



## **The Star Captains' Daughter**

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This novel is dedicated to my daughter, the desire for whom inspired it, and to my husband, her dad, who restored my faith in fairytales.

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# Chapter 1

In the Year of Her Holiness 2296

*Others before self.* Junior shifted in her seat, first one way and then the other. She slid her butt off the edge and stuck the computer stylus up her nose. *Others before self.*

The Intari ambassador's nasal drone rattled her spine. She knew the energy building in every part of her would culminate in disaster which would embarrass the hell out of her very elegant star captain mother.

Best friend Rehama Kahn leaned close and whispered. "Only ten more minutes. You can make it. Remember your breathing exercises."

*Breathe...one...twothreeBLASTOFF!* Junior's legs jerked beneath her and she scampered up the wall like a squirrel. The rocks mortared together provided excellent finger and foot holds.

"Junior!" Rehama had made a wager with Ret she could sit still through the Young Diplomats' Conference.

Ret's laugh chased her all the way down the ventilation shaft. "Told you. She may look fifteen, but she'll always be a five year old at heart."

Guilt stabbed Junior's heart, though it did not slow her escape.

Rehama had made the bet to encourage her mastery of Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder.

Strips of light shone through vent slats. Junior snaked towards it, powered by all the energy she'd accumulated since the start of the ambassador's speech. She hit the vent full-throttle. The vent crashed against the far wall and she shot out, right into waiting arms which wrapped around her. They fell to the marble floor together.

She lifted face off his chest and looked into his stormy blue eyes. *He's gorgeous!*

"Hi! I'm Junior. What's your name?"

"You do not remember?"

A slamming door alerted her and she launched off the boy and away into a crowded market.

Ducking behind stalls selling Arion tapestries and Intari swamp sponges, she peered over a blue-skinned Neboan trying on lipstick in a lovely shade of maroon.

The conference instructors would have certainly alerted Sachi. Her mother had left the security chief in charge of the teens while she negotiated a technology exchange with the Intari. But, Junior had spent the better part of her childhood outwitting Lieutenant Commander Sachi Owada and knew all the tricks. *If adults realized what Space Brats know, they'd round us all up and turn us into special ops commandos.*

No sign of pursuers.

She pointed at the Neboan's first choice. "I like dark maroon best on you."

The Neboan frilled his ears in gratitude and bowed.

Junior looked over her shoulder and realized the open-air market backed a sound stage. Already she could hear Denahi dancers leaping and twirling to musical instruments which made a twang similar to Japanese Yamatogoto. She slipped behind a tapestry and climbed through the criss-crossed support beams.

Sliding leg over the last beam, a hand appeared before her and she looked up to see the boy she'd fallen on. Never one to stop a silly grin, she took his hand. "Sorry I fell on you." She straightened up beside him. "The Intari ambassador bored me to death. I couldn't get out of the conference fast enough."

The boy hugged her. "I have found you at last."

"Huh?" Junior's eyes bugged out, chin on his shoulder. *What the hell? He's really cute!* She hugged him back, his body warm and snug against hers. *I wonder if I can get a kiss.* "I'm sorry, but you've mistaken me for someone else. I'm Junior, well, Gennie O'Keefe, actually, but everyone calls me Junior. My mother's Star Captain Olivia O'Keefe of the USS Maverick and my dad..." Pain bit her heart. "Well, my dad died last year. What's your name?"

"You did not fall on me." The boy lifted his face from her hair. Only a centimeter taller, his eyes shone blue in the dim light and his full lips curled. "I caught you. I failed to sufficiently brace myself for the speed of

your ascent." The formal way he spoke and his tone seemed so familiar, and she swore she'd run her fingers through his dark blond hair before.

*Yes, please, go on breathing warmly upon me!* Junior pointed a finger at his chest. "Do I know you?"

A small laugh escaped him. "Yes. We know one another very well." He slid his fingers up her cheek and held her red braid to the light. "I understand you are disoriented. We knew your memory would have difficulty crossing the Threshold between Dreamtime and Waking Moments."

His scent intoxicated Junior, but she'd caused enough chaos in her life by not accepting reality. "I'm sorry. This is just a terrible..."

"I will not leave you."

Junior darted eyes from his earlobe to his gaze. "Wha...what?"

"You fear I will leave once I realize this is a terrible mistake, but it is not a mistake and I will not leave. I am Ariez, the one who loves you."

Something about Sachi lecturing her on boys' pick-up lines rambled through Junior's mind, but she couldn't remember her mentioning anything this weird. "Ariez." The sound of his name and his voice soothed her. *Déjà vu*. The raging energy calmed into a swirl of goodness.

He waved fingers in front of her face.

Rather than distract her, his gesture weighed down her eyelashes with pleasant feelings. An image of dark green ferns, moss, fallen leaves, and him falling off a log, laughing drifted through her thoughts.

"Remember." Ariez murmured and kissed her temple. "Come." He led her by the hand.

Junior followed him towards a tent flap. "Where are we going?"

"The arboretum. You will remember our Dreamtime more quickly if we are surrounded by trees. You love trees, and birds."

The glass dome which protected the city flashed bright when she followed him out from under the stage. He kept to the edges, behind stalls, in the shadows. "The arboretum is right through those arches." She pointed. "Let's cross through the vegetable market."

"I cannot be seen here." Ariez didn't look back. "The Intari would use me to blackmail the Empress."

"Empress?"

Ariez led her through a noisy corral of wallow-beasts. They skirted the vegetable market and passed under the arches behind a cart overflowing with succulent leaves.

Once through the arches, nothing blocked the sunlight streaming through the impexi-glass dome. Trees of every kind loomed around as Ariez led Junior along a pebbled path.

She realized she'd stopped when he settled hands around her waist. The arboretum faded from comprehension, replaced by a great redwood forest, beautiful and bright, the scent of evergreen boughs calming her nerves to bliss. "What's happening?"

"Dreamtime in Waking Moments." Ariez's lips touched hers.

When his kiss closed on Junior's mouth and her eyelashes rested on her cheeks, her whole being came into synch with him and she knew they'd kissed before.

A bright light drew her attention over his shoulder and her eyes popped open.

A sword gleamed with Celtic swirls and gold hilt, stuck in a stone. All at once familiar and strange, it drew her with primal instinct. She pulled away and started for it.

Ariez looked. His face twisted. "No!" He shoved her aside and whipped a sword out of a hidden sheath. In blackness, he lunged, smashing his blade down on the sword trapped in the stone.

"You'll hurt him!" Horror.

Ariez's blade shattered and a force threw him back.

The Celtic sword trapped in the stone remained unblemished.

Junior reached to free the sword from the stone.

Ariez grabbed her.

"He's hurt, trapped. I need to help him!" She stood two nanoseconds from twisting the boy's wrists off.

"No, My Love. Listen to me, please. He is evil, bent on usurping the heart of the Holy Bennu."

"The...what?"

"You must resist." He gripped her shoulders not too tightly.

Junior startled at the fear trembling in his face. She re-focused on the sword in the stone, and she saw a man with brown hair fall to his knees, screaming.

*Olivia!*

The man fell down, sobbing, utterly destroyed.

Warm tears dribbled down Junior's face. "He is good."

"You should not be capable!" Ariez cupped her face in both hands and pressed his forehead to hers. "Shhhh, My Love, I will protect you from all unpleasant thoughts and feelings."

A warm cloud wrapped around Junior's mind, evaporating the raging grief like mist on a summer morning. His kiss cradled her lips. The goodness of his touch replaced memory with only him.

Junior opened her eyes to the Intari arboretum. "Wha...what happened?" Alone with him among the trees, strange trees fluttered with leaves instead of evergreen boughs.

"Waking Moments."

She looked over his shoulder and all around, and then back up. "This is so weird."

"We have found one another in Waking Moments after a long and difficult search." Ariez kissed her ear. "Our bond is established and will soon be complete."

Images of a redwood forest drifted through Junior's memory and little else but him. "We were children together."

Ariez smiled. "Yes, in Dreamtime. Everything will be all right, but we must leave at once."

"Leave? Where are we going?"

"My ship is in orbit. It cannot remain cloaked much longer." He let go of her waist and took her hand, ready to lead her away from all she knew.

"Your ship? Oh, but I...I need to ask my mom if I can visit your ship. She..." The mention of her mother sent a wave of grief through Junior's heart. "My mother...Olivia. My mother's name is Olivia."

*Olivia!* The disembodied voice rang through memory, but nothing else.

Junior's lips fell apart.

"I will send for your mother later, but we must leave now if we are to cross the border undetected. Come." Ariez pulled her hand.

"Border? What border?" Her feet stayed put.

"Junior!" Sachi's voice echoed off the domed impexi-glass ceiling.

Junior wheeled around to see her godmother climbing a rock formation on the far side. The bright sunshine glinted off Sachi's black hair braided around her head. "Oh, schmutz-butt." She twisted out of Ariez's grasp and kissed his cheek. "Gotta fly!" Away she dashed.

"No! Wait!"

"You know what ship I live on. Message me on Interstellar!" Junior knew he gave chase, but so did Sachi.

The longer she evaded her godmother, the longer she could go without scrubbing the magna-converters with an old-fashioned toothbrush. Dread reignited hyperactive energy throughout her body.

Inside a minute, she'd lost herself in the crowded market. She didn't dare slow down to look at the pretty Ethiopian necklaces imported from Earth, no matter how curious she was about her own homeworld. She'd only visited Earth twice.

*Where to hide?* Junior fastened gaze on an Intari climbing up the interior of the glass dome, cleaning, his green head bobbing. "Crackling!"

Slipping behind some workers in plain olive jumpsuits, she found a gray box and the climbing equipment inside. "Oh, yeah, this is going to be fun." Glancing around, she pulled out the super-suction cups and fastened them to her feet and hands. The climbing proved awkward at first, but she soon caught on. All those rock-climbing programs in the Holographic Recreational Center really paid off.

Up the curved bubble ceiling she climbed, up over the arboretum. Looking down never frightened her. Only bugs scared her. Dark red hair smooth in a French twist caught her eye. *Mom! Oh, schmutz.*

No dirt speck dared contaminate Mom's dark blue uniform. The gold captains' pips reflected sunshine in diamond shapes. Green stripes wrapped around her cuffs, indicating her status as a Deep Space Fleet officer.

Junior looked down at her own attire. The gray leggings' knees were blown out and the pink and silver embroidery of her brocade mini-dress was shredded. *Hopeless.* She sighed. If not for Rehama, she'd probably gone to the conference in pajamas.

Mom walked slowly among the ferns towards a bridge over a sparkling brook. Obviously, Sachi hadn't transmitted an alert yet.

Sachi once said if she alerted the Captain every time her brat freaked out the bad guy aliens wouldn't need to fire a shot to take over the ship.



And then Junior saw Admiral Roman Jackson approaching her mother. *Dirty old goat!* As soon as they'd entered communications range with the nearest Alliance outpost, Jackson had reared his ugly head over Interstellar communications. *Admiral Jackass has been lusting after my mother since before I was born!*

Junior plotted the most satisfying retaliation, tracking Jackson moving on her mother's location among the ferns of the arboretum below. *Dad's gone. Defending Mom's honor is my job now.* She pressed her small chest against the curved impexi-glass of the domed city. Only a meter away on the other side of it, temperatures would fry her in an instant. On this side, the surface felt cool to her acne-inflicted cheek. She dangled from the ceiling of the gigantic dome like a bug clinging to the inside bottom of an overturned bowl.

*Mom's going to burst a blood vessel.* But, she was in for it anyway.

Junior gritted her teeth and resisted the urge to nail Jackson in the back of the head with the cleaners' portable computer. Instead, she narrowed her glare like a rifleman on target. She watched him pause, lay a hand on a rail, and study her mother. *Schmuck.*

Junior spied the mug-shaped matter recycler near the pond only three meters from her mother. "Ooh, yeah..." She released one hand from a suction cup and grabbed the computer out of her belt and kissed it. "Show mama how much you care." She tapped commands into the computer and pointed it at the matter recycler. "Wait." She tapped her chin with it. "Hmm, must think of some crackling taunt first." Tap, tap. "Otherwise, over too quickly and not as much fun." Tap, tap. *Ugly old windbag.* "Nah." Tap. Scratch chin. "Too obvious."

Down below, Olivia ran her hand along the rail overlooking the deep pond and watched the Intari children swimming in it. They still had gill slits, flippers, and tails. One peeked out of the bucket his father carried him in. They didn't look much like her own baby, but they were still babies tugging at her heart.

*I love you, Olivia. I will do anything to make a family with you*

She shook the memory from her head. It had ruined her second marriage and then Malcolm died, riddling her heart with guilt.

Olivia propped her elbows on the rail and observed the children at play. *My baby isn't a baby anymore.*

"Olivia, I searched everywhere for you." Jackson's voice startled her.

"Captain...sorry...Admiral Jackson, I saw your name on the roster. I thought you would be in meetings the entire conference. How are you?"

"Wonderful, now I've found you." The lines around his compelling blue eyes appeared unnatural to her, like he'd indulged in cosmetic surgery to hold onto youth.

The surgeon owed him a refund.

Jackson's lips twisted into a grin. "You look absolutely beautiful."

*You're rather beautiful yourself, but definitely not worth the trouble.* "Thank you." Olivia smoothed a hand over her hair to ensure it still swept off the mandarin collar.

"Is something wrong?"

Olivia sighed. "I'm worried about my daughter. My security chief hasn't reported in for three hours. I suspect she doesn't want to interrupt my meetings with the news that Junior escaped the Young Diplomats' Conference and is larking about, getting into mischief. I'll probably hear crashing and screaming before long, followed by a quick trip to the medical facility."

Jackson chuckled, as though he understood. But, he couldn't possibly. According to rumor, he'd sired several children by a variety of alien women across the galaxy, but he wasn't even providing child support.

*Jackass.* Olivia stopped a groan from getting out.

Jackson shifted his body. "You should send her to live with your mother on Earth where she can attend a regular school with normal children."

"Oh, no, I couldn't." Olivia drew a deep breath. "She's all I have left of my husband and she's so much like him it's frightening."

"You're a captain, for crying out loud. When do you find time to be a mother?"

Fire lit under Olivia's ears, or so it felt, but she couldn't chuck an admiral into the mud pit. *You're hardly one to advise me on how to raise a child!* *Jackass.* "I'm Deep Space Fleet, or weren't you aware? All Deep Space Fleet starships are equipped for families. Junior has an honorary grandfather, a godmother, 368 honorary uncles and aunts, and one of the finest secondary school teachers in the quadrant."

"Of course, but you might've made admiral by now if..."

“Whoa-ho!” Junior’s wicked laughter echoed off the ceiling twenty meters above them. “I throw my head back and laugh haughtily at you! Woo-hoo!”

“Junior!” Olivia whipped her head around and, on the upswing, a wave of green goo splashed out of an industrial matter recycler, past her, and right over the Admiral.

Jackson cut loose a roaring scream and stumbled back, hands like claws, pond scum in eyes and dripping off perfect nose.

Olivia looked at him, jaw dropping, then up at Junior dangling upside down from the impexi-glass domed ceiling. “Ju...” The super-suction cups came unstuck with an un-sucking sound.

Junior screamed, plummeting into the pond.

“Junior!” Olivia sprinted forward. She hurdled the rail and dove into the deep green water, narrowly missing an Intari father and son. Eyes open under the scum; she grabbed her unconscious daughter about the chest from behind and kicked for the surface. She swam to a smooth rock, ready to rip her own lungs out for the girl to breathe with.

Thankfully, emergency medical technicians were right there.

## Chapter 2

Olivia ran behind a hover-gurney into the habitat's medical facility. "Where's Isaiah?"

Before Junior, Sachi never missed a beat or lost her breath. "Still on his date with the blue lady from the banquet!" Her chest heaved and her rosebud lips tensed into a white line.

"I didn't grant shore leave to the whole damn crew!"

"I'll post guard, Captain."

"And find Isaiah!" Olivia chased the Intari doctors through the sliding doors. She knew they were competent enough, but Isaiah had caught Junior when she was born.

Hours later, Junior's green eyes fluttered open, waking in a medical bed. So much like her father, except for the hair. She had his strong nose and pouty lips.

"How do you feel?" Olivia brushed a red curl from her daughter's ruddy cheek. She'd failed. All those years of so desperately wanting to be a mother, and she'd failed her only child.

"Fine. Where am I?"

"Hospital. Do you remember sliming Admiral Jackson and falling from the ceiling?"

"Oh, yes!" Junior laughed, a few red curls popping down the middle of her forehead.

"You were nearly killed!" Olivia rubbed her right temple, memory racing. Fighter pilots. She should've known better than to mix her genes with one.

"Yeah, completely crackling!" Junior busted up with new laughs. "Did you see

Jackson's face?" She mocked the shock and busted up some more. Holding her sides, she fell right over laughing, a tray of medical

instruments clattering down on her. "I'm sorry!" She tried to put the instruments back, but knocked over a hydration pole with her elbow. It crashed down on a medical monitoring computer. Sparks flew.

Olivia hoisted her daughter into the bed, wrenching out her back in the process. "Oh, God..." Her baby was growing up. Way up. She grabbed the side of the bed with one hand and her lower back with the other and wondered if she'd ever stand up straight again.

The girl was over 20 centimeters taller than her, and still growing. Her feet and legs grew at a faster rate than the rest of her body, giving her a lanky, colt-like appearance.

Nurses rushed in. Glancing around, they went right to work, cleaning up.

"Junior, Junior..." Olivia grabbed her daughter's hands.

The girl cried, face trembling red. "I'm sorry!" A far computer distracted her. "Is that a new kind of internal imaging device? Why am I freaking out? What's to eat?"

"Junior, listen to my voice." Olivia breathed relief when the girl looked up. "You suffered some neural trauma and the Intari physician needed to neutralize your ADHD meds. This isn't your fault. Do you understand?"

"I want Isaiah." Junior's lower lip trembled, tears dribbling on it.

"I know. I want Isaiah too. He'll be here soon and everything will be all right." *I'm the worst mother in the galaxy.* "Are you hungry?"

Junior nodded. "May I have some banana pancakes please?"

"Chef is bringing them from the Maverick. He blames himself for not making sure you ate a good breakfast before we left the ship this morning." Olivia smoothed a finger over the girl's forehead and watched her slump over.

Junior frowned. "There was a boy."

"A boy?" Olivia took her hand. *She's fifteen years old. Of course, she met a boy.* "What was his name?" *Oh, God, I hope she didn't forget The Talk.*

Tears gathered and spilled over Junior's eyelashes. "I can't...I can't remember."

*Memory loss.* Olivia's stomach twisted into knots. *Again.*

"I liked him very much." Junior looked up. "I can see him with my waking eyes. I can see..." her head slumped the other way "...him." She

swallowed. "I can't...I can't remember his name. I can't..." Sniff. "I want to remember."

"Well." Olivia took in a deep breath and let it go. "You make friends so easily. I'm sure you told him your name and what ship you live on. If it's meant to be, he'll find you."

"I miss him." Junior sniffed a tear. "I miss him a lot."

*I know how you feel.* Olivia squeezed her hand and said nothing aloud. *I will do what I must to protect you. There is nothing more precious to me than you.*

Around midnight, Olivia collapsed into the sofa after Junior finally fell asleep. A minute later, the door opened.

Isaiah looked from her to Junior, his dark chocolate eyes showing tired redness too. He slipped in and silently walked around the bed, pausing to check the medical monitor.

"The Intari physician noticed an unusual neural pattern," whispered Olivia. "He doesn't have much experience with mammalian brains, however."

"Accessing it." Isaiah studied the brain waves snaking across the black monitor in pale blue. Groan. "Not again."

"What again?"

"Doecheon Prime."

"Ooh, no." Olivia pressed hand to face and wiped it down her moist cheek. "Is she allergic to telepaths or something?"

Isaiah's bushy brow lifted, but not his face. "There are no telepaths at this conference. The Arion delegation cancelled. Emola Plague outbreak on the Crystal Sea." He pointed a thick finger at the neural pattern. "This is not Junior's brain pattern here. She was in telepathic contact with someone and now she's suffered memory loss again, just like on Doecheon."

"The Arions are the only telepaths..."

"No, they're not and you know it." Isaiah shuffled over and sunk into the sofa. A long, groaning yawn rumbled out of him as he went down. "The Menelaen border is only a parsec from here and the Denahi sector on the other side is still disputed by the Intari."

Olivia stiffened in chills. "Authorize Junior's immediate release and take her back to the Maverick."

"You really think Edward sent someone to kidnap her?" Isaiah gave her a hard look.

Olivia really did not want to get back into the old argument. "If he found about her..."

"He's her father!"

"He's a Menelaen warlord."

"No, he's a human who's forgotten the way home because his wife divorced him over trumped-up charges." Isaiah rubbed his brown face with both hands and leaned forward, elbows on knees. The lit panels of the medical computer shone on his thick, salty hair, neatly buzzed to regulation.

"Isaiah..." Olivia shook her head "...you didn't see the report I did. Edward Delano is a war criminal and defector."

Isaiah rested face in hands. "This is a very old argument." He blinked heavy eyelids. "Dr. Karana Williams is at this conference too. She's a neurologist. I want her to take a look at Junior."

"Karana?" Olivia's heart lightened. "Isn't she an old girlfriend?"

"Ex-fiancé." Isaiah harrumphed. "And I deserved it when she kicked me to the curb too."

"Right. Sorry." Olivia remembered him lifting her squealing, slimy baby directly onto her chest following birth. She remembered how her daughter, all of two minutes old, found a pink nipple to nurse. She'd planned to bottle feed, but Junior would have none of that. "You're not the same person you once were and she's a smart, compassionate lady."

He took her hand and squeezed. "We'll figure this out, Olivia, one way or another."

Olivia studied his face's wise lines. "There's a reason you're her honorary grandfather."

"Yeah." Isaiah pointed at Junior with his thumb. "The job required a medical degree."

She smiled, helplessly. "Run along home now."

"All right. See you in morning." Isaiah pulled his exhausted muscles up, and shuffled from the room.

Olivia scooted down and lowered herself to lie on the tiny sofa. She curled up and rested her head on her hands. The minutes ticked by and her eyes closed in sleep.

Junior lingered on the Threshold between Waking Moments and Dreamtime. She saw a green face and a knife. Terror froze her in the bed.

A sword drew in silence and pressed to the green neck.

"Delano has a long reach," the green face said.

The guardian angel said nothing. Her presence remained serene and firm.

The green face backed away and vanished.

The guardian angel blurred into invisibility.

And then Junior crossed over the Threshold completely.

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Dreamtime.

Junior rose up from the forest floor.

Darkness clung to the redwood trees looming above her. Pain. Fear. "Ariez?" She got to her feet and looked around. Patches of gray provided no illumination among the black.

She did not need to see. His presence drew her through the woods. She knew every rock and rotting log by memory. Feet squishing into the moss, mud between her toes, she picked her way through the darkness until she came to a rockslide.

Dirt and rock collapsed into their brook. A body laid half way in the water below.

"Ariez!" Junior slid down the dirt and rocks to him. On her knees, she drew his head into her lap. Suddenly, golden hues broke through the trees and the darkness began its morning retreat.

Ariez created Dreamtime, but it responded only to her.

Dawn illuminated his bruised and battered face. She brushed blond tendrils from his moist brow. "Ariez? I'm here."

His eyes blinked open. "You are all right." He touched her face and his own bruises faded.

"What happened?"

"What do you remember?" Ariez sat up and pulled her into his arms.

"Something bad...a green face with a knife..."



"A green face? An Intari assassin!"

"What?" Junior lifted her chin over his shoulder when he hugged her tightly. "It's all right. My guardian angel protected me."

"Your angel?" Ariez lifted her chin from his shoulder and studied her face. "Guardian angel...a celestial being in human culture. Who was he?"

"He was a 'she' and I don't know who she was. I couldn't see her. She was strong and serene."

"The Guardian of the Holy Bennu. Your time is at hand if the Guardian has found you." The tension eased from his face and then from his body.

"Why did you get hurt?"

"I always hurt when you do."

"But, not this badly."

Ariez trembled, lips curling. "Our bond is strengthening."

"But...we're not together in Waking Moments."

His lips lost their happy turn. "I failed. We knew you would have difficulty remembering Dreamtime."

"Oh." Profound sadness sunk Junior back to his shoulder.

"I won't fail next time, I promise. I know your true identity now. You are the daughter of Star Captain Olivia O'Keefe Delano."

"Delano? Is that my birthfather's name?"

Ariez's face darkened and he broke eye contact.

"Who is he?"

Ariez returned gaze, reddened with anger. "He is an evil man."

"No." Junior shook her head. She pushed his arms away and stood. "No. My father is a good man. He must be a good man. My mother loves him."

*Olivia!*

Junior spun around and saw a bright light cutting through the ever-green boughs.

"No, My Love." Ariez leapt to his feet and took her shoulders into his hands. "You know I speak the truth. You can feel it."

"I also feel..." she licked her tense lips "...other things."

Ariez's warm breath caressed her cheek. "Forgive me. I should protect you from unpleasant feelings." His long, dark eyelashes rested. His lips touched hers. Energy from his fingers tingled her face and swept over her head, down her neck and throughout her body.

Junior slipped her fingers through his hair. She loved him. From the moment he first stepped into her dreams when they were children, she loved him.

Ariez rolled her lower lip between his own and finally let go. "I sense your presence at all times now. There is no place you can go where I cannot find you. We will be together again soon in Waking Moments and you will remember me."

Junior smiled. "Of course, I will." Sunshine broke through the towering redwood trees, warming them in glory. "Let's go swimming." She gripped his hand. "Come on!"

# Chapter 3

"Keep going. You're doing fine." Isaiah tapped the computer control and another boy's picture came up.

"No." Junior tapped the control rapid-fire, images of every boy on Intari flashing before her. "No, no, no." She slammed both fists down. "I can't remember! I can't!" Jumping out of bed, she rifled through the duffle bag he'd brought from the ship.

"All right. Just tell me everything you do remember about the boy."

Olivia folded arms and listened from the doorway. She wondered how long her daughter's new leggings and pink brocade dress would last. Maybe they should've brought a straight-jacket instead.

"He had blue eyes. He got hurt. I miss him." Junior jerked on her boots and slung the duffle over her shoulder.

Olivia met Isaiah's look. "No human-looking boys with blue eyes were admitted to the hospital yesterday."

Isaiah heaved a big sigh and got up. "Junior's like you. She's highly intuitive. If the boy meant her any harm, she would've picked up on that."

"I hope you're right." Olivia studied her daughter.

Junior grumped.

"Just because you lost faith in your own intuition, doesn't mean Junior has to." Isaiah winked at her.

Olivia gave him a right, sturdy glare. She knew he would never say anything about Edward without her consent. Still, sometimes his role as honorary grandfather did clash with his duties as a subordinate officer.

"Can we go now?" Junior started for the door.

"Ensign Ashley can keep an eye out for a message from the boy," said Olivia.

"You're not going to read the message!" Junior spun around. "Are you?"

"No." Olivia guided her out, hand to back. She looked back at Isaiah preparing to follow. "If he meant you no harm, there is no need. We only want to know what set you off."

Isaiah thumped Junior's shoulder. "In the meantime, try to remember your breathing exercises and stay away from anything sharp or breakable. You'll be burning energy on the rocketball court before you know it."

Out on the landing, Isaiah and Sachi drew the short straws on who escorted Junior back to the Maverick while Olivia finished business on Intari Prime.

Sachi held up her straw. "Someone to fly the shuttle and someone to make sure Junior doesn't fall out."

"It's not her fault," said Isaiah. "Dr. Williams wants to keep her off meds until morning so she can accurately monitor her natural brain patterns and chemical responses. We can put up with her bouncing off the hull until then."

Junior rushed towards a landing console. "A type-2 micro-generator!"

Isaiah gave chase. "Don't touch that!"

But, Junior already had the cover off and climbed inside, nothing but her boots and brocade skirt showing as she tossed things over her shoulder.

Taking her elbow, Isaiah dragged her out.

Junior came up with a phase discriminator in hand and face lit up like the sun. "Crackling!"

"Now put that back." Isaiah grabbed the discriminator.

"I only want to see if I can cut through..."

Isaiah jerked the discriminator back, but Junior wouldn't let go. "You're going to fry your eyebrows off again!"

Olivia watched the tug-of-war with Sachi. "As long-winded as Intari politicians are, I ought to have plenty of time to complete our pitch for the technology exchange." Squaring her shoulders, she spoke in her most firm because-mama-said-so voice. "Junior."

Junior's expression instantly went innocent. The phase discriminator flew out of her hand.

Sachi caught the phase discriminator and tossed it to Isaiah who put it back.

Olivia kept gaze locked on daughter.

"What? I'll be good now. I promise!" Puppy dog eyes.

Olivia curled a lip. *Barely housebroken... just like her father.*

Junior bounded up the gangplank and into the white pill-shaped shuttlecraft. She rushed to the helm. The little panels of lights against the black grids excited every nerve ending in her body. "May I fly?"

"No, Junior." Sachi dragged her out of the pilot's seat.

"But, I'm going to be a fighter pilot!"

Isaiah took her from Sachi and guided her into the monitoring station. "Here, you keep an eye out for gaseous anomalies."

"Gaseous anomalies?" Junior couldn't stop the hilarity, laughing so hard she held her sides and almost fell out of her seat. "Did Chef Bot make chili again last night?"

Sachi rubbed her temples before returning hands to the piloting controls. "Ooh, my head."

Junior froze for a second while the sub-light engines fired up. "Port engine's field matrix is off by point-five nichrons."

Sachi checked her monitor and let go of a breath. "How do you do that?"

"Can't you feel it?"

"Space Brats," grumbled Sachi.

Isaiah chuckled and thumped the security chief's shoulder. "You were the one who used to walk Baby Junior through Engineering to get her to sleep."

Junior twittered in her seat and flashed her fingers over the starry grid. "Oooh, there's a solar flare at coordinates 1-15-charley!"

"Mm-hmm."

"Isn't it pretty? Oh, another one - brothers!" Junior glanced to make sure he was paying attention only to her.

"Mm-hmm." Isaiah sat back and folded his arms.

The shuttle rose off the landing pad beneath them.

Junior quieted. They whooshed up into the atmosphere and a wave of rapturous joy surged through her. "Woo-hoo!" Her head fell back in laughter. "Soooo knotty!"

"Ow! Will you stop screeching in my ear?" Sachi cringed.

"May I fly? Pleeeeeease, may I fly?"

"No, Junior."

"But, I'm really good!"

"Maybe in the Holographic Recreational Center, but not in real life."

"How am I supposed to get good at real life if no one ever lets me live it?" Junior slumped in her seat and folded her arms. She let her lower lip hang for maximum drama.

"I'll help you prepare for the solo flight test, but you know it's not going to happen until you learn self-control and focus."

"Did you finish your homework?" Isaiah leaned forward in his seat.

Junior leaned over and rifled through her duffle bag. She handed a portable drawing board back to him. "Art was all I needed to do."

Isaiah's forehead furrowed. "Why do you always draw redwood trees?"

"I like them." Junior peered at the picture. "Isn't it good?"

"Sure, it's fine, but..." Something caught Isaiah's eye and he pointed through the fore window. "We're home."

Junior saw the USS Maverick for the first time in three days.

The Maverick rose out of the starry void of space like an experienced mother eagle calling her chick under her wing. Junior couldn't remember her ever being white. Nearly twenty years of deep space exploration had left a gray hue all over her.

Commander Jose Fernandez and his staff tended the Maverick with meticulous care. Every part still functioned perfectly, though some panels had alien technology integrated. The Intari deflector array was particularly odd with purple lights running along the leading edge of the main hull.

Junior pointed to white-suited crew floating around the port nacelle. "Jose's got a team on the field emitters. I told him they felt a little sluggish when we came out of hyperspace last time." The starboard nacelle looked fine, the matching wing of this great bird.

The shuttle powered around the Maverick to enter its hangar bay in the aft. The blinking landing lights were as familiar to Junior as her mother's face. She crinkled her nose at the tingling sensation when they

passed through the energy shielding. The shuttle settled down on its assigned pad next to the other one.

Mostly out of view, two arrowhead-shaped fighters rested on their own pads, on loan from the Defensive Fleet for the upcoming DMZ patrol.

Junior rushed to help with landing procedures, fingers flying. "Last week, Rehama and I rigged up the HRC so we could bring a couple fighters from our training simulation into our London Blitz game. We blasted the Luftwaffe right over Buckingham Palace and..." A glance out the port window revealed a handsome young man standing with his mother. "Hooo...blam...he's...hot!"

"What?" Isaiah leaned forward and peered out. "Karana...and that's her boy, Jakoby. They're coming with us as far as New Kenya Colony." Junior paused long enough to notice his expression. She could understand his blush. The hottie's mother was gorgeous, voluptuous even, in a teal-blue dress which made the most of her ample bosom. Her many black braids streaked with silver. "Va-voom."

Karana had generously passed her dimpled smile down to her male offspring too. *What a wonderful mother.* "And he's got a nice butkis too."

Jakoby could've been Isaiah's son, judging by his melted chocolate eyes. He wasn't and she felt Isaiah's regret over that.

Sachi spoke up. "Never waste a second chance, Isaiah."

"I get the one on the right." Junior elbowed her honorary grandfather. "And you get the one on the left. C'mon!" The gangplank lowered enough for her to spring out. "Hi!" Her foot hit a grease spot, she hit the floor, and a tray of tools clattered down on top of her.

Jakoby dashed to her rescue. "Are you all right?"

The whole front of her flamed to life, hands smoothing over his chest as she rose up in his arms. "Uh-huh." She stood at least three centimeters taller than him, but he didn't mind at all.

Two paces away, Isaiah trembled like a schoolboy meeting his girlfriend behind the gym. "Karana...I...I mean you're so..."

The right side of Karana's full mouth curled. "Beautiful?"

"Yeah!" Isaiah laughed out loud. He took her hand, but forgot to shake it. Instead, he stood there holding it in both of his.

"You play rocketball?" Junior grabbed Jakoby's hand and started dragging him away.

"Yeah. Love it."

"Let's go!" Junior jerked him right off his feet.

Following rocketball, lunch, the necessary food fight and requisite clean-up, Junior, Jakoby, Ret, and Rehama finished off the late afternoon snowboarding in the Holographic Recreational Center.

Normally, they would've all been scrubbing the magna-converters with toothbrushes for the food fight, but Sachi suspended their sentence for 24 hours. Junior, Ret, and Rehama were the only teens on board and they rarely had a guest. Besides, Junior needed an open-ended outlet for her excess energy until she went back on meds.

Late afternoon saw the friends snowboarding in a holographic Alaskan ski resort.

By early evening, Junior followed her friends back to the chalet begging to go up nosebleed hill one more time, tromping through the snow. "Oh, come on, just one more time. Losers cover classroom clean-up for the winner tomorrow."

Grinning, Jakoby pointed a gloved thumb at her. "Is she always like this?"

"Oh, no." Ret pulled a purple hat from his brown head. "She's just being shy." Green swirled up from his extra-wide mouth, causing some to believe he was tattooed. Actually, he was one-quarter Intari. "Wait until she gets to know you."

Jakoby laughed.

"Face it," said Rehama, black braid dangling down her back. "We're beat."

Ret shot a snowball at her. "Junior, you're a freakin' mess. Let us die in peace for a change."

"Fine. I'll walk Jakoby to guest quarters." Junior kicked up her snowboard and tucked it under her arm.

"Big shock there," said Ret.

Junior grinned at Jakoby and they followed Ret and Rehama towards the chalet.

"Don't pay attention them. We were babies together. Do you think I talk too much?"

"You can talk as much as you want. I like it."



Rehama exchanged nauseated looks with Ret. "Like tossing gas on a fire."

"Chef's making banana pancakes for breakfast." Junior ignored them and started to prattle. "Do you like banana..."

A few minutes later she and Jakoby rounded a gray corner alone.

"Of course I didn't mean to usurp command controls." Junior was in the middle of a story. "But, I didn't realize I'd reprogrammed Stella – she's the computer's voice – to scan only my maternal DNA for biology class. So, she thought I was my mom!" Her head fell back in laughter. "Next thing I knew, smoke started rolling in and the tactical alert sirens went off and red lights started flashing."

"Geez, you were lucky to live on a starship." Jakoby finally got a word in edge-wise. "Planetary schools are so boring."

"Are you taking entrance exams to United Fleet Academy?"

"Mm-hmm, exo-archaeology, Deep Space Fleet. Maybe we'll serve on the same ship one day."

"Crackling." Junior paused near a closed door. "Well, here's the guest quarters." Sadness descended on her, but then she perked up again. "Hey, do you want me to stop by and walk you to the Mess Hall for breakfast in the morning?"

"I'd love that." Jakoby faced her, smiling.

Something about his dimpled grin triggered an impulse and Junior flung her arms around him and kissed him full on the lips.

Jakoby didn't mind one bit. His hands went around her waist and he kissed her right back.

A boy screaming jerked Junior out of bliss. She saw blue eyes before her and Jakoby's eyes were brown. Her heart galloped across her chest and not in amore.

"What's wrong?"

"Um, I thought I heard someone scream." Junior pressed a wall-com. "Stella, is everyone all right?"

The computer's English accented female voice responded. "There are no reports of injury or illness among the crew, their dependents, or guests."

Junior drew a deep breath and let it go. "I'm sorry. My head's really been messed up these past couple of days."

Cupping her cheek, Jakoby kissed her chin. "Don't worry about it. My mom's the best neurologist in the quadrant. She'll figure out what's going on with you in the morning."

Warmed by his smile, Junior slipped her hand into his. "Good night."

"A very good night." Jakoby squeezed her hand and let go.

Junior walked backwards, watching him disappear through the door. He was so cute, and such a good listener! "A rare and wonderful combination." Just as quickly, a wave of dark feelings passed through her and she couldn't imagine where they came from.

Into the lift she went and the door slid closed. "Home, Stella." She folded arms and listened as the lift whirred; carrying her up a deck to the private quarters she shared with her mother.

The lift door opened and she walked out, down a door, to her own door and it slid open. She walked into the dark quarters and the lights came on automatically. The door slid closed behind her.

She could still see the eyes. Blue.

A second later, the feeling dissipated and the eyes with it.

Junior exhaled. "Music, Stella." The tempo made her feel like she was in synch with her own body, if only for a while. "1950's Earth."

"Acknowledged." The sound system crooned, *All I Have to Do is Dream*, by the Everly Brothers.

Olivia completed her part of the negotiations and politely declined the invitation to the subsequent banquet. That evening, the Maverick welcomed her shuttle home.

Minutes later, she strode down a bluish-gray corridor bound for her private quarters, rubbing her temples. She couldn't wait to strip off her uniform and slip into a bubble bath. A memory of sharing such a bath with her first husband tried to invade her thoughts. She pushed it away like so many times before.

Sachi exited a lift and fell into step with her. "Captain, I've given the order to get underway."

"Already?"

"Admiral Jackson tried to pull rank to board less than ten minutes ago." Sachi waved her hand. "A snap inspection or some other nonsense. I contacted Admiral Codetalker and he ordered us to immediate border patrol."

Olivia studied her best friend's tension as they strode along. "He did? Why? I already apologized on Junior's behalf and no charges were filed."

Codetalker was the one person who threatened Sachi's resolve to stay eternally single. "Cody informed me Jackson was brought up on charges of sexual assault on Nebo Prime. The girl was only fourteen. Of course, he bribed local officials to avoid prosecution."

"Oh, God." Olivia's feet dragged to a stop. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"Jackson's always tried to convince you to get rid of Junior. Now, all of a sudden, he wants to meet her. He asked a lot of questions about her. I think he looked up her picture on the crew manifest and saw how pretty she is."

Olivia groaned.

"I know you hate to think about it, Olivia, but Junior's grown into a beautiful young woman. She's become prey."

Anger dropped Olivia's hand and she thrust a finger at Sachi's nose. "My daughter is no one's prey!"

"She still hasn't earned her green belt in Kenpo after ten years' training."

Olivia dropped the finger.

"Legally, she'll be an adult in just over two years, free to go wherever she wants. The day is fast approaching when she will leave our protection."

Turning away, Olivia folded her arms.

"We've all done our best with her." Sachi softened her tone. "She's just too much like her father for us to handle. Edward Delano's a powerhouse."

"That he is." Olivia inhaled deeply. "He certainly is." She exhaled. "Thank you, Sachi."

"Good night, Captain." Sachi shifted from 'best friend' back to First Officer and vanished around the corner.

Olivia's mind raced with the requisite lecture to come. She finally came to her door and stopped to study the curved frame. "What made me think I could raise a child on this damn ship anyway?" She drew breath. The door slid open. She walked in.

The thump-thump of ancient rock music struck her first thing.

Junior hung by her knees from the coolant pipes on the ceiling. With one hand she gripped the pipe and with the other she held a half-eaten banana, its peelings dangling down. And she was belting out some jungle song at the top of her range, the walls vibrating with the background music over com. Her face lit up. "Hi, Mom!"

"Stella, discontinue music."

"Unable to comply," said Stella. "Command Authorization O'Keefe, Captain Olivia required."

"I am Captain Olivia O'Keefe!" .

"Stella, kill the music!" Junior flipped down onto her feet.

The music stopped and Stella said, "Authorization recognized."

"Junior!" Olivia propped her hands on her hips. "I told you never to usurp my command codes again!"

"Well...it was only for music, Mom. The rest of the ship still thinks you're you." Junior pointed at her mother's head, walking around her. "Oh, no, you did not go into the delegates' chamber like that! It looks like a cinnamon bun died on your head!"

"Will you stop?"

"Stop what?" Junior walked around her, still pointing, for the third time. "What's wrong, Mama Bear?" She shifted into fast-forward. She walked right over the back of the sofa to frenetically rearrange the vases on the shelf behind it. Then, she pushed one of the beige chairs against the wall, stepped back, glared at it, and pushed it back.

Olivia's throat constricted. All breakable objects had been replaced with impexi-glass long ago. "Junior..." *Count to ten, breathe.*

From the computer desk, Junior worked her way around the room. "Whoa-hah!" She tripped over her feet after the matter re-sequencer and wiped the grandfather clock's face with her sleeve when she popped back up.

"Junior, stop!"

"Stop what?" Junior spun around, licked her thumb and cleaned a smudge from her mother's cheek. "Why couldn't I have inherited your little nose? I mean, whose crazy idea was it to put this ski-jump in the middle of my face?"

"You climbed up the inside of the habitat enclosure. You might've been killed!"

You slimed Roman Jackson. He's an admiral!"

Junior stopped, face abashedly pink. Her lower lip trembled. "I'm...sorry..." eyes rolled to the side "...about climbing around the bubble ceiling. But, I am not sorry about sliming that old windbag! He deserved it! What planet is he from anyway? Jupiter, because he's so much stupider?"

"Junior." Olivia rubbed her throbbing forehead.

"My father's gone and it's all his fault!"

"Junior..." Olivia's words got caught in her throat. She took a deep breath. "We were in deep space when Malcolm died."

"Well...I just know. He's a villain!"

Olivia watched the girl pace back and forth; hands on hips, just like Edward always did when he was mad. "God."

"Ooh, poor Mom." Junior flung her arms around her neck, jerking her into a tight hug. "It's not very fun being a star captain sometimes."

Olivia muffled a little cry of pain when her daughter's shoulder jammed her nose.

"Next time, I'll chuck Admiral Jackass into the mud bog for you."

Olivia unwedged her nose and found oxygen again. "I failed you. Maybe I should've sent you to live on Earth. Maybe..."

"No!" Junior cried in a shrill voice, pushing her back by the shoulders. Big tears appeared and dribbled down her freckled face. "Please don't send me away! I'll do better, I promise I will! I'll play rocketball three times a day to burn more excess energy and never break into the chocolate again, I swear!"

"Oh, Junior." Olivia sniffed, smoothing red tendrils from her cheek. "You are all at once my greatest strength and my greatest weakness."

An image of Olivia's long-ago husband passed through her thoughts. *I will do anything to make a family with you, Olivia. I'll resign my commission. Then, we'll qualify for reproductive assistance.*

Bowing head, Olivia pressed fingertips to her lips. "I'll resign my commission, if I must, but I will never let you go." She looked up and took daughter's chin in hand. "There is nothing more precious to me than you. Understand?"

Junior nodded.

"Find a tissue and blow your nose." The image of a sword on the far computer screen interrupted Olivia's train of thoughts. "What are you..."

Junior bounded across the room, and fell into the desk chair. "Look what I found!" She pointed at the sword's image. "It's an Irish Gallowglass sword. Isn't it knotty?" She propped her elbow on the desk, chin in hand. "The historical record states its name is 'Aodhan,' which means 'born of fire,' and it's an O'Keefe family heirloom. Could that mean our family?"

Olivia's fixed attention on the sword with Celtic swirls etched down its blade from the gold hilt. "Uh...yes." She licked her upper lip. "Yes...this belonged to us once."

"Where is it?"

"It...was lost...a long time ago." Olivia swallowed down a lumpy throat. The memory of placing it in Edward's hands during their wedding ceremony drifted through her thoughts.

"Oh." Junior settled her chin back on her hand. "Grandma-in-Montana must still have a record of it though."

Realizing where the conversation was going, Olivia changed the subject on a dime. "I understand you made a new friend today." She started for her bedroom. Distracting Junior was not a difficult task. "Oh, yeah, Mom! Jakoby is reeeally knotty. I'm going to marry him someday." She quickly launched into prattling. "He's going to be on board with his mom for six whole weeks. Do you think Isaiah and Karana will get married? Do you think I'll be a bridesmaid? Oh, it would be so dreamy to..."

Around the corner of her door, Olivia listened to her daughter prattle.

Junior carried on and on and leapt up and spun around and knocked over a picture with a swoop of her hand, screamed, and rushed to put it back, all without pausing to breathe between prattles.

*Oh, Edward, how much you've missed.* Something akin to guilt pierced her heart, but she quickly dispelled it with the knowledge her daughter's safety was paramount. That's when she noticed the prattling and crashing about had stopped.

Whimpering replaced it, growing into cries, and then into sobs.

Olivia leaned back out the doorway.

Their daughter sat, sobbing into her hands, the image of her father's sword on the computer beside her.

"Junior?" Olivia went to her. "What's wrong?" *Oh, God, when can I get her back on medication?*

"It's mine." Junior trembled, collapsing on her mother's shoulder and holding on tight. "I want it back."

"What? The sword?" Olivia eyed Edward's sword.

"He's mine. They took him away. I want him back."

Olivia gripped her shoulders and studied her red face, wet with tears. "What did you say?" She observed the pouty, quivering lips. "Him?"

"I want it back." Junior looked at the sword. "It's mine."

Releasing a long breath, Olivia hugged her daughter and forced herself to exhale. "Only a few more hours and you'll be on your new meds and everything will be all right."

Accordingly, the next morning before school Junior lay down on a medical bed and Dr. Williams' hand came to rest on her shoulder. She could feel the drugs flowing through her veins and she hated them. It wasn't fair. *Why can't I think straight without them? Why was I born like this?*

"You all right, Honey?" Karana Williams rubbed her shoulder.

"Fine."

Karana gave her a pat and joined Isaiah in his office. "Done. She'll have to keep up with the behavior modification. I don't want her on any higher dosage. This is new to her system and its best if she learns to live with it."

"What about the telepathy?"

Karana leaned on the desk and gave Junior an encouraging smile over her shoulder. "Some humans have headaches around telepaths."

"Olivia's the only the one I know who does."

"It's genetic. You told me how intuitive Olivia is. That's one step down from empathic ability. Sure, it's extremely rare in humans, but take a look at this." Karana walked around and settled into the chair. She tapped on the computer controls. "Check out Junior's DNA here." She waved a finger. "Here's her maternal DNA. See that gene there? Now, look at that gene here in her baby records."

"It was recessive. Now, it's dominant." Isaiah leaned over her. "Are you saying Junior's empathic?"

"Maybe. I'm guessing something in her paternal DNA triggered this gene as she matured, but I'm just guessing. The ADHD aggravates or is

aggravated by it. I can't tell which." Karana leaned on her hand. "It sure would be nice to run a full scan on the father."

"Yeah, sure would." Isaiah heaved a troubled breath and glanced at her. "So, what gives Olivia a headache causes Junior neural trauma."

"The good news is she's adapting." Karana tapped off the computer and pushed out from the desk. "I realize after the hell she just went through, it may not seem like it."

"She'll grow out of it?"

"Or grow accustomed to it. Without her father, it's difficult to make an educated guess what she'll be like as an adult." Karana stood and walked past. "As a young adolescent, Junior's brain is still maturing. And, remember, she's about three years behind girls her age. She's laying down new neural pathways all the time."

*Dad didn't have ADHD.* Junior frowned and rolled her head over on the pillow. *And his medical record is on file.* She stared at the white wall, ignoring the flickering computer lights all around her. Without meds, those same lights would've driven her batty. Already, thoughts found their proper places in her head. Math test on Tuesday, babysit for the Wu-Cheng family on Thursday, don't forget to feed Ret's Neboan Fish-Eating Plant on Saturday because his bubby be visiting from Queens, New York and she's very strict about observing the Sabbath.

Nevertheless, it all felt wrong somehow.

"How do you feel?" Karana patted her shoulder again and drew a micro-scanner near on the swing-arm.

*Alone.* Junior hugged the pillow to her chest and rolled onto her side, facing away. Something was gone, as if suddenly snuffed out or...

Silenced.

Tears fell hot on her cheeks. "Fine. Can I leave now?"

The following months passed slowly for her, like running a marathon through deep mud in a cold rain. Her grades improved and there were no more food fights, but she dropped out of martial arts training completely.



# Chapter 4

## BENNUVIAN NEW YEAR 2297

Sitting cross-legged on the preschool room floor, Junior welcomed the little black-haired girl into her lap.

"Read it again, Miss Junior!" The little girl thumped her book and whipped open the covers. "Sing it like last time."

A little boy across the room overheard. "Miss Junior's singing a book!"

Instantly, a herd of squealing two, three, and four year old children stampeded over her. One leapt onto her back and dangled a purple tentacle over her ear.

Junior pulled on the tentacle, gasping for air. "Kelsa, retract please."

"Sorry, Miss Junior." Kelsa retracted her tentacle and wrapped her other one around her chest.

"I had Miss Junior's lap first!" The black-haired girl shoved a boy away. Being part Altarian, adorable freckles dotted up the center of her forehead and encircled her dark brown eyes. "Sing the coffee pot song, Miss Junior, like last time."

"All right, but I'll need my arms to do the motions." Tucking a hand to her hip and sticking the other one out, Junior sang:

""I'm a little coffee pot,  
Short and stout,  
Here is my handle, here is my spout.  
When I get all steamed up,  
Here me shout..."

"Do it, Miss Junior! Do it!" Kelsa's tentacles flew out.

"I need to breathe." Junior peeled a tentacle from her neck again. She held her fist up and all the children did too. And, altogether, they pounded out the last line.

"...Give me coffee or I will pout!"

The children rolled off and fell over, laughing themselves silly.

Junior pulled up on the back of the teacher's chair. "I really have to go now or I'll be late for my own school."

"Noooo!" Kelsa leapt back onto her, wrapping both tentacles around.

Junior was certain the little girl looked like a backpack.

Thankfully, the teacher noticed her plight and peeled Kelsa off. "Who knows the date today?"

The little boy chimed, "July 1st, 2297!"

"Excellent, Elijah. Junior's birthday. Let's sing to her and then she has to go."

"Happy birthday to you..."

Junior smiled, misty-eyed in their sweetness. She loved little children so much, even more than music. One day she would sing for her very own babies. When the song completed, she waved amidst cheers and exited for the lift.

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Dreamtime

Ariez stood with eyes closed, breathing in the purity of her maternal nature. So strong. She nurtured him across lightyears.

"Please, come to me." He clenched fists and willed patience. Minutes passed and then he felt her presence. He opened eyes.

She sunk into the moss and fallen leaves nearby, disoriented. "What...wh..."

Ariez fell into the dark green ferns with her and pulled her into his arms, clutching her tight. "We did it. You have returned."

"Where...where am..." She looked around, disoriented.

"Look at me." He brushed red curls from her nose. "You know my voice."

She looked. "Ariez?" She wrapped arms around him and pressed cheek to his neck. "What happened? It feels as if it's been a lifetime since I've seen you." She clung to him as though he might vanish beneath her fingertips.

"I do not know. It must have been the accident. But..." he took chin in hand and beheld her gaze "...you have adapted...again. You always adapt. You always return to me."

A gentle smile parted her lips. "I love you."

"And I love you." Ariez kissed her lips, her nose. "Listen to me. You must remember what I am about to tell you when you wake. The Maverick has arrived at Kalpuna Chowla Station. I will arrive tomorrow. It is imperative you remember me and come with me at once."

She searched his face. "Why?"

"I will not appear as I do here. I will be disguised as an old human male. You will know me because of our connection here."

She tilted her head. "If I come with you, I'll have to leave my home."

"Your mother is coming with us. She is revered among my people."

"Your people? But, what about my..." She vanished.

"No!" Ariez grabbed the grass beneath where she had been in his arms.

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### Waking Moments.

Junior woke when the lift door opened. Dizzy, she grabbed the rail and hauled herself up. She peered out the open door. How she'd gotten into the lift, she could not remember.

Everyone was so relieved the medication kept her at normal human speed and Mom, Isaiah, and Sachi were so proud she was doing better in school. She'd just die if they all found out about the dizzy spells.

Jose exited the science room and approached. "Hey, Junior. You all right?" Curly brown hair, big, brown eyes – he looked like he could be her father's brother.

"Huh? Oh, probably drank real milk for breakfast instead of soy again." *My allergies are always a good excuse.*

Jose laughed, entering the lift as she exited. "Well, if you break out, we can start calling you 'Spot.'"

The door closed and her fake smile vanished. She knew Jose didn't mean to be unkind. Still, some tears threatened her eyelashes.

Junior hesitated a meter from the school room door and drew a deep breath. Before taking a step, her mother walked out. "Oh, Mom! I'm sorry I'm late! It was my morning with the preschoolers and they..."

"Shhh, it's all right." Olivia nodded to her teacher. "Today's your birthday. Remember? No school. We're going shopping on Kalpuna Chowla Station."

"Kalpuna Chowla Station?" Junior froze.

"Is something wrong?"

"No." Junior leaned over and waved to Ret and Rehama still stuck in their computer desks. Maybe we should go tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? Why?"

"I don't know." Junior shrugged.

"Well, we can go again tomorrow if you like. We have three day shore leave here."

Rehama raised her hand and received a nod from the teacher. Beaming, she rushed from her desk, out the door, and dragged Junior into the corner.

Her mother smiled, knowingly, and pretended not to notice.

"Well?" Rehama shook gripped hands with her.

"Well, what?"

"Did he call?"

Junior studied her best friend's face for some indication what she was talking about. The meds made it all so cloudy. "Um, who?"

"What do you mean, 'who?' Jakoby! Your boyfriend!"

Junior glanced at her mother. *Jakoby?* She'd finally learned the hard way, of course, to keep her mouth shut when people asked her questions for which there seemed to be an obvious answer.

"She's just a little embarrassed." Her mother walked over and draped an around her waist. "His birthday card was so sweet."

"Um, can I watch it one more time?" Junior tried to be bright. *Got to refresh.*

"Over here." Olivia nodded with her head and led them to a computer face. "Stella, replay Happy-Birthday-Gennie..."

*Gennie!* Relief flooded Junior's heart. *I knew someone called me by that name!*

"...Love-Jakoby."

"Oooh, love," said Rehama, giggling and squeezing her hands.

The computer screen filled with the image of a boy, warm brown skin, dimpled smile, enormous brown eyes.

"He's so cute!" Junior felt her ears heat up. And she remembered Jakoby once more.

Jakoby broke into song. "'Sixteen candles makes a lovely light...'" He knew how much she loved ancient love songs. This one was first made famous by the Crests.

*I remember.* Junior drew in a deep breath and released.

An hour later Olivia walked along the promenade of the Kalpuna Chowla Space Station, arm hooked around Junior's. Her stomach twisted into knots. The time had come. She couldn't put it off any longer. *She's been doing so well these past few months, since she started the new medication.*

Junior skittered around merchants' stalls and darted in and out of shops. She emerged from one shop with a creature which looked like a cross between a white Persian kitten and a flying squirrel. "Oh, Mom, isn't she cute? Let's call her Fluffy!"

"Oh, no, no, no..." Olivia shook her head. "I don't like cats."

"Pleeease!" Junior begged with those green puppy dog eyes.

"No. Remember who ended up feeding your Nebo Fish-Eating Plant?"

"I didn't know it ate real, live fish!"

"You had a hysterical crying fit and passed out." Olivia failed to block fast enough when the Freyan Flying Feline leapt into her hair and curled up on her shoulder. "You gave it to Ret."

"Oh, she likes you, Mom!"

Olivia gave a soft groan. "I think she's frightened and knows I'm the mother here. She's still a kitten." Maybe a new pet would soften what

she had to tell her daughter. "All right." She handed Fluffy back. "But, it's your responsibility. You clean up after it. You feed it. Understand?"

Junior grinned.

Fluffy jumped right back into Olivia's hair and snuggled about the base of her neck, tail hanging over her shoulder. Olivia sighed in resignation. *Damn those green puppy dog eyes. They've gotten me into more trouble.*

And on they walked, daughter prattling. "Didn't I have a Gawainian Hopper once? I can't remember much about him, except he shed all over the place and you called him a rat. Oh! And remember Hank the Tank, my holographic Anklyosaur?"

He..."

*We'll stop for Neboan chocolate fluff. Then, I'll tell her.* Olivia tucked a stray auburn lock behind her ear and Fluffy shoved it right back out. She didn't often wear her hair down because it always got in the way. Yet, she couldn't bear to cut it either. This made her feel stupid, because it was Edward who liked it long.

"Oh, there's a jeweler!" Junior grabbed her arm and dragged her that way.

Olivia remembered being embarrassed to be seen with her own mother at age sixteen, and was delighted to realize Junior had no such inhibition. In fact, very little inhibited Junior - she loved everything and everybody.

Isaiah had advised her to be thankful for the bubbles and sunshine. And he had been right. As always. He had also said if Junior knew her birthfather was hyperactive and had big feet too, she wouldn't feel like such a freak.

Olivia watched her studying the necklaces, some imported from Earth and some from the various worlds in Earth's coalition. She hated shopping, but Junior loved pretty little things and it was her birthday. *How am I supposed to tell her the man who sired her betrayed his oath to the United Fleet at the cost of hundreds of lives and is now an evil warlord in the Menelaen Empire, sworn enemy of the Earth-Intari Alliance?*

Junior pointed to a gold heart-shaped locket. "I want this one."

Olivia fingered the locket and examined the back. "It has a holographic emitter with enough memory for a family portrait." She addressed the human-looking shopkeeper. "We'll take it."

"Please," said the brunette, violet eyes shining at Junior. She held open her hand towards the locket. "Please, Holiness, accept the necklace as a gift. It would be an honor unequaled in my lifetime."

*Holiness?* Olivia cinched brows together.

"Huh?" Junior took the necklace into her fingers. "Um, can I, Mom?"

"Uh..." Olivia studied the shopkeeper's earnest expression. "No, Junior. I'm sorry. It would violate United Fleet regulations regarding officers and their families accepting gifts from non-fleet individuals and organizations." She pulled out her credit chip and slid it across the counter to the shopkeeper. "We appreciate the sentiment, however."

"As you say, so shall it be," said the shopkeeper with a quick bow at the neck.

Olivia took the necklace and unfastened the clasp.

"Do you think I should put Dad's picture in it too, or just you, me, and Isaiah and Sachi?"

Olivia fastened the necklace around her daughter's neck and noticed the gold Celtic wedding rings already dangling from a chain there, a fourteenth birthday present. She'd told her the rings were her grandmother's, but she'd never told her which grandmother or that she'd once worn them too. *I've put this off far too long.* "Let's..." deep breath "...talk about it." Latching onto her arm, she guided her away.

All around them, fellow shoppers of every shape and color passed one another or strolled along together, a few of the winged ones flew across the cathedral-like ceiling.

"Do you still think about Daddy?" Olivia found a small round table for them in the food court.

"Well, the truth is, I really don't think about him as much as I did a year ago. Is that bad?" Junior sat in her chair and eyed the chocolate fluff being served to the customers in the next table.

"No. It's not bad. It's healthy. It means you're processing the grief." Olivia held up two fingers for the waiter and he nodded. "I always bury my feelings in my stomach."

Junior smiled a bit. "Do you remember when Dad and Mr. Ashley chucked the Creosian boy into the canal of regurgitating eels?" She laughed. "Seriously, he only tried to hold my hand."

"Creosians copulate through cells on their hands."

"Well, he had gorgeous gray eyes." Junior accepted her chocolate fluff from the waiter and twirled the dark goo around the poofy white confection. "I wish I'd been born with Dad's eyes."

Olivia contemplated her innocent face. "Baby...you do have your father's eyes."

"Dad's eyes were brown."

"Junior, I loved your father very much, but..." A feeling struck her heart like a black dart. She saw two Intari in moss-green suits three tables away.

*Kill the mother quickly or we won't take the daughter without a fight.*

"Junior!" Olivia flew across the table as one Intari drew a weapon.

Just as the shot fired and Olivia fell to the floor shielding Junior, the violet-eyed shopkeeper dove between them and took the shot fully on her own chest.

Olivia dragged Junior behind an overturned table.

The station exploded in violence all around them.

Two figures cloaked in gray leapt out of the chaos to engage the Intari, slashing off their hands and driving blades into their guts. More Intari, station security, and persons in black battled back and forth, plasma shots striking glass and shattering metal over their heads.

Sachi and another Maverick security guard squeezed between the destroyed counter, plasma pistols drawn. "This way, Captain! We've got you covered!" She motioned another guard to lay down fire and rushed captain and daughter away, backs to them, along the edges, behind the station security's firing line.

Finding a door, Olivia pushed it open and shoved Junior in. Altogether with her security team, she hurried Junior through a kitchen and out another door into a corridor. The sounds of battle chased them all the way to the airlock.

With her baby girl safely on board, Olivia hit a wall-com as the doors closed and locked in a hiss of air. "O'Keefe to bridge."

"Bridge here," Lieutenant Mir's deep Russian accent broke over com.

"Recall the crew. As soon as everyone is on board, get us the hell out of here." She thanked God it was a civilian space station which hated United Fleet interference unless absolutely necessary.

"Aye, Captain."



"One parsec out." Olivia knew they couldn't go too far. They'd be expected to provide testimony in the investigation, or assistance if station security couldn't contain the violence alone.

"Understood. Bridge out."

Olivia's thoughts kept coming back to the violet-eyed shopkeeper who'd sacrificed her life to save theirs. "Junior, security lock-down."

"Yes, Ma'am." Junior let go and strode calmly to the lift, falling into step with other civilians. She'd been born and brought up on the Maverick. She knew what to do in an emergency.

Blowing out a breath, Olivia did an about-face and proceeded towards the other lift. Already, the Maverick was disengaging from the airlock and she imagined her crew running through.

A second later, she leaned against the rail and felt the lift whir her through the ship towards the bridge.

Lieutenant Ashley's voice came out of the wall. "Admiral Codetalker on a secured line."

The lift door slid open on the Bridge and Olivia strode through.

"Pirates, Captain?" Ashley looked up from com.

"Unknown."

Sachi sat in the command chair and all around her the consoles lit up like Christmas trees. Red lights flashed silently in the corners. "Station security is now requesting assistance, Captain. The violence continues."

"Understood. Stand-by."

The door to her ready room slid open and she walked through, stopped, and waited for the door to slide closed. "Stella, enable communications with Admiral Codetalker." She stepped up to her gray desk, spun the computer monitor around, and struck the controls.

Graham Codetalker's chiseled features appeared, black hair streaked with silver and tied in the back. A vivid blue Navajo banner hung behind him and he folded hands upon his desk. "Admiral Jackson is fourteen hours away from you."

"What's going on?"

"Jackson's been making inquiries about Junior."

*Enter the equally overprotective godfather.*

"Searching juvenile and family law. I think he wants to assume custody of her."

“Absurd!”

“He brought down Edward. If he can’t have you, maybe he thinks he can get his hands on your daughter. It would be the ultimate act of revenge.”

Rage boiled inside Olivia, a sickening feeling deep in her gut. “I assume you know what just happened on the Kalpuna Chowla Station.”

“I’ve received initial reports. Olivia, those Intari were Premarean Guard. You know the part they played in Edward’s discommendation.”

Sinking into her chair, Olivia pressed fist to chin. “Two of the combatants used swords. Only Menelaens carry swords. It’s a religious thing for them, I think.” It wasn’t a good thing for star captains to show any weakness, but she’d need Codetalker’s help if everything blew apart. She laced her hands on the desk. “Edward must know about Junior. He’s coming for her.”

“If that’s true, he could set off an armed conflict in the DMZ and blow apart the armistice, especially if Jackson stays on you. I want the Maverick out of the way. Your navigation is malfunctioning. There’s no way you’ll keep on the assigned path. Circle back towards Earth. I should have the red tape cleared up for your next deep space mission by then. Codetalker out.” He leaned forward, pressed a button, and was gone.

Olivia gripped armrests and pushed herself up. She made for the Bridge and didn’t look up when Sachi relinquished the command chair. “Lieutenant Mir, navigation is out. You’ve no idea where we’re going.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Mir leaned over to tap panels of light below a spatial grid. “Any particular rabbit trail we’re lost on?”

Olivia waved a hand. “That way.” She looked back to com. “Mr. Ashley, communications is on the fritz too.”

“Understood.”

Sachi didn’t request an explanation.

No one ever did.

Junior’s ‘Sweet 16’ birthday party was slated for that night.

Olivia settled into her command chair and let a hand fall into her lap. *She might not. She grew up on this ship.*

All around her, the Bridge crew worked silently.

Safe in their quarters, civilians quietly occupied themselves, waiting for the next order. As unruly as Junior could be, security lock-down was as normal to her as brushing teeth before bed. Come to think of it, she’d

had six previous birthday parties postponed at the last moment and never complained.

*Breathe in, breathe out.*

It was true Junior had seen her share of action, growing up the Captain's Brat on a deep space starship. *But, she's never been the target of simultaneous attacks by three different entities. If Jackson's in bed with the Intari again, why is he still 14 hours out?*

Olivia shook the dilemma from her head. Whatever the case, she couldn't tell Junior about her father now. *Once we're safely back in deep space, I'll tell her everything.*

Med-bay was Junior's designated lock-down area, because she and the other teens were qualified field medics. She stood before a storage unit with scanner in hand, checking each emergency medical kit locked behind the little doors. Concentrating on the tedious work was made even more difficult by the flashing red lights, irritating her senses. If Isaiah noticed how much pain she was in, he'd realize the medication was no longer working. There'd be more scans, more maternal freak-outs, and more medication to dull her.

Silently, the nurses and other medical technicians worked with Isaiah, getting the medical bay ready for triage. It was the same routine Junior had always known, even before she actively participated.

She wiped a sleeved forearm over face and sniffed. Her whole head throbbed and a deep, inexplicable grief churned in her stomach.

"Mine check out." Ret stood suddenly beside her, scanner in hand. "You almost done?"

"Yeah."

Cocking his head, Ret peered into her face and shook his head. "Junior, you're a freakin' mess."

"You always say that!" Junior clamped her teeth shut tight for a few seconds and hoped Isaiah hadn't noticed her anger flash. She released her teeth enough to growl. "You think I don't know?"

"Sorry."

"I need to use the 'little Martian's room.'" Junior crammed the scanner into the recharger and strode for the door. But, she didn't go to the restroom.

A huge breath of some relief filled her lungs when the door slid closed behind her. Yet, the rage still boiled within. *Everyone wants me to be normal, but no one wants to listen to what's wrong.* She skipped the lift and took the work conduits up a deck.

Junior found the HRC empty. Everyone else was at tactical alert or security lock-down, which was where she ought to have been. She couldn't let anyone witness her meltdown though. Mom, Isaiah, and all the rest, they thought she was doing well. It certainly was a lot easier on them for her to be on meds. "I'm a freak. Why am I such a freak?" She started pacing, fists clenching and unclenching at her sides.

The primal scream welled up in her like a volcano until she fell to her knees and it ripped out of her chest, ricocheting off the blank HRC walls.

In a dark bedchamber, Edward Delano leapt out of deep sleep and ripped his sword from the wall. Thrusting it forward in battle stance, his bare chest went cold when sweat mixed with air. *Olivia?*

Adjusting to the starlight passing his ship, he scanned his Spartan quarters. Another disembodied scream. Another bad dream. He was used to bad dreams. He'd been a dead man walking for so long.

Threat hung in the air, a phantom he could not attack. Delano swung the sword around one side of his body and then the other. Relaxing, he slid the flat over two fingers and found his desk chair. He propped legs up and leaned back.

Seconds passed and he polished his sword with a soft, white cloth. The silver-toned blade glistened in the starlight, Celtic swirls running down the flat. The golden hand guards and ringed pommel shone as though in their own energy. He picked up another cloth and conditioned the brown leather double-grip hilt.

Aodhan looked as new as the day his wife had rested it on his finger tips, concluding their wedding ceremony. Of course, it wasn't new at all. The O'Keefe family home in Dublin was invaded by mercenaries over a thousand years before. An ancestress took the leader with his own sword and the others fled upon seeing her draw it from his bloody corpse.

Delano's lips curled, remembering Olivia telling the story.

A beep brought him out of memory. He tapped a desk-com. "Speak."

The voice of his Primary Kaiya commander filled the room. "Captain Delano," she said. "We confirm the attack on the Ladies Olivia and

Rowan on the Kalpuna Chowla Station. They escaped unharmed and the Maverick is safely away."

Delano set the sword back in its black case. "Who were the attackers?"

"Agents of the Intari Premarean Guard. The Orachi..."

"Orachi?" Delano lowered the case lid.

"These Orachi defended the Ladies. They did not try to kill them."

"Lord Kaliban." Delano stood and rubbed his throbbing head.

"With Prince Ariez dead, marriage to a red-haired female could elevate him to Imperial Heir Designate once Princess Ara succeeds the Throne."

Groan. "I haven't even brought my wife and daughter under my protection yet and already the dragons are circling."

"There was one other Menelaen present, Captain."

Delano dropped his hand. "Who?"

"Meshell, daughter of the Empress' most trusted servant and Bishop Trihn, imperial companion to the deceased Prince Ariez. She accompanied the Prince when he left Menelaen on a quest for the Holy Bennu and had been presumed dead as well."

"Bring her in for questioning, but as a guest."

"Meshell took the shot meant to kill your wife, Captain. We have retrieved the body for pious burial."

Delano pressed palms to desk. "Why would a member of the Imperial Household sacrifice her life to save Olivia?"

"Captain, your wife has red hair. Meshell was deeply religious. Her father was the Bishop."

Delano took one step around his desk and passed gaze over the stars. For a moment, he considered that his family might be safer on the human side of the DMZ after all.

"Captain, there is one more issue. Admiral Jackson was fourteen hours away from the station when the attack occurred. He laid in an intercept course with the Maverick when it departed. I am relieved to report the Maverick vanished off sensors soon after. The Admiral has begun a full spectrum sweep of the area. He has not located her."

This revelation burned, coming up Delano's throat, but it did put an end to his doubts. "We absolutely cannot allow my wife and daughter to fall into Jackson's hands. I trust you've not lost track of the Maverick."

"We have not, Captain. The Maverick will enter our security net in five months, nine days after the Bennuvian calendar. Your resurrection is at hand."

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Dreamtime.

Junior climbed the rope ladder up into their tree house and found him leaning against the redwood tree trunk.

Ariez propped elbows on knees and held head in both hands.

She knelt beside him. "You're grieving...like when your father was murdered."

He lifted his wet, red face. "Meshell...she was a sister to me, greater than Ara could ever be, the daughter of my nanny and spiritual tutor."

"How did it happen?" Junior sat cross-legged, his grief flooding her heart.

"There was a battle on the Kalpuna Chowla Station. She took the shot meant to kill you."

Horror. "Kill me? She... Why would anyone..."

Ariez took her into his arms and held her close, face against his neck. "Meshell and I grew up reading the stories together, acting them out, and dreaming of the day we seek out the Holy Bennu."

"What's a boo-noo?"

"Holy Bennu." Ariez lifted her chin betwixt thumb and forefinger. "You are the Holy Bennu."

"Me?" Junior caught a laugh in her throat and coughed into her hand instead. "Sachi'd die if she heard anyone call me 'holy!'"

"Your wings are unfurling even now."

# Chapter 5

JANUARY 2298

Junior finished scrubbing the Mess Hall windowsill and dropped the giant sponge into the buck. She sat back on her legs and glared over her shoulder at Chef Bot whipping up breakfast. *I don't know why he freaked out so much. It was New Year's Eve, for crying out loud.* She wrung her sponge out in the bucket. Using the old fashioned cleaning things was her mother's idea.

Having to clean up the Mess Hall was not as unpleasant as dreading the medical exam which would follow. She'd overheard Isaiah tell her mom she was the only case of incurable ADHD in thirty years. The food fight had tipped him off about her ADHD meds no longer working. Now, there'd be lots more scans and getting jerked back and forth by different drugs and dosages.

Tears burned on her cheeks.

"Isaiah to Junior." His voice summoned her attention over intra-ship com.

"Junior here." She scrubbed jelly off the lower wall.

"Mr. Ashley got me through to Dr. Williams. Jakoby wants to talk to you when we're through, so you'd better hurry up."

"Jakoby?"

"Don't tell me there's trouble in adolescent paradise already."

*What the hell? Who's Jakoby?*

"Junior?" Isaiah fell silent for a few seconds. "All right, I'm gonna tell your mama I need you in med-bay right now. She can have you scrub the magna-converters later for punishment instead."

*Oh, schmutz. He thinks I've forgotten stuff again.* Junior thought fast, but came up empty. "I'm all right. I'd rather clean than Mess Hall than the magna-converters."

A few seconds passed in silence. "All right then, but you get down here the minute you start spinning in circles and dancing on the ceiling."

Roll the eyes. "Fine. Junior out." She scrubbed, hoping she could think of something in the extra time she had before the scans. No more hiding and no way to avoid the maternal freak-out.

Something glimmered among the muck on the floor. She picked it up and grinned. *A kebob skewer!* She checked to see if Chef's back was turned and pushed the last bits of roasted vegetables off. Standing up and stepping out, she began to whip it around her body like she'd seen Sachi do with her katana sword during work-out. She was sure she looked just like a Japanese samurai. Spinning around for the one-cut/one-kill, the skewer stuck into a Hitachi melon and spun off the tip on the upswing.

Smash! Right into the wall next to Chef's head!

"Oh, I am so sorry!" Junior cupped hand to cheek.

"Junior!" Chef's hands went to his hips. Being half-Intari, his skin tone of red showed his frustration with her. Being half-Jewish-from-Queens, New York, he sputtered some Yiddish expletives too and ordered, "Drop that!"

She obeyed. The skewer landed in a pool of pudding.

"What is it with you and swords?"

"I...I don't know." Junior shrugged. "I'm really sorry."

Chef Bot grumped. "Get back to work. The breakfast crowd will be here in an hour." He stomped over and picked up the skewer and stomped back.

Ret always helped out before school, but was in detention for putting a bloat-frog in the teacher's chair.

Chef was on his own in the galley, which doubled his crankiness.

Rehama had ducked out before Mom broke up the fight.

Lower lip drooping, Junior grabbed her sponge back out of the bucket and started scrubbing again. *Why am I always on the schmutz-list?*

Scrub, scrub. Her feelings churned inside her, but something about the stars in the window captured her attention. Traveling at Mark Two, the stars seemed to speed by, although it was only an illusion. The stars



were fixed and thousands of lightyears away. She'd first noticed them from her mother's arms.

In that moment, however, there was a familiar presence among them, like the last time her mother returned in a shuttlecraft. *Mom's supposed to be on the Bridge.* She tried to shrug the feeling off, but it wouldn't go away. Finally, she tapped her wrist-communicator. "Junior to Bridge."

"I'm here, Junior," her mother's voice filled her. "What's wrong?"

"You're on the Bridge?"

"Yes. Something's wrong. What is it?"

"Nothing. It's stupid." Junior shook her head.

"No. It's not. Please, tell me...please."

"I thought you were out in space..." Junior scrubbed "...in a shuttle or something."

"Scanning." Sachi spoke over com. Two seconds passed in tense silence. "Tactical alert! All hands to battle stations! Security lock-down all civilians!"

Red lights and sirens split the air.

Junior jumped up and ran to a computer interface. "Stella, what's going on?" She studied the black and white spatial grid. Three red dots approached the blue one and she knew the blue dot represented the Maverick.

"Sensors detect three Menelaen battle cruisers."

The urgency of it didn't quite register in Junior's mind. "The Menelaens don't send battle cruisers out this far or we never would've been assigned to this patrol. This is a deep space starship with families on board."

"Junior! What are you still doing here? Security lock-down!" Chef shoved his pans away and switched off all heating elements.

"But...they don't want to hurt us."

"Scramble!"

Junior ran out, bound for the med-bay. She passed some young children being escorted to the preschool room by Rehama, the teen volunteer. She caught the fear in her best friend's big, brown eyes, but said nothing. Everyone knew what to do and no one made any unnecessary noise.

On the Bridge, Olivia stood to watch the forward screen as three gigantic phantoms descended upon them against the backdrop of stars. "Mr. Mir, get us the hell out of here!"

"Yes, Ma'am!"

The Maverick banked and roared into maximum velocity even as she spoke the order.

The Menelaen battle cruisers resembled silver beetles with purple running lights, one large starship flanked by two smaller ones. And they gave chase.

Spinning around, Olivia slid back into her chair.

"Captain," said Mr. Ashley from communications. "We're being hailed."

Olivia rose slowly to her feet. "Lead ship's designation?"

"IMS...Mydis."

*Daddy's home.* Olivia heard her voice go hoarse. "Sachi, execute Command Security Protocol Junior-alpha-one."

"Yes, Captain." Sachi tapped the colored lights of her security console. "Owada to Team Alpha, place Junior in maximum security with a rotating shield modulation."

A male voice responded in the affirmative as Sachi worked.

"Captain," said Lieutenant Ashley looked up from the com board. "Captain

Delano wants to speak with his daughter."

Olivia looked fiercely at her com officer. "Tell him to go to hell." She faced tactical. "Sachi, Re-calibrate static shields, full power to the Tryon Canons, evasive maneuver Psi-Demeter."

Seconds later, the Maverick shook in its escape.

"Captain, he's firing non-lethal shots, targeting our engines only," reported Sachi.

"He means to disable us and take what he wants! Target his weapons!" Olivia resumed the command chair and gripped the armrests. "Come about!" She studied the forward view screen. The destroyers swung hard to align their torpedo launchers. "Don't give him a clear shot at our engines!"

"Captain! Those last laser shots are reconfiguring our shield frequencies." Sachi worked tactical in quick proficiency. "Attempting to compensate."

Olivia studied the monitor in her armrest. "Not working! He can teleport! Dispatch security teams to critical points!" She reached over and grabbed a plasma-pistol. "Arm yourselves!"

Down in the Brig's main security cell, Junior stood still and listened. Nothing made sense. As a Space Brat, she'd been in security lock-down while the Maverick battled bad guy aliens plenty of times. But, her lock-down area was the med-bay. Not the Brig.

The Maverick shook at maximum velocity, firing all weapons in defense.

Duke Sinclair and Billy Grant stood guard near the controls on the shield's other side, pressure rifles at the ready.

The Maverick suddenly lurched.

"What? A tractor beam? No way!" Junior looked to the guards, but they only studied the console.

Another lurch and Junior flew sideways. She rolled with it like a good little klutz and when she came up she saw the guards smashed up against the far wall, unconscious.

Junior jumped up and slapped a com-panel. "Junior to the Captain!" She listened to static for a second. "Mom!" Ship-wide communications were down. She ran to the fallen guards. "Billy? Duke?" One look and she knew their wounds were beyond her skills. They needed Isaiah. She dashed out the door, hurdling fallen ceiling panels to find him, or at least some emergency medical technicians.

Crewmen dashed through the smoky chaos, putting out fires.

"Billy and Duke are badly injured in the HRC!" Junior shouted, but wasn't sure if anyone heard. She sprinted down a corridor and climbed over debris. *This shouldn't be happening. There is no hostile intent!*

Finding a work conduit's door blown off, she climbed inside and ran on all fours to the end.

Junior emerged inside the hangar bay behind a toppled console. The two fighter craft and two shuttles still waited for their pilots. She ducked down when she saw a dozen Menelaens in gray uniforms and helmets

with full masks. Their pressure rifles were leveled on four pilots, two co-pilots, and other flight and hangar crew, captured.

The two fighter craft waited in glimmers of white under the harsh lights, hatches open. However, it was a shuttlecraft which was closest to her position. *Oh, schmutz. Shuttles are so boring.*

*What is happening?* A young man's voice.

Junior glanced around, but saw no one near her. Probably an echo. Up above and all around, she could hear the Maverick firing Tryon Canons. She reached down and grabbed a heavy crossbolt lying in the rubble. With all of her strength, she hurled the crossbolt like a discus thrower in Ancient Greece. It crashed into a power conduit on the far wall and sent sparks showering down on the Menelaens.

The pilots and flight crew lunged at their confused enemy.

Junior dove through the hatch of the nearest shuttle and activated manual lift-off.

"Time to kick the tires and light the fires!" She gloried in finally powering out of the hangar bay in a real spacecraft. "Stella, recognize O'Keefe, Captain Olivia." She hacked into the computer on board to accept her as pilot, pulling wires and tapping controls. "Authorization O'Keefe-Charley-Zeta-Nine."

"O'Keefe, Captain Olivia recognized."

"Woo-hoo! I've been promoted and I didn't even have to go to the Academy first!" Junior grabbed the yoke and sent the shuttle into a clumsy spin through the stars. "How many Menelaen ships are still functioning out there?"

"Two."

"All right, fire up the rapid-fire Tryons and target their weapons." She finger-traced the targeting scanners and zeroed in on the enemy destroyers.

"Processing. Scanning. Target locked," said Stella.

"Fire!"

Junior's little shuttle stung the Menelaen battle cruiser like a mosquito might an elephant.

Some sort of port opened on the Menelaen battle cruiser and shot a blue light over her shuttle's nose.

"What the schmutz?" Junior whipped her head around. Her craft lurched to a sudden halt and her safety belts grabbed. She looked over her shoulder to see the blue light enveloping the shuttle. "Ut-oh, now

that's a tractor beam." She stomped on the floor and yanked back on the yoke, but her shuttlecraft only whirred, helplessly caught. The engines died altogether. "Oh, no, Mom's gonna kill me!"

Junior wheeled around as her shuttle was pulled into the flight deck of the Menelaen vessel. "This has got to be the stupidest thing I've ever done in my whole entire life! Why did I do this?" As soon as the shuttle slid to a stop, the great doors creaked shut and a white flash could be seen.

The Menelaen vessel had gone into hyperspace with her on board! "I am so toasted and fried!"

On the Maverick Bridge, Olivia felt the loss of her daughter like a rock in the chest. "Junior..." She jumped to her feet. "Stella, locate Junior!"

The computer's voice cut to her heart. "Junior is not on board the Maverick."

### Delano & Daughter

Deep within the Mydis, Captain Edward Delano strode into a lift, his long crimson cape billowing after him. He gripped the rail with one hand and rubbed his chest with the other. He heard Commander Bo enter. "Has my wife been harmed?"

"No, Captain. Communications report only two injuries among the Maverick crew, both security officers. The command deck was never struck."

Delano nodded. The seconds passed, his head remained bowed. "She hid our child from me for seventeen years." He drew breath through his nose, lifting his chin. "I tried to open a dialogue and she refused my rights as a father. The Menelaen Empire and the Earth-Intari Alliance exist in a state of cold war. This is the only way."

"Yes, Captain."

"Maintain continuous scans. Lady Olivia will come and her safety must insured." Lowering his helmet, the Captain exited the lift. He strode through the line-up of his troops, his red cape striking against their grayness. He stopped six meters from the shuttlecraft framed against the white walls. The gangplank lowered and he gestured with one gray-gloved finger.

Two female security officers responded to his silent command by entering the shuttlecraft.

Commander Bo stood at his side, his cloak replaced with a First Officer's uniform. Gray like the others, red slashes marked his uniform's shoulders.

A screech rang through the flight deck and one guard flew out the shuttle hatch head-first. With a crash, the other one tumbled after.

Behind his helmet, Delano's lips curled. His chest filled with pride. *That's my girl.*

"She is her father's daughter, My Lord," said Commander Bo. "A warrior."

Delano gestured again. Four more female security officers trotted forward and up the gangplank. The first two flew out head first. Then, there was an enormous thump and the third security guard slid out on her belly. The fourth followed almost immediately, but she gripped the wild banshee's arm.

At the bottom of the ramp, Junior landed on her back, but instantly leapt onto her feet and side-kicked her opponent in the head. She darted eyes from side to side. There were Menelaens everywhere! They stood with their pressure rifles at attention. Their helmets with full masks kept her from seeing any emotion on their faces.

Junior's focus settled on the Captain's boots and rose up the tremendous height of him to his helmet. Awe dropped her jaw. "You're humongous." He stood head and shoulders above the tallest Menelaens. His long, crimson cape flowed over his charcoal gray uniform to his powerful calves. His silver helmet was Viking-like with eyes-and-nose guard. The sides of it curved forward like wings over his face. A sunburst emblazoned his breastplate. "Who the hell are you anyway?"

"Star Captain Edward Delano of the IMS Mydis."

Feeling a rush of emotions too powerful to process, Junior propped hands upon hips and let it fly the only way she knew how. "How dare you kidnap me? My mother is going to nail your butkis to the wall!"

Though the Captain's face could hardly be seen, his nose and chin reddened. "Come with me."

“Blow it out your magna-converters!”

The Star Captain took two steps towards her and reached with his hand.

Junior grabbed his wrist, whipped around and thrust her leg up behind him to sweep him off his feet. His leg didn't budge. She shoved with all her might, but he might as well have been a skyscraper. He reached down, grabbed her by both upper arms and pinned her against the hull of the shuttle, facing him, legs dangling. She wrapped her leg around one of his arms and yanked with all her strength. Failing that, she kicked fiercely at his chest, growling

No effect. He didn't even breathe hard. “Are you quite finished?”

“Ahhhhh!!!” Junior kicked even more fiercely, still with no effect. She stopped struggling for a second. He set her down, released, and took one step back.

“Come.”

Junior caught her terror and channeled it back into glowering at him.

The Captain suddenly grabbed her upper arm and dragged her away, leaving no opportunity for escape.

The troops snapped to attention and presented arms as they passed.

Junior noticed a female Menelaen, without masked helmet, and was sure she'd seen her before. “Who's that lady?” She was dragged around the corner and lost sight of her. “Why...why have you kidnapped me? Did...did you destroy the Maverick?”

“I haven't kidnapped you,” the Captain stated, still dragging her along. “The

Maverick took minimal damage and only minor injuries. Your mother was not harmed. I would never allow your mother to be harmed.”

“Like hell you wouldn't!” Junior railed back. “You took me away from her! You've inflicted the most pain on her anyone ever could!”

“She took you away from me first!”

“Oh, that's a really grown-up thing to say!”

A breath lodged in the Captain's throat. “Do not be frightened. Your mother will soon be with us, as well, and everything will be as it should.”

“I'm not scared at all, but you should be! Nobody blasts bad guy aliens out of the stars like my mother. Isaiah says sometimes Mom throws the switch on her maternal instinct and she shoots right into hyper drive and the best you can do is get the hell out of the way! There was this time...”

The Captain turned aside to a door and tapped the security panel beside it.

Junior stopped prattling, chest frozen in terror.

The door slid open. He strode in and released her. The door closed.

Junior scanned the expansive room, decorated all in white with silver and gray accents, clear glass tables, a sleek educational computer desk in the far corner. A crystal figurine of a slender bird stood upon a round glass table. "Oh, crackling!" She swooped down and grabbed it up. "I saw something like this in my art appreciation text!" She spun around. "It..." And it flew out of her hand.

The Captain dodged and it smashed into the wall right behind his head.

"Oh! I am so sorry!" Junior's hands went up to clasp over her mouth. She noticed his brow furrowed in bitter contemplation. She sent hands back to her hips. "Hey! Why should I apologize to you? I'm not the one who kidnapped me!"

"As I said before, I haven't kidnapped you." The Captain removed his helmet. A few gray strands mixed with his straight, light brown hair, pulled back from the front into a leather-bound ponytail. His trim beard gave his strong nose a more distinguished profile than hers. "I've brought you home."

Junior pointed at his face. "You're human! You're..."

"Yes," said the Captain in deep satisfaction.

"You're a traitor!"

"I am not!" He slammed his helmet down on a little table which broke into pieces all over the floor with the shattered bird statue.

Junior shook a little. "Geez, you're almost as clumsy as me."

"Did your mother never tell you of your father?"

"Tell me? He raised me! He was with me every day until he died two years ago! And, anyway, it's none of your blame business!"

The Captain's face went red and moist. "It's one thing to hide you from me all these years, but how could she not tell you?" He paced away once.

"Tell me what?"

He faced her. "You are my daughter!"

"And you are a big dope!"

His hands went to his hips too. "Did your mother never teach you how to address your elders?"



"Yes!" Junior pointed at her temple. "But, sometimes things go through my head so fast they don't snag any brain cells on the way! She says I get that from my father!"

"I'm your father!"

"And I'm Empress Junior, Scourge of the Freakin' Galaxy!"

Delano pointed at her nose. "Don't talk to me like that, Young Lady! As long as you live on my starship, you'll do as I say!"

"I don't live on your starship! I live on the Maverick and you kidnapped me!"

The door slid open and the Menelaen female walked in with a white dress draped over one arm and white shoes in her hand. She had keen burgundy eyes and smooth black hair. Her burgundy lips were striking against the pale skin of her face.

They looked at her in the same instant, both with hands on hips, and demanded, "What?"

Junior looked him up and down. "Why are you mimicking me?"

"I am not mimicking you. I am your father – you are mimicking me."

"I am not!"

"Yes, you are!"

"Am not!"

The female Menelaen simply stood there, unperturbed, even serene.

Delano jerked his head back and forth between them. "This is your nanny, Naana."

"Nanny? You have got to be kidding!"

Delano's nostrils flared. He grabbed his helmet out of the debris field and lowered it back over his face. He glared at her for a second more, then at Naana.

"Remove all sharp and breakable objects from Lady Rowan's chambers and remember she's four years behind Menelaen children in development."

"What?" Junior stomped her foot.

"Yes, Captain." Naana's voice was soft, but wise.

Delano strode from the room. His cape billowed after him in scarlet.

When the door closed, Junior said, "Geez, does he have a Julius Caesar complex or what?"

"I am unfamiliar with that condition, Milady," said Naana. This Menelaen was the only one Junior had ever seen without a uniform or masked helmet. She wore a trim dress of burgundy with a wrap-over bodice and simple gold-tone necklace.

"Hi, I'm Junior."

The Menelaen nanny bowed at the neck. "Lord Delano has instructed the crew to address Your Ladyship by your title and true name."

"Oh, uh, I..." Junior bunched up her chin. "Actually, I really don't like being called Genevieve, but you can call me Gennie if you want."

"His Lordship has instructed us to address you as 'Lady Rowan.'"

"Whatever. Everyone calls me something different." Junior searched her memories. "It seems like we've met before."

"According to my faith, some are destined to impact the lives of others. We become aware of one another without conscious thought."

"'Kindred spirits' is what my family calls them."

"Kindred spirits." Naana pondered. "Yes." She held up the dress. "Does this please Your Ladyship?"

"Uh..."

Naana took her utterance as an affirmative and proceeded to the dressing chamber.

Junior tucked her lower lip under top teeth. A few puffs of air found their way out of her nose, shaking her chest a little, and she muttered, "Well, if he wants to play daddy..." She left off speaking as inspiration swept over her face and curled her lips into a trickster grin. "Oh, yeah...this is going to be fun."

## Chapter 6

Olivia gripped the back of her desk chair and leaned hard, focus on the stars without really seeing. She'd known this day would come. The day Isaiah informed her Junior's ADHD was incurable, coupled with all she knew about her ex-husband, she'd known this day would come. There was no debate. Instinct forbade it. However, she could not allow her crew to risk their lives and destroy their careers along with her. She straightened and strode for the Bridge.

The door slid open and Captain Olivia O'Keefe proceeded to her command chair, but she did not take it when Commander Owada relinquished. "Commander, ready a shuttlecraft. I'm going after my daughter."

"Captain..."

"Your orders are to hold this position for a week. Junior will return, but if I don't you can assume I died sending her back." Olivia held up the data-disk. "My resignation from the United Fleet, effective upon my departure."

"Olivia..." Isaiah emerged from the lift "...we're not going to let you do this by yourself." Obviously, he had figured out her intentions. He always did.

Jose stepped onto the Bridge, as well, and proceeded to the engineering console to left of tactical.

Olivia continued her stiff address. "Captain Delano's ship is two days from the De-Militarized Zone, a violation of which is considered an act of war under the Nebo Armistice. Admiral Jackson would never grant authorization to cross the DMZ. I will not place the lives or careers of anyone else at risk."

"Well, I think that's pretty damn selfish of you, Olivia!" Isaiah took one long step, grabbed the disk, and crushed it. "Junior is just as much

ours as yours!" One hand waved over the crew. "Why do you think this crew has stayed on two decades when there's no chance in hell we'll ever get promoted? It's 'cause we're a family, dammit!"

Olivia listened, her eyes moist.

"Captain," said Sachi. She'd turned down command of her own ship twice. "As your First Officer, I must inform you that if you attempt to leave this ship and crew behind, there will be a mutiny. Should we survive the conflict to come, we will all sit before a court martial."

"Captain," said Mr. Ashley from the communications console. "We're Deep Space Fleet. We take care of our own because we're all we've got. If it was my little Elijah who'd been abducted, I know you'd find a way to rescue him."

"Admiral Jackson will have our heads on a platter." Olivia propped her hands on her hips and glared at them all.

"To hell with Jackson," Jose said under his breath.

Sachi spoke again. "Captain, we don't have time to request Admiral Jackson's permission in any case. If we don't retrieve Junior before Captain Delano takes her across the DMZ, we never will."

Olivia held her gaze without blinking.

"Pursuit course laid in, Captain," said Lieutenant Mir from the helm. "Awaiting your order to get underway."

Olivia nodded slowly. "What's left of our engines, Mr. Fernandez?"

"I can give you Mark Two, Captain. If we need more, I'll get out and push."

"Understood. Mark Two, Mr. Mir."

"Aye, Captain, Mark Two."

On the forward screen, the stars against the black void of space flashed white when the hyperdrive engaged.

Olivia turned and sat down. Drawing breath and releasing it, she reached over and tapped a blue light on her armrest. "This is the Captain to all hands. The Maverick is on course to the De-Militarized Zone to retrieve Junior. If there are any objections, they will be noted and logged. Captain out." She faced her First Officer assuming tactical. "Sachi, order a meeting of the senior staff. The Maverick is a twenty year old ship currently held together with bailing wire and spit, but we have to rescue Junior off one of three top-of-the-line Menelaen battle cruisers. We

should expect the disabled one to be back at peak operations by the time we catch up."

"Yes, Captain." Sachi ran her fingers over the bright lights of the tactical station. "We can also expect Junior to sabotage the Mydis. I know it didn't seem like it, but she was listening during security training."

Isaiah stood by his honorary daughter and folded his hands behind his back.

"You should all be hanged."

He chuckled deeply, but didn't let it spill. He was back to his reverent self.

"Do you think she's all right?"

"You don't really think Edward would hurt her?" Isaiah raised one brow.

Olivia shook her head slowly. "No. Even after everything we've been through, I know he could never harm his own daughter."

"Yeah, but she sure can do him a lot of damage!" Deep chuckle.

In his dining room, Delano stood in contained fury. "What do you mean she's not coming to dinner?"

Naana spoke. "Her exact words were 'sometimes little girls drive their parents out of their stark, raving minds.'"

Delano said nothing, but swept away from the table, red cape flowing. He lowered his helmet back onto his head. He liked wearing his helmet all the time, even when not in battle.

Scared the living daylights out of people.

Captain Delano emerged from a lift a minute later, followed by Naana, and strode towards his daughter's door. He pressed the door chime. "Rowan, open the door and come out."

No response.

Delano pulled off a small panel and pushed the buttons behind it. "Computer, open this door." He walked in, noticed a potted plant smashed all over the floor and the two wide lines of the guard's heels dragged through the soil.

The trail led into Junior's bedchamber.

*Rape!* Delano whipped out his sword and charged the door, smashing the lock with his boot.

The door slid open. The guard lay bound and gagged on the floor, trembling in terror, and wearing nothing but his underpants. Soil shook loose from his hair. He pointed to the ceiling with one free finger.

Looking up, Delano saw the vent panel hanging open and groaned. *I escaped summer camp the exact same way.* Sheathing his sword, he strode for the corridor. It had not occurred to him before that other members of his gender might see his daughter as a woman. *Thank God the guard never got a chance.* “Naana, only female Kaiya Rangers serve and protect my daughter from now on. Inform the male members of the crew I will kill any one of them comes near her.”

“My Lord,” said Naana, the tone of her voice stopped him in the doorway. “Under Menelaen law, Lady Rowan is an adult. The Right of Protection would not apply, unless she requested your assistance.”

Delano let his anger increase his chest size and heat his eyes.

“Yes, My Lord.” Naana bowed and withdrew.

The poor guard was left to suffer in humiliation where he was. He whimpered and lowered his head back to the floor.

Within the first 15 minutes head-start, Junior crawled through the ventilation shaft above the main computer core and found an interface. After taking five minutes to memorize the ship’s specifications, she sabotaged internal sensors.

At the end of the first half-hour, she popped a conduit hatch into the medical bay. Standing, she straightened the gray uniform she’d taken from the guard in an effort to blend in with the Menelaens. She’d gotten the idea from an old Robin Hood holographic novel.

As expected, there were no conscious Menelaens in the medical bay. The android doctors stood inactive and the one patient slept.

Junior came close and peered into the patient’s face. His features were fine and purple strands lit up his black hair. So far, she had seen three unmasked Menelaens, all with slender builds, her height or shorter. This one had dark chocolate skin like Isaiah, but eyelids like Sachi. She wondered if his eyes were purple, because Naana’s eyes were burgundy like the highlights in her black hair. The two males both wore their hair about shoulder-length. This one’s hair was kept in a neat ponytail. He had tan spots on the outsides of his hands. She wondered if they were tattoos or freckles.

Junior spied a medical scanner and rushed to it. “Medical computer?”

"Please provide instructions." The Medical Computer said in a male voice.

"All right, Medical Computer. Please, scan my DNA."

A blue light flashed over her from head to toe. "Scanning. Refer to section Auch-nichilin."

"Thanks." Junior watched the double-helix snake across the screen in bright pink. "Isolate paternal DNA and identify."

"Contributor of paternal DNA is Captain Edward Delano."

Junior lip snarled. "Oh, I cannot believe my mother...knotted...with that...that intergalactic megalomaniac!" She could just puke. Throwing up her hands instead, she backed away. "Okay, that is not an image I want in my head right now." Besides, as a Captain's brat, she knew how easily a computer could be tampered with. "All righty then, computer, transfer my paternal DNA code to the main computer and show me all command codes authorized by it."

"Working. Please refer to security grid."

Three codes appeared on the wall panel. Junior studied them. "Not much, but they'll have to do."

"I have alerted Captain Delano to your presence. Security officers arrive soon. Please cooperate."

"Stella never tattled." Junior crawled back into the vent.

On the command deck, Captain Delano paced between his chair and the internal security monitor.

"My Lord, the ship is venting ionized gas!" The pilot glanced over his shoulder.

The forward screen showed the Mydis with clouds pouring out of its nacelles.

"Shut it down!"

The pilot didn't have the opportunity. Suddenly, the great ship lurched and everyone, including Delano, flew across the bridge.

"Gravity plating is being tampered with! Inertial dampers..."

A girlish voice broke over ship wide communications and filled her father's bright red ears. "Junior is bad! Junior is very, very bad! Bad Junior! Bad, bad, bad!" Evil scientist laughter. "Ooooh, but Junior soooo good at it!"

Whipping back his red cape, Delano strode into the lift while his daughter's taunts continued and clouds of water vapor poured out of every crack, filling the command deck with white puffs.

"Rain, rain, go away. Come again some other day. The Captain's brat wants to play..."

Junior slid into the mess hall, behind the counter, and peeked at the confused Menelaens talking between themselves and trying to wave the clouds of mist away. She grabbed something like roast chicken and wolfed it down. "Can't storm the castle on an empty stomach!" Then, she reached for a large bowl of orange goo among the assorted foods ready to be served. "Oh, how I love goo of any kind!" Grabbing the bowl with both hands, she burst out of the galley, shouting, "Food fight!" The goo waved through the air and splashed over the dozen Menelaens who were too shocked to react.

Junior slid right through two who dove after her, causing them to smash into each other. The previously dignified Menelaens slipped around in the goo, grabbed each other for balance, and fell with little cries.

Junior raced out of the Mess Hall, peeling with laughter, as Captain Delano rounded a corner. She saw him and slammed right into the wall. She didn't have time for the pain. She galloped away.

With all the sirens blaring and clouds billowing, Junior found a dark spot in a cargo bay to hide, squished in between containers. She didn't like the sirens. They rattled her spine. And she didn't like hiding. Too much sitting still and being quiet. She heard troops charging to guard the door she'd just locked. That didn't trouble her so much as the itchi-ness crawling up her neck. She dug fingernails into her cheek and scratched. "What a time to get a rash."

The communications system crackled back to life. "Lady Rowan," said Delano's deep voice. "The cargo bay is surrounded on all sides. If you resist, my crew have permission to stun you."

Junior busted up in little sputters of chuckles. "Geez, he cracks me up." She crawled out of her hiding place and took inventory. "Crossbolts, baric terminators, velocity markers..." She stopped at a large crate; a crate larger than the shuttlecraft she'd flown. She peered in the breathing holes. "Ho, ho, yeah, if only I'd been around twenty years ago the humans 've won the war."



Delano waited in the corridor with his troops, ready to stun her if necessary. As commander of a battle group, he hadn't anticipated the need for a tiger trap. "Rowan, we're going to blast the door. Stand clear!"

"Yyyou'lllll bee sorrrrrry!" Her voice squeezed out to him.

The blast disintegrated the door. Smoke and sparks billowed and flew. "Shriiiiiieeeeek!" Out flew thousands of tiny Borilliam Swamp-Bats, diving and darting, irate at awakening from hibernation a month early.

The Menelaens screamed and flailed at the stinging assault.

Delano stepped back through another door and closed it before the bats could swarm over him. In memory, he could hear his mother cursing, 'Someday you're going to have a kid just like you!' He rubbed his throbbing head.

"Wee-ha-ha!" Junior's unceasing laughter filled the ship over com.

Delano opened a different door into the intersecting corridor. He came to a vent and ripped it off so that it crashed into the wall behind him.

Junior's laughter continued to rattle his spine and he heard her stomping against the walls of the conduit too.

Standing to full height, he pointed at the small vent. "Bring her out!"

Two female guards quickly crawled in. Seconds later, they backed out, pulling the girl between them.

Junior fell to the floor laughing hysterically, but she was gasping and holding her sides too.

Delano grabbed her and penned her against the hull.

The laughter squeaked out and her red face was covered in hives. She suddenly went pale and clammy, her breathing a squeak and the laughter gone. Her hysterics and some other mysterious malady, was robbing her of the ability to breathe. Her head slumped over, her body went limp, and her lips turned blue.

Panic shot through Delano and he cradled his little girl in one arm. Instincts and adrenaline took over. Lowering her to the floor, he ripped a small panel from the wall. A medical kit fell out and grabbed the oxygen mask. He shoved off his helmet with his forearm and the mask onto her face in one swift movement. "Breathe!"

Memory of himself nearly dying after a raging fit tormented him.

With the coming of unconsciousness, the automatic reflex to breathe kicked in. Junior's muscles loosened and she drew breath.

Delano kept the mask over her face and stood, cradling her in his arms. He looked down into her face, now resting against his dark gray uniform. "You've suffered enough."

Junior's red corkscrew curls spilled over her freckled forehead and ruddy cheeks. Her little nose glowed red again.

*You will never go through the hell I did, I swear it.* Delano kept his face turned away from his subordinates so they couldn't see him tremble. He ran with his baby down the corridor.

Delano burst into the medical bay and carefully laid his daughter on a bed. "Computer, activate physician!" He grabbed the nearest android and hurled it towards the medical bed. "She has Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder and she's having an allergic reaction to something!"

The android fitted her with a new oxygen mask and scanned her.

Delano strode over and hovered around its shoulder. "She just had a hysterical fainting spell. You should check the chemical levels in her brain."

"Pardon, My Lord." The Physician bumped his elbow trying to work. "Yes, I see there is a chemical imbalance in her frontal lobe which inhibits her ability to control emotion and..."

Delano smoothed hand over forehead and down cheek. "Don't medicate her. She's going to master it on her own. Neutralize all medications in her bloodstream."

"Yes, My Lord. I have detected an allergic reaction to monolaetomine."

Delano stopped. "Monolaetomine...she's allergic to seafood, just like me. Damn!" He slammed his palm against the wall. "I had that as a kid too. Synthesize Ickmachazine to counteract it."

"Yes, Captain." The Physician and his female-looking aide proceeded with treatment.

"She must've grabbed a darly-eel while trashing the Mess Hall." Delano continued to pace. "Further scans may reveal other allergies. I'll enter them and their treatments into the data-base."

Naana entered.

Delano faced her. "Naana, inform the crew Lady Rowan is highly allergic. Under no circumstance is she to be served any food or drink which doesn't first meet with my approval. I will provide you with a list of substances she may have reactions to. You must scan her environment and remove them at once."

"Yes, Captain."

"I will train her in self-control and focus." Delano paced, hands on hips. "A great deal of work is to be done. Remove everything from her chambers, except her bed, a table, and a chair. Adjust all colors to beige. Reduce illumination to point-eich. Go."

Naana bowed at the neck and walked out.

Delano watched the Physician press the spray-syringe to Junior's neck. The spots began to vanish.

Junior stirred in her sleep, drifting into a lighter stage. So sweet, so innocent with little curls across her freckled forehead. *Ooh, brrrruther.* Delano smirked. *No wonder Olivia calls her 'Junior.'*

Junior's head rolled over in the pillow and a curl popped down between her eyebrows.

The android physician interrupted his paternal thoughts. "Captain Delano, I am pleased to report Lady Rowan is in excellent health, aside from ADHD and a variety of allergies. Scans reveal no cellular damage. It appears humanity has recovered from the infertility which plagued your generation. Should Lady Rowan complete the Marital Bond, you may very well be a grandfather one day."

"Grandfather?" Delano's horror cut out in a cough.

"Yes, her reproductive..."

"Enough." Delano held up a hand to stop the android, ready to switch him off, if needs be. "It only matters that she's healthy." His little girl was a little girl and she would stay a little girl and that was the end of it.

## Chapter 7

Delano watched her eyes open; they were green just like his. The curly hair was from his mother and the red, of course, was from Olivia.

Junior jumped right up and a whole tray full of medical instruments crashed down on her as she fell to the floor.

*Been there.* Delano grabbed her upper arm before her bottom hit. He jerked her up and set her back on her feet.

She frowned at him and tilted her head. And then she started to prattle. "Where's your helmet? Why do you use androids for doctors? How can they adapt in emergency situations? What if they need to make a medical ethics decision during pre-op? What's this?" She picked up an instrument which resembled a stylus.

"A minor wound regenerator," replied the Physician.

"A what?" Junior spun around and jammed the instrument right into the android's facial circuits. "Oh, I am so sorry! I'm so sorry!"

The android doctor wobbled and shot sparks from his head.

Delano grabbed his daughter by both upper arms, picked her up, and set her down at a safe distance. "Fold your hands together and keep both feet flat on the floor."

"Aren't you going to give me meds?"

Astonished by her obedience, Delano took a deep breath. "No. All ADHD meds have been neutralized in your body. You will never be medicated again, except for allergic reactions. I will train you to master ADHD on your own."

"How?"

"I have incurable Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, as well, and I have mastered it through careful nutrition and martial arts."

Junior's little face lit up like the sun, her mouth hung open, and her eyes got really big. Knuckles white and legs shaking, she honestly couldn't speak.

*That won't last long.* Delano worried she would launch right out of her boots. "Come. It is time for your Kaiyakempo lesson."

"What's that?" Her hands flew apart and her legs collapsed.

Delano caught her by the arm and dragged her out the door. "Kaiya is the traditional martial art of the Menelaen noble caste and the Imperial Family."

"Oh!" Junior saw the clothing replicator's flashing purple lights and started after it down an intersecting corridor. "Pretty!"

Delano jerked her back into step with him, not allowing her control over her own feet which she tripped over every two paces. "Though it utilizes a variety of weapons, the sword is the most revered."

"Why were you transporting the bats in a battle cruiser?"

Snapping to a halt, Delano took her other forearm and spun her around. Seizing eye contact, he asked, "Do you want to master your ADHD or not?"

"Yes...please." Tears sprung into her eyes.

"Then, focus on me, only on me." He pointed at his ear. "Listen. Listen to my voice and do exactly as I tell you. Do you understand?"

"Uh...I..."

"Speak incisively. Say, 'Yes, Sir.'"

"Yes, Sir!" Tears streamed down her face.

"If you want to be treated with respect, you must insist upon it." Delano set her back down and resumed their walk. "A Menelaen warrior is never without his or her sword."

"Yes, Sir!"

Delano rolled his lips to keep from chuckling at her massive determination. "Settling a matter of honor with a different weapon is forbidden under Sacred Law. I found Kaiya highly compatible with the Chinese martial art of Kenpo. I merged the two into Kaiya Kenpo."

"Oh, I love swords!"

"Are you not curious as to why you woke up in the medical bay?" Delano studied her out of the corner of his eye.

"Oh, no, happens all the time." Junior waved it off.

Delano scrunched up his nose. *Oh, right. My mother had a Frequent Flyer Plan at our local hospital when I was growing up too.*

"What's for dinner? I'm starving! I really like banana pancakes with maple syrup. Got any banana pancakes with maple syrup? Mom won't let me drink juice with breakfast because she says it has too much sugar, but I can have sugar-free syrup. Do you have sugar-free syrup? What's that?" She saw two officers walk past them and tried to follow. He jerked her back into step with him. "Do you have any bananas? I know how to make banana pancakes, but Mom won't let me use anything hot because last time I was telling her about rocketball practice and I spun around to show her how I made the winning shot and I accidentally knocked the skillet off the cooking surface and it went flying into the wall, just missing the window, although a force field would've stopped it from smashing the window and sucking us all into space. Can you imagine getting sucked into space over pancakes?"

"Now you're on board? Yes." Delano dragged his daughter through a doorway and released her. He removed his cape and gloves and handed them off to a crewman. He couldn't remember what had happened to his helmet. He took a deep, cleansing breath. "Your first lesson will be in gaining control of yourself, starting with your mouth."

"My mother knows where we are now. I vented the ionized gas and slammed on the brakes so she could find us more quickly." Junior followed him to a wall which held a variety of weapons.

Delano tensed. "Until the lesson is complete, you will not speak unless spoken to." He chose a pair of practice fighting knives. The dull blades felt like wood, but were a kind of energy-absorbing metal. He placed one in her right hand and clasped his hand over it. "Feel the balance. Keep it firmly in hand, but not tight." He placed the other in her left hand. "This is your blocking blade."

"How do you know I'm not left-handed?"

"I am your father and I am right-handed."

"Oh." Junior pointed to some sharpened blades. "May I try those?"

"No." *She's losing focus again.*

"Why not?"

"Look me in the eye!" Delano pointed to the bridge of his nose.

"Yes, Sir!"

"Always look me in the eye. Command my respect." He chose fighting knives for himself too. His had sharp, shining blades. "In time, you will wield these in personal combat."

"Mom won't let me learn weapons yet." Junior spoke in an awe-struck tone. "Sachi says I'd skewer myself like a pig at a luau."

"Sachi is a formidable warrior, but she does not know how to properly train you. I do." Delano proceeded onto the floor. "Follow my lead. Do exactly as I do."

"Yes, Sir!"

He crossed forearms over his chest and observed her doing the same. He bowed. She bowed. He scratched his nose. She scratched her nose. He turned around and rolled his lips to keep down a chuckle. Clearing throat, he stepped out in balance and swept his fighting knife slowly before him. Surely, she'd been instructed in Tai Chi and adapt at once. He turned heel for the following move and she fell with a small scream. He exhaled. It was going to be a long lesson.

"You will learn balance." Delano resumed the exercise. He rolled eyes the next time she fell with a 'wah-hah,' but ignored it after that.

Junior fell nine times, but she immediately got right back up without complaining and resumed every single time.

Finally, Delano faced her, drew his hands to his chest, crossing his blades in completion, and bowed.

Junior copied him perfectly.

"How do you feel?"

"Serene." Junior's expression said she was surprised with herself.

"Excellent. Now you've calmed, we will proceed with dinner." Delano turned and handed the knives over to a subordinate.

"But...I don't want to stop! I want to learn more!" Junior followed him towards the door as though begging for candy.

"You may practice anytime you wish, once your other lessons are completed each day."

"What am I supposed to learn from this anyway?"

Delano gestured to a crewman who tapped a panel on the wall. A holographic wasp-like creature appeared and flew around the expansive gymnasium. He stepped back against the wall and it went after Junior.

The wasp whirled around her. For an instant, her eyes darted, but then she swept back her fighting knives, ready to defend.

Suddenly, the wasp spit tiny balls of lightening at her. She spun the practice knives around to meet the attack, their special metal absorbing the balls of energy.

Junior's hands seemed to move on their own accord. She didn't need to think. She whipped the knives around and deflected the balls in an electric pow-pow sound. Not one ball got through. "Whoa!" Her chest heaved, invigorated. "I can...can do this! I did that!"

"You possess a natural instinct for the martial arts, as I knew you would. Come."

Delano turned to leave.

Junior leapt forward with a battle cry and attacked the holographic wasp, whipping the knives around. It shot balls faster. She inched forward, keeping her body balanced. Not one shot got through. Cornering the wasp, she shredded it like a sushi chef and it fell in pieces.

Delano walked over and looked down at the shredded hologram which, being only a hologram, was not realistic enough to bleed. He pointed at it. "You killed it."

"Well..." Junior pointed at the shredded holo-wasp "...he started it."

A deep chuckle rose up within Delano and spilled over his lips. He even snorted, trying to contain his amusement.

Junior could feel the paternal pride emanating from him and it felt...amazing.

His head fell back in a booming laugh.

She blushed. "Well, he did."

Delano didn't notice the subordinate offering his cape and helmet as he walked past.

Junior put away the fighting knives and followed him out the door, skipping to fall into step. "I can't wait to show Mom!"

Delano kept his focus straight forward. "I have no doubt your mother will be pleased with your progress."

"Why won't anyone call me 'Junior' here?"



"I've instructed them to address you by your real name and title. 'Junior' is a childish nickname. As the daughter of a star captain, you are entitled a lady."

"But, Genevieve is my real name. Not Rowan." *Ret and Rehama would choke on the whole 'lady' title thing!*

"Olivia and I agreed before we were married if we would name a daughter Rowan, after my mother. And Genevieve would be her middle name, after her mother. You are Lady Rowan Genevieve O'Keefe Delano."

"I don't feel like a 'Rowan.'" Junior scrunched up her nose.

"You still feel like a child. It's time to put childish things behind you." Delano entered his dining room. "Your next lesson will be learning to sit still at the dinner table without breaking anything."

Junior followed him, but stopped inside the door. Her eyes were drawn like a targeting scanner to a long, rectangular black box sitting on a narrow table against the far wall. She rushed over, all ten fingertips settling on the box at once.

Delano followed, but she hardly heard him.

She unfastened the gold clasps and opened. And saw the sword of her dreams. "This belongs to my mother!"

"Yes, it did."

"This sword is Aodhan, 'Born of Fire.' It's been in the O'Keefe family since it was forged in 15<sup>th</sup> century Ireland." Junior turned to accuse him of theft, but the expression on his face stopped her.

Delano's face haunted with faraway dreams unfulfilled. He gazed upon the sword like a groom upon his bride in a holy sanctuary.

The silver blade was etched with Celtic swirls to the tip. The hand guards and ringed pommel seemed to glow in their own energy. A heavy sword, it was meant to be wielded with two hands by a large man and had a double-grip of brown leather, fitted through precise care and regular use.

Junior spoke. "This is the most precious heirloom of the O'Keefe Family. How did you get it?"

"Your mother gave it to me on our wedding day." Delano's eyes misted over when he pulled out the sword. He tapped the blade and the perfect sound resonated through the air.

Junior faced him as he stepped out and spun the sword around his body in expert alignment, drawing it back to his ear before relaxing and sliding the flat of the blade along his finger. "Crackling."

"Come, I'll show you." He offered the family sword.

Junior took the hilt in both hands, feeling the supple leather. His hands closed around hers, positioning them correctly. She watched their hands together and something flashed through her thoughts. *Deja'vu*. She drew a quick breath, transfixed, mesmerized, wholly focused on their hands holding the sword together. The third finger of his left hand bore a gold ring with Celtic swirls, like the sword.

"What is it?"

Junior felt the warm tears spill over her lashes and down her face. She swallowed, nose stinging. "You love my mother."

Delano's chest heaved, but he couldn't speak.

"You really are my father."

"Yes." He released the sword into her hands.

"Whoa!" The blade dipped. "It's heavy." Junior hoisted it back into position.

"You're stronger than you know."

Junior stepped out and raised the sword forward of her, feeling the weight and shifting her body to balance it. "Will you teach me?"

"It is the greatest hope of every Kaiya master to apprentice his own child. Swordsmanship requires many years of training."

Junior lowered the sword and handed it back to him. "Will I ever grow into my big feet?"

Delano smiled. "Yes. The Physician tells me you'll top two meters before you're finished growing. You'll need those feet to hold you up in a strong wind." He winked and put the sword back in its box.

Junior laughed a little girl kind of laugh. "Who are my grandparents?"

"I will explain everything while we dine. It is time for you to learn how to sit still. Focus on me and do exactly as I do." Delano proceeded to the head of the clear, rectangular table and turned to sit down.

She was right there, practically joined at the hip.

"From your end of the table." He nodded towards her place setting.

"Oh." Junior rushed to the end, swiping her glass off the table and shattering it against the wall. "Oh, I am so sorry!"

Delano took one long stride, caught her, placed her in the chair, and tapped the wall vacuum. "You never need feel ashamed or embarrassed or guilty about such things before me. I was shattering glasses over three decades before you were born." The wall vacuum sucked the shards away.

"Yes, Sir!" Sitting ramrod straight, Junior waited on his move, a tear half-way down her face.

Delano sat down and very slowly took his napkin, waiting while she made exactly the same movement. They unrolled their napkins, placed utensils in their places, released napkins from folds and placed them on their knees. "Excellent." He reached for his fork and knife, European style, as did she. "Your grandmother died a year after I married your mother. My sister was a teacher on Omaha Colony last I heard; never married, no children."

Junior scanned the table. Their place settings and the sword box was the room's only décor. Everything was either beige or clear glass.

"As you develop self-control and focus, visual distractions will be returned to your environment one by one." Delano picked up his glass of water. "My mother - your grandmother - was the sweetest person who ever lived." He recited the story, perhaps because the truth was too painful to blurt. "My father was an abusive drunk who didn't deserve any of the kindness she ever showed him. One day I came home from school and he was hitting her again. I grabbed a shovel from her rose garden and slammed it over his head. He died. I was eleven. I didn't mean for him to die. I only wanted him to stop hurting her."

Junior couldn't keep astonishment off her face. "It wasn't your fault. You didn't mean to kill him. You were only trying to stop him from hurting Grandma."

Delano buttered his bread as though his life depended on the perfection of the task. "I swore to God I'd never be like him. I got into Kenpo, to learn self-control, and I took care of my mother and little sister myself."

"You believe your mother was weak, that she should've kicked his ass herself to protect you and your sister. Did you ever forgive her?"

Delano didn't answer the question directly. "I knew if I ever got married, it have to be to a strong woman. When I first saw your mother, I wasn't sure if she was a star captain. I only knew there was strength the way she carried herself. She was so beautiful." He drew a silver rectangle

from a hidden pocket and handed it to her. "I knew she would be the mother of my child."

Junior accepted the gift which turned out to be a folded photograph frame. She opened it, drew a quick breath and broke into a smile. The left photo was of her mother and father in their dress uniforms, flanked by Graham Codetalker, Sachi, and Isaiah. Mom held a white and pink lotus flower. "Was Uncle Graham your best man?"

"Uncle? No. Graham was my best friend, but he actually officiated the wedding on his battleship, the Crazy Horse. Isaiah was my best man and Sachi, of course, was maid-of-honor."

"Graham and Sachi are my godparents, although they swear they'll never get married, and Isaiah is my honorary grandfather."

The photo on the right was of her parents alone. Mom's hair flowed loose with one side held back by Bells O' Ireland and Baby's Breath flowers. Dad's face was smooth and his brown hair cut to regulation. "You look better clean-shaven."

Delano rubbed his bearded chin. "Your mother thought so too."

"Hey!" Junior reached inside her collar and pulled out the gold chain which held her locket and her mother's rings. She unfastened the chain and slid the rings off. "Mom gave these to me for my fourteenth birthday."

Delano's eyes danced to life when she put the wedding rings into his hand. "They belonged to my grandmother. She gave them to me for Olivia when we married." He studied the Celtic swirls. "Your mother didn't tell you where they came from?"

"She said they used to belong to my grandmother, but Grandma in Montana wore only a plain gold band and Dad's...I mean my step-father's mother never married." Junior's gaze drifted to the stars. "I think Mom was trying to tell me. I think...I think she was just...so afraid for me. She tried to tell me about the War and..." sigh "...she never could. Too much pain. Isaiah said the War cost her lot. I thought he meant her friends who were killed, but..." she sent gaze back to him and saw his haunted expression "...now, I see it was much more than that."

"Here." Delano handed the rings back. "She wanted you to keep them safe."

"Yeah. I think she did." Junior took the rings and slid them back onto the chain. The gold glittered in the lights and she looked beyond them to the past. *Chained. My parents are in chains.*

After dinner, Junior walked with her father down a corridor, towards her private chambers. As long as she stayed in step with him, her pace remained steady and slow, her thoughts aligned. "You do realize Mom is coming for me, right?"

"Yes."

"She's really toasted at you."

"I don't want you to worry about it." Delano turned aside to her door and pressed the panel. The door slid open. "I've taken care of everything. We'll soon be together as a family and you will enjoy everything you've ever wanted."

Junior wondered what he imagined she wanted. She didn't even know what she wanted, beyond mastering ADHD and getting her parents back together. *And a new Alliance fightercraft HRC game.*

"Now, carry out the mediation I described to you and you will sleep." He thumped her shoulder.

Junior watched him walk away, towards the lift. "Good night...Dad."

Stopping, Delano turned around and looked back. Face pink, he smiled and a little chuckle escaped. "Good night. Sweet dreams." The whole Dad Thing was so new to him and she hadn't exactly gone easy on him.

"Sweet dreams." Junior passed through her door and listened to it close behind her. She had a great dad who was helping master ADHD, her mom was coming and they'd all get together. All she needed to live happily ever after was a boyfriend and she was sure she already had one somewhere. She just couldn't remember his name, only that he had dark chocolate eyes and a gorgeous dimpled smile.

Of course, her dreams would be sweet.

Chambers now beige and bare, there was nothing to distract her from meditating. She sat upon the floor, cross-legged and closed her eyes.

Minutes later, Junior sunk into her soft white pillow and to sleep soon after.

\*\*\*

Dreamtime.

The forest was shrouded in darkness when Junior arrived, but lit up as soon as her feet sunk into the moss.

"You're here!" Ariez jumped up from a fallen log and ran for her.

Junior laughed when he grabbed her and swung her around and clung to her like a monkey. "What are you doing? Wait, let me guess, this is a game."

"Game?" Ariez pulled back from her neck. "What do you mean?" He cupped her face and slid thumb over her lips. "You're all right?"

"Of course, I'm all right." Junior studied his red, moist skin. "Why are you so upset?"

"You've been abducted by an evil sorcerer."

"You're kidding me, right?" Junior bubbled in little laughs. "There's no such thing as sorcerers."

"He is real and he's taken you from your mother."

Her joviality vanished. "My mother?" She pushed out of his arms and walked away, towards the edge of the clearing. Clouds moved over the sunny sky and shades of gray descended upon them. The more she focused on her mother the darker the forest became. "I miss my mother." Pain wrapped around her eyes and she rubbed both temples. "She's...frantic."

"You have been taken away from her. The bond you share with the Sacred Mother is powerful. You would never willingly leave her side." Ariez enveloped her in his arms. "But, I'm coming to rescue you."

She looked into his intense gaze. "You'll return me to my mother?"

"Yes, of course, and then I will take both of you safely to Pellosia where the sorcerer cannot go."

Junior realized that should've reassured her, but it filled her with panic instead. "No, you can't."

"What?"

"I mean..." She searched the darkness, tried to comprehend. "I don't think..." Her heart galloped inside her chest and she couldn't quiet her breathing. "I don't...understand." Covering face with both hands, she felt sobs and little cries coming up. "Something terrible is going to happen!"

"Shhhh, everything will be all right. I'm coming for you. I will assume command of the Mydis and extradite Delano to the humans. I will protect you from his wrath, I swear it. Once we're across the border and our

bond is complete, we can never be parted. You will never see that monster again."

Junior quaked in his arms, hands shaking to her face. "I...love...you."

"And I love you. Everything..."

"It...hurts. It hurts!" A scream started up her throat and she shoved him away.

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Waking Moments.

Junior shot out of bed and landed on her feet, sheet plastered to her chest in sweat. Blue eyes remained before her conscious thoughts, but all memory of their origin fled into the darkness. "I've lost my mind...if it ever belonged to me at all."

Someone was always mad at her for something. She looked at the com panel on her nightstand, half expecting her father's angry voice to come out.

The blues eyes vanished.

And she missed them.

## Chapter 8

Three days after the abduction, Junior charged through her Kaiya Kenpo lesson with Lieutenant Beling. She'd been told Beling was the second best female warrior on board. She couldn't imagine who the first best could be.

Beling's staff hooked her heels and WHAM!

Junior's backside hit the floor for the fifteenth time. She spun to the right and back onto her feet. Facing her opponent, she breathed as her father had taught her – one, two, three. She felt the cool air mix with the fine mist of perspiration on her face. Defeating Beling was unimaginable, but she was very proud of not getting pinned after two hours of sparring.

Beling was winded. Her purple eyes threaded with redness. Black hairs plastered to her face with sweat. Her last thrust left her with hardly the energy to hold the staff up in defense.

Junior couldn't keep the right edge of her lips from curling. *Oh, yeah, she's going down.*

Beling circled out.

No time or she'd recover. Junior wheeled her staff around for a full frontal attack. "Ahhhh!"

Beling raised her staff to block and it shattered.

Junior watched her staff smash into Beling's face. Too late. She jumped back. "Oh, no! I'm so sorry!"

Naana was already at Beling's side with a towel. "It is only a bloodied nose,

Milady. Lieutenant Beling will recover quickly."

Junior helped Naana raise Beling to her feet. "Still, I'm so sorry. I didn't realize I'd go right through your staff."



"You are very strong, Milady, and I was too exhausted to properly block." Beling breathed hard, hand to chest. "Well done, Milady." She bowed.

Junior bowed. "I have been honored to receive your instruction, Kaiyadaikoo."

Delano's voice interjected from the doorway. "Didn't I say you're stronger than you know?"

"I guess." Junior watched Naana help Beling out the door, bound for the medical bay.

Delano assigned five females to attend her. Though he tried to explain why she needed them, it didn't make a lot of sense. He seemed to think the Menelaen males would try something, which was ridiculous. They were all really old and, besides, she already had a boyfriend. At least, she thought maybe she did. She couldn't exactly remember.

Naana was her chief attendant and Beling was second to her. Beling had taken a vow of chastity after her husband was killed in battle. She had a secret doll she babied when no one was looking and grief overwhelmed her. Lali was in love with a security officer, Jae, but wasn't ready to give up her career to marry him. Junior was glad human girls hadn't had that dilemma in hundreds of years. Palin and Talya were a couple, but not allowed to marry. At first, she wondered if it was because they were both girls, but Naana said it was because they were incapable of reciprocating the Marital Bond. *Must be some legal issue.* Palin had a pet Hopper which Talya was allergic to. They argued it about all the time. And Naana's heart raced whenever Commander Bo walked into the room, but she never showed it.

"I don't think I'm really a warrior." Junior propped staff over her shoulder and approached her father. "I don't like hurting people." She pulled her white Kaiya tunic from sticking to her moist chest. A pale blue cloth belt secured it at the waist. Blousey white pants fitted into white boots to complete the outfit. The boots had the flexibility of volleyball shoes and the support of basketball shoes. She'd never worn anything which fit her so well.

Delano tossed her a towel and handed her a water flask. "Power is not the ability to harm others, but the ability to control one's self. The duty of the powerful is to defend those who cannot defend themselves. That is what it means to be a true warrior."

"Yes, Sir." Junior proceeded to the wall, set down the flask, tossed the towel and reached for the cloth to rub down her staff. This was a servant's task, but she always did it herself. "It was non-lethal combat training. If Beling intended to kill me, she certainly could've done so right away. Until she began to tire, I was unable to block her attacks."

"True. It is good you realize that. An inflated opinion of one's abilities has stunted the development of many apprentices."

"Dad." Junior licked her lips as she rubbed the staff. "Mom's going to arrive any time now."

"I know." Delano started for the door.

"What are you going to do when she gets here?"

"I told you not to worry about it. I've taken care of everything."

"What do you mean?" Junior placed the staff back on the wall and tossed aside the cleaning cloth.

Delano waved her off and walked out the door.

"Dad, please, tell me." Junior pursued. "Mom's going to show up with all weapons firing. She's going to blast your butkis out of the stars if you don't let me talk to her first."

"Relations between the Menelaen Empire and the Earth-Intari Alliance are very tense right now. When your mother arrives, I must handle the matter very carefully." Delano stopped and put a hand on her shoulder. "I promise everything will be all right."

"You're planning on coming home then?" Junior followed him down the corridor, but he didn't respond to her question. "Are you?"

"Run along now or you'll be late for your piloting lessons." Delano entered a lift and disappeared when the door closed.

Junior's chin sunk. "And to think, three days ago all I had to worry about was Chef yelling at me in Yiddish." She walked back into the gym, too much angst to keep her feet still. The door slid closed after her. She paced, hands on hips.

*Come to me.*

Junior turned around, sure she heard faint words. The four corners of the gymnasium were empty. She was alone. Sleepiness ascended upon her. "Oh, no. What did I accidentally eat this time?"

"My Lady?"

Junior gasped to see Naana standing there in the open door. After trashing the mess hall and terrorizing the crew with swamp-bats, she wasn't eager to divulge anymore of her faults to anyone.

"My Lady, are you all right? What do you sense?"

"Oh, uh." Junior glanced around. "Nothing." The sleepiness fled in her nanny's presence. "Dad's making me crazy."

"The chief pilot awaits Your Ladyship on the flight deck."

"Thanks, Naana." Junior followed. She was sure she would miss Naana when Mom came for her and Dad. And Beling. *Who will babysit her doll when she's on duty?*

Less than a minute later, she felt a familiar sensation she'd known from the very beginning of her existence.

"My Lady, what do you sense?"

Junior shook her head. "Nothing. It's nothing. It's stupid." Though Mom conceded to intuition, sensing things the way she did was something she'd learned not to talk about.

"Please, do not be frightened to explain. I have noticed you are more sensitive than your father."

"My mother. She's coming."

"Do you remember your mother's womb?" Naana's tone intensified.

A gentle smile warmed her face. "Yes, but...I'm the only person I know of who does."

"All Menelaens remember."

Junior started for a communications interface. "I have to talk to Dad."

"His Lordship cannot be disturbed while on the command deck."

"But, I'm his daughter all the time, not just when it's convenient." Junior tapped the com panel. "Junior to Dad." She listened, agitation mounting with each passing second. "Hey! This is the Captain's brat! Patch me through to my father or I'll release tyranium gas into the environmental systems and you'll all be wallowing on the floor laughing like Bomkok dogey-birds within the hour!" *Ah, to Hades with hiding my faults.*

"Understood," said a male voice, instantly.

"Rowan, you're not permitted to..." Her father's voice said over com a second later.

"Mom's here."

"What? Rowan, return to your lesson. I don't have time to discuss this. I told you everything will be all right."

Junior folded her arms while Naana waited. "How much time does it take to run a long-distance scan?"

"Fine, but then you're going back to your lesson. Scanning." A few seconds passed. "Nothing. Now..."

Junior sighed, dramatically. "Recalibrate sensors to a nine-nine-epsilon-Charlie modulation."

"A...what?"

"Oh, come on, Dad!" She propped her hands upon her hips. "You haven't forgotten Deep Space Fleet sensor frequencies. Have you? For crying out loud, I had them all memorized by my sixth birthday!"

"Scanning." Pause. "Naana, secure Lady Rowan to quarters!"

"Wait, Dad! I need to be there when you talk to Mom!" Junior noticed Palin and Talya draw near. Both petite blonds, no one would've guessed they were lethal with fighting knives.

"I've ordered my flankships to disable the Maverick's engines only. I will not permit your mother to be harmed."

"Sweet, Dad, but I'm telling you she's..."

"Rowan! The Maverick..." Delano stopped with distinctive grumpiness. "I don't have time for debate. Proceed to your quarters at once!"

"But...but, she'll listen to me if I open communications first and then you can..."

Dad cut the com.

Junior felt very much like she might blast off. Emitting a fierce growl, she stormed away instead.

Once the door closed on her private quarters and she was alone, Junior went to a far inner wall. She laid her ear and the palm of her right hand against it, listening, feeling. Hum. A soft, long beep. She quieted her breathing. "I'm getting better at this commando stuff," she whispered. Then, she heard the tiny buzz and her lips curled. She stood up and stomp-kicked the wall in. Pulling off some inner panels, she reached in and began to work the inner rods, listening for the right frequency. "Junior to Maverick!"

"Junior?" Her mother's beautiful voice.

"Mom! Listen, hail the command deck and tell Dad..."

"Junior, stay where you are! We're getting you out of there!"

"But, wait, Mom!"

Static.

Her father's voice came over com next. "Rowan, stay out of the machinery! I promise your mother won't be harmed. Proceed with your exo-biology lesson."

"Dad!"

Static.

Junior clenched her fists together, growling. "Geez, Isaiah's right! People really do turn into complete psychos when the pregnancy test comes back positive!"

"Captain Delano." On the command deck, the tactical officer raced fingers between the console lights. "A shuttle is emerging from hyperspace."

"Put it on the viewscreen." Delano shifted in his chair, too tense to be still. Anticipating the battle, he and the crew were back in helmets, but that wasn't why he tensed up. "How long until the Maverick is within weapons range?"

"At least two minutes, My Lord."

As Delano watched, a small Deep Space Fleet shuttlecraft emerged from a flash, spinning towards his ship firing all weapons. "Take out the engines!"

"Yes, My Lord."

The Tryon shots struck the shuttle's aft section. The shuttle sputtered to a stop.

"Captain." The officer looked up from the com station. "We're being hailed by the shuttle pilot."

"Let's hear it." That was the order. Delano rose to his feet upon seeing his wife for the first time in seventeen years. "Olivia." She still wore her titian hair long and draped over her shoulder, her starry eyes...dropped briefly to his loins. His body required no conscious thought to respond to the marital command.

*Make love to me now.* Olivia spoke aloud, but the words didn't quite process. "Release my daughter or I'll blast your filthy head off."

"Honey, I..." The edge in her voice diverted sensible speech. "Uh..." A memory of his favorite red dress slipping from her shoulder flashed through his thoughts. He could smell her skin, feel her bare back. "Olivia..."

Olivia glared and cut communications.

"Tr...tractor beam!" His voice came out rough.

"Can't get a lock, Captain. Dampening field."

"Can we teleport?" Delano walked stiffly back to his command chair, sat down hard, and hoped none of his crew noticed.

"We can teleport in, but not out."

"Send the five subordinate Kaiya." Delano passed glare over his crew. "Under Menelaen law, Captain Olivia Delano is still my wife. I will carry out my Right of Revenge on anyone who harms her."

Junior popped out from under the communications console and leapt to her feet. "Dad!"

"Rowan! I told you to stay out of the machinery!"

"Dad, if you would only let me talk to Mom, I can explain things and maybe she'll..."

Delano grabbed his daughter by the upper arm and dragged her back to the lift. He shoved her into the arms of some waiting female security guards. "Place Lady Rowan in a maximum security cell!"

"Dad!"

The security guards ushered Junior into the lift. "Oh, good grief! Most parents send their daughters to their rooms!" She folded her arms with a significant harrumph. "But not mine! No! My parents are star captains! They throw me in the Brig!"

Delano groaned.

Inside the drifting shuttlecraft, Olivia and Isaiah stood waiting with pressure rifles leveled on the aft section.

"Was that an officially sanctioned tactic?" Isaiah eyed Olivia. "Get your enemy all hot and bothered and then drop him like a rock?"

Olivia glared. "I only looked at him."

"Mm-hmm." Isaiah chuckled. "You all right?"

"I'll manage."

"Sure you don't want a cold shower first?"

Olivia rolled eyes at him. She'd ordered him stay in the med-bay, but he insisted on coming. *I ought to have tossed him in the brig.*

"If you want to re-think how you're handling things, now's the time." He was Isaiah and no one tossed Isaiah in the brig. "For all you know, Junior's crazy about her dad now and is going to hate you for this." At least, he never disobeyed orders in front of the crew.

"Let's get it over with." Olivia drew back the laser chamber on her rifle.

"You don't want to listen to me, fine. Three hundred years ago doctors were gods and now we're nothing but a damn nuisance."

Stella, the voice of the computer, spoke. "Teleportation in progress."

Olivia and Isaiah shimmered in silver and vanish.

On the Mydis command deck, Delano leaned over tactical. "There are five life signals on the shuttle! There ought to be six! What the hell is going on?"

Junior popped a hatch on the ceiling and dropped down beside him. "Dad, I..."

"Rowan! Stop doing that! Go to your room!"

"But, Dad!"

Delano nodded to the security guard standing behind his daughter.

Junior turned to see who he made this silent order to, but as she did a spray-syringe pressed to her neck and she fell unconscious.

Delano caught his daughter and handed her off to Naana and a female security guard. They carried her to the lift.

"Captain! The Maverick!"

Delano spun around to face the screen. "Is my wife on board yet?"

"Unknown, Sir. I am unable to raise the Subordinate Kaiya on communications."

Delano looked at him, breathing hard, but said nothing. "Olivia's charged after our daughter without her crew and now they're trying to get her back. I knew this would happen."

"The Maverick commander is initiating contact, My Lord."

"Permit it."

Sachi's image appeared on screen. "Captain Delano, it's been a long time. Your abduction of Captain Olivia O'Keefe and her daughter is considered an act of war. Release them to us at once."

"Sachi, it's good to see you." Delano cleared his throat, fist to lips. "Captain Olivia Delano is on board the shuttlecraft adrift before us. If it is her choice to return to the Maverick, you may tractor it back into your hangar bay without fear of retaliation. She is not our prisoner. Under terms of the Nebo Armistice, however, my daughter's choice to remain with me must be respected."

Olivia rolled out of a conduit and into the corridor outside Junior's chamber. The guards on duty there recognized her and looked stupidly at each other.

"Do we have permission to stun her at least?"

"No, but we can pummel you!" Isaiah rose up behind them and smashed his pressure rifle over the first one's head. The other one spun around, but was expertly blocked and received a smashing in the face.

Olivia walked over to the unconscious guards. "That was easy."

"Told you Edward would never allow you to be harmed. In fact, I almost suggested you two get a room."

Olivia shot him a glare. "Come on." She went to the door panel and ripped it off. She pulled a metallic rectangular device from her sleeve and pressed it into the open panel. "Don't fail me now, Mr. Ashley." The door slid open a little.

Isaiah shoved his shoulder in and pushed the door open enough for them to squeeze through. "It's good to have a geek on board to make little gizmos like that."

"Here she is!" Olivia rushed to Junior asleep on a sofa. "What did he do to her?" She took her baby's head in one hand and stroked her cheek with the other.

Isaiah knelt beside her and passed a medical scanner over Junior. "It's all right. Mild sedative." He tucked away the scanner and gathered the overgrown girl up into his arms.

"A sedative? He sedated my daughter." Olivia ground her teeth. "What kind of a father sedates his own child?"



"An exasperated new father who doesn't know any better because he didn't make it to my new parents' class because no one told him he was going to be daddy!"

"Will you stop? "

"You asked." Isaiah shifted Junior's head against his shoulder.

"I'll take out the shields now." Olivia spied the smashed-in wall. "Looks like Junior already got started." She pulled out her own scanner and fiddled with components. "Hear anything?"

"Nope." Isaiah leaned out the door.

"Got the shields down! Signaling the Maverick! Get Junior out of here!" A second later, Olivia grabbed a chair to steady herself as the modified torpedo jammed into the Mydis' sensor array. Her fingers flew over the com panel. "I think its working!"

Isaiah waited in the corridor with Junior. "Hurry up!" He peeked through the wedged door, lights blinking on and off all around him. "It's working!" Emergency sirens started wailing, then whining, and then diminished into a low hum.

In silent perfection, Delano swooped down, slamming his body into Isaiah with all of his weight.

Isaiah flew against the wall.

Delano grabbed his daughter.

His size had never been a deterrent to Olivia when her emotions ran high, however. There was a barely audible swooshing of air when she brought her pressure rifle down against the base of his neck, grabbed his arm, wrenched it up behind and flipped him onto his butt. Stomp-kicking a pressure point in his arm, she grabbed Junior when this forced him to let go. She yanked and dragged her daughter away, hitting her wrist-com. "Teleport now!" She shoved Junior at Isaiah and covered them both with her body.

Responding in that split second, Delano leapt up in time to see his bride vanish. "Olivia!" And she'd taken their baby with her too.

Materializing in the Maverick teleportment bay, Olivia hit her wrist-com again. "Sachi, get us the hell out of here!"

Sachi's voice came over come. "Yes, Captain, getting us the hell out."

Isaiah gathered Junior back up in his arms, bound for the med-bay.

Seconds later, Olivia dashed from the lift onto the Bridge of her starship and fell into her command chair. "Status!"

"The flank ships are in immediate pursuit, Captain. The flagship has neutralized Typhoid Mary and is now in pursuit, as well. We're at Mark Four and they are gaining." Satchi dashed back to tactical.

Mir glanced around from the helm. "The Mydis can make at least Mark Six. It will soon overtake the flank destroyers and be right on top of us."

Junior sprinted out of the lift. "A Defensive Fleet battle group is here!"

"It's Admiral Jackson!" Ashley shouted from com.

"Junior, return to med-bay!" Captain O'Keefe stood forward of her command chair and watched the five much larger Defensive Fleet vessels fly over the Maverick. "Oh, shmutz," she growled under her breath.

The gleaming white, torpedo-shaped Defensive Fleet starships descended on the short Menelaen battle group, blasting away. The Mydis and his flankships careened away and retreated. Admiral Jackson's starships gave chase, hammering them with all weapons.

Junior lunged forward. "No!"

Olivia grabbed her daughter. "Junior!"

"My father's on board that ship! And Naana! And Beling!"

"They're on the wrong side of the DMZ. Now, sit down." Olivia tried pulling her back.

"No, Mom!" Junior twisted out of her mother's grasp. She hurdled the communication console and smacked a palm down on it. "Dad! Jackson's ships fly on cirillian-based energy! Flood his burners with ion particles and you can escape! Daddy..."

"Junior!" Just as Olivia grabbed both her arms, she looked to see Delano's battleships releasing the sparkling ion particles.

Jackson's ships stalled in the wake as Delano's ships leapt into hyperspace, disappearing in a flash.

"Poor Dad. Now, he's all alone again."

Olivia looked at her daughter through haunted eyes. "All stop. Hail the flagship. Ask Admiral Jackson if he requires assistance."

"Aye, Captain." Lieutenant Ashley chimed in with Lieutenant Mir.

“Why didn’t you tell me about my father?” Junior now demanded, ignoring bridge protocol completely. “Why didn’t you tell my father about me?”

“Sachi, you have the Bridge. Come on, Baby.” Olivia dragged her into the ready room. The doors closed behind them.

## Chapter 9

*I've been ratted out.* Olivia faced her daughter and folded her arms. "Junior, we were at war. Edward Delano committed war crimes, resisted arrest, and defected to the Empire with the help of Menelaen conspirators. The Intari were upset by the incident. Admiral Codetalker worried if Edward knew about you; whatever action he took would destabilize an already volatile situation. We were so close to achieving armistice and no one wanted to threaten that. You must understand billions of lives were at stake."

"Mom!" The incredulousness shook Junior's reddened face. "Dad defected because you divorced him! He was planning on turning himself in, but when the divorce decree came through without you even trying to talk to him..."

"I did try! He never replied to my communiqués!"

"He never received your communiqués!" Junior's voice hit a new octave. "When you divorced him, he didn't think anyone would believe him if his own wife didn't! He gave up." She paced away, hands on hips and looking very much like her father. "Admiral Park rescued Dad because he's a man of honor and Dad had shown mercy to his crew during battle. He even adopted Dad. Admiral Park is my grandfather now, just as much as Isaiah." She did an about-face. "Did you act against orders to come after me?"

"I didn't even ask permission." Olivia released breath and took a step away.

"I told Daddy you wouldn't." Junior folded her arms.

"That man is not your 'Daddy! That man is nothing but sperm donor and a war criminal!"

Junior's lower lip quivered. "My dad is a good man! An honorable man! How can you say such horrible things about him?"

Olivia caught the hurt expression. "I'm...sorry." She paced, rubbing her forehead. "But...you had a 'Daddy.' When I explained everything to your father, to Malcolm, I mean, he accepted it and agreed to claim you as his own. He raised you and you adored him."

"I know, but he died two years ago. Now, I find out I have another father and, Mom, I'm so much like him! He's helped me so much. I can stop myself from getting hysterical now. I can breathe when I laugh. Mom, I need him."

"Junior..." Olivia reached out and rubbed her arm a bit. "When I married your father, he was a good man and I loved him very dearly. But...war is hell in so many ways. Sometimes it changes people on a fundamental level. Baby, Edward Delano is a star captain in the Menelaen Empire now. You wouldn't be human if you didn't feel an attachment to him, but the truth is you can never see him again. Its standing orders throughout the Fleet that he's to be arrested and brought back to Earth to stand trial if he's ever apprehended."

"That is unacceptable." Junior narrowed his, face set like stone. "My father is a good man and we need him. We have to find a way to clear his name and bring him home."

"There's no way Admiral Jackson..."

"Admiral Jackson's a two-faced toad!" Junior grabbed her hand. "Mom..." she let go a breath "...Daddy loves you."

"Junior, please, don't cling to this fantasy. You must accept the truth."

"I have accepted the truth! Why can't you? This mess is as much your fault as Dad's."

"Bridge to Captain," said Sachi over inter-ship communications.

"O'Keefe here." Olivia clenched her jaw and swallowed.

"Admiral Jackson orders you and Junior to teleport directly to his office for debriefing."

"Understood." Olivia looked at Junior, face so tense it hurt. "You must keep yourself under control."

"I told you Dad's taught me how to do that."

Ariez paced inside Jackson's persona, shoulders shifting inside the old admiral's itchy uniform. The cosmetic surgery stung his face. A shimmering sensation stopped his pacing.

The Holy Bennu materialized before him, the Sacred Mother at her side. "You ruined my father's life, you stupid son of bitch!" She launched at him and the force of her anger struck his spirit.

"Junior!" Olivia grabbed her daughter by both arms before she could physically touch him.

Horror churned his stomach and his face heated with burning. "Listen to the sound of my voice! You must know me!"

"Yes, I know you! You're the jackass admiral who ruined my father's life!" Only her mother's love prevented her from breaking free and destroying him.

"I...I was trying to rescue you from that monster!" His face crawled with tiny, invisible flames and would soon bubble and burst if she did not back down.

"My father is an honorable man." Junior thrust her finger at his nose. "You are the monster unmasked!"

"No...no, it's not..." It was the risk all Menelaen males took in finding a mate.

"Admiral." Olivia shoved her daughter back and held on tight. "My daughter has ADHD and she's been off her medication for three days. I thought she was all right, but clearly she's not." She tapped wrist-com. "Sachi, emergency teleport to med-bay!"

The Holy Bennu vanished with the Sacred Mother in shimmering energy.

Ariez grabbed Jackson's face in all ten fingers and dug in his nails. "No!" If he could have ripped off the mask of Jackson, he would have. "The Intari...tricked me!" He took two strides to the computer interface's reflective surface and saw the burns, dark red with blisters.

Olivia materialized with her daughter in the Maverick med-bay. "What the hell did you think you were doing?"

"Sticking up for my father!" Junior jerked her arm free.

Isaiah came out of his office. "What's going on?"

Olivia didn't make time to answer him. "The way you behaved in front of Admiral Jackson just now was completely inappropriate!"

"No! I'll tell you what's inappropriate! Jackson swaggering around like an admiral while Dad's stuck on the other side of the DMZ away from his wife and daughter! That's what's inappropriate here! Dad loves

you, Mom! And I know you still love him too. My dad is a good man. I know he is." Junior turned to leave. "Deep down, you know it too. You're just afraid." And then she walked out.

Olivia blew out a breath just as Sachi walked in.

Isaiah handed over a silver rectangle. "Junior dropped this. Maybe you should give it back to her and explain why her daddy's kept it all these years."

Olivia opened the silver photo-holder and saw their wedding picture for the first time in seventeen years.

Edward...face smooth, boyish grin.

"Captain," said Sachi. "I've run the scans. Your suspicions regarding Admiral Jackson's interest in Junior are confirmed. He's been accessing United Fleet family law and laws regarding juvenile offenders. He appears to be searching for a way to take legal custody of her."

Reserved Isaiah burst with rage. "That dirty old pervert!"

Olivia struggled to keep pulse and breathing under control, gripping the photo-holder in hand.

Everyone knew Admiral Jackson had grown steadily more corrupt since the War, and he wasn't exactly a model officer back then either. Co-detalker suspected the Intari Premarean Guard and human conspirators kept him on the job. This wouldn't be the first time he tried to install an under-aged girl in his private quarters.

"Captain," continued Sachi. "If he does obtain physical custody of Junior, there will be nothing we can do to protect her. We will be forced to pursue the matter through the courts. By the time we got her back..."

"...she'd be emotionally scarred for life from sexual abuse." Isaiah finished the sentence.

Olivia knew they were already in for it and honorable United Fleet help was too far away. "Sachi, draw up a tactical plan for worst case scenario."

Sachi nodded. "Consider it done." And she walked out.

Olivia settled gaze on her oldest friend.

"Jackson got Edward out of the way and you rejected him." Isaiah propped hands on hips. "Malcolm died and still you rejected him. Now, he wants to make you pay and nothing could hurt you more than him hurting Junior."

"Oh, Isaiah, I know you're always right, but I dearly hope you're wrong this time."

"Are you holding on to Junior for your sake or hers?"

Olivia's lips fell apart. "Pardon?"

"Jackson can bring her up on charges of aiding and abetting the enemy, and even treason. We can't keep her safe anymore." Isaiah spoke in a tone of eternal wisdom. "Maybe Edward can."

*My dad is a good man.*

Junior smacked the closet door panel and it slid open. "What the... Did I actually wear these crappy little girl dresses?" She fingered a pink and silver brocade with gray leggings and silver bootie boots. "No wonder Rehama was constantly nagging me about my clothes."

Grabbing the offensive outfit, she tossed it into the matter recycler. "Stella, turn this into something more grown-up." She leaned against the wall and glared at the clothes piled in the metallic alcove.

"Please specify."

"I don't know!" Junior threw up a hand. "My new favorite color is jade green. Access Rehama's fashion magazine and make something jade green from it."

"Acknowledged."

A few seconds passed. The little girl clothes shimmered and finally vanished. New clothes, neatly folded and stacked, materialized, along with black riding boots.

"Knotty!" Junior whipped out the green silk and found it to be a long-sleeved blouse.

Seconds later, she exited her quarters in the jade blouse, sleek black pants, and rider boots. She pulled the gold heart-shaped locket outside the collar.

Rounding a corner, Junior watched as a dozen security guards escorted five members of her father's crew. Four of them were her own female attendants he'd assigned to her. "Hey, Billy!" She caught up with the black-haired guard riding shotgun. "What's going on?"

"Oh, hi, Junior. Did you know your mama was worried sick about you?"

"Yeah, yeah, what's going on?"



"We're taking these POWs over to Admiral Jackson's ship for interrogation."

"Lady Rowan." Beling craned her neck to see her.

"Lady Rowan?" Billy twirled his brown eyes in absurdity.

"Hey, as long as Chef calls me to dinner, I don't give a damn what the rest of you call me." Junior pushed past him and caught up to Beling. "Are you all right?"

"Hey, these are dangerous..." Billy started to say.

"These are my friends!" Junior shouted back at him. "Beling, are you all right?"

"There is no one to comfort..." Beling glanced and blushed "...Ayme. She is alone."

*Her doll. 'Ayme' means 'beloved.'* Junior patted her back. "It's okay. I'll get you home to her, I promise." She waited for Billy. "We can't send these five over to Jackson. They're my dad's crew. We have to send them back."

"We got our orders, Junior."

Junior broke ranks and tapped a com panel. "Junior to Mom."

"What is it, Junior?"

"Why are you sending Dad's crew over to Jackson?"

"Orders, Junior."

"But, Jae has a date with Lali tonight! He's trying to get her to marry him. Beling needs her...well, she needs to get home and..."

"Run along to dinner now. Bridge out."

Junior propped her hands upon her hips. "I can't believe this. My parents are so much alike I could scream!" She watched the guards and the Menelaens pass through the hangar bay doors.

Popping a ceiling vent, Junior jumped up, grabbed hold of the edge, and hauled herself up into a work conduit. She crawled over to a wall vent and peered into the hangar bay.

The shuttle moved slowly from its place and out the great doors, towards Jackson's ship.

Junior pulled her knees to her chest and held them. Picking up her gold heart-shaped locket, she pressed the bottom of it. The family hologram appeared. She'd digitized her parents' wedding picture and merged it with her own.

Family.

She pressed the button and the hologram vanished. Gripping locket and rings in hand, she pressed fist to forehead.

*Come to me.*

Junior perked up, looked behind her, and saw the blue eyes in her thoughts. Then, her lashes weighed down with pleasurable feelings she couldn't resist.

He was calling her from beyond the Threshold and she would go to him.

\*\*\*

Dreamtime.

Ariez stood in the dark forest, the leaves wet beneath his feet. The cool air soothed his facial burns.

She appeared. For an instant, she did not know him and he feared her.

"Please." Ariez could think of no other words to say.

"Something's wrong." Confusion riddled her pretty face. "Your face is burned." She passed fingertips over his face, but feared her touch would harm him further. "Who did this to you?"

"It does not matter who did it. Something terrible happened, just as you predicted. I failed to manage the situation and still our bond is not complete. Please..." he tried not to tremble "...forgive me."

"Who burned you?"

Ariez shook his head and tried to put an obliging expression. "All that matters is..."

"Answer me." Her focus could not be denied.

"You did."

"What?" All color vanished from her face. She knew it was true. "How?"

He swallowed hard and could only hope. "With your anger."

"But...how could I ..." she could no longer bear to look at him. "I..." deep breaths "...love you."

"It was mistake. I was in disguise and you did not know me." Ariez followed her and dared to slip his hands around her waist. "You thought I was a monster."

She turned in his arms and slipped her hands up to his face.

It stung horribly at first and Ariez ground his teeth to keep the scream in. He waited for the healing to come. Only faith in her healing could make it so.

The burning lifted from his face and vanished. "I knew you loved me. You simply could not remember."

She smiled, weakly, in response to his hopefulness. "I don't ever want to hurt you again."

"You will not." Ariez lifted her fingers from his face and kissed them. "Remember me when you cross the Threshold. I have a specialized shuttlecraft waiting. We can escape across the border. I will assume command of the Mydis before..."

She listened, but her tense face convinced him she did not fully understand.

"Nevermind. It is only important that you remember me. As long as you remember me when you wake, everything else will fall into place." He slipped his hand up into her hair. "You will remember me? Will you not?"

"I...I don't..." Her eyes darted around. "I want to. I love..."

A bright, white light shone upon them, cutting through the forest.

She looked. She saw the sword in the stone.

"No!" Ariez pulled her away. "Please, do not look at it. Make it go away. It can not be here if you don't want it here." He took her chin in hand. "Focus on me. Reject the sorcerer and come away with me."

"He's not a sorcerer." She kept her focus on the sword trapped in the stone. "My father is a good man."

"Please." Ariez cupped her face in both hands. "You said you did not want to hurt me. If you free the sorcerer, he could force you to destroy me."

She shook her head. "No, he..." But, she knew it was possible. "But, I..." She gripped one of his hands and pulled it down. She looked at the sword in the stone and panic seized her heart. "He's dying!" Whipping hands around, she shot them up between his arms to break free. And then she ran, she ran for the sword in the stone.

"No!" The restraints showed no mercy to Ariez.

"I won't let him die." She grabbed the sword in both hands and pulled. The sword slid easily out, scraping metal against stone, and she

held it high. The sunshine streamed through the redwood trees, the dark green ferns gathered about her.

The Holy Bennu vanished and Dreamtime with her.

\*\*\*

Waking Moments.

Junior recovered from a lapse of consciousness with a sharp breath, all memory of it fleeing into the darkness. She rose from lying on cold metal and surveyed the hangar bay. Only technicians remained, passing decontamination machines over the surface.

Energy shielding framed Admiral Jackson's ship in the launch doors.

*The time has come to set things right.* Junior opened her hand and examined her locket and her mother's wedding rings. *I have to get Dad and bring him home to Mom.* She dropped locket and rings to catch on the gold chain and crawled out.

Olivia set a plate on the family table, hoping dinner ease the tension. She eyed Fluffy perched above the cooling unit. "I don't like cats."

Fluffy gave her an imperious sniff and flipped the end of her tail.

Junior walked in. "Mother, we need to talk." She looked so grown up in a jade silk blouse and black pants. And tall, she looked really tall.

Olivia drew breath and squared her shoulders. She observed, with chagrin, that Junior squared her shoulders in the exact same way.

But, then, Junior relaxed her shoulders and walked calmly to the beverage dispenser. Resting a hand on the alcove, she said, "Stella, one cup of coffee with one tablespoon skim milk and half a teaspoon of sugar and one cup of chamomile tea with one teaspoon of honey."

The two cups appeared in shimmering light. Junior picked them up, walked over, handed her the coffee, and sat neatly down with her tea. She hadn't broken anything or spilled even a drop.

Olivia sat down and felt a tear trickling down her face. "Your father taught you all this?"

"Yes. He did." Junior sipped her tea.

"Well, I'm so...so proud of you." Olivia had long since given up hope of ever teaching her the same thing.

"I'm going after Dad."

"What do you mean?"

"According to the database on family law, a child of divorced parents has the right to choose which parent to live with after the age of twelve. I'm sixteen years old. I choose to live with my father now."

Olivia pressed her lips together before speaking again. "Family law is irrelevant in our case. No Alliance citizen is permitted to cross the DMZ."

"My father is a naturalized Menelaen citizen and I am his daughter. I have dual citizenship."

"Why do you want to go?" Olivia noticed her hands shaking and set down her coffee cup.

"I'm not a stupid child anymore, Mom! I know how things work. Lots of people divorce. Some people reconcile. Most don't. But, my father and mother still love each other! My parents' marriage was destroyed from the outside. I'm going to Menelae to bring my father home. I'm going to find the evidence and witnesses needed to clear his name."

"I can't let you go."

"No one knows better than you that I cannot be contained! I am my father's daughter. I am going. And I will come back. I will come back and I will bring my father with me, tied up in a sack. I swear to God."

The tears squeezed out the inner corners of Olivia's eyelashes. She swallowed hard and opened. "Junior...you can't..."

"Why did you, and this entire crew, risk everything to come after only one person, to come after me?"

"You are my daughter and I love you. This crew is your family."

"Edward Delano is my father and I love him. He is my family too." Junior drew a shaky breath. "Right now, he's in bondage to despair."

"It's too dangerous!"

"This is my risk to take. My own. I love you, Mom, and so does Dad. I will come back to you. We both will." Junior hugged her.

Olivia responded to her daughter's hug by holding her tightly, wanting to freeze that moment forever. Drawing a deep breath, she found the courage to let go somewhere between Isaiah's wisdom in her heart and a kiss on her daughter's cheek.

Junior placed something in her hand, stood, and walked out.

Olivia opened her hand to see the rings Edward had given her on that day long ago when they two became one. She fisted the Celtic gold and pressed it to her lips. A maternal sob made its way up from the innermost parts of her being.

Seconds later, Sachi's voice piped in from the Bridge. "Captain! Junior's

jettisoned in a LifePod! I'm getting a tractor beam on her!"

Olivia lifted her face from the palms of her hands. "No."

"Say again?"

Olivia's nose stung. "Let her go. She's returning to her father. He needs her more than we do right now."

"Captain?"

"You heard me." Olivia wiped away her tears with her fingertips. "Junior's growing up. The time has come to let her go."

Fluffy flew into her hair and snuggled in.

Olivia almost grabbed the stupid cat to toss it away, but then it purred in her ear and she remembered Junior's cute face holding her. Sniffing a bit, she gingerly petted its head. "Sachi, commence Operation..." she lifted eyes to Jackson's ship framed in her starry window "...Demeter's Wrath."

"Understood. Bridge out."

Deep inside Jackson's flagship, Junior rose up behind a security guard outside the Brig and pressed a spray-syringe sedative to the neck. She caught him when he slipped into unconsciousness and lowered him to the floor. Swiping his wrist-com, she pulled the security clearance rod from it and inserted it into the panel beside the door. It opened and she fired plasma-pistol on the stun setting. Both interior guards went down. She saw the Menelaens standing on the other side of the force field and dashed behind the console. Her fingers flew over the controls. "Almost got it. Got it!"

The Menelaens rushed out when the force field went down, Beling in the lead. "I knew you would not abandon us, My Lady!"

"I've got a LifePod sucked onto a garbage chute waiting for us. I've fiddled with internal sensors but we only have four minutes before they come back on-line. Let's roll!" Junior led the way out.

Jae grabbed pistols from the unconscious guards and tossed one to Beling who gestured for Lali, Palin, and Talya to follow them.

Two minutes later, the group of six crammed into the LifePod which only seated four. Beling inadvertently shoved her heel into Lali's ear. "Forgive me."

"Forgiveness."

"Time to blow this tossberry stand!" Junior announced, seizing the piloting controls. "Lali, you've got navigation there. It's just like Menelaen nav-cons, except coordinates are based on the center of the galaxy rather than the rim."

"Understood, Lady Rowan."

On the Maverick bridge, Olivia watched the tiny LifePod detach from the hull of Admiral Jackson's enormous, gleaming white starship, the largest, most powerful ship in the entire Defensive Fleet.

Nothing in the Deep Space Fleet even came close.

In a flash, the blackness of space swallowed up the Lifepod, and her little girl with it.

"Sachi?" Olivia folded arms, biting back the urge to order a pursuit course and tractor beam.

"Scanning hyper-space on long-range," said Sachi. "Stand-by." She moved fingers to the adjacent panel and breathed relief. "Yes. The Mydis has scanned the

LifePod and is moving to intercept."

*Take good care of our baby, Edward.*

# Chapter 10

Delano faced Commander Bo in his office. "Send Aodhan to my daughter. My wife's sword is the only thing of true value."

"Please reconsider, My Lord." Commander Bo presented a dagger laid out on a black cloth in his hands. "As long as there is life, there is hope."

Delano picked up the dagger. He remembered his promise to his adopted father, not kill himself, but he had already failed in every other way. "My daughter was my hope. I caused my wife great pain when I kidnapped her. I cannot live without hope, but I cannot cause my wife further pain. It's clear she will have nothing further to do with me. This is the only way to spare my daughter the stigma of my cowardice."

"You are not a coward, My..."

"Leave me."

Trembling, Commander Bo bowed. "It has been the greatest honor of my life to serve under your command, My Lord." He walked out.

Delano knelt on a decorative cloth and held the sheathed dagger in his left hand. He drew it out with his right hand. The dagger was Menelaen. He would not dirty Aodhan with his cursed blood. He drew a breath and pointed the dagger's blade at his heart. "I die with your name on my lips, Olivia." He drew another breath and...

"Dad!"

Delano's eyes popped open in clarity. "Rowan?"

"Dad, Bo patched me through com. I'm crammed in a LifePod with five of your crew and I accidentally elbowed environmental controls. Can you tractor us into the hangar bay before we all suffocate please?"

Delano dropped the dagger and jumped up.

A minute later, he ran onto the flight deck without his helmet or even his red cape. He stopped as the hatch popped and Beling got out first

"Come quickly." Beling reached back to help the others out.



"Dad?" Junior finally emerged.

Delano grabbed his daughter in both arms and spun her around in their very first hug.

"I'm okay, Dad. I'm all right."

Delano set her down, uncomfortable with his paternal outburst. "How did you escape?" He gripped her shoulders and stepped back.

"Escape? I didn't escape. I told Mom I needed to come back to you and...she let me go."

Delano searched her cute little face. "She...let you go?" The flame of hope re-ignited in his heart. *Olivia's letting me hold the baby?*

Junior nodded, smiling a bit. "Yeah."

Delano thumped his daughter's shoulders, feeling very awkward. He dropped one hand and turned towards the door, but he couldn't let her go. He thumped her back, nodding again. "All right," he said, because he couldn't think of anything else. "All right."

"Well, not yet," Junior said as they began to walk along. "It's not all right yet, but it's going to be."

Delano looked at his daughter, feeling the moisture of his own face. "Are you hungry? We have banana pancakes."

"Banana pancakes? Really?"

"We ran into some human smugglers."

"Oh, let me guess!" Junior twirled and waved her hands, laughing. "You whipped out your sword, spun it around the smugglers' bodies a few times, and said, 'Hand over the bananas and nobody gets hurt.'"

Delano remembered doing exactly that and felt rather stupid about it in retrospect. "A dad's gotta do what a dad's gotta do."

A couple of days later in the Mydis' gymnasium, Junior spun around in a flying leap and shot a fluorescent purple ball into a clear cylinder high on the wall. She pointed three fingers at the barrel-shaped android in the corner. "That's three points, Govina!"

"Lady Rowan, my designation is Governess Android 291. I am unfamiliar with this game." Her design was almost entirely functional. Facial circuitry made a nose-less humanoid face.

"No kidding. You n't believe what I went through to get the matter converters to cough up something which resembled a basketball. What's next?"

"Art history."

Junior groaned. "Art's fun, but I hate history. Can't we study the charges against my father now?"

"Captain Delano's criminal record in the United Fleet is not part of this curriculum."

Junior took a shot at the cylinder again and missed. "You really need a personality, Govina. It's bad enough there aren't any other teens on this ship. I didn't realize how mind-numbingly boring non-family starships are. I mean, good grief, what do grown-ups do for entertainment around here without little kids racing through the corridors, setting off fire alarms?"

"I do not understand the question."

"No kidding." She retrieved the ball and jump-shot the next one. "All right. Go ahead with art history."

"Yes, My Lady. We will begin Lesson 29: 18<sup>th</sup> Century Europe, Earth."

"Why do Menelaens care about 18<sup>th</sup> century European art?"

"Artistic ability is one of the five most valued talents in Menelaen society. The art referred to as 'Classical Art' on Earth, as well as the art of Ancient China, Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, Japan, and Cambodia are highly valued in Menelaen society."

"What about Russia? I love art from Tsarist Russia."

"Yes, Russia, as well."

"And Navajo? That's my favorite Native American art. Dad's best friend, Graham Codetalker, is Navajo."

"Yes. Please stay on task, My Lady. Please identify this painting by title, artist, and date."

The far wall lit up with a painting. Junior didn't immediately look, but retrieved her ball first. When she did, she sucked oxygen into her lungs. She'd seen this particular painting many times before in books and holographic databases, but this time it sent chills through her. "'Cupid and Psyche' on canvas by Francois Gerard, 1798." She stepped up to the two meter high representation of the famous painting.

"Excellent. The next painting is..."

"Freeze program."

Govina stood motionless and silent.

Junior studied the painting. The mythical couple looked about her age.

Psyche sat upon a stone, naked and vulnerable. Cupid reached for her face to kiss her and he had wings. Her face the image of bewilderment. His - absolute adoration.

Junior's pulse quickened. She felt a touch - the slightest feeling of a kiss - on her eyelash, and rubbed the spot. She glanced around, suddenly afraid her father walk in and see her staring at this painting and be angry. Very angry. Like she'd done something terribly wrong. Against him. "Computer, delete this image from the database."

The painting vanished. But, the feeling didn't.

Junior swallowed angst. "Govina."

The android governess reactivated. "The next painting..."

"Govina, I'm going to lunch." Junior dropped the ball and walked out.

About an hour later, she lifted her chin from her arms folded on knees, sitting on a crevice above the hyperspace engines. The crew work below blurred.

Dad walked in and nodded in response to his crew's address. He propped his hands on his hips and looked up. "Why aren't you in class?"

"I don't feel pretty good." She settled her chin back down. "I don't...sleep well and...I have headaches."

"Why haven't you reported to med-bay?"

"Isaiah's not there and, besides, I like this engine. It has a nice hum."

"All right. Come on down. I was getting bored on the command deck without even an asteroid to blow up anyway."

She smiled a bit at that.

"Come on down." He motioned for her. "I've got a great rock-climbing holographic program."

Junior climbed down part way and then dropped to her feet.

"So, how's school?" Dad thumped her shoulder as they walked out.

The memory of the painting brought a wave of nausea. "Fine."

"I know it's boring without your friends."

"I didn't have time to say good-bye to Ret and Rehama, and we've been best friends since we were babies."

"Things will be better once we arrive on Menelae. Naana will retain ladies-in-waiting to keep you company. I've specified they have athletic ability and share your love of science."

Junior's mind wondered off on how her daddy was buying her new friends.

"I've created a future for our family on Denahi," he continued. "When we arrive on Menelae, the Empress will elevate me to Viceroy of Denahi. Then, you will be a princess and your mother will be queen."

"A princess? You mean one of those screaming wimps who cower in the corner while Robin Hood gets to have all the fun kicking the Sheriff of Nottingham's butkis?"

He chuckled. "You're going to have the best of everything. I've worked hard for this a very long time." He led the way into the HRC. "Computer, run Program Delano-Yosemite-Auch."

Instantly, the lush green grasses grew up and a gray jagged peak rose up before them. Junior drew breath, smelling the cool mountain breezes. "El Capitan!"

Delano smiled, also looking up at the famous California peak in Yosemite National Park. "Yes." He grabbed the climbing gear from a nearby rock and tossed it to her. "Your mother and I honeymooned here."

Junior caught it and smiled over her parents' honeymoon. Watching her father find finger-holds and toe-holds on the sheer rock, the smile faded. She scanned the ground, the ferns and off into the distance, re-thinking events which had brought her to this point. *Dad meant to kidnap Mom too.* The thought tensed her whole body and made her stomach roll. She had been the bait. Once across the border, Dad thought he could convince Mom to stay with him too.

She ran the bright pink rope through her fingers. *I'm the bait again.*

Dad had no inclination to return home at all.

Junior watched him move up the rock, reaching for the next finger-hold, and the bottom fell out of her heart. "Dad...I really don't feel much like rock climbing. I think I'll go...study...something." She dropped the rope.

"Rowan? What's wrong?"

"I don't like to be called 'Rowan.'" She walked out. "Not that it matters to anyone."

Junior tried to study Menelaen history, but it wasn't anymore interesting than human history. Tired, she still didn't want to go to bed. She found the antique copy of *Lord of the Rings* her father had given for a belated birthday present and fell asleep when it fell open in her hands.

\*\*\*

Dreamtime.

Ariez remained in shadow when she appeared and swallowed the anguish of his burns. He observed her through the evergreen boughs as she approached their tree house. Clouds blocked a full moon and faraway thunder heralded another coming storm if he failed. He drew courage from knowing he could not be there if she had truly rejected him.

All Menelaen males were at the mercy of their females, but the Courtship Rites protected them beforehand and the Marital Bond after. However, she never quite comprehended his explanations of either. His father had warned him marrying a human female would be challenging, even if she was the Holy Bennu.

If she was Menelaen, anger would be justified. He could withdraw his suit and file a complaint of 'false pretenses resulting in bodily harm' with the Bureau of Family Affairs.

The Empress would preside over the case herself.

However, the Holy Bennu was not Menelaen and her heart was pure.

Sniffing brought Ariez out of deep thought. *She weeps. She thinks of me and she weeps.*

Then, she felt his presence and searched. The cloud passed from the moon and her tears reflected the light. She searched for him, but saw only his shadow. "Ariez?"

He stepped forth.

Gasping, she stumbled back at his appearance. She understood she had hurt him again. She turned away and felt the tree trunk, searching for the rope ladder to escape her own guilt. "I'm sorry." Her voice was weak and she sunk into the ferns and anguish. "I'm so sorry."

"I know." Ariez knelt beside her and let the moon illuminate his burned face.

On instinct, she passed hands over him and the burns vanished. Relief softened her, but confusion quickly returned. "I didn't want him to die, but then something else happened too and..." She watched him take her hands. "I can't remember what it was, but it...it hurts."

"Your father tried to coerce you into rejecting me." He thought better of referring to Delano as a sorcerer. That only confused her more.

She watched their hands together. "Why would he do that?"

"He knows I am too powerful to manipulate. He wants you to marry my half-brother, Kaliban. Then, he could rule the Empire through your son."

If not for their growing bond, she would've laughed and said he was playing a game. "But...I...I don't know anyone named Kaliban and I...love you, and I'm...too young to..."

"You came of age two years ago."

"I did?"

"Yes." Ariez smiled in spite of the lingering darkness. "I will not allow the sorcerer to succeed, I promise you, and I will protect you from Kaliban. I will find a way across the border. Once I have resumed my true identity, I will have more than enough power to rescue you."

She trailed gaze up to the moon and back down. "I'm not sure I need to be rescued."

Ariez passed a hand over her cheek and she winced at the tickle, but then her lips curled. "Do you remember our first kiss?"

Pink softened her face. She ran her finger up his neck. "Your father had just died."

"He was murdered, assassinated by Ara's Loyalists. I had just come of age and she feared my growing power with my father's help."

"You wanted to die too. I held you while you cried."

"And then you kissed me." Ariez took her chin and brought her lips to his. "I was fourteen years old. You were twelve."

She smoothed her fingers over his eyes. "You still hurt. Why?"

"It is..." he blinked back the pain "...unnatural for the Courtship Rites to carry on so long. Maintaining this..." he waved a hand over their forest now glittering with dawn "...is...difficult. I am...tired."

"When were we supposed to...to whatever?"

"Nearly three years ago." Ariez let his head fall against her shoulder and she held him. Her scent soothed his pain and he dared kiss her bare arm. It was a prelude to completion and never done in Dreamtime.

The Holy Bennu could not yet be with him Waking Moments, however, and she trembled when he kissed her, banishing all angst from his body.

# Chapter 1

Junior walked onto the command deck with Naana.

"Sleep well?" Delano asked, standing forward of his chair.

"Great!" Junior grabbed the rail and swung around to stand beside him as the Menelaen homeworld came into focus. A blue marble in space, like Earth, it swirled with white clouds. From her studies, she knew there were only two continents. Because of this, a rich oceanic culture thrived in submerged cities.

The Northern continent was shaped like a bean on its side, mountainous and temperate. The Southern continent resembled an apostrophe, brown-edged with green on the shoreline, being mostly desert. Only pre-industrial societies existed there.

"Dad, do you think Menelaens really are the same species as humans?"

He glanced at her.

"I was reading the medical database this morning." Junior remembered to lower her voice in front of the crew. "They believe they're like us, only more highly evolved."

"I believe we're the same species. Of course, I don't think they're more highly evolved. They simply have special adaptations to suit their environment." Delano stepped forward to issue orders to his crew. "Standard orbit. Hail SkyDock."

"What adaptations?" Junior watched as their ship settled into orbit. Other starships docked to the feet of the white spider-like space station.

"It has to do with their...reproductive...practices."

"Oh, that reminds me! Why don't Menelaens have very many babies?"

"Shhhh." Delano admonished and then continued in a whisper. "They haven't recovered from the multi-phasic radiation the Intari poisoned them with during the War yet."



"The Intari poisoned the Menelaens? Isn't that..."

"Genocide? Yes, attempted genocide, at least. You never read about it in your United Fleet history text because the education board feared it be too divisive. It was a stupid concession for our people to make, since we suffered infertility from it too."

"But, why haven't the Menelaens recovered yet?"

"Menelaens reproduce more slowly than humans."

"So...did the Menelaens slow their reproductive abilities on purpose or was it a natural biological adaptation?"

He waved her off. "It's not something you need to know."

"Why not? Is that why you censored that part of the medical text? You know, Mom and I had The Talk a long time ago. I know all about sex."

Delano narrowed his eyelids. "Menelaen courtship rites are very complicated. You couldn't possibly comprehend or reciprocate."

"Why not?"

"Enough. You're too young to marry and you won't marry a Menelaen in

any case."

Junior released an overly dramatic sigh. "You expect me to come live with you in the Menelaen Empire, but you don't want me going out with Menelaen boys. What do you expect me to do? Die a virgin?"

"Yes." He wasn't anywhere near ready to crack a smile. "Only, you're not allowed to die."

Junior shot him a right sturdy glare. She knew she took after her mother on that point.

"After learning human females reproduce quickly, the Menelaen conquistadors raped the female officers of their first captured battleship. The females went insane and took great pleasure in burning the Menelaens alive. Their pregnancies ended in miscarriages and they spent the rest of their lives in a catatonic state. Humans and Menelaens are not physiologically compatible."

"So, why did you put five bodyguards on me then? Seems to me Menelaen males would want to stay as far away from human females as they could."

"Normally, they do, but..." he leaned back and frowned at her braids "...they're as obsessed with red hair as human males are with large

breasts. Once a Menelaen male engages in the Courtship Rites, his reasoning ability is compromised until the Marital Bond is complete. By then, it's too late."

"So I'll go blond, good grief." Junior remembered her mother saying something about death not being a deterrent for boys when it came to sex. She raised both eyebrows. *Guess Menelaen boys aren't all that different from human ones after all.*

"You absolutely must not become involved with a Menelaen boy."

"Whatever." Junior yawned behind her hand. "I have boyfriend back home on the..." Then, she realized she could no longer remember his face. "Anyway, I have a boyfriend."

"Don't count on him waiting. Boys your age lack the skills necessary to maintain a romantic relationship."

"Oh, yeah?" Junior propped hands on hips. "Remind me which one of us is divorced." She watched him fold arms across his massive chest and knew the conversation was over.

Her newfound ability to stay focused on certain thoughts was wonderful most of the time. Just then, she wanted to remember her boyfriend's face, but her focus kept returning to her father telling her not to become involved with a Menelaen boy. *I'm not going to be here long anyway.* Nevertheless, her focus went right back to him speaking the words, 'absolutely must not become involved.' And then her focus flitted from there to the story about the human females burning the Menelaen rapists to death, and back again. She swallowed a sickness in her throat and decided to play basketball while the crew was busy with docking procedures and disembarking and all that.

An hour later, Junior sat beside her father while he piloted the shuttlecraft down to the planet's surface. She looked back at the dozen Menelaen aides, including Naana. Their happiness to be home shone clearly on their faces. She turned back to the controls.

"What does that one do?" She pointed to a blue button.

"Rear stabilizer."

"And that?" She pointed to a red one.

"Brat Ejector. Go ahead – push it!"

Junior frowned. "Dad!"

"Here. You fly." Delano slid out of his seat and pulled her into it.

"Really?" Junior grabbed the controls and pulled back on the stick. "Woo-hoo!"

The Menelaens gasped sharply as the shuttle reared up like a horse, then spun once in the turbulence.

Delano laughed, seizing the stick and leveling out. "Amelia Earhart, you are not."

"Darn-tootin! I'm Captain Jessica Rhyne - fighter pilot!"

"Not on my watch."

"You were a fighter pilot."

"And that's exactly why you're not going to be."

Minutes later, the shuttle came to rest on the yellow and gray landing platform. Junior peered out the window to see the delegation from the Imperial Council waiting to meet them. *Geez, I didn't know Dad was that important.*

Male, female, dark, fair, stout, lean, and so on, they were as varied as any group of humans. Two couples had even brought their children along.

"Wow, they really dress their kids up fancy here." Junior realized too late the remark might sound ethno-centric.

Naana never seemed to take offense at anything. "Many aristocrats have lost their seats in the Imperial Council because they have passed the age of procreation without producing a single heir. As a result, those who do have children flaunt them."

"That's not very nice!" Junior couldn't stop her grimace.

"As you say then so shall it be." Naana nodded at Beling.

Beling seemed to be recording what she said.

"Oh, no. You're not going to tell Dad I was being judgmental, are you?"

"No, My Lady." Naana was truly astonished. "You walk in goodness and light."

Junior looked out the window again and tried to understand the exchange with her honorary big sisters. She sighed. Times like this she missed her life on the Maverick so much. But, then her father gestured to her. It was time to follow him down the gangplank. She stood up, still studying the Menelaen delegation through the window.

The aristocratic colors were gray, white, and silver, but also there were stripes of cobalt blue. Naana had said blue indicated their status as members of the Imperial Council. The males seemed to wear a variation of cloaks or capes, none of which extended beneath their thighs. Likewise, the females wore thigh-length capes or wraps of some kind, but their gowns were more elaborate than the males' embroidered tunics and snug-fitting pants. The ladies' bodices were so tight they hardly looked mammalian, despite the plunging necklines. *That's gotta hurt.* While the males wore their shoulder-length hair loose or in simple ponytails, the females wore theirs in lots of elaborate loops of curls and tiny braids fitted with beads. A variety of headdresses complicated their style further, headbands, small tiaras, enormous comb-like devices. Jewelry added to the excess. *It's the Italian Renaissance on zeta-steroids!*

She followed her father down the gangplank, feeling rather plain in her long, white gown. She'd tried six other dresses, but only this one made it past Dad. High-necked and simple, she was sure it made her already small chest appear quite flat. The sleeves flowed almost to her feet, revealing only her fingers through slits.

Naana had said bare arms were considered rather erotic on Menelae. She wore her burgundy dress, as always. It was the nanny uniform of her society.

Beling, Palin, Talya, and Lali followed in their long, split-skirt dresses, dove gray and with short capes. Their hair was smoothed back into simple knots at the napes of their necks. They were security officers filling in for ladies-in-waiting and Naana seemed in no hurry to find real servants.

With her red hair flowing freely, Junior was sure her final image was that of a ten year old child draped in a bed sheet to play a ghost on Halloween, and with a whole troop of nannies following her too. She gave a martyr's sigh, but resolved to behave herself. She waited while her father greeted the Premier.

"Your Grace." Delano bowed slightly at the neck, as did the Premier. They were social equals. Govina said aristocrats attained their positions through inheritance or military accomplishment.

"Welcome, Captain Delano. This must be your daughter? We have heard so much about her." The weasel-like Premier's smug expression reminded her that the hereditary aristocrats believed themselves superior to the military aristocrats. How they could believe the accident of

birth made them better than people who earned their rank through hard work and determination, she couldn't imagine.

Nevertheless, Junior smiled at being noticed.

Delano. "Yes, this is my little girl, Lady Rowan."

*Little girl.* Junior stopped her eyes before they could roll again.

"Your beauty is stunning, My Lady." The Premier bowed to her. "I understand you have come of age. This is Lord Kaliban, son of the deceased Imperial Prince Consort and step-son of Empress Araina." He opened his hand towards the young man at his side. "Her Imperial Majesty has appointed me his sponsor for the Courtship Rites."

Kaliban was about her height. He hadn't a hair on his head and looked good that way, even though he couldn't have been more than twenty years old. Junior guessed Menelaen males didn't equate baldness with age, like human males did. His eyes were a beguiling gray. He was handsome, that was for certain. Full lips. His gaze fixed on her, running the length of her hair and back to her eyes, and he smiled.

Her father stepped in front of her then and she couldn't see Kaliban at all.

Dad's hand settled on the hilt of his sword and he spoke in a low, firm tone. "Lady Rowan is human. She will not come of age until her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. In any case, you know as well as I do humans and Menelaens are not physiologically compatible."

"Actually, it is not a proven fact. The case studies of incompatibility involved rape, not consensual romance. No female would deliberately harm her beloved spouse."

"Nevertheless, I will not risk my daughter's sanity. I will not accept applications for the Courtship Rites on her behalf."

*Courtship Rites?* Junior's eyelids peeled back. *Mom would launch right through the hull!*

"As the daughter of a military commander, she will need to marry well to secure your family's position into the future. You must realize the Empress would never permit a viceroy's daughter to marry a human male. It would corrupt our form of government."

"My family's position is not your concern, Premier."

The Premier bowed at the neck. "I apologize, Captain. May I introduce my wife, Lady Nimue?" He gestured to the woman at his side.

Lady Nimue took over the conversation at that point, just as human wives were oft to do when their husbands spoke inappropriately at social events.

Commander Bo and Lieutenant Jae tightened their positions, flanking her father and blocking access to her and the commando nannies by Kaliban and the Premier.

Junior's attention shifted to a girl about her age who stared at her. She took the staring as a cultural mannerism inviting friendship.

The Menelaen girl's skin and hair were so pale the three beige spots above her nose seemed painted on. Naana had told her Menelaens never tattooed themselves. The spots were genetic, like human freckles.

"Hi, I'm Junior." She smiled, the universal expression of friendliness.

The girl's eyes widened, but she didn't reply. She leaned into her mother and said, "Her hair really is red. I want to touch it."

"Maintain your composure, My Daughter." The statuesque mother admonished, attention still on the posturing males.

Menelaens always referred to each other by title, Junior had learned. She'd been instructed not to publicly yell, 'Hey, Dad!'

The girl gaped. "I want a dress like that. I want to wear my hair loose like the Holy Bennu."

Junior assumed the girl missed the translation. "You can call me 'Rowan' if you want. That's what they call me on my Dad's ship. What's your name?"

The girl looked her up and down. She tugged at her mother's sleeve.

The mother remained statuesque.

"My Mother, Lady Rowan is not wearing a corset, yet her breasts are so small."

Naana shifted the nanny blockade to compensate.

The girl reached a hand towards her.

Junior backed away, trepidation snaking through her stomach. She knew her breasts were small, but having that fact publicly pointed out made her want to get sucked down a Black Hole.

The girl took a step towards her, reaching.

Innocuous cultural mannerism or not, Junior wanted to bat her hand away.

Naana blocked access. "Your behavior threatens sacrilege," she said to the girl.

Blushing scarlet, the girl backed away and bobbed a quick bow. "Please, intercede on my behalf, Oh Guardian."

*Guardian...nanny...another mistranslation?*

The group of them followed Captain Delano in close order formation.

Junior let the creepy feeling evaporate. She crossed the narrow landing feeling safe again. A far pyramid-shaped building caught her eye. "What building is that?" She pointed, long sleeve falling back from her wrist.

"The Imperial Archives." Naana noticed her bare arm. "My Lady, you are not wearing your wrist-com."

"I forgot. Sorry." Junior lowered her hand.

"Your wrist-com carries your translator."

"Oh, I don't need that anymore. I grew up in deep space, you know, making first contact with new alien species practically every week. All the kids on the Maverick are good with languages."

"Have you ever become fluent this quickly before?"

"Um, no," said Junior with a shrug of one shoulder. "'First time for everything.' That's what Isaiah always says."

Naana said nothing more.

The nanny brigade escorted Junior to her father's apartment atop a gleaming white skyscraper in the midst of Kursk, ignoring the whispers and stares of those they passed. She reminded herself she was the first human female any of them had ever seen. Still, it didn't make her feel any better to overhear them commenting on her red hair, towering height, and small chest.

"White and gray everything again." She sighed when she followed Naana into her new rooms. White sofa. Gray table. It all made her want to toss in a bucket of purple paint. At least, the windows were enormous. She rushed to one and looked down. "Wow!" Hover-vehicles sped everywhere in carefully regulated traffic patterns between a myriad of gleaming white skyscrapers.

Naana stood near the open door. "Lady Rowan, may I bring your meal?"

"Yes, please. Thank you." A sleek marble ziggurat with two rounded peaks at the top loomed gleaming white in the sunshine. "Naana, what is that building?" Junior pointed.

"The Monument to the Sacred Moon." Naana brought a tray to the small table near the domed window. She pressed a button of light. The window drew up and away, making the dining area into a balcony. "At night, when the Moon is full the monument flashes silver. When the Moon sets between the breasts of the..."

"Breasts?"

"Yes, of course. The Moon represents the female of our race."

"Oh."

"When the Moon sets between the breasts of the Monument, the Faithful believe she is assuming her throne on Menelae."

"Does everyone worship the Moon here?"

"Uh, no. Worship of the Sun and the Moon is the state religion. We are free to worship as we please, so long as we pay tax to our local temple. My family reveres our ancestors, for example."

Junior shrugged a shoulder. "I'm not religious at all. Grandma in Montana is Catholic. Mom and I never go to church, except when we visit her."

"You take notice of others and are concerned for them. Is not compassion the basis for all benevolent religions?"

Junior thought for a second. "I guess so, but Mom always says, 'Own your destiny.'"

"Wise words."

"But, religion tells you what to do."

"Not all religions. The destiny of the Holy Bennu lies in her own hands. The purity of her heart will guide her as she finds it."

"Uh, okay." Junior reminded herself that, even after thousands of years, it still was not a good idea to discuss politics and religion in polite company.

Hours later, the sun set in the East and Delano was finally released from his meeting. He departed the admiralty chamber through a wide gray hall, accompanied by his adoptive father.

"Your Heir Designate is impressive, My Son," said Admiral Park. Despite his silver hair sleeked back into a band at the nape of his neck, he was strong and sturdy on his feet, head held high with dignity, face lined with wisdom.



"Thank you, My Father. Rowan is very young and has much to learn. However, I am pleased with her progress."

"Is it true she out-last-ed Lieutenant Beling in training combat?"

Delano nodded, face warm with pride. "Yes. Beling knocked her down fifteen times, but Rowan leapt right back up every time. My daughter is fast. She's never been pinned."

"Never? Extraordinary!"

Riding the tide of paternal pride, Delano couldn't help but add, "She already flies in the Stinger flight simulator. Made six kills last time." He chuckled. "Won't be long and she'll take out her old man."

"Lady Olivia has brought her up well, even though she was alone in the parenting task," said Lord Park.

"My wife is an unusually strong woman," Delano said with a nod. "Did I tell you I've already begun training Rowan with my Gallowglass sword? With blade guards, of course. She has remarkable control. She..."

Naana ran towards them. "Captain Delano!" She pointed urgently out the window.

Delano rushed to see. And there was Junior climbing the moon ziggurat. On the outside of it. Like it was El Capitan. With no ropes or safety equipment of any kind. "Oh, God!" He sprinted out, followed by the nanny.

The sun shone golden red, setting on the right side of the Monument of the Sacred Moon. The silver moon rose to the apex as Junior neared the top. Her white jumpsuit blended her in with the monument, except for her long, red curls.

Junior was having a glorious time. The setting sun warmed her whole body and a gentle breeze caressed her cheek. She reached the window and pulled herself up into it. There were no glass panes or energy shielding. She sat there, swinging her legs, enjoying the awesome view.

The Imperial Palace glistened on the hill above the capital city. The government buildings loomed above the little people. Beyond the city, white-capped mountains seemed to go on forever until they vanished on the horizon.

She noticed another monument positioned across the city. It resembled an enormous spike shooting into the heavens. The setting sun came to rest on the tip. "Moon monument...moon throne..." She studied the

golden red spike monument. "Oh, that must be the Monument of the Sun. And if the Moon monument has breasts then the Sun monument..." She blushed deep red, cupping a hand over mouth in sudden realization. "It's a...penis!" She cupped both hands over her mouth, trying to keep the giggles in. Snorts escaped when the threatened giggles morphed into laughter almost right away. Her head fell back and she surrendered to hilarity, hugging her sides with both arms.

It did no good whatsoever to remind herself that human males had also been erecting monuments to themselves for thousands of years, or that her mother had once said some men really did deserve monuments. She almost gagged when the thought occurred to her that maybe Mom was thinking of Dad when she said that. "No! No! I was an immaculate conception!"

Shoppers and other pedestrians stared up at the monument. None of them noticed Delano sprinting across the open marketplace, right over parked hover-vehicles and through merchants' stands. Crates of fruit and handmade baskets went flying. Two speeding vehicles smashed into each other with a shrieking crash. The safety straps grabbed the drivers who remained transfixed by the human female climbing the ziggurat.

Adrenaline throbbed in Delano's veins. He sprinted up the stairs which had been built thousands of years before lifts were invented. His thoughts battled each other - one sick with the image of Junior falling and the other dying with the image of Olivia's face when she learned he'd failed to protect their baby.

Delano charged right through the door at the top, saw Junior sitting in the window dangling her legs, and grabbed her with such force that they both fell to the floor. He held her tight, gasping for air. "Oh, God, oh, God."

"Gee, Dad, I didn't know you were religious. What's wrong?"

Rage flooded Delano's body. "What's wrong?" He jumped up and jerked her up too, gripping her shoulders, nose to nose. "You climbed up the outside of a ziggurat!"

"Yeah, and it was so crackling! Did you know the Monument to the Sun is a penis?"

"Rowan!" Delano gave her a shake. "You might've been killed!"

"If I only had a credit for every time Mom said the exact same thing..."

"Rowan!" Another hard shake, but then he remembered something about how the parent is never, ever to shake the baby. That doubled shame up with his rage until he was a volcano.

"But, Dad, you're into free climbing too."

"Yes, but... That's...different. That's me. And you are my daughter! Never do it again!"

Junior glanced out the window. She obviously didn't know and didn't care about the risk factor or his parental angst. "Ooo...kay..."

"Come." Delano dragged her out by the elbow. There was no way he was letting her regain control of her own feet. "Maybe I should put you back on the ADHD meds."

"You know, all this freaking out can't be good for your health. Maybe you should meditate when we get back to the apartment. Mom always ate chocolate. She..."

"Silence!"

Naana and a large security team waited for them outside the door at the bottom of the Monument to the Moon. Quite a crowd gathered to gawk at the red-haired human female who had climbed their most sacred temple - and survived.

The crowd parted like the Red Sea the instant Delano's foot hit the second step, errant daughter in hand.

Admiral Park strode through the path towards them. "Has my granddaughter suffered injury?"

All the blood rushed into Delano's face, but there wasn't time to smuggle his obnoxious offspring away before his honorary father could see what a failure he was at controlling her.

Admiral Park snapped to a halt.

Junior bowed and, with great reverence, said, "Ch'um popgetsumida, Haba."

Delano's jaw dropped and he looked at his daughter, and then at Park's noble face.

Junior pulled her arm out of his astonished grasp and pressed palms together in traditional greeting.

"Welcome, My Granddaughter," said Admiral Park in English. He patted her head once in the traditional way and noticed Delano's expression. "Is something wrong, My Son?"

"Uh, uh, I...I didn't realize she could speak Menelaen already." *And I had no idea she knew the proper form of greeting one's grandparent!*

"All space-brats are good with languages, Haba," Junior told her adopted grandfather.

"Space...brats?" Park's expression mixed curiosity with amusement.

"Oh, that's what humans call people who are born and raised on starships."

"Ah. Excellent. Come, My Granddaughter. It is time for the evening meal." Park motioned for her to fall into step and glanced back at Delano. "Are you coming?"

Delano finally managed to lift his jaw back into place, and he followed.

Park patted Junior's hand. "Now, then, my dear, if you go about climbing religious buildings, people may believe you divine."

Junior laughed, but Park did not.

Horror rushed into Delano's lungs and he looked at her hair. *Red...oh, God!*

Thousands of lightyears away, Olivia stood before her window watching rocks floating by the backdrop of stars.

The Maverick entered the Jemison Asteroid Field.

Olivia stroked Fluffy curled on her shoulder against her neck.

A white coffee cup sat upon a small table. Next to it, a hologram of Edward and Junior grew up from the base of a com-scanner. They stood, smiling, upon the peak of El Capitan together, their climbing ropes looped around their shoulders.

She sighed, elbow cupped in the other hand. She didn't really see the stars. She saw beyond them. *Those two were enough trouble separately. What kind of trouble will they find together? Without me there to referee?*

The door chimed and Fluffy flew to her hiding place above the recycle unit. She focused on the door, no doubt plotting revenge on the evil chime.

Olivia didn't turn around. "Come in."

Sachi entered from the Bridge. "Captain."

"Did you read it?"

"Yes. I've found it impossible to trace the source of Captain Delano's communiqué' without violating the Nebo Armistice. With United Fleet Intelligence, it shouldn't be difficult to track someone of Delano's importance within the Empire. However, we don't possess that clearance level."

"Understood." Olivia faced her. "Speak frankly. Is this a ploy to capture the Maverick?"

"Unlikely." Sachi clasped hands behind her back. "The Maverick is a deep space starship two decades old. Menelaen battleships are far more advanced. Furthermore, none of the crew has any knowledge the Menelaens couldn't more easily obtain elsewhere."

"Just say it, Sachi."

"Edward has his daughter, but he wants his wife back as well." Sachi approached, handing her the data-scanner. "This communiqué is addressed to 'Captain Olivia Delano.' He referred to you that way when we rescued Junior as well. You've read my report. You know he said 'if' you chose to return to the Maverick. He intended to convince you to stay with him. In his mind, he's still married to you."

"After all these years..." Olivia winced a bit, pretending to read the message again. She couldn't keep her gaze off 'Delano,' however. She remembered wanting to take her husband's name, even though it was an archaic tradition. And she remembered Edward growling 'Mrs. Delano' whenever he landed her in bed.

"As First Officer and Chief of Security, I must inquire of your intentions." Sachi paused. "Captain Delano has invited you to visit Denahi, a planetary system of which he will soon be viceroy. He has assured safe passage for the Maverick, but he intends for you to remain there as his queen."

"I will not break my oath to the United Fleet, violate the Nebo Armistice, or endanger this crew, Sachi."

"Even for Junior?"

"I will not be baited into Edward's fantasy. Junior is an Alliance citizen. We will remain ready to retrieve her. That is all."

"Indefinitely?"

"Until her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. She wanted to train as a pilot at the United Fleet Academy. I know I've had my doubts she could pass entrance exams, but that was her last expressed desire for her own future and we will honor it."

“Understood.”

“Dismissed.”

Satchi turned for the Bridge, but paused before internal sensors could open the door for her. “Captain...she will come home.” She looked over her shoulder. “She is her mother’s daughter.”

“By that you mean ‘stubborn as hell.’” Olivia harrumphed, just like Isaiah.

Satchi smiled a bit and proceeded to the Bridge.

# Chapter 12

The morning after arriving on Menelae, Junior ran down the silver staircase with a white scarf in her hand. "Dad!"

Delano passed near the double-glass doors. "What's wrong?"

"Dad..." Junior waved the scarf in her father's face "...you don't really expect me to wear this. Do you?"

"Rowan, you're the only redhead on the planet. It's a security risk for you to run around Kursk with your curls flying."

"Ooooh, geeeeezzz." Junior groaned, spun around, flung the scarf, and sent her hands to her hips. "I can't believe this! Mom never told me what to wear."

"Really?" Delano sent his hands to hips to. "You've never visited a world which required you to dress a certain way to blend in with the population or to not insult your hosts?"

Junior pressed her lips into a frown. "Well..."

Delano accepted the scarf from Naana and held it up. "Will you do it for your old man?"

"You're not old, Dad, just neurotic." Junior grabbed the scarf. "What are you doing today anyway?"

"I've delivered my security report. Now, I'm in negotiations for the transfer of power on Denahi."

"Take me with you." Junior didn't bother to stop the whine.

"No." Delano strode through the doors.

"Mom would take me with her."

"You're too smart to expect me to really believe you." Delano said as the doors closed after him.

Junior groaned and trudged back up the stairs.

Back in her dressing room, Junior avoided the mirror while Naana twisted her hair into a bun. "I can do the rest." She took the

headcovering and draped it over her head, then twisted the ends and wound the up above her forehead. She wound the twisted ends around her head and back to the nape of her neck where she tied it. "This is the traditional Israeli way. Chef Bot showed me a picture."

Her trousers and blouse were white and airy, like cotton. Her long, vested tunic and knee-high boots were of a thick, gray fabric, embroidered with silver. She turned to see Naana and her commando-nannies similarly attired. "I think we're ready to hit the town."

And off they went.

The carefully planned outing included all the government buildings and a large park filled with animals, including holy birds called 'the bennu.' They resembled Japanese cranes, white with long, yellow feathers on the tops of their heads and long, thin legs. Imperial guards stood watch over them and people left offerings of grain and fruit for them. She watched for a while, marveling at their graceful steps through the lily-covered pond.

Afterwards, a festival drew Junior's attention and Naana reluctantly allowed the adventure.

A parade of silver and gold flags, tall poles covered in feathers, and dancers leaping about in bennu costumes played through the streets of Kursk. Naana found an observation point on the roof of a small, open-air restaurant. The roof served as a dining area, as well, full of tables and chairs and people craning their necks to see the festivities below.

Junior leaned on the railing, invigorated by the cheerful music of pipes and drums. "What part does the bennu bird play in your religion?"

"The bennu birds are mere representatives of the Holy Bennu," said Naana at her side.

The other commando-nannies flanked them, appearing casual while keeping watch.

"The first Holy Bennu was sent to us over six thousand years ago. The male population of the time enslaved the females through telepathic bonding. Without the balance of feminine power, Menelae bogged itself down in constant warfare. A great firestorm swept across the Plains of Pellosia towards a village. The Holy Bennu rose from the mountains and flew down. She gathered the women and children under her wings. She saved them all, but died as result. According to Sacred Law, she will be resurrected as a beautiful red-haired princess who will herald the coming of the Celestial Ra and a new golden age."



"Oh, like the phoenix myths on Earth."

"The Age of Enlightenment followed the death of the First Holy Bennu. The Courtship Rites were laid down to protect women from coerced marriages, as well as ensure our role as equals in religion and government. The Holy Bennu is patron of all women and children and a symbol of feminine power and beauty to men. All Menelaens revere the Holy Bennu. Although..."

"Although what?"

"Our various religions interpret the ancient texts concerning the Holy Bennu differently."

"Most religions have several interpretations of sacred texts."

Naana's burgundy eyes flickered, but she didn't comment on the statement. "Those who worship the Sun and the Moon believe the first Holy Bennu was ripped from the heart of the First Ra at the beginning of time. Only by the two rejoining will balance be restored to Menelae. No doubt, this myth rose from the male's incompleteness without the female."

"Ra?"

"They believe the First Ra fathered the Imperial Family. Therefore, the ra symbolize imperial power. Only the Imperial Family is permitted to use any representation of ra. The First Ra was said to be a giant reptile which flew."

"A dragon! Wow, this is so crackling! There are so many similarities between Menelaen mythology and Earth mythology."

Naana looked upon the dancers, soaring about the streets in their white feathered costumes. "The Incarnate Ra is wholly fixed on joining with the Holy Bennu, for all he desires is bound up in her wings."

Junior propped chin in hand, elbow on railing. "How romantic."

Normally sedate Naana gasped. "The Incarnate Ra must never bond with the Holy Bennu! The union of religious and political powers on the Throne would be too great. The Incarnate Ra would plunge our society into a Dark Age from which it would never recover."

Junior lifted her chin. "I'm sorry. I thought we were still talking about mythology."

Naana's expression softened. "Please forgive my outburst, Lady Rowan."

"It's okay. I grew up in deep space. Yours isn't the first religion I've stumbled over. I don't always engage my brain before I open my

mouth." Junior decided it was best to shut-up then and settled her chin back into hand to watch the parade.

Banners fluttered from poles thrusting out from every window of the buildings lining the streets. The silver banners featured stylized white bennu birds. A few red banners fluttered in between them and upon these banners were embroidered the ra – dragons – in gold.

Junior wanted to ask if the festival was an annual event and if the ra got his own, but she didn't want to upset Naana either. Then, a glorious scent wafted through the air and captured her nose. "Mmm, food!" Twirling around, she sprinted off, through the crowd and over the roof's half wall.

Landing on her feet, she took off running.

"Lady Rowan!" Naana's shout was lost in the rumble of conversation, dancing feet, and music.

Rounding a corner, Junior found herself in a food court, lined with stalls offering various entrees and desserts. Except for the cooks, it was largely empty. Nearly everyone was at the parade. She followed her nose to a stall with roasted eel-like creatures on a stick. "Oh, no. Seafood. I'm allergic to seafood."

"May I find something else to your liking, My Lady?"

Junior spun around to see Kaliban suddenly at her side. "Uh...I...I don't know. You're...you're Lord Kaliban, right?"

"Yes, Kaliban to you alone." He bowed at the neck, full lips curling into a charming smile. His gray eyes shone. Maybe it was the sunlight. "Please allow me the opportunity to prove my worth."

"Your...what?"

A blurring, rushing image, a feeling like a kiss, deep, and his fingers reached into her hair. A warm cloud of goodness embraced her.

The kiss was real.

"What are you doing?" She pushed his chin. "I don't want to..."

"You will love me." His mouth covered hers again.

A wave of pleasure swept over her and everything but him vanished in comprehension.

But, then, another feeling, faraway at first and then suddenly it was a forceful rush.

Junior opened her eyes on Kaliban slammed into a stone pillar by an invisible force. Shock dropped her jaw.

Kaliban rolled instantly back onto his feet and paced out like a caged lion. "My brother is alive! Where is he?"

"Your brother? I..." A surge of panic rushed through Junior.

"I will kill him!" Kaliban turned and paced the other direction, face red and snarled. "If you do not wish to suffer the Pain of Severance, you will not complete the Marital Bond with him!"

"Lady Rowan!" Naana sprang out of nowhere, grabbed her by both arms, and pushed her back.

"Naana?" Junior heard metal sliding against metal.

Beling landed before Kaliban with sword raised. "Lord Delano is not accepting applications for the Courtship Rites on behalf of Lady Rowan."

"Irrelevant!" Kaliban's hand rested on his own sword hilt. "Lady Rowan greeted me without hesitation. She accepted my kiss and found me worthy."

Alarmed, Naana peered into her face. "Milady, are you all right?"

"Well, yeah. What's going on?"

"Milady, I'm afraid I must ask if you wish to enter the Courtship Rites with Lord Kaliban?"

"Um..." Junior peered over her shoulder at Kaliban's fierce face "...no."

Naana did not move her body from blocking Kaliban's access. "Lady Rowan has rejected you. Under Sacred Law, you must withdraw."

"I am the Incarnate Ra! I will not be denied what is rightfully mine!" Kaliban jerked on his sword hilt, but the commando-nannies' swords lowered to point at his chest. He shoved the hilt back into place. "Lady Rowan is human. She does not comprehend, but she soon will. Captain Delano will have no grounds to dispute my claim then." He did an about-face and strode away, towards a waiting open-seater. Leaping in, he sped away in the hover-vehicle and disappeared around a far building.

"This does not bode well," said Beling, lowering her sword. "How could he have sensed Lady Rowan's presence without the Courtship Rites already underway?"

Naana released her. "He must possess greater ability than the average male. Talya, research his family lineage and learn if he carries the trait."

"Yes, Commander."

"Commander?" Seeing their fierce looks, Junior decided not to press further. "You people are really freaking me out. I want to go back to the apartment now."

"Yes, we must keep you safely indoors while on Menelae." Naana stooped to fetch the white head covering and quickly wrapped it back around Junior's red hair.

Junior hadn't noticed the head covering had been removed.

At dinner, Junior listened to her father read the list of misadventures.

"Juggled the Sacred Orb of the Moon."

"Actually, I was only doing this little trick Ret taught me, running it up and down my arms. I didn't break it!"

Delano glanced. "Mm-hmm, fell in the Treasury Building fountain."

"I wanted to see the star-crystals on the bottom and I slipped!"

"Rendered two Imperial Guards unconscious."

"Do you know how big the Scepter of the Sun is? About the size of a small tree! I wanted a closer look at the etchings, so I picked it up. Naana told me it wasn't permitted, so I swung it around to put it back and forgot the guards were standing right behind me." Junior smacked her hands together. "Wham!" She giggled. "Of course, I feel badly they got hurt, but it was kind of funny when you think about it."

"I never liked Imperial Guards anyway." Delano tossed aside the datapad. "This is nothing in comparison to your encounter with Lord Kaliban."

Junior curled a nostril. "He is quite possibly the weirdest guy I've ever met. Cute, but, geez, definitely not worth the trouble."

"I'm glad to hear you say it." Delano picked up a fork. "As long as we're on Menelae, you'll stay indoors unless you're with me."

"What? The jerkwad goes free and I'm getting locked up? How archaic! Mom would launch right through the hull."

Stabbing some salad, Delano released a groan. "I know and I'm sorry, but... Listen, it's only for two more days. You'll have full access to the Holographic Chamber in the meantime. I'll be in charge of security on Denahi. You'll have complete freedom as soon as we arrive."

"When do I get to see the Imperial Archives?"

"Hmmm?" Delano took a bite of salad.

"I want to see the Archives before we leave."

Delano chewed and swallowed. "Not going to happen."

"Why not?" Junior's face tensed.

"The Archives are only for individuals with a Level Six Clearance or better."

"Do you have that?"

"Yes."

"Then, take me with you." Junior could see the tension in his face too.

"I can go, but I cannot take you with me."

"But, Dad, I need to find evidence, so we can clear your name and go home to Mom." Junior's stomach knotted.

"I've searched the Archives and every other Intelligence gathering organization in the Empire. There's nothing useful to be found, nothing admissible to a United Fleet court martial trial."

"Dad..." Junior whined.

"I've created a new life for our family on Denahi. Once we're settled, we'll bring your mother across the DMZ. Everything will be all right."

"But, Mom would never..." Junior started to shake her head.

"I don't want you consumed by the past. Be young. Have fun. Naana will arrange for the dressmaker to come here for a personal fitting. You will soon be a princess and you must dress the part."

"Is there anything in the Archives you'd rather I not see?" Junior asked in an accusatory tone.

"Yes," said Delano without hesitation. "The Archives contain a complete record of the War, including all of its atrocities. You're too young for it."

"I'm not going to have nightmares, for crying out loud! Are you hiding something bad you did from me?"

"No, but there are things about the War you're not mature enough to cope with yet."

"And since you'll always think of me as your little girl..." Junior sighed most dramatically.

"Enough." Delano's voice hinged between impatience and anger.

At bedtime, Junior fell asleep plotting. In less than three days, they would depart for the Denahi System and if Dad didn't budge by then

she'd lose her opportunity to search the Imperial Archives. Staring up at the bare white ceiling above her, she decided to give him one more day to be flexible and understanding. She rolled over and closed her eyes. Minutes later she slept and about a half hour later, she entered REM sleep.

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Dreamtime.

The sensation was familiar, but the environment was not. Junior found herself in the grand ball room of a glittering palace. Mirrors reflected the light of a thousand candles raised high on golden circles and in wall sconces. The music drew her attention around to the couples waltzing in rich fabrics, swishing and twirling. Her first impulse was to leave before her mother found out. The last time she'd visited a place so opulent she accidentally knocked over a statue which had crashed into a mirror, shattering it and setting off security alarms which brought rain down from fire sprinklers.

The very proper British governor of the New Gawain Colony absolutely forbade her mother from bringing her again.

"Princess Rowan."

Junior turned to see Kaliban standing there in a green jacket emblazoned with a golden dragon. "I'm not a princess, just the captain's brat. What is this place?"

"According to the cultural database, this is the Palace of Versailles on Earth. I hoped a human dreamscape might please you."

"Oh, well..." she shrugged "...I've only ever been to Earth twice in my life and never to France."

"Your beauty outshines the stars." Kaliban brought her fingertips to his lips.

"Beauty?" Junior looked down to see a full skirt heavy with gold embroidery. That's when she noticed the smooth bodice cinching in her waist and boosting up her... "Cleavage!" She stumbled back a couple of steps, gaping at her own chest.

Kaliban caught her by the elbow or she might've gone down.

Pressing hand to tummy, she stared at the tops of her own small breasts. "Whoa, cleavage! I never knew I had it in me."

"You are such an innocent." Kaliban ran the back of his fingers down her bare arms. "I have never had the pleasure of a virgin before."

"Big shock there." Junior let the sarcasm fly.

"It amazes me how the gods could invest so much power in one so simple."

"Who?" Junior looked behind her, but saw only the dancers who paid no attention.

Kaliban's hand slipped around her waist and he pulled her into his embrace, firmly against his body.

"Excuse me, but did we already go on a first date and I've forgotten about it?"

"Date?" That's a human courtship rite. It is irrelevant here."

"Except maybe to get to know each other before we start pressing our bodies together." Junior pushed at his chest, but he didn't loosen his grip.

"Once our bond is complete, I will know all there is to know about you." Kaliban swirled his fingers around her cheek. "I doubt I will find anything significant in any case."

Pulling back her chin, Junior avoided his first kiss by catching his mouth in her hand. "Such sentiment gives me such warm fuzzies all over."

"Shall we dance?"

She glanced at the swirling skirts. "I don't know how to dance like that."

"This is Dreamtime. We can do anything we want here."

"Dreamtime?" Junior jerked in his arms and looked around. "Then, where is Ariez?"

"You will not speak that name here!" Rage shook through him. "I absolutely forbid you to speak his name!"

"Oooh, I'm shakin'." Junior set her face like stone. "Schmutz-butt."

Kaliban swirled his hand around her cheek again and took her chin in hand. "Draw together with me and I will fill you with such pleasure." His mouth came over hers. *I will cleanse your heart of all memory and fill you with my truth.*

Anger burned up from Junior's stomach, causing her no harm. It burst forth from her spirit and flashed over Kaliban in yellow and orange fire.

Shrieking, he stumbled back, face over hands and snuffed the fire, but he could not heal himself. He lifted glaring eyes at her. "You will love me." He stretched forth a hand, swirling fingers towards her face.

This time the intoxicating effects overwhelmed her and covered her anger in a cool mist. His body pressed against hers and she comprehended only his affection.

"Usurper!" Ariez rammed into Kaliban, rammed him hard into the marble floor.

The sheer force of their collision threw Junior back against a familiar tree trunk. She glanced up at their tree house, swathed in darkness.

Kaliban spun to his side, back to his feet, and drew a gray sword out of nothingness. He swung his blade and smashed it down on Ariez's sword.

Junior's butt hit the cold, wet moss, fallen by shock.

The glittering palace evaporated all around them as Ariez defended all he had created for her, all she'd accepted in the freedom of her own heart.

Digging her fingers and toes into the bark, she climbed up into the lower platform of their tree house.

Ariez and Kaliban battled at blinding speed, matching every attack with equal force.

"She has rejected you!" Ariez screamed.

"There are no witnesses!"

A full moon illuminated the combatants moving into the trees. Their blades flashed, growing into their hands and becoming claws.

Ariez emerged dark purple and gold in a glimpse of moonlight. A ra-a dragon!

Kaliban morphed into some sort of cat, heavily muscled and black. The two vanished into the forest. Their screams of rage, clashes, and the cracking of trees filled the night.

A great roar drew her attention to the far East and grew into a terrible wind rushing through. Torrents of rain chased it, swallowing the forest in tsunami. The water and wind rushed all around her tree, but never touched it. The wind wafted over her a gentle breeze, the rain a light mist.

"This has got to be the weirdest dream I've ever had in my whole entire life." Junior gripped the edge of the platform, focused on the battle.



Whether minutes or seconds passed, she could not tell. The dark clouds lifted and vanished. The waters receded and the splintered trees grew back, the lush, green ferns returned, and everything became as it was before. Even the night withdrew until a new day's sunshine reached for her in warmth.

Ariez stumbled into the clearing, his natural self again, and collapsed among the mosses and fallen leaves.

Junior grabbed a rope and swung down. She ran and fell to the ground with him.

"Ariez?" She pulled him into her lap and pushed hair from his bloodied temple. His black clothing diminished into his usual beige shirt and brown pants. She noticed her own attire had become her simple beige dress too. Everything was as it had been before in their Dreamtime together. "You saved me."

"No." Ariez drew a deep, cleansing breath. "You saved me." He cupped her hand to his face and the blood retreated. The wounds vanished, clearing his skin. "I couldn't intervene until you rejected him."

"You wanted to kill Kaliban, but you didn't."

"He's my brother." Ariez ran his fingers down her temple. "The son of my father, but not my mother. He believes our father abandoned him when I was born to care only for me."

"You're exhausted." Junior took his hand and rested it warmly within her own. "Sleep deeply. I'll keep watch." She smoothed fingertips over his face and kissed his nose. "Sleep."

Ariez relaxed in complete trust, deep unconsciousness restoring his spirit.

She wanted a blanket and one appeared. She tucked it around them and held his head in her arm, face to her neck. "I love you."

# Chapter 13

Junior cradled a white teacup in her hands, sitting to her breakfast table with the window drawn back. The dawn warmed her, but she knew only her own chaotic emotions.

"Milady, are you all right?" Naana brought a fresh glass of chilled water.

"Hmm? Oh...fine." Junior shook her head. She reviewed her memories again, but the emotions inside her still did not match up with them. Nothing made sense. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, of course."

"And Dad's all right." Junior sighed. "Well, except for his delusion about convincing Mom to come back to him while he's a Menelaen warlord."

Lali walked in with a new white dress draped over her arms. "Comman...uh, Naana, I have been informed Lord Kaliban was admitted to the medical facility with burns and extensive neural trauma during the night. He almost died."

Naana's lips tensed into a thin, white line. "I wasn't aware of this." Her tense gaze shifted to Junior. "Milady, did you happen to dream of Lord Kaliban last night?"

"Kaliban?" Junior studied her demeanor. *Who the hell is Kaliban?* "Why dream about him?"

"If you're romantically interested in him, you might."

"Romantically...no." Junior shook her hand. "I'm not romantically interested in anyone right now."

Alarm passed through Naana. "What about your human...what is the word? Boyfriend?"

"Uh...well, besides him." Junior nodded, lifting glass to lips. "I thought you meant only Menelaens." *I have a human boyfriend?*

Naana did not appear convinced.

"Perhaps, Kaliban attempted to initiate the Courtship Rites, but was defeated in a Challenge of Worth by another rival who has yet to present his suit." Lali's pale blue eyes widened at the nanny.

"Perhaps."

"Or, he could have suffered the defeat while attempting to copulate with another female."

"No," said Naana. "Lord Kaliban copulates with many females, but he would never initiate the Courtship Rites with a female who was not politically advantageous to him."

"Why?" Junior knew her father had deleted sex education from her curriculum, but that didn't mean she couldn't pry info from the Nanny Brigade.

"Kaliban needs to sire offspring by a powerful female in order to be accepted as Princess Ara's heir."

"So?"

Naana hesitated, as though she assumed Junior understood. "Only bonded couples can produce children."

"Why?"

"Because the..." Naana paused, clearly uncertain if she was stating the obvious. "The husband awakens the wife's fertility cycle through the Marital Bond. Likewise, the wife sustains the pregnancy. Pregnancy cannot be achieved or sustained without telepathic bonding."

"Oh." Junior turned back to her water glass. "That's why those human officers lost their babies after the Menelaens raped them."

Lali refilled the water glass. "Those human mothers could not provide their unborn children with telepathic reassurance, but some believe..."

A stern look from Naana stopped her.

Movement on the landing ramp caught Junior's attention and she stood for a better view. "Dad's leaving for the day already?" Not waiting for a reply, she ran out and hiked up her long, white skirts coming down the stairs. "Dad! Where are you going?" She caught him by the elbow out on the landing ramp.

"Central command."

"May I come?"

"No."

"Mom..."

Delano groaned. "That ploy hasn't worked yet. Why do you keep trying?"

"Give me a minute. I'll think of something new." Junior shrugged.

"You would get bored and cause trouble." Delano pulled out of her grasp and strode for his red sport coup.

Junior followed. "Then, drop me off at the Imperial Archives on the way! Get me through security and I'll be fine."

"No." Delano took her hand from his elbow. "I've told you..."

"But, Dad..."

"We've already discussed this. There's no chance of a fair trial with Jackson commanding the Defensive Fleet."

"Then, we can find evidence to bring charges against him! There's got to be something!"

"Rowan, I know you want our family back together. I do too. And it will be. But, you must understand if I cross the DMZ, I will be imprisoned. Our family will not be together. The only way we can be together is on Denahi."

"Dad..."

"Do you understand?"

"I understand what you're saying." *I understand you believe it's true, but I know it's not.*

"You're being fitted for your new dress today. We have our audience with the Empress tomorrow."

"I hate dresses."

"You can leave the purchase to Naana, then, and spend your credit allowance on something you really want. Our family will be together again by Christmas." Delano glanced back before disappearing. "I promise. Run along now."

Junior watched him board his red sportcoup. "'Our family will be together again by Christmas,'" she repeated her father's words in a whisper. She was his little princess and he believed her mother would soon be his willing queen.

Dad wasn't going to let her into the Imperial Archives.

"And they say teenagers are out of touch with reality." Junior didn't watch him speed away, but walked back into the upper foyer, towards the sweeping staircase.

Despair like a dark cloud filled her heart, but even as it did a rush of illogical good feelings chased it away. The staircase before her feet seemed to float around. Drawing a breath, she grabbed the rail and settled down on the bottom stop. The darkness and the mist of euphoria evaporated together. She dropped her hand.

"Lady Rowan, are you all right?"

Junior looked up at the young woman approaching. "Palin?" She tried to remember how she'd gotten into the foyer. "Where's Talya?"

"I am here." Talya entered from a far doorway while Palin helped her stand.

"Oh, I've never seen you two apart. Well, Dad wants me to buy a dress today for meeting the Empress tomorrow."

"We have the perfect dressmaker!" Palin lit up, clasping hands together. "She's waiting to take your measurements."

"And I will do your hair, Milady," said Talya, just as excited. "Palin, we must choose a gown which will compliment the tiara Captain Delano ordered."

"Yes, of course."

"And do not allow your Hopper to chew it up."

"My Hopper does not..."

Junior glanced at them on either side, leading her up the stairs, chattering excitedly. She was glad they didn't see her little dizzy spell. Bad enough having everyone know she had ADHD and a small chest.

Night came and Junior skipped her usual four hours of sleep. She waited in bed for a half hour, until she was sure the guards had been lulled into a false sense of security. Then, she reached for a device on her belt and sat up. She flipped open the micro-computer, checked it, and then tucked it away again.

Shoving back the covers, she slid her legs out of bed and stood in the starlight. The speeding traffic lights of the city blocked most of the stars, but she could just make out a small, triangular view of them. She stood transfixed a few seconds, thoughts tumbling back over what Naana had said about Kaliban. Whoever he was, all memory of him was gone. *Something's happening to me.*

A soft whisper, a male voice.

Junior searched the air. Nothing. No. There was something just out of reach. Or someone. She reached forth her hand as though she could touch whatever it was or...whoever...it was. *I'm losing my mind.* She took her hand back and pressed it to lips. *But, I can't lose myself. I can't let Mom down.*

Stepping up onto her bed, she popped the ceiling vent. She climbed inside and pulled it closed after her. The energy beams at the far ends encircled their private rooms, but she wasn't sneaking out that way. She crawled towards her father's rooms.

Delano worked in his office. He rarely slept more than six hours a night.

*Ah, genetics.* Junior could see him as she crawled silently in the shaft above his head. She peered at his computer screen.

Speaking Menelaen came almost automatically, but reading it was proving to be much more challenging. Though it resembled Korean with lots of little loops, the letters didn't come close to making the same sounds. She crawled on.

Junior came to the dark dining room. Popping the vent, she dropped silently to the floor and replaced it. Her father kept a computer interface hidden in the wall. She had felt it every evening, coming and going from dinner. She ran her fingertips along the wall until she came to the hum.

Junior lowered the cover panel and went to work. "Computer, scan and isolate my paternal DNA."

"Working." The male computer voice said. "Complete."

"List all security codes cleared by this DNA scan."

"Working."

Junior delighted in the full list on the screen. She took out her micro-computer and entered the codes into it. She shut down the computer and closed the panel.

Next, she paid a visit to her father's closet and clad herself in his complete uniform, full helmet down over her face. With her height, face and red hair completely covered, she was a dead ringer for her Star Captain Edward Delano.

Armed with her father's DNA codes, she walked right out the door and down the corridor. The guards even bowed.

Junior knew she didn't have much time. Her father need only go for a midnight stroll outside his door for her escapade to be discovered.

She found her father's red sport coup nearest the door on the landing pad. Once his secret code was entered, she was able to activate thrusters and move it silently away from the security monitors. Another button tap and the roof peeled back. *Open cockpit!* She jumped into the driver's seat and fired up the engine.

"Time to make like a baby and head on out! Wooo-hooo! I mean, wahh-waaah!" Away into the night she sped, feeling the glorious wind in her face. "Wah-ha-hoooo!!!" She laughed, the thrill deep in her chest. She almost forgot herself, spinning around corners, not resisting a few loop-de-loops, terrorizing the more dignified Menelaens. "Go, Junior, go Junior, go Junior...Wwoooo-hooooo!!! Time to get dirty, time to get fast!"

Too soon for all the fun she was having, Junior found the Archives building, parked next to a prelate from some Southern province, and killed the engine. "Whew!" She smoothed her hand over the dashboard. "Well, I know what I want for my birthday now." She hurdled the side, red cape swirling after.

Inside, the stoic librarian wore a skirted suit rather like a priest from Grandma's church. Once he received her DNA code, he was extremely helpful. He led her through dozens of aisles filled with thousands of gleaming silver data-disks and directed her to a computer.

Minutes later, hunched over a monitor, Junior felt tension. She winced and her shoulder muscles cinched up. She popped the microchip out of her assigned computer and into her mouth, swallowing. Six Menelaens strode from one end of the library and six more from the other. *Ooh, busted.* She slowly stood and faced them.

"Remain where you are," One said as they surrounded her. "Lord Delano will arrive soon."

Junior reached up and pulled the helmet from her head.

The Menelaens' eyes all widened when her red hair tumbled out. Some of them gasped. One of them in the back even went to his knees and covered his face.

*Whoa! I know Dad scares some people, but this is ridiculous!*

A second later, a terrible bang announced Captain Delano striding through the formal doors. Menelaens backed out of his way. His long red cape billowed and his extra helmet covered his face. He strode into the circle around his daughter and stopped. He put his hands upon his

hips. His red cape spread out, making him look three times larger than he really was.

Junior knew he was very angry, but he'd get over it.

Mom always did.

"Librarian, I'll take my daughter into custody now. As I've informed many others, human children mature much more slowly than Menelaen children. Lady

Rowan is still a child and I will deal with her personally."

"Please, do not be angry with Lady Rowan," said the librarian, trembling.

"The fault is entirely my own. If I had been more astute, I would have recognized her immediately and provided a full tour of the Archives...uh, with refreshments, of course."

"Got any cookies?" Junior tried to loosen the tension.

"Uh...yes...as a matter of..." The librarian tried to reply.

"Silence!" Delano's helmeted head jerked at him.

The librarian shook visibly. "If...if Her Holiness desired access to the Imperial

Archives, it must have been the will of the Sun and the Moon." He moved in closer and placed himself between her and her father. "I accept full responsibility for failing to assist Her Holiness. Please release Her Holiness into Imperial Protection and punish me instead."

Delano shoved the librarian aside and grabbed his daughter's arm. He jerked her after him and dragged her away at a furious rate.

Several sharp gasps rose up from the other Menelaens.

A minute later, Delano whipped around the skyscrapers in his larger transport with security guards in the back and daughter beside him.

"The librarian wasn't mad. Why are you?"

"The librarian is not the Orachi!" Delano wrenched the yoke to the right, narrowly missing a basilio statue. Another sharp turn and a Neboan diplomat's tentacles flew out when he just missed scraping vents.

"Who are the Orachi?"

"Secret police."

"Ooh, Gestapo."



"In this culture, you are considered an adult and be prosecuted as one under their law! There be nothing I could do to protect you!"

"Dad..."

"Silence!"

*Jerkwad.*

*What is happening? A young man's voice.*

Junior looked into the backseat to see who spoke to her, but Naana and the others were stone-faced and female. She decided to keep her mouth shut in any case.

A couple of minutes later, Delano dragged his daughter down the corridor to her private chambers.

Naana followed directly behind, along with two guards.

"Naana! Why did you permit my daughter to leave?" Delano shoved his daughter to her bedroom door and towered over the nanny, hands back on hips.

"She didn't know anything about this!" Junior defended, coming back to her nanny's side. "I told you I came here to find evidence to..."

"Enough!" Delano grabbed Naana by the neck and pinned her to the wall.

"No!" In a flash, Junior grabbed a pressure rifle from the guard next to her and slammed it over her father's head. She shoved her precious nanny behind her. "You will not touch her!"

Delano caught himself against the wall. He groped away, down the wall, his red cape catching in his office door and ripping.

Slam.

Junior handed the rifle back to the guard. Cupping a hand to her forehead, she groped for her own doorway. In the heat, a wave of euphoria came crashing over her too. She lost all feeling in her feet.

"My Lady?" Naana touched her shoulder.

"I...I...want to...be alone."

"Yes, My Lady."

Junior got inside the door and heard it close behind her. "Computer, lock the door." She grabbed for a nearby chair, but only felt the impact of the floor before everything went black.

Dreamtime.

Ariez turned to the sound of her weeping. His chest heaved and burned all at once. Their tree house loomed up before him, but she was not there. He ran deep into the forest, shoving evergreen branches and ferns out of the way, following the sound of her cries. He soon found her huddled beneath the gigantic roots of a tree. He fell to his knees and pulled her into his arms. "Shh, my darling, I'm here, I'm here."

She embraced him, resting her head on his shoulder. "I can't...find...our tree house."

"I know where it is." He held her face, smoothing the curls and tears away with his most tender touch. "Can you remember what happened in your Waking Moments?"

She only shook her head. "Something bad. Something very bad."

"I will cleanse your heart of this nightmare." Ariez ran his fingers through her hair, but the heat of his affection wasn't enough. "Everything will be all right. I love you."

The Marital Bond could not be completed in Dreamtime.

The great darkness which shrouded her heart required more energy to dispel than the memory of her human suitor, however. He could barely muster it with the strain of incompleteness. It would leave him ill when he woke.

"I want...to go...home." She sobbed.

"I am coming for you. We will be home soon, I promise." He could not abide her anguish and so intertwined his essence with hers. "Pellosia is beautiful, surrounded by snow-capped mountains and trees, and there's a lake. Have I told you of the lake?"

# Chapter 14

Junior awoke with dreams still lingering and dawn warming her face. Blue eyes shone upon her and fingertips stroked her ear.

*One more kiss.*

*Always with the kissing.* She smirked when his lips touched her nose. The need for water convinced her to lift face. When she did, all dreams vanished into forgetfulness.

Junior realized she was lying upon a soft carpeted floor inside a door, not in a bed. She reached for a chair and pulled herself into a sitting position. Beams of light drew her attention to the window.

Sunshine.

"Sunshine!" Junior gasped, scrambling back like a crab and knocking into a small table. "Stars! Where are the stars?" She whipped her head around at all the gray and white. This wasn't her quarters on the Maverick! "Mom?" She grabbed a chair and pulled herself up to shaky feet. "Mom?" She took a step.

The door slid open.

A woman stood there. She had black hair, burgundy eyes, and wore a burgundy dress. "Lady Rowan..."

*Menelaens! I've been kidnapped!*

"Lady Rowan, please..." The woman walked in as she backed into the doorframe.

Junior turned and sprinted down the corridor. "Mom!" Spinning into a wall turning a corner, she smashed into a table with glass objects on it. The shattering conjured up horrible, sickening feelings which were followed by a wave of euphoria until her very soul seemed to spin inside her. She grabbed her head in both hands. "Mommy!"

Many lightyears away, Olivia woke alone, breaths sharp. "Junior!"

Delano had jerked on his pants with the first crashing sound and was still pulling on his shirt when he dashed out the door. The ghost of his younger self smashing the shovel over his hated father's head chased him all the way down the hall.

Junior's screaming rattled his backbone. She stood against the wall, hands bloodied from the shattered glass, face red in hysterics, screaming. "Junior!" He grabbed her from behind and pulled her away from the shattered glass.

Naana dragged in an emergency medical android.

Delano fell back on his bottom, holding his daughter while she screamed and the android cleaned her up and healed her wounds.

"Mom." Junior said in a gasp. Her screams diminished and she spoke between sobs. "Mom...I want...my...mother."

"I know, I know," said Delano, pulling her into a cradle hold. "I want your mother too. We'll all be together soon, I promise."

"Mom...I want...my mom." Junior lifted her eyes to him and focused. She jerked in his arms. "Mom!" Her head whipped around. "Mom!"

Delano gripped her shoulders. "Look at me!"

She looked at him. Sheer terror.

"I'm sorry!" The words shot out of him. "I'm sorry," he said again, lowly.

Wild eyes.

"I'm sorry. I don't want to be a monster like my father. I don't want you to be afraid of me. I don't want to hurt your mother."

Junior blinked and steadied her breath. The terror evaporated. Seconds passed. "Dad?"

Delano hugged his little girl tight. "Yeah." His chest shook. "I'm your dad." He patted her back. "I will take care of you and protect you. That's what a dad's supposed to do." He stood and lifted her to her feet.

Naana stood near, the Kaiya Ranger who had humbled herself to a servant's task for the sake of his daughter.

"I'm sorry."

"I forgive you, Captain."

Junior's pinched eyes searched his soul. She touched his scabbed-over temple. "You're hurt. How did it happen?"

The horrific few seconds of the night before flashed through Delano's memory. *It was too traumatic for her to remember.* "I...was stupid. I...I tripped over my own..." ...past... "...feet."

Something bad had happened. Junior couldn't remember what it was. Memories filtered through the fog in her mind. She thanked God her father didn't insist on a full medical exam, but only first aid. Things were bad enough. In fact, he seemed afraid to talk at all and she couldn't imagine why. When she worried about it a weird euphoric feeling crept in and someone whispered in her head, but she couldn't understand what he said. *ADHD, narcolepsy, allergies, and now I'm hearing things too.*

By the time she finished breakfast, mostly in a daze, and walked back to her room, she remembered she had chosen to come to this place with her father and why. She remembered her life before coming to this place, but not much since.

Something bad had happened, but Dad avoided speaking of it. He wanted to buy her a new dress or some rock-climbing gear. They'd go climbing and scuba diving as soon as they stepped off the shuttle on Denahi, he said. Everything would be all right.

*Maybe I have a brain tumor or something.* Junior stared at the white gown in her dressing room afterwards. It had a silver belt and long, flowing sleeves, like all the others. *If only Isaiah was here. He always knew what to do and always kept my secrets.*

This was the day they were to be presented at court.

*What if I have a dizzy spell in the Imperial Presence?* Her cheeks burned and she wished she'd told Isaiah about the time she woke up in the lift. That's when it all started, as far as she could remember. She might die without ever getting Dad home to Mom, and Mom'd blame him for it. *I am such a freakin' mess.*

The woman in the burgundy dress walked in, carrying soft white boots. "Do these

please Your Ladyship?"

"Yes, thank you...Naana." *Or is she Beling?*

"Are you well? It is acceptable to decline an imperial summons for illness."

"Oh...I'm fine. I'm sorry. I guess I'm not as...grown-up...as I'd hoped." Breathe. *But, I have to grow up.*

Naana smiled softly. "My Lady, your wings are unfurling even now."

"Wings?" Junior fingered the silky dress. She waited until her nanny disappeared into the bathing chamber.

Looking over her shoulder to make certain Naana was out of sight; Junior lifted her hand and opened it to see the microchip in her hand. One precious memory she managed to hold on to. *Dad will never let me send this to Mom. I have to find a way to send it to her myself.* She heard the nanny returning and so tucked the tiny data-disk away.

Naana draped the dress over the rack and began helping her out of the nightgown.

Junior had gotten used to being helped with dressing and undressing. Menelaen styles for aristocratic women required help, unfortunately. Nearly every garment laced up the back. She eyed the dress. Of course, the neckline barely let her chin out, since it had to meet with her father's approval. Looking down at her small chest, she didn't see how wearing a more stylish neckline would've made any difference. "This dress is not at all attractive."

Naana showed surprise on her face. "Actually, Milady, I am surprised Lord Delano allowed you to keep this dress. The emphasis on your small breasts is so erotic."

"You're kidding me! Small breasts are considered erotic?" *Obviously, Dad missed that cultural difference!*

"Yes, of course. Large breasts might smother a newborn infant during nursing."

Junior didn't catch the incredulous tone in her voice. "Is breastfeeding what Menelaen males really think about when they ogle at a woman's chest?"

"A male is incomplete without a female and emasculated without offspring. Sacred Law holds the father solely responsible for the safety of a child. No man would risk siring offspring by a woman who might smother them."

"Uh...oookay."

Following a bath in her enormous marble-like tub, Palin, Talya, and Lali arrived to help Naana prepare her. Their clucking and fussing made

her a bit crazy. Half-way through, she started to shake from wanting to jump down from the dressing pedestal and run screaming away.

"Deep breath." Junior let Lali turn her to face the mirrors. She hated mirrors.

The deep breath caught in her throat, for she did not know the young lady staring back. She touched her cheeks, realizing for the first time many of her freckles had faded with childhood. Her lips were now a deep red. Tight curls had loosened into long waves. Swirls of silver crossed her forehead, disappeared into her titian hair, and fastened in the back. Loops of silver mixed in with her hair. The neckline was a high rolled collar. The sleeves flowed almost to her feet, revealing a silver inner sleeve which fitted snugly over the tops of her hands and between her long fingers.

Junior followed Naana and the others into the corridor.

Dad turned the corner talking to Commander Bo and his jaw dropped. He smiled in paternal pride. "I wish your mother could see you right now."

"I'm afraid to move my head or this thing's going to fall off." Junior pointed at the tiara.

"You look like a princess and that is exactly what you will soon be." He took her hand and placed it in the crook of his arm. "I'll take a picture to send to your mother."

"Dad." Junior lowered her voice as she walked along with her father. "Human males like large breasts, right?"

"Yes." Delano grumped. "Not me, of course. I think your mother is perfect."

"Well...you do realize..."

"What?"

"Mom's girls don't stand up by themselves anymore. It's my fault. She nursed me until I was over a year old; fourteen months, I think."

Delano chuckled softly and patted her hand. His face reddened. "You were a very lucky baby."

Minutes later, Junior craned her neck to peer out the window of their main transport vehicle. She watched the glistening ocean on the city's outskirts as they approached the white Imperial Palace at the foot of the mountains.

A household official greeted them on the landing pad. Guards escorted them into the gathering chamber to await their summons into the Imperial Presence.

At first, Junior was preoccupied with looking over her new surroundings. The ceilings loomed cathedral-like. The Great Hall formed the centerpiece, perfectly flanked by lesser halls and chambers, all gleaming white. Silver murals of the moon and stars glittered on the ceiling.

Dad tightened his grip on her.

Junior looked around the chamber to see all the young males focused on her.

Naana moved in close at her other elbow and their aides drew up around them.

"It's about time," Dad grumbled, leading her after a footman in long silver jacket. Through the towering double-doors they went together.

Junior looked back at the towering doors closing on Naana and the rest of their entourage.

The Empress sat enthroned surrounded by the white marble walls and ceiling. Her throne was gold and silver, the back of it rising above her in an enormous disk and etched to resemble the Moon. Her crown rose in an enormous sunburst design. Her silver, gold, and white gown layered in the richest of all Menelaen fabrics. So fragile and small, she nearly vanished beneath it all.

Glistening statuary of her ancestors lined the way, some naked like ancient Greek gods and goddesses and others in full armor.

A red carpet encircled the Throne. Delano knelt on the leading edge of it and Junior copied him.

"Rise, Viceroy Delano and Princess Rowan," the Empress spoke in a deep, yet feminine voice. With these simple words spoken by Her Imperial Majesty, they were royalty.

Viceroy Delano rose, as did his princess. "Most gracious, Your Majesty."

"Your beauty is stunning, Princess Rowan. The manner in which you broke into the Archives..."

Junior finally focused on the Empress' eyes. Blue. Compelling blue and alive. And so very familiar.



“...was ingenious. Like your father, you have the ability to think in new and innovative ways. I have no doubt you will serve the Empire well.”

Junior found she could not speak. Whispering tickled her ear, but no one was there and she could not comprehend the words. She swallowed sickness down into her stomach and didn't realize her knees had gone weak until her father caught her by the elbows.

Delano glanced down. “Please forgive my daughter, Your Majesty. She's never met an empress before.”

The Empress's small lips curled. “Of course. Now, then, Viceroy, it has been brought to my attention some of the noble caste are concerned for the safety and proper education of the Princess.”

“Pardon?”

“The Minister of Family Affairs has informed me requests for Courtship Rites with Her Highness mount daily.” Empress Araina released a sigh, her eyes drooping with age or sadness or both. “If only my son had lived...Ariez, my son...”

“Ariez?” Junior didn't realize she'd spoken the name aloud until she comprehended the Empress' gaze fixed on hers.

“Yes, my son, my only son, murdered by the Intari shortly after the Prince Consort died.” The Empress briefly caught forehead in hand and, for a moment, she was only a grieving mother. “You would have made him a lovely bride, my dear. He was handsome, devout, and good, so much like his father.” Composing herself, she resumed her formal demeanor and addressed Delano. “My step-son, Lord Kaliban, ranks first among the Princess' suitors. I realize his personality is...uh...less than warm, but sacrifices must be made in difficult times. He insists he's passionately in love with your daughter. Once the Marital Bond is complete and a child is conceived, she will be happy enough. As you know, Princess Ara cannot bear children. In all likeliness, Kaliban will succeed her on this throne. The match will ensure your family's dynasty, Viceroy. Perhaps, it is in the Princess' best interests to remain at court.”

“Your Majesty...” Delano stumbled over his words before gathering them up in a second of determination. “I do appreciate imperial concern. However, Princess Rowan is still a child by human standards. Furthermore, I must have an heir of my own and I cannot sire more offspring. My wife is past childbearing age.”

"Yes, this is why Queen Olivia was accepted as consort, but you must realize I cannot accept a human consort for your daughter. Her children must be sired by a Menelaen. As the Imperial Crown Princess, her first-born child will ascend this throne. The second son will succeed you on Denahi. You will not be without an heir."

Junior felt her father's frozen senses.

"Pardon me." Delano cleared his throat. "Your Majesty, surely you're aware of previous human/Menelaen couplings. I will not risk my daughter's sanity, even for the Throne."

"The medical board has developed therapy which can enable a human mother to sustain a Menelaen pregnancy." The Empress gripped her armrest. "Surely, Princess Rowan will not reject Kaliban's advances, knowing she will be mother to the next generation of imperial children."

Junior expected her father to glance down at her, but he remained steadfast.

"My daughter cares nothing for politics." Delano nearly choked.

"Nevertheless, the Princess is of age under Menelaen law. The choice is hers alone. Princess Rowan, Lord Kaliban would be pleased to welcome you into the Imperial Household. Will you accept his initiation of the Courtship Rites?"

"No!" Junior saw a flash of blue eyes, not the Empress, although she was astonished. "He's bad."

"Is that what your father told you?"

"No. Dad won't talk about boys with me." Junior couldn't imagine how she knew Kaliban was bad, in fact. "I want to stay with my father."

Dad squeezed her hand and he could breathe again.

"Very well. For the time being, a remote world may be a safer place for Your Highness than the capital. This matter does not need to be decided now." The Empress returned her attention to her newest vassal. "Viceroy Delano, do consider what I have told you. I understand how difficult it is to release a child into adulthood, but it is an inescapable rite of parenting. Now, go."

"As you say, Empress," said the new Viceroy, bowing deeply, as did his princess, and they walked out.

"Dad?" Junior whispered as they were escorted out the grand hall to their waiting transport. "Why would Menelaen doctors invent drugs to

help human females not miscarry Menelaen babies?" She was quite sure she knew the answer, but she wanted his reaction.

"The Menelaens are desperate. Their population is shrinking at an alarming rate and only humans are remotely compatible. I've tried explaining to the Imperial Counsel that humans would resist conquest to the last person, leaving no breeding population at all."

"Did anyone listen?"

"A few, like Admiral Park. Only peace could facilitate the kind of marriages Menelaens need and there's little chance of that happening if the hereditary aristocrats have their way. They're hung up on the past and out of touch."

# Chapter 15

A reception of congratulations awaited them in a cavernous banquet hall. Junior entered on the hand of her father, all in white and silver. Their glittering guests kneeled so suddenly their robes and skirts made a great whooshing sound. She hadn't realized being a viceroy was that big of a deal. A seed of trepidation grew and churned in her stomach. They took their seats behind a long white table.

The settings were silver and everything else white or clear like crystal, except for her father whose red cape indicated his status as a military commander. His new helmet had a gold peak in the front and gold wings on the side to indicate he was now royalty, as well.

A few minutes into the banquet, Junior noticed no one approached her or sat near

her, though they conversed with her father quite easily. About the fourth time a couple of aristocrats walked in a wide semi-circle to avoid her, she feared she might throw up.

The dancers performed then, which helped her nerves. They were similar to Cambodian dancers, except their peaked crowns and wide collars were silver, instead of gold, and their sheath dresses were white.

Junior acclimated to the sounds of the banquet, her nerves calming. In doing so, she could focus on individuals talking. She couldn't remember having such keen hearing and wondered if, instead, she heard them in her thoughts. Most of their conversations centered on politics, some on food, and a few on traditions she couldn't begin to understand. Her name came up many times. The discussions focused primarily on her hair color and her misadventures. Then, a particular conversation caught her attention.

The conversation took place between two fat male politicians with cobalt blue edged mantels.

The One wore a gray doublet. "The new princess is astonishingly beautiful."

Beautiful? The Empress had said something similar. Junior assumed it was mere politeness. She had a mirror. She knew she wasn't truly beautiful.

By the drape of his mantel, the Other was a centurion. "Has Her Highness accepted any applications for the Courtship Rites?"

"No. My son asked me to submit his suit only yesterday. I was informed the new Viceroy considers the Princess too young for the Marital Bond," said the One.

"Her Highness is nearly seventeen years old!" Heavy sigh from the Other. "My own son will be so disappointed."

"I am not ashamed to say I was relieved when my son's suit was rejected. He is not a warrior. He would not have survived a Challenge of Worth against Lord Kaliban. You have two children. I only have one."

"Did you know Princess Rowan can conceive at any time and give birth yearly?" The Other's tone shook with fear though he inflated his chest to disguise his apprehension. "Whoever she marries will soon sire more than enough children to secure his position."

Junior blushed scarlet and cupped a hand over her mouth. She watched her father deep in conversation with Admiral Park. When he finished a sentence, she leaned over and said, "I want to go. I don't feel well."

Her father gestured to their aides with one hand.

Naana immediately appeared to escort her from the reception, along with a dozen

new female security guards posing as ladies-in-waiting.

Walking out with her small army, Junior knew bondage. The young males purred. The females gawked, many of them now wearing their hair and dresses long and flowing too. There were no equals among them. She was no more real to them than a statue. *A statue has no feelings to be considerate of.*

"Princess Rowan." A young man without a hair on his head waited for her in the foyer, eyes a beguiling gray.

Instantly, the nanny brigade closed ranks.

"Lord Kaliban." Naana stepped before her. "Viceroy Delano is not..."

"Irrelevant," interrupted Kaliban. "The Princess is of age and I have the Empress'

full support. Princess Rowan, will you speak with me?"

"Uh, sure." Junior slipped around Naana.

"Alone."

Junior felt her attendants' extreme tension and also a burning anger inside herself, but instinct told her she needed answers. "Naana..." she consciously didn't add 'please' "...take the others and wait for me by that pillar."

"Yes, Princess."

She'd come a long way from the girl who couldn't keep her mouth shut to save her life, but she didn't have time to feel proud of herself. She narrowed gaze on Kaliban. "This is as alone as you will ever be with me." She glanced at her attendants glaring at him, hands on sword hilts.

"Let us not play games, Princess. Where is Ariez?"

"Ariez?" Junior had also learned not to let on how little or how much she knew when people asked her questions. "Elaborate."

"I have seen through your 'stupid little human girl' routine. You may have fooled your father, but you cannot go on like this forever. Already you are teetering on the edge of sanity from Incompletion of the Marital Bond."

"Ariez." Junior's thoughts tumbled over the Empress' eyes, so familiar, but mostly over her dizzy spells and fragmented memory.

"You must realize Princess Ara will tolerate no competitor for the Throne, and I will succeed her. If your father is hiding Ariez..."

"Hiding Ariez? How could he..."

"Delano is a fool if he thinks he can rule the Empire through your son. Ariez will kill him first and I will kill Ariez. Come away with me now and you will not suffer the Pain of Severance." Kaliban looked over his shoulder to a dozen Imperial Guards in gray uniform and short capes, masked helmets over their faces. "I assure you, Delano cannot follow where I will take you. If he is wise, he will accept our marriage and enjoy his status as father of the new Menelaen empress."

"Geez, you're cracked."

Kaliban lifted a hand towards her face

"Leave." Junior glowered at him.

His face reddened, sweat poured. And he fled from her, hands covering his cheeks.

Naana rushed to her side. "Princess, you did well. I worried your instincts would not translate."

"I burned him with my anger."

"You rejected him before he could intoxicate you and initiate the Courtship Rites without your consent."

"Date-rape." Junior shifted gaze to her. "That's what humans call it when a boy's romantic skills are so pathetic he has to drug a girl into having him."

"Come, Princess, before the Imperial Guards take issue with the Viceroy over this matter."

Ariez reclined on a bed in the med-bay of his flagship. He wore black silk pants, his smooth, finely toned chest bare. A silver medical device covered the left side of his face, revealing only his eyes, nostrils, mouth, and chin. Having never grown a whisker, he removed Admiral Jackson's beard stubble with a phased energy device in one hand and a small mirror in the other.

An older Intari man wearing a sleek tan uniform beneath his short, off-white cape, entered and held up a data-pad. He sported the usual tattoo on his greenish bald head, but no jewelry. "Admiral."

"Commander Net. What are you doing here?" He set the removal device on a medical instrument tray. To his right the physicians worked together, reviewing his physiology on their computer grid.

"The newest intelligence report on the Delanos, Sir." Net handed over a data-pad.

Ariez read it quickly in Jackson's hand. "This is nonsense."

"All of our operatives on your homeworld agree. These events did occur exactly as described in the report. Princess Rowan..."

"Princess Rowan?"

"Her Highness was re-named Rowan by her father. The Empress elevated Delano to Viceroy of Denahi."

"Yes." Ariez studied her name. "'Rowan.'" He tried it out, rolling the 'R' off his tongue. "Yes. 'Rowan' means 'red' in the ancient dialect." He studied a paragraph, smiling. "She knocked the head off the sun god statue and replaced it with the urn of the Last Prophet?"

"The Bishop took it as a sign from his god the Menelaens have lost their way. All the priests shaved their heads and crawled around the temples as penance."

Ariez tossed Jackson's report back into the ugly toad's hands. "Princess Rowan has destroyed her mother's career. She may very well bring down the Viceroy as well."

Commander Net nodded. "Indeed. The nobles are fighting over her like crazed tarkees, but it is to Lord Kaliban she will be wed. This is how Princess Ara will secure religious support. If Delano doesn't concede to the match soon, he will die in a carefully staged accident."

Ariez lifted his chin and rubbed the smoothness of it.

"Admiral, leading members of the Guard have asked me to relay a concern."

"What concern?"

"The Guard is concerned about your returning to your natural appearance before planned."

"What do you think will happen if Kaliban sires offspring by Princess Rowan before I can claim what is rightfully mine?" Ariez rose from Jackson's bed and walked slowly to a wall mirror.

"Kaliban's offspring can be easily disposed of in the womb."

"You have no idea how fiercely human females protect their children, regardless of who sires them. The Princess would resist and that resistance could escalate into civil conflict. Furthermore, her mother's an Alliance star captain. Do you really believe the humans would stay out of it? You are organizing a political coup. You do not possess the resources for interstellar war."

"You have been made Admiral of the Defensive Fleet. If the Alliance or the

Menealens discover your true identity prematurely, it could ruin everything we've worked for, regardless."

Ariez hardened his face against the little troll. "The Princess will recoil if I appear to her as an old, ugly human." He tossed the little mirror onto a convenient computer console. "In a short time, I will rescue her from Delano and bring her into Intari space. This will draw Olivia out of hiding. Without an Heir Designate or a consort, Delano will be forced to abdicate his rights as viceroy of the Denahi System, along with all five of its battle groups." He shifted a glare to the ugly little man. "You can then



take back that star system while I'm removing Princess Ara from my throne."

"Very well, but Princess Rowan must remain on our side of the border. You will not use her as a weapon against us."

Ariez came to his full height and looked down, but he could not risk revealing his hand at such a critical point.

"Either cooperate as an ally and dominate this quadrant with us or face a war you will not possess the resources to fight. Do you really think the Intari Parliament will do nothing to prevent your consolidating power against them? The Denahi Star System is insignificant compared to the threat of religious and political power united on the Menelaen Throne."

"Get out."

"Are you feeling better?"

Junior followed her father into the gymnasium for their morning Kaiyakempo lesson. "Yeah, I'm fine," she grumbled. "I hated the Imperial Court."

Delano thumped her shoulder. "I know. I hated it too." He handed her the practice sword. Stepping out onto the floor, he drew Aodhan from its sheath. "But, it's over now. We'll soon be home on Denahi."

*Home on Denahi.* That was just one of the things Junior was hesitant to talk to her father about. "I overheard some things at the party."

"What things?" Delano handed her the practice sword, hilt-first.

"Oh, well, about Prince Ariez. Some people think he's alive."

"Yeah, that rumor crops up every other year, usually after Princess Ara does something tyrannical." Delano spun his sword in wrist-stretching exercises. "It's easy to believe Prince Ariez do better on the Throne, because he's not here to prove otherwise. Some people will cling to whatever hope they can find, even false hope. Who'd you hear it from?"

Junior whipped her practice sword around her body a couple of times, feeling her muscles loosen up. "Kaliban." The blade looked wooden, but was actually made of the same energy-absorbing metal the practice fighting knives were.

"Kaliban?" Delano froze. "Naana said she and the others ran him off."

"Well, he got a few words in before they did." Junior shrugged, willing herself to calm. If Dad sensed her anxiety, she'd get a lecture.

"We can't get out of this armpit of the galaxy fast enough." Delano grumbled and turned back on her to begin the exercise. "Even if Prince Ariez was alive, I don't want you to become involved with any member of the Imperial Family in any way." He swung sword around his body, first to the right and then the left. "The Empress will die soon. The religious factions oppose Princess Ara's succession claim. There will be a power struggle. People who associate with the Imperials during times like that often die in well-staged accidents."

Junior followed his lead, swinging the practice sword around her body, loosening up. "When are you going to let me try Aodhan again?"

Delano pointed at her. "When you stop thunking yourself in the head with your practice sword." He turned around and assumed the balanced stance. "I don't like it when you bleed all over the place."

"Oh, I suppose you never accidentally took off an ear."

"An ear, the tip of my nose, and three fingers, but that's beside the point."

"What if I promised not to misplace any severed body parts so they can be re-attached?"

Her father chuckled.

Junior giggled in spite of the dark feelings still haunting her. She tried to chase them away with good memories. Isaiah in the med-bay. Chef in the galley. Everything on the Maverick the way it had always been. If Isaiah and Karana married, then... *Karana had a son, I think.* That's all she could remember.

Kaliban's words haunted her. *Already you're teetering on the edge of sanity from Incompletion of the Marital Bond.*

"Quiet your thoughts." He drew his silver blade back. "Follow my lead."

Junior could not obey. "Dad, what about what the Empress said? That I have to marry a Menelaen or you'll lose Denahi?"

Her father's great shoulders slumped a little as he blew out a breath. "Don't worry about it. I'm Admiral Park's adopted son. We'll think of something."

"But, Dad, I can't live here for the rest of my life if I can't even have a boyfriend. Besides, are you really going to let your sole heir become a fighter pilot?"

He turned, face grim. "You're a princess now. You'll have plenty of other..."

"But, Dad, I don't want to do anything else! I want to be a fighter pilot and make babies and explore deep space. There's no future for me here, Dad."

"I will create one for you."

"Dad..."

"Calm your thoughts. Everything will be all right." He turned back around and resumed the exercise. "I've taken care of everything."

*You've taken care of everything you know about, anyway, and you don't want to hear about anything else.* Breathing deeply, she assumed the stance behind him and began to mimic the slow exercise, drawing her sword around.

# Chapter 16

Junior leaned against the shuttle window watching the Menelaen homeworld fall away and the eternal night of space come into view above the clouds and blue horizon. Such a relief. The Mydis was not the Maverick, but at least it was a starship.

A week of space travel at maximum velocity brought the Mydis into orbit of Denahi Prime, one of two habitable planets in the star system.

Junior stood on the command deck with her father when the greenish world came into view, shining brightly on the viewscreen. Mostly lush forest, a Southern continent was brown desert. Two large pockets of deep blue formed the small oceans with rivers of blue snaking away from them. She'd learned in her geography lesson with Govina that the rivers had been widened to accommodate boats because the Denahi were amphibious. They preferred travel by water than by road or air.

When their shuttle craft came to rest on the landing pad outside their new palace, Junior understood the rivers better. The Denahi officials waiting to greet them were clearly Intari, though more waif-like than stout. She'd stayed awake long enough in history class to learn the Intari homeworld had looked very much like Denahi before the Menelaen War destroyed the atmosphere. Now, it all made sense.

The Intari and the Denahi were the same species.

Junior's experience with the emotionally expressive Intari told her the Denahi's polite greeting belied resentment in shades of yellow around their recessive ear spots.

"Does this please Your Highness?" The new Denahi governess walked beside her and spoke Menelaen. She wore a cobalt blue underdress under her gray jumper. A simple fabric band wrapped around her naturally bald head, her facial features fine, her lips wide and thin.

The blue-gray stones and tall, arching windows of the palace certainly were a welcome departure from monochromatic Menelaen structures. Junior had heard enough of the Denahi language to discern its subtle differences from its mother language, Intari. She replied in the Denahi language, "It's beautiful, but I can't agree with the government it represents."

The governess couldn't respond aloud, but her color changed to soft pink – delightful surprise. "This way to your private chambers." Her stiff voice softened too, and reverted to Denahi. She ascended the sweeping staircase inside the entrance.

Junior followed her. When she reached the top, she noticed the foyer was acoustically perfect. She paused to enjoy the sensation. Even as she did though, she overheard her father speaking with the House Chamberlain.

Bowing, the Chamberlain said, "The Princess is very beautiful, Your Highness. It will be a tremendous honor to serve her mother, as well. When can we expect Queen Olivia to grace these halls?"

"Soon, Mr. Yet. The transfer of power is complete. I can concentrate my efforts on bringing her safely across the De-Militarized Zone. You may begin making arrangements for her comfort."

Junior studied her fingers upon the banister.

Dad wasn't going to let go of this fantasy. He had set himself up as a king, complete with peasantry to oppress.

Mom would never take him back like this.

When Junior lifted her eyes, she found her father looking right at her. Somberly, she turned and walked away.

As promised, Dad took her rock climbing soon after arriving on Denahi. The mountains looked Chinese to them, rounded and thick with greenery. A far lake provided ample diving adventures too.

Within days, however, Delano departed for patrols of the De-Militarized Zone, leaving Junior in the provincial palace surrounded by ladies-in-waiting, every luxury, and tight security.

Junior studied her lessons in her expansive private chambers, white sofas, crystal tables, and white silk draperies everywhere. If she had an eye for interior decorating and wasn't so otherwise preoccupied, she might've splashed some color around. She faithfully practiced her Kaiyakempo on the green lawns. She also went exploring and played in

the streets with the children. At first, the Denahi were frightened of her, but one smile from her governess put them at ease.

No Menelaen troubled himself to learn the Denahi language. In fact, it was forbidden to speak it in their presence.

Junior spoke Denahi the entire time.

She taught the children human games like 'Red Rover' and 'Kick the Can.' Still, there weren't any teens to befriend. They worked in the fields alongside their parents. No amount of charitable donations could get them out and education beyond the elementary level violated Menelaen law. The days became weeks which stretched into months. The loneliness bit at her soul, creating a chasm of despair.

## IN THE YEAR OF HER HOLINESS 2287

It happened that Junior's 17<sup>th</sup> birthday fell in the middle of the week. She wasn't sentimental about exact dates for special occasions though; not after being raised by a star captain with a crazy work schedule. Nevertheless, when the sun rose her heart sank.

No matter how busy the day had been, Mom always found a way to make her birthday special. That would be impossible this year.

Junior strolled out onto her breakfast balcony with the table laid out behind. Her friends and family on the Maverick filled her thoughts. Ret and Rehama. Isaiah was probably marrying Karana without her there to march in with... Her face tightened, realizing she'd now forgotten everything about him, except that he was Karana's son.

Despite her father's censorship, she'd managed to squeeze out of Lali the fact that Menelaen males erased all memory of other romantic partners from their females' minds, if they could get away with it.

Jae had tried it with Lali and Bo had to talk him down from the local temple spier afterwards. Apparently, refusing to complete the Marital Bond once it had begun was more painful than being burned alive.

Anyway, Lali forgave Jae, but she sacrificed her career in the Kaiya Order to marry him and Junior felt rather sorry for her. Since the infertility epidemic began, law required fertile females to stop working outside the home once bonded. Naana had said the day was coming when all fertile females, bonded or not, would be locked in their homes.

*I wonder if Kaliban erased that boy, Karana's son?* She looked over her shoulder to the educational computer. *But, then, who erased Kaliban?* After a glance to ensure privacy, she proceeded to it and lowered into the seat as though someone might pull it out suddenly. "Computer, access historical record of Prince Ariez..." she knew the name to be common in the imperial dynasty "...son of Empress Araina and Imperial Prince Consort Kalric." Imperial children were always named for the Emperor or Empress Regent. Hence, Ara and Ariez were the biological offspring of Empress Araina. Their fathers played no part in their naming.

The screen lit up with a handsome face, all at once familiar and mesmerizing, and those blue eyes... Junior drew a deep breath, feeling fingertips caressing the side of her face and down her neck. "Computer, off-screen." She stood and walked away, cupping chin in hands. The feeling left her and she swallowed hard.

The door slid open and Palin walked in.

Junior retreated to the railing and pretended to study the bennu birds in the pond below. "Palin." She licked her lips.

"Yes, My Lady?" Palin carried a steam iron and a white dress in her arms and was en route to the dressing and bathing chambers.

"I've been, um, studying my history lesson and..." she shrugged one shoulder "...I was just wondering. What do you think would happen if Prince Ariez was alive?"

"Prince Ariez?" Palin pondered over the name, as though she was reading it on the sofa. "Civil war."

"Civil war? Why?" Junior's pulse suddenly raced.

"The eldest child of the Emperor or Empress Regent is the Imperial Heir Designate, unless he or she cannot produce offspring. Princess Ara is infertile. When Prince Ariez came of age, the medical board verified him reproductively fit. Most of the hereditary aristocrats support her claim, regardless, and she tolerates no rival."

Leaning hard on the railing, Junior watched her knuckles turn white. "Do Menelaens believe in ghosts?"

"Ghost? What is this?"

"The spirit of a dead person."

Palin gave her such an odd look. "Our spirits return to the Celestial Garden when our corporeal selves die."

"I see." Junior straightened. "You may go." She watched the lady bow and withdraw through the dressing chamber doors.

Breathing deeply, she wrapped arms around herself and closed her eyes, and the feeling returned as though invited by her behavior. Lips on her neck, hands on her waist, whispers in her ear she could not understand. The whispers she could not understand, but the feeling she could. *Ariez is alive.*

Considering all she knew of Naana and the others, there would be a major freak-out if she spoke her belief aloud. "And Dad..." *Oh, God.* She smoothed hands up to her face, body freezing up. *How will I get him across the border to Mom if I lose my mind completely?* Goodness wrapped around her, pushing the fearsome thoughts away. *Wait...I can't...* But, she wanted to.

And she did.

A week passed without a word from her father. Finally, Junior contacted him. "Forgetting something?" She folded her hands on the desk before the computer screen.

"No," Dad said, obviously pleased with himself. "I prepared the com-beacon to send across the DMZ to your mother for our wedding anniversary."

Junior sighed. "Your anniversary is in September. This is July."

"Oh." Delano folded his hands together, crestfallen.

"Dad, my birthday was July 1<sup>st</sup>."

"Oh! I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you when I come home next week."

"Tomorrow. You're supposed to be home tomorrow."

"I am? Right." He looked to the side. "Well, some things came up. I can't make it back for a visit until next week."

Junior could tell he was searching for an excuse to end transmission. "Dad, I want to come live with you on the Mydis. It feels weird not having a hyperspace engine around."

"I've told you this sector of the DMZ is too dangerous."

"Dad! I didn't leave everything and everyone I loved on the Maverick to come live with you so I could be stuck here while you're out there all the time!"

"Rowan, you're becoming hysterical."

"And you're becoming a jerkwad." The angst mounted within her.



Dad blew out a groaning breath. "I'll be home as soon..."

"This isn't home. This is Denahi, a disputed territory in the Intari-Menelaen cold war."

"I'll be home next week."

"No, you won't, but I might be."

"Rowan, don't start. Now, do your homework and go to bed."

"Whatever." Junior slapped the com button and his image vanished.

The goodness she held back longed to comfort her. She buried her face in her hands. *Ariez is coming for me. Dad's gonna freak out. They're gonna kill each other!*

"Computer, off." Junior stood and turned slowly, gaze lifting to the stars shining in the window. *Maybe if I run away, Dad will chase me across the border.*

The blanket of goodness fell over her as she sank into the sofa. *I will cleanse your heart and bring you joy.*

*I'm losing my mind.* She rolled her head over in the pillow.

*Our time of longing is nearly at an end.*

Inside an asteroid cave, Captain Olivia Delano sat in her command chair on the Maverick, elbow on armrest, leaning forehead against finger. Sensors showed no Alliance or Menelaen vessels in the vicinity. She knew they were out there, however, faced off against each other on either side of the border with her little ship somewhere in between. She stood and contemplated lunch, emergency rations again. She rubbed her tense neck muscles, wondering how much longer. Her crew had already sacrificed so much.

"Captain, a communications beacon!" Ashley announced from the com station.

"Locate." Olivia jumped out of her seat and strode back to him.

"Bearing Mark-one-three-nine. No power. Emitting Claryon particles only."

"Junior! How far is it?" Olivia studied the tiny yellow light on the spatial grid.

Ashley shook his head. "Approximately 20,000 kilometers."

Olivia looked over her shoulder at the stars and spinning asteroids on the forward screen. "Helm, we need to crawl like a cat towards the beacon. Can we do it?"

"Yes, Captain. The risk we'll be detected by either side is high though." Lieutenant Mir tried out different headings, eyes darting between his piloting controls and the forward screen.

"Well, we're not out here to play it safe."

An hour later, Olivia stood with arms folded, watching the moon-sized asteroid pass to starboard as they inched along.

"Captain!" Sachi spun around tactical, fingers flying over the panels. "We've tripped a Menelaen sensor net. I'm detecting ships."

Olivia strode back to her station to study the starry grid. "A short battle group...there." She pointed at three red dots. "What's the lead ship's designation?"

"IMS Mydis."

Olivia looked up at the forward screen, watching the sky destroyer and its two flank destroyers emerge from behind some space rocks. "Edward."

"Their shields are down and their weapons remain off-line," Sachi reported, studying her readings. "Canon ports are open, but canons are not extended. That's the Menelaen gesture to indicate no hostile intent."

Mr. Ashley looked up from the communications station. "The Mydis is hailing."

A beep interrupted.

Sachi checked. "Three United Fleet patrol ships closing on our position, all

weapons on-line!"

"United Fleet?" Olivia charged back to her command chair. "What the hell are they doing on the Intari section of the DMZ?" *Hunting down a renegade starship, duh.*

The Maverick rocked with a volley of warning over the port bow.

"They're mighty pissed," said Sachi.

Olivia watched as the patrol ships passed over and engaged the Mydis battle group, all weapons firing. "They must be under Admiral Jackass' command," she muttered as the lead ship jockeyed with the Mydis for a position closest to her own vessel.

The raider's captain spoke over com. "Captain O'Keefe, you are in violation of treaty. Power down your engines and prepare to be boarded."

"Oh, go suck a squid," muttered Olivia, channeling her daughter's slang.

"Captain, I'm intercepting transmissions between the Mydis and the lead patrol ship."

"On speakers."

"Yes, Ma'am, on speakers."

Olivia stood listening.

Edward's voice came clear and strong over com. "United Fleet patrol ship, I am loathe to fire on a human ship. However, the Maverick is commanded by my wife, Captain Olivia Delano. I will not allow her to be harmed or abducted. Stand down your attack."

A male voice responded from the lead patrol ship. "Captain Edward Delano, there is an outstanding warrant for your arrest. Power down your weapons and prepare to be boarded."

"That'll be the day." Olivia watched as the Mydis swung wide and blasted with forward canons, striking the patrol ship's engines dead-on. The patrol ship sputtered to all-stop, spewing hyperdrive coolant. "Edward's refitted the Mydis with bigger canons and better maneuvering thrusters."

The Mydis took position between the Maverick and the other patrol ships.

"Edward always loved charging to your rescue." Isaiah appeared at her side, seemingly out of thin air. "He loved how it pissed you off."

Olivia shot a glare. "Sachi, how close are we to Junior's com beacon?"

"Not close enough."

As they watched the forward screen, the flankships pursued the United Fleet patrol ships fleeing for the border, battering their aft shields with fire.

"Starboard," commanded Olivia. "Ahead, one-quarter sub-light."

"Aye, Captain," responded Mir, making the adjustments. "The Mydis is adjusting course to match."

"He knows what we're after," said Olivia.

"Captain," said Sachi. "He's powering the secondary laser canon on a low frequency."

"He means to destroy the beacon to keep us from snagging it. He won't fire on the Maverick." Olivia lifted her chin from her hand, elbow on armrest. "Slap his hand, Sachi, and grab the beacon as soon as we're in range."

"Aye, Captain, slapping hand." Sachi opened laser canons and blasted the Mydis canon port. "Two seconds to beacon. He's bringing primary laser canon on-line."

"Power the tryon canons." *Don't even think about it, Edward Delano, or I'll never sleep with you again.*

"Acknowledged. He's holding fire. Grabbing beacon."

Olivia watched the blue tractor beam shoot out and grab the tiny cylinder out of the black void of space.

Edward Delano stood on the command deck of his Menelaen battleship, fixated on the image of his wife's starship on the viewscreen. His face hurt with tension, red, moist. "Please," he whispered.

"Viceroy?" The weapons officer hovered over his console behind him. "Awaiting your orders."

The communications officer spoke up. "The Maverick is an Alliance ship and the communications beacon may contain classified information, Your Highness."

Delano pointed at the weapons officer. "Order all ships to hold their fire! Captain Olivia Delano is my wife!"

Commander Bo stood beside the Viceroy, tucking his hands behind his back.

"As First Officer, I confirm the Viceroy's order. Captain Olivia Delano is Queen of Denahi. She is also Sacred Mother to Princess Rowan. The Wrath of the Sun and the Moon will be upon us all if she is harmed." The crew bowed their heads and returned their attention to their respective consoles.

Delano's glanced at his right-hand man. "Open a channel to the Maverick."

"Channel open."

Delano cleared his throat and spoke in a formal tone. "This is Viceroy Delano to Captain Olivia Delano, please respond."

The seconds passed with no response.

"Captain Olivia Delano, this sector of the De-Militarized Zone is a volatile area in the Intari conflict. Please accept my protection."

Again, no response.

"Captain Delano...our daughter, Princess Rowan, is anxious for you to visit the Palace of Denahi. You have my word your crew will be received as honored guests, free to return home with their starship at will."

Delano watched as the Maverick powered up sub-light engines and turned slowly away from the Mydis. His eyes stung, watching it vanish behind an asteroid. "Maintain continuous scans of the Maverick to ensure her safety." He sat back in his command chair, chin leaning into hand, elbow on the armrest. "Withdraw."

The crew worked in silence.

Several minutes passed before Delano lifted his chin from his hand and spoke.

"Bo, arrange to have the Princess brought to me at once."

"Yes, Your Highness," said Commander Bo.

A while later, Olivia sat, hands folded upon her desk. She waited for Stella to load the smuggled data-disk into the drive. Finally, the first image appeared. "My baby." Her nose stung, eyes pooled with tears.

Junior's freckles had mostly faded into womanhood and her curls had eased into waves. "Hi, Mom. I miss you. So does Dad and he's missed you a lot longer." She worked her computer, loading information into the data disk. "Most of the disk's memory will be taken up by data concerning Jackson, Dad, and the incident which led to the charges against Dad." She glanced up. "Admiral Park has agreed to testify too." She tapped a panel. "This first part's just for us." She folded her hands, looking into the screen. "Dad hasn't even had a girlfriend since you divorced him, Mom. He is one lovesick puppy, I'm telling you." She pushed a button and a secret recording of Delano replaced her image. He wielded Aodhan in a practice session, whipping the sword around his still-powerful body.

Olivia's gaze ran down his finely toned torso and lingered around his loins. A blush crept up her neck. Memory took her back to the night of the Wu-Cheng wedding, the night Junior was conceived.

If any man deserved a monument to his masculinity, it was Edward Delano.



# Chapter 17

Naana departed Denahi to visit her sick mother only an hour before the order was received to bring Junior to the Mydis.

Lali was undergoing fertility treatments.

That left Palin and Talya in charge and they quickly made the necessary arrangements. They knew better than to keep her father waiting. She had a pretty good idea what was up, but went along as though she didn't.

The provincial yacht arrived on the Midas flight deck only a few hours later, along with its two fighter escorts. Junior was taken straight to the command deck. As required by protocol, she wore a long white gown with silver belt and headband.

The Viceroy waited, arms folded. He turned to her. The guards withdrew.

"Hello, Father," she addressed him formally before the crew.

"We encountered the Maverick."

"Mom?"

"Come with me."

Junior followed him into his office. He walked to the window, back to her. "What happened?"

"The Maverick retrieved a communications beacon, apparently left by you," Delano said, turning to her. "A Defensive Fleet ship detected her and attacked. I intercepted them and let your mother go."

"With the beacon?"

"Yes."

Junior breathed relief.

"What have you done?"

Junior squared her shoulders, realizing for the first time she'd picked up the habit from her mother. "I downloaded all the information I've collected into the com-beacon. I rigged it with a timer so it would release from the hull of your right flank destroyer as soon as it came within visual range of the DMZ. It emitted Claryon particles only, so Mom would know it was from me. Menelaen sensors consider Claryon particles space junk. Satchi worked out this signal system for the Maverick a long time ago."

"Do you realize that was espionage?"

"Yes."

"Do you realize that is a crime punishable by death in the Menelaen Empire?"

"Yes." Junior drew breath. "Mom still has friends in the United Fleet. Once she delivers my information into Admiral Codetalker's hands, an investigation can be launched. I know how the United Fleet works. Jackson is no dictator. The information I've collected can prove him guilty of conspiracy with the Intari Premerean Guard, ending his career and exonerating you of all crimes."

"If I had not found your mother first, she might've been killed!"

Junior felt his wrath.

"Rowan, listen to me! Jackson is mustering an invasion fleet on the other side of the DMZ! Tensions are mounting! War could break out at any time! And when it does, it won't matter who the hell is in charge of the United Fleet!"

Junior swallowed.

Delano grabbed her upper arms. "I have to bring your mother under my protection before the shooting starts!"

"My mother knows how to defend her own," said Junior. "And so do I."

"What are you saying? Are you planning to run away?"

Junior didn't answer.

"Listen to me!" Delano shook her. "If you leave my protection, you could be captured by an aristocrat and coerced into a political marriage! You could be picked up by Premerean Guard and interrogated! You could be arrested for espionage by the Orachi and executed!"

"You want to protect us."

"Yes! You must convince your mother to..."



"There's no way in hell, Dad."

He slowly released her.

She turned and walked two paces towards the door, then faced him again. "I love you, Dad." She shook her head. "But, I don't trust you." She gestured towards the command deck and her words shot out. "I've seen how much you enjoy the power you've acquired, the way you scare the living daylights out of people with your helmet and cape like you're some kind of god." She propped one hand on her hip. "My mother would never break her oath to the United Fleet to live a life of luxury at the expense of a people who do not even have the right to vote."

"You don't understand!"

"It's not difficult to look into the faces of the Denahi and see they are Intari!

You are taking part in the oppression of a conquered people! There is nothing I can do to stop you from choosing that life, but I will not be a part of it. And neither will Mom."

"Rowan, you're becoming hysterical over matters you do not understand and I will not allow you to endanger yourself in the process!"

Junior knew what he meant - more security, more restrictions. "Who's hysterical?" She walked out.

Minutes after departing the Mydis, Junior settled into the sofa in the private aft section of the provincial yacht. She curled up, leaning on the arm, and pulled a silver blanket around her. She still wore her long, white dress for the formal visit, but had removed the headband. Her line of sight fell into a staring position, despair filling her heart. *The hero has become the villain, locking the princess up in an ivory tower himself.* If she ran away, her father might chase her across the border, but her mother would conclude he truly was the villain she'd feared all along. *Mom won't take him back like this. She won't listen. No one ever listens to me.*

Despair.

Then...euphoria.

"Oh, no. Not again." She drew a deep breath. The two feelings - unreasonable goodness and dark despair wrestled each other with her caught in the middle, desperately clinging to self.

She lost the battle and closed her eyes.

Some time later, she felt a hand stroking her cheek. Her eyes fluttered open, bleary, focusing on a face, the face of the yacht's pilot. His helmet was off and he studied her, stroking her face, purring, glowing. He slid his fingers up into her famous red hair. "So...beautiful..." His breath quickened.

"What are you doing?" Junior knocked his hand away.

Then the force which was Ariez slammed him against the hull.

Sucking in her own breath, Junior felt her away along the side, bound for the cockpit. To touch a princess meant certain death for him. He not dare take such a risk, unless...

"It's true!" The pilot followed her. "You are engaged in the Courtship Rites with someone." He pursued her out the hatch. "Reject him and allow me to prove my worth."

"Oh, shut the hell up!" Junior ripped open the door to the cockpit. The co-pilot and Palin and Talya were dead, slumped over and partially out of their seats, plasma shots in the backs of their heads. A little scream and she leapt backwards.

The pilot caught her from behind. "I was to deliver you to Admiral Jackson, but if we were to Bond now..."

Junior could see a blue tractor beam pulling the yacht into an enormous Defensive Fleet starship. She knew the markings. Jackson's ship. "Why have you done this?"

"It is the only way a male of my caste may enjoy the pleasure of the Holy Bennu."

Junior just registered the sounds of the yacht entering the hangar and settling into its assigned place. She felt him gripping her tightly. Her face reddened and she snarled, focusing all her energy on indignation. "You stupid son of..."

Grabbing his face, the pilot staggered back and burst into flames, shrieking.

Stumbling back against the wall, Junior slipped into the cockpit.

The pilot grappled at his face, flames eating away his skin, eyeballs bulging out.

Still partially in Jackson, Ariez knew the horror she felt and prepared to leap onto the gangplank as soon as it was low enough to do so.

The pilot ran out and fell off the end, half-way to the floor, and rolled around in a ball of fire. Emergency technicians rushed in with fire extinguishers.

Ariez hoped they would be too late. "Rowan!" Catching the edge of the gangplank, he swung up and found her huddled between two seats in the cockpit.

"He killed them." She held the hands of her two dead ladies-in-waiting to her face. "He killed them all." The flight crew slumped out of their seats.

Ariez lifted her into his arms and held her close. "Shhh, it's all right. We're together now."

She went cold against him and shoved him back against the hull. "What the hell are you doing?" She shoved past him and ran down the gangplank.

A scream quickened his pace after her and he spun her away from the sight of the pilot's burned corpse and into his arms.

"I killed him. I didn't mean to kill him." She quaked, hands in front of her face.

"It was Divine Retribution, My Love. He'll never have the chance to harm another female now." Ariez held her tight to his side and addressed the crew. "Get that disgusting heap away from the Princess now! He murdered the crew and her most trusted ladies."

The technicians heaved the corpse onto a manual gurney and carried it away.

Finally, Ariez could focus completely on her. "Rowan..."

She jabbed elbow into his gut. "Don't touch me, you dirty old goat!"

He felt his face heating up with her anger and backed away. "Rowan," he whispered, glancing at technicians assessing shuttlecraft damage. "It's me -Ariez."

Her green eyes widened. She remembered. How much she remembered, he could not tell. Confusion shrouded her heart.

"Remember me."

"Yes, I remember you!" Her hands went to her hips. "You're the jack-ass admiral who framed my father for crimes and manipulated my mother into divorcing him!"

"No, no, it was not me! It was the Intari." He focused on keeping his breathing under control. "Your thoughts are chaos. Your anger is fire to me."

"No kidding and I have a headache you wouldn't believe!" She rubbed her temples.

"Please, come with me." Ariez opened a hand to the lift.

She glared at him, but proceeded into it. "I could kill for anything chocolate right now."

Ariez followed her into the lift and the door closed. "There is no need for further violence." He reached into the small pocket of his doublet. He pulled out a silver-wrapped chocolate and presented it to her.

Unwrapping it, she popped the chocolate into her mouth. "Mmm, Altarian chocolates are my favorite."

He felt her pleasure in the warm brown sweetness. "Yes, I know." He tapped the control panel. "Computer, my office."

"Acknowledged."

"Stella!" Joy rushed through her at the sound of the computer's female voice. Just as quickly, she sunk into deep sadness.

His chest heaved in the sudden surge and sinking of her feelings.

"No. Of course, it's not Stella. That's the standard voice for all United Fleet starship computers." Her feelings sunk even lower. "I named the Maverick's computer voice 'Stella' when I was a little girl."

"Yes, I know. I will download her voice program to take with us when we leave."

She listened to the whirring of the lift carrying them up, deck by deck, to Jackson's office. Her hearing was so keen it buzzed his inner ear. The sensation of feeling all she did so close to him in Waking Moments almost sent him back into his tele-conscious, but she was not ready to go with him.

The door slid open.

She stepped off the lift and into Jackson's expansive office. "This doesn't look much like a United Fleet admiral's office and not at all like I remember." The floors and walls were gray, the sofas and chairs red, gold and black accented everything else. "These are Menelaen colors, imperial colors. Only the emperor or empress or crown prince or princess is permitted to use gold, red, and black together."

"Yes, I know." He listened to the door close behind them.

Alone. He breathed relief after so many years of longing to become one soul. He reached out to caress her innermost thoughts.

She glared at him, not comprehending his affection in their Waking Moments. She could not yet remember, but she did notice his physical appearance, his longer hair, smooth face, and royal blue jacket instead of a UF uniform.

"Remember me, Rowan." He approached, holding her gaze, face gentle. "Awaken to me."

"Awaken to...you pathetic old goat!"

"Rowan, please, listen to me! I am Ariez, the one who loves you! I am only 19 years old!"

"You're old and you're ugly and I hate you!" Junior threw up her hands. "Oh, I can't believe what a day I'm having! I'm deluged with psychos and megalomaniacs!"

"Rowan, please." Ariez followed her when she spun around for another tirade and he touched the palm of his hand to her cheek. Gently. "Your pain is unbearable to me."

"What are you..." She started to react, but the wave of his affection subdued her raging emotions at last. Her first breath was sharp, but the next softened. She faced him, lifting her eyes to meet his and then closing them in communion of soul. Her breathing deepened.

"Remember me." He entered her thoughts with all gentleness, finding them beautiful and soft. "I am yours. Every part of me belongs to you." He showed her the redwood trees of their Dreamtime together.

"Ariez?" She saw trees with her waking eyes.

"Yes, I am Ariez, the one who loves you." He slid hands around her waist and pulled her warm body against him, finally real together in Waking Moments.

"This..." She shook her head. "This...can't...we can't..."

"Rowan..." He meant to calm her with a kiss.

"No!" Her anger slammed him against the hull in a ball of flames.

"Rowan, please!" Ariez fell to the floor, the fire eating his face like a dragon.

"Ariez!" Junior grabbed a knit throw from the sofa and dove to smother the flames. "I'm sorry!" The smell of his burnt skin gagged her. "I'm

sorry." Instinct pulled her hands to his burnt face. *This has happened before.*

Yes.

*I remember.* She watched the skin regenerate, the black burns, the busted blood vessels heal. More than that, whatever remained of the hated Admiral Jackson also vanished until his face resembled the one in her history text, only more mature. *You're not a little boy anymore.*

Ariez got to his knees and lifted her to the sofa. He kissed her hand cupping his face and smiled.

"You're real. You're alive." The rush of further memories roared through her senses so that her sight blurred and stabbing pain shot through her forehead. She cringed, hands to temples.

"Here, I can help." Ariez smoothed hands over her face and kissed her eyelashes.

The familiar goodness dulled the roaring to a warm crawl, evaporating all pain and anxiety with it. She sighed and let him place her head on his shoulder. *Everything that's happened to me...*

*The misery you endured was from incompleteness. If we had come together at the appropriate time three years ago, neither of us would have suffered.* The blue eyes, always before keeping watch, now shine upon her, beneath her fingertips, her lips. *Your thoughts are pure beauty to me.*

# Chapter 18

The Mydis charged the Defensive Fleet battle group.

Delano watched his ships blast apart those of the enemy with heavy strikes to their nacelles. According to sensors, six hours had passed since Jackson took possession of the yacht with his daughter on board and he knew the monster well enough to know what that meant. Rage drove him back to the operations console. "Teleportment, locate and lock onto the Princess!"

"Viceroy!" The sensor technician glanced up. "Jackson's personal shuttlecraft is launching! I'm detecting the Princess' life signal on board!"

"Get her out of there now! Now!" Delano grabbed the weapons officer and threw him out of his seat, taking over tractor beam operations himself, sweat dripping off his ski-jump nose. His fingers flew over the console's many panels of light and snaking loops of color. He fired a focused laser beam and watched the viewscreen as it disrupted the shuttlecraft's shields. Hitting the teleportment controls, he leapt up. "Got her!"

Seconds later, Delano sprinted down a corridor, already his little girl's screams pierced his soul. He charged through the teleportment bay doors to see the android physician standing over her, but doing nothing.

"Why aren't you helping her?" He shoved the android aside and grabbed up his screaming child.

"There is nothing we can do, Captain," said the android, face blank. "The Princess must be returned to her husband at once. It is the only way to relieve her pain."

"Husband? My daughter is only sixteen...ssseventeen years old!" Delano choked on his own tongue and stood with her cradled in his arms.

"On the contrary, all scans indicate the Princess has just completed telepathic bonding with a male. She must remain in close proximity to him until her neural pathways fully adapt."

"My daughter was raped by a Menelaen on a human starship!"

"No, Captain. The Princess was not raped. There is no evidence Her Highness was coerced or forced in any way."

"Kaliban is powerful enough to intoxicate a female. There wouldn't be any evidence of force!"

The Physician pressed a spray-syringe to her neck and the screaming stopped. "This is a mild sedative. It will quiet her, but allow her to remain in communication with her husband."

"My daughter doesn't have a husband! Administer a stronger sedative!"

"Forgive me, Captain, but if I administer a stronger sedative she may suffer brain damage. The Marital Bond has only just been completed. I must inform you it is a violation of Sacred Law to separate a newly bonded couple. The female, in particular, requires time to adapt. The Princess is human. The process will require even more time during which she will be vulnerable. The Princess must be returned to her husband at once."

Naana appeared at his side. "Who did this?"

Delano looked at her. "Kaliban?"

"I do not sense his presence, Captain."

Delano shifted Junior around in his arms so her head propped up on his shoulder. "Rowan, who did this to you?"

She winced in deep, sharp pain.

"Rowan...Jun...Junior?"

Her eyes opened a bit.

"Junior, what happened?"

Her eyes rolled and closed. "Ariez."

"Ariez?" Serene Naana's voice sharpened in true horror. "Prince Ariez is alive?"

"I'll take care of my daughter myself now." Delano strode from the room, mind racing. He'd lived in the Menelaen Empire long enough to know Sacred Law was against them. Worse than that, Prince Ariez was



the Empress's rightful Heir Designate. To oppose him was to oppose the full might of the Menelaen Empire.

*Olivia will never take me back. I failed to protect our baby. He broke into a jog down the corridor and into the lift. It's been two decades since those female officers were raped by Menelaens and went insane. Isaiah just married the foremost neurologist in the quadrant. Maybe Dr. Williams can save Junior.*

He had to get out, and fast. The Maverick still hid among the asteroids. Somehow, they needed to escape the Mydis and find her before the Menelaens could stop them. *Olivia is keeping watch. She'll detect us right away, but what chance does she stand against this battle group?*

Olivia and the Maverick crew had outwitted this battle group before. Surely, they could do it again. There was nothing Olivia couldn't do when her maternal instinct was engaged. And he knew the Menelaen battleships. He could send Junior to the Maverick and run interference while Olivia escaped with her into Alliance space.

The searing pain forced screaming from Ariez as he lay on the shuttlecraft floor. Gone. Ripped away. The sorcerer Delano had ripped the Holy Bennu from his heart. Her screaming shook him across the Threshold.

Then, an unnatural sensation shimmered throughout his body, almost providing some relief, and he materialized on a medical bed inside an Orachi reconnaissance starship.

A subordinate's words filtered through the blearing agony. "Prince Ariez is suffering the Pain of Separation. Administer the sedative so that he may speak."

A spray-syringe was pressed to his neck and the pain dulled. The heaving of his chest sent aches rolling throughout his torso and to his fingertips. He rubbed his tight brow, body heaving with breaths. "Status."

"Prince, Ariez," the black-clad special operations officer braced him up so that he could sit. "Viceroy Delano keeps the Holy Bennu prisoner aboard the Mydis for the moment. His battle group is en route to Denahi. We have hailed his First Officer and demanded her immediate return to Your Highness."

"Commanders Bo and Naana are Kaiya-Bennu. They worship the souls of the dead and oppose union of church and state." Ariez's eyes burned with trying to keep them open. "Even if Delano died, they would

never release the Princess to me. Establish communication with the Empress on a secure line."

"Yes, Your Highness." The officer bowed at the neck and exited the medical facility.

Cupping face in hands, Ariez reached through the pain deep into his mind to find her, suffering even greater than he.

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Dreamtime.

Ariez appeared sitting among the ferns, cradling her on his crossed legs. "Shhh, My Love, I am here."

"Wha...what happened?" She trembled, face into his chest, tears staining his beige shirt.

"A monster came. He ripped you away from me before you could even maintain a conscious state on your own."

"It hurts." She clenched her teeth and dug her forehead into his chest. "It hurts!"

"I know. It hurts me too." Ariez kissed her. "Listen carefully. You must focus on your Waking Moments. Allow me to see what you see, hear what you hear." He placed hands over face and willed her to focus.

*Everything will be all right. Delano's voice! I'm taking you home to your mother now.*

Careful to hide his vengeful feelings, Ariez considered what would happen if Delano took his wife across the De-Militarized Zone.

The Intari would do anything to seize control of the Holy Bennu and, thereby, bring the Menelaen Empire to its knees.

War.

The Empress was dying.

Although Princess Ara held sway over the Imperial Council, he have most of the starship commanders on his side. Still, he could not afford a war with the Intari as well as her loyalists. If the humans were drawn into the fight, the anguish for Rowan be horrible and that compromise his ability to rule.

"Listen to me. Hear my voice." Ariez stroked his wife's face. "Please?" She managed to open her eyes a bit. "Ariez."

"Listen to me. I'm coming. The monster would deceive you. He promises reunion with your mother, but he will deliver you to the Intari instead."

"I want my mother." Her pretty face twisted up with emotion.

"I know. I will rescue you and bring your mother safely across the border to live with us at Pellosia." He stroked her cheek and kissed her quivering lips. "Everything will be all right."

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Waking Moments.

Ariez lifted his face.

"Prince Ariez." The Captain's voice alerted him over ship-wide communications.

"The Empress awaits you."

Sliding off the bed, Ariez braced himself against it. He took the crimson cape offered by the Physician and drew it over his shoulders so that the golden ra shown over his chest, upper left side. Breathing in determination, he strode from the room. He could not show any further weakness to his subordinates.

A minute later, he strode onto the command deck fully Crown Prince Ariez of the Menelaen Empire.

"Prince Ariez." Bishop Trinh bowed at the neck in greeting. "It is a tremendous relief to see you alive and returned to us." The fashion for religious leaders had not changed. The long green robes still matched Trinh's skull cap, lined with gold.

"Thank you, Bishop. I regret Meshell did not survive the quest. She sacrificed her life to save the Holy Bennu."

"Her mother and I are enormously proud of her service to you both. Dady remains in the temple, praying your son will come to you soon. She stands ready to care for him."

"I appreciate you both. However, the Princess is determined to care for our children with minimal assistance."

"As you say so shall it be." Trinh bowed again and faced the viewscreen. "Audio confirmation. Trinh-ra-fidelis. Your Imperial Majesty, I bring the son of your own body, the son of your dear husband,

the good and devout Prince Ariez before you. He is alive. I swear by the Sun and the Moon it is true."

"If the young man you bring before me is My Son, I will know." The screen lit up with the Empress on her throne, flanked by too veiled ladies-in-waiting.

Ariez expected his mother to have aged, but not so much. "Hello, Mother."

The frail creature in somber robes closed her eyes and reached for his thoughts.

Ariez allowed her access, knowing she would only spend enough time on him to verify he was her biological offspring. *My children will have a loving mother who will play with them.*

"My Son!" The Empress' eyes opened wide.

Ariez did not smile, but he let the gratification show on his face.

"You are alive!" The Empress stood, wobbled, and was caught by the arm and settled back down.

"The Intari Premarean Guard promised to help find the Holy Bennu. Instead, they trapped me in the guise of the human Admiral Jackson."

"Insidious creatures," growled the Empress.

"When I did find Her Holiness on my own, she transformed me back into my true self all at once."

"You have found her?"

"Princess Rowan of Denahi."

"I knew it! Your step-brother attempted the Courtship Rites with her, but was rejected."

"Yes, but that didn't stop him. I nearly died in his unsanctioned challenge."

"Yes, yes, Kaliban suffered severe neural trauma as well as burns to the face." The Empress was relieved by this evidence of his veracity.

"I have been engaged in the Courtship Rites with the Holy Bennu six years. Now, our Bond is complete."

"Then..." the Empress waved a hand "...where is she?"

Ariez drew oxygen into his chest and exhaled. "We were on our way to you when Viceroy Delano attacked and ripped her away from me."

The Empress gripped her armrests. "It is as we feared. Delano's service to the Empire has been flawless." She touched her forehead in extreme tiredness. "Now, he attacks my own dear son."

"It is a violation of Sacred Law to separate a newly bonded couple. The agony burdens every part of me, but my wife suffers even more greatly. She is human."

"I will send my ministers to retrieve the Princess."

Ariez stepped forward, heart fierce. "They will fail. I have access to Delano's plans through my wife. At this moment, he is preparing to take her across the DMZ."

"This could set off a war." Empress Araina pressed hand to forehead. "What do you ask of me?"

"Delano is still the father of the Holy Bennu. She would be devastated if he were to die. Grant me command of the Front Talon Fleet immediately. I must take his battle group with overwhelming force."

The Empress touched her chin and leaned back. "Some star captains are loyal to your sister. Princess Ara will not be pleased to learn of your resurrection and sub-sequent marriage to a fertile, red-haired female."

"Once it is known I have married the Holy Bennu, the political and religious powers will unite under our banner."

"You are the Incarnate Ra. May it be as you say." Great sadness weighed upon the Empress then and, for a second, she was only a dying mother filled with regret. "I will notify my Admiral of the Fleet at once. The Front Talon will join you within the hour. Bishop Trinh."

"Yes, Your Majesty?" Trinh stepped forward.

"Make every effort to convince Viceroy Delano to comply with Sacred Law. He has always insisted his daughter's happiness was paramount. Now, we will see if that is true."

Trinh bowed again.

Empress Araina covered her eyes with a hand and leaned elbow on the armrest. "End transmission." Her image vanished.

*My heir designate will never suffer this. He will have the love and loyalty of his brothers and sisters.* Ariez turned to Trinh. "Prepare a salutation for Viceroy Delano."

"Yes, Your Highness."

Ariez watched him proceed to the communications station. Closing eyes, he breathed deeply. *Only a little while longer, My Love, and the Pain of Separation will end.*

Delano watched the Mydis battle group on aft viewscreen of their shuttlecraft. He'd commanded it for so long. He looked back at his daughter, sedated and on the verge of losing her mind because he'd failed to protect her. "Nothing else matters now." He worked the helm. He'd known every necessary trick to leave the Mydis undetected, but he monitored a secure channel just in case his crew turned on him. He'd considered telling his Kaiya Rangers, but decided their loyalty was to Menelae first. They couldn't go along with what he was doing. From their point of view, he was kidnapping a newly bonded wife, an act which could kill her new husband who happened to be the next emperor.

A soft beep brought his attention to the security monitor. He shifted focus in time to see dozens of yellow dots enter the black and white spatial grid. He hit the red panel and watched the viewscreen.

The entire Front Talon Fleet appeared out of hyperspace, surrounding his battle group of just three starships.

"My...God." The viewscreen was full of battle ships!

Then, nine ships broke ranks and moved on.

"What the..." Delano tapped a few panels. "Computer, calculate course of those starships."

"Nine of the starships have laid in an intercept course with this shuttlecraft."

"Shit!" Delano raced fingers over the helm. "Computer, all power but life support to propulsion!" He kicked it up to maximum velocity, but the nine starships continued to gain.

The flagship gained on him even faster.

"Computer, identify the flagship."

"IMS Shirone."

"That ship wasn't supposed to be operational yet!" Delano knew the specs.

The Shirone was the first in a new fleet of starships, faster and more powerful than any which had come before.

The communications beeped and the computer spoke. "Incoming hail from IMS Shirone."

"Maybe I can buy us some time." Delano said it while still wondering who could be commanding the Shirone. "Let's hear it."

Princess Ara did not go into battle, but sent her lapdog, Kaliban. Yet, Naana had not sensed his presence around Junior.

The viewscreen illuminated with the face of a very old nemesis.

"Jackson!" The rage boiling decades in his heart exploded. "I'm going to kill you!"

"Prince Ariez, actually," said the hated, but youthful face.

"Prince Ariez." Delano gripped the communication console's edge. The resemblance to Jackson was unmistakable, but not even cosmetic surgery could have transformed Jackson into this boy. "Does the Empress know you've been feeding Menelaen secrets to the Intari?"

"Babbling old fool." Ariez stepped down from his command chair. "The only reason you will live is because you are the father of my wife. Release Princess Rowan to me now and I will allow you to flee across the De-Militarized Zone. The Alliance may imprison you for crimes against them, but they do not practice capital punishment. We do."

Delano looked back at his daughter asleep in the medical bed, the side curved up over her. *Getting her home to Olivia is the only thing that matters now.*

"Lower your shields," said Ariez. "We will teleport the Princess aboard this ship and then you may go. Consider the shuttlecraft a wedding present."

Delano wheeled his head around. "Go to hell!" He slapped com and the Prince's image vanished. The brown spots on sensors revealed their true nature- asteroids! The starships were too large to follow the little shuttle into the field.

The shuttle shook to all-stop, caught in a blue tractor beam.

"No!" He rushed to reconfigure shields to prevent teleportation, but not quickly enough. He felt the shimmering sensation and looked back in time to see his daughter vanish. "Junior!" He lunged at her, as though he could keep her safe with his bare hands.

Too late.

The god of the underworld had taken Persephone for his own.

Delano felt the loss of his daughter like a rock in the chest.





# Chapter 19

Olivia leaned on the tactical console and wondered if she irritated Sachi working there.

"Captain."

Olivia cocked her head at Ashley's breathy tone. "What is it?"

Lips white, Ashley responded, "Um, I'm intercepting a communiqué from the Alexander's First Officer to central command."

"What's it about?"

"Captain." Ashley looked up and pressed earpiece with forefinger. "The Alexander has been destroyed in battle and..."

"Destroyed?"

"Confirmed. The First Officer reports that...he says that Admiral Jackson wasn't Admiral Jackson. He was a Menelaen in disguise- Prince Ariez."

"A spy," said Lieutenant Mir from the helm.

"Prince Ariez?" Olivia glanced at him. "Doesn't make sense for the Empress to send her only biological son, a teenager, on such a dangerous mission. And wasn't he dead?"

Sachi raised brow. "Guess he got over it."

"Go on, Mr. Ashley." Olivia straightened.

"The First Officer reports they captured a shuttlecraft with a Menelaen princess on board. The fake Admiral Jackson then reverted to his true self and disappeared with the princess during the battle."

"Battle? With whom?" Olivia started for her command chair.

Ashley checked the communiqué. "The Mydis."

Olivia lost all feeling in her face. "Mr. Ashley, if Edward Delano is a Menelaen Viceroy, what does that make Junior?"

"Uh..." Ashley swallowed hard "...a Menelaen princess."

"Princess?" Mr. Mir let his incredulousness fly. "Junior? Our Junior?"

"Good...lord!" Isaiah emerged from the lift. "So, it wasn't a dirty old pervert we were dealing with. It was a horny little teenage boy all along."

"Not so little," said Ashley. "He's a Seventh Level Master of the Sword in the Kaiya Arts, trained from birth to rule the Menelaen Empire."

Isaiah propped hands on hips, forward of the command chair. "Not unlike Alexander the Great who set out to conquer the world at age twenty, coincidentally." He gave her a look. "Menelaens achieve adulthood at age fourteen."

"Sachi..." Olivia started.

"Captain," Ashley interrupted for the first time in his life. "Captain, I'm receiving an imperial announcement on all frequencies. The Empress...the Empress announces that...that Crown Prince Ariez has completed the Marital Bond with Princess Rowan, daughter of Viceroy Delano and Queen Olivia of Denahi."

"My seventeen year old daughter is married?" Olivia sunk into her command chair.

"The Menelaen form of government is a hereditary monarchy." Isaiah came near.

"Without children the ruling dynasty collapses and civil war ensues. The Empress has only two biological offspring and one is sterile. Junior's reproductive system is completely healthy. Without contraception, she could give birth every other year well into her forties."

"Edward battled the next Emperor of Menelae over this." Olivia stood and locked gaze with him. "He's sacrificed all the wealth and power he's built up over the past two decades to protect our daughter."

"Captain," said Sachi. "This crew will go to hell and back with you."

Olivia looked at her. "Can we really charge the Menelaen Front Talon Fleet across the De-Militarized Zone in this rickety old starship? We'll be blown to bits and set off a war."

Isaiah harrumphed. "I'd sacrifice my own life for peace, but I will not sacrifice Junior's freedom."

"Tactical Alert, Commander Owada." Olivia resumed her command chair, red lights flashing around her head. The viewscreen revealed

nothing but stars and floating rocks, but her mama's heart knew better. "Hell, here we come."

Junior woke surrounded by warmth and filled with goodness. She blinked at the starry window and realized she laid open a white sofa, covered by a white silken comforter.

The door slid open.

She rose up and observed Ariez stride through, gray and black uniform, crimson cape, gold embroidered ra over his upper left chest.

"Sweet sleep?" He smiled for her and went down on his knees beside her.

"Very sweet." Junior fingered the gold clasp holding his cape. "You look so knotty in this." Her ears heated up and she reached for the clasp.

"I have something for you." Ariez held out his closed hand.

"What?" She grabbed that hand in both hers.

"It is very special. Perhaps I ought put it away until after dinner." He tried to pull away.

"Oh, no, you don't!" Junior pried his fingers, but he was just a little bit stronger and got to his feet faster.

"Definitely too special. Sparkles too much in the starlight." He started for the dressing room. "I will place it in a security alcove."

"Give it to me now!" She launched off the sofa and chased him across their living area, right up over the next sofa and through the dressing room and the bathing chamber. "Ariez!"

Laughing, he escaped through another hallway, back into the living area and then into the dining room. He dodged her behind the table and raked hand through his wavy blond hair. "Perhaps, we should discuss this." He swaggered back through the doorway.

"You discuss it!" Junior scrambled right up and over the table and tackled him to the floor. Rolling with him, she grabbed his hand and tried to pry the fingers apart again. "Give it to me!" She jabbed his ribs until he laughed too hard to hold on any longer.

"All right! All right!"

A silver something fell from his hand to the white carpet.

Junior picked up the silver necklace, sat up, and examined it under the lights. "It's beautiful." The whisper soft chain clasped a crescent pendent

upon which was etched a bird, wings outstretched. "This is one of those birds I saw on Kursk, the ones which look like Japanese cranes."

"The emblem of the Holy Benu." He pulled back his collar to reveal a gold chain, wide, and etched with a dragon. "And this is the emblem of the Incarnate Ra."

She smoothed a finger over the face of it, and up his neck to his chin and drew his lips down for a kiss. "Let's take a bath."

Ariez exhaled and caught her hand. "My presence is necessary on the command deck. I had only a moment to visit. I must go now."

"Why?" Angst spiked along the back of her heart.

"I have been away from the Empire a very long time. I have a great deal of work to do now that I have returned."

"What sort of work?"

"According to Sacred Law, the Imperial Heir Designate must have offspring to succeed the Throne, but Princess Ara is sterile. Now that I have returned, married, she no longer has an excuse to hold onto her power. Yet, she is not willing to relinquish it. The Imperial Council is holding a special session."

"Oh."

"I will stop in for dinner." Ariez kissed her. "In the meantime..."

"I'll go with you." Junior stood and offered him a hand. "I need to call my mother and I'll need the communications console on the command deck to cut through static in the Mae Jemison Asteroid Belt."

"Impossible." Ariez stood and laced his fingers with hers.

"Impossible? There isn't a computer I can't hack." But, maybe it wasn't the computer he was talking about. "My mother is going to freak out when she finds out about us!"

"The danger is too great at this time. As soon as the matter with Princess Ara is settled, I will send a consular ship to bring your mother to us on Pellosia." Ariez kissed her hands. "I have awakened your Maternal Phase and filled you with my essence. Our baby will be with us when we arrive at Pellosia. He will keep you company when I am away."

"Baby?" Junior froze, mind suddenly rushing back over the previous hours since they completed their bonding. "Oh, my God, we didn't use any... Ariez, we can't..."

"Shhh." Ariez touched her lips with his fingertips. "Now that our bond is complete, we can have anything we want. I know how you love babies."

"But, that doesn't mean I want one right now! I haven't even taken entrance exams to the Academy yet. We need to talk." Even as the words came out, she tried to fathom why contraception had never occurred to her before. *Menelaens control fertility telepathically.*

"I have all your thoughts now." He kissed her and strode for the door.

"I don't think you do." Junior watched him pass through the doors and followed him on numb feet, but the door remained closed for her. "Computer, open door."

"Unable to comply. Imperial authorization, Crown Prince Ariez, required."

"Open the damn door!"

"Unable to comply."

Anger flashed, but then Ariez's calming hand passed over her face unseen like an extinguishing blanket. Filled with unreasonable goodness, she lost the battle to think and sunk to the floor, asleep.

Some time later, Junior woke and discovered Ariez's attention elsewhere. His thoughts were focused entirely on tactical status and incoming reports from the Imperial Council. She lifted her face off the floor and pushed herself up.

Ariez believed he had access to all her thoughts, but now she was certain he did not. After their rocky courtship, perhaps it never occurred to him she might exceed a Menelaen female's abilities through the Marital Bond. She closed her eyes, quieted her emotions, and listened in.

*You have something on Delano?* Emotions dark, Ariez approached a station.

*Delano?* Junior was sure she knew that name, as though it belonged to someone she knew long ago.

*Yes, Prince Ariez.* A subordinate's voice. *He was rescued by Admiral Park and the Kaiya-Bennu in a small, cloaked battleship. It vanished on a pursuit course.*

Ariez's emotions blackened. *How did Admiral Park come into possession of an experimental ship? Pause. Nevermind. Delano is a cunning warrior. Even with one battleship, he could pose a threat to the Princess. Maintain scans.*

Junior lost interest when he moved on to the boring Imperial Council reports. A minute or two of that and she was ready to climb the walls. But, then, she heard a subordinate say:

*Prince Ariez, I have detected Princess Ara's battle group on long range sensors!*

Ariez's voice responded too harshly to comprehend.

Shoom! All the windows went black around Junior. An energy shield activated within them, the walls, the ceiling, and the floor, buzzing her spine. "A gilded cage."

Through Ariez's eyes, she saw plasma blasts on a screen, fightercraft hammering shattered bulkheads. *A battle!*

Junior put one foot under her and shot up, towards the door. She knew it to be locked, but all Menelaen starships had computer interfaces located near interior doors. Spreading her hands on the wall, she reached out with all her senses. The energy shielding made a shooming sound which she disregarded at once. She felt along the wall until she reached the hum.

Stepping back, Junior hoped like crazy the interface could be accessed through voice interaction. "Computer, display interface."

"Enter code now."

Junior frowned, but an instant later realized the code resided deep inside the mind of Ariez. She closed her eyes and searched. *Deep breath.*

Ariez sat in the command chair, body fired with combative emotion. He did not notice her.

Junior opened her eyes in satisfaction. "Computer, the code is 'rowanmysoul.'" "Acknowledged." The cover slid away from the computer interface.

"Main viewscreen, command deck."

The interface displayed the battle – a dozen battleships, countless fightercraft, spitting fire, bulkheads breaking apart, nacelles exploding and hurtling through space. In an instant, she broke through Ariez's blockade against her father's memory and much of what was lost returned. "Dad's trying to get me back. He'll never make home to Mom that way. He'll just get himself killed."

A sickening feeling worked its way up Junior's throat. "Computer, identify lead enemy vessel." She looked over her shoulder at the bed.

"The IMS Luhfay."

"Princess Ara's flagship."

"Correct."

"This is the first battle of a civil war."

"Available data supports your conclusion."

*Others before self.* Junior drew a deep breath and released. She caught her forehead in hand. *Others before self.* Fisting her hand, she pressed it to her lips. *There can be no happy ending for me.* She narrowed focus on the emergency icon at the screen's bottom left. "Computer, display evacuation plan for the Imperial Chambers."

The screen illuminated with a map of the entire deck and corresponding escape routes. She pressed finger to a pink line leaving the dressing chamber.

Junior strode for the dressing chamber in her long, silky nightgown. "Don't think. Just do." She found her white Kaiya uniform and white boots to match. The nightgown dropped and she pulled the uniform top over her head. Pants and boots pulled on, she yanked her long, red hair back into a ponytail fastened by a fabric strip ripped from her

nightgown.

Thus clad, Junior faced the appropriate floor panel.

*Rowan, what are you doing?*

Junior felt the air on her eyes. *Risk no thoughts.*

*What do you mean?*

"I love you, but..." Junior took a deep breath and exhaled. A few tears escaped. "I'm sorry. I can't do this with you."

*Sorry? Do what?*

"Computer, activate scramble chute."

The floor panel receded and Junior jumped in feet first.

NO!

Whooosh! Down the chute she slid, hitting the fighter seat with a hard thud. She grabbed the helmet in front of her and yanked it on as the cockpit closed in around her and sealed. On autopilot, the Stinger fightercraft moved into position for launch. It looked like a bullet with sharp wings. The beeps and sirens alerting technicians to her unauthorized launch mixed with hums and buzzing as the hacked computer thwarted their efforts to stop her. *Now's when all my childhood antics pay off!*

Just as the Stinger settled into the launch tube, Junior caught sight of Ariez landing in a second Stinger for pursuit. *This is going to be a hell of a day.*

The Stinger shot out of the Chiron and right into battle. Junior hung onto the yoke and dodged missiles over her left wing. Spinning over the Chiron's top, she focused on her path of escape, letting the blasts and searing fire diminish into background noise.

Only Ariez knew she'd left the Chiron, for he was mortified at losing track of her again. *Ara will kill you!*

"Better that than a civil war which could kill millions." Junior didn't need to speak into the flight mask's com system.

Ariez could hear and see everything she did. *This conflict will end when the people realize we have married! Do you still have no idea of your own importance?*

The battle's edge came into visual range and Junior wondered if the tactical officers realized something was amiss with two fighters bugging out. "I cannot allow myself to be used as a catalyst for war. It defies all I know to be good and true."

*You are a catalyst for peace!*

Junior glared over her shoulder at two battleships colliding, wreckage breaking away and fightercraft smashing into it. "You call that peace?"

*Rowan...*

"Fight your own damn war! I'm going home!"



## Chapter 20

Olivia sat to her desk, studying the picture of her husband and daughter together in climbing gear. Her wedding picture stood next to it. In a third, she held Junior, five years old. Her daughter clung to her hip, wearing a white dress and crown of pink roses. *My mother's birthday party.*

A beep interrupted her thoughts. She pressed the desk-com. "Delano here." Her gold wedding rings flickered in the overhead lights, Celtic swirls gleaming.

Sachi's voice came over com. "Captain, we're receiving a distress call from a Menelaen shuttlecraft. It's under attack."

Ferocity blew through Olivia's chest and she jumped up. "Intercept course! Maximum velocity!" Onto the Bridge she strode and took her command chair from Sachi. "Bring all weapons on-line." The red tactical lights flashed around her head. She fixed gaze on the starry viewscreen. *Junior.*

Seconds passed and the Maverick's hyperdrive engines roared.

"Coming into visual range," reported Sachi. "Viewscreen."

A Menelaen scoutship battered the tiny shuttle against the stars.

Olivia gripped handrests. "Destroy their weapons!" She watched the Tryon

Cannons fire as they swooped over the two smaller ships. "Take out engines and jam transmissions." Another couple of blasts sent the scout ship spinning away, adrift in space. "Tractor the shuttle and get us out of here before anything else shows up."

"Yes, Captain," said Sachi.

The blue tractor beam grabbed the disabled shuttle and towed it in.

Olivia launched out of her seat and strode for the lift, hitting wrist-com as she went. "Medical team to the Hangar Bay."

Seconds later, Isaiah followed her as she broke into a jog and entered the Hangar Bay. The shuttlecraft came to rest and emergency crews raced to provide de-con, fire extinguishing if needs be, and security, just in case her instincts were off.

A technician jammed a device into the hatch and ripped it open.

The gangplank lowered. A young woman stumbled out first, saying something in Menelaen and gesturing to the interior.

Olivia tapped her wrist-com, adjusting the translator. "I'm Captain Olivia Delano."

"Delano?" The woman fell to her knees. "Sacred Mother!"

A young man came down, holding the arm of another, much older man.

The young woman rose to her feet and gestured to the old man. "Admiral Park."

Isaiah cocked his head. "He's the one who adopted Edward."

"Yes!" The young woman nodded. "Yes, adopted!"

Olivia couldn't stand it. She took a long step forward and grabbed the woman by upper arms. "Where the hell is my daughter?"

The young woman broke down into sobbing.

Olivia released her.

"My granddaughter," said Admiral Park in deep, heavily accented voice. He pulled arm out of the young man's hand. "Your daughter has been abducted by Prince Ariez, the one who had assumed the identity of Admiral Jackson for a time."

"Yes, we know." Olivia nodded once. "I just received a personal communication from the Empress congratulating me on their marriage."

"My granddaughter was coerced into that marriage." Park confirmed her fear. "As the eldest child, Princess Ara was Imperial Heir Designate. However, she cannot bear children. Prince Ariez knew if he married a fertile red-haired female, he would unseat her."

"Why red hair?" Olivia's brow pained and she smoothed a hand over her own auburn tresses.

"The legend of the Holy Bennu states that she will be reincarnated as a red-haired princess. The genome for red hair is extinct among my people."

Olivia exchanged looks with Isaiah.

"Your husband is in the process of rescuing Princess Rowan with the help of my commanding Kaiya." Park waved a hand over the young man and woman who held each other, utterly terrified. "These are my subordinate Kaiya, Lieutenants Jae and Lali. They have completed the Marital Bond."

"Kaiya Rangers." Olivia had studied up on them. *If they're warriors, why are they so frightened?*

Admiral Park showed no fear. He stood there as dignified as a bronze statue. "Kaiya-Bennu, actually. Our order is a secret one, dedicated to serving and protecting the Holy Bennu with our lives or our deaths. Of course, I never told Edward this. I am certain you are aware he is not one for organized religion."

Remembering protocol at last, Olivia gestured to Isaiah who was anxious to treat their scrapes and bruises. "This is my Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Isaiah Freeman."

Lali fell at Isaiah's feet. "My Lord Doctor, please, we need children!"

Jae knelt too, hands around his mate's back. "Please, we are your servants. Please, share maternal blessings. Please."

Olivia's mouth fell open.

Isaiah also went slack-jawed.

Karana arrived and went down on one knee to help Lali stand. "Oookay, I'm Dr. Williams. Come on, it's all right. My husband and I are happy to help."

"That's right." Isaiah helped Jae stand. "Let's get you to the medical bay and start running some tests. Come on now. Everything's gonna be all right."

"My Lord and Lady Doctors, please, wait," said Park.

The desperate couple bowed heads in concession, though they wept.

"The Star Captains' Daughter has been telepathically bonded to a dragon. She will require all of your skills upon arrival, Dr. Williams."

"Understood. I'll be ready." Karana led Lali towards the door. "Don't worry. Isaiah can run your tests while I prepare for Junior."

Olivia watched her doctors lead the couple out and remembered her own anguish with infertility.

"My Daughter," said Admiral Park, taking her hand. "We have much to discuss." He started leading her out, as though he'd lived on the Maverick for years. "Allow courage to fill your heart. My Son will not fail."

"I can see you with my waking eyes." Junior scanned the blank stars behind her. She'd lost Ariez in a junkyard orbiting a lifeless planetoid, but he was there. She could feel it.

*There is nowhere you can go where I cannot find you. I sense your presence at all times.*

Junior wondered where the airsickness bag was kept. *Fighter pilots aren't supposed to get sick.*

*Adjust your scanner. We're being pursued.*

Junior tapped the purple-lit panel. "Oh, shmutz. And this is a short-range fighter too." She saw the leading edge of a swirling mass of hot pink gases.

*They cannot track you within the nebula. I will guide you to the Mebora moon. I have signaled my ships to intercept us there.*

The nebula grew larger in the cockpit window to the stars. "I'm so tired." Junior rubbed her temple, trying to remember her days of boundless energy.

*This will soon be over and you will be safe on Pellosia.*

Junior felt his emotions wrapping around her like a warm blanket, the hope for comfort and peace in his own soul. "I believe in your intentions, but there are forces bent on destroying you. The Orachi would manipulate you even as the Premerean Guard did. I must escape across the DMZ. It's the only way to prevent civil war."

*A time of civil unrest cannot be prevented, but I can protect you from the unpleasant knowledge of it.*

"Oh, like you've been blocking and erasing so many of my other memories?" Junior felt the flames of wrath.

*What do you mean? Why are you angry?*

"Why am I angry?" Junior let her head slump over. She knew Ariez couldn't understand. From his point of view, he was being a loving husband, protecting his wife from traumatic feelings.

*The Mebora moon is straight ahead. Do you see it on the sensors?*

Junior released a sigh which felt like snake slithering out of her dry throat. "Yes." She studied the grid. "I'm reading an oxygen atmosphere. Database indicates it's an abandoned mine."

The swirling gases cleared and the reddish-brown moon came into full view. She piloted the Stinger down through the atmosphere and into a gaping cavern, passing by rusty equipment long silent and still. Extending the landing struts, she touch down.

Junior launched out of her seat, catching a glimpse of Ariez's fighter-craft landing as she hurdled the lowering gangplank. Sprinting into tunnels lit only by glow crystals, she heard his hatch pop. She wasn't sure what she could accomplish running from him. For all she knew, Dad was dead. There was no way home.

"Rowan!"

Death or a lifetime of splendid incarceration, it wasn't a pretty choice.

Junior squeezed through a crack in the rock and into a cavern. Instantly, a half-dozen pressure rifles snapped down on her as target. Loyalists! "Okay, bad idea!"

"Enough of this nonsense, Princess Rowan." A Loyalist commander pushed through his troops. "It is time to fulfill your destiny with Lord Kaliban."

"I own my destiny."

A subordinate lieutenant staggered back as though pushed by an unseen force. "My Lord, the Marital Bond is complete! She may already carry the Seed of Ariez."

"An unborn prince is easily disposed of."

Junior pressed hand to her tummy. "You would kill...my..." Anger started boiling up inside her.

The lieutenant's eyes widened. "But, My Lord, I feel the heat of her wrath!"

The commander realized it too and backed away. "Destroy her!"

Like a giant bat in the night, Ariez attacked his prey. His sword slashed through the first Loyalist and then another, the Power of the Bond propelling him in frightening swiftness. Junior didn't have time to cover her face from the carnage. His blade destroyed the Loyalists' high-tech weaponry before they could fire one shot. Her spine rattled. His back to her, he seemed to be cleaning them away, swinging his dark blade through the torso of one and then through the neck of another. She could feel the strength of him against her.

Ariez severed the Commander's hand when he drew a secret pistol and plunged sword into his gut. "I am the Sun! Feel my wrath!" He shoved the man back into a heap with the others.

The energy which invigorated Ariez in battle sunk Junior to her knees, clutching both sides of her head. She couldn't cry. She couldn't think.

Ariez wiped his sword on one of the corpse's shirt and sheathed it on his back. "Rowan." He rushed to her and gathered her up. "Shhh, it's over. Everything is all right." He half-carried her, half led her down a tunnel into another cavern, away from the bloodshed. "I am sorry I could not shield you from feeling that, but it was the only way to stop them from destroying us." He settled her gently down in the next cavern and cupped her face in one hand. "I will comfort you."

Junior's lashes weighed down with his affection. "Wait!" She grabbed his wrist and pushed it away. "Stop!"

"I must protect you."

"No. I'm human. I need my memories – all my memories."

"But...they fill you with such anguish."

"I need them to comprehend my past, present, and future circumstance." Junior gripped his collar in hand. "I must escape across the DMZ or die trying before this conflict escalates into a war which could kill millions. Once I'm gone, the various factions won't have anything to fight over."

"If only it could be so simple." Ariez held her shoulders close. "Listen to me, please. You've shared my thoughts. You know what I'm saying is true. Princess Ara adheres to the old ways. She has begun a rampage of conquest. Do you really think she'll stop at the De-Militarized Zone?"

Such an idea had not solidified in Junior's mind until he said it. There were so many thoughts and feelings competing with each other. "Even if you succeed in stopping her, you will be Emperor of Menelae. Imperialism is an oppressive form of government. I cannot be a part of it!"

"A constitutional monarchy is a republic. There are still sovereign nations on Earth with that form of government; England for example."

"Do you really think the noble caste will tolerate free elections and the sharing of power?" Junior let her incredulous tone fly.

"Not right away. No. Of course not. But, in time and with you as my conscious and the symbol of hope and peace..."

Junior let her gaze sink away.

"The Menelaen people must evolve or our society will crumble within a decade. Princess Ara knows this and she would accomplish it through conquest."

Junior knew he spoke truth. "What of my parents? Are they doomed to a lifetime of misery for the sake of interstellar peace?"

"I'll send your father across the DMZ to your mother."

"He won't go without me! Even if you hog-tied him and sent him across in a shuttlecraft, Mom would blame him for losing me and hand him over to be tried on war crimes he didn't commit! Don't you see? They won't understand! I have to go."

"It's too dangerous. I'll send my best diplomats..."

"Ooh, God." Junior groaned and caught forehead in hand. "Your listening skills are no better than theirs."

*I love you. Rest in my care.* Ariez smoothed a hand over her face. Within his care, she would know only the peaceful Pellosian mountains and the joy of their children. Worshipped by billions, she would unite the Menelaen Empire under his rule forever.

Knowledge of her father's death and her mother's broken heart never torment her. All memory of it be erased beneath warmth and pleasurable caresses.

*This isn't a marriage. This is an addiction.* Junior gripped his shoulder when his mouth covered hers. Gone. Alone in a room with only him. The windows to everything else opaque. Nothing. Except a feeling.

A feeling like the last gasp of air before drowning.

A sword being unsheathed, the slide of metal, the way it reverberated through the oxygen molecules brought Junior to her senses and she gasped.

Ariez stood fast with her gripped tightly to his side. He whipped his sword back out of its sheath and assumed a combat stance.

"It's all right, Junior. I'm taking you home to your mother now."

"Dad..." Junior tried to turn to her father's voice, but she was gripped so tightly she couldn't.

Ariez's black sleeve cloaked the white of her jumpsuit, as his mind tried to cloak hers. He chanced a quick look at her expression. "Liar! You ripped her away from her mother, used her for political gain, and filled her heart with despair!"

"You're right. I did all those horrible things...and worse...and I deeply regret them. Take me to stand trial, but let my daughter go."

"I will make you pay for all the misery you've caused my wife!"

Junior struggled on wobbly legs and tried to turn far enough to see her father.

"Wait, please..."

Delano took a step forward, balancing his body for the coming battle. "Release her, Ariez!"

"Rowan is my wife! Our Bond is complete!" Ariez lowered her to the rocks behind him, keeping his sword trained on Delano.

Junior backed away on her bottom, finally catching sight of her father in warrior's stance. With Ariez's attention divided, his cloak over her thoughts loosened.

Dad's rich voice filled the cavern. "Junior belongs to herself and she only wants to go home."

"Rowan's home is with me now!" Ariez circled out, both hands taking the hilt. "Your grandchildren will bear my countenance!" He flew at his enemy even as he railed, smashing his gray blade down on Aodhan with all the power of his wrath.

Delano blocked, twisted Ariez's sword around and kicked him back.

*There can be no happy ending for me.* Junior rose to her feet, bracing herself back against the rock wall. *Embrace the memory of my mother's womb.* In that moment, she was there, snuggling safe. Warm. Purely loved.

Then a scream.

Her own.

Ariez attacked again. Thrust. Block. On his butt, his knee. Jumped back up and the two locked in equal power.

Delano stomped and hooked Ariez's foot and the two crashed into the dirt together.

Ariez caught an elbow in his ear. Spin away, back onto feet. SMASH! Block Delano's thrust. Shove. Hammer. He hammered, smashing, smashing the blade, forcing him to stutter back on his feet. "If you kill me, Rowan will die too!"



"She has rejected you, Ariez!" Delano hit the rock floor with a vicious spinning assault and rolled back onto his feet. "You would have destroyed me with the Power of the Bond by now!"

"No!" Ariez knew the old man taunted him with nonsense, but it fueled his hatred nonetheless.

Delano spun to his side, avoiding a plunge into the gut, and ran up a rising, rock ledge. He spun Aodhan around and drew it back to his ear. "I'm taking my daughter far beyond your reach, Ariez! I will leave you to rot in anguish!"

A scream peeled from Ariez's stomach and he charged.

Delano blocked, pivoted and shoved.

The blackness engulfed Ariez in a second or two of air and then his body hit the bare rock, breaking it in searing pain which escaped his mouth in agony. In the same instant, he felt Rowan's pain and cried out for her.

The healing came like an angel in a bright light, flooding over his body, knitting his bones together, licking his wounds until they vanished.

Ariez drew a deep breath and shoved himself away from the ground and up to his feet. He found his sword, sheathed it, and dug fingers and toes into rock for the climb.

Whatever sorcery Delano had employed, their love had prevailed over it once more. *The Holy Bennu has unfurled her wings!* He gloried in the power propelling his climb up the rock wall. Reaching the top, he strode forward, his face burning hot with vengeance. His sight pierced the dim light to see his adversary hunting Rowan in the dark. He grabbed a rock from his path and pulled it back to his ear.

Ariez shot the rock straight into Delano's head.

Delano fell forward onto his knees and then face first into the dirt.

Ariez never slowed his pace, running up and over rocks. He jumped from the last rock and whipped out his sword. He would free Rowan forever.

The flurry of movement barely registered. Within the same nano-second he swung his saber, the sword of Delano was picked up by his Seed and she smashed it into his own in an immovable block, bracing herself back on a knee.

"You will not touch him!"



# Chapter 21

Junior rose to her full height, her father unconscious behind her feet.

Ariez instantly withdrew and lowered his blade. He stepped back three paces, breathing hard. "This is unthinkable!"

"Well, start thinking, Bub, 'cause it's really happening!" Junior gripped Aodhan in both hands, her mother's sword given to her father on their wedding day.

"Rowan, he is monster!" Ariez pointed a trembling finger at Delano. "He ripped us apart when our bond was new!"

"My father is no more a monster than you are! Neither one of you will listen to a thing I say!"

"You're confused."

"My thoughts are clear and they are my own." Junior kept balance, stepping one foot over another to black access to her father. "I'm taking Dad home to Mom now. That is why I came to the Menelaen Empire and that is what I'm going to do."

"You are the Holy Bennu of Menelae." Ariez sheathed his sword and lifted his empty hand towards her, approaching. "I am the Incarnate Ra. It is our destiny to lead our people into a new era of peace and prosperity."

"Your religion! Not mine!" Junior's rage startled him back on his feet. "You can go in for all the 'Ra and Boo-noo' bullshit if you want, but you're not taking me with you!" She sprang like a leopard, wielding her father's sword.

Ariez whipped his dark blade out to block her attack. "Rowan!" The Irish

Gallowglass smashed into his defense. "Our Bond is complete!"

Junior drew back. "Well, I'm getting an annulment!" She lunged into his block again. Smash, twist, front-kick to the kneecap.

Ariez blocked her next attack to the back of his neck, backing, sword raised in defense posture. "Our Bond is unbreakable!"

"Like hell it is, you stupid son of bitch!" Junior charged him, smashing into his sword, smash, smash.

Ariez met her block repeatedly, the clashing of their metal filling the caverns. He spun out of one and leapt onto a boulder. "If you truly wanted to break our bond, you would have burned me to death at your feet."

"I...I don't want to kill anyone!" Junior circled out. "I only want to take my father and go home."

"Your home is with me now. I will send your father across the DMZ."

"Don't start that again!" Junior chased him up the rock and down the other side, leaping after him, and back into the sand. "I've told you it won't work!"

"Then, burn me and be done with it." Ariez raised sword for her next attack.

Risk no thoughts. Instinct. Human instinct. Junior braced her leg when their swords locked, his upper body strength pushing her down. "Your power comes from the Marital Bond." She spun backwards out of the impasse. She backed away, breaths shooting in and out of her chest like knives.

"As does yours." Ariez's chest heaved too. "Only by accepting your destiny will you know this truth."

Junior drew back her sword for another attack. "I'm human! My power comes from within myself! I don't need you!"

"You are not human, Rowan! Not anymore!" Ariez reached a hand towards her again and this time she gasped.

Junior felt the pull into Dreamtime, saw the waving green grasses. "No..." The word left her in a breath. Her sword being ripped from her hand brought her back to their Waking Moments.

Aodhan clattered across the stones and into the darkness.

And, then, Ariez held her in his arms, his sword sheathed once more. "Do you see?" His voice softened, struggling with his breath. "We are one."

She smoothed hands up his strong shoulders. "No. I have to go. My father will die if I don't. My mother's heart will break. I have to..."

"I am not angry," he said, touching her pink lips with his trembling fingertips. His tone became more and more helpless, kissing her. "Please, please, do not think I could ever be angry with you. I love you."

"I know you love me, but I..."

Ariez stroked her face, fingers reaching up into her hair. His face glowed, his blue eyes shone in subjection to her influence. "I was angry with those who drove you to this madness with their lies. They would use you for their own selfish purposes, but...I promise I will protect you."

Junior felt his lips take hers, the warmth of the Bond sweep over her. Before it could take over, she dropped out of his clutches, twisting to break free. Diving under his arm, she scrambled away and up the rock slide on all fours. She squeezed through a crack at the top and back down another rockslide on the other side. She glanced back to see him emerging through the same crack.

Escape from his physical embrace was easy, but she wouldn't get her father out alive with a dragon on her tail. The cavern before her soared up like the ceiling of a great cathedral, but with stalagmites and stalactites like gigantic teeth to crush her. She hid among the fallen spires and jagged piles of sedimentary, all the while feeling his constant petting of her thoughts.

*Rowan, I will take care of you.*

*Just my luck, I'm telepathically bonded to an intergalactic megalomaniac.* Junior pressed back into an indentation and disappeared into shadow. *No wonder I've been going nuts all this time.* She hoped he would pass over her, above, on the natural rock bridge on the other side, so she could sneak back to Dad and start dragging him out. She could only hope a shuttle or something waited somewhere nearby.

Ariez stopped right above her. "If you cross the DMZ, the Intari will target you for assassination...or worse."

She craned her neck to see.

His voice came like black velvet in the night. "There are no secrets between us."

Junior's eyes fluttered in the intoxicating effect of the Marital Bond. "I'm human," she whispered, squeezing her eyes shut. "These feelings can't be real."

And suddenly he dropped to his feet before her. "Yes, real." He took a step towards her, waving his hand in front of her face and drawing his

fingers to her chin. "Remember our first kiss?" He drew her back into his arms, holding her to him, caressing her forehead with his lips.

"It was only a dream." She clenched the fabric of his doublet in her fists, trying to hold on to the belief that she could not love him. Not really. Not humanly.

"We were children together." Ariez spoke in a soothing tone, holding her face against his neck. "Your heart is pure. You love without prejudice."

The truth of their merging rushed to replace all memory. She clung to one and let the rest fall into bliss. She slipped her fingers up into his hair and kissed him fully. She could see him glowing. "I do love you." The radiance of the Bond shimmered over her own hands, but she couldn't think or he would instantly know. She could only act. She suddenly jerked out of the kiss, looked over his shoulder and shouted, "Dad!"

Instantly, Ariez spun around, whipping out his sword to defend his wife.

Junior reached up to the ledge behind her, grabbed a melon-sized rock and slammed it down on his head. He dropped to the ground before her. The rock fell from her hands. She staggered back against a slab of sedimentary on numb legs, and then sunk to her bottom.

Ariez lay before her, unconscious by the strength of her own will. Her face twisted in the clashing of emotions within her. Need oxygen. A rush of pain like drinking ice water too fast made her grimace and grab her head in both hands. She almost cried out. But, then, it passed.

Breathing hard, she crawled to his side. An overwhelming draw pulled her hand to his face. When she touched him, a shimmer of energy left her and he groaned. Another sharp breath. She grabbed her hand away with the other. She gripped both hands together and pressed them to her lips. The Power of the Marital Bond could heal and wake him. The instinct to care for her mate burned within her.

She remembered the first time their thoughts touched, his little boy face growing into manhood, and, yes, their first kiss. She pushed down the memories when she realized her body shook in grief. *My father would have died.*

A glimmer of gold caught her eye and she looked. The dim light reflected the pure gold of the feather-soft ra chain about Ariez's neck. The instant she touched it, the clasp fell open in her fingertips. She grabbed it, pulling herself away from him on her bottom. *My heart will only break.*

Junior fastened the gold ra chain around her neck, concealing it carefully beneath the silver bennu necklace. She tucked both inside her collar and realized, for the first time, that her gold heart-shaped necklace was missing. "He took it. He made me forget." Tears dribbled down her red-hot cheeks. She ran her fingertip down his nose. "Keep it...and remember me."

He groaned, head shifting in the dirt.

Hands splayed out for balance, she stood. Feeling very sick from the adrenaline overload, she turned to climb the rock pile hugging her middle.

A couple of minutes later, Junior clambered down another pile of rocks and found her father where she left him, face down in the dirt. She tucked his arm to his side and rolled him over. Finding his sword among the rocks, she pushed it back into its sheath.

"Junior?"

"Dad?" Junior delighted in hearing her old childhood nickname spoken by him. Some warm tears trickled down her burning cheeks. She cradled his head in her arm. "Dad? Dad, it's okay. We're going home to Mom now."

"Please...forgive me."

Junior felt the skin of her face tighten and a sob well up. "I do. And so does Mom. I know she does."

"I saw you stop Ariez with your mother's sword." He touched her face with his fingertips. "I'm so proud of you."

*Well, that makes one of us.* Junior's countenance broke, realizing he was trying to say good-bye. "Daddy...Dad...do you remember...do you remember Mom brushing her hair?"

He smiled softly.

Junior sniffed, the tears pouring over her smudged face. "Her hair is so red, such a...deep, dark red and...I used to...I used to watch her...brush it every morning and it was like a beautiful...red wave over her shoulder...Dad? Daddy? Do you remember?"

Edward Delano's eyes almost closed. "Olivia..."

"We're getting out of here, Dad," Junior said, even as she felt the sobs overtaking her. She channeled it into anger. "We're done with this armpit of the galaxy! We're going home. I made a promise! I promised

Mom I bring you home...tied up in a sack! And you know how toasted she gets when we don't do what we say we will."

Dad looked at her, his lips still curled. Slowly, his eyes closed.

Junior grabbed her father under the armpits and pulled with all the strength left in her. Disregarding the sounds of battle above, the plasma blasts and shrieking of metal against rock, she focused on the hum of a starship at rest. Following the hum, she dragged her father over rocks, tiny steps backwards all the way. And all the while, dust and small rocks shook down from the ceiling. "Ground troops have landed."

Just as she reached the bottom of the gangplank, she heard plasma blasts coming down one of the tunnels. She reached for Aodhan, but then she heard a shout.

A second later, Commander Bo squeezed through a crack. "Holiness, I will help you." He grabbed her father under one armpit so she could concentrate her strength under the other. "Holiness..."

"Please, don't call me that."

Beling sprinted down the gangplank to help, pistol drawn for cover.

"Junior," Bo corrected. "Prince Ariez's personal fighter craft is here. Do you know where he is?" Like Mr. Mir, Jose, Mr. Ashley, and Chef Bot, he'd become an honorary uncle.

Nevertheless, Bo believed Ariez was something she knew he wasn't. He would kill Ariez in his unconscious state. "Uh...I...I don't know." A lie. Her nose stung. She threw her shoulder into heaving her father up the gangplank with his help. *What if the Loyalists find Ariez before his troops do?* She could hear the ground battle raging on. It was only a matter of time.

"Here," directed Bo, and they hoisted her father into a med-bed.

Junior hit the medical stasis button and a cocoon of energy enveloped him. She spun around to dash into the cockpit, but was stopped by the sight of Naana in morgue stasis right above her father. "Naana!" She grabbed the impexi-glass cover to free her beloved nanny.

"She died in the battle to free your father, Holiness." Beling caught her from behind. "It is only an empty shell. Commander Naana has rejoined her foremothers in the Celestial Garden."

*Heaven?* Junior looked at her. "We don't have time to grieve now."

"We do not."

Junior dashed for the cockpit.



Bo was already at tactical, hands racing all over the controls, studying the spatial grid. "Thank the Fathers we found you and Captain Delano before the Orachi found the Dauntless."

"The Dauntless?" Junior fell into the pilot's seat. There wasn't time for chit-chat. She knew the Dauntless had been her father's Defensive Fleet starship. "What's Beling doing?"

"Monitoring the cloaking device."

"Cloaking device? Crackling!" Yet, even as Junior felt the sub-light engines roar to life beneath her, she could not keep her thoughts from her mate. *Ariez*.

No response. He was still unconscious.

"Hold on to your butkis!" Junior punched the launch panel and watched the tunnel race by them. Her body slammed back into the seat and her stomach wrapped around her backbone. "Dad's gonna freak when he wakes up and finds out I flew this baby! Woo-hoooo!"

The Dauntless emerged from the mine and shot up through the thin atmosphere swarming with Menelaen ships blasting each other. Some of them turned canon ports and started battering their fore shields.

"Now's a good time to fire up the cloaking device, Beling!"

"Understood, Milady."

"Call me 'Gennie' from now on!"

"Yes, Mil...Gennie."

Junior dove hard to the right, dodging fire. The cloaking device came on-line and they vanished off sensors. "We're clear."

"Well done."

Junior had felt her old self for a moment, or maybe it was herself she had never been allowed to be. Studying the aft screen, she watched the Mebora moon fall away. Loyalist troops were swarming all over the mine and surrounding area. *Ariez, wake up!*

*Rowan!* He cried her name before his injuries were fully healed at her word.

*Loyalists are closing on your position!* She saw him grab his sword from where it had fallen into the dirt.

Ariez leapt up and sprinted away. *Where are you?* He clambered up the rocks.

Junior shook her head, face tightening. *Somewhere you cannot follow.* She could feel his wrath escalating, consumed by his Menelaen male instincts. *I was the one who struck you.*

*Delano deceived you.*

Junior sighed, watching the blasts and wreckage clear and the stars of endless space welcoming her home. *You still won't let go.*

*We are one soul.*

She could risk no more thoughts. Not his. Not her own. It was so exhausting. *I really am a scourge on the freakin' galaxy.* She rested forehead against hand, elbow on navigation console.

Bo reactivated her thoughts. "I am detecting a United Fleet starship on sensors."

Junior sat up straight and looked over. "Re-modulate sensors to a malaki-wan frequency." She tapped in some heading information and watched the tiny white dot on the black spatial grid transform into a golden triangle. "The Maverick!" She felt the cry come out and her chest heaved in the emotion. She spun to the communications controls and flew her fingers over it, inputting the new data. "This is the Dauntless to the USS Maverick. Please, come in!" Deep breath. "Mom?"

## Chapter 22

Olivia rose to her feet, intent on her viewscreen to the stars. "Junior!"

"Dad's really hurt," Junior's beautiful voice came over com. "I could really use a neurotically overprotective Mama Bear right now!"

"I'm on it, Baby!"

"Captain, the lead ship just locked on a tractor beam," said Sachi.

Olivia spun around and strode for tactical. Shoving tactical chief aside, she assumed controls. "Helm, I'm feeding you some coordinates. There's no room for error."

"Understood," said Lieutenant Mir, studying the coordinates. "We'll smash shields dropping out of hyperspace that fast!"

Olivia tapped her wrist-com. "This is the Captain to all hands. We're getting Junior out now. Grab something bolted down!" She watched the viewscreen flash and the largest Menelaen starship she'd ever seen appeared just as they smashed shields. The air shattered around them like lightening and everyone hung tight. Hitting the Tryon Canon, she blasted the tractor beam emitter and grabbed her baby out of the dragon's claw. "Got her! I've got her! Get us the hell out of here, Mr. Mir!"

"Yes, Ma'am! Getting the hell out!"

Coming about, the Maverick jumped back into hyperspace towing the Dauntless.

The Menelaen starship pursued, blasting the Dauntless engines.

Olivia left tactical to Sachi and resumed her command chair. "Full power to the aft shields. Keep him off our tractor emitter and engines."

"Captain!" Sachi raised her voice.

Olivia looked to the viewscreen just as an armada of Menelaen starships appeared. "My...God."

A nanosecond later, the lead ship broke off its attack to engage the armada. Some of the armada broke off and turned on the others.

"What...the...hell?" Olivia stood, hands going to her hips.

"They're fighting each other," said Mir.

Fleeing as they were, a few Menelaen starships managed to break the line and pursue. One blast to their aft shields later and another group of battleships appeared, swooping over the top of them.

"It's the Crazy Horse!" Shouted Ashley from com. "I've got Admiral Codetalker standing by!"

"Let's see him."

The screen lit up with Admiral Codetalker, standing forward of his own command chair, a fierce warrior charging into battle. "Olivia! His ass is mine now! Get your girl outta there!"

"Aye, Sir!" Oliva sat down. "Bring home the fire, Sachi!"

The USS Crazy Horse battle group swung widely to intercept the destroyers.

Another four flankships appeared a nanosecond later, overwhelming the splintered battle group, fighters darting in and around, spitting, and stinging.

"Someone tell me we can bring the Dauntless into our hangar bay!"

"It'll be messy, but we can do it." Sachi responded. "Jose, don't lose the hyperdrive engines."

"Hangar Bay, clear the decks," ordered Olivia. "We gotta big bird comin' in! Stand by, emergency crews."

Mr. Mir laughed midst the tension. "We're used to cleaning up after Junior." He lurched with the ship, studying his console. "Jose's standing by to kick it up to Mark 6."

Olivia watched the Maverick drawing the Dauntless closer and closer in until the smaller ship wedged into her hangar bay like a burger into a bun. The two starships married each other in a clash of titanium and sparks. The emergency doors slammed down, safe.

Sachi. "We have the Dauntless!"

"Understood," said Mr. Mir. "Sensors indicate a clear path to the DMZ with nothing but Alliance patrol ships in range." He looked around. "Recommend we slow to Mark 4 before we rattle apart."

"Mark 4, Mr. Mir. But, I won't breathe easy until we're across the border." Olivia felt the Maverick steady out at her usual speed. "Dispatch repair crews. Helm, alter course for the Eileen Collins Station. I'll be in the Hangar..." she jumped out of her command chair and rushed for the lift. "...or the med-bay."

A minute later, Olivia stood inside the door, gaze fixed on the heavily damaged starship wedged into the hangar. The fighters and shuttles traveled off the port and starboard now because the Dauntless left them no room here. She pressed fingers to her lips, watching the gangplank.

Jose dodged in between crew with fire extinguishers to visually assess the damage to the Maverick and the Dauntless. Just then, a Menelaen female with purple eyes and purple highlights in her black hair stumbled out and Jose froze, and then he heated up. His lips fell open. She looked at him with a mixture of surprise and curiosity, and he kind of just grinned.

Olivia pretended to be distracted by the repair crews.

"I am Beling," said the female, clutching a doll to her breast. She blushed red and covered the doll's face with her arm. "Subordinate Kaiya of the Holy Bennu."

"Uh..." Jose touched his chest. "Commander Fernandez."

"Commander Jose Fernandez, Chief Engineer of the USS Maverick." Beling cocked her head. "Yes. You are highly esteemed by Her Holiness."

"Thanks." Jose nodded to the doll. "She's pretty cute. My mother likes dolls too."

"Truly?" Beling's lips fell apart.

"Can I..." Jose waved a hand towards the door. "Can I...may I show you to the Mess Hall? You must be hungry."

"Thank you."

"Can I...may I take that for you?" Jose nodded to the burden she carried.

Beling let go of the doll and the duffle bag. She watched him carefully place the doll into the bag and slip the bag over his shoulder, purple eyes full of wonder. Together, they walked out.

Olivia raised her jaw back into place. *Menelaens and humans, together, here, on my ship...because of my daughter.*

A couple EMT's came down the gangplank with a hover-gurney between them. Isaiah hurried alongside, scanning the unconscious man thereupon. "It's all right, Olivia! Nothing we can't fix!" As they drew near, about to pass, she looked upon her husband lying, strapped, to the gurney. She could not see the gray in his hair, nor the lines on his face. She only saw the chiseled features of the man she'd married so long ago. A warm tear trickled down her face and she found she could not bring her lips together for the emotion. She watched him vanish through the door.

"Told you I'd bring him home tied up in a sack."

Olivia looked up without blinking, receiving her daughter back into her arms at last. She smoothed her hand over the mass of red waves on her shoulder. "Oh...oh...my God..."

"Oh, Mom, I am sorry! I'm so sorry!" Junior broke down, sobbing.

"You've been in the trenches. Things get dirty in the trenches." Olivia touched her daughter's chin with her finger, lifting her face. "My baby girl." Her face quivered. "You're all grown up."

"Yeah." Junior sniffed and stopped crying. "Somehow, I thought it would be a lot more fun."

Olivia cupped a hand to her daughter's face. "I am so...proud...of you."

"Well...good, 'cause..." sniff "...personally, I feel like absolute shmutz." Junior took the hand from her cheek and marveled at the wedding rings thereupon. She broke into a glistening smile.

"Let's check on your daddy." Olivia loosened her grip and walked with her, arm in arm.

Faces lit up in the corridors and Junior acknowledged their greetings, but tensed up each time. What she must have endured which caused her to react that way to her own family and home could not be imagined.

"You must be exhausted." Olivia led her into the lift. "Whatever happened, we're going find a way to make things right again." She wanted to ask about the telepathy, but something about it made her uncomfortable. *Do I really want to know how intimate my daughter was with the next Emperor of Menelae?*

Isaiah would say only the truth could set her daughter free.

Folding arms, Junior leaned back against the rail. "I can't wait to shower and get into some human clothes."

A minute later, they walked into the medical bay.

"You're just in time," said Isaiah, beaming with smiles. "Daddy should be waking up any minute now."

"Isaiah!" Junior ran into her grandfather's hug. "I missed you so much." Tears pooled.

*Another step closer to home.* Olivia let go of a sigh.

Isaiah patted her back and held her tight. "It's all right now, Little Girl. You're home." His chin shifted against her shoulder. "Why don't you hop up there so Karana can have a look at your brain?"

"It can wait." Junior slipped out of hug and looked ready to flee.

"Hello, Junior." Karana wore a long, teal jacket over her scrubs. "Isaiah was worried sick about you the whole time."

Isaiah pulled Karana in for a giddy cuddle. "We're married now."

"Really?"

"Mmm-hmmm, and still on our honeymoon." Isaiah kissed his bride's ear.

"Ooh..." Junior words sunk with emotion and she swallowed to keep the cries down "...wonderful."

"Jakoby's here too." Isaiah instantly noticed the blank expression on Junior's face.

"Oh...well, that's...that's wonderful too." Junior had learned how to keep her mouth shut.

And suddenly Olivia regretted ever wishing she would. She traded looks with Isaiah.

"Mom." Junior took her hand. "I think your face should be the first one Dad sees upon waking."

Olivia couldn't verbally respond. She simply nodded and slowly approached the medical bed. She sat on the edge and touched her husband's warm hands for the first time in nineteen years. She took both of them in hers and observed his eyes trying to open.

Edward's eyes opened and struggled to focus on her. "Uh..." His breath raced before he could think of what to say. His hand shook against his stubbly chin. "Uh...I...I'm sorry...I...forgot to shave."

Olivia smiled and let the tears fall. She took his chin, leaned over, and tenderly kissed his lips, finding them just as warm and soft as they had been two decades before.

His hand trembled against her hair. "I...I'm sorry...the...the baby..."

"Junior's fine." Olivia nodded to their tearful daughter standing near. "She brought you home to me just like she promised, tied up in a sack."

"She's not a baby anymore."

"I know." Olivia rested her head on his shoulder and he held her close.

Junior stepped back and pressed the privacy controls. She turned to see Isaiah scanning Beling with Jose looking all nervous and cute nearby, holding a duffle bag with Beling's doll peeking out. *She finally let go.*

Karana was just finishing up with Commander Bo. "Junior, you're next."

"Uh, if you don't mind, I'd like to shower first and see if Chef's made chili."

Karana glanced at Isaiah. "All right then. One hour and I want you right back here."

Junior walked out. *One hour. I'm not a little girl and I'm not in the United Fleet yet. I don't have to follow orders if I don't want to.*

Ariez's presence grew stronger in her mind. *Now, you must tell them you want to return to me. You must cross the border before the Intari fleet arrives.*

"Junior!" Rehama's face lit up when she exited a lift.

"I have to go. I'm sorry." Junior rushed past her and hit the control panel. *The Intari fleet is on its way?* She glanced guiltfully back at her best friend she'd not seen in so many months.

Rehama's astonished face vanished when the door closed.

*Yes. If the humans will not return you to me, you must escape. We are tracking the Maverick. We can intercept your shuttlecraft as soon as you cross the first marker without violating the Nebo Treaty.*

"Because I'm considered a Menelaen now?"

*You are Her Imperial Highness The Crown Princess Rowan, Holy Bennu of Menelae.*

*I'm not even going to try saying that three times fast.* Inhaling deeply, Junior leaned on her hand, hearing the lift halt at her deck. The door slid open and she walked out. There were no other crew, old friends, or defectors waiting to accost her there and she was safely inside her mother's private quarters within seconds.



The door closed after her and she stood in the darkness, hardly seeing her old home, so wrapped up in the misery of her own mind.

*Rowan, why do you now hesitant? Your mother has accepted your father back. You've completed your quest.*

Every bit of energy drained from her, Junior took one last step towards the window. Off port, a Defensive Fleet starship towed another one. Half of the towed starship was completely blown away, undoubtedly with loss of all hands. "I will not be a catalyst for war."

*Rowan!*

Her body surged with his panic and she sucked in a sharp breath. Letting go, she let her lips fall part. "I trust in your intentions, but this is a volatile situation. Perhaps in time..." she wiped tears from both eyes "...when peace is achieved..."

*I cannot achieve peace without you!*

## Chapter 23

Delano walked into his old home on the Maverick. Not much had changed, except for the addition of Junior's pictures. He touched one near the protein resequencer. "Baby's first tooth." Another hung near the O'Keefe family portrait. "Baby's first steps."

Olivia pointed to one over the matter recycler. "Baby's first dismantling of the hyperspace field generator."

Delano peered into the gold-framed picture. In it, a little girl with curly red hair sat upon a heap of junk and grinned like she'd saved the galaxy.

"It was hell keeping that child in time-out." Olivia chuckled. "Thank God she accidentally programmed a holographic nanny or I never would have gotten any sleep."

"How'd she do that?" Delano pulled her into his embrace.

"It's a long story." Olivia smoothed her hands up his chest. "I think we have a lot of long stories to tell each other."

Delano held a finger to her nose. "I learned a few things in the past eighteen years." He let go of her and stepped back. Balancing on one foot, he pulled off each boot. Holding up the pair for his wife to see, he carried them into the bedroom, found the closet right where he left it, and put them away. He turned, grinned, and gave a little bow.

"Very funny." Olivia grabbed the boots and flung them across the floor. "Better."

Delano let his head fall back in laughter. His gaze fixed and his body suddenly went cold. "Junior!"

Olivia spun around when he dashed past her and scooped up their unconscious daughter from the floor. "Pulse? Breathing?" She chased him out the door.

"Yes, she's just unconscious." Delano rushed past Rehama standing in the door. "Captain Edward Delano to the med-bay. Incoming medical emergency."

Olivia nearly knocked poor Rehama over.

"Understood." Isaiah was on duty.

"With Junior, it's always an emergency." Olivia fell into a jog beside him.

"Why wasn't she checked as soon she came aboard?"

"She was supposed to have been, but you know Junior."

Into the lift they went, leaving Rehama to update Junior's friends.

Seconds later, Olivia followed her husband carrying their daughter into the medical bay.

When Junior was laid upon the medical bed, she rolled her head over in the white pillow and struggled to open her eyes. "Mom?"

Olivia sat on the bed and took her hand. "Baby, is Prince Ariez doing this to you?"

Delano hovered nearby and Isaiah brought the medical scanner over.

"No. I'm just so...tired." Junior shook her head and squeezed her eyes shut tight. "Mom, please...I only want...you and...Isaiah here."

Olivia looked at her surprised husband and Karana working in the corner.

Karana got up at once. "I'll read some files in the office."

"Edward."

"But..."

"Our daughter is practically an adult now. She has the right to make her own medical care decisions."

Delano patted his wife's shoulder, squeezed his daughter's foot, and walked out.

Olivia devoted all her attention to Junior then. "What's going on?"

"I think..." Junior looked at Isaiah "...you'd better check for pregnancy."

"Junior." Olivia's voice stuck in her throat, along with her heart.

"Mom..." Junior's face twisted up with emotion.

"It's all right. Whatever's going on with you, we're going to get through it together. You're home now." Olivia rubbed thumbs over her palm warmly in hers.

The tears trickled over Junior's face and she watched Isaiah pass the scanner over her abdomen.

Isaiah breathed relief. "Not pregnant, but...there are over three million live sperm in your reproductive tract. If you remember sex-ed class, you know they can remain viable for up to five days. You're going to ovulate within the next six hours. If there are still viable sperm in your Fallopian Tubes when you do, you will become pregnant. If you're not ready to be a mother, I can neutralize the sperm with a contraceptive injection right now."

Junior winced.

"What is it?" Olivia bent near.

"Ariez wants me to have his baby." Her voice seemed so small to say something which carried such weight.

"Junior, did he..." Olivia couldn't say the word.

"No, Mom." Junior focused on her.

"Did he...trick you...somehow with the, um, telepathy?"

"No." Junior squeezed her eyes shut again. "I wanted to."

"All right." Olivia took a deep breath of determination. "I will support whatever decision you make."

"Isaiah."

"I'm here, Little..."

"It's okay. You can still call me 'Little Girl' if you want, but just you." Junior tried to smile for him. "Give me the injection." She shook like someone screamed in her face.

"Junior?" Olivia smoothed hair from her daughter's face. "Junior, what is it?"

"Ariez. He's crying." Junior lowered her hand.

"You won't feel a thing. The contraceptive only neutralizes the sperm." Isaiah gently pressed the spray-syringe below Junior's belly button. He studied the neutralization process on the medical scanner beside her. Finally, he covered her abdomen. "Got every single last one of them."

Olivia willed her eyes open. "Junior, tell me more about the Marital Bond."

"No." Junior shook her head on the pillow. "You can't understand."

Olivia observed her tears. "All right. Will you allow Isaiah to run a neural scan?"

Junior nodded and covered her face with both hands.

Isaiah brought the dome-shaped scanner over Junior's head and tapped the controls. He studied the blue light passing over her head and the corresponding read-out

of her brain. "Good...Lord."

"What is it?" Olivia's throat hurt with tension.

Isaiah shook his head. "She's lost nine percent of her memory em-grams. Little Girl, do you remember a boy named Jakoby? At all?"

Junior looked up, tears streaming. "No," she whispered, as though it was her fault she'd forgotten her very first boyfriend.

*Was Jakoby really her first boyfriend?* Olivia studied the neural monitor.

"Little Girl." Isaiah squeezed her hand. "Karana's been studying up on this and I could really use her help."

Junior sniffed. "Okay."

Isaiah tapped a wall-com. "Karana, we need you out here."

"On my way." Karana walked out of the office still saying the words.

"Alien-on-the-Brain." Isaiah brought her neural scanner, a dome-shaped device with a wide computer monitor attached.

"Darling, please don't use slang when referring to medical conditions around a patient." Karana used one hand to tap instructions into the scanner and the other to stroke Junior's arm. "It undermines their emotional well-being."

"Won't happen again, Honey."

Karana studied the streaks across her scanner and massive amount of data on the read-out, much of it written in Swahili. "Jae and Lali have been filling us in on the Menelaen mating cycle." Karana studied the read-out a second more, and then turned attention to Junior. "Little Girl, listen to me."

Junior opened eyes as best she could.

"The majority of the telepathy is occurring in areas of your brain responsible for dreaming. You didn't faint. You fell asleep."

"I know."

Olivia studied her daughter's pained face. She remembered the strange neural scans Isaiah had taken of Junior throughout adolescence and the prolonged periods of REM sleep he couldn't explain. *How long has this been going on?*

"I don't have the full story on the process yet, but I can tell you Lali's brain adapted to it immediately. Her hormones triggered the adaptation, just as a human female's hormones prompt the thickening of the uterine lining in preparation for implantation of the zygote. But, Lali's a Menelaen female." Karana resumed studying the monitor. "You're human, Junior. Your hormones are going crazy and your neural pathways are adapting in a haphazard way."

By the cringing of her daughter's forehead, Olivia suspected Junior knew more than she was letting on. "How long has this been going on?" She remembered all the erratic neural scans and prolonged periods of REM sleep Isaiah couldn't explain.

"Based on her medical records, my guess about six years."

"Six...years..." Olivia swallowed to keep her breathing under control. "Junior? Is that true?"

Junior pressed fingers over her eyes and didn't reply.

Olivia let go of a breath and took in a new one. "Baby, we can't help you if you won't tell us everything."

"Yes, you can." Junior refused to drop her hand. "I will tell you what you need to know. Everything else is..." she swallowed "...private."

Karana re-focused on Junior. "Little Girl, you need to make a decision. Did you know what would happen when you were intimate with the boy?"

"Does it matter? What's done is done." Junior's red-streaked eyes darted around. It seemed she drifted in and out of consciousness and telepathic communication. Her face contorted. "I'm so...tired."

"If she did," said Isaiah, "it's obvious she had no idea it would debilitate her like this."

"It's a lot of work for her to stay conscious." Karana studied the biochemical scan. "Judging by her stress hormones, she's been struggling with this for some time and is now too exhausted to keep up."

"She can't function like this!" Olivia gripped the bed rail.

"It's possible she could adapt to function like this. Of course, it's also possible she could suffer extensive brain damage, like those female officers who were raped by Menelaens. The last one just slipped into a coma and died last year."

"The memory loss," said Isaiah with a groan.

Karana tapped fingers over the medical scanner and leaned close to Junior's face. "I can bring you to near-death. It won't hurt and it's completely reversible. It will break the telepathic connection."

"No!" Junior's eyes popped open, tears streaming. "No...please, that..." she pleaded, voice hitting a shrill high "...that kill him. Please..." her head rolled over into unconsciousness "...don't hurt him."

*She's in love with the boy.* Olivia's lips fell apart.

"All right, Plan B," said Karana. "I can program a Specialized Neural Inhibitor to suppress the neural pathways which facilitate the telepathy." "You can?" Junior looked up at her.

"At this point, yes, but..." Karana drew a deep breath and exhaled "...it will require extensive surgery right away. The device will be implanted in your brain. Part of it will be visible." She traced a shape over Junior's right eyebrow. "A silver apostrophe a little thicker than your thumbnail will be visible here. And your sleep pattern will be disrupted. You won't dream as often or as deep. The limited amount of REM sleep will affect you while awake. It will take some getting used to."

The wincing of Junior's face told of an inner anguish Olivia felt the shockwaves of, but was helpless to do anything about. "I can't...I can't..."

"Baby, what is he saying to you?" Olivia squeezed her hand.

Junior's face contorted in terrible anguish, lips twisting and squeezing shut with tears trickling down. "It's too...dangerous. Please, don't..."

Feeling the air, Olivia realized her daughter was talking to Ariez. "What does he intend to do?"

"No." Junior opened eyes to her mother. "I won't tell you. It's too..." She gripped hands. "Mom?"

"Baby?"

"The Intari...they'll try to force me to...to hurt Ariez." Little cries escaped her lips. "Please, Mom, please, don't let them."

"Baby, I will never allow anyone to force you to do anything you didn't want to do."

"He can't understand. He can't stop." Junior rolled head over on the pillow to Karana. "Implant the SNI." Instantly, she shook as though Ariez screamed and she cupped a hand over her mouth.

Olivia pulled her daughter into a cradle hold and wished like crazy she was two years old again. A simple kiss always made the hurt go away back then. She looked at Karana. "I think you heard her decision."

Karana nodded and turned to her husband. "Prep her for surgery. I'm going to need you and our two best nurses."

"Understood." Isaiah gave a nod.

Olivia smoothed red tendrils from her daughter's freckled forehead. "Baby, you were right. I was afraid and I made a terrible mistake, and you've suffered..."

"Mom..." Junior swallowed grief "...there are no innocent victims here today."

Isaiah came near. "I'm going to sedate you now, Little Girl." He settled hand on her shoulder. "You'll have a minute to say good-bye before you're completely unconscious."

"Thank you."

Isaiah pressed the spray-syringe to Junior's neck, sedating her.

The redness of Junior's face softened into pink and Olivia wiped the tears with a cotton cloth. The tension in her lips eased, then her cheeks, her forehead, until she slept deeply in peace.

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Dreamtime.

"Please." What was about to happen had never happened to a Menelaen couple before. "You...you do not want this."

"It doesn't matter what I want. No one can give it to me." Junior held his hands in her lap and spoke softly. "I don't want to hurt you, but...I can't...I can't do this with you anymore." She cupped his moist face in her hands and kissed his lips. "I'm so sorry."

He vanished, screaming, and all of Dreamtime with him.

Darkness banished all thought and every image, and numbed the agony.



Waking Moments.

Olivia pushed red curls from her daughter's face and observed a tear escape. Memory took her back to when she let go of someone precious too.

Karana came close, sterile hands held out in front of her.

Olivia looked from Isaiah to the nurses closing in and, for an instant, she wanted to send them away, but it was Junior's decision and a sound, albeit painful, one.

Minutes later, Olivia found her husband beating the dickens out of a boxer's ball in the ship's gym, over and over, beating it. She adored him from sweaty head down shimmering, muscular back and finely sculpted buttocks. *This is no time to indulge in marital privileges.* She unclenched fists, fluttered her fingers, and approached.

Delano caught the ball. "How's Junior?"

Olivia folded her arms. "She's in surgery."

"Surgery?" Alarm in his voice. "For what?"

"How much to you know about her relationship with Prince Ariez?"

"He kidnapped and ra..." Delano couldn't speak the word.

"I'm not so sure that's what happened. I think she's in love with the boy."

"If that's true, she could never have rejected him to save me. The Marital Bond drives a couple to defend each other first and at all costs."

"Maybe that's how it works for Menelaens, but Junior is human."

Delano raised chin. "What are you saying?"

Raising hands to hips, Olivia turned slowly around, eyes focusing on nothing in particular. She paced away. "Junior is our daughter. We are her parents. It's our job to take care of her..." she looked over her shoulder "...but she's gone through hell trying to take care of us."

"You don't think I realize this is all my fault?" Delano rubbed his temples.

"You never would have gone into exile if I hadn't divorced you. I didn't even seek counsel." Olivia pressed fist to her tight lips. "We can beat ourselves up about this later." She pointed in the direction of the

med-bay. "Junior is in surgery right now, having a Specialized Neural Inhibiter implanted in her brain."

Skin a sickening white, Delano turned away.

"The SNI will block telepathic contact with Ariez. She wanted the implant to protect him..."

Delano flashed red and pointed at med-bay too. "If the little worm has a telepathic lock on her, it was rape!"

Olivia dropped her hand. "Would that be easier to accept than Junior falling in

love with him of her own free will?" She kept the other hand firmly on hip. "All that matters right now is Junior and how best to care for her. She's going to wake up with a broken heart, whether it makes sense to us or not."

A beep interrupted. "Bridge to Captain Delano."

Edward Delano startled at the summons.

"Mr. Ashley is talking to me." Olivia patted his chest. "It's time for this family to close ranks."

Delano's eyes danced back to life.

Olivia tapped her wrist-com. "Olivia Delano here."

"Admiral Codetalker is standing by on a secure channel."

"Route it to the gym." Olivia walked to the nearest computer interface and tapped its protective panel.

The panel rose and the screen lit up with Admiral Codetalker's gray-ing face and his focus went straight to his old friend. "Well, it's about damn time you came home! Olivia, why the hell did you take the ugly bastard back?"

"He's a good kisser." Olivia smirked.

Codetalker boomed his laugh.

Delano slid his hand around his wife's waist. "Thanks for looking out for my family while I was gone."

"I gave my word."

"Yes, you did, but I never imagined I'd be gone nearly two decades."

"Olivia, I got the message about the real Admiral Jackson's corpse." Codetalker got serious and folded hands on his desk. "We found it in Antarctica, just like Junior said. All that information she provided along with your Menelaen friends' testimony would normally go a long way to

your exoneration, Edward, but I got some bad news." He shifted grimly in his seat. "Things are really getting messy on the border. The Menelaens are fighting each other and demanding your extradition, Edward. They've accused you of kidnapping Crown Princess Rowan...which I've come to realize is Junior. And, of course, they want her back too. Prince Ariez claims she's his wife. I tried telling them the marriage is invalid under human law, but they won't listen. Princess Ara says Junior's a false prophet who must die before she corrupts true faith. Then, there's another guy, Kaliban..."

Delano groaned.

"There's more." Codetalker continued. "The Intari know what Junior means to the Menelaens. They're demanding you hand her over to them or they'll kill her to prevent the Menelaens getting her back."

Olivia exchanged alarmed looks with her husband and remembered what Junior said about the Intari using her to hurt Ariez. "I hope you know a way out, Graham."

Codetalker grumped and leaned back in his chair. "This far from U.F. command, I have some leeway in issuing orders. As of now, I'm sending the Maverick on a new deep space mission. The Brass'd love to tear apart the Dauntless and interrogate you and your Menelaen friends, Edward. That doesn't bother me so much as knowing they'd like to get their hands on Junior too. They'd use her to manipulate the Intari and the Menelaens. They'd assume custody of her, maybe even trump up some charges against her, or drag your exoneration out to blackmail her somehow. They'd get her and use her and you wouldn't see her again for a really long time and she'd be a mess. Well, I'm not going to let that happen to my goddaughter. Or my best friends. I want you all to stay gone at least five years so I can sort out this mess."

Delano shook his head. "There's got to be another way besides us bug-ging out. The U.F. will string you up."

"Maybe so, but something nasty's going on behind the scenes. I've tasted it for decades now. If I don't dig it out soon, well, my first duty is to protect humanity – not kiss ass and die." Codetalker leaned back in his chair. "Bug out now. The Intari fleet will enter weapons range in three hours."

"Understood, Admiral. Delanos out." Olivia tapped the panel and strode out the door.

"Worst case scenario, we transfer Junior onto the Dauntless and cloak while the Maverick provides a distraction." Delano fell into step in the corridor.

"Agreed."

Delano tapped wrist-com. "Delano to Commander Bo. Tactical alert. Hyperspace engine repair is top priority, then the cloak."

"Understood," said Bo over com.

Olivia tapped her own wrist-com. "Delano to Bridge. Tactical alert. Lay in a course for the Cogdon Sector and engage at maximum velocity."

Sachi responded without hesitation. "Yes, Captain."

Olivia felt the hyperspace engines roar back to Mark Six. "We'll be in the clear once we pass the Eileen Collins Station and it's only two hours away. It's easy to throw off sensors in the Kenai Expanse beyond it. Once we're through, we'll cross the threshold into deep space."

Delano followed her into a lift. "Neither the Intari nor the Menelaens have contemporary experience with deep space travel. It goes without saying they have no knowledge of deep space beyond Earth's territories. We'll lose 'em."

"Remember the night of the Wu-Cheng wedding?" Olivia kept her eyes on the lift door.

Her husband's chest filled with new breath and he touched the small of her back. "How could I forget?"

She trembled, delighted to realize he hadn't forgotten her favorite spot. She lifted gaze and touched his chin. "Don't forget to shave this time. I still have a rash from the med-bay." She gave him a good smack on the butt, the door opened, and she walked out. "And it's your turn to cook dinner."

"Yes, Mrs. Delano."

Olivia glanced back at his boyish grin and wagged her finger before turning the corner.

## Chapter 24

Junior lifted heavy eyelashes with great effort and lights blinded her. As she adjusted, she realized the lights were actually quite dim. The multi-colored lights of the medical computers flickered around her.

Isaiah cast a long shadow, reading something near the Intensive Care Unit door.

Someone held her hand.

She was surprised to see that someone was her mother. She'd never been surprised by her mother's presence before.

"Baby," said her mother, drawing near. Mom's blue eyes shone like the brightest stars.

"Mom...I can't..." Her fingers went to the apostrophe-shaped implant over her left brow.

"Can't...what?"

"I can't...feel...you anymore."

"You really were empathic." Her mother's gentle fingers lifted away stray curls. "How do you feel, well, otherwise?"

*Alone.* Junior licked her dry lips and swallowed grief. "Free."

"Well, Sleeping Beauty's finally woke up," Dad's deep voice filled the room as his boots hit the floor coming in.

Some tears escaped. Junior looked at her father tall in the doorway, light brown hair, gentle green eyes like hers.

Clean-shaven, regulation haircut, Edward Delano was human again in a tan raglan shirt which emphasized his massive chest and shoulders. Her mother must've picked out the shirt for him. He pulled something out of his pocket and sat down on the bed's edge. Taking her hand, he placed the something in it.

Junior opened her hand to the glittering gold. "Your wings." Even though pilot's wings were no longer pinned to uniforms, it was still tradition to award them after the first solo flight.

Her father looked upon her. "Well, I figured if you're going to be a pilot I'll be damned if I'll let anyone else teach you. I mean..." he shrugged, the regret clear on his face "...if...if you want me to. I'm in charge of all the Maverick's U. F. cadets now."

Gripping the wings in her hand, Junior tried to smile and managed to get out a whisper. "I want you to."

Delano smiled and cleared his throat to hide the emotion behind it.

Olivia spoke up. "'There are only two lasting bequests we can hope to give our children. One of these is roots; the other is wings.'"

They looked at her.

Olivia smiled. "Cecelia Lasbury." She smoothed Junior's wavy red hair over her shoulder.

Junior spent that day and night in the medical bay while Karana monitored how well she adapted to the Specialized Neural Inhibiter. She asked and was permitted to stay in the more private Intensive Care Unit, even though there were no complications. She accepted no visitors, except her parents.

The following morning, she left the medical bay a little earlier than scheduled and made her way to her new private quarters through the work conduits. As she climbed ladders and crawled through the technical tunnels, she marveled out how much smaller they seemed compared to her childhood days of unbridled energy. At last, she popped a vent outside her door and rose to her feet in an empty corridor.

Replacing the vent, Junior faced the door to her very own private quarters. If not for the ship's new counselor, she would still be sharing quarters with her parents. Thank God, the counselor was able to convince them that she needed to 'individuate' from them as part of the healing process. She stepped up to the door and it slid open for her.

Inside, the décor was standard issue gray. Storage containers with her childhood belongings stacked in the far corner, waiting to be unpacked. She had nothing from her time in the Menelaen Empire.

"No, wait." Junior reached inside the neck of her Jade silk blouse and pulled out Ariez's gold ra chain coupled with her silver bennu necklace.

Breathe in, breathe out. "Stella, locate Star Captains Olivia and Edward Delano."

"Captains Olivia and Edward Delano are located in the Mess Hall."

She walked over to her computer desk and tapped the monitor. "Display security screen Delta-nine."

The screen illuminated with the image of her parents holding hands on a small round table, framed by the starry window. Dad laughed his great old booming laugh and Mom smiled like she was plotting some terrific trick.

Junior rolled her lips and rubbed her stinging nose.

The door chimed.

Groan.

Rehama's voice came over com. "Open the damn door or I'll hack into the security protocols."

Frown. "Come in." She tapped off the image of her parents having breakfast.

The door slid open and her best friend, besides Ret, walked in, ice cream container and two large mixing spoons in hand. She held up the container as the door slid closed. "Double Altarian chocolate – the finest cure for a broken known to humanity."

"Broken heart?" Junior harrumphed, just like Isaiah, folded her arms and glared at the stars.

"We've been best friends since we were babies." Rehama came to stand beside her and thrust the container into her arms. "We don't need telepathy." She held up one spoon.

Now pushing twenty years of age, Rehama wore her long black hair loose and her face had lost all of her childhood roundness.

Junior almost forgave her for needing a bra before she did. "Give me that before you hurt yourself." She took the spoon and the container and slumped into the sofa.

Rehama snickered and slumped down beside her. "Was he worth it?"

"Yeah. He was."

"I'm still a virgin." Rehama dug in her spoon too.

"Really?" Cram in the ice cream and swallow.

"Ret's gay and everyone else is too old, and Jakoby's..." Rehama cut off her own sentence with a dignified bite of ice cream.

"Ret's gay?" Junior licked the edge of her spoon. "I don't know why that never occurred to me before. Well, why didn't you go to the Academy on Earth then? There's gotta be tons of gorgeous, heterosexual guys there."

"I wanted to hang out with my best friend again. We never got to say good-bye before. Who knows how long it'll last before we traipse off in our own directions and never see each other again?" Rehama dug in her spoon again. "Besides, do you really think you can serve under your parents' command for long?"

"I never thought of that either." Junior licked the back of her spoon and studied the stars.

"Even if you make admiral, you'll always be their little baby girl."

Junior had to laugh a little at that. "True. They really are pathetic. The first time Mom tries to clean a smudge off my face on the Bridge, I'll probably run screaming the nearest airlock.

Rehama laughed.

"I don't want anyone calling me 'Junior' anymore." Junior took a small bit of ice cream and rolled it around on her tongue before swallowing.

"What do you want us to call you then? Rowan?"

"Oh, God, no." Junior let her head hang back on the sofa.

"What then?"

"Gennie Delano." Deep breath and she straightened up. "I'm Gennie Delano all on my own now."

The End





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