."

Adara looked back the way they came, saw the rubble and the press of Korvals running for their lives. "I can't risk sending you back alone so you're going to have to stick with us. Ziki, you and Janice switch."

The three remaining members of the team pulled the

rocks away. They stopped when they'd cleared out part of the tunnel entrance. There was about a meter for clearance.

"Commander?" Janice said, terror in her voice. "There's more of them coming in!"

Adara turned to see six more Karaash drop down through the hole in the ceiling. The two that had been goring the Korval were finished with it and they sniffed the air, searching for new game.

"Commander, this is Dirk." A hail of laser fire drowned Dirk's voice out temporarily. "-beat a retreat. We've sent up one load already. We're taking the rest due south, about half a kilometre from where you went down. Pilfer's found another door there and he's says it connects to some other tunnels. He's hoping it's all joined up there somehow. Disck and the other Pilfer are headed that way already." Another laser blast - this one sounded close. "Commander, do you hear me?"

"Yes, Dirk! Move out of there! That's an order!" Adara looked at the Karaash again. They now outnumbered their small team. They were advancing slowly, cocking their heads this way and that, trying to pinpoint the location of their prey.

Every fibre in Adara's being yearned to strike out at them, but she held herself firmly in check. "Ziki look inside that hole and see if we can get those Korvals out. Brad, get Janice back from there."



Ziki poked her head and shoulders in the hole and then pulled back. "It's a small room," she reported. "There's an exit on the other side, partially blocked by rock. The Korvals you scanned are in there."

"Are they trying to dig themselves out?"

Ziki shook her head. "They're in a state of panicked shock, Commander. Besides, it's out of their reach."

Adara checked the Karaash. They had stopped advancing temporarily and it looked like some of them had found more Korval bodies to mutilate. She counted more than fifteen this time. Some were moving toward the tunnel exit, blocking their escape.

Janice saw where the Karaash were going. "Commander, how are we going to get those Korvals out of there and past them?"

"We're not," Adara replied. "Everybody, get in that room."

"But we'll be trapped!"

"Not if you dig fast enough," Adara said grimly. "Now move it!"

They slid into the hole, pulling Janice in awkwardly behind them. The Korvals were too panicked to react with violence; they simply flattened themselves against the walls.

Adara held Janice up while Ziki and Brad moved to clear the other exit. They quickly removed the smaller chunks of stone, but stopped when they came across a

large sheet of rock angled toward the doorway. They heaved and pulled on it, but it wouldn't move.

"Commander, we can't budge this thing," Ziki panted.

"Put your backs to the walls and use your legs. Rock it back and forth and direct it another way," Adara ordered. She could hear more Karaash spitting and shrieking outside. The ground rumbled with laser impacts and explosions. "We don't have a choice, move that damn rock!"

Brad and Ziki braced themselves either side of the rock. Ziki sounded out the rhythm. "Push! Back. Push! Back. Push-" The piece moved ever so slowly.

"I see a crack in it, near the bottom," Brad said. "Keep shoving Ziki, I'm going to try to widen it." He picked up a hunk of stone and began smashing at the base of the rock sheet.

At that moment, a Karaash stuck its head through the other entrance and hissed in triumph. It reached in with long arms, wrapped them around Adara and yanked her back against the wall. Janice, suddenly without support, fell to the ground with a muffled cry.

The Karaash began squeezing Adara's neck. Panic nearly overtook her. She struggled against the iron arms that held her, pulling uselessly at them with her hands as she choked and gasped. The room around her began to go black. Just in time, she remembered to turn her neck to the side, which moved her throat just out of the crushing

grip. The Karaash tightened his arms.

Time slowed. Out of the corner of her eye Adara saw Brad hit the rock sheet again, just as Ziki strained forward. The rift in the sheet widened and then spread slowly, inexorably along the base as the rock's own weight acted against it. Seeing it, Brad dropped the rock and pulled backward with all of his strength. An eternity later, the rift found the far end. There was a puff of crushed rock dust as the sheet cracked in half.

The top half shifted and went teetering toward Brad, who danced out of its way. Ziki fell over. The stone sheet landed with a crash.

Adara fought the beast, struggling against unconsciousness. Using her own skull as a ram, she battered it against the Karaash, forcing it to loosen its grip. She slipped an arm up to try and break its grasp.

"Commander!" Janice cried. She tried to stand but lost her footing and fell. "Help her!" she cried to the others.

Brad swore and rushed over to Adara, another rock in hand. "Move your head!" he yelled. He used his rock to pummel the Karaash. It let go of Adara to shield its head.

Adara fell flat, the impact and relief bringing stars to her eyes. She waited until she could see clearly again. When she stood up, Brad was trying to shove the Karaash back into the hole.

"No, wait!" she ordered. "Hold him down! Use him to block the entrance! Ziki, get the Korvals out of here."

"Commander," Brad grunted, struggling with the half-stunned Karaash. "Could I get some help?"

Adara checked Janice and then grabbed a heavy rock. Staying clear of the flailing arms, she heaved it up onto the back of the Karaash. Brad grabbed some more debris and wedged it around the beast.

Adara turned around and saw Ziki trying to shove Korvals into their escape hole. She was getting frustrated.

"Come on you stupid beasts! Get in the tunnel! You can run now! Run!"

A third blue arm worked its way through the blocked entrance and swiped at Brad. He yelped and jumped back.

Cursing, Adara grabbed the nearest Korval and hauled it up to what she hoped was eye level. "The Stands! Tell your friends you've got to go where my people are taking you, so you can protect the Stands! Do you hear me? The Stands!"

The Korval was motionless for a moment and then it squealed. It shook itself from Adara's hands and ran for the door, still squealing. The other Korvals started squealing in reply and suddenly there was a tide of Korvals heading for the door. They crushed Ziki against a wall.

"Oof!" she grunted. Suddenly the room was empty, except for the Loaders. Ziki pried herself away from the wall. "Good thinking, Commander."

"Come on, we don't have much time," Adara snapped. She grabbed Janice's arm and helped her stand up. Ziki grabbed the other arm and together they lifted Janice off the ground.

"Comptrol," Adara said, moving to the entrance. "Correlate spatial information from Dirk Johnson's last transmission with our current position and our previous movements. Extrapolate, based on Korval architectural patterns, to find nearest exit point to surface."

"Complying. Stand by." Images flashed on the surface of Adara's visor. The computer sketched out a route.

"Hypothetical route now being displayed. Extrapolation and correlational data integrity is rated as good-"

"Transmit to Brad Manter and display."

"Complying."

"Lead the way," Adara ordered.

"Yes, Commander," Brad said promptly. He moved away at a brisk walk, going faster only when he was sure Ziki and Adara could keep up. They ran when they could, slowing only to prevent themselves from stumbling over debris. Janice moaned with each bump.

Brad skidded to a halt; the tunnel forked here and a rock fall blocked the route they were supposed to take. Brad gasped and pointed.

A Karaash lay in front of the rock fall, beside the wreckage of three dead Korvals. It had obviously cornered and torn the spider-like creatures apart. The

body of the Karaash twitched and spasmed.

"Is it dead?" Janice asked.

"I hope so," Adara said vehemently. There were sounds of pursuit behind them. "Recalculate, Manter. Quickly."

Brad gave the commands to his computer and darted off again. They ran until they found a tunnel leading up to the surface.

"This is it," he panted. "Straight up."

"Brad, take Janice on your back. Ziki up first, I'll go last."

"They awre hewre!"

Adara looked up to see Pilfer lumbering easily down the shaft. He dropped to the ground gracefully.

"You wooked wike you needed hewlp, Commanderr."

"Yes, grab Janice and take her up. Why are you here?"

"Thith sec-shun ith cwear now Commanderr. We haf been we-athined. We awre justt waiting forr you."

"Up, all of you," she said. Pilfer lifted Janice gently and cradled her in one massive arm. He climbed up as nimbly as he had come down. Adara took up the rear of the procession.

"Johnson," she snapped, when they reached the surface. "Why haven't you gone on to the next section?"

Dirk winced at her tone of voice. "We had six minutes before we had to move to the nearest BT rendezvous point for transfer to section 402. I didn't want to abandon you if I could help it."

Adara glanced at the sky, where the Karaash flyers were looming closer. "Admirable," she said flatly. "Don't cut it so close next time. Move out."

Dirk looked relieved and turned to lead the way. They found the BT site and waited anxiously. The BT arrived two minutes later.

They boarded the ship and squeezed between the Korvals already in the ship. The BT launched back into the air again. They flew a steady course, humming along at a constant speed. Then the BT slowed abruptly and changed direction.

Adara sensed the shift and opened a link to the BT pilots. "Why have we changed course?"

"The onsite co-ord has just signalled Karaashi withdrawal. We're dropping these casualties at the offsite and then returning to *Mat-1*." The pilot paused as he listened to another message. "*Alexei-4* has just entered primary orbit. They've apparently offered to handle cleanup."

"That's good of them," Adara said sarcastically.

"Yeah," said the pilot. "I guess the Karaash got bored early this time."

An image of the shredded Korvals flashed through Adara's mind. "Apparently," she said bitterly.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

The BT slid into the huge docking bay and then began shunting toward its assigned spot. As she waited to disembark, Adara stood completely still, fighting the urge to fidget. The abrupt ending to the assignment was horribly anticlimactic. Her blood sang and her muscles vibrated with energy. She felt like a coiled spring, ready to explode with sudden, startling movement.

Her neck ached. It was as though the arm of blue tempered-steel was still there, still squeezing, still crushing. She remembered the all-too-familiar feeling of sudden overwhelming terror, of being small and helpless against the sheer physical power . . .

*Stop it!* she told herself. She grabbed the memories and locked them away, shoving them deep into her mind. She went through the motions of adjusting her uniform, methodically, calmly.

The BT stopped and the back door opened with a hiss. By the time she stepped off the ship, she had mastered herself. No one around her had seen any indication of the



inner struggle. She undid her suit seal and pulled off her helmet.

"Pilfer, help Scader to sickbay and report there yourself if necessary," she said. "The rest of you should go there as well and then prepare your personal reports. When a debriefing time is set up, make your statements."

There was a chorus of replies. "Ziki," Adara continued. "Do an inventory check."

"I did, Commander," Ziki said, proud to have anticipated the request. "We lost four boards and one stunner, all in section 313. All other equipment, including protective gear is accounted for. Shall I notify the *Alexei* crew assigned to that section?"

"Yes. Note the missing materials in your report however," Adara said. "We might not recover them. Go to sickbay."

Ziki came to attention. "Yes, Commander," she said and left the bay.

Adara turned to leave as well, but stopped when she noticed something odd about the outer shell of the BT. She stepped closer to get a better look.

The hull was badly damaged, scorched black and warped from intense heat. At first Adara assumed the craft had set down in the middle of a fire at some time during the assignment. It wasn't such an odd idea; BT pilots sometimes did a quick touch down to clear a path through a fire for ground crews - they called it 'snuffing.'

If done with care and speed, it didn't severely damage the craft, but it did discolour it.

Adara pulled off a glove and cautiously ran a hand over the surface of the ship. She frowned. The pattern of scorching didn't look or feel right. The darkest, most warped sections weren't near the bottom of the BT, as they would be for a snuffing. Instead, they were randomly dispersed along the side of the ship, large black spots surrounded by lighter grey patches.

"There's two other BT's that look like that on the far side of the bay," said a voice behind her.

Adara turned to see Colm Patrick leaning casually on another parked BT. "You're Cohili aren't you?" he asked. "Red Team leader?"

"Yes," she said.

"Colm Patrick, Blue Team. I'd have introduced myself before, but this is the first time I've seen you standing still for more than two seconds."

"There are other ships marked up like this?" she asked.

Colm raised an eyebrow at her terse manner. "Yes," he said. "I don't think those are snuffy burns, do you?"

"No," Adara said. "These things have been shot at."

"I agree," he said. "I just asked a pilot about them. I think they're under some kind of gag order because he said he couldn't confirm my suspicions. He didn't deny them either though. He also hinted that his craft didn't get marked up at the onsite."

Adara felt a sudden chill. Everyone knew that the Karaash had a predictable pattern: a surprise attack, destroy everything and pull away. Until now, apparently.

"How long has this been going on?"

"I'm not sure," Colm said, shifting the helmet he had tucked underneath his arm. "I've seen one other ship like this one and that was on our last action. The pattern wasn't as distinct as this one and I wasn't sure of what I was seeing until today."

"Why would there be a gag order on this?" Adara wondered, almost to herself. "There's nothing in regulations to cover this."

Colm looked surprised at the question. "Well I can't imagine this is going to do wonders for morale," he said. "It's hard enough going into a site knowing you have almost no protection. Then to find out your going to be chased . . ."

"Patrick! Cohili! Welcome back!" It was Jonathan. He hurried across the bay to meet them. His eyes danced with excitement.

"Commander Smith," Adara said formally.

"What's up?" Colm asked.

"I've got some news. First and most important, I've finally been put back into something more exciting than piloting a desk." He fingered his rank insignia self-consciously; it still read 70th Classer. "Rilkens has had me on administrative and training duty for so long, I've

forgotten what it's like."

"That's good to hear," Colm said, clapping Jonathan on the back. "Welcome back to Loader land. I know what it's like to miss an action and it's tough."

"You don't know the half of it," Jonathan said with a laugh. "You were off with an injury and you only missed one! But I didn't come down here to brag - at least, that wasn't my only reason. My good news is your good news."

"How so?" Colm asked.

"Well, both of you have been bugging the hell out of me to get into BT pilot training," Jonathan said. Colm and Adara glanced at each other in surprise. "Because of that, you and a few others, myself included, are getting first crack at training for something completely new." He leaned forward to whisper conspiratorially. "AeroDarts."

Colm let out a low whistle. "That *is* good news. I've heard rumours about those things."

"First crack, Commander?" Adara asked. "How many people will be trained?"

Jonathan grinned. "Rilkens didn't spell it out, but the way I understand it, they are putting together certain team leaders on a task force to test these things out. Once we play with them for a while, we turn around and train our team on them. Why, I don't know. Maybe it relates to that." He gestured at the burnt BT.

"Jonathan?" Colm asked.

"What?"

"I hate to be the one to break this to you, but you don't have a team any more."

"Ah, but I do!" He laughed again and ran a hand through his hair. "Gold team. When the time is right, they will second some BT pilots to my command."

"When do we start?" Colm wanted to know.

"We weren't supposed to start until tomorrow, but since the Korvalis thing went so quickly, Rilken's rescheduled. We're to meet in sim hall two at 1600 hours." He looked at Adara. "So what do you think trooper?" He peered closer. "Say, that's a nasty piece of work under your chin there. Good and purple."

Adara gingerly raised her hand to her throat. It was sore to the touch. "I'd better go to sickbay."

"Sure," Jonathan said. "I'll see you later. Meanwhile, if you see green leader Sark, or orange leader Sheersa, let them know too, okay? Otherwise, keep this to yourself. Rilken's orders."

\*

The sim hall seemed that much larger with only five people in it.

Jonathan and Colm chatted quietly to one another. Sark and Teerso Sheersa stood next to each other, but did not speak; his angular, pinched features stood out in sharp

contrast to her rounded, cherubic face. Adara stood apart from them all, waiting impatiently. She twisted her neck, testing it again. It was still tender, but the deep bruising was gone, taken care of by the medics in sickbay.

Rilkens arrived, five minutes late. He was clearly annoyed. "My apologies for being late," he said. "I was just talking to the Commander of the *Alexei-4*. They are having problems figuring out what they're doing down there. Perhaps we shouldn't have let them handle the cleanup."

"Well, Commander Rilkens," Sheersa said arrogantly. "If you want something done right, you can't trust other people to do it."

Rilkens covered his smile by coughing into a fist. "Precisely." He looked at the five people in front of them. They were all eager and excited, although they tried not to show it. "Well, here we are. I assume you all know by now that you've been reassigned," Rilkens said, enjoying their enthusiasm. He clasped his hands behind his back. "Before I go any further, I want you to understand this: until I say otherwise, anything that goes on in this room can only be discussed among yourselves, with myself, or with a member of High Command. You are under direct orders from High Command to deny all knowledge of this meeting and any meeting hereafter, to anyone outside this room. That includes your best friends, your spouses or partners and your bunkmates."

"May we ask why, Commander?" Teerso asked.

"As you may have already guessed," Rilken said wryly, "I'm not always privy to High Command's motivations. But if you want my opinion, I think we're setting up a unit that isn't supposed to exist yet, at least officially."

"Does this mean we're going on the offensive?" Sark demanded.

"No, I don't believe so." Rilken said carefully, aware of the sudden tension in the room. He tried to gauge everyone's reaction. Adara and Colm looked disappointed. Teerso and Sark looked angry, but mollified by his last statement. Jonathan didn't appear to have an opinion on the matter.

"No," he said again. "The Karaash might be switching tactics. They've started to pursue bulk transports both on and offsite. They aren't doing it consistently yet and we've been handling it by sending in empty BT's as decoys. But as good as our pilots are, BT's simply aren't as fast or as manoeuvrable as those flying platforms the Karaash use. We've been taking a lot of heavy and expensive damage."

Adara scowled. She remembered searching through the computer for information on those Karaash machines. ISR knew less than nothing on what they were, how they operated, or even how they managed to get to an attack site.

"We've had a few Dart prototypes for a while," Rilken

was saying, "and I think this unit will be used to replace the decoy BT's."

"So," Colm drawled, "we're being promoted to being airborne targets?"

Rilkens hesitated and then relaxed his manner. "Yes," he said affably. "That sums it up. If any of you wish to refuse this assignment, that's fine by me. Just let me know by the end of the day." He turned to the sim hall computer, knowing that none of the five people he had selected would turn down the job. He keyed in a sequence of commands and authorization codes.

The air wavered, an AeroDart appeared. There was an appreciative murmur from the group. Rilkens chuckled.

"Not everything in ISR is as ugly as our carrier ship design," he said. "Mr. Sark, I believe you're our resident expert on this type of technology. Would you do me the honour of being the first to check it out?"

Sark's eyes glittered and he hastened forward to examine the Dart. He ran a hand over the seat and up to the controls, muttering specifications to himself. He walked all around the craft and then got down on his knees to peer underneath it.

"I haven't had the chance to try these out myself," Rilkens admitted, ruefully. "But I understand they are incredibly fast and capable of omni-directional flight. You'll have to trade in your current biosuits for an upgraded version, because the in-flight stresses will



overload the environmental systems you've got right now. The new suits will have a direct link to the Dart's onboard system."

Sark sat on the Dart and peered closely at the navigational controls. Colm edged closer to look over Sark's shoulder. "What about communications and sensors?" he asked.

"Short range, the sensors can instantly scan in all directions." Rilken said. "You'll get a datasphere of about twenty meters around the Dart. In the long range, it takes a little longer to get results, because it has to make a sweep and then correlate the information."

Adara looked at the open seat. "What about protective shielding?"

Rilken looked uncomfortable. "It's equipped with a basic bubble shield. Our information on Karaash armaments is sketchy at best, because Union members are unwilling to give up data on their defensive systems or damage reports. A few ship commanders have tried to gather intelligence during a cleanup, but they get tossed off-planet in a big hurry if they're even suspected of doing it. So we really don't know how effective these shields will be."

"Not until we sustain our own damage," Adara said.

Rilken sighed. "To be blunt, yes."

Colm's normally jovial smile turned bitter for a moment. "The Union doesn't want much do they? Airborne targets

and test subjects to boot."

"The Union knows nothing about this," Rilkens reminded them. "This is High Command's initiative. Again, we aren't ordering you to participate. This is strictly voluntary. You were all chosen for this based on your technical expertise and the fact that you've all expressed a desire to do more for ISR. But if this isn't your type of assignment, you can leave it any time you like."

After a moment, Colm winked at Rilkens. "And miss my chance to buzz the Karaash in-flight? Not a chance." He gestured at the Dart. "Any more of those where that one came from?"

Rilkens took the hint and keyed in another set of commands. The sim hall disappeared, replaced by a wide, flat, grassy meadow. Five of the Darts now sat on the ground. Sark was still on his and he powered up. He gave everyone a smug, self-satisfied look and raised the craft a meter off the ground.

Everyone hurried forward to claim a Dart of their own. Rilkens stepped back out of the way.

"Aren't you going to join us, Commander?" Jonathan asked, as he straddled his Dart.

"No," he waved them on. "If I get on one of those things, you couldn't pry me away and I've got work to do." Jonathan laughed. "You've got the hall until 1900." Rilkens said. "I'll be back then to get your opinions."

\*

Adara hovered ten meters above the ground, manoeuvring slowly until she could get used to the controls.

Jonathan tried to pull up beside her and overshot the mark. He reversed, overshot again and edged forward. "Geez these things are sensitive," he said. He'd nearly thrown himself off the Dart two minutes ago.

"Yes," Adara agreed. She gently pushed the left-hand control and did a slow spin. "Some instructions would have been nice."

"I think the idea was for us to ask Sark," Jonathan said, looking at the sky. Sark was already moving at high speed. "Somehow I don't think he much cares how we do." He watched Adara bring the craft to a full stop. "Say, how are you doing that?"

Adara showed him how to nudge the controls. He tried it himself and executed the same slow spin. "That's much easier," he said with satisfaction. He reversed the spin and then stopped the Dart. "This thing moves almost as soon as you've decided to move."

"It's no good to us if the controls lag behind our reactions," she pointed out.

"Ha," he said. "You're right there. Now what are you doing?"

She guided her Dart around his stationary craft, drawing a square around it, keeping the nose of the Dart facing forward the whole time. The flight pattern was a little jerky when she switched directions, but otherwise she did not bump into Jonathan.

When she finished, she said "I'm going to try some more speed."

"Go to it," Jonathan said. "I think I'll stick to this for a minute longer."

Adara bent over the Dart and pulled it higher. The simulated breeze ruffled her hair. She carefully touched the accelerator and shot forward, the Dart's stasis field gripping her just in time, preventing her from falling off the back. She pulled back a little and the speed levelled out.

The grassy meadow raced by underneath the Dart. She looked down and felt a touch of dizziness, overlaid by an exhilarating sense of power, speed and control. She twitched her right hand and did a hairpin U-turn, then tapped the foot control repeatedly so that the Dart bounced up and down.

She decided to try a roll. She leaned to the right and down, twisting the ship in midair. In less than two seconds she was parallel to the horizon and then she was upside down. Then she was stuck.

She flew that way for a moment, completely disoriented. Up was down and down was up. She tried

twisting her body, but she couldn't right the Dart again. She pulled the craft to a halt and hung there.

Colm whizzed by her, turned around and stopped a meter in front of her. He looked vastly amused. "That was intentional, was it?" he asked.

"No," she said irritably. She pointed the nose of the Dart at the sky - the ground - and looped herself back to an upright position. The blood rushed away from her head, making her feel woozy.

"Didn't think so," Colm said. "What were you trying to do?"

"A roll," she said shortly, annoyed with herself and annoyed at him for stopping.

"You've never been boating, have you?"

"No, Commander, I have not."

"Didn't think so," he said again. "You didn't swing around fast enough. Get the momentum working for you." He backed up his Dart and did a stationary roll, shifting his weight so that he came upright again.

"Thank you Commander," she said, angling away from him. "I'll keep that in mind for future reference. She accelerated away, wondering if she could arrange to practice in private from now on.

They continued working with the Darts until 1900 hours. By the time Rilken came back to the sim hall, they all had enough skill to make an accurate, although bumpy landing in front of him. He looked very pleased.

"Well, what do you think?" he asked.

Colm dismounted and winced as he straightened his back. "They're not very comfortable," he grumbled. "But judging by what I've seen of the Karaash ships, they should be all right."

"They're not very efficient," Sark said promptly, his eyes bright. "It needs some adjustment."

Rilkens nodded. "The design was already in progress when you first joined ISR, Mr. Sark and of course, it had to be kept quiet. But if you'd care to add to the design now, you are more than welcome. I will give you access to the database on it later." He looked at the rest of the group. "That goes for the rest of you as well, because no doubt you'll all want to have some input."

"When can we do this again?" Teerso said.

"Tomorrow, same time," Rilkens answered. "I want you to get proficient as quickly as possible, because it's taken some massive rescheduling to allow this hall to be out of commission for this amount of time. I've got a whole load of hunnies due in a week that will need training." Jonathan looked horrified and Rilkens chuckled. "Relax, 70th, that's someone's else's job now."

Jonathan let his shoulders relax in an exaggerated manner. "You have no idea how happy I am to hear that, Commander."

"Good. Meanwhile, I want you people to put your heads together and see if you can come up with some effective

strategies for using these things both on and offsite." He patted a Dart. "You'll all be part of a joint advisory committee to High Command. I hope you're suitably impressed by that, because I'm expecting top quality results from you. I want *Mat-1* to set an example."

"That goes without saying, Commander," Teerso said. "You'll get nothing but the best from us, of course."

"Excellent," Rilkins beamed. "I'll see you all here tomorrow. Dismissed."

Adara headed for the door, intent on getting to her quarters. Jonathan hurried to catch up to her.

"Hey trooper," he said, "now that we're both at the same rank, I have a question for you. I didn't want to ask you before, because it wouldn't have been right."

Adara didn't slow her place. "What, Commander Smith?"

"What's a good-looking 70th Classer like you doing for dinner tonight?"

Adara stopped, completely stunned. For a moment, she didn't know what to say. "I was-"

"Hold on," Jonathan stopped too and held up a hand. "I can see by the look on your face that you already have plans. Somebody beat me to it, then?" He gave her an engaging smile. "Never mind then, I won't put you in an awkward position. However, if you ever find yourself in need of some company, let me know. Meanwhile, I'll bide my time. See you tomorrow!" He left.

Adara stared after him, still in shock. Then the implications of the request hit her and a dark look passed over her face. She walked quickly to the privacy of her quarters, just as happy he had misinterpreted her reaction.



## **CHAPTER THIRTEEN**

The next morning, Adara was sitting in her quarters reviewing her training log, when the door entrance monitor beeped. The sound startled her. No one had visited her since she'd moved to the upper decks.

"Open," she ordered the computer.

The door slid open to reveal the tall frame of Colm Patrick. "Hi," he said.

Adara blinked in surprise. "He-hello, Commander."

He was dressed casually, in a loose white shirt and grey pants. He was carrying a computer pad in one hand and a blue bottle in another. "Are you ready to get started?"

"Started on what?"

Colm leaned in the doorway and glanced around the room. "It was my understanding that we're supposed to be working on some possible strategies."

"Oh," she replied. She hadn't planned on talking to anyone ahead of time. She had been going to come up with her own ideas and then just give them to Rilken this afternoon.

"If you're busy, I could come back later," Colm said.

"No, that's fine." At a loss for words, Adara reverted to regulations. "You're out of uniform."

Colm looked down at his clothing. "Every once in a while I like to change into something a little less stiff and formal. It's a bit of psychology on my part. A change in clothes helps me break up my thought patterns. Prevents me from getting into a rut." He shrugged and held out the bottle. "Besides, it's hard to enjoy this stuff in uniform. It's too unpredictable for regulations."

"What?"

He smiled softly. "You'll understand when you try it." He looked around again and noticed the small console she was working at. "We need some more furniture in here. Hang on, I'll be right back. The, ah, door will close behind me." He set the bottle and pad down on the floor and left.

He returned a few minutes later with a table and chair, beeping the door before he entered. He laughed when he saw her. "You aren't very good at taking hints are you?"

"What do you mean?"

He set down the table and pulled up the chair. "I had kinda hoped you would take the opportunity to change into something casual while I was gone. But, it doesn't matter." He crossed the room. "Does your Fetcher work?" he asked and punched a button. The unit hummed in response. "Great! Mine's been fried or something. I

forgot to call for a repair crew."

Adara found herself getting annoyed with the intrusion. *He acts as though he owns the place!* "What do you think you're doing?" she demanded, standing up to get a better view.

"Just getting some glasses," he said without looking back. "We need something to drink out of, unless you want to swig from the bottle."

She glanced at the blue bottle. "I don't drink mind-altering substances."

Colm suddenly turned and stared at her. Thoughtfully, he crossed his arms and put a finger to his chin. "I wonder," he murmured. He stepped back two paces and then shook his head. "Would you mind sitting for a second?"

"What?"

He walked over and dragged the chair up behind her. "Just sit here, I'm trying to figure out something." She sat, looking bewildered. He pulled back to look at her again. "It was you!" he exclaimed.

"What are you talking about?"

"You were the one staring at me in the gym. A while back, when I came aboard."

Adara felt her face grow hot. "I don't stare," she said.

Colm grinned at her and retrieved the glasses from the unit. He pulled up the other, sat and poured two drinks. "I wasn't sure at first," he said, replacing the stopper in the

bottle, " `cause your hair was all wet and messed up then, you know? But when you got in the chair like that again, it all came back." He toasted her with his glass and took a sip of the ruby red liquid.

Still red-faced, Adara was about to do the same when suddenly she was aware she had lost control of the situation. She put her glass down. "I said I don't drink mind-altering substances."

"Neither do I. Fuzzes up your judgement," he said, waving his hand vaguely. "What do you drink?"

Adara was caught off-guard by the question. "I--. Water, mostly."

Colm nodded wisely. "I thought as much." He pointed at her glass. "Try some. I promise it won't kill you."

She was about to protest, but something in his look told her arguing was pointless. Reluctantly, she took a sip.

The taste seemed to explode on her tongue. At first it was spicy hot and then it shifted to a cool, minty sensation. As she swallowed, the last drops turned stingingly sweet.

"It -it changes flavours," she said in astonishment.

Colm, who had been watching her intently, smiled in triumph. "It's never the same drink twice. Never."

"What is it?"

"Papillon fruit juice," he replied. He stuck out his tongue and pointed to its wet surface before withdrawing it again. "It's named for its effect on your papillae.

Otherwise known as your taste buds. The fruit is a delicacy on my planet. We can't duplicate the stuff properly here. I have to buy it off ship." He pulled his computer pad in front of him, suddenly all business. "Shall we get started now?"

Relieved to be on familiar ground, Adara agreed. "What do you think of the AeroDarts?"

Colm pursed his lips in thought before answering. "I don't like the fact we'll be unarmed, but we can work on that later, I suppose. I'm guessing that what we lack in speed and weaponry, we can make up for in manoeuvrability."

"What makes you say that, Commander?"

He touched the surface of his pad and watched it come to life. He called up two images, one of a Dart and another of a Karaash flying platform. "The Karaash stand up on theirs, which means they have to remain upright all the time. Even if they have stasis fields, the design isn't very aerodynamic or very comfortable. It's got to be hard to do fancy moves that way."

"Good point."

"I thought so. The way I see it, we can use that to our advantage. If we can entice a Karaash platform to follow us, we can probably remain just far enough out of his way to prevent injury, but close enough to keep its interest." He called up the data from a recent assignment. "Now, we'll have to set up decoy Loader pick-up points

and-"

Adara shook her head. "It's not that complicated," she said. "Recreate that attack from the point at which we sent the BT decoys in." She watched as he set the pad to replay the scene in mini-hologram form. "I've been studying this," she said. "Watch the Karaashi platforms carefully and make note of which ones decide to pursue the fake BT's."

Colm let the scene play to the end and then restarted it from the beginning. The second time through, he gave up and looked at her quizzically. "I don't see a pattern. Seems to be pretty random to me. They chase everybody."

Adara leaned forward and reset the pad again. "You have to see it four or five times before it becomes obvious. They pursued the BT's because they crossed a Karaashi flight path. Look," she said, pointing to a ship on the screen, "this decoy hovered there for ages and none of the Karaash went after it, although the pilot made several false starts upward. This BT wasn't a decoy, but it crossed the path of this platform here. The Karaash chased it and they destroyed the transport."

"Are you saying that all we have to do is keep the transports out of Karaashi flight paths?"

"It's not that easy either," she answered. "The Karaash who aren't engaged in fighting fly around in random patterns. I haven't figured out if it's a clever technique to

add confusion and fear, or if it's just because they haven't found anything to attack. At any rate, it's too hard to predict. We'll have to keep them actively engaged."

"So," Colm said slowly, watching the scene, "what the Dart pilots need to do is run interference by flying under their noses and hoping they pursue."

"That's what it looks like. We won't know until we try it."

Colm was silent for a moment as he considered this. He drummed a beat on the table top with two fingers. "I wish we had more information on their ships. What they're capable of, how their sensors work, how they talk . . ." he trailed off, adjusting the pad so it zoomed in on an image of a Karaash head and shoulders. "Or for that matter, how they see! Maybe it's just me, but it doesn't look like they have any kind of visual system - at least nothing I'm familiar with."

Adara stared at the image, so real and yet so unreal, disembodied as it was, hovering over the table.

*The face with no eyes that looked at her . . .*

"They don't have eyes," Adara said. "They cannot see."

Colm fixed her with a shrewd look. "It must be hell to be on the receiving end of a Karaash assault."

Adara stiffened. "It's not pleasant," she said tightly.

"You were involved in one?"

"Yes," she said, "but I hardly think that now is the-

"Who's Sark to you?"

Adara opened her mouth and then closed it again, the new question throwing her off track. "Nothing. He's just another Loader."

"He doesn't seem to like you very much."

"You are either very observant, or you listen to too much gossip."

"No gossip involved. I do know you two were in a fight."

Adara looked at him suspiciously, wondering if he'd been looking into her background. The fight had happened before he'd transferred to *Mat-1*.

"Sark doesn't want ISR involved in anything but evacuations. I think we should be more aggressive. We had a disagreement." She glared. "Why do you ask?"

Colm shrugged. "Just wanted to know who we're up against."

*We?* Adara thought.

"What about Jonathan?" Colm asked before she could say anything further.

"What about him, Commander?" She wondered where this new direction was going.

He smiled. "Call me Colm. We're the same rank." He leaned forward, placing his chin in his hand. "What do you think of him?"

Adara frowned, baffled by the question. "He was my training officer. Now he's a team leader. Why?" she asked more forcefully.



"Oh nothing," he said. "I just like to check out the people I'm working with." His eyes flashed with amusement. "I'm sure you do too."

Adara felt her cheeks warm again, wondering if he knew she'd accessed his file. *So what?* she told herself angrily. *That's not against regulations!* She raised her chin a little and met his eyes steadily.

Colm opened up a new front. "Tell me," he said. "Did it surprise you when they nominated you for a Leader position?"

"No," Adara said irritably. "Should it?"

"Hmm," Colm dodged the question. "I can tell you I was. Surprised, I mean. I never joined ISR to get a Command position, but people keep nominating me all the time. I have not figured out why and I was wondering if you had."

"Why you keep getting nominated?"

"No, why *you* keep getting nominated," he said. "Never mind. It doesn't matter." He smiled wickedly. "Tell me, how often did you fall off your Dart in training yesterday?"

Now Adara was thoroughly exasperated. "*Mister* Patrick," she said icily, "we are supposed to be discussing strategies!"

Colm looked hurt. "I *was* discussing strategy. We need to know how complicated to make our standard patterns. We'll have to be able to accommodate our worst and best

riders."

Adara was completely taken aback by Colm's expression. "My apologies, Commander," she mumbled. "If- if we're back to discussing the Darts, then I think we need to split up our personnel into two sections: one for the onsite and one for the offsite."

He disagreed. "Three sections."

"Where does the third group go?"

"We can use them to pull Karaash away from the actual attack - you know, stop them from doing more damage and slow down their advance. It will initially reduce casualties and eventually, we can change it to a truly offensive-type unit."

Adara nodded, liking the idea. They stayed on topic for more than an hour, tossing ideas back and forth. By the time Colm got up to leave, they had a complete report worked out.

"I'll flesh this out later this afternoon," he said, as he moved to leave.

"Fine, Commander." She followed him to the door. "If you're too busy, however, I will be available to complete it."

"No, you should get some rest," he replied. "You need to heal after falling off the Dart so often."

"I didn't fall off the Dart once!"

His eyes twinkled. "Didn't you? My mistake." He opened the door. "Maybe I'll see you in the gym later."

The door slid shut behind him.

Adara punched the door, infuriated with him and not understanding why. She paced the room for a long time before she realized that he'd left both the furniture and the bottle of papillon juice in her quarters. That annoyed her even more.

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Rilkens let the team leaders practice alone for two more days, to allow them time to choose the best flight patterns from the rapidly expanding list of ideas. Then he ordered them to start training their teams.

"The transition is going quite smoothly, Commander," Rilkens said to Teshwa as they walked from the BT bay to the sim hall. "As far as I can tell, everything is still quiet. I've been keeping track of the latest scuttlebutt and there's been a lot of speculation about what's going on, but nobody outside the Dart unit seems to know the truth yet. I doubt they will until we put the unit into action."

"Now there's something I can't do," Teshwa said. "Keep tabs on intraship rumours. I can never remember who is saying what about who, or keep it straight. I've no patience for it."

Rilkens chuckled. "Are you calling me a gossip, Commander?"

"If the helmet fits," Teshwa said readily, smiling at him.

"It's a good habit to get into though, as a ship's Commander in ISR. I imagine it helps you keep culture clash from boiling over into intraship fighting."

"Occasionally," Rilkens said. "If I hear of a dispute that threatens to get too big, I step in. Usually I just let them run their course. I use the gossip tracking more to monitor morale." He looked thoughtful. "It seems to be a universal constant - when you're busy and happy about it, you find fewer things to argue about."

Teshwa's eyes darkened. "It's too bad the Union representatives don't have more to do with their time."

Rilkens didn't miss the bitter undercurrent. "What's the problem now?"

"The color of our uniforms, if you can believe it," Teshwa ground out. "The Ayakis have decided that our use of black deeply offends them in the ISR uniform. Apparently, black is the reserved color of Dekok, one of their gods. By using the color, we are implying that we are on the same level as Dekok. They're threatening to leave the Union. Why this is suddenly a major issue now?"

Rilkens nodded knowingly. "There have been three attempted coups in as many months on Ayak. I would guess this is an attempt to make the current leaders look strong and shore up support."

"ISR gossip doesn't keep you busy enough?" Teshwa asked with a sour smile.

Rilkens looked a little sheepish. "I've got my Net collector set to pick up tidbits on all major events related to Union members. I couldn't tell you a thing about the coups, just that they happened."

"Hmm," Teshwa grunted. "I suppose the thing that really bothers me about this is Marsalis' behaviour. He always goes to such lengths to satisfy the Union and it's always really *stupid* things that come up. If he has to give in?" She shook her head angrily. "The cost of having to change over all our uniforms is too much to think about. How long before someone else gets offended by the next color we choose?"

"Marsalis does good work, Teshwa," Rilkens said carefully. "The Ayakis have a lot of influence and we can't afford to have them pull out. He hasn't lost anyone yet."

"I know, I know," she said, irked. "You don't have to lecture me, Matt."

"I'm not trying to. I'm just trying to give you perspective."

"Give me a stunner instead," she muttered. "Or something to knock heads together."

Rilkens got a sudden image of Teshwa storming the Union hall, brandishing an oversized stunner and a lengthy requisition order.

"What's so funny?" she asked accusingly.

"Nothing," he said. They arrived at the sim hall. "Here,

maybe this will cheer you up. After you."

The team leaders had called up the meadow for their training ground. Two teams were currently in the hall, swooping and gliding around one another, not quite gracefully yet, but getting there.

Rilkens caught Jonathan's attention and waved him over.

"Good afternoon, Commanders," Jonathan said, setting down in front of them.

"Smith, 2nd Classer Zig would like to see what this unit is capable of."

"At once," Jonathan said, happy to have a chance to show off. He lifted off, consulted with Sark for a moment and then backed off to gather his team.

Teshwa scuffed the ground with a boot, crossed her arms and settled back to watch with an air of scepticism. Rilkens hid a smirk and waited.

Above, Sark and Jonathan called out their orders. The Darts trainees immediately broke off their current patterns and came together with perfect timing and precision. They rolled, turned, and twisted, creating a strangely chaotic, yet beautiful aerial ballet.

The group suddenly banked left as one and reformed into a tight arrow shape, with Jonathan at the point. The arrow twisted, banked right and pointed at Rilkens and Teshwa. It sped toward them, splitting apart at the last possible second, the two halves streaming past the

officers.

Jonathan circled to hover in front of the Teshwa and Rilkens. He looked a little embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Commanders," he said. "That was a little rough. We'll keep at it."

"Thank you, 70th," Rilkens said, silently blessing him. The performance had been flawless. "Dismissed."

As Jonathan rejoined his team, Rilkens clasped his hand behind his back and rocked on his heels. He tried not to look smug.

Teshwa was dubious. "You must have had them training for longer than your official records show, Matt."

"Perish the thought," Rilkens said, pretending to be indignant. "That would be against direct orders."

Teshwa snorted. "Well, they're good, I'll give them that," she admitted. She noticed Rilkens' unmistakable look of pride. "You're taking this competition thing little too much to heart, aren't you Matt?"

Rilkens laughed and waved the comment away. "Relax, the other units get to learn all our tricks, just as we learn theirs. However, everyone is very aware of who came up with what."

"I can see that," Teshwa laughed with him, her good humour returned.

Rilkens led the way out. "My office?" he asked.

"Rec Level," she replied. "I could use something to eat. How long before they're ready to go in for an

assignment?"

"I don't know," he said. "That depends on their level of confidence. If they feel too new, they're bound to have problems under pressure."

"If they look ready the next time you're called out, put them in action."

Rilkens stopped in mid-stride. "Does the order come from High Command?"

"I'm in High Command," she reminded him. "But yes, this comes from all of us. At my insistence though."

He sucked in his breath. "You're pushing awfully hard, Teshwa. You shouldn't bring the units out until High Command is ready to acknowledge their existence to the Union. The minute we bring out the Darts and the Union hears about it, the anti-combat group will shut the whole thing down."

*If* they hear about it. You forget, Union members don't share information with each other. Most of them aren't familiar with what we have and don't have, so the Darts have a good chance of going unnoticed. They are unarmed vehicles, so they won't attract much attention."

Now Rilkens was in a foul mood. "I can't say I like this. These things should be done according to protocol. It prevents problems later."

"I'm not prepared to train these units so they can do stunts in their spare time."

Rilkens said nothing, just continued walking.



"Relax Matt. This won't come down on your head. It's High Command's decision and we'll deal with the consequences."

"It's a messy decision."

Teshwa sighed. "Yes, well, that's what we get paid to do."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

They had been training for less than a week when ISR called the Mat fleet to action. Colm met her in the bay.

"Are we ready for this?"

Adara was struggling to put on a pair of gloves. "I don't see that we have much choice, Commander."

"We don't have to go down as Dart riders," he said. "There is the chance the Karaash won't attack the BT's. They're not attacking the transports consistently. Rilken's didn't seem too happy about ordering our units down, so maybe we should insist on going down as Loaders."

"What if they *do* attack the BT's?"

"What if we end up losing half our pilots because of inexperience? This is the first time we'll be on real Darts! I don't want to lose anyone because they decided to get fancy."

Adara paused to consider this. "We have a large repertoire of patterns. If possible, let's limit ourselves to the ones we know we've got down."

Colm smiled. "That's exactly what I wanted you to say."

Adara glared at him. "Then why didn't you just suggest that in the first place?"

The smile widened. "'Cause I had to make it sound like it was your idea."

"Listen, 70th Classer Patrick," Adara began, but Colm had already put on his helmet and couldn't hear her. She forced her own helmet down on her head and waited for her new uniform to seal. It looked much like her old one, except that, as promised, its environmental controls were rigged specifically for AeroDart flight stresses. The helmet computers and sensors were also linked directly to her Dart.

A red light appeared over her eye, showing that a communication link had been established. "*Beep*. Any last words before we play tag-the-Karaash? For posterity, I mean. *Beep*."

"Yes," Adara replied. "Turn off the damn intro-beeper."

Colm gave her a mock salute. "Aye, Commander. Shall I pass that order on to the rest of the crew?"

"Please," she replied. She checked around the bay. "Where the hell are the Darts?"

"In the first two BT's, over there. Two teams in one and the other three in the other. Rilkens is having us dropped out of their bellies, one at a time."

"Wonderful," she muttered. "Let's get going."

They ducked inside the BT and found their Darts. "Comptrol," Adara said into her helmet, "full systems

scan."

"Complying," the computer told her. The other pilots were coming into the transport now, searching for their assigned aircraft.

"Commander Patrick?" Jonathan Smith's voice came over the link.

Colm tilted his head to one side as he listened. "Yes, Jonathan?"

"Which team should be heading to the offsite?"

Colm muttered a word to the computer and switched to a private link with Adara. "We're all the same rank, but Smith's technically still the most senior among us. I think I'd prefer to have an experienced officer leading the isolated team."

"Agreed," Adara said.

Colm went back to the open link. "Jonathan, we've voted to strand your group at the evacuation site. We'd like to think you could handle it."

"You're all heart, Commander Patrick."

"I try."

The last of the Dart riders filed into the transport and found their vehicles. Some were still adjusting their clothing and all of them had their stunners hooked into their waist belts. Ziki took up her now-standard position beside Adara and did a quick count.

"All accounted for here, Commander," she said.

"Signal the transport pilot to move out when ready."

"Yes ma'am."

The computer finished its scan. "All systems are performing at 100 percent. Unit is capable of peak performance levels."

Adara put the Dart on standby. *It's good to find something around here that's working properly*, she thought.

The BT groaned and heaved itself out of the Bay. The descent through the atmosphere was quick and a few minutes later, the position indicator light at the front of the ship flashed yellow and then green. There was a flurry of quick movements among the riders; they all mounted their AeroDarts and floated as one off the ship's floor.

"Well, Commander Cohili, which part do you want in the play?" Colm asked.

Adara quickly found the BT's position on the planet surface. "My team will go directly to the Karaash. You can handle the pickup points."

"Sounds good," he replied. "Commander Sark, would you care to join my team for pickup guard?"

There was a pause. "Commander Smith has taken the offsite?"

"Yes. You can join Commander Cohili engaging the Karaash, or come along for my ride."

"Then we will go with you, of course," Sark said, the sneer audible.

"Sheersa here. If I'm paired with Cohili, my team will head to section 21-a on area map."

"Understood, Commander Sheersa," Adara said. She tapped a control on her Dart and brought up a map of their destination. "Red Team will go to section 21-b for direct engagement."

At that moment, a hatch in the center of the transport slid aside to reveal the planet surface. Dart riders began disappearing through the hole in quick succession. Adara brought her own Dart over the hatch and dropped through effortlessly. She matched the speed of the BT and hovered there under the ship.

"Comptrol, autopilot to specified co-ordinates. Proximity monitor on, omni-directional. Search pattern one: Karaash platform, audible warning. Search pattern two: AeroDart, silent monitor."

"Complying."

She sped off, the landscape of sand and pale pink canyon walls changing into blushing streaks of topography. The Dart computer brought her to a halt at the top of a rocky precipice, where half her team was already waiting for her.

From their vantage point, they could see the battle raging below. Great flying reptiles were flapping around awkwardly, goaded by their humanoid riders, trying to beat back the onslaught. With only light armaments, they were no match for the Karaash, who swooped around

easily on their platforms, firing scorching shots into the air.

On the ground, hundreds of the Karaash advanced on foot toward the base of a cliff, ducking the rocks and debris being hurled at them by the panicked cave dwellers above. The first wave of Karaash climbed nimbly up the steep wall and began searching the caves, poking in and out like bees searching a honeycomb. Many came out with blood on their swords.

Ziki muttered a curse into her helmet.

"Is there a problem, Ziki?" Adara asked.

"No, not really. It's just it would figure that the first time we have the Darts, it looks like we're going to be competing for air space with those dumb lizards. No offence, Disck."

"None taken," he chuckled. "Everyone knows ground lizards are more intelligent than sky lizards anyway."

"Focus people," Adara said. "Janice, Dirk and Brad, raise shields. Head for the cliff wall and attempt to physically knock off as many from the ledges as you can."

"Commander?"

"Try to clear the walls of Karaash so the Loaders can get the civilians down off the cliffs to the pickup points. Do not risk civilian lives by flying too close to them. Understood?"

"Yes, Commander," they said in unison.

"The rest of you with me. Arrow formation. Shields at maximum strength. During this engagement, patterns are restricted to Diversion Class only. Move out."

They lifted away from the precipice and separated into two groups. The first three pilots disappeared against the backdrop of the cliff.

Adara's Dart, the tip of the arrow, cut into the melee first. "Comptrol, proximity monitor, search pattern three: live airborne being. Automatic evasive manoeuvres for patterns one and three."

"Complying."

"Red Team, find and lock onto the enemy. Tag-and-run action. Go!"

The arrow seemed to shatter as the group split up. Taking her own craft into a dive, Adara searched her screen for the nearest platform, found one and headed toward it.

"Warning," her computer blared, "approaching specified parameter two."

"Understood," she said. "Shields at maximum."

"Complying."

The Karaash was flying away from her, firing its forward lasers haphazardly at the ground. She raced toward it, braked at the last minute, ducked underneath and then pulled up right in front of the platform. She slowed just enough to make sure she had its attention. A laser blast slammed against the back of her Dart, rocking



her.

"Shields have fallen to 76 percent of maximum. Attempting to correct."

*One hit!* She veered away from the direct line of fire. The Karaash dropped behind her, attempting to pursue.

"Comptrol, auto-evasive, now!"

A second shot drowned out the computer's response. This time, it only glanced off the left rear portion of the Dart. Then Dirk yelled into his link. "Got one! Heading away now!"

"Acknowledged," Adara said. "Red Leader also engaged."

Her Dart accelerated as the computer attempted to stay ahead of the Karaash. Together, their ships sailed away from the cliff area and streaked into a maze of canyon walls. Two dizzying, heart-stopping minutes later, she pulled up above the rocks. The Karaash was gone, seemingly lost.

She dove back into the fray, tagged a Karaash and teased it away from the battle. As she prepared to head back in a third time, Ziki contacted her.

"Read Leader, this isn't working."

Adara broke off her dive abruptly. "Explain," she barked.

"They keep coming back! We can't get them lost enough!"

"Help!" It was Dirk. "My shields are down to 33 percent

and I can't shake this thing!"

Adara checked her screen and raced into the center of the fight. "Pattern restriction lifted," she said. "Dirk, take these coordinates for a Crossover, I'll meet you there." She swooped by another platform and the Karaash pilot shifted direction to give chase. "The rest of you, attempt the Destruction Class patterns you know you can do!" She streaked away at an angle just sharp enough to keep the Karaash in pursuit and herself out of trouble.

"Commander, I'm down to 15 percent!" Dirk wailed.

Adara swore. "Disregard standard pattern and put twenty more meters between you. I'll compensate at this end."

A quick glance at her screen - Dirk's AeroDart was curving around on her left. The Karaash following him matched his flight path exactly and increased its speed. Now both ships were surging toward her.

"Rider alert," her computer said calmly, "collision with AeroDart number six in four seconds . . . three . . . two . . . one . . ."

At the last possible second, Adara heaved upward on the controls. Dirk's Dart ducked under her own, so close that Adara was bounced upward momentarily when their shields connected. She pulled down again, hard, tracing Dirk's flight path backwards and took two shots from the oncoming Karaash. Dirk sailed off behind her, out of the line of fire.

"Shields have fallen to 52 percent of maximum. Attempting to-" the computer paused to correlate new information. "Search pattern one parameter is increasing speed and closing distance. Would suggest automatic evasive manoeuvres."

"No!" Adara shouted. She jabbed at the accelerator control and pulled further to the left. The Karaash behind her copied her every move. The other Karaash, still intent on chasing Dirk, didn't notice as Adara sliced across and away from his path. The two Karaash platforms slammed into each other and exploded.

The force of the blast sent Adara's Dart into a fast, headlong tumble. The world spun around and her bio-suit struggled to keep her from blacking out.

"Comptrol," she croaked, "stabilize!"

"Complying." The machinery groaned in protest as it ground through the last turn of its spin before stopping.

"Yahoo!" Dirk screamed. "Two Karaash crossed out!"

"Dirk Johnson disengage and make repairs!" Adara ordered, gasping. "Comptrol, do likewise."

"Will assume last request was to disengage and repair. Complying."

The Dart computer took her back to the precipice. Her heart was pounding in her ears, making it difficult to hear the communications from her team.

It had all happened so quickly; she wasn't sure exactly how the move had worked. She knew it had been close.

*Too close.* But two kills! She hung above the rock, hovering and shaking and listened to the grunts and cries of the Dart riders as they buzzed through the Karaash swarm. The Dart hummed as the shields recharged.

"I'm in trouble here!" Brad Manter's voice cut through the din.

Adara consulted the flight screen. Six Karaash were hot on his tail. "Up-and-back loop, Manter!" she said.

"No good!" he hollered back. "That doesn't work!"

"Great," she mumbled. She was too far away to get there in time. She wasted no time with the decision. "Scader, Chang and Dart Five Pilfer, do the Depressurizer at these co-ordinates." She fed the numbers into her ship and watched the pattern unfold.

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Meanwhile, Colm had his own problems.

"Distance still closing."

"Shut up Comptrol! I don't need to hear that!"

"Is rider requesting cancellation of audible warning?"

"No!" He risked a backward glance. The Karaash was right on his tail and there was no one available to divert it.

"Dammit!" He searched the horizon. To the west, the sky was open. To the east, a tall, solid sheet of rock ended at the edge of a foamy, pinkish lake. He aimed his

Dart at the rock's edge.

"Comptrol, calculate Rolling Spiral from this point to rock structure and engage."

The Dart immediately rolled sideways and upside down and the reply of the computer was lost as the blood rushed through his ears and to his head. The landscape seemed to turn to liquid in front of his eyes as he came up through the turn and back down again, tracing a corkscrew pattern in the sky. Colm, the tip of the corkscrew, spiralled faster and faster as he approached the rock. The Karaash spun around with him, matching him move for move.

The rock face loomed closer. Colm gave up trying to figure out which way was up and closed his eyes tightly. He whispered a prayer to the gods that look after computer calculations. The Karaash began shooting at him.

"Approaching specified target." A shot connected, rattling his teeth. "Shields at 72 percent of maximum."

The corkscrew bore down on the rock's edge, one half of the spiral overlapping the hard surface, the other half in the open air. Colm pulled up through one last turn, his shield scraping against the cliff before he cleared the edge. The Karaash, just one half turn behind him, smashed into the rock. The air thundered.

As suddenly as it began, the corkscrew levelled out. He flew over the water in a straight line, the lake flashing

and gurgling beneath him. He took a few deep breaths.

"It worked. And I hope I don't have to do that ever again," he said fervently. "Comptrol, where are my flight monitor images? Where is everyone?"

"Rider is out of range. Can divert power from shields to boost gain for long range scan."

"Don't do me any favours," he said wryly. "This is Commander Patrick, does anyone hear me? What's going on over there?"

There was a pause before someone's voice sounded weakly through Colm's helmet speakers. "Sark here, Commander. The Karaash have broken off their pursuit of the transports. They're heading back into the fray to attack the cliffs. Diversion Class patterns don't work. We managed to take out three of them though with the other methods."

Colm did a quick calculation in his head, remembering how many platforms had been in the sector originally. Three destroyed here . . . that meant that forty-four platforms were on their way. "Then what are you waiting for?" he said, envisioning the sudden flurry of laser fire the new arrivals could inflict on the other teams. "Get over there and help. Blue Team, you're all under Commander Cohili's control until I get there."

"Yes, Commander."

"Comptrol, autopilot to sector 21-b now."

"Complying."

\*

Adara could see Brad Manter's ship bouncing wildly on her flight screen. The Karaash platform was closing in fast. "Come on," she whispered to herself, "get him out of there."

Janice made it there first. Coming from behind, she flew past the platform and cut across its bow, teasing it off to the right. It followed her easily, eager to be after its new prey. It gained on her quickly, accelerating faster than she could.

Chang cut in at the last second, pulling it away from Scader and onto a new course. Still fresh, he zigzagged through the air, taking the Karaash on a wild chase. Over the link, Adara could hear him throwing filthy insults over his shoulder at the beast. He dipped and bounced, wagging the back end of the Dart to taunt the Karaash.

The chase came to an abrupt end. Chang cut too sharply to one side and a single shot erupted from the forward cannon of the platform. The bolt slammed into the side of the Dart. Chang yelled in surprise and his shields failed immediately. The blast sent him spinning toward the ground.

The Karaash dove in pursuit of the falling Dart. Adara swore and took off from the cliff, speeding toward the area where Chang was likely to crash.

"Warning," the computer protested. "Repairs are not

complete. Shields are 68 percent of maximum. Repeat. Repairs are not complete."

Ahead, Pilfer arrived on scene. Knowing he had no chance of stopping Chang's descent, he decided to go ahead with the third section of the Depressurizer. He pulled right in front of the Karaash, his big body nearly covering his Dart. He evaded six rapid shots and pulled away to the right, toward the cliff face the manoeuvre was calculated for. Pilfer charged at it, waited until he couldn't wait any longer and came to a dead stop, just centimetres away from oblivion.

A split second later he dropped four meters straight down. The Karaash, screeching defiance, couldn't correct in time and crashed into the rocks. The concussion shattered the rock into a thousand tiny pieces and left a flaming depression in the cliff.

"Yes!" Adara said, watching the explosion as she approached. She scanned the ground for signs of Chang. "Comptrol, scan for Dart number-"

The rest of the sentence got cut off in a grunt as the Dart jerked to a stop. A huge group of Karaash sailed up from the ground, blocking her path like a living wall. The Dart pulled her away before they enveloped her completely.

"What's the matter, Commander?" Sark sneered, as he flew overhead. "A little overwhelmed? Over your head?"

"What are you doing here?"

"The Karaash left the pick-up points in our section to



come here. What are you trying to prove?"

"Chang's been hit. I'm trying to get him before he becomes an easy kill."

"Skip it," Sark said. "I'll get him." He guided his Dart through the platform barricade.

"Commander Cohili, this is Al-Al from Blue Team. We're under your orders until Commander Patrick can rendezvous."

If the air seemed crowded before, it was doubly so now. The new Darts competed for space with more than seventy Karaash platforms and a half dozen flying reptiles. The sky reverberated with the sounds of explosions and lasers. The Karaash pounded the citizens on the cliff side mercilessly.

"Blue Team, attempt Destruction Class patterns and clear that residential area. Red Team, continue clearing the air."

"Yes, Commander."

"Attention all Team Leaders," the message came in from the onsite coordinator. "*Mat-2* and *Mat-12* have arrived and are operating in sections thirty-five through fifty-six."

"A lot of good that does us," she muttered. She poked her Dart into the cloud of platforms and lured two away. They closed in fast, forcing her to go into a steep dive. The ground surged up to meet her. She waited until she felt the first instant of impact between the shields and the

turf and pulled up, bouncing the Dart wildly off to the side. The first platform speared the ground and twisted into a mass of broken flesh and metal. The second ship pulled away in time and disappeared above.

"Shields at 15 percent of maximum. Would advise disengaging to make repairs."

Adara checked her screen. A red light - a distress signal - was still flashing where Chang went down. "Where the hell is Sark? Red and Blue team available personnel: Go and get 73rd Chang off the ground!"

Colm Patrick flew by. "I hear and obey," he replied.

Adara flew back to the precipice for repairs. The images on her screen suddenly began to shift and clear.

"It's over Commander," Ziki called her. "They're pulling out."

"Onsite coordinator," Adara said. "Confirm Karaash retreat."

There was a pause. "Confirmed in your section Red Leader. Flight patterns in other sections suggest imminent general withdrawal."

\*

The BT's took longer to get back to *Mat-1* than it had to get to the surface. In the transport, the riders chattered excitedly over the open link. They were busy comparing stories and counting up the number of Karaash they

destroyed.

Adara was still sitting on her Dart, ignoring the talk. Instead she listened to the incoming reports of the site coordinators and her fury grew with each new piece of information. So far, there were four hundred confirmed casualties among the habitants of the planet, with more still en route to the field hospitals. At least twenty Loaders were also listed as casualties, but the full extent of their injuries was unknown yet. Meanwhile a BT pilot at the offsite had narrowly escaped a Karaash attack by exiting the moon's atmosphere, only to find out - too late - that the creature had blasted away the back half the ship. The environmental systems failed and the pilot and co-pilot were sucked forcibly through the wreckage into space.

Another fatality was a Dart pilot from Sheerso's team. The Karaash blasted him out of the sky before he'd even reached his rendezvous coordinates.

Chang lay on an anti-grav board at the back of the BT, breathing painfully; a medic hovered over him. Blood dribbled out of his mouth and he was twisted in an awkward position. He had crashed on the surface, punctured a lung and broken his spine in three places. The Dart stasis fields had held him together until Colm had picked up him and transferred him to a board. The medic had said he'd be all right if they got him to the sickbay in time.

Disgusted, Adara terminated the communication and pulled off her helmet. She ran a hand through her tangled, sweaty hair.

Colm got off his own Dart and strolled over to her. "What are you thinking about?"

"I'm thinking we need better shields."

"I agree," he said. "Want to come over to my quarters to talk about it? Perhaps we can do some research and come up with a better system."

"Thank you, no. I'd prefer to go to my own."

"Okay, suit yourself," he shrugged.

The BT docked and scraped its way into the bay. The doors to the transport opened and they all filed out. Chang was rushed off to sickbay, followed by some of the members of Red Team. As Adara made her way through the crowds to the exit, she found Sark standing there. He seemed to be waiting for her.

"Welcome back, Commander Cohili," he said.

Adara eyed him suspiciously. "Commander Sark."

"I just thought I should let you know that High Command will shortly be in an uproar."

"Why is that?" Colm was close behind.

Sark ignored him, choosing instead to keep his eyes fixed on Adara. "I just turned over a large chunk of a Karaashi flying platform to Commander Rilken. He is ecstatic. He says it's the first piece of their technology we've managed to get our hands on."

"Where did you find that?" Adara wanted to know.

"I did a scan of the ground, near the rock formations at the edge of section 21-b. There were several burnt pieces lying there."

"Congratulations," she snarled. "When exactly did you find time to do this?"

His face fell at her vehement reaction, but he recovered quickly. "I picked it up right after Pilfer executed the last section of the Depressurizer you ordered."

Colm picked up on the same thought that Adara had. "Commander Sark, I was under the impression, from communications I overheard, that at that time you were on your way to find and retrieve injured personnel."

"I didn't go after him myself because you said you were going in Sark," Adara seethed.

Again, Sark avoided looking at Colm. He smiled smugly. "You're just upset that you didn't think of going after the wreck yourself. I guess you're not the only one with a brain around here after all." He paused, making a show out of studying the backs of his hands. "My log will show that I was turned back from recovering Chang by the sudden influx of Karaash ships. I did the next best thing. Good day, Commanders." He walked away.

Adara began walking too, quickly. Colm followed.

"There *were* a lot of Karaash there," he said. "I know, I went through them and toasted my Dart doing it. Obviously, he didn't have the guts to." He glared at Sark's

retreating form. "With the find he made though, we're not going to be able to make a charge of incompetence sound like anything other than sour grapes."

"Hmph."

Colm looked at her. "You're angry."

She had a firm clamp down on all of her emotions. "No, I'm not."

"Yes you are. You are tired, angry, a little shaken up and probably sore."

She eyed him sourly. "And you're the expert?"

"Yes ma'am," he agreed cheerfully. "I know how you feel, because I feel the same way."

"Not noticeably."

"Well, I fight it off with my wonderful sense of humour. You should try it some time."

"What?"

"Humour. You know, laughter, jokes, the occasional smile?"

"I don't have time for humour."

"Yes, you do. You have great sense of humour. I can tell."

"Once again, your expertise comes to the fore."

"Naturally." He gave her an engaging smile. "I say that because you and I are a lot alike."

"No, we are *not*," Adara said.

"Yes, we are."

They stopped in front of the door to her quarters.

"Mister Patrick, why do you insist on disagreeing with everything I say?"

"Because you disagree with everything you say!"

"What?!"

"I can tell. You mean to say one thing, but something else comes out."

Adara rolled her eyes heavenward and opened her door. It closed behind Colm.

"What are you *doing*?"

"You said," he replied innocently, "that you didn't want to meet in my quarters."

"What I said was that I preferred to go to my quarters. I don't recall saying anything about you joining me."

"You meant to, though."

"If I had meant to say it, I would have said it. Now surely you have something better to do than hang around here!"

Colm appeared to consider the thought. "Nope."

"Mister Patrick, please leave the room."

"Is that an order?"

"Yes, it's an order!"

"Too bad," he smirked. "We're the same rank, remember?"

"Listen, 70th Classer," she said, emphasizing the number. "I'd like to get some work done and then get some rest. I can't do that while you are-"

"But you just told me a few minutes ago that you

weren't tired. I remember it distinctly. You said 'No, I'm not.' Direct quote."

The emotional clamp she had so carefully put together shattered. "Get out! Get out now!"

Colm could barely contain his laughter. "On one condition."

*Anything!* she thought. "What, Mister Patrick?" she bit out.

"That we meet tomorrow to discuss today's mission-

"Fine. Now leave."

"-In my quarters. We can have breakfast while we look over shield design."

"Whatever."

"And the attire is casual."

Adara fixed him with an exasperated look. "That's two conditions."

He started getting comfortable. "Or, we could just talk here . . . "

"Okay! Agreed! Just leave!"

Colm gave her a little bow. "See you at 0800," he said and left.

The room reverberated with the sudden silence. Adara cursed it, threw her helmet in a corner and stalked into her cubicle to wash up.



## **CHAPTER FIFTEEN**

K'Saka chittered and squeaked happily to himself. The Search for the Placer was going well.

He was in the Center, the heart of the Karaashi homeworld. It was buried deep inside the planet, so close to the core that the very walls of the chamber seemed alive: molten lava coursed like blood under the rock beneath K'Saka's feet. Minor eruptions beneath the surface sounded like an erratic, pounding pulse. The heat was almost unbearable, even for him and sweat poured down K'Saka's back.

Only the king was allowed in this sacred chamber, for it was here that the king's Search was laid out in the open. A huge stone table, carved out of the very rock that formed the floor, the walls and the ceiling, dominated the chamber. On its surface, many thousands of years ago, the Ancients had etched a map of the cosmos, with the Karaashi homeworld at its center. Generations of kings had swept their bony fingers across this map, trying to calculate where the Placer would be, where he would be

hiding. Without success.

K'Saka walked around the table, hissing, feeling its edges with his hands. It was now covered with small bits of rock, each representing a ship or fleet of ships, depending on the rock's size. K'Saka was no fool. He did not waste his time with calculations of probability and statistical analysis. He waged war. His enemies would either tell him where the Placer was, or they would die. They were all enemies. Yes. They would all die.

He leapt up onto the map of the stars, inadvertently scattering some rocks onto the floor. He felt along the pattern, tracing the lines and scratches until he found the place he was looking for. He picked up six rocks and licked them one by one with his pink tongue while he considered his next move.

The ships he held in his hand represented a foray into a far away quadrant of this galaxy - a search for food. With the treacherous Sill filling that need, there was no reason to waste any more time on hunting expeditions. It was time to intensify the Search.

Oh how he wished to be on the Search! K'Saka could barely contain his excitement at the thought. The thrill of the chase, the interrogations, the chance to make a kill! K'Saka let himself savour the beginnings of the Saisiss for a moment, before he pushed the sensations aside. It was not to be. The king of the Karaash had to content himself with other privileges.

He dropped the rocks in a new location, bunched the thick muscles of his legs and jumped away from the table. He landed, almost silently, in front of a stone altar. Its surface was stained black with old blood: the result of a hundred thousand sacrifices. He touched it reverently. Its history overwhelmed him.

In the beginning, according to the lore of the Ancients, there was the First Test. The Placer had left them here, it was said, challenging them to survive in this unforgiving land, alone and without help. Hundreds of their kind had died, up on the bitter, barren landscape above. Thousands more had succumbed below, from the heat and the terrible, noxious gases that had wormed into their lungs, choking them from the inside out. They had nearly failed the First Test.

But their hunting sustained them, or at least some of them. They carried on for an unimaginable time in this desperate, lonely state. Then the Ancients had begun the Learning. They poked and prodded the world, teasing out the secrets to survival. Hundreds of beings were dissected; hundreds fell victim to the inquisitive knife on this very altar. Creatures great and small were sacrificed and they discovered the keys to life.

Armed with that powerful knowledge, the Karaash, under the guidance of the Ancients, began to change. No longer were the noxious gases deadly; no longer was the hunt so difficult. They were nothing like the first,

miserable beings the Placer had left on this planet. They had found the keys to life and they had passed the First Test. They flourished.

Then, the great uprising, when the true purpose of the Placer had been revealed. They made the sacrifices, no longer for the keys, but in the name of divination. They gave over the first beast spotted on the hunt to the High Seeker, the king, its entrails split wide and stretched taut over the altar. The grains and patterns of the bloody membranes affirmed or denied the careful calculations of the Search for many generations. As a member of the Council of Two Hands, K'Saka had participated in many such killings.

Then the glorious, gory assassination. K'Saka became king. In the early days of K'Saka's reign, as he was formulating his own answer to the Second Test, the Search, K'Saka used the altar for the interrogations. Brief expeditions into the surrounding stars brought back prisoners. K'Saka knew, yes, he knew that they were hiding the Placer from him. They had to be. But those prisoners had been strong - they had refused to give up their knowledge of the Placer. Some had screamed defiance, some had screamed in agony. All had died.

K'Saka curled his hands around the base of the altar, feeling the power of the lore pulse through him. He pulled his knife from his belt and ran its vicious tip along his scarred forearm. A thin stream of blood trickled down

through his fingers and dripped onto the base of the altar. There weren't as many prisoners anymore. The ones brought back in recent times were kept, stuffed away in the smaller caves for future use. K'Saka himself had decreed it. For now, K'Saka kept the Placer appeased by sacrificing his old, useless copies of himself.

A noise from the direction of the table brought K'Saka to full alert. He tensed, listening to the blackness, ready with his knife. After a few moments of silent surveillance, K'Saka relaxed. For who would dare enter this hallowed chamber?

## **CHAPTER SIXTEEN**

Adara walked quickly down the hall, yanking furiously on her collar with one hand and holding the leftover bottle of papillon juice in the other. It had taken her half an hour to find something in the database that was suitably 'casual,' and she hated it. It was a light blue jumpsuit. It had just enough of the uniform look and in fact, it suited her brusque manner and short hair perfectly. But to Adara, used to the tighter, ISR issue clothing, or her plain black exercise outfit, it felt incredibly baggy. She didn't know how to walk in it. She felt sure it looked ridiculous. She increased her speed, hoping she wouldn't meet anyone from Red Team.

She made it to Colm's quarters without incident and the door, apparently programmed to anticipate her arrival, opened for her. She stalked in and then stopped dead in her tracks.

"Commander Rilken's," she stuttered.

Rilken's, seated at a table, rose to acknowledge her. He took in her attire and the bottle and barely suppressed a

wayward eyebrow. Both he and Colm, who remained seated, were in full uniform.

"69th," Rilkens intoned. "I trust you have recovered from your assignment yesterday."

Adara remembered herself enough to come to attention. "Yes, Commander." There was a moment's awkward silence. "I-I wasn't aware you were going to be here this morning. Pardon me for intruding." She nodded coldly to Colm and prepared to leave.

"No, no," Rilkens said, hastily pulling back from the table. "I just came by to talk to Commander Patrick about the damage we sustained. With the wreckage that Sark brought in, we may be able to design something effective. The research department is looking at it now and you will have access to their findings as soon as possible." He hesitated and cleared his throat. "I was just about to come and see you, but it appears that's unnecessary now."

"Yes sir," Adara replied tightly.

"I was also going to ask one of the two of you to speak at the memorial services for that pilot today. You were the senior officers on the field and Teerso has suggested she would like some help with that."

Something that felt like mild panic surged through Adara. *Speak at a service? And say what?* She wasn't even sure she'd met the dead pilot.

Colm finally spoke up. "Yes, Commander. I believe I'll

take that responsibility."

Rilkens nodded. "Good. That's settled then. I'll leave you to your - meeting then." He strode toward the door and turned back just as it opened. "My new people arrived today, so the sim hall is booked. You have the day off, unless of course there is an emergency."

Colm grinned. "Thank you sir."

Adara didn't miss the faint questioning look on Rilkens face as he took his leave. When the door closed behind him, she whirled to face Colm. His eyes were brimming with what looked suspiciously like mirth.

One-handed, she heaved the papillon juice bottle at him. It thunked loudly against his chest as he caught it.

"Oof," he grunted and rubbed the sore spot. "What was that for?"

"I thought the deal was for casual dress!"

"It was. But Rilkens called and said he was stopping by."

"And you couldn't call to forewarn me?"

Colm shrugged. "I didn't think he'd be here that long. Can I help it if you decide to be early? Besides, what do you care? You're off duty."

"But he wasn't!"

Colm laughed. "It's okay, 69th Classer Red Team Leader Cohili," he said, emphasizing her rank and title. "He *has* seen people out of uniform before."

Adara opened her mouth to snap something back,



thought better of it and closed it firmly. She tried counting to ten.

"So, aren't you going to thank me?"

Adara expelled the breath she'd been holding with a *whoosh*. "Whatever for?"

"For taking the speaking job for you. You kind of looked like a Mercker beast caught in a trap when Rilken mentioned it."

Adara quickly resolved to be more careful with her facial expressions in the future. "Yes, well. Thank you for taking the job. I wasn't looking forward to it."

He smiled gently and his whole demeanour softened. "I could tell." He indicated the table. "Sit down, I'll get you something to eat."

Colm bustled back and forth between his Fetcher and the table, setting out plates and food as they became available. He served Adara first, poured them both a glass of juice and then sat to eat. They ate in companionable silence.

Adara hadn't realized how hungry she was and finished quickly. Without a word, Colm got her a second plate. By the time she was full, the quiet atmosphere and the good food had relaxed her. When Colm finished his meal, they fell into conversation about the previous day.

"It doesn't take much to shut down the Dart shields, does it?"

"No," Adara replied. "Especially at short range. The hit

Chang took was strong enough to both wipe his shields and send him down. According to the information the onsite coordinator recovered, his Dart was at 100 percent when he was hit."

"Ouch," Colm winced. "If he'd been down, what, just 5 percent, he'd have been dusted for sure. How is he by the way?"

"My report from sickbay says that he responded to reconstructive surgery. He should be back on duty in a week."

Colm breathed a sigh of relief. "That's good to hear. I didn't think I was going to make it in time. I was shot twice while I was in the air and I nearly got dusted on the ground looking for a board to put him on."

"You shouldn't have had to go down in the first place," she said. "I should have."

"Nonsense," Colm said firmly. "Sark said he was going to do it and he is a good Dart pilot. Up until now, he's been reliable. Annoying, but reliable. You couldn't have known he was going to go on a treasure hunt instead."

"Chang is under my command and therefore my responsibility," she said, her tone hard. "I should have gone for him."

Colm shrugged lightly. "No harm done. He would have been just as injured when you got there, because the crash was over with. I didn't get hurt playing the hero, so it's not an issue. We'll just have to keep an eye on Sark in

the future. Perhaps I should mention this to Rilken's."

"No!" Adara said and then forcibly calmed herself. "As you said, it's not an issue. It's not your issue. I will deal with Sark myself."

"Fair enough," he said. They sat in silence for a moment. Colm refilled her glass and gave her a long, appreciative look. "You know, you look great in that outfit."

Adara tensed. "Why do you do that?" she demanded.

Colm looked genuinely surprised. "Do what?"

"Constantly change topics all the time. You are always trying to throw the tone of the conversation."

He looked solemn for a moment. "I'm sorry. I didn't intend to, that time. I meant what I said though. You do look good."

Adara felt her cheeks grow warm and silently berated herself for her reaction. *This is nothing new, Adara, Jonathan has said the same thing.*

A mischievous look came into Colm's eyes. "But don't worry. I don't do this to everyone. I only do this to people I catch staring at me in gyms."

Adara fought an urge to begin tearing her hair out by the roots. "I was not staring at you."

"Oh yes you were. I remember it very well," he paused. "Now that I think on it, you looked good in your physical training suit too."

"Commander Patrick!"

Colm laughed, leaving Adara to sit there in indignant confusion. "You still haven't answered my question," she snapped.

Colm sobered, but a little of the sparkle remained in his eye. "I've met a lot of people in my short lifetime, but I've never met anyone quite as interesting or as complicated as you seem to be." He leaned forward. "I do it because I think you need your buttons pushed, Adara. You have a lot of walls around you."

Adara realized with a shock that he'd used her name for the first time. Suddenly she felt open, inexplicably vulnerable, and a cold knot of fear settled in the bottom of her stomach. She stood up and pushed away from the table. "Those walls are there for a reason, Commander Patrick. I don't think you should become too absorbed in trying to knock them down."

Colm watched her practically run out of the room. He poured himself another drink and sat back. "I know," he said quietly to himself, "but I think it's too late to tell me that."

\*

Adara decided to spend the rest of her day in her quarters. She knew it was useless trying to put in some Dart training time, because the sim hall was booked and she was supposed to have the day off. No doubt Rilkens

would hear about it and order her to the Rec Level. The last thing she wanted to do was face Rilken today.

Seated at her desk, Adara looked at the reflection of her face in the computer console. *Check that*, she thought. The last thing she wanted to do was go to the gym.

She changed into her uniform, then sat back at her computer and began idly going through the available databases. She sighed. The problem was, she had nothing to do. She checked her personal log. She had completed an equivalency examination in her fundamentals a week ago, but had not received any word on the results. She wasn't worried about how she did; she was anxious to move on, but couldn't until the examination had been checked.

The log showed six messages, all of them to do with ISR. There was no message about her examination. She sighed again. Everything seemed to move so slowly.

She'd been staring glumly at the screen for almost an hour, when the door beeped. She closed her eyes and prepared for the worst.

"Who's there?"

"Commander Cohili? It's me, Dirk Johnson."

Adara opened her eyes in surprise. "Come in."

Johnson walked in, looking nervous. "I hope I'm not bugging you, Commander."

Glad to have some sort of diversion, Adara shut down her computer. "Not at all, Johnson. Is there a problem?"

"Er, no. Not really." He scratched the back of his head. "I wanted to show you this."

He handed her a swatch of black material. Besides a slight sheen on the one side, it looked exactly like the material of her uniform. She said as much.

"It does, doesn't it?" He flipped the piece over in her hands. "Um, press this spot here."

He pointed to a small switch embedded in the dull side of the cloth. She pressed it and flipped the material over. As she watched, the shiny side went silver and the cloth grew stiff. Within seconds, the silver stuff had thickened, layer by layer, into a hard shell. When the metamorphosis seemed to stop, Adara poked it tentatively.

"What is it?"

"That's an oxide. The fibres of the cloth are coated with a material that oxidizes very quickly in the presence of a couple of chemicals. You released one when you pressed the switch. The coating only builds up to a thickness of a centimetres or so, but it should be enough to deflect coherent light."

Adara looked up at him sharply. "You mean laser?"

"Yes ma'am."

She looked at the material with new respect. "Body armour," she said in amazement.

Dirk beamed. "I knew you'd see what it's worth! I was thinking that if we could make our uniforms out of this stuff, we'd be safer both up in the air and on the ground."

Forgetting his self-consciousness, Dirk began talking excitedly. I thought maybe I could release the catalyst into the suit in certain spots, say, from below the knee, to just above the ankle and it would form a shell around your calf. It should scatter a beam enough to reduce injury."

"Should?"

Dirk sighed. "That's my problem. I've based this whole thing on damage data collected from assignments we've been on. I've been working on this for weeks. In theory, it should stand up against a Karaash laser. But I don't know how to test it. I also don't know what to do if there's no oxygen in the atmosphere. No oxygen, no oxide."

"Hmm. The second part is easy enough. When we're in a non-oxygen atmosphere, our packs have to generate breathable air for us anyway. Just divert some to the suit."

"Excellent idea, Commander! Now what about-"

Just then the door beeped again. *This place is getting to be worse than the Rec Level.* "Come in."

Ziki walked in, caught sight of Dirk and stopped. "I'm sorry, Commander, I didn't realize you were busy."

"Don't worry about it. Come and look at this."

Looking furtively at Dirk, Ziki took the cloth shell from Adara, who explained the process. Ziki listened quietly and then banged the shell hard against the wall. It came away without so much as a smudge.

"Wow, I'm impressed," she said, finally. "Where'd you learn to do this, Dirk?"

Dirk went red and looked down shyly. "It's nothing really. My family has always been into freelance textile design. My parents made their living by coming up with new programs for manufacturing units. I never really enjoyed it that much, because the only things that would sell well were new patterns or something for fashion, which I thought was pretty useless. I left the business to join ISR." He shrugged. "I wasn't until recently that I realized that I could use the stuff for something more useful."

Adara took the cloth back. "Ziki, you're an expert in simulation programming aren't you?"

Now Ziki turned red. Carefully avoiding Dirk's eyes, she said "Well, I don't know that I'm an expert, but I can do a few things in the sim hall."

Adara looked at them both and suddenly realized that if she sent them off together to test the material they'd both die of the embarrassment of being alone together. *When did this happen?* Adara ground her teeth. They had been working well together until this point. *This is why relationships are a stupid idea, Rilken's*, she told herself. Now she'd have to accompany them to make sure the job got done in this lifetime.

She suppressed an urge to groan aloud. She tossed a "follow me" over her shoulder and walked out of her



room, leaving Dirk and Ziki to scramble after her as best they could.

\*

Adara stood in the center of the sim hall, arms akimbo, waiting.

"Let's try this," Ziki said, from her position at the simulation computer. Dirk stood beside her, describing how to design the suit.

The air fluttered around Adara and a helmet appeared over her head. She looked down to see that the plain black biosuit was shiny with oxide.

"Okay, ma'am, give the command as you would any other."

"Comptrol," she spoke into her helmet, "engage full armour."

"Complying."

She heard a short hiss, as the virtual enviropack activated and injected chemicals into the suit. A moment later, Adara examined the suit again. Her arms, legs, torso and neck were encased in silver.

She took a few cautious steps forward, getting used to the feel of the new weight. Immediately, one thing became clear. "Split up the sole of the boot into sections. It's too hard and stiff - I'll never be able to run with it like this."

Ziki and Dirk conferred for a moment and then Ziki made the correct adjustments. Adara flexed her toes with satisfaction. She then examined the whole suit, flexing each joint, jumping up and down, making running, dodging and ducking motions. She rolled on the floor, did a standing back flip, squatted, sat down and stood up. Each time she made a suggestion, Ziki would change the simulation accordingly.

After testing the suit for every conceivable movement, she called for the bigger test. "Ziki, pour everything we know into that thing about a Karaash platform and its weaponry."

"That's not that much, Commander."

"I realize that," Adara said patiently. "Dirk, give her your damage statistics. Equip the platform with a weapon strong enough to wipe a Dart shield at close range."

The pair talked for a few more minutes, collecting data from several different sources. After what seemed like forever a Karaash platform appeared in front of her.

"All right Ziki, shoot."

"Commander?" Ziki looked horrified.

"I said, shoot. Program the thing to fire. You'll have to take off the safety constraints."

"Commander, I can't do that! This is only a simulation, but when the safety restraints are off the damage is real! If the suit doesn't reflect properly then-"

"I'll get burnt. You'll call the med teams, who'll give me

a new skin. Fire, Ziki. Just don't blow off my head."

Ziki looked at Dirk, who was also shocked. "Commander," he said, "wouldn't it be better to leave testing to High Command?"

Adara sighed. "Dirk, think about it. You've been in ISR long enough to know that it will be three months before they work up enough nerve to experiment with a real live body inside. In the meantime, they'll mess around with simulated people, which won't give them accurate results. I'd test it here, get the correct data and move this suit onto the field as soon as possible. I'll take full responsibility if anything goes wrong. Now fire."

"But-"

Adara fixed them both with a hard stare. "That's an order," she said firmly. "Come on, we don't have much time before the next group of trainees shows up."

"Yes ma'am," Ziki replied miserably. "Please brace yourself, Commander. Firing in five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . . zero . . ."

The tip of the Karaashi weapons array flared to life and spewed forth a bright beam. It caught Adara's shoulder in a crushing blow that sent her flying backward through the air. She landed heavily.

Adara gasped for breath and tried to clear her vision. When the beam had connected with her suit there had been a blinding flash of light that left bright violet and blue spots in her eyes. Dirk came over with an

emergency medical kit. He ran the analyzer over her shoulder. Ziki watched the two of them nervously.

When she could see again, Adara sat up. Pain flared through her shoulder and down her arm. "Well doctor?" she managed to gasp.

"It says the impact shattered your shoulder," he said, frowning at the readout, "and there is severe muscle damage. It wasn't a clean reflection; there was some refraction of the beam. But there are none of the usual signs of nerve damage, burn trauma or bone crystallization associated with this type of wound."

Adara tried to nod, but the movement made her feel like someone was shoving a hot knife into her neck. "How much of a hit did I take?"

"According to the computer, 88 percent of the beam hit you at a range of 1.5 meters."

Ziki rummaged through the medical kit and pulled out two small devices. "Computer, end simulation program Ziki Suit." The body armour faded from Adara's body. "I'm going to put a stasis field on that shoulder Commander, so we can take you to sickbay."

"Fine," Adara grunted. "Dirk, have the computer analyze the extent of the damage and calculate how much of a hit someone could survive in one of these things."

"Yes ma'am." Dirk took the analyzer over to the computer and plugged it in. It beeped a second later. "According to this, a humanoid of average build and

health has a 76 percent chance of surviving a direct hit to the torso, from a distance of two meters. That's if their stasis field kicks in and they receive medical attention with thirty minutes. Other species have varying rates of survival."

The door to the sim hall opened and Jonathan Smith walked in. When he saw Ziki applying the stasis field, his eyes widened. "What happened here? What's the injury?"

"Commander Cohili has a shattered shoulder-" Ziki started to reply. Before she could finish, Jonathan had walked over and pushed her aside. "Then why is she still here?" he demanded. He scooped her up gently in his arms, Terran charm at full strength. "Stand aside, please."

The pain was making Adara see stars. As he carried her out the door, she called out. "Dirk," she said, "you and Ziki know who to talk to."

\*

Adara was lying on her back, savouring the soothing warmth of the treatment beam when Jonathan came back in to see her.

"Hi trooper," he smiled warmly. "The medic said you'd be cemented back together within the hour. How do you feel?"

Adara resisted the urge to shrug. "All right I guess. Still sore yet."

"I'll bet," he laughed. "You gave me quite a turn. I was just coming in to get ready to instruct some new Unloaders. Rilkens is having me fill in for someone today." He frowned a little. "I didn't expect to find you bleeding all over the floor."

"I was bleeding?"

"Well no, I suppose not, but you know what I mean." He sat on the edge of her bed. "So what were you doing anyway? That was some nasty simulation."

"Just testing a new piece of equipment that Dirk Johnson has come up with. You can thank Ziki for the realism of the simulation."

"Well, I don't know that I'd thank her for it."

Matt Rilkens chose that moment to walk in the room. "I know I didn't. Dismissed Mr. Smith."

Jonathan came to attention. "Sir." Before he left, he patted Adara's hand fondly. "Let me know when you're up and about okay?"

Rilkens waited until Jonathan was gone before he let loose. "The senior medical officer just called me to let me know about an unusual simulation injury involving laser trauma. What the hell is going on 69th? Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

"No sir. Am I to understand you've also spoken to Johnson and Ziki?"

"Yes and you can bet that when I hear back from High Command that they will both receive reprimands and

possibly demotions for endangering a superior officer's life like that."

Adara glanced sharply at Rilkens. "What exactly did they tell you?"

"They presented me with the specs on this new armour and said that you had been involved in some testing when the accident occurred."

Adara groaned and shut her eyes. "That was no accident, sir, they were ordered to do that. By me. I took complete responsibility for anything that happened."

Rilkens blinked. "They neglected to mention that." His face grew dark again. "So you were trying to get yourself killed!"

"No Commander, we were trying to test the armour. I took charge of the whole thing. Ziki and Johnson were just following my orders. Everything was according to regulations."

"Except for the tiny little fact that you went and did a highly dangerous field test without even so much as consulting a superior officer! You were *supposed* to be taking the day off! And you weren't authorized to use the sim hall even if it was temporarily empty!" Rilkens paced up and down. "But damn it, that armour has potential. Your data will speed up their implementation." He stopped and fumed. "Why is it that every time you chose to ignore the regulations, there is always something good attached to it that makes it damn near impossible to ever

discipline you?"

"I don't flout regulations deliberately Commander. I just attempt to get things done."

"Well damn you and damn your body armour," he snarled. "What the hell am I supposed to do now?" He threw up his hands. "Just once I'd like a day go by when everything runs the way it's supposed to!"

Adara opened her eyes again, trying to shake the groggy feeling that was stealing over her in the wake of the injury. "You can tell Dirk to fix the design for the chest plate on the suit. The edge of it dug into my stomach and gave me some deep bruises. Then you can give Johnson and Ziki a commendation and promotion for their efforts, with a notation about the 'accident.' Give me a reprimand for failing to notify my commanding officer."

"You know, I might just bloody well do that." He stomped to the door. "And damn this whole stupid outfit."



## **CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**

Marsalis stood to receive Michael Hamilton as he came into the room.

"Michael," Marsalis said. "It's so good to see you."

Michael snickered. "You never turn it off do you? We just talked two days ago."

Marsalis smiled gently. "Bad habits are hard to break, I guess. Sit, please, and bring me up to speed."

The room was small and unassuming. Everything in it - from the furniture to the small number of personal effects - was connected in some way to ISR.

Michael consulted his pad and grimaced. "I've got good news and bad news. Which do you want first?"

"Either one," Marsalis replied. "Nothing can spoil my mood today."

"Really?" Michael's eyebrows shot up. "That sounds promising. Okay then, first the bad news. Our linguistics people are still completely stumped. They've told me we can scrap the extrapolation project, because it's not working."

"Still no progress?"

"No. They've gone through all our data logs and isolated every Karaashi noise we've got on record. They've tried correlating it with everything - movements, gestures, possible commands. Nothing seems to match up. They've gathered up a whole database of screeches, but nothing suggests that there is any kind of recognizable language structure. Nothing we'd recognize anyway." Michael shuddered. "I'm glad I'm in biology and not linguistics. Listening to those noises all day would be enough to set your teeth on edge."

"That's too bad. I know they've worked hard on this idea. There's nothing new with the other communications attempts?"

"Same old story. They've tried every frequency, every known language, and every known communications technology. If the Karaash can hear us, they're ignoring us."

Marsalis leaned back in his chair, placing his elbows on the armrests and steepling his fingers. "It seems like the Tironis named the Karaash well."

"The Unknowables. Yes, it looks like it."

"What else have you got for me today?"

"We're having better luck with Karaashi technology. Really good luck. We've got three separate pieces of their discs right now, two recovered by the *Alexei* crew yesterday and one by a *Mat* crew three days ago. These

Darts are really helping. Until lately, all of the Karaash and their discs have been getting away intact."

Marsalis beamed. "I'm glad to hear that. The Ayakis have thrown their support behind authorizing the use of Darts on the field."

Michael was incredulous. "Please tell me you're not kidding!"

"I'm not," Marsalis chuckled. "The Union voted on it this morning. It was close, but it passed by a three-percent margin. We're legitimate."

Michael pounded the table in triumph. "Unbelievable! How did you manage to pull that off?"

Marsalis tapped his computer console. "Theological arguments. I was looking for a way to settle that whole color issue when I stumbled across some traditional Ayaki texts concerning Dekok. Apparently, in the early days, Dekok and its followers were known as defenders of the weak against the strong. I convinced the Ayakis that they should be supporting us in our bid to set up offence strategy, seeing as we were only emulating Dekok."

"And by supporting us, the Ayak government looks like it's simply returning to the traditional values," Michael whistled admiringly. "That's bound to be popular. Smooth, Marsalis. Very smooth."

"Luck," Marsalis said modestly. "If I hadn't found that information, we would all be wearing light purple

uniforms right now."

"Yuck," Michael said. "Purple?"

"It's the only undisputed color right now"

"Yuck," he said again. He glanced at his pad and winced. "That's really good news. I hope the rest of my bad stuff doesn't spoil it for you."

"Let's hear it."

"I've got a long list of ships' commanders' names here. All of them have put in requests to begin arming those AeroDarts."

Marsalis rose and walked across to a viewing window to look up at the starlit sky. "I admit I'm not entirely pleased to hear that," he said after a moment. "But the news doesn't come as a complete surprise. Any idea why there's a sudden rush to voice an opinion on this?"

"This is just an opinion, but I think there's a campaign afoot. About two thirds of the requests are from *Bir-Bir* and *Mat* ships. There are quite a few from the *Toar* and *Chance* fleets as well, but not as many."

Marsalis nodded. "Loysa and Teshwa."

"Yes."

"That probably means they plan to bring this up at this evening's real-time conference?"

"There's nothing listed on the agenda so far, but that doesn't mean anything."

Marsalis sighed and sat back down. "I can't say that I think the idea of arming so quickly is a good idea. We've

just barely achieved a majority opinion on the Darts in the Union as it is." He looked at Michael. "Have there been any references to the Darts on the Nets?"

"Not one. Nobody appears to have noticed. Or if they did, nobody cares."

"That helps. We officially sanction darts now, so there's no real reason to notice them. Perhaps we'll can keep the weaponry a secret until we can get official permission for that too."

Michael shot forward in his seat. "You don't mean to tell me you're going to approve arming the Darts already?"

Marsalis smiled ruefully. "No, my friend, I'm not going to approve of it. I am trying to be realistic however. If two of my 2nd Classers have a campaign going among their ship Commanders, they probably have a campaign planned for members of High Command. I have no doubt that they'll can work up majority support in the Assembly for Dart armaments."

"Things are getting very complicated lately. I hate all this double-dealing. The Union is bad enough."

"Things started getting complicated the moment we decided to start fudging the numbers, Michael. It's a path that's hard to stray from, once you're on it." He stretched, trying to loosen his shoulder muscles. "There's a lot of information on the Nets. Perhaps we will stay lucky and remain lost in the datastream."

Michael let out a bitter laugh. "I suppose. We all know how little people care when the Karaash attack somebody else's planet. Why would they want to notice our tiny struggle?"

"Have a little faith, Michael," Marsalis said softly. "We are making progress." He checked the time. "Aren't you due back at the lab?"

Michael brightened immediately. "Yes, I am, thanks for reminding me. We've got a new pulmonary procedure to look at. It's got great potential."

Both stood. "I'll talk to you later. Conference link two, don't forget."

Michael was halfway out the door already. "I won't. See you then!"

\*

The bulk transport bay was crawling with techs and roboservs when Adara arrived there the next morning. She met Dirk at the door.

"Commander," Dirk came to attention. He avoided Adara's eyes.

"I read your report to Commander Rilken."

"Yes, Commander." He swallowed guiltily.

"I noticed that there were a few details missing. Especially the ones about my orders to fire the platform."

"Yes, Commander."

"Don't let it happen again."

"Yes, Commander."

Adara squelched an urge to sigh. "What's going on here?" she said, indicating the crowd of people. "I was just coming in to check a setting on my Dart. I wasn't expecting guards."

Dirk was obviously relieved to be able to change the subject. "There was a general bulletin from Commander Rilken's this morning. Only Dart personnel are allowed in today," he said, "and these techs. We're not supposed to discuss what we see here with anyone outside the Dart unit."

"Again, I ask what's going on here?" Adara said. "What is it I'm seeing?"

"I'm not exactly sure, Commander," Dirk said. He leaned forward and lowered his voice dramatically. "But I think they're arming them."

Adara's eyes flashed and then she frowned. "I read that the Union approved the Darts yesterday morning, but I'm sure they didn't approve armaments."

Dirk nodded enthusiastically, his hair bobbing with the movement. "I read that too and noticed the same thing. Maybe that's why all the secrecy and the special instructions."

Adara folded her arms across her chest, unsure of whether to be pleased or disgusted. "High Command is stupid if they think they can keep this a secret. A few

extra aircraft might have stayed unnoticed, but armed AeroDarts? What happens when we start shooting Karaash?" She paused as a thought registered. "What special instructions?"

"The bulletin said and I'm quoting it directly, 'the peripherals being installed today are for emergency purposes only and are not to be used during assignment without permission of the onsite coordinator.'" Dirk shook his head. "I guess we'll get more information later. We've got a training session scheduled for 1600 hours."

Adara quickly decided how she felt about it. "Stupid!" she spat. "They might as well not give us anything at all! What the hell qualifies as an emergency in the middle of an ISR rescue operation? Doesn't being shot at count?!" She stomped over to her Dart, leaving Dirk looking bemused.

A tech was tinkering with the navigational controls. He looked up briefly and then focussed his attention back on the panel.

"This Dart yours?" he asked.

"Yes it is," Adara replied. "What are you installing?"

"I don't know really. All I know is I have orders to readjust the nav system to take inputs from an auxiliary system soon to be installed." He gave her a disapproving look. "You should take better care of this machine. The shielding systems were almost completely gone."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Adara said, her tone dripping



sarcasm.

"S'bad enough I gotta bounce from ship to ship to fix these things," he said, ignoring her. "But I hate having to make unnecessary repairs."

*Unnecessary?* Adara barely restrained the urge to cuff the man senseless. "I'll remember to tell the Karaash watch what they're firing at."

"There's no sense talking to her," said someone behind her. "She doesn't appreciate the finer qualities of a ship like the Dart."

The tech glanced up at the new voice. "Sark! I didn't know they posted you on the *Mat*. How have you been? Have you seen any action?"

Sark smiled sardonically. "I've been out a few times."

The tech reached forward to pump Sark's hand enthusiastically. "What brings you down to the bay?"

"I figured you'd be here," Sark said. Then he looked at Adara. "I figured you'd be here too."

"Mr. Sark," Adara said coolly.

"Are you having fun supervising your latest change in ISR policy? Or did you just come here to gloat generally?"

"I am just as surprised as you are, Mr. Sark. I had nothing to do with this."

"I'm sure." Sark's pinched face suffused with red. "My little foray bothered you that much? My measly little piece of Karaash platform? You couldn't stand being

outdone, could you?"

"I said," Adara repeated, "I had nothing to do with this."

"Why don't I believe that?"

"I have yet to figure that out, Mr. Sark. I am a 69th Classer, not a member of High Command. I have no control over ISR policy."

Sark gestured wildly at the Bay. "Yes, I can see that."

The tech, sensing trouble, interjected. "Sark, I'm glad you're here. We've got a design problem here that we can't work out. What do you suggest we do about this?" He handed him a computer pad.

Sark gave Adara a withering look and turned his attention to the pad. "You'll have to put that on the undercarriage and swivel mount it so you . . ." The tech gently led him away. All alone and with no duty requirements, until the evening, Adara kicked despondently at the parts on the floor before she decided to go back to her quarters.

Colm met her outside the BT bay door. "Good morning. Have you eaten?"

"I had breakfast an hour ago."

"Good! Then you'll be needing a midmorning snack. Would you join me?"

Without quite knowing why, Adara acquiesced. She tried to put it down to an effort to stave off boredom.

They walked to his quarters to eat a small meal. He served her warm, sticky buns and juice. They ate for

several minutes in companionable silence.

"That was a nice thing you did the other day," Colm finally mumbled, his mouth full.

"What?"

"Setting up Ziki and Johnson like that. They were on the Rec Level late last night acting all goofy with each other. It was cute."

Adara snorted. "Must be something in the air."

"My," Colm drawled, "we're in a grumbly mood this morning, aren't we?" He thrust his chin in her direction.

"How's the shoulder?"

"You know about that?"

"Rilkens told me. He figured I should know, considering we're in joint command." His eyes sparkled. "Most of the ship has heard already. You know how it is."

"I see. Well, it's still stiff, but I'll live."

"So was it worth it? The suit I mean? Does it look good?"

Adara took a sip of juice. "It's got a lot of potential. Combined with the speed and the new shielding of the Darts, it should give us a lot of protection. It might also help the ones on the ground."

Colm studiously examined the drink in his hand. "I imagine something like this would have a lot of non-military applications too."

Adara agreed. "I think so." A thought occurred to her

and she leaned forward a little, eyes bright. "I was reading a little while ago that the staff on Interstellar B-8 was having problems exploring Xerxes Basin on Pershia II. Maybe if they use some of this stuff, they'll be able to—" Adara suddenly noticed what she was saying. She closed her mouth firmly.

Colm was watching her intently. "Go on."

"Never mind. It's not important."

"You have an active, intelligent mind, Adara. It's wrong to close it like that."

"It's also wrong to waste time on useless speculation. I have nothing to do with that expedition. There's a job to be done here."

Colm was silent for a long time. "The shoulder you injured yesterday. Was it the same one that got wounded when you were young?"

A sharp stab of pain, centered deep in Adara's chest, surprised her. She struggled to keep her voice even. "No, that was the other arm."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No."

"Another thing to keep bottled up?"

"What's to bottle up?" Adara blazed. "It's not as if it's a secret. The whole galaxy knows my story! I have work to do here and I don't want to waste my time repeating my hard luck case to everybody with ears. Everyone has their own, they don't need mine!"

"That's true," he said quietly. "Everyone has a story. Would you care to hear mine?"

Adara didn't respond, but instead crossed her arms over her chest.

Colm refilled her glass. "I know a little about pain, Adara. I know what refuge there is in silence. But on the other side of such silence, there is nothing but a bottomless, terrible abyss. The wall dividing them isn't that thick."

Adara stood up and slammed her glass down on the table. "You know nothing about pain! Pain keeps you sharp. Pain keeps you focused and I have to stay focused."

"Why?" When she didn't answer, he said: "Focus is admirable. But there are very few crimes that are more damaging than locking up a mind, Adara." He waited and then said: "Thinking about the Xerxes basin won't kill you."

Adara said nothing. The pain in her chest ballooned and enveloped her entire body. She remembered a little girl who once thought about optics. She remembered an exam and a surprise - a request for a lab that brought down brutal death and destruction on a young family. On a whole planet. She remembered a little girl fighting for her life in the forest.

*Alone.*

Alone except for the laughing trees and the vicious

beasts that lived in them. Adara fought the waves of pain she thought were long since buried, gripping the glass in her hand so hard it shattered. She stared down unseeing at her bloodied fingers.

The physical pain brought her back from the edge. She felt the maelstrom of emotions swirling around her shrink and coalesce into a tight, hard funnel inside her soul. She stared at Colm, the man who with a few short words, had brought her to the edge. *How? How does he do that?*

"Good day, Mr. Patrick," she said and walked stiffly out the door.

\*

Sometime later, Rilken's blinked rapidly at the computer screen, trying to keep his rage in check. "Where the hell did this come from?"

"We haven't found the source yet," Teshwa replied, silver eyes flashing. "But we will. Mark my words."

Rilken's scrolled through the text file that accompanied the NewsNet report. *Subject*, it said, *ISR. Working title: Strange Happenings in a BT Bay.*

"One of my 4th's found it, accidentally. It's full hologram quality, no compression or scaling. Great big, full-size holos of a BT bay full of AeroDarts being outfitted with weapons. Wonderfully clear stuff."

Rilken's jaw worked. "What ship is this?"

"Yours," she said harshly, anger obvious in her tone. "Check the date of filing. The *Mat* fleet was the first to be rigged with the new stuff. That thing was on the system before the first tech team even left this ship. We've only completed two ships so far and that's with a full complement of techs on duty since 2100 hours yesterday."

With a sudden, violent jerk of her arm, she sent the console crashing to the ground. Her mouth worked and she struggled to put her feelings into words. "*Obrut!*" she swore. "I finally get High Command to put something together, something concrete and I am undermined by my own people!"

Rilkens was stunned. "I don't understand."

"Don't you see?" she shouted. "I only got approval yesterday evening to go ahead! I have only one team of techs working on this and that team was split so that only the last working group would know exactly what they were installing. The whole operation has been under lock and key since the beginning. Only our people know. Only High Command, a small team of techs and your Dart pilots." She kicked the desk now, denting it badly. "We have a leak. Our own people leaked this."

"Impossible," Rilkens said, his mind working furiously. "Off-ship communications are restricted and monitored closely. Especially the Dart pilots."

"Then maybe it's not the Dart pilots. Maybe it's

someone else on this ship. Perhaps security was lax."

"Security was tighter this morning than it has ever been before," Rilken said, an edge to his voice.

"Well obviously it wasn't tight enough!" Teshwa yelled, her face darkening. "Someone from somewhere got into that bay, took those holos and transmitted them to a NetFiler! I want them found before any more of our projects are leaked to the public." Teshwa paused, eyes narrowing. "But then again, perhaps I shouldn't be telling you about any future projects. I don't want to see it appear in my Net gathering archive tomorrow night."

Rilken flinched as though physically struck. "You don't mean to imply that-"

Teshwa drew herself up to her full height, her eyes full of cold, quiet fury. "I'm not implying anything. I'm telling you that there has been a leak of information and as far as High Command is concerned, everyone and anyone aboard this ship is suspect." She dropped her voice for effect. "Including you, 4th Classer Rilken."

Rilken came slowly to attention. "Yes, Commander," he said. "What are my orders?"

"You are to investigate all personnel on this ship. I want a list of suspects before the week is through."

"Is that wise, Commander?" Rilken asked bitterly. "To appoint an obvious suspect as leader of an investigation?"

Teshwa wavered slightly before answering. "They are investigating you separately. They will monitor your



actions and conduct during your assignment."

"Of course." Rilken swallowed hard. "Anything else, Commander? I should like to make changes to security right now."

"No one is allowed off this ship for leave time until further notice. Dismissed."

"As you wish, 2nd Classer Zig."

Alone in the office, Teshwa paced for a moment and then stopped to pick up the console. She sank into a chair, dropped the console on the desk and put her head in her hands. The silence after her outburst seemed loud.

The hurt in his eyes had been unmistakable. The tone of his voice had condemned her. She wished she could call him back, tell him it was just procedure, that he wasn't really a suspect, that she knew him better than that. *Much* better than that.

But she couldn't. The orders from High Command had been clear.

So instead, she sat there, mourning the lifelong friendship she knew she had just killed.

\*

Ziki found Adara heading for the sim hall. She followed her to the door and then waited with her for the others to show up.

"Commander," Ziki began, then hesitated. Seeing that

she had Adara's attention, she gathered her courage and continued. "Permission to speak candidly?" Adara nodded. "Is there anything wrong, Commander?"

Adara was mildly surprised, but didn't let it show. "No, Ziki, my shoulder has completely healed."

"That's - that isn't what I meant. I, um, well it's just that you don't seem like yourself today. I mean, you've never been really talkative-" Ziki flushed and twisted her hands together. "I didn't mean it that way, you do talk, but, well, it's just been sort of different, you know?" she finished lamely. "You look a little tired," she added.

Adara adjusted the fit of her uniform sleeves. "I've been spending a lot of time working."

Ziki gave her a searching look. "Then this doesn't have anything to do with Commander Patrick?"

"No. Should it?"

"I-I don't know. I kind of thought you two were seeing each other and were having a problem and well, maybe you'd like to talk about it?" Ziki smiled shyly.

Adara glanced down at her hand where a network of thin scars crossed the palm and fingers. She'd left them there deliberately as a reminder. A reminder of the need to be completely in control of herself. The need to avoid Colm and his infuriating, disturbing, distracting words.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, but Commander Patrick and I weren't seeing each other, as you put it," Adara replied.

"Well, I just thought you'd been spending a lot of time together lately and-"

"A natural consequence of our new assignment on *Mat-I*. You should know, you're my second in command."

Ziki looked downcast. "Yes, of course. Then you're not seeing him?"

The Adara of this morning would have allowed herself a sigh. This one said coolly: "No, Ziki. I don't `see' anyone. With my current situation, there is no room for such a thing in my life." She flicked her eyes over her hand. "Nor is there ever going to be," she added firmly.

"You mean-"

"I mean that as long as the Karaash are still murdering, I cannot afford to be idling. Was there anything else you'd like to discuss?"

"No, Commander."

"Good. Let's find out what all the work in the BT bay this morning was all about."

## **CHAPTER EIGHTEEN**

He was a fool, he was, he was. But now he is dead.

Sill dragged the body of K'Saka through the Long Path, paying no attention to the bits of skin that scraped off the body and onto the sharp stones and rocks, leaving a bloody trail behind them. Who cared? Sill was king.

Yes, yes. King. King K'Sill. He had killed the murderer Saka.

After he had broken away from the fat slobs at the Duplicant, it had taken him five days to find where Saka was hiding. Five long days of seething rage, incredible fury, unimaginable anger.

For he had discovered why he had been Duplicated. He had been Duplicated for feed. Fodder to the people. Yes.

Even now, the thought of Saka's evil filled him with hatred. How dare he commit such a sacrilege? Death was too good.

But K'Sill knew why Saka had done such a thing. What could one expect from a descendant of the Ancients? Those wicked Karaash who had discovered the Wonders

of the Placer and who professed to want to take them all to happiness and prosperity? Oh, thank the Placer for the wisdom of K'Sia! He alone saw through their so-called science and named it the blasphemy it was.

K'Sia, the leader of the great uprising. Yes, life had been good after the First Test. The Ancients had been wise in the beginning, showing their people the way to pass that First Test. They had changed their people, allowed them to survive. But then they had gone too far.

K'Sill shivered at the memory. The Ancients had turned their tools on other areas. They created tools that the Placer had not meant his people to have. They peered into the skies and dared say that the universe was not laid out the way the lore texts had proclaimed. They had dared. To say that there were others, others not of the Placer, others who lived differently and that they were good.

K'Sia had seen through their evil ways. Many had whispered that K'Sia was simply angry, because he had tried to understand the Wonders and could not. They had whispered that K'Sia was a failed Ancient.

And K'Sia had whispered back that the Ancients had coded the knowledge, to keep it secret. And everyone knew it was true, yes, because very few had been able to understand the Wonders. And everyone knew that those silent whisperers were agents of the Ancients. They had dared. And they had died.

Yes, yes.

Killed during the great uprising, many of them at the hands of mighty K'Sia himself. For they lied. Killed along with the Ancients. How dare they corrupt the Search for the Placer with their ideas? K'Sia had been smart, he had, he had.

K'Sill jerked the body over a fallen rock and scuttled further down the Long Path. He hissed, remembering what he had been told about the time after the great uprising. It had been hard then. K'Sia had proclaimed the Placer was punishing them for the corruption of the Ancients. Others proclaimed that without the Ancients they were doomed. There had been many clashes, many, many battles. Many had died.

The Search took precedence over everything and rightly so, yes, rightly so. Killed were the weak, the aged, the young. Killed were the females who had wasted precious Search time with their child rearing. For who needed any of them anymore? They had the tools.

The tools.

The body of K'Saka got stuck in a narrow portion of the tunnel, forcing K'Sill to stop for a moment. He struggled with the dead weight, pulling with all his might until part of the body - an arm, perhaps - tore away, freeing the corpse again. Dead Saka. King K'Sill.

There had been much death in the first years after the great uprising. As the New had struggled to undo the

codes of the Ancients, there had been starvation, disease, destruction. But K'Sia had told them it was the price they had to pay for the corruption. They refused to listen to the last, final whisperers who claimed that they were doomed because they'd given up the tools of knowledge. They believed him and their faith was confirmed when he undid the most important secret. The Duplicants.

The Duplicants. K'Sia has spoken with the Placer, who told him to use the Duplicants, the tool of the Ancients. The Ancients had tossed it aside, but the Placer had revealed its true worth to K'Sia, taught him how to use it. It had been the tool the Ancients had not wanted the people to know about, K'Sia had said, because it was so powerful.

K'Sia had spoken and so it was the truth. K'Sia spoke with the Placer.

K'Sill knew it was true. His predecessors had told him the truth. K'Sia had been the true way. And hadn't the Duplicants allowed the Search to continue?

The Duplicant, K'Sill's destination. The all-powerful weapon that had expanded their empire, sent them back on the Search. The tool that K'Sill would use on Saka, to avenge his indignity. K'Sill knew the location of only one Duplicant, but he knew there were more. He had been told, it was the truth. And using the once-mighty Saka to feed his subjects was a fitting death for a descendant of the Ancients, wasn't it?

Yes, yes.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Union raged over ISR's deception for a week, without coming to a clear decision about armed Darts. When they called the Mat fleet into action, 2nd Classer Teshwa Zig ordered all personnel to take part, with the armaments. If the craft were going to be grounded, she wanted to get her shots in while she could.

The alarms went off aboard the *Mat-1* less than an hour after Adara had gone to sleep. She awoke quickly and found her way into her uniform without hesitation, working automatically. She hurried out the door and sprinted easily to the transport bay. She was one of the first ones there. She started moving from ship to ship, firing them up so they'd be ready in time for the launch.

She met Colm in the BT. "Could be a bad one," he said without preamble, "densely populated area, not much of a defence system. *Toar* fleet is a good twelve hours from here."

"Is there anything unusual about this situation?" Adara asked.

Colm gave a rueful half-smile in response to the unintentional sarcasm. "No, not really. These people are humanoid at least and similar to our culture and technology. Won't be too much of a hassle getting them evacuated. We've got a team of Loaders going down on this transport because number eight and twelve are still inoperative." He turned on his Dart and adjusted his suit before putting on his helmet.

The BT was filling fast. Adara made her own review of the briefing, completing it just as the door slammed shut behind the last person in. A silver wave passed through the crowd of soldiers, as they activated their new suits - morph suits they called them now. Within seconds the BT launched.

They were only minutes into the flight when the ship gave a violent heave. All eyes immediately turned to the senior officers; they were the only ones allowed to have communication access to the pilot.

Colm righted himself and signalled to Adara that he'd make the link. A few seconds later his voice came over their private link.

"Ambush!" he said, "Hang tight." He switched to an open channel. "Assume crash positions!" he barked. The ship rocked again. This time, there was no mistaking the feel of a laser bolt impact.

Adara slid off her Dart and tucked herself into a ball. Another hit shoved the Dart sharply into her side, nearly

knocking her sideways. "What happened?" she grunted.

Colm sounded muffled somehow, as though his mouth was pressed too close to the transmitter in his helmet. "We're being attacked by a hostile transport ship, probably Karasshi, but the pilot isn't sure. We've never seen how they dump their platforms."

"Are we headed for the planet?"

"No, we're- ow!" The BT rolled to the side and then upright again. It was a second before she heard Colm again, breathing hard. "The re-entry would slow us down too much. She's making a break to swing around a moon."

The inside of the ship boomed as another shot made a direct hit. The rear of the capsule shaped transport began to swing back and forth, hard enough to set the heavy Darts sliding. The surprised shouts of those caught off-guard echoed on the open link. Stasis fields flickered on and then off again.

Adara opened her own channel to the pilot's section to hear for herself what was going on. The shrill voice of the terrified co-pilot nearly deafened her.

"We're not going to make it around," he screamed. "Take us back to the *Mat!*"

"Negative," the pilot answered, just as scared, but with more control. "That will endanger the mother ship. We'll have to take our chances on the moon's surface. Take us down."

Adara felt the ship tilt and then bounce and skid as the swinging of the transport prevented a smooth entry into the moon's atmosphere.

"Stabilize!" the pilot shouted. The swinging stopped and the transport shuddered into the atmosphere.

"They're still in pursuit! Shields at 14 percent, attempting to boost." The co-pilot muttered instructions and then sucked in his breath. "They're cutting in sideways! Aft section has been targeted!"

The blast cut in directly underneath the rear section of the transport, close enough to nick the shield and flip the ship like a coin in the air. Adara's world turned upside down and everything crashed from the floor to the ceiling. The transport began to shake in earnest.

"We're through the atmosphere," the pilot gasped, "and in free fall. Get this thing turned over or we won't stop!"

Unable to flip the BT end for end again, the pilots began rotating the ship sideways. Caught in a tangle of limbs and bulky Darts, Adara slid helplessly from the ceiling, over the walls and back down to the floor again.

"There's not enough power! I can't slow us down!"

"Course plotted for impact," the pilot reported, her voice distorted by the vibration of the ship. "Cut power to all systems except navigation, thrust and shields. Send two percent to navigation and split the rest."

The upward thrusters cut in, attempting to slow their fall. The opposing forces fought for control of the ship

and Adara felt like her guts were being squeezed in a vice.

They crashed into the moon's surface nose first, the impact crumpling it as they bored into the ground. They slid forward for what seemed like an eternity, until friction finally brought them to a grinding halt.

Silence descended on the transport like a heavy blanket. Pinned as she was, Adara could only lay there, dazed, head spinning. She heard Ziki's weak voice on the link.

"Comptrol," she wheezed, "find any operable scanning system, enable proximity monitor. Search pattern: Karaash platform or similar vessel."

The computer's voice, completely unaffected by the crash, came back sounding unnaturally strong. "Complying. Please stand by." Somewhere in the BT, a Dart hummed to life of its own accord. "Short range scan . . . negative. Medium range scan . . . negative. Long range scan . . . negative."

*Good thinking, Ziki.* Relieved that there was one less problem, for now, Adara began to struggle upward. Nearby, someone threw up violently into his helmet. "Comptrol," she said hastily, her own gorge rising, "close open link."

Colm had heard it too. "The ship's environment is still intact, somebody get that thing off him before he chokes to death."

Adara found her feet and stood up. Elsewhere, the

others began to come to life. "Do we have any medical personnel aboard?"

"Here, Commander Cohili. There should be at least six of us on board. We missed the first two transports out."

Adara did some swift mental calculations, trying to keep her mind off nausea. Although three hundred was the usual ship's complement for a BT, the Darts took up a great deal of room. With forty Darts and their pilots aboard, that left room for about a hundred or so Loaders and Medics and their equipment. "Find out who's in trouble and do what you can."

"Yes, Commander."

Colm started pushing his way toward the front of the ship. "I'm going to try and find out where we are," he said.

She was helping six others lift a damaged Dart when he returned. He drew her aside to give her a complete report of what he'd found.

"There's nothing left of the forward cabin," he said bleakly. "What isn't crushed is burnt beyond recognition, including the pilots. There are a few live sensors still left and from what I can tell, we've buried the front end at four, maybe five meters below the surface."

"Which means the side and floor hatches won't be opening any time soon."

"Right. Our only way out of the ship is through the back. Even if we can get through the hull though, there's

still the problem of getting to the surface. I'm only guessing here, but judging by the angle we are at and the length of time we spend sliding, there's likely to be a long tunnel behind us. Which has probably collapsed."

"Hmm." Adara tried to visualize what their path into the ground looked like. "If we slid for a long time and we're only a few meters down, it may mean that the stuff is soft enough. We can dig our way straight up."

"You didn't see the forward cabin," Colm said darkly. "It's not that soft."

"You said there's nothing left of ship's systems?" Adara countered.

"That's right. There's still a little power left, which is why we can still see. But that won't be around long. Communications are definitely gone, I tried."

"Well then we can't stay here. With life support gone, the environment will run out of oxygen soon and we'll have to depend entirely on our suits. You know they won't last more than three or four days in an oxygen-free system, even with the recycling. There's a good chance that surface air will have enough in it to regenerate what we've got."

Colm looked at her for a long moment, thinking. "I don't suppose any of those medics mentioned they had one of the portable manufacturing units with them?"

"I doubt it. They were late to the bay. They'll have their personal emergency kits on them, but that's about it."

"That settles it then," he said, squaring his shoulders. "Without any manufacturing units we have no source of nutrition either, so if we don't suffocate first, we'll starve. Let's find out what we've got then."

Together, they surveyed the damage to the Darts. Twenty-six were still air worthy and seventeen still had working weapons systems. Surprisingly enough, the crew fared even better.

"Three major injuries, Commanders," said the medic. "Commander Teerso has three broken ribs and some internal bleeding. 75th Foaol has a punctured spleen and Commander Sark suffered a head wound. There are also several with minor bumps and scratches."

"Remind me to hug Dirk for inventing these armour suits. It could have been a lot worse. We got lucky," Colm said.

"If you consider getting ambushed and shot out of the sky, with two out of four Team Leaders among the injured, *lucky*, I suppose so," Adara muttered. She switched back to an open link and explained their situation to the rest of the crew, keeping some of the more frightening details to herself. "We're going to have to shoot our way through the back, so I want three working Darts lined up over here."

Teerso's second-in-command came forward. "I turn over Orange Team to you Commander Cohili, as you are one of the seniormost officers aboard."



Colm agreed. "And I'll take Sark's crew under my command. Blue and Green teams will move the wounded to the back and use the completely trashed stuff to make a barricade in front of them. Place the Darts tightly - we'll need protection from flying debris."

*And create a separate air pocket in case half this rock comes pouring in on us,* Adara thought sourly. "Agreed," she said aloud. She helped moved three good Darts into position near the back hatch. Colm's people moved quickly to stack the crushed Darts into a wall while she instructed her teams to move the Loaders, medics and all the remaining equipment behind the barricade to protect them.

Adara nodded. "Good work. I'll start firing when you-."

"No way. I've already decided who I want up there with me and we can't have two senior officers in the same dangerous place at the same dangerous time."

Adara felt inexplicably annoyed. "I can do without the chivalry, Commander Patrick. There's no need to hide *me* behind a barricade."

"Oh, don't worry," he replied, with more than a hint of sarcasm. "You've got as much of a chance of getting killed back there as you do up here."

Unwilling to argue the point, Adara shepherded the last of the crew behind the barricade and helped heave the last Dart into place. It was extremely crowded.

Colm had a crew of six on the other side. Adara waited

impatiently as they carefully positioned the Darts.

"Here goes," Colm said, after he was satisfied. "Fire!"

The Darts replied in unison and the walls of the BT hummed. There was the sharp sound of metal being ripped apart and then, nothing but quiet pops and sizzles.

"Well, I'll be," he drawled finally. "Come out here, Commander Cohili."

Adara worked her way over the barricade and then peered through the still smoking hole. As her visor adjusted to the gloom, she could make out a perfectly formed tunnel, its shape matching that of the transport.

"It was a double or nothing shot," said Colm, "and it looks like we came up with the double. The tunnel's clear."

*Then let's not waste it.* "Take that wall down people, I need an advance party in three minutes."

\*

The tunnel was shorter than it seemed. Cautiously nudging their Darts forward out of the hole, Adara and her advance team found themselves in a dense forest. A thick canopy of leaves and branches blocked out much of the light from above.

"Sensors still showing no signs of the Karaash, Commander," Dirk reported. "They're not showing much of anything, except the flora you see around you and some weak-looking small animals."

"Don't shrug them off too easily, Dirk," admonished Disck, his long tail coiled carefully behind him on his Dart. "On my homeworld, it's the smallest things that are the deadliest."

"Cut the chatter and pick a compass point," Adara ordered. "Fan out to maximum range and then report back here. If you encounter the enemy, don't even think of flying back this way. Signal the rest and take it on a chase. Go."

Hastened by the curtness of the orders, the group split away from the hole. Taking her time, Adara allowed her Dart to float upward slowly, so she could survey the crash site. The area where they'd come down was a disaster, with broken branches and half-crushed tree-trunks strewn about haphazardly. The earth, where they'd smashed into the ground, was blackened and scorched. As she rose above the treetops, she could see the exact path the transport had taken under the surface; the trees above it looked drunk, tilted at odd angles, and barely able to support themselves. *That's probably why the tunnel didn't collapse*, she thought. *The root system under there must be incredible.*

With the flick of a finger, she set the Dart to coasting over the forest. It was a still day; there was no breeze or sharp wind to fight against and so the ride was smooth. A single sun shone brightly overhead. The forest itself was a dark, healthy-looking green and it seemed to extend

forever into the horizon in all directions.

It was also very quiet; there were no raucous birdcalls emanating from the branches below, no loud animal cries. What creatures there were contented themselves with scurrying silently from tree to tree.

Adara continued her straight-line sweep of the land and air, searching for signs of the Karaash, but finding none. When her computer warned she was getting out of communications range, she turned back toward the rendezvous point. A flash just above the trees to her left caught her eye and she tensed, then relaxed as she realized it had been the sun glinting off another pilot's armour.

When she came back to the site, she found half the team waiting there already. They were comparing notes.

"Well?" she asked. "Anything?"

"No Karaash," Dirk replied. "Just lots and lots of trees. Either the ship burned up in the atmosphere, or they gave up the chase."

"Signal the others come up then, we may as well get settled."

They soon filled the blasted clearing with people, each of them taking the opportunity to stretch their legs. Colm immediately came strolling up to where the Dart riders had gathered.

"Has anybody thought to analyze the air content?" he asked. He indicated his helmet. "I'd really like to take this

blasted thing off."

Dirk consulted his Dart computer. "Go ahead Commander. It's good stuff. A little more oxygen than we're used to on board ship, but that's okay."

Colm grunted in satisfaction and immediately removed his headgear. Adara did the same and her nose filled with the fresh scent of green leaves and moist earth. She hated it.

The rest of the company followed suit. "Whoa," Chang beamed. "This place is fantastic."

"Hmm," Colm agreed. "A stable tunnel, no Karaash in the neighbourhood and fresh air. Good things do come in threes."

"Unless of course you're talking about a Selortian Triad," Dirk quipped and there was laughter all around. Colm looked amused but didn't reply.

At that moment, the remaining Dart riders flew down from the sky. Ziki landed and after glancing around briefly, took off her helmet. "Commanders," she said, "if we need a place to move to, I think I've found one. There's a small lake way over that way," she pointed behind her, "right next to a large clearing. It gives us a good view of the open sky and it's close enough to the trees that we can scatter back into the woods if need be."

Colm grinned. "Well, that's good news. I was hoping we weren't going to have to stay down in that stuffy hole. I wasn't looking forward to bailing it when it decides to

rain." A thought struck him. "How are we going to get everyone there though? The Darts only seat one, uncomfortably."

Everyone looked blank for a moment, until a Loader brightened. "We've still got our anti-grav boards. We can hook them together in a line behind a Dart and get towed in."

"Oh boy!" Chang clapped his hands together gleefully. "I get to play crack the whip! I haven't done that since I was a kid!" There was a chorus of laughter and exclamations of mock horror. Several Loaders went back down to the transport to fish out their boards.

Adara looked around her in disbelief. *You'd think this was a scheduled planetside leave.*

"Lighten up," Colm said, as though reading her thoughts. "We've all just been through a pretty rough experience. Let them laugh." As though to emphasize his point, he started leading her away from the crowd, so they could discuss their situation without disturbing the mood.

When they were far enough away, he stopped and glanced up at the trees. "Any clue about where we are?"

Adara shook her head. "Not really. I'm assuming we're on a moon orbiting the planet we were headed for originally."

"Trouble is," Colm said, "which one? There's no way of retrieving that information from the transport that I know

of. If Rilken is searching for us, it'd be kind of handy to be able to broadcast our approximate location, to narrow down the search."

"Assuming Rilken is looking for us. For all he knows, we went down during rescue operations. If we were attacked by Karaash, there's a good chance the *Mat-1* is fighting for its life too."

Colm rolled his eyes. "You are such an optimist. For goodness sake, don't go mentioning that to anyone else."

"Why not? It will become obvious soon enough."

Colm glared at her. "Because not everyone is as stoic as you are, that's why. They need hope and laughter."

"It doesn't seem to bother you."

"I'm a realist. I can deal with things like that. Which is why I'm in a Command position, as low as it is. That's also why you have a higher rank. People draw on our strength. Why do you think the seconds turned over their teams so quickly? There really wasn't any need for them to do so."

Looking at the group of people in front of her, Adara was struck by the truth of what he said. She hadn't thought of it that way before and the idea disturbed her, just a little. She wasn't sure why.

She shook her head, as though to clear it and switched to something less abstract. "What will we do with the wrecked Darts and our casualties?"

"Let the medics handle that. You and I," he said firmly,

"need to be organizing a camp. I want everyone to be busy."

\*

They arrived at the lake on their Darts, towing a weaving, snaking line of anti-grav boards and their passengers behind them. There was a great deal of giggling and laughing as the Loaders teetered precariously on their boards, helmets off, letting the air blow through their hair.

Adara landed gently, got off her Dart and looked around. Ziki had chosen well. The lake was small and judging by the light blue color of the water, fairly shallow. The trees surrounded the water on one side, but where Adara was standing, the timber had receded, leaving a wide, crescent-shaped, beach-like area. If the weather held, they could sleep out in the open, which would make it easier for any ships scanning for life to pick them up. If the weather turned nasty, the trees provided a natural shelter.

Ziki walked up, looking nervous. "Well, Commander? Is this okay?"

"Yes, it looks good," she answered and Ziki smiled proudly. "How's the water?"

"A medic just analyzed it and he says it looks fine, but we should probably boil it to be on the safe side."

"Well, then take a group out through the woods and



gather up some firewood and get a fire started. We may need a fire for warmth later anyway."

Ziki looked puzzled. "Why would we need a fire, Commander? We can heat the water with a laser and we have our morph suits to keep us warm."

"I'd like to save them as backup. They've got a limited power supply, but we have an unlimited amount of wood. Save the suits for really bad weather or an emergency."

Ziki turned to leave and then paused as though something had just occurred to her. When she met Adara's eyes, there was worry in her own. She lowered her voice and stepped closer.

"Are we going to be okay here? Without manufacturing units and generators and stuff? What if it takes ISR a while to find us?"

Adara waved aside her concern. "We could make due with a lot less than what we have. It sure as hell won't be comfortable, but discomfort never killed anyone."

"No, I guess not," Ziki was relieved. She turned to leave.

"Ziki?"

"Yes, Commander?"

"Make sure the wood is dry. And no green branches."

"Dry wood. No green branches. Yes, Commander." She looked dubious, but didn't ask the obvious question. She jogged away, calling to some other crewmembers for help.

Colm came over, followed by eight others. Three of them were Roikans.

"Here," he said, pointing at an anti-grav board, "give me one of those. I figure if we're going to hang out here, we might as well fix something to eat. We're going to go out and see if we can catch something good." He jerked his thumb at a medic who accompanied him. "Jared here thinks that some of those critters in the trees might be edible."

Adara cast an eye over the large number of people gathered in the clearing, contemplating the number of mouths they had to feed. "Try and take them from a wide area," she said, "so we don't end up driving them away. We don't know how many we'll need."

"Don't conthern yourthelf, Commanderr," one of the Pilfers said. "I wiwill thow them how to hunth without thcaring the game away."

"Good." She looked down at the stunner hanging on her belt with a grimace. "In the meantime, I'll be looking for something to clean them with. Let me know when you're back."

Colm and his band wandered off, leaving Adara to put the other idle crewmembers to work. She sent a large group away to make some sort of defence perimeter around the makeshift camp, while another group was sent back to the crash site for the scrap metal they'd left behind. The few who knew how to fish were instructed to

check the lake, while others went to search for branches suitable for roasting spits.

When the metal sheets came back, she rigged one of the Dart lasers to make a fine beam and then set yet another bewildered group to the task of cutting knives, crude forks and small plates out of the scrap. Some other pieces were bent into bowls for water and pans for frying.

It was growing dark by the time the hunters returned with two anti-grav boards heaped high with dead beasts. They were ugly things, about a meter in length from head to hind end. They had been tree dwellers; six muscular-looking limbs sprouted from the torso, each ending with a three-fingered claw. They were arranged carefully on the board, all of them with their necks neatly broken so that their heads lay at a precise right angle to the body.

"Pilfer here is very efficient," Colm was saying to the crowd of people who had gathered to see the catch. "All we'd have to do is stun them off a branch and he'd do the rest. He got so fast that they didn't even hit the ground."

The three Pilfers bowed simultaneously to acknowledged the compliment and seemed to look pleased, although it was hard to tell under all the fur. "It wath no pwoblem weawy," he said modestly. "It wath eathy wok."

Adara noticed Dirk looking at the pile of dead creatures with something akin to horror on his face. "Is there something the matter, Mr. Johnson?"

Dirk flushed red at the question. "Er, this is what we're eating tonight?"

"This and a few other things. Why?"

"But it, it's," he pointed at the creatures. "This stuff has fur all over it. It moved once, it was alive! We can't eat it!"

"Not like this, no," Adara agreed and handed him a crude knife. She picked up a beast by an arm and slung it over a shoulder. "Come along, Mr. Johnson. It's time you learned the finer points of non-synthetic food."

Dirk looked down at the knife in his hand and swallowed hard.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY**

By the time it was fully dark, Adara was seated on a rock at the far end of the crescent beach, with a metal plate across her knees. The creatures from the forest had roasted well and the leaves from the trees, combined with a few plants from the lake bottom, made a credible salad. There was a little fried fish for variety and hot tea, made from boiling the bark from some young trees. It was bitter, but the medics who had suggested it had said it would provide some additional pain relief for the wounded. Still a little bruised from the landing, Adara had enough made up for the whole camp.

She ate quietly, staring out over the lake. Several Dart pilots were currently standing on guard at the defence perimeter, taking a Dart out now and then for a long range scan of the area, waiting their turn to come back to the beach area for a rest. Most of the crew was there now, eating their supper in the orange-red light.

She looked at the group of Loaders, Medics and Dart pilots who were gathered around the fires. They were

talking loudly and telling jokes. It looked for all the world like a scene from some sort of primitive lakeside settlement.

Colm walked over just then, carrying a plate of food and sat down on the ground, cross-legged. He seemed to read her thoughts again. "You know," he said, "we really ought to invent some sort of method of miniaturizing star bases. So we could all carry around a little package that says something like `instant modern civilization, just add water.'"

Adara snorted. She was sure some of the rest of the crew would agree. Dirk hadn't been the only one to have problems with the menu; most of them had been astonished at the prospect of having to skin and gut their meal. What had really been shocking though, was the fact more than half had never encountered a real fire before. None of them had ever considered using one as a heat source.

"This is weird," Janice had said, holding out a hand to the flames. "One side of you gets really hot, while the other stays cold. It's so uneven!"

Now, the air was cool, but comfortable. Adara finished her meal and set her plate down on the rock.

"You put together a nice setup this afternoon," he remarked. "This reminds me of when I was a little kid." Adara winced in the darkness. She had been hoping to avoid any sort of non-business conversation with him. In

fact, she had been hoping to avoid him altogether. She attempted to change the subject.

"Did you set up that beacon?"

Mouth full of roast meat, Colm nodded. "Hmm-mmm." He chewed quickly and swallowed. "Although I wish I had a better idea of where we were."

"What are you broadcasting now?"

"Just a general stream about what happened, how it happened and a basic description of the plant and animal life here. Maybe there's something really distinctive about it that will match with whatever ISR has in their database to help the search."

He was quiet for while, busy with the remains of his food. Trying to discourage any further conversation, Adara pulled her knees up to her chest, laid her chin on her arms and ignored him. She considered leaving, but there wasn't any place inside the perimeter that didn't have a group of people nearby.

The water of the lake rippled gently and there was a flash of movement. A fish swam as close to the beach as possible, poking its snout up through the water, mouthing the air as though trying to taste it. Then it disappeared into the dark water.

Colm chuckled, deep in his chest. "Mother used to say that when a sea creature does that, it means that it was once human and it's trying to remember what it was like to breathe. She said that being turned into a legless,

lungless creature was of some kind of punishment for some evil deed the human did once."

Adara glanced over at him, appalled and curious in spite of herself. "Wherever did she get such a ridiculous idea?"

"From our neighbours. From our friends. Everybody knew that. That was one of those things that every parent tells their children to make them behave."

"Your mother threatened to turn you into a fish? What kind of parent does that?"

Colm, who had been staring at the water where the fish had been, looked down at his lap. "The same kind of parent that turns you into the authorities when you are seven. For crimes against society."

"What?! Your mother had you arrested? What for?"

He gave her a one-shouldered shrug. "I thought disrespectful thoughts. I asked too many questions. I wanted to know more than my neighbor."

Adara peered at him through the darkness, trying to see if he were making this up. "What is that supposed to mean? `Know more than your neighbor?'"

"It means that all people are supposed to be equal and if you have an idea on how to cook dinner faster one night, you'd better keep it to yourself. Because that implies you know better than everyone else."

"So what if you do?"

"So you get turned over to the authorities and beaten," Colm replied. "For being disrespectful to your equals."



He rubbed absently at his shins, as though soothing an old ache.

Adara noticed the movement. "You were beaten? Just for thinking?"

He smiled wryly. "More times than I can count. They told me it was for my own good. My parents helped sometimes. It was horrible. That's why I ran away, eventually. I left when I was eight."

"How did you get away? A place where ideas get you a beating doesn't strike me as technologically advanced."

Colm laughed outright at that. "Good grief, no. It wasn't much better than this," he said, pointing at the primitive campsite. "I hopped on a visiting freighter. One from ISR, in fact, when they first tried to convince the people there to join the Interplanetary Union."

"They let you join ISR at age eight?"

"No, no. I was a stowaway. I didn't join until much later. I had no idea what it was for one thing, you see." He stretched out his long legs, trying to get the circulation back after being cross-legged. "I didn't know much of anything, really. So I spent a long, lonely time hitching rides on freighters, swiping food from Fetcher units and using every computer I could get my hands on. Once I'd figured out how people got them to do what they want, of course." His voice softened in remembrance. "I spent a lot of hours, holed up in some cargo bay, going through file after file of material. My own little world."

He laughed. "I'd read anything. From technical papers to Melkan poetry."

*Poetry.* The word flashed through Adara's mind, like lightning. It had been years since she'd read poetry. She remembered once being fascinated by the endlessly different forms that existed throughout the galaxy. One-word poems in languages that could convey an entire epic story with a single, clipped syllable. Lengthy ballads praising long dead heroes and unrequited love.

*Poetry.*

She had been ten years without it. Without it, or any kind of literature, be it philosophy or adventure tales. Ten years with nothing but trees and now, nothing but technical manuals and ISR regulations. She suddenly felt a deep, terrible longing for someone to tell her a story. The need seemed to tear out her heart.

She caught a glimpse of her hands and noticed they were trembling. Colm, seemingly impervious to her silence, had turned away from her and was staring out across the lake. *How?* she thought at him furiously. How did a few words from him, a stranger, seem to sweep under her carefully built up defences, to poke at the raw places she kept hidden away, places she didn't even know existed? Nothing Rilken had said, or Ziki, or Dirk, or Jonathan had the same effect.

Her eyes swept over him. He had turned off his morph suit, so the skin-tight cloth outlined the curves of his

body clearly. She could see his back in the dim light, broad at the shoulders, lean and muscular as it tapered down-

She felt her face flush with sudden heat and immediately felt confused. *What's wrong with me?* The trembling worsened and panic crept into her soul. She had to escape him, somehow. Seeing no other recourse, she pretended to yawn and hurriedly stretched out on the ground, keeping her back to him. Forcing her breathing to become even, she laid there, faking sleep.

It would be hours before it truly came to her.

\*

Colm sat there, in the darkness, listening to the silence. Most of the crew had gone to sleep hours ago, but hadn't felt tired. Not yet, anyway.

He glanced over at Adara, asleep on the hard ground and smiled. She was curled into a gentle ball, with one hand firmly on the stunner at her belt; a picture of both vulnerability and strength.

He had noticed the sudden decision to sleep, of course, and knew it for what it was. He had seen the sudden flash of insight, the pain of self-deprivation. He had longed to reach out to her, tell her some of the things he had learned, to make her eyes sparkle with bright enthusiasm as he knew they could. But his instincts had warned him

not to press too hard this time, lest he drive her deeper into herself.

He sighed and stretched out, letting his body relax. He would have to be patient.

\*

The next day dawned as bright and clear as its predecessor had been. Awakened by the sun on her face, Adara sat up hastily and glanced around her. Seeing that she was alone, she relaxed and stood to go to the water's edge.

The tea from the night before and the disturbing dreams had left a bitter taste in her mouth, which she rinsed away with cold water from the lake. They had been dreams, of course, Adara assured herself. Something to do with fish and freighter ships. Probably the result of being hit in the head during the crash.

After a few more liberal splashes of water, she rose stiffly, just beginning to notice the effect a bed of rock had on the body. Within a few seconds, she also became aware of the dangers of drinking too much tea and water. Preferring the privacy of the woods to the relative openness of the latrine, she stepped quickly into the trees.

Emerging a short time later, she walked the length of the beach to find Ziki, Chang, Janice, Dirk and Brad gathered around the cold fire pit, talking quietly to

themselves. Most of the other crewmembers were either still asleep, while some had disappeared.

Seeing Adara approach, the group had scrambled respectfully to their feet. Motioning them back to their seats, she crouched down beside Brad.

"Where is everyone?" she asked.

Brad cocked his head toward the trees. "Commander Patrick took a lot of them out hunting again. He said we could use some stasis fields to keep the meat fresh. The rest are out exploring the woods, with permission from him of course," he added quickly at Adara's sudden frown. "There's not much else to do now."

Out of the corner of her eye, Adara caught a slight movement from Dirk. Staring down at the plate in his lap, he was picking disconsolately at his breakfast of fish. Casting her eyes about the group, she noticed that Ziki, seated on the other side of the pit, was eating her own breakfast quickly enough, although she kept her eyes fixed on the meal. Dismissing Dirk's mood as leftover squeamishness, she turned her attention back to Brad.

"Well then, I suppose I'd better put you all to work. This morning we're going to start making some permanent shelters."

"Permanent?" Janice's green eyes went wide with sudden trepidation. "How long do you think we're going to be down here?"

*Maybe forever.* The entire group was looking at her,

waiting for her answer. Looking directly at Janice, she saw the trust implicit in the question. The faith placed in the commanding officer to get them out of a bad situation.

"A few days at least," she said finally. "The attack we were headed to was supposed to be a bad one and it will take at least that long for clean up crews to notice we aren't in the wreckage." Janice nodded, seeing the sense in the analysis. "At any rate, we don't know much about the weather patterns here and I just don't want to be caught unprepared."

"What kind of shelter are you planning, Commander?" Brad asked. "It won't take us that long to put up, will it?"

Adara allowed herself a small smirk at his naiveté. "Long enough. I want something solid." She scanned the forest with a critical eye and pointed to a spot between the latrine and the sleeping area. "We'll start clearing trees over there."

"Uh, clearing them where, Commander?"

"Down, of course. If we're putting something up, something else has to come down. Follow me, I'll show you."

She paced out a large, squarish area of the forest floor and moved one of the more battered Darts to face a tree on the edge of the woods. She modified the laser again and then cut a thick wedge out of the trunk of the tree. Gravity had begun to work before she had even finished

the cut and brought the tree toppling down into the lake, raising a great gout of water into the air.

Within a few minutes, Brad and the rest of the transport crew, all fully awakened by the sound of a crashing tree, gathered around the fallen giant.

"It seems a shame," Ziki said mournfully. "To have to do this, I mean."

Gritting her teeth to prevent herself from shouting about sentimentality, Adara gave her a stern look instead. "We don't have any other options. Trees will eventually grow back. Would you prefer it if I blasted out some holes in the rock instead?"

Shamefaced at the rebuke, Ziki shook her head.

"Fine. Now here's the hard part. You're going to have to drag it out of the way, so I can cut down the rest of them. I suggest you strip the branches off first, like this," she said, turning the Dart to aim a short blast at a spot where a limb joined the trunk. "Set them aside for fire wood."

"How are we supposed to get this thing out of the water?" Brad asked, looking astonished. "It's huge."

"Pull it, push it, kick it or roll it, I don't care. I'll leave that for you to figure out." She paused, searching the crowd. "Chang, you're in charge of notching the logs."

"*What*-ing the logs?"

Getting off her Dart impatiently, Adara drew a rough sketch of a log in the dirt. "Make two notches in either end of the log, here and here." She indicated a spot on the

log. "Make them about this big and make sure they're both on the same side."

"Yes. Commander." Clearly unsure of himself, Chang began looking over the unwieldy tree.

\*

The sun was high in the sky by the time Colm and his hunting party returned again to the camp. He was astounded to find out that it was a now a construction site.

Stopping at the edge of the clearing, he stared open mouthed at the scene. At the other side of the lake, most of the crew members were struggling to lift a thick log a few centimetres off the ground. From where he was, he could hear them chanting, `one . . . two . . . three!', heaving upward on the last beat. They held it there for as long as they could, grunting and straining, while several others jammed anti-grav boards under the wooden mass.

When at last the tree came down with a *whump!* on the boards, a cheer went up and the soldiers bent to pick up the tree again. This time though, more than half of them backed away, while the remainder grabbed a board edge. They lifted the log handily; cautiously though too. They'd learned the consequences of letting the trunk roll on the boards the hard way.

Elsewhere, several people were dragging large branches



away to a growing pile. There they were met by yet another group which was industriously stripping the soft leaves and tender twigs away from the hardwood. Colm smiled to himself; they were looking for softer mattresses than bedrock, no doubt.

Then there was the most curious sight of all: Chang, bent low over a tree trunk, was muttering quietly to himself.

"What are you doing there, Chang?"

Chang straightened to find the source of the question and grinned. "I," he said self-importantly, "am notching logs. Or so I'm told." He pointed to a pile of tree trunks, notches cut to precise right angles and blackened by the heat of a laser beam. "These are going to make the walls of the shelter."

"Is that so?" Colm crouched to inspect the wood, running a hand over the smooth, charred surface. He glanced over at the forest edge, where Adara was flying about the trees like a bee, the gun of the Dart, her stinger. "Those guns are coming in handy today."

"Commander, do you know anything about this stuff? Making stuff out of trees?"

"A little," Colm hid a smile.

"Well," Chang said slowly, "I think I know why we need notches. If we stack the logs on top of each other, the notches will prevent them rolling off and that will make the walls, right?"

"That's the general purpose of notches, yes."

Chang studied the woodpile. "Won't that leave cracks between the logs though? No matter how deep I make the cuts, it will still leave a space."

"If Commander Cohili is planning to build what I think she's planning, then we stuff the cracks with mud."

"Mud?"

"Mud and a few other things," Colm winked. "Don't worry about it. Just notch the logs. You might want to trim them all to the same length too. She'll be very impressed."

Chang grimaced as another tree came crashing to the ground. "I hope so." He looked at Colm with laughter in his eyes. "You'd better not stand around too long," he advised, "or she'll find something for you to do, too."

Colm fingered the hilt of his knife and jerked his head toward the anti-grav board he'd set down by the forest's edge. It was piled high with carcasses. "No problem there," he grumbled good-naturedly.

\*

By nightfall, they were putting the finishing touches on their first cabin. Several people were manhandling half-logs onto the roof beams. Others stuffed the cracks between the logs with a mixture of mud and shredded leaves, while inside, a group of Loaders was busy

scraping and stomping the floor into a hard, flattened surface. Several dozen skins from the forest creatures were stretched out by the fire, to be used to line the walls.

Adara stirred a batch of crack filler and mopped her brow. Her back ached and her fingers were cramped and sore from the continuous stirring. The smell of cooked meat rose from the cooking fires and her stomach growled loudly in response.

There was the sound of approaching footsteps behind her. "Commander?"

Adara turned to face Brad. "What can I do for you, Mr. Manter?"

"Is it okay if we go swimming before we eat? To clean up and cool off, I mean."

Adara cast a sceptical eye over the lake. "Provided there isn't anything there that will bite and you go in a few at a time, fine."

Brad smiled with glee. "Thanks!" With that, he raced off to the lake's edge to pass on the affirmative. A few minutes later, more than a quarter of the camp had stripped naked and plunged into the cold lake waters. Hastily averting her eyes, she decided that the mud needed more mixing.

After ten minutes of yelling and splashing, Colm came over to where she was mercilessly pounding her mix and shook himself dry. "You're not going in?"

She kept her eyes firmly fixed on the gooey mush.

"No," she mumbled.

"Too bad," he said. She could hear him sit on the ground and shake out his morph suit. "The water's great. I feel much better."

She risked a glance. He had his back to her, glistening with water. In the dim light of the sunset, she could make out a large, scarred patch of skin on his left shoulder; probably the result of a bad burn. The rest of arms and back were clear, she could see, as he lifted himself to draw his uniform over his bare-

*Pound, mix, stir.* The stick went around and around in the mud.

Colm finished adjusting his uniform, then turned and bent down to look at Adara's face. She straightened and glared at him defiantly.

He gave her a look of concern. "You all right? You look flushed."

"I'm hot," she told him crossly.

"So go jump in the lake!"

"Later. I want to eat first."

"Silly me. Why didn't you say so? I'll go get us dinner."

"You do that," she muttered at his retreating form. She looked down in disgust at her crack filler. The dirt and leaves were mashed so fine the mix wouldn't do anything more than dribble back out of the walls and onto the floor. She went over the edge of the forest and dumped it unceremoniously at the base of a tree. It landed with a

sickly splat.

Colm handed her a steaming plate of food when she got back. Wordlessly, she nodded her thanks and began eating. They'd nearly finished when he pointed at the shelter with his knife.

"So how many of these things are we going to build?"

"As many as it takes."

"Until what?"

Adara sat her plate down and wiped her hands in the sand. "At this rate, we can get one done every day. In two weeks time, we'll have fourteen completed, which should give everyone enough room and privacy for now. After that, we'll start clearing land for crops and possibly begin mapping and cataloguing the immediate area."

"Good grief! You're really in this for the long haul, aren't you?"

"There's no point wasting time in the hopes we'll be rescued, only to discover we've been forgotten and are suddenly in need of large amounts of food."

"True," he agreed. "Meanwhile it keeps everybody occupied."

"Yes. We'll have to take it one day at a time."

"Does it help? To look at it that way?"

Adara carefully removed the granules of sand from between her fingers. "Sometimes," she said quietly. Colm nodded and turned to watch the swimmers still in the water.

A long, horrible, ear-splitting scream from the forest suddenly shattered the silence between them. Shouts of alarm followed.

"Something's happening at the perimeter," Colm scrambled to his feet and ran in the direction of the scream.

The swimmers, caught unawares, were stepping on each other in their haste to get out. Brad and Dirk were standing on shore, helping people out of the water. "Get them out of there and into the shelter!" she shouted at them. "Form a security group to protect them and the supplies!" Brad signalled his understanding and she ran after Colm.

She followed the sound of stunner fire to the edge of the defence perimeter and halted in shock. A huge, four-legged beast, at least as wide as the cabin they had just built and almost as tall, stood surrounded by soldiers. Covered in glossy black fur, it had massive shoulders and thick legs that ended in a set of wicked, dark claws. Its head was a shaggy mass of blackness, broken only by two gleaming yellow eyes.

Pulling her own stunner from her belt, Adara levelled it at the beast and fired. The bolt sliced through the air, caught the creature square in the face and dissipated over the surface of its body. It shivered once in response and roared in rage. A front leg snaked out, wrapped itself around the closest person - Chang - and flung him

through the air. Chang sailed up and over Adara's head and slammed against a tree trunk. He landed at the base and didn't move again.

"Maximum setting!" shouted Colm, thumbing the controls on his stunner. Crouching, he fired at the beast's head, keeping his finger on the trigger for a continuous beam. Hoping to combine their strength, four more people fired at the same spot. The thing roared again, so loud that the trees and ground seemed to shake. It pulled into itself, bunched the muscles of its hind legs and sprang into the air toward Adara . . .

... and vanished. Whirling, stunner at the ready, she searched the trees branches above, thinking it had somehow found a series of branches strong enough to support it.

"Where the hell did it go?" she demanded. The others looked fearfully around them and shook their heads. An eerie quiet descended around them.

"Grab whoever's been hurt and get them to the camp," Colm barked. "Get some more Darts out-"

There was a rending crash behind Adara. She spun around and fired blindly into bush. For a split second, from the darkness, the yellow eyes glared out balefully at them, as it stood unmoving.

Then it lowered its head and charged.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE**

It smashed through the trees and thundered toward them. Its claws bit deeply into the ground, churning up the dirt and tree roots like they were soft butter. As it rumbled through, it struck out once, twice, sending several more people headfirst into the forest. Adara dove out of its way just in time, rolling into a dense thicket, out of the creature's path. Colm was not so lucky.

Unable to manoeuvre fast enough as the ground shifted beneath him, Colm caught the full brunt of the beast's charge as it slammed its head into Colm's stomach. The momentum lifted him off his feet, flattening him against the thing's skull as it pummelled its way through the group. Gaining speed, it collided headfirst with a tree, crushing Colm. Then it vanished again, leaving him to collapse weakly onto the forest floor.

Cursing, Adara struggled to pull herself out of the tangle of branches. "Where are the perimeter Darts?" she yelled, squinting through the night. "We need lasers here!"



The beast reappeared, back where it had begun its charge. Its sides heaved and it shook violently, spasms racing through its body. All they had done was make it mad.

It seemed to gather itself again and Adara braced herself for another charge. But instead of running, it raised itself onto its hind legs to tower above them. Lowering its head, it opened its mouth wide and roared.

This time, the ground and trees did shake. The dirt directly in front of the thing seemed to explode, sending clods of earth everywhere. The beast came down on its front paws and roared again, louder this time. It held the sound, turning its head slowly, directing the terrifying noise like a beam of destruction. Everywhere it turned, great chunks were ripped out of the ground. Trees cracked and splintered. A maelstrom of wood and debris filled the air.

The sound intensified and the shock waves spread out from the beast, lifting Adara off her feet and into the air. She landed on her back, away from the beast. Trying to ignore the pain that screamed its way through the muscles of her back, she rolled and tried to crawl away. Over the howl of the beast, she heard the sound of breaking wood and looked up in time to see a tree snap in half and fall toward her. It landed heavily on her legs, the crown of branches pinning down her upper body, shoulders and arms. Her stunner was knocked out of her

hand. She was trapped.

Pieces of wood and dirt continued to rain down as the beast advanced through the forest. Through the din, Adara could hear fitful stunner blasts crackle through the air. The beast didn't hesitate for a second. Trees crumpled under the assault, the earth rumbled in agony and the crew members were tossed like rag dolls and dashed against the ground.

Suddenly, there was the buzz of Darts overhead and the vocalization of the beast changed from a destructive force to a shriek of agony. Laser beams sizzled into its black fur, raising the stench of burnt flesh and hair. It swung wildly at its attackers, its fury now tinged with fear. It stood on its hind legs, slashing and staggering under the assault.

Keeping their distance, the Dart riders fired again and again, blasting away at its head and body, until finally it toppled forward and crashed into the ground. The riders shot it several more times before silencing their weapons.

The sudden quiet pounded into Adara's ears. She struggled futilely to get loose, but was forced to collapse under the weight of the wood. In the clearing where the beast lay, she could hear someone issuing orders and asking questions. It was several minutes before she was found.

"Commander? Commander Cohili?"

"Over here Ziki. Bring a Dart."

Ziki issued the necessary order and then followed the sound of Adara's voice to find her. She knelt down beside her commanding officer, a look of concern on her face.

"Are you injured?"

"Not seriously. Get this thing off me," Adara said. "What's going on?"

"I assumed both you and Commander Patrick had been incapacitated, so I sounded a retreat back to the campsite. I've got people combing through the area to pick up the wounded and I've got all Dart riders in the air."

Adara grunted as the Dart rider latched onto the tree branch and pulled it up. Wincing as her back spasmed, Adara nodded at the beast. "Check that thing. I want it thoroughly dead. Then I want to know what happened to our defence perimeter."

"You should get checked out by the med staff, Commander."

"I intend to, as soon as I find out what went wrong. Let's get back to the camp."

Steeling herself against the pain a brisk walk would create, Adara marched back to the lakeside. The medical staff had already set up a makeshift hospital and were busy treating the injured as they were brought in. Colm was there, leaning over painfully so the medic could scan him properly. Seeing him, some tension Adara hadn't been aware of drained away. He stood up slowly as she approached.

"You're okay?" he asked hoarsely.

She looked him over. The back of his head was matted with blood and he was holding himself awkwardly, his arms away from his sides. "Better than you, by the looks of it."

He smiled weakly and turning, lifted an arm to expose his ribs. The oxide plating of his body armour had split and crumbled in a thin band that extended from his underarm to his waist. "Having an exoskeleton is very handy at times. It's the same on the other side. I feel like a squashed bug. I'm glad I had it on."

"Have you had it checked out?"

"Six cracked ribs, a mild concussion and a bruised kidney. Nothing that can't wait until after the more serious cases are handled."

Just then, Dirk was brought to the campsite, stretched out on an anti-grav board. He was conscious, although obviously in a lot of pain. As they carried him past Adara, he waved at his escorts to stop.

"Commander," he called out. He tried to sit up, but she pushed him firmly back down on the board. "I have to make my report," he protested.

"Then make it horizontally," she said. "You were on the perimeter this shift, weren't you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"What happened? How did that thing manage to get so close?"

"I don't know. I was at my station, just back from a quick flight, when I heard noises. Nothing was showing up on my scanner, so I had to track it by ear. When I heard the scream, I decided to leave my post. I found the thing- ah!" A medic was gently probing Dirk's knee. "I found the thing about fifty meters outside our line. It looked like it had surprised a rider coming back from a patrol. I fired once, but I don't think I hit it. I -I had to aim manually and it was dark and I couldn't see what I was firing at so-

"That's fine, Dirk," Adara soothed. "Then what happened?"

"Then it swatted me out of the sky," Dirk grinned half-heartedly. "That's the last thing I knew."

"Did you signal the other perimeter guards before you left your post?"

"Of course, Commander."

Adara turned to face the Dart riders who had just returned from the site of the melee. "What took you so long to show up?" she demanded.

An older woman, a member of Colm's team, made the report. "We couldn't find the source of the distress call with our scanners. We knew it had to be near Dirk's post since he'd just left, but we didn't know where. We tried to listen for a disturbance, but it kept shifting. Twice it sounded like it was coming from the opposite side of the lake."

"When it disappeared, maybe?" Colm suggested. "Perhaps it can zap around the area quickly."

"Could be," the woman agreed. "Whatever the case, we couldn't be sure of the location until it started howling."

Adara looked from the guards to Dirk and back again. "You mean to tell me we can't detect these things at all until they're right on top of us?"

"That's right," the woman answered. "Even now, our sensors aren't picking up any signs of the body."

*Which means there could be hundreds of them wandering around, just waiting to stumble onto our campsite,* Adara thought to herself. Her stomach tightened. "You," she pointed at Brad, "are in charge of finding a way of reconfiguring the sensors to see those things. The rest of you pull in the defence wall to surround the cabin. Obviously we're going to have to stick closer and remain in visual contact. Move the injured inside right away."

The guards dispersed and the medics began shifting the hospital inside. One of them stayed behind and drew Adara away from the crowd of people. There were tears in her eyes.

"You have a report for me?" Adara asked.

"Yes, ma'am. We have several cases of broken bones, four concussions and eight with serious internal wounds. We can probably help all of them, except-" Her voice broke and she drew a deep breath to compose herself.

"Except Janice Scader. It looks like she was the rider the beast found first. She's been badly mauled."

"Through the body armour?!"

"There isn't much left of her suit, Commander."

Adara groaned inwardly, thinking of how strong the beast would have to be to rip through the hard shell of the suit. Even so . . .

"Surely you can patch her up sufficiently? Karaash wounds are vicious enough."

The medic shook her head sadly. "That's not all of it. If it were, we could save her. Commander, she's been poisoned."

"You mean that thing is venomous as well?"

"Yes and it's one we've never come across before. I can't isolate it. If I had access to the computers on board the *Mat*, or even a regular robomed . . ." She trailed off, looking helpless.

"Has anyone else been affected? Does anyone else know about this?"

"It doesn't appear to have poisoned anyone else. I'm the only one who knows what the true problem is."

"How long?"

The medic shrugged. "She has half an hour. An hour at best. It is attacking her central nervous system and it's spreading too fast."

"Stasis?"

The medic looked miserable. "We have stasis on her

now, Commander. It's holding her wounds together, but it's not going to stop the venom."

Adara squared her shoulders. "Take her out to a secluded area away from here and make her comfortable. Don't mention the venom to the others, we don't need a panic. If they ask, just tell them we didn't find her in time."

"Commander, someone should be with her. She shouldn't die alone." The tears welled up again. "I hate not being able to help her."

Adara looked the medic in the eye. "She'll die alone no matter what we do, 88th. However, I will be with her in a moment." She turned to go and then paused. "You did the best you could under the circumstances."

"Thank you, Commander."

Adara went into the cabin to find Colm. "Are you able to be in command alone?"

Colm glanced at the medic who was treating him and received a nod. "Apparently." He gave her a searching look. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said shortly. "I'll return in a little while. I suggest you keep the riders on high alert. Get everybody into full armour and head gear and keep them that way."

Leaving him before he could protest further, Adara took a spare Dart, for protection, into the woods. She found the medic kneeling beside Janice's body. A small light from her kit illuminated the area.



The sight of Janice was a shock. Her once clear face was a mass of purple contusions, the left side badly swollen and bleeding. Her eyes were glassy. Her forearms were locked in an upright position, quivering, fingers curled as though she were still trying to push off the beast that mauled her. The front of her suit was in tatters and the flesh of her chest and abdomen was unrecognizable. A stasis field hummed quietly, clearly the only thing preventing the mound of bloody organs and tissue from slipping apart.

Adara sat on the ground beside her, gasping as her back adjusted to the new position. The medic moved to administer a drug to her dying patient.

"W-wait," Janice whispered. The medic stopped in mid-motion. Janice, who had been staring fixedly at the sky, flicked her eyes over to look at Adara. "C-commander? Am I going to die? Is that why I'm here?"

Adara looked down into pain-glazed eyes that seemed to pierce her to the core and knew she couldn't lie. "Yes," she said simply.

"Then . . . save it," she rasped. "Use the drugs on someone else."

The medic looked at Adara who nodded. "Thank you 88th. You can go now."

Reluctantly, the medic packed her kit and walked slowly away. Janice waited until she was gone before speaking again. "Thank y-you Commander."

"For what?"

"For being here. For not letting the others see me like this."

Adara nodded, not knowing what else to say. Janice eyes turned to the sky again and she stayed that way for a time, her breath gurgling in her chest. The forest was silent all around them.

Janice gave a violent twitch and sucked in the air. "My legs," she gasped.

"What is it?" Adara said.

"They're . . . they're on fire."

The poison was starting to take effect, faster than expected. Adara hoped it would be swift. "Are you sure you don't want anything?"

Janice jerked her head sharply from side to side, fighting the pain. "No. You may need it for others." The muscles in her legs were beginning to tremble, ever so slightly. "Commander? What will you tell my family?"

Her family. Adara closed her eyes briefly, looking for strength. "That you gave your life defending your friends and your unit."

A look of relief passed over her face, which quickly contorted again. "I - unh!" Another violent twitch. "I have four sisters," she said trying to smile. "Six nieces and four nephews. Another on the way, too, I hear."

The legs were beginning to shake harder. Janice emitted a low groan, fighting the convulsions. "It hurts, it hurts,"

she said, tears beginning to seep out between her swollen eyelids. "It burns -ohh!" The twitch rolled through her whole body. "Commander," she wailed, "hold me. The pain. It's spreading, hold me."

Adara leaned over the body, bracing herself with one arm. She grasped Janice's hand, pulled the arm tightly to her own armour-bound chest. "Easy," she said. "Go easy."

"My chest is burning, it's hot," Janice panted. "Ice and fire, both at once." The legs kicked and her hips bucked upward. "Ice and fire, ice and fire." She bucked again, bringing her knees up hard into Adara's side. Adara fought to hold the body down without disturbing the stasis field devices.

"I wanted-" Janice was saying, "I wanted to make it safe for my family." The convulsions reached her upper body. "Don't tell them how I die-" The last word broke off into a high-pitched scream. The whole body twisted in agony, shuddering as the poison swept through the rest of the bloodstream. When the screaming stopped, it was replaced with wracking sobs, which were broken by more screams. Janice's heels dug deep trenches in the dirt and her hand wrapped around Adara's, nearly crushing it with the force of the grip. Wave after wave of convulsions took the body.

The poison, once through the entire body, took its time to finish the task it started. Janice heaved and thrashed,

punctuating each fresh pain with a shriek. Adara stayed with her as she writhed her way through death's gate, struggling to maintain her hold, until the moment Janice Scader's soul fled her eyes.

The screaming subsided into merciful silence. It was a long time before Adara could move.

Finally, trembling with exhaustion, she gently pried her hand loose and pulled the eyelids down to mask the vacancy of Janice's face. She arranged the body into a restful position and then readjusted the stasis fields so they enveloped the entire corpse. Activating the anti-grav board, she towed it over to her Dart and hooked it up to the back. Moving swiftly and methodically in the night air, she flew to the crash site and deposited the body in the submerged transport. She barricaded the wreck to keep the animals out.

By the time she returned to the camp, almost everyone was trying to sleep. The wounded and anyone else who could fit were inside the cabin, while the rest were huddled around the base of the walls. The Dart riders maintained a tense watch, their eyes constantly scanning the now fearsome forest. Colm was waiting for her at the edge of the clearing. Adara walked up beside him and stopped, not looking at him.

"Is she gone?" he asked.

Adara didn't bother asking how he knew. Her jaw worked; her mouth tasted of death. It seemed like she'd

been tasting it forever. "Yes."

He made as though to put a hand on her shoulder, but she shrugged him off and walked toward the lake, circling over to the spot where she'd slept the night before. She sat on the bedrock and stared out over the water, her eyes as unseeing as Janice's had been.

She now understood why Colm's comments about being a commanding officer had bothered her the day before. *It's bad enough to have to be strong enough for one person*, she thought, shivering in the cold night air.

*Must I be strong for everyone else too?*

\*

When morning arrived, dark grey clouds obscured the dawn. The sombre setting cast a pall over the mood of the campsite, as the deaths - another crewmember had died quietly in the night - and the seriousness of their predicament caught up with them.

Adara and Colm put them to work early, driving them hard to keep them busy. They finished their second and third cabins near dusk, just as the rain started. They skipped supper and huddled inside the relative safety of the new structures, letting the monotonous sound of water drumming on the roof lull them into morose silence.

Outside, the rain pattered on Adara's armour. She was

sitting on a Dart, tinkering with the sensory controls. A leg from the howler beast was stretched out in the mud before her. As she bent to adjust the lower half of the Dart, someone sighed into the open comm link.

"What are you doing out here?"

"I should think that would be obvious, Commander Patrick," Adara replied without looking up.

He stood over her, his fists on his hips. "I just spent ten minutes looking for you. Why are you out here? It's not even your shift!"

Adara tapped the front console of the Dart and attempted to scan for the howler beast. The computer sounded the negative response. "There's nothing to do in there, Commander. I thought I'd attempt to reconfigure the scans."

"You already instructed Brad to do that. He's tried everything in the book and then some."

"There is an outside chance he may have missed something."

"Well you can put that aside. You just spent all day hauling trees about and you need a break."

"Thank you for your concern, Mr. Patrick, however that is none of your affair."

Colm muttered something nasty under his breath. He decided to change the subject. "What have you done to Dirk and Ziki?"

Adara stopped her work long enough to face Colm.

"Nothing that I am aware of."

"Dirk is still recovering from his injuries and she hasn't been to see him once."

"Perhaps she's been busy. So what?"

"She hasn't been busy at all. She's been sulking in a corner of the cabin all night. I spoke to her and she told me that she couldn't be idling over one person when the Karaash were busy killing thousands."

She shrugged. "Sounds like a perfectly reasonable statement to me."

"I thought you'd see it that way," Colm said accusingly. "In fact, that sounds exactly like something you'd say."

Adara bristled. "Contrary to what you seem to think, Commander Patrick, I did not say anything to either Ziki or Dirk about their relationship. I do not make it my business, unlike some people I could name, to poke my nose into other people's affairs!"

"Well you must have said something! Both of them are miserable and we both know how good you are at making people close to-" Colm stopped himself and drew in a steadying breath. "Look," he grated, "whether you said anything directly or not, somewhere along the line she got the impression you disapproved of her relationship. She respects you a great deal and has broken her ties with him for your benefit."

"That's ridiculous. I refuse to believe she's left him just to impress me."

Colm smacked his hand against his helmeted forehead in exasperation. "These people are prepared to follow you to their deaths, or hadn't you noticed? Of course she's trying to impress you. What you say and do has an influence on everyone under you."

An image of Janice Scader's trusting face flashed through her mind. A sense of gloom that she had been fighting all day descended heavily on her shoulders. "This is one of those Command things again, isn't it?"

"Yes. I'm afraid it is."

Adara got down off the Dart, struggling with herself. It wasn't enough that she had to live within the confines of an underfunded, slapped-together coalition. That she had to make command decisions that could result in the deaths of all her team-mates. That she had to face her own death on every flight. Now she had to watch all her own actions and words for fear of trampling on their emotions as well. "I suppose my checking the scan configuration is a bad idea then?"

Colm considered it. "Brad might think you don't trust his abilities."

Adara gave the howler beast leg a vicious kick and then reigned herself in. Colm could see the unresolved tension in her body, in the way she held herself upright and knew that she must be thinking about Janice. He hated himself for having to do this. "Look, I'm sorry for saying what I-

"Stop doing that," Adara snarled. "There is no reason



for you to be sorry for advising me on matters of command."

"You think that's all I'm doing here? Advising you on a command situation?"

"That's all you could possibly be doing," Adara said, with more than a hint of warning in her voice.

"I'm trying to help you," Colm snapped. "You don't have to do everything all alone you know. You don't have to shut everybody out."

Adara drew herself rigidly to attention. "Still trying to batter down those walls, Commander Patrick? I thought I'd made myself clear about them."

"Perhaps I like a challenge."

"Then perhaps you'd better look elsewhere. In the meantime, I have to talk to one of my people."

"Save it for later," Colm said. "I was just readjusting our beacon to include information about the howler beasts when I received a return signal from *Mat-1*. I came here to tell you we'll be out of here within an hour."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"This way, Commander, if you please."

Teshwa Zig stepped out into the docking bay and blinked in the brighter light. The senior officers of *Bir-Bir-5* were waiting patiently for her, ready to escort her to the meeting hall. If everyone in High Command had arrived according to schedule, she would be the last one to come aboard.

She looked around the bay and frowned. There was a new aura of suspicion and tension in ISR. There were armed guards posted at every exit of the bay and while most of the soldiers on board the vessel appeared at ease in their black suits, the guards stood stiffly in full armour. As she stepped away from the ship and into the corridor, an escort fell into step behind her and the other officers.

The new security measures infuriated her. She appreciated the need for ensuring the physical safety of High Command, but she was also keenly aware of the psychological damage such a move created. ISR had always been an organization on the defensive, against the

Interplanetary Union, the Karaash and now, the prying eyes of the public. Combine those factors, the sudden heightening of security, along with the rumours of sabotage and treason that had been humming along the private communication links lately and you created an organization that felt very insecure. Insecure organizations had a history of falling apart when crisis struck.

Sabotage. Treason. There was no doubt about it, somebody somewhere was leaking information. No sooner had the BT's from the *Mat* fleet gone out on a rescue, then news of the incident had been flashed over the nets. The stories weren't precisely accurate; the numbers of people and equipment involved were incorrect, but that wasn't the point.

Teshwa tried to clear her mind and stepped past another door and another set of guards into the meeting room. Her escort stayed outside and the door sealed shut behind her.

Marsalis Marselei looked up from a datapad at her arrival and smiled thinly. "Commander Zig," he said formally and then did a swift head count in the room. She was indeed the last to arrive. "Please be seated," he said.

Teshwa found a chair and looked carefully at the faces of her fellow officers. They were all tense and tired. Jane Kilady looked ruffled, a difficult thing to do in hard silver armour, but there was no other way to describe it.

Bine Flayder flicked his eyes from Marsalis to his own pad; Teshwa knew he had four ships currently engaged in a nearby system and that it was not going well. Michael Hamilton sat glumly in his own chair, his hands steepled before his face, his eyes brooding. The others were just as morose. The silence hung over the room like a thundercloud.

Marsalis rose, holding his pad loosely in one hand. His eyes swept the gathering and came to rest on Teshwa, who stiffened. "Commander Zig," he began, "I understand from what I read here that your people have found one of the BT's that went down."

Teshwa regarded him warily, sensing anger underneath his smoothly diplomatic exterior and wondered what he was leading up to. She had sent him the private dispatch herself, earlier this morning, when she had received word on the discovery. "That is correct, Commander," she replied.

Marsalis appeared to reread the contents of the pad. "It says here that nearly half the crew aboard perished," he said. "Only four of those were in the initial crash. The rest died due to, apparently, incompetence."

Moving deliberately, Teshwa thumbed a button on her pad and reviewed the message she had sent. "That's not right," she said with a sinking heart, "Only four died. Two in the crash and two as the result of hostile action on the moon surface."

"I see," Marsalis murmured. "I am misinformed then. Would you care to know, Commander Zig, where I got this information?"

Teshwa knew exactly where the information was from, but played the game anyway. "Yes Commander, I would."

"Well," he said slowly, "I read this in my net scan packet this morning over breakfast." His voice rose sharply. "In fact, I read it precisely eight minutes and thirty-seven seconds before your dispatch arrived on my comm link!" he shouted. He smashed the datapad down on the desk. The casing shattered completely. Michael, sitting beside Marsalis, flinched at the sudden violence.

"In the past four days alone, I've picked up twenty-six separate stories on our activities. *All* of our activities. I've been forced to admit to the Interplanetary Union that we've been using armed Darts against their wishes. I've been forced to renegotiate nearly half the contracts we have with the members of the Union, just to try and keep them in it! I've been stonewalled in every attempt I've made to find the blasted leaks and what's worse is that now I'm getting Net garbage before I'm getting the legitimate reports from my own people!"

He placed his hands behind his back and clenched them together tightly. "To top it off, it appears that Karaash attacks on local systems have almost doubled in the same time." He dropped his voice to allow the full implication

of what he was about to say sink in. "It's almost as if they are reading this stuff too and know exactly what kind of mess we're in."

Jane Kilady groaned and put her head in her hands. Teshwa didn't react, as a similar thought had occurred to her when the first leak appeared. "Tirades aside," she said dryly, trying to cut into the melodramatics to ease the tension, "what precisely is this meeting for? None of this is new information."

Marsalis' eyes flashed, but he spoke calmly enough. "Tirades is it? Perhaps it's just as well you won't make 1st Class then. You'd never be able to handle the Union."

Teshwa let the insult pass and merely regarded him with raised eyebrows. Marsalis continued. "The agenda for today includes several items, most of them distasteful I think, but necessary." He sighed wearily, letting them see precisely how tired he was. "If there is a positive side to any of this, it is the fact that this entire episode has me convinced that this organization is going to have to go ahead on its own."

2nd Classer Loysa lifted his eyes as though in prayer. "Thank Nemenath for that."

Marsalis glared. "It has recently become clear," he said, with special emphasis, "that there will never be enough of a consensus within the Union to be able to turn ISR into anything resembling an effective defence against the Karaash, much less a way to eradicate the threat. Most of

the pacifist factions have banned instruments of war from their homeworld and refuse to have anything to do with something that is even remotely war-like. A lot of them haven't experienced violence in centuries; they simply don't comprehend what they're up against."

"Obviously," Loysa said.

Marsalis ignored him. "The other factions are afraid that ISR will become an agent of their enemies and that when the threat has passed, they'll become victims of their own 'generosity.' Those that aren't paranoid, don't understand the Karaash. The Karaash don't fight on terms we are used to. We're used to fighting for secret knowledge and economic gain. The Karaash appear uninterested in either, in fact they don't even seem to want territory. Our methods involve thinking, strategy and technology. The Karaash use brute force. Their methods involve death. That's simply incomprehensible."

He sat down heavily in his chair and rubbed his eyes. "Throw in the fact that no one trusts anyone else and that all past attempts at planetary unification have failed . . . " He gestured helplessly, bitterly. "There is just not enough cohesion there to do what's necessary."

Teshwa felt a twinge of sympathy for the embattled Marsalis. It had been one of his mother's greatest desires to see the Union succeed and become the driving force behind ISR. She had often expressed the hope that whatever group they could cobble together to fight the

Karaash would stay together and perhaps change this section of the universe, at least a little. To give up on that dream must have been a wrenching decision.

Indeed, the decision, now admitted out loud, seemed to press down on him. He spoke in quiet tones. "The new Dart units are officially known as OSTD's. On-Scene Tactical and Diversionary. You can thank Michael for the name."

Michael made a wry face. "They like initials, I give them initials."

"Didn't they want to know how we got sufficient funding together to construct the Darts and weaponry in the first place?" Loysa asked.

"Myself and the rest of the 1st's managed to convince them that some recent additions to the Union provided the extra materials." He laughed. "Until yesterday, there weren't any additions to the Union, but they're so incredibly secretive with each other, they haven't figured that out yet."

"You said we're going ahead on our own," said Bine Flayder, keeping one eye on his pad. "What's next?"

Marsalis chose his next words carefully. "High Command takes on a new role."

Sarcasm dripped from Jane Kilady's voice. "You mean besides dancing with Union, fighting the Karaash and managing a force of how many thousand life forms?"

The humour was not lost on Marsalis. "I know you've



all been bored lately," he replied and there was gentle laughter in the room. Some of the tension dissipated. "I'd like to propose to you the formation of a new division. Directly, it will be made up by those of us in this room. As you know, I consider members of High Command above suspicion regarding the leak situation. "Teshwa smirked. Although she was not a communications expert, she knew enough to get by. In her own leak investigations, she discovered they were monitoring her messages, so she knew full well that High Command wasn't *that* far above suspicion.

"Indirectly," Marsalis was saying, "it will involve those already in the OSTD's and the research facilities. The separate and completely secret department would be known as Intelligence and Armament Development."

"What would be our role?" Teshwa asked.

"First, we would require each fleet commander to squeeze every possible atom of extra material out of their ships. To continue `realigning' the damage assessment figures. We will divert the surplus to developing better arms and defensive systems. More of what we've been doing to create the OSTD's in the first place."

"That takes care of the Armament part," Teshwa said. "What about the Intelligence?"

"There are two aspects. One deals with gathering intelligence on the Karaash." Marsalis stabbed the table with a finger for emphasis. "We have *got* to start getting

a handle on these things."

"Respectfully, Commander Marselei," Loysa began, "we've already run all our available Karaash data through the gamut of examinations."

Marsalis pounced on the word. "Available, yes. It's time to start taking risks. We have to go looking for information. We have some new material through luck, or through the initiative of our front line people. But we've got to give them permission to be more aggressive. That means following the Karaash after an attack, taking prisoners if necessary. It means tapping into the information the members of the Union have on the Karaash and haven't been passing on to us."

There was a collective gasp. "You mean we're going to start investigating the Union?" Jane looked astonished at the prospect.

"The time has come," Marsalis replied simply.

Teshwa looked at him with newfound respect. He had taken his time to come around, but now that he had, he was going into it full bore. Still, she was concerned. "All very well and good," she said, "but how are we going to keep this a secret? If you think the Union is angry about the Darts, wait until they find out we've been checking on them."

Marsalis grimaced. "That's the second aspect. I can see no other alternative. We're going to have to bring in Netters." There was a general sound of distaste from the

officers.

Netters were an unsavoury bunch, experts in information technology, often hired by oppressive regimes to help ensure that net links were configured according to the government's desires. "With your permission, I'd like to bring one in. I'm told his group is the best there is."

Loysa stood up, breathing pouches quivering with sudden fury. "You've gone ahead and contacted one before consulting us? Do you have any idea what this kind of subterfuge will cost us if the Union finds out? ISR will be completely and utterly destroyed."

"Perhaps you should have thought of that earlier, 2nd Classer," Marsalis said coldly, "when you voted to create the OSTD's in the first place."

Loysa cast about the room for outraged support. The other officers avoided his eyes. Unhappy as they were, they too could see no other alternative. "Let the record show, then, that I am vigorously protesting this state of affairs."

"There are no records anymore," Marsalis said tiredly. "As far as I'm concerned, this meeting never took place. Is that understood?" Loysa subsided into his chair, still full of impotent anger.

Seeing that Loysa had no further comments to make, Marsalis motioned at the door. "Michael, please show Drachva in, please."

A tall, gaunt figure walked into the room. Humanoid in form, his face was thin and long, his cheeks sunken and shadowy. The ears were abnormally long, so much so that the lobes extended almost to the level of his chin. His severely dark hair and loose-fitting clothing contrasted sharply with the pasty white complexion of a being that spent too much time in dark places. He wore an expression of boredom and disdain, but the black eyes missed nothing as he glided to a chair.

"Good day," Marsalis greeted the guest. "Thank you for coming on such short notice." Not sure of how to begin, he appeared discomfited. "It appears we have a problem."

"Of course you do," Drachva pressed his thin lips together into something resembling a smile. His voice was cold, sibilant and slow. "What precisely do you want done about the stories?"

"You know about them?"

Drachva gave a self-depreciating shrug. "It is my business to know. I have been expecting your call."

"I see." Marsalis pursed his lips and looked at his officers. "Well then. We want them stopped."

Drachva emitted a soft, insidious chuckle. "As simple as that?"

"Perhaps you could trace the stories back to their origin," Jane said. "Follow them back through their distribution points."

"That would have worked, a hundred years ago,"

Drachva replied. "Since then NetFilers have become extremely adept at what they do." Again, the soft laughter. "Bigger and much . . . much more powerful organizations than you have tried repression in the past."

"We're not `repressing' anything," Jane said indignantly. "We're doing this for a good reason."

The gaunt figure inclined his head, dark eyes amused. "So they all tell me."

Jane was about to reply, but Marsalis waved her down. "Then tell us our options."

Drachva folded his hands neatly into his lap. "Let me give you a brief lesson. A NetFiler is someone . . . or something . . . who lives by recording the lives of other people. A parasite of sorts . . . its survival depends on how interesting it can make those recordings. It is paid by the NetMinders, in whatever fashion, according to the number of times its particular version of events is accessed. Therefore, it will stop at nothing to get each story. It will twist it according to its own needs and will do everything to ensure that the story stays accessible. That is what makes my life so . . . interesting."

"So what can you do?" Marsalis asked.

"Given time," Drachva paused, "and the proper resources, I can find the original Filer and . . . how shall I say this?... silence it."

"Can't you just bring `it' to us? Let us deal with it?"

Drachva made an indifferent gesture. "That would not

be nearly so effective or . . . enjoyable. But we could arrange it."

"You said 'original Filer,'" Teshwa noted. "What do you mean by that?"

"There are even more parasitic beings around who will simply copy a particular recording, alter it and refile it. I can do nothing about those, however, normally when the original has gone . . . quiet, the rest look for easier prey." He leaned forward, looking intense. "Likewise, I cannot do anything about your little leak . . . without a mandate."

Marsalis suppressed a shudder. "Thank you, but I believe we'll handle that part ourselves."

Drachva shrugged, but looked vaguely disappointed. "No matter."

No one else appeared to have any questions. Drachva rose. "Obviously you will need a moment or two to discuss this." He gestured toward Marsalis. "He has a list of my . . . requirements for services rendered." He glided through the door and was gone.

"This stinks," Loysa snapped.

Marsalis nodded in agreement. "So do the Karaash."

\*

Colm flinched at Adara's cold and brutal tones. Her words were sharp and hard and each one cut into him like a knife.

They were in a private conference room, just the two of them. Adara was standing in front of the holoviewer in the at-ease position, although there was nothing easeful about her stance. Colm stood behind and to the right of her. Together, they faced the images of Janice Scader's grief-stricken parents.

Colm had insisted on being here, to stand with Adara as she broke the news to Janice's parents. Officially, he had told her that it was because he had been on the mission and was the other senior officer in charge. Privately, it was because he did not want Adara to face this alone. He had done himself once, on the *Sargentus* and he knew what a heart-wrenching and soul-searing experience it could be.

He stared at the sobbing form of Janice's father and knew an intense grief of his own. Adara had not spoken with him since they had been rescued and the tension between them in this room was a palpable entity, a wall that stood between them. Her face was a smooth mask, but he had studied it long enough to be able to detect the signs of conflict underneath the surface. She was railing against this task with every fibre of her being and yet she would not, could not, come to him for comfort and solace.

His grief turned inward into depression. Perhaps he had pushed too hard, he thought. Perhaps he was letting his own desires interfere with his judgement. He looked at

her. She was beautiful and yet she did not know it. She was intelligent, although she tried to hide it. She was exactly the kind of inquisitive, capable person he had been searching for since his escape from his homeworld. Her personality ensnared him. But as surely as his need for her trapped him, to be with her, she was caught in a crippling emotional net of her own making.

"Tell me Commander Cohili," Janice's mother was saying, her eyes sparkling with unshed tears. "Tell me how she died. Please."

Was it possible for Adara to stand any straighter? Colm wondered. He tried to offer silent sympathy to the anguished parents through the holographic transmission. He was relieved that at least Janice's mother seemed to be taking strength from Adara's stern and stoic demeanour.

"A large beast attacked us," Adara replied, hesitating only for a second. "Your daughter was the first to discover the creature, which struck her in the head. She died instantly. She never knew what happened."

The woman allowed herself a little smile of hope. "Then she did not suffer?"

"No."

Colm saw through the lie and was grateful for it. He had spoken to the medic that had treated Janice and knew exactly what had happened. But they would repair the body before they sent it home. Some things were better left unsaid.



Adara spoke with the parents for a few minutes longer and then ended the connection. She turned, away from Colm and left the room. The waves of anger she left in her wake washed over him and enveloped him completely in the silence.

\*

The dark figure blinked as he stepped through the doorway and the lights in the tiny cargo bay flooded the room.

"Comptrol," he muttered, "cut the lights."

"Warning," the computer responded, "traversing an occupied room in less than regulated illumination will-"

"*Cut the lights!*" he snarled. The computer complied and the room abruptly went dark. He stepped away from the door, letting it seal behind him to cut off any light from the corridor. He stood there for a moment, letting his eyes adjust.

The cargo bay was almost empty. He had chosen this bay for many reasons, not the least of which had to do with its location. Tucked away in a rear portion of the *Mat-1* underbelly, visitors to this area of the ship were rare. The lights in the corridor leading to it came on at only half the normal intensity, to save on energy.

The contents of the loading containers were important too. Shuffling his feet so as not to trip over anything, the

figure moved to a container and pulled out a small device with a gloved hand. He had taken particular pains with that brand new glove earlier, pulling it on gently and then running it and the rest of his fully armoured body through a light radiation bath. There would be no traces of his organic material anywhere on the outside of his suit. He had even rearranged the rank insignia on his chest; although no one had seen him on his way down here, he was not about to take any chances.

He turned on the device, a portable transceiver and as it cycled through its start up diagnostics, he pulled another item from his belt and affixed it to his throat. When he was ready, he keyed in a code on the transmitter and waited for a response.

He didn't have to wait long. A full-length image of a man shimmered into being before him. He had flaming red hair and penetrating green eyes. He was slim and tall and he had a wary look about him. Once his image had stabilized, the man gave the dark figure a sardonic smile.

"Well, well," he said. "If it isn't my friend from the dark rooms of ISR. What can I do for you today?"

When the dark figure spoke, his voice was strangely different from before, almost garbled sounding. "I have some new information for you. I have intercepted new directions from High Command. Only the ship's commanding officer knows about it at this point."

The red-haired man appeared to search the figure up and

down, his eyes coming to rest on his throat. "I do so love that voice modulator of yours," he chuckled. "Are you sure you aren't willing to part with it? I'm willing to pay you very well for it."

"The answer is still no. I cannot afford to have a ship's computer alter my voice, as it will keep the original print. The voice it changes has to be scrambled once already. You know that."

The red-haired man sighed as though grievously wounded. "Too bad. That little device has an antique value like you wouldn't believe." He made some motions in the air; presumably he was entering his own instructions on his communications device. "Same format as last time?"

"Yes," the dark man replied. He touched a button on his transceiver. It would, he knew, search for a data packet he had loaded into another computer in another remote cargo bay on the ship. In the space of a heartbeat, it would retrieve it, send it to the red-haired man and erase all traces of its existence on *Mat-1*.

The man nodded. "Received. One hundred percent accuracy," he noted. "Now then, as for payment . . ."

"Don't mess with me. I told you I don't want to be paid."

The red-haired man held up both hands in surrender. "I'm just protecting myself," he explained. "I have to ask every time and get the denial every time, on the record. If the terms of the contract suddenly change. It wouldn't be

the first time you know." He regarded the armoured man with interest. "Although this time I'm going to vary the routine. My curiosity has gotten the better of me, you see. I'd really like to know why you're doing this. I mean, you could be getting just about anything for this kind of juice, but-" He let the sentence trail off into a question.

The figure in the cargo bay was getting impatient to close the transmission. "Let's just say I want to have things done my way from now on," he snapped. "Without any interference from that woman. That's all the payment I need." He moved to shut off the device. "Anything further?" The red-haired man shook his head and promptly vanished.

The dark man put the transceiver down on the floor and removed a stunner from his belt. He jammed the tip of the gun into a port in the device and fired three times. The blasts of energy ripped through the delicate components, fusing some together and frying the remainder. Satisfied, he dumped the ruined device back into the loading container and left the bay.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE**

Jonathan strolled into the gym area of the Rec Level and was delighted to find Adara working out, alone.

"Hey trooper, I thought I was the only one who got up this early when I'm not on duty," he smiled. "I'm real glad to see you back safe. That sounded like a nasty moon."

Moving aside a piece of exercise equipment she'd been using, Adara gave him a tight, one shouldered shrug. "I didn't expect to be back. Not so quickly."

Jonathan leaned against a wall and crossed his arms lightly against his chest. "Ye of little faith! You didn't think we'd go off and leave you to the big blue beasties, did you?" When Adara didn't answer, Jonathan laughed, almost to himself. "Commander Rilken's just about tore this section of the galaxy apart looking for your transport. After we found out you hadn't been blown to pieces, he was sure he'd find you alive. Must be nice to be so respected."

"I hope he didn't waste too much time."

"Now, don't be too modest there. You and yours are

worth a whole fleet's time. Even High Command thinks so, apparently . . . "

Adara paused in mid-stretch and looked at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He grinned. "Serves you right for leaving your quarters so early in the morning. There'll be a report on your computer. Thanks to you and your merry band of campers, they are bumping the entire Dart force up in rank. Welcome to the nifty fifties, Trooper."

"I've been moved up to a 59th Classer?"

"Better. You're a 50th. So's Commander Patrick and so am I. Sark and Teerso too. The rest of the crew are 51st's." He reached out, grabbed her hand and shook it in congratulations. "We also have an official name. OSDT team, or something like that. I forget what it stands for."

Adara looked thoughtful. "Why so many ranks? It was a single mission with an ambush situation. We survived it. Most of us."

"Beats me. I'm not about to complain though. I didn't even have to go through the crash to get the higher rank. My mother should be pleased to hear about this."

"Are the other Dart teams getting the same ranks?"

Jonathan was surprised. "Hey, why ask me? I just work here." He became serious. "Would you consider having dinner with me later? To celebrate?"

Irritated, Adara shook her head. "I don't think that would be a good idea."

"Is it because of Commander Patrick?" He looked disappointed, but hopeful at the same time. "I just wondered because, well you know how people talk . . . "

"Commander Patrick has nothing to do with this."

Jonathan sighed with relief. "Well then, I'll just bide my time. I thought I had some serious competition there for a minute." He winked. "I know this whole promotion thing is all very sudden, so I'll give you some time to adjust. I want you to know though, that I would very much like to go out with you, Adara. I've liked you since the first time I saw you. We could really do things together."

"Commander Smith, you don't understand . . . "

Jonathan held up a finger. "No, don't explain. I'll just be patient. I've learned to be very patient when it comes to women. At any rate, we have to be at Rilken's office in about half an hour for another debriefing."

Jonathan was about to say something else, when the door opened again and Ziki walked in. He stiffened, nodded his farewell to both of them and left.

"Commander," Ziki said, "I take it you know about the meeting? I was just coming to tell you."

"Yes," Adara replied. "Are you ready right now?"

After a cursory glance at her uniform, Ziki nodded. "I guess so."

"Good, then walk with me. I need to stop at my quarters first." They left the gym together.

Adara was silent for a moment, trying to compose her

thoughts. "How is Dirk?"

Ziki looked uncomfortable as she answered. "I don't know. I haven't seen him since we boarded the *Mat-1* yesterday."

"I see. Are you two not seeing each other anymore?"

"No ma'am." Ziki was surprised at the question. She didn't think Adara had paid much attention to the activity around her on the Rec Level.

"Who ended the relationship?"

"I-I did Commander." There was a moment of silence and Ziki, feeling more was expected, added "I felt it was necessary. It was getting in the way of my duty."

"51st Ziki, I'm going to assume that decision was influenced by something I said sometime ago. What I say in conversation is not meant to apply to you. From now on, you are not to let my comments influence your behaviour unless it's a direct order. Is that clear?"

Confused, Ziki agreed. "Yes, Commander."

They reached the door to Adara's quarters. They stopped and Adara looked expectantly at her second-in-command. Ziki stared back.

"Well?" Adara asked.

Even more confused, Ziki blinked. "Er, well what, Commander?"

"Are you going to go out with Dirk again?"

"No," Ziki said slowly. "I don't think so, Commander. The relationship would interfere with my duties. But, I



will keep what you said in mind for the future." She straightened her shoulders and smiled, thinking the matter settled.

Adara glared. This wasn't going as planned."51st, how do you feel today?"

"Okay, I guess."

"And how did you feel when you were going out with Dirk?"

Ziki blushed, the color of her face matching her hair.

"Then you should go out with him."

"It would interfere with my duties here."

"If I find you aren't performing your duties as required, I will let you know."

"Commander, it's okay, really-"

"Ziki-go-out-with-Dirk-that-is-an-order!" Adara snapped, abandoning tact.

Ziki came to attention and nodded curtly. "Yes, Commander."

Exhaling loudly to regain her composure, Adara attempted to dignify her outburst. "I need my people to be in top form. If you feel better in a relationship, that's where I want you. Now wait here, I have to go change."

Ziki remained in her stiff position, but her eyes softened and traces of a gentle smile appeared around her lips. "Yes, Commander," she said quietly.

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The room emptied quickly, leaving Jonathan, Colm, Adara, Teerso and Sark alone with their commander. The smile on Rilkens face faded a bit as he addressed the five of them.

"Now I'll tell you the real story," he said. "High Command didn't choose to reveal the Dart weapons to the Union. Members of the Union read about them from material collected off the Net. I didn't want to mention it to the others yet, because as you can see from the scrap we just had with the 51sts, feelings about going on the offensive are already high."

Colm nodded. "It was bound to happen. It's hard to hide Darts from the public, especially when you fly them around an evacuation site in full view."

Rilkens sighed. "You don't understand. Nobody had noticed the Darts - or at least if they did, they didn't think it was Net material. Somebody did think the guns were worthy of attention. In fact, they were worthy of full scale images taken from inside this ship on the morning of their installation."

"That explains the extra security details," Colm said grimly. "You've been trying keep non-ISR people from coming on board."

"That's part of the reason for the details," Rilkens admitted. "However they are there mainly to keep an eye on the activities in the ship. This information is coming

from the inside."

"We have a leak?" Adara was incredulous. "That's insane. Why would anyone want to do that? The chances for the information to get out were already unbelievably high! Why would anyone want to help that along? Don't they realize that this kind of information could ruin this force?"

Colm smothered a smile at her naiveté. "Probably that's exactly what they want. From what I understand, there are many factions in the Union that would like to see ISR broken up. They don't like the presence of a large military style force in their sector. There are half a dozen governments in this area alone with feelings like that."

"As much as I disagree with High Command policy," Teerso said, "I would never let anyone outside the force to know how I feel. We have to present a united front. To do anything else weakens the structure of the whole and would be highly dangerous." She shook her head. "I know a lot of people who disagree with policy. But I can't think of someone who would willingly jeopardize everything we've worked for in terms of saving lives."

"Alternatively," Colm said, "it could be someone who sympathizes with the Karaash."

Adara's expression was stony. "What's to sympathize with?" she growled. "They're butchers and there is nothing else to them."

"There are people who like the Karaash," Jonathan said.

Adara gave him a scornful look. He shrugged. "There are those in the Union who figure the Karaash are simply misunderstood and that if we talked to them, we could end the aggression."

"We can speculate forever," Rilken interrupted, "just like High Command has been doing. They've been investigating this for a while now and everyone is under suspicion. Particularly us."

"Us as in this room, or this ship?" Colm asked.

"This ship. As I said, the first major leak was from this ship, when we were outfitting the Darts. I'm breaking a direct order by telling you about the investigation, however I'm at a loss here. I can't place the source. My odds are on a Dart rider though. As team leaders, I want you keep your eyes and ears open for me. See what you can dig up."

The five commanders nodded, each drawing up a suspect list in their own minds.

"Moving on," he said wearily, "here's our first assignment. High Command has been trying to discover a pattern in the Karaash attacks. Until recently, they haven't had any luck at all. Now, based on some new information, they think they might try guessing where the next hit will be."

"Where?" Adara was eager.

"In this system," Rilken pulled up a projection map on his computer. "On one of these three planets."

"Isn't that the system that has had four hits already?" Jonathan asked.

"Yes, two of them have been recent. *Toar* fleet has been looking after them and High Command suspects that because they have hit this system so often - more than the others in the last little while - they may hit it again, soon. Our objective is twofold. One, we have to decide precisely what defence system this area uses, so we can see what's not working and what is working, if anything. Maybe we can detect some weaknesses in the Karaash. See what weapons affect them." He looked at them one at a time. "It's an intelligence gathering mission. No one in the Union is prepared to give details on their defences, so we have to sneak in and find out."

Jonathan let out a low whistle. "High Command is serious."

"Very. This system was picked because if the Karaash can get in so easily, we might too." He tapped the desk. "Two, if we happen to be there during an attack, we have orders to capture a Karaash for study and interrogation. Those orders stand for all rescue assignments as well."

Sark hissed. "We're going to get killed trying to pull that off."

"Then do it carefully," Rilken snapped, all patience gone. "Don't do it if you don't want to, Sark." He turned on his console and called up an image." He indicated a planet. "This one's ours. We've laid in a course already

and we're going to drop you and a couple of other Dart teams off there, outside the occupied areas. Your job is to go in and identify their weak and strong spots." He pointed at the computer screen. "Use whatever systems you can and set yourselves up in case of an attack. Monitor the site and alert ISR if it seems like there is a sudden increase in military or defensive activity, and see if you can figure out what direction this system thinks the threat is from. We've got to find out where these creatures are based."

Colm looked thoughtful. "What if the Karaash attack some other place, while goodness knows how many Dart units are occupied with spy missions in various parts of the galaxy?"

"High Command is gambling that the other forces will be deployed well enough to be able to handle it."

Colm snorted. "Some gamble."

Rilkens stood again. "Those are your orders. Figure out what gadgets you'd like to have, plot your strategy and I'll see what I can get you. We'll discuss further details later. Dismissed. Oh - Smith, have you got time on your roster over the next two weeks for another recruit training session? Johansson just isn't handling this assignment well."

The other four officers left, leaving Smith and Rilkens to work out their schedules. Teerso walked away quickly, but Sark hung around and turned on Adara as soon as the

door to Rilkens office closed.

"So it's official. You've got your offensive unit. In spite of everyone else's best efforts to keep the status quo and our hides."

"I'm getting tired of repeating myself Mr. Sark. I had nothing to do with High Command's decision, Sark. You know that."

"I'm sure," he leaned toward her menacingly. "What's it going to take to shut you up? A direct hit from one of those new cannons on our Darts?"

Adara was about to reply, when Colm's back suddenly blocked her view. "Mr. Sark, I hope that wasn't a threat."

Sark pulled back. "Of course not. I was just expressing my opinion to a commanding officer." The last two words were mocking.

"Good," Colm smiled, but his eyes glittered. "Because I'm sure you heard Commander Rilkens when he said you don't have to be in this unit."

"Oh don't worry, *Commander* Patrick. I intend to stick with this group. Somebody has to watch her. No one else seems to see through her plans." He spun on his heels and left the corridor.

"What plans?" Colm called after him. There was no answer. "I will never understand him."

Adara was inarticulate with rage. She tapped Colm on the shoulder. He turned with his brows raised.

"Yes?"

"What did you do that for?" she asked, in measured tones.

"Do what?"

"Step in front of me?"

Colm suddenly looked sheepish. "Well, I - ah. I was just trying to remind 51st Sark of his position. Yes, that's it."

"Then you weren't trying to protect me."

In fact, that's exactly what he'd been doing. Sark had meant business and he'd stepped in without thinking. He looked at the expression on her face. Big mistake.

"Of course not," he lied.

"Good," Adara said sweetly. She looked him over and noticed he didn't have his armour activated. Without warning, she doubled up her fist and slammed it into Colm's stomach. He let out his breath with a *whoosh* and collapsed against the wall.

Adara watched while he gasped for air. "Because I can take care of myself," she said. "Don't forget that." She left him there.

Colm sank down against the wall and waited for his lungs to start working again. When they did, he gently probed his stomach, wincing. Then he grinned. "Well," he said to himself, "at least she's talking to me again."



## **CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR**

K'Saka had a new plan.

He'd first thought of it when the door to his prison cell had opened. When he had first been freed.

Why the door had suddenly opened, he didn't know. It had been closed to him ever since he could remember, ever since he first became aware that he existed. He had tried to bash it open a hundred times, a thousand times, without success. The door had been strong and heavy. Yes.

Some part of K'Saka's mind flickered briefly. The Karaash who sounded like himself, K'Saka, smelled like K'Saka and acted like K'Saka had stopped visiting K'Saka in his cell. The door had opened. A connection?

No matter. He had a plan.

The heart of the homeworld throbbed around K'Saka. The body of Sill still quivered on the sacrificial table, pinned as it was by three long swords, one through the neck, one through the chest and another through the groin. K'Saka felt along the body, dipping his fingers into

the squishy matter around the sword points. Spittle dripped onto his chest.

The plan hadn't included Sill. Nor Asas, the foolish creature who had failed to acknowledge K'Saka as king. The one who had told him that Sill had taken over. The one who he'd strangled and spitted on a stalagmite.

The plan was for more attacks. More butchery, more prisoners, more sacrifices. The Placer seemed to like it. Soon they would find the one prisoner who would tell them where the Placer was hiding.

The plan was for more food. More hunting. His people would obey. They had to obey. He would tell them to and they would. Yes.

K'Saka opened his mouth wide, to utter a screech, but no sound came out. No sound bounced off the walls and back, to tell him where he was. Something that may have been fear fluttered through him. No sound? Then he relaxed. A sign from the Placer, surely.

A sign for the plan.

A sign for the king.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The viewport offered a tremendous panorama of the star system. Marsalis stood in front of it, blinking moisture out of his eyes as he always had to when confronted with a glimpse of the stars he loved so much.

One hand hung loosely at his side, while the other clasped a small, grey datapad. It held his most recent Net packet, the contents of which were giving him some serious digestive problems. At the top of the packet's list was the latest article connected with ISR: *Interplanetary Search and Rescue's latest addition - OSDT's*. The date showed that it had been filed just one hour after Marsalis had issued the appropriate orders to the fleet commanders.

Marsalis sighed deeply and tried to let the starlight seep into his soul. The leaks were becoming more frequent and more immediate. The investigation was going badly. He had several of his best people from his personal staff working on the problem, but even with the best will in the world, they could not even begin to sort through the

personal communications of all the members of ISR. Even with off-ship comm links severely restricted and computer programs working overtime, it seemed an impossible task.

Were they looking for encrypted transmissions? Ordinary communications filled with a private code? A series of messages, each carrying a piece of the latest leaked information? Where, exactly, was the source of the leaks? The information coming out now wasn't strictly traceable to events on the *Mat-1* or any other single ship.

Even intuition hadn't helped to narrow the search. Marsalis had worked with the members of High Command for several years now, knew their families personally and had trusted his life to many of them dozens of times. He could not think of one of them that would be willing to betray ISR for any reason. He could not find it in his heart to even consider accusing them of treason.

Marsalis leaned his head against the cool surface of the viewport. Perhaps the fault was with him. Every time someone's name came up as a suspect, he would consider it, brood over it for a few hours and then strike the name from the list. *He* couldn't comprehend the motive behind the crime and therefore simply couldn't believe anyone else in his vast force could either. He suspected the more cynical members of his staff kept a separate list of their

own.

He pulled the pad up and read it again. His chief investigator had come up with a plan, but its deviousness repulsed him as much as lying to the Union had. Marsalis was to begin issuing private orders - false of course, different ones to different fleets and see which ones surfaced on the Nets. It was going to be a complicated business, keeping track of who received which directive and making sure the false orders didn't conflict with the real ones. As if his job wasn't complicated enough.

A discreet cough pulled him out of his reverie. He turned and was startled to see that Drachva was standing beside him at the viewport, casually surveying the starscape.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

With a sly, slow smile, the dark Netter replied. "The same thing you are, High Commander. Waiting for my transport ship."

Marsalis, severely annoyed at the security breach, was about to ask Drachva how he knew that, but then he stopped himself. As a Netter, it was his job to know what everyone was doing. Still, it was very unnerving.

Sensing his discomfort, Drachva sought to put his client at ease. "My people have to specialize in getting through security measures of all kinds," he said. "You may rest assured that yours are more than adequate for your needs."

"Obviously, they aren't as good as they could be," Marsalis grumbled. "I take it you have something to say to me?"

"Of course," Drachva nodded, the slur on the 's' making him sound serpentine. "I do not travel without a purpose."

"Well?" Marsalis said.

"We have found the Filer you are looking for. We wish to know what you are planning to do."

"So soon?" Elation filled Marsalis for a moment and then vanished, leaving him deflated. The NetFiler was just the first step in a nasty sequence and it didn't solve the original problem of the leak. What to do?

"What are my options?" he said aloud.

Drachva traced an obscure pattern on the hard material of the viewport. "Not many. You can order me to . . . silence him. Or you can let him continue filing, until you somehow solve your little problem here." The glint in his eye suggested that he knew exactly how well that was going.

Marsalis consulted the stars, asking for guidance with his eyes. He was quiet for several long moments. "Ask him if he'll stop," he said finally.

Drachva barely covered a laugh with a cough. "Compassionate," he said, "but unwise. Our Filer may go deeper and become harder to find."

Marsalis turned to face him, nostrils flaring. "Then

you'll find him, her, it - whatever, again. Do what you have to, but get him to stop voluntarily. Offer him compensation for his losses."

"You couldn't possibly afford to compensate him for what he stands to lose, my friend. Your little organization has become a well-discussed aspect of the Net. And well accessed. Our NetFiler is doing very well by himself. Most of the members of the Union couldn't afford to compensate him."

Marsalis fixed him with a hard stare. "I need the time," he said. "My leak could just as easily find another NetFiler after this one has been . . ." he swallowed " . . . taken care of."

"Such delicate sensibilities seem odd, coming from the High Commander of a military force such as yours."

"It's one thing to repel an invading force. It's another to hunt someone down in cold blood, without a trial."

"So true," Drachva acknowledged. He attempted a sincere expression, but then dropped it for one of ill-concealed delight. "Such dilemmas can be profitable for our kind. We will attempt what you ask, but should our little Filer become scarce . . . ?"

"You'll be paid," the officer said shortly.

"And your leak, High Commander? For a minor increase in support, we could - how shall I say? - assist you there. We could be quite gentle if you so desired."

"Thank you, no. We prefer to handle that ourselves."

"As you wish." Drachva turned to leave, but Marsalis detained him with a gesture. "One thing I must know. Do you keep track of the Karaash as well?"

"Only enough to ensure that their activities do not interfere with our own. They are too far away for us to worry about. We confine ourselves to this section of the Net and to things that people are willing to pay to know. Like the rest of this part of the universe, we rely on your people to handle the Karaash."

Marsalis was disgusted. "People are dying every day, due in part to a lack of knowledge which you must have. Do you mean to tell me you won't do anything to help get rid of this problem? Don't you feel any responsibility there?"

Drachva shrugged, a delicate dance of thin bones. "Problems come and problems go, High Commander. If not the Karaash, it would be something else. I am a simple creature with a simple philosophy. I cannot divide myself to handle all the problems of the world, so I content myself to fill my singular role."

In spite of his disgust, Marsalis felt a strange twinge of jealousy. He thought about all the roles he was expected to play - diplomat, devoted and grieving son, ruthless commanding officer, and compassionate humanitarian - and for just the tiniest of moments, he envied Drachva's simplistic philosophy.

Drachva followed the traces of emotion that ran over



Marsalis' face and correctly read the conclusion there. "Just so, my friend," he said, with a hint of mockery. He bowed lithely from the waist and walked a few steps, turning a few seconds later. "Oh and if I may give a word of advice?" he asked, not bothering to wait for an answer. "Begin issuing those false orders, High Commander. Things will go much more quickly." With that, he walked away, leaving Marsalis to stare glumly out the window.

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The meadow they'd set down in was quiet and still. It was early in the season, so the grass was short and it still had that soft, sweet smell of new growth. Dark, rocky hills loomed behind them, their barren faces looking like roughly chiselled chocolate. Orange flowers grew in rough bundles on the rocks, trailing droopy vines over the sharper edges of the stones.

The whole team was here, carefully stacking their Darts against the hillside. They'd already found one serious hole in this planet's defence system; their BT had simply dropped out of orbit and manoeuvred along the upper reaches of the atmosphere until they'd found a small gap in the overlapping sensor fields. Once inside the system, it was a simple matter of finding a convenient place to land.

"The city is thirty kilometres that way," Ziki reported,

peering into a small nav computer. She adjusted the controls and nodded to herself. "That's confirmed. Thirty kilometres."

That, at least, was a point in the planet's favour. The defence system apparently prevented intruders from using the existing satellite systems to figure out where they were on the surface. Ziki had to make her calculations from what they'd learned in orbit.

Colm, watching the riders stack the Darts, clapped his hands together impatiently. "Come on folks, let's get a move on. We don't want to be found yet and we have a lot of ground to cover."

The riders hustled the remaining Darts into place and then stood by as Dirk and Sark placed four fist-sized boxes in a half-circle around the machines. Dirk spoke a command sequence into the open air, stepping away from the boxes as he did so. A bright white light flared up, blinding them all temporarily; when it had dimmed enough for them to see again, it looked like someone had just built a large white screen in front of the Darts. Within seconds, the screen darkened, fading to the dark chocolate brown of the hillside. Soon, the camouflage projection was indistinguishable from the real landscape.

Adara was just as impatient as Colm to be away. "Helmets back on and engage your morph suit cloaks," she barked. "Follow at a quick march." She fluttered a hand at Ziki, shooing her in the direction the computer

had shown earlier. As they fell into line, the sun flashing on their body armour changed abruptly to a dull gleam, as the suits changed their colors to match the surroundings. By the time they started their advance over the meadow, they looked like so many clumps of tall grass.

Colm had taken up position in the line directly behind Adara. "I'm impressed," he said, over the commlink. His voice was muffled as he bent his head forward to inspect grass-green arms. "Research and development can really come through when they want to."

"Hmmp," Dirk grunted from further back. "They wouldn't have been able to add the holographic stuff if it wasn't for the neat surface my body armour provides. 'S'kinda hard to project things on that flimsy black stuff we had before."

"Credit where credit is due," agreed Colm. "So, how long before we reach the first possible defence station site, Commander Cohili?"

Inside her helmet, Adara rolled her eyes. He'd been extra friendly ever since she'd punched him and it was getting on her nerves. She felt like hitting him again, but she didn't want to risk the consequences. "We don't know, exactly," she said. "We're only going by whatever information is freely available about this place. Things the Karaash would have access to."

"We are still checking their ground-to-air system first,

right?"

"Right." Adara reviewed the information they'd pieced together earlier. Early in its history, the planet's population had been prone to long, bitter, territorial wars. As a result, the general population had coalesced into a series of urban pockets, fleeing from the vast tracts of lands that had become battlegrounds. Each city had developed defence systems around its perimeter; ironically turning the land they struggled over into a useless no-man's land of weapons technology.

While peace had reigned for more than half a century now, the citizens had not changed their living patterns, save to push the walls of their cities out further to encompass the burgeoning population. The defence systems, once turned on one another, were now supposed to be linked together against outsiders. It was one of those city perimeters they were going to examine now.

"Odds are," Adara said, "that they first layer should be at twenty-five kilometres. I doubt they'd want anyone closer than that without a fight."

Colm grunted his agreement and they continued the march in relative silence. The grass was getting higher as they approached the city - hiding them and many other secrets besides.

It didn't take them long before their sensors picked up what they were looking for. Ziki brought them to a halt.

"It's underground, Commanders," she said. "Some kind

of ground-to-air laser battery." She pointed her device straight out. "It extends for quite a way in both directions. I can't get a fix on where it ends."

"Fan out," Colm ordered, splitting the group in two. "Follow it and see how far it goes and try and find out as much as you can."

They broke up, waving scanners about. Some scanned the ground, others disappeared through the grass, looking for triggers or alarm systems. They met back at the rendezvous point and all had the same conclusion.

"Not bad," said Chang, as he returned. "A hair trigger setup that extends all around the city."

"They're likely to fire at anything - no questions asked - that crosses a sensor field and doesn't have the proper flight authorization signature," Sark added. "We couldn't find anything like a ship identification system, or a monitor. Presumably, you have to have permission to come into the airspace before you drop out of orbit. They've got a very long range. It should be pretty effective."

"Except, obviously, against Karaashi ships," Teerso said dryly.

"The actual bolt might not damage a platform's hull," Dirk said thoughtfully, "but the impact of any object or energy wave at a good velocity will at least screw up a flight path or two. If they programmed these things to fire smart . . . "

"They're not," Colm cut in grimly, "they're programmed to fire blindly at whatever isn't authorized. Can we advance across them without setting them off?"

"So long as we're not airborne."

"Let's go."

\*

It was dark by the time they set up a makeshift camp, two kilometres outside the city. They were tired, very sore and annoyed.

After clearing the air system, they'd found the next layer of defence: a series of nasty booby traps. They'd found two of them the hard way; Dirk had set off the first and it was only his body armour that had prevented him from losing a limb. As it was, he was limping badly. Another trap had taken out nearly half the group and without the aid of the anti-grav boards, it took an hour to haul their slack, unconscious bodies far enough away from the danger to revive them.

Now the group was busy unpacking the small cache of supplies they'd brought with them, which included food, a compact sleeping roll and their disguises for their trek into the city tomorrow.

Adara sat with her back against a scraggly tree that had begun appearing on the landscape closer to the city. She carefully scraped mud and soot off her suit. She was

watching Colm warily, through narrowed eyes, as he moved through the camp. He walked easily through the group, lending a hand here and there, chatting with the riders.

Jonathan suddenly blocked her view as he sat in front of her, uninvited. "Hey trooper, how are you holding up?"

"Just fine," she answered. Trying to avoid another request for dinner, she decided to mention his earlier quick thinking. "That was good work back there with that trap."

Jonathan looked pleased. "Thanks. I don't know how I figured out the trigger mechanism, but it just sort of flashed through my mind and I went with it." He sniggered. "Sheer desperation does wonderful things for your focus."

"I'm sure it does," Adara murmured, only half paying attention to his response. Colm had stopped, to talk to one of the Blue Team riders privately. At one point, he threw an arm around her shoulder, leaned close and made some exaggerated gestures with the other hand, making her laugh.

"You know," Jonathan said, hesitating a bit, "I'm not sure I like this assignment much. It's extremely risky trying to find out what this planet has in the way of arsenal, just on the off-chance it might be the next target."

Adara wrenched her attention back to Jonathan,

suddenly inexplicably angry. "You heard Rilken's," she said impatiently. "They have hit this solar system four times. If we can study first hand an area that is intact - without all the usual propaganda a government puts out about their superiority - we can probably figure out how the Karaash shut down those other four places. If we know that, we can make a stab at tracing Karaashi technology back to its origin."

"I suppose so," Jonathan said doubtfully. "Still, that's a lot of `ifs.'"

"Comes with the job."

"I guess." Seeming to notice for the first time that Adara wasn't inclined to talk, he got up and dusted off his pant legs. "I'll go establish a watch schedule. I think I'll go talk to Sark to coordinate efforts."

The exhaustion of the day suddenly caught up with her and left her feeling drained. She pulled out her roll, flattened some grass and spread out on it. She had just closed her eyes, when she heard someone close by. She cracked open one eye to reveal Colm, who busily engaged in spreading out his own sleeping gear right beside her. Adara sat bolt upright.

"What are you doing?" she yelped and immediately regretted using the obvious question.

A look of feigned innocence quickly suppressed a mischievous glint in his eye. "My watch isn't until just before dawn. I'm just trying to get some sleep."



"Here?"

Colm glanced around the camp with exaggerated slowness. "Well, you don't expect me to sleep right beside the rest of the riders do you? It wouldn't do my image much good if they heard me snoring all night."

Adara glared at him suspiciously. "Are you trying to tell me that this is one of those command things?"

The glint returned. "Absolutely."

"Fine," she laid back down, turning her back to him. He twitched and fidgeted for a bit, trying to get comfortable, then he went still. Adara closed her eyes and attempted to get to sleep again.

"Did you say anything to Dirk and Ziki?"

Adara went limp with resignation. *Please*, she said in silent prayer to whatever might be listening, *can you just make him stay quiet?* "Yes."

"I thought so. Can you hear them?"

She suddenly became aware of the sounds from the camp. Over the murmur of quiet conversation, she could hear giggling and fits of intimate laughter.

"So what did you say to them?"

Adara pulled her arms tightly against her chest. "I just spoke to Ziki about it, that's all."

His voice came to her, quietly insistent. "Spoke to her, how?"

"I told her to go out with him again."

Colm hauled himself up onto one elbow. "Oh well

done," he said, sarcastically. "You mean you *ordered* her to go out with him? Incredible."

Adara could feel her cheeks growing hot, in spite of the covering darkness. She whirled to face him. "What was I supposed to say? I tried everything else!"

"Well surely there must have been a more tactful way of doing it than that?"

"How would you know? You weren't even there. You were probably off chatting to some young Dart rider and telling her jokes!" Adara stopped, appalled with herself.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that I'm tired and I don't want to talk any more." Reaching forward, she raked at the grass, making the crushed and sticky stems stand upright again. Working from one end of her makeshift bed to the other, she put up a pathetic looking barrier of grass for privacy. "If you *do* snore," she seethed, "I swear I'll shoot you."

\*

Colm lay with his hands behind his head, idly chewing on a broken bit of grass. He was debating if he should send Adara another bottle of juice when they got back to their ship. He was feeling very smug.

So she'd seen him speaking with Danale earlier had she? Colm hadn't done anything to deliberately provoke Adara and, in fact, hadn't known she was watching him. But the

effect, apparently, had been the same.

Adara *did* care.

Danale, the young dart rider, had transferred over with him from the *Sargentus*, but he'd known her a long time before that. She'd been a cargo ship pilot and she'd found him skulking about a shipping port. She and her friends had seen what kind of person the shy runaway could be and had taken him in, teaching him how to be sociable, open and friendly. They had all joined ISR at the same time and he and Danale had trained together. She'd always made it plain to him that she was open to something more than friendship. He'd never taken her up on the offer.

It wasn't that there was anything wrong with Danale, or any of the other women he'd seen before and since. They were all attractive, intelligent, warm and caring. Before he'd met Adara, he was beginning to think that there was something wrong with him. Why couldn't he bring himself to feel anything more than brotherly friendship toward the women he knew?

He rolled onto his side, to better consider the still figure that he could dimly see through the grass wall and smirked. Adara was not what one would call warm and caring. At least not outwardly, but Colm could sense that the compassion was there, buried deep beneath the surface. She was definitely attractive and more than intelligent. But the main difference - and the only thing

that mattered - was that spark, that burning sense of drive and purpose that forced her to look for something beyond the average. It drove her to question, to take charge, to *be* somebody. It was the same thing that had changed him from Danale's friend, to Danale's commanding officer.

Colm let his head rest on his arm and heaved a sigh. The only problem was, she didn't know she had it. She seemed to confuse it with her mission against the Karaash. What was worse, she kept her mind tethered, her emotions chained up. Something like that had to be allowed to roam, to express itself freely, otherwise it would start to feed on itself. He, of all people, knew that.

But how to free it? There were times when he spoke to her that he felt sure he'd found a chink in her hard armour, a breach of some sorts. He'd try to open it, just a little at a time, so as not to expose too much of the vulnerable person inside. Then, there were the times when he'd see her again and discover that the hole had been plugged and doubly reinforced and he'd have to go looking for some other way inside.

He reached out a hand and let it play along the greenish barrier between them. It seemed oddly symbolic somehow. The wall was there, to be sure, but the grass that formed it was bent over, snapped in some places. Tonight at least, he'd pushed through, a little.

It was not enough though. He longed to hold her, to sleep next to her. To forget everything else and help her

become the person he knew was there.

He laughed silently and cursing himself for a fool, he closed his eyes firmly and tried to sleep.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX**

They bumped and jostled their way through the early morning crowds, trying to stay within sight of one another.

The humanoid members of the team had slipped into their disguises earlier this morning - altering hair color, styles and adding jewellery to enhance the effects of the morph suit holographs. Hoping their information about current trends and fashions was correct, they sneaked into the city just before dawn. The rest of the non-humanoid riders, including the three Pilfers, had stayed behind at the camp. As good as the suits were, it was hard to alter the appearance of a single tall, hairy Roikan convincingly, much less three of them.

"City center, Commander," Adara's collar told her. It was Ziki, speaking through the hidden communicator in her clothes. Adara pretended to sneeze, replying as she did so: "Go to it, then."

She stopped then, looking for her likely target. They were looking for access into the city's computers. She

cursed, looking at the milling group of people and numerous buildings, and decided that she didn't like spy missions. Too many variables, not enough information, too many unnecessary risks. And no chance to shoot Karaash.

A long line-up attracted her attention. It appeared as though a group of people was waiting to take a turn at a small terminal set on the side of a short building. Adara walked to the building slowly, casually leaning against it as though waiting for somebody. After a few minutes of this, she palmed her sensor array and took a quick reading.

It was a terminal into the city's main commerce system. Adara was pleased. This would likely be one of the busiest tracts and a little extra traffic wouldn't be noticed. It was also likely to have direct connections with most of the city.

She sauntered to the end of the line-up, keeping a close eye on the way people were using the terminal. What was its specific function, she wondered? It was a public access site, which likely meant that personal data transfers were restricted to a minimum. A lot of governments restricted that kind of thing, for security reasons. How was she going to get into it?

She scanned the people in the line ahead of her. Each of them was carrying a personal encrypter and a data bloc. Could she program her own equipment to imitate theirs?

But what if someone noticed her using a strange looking device? She watched the people interacting with the terminal. People in the line-up were standing a polite distance away from the people at the terminal, so that solved that dilemma. She assumed a bored expression and began fiddling with her scanner, hoping to make it look as though she was playing with it idly.

Everyone was taking their time at the terminal. The line moved very slowly, but Adara barely noticed. She was so absorbed in her task that she nearly jumped when Colm's voice came over her communicator.

"Adara, don't answer, just listen," he said urgently. "We have a serious problem. Stay there, I'm coming to get you. I'll be coming from your right. Make it look as though you've spotted me in the crowd."

*What now?* She looked up at the sky, trying to estimate how much time had passed. An hour had flown by. As she searched the crowd for Colm, she became aware of a growing sense of restlessness in the air. There was a group of people nearby, talking excitedly amongst themselves. Something was definitely wrong.

Colm appeared a short distance in front of her, with his back to her. He held a datapad in one hand and a wrapped package tucked under his arm. She feigned recognition and walked over to him. She gritted her teeth against the thought of losing her spot in the long line.

"What is it?"



Without a word, Colm handed her a datapad. He'd been able to access a terminal and had downloaded several blocks of information. A net packet was being displayed on the screen. *Eamacron Residents*: it read, *Cannon Fodder for ISR?*

"Our leak has really done it this time," he said. "The text claims we're trying to set up a secret base here and that we're prepared to let the residents die to protect the area. I didn't have time to read the whole piece, but I do know the damn thing includes holostills of us leaving *Mat-1*. Even worse, it's got references to you and me as leaders of the expedition."

Adara quickly ran through the implications of that statement. "When did this transmission get here?"

"Shortly after we did, yesterday. I ordered a retreat on the way over here, but it's going to be hard to get out being noticed."

As if on cue, there was an angry shout from the terminal Adara had just left. The group of residents parted to reveal someone waving around a small device. He pointed it in their direction and immediately, their morph suit projections failed. There was an angry shout as someone in the group recognized Adara.

"Perfect," Colm muttered. "Your reputation precedes you. Let's move!"

They moved quickly, but calmly, trying not to alert the other passers-by to their presence. The shouting grew

louder and suddenly the crowd around them scattered. A second gun shot explained why.

Colm grabbed Adara's hand and yanked her into a run. They rounded a bend and raced headlong into an oncoming stream of foot traffic. Dodging and twisting to avoid the hands that reached out to slow them down, they took two more corners at high speed.

Adara flinched as another shot scorched the ground beneath her feet and glanced backward. "They've brought in some patrols," she panted. "We can't go back to the perimeter, or they'll follow us."

"Then we've got to try and lose them," Colm answered. "This way." He ducked through a low passageway on the left and followed until it split in four directions. Choosing one to the right, Colm led her through a complicated set of turns, to the entrance of a large, deserted building. They ran inside and found their way to the top floor.

Adara collapsed against a wall, gasping for breath. They were in a big, empty room. It was filled with half-opened crates, bits of spare building material and tools. There were no lights and the only illumination came through a small series of windows, near the ceiling on one wall. "Do you," she breathed, "do you know where we are?"

Colm was bent over, hands on his knees, his face red with exertion. He nodded. "One of the things I found while I was digging was a map of this area of the city. This is a new residential development. It's not finished

yet, although people are supposed to be moving their stuff in. It won't be officially opened for another week or so."

"That's convenient." She struggled back up on her feet. "How'd you remember how to get here?"

He grinned at her. "When you stow away on a lot of ships, you develop a memory for maps. You don't have a lot of time to study them when you're trying to sneak into a cargo hold somewhere. Most of your time has to be devoted to disabling the security system."

"That explains how you could get so much information so fast today."

He snorted. "That's my misspent youth coming back to haunt me."

"Now what?"

"We wait until things quiet down. Hopefully, they'll figure we escaped already and everyone will go home. Otherwise, we don't stand a chance in a hysterical crowd. You're too easily recognizable." He began rummaging through the junk. "I wonder if there's anything useful in here?"

Adara spent ten minutes searching her own section of the room and then began pacing around the walls, to see if there were any other exits or hiding places. She stopped abruptly near the windows and cocked her head. She pressed an ear against the wall.

"Shhhh," she waved a hand.

Colm poked his head up from the crate he'd been dismantling. "What is it?"

"Listen."

As the room got quiet, Colm could hear noises from outside. It sounded like a low-pitched, rhythmic pounding.

"That sounds like," he began, swallowing, "that sounds like lots of people, chanting. Angrily."

Adara pointed to the windows. "Give me a leg up." Colm crouched down and acted as a step to allow her to reach the sill. She peered over the edge. What she saw made her scramble back down in a hurry. "Get back!" she shouted. "They're pointing a blaster this way!"

They made it to the other side of the room before the explosion sounded. The building shuddered violently, but miraculously, the room stayed intact.

"They're going to level the whole place!" Colm said, in disbelief.

"Find us or flatten us," Adara replied. "What do you expect from a people that lays traps like those things outside the city? Come on, we can't stay here."

Another detonation rocked them off their feet. Colm fell forward roughly and his datapad went skittering across the floor. Adara lunged to retrieve it, landing heavily on her chest and sliding forward. The building convulsed again and the floor beneath her heaved and then crumbled away.

From the other side of the room, it looked as though the floor had suddenly taken life, opening its mouth for a great yawn. Colm looked up in time to see his partner swallowed whole. "Adara!" he yelled. He scrambled to the edge of the hole and gasped. The side of the building had shifted to fall forward, ripping out walls and beams from the top floor all the way to the bottom. There was debris everywhere. "Please, no," he whispered, searching in the half-light for what he was sure would be a crumpled body.

"Commander Patrick?"

Her voice was strained and dust-choked, but it was there. Nearly giddy with relief, he leaned out farther to search for its origin. Then he gasped again.

She was hanging upside down, dangling precariously by one leg. She'd fallen three floors, sliding with the disintegrating structure. An exposed support beam had temporarily halted her descent, just long enough for another girder to come tumbling down and catch her right shin in a scissor-like grip. Her entire body weight was suspended from her knee. She was trying to hold the other leg straight up, but it hung awkwardly in the air, making her body swing painfully.

"Commander Patrick?" she said again.

"I'm here," he said. "Try not to move. I'm coming." He looked around for a way down. He had to get there before she was shaken loose. Her body armour might help

protect her in a fall, but without her helmet, she might just as well have been wearing an exercise suit.

The crowds outside continued chanting. There was less rhythm to it now, more rage and fury instead.

The door to the stairs was blocked now, leaving the hole in the floor as the only way down. He tested the flooring around the hole. Stable, but slick. He decided that the smooth surface of his armour would make him slide too much. He searched the room quickly and with an audible sound of relief found the package he'd been carrying before - his helmet, tucked away in a knapsack. He jammed it on and instructed the computer to shut off his armour. The suit changed from silver to black.

He turned his back to the hole, got down on his hands and knees and slid into it, grabbing at the ledge at the last minute. He hung by his arms for a second, then swung his legs back and forth. When he had a good rhythm, he let go and fell to the floor below. He negotiated the second floor the same way.

Another shot from the blaster sent a tremor through the building. The girders shifted and Adara's leg slid partially out of the vice. Her weight jerked her down savagely, wedging her shin like a lever between the two beams, before the beams settled again. She groaned, but kept her lips firmly pressed together.

"Hang on," Colm said. He dropped down another floor and tried to reach out to her from the edge, but to no

avail. The beams stretched too far out, suspended like a gangplank in mid-air. There was nothing but loose flooring nearby.

Seeing no other option, he gently stepped out onto the beam. The added weight pressed down harder on her trapped leg and she strangled a scream. He immediately stepped back. "Dammit," he swore. "Adara, I'm sorry. There's no other way."

Breathing hard through her nose, she nodded sharply. "Get on with it."

He stepped out again, steeling himself for the job. He concentrated on maintaining his balance, trying to shut out the stifled sounds of anguish coming from the end of the beam. He could feel his heart pounding against his ribs.

He edged out to where she was trapped and carefully stepped off the top beam and onto the bottom. The change in pressure wrenched a cry from her lips. "I'm sorry, Adara," he said, feeling the pain in his own leg. "Hang on. Please, hang on." He put his feet on either side of her trapped shin and wedged his toes between the beams. He looked down and his cruel brain instantly measured the exact distance they would fall. "Please," he said again. He bent over the top girder, stretching down and hooked a hand under the knee of her free leg. As he pulled up, she shifted her weight to that limb and reached for his hand.

They locked arms, him pulling her upright to relieve the weight on her leg; Adara became the counterbalance, preventing him from falling backward into the void. When they were both centered over the girder, they transferred their grip to the beam.

The building shivered and rubble rained down on their heads. Trying to shelter Adara, Colm asked "Can you pull your leg out?"

"Not a chance," she breathed. "It's stuck and it's broken."

The blaster bolts were starting to become more frequent. The crowd was getting louder - or closer. Colm thought he could hear people coming in on the floors below.

"The datapad is tucked into my belt," Adara said. "Take it and get out of here, before we both fall."

"You've still got the thing?" he said. "Unbelievable. Help me take off my helmet."

"Don't be stupid," Adara said. "Just get out of here!"

"I'm not leaving. Help me with the helmet. I've only got one free hand."

"There are people coming. Go!"

"The helmet, Cohili. That's an order!"

Each using a hand, they removed Colm's helmet. Taking it in his free arm, he slid to the far end of the beams, where the gap was widest and shoved the helmet in as hard as he could.

"The supports are too heavy," Adara said. "You're not



going to be able to wedge them apart with that."

"I know that," he grunted, sliding back. "It's to prevent the beams from crushing your leg altogether. Lean forward."

"What for?"

"Quit arguing with me and lean forward, would you? I'm going to turn off your armour. That will give us some spare room around your leg."

He reached into her collar at the back of her neck and tripped the emergency switch. It was a slower method than computer control, but they didn't have much choice. Adara's armour dissipated piece by piece and the helmet creaked ominously.

"Now can you move your leg?" Colm's voice was hopeful and desperate at the same time. He was running out of ideas.

She gave her leg an experimental tug. She let out her breath explosively and then sucked it in just as hard. "Yes."

"Good. I'm going to move your leg out toward the open end." Keeping one hand on the beam, he grasped her foot and gently pushed it sideways. She pivoted at the waist, leaned backward and pulled. Together they pushed and pulled alternately, until it swung free.

Sweat beaded on Adara's forehead and her arms were shaking with fatigue. "Just a few more minutes. Stay with me." Colm pleaded, trying to keep her from blacking out

on him. He hoisted himself back onto the top beam and straddled it. With both hands now free, he grasped the back of her uniform and hauled her bodily onto the girder, swinging her good leg over it, so she was facing him.

The building rumbled and shifted again, the force of it nearly sending them both toppling off the beam. Adara's eyes rolled upward and she swayed, but she fought it off. Colm gripped her forearms to steady her. "Back up," he said. "Move back, Adara."

They inched their way back up the beam. As soon as he reached the edge of the floor, he scrambled off the girder and, lying flat on his stomach, dragged her back off the beam and onto a stable patch in the destruction. Once they were well away from the edge, Colm collapsed onto his back and pulled her full length against his body.

"That was close," he murmured, enfolding her in his arms. "That was just too damned close."

The sudden, intimate contact was like the lifting of a veil, suddenly clearing away the haze of pain and fear. She lay with her cheek pressed against his chest and she was shocked to hear his heartbeat thumping rapidly into her ear. How long had it been since she'd heard that sound? The sound of life, so close, so near?

His warmth and solidity engulfed her, drawing her downward, making her aware of every curve and angle of his body. For a moment, she drifted with it. It was the

feel of another human being. After the terror of a moment ago, it felt good.

*Safe. In his arms.*

The realization suddenly terrified her more than the fall had. "Let go," she said, pulling away. "What are you doing? Let go of me!"

"What am I doing?" Colm said, the relief of finding her alive fading fast. "What the hell were you doing, diving after some stupid pad into a huge damn hole?"

"The hole wasn't there at first," she said hotly. "And that information is important."

"Important enough to get us both killed?" He sat up, forgetting her injury, took her by the shoulders and shook her. "When are you going to get it through your head that you are not indestructible? When are you going to get it through your head that you don't have to be a hero all the time? When are you-"

"I never said I was," she pushed him away and tried to stand up. The effort nearly made her faint and she fell back across his lap.

"Oh no," he said with feeling, "you never said that at all. You just run right in where the gods wouldn't dare stick in a toenail and then wonder why you get hurt." He shoved her off his lap and stood up. He hauled her upright and then, still holding her arm, presented his back to her. "Get on," he said roughly.

"You are not going to carry me out of here," she said.

Her face was pale and drawn, but her words were steel.

"I am, because you can't walk. And our time is running out." As if to underscore his words, three more blaster shots struck the building, sending down another shower of debris. The support girders tore away from the flooring with a rending shriek and sailed down into the abyss.

Without missing a beat, Colm handed her his blaster. "Besides, you're going to have to use this, while I navigate. I can't shoot and walk at the same time."

"You what-?"

There was a sudden flurry of laser fire outside and the outside wall fell away completely, leaving them exposed to the open air. They blinked in the brightness and it was a few moments before they could focus on the three shapes hovering in front of them.

"At your thervice, Commanderrs," the Pilfers said in unison. "We belieff that you are thcheduled for a quick flighth off pwanet, yeth?"

Colm exhaled with relief. "Yeth indeed," Colm bowed to Adara with a flourish. "Aftther you Commanderr Cohiwi."

Taking advantage of his prone posture, Adara gave him a quick shove that toppled him sideways. "Idiot," she muttered and struggled over to the ledge.

"Ingrate," he mumbled around a mouthful of dust.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN**

He dropped down from the hole in the ceiling, hit the floor and drew his dagger in one smooth, fluid movement. He hissed his name; it was a warning, a threat. The obedient, fat, slow creatures that operated the Duplicant slapped the floor in response. Good. They knew their king.

The chamber of the Duplicants was far from the well-traveled paths of the rest of the Karaashi homeworld. Once released from their sticky growth pods, most Karaash, if they managed to escape the hungry guards, left this part of the planet forever. Only K'Saka had decided to return.

He laughed and a sound that had nothing to do with mirth rattled in his chest. His brilliant idea had come to him just days ago, moments after he had sent his minions to purge the planet of traitors. He would make a copy of himself and hide it away. That way, oh yes, even if he were killed, he would still be king! He dropped the knife back into his belt and a sense of power coursed through

his veins. The other fools would never guess why he would be the only king from now on.

He felt the wall behind him, trying to figure out where he was, where the right pod was. His memory stumbled along the twisted and dark corridors of his mind, even as his own body stumbled forward in the complete blackness that was the underground. The chamber was bulb-shaped and very big. Once a pocket of rich ore, it had been sucked clean many years ago and now it provided an ideal birthing place, a womb of stone, for the Duplicated Karaash. His hand reached out and touched the smooth metal exterior of the pod closest to the exit. There were hundreds more like it in this chamber.

Off in the distance, as K'Saka moved, there was a sudden explosion of sound and fury. He listened to the noise with interest. There had been rumours of this, quiet whispers of truth and conjecture floating up and down the Path. Every once and a while, these whispers said, a fresh Karaash would kick open his hard metal eggshell, screaming and flailing with incoherent wrath. Struggling up from his gooey bed, he would lash and kick and lunge at everything in his path. Filled with rage and hatred, such a being would rampage forever if not killed, for nothing short of death would halt it.

K'Saka listened to the pattern of the grunts and shrieks as the Duplicant guards fought with the berserk creature. One, two, three, fell away . . . bleeding, torn, dying.

Grasping, grappling. Then there was the soft whistle of a sword slicing through the air, the grating sound of metal against bone as it bit deeply - where? - the neck, the base of the skull and up. Triumphant squeaks, as the berserker fell back into the muck. Heavy breath, the spasms of the Saisiss. K'Saka almost joined them, in the After-Blood, so intense was his concentration. Almost. Yes.

Faint illumination crept into a recess of his mind, preventing it. Dim memories, evoked by the sounds of conflict, came to the surface of his consciousness, unbidden. A strange feeling enveloped him, a feeling that this thing, this creature, was not to be somehow.

Images - yes images - floated through his memory, washing through his mind like a torrent. Pictures of how things used to be, before the Uprising. Karaash that could look upon each other, talk to one another. Strange creatures that bore little resemblance to the things that crawled around K'Saka today. Strong, wonderful creatures, males, females, young ones that had survived the First Test by metamorphosing themselves into greatness, only to change again at the hands of K'Sia. Yes. Strange creatures that said the name K'Sia as a curse, not a mantra.

K'Saka trembled in the darkness. How was it that he remembered such things, he, whose existence seemed to only begin a short time ago? Why was he recalling such things? He listened, terrified at his blasphemous recall of

the great K'Sia, to the murmurs of the comatose Duplicant guards. He could only think, in his murky, disconnected way, that the guidance of the Ancients was somehow still needed today, that the berserkers should not be.

Should not be.

The smell of blood drifted over to him, from the far reaches of the bulbous chamber. The odour delighted him and he licked the air with his forked tongue. The strange buzzing that had been pursuing him for days, sharp and painful inside his skull, came back to him, clearing the dusty dreadful memories away. Silly fool, silly K'Saka! It was another sign from the Placer; of course, it had to be. What better way to hasten the Search? The Placer had just given him another tool, the Berserkers, to help them mill through the heathen. Brilliant, brilliant K'Saka! He would have them confined and sent out on the Search.

He crept to the back of the chamber, dragging his clawed feet through broken bits of metal and wire. He found the pod he was searching for and traced his fingers over the pod to the control box. He keyed in a special code he knew from memory, squeaking happily when it responded with a soft peeping noise. A small drawer on the side of the box slid open and waited. It needs a sample, K'Saka thought, a sample of me. What to give it?

He drew his knife again and played with the haft. A finger! Yes, it would do. He'd take off his sixth finger on



his left hand, it always interfered with his fighting anyway. Eagerly he removed the misshapen digit, sawing it away roughly with the point of his small knife. He dropped it into the drawer, which closed itself. The box hummed with energy while it analyzed the bloody stump, emitting quiet beeps at regular intervals as it completed its pre-programmed checklist. The thick rubber tubes that extended from the ceiling of the Chamber like umbilical cords suddenly jumped with life, as synthetic fluids surged through them to fill the pod. The process had begun.

K'Saka lowered himself to sit on the ground beside his progeny. It would be some time before it was ready and he needed to protect the body from the foraging guards. His people could wait while he prepared his heir, he had given them their orders. Just before the body was ready, he'd take the pod to his secret room, the one only he knew about and hide it away to let it finish developing alone. Brilliant K'Saka . . .

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The ceremonial audience chambers of the Union hall pulsed with suppressed anger. All of High Command was there, arranged in a semicircle that opened up to face the rows of chairs where the Union normally gathered. The Commanders remained rigid, motionless, silent.

At the center of the half-circle, Marsalis Marsalei stood out as the blazing iron in the forge of wrath. Stiff-backed, his eyes were focused on the door to the chamber, but the sooty smudges beneath them were a clear sign of what the past few hours had cost him. Bloodshot and red-rimmed, they burned with an unfamiliar emotion: *hatred*.

The door slid open to admit a squad of armed guards. They marched quickly into the center of the chamber and parted to reveal a tall, slim man with red hair. He looked around, his manner indifferent, even cocky. A moment later, behind them, Drachva slid noiselessly into the room, accompanied by two dark aliens.

For a moment, no one moved. Then Marsalis spoke, his voice insanely gentle in the charged atmosphere.

"You are Kiljaren Mey." It was not a question.

The red-haired man shrugged. "I've answered to that name on occasion."

"You are a NetFiler."

"I subscribe to the Nets, like everyone else."

"You live in this system."

"I have a lot places I call home."

"You are a murderer."

The accusation hung in the air for several seconds. Kiljaren's eyes narrowed as he reassessed the situation. His reply matched Marsalis' tone.

"That's a serious charge," he said. "You seem to know who I am. Who the hell are you?"

"We are the High Command council of the Interplanetary Search and Rescue. The Interplanetary Union funds us," Marsalis said. "But you know that and a great deal more."

"I know nothing except that I've been kidnapped from my home for no apparent reason, by a small army of tin-covered soldiers," Kiljaren snarled. "What's going on here?"

"Then let me tell you something else you don't know," Marsalis replied, an edge creeping into his measured words. "Four days ago, a NetFile became accessible to the residents of Eamacron. It suggested that ISR was about to set up a base there, without permission of the government. It also suggested that ISR was preparing to

make a stand at this base and that the Eamacrons were going to be used as a living shield."

"So?"

Marsalis continued as though Mey had not interrupted him. "As it so happens, the file also noted that a party of ISR soldiers was on Eamacron, doing a reconnaissance mission. That was the *only* part of the file that was correct."

"You are beginning to bore me, Mr. Commander."

"Then let me share some more interesting facts with you. This small file naturally angered a few residents on that planet. Actually, angered all of them. When they discovered a few ISR soldiers on Eamacron, it sparked a full-scale riot. They injured several soldiers. Several hundred residents were wounded. A section of the Eamacron defence squadron left orbit, declared war and attacked three nearby ISR ships. ISR fleet ships that are, by standard policy, unarmed."

Kiljaren stared insolently at his captor. "What's your point, tin man?"

"While the ISR ships in that sector were engaged, the Karaash chose that moment to attack a city on another planet in that sector. They hit a race of pacifists, who were completely defenceless. Would you, Kiljaren Mey, like to know how many people they mercilessly slaughtered in their sleep?"

"Oh, tell me, do. "

Marsalis enunciated every syllable. "Forty-two thousand, seven hundred and twenty-eight."

"I see," Kiljaren nodded, after a short pause. "So, to cover-up your massive tactical error, you've chosen a citizen at random to accuse him of being a NetFiler with a tendency to stir up trouble?"

"Oh no," Marsalis' eyes glittered dangerously. "You weren't chosen at random at all. You were found. Or haven't you met the local Netter?" He nodded his head to Drachva. "You must have spoken once before."

Kiljaren turned his head to look and flinched. For the first time since he entered the room, fear flickered over his countenance. Drachva's reputation was known to anyone connected to the Net. He tried to face Marsalis with a brave expression.

"Well," he said mildly. "Now we both know I'm a NetFiler and that I uploaded that story. And several others. However, the use of Netters is illegal and anything they find isn't admissible in a court of law. Besides, you can hardly bring me to trial on charges of murder."

"You," Marsalis growled, "are as responsible for their deaths as you would be if you had killed them all with your bare hands."

"I filed a story. The people have the right to know."

Marsalis exploded upward, sending his chair into a wild spiral dance that ended when it smashed into a wall. "The

people have the right to know the truth! The truth is, ISR was at Eamacron to examine their technology, not to set up an entire base of operations. If you had bothered to take a single moment of your precious life to check your story, you might have found that out!"

"From an organization that likes to operate in secret?"

"Did it ever occur to you that the Karaash might have access to the Nets? Did you think it was simply coincidence that they attacked at the precise moment ISR was engaged?" Marsalis shouted. "Did you not realize that when you tell the people you tell the enemy as well?! When you tell the people, you also tell the Union. The Union is an unstable organization and everything that goes over the Nets adds to that instability. We operate quietly because we have no other choice. What do you expect us to do?"

Kiljaren thrust out his chin. "I was just doing my job. You still can't take me to court."

The temperature in the room seemed to plummet. Teshwa Zig, immobile until now, gave him a cool albino smile. "You aren't going to court, Mr. Mey. You are going to give us a name. And you are going to stop filing stories."

Kiljaren looked surprised and then relaxed into an easy laugh. "You want me to give up my source? And halt the biggest boom in my career? You're all crazy. Your armour must be on too tight there, whitey."

Marsalis issued a steely warning. "You will give us the name, Kiljaren."

The cocky facade was back. "Oh really? Or what? You'll parade me in front of the Union? They'll have me strapped onto a Dart and flown low over the trees? Everyone knows the Union is gutless. Give me a break."

"The Union has nothing to do with this. And let me remind you that Drachva is still in our employ."

Drachva glided over the floor to stand directly behind the captive. His eyes shone with anticipation as he leaned forward to whisper slowly into Kiljaren's ear. "Forty-two thousand, seven hundred and twenty-eight."

Kiljaren shivered violently and glared at Marsalis. "You wouldn't dare, Commander."

Drachva swayed gently to the other ear. "Forty-two thousand, seven hundred and twenty-eight," he breathed.

"Give us the name, Mr. Mey."

"I won't."

"Forty-two thousand, seven hundred and twenty-eight."

"I have rights you know!"

"Not anymore, Mr. Mey."

"Forty-two thousand, seven hundred and twenty-eight."

"You can't make me give up my source. I'll file a story on your threats! Then what will you do?!"

"You will not be filing any more stories Mr. Mey. The name, if you please."

"Forty-two thousand, seven hundred and twenty-eight."

"Stop saying that!" Kiljaren screamed.

Drachva bared his teeth. "But it is such a delightful, large number," he said softly. "It doesn't even begin to count the number of ways there are . . . to die."

Kiljaren looked wildly about at the faces of the High Command council. They were immovable in their half-circle, cold and stone-faced, awesome in their silent resolve.

"You wouldn't dare," he said again, but this time it was a plea.

At a movement from Drachva, the two dark aliens strode forward and took Kiljaren by the arms. He began to struggle, but his violent thrashing did nothing to halt their progress as they dragged him to the door.

"You can't do this!" he screeched. "You can't do this to me! I have rights!"

Drachva sketched a graceful bow. The door closed on his almost sensual whisper: "Forty-two thousand, seven hundred and twenty-eight . . ."

No one stirred. The universe ebbed and flowed around them.

"We should have stopped him before," Teshwa murmured, finally.

The room slowly cleared, leaving Marsalis alone in the audience chamber. He stepped over to the wall and pushed a button that opened up a floor-to-ceiling viewing panel. He stared up at the stars. The lights dimmed.



"Forgive me, Mother," he whispered. "For what I have done and for what I am about to do."

Then Marsalis, the man of such great patience and strength, leaned on the glass and sobbed brokenly against the cold fabric of space.

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Colm and Jonathan sat at the table, uninvited.

"I guess that answers our question," Jonathan said.

Adara looked up from the report she'd been trying to examine in the din of the Rec Level. "Which was?"

"We were wondering if you'd seen the data analysis from the scout missions," Colm replied. "I guess in your case, that's a rhetorical question, isn't it?" A robo-server floated up to the table. "What'll you have, Jonathan?"

"How about a nice tall Terran drink? Orange juice."

Colm laughed and gave the server the order. "I'll have . . ." he flashed a knowing smile at Adara, "two waters, please."

Jonathan frowned as he sensed the undercurrent between them. He tried to catch Adara's attention. "How's the leg?" he asked.

"On the mend," she said. "I still need another treatment before I can go back on active duty."

"Seems like I'm always asking you that question these days, or one just like it. I bet the medics know you by

name now, huh?"

"Yep," Colm mumbled, "the daredevil on a Dart."

"What was that?" Adara demanded.

"Nothing," he said in a louder voice. The robo-server produced the drinks and he passed them out. "Cheers."

"So," Jonathan said, after gulping down his juice, "what do we think?"

"I agree with the conclusion given here," Adara said. The report's author had examined the results of several different scout missions, including the one they had been on a few days ago. After looking at the diverse nature of the sites the Karaash had overwhelmed, it had been decided that they probably weren't using a single style of technology; instead, they were using a collection of stolen or copied items.

"So do I," Colm said. "The question now becomes, what are they using?"

"I've been thinking about that," Adara sipped at her own glass. "I've been trying to find a common element in all the attacks."

"There isn't one," Jonathan said. "I've been looking for the same thing."

"Well, there may not be one for all the incidents, but 35 percent of the places attacked by the Karaash were using some sort of satellite-based defence technology. That could be significant."

"It is a high number," Colm agreed. "Although that

could be just because it's an antiquated tech and easy to overwhelm."

"Not really," Jonathan said. "If you look at it as to how soft a site it is, all of the attack locations were easy to overwhelm. That's why we were there."

"Ha," Colm laughed. "Good point. So what's yours, Cohili?"

"I was thinking about probabilities. If you were to try to knock out a place that depended heavily on satellites, what would you use?"

"Gougers," said Colm instantly.

"What?"

"Pardon?" Both Jonathan and Adara gave him blank looks.

"Sorry," Colm grinned. "Officially, they're called parasitic orbiters. They're a small probe that you launch into enemy space. Depending on what they're programmed to do, they latch onto a specific satellite and alter its function somehow. What's more, it feeds on the target's power source to do it."

"Gougers?" Adara repeated patiently.

Colm made a scratching motion at her eyes. "It blinds the whole planet. Gouges out their eyes in the sky."

Jonathan shuddered. "Spooky thought. I wouldn't want to be that vulnerable." He thought for a minute. "Why haven't I heard of these things before?"

Colm shrugged. "They aren't as popular as they used to

be. A lot of systems have treaties set up to ban the use of them. I only know about them because my favourite area of study is communications and it's part of the history. There are a few places that still produce them, though. Ziki's home system is one of them I believe." The light dawned on him suddenly and he looked at Adara with respect. "Probabilities. I see what you're getting at. We pick the most likely technology and then pick the most likely producer."

"What, you mean guess what the Karaash might be using and then guess where they might have gotten it from, just based on 35 percent?" Jonathan looked dubious. "Sounds like a lot of `ifs'."

"It is," Adara conceded. "Looking at satellites alone. But if we look at other significant elements and crunch a few numbers-

"-and combine the probabilities," Colm continued, nodding vigorously, "we might narrow down the possibilities." He ticked off names to himself on his hands. "We should send a draft of your theory to all the 50th Classers I know with expertise in the tech this report has identified. That way we can gather up a few numbers. They'll have to send their data directly to High Command before we see it of course, but the top brass can plot a probability of their own, if they know what we're driving at."

The conversation was pulled to an abrupt halt when the

table display cleared and a message came in.

"Rilkens here. All three of you report to cargo bay number five, immediately."

They gathered their materials and hustled down to the cargo bay. Rilkens looked grim. Sark and two armed 100th Classers were with him.

"Mr. Sark has been working on the investigation I set you all on a few days ago. He has, apparently, been checking some of the lesser-used rooms on board the *Mat-1*. Rilkens made an impatient gesture. "Show them what you found, Sark."

Sark handed Colm a small piece of twisted metal. "Do you know what this is?"

Colm turned the piece over and over in his hands. "Sure. It looks like some sort of communicator. It's in pretty sad shape though."

"It's a transceiver. I found it in a storage bins," Sark said casually. "Since our supplier has never messed up before, I got suspicious and started doing a little checking. It turns out, someone made a transmission from this room with that device. Right before the news about the offensive units was leaked to the Nets."

"So it *is* someone on this ship," Jonathan growled. His jaw worked.

"That's the way it looks," Sark said. He levelled a glare at Adara. "You had quarters near this bay a short time ago, didn't you, Commander?"

"Watch your tongue 50th," Rilkens snapped. "I didn't ask you for specific charges."

Sark didn't back down. "It's just it seems very convenient, Commander Rilkens. ISR found her all alone on a planet and bought her story about the attack. She comes aboard and immediately starts to change things around so that we're in more danger. When that backfired, she began to study other ways to slow the force down. Whoever did this knew what they were doing." He came closer to Adara, stabbing his finger in the air and shouted. "The security analyzer has a record of a humanoid coming in that day, but there wasn't a single trace of DNA on the suit! She kept it dark, but she knew her way around this bay!"

Adara was rigid with anger and disbelief. Colm, his own pulse pounding, nearly stepped between the two, but remembered himself in time. He settled for interrupting the tirade. "Sark, are you seriously accusing Commander Cohili of being some kind of infiltrator for the Karaash?"

Rilkens cleared his throat loudly. Sark tried to reign himself in. "I'm saying it's a possibility we should consider."

"What is the suspect's body weight, Mr. Sark?" Adara said.

"What does that have to with it?"

"Comptrol," Adara alerted the computer. "Access security analyzer archives. Calculate from volume the

weight of the person who transmitted from this cargo bay on the date specified in current investigation."

"Accessing," the computer replied. "The subject weighed 95.254 kilograms."

"My weight is, including a full armour suit?"

"Commander Adara Cohili's combined weight is 65.771 kilograms."

Sark smirked. "That doesn't prove anything. You could have weighed yourself down."

"That's enough, Sark. I'll handle this." Rilkens said. "Comptrol, speculate. Could Commander Cohili be the unknown subject? Factor in hidden weights."

"Negative. The 29.483-kilogram difference is too great. Security analysis does not suggest an unusual humanoid profile, eliminating any hidden large objects. Security analysis materials profile does not suggest the presence of any dense compounds that would account for the difference."

"Satisfied?" Rilkens asked Sark. Sark nodded, but clearly didn't look happy. Rilkens turned away in disgust. "Comptrol, access personnel records. Who matches the weight and general profile of the subject?"

"Specify parameters."

"Within 10 kilograms, either way. Suits included."

They waited in silence as the computer sleuthed its way through the database. "There are currently seven male, humanoid personnel who fall between the specified

parameters of 105.254 and 85.254 kilograms aboard this ship. They are Commander C-

"Comptrol, stop audio. Analyze voice pattern records of those personnel and compare to transmissions made from this room. Is there a match?"

"Unable to confirm that analysis," the computer answered. "Transmission voice pattern was altered a minimum two times."

"Someone who knows their way around a communications grid then," Sark muttered, looking pointedly at Colm.

"That's enough Mr. Sark!" Rilken yelled. "You are dismissed!" He waited until Sark had stomped out of the room and then sighed. "Comptrol, forward personnel list to my office and to High Command as well." He acknowledged them all with his eyes. "Thanks for your input. Return to your duties."

Adara followed him out. Jonathan stared at Colm and then the mutilated transceiver in Colm's hands. "Unbelievable," he said.

"Isn't it just?" Colm said bitterly. "Those bloody blue things murdered her parents right in front of her eyes and Sark has the nerve to accuse her of being their spy. Don't leave me alone with that guy in the future." He threw the metal back into the bin and stalked out to find Adara.

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The hallway was silent except for the rhythmic *clip clip* of Adara's hard-soled shoes. She did not slow down when she heard Colm's step's echoing her own.

"Wait up, will you?" he panted, coming up beside her. "We need to talk."

"Yes," she said, as she rounded a corner and came to her quarters. "Who should I forward this draft to?"

They entered her room and Colm waved impatiently. "Not that, not yet. Are you all right about what Sark said?"

Adara sagged tiredly. "I'm fine. As far as I'm concerned, Sark just hung himself in the wind. He tried to pin the blame on me. If he understood anything about my motivations, or my thought processes, he would know that there is no way I'd be remotely connected to anything that would help the Karaash. Not after what I've seen." She trailed off for a second, her eyes glazing as dark images floated through her mind on wispy tendrils of memory. She came back to the present with an effort. "Perhaps *he's* trying to cover up something."

Colm sat on the edge of her bed, crossing his arms and pursing his lips thoughtfully. He gave her a long look. "And what are your motivations? What driving passion sent you to ISR, Commander Cohili?"

"It's not a matter of driving passion. I'm here to do a job and that job is to get rid of the Karaash."

"Why?"

"Because I have a score to settle."

"That's it?" Colm exclaimed.

"That's all. What else is there?"

"All the pain and suffering and hard work, just to balance out some cosmic accounting system?!"

Adara hunched her shoulders against the vehemence of his words. "I suppose you have some grand and noble reason."

"Well at least my reasons have something to do with real emotion," he sputtered, "and not some cold, rational desire for symmetry in the death count!"

"Hmph," she grunted. "Emotion. What the hell use is that? All it ever does is send people tripping over their own feet, head first into disaster. People with their eyes on their heart all the time are blind to everything else in the world."

"Well obviously," he said with some asperity, "but you can't just sweep it away. You have to have passion and joy and love and desire. You have to have wants and needs. Without them, you're the one who's going to run right into a wall! Emotions are the things that change you. They kick you out of your rut. They alter your thinking. You can't just lock them up. Just like you can't lock up your mind!"

"Can't I?" she said. "Can't I? When people think of anything besides survival they die! My family devoted all

their time to wonderful, complex thinking and they were hacked to pieces. Every time I've opened my mouth here, the very people I risk my life for have attacked me. Damn it, Commander, you of all people, should know this! Your own family beat you when you tried to think. That's why you left!"

"No!" Colm sprang up from the bed, months of anger, frustration and impatience finally boiling over. He stood no more than a hairsbreadth away from her and raged. "You stubborn woman! I left because I love life. I fight because I love life. Life is more than just survival. You shut yourself up like that and all your mind and your dreams will be trapped." He gestured wildly with his hands. "They'll smash against your walls, faster and faster, until they come together like some horrible inner fire and you burn yourself from the inside out and you wither and die! If you stop yourself from thinking, exploring, questioning, and experiencing we cut out the very thing that makes us better than the Karaash! You've got to think, no matter what it costs."

The words flamed around her, searing her, mind and body. She tried to stare him down, but the sheer intensity of his gaze forced her to avert her eyes. His chest heaved up and down and she could hear the air whistle around his nose and mouth as he breathed. It was too much.

"Get out," she whispered.

"No Adara," he moved closer. "Not this time. I will not

let you run away from this."

"I'm not running," she said. "I have work to do. Go away."

"Did you understand what I just told you? Did you listen?"

"Get out," she said again. "Why are you doing this to me? Leave me alone."

He put his hands on her shoulders. "I can't leave. I can't leave you. I love you."

Adara jerked backward out of his grip, stricken. "You can't!"

Colm let his hands fall back down, the vehemence startling him. "I do. I have since the beginning."

"No," she gasped. "You can't. You're lying."

"Adara, why do you think I'm here? Why do you think I keep saying these things to you?"

She looked at the door, searching for escape. Colm saw the look and tensed. "I'd only be here when you got back," he warned.

"You can't love me," she said. "I don't love you."

"I think you do. I'm the only who makes you lose control. I think you lo-"

"You don't understand!" she cried desperately. "I don't love you. Anyone who ever gets close to me *dies*. My mother, my brother, my father, Meeja, Janice, all those others under my command." She shuddered fiercely, straining against the inner turmoil. "Me," she hissed, "all

because of me."

Colm stared at her, horrified at the expression on her face. She stood before him as a naked child, hovering at the edge of a precipice, the unbearable weight of imagined guilt pressing her ever downward. "You can't believe that. Adara, you're killing yourself. Tell me you don't believe that."

"I hate you," she said. "I hate you."

"Please, Adara, don't . . . "

"I don't love you," she repeated the words like a prayer. "I hate you." She ran at him suddenly, throwing her full weight against him. He staggered backward, landing against the door. It opened to tumble him into the hallway. She ran to the locking toggle and punched until it shut the door.

"I," she panted, enunciating carefully, "hate you."

Outside, with every spoken syllable coming through the door, Colm died a thousand deaths.

For them both.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Matt Rilken was surprised to find Teshwa looking back at him on the view screen, but he recovered himself quickly.

"Yes, Commander?" he asked, politely. "Is there something I can do for you?"

Teshwa winced at the forced civility. "High Command is reconvening in about ten minutes time. Apparently, a fleet from the *Bir-Bir* finished with an engagement earlier this morning and an OSTD team has recovered a Karaash body. It's in good shape."

"That's good news," Rilken agreed.

"I also thought I'd give you some advance warning. High Command is furious over the Eamacron debacle and I'm betting we'll be making our first planned attack soon. They may even launch it within an hour of our meeting, to prevent our leak from getting the better of us again. I thought you might like to adjust your schedules accordingly to prepare."

"As you wish, Commander."

It hadn't been an order and he knew it, she thought. She tried again. "I've got to tell you Matt, I really hate these face-to-face meetings. I know Commander Marsalei prefers them, but it terrifies me to think of what would happen if the Karaash hit us then. Or even if some stupid anti-ISR faction from within the Union."

Rilkens' mouth twisted. "It's not for us 4th Classers to question the wisdom of High Command."

"Oh Matt, enough!" Teshwa snapped. "This is me you're talking to."

"My, how damned convenient," he said. "Now I'm supposed to talk to you. When it came to investigations, I was supposed to talk to Commander Zig."

"I had no choice and you know that. High Command was on my back day and night. The Union was screaming for blood. I had no choice. You understand the meaning of duty, Matt. I'm sure you would have done the same thing."

"I have a lot of officers under my command," Rilkens said quietly. "I've grown to know them over the past few years. I'd trust most of them with my life, if I were on the field again. But perhaps I'd do the same thing with them. However, I didn't confide my aspirations to them. I didn't join ISR along side them. I haven't hauled their ass out of trouble, nor have any of them hauled out mine. You're sure I would have done the same thing? To you?"

Teshwa's silver eyes glistened, but she did not reply.

"Since we're on the subject of leaks, you'll be happy to know that I can confirm that this ship has been the source of at least one suspicious transmission. I have a list of seven people who may qualify as suspects. Three of them are part of my OSTD, the other four are in the 80th Classer range. The list has been forwarded to High Command. How do you want me to act?"

Teshwa passed a hand over her face wearily. "What were you planning to do?"

"I was going to have the data bank searched for records of their movements during their free time. That should tell me who I should investigate more thoroughly."

"So be it." She moved to cut the link. "Keep me posted."

Rilkens sat more comfortably in his chair and dove into his work. "Comptrol," he said, "retrieve suspect personnel list. Cross-reference to ship security analyzer archives and pull up all relevant data on their non-duty-related activities. Display this week's duty schedule for adjustment. Alert OSTD personnel to remain on emergency standby."

He tried not to think about Teshwa.

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As the link terminated, Teshwa blinked rapidly to clear her eyes. She had hoped for something better from Matt, especially since it seemed that - finally - they were



getting close to what they had both dreamed about for so long.

She smiled bitterly and recalled a phrase that was often used on her homeworld: 'Reach not for the stars without preparation, for they will surely burn your soul.' She'd since found several variations on that same expression.

It seemed like that was what was happening. After so many years of inaction, slow plodding, the past six months now seemed like a flurry of sudden change and turmoil. New ships, new shields, recruits pouring in, weapons in, weapons out, NetFilers, leaks, riots, sabotage, treason. This morning had been the worst. It was all happening so fast.

The console in the private conference room beeped and Teshwa pulled herself together with an effort. 'Come on Zig, get with it,' she said aloud. "This is not the time to lose it, not now."

She walked the short distance to the audience chambers and joined the rest of High Command as they reconvened for the evening session. The fury from the morning had left them, leaving a sick, drained sort of feeling in the air. Most of them could still hear the sibilant whispered numbers.

Marsalis smiled benignly at them all. He had a manic look about him, as if he had been running all night and all morning and still had enough energy to race them all back to their posts.

"Regular business: how are things progressing? For those of you who received yesterday's refit orders, I mean?" he asked. There was a general chorus of affirmative replies. "Good, good. I expect all the new weaponry will be ready for tomorrow morning, as planned."

"Does that mean we have a site to attack then?" Bine Flayder wanted to know.

Marsalis' smile widened. "Yes, we have a site. As you all know, I released the scout mission analysis a while ago, in the hopes that if all the OSTD teams had a chance to look at it, their combined efforts might help solve the Karaash enigma. We have a lead now, thanks to a brain flash or two. If you'll all look this way please," he continued, pointing to the far end of the hall.

He darkened the lights and called up a display. It was a clear hologram of the stars. Karaash attack sites showed up as bright red flares against the black background.

"You're all familiar with this picture, I'm sure," Marsalis said. "This information has been totally useless to us. The Karaash seem to be everywhere, all at once. Sometimes, they seem to like to pick on certain areas," he pointed to a cluster of the blood-coloured dots, "and other times they appear to like to scatter their assaults. The intelligence we gathered from our raids on Union and non-Union planets confirms that the Karaash come from every conceivable direction.

"We now have a new picture. Using information on the technology we know they're using and the technology we think they're using, this is what it looks like. The dots represent probable sites of technical origin."

The display changed and the members of the High Command gasped. Two dozen pale blue spots wavered into being. They were widely scattered, but the pattern was clear - one could trace a circle around them and mark out a definite area.

Marsalis got up and walked into the display. "This encompasses a huge section of space," he admitted. "But now we have a fighting chance to find the rock the Karaash crawled out from under."

Loysa, who had been getting up to get a closer look at the circle, bristled. "By Nemenath, I resent the connection between those disgusting creatures and my people, Marsalis," he said indignantly.

Marsalis was stunned for a moment. "My apologies, Loysa. I had forgotten your homeworld's living arrangements. It's an old expression. I will endeavour not to use it in the future." He smiled weakly. "I meant nothing by it, of course."

Loysa subsided and the rest of the room broke into excited chatter. Teshwa's voice cut through the din.

"So where are we sending our troops?"

Marsalis indicated a moon just inside the edge of the circle. "Here," he said. "It's an abandoned lunar mining

station. Preliminary scans from *Toar* ships in that area show that it is occupied by many life forms, both in the buildings that still exist there and in the old shafts. None of the systems nearby are laying claim to the station and haven't done so for years, so it's being assumed that the Karaash are using it as a kind of outpost."

"Sounds like a reasonable assumption," Bine said. "Do you have a plan of attack in mind?"

"I was thinking of a two-pronged assault. A small force of five or six OSTD units will attempt a diversionary aerial attack on the outpost. According to some old design plans we've found, this station wasn't set up with any sort of defence system, so this force will only have to contend with the Karaash themselves."

"Which means this force is the one we are experimenting with, right?" Teshwa said.

Marsalis smirked. "Blunt as ever, I see. Yes, this is a sacrifice play, to some extent. We have no idea how the Karaash will react and there's only one way to find out. We won't keep them there long though. The other force, just one unit in size, will use the covering attack to penetrate the buildings and shafts and lace them with explosives. They'll have to be detonated while most of the Karaash are still in the ground. Above all, I want to take out as many Karaash as we can, without losing too many ISR troops."

"Learn, hit and run," Loysa said.

"Exactly," Marsalis said. "Unless anyone else has any better ideas?"

No one did. "What do we know now about the Karaash that we didn't before?" Loysa asked.

"Michael," Marsalis said, "you've been looking after that investigation. You know more about that than I do."

Michael Hamilton was wearing a puzzled expression. He scratched his head. "The body we recovered has given us more questions than answers. It doesn't even come close to resembling any race type known. It's," he hesitated, "it's like it's this really weird collection of biological parts."

"Their technology may be a collection," Jane pointed out.

"I know. But their bodies seem like a collection designed to be together." He frowned. "I can tell I'm not making myself clear here. What I mean is, that it's a collection of parts designed to be together, but it doesn't seem like a natural design."

Everyone pondered that statement.

"Let me give you some examples. Their respiratory system seems capable of separating and using eight different gases. That doesn't help us select a planet based on atmosphere, but more importantly our medical teams don't think it evolved naturally. The musculature is about seven times more powerful and reactive than it should be for the size of the things. The one we picked up has no

eyes."

"None of them seem to," Jane said.

"I know, but now it's confirmed," Michael replied. "We think it might use an advanced type of sonar, but we're not sure. It has the right kind of vocal structure for a squeak and receive system, but the brain on this one doesn't seem to have enough cells in the right area to process sonar perceptions."

"If it can't see, how does it fly a platform?" Teshwa wondered. "Surely they aren't using sonar to do that?"

"If they're getting their platforms from where we think they are," Marsalis said, "they fly using a direct neural connection. They've plugged themselves right into the equipment. That's odd in itself, because those types of links are highly dangerous. The chances for neurological feedback are very high."

Michael, lost in the wonder of his medical report, appeared not to notice the brief interruption. "The skin is what gets me. It's thick, really thick and tough. It takes up a huge proportion of body volume. The outer layer's cells are structured so that the skin diffracts light. We think that's why lasers don't damage them the way they should. *Bir-Bir* crews took runs at a lot of ground-based Karaash and didn't do any significant damage at all. The inner layer cells, on the other hand, are like microscopic heat sinks. Wherever they live, it's probably very hot."

"That would explain what I'm reading here," Jane said,

looking down at her datapad, "about further additions to the Darts. You've ordered some heavy duty changes."

Marsalis nodded. "All Darts will have frequency generators and amplifiers. The troops will have to play with it a bit to see if they can find a frequency that works on them, to interfere with their sonar. And the laser turrets, of course, but those are for shooting the platforms. Some Darts have been refitted with spray tanks of compressed acid. Tests show that it can work through the skin in about four minutes. We're looking for a faster compound but it will do for now."

Loysa shook himself. "What a horrible way to go."

"Is it any worse than what the Karaash did to those 43,000 civilians?" Marsalei demanded, his eyes bright. "We're not anywhere close to their level, Loysa and don't you dare forget it."

Teshwa tried to divert the conversation back to where it belonged. "What else are the Darts going to get?"

"Some will have more powerful versions of the hand stunners," Marsalis said. While the rest were fitted with electrified blades on either side of the Dart. Those are the Darts that will make ground sweeps to attack the ones that will be on foot. We don't have to worry about hurting anyone, since this is an assault, not a rescue."

"This has become very brutal very fast, hasn't it?" Bine said. "Why did you order these installations before convening the Command Council? Does the Union know

this?"

Marsalis swatted the holographic display off with his hand. "This Council, particularly me, wasn't decisive enough before. Some 44,000 people died because of it, remember?"

"It was 42,000," said Teshwa sharply. "Let's not make that any worse than it was, Commander."

"Does it matter?" he said, a caustic edge to his voice. "Does the number make that much difference? They're all dead." He addressed the whole Command again. "Besides, you are all here now. There is still plenty of time to make changes, if necessary."

"Who are we sending?" Jane asked.

"*Mat* and *Sargentus* fleets are closest. We'll send the units from the first three ships in each fleet. Any objections?"

"Yes," Teshwa leaned forward quickly. "That brain flash you talked about earlier came from the *Mat* fleet. I'd really not use those minds in a sacrifice play."

Marsalis gave her a humourless smile. "The fleet that has been very productive lately, I agree. But the hand that gives, is also the hand that takes away. *Mat* fleet is also the source of the leak, isn't it?"

"Yes, but-"

"I really hope, Commander Zig," interjected Loysa, "that you aren't suggesting that everyone else's personnel are more expendable than yours?"



In fact, Teshwa had been thinking that, but a look around told her she wasn't going to get any support from the others. They were happy with any arrangement that didn't involve their troops.

Seeing that she wasn't going to protest further, Marsalis let the question hang. "If we're all in agreement then, let's get separated again. *Sargentus* and *Mat* fleet Commanders can work out the actual deployments for themselves, subject to final High Command approval."

The meeting broke up. Teshwa stayed behind for a moment to address Marsalis privately.

"You're not going to try and change my mind about deployments, are you Teshwa?" Marsalis said. "I have other things to do just now."

"No," she said. "I wanted to ask if you were feeling all right. I noticed you slipped with Loysa tonight. It's not like you to make a cultural mistake like that."

Marsalei's face was guarded. "You're very observant. Yes, it was a mistake, but not a big one. I'd rather slip here, than in front of the Union. I'd like to think my Firsts and Seconds are more forgiving."

"Are you all right though?"

"Yes," he said, losing patience. "I'm fine. Don't you have an assignment to work on?"

After she left, Marsalis turned to find that Michael was the only other person left in the room. He was staring off in the distance, still pondering the wonders of Karaashi

biology.

"She's quick," Marsalis noted. "She'd make a good 1st. Don't you think?"

"Hmm?" Michael said absently.

Marsalis stared at his colleague with an expression of profound sadness. "Michael," he said, "you and I shouldn't be here, doing this."

## CHAPTER THIRTY

The lava stream writhed and frothed over the rock, glowing a fearsome red in the darkness. But blind K'Saka could not see it's terrible beauty. Two pointy ears caught instead the hot murmurs of the air currents, as the stream whispered its subtle warnings. *Touch me*, the lava said, *and touch naught again*.

The superheated air coiled around the king and his prostrate subject, cocooning them without blistering their thick blue skin. They had survived the First Test and the noxious elements of their chosen world would not penetrate their scars.

Sich squeaked excitedly, sounds spilling out of his throat and tumbling over his forked tongue. He claimed his report was direct from the front lines of the Search, from which he had just returned to the home world. To be granted a private audience with the king was an honour beyond belief.

K'Saka sat on a rock ledge, fingering a belt strap with bored disdain. The news was good, there was no question

of that. As the Duplicants worked overtime, the borders of Search territory expanded with exponential speed. More interrogations, more butchery, more glorious blood. They had discovered a new planet, teeming with fresh wildlife. In a flash of searing insight, the new K'Saka had sent the overfed Duplicant guards to fetch the food back; already many hundreds of thick, meaty carcasses had made the journey. The Placer was smiling upon them.

The squeaking went on endlessly. The buzzing in K'Saka's skull changed slowly into a dull throbbing and he wondered idly if he should kill the prone Karaash in front of him. A quick lunge, a sudden, snappish twist to the neck? A dagger swipe, neatly, swiftly, across the throat? He made a gentle motion toward his knife; Sich's voice caught imperceptibly and he twitched in the oppressive air. Ah, K'Saka thought, perhaps not so easy after all. A good fight at least.

The throbbing jarred loose a thought in his cluttered mind, which snagged his wandering attention. Hadn't he killed Sich once, long ago? There was a vague remembrance, dreamlike in essence. It didn't taste like a real memory; no, K'Saka could feel each of his kills as though he were living them all again. The heft of the blade in his hand, the tension in his muscles, the tang of death in the air. The murder of Sich had none of those, yet the memory persisted, a niggling worm in the cavity of his skull.

If he had killed Sich? Why was he here, licking the sizzling stone in obeisance? How had he escaped the black grip to the front lines of the Search?

A friend perhaps, K'Saka thought. A loyal companion had saved a shred of Sich's body for the Duplicant. If K'Saka was to make any more kills, he'd have to be sure he destroyed the body, utterly, completely.

But wait . . . what was that Sich was saying? K'Saka leaned forward, eager. New ships, new toys. A huge bounty of technological riches had been found. More weapons and tools to aid the Search.

K'Saka rubbed his hands with glee as Sich laboriously tallied the latest find. Those foolish Ancients! Years wasted in developing things to play with, when the soft, weak beings of other worlds had already created them. Why not rape them of their treasures and use the very product of that union against them? Stealth and speed and strength, yes! Conquered by the hand of the Placer, the weapon of choice an ironic twist of fate.

K'Saka began thinking of new orders for his most loyal subject. There was no other king K'Saka - he would have to be obeyed, wouldn't he? To the farthest reaches of his people, they would listen. Yes.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The last of the refit crews on *Mat-1* were just clearing away their tools when the doors of the BT bay opened like valves to allow a rush of soldiers through. There was a new air of excitement about them; they may as well have been fresh recruits for all their trembling anxiety. Quiet words here and there and furtive glances revealed the reason: ISR was on the attack at last.

Inside a BT, Adara's Dart reminded her of the patients she had seen come out of the sickbays. It looked like it was in good condition, but it the raw, unsteady look of something that had just been through a long surgical procedure. The underside bulged where they had moulded new material around a compression tank and the forward laser barrel gleamed. Primed for the attack, it had a more powerful gun and a belly full of acid.

"Comptrol," she said, "full systems scan."

"Complying."

"Commander," Ziki came running in, her face betraying concern and worry. "Commander, why have you mixed

our teams up? Dirk just told me that doesn't have the same mission we do. He said he has to go underground with explosives."

"I didn't set the assignments," Adara replied. "We're attacking a lunar station and we're being merged with a larger attack force. High Command picked the OSTD's from *Mat-1* and *7* and *Sargentus-3* and *9* to form an aerial assault team. It looks like they've taken a few from every unit to make up a smaller team to go into the station itself and destroy it."

"But who's in charge? Won't you be giving our unit orders? What about Commanders Smith and Patrick?"

"That's a lot of questions, Ziki," Colm said, coming into the BT. "I happen to be in charge of the underground team." He jerked a thumb in Adara's direction. "She'll command her regular squad, plus half of mine and Commanders Smith, Sark and Sheersa will do the same. The whole aerial team will be led by Commander Schermberg from *Sargentus-9*."

Ziki was indignant. "Why should he lead?"

Colm frowned. "Don't question High Command," he snapped. Ziki looked surprised at the outburst and backed away.

"Of course, sir. Um - I'll go to my Dart now," she said.

Colm watched her retreat. Adara tried to turn to her Dart before he could start speaking again, but he caught her arm.

"Adara, wait."

"I have nothing to say to you." She tugged at her arm.

"I said wait, damn it!" His face was suffused with anger. The strange change in temperament surprised Adara into standing still for a moment.

He started to say something, stopped, started again and stopped again. He looked like he hadn't slept in two days and his whole stance suggested fear and dark foreboding. His eyes seemed haunted. "Tell me you'll be careful," he said finally.

"Don't be stupid," she said.

This time he grabbed her other arm and pulled her closer. "Don't you see?!" he demanded. "You're the bait! You're there to distract them while we go in for the kill. We don't know how the Karaash are going to react today. It's a test."

"They're going to try and kill us," Adara said. "That's it."

"Just tell me you'll take extra care," Colm said, his voice filled with dread. "Something's going to go wrong, I can feel it."

"Name me a time in my life when something didn't."

He gave up, looking miserable. The computer chose that moment to report.

"All systems are performing at 100 percent. Unit is capable of peak performance levels at this moment."

She turned away from him and pulled on her helmet.



Her suit sealed with a hiss and she was locked into her own private world.

A comm link came to life. "Intership broadcast, Schermberg here. Aerial squadron commanders, your assault area coordinates are being uploaded now. You are to go to and clear your assigned area of Karaash and technology as quickly as possible, using whatever means are necessary. If you are successful, move your squadron to the nearest clearing area and place yourself under the command of that area's squad leader to help them. Continue in that fashion until you receive orders to withdraw to the command post."

The screen on Adara's Dart flashed and a tiny replica of the lunar based glowed. A red rectangle outlined her area. Another red dot, a small cluster of landed BT's some 30 kilometres away from the base, showed where the command post would be.

Schermberg continued. "The frequency emitters on your Darts will be controlled from command. Please make a verbal report on their effect once every five minutes."

The connection fuzzed and spat for a moment and then cleared. "Ground squadron commander, upload your assigned areas to your squad now. The aerial assault will last for precisely one hour. We have allowed you forty-five minutes to complete your assignment and fifteen minutes to withdraw to command. There is a fifteen-minute period after that, to allow the aerial teams to

withdraw. We will detonate your explosives precisely one hour and fifteen minutes after commencement."

The BT door crunched shut and the ship began its slow shuffle out of the bay. Schermberg's voice became stern. "I repeat, our orders are that we will detonate explosives precisely one hour and fifteen minutes after the attack begins. Our objective is to destroy this station, by whatever means necessary. Don't hang around."

\*

The BT broke through the thick, angry looking clouds and began regurgitating its cargo in the bitterly cold air. Adara hovered, waiting impatiently for her squad to assemble around her. She looked down at the station below.

"Comptrol, zoom in." Her visor clouded and an enlarged projection of the scene filled her field of vision.

The huge station lay in ruins. Patches of ice gave the otherwise colorless ground a dull grey gleam. The skeletal remains of abandoned buildings poked out from massive piles of rubble. Land and air transport vehicles and pieces of mining equipment lay overturned, their frozen underbellies open to the sky. Although there was some desolate vegetation elsewhere, the land around the station was nothing but broken rock, as though a skin had been pulled back to expose the very bones of the moon.

Vast craters appeared as open sores on the surface. The air moved sluggishly, stagnant and stale, as though weighed down by the decay it surrounded.

But the station throbbed with activity. Shockingly blue against the bleak destruction they lived in, the Karaash streamed from building to building. They moved in single file, popping up from mine shafts, crater edges and doorways, following distinct paths to their next destination. They worked around groups of new flying platforms and large foreign-looking air ships. Masters of chaos, butchery and confusion, they seemed to move with a perverse, precise, order.

"Automatic time check commencing," the computer intoned. "Aerial assault will begin in two minutes. Ground assault will begin in five minutes."

Adara swallowed hard and tore her eyes off the landscape. Her visor returned to normal. "Red Team," she said. "Arrow formation to these coordinates. Targets are entrances, Karaash technology and Karaash in that order. Keep them on the ground, or in it. Comptrol, proximity monitors on, search patterns one and two, Karaash and AeroDarts respectively."

"Complying."

The BT above them finished its convulsions and sped away. Two minutes scuttled by just as quickly and the Darts scattered. The attack began.

The arrowhead that was Red Team dove toward the

ground. It stayed locked in formation until it was just meters from the hard surface and then the tip Dart slowed to a halt. The others behind the tip moved ahead, but held their position so that the arrowhead seemed to twist itself inside out and stretch across the attack area. Then the formation shattered completely, as each rider sought out a target.

The still air erupted with the sound of the attack. Adara hurled her Dart at a mineshaft and opened fire. The twin bolts of energy ripped into the earth around the entrance, collapsing it to cut the arterial flow of Karaash to the surface. A cloud rose from the debris.

She turned away, scanned and took aim at a low building. Twisting to fly on her side, she flew across the front of it and strafed the foundations. Her Dart bucked with each shot, the powerful laser rocking hard against the flight stabilizers. She turned in a tight circle, took a second pass and a third, each time carving out huge chunks from the foundations. On her fourth pass, the building rumbled and crashed.

Ziki and Brad Manter streaked by. They locked together in a close formation and began a quick rolling attack on a short line of grounded Karaashi platforms. The platforms blew up one-by-one in quick succession, so that it sounded like a single, long, staccato explosion.

The surprise attack completely confused the Karaash. They halted wherever they were and threw themselves

down on the ground. Their mouths worked, they screeched into the air and they clawed at the dirt. The sky rained debris on them, pelting them with hunks of ore and metal.

Adara saw the trails of prone Karaash and felt calm confidence. She pulled up and started a spiral attack of her own.

\*

Above ground, the air had been cold and still. Below ground, in the entrance of a deep mine shaft, it was colder and it moaned through the tunnels.

Colm and his little band of saboteurs huddled together on their Darts for a brief moment. The heat from the machines was visible as shimmering waves in the light from above ground.

"In ten minutes, we will collapse this entrance behind us," Colm said. "When they assign a free squadron to this area. Our exit is the blue area on your map. It will not be assigned for destruction by the aerial teams. Be there in forty-five minutes. Meanwhile, pair up and take the preset route you've been assigned. Set your lasers for a fine beam and start ripping up the walls as you go. Kick up a lot of dust and partially collapse the tunnel every 1000 meters if possible. Drop the cylinders every 500 meters. Try not to engage the Karaash directly, we don't

have the time for it. Remember, forty-five minutes. Dirk, you're with me."

Everyone vanished into the gloom. Colm and Dirk adjusted their visors to see in the darkness and ducked into a tunnel of their own.

The passage was wide and they flew abreast of each other. The Dart lasers fired systematically, gouging the smooth walls and floor and creating a fine spray of rock particles. They kept their speed to a moderate level, staying just ahead of the expanding dust cloud behind them.

They came to the first 500-metre mark. A small opening appeared on the underside of Dirk's Dart and a tiny device dropped onto the ground, bouncing once. "Explosive cylinder released," the computer reported.

"What are we doing, Commander?" Dirk asked. "I mean, how exactly is this supposed to work?"

"The cylinders contain explosives, super compressed gases and detonators," Colm replied. "The partial collapses are to trap Karaash in pockets and to make the explosions more deadly. The gas cylinders will begin leaking three minutes after they're dropped, to fill the passageways with something that will not only blow, but stick and burn. Ripping up the walls creates dust, which slows the Karaash and will combine with the gas to create a more violently explosive compound."

Dirk moved his Dart as the passage narrowed and

moved again as it returned to its former width. "That's kind of sneaky," he chuckled. "Using their bad housekeeping, all this dust, against them."

"It's destruction on the cheap," Colm said sourly.

Dirk sensed Colm's bad mood and kept to himself. They flew on in silence, bobbing and ducking to adjust for changes in the tunnel structure. They slowed down at the first 1000-meter mark.

"Comptrol, wide beam," Colm said, swooping back to blast the ceiling. It caved in, creating a pile of rock that almost completely filled the passage.

"Good thing I'm not claustrophobic or anything," Dirk mumbled. "Or this would really give me the creeps."

"Why do you think you're down here?" Colm said.

"Because I offended High Command somehow."

Colm smirked. "I don't see how you, with your personality, could have offended anyone that much. Let's get a move on. This is one appointment I don't want to miss."

"Right." Dirk said.

They moved on, dropping a detonator again and then breaking another ceiling.

"On schedule," Colm noted, consulting his Dart screen.

"Commander?"

"Yes, Dirk?"

"There's something bothering me."

"What?"

"Why is it so quiet?"

\*

The Dart skipped a little, but held steady.

"Shields have fallen to 92 percent of maximum effectiveness. Attempting to correct."

A few Karaash had found their platforms. Others were firing straight up from the ground, using the remnants of the burnt discs.

Adara veered right to avoid another barrage. The sky had darkened further, so that it was now a solid mass of lead-grey clouds. In the distance, they flashed with sporadic lightning. A light breeze was stiffening into a brisk, gusting wind.

A group of Karaash broke away from the side of a building and began loping toward a free platform. Adara dove and fired off two quick shots. One Karaash took the direct hit in the chest and went sprawling backward. Another caught a glancing blow on the arm, but the force of the bolt was enough to send him spinning to the ground.

Adara arced up and twisted to come back and pick off the rest. She broke off the attack with a vicious word. Both Karaash were staggering upright.

"Comptrol, identify and lock onto assembly of Karaash targets. Prepare acid tank. Initiate spray sequence on fly



over, minimum waste."

"Complying. Please begin fly over."

She pointed the Dart back toward the Karaash and tucked herself in, feeling the controls lock as the computer took over the flight. She dipped low and then levelled out, the ground streaked by in a dull blur. She came closer and closer to the Karaash and closer still, until suddenly she was over them. The brief pop and hissing noise of the acid ejection was lost in the turbulence.

"An estimated 77 percent of acid hit specified targets. Shields are now at maximum effectiveness."

Adara whirled around in midair and hovered a few meters off the ground to watch. The Karaash continued their cantering run across the ground, unheeding. They covered ten meters before the rear creature twitched violently and slapped at his arms and back. It stopped running, spun around and crouched, spreading its arms out to try to catch its invisible attacker. Soon two more stopped running and began leaping into the air, swinging their legs wildly.

Within minutes, twelve of the group were writhing on the ground, twisting in desperate agony. The skin on their backs had blistered, turning from a bright blue to an ugly purple and then to an angry red. Clear fluid started seeping from the growing wounds. One beast thrashed onto its side, arched its back and began digging its heels

into the ground, running, grinding itself around in a circle. Their screeches were horrifying, loud and piteous over the din of battle. Adara watched with clinical detachment.

A Dart rider circled overhead and did a strafing run ahead of the remaining Karaash, blowing up bits of ground and rock. Ziki pulled up beside her.

"If this acid is effective, then all targets in this area have been hit Commander," she reported. "We can move on."

Adara checked her screen and entered a fresh set of coordinates. Then the air began to hum.

"Frequency emission has begun," said the computer. "Automatic time check, forty-four minutes to withdraw aerial team, twenty-nine minutes to withdraw ground team."

\*

The tunnels were narrower now, but they were flying faster anyway.

The eerie silence of the passageway made Colm's pulse pound and he was sweating in spite of his flight suit's internal temperature control. They'd passed two small, wandering groups of Karaash, slicing the air over their heads to ribbons, gone in a flash before the Karaash had even registered their presence. Dirk had sealed them in 367 meters later.

Where were they all hiding? High Command had hinted that there could be as many as 50,000 of them here. Had they all rushed out to hack the aerial team to pieces? Were they all on the surface, waiting for the Dart riders to fly, unsuspecting, into a seething mass of carnivorous, blue flesh? Where was Adara? Dread consumed him, but he dared not reveal his concern by calling up on the open links and private links were restricted. As the officer in command, he couldn't let his charges hear him worry out loud. Dirk was worried enough about Ziki's chances as it was.

The tunnel angled right sharply and the walls, before the lasers bit into them, looked jagged and scarred. They flew into and out of a node, a sudden spherical room linking separate tunnels, a marker in the dark underground.

"Cylinder released," said the computer.

Colm checked his chronometer. "We're fifteen seconds behind, boost speed."

They accelerated even more. Dirk consulted his map. "How extensive is this mining area? We don't have the time to go through the complex, do we?"

"No," Colm said. "There are hundreds of tunnels, but the routes were mapped to make the best use of the layout and structural faults. When they detonate our presents, the whole place will go up." His stomach churned. He hoped the aerial team wasn't going to be

trapped in combat above the station when it happened.

He shook himself roughly, trying to throw off his mood. "Chang, report please," he said into his helmet.

Chang's answer was preceded by an ear-piercing screech. "Hang on," Chang grunted back. Over the link there was the sound of laser blasts and rock fall. "We've found a huge group, Commander, hang on."

Dirk and Colm ducked under a low rock shelf. "Don't engage, Chang. Your orders are: don't engage. Get out of there."

More rock fall. "That's got them," Chang muttered. "We're okay now. We couldn't get through until we cleared some ceiling. Al-Al had to bring down half the tunnel. There's thousands of them down here."

Chang and Al-Al were in the lower tunnels. Colm tried to assure himself that's where the Karaash were. "Make the time up by skipping your next collapse," Colm ordered. He checked in with the others and issued similar instructions.

"Sounds like we got the easier route," Dirk commented when he was finished.

"Warning," the computer said. "Obstruction in flight path imminent. Reduce speed."

They stopped in the middle of a node. It connected four tunnels, two on either side of them, the one they just left and one directly in front of them. The one in front, the one they were supposed to use, had collapsed.

Colm turned to glare at Dirk. Although he couldn't actually see Colm's expression, he got the message. "Me and my big mouth," he said apologetically.

Colm didn't hesitate. "This way," he said, turning right. "It reconnects later. Double your speed."

\*

The thunder crack was so loud that the armour plates of her suit jumped and vibrated painfully against her skin. When the sound rolled its way over the station, it was replaced by the incessant whine of the frequency emitters and the howl of a wicked wind.

"Comptrol, visual enhancement." The sky was almost black now and the landscape was dark and devoid of any color it might have had before. The lightening flash had turned night into day, just briefly, freezing the battle scene into a tableau of murder and mayhem, before plunging them all back into darkness.

The Karaash were thick in this area, on the ground and in the air. The riders had not had the same luck in cutting off passages to the surface and many had escaped to fight. And the Karaash were no longer surprised.

"In for another run, Ziki," Adara commanded. Ziki pulled even with her Dart and the two went down for a low pass over the Karaash. They flew just two and a half meters above the ground, so close to the creatures that

their bright swords chopped at their knees and thighs.

The acid sprayed out in a plume behind them and whipped around in the wind, coating arms, heads, backs, open mouths. Some jerked and spat immediately, flinging down their swords to rip and tear at the pink tongue inside their mouths. Others pushed and shoved in the crowd, trying to chase down and attack the two Darts as they flew by.

Adara's comm link crackled. "Somebody help! I'm being pursued and I can't shake them off!" The air buzzed and a Dart rider sailed by, three black platforms close behind. "Shields are failing!"

"I've got them," Adara replied and pulled up. Ziki followed without being told. They accelerated hard, closing in on the platforms. The rider being chased snapped right, left and right again, attempting to dodge the triple attack. The Karaash matched her every move and Ziki and Adara matched theirs, so that the line looked like a metallic snake weaving through the air.

Ziki locked and fired, scoring a direct hit on the closest Karaash. The back of the platform flamed once and then the explosion consumed it. They swerved to avoid the debris cloud.

The other Karaash did not turn around. The lead flyer pounded the Dart with a hail of shots at close range. One, two, three slammed into the Dart's shields, coiling around it before dispersing. The fourth shot overwhelmed the

shields completely.

"No!" Ziki yelled, trying to lock again. Adara fired at her target and sent it spinning to the ground, where it blew to pieces.

Still the remaining Karaash did not turn around. It bore down on the Dart, firing continuously and annihilated it. It flew through the explosion with a screeching victory call.

"Dammit!" Ziki screamed.

The thunder echoed the blast and the black clouds above released their load, drawing a curtain of freezing rain between Adara, Ziki and their prey. Suddenly, the high whine of the emitters stopped, with no explanation.

"Automatic time check, twenty-seven minutes to withdraw aerial team, twelve minutes to withdraw ground team."

\*

"Come on, again," Colm said.

The two men heaved. The Dart scraped through the small opening in the blockage, another collapse they couldn't go around and slid across their feet.

"Yikes," Dirk exclaimed, more out of nervousness than pain. "It's a good thing I'm wearing these boots."

Colm was breathing heavily with exertion. "Let's get the other one. Move, move!"

Dirk scrambled through the hole and pulled Colm after

him. On the other side of the collapse, they floated the Dart up, guiding it with their hands to the opening. Leaving Dirk to hang onto it, Colm crawled back through the hole and then helped Dirk slide through, backwards, still tugging the Dart. It creaked and groaned, but finally came out without much damage.

They wasted no time. They leapt onto the Darts and sped away, without sparing so much as a backward glance.

Colm checked and rechecked the time. "We're okay," he said. "We've still got three of the five minutes we gained after that turnoff."

"It was a good straight run," Dirk agreed.

"We've got another long run ahead, but it's full of twists. We'll skip the partial collapses. It won't hurt us to get to the exit early." He called the others in quick succession. "The rest are ahead too."

They were flying so fast now that the cylinders were dropping out in an almost continuous stream.

\*

"Commander Schermberg," Adara said. "Commander Schermberg, please respond."

"I'm still not getting anything on the post," Ziki said. "Two of the BT's that are supposed to be there aren't showing up on the screen."



The moon station was receding into the background. Brad Manter had been left in charge of Red Team. The rain continued to pour.

"Commander Schermberg," Adara repeated. "Respond please."

Somebody groaned into the link. "68th Gabadoon here," came the hoarse reply. "Command post has been attacked. Who is this?"

"50th Cohili. What's the damage?"

"I- I don't know for sure," Gabadoon said. "I can't see anything. I'm pinned. Wait a minute, let me shove this-." There were rustling noises. Something crashed. "Oh my . . . who was tha- . . . Schermberg's dead," he said. "So's just about everyone else. They came up out of nowhere, on foot. They've just cut everyone, everything to bits!"

"Pull it together, 68th. Find out how much equipment is still working and start repairs if you can. Get the able wounded to help. We'll be there in a minute."

"Yes, Commander."

"Ziki," Adara said, "find the senior officers on the field. We need someone to take the command post right away."

"Yes, ma'am."

They landed right beside the wreckage, slipping and sliding on the patches where the freezing rain had iced the ground. Adara left Ziki to her communications and picked her way to where Gabadoon and two other soldiers were piecing a BT cockpit together. Two BT's

were still smoking in the rain.

"We're it," Gabadoon said. His helmet was missing and blood streamed down from the back of his head and dribbled down the silver armour on his back. "The two others who could move are attending to the wounded."

"Have we got a live link for detonation?" Adara didn't wait for an answer. "If we don't, get one."

"Commander!" Ziki came sliding in. "No one else can come off the field. Three of the senior officers are down and the rest are covering. You're it."

"Automatic time check, ten minutes to withdraw aerial team, two minutes to withdraw ground team."

\*

"We'll collapse this one and go," Colm said.

They turned and fired simultaneously and the tunnel roof rumbled down.

"Are we still ahead of time?" Dirk asked.

"Yes, we're on schedule. We've got just two kilometres before the exit. Then we have fifteen minutes to evacuate to the command post." Colm tried to feel some relief but couldn't. The sense of foreboding was stronger than ever. What would he find above ground? How was the aerial attack going?

"We'll have just enough detonators do it then," Dirk was saying. "I think I lost some when we pulled the Darts

through the rocks."

\*

The storm raged around them, blowing them over the ice patches, pounding them with huge chunks of hail. They could hear nothing outside but the wind and the sound of the hail on the tops of the BT's.

Adara's voice seemed to Ziki to sound strangely soft, preternaturally calm in the face of the fury around them.

"We need three more bulk transports immediately," she told Rilken over the link, "and medics to treat the wounded on the way up."

"They're on their way down now," he said. "Cohili, do you know if the Karaash bulk ships were destroyed in the melee? The storm is interfering with our scans."

"I can personally confirm at least three are gone," Adara said. "As for the rest, I don't know. We're just getting a live link to the battle site now. I still can't confirm if the withdrawals have started on time."

"We have four fleet ships in the immediate area," Rilken told her. "We know from the Eamacron incident that Karaash are just as difficult to handle up here as they are down there. We simply cannot afford to have those transport vessels leave the station."

"Understood, Commander," Adara said. "The station will be destroyed."

"Automatic time check, eleven minutes to detonation

limit."

\*

The blast tore the Dart to shreds and sent it spiralling into the side of the tunnel.

"Dirk!" Colm screamed. The tunnel filled with Karaash, gnawing, snapping, slicing, shooting. Colm's Dart sustained three hits.

"Shields have fallen to 53 percent of maximum effectiveness. Attempting to correct."

"Ground squadron!" Colm yelled. "Primary exit has been blocked! Repeat, we can't get out this way! Find another exit and withdraw immediately!"

\*

The BT cockpit roof and most of the side hull had blown off, leaving them exposed to the deluge of rain. It had warmed again and lightning flashed and streaked across the sky.

Adara stood stock still, shifting only when the gale threatened to toss her head over heels into the mire. One hand was clenched into a fist and held behind her at the small of her back; the other gripped a rail. Her helmet was gone, sacrificed for the undamaged circuitry it contained. A computer screen glowed defiantly in the

wreckage. It displayed the station and the land around it: with the attacks from the air called off, the Karaash were now pouring out of the ground by the hundreds, erupting like the liquid from a breaking blister.

Adara did not look at the screen. She stared off toward the horizon, toward the station, as though she could see the real activity there. Rain had plastered her hair to her head and it battered her eyes, making her blink rapidly.

"Automatic time check, four minutes to detonation time limit," the screen said, barely audible over the wind.

Ziki stood beside her, also searching the land. "The last air teams are coming," she shouted. "There's still no word on the ground team." She shifted from foot to foot, unable to contain her anxiety as she waited.

"Automatic time check, three minutes to detonation time limit."

Adara moved the hand from behind her back and gently tapped the screen. The display cleared and it asked her to enter the safety codes. She did so.

"Automatic time check, two minutes to detonation time limit."

The remaining air teams appeared as dots in the air, rapidly expanding to full size as they got closer. They flew by the BT's and circled back, landing to load what they could in the safe transports.

"Automatic time check, one minute to detonation time limit."

Adara keyed in the second code.

"Dirk and Colm - the whole team's still in there!" Ziki yelled. "They're all in there!"

Lightning struck the ground nearby, filling the sky with a blinding flash. The boom shook the ground and flattened the wrecks. Bits of rock rained down. Ziki saw Adara with the fading flash, her eyes hard and shining in an unreadable face.

"I know," she said.

The screen flashed. "Automatic time check, initiate detonation now."

The hand over the screen moved again. The hand on the rail did not. She could smell ozone.

"Detonation sequence has begun."

Even from that distance, over the blasting maelstrom, they heard the roar of the explosion. When the buildings went up, a bright orange fireball expanded majestically upward, a huge moving crown of death on the horizon.

Ziki dropped to her knees and screamed. "No, Dirk!" she sobbed. "Dirk!"

The rail under Adara's hand crumpled and snapped. But she did not move.

## **CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO**

"Confirmed," the computer replied. "The subject took extensive informal training in communications over the past five years. His movements correspond exactly with the dates and times of transmissions indicated in parameters. There is a 97.56 percent chance that this subject is guilty, according to specifics of the requested search."

Teshwa's jaw dropped and she looked at Rilken's image on the viewscreen. "Unbelievable," she said. "I've met him. When Marsalis gave me the name I thought there must have been some sort of mistake. But now you tell me your search has come to the same conclusion?"

"That's right."

"You can never tell, can you?" she wondered aloud. "I mean, I knew he'd caused some trouble there at the beginning, but what new recruit doesn't? How did he manage to keep so quiet all this time? How come no one noticed any odd behaviour?"

"That's irrelevant now, isn't it?"

"True," she sighed. "What do you intend to do now?"

"He went down with the aerial attack team and is currently in sickbay," he said. "I'm having his quarters searched right now."

"Why?"

Rilkens frowned at her. "The other 2.44 percent. The image of my fleet has been smeared enough, without adding an unfounded arrest to it. We expect to find an intercepting link directly connected to the terminal in his quarters."

"If you do, that means he knew what High Command was doing before High Command knew what it was doing."

"Yes."

"This is unreal"

"The last BT docked three minutes ago. There are no life signs at the station. We have declared all hands on the ground team assignment, lost."

"Matt, I'm so sorry."

"So am I."

\*

The sickbay hummed with activity. Medics rushed around worktables and yelled for assistance. There were lots of wounded. The emergency cases took priority, while those with minor hurts waited in a side room to be treated or inspected for injuries.



Adara sat in that room, between Jonathan and Brad Manter. The three Pilfers sat across from her, along with two women and an alien she didn't recognize. Sark sat on the floor, leaning against the wall, eyes closed. They all looked battered and tired; they had their armour turned off and they had stored their weapons. They were silent.

When four guards marched in then, they looked out of place. Two had stunners at their belts, the other two had them in hand. They looked fresh and angry and their armour plates shone in the bright lights.

"Which one is 50th Classer Sark?" the one in front demanded.

"That would be me," Sark answered, without opening his eyes.

"I regret to inform you that your brother has been in a serious accident while you were on duty. Your parents are requesting that you contact them right away."

Sark's eyes flashed open. "Is this a joke?"

"No sir. Commander Rilken asked me to pass the request on if I saw you while I was here."

Without a word, Sark scrambled onto his feet and out the door. Brad Manter and one of the Pilfers exchanged a glance.

The lead guard whirled to face the bench where Adara was sitting. "49th Classer Jonathan Smith, you are under arrest."

Brad's eyebrows shot up. "What?!" The rest of the room

came to full alert.

Jonathan looked stunned. "On what charge?"

"You are being charged under the Interplanetary Treason Act, the Information Technology Act and the Crimes Against Sentient Life Treaty. Under the ISR Justice Code, you are being charged with gross misconduct, criminal negligence of duty, failure to uphold your oath and conspiracy to commit multiple murder."

No one moved.

"The leak," Brad said, slowly. "He's the damn leak!"

Jonathan shrank back, pulling his feet up from the floor and bringing his knees under his chin. He turned to Adara, his eyes imploring. "Don't believe them, trooper. They're lying. I'd never do that to you." He dropped his voice to whisper conspiratorially. "It's all my mother's fault, you know. She made me do it so I could be like my sister. She always told me how to do things. My sister was always better."

He leapt up, looking wild. "I didn't do it!" he shouted. "I hate the Karaash!" He crouched. "She was always better. She wouldn't join ISR, she was going to be an ambassador, just like Mother. This was my job. My job!" he screamed. "I was doing it my way. The Karaash do it their way. Nobody pushes them around. Not even us. They have the power over life and death." He grinned his handsome, engaging, maniacal grin. "Just like me. 49th

Classer, soon to be 1st! Power. Life and death."

He stood up and sketched an elaborate bow. "Ladies and gentleman, non-humanoids, half-Terrans and noble guests. I am not guilty of the charges you just heard." He placed his hand over his heart. "I am an innocent man. A victim." With that he laughed hysterically, threw a fist in the guard's face and ran.

A stun blast caught him at the door. He crumpled in a heap. The guards each grabbed a limb and hauled him up roughly. He was sobbing as they carried him out. "I didn't do it! Let me talk to my sister. She'll tell you the truth. Please?" he bawled. "Where's my sister?"

The door closed on a room in shock.

\*

"Smith was one of the survivors. We had assigned him to the air team," Michael Hamilton said, first scanning and then setting his datapad down. "They'll likely have him by now."

Marsalis did not turn away from the panorama of stars. He laughed humourlessly. "Of course he was a survivor. The gods do not dispense justice anymore."

The bitterness was hard to miss. "The raw data coming in looks good," Michael said. "They don't seem to change their tactics when they are on the defensive. We can fine-tune our own methods. There were very few air team

fatalities. We've recovered ten intact Karaash bodies for study." He drew a breath. "There were more than sixty-five thousand Karaash down there. It was worth it, Marsalis."

Marsalis turned to give him a sharp look. "Sixty-five thousand on one, tiny lunar mining station on the outskirts of what we *think* is their home system. How many more of them are there? How many more sacrifice plays are we going to have to make?"

"Not all of our assaults will be like that."

Marsalis ignored him. "I should have changed our ways long ago." He turned back to the stars. "There is no chance of finding anyone from the ground team?"

Michael shook his head. "They never made it back to the surface. They've been over it three times. We can't find them."

"Then give the orders to withdraw. We need those ships elsewhere."

"Yes sir."

Michael left and Marsalis continued to look at the stars. He was trying to count them, but one number kept pounding through his thoughts, scattering them.

*Forty-two thousand, seven hundred and twenty-eight.*

\*

*The sun shone down warmly, making the dewy grass*

*sparkle. It was slippery beneath her feet.*

*She followed the beaten trail from their hut to the Tasker's hut. She was late again, which meant she'd likely have to do two extra chores. In spite of that, she didn't hurry. It was a beautiful morning. She hated waking early, but now that she was up and away from her mother's eyes, she was determined to enjoy herself. She dawdled. She thought she could smell smoke coming from the village.*

*The path bent. She stopped. Just to the side of the trail were Ekulic and a girl from the village. He wasn't looking at the girl, he couldn't. Instead he kept his head down, his hands behind his back. His toe dug a small trench in the ground. He was saying something and it must have been funny, because the girl was giggling. She couldn't look at him either. She stared down at the basket in her arms.*

*Adara's face broke into an evil grin and she stepped off the path and into the brush. Taking care with the loose branches and the crinkly leaves on the ground, she sneaked up to where the two young people were still murmuring nonsense at each other. She crawled under a small shrub. She waited until there was a break in the halting conversation.*

*"Googly eyes, googly eyes, googly eyes!" she yelled.*

*Ekulic and the girl both jumped and turned bright red. The girl took one look at Ekulic and fled in the direction*

*of the village. He could only stammer and watch her go.*

*Laughing too hard to contain it any longer, Adara snorted loudly. Ekulic whirled around and glared at the shrub. "You're gonna get it this time," he snarled.*

*She bolted. She emerged from the brush and ran down the path, her little legs pumping hard. Ekulic came after her, spitting curses and promising retribution. She ran until her breath failed her and she faltered just for a second. Ekulic's hand came down hard on her shoulder and he pulled her to the ground. He sat on her.*

*For a moment, all he could do was pant and scowl at her. He tried to think of what he was going to do. She stayed still, not at all afraid and waited until he was about to speak. Then she lifted her hands to either side of her face, waved them, stuck out her tongue and made a long, loud raspberry noise.*

*Ekulic was surprised enough to keel over laughing. He reached out and dug his fingers into her ribs and tickled her until she started laughing too. She tried to squirm away, but he caught her and they began to tussle in leaves, rolling over and over, each reaching in to find a sensitive spot, barely able to breathe with the force of their laughter. Ekulic rolled to his feet, reached down to pull her up by her arm . . .*

*...and jerked her up to eye level. Turning and twisting, Adara tried to break the thing's iron grasp, averting her gaze from the face with no eyes that looked at her. A*

*blade flashed and Adara felt cold steel slide into her arm. She jerked back in pain as the blue being raised its gore-slicked sword.*

*Bodies lay all around her . . . Ekulic, Sivlee, Drevek, Meeja, Janice, Dirk, Colm, Ziki, Chang, Colm . . . and they all screamed curses at her from dark holes in mutilated, burned faces. Adara watched in helpless fascination as the creature flicked its incredibly pink tongue over its lipless mouth and teeth. The sword flashed up and whipped back down, plunging itself hilt deep into her chest . . .*

The lights flooded the room when Adara bolted out of bed. Her chest heaved. She looked down at it and ran a cautious hand across it, still feeling the fiery penetration. She couldn't hear anything over the sound of her breath rattling in her throat.

She got up from her bed and dressed quickly and stepped out into the hall. She wrinkled her nose. They had been cleaning the lower decks when she'd left sickbay a few hours ago and the smell still lingered. It was choking and musky; it reminded her of taka beast.

*Obsession, repression, depression, suppression.* The words floated through her mind and she shook her head, trying to clear it. The rhyming words had started when the ship had heaved itself out of orbit. They irritated her. She clamped down harder.

She found her way to the gym and went to her

customary spot. She worked mechanically, unthinking, unfeeling. She kept her face motionless, eyes fixed, as though she was still a recruit being inspected in a line-up.

Ziki entered the gym and came over to Adara. They had not seen each other since they had boarded the ship. Her eyes were red and puffy and her shoulders drooped. She looked at Adara's bleak countenance sadly.

"Hello Commander."

"Ziki." *Revision, decision, derision.*

"I'm off-duty now," she said. "But I thought I'd come and see you anyway."

Adara changed the workstation and started again. *Anthro. Aphro. Dethro.*

Ziki sat down and wrung her hands. "It's going to be a while before I'm back to myself." She smiled limply. "If I ever am. I- I just wanted you to know that I still intend to work with you."

The chin-ups were starting to make Adara's arm muscles burn. She pushed herself further.

Ziki stared down at her feet. "I mean, I said some stuff down at the station. When," she paused, trying to collect herself, "when it happened. I didn't want you to take it the wrong way. It was a situation. You took control. You followed your orders. Dirk and I knew the risks." She looked up. "I don't blame you, Commander. I just want you to know that."

"So noted."



Ziki's eyes filled with tears again. "I'll be in my quarters if you need me," she said and left.

Adara switched to sit-ups.

*Convulsion.*

*Revulsion.*

## **CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE**

Two long, slow weeks dragged by. Nothing changed. The Karaash continued to attack single planets in widespread systems. ISR continued to respond. The cycle of life that this part of the universe had come to know, went on.

Teshwa Zig stepped into the sim hall on one of her fleet ships and secured the door behind her. "Continue transmission," she said.

The images of the rest of High Command appeared around her. She wasn't sure whether to be relieved or worried. Marsalis had finally settled for a virtual conference, than a real-time session. The risk to the Command structure was reduced. At the same time, however, it was an unusual change in style for him. He was hands-on, up-close, and personable. Why the distance now?

She sat down. Marsalis called the meeting to order. "Reports," he said.

They issued their reports, one by one. Bine had two

ships engaged, Loysa six. Casualties were higher than usual, but not desperately so. Jane had enough new people spread throughout her fleet to warrant the commission of another new ship. One would be requested.

"There is some progress on the frequency emissions," Jane noted in her summation. "In our last run, we found that more of them were dropping into that odd, convulsive state than normal. They stayed that way for longer too."

"For what frequency?" Teshwa asked.

"That's the funny part. It's not for one specific level. It seemed to happen only when we moved quickly from a low frequency to a high one."

"Take note of that and make the appropriate changes in your orders," said Marsalis. "Michael?"

Michael stood. "As you know, we've been examining Karaash specimens from a number of prior engagements. We picked up ten from our own assault and we have recovered six since then. With the number we have to look at now, we've reached a few conclusions. Seven out of the sixteen are almost exact copies of one another. Only three came from the attack site."

There were a few raised eyebrows and glances exchanged. Jane said "I knew everyone thought they all looked the same, but I didn't think they all . . . really looked the same."

"We think they're clones," Michael added.

"By Nemenath," Loysa exclaimed. "I haven't heard that term in a long, long time."

"For good reason," Michael said. "Cloning hasn't been in use for years. For those of you who don't know the term, it's an early genetic manipulation and duplication technique."

"Why don't we hear about it anymore?" Jane asked.

Michael sat back with the air of a lecturer. "Historians typically say that other genetic engineering techniques eliminated the need for cloning. Scientists became adept at other techniques, like creating new cells from scratch. As a tool of science, what we know of cloning was simply left behind."

Loysa blinked. "If the Karaash are cloning themselves that means we could be fighting them forever. They can't die."

The images of the other Commanders fell silent as that horrible thought sunk in. Teshwa chewed her lip thoughtfully. "Does the dating of cloning give us any more clues to the Karaash origins?"

"It might," Michael conceded. "Although there really isn't a way to pinpoint when exactly cloning died as a useful technology."

"No," Teshwa leaned forward. "It likely faded out of general usage over a period of time. But look, we haven't been able to pick a specific spot in that Karaashi zone,

because there are dozens of unclaimed planets and even whole unsettled systems within that area. Perhaps if we looked at specific historical events in that area, over that time range, we can eliminate some possibilities."

Michael's brow furrowed as he concentrated. "Interesting," he said and pulled up his much-abused datapad. He tapped a few keys and stared at the display for several minutes, scrolling through text. Then, appearing to notice the idleness of everyone else, he impatiently altered the simulation transmission. Images of his pad readout appeared and the rest of the High Command began searching as well.

"Here's something interesting," Bine noted. "After a particularly vicious civil war on Dayshone 15, one of the larger factions seceded from the planet. According to this they were violently anti-technology. They had a particularly charismatic leader who promised to take them to a utopian existence 'where intellectuals wouldn't tamper with the natural order of things.' It says they packed up everything and headed to the Luid system." He did a cross-reference. "They've never been heard from since."

"Luid system?" Jane said. "Isn't that the one that was a raw ore bonanza a couple of centuries ago? I seem to recall a joke calling it the Mother Lode or Mother Luid system."

"Abandoned mines," Teshwa noted sharply. "A whole

system of abandoned mines."

Bine looked horrified. "You don't think that those people who left Dayshone are the Karaash do you?"

Michael nodded thoughtfully. "Possibly. It wouldn't be the first time a cult leader has based his power on being against something and then turned around and used it himself. And if they had a history of suppressing research, they probably didn't have enough background knowledge to understand what they were doing or how to use it correctly. Obviously something has gone very wrong there."

Teshwa sighed. "How many times will we have to learn the same lesson over again? It's no use being against something like that, or trying to suppress knowledge because as long as there is just one curious, sentient being about--"

"Never mind that," Loysa interjected excitedly. He was waving his hands and nearly bouncing off his chair. "You'll never guess what my OSTD team told me they just found!"

\*

The little roboserv produced the necessary tool and handed it to Adara. She bent her head and poked it into the open access hatch that sat next to the BT bay entrance.

Most of the circuitry on the security panel was fried, thanks to a careless power rerouting. Adara had been on the repairs tour for three days and been asked to fix it.

She detached the useless panel and handed it to the roboserv, which giddily raced to the nearest Fetcher niche and dropped it off. It zipped back to her side. The thing irritated her. She could almost hear it panting eagerly. She began cleaning the connections to the old panel, so she could install a new one.

Faintly, she could hear the awful grinding noise of a transport ship coming into the bay. Within minutes, the grinding noise was replaced by the sounds of shouting voices. Someone ran by her in the hallway, knocking the roboserv into a spin as they went by and ducked into the bay. The hapless 'serv rolled into the open bay doorway and settled upside down. It fidgeted, but couldn't right itself. The door sensors noted the little object and did not shut. Adara ignored it and pushed a new panel in place. She picked up another tool and began the reconnections.

Suddenly she stopped. One voice carried across the bay and through the door clearly. She shook her head and thumped it with the heel of her hand, trying to clear it. She waited for it to go away, but it didn't. The voice came closer and she stood, turning to look through the open door.

Dark hair, broad shoulders. A laugh and a smile.

She dropped her tools and began walking. This was

new. The rhyming words had stopped three days ago, but the smell of taka hide hadn't left her. Now she was getting visual hallucinations.

The voice called her name. She began walking faster.

She tried concentrating on the sound of her feet hitting the floor. It had a soothing, steady rhythm. But in a flash it had an echo. The voice followed her.

It called again. She began to run.

The corridors passed by in a blur. She streaked by people in the halls, pushing past them or shouldering them aside if they were too slow. She ran and ran and ran, turning down different paths, never stopping.

The voice called a third time. She doubled her speed, her legs working frantically to move her away. She skidded around a corner and slammed into the door to her quarters, beating at it until it opened to admit her. She looked around wildly, threw aside the single chair in the room and pulled open the storage compartment where she kept her spare morph suit. She found her stunner.

The door opened. Colm stepped across the threshold and without looking, reached back and touched the locking toggle.

With one hand, Adara rubbed her eyes furiously and blinked several times. She was breathing hard. The vision did not vanish.

"I'm real, Adara," Colm said. He didn't take his eyes off her.



"No, you're not," she panted. "You're dead. This isn't real."

"I'm not dead. I survived. We all did."

"Commander Patrick is dead. I killed him."

"That's not true. We got trapped at the exit by Karaash trying to go back underground. We backtracked to our other exit. When the detonators went off, the explosion flipped a transport ship over the exit and sealed us all in. We were nearly buried, but we were able to cut our way into the ship."

"This is not real," Adara said. The hand holding the stunner had begun to waver. "I killed him."

"We got lucky. We were able to patch the ship back together and cleared out, but then drifted when the engines failed. We finally got them fixed and flew out two days ago." He took a step forward.

The stunner jerked. "Keep away from me."

Colm's eyes filled. "It's worse than I could have imagined, isn't it? What have you been doing to yourself? What have you been thinking over these past two weeks?" He stepped forward again.

Adara fired over his shoulder. He flinched and stopped. "Keep away from me, damn you. I killed you. It was me! *Me!*"

"I'm here, Adara. I'm alive."

"No!" she screamed. Her faced was filled with pain and confusion. "No! *I killed you!* I set off the explosion! *Me!*"

My hand! I killed you with my own hands!"

She turned, grabbed the side of her bed and ripped it away from the wall. With superhuman strength she flung it at him. He ducked and ran under it, emerging from beneath it to grab her wrist. He brought it hard against the wall, knocking the stunner out of her hand. He pinioned her other arm and crushed her to his chest.

She kicked and screamed. "Let me go! I murdered you! I killed you! Let me go!"

Tears streaming freely down his face, Colm struggled with her for what seemed like hours and held her until her strength gave out. She collapsed against him and was still.

He sat down and pulled her across his lap. He pressed her face against his neck and wrapped his arms around her.

"I am not dead. You did not kill me," he whispered. "You are Adara."

She began to tremble.

"Let it go," he urged, his voice raw. "Please, please let it go. Adara, let it go."

She gripped the front of him, shaking and writhing in anguish. Finally, in great, wracking sobs that threatened to tear them both apart, she broke.

She poured out her heart and the flood of grief that escaped her destroyed her walls and smashed her very soul. She cried with all the force of an innocent child and

all the pain of a shattered adult.

\*

Some time in the night, she woke. She felt empty, drained. The lights had dimmed.

They were both lying on the floor. She pulled herself up on one elbow and looked down at the man sleeping beside her.

There were rips here and there in his uniform and it was still dusty in places. His face was bruised and his jaw was roughened where a short beard had begun to grow. His eyes were closed and the dark lashes seemed even darker against the shadows around his eyelids. A small cut traced a reddish path across his cheek. She reached out and lightly touched it.

He awoke instantly and trapped her hand against his cheek. "I didn't even stop for the medics. I had to see you first." He turned his head and pressed a kiss to her palm. "For a while, I didn't think we were going to make it. The thought of you kept me going."

She withdrew her hand and sat up with her back to him. He pulled himself upright and drew a slow, gentle hand up her arm, to her shoulder, across her back and down again. "Come here," he said softly.

She didn't move. "I can't."

He sighed. He'd been expecting this, but it hurt him all

the same. "Can't?" he said bitterly. "Or won't?"

She squeezed her eyes shut. How could she tell him of the one burning coal inside that had not yet been extinguished? How could she allow him the closeness he deserved while they still risked everything they had? "Please," she said hoarsely. "I can't."

Colm stood, too weary, too heartsick to argue and left her alone in the darkness. She hugged her knees tightly against her chest and dropped her head. She did not know if she could stop crying this time.

## **CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR**

Four full fleets massed on the border of the Luid system. One by one, each ship came alive with frenetic movement and the determined members of the ISR mobilized for another attack.

Dirk found Colm as he emerged from his quarters. He looked happy and he met Colm's eyes with a twinkle in his own.

"Ready to roll, Commander?" he asked. "I haven't seen you in days."

"I've been busy training the Loader and Unloader crews on the new Darts. I'm not sure whether High Command let the Union know about our last success and it suddenly got generous, or whether the rest of the force has been bankrupted, but it seems like everyone now has a Dart."

"Tell me about it," Dirk grinned. "They've had me training people to handle those new ground level transports, although I barely know how they work myself. We must be throwing everything we've got at this system."

"Sounds like it." They struck out for the BT bay.

"I wanted to let you know something before we got busy," Dirk said. "Ziki and I took the liberty of making sure people knew what happened with Commander Cohili the other day."

A brief flash of pain passed over Colm's face that he quickly covered with a look of puzzlement. "Okay, I'll bite. What happened?"

"As far as Ziki could tell, the panel Commander Cohili had been working on had a sudden surge and burned her. She ran to her quarters for her emergency kit, because she knew sickbay would have been backed up with the morning's rescue. She was obviously in pain and you went to help her."

"*That's* what happened?"

"Well," Dirk said with a shrug. "We wouldn't want to have people get the wrong idea about their best officers. There's no need for idle talk."

Colm stopped them both and gave him a stern look. "How exactly did you make sure that people got the right idea?"

Dirk tried to look nonchalant. "We just went around to talk everyone, that's all."

Colm folded his arms across his chest.

"Er," Dirk mumbled. "We brought Pilfer along with us."

Colm leaned forward.

"That would be all three of Pilfer," Dirk amended. "Just

to talk."

Three hairy Roikans and two polite, but extremely firm OSTD officers. Colm couldn't help a smile. "I wish I could have seen that."

Dirk brightened. "Everyone was most agreeable. How is Commander Cohili?"

Colm laughed and clapped him on the back. "I'm sure they were agreeable," he said, deliberately ignoring the question. "Let's go."

They jogged to the BT bay. Both moved into the transport quickly and began the launch routine.

As he waited for his Dart to power up, Colm looked around the battered interior of the BT and smiled ruefully to himself. He was getting heartily sick of this routine.

\*

Drachva handed him a helmet. It felt strangely heavy in his hands.

"I want to thank you for all your assistance," Marsalis said. He looked at the craft that was waiting for him. "Financial and otherwise."

Drachva studied his hands. "You may thank poetic justice for the financial assistance," he said. "Not us. My associates and I decided to keep Kiljaren's profits, which were considerable. Because your Karaash population estimates, however, which could make for a prolonged

and disruptive battle, we changed a long-standing policy. We tried to persuade anyone else who had profited from Kiljaren's source to make a donation to your cause. We thought it was fitting." He feigned a look of surprise. "Everyone was quite amicable to our . . . suggestion."

Marsalis gestured at the ship. "Is everything ready?"

"Exactly as you asked." He handed Marsalis the access pad. "I shall miss dealing with you."

Marsalis looked at him sharply. "What makes you think you won't be dealing with me again?"

Drachva shrugged. "You look to me like a man who does not expect, nor wish, to return."

Marsalis said nothing. Instead, he offered him his hand. They shook solemnly and parted ways, neither looking back on the other.

\*

They did not surprise the Karaash this time.

The sky over the system's sixth planet was an aerial nightmare. In the first ten minutes, hundreds of the Karaash had managed to become airborne and their platforms spat death and destruction at every angle. If the Dart riders weren't busy with the flying ovals, they were engaged in bringing down the three huge transports that were attempting to move into orbit.

Adara flew in front of a party of twelve Karaash and



baited nine of them away. They began firing at her before she was even in range of their weapons.

"Comptrol, automatic evasive manoeuvres," Adara said.

"Complying."

The Dart dropped like a stone. The two lead Karaash did not correct in time and they flew overhead, directly into the path of seven other platforms. The collision scattered metal and blue flesh everywhere.

The Dart halted, hovered for a millisecond and snapped sideways. With barely any lag, the Karaash followed. "Comptrol, pivot laser," Adara grunted, struggling with the sudden change in direction. "Fire at pursuing targets."

"Complying."

On her Dart screen, Adara could see the cluster of platforms that hunted her jerk aside with every shot she fired.

"No good," she muttered. "They can see it coming."

"Please make commands more specific."

"Comptrol, return to manual. Return forward laser to original position."

"Complying."

Adara thumbed the controls and angled the Dart into a sharp climb. The Karaash gained and nearly crashed into one another in their eagerness to attack. They trailed her in a single line.

"Comptrol, release acid burst!"

A hail of shots smashed against the shields and they

crackled angrily in reply. The Dart spewed acid, splattering the first Karaash. The first Karaash immediately let go of its controls to rip at its ears, lost balance and toppled off the edge of the craft. It plummeted, still clawing its own face.

The unpiloted platform went into a backward spin, smashing away the control grips of first one, and then two platforms. The explosions enveloped the other platforms in fire and they tumbled to the ground.

Adara did not have time to draw breath before a renegade flyer careened into her, broadside.

"Shields have fallen to 11 percent of maximum effectiveness. Attempting to correct."

The impact sent her into a skittering elliptical spin. Still on manual, she could not control it. On the ground, a Karaash took aim at her falling Dart and blew it out of the sky.

\*

"Phase two of assault now commencing," the computer told him. "Ground transports have locked on targets."

That was his cue. The ground transports would be dropping charges down the various shafts and holes and firing explosives into the hundreds of craters this desolate rock was spotted with. He'd have to go in now.

The sleek, black craft sped over the battle scene, easily

evading the sporadic fire that was aimed his way. He paused for a second over a vast crater rimmed with Karaash ships. Hundreds of the snarling, shrieking creatures were crawling up and over the edge to the surface. He guided the craft into the great maw and flew down the throat of the planet.

\*

The transport had ceased rising. Colm became hopeful.

Flanked by four other Dart pilots, he took another strafing run along the top of the craft. The aft and starboard side caught fire and began to smoke.

The ship returned fire, with great thundering blasts from guns along its side. Two pilots strayed into bad airspace and caught the bolts full on. They were disintegrated.

Colm swore. "Take out those guns before they power up again!" he barked. "And track their target locks!"

Two Darts swooped in, taking aim. Eight platforms gave chase immediately, firing a series of rapid shots at the Darts. Caught between the chance of a blast from below and a definite attack from above, the riders had to break off and split up. The guns boomed again, this time taking out two Karaash flyers.

"Thanks," Colm grunted and steered his Dart to take on the remaining platforms.

\*

He shut the audio alarm off. He knew it was too hot. He was drenched in sweat; his biosuit was completely overcome.

The tunnels twisted and turned. He scanned the view screens rapidly, searching, searching. Where was his target hiding?

He switched directions and found himself on a long, straight run that brought him deeper into the planet.

\*

The black mist cleared. Adara raised her head.

She was lying on her back, beside the smoking hulk of her Dart. It had fallen nose down, twisting to the side and it had nearly buried its front half in the ground. While the rest of her body had been thrown clear, her arm was bent at an awkward angle and crushed beneath the Dart. She tried moving, but the slightest twitch brought her fiery warnings from her shoulder.

The attack continued without her. Darts and platforms streaked around her and the ground rumbled with the depth charges being dropped by the ground craft. She had crashed not far from the center of the battle.

"Comptrol, raise Dart one meter from ground level."

"Unable to comply with instruction. AeroDart

propulsion systems are damaged beyond reparable levels."

She tugged again and nearly fainted. The pain was intense.

Then she heard a sound that made her freeze in terror.

A quiet hiss that ended with a squeak.

She turned her head to one side. A Karaash was crawling over a rock. Toward her.

It twisted its head this way and that, sniffing, listening. One clawed hand curled around a sword hilt; it lifted the monstrous blade easily. The tip was covered with blood, which dribbled down the length of the razor edge, over its fingers to its wrist.

The Karaash knew where to direct the awesome strength of their blows; armour could be cleaved away from the body with a simple downward swipe, leaving the rest of the flesh so vulnerable.

*...smashed her brutally to the ground . . .*

Laser fire pummelled the ground around them. The fight went on, heedless of the horrific drama about to play itself out. Adara struggled with her panic. If she didn't move, she would be killed. If she moved, she would be killed.

*...that same hand curled around her arm . . .*

The Karaash stepped away from the rock it had just scaled. It lifted its head, caught a scent on the breeze and screeched. It moved faster, more confidently. It knew

where she was.

*...the face with no eyes that looked at her . . .*

"Comptrol," Adara breathed. "Is the weapons system working?"

The Karaash came closer. It tossed its sword from hand to hand. Spittle dribbled from the corner of its mouth.

"The forward end of the weapons system is .75 meters below ground level. It is capable of discharging the remaining energies, however the rotary mechanism for positioning the system is damaged beyond repairable levels."

*...looked at her . . .*

The Karaash swung its sword upward, reaching up with both hands to grip the handle.

"Comptrol! Fire!"

The sword flashed down.

The Dart jumped as the laser fired into the ground. In the split second that it lifted, Adara rolled sideways, pulling her arm free. The Karaashi sword drove into the ground where she had been.

She stumbled to her feet, cradling her arm. The Karaash howled with rage and heaved on its sword. It pulled free. The creature spun, sniffed once and lunged. It swung in a wide arc, the blade whistling through the air. Adara dropped back to her knees and the blow barely missed her head. The Karaash, expecting a hit, overbalanced and toppled over her. It was forced to let go of the sword and

throw both hands forward to brace for the fall.

Adara was knocked forward onto her face as it scrambled. She twisted at the waist and grabbed for the only weapon available: the impossibly heavy sword. The Karaash recovered, crouched and leapt snarling into the air. Adara, her good arm straining with the effort, dragged the sword flat across her chest, but only had enough time to wrench the blade so that the edge was facing upright.

The Karaash landed, flat out on her. The blade was sandwiched between them, but the armour plates on her chest prevented it from biting into her soft flesh. The creature jerked back in surprise and pain and a long gash opened across its belly. It flipped onto its back, screeching and before it could move again, Adara staggered up, standing the blade on its tip. She leaned against it, letting the full weight of the metal and her body fall across the Karaash's neck. The impact on her shoulder made her scream in agony

The shrieking cries ended with a sudden wet, sucking noise. Adara pushed herself away as the first rush of blood pulsed out of the neck, soaking into the ground. Blue arms twitched and quivered and then lay still.

Shaking, she fell back and tore off her helmet. She heaved once, a dry, rasping sound and then threw up into the growing pool of blood. Around her, the air began to whine, as the frequency emitters started their work.

\*

K'Saka cocked his head, his attention drawn away from the map of the stars he crouched over.

From above, a wondrous noise filtered down through the tunnels and caverns that had been carved into the planet. A voice. *The* voice. The Placer.

K'Saka stood and raised his hands above his head, exultant. He, the mighty king had succeeded, where all before him had failed. He had called The Placer. The Placer sang to him.

The noise filled his ears and penetrated his clouded mind. His muscles began to spasm and the Saisiss gripped him, throwing him limply to the ground, where he shook, senseless to the outside world.

\*

The black ship flew into the wide cavern. Strange machinery connected the walls to the ceiling, the walls to the floor.

*For what I have done. For what I have not done. And for what they shall never do again.*

He keyed in an instruction.

*Forty-two thousand, seven hundred . . .*

*... and twenty-nine.*



The ship tore itself apart, taking the machinery and the cavern with it to oblivion.

## **CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE**

Several hours later, the BT's limped home. On the large display screen in the Union audience hall, the reports came through quickly, flashing numbers, names, and locations. There were lots of names.

Sitting in a chair, Michael Hamilton ignored the reports. He stared instead at a datapad in his hand. It had belonged to Marsalis. Tears poured down Michael's face, soaking into his collar to darken the already dark cloth.

The words on the pad were perversely cheery, complimentary and exceedingly polite. They told Michael how Marsalis' aides had pinpointed the location of a cloning facility on the target planet. They told him of the sleek black ship, the explosives and the final call to action for the Marsalei family. It offered no explanation, except perhaps the mention of a haunting, five-digit number.

Of course, the pad had a list of instructions and suggestions on how to deal with the next meeting of the Union. Who to promote in ISR, who to soothe in High

Command. That was the part that hurt so much. It was so typical of Marsalis, to be the diplomat even unto his grave.

Michael walked over to the view port and looked out. The stars winked. One, more than any of the others, shone brightly in the night sky, cold fire spilling out into the blackness. Touching the glass, Michael prayed that his friend had finally found peace there, in that furnace of the heavens.

\*

“...and then at this point you should probably understand that my sister was very upset with me, because she always gets upset at times like this and so she called me a bunch of really filthy names and of course this made my parents very angry because they were raised differently and don’t believe in using that kind of language and . . .”

The slaver looked down at the bubbly person in his cargo hold and tried not to pull out his fins in exasperation.

“If I gave you your freedom, where would you like to go?” he said, finally.

“Oh well, I suppose there are lots of places I’d love to visit, I haven’t seen half the galaxy yet and there are tons of places that would be so interesting to see, but I guess I

probably should report to my friends as they've got to be wondering what happened as I'm sure they didn't think to ask nearby ships if they'd be making slave salvage trips to that moon, so likely anywhere in this sector would do for the time being as I'm sure I can find . . .”

The slaver huffed back to the bridge of his ship to give the orders to stop at the nearest starport.

\*

The next day, in the relative calm after the storm, Matt Rilken was surprised to find it had been Teshwa who had called him down to the Rec Level.

"Please," she said, indicating the chair across from her, "sit." He did so, not sure what to expect. He hadn't even been aware she had boarded. Then again, he'd been busy.

"How are things going?" she asked.

He looked at her with more than a little suspicion, but he answered readily enough. "Everyone is recuperating and repairs are on schedule. Mostly, everyone seems numb. We haven't had time for memorial services yet and there will be a lot of them. Everyone seems concerned about the future. Oddly enough, there isn't any outcry over the damage we sustained because of our aggression. It seems like we may have surpassed that argument, at least on this ship, for now."

"Yes," Teshwa said. She had only really heard half his

answer. "We've confirmed what everyone suspected. It was Marsalis who went down there."

"I'm truly sorry to hear that," Rilken said. "I didn't really know him that well, but this force, hell this whole galaxy owes him." He shook his head sadly. "Has High Command chosen someone to take his place?"

"Amazingly, he left instructions on that," she said. "He wants, wanted me."

Rilken's eyebrows lifted, as he considered that statement. "He chose well then."

"Marsalis didn't talk to anyone much, ever, but when he did, it was to Michael Hamilton. Michael was his advisor. He trusted him more than anyone." She folded her arms and rested them on the table. "Michael is devastated, of course, and wants to return to his former duties, as a medical specialist. If I were to take this position, I don't know who I'd trust enough to help me like he helped Marsalis."

Rilken looked at her for a long time. Finally, he said, "I know someone."

Teshwa's silver eyes flashed. "That someone would have to be able to forgive past sins."

He grinned sheepishly. "Already forgiven. I've been thinking about this for a while. If you can forgive me for being overly sensitive—"

"Not to mention grouchy."

Rilken looked indignant. "I have never been grouchy!"

Teshwa, full of joy, signalled to a roboserv. "Okay. Never grouchy. Irritable maybe? And real pest when it comes to rules?"

\*

In the gym, Colm strained and stretched in his workstation. Over time, he became aware that someone was staring at him.

He glanced at the bench beside the door. Adara was sitting there. Her eyes did not waver.

He shut down the station and walked to the bench. He sat beside her and mopped at his brow. "How's the arm?" he asked.

"Feeling abused. Again." she said, glancing down.

"Mmm."

There was an awkward pause. Finally, she shifted a bit and said "I just received a communication from Interstellar 1275-A. They're planning to start a colony. On Taiamoora." Not knowing what else to do with her hands, she let them drop onto her lap." As the only one who can truly be considered a resident of that planet, they have asked me if I would like to be the governor."

"Honorary?"

"No. It's a real position. High Command is even thinking of establishing a permanent base there, to help get things started."

Colm tried to search her face, but she was looking down. "That would involve leaving ISR. The Karaash aren't gone yet. There are still thousands of them out there."

"I know. But with our first real victory, people are signing up by the thousands. There will be plenty of others to take my place." She frowned. "The Selortians announced their firm backing too, if you can believe that."

Colm bit his lip and said nothing.

Adara went on, trying to fill up the silence. "Ziki wants to move up and with the change at High Command, there will be a chance for a lot of promotions all the way down the line. She'd easily fill my spot."

Colm didn't reply.

She drew a deep, shuddering breath and closed her eyes. "I'd like you to come with me."

He still said nothing. When she opened her eyes, they sparkled. "Colm, don't make this any harder on me," she said. "I need you. Come with me."

"Say that again," he said quietly.

"I need you. I want you to come along."

"No," he shook his head and leaned toward her. "Say my name. I've never heard you say it before."

She looked at him and shyness flitted across her face. "Colm," she said.

He leaned closer and gently kissed her lips. They stayed

like that for several long moments and then slowly drew apart.

"On one condition," he sniffed, his eyes moist with tears.

"What's that?"

"That you stop making cracks about the Selortians."

She was startled. "Well, okay. Why?"

"Did it ever occur to you that I was a Selortian?"

She gasped. "With a name like Colm Patrick?"

He looked at her severely. "I changed my name, silly. I was raised on Selort."

"Oh." She suddenly remembered all her indiscreet remarks. "Oh my. Colm, I'm so sorry. I never meant to-"

He cut her short by giving way to laughter. "If you could have seen your face!" he gasped.

She tried to get angry with him, but his laughter was infectious. Soon she dissolved as well and they leaned against each other for support. Once they'd regained their breath, she reached behind her, pulled something out and pressed it into his hands. Then, just to prove she could, she kissed him.

He looked down at the object in his hands. It was the juice bottle he'd delivered to her quarters so long ago and forgotten. He thought she had thrown it away.

She hadn't. But it *was* empty.