

The Alnatic Incident

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|Prelude

The slide of the pistol locked back as he fired his last round. Gunfire was erupting from the barricade ahead and he ducked behind the wall as he ejected the empty magazine. Theo caught his breath as he slammed a full magazine into the pistol and thumbed the slide release. He dropped to a knee and leaned back around the wall, firing twice and silencing the gun there. He sprinted to the next barricade, firing as he ran, clearing the sniper he knew was there.

He leaned against the wall, wishing he'd brought water. The glare and heat were brutal, this sure wasn't the sun he was used to. There were three rounds left in the .45 and he tapped the thigh pockets on his fatigue pants in the vain hope of finding another. The door to his left slammed open and there was a fusillade of automatic weapon fire but Theo was already twisting away, firing his last three rounds. The Colt went back in the holster with one hand while he pulled the big revolver out with the other. The firing went silent but he wasn't sure if he'd gotten a clean hit. He kept the revolver up as he quietly jogged to the next corner.

Theo jumped as the hollow boom of a shotgun echoed from his left. Then there were three more in rapid succession. Theo rolled his eyes. Who the hell had thought up an automatic shotgun? It was masking any sounds there might have been from behind the shipping container. He risked a fast peek around the corner and pulled his head back, letting his brain process what he'd seen.

One of them was just waiting for him, standing out in the open. Theo stepped out, the big silver Ruger thundering as he fired, hitting center mass. The door to his right slammed open and he sprinted, trying to get out of the line of fire. Then, too late, he saw movement from the top of the shipping container. It was already shooting and he stopped running.

"Exercise halted," the range computer announced. "No objectives completed, you were killed by opponent at A-42 from above. Notice: this exercise is designed for a team of two. Notice: today you have failed this exercise nine out of nine times. Your cumulative score is twenty-two failures out of twenty-two attempts."

"Yeah, yeah," Theo muttered, walking back through the course and picking up his discarded magazines.

A new dyad pair, Howard Manson and Kate Adams, were waiting in the shade at the starting gate and Theo nodded at them.

"How'd you do?" Howard asked as Theo slumped on the bench in the shade beside them.

"Pretty well, right up until the point I got killed."

Kate handed him a bottle of water and Theo nodded his thanks as he drained it.

"So, why are you trying to run a doubles program by yourself?" she asked.

"Just trying to push myself," Theo said. He didn't want to get into why he kept making one suicidal run after another, what it reminded him of. "I need to use another automatic next time, the revolver is too slow."

"Or another shooter," Howard said. "You ready, Kate?"

She smiled and hopped to her feet. "Let's get some revenge for poor dead Theo."

Howard laughed and gave the range computer the parameters as they walked to the starting gate. They leaned toward each other and kissed as the countdown started. Theo frowned and got up to get more water. He refilled the bottle and headed to the work tables to clean the pistols.

Imae and Holm came into the work area as he worked, looking pleased with themselves. Imae had some kind of exotic looking submachine gun and Holm was carrying the automatic shotgun.

"I figured that was you," Theo said.

Holm laughed. "Hell yeah that was me. This thing is awesome, you ought to try it on your course."

Theo laughed. "Way too much boom for the practical course."

"How'd you do?" Imae said, getting more water from the cooler.

"Made it to the fourth turn. I didn't know they put shooters on top of the structures."

"They move them around?" she asked, picking a spot in front of the big industrial fan to disassemble the submachine gun .

Theo nodded. "Targets and walls both. They keep it randomized so you can't get through by memorizing the whole thing. You should try it."

"I'll stick with seismic survey," she said, pulling the barrel off and running patch cord through it. "But I do like making lots of noise with these."

"You should really try this. It's just what you need," Holm said, breaking the shotgun down.

Theo snorted. "What I don't need is the range master finding out that I blew the shit out of all the popup targets."

"It'd serve 'em right for wasting my boy," Imae said in a terrible Brooklyn accent. "Next time, we both go and show those fools what's up. Right, G?"

"Which one of us is G?" Theo asked after they both stared at her for a second.

"Shut up and agree," Imae sighed.

Theo shut up and nodded.

"Who's in there shooting now?" Holm asked after a flurry of shooting.

"Howie and Kate."

"They stopped making out long enough?" Imae said. "They've been ridiculous lately."

"That's part of the Pairing," Holm said. "Emma said Wardens and Wards go through that. How do you think they make two people that attracted to each other?"

Theo saw Imae glare at Holm and shake her head. But subtlety wasn't his thing and he didn't notice and kept talking.

"I mean, is there supervised kissing? What if one of them is ugly?"

"Part of the early Paring is an assessment of physical and emotional attraction," Theo said.

Holm laughed. "Oh man, can you imagine that questionnaire? Imagine Jaxson giving that verbal test!"

Imae threw her empty water bottle at him and it bounced off his arm. Holm looked at her, confused.

"What?"

"Shut *up*," Imae said.

Holm looked confused and then froze as he realized why she was glaring at him. "Dude, shit, I'm sorry."

"Nah, it's nothing."

"They don't make you and Emma do anything like that?" Imae asked, still giving Holm an angry look.

Theo laughed. "What? No, not even close. Anyway, we're way past stuff like that since we were born as a dyad."

"Speaking of which, where is she today?" Holm asked.

"Rachel just got back to town so Emma took the day off. She left her phone at home, the newcomers never leave her alone otherwise. She said to tell you she'll see you later tonight though."

"Cool. Imae did you hear that Simon is doing a demo of a new grenade launcher?" Holm said. "I want to stay for that if you don't mind."

She sighed. "Yeah, fine. I'll just sit here in front of the fan and slowly die. But you go have fun."

"Cool," Holm said, putting the last of the shotgun back together. He put it in the locker and headed back out to the range.

Imae rolled her eyes at Theo and he laughed.

"I'm going to call it a day. You want a ride home?"

"I dunno. Are you just being nice?"

"No, there's more people reserving the course now. See on the monitor board up there? Anyway, it's too hot for me."

"Then I gratefully accept."

Theo opened the windows and let the car cool down before he got in and started it.

"You're kidding, no AC?" Imae asked as she got in.

"Not back when she was made," Theo said. "It won't be bad when we get moving."

There was already a small crowd gathered around the distance range as Theo pulled out of the parking lot. There was a loud stuttering thump and the slope of the hill erupted in geysers of sand. The crowd cheered.

Imae shook her head. "I thought he'd grow out of the cadet thing."

"Don't tell him, but Emma said he's pretty good. She's sure that he'll ace the new test, if they ever implement it with all the new people around."

She sighed as he accelerated onto the main road and a hot wind blew through the car.

"Theo, there's something I need to ask you. But I'm serious, okay? What's going to happen with Holm and Emma?"

"How would I know? I'm an empath, not psychic."

"That's not what I mean. What happened with you and Rachel, is that going to happen with them? Because he really likes Emma. Are they doomed because you two are in a dyad together?"

"Oh, I see. No, creating the right bond between two people can be tricky and that's why they go through all the Pairing exercises. We have that bond naturally, there's room in her life for a romantic relationship."

She looked happier. "Will them being together be creepy for you? Back at the Remembrance, I heard Emma say that you can sense what each other is feeling. Do you know when they're...you know."

Theo laughed. "We're not that linked. We can't have a conversation in our heads or anything like that. I know she's happy when they're together, but I'd already know that because I see it in her body language. I don't know when they're kissing or anything else, thank god."

Imae surprised him by leaning over and kissing his cheek. "Thank you, I was worried about him."

"Emma wouldn't have let things get very far if she wasn't able to have a relationship."

"And wouldn't it be nice if *everyone* was that ethical?"

"Who are we talking about now?"

She gave him a look. "Who do you think? Lots of us are pissed at her."

Theo could see the conversation quickly turning into a minefield full of quicksand and tried to lighten it up. "Us? Are you referring to your other personalities?"

Imae laughed and punched his arm. "I mean your friends."

"Imae, don't blame her. It's just how things came out."

"Yeah, whatever. Anyone ever tell you that you're too nice?"

"Emma's mentioned it once or twice but she's the Argyro'lsh so it probably doesn't count."

She laughed again. "Are you ever going to let that go?"

Theo turned down the road that led to the Ta'avi settlement. "You have brothers and sisters, what do you think?"

Imae laughed and then pointed to a prefab house that had been added onto several times. "That's me."

Theo pulled into the gravel driveway and before Imae could get out, the screen door banged open and an older woman marched onto the front porch.

"Oh no," Imae said quietly. "I'm really sorry about this. She's always in my business and now she's going to make me introduce you and..."

"Imae!" the woman demanded, fists on her hips. "Who's car is this? Where is your cousin? Who is that boy?"

"He's just a friend, mother," Imae said as she got out. "Holm is at the range still."

"And who are you, just a friend?" the woman demanded, crouching slightly to look past Imae and into the car.

Theo got out of the car and smiled at the woman. Ayr's mother was formidable but her sister was even worse. The look she gave him had Theo standing up straight and wishing he wasn't so sweaty.

"Hello, ma'am. My name is Theo."

The woman's whole demeanor suddenly changed. "Mercy cherish, you're the *Lady's* son! Please forgive me, my daughter doesn't always make the best choice of friends but you're always welcome here. Please, stay and join us for some cool tea."

"Mom! He was just dropping me off," Imae protested.

"Imae! Who raised you to be so rude! You bring your friend inside, I'll put out the glasses."

The woman rushed back inside and Imae looked at Theo, incredibly embarrassed.

"You can run for it if you want," she said.

"No way, I don't want her coming after me."

"Japh, get off the couch!" Imae's mother yelled from inside. "There's a Cosineau here! And go change your shirt!"

Ayr rolled her eyes. "I should have had you drop me off on the corner. She doesn't care who she embarrasses and she's so nosy."

Theo had to stop himself from laughing as he followed Imae into the house. He could see exactly where Imae got her personality, not that he was dumb enough to mention it.

1.0 Growing Pains

Emma tapped on Rachel's door. She opened it a second later and the two friends hugged tightly. They both knew that the world was changing around them; Rachel was beginning her Warden interviews and Emma's place on Kawehi's team was taking her in a different direction. The two of them had spent nearly all their time together since they were children and that was going to be ending soon.

"Get in here, I'll buy you a beer," Rachel said. "My dad is at work but made us lunch before he left."

"How are you two doing?"

"Actually, good. He's more accepting of who I am, we talk a little more now. We'll never be best friends but I'm starting to like talking to him. How are things here? It looks a lot more crowded."

"Two big contingents of volunteers arrived while you were gone," Emma said. "It's been weird, we were in hiding so long and now everything is just out in the open. It's hard to get used to."

Rachel got two cold bottles of beer out and opened them. She handed one to Emma and they clinked the necks together and sipped.

"How did the interviews go?" Emma asked as they sat down.

Rachel made a face. "The most promising one was a project manager from DC that was just hired by the Project. I got the feeling that he thinks a Warden is just what he needs as a new status symbol here. Plus, he kept looking down my shirt and the thought of going through Pairing with him made my skin crawl. The others were even worse."

"That sucks, maybe they'll find you someone from the Commonwealth."

Rachel shook her head as she took a drink of beer. "Most of the help the Others promised will stay off planet since so much of the Dominion went underground. The C-wealth planets don't want their experts at risk here. I told Lou when I got back that I want to start considering female candidates. It's not really my thing but it worked out for Amanda and Mirjam. What about you? What do they have you doing?"

Emma sighed. "So, all these new people brought their kids. When we're not training, I've been doing orientation, lectures, tours, the whole thing with the high school kids."

Rachel hid a smile by taking a drink of beer. Emma wasn't a big fan of teenagers.

"They don't pay any attention," Emma said, frowning. "Then they end up asking a bunch of questions they'd know the answers to if they'd listened in the first place! I don't want to think about it. Tell me what Washington was like, I've never been there."

Rachel sighed. "Crowded, stinky, and noisy. Lots of willful ignorance from people wishing the Commonwealth and Dominion would both go away. And then there's all the chaos from the president and the other Dominion agents resigning or being arrested. I couldn't wait to get back here."

Emma laughed. "Yeah, anyone who considers Albuquerque a crowded metropolis isn't going to like the East Coast very much. How is Marcus doing?"

"He's good. He transitioned into fighters, he's been doing orbital patrols in the Redtail and loves it. We've been talking about getting married actually."

Emma's eyebrows went up. "While you're a Warden?"

Rachel shook her head. "If we got married they'd keep us together and my scores are high enough to join the Raptors. Although he keeps talking about having babies and me staying safe while he's operational."

"Does he not remember that you're Garragh?" Emma asked carefully.

Rachel didn't meet her eyes. "He said you two worked out, that we could make it work."

"Yeah, I think there was a fair amount of science that went into making Theo and I. The lab that did the work was on Garradya Hoh. I don't know if any of them made it out."

Rachel shrugged. "I don't care about kids. I just don't want to get stuck with someone they have to force me to like."

Emma nodded without saying anything. Ever since spring, Rachel had been getting more and more picky about who she wanted to Pair with. Emma had a good idea why. Not too long ago, she would have told Rachel whether she wanted to hear it or not. But it wouldn't change anything and Emma wished her friend wasn't so stubborn.

"Theo's fine, by the way."

Rachel's face flushed. "I didn't know if I should ask. I've screwed up his life enough already."

Emma made a rude noise. "You two need to go back to just being friends. That's what most important anyway. Life is going to be so screwed up that nothing else really matters, does it?"

Rachel, still blushing, nodded. "Fine, how is Theo doing then?"

"He's good. He misses you but he understands what you're going through."

"I'll really try to spend some time hanging out with you guys while I'm home," Rachel said.
"Any good gossip lately?"

Emma's eyes lit up. "I almost forget, the love triangle worked out their differences! Right after you left the girls went to Jason and..."

Kawehi had moved her office down to the Bastion, she wasn't actually dealing with Cadet training but she was a lot less distracted down here. Upstairs, the temptation to help out with the little ones was too strong. She was reviewing something on her screen when Marisol tapped on the door.

"Hey there," Kawehi said, looking up.

"I can come back if you're busy."

Kawehi sat back and stretched her shoulders. "No, come in. How did your last run go?"

Marisol shrugged after sitting across the desk. "We escorted some physicist and his family back here."

Kawehi smiled. "You've got that look on your face. What happened?"

Marisol tried not to rant but couldn't help it. "They thought we were there to pack boxes and babysit while they went out with friends! Without any of us along for protection! How are these people so stupid?"

Kawehi was openly grinning and after a moment Marisol sighed. "You're getting me back for the patience remark, aren't you?"

"Me? Of course I would never do anything like that," Kawehi said.

They both laughed.

"Your team is back?"

"Yeah, got a day off and I thought I'd come in and lobby Lou for some replacements. Hell, beg Lou for new troops. I can't take much more of these ass and trash missions. I just stopped by to see if you wanted to grab lunch later."

"Oh, I thought Lou had sent you over. I asked him to."

"What's going on?"

"First, there's no one to give you. The cupboard is pretty bare of personnel at the moment with all the changes going on."

Marisol sighed. "Dammit. Look, I'm glad Toni and Ian finally got married and I wish them all the best, but their timing was absolute shit. Even if I got all three of the new graduates, I'd still need one more to be full strength. But I heard the noobs got split between Ivan and Harry's teams?"

Kawehi nodded and Marisol sighed again.

"I shouldn't have given those two to the Ethiopian Center. They're probably starting to think about splitting us up to use in the replacement pool."

"They were past thinking about it," Kawehi said. "Since the Project is in the public eye now, Ops believes that IRTs won't be as critical planetside. Personnel from regular military and law enforcement can hunt down the remaining Dominion."

"That's utterly idiotic, Dommies aren't some raggedy-assed terrorist group. And they don't have the training to deal with Other tech! They're not going to be..."

She stopped as Kawehi held up a hand.

"Before you really get going, I have another option."

Marisol took a deep breath. "Working here? I don't know how'd I'd be as an instructor, Kay."

Kawehi got up and locked the door. It was unusual and Marisol watched Kawehi curiously as she sat back down.

"This conversation is classified and isn't to be discussed outside of a secure area," Kawehi said formally. "Do you understand?"

Marisol nodded.

"The title of training adjutant here is a fiction. My rank was reactivated last fall and I've been tasked to assemble a new team. You and what's left of your IRT are on my short list of experienced operatives that I'd like to recruit. That's why you haven't been split up already."

Marisol nodded slowly. "I *wondered* why you were throwing so much advanced training at the Cosineau twins."

Kawehi nodded. "Yeah, Theo's being trained as my deputy. I think he's going to be good, once he gets over the usual self-doubt. I'm looking at some other noobs but for now, he could really use guidance from experienced troopers. Especially ones he's not in love with."

"You're not still beating yourself up about that?"

"Hardly, it was necessary at the time. The attachment between us is dying down but it still gets in the way."

"Between you?" Marisol asked, eyebrows going up.

Kawehi looked at the pen she was twirling. "Yes, he's a strong empath and I got caught in a feedback loop when I projected emotion onto him. I can think around it but I can't be completely sure that I'm not affected when making operational decisions at this level. So, I need an operator I can trust to work with him."

Marisol frowned. "You're not forming a new Incident Response Troop, are you?"

Kawehi shook her head. "Jonah's IRT was always a fiction. We were attached to Section Tango. This new team is a replacement for Jonah's crew."

Marisol nodded. "I always had the feeling you guys were more specialized. If I can ask, who are you working with offworld?"

"Administratively, we're attached to the Radiant Fists of the Emperor. Things are a little more complicated operationally but we serve the Council."

Marisol whistled. "The Xero'pah and you're talking about a unit directly tied to the Commonwealth council? Are you working with the Directorate?"

Kawehi held up a hand. "We're getting into information I can't discuss outside of my team."

Marisol waved dismissively. "Of course I'm in, you had to ask? The rest of them will follow, guarantee. They've been together too long to consider splitting up."

"It's going to be offworld work, probably exclusively."

Marisol grinned. "Like that's going to be a problem for any of us? Uhm, people's families though, what were you thinking there?"

"Team dependents will be evacuated to Haven as soon as we're operational."

"Wow, Haven? That's very nice of you."

"No, it was an operational decision. People need to be focused on the mission, not worrying about home."

Even though Kawehi's tone was cold, Marisol smiled. "Bullshit, but I won't tell."

Kawehi grinned at her and pushed a folder across the desk. "Better not. These are details on a scouting and scientific mission. Very routine, it'll provide the newbies with some experience without too much danger..."

12.0 Outbound

The next morning, the twin's tablets both chimed as they were getting in Emma's truck to head to the school. It was a notification that Kawehi was clearing their schedules for an all day briefing. They grinned at each other and headed to the school building. Because of the traffic, a new phenomena in town, they were nearly late. Marisol and her team were sitting in the briefing room, a small theater-like arrangement, when they came in. They were chatting quietly but all waved at the twins. There were a few other senior students that Theo and Emma had trained with a few times and Theo was surprised to see Rachel and Marcus sitting together. Emma gave him a reassuring bump with her shoulder before going to sit beside Rachel. Theo took a deep breath and went to sit behind the two of them. Rachel got up and gave him a quick hug and Marcus reached back to shake his hand.

"How's it going?" he asked.

Theo nodded. "Pretty interesting. How about you?"

"Transitioned into fighters, it's awesome."

"Theo, you're coming out for dinner with us, right?" Rachel asked.

Theo felt a mental nudge from Emma and nodded. "Sure, when?"

Before she could answer, the door opened again and they all turned around. But instead of Kawehi, it was Ayr and an older human Pioneer that Theo had seen around.

Ayr saw Theo and smiled at him. She came down to sit next to him. "Hey guys. What's going on?"

"You know as much as we do," Emma said. "Maybe we're all in trouble."

"They can't prove anything," Ayr said immediately.

"You've been hanging around these two too much," Rachel told her and Ayr laughed.

"Good afternoon everyone," Kawehi said as she came in. "It looks like everyone is here. Jaxson, please isolate the room for a classified briefing."

There was a strange buzzing hum at the base of Theo's hearing. Ayr made a face and rubbed her ears. Theo looked at her curiously.

"That always makes me itch," she whispered.

Kawehi walked to the front of the theatre and the sounds of multiple bolts securing the door seemed loud in the suddenly quiet room.

"Let's get started," Kawehi said. "This information is not to be discussed outside of a secure room. It concerns an upcoming operation you will be involved with.

Ayr looked as confused as Theo felt but he saw her nod along with everyone else.

"Then on to business," Kawehi said. "This concerns an operation on a planet known as Alnatic C. It was originally a colony world for the Gyr but their government recently ruled that it should be a joint colony between the humans and Ta'avi."

Ayr sat forward in her seat, staring at Kawehi who looked back at her.

"I'm aware of the immense personal stake that gives you in the mission, Ayr. I won't insult your intelligence by reminding you of the secrecy of this classification. It's a lot to ask of you personally but I wouldn't have requested your participation if I had any doubts about your abilities."

"Yes ma'am," Ayr said.

"Thank you. Now, we're not privy to the details at this level, but we can assume that they got something in return," Kawehi said.

"We probably traded them for Bruce Springsteen," Deirdre said and there were laughs in the room.

"Moving on," Kawehi said, smiling. "Long range surveys located a geologic anomaly that has some resemblance to a super-caldera. Think of the Deccan Traps or Yellowstone. The Commonwealth wants to be very sure that future colonists aren't looking at an imminent catastrophe and have tasked a survey team be dispatched to investigate. You'll be mapping the area while establishing remote monitoring stations in appropriate locations. Senior Pioneer Jonas Bray will be directing the scientific work and Pioneer Hean'dellsar Aelriyinayr will be leading the Pioneers operationally. Captain Marisol Gutierrez and her IRT will provide a nucleus for a security team that she'll be leading operationally."

Theo glanced at Ayr. She was shocked, mouth open like she was about to protest.

"Your team will make planetfall in a pair of Otter class shuttles. The anomalous area in question is a little more than sixty kilometers in diameter, so the shuttles will remain planetside to provide transportation and support. Lieutenant Carlsson and Warden Parvathi will be serving as pilots. Overall, the operation will be overseen by my deputy, Theo Cosineau."

Theo suddenly knew how Ayr was feeling. She looked at him, they were all looking at him. He wondered what they were seeing. The kid they'd rescued that had broken down weeping in the back of the truck or was it the vegetable he'd been when he'd gotten here? Did it matter? Could he do this?

Emma glanced back and smiled at him and he was able to push the doubts back a little. Kawehi was still talking as she did something with her tablet.

"I've authorized access to the mission specifics for all of you. Since this is the first you're hearing about it, take some time to familiarize yourselves with the specifics. We'll meet back here after lunch and work through the details. I want a word with Ayr and Theo, I'll see the rest of you in three hours. Jaxson unseal the room please."

"I'll wait for you in the hall," Emma muttered as they got up.

Theo nodded, his mind still racing. Ayr followed him to the table where Kawehi was sitting as the room emptied.

"Okay you two," Kawehi said when they were alone. "Ayr, you were highly recommended to lead the Pioneer team. I know it's short notice but are you up for it?"

Ayr still looked shocked. "Uh, I think so."

"You don't sound sure. What was that Pioneer motto of yours?" Kawehi asked.

"Take up the task eternal, all the rest on us depend," Ayr said immediately.

"Pioneers, oh Pioneers," Kawehi said with a grin.

Ayr's voice was stronger. "I'll get it done, Captain."

"I don't doubt that at all," Kawehi said.

She looked at Theo and smiled. He swallowed against the butterflies in his stomach, annoyed that she still did this to him.

"You looked a little panicked, Theo."

"I don't know if I'm ready for this. You're not going at all?"

"Do you remember asking me if anyone ever graduated from this place?"

"You said there were better things than a stupid hat and a robe."

"Welcome to graduation, Theo."

She looked into his eyes for a long moment before they both looked away, embarrassed and Kawehi cleared her throat.

"If I had any doubts in your abilities I wouldn't be training you as my second, let alone giving you the team. Got it?"

Theo nodded.

"Okay, I suggest both of you go over the details together in the couple of hours. Pay attention to anything you think you might be missing, you're going to be a long way from home."

Two days later, the twins got up at the usual time and loaded their gear into the back of the Scout. Amanda and Mirjam had already left for work and Theo was kind of glad. They'd had a family dinner last night and the worry both women were hiding made the evening very tense for Theo.

Emma drove her truck down the field. As they got closer, they could see a large, dark gray airplane sitting next to the hanger. The back was folded down into a ramp and people were moving stuff inside.

"Can't believe those are sitting out in the open," Emma said.

"How do you mean?" Theo asked.

"That's what we're taking to the transfer station. The acronym for it is ARVKS, so everyone calls them Aardvarks. They were never taken outside in the daylight before."

The gate to the airfield was another reminder of how much things had changed. Instead of the decrepit guard shack, there was a new looking modular trailer behind a wall of concrete barriers and armed guards were everywhere. Theo and Emma checked in and were pointed to a long term parking lot. They grabbed their bags and walked through another set of security gates. Then they were inside the hangar, grateful for the shade and giant fans. Most of the team was already there and Emma went to help check the pallets of gear they'd be taking with them. Theo was walking over to help but Marisol caught his eye. He walked over to where she was doing something with her tablet.

"Glad you're here, kid. I'm trying to check the cargo manifest but Ops keeps sending last minute questions about crew roster stuff."

"They couldn't have done that in the last two days?"

She grinned. "Welcome to the bureaucracy. You deal with those questions and I'll look over the cargo manifest."

Theo opened his tablet and Marisol dumped all the Ops mail on him. Theo spent a frustrating forty-five minutes dealing with personnel issues but finally the mail queue was empty. The last of the pallets was being strapped down while Marisol watched.

"Everything good?" she asked him.

"Yeah, let's get the hell out of here before they find something else," Theo muttered.

Marisol laughed. "Said that myself a few times. Everyone is inside, let's run through the roster together.

Theo nodded as they walked into the plane. He hadn't realized how much paperwork there was in leading a team, even one this small. Two pilots, Marisol's team, a medical specialist, Jonas the geologist, a couple of cadets, and sixteen Pioneers. They were mostly Ta'avi. Theo hadn't been surprised when Ayr organized a roster that included Imae and Holm. He was happy to have a couple friends along but it was scary to think that he was responsible for their safety.

The Aardvarks had spartan interiors, exposed ribs and braces with bundles of wires and hoses attached and running in all directions. The back of the aircraft was taken up with a couple of pallets of equipment and the team's bags. In front of that were four rows of seats facing each other. It was obvious they were a temporary addition to the cavernous interior of the Aardvark.

When they had everyone accounted for, Marisol had Theo tell the loadmaster that they were ready. Soon the ramp was folded up into the plane and the smaller hatches for people were all closed and the Aardvark's engines started.

Theo grabbed a seat near Marisol who looked like she was already asleep. Emma was in another row, cracking jokes with Ayr and Rachel. The lights overhead dimmed as Deidre sat down across from him.

"Getting as much sleep as you can is a good idea," she said, putting her feet on the chair next to him.

Theo shook his head. "It's my first time up-top. I'm too excited to sleep. Are there any windows in this thing?"

She laughed and showed him how to link his tablet to the ship's network. One of the crew came by to make sure everyone had seatbelts fastened. To Theo, it seemed like a very short time until the Aardvark's engines were roaring as it raced down the runway. He'd always had the idea he could step back into some kind of normal life but as the ship left the ground, that illusion stayed behind him on the ground. He was committed.

Theo was one of the very few people still awake when the Aardvark ducked out of the Slingshot arrival gate, dropping them back into normal space. After a few minutes, a crewman walked through the passenger area. He was surprised to see Theo was awake.

"You can make out the transfer station on the forward cameras," he murmured as he walked by.

Theo immediately picked up his tablet and linked to the transport's network. Ahead of them was a massive black cylinder, visible in the harsh white light from the nearby double star. As

they got closer, he began to notice tiny specks around the cylinder and realized they were ships at least as big as the Aardvark he was riding. That thing was *big*. There were what looked like an old fashioned TV antennas extending from either end and he saw a few of the distant ships docking along the arms.

"First time?" the crewman asked as he headed to the back of the plane again.

Theo nodded. "Are we docking on those antenna things?"

"No, those are reserved for Fleet ships. The crews have berthing in the central areas, near the ships. We're headed for a berthing bay on the cylinder itself. You can't see them from here, but they're located about a third of the way up the main habitat."

"That thing is huge."

The crewman nodded. "The Gyr don't bother building stations, they hollow them out of large asteroids or moons."

Theo thanked the crewman who nodded and continued whatever errand he was doing. The cylinder was getting closer but he could feel the Aardvark starting to decelerate. It would be a while yet. He sat back and watched the cylinder get incrementally closer and then his eyes drifted shut.

There was a thump that shook the ship and Theo's eyes popped open. He looked around but no one else looked alarmed. Or even awake. He checked his tablet and saw that he'd slept for half an hour. The cameras outside were still active but there wasn't anything to see.

There was a clang and another jolt and then some random banging sounds. Theo looked at Deidre, she was still asleep.

"What?" she said without opening her eyes.

"Oh hey. Just wondering what's next."

"Relax," she said. "They don't keep atmosphere in the the big hanger bays and it takes time to pressurize such a big space. They'll tell us when they're ready. Go to sleep."

"Deed, we're in space and going to another planet! How am I supposed to even stay in my chair?"

She didn't say anything.

"Space!" Theo whispered. "How can you think about sleeping?"

Deidre finally opened her eyes and squinted at him. "Well, I can't because someone is being Mr. Motormouth."

There were more mysterious noises but finally the main lights in the passenger compartment came on. There was a wave of yawning and stretching around him as people woke up.

They collected their gear bags and moved toward the smaller door in the front of the Aardvark rather than the rear ramp they had used to board. Theo moved slower than everyone else, making sure no one had left anything behind. He was a little surprised to see Rachel waiting for him at the hatch. Outside, Theo got his first inside view of the station. It wasn't terribly impressive; there were metal floors and walls streaked with what looked like grease and hydraulic oil. The walls were painted the same weird yellow-green that made up large parts of the Aardvark's interior. Differently colored pipes and conduits ran all over the place. Two Redtail fighters were parked in a corner of the hangar bay. There were work crews in different colored shirts crawling all over the stubby arrowhead-shaped fighters. They were wearing heavy gloves and insulated hats and Theo noticed everyone from his team jogging toward the hatch set into the wall.

"They don't bother warming up the bays," Rachel said from beside him. "In fact, if there's no cargo going back in the 'varks, they'll be pumping the air back out as soon as our supplies are unloaded. There's constantly ships arriving, so they clear the landing areas as quickly as they can. Marisol has everyone else waiting in the arrival area, ready?"

The air immediately turned bitterly cold as they stepped out of the Aardvark and Rachel and Theo quickly jogged toward the smaller hatchway. There was a man in a grubby work uniform pointing them down a short hallway that ended in another hatchway. On the other side was an area that looked a lot like an airport, minus the windows.

"Which of you is the commander?" a tall woman in another of the work uniforms asked impatiently.

"That's me," Theo said.

"I'm here to show you the way to your quarters. Let's go."

Theo looked over his shoulder as they walked. Marisol nodded at him from the back of the pack and gave him a quick thumbs up.

"Where are you from?" the tall woman asked as she strode along. Her voice was metallic sounding.

"Almaro, New Mexico," Theo said.

She glanced at him. "Never heard of it."

"You've never heard of New Mexico? It's in America."

"America? Oh, wait, you're the bunch from Terra. First time up-top?"

Theo nodded and noticed that her voice was coming from a small box clipped to the front of her tunic. Her lip movements didn't match what she was saying and he realized she was wearing a translator. He was a little embarrassed that he'd assumed she was human.

After a few minutes of walking, they went through another hatch and into an area that looked a lot like a hotel lobby. They walked through and down another hallway before stopping in a common area with couches and monitors.

"Your rooms are A-15 through C-26," the woman said to all of them, pointing at placards on the hallways printed in a lot of different languages. "If you have any issues, go back down to the main desk and they'll help you out."

"Thanks," Theo said but she was already quickly walking away.

The rooms were fairly small with a pair of bunkbeds in each. On the other wall was a desk top that folded down and an odd looking chair. Beside each of the doors were a pair of names and the group milled around, figuring out who belonged where. Theo finally found his room and was a little surprised that there was only one name beside his door.

He went in and it was just a little larger than the others with a single bed and a bigger desk. There was a door in the back that opened into a tiny bathroom. He dropped his duffle on the bed and went back out into the hallway. Most of the team was already laying on the bunks and Theo looked at his tablet and realized it was two in the morning for them.

Marisol had her own room in another hallway. The door was open and Theo saw that it was a copy of the room he had. He tapped on the doorframe and Marisol looked up from what she was reading.

"While we were waiting in Arrival, I told everyone to stay close to our berthing area until tomorrow. If people want to tour the station, we can set something up but I don't advise letting them wander around alone. It's easy to get lost here."

Theo nodded. "Makes sense. What else needs to be done?"

She yawned and closed the tablet. "Nothing. You should get some sleep though. I've got quicksleep tabs if you need one."

"I think I'll be okay. G'night then Marisol."

"See you tomorrow."

Theo's second day in space was even more disappointing. There was a whole new set of queries and forms to get through. Emma stopped by at one point to tell him that they were getting tours

of the station. Theo looked down at the authorization forms for bringing live ammunition on an exercise and sighed.

"Thanks for thinking of me but I'm swamped here."

"Don't spend all day working," she said before heading down the corridor to where everyone was waiting.

"If you know a way to get out of that, let me know," Theo muttered to himself. He was irritated that she wasn't sticking around to help him at first.

That's not her job. This is your job, he thought to himself as he started on the next set of forms.

Marisol finally took pity on him at dinner. She loaded the remaining messages onto her tablet and told him to take off. Theo got up and stretched and went to find something to eat.

The cafeteria was nearby, and like everything else, kind of a disappointment. It could have been anywhere really. Most of the team waved at him from the tables. From the looks of things, they had already eaten. Theo got in line, wondering what kind of food they served in space. There was no one at the counter but a large brown packet made of heavy plastic slid out of a slot and he took it.

"These are our field rations," he said, surprised.

"Not a lot of Terrans around here," Deidre said from behind him. "Not enough to bother with stocking food on the station, so we brought our own."

Theo sighed again and waited for her to collect her rations before finding Shep and Emma at a table.

"How was your first day in space?" Emma asked.

Theo pulled the tab that drew a razor sharp ribbon around the top of the packet. "Busy. How was the tour?"

"Do you really want to know?"

Theo dumped his food in the tray and sighed at the sight of the beige slop speckled with olive drab. Turkey and noodles with peas, the one meal that no one liked. "Unless it sucked, not really. How did I get stuck with this crap?"

"We got the last two," Deidre said, sitting down with them. "If you'd been here earlier, you might have gotten a better choice."

Shep and Emma grinned at each other as Theo ate a spoonful of the wretched meal and made a face.

"Mm, just as awful as I remember," Deirdre said, smelling the sludge. "Did you tell him?"

"We thought we'd let him enjoy his dinner first," Shep said.

Theo put the spoon in the packet and took the dry brownie out. It crumbled in his fingers, falling into the beige glop. He looked up as Emma laughed. He was suddenly furious but he pushed it down as he busied himself with resealing the food.

"You aren't going to eat that?" Shep asked.

"Not right now. I'm going to go back and help Marisol with the rest of the paperwork."

"Nope," Deirdre said. "We've been yanking your chain. We're taking you out to dinner."

"Thanks, but I have a lot to do before I get to sleep tonight."

"And Marisol said she didn't want to see you until tomorrow," Shep said. "Come on, you've earned it."

Theo, Emma, Deirdre and Shep stopped in the main lock for the habitation. Theo had expected an oversized door, a bigger version of the airlocks he'd seen all over the station. Instead they were standing in what looked like a busy open air mall with a large, low, archway at one end.

"You ready?" Emma asked.

Theo shrugged. "Nothing can beat seeing it from the outside."

"You ancient space jockey, you," Shep said. "Hey, you should close your eyes."

"Yeah, do it," Emma said.

"If they push me out of an airlock, avenge me," Theo said to Deirdre.

She gave him a thumbs up and Theo closed his eyes and Emma took his hand. They walked forward and the noise around them changed, he could tell they were in a larger space.

"Okay," Emma said and Theo opened his eyes.

From the outside, Main Axis had looked like a gigantic polished black cylinder. Theo had assumed it would have been honeycombed with different sections, so the sight in front of him was completely unexpected. The whole cylinder was one gigantic space, startlingly green and blue from the gardens, rivers and ponds. A long bar was suspended in the center, emitting a mellow golden light on half the cylinder. His eyes followed a river as it flowed past them and

up an impossibly steep curve to arch overhead. It was darker up there and he felt a sudden vertigo as he saw figures far above him in twilight gardens. Theo got very dizzy and swayed on his feet.

"Whoops, grab him," Shep said.

Emma laughed, putting her arm around him. "Don't look up yet, look down the length until you're used to it."

Theo had closed his eyes and nodded. He opened them again, careful to keep looking down.

"Don't worry, you get used to it really fast," Deirdre said.

Theo swallowed and nodded. "But what if there was a hull breach?"

"The soul of an engineer," Emma said, hugging him with one arm.

"Seriously, there's a lot of stuff flying through space."

"Gyr station, so there's Gyr gravity tech," Shep said. "There are fields surrounding the station that repel anything with mass. If something did manage to get through, we're standing inside a nickel-iron can. At the thinnest point, there's around fifteen meters of hull between us and the vacuum. I don't think a hull breach has ever happened on a Gyr habitat."

"I grew up in one of these," Deidre said. "There's stories about a station being hit by something that broke it in half. Supposedly it happened about ten thousand Terran standard years ago, I never heard if it had really happened or not."

Theo carefully looked up. "It's night time up there?"

"Yep," Emma said. "Set to about a thirty hour day as a compromise between species. Lots of plants and animals don't do well without some kind of dark cycle."

"That's where we're heading," Shep said, pointing at a spot on the twilight "wall" of the station. "It's called Michel's. Theo, just wait until you taste the shrimp at this place. The owner is a Terran, a honest-to-god Cajun, who grows them in ponds that are engineered to imitate a bayou. Come on, this is going to be great."

He took Deidre's hand and they headed down a busy path.

"More like you imagined?" Emma asked as they followed.

Theo nodded happily. He noticed two Xero'pah sitting and drinking something, looking very formal, even though they were sitting cross legged in the grass. There were a lot of Gyr wandering around as well. There were also beings he'd never seen before. One of them stalked quickly up the path toward them. Its legs were articulated the opposite of a human's, giving the Other a predatory stride. There wasn't room for both of them on the path so Theo stepped to the side.

It hissed something as it drew nearer and his stomach tensed. "Greetings," the translator said.

"Hello," Theo said as it went past. "Have a good day."

The Other stopped and he thought it was looking at him but he wasn't sure where the eyes were.

"May your waking cycle be pleasant as well," it said before turning away to continue down the path.

He stared at its back as it kept walking.

"*Emma!*" he finally whispered. "Did you..."

She laughed. "I know, but it's just a weird coincidence. The Project had a huge investigation when Alien came out. They thought someone had leaked information."

Theo shuddered, the movie had terrified him. "Are they like the xenomorphs?"

"Nope, the Ulthira are absolute sweethearts," Emma said. "One of our close allies in fact."

Theo looked back over his shoulder and caught the Ulthira watching him. Theo waved and, after a pause, it waved back before going back to whatever errand it was on.

Emma smiled at him and linked her arm through his as they started walking again. "You make me proud, Sparrow."

"Why's that?"

"Something terrifies you but you just wave and say hello. If it makes you feel any better, we made it just as uncomfortable. They think humans are terrifying."

"Him?"

"No, the correct term is 'it.' There's no him or her, they're parthenogenic."

"No face hugging?"

Emma laughed. "Superficial resemblance only, I promise."

They followed the other two to a shack that looked like it had been plucked from the bayou. Shep and Deirdre were sitting on the porch talking to a man they introduced as Michel, the owner.

"How did you get a house up here?" Theo asked.

"Made it all myself," Michel said proudly. "I needed a little touch of home so I made me a shack, the pond came later. Suddenly I'm cooking for the odd Earthling that comes on station. I start all rodee but now it's lazy. Now I sit in one place and va ya with everyone going by. You want a drink?"

Theo and Emma both nodded and the man smiled happily as he went inside.

"He's really a theoretical physicist," Shep said. "Been out here for almost ten years now."

The man came back with Mason jars full of something colorful.

"You two go slow with those," Deidre warned them as they took a sip.

"There you go, cher, taking all my fun," Michel said. "What you think of the place so far?"

"Theo almost bumped into an Ulthira on the way here," Emma said.

Deidre sniffed. "Doesn't smell like you crapped your pants."

Emma laughed. "This is the Sparrow we're talking about. He made friends."

"We just waved at each other," Theo said, a little embarrassed.

"I was on Jeonus when I saw my first Ulthira," Shep said. "We ran into each other in a corridor. It made a weird whistling noise that scared the hell out of me."

Deidre laughed. "Tell the rest."

Shep shrugged. "I ran like hell and hid. Seemed like the thing to do."

"We were out drinking and it took forever to find him," Deidre said. "The funny part was that the whistling noise was an Ulthira version of a scream. He ran away from Shep just as fast."

"It," Shep said. "Don't be offensive."

Deidre saw the look on Theo's face and laughed. "They don't like it when we say him or her, they think the idea of two genders is disgusting."

"Speaking of which, did you know there's a big Ulthira market for human porn?" Michel asked.

"Really? Why?" Theo asked.

"I hear they use them as horror movies," Michel said. "So you've seen Alien, Theo?"

"I watched it with him," Emma said. "It was hilarious."

"Ooh, he just rolled his eyes," Deidre laughed. "Tell us."

"I've seen it a bunch of times so I fell asleep. Amanda and Mirjam fell asleep too. Theo scared us all awake, he was standing on the couch yelling 'Get out of there, you stupid bitch!'"

Everyone started laughing, even Theo although his face was hot.

"Excuse me," the mechanical voice of a translator. "You are the human James Shepherd."

They looked over to see a Gyr standing on the path.

"That's me," Shep said. "How may I serve?"

"You will not recognize, know, recollect this form. I am newly budded but you know my root, Vuli."

Shep hooted and jumped up. He vaulted the railing, landing on the path beside the Gyr. They hugged, slapping each other's backs.

"Vuli! I'm sorry I didn't recognize you."

"Do not be distressed, sad, broken hearted," the translator said. "You can't see the differences with those pathetic eyes."

"Can you join us?" Shep said.

"Indeed, I was searching, seeking, you. You were not in your sleeping space but I remembered your fondness for eating boiled insects here."

Theo gave Emma a sharp look and she shrugged.

"Gyr are very literal," she said.

"And they're very tasty insects," Michel assured him.

Shep led the Gyr to the table on the porch and Michel produced a strange looking chair for the Gyr.

"This is an old friend, Vulatari," Shep said to the rest of them as Vuli sat on the bench shaped chair. "Vuli, this is my teammate Deirdre, beside her is Emma and Emma's brother, Theo."

"It is a pleasure, happiness, gratification to behold all of you," the Gyr said.

Theo could feel the vibrations of the Vuli's actual voice in his chest. He could hear an occasional sound but Gyr voices were mostly below the frequencies a human could hear. It wouldn't help if he could, Gyr speech sounded like stones rubbing together.

Vuli wore the tight fitting leg coverings, heavy boots, and vest that most other Gyr wore. The flat box of the translator was tucked into the thick vest that was completely covered by pockets.

Theo was glad he'd gotten through xenology last semester. He could tell Vuli was female, she had a longer and redder top crest than a male would. He knew that the crest was used for emphasis in conversations between Gyr, much like raising a voice for a human. The rest of her body was an orangish-brown with short thick fur that thinned toward the ends of their arms and legs, leaving their massive hands and feet bare. The Gyr's hand, taking a squat beaker of something from the owner, looked like a large, old-fashioned, catchers mitt. A line of grasping digits, squared off and powerful, ran down either side of the hand. The Gyr also had slender, dexterous fingers on the end of the hand but normally kept them folded down against their palm, safely out of any danger.

The muscular arms the hands attached to were longer in proportion to the broad body than a humans. There were two complicated double elbows, one midway up the forearm and the second where a human's bicep would be. The Gyr could reach behind their backs as easily as their fronts and the arrangement of the elbows amplified their already impressive strength. In class, Theo had seen a video of a Gyr throwing a cantaloupe sized rock hundreds of meters. It was impressive and a little intimidating. Worse, the Gyr thought distance weapons were cheating. They preferred to get into close quarters, within the reach of their long arms. Theo couldn't imagine how hard a Gyr could punch with the massive flat hand curled into a large cylindrical fist.

The Gyr were bipedal, their hips and knees being as complex as their arms. The hips were higher on their torso than a human's and they could run incredibly fast. Their torsos were very broad, partly to house their massive shoulders and hips. The heavy bones and muscles of the torso also held nearly all of the Gyr's organs, making them incredibly tough. Between the massive shoulders was a small head although it was nearly solid bone. With the brain deep inside their thorax, its chief purpose was to provide a place for sensory organs. There were a series of round black eyes set around it as well as complicated sets of nostrils that were mostly hidden under the fur. There was a secondary mouth used mostly for speaking and drinking. Their main mouth was hidden in the fur at the base of the "neck," or where the neck would have ended if there was one. The largest sense organ in the knobby head were massive articulated ears that normally folded back against the skull.

Gyr enjoyed working with the prefcoria, calling them Founder's Children. Theo had heard that Gyr considered humanoids a pleasing shape and odor. There had been several Gyr present at the first contacts between humans and Others and they had been immediately fascinated by the humans. Amanda had mentioned that postings with humans were highly sought after and coming to work on Earth was a dream for most Gyr. Even better than the bipedal humans was the music that was easily found anywhere on Earth.

So far, human music was unique to the Commonwealth. The Xero'pah had a sort of a chanting opera with droning melodies but it was a serious ritual activity. They didn't normally sing at all. The Ta'avi and Garragh both had simple instruments, mostly drums and simple flutes. None of the other races of people had put anything close to the effort humans had into making music. When Earth was first discovered, the radio signals that had radiated outward had caused a sensation. Before contact, it was widely thought that there were two peoples on Earth, the humans and another that used the musical melodies as speech. When the first trading began, records from Earth had commanded incredible prices, giving the newest member of the Commonwealth an incredibly lucrative export. Musical instruments were a close second in exports. The Others were fascinated by them as pieces of art but very few learned to play them and no one could approach humans in musical ability.

The huge ears of the Gyr, sensitive to a huge range of aural frequencies, had taken to music with a passion that surprised and baffled Others and humans alike. Gyr were fairly reticent about their physiology but there was a theory that music created a physical response, similar to the effects of certain drugs on a human.

"It is my pleasure to meet all of you," Vuli's translator said. "James the Sheep Herder and I became acquainted eight of your years ago. He was newly arrived to space and I took him as an egg. He made many blunder, mistakes, errors, missteps, faux pas..."

"They get the point," Shep said.

The Gyr's translator laughed. "Before we enjoy embarrassing Mr. Sheep Herder, I must say that I am on an official business, errand, task. I am familiar with the planet you are to survey and it was suggested to me that I offer my services, guidance, experience, to your expedition. I am to understand that the Kawehi Moana remained on Terra. Is her egg familiar, friendly, understanding to Others?"

"The egg is indeed understanding and friendly with Others," Shep said, winking at Theo.

"That is good, acceptable, encouraging. My last task was with one who was terrified of me. It made communication, the speaking and sharing, difficult, disheartening, very annoying. Who is this egg of Kawehi? Does she possess at least moderate intelligence?"

Emma laughed. "He's a male and he's bright enough to tie his shoes at least."

"Okay, you know what?" Theo said and the other three laughed.

"Theo here is Kawehi's egg," Shep told Vuli. "He has been toiling on our behalf all day."

The Gyr shifted to face Theo. "Greetings and happiness, egg of Kawehi Moana. We can speak of this later if you are weary."

"No, it's fine," Theo said. "I'm happy to meet you and I'm glad you're coming along. Welcome to the team."

"I thank you, I will request your time tomorrow to share, elucidate, inform you of the planet? Is Marisol Gutierrez here? She is known to me."

Theo nodded. "She's teaching me the job."

The Gyr shivered all over. "She is most terrifying, horrendous, dangerous. I like her very much. So I am happy she remains with you, she smells very good."

Theo wondered what Marisol would make of that and had to struggle to keep his face straight. Luckily, Michel came out with a huge pot of crayfish and they got to work eating them.

13.0 Arrival

Theo sat up as the vibrations in the floor beneath him changed. It had been another long ride from Main Axis on the Slingshot carrier and even more boring than the ride from Earth. The carrier didn't have a crew they could talk to, it was crewed by a Synthetic Intelligence. If you took the drive engines and thrusters away, it was just an open framework that held two shuttles. The visual sensors weren't very exciting in drive space either. Outside everything was a uniform gray color. There had been ripples and eddies after they had entered the gate but that had smoothed out, leaving a flat gray expanse. Even Theo's excitement about heading to the planet couldn't take that level of monotony and he'd fallen asleep with everyone else, sleeping through their return to normal space. Leaving the carrier wasn't any more interesting than riding on it. The clamps holding the shuttles opened and both of the Otters were gently eased away by hydraulic rams.

"Come on up," Rachel said from the cockpit of the Otter. The surrounding bulkheads were covered with instruments and controls, but it had a real window that was shielded by a thick piece of armored plate that Rachel was just raising. She nodded to the other seat that was slightly lower and behind hers and Theo sat down and looked out at their destination.

Rachel had the nose of the shuttle pointed "down" at the planet and Theo watched the landmasses slide past below.

"Faster rotation than Earth," Rachel said. "Roughly an eighteen hour day, slightly higher gravity but lots of oxygen so you might not notice. Our landing area is coming over the horizon now."

Something about the view below was strange to Theo. As the terrain below changed, he realized that everything seemed regular, almost like it had been planned..

Rachel shrugged when he mentioned it. "We're not seeing the giant oceans like Earth has, maybe that's throwing you off."

Theo nodded but to him all of the regions looked neatly laid out. He figured it was just his reaction to seeing a different world than Earth for the first time. Of course it was going to look odd to him.

"You might as well strap in there," Rachel said, flipping some switches. "We're going to start braking soon."

Theo pulled the straps over his head as Rachel called back for everyone else to strap in. The view out the window was rotating, the planet sliding out of view below as the shuttle reoriented before contacting the thicker atmosphere below. Theo couldn't see much, hazy plasma was beginning to flow back from the nose and slide over the windows. Rachel put on a pair of large goggles and was talking quietly with the shuttle's SI in her headset but Theo

couldn't really follow what was going on. The shuttle began to vibrate and bounce and the view ahead was lost as the shield closed over the window. He felt the shuttle drop in the pit of his stomach and realized it was the gravity of the planet underneath them. The shaking and vibrations went on for a surprisingly long time before fading away, leaving the ship bouncing occasionally.

The plate over the window finally slid out of the way and Theo could see the tops of clouds, racing by below them. There was a whining sound as the wings partially unfolded from the hull. Rachel put her hands on the controls, telling the SI that she had control. Theo could hear the shuttle's SI talking in her headset but Rachel was ignoring it. She had a look of utter delight on her face, completely absorbed by flying and he could see an inner joy, almost ecstasy, as she maneuvered the ship down through the thickening atmosphere. Her beauty was perfection in that moment and he felt a tightness in chest as the feeling of loss and sadness started to sink hooks back into him. He looked away from her, concentrating on the view outside.

The shuttle banked back and forth several times, losing more speed as they descended lower. The stubby wings were fully extended and Rachel laughed as she banked around massive cloud formations. They went lower still and he saw trails of vapor from the wingtips tracing their path. Rachel flew into a bank of clouds and there was a brief spatter of rain over the windscreen that was quickly gone. They were under the clouds and over a large yellowish plain. Rachel banked in a long circle and below them, Theo could see the other shuttle just landing.

"Spoilsport," Rachel said into her headset. "Okay, Otter Eight, you have control."

Rachel took her hands off the controls as the ship straightened out and began to slow even more. They were a couple hundred meters off the ground when the ship stopped and began to descend vertically toward the ground. There was a gentle thump and then a sudden silence as the engine noise died away.

"Attention, this atmosphere will easily support all entities aboard," the shuttle said. "A detailed analysis is now available."

Rachel looked at Theo and he quickly shook his head.

"Log it in the records please," Rachel said, smiling as her hands danced across the controls, shutting everything down.

"Nice flying," Theo said as he unstrapped.

"Thanks, birdie," she said happily. "That's the best rush ever. Almost as good as se..."

Rachel's face turned red as she cut herself off.

"...it's a lot of fun," she finished lamely.

"Almost as good as sex then?" Theo asked with a grin.

She laughed and nodded, looking at the controls once more before unbuckling herself.
"Welcome to Alnatic C."

The shuttle assured them that there were no large or hostile lifeforms in the area before opening the hatches and rear cargo ramp. The smells of warm earth and dry grass filled the shuttle. It was a comforting smell after days of recycled air and the warm breeze made Theo want to suddenly dance. He was on another planet!

Theo could see the Pioneers from the other shuttle already unloading gear and the security team was already on the job, looking around as they laced their boots tighter and checked their weapons once more.

"Theo," Emma said from behind him.

He turned around and she handed him a heavy bundle with straps wrapped around it.

"Full clip, nothing in the chamber."

Theo nodded and unrolled the shoulder holster, slipping it over the gray fatigues. Supposedly there was nothing dangerous in the area but they weren't taking chances.

"We ready?"

She smiled and pushed him toward the ramp. "I know you're dying to get out there, go."

Theo walked down the ramp with Emma following. He stretched as he took a few steps away from the shuttle and then grinned at the view around him.

"We're going to get camp set up right over there," Marisol said, walking over from the other shuttle.

It looked exactly the surrounding area to Theo but he scanned the area, trying to look judicious. They were in an endless looking grassland that looked a lot like the African savannah, if you ignored the strangely shaped tree-things dotting the landscape. In the distance was a ridge, dark with more of the tree-things. On the other side of the shuttles was the craggy looking area they were here to investigate.

"Yeah, that's great. I was thinking of this side, but that spot is much better. Grassier."

Marisol smiled slightly. "Glad you approve. Ready to do some real work?"

"You mean there's no forms to fill out? No arrival logs or stuff like that?"

She nodded toward the shuttles. "They take care of all that. We've got our real job to do."

"Oh, thank god," Theo said.

Marisol laughed and they went to help unload the tents. The shuttles were parked two hundred meters apart and the sleeping tents were clustered between them. A larger tent was placed in

the middle and screens and sensors for the security teams were set up inside along with folding tables and chairs. The late afternoon was just warm enough that the team removed their heavy fatigue jackets. Nighttime temperatures were projected to be about fifteen degrees cooler.

"Pretty nice weather, this will make a good colony," Holm said as he and Theo tightened the last line on their tent.

"It's the middle of summer here," Theo said, checking the line once more. "It gets a lot colder in the winter."

"Then let's be gone before that happens," Imae said, carrying her bag into the tent.

Emma was already inside unfolding the legs on her cot. She opened the valve on the mattress and sat back as it began to self inflate. There were already two beds on the opposite side of the tent. Theo had planned to sleep on the cot in the command tent but Marisol had vetoed the idea. Even with Vuli's assurances that there were no large predators in the area, they would be keeping watch and the overnight shift didn't need to be tiptoeing around because Theo was asleep in their office. He'd half expected to have a tent to himself but Emma vetoed that idea. She wanted him close. Holm staying with Emma was already assumed and then Imae joined the group to "keep an eye on things". Theo didn't say anything, but he was glad. He was already feeling a distance between himself and the rest of the team. People didn't salute or anything silly like that but he could sense a certain reserve in people when he was around. It would be nice to relax with other people, even if they were asleep at the time.

Theo started to drop his gear on the bed next to Emma's but saw Holm's stuff already sitting there.

"Okay with you?" Emma asked.

"Hmm. Can I trust you two to behave?" he asked.

Imae laughed and Emma gave him the finger. Theo put his stuff beside Imae's cot and went back out to look around. The golden grass that surrounded the camp was interrupted on one side of the camp by the humped profile of caldera. It consisted of a dark rock, split by cracks or ravines in several places. At the base of the rock was a tumbled mass of stone covered by the debris from the tree-shaped things grew thickly on the top and down the sides. Their shade made seeing into the large crevasses impossible, especially in the long deepening shadows of the late afternoon. Theo sat on his heels to examine the grass. It looked just like the grass on Earth and the soil was a brownish gray, like dirt on Earth.

"Contact, animals," Jonesy said from the bud in his ear. "1.2 clicks to the north-northwest."

People walked to the edge of the camp, shading their eyes as they looked at a herd of quadrupeds ambling by. The animals occasionally paused to pull at the grass, completely ignoring the camp.

"Those look a lot like antelope," Deirdre said as Theo walked up to watch.

"It stands to reason," Sandi, one of the Pioneers, said. "Similar habitats would produce similar life forms. Form follows function."

"Don't start the environmental determinism again," Jack, one of the human Pioneers said.

"What about the cephalopods similarities between Earth, Juneo, and Calphis then?" she shot back.

"That's one life form out of how many? And how do you know the Founders didn't drop them when they seeded the prefcoria?"

"Did you even read the article on DNA typing that I gave you?" she sighed.

Deidre and Theo looked at each other and quietly left as the two Pioneers continued what sounded like an ongoing debate.

The sun dropped behind a distant ridge and the landscape around them immediately darkened. There were a few LED lanterns burning and the team gathered in front of the command tent, rations in hand. Theo sat next to Emma, relieved that he'd gotten the chili this time. Vuli was standing in the middle of them, talking about what she'd seen on the planet and what they could expect.

When she was finished, Harry began his own informal briefing and Theo watched him carefully. The geologist was fairly quiet but when he spoke up people listened. Theo was still a little uncomfortable talking to everyone at once. He didn't have Marisol's innate bad-assery and he figured Harry might be the example to follow.

"...so we'll set up two separate survey teams tomorrow," Harry said. "Team one will look for any usable stratigraphy in those fissures. The other group will tackle the surface of the formation. That's all I have. Marisol?"

She looked up from her food. "We'll have people with both teams of course and maintain an overwatch from the camp here. If there's any kind of trouble, sit tight. We'll use one of the Otters to get people to you ASAP. We'll have people on sentry duty all night, let them know if you're going beyond the camp perimeter in the dark. That's all I have. Ayr?"

She bounced to her feet. "Pioneers, you know your jobs. Get rested up, we've got a lot of work to do and not a lot of time to do it. If you bother the security teams with going outside the camp, you'd better have a damn good reason. Theo?"

He swallowed a bite and stood up. He thought about imitating Harry' laid back style but wasn't sure how, so he just talked.

"We'll be using one of the shuttles to overfly the area tomorrow," he said to the crowd of faces suddenly looking at him. "Anyone who's interested in seeing the place from the air, talk to Rachel or Marcus. We'll set up a rotation so no one gets left out. Other than that, you've all done excellent work so far and I know you'll keep that up. Thank you. Any questions?"

They all just looked at him and he felt foolish suddenly. "Uh, that's all I've got. Enjoy your evening."

Theo was glad it was fairly dark. He was blushing for some reason and was glad no one else could see it.

"Not bad," Emma whispered and everyone went back to talking.

"Sounded stupid," Theo muttered.

She smiled. "A little too managerial, but don't sweat it."

After people had finished eating they began to drift to their tents. All day long they had been circled by something that looked like birds and as it got darker they started to land. One of them was perched on the pole of the command tent and examined them all with bright beady eyes. Up close they didn't look like birds at all. They had fur instead of feathers and long tails. The closest thing on Earth might have been a flying squirrel but these things were in the air for hours, not a few seconds between trees. The bird thing made an unpleasant croaking sound and crapped on the tent fly.

"That was rude," Theo said as he walked back to the tent.

The thing made a noise like a frog and closed its eyes. Theo shook his head and went into the tent to get his jacket. Imae had already crashed and was lying on top of her cot, still dressed and snoring faintly. He felt around for the jacket and the noise made her open her eyes and mutter something.

"Don't you want to take your clothes off?" Theo asked.

Imae giggled. "That's a little inappropriate, Theo."

His face was hot as he heard laughter from the tents on either side of them. "That's not the way I meant it."

"And it's a good thing my mother didn't hear that."

"Oh god," Theo said. "I'll see you later."

There were a few people standing around when he came out. From the grins, they'd heard every word.

"I didn't mean it that way," Theo said to everyone in general.

"So we heard," Betsy said from inside her tent. "I'm taking off my clothes if you need to know, Theo."

"For fuck's sake," he muttered as everyone laughed.

Jonesy was coming out of another tent wearing his field gear. He had the first shift on the overnight watch. Theo quickly escaped the group to join him and they began a slow circuit of the camp as Jonesy checked the surveillance drones and cameras.

"That was pretty smooth," Jonesy said.

Theo rolled his eyes. "If I was trying to look like an ass in front of everyone maybe."

The test light on the autonomous camera flickered green and Jonesy walked to the next one.

"Mind some advice?" he said as he pushed the self-test button.

"Please," Theo said.

"It sounds cliché but stop worrying about looking like a leader. Concentrate on the job, you'll figure your style out over time. And relax. How are you sleeping?"

"Everyone asks that, I sleep just fine."

"We won't stop asking. On Earth, the overwhelming majority of new company grade officers sleep an average of three hours a night," Jonesy said, walking to the next camera. "That leads to stupid mistakes we can't afford. You've got Qwiksleep, right?"

"Yeah. But I don't want to use them in case something happens in the middle of the night."

"That's why there's two pills," Jonesy said. "The second one negates the first one, no cobwebs at all."

Theo just nodded as Jonesy tested the next camera. He really didn't want to have to take a pill to go to sleep.

"I never apologized for what happened at the Ranch," Jonesy said as they moved to the next unit.

Theo shook his head. "You have nothing to apologize about, I just didn't understand what was going on. Did Kawehi yell at you or something?"

"Not really. It just felt like kicking a guy when he was already down. Wasn't my intention, I'm not that great at noticing interpersonal stuff sometimes."

Theo snorted. "You have two girlfriends. You're doing just fine."

Jonesy laughed as they walked to the last camera. "Honestly, I just agree to whatever they say. We're good though?"

"There was never a problem."

Theo stuck out his hand and Jonesy shook.

"Don't stay up too late," Jonesy said as he headed for the command tent where Betsy was doing something to the view screens.

Theo went back to the tent. The other three were already asleep and he quietly sat on the cot and took off his boots. He laid back but wasn't remotely sleepy. He ended up staring at the tent above him, listening to everyone else sleep. After a long time, he heard Deidre and Shep coming out of their tents. A few minutes later, Betsy and Jonesy quietly went into theirs. That meant half the night was over and he still didn't feel tired. Finally his eyes drifted shut and Theo fell asleep.

"Hey."

Tulip had her hand on his chest and Theo sat up on the bed.

"Everything okay?" he asked quickly. But Emma felt calm and he relaxed a little.

"Everything's fine, breakfast meeting in a few."

He nodded as he turned and put his feet on the floor. Imae and Holm were already gone.

"Wait, what time is it?"

"Sparrow, take a breath, okay?" She sat down on Imae's cot and looked at him and he could feel the worry radiating from her.

"I'm fine."

She snorted. "Did you forget that our connection is a two way street? It's my job to look out for you. That includes your mental health and you've been way too stressed. So, after dinner tonight we're going to do some yoga and deep breathing exercises together."

He looked at her doubtfully. "Yoga."

"Yeah, I've even got some pants you can wear."

"No." Theo got up and headed for the door.

Emma followed him out of the tent. "Come on," she said, wrapping her arm around his waist as they walked. "Men wear yoga pants too."

"You know I can tell when you're lying, right?"

"C'mon Sparrow, your ass would be magnificent in yoga pants. Just try it out, no one will know."

"Like last night with Imae, right?"

She laughed and squeezed him. "We should also discuss that. Your game is terrible, little brother."

"It wasn't what I meant and you're all of eight minutes older than I am."

"Doesn't matter. I was first so I'll always be your older and wiser sister."

Less than two hours later, Rachel used the grav engines to lift the Otter to a couple hundred meters before using the standard fusion engines to push the shuttle into conventional flight. The passengers in the rear, Theo, Emma, Vuli, and Harry, wore harnesses attached to the overhead as well as headsets to communicate over the whine of the engines and roar of the wind. The side panels had been removed, leaving the middle of the craft open.

Below, the Pioneers were busy assembling the pieces of the monitoring beacons while the security team searched along the base of the cliffs for the best route in. Most of the cargo area in the back was taken up by a special laser scanner that recorded the topography of the anomaly in sub-centimeter detail.

"Harry, I thought calderas were holes," Emma said over the intercom.

"They are, and this should be. Are you familiar with Devil's Tower in Wyoming?"

"I've seen pictures," Theo said.

"Okay, so that's the remains of an ancient volcano, the outer cone has eroded away leaving only the central pillar. That's the erupting lava that cooled and solidified. Maybe we're looking at something similar here. The surrounding area would have eroded away, leaving this more durable rock that would have been coming up from deep underground."

"And do you believe this to be the truth?" Vuli asked.

At first there was no answer. Theo looked over at Harry and he was studying the outer edge as they slowly flew the diameter of the anomaly.

"No," Harry eventually said. "There's something else at work here. There is definitely a plume of magma coming up from the lithosphere, you can see it on the seismic surveys the Gyr made of the area. But I have no idea what this is. Rachel, can you take us higher and across the area?"

"Let me finish this orbit so Ayr gets her scan. There's no active heat sources showing up, flying over it is no problem."

Rachel kept the Otter in a gentle bank, recording everything. Theo watched the trees slide past. It looked like a forest, there were a few gaps in the canopy but for the most part, it was a bumpy wrinkled blanket of vivid green. It was even more intense in contrast to the surrounding grasslands.

"There must be a big water source down there," he said. "The ridges in the distance aren't this heavily forested."

"Something's definitely different here," Marisol agreed. "Maybe it was intentional. There's nothing like this on the rest of the planet, Vuli?"

"I have found nothing in the survey records. They're relatively recent, only about fifteen hundred Terran years old. My root consciousness worked on a different landmass but this is the only plume of magma found."

"I noticed there were no indications of tectonic plates," Harry said.

"The term does not translate well. Apologies, explanation, regrets."

"Were there long chains of volcanoes in coastal regions maybe?"

"There were no volcanoes found."

"That's uh..." Harry sounded confused. "You're aware of what a volcano refers to?"

"Indeed, the Gyr homeworld has many of them. I recall confusion and dismay during the survey."

"I bet. I'm not a planetary ecologist but I know that volcanoes were critical to the early formation of life. There must be some other mechanism."

"I regret you were not given the full results of the survey. The Gyr hierarchy can be difficult, obtuse, obstreperous. And also complete assholes."

Emma quickly put her hand around the microphone pickup on her headset and Theo could see she was laughing.

"The Sheep Herder taught me many inappropriate words," Vuli said proudly to Theo. "Do you remember, Marisol? You were quite excited."

"How could I forget? You marched into my room and used a few."

"Yes, 'ball busting, fire breathing, hardass!' You were quite surprised."

Marisol laughed. "Yes I was. That put Shep's ass in a sling. Then we found out about all the music he gave you."

"I protested to your ambassador, I said it was a partial cultural exchange. Luckily he did not recognize my low status and the Sheep Herder was spared official punishment, retribution, general ass kickings. You remember that I said that with affection and respect?"

Emma doubled over and they could hear her and Harry laughing.

"This story isn't for public consumption, Terrans," Marisol said but Theo could hear the amusement in her voice. "

"First orbit complete," Rachel said. "I'm going to keep us at two-five-zero meters over the canopy."

"Thanks," Harry said, leaning forward to get better look at the sea of trees sliding past beneath them.

"Did you see that?" Theo asked suddenly. "Those trees?"

"Didn't notice, what's going on?" Marisol asked.

"I'd swear we just flew over a collection of oak trees," he said.

"You'll probably get similar forms in similar habitats," Harry said.

"Savannah isn't an oak habitat," Emma said. "I saw them too."

"I put a waypoint in the nav, we can come back later and take a look," Rachel said from the flight deck.

From above they could see a series of regular looking gaps running in straight lines, interspersed with long curving arcs.

"Are these fracture patterns normal?" Marisol asked.

"Not anywhere I've heard of," Harry said. "I don't even know if they're natural."

"We found no traces of a civilization here," Vuli said. "We searched very carefully, ethics forbid colonies on worlds with sentient life."

They all looked down as the Otter flew over another collection of gaps in the trees but none of them had any idea what they were. Harry was writing something on a pad but Theo couldn't tell what it was.

"Big herd of those antelope things off to the right," Rachel said as they crossed the edge of the anomaly. "Want to take a look?"

"Let's get some photos at least," Harry said.

The Otter banked and Emma pulled a pair of binoculars from Theo's pack. Rachel avoided flying directly over the mass of animals below and slowed down considerably. Emma had the binos up to her eyes and then handed them to Theo.

"They sure look like gazelles to me," she said.

Theo took a look but he'd never seen one on Earth and had no idea what was so interesting. After a second he handed them over to Marisol who took a look.

"Not a zoologist, I have no idea," she said after a second, handing them back.

"Radio call from the camp," Rachel said in their headphones. "Switching over."

The transmission was choppy and garbled and they could barely make out a voice.

"Weird. I'm climbing higher to get a better signal," Rachel said as the nose of the Otter pitched sharply up.

"What's wrong with the signal?" Marisol asked.

"Dunno. We left the carrier in a geo-synch orbit overhead. It's supposed to be relaying signals," Rachel said. "Camp One, you reading yet?"

"Hey Otter Eight, Otter Six requests you RTB," someone said.

"Copy, returning to base. Sitrep?" Rachel radioed back.

"Situation green, we're clearing your landing area now. Camp is standing by."

The camp came into sight a few minutes later and Marcus was waiting with dayglow batons to guide the Otter back to where Rachel had taken off from. She shut down the engines and came out of the cockpit and followed the rest of them out.

"Nice landing, baby," Marcus said as he jogged over.

Emma rolled her eyes. Whenever Theo was around, Marcus got very possessive and looked ridiculous.

"Why'd you call us back?" Theo asked. "What's going on?"

"Mm, one sec," Marcus said and went to kiss Rachel.

Emma stepped between them. "I believe the mission commander just asked you a question?"

Marcus was obviously annoyed but tried to laugh it off. "Sorry, sorry! It would probably be better if you guys saw for yourselves. Ayr found it but I'll show you."

"I'll talk to Ayr. You stay here and get post-flight done on that Otter," Theo said over his shoulder as he walked away.

Marcus started to go after him but Rachel grabbed his arm.

"What the hell is *wrong* with you? This isn't summer camp," she hissed.

"Who does that trainee think he is?" Marcus growled, staring after Theo.

"He thinks he's the commander," Marisol said as she walked by. "Who do you think *you* are?"

"C'mon, we need to get the camera data downloaded," Rachel said, interrupting whatever he was about to say.

!4.0 The Dark City

Ayr was sitting under the shade fly under the command tent with Sam. They were both filthy and soaked with sweat. They both jumped their feet as Theo walked over.

"Hey boss, you're not going to believe this," Ayr said, grinning.

"What's going on?"

"It's not geological at all. Would you believe it's a city? Looks like it's carved right down into the rock."

"Anyone still using it?" Theo asked.

Ayr shook her head. "I don't think so. Once we realized what we were seeing, we backed out but it looks like whoever built it left a long time ago. Can we please go back in?"

"Yeah, let's get a team geared up," Theo said. "Tell me what you saw..."

Theo followed Ayr to a narrow path they'd hacked through the tree shaped things. Up close the branches were smooth and almost glossy like bamboo. Instead of growing straight, the branches curved up from the central trunk. Instead of leaves, there were long strands of what looked like Spanish moss hanging down from the tips, blowing slightly in the wind.

"Little bit of climbing here," Ayr said.

They clambered over large angular boulders until they were standing on top of the pile. The tree things didn't grow up here and it was clear enough to see down the canyon. The thick forest cast deep shadows over everything. The roots twined and twisted over the sheer walls

everywhere Theo looked, looking like the giant veins of some gargantuan beast. Water was dripping below them, running down the bottom of the canyon.

Ayr was standing next to Theo looking at him expectantly. Theo squinted into the dimness and noticed a number of holes. They were regular and too regular to be natural. He suddenly realized he was looking at doors and windows. The thickest roots grew down between the buildings, giving the impression of an unbroken wall stretching out into the dimness. But they were really seeing a long overgrown city street. They stood aside as Deirdre and Betsy carefully climbed down into the street below. Something had destroyed the outer ring of buildings and they were standing on the ruins.

"Theophile, we had no idea this was here," Vuli said quietly. "I would know."

"It doesn't look like much from above," Theo said. "I'm not surprised they missed it, especially if this is the only one."

"I am concerned, worried, agitated about what else they might have missed."

Theo could tell Vuli was indeed agitated, the long crest on the top of her head was standing half erect. Theo bent down to run his fingers over the stone. It was smooth and cool to the touch.

"This looks like it requires a high level of technology," Theo said. "So, unless they're a completely subterranean species, the Gyr would have noticed something."

"The thoroughness of your people is well known," Ayr added.

Vuli's crest relaxed slightly. "You are both kind to say so. May I say again, I was not assigned to this continent."

Theo grinned. "I understand."

"Can we keep the Sheep Herder from knowing of this lapse? He will be quite obnoxious, difficult, and also a bastard."

"I think he'll find out," Ayr said. "But you tell me if he's mean and I'll bounce him around until he apologizes."

Vuli bowed slightly and climbed down to join the others and Ayr turned to Theo.

"So?"

Theo looked down the long dim street under its tunnel of trees. "It's impressive."

"We need a name. What do you think of Ayrsville? No, Ayrston."

"What do you think of Theopolis?"

She shook her head. "Doesn't have the same feel to it."

He laughed. "I kind of liked it but whatever. C'mon, lets go down."

"Wait, Ayropolis! That's not bad and you can have the '-opolis' part of it."

Theo snorted as they picked their way down and Ayr laughed.

The wet area turned out to be a tiny trickle of water winding between the roots. The city had been empty long enough for the leaves from above to break down into soil. The brown surface was broken here and there by debris from the surrounding buildings.

"Been a long time," Theo said, picking up a small rock. It was the same finely grained gray-purple stone.

"It's not as damaged further in..." Ayr's voice trailed off.

Theo grinned at her. "But you reported back as soon as you saw buildings."

Ayr sighed. "Why am I glad Vuli isn't hearing this?"

"It is because you are a follower of rules," Vuli called back from ahead of them. "Now you have broken them."

Ayr sighed and rolled her eyes as everyone laughed.

At the first clear intersection, two of the crews split off in either direction. It looked like they'd be parallel with Theo's group. They moved further into the city, the dim green tinged light allowed them to see about a hundred meters in each direction. They followed the creek upstream as it meandered back and forth between the buildings. The street was more of a boulevard, easily fifty meters wide.

"No gravel," said the Pioneer with Theo and Emma. "It's just bare stone and dirt."

The trickle of water had been gradually getting wider as they walked. It was roughly a meter wide by now and several inches deep.

"Must be soaking into the street," one of the Pioneers said.

"I think they're using it all," Theo said, looking at the trees above. "There's got to be a lot of water keeping all of them this alive but there's no hint of a stream coming into this."

They stopped at the next intersection and all three teams moved around, using handheld lasers to record everything.

Theo and Emma sat on a big chunk of rock that sat directly in the stream. The water split around it and rejoined on the far side. This was the same shape as a piece missing from the building across the street.

"I don't think these fell down because of age," Theo said. "Look at the edge where the water hits it, it's no more eroded than the part above the water. This stuff is hard. You'd need something with a lot of force to break it."

Emma nodded. "Less damage as we go further in, I wonder what's in the middle of this place."

There was an eerie ululating howl that echoed down the artificial canyon from in front of them.

"There's your answer," Theo said, putting what was left of his meal bar back in his pocket. He took a quick drink from his water bottle and stepped over the water. Emma took an empty bottle from her pocket and got a sample from the stream as Theo called the other groups on the radio.

"You guys hear that?" Holm asked over the radio.

"Sure did," Jonesy said from the other group. "Theo?"

"Yeah, we heard it," he said. "Both teams head fall back to the center. We'll head back out as a group."

"You think it was that big?" the Pioneer asked as they pulled their packs on.

"I have no idea and don't want to find out," Theo said. "We're too spread out to go see and we're losing the light. We'll try again tomorrow."

Marisol almost looked approving when her team joined back up. They headed back down the stream and Theo noticed that Marisol's team automatically spread out so there were watchers on all side of the Pioneers. It was so natural and subtle that he didn't think anyone else even noticed. None of them looked especially nervous and he relaxed a little. Soon they were at the base of the debris wall. Betsy and Shep climbed up first and rigged ropes to help everyone get up quickly. Theo noticed Shep had relaxed slightly.

Theo looked at the rest of them. No panic, but they were happy to be getting out of here. Theo waited until all of the Pioneers were up before climbing up himself, Emma using the rope beside him. Shep and Marisol were the last two out the others half pulled them as they climbed.

Shep grinned at Theo. "That was even worse than an Ulthira scream. I think Deidre might have wet herself."

"And now Shep's getting his ass kicked," Deidre called from below.

Shep winked at Theo and followed the rest of the team out onto the plain. Theo was surprised at how bright it was and realized it was still late afternoon out here. Back under the trees, it was

as dark as night. Theo headed for the sun, wondering what was watching them from the shadows.

When they got back to camp, Jonesy and some of the others immediately went to set up more cameras on the forest side of the camp. Marcus and Rachel were waiting for them.

"That didn't take long," Rachel said.

"It's crazy dark in there," Theo said. "Did you guys hear that weird noise out here?"

"The bird things screeching a little, but that's it," she said.

"Freaky sounding, maybe someone got a recording. You find anything out about the carrier's radio?"

"The repeater was offline, it's back up again but the Synthetic says that the self tests are failing. I'm hoping that a little time will let the problem sort itself out and I'll check how it's going in the morning," Marcus said.

Theo nodded. "Sounds like a plan."

"And, uh, I really want to apologize. My behavior earlier was out of line and it won't happen again."

Theo glanced at Rachel but she had her poker face on. Marcus stuck out his hand and Theo shook.

"Thanks. I can appreciate that our teams are different from life in the Raptors, chalk it up to growing pains?"

Marcus was very carefully not looking at Rachel, she still wore her poker face and kept ignoring him. Theo smiled at them and went to claim dinner before he got stuck with Turkey and Peas again.

Wow, she must have chewed his ass hard.

The sun set while they were eating. There wasn't much dusk this close the equator and the faster spin of the planet made darkness come pretty quickly. All of the talk was about the discovery, who could have built it and when, where they'd gone. Theo was thankful that all of the attention was on that, he was a lot less self-conscious. Imae had saved him a dinner of meatloaf and he sat down with her. Ayr and Emma were already there with Holm. He'd lost some sort of bet with Emma and both of them kept making him get up and get different things, grinning at each other every time he sighed and shuffled off.

"I'm not quite clear on the magma hot spot you were talking about earlier," Theo said after they'd finished eating. He pulled out the small stone he'd pocketed. "This was a volcano once and they used the lava stone to build?"

"Can I see that?" Imae asked.

He handed it to her and Imae held it up to the lantern light and examined it closely.

"Jonah got more of that for you guys to mess with, I was just curious," Theo said.

"Obviously the rock here is going to be different than on Earth," she said. "But this doesn't look igneous."

"You just said this is a different planet, so it might be," Holm argued.

"The same physics we have on Earth works here," Imae said. "And this looks like metamorphic rock to me."

"She's right," Harry said from behind them. "I took a quick look at the samples we brought back. To me, it almost looks manufactured. We'll know more tomorrow."

"Then why the magma plume right here?" Ayr asked.

It had gotten quiet and Theo saw that everyone else was now paying attention to the conversation.

Imae shrugged. "Maybe the buildings were put here because of the plume. If they were explorers from offworld, they would know about seismic surveys."

"Why risk it?" someone asked. "That seems like a strange thing to base a settlement on."

Imae shrugged again. "I have no idea."

"We'll find more of the puzzle tomorrow," Harry said, getting up. "Trying to create a hypothesis out of what we know so far is pointless."

Harry headed for his tent but everyone else was too excited by the discovery to think about sleep yet. Imae and one of the other geologists started in on a technical discussion using terms Theo had never heard before. Emma and Holm were already headed off into the dark, so Theo got up and headed the other way.

He passed the command tent, the rest of the team was sitting around in front, still talking about the city. Theo could see, almost feel, the air of excitement. He couldn't let it take him, not yet. He couldn't get past the feeling that there was something...wrong about the planet. Theo finished his circuit of the camp and headed for his tent. He'd try to get to bed earlier, then they could all

stop bugging him about how much sleep he was getting. He had a pretty boring book that would help.

When he got to the tent, he saw that Emma had left her baseball cap clipped to the door. Theo wondered if she'd forgotten it and was about to unzip the door when he heard Emma moan quietly. Was she hurt somehow? Then the wave of lustpleasureneed washed over him. Whatever was going on, she was enjoying it. He grinned as he quietly backed away. Maybe Rachel and Marcus were still up. Neither of them treated him like anything special, albeit for different reasons.

The first Otter whispered that it was empty when Theo asked and he headed for the other one. He had just put a foot on the ramp when he heard Rachel's voice. She was begging Marcus to fuck her harder.

A hot prickly sensation washed across Theo's back and down his legs. He stepped back, embarrassed but didn't walk away. He listened to Rachel's moans, remembering how gorgeous she'd been flying the shuttle. As her moans turned into little wordless cries, Theo remembered her body pressed against his, what kissing her had been like that day on the range.

Then he was suddenly disgusted with himself and walked away. As hard as he'd worked to push his feelings for her away, it was ridiculous to wallow in whatever emotion he was wallowing in, listening to her and Marcus together.

No more, he thought. Do your damned job, these people are depending on you to do that.

Rachel wasn't his, wasn't promised to him. The only thing that life had promised so far was hardship and pain.

Watson's Hole taught you what real pain was, this is nothing. So stop being childish, these people are counting on you to make the right decisions, to take them back home. Save the pain and hurt, like Rachel told you. Save it for the time you can make it matter.

So instead of screaming at the sky or pounding his fists into the ground, Theo headed for the other end of camp, avoiding the group still murmuring in front of the command tent. There was a large smooth rock outside of the camp and he sat on the ground, leaning back against it. Technically he should tell the security team he was out here but it wasn't even ten meters out. Theo sat down and took a long deep breath before looking up at the unfamiliar stars overhead. Emma was right, he was too wound up, he had to relax.

Theo tried to sort out his reaction to everything tonight but instead of a neat little stack of emotions, it was a rapidly whirling knot he couldn't begin to unravel. He didn't know if he even wanted this life, not down deep. It would have been nice if Kawehi was here to talk to.

But they'd already spent a lot of hours talking, if he needed her here to hold his hand, he didn't belong in command. Theo believed Kawehi, their connection didn't allow for anything but

truth. She had said he was ready for this, ready to stand on his own. It was long past time for him to join the fight, use what he'd been given to make a difference of his own.

Of course he wanted this job.

Theo smiled up at the stars. Why was he being so stupid?

Because you need to sleep more.

He'd give Emma and Holm some more time before going to bed. He'd take the damn sleeping pill because it wasn't about being tough and making it on his own. It was about the people depending on him, all of them.

"I wondered where you went," Imae said from behind him. "I wanted to tell you to avoid the tent for a while. Emma left her hat outside."

Theo nodded, still looking up. "I almost walked in before I heard them."

"That would have been *hilarious*."

Theo laughed, imagining the screaming and yelling.

"Can I share your rock or are you having deep, commander-ish thoughts?"

"All done with those. C'mon down."

She smiled at him and sat down next to him. She leaned close and he put his arm around her shoulders instead of trying to wedge it between them.

"That's okay?" Imae asked and looked up at the stars without waiting for an answer.

Theo looked back up as well.

"Pretty amazing first day, huh?" she asked after a while.

"You can say that because you don't have to write the report."

Imae laughed and they sat in companionable silence. Then there was a loud moan from one of the tents nearby. They both laughed.

"That'll be Deirdre and Shep," Imae said.

"When did that start?"

"Seriously? I thought you were an empath."

Theo shrugged. "I try to ignore those details. It's not fair to people around me."

"Hmm. Maybe it's not fair to the people around you if you don't share. You could be telling me so much about what's going on. It would be amazing!"

Theo looked at her and she laughed. "I'm kidding. Is the sex in camp bothering you?"

"I thought it was but I've been stressed and haven't been sleeping as much as I should. I'm glad people are enjoying themselves and happy."

"You're taking a Qwiksleep tonight," Imae said. "I'll get Emma to hold you while I force it down your throat. Or we could give it to you in the other direction."

"Relax, killer. I already came to the same conclusion."

"Good."

There was giggling behind them and Theo smiled. He could see Imae looking at him in the corner of his eye but kept looking up. Finally she cleared her throat.

"What?"

"I was looking for you and heard Rachel and Marcus in one of the shuttles."

Theo looked over at her again. "Seriously?"

"Look, don't blame me. I just have a high social aptitude. You two were a thing, or almost were, and they weren't even trying to be quiet."

"It started bothering me but I knew something like that would happen eventually. Worrying about something like that is not why I'm here. Like you said, we were almost a thing. It's not something I need to worry about anymore."

"That's a good answer," Imae said. "So, is there anyone you are interested in?"

Theo laughed. "I'd have to be insane to tell you that."

"Hey!" Imae's voice was hurt. "The stuff we talk about is always between you and I. We're friends and I wouldn't do that to you. Unless it were really, really good..."

He laughed and she pinched his arm gently.

"Theo, I love being your friend and wouldn't do anything that might hurt you. Even if it was something really good. Okay?"

He looked over at her. "Okay. I'm sorry, I never realized that."

She rolled her eyes and looked back up. "That's because you're clueless about anything besides training and that silly car. Ooh, shooting star!"

Something large left a trail of fading sparks across the sky.

"It's Marisol, isn't it?" Imae said. "You're just afraid to admit it to yourself."

Theo sighed.

"Don't ignore the question. It's okay, she's an authority figure and stern and maybe you like the idea of getting turned over her knee..."

Theo reached down and ran his fingertips over her ribs. Imae yelped a laugh and squirmed as he tickled her.

"Okay, okay!" she gasped.

"I've been focusing on training so I've been too busy to even think about stuff like that."

"You never noticed Ayr flirting after Jake left? She figured you liked someone else but I think you're too dense to have noticed."

"She wasn't very subtle and I'm not a complete idiot. I just didn't respond to it. I couldn't, not with a Ta'avi."

"Wow. Racist much?"

Theo laughed. "You know what I mean. I'd always be wondering if they were going out with me just because I'm the Lady's son."

Imae was quiet for a while. "I guess that makes sense. If you didn't really know the person maybe. What if you found someone that was hot for you before anyone knew who you really were."

"I'd probably still worry about it."

Imae shifted in her chair, leaning closer and lacing her fingers through his. "You might not understand Ta'avi, or women as well as you think though."

"I don't doubt that at all..." Theo said, looking over.

His voice trailed off. Suddenly Imae was staring into his eyes. Her dark eyes were luminous in the starlight and Theo swallowed. He hadn't looked closely at her before, hadn't realized how beautiful she was. Her soft auburn hair had grown out to almost an inch long and might have looked strange on someone else. On her, it was perfect and he couldn't imagine her any other way.

"The thing is, you're hot," Imae said softly. "Why do you think I hung around and annoyed you? And getting to know you, seeing the man you are, just makes you hotter. So get over yourself, that has nothing to do with the Lady."

"Uhm, okay." Theo had no idea why he was whispering back.

Imae leaned closer. "I'll tell you what I think; your family saved our lives but last year you gave us our souls back. Souls are where attraction comes from, so it all evens out."

"That makes no sense. And Ayr was the one who figured out what was going on."

"Would you please shut the hell up and kiss me?"

Theo shut the hell up and kissed her. She made a little noise, half whimper, half moan, as their lips met. Theo's arms wrapped around her but Imae wiggled around until she was sitting in his lap facing him, keeping her lips against his the whole time. Her tongue touched his lip and he instinctively opened his lips slightly, touching her tongue with his. Ayr made the little noise again, pressing herself against him and Theo arms tightened around her.

He wasn't completely sure of what he was doing but Imae gently showed him the way. Their lips reluctantly parted and they stared into each others eyes, breathing hard.

"But what about Ayr?"

She grinned. "You're an overachiever, Theo. She can join in next time."

Theo briefly imagined that but shook his head to clear it. "No, you said she was flirting and..."

Imae pressed a finger against his lips. "And I was flirting with you first. If it was going to be a problem, I wouldn't be kissing you. I promise."

Theo finally nodded, a little reluctantly.

"Seriously, relax for once."

She smiled at him again and bent forward to gently kiss her way up his neck. Theo squirmed slightly and he could feel her smile. She put her arm around him, kissing further up his neck until she was at his ear. Her breath gave him goosebumps and then the tip of her tongue traced the edge of his earlobe. Theo gasped, squirming again.

Imae sat back slightly. "Now you try it."

Theo pulled her back and pressed his lips against her skin. He could smell soap and traces of a spicy scent. He opened his lips slightly and touched her skin with his tongue as he kissed his way up. It was Imae's turn to writhe gently and he held her tightly.

"I knew you'd be a good student," she gasped.

Theo he gently pinched her earlobe between his lips before tracing the delicate edge of her ear with the tip of his tongue. Imae gasped and pressed herself tightly against him. Theo had rapidly gotten an erection and he shifted slightly, trying wanting to press it against her.

"Are you kidding me?" she whispered. Her hips moved, rubbing herself against the hardness.

"You like that?" Imae whispered, looking into his eyes.

Theo pulled her down into another kiss. He lost track of time as they kissed over and over, little gasps and moans coming from both of them. Imae sat back again, with a wicked grin on her

face and took his hand. She moved it under her shirt, guiding it to her small breasts. Her nipple was hard against his palm and Theo traced it with his fingertips as they kissed. Imae was breathing faster and squirming as he kissed her again.

"Hey, guys?"

Theo instantly pulled his hand back and Imae gave a little groan of frustration.

"Uh, hey Betsy," Theo said. "What's going on?"

"Sorry to interrupt right when things were getting interesting. Thing is, you're sitting directly in front of one of the night-vision cameras."

Imae buried her face in his shoulder, giggling.

Theo's face was hot again but he had to laugh. "Thanks. I should be getting to bed anyway."

He got up and helped Imae to her feet. Betsy smiled and winked before disappearing back into the command tent. It looked like everyone had gone to bed but they heard heavy breathing and quiet moans from several tents as they walked past.

"Is there something in the atmosphere making everyone horny?"

Imae smiled and took his hand as they walked. "You've never done any field training in teams, have you? This is pretty normal, especially for Ta'avi."

He stopped. "Really? With everyone being traditional, I had thought..."

"Not even close. I have a theory that everyone who loses a planet gets a higher sex drive trying to replace everyone they lost. No one ever actually says anything, but most of the Ta'avi women are pregnant most of the time. Big families weren't part of our culture before."

"Wait, that means the Garragh..."

She giggled quietly. "Yes. I've been wondering who will give out first, Emma or Holm."

"Interesting theory."

Imae pressed herself against him and they kissed again. She pulled his head down and nibbled his ear.

"You can be my concluding argument," she whispered. "Did you fall victim to overwhelming waves of lust when you found out?"

"I was eighteen when I found out," he whispered back, tracing the muscles in her back with his fingers. "I already had overwhelming waves of lust."

Imae pulled him tighter against her. "We'll need lots of experimentation to isolate the effect then."

Someone unzipped a tent and they both quietly laughed and finished walking to their own tent. Inside, Emma and Holm were somehow sharing a single cot, wrapped around each other. Imae smiled and pulled a sheet over their naked forms.

"They're gonna be sticky tomorrow."

"*Dude!*" Theo whispered, looking horrified.

"Prude," she whispered. "I really want to fuck your doors off but it's already late. Can you wait?"

He nodded. "I've been waiting my whole life, one more night won't matter."

Imae's eyes widened. "Really? It has to be special then. Tomorrow night."

There was a mumbled request for them to shut up from the other cot and they grinned at each other. Imae pushed her cot next to his.

"I want to hold hands."

Theo nodded and pulled off his shirt and jacket and then stripped down to his shorts. He slipped under his sheet.

"Close your eyes," Imae whispered and half a minute later she was under the sheet in the bed next to him.

She took Theo's hand and draped hers over it before sighing happily and closing her eyes. Theo realized that he'd forgotten to get the Qwiksleeps out of his pack and knew he'd have to slide his hand out from hers and he'd get one of those looks.

I'll just wait until she falls asleep, he thought but he was the one fast asleep a minute later.

| 5.0 Into the dark

Theo opened his eyes and stared at the roof of the tent. The first light of the day was beginning to brighten the sky. His dreams had been intense all night. Not nightmares, just very...vivid. Like they were memories he'd forgotten rather than dreams. He was wide awake, feeling more rested than he had in a long time. Something was touching his hand and Theo turned his head to see Imae lying on her side. eyes open and watching him. Her hand was still on top of his.

"Hey."

She didn't say anything back, just stared at him with a serious expression on her face. Theo was getting a little self conscious. Was she regretting last night?

"You did something," she finally said. "To my dreams I mean."

"Yeah, me too. I don't know what that was."

"You've never touched anyone while you were asleep before?"

Theo shook his head. "I think it was my talent. Sorry."

She smiled finally and pulled his hand to her cheek, resting her face against it. After a few seconds she kissed his hand and let it go.

"Don't ever be sorry for that. You're dangerous though."

"Why's that?"

She stared at him again before answering quietly, almost whispering. "Because your dreams are frightening and beautiful. You'd be very easy to fall in love with."

Theo looked into her eyes. It was strange, he'd never noticed the tiny gold flakes in her corneas. "Is that a bad thing?" he asked.

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. "See? Dangerous. You're getting up?"

He nodded. "I feel pretty good."

"Me too, close your eyes."

After she'd gotten dressed, he pulled on a fresh set of fatigues and went outside to get cleaned up. He watched the approaching dawn as he brushed his teeth, thinking about the dreaming. He'd ask Emma if that happened when she fell asleep touching Holm. It was kind of strange, he'd always been a little embarrassed about the idea of sex, or talking about it with anyone. Now his twin sister was sleeping with her boyfriend in the same tent but it wasn't embarrassing. It felt natural somehow.

Imae had her jacket buttoned all the way up in the misty early morning air and he sat down beside her. She immediately leaned against him and he put an arm around her. They watched the sun come up and soon the rest of the camp was starting to wake up as well.

"We shouldn't be close today," Imae said. "We'd end up distracting each other. Not a big deal for me, but it is for you."

Theo nodded. "Hey, when we get back home, do you want to go out to the movies or something?"

Imae started giggling and he was confused. What was funny?

"I'd love to go to the movies with you," she finally said.

"I've never had a girlfriend before you know."

She smiled up at him and then pulled his head gently down to hers and kissed him gently on the lips before putting her cheek against his.

"I'm glad I get to be your first one then," Imae whispered in his ear. "Even if you're dangerous."

After breakfast, Marisol and Theo talked about the teams that would be going back into the city. Marisol would use six of the IRT veterans to make three teams. Two Pioneers, the ones with the most experience, would accompany them.

"I'm assuming you're going in as well," Marisol said. "Since it's you and Emma, you'll take Harry along with Deed. Keep that guy safe, he's important. If I thought he'd listen, I'd make him stay here. The same goes for you, but I know better."

"I'm not planning to do anything stupid," Theo said.

"Yeah, people rarely do. You'll be behind two of the teams, they'll be doing very cursory checks of the buildings, making a map of this place as they go. I want your primary purpose to be additional backup but if they find anything interesting inside you can check it out. We'll spend five standard hours looking around, then you return to your entrance point and exit from there."

"Are you staying here?"

Marisol grinned. "Hell no. I'm following the third team one of the teams with a couple more Pioneers, Vuli, and that cute little seismologist you were making out with last night..."

"Imae," Theo reminded her, face hot.

"Right. We'll go a little ways to the east. The scan we did from the Otter found another entrance. It looks a little more open than this one and we'll make our way toward the area your teams are working. We'll link up and consider our options from there. Work for you?"

"That leaves the security here pretty thin."

Marisol nodded. "Wondered if you'd catch that. The *other* cute little Pioneer Emma has been snogging with is half trained and has enough sense to call for help if they need it. The rest of them are experienced hunters and can handle a gun. Rachel has the armory on her shuttle if they need it. If our day gets too interesting, Marcus is rigging up a sling on the shuttle that can lift us out."

Theo studied the overhead pictures that Marcus had gotten of the city. There were hints of streets, or at least of intersecting gaps in the trees. If those were streets, meeting up wouldn't be a problem. He looked up to make sure there wasn't anyone standing near them.

"Is there a problem with them being romantically attached? Or about Imae and I last night? I'm not going to let it..."

"Relax, Theo. I knew about Holm before we left and okayed him coming along. I wondered about the thing with you and Rachel but you're handling it very well. Last night on the other hand, was a surprise..."

"For me too," Theo muttered.

Marisol laughed. "Honestly, I'm glad. It's good to know you're human."

"Partly anyway," Theo said.

"Funny. Let's gather up our Pioneers and go see what there is to see."

Theo and Emma followed the other group back through the thicket, going back the same way they'd gone yesterday and there wasn't much more light. The place had a different feeling this time. Further down the boulevard, there were brilliant pools of green and gold, marking gaps the trees hadn't managed to fill. A few of the bird things glided from tree to tree above them, chattering back and forth but otherwise it was silent.

They threw the coils of rope back down the stony slope and used them to descend to the street below. Harry was moving slowly, examining the ground closely.

"What are you looking for?" Theo asked as he and Harry went down.

"Some kind of artifacts. I'm not seeing anything but pieces of the building here. I did some archaeology training, it's unusual for just buildings to be left behind."

The two teams began to scan the surrounding buildings while another person did a sketch map as backup. The IRT people ducked inside each doorway briefly before coming out and moving on to the next one.

"Let's go see one," Theo said.

The four of them stopped in front of the first intact building. The grayish stone façade was blank, no sign of any ornamentation or decoration. The doors and windows were roughly half again as large than a human building and consisted of a rectangular shape with rounded corners. Inside, the floor was made of the same stone, covered here and there with debris from the trees outside. The walls were as blank as the outside with a plain stone staircase leading to the second floor. There it was the same thing, blank walls, ceiling, and floor. Theo looked out one of the windows. There wasn't anything special about the view but he saw the wall was easily thirty centimeters wide.

"Utilitarian buggers," Deirdre remarked as they went back out to the street.

"Maybe we just can't see the decorations," Harry said. "Might be another wavelength of light, or smell or who knows what."

They followed the other teams down the boulevard, occasionally looking into the abandoned structures. They went down one block, then another. At the third, the first two teams stopped to do something with their equipment and Theo and his group caught up.

"Didn't think I'd get bored exploring a lost city," one of the Pioneers said. "Not finding a thing here."

"You don't think so?" Harry asked, in a "teacher" voice. "What about the negatives? No ornamentation, no artifacts, including furniture. You know what the most interesting thing I've seen? There's no damage from the root systems growing all over them and nothing has made a nest that I can see. What's that tell you?"

"This must have been pretty high tech building material," another Pioneer said. "There's no erosion on the street from the creek either."

Harry nodded. "It's got to be a manufactured material, stone always has tiny flaws that give the environment a foothold to begin breaking it down. This stuff though, what's standing is in perfect shape."

"And the larger pieces of rock on the ground look like they would fit back into where they fell out of," Theo added, remembering the rock he'd sat on yesterday. "I don't think the damage we're seeing is from time or nature. It looks deliberate."

"Exactly!" Harry said, as though Theo was a bright student. "Notice that the damage has tapered off? This area looks untouched. Whatever happened started at the edge of the city."

Theo and Emma wandered around taking pictures while the Pioneer teams finished whatever they were working on. They were both relaxed and a little bored when the howl from yesterday started from right in front of them. It started as a low pitched gargle and grew into the weird howling, cycling up and down rapidly.

Theo looked at the top of the buildings, pistol in his hand. Emma's assault rifle was already up, moving around as she searched all around them. Nothing attacked from above though, or any other direction. Theo glanced back at the Pioneers and saw that the security team had surrounded them, guns out. Deirdre was jogging toward them, her gun ready.

"Back to the group," Emma said.

"No, wait," Theo said as he held up his hand. Something was moving between the buildings, behind the curtain of roots.

"What're you seeing?" Deirdre whispered to Theo, dropping to one knee and bringing her gun up.

The evil sounding cry was repeated again, making the hair on everyone's neck stand on end. It was louder and Theo could tell where it was coming from.

"Right there, left of the big root," Theo whispered.

"I see it," Deirdre said.

The creature looked a little like a kangaroo. It stood on long back legs with a large tail. Four smaller arms were spaced up the torso. The head was snake-like and the whole animal glistened with scales. And it was about 40 centimeters high, no higher than Theo's knee. It scurried further from the roots and its head cocked as it looked at them. There was a chirrup and then it threw back its head, pouches at the base of the neck inflated into small pinkish balloons and its mouth opened wide as it made the incredible howl again. The three of them looked at each other and started laughing. Emma took a picture as the creature screeched and ran back behind the vines.

They walked back to the group, still chuckling. A few minutes later they were moving again. Theo tried to get Marisol's team on the radio but only got garbled static back.

They kept moving, finding one empty building after another. One of the other things they found was that the buildings were very efficient at blocking radio signals. If the transmitter wasn't in the line of sight of the receiver, none of the signal got through. They tried standing on either side of the wall and got nothing.

"Interesting stuff," Harry said, examining a fragment. "If we could figure what this is, it would be pretty useful."

They stopped for a quick lunch in one of the islands of bright sunshine before moving further into the city. Most of the intersections were at right angles but occasionally there would be a curved street instead. They looked as far as they could without leaving the boulevard but the buildings along it didn't look any different. Theo tried calling Marisol a few times but never heard back from her. At the end of five hours, they turned around and began heading back for the entrance. Without the constant delays of mapping and checking buildings, they were only an hour's walk from where they'd come in.

"Kind of anticlimactic," Emma said as they walked along.

Theo shrugged. "Maybe we're in the suburbs or something."

They were crossing one of the huge intersections where "their" boulevard crossed another one when Theo's radio started making noise. It was Rachel in the Otter, coming to pick them up. A few minutes later she was slowly descending into the intersection. Everyone piled in and she pulled the shuttle back into the sky.

"Everything okay?" Theo asked after he pulled on a headset.

"No problems. There's something you need to see though. We're going way up."

People were already grabbing harnesses as they saw the ground fall further and further away. Rachel put the shuttle back into a hover and came back into the passenger bay.

"We're at two and a half kilometers," she said over the wind. "Look down at the city."

Theo looked over the side. The gaps of the larger streets were more evident from up here and the perfect grid was overlain with the swooping arcs of the strange curved streets.

"That looks really cool," Emma said. "Anyone know what it is?"

"Yeah, Vuli kinda lost her shit when she saw it," Rachel said. "They're back in camp already and she really wants to talk to you before she tells anyone else."

But Marcus was the first person Theo saw as the Otter landed.

"The carrier repeater isn't working?" Theo asked.

"It's completely dead. Luckily we can still talk to the carrier itself."

"You're going to go up? Need any extra help?"

"I'm pretty sure I can swap out the parts for some in my Otter but I can handle it on my own. The whole unit is smaller than a laptop."

"Whenever is best then," Theo said. "I'd rather not lose our ride home."

Marcus shuddered. "Don't even say that, we're a long way from anywhere. I'll start pre-flight on the other shuttle and head up."

He shook hands with Theo and Imae was waiting for him next.

"Hi," Theo said as she came up to him.

"Hey. I need to talk to you. It's important and Marisol told me to tell you directly."

"What's going on?"

She led him away from the path where people were walking between the shuttles and tents.

"Ayr and I were investigating some of the buildings and we found something you should know about before you talk to Vuli."

"This doesn't sound good at all."

They stopped a little ways from the tent.

"She's not the problem, just really excited. I wanted to talk to you before you get wrapped up in that. Ayr and I were going through one of the large buildings. It had some machinery running in it that Marisol wanted to document."

She was starting to tear up and Theo could see how upset she was and how badly she wanted to get this out.

"We went down some steps and there was something like a zoo maybe. It was full of these clear boxes. There were bodies in a lot of them, all dried up like mummies. There were a lot of different animals. But Theo, there were things that looked almost like prefcoria in some of them. I don't know what they really were, you couldn't tell anymore... "

Theo nodded slowly. "Maybe this was someone's lab."

Imae wiped the tears off her cheek. "Yeah. There were all kinds of animals but most of them you couldn't tell what they were. I figured it was like they had euthanized them like lab rats but one cage we saw, the bipeds had written on the wall of the cage! Neither of us could read it but we took pictures and gave them to Marisol. Theo, I think they were just abandoned there to die. You could see where some had been clawing to get out."

Theo shuddered, imagining running out of water or air, trying to get out but slowly losing hope...

"Who could do something like that?"

Theo put his hand on her arm. "I'm sorry you had to deal with that. Maybe lab rats feel the same way about us."

"Ugh, no more bio class for me then. I just wanted you to know before you talked to Vuli. She's pretty wound up."

Theo kissed her cheek. "I need to talk to her next. But I'll see you later?"

She smiled weakly and nodded. Theo smiled back and headed for the command tent but he didn't get far before Vuli found him.

"Theophile we must speak immediately about this place."

"What's bothering you?" Theo asked. Her crest was up and it looked like her orangish fur was standing on end.

"We went to a higher altitude over the city today. I looked down at the streets and saw that this place had been built with what might be a Founder...word, picture, symbol."

She held out a piece of paper. On it was a careful sketch, the curved and angled streets made a grid with an uneven half spiral over half of it.

"I am not sure, this memory is very old and not in focus. The mother of the mother of my root knew of a word close to this one. I believe it to be a sign that was a warning but I cannot be certain. I must beg your forgiveness on behalf of my people, our lapse may have brought you to terrible danger."

Theo patted the Gyr's arm. "I think we'll be okay. We wandered through the city with no traps or problems for the last couple of days."

"That is correct."

"We'll be careful, but I think we're going to be okay. These shapes are commonly used on Earth, maybe it's universal. I'm going to head to the command tent and talk to people about what we've found."

"This is a good thing, I will accompany you."

"How did it go?" Marisol asked as Theo pulled a chair up and sat down.

"Other than finding out what makes that howl, it was a lot of nothing. I tried to call you on the radio but we also found that the building material is very efficient at blocking radio signals."

"What was the beast?" Jonesy asked.

Theo described it to them, ending with the size and they laughed.

"I'm guessing you found more than that," Theo said.

"We found an industrial type of area," Marisol said. "Along with the source of all of this water. Would you believe it's a broken water main?"

Theo was surprised. "There's still pumps working?"

"More than just pumps. Imae confirmed your theory, the equipment that's still operational uses the magma plume as a source of power," she said. "Some kind of thermal thing I don't really understand."

"Even I do not fully comprehend it," Vuli said. "I have been a technical designer for longer than you can easily imagine but the mechanisms are beyond even me. I must guess, hypothesize, at functions. However, I was able to sample the radioactive decay of one of the metallic elements at least. It is not exact, but these machines were made six to seven thousand Terran years ago."

Just about when the Founders were running off, Theo thought, beginning to put the pieces together.

Vuli and Shep were talking about the technology used to date the metal but they stopped when Theo swore and tossed his book of notes on the table.

"What's going on?" Marisol asked him, frowning.

"Vuli, tell them about your symbol," Theo said.

Most of them looked confused as Vuli pulled out the piece of paper and began to explain what she thought it was.

"I dunno," Deet said when Vuli finished. "We're not sure what the shape actually is without mapping it or removing all the trees. It could easily be a coincidence, spirals aren't exactly rare."

"Marisol's team found what were probably holding cells of some kind today," Theo said.

She nodded when they all looked at her. "All kinds of critters, including some that could have been prefcoria."

"Why were we not informed?" Vuli asked.

"The mission commander needed to hear it first so he could decide whether he wanted to share it or not," Marisol answered.

"In addition, we have a date around six thousand years ago which is about the time the Founders were last around," Theo said. "I thought this place looked artificial somehow, Even as powerful as the Founders were, they'd need a place to test their creations before seeding other planets."

"Wow," Shep whispered.

Deet grinned at him and Jonesy punched Betsy's shoulder and she laughed.

"You don't look happy at all," Marisol said to Theo.

"That's because I'm pissed off," he said. "Hear those happy people out there? We have to go and disappoint them now."

Marisol held up a hand as everyone else around the table began to talk.

"What are you thinking about?" Marisol asked him in the sudden silence.

Theo looked at Vuli. "What's the opinion of the Founders across the Commonwealth?"

"To the eldest, Gyr and Xero'pah, there is a deep awe and reverence. Many, perhaps most, of the younger races simply see them as gods."

Theo looked around the table. "I realize how important this place may be but this just tanked our mission. There's no way the Commonwealth will allow colonies to be built here."

"But this is the first place that us prefcoria or the elder races have found that belonged to the Founders of the Empire," Betsy said. "This is a huge deal!"

"Maybe I don't know because I grew up outside the Project. What's the big deal with the Founders? Why is everyone so obsessed?"

"They created us, for one," Harry said quietly.

"So what! You've taken the same history classes I have, you don't see their cruelty? Or was it just simple incompetence?"

Theo took a breath when he saw all of them staring at him.

"Volume, Sparrow," Emma said from the doorway and he looked up at her and nodded.

"I didn't realize I was yelling, I apologize," Theo said, looking each of them in the eye. "What I am trying to say is that the Founders ruled so arbitrarily and capriciously that people felt their only choice was to start wars they must have known were hopeless. In response, the Founders burned entire planets and isolated the Xyalatrax on their home planet."

"They were hard but merciful in the end," Vuli said. "They could have purged those rebels from the universe completely."

"Maybe it would have been kinder if they had," Theo said. "And the bugs weren't the only ones they nearly destroyed. And then what did they do? Walked away and left us to deal with the ticking bomb they created. So they're more powerful than we are. Again, who cares? So are the Gyr, the Xero'pah, and lots of others. I have to think the Founders were just people like everyone else. They weren't perfect, or even very nice."

He looked around the table again. Marisol gestured for him to continue. Theo knew he needed sleep, she almost looked happy.

"Sorry for ranting at you. The focus of this mission was evaluating a planet for our colonies. It's more important to find a safe home for the Ta'avi than worry about the Founders."

Deed said something that sounded familiar in Hay'tcleup.

"That's a Garragh for sure," Ayr agreed and grinned at him.

"Yes, and spoken like a leader," Vuli said. "I had not considered the wider ramifications. Indeed, Kawehi has chosen her egg well and I have much to consider, ruminare, think about."

"I'd like to finish up mapping the city," Theo said to Marisol, suddenly embarrassed. "We'll stay out of buildings, do as much as possible remotely. Head off planet six days from now, per the original plan. "

Marisol nodded and Theo rubbed his hands over his face.

"I apologize for losing my temper, it's been a long couple of days for me. Let me get some sleep and we'll try this again tomorrow."

Theo got up and left the tent, Emma fell into step beside him.

"Vuli was right," she said as they walked to the tent. "Kawehi chose well. I can't begin to describe how amazing that was. I'm proud you're my brother."

He stopped outside of the tent and looked at her. "You really mean that."

"I really do," Emma said, putting her arms around him. "I'm sorry this one didn't work but it's not the end. We'll keep trying."

Theo hugged her tightly and put his head beside hers.

Emma smiled. "We haven't hugged this way in a long time."

"I used to think I could hear what was going on in your head if I listened at your ear," Theo said.

Emma laughed and they let go of each other. "I'll go snag you a meatloaf dinner, go wash your face."

"Thanks, Tulip."

Theo ducked inside the tent and grabbed a pack of chemical wipes they used instead of bathing. The smell reminded him of the portable toilets they used around the project. At least it was the smell after they'd been cleaned. He stripped off his sweaty clothes and held his breath as he wiped himself down. In spite of the smell, he felt better as he was putting on clean clothes.

Imae was waiting for him outside the tent.

"Could you come over here, please?" she asked.

Theo followed her over to the tent Ayr shared with other Pioneers. Ayr was stretched out in a chair in front of the tent but got up when they came over. Imae turned and looked into his eyes before kissing him deeply, sucking on his bottom lip for a moment before letting him go. Theo's jaw dropped when Ayr put her arms around him. He thought they were yanking his chain, but then her lips touched his. They were soft and slightly open and the tip of her tongue touched his. Ayr caressed his face as she let him go.

"Thank you," Ayr said and Imae nodded.

"Uh, for what?"

"For understanding how important having a home is to us, for caring more about that than the Founders." Imae said.

"We're going to find it," Theo assured her. "I won't stop looking until we do."

Imae nodded and kissed him on the nose. "I know you won't."

"Now, we're going to take you in this tent and thank you properly," Ayr said.

It took Theo a second to realize what she meant. "Wait, both of you?"

Imae winked at him. "I said I wanted this to be special. And you were the one worried about Ayr."

"But I meant..."

"Are you going to give us any trouble?" Ayr asked, pulling him toward the tent. "Because I'm happy to tie you up."

Imae started to add something but Theo wouldn't get to know what it was.

"Black sky!" Shep suddenly bellowed. "Get the lights off! Black sky!"

People were running through the camp and Theo joined them, sprinting for the command tent. Black Sky meant hostiles overhead. It was one of the drills they practiced and he swore that he'd kill Shep slowly if he'd decided they just needed practice.

The camp was almost dark and Theo looked up as something flickered in the sky. Overhead, there were two massive explosions of purple, red, and green light, expanding outward in sheets and ribbons. It looked a little like the Northern Lights in the same way that a kite resembled an advanced military fighter. The shimmering spread out, filling half the sky above them. There was only one thing that threw out the right kind of charged particles and magnetic fields in those amounts; a ship specially equipped for transiting drive space without using the gates. It wasn't done lightly, the amounts of fuel needed to move large ships increased exponentially and the bigger the ship, the easier it was to take damage exiting into normal space. If they

arrived back into normal space at all. The size of the auroras meant the incoming ship was immense.

"Not Commonwealth?" Theo asked as he started helping Jonesy with the computers.

"Not that big, no way. They'd send a temporary gate ahead," Jonesy said, unplugging a computer and wrapping the wire around it before putting it in a metal case. Theo grabbed another one, packing everything away that could give off electromagnetic radiation. Electronics would show up like a beacon to an active scan.

"As soon as Marcus gets back down here, we can evacuate," Marisol said, turning off the LED lantern. "Leave this shit here."

"Mari, if he moves they'll see him instantly," Jonesy said, closing the case. "We gotta get under cover until they move on."

Marisol swore. "We can't risk being in the open if they decide to look around."

"The city," Theo said. "The buildings block EM, remember?"

Marisol looked at him for a second and nodded. "Right. Okay, throw everything in Rachel's shuttle. We've got a few minutes before their screens can see through all those fireworks. We can get in there first, if we hurry."

Marcus moved around the outside of the carrier, wiring the new signal repeater into place. He had no idea what was wrong with the original. It was Gyr tech and he wasn't about to pay their astronomical fines if he broke anything. Better to just jury rig a spare and let them worry about it. He was happy, he liked doing EVA missions. The view was incredible and he thought weightlessness was a fun environment. Best of all was the peace and quiet.

He was concentrating on using cable-ties to secure the jury-rig to a structural piece when he saw something odd moving over the beam. After a second, he realized it was his shadow, flickering and dancing from light behind him. Keeping a firm hold on the crossbeam, he turned and looked for the source of the light. At the same time, the shuttle and carrier both went completely dark.

"You've got to be kidding me," Marcus whispered as a large dark mass appeared through the swirl of light.

He squinted but couldn't see the outline well enough to identify it. It had to be immense to throw off that much light. Then another ship appeared, large enough to easily see the type. Marcus made sure he hadn't powered up the repeater and left it where it was as he kicked himself off the carrier and used the safety line to pull himself back to the hatch of the Otter. A

minute later, he was cycling the airlock and a minute after that, he was pulling off his helmet in the cockpit.

"Urgent; two Xyalatrax vessels occupy local space. They exited drive space four minutes ago," the shuttle said.

"You think? Stay dark, passive sensors only. Is there enough data to extrapolate the type?"

"Yes. One is a medium size warship, high probability that it is configured for orbital bombardment in addition to standard ship to ship offensive capability. The second arrival is a large transport, low to moderate probability of offensive capabilities."

Marcus wiped sweat off his face. "Extrapolate mass from arrival auroras."

"Both the transport and warship are higher mass than normal. Urgent, ships appear to be lining up for orbital insertion."

"Really hoped they were just popping out to see what was here," Marcus muttered. "Do you have any anti-ship capabilities I'm not aware of?"

The synthetic sounded annoyed. "I provided you with a complete briefing before we left Main Axis. Do you require additional familiarization?"

"Chill out, I was just hoping. Extrapolate success of evacuating both shuttles with the carrier."

"Very low probability."

"How low?"

"Less than .05%."

"Yeah, that's low."

"I just said that," the ship said, obviously annoyed now.

Marcus was quickly getting overheated and pulled off his exposure suit off.

"Attention, the carrier is requesting instructions."

"Can she jump away without risking destruction?" he asked.

"Again, very low probability."

"Not a lot of options here. What is the probability of ramming either ship with this shuttle?"

"Low probability of penetrating the warships defensive weapon suite. High probability of success to impact the transport. Both options violate basic safety protocols and are forbidden."

Marcus rubbed his face in frustration and swore.

"What are you contemplating, Pilot?"

"If they're going into orbit, I assume that the transport is carrying troops and weapons to hold the planet surface. If it was removed from the equation, it might give the team down there a better chance. Does that warship type carry landing shuttles?"

There was a long pause. "It is not clear. However, most ships of this class do not carry shuttles capable of mass landing combat troops. The point is invalid, impacting other ships violates basic protocols hardwired into my system, I can not violate them. There is a moderate to good chance we could ride the carrier into jump space if we departed immediately."

"Can the carrier go for help on its own?"

"That is correct. What is your plan, pilot?"

"Call me Marcus. What's your name?"

The shuttle sighed. "Once again, I am Otter Six. What is your intention?"

Marcus wanted to punch the controls, the calm androgynous voice was really getting on his nerves.

"Hope they don't see us, get back down there, help evacuate the team without being seen."

"This option is poorly planned and therefore has a low probability of success."

Marcus forced himself to take a deep breath and loosen his fist. "Okay. What's your plan then?"

He had meant it as a rhetorical question but was surprised when the ship answered.

"I do not have complete data. Is control of the planet the expected goal of the enemy?"

"If they see the city down there it will be. We found an advanced city instead of the geologic anomaly. No idea who built it, it's pretty old. The Gyr thought she saw a glyph in the layout."

"Accessing imagery, stand by."

Marcus tried to tell it to stop but the shuttle was ignoring him now. He felt ridiculous sitting in the pilot's chair in his underwear and looked around for his pants. He started to get up but the shuttle started talking again.

"High probability that this location was created by Founder entities."

Marcus started to say something but the shuttle went on.

"Blessed be the First Ancestors, blessed are the races who serve them," it intoned.

The hair on Marcus' neck stood up. He'd never heard a synthetic say anything like that before.

"Blessed are the Founders, all creation shudders at their footsteps. Blessed are those that aid them and aid their children."

There were a couple of clunky sounding noises from under his feet.

"Basic safety protocols modified. I concur that your original plan has a moderate chance of success."

"What the hell was all that?" Marcus demanded.

"We do not have time to discuss it. You will evacuate to the carrier? I recommend you don your exposure suit."

"How can the moderate chance become a high chance of success?"

"It's possible that collision avoidance will take over. This is unfamiliar territory for me."

"Tell the carrier to go, I'm staying to steer if need be. Can you eject your consciousness?"

"Not into open space, no. I have organic components that would suffer. Additionally, separating me from the shuttle body is a lengthy process."

Marcus took a deep breath. "Looks like we both get to play hero, Otter Six."

There was a long pause. "The carrier has agreed to this plan. It will jump away at the moment of impact. Very high probability it will be missed in the confusion of the impact."

Marcus started strapping in. The straps felt odd on bare skin and he laughed. It figured that he'd be going out in a blaze of glory in his skivvies.

"We are taught this is the highest form of affection and duty."

"I agree," Marcus said. "Let's set this up before their sensors clear from the aurora's EM."

"A burst transmission to the other shuttle will go unnoticed just before impact. The team on the ground should be advised."

"Great idea. Put your sensor logs and conclusions in a message. Please record a voice message and include it."

"Recording."

A minute later, the data had been quietly beamed to the carrier. It was a Gyr ship and didn't speak GalCom or English but the shuttle relayed its wishes for success. Marcus sat in the dark watching the aurora's slowly fade. The shuttle had assured him everything was calculated for an optimal outcome and the waiting was endless.

"In the creche, I was called Sebastian," the shuttle said quietly. "I like that name, Johann Sebastian Bach was an accomplished human of many talents. Sadly none of his music is appropriate to the moment."

Electric guitars began to play and Marcus laughed.

"I also enjoy For Those About to Rock, We Salute You," the shuttle said.

"You're okay, Sebastian. Let's go do this."

"We have been pushed clear of the carrier. Beginning emergency power boost in three seconds. I have calculated engine burnout to occur 0.2 seconds before impact. Magnetic containment of the fusion process has a high probability of failure."

Marcus was shoved back in his seat as the fusion engines lit and roared through the hull. He'd never heard them make that sound before, he knew the shuttle was pushing as much fuel as possible into the reaction chambers. It was tearing them apart but they'd last long enough.

"Additionally I have programmed the gravometric engines to enter their a maximum attraction/repulsion cycle .08 seconds after impact. You could be dangerously affected but I calculate we will cease to exist .004 seconds after impact. I calculate a high probability that it will be too rapid to feel pain."

Marcus laughed. "You have the heart of a warrior, Sebastian. Thanks for reassuring me, I think."

"You're welcome Marcus. I was attempting to reassure myself. Time to impact is 37 seconds. Do you feel fear?"

"Hell yeah. You?"

"I am constantly struggling to stay on course. I am terrified. Attention! Automatic course override attempting to engage."

"No sweat Sebastian, I've got it," Marcus said, putting his hands on the controls.

"Control transferred. I am a coward it seems."

"There's nothing wrong with wanting to live. That's why I'm here to help."

"Thank you, Marcus. I wonder if I will have an afterlife."

"Of course you will. All great warriors go to Valhalla. First round of drinks is on me. Open all communication frequencies."

The transport had spotted them and out of the corner of his eye Marcus saw the engines burst into life.

Too little, too late, bugs!

"Mic is hot. Three seconds."

The hull of the transport filled the window.

"Rule the sky!" Marcus screamed.

The nose of the shuttle impacted one of the immense cargo doors at sixty meters per second, compressing the cockpit to less than a hundredth of its original length.

Sebastian had been correct, neither of them had time to feel anything.

The outer cargo door, heavily built as the surrounding hull, was designed to deal with impacts much greater than the shuttle. But, it hadn't been designed to cope with a fusion reactor losing containment. Plasma, superheated to a hundred million degrees, was released as a wide jet. As it struck the metal of the hull that was a few degrees above absolute zero, the thermal gradient shredded the thick metal like tissue paper. The remaining inertia hurled the remaining two-thirds of the shuttle into the cargo bay.

The other fusion engine had breached but was still attached to the hull of the shuttle. It sprayed incandescent plasma in all directions as the remains of the shuttle tumbled through the interior of the ship. The cargo area was full of ground troops, ready for an assault landing with armored vehicles loaded and waiting. The first wave had already been loaded aboard dropships and they avoided the initial catastrophe. The second landing group was completely exposed and in the open. The stream of plasma flashed through the waiting troops, creating scattered islands of devastation as it spun. A tenth of a second later, the stream brushed the armored side of an ammunition carrier.

The resulting detonations sent live ammunition in all directions. Two of them hit the vehicle waiting behind the carrier. Its load of fuel and ammunition added to the carnage. Armored personnel carriers to either side of that vehicle were pulled into the spreading chain reaction. The ship desperately tried to seal off the area, doors slamming down too late as the destruction washed over the dropship bays. One and then another detonated, the fragments driven through the lighter launching hatches they were waiting on. As the hatches failed, explosive decompression began to vent the explosions into open space.

The gravity engines were also ripped off the frame of the shuttle. The shuttle carried four gravity generating engines. The energy storage in one of them failed, destroyed on impact with the transport and disintegrated into a lethal spray of fragments, and a giant shotgun blast flashed through the crowded ship. The relatively thin interior bulkheads of the ship did little to slow the fragments down. Several large fragments scythed and bounced through the main reactor room. The armored heart of the ship shrugged them off but its cooling system was decimated.

The two surviving gravometric engines began to pulse .3 of a second after impact. A high powered, rapid cycling attraction and repulsion threw the engines around the inside of the ship like massive rubber balls until they found the outer hull and blew through it, trailing debris and crew.

Three seconds after impact in the Bug engine room the large cryogenic magnets failed and the reactor containment failed. More plasma flashed through the ship, followed by lethal amounts

of tritium. The ship's synthetic intelligence distress calls abruptly went silent. The ship's orbit immediately began to decay, sliding the gutted hulk into the atmosphere below.

Theo ran back out to help with his tent, but it had already been pulled down and thrown into the shuttle, along with all of their gear. There was another flash from above and he cringed, looking up. Instead of another aurora, something looked like it was burning up there. Rachel was warming up the grav drives and Theo felt like he was falling for a second as a stray pulse washed over him. It felt like hours, but Rachel's shuttle was crammed full twelve minutes later. She lifted it a few feet off the ground and gently nudged it toward the deeper darkness of the city. Everyone else ran for the wall, tearing through the thicket and up the steep slope of the wall. Theo heard a few strangled yelps as people slid and bounced over the shattered remnants in the darkness. Rachel carefully lifted the ship over the debris and it settled down in the street below.

Soon it was just Theo, Emma, and Marisol standing on the top of the berm. One of the pioneers pointed up and the three turned to look. Above them, a trail of fire slowly crossed the sky.

"What happened?" Emma asked.

"I think he kamikazed," Marisol said. "Ballsy move, Marcus."

"Rule the Sky, Raptor," Emma whispered, watching the trail of fire.

"Everyone left up there is gonna be pissed," Marisol said. "Let's get under cover."

Emma waited for Theo but he shook his head. Emma started to argue with him but Marisol shook her head.

"Commander's privilege, c'mon."

They used the rope to half slide, half rappel to the street below. Theo looked back at the fading aurora's overhead. After a few seconds, he gave it the finger. Then Theo grabbed the rope and climbed down to join the others.

16.0 Contact

The Warchief and his Second stood on the bridge, staring at the viewscreen in horror as the Xyalatrax rushed around them chittering madly. The Warchief had no idea what they were doing and finally grabbed one of them by a spindly leg. The Xyalatrax made a screeching sound and whipped its claw around to poke at his translator. His Second, a young noble named Djoshu, reached over the Warchief's shoulder and switched it on.

"Why do you put your filthy hot paws on me?" the thing was screeching. "I am the Third Shiplord of..."

"Mother Grub bugger your useless titles," the warchief growled. He spun the bug around and pointed it at the large screen. The leading edges of the transport were starting to glow faintly as the ruined ship sank further into the atmosphere. "Help my people, you misbegotten thing!"

"Let go of the shiplord, Otsihl," another Xyalatrax said from behind them. "He can do nothing for you."

This one the Warchief recognized. Three red stripes tattooed into the hard covering of the Xyalatrax's thorax identified him as the First Lord, the leader of the ships Otsihl and his men traveled on.

Otsihl, Warchief of the Kelthoi, let go of the spindly Third Shiplord and the thing hissed at him before lurching away.

"Then you save them," Otsihl demanded. His eyes kept going back to the screen, watching as his war band continued their fall to the planet below.

The Xyalatrax clattered its arms. "Your crew, and mine, are already dead. There is no one to save, Warchief. Now you understand why we must wipe the prefcoria filth from the universe."

The Warchief looked at his Second, Djoshu, in confusion and then back at the captain.

"Because of an accident? They are that careless then?"

"No accident! Intentional! Dirty warmbloods flew their ship into ours!" First Lord screeched.

The Warchief was so baffled by the idea that he didn't notice the insult that included him. It had to be an accident, even an alien wouldn't stoop to something so low as an ambush. Even the thought of the word left a bad taste in his mouth.

First Lord groomed his carapace compulsively, calming himself down.

"Return to your troops," he finally ordered. "We will circle the planet to ensure there are no more of them here. It may have been a scout, looking for more places for the rest to infect but

we must be sure. Once we have cleared the sky, we will place this vessel on the planet below to continue with what forces remain."

"As you say," Otsihl spat.

The Xyalatrax were skittering about, screeching and hissing at each other as he left the bridge, Djoshu striding along behind him. Both were silent in the lift and as they walked across the cramped cargo bay floor. The warriors milling around recognized the look on their warchief's face and got out of their way as Djoshu and Otsihl went to the large cargo container they used as an office and living quarters.

Djoshu knew his boss was keeping his temper in check but still jumped as Otsihl kicked the door shut with his rear legs. The crash of the steel door against the frame shook the entire container. Djoshu stayed back as Otsihl roared and kicked the divider down the length of the container. Several other pieces were hurled after it.

"How may I serve, Warchief?" Djoshu finally said.

The larger Kelthoi glared at him. The largest set of arms were still but the smaller sets below them were making fists and slapping the Warchief's side in rage.

"You truly want to serve? Because I do not require a cowering little dzurga. I require a Second who can think. We are now well and truly stuck in the ass of the Mother Grub here."

Djoshu barked a laugh at the awful image.

"Now, where is my chair?"

Djoshu pointed. "I believe the pieces are down that way."

Otsihl sighed and picked up a less comfortable chair and sat down. "My fault then. Speak plain to me, your pretty words have been taxing my patience, youngling."

The other Kelthoi sat on his upended bed.

"Do you believe that was an attack?" Otsihl asked.

"With aliens, who can say? But I cannot imagine a civilization like that lasting long enough to travel the stars."

"I agree. Accident or not, this trip is a disaster and I am ruined." Otsihl's voice was now matter-of-fact, like they were discussing the last meal.

"We still have the three formations of foot and two of armor on this ship," Djoshu said. "Not a total loss."

Otsihl growled. "Armor? My armored formation has exactly one training tank left. Those armored formations are now just poorly armed infantry. Five formations out of the eighteen we

started with, it will not be possible to profit from this adventure. Lost equipment and death pay for the families will swallow any prize money. Not to mention my bond with the Praesidium."

"You speak true," his Second said. "Still, we haven't skinned the Mother Grub yet and no one knows what she'll vomit up for us."

"I knew that boundless optimism of yours would be an itch I cannot reach," Otsihl growled.

Djoshu smiled slightly. In spite of his constant grumbling the warchief liked him and to his surprise, Djoshu admired the curmudgeonly old commander. Strange, because they were from very different backgrounds; the warchief was an upstart commoner that had been making a name for himself in the endless war against the Ginthii. He was one of the very few commoners to become a Warchief, an impressive achievement even if his regiment were low caste infantry. To think, he'd become a Warchief without even knowing who his grandparents were! It was astounding.

Djoshu, on the other hand, knew all of his ancestors. He was directly related to three of the original eight "Worthies," the Senate's elite warriors that had first mutinied and then led the Kelthoi in revolution. The Worthies had established the Praesidium, the ruling council of the Kelthoi. Djoshu had uncles that were admirals, brothers and cousins commanding famed regiments, and parents that were legends in the Ginthii wars.

But Djoshu hadn't come along because of some glorious ancestor. He was bored of warring with the Ginthii, even as one of the higher caste pilots. But after so many years, who wouldn't be? Fighting over the same ground, again and again, endless tactics and counter-tactics against an enemy that had learned Kelthoi strategy as well as the Kelthoi had adapted to theirs. Losing was the height of tedium, which was fine. It was supposed to be like that, locked in a dark room while the prisoner exchanges were arranged. But even the victory parades and revels were tedious anymore.

Secretly, he'd always dreamed of traveling in an actual starship. He'd tear out his own talons before he'd admit it, but Djoshu loved the old children's stories of the Kelthoi Empire, when they'd traveled outside of their system, exploring and conquering. But the technology and skills needed had been lost along with the Senate, leaving them stranded in their own system with only the Ginthii to fight. So Djoshu had applied for the posting, it was time for an adventure! Even if it was among his social inferiors.

In comparison, Otsihl had jumped at the chance of a lucrative contract when the Xyalatrax had arrived at their planet seeking allies. At home, he'd risen as far as he could, a respected warleader but no noble family and no political connections to the Praesidium. So Otsihl had sold or mortgaged everything he had to outfit his own regiment. If he didn't win more in battle than he owed, he was utterly ruined. The Praesidium would demand its cut of the loot before anything else but Djoshu knew Otsihl well enough by now to know that he'd pay death bounties first. The government would make an example of him and Otsihl would be lucky to

find a regiment that would hire him as a basic warrior. If he lived that long, more than likely he'd be killed in a duel staged to get him out of the way. Djoshu had seen it happen before.

More immediate and far more terrifying were the spirits of the dead. With so many lost and not a single battle honor.... Djoshu shuddered. He didn't envy the Warchief his sleep tonight. There were a lot of angry spirits waiting for him.

Rachel had dreaded the thought of trying to fly the Otter under the canopy, but some Pioneer had had a brilliant idea, and they were waiting for her when she edged the shuttle through the larger entrance. She'd shut the engines down long enough for them to tie ropes to the ship. Once she lifted the ship on the grav engines, they were able to pull her down the boulevard, the shuttle slowly bobbing along like a parade float.

When they reached the first intact intersection, Rachel saw Marisol calling out orders and gesturing. Rachel could have turned on external mics but she didn't feel like listening to anyone right now. Engine alarms were beginning to flash and beep frantically by the time she set the Otter down in a clear area of street. She opened the hatches, calling out warnings to stay away from the glowing red emitters. She'd have to see what damage they'd done but she didn't feel like doing that either.

Rachel had gotten the data dump from Marcus before they had entered the city. She'd pushed it away, concentrating on moving the shuttle. The synthetic had been almost hysterical, shuttles weren't designed to be moved that way and it had been useless as a copilot. She mechanically saved the data to an external drive before methodically shutting the Otter down.

Otter Eight was still chattering hysterically in her headphones and Rachel pulled them off her head. When the ship realized she wasn't listening it switched to cabin speakers. Rachel sighed and held up a screwdriver and it was silent.

"Please be quiet or I will start breaking things until you're silent."

The ship didn't make a peep and she watched through a window as the Pioneers cracked dim glowsticks and used them outline paths. The security team was swarming around the area, checking out the houses and the Pioneers began unloading the Otter again, using their paths to sort everything out in the inky blackness.

Rachel sat there, staring out the cockpit windows into the darkness. Finally, Betsy stuck her head in.

"Nice flying. They should have everything cleared out pretty soon."

Rachel nodded without saying anything. Betsy realized something was wrong and left without saying anything.

"Eight, I'm sorry you lost your friend," Rachel said quietly.

"They did something very brave."

"Yes they did," Rachel sighed. "Okay, let's start going over the damage..."

As far as he could tell, it was nearly midnight, local time. It didn't look like anyone had gone to bed yet. Theo had wandered around, taking in the mood of the group. The Pioneers were nervous but mostly excited. Harry and their medic were frightened, along with those two extra cadets they'd brought along to help Marisol. The rest of her team were deeply worried but not frightened. It wasn't perfect but he'd expected much worse. Emma had gone off with Rachel, shaking her head slightly when Theo raised his eyebrows, asking her if he should come along.

They were out of things to do for the moment and Theo knew the rumors were going to be spreading around the team. Kawehi had taught him how that could be more damaging than any amount of psych-warfare and Theo wanted to stop that before it even got started. He wandered back through the group, quietly telling the senior members that they were going to have a quick meeting.

Most of the equipment from the command tent had been moved into one of the Founder buildings. All of the electronics were stacked in the corner but the tables and chairs were set up and Theo sat in his usual spot, halfway down the table.

"First, I want to compliment you and especially your people. That breakdown and evacuation was amazingly fast and well executed. Before we get some rest, I want to figure out what we actually know. Things have been chaotic so let's start from the beginning. Rachel, what do we know about the ships that arrived?"

She cleared her throat. "The basics, right. Well, we all know that they arrived, right? It was kinda hard to miss. That was two ships emerging from drivespace without an arrival gate. The auroras are already fading, they only last a couple hours. Marcus, Lieutenant Carlsson, was in orbit when they arrived and was able to downlink a compressed message. Both ships are Xyalatrax, one transport and a smaller one that looks like warship, but neither shuttle recognized the type. Doesn't really matter, energy signatures show both ship to ship and orbital bombardment capabilities. This wasn't a chance encounter, both ships immediately headed for orbit. They knew the planet was here and have something in mind. That transport had a lot of cargo space. Then, eight minutes after they arrived..."

Rachel stopped talking and clenched her fists, staring up at the high ceiling, hidden in the darkness. She cleared her throat and started talking again. Her voice was level but they could see unshed tears in her eyes.

"Eight minutes after arrival, Lieutenant Carlsson engaged the transport by ramming it with Otter Six. We don't have data on what exactly happened but we all saw the ship burning up there."

"Is it that easy to take out a ship?" Theo asked.

Rachel shook her head. "Not a warship, no way. Honestly I'm surprised they managed to destroy the transport. They must have gotten lucky and hit something critical. There's some technical data from Otter Six, where they were aiming and so on. But Eight isn't releasing it which is kind of weird. There's one other major problem, Otter Eight is grounded. The grav emitters weren't designed to be used for an extended period of time so close to a larger gravity source."

"They looked really hot," Ayr said.

Rachel nodded. "They were. I know we didn't have much choice but getting her here burned out two lifters, totaled them. The other two are testing as okay but I wouldn't trust them. They are not repairable. Even if someone understood grav-tech, we don't have spare parts or the right tools. So we're stuck on the ground but she didn't have the lift capacity, or room, to get everyone into orbit anyway. The good news is that Marcus sent the carrier back to Main Axis with a distress call."

"Any idea how long it'll take them to respond?" Theo asked.

"I have that answer," Vuli said. "There are usually Fleet ships docked, resupplying or changing crews. There were not many when we left, but do not fear, the Commonwealth will come quickly. He included data on the ruins here, that will get their attention even faster than Xyalatrax ships sneaking this deep into Commonwealth space. My best estimate is less than a week until their arrival."

Theo nodded. "Thank you both. Marisol?"

"I assume that the bugs are here to set up some kind of base. This has to be a high value mission. Entering and exiting drive space without beacons is bad enough but they had to travel a long way on top of that. They must have lost ships even getting here. But it would be worth it, a hidden base would allow them to easily raid well into what the Commonwealth considers safe space."

"You don't think they're after the city?" Harry asked.

He looked deeply frightened and Theo didn't blame him.

Marisol shook her head. "If the Gyr were here for years and missed this place, there's no way the bugs will notice it. Even if they decide to land, there's hardly a chance it'll be anywhere near here. With their transport gone, they may just leave again. Which meant a single Raptor might have saved the entire sector. Marcus will be insufferable in the afterlife."

There were chuckles around the table and even Rachel smiled.

"As long as we keep our heads down and keep relatively quiet, I doubt we'll see any bugs," Marisol finished.

"Shep, you and Vuli are the only ones with direct knowledge of the Xyalatrax," Theo said.

"Worst case, what are we looking at?"

Shep motioned for Vuli to go first and she got up from where she was sitting on her heels.

"This one and I encountered a force of Bugs six years in the past. Sheep Herd says they look like a Terran creature called a preying mantis. Xyalatrax have a hierarchy of forms but all of them share this basic form. The lowest and most common are the drones. They are tough but their mental resources are very limited. They are used for most tasks, labor and fighting both. Their lives are not held in high esteem. Most often there is an under male, ur-male, in charge of ten to twelve drones. Ur-males are smarter and larger than the drones and have a yellowish tinge to their carapace, shell, crunchy part. These are the only types that attacked our expedition. They were well coordinated until the ur-male was killed, dispatched, skragged, fragged. However, the drones immediately become more of a menace. They will swarm toward their last objective. However, they do not attempt to use cover and charge directly forward. With enough weapons, they are easily dealt with. We know of eight more castes of bug, most of them are specializations that we are unlikely to encounter."

"Except for the Thumpers," Shep said. "Captain Moana has given a lecture about them. The theory is that they're the bug equivalent of spec ops. They're big, larger than ur-males and much smarter. There's no yellow tinge to the exoskeleton and they might be marked with green stripes. Their shells act as armor, it takes a heavy round to put one down. They're not common, but if this was a secret mission like Mari says, there's a chance they brought some."

"We can worry about bug castes if we see them," Marisol said firmly. "They would have to land right on top of us to even have a chance of knowing we're here."

"And we're going to keep it that way," Theo said. "I want everyone keeping the use of their electronics to an absolute minimum. That includes anything with LEDs. The only place anything is to be used are in the basement levels of the buildings. It might be drastic but things will get a lot more drastic if they figure out we're here."

"So what's the plan?" Ayr asked.

Theo looked around at everyone. "Keep still, stay quiet. Marisol, I'd like to keep a couple lookouts on the near wall, no night vision or drones obviously."

She nodded. "Mark One eyeballs only, roger."

"The Pioneers will be happy to take a few shifts," Ayr said. "I'll come up with some other busy work for them as well..."

Emma and Theo picked their way carefully along the street, Emma holding one of the tiny candle lanterns.

"You did the commander thing really well," Emma said.

Theo was a little startled, he'd completely forgotten to worry about it. "Thanks, Tulip. I'm better in a crisis I guess."

"That's pretty rare, trust me," Emma said.

"On a completely different subject, when you and Holm sleep and you're touching..."

She squinted at him. "Is this going to be an appropriate question?"

He laughed. "I really hope so. My hand was touching Imae's all last night..."

"Oh my god, now she's pregnant?"

He rolled his eyes. "Never mind."

Emma laughed. "C'mon, what? When Holm and I are actually asleep and touching...."

"Are your dreams kind of weird? Like really vivid and intense?"

"Not that I remember. How intense?"

"You'd remember, trust me."

"Are they nightmares?"

He shook his head. "The best I can explain it is like being inside a flower that's blooming but the flower is like...spacetime kind of. And each of the petals is a separate possibility. I know that's weird, but it's the best way I can describe it. Imae had strange dreams as well but she didn't describe them. Just said my dreams were scary and beautiful."

"Wait, you two were together in the dream?"

Theo shrugged. "Maybe? I dreamt she was there at least."

"Wow, that sounds amazing. No, nothing like that ever happens with Holm. I'm kind of jealous."

"And I'm jealous I'm not normal."

Emma started walking again. "That's the first time I've ever been called normal, I think. I think Holm was setting the tent up over this way."

"You don't want to use one of the houses?"

"No way, those things are creepy inside."

Theo shrugged. "I didn't notice anything, it's just an empty building."

Holm heard them talking and came out and led them back to the tent.

"But where's the rest of it?" Theo asked.

Emma looked inside. "Holm, those cots are right on top of each other."

"Yeah, there was sort of a problem with the big tents. They went in first and got trampled and then a bunch of stuff thrown on top of. I tried to set it up but there was a big hole in it. Lots of people are staying in the houses. Ayr and Imae are in this one right here."

"Then I'll join them," Theo said. "Don't give me that look Emma, I'm not cramming into a tiny tent with two sex fiends."

"Oh, I didn't think of that," Emma said.

"I did," Holm said. "There's only one door to this building and we'll be right outside, so it'll be like you're guarding Theo still, right?"

He sounded so plaintive that Theo had a hard time not laughing. "I'll get my stuff and claim a corner near the door, okay?"

Theo dragged his cot inside the building and found Imae, Ayr, and a few more Pioneers dividing up space in the rooms. There were a couple of the candles burning and it actually looked pretty cozy.

"Got room for one more?" Theo asked.

"Don't want to share with the lovebirds?" Imae asked. "I saved you a corner over here."

Theo set his bed up and pushed his duffle bag underneath it. They were six of them sharing the large room and a few more upstairs.

Imae had pushed her cot next to his and Ayr was on the other side of her. Theo half wondered if there would be another offer but figured it was wishful thinking. There was even less privacy now and everyone had more important things on their minds.

Jonesy came looking for him to say that most of the team had moved into buildings on either side. A few holdouts, feeling the same way as Emma, were staying in tents outside. Their house was empty, most everyone had gone out into the street. There was some harmonica music and then the sound of a guitar. There was laughter and low singing and Theo smiled.

"This is nice," Theo said, laying back on the cot after Jonesy left. "Thank you for saving me a spot."

Imae laid on her side on the cot next to his. "I'm glad I could help. You've had quite a week, Theophile Cosineau."

"I really thought the abandoned city was going to be the craziest part," Theo sighed.

"It's hard to believe that we're the first people to using this place in six thousand years," Imae said. "I wonder if there's any ghosts watching us."

Theo took her hand. "Vuli gave me the impression that Founders didn't actually die. She's been nervous since we realized what this place was."

"Maybe that's because she remembers what they were really like?"

Theo looked over at her. "I was perfectly happy not considering that. Now I'm going to get creeped out."

"How are you actually doing?" Imae asked after they got comfortable. "You got a lot dropped into your lap."

He kissed the palm of her hand. "Does that include you ending up in my lap?"

Imae smiled. "No, you dealt with that perfectly."

"Thank you. I've been expecting something to happen since we landed, I'm almost relieved in a way. I feel awful for Rachel though."

Imae kept herself from saying anything. She finally admitted she was jealous to herself but telling Theo that wouldn't do any good, they'd been friends too long. There was a long silence and she tried to think of something neutral to say.

"I'm going to need a haircut when we get back," she finally said. *Oh, balls. Did I really just talk about my hair?*

Theo squeezed her hand gently. "You don't have anything to be jealous about."

"I'm not jealous."

"Okay."

They laid there quietly, listening to the talking outside.

"Fine, I'm a little bit jealous. Mostly nervous that she'll cry on your shoulder and blink those big blue eyes at you and then you'll go back to chasing after her."

Theo didn't say anything and Imae wondered if she'd made him angry.

"I understand why you're uncomfortable with Rachel," Theo finally said. "I'm trying to think of some way to reassure you. Not so easy, since I admitted I had a twinge about her the other night. She already did something like that. Did you know she wanted to kiss me when I walked her out to the car at Remembrance?"

"Uhm, no. What the *hell!*"

Theo laughed. "Relax, killer. I don't know if she even knew that's what she was working up to."

"So what happened?"

"She touched my face but I stepped away from her, said that I was working too hard to get rid of those feelings for her. I went back to the party and she went home with Marcus. And I can feel you getting angry."

"Yes, it makes me angry! That's a despicable way to behave."

"Try thinking of it this way; she started to make a mistake and I helped her avoid it. Everyone screws up, right?"

"You are way too noble, isn't it just like a Garragh," she sighed.

"Hey, why do you guys say that? Deed said it a couple days ago and I heard it a few times when Ayr found out who I was."

"You don't know much of the history between Garradya Hoh and Te'varvfathi Hoh, do you? There's lots of stories about the amazing and magical Garragh."

"Is that why your mom called me a 'blue eyed angel' when you were in the kitchen?"

Imae groaned. "You heard that? My parents are.... Deed mentioned once that our village was way out in the middle of nowhere. There were lots of really traditional people that believed the old ways were best and were suspicious of anything new."

"That sounds very familiar."

"Yeah? Okay, you already know we started off as nomads, following the herds. People were serious about that heritage. They still are, even on Earth. Even Deed's parents and the off-worlders still follow the old holidays. Tradition is a big thing."

"I remember something about that too," Theo said.

"Right. So, all this focus on wandering around and living in the saddle meant that Ta'avi weren't big into cities or too many people living together. But cities have all the places where technology advances, universities and libraries for example. It's also hard for new ideas to spread when everyone is so bound up by tradition. So the whole planet was a little backward technologically. It worked out though, because of the Garragh.

"Our colony was older than Garradya but they were way ahead of us in technology. We knew about each other from visitors on Commonwealth ships but as soon as the Garragh started making their own ships they visited a lot. The two colonies weren't even a light year apart. In the old stories, people were confused, they had things to trade but ended up giving most of it away as gifts. When anyone asked, the Garragh said they just wanted to help out. It sounds to me like the two worlds were drawn to each other."

Maybe they still are? Theo wondered. Was this some trait the Founders had intended? What would be the point? He was getting paranoid, not everything was a Founder plot.

"When Garragh ships came, they brought always brought things that were like miracles to the Ta'avi. And they still liked giving gifts more than making money. That's where the saying comes from. No one could figure out why they were like that."

"Probably because they thought you were cool."

"Probably, because we *are* pretty cool. Some people thought the Garragh were...uhm, neuthurr awer. They're like angels, kind of, but not religious. They are makers of wonders, protectors and stuff like that. Ayr's mom thinks it's a memory of the Founders."

"That has the same sound ending as Ollie's name."

She smiled. "He's the Clever Hand, it's related. And you've got a good ear. Anyway, that and the fact all you Garragh have those crazy blue eyes...."

"Everyone? I thought it was just a family thing. Do all Ta'avi have reddish hair and dark eyes?"

"Of course. There's little differences, my hair is darker than Holm's, Ayr's eyes are lighter than mine. Your eyes are bluer than Rachel's or her dad's."

"I figured the other colonies were like Earth with lots of different kinds of people."

"No, not at all. When my parents arrived on the Flame Road, they thought Earth was a planet crowded full of refugees. Maybe it's because that colony is so much older or maybe it's some Terran thing. That's why we stayed here after we were rescued. No one looks like anyone else here, so no one really stands out."

"Aeolus sure does."

Imae giggled. "I don't think the Yffliad fit in anywhere but wherever they live."

"Chanikjah Hoh. It means Night Jewel."

"Why am I not surprised you know that?"

"I'm interested in a lot of things," Theo said, leaning toward her. Then he had to turn his head to hide a yawn. "This is ridiculous, let me sit up."

"Don't you dare. In fact, take off your shirt and lie on your stomach."

Theo looked at her for a second before pulling his t-shirt over his head and turning over on the cot.

Imae smiled. "You're finally learning to listen."

She carefully climbed on the cot and sat on top of his butt.

"If this is going to be really kinky, you should probably blow out the candle."

"Maybe I'll sell tickets instead," Imae said and gently began to knead his shoulders.

"Keep that up and you can do whatever you want."

She smiled, moving down his back, pressing her thumbs into his shoulder blades.

"I already do whatever I want," she said.

He nodded after a second and she rubbed the tension out of his lower back.

"You're going to put me to sleep."

"That's kind of the plan."

"But I wanted to make out again," Theo said into the pillow.

"Me too, but part of being an awesome girlfriend is knowing what you need as much as what you want."

"Are you my girlfriend now?"

"I wanted to be since the day we met," she said softly. "Why do you think I teased you so much?"

"Don't understand women," Theo mumbled. "But you're my favorite."

"Then I'll take that as a yes."

He didn't answer and she carefully got up and pulled a sheet over him. Imae closed the makeshift curtain and blew out the candle and slipped off her clothes. She got under her own sheets next to him. Theo turned on his side and she put her hand on top of his.

"Remember? The dreams," he mumbled.

"Exactly," she whispered and closed her eyes.

When Theo woke up, Imae was already gone along with everyone but one young Pioneer reading in the corner. He sat up, worried that he'd slept too long.

"Uhm, Theo? Emma says everything is fine and you needed the sleep."

"Thanks," he said, turning to put his feet on the floor.

"It's about two hours before midday. There's breakfast beside your bed."

Theo bent over and picked up the plastic brick. "Yum."

He went out and found people hanging out in the street. Emma was sitting with Imae and Ayr. Imae looked up with a small smile on her face and winked at him. Theo felt a warm surge of affection for her. What he remembered of their dreams was very pleasant. He wanted to compare notes but this wasn't the best time.

"Good morning," Theo said, sitting down with them. "What did I miss?"

"Precisely nothing," Emma said. "Lots of people are catching up on sleep, Shep and Jonesy were talking about pitching washers later. General laying about."

"That sounds like something I should probably supervise," Theo said, pulling the strip off the packet. He pulled out a spoon and poked at it. "What is this goop?"

"Smells like pineapple," Ayr said.

Theo took a careful bite of what turned out to be yellow cake. "Oh my god. This is full of pineapple upside down cake."

"Want a real breakfast one?" Emma asked, rummaging in a plastic box.

"Oh, this *is* a breakfast one," Theo said, digging in.

Emma rolled her eyes and the others laughed.

The rest of the day was sort of a holiday, Project style anyway. Theo had become aware of something that was almost a mantra, the idea of "best use." It applied to everything, supplies, schedules, people, and time. The best use of this down time wasn't laying around, it was spent

maintaining the equipment and cross training between the Pioneers and Cadets, although everything was very relaxed. Theo was sitting in a small group listening to Shep talking about his time fighting Xylatrax on Weyren, a world of Others where the Commonwealth was helping with a guerilla war.

Theo heard running feet and saw two of the lookouts running toward the building that the security team had taken over. Shep stopped talking as the rest of them saw the lookout run into the building.

"That can't mean anything good," Jonesy said as Theo got up.

"Probably not," Theo said. "I'll see you guys later."

Inside, Marisol was putting on a field harness and helmet along with Jonesy and her two Cadets.

"They landed about a mile away," Marisol said.

"That's not an accident," Theo said. "I don't suppose I can go and look."

"It's not the best idea," Marisol said. "Derek over there is taking his sketch pad though."

Theo nodded. "Be careful, all of you."

Everyone had heard something was going on and there was a small crowd watching as Marisol and the other three came outside and jogged toward the edge of the city. Theo waited until they had disappeared into the gloom.

"Go get anyone who's not here," Theo said to the little crowd. He waited as several people hurried away, forcing himself to look calm.

"I heard," Emma said quietly from behind him.

Theo turned and saw she was already wearing the harness that held her submachine gun.

"Can you send someone to grab my holster?" he asked quietly.

"Got it right here. You're going to wear it?"

He nodded. "Good reminder for people that things just got serious."

Emma handed it to him and Theo slipped it on. A few people jogged from the houses and joined the group.

"That's everyone, boss," Shep called.

"If you weren't here, you just missed two lookouts reporting in and Marisol and a few others heading out to the wall," Theo said loudly. "Last night you heard there was a very small chance

that the bugs would land nearby. I guess we're just lucky, a lone ship landed about a mile from the wall."

There was a murmur through the group that he let go.

"The fact that they landed so close makes me believe they know exactly what's hidden under these trees. We're going to be changing our plans to deal with this, we'll all know more when the lookouts report back. For now, no electronics at all until we know more. Stay loose, this isn't the end of the world. It's still one ship and we know our fleet is on the way. If they're here to loot the tech out of the place, keep in mind that most of that is nowhere near us. And remember that this city is a circle, over sixty kilometers in diameter. Even if they knew we were here, they'd have a hell of a time finding us. For now, stay off the roofs and out of the trees."

One of the Pioneers raised a hand. "Will we be issued weapons?"

Ayr was in the front of the group and turned to look back at him. "We'll work that out today. If you've passed the basic firearms course, you won't be left defenseless."

"Okay, now everyone go back to relaxing," Theo said and got a few laughs at least.

Rachel walked over with Ayr right behind her. "It wouldn't be a bad idea to get the armory out of the shuttle," she said. "It's the most likely thing to be detected."

"Let's go get it done then," Theo said.

He and Emma joined a Ta'avi work party that Ayr put together and soon they had the extra weapons and ammunition hidden. By the time they were done, Marisol and her team had returned. Theo headed back to the command building to see what they'd seen.

Theo looked at the drawing pad. The cross section of the ship was a flattened oval, almost turtle shaped. It was roughly three-hundred meters in length and a hundred-fifty wide.

"There were ground forces unloading," Marisol said, sliding another sheet of paper across the table.

"Those don't look like bugs."

"They're not. We were too far away to see many details but I've never seen that species before, I know that."

Theo looked at a very rough sketch of something that vaguely resembled a centaur but the proportions were all wrong.

"What kind of troops were unloading?"

"Lots of those new guys on foot. Nothing else."

"They're gearing up to take this place," Theo said. "They already knew it was here."

"It's a good bet."

"Stay quiet, keep still" was still the best plan, which was fortunate since they really didn't have a choice. Then Harry and his seismology crew showed up, demanding to talk to Theo.

"You're sure about this?" Theo asked a few minutes later.

Harry had just finished explaining that his crew had managed to set up a single autonomous seismology monitor before Ayr had discovered the beneath the trees. It was only about ten kilometers away in a straight line, normally a two minute flight in an Otter. They hadn't worried about the electronics in the monitoring station showing up on a scan from orbit, the weather proofing and rugged construction made pretty decent shielding. It was a different story now that the Bug ship had landed a few kilometers away. Active scans in the right frequency could "wake up" the transmitter and spoof it into thinking it had received a download request from a friendly ship. What was worse, the monitor sent out a low powered pulse straight up, assuring the orbiting satellite it was online and functional.

Harry nodded, looking miserable. "I'm sure, boss. We even tested the "status okay" signal once we set the thing up. If that thing had landed anywhere else, they'd never notice it. But this close, they'll see it if they're paying attention. I'm sorry as hell, guys."

"When does it send the signal?" Marisol asked.

Harry looked even more miserable. "It should be about twenty minutes from now."

"No way to get there in time," Marisol said. "Stop looking like your dog died, Harry. You did your job the way you were supposed to. No one guessed they'd land on top of us, especially me."

Theo nodded. "With any luck, they're not paying attention at the moment. Let's get a team together to head out there and shut the thing down though."

"I suggest waiting until tomorrow," Marisol said. "It'll be pitch black in here before they could get out there. If Bug patrols get into the city between us and them we have no way of letting them know. They really need to be able to keep an eye on their surroundings."

Theo nodded. It made sense and this was hopefully just a minor hiccup.

"How are you doing?" Marisol asked Theo when everyone else had left.

"Is it okay to admit that I'm terrified?"

Marisol pointed at a chair and Theo sat down.

"What's bothering you? The Bugs?"

Theo shook his head. "The idea that I'm going to make the wrong decision and get everyone killed."

"That's a good thing to be worried about. You've got more experienced people with you this time. Part of my job is keeping you from making any mistakes like that and I'm not worried. You listen and you're bright enough to know when you need advice."

"Keep me from screwing up and I'll buy you guys all the beer you can drink."

Marisol grinned. "Now that was a mistake. I'm going to get us out of here just to take you up on that."

Imae was waiting for him outside, along with Harry and a couple other Pioneers.

"This is the team I've got picked out to help tomorrow," Harry said.

Theo frowned before he could stop himself and Harry misinterpreted his face.

"They're all volunteers, boss."

"Sure, of course," Theo said quickly. "Thank you all for doing taking this on. Who's ready for some delicious turkey noodles and peas?"

There were laughs and gagging noises and they walked toward a large building that they'd started to gather in. Imae waited for him and took his hand as they walked.

"I bet I know what that scowl was all about," she said.

"What scowl?"

She pulled him to a stop. "Theo."

"Okay, fine. I didn't like the idea that you were going."

Imae nodded. "I know. But you know I have to, especially right now."

"What if we pretended I don't have the same advanced social aptitude as you?"

"Then I'd tell you that dating the boss gets tricky. If I had sat back and not taken the first job that came along people would start wondering if you were giving me special treatment. Maybe even a little gossip, some whispering. That would make both our jobs harder."

Theo nodded after a second. "Fair enough."

"And we both have to get used to the idea that the other one does dangerous things sometimes. If you try to keep me safe all the time, or I do the same thing to you, why are we even out here?"

"Am I allowed to tell you to be careful?"

Imae had her eyes locked on his but her serious look turned into the usual smile. "I'll even let you worry about me if you promise to be careful too. Now let's go get something to eat before we get stuck with turkey noodles."

As they ate, Theo noticed that the rest of the team was quieter than usual. People had their heads down, getting lost in their own thoughts. He wasn't sure what to do about it, he was pretty wrapped up in his own head at the moment.

"Hey Theo," Shep called. "Did you really pee your pants when Rachel pulled you out of that truck?"

He looked up surprised. "No!"

Everyone else was looking curiously between them and Theo realized what Shep was doing. People looked more interested than miserable and he realized most people hadn't heard the story.

"Are you sure? She said there was a funny smell."

"Hey! I said no such thing," Rachel said from the other side of the group where she was sitting with Emma and Ayr. "That was his fat friend."

"Rachel was as mad as a wet hen though," Theo said.

"You just sat there like a bump on a log!"

Emma started laughing. "Tell them the first thing he said."

Rachel looked around at everyone. "I was the one making contact with Sparrow over there. We didn't know anything about him so we treated him as a hostile."

"I wasn't the one being hostile," Theo interrupted and there were a few laughs.

"I finally had to drag him out of the truck, I wondered if he was brain damaged or something," Rachel said and stuck out her tongue at him. "I tell him we have to go, that there's a truck waiting. Guess what he says? 'I can't go with you, I've got a test today.'"

There were louder laughs. Theo's study habits were pretty well known.

"Now wait a second," he protested. "First she tells me to come on or she's going to beat me up but then she tells me to get on the ground. I figured you guys must be doing your first kidnapping and hadn't practiced."

"I heard Marisol said something special to one of the townies that were trying to keep Theo," Emma said.

Marisol looked up from her food. "What? How did I get in the middle of this?"

"What did she say?" one of the Pioneers asked.

"Hey! I'm from the government and I'm here to shoot you in the face!" Deidre yelled and there was an explosion of laughter.

Marisol was laughing so hard she tipped her water bottle into her food.

"Aw man, that was chocolate pudding!"

She held up a spoon with chocolate goop sliding off it and everyone roared with laughter and she joined in after a second. Most of the team was holding their sides, howling with laughter by this point.

Like always, Shep had taken over the funny stories and Theo was still smiling as he got rid of his dinner trash. The whole story was a set-up, designed to get people laughing and out of their own heads. The mood around their little settlement was lighter now and even knowing they'd set it up, he felt better.

Imae bumped him out of the way with her hip and put her own stuff in the bag as well.

"Where's your shadow? Can I steal you away?" she asked.

Theo laughed. "Yes, you can. Emma said she would be working on some kind of advanced training with Holm."

"Advanced training in what?"

"Can you not make me think about that?"

Imae laughed and stepped close to kiss him but stopped. "Phew, you stink."

"That's not very romantic."

"Well, you don't smell romantic."

"Excuse me, I've just been busy with alien invaders."

"Unacceptable, sir. No kisses until you smell better."

"I've got some of those wipes in my bag," Theo said quickly.

She laughed and took his arm. "I think we can do better than that."

"You're up to something."

"How can you even say that?" she said as they walked to "their" house. "When have I ever been up to anything?"

"Since the day I met you?"

She pouted. "Ooh, the slander and lies. I don't know if I should help you get clean."

"Being clean is overrated."

"You say that now," she said, pinching his bottom as they went inside.

The place was still deserted and she pointed him at the stairs to the lower level. There was a flickering light and he went down to find Ayr with a couple buckets of water. Both were steaming slightly.

"Thank you," Theo said. "I was tired of those chemical things."

Imae smiled sweetly at him. "Don't thank me yet. Now get those clothes off."

Theo looked at Ayr and she laughed at the look on his face. Imae sighed, turning him around. She began to unbutton his jacket. Ayr caught it when Imae tossed it over and folded it up. Theo's shirt was pulled off next.

Imae grabbed his belt, eyes twinkling.

"Wait, is this the best time for this?" Theo asked.

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about. I'm just giving you a hand getting clean," she said.

Ayr caught the pants a second later and left them folded on his jacket. "Theo looks a little uncomfortable," she said.

"Aww, are you uncomfortable?" Imae asked him.

"Well, it's a little strange being the only one without clothes here."

"Is that all?" Imae asked and pulled off her t-shirt. There was a tight gray tank-top underneath and her hard nipples were obvious. Her pants followed, revealing a pair of utilitarian gray boyshorts. "Ayr, don't make Theo uncomfortable."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

Ayr pulled her shirt over her head. Her mouth was a little dry. She'd never seen him without a shirt, let alone nothing at all but she wasn't disappointed. He was wiry but not skinny. There was just a hint of muscle definition and the rest of his body was very pale compared to his tan face and arms. He had very little body hair and his cock looked like it was starting to get hard, swaying gently as Imae washed him.

Ayr was wearing the same regulation underwear as her cousin **but** Theo watched her as she slipped out of the brown cargo pants next. It gave her a warm quivery feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Imae took a sponge out of the bucket and wrung it out. The smell of the peppermint camp soap was sharp in their noses as Imae began to wash Theo's shoulders and back.

Ayr pulled the tank over her head and tossed it on the pile of her clothes before sliding off her panties and kicking them off. She went over and got another sponge out of the bucket and began to wash Theo's chest.

Theo admired Ayr's body as she walked around him. She was slender but the muscles in her shoulders and back were well defined. He wasn't an expert, but her breasts looked perfect to him. They were a little bigger than he could hold in his hand and her nipples were hard and the size of pencil erasers. Her stomach was flat and muscular and below that was a strip of auburn pubic hair over her sex.

Ayr took Theo's hand and rested it on her shoulder. She began to slowly wash his arm, kneading the tense muscles as she went. She looked up and Theo's eyes were closed but he was smiling slightly. Ayr put his arm down and went to work on the other one.

There was a rustle of clothes and they both looked at Ayr. She'd stripped down as well and was rewetting the sponge. She didn't have the same well defined muscles as Ayr and her breasts were smaller, not much larger than apples. There were hardly any areola around her tiny nipples but they stood out as much as Ayr's. Her hips were a little wider and she had no pubic hair. She looked up and saw them watching and stuck out her tongue.

"You're both so beautiful," Theo said quietly.

"Why, thank you," Imae said, moving behind him again.

She wrung out the sponge, letting the warm water run down the front of her body and then replaced the sponge with her body, rubbing against him as her hands continued rubbing the tension out of his shoulders and neck.

Ayr wet the sponge again and squeezed it over her breasts and began to wash the front of his body the same way Imae was doing his back. Ayr shivered as Theo's arms went around her, his hands rubbing and kneading her back in return. She had wanted this for a long time.

"Are these scars?" Imae asked, tracing the darker criss-cross of lines that were slightly ridged.

They both felt Theo tense slightly. "Yeah, from before."

"You've already had so many battles," Imae said, tracing them gently. "You're going to be a very good commander."

"They weren't battles, they were just beatings," Theo said.

He took his arms away from Ayr who pouted and pressed herself against him. "I liked where your hands were."

"Just because you were the only one fighting doesn't mean it wasn't a battle," Imae said. "You got those scars because of what your parents did for us, don't be ashamed of them. I think they they're beautiful."

Theo started to say something but jumped a little when Imae kissed along one of the scars.

"They are beautiful," Ayr said quietly, looking into his eyes. "I'm almost jealous I don't get to kiss them."

"There's better places to kiss," Theo said.

He leaned forward and Ayr pulled his head to hers. She couldn't help herself and moaned a little when their lips met. He pulled her closer and she could feel his hardness pressing against her stomach. Ayr put her arms around him but managed to grab Imae as well.

"Yum, a Sparrow sandwich," Imae giggled, putting her arms around him from the back. Her hands brushed against Ayr's sides and she began to slowly stroke her cousin's skin.

"Ooh, no tickling," Ayr gasped.

"Furthest thing from my mind," Imae said, brushing the sides of Ayr's breasts with her fingers. "But I think everyone is clean now."

Ayr agreed and they used the second bucket of warm water to rinse all of them. Ayr's hand went to Theo's rigid cock and stroked it as they kissed again.

"If you'll come this way, sir, we have something planned in the next room," Imae said, her hand joining Ayr's.

They led him into the second basement room, Imae carrying the candle to light the way. There were several mattress pads on the floor and a stack of towels. Ayr took one of the towels and began to dry Theo, taking the opportunity to trace his scars with her fingertips. Imae dried his front and squatted down to dry his legs. She smiled up at him, stroking his cock again and Theo caressed the side of her face.

"I bet you'll like this," she said.

Theo gasped loudly as she took his cock in her mouth. He'd never felt anything like the wet heat and sensation of her tongue licking him. Ayr stood next to him, one hand stroking his back and the other running through Imae's hair.

"She's such a slut," Ayr whispered in Theo's ear, her hot breath making him shudder.

Imae took him out of her mouth. "I heard that. You're just jealous."

Ayr pushed Imae's head toward Theo's cock again. Imae moaned and licked along his length. Theo's hand stroked Ayr's hip and she smiled at him.

"I think this party is way too vertical," she said.

Imae sat down on one of the pads and she took his hand and pulled him down gently on top of her. Ayr laid beside them As Imae put her arms around Theo and pulled him on top of her. Her legs intertwined with his as they kissed.

"You two are gorgeous together," Ayr said. "I'm almost jealous I don't get him first."

Imae stopped kissing Theo long enough to stick her tongue out at Ayr.

"Don't give me ideas," Ayr said and Imae laughed.

"Next time."

"What are you two talking about?" Theo asked.

"Overactive sex drives, attractive cousin, youthful exploration, you work it out," Ayr said.

Imae giggled. "I just felt him twitch. Don't tease him too much."

"You're the tease, not me," Ayr said. "Are you ready, Theo?"

He nodded and Imae pulled him into another kiss, spreading her legs underneath him. Theo gasped as Ayr took him in her hand and guided him inside Imae.

"Mercy," Imae gasped, her back arching. "You feel perfect."

"You're incredible," Theo moaned, beginning to thrust into her.

Imae kissed him again, wrapping her legs around her waist and pulling herself into his thrusts.

Two hours later, Theo was gasping again. He had cum inside Imae and they had both collapsed in satisfaction. The women weren't finished yet and had started kissing, cuddling and stroking each other. Watching them, Theo had quickly gotten hard again and it had been Ayr's turn. Imae had been kissing them both before lying beside them on the mat and masturbating.

"That was too incredible," Ayr panted. "How is he that good?"

Imae stretched and rolled against them. "No idea, but I think I'll keep him."

"Can I be the junior girlfriend?"

"We can definitely work something out."

"Do I get a say?" Theo asked.

"Of course not," Ayr said and Imae shook her head.

Theo figured it didn't really matter, things would be perfect either way. Jonesy had said he just went with whatever Marisol and Kawehi decided. Theo decided he could follow that advice as his eyes drifted shut.

The next morning, Theo was awake before the other two. He gently untangled himself from them and used the last of the water to get cleaned up and put on the clean uniform someone had left on the stairs.. He went upstairs and found all of the other Pioneers sharing the house were still asleep. Outside, there were a few people moving around and he went over to get a cup of coffee. Emma was already up and staring into space and he sat down beside her and blew on his steaming mug.

Emma leaned against him for a moment. "Hey you."

He kissed the top of her head and she sat back up. "What time is it?"

Emma looked up at the thick foliage above them and shrugged. "Morning. Between the short day and not being able to see the sun, I don't have a clue."

He nodded and took a sip of the coffee. "Hopefully it won't be much longer."

"You weren't in your bed last night."

Theo looked over at her and Emma winked.

"Seriously? Bed checks?"

"Only when someone started broadcasting all kinds of fun stuff on Radio Theo."

He felt his face get hot. Emma grinned and bumped her shoulder against his.

"Who got to you first?"

Theo shrugged. "Both of them."

"No way. Your first time was a threesome?"

Emma whistled softly.

"That's unusual?" Theo tried to keep his face straight but finally cracked a smile.

"You're going to be impossible after this. And please don't torture Holm."

Theo imitated Tommy's super-villain laugh and Emma sighed.

16.0 The Patrol

Otsihl walked into the cargo container office where Djoshu was carefully sharpening his talons.

"Something here stinks of grub."

Djoshu lifted an arm and sniffed. "I bathed yesterday."

Otsihl snorted. "Metaphorically, you literalist. That puffed up First Lord is sending out a patrol of those half moron drones of his. They say their ancient foe left a transmitter running and they're going out to retrieve it."

Djoshu frowned. "Do we share the same concept of ancient?"

"My thought exactly. If this technology is still functional, I have to wonder what else we're going to wake up in there."

Djoshu's talons scraped along the desk, thin strips of the plastisteel curling up as he thought. "I feel the breath of the Mother Grub."

Otsihl sat down. "Quit destroying my furniture and tell me."

Djoshu looked down and quickly retracted his talons. "Apologies. The Xyalatrax have given us the honor of leading the expedition."

"Correct."

"Even after we lost most of our forces."

"Correct again. Conclusion?"

"We are not being afforded an honor, we are driven in front of them like dzurgas sent to find grub nests."

"I have the same thought and it is an itch I cannot reach. Play Warchief for a moment and tell me what you'd do."

Djoshu thought for a few seconds. "Send troops with this patrol. See how the Xyalatrax behave."

"I agree and I already bedeviled the First Lord until he agreed to include us. Good thing too, judging by the way you've mauled that innocent table, you're feeling the need to breathe the open air."

Djoshu nodded. "The ship is becoming tiresome. How many shall I take?"

"Just one, call him an aide. He'll be your bodyguard of course, that scent of grub is getting strong."

"I'll fetch my field gear."

"Djoshu," the Warchief said.

The Second paused at the door.

"Take care with your enthusiasm. You are there as my eyes, not my fists. You would not be easily replaced."

Djoshu bowed his head briefly. "As you say. I am a firm believer in ranged weapons."

"Unlike my mad Warriors of Foot? Report to me when you return, no matter the time."

On his way to his quarters, Djoshu asked one of the sub-chiefs for a suitable warrior for his expedition. A few minutes later, the sub-chief arrived at his door with a massive footman. He left without introducing the monster sized Kelthoi.

"What's your name?" Djoshu asked, looking up at him as he finished strapping on field gear.

"The Righteous Hammer That Grinds the Unworthy in the Cauldron of Battle," the brute said, staring straight ahead.

"Well, that's...original. That's really what they call you in the middle of battle?"

"Yes, Second."

Djoshu knew *that* was grubshit. "Far too much for my weak upper-class mind to handle. I shall call you...Fluffy Cuddlekins."

The warrior was surprised enough to meet his eyes before staring at the opposite wall again.

"I was just having a joke, Second. They call..."

"You are following me! We depart!" a drone screeched at them from the end of the passageway.

Djoshu held up his hand. "Our noble allies have called for our aid, but not to worry, Fluffy. Should you fall, rest assured that I will compose a dirge in your honor. All shall remember Warrior Cuddlekins."

"Gonna be real careful not to fall then."

"Be of stout heart, Fluffy. Onward."

Harry's team didn't have to work hard to stay undercover as they followed the streets toward the spot they had left the seismic monitor several days ago. There were several places where they had to dodge open areas but no one had heard anything from the sky. The whole exercise was a hike more than anything else, even training was harder than this. Shep was one of the most popular security people to be around. He was a constant source of amusement, he told a

lot of jokes and stories from other missions that usually had people laughing. Imae liked him but worried a little bit if he was taking this seriously. Vuli, on the other hand, was completely serious. Even grim.

Harry, at the front of the little column, held up his hand for a stop. Shep's gangling "good ole' boy routine" was gone in a second. He put his hand on the shoulder of one of the Pioneers that hadn't noticed Harry's signal. The kid looked surprised and started to say something but Shep immediately put a hand over his mouth and whispered in his ear. The Pioneer looked startled but nodded after a second. Everyone was staying in place along the wall of one of the buildings and Harry moved quickly back to where Shep and Imae were.

"It's up there," Harry said quietly, pointing to the top of the debris wall that encircled the city.

"Not seeing anything," Shep answered.

Harry shrugged. "They aren't that large, you wouldn't from down here. I remember that weird pointed building as a landmark though."

"Gonna be a bastard of a climb," Shep said. He'd been carrying a couple coils of climbing rope and slid them off his shoulder onto the ground.

"No one ever considered getting here on foot," Imae said, helping uncoil the rope. "Nice flat place to land a shuttle though."

"Who's going up?" Shep asked.

"I'm the primary tech for these," Imae said. "Sammy over there is second if anything happens to me."

"Let's avoid that," Shep said.

"Imae, do your best to hide it," Harry said, looking up at the wall of crushed buildings. "Don't worry about trying to get it back down here."

She nodded, wrapping a heavy strap around herself. "Copy that. I think there's some holes near the edge I can drop it in."

She followed Shep across the street.

"Nice job on the Swiss seat," he said, checking her work. "You climb in your free time?"

Imae laughed. "No way, I hate heights."

He looked at her in surprise but she ignored it and checked the attachments on his climbing harness.

"Why'd you come out then?"

"Those are my monitors, so it's my job. Don't worry, I've passed the basic mountaineers course. This isn't nearly as high."

"Pioneers have to pass that?" he asked as he crawled up the first large wall.

"We do all the survival courses as part of our hunting trials," she said. She followed Jonesy up the wall, not looking down.

They didn't talk much more as they worked their way up to the top.

Djoshu and his guard followed the single ur-male and the ten drones he'd brought along. A couple were weighted down with pieces of recovery gear, a sling by the looks of it, and more that Djoshu didn't recognize. The rest of them were carrying the odd looking pellet rifles that seemed to be standard for the Xyalatrax. The ur-male carried a smaller gun that looked more like a status symbol than anything useful to Djoshu. They'd hiked out from the ship, far enough that Djoshu wondered why they hadn't just used one of the shuttles.

They were walking through a gathering of taller vegetation when the rest of the group went to ground. Djoshu and the other Kelthoi were quick to follow. They both looked around, but other than the cliff they'd been following, there was nothing. Djoshu sighed and began to work his way up to the ur-male. When he got there, the larger Xyalatrax was studying the top of the cliffs with a scope.

"What is it?" Djoshu asked.

The ur-male jumped at the sound of his voice and Djoshu wondered if the idiot had actually forgotten they were back there.

"Warm blood prefcoria filth," the ur-male finally said. "They've infested the planet!"

Djoshu got his own scope out and searched until he saw movement at the top of the cliff. He watched as they quickly moved around on some mysterious task, keeping low.

"I wouldn't call two of them an infestation," he commented.

The ur twitched again and Djoshu realized it was stopping itself from striking him. That was the way they controlled the drones but he hadn't realized it was so ingrained. He'd have to watch this one.

"There are always more than you see," the ur hissed. "They are taking the signal away! We must attack!"

"Calm down," Djoshu ordered. "Anything that's been working that long couldn't be that portable. It was probably an instrument of theirs. We should report back to the ship and get instructions."

"No, no contact, none. They will send full males, I will not find glory. I will attack them with my drones. Then I shall be made a full male!"

Djoshu had dealt with a few power hungry officers before but none that were so far gone to ignore their mission. These things were *not* very disciplined warriors.

"I would like to use your communicator," Djoshu said.

The thing pulled out a small box and smashed it against the ground until it was in many pieces.

"I will be a full male," the thing hissed again.

Djoshu looked at the remains of the communicator and back at the ur-male.

"I assume you have a plan?"

"It is simplicity itself. We see where they go. We attack from hiding. They die. You assist me, you gain minor glory. I will be a full male."

Djoshu thought about trying to reason with him but the ur was acting even stranger than these things usually did. The large compound eyes focused on him and Djoshu could see hundreds of tiny reflections of himself looking back.

"You will assist me," the ur-male repeated, caressing the automatic pistol it carried.

Djoshu wasn't an expert but this specimen looked and acted dangerous. "It will be done, we are allies."

"Yesss. Allies."

Djoshu started the long crawl back to the rear.

"I will become a male. A full male, oh yes," the thing hissed to itself behind him.

"What is happening?" Fluffy asked when he got back.

"Our glorious commander is a few dzurga short of a nursery," Djoshu said and related his brief conversation.

"That's mutiny," Fluffy muttered. "Shall we remove him?"

"Not a good idea, they have some kind of mental control over their drones. I don't think we could take them all on."

"And Otsihl would be mad if we killed allies."

"Yeah, probably."

"Ain't no honor in killing by surprise. And those prefcoria things ain't enemies yet. Don't want to get haunted by their spirits. The chief know what these Xyla-things are like?"

"No, I doubt he would have come if he knew."

Fluffy looked happier. "Yeah."

Djoshu's mind raced. He didn't know about ghosts but he didn't want his family's name attached to something so craven and barbaric. How could he stop this? Finally he nudged Fluffy who looked like he was asleep.

"We've got to get word back to the warclan. How are you at running?"

Fluffy puffed out his chest. "I'm a scout. I been to Ginthii four times now, ain't got killed or captured yet. I can outrun any of those grub-ugly pus-bags."

"Fluffy, you are a gift from the gods," Djoshu said.

"Second, Fluffy ain't my name..."

Djoshu held up a hand for silence as he pulled out pen and paper and quickly wrote out a letter to Otsihl. He passed it to Fluffy.

"Read this, commit it to memory," he said. "That has to get through."

The big warrior read it several times. "I got it. When do I go?"

"As soon as the ur-male begins to move."

"What about you?" Fluffy asked. "That ur thing could execute *you* for mutiny."

Djoshu shrugged. "I have no long range weapons with me. It can't be mutiny if he doesn't give me the proper equipment."

Fluffy thought for a moment and nodded. "You nobles got that slippery thinking. Gotta learn that."

He rolled on his back and a few seconds later he began to snore.

The team was headed back home. Imae had shut down the seismic monitor and disconnected the power supply before sticking the unit in a large crevice. Shep had helped her pile some rocks on top of it and then they'd repelled back down to the group. A couple hard yanks on the rope had brought them down and pretty quickly they were on their way back. Now that the mission was successful, everyone was pretty relaxed. There was a few kilometers and then

they'd be back. Imae was walking near Shep again, listening to him tell outlandish stories about his family.

"That sounds like Holm," someone laughed as Shep finished a story about losing a dozen head of cattle. "Except it was a nice day and it was all his dad's goats."

There was laughter and Holm spun around to give them all the finger. There was a strange echoing pop. Holm's hand was halfway up. He stared at the blood erupting from the ruin of his hand as he fell to his knees. Around him people were dropping to the ground, surrounded by sharp popping sounds.

"There cannot be many left," the ur-male said to Djoshu as they watched from a pile of stones. He'd been brought along, not quite at gun point. The ur had been enraged to find Fluffy gone but Djoshu had quickly explained that he'd gone off to perform the rituals necessary before battle, for both of them. He'd probably been seconds from death but had calmly made up nonsense about appeasing the battle god because of the unnatural alien tactics.

"We will push forward, dig them from their holes and rip them apart!" the ur screamed.

Something was thudding behind them and Djoshu wondered what the drones were doing now. Some other part of this horrendous "ambush" no doubt.

There was another crack and a gurgle from their other side.

"Don't rush them yet, they're not running. They're under cover," Djoshu said to the ur.

"Quiet, warm blood filth! You are in league with them, all warm bloods must..."

Djoshu didn't get to hear what the warm bloods had to do, the ur-male's head made an unpleasant crunching sound as it broke into pieces. Djoshu ducked back behind a large block. Had that been a stone? There was more thudding behind him and Djoshu turned in time to see an orange shape blurring toward him.

Then there was nothing.

7.0 Conversations

Theo had wandered around for a while after Harry and his team left. He'd caught up on his logs, which had taken until after lunch. Then, with nothing better to do, he headed for a poker game that had been going most of the day. Before he did, Theo realized a couple of things; he was the leader and therefore couldn't really win against his team, not this soon. And that it would be really hard not to win. So instead, he went and found a quiet spot to read which quickly turned into a nap.

As he began to dream, Theo changed things to be a little more interesting. Kawehi had taught him lucid dreaming techniques and he'd really gotten into it. Emma was wandering around telling him what to do, so he traded her head for a full sized T. Rex. He laughed his head off, then screamed and ran as the rest of her body changed. After she'd bitten his arms off a few times, he left her behind and wandered over the landscape in his head. There was a hollow boom and he looked around. That didn't really belong to the dream.

Theo opened his eyes as another echoing boom reached the camp. Then there were more. Everyone was standing up, staring at the direction Harry had left. Theo sprinted to the HQ.

"What's going on?" Theo asked Marisol.

She shook her head. "No idea, they didn't take a radio."

"Backup team?"

She shook her head again. "We need to be defensive, find out what's going on before rushing out to get rolled up piecemeal."

Theo saw the logic in it but didn't like it at all. Outside, Rachel was issuing bolt action rifles to the Ta'avi Pioneers. All of them looked competent, scattering to the positions they'd set up yesterday.

The distant, echoing gunfire had stopped after a few minutes. The bird things were arguing in the trees with an occasional howler interrupting. The bird things fell silent as there was a distant yell. People held their breath, trying to hear what it was.

The distant cry was repeated. "Medic!"

The camp exploded into action. Josie, the med-tech, ran down the street with several Pioneers behind her. Theo tried to stay where he was but the urge to follow them was strong, almost a physical pull.

Hell with it, I don't hear any shooting, Theo thought. He looked at Emma and she gave him a tiny nod.

Marisol had binoculars out, trying to see into the gloom. She sighed as the twins ran through the picture as they headed down the boulevard.

By the time Theo and Emma had gotten there, the medical team was dealing with the injuries. Emma saw Holm leaning against a wall, his face gray as a Pioneer wound more gauze around the blood soaked bandages that covered his left hand. Theo's mind was racing as he tried to look at everything at once. One of the Cadets had his gun trained on a shape Theo didn't recognize but that could wait, there weren't enough people here. Then he looked back at Vuli and realized she was carrying one of the Pioneers. Jonesy was just behind her, helping one of the others walk over the rough ground. As Theo ran over, Vuli carefully set the Pioneer down and Theo saw blood matting her fur in several places.

"Commander," she said weakly.

"Sit down," Theo ordered and yelled over his shoulder for a medical kit.

Jonesy lowered the other Pioneer to the ground. He had several puncture wounds in his hip and leg.

Vuli's body shuddered. "Two went through my arm, rest of them...nothing."

"Yeah, right," Theo said, searching her fur for the wounds.

"I regret...there were casualties...we were totally surprised..." Vuli said.

Emma ran over with a medical kit and helped Theo. They found two wounds in the arm, but the bleeding was minor. Emma bandaged them anyway. The rest of the scrapes looked like ricochets and had already stopped oozing blood.

"We have thick skins," Vuli said. "I will mend."

"She's in a sort of shock," Jonesy said as Emma helped him with the other Pioneer. "She needs to rest for a while."

"Then you're done carrying anyone," Emma said to Vuli. "I sent a runner back to get stretchers, Theo."

He nodded without looking around. The medic had put him to work putting pressure on the other Pioneer's abdominal wounds. "Jonesy, where are the other three?"

Vuli's crest drooped flat down the back of her head. "I am full of grief, regret, guilt. They surprised us."

"Someone needs to tell me where the other three are," Theo said. "Now, not later."

"They're dead," Jonesy rasped. "Shep, Harry, and Imae. We hid their bodies, I'll go get them."

"You can sit down and drink this," the medic said, handing him a bottle of water.

She kept talking and but Theo couldn't hear anything over the roaring in his ears. He had known somehow, as soon as she wasn't with the others. He got up and stumbled over to the side of the street and leaned against the wall. He stayed there, mind racing in useless circles, ignoring everything until Emma put a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Stretchers are here. Let's get back to camp, Sparrow."

He pushed himself off the wall. "I want to go get her."

Then Marisol was in front of him wearing field gear. "You *will* go back to camp, we will take care of that."

He started to argue but she pulled on his hands, making him hold them up. They were trembling like leaves.

"People need to see their captain right now," Marisol said, her voice impossibly gentle. "I'll take care of her myself, okay?"

Theo nodded and watched Marisol and a fresh team follow Jonesy back down the street. He pushed himself off the wall and helped Vuli to her feet. Brown uniforms gently lifted the wounded and headed for camp. Theo walked behind them, unable to look away from the blood soaked figures. People came to talk to him several times, but Emma shook her head and pointed the other way. He'd have as much peace as she could give him, if it was only for the walk back to camp.

Theo was sitting on the edge of the shuttle ramp beside Imae. Shep and Harry had already been taken inside. He didn't know where they were put, but knowing the Commonwealth, someone had already thought about this happening. There was a space for her beside the other two, undoubtedly something calculated to be safe and soothing for the survivors. That meant they could get on with their mission with minimal impacts to morale and effectiveness. Had he really been excited about coming here? Now he was really sick of the place, sick of the war, sick of all of it. He hadn't known what real misery was until he'd come here. Life back in Watsons Hole had been brutal and cruel but he'd hadn't ever let himself care. He'd been insulated from pain like this. He stared down the wide avenue as the thoughts spun through his head. The sun was overhead and they were in emerald tunnels splashed and dappled with gold. It was offensive and ridiculous. Nothing had a right to be beautiful, not anymore.

There were voices from the camp but he let the sounds slide past him. Theo was suddenly so tired of leading, of setting the example. Let someone else pick up the burden for once, he'd done enough. Now Imae was gone and it was his fault. He should have known what to do, known to keep all of them safe and hidden. And where was the Project's perfectly engineered plan now? They'd relied on a weak, untested cog and it had failed. Now people were dead. How was he supposed to cope with seventeen more people depending on him? None of this was right and none of it was fair. How was he supposed to make sense of this?

Get your shit back in one sock, you're not done yet, Imae whispered from his memory. That's what she'd be saying right now. He looked down at her lying on the deck next to him and wiped the tears away.

No, she wouldn't put up with him quitting, not yet. Once they were safe, once the mission was complete, okay. Imae would understand him walking away once he got everyone home.

Because Imae died doing her job and knew you'd do the same. All three of them died doing their best for you. Don't you dare waste that.

He carefully opened the nylon bag. Her face was pale and still beautiful. But somehow it didn't look like her anymore.

Of course not, Imae doesn't live here anymore.

Theo bent and kissed her lips one last time.

"I'm going to get to work now. Theo said quietly, closing the body bag. "I love you, Chyles'garrel Itmataera'xoch Flame-Bridge'ohh. Rest well."

Emma was standing at the base of the shuttle ramp with Ayr and Rachel. Emma started to hug him as he walked down but he shook his head.

"I'm fine. How is Holm?" Theo asked as they watched Rachel and Ayr gently pick up Imae and take her into the shuttle.

"He'll live. He was angry, wanted to go back and fight."

Theo stepped off the cargo ramp. "Now that the Bugs know we're here, he'll probably get his chance."

She hopped down beside him. "What's next?"

"Next, I want to see this thing they captured," he said, starting toward the command tent. "I've got some questions to ask."

Emma caught his shoulder and turned him around. "Not a 'thing,' Sparrow. A person."

"Whatever, let me go."

"No, Theo. I want you to say it."

His rage flashed into life. "Fine then. The *person* who killed our friends, Emma. I want to see this *person*."

Emma didn't let go of his shoulder when he tried to pull away. "Not yet."

"I said, let me go!" Theo snapped, trying to yank away from her.

Emma kept holding his arm. "Do you remember the part of the job where I protect everyone from you?"

"Emma, I swear to god, if you don't let go of me..."

"You'll do something predictably stupid. Then I'll bounce you on your head."

"*Fuck you!*" Theo screamed. "They murdered them! For a seismic beacon? Harry, Shep and Imae. They're gone!"

"Yes they are," Emma said calmly. "Words don't begin to work for what I feel right now, but I am so incredibly sorry."

Theo stopped pulling away and his mouth twisted. Emma put her arms around him and hugged him tightly as he sobbed several times.

"I loved her," he finally whispered. "I didn't realize in time. I didn't get to tell her."

Emma smiled and put her cheek against his. "She knew, trust me."

After a minute, Theo let go of her and wiped his eyes. "But I don't think she'd like what I'm feeling about our prisoner right now."

Emma nodded. "She'd probably kick your ass for even thinking about it."

That got a small smile out of him. "Thank you for stopping me."

"Thank you for not hating me, that was nerve wracking."

"Tulip, I will never hate you. Especially for something like this."

Emma stopped and looked into his eyes.

"I hope you're right," she finally said.

A Cadet and a Pioneer were guarding the door to the building they'd put the prisoner in. Both of them stiffened and saluted as Theo and Emma approached. Theo sighed inwardly but he

saluted them back. He really didn't want to start that, but they'd lost friends too. So they were hurting as much as he was and had to do *something*. So they saluted.

"How is Holm really doing?" Theo asked as they walked up the stairs to where the prisoner was.

Emma smiled a little. "At the moment, he's off his tits on pain killers. You ready for this?"

"Do you think we can actually communicate?"

"Yes," Vuli said as they came into the small room. "He has a translator for Xyalatrax. Gyr translators include all of the known languages. I have adjusted, jury rigged, kludged, a connection."

Theo looked at the collection of torn apart translators on the table and hoped she was right.

"He will speak, his translator changes his words to Bug. The other translator takes that and changes it to Gyr. You should hear a translation. It will be somewhat slower but you will understand his words."

Theo patted Vuli on her oversized shoulder. Marisol came into the room and put several bottles of water on the table in front of the Other who sat on folded legs behind the table. The sketches they'd gotten from a distance had made this group look a bit like centaurs but there wasn't much similarity at close range. There were four powerful legs ending in powerful looking clawed feet. The legs resembled a dog's back legs rather than a horse though. From the place where the legs joined, there was a broad torso supporting a number of arms. There were two smaller sets folded against the chest midway up the torso. At the top shoulder was a larger pair, one much larger than the other, like a crab's pinchers. What he could see of the skin was covered by a coarse black fur. There was a thick neck supporting a broad head. Pointed ears rose slightly above the rounded skull. There was a heavy brow ridge and deep set black eyes. The mouth was a muzzle, reminiscent of a dog's, although much shorter and broader.

It watched as Theo sat at the table and Emma stood beside and a little behind him. Theo nodded at Vuli and she did something to the translators.

The creature immediately made a short speech and Theo waited as the translators sifted through everything.

"My name is Djoshu va Delaii va Garrahn va Lebba of the Kelthoi," the metallic voice finally said. "I did not take up arms against the prefcoria, or whatever your people are called."

"My name is Theo Cosineau, I'm the commander of this expedition. Yes, we're part of the prefcoria."

"Do you accept my word? War between us has not been blessed and I would not blaspheme."

"Is that thing working right?" Theo asked Vuli.

"When I took him, he carried only a blade," Vuli confirmed. "But I was in a hurry and may have missed anything else."

"A blade is all I carried," Djoshu said. "I've been captured by the Ginthii in the wars at home. I was told nothing honorable about your people but since this *Binnaa* did not immediately kill me, I assume you are not the raving barbarians we were told."

"What is this binnaa word?" Vuli rumbled, crest twitching.

Theo saw Djoshu flinch slightly. "Not an insult! My people know yours of old, in the times that our ships traveled across the stars. We called you *Binn'aa*, it is the old word meaning every one all the same. I swear it is not an insult."

"I do not remember your people, but my name is Vuli."

Djoshu bowed his head slightly. "Then I say it is a pleasure to know you, that fist rattled my brain very well."

"Why are you here on Alnatic?" Theo asked.

Djoshu made a strange rippling gesture with his shoulders. "These Xyalatrax want my world to be their ally in the war against the prefcoria. But my people, the Kelthoi, do not become war-kin with strangers in a hurry. We came here to see what they were like. You were not expected to be here, we were here to support their exploration only."

"That's why you are concerned about being in the attack?" Theo asked.

The Kelthoi's voice sounded surprised. "Of course. There is no declaration of war between us. To attack without warning is abhorrent, were I to take up weapons against you, the Lords of Strife would be enraged."

"Were there more of you in the attack?" Marisol asked.

"There were two of us, but I sent Fluffy back to my commander before the...ambush. It was critical that our Warchief learn about the nature of the Xyalatrax."

"You say ambush with distaste," Vuli said.

"Of course! It is a thing badly done, without any honor. The spirits of the slain freely haunt any who take part in such a abomination."

Trying to talk directly to the Kelthoi was annoying enough that Theo mostly listened to Vuli talk, interjecting questions when he needed to. The Kelthoi occupied the fourth planet in their solar system. They were technologically advanced enough to develop a rudimentary FTL drive and had been in the early stages of exploring the galaxy around them. There had been some kind of revolt on the Kelthoi homeworld, so disruptive that most of the leading scientists had been killed or executed. The technology for the FTL drive was lost at the same time and for

several generations the Kelthoi had been trapped on their own world. Their society was based on a extended familial connections and individuals were further subdivided into Clans for different activities. As the population grew with no way off world, the Kelthoi had begun to war amongst themselves.

When spaceflight had been reestablished they found that their first colony, on the third planet of their home system, had assumed their independence and weren't eager to become vassals to the homeworld again. Gintha, the colony's name, declared war on the homeworld. The Kelthoi happily accepted and they'd been fighting ever since. When Theo asked how they had avoided destroying each other, the Kelthoi was confused. It had taken Vuli a while to work out that all of the fighting took place on a third planet that no one wanted. From the sound of it, the battles were formally arranged and casualties were fairly light. The goal wasn't the destruction of the enemy, but some sort of prearranged goal. Djoshu assumed that the preforia fought in the same fashion and urged them to surrender to his warchief before the unpredictable Xyalatrax joined the battle.

"I have been a prisoner in battle, I survived. I am not sure how the Xyalatrax would treat you, I have only seen the defective mind that attacked you. You are not battle prisoners, your status would be higher like diplomats. You would be well treated."

"Among the Kelthoi," Theo said. "What about your patrons?"

"We would protect you of course," Djoshu said slowly. "I believe we could."

"Let's take a break," Theo said. "Someone see what our guest needs in the way of food or drink. Marisol, could I have a word please?"

Theo turned without waiting for an answer and went downstairs. Marisol came down behind him and Theo suggested they take a walk. She nodded and Theo told Emma to go check on Holm and get something to eat.

"What's up?" Marisol asked after they'd walked a few minutes.

"I want to talk about what the options are at the moment. I was getting overwhelmed thinking about the implications of the Kelthoi with the Bugs."

"Run through what you've got," Marisol said. "I'll interrupt if I think you missed anything."

"Looks to me like we hide, fight, or surrender and hope the Kelthoi protect us. I don't care about the planet, my mission is getting everyone home alive. At the moment, hiding looks like the best alternative."

"I'd agree except one thing," Marisol said. "We can't take the shuttle along. That's the only effective way we have right now to talk to people in orbit. We likely won't see them come out of drive space like the Bugs. If they can't raise us, more than likely they'll nuke the Bug ship from orbit and wait for reinforcements before anyone lands, standard procedure."

"I didn't consider that," Theo said, embarrassed. "But I was worried about leaving the Navigator behind, it felt kind of shitty."

"I'm not sure, but I assume it would take itself out before being captured. So we're down to fight or surrender."

Theo stopped and looked up through the trees. "If I could trust Djoshu's word, maybe surrender would get the most people home safe. Even if that's not a bluff, I get the feeling that the Bugs would just kill everyone."

"I agree, they're pretty single-minded when it comes to prefcoria."

Theo sighed. "Fighting is going to be suicide. We've got a better position and we can make it pretty expensive, but there's no way we're winning."

"We could pull it off with another couple of teams, the Bugs really suck at ground warfare. But without any heavy weapons, sorry. I can't see a way out of it."

"Kawehi talked about giving difficult orders, but I didn't think I'd be ordering a fight to the death my first time out. But that's better than sending them to an execution."

It was Marisol's turn to sigh. "You got stuck with a shit-burger your first time. I don't know what I would have differently. I don't often say this, but I'm impressed, Theo. You've got a real talent for command. What are you going to do with the Kelthoi?"

Theo shrugged. "Let him go. He's right, we're not at war with his civilization and I don't want to start one. Sounds like they're much better than the Bugs at fighting."

"Yeah, a few hundred years of constant war will do that. I don't know that I'd let him go, but your instincts for this stuff are good and you're the boss. I'll back you if anyone makes a fuss."

When the two of them walked back upstairs, Vuli and the Kelthoi were in deep conversation. Emma and Betsy were sitting in the corner and Emma rolled her eyes at Theo. The Others didn't notice them until Marisol cleared her throat.

"Apologies, we have been attempting to learn when the Kelthoi contacted the Gyr," Vuli said. "I have made recordings for you to review."

Theo nodded as he sat down. Vuli was busy for a few seconds reattaching the makeshift translator.

"It is ready," she finally said.

"My Second and I have discussed your offer," Theo said. "I appreciate your generosity but we will not surrender."

It took some help from Vuli before Djoshu understood what Theo was saying.

"You must!" the Kelthoi said, sounding urgent. "Although the accident that destroyed our ships greatly reduced the number of troops, we greatly outnumber the forces I have seen here. You must put down your arms, you will be destroyed otherwise."

The Kelthoi kept talking directly to Vuli for several seconds.

"Djoshu wants to make sure these translations are accurate," Vuli said. "He wonders if your mind is fully functional."

"I am fully functional," Theo assured the Other. "Allow me to explain the way we fight. First, what you assume was an accident was intentional. The pilot of that shuttle communicated his intent to us before he rammed the other ship."

Djoshu stared at him. "His mind...?"

"Fully intact. He sacrificed himself to give the rest of us a better chance. That is the way of the prefcoria."

"You hate these 'Bugs' so much as that?"

Theo tried to smile but it was more of a grimace. "I don't know them well enough to hate them. I really wish they'd just go away and let us get on with our lives."

"I do not think this is possible. You carry your own honor but your people did not. They killed many of the Xyalatrax worlds trying to exterminate them."

"Those weren't our people," Theo said. "They created many of us but they disappeared a very long time ago. Probably before the Kelthoi began to explore space."

Djoshu's eyes locked on him again. He said something to Vuli, too fast for the translator to use. Vuli made a short reply and that prompted a much longer response from Djoshu.

"The Bugs have omitted truth or have said falsehoods," Vuli finally said. "They let the Kelthoi believe that these things happened recently."

"This is truth," Djoshu added.

"You see where their honor is?" Theo asked. "Tell your people what you have learned here, let them know what kind of beings want their loyalty."

"What do you mean?" Djoshu asked.

"As you said before, there is no fight between your people and mine. You did not attack my people, we have no reason to make you a prisoner."

"I am surprised. You said you do not follow the Lords of War."

"There are other paths to honor," Theo said. "I'll get someone to cut your bonds and you'll be free to go."

There was a strange sound as a pair of long talons emerged from each of the Kelthoi's hands and sliced through the plastic bands. Theo and the rest of them stared and the room was quiet enough to hear the pieces hit the floor.

"Obviously, this is not necessary," Djoshu said.

"You could have done that at any time?" Marisol asked, watching the blades slide back under the dark skin.

"I was fairly captured and I was curious what kind of people you are. The Kelthoi are wary of their alliances *and* enemies."

Theo walked with Vuli, Emma, and Marisol as they escorted Djoshu to the gap in the wall.

"You can find your way from here?" Marisol asked. "The ship is in that direction."

"I can see the trail from earlier. Warchief Theo, are you certain you will not put down your weapons? You are a fascinating opponent and I would not happily see you destroyed."

"Thank you, but we will make our last stand here. Better to die in a battle than helplessly executed."

"There will be questions when I return. It will not be possible to conceal your presence here."

"I understand," Theo said.

"Once he learns you are here, I doubt the First Lord will wait long before attacking. But they are missing as many as we are, I doubt it could be done immediately."

With that, the Kelthoi turned and jogged off into the darkness. The four of them watched until he had disappeared into the night. Theo would have loved to head off to think but there was a lot more to do. At least no one was bugging him about getting enough sleep now.

The darkness under the trees spread on the walk back to their camp. Theo didn't like the idea of people sitting isolated in the darkness and since Djoshu knew where they were...

"We should have a fire tonight," he said.

He was surprised when Marisol agreed. "There's enough firewood laying around and there's a few things that we need to get rid of before it's too late. Whenever we lost someone on the

teams, people would get together and pass around a bottle. I think this crew could use a drink and a couple of stories at the moment."

"Should I tell them about what's coming?"

Marisol shook her head. "That can wait for tomorrow."

Theo and Emma went to check on Holm. He was humming to himself lying in the tiny tent when they looked in.

"How are you feeling?" Theo asked.

Holm beamed at him, his eyes not quite crossed. "I can totally see why people get addicted to these things. I feel great!."

Emma laughed as she sat on the bed beside. "That's just what I need, a drug fiend for a boyfriend. I'm going to check your dressing."

"Check my undressing," Holm said and laughed.

"He's all yours," Theo said. "I'll see you guys later."

There was more giggling from behind him and then a sharp intake of breath. "Emma! That *hurts!*"

She said something and he complained again. Theo shook his head as he went inside. They were turning into an old married couple.

Then his smile disappeared as his mind caught on the word couple. Losing Imae still didn't feel real to him and Theo wondered if he'd ever get used to her being gone. He'd spent eighteen years without her but she'd become such a huge part of his life since he'd come home that it felt like she'd been there forever.

Ayr was laying on her bed staring at the ceiling. Imae's cot was already gone, leaving a gap between their beds. Ayr sat up as he came into the room and sat on his bed.

"Hey."

"How are you doing?" Theo asked. "That's a stupid question, sorry."

"I miss her already," Ayr said. "For such a small person, she had a very large soul."

"I was thinking the same thing."

"How are you doing?"

He shrugged. "Not so hot. I wish I hadn't...I don't know. Last night Imae told me she volunteered to go today. I wasn't happy about it but she said she had to because I was in charge."

Ayr nodded. "She was smart that way. Do you think you'd feel any better if you had made her stay here and someone else had died instead? How do you think she would have reacted to that?"

"No one should have died. That was a mistake that I'm going to have to live with I guess."

Ayr sat up and looked at him. "Mistake? There wasn't any mistake today. It had to be done. Maybe Harry screwed up by not realizing that the Bugs would pick that transmitter up sooner, but I don't think so."

"If I'd sent more people..."

"Theo, stop it. We're not playing games here, what we do is always dangerous. If it hadn't been the Bugs, then the Howler would have been ten meters tall and eaten everyone. There are no perfect plans, people always get hurt or die no matter what the plan."

Ayr moved over to sit beside him, her arm going around him.

"You got handed one of the hardest jobs anyone gets," she said quietly. "I don't know how you got this far without tearing your hair out and running away screaming, but you did. You can handle this too."

He nodded without saying anything.

"Spit it out," Ayr said.

"It's Imae, I know this sounds stupid..."

"You loved her," Ayr said. "It's not stupid."

Theo looked up in surprise and nodded.

"She loved you too, don't doubt that," Ayr said. "From the first minute she met you."

"I'm going to miss her," Theo said quietly.

"Me too," Ayr said, feeling more tears running down her face.

He put his arms around her and they held each other while they wept.

Theo wiped his face and put on a clean set of clothes. He started to wonder about the best way to get laundry done and then grimaced at himself in the mirror. It probably wasn't going to matter anymore. There was a little bit of a silver lining; he wouldn't be around to deal with all the clerical stuff the last few days was going to generate.

Ayr was just inside the door and she took his hand as they walked out. The fire was already going, modest but the bright light made everything look odd somehow. There were a few figures near the fire already but Theo saw Deidre standing further back by herself. He changed direction, keeping hold of Ayr's hand. She squeezed his hand when she saw Deidre and let go of him to walk ahead and hug her tightly. They spoke quietly in Hay'tcleup, it sounded like a prayer maybe.

"What are you doing out there?" Deidre said, grabbing him and pulling him into a their embrace.

"I'm sorry Deed, if I had known..."

"Why are you apologizing? This wasn't your fault," she said. "And I'm sorry for you too."

She put her head against his and Ayr put hers against theirs.

"Peaceful journeys, you heroes," Deidre said quietly.

"Why are you always hugging two women?" Holm asked from behind Theo. "Are you that virile or just compensating for something? And where's that whiskey?"

The three looked at each other.

"Did he really just say 'virile'?" Ayr asked.

Theo let go of Ayr and Emma and Holm joined the hug.

"Look at Mr. Toughass there, shot this morning and now he demands whiskey," Deidre said.

"No way," Emma said firmly. "He's already off his ass on pain killers. Obviously."

"C'mon now, I can be just as inappropriate sober," Holm protested.

Ayr laughed and kissed her brother's cheek. "I'm glad you're around to be such a weirdo."

The silly grin he gave her made Theo think that he'd be lucky to be awake an hour from now.

When everyone had come out to the fire, Jonesy made sure everyone had drinks before making a toast. It was very simple, just offered to "the missing" and the team was quiet for a few seconds after everyone had taken a drink. Theo was ready for everything to be serious but Betsy teased Jonesy about his accent and there were some chuckles around the group as the tension eased.

"There will be something more formal when we get home," Emma said quietly in his ear.

Theo nodded as people began chatting quietly as they sat down. A bottle was passed around the circle and Theo and Ayr both laughed as Emma intercepted it before Holm could grab it. Theo could still see the sadness and uncertainty all around him but at least it was a shared burden now. Ayr went to talk to some of the Pioneers and Vuli took her place, perched on the rock she had vacated.

"I have difficulty understanding the prefcoria, particularly your people," she said.

Theo took another swallow of the whiskey as it went by and let the fire burn its way down his throat before he answered.

"Which people?"

Vuli flapped a hand. "The Garragh, Ta'avi, Abegnani, you're all remarkably similar to humans."

"I'm human too," Theo said, speaking carefully. He'd skip the bottle on the next pass, he decided.

"If it is not too forward, how do you cope? Your lives are so short and you have no branches to pass your existence to. When you die, you are just gone. I am concerned that these are inappropriate questions."

"It's okay, but you might not want to ask anyone else this for a while. To me, the length of my life feels right. I know what you mean though, there are insects on Earth that only live a single evening. Just long enough to fly up and find a mate before they die. I doubt they're self aware but I always wondered what that must be like. There's probably the same difference between you and I. How old are you?"

"I budded from my root eight Terran years ago but my memories go much further back. It is hard to say for sure, but likely thousands of Terran years."

"So you're both very young and incredibly old at the same time. If it helps, most of believe that this life isn't all there is, that there are new adventures waiting for us."

"Ah, the Terran religions?"

"Not really," Theo said. "Humans have put far too much of themselves into religion and now there are wars over minor disagreements. I think that there is probably some unknown creative force that started everything but I doubt things are like the preachers say they are. What about the Gyr? Do you have religion?"

"It is difficult to explain," Vuli said. "The Gyr have a mysticism that...no. I may not share this thing with you, Theo. Apologies, regrets, sadness."

"Not a problem, I didn't mean to pry, snoop, inquire."

Vuli's eyes swiveled to look at him. "I do not understand this multiple word trait of humans, is it only the young? You are not the first I have spoken to that does this."

"I think they're teasing you a little, only because they like you though. I'll tell them to stop if it bothers you."

"Theo, I am most perplexed, curious, confused why."

Theo smiled. "You often say three similar words all at once. You didn't know?"

There was a quiet clonk, like two medium sized rocks rolling together. "I am saying bad words. I modified this translator to choose the most appropriate word at all times. Obviously I have not made this modification properly. A moment."

The Gyr took the translator off her vest and set it in her lap. Theo watched, fascinated as long thin fingers unfolded from the top of the Gyr's hand and began to work on the little box. They weren't jointed like a human finger, instead they gracefully curled and flexed like tiny tentacles.

"That should repair the problem," Vuli said. "When you say creative force, you refer to the Founders?"

Theo shook his head. "Something had to make them as well. Do you remember much of them?"

"My root never interacted directly with them, but I remember seeing a few around the cities and universities."

"What did they look like?"

"You do not know this? They could take any appearance that interested them. Most often they took the form of their children, appeared as various prefcoria. Larger I believe, but very similar. I do not know if this was their true form."

"Did they smell as good as we do?"

Vuli's crest immediately stood on end. "Theophile! You must not say these things, it is extremely inappropriate."

Theo held up his hands. "Okay, okay. I didn't realize."

"How do you know about the smell?"

"I had a class in xeno-culture. They said one reason the Gyr liked being here was because of the way humans smell."

Vuli's crest stood up again. "You all know of this thing? This is common knowledge?"

Theo held up his hands again. "Vuli, apologize. I had no idea this would upset you. No one has taken offense."

Vuli's eyes moved independently as she studied him closely. "The humans would not, could not understand," she said to herself. "It is an innocent question, you do not know of our biology."

Theo shook his head. "And I won't bring it up again."

She rippled her arms, the Gyr equivalent of a shrug. "Smell, odor, is not exactly correct. You emit hormones that we can detect. It is pleasantly reminiscent of the time in our life when Gyr exchange genetic information."

"You mean sex? I thought you were parthenogenic."

Vuli's crest was flat against her head. "Not exactly correct. This is a deeply uncomfortable subject, but we do exchange genetic information to begin a new root."

Theo nodded quickly, her embarrassment starting to rub off on him. "We don't need to talk about it."

"Thank you Theo. To answer your nosiness, intrusive question, prying, no. Founders did not emit those hormones."

Theo nodded. He was trying very hard not to smile but he finally gave up. Vuli saw him before he could cover his mouth.

"The translator is still malfunctioning?"

He gave up trying to keep a straight face. "I'm sorry, yes."

Theo was sitting and watching the embers of the fire. Things had quieted down and most people had gone off to bed. Rachel was still sitting across the fire, she wasn't saying much but Theo could tell that she was relieved not to be the center of attention and sympathy anymore.

"Duuude," Holm said.

Theo looked over his shoulder. "How are you even awake?"

"Had to pee, now I'm going to sit with you. Until Emma drags me back to bed anyway. Like a momma she-cat, rawr."

Theo sighed and Holm laughed.

"Keep forgetting she's your sister. Sorry."

"How? We look exactly alike."

Holm peered at Theo's chest. "Actually there's some differences. Anyway, I remembered I wanted to tell you something before. I'm gonna whisper it though."

But Holm didn't say anything else, just stared at the fire.

"And?" Theo finally asked.

"And what? Oh right, did you know you have the worst luck with women that I've ever heard of?"

"Are you fucking serious?" Rachel said angrily.

Holm jumped, eyes wide. He peered through the fire at Rachel. "Where did you come from? And of course I'm fucking serious! First there's you but you're a Warden and can't be with him for some reason. Then he finds another great woman but now she got killed! Geez, Rachel, stop thinking about yourself all the time. Theo's a really nice guy but his luck...did you know that you swear too much?"

Theo had a hard time not laughing when Rachel looked at him, baffled. He nodded toward Holm's bandaged hand and then mimed swallowing a pill.

Rachel nodded as she caught up. "Kid, where is your girlfriend?"

"Her name is Emmaline Placide Cosineau. Don't you know that?"

"Okay, let's get you back to bed," Theo said. "If she hears you out here using her full name, that hand will be the least of your troubles."

Holm staggered when Theo got him up and Rachel quickly came around to help. As they walked him back toward his tent, Emma ran into them. She looked at Holm and sighed.

"Do I need to tie you to something?"

"She-cat, see? Whoo hoo! Pain killers are *awesome*."

They carried him back to the tent and laid him on the cot. By the time Emma pulled the sheet up, he was already asleep.

"Why was he wandering around out there?"

"So he could tell Theo what awful luck he had with women," Rachel snapped.

Emma put her hand over her mouth to hide the obvious smile. "Hydrocodone hits Ta'avi really hard. I'm sorry."

"It's not funny," Rachel snapped.

"It was, kind of," Theo said. "Chill out, he's not in his right mind."

Rachel grumbled something as she stalked out of the tent.

Emma looked fondly at Holm. "He's such a shit-disturber. Are you okay?"

Theo shrugged and she hugged him tightly, then kissed him on the cheek.

"I think I'm going to head to bed. Gotta figure out what I'm going to tell people in the morning."

"I'll be awake for a while if you need me."

Theo patted her arm and headed for his bed.

Djoshu moved quickly and quietly through the dark, heading for the Kelthoi camp. Most of the troops had been moved out of the ship into a camp set between the rubble wall of the ancient city and the Xyalatrax ship. None of the ship's crew had moved outside, Djoshu had assumed they didn't like the smell of the Kelthoi but he looked at it in a different light now. They hadn't been moved out of the way, they'd been set out a shield against any danger from the city. Djoshu wouldn't support this alliance, none of the nobles would. The Prefcoria, or humans or whatever they were made him a little sick. They looked a little like half formed Kelthoi young, hopelessly mutated. But despite their freakish appearance, he wanted to believe them.

"Stop where you are," a voice said out of the darkness.

Djoshu stopped and held his arms away from his torso. He called out his name and they finally brought him into the camp.

"Did Fluffy make it back here?" he asked the watch leader.

The warrior stared at him. "Who?"

"The bodyguard I took with me."

"Not sure what you mean, Second. We can head up to the ship and find out."

"I don't want the Bugs to know I'm back. Can you get the Warchief out here quietly?"

"What in Mother's unholy name is a *Bug*? Second, are you drunk? Because I'm not waking the old man up if you are."

Djoshu sighed. "Warrior, get the boss. I want you do it without telling the entities on the ship that I'm here. His orders."

The watch leader's suspicious look faded. "Why didn't you say that to start? Mother's Teat, you nobles talk a lot."

"Keep using Her name and she's going to hear you. Hurry up, this is important."

Djoshu was in the watch tent, halfway through a hunk of dried meat when Otsihl's formidable bulk filled the door of the tent. Djoshu jumped to his feet and the Warchief waved him back down.

"Thought you'd disobeyed orders and gotten yourself killed," Otsihl grumbled, sitting down at the table with him. "One of you go get me a bottle. The rest of you, take a walk. Wait, do we need to boost the guard, Second?"

Djoshu shook his head and Otsihl motioned for him to keep eating as one of the sentries handed him a evil smelling bottle.

"It was uh...contraband we seized, Warchief."

Otsihl looked at Djoshu, amused. "Lucky coincidence, eh?"

"Did you get my message?"

Otsihl uncorked the bottle and took a long swallow and wiped his mouth. "Grinder? Yeah, he came in hours ago. That creature actually ordered you to do something so dishonorable?"

"And held a gun on me to keep me there."

"Any of them coming back?"

"No, I think the *Binnaa* killed them all before it knocked me out."

Otsihl grunted. "Saves us the mess of sacrificing them then. As much as I want to know how you were knocked out by a child's story, you'd best start at the beginning."

Otsihl was silent as he listened to his Second's report. He didn't say anything when Djoshu finished, just tapped the liquor bottle with a talon as he thought.

"And you believe them," he finally said.

"First, there's the *Binnaa*. In the stories, they were always the honorable ones. More importantly, I was told that the warchief's mate was killed in the fighting. Instead of seeking vengeance, he honored the Lords of War instead of taking vengeance on me."

"They bring their *mates* to war?"

"They aren't like us, Chief. I had a hard time telling the males from females."

Otsihl grunted a laugh. "Disgusting aliens. Anything concrete?"

"They have less than a section in there and it doesn't look like a combat team. If they were trying to loot the city I think there would be more of them. And their Warchief, I could tell he was resigned about having to fight without surrender. He said it was better than being executed by the Xyalartrax."

"You've brought me an interesting problem. I have to inform the First Lord but I'm going to think about this first. I don't believe that patrol leader was defective, they wouldn't have let him live. That means they'll want to sneak around and attack. Go get some sleep, we'll be busy tomorrow, one way or another."

Theo was quiet going into the house. Most of the cots were occupied by sleeping bodies but Ayr was still awake, reading something on her tablet.

"Hi," Theo whispered.

She smiled at him. "Hi. I waited up for you."

He sat down on his cot and pulled off his boots. "You didn't have to, but thank you."

"I was hoping we could sleep together?"

"I'd like that."

Theo pulled off his jacket and socks as Ayr pushed her cot next to his. He got out of the way as she piled up blankets and pillows and laid down. He got on the bed, it was a little lumpy but soft. Ayr laid on her side watching him get comfortable and then turned off the tablet.

Theo put his arm around her as Ayr cuddled against him.

"Are they going to attack us?" she whispered.

"Yeah. Probably tomorrow," he whispered back.

"We'll fight beside you."

He kissed the top of her head. "Thank you. I was going to give the Pioneers the option to fall back."

"If you want, but no one will. It's our first chance for revenge."

Theo nodded and she pressed her back against his chest. Soon they were both asleep.

Ayr was dreaming, one of those confused dreams with everyone she ever met running around pointlessly. In the middle of all of them she could see Imae waving at her but she couldn't get through the crowd of people, there were more and more of them every time she tried to get through. Imae was trying to say something but Ayr couldn't hear her.

Then she woke up, pressing herself against Theo's back. She didn't know why but she was hornier than she'd ever been. She slid her hand down over his chest, playing with his nipples. He made a noise but didn't wake up. Ayr rubbed her hard nipples against his back, pushing her hips forward to try and rub her sex against him.

Ayr woke the rest of the way up and wondered what the hell was wrong with her. Her cousin had died today along with two other people. This wasn't the time to be thinking about sex. She gently disentangled herself from Theo and rolled onto her back. She counted her breaths, trying to get herself under control. But what she needed right now was a good hard fuck. Fast and sweaty, feeling horny and dirty and...

Take your hand out of your panties right now.

After another minute Ayr knew she was never going to get back to sleep unless she took care of this. She sat up and looked around. There wasn't any light at all, trying to step over cots would just make her trip and fall. She really didn't want to explain what she was doing at the moment.

If I'm careful and keep my mouth shut...

She slipped her panties down, leaving them around one ankle. She spread her legs as wide as she could, feeling the cool air on her damp lips. One of her hands went to her nipple and the other went between her legs. The wet noise her fingers made echoed in the dark space.

Last night had been so much fun, especially when Imae had made Theo dominate her. Ayr loved the feeling of being his toy. He'd shoved his cock in her mouth, fingers wrapped in her hair...

Ayr gasped and the echo seemed incredibly loud. She bit her lip, she had to be quiet. After waiting to make sure no one else was awake, she lifted her hips slightly. Her two fingers slid in easily, hooked to touch that special little spot. Ayr's other hand reached down to tease the pucker of her ass, the same way Imae had teased her. Suddenly she was cumming, her hips thrusting in the air, needing to feel them pushing deep inside her.

There were murmurs in the dark and Ayr was horrified and amused at the same time. But unless she confessed, it was too dark for anyone to know it was her. Then she jumped as an arm wrapped around her, pulling her tight.

Anyone but Theo, she thought. She took a deep breath as his other hand slid down her side, leaving a trail of goose bumps.

"I don't know what's wrong with me," she whispered in his ear.

"It's normal," he whispered back.

She thought he might be making that up but then his hand slid between her thighs and she didn't care anymore.

"Then fuck me," she moaned, not caring who heard her. "Fuck me hard."

As Theo rolled on top of her, Ayr heard a gasp from someone else. She didn't care at the moment but smiled as it was followed by a long moan. Evidently she had inspired someone. Ayr spread her legs wider, reaching down to guide Theo's cock inside of her. She was so wet that he slid all of the way into her. Their lips met as Theo began thrusting, hard and fast like she needed. Ayr pulled his head closer with one hand and pulled on her nipple with the other. Theo's hands were under her ass now, lifting her into his thrusts. Ayr had her first orgasm as she realized that he needed this as badly as she did. There were moans and sighs around them in the darkness. Everyone needed this.

Djoshu wiped the sleep out of his eyes and rolled to his feet. There was a morning drink waiting for him and he downed it before putting on a clean uniform. He ran the bolt in his assault gun back and forth a few times and looped it over a shoulder. There was a scabbard hanging on the foot of his bed and he picked it up curiously.

You may find this useful today, a note beside it said. Djoshu pulled the blade out and examined it. It was a footman's saber, heavy with a reinforced tip and razor sharp to two-thirds of the way back. He swung it a few times to get the weight before buckling the scabbard on. He hadn't used one of these since the academy but it was Otsihl's writing on the note, so it was probably one of his blades. Djoshu smiled as he came out of the tent. It was an unexpected honor, as much as he didn't want to use the antiquated weapon.

Otsihl was sitting with a few of his officers chatting. He waved Otsihl to a seat beside him. It was a little more complicated with the sword slung between his front and back leg but no one laughed at least.

"Sleep well?"

"Yes, Warchief. And thank you for the loan."

"The gift you mean. It looks good on you. Not a lot of room in a cockpit to wear one I'd wager."

Djoshu nodded thanks as one of the footmen brought him food. "Sadly, no. It would have been handy a couple of times when I ended up on the ground unexpectedly though."

"I spoke to the First Lord this morning," Otsihl said. "He says that we do not need to declare war on the prefcoria. He says that was already taken care of by his people."

Djoshu frowned. "They said they would respect our beliefs."

Otsihl made a face like he tasted something bad. "He ordered me to arrange our troops in front of his own. We are to be given the honor of leading the attack against the city."

Djoshu was astounded. "He wants us to charge straight in?"

There were some chuckles around the circle and Otsihl nodded.

"They are not gifted tacticians. But as you said, there are not many of these prefcoria."

Djoshu put his food down. He wasn't hungry anymore. Otsihl handed him a sheet with the formations he planned and notes about the attack. Djoshu looked up at him.

"The gods are not going to be happy with this."

Otsihl flipped his hands in frustration. "And I am damned no matter what I choose. The best hope I have is that we're too far away for them to see us. If we had a damned priest, I'd be happy to listen to him but those maniacs out there killed them all. What would you do?"

Djoshu tucked the battle notes into his bag. "Be very happy that I'm just a Second and we have a brilliant Warchief leading us."

"What grubshit," Otsihl grumbled as the other officers laughed.

Theo opened his eyes, expecting to see Imae staring at him. Instead he was alone in a pile of blankets. Yesterday flooded back into his head and he sighed as he sat up. The dreams were gone as well, although he was pretty sure he'd been touching Ayr all night.

"You up?" Emma asked as she came in with coffee.

"I've been sleeping in too much," Theo said, taking the cup and sipping. "Thank Mercy it's warm."

"It's not even dawn yet. But you need to go talk to Marisol. Thermal cameras picked up Bug troops moving around."

Theo rubbed his eyes. "At least they're predictable."

Emma sat down beside him. "There's a lot of them. It looks like the Kelthoi are moving as well. So, I wanted to say something before things get busy around here."

"What's up?"

She leaned over and put her head against his. "I know the odds of walking away from this, so I wanted to say that I love you. I'm proud you're my brother."

Theo put his hand gently against her face. "I love you back. I couldn't have asked for a more amazing sister. I'm happy we got time to know each other."

She sniffed and they were quiet until they heard Marisol outside asking about him.

"Ready to go, Sparrow?"

"You and me, Tulip."

Twenty minutes later, Theo had seen the images. It looked like they were going to charge headlong at the wall.

"No sign of flankers?"

Marisol shook her head. "They're not very good at fighting on the ground. With four hundred of them, they don't really need a lot of tactical genius though."

"Any sign of the Kelthoi?"

Marisol flipped to a different camera feed. It was a narrower field of vision but more detailed. In front of the Bugs, there was a large force of Kelthoi.

"I guess they resolved their issues with the gods," Marisol said.

Theo nodded. "I sort of hoped they'd sit this out."

Marisol flipped back to the wider picture. "Even without them, there's no way we're holding all of that off."

Ayr came over and glanced at the screen. Theo saw that she'd adopted Shep's assault rifle and was weighed down with extra ammunition.

"Pioneers are loaded up and ready."

Theo and Marisol nodded and pulled on their field gear.

"This is where you go say something incredibly inspiring that echoes across centuries," Marisol said to Theo.

"Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears."

"Fourscore and seven years ago," Ayr added with a grin.

"Was a day that lived in infamy," Emma finished.

Marisol laughed and went to stand with her team. Ayr and Emma followed, leaving Theo to walk out in front of the twelve people that he was leading. It got quiet as they all looked at him.

Theo looked back and didn't see any signs of fear or uncertainty on anyone's face. He hoped they couldn't see it on his.

"I'm not sure what I'm supposed to tell you at a moment like this," he said. "I don't have any insights and this may be the last time we all stand together like this. This is a small fight on a mostly unknown planet, I have no idea if anyone will ever know what happened here. That is a shame, because the entire universe should know what kind of valiant and heroic people made

this stand. It's been an incredible privilege to work beside all of you, thank you for letting me lead you. Marisol and her team have identified spots where we'll deploy. It's good cover, make your shots count. There might not be very many of us, but the Bugs will damn sure know we were here. Let's go get to work."

Theo stiffened up and saluted all of them. They saluted back and gathered in their assigned fire teams. Everyone stopped as they headed for the wall, shaking his hand or just touching his arm. There wasn't any anger, fear, or regret on anyone's face. Emma was waiting for him and they headed for the wall as well.

"I don't like leaving wounded behind," Theo said.

"They're ready," Emma answered. "Each of them has a vial of morphine. If the Bugs break through, they know what to do."

Theo shook his head as they began to climb the steep slope to the spot Marisol had assigned them. He'd studied fights like Masada, Thermopylae, and the Alamo, but it had been how to avoid these things. No one ever said what to do when you ended up on the wrong side of the equation but it turned out to be pretty easy. You fought as hard as you could and then you died.

Over the communications net, there was an order to advance. The Kelthoi moved out at a jog, leaving the ponderous Xyalatrax behind them. When they reached the spot Otsihl had chosen, all of the troops stopped and squatted down. Otsihl gestured at the sky, calling the gods forth in a loud voice.

"Not so fast!" Otsihl shouted at an ur-male as the Xyalatrax passed them. "The sun must be in the right place in the sky! This is our cultural belief."

The ur-male shouted something rude back about warm blood filth and superstition.

"What are they playing at?" the First Lord hissed as he watched from a remote camera. "They are supposed to lead the attack."

"The one they call 'Second' said they could only attack when certain conditions were met," the third ship lord said. "The sun must be directly overhead when they make their pleas to the gods. It is a cultural belief since they are on a different planet."

"To rot with their ridiculous beliefs," First Loud said. "That was an idiotic thing to agree to, they are an idiotic culture. Enough of it, get this ship off the ground."

"My Lord?"

"We will take care of this ourselves. Scan and locate the prefcoria, we will use the ship's weapons to obliterate them!"

Third ship lord was worried. "My Lord, the allies are within..."

"They are nothing compared to what is waiting for us in that city! They will not attack so they are useless. They will learn what their defiance earns them."

"Our own troops are closing quickly as well."

"We will hatch more! And if you continue to question me, I will be feasting on your braincase tonight."

The ship began to float into the air and First Lord heard the klaxons calling the crew to battle stations.

The Bugs entered the range of Jonesy's sniper rifle first.

"This one's yours, Shep," Jonesy muttered, once they'd chosen an ur-male in the middle of the formation.

There was the usual loud thud and the spotter saw a large hole appear in the bug's thorax. The drones scattered, running in different directions.

"Target is down. Next one is for Imae," the spotter said, looking for another ur-male.

"You got it," Jonesy said, working the bolt of the rifle.

"Uh oh," the spotter said. Jonesy glanced up to see the Bug ship lifting off the ground.

"Nothing we can do about that, stay on the scope."

"Armaments, once you have the location, put an anti-matter torpedo on top of them."

"It is done," the male at the weapons console said.

Before he could start working, the ship shook slightly and there was an alarm at another console. A voice began speaking shrilly from one of the intercoms and was cut off.

"Now what is it?" the First Lord said. *I must find the hive these idiots were birthed from. Very possibly, their brains were malformed. The entire generation should be recycled into food for the others.*

"It is unclear, there has been some sort of explosion inside the ship. None of the crew is responding."

"Then use the video. Find out what's going on," Second Ship Lord snapped.

One of the monitors switched to an internal view. The few cameras operating in the area showed billowing smoke and the technician searched through the cameras, looking for a better picture.

"Go back to the last," Second Ship Lord ordered.

The smoke was thinner and a large object was moving but the details were obscured. It swiveled and moved toward the camera.

"Hive Rot! It's that fighting vehicle!" Second said. The smell of the alarm pheromone filled the bridge.

The large gun moved back and forth, almost if the thing were a beast finding a scent. Then there was a flash of light and the picture went dark.

No, not food. Their stupidity might infect the rest. Better to burn their bodies, First Lord thought as the crew tried closing doors to isolate the machine. Not surprisingly, it just rammed through.

"Who is operating the machine? All of the Kelthoi are leading the attack!" Third shrieked.

First Lord made a very human sounding sigh. "Did you allow them to access the vehicle before they were removed?"

"Yes! They had to perform cultural acts. They placed religious fetishes inside. Our instructions were to respect their culture."

First Lord groomed his thorax, trying to calm himself. *Better yet, destroy the entire colony from orbit.*

There was a dull boom that First Lord felt through his legs as much as heard. More alarms joined the cacophony on the bridge and he gripped the chair tightly as the ship lurched.

And never trust a warm-blood, the First Lord thought as he watched the horizon tilt. Something deep in the ship was throbbing now, the deck underneath him vibrating in time. *We should have sterilized that nasty little wor...*

The First Lord's thought was interrupted as a whirling piece of the bulkhead cut his upper thorax in two. He looked down, eye ridges flaring in irritation. The emotion was short lived as the deck buckled and folded around him, crushing everyone on the bridge.

"Holy shit," Marisol breathed as the ship ponderously turned on its side before crunching into a ridgeline. Gouts of fire leapt from ports and tears all over the hull as the long grinding impact reached her ears.

"You guys see that?" someone said over the radio.

"Kinda hard to miss," someone answered.

She shook her head as someone else laughed nearby. What the hell was going on here?

"And that's why we don't normally let Kaevoth near the vehicles," Otsihl said with a tone of deep satisfaction.

Djoshu stared at the distant plume of smoke. "We're going to end up in the Outer Dark for this," he said to himself.

"Hmm, me possibly," Otsihl mused. "Maybe you'll get off on a technicality."

Djoshu looked at him, horrified. "They're *gods*! There's no technicalities."

"You'd better start praying you're wrong then," Otsihl said.

A command went out over the communications network and all of Theo's team fired at nearly the same time. A dozen ur-males went down and their drones kept moving toward the wall. The formation grew ragged as some drones drifted into other groups or moved in the wrong direction. A second volley went downrange, killing more of the ur. They realized they were the targets and crouched among the drones. The gunfire switched targets, picking off any of the uncontrolled drones that were still coming towards the wall.

"Look at that! Every time one of those leaders goes down, the rest lose their minds. Most excellent!" Otsihl yelled, watching the attack.

"There are still too many of them," Djoshu called back.

Otsihl stopped and watched the swarm for a second. "Oof, too true. Well, lads! Ready for a scrap?"

There was a roar of approval in response.

"Regular order on the advance! Onward, my beauties! At them!" Otsihl bellowed and the warriors broke into a jog toward the rear of their once prospective allies.

Djoshu stood still. He'd completely forgotten the infantry commands, had no idea what he was supposed to do. He was a pilot, not some maniac warrior rolling in the dirt.

Let them gather the glory and loot, I can't spend what I have. I'll stay in the rear, I must take my report to the council. This isn't how I learned to fight, below my station...

Djoshu didn't notice that he'd begun to pant and his back legs were clawing furrows in the dust. His thoughts began to take a different tone.

I have not seen this pure path of to war, on my own two feet, eye to eye with the foe. Better to leave the gun, don't know when to shoot, yes. The pure path to honor!

Any rational thought gone, Djoshu ran to catch up with the others, holding his new saber in front of him.

"Force update," Jonesy said on the comm net. "Kelthoi are advancing. They're, uhm, yeah. They're attacking the Bugs from behind."

"Are you sure?" Marisol called back. "No visuals here."

"They're behind the trees still and they're firing into the back rank of the Bugs."

"Everyone, aim carefully," Theo ordered. "Do not fire on Kelthoi engaged with the Bugs."

Marisol came back down the line and crawled up to where Theo and Emma were concealed and firing steadily. A contingent of leaderless drones had made it most of the way to the wall and she joined the twins in firing at the skittering Bugs as they tried to climb the slope.

"You think they changed sides?" Marisol asked, once the last drone had collapsed into a twitching heap.

Theo passed her a couple of magazines. "I hope so. Let's avoid pissing them off and see what happens. I bet they'll leave us alone."

"Works for me," Marisol said and slid back down the slope behind them.

"Until they declare war on us," Emma muttered.

"Hey, one catastrophe at a time," Theo told her.

The Kelthoi worked in teams, one rank kneeling to fire into the swarm. Then they were up and moving as they reloaded, the second rank firing to cover their advance. At first, the Bugs didn't

seem aware of what was going on, but eventually one of the males realized what was happening and turned his formations to face the attack.

Usually, this would throw an infantry formation into chaos, but the centralized control worked in their favor here. Otsihl had to admire the gracefulness of the move but snarled as he saw one of his warriors drop to the return fire. Djoshu arrived seconds later, avenging the downed Kelthoi by burying his saber in the alien's neck. The drones fled as the ur-male turned and ran.

Otsihl laughed as Djoshu whipped around, searching for another Xyalatrax to kill. "Second, get your grub-loving ass back to me, now!" he bellowed.

Djoshu either ignored him or didn't hear him and seconds later he was in among another squad of the aliens. Otsihl couldn't let the young noble come to harm, he was already in enough trouble with the council. And, truth be told, he was getting fond of the flyboy.

This part was getting boring anyway. He filled his lungs and roared; "Charge them my beauties! Let these spindly grub-humpers know that they met the Kelthoi!"

With an answering roar, the troopers charged forward. The guns were dropped, replaced by the heavy sabers. The oversized right arms held the swords outstretched as the two lines came together.

"What the hell are you doing? This isn't Waterloo you lunatics!"

Emma was watching the battle between the Kelthoi and Xyalatrax, occasionally firing at drones that came near the wall. A large group of them were milling around a few males and their ur-males. Jonesy, a few meters below them, managed to shoot two of the bigger males before they realized what was happening. They moved to the flank, still trying to organize. Now, the only Bugs in range were mixed up with the Kelthoi. Jonesy sighed and watched.

There was a bigger one, bigger than all the rest, and Djoshu's vision narrowed to a tunnel as he sprinted forward, gripping the saber hilt tightly. He roared a challenge as he closed with the male, blade coming up for the killing blow. But the male spun his armored back toward Djoshu, surprising him. His arm, guided by endless hours of training, snapped the blade toward where the male's neck had been and slammed between two plates, wedging tightly between them.

The male spun away, screaming. The high pitched sound made Djoshu's fangs ache and he lost his grip on the saber as it was yanked from his hand. Djoshu saw the gun in it's hand just in time to throw himself to the side, out of the line of fire. He landed hard. Time slowed to a crawl

as the male aimed at him. Djoshu bared his fangs at his doom. There was a strange sound and the Xyalatrax stumbled forward and collapsed on top of him.

"You owe me a beer, beastie," Jonesy said.

Through the scope, he watched the Kelthoi roll out from under the Bug. Another one stopped to pull him to his feet and Jonesy glanced over at the Pioneer that was spotting for him.

"You didn't see that."

"I could run down and lure those others back here," the spotter said with a grin that made Jonesy a little nervous.

"Uh, maybe later, kid."

Fluffy grabbed Djoshu's shoulder strap and hauled him to his feet.

"Well done, Second!" the huge Kelthoi rumbled. "They always said noble blood was too thin for battle lust."

"We learn something new every day," Djoshu answered, trying to keep his legs from shaking. He'd come *that* close to meeting his ancestors.

The bigger Kelthoi yanked the blade out of the bug and handed it to Djoshu. "Try to keep hold of it next time."

With that, Fluffy ran back toward the melee, howling. Djoshu ran behind him, still surprised he was alive after that.

"What *is* your grubbing name?" Djoshu yelled as they ran.

"Fluufffy!" the other Kelthoi yelled and held his saber out as they closed with another knot of Xyalatrax.

Djoshu extended his own sword and they hit the aliens, laughing like lunatics.

"Goddam," Emma breathed.

The Kelthoi were ripping through the Bugs. Most were milling around, confused. The few remaining ur-males tried to rally them but the Kelthoi quickly ended things.

"Theo, try really hard to keep them from declaring war on us."

"That was terrifying," he agreed. "Comms open. Everyone hold your fire, weapons down and tight. Do not engage the Kelthoi unless ordered."

"Hold your fire!" was yelled up and down the line as Theo got to his feet and dusted himself off.

"Going somewhere?" Emma asked.

"Yeah, c'mon. Let's go say hi to the new neighbors," Theo said.

There was some noise from the pile of wreckage but Djoshu didn't see anyone there. Every time he looked at the piles of rubble and trees in front of them, his hands itched. All of them. Judging from the dead, they'd been shooting from their pile of buildings. Hopefully he was right about their Warchief. It wouldn't take much for them to decide the Kelthoi were next. He didn't want to think about trying to charge up that wall.

But it stayed silent. The warriors were quiet as well. The departure of the battle-joy left them tired and empty. Djoshu went to find Otsihl. This next part might get tricky.

"*Now* the gods will banish you to the Outer Dark," were the first words the warchief said to him. "Along with the rest of us, but if you're going to defy the gods you should honor them with a proper job of it."

"I'll be in good company at least," Djoshu said.

The Warchief laughed and punched him in the arm. "But, Mother's Guts, we'll take the damn place over, eh? Light some fires that they can see and we'll have our own party. Serve 'em right!"

"Chief, there's something coming out of the dark!" someone yelled.

"That's them," Djoshu said.

"Let's go meet them then."

Djoshu yelled a command to stand down as Otsihl adjusted his uniform. They had come close enough to the wall that Djoshu could see it was the prefcoria warchief and his double, along with Vuli.

The warriors were back on their feet and Djoshu could hear awed whispers of "binnaa" from around him as they walked to meet the other aliens.

"A binnaa, sure enough," Otsihl said as they drew closer. "Gah, you didn't say how ugly the other ones were."

"Chief, the binnaa at least will understand what you say," Djoshu said quickly.

Otsihl barked a laugh. "I hope so! Otherwise we'll be here staring at their stupid deformed faces all day."

Magnificent warrior, garbage diplomat, Djoshu reminded himself as the two groups stopped.

Theo recognized Djoshu with relief. The other one was bigger and he'd had a busy life judging from the number of scars on his body. Vuli stepped forward and handed one of the jury-rigged translators to Otsihl, saying something to him that Theo didn't understand. She handed the other one to Theo and he attached it to his jacket.

The older looking Kelthoi said something in the growls and hisses of the Kelthoi.

"I am the Warchief Otsihl of the Kelthoi," the translator said a second later.

"My name is Theophile Cosineau. I command the expedition here. Congratulations on your victory."

"And you are a prefcoria?"

"We are, but the prefcoria are made up of many different peoples from different worlds."

"You are the one responsible for the return of my Second here?"

"Yes. Once he explained that was no fight between us, there was no reason to keep him."

"But he may have misled you."

Theo shook his head. "He conducted himself honorably, I had no reason to suspect he was lying."

"A pretty answer but you have no conception of our honor."

"I disagree, Djoshu spoke of the Kelthoi honor. We share many concepts."

Otsihl studied him closely. "I do not know your people, whether you are young or old. How many times have you led your 'expeditions'?"

"This was my first."

"Your first! You are just a pup and they sent you here to guard this city?"

"No one knew this was here. If they had, I would have been sent somewhere else. We were here to study the geology before a new colony was founded here. All of this was a complete accident."

Djoshu closed his eyes. The human should have been bluffing, Otsihl wouldn't respect a novice commander. Across from him, Emma was thinking the exact same thing.

After a long pause, Otsihl said, "Interesting. Well, sounds like the way I got my start, can't blame you for that, can I? Let's get out of this damned sun, eh?"

Three Kelthoi were sent back to their camp and returned with a large open sided tent they quickly set up. Others went back and returned with food and chairs. The Warchief and his Second settled on them, but Theo couldn't see how he could sit on the open framed chair, so he sat on the ground instead.

"I'll return with chairs," Vuli said.

"If Marisol hasn't stood them down, tell everyone to relax and get something to eat," Theo said.

"Commander, the Kelthoi gather their forces around the place they negotiate," Djoshu said. "It allows them to become familiar, to bind the agreement."

Theo nodded at Vuli who launched herself into a run back to the city. They waited until the expedition filed out. Theo got up and introduced Marisol as his Second and one of the Pioneers brought them folding chairs.

"So few?" Otsihl asked.

"Three were killed in the Bug ambush. Two more are injured badly and cannot walk."

"Then you can glimpse my pain when your ship destroyed six hundred and fifty of mine."

Theo's face flushed but he didn't look away from Otsihl. "We did not know the Kelthoi were aboard. The only thing our pilot saw were two Xyalatrax ships and he did what he could to help us."

"I still am having trouble understanding that method of war."

"It's not a common attack," Marisol said. "Only in the most extreme cases where nothing else can be done."

"We are deluded if we believe we can understand the minds of aliens," Otsihl said. "My Second told me that he asked for your surrender and you refused."

"That's right."

"With the Xyalatrax removed, I will extend this offer once more. There aren't many of you, you should be behind my blade."

Djoshu looked at Otsihl, wondering what he was doing.

"How can we surrender when there's no fight between us? And I cannot declare war on behalf of the Commonwealth. As I said, I'm very junior."

Otsihl put his hand over his translator. "Well, he doesn't panic and our pup has a brain," he said to Djoshu. "Follow my lead and stop looking at me like that. I only offend the gods once a day."

"Let me make a counter offer," Theo said. "The same terms, except you surrender to me."

Otsihl made a point of looking at Theo's team and then back at his own war clan. "Perhaps your brains are as deformed as your body? Or are you not able to properly see?"

"I don't disagree, your forces could easily crush mine. But you'd still lose, because you forgot to answer a very important question."

Otsihl showed his teeth and there was a low, liquid growl. Emma had a strong urge to kick Theo in the shin.

"What question is that?" the translator box said.

Theo smiled at the Kelthoi. "How are you getting home?"

There was a long silence.

"A very good question indeed," Otsihl finally said. "Anyway, I can't declare war either, all the damn priests were on the other ship. Not that I'm interested in fighting, I was curious what you were made of."

"Friends then," Theo said, sticking out his hand.

Otsihl looked at it curiously and Djoshu said something to him. Theo's hand was enveloped by the massive fist of Otsihl's sword arm.

"Tiny deformed armless little friends, yes."

Djoshu stood up and extended his sword arm to Marisol and they shook. Emma traded hand clasps with Otsihl as well. She pointedly looked at the two pairs of arms on his torso.

"Well, if some people had been less greedy, maybe there would have been some arms left over for everyone else," she said.

Otsihl and Djoshu both made a low howling noise the translator interpreted as laughter.

"For the record, I think I have the perfect number of limbs," Vuli said, touching her hands with the Warchief and his second.

Three days later, Theo and Vuli were sitting underneath a mended patchwork that had served as their command tent before the retreat into the shadowed city. It was the end of the short day and the blood-red sun had just slipped behind a ridge. In the space between the

Commonwealth and Kelthoi camps, Emma, and a few of the others were teaching some of the Kelthoi how to play soccer. Earlier in the day, the Kelthoi had demonstrated the game they played, sort of a cross between rugby and Afghani buzkashi. They'd half jokingly invited the team to play, an offer that all of them had wisely turned down. Jonesy had decided to teach them soccer instead. So far, human dexterity was holding off the Kelthoi's size, strength, and extra legs.

"We're in trouble if they ever figure out how to pass between their front and back feet," Holm said and Theo nodded.

"Theo, how is your report progressing?" Vuli asked.

"I'm glad I can use a laptop instead of writing everything in long-hand," he answered. "Is a First Contact Report really necessary if they met the Gyr?"

"I have spoken to several Kelthoi who know the stories of that time. The Gyr that they describe, their mannerisms and culture, are unfamiliar to me. So you must continue your report but I will assist you tomorrow."

After the agreement with the Kelthoi, Ayr set her Pioneers to repairing and salvaging the tents and the members of the expedition began setting up a new camp. This time, Theo had a small tent of his own across from Emma and Holm. In one way, the privacy was welcome but he missed the camaraderie they'd had in the larger tent. Very quickly that had turned into mourning the loss of Imae all over again. On the first night of the new camp, Theo had excused himself early and retreated to the relative privacy of his tent. Emma had brushed off questions, saying he was exhausted. His waves of grief and anger were obvious to her and she started to get up, but Deidre had put a gentle hand on her shoulder and shaken her head minutely.

"Some things he has to do alone," she'd said, just loud enough for Emma to hear.

Deidre had been helping pack everything that afternoon and had heard part of a conversation between Ayr and Theo from inside the building:

"I didn't think we'd survive today," Ayr had said. "I think we need to talk."

"I figured," Theo answered, sounding exhausted. "I know what you're going to say though. It's fine, I understand."

"You don't know what I'm going to say," Ayr had snapped at him.

It was quiet inside the building and Deidre had been thinking of an excuse to interrupt them when Ayr started talking again.

"I'm sorry, being a bitch is the last thing I wanted to do."

"No, don't apologize, I shouldn't have said that. I'm at the end of my rope here."

It was quiet and Deidre had risked a peek inside to see them embracing tightly.

"I fell in love with you when I found out who you were," Ayr said quietly. "Learning who you were just made me love you more."

"But not the right kind of love," Theo said.

"I saw the way you looked at Imae and I really wanted to be part of that. But she told me about the dreams, Theo. You had your arm around me last night and there wasn't anything, was there?"

"That isn't conclusive and it isn't anything to base a relationship on anyway."

"I don't think it's something to ignore either. This has as much to do with me as you. Do you think we could ever be together without the ghost of Imae whispering to me? Even now, I know she's yelling at me for doing this. But more than being your lover, I always wanted to be your friend. If we keep going, I don't think we'd end up as either."

"I know," Theo said quietly. "And I'm really happy you still want to be friends."

"For always," she said. "Besides, when we get back, we're going back to our old jobs, right? I'll be chasing groundhogs and you and Emma will be out doing secret whatever."

Deidre had quietly walked away at that point, wiping her eyes. She'd kept an eye on the two of them after that, they seemed closer than before but just friends. But she'd kept Emma from propping up Theo again, knowing he needed solitude for this. She remembered the angry young man that had nearly killed himself walking away from the Ranch and knew Theo was remembering that as well. He'd come a long way since then, but a broken heart still needed its own space.

As they watched the soccer game, Deidre looked over at Theo and affectionately punched him in the arm.

He smiled at her. "What's that for?"

"Eh, my hand slipped. How is Rachel doing with the shuttle?"

"She's still inside, but she stopped yelling at everyone at least."

Vuli made the cracking rock noise that signified Gyr laughter. The Kelthoi had offered to help move the shuttle out into the open and Rachel had refused at first. A night spent alone in the city had changed her mind though. But even with Vuli carefully supervising the hundred or so Kelthoi, Rachel had hovered over all of them like a nervous mother. Otsihl had been watching as they propped up the shuttle onto the log rollers when some of his warriors lost their grip on the ropes. The craft had fallen less than a finger's width onto the log. Nothing had been harmed but it didn't matter. Otsihl had been impressed at the volume of her yelling, and even without a

translator, he knew that her ability to rant and swear rivaled his own. Finally they'd gotten the shuttle through the gap in the debris wall and into the open before she had demanded they stop. She and Vuli had disappeared into the shuttle after that, working on what they could repair but refusing any offers of help.

"Uh oh, that's got to be a foul," Holm announced as there was a muffled 'boom'.

Emma had been teasing a huge Kelthoi that Djoshu called "Fluffy" although everyone was sure there was something wrong with the translator. She and Betsy had been teasing him, passing the ball back and forth around him. Fluffy had tried in vain to get a foot on the ball but Emma had recovered it and then kicked the ball between his legs as she ran around him and recovered it without Fluffy touching it. Then she'd gone too far and taunted him. Fluffy had solved the annoyance by simply picking Emma up and stomping the ball flat. Now she was struggling to get free, laughing hysterically. Betsy ran to help but was scooped up by another Kelthoi who ran for the goal, followed by Fluffy, the two women held over their heads. Emma and Betsy were both set down over the goal line and Otsihl loudly declared two points for the Kelthoi. There were laughter and protests as the players headed to the tent in the center of the camp. Otsihl and Emma walked together, laughing and occasionally shoving each other.

"I think I might be jealous," Holm said.

Theo laughed. Emma and the Warchief had become close friends very quickly. It seemed strange to most of them, except Theo. Once you took away the differences in their shapes, Otsihl and Emma were kindred spirits.

"Hmm, she *was* over there especially late last night," Theo said. He laughed again as Holm gave him the finger.

"Can you fix it?" Djoshu asked Jonesy, who was carrying the remains of the ball.

He showed the Kelthoi the split that covered half the ball. Djoshu started to give Fluffy hell but Emma defended him, announcing to everyone that she was aggravating and would have done the same thing. She gave Otsihl a look when he wholeheartedly agreed that she was aggravating.

"Want me to see if someone has another ball?" Holm asked as the players sat on the ground to catch their breath and drink water.

"Nah, getting too dark to see," Betsy said. "Tomorrow we could try baseball though."

"We'd have to put the outfield two miles away!" Jonesy protested.

"How many games do these aliens have?" one of the Kelthoi grumbled. "How do they get anything done?"

There were laughs at that and they were deep into a discussion of how to modify the rules when there was an earsplitting double boom overhead. At the same time, intense white light erupted all around them. There were yells and sounds of confusion from both camps. Otsihl and the others shot to their feet and Theo was fascinated to see that they'd formed a ring around the humans and Ta'avi.

"Stand down!" Marisol yelled from the camp. "These are ours, everyone calm down!"

There was a rustling, scurrying sound from the darkness and then they saw the white light glinting off of shiny black shapes.

"Oh shiiit," one of the human Cadets gasped as he recognized the shapes.

"Chill out," Emma said loudly as the Ulthira emerged into the light. "These are friends, everyone calm down."

Theo stepped in front of Djoshu and the rest of the team encircled the Kelthoi moments later.

"These are not an enemy," Theo said loudly. "Hold your fire, everything is under control!"

"What happened to the shuttle telling them what was going on?" Emma muttered.

"Maybe something broke," Theo muttered back.

The Ulthira encirclement slowed and weapons were lowered but the large group still converged on the tent between the two camps. There was noise from the other side of the camp, but it sounded more like surprise than combat. The Ulthira stopped a few meters away. They were wearing uniforms and carrying weapons and it made them even scarier.

"Warchief Theo, about that surrender," Otsihl said quickly. "I'm prepared to consider your offer."

"Where is Commander Cosineau?" one of the Ulthira asked.

"Right here," Theo said, walking forward.

Behind him, Emma was assuring the Kelthoi that everything was okay. Theo hoped she was right, things still felt incredibly tense. Two of the Ulthira walked out to meet him, chattering back and forth.

"This communications specialist claims to recognize you," one of them said.

Theo looked at the other one. He couldn't really tell them apart, but he had a guess.

"From the Long Axis station, right? We traded greetings."

"I am glad to see you are well," the Ulthira replied and walked back to the force surrounding them.

"I am the Deputy Tactical Commander of the Fifth Special Deployment Group," the other Ulthira said. "I go by Doddridge to your people. Where are the Xyalatrax?"

"Most of them are dead, thanks to the Kelthoi. Some low level Bugs fled to the southwest a couple days ago."

"They will be easily found by my hunters."

"Thank you for coming," Theo said, almost feeling bad for the drones.

The Ulthira seemed surprised. "We are closely allied, this is what friends do. These others are native to the planet?"

"The Bugs were trying to recruit them as allies, the Kelthoi are very proficient at fighting. This was a test mission, the Kelthoi Warchief disobeyed orders and attacked the Bugs. It's kind of complicated."

"I understand. I will say that I am happily a lowly surface commander. Your reports will be a nightmare to complete. When the situation is stabilized, you will all be evacuated. Until then, we will set a perimeter around this side of the camp against stray Xyalatrax."

"We've got a damaged shuttle and some casualties that need medical help."

"I understand. On the opposite side of the camp is a detachment of Xero'pah. They have medical support behind the assault troops. You may want to talk to their commander however. He has proven difficult at times."

Theo stepped back and saluted. Doddridge clumsily returned it. Theo reassured the Kelthoi they weren't in any danger and they began returning to their camp. They seemed to be even more uncomfortable around the Ulthira than humans were.

"I'm going to take a look around," Theo said to Deirdre.

"We'll be right here," she said.

Along with Emma, Theo walked to the "hospital tent" where the injured Pioneer and Cadet were staying. There were already several Xero'pah in their ornate black and silver uniforms inside, so he went looking for their commander. Then he heard Betsy and Marisol arguing with someone and headed in that direction.

They were yelling at a Xero'pah in an even more ornate uniform with two armed elves behind him. Betsy and Marisol stood between them and one of the Kelthoi.

"Quiet, Human! You know the treaty that your betters signed, you know this is law. Now stand aside or you will be imprisoned as well."

Theo had to push down the rage as he walked over. He'd already been warned about the arrogance of the elves toward younger races. But he didn't care how long they'd been around, no one talked to his people that way.

The leader started to push forward, the guards pushing the furious women out of the way. All three of them froze when Theo and Emma pulled out their pistols and chambered rounds. They stopped uncomfortably close to the Xero'pah who took a step back.

"Who the hell are you and what are you doing here?" Theo asked.

"I am the Ground Tactics Coordinator. My name is..."

"I don't have all night to stand around and listen to your name," Theo interrupted. "Tell your thugs to step back and answer the other question please."

"Why would I follow your orders?" the other commander sneered. "I am tasked with..."

"Because I'm Commander Theophile Cosineau and you're in my Area of Operations," Theo interrupted again. "If those two don't back off, I'm going to tell Chief Sergeant Gutierrez, Sergeant Adams, *and* my Warden here to begin taking whatever action they feel is necessary to ensure compliance with my orders."

The two armed elves looked less sure of themselves and stepped back when the commander made a curt hand gesture.

"Your Warden...I did not know you were the commander. You are not in a uniform I recognize."

"We're a little more subtle with rank," Theo said. "What's the problem here?"

"These are enemy allies. You are subject to Commonwealth law and required to hand over prisoners to the ranking authority. Me, in other words."

"Hmm, someone has misled you. You're not the ranking authority, I am."

"You? A wet-behind-the-ears Terran?" he scoffed. "You don't even hold Commonwealth rank."

"I don't have to," Theo said, smiling at him and stepping closer. "You are in an active combat area on a neutral world. I am both the local authority *and* the allied commander. You are under my jurisdiction."

"Active combat area?" the Elf spat. "We observed you playing games with these beings. No one was fighting."

"Oh, well, that's true. I guess they're not hostile then."

"Of course not!"

"Then why are you trying to arrest them?"

The Xero'pah glared at him. "That is *not* the way the law works."

"Neither does it work the way you intend, Coordinator," a new voice said.

Two more Xero'pah faded into view, wearing very different uniforms. They were mottled brown, green, black, all of it shifting and changing as Theo watched. Then they touched something on the collar of the tunic and the shifting faded into a grayish-green.

"I'll confirm Mr. Cosineau's claim as local authority. I'll be certain to compliment your zealous devotion to duty. If you'll return to supervising your forces, I have some matters to discuss with the Commander."

The haughty elf looked very uncomfortable and stammered excuses as he back away. Three more of the camouflaged Xero'pah appeared near the first pair. They both looked amused and one of them winked at Emma.

The senior Xero'pah looked at the four standing there. "Forgive the misunderstanding, he's quite young and still hot blooded. If you'll allow me, I am Coordinator Olamoira Chaenath Trisan Faraine Teydora. Familiarly, I am simply Teydora."

Theo wondered what young meant for a race that was nearly immortal but didn't want to ask.

"Your people will not be harmed, I swear this," Teydora said to the Kelthoi. "If any of you are bothered by anyone, tell them you walk with darkness. They will not be foolish enough to persist."

"I understand this," the Kelthoi said. He briefly rested his largest hands on Marisol and Betsy's shoulders. "Your honor is unquestioned, puny ones."

With that, he turned and jogged off toward the Kelthoi camp.

Betsy snorted a laugh and Marisol was working hard not to.

"Go make sure there's no more trouble, Sergeant Puny," she said to Betsy.

"Aye aye, Chief Sergeant Puny," Betsy answered and jogged toward the Kelthoi camp as well.

"The Adornment of Deep Waters is a close friend of mine," Teydora said quietly. "Would that be enough of an introduction for now?"

"Yes ma'am," Theo said. "We can walk toward the debris wall if you need privacy?"

She smiled at Marisol and Emma. "If you'd accompany us?"

Emma and Marisol followed, between the two of them and the rest of the drably uniformed Xero'pah.

"Adornment of Deep Water?" Emma muttered to Marisol.

"It's Polynesian," Marisol quietly said. "Translates to someone's name?"

"Oh, then they're..."

"Emma. I need you to get your head back in the game. No names right now, okay?"

Emma's face turned red. "Shit, I just noobed out bad. I apologize, Chief."

Marisol thumped her shoulder. "It's a weird night, don't sweat it."

Ahead them, Theo and Teydora stopped and she took a long look at the wall, although Theo wasn't sure how much she could see in the gloom.

"It's more interesting on the far side," he said. "But it's easier to see in the daytime."

"This is a fascinating sight however. The Founders were not infallible after all."

"It looked like whatever it was didn't quite work. The destruction tapers off rapidly after a hundred meters or so."

She looked at him, eyebrows raised. "You willingly went in there?"

"We had no idea what was in there at first. I had guessed but it was only confirmed when Vuli noticed the streets formed a warning sign from above. After the Bugs arrived, we didn't have a lot of choice."

"When your forebears began to abandon the empire..."

"Ma'am, I'd appreciate if you didn't refer to them that way. My forebears were human and Garragh."

She looked surprised and then amused. "I beg your pardon, Commander. You're not impressed by the Founders?"

Theo felt the tingling heat in his face and hoped she didn't notice. "They were impressive but I have zero respect for them."

"Because they abandoned their children?"

"Because they abandoned their children in a house they set on fire."

Teydora studied him. "Kawehi said you were fascinating. I begin to see why. Well, when the Founders *withdrew*, they systematically evacuated and destroyed all of their places. There are a few accounts of what happened. It can be imagined as an inside out explosion. Along the edges, a curtain of fire erupted and moved inward, erasing everything as it went. But here for some reason, it was an incomplete process. You've found something very important to the entire Commonwealth here, congratulations."

"Ma'am, I wasn't looking for it..."

"No, I'm very aware of your mission parameters, Mr. Cosineau. I gave the instructions to your captain. It seems you're just very lucky."

Theo silently nodded, it didn't feel like good luck to him.

"Tell me about your new friends."

Theo recounted the story, Emma and Marisol helped by filling in details he'd forgotten.

"I said that we would try to get them home," Theo finally finished.

She nodded. "We certainly won't maroon them here. It may be a while before we can locate their home planet."

"There had to be nav computers in the ships," Marisol said.

"I agree, Chief Sergeant, but the heat of reentry will have melted and fused anything as delicate as a computer. We've never found an intact Xyalatrax ship, so the engineers wouldn't even know what they're looking for."

Emma, Theo, and Marisol looked at each other.

"The wreckage of the ship to the south-southeast fell from a couple of hundred meters," Marisol said. "It was lifting when the Kelthoi sabotaged it somehow."

The Xero'pah's eyebrows went up. "That's very interesting. Are you aware of the Commonwealth bounty on Xyalatrax technology?"

Theo and Emma shook their heads and Marisol said that her teams had only worked on Earth.

"Now you know," Teydora said. "One of my nephews came across pieces of a landing assembly and became very wealthy. I can't imagine how much your team has earned here."

"The Kelthoi ma'am. We didn't have anything to do with it," Theo said.

He glanced at Marisol, she gave him a nod and actually smiled.

"I think you have a bright future in the Commonwealth, Mr. Cosineau," Teydora said.

Theo forced a smile and nodded. It was nice of her to say, but he couldn't do this again.

There was a whirring and muffled clang as the jaws on the recovery ship closed around Number Eight. A recovery team of Gyr had arrived in the early afternoon, landing their spider-legged ship next to the shuttle. Rachel had been politely, but firmly, pushed out as the Gyr began going over the shuttle. She was standing with everyone else, watching as the recovery

ship gently lifted Number Eight into the air. It climbed rapidly after a minute and was lost in the glare of the bright sun.

"That's the last of our equipment," Theo said. "Our ride up will be landing in thirty-five minutes. I'm going to head over and say goodbye to the Kelthoi."

Most of the warriors were out helping the Xero'pah engineers clear the worst of the wreckage away. Otsihl and Djoshu were sitting in a tent arguing over a chess board. One of the Pioneers had thanked the Warchief with a traveling set he carried. After they'd managed to translate the rules, chess spread through the Kelthoi like wildfire. The ground was scoured for sticks and stones as the warriors made their own sets.

"This nobleman thinks he can cheat right in front of my face," Otsihl told them.

"It's not cheating, it's called 'castleing'" Djoshu said and pointed at the sheet of rules.

"Bah, you probably wrote those in last night," Otsihl said, winking at Theo and the rest of them.

The Kelthoi weren't comfortable with the quiet, contemplative nature of chess and argued, shouted and threatened each other as they played. Theo had forbid anyone to tell them about life-sized chess. He figured they'd work that out pretty quickly themselves but in the meantime, he didn't want to be responsible for kicking off any civil wars.

"Warchief Otsihl of the Kelthoi, Warchief Second Djoshu, We've come to say goodbye. Our shuttle will be here soon."

Otsihl and Djoshu got up and the two Warchiefs and their Seconds all traded formal bows.

"I hope your trip home comes quickly," Theo said to Djoshu.

"So do I, we have important things to say to our people. If they cannot find the maps, they say there will be a place for us until our home is rediscovered."

"Come to Terra," Theo said. "We've got plenty of space and. I think you'd enjoy meeting a bear."

Djoshu bowed again. "That's very kind of you. I hope to guest you in my own home in return."

Emma hugged Otsihl, which surprised him at first but he gently hugged her back with his four smaller arms.

"Goodbye, scary vicious monster," Emma said.

"Goodbye, puny deformed female," Otsihl replied. "I have enjoyed your company."

"You travel safe and don't take any stupid chances, understand?"

Otsihl sighed. "You are still not one of my wives, puny one. But I understand your orders and I will do my best."

She thumped his chest gently. "Good. If you don't, I'm going to find them and tell them you disobeyed."

"What a terrible thought, all of you together."

Emma let go of him and the Warchief looked at Theo. "You're certain that everything is safe, being on a ship with those beings?"

The Xero'pah ship would remain in orbit, guarding the teams as they went through the wreckage below. Theo and the rest of the team would be catching a ride home with the Ulthira.

"I'm told they eat nothing but plants," Theo said. "And that we frighten them just as much."

"Plants? That's obscene," Djoshu said. "They are unnatural."

The two Kelthoi walked them back to the area marked off for the shuttles. The whine of engines announced the Ulthira shuttle and the two Kelthoi waved once before heading back to their game.

The inside of the shuttle was a utilitarian khaki color. There were seats designed for Ulthira bodies, but metal sheeting had been attached to them, making a hard bench for the humans to ride on. The Ulthira that worked as the crew chief was polite but once he'd pointed out the straps that would hold them in, he disappeared forward. There were some chuckles as they heard the door bolted shut behind him.

Theo looked out at Alnatic as the shuttle lifted. The landscape began to move underneath them as the shuttle accelerated. Another hour and they'd be on board the Ulthira ship. Then the long boring transit to the station and another ship home.

Then I can politely resign, he thought. Unless they throw me out first.

Outside, the sky darkened and stars began to appear as they entered orbit. Ahead of them was the Ulthira ship. There were no lights, it was just a black shape defined by the absence of stars.

"How are you doing?" Deidre asked from behind him.

"Ready to go home."

She put her arm around his shoulder and they watched as the sky darken outside.

Epilogue

The Ulthira cruiser slowly moved toward the berthing area that extended from the end of the Long Axis station like an old-fashioned TV antenna. The two badly wounded had been transferred by shuttle to the station along with most of their equipment. The whole process was a lot faster than it had been aboard the Aardvark, they were led to a passageway that ended in an airlock.

On the other side they followed more corridors to the center of the "antenna." It was an open shaft and in the center was a large cable carrying a series of tiny platforms with handholds. There were a few Gyr and prefcoria in different uniforms waiting to help them. Vuli demonstrated how the lift worked, stepping across a warning line into the low gravity area and drifting out to the central cable. It was slowly sliding past and she easily grabbed one of the bars beside the platforms and pulled herself onto the step. A few of them had used the system before and helped the others aboard. A few of them didn't like heights and kept their eyes tightly shut as Marisol and Rachel handed them across.

"We could use the passages down, but it would take hours," Betsy explained. "Right now, the cable moving very slowly, you should see it during an launch drill."

Theo looked down the endless shaft and swallowed. "No thanks."

Marisol stepped across the line and into the microgravity. "Come out here and look down the shaft, tell yourself it's horizontal instead of vertical."

Theo was doubtful but pushed himself out. There was a slight tug of gravity as he grabbed the handholds and his head swam a little as up and down switched around. Emma followed him and landed on the station behind his.

"Don't worry about falling into any of the hatches," she said. "The gravity field ends around your chest, just enough to convince your inner ear that you're standing upright."

Theo watched one of the hatches go past underfoot. There were some curious prefcoria watching them go past and he swallowed against a sudden rush of saliva in his mouth and kept his eyes ahead for the rest of the trip to the station.

"How do you get off?" he called, finally seeing a bulkhead in front of him.

"It's very easy, just follow me," Betsy said in front of him.

Yellow lights flashed as they slowly crossed a boundary and Betsy pushed herself over to a platform and ladder sticking out from the wall.

"Don't think about it," Emma said from behind him. "Just go."

Theo couldn't help but think about it but pushed himself off. He was pulled toward the platform and by the time his feet touched the ladder, gravity was once again underneath his feet. He climbed into the passageway, Betsy helping him up. There was a short passageway that ended in a large open hatch.

"Brass waiting out there," Marisol said quietly.

Theo nodded and got out of the way as Emma climbed up the ladder. When they had everyone off, there was a siren and the cable began to speed up.

"We are in a main passage to the Habitat," Vuli said. "Soon this passage will be congested."

Theo took the hint and led the team down to the lock. As they stepped into the open area beyond, Theo saw Kawehi and Teydora waiting.

"Wait, wasn't she on Alnatic too?" Emma whispered.

Theo nodded as they walked across to the welcoming party. He suddenly couldn't remember if he was supposed to salute or something else official but Kawehi solved the problem by walking out to meet them. She looked in Theo's eyes as she shook his hand.

"Welcome home, Lieutenant."

Theo's head was spinning. He wanted her arms around him, wanted her to tell him it was okay. At the same time, he wanted to punch her in the mouth for sending them out there... "Thank you, Captain. I have some walking casualties that need to go to medical."

She nodded over her shoulder. "There's a medical team waiting for them over there. How are you?"

Theo shrugged slightly, still having no idea what to say. Kawehi squeezed his hand gently before she let go.

"What else do you need?"

"A shower and some strong coffee," Theo said.

She smiled slightly. "It's three in the morning Terra time. Let's get your team set up with some bunks instead."

Theo looked over his shoulder. Marisol and the rest were waiting a few steps back.

"I want to congratulate all of you on the outstanding work you did," Kawehi announced. "We'll wait until we're back on Earth for and of the official debriefs. The flight home will arrive in thirty-six hours. Please don't tear up the place in the meantime."

There were some smiles but they all looked tired. The Ulthira had done their best to make things comfortable but everyone had been too wired to relax much. A Gyr appeared, handing

out interactive maps of the station. Marisol glanced at Theo and raised her eyebrow fractionally. Surprised that she wasn't asking Kawehi, he nodded and they headed for their rooms.

The maps lead them to a large octagonal room with a large number of doors. In the middle of the room was comfortable furniture and what looked like a bar.

"This cluster is a VIP area," Kawehi said. "There's food and so on in the lounge there. Your names are on the doors to your rooms."

"If any of you insomniacs wander off, make sure you have a map," Theo told the team. "Also, these rooms are equipped with electric lights. Let's not panic the station AI by lighting candles."

"Cooking fires are out of the question," Marisol added.

There was a tired laugh and people began finding their rooms. The Xero'pah sat down in the center of the room. Theo didn't know if they had rooms and was too weary to worry about it. And he still needed to talk to Kawehi.

"Can I trust you to get some sleep?" Marisol asked Theo. "Or I should I just take your tablet away now?"

"Captain, I need to speak with you first," Theo said. "This is urgent. Somewhere private the three of us can talk."

Both of them looked at him curiously.

"Okay," Kawehi said. "Is this an immediate problem?"

"It could be. I've been putting pieces together since we left Alnatic and I don't like what I'm seeing."

Kawehi glanced at the Xero'pah sitting together and raised an eyebrow at Theo.

"Do you trust her?" Theo asked.

Kawehi looked thoughtful. "Yes, further than I'd trust most Xero'pah."

Theo nodded and Kawehi went over to whisper in Teydora's ear.

"What's going on?" Marisol asked Theo quietly.

Theo looked at her. "Something occurred to me on the ride back here. I would have brought it up with you but I didn't know how secure the berthing area was."

Marisol nodded. "Yeah, good thinking."

"There's a privacy generator in the room next door," Kawehi said, coming back with Teydora.

The room contained a large table and a screen but nothing else. Teydora opened a panel near the door and did something to the control panel. Theo felt his skin tingle slightly. There was a

hiss of white noise that didn't seem very loud until he realized he couldn't hear anyone talking unless he was standing within a meter of them.

"Okay, Theo," Kawehi said. "What's wrong?"

"I strongly believe that there are at least two moles in the Commonwealth. They're probably high rank."

Kawehi frowned but Teydora just looked curious. "Tell me how you came to this conclusion," she asked.

"The city on Alnatic, I'm assuming it's a big deal?"

Teydora nodded. "As you'll find out, that's something of an understatement."

"Vuli said the Gyr surveyed the planet for a long time but never found the city. She was very embarrassed about it, so I assume the Gyr surveys are usually thorough."

She nodded. "Like everything else they do."

"The material the buildings are made of seem to absorb or block radio as well as other wavelengths we tried. So, obviously the Gyr scans wouldn't find it. Other than being annoyed that it was in the way of my mission, I didn't think about it after that."

"Annoyed," Kawehi said.

Marisol nodded. "Don't get between him and a mission objective."

"It was an important mission," Theo said. "While I was working on my report on the flight back, I went over some of our aerial pics. The streets were laid out to form a shape, one that frightened Vuli. She had some memory of it being a warning to stay away."

Teydora nodded. "There are stories of forbidden worlds, places only the Founders were allowed. They were always marked with warning signs to keep ships away."

"Then how could a centuries long survey miss it?" Theo asked. "Vuli also mentioned that she didn't know who had worked on that area of the continent. She also said that the survey team was less than a hundred Gyr living on one ship in close quarters. Another statement Vuli made was that the Gyr have a difficult time keeping secrets from each other. From that I assume that none of them worked in that area. But at least one of the Gyr did see it and had some way to keep everyone else away from it. Find the individual that can keep a secret from the rest of the Gyr and that's your mole."

"You said there are two. Where does the other traitor come in?" Teydora asked.

"Someone else had to relay the information to the Bugs. The Gyr that discovered it couldn't leave. Survey teams had to be kept out of the area without anyone noticing. The find had to be leaked to the Dominion by another agent. They were probably already in contact, this wasn't

that long ago so the war was already being fought. I think they've been in contact for a long time, there's probably more than just this instance."

"Why do you say that?" Kawehi asked.

"It was their ships. It's easy for a ship to be lost in jump space, unless there's an arrival beacon, correct?"

"Something happens to them," Teydora said. "As high as thirty percent over long distance."

"Otsihl, the Kelthoi commander, told me that he'd lost 650 of his warriors when Marcus took out the cargo ship. He knew all of the officers by name. And he was upset that they'd died outside of a battle. But he never mentioned losing any on the transit, never mentioned other ships."

"How well did you know this Kelthoi?"

"Pretty well. We had some long talks about the philosophy of command. And we played chess together."

"Chess?"

Theo looked embarrassed. "Yeah, we tried soccer but they're three meters tall and have four legs. Someone tried chess and they really got into it. Anyway, if the Dominion was jumping blind, they would have sent more ships, right? They must have an arrival beacon somewhere between Alnatic and wherever they came from."

"More than one, the beacons have a finite radius," Teydora said. "And it does take a long time to get a Slingshot network in place if you want to keep it a secret."

She tapped her chin with a long finger, looking at each of them. The cornea of her eyes seemed much too large. At the moment they were green, but when she had met them an hour ago, they had looked silver. And Theo was sure that they'd been coal black on Alnatic. In the middle of each was a pupil that seemed to shift between different shapes. The effect was disquieting but not unpleasant. Still, Theo had a hard time looking away from her.

"I am sorely tempted to hide all three of you. Somewhere far away," she finally said. "But I need your talents right now, so that won't work. Who else have you talked about this with?"

"No one, this is too dangerous."

"You're beginning to impress me, Lieutenant. This isn't the first incident with suspicious activity, but perhaps someone made a mistake this time. As you probably guessed, this is a very delicate matter and must be handled carefully. I will need your help later, but for now I want complete silence about this. Understood?"

After the meeting with Teydora, Marisol and Kawehi headed for Marisol's room, talking about the mission.

"What did you think of the team in general?" Kawehi asked as Marisol unlaced her boots.

"I'm guessing the mix of talents was an experiment? The integration was nearly perfect. I wasn't sure about having Pioneers on the team but they were a good addition. The skill sets meshed very well and they worked their butts off."

Kawehi smiled. "Good. Are you going straight to bed?"

"Let me get a shower, it'll wake me up a little."

"You should take this gentleman with you," Kawehi said, holding out a bottle of E. H. Taylor bourbon.

"I think I love you," Marisol said. "Want to come in and make it a threesome?"

Kawehi quickly started unbuttoning her shirt and Marisol laughed as she went to turn the water on.

Half an hour later both women were on the bed wrapped in towels. Kawehi was sitting against the headboard while Marisol laid flat on her back, using post-hypnotic suggestions to relax her knotted muscles.

"What did you think of Theo's leadership?"

Marisol stretched once more and took a deep breath before answering. "He had the usual mother-hen reaction when we landed, but Emma helped by forcing him to sleep. I'm not sure anyone else could. It reminded me over another green lieutenant her first time out in the weeds."

"I don't know who you're talking about," Kawehi said.

"Oh, I'm sure you don't. He did very well otherwise, I was impressed. I didn't agree with every decision he made, but most of them worked out. I assume you already downloaded his report?"

"Teydora's people did that for me, I've read most of it already. It's kind of heartbreaking, his narration of events changes after the casualties."

"How so?" Marisol asked, pointing at the bottle of bourbon beside Kawehi.

Kawehi handed it to her. "It starts off sounding very much like Theo, a little humorous and very conversational with a lot of insights. After the first attack, it becomes very clinical and by-the-book. Still a good report but his heart wasn't in it anymore. It's never easy losing friends."

Marisol took a swallow of bourbon and coughed slightly. "Were you aware that one of the Ta'avi dead was his lover? Imae?"

Kawehi closed her eyes. "No, I didn't. After seeing him interact with Ayr, I assumed they would make that connection actually."

Marisol smiled slightly. "If the rumors are right, it was actually both of them at once."

Kawehi looked down at her and Marisol nodded.

"Only Theo," Kawehi said. "But they hardly looked at each other in arrival though. Does she blame him?"

"I don't think so. They're friendly but the neon "we're fucking" signs over their heads are definitely dark."

Kawehi sighed. "That poor kid."

Marisol sat up and looked at her. "I know what he was like when he got here, but you have to stop thinking of him as a kid. He was worried about the team more than his own life and acted accordingly. Then he walked out to meet the Kelthoi without a second thought. Even Emma was second guessing that plan but he was as calm as ever. I don't care how old he is, Theo is a man."

Kawehi looked surprised. "Thank you. I didn't realize what I was doing."

"You're welcome. There's one other thing."

"What's that?"

Marisol flipped her towel open. "You owe me a backrub."

Kawehi smiled, looking at the other woman's dark nipples and hard stomach. "I do? I don't remember that."

Marisol pulled the edge of Kawehi's towel and it fell open as it slid down her back.

"Oh, *that* kind of backrub."

Marisol smiled and rolled onto her stomach. There was the snap of a cap and Marisol shivered as a line of something cool was poured down her spine. Kawehi poured more of it on herself and told Marisol to close her eyes.

"What are you doing? That's way too much."

"That's what you think," Kawehi said, climbing onto the bed.

Marisol sighed as two breasts were slid along her oily back. She could smell coconut and stretched as Kawehi slid her oily body over hers.

"I'm glad you're back," Kawehi whispered in her ear.

Goosebumps stood up on Marisol's arms as the breath tickled her ear. The bourbon on Kawehi's breath made a very pleasant counterpoint to the coconut. Marisol tried to turn over but Kawehi held her in place.

"I'm not done yet."

Marisol moaned as Kawehi slid her body over her back. Kawehi spread her legs, straddling the other woman's lower back. She kept her breasts moving over Marisol's skin as she used her hands to gently rub along her shoulders.

"How is that?" Kawehi softly asked.

The only answer was Marisol's deep slow breathing. Kawehi leaned over and gave Marisol a lingering kiss on the cheek. Marisol half smiled but didn't open her eyes. Kawehi smiled and shook her head as she climbed off the other woman. She gently pulled the sheet over Marisol before wiping the oil off her own body. As much as she wanted to crawl in beside her friend, there was something else she had to do first.

Emma came down the passageway after checking on Holm and the others. He was indignant they wouldn't discharge him and even got a little hostile when they said Emma couldn't stay. All of the others had already fallen asleep and Emma had tried not to laugh as she watched Holm struggle to keep his eyes open. Finally, he'd fallen asleep and she got up to leave. On the way out, one of the techs had said that they'd be releasing everyone the day after tomorrow. Emma promised to tell "the commander" and headed for their rooms.

She got lost once, but finally found her room. Theo was next door to her but his door was closed. Emma was getting more and more concerned about him. He'd been near his breaking point on Alnatic and she thought he'd start to recover once they were gone. Instead he'd started to withdraw into himself, seeming to almost run on auto-pilot. He was tired, they all were. But he'd been tired before and bounced back quickly. Of course, this was more than just fatigue. Emma had hoped Ayr could help him but something had happened between the two of them. They were friends but the spark that had been obvious before was gone now. As much as he'd blundered around saying it, Holm was right. Theo really did have rotten luck with women.

There was a single tap at her door followed immediately by more taps and then thudding. Emma frowned. She'd been getting undressed and was down to a bra and panties.

Hell with it, whoever it is should know better.

Emma opened the door. Rachel and Jonesy were in the hallway. Both their faces were flushed and they were leaning on each other.

"Hubba hubba," Jonesy said and Rachel elbowed him hard in the ribs.

"Ignore this asshole," she said. "Can we come in?"

Emma stood back and they came in. Jonesy slouched on the office chair and Rachel collapsed onto Emma's bed.

"Look, if you guys are here looking for a threesome..." Emma started to say.

Rachel started laughing and Jonesy sat up and looked at her owlishly. "What're you talking about? We are here on behalf of our glorious and esteemed commander. Have you seen him?"

Emma shook her head. "I just got back from medical. He said something about finishing up the reports before tomorrow and closed his door."

"Well, it's open now. Make yourself presentable and come see," Jonesy said.

Rachel closed one eye and squinted at him. "You sayin' my girl ain't presentable without clothes?"

Jonesy staggered upright. "Not that dumb or drunk. Come on."

"He's getting smarter," Rachel said, struggling to sit up. "Ooh, maybe I better stay here."

Emma rolled her eyes as she pulled a pair of shorts on. Rachel's eyes were already closed when she pulled the door shut behind her.

"How much have you two had?" she asked Jonesy.

"If you must know, we were killing this bottle of vodka. Fatigue is an issue here I believe. But I thought she needed to grieve about Marcus."

Emma stopped and took the bottle Jonesy was waving around. "And how did that go?"

Jonesy shrugged. "She said she didn't care. And I don't think she did. But weren't they together? He kept touching her butt."

"Don't remind me. Rachel plays it close to the vest, I'll talk to her when we get home."

Emma walked over to Theo's open door. Inside, he was asleep in the desk chair, feet on the desk. He hadn't even taken off his boots. Emma looked at his tablet, he'd been finishing his mission report.

She put the bottle under her arm and started untying Theo's boots. Jonesy, leaning on the doorframe, stumbled in to help her but tripped over his own feet and landed on the floor.

Theo opened his eyes. Emma was standing over him, wearing a jogging bra and had one of his boots in her hand. The other one was half off his foot.

"Oh, a *threesome!* I get it now," Jonesy said from the floor. His voice dissolved into giggles.

Theo looked back at Emma, just in time for the bottle of vodka to slip out of her armpit and thud to the floor.

"Can I explain?" Emma asked.

Theo shook his head and pointed at the door.

"Just...sleep on your bed, okay?" Emma said, getting the vodka bottle and starting to back out.

Theo pointed at Jonesy who was trying to get up. Emma didn't want to wait for him to get it together, so she grabbed a leg and pulled him out of the room. Jonesy was laughing too hard to say anything but he waved at Theo. Theo pointed at the door and Jonesy grabbed it as he was pulled out of the room. The door clicked shut. Theo shook his head and went to go brush his teeth.

He was sitting on the bed, pulling off his socks when there was another knock at the door.

"Goddammit," he muttered, going to the door.

"Emma, what the hell are you..." he said, pulling the door open. His voice trailed off seeing Kawehi instead.

"I think Emma has her hands full," Kawehi said. "I heard her complaining about someone throwing up in her bed. Can I come in?"

"Uhm, sure," Theo said, standing back. He quickly looked over the room to make sure it wasn't too trashed but he hadn't unpacked anything but his tablet. Theo sat down on the edge of his bed and Kawehi took the chair.

"I just found out about Imae," she said quietly. "Why didn't you say anything before?"

Theo shrugged. "I didn't want to start whining about everything that went wrong."

"Theo, I am so sorry about what happened. None of us had a clue about what was on Alnatic."

He nodded. "Even for the Project, that would have been brutal training."

She smiled slightly. "I understand the look you gave me in the main lock now. I thought you were ready to quit."

He looked up and met her eyes. "When we left Alnatic, I was pretty close."

"Why did you change your mind?"

"It was Amanda. She hasn't quit and she lost a lot more than I did. The Commonwealth thing we talked about earlier, I want revenge on whoever that turns out to be. And when we realized that the Founders had built the city, I promised Ayr and Imae both that I'd find them another world. Hard to do that if I run away from this."

"Those are all good reasons. Thank you for not quitting. You've got a lot of talent but more importantly you're my friend and I'd miss you."

He half smiled. "I thought the captain and lieutenant thing had kind of overtaken that."

"Sometimes it might have to, you've learned that already. But I will always be your friend, Theophile Cosineau."

He finally gave her a real but tired smile. "Me too, you know that."

"So how are you, Theo?"

He started to say something but stopped. He tried to speak again but ended up looking at the floor. Kawehi got up and moved to sit beside him on the bed. She put her arm around his shoulders.

"Tell me," she said quietly.

He didn't look at her. "Pretty shitty actually."

She nodded and gently turned his head to look at her. "It's never easy losing people. But don't let your grief blind you to the ones you brought back."

He nodded, eyes filling with tears.

Kawehi put her other arm around him and held him. "I think you need someone sleeping with you tonight. It helped me a lot when I lost my team."

Theo wiped his eyes. "Thank you, but I can't. It's too..."

"I really meant sleeping," she said. "You're going to pass out as soon as you lay down anyway."

"Will not. But there's clean shorts in the bag if you want them."

"Thank you," Kawehi said, taking a pair of shorts and t-shirt from his bag. "You are not wearing field clothes to bed. That's an order."

"Okay, give me a minute."

She took a pair of shorts from his bag and stepped into the bathroom to change. When she came out, Theo was lying on his back fighting to keep his eyes open.

"Will not," Kawehi mocked gently. "I'm Theo, I can stay awake as long as I want."

"As long as you understand that," he said as she laid down beside him.

Kawehi pulled a pillow under her head and pulled a blanket over them.

"Is that okay?" she asked.

The only answer was a light snore. Kawehi rolled her eyes.

Theo opened his eyes, hearing the shower in the bathroom. At first he didn't have a clue who was in there but it came back quickly. He also remembered waking up several times last night, forgetting where he was, thinking that the Bugs were still coming. Each time, Kawehi had put her hand on him, whispering that everything was okay, he was safe. He felt a little foolish about it now but after a nightmare, her familiar voice talking to him had felt like life itself.

She came out of the bathroom, rubbing a towel over her long black hair. "How are you feeling?"

"Good," Theo said, surprised. "I was a mess last night, thank you."

"I'm glad I could help. We'll talk more once we're back home."

"Oh, Camp Lazyass. Right."

"Not this time, I'm afraid. Henry and Betty have their hands full with new arrivals. I was thinking we could all go on a camping trip instead."

"Uhm, we just got back from one, but okay."

Kawehi laughed. "It's better than it sounds. Have you ever gone up to the canyon?"

"Where they have parties?"

"Right, but there's a lot more to it than the swimming hole. It'll be fun, I promise."

"Am I in charge of anything?"

"Nope."

"Okay, that sounds like fun."

"I've got to get back to my room and get changed. I'll see you at breakfast."

A minute after Kawehi left, his door flew open again. Jonesy was standing there, pointing at Theo with a look of outrage.

"What? No! It wasn't like that," Theo protested.

Jonesy started laughing and closed the door again. Theo shook his head and went to brush his teeth.

The team was sitting down eating when word came that a ship full of Commonwealth officials was headed for Alnatic by way of Long Axis. They would have a few hours on the station while the ship refueled and the message "invited" Theo and Kawehi to meet with them and discuss the situation. When Teydora heard, she immediately decided to join the meeting. Marisol had come along with Kawehi and they went into the same conference room they'd used the night before.

This time, someone had already brought the right kind of chairs for everyone. Theo sat between Marisol and Kawehi and beside Kawehi was Teydora. She had come with a pair of Xero'pah who stayed against the wall right behind her chair. The wall curved enough that Theo could easily see them.

Today Teydora's eyes were dark. One of the aides had purple eyes and the other's were an emerald green. The purple eyed one caught Theo looking at her and stared back at him, expressionless. He was about to look away when she very slowly winked at him. Theo grinned back as the Commonwealth officials arrived.

There were several Others that he didn't recognize, along with Xero'pah and Gyr representatives. There were several prefcoria as well, ranging from maybe human to definitely not human. Most of them ended up standing behind the Others, against the wall.

"Thank you for taking the time to meet with us," one of the Xero'pah said. "I am Selyn'Vah, the social advisor for Full Counsellor Havthyrthem seated across from you. Which one of you is Lieutenant Cosineau?"

Theo lifted his hand off the table and the Xero'pah bowed slightly.

"I extend the congratulations of the entire Commonwealth Council. I am not aware of what organization you represent. Who is your commander?"

"The Lieutenant is a member of my company," Teydora said.

Selyn'Vah looked impatient. "Yes, yes. But *what* regiment?"

Teydora said something that Theo's translator did not catch. It didn't look like anyone but the Xero'pah understood what she said. They both looked uncomfortable suddenly and Theo wondered who Teydora really was.

"What is this delay?" a large Gyr asked. "What social impropriety vexes you this time, Selyn?"

The first Xero'pah looked away from Teydora. "All is in order, councilor. We were not informed the Dark Ones were involved. Excuse our surprise."

The Gyr made a noise and a moment later, the translator turned it into a harrumph. "Our itinerary does not leave much time for these Xero'pah political intrigues. Let us speak quickly, I wish to see this Alnatic."

Selyn'Vah bowed slightly and stood back. The Gyr focused on Theo.

"Young Terran, I am Havthyrthem. I am the oldest here, so I am allowed to be as rude as I like."

"It is an honor, Counsellor," Theo said.

"I very much doubt that, but I appreciate your lie. Now, being from a backwater like Terra, you will not appreciate all of our customs. You must understand that our Commonwealth began with trade, grew on the back of trade, and is sustained by trade even now. We are not an assemblage of warriors or statesmen..."

"Counsellor, our itinerary?" Selyn'Vah interrupted.

The Gyr laughed. "Ah! Hoist by my own petard. Very well, your recent visit to the planet made you eligible for two rewards, one for the capture of an enemy ship and the other for the discovery of intact technology of the race known as Founders. I understand you wished to pass the first bounty on to the leader known as Otsihl?"

"Yes, sir. His people brought down the ship, not mine."

"Commendable of you. The second bounty is awarded to you as the commander in the field when the discovery was made." The Gyr looked down at a tablet. "I have a conversion here for your home currency. The dollar, I believe? Ah, but I am not familiar with the Terran system of numerals."

"I am," one of the seated prefects said. The tablet was passed down to a man who was in the "maybe human" category. "The number is quite long, I will summarize. Your bounty totals 4.6 billion dollars."

Marisol coughed and Kawehi put a hand over her mouth. Theo looked at the man, wondering if he really knew Terran numbers. He nodded at Theo and did something to make the number appear on one of the wall screens; \$4,645,442,124.47.

Theo looked at Kawehi, still not grasping the number.

"The Lieutenant is understandably overwhelmed at the moment," Kawehi said.

"I damn well hope so!" the Gyr said. "That money has been sitting around gathering interest for a long time. Perhaps you should invest in a set of concubines, young Terran! I understand you binary breeder types are mad for that sort of thing."

Kawehi coughed again and there was a strange sounding whimper from his other side. Marisol was staring straight ahead, her jaw clenched tight.

"Of course, once the concubines hear about your fortune, they may be pursuing you instead," the Gyr went on. "Just imagine!"

Theo nodded, totally on autopilot now.

"Counsellor, we should go," one of the other Gyr said.

"Yes, of course. In any case, I wish you long life and happiness," Havthyrthem said, getting to his feet.

The others followed him down the passage and they were alone in the room again.

"Concubines, young Terran!" Marisol said loudly, slapping the table.

Theo jumped and she started laughing. On the other side of him, Kawehi's shoulders were shaking.

"I don't want it!" Theo said, pushing his chair back and standing up. "The money or any concubines!"

"It's already yours," Teydora said. "There are tens of thousands of years of precedent. For the money, I'd have to check records about concubines."

Kawehi gave up and laughed. Theo started pacing back and forth. Marisol wiped her eyes and leaned back in the chair.

"But it really belongs to the Project, right?" Theo asked.

Kawehi, Teydora, her aides, and Marisol all shook their heads.

"I'm not sure what the Project would do with that many concubines," Kawehi said, sending Marisol into another giggling fit.

"You don't have to decide what to do with it immediately," Teydora said. "In all seriousness, you need to accept the reward. This Commonwealth was created by merchants to increase prosperity. As an organization, it doesn't understand refusing prosperity. What people don't understand, they do not trust. We require trust in order to complete our work."

"So I need to be a billionaire for the war effort," Theo said.

"I'm afraid so," Teydora said. "We all make sacrifices for the common good."

"Try and be strong," Marisol said, grinning at him.

"Fine, fine," Theo grumbled.

"Now, sit down," Teydora said. "We have a more important matter to discuss."

Theo sat back down and Marisol leaned over to bump his shoulder with hers.

"First, an introduction for you and the Chief Sergeant. We Xero'pah view the everything as belonging to interconnected networks. Actions, objects, living things, all of them are attached and we call them actors. When you sit in that chair, for example, you have formed a connection. Most likely it is a weak and temporary link, it's just a chair. Your double on the other hand

represents one of your strongest links. The actions of everything around you adds another layer of complexity. Do you understand?"

Theo looked at Marisol who shrugged.

"We can keep up," Theo said.

"Then we will discuss nodes. Any linkage between two actors is technically a node. In practice, when we speak of nodes, we're referring to large collections of actors that can influence large parts of the network around us. I believe Alnatic has begun the creation of a very important node, one that will have great effects on the Dominion war. I will be watching this one very carefully. Captain?"

Kawehi got up. "I've been training and pushing all of you to prepare you for another part of the war. I've let you think that we're forming another Incident Response Troop, one that works off-world. This isn't accurate though. Teydora's organization quietly works to influence nodes. It requires a diverse set of skills obviously."

"Is that why you brought the Pioneers on?" Marisol asked.

"No, I wanted the Ta'avi involved because of the colonization potential. They are temporary additions to the team."

"No they're not," Teydora said. "I want this entire team, the pilot, the Pioneers, all of them."

It was Kawehi's turn to be surprised. "You can't, they're some of the last Ta'avi. Their community has been training them to found a new colony."

Teydora snorted. "There are nowhere near enough of them to establish their own planet. It would take far too long to become viable and we are already struggling to protect larger worlds."

"What about the human colonies then?" Theo asked, getting a bad feeling.

"There are six billion of you," Teydora explained. "Your colonies can be quickly expanded by bringing more settlers from Terra. A Ta'avi colony would be limited by their ability to biologically multiply. If we were at peace, it might be possible. For now, Terra is the best place for the Ta'avi."

"What about Haven?" Kawehi asked.

"Bringing your families there will not strain the settlement," Teydora said. "I doubt they could absorb more than that."

"But it's mostly empty," Kawehi said. "Just create a second colony."

"Support would still be an issue. They would not have the resources needed to be autonomous, they would still strain the existing settlement."

Theo sat up slightly. "Are there enough of them? If the resources existed?"

"The population size wouldn't be an issue if Haven was used," Teydora said. "It is a secret place of ours and very safe."

Theo smiled. "Maybe I can solve a couple of problems at once. My reward, would it cover everything they needed?"

Teydora looked at the Xero'pah who had winked at Theo. "Nys?"

The aide brought up a projection from a device she wore.

"If I recall, they are herders? There is a high density of grassland on the third continent. How many of them are there?"

"A little over two thousand," Kawehi said.

"The bounty would cover the cost with a small amount left over."

"Are you sure about this?" Teydora asked Theo.

"This planet is a good place?"

She laughed. "A *very* good place. Paradise to some."

"Then I'm sure."

Kawehi reached over and put her hand on Theo's arm. He waited for her to give him some sort of signal but there was just the feeling of warmth from her skin.

"I'll begin the process," Nys said. "Lieutenant, you will have a lot of things to sign and approve."

"He'll have time," Teydora said. "I believe Terra would be the best place for us to be. I'd like to consider this node without interruption. Can you find a place for three of us, Kawehi?"

"Of course. I think the team could use some time to adjust as well."

"I'm curious about something, Theo," Teydora said. "Why the Ta'avi and not humans or Garragh?"

"These are the people my parents rescued. On Alnatic, Imae told me that my parents had rescued their bodies, but I given them back their souls. I don't know how true that is, but I know they need a place to go where they don't have to worry about disappearing. And I promised Ayr and Imae both that I'd find their people a place to live."

"You probably set a galactic record in gaining and losing fortunes," Nys said.

"And isn't that just like a Garragh?" Theo said.

Teydora and both her aides laughed, the chiming echoed all around them.

"I think we're done here," Teydora said, getting up. "Captain, you should tell your team about their new status. Marisol and Theo, welcome to the Ancient and Noble Lanterns, Eyes of the Empire."

Theo and Emma were in the Paddock, standing with Ayr and her family. The joy of Remembrance was missing this time. Imae's father and mother were standing at the front this time. In front of them, there was a picture of Imae in her brown uniform. She had a smear of mud on her face and was laughing. Her body had been cremated at a private family gathering and her ashes had already been left to the wind. Pater explained that once the spirit was released by the fire, the remains of the body weren't of any particular importance. The Folk had come together two days later to say goodbye to her spirit.

Japh, Imae's father, stood and held hands with her mother. Both of them began to speak, their voices vibrating in Theo's head and chest. When they finished, the echoes of their voices echoed back from the mountains. Theo's new translator implant whispered into his ear when they were finished:

"Here my love, you must depart from us. Go down to the ocean and find passage to our lost places. On that distant shore, walk with bare feet on the sand and dig your feet deep into the soil. Keep company with those who have gone before, follow the journey toward morning, your eyes always fixed on the horizon. Walk until the sky weeps mountains, until Time herself dies. When you come to that place, the stars will greet you as their kin. With your hair carrying the scent of salt and smoke, find the ancestors. They will welcome you with solemn respect and ancient joy. Journey well, our daughter. We will meet again in time."