

# Mostly Deadly

## Chapter 1

Regardless of how supposedly equal a society is, being hit in the face is generally not something most women are prepared for when growing up in the galaxies. The fist in question drew back again at the end of a rather flabby, hairy arm, ready to meet its target again.

Velisa Hayee was just gaining her balance and focus in the direction of the offending fist to try protesting.

“No, wait a min...” was all she managed to get out before the next punch connected directly with her cheekbone and the side of her nose. There was a distinct crack, followed by a large amount of pain and the strange sensation on the floor rushing up to meet her face as it pivoted away from the source of the impact. She pushed herself up on her hands, observing the pool of blood spreading out on the floor, which was leaking swiftly from her right nostril.

“You green face scum,” she spat as her head turned to glare at the assailant behind her who was still on his feet.

He was an obligatory standard spacer that spent too much time in the command chair of his ship and not enough time in the exercise clubs. Guys like him ended up a little too overweight then turn the gravity off to make them feel relaxed from time to time and then get even fatter due to not having to make any effort to move themselves around. This guy had not gone too far, but was on his way. He was fresh from the pilot seat, still a little sweaty and unwashed. His appearance was made even more unpleasant given that his skin had a slightly blue tinge to it and around the neck was some evidence of now probably useless gills. Obviously, his ancestors somewhere far back were some type of aquatic life form.

Velisa observed him with contempt and wondered how his humanoid and whatever else ancestry had even managed

to produce offspring. The thought sickened her and made her contempt for him grow. This is exactly the situation she didn't want happening to her today. She'd come into the bar for a nice quiet drink and been very pleasantly surprised that she had been approached and chatted up by a man who for once she had not found utterly repulsive, annoying or stupid. She'd even been starting to consider inviting him back to her hired quarters when it had all been spoiled by the appearance of the fat frog descendent pirate and his cronies. He was evidently new to the whole pirate thing. Any longer term scumbag wouldn't have bothered, but this one was up and coming with something to prove.

Velisa eyed the two cronies standing just behind her assailant. They glared down at her, with mocking expressions, hands resting on the concealed weapons in their coats. The frogman pointed a flabby blue tinged hand at Velisa causing the fat on his arms to wobble slightly and it was as though he waited for it to stop before saying his piece.

"You've been told before, not to come into our bars." The slight gurgle to his voice confirmed his amphibian ancestry. She stood up slowly, smoothing back her now slightly messed up hair. Most of it was still tied in a ponytail but some had now escaped, framing one side of her face. She tried to move it again and failed as it fell back with one hand and wiped the blood from under her nose on the back of the other. It was a useless gesture as it was quickly replaced by a fresh batch that ran down her chin, dripping on the floor and down the front of the immaculately white top she was wearing.

"Look, I'm sorry..." She spat out the blood that had run into her mouth, "I'm sorry if you're annoyed by my presence, but come on. This isn't really an official bar is it?" She looked around at the other assembled patrons who tried to look innocent. "You move them every day to another empty section so that the station officials don't get wind of them and even if

they do, you wouldn't be here when they come looking for you." She drew herself upright a bit more and grabbed a towel from the bar to wipe her face on. "I obviously know the right people to be able to even know where to look for the place, so what's the big deal?"

"You are not a member of the clan. You have no right to be here and pumping our other members for information is the kind of thing that will get you killed, quickly." One of the cronies un-concealed his sidearm and pointed it at Velisa's chest.

"You are well known as being a serious pain in everyone's side, underhanded, massively annoying and you're not far off a general shoot on sight order."

"Oh come on." She put her most innocent, girly face on. "Little old me."

The fat frogman turned to a crony.

"Just shoot her please. Now!"

The tall human crony eyed her up and down around the sights of his gun in appreciative manner. Velisa posed slightly as best she could while covered in blood and let him get a good look.

"Do we have to?" he said, "I don't like killing a good looking woman. It makes me feel so bad afterwards." His view was instantly blocked by the bulk the fat man.

"I don't care how you feel. She's trouble. We don't want her around any more. Shoot her." His arm wobbled into pointing at Velisa again.

"Do we have to actually kill her?" The frogman's gills flexed slightly.

"Fine, shoot her in the knees." He turned back to find Velisa right in front of him, nearly nose to broken nose.

"Oh come on. You wouldn't do that would you?" she said, trying the innocent girly approach one more time.

"Oh I would." He grabbed her round the neck with a fat greasy hand, and the stench of him managed to permeate her

nostrils past the pain and swelling that was just starting to set in.

Velisa's would be suitor who had decided to keep a safe distance from the affray at the start, chose that moment to step in.

"Hey," he said. "The lady isn't doing any harm. We were just having a quiet drink together." The second crony drew his own gun and pointed towards the approaching suitor who raised his hands instantly.

"Back off scumbag," shouted the fat pirate. "This has nothing to do with you. Besides, do you really think your chivalry is going to have any effect on this piece of hermit dung?"

The fat man's expression sudden changed to a state of shock, his breath held. He stared wide-eyed into the face of the suitor who returned his gaze with puzzlement.

"He's right you know," said Velisa, her voice changing. "Although I don't know any woman who wouldn't appreciate a little chivalry, it probably won't work on me. Besides, I can take care of myself. Also, I'm no lady."

The frog pirate slowly turned to look downwards towards his chest, where Velisa's hand was pressed against him.

"I would have let you get away with just a bit of a fight and some harsh language, but I was having a nice time, with someone I didn't instantly hate. Secondly, you ruined my brand new, really expensive top and that really pisses me off." She looked down at her hand. "You need a matching stain."

The pirate's hand dropped from Velisa's throat and his cronies started to move round to see what was actually happening. His other hand began to lift shaking violently towards Velisa's head and started to poke his fingers into her bright red hair, separating it more from the tie at the back. Velisa bared her teeth towards him and with sharp movement of her head, she jerked away from him and withdrew her hand

revealing he source of discomfort. Protruding from the underside of her wrist-mounted, multi-function device was a thin blade about six inches long, covered in slightly slimy blood. He stared wide-eyed at it, the apparent obviousness of the situation just starting to dawn on him. He looked down again at the growing stain of blood appearing in the chest of his own shirt.

“And don’t ever touch me with those fat, greasy, stinky frog hands.” Her comment raised the eyebrows of a couple of other aquatic ancestry life forms within the bar, but they quickly decided against saying anything.

The two cronies began raising their weapons towards Velisa and quickly stopped because of the sensation of a hard metal object pressing into the back of their skulls. A tall man with a face covered in hair and a split lip leaned over the first one’s shoulder and spoke closely and directly into his ear, revealing his pointed teeth.

“I really wouldn’t be so stupid as to point that thing at the mistress.” The whiskers on his face poked the crony in the ear and side of the neck making him shudder. “That’s the kind of thing that gets a guy’s brains shot all over the wall.” A furry hand closed round his throat and claws dug in.

“Jansen. You really didn’t have to get involved you know.” Velisa smiled towards the feline mischievously and he smiled back. They’d done this routine before.

“I know mistress, but I couldn’t possibly let this one shoot you. He’s way to nice looking for that.” Jansen licked the neck in front of him with his rough tongue and clamped his large, well-built arm around him restraining him as he struggled uselessly to get free. “You ain’t going anywhere yet sweetie.” Jansen slowly took hold of the pistol being pointed at Velisa and pocketed it. Velisa drew closer to the fat pirate frog again, staring directly into his slowly drooping eyes and he started to shake. She was amazed he’d managed to stay standing this long.

“Consider this a warning.” She looked at the two cronies in turn. “To everyone.” Through gritted teeth, she spat the next words in his face. “Leave me the hell alone.”

The first crony struggled again.

“If you really want to do something sweetie, go ahead,” Jansen whispered in his ear. “I wonder if she’ll just shoot you or drag you behind our ship through witch-space without an EVA suit on.” He was convinced and stayed still. Crony number two was still holding his weapon wondering what to do.

“Is this guy ever gonna fall over?” Velisa asked, pushing the fat man in the face. As he began to pitch backwards the second crony decided he had a chance.

“You complete bit...” He just had a chance to say as his finger went to pull the trigger. A bolt of light sprung outwards from his face, splattering Velisa and some of the other patrons with his blood. He dropped to the floor, leaving a trail of smoke that ran back to the pistol of the second man stood next to Jansen. Barely a second later, the fat man finally hit the floor and rolled a little to one side with a distinct wobble.

Velisa’s face was screwed up, eyes closed against the incoming blood and gunfire. She wiped a hand down her face and blinked her eyes open, glaring at the gunman.

“Damn it Sobal. Did you have to do that?”

“I did warn them,” said Jansen. “Now where are his brains?”

“He shoot mistress.” Sobal’s voice was high-pitched and very quiet. “Cannot allow.” His grasp on common speak was not as good as Jansen but he got the point across.

“You could have warned me,” she said, wiping one eye.

“Short time. Must shoot.” Sobal holstered his weapon.

“What shall I do with this one?” Jansen pulled the only remaining member of the gang towards Velisa. She eyed him up and down.

“Not sure what makes him so pretty, but I’m only human,” she shrugged “You can have him if you want. Or just

let him go.”

“Your lucky day big boy.” Jansen kissed him on the cheek, digging his claws into his neck just enough to draw a little blood and let go of him. The crony needed no further prompting, running straight out the door.

Velisa shook her head and wiped her hand under her nose again, sending a fresh bolt of pain through her face. She kicked the soles of the fat man lying in front of her.

“He broke my damn nose, that disgusting slime faced scum.” She uselessly tried to wipe some of the mess from the front of her shirt then turned to face her would be suitor who had been slowly trying to back away the entire time.

“So,” she said smiling, “Does that offer for dinner still stand?” He stared back at her, fear on his face, blood all over hers.

“Err... I’m not... Maybe another...” he stammered.

“Thought as much,” she said.

“Mistress.” Came a voice behind her. Jansen and Sobal were standing at each shoulder. “I really think leaving would be prudent.” Jansen said in his gravelly voice.

“Leave must. Patrons aggressive looking. Lots of.” Sobal said.

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea.” She nodded, and then knelt down next to the two corpses. She rummaged in the frog mans pockets, trying not to be sick. She pulled out a card, and pressed it against her wrist device.

“*Credit transfer*,” said the small computer voice.

“Four thousand, two hundred credits,” Velisa said into it.

“What doing mistress?”

“*Place thumb print*.” Velisa pressed the fan man’s thumb onto her wrist device and gagged slightly when she saw the greasy fingerprint it left.

“This is a genuine Ranne Kranvech,” she said pulling at her top. “It doesn’t look like much but under certain light

conditions, when you are close to a sun with the right frequency of light, it has the most amazing pattern on it. Like nothing you've ever seen."

"Have you ever actually seen it?" Jansen asked.

"It's brand new. How could I?" She tossed the card back onto the fat man's corpse. "That's why he's paying for a new one."

The Night Whisper's engines fired blasting the ship out of the station leaving behind a blood splattered bar a fair amount of worried lowlifes. Velisa was sat in the command chair, scowling. She was wearing a different shirt, and her face was cleaned up. All that was left to give evidence of the incident in the bar was a slowly spreading bruise that started on the left side of her nose and spread across her top lip. Next to the command chair was a small bag with a gold K on the side.

"Seriously." She said. "That guy sucker punched me."

"Well of course he did." Jansen's athletic frame was lying under a control panel at the back of the command deck, tools scattered on the floor. "He was a pirate." He slid himself out from under the console. "They're not known to be the most honest and fair fighting people in the galaxies now are they, mistress?"

"Yes, yes." She waved her hand dismissively at him. "Just fix the damn food dispenser. Next time I get a coffeen, I want it under 100 degrees."

"Yes mistress," he said and slid himself back under the console.

"And for the last time, stop calling me mistress."

"I cannot do that mistress. You are my commander and..." She cut him off. It was a very old argument.

"I know, I know. I'm a woman, I'm your commander, you call me mistress, that's the way it is on your home world."



She turned the ship away from its direct course towards the planet and brought the engines up to full power. "Can't you just call me Captain?" She pivoted the seat around towards Jansen.

"That would imply a military rank, that you do not hold mistress."

"Just forget it." She hit the hyperspace button and stood up from the chair, ignoring the countdown timer and picked up the top out of the bag, holding it against herself. "I do like the way these fit. Nothing else comes close."

She wandered to the side of the command deck, and looked into the small mirror that hung on the wall, inspecting her nose in the reflection. She pulled the tie band off and shook her bright red mass of hair out in order to re-tie it.

Being a red headed woman, gave her the usual dose of pale skin that went with it. Being out in space most of the time and rarely being in any kind of position to get a bit of colour, she was even whiter than most white skinned humans were. This had earned her the nickname of The Flame Ghost, not only for her appearance but also for her combat tactics, of seeming being able to disappear at will, during combat only to reappear in the most unexpected place and blast opponents to bits. Velisa just put down her combat tactics as being better than anyone else. They wanted to give her a scary name, more the better.

She juddered to one side slightly as the ship jumped through the wormhole and popped out the other side. She wandered back with a bored look on her face, pointed the ship towards the sun and hit the jump drive.

"Not going to the station?" Jansen asked.

"Quick top up of fuel and then on to the next system. Probably a good idea to keep out of station scanner range for a few jumps at least."

"Precaution sensible." Sobal said as he entered through the open door at the rear of the command deck. "Pirate

grudges. Get mistress."

"And another thing." Jansen was on his feet this time. "Do you really think that girly innocent look is going to work? Trying to appeal to his chivalrous nature? Those concepts are long forgotten."

"It might work on some." She tilted her head to one side. "Back home when I was young, I once had 2 men fight a duel for my honour."

"Aquatic ancestry?" he said. "I seriously doubt that amphibians have any sense of chivalry." She waved him off.

"So where are we headed, mistress?"

"Isinor. Time for some easy pickings off the newbies."

## Chapter 2

Just off outside the scanner range of the jump navigation beacon near Zaonce hung a rather battered looking old Fer-de-lance. Its hull bore the faded decoration of its previous life, now long forgotten. In the rather worn and stained looking command deck, two occupants huddled over the scanner which was surprisingly full for a ship parked so far out from the station and much newer looking than the rest of the ship.

In the very worn commanders chair sat, or rather perched an avian with resplendent, bright coloured plumage. He shifted himself uncomfortably in the seat, trying to find a comfortable place for his wings and cursing himself at not having the ship properly adapted to his physical form. The humanoid beside him jumped up frustrated, and paced the cabin.

“What the hell are we doing here, Kreena?”

“We’ve been over this, Samson,” Kreena squawked.

“We’re waiting for our target.”

“I know that,” he said, annoyed, “But why here? Zaonce of all places. Why would she even bother coming here?”

“We were told to find her and apart from the patchy information I could find about some of her more questionable actions one thing did seem prevalent.” His eyes blazed at his partner. “She can’t resist a good sale.”

Regardless of where the humans set up home, people always seem to build the best and biggest shops in the most boring places. Where’s the biggest branch of any shop? Right next to the motorway flyover.

Zaonce, obviously due to the absolute lack of any remarkable features and for its corporate status had been the obvious choice for one of the best shopping precincts in the galaxy. The human race just trying desperately to liven up

something mundane. It was by no means a failure though.

Near to the Zaonce navigation buoy, a wormhole formed with a few bolts of lightning and its familiar blueness grew to a spherical ball of energy. A point formed on the sphere and was sucked back, turning the sphere inside out into infinite space. The hole widened and from inside, out popped the sleek lines of a Cobra MK3. The Night Whisper turned lazily on its axis and then pulled up slowly, increasing speed directly towards the planet, reflecting light from the sun of its nearly pristine surface. The hull was subtly decorated, nothing like the boy racers, but enough to make it clear this was not a neglected ship. The subtle paint job, in brilliant white with black lines accenting the edges of panels in various places across the hull, complimented with tribal style, old-fashioned rapier designs on each wing. A few subtle running lights along the front pointed to the weapons ports, as though highlighting them.

The ship increased speed and jumped rapidly away as the Torus drive was engaged. After half a minute, the Fer-de-lance swung on an orbit out from behind the sun into range of the buoy and followed. On the command deck, Kreena had swapped places with Samson.

“Keep out of her scanner range,” Kreena said quietly. Samson nodded and concentrated the scanner that was different from standard. Its general configuration was the same, but the central area was separated about half way out from the central axis by another circle. Directly in front, nearly at the very edge of the outer circle was a green trace with several yellow ones clustered round it. Just outside the inner circle was another yellow trace, moving towards the green one. Samson fired his own jump drive and the ship leapt forwards. He deactivated as the yellow blip suddenly came close to the inner circle. There was another trace on the

scanner far off to the left. The two traces matched speed and direction.

“Looks like she’s mass locked,” Samson said.

“No problem.” Kreena hopped his way to the back of the command deck and removed a small white box from a cabinet, placing in on the desk. He plugged it into a console and began pressing buttons with a claw on his foot while expertly balancing on the other.

“You really think that thing is a good idea?” Samson asked, looking round.

“We haven’t spent the last 3 months looking for her just to fail. It’s a good idea for us, probably not for her though.”

“You don’t even know what effect that thing will have, Kreena.”

“I know that we have a job to do and we must carry it out.”

Samson turned back sulking, staring at the trace on the scanner again. It was still just outside the inner circle. For a moment, all the traces on the scanner flickered, jumped around and then returned to normal.

“It’s doing it again,” He said without looking away it.

“I’m not really surprised. That scanner is seriously cross wired and bodged together.”

“Are you sure she can’t tell we’re here?”

“I didn’t spend a considerable amount on that hyper scanner just so it would be inaccurate. Occasional flickers I can deal with.”

“Just don’t try to use the zoom,” Samson half laughed. “Good thing we’ve avoided any combat so far. Probably knock the whole thing offline.”

“Then I suggest you make sure we stay out of the scanner range of any other ship.” Kreena was getting annoyed, his voice reaching a high-pitched squawk. “Just watch the damn scanner.”

Samson scanned across the worn, but well laid out

console and at a small panel to the side.

"So what the hell is Star Field Six?"

"You never heard of Star Field Six?"

"Should I?"

"When I was a young bird, Star Field Six were the best band in the eight. I suspect that this used to be their old tour ship."

"Makes sense. The seats are worn and full of burn holes, the console is smoky, all the sleeping quarters look thoroughly worn out and it smells like someone spilled an entire case of evil juice in here. I've seen cleaner engine rooms."

"How do you think I got a ship like this so cheap? You don't pick up a decent one of these for peanuts."

Samson, wiped his finger along the underside of the console, bringing it back up covered in a brown film.

"Couldn't you have got it cleaned first?"

"No money for that. Now shut up and watch the scanner."

"Yes sir," he said with a mock salute.

On the command deck of The Night Whisper, Jansen hissed his disgust at the blip to the far left of his scanner range that had blocked his jump. They were still a fair distance from the station. It would take them a good 20 minutes to get there. Jansen leant back in the command chair and closed his eyes, listening to the sound of the engines. A small smile graced the corners of his mouth and he hit the intercom.

"Sobal, where are you?"

Sobal's voice came back with the distinct tell tale echo of the cargo bay.

"Cargo. Pod check."

"I feel the need to even the score."

"Score?"

"The zero-G basketball score."

"I acquire court after land."

"Cool."

"Kicking you tail again." Despite Sobal's flimsy grasp on common, his mischievousness was obvious. Jansen bared his claws and looked at them smiling.

"We'll see."

"What else do?" came Sobal's voice after a pause with a cargo bay noises accompaniment.

"After the game, I feel the need to be pampered." Jansen said, running his back against the command chair. "A full coat rub and preen, claw sharpening, tooth clean the full works."

"There." Sobal's single word response said it all. Jansen imagined Sobal in he cargo bay eyes closed, imagining the masseuse doing their work. Velisa's voice on the intercom interrupted both of their mental flights of fancy.

"Why the hell aren't we docking yet?" Jansen was snapped back to reality and he checked the scanner. The far off trace was still there.

"We're mass locked. Someone's albatrossing us." He could practically hear her shoulders drop.

"How long?" She said with a bored sounding tone.

"About 20 minutes. Another 10 to dock maybe."

"Fine. Gives me time to finish getting ready then."

Jansen had seen nothing of Velisa for the last two jumps.

"You're not going to join us at the spa?" A hairdryer sounded over the intercom.

"No. I'll do that later on. Girl's got to look good when she goes shopping."

Velisa was in the bathroom with a towel wrapped round herself. She stared intently into the mirror, examining her nose and the bruise that was still just visible. She'd spent half an hour in the ships medibay getting the medi-comp to fix and re-fix her nose. On every cycle it had taken a little more of the bruise away, but eventually it had given up and simple told

her that there were no more injuries to fix. She scowled at the bruise and began to apply some cover-up to it. Eventually she was happy with it and applied the finishing touches to her makeup. She stepped back to inspect the effect from a small distance and was satisfied.

Next to her in the room was her personal info tablet. She picked it up and scanned down the list of numbers on the screen. The previous outing had netted a fair amount of profit and she smiled. The base line profit figure was just a touch over twenty four thousand credits. She split the figure down the middle and transferred half to each of her two companion's accounts.

"Enjoy it boys," she said under her breath, throwing the tablet back onto the counter top. She considered her appearance in the mirror. She'd never considered herself to be overly pretty or attractive. Too many freckles, lips not full enough and ears that she always felt were just a little too big for her face. She was never going to make the cover of anything. She knew how to use a bit of makeup and such to make herself feel and hopefully look better. Her hair always annoyed her though even from when she was a little girl. Too coarse, too unmanageable and the wrong colour red. She took pigment pills once a month to change it to the vibrant red she had now. She turned her attention to it and began pinning it up into place.

Jansen was just lining up for docking procedures when Velisa's voice came over the intercom.

"How long?" Jansen's concentration was broken momentarily and he cut the engines to respond. He didn't want his docking procedure messed up.

"Five minutes tops," he said. "You want to take her in?" There was a pause.

"Line her up and I'll do the final docking."

"Certainly mistress."



Jansen closed the comms and pushed the ship back up to full power. Far in front of him a small dot glinted, reflecting the sunlight from behind the ship. He was an old hand at piloting, being a pretty good solo trader in his youth and like any older pilot, he had his own method of docking. In the days before the navigation beacons were placed directly in front of the docking ports, he'd watched countless new pilots struggling to line themselves up and find a good way of docking. Everyone made the same mistake to begin with. They flew directly towards the station and then spent ages trying to line themselves up.

Jansen had a simpler method. He hated using the beacons; they were just a waste of time. He'd wait until the station just became visible, slow to a stop and then aim the main crosshairs just to one side of the station so the apex of the planets curve, the centre of the crosshairs and the station were in perfect alignment, then fly towards it. When he was in range for docking, he'd slow and watch for the station to appear in the side view. Without fail he would be perfectly lined up. All he had to do then was cut power; turn towards the docking port, match spin and in. Way quicker than a docking computer.

The station was nearly filling the left side of the view screen when Velisa strode onto the command deck. She looked immaculate. She wore a pair of loose fitting white linen trousers. The bottoms fluttered over a pair of high red shoes that despite their appearance, made no sound at all as she walked across the deck. She was no small woman at five foot nine and the heels drew her up to over six foot. She'd dispensed with the designer top from the previous station and gone with a backless, red, halter neck that was made of such little material to justify its extortionate price. It tied at the back with a single cord. Up the left side was a subtle dragon design that was an almost complete match for the tattoo that ran from the small of her back, round over her right shoulder

blade and finished at the base of her neck.

"Is this thing fixed now?" she said, pointing at the food dispenser.

"Certainly is," Jansen said.

"Small coffeen. Black. One sugar," she said to it and a small cup was dispensed. Velisa refused to call it coffee despite the fact that the dispenser listed it as such. It was a poor impression of a cup of coffee, a little too bitter, slightly off coffee flavour and in no way strong enough but on board it was the best she could do. A standard coffee machine just made too much mess for on board ship.

Jansen slowed the ship to a stop and jumped up from the command seat, observing Velisa. She smiled at him warmly and mischievously over her cup. Jansen let out a little low meow.

"Looking good mistress."

"Flattery will get you everywhere Jansen my dear," she said.

"She's all yours." Jansen gestured towards the commander's seat in a playfully overformal fashion.

"Why thank you good sir." She returned the joke, bowing in his direction.

"How long are we staying on station?" Jansen asked. Velisa slowly sauntered to the command chair.

"Now not quiet hot enough," she said to her coffeen and downed the liquid from the cup quickly before turning her attention back to Jansen. "I was thinking that we could all use a break. How does five days sound?"

"Sounds great." Jansen smiled a big smile. Velisa was prone to doing this. Just deciding off the cuff to have several days R&R.

"I've split the takings too. Get Sobal to schedule the essential maintenance and then you boys go have fun. I know I'm going to." She gingerly lowered herself into the seat, trying not to crease her trousers. Jansen bounded off from the

command deck and Velisa watched him go. She waited until he was gone before pressing her thumb onto the ship ident scanner. The status display, changed.

*Changing commander...*

*Resetting controls to personal specifications...*

*Velicinda Hayyeesundor*

*Ratting: Deadly*

*Legal Status: Clean*

*Cash: 90,789,159,282.8 Credits.*

She quickly changed the status screen to display the current ship configuration and turned her attention to the view screen. She eased the engines up to speed and turned into the docking port, matching rotation and entering the port all in one go.

“Your designated docking bay is number seventeen F. Thank you.” Came the docking systems computer voice over the comms and The Night Whisper glided into the main docking hub. It stopped in the centre of the hub and then rotated 90 degrees. All the docking bays were arranged in a spoke design from the central hub, twenty-four of them in total, each with twelve bays apiece labelled A to L. Despite this, the station was in no way limited to this number of ships. Up to five ships of various sizes could dock in each bay.

The Night Whisper descended into spoke number seventeen and then was smoothly manoeuvred into bay F where only one other ship stood. The engines powered down and the main hatch opened, revealing Velisa who immediately began striding down the ramp before the stairs had even fully touched the ground. Jansen followed closely behind, playing the bodyguard role to superb effect. He fixed his gaze on the ship that shared the bay with them and on the two insectoids that were inspecting it. They looked across briefly and went back to their work. Sobal was a little slower exiting the ship, jumping nimbly from the top of the stairs to ground level. He was a much less well-built feline than Jansen, but had that

thin, wiriness about him that gave the impression of a coiled spring. He immediately began looking over the ship's hull, looking for any signs of damage and needed repair. Sobal was inspecting the bottom of the engines when Velisa joined him.

"Anything obvious need doing Sobal?" Velisa was looking over her ship, admiring it. She always felt that the only problem with flying a good-looking ship was that you only got to look at it when it was stationary in a docking bay.

"Damage nothing," he said running his hands over a section of the hull. "Repairs previous, fine working."

"Fair enough. Get a cleaning crew out on her while we're here though." She wiped a finger across a white section of hull, leaving a distinct clean line. "She could use a wash and brush-up too."

"Mistress." Sobal was off over to the bay's info panel.

"So, what do you have planned?" Jansen was at Velisa's side.

"Shopping, dinner, drinking, more shopping, dancing, more drinking and then a luxury room for the night. What about you and Sobal?"

"The usual game, followed by the spa then probably much the same as you, minus the dancing of course."

Velisa hugged him closely and Jansen wrapped his large fluffy arms round her.

"I'll see you guys in a few days then." She released him. "Call me if you need anything or we need to get out of here quickly."

"Yes mistress," he said with small salute.

"And do go easy on him." She pointed to Sobal.

"Yeah right." Jansen smiled and bared his claws. Velisa had turned to leave but Jansen called her back. "And please don't go into the illegal bars again. Can we just have a quiet bit of dock time?"

Velisa turned and pouted at him.

"You're no fun." She said in mock disappointment.

Jansen raised his eyebrows. "I'll be good," she said and blew him a kiss on the way out of the docking bay.

Jansen looked back to the ship where Sobal was inspecting a small section of the hull in seemingly minute detail.

"Sobal," Jansen called, "Stop fussing over the ship, I'll lock her up and let's go get a drink."

Sobal scampered past, slapping Jansen across the back with his tail.

"Not falling again," he said running towards the bay exit. "Game require soberness."

Jansen pressed a button on his wrist device and the ships doors closed up as he ran after Sobal.

Behind him descending past the docking bay, the battered Fer-de-lance came into view paused and then continued on its way towards the higher lettered bays.

## **Chapter 3**

Down in the habitation levels of Zaonce station, a pair of small rodents was scared half to death as Jansen and Sobal came striding confidently round the corner. The sight of the two felines was enough to trigger the prey response in the rodents and they jumped into a doorway, trying desperately to hide.

“You are just a cheat.” Jansen was ribbing Sobal.

“You just bully.” Sobal said, pointing at the claw marks on his arm. The blood was just starting to dry up.

“Oh come one, I hardly touched you. Besides, I didn’t see you restraining yourself with the claws.”

They both passed the two cowering rodents and Sobal shot them a look, followed by baring his claws. They pressed themselves further into the doorway and then scurried away as fast as they could when the two felines had passed.

“Need advantage somehow. You big guy.” Sobal licked the wound on his arm.

It had been a hard game, but then again they always were. Jansen gave no quarter using his superior strength to his advantage by pushing Sobal around. Sobal on the other hand was smaller and sneakier. He played with more cunning and as such generally beat Jansen by a considerable margin. Neither of them cared too much though. The game helped them blow off steam after a time on the space lanes.

The pair of them ceased their bantering and walked in silence, breathing heavily, still out of breath from the game until they reached a door. Jansen pressed his hand against the ident pad by the door and it opened. The light came on as they entered and Jansen headed straight for the bar area. Due to the considerable payout from Velisa on their last trip they had decided to go for one of the better hire quarters for the duration of their stay. Standard ones were kitted out with a bed, a small bathroom and not much else. This one was a little

better. The bathroom had a proper shower and bath plus there was a separate bedroom area. The main room had another bed available plus a couch and a darn good entertainment system on the wall.

Jansen was pouring himself a rather large drink when Sobal tossed a pad onto the bar top beside him.

"Take look." Sobal pointed to the displayed figures. Jansen scanned them and mostly dismissed them. It was a run down of the previous trips numbers.

"Numbers from the last trip. So what?" Jansen knocked back a big slug of drink.

"See oddness?" Jansen just got what Sobal was saying. Generally he understood him very well but sometimes Sobal was a little more obtuse. He scanned the list again, seeing nothing weird. The breakdown of profit was distinct.

"I don't see anything weird at all. What are you getting at Sobal?" Jansen placed his glass down on the bar and picked up the pad to examine it more closely.

"Amount to us not sense." Sobal pointed at the bottom line transfer figures.

"Are trying to make out that Velisa as screwing us over?" Jansen looked furious by the possible implication.

"No. Opposite. Look!" Sobal tapped the pad again. Jansen frowned and looked down it again and then he saw it. He saw what was missing.

"Oh my..." Jansen began to smile.

"Now see."

Jansen stared open mouthed at the bottom line. Velisa had given them half each and nothing for herself. There wasn't even a transfer entry for her.

"She gave us everything."

"Exactly." Sobal headed for the bathroom and there was the sound of water running. "When saw transfer my account, thought was big."

"She didn't take anything for herself. How can she

manage?" Jansen stared down the number again.

"Something to it more." Sobal's voice echoed slightly in the bathroom.

"When I see her next, I'm going to give her a big kiss," said Jansen and tossed the pad back onto the bar. "I always knew this gig was a good one."

Sobal came back out of the bathroom with his hands on his hips.

"Kiss mistress?" he said.

"Well, not exactly. Maybe," Jansen stammered.

"Anyway, what's next on the agenda?" He tried to change the subject and Sobal didn't push anymore.

"Spa fur rub," Sobal said decisively. Jansen rubbed the fur on his head.

"Definitely. Mines looking a right mess at the moment. Needs a proper long grooming."

A mischievous look crossed Sobal's face and he pounced on Jansen, knocking him to the floor. Jansen was taken completely by surprise and even more so when Sobal hitched up the front of Jansen's shirt and licked his belly right up to his neck.

"Let do that you for." Sobal said fixing Jansen's gaze. Their eyes blazed at each other and a wide smile grew on Jansen's face.

Several hours later on the other side of the station on one of the most expensive hire quarters, two reptilians faced each other, circling, slowly looking for each other's weaknesses. Their arms spread wide, ready to grab at the other. They were stripped to the waist, powerful looking and sharp of eyes. One lunged to grab and the other jumped swiftly out of the way. He smiled and bared his extremely sharp teeth. In the background music blared from the entertainment system, spurring the two reptilians on. One lunged again and



caught the other. They locked onto each other, wrestling to the floor and trying to gain advantage.

"You're no match for me," one of them hissed. The other said nothing, smiled and went to bite at his neck with extremely sharp teeth. The teeth missed and they rolled across the room. The pair of them collided with the table near the main couch area that was covered in a few personal items. Some clattered onto the floor as they were shaken around by the impact.

"You two, save that for the exercise clubs," Velisa shouted from the adjoining bathroom. The two reptilians untangled from each other and stood up looking in the direction of the bathroom door. There was the sound of a shower running water and a towel was thrown out from the door towards them.

"Now get in here and make yourselves useful."

Neither needed any further prompting and were in like a shot.

Down in docking bay seventeen-F, The Night Whisper had a pair of visitors. Kreena and Samson were glancing nervously around the landing bay, making sure that they were not observed. Hacking the door to the landing bay had been fairly simple but a nervous Kreena approached the ship praying quietly that he didn't trigger a self-defence mechanism. Most traders didn't bother, but he knew full well that The Night Whisper was no ordinary trading ship.

"Air above, air bellow, gliding silently, soaring forever," Kreena whispered the prayer under his breath so Samson could not even make out what he was saying exactly.

"You really think this is wise Kreena?" Samson whispered.

"Quiet," Kreena hissed and crept right up to the main docking hatch. He looked over the control panels and round the door. Seeing nothing to arouse alarm, he pulled open the

hand scanner panel next to the door and pulled out a few wires. He cut two and twisted them together. From a pocket, he produced a small electronic device, cut some more wires and connected it. The panel began to glow, highlighting a human palm print. Kreena smiled as best avians can and beamed to Samson to come over.

“Put your hand on it,” Kreena said pointing at the panel.

“It’s not going to recognise me,” Samson protested.

“I’ve fixed it, now just do it.”

Samson shrugged and put his hand as near as possible over the top of the glowing handprint. The scanner glowed brighter for a second and then went dark. Both of them stepped back, waiting. Nothing happened.

“Try it again,” Kreena gestured to the panel again.

Samson obliged and was greeted with a whole big load of nothing.

“You sure you did it right?” Samson looked round to Kreena.

“Definitely. There’s only one way to use those things anyway, so yes I’m...”

He was interrupted by a hissing sound from beside the door. They both moved in front of the door waiting for it to open. Instead of the main hatch opening, a small square panel in the middle of the door opened, Kreena and Samson looked closer. There were several flashes of light, illuminating the pair.

“Thank you gentlemen,” Velisa’s voice came from the small speaker in the open panel. “Your picture has been logged in the system. Attempt to break into this vessel any further and I will hunt you down and kill you.” A small laser pistol was pushed out from the panel, pointed directly at them. “That is, if you survive being shot. Your choice gentlemen.”

Kreena and Samson stared at each other wide eyed and backed away slowly from the ship.

“Good choice,” Velisa’s voice announced and the panel

snapped shut, followed by a panel shutting over the hand scanner.

"So what now?" Samson asked, still backing away from the ship.

"I've got a plan B." Kreena said confidently.

"Is it one that doesn't involve having guns pointed at us?" Kreena's shrug made Samson drop his shoulders and slump. "I'm gonna end up shot by the end of this job," he muttered under his breath.

"Take a wild guess what the cats will do to me if they get hold of me." Kreena had turned to walk away, not looking at Samson as he spoke who followed quickly behind.

Velisa slowly woke after what she felt was probably the best night's sleep she'd had in years. The bed was supremely comfortable, decked out with sumptuously smooth silk sheets and wonderfully soft pillows. Not too soft and not too hard, just perfect. Her previous night's escapades had left her fully tired out and totally contented. She pulled her legs up with a satisfied smile on her face, still with her eyes closed, reliving the experience over in her mind and she squirmed with a pleased little sigh.

As she stretched in the bed, she winced as a pain in her leg and a small stain of blood soaked into the sheet from below. She lifted the covers to have a look at the teeth marks that graced her leg and found another on the top of her left arm.

"Vicious little 'stards," she muttered and giggled, pulling herself out of bed. One quick call to room service and ten minutes later she had a full spread breakfast delivered to the door.

As she ate her meal she pondered what to do next. Trading was not really that exciting but buying and selling between vastly different systems and always going to the low level Anarchy worlds had given her a darn good number of

kills. She was Deadly rated but as with all pilots, she wanted that elusive Elite rating. Money was no big deal to her. She had plenty and could have bought a planet if she wanted. That Elite rating was all she cared about.

At that moment, she had a clean rating, but that wasn't always the case. Running illegal goods and being jumped by cops a few times had been much more of a rush. Some pirates seemed to accept her as a fellow pirate; some knew exactly what she would do to them if they tried it on. Among the bounty hunters guild she was fairly well known, but not overly liked due to her absolute lack of professional discipline. She flew where she wanted, took any dangerous mission she could and didn't care who was shot in the process.

She pondered jumping on a couple of galaxies where things were a little more lawless, more out of the way. It didn't really appeal to her anymore. It was getting boring. Fly here, fly there, shoot ships, trade, trade and trade some more. There had to be something else. For a second she considered going home, but quickly shrugged off the thought. It was totally not an option.

The comms panel on the wall beeped, breaking Velisa out of her musings.

"Who is it?" she said, rapidly swallowing the current mouthful, anticipation jumping into her mind.

"Cleaning crew. We've finished your ship clean," came the voice from the other end.

"Oh, okay thanks." She said and her shoulders slumped. She'd hoped it was Jansen or Sobal, but they were probably too wrapped up in each other.

She'd been trying to deny it for a while now, but she finally had to admit it. She was bored. Nothing was exciting, money meant nothing and even combat was starting to be just a little too easy. So what was left? Total hedonistic exploration? Why bother? She slumped in her chair and considered having a drink. Even she very rarely drank in the morning. It was bad

for concentration and she needed it given the places she was prone to hanging out at. She was starting to think there was more to it than simple boredom. She was probably getting somewhat depressed. She blamed it for her dalliance with the two reptilians the previous night. A single human male not enough for her any more. The memory of their taught scaly cold skin pressed against hers brought it all back. Last night, fuelled by drink and bored depression she'd wallowed in the sheer wild pleasure. In the cold light of day, she felt disgusted with herself and shuddered at the thought of some of the things she'd let them do to her.

She jumped up from her seat, trying to suppress the mixed emotions in her head. She had to get out had to do something. She rapidly got dressed and headed out of the door in the direction of the retail areas, just resisting the urge to take a slug from the bottle of extremely strong spirits lying discarded on the floor next to the bed. As she exited the door, glancing back towards the collection of bags lying around the seating area, she paused briefly, considering not buying more things and cluttering herself up with more useless pieces of clothing and pointless gadgets and then was gone, attempting to leave the memories of the previous night behind her. Amongst the pile of bags, a small device within a small, unmarked bag started to glow softly.

## **Chapter 4**

The door slid open onto the darkened luxury room. Velisa stomped in, laden with more bags and an even darker mood than before. The shopping had not helped. She wandered across the room and as the door slid shut leaving it illuminated only by the soft starlight from outside the window. She kicked items of clothing and discarded bottles as she went, dumping the collection of bags on top of the already seemingly large pile.

Looking out of the window, she collapsed into a chair and stared at the stars beyond. She felt like she was at rock bottom, minus only a nearly empty bottle in her hand and a landlord banging on the door for rent.

Standing up abruptly she ordered the lights on and programmed the food dispenser for a simple meal. She didn't feel like she could stomach anything fancy at the moment. Just some simple sustenance. The half drunk, rather expensive bottle of spirits on the floor tempted her to break the sobriety and she gave in. Picking it up, she poured a large measure into a glass, knocking it back in one go. The liquid burned its way down to her stomach and radiated inner warmth for a short while that she so much craved.

"So, what now, Lesi?" she said to her own reflection in the food dispenser window. It beeped and a small plate appeared inside. She opened it and withdrew the plate that contained a slice of toasted bread, topped with small white beans in a light red coloured sauce. It was a simple meal that had gone with humans across the galaxy, easy to make, with a surprising amount of goodness given the seemingly unhealthy nature of it. Velisa sat down on a large couch, resting the plate on her lap and took a bite. She relished the taste and felt seven years old again, sat at home with her nanny looking on. The taste had an extra bite. Smearred over the bread before the beans was a layer of VeMarMite yeast extract. Regardless of

the name it was another staple that had travelled across the charts from the old times. For Velisa it was the height of comfort food even though her nanny had berated her for liking it so much as a youngster.

She finished the meal, savouring every bite and sucked a blob of sauce from her finger. She put the plate away and turned her attention on the pile of bags lying on the floor. She felt momentarily disgusted with herself at the vast quantity of stuff and began to sort through it, looking for a particular bag. Eventually she found what she was looking for and pulled a small disk shaped device out of the bag. It was white, about the size of her palm, plain on one side, with a belt clip on the other. Round the circumference were spelled the words "HyperCargo Personal" and in smaller words "Aquarian Shipbuilding Corporation."

Velisa stood up, grinning and pressed its on button. A small voice emanated from the device.

"Greetings purchaser. Thank you for buying the HyperCargo Personal. Please press your thumb on the scanner to personalise."

Velisa did as instructed and the device continued.

"Now secured to your genetic structure. You device is now ready for use."

Velisa turned the device over in her hand, studying it and then, holding it in her fingertips at arms length, she pointed it at the pile of bags on the floor. She squeezed the outside ring of the device and a wide, cone shaped beam of light sprung outwards from it. The bags glowed for an instant and vanished. A small display lit up on the rear of the device displaying '4% full'.

She smiled an impressed smile and pointed it at a section of empty floor. She squeezed again and the bags reappeared with the same glow. One more squeeze and the bags disappeared again. Velisa clipped the device to her belt and looked around the room at the assembled mess. She

ordered a cleaning crew to her room from the comms panel.

No sooner had she finished her conversation with the cleaning crews when the comms unit beeped for an incoming call. She jumped across to accept the call in the hope that it was some distraction to break the boredom.

“Hello,” she said expectantly.

“Mistress. It’s me.” Jansen’s deep voice boomed from the comms unit as his face appeared on the small view-screen.

“Jansen my dear. It’s good to hear your voice.” She really meant it too. She felt her mood physically lift at the sound of his voice. “To what do I owe this pleasure my fluffy friend?”

Jansen raised his eyebrows, a faint smile growing on his face. “Sobal and me are off to the Sunrise Club on level 64. Join us?”

Velisa’s heart jumped at the thought.

“I’ll meet you there,” she said smiling broadly and punched the disconnect button. She was dressed and out of the door in five minutes flat.

On entering the club, Velisa scanned the crowd, searching for her two feline crewmates. After a short time of looking around she saw the two of them, standing at the bar ordering drinks. She skipped across the dance floor narrowly avoiding the collection of gyrating bodies that moved to the overly loud music, blasting from the sound system. Approaching the bar the music grew a little quieter and Jansen spotted her as she approached.

She was genuinely pleased to see the two of them, feeling her dark mood begin to lift more and more with each passing moment. She began to realise what she had and also what she was missing.

Jansen smiled wide and Velisa pounced on him, hugging him round his broad fluffy neck. Jansen returned the hug, somewhat confused.



“What’s wrong mistress? Something got you down?” Jansen asked.

“Just had a bad day. It’s really good to see you my friend.” Velisa said, somewhat muffled by his fur and she felt like nearly crying. The absolute relief in seeing him was nearly overwhelming.

“Mistress...” Jansen said and stroked her head with his paw. Sobal watched on, suppressing his slightly jealous feeling. Velisa and Jansen had a long history and a large friendship. He knew he had no competition in Velisa as Jansen had made his feelings clear on many an occasion, but somewhere deep down he knew that there would have been more if Velisa had her way entirely. Sobal turned away and sipped his drink giving them a little privacy for a moment in the crowd.

“Why do you fly with me?” Velisa looked up into Jansen’s eyes, hers were slightly puffy.

“You know why,” he said. “You are my mistress. What you did for me, for us requires my life in your hands.”

“Surely you’ve paid that back by now. You don’t have to stay with me you know.”

“I can never pay it back. You know this. Why do you have to go over it all again?”

“But don’t you want your own life back? Free to go and make your own life with Sobal. Your own ship. Not answering to a bored old trader like me.”

Jansen looked her right in the eye.

“I had that life on my own and the universe had another path for me as that one ended. My life is yours now.”

“What about Sobal?” She said quietly, motioning towards Sobal who had moved down the bar a little. “He loves you, you know.”

“I cannot forget what I must do. Sobal understands that.”

“I know, but can I not release you from it. Let you go

and make your own decisions. It's been five years now. Three with Sobal." She was almost testing him now, trying to find out how he really felt and maybe validate herself at the same time.

"Then I would choose to stay in this crew. The pay is good, the work is varied and we always make time to stop and have fun. There are way too many commanders that work their crews to the brink of exhaustion, hardly ever stopping and paying them a small fraction of what we get from you. Why would I leave?"

"Your own ship?" Velisa smiled a little again, shrugging.

"All on my own, in the big black? No thanks." Jansen shook his head. "Just accept my presence, mistress. It will not change. You will always be able to rely on me."

Velisa hugged him again.

"I could kiss you, you know you big fluffy hunk of loveliness."

"And then Sobal really would be jealous. Let's not go over this all again, besides the bottom line is, you need me."

Velisa pulled away and smiled, thinking to herself just how much she really did need him and then abruptly she slapped him on the arm.

"Now where are those drinks?"

She called the barman over, ordered some exceedingly strong, expensive drinks for herself and the two felines. Taking their first slug, they all disappeared into the club with drinks and smiles.

Several hours and many drinks later, all three of them were in Velisa's hired quarters, slumped on one of the big sofas. A pot of snacks was discarded on the floor and bottles in various states of fullness crowded the coffee table in front of them. A film played on the big screen on the wall but no one was really watching that intently.

Jansen was mostly propped up in one corner of the sofa, with one arm round Sobal who was rapidly on his way

towards sleepy unconsciousness due to Jansen's other hand slowly stroking his head just behind the ears.

In the other corner Velisa sat with her feet up, cuddling a cushion.

"This is a classic," Velisa shouted drunkenly, pointing her bottle towards the screen.

"I'm not sure I get it." Jansen frowned at the screen, mostly able to still focus. "What make this better than what get's produced today?"

"This was made by people. By hand, with cameras and actors and props. It's an artistic construction not just thrown together in a computer system."

"I quite like those films though." Jansen shrugged.

"Yeah, they're okay, but there no artistry to appreciate. They're just a ride."

"A pretty good ride though."

"Maybe." She took another slug of her drink.

"Not enough cats either."

"Old earth cats didn't really make for great actors you know."

Jansen shifted a little and Sobal began to purr quietly with his eyes now shut.

"I guess not. I reckon I could make a fortune though, translating cats in old earth movies," Jansen said rubbing his chin.

"You could do what?" Velisa nearly spat a mouthful of drink across the room. "Are you trying to tell me you can translate what cats say?"

"Why not?"

"That's incredible, but... hey wait..." Velisa had him sussed.

"Got you," he said. Velisa threw a discarded piece of snacks at him.

"You bloody wind-up merchant."

"There's no way I could translate them. I don't speak

ancient Earth cat."

Velisa threw a couple more pieces across at Jansen and one bounced off Sobal's head making him stir and push himself up.

"I sleep," he said slowly getting up. He gently kissed Jansen and walked towards the door of one of the bedrooms in Velisa's suite.

"I'll join you soon," Jansen said to Sobal's slowly departing, half asleep form.

"Rush none," he said waving a paw over his shoulder. "Enjoy film. My frame small for much drink."

The door slid shut and for a moment the two of them sat in silence bar the soundtrack of the film.

"So what happened to that guy you were talking to?" Jansen said as he started sorting through the bottles on the table for something to drink.

"Which guy?"

"The nice one in the retro suit with the small goatee," Jansen said as he stood up and headed for the kitchen area.

"Him?" blurted Velisa. "He was a lovely guy, but as I was talking to him I noticed he had this strange growth on his chest that he'd done his best to hide but it really put me off."

"You want something to eat?" Jansen pointed at the food dispenser. A guilty look crossed Velisa's face.

"I could be really bad," she said.

"Can't we just share a pizza?" Jansen held his hands out.

"You always want Tuna though."

"I like Tuna."

"It's not even real anymore. There's no such thing as tuna. It's just a flavour."

"I know, but it's better than those kebab things you like. They don't even look or smell like real meat."

"You're a bloody philistine Jansen," Velisa said in a mock posh accent that sounded a little too good. "A good kebab is the perfect accompaniment to a bout of a drinking

heavily.”

“It’s that ridiculously spicy sauce you insist on having with it too. How the hell can you eat it?”

“You have to be drunk to enjoy it.” Velisa waved a hand towards him. “Just get a pizza done, but no tuna.” She pointed at him drunkenly.

Jansen rapidly punched buttons and selected the dispenser to start.

“So, no one else catch your eye tonight?” Jansen probed a little further.

Velisa narrowed her eyes at him.

“A few, but nothing special.”

“Any nice reptilians?” He was still looking in the direction of the food dispenser as it hummed into life.

“No.” Velisa said bluntly and shuddered slightly. “No more of that.”

“The quest for mister right continues then.” Jansen turned to find Velisa face to face with him.

“I’ve already found him,” she said burying her fingers into his belly fur, under his shirt.

“Please stop.” He tried to back away, but was already pressed against the kitchen worktop.

“Just kiss me.” She looked deep into his eyes.

Jansen tried to push her away, but Velisa was too quick. She wrapped her arms round his neck and pulled him close.

“Lesi, please...” Velisa’s lips on his cut him off and he wrapped his arms round her and then abruptly pulled away. “I can’t do this Lesi.”

“Please just shut up and hold me for a while then,” she said with tears in her eyes. She pushed her face into his neck and they both sank to the floor.

They sat there on the floor for nearly half an hour Jansen stroking the back of Velisa’s head. As much as he wanted to tell her to leave him alone and not pursue it, he couldn’t shirk his responsibility to her. His life was hers to

give for her protection from whatever it was. Right now he knew he had to protect her from herself and her own dark depression. It wasn't the first time and he hoped she was getting better, but nothing seemed to be quelling her self-destructiveness.

He felt Velisa's grip relax and lifted her head away to find her fast asleep on him. He stood up, lifting her with him effortlessly and carried her off to her own bedroom. He pulled back the sheets and laid her in the bed, stopping just long enough to kiss her on the forehead. Velisa stirred, opening her eyes sleepily to look at Jansen standing over her. She reached out a hand and grabbed his arm, stroking it.

"I love you, you big fluffy beast," she said and her hand dropped back into the bed, eyes closing.

"I know." He kissed her forehead once more and walked to the door.

"Why can't you just climb in here with me?" Velisa mumbled.

"You know why." He said.

"I always love it when you call me Lesi," she said sleepily and he let the door slide shut behind him without an answer.

In the main room Jansen made a token gesture at tiding up a little and turned off the film. He ordered the lights off and was left, bathed only in the starlight from the main window. He stood in the middle of the room, looking back and fourth between the two bedroom doors.

## Chapter 5

On board The Night Whisper command deck, Jansen was looking blearily over the console. All of them had slept late and nursing hangovers, except Sobal. His small frame made him more susceptible to the drink but he usually stopped as soon as he reached his limit, which was always Jansen and Velisa's problem. They didn't know when to stop. He'd left Velisa asleep in bed, hopefully able to get enough sleep to counteract the previous nights excesses and giving him and Sobal time to prep the ship.

Jansen punched the ship intercom.

"Sobal, can you make the engines run quieter?" He rubbed his head.

"Worse wear?" came the response from the comms panel loudly. Jansen winced a little and turned down the volume on the comms. "You two always bad."

"I'll be in the medical bay." He punched the disconnect button. On arriving in the medical bay he dropped onto the medi-com bed and ordered it to fix him.

*Dehydration and mild poisoning detected. Recommend ingestion of water. Pain medication dispensing.*

A small hatch opened with 4 pills inside.

"Please just get rid of the headache," he spouted to the machine. "Now."

Two more pills dropped into the container and Jansen took them.

*Ingest medication with plenty of water.*

The display was telling him what he already knew and he stomped off to find some water.

It was nearly three hours later when Velisa appeared in the landing bay with a deflated look and expression like she was far away. Jansen was touching up the decals on the top of the ship when she arrived and smiled towards her. She

deliberately didn't look back at him and bumped into Sobal who was adjusting the landing strut on the bottom of the ship.

"All ready to go?" she asked blankly.

"All good. Fixed and stocked," Sobal responded. "What plan?"

"I'll tell you once we're off station. I need to get out of here now." She looked up towards the top of the ship. "Jansen, we are out of here," she said and headed inside the ship.

The Night Whisper exited the station on full power turning away late from an incoming Python, buzzing the ship before heading out into space. Velisa sat at the controls and pushed the ship up to full speed before beginning to idly flick through the galactic charts on the navigation console. Both Jansen and Sobal were on the command deck with her, waiting for her to tell them where they were going.

"What's the plan mistress?" Jansen asked, back in full official mode. Velisa looked round, over her shoulder at him and raised her eyebrows.

"I've had enough of this trading lark. Too boring. Let's go do something interesting." A wicked smile grew on her face.

"What in mind?" Sobal asked.

"I think we go shoot some pirates to bits. Some difficult ones. I want my Elite rating."

Jansen shook his head. This couldn't end well.

"I can already hear your objections Jansen. Just don't bother. If you want out, I'll turn back now." Jansen remained silent. "I thought so." She picked a system on edge of their jump range and hit the hyperspace. "Besides, it's not going to be no fun. We'll do some sight seeing on the way."

The countdown finished and they all felt the distinctive slight acceleration and then deceleration. The sun of Bemaera swung into view as Velisa banked the ship and triggered the Torus drive.

"Here little 'stards. Come get some," she whispered.



“Watch that scanner close. I want to know the instant someone drops onto our scope.”

Jansen saluted him her direction and glued his eyes onto the scanner.

“What’s the overall plan?” Jansen asked.

“We cruise the low level systems to the middle of the chart and then head north to Ceesxe.”

“What there?” Sobal looked round from the engineering console.

“I know a couple of guys there. I’m thinking I need some extra stuff for this ship. It needs some upgrades and besides, maybe we can all rack up some kills on the way.”

Jansen nodded. Although he didn’t care too much about his own rather meagre Competent rating, he didn’t balk at the chance to add to it. Regardless of how much he didn’t care, the rating always helped get more respect from other spacers.

“That’s why we’re in this dead end then?”

“Indeed.”

Velisa powered the ship towards the stars corona and the fuel scoops activated, slowly filling the tanks. Jansen rubbed his forehead, looking bored.

“Look sharp.” Velisa said. “There’s someone else here. I know it.”

Far behind them in the black, Kreena’s Fer-de-lance popped out of hyperspace and jumped away, trying to keep out of The Night Whispers scanning range. At a good distance, away it paused and held station with the sun and planet space way some considerable distance beneath them.

“I got something.” Jansen shouted. “No wait.”

“What is it?” Velisa glanced at him.

“For a second a ship on the edge of scanner range and then it was gone.”

“Like I said. Look sharp.”

The tanks registered full and Velisa pulled the ship around facing away from the sun on a direct course for the planet, sticking rigidly to the space lane. A second after she triggered the Torus drive, she saw the familiar plumes of injector bursts from three ships blast across the front of the ship in the distance. They turned into scanner range and mass locked her. An instant later the blips on the scanner turned red and formed up, coming their way.

“Game on boys,” Velisa said and stretched her arms before resting them back on the controls. She pushed the ship to full speed, pressed the injectors directly towards the incoming ships.

Jansen cycled the targets as soon as he could.

“Two cobra’s, mark one’s and a python. All tagged as fugitive.”

Velisa smiled and just as the first laser beam tagged her shields, she pulled back the stick to pitch to over 90 degrees off original course, turning off the injectors just long enough for the incoming ships to slot in nicely behind her. She flicked to rear view and pummelled the lead Cobra to dust in a second flat with the rear military lasers close to heating up. The other two ships scattered either side of the exploding ship, not wanting to be next on the list.

Velisa punched the comms channel open.

“Picked the wrong girl to fuck with scumbags.” She shouted. “Drop your cargo and I’ll spare you.”

The response was short and direct; another dose of laser across the rear shield on Velisa’s ship and an incoming message.

“Get fucked. That was my brother you just spaced.”

Velisa pulled the ship around hard, maximising her advantage on the scattering ships. She headed directly towards the remaining Cobra, expelling the full charge of front lasers on it. The Cobra started leaking plasma and drifting to port slightly. It was obviously a little more beefed up than the

first ship. It turned away, now trying to run.

"Please don't," cracked the voice from the comms with emergency noises beeping in the background.

"Drop your cargo and I'll spare you," Velisa said.

"I don't have anything," came the frightened response.

"Too bad."

A final burst of laser fire ripped through the Cobras hull and it exploded leaving very little but dust.

"Where's the other one?" Velisa shot a look at Jansen.

"Running, in the opposite direction."

The Night Whisper banked round sharply and Velisa targeted the final ship just as it triggered its injectors. She did the same and took a shot at the ship, not expecting to hit just to prompt him into doing something. The Python pulled up sharply and rolled to the right of her view, showing the larger surface area. The comms chattered open.

"Please don't kill me," came the frightened sounding response.

"Dump your cargo and I might spare you," Velisa responded. "Or I can just kill you and take it anyway. Your choice."

In response, suddenly a large number of grey blips appeared on the scanner. The Python captain had decided to dump and run no longer on injectors. Velisa steered the ship expertly, picking up every single cargo canister.

"Thank you very much." She locked a missile onto the ship and punched her injectors again to take her just behind the ship, matching its speed. "So, what did you do to get your fugitive status? The truth."

There was a pause before the answer came.

"Okay, okay. I jump ships coming off of fuel refills and take all they have. Had some run ins with the law here and there."

"Too bad really. If you'd have said, running illegal's I might have been more lenient."

She fired two missiles in quick succession. At the close range, the Python didn't even have time to trigger its ECM. The first one took out most of the rear shields and the second removed the rest. Short blasts from the front lasers were targeted directly at the port engine. It exploded, taking most of the rear of the ship with it. The force of the explosion made the Python spin end over end. It was dead in space. A few more cargo canisters drifted out from the wrecked cargo bay.

"I knew you were holding out on me," Velisa taunted into the comms.

"Please don't," came the response, overlaid with warning sirens and the on-board computer complaining.

"Time to say goodnight." Velisa triggered the lasers just a second after an escape pod popped out of the stricken ship. It exploded into a thousand pieces, pushing the escape pod into a spin. The Night Whisper flew through the cloud of wreckage, picking up the extra cargo on the way and the remainder vaporised on the front shields.

Banking to starboard, Velisa targeted the escape pod that was rapidly on course for the planet. She slowed the ship to match its speed.

"What do you think boys?" said Velisa turning to her shipmates. "Take him in or leave him?"

"Will take him 3 days to reach the station," Jansen said, scanning the pod. "Looks like it was a little close to the ship when it blew. The engines are damaged and are not operating at full power."

Velisa keyed the comms again.

"Right now, I could blow you into a million pieces."

"Please. No."

"Change your profession," she snapped and closed the comms for the last time and angled the ship on a direct course towards the planet.

"Next," she shouted and pushed the ship up to full speed.

On board the Fer-de-lance, Kreena and Samson had watched the rather short battle on the scanner.

"Damn she's good," Samson said shaking his head slightly.

"And ruthless. Not far off Elite status too," Kreena said and stomped off to the sleeping quarters. "Keep an eye on them, follow out of range and just see what she does."

Samson jumped up and took the pilot seat.

"I'm going for some sleep. Baring anything insane happening, do not wake me. Follow her jumps but don't let her know we're here."

Samson pressed his thumb onto the scanner, logging himself onto the ship.

"And what do I do if we run into trouble?"

"Run, if you can. We'll be fine."

"Comforting." Samson raised an eyebrow and turned his attention back to the scanner where The Night Whisper sat outside of the standard scanner range. He checked down the ship systems again, making sure the lasers and shields were good. He'd never been out in space before this excursion, never had need to. He'd earned his pilot license less than 3 months earlier, but now suddenly thrust into the pilot seat out of necessity, he was bitten by the bug. He wanted a good rating. His own meagre Mostly Harmless rating was going pretty much nowhere on this mission seeing as Kreena took the controls most of the time, but he was getting tired and more annoyed with controlling the ship.

He was fortunate that Kreena had seen fit to spend some credits on the weaponry and defensive systems of the ship too. He'd made a couple of easy kills here and there, but nothing amazing and in no way the frequency he would have like to step his rating up significantly. The upgraded scanner mostly saw to it that they hardly ever encountered another ship. It was exactly what their mission required, but not

Samson's ambition.

All of a sudden, the scanner display flickered, going blank. Samson waited for a moment and it returned. He let out a sigh of relief and relaxed. Then it all went wrong. The display shifted one way then the other, magnified one hundred times what it should have been and then cut out.

"Oh crap," He said and dived under the controls, releasing a panel and letting it drop to the floor. He lay on his back underneath and scanned the wiring. One of the main sensor lines to the display had shorted out again. The wire hung down, blackened and smoking slightly. The wiring just wasn't able to handle the upgrade that well. In an instant, Samson was back up on his feet and rummaging through a maintenance compartment. He dived back under the console, with a replacement length of wire and a connector tool.

"Shit," he shouted as he burnt himself on the smoking wire. It left a red line across his hand that stung like mad. Realising he had no time to mess with it, he quickly replaced the wire and gave himself a small electrical shock in the process.

"Shit, shit, shit," he said through gritted teeth shaking his hands. He was just about to hit the button to start the bridge medi-comp unit when he caught sight of the scanner. Five ships were within the inner circle, running at high speed towards him.

"Oh shit, shit, shit!" he shouted once more and dived back to the control panel, grabbing the controls and pushing the ship up to full speed, the pain in his hands of little concern. He turned the ship to face away from them, hitting the injectors for a second to gain a bit of extra ground. It was too late. He flicked the display to rear view just in time to see the lead ships open fire, raking the rear shields down to half strength.

Back on front view, he spun the ship on its axis and dove away from the next volley of incoming laser fire as the

comms cracked into life.

"Drop your cargo," was the simple order.

"I don't have any cargo," Samson replied frantically, "I'm on a scientific research mission."

"Thargshit." The statement was punctuated with another dose of laser fire knocking the rear shields to practically nothing and then against the hull.

With a loud, distressed squawk, Kreena crashed onto the command deck, struggling to keep his balance.

"What is going on?" His voice was up an octave and nearly unintelligible.

"The damn scanner shorted out and while I was fixing it, five ships crept up on us." Samson didn't even take his eyes off the front view.

Kreena decided that shutting the hell up and letting Samson fight was probably his best bet. He was just scanning the chart to see if a jump away was possible, when the comms cracked open with a new voice.

"Fer-de-lance, Sour Brandy, continue on course. I'll take care of your little problem."

Samson glanced down at the scanner and then back to the screen just in time to see The Night Whisper blast directly overhead on full injectors.

"We are so screwed," squawked Kreena.

Samson flicked to rear view just in time to see the two lead ships reduced to dust by laser fire from Velisa's ship. The third was close behind with a missile followed by a finishing blast from the lasers. The final two ships ran as fast as their engines could go. One was reduced to dust by what appeared to Samson to be some sort of projectile based weapon. Regardless of how much the ship tried to evade, every single shot was on target and soon the ship was gone. As if to show off, for the final kill, The Night Whisper did a full 180-degree pitch, stopped dead, and the rear lasers got a full charge directly at the fleeing ship. It exploded leaving nothing behind

except an escape pod that drifted off towards the planet, to join two others that had made it out.

The Night Whisper powered up again and headed back to the Sour Brandy.

“What do we do?” Samson was frantic.

“Stick to the plan,” Kreena smacked him round the back of the head with one wing.

They didn’t have any more time to discuss it as Velisa’s voice sounded over the comms.

“You okay there, Commander?”

Samson keyed the comms nervously.

“Fine. Thanks for the save. I would really have been toast if you hadn’t been there.”

“No problem. What are you guys doing out here anyway in that crate? Not the best system to caught off guard in.” Velisa’s voice was relaxed.

“I’m not a trader.” Samson glanced round at Kreena. “We’re doing scientific research.”

“Oh yeah. What kind?” There was a dose of humour in Velisa’s voice.

Samson looked round at Kreena and shrugged, muting the comms for a second.

“What the hell do I tell her?” Samson pleaded.

“Just make something up,” Kreena squawked, flapping his wings about.

Samson put his finger to his lips and un-muted the comms.

“We’re measuring the relative particulate density of wreckage in various high risk systems,” Samson ad-libbed. “We’re trying to determine if eventually all the extra debris from destroyed ships and expended energy in these regions is having any effect.”

He took his finger off the comms and there was a pause.

“Whatever. Want to follow me back to the station?”

Samson and Kreena let out a collective sigh of relief and



Samson re-keyed the comms.

"That's fine thanks, I think I'll just use the injectors all the way back and get the damage sorted back at the station. Thanks again for the save."

"Let me offer you a word of advice. If you're gonna hang around in bad areas. Take some friends with you."

On the command deck of The Night Whisper, Velisa punched the disconnect button on the comms and shook her head at the screen.

"Stupid damn scientists."

She watched the scanner as the Fer-de-lance hit the injectors and powered off out of scanner range in the direction of the station. She frowned little, mulling it over in her head.

"Something wrong mistress?" Jansen asked.

"Probably nothing. Just a little deja-vu." She tapped the console with her fingers. "The name of that ship seems familiar somehow." She trailed off and shrugged. "Whatever."

On the bridge of The Sour Brandy, Samson and Kreena let out a collective sigh of relief.

"You think she bought it?" Samson looked round to Kreena.

"No idea," Kreena shook his feathers. Avians find it somewhat tricky to shrug.

"Why don't we just head back now? She's got the device on board, we can just wait for her to show up."

"We've got to make sure that it works. If not, we'll have to try something else. For now, just watch the damn scanner keep out of the way." Kreena stomped off to the sleeping quarters leaving a few feathers behind him.

"Oh yeah, it's been really reliable so far."

For the next 2 hours, Samson watched Velisa make mincemeat out of the local pirates, jumping back and forth

from the witchspace beacon to the planet. Occasionally she'd let them run, but not often. By the time she was finished, he predicted she had a full cargo hold and not a drop of witchspace fuel left.

The Night Whisper made a quick stop at a fuel station and then jumped on to Esesla. She filled up again at the next fuel station while Samson piloted The Sour Brandy round the sun for free fuel. Velisa had money to burn but he did not. Evidently she found little to interest her, so soon Samson was following her to Biramabi. Jumping on through other systems she blasted pirates away, slowly headed in an arc through the chart.

At Inonri, Samson watched the wormhole scanner closely as it registered her jump to Solageon, but on arrival himself, The Night Whisper was nowhere to be seen. He searched the scanner and ran back and fourth through the system, waiting to see the familiar orange trace on the scanner. Back on Zaonce, he'd managed to plant a small tracking device on The Night Whisper's hull. It gave just enough signal out to allow the scanner to trace the ship as something a little different, but now it was nowhere to be found. Samson's profanities filled the air as he jumped back and fourth from the sun to the planet, looking for the trace of Velisa's ship, but it was nowhere to be found.

## Chapter 6

As Velisa engaged the witchspace countdown to jump to Solageon, a status indicator flickered for just a second to show an error and then it all went back to normal. Velisa tapped the offending light with her finger.

"Sobal?" She asked over her shoulder. The question was obvious to him.

"No errors. Working systems all," He said.

The countdown continued and Velisa scratched her head. She'd not got any error light with the ship in a long time. Maybe she was just starting to get a bit old. The countdown reached 2 seconds to go and a warning light lit up on Sobal's panel.

"Jump abort," he said just a little too late. Velisa punched the cancel button just after the witchspace wormhole had formed and The Night Whisper entered it. There was a surge in acceleration, then a sickening deceleration, followed by the sensation of free-fall.

*Witchspace misjump.* The computer reported and all three occupants of The Night Whisper looked up in surprise and horror at the screen in front of them. Just in the forward display, Jansen counted six green and purple warships. He looked down at the scanner and lost count after twenty.

Green laser fire hammered the shields and snapped everyone out of their shocked immobile expressions. Velisa thumped the throttle to maximum and pointed the ship in the direction of the clearest patch of space she could make out in a second.

"How many?" She shouted, dodging laser fire.

"I don't know," Jansen stuttered.

"How many?" She asked insistently.

"More than thirty, maybe fifty plus."

Switching to rear view, she pummelled one ship with laser fire and it released some Thargon remotes.

"If you keep doing that, we might have well over a hundred targets to shoot at," Jansen said, warning.

"Good idea," Velisa said, a smile forming on her face. "Here's the plan. Target me a warship in turn, I'll shoot it once and then on to the next one."

"What the hell. Have you lost your mind?" Jansen asked.

"Don't fucking argue with me Jansen. Just do it, and keep up with me."

For the next minute or two, Jansen and Velisa worked like a well-seasoned team. Jansen targeted, Velisa turned fired and dodged laser blasts from the Thargoids. Sobal kept a masterful watch on the ship systems and tweaked energy distribution as much as he could. Soon it became all too much.

"Energy down. Must escape," he warned.

"How many now?" Velisa asked as the ship rocked from another blast of laser fire.

"Must be nearly two hundred counting all the Thargons." Jansen was zooming in and out of the scanner, finding very little sense in the mass of traces.

"Hold on boys, I've got a little surprise for them," She said and turned the ship round and headed straight towards the middle of the pack of ships. "Plot an escape jump now."

Jansen punched up the local chart and picked the nearest system to where they were. Luckily they could still make Solageon with what remained.

"Any fuel available above the jump?"

"A little..." Jansen trailed off. "Oh no."

"Oh yes." Velisa grinned from ear to ear and punched the hyperspace, just before they reached the centre of the pack of Thargoid ships.

*Witchspace to Solageon in 15 seconds.*

"Not tried one of these things yet," she said and selected the second slot of the secondary ordinance.

*Mine armed.*

*Witchspace to Solageon in 10 seconds.*

Once again she pointed the ship at the clearest section of space and switched to rear view. She fired the mine and watched as it fell away from the rear of the ship. At the same moment, she hit the injectors and the crowd of Thargoid ships began to shrink away, the traces on the scanner were soon behind her.

*Witchspace to Solageon in 5 seconds.*

“Put every bit of available power on the rear shields,” she shouted just before the mine exploded sending a gigantic blue ball of energy expanding outwards. As it hit a Thargoid ship it too exploded in a bright purple ball. Soon the entire rear screen was full of blue and purple and the shock wave was headed towards the rear of the ship. A small rumble started up and they could all feel the incoming wave just as the wormhole formed in front of them and The Night Whisper dived through, emerging out the other side trailing a little bit of plasma.

All three of them held their breath, watching the rear view on the screen intently for any sign of pursuit. It didn't come and the wormhole closed behind them. No one moved for a moment, barely able to believe they were still alive.

“Now that was fucking close,” Velisa blurted out. “How bad is it Sobal?”

He scanned down the status indicators on his panel. Many of them were flashing red.

“Bad.” His one word answer said it all so Velisa pointed the ship towards the planet and hit the torus drive.

*Torus jump drive offline.*

“Shit.” She thumped the desk with her fist. “What are we gonna do now?”

On the scanner five purple blips appeared, headed towards the ship and the comms clicked open.

“Cobra Mk3 Night Whisper this is GalCop patrol, do you require assistance?” came the very polite voice.

Velisa frowned and keyed the comms.

"I think we'll be okay. Might take us a little while to reach the station, but we'll make it."

"Okay," came the response. "GalCop patrol out."

"Are the injectors working?" Velisa asked.

Sobal nodded so Velisa pushed the ship up to full speed and hit the injectors with the intention of burning up the remaining fuel to reduce their travel time.

"Gonna be a long haul back to..." she was cut off by a massive explosion from the rear of the ship and it began to spin end over end. The artificial gravity went off line and they all found themselves floating around the command deck. Sobal grabbed for the status console and pulled himself into the seat and strapped in. Jansen was not so lucky. He drifted across to the rear of the command deck with nothing in range to grab hold of until he hit the food dispenser.

"Engine starboard explode," shouted Sobal over the alarms. Velisa had her foot hooked under the arm of the command chair and was trying desperately to pull herself back into the seat. Just then another smaller explosion from the rear of the ship sent her upwards to the ceiling. As she impacted, the personal cargo device at her belt was activated by her contorting to get a purchase on something and the entire inventory of her previous shopping trip materialised in the middle of the command deck, floating. It didn't stay together for long and was soon spread out around the command deck.

"This is just great," Velisa's shoulders dropped. "Anything left Sobal?"

"Engines offline. Manoeuvre thrusters work," he offered, just as the comms clicked open again.

"GalCop patrol to Night Whisper. You sure you don't need any assistance?"

Velisa groaned and shook off a shoe, keying the comms with her big toe.

"Confirmed GalCop patrol. Our engines are offline. I'd

appreciate a tow back to the station," she said in a defeated tone.

The Police ship took his time getting them back to the station. He didn't waste any fuel on injectors so the journey was long. After a fairly hefty expense in repairs, which obviously were not spared, the crew of The Night Whisper were finally able to rejoin their ship and continue on their journey.

Velisa was the first onto the bridge and surveyed the piles of clothes and other trinkets strewn around. Some of the clothes were still in their bags, but mostly it was all over. There was a rather fine evening dress hanging over the back of the main commanders seat and Velisa headed to it first only to find a small tear in the shoulder. Jansen was close behind.

"Need a hand with this?" He offered.

"Please," she said. "Just put stuff in any bags you can find. I'll stash it all in my sleeping quarters for now and then transfer to my wardrobe later."

She said, wardrobe, but in reality it was a modified cargo pod, that was permanently attached in the cargo bay that housed her entire clothing collection. It was quite large.

As they cleared up round the bridge, Velisa stopped, picking up the small white cube device. She turned it over in her hands, wondering what it was. She didn't remember buying it, which in itself was not an unusual thing to her. Many a shopping trip had left her with a few items she couldn't remember. Pressing the cube all round the outside it seemed to glow a little. Other than that it didn't seem to do anything so she tossed it onto the console for later filing. It glowed brighter as she turned her back.

While she was on the other side of the bridge a small wire extended out from the side of the cube and buried itself into the side of the main command console. The ship equipment screen flashed up and then a Galactic Hyperspace charge was selected and purchased. A rather loud bleeping

quickly followed this. Both of them turned round looking in the direction of the sound and saw the cube on the console glowing brightly.

“What is that thing?” Jansen pointed at the cube.

“I’ve no idea,” Velisa shrugged. “I don’t actually remember buying it.” She stomped over to the device and attempted to pick it up, but was met with a rather nasty electric shock.

“Damn thing gave me a shock.” She waved her hand around trying to get rid of the weird feeling that remained. Jansen came over and noticed the wire going into the console. He grabbed a cutting tool and tried to cut the wire. As soon as he got the jaws of the cutters near the wire, they were thrown out of his hand across the command deck.

Before either of them could react, a floating three-dimensional holographic face began to appear, hovering over the top of the box. It slowly formed into the face of a slightly smiling old man with white wispy hair that was immaculately styled. As his features came fully into focus, Velisa stumbled backwards in shock.

“Oh no. Not now,” she said shaking her head, wide eyed.

“What’s wrong mistress? Who is that?” Jansen asked with a puzzled look on his face.

“That’s...” Velisa stuttered just before the hologram head began to speak.

“Hello Veli,” it said. “Long time no see, although that phrase isn’t really accountable to myself as I can’t actually see you at the time of recording this.” His voice had a distinct upper class accent to it and his pronunciation was perfect. “Well aren’t you going to say hello?”

Velisa stood, mouth hanging open and eventually managed to speak.

“Daddy?” she said.

“Hello my girl,” the hologram said, “We’ve been looking for you for quite some time now. You are not an easy girl to



find.”

“That's your father?” Jansen pointed at the hologram and Velisa shushed him.

“I regret having to do this but it's the only way I could get you attention. You have never answered any of my comms and I have been under the assumption for quite some time that you have been living under a different name.” The face changed expression and took on a serious expression.

“There's no easy way to tell you this Veli.” Velisa's heart sank and she felt a flutter of fear in her belly. Not something she'd properly felt in a long time. The image of her father was not something she'd expected to see for a long time and the only reason he'd be contacting her in such a forceful and expensive way would be because something bad had happened.

“I'm afraid I have to inform you that your Mother is dead.” Velisa dropped into the command chair, mouth agape and blinking. Her father's head dropped and he lowered his eyes to the floor. “I'm so sorry to have to tell you like this, but you left me with little choice.”

Velisa looked up, frowning with tears running down her face. Her head filled with thoughts of her Mother. How much fun it had been with her. The days walking out in the hills, the sheer enjoyment of life. Her Father on the other hand had always been so stoic and serious. She also remembered the look on her Mothers face when she had left, but her Father had left her with little choice.

“You just wanted to control me. Marry me off to some hideous piece of crap just to satisfy your own ambitions.”

The hologram of her Father flickered, its responses were programmed.

“I know you are probably still upset at me about everything that happened but please can we put it behind us.” He raised his head. “Please come home.”

Velisa began shaking her head.

"Your sister had a complete breakdown when your mother died and is in no fit state. You have to come home."

Velisa knew exactly what going home meant and going back to be stuck on her home planet was not something she was prepared to do.

"Not a chance." She spat at the screen, tears running freely down her face. Jansen approached from the side and put a paw on her shoulder.

"I really hoped you'd be reasonable," Her father continued, "We need you now."

"Forget it." She shook her head.

"Then you leave me no choice." The hologram shook its head and faded. Before Velisa could do or say anything, the ship began to power up on its own.

"What the hell?" Velisa wiped an arm across her face to remove the tears and looked at the console as the comms burst into life.

"Attention Night Whisper. You have not been cleared for departure. Hold position." The voice of the dock control master was annoyed. Velisa pushed controls in an attempt to stop the ship from departing but nothing seemed to work. She pushed the throttle to nothing and pushed the stick around in an attempt to move the ship. It made no difference and The Night Whisper began its ascent towards the main docking hub. She thumbed the comms control.

"Dock master. I have no control of ship. It is piloting itself."

"What?" came the only response.

Suddenly without warning, the ship's main engines powered up and it flew recklessly round other departing ships making straight for the docking hatch. It was open and The Night Whisper darted straight out from the docking port.

Hitting the internal comms Velisa shouted into it.

"Sobal. Get your tail up here and get this cube off my console." Within seconds, Sobal was on the command deck

looking over the device wired into the console.

*External comms offline.*

*Galactic Hyperspace in 15 seconds.*

All three of them stood agape looking at the screen.

“Oh no,” Velisa said, just as the ship dove through the galactic wormhole.

## Chapter 7

After The Night Whisper had emerged from the wormhole in chart two, all was chaos. The AI in the cube was extremely sophisticated and despite Sobal's best efforts to disable, it countered his every move. In the process he'd been met with either electric shocks or a small force field that covered the device. He'd tried to shutdown the main power unit, the engines and control systems but to no avail.

Jansen had stopped Velisa short of blasting the thing to try and disconnect it. He didn't relish the thought of the ricochet.

"So what the fuck do you propose we do then?" Velisa shouted, waving her blaster around.

"First off, put down the fucking gun," Jansen said calmly with his hands in the air. "Second, we just have to wait till we hit the station and try and attract someone's attention." Jansen pointed at the console. "Once the umbilical's hook up to the ship, there has to be some way we can tap into them and make our presence known."

"I want control of my ship back. There is no way I'm letting this thing take me back home."

As the ship docked at the station, they all poised at different consoles ready to try and hack their way into the data links as soon as the docked. As the ship touched down and made a connection to the station, Sobal was the first to go. He tapped away and just managed to get a connection to the station but was abruptly cut off as the ship began to depart again.

"Too quick." He said.

"What did it get?" Velisa was scanning the ship manifest. On the screen in front she could see that the ship had topped up with fuel and another Galactic Hyperspace charge.

“That’s just great.” She thumped her fist onto the panel.  
“Now what?”

On board the Fer-de-lance, Kreena and Samson, frantically turned round their own acquisition of a Galactic Hyperspace charge and began their own launch.

“Keep up,” Kreena squawked at Samson who was at the controls of The Sour Brandy, pushing the engines up to full power and hitting the injectors just to try and keep up with The Night Whisper.

“I’m going to try and follow through their wormhole. Save us a charge. This is a little fast paced.”

“They will see us.” Kreena flapped at him.

“Does that really matter now? They’re not going to be able to do anything.”

“Just be careful.”

As The Night Whisper continued its cycle of jumping, docking and buying a galactic hyperspace jump, Velisa, Jansen and Sobal continuously attempted to bypass the cube to no avail. Just as Sobal was in the middle of another attempted bypass, the cube suddenly sprung into life again.

“Velisa,” said the hologramatic projection of her father, “Please just give up or we’ll have to get more serious with the security.”

“What are you going to do, ground me?” she shouted.

“This,” came the singular response and the hologram faded. Next thing they knew, the gravity failed in the command deck and all three of them began to float around. Jansen just about managed to grab hold of a chair and strap himself in, Velisa and Sobal were not so lucky. They both floated round the cabin along with the contents of Sobal’s tool box. Just as Velisa was trying to reposition herself to strap into a chair, her side collided with a bulkhead and triggered her personal storage device, dumping its entire contents to float around

with them once again.

"This is just great."

As they floated surrounded by Velisa's shopping, Jansen finally plucked up the courage to ask the question they'd both been dying to ask, but he softened her up first.

"Velisa, seriously, where are we going? What is going on?"

She glared at Jansen, her eyes beginning to well up with tears again. She repositioned herself, pointing towards the command seat and kicked herself off from the wall. Her direction was a little off and she collided head first with the command console. Rubbing her head, she pulled herself into the commander's chair and strapped in.

"You really don't want to know." She hid her face in her hands.

"Do want know." Sobal said sternly. He looked angry. "What not telling us?"

Velisa looked up, wiping her eyes and grabbed a rather expensive evening dress as it floated past. She flicked it over her shoulder to just within Sobal's reach. He grabbed it and she pulled him into the spare chair. Strapping himself in, his gaze never left her, his expression expectant. Velisa looked up at the ceiling and sighed.

"I'm not sure where to start."

"Well let me give you a little push in the right direction," Jansen said, trying to hold back a little. "From what we've been able to work out, you haven't taken a cut of money from any of our recent trips. Secondly, you have the kind of love of the fine things that would make most of what you should have taken in payment, disappear inside of a week." Velisa raised her eyebrows, biting her bottom lip.

"And lastly, although you mostly have the kind of accent of a fairly well educated farm girl, when you get into a fire fight, your accent slips. You are defiantly not a peasant made good. Where are you really from? How the hell do you

support your clothes habit? You're the only spacer I've ever met with one cargo space completely devoted to clothes."

Velisa covered her face with her hands.

"Alright, alright!" she shouted and then removed her hands, her expression like a wounded puppy. "You're gonna hate me after I tell you." As she spoke the last few words, her accent changed slightly. The guttural colloquialisms changed. Her pronunciation became perfect, her voice softer and more controlled. A slight air of superiority and detachment filled its tone.

"My real name is Velicinda Willamina Elizabeth Windsor Victoria Hayyeesundor, second in line to the throne of the house of London, prime ruling house of Dirien."

Jansen punched up the galactic search and found Dirien nestling in the top right corner of chart six.

"But it's a Dictatorship planet"

"Dictatorship is a limited description. A limitation of the early databases, but in all honesty a description that suited us well. Nowhere in the galaxies can you find a monarchy planet and besides, being called a dictatorship kept us off the radar."

"This is thargshit. There are no monarchies," Jansen spat, "Well not like the old Earth ones anyway."

"Really?" Velisa asked, "What about how we met? Had I not been in the right place at the right time to save your entire planets royal family from slavery by a rather large force of nefarious traders, we wouldn't be sat her today now would we?"

"We're not a royal family, more of a leading planetary tribe if you like. Cat's don't do royalty." Jansen shrugged.

"It is of a similar nature, but our planet is unique. We are the decedents of old Earth's monarchies. My particular line traces right back to the old European families most specifically the area that was know as England."

"No way. You're a princess?" Jansen said mouth agape

and Velisa nodded.

“And if we can’t turn off that cube, in about ten more jumps, you two get to be guests at my wedding and coronation.”

“Wedding?” Sobal finally piped up and Jansen seethed with hidden jealousy.

“My Father was always trying to marry me off to some horrible prince from some unknown family. None of them were ever very nice so I took another option. I did what lots of us have done for centuries. I told my father I was going off into the galaxies to find myself a commoner husband to rule with. It’s one of our traditions, but usually only the men go out, to use a crude vernacular ‘Sow their royal oats.’ I on the other hand just wanted to run away.

“My father was always so domineering and so set in his traditional ways. My mother on the other hand, had other ideas. She was convinced that all good royals should know how to handle themselves in a fight, how to fly a ship well.” She felt a sting of grief punch her heart. “Now she’s dead, and my sister can’t take over, it’s my duty to rule.” Her eyes filled with tears again.

“You don’t want to though, do you? Marry some random posh guy and sit in a throne?” Jansen said.

“I’m not sure I have a choice,” Velisa said. “I always assumed I didn’t have any duty to the family seeing as my sister was next in line and she would rule during my lifetime, but she’s obviously in no fit state to do so, the duty lands with me.”

“Why important so?” Sobal asked.

“As with most things, the rule of a planet and one of the biggest business empires in the charts.”

“But Dirien has nothing. A slightly dodgy sun and... ah.”

“Exactly.”

“Don’t get?” Said Sobal.

“After Evil Juice and Diso Cola, what’s the most popular



drink in the charts with the rich?" She asked.

"Dirien Brandy." Jansen said.

"Never had." Sobal said.

"No reason you should," said Jansen. "It's seriously expensive, like several thousand creds a bottle for the cheapest stuff. All the rich guys have it in their drinks cabinets, but most people drink Evil Juice or one of the many generic whiskies distilled throughout the charts. Dirien Brandy is totally a one off."

Velisa nodded. "It's a recipe that's been passed down for... forever throughout the families. The colonisation of Dirien made it something even more unique. The strange solar activity, combined with the soil composition and we get a very specific set of variables that just makes the ingredients growing and distilling process something you just cannot replicate anywhere."

"It's one of those things that if you're lucky, you get a taste in a lifetime if you just happen to be in the right company at the right time and they deem you worthy."

Velisa tilted her head towards Jansen. "You tried some before?"

"Once," he got a guilty look on his face. "When I was an independent trader, I got jumped by bunch of pirates."

All three of them looked up at the screen as The Night Whisper, entered the station completely failing to follow docking procedure, purchased a galactic charge and launched again, reserved to their fate.

"I managed by the skin of my teeth to space them all, but I lost most of my cargo in the process. By the time I managed to plug the leaks in my fuel tank I found a bunch of cargo pods still on my scanner. I scooped them and was pleasantly surprised to see a large amount of luxuries and liquors.

"After a somewhat fraught journey back to the nearest

station for repairs, I cracked open one of the liquor cargo pods. At first I thought it was empty, but on closer inspection I found a rather battered looking packing crate.”

Velisa was smiling nodding. She knew what was coming next.

“Inside the packing crate were twelve bottles of Dirien Brandy. It scared me half to death because I had four more cargo pods and they probably had the same. I didn’t even know if they were the best stuff or not, but by my rough calculations I just scooped a nearly a million cred haul.”

“That is typical of some of the lone traders who know about where to get the good stuff. They come to Dirien with as much cash as the can, buy maybe four cases of the stuff, and then sell it for a massive profit. Usually sets them up for life. Some do a few runs and are never seen again. I bet it was some of the better stuff too.”

“Oh it was. After I’d taken three bottles for myself, and sold the bottles to the richest people I could find, I had a brand new ship, every possible upgrade I could get my hands on and some seriously nice things. I drank the brandy slowly. Very slowly. I shared it with no one and I think I managed to eek it out to over five years.”

“My family produces one of the top labels on Dirien. You won’t even find ours for sale anywhere,” Velisa said proudly, with a hint of arrogance. “Never really liked the stuff myself.”

Jansen looked at her, shaking his head.

“I should have known something was going on when we rescued those scientists.”

“Eh?” Jansen frowned.

“Remember the ship name? The Sour Brandy?” She tapped the scanner as the ship popped out of the wormhole into chart six at the blip that quickly fled to the outer range of their scanner. “They’ve been following us.”

“Who?” asked Sobal.

“Daddy’s little messengers,” she snarled. “I guarantee if we could get inside that ship we’d find a rather startled looking bird and a guy dressed like a monk.” She pushed across a video pad to Jansen and it played back the rather bad quality recording of Kreena and Samson’s attempted break in.

Jansen lowered the pad and randomly pushed some buttons in a futile attempt to do something with the ship and just at that moment, five yellow blips appeared on the scanner dead ahead of them. Velisa’s eyes widened.

“What system are we in?”

Jansen punched up the system info.

“Eddi. Level two. Anarchy,” he said his voice full of alarm. Velisa grabbed the controls of the ship, pushing them first one way then the other, unable to alter its relentless course.

“Oh shit! Sobal, get me control of this ship now!”

Sobal unstrapped himself and pulled himself reluctantly under the command console, as the blips grew closer. Velisa punched the cube on the console and got a distinct shock.

“Stupid bloody thing. Wake up. We’re about to get blown to bits,” she shouted.

The next second a combined blast of laser fire from the incoming ships stripped the forward shields down to nothing and drained half the first energy unit.

“Not like this, you stupid arse.” She punched the cube and seeming on cue it sprang into life.

“External threat detected,” the voice from the cube, said. “Releasing control lockout.”

Velisa’s hands were on the controls a split second later and she pulled The Night Whisper into a steep dive, twisting port then starboard and pushing the yaw thrusters.

“How much witch fuel we got?” she shouted, her eyes glued to the shield level, hoping she could keep the lasers off

the ship for long enough for it to climb a little higher. She was confident, sure, but even she didn't fancy her chances against five heavily armed ships with no forward shields. From the speed at which they had disappeared she knew full well this band were a little more organised than most and well equipped. Those weren't pulse lasers they were hitting her with.

"A full load," Jansen responded prompting Velisa to fire the injectors, taking the ship on a spiralling course, around underneath the offending ships. She released the injectors, switched to the port view and rolled until she caught one of the ships in the crosshairs. She let rip with the side mounted military lasers and reduced it to dust before it even had time to change course.

"Someone didn't have their shields upgraded then?" she said, laughing slightly, which was cut short by the rear shields being reduced to nothing by the combined lasers of the remaining offenders.

"You'll pay for that," chattered the comms from the unseen opponent, wiping the smile from Velisa's face. "Drop your cargo and you'll live."

"Do we have anything to drop?" Velisa shouted.

"Only your pod," Jansen said.

"Eject controls not work." Sobal punched buttons, trying to get something else other than the controls working.

"We'll that's going nowhere," Velisa shouted. "Start up another jump sequence if it works."

"Jump programmed for Maessote. 15 seconds," Jansen said.

"Just follow us." Sobal pointed at the screen.

"Indeed they will," Velisa smiled to herself.

"Are you gonna..." Jansen began but Velisa cut him off.

"Yes I am."

Another volley of laser fire from the remaining craft found its target reducing the energy levels to two full units

and the view screen flicked to rear view. Velisa fired enough to put off the pursuers temporarily, but from their scattered position, they managed to score a couple more hits before the wormhole began to form just in front of The Night Whisper. Seeing it form, the pursuing ships hit their injectors to follow. The Night Whisper entered the wormhole with the other ships in hot pursuit.

“Exit in three, two, one,” Jansen counted down.

The instant they hit normal space, Velisa pitched the ship ninety degrees down, reducing speed to nothing and then hit the retro rockets, powering the ship backwards, just past the nose of the first pursuer. Velisa’s timing was perfect and the whole bulk of the ship filled the front view. She fired a full burst, angling the ship to keep the front screen full, dropping the power to nothing. The second ship emerged just in time to see the leader, reduced to dust. Two missiles were sent pounding into it’s hull, unchallenged by the ECM and finished off with a blast of what remained of the front lasers before the overheat warning flashed up in front of Velisa.

Sobal sat open mouthed.

*Right on Commander!* She barely registered the message.

“You like that one?” Velisa smiled at him and turning the ship towards the planet she hit the injectors. “Now all we have to do is hope the shields and energy recharge a bit. Put all charge on the rear screens and as soon as we are out of lock range, punch the torus drive.”

Confused and alarmed at the destruction of their comrades, the remaining commandeers floundered for a moment, picking up any remaining valuable cargo from the floating wreckage before setting off in hot pursuit. The delay gave Velisa just enough time to get them out of lock range and soon the huge bulk of the planet was zooming in on the view screen as the Torus drive speed them closer.

“Now let’s see if that bought use some time before

they..." She was cut off by the voice from the control cube.

"Scanner clear. Threat averted. Control systems on lockout," It said.

"Oh no." Velisa pushed the control stick around uselessly. The ship stayed locked on course towards the planet. It was following a simple set of navigation commands and wasn't going to deviate.

"This is not good," shouted Jansen.

Within a few seconds, the first remaining pirate ship appeared on the scanner and powered towards them on injectors but didn't fire. Five seconds later and the second ship dropped into scanner range and sped towards them.

"Unlock the controls you stupid praking piece of thargshit." She was kicking the control console and hitting buttons at random. "Trust you Dad to program something this stupid."

The two ships closed obviously bemused by the lack of response from The Night Whisper. They matched speed closely to the rear.

Sobal eyed the shield and power levels closely as they slowly crept higher.

"Drop your cargo, last chance shithead," chattered the comms.

"Fuck that," a second voice came over the comms, "Three of our guys are dead because of them."

"Fine. Space 'em"

*Incoming Missile detected.*

The message flashed up the view screen four, five, six times. Both ships had let loose, a large volley. Velisa twisted the controls around uselessly.

"Come on..." She switched to rear view, to see the missiles coming dangerously close.

"External threat detected," said the cube finally and Velisa fired the rear lasers at the incoming missiles, destroying three. At the same time, Jansen hit the ECM that jumped the

energy levels down some more and did nothing to the missiles.

“Bloody hardheads,” Velisa spat at the screen, trying to hit the remaining missiles but they span on erratic courses. She hit the injectors to try and give them a couple more seconds and the altitude meter began to rise ominously. Flicking back to front view, she tried to manoeuvre out of the way of the incoming missiles to no avail. The remaining missiles struck the ship in rapid succession, stripping the last of the shields to nothing and rocking the ship violently. They all felt the artificial gravity fail and then a loud explosion from the rear of the ship sent the ship into an unnatural spin.

Plasma vented freely from the destroyed engine at the rear of the ship and only the upgraded armour on The Night Whisper had saved its occupants from certain death. It span helplessly as the two remaining pirates closed for the coup de gras.

Suddenly one of the pirate vessels exploded, from the combined impact of three missiles and the entire shot of lasers.

“What the...” Jansen said.

The Sour Brandy streaked through the debris on injectors and then away from the planet.

“Don’t worry Velisa. I got this for you,” came Samson’s voice over the comms.

“Who the fuck are you?” she shouted uselessly into their still blocked comms.

The final remaining pirate obviously fancied his chances and took off in pursuit, firing his lasers after the ship.

On the command deck of The Night Whisper, they all watched the two ships power away. The scanner array was useless and only a couple of indicators were working. Every other reading on the status panels flashed red and messages scrolled up the screen.

*ECM destroyed.*  
*Hyperdrive destroyed.*  
*Torus drive offline.*  
*Injectors destroyed.*  
*Port engine destroyed.*  
*Retro rockets offline.*  
*Hull integrity at 22%*

The altitude meter flashed up a notch again and Jansen's eyes widened.

"I think we might have a bigger problem," he said pointing at the readout.

Velisa flicked back to front view and after fighting with the mostly useless controls managed to stop the spin and point the ship at the planet that filled the entire view screen.

"Engines not work. We sitting ducks," Sobal thumped the control panel.

"Okay," Velisa said, trying to remain calm as the altitude flicked another notch, "What about the manoeuvring thrusters on manual?"

"Might just be enough to pull us away, but we're not going to get back to the station with them." Jansen was tapping controls.

"Screw it," Velisa said, throwing her arms in the air. "Let's just all jump in the escape pod and let it take us to the station."

"Possible not." Sobal pointed to the escape pod entry hatch at the side of the bridge. A small stream of gas was escaping from round the door with a slight audible hiss. "There not."

From her position strapped in the command seat, Velisa could just make out that the escape pod was missing from its berth. As she turned back she felt the ship accelerate forwards a little. The station-keeping thrusters could no longer do their work and due to the rapidly decaying orbit they were accelerating towards the atmosphere.



“This could be bad.”

Velisa’s statement was punctuated by the altitude alarm sounding.

*Low altitude. Pull up.*

“Easier said than done.” She pulled the control stick towards her, trying to get the ship into some sort of descent angle. “We might be making a little stop planet side.”

She pushed the manoeuvring thrusters to full power forwards to try and get a little more forward momentum instead of the decaying downwards trend.

“You think you can land this ship?” Jansen asked over the slowly growing noises in the cabin.

“In ideal conditions with a perfectly working ship, yeah, done it loads before.” She glared at him.

Sobal shot Jansen a look and dug his claws into the arms of the chair, bracing for the bumpy ride ahead.

For a couple of minutes not much seemed to be happening apart from a few creaks around the ship as its hull reacted to the slowly growing gravity. Then all hell broke loose as the crippled ship brushed the top most outer reaches of the atmosphere. Protruding pockets of gas were like brick walls at the speeds they were travelling at.

“This is going to get very bumpy,” Velisa said and she was proven right a second later by several more walls of atmosphere. She fought with the controls to angle the ship directly into the pockets to minimise the effect and then as the pockets grew more frequent, she pulled the ship up so that its nose was pointing away from the planet, the belly of the ship in direction of travel.

*Hull temperature at 10% tolerance.*

Just as she adjusted the angle back down a little and totally unwelcome voice echoed round the cabin.

“External threat lost. Controls locked out.”

Velisa’s jaw dropped and her heart leapt into her

throat. That was that then. Now helpless behind the controls, fear finally managed to get a hold and she watched the view of the planet begin to fill the view screen.

*Entry angle to steep. Pull up.*

"What do we do? What do we do!?" she shouted over the increasing noise. The ship lurched sickeningly to one side.

"If we can't get that cube off, we're dead," Jansen shouted.

"We tried everything already, besides now is not exactly the best time to be trying to diagnose a problem like this," she shouted.

*"Do something for fucks sake or we're all going to die."*

*Hull temperature at 30% tolerance.*

Jansen's words buried deep into Sobal's mind. He looked across at him and fixed his gaze on his face. Jansen would never say it and probably didn't feel the same way, but even now while in freefall towards certain death, he felt butterflies in his stomach at the sight of him. Jansen was an old fashioned cat. Didn't like to have a tie but he'd slowly come around over the two years they'd been together. He wondered if he'd ever care for him in the same way as he cared for Velisa.

Jansen caught Sobal staring at him across the command deck and Sobal gave him three long, slow blinks. A small smile flicked onto his face.

"What is it?" he asked.

With that, Sobal grabbed a pair of work gloves out of his coverall and pulled them on. They were custom fitted to him, with small holes for his claws, which he popped out. He unclipped his belt and stood up into the seat, gripping with his rear claws to prevent himself from drifting away.

"What he hell are you doing Sobal?" Velisa was uselessly pressing buttons.

With expert precision, between the more extreme lurching of the ship, Sobal pounced onto the top of the control console where the cube was attached and dug in all his claws

just to keep himself there. He grabbed the cube and was met with a small shock that was mostly insulated by the gloves.

"Doing something. No choice mistress," he said and pulled.

The shocks increased in voltage, every one doing its best to throw him off of the device, but his claws were buried into its surface. With a massive effort, he pulled the cube away from the top of the console and took a section of the panel with it. Velisa caught a glance of where it had drilled its way into the console. The wires leading from it were still attached and delivered another much bigger shock up Sobal's arms.

He yowled in pain but continued to pull and the next shock singed one of his claws off, sending a fresh bolt on pain through his left front paw. Obviously undeterred by this the cube used its final trick. Several small spikes shot out from its sides and buried themselves into Sobal's paws through the gloves and delivered a shock directly under the skin. This was its undoing and the shock made the entire of Sobal's body spasm, ripping the cube from its attachments and throwing it to the rear of the cabin. Jansen pulled out blaster and fired. Deprived of its power supply for shielding, the cube exploded into tiny fragments. Sobal cowered down pulling his front paws towards his chest. He screamed in pain.

*Hull temperature at 60% tolerance.*

"Controls are back on line," Velisa said and began to pull the ship back to better angle.

"Are you okay?" Jansen's voice was full of worry.

"Might be. Hands fire." Sobal's face was wracked with pain.

He looked across the violently shaking command deck to locate his chair and then stretched out to try and grab it. His body convulsed with pain as his muscles residually reacted to the shocks he had received.

Just as he was almost touching the chair, another large explosion from the rear of the ship sent it spinning and he was

torn from the console, leaving several claws attached to its top as they were violently ripped from his rear paws. He flailed wildly in the gravity void area, trailing blood and tried to grab at anything, screaming from the pain in all his paws. Two claws found something to grip onto, but it wasn't totally stable.

Velisa winced in pain as Sobal's claws dug deep into the flesh of her upper arm. She gritted her teeth, pulling the ship round and back to a proper angle.

*Hull temperature at 90% tolerance.*

"Fuck me those claws are fucking sharp and fuck." The swearing was helping her ignore the pain. "Hold on."

Sobal was unable to comply as another sickening lurch downwards, ripped his claws from Velisa's arm and threw him against the ceiling of the flight deck with a distinct crack and he stopped moving.

"Sobal!" Jansen shouted, but he could not respond. The impact had knocked him out cold and done who knew what other damage.

"Stay with me Jansen I'm going to need you to help get us down," Velisa lectured him.

"But Sobal..."

"If we don't land we'll all be dead. Watch the panels."

The view outside was turning a distinct blue as they slowed, hitting denser atmosphere.

*Hull temperature at 120% tolerance.*

"I really hope that tolerance is wrong," she shouted over the terrible noise. Jansen could only look across as her words were lost in the noise and he felt a rapid deceleration occurring, pushing him down into his seat.

Sobal's limp body, crashed down onto the floor of the command deck, unmoving. Jansen caught the movement out of the corner of his eye and looked to where he lay. Pools of blood were growing round his feet and a large wound across

his face. One of his legs looked like it had too many joints in it. He tore his gaze away, not wanting to look at his twisted, broken body anymore.

*Hull temperature at 80% tolerance.*

"Extend the flight wings," Velisa ordered and Jansen pushed a button. Two small wings extended out of the sides of the ship and the deceleration grew.

"I think we might make this." Velisa pushed the manoeuvring thrusters on full beneath the ship and managed to get it slow even more and then just as the speed dropped below the required amount she pitched the ship forward and the wings began to do their job, creating lift. The violent shaking abruptly stopped and then they achieved some resemblance of level flight.

*Hull temperature at 20% tolerance.*

*Hull temperature at 10% tolerance.*

"I was a little worried there," she said flippantly.

With the renewed flight status of the ship and gravity to help, Jansen was out of his seat and knelt over Sobal.

"I'm taking him to the med bay. Land the fucking ship," he said frowning angrily and picked up Sobal's motionless form, carrying it off the command deck.

Velisa was engrossed in the readings on the console and began prepping to land. The decent thrusters meter showed nothing at all so she tried them with no response.

"As suspected." She thumbed the internal comms. "This is going to get really, really bumpy. Strap in down there."

Jansen hurried to the medi-comp station and strapped Sobal's body down on the table. It would be mostly unaffected by any bumps in the landing and Jansen strapped himself into a chair near by. He watched as the scanner played over his body and watched as a few drips of blood landed on the floor. The readout confirmed what he already thought was wrong. While carrying him, he'd felt the misaligned vertebrae and the

odd bulges of flesh. One leg was obviously broken and two more were fractured. He wasn't going anywhere for some time, if indeed the medi-comp could fix the long list of injuries.

The lack of descent thrusters meant Velisa was rapidly trying to get creative with the landing. Cobras are not known for their atmospheric flight ability even with the extra wings. There was no way she could just put it down, that would be too much of a jolt and kill them all on impact. She briefly toyed with the idea of entering some body of water head on and then levelling out underwater but the thought of drowning strapped in her chair put her off the idea. It was then that she came up with something and began scanning the landscape beneath her. In the far distance and still hard to make out, she could see a large range of mountains. In fact a large amount of the planet surface seemed to be mountainous with long sweeping valleys. It was exactly what she needed.

"I'm about to do something that could very well get us all killed," she shouted into the comms.

"So, what else is new," came Jansen's voice from the other end, not filled with the humour she might expect.

"How is he?"

"Very bad. Nearly dead already." His voice was distant and morose.

"I'll try to be gentle."

As the broken smoking form of The Night Whisper descended lower, Velisa angled the ship towards the top of one of the larger mountains and began to press buttons on the shield grid control. Somehow despite the damage, the front generator was still working. She pushed every bit of power she could into it and reconfigured it to protect the bottom front of the ship.

"Hold on."

As the ship flew within mere feet of the top of the

mountain, Velisa put it into a steep dive giving her a view of the long green valley stretching before her and then a view of the sloping mountainside. Using the last bit of ability left in the manoeuvring thrusters, she pulled the ship towards the flattest stretch of rock she could see and took the ship closer.

The front shields touched the ground at dangerous speeds and jumped the ship back away from the ground. The jolt nearly pulled Velisa's arm out of its socket on the restraining strap and the wound from Sobal's claws burned, sending a fresh gush of blood onto the arm of the command chair. Gritting her teeth from the pain, she swore loudly and pushing the stick forward, she ploughed the front of the ship right into the ground, starting another batch of warning alarms and violent shuddering. With deft ability she slid the ship from side to side on the fast moving ground, dodging larger boulders and keeping as much contact with the ground as possible. The shield generator complained but held, generating enough backpressure to slow the forward momentum of the ship. Pushing the front manoeuvring thrusters up to full power she managed to slow the descent a little more. As the speed of the ship dropped to something more sensible for being in contact with the ground, she cut all power to any thrusters and the shield generator.

The bottom of the ship made direct contact with the ground and the increased friction finally slowed the ship just as it slid downwards on the slowly decreasing incline until it slid to a stop on a grassy plateau overlooking the valley.

Turning off switches on the control panel, every noise from the ship was silenced and Velisa sat in near darkness and what seemed like complete silence after the terrible and violent descent. The only light remaining on the console was the status display that was cracked down the middle, making the words a little difficult to read. Flicking to the log, she scanned it quickly and saw the words again that had only half registered at the time.

*Right on Commander!*

She flicked it to her status screen. The rating was clear to see and echoed in her mind with hollowness.

Elite.



## **Chapter 8**

Tiptoeing gingerly through the debris on the command deck, Velisa made her way to the medical bay, the light from her wrist-mounted personal information device the only thing to light her way.

After all this time, all those battles and all those near misses, she'd finally done it. She'd reached the only goal she'd ever really set for herself. The fact that her fathers control cube had forced her into the kill made it a somewhat bitter achievement. Years of successfully avoiding any contact with her home world and suddenly, just at the moment of her greatest achievement, up pops the maniacal patriarch from the past to sour the moment.

Elite. The word bounced around in her mind and made her more and more annoyed. She wanted to go into the system and scrub the last few kills so she could do them over again, on her own terms.

As she neared the back of the command deck, her foot got caught in the strap of a rather fetching green top and sent her stumbling into the bulkhead, impacting directly on the arm wound. She cursed loudly and headed out the door towards the medi-bay. There she found Sobal unmoving strapped to the medi-comp. Due to the violent nature of the landing, the medi-comp seemed to have switched itself off and Jansen was unconscious in the seat next to it. Looking over Sobal's broken form, she pressed the restart on the medi-comp and it started back up.

"Jansen?" she said shaking him by the shoulders and his head flopped lazily to his chest and then up, followed by his eyes flickering open.

"Lesi?" he said weakly and then shook his head to come to a little more. "I mean, Mistress."

She considered telling him to just call her Lesi again, but decided against it.

"You okay?" she asked tenderly, cupping his face in her hands.

"That was one hell of a landing," he said trying to avoid the closeness going any further again.

"Whether we can ever take off again, is another matter. If it's just you and me fixing the ship, I'm not sure I fancy our chances."

Remembering what had happened, the fog from his mind clearing he unbuckled his belt and jumped up to check the medi-comp readouts.

"He'll be there for a while." Velisa rested her hand on Jansen's shoulder. "He's gonna be okay though." She gestured at the readout.

Jansen stroked the top of Sobal's head. "He's going to be really pissed off about loosing his back claws." He was trying to lighten his mood.

"The medi-comp hasn't written him off. He'll be fixed."

Jansen just stared at the floor, wanting everything to just be not how it was. His feelings were now doing cartwheels. Beside his own ingrained sense of feline ambivalence, sat a great big chunk of guilt at Sobal being pretty seriously hurt and the fact that before any of this had happened, he'd mostly considered their relationship off as a long standing, mutually pleasurable experience and not a lot else. Somewhere deep down he knew there was more to it than that, but his upbringing kept slapping it down.

"So what are we going to do now?" he asked, tilting his head to look at Velisa sideways.

"Well, the only thing we can really do now is check out the ship, see how badly damaged she is, attempt repairs and if we need any parts we'll have to go meet the locals. Hopefully they'll be friendly and have the tech to supply what we need."

"This is a level 10 planet so we should do okay." Jansen shrugged and put his paw on Sobal's head. Velisa took hold of his other one.

“Hey. He’ll be fine. Let the medi-comp do its work. We’ll get on with things. It’ll take your mind off it.”

“Yeah,” he said reluctantly.

Taking his mind off it was not the problem though. Keeping it there was what was bugging him more than anything else. His mind was saying not to care, but something else was quietly picking at his thoughts.

The locking mechanism on the rear hatch groaned in protest but eventually gave in. Velisa pressed the buttons to lower the hatch but nothing happened so Jansen gave it a sharp kick in the middle, sending it crashing to the floor outside startling several birds that had returned after the violent crash. The bright sunlight flooded in making them shield their eyes and after several seconds of blinking profusely, they stepped out on the plateau to be confronted with the site of the huge gouge down the side of the mountain. Trees littered the ground on either side and the ground was smoking a little. Small stones still clattered down at their feet.

“How the fuck did you manage not to kill us all?” Jansen pointed at the mountainside, fixing his stare on Velisa.

“Strong survival instincts,” she shrugged.

They both turned round to inspect the rear of the ship, coming face to face with the gigantic hole where the port engine should have been. What they could see of the hull was scored with laser burns, dents and countless holes made all the more obvious by the now ruined white paint job.

Jansen’s mood was grim as they inspected the exterior of the ship and compiled a damage report on the key systems. His mood did not lighten as they discovered the landing jets to be almost completely destroyed, thus meaning they would have to try and get replacement parts somewhere. Luckily they were on a level 10 planet with Human colonists so the likely hood of finding the required parts were fairly likely.

The only problem was where. Velisa had not even tried to set the ship down near somewhere populated and with the nav-comp offline, they had no idea where they were or how far the nearest town, city or spaceport would be.

Leaving Jansen outside with a several cans of hull sealant and lots of encouragement, Velisa re-entered the ship and fought her way through broken doors and manual overrides until she arrived on the command deck. By the projected light from her wrist device she picked her way slowly through the debris of strewn around clothing and bits of exploded bulkhead. Catching her foot on something, she stumbled sideways and steadied herself on the bulkhead. Looking down, she saw the offending item hidden underneath a devilishly expensive piece of nightwear. She bent down to throw it aside and revealed a dinner plate sized metal plaque. In ornate script, engraved into its surface across the top, was the name of the ship. Velisa traced her fingers across the inscribed verse.

*Like the triumphant phrase of just revenge spoken in your ear,  
And the murmur of a sated lover between sheets of silken sheer,  
Like words from shadowed sources that aid you in a fight,  
She will know you, love you, kill you with a whisper in the night.*

She read them over and over, scoring them into her mind again. Jansen had bought her the plaque for the wall after their first year of flying together. Some tradition on his home world that was all wrapped up with the circumstances that had brought them together. Given the state of the ship, it was probably the end of them being together. Given the traditions of Jansen's home world, he had to stay with her and her ship, until the ship was replaced. Cats don't have this obsession with nostalgia and personal attachment to things and ships so it usually worked out to be fairly short. Velisa had managed to keep The Night Whisper going for nearly ten years now, Jansen being onboard for close to seven of them, simply so she could keep him around. He'd more than served his time.

She knew full well this could be the end of the ship that had got her where she was today. Elite. Carefully, she placed the plaque down on the pilot seat and rested her hand on its back. Shaking off the morose thoughts, she grabbed an emergency power pack from a storage locker and plugged it into the side of the console. It flickered to life and displayed the ships status. Three lines stood out

*Hull Integrity: 4%*

*Flight Capability: 2%*

*Recommended action: See you're nearest Cowell & MgRath dealer for trade in options.*

Velisa stroked the side of the console.

"Sorry darling. I really broke you this time didn't I?" she said and looked round the ceiling of the command deck.

She pulled the plug on the console and made her way to the med-bay where she found Sobal, still unconscious. The medi-comp readouts were better than before, but still serious enough for him to be held sedated by the computer so she made her way to the cargo bay.

Outside the ship, Jansen was looking over the remaining engine, wondering if it would ever work again. The can of unused hull sealant, hanging uselessly from his hand he inspected the deep scores and burning. He shook his head and pointlessly filled in a large crack in the hull next to the engine. His mind spun over and over with the upcoming coming possibilities and likely outcomes. He knew the ship was a dead loss and knew that this should be the end of his service to Velisa. He knew his next step should be to take Sobal back to his home world but he didn't want to leave.

His thoughts were shattered by Velisa's voice squawking from his comms unit.

"Jansen. Where are you?"

"Next to the engine. You need me inside?"

"No, just stand back a bit. I need some room." And the

comms went dead.

Jansen looked around and then in the background heard a muffled explosion. He looked at the cargo bay hatch and his eyes went wide.

"Shit..." he said and ran in the opposite direction. He made it to the edge of the ship just as the cargo bay hatch exploded outwards and Velisa flew out and towards him on an extremely shiny looking hover bike. As the laser cannons folded away she stopped the bike next to Jansen.

"Hop on then," she said, gesturing head behind her towards the plush suede seat.

"What the hell is this?" Jansen said wide-eyed.

"It's my hover bike," she said nonchalantly.

"Where were you hiding this?" he asked as he swung his leg over the seat.

"In my wardrobe."

"You mean in that converted cargo pod that means we loose out on a full load every run?"

"Whatever. Are you getting on or not?"

"Where are we going anyway?" he asked, holding his paws out flat.

"The ship is screwed, there is no way we're going to take off so we've got one option. Get to the nearest spaceport, get up to the station and get a tow. I'm covered."

"Of course you are," he said and manoeuvred himself into a comfortable position. "What about Sobal?"

"The medi-comp is taking care of him and we shouldn't move him for quite a while yet. He's better off where he is." Velisa gunned the engine. "Besides, the sooner we get the ship back to the station the sooner we can get someone to look him over."

Jansen shrugged, resigned to the current situation, but he didn't want to leave Sobal.

"Hold tight." Velisa said and swung the bike round the side of the ship. "This could get a little rough."

“Worse than your landing?”

Velisa shrugged and steered the bike expertly towards the lip of the plateau and dropped directly off the edge onto the nearly vertical surface. Jansen’s eyes went wide as he grabbed Velisa tightly round the waist and wrapped his rear paws round the passenger pegs.

“Easy on the claws,” Velisa shouted above the rapidly increasing wind noise.

“Drive less scary then,” he shouted back.

“Wuss!” she shouted nearly inaudible and pushed the bike faster, jetting them towards the valley floor.

## **Chapter 9**

Underneath the dark Maessote sky, Jansen paced back and fourth round the small campfire. He stared towards the mountainside from which they had come that was only just visible in the distance. He kept convincing himself that he could see the track left by the crash-landing ship, but it was probably nowhere near where he was looking. Being planet-side always gave Jansen an odd feeling. Being in space for so long gave you a distorted view of the universe and exactly how big things are. You look at the chart full of systems, pick a destination and jump. Several light years crossed in a few seconds and then off to a station. Stations are big, but their not planet sized. You forget how much goes on down on the surface of the planet you orbit. There are streets and buildings; entire cities and many of them. Millions of people, going about their daily lives, going to work, raising children, fighting wars and everything else that the people of the galaxies do. Some go on in complete ignorance of the space activity going on above their heads.

Jansen leant over and threw another log on the fire, contemplating the shear size of the universe. He sat back on his haunches and stared up and the stars. Unlike those dreamers from ancient Earth, he looked up and knew he'd probably visited a fair number of them in his time. The sound of the Maessotean singing crickets began to calm his mind. After so long being cooped up in a ship his old feline instincts were kicking in again. He had a burning desire to run through the fields and hunt again. Hunting with a ship was one thing, but out in the open, his acute senses were tuning into the night and the sounds of small mammals foraging through the long grass all around. He imagined himself, crawling through the undergrowth, head totally level, eyes unblinking, stalking his target. Every time it moved, he stopped and watched. Then when close enough he would pounce and snap its neck before



it even had time to cry out.

"When was the last time you were planet-side?" Velisa snapped him out of his thoughts. She was lying with her head propped up on one arm on the other side of the fire from him, illuminated by its flickering glow.

"Huh. What?" was all he managed.

"Exactly. Been a while hasn't it."

"A long while." He nodded slowly and tried to calm the burning desire to run.

"Under different circumstances, I think I could really enjoy this."

Off in the distance somewhere, a small animal cried out as it met its end at the hands of predator.

"You hungry?" Jansen said, not looking at her.

"Yeah. I've got some emergency ration packs on the bike. You want some?" Velisa was just getting up.

"Emergency rations? No thanks."

"Hey they're the good quality ones. They actually taste like what they are meant to taste like, not some close approximation."

Jansen pulled out a small tool from his pocket; running his front claws over the end, it emitted a slight glow and a high-pitched wining noise. He went through each claw and when finished he held them up in front of his face and admired the shine in the moonlight.

"I'm talking about real food. Emergency rations should be for emergencies only."

He stripped off his flight suit and removed the rest of his clothing. Velisa smiled and admired his muscular form.

"Oooo, my own personal fire-side show." She grinned and felt a surge of attraction go through her.

Jansen barely noticed her attentions. His eyes and ears were scanning the entire area, picking out movements and sounds in the grass. Far off in the distance he felt the movement of something bigger and then caught a smell on the

wind. It was potent and drew him in. He turned back to Velisa his eyes burning.

"I'll be back soon," he said with a snarl and leapt away into the darkness.

It was just over an hour before Jansen returned and found Velisa standing on the seat of her hover-bike, waving her arm around.

"What the hell are you doing," Jansen said, his eyes half closed. Velisa jumped and dropped off the bike.

"Trying to get a signal connection to the ship." She eyed Jansen's roughed up form. He had blood smeared round his mouth and was carrying a small deer like creature. "Have fun?" she asked.

Jansen, realising his lack of clothing, dropped his kill on the floor and dressed himself again from the pile he had left earlier. Velisa retrieved the carcass, finding it already gutted and skinned, she set up a makeshift spit and started it cooking. She cut off some smaller pieces of meat and set them closer to the fire.

Jansen finished dressing and flopped on the floor by the fire. His sleepy eyes fixed on the glowing coals and he curled up a little.

"When was the last time you did that?" Velisa asked. She'd never seen him actually go off and hunt in that way before. It had never really been necessary.

"A very, very long time," Jansen said with a satisfied smirk and he curled up even more, tucking his tail round his nose. His eyes flicked once more and he fell asleep with a satisfied purr.

Velisa watched him fall asleep, wanting nothing more than to wrap herself around him, bury her face in his neck and have him do the same to her. Out of all the beings in the charts why did she want the one who was inaccessible? She watched the fire glow and the strips of meat sizzle as they cooked. The

smell coming from them was extremely pleasant and began to make her hungry. They'd ridden until night had fallen and Velisa could no longer see where she was going, and she had relished having Jansen pressed up against her.

She shook her head and stood up, trying to purge the thoughts, biting her finger hoping they would serve the same as a cold shower. She decided to concentrate on looking through what she had in the bags on her bike. In amongst the mostly survival based items, she found a battered looking paperback book in a sealed plastic bag. Her eyes blazed at its cover. It was creased and battered to the point of mostly obscuring the title, but she didn't need to read it, instantly recognising the battered picture of an old man and child in ancient Earth clothing, accompanied by a dog. It was her mother's copy of 'Goodnight Mr Tom', the same one her mother had read to her countless times as a child. The book was barely in one piece and Velisa gingerly pulled the book from the bag, at once picking up the smell of musty old paper.

Her mother had loved keeping real books around and had some serious antiques, some several thousand years old and she had read them and carried them around like a data pad, reading them herself and to Velisa. It was an extravagance, but Velisa shared the love for the feel of a real book. She'd thought it lost over the years but then on seeing it, realised it had been part of her emergency survival gear selections. She knew the bike would probably only be used in some dire emergency and as such knew she would need some cheering up at the time. It was working. She flicked open to the first chapter, holding the first page into the book and began to read letting the nostalgia of the story pull her attention. Any serious antiques collector would be having a heart attack at her flagrant carelessness with a genuine old Earth artefact and probably would have insisted that it went into a museum.

The smell of the cooking meat just managed to

permeate into Velisa's attention as she reached the fifth chapter. Barely taking her eyes from the page, she reached over to the fire and pulled out one of the smaller cuts of meat. She ate it hungry while reading and went back for another cut. She was halfway through the book by the time she'd had her fill of both meat and book.

She stood up, carefully tucking away the book into the storage compartment on the bike and scanned the horizon around her. It wasn't just Jansen that hadn't been planet-side in some time. The feel of being out on the open was like an immense wave washing over her. She'd never feel it like Jansen did, but still being locked up in a ship for months at a time takes its toll.

Pulling out a fluffy blanket from the bike bag, she wrapped it round her shoulders and lay down behind Jansen, and wrapped an arm round his sleeping form. He barely stirred and Velisa was soon asleep

## **Chapter 10**

Samson compensated once more to correct the starboard yaw in The Sour Brandy. The starboard engine was slowly failing and resulted in the port engine pushing the ship off course.

"Give it another half hour and we'll be flying around in circles," Samson complained and grimaced as he pushed the yaw hard to port, then back to about half off centre, giving the flight-path a distinctly curved appearance.

"Just get to the station, we'll get repairs done and then we need to find her." Kreena ruffled his feathers.

"Can't you have a go at fixing it?"

Kreena pointed the end of one of his wings across in from of Samson's face.

"Do I look like I'm any good with humanoid tools? Just get us to the station."

"You think she's still alive?" asked Samson, his voice filled with worry.

"We've still got a slight trace on the scanner."

"That's on the planet surface. From the state of the ship, how the hell could they still be in one piece?"

"You'd better start hoping so," Kreena squawked loudly, "Because if they're not, then we are both dead."

"It's not completely our fault." Samson looked round, worried more for his own neck this time.

"Oh her Father will blame us."

The safe zone marker flicked on just a few seconds before the entire engine control system died and left them floating in space. Samson looked round at Kreena and shrugged, thumbing the comms button.

"Maessote station control. This is The Sour Brandy. Requesting recovery tow."

"Roger Commander. Do you have a service preference?" came the response.

"Negative Maessote control. Whoever's first out the dock gets paid for the tow."

"Confirmed. Dispatching now."

No sooner had the comms closed and a new blip appeared on the enhanced scanner array heading straight for them.

"So, what do we do now?" Samson was up out of the pilot seat and standing face to face with Kreena.

"We have to find Velisa and the rest of her crew."

"What about the cat?"

"We'll make sure that traitorous feline gets his just deserts."

"You think she knows?"

"I doubt it. If she did, I suspect he'd be floating out of an airlock with no suit on."

A brightly painted Krait slid into view on the view screen. Across its side was emblazoned the recovery service logo and underneath was written the company motto.

*'For the final leg of the journey.'*

"So why didn't we tell her before hand?"

Kreena shook his head. "You still don't get how all this works do you? We've been in conflict over this crap for centuries and with an opportunity like this for them, he'd have to be one of their top operatives." Kreena began to pace the command deck, looking over for a brief second as the recovery ship fired a magnetic tow clamp onto the front of the ship. It impacted with a distinct clang that echoed throughout the ships hull.

"This is Maessote aegis recovery vessel 472. Have you on the station in a few minutes," the Krait's commander said in perfect customer service voice.

"Roger recovery vessel," Samson said into the comms.

"Please quote my number on the customer satisfaction form."

"If he realised," Kreena continued, ignoring the comms,

“He’d have taken over the ship, killed whoever got in his way and forced Velisa back at gun point. Even then we don’t know exactly what his plans are.”

The ship lurched forward as they were pulled along by the Krait, making Samson grab hold of the command chair and Kreena momentarily flap his wings and nearly lift off the deck for a second..

“So what now?” Samson asked.

“We have to get to Velisa and let her know the truth. After that we just have to hope that she won’t kill us on sight.”

“That’s not very comforting.”

“That’s life. Get used to it.”

The first thing he became aware of was cold and then the pain in his feet. Sobal’s eyes flicked open in the darkness of the medical bay. He looked across to the medi-comp display, waiting for it to become clear in his blurred vision. Trying to read off the display was difficult.

“Diagnosis,” he said.

“Internal injuries repaired. Additional recovery required,” the computer voice spoke, “Return to medi-comp in 3 hours.”

Sobal pulled himself up into a seating position and grimaced at the pain in various places through his body. Dropping off of the bed, his legs collapsed underneath him as pain shot through his feet and up his legs. The missing claw injuries were still extremely painful. Detecting his pain, the medi-comp stretched out a robotic arm and injected him with painkillers. A warm glow of relief washed over Sobal’s body and he smiled stupidly under the narcotic effects of the painkiller. He could have easily have curled up and gone back to sleep, but he shook his head, rousing himself to the work at hand. He had something on his mind to do.

“Lights,” he said sternly in the darkness but nothing

changed. He gingerly made his way to the side of the medical bay, trying to ignore the ever present pain despite the painkillers and began to rummage in storage lockers until he found an emergency glow-stick. Breaking it in the middle, it began to glow and lit up Sobal's face and the med-bay with an eerie, ethereal, green light.

Picking his way to the command deck, he found the command console in much the same state, dark and un-powered. He pulled out his personal comms device and thumbed the button.

"Sobal call Velisa. Mistress respond," he said into it. He waited for a response that never came and repeated his call. Satisfied that there was none around or in range, he returned his comms device to his pocket and pulled another device out of his pocket. It resembled a fat cigar with a hole in one end. He made his way to the command console, put the hole end of the device over the top of the commanders thumb-print scanner and pressed a button on the side. It glowed brightly and a small amount of smoke drifted up from the end pressed to the scanner. Once it had finished its cycle, the lights went dead and Sobal returned it to his pocket.

He stumbled into Velisa quarters, tripping over some items of clothing that had been shaken loose by the crash or just discarded. Swinging the glow stick around, he could make out Velisa's dressing station. He made his way to it, and slid back the top that held all the small items in place and fished out a hairbrush. Holding it up in front of his face with the glow-stick, he inspected its surface and pulled off a single hair. Dropping the brush he once again pulled out the cigar shaped object and fed the hair into the open end. Pressing the button a second time, a mass of steam began to emanate from the hole along with a torch like beam of light that lit up the room brighter than the glow-stick. The light got brighter, to which Sobal shielded his eyes and held the device at arms length. When it finished he blinked in the once again dimly lit room



and pulled the device back towards his face. On the end was a perfectly formed humanoid thumb exactly the same shape and size as Velisa's. Sobal smiled at the newly formed flesh.

Expecting to find daylight, Sobal was somewhat confused and disorientated as he stepped out of the rear hatch and was confronted with fresh night air and a dark, star filled sky. Picking his way carefully around the outside of the ship, he noted the ships condition and grew angrier by the minute, stomping as much as his injured feet would allow.

Suddenly he was stopped in his tracks, his acute feline hearing alerting him to something in the distance. He couldn't quite make it out, but it was a sound he was completely unfamiliar with. Scanning his head back and fourth, ears rotating, he waited for the sound to come again. When it reached his ears, he was sure he could hear a collection of tapping sounds coming from all around, the bulk of the ship reflecting the sounds in odd directions.

Then he heard something that chilled him to the bone. Echoing around the mountainside that he could just make out in the darkness and from the glow-sticks light, came a deep throated growling bleat.

Throwing the glow-stick far away, he grabbed for his side arm that to his relief he found still attached to his belt. He pulled it up in the rough direction of the sound and switched on the weapon-mounted light, playing it back and fourth across the rock face. All was silent, except for a small clatter of stones from where he had discarded the glow-stick. Hearing another bleat from behind he spun round and pointed his gun in the exact direction it had come. Nothing.

After making they're way to the nearest space port, and Velisa enduring Jansen scolding her for him waking up with her arms wrapped round him. They eventually managed to get a transport up to the station. As the landing shuttle docked at the station, Velisa was already looking up where to find the

nearest recovery service. The atmosphere between Jansen and Velisa in the shuttles seating compartment had been frosty as Velisa hardly talked to Jansen.

"Seriously mistress," Jansen was protesting, "You've got to lay off the trying to seduce me stuff."

"I can't deny my own instincts," she said bitterly, "You should know all about that after your little hunting trip."

Jansen shifted uneasily in his seat and said nothing just waiting for the shuttle to finish its docking.

"Let's just forget it," she said, and stormed out of the half open airlock.

The nearest recovery service terminal was next to the docking bay so Velisa thumbed the activate button and a reptilian face appeared on screen.

"M. I. Sssssssentral. How may I help you?" the reptile asked.

"I need a recovery of a ship," Velisa said.

"Shhhhhhip IDsssss?"

"The Night Whisper, Cobra Mark three, registration 400000."

"Okay." The reptilian tapped some controls just off shot. "That'ssssss a limited edition 50<sup>th</sup> anniversssssary edition isn't it?"

"Damn straight, that's why I want it back, besides our shipmate is in the medical bay still." She glanced over at Jansen and met his gaze for an instant.

"Okay." The recovery service tech looked puzzled. "Not on long range ssssssscanners. Where?"

"I had to ditch her on the planet surface. She was too messed up to make it here."

"Okay." His voice was a little more worried this time. "Where issssss she?"

Velisa tapped a few controls on her wrist device and then held it up to the console's camera. The reptile studied the co-ordinate numbers and fed them into his own system and

his eyes widened.

"Bay 19G. Go now," he said, looking Velisa directly in the eyes.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" she said, frowning.

"This is Maessote and you crasssssh landed your ship in the mountainsssssss."

"Yeah, so?"

"Look it up." The reptilian closed the connection.

"How rude," Velisa said and began to make her way to the transport elevators. Stepping inside with Jansen she told the lift where to go and looked up the local planet info. Her eyes widened as she read the last three words on the planet summary.

*... killer mountain goats.*

Sobal stumbled backwards again, listening to the cacophony of tapping all around him grow in intensity. It was still far off yet, but getting closer. He swung around again at the sound of another bleat and just caught sight of a silhouetted figure disappearing behind a rocky outcrop. He fired in its direction, causing some stones to clatter down the mountainside. The tapping stopped for a few seconds then started up again.

Behind him, he just picked up the sound of heavy, damp breathing and whirled round. The light from his gun reflected back from a pair of eyes, staring directly at him. As the owner of the eyes drew closer, Sobal began to make out its features. Long horns sprouted from the top of its scarred head, each one with many thorn-like sections, protruding from the front. Beneath was a mouth, half open with long, jagged looking teeth. Saliva dripped from the mouth onto the floor and its breath fogged in the cool night air. It stepped forward and Sobal managed to make out that at the shoulders, it was over his own height.

Suddenly it let out a terrible growling bleat, brow

furrowing over its eyes. All around, came the sound of other bleating, some very close.

Sobal fired, carving a hole directly through the skull of the goat in front of him and spun round, his torchlight picking out many more creatures lurking in the darkness. He panned around, making sure to shine his light in as many eyes as possible and then turned it off, hoping his feline eyes would recover quickly enough to enable him to see everything. The scent of them was now overpowering.

As quietly as he could, he made his way to the edge of the ship, keeping his back to it; scanning left and right, he could see many figures closing on his position in the darkness. Most of the side of the mountain seemed to be moving with creatures. Reaching the ship side, Sobal re-holstered his gun and leapt as high as his injured back legs would allow, digging his front claws into the surface of the hull, praying for some sort of purchase.

Two claws dug in, just as he heard the tap of hooves turn into a thunderous noise. Scrabbling uselessly with his ruined rear feet, he pulled himself ever higher up the side of the ship until he managed to find the protrusion of the remaining engine and pulled himself onto it. Gripping with one hand, he pulled out his weapon again, activating the light and shone it down below himself. There were hundreds of them, tripping and climbing over each other. They were fighting amongst themselves and trampling others underfoot.

Sobal fired his weapon, killing the closest but another quickly replaced it. He began firing repeatedly into the mass of moving bodies beneath him, making sure to score a headshot every time. Another instantly replaced every dead animal and the fallen bodies provided a platform for them to climb on, reducing the distance to him. He stopped firing for a moment and watched but soon realised they were getting closer regardless of the dead bodies. Some began to jump towards him, attempting to get purchase on the engine protrusions.

Firing again, Sobal sent one of the jumpers tumbling back down over the bodies of the remaining goats.

Balancing himself carefully, he pulled out two hand-tools from the pockets on his coveralls and then fished around inside another pulling out a tight coil of wire. Rapidly arranging the two tools into a hook he tied it all together with the wire and then pulled out a long section. Looking upwards, he could see the overhang at the top of the hull some 10 feet above him. He looked down, at the closing group of goats below and decided to shoot a couple more for good measure. This gave him a pause in the action that he needed.

Digging the claws on one hand into the tiniest of panel joins, he leant out slightly and began to swing his makeshift hook around, playing out the line slowly so it could reach the top of the hull. He swung the line faster and faster, and then finally, released it on its way up, sending the hook flying into the air. The hook clattered down onto the top of the hull and Sobal pulled it hoping it would catch on something. The line stayed loose as he pulled it back and then it caught sending the line tight just as his tenuous grip on the hull surface failed.

Instinctively he grabbed the line as he fell sideways from the engine and for a moment he swung in mid air, looking downwards at the mass of animals below. One jumped, jaws snapping towards his feet, nowhere near close enough yet but still causing him to pull his feet upwards. He was suddenly struck with the size of the ship as he hung from his makeshift grappling hook. There was a least twenty feet below him to ground level and another ten above. The space below was full of the goats, bleating and jumping at him.

*How can there be that many?*

Wasting no more time, he began to pull himself up the wire, hoping that his sharp claws didn't sever the line before he reached the top. The goats seemed to have run out of any additional number and the distance between them grew as he climbed, eventually reaching the top of the ship, finally pulling

himself over the edge and lying on the cold metal surface for a moment. Suddenly his comms cracked into life.

"Sobal, come in. Sobal, respond." Jansen's voice was weak and broke up over the distant comm line.

"Trouble with locals," he said, "Giant goats."

"We'll be there real soon. Hold on." Jansen's voice was full of worry.

"Please soon," Sobal answered.

Spinning round on his belly, he peaked his head over the edge of the ship. The pyramid of animals was now covering nearly half the engine. Sobal's eyes blazed and he pulled himself towards an access panel, flipping it open. Inside were a section of controls. Punching a few buttons and rotating a valve, liquid suddenly spilled from the engine covering the approaching goats and spilling down over them like a waterfall. After half a minute of it running, he shut off the valve, and returned to the edge of the ship. The cascade of liquid had only intensified the thrashing beneath him.

Fishing around in another pocket, he fished out a handful of panel bolts. Searching through them he discarded all but one and held it up in front of him. He studied the small text printed on the side.

*Mk35 Ex. Bolt. M10.*

He tossed the bolt down towards the pile of animals, and fired his pistol just as it hit one of the bodies thrashing for purchase. The effect was instantaneous and the entire pile of goats went up in a gigantic fireball and the sound of hundreds of terrible bleats.

The recovery vessel piled its way through the atmosphere, sending sonic shockwaves through the air.

"Seriously, can't this ship go any faster." Velisa was leant on the back of the command chair. The human pilot, looked around at her, frowning saying nothing.

She scanned the dark horizon displayed on the view-

screen and tried to pick out the landscape looking for anything familiar.

“There,” she said, pointing towards the valley under the crash site. At that moment, a gigantic fireball blazed upwards into the sky.

“Fuck,” shouted the pilot, “What the hell was that?”

Slowing to approach the crash site, the recovery ship, turned on its landing lights, illuminating the top of the ship where Sobal lay unmoving. Beneath him on the ground near the ship, the blaze of bodies sent clouds of smoke into the air. Any animals lucky enough to be spared the fire, scattered back into the rocks as the ship roared overhead. A panel opened underneath it and doused the entire area with foam, dousing the flames.

“Open the rear hatch,” Jansen shouted at the pilot as he was running out of the command deck for the rear compartment. The pilot obeyed his request and manoeuvred the ship over the top of The Night Whisper. Jansen leapt the last ten feet, landing perfectly on the top of the ship and scampered over to Sobal’s still form.

“Sobal, you okay?” he said, lifting Sobal’s head from the hull.

“Little local trouble,” Sobal said shakily.

“Looks like you dealt with them pretty good.” Jansen’s eyes were a little misty.

“Fancy barbeque?” Sobal said, trying to laugh and then passed out.

Jansen picked up Sobal’s limp body and headed for the hatch of the recovery ship that was now being expertly held just in the right place so Jansen barely had to step up to get onto the ladder. The hatch closed and the ship ascended, firing three large magnetic clamps onto the top of The Night Whisper and the two ships climbed away. The ship was then carefully set down on the surface and another panel was opened. Circling, the entire ship was sprayed with another

foam compound that rapidly expanded all round the ship until all that was viewable was a vaguely Cobra shaped lump of solid foam with some exposed hull on the top. The foam filled in all the holes and open hatches, sealing it for space travel. The three clamps shot out again and the two ships ascended once again directly upwards, gaining speed.

In the recovery vessel medical bay, Jansen had lain Sobal down on the bed and watched as the medi-comp did its work. Velisa entered and looked at Jansen, concerned.

"He'll be okay," Jansen said, stroking the top of his head. "Medi-comp on The Whisper had pretty much finished fixing him. He's mostly just passed out."

"I'm sorry." Velisa placed his hand on his shoulder.

"It's not your fault. I should have thought about it before we left." He rubbed his hand on hers.

"Not just about this. About last night."

Jansen hung his head. "I just wish you understood a little better."

"I think I do now," she said and turned, leaving Jansen in the med-bay with Sobal. The hatch closed behind him and Jansen stroked Sobal's head again.

"No, Lesi. You don't," he said to the ceiling shaking his head. "You really don't."



## **Chapter 11**

At a table, in the back of probably the worst looking bar on the station sat the gigantic bulk of creature that resembled a dung beetle. He surveyed the interior of the bar, picking up sights and nuances of smell that even the most sensitive of noses would never detect. Lifting his drink to his mouth parts, he sucked in a large amount of gloopy looking liquid that would turn the stomach of any humanoid. He already knew that his contact was about to walk in before anyone else did.

In the doorway, appeared a tall humanoid woman, dressed a set of dirty looking spacers overalls. She looked round the bar a shifted in the suit uncomfortably, as though she was not used to it. Her dark grey/blue hair was immaculately styled and she wore very subtle make-up that clearly did not fit with the clothes. Her yellow, feline like eyes flicked round the bar and spotting the insectoid lurking at the far table, she made a beeline for him. She pulled up a chair and sat down, wincing slightly at the smell from the drink sat on the table.

“Nita Cranjen,” she said, holding out her hand enthusiastically. The insectoid held up his front appendage, revealing the row of barbed spikes. Nita looked it up and down and retracted her hand.

“How can you drink that stuff?” she asked, wrinkling her nose. “It smells like bovine dung.”

The insectoid make a series of clicks and actions with his mouthparts. Nita listened intently, completely able to understand her counterpart without the need of a translator and nodded impatiently.

“I know who your ancestors were. I’m just having a little joke at your expense.”

He clicked again, angrily, waving his arms around.

“I am not a racist. Can we just drop it and cut to the chase?”

The insectoid tilted his head at her, reached into a nearby bag and tossed a small data pad onto the table. He clicked a few more times.

“So who do you want this package delivered to?”

Shaking his head, he told her exactly what she had to do.

“So all you want me to do is take this cargo, five jumps and sell it at the station.”

The insectoid was already getting up from his chair.

“Hey wait a second. What about my money?”

Saying nothing, he pointed a long spiked arm towards the bottom of the data pad screen. Reading the figure off the screen, her eyes widened.

“No problem,” she said. “No problem at all. That’s the kind of no questions asked figure I like to see.”

Nita looked back up from the pad to find the insectoid already gone. She smiled to herself and scampered out of the bar full of thoughts of what she was going to spend the money on.

Taking the express lift to the docking bay marked on the pad, she found an extremely new looking ship of a design she did not recognise. The shape of the ship was extremely basic, looking not unlike an extremely small Cobra Mk1. She frowned for a moment realising that the size of it would only really do for a command deck, the engines, maybe a weapon mount and not much else. As she approached, the main hatch opened allowing her access, and closed quickly behind her.

She hopped into the command chair and pushed her thumb onto the scanner. The console lights came on and the ship began to power up at her touch.

*Welcome commander...*

Checking the status and manifest screens, she found the ship to be modestly equipped with beam lasers fore and aft, plus a fuel scoop, injectors, two missiles. She flicked the view to the cargo manifest. She had to know what warranted

paying her such vast amount of money.

*Cargo 0t.*

“What the...” she said to no one in particular and then pressed through to another screen.

*HyperCargo vX.*

Her eyes widened again. She’d only read about the HyperCargo upgrade and had never actually had cause to use one. She brought up the control interface and selected to view the manifest.

*100 t x Cargo.*

“Cargo? What Cargo?” she said once again to the empty bridge. Pulling out the data pad again she scanned down the list of information but saw nothing new. She was just about to put it down when a message sprung across the screen.

*Ship readiness detected. New Message.*

Frowning she read it.

*Nita,*

*You will find the ship you are now onboard is a modified Copperhead. It has no cargo bay and this is because it has been fitted with a seriously hacked HyperCargo system that ejects its cargo directly to the exterior of the ship.*

*Curb your curiosity regarding the contents as we have shielded it to such a point that yourself and any scans will not be able to ascertain it. To any scans that you may encounter, it will appear as water so your legal status will remain intact.*

*Avoid contact with any other vessels until contacted at your destination system. All being well feel free to keep the ship at the end of the contract.*

The message ended there with no sign off. Nita was not surprised, as she was fairly certain the cargo was not legal and the organisers almost certainly wanted to remain anonymous. A free modified ship with some pretty funky cargo setup was another bonus.

“Maessote control, this is the...” she paused looking around the ship trying to find a registration plaque with comms held open.

“This is The Miniscope. Request launch slot.”

“Confirmed Miniscope. The queue is empty. Proceed now.”

She smiled and the autopilot lifted the ship off the docking pad out into the main hub of the docking area. Within seconds she was out in space and powering up for her first jump. As the counter passed ten seconds, she blasted past a recovery ship, towing a rather damaged looking Fer-de-lance.

Velisa jumped down from the recovery ship’s still opening ramp onto the deck of the repair bay and frowned at the huge bulk of The Night Whisper wrapped in recovery foam.

“If my quarters are messed up, I’ll make you pay for it,” she said to the recovery technician you was striding professionally down the ramp after her.

“You don’t have premium service for nothing madam,” he said. “The foam protects the ship, is removable and the process is almost instantaneous.”

“How instantaneous?”

The technician simply smiled and spoke into his wrist device.

“Open her up.”

Above the ship, what appeared like a set of fire extinguishers fired downwards, obscuring The Night Whisper from view. There was a loud clunk and the smoke thickened for a moment before being sucked away through the vents in ceiling leaving the damaged ship uncovered on the deck, listing to one side.

Jansen appeared at her side with Sobal on a lev-stretcher. He studied the ship with her and looked at Velisa’s disappointed looking face. She looked across to Sobal who was

still unconscious.

“How is he?” she asked.

“He’ll be fine. Just going to take him to the main med-bay.” He pointed at the ship. “Will she be okay?”

“I hope so,” she said shrugging.

Jansen took a look at the recovery tech stood behind her. He was shaking his head.

“I’ll see you in the med-bay as soon as I’ve sorted out the insurance paperwork. Look after him.”

Jansen nodded and followed the medic and Sobal’s bed, watching Velisa stride confidently across the repair bay to the group of repair techs who were starting to gather around the ship.

“Right,” she shouted, her accent slipping to her proper diction, “You lot tell me what its going take to get this ship space-worthy again.”

One of the technicians, a rather round looking, grease covered human, looked up from a data pad that he had plugged into an access port on the front of the ship.

“A scrap yard and then a call to the local ship dealer. This thing is a total write-off,” he said dismissively.

“Just fix it. I’m covered.”

The technician unplugged the pad and tossed it into Velisa’s open hands. She scrolled down the rather long list of damaged parts, wincing at the bottom repair costs.

“Just get a new ship, it’ll cost less.”

Beckoning with her index finger, Velisa gestured for the technicians to follow her. She led them to the front of the ship and a small plaque that was still just about attached.

“This is a 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition mark three. Number four hundred, thousand. They made exactly one hundred of this edition and as far as I am aware, there are only around twenty left. Do you have any idea how much this ship is worth.”

The technician looked Velisa in the eye and touched

one of the front sensor protrusions with a single finger. It dropped to the floor with a clunk.

“This thing needs an entire hull rebuild, new engines and in all honesty new everything. Some of the interior is recoverable, but not much.”

Velisa scowled angrily and then grabbed the tech by the collar, pushing him up against the front of the ship and bending him over backwards. He winced at the pain in his back and shock came over his face at the unexpected strength from Velisa.

“Listen carefully fuck’ead. Fix this ship.” She pointed at the hull. “Fix it now and fix it quickly. I want to be off this station in the next twenty four hours.”

Witnessing the altercation, one of the recovery service’s customer care reps came running across the repair bay.

“Miss Hayee please, we can sort out any problems you may have,” he said quickly.

Velisa looked across at him and scowled. He was a thin weasely looking human, at least a half a foot shorter than her, wearing a cheap looking suit. She took an instant dislike to him and let go of the technician who ran off in the direction of the tool bench closely followed by the rest of his crew.

“Please Miss Hayee. I’m afraid the repair of your ship is simply not financially viable. We can offer you a scrap value trade in on another.”

Velisa began to approach him and lowered her face to his height.

“I don’t care what it costs, I don’t care how many men you have to get working on it and I don’t care what you think about it, get this ship fixed in the next twenty four hours or I’ll make sure your entire company is screwed. Bankrupt, closed down, sold off, and liquidated.” She emphasised every syllable with a poke to his shoulder. “And if you still don’t want to fix it, I’ll call your competitor over there.” She pointed towards

the force field at the end of the deck.

She stepped back, pulling out a data pad. She pressed her thumb to it, and turned it to the rep, pointing at the credit figure.

“Fix it and quick.” With that she stormed off in the direction of the medi-bay. Just as she was reaching the lift at the far end, she saw another recovery vessel coming in, towing a battered Fer-de-lance. She frowned at it and her eyes blazed.

“Jansen, get down here,” she said into her wrist device.

“I’ve only just got to the medical bay,” came his response.

“Get here now. Our Fer-de-lance flying rescuers are in the recovery bay as well.”

“On my way.”

As Kreena opened the hatch on The Sour Brandy, he was confronted with the sight of The Night Whisper, surrounded by repair technicians. He blinked slightly at the change of light and then realised what he was looking at. Looking nervously round the bay, he spotted Velisa striding towards him, right arm outstretched and pointing a gun at him. Kreena stretched his wings out making ready to fly off across the large recovery bay but a warning shot to the hull of the ship stopped him in his tracks. Samson who was following close behind, was snapped out of his thoughts.

“Don’t even think about it. Move a single feather and I’ll blast those wings clean off you.” Velisa adopted a stance just at the bottom of the ramp, well out of wing reach. “That goes for you too.” She pointed the gun at Samson for a moment.

“Okay, calm down please,” Kreena squawked.

“The only reason that you are still alive at this moment in time is that your actions out there probably saved our lives.” She tilted her head to one side. “But, I’m guessing that you’re responsible for the cube device that took over my ship in the first place.”

“Please, let me explain. We’re not responsible...”

Ignoring him, she interrupted. “In about two minutes an extremely pissed of feline is going to walk through that door.” She pointed to the entrance. “You’d better have a seriously good explanation for everything because I suspect I will be unable to hold him back.”

Kreena, drew himself to full height and his expression grew serious.

“Don’t threaten me you stupid girl. You always were full of yourself, full of pride and self righteousness.”

Samson stared open mouthed at his companion, barely able to believe what he was saying.

“You shouldn’t really talk to her like that you know,” he said in a hushed voice.

“I will do whatever it takes to complete our mission,” Kreena squawked loudly, his voice going up several octaves till the words were barely recognisable. “You are still new to this and do not understand anything.” He punctuated the final word by hitting Samson with the flat of a wing. “Silence!”

“Who the hell are you guys?” Velisa was confused, but something bout the bird seemed familiar.

“Don’t you recognise and remember me young Velicinda? I certainly recognise you. A little older, maybe not wiser, but certainly harder.”

Velisa stared into the bird’s eyes, trying to gain some level of information and Kreena stepped forward down the ramp, closing the gap. The closer he came the more Velisa sensed something from him. A sense of warmth and protection washed over her. Velisa’s gun lowered slightly as he grew closer and she studied him closer.

From out of nowhere there was a flash of claws and feathers, followed by Kreena tumbling across the repair bay. Stunned by the sudden movement, Velisa was snapped out of her memories and turned to see Kreena pressed to the floor, with Jansen burying his claws into his back.



"I'm going to enjoy this," Jansen said. "I've not eaten a live bird in quite some time." He opened his mouth and went to close his jaws round Kreena's neck.

"Jansen! No!" Velisa just managed to say and Samson moved as if to run to his colleges' aid. Before Jansen's teeth even made contact, Kreena threw Jansen off with a powerful flap of his wings and became air-borne, flying across the space as best he could, turning to come hovering towards Velisa. As he approached, Jansen pulled out his pistol and aimed it at a wing. Velisa was at his side in a second and pulled the weapon from his grasp.

"Jansen, you have to stop."

"You know what they did." He turned on Velisa in a fury, his teeth bared and claws at full stretch. "Sobal is in a hell of a way because of him. We all nearly died because of what they did. I'll fucking kill the pair of them, right now."

"No you won't Jansen." Velisa's voice was softening. "Please, don't. We have to speak with them."

Velisa's humble request was uncharacteristic and caught him off guard he stared back and fourth between the two of them, a smile was forming on Velisa's face as Kreena landed next to them.

"You remember me now?" Kreena asked, his voice soft and reassuring. Velisa didn't answer and dived forwards, wrapping her arms around him. He responded by shrouding round her with his wings.

"My little princess," he said warmly.

"Kre-kre," Velisa said with the voice of a delighted child.

## **Chapter 12**

"I thought you were dead," Velisa said, drawing back from Kreena's chest with tears in her eyes. "They always told me not to get too close as you never knew when you would go."

"I had no choice," Kreena said.

"One day, someone replaced you. No matter how much I asked, they wouldn't tell me where you had gone. I kept a brave face on it, like you always told me."

"I know. I still monitored your progress as much as I could from afar."

"What happened?"

"Your father reassigned me."

Velisa pulled away and folded her arms. "Why am I not surprised?" she said, scowling.

"One day I was looking after you, and the next I was 'protecting interests' in a far corner of chart two."

"So why are you here now?"

"When I realised what your Father was planning to do, I made sure I was picked for the task. Besides, I knew if anything went wrong, you wouldn't shoot me on sight."

Velisa smiled. "I nearly did you know."

"For a moment I thought you were actually going to do it."

Jansen, had been staring back and forth between the pair of them, open mouthed.

"Exactly who is this Lesi?" he finally managed to ask.

Kreena turned to face him. "Kreena Treefire. Vice director of operations, Dirien royal guard." He bowed towards Jansen.

"He was my bodyguard back home when I was a kid." Velisa blushed and smiled warmly. "More of a father to me than my own and one of my best childhood friends."

"What about him?" Jansen motioned towards Samson.

"Oh, he's my bodyguard," Kreena said. "I'm not as young as I used to be and the guard decided I needed some help. He's still inexperienced though."

"This is all amazingly touching and everything, but just what the hell is going on? Why did you mess up our ship?"

"I think we should go somewhere a little more private," Kreena said under his breath. "This is serious."

After some additional persuasion, Kreena and Velisa had finally managed to calm Jansen down. Velisa had hired one of the station's lavish secure meeting rooms and Kreena had swept the entire area for monitoring devices.

Velisa made herself comfy around the conference table with a girlish smile on her face while Jansen sat wondering exactly what he was witnessing. It was becoming clear since Velisa's little revelation that there was a lot more to Velisa and what was going on than met the eye. Kreena paced the room, looking at panel joins and generally looking worried. Samson took up a distinctive security guard position near the door, eyeing Jansen suspiciously.

"Shouldn't Sobal hear this too," Jansen asked casually.

"No." Kreena snapped. "It is best that he does not. All will become clear."

Pacing slowly, Kreena nervously preened a couple of feathers and then looked round at them.

"How much do you know about the family business and its history?" Kreena asked, addressing Velisa directly.

"Not a massive amount." Velisa stuck her bottom lip out. "We make and supply some of the best Brandy in the charts. The majority of the financial wealth seems to come from sales of it. I know it is seriously expensive." Velisa looked upwards, trying to remember. "If I remember my history class correctly, not long after we settled on the planet there was some trouble with the occupants of Betigere, one jump over. They also do a line in Brandy but have never been as well

known as ours. Apparently the government controlled the production and distribution of the brandy and were pretty hard-core by all accounts. Eventually the workers decided enough is enough and tried to overthrow the government. Civil war.”

“This is all true,” Kreena said, “But what you almost certainly don’t know is that the Betigerians have been trying to steal the recipes and production techniques from us for years.”

“I always suspected something weird was going on. I seem to remember when I left originally the dock master who got my ship for me told me to jump to Tiatenqu first despite it being Feudal.”

“Wise advice. Had you jumped to Betigere first you would probably have been captured instantly and held to ransom.”

“So what exactly is going on now?” Jansen finally piped up.

“It’s complicated.” Kreena fluffed himself up, pacing. “Not long ago, I started to get some intelligence that there had been an impostor placed in the royal line. Someone that the Betigere government had control over. They have been waiting for the ideal opportunity to take over. What with your Father nearing death and your sister in no condition to rule, it passes to you to take over.”

“But seeing as you decided to do a disappearing act the next in line would be your cousin Farlan.” Samson finally gave up his guard position and joined Kreena at the front of the room.

“Farlan’s an idiot,” Velisa said. “He’d be useless.”

“If he was still that arrogant young man with no power and a bad attitude,” Kreena said. “He’s a very different man now. He’s focused, well advised and someone is giving him backing.”

“You think...”

"We suspect he has either been replaced by a double or somehow co-opted. We honestly don't know." Kreena's eyes were wide.

"We have to get back as soon as possible," Velisa said in a panic standing up.

"One problem. There are two factions of bugs out there all vying to take you down. They both want to take you out and each other. We're only five jumps from home and there's going to be a massive crap storm coming down on us."

"So what the hell does Sobal have to do with all this?" Jansen asked.

"You're not going to like this, but your friend is not who he says he is." Kreena said bluntly.

"Who exactly is he then?" Velisa asked, folding her arms.

"He's a spy, working for one of the factions, we're not sure which though. He's been earning your trust, enough to get close so he can steal the family secrets."

"No way," Velisa waved her arms about. "He's been on my ship for two years and never shown anything of the sort."

"There is no way he's a spy," Jansen said, standing up and storming towards Kreena. "He was the one who first drew my attention to the discrepancies in the money shares. Until Velisa dropped her little revelation on us, we had no idea that she was royalty with a massive stack of creds."

"Sobal did." Kreena stepped back from Jansen and Samson fixed him with a stare.

"I would have known," Velisa said and Jansen nodded in agreement.

Kreena looked back and forth between the two of them and started to shake his head.

"Jansen, you're his lover so you're blinded by all the emotional connections that come with that." He turned to face Velisa. "You're wildly in love with him," he motioned to Jansen, "So you're blinded by you attempts to not get in the way of the

two of them. You kid yourself that the feelings you have about Sobal are just your jealousy making you not trust him." He motioned to Jansen again. "And you trust her so totally, that you'll go with what ever she says. You've been flying with her for so long you're practically married. You're both not seeing things clearly because of your emotional attachments to each other. You hide it well Jansen, but I'm pretty sure you're wildly in love with Velisa to, but only your sense of duty to her gets in the way."

Jansen and Velisa both frowned and then looked at each other.

"No." Velisa muttered, not quite convinced by her own words and Jansen shook his head also.

"Kid yourselves if you want to but I can smell it on the pair of you."

Velisa and Jansen began to step back from each other.

"Look we don't have time for your personal lives to get in the way of what's happening." Kreena said.

"Do you have any proof of this?" Jansen threw his hands in the air, exasperated.

"This." Samson stepped forward, pulling a pad out of his robes and handed it to Jansen. He tapped the screen and it displayed a picture of Sobal sat at a bar room table with a large black insectoid. The insectoid had an array of painted tribal markings across his body. "This was taken around three months ago."

"Who the hell is that?" Jansen pointed to the insectoid.

"We can't be on hundred percent sure, but I suspect he is Lik-Kar Krech, head of the Betigere rebel distillers alliance."

"Rebel distillers alliance?" Jansen laughed, "You are joking." He looked at Velisa who was not laughing at all.

"That guy, is one of the biggest, most powerful scumbags you could ever meet or he's the heroic revolutionary saviour of Betigere, depending on which side of the civil war you're on." Velisa said, looking to Kreena, who

nodded in agreement. "Personally to the Diriens, he's a pain in the arse, much like the main government."

"He's a rebel leader, with loads of power, weapons, followers and charisma. He's also not someone who lets someone take a picture of him without knowing it either. He wanted you and us to find out."

"I think I need to have a serious chat with Sobal."

Jansen tossed the pad back to Samson and headed for the door.

"Be careful," Kreena laid the tip of his long wing on Jansen's shoulder. "He'll know something is up straight away. Do try and find out what he's up to though."

Jansen nodded and left the room.

The main lift door to docking bay number 24H slid open and Sobal stepped out with a distinct limp and a scowl on his face. He approached a very nicely painted Cobra and entered the open entry ramp. Sliding himself into the commander's chair, he powered the ship up and began checking systems. He pulled out the tube device from his pocket and inspected the fake finger on the end. He pressed it lightly and saw the fake blood flow move under the surface of the skin then pressed it to the indent scanner on the console.

*Welcome Commander Hayeesundor to your new Cobra Mk III. Please take a few moments to setup your default preferences.*

Sobal hit the cancel button on the new ship setups and requested clearance to departure. As he waited for his slot, he eyed the thumb protruding from the end of the device. He opened his mouth and ripped it clean from the housing, spraying fake blood over his face. He chewed, crunching up the bone and enjoying the taste of genuine human flesh. A delicacy only a few of the most unscrupulous feline criminals had ever tasted. He chewed and relished it, realising then why

some developed an insatiable desire for it.

The ships autopilot automatically kicked in as the slot was available and blasted the ship out into space. Sobal pulled the ship around and looped around the station, powering on injectors. Once at a distance he desired, he cut power and turned to face the station. With it in his cross hairs, he opened fire for a second and the stations shields absorbed the military lasers hits harmlessly.

*Please wait while enforcers are dispatched to your location.*

Sobal grinned and quickly plotted a jump course out of the system. The second the first viper appeared from the cover of the station, he pressed a full charge onto the ship, vaporising it in seconds. A second ship appeared from the station, heading rapidly in his direction. Just for good measure, he blew it away too and flicked to his status display, which displayed *Fugitive* and he smiled.

Turning a full one-eighty, he hit the injectors and the hyperspace at the same time, watching the timer count down to zero.

“Have fun mistress,” he shouted as the ship plunged into the wormhole and was gone from the system.

Finding Sobal missing from the med-bay had sent Jansen on a search of the entire station. The station records showed that he had not left so Jansen had searched, all the time wondering if what Kreena had told him was true. Could Sobal really be trying to screw them over? Were they both really that blind to the truth? He shook his head, frowning. Velisa and himself had frequently dealt with and seen through the most trustworthy seeming of individuals.

“Samson to Jansen.” His comms device cracked to life.

“Yeah. I’m here.”

“I’ve just had a rather interesting chat with one of



Krech's men. He wasn't as good at hiding his tracks." There was a pause from Samson. "Looks like Sobal made off in a brand new mark three, fully loaded by all accounts."

"So what the hell did he do?"

"Can't be sure. Someone did open fire on the station a little while ago, destroyed a couple of vipers and jumped out, but I've looked up Sobal's record and it's still clean."

"Would have got a Fugitive tag for sure."

"Indeed. I think it's time we got out of here and head back to Dirien. Get to your ship and we'll rendezvous at the Ataren witch space beacon after jumping."

"Okay," Jansen said a little doubtfully, and closed the connection. He still didn't trust Samson and Kreena, but Velisa obviously did, so really he had no choice but to trust them. Recent events were starting to make him realise that he should be careful who he trusted though. A call from his comms snapped him back to reality.

"Jansen. Get your furry ass down to the docking bay. We're out of here." Velisa's voice was impatient sounding.

"I'm on my way. Just got a call from Samson."

"Good good. If you get there before me, get the ship prepped."

"Will do." He paused for a moment, "Do you trust him?"

"What Samson? No idea, but I do trust Kreena and if he trusts Samson then so do I."

"Seriously Lessi, this has just got weirder and weirder by the minute. What the hell is gonna happen?"

"I don't know. Get to the ship. We'll talk more." Her voice was soft and full of concern.

As Jansen entered the docking bay, his head was hanging low, the depression just stating to come over him. He tried his damndest to push the feelings away, letting his feline instincts push away the fact that he cared away. It didn't help. He spotted Velisa running round the outside of the newly

repaired Night Whisper checking that everything was intact and to her liking. The ship had not been repainted but appeared to be fully repaired, covered in welded panels.

Velisa saw Jansen as he trudged towards her and met him half way, putting an arm round his shoulder.

"Let's get out of here," she said and led him into the ship.

As she sat down into the command chair and Jansen took up his usual position she paused in her usual pre-flight checks.

"Jansen. Are you sure you want to go with me?"

He frowned and then his face fell. Was Velisa about to cast him out as well now? Would he be left with nothing but his credits and a reasonable rating?

"Oh course. I owe you and always will be your servant, mistress..."

"Stop right there." She cut him off. "You have repaid that debt over and over again. You no longer owe me a thing. If anything I owe you my life a million times."

"Do we have to do this now?" He hung his head again.

"Yes. We do. You are released from my servitude. I no longer require you around."

"It doesn't matter, I would stay anyway. I have my oath and nothing can break it."

"Is that the only reason you stay with me?"

"No."

Velisa paused staring him in the face. Jansen would not meet her gaze.

"Come with me," she said getting out of her seat.

Bemused, Jansen followed close behind her as she headed through the main door and towards the cargo bay entrance. They both descended the ladder and down to the main deck of the bay, which was empty besides Velisa's wardrobe crate. In the middle of the empty space was a small altar with two candles burning and in between was a small cage containing a

live, small rodent.

“Exactly what are you doing?” Jansen asked.

Velisa approached the small altar and pointed to the floor in front.

“Sit down,” she ordered and Jansen complied. Opening up the cage she grabbed the rodent in one hand and it began to squeak, attempting to bite her hand, but her grip was too strong for it to twist round to the correct position. With her other hand she pulled out a small knife, then quick as a flash, she dropped the startled creature to the floor and chased it where it ran, grabbing it again skilfully, she pushed the knife through its neck, killing it instantly.

Jansen watched with his eyes wide, suddenly realising what she was doing. Velisa stood back up carrying the dead rodent between her teeth. Her eyes were screwed up, squinting and she was trying not to be sick. She rushed over to the altar and dropped the body on the top, leaving a small splatter of blood where it landed. She rapidly started spitting on the floor, wiping at her mouth with the back of her hand, then she stepped back from the altar and motioned to Jansen.

“Take it,” she said calmly.

Jansen stared down at the body in front of him and began to shake his head.

“No Lessi, please.”

“Just take it. It’s the only way I could think to break this debt you owe me.”

“But I can’t. You know what this means?”

“Of course I do.” She pointed at the body and took another step back. “Take it.”

His face fell and he took the small rodent off the altar and then bit its head clean off. He chewed with tears in his eyes and then took another bite. He continued until the entire thing was gone and looked back at Velisa, waiting for what was about to happen next.

From a small storage locker, Velisa removed another

cage, with another small identical rodent. She swiftly removed the creature from the cage and approached Jansen, deciding that holding it between her teeth was not a good idea this time. The rodent squeaked in protest, thrashing its body, desperately trying to break free.

"Your turn," she said and briefly held it in front of Jansen's face before dropping it to the floor. The terrified creature instantly took off across the cargo bay, desperately trying to find somewhere to hide.

Jansen's eyes blazed his instinct to chase insanely strong. His claws barred from his paws and he stood up to full height.

"Go on," Velisa said, encouraging him.

Quick as a flash, he was gone across the cargo bay and within seconds there was a muffled, terrified squeak from a dark corner of the bay. Jansen returned the body of the rodent in his mouth, limp and unmoving. His eyes shining half with sadness, half with anger and he dumped the body on the altar. Velisa leant forward and sniffed the body and then stood back up, taking two steps back. Jansen shook his head again, picked up the body of the rodent and began to eat, thus completing the ritual he never thought he could be on the receiving end twice in his life.

"How could you do this to me?" he shouted between mouthfuls.

"I'll see you on the command deck when you're ready." Velisa headed for the ladder and out of the cargo bay. "After I brush my teeth."

Jansen shuffled onto the command deck a few minutes later, his head hung low. Velisa had done the unthinkable. She'd performed the de-homing ritual used by his people. It was exactly the same ritual he'd been on the receiving end of when his own mother had decided it was time for him to leave the family home and make his own way in the world.

"Shall I leave now?" he said to Velisa, who was sat in the command seat checking over the systems of The Night Whisper.

"Don't you get it yet?" she said without looking round.

"I get that you just performed the de-homing ceremony. I know what it means." There was venom in his hurt voice.

"You stupid fucking cat." Velisa got out of the chair and positioned herself directly in front of him. "I did it so you would no longer be indebted to me. Don't you get it? I basically banished you from my home." She motioned to the ship around them, "But you can still come back, of your own choice."

"But I would choose to be with you anyway," he said.

"I'm sorry Jansen, but I had to make sure. I had to make sure you were staying for the right reason, not just because you feel some debt towards me."

Jansen shuffled about the command deck.

"You know, this is turning into a hell of a week. We nearly die about five times, I find out that you're not just a trader with a love of expensive stuff, but actually a princess with loads of creds. Sobal did know and turns out to be not who he says he is, you do the de-homing ritual on me and now were off to your home world to take down a plot to steal a liquor recipe." Jansen looked Velisa straight in the eye.

"Seriously, could this week get any weirder?"

Velisa sniggered and held Jansen by the shoulders.

"You haven't met my family yet. Now let's get out of here."

Jansen nodded and took his station in the co-pilots seat and Velisa punched up the comms.

"Night Whisper to Sour Brandy, you ready to go Kreena?"

"Already outside awaiting your launch," came the response. "All seems quiet out here. Traffic is extremely light, just a few police patrols."

"Acknowledged. Launching asap." She thumbed to a different channel.

"Station control, request launch clearance."

"Confirmed Night Whisper. The queue is empty. Launch at your convenience."

The autopilot kicked in at Velisa's command and then the Night Whisper was shot out into space. Almost immediately, the warning klaxon sounded and five blips on the scanner turned red.

*Fugitive. Halt and prepare to be destroyed.*

The Vipers streaked towards the ship at maximum speed.

"What the..." Velisa punched up her status chart.

*Legal Status: Fugitive.*

"How the fuck am I a fugitive?"

Laser fire raked the shields and the comms taunted her.

"Gonna make you pay for spacing my buddies."

"No one shoots the cops in this system and gets away with it."

"I didn't kill anyone, in this system," Velisa shouted back into the comms and pushed the ship into a dive away from the station, hitting the injectors as she did.

"Jump to Ataren. Now!" she barked at Jansen who punched the hyper drive to start the countdown. "Night Whisper to Sour Brandy, follow me through and get ready to waste some cops."

Kreena's response did not sound impressed.

"I thought we were meant to be keeping a low profile. Why didn't you tell me you were tagged as a fugitive?"

*Witchspace to Ataren in 10 seconds.*

"I'm not, well I wasn't before I launched."

"This will make things complicated."

*Witchspace to Ataren in 5 seconds.*

"Don't I know it. Next system is Anarchy so we shouldn't get too much trouble from the local cops."

Velisa let go of the injectors, giving The Sour Brandy just enough time to catch up and the police vipers enough time to get a few more good shots in on her rear shields. The wormhole opened and the ship powered through, emerging in the Ataren system a few seconds later, shortly followed by the Sour Brandy that had been on injectors all the way. On the other side, both ships peeled out of the wormhole and took up positions to cover the exit and enable them to slot in behind whoever came through.

"How ever many get through, leave at least one alive for me to tag," Velisa said over the comms.

"I have to admit, I am a little reluctant to let Samson mess up his own legal status over what is most likely a misunderstanding." He paused, thinking about it a little. "Needs must I suppose."

In the background of the comms chatter, Velisa could hear Samson, grumbling about having to shoot cops and she sniggered to herself, just as the first Viper streaked out of the wormhole. It barely got more than a few ship lengths out before Velisa blew it to pieces with perfectly aimed shot at its rear engines.

"I see you've got a little ruthless in your time out amongst the stars," Kreena said over the comms and did much the same to the next one that came through.

"Okay enough posturing." Velisa scolded Kreena, "I'll take the next one away and you deal with the rest. There were only five at most."

"As you wish, your majesty," Kreena said just on the border between sincerity and sarcasm.

The third Viper appeared and Velisa spurred it on with a quick blast from her laser. The pilot hit the injectors and started trying to manoeuvre to bring his weapons to bear, but Velisa punched the injectors herself and took off after him.

Just as the wormhole collapsed, a final Viper made it through. Kreena decided that he would give them a chance.

“Police Viper. Stand down and we will not harm you,” he said over the comms. The Viper responded with a blast from his lasers and Samson pushed the ship up to full speed.

“Have it your way,” he taunted and returned the laser favour.

Velisa closed on the other Viper, keeping a permanent missile lock on him. She closed the distance rapidly and launched the missile at near point blank range and the Viper dived to manoeuvre away. The explosion took out most of the Vipers rear shields and slightly touched the front on The Night Whisper. To back the missile up, she hammered the hull of the ship with her lasers until she could see plasma escaping. Just as the Viper looked close to exploding, Velisa cycled the missile launcher and launched an extremely small missile. The head of it split open to reveal four sharp prongs that splayed outwards. It hit the rear quarter of the Viper and the points of the prongs embedded themselves into its hull, drilling their way in. A second later sparks erupted from the device, surging over the entire ship. Its running lights flickered and died leaving the Viper drifting, dead in space.

Finding his ship dead and being on the receiving end of a rather hefty electric shock, the Viper pilots training kicked in and he pulled the ejection handle. The mechanical parts of the ejection process mostly worked, but simply allowed the escape capsule to drift away from the main body of the ship. When it was far enough away, Velisa scooped the pod and headed back in the direction of her companion ship.

“I’ll go and welcome our guest,” Jansen said getting up from the co-pilots seat.

“Do go easy on him. He’s just doing his duty,” she said in mock posh tone.

“You do that accent a little too well you know.”

Samson skilfully hammered the final Viper till it was leaking plasma. The Viper pilot was well trained, but the



members of the Dirien Royal guard are better trained.

"Last chance," Samson said into the comms, "Stand down and I'll let you limp back to the station."

"You damn 'stards," the Viper pilot responded, "Killed my buddies. No chance."

The Viper pulled around, the engines beginning to fail and a second later it exploded as the pilot foolishly tried to engage his injectors.

Back on the bridge of The Night Whisper, Velisa sat in the command seat scowling at the screen. It was displaying an exterior view of the Massote station. A Cobra swung into view and hammered the station with laser fire, then destroyed a couple of vipers before hyper spacing out.

Frowning, she punched a few buttons and brought up the internal camera recordings. As she searched through, her frown deepened as she came across footage of Sobal, taking hair from her dressing room. She thumped the console and turned to acknowledge Jansen as he entered the bridge.

"What should I do with our guest?" he asked, leaning on the back of the seat.

"Chuck him back in his pod and eject him into space once we're nearer the sun. I've got what I wanted."

Jansen stomped off, trying to avoid looking at images of Sobal.

"We'll get him Jansen. He made a fool of both of us."

"He made a bigger fool out of me. Not going to make that mistake again."

Velisa hit the comms. "Gentlemen, I think it prudent for us to get out of here. Ataren is not a friendly system and the sooner we get home the better."

"Indeed." Kreena responded. "Let's head for the sun and full up."

After skimming and releasing the escape pod, they

jumped to Istiesri, then Teesso and Edince all the while waiting to be jumped by the Betigereians. But nothing happened. After sun skimming at Edince, Velisa set course for Dirien and jumped with The Sour Brandy following close behind.

## **Chapter 13**

Powering in system from the beacon, The Night Whisper and The Sour Brandy made their way to the planet. Velisa shifted uncomfortably in her seat, feeling like the naughty child who'd stayed out and was coming home late. As the Torus drive powered the ship towards the station, she watched the planet grow; seeming calm and serene, but she knew a gigantic shit-storm was coming her way from all possible sides. Just out of scanner range, behind her, The Sour Brandy followed.

"If the beetles are going to do anything, it's gonna be now," she said, glancing at Jansen.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Just feels weird to be home after all this time." She nodded to herself. "It's about time really."

Jansen watched her closely, focusing on her discomfort to take his mind off his own turbulent thoughts.

As the jump drive cut out, she swung the ship towards the station slowing slightly so The Sour Brandy could catch up.

"Anything on your scanner?" she said into the comms.

"Lots, but nothing notable or obvious." Kreena's voice sounded worried.

"If anything twitches in our direction, I want to know."

Powering up again, she headed towards the station at full speed.

"Something isn't right. We should have been jumped by now," she said.

"You're worried because we haven't been attacked yet?"

"If we're not the target, then who or what is?"

Jansen frowned and shrugged.

"Exactly. Something is going on."

Next thing she knew they were in the station aegis and the warning klaxon sounded.

"We've got incoming. Police ships I'm betting," Samsons voice was worried.

"I'm gonna have to talk them off. With my Fugitive rating, it's not going to be easy. Kreena, get on to the guard and let them know it's us." Velisa thumbed the comms to a very specific frequency assigned to police inter-ship comms.

"Dirien police Vipers, this is Her Royal Highness, Princess Velicinda Hayyeesundor, aboard The Night Whisper. Please halt your attack run," Velisa said in her most royal, official tone.

There was a pause as they considered it.

"All Fugitive craft entering this system will be destroyed. Jump out or face the consequences." The reply was official, and slightly nervous.

"Stand down Police Vipers." Kreena added his official tones to the conversation. "This is Kreena Treefire, Director of royal guard operations. Stand down now, or I'll personally have you executed for treason for threatening the next Queen of Dirien. Fugitive status on her highness will be rescinded as soon as I have access to the guard main system."

There was another pause and then the Vipers powered down, turning back towards the station.

"Follow us to the station, but do not dock yet. We need to confirm identities."

"Confirmed police vipers," Velisa said with a smile, "Lead the way."

On their way to the station, Velisa watched with mind amusement as years of police training kicked in and the Vipers slowly swung into Royal escort positions. She sniggered to herself.

"What?" Jansen asked.

"You asked if things could get any weirder. I suspect things are about to get a whole lot weirder in the next hour or so."

Nita Cranjen swerved her Copperhead round the pair of Vipers as they exited the station at high speed, swearing over the comms. They ignored her.

"Dirien station this is The Miniscope. Request docking clearance," she said into the comms.

"Confirmed Miniscope. Docking bay fourteen, F. Clear to dock in twenty seconds."

"Dirien station, I need an empty bay to offload one hundred tonnes of cargo."

"How the hell have you got one hundred cargo pods in that small thing?"

"Special Hypercargo mod."

"Hold for scanning."

Nita watched on the view screen as a sinister looking Python swing out of the docking port. She was still wondering what her cargo was but guessed she was about to find out.

Scanning beams emitted from just above the docking port played across the surface of her ship and she held her breath.

"Clear. Docking bay twelve, K then. The dock master is off till the morning. You'll have to wait till he's on duty," The voice said as the beams cut off.

Nita started breathing again and guided her ship into the station opening. The automatic docking controls kicked in and guided her ship to the empty bay. Once there she powered down the ship and unstrapped, wondering what to do with the cargo. Having only ever used the automatic trade facilities she was a little unsure how it would go.

She shrugged the doubt and worries off and headed to find the nearest bar and then some sleep before the morning.

Jansen shifted in his seat, as a shadow seemed to fall across the display. He punched up the left view and saw a small armada of ships coming into range. As they grew closer, he could make out at least twenty Vipers in extremely shinny

paint and at their head was an Anaconda.

"That's a royal guard fleet wing. Who the hell is in the lead ship?" Kreena said over the comms. Before Velisa could respond, another voice cut over the comms.

"Night Whisper, this is the Shining Star, Farlan Moonwind commanding." His voice was official, with perfect pronunciation. Royal.

"That is my cousin," Velisa said. "Looks like he's been given full royal privileges already."

Jansen bristled and hovered his finger over the missile arming button.

"Now, police vipers," Farlan said in complete official mode, "Stand down and return to base. I will not have the future queen harassed in this manner."

"Sir," came a response from one of the police ships, "We have to follow procedure and check all identities."

"I am overriding. Stand down or face the consequences."

Velisa and Jansen sat open mouthed listening to the exchange, feeling very much caught in the middle.

"Sir, if you will also follow us back to the..."

The Viper pilot's words were cut short by the combined laser blast from the entire armada, reducing the two police ships to dust in an instant.

"Now your majesty," Farlan's voice didn't miss a beat. "If you would allow me to escort you planet-side, we can proceed with the arrangements."

"Now hang on just a minute." Velisa was fuming. "I will make my way to the palace in my own time and in my own way. There's no need to be all official about everything anymore. I will be taking over my duties fairly shortly."

There was an obvious pause from Farlan's end of the comms. Jansen could practically hear him curse under his breath.

"He won't like that much." Kreena said on a closed

comm line.

"Indeed, your majesty." The words were tainted with gritted teeth. "Please lead the way."

Velisa was just about to power up when a second set of traces appeared on the scanner and the comms cracked to life.

"You're royal highness. May I be of assistance?" came the well spoken, yet relaxed male voice.

"Who the hell is that Kre?" she asked into the direct comms line.

"I suspect, that is Tiberius Heart. Lord of the New Anglia district. This could get ugly," Kreena said with a worried voice.

"Shit. It's my future husband." Velisa thumped the main comms open.

"Lord Heart I presume." She said in official tones.

"Your majesty. Welcome home. Please allow me and my fleet to escort you to the royal station."

"I assure you Lord Heart, that will not..." Velisa was cut short by Farlan sounding very pissed off.

"I will escort her majesty home, Lord Heart." He spat the words like an order, bordering on official reprimand.

"Gentlemen, please," Velisa half scolded, "I have no need for an escort, but feel free to fly along side me. I have the lead." She closed the comms and giggled.

Watching the scanner with a smile, Jansen saw all the blips on the scanned line up to each side of The Night Whisper, Lord Heart's to port and Farlan's to starboard. Velisa powered the ship forward on half throttle and leant back in her chair, an intense look of concentration on her face.

In the main station bar, Nita Cranjen nursed her third beer of the night. She'd tried to sleep but the promise of a big payout was keeping her awake. Time doesn't really have a specific clock in space and Nita had watched the barman turn in for the night when the next shift arrived. She'd spoken to

him at length about many things but now sat in silence as the newcomers, cleaned the bar area and checked stock levels all too busy for the general chatter that comes at the end of a working day.

Idly, she pulled an info screen round to face her that was attached to the bar top. She slicked to the commodities market page and scanned the prices. She flicked to the detail on the Liquors and Wines section and then into the Brandy section. If she could afford just one case. P.O.A. it listed next to the various entries, except the Betigereian entry was up for a measly 35c and availability was high.

Just then the screen flickered once then twice in quick succession. Nita tapped the edge of the screen and frowned then realised that every member of staff had stopped what they were doing and were looking up to the ceiling, waiting and listening. Then the klaxon sounded, very loud and made Nita jump, spilling her drink. The head barman smacked a button behind the bar and a heavy steel shutter slammed down over the viewing window, obscuring the gently spinning star-field.

*Solar flare. Level 7.*

"Shit." Shouted the barman.

"Level 7?" shouted one of the other barmaids and they all jumped beneath the bar.

The screen in front of Nita flicked off and all the remaining computer screens in the bar went dark.

"What the hell is going on?" she shouted over the klaxon.

"Get on the fucking floor and hold on to something." The barman's head appeared just long enough to deliver the words. Nita decided to do as she was told and dropped on the floor, clinging onto the bar stool support.

The klaxon ceased and they all waited.

*All systems in sleep mode. Please wait...*

Nita waited for something to happen.



“Seriously, what the fuck is going on?” she shouted.

No one got a chance to answer and suddenly the floor beneath Nita bucked and jumped and began to shake with a growing rumble. She gripped the stool tightly and then with another jolt, her head was slammed into the bottom of the stool and everything went dark.

As the systems on The Night Whisper came back on line, Jansen came to finding himself on the wrong side of the command deck. Velisa was still in her seat, having just managed to slip her arms into the harness.

“Lesi,” Jansen said, rubbing the slowly growing lump on his head, “What the fuck was that?”

“Level 7 solar flare,” she said with a slightly worried tone. “Did you not read your planet info?”

“Yes I did,” Jansen said, getting up and wobbling towards the co-pilot seat, “Now I’ve never known a solar flare be that violent.”

“To be honest, it’s something you learn to live with round here. That was a lot worse than I remember them though.” She scratched her head. “Worst I’ve ever experienced before this was a level four.”

“I always wondered why you had an emergency system shutdown button on top of the console. I saw you hit it just before I was flung out of my chair.”

“Old instinctual reaction. Lesson one in flight safety briefing is solar flare drill.”

The comms cracked back to life with Kreena’s voice.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Fine, Kre. What’s going on though? That was way worse than I remember them.”

“They started getting worse about a year ago, about the same time your Father began to get really ill and not long before I set out to find you.”

“You’ve been looking for me for nearly a year?”

“You’re a hard girl to find.”

The scanner flicked back to life finally and Velisa gasped at what she saw.

“You’re scanner back on line Kreena?”

“No. Mine is dead and I don’t think it’s coming back.”

The previously well ordered blips on the scanner were now scattered all around and moving furiously. She flicked the view screen round and saw the same thing in each view. Ships from both groups were firing on each other, wreckage flying everywhere and mangled bodies drifting across the view.

“Kre, they’re killing each other.”

As she scanned the view before her, she caught sight of Lord Heart’s glittering ship drifting across the view with laser scores across her hull. Three of Farlan’s vipers, swung round and hammered it with laser fire. They were quickly annihilated but left the ship leaking plasma. Velisa had had enough and she thumbed the main comms open.

“Everyone,” she shouted, “Stand down!”

Across the display, the laser fire abruptly ceased.

“What the hell do you all think you are doing?”

“My apologies, your majesty.” It was Farlan on the comms. “I’m not sure exactly what happened but...”

Velisa cut him off.

“I don’t give a fuck, Farlan. This is not how members of our family conduct themselves.” She was fuming. “Now take the rest of your little fleet and fuck off back to your station. We will deal with this later.”

“What about Lord...” Velisa interrupted him again.

“Leave now.”

Without another word the remaining functional ships of Farlan’s fleet turned and powered away.

Spinning the ship around rapidly, she searched for Lord Heart’s ship. Eventually she found it, surrounded by Vipers and listing slightly.

“Lord Heart, come in,” she said into the comms.

No response came and she powered The Night Whisper towards his ship.

"I'm coming aboard," she said into the comms and the protecting vipers made a space for her to dock.

As soon as the airlock had cycled she was down into the adjoining ship racing for the bridge, dodging sparks of broken equipment and injured crewmen with Jansen in hot pursuit. She crashed onto the bridge to find a medic with a bleeding head wound leaning over an immaculately dressed man lying to the side of the commander's chair.

Velisa looked the medic in the eyes, enquiring. He shook his head, wiped the blood from his eyes and stood up.

"He wanted to speak to you privately. I suggest you talk quick." He paused, remembering his manners, "Your Majesty."

As Velisa approached Lord Heart he raised his hand and Jansen watched the remaining crew clear from the bridge. Velisa knelt down next to him and took his hand.

"Lord Heart, I presume," she said smiling. She was struck by his rugged handsomeness. Not obviously over bread through the higher classes. Even in his crippled state, he oozed power, strength and Velisa found herself upset that the man she had never met before but was due to marry, was dying before her.

"We need to get you to the medical bay," she said.

Gripping her hand in his, he drew it up in front of her.

"I dreamed of this moment. I would have been yours, but now I have only a few moments."

"I remember visiting your family estate as a child. I remember having fun."

"I loved you even then."

"My Lord..."

"Enough of this though. There is something I must tell you." He coughed discreetly away from Velisa and spat a puddle of blood onto the floor. "I have no feeling left in most of my body so listen carefully."

Velisa leaned closer.

"Farlan is not who he appears to be. He will betray you the first chance he gets. He will use the solar flare as an excuse that my forces fired first and build himself up in the eyes of your Father. If you do not stop them soon, there will be a massive catastrophe. He is planning something but I know not what." He coughed again and his next words were croaky and quiet. "Beware my love. This is not the peaceful system it once was."

Velisa was stuck for words for the first time in a long time because of the man dying before her who would have been her husband.

"We..." he swallowed hard and winced in pain, his eyes beginning to glaze over. "We would have been amazing..... my... queen." His hand relaxed and then he was gone.

Velisa bowed her head and Jansen could see she was whispering a silent prayer. He then realised that the bridge was now lined with people again, remaining crewmen, some injured, were waiting. Reaching the end of the prayer she stood and stepped back from his body. A crewmember in official grab stepped forward carrying a velvet blanket that he used to cover Lord Heart's body. Velisa nodded towards him and the other crewmen stepped forward, lifted his body between them and carried it off the bridge, down to his quarters.

Kreena entered the bridge with his feathers ruffled and unkempt looking. Velisa looked up at him.

"This is not good," Kreena said shaking his head.

One remaining crewman was still on the bridge, attempting to repair damaged systems. Velisa placed her hand on her forehead and tapped the middle of it with her index finger.

"Could you give us a moment alone please crewman?" she said and the crewman scampered away without a moment's hesitation, the bridge door grinding shut behind

him.

"You think Farlan will do what he's told?" Velisa asked Kreena.

"Maybe. He should do or risk putting himself at odds with your Father, but he has been granted a few too many official powers. Although your Father is still technically in charge, his general state of health is not too great now. It has deteriorated quite significantly in the last few months."

"But he seemed pretty good in that holo-vid thing."

"That was recorded almost a year ago. I have been in repeated contact with him since and over the last few months and many times he himself has been unable to speak to me personally. I suspect he does not have much time left."

Velisa tapped her forehead again and frowned.

"I need to get planet-side as soon as."

"One other problem though," Kreena said and Velisa looked up, nodding.

"I need to find a new husband," she said, glancing across to Jansen.

"Now wait just a minute," Jansen said, raising his hand.

## **Chapter 14**

“I’m not doing it. Absolutely not.”

“Oh come on Jansen.”

Jansen was stomping through the ships corridors, heading back to the airlock and The Night Whisper with Velisa and Kreena close behind.

“No.”

“Jansen, come on. You’re my eternal servant. You have to.”

Jansen’s eyes blazed and he turned round, snarling at Velisa making her stumble back into Kreena, who instinctively reached for his weapon.

“Are you fucking kidding me Lesi? Fuck you.” He shook his head at her. “Sobal, betrays me, you turn out to be royalty, then you perform the de-homing ritual, tell me I can do what I like now and then try and tell me I have to do what you say now. You never ordered me to do anything before. Never! I would have followed you into death one hundred times over.”

“Jansen, if you don’t do it, not only do I loose my position in the family and the head of a very lucrative business empire, Farlan will make sure I have to marry someone he wants me to who will no doubt be controlled by the Betigerians. “

“Why should I care Lesi, eh?”

“I seriously doubt I will last two weeks with my new husband. Either he’ll make my life a complete misery till I have to go, leaving control of the royal court in his hands or he’ll have me killed in a mysterious accident.”

Jansen blinked looking worried.

“Also, I have no idea what the hell the rebels have planned, so right now, I’ve got three different groups including members of my own family that would like to see me dead.”

“Fucking hell Lesi,” Jansen said, “You’re life is seriously messed up you know.”

He paused staring her in the eyes.

“What do we have to do?” he said finally and Velisa pounced on him, wrapping her hands round his neck and burying her face in the fur at his neck. Jansen returned the hug after a pause and then drew away.

“I have to warn you Jansen,” Kreena said, “In order to marry Velisa against the wishes of her Father and Farlan, you will most likely have prove your worthiness.”

“And what will that entail?”

“Yeah there is that,” Velisa said biting her lip.

Jansen stood under a tree in the royal gardens around the palace and wondered just what the hell he was getting into. In front of him stood Farlan, practically snarling and shooting daggers with his eyes. He was slowly removing his jacket and glancing back and forth between the various members of his entourage. He was handed an ornate rapier like sword that was blunted with two flat protrusions in the end. Farlan swung it back and forth flamboyantly and pointed at the portable medi-comp that was sitting on the grass nearby.

“You won’t last three hits you stupid cat,” he snarled and glanced towards Velisa who was standing at a discreet distance, now dressed in her royal finery with Kreena and Samson at her side. Jansen had never seen her dressed this way before. She was amazing looking.

He looked down and the weapon in his own hand and tested its weight. He was unfamiliar with the majority of melee weapons due to having a darn good set of claws at his disposal. He hoped his instincts would serve him well.

A man stepped forward in official royal garb, obviously the referee for their duel and looked at both Farlan and Jansen.

“Gentlemen, prepare yourselves and state your cases.”

Farlan stepped forward confidently.

“Farlan Moonwind. In order for this supposed royal blooded feline to be allowed into my family, I have chosen to the three fold challenge. First round of my choice is electric rapier. Second challenge will be our royal highnesses choice.” He spat the words. “Lastly will be the choice of this feline.”

Jansen snarled at him and Farlan stomped back to his group and then shooed them all away, keeping his back to Jansen.

“I Jansen Coothlier, second son of the ruling house of Isanlequ do formally challenge the suitor and declare my intention,” he paused, “my intention to marry her royal highness.”

“On what grounds do you make this challenge?” Farlan said without turning round.

“I love her.”

“Defend yourself!” Farlan shouted and turned, lunging towards Jansen with his rapier pointing directly at his throat. Jansen’s thankfully quick reactions enabled him to parry the blow, but Farlan countered, landing the tip of his sword on Jansen’s forearm. The shock delivered was violent and painful making him drop his own weapon.

“One point to Farlan,” the official referee said.

As Jansen shook his arm and leant down to retrieve the sword, Farlan leant in close.

“It gets exponentially more severe with every hit so give up now and save yourself a lot of pain.” He looked down with disdain. “You’re no swordsman.”

Jansen said nothing and stood back up adopting his en-guard position.

“You gonna talk all day or get on with it.”

Farlan stepped back and lunged almost instantly, aiming for Jansen forearm again. Jansen sidestepped, whirled, grabbed the sword in the free hand and elbowed Farlan



viciously in the side of the head causing him to yell in pain and stumble side-ways. Jansen spun round and delivered a hit with his own sword directly to Farlan's knee. He dropped to the ground and rapidly picked himself up, wiping the mud from his face.

"No point. Illegal manoeuvre," the referee said.

"That's how it's going to be then."

Farlan settled down and adopted en-guard again.

Jansen decided to take the initiative, but was met with a vicious stop-hit to the upper arm. The shock was twice as painful, but he gripped hold of his own sword with gritted teeth. Letting his guard down he drew back, but Farlan delivered a second blow to his other arm, dropping Jansen to his knees.

"No point. Illegal manoeuvre," the referee said.

"Tell you what," Farlan spat at the referee, "Just shut up. We don't need to keep score and I'm sure this stupid feline will agree that neither of us give damn about illegal hits." He pointed his sword directly at him. "One more interruption and I'll give you the next hit." The referee backed away with his palms facing Farlan.

Jansen tried his best to fight Farlan, but the rising pain from each hit got the better of him and he was floored as Farlan delivered his final hit directly to the centre of Jansen's chest, causing him to drop on his face, unconscious.

Velisa rushed forward as Farlan turned away smirking, he caught her eye and raised his eyebrows at her. Velisa glared back and dropped to the ground beside Jansen.

"Medics!" she shouted with venom and two men rushed forward, picking up Jansen and placing him on the nearby medi-comp. Running it's cycle, it pronounced Jansen okay, but unconscious, recommending he rest until waking naturally. Velisa ignored it and punched some buttons to revive Jansen.

His eyes flickered open and Velisa stroked his face.

"How do you feel?"

"Like someone who knows nothing about sword play," he groaned.

"Not to worry, you'll ace the next challenge. I picked one you'll have no trouble with, just don't kill him, yet."

Before Jansen could answer, the referee stepped forward with Farlan close behind.

"Gentlemen please prepare yourselves for the second challenge. You have one hour."

"What is the second challenge?" Farlan curled his lip at Velisa.

"Something straightforward," Velisa said smiling, "Unarmed combat."

"Ha," Farlan said, "I've been trained by some of the finest coaches in the kingdoms."

One hour later, Jansen was stood facing Farlan for the second time. This time, Farlan was stripped to the waist and was warming up with focus pads being held by one of his entourage.

"Come on. Hurry up you show off," Jansen shouted and Farlan snapped his head round glaring. He pointed at the referee.

"Start the match. Now so I can pound some sense into this stupid feline and finish this farce."

Jansen grinned at Farlan.

"Ready Gentlemen? Fight!" he said and retreated to a safe distance.

Farlan raised his fists in a classic boxing stance. Jansen began to growl and crouched slowly down on his haunches, just as he reached the floor, he sprang his front claws out digging them into the ground. Farlan's face fell.

"This is unarmed combat," he protested.

"Wouldn't find a feline blunting his in built weapons," Jansen growled and he leapt forward, knocking Farlan off his feet and digging his claws directly into the flesh of his chest,

drawing blood instantly. Farlan screamed and Jansen barred his teeth snapping forward to bite at his neck but Farlan just managed to land a punch to the head, knocking him off target.

Jansen pulled back one paw, tearing long gouges in Farlan's flesh making him scream once more. Blood flowed freely from the four long open wounds and he reached one hand to his chest and the other crept down to his pocket. Jansen saw the knife just in time and swiped claws at his hand, tearing the majority of Farlan's forearm flesh off down to the bone and then dug his teeth into the hand. Farlan's mouth fell open, his breathing rapid gasps as the shock took over and he passed out, going limp. Blood splashed onto the floor quickly from his ruined arm and Jansen dropped it, watching the pool spread out quickly.

He stood up from the limp body of Farlan.

"Stupid," he said and walked away licking the blood from his paws as Farlan's entourage rushed forward.

"Medic!" one of them shouted and he was rushed off to the nearest medi-comp.

Velisa stood open mouthed and staring. She'd seen Jansen in hand to hand combat before, but never quite so vicious.

"Fucking hell Jansen," she said quietly. "I told you not to kill him yet."

"He'll live. Might not be able to hold a sword again, but he'll live." He tilted his head towards her. "Not shocked are you?"

"Guess you always held back a little."

"Not just a little."

"So I see." Velisa was staring straight into his eyes, her attraction obvious. Jansen returned her gaze and could practically feel her mentally jumping on him.

"Your majesty." Kreena leaned in, breaking the moment. "We should retire to your chambers until Farlan is ready to continue."

## **Chapter 15**

In an immaculately white and clean medical bay, Farlan lay on a very expensive looking medi-comp staring at his ruined right arm. It was suspended in a force field just above him looking like a piece of butchered meat. Many small arms from the medi-comp were extended, working on the nerves, veins and muscle tissue. It was slow going. The computer was having to rapidly fabricate new sections of nerve and tendon.

Farlan scowled and tried to move his fingers to no avail and the medi-comp beeped as a fresh wave of painkiller was injected to counteract the pain response. He studied the bite marks on his hand, seeing the index finger was holding on by the bone only.

"Please try and relax and lie still." The medic at his side, studied the readouts on the medi-comp.

"Relax?" Farlan shouted. "Are you fucking kidding me! That fucking cat, nearly tears my arm off and you're telling me to relax?" He shoved the medic viciously in the chest, shoving him away from the medi-comp. "Get out and leave the computer to its work. If you're really lucky I won't have you killed. Now fuck off."

The medic ran for the door and was gone.

"Trouble with the staff?" a computerised voice said at the doorway a few seconds later. Farlan looked across and could see the figure of a fat insectoid stood in the door. He approached the medi-comp and studied Farlan's arm.

"Challenge not going quite as expected" the computer translated his clicks rapidly.

"I underestimated that cat. Not a mistake I will make again."

"Then you may be happy to know what the final challenge will be."

"How on earth can you know?" Farlan shook his head.

"I have sources you could never even imagine."

"Jansen, you can't do this." Velisa paced round the elaborate office in the main family palace. Jansen was sat relaxing on a lushly upholstered sofa.

"Of course I can. He'll be no match for me."

"Are you kidding? Farlan is one of the best pilots on Dirien. He'll take you apart and use every dirty trick in the book to get the better of you."

"I'll take him down no problem." Jansen stood and put a paw on her shoulder. "I'm gonna make sure we get everything sorted out."

She hugged him and he returned the hug strongly, pulling her tight against him. She tilted her head back to look him in the eyes.

"You're not annoyed with me anymore then?" she asked, wide-eyed and girlish.

"No," he said and stroked her hair. "I realised something earlier. I woke up after having that darn sword shock me in the chest and realised that what I said earlier was true."

"Which bit?"

"The part about following you into death. I meant that." He paused and looked around the room. "I know it sounds like I'm just saying this because of what he did, but I couldn't really say that for Sobal."

"I thought you two were inseparable."

"Evidently not, and you knew full well that was the case when you tried to seduce me."

"I had my doubts about it."

"There was something else I meant to."

"What was that?"

"That I loved you." Jansen fixed his eyes on hers. "I always have, but I could never tell you."

Velisa couldn't stand it anymore and pulled his lips to hers and sank into his arms. He grabbed her round the waist

and easily picked her up so her head was the same height as his without breaking the kiss. Velisa could have stayed forever but her blissful train of thought was interrupted by a knock at the door. She pulled away and pulled her mouth next to Jansen's ear.

"Swept off my feet," she said with a contented sigh and dropped to the floor as she was released. As she straightened her hair and clothes, Jansen wiped the lipstick from his face and sat back down on the couch.

"Enter," she said twitching her eyebrows at Jansen.

Kreena and Samson came in, looking worried.

"It's time," Kreena said. "Farlan has signalled his readiness to begin in two hours. We should get up there and prepare."

"Look, before you go, don't you want to use a better ship?"

"Less I know full well that as a royal house you are bound to have some seriously good fighters available, but ask yourself this," Jansen said, standing and looking round the room. "If you had to go up against anyone out there," he pointed to the sky, "What ship would you choose?"

"The Whisper of course," she said without hesitation. "A small fighter is gonna be more manoeuvrable, but I'm pretty sure I wouldn't be standing here today if I had a different ship."

"Exactly," he said holding up a finger

"Just do me a favour," she said grabbing hold of his forearm. "Bring yourself and her back in one piece."

"I can do one out of two," he said and leant forward, kissing her quickly.

"The referee has requested that The Sour Brandy be the official observation vessel," Kreena said "Seems as though he doesn't trust anyone else and some of the engineers on our station have been ever so kind as to repair the enhanced scanner so we should be able to observe most of what goes on

even if we are not within visual range.”

“I’ll come with you on The Brandy,” Velisa said.

“I also took the liberty of having The Night Whisper taken into the repair yards. The engineers have been all over her and fixed the rather rapid repair job from previous escapades.” He looked at Jansen. “They also up rated the engines a little and have put a few extra additions on board that you may find useful. She should fly better than ever.”

“You know that thing is a classic ship,” Velisa said. “I hope they didn’t screw it up.”

Up on the main station, Nita Cranjen entered the docking bay and she saw a dock master coming to meet her with a pad in his hand.

“How’s your head little lady?” he said.

“It hurts like hell,” she said and rubbed the section of her head covered in a bandage. “Some hefty solar activity in this system.”

“Been getting worse recently. Wouldn’t be surprised if the Betigereians had something to do with it.”

“Really,” Nita said, uninterested. The political shenanigans in the system were the last of her concerns.

“So, what the hell you got in here?” he asked.

“Just got the ship, with a specially modified Hypercargo upgrade and I’m not exactly sure how it works.” She rubbed the back of her head, shrugging her shoulders to act the stupid girly act. “Got a hundred crates in there so that’s why I needed the empty bay.”

“Whatever.” The dock master tapped a few controls. “Gets me out of the office for once. Off load your crates and we’ll see what we got.” He sauntered back across the bay to make room, while Nita made her way back inside the ship.

On the command deck of The Sour Brandy, Kreena, Samson, Velisa and the referee all watched the scanner intently. Two blips were visible an equal distance left and right from the main central line and their hulls were just visible reflecting the slightly red tinged light from the Dirien sun. Further out from the two ships, was a line of other blips. They no doubt consisted of observers from all houses of Dirien, eager to watch the outcome of this final battle. A battle that would ultimately decide who would have control of Dirien and the entire export business. Samson targeted Jansen first.

*Cobra MK3 – Night Whisper.*

Then he targeted Farlan.

*Manta Ray – Fleche.*

“Could you open the comms for me please,” the referee asked and Samson obliged.

“Gentlemen, this is the final challenge. Prepare yourself.”

Farlan flexed in his command seat. The vessel around him was immaculate and considerably up rated from the stock ship. His right hand trembled painfully as he gripped the stick tightly. Although he had left the medi-comp to fix his arm for as long as possible, it was still not right. It gave him a jolt of pain every time he gripped too hard and he had pretty much no feeling in his middle, ring and little finger. His hand twitched slightly, pushing the ship off target and he violently thumped it on the side of the seat, once then twice, swearing loudly as he did. He held it up in front of his face, as if staring it out, threatening it with a stare to stay still and then grabbed the control stick once more.

He’d tried using the other hand, but despite the lack of shaking and pain, his fine motor control was nowhere near as good. He cursed through the pain again as he grabbed the control stick; he would make do, and still beat him.



On the command deck of her brand new Copperhead, Nita looked over the cargo controls. They were a little different to what she was used to and was also a little confused.

“Come on little lady. I ain’t got all day,” came the dock masters voice over the comms. She could see him biting his thumbnail on the forward view.

“Okay.” She said. “Here it comes,” as she pressed the unload cargo button and selected ‘all’.

As she did the ship rose off of the deck and took up a position towards the back of the hanger and a hum began to build in pitch and volume. The entire ship began to vibrate until Nita could no longer see correctly as her eyeballs vibrated in their sockets. Then there was a blinding flash, a sickening crashing noise and a thump as the ship was slammed into the ceiling on the docking bay.

“What the fucking hell did you just do?” It was the dock master again.

As Nita’s vision cleared, she took a little while to realise what had happened. She looked at the cargo readout and it read zero. Her forward view seemed to be full of various bits of metal that she could not recognise. She flicked on the ships external lights and then realised what she was looking at.

The dock master stared on horror at the mass of ships before him. Filling almost the entire bay, were Copperhead ships, from floor to ceiling. The initial vibration from the ships had made him step back in alarm and press himself against the bay door. It was a good thing that he did as he stared at the section of the bay where he had been standing was now occupied by several ships, piled on top of each other. Nita’s Copperhead was pressed against the ceiling of the bay on top of these ships.

“Are you trying to tell me that you had one hundred ships in your cargo bay?” He tilted his head to one side and raised an eyebrow. “That’s one hell of a cargo upgrade.”

"I thought it was just some cargo someone wanted delivered," Nita said in reply into her comms. "Wasn't exactly sure what it was and someone else had the ship ready for me to pilot."

"Fair enough," said the dock master. "I suggest you get on your comms and see who wants them here and then have them transported over to the ship sales yard. Must have been a special order for someone."

As he finished his sentence, he just started to hear another hum beginning to build up. The hum increased in volume much more rapidly this time and the entire bay began to shake. Nita and the dock master couldn't even speak above the noise and she could see that the ships in the bay were powering on and attempting to move apart to make space.

Her eyes widened as the one hundred ships, all at the same time, unloaded one hundred Copperhead ships into the cargo bay and the structure of the station around it, crushing the original ship, pilot, dock master and all unfortunate enough to be in the vicinity of the bay.

Alarms all over the station began to sound the emergency evacuation alarm. Only a handful of ships who's commanders had already powered up and were in the queue waiting to get out made it out before the ten thousand ships created by the second unloaded their own batch of ships, filling around half the internal volume of the station.

The station bulged in many places, venting atmosphere, equipment and life forms out into space. Some on the outside levels of the station were luckier and managed to scramble to and escape pods.

## **Chapter 16**

Jansen ploughed The Night Whisper directly into the small asteroid field, hoping to shake Farlan from his position directly behind him. Farlan stuck to him like glue peppering the rear shields with laser fire. The impact was small but enough to take a few bars of the readout, much less than Jansen was used to.

Prior to the fight both ships had been stripped down to the bare essentials for a fair fight. Just a fore and aft pulse laser each, everything else had been deactivated.

Jansen dove the ship forward under an asteroid and then pitched back up to put it between himself and Farlan. Just as he lost sight of Farlan in the rear, he cut power and pummelled a nearby asteroid with as much charge out of the front laser as he could. It held as Farlan's ship came into sight again.

"Break damn you," Jansen shouted as the shields were hit again and then suddenly the asteroid shattered, sending pieces out in all directions. Jansen reversed course and just managed to put the larger asteroid between him and any debris. Farlan's shields lit up as fragments of the asteroid vaporised all around him.

"Nice one," he shouted into the comms and pulled round to deal his own set piece. As he pulled the ship round, his comms suddenly burst into life with overlapping voices and cries of alarm.

On the Sour Brandy, Kreena, Velisa and the referee all jumped back from the sudden rush of activity from the comms. Kreena reached into the pouch at his waist and pulled out his agency comms device.

"What the hell is happening?" he squawked loudly over the comms chatter.

"Not sure. Sketchy reports of something wrong at the station." The voice on the other end sounded desperate and

alarmed. "Reports say the main station had some catastrophic structural failure."

Velisa pointed at the scanner as it struggled to keep up with what it was trying to display. In the position where the station should be, was a gigantic green mass of ship traces.

"What the hell is that?" she said.

"According to the scanner that trace is made up of over ten thousand ships," Kreena said, unbelieving his own words.

"How the hell did they get here?"

They were cut short by a comms message across the whole range of frequencies.

"Attention all craft in the Dirien system. A major catastrophe has occurred on the main station. Nearby observers claim to have seen the station suddenly burst apart with multiple Copperhead vessels everywhere. It is recommended that all ships get to a safe distance from the planet."

Kreena was at the controls and pulling the ship round towards the station ageis.

"Jansen, get your ass over here," Velisa shouted into the comms. "Duel time is over."

"Indeed it is," came a response from Farlan. "It appears we will have to continue our sport later Tiddles."

Farlan broke off and headed for his mother ship, a large dominating presence in the array of ships that had been watching the fight. Many were breaking off, heading in the direction of the witch-space beacon. Others were turning for home, and some were just sat, waiting, watching and listening to everything.

Within ten minutes, Velisa was back on The Night Whisper, Farlan was on his mother ship and Kreena and Samson were alone on The Sour Brandy again, powering towards the planet as fast as they could.

Velisa gripped the controls tightly as Jansen lay under a control panel, fighting to re-activate all the disabled weapon

systems.

“Get them back online. We’re gonna need everything we have.”

Dwarfed by Farlan’s mother ship and nearly lost amongst the fleet, the two vessels powered on injectors in system towards the station. As it came into view, it looked like Dirien had a massive traffic problem. Several other emergency craft, launched from the planet surface were circling, picking up the survivors lucky enough to have had access to a remlock.

The body of the station was unrecognisable. Some angled areas of superstructure could still be made out, but overall it was a bulging mess. Derelict and broken ships were floating everywhere, many being Copperheads in various broken looking states. Many were leaking plasma and occasionally one exploded from the final catastrophic impact with another piece of floating debris.

“Be careful everyone,” Kreena said over the comms. “I think we should try and keep our distance as much as possible.”

Velisa dropped the power slightly on The Night Whisper, so Farlan’s ship just crept past and she locked the ident system on his ship.

“Is there a reason you’re targeting my ship?” Farlan’s sensors had obviously detected the lock.

“Just making sure I know where you are,” She said into the comms with a glint in her eye.

“Indeed,” was all Farlan said in response.

“If he does anything funny, I want every missile we’ve got fired at him,” she said to Jansen after closing the comms.

“With pleasure,” he said, punching a few controls.

Kreena watched his screen intently, searching amongst the mass of ships and debris. He was looking for something

and eventually found it. Hanging lazily in space, unmoving was an extremely black ship that you could easily miss on a cursory glance. Its size and shape was difficult to make out but Kreena recognised it instantly.

"Everyone follow me," he said into the comms. "Farlan, please leave your fleet here."

"I assume we are heading for the rather black vessel ahead."

"Yes. Leave your fleet here." Kreena emphasised the words, and watching the scanner, the large group of ships following Farlan, stopped and the three ships continued.

Velisa eventually locked onto the ship, thinking she was closer than she was. Its vast bulk and black hull made it seem smaller than it was. Following The Sour Brandy closely, they all made their way round to the belly of the mother ship and towards the docking bay that was minimally lit. It was easily large enough to take Farlan's ship and Jansen was open mouthed at the sheer scale.

"What the hell is this ship, Lesi?"

"I've never actually seen it before, but I'm pretty sure it's the Dirien security command ship, given the way Kreena has just approached it."

"This thing is nearly as big as a station."

"It practically is a station, but it goes where needed."

As the docking bay computers took over the piloting of the ships, Velisa stood up and headed for her cabin.

"I'd better go and get dressed. I suspect I will be required in an official capacity."

Velisa was back beside Jansen, just as he was opening up the docking hatch. Although not in complete official garb, Velisa was distinctly presentable as her royal position demanded.

"I could get used to seeing you like this," he said playfully.

"You'll have to. I suspect by days of dressing racy are behind me." She looked him up and down, surveying his coveralls. "You'll need some new clothes yourself."

He looked down at the slightly dirty clothing and suddenly felt very self conscious, but it was quickly replaced by anger as he saw Farlan waiting for them, flanked by two guards. Jansen began to growl quietly, boring his gaze into Farlan.

"Calm." Velisa said.

"Indeed," said Farlan watching them with a bored expression. "I think we have other more pressing things to deal with."

Kreena fluttered through the main door and approached quickly, looking flustered and worried.

"I think you need to come with me," he said to Velisa. "Your father needs to see you."

She stiffened and a frown formed on her face, Jansen felt her mood change and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"And you will come with me," Farlan said, pointing at Jansen.

"No he won't," Velisa protested, "He's staying with me."

"You have family things to sort out," he said, dismissing her comment. "And if this feline is to be married to our future monarch, he should be attired appropriately."

Jansen and Velisa looked at each other suddenly the reality of the plan they had made was barrelling towards its inevitable destination. They were to be married and rule an empire. Suddenly feeling very alone, they went their separate ways.

As Farlan and Jansen wandered along the corridors of the vast ship, Jansen did his best to keep his eye on him. Rounding a corner, Farlan suddenly stopped ahead of him.

"Are you deliberately walking behind me?" he asked, without looking at Jansen.

"I want to keep an eye on you," Jansen shrugged.

Farlan wheeled round, eyes blazing and Jansen's hand instinctively moved to his sidearm. Farlan's guards were quicker and had theirs drawn and pointed at Jansen's head. He shook his head and lowered his hands.

"Look you stupid cat," Farlan spat, "We have more important things to worry about. If you hadn't realised already, it's pretty obvious that your trial is over. You passed. I may not like it but you're about to marry Velicinda and be part of the royal leadership."

"You near enough tried to kill me."

"And you nearly tore my arm clean off." Farlan held up his shaking his limb. "But it was my own fault for underestimating you and there are bigger threats to this system than a little rivalry between us."

"A little rivalry? You know Velisa doesn't trust you either."

"Look," Farlan said sighing. "I have no animosity towards you, Velisa, Kreena or anyone else in the royal court. I am a loyal member of this family and always have been. What happened out there was because it is my duty to challenge the new arrivals. If by some freak accident, the king, Velisa and all her immediate family were killed, I might have a shot at being King but I'm not banking on it and I am certainly not trying to remove anyone."

"Why the hell should we trust you?" Jansen snarled.

"I know what you think. You think I'm in league with the Betigereians, trying to get someone they want on the Dirien throne."

Jansen's eyes widened.

"I thought so." Farlan shook his head turning away.

"The threat is not from my house. There is more going on that you can know and soon, I suspect, we will all have to work together to stop whatever is about to happen." He turned back to face him. "Now will you stand with me, or just let me get on



with it?" Farlan put out his hand to shake.

Jansen stared open mouthed at Farlan.

"Oh for heavens sake," Farlan said and dropped down to one knee and bowed his head. "Your majesty. Please join my efforts to counteract this threat."

Jansen's mind churned. Should he trust him or not?

"Don't bow to me Farlan," he finally said. "You know way more about this than me and I'm sure we will both need each others help."

An hour later, Jansen walked on to the bridge, dressed in clothes that cost more than he would have spent on a new ship. He pulled at the collar on the shirt, that he was unused to and shifted his feet in the boots that had been specially made for him. He didn't like them. He'd never worn shoes in his life.

Around a holo-table at the side of the bridge, Farlan, Kreena and a few other military officials stood, looking at a projection of the ruined station and the debris floating round it. A man in a fairly standard suit manoeuvred the image around to zoom in on one area of the station. Farlan motioned for Jansen to come closer, without looking up from the table. Jansen read the ID badge on his suit. Simon Trask – Scientific Advisor.

"We think we know what happened. It looks like someone came onto the station with a new type of ship, a Copperhead with a hypercargo system."

"So what? Hypercargo is nothing special," Farlan said.

"This one appears to be different. According to the scanner log, when the ship entered the station, it was carrying one hundred tonnes of cargo."

"And?"

"You misunderstand. The log literally says 'cargo' not the type of cargo. Also, according to the logs, the commander requested a special large cargo bay to unload as the system apparently offloads directly outside the ship. This is why the

Copperhead in question is much smaller than a standard and has no actual cargo bay. Take a look.” Simon pointed to the ship that had expanded in the view, then an image appeared from the station security camera of The Miniscope entering the station.

“They look the same,” Farlan said.

“They are exactly the same, look closer.”

The view zoomed in on the ship registration plate. It matched with the one on the security camera.

“Every one of those ships is a copy of the original.”

“How the hell can that happen?” Jansen asked. “Hyper-cargo systems don’t work like this.”

“Quite,” Simon said, zooming into the ship, showing its internal structure. “We suspect the commander had no idea that this ship was rigged this way. It looks as though, the system has been modified to effectively back project the source of the hyper-cargo bubble through the shield generator.”

“It’s a software hack?” Farlan said, amazed.

“It is. A very clever one too.”

“Wait,” Jansen said. “Does this mean that every one of those ships out there also has a system that is about to unload another one hundred ships.”

“We calculate that at this moment, we are on the second iteration. The first ship unloaded one hundred, ships, each one of those unloaded one hundred ships each equalling a volume of forty one per cent of the size of the station.”

“Oh my, you mean...” Farlan began.

“The next iteration will produce around one million ships, creating a total mass of around forty times the size of the station. At this time I strongly recommend that there are no ships in range.”

A table of numbers flashed up on the display.

“At the iteration following that the total volume will be point four of the size of the planet. On the next following that

it will be nearly half the size of the planet and then we will have a serious problem with gravity.”

“How the hell do we stop it?” Jansen asked.

“We have taken one ship on board in the hope that we can find a way to disarm the system, but at this moment, there are around ten thousand ships to manually disarm and we don’t know how much longer before the next unload. From what we can tell, because of the amount of energy required to do this, there seems to be an exponentially longer amount of time before the next unload.”

“How long do you estimate?” Farlan asked.

“To be honest, until the next iteration, we won’t be able to calculate the timing, but our best estimate says we have only about an hour or two at most.”

“And at that point, we’ll be looking at an artificially created moon in orbit round the planet.” Jansen said.

“Yes, but the problem is that once we get to the fifth iteration we’ll have a body about half the size of the planet.” Simon wiped his brow, closing his eyes for a moment. “And the orbit of the station, is not enough to hold something of that mass in the same orbit, so it will begin to decay into the atmosphere.”

“Let’s just Q-bomb the lot. Move everyone to a safe distance.” Farlan gestured towards the display.

“Not everything can be solved with a Q-bomb.” Simon glared at him. “Hypercargo works with a contained witch-space bubble. One on it’s own dissipating, would not be a problem, but that many ships could be catastrophic.”

“Besides,” said Jansen, fixing his gaze on Farlan. “Do you really want to risk a ten thousand ship cascade explosion this close to the planet?”

“Then lets just get every ship we have out there and destroying the ships, minimise the expansion as much as possible.”

“We’d still have to deal with the main problem and I

doubt we have enough time to destroy each ship singly. “

All three of them stopped talking and stared at the display, resting their hands on the table top.

“You’ve got one of them in a hanger?” Jansen asked Simon.

“Yes. Bay sixty two.”

“I’m going down there. I may not be much of a royal, but I know my way round ship systems and computers. I might be able to work something out.”

Just as he was leaving the bridge, a klaxon sounded and one of the officers on the bridge shouted over the noise.

“Registering a massive power surge from the ships.”

“Looks like your estimate was a little out.” Farlan said.

The main scanner lit up with traces and it’s frame rate dropped to a crawl as it tried desperately to keep up with the number of objects it had to display.

“You may be right.” Simon was rapidly tapping away at some calculations. “It’s happening much quicker than we expected. There should only be a finite amount of energy that can be drawn by the witch-space bubbles.”

“How many are we looking at now?” Jansen asked, returning to the display table.

“If calculations are correct and all ships from each iteration produced its complete set of ships, one million, ten thousand, one hundred and one,” Simon said.

“What the hell are we going to do?” Jansen said.

“The only thing we can do,” Farlan said, striding towards the lift. “Comms officer!”

“Sir!”

“Open me a channel, wide band across the entire system, emergency override all channels.”

“Sir!”

“Kreena, would you mind opening up as many security channels as possible?”

Kreena nodded, his eyes widening. Farlan’s

transmission cut across the entire Dirien system. Every ships comms was suddenly listening to him.

“Attention all craft in the Dirien system. This is a priority request from Dirien royal command. All space capable ships with a weapon at their disposal is requested and required to report to the main station vicinity and destroy any and all Copperhead vessels bearing the following registration code.” He pointed to the comms officer who tapped some controls and the ID number of the ships was broadcast. “The safety of the entire Dirien system depends on the destruction of these ships. We only have...” he stopped, looking in Simon’s directions, who held up six fingers. “...six hours until the next catastrophic expansion. At that point we will have over one hundred, million ships to destroy.”

Pausing for dramatic effect, he paced round the bridge, listening to the silence of countless commanders letting the news sink in. Dirien had never truly been under any kind of threat and this was something new.

“The very safety of our entire system depends on these next few hours. Bring every ounce of energy you can.”

Jansen and Farlan were soon in the main hanger again and Jansen was staring at The Night Whisper.

“What are you waiting for?” Farlan asked him. “Get out there.”

“I’m just not sure I should take her out without asking Velisa first.”

“Would she refuse you?”

Jansen tilted his head to one side.

“No,” he said.

“Then take her.” Farlan stomped across the bay and then stopped, turning back to face Jansen.

“Or you could just take one of my ships. Take your pick from those.” He waved towards one side of the massive hanger, at several hundred ships of various types.

“Which ones?”

Farlan stomped back and pointed down one side of the hanger.

“Every ship on that side of the hanger is mine. Feel free to take any one of them. I’ve already logged you as a valid pilot for any of my ships.”

Jansen regarded him, untrusting.

“Seriously, why the hell are you being so nice to me now?”

“No point in bearing grudges is there.” With that, he left for a ship of his own. “And do hurry up choosing. You never know, those ships out there might count towards your kills. Might make Elite status if you’re lucky.”

Jansen wandered down the hanger side, admiring the many ships, all seemed to have immaculate paintwork. There were ships of every possible type, including some practically antique ships. Then he stopped, looking up at the triangular ship in front of him. He grinned and ran to the hatch. He’d always wanted to fly one of these.

## **Chapter 17**

It was dark in the royal bedchamber aboard the ship. Velisa entered slowly and looked deep into the darkness, waiting for her eyes to adjust. She could just make out a dim lamp beside a bed on the other side of the room. As she began to walk to it, a medical technician scampered to her side.

"Please be as calm as possible," he whispered, barely audible. "Due to his mental state, he can be easily shocked although I suspect seeing you again will send him in a few loops anyway."

"How long does he have?" Velisa said as quietly as possible.

"He should be dead already. I think he's been waiting for you though. His mind is in pieces, and his body is fading fast, but one thing has never left his mind." The technician pointed at Velisa.

"Anything else I should know?"

"Keep an open mind," he said and scampered away to the bulk of medical equipment that seemed to line an entire wall.

Velisa approached the bed slowly and eventually she could make out the form of a man lying covered by a single, silken sheet. A few tubes and wires connected him to the machines and he was breathing shallow with long pauses in between. As she approached he seemed to detect her presence and his eyes began to flicker, trying to open, as if forcing himself back to consciousness. The light came up a little and she could now make out the man's face, although much older than she remembered. Despite his frail appearance, she started to feel the old animosity rising again.

"Velicinda? Is that you?" his voice croaked and rasped through the words.

"Yes father. It's me."

"My little girl," he said, trying to sit up, only managing

to prop the pillow under his shoulders. "I missed you."

"Really." The sarcasm in her voice was plain to hear.

"I wanted you to come back all the time, but I also knew you had to find your own way round."

"That's why you commandeered my ship and nearly got me and my crew killed?" she said, her thoughts suddenly turning to Sobal. Where was that double-crossing feline?

"There is much more going on, than you know."

"That's what everyone keeps saying."

"You never did catch on quick to the political situation, did you?" He shook his head slightly.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she snapped.

"You always did have difficulty looking beneath the surface of things. Knowing what's really going on. Seeing the non-obvious. I wish I could explain everything, but I just don't have the time."

"You never did," she scowled at him. "Except to punish me or push me to do things I didn't want to."

"Oh please," his voice cracked and tears began to fall off his cheeks. "Just listen to an old mans final words."

Velisa stepped back slightly aghast. This was not the reaction she was expecting.

"I've held on as long as I possibly could, just to see you, you stupid girl. You may think I've been cruel and unkind in the past, but I was only trying to prepare you." With a shaking hand, he wiped the dampness from beneath one eye and bored his gaze into her. "When I release my final breath, you will be queen of Dirien. If I had left you to your own devices here at home, you would have turned into a spoiled little brat who got anything she wanted. You'd have married one of the idiots on this planet and just continued the cycle of royalty that has dominated our society since we settled here."

Velisa stared in shock disbelief at her Father, wondering just how much was true.

"I had to try pushing you to marry some local fop and



make your life hell just to drive you away. I'm inside the system and always have been so there's no way I could change it. Lord Hart would have been a good husband for you, but still part of the same system." He stopped as if loosing breath and slipping away but his eyes blazed, keeping his concentration and forcing himself to stay alive. "I wanted you to go out there and find someone new to the mix, someone who didn't conform to the standard society on this planet. How could I know that you would come back with someone of a different species too and with royal bloodline? Even better."

"You wanted this to happen?" Velisa said, her jaw nearly on the floor.

"Of course I did. You really think I'm not in control of anything? You really think I'd let my heir disappear and ruin the royal line? Really?"

"Well.. I..." Velisa stuttered.

"I'm the fucking king of Dirien. What I say goes. Wake the fuck up." He started coughing with the extra effort in talking and gasped for air. Machines next to him began to beep wildly and the medics rushed in from all sides. As they approached he forced a lungful of air down and batted at their hands.

"Leave me the fuck alone now and turn those damn machines off," he said with venom and after turning off the alarms on the machines, they scampered away into the darkness. Velisa became aware of another man in the room who was lurking just nearby. He was dressed in official royal finery, but she couldn't quite remember what his specific uniform was.

"Come here my girl. I don't have much more breath in me."

"What am I going to do?" Tears were forming in Velisa's eyes.

"You're going to be head of state, Queen of Dirien." With a shaking hand he brushed a tear from her cheek. "And

you'll be amazing." Tears were forming in his own eyes now. "Just remember, Farlan is not your enemy. The bugs have something hideous up their sleeves." Velisa considered telling him about the destruction of the station for a moment, but assumed he knew already. "I missed you my girl." He gripped her hand as tightly as his body would allow. "And your mother."

"Daddy," she whimpered and kissed him on the forehead, when she pulled back, his eyes were closed and his final breath fluttered through her hair.

She hugged him closely and tried to make sense of the conflicts of emotions and thoughts crashing round her head. As she stood back up, the man in the darkness stepped forward and examined one of the machines displays. Velisa recognised him now, a man almost as old as her Father, his personal aide, Revus Craigen, someone she had not seen in many years.

Revus stepped round to beside Velisa, looking her in the eyes with a soft caring look. He placed a hand on her shoulder.

"He spoke of you often. Always wondered where you were and what you were doing."

"I'm not sure he would have been particularly proud of some of the things I've done." She wiped her eyes.

"He loved you unconditionally. Constantly questioned whether he had done the right thing. He had your best interests at heart, but knew he had to try and do something. When your sister was diagnosed with her condition, he knew that you would be the next Queen."

"I wish I could have known that before I left and not spent most of my life hating him."

Revus put his hand in his inside jacket pocket and pulled out a data card.

"When you have time, watch this. He recorded several messages to you while he still could."

Velisa took the card and studied it briefly. Written in her Father's handwriting in ink no less was her name, in full. She pocketed it and stood up.

"Now your majesty," Revus said, "We have a duty to perform." He held out a hand and Velisa took it, allowing herself to be lead away.

Revus lead her out of the bedchamber and down several corridors of the ship, which were all curiously deserted. Eventually the rounded a corner and Revus motioned for her to wait at the door but Velisa already knew what was coming. Two aides were waiting at the door who stepped forwards and adjusted Velisa's dress.

They were at the entrance leading to the largest bay, and sitting in that bay, Velisa could just make out the landing gear of the primary royal transport, her Fathers ship and people clustered around it, everywhere she could see.

Revus stepped through the door and looked around the bay, Velisa followed close behind, but stayed just outside the door so the assembled crowd could not see her yet.

"The King is dead," he proclaimed loudly and stepped to one side, revealing the doorway which Velisa dutifully stepped through. Another man next to Revus stepped forward and handed something to him. He turned and Velisa could see the red velvet cushion with an ornate, gold crown on top, which Revus held out to her. Velisa took it, placing the crown on her head and Revus stepped back to address the crowd again.

"Long live the Queen," he proclaimed, rousingly.

Velisa looked round at the assembled crowd and suddenly felt very alone. Alone in world that she felt a complete stranger to and now she wished more than anything that Jansen was by her side.

"Long live the Queen!" the crowd shouted in unison, their combined voices filling the entire bay.

## **Chapter 18**

Sobal sat in the darkened chamber, restrained in a metal chair and staring blankly at the wall opposite. The chamber was circular, with featureless walls except for a door and a few barely noticeable grills.

"Why did you come back?" an insectoid voice boomed through the room. Sobal did not react and simply stared at the wall, unflinching. A high-pitched noise filled the room and Sobal blinked, shaking his head as if coming to. He felt the restraints around his wrists, ankles and body and began to struggle against them.

"Why did you come back?" the voice repeated.

"What?" Sobal shouted. "Who fuck are you? What doing here?"

"You were not meant to return. You should be dead. Why did you return?"

"What talking about? Cowardly fucks. Tear you apart what made me do."

"It's no good, he doesn't..." the voice was cut off abruptly and the high-pitched noise filled the room again, sending Sobal back into his catatonic state.

The door slid open and two large black insectoids skittered across towards him. One raised a weapon and pointed it at Sobal who was unflinching. As the insect was about to pull the trigger, the other pushed his mandible down and chattered in their language. Sobal's would be executioner, tilted his head to one side and nodded.

After swiftly releasing Sobal's restraints, they grabbed him under the arms and carried his unmoving form down to the launch bay. There they wandered up the ramp of a battered looking Cobra MK1 and dumped Sobal in the commander's chair. He stared straight ahead at the view screen, un-blinking.

Under autopilot the ship was fired out of the docking

bay into space and the witchspace countdown started.

*Witchspace to Dirien in 15 Seconds.*

Plunging through the wormhole, the ship appeared next to the beacon and began an auto jump in system on torus. There was a small explosion from the rear of the ship and words flashed up the screen.

*Witchspace drive offline.*

The massive cluster of ships that used to be the station was clearly visible at even this extreme range. The high-pitched noise sounded throughout the cabin and Sobal blinked shaking his head, looking around the cabin trying to work out where he was.

"Fuck scumbag bugs," he cursed and began to assess the situation. He flicked the screen around the various systems and realised swiftly where he was.

"Not good."

The short range chart's lack of range circle warned him of what he already suspected and as he tried to turn the ship around he found the controls unresponsive, leaving the ship powering towards the planet.

From out of nowhere, the comms unit burst into life, filling the command deck with a thousand voices all overlaid and confused. In the growing mass on the view screen, Sobal could just make out lots of explosions, like ships being destroyed. Then through the comms chatter he just managed to make out the words: "...energy spike... craft withdraw imeid.."

The explosions seemed to stop and in a blinding flash there was suddenly a much larger expanse on the screen.

"What hell going on?"

Hanging in a polar orbit round the Dirien sun at just enough distance to prevent burn up, hung the Vis Solis station. It's powerful heat shielding keeping the interior habitable and

performing its vital mission. On the main command deck, sat rows of readouts, all monitoring the star beneath them, attempting to make sense of the turbulent surface. Many of the crew were congregating there listening intently to the events occurring near home being beamed out on the main comms channels.

Jessa Trent a young solar scientist sat at her console, watching readouts from the star and listening to the comms. She spotted a small discrepancy on the readouts and concentrated her scanners on one spot on the sun's surface.

"Possible level 1 flare, sir," she said looking over her shoulder at the crowd huddled round the comms console. "Sir!" she reiterated with a frown.

Commander Trask, A tall man in his sixties turned round.

"Possible level 1 flare," she said, pointing at the display.

"Log it on the alert list. Looks like a small one."

Suddenly, another claxon sounded.

"Proximity alert, Commander," The fresh-faced operations officer said, somewhat puzzled and punched up the display screen. At the angle they were at, the vessel was mostly obscured by the star's corona.

"Looks like a standard Asp," Commander Trask said. "What the hell's it doing here? Open comms."

"Sir, its in direct proximity to the flare I detected," Jessa said and Trask nodded.

"Asp vessel in proximity to the Dirien sun. Identify yourself."

The comms cracked and a series of clicks come over the speakers. The computer struggled to keep up but eventually it translated the message.

"Prepare to die," it said.

"They're firing something at the surface of the sun, directly on top of the flare build-up."

In an instant there was a blinding flash of light and the

readings on Jessa's screen spiked off the scale. The flare seemed to burst forth from the surface of the sun, engulfing the Asp and firing a massive burst of plasma outwards into space.

"How big is that flare?" Trask shouted over the ever-increasing insistent claxons.

"Off the scale, Commander."

"Exactly what effects will that flare have on the system?"

"Unknown, Commander but it will have a massive impact on all communications systems within the system and most likely will cause serious damage to planets atmosphere."

"Issue warnings. I'm not sure if it will do any good, but we have to warn as many people as possible."

Farlan and Jansen stared intently at their rear view as they powered away from the remains of the station. The blinding flash filled the screen and instinctively, Jansen hit his injectors hoping he was far enough away. As the view cleared, he could see the gigantic expanse of ships now looking like a small moon.

"How many are there now," Farlan shouted into his comms.

"One hundred and one million, ten thousand, one hundred and one, plus or minus a few thousand. Total volume is around zero point four per-cent of the planet size."

Farlan's cursed response was cut short by a burst of static from the comms that slowly resolved into a barely recognisable voice.

"Incoming flare. Level fifty plus. Recommend evacuation of system and planet."

## **Chapter 19**

Jansen pulled his ship round hard, locating the sun in his forward view. Although hard to see, he could just make out the plume of plasma spewing from its surface.

“Attention all craft in the Dirien system,” Farlan’s voice, spewed from the comms on all channels. “Jump immediately to Tiatenqu. Command vessels will be waiting you there. Any non witch-space capable vessels follow another ship through.”

Jansen located the Royal command ship just in time to see a familiar sight launch from the docking bay.

“This doesn’t make sense and it’s all a little too convenient. There’s something else going on,” Velisa’s voice cut over Farlan’s broadcast. “Before we evacuate the planet surface, we need to make sure everything is secure. Jansen, where are you?”

“Right here,” he said into the comms and he saw The Night Whisper, thrusting towards him.

“A police interceptor? Seriously?” she said.

“You should try it. It’s one hell of a mover.”

“You want to swap it for The Whisper?”

“Not a chance.”

The Night Whisper loomed large in Jansen’s view screen, rolling so it appeared inverted and with a clunk, their docking ports were together. Before the airlock had even opened, Jansen was up the ladder and had his hand pressed against the door.

The instant the door was open he leapt up the ladder and allowed the change in artificial gravity direction to pull him into the command deck. With a perfect flip, he landed on all fours, and then drew himself up to full height. Velisa was standing in front of him, smiling with slightly misty eyes. They grabbed hold, wrapping their arms around each other.

“Don’t leave me again,” Velisa said, just managing to hold back a torrent of tears.



“Never.” Jansen said, and kissed the side of her neck.

“Time for this later,” she said, pushing herself away from him. “We’ve got work to do.”

Wiping the moisture from her eyes, she jumped into the command seat and Jansen adopted his usual position in the co-pilot seat.

“You know, this whole week has been seriously weird,” she said shaking her head.

“You’re telling me.”

“And now, just as I become queen of an entire planet some fucker is trying to destroy the whole thing.”

“You think they might have been waiting for this opportunity?”

“Just before my Father died, he was trying to tell me that something was going on, but I was a little too upset to hear him properly.” Velisa tapped her forehead, thinking.

“So what are we going to do? Even if we could destroy all those ships, we’ve still got the solar flare.”

Glancing down at the scanner, Velisa saw a rather large blip heading in the direction of the solar flare. Various traces were appearing from it, heading in the opposite direction. Velisa opened the comms.

“Farlan, what are you doing?”

“How observant of you, your majesty,” came Farlan’s voice after a brief pause. “Based on how long we have left before the flare hits the planet, and I see no other way to destroy the ever expanding ships, I have asked one of my engineers to rig the witch-drive on the ship to open a wormhole to just in front of the station wreckage. The ship should be able to produce one sufficiently wide enough to channel all the energy from the flare directly into it, and destroy the ships.”

“You have an escape plan for that?”

“In theory, yes.” The tone of Farlan’s voice said otherwise.

"I have an even better plan." Another voice cut over the channel. Jansen recognised it instantly.

"Sobal?" he said.

"Where are you, you double crossing scumbag?" Velisa spat at the comms.

"Don't have much time. I not explain. Already on Copperhead ship."

"You're doing what?"

"Witch-drives rigged. All Copperheads. Open biggest wormhole seen. 1 minute. Farlan need open his wormhole entrance of mine."

"I see what you're getting at," said Farlan.

"And exactly where are you going to take this wormhole to?" Velisa said shaking her head.

"Betigere. Give bugs payback."

"This is insane." Jansen said. "Why the fuck should we trust you." He paused, letting his head drop to his chest "I trusted you." He almost whispered the last three words his voice filling with sorrow. Velisa looked round at him, reaching her hand out to rest on his arm.

"I know. Wish my words were better." He was speaking slowly, trying his best to form the sentence as clearly as possible. "Betrayed you. Both of you. Entire planet too."

"You lived on my ship and fought side by side with us through all sorts just for a pay check?" Velisa shouted.

"Fucking Betigereians. One side play me off other and against everyone. Fucked my life and yours. No coming back."

"What are you talking about?" Jansen's voice was close to cracking.

"Messed with my brain. Only one thing left. Read it."

"Read what?" Jansen asked but Sobal had closed the comms.

"You ready, Farlan?" Velisa asked.

"Certainly you majesty. I suggest moving as far away as possible."

Pulling The Night Whisper around, Velisa flicked to the rear view and watched the slowly decreasing sight of the planet, and then saw a familiar ship racing to catch up on injectors. It was the Sour Brandy.

"Kreena," Velisa said into the comms. "Where have you been?"

"Finalising some arrangements. Due to tradition, I will now be head of your personal guard," he said with a small trace of pride in his avian voice. "Now I suggest we sit back and enjoy the light show."

As they watched, a familiar blue ball appeared between the cluster of ships and the planet. It expanded and expanded almost endlessly, till it was dominating the view, outshining the light of the stars. Then it folded in on itself, forming the flat blue disk and the cluster of ships began to move towards it.

Far in the distance, another ball was forming, directly in front of the growing torrent of plasma from the solar flare. As it turned in on itself, another exit disk formed just behind the rapidly disappearing body of Copperhead ships. Squinting into the immense light, Velisa just picked out the shape of the Royal command ship, emerging from one wormhole and into the other, its injectors firing briefly while it was in normal space. The stream of energy closely followed it from the solar flare. It raged through the gap and bathed the side of the planet in light before finally stopping and the two wormholes collapsed, leaving a distinctly empty orbit around Dirien.

Velisa and Jansen blinked in unison, waiting for their eyes and the view-screen to adjust back to normal. Glancing at his screen, Jansen saw a flashing message indicator and opened it, frowning. He read the words in front of him and when he was finished, he covered his face with his hands and stood up, heading off the bridge.

"Jansen. What is it?" Velisa asked, concerned, but Jansen was already through the door and it was closing behind him.

Powering the ship down, she read the words from his screen.

*Jansen,*

*My speech fails me even when I have to try very hard to be understood so I had to write the words so you could fully understand.*

*Know that I was not responsible for my actions and betraying you both. It is only now that I know the full extent of the damage I have caused and also the changes they made to be. I have no idea if this is reversible or if I will pose any further threat to yourself or anyone else. As such, I will not be coming back from Betigere but I will make sure that they pay for what they have done to my life.*

*I always loved you, Jansen and I know you never loved me in the same way but I do not blame you for it. Your culture and upbringing make it hard for you. I also know that you love Velisa with all your heart and I never held that against you. She will need you now more than ever before, so stay by her side and love her.*

*Do me one favour though. On those occasions when you do get to a bar, pour a drink for me. I'll try my best to come back from whatever afterlife I end up in and drink it down with you.*

*Every moment we shared was amazing.*

*Sobal.*

## **Chapter 20**

Sitting in the command ready alcove at the side of the bridge, Jansen looked hunched and wore very different clothes from his usual spacer overalls. He was decked out in military finery. An immaculately fitting military uniform, hugged his body, complete with shoulder tassels, ceremonial sword and a small collection of medal ribbons on the left side of his chest.

“Jump in 3 minutes captain,” an immaculacy preened helmsman shouted across the bridge. Jansen nodded in his direction and opened a small cupboard under the desk he was sat at. He pulled out two small crystal glasses, placed them on the desktop and then placed a small, unlabelled bottle next to them. Uncorking it, he poured a measure into each and then returned the bottle to its cabinet. Lifting the glass he admired the metal disk, in it's base that levelled out the drink and kept it in the open glass regardless of how much movement it may get.

He raised the glass in front of his face as if to toast his unseen drinking companion and then chinked his glass into the one sat untouched.

“Here's to you,” he said quietly under his breath and sipped at the drink, enjoying the exquisite taste the he kept telling himself he must not get used to.

As if on queue, the main doors to the bridge slid open and Velisa wandered onto the bridge, dressed in her official, royal military uniform, unique from any other to indicate her status as commander in chief. Two two large looking humanoids, in subtle coloured suits flanked her, who carefully and discreetly scanned the room but being less discreet about their holstered weapons.

Jansen finished his drink and stood up to join her.

“C in C on the bridge,” he bellowed and everyone stood up to attention, except the helms man who continued to man his post.

“As you were,” Velisa said in full stately voice.

Jansen sidled up beside her and they shared a discrete kiss before turning their attention to the view screen.

“Does your new flag ship meet with your approval, your majesty?” Jansen asked, trying not to smirk too hard.

She raised an eyebrow at him.

“It does indeed, your majesty,” she said and they both broke down laughing.

“I am never going to get used to being called that,” Jansen said, snaking an arm round her waist and they both relaxed for a moment, leaning against each other.

“You like commanding this new ship?” she asked him quietly, “Having all these people to boss around.”

“I kind of miss flying myself you know. Just me and the ship.”

“The Night Whisper is in the docking bay if you want to take her out instead.”

“Tempting, but no.” Jansen shook his head a little, considering for a moment.

Velisa shrugged and walked down into the main section of the bridge, standing in the middle.

“Open comms to all ships.” She looked down at the main scanner, taking in the formation of traces all round, totalling hundreds of ships, many producing very large traces.

“Initiate witch-space countdown now.” She said. “We stand at a historic day my fellow Diriens. We stand at a crossroads and today we will be the instrumental in deciding what path our society will take from here on.”

Many wormholes formed in front of the amassed fleet and all ships followed through to the other side. They were greeted with a system, full of debris. Jumping in close to the station position, they came face to face with half a coriolis station and a planet that seemed to have an entire side on fire.

“The Betigereians would have wiped out our entire planet for the sake of business. They would have killed

millions of innocent people regardless of military rank or social standing." She paced the bridge, her mood and expression darkening.

"They have brought destruction on themselves and we will make them pay for everything they did to us." Velisa shouted. "We are at war!"

## Epilogue



### Galactic Co-Operative Communiqué.

Notice to all commanders.

As of this date, all commanders are advised to remain clear of the majority of the northwest section of chart 6.

The systems of Dirien and Betigere are now openly engaged in extensive hostilities and, as such all commanders should consider the two systems as war zones. Entry into these two systems is considered extremely hazardous.

GalCop stations in both systems have been destroyed and as such, trading in these systems has now become a near impossibility.

Neighbouring systems of Rileisis, Tiatenqu and Edince are also hot spots for fighting, with some skirmishes even being reported as far as Anare and Istiesri. It is assumed that both parties are attempting to annexe the other.

The Co-operative is attempting to bring this conflict to a peaceful settlement.

Galactic Co-operative Department of Information:  
1195375:06:25:00





## Galactic Co-Operative Communiqué.

Notice to all commanders.

As of this date, all commanders are advised that use of the so-called Binary Exponential Expansion Bomb is now banned throughout all charts. The destructive capability of this weapon is not only immense in possibility but also a potential catastrophic threat to not only the system it is used in but also all charts in the eight.

Any ship found to be in possession of such a device will be destroyed on detection without warning.

Also please note that all commanders with the Aquarian Shipbuilding Corporation Hypercargo system will receive an upgrade to their software version in the next 24 hours.

To all commanders of the Copperhead-H variant, please proceed immediately to the nearest station for an enforced trade-in. All variants of this vessel are now banned within the co-operative.

Galactic Co-operative Department of Information:  
1195375:06:25:00

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