

*Dedicated to all of my family without whom I would  
Surely be adrift*

Wake of the Nightshade  
By  
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PROLOGUE

The disparate group of men stood in the giant foundry and gazed at the beast of a ship before them. Even now, while a major portion of it was still under construction, it was so large that the bottom half was obscured by the lower building platforms that stretched stories below them. There were hundreds of workers attending their tasks with a quick but steady rhythm. These workers knew that mistakes were not tolerated here and any expediency could lead to errors. The small delegation had been brought here in secrecy from a distant world and had no idea where in the galaxy they were. They had already been scanned many times for any devices that could record the incredible scene before them. They could only watch with careful eyes as the great ship took shape.

A man came to the rear of the small group. He stood a full head taller than the tallest of the group and his hard face looked at them. His jet black hair served to chisel his face into a square that projected iron will. The group turned to face him.

“I trust everything is as promised,” the hard man said. The others had never seen him before and felt a sudden sense of menace that clouded around the man.

“It seems to be, Mr.-” the chief accountant said and waited for a name.

“Michael,” the hard face said. “You may refer to me as Michael. Now, if there is no issue here to be discussed, my master has commanded that this meeting come to an end.” The words seemed to have some kind of weight behind them and each person felt suddenly fatigued.

“There is an issue,” the foreman of the group said and stepped forward. He was unafraid and had put many men in the ground in his rise to this position.

“Yes,” Michael said.

“You have refused to allow us to inspect the hull of this vessel until it is complete,” the foreman said. “This is not acceptable. How do we know that the correct and promised alloys will be employed in its construction? I can’t tell from here that the material conforms to our specifications. How am I supposed to confirm to my employer that this is indeed what was paid for?”

“You can confirm to your employer that which my master has promised will be delivered,” Michael said dryly. “Our methods of construction are ours and ours alone. Now, this meeting is over. You are to follow these men back to the hangar for your departure.” Michael motioned and two heavily armed sentries stepped forward.

The foreman did not budge one inch and the others looked at him. The accountant shifted nervously and tried to hide the sweat stain that started to appear at the nape of his pudgy neck.

“Indeed,” the foreman said, “Michael. We are no mere patrons that can be shuffled off the premises. My employer has demanded this of me and I shall see it done. To the letter. Otherwise, I will not be able to confirm what has been purchased. I demand to make a

close inspection of the hull of this vessel or I shall recommend that our agreement be terminated.”

Michael looked at the man for a brief second. The sentries stood awaiting orders. In a flash of movement, Michael reached out with a machinelike fist and grasped the foreman’s entire head within it. The palm of Michael’s free hand shot like a battering ram to the area just under foreman’s armpit. The blow crushed his right lung and sent a shock to his heart. Michael lifted the foreman over his head and stepped to the side of the foundry. He threw the quivering body over the side and it was torn to pieces as it fell through the construction platforms. He turned to face the others and the sentries raised their weapons to liquefy the group. But the order did not come.

Michael looked at the group one at a time. “Do you now understand the correct protocol for adhering to agreements with my master?”

“Most assuredly,” the accountant said quickly. “We find this ship to be in order and shall await its delivery. Thank you for your time.” The accountant’s palms were sweating so much that there was a stain on his expensive trousers from the continual wiping.

Michael looked at them all once again. “Take them to the hangar,” he said to the sentries. He then turned and walked back towards the great ship.

In another, distant part of the galaxy aboard a ship much smaller than that in the foundry, there were two people having a very different sort of meeting.

“If you promise me that we will be together, I’ll give you a surprise,” she said in her lilting voice.

“Very well, I promise,” he said.  
“Can you love me?”  
“You know that I do,” he answered.  
“You could find another,” she said quietly.  
“I will never find another.”  
“Have you regretted our time together,” she asked.  
“I have no regrets.”  
“Are you comfortable,” she asked, more serious now.  
“Yes,” he replied in the voice he used when she was being motherly or concerned.  
“I want you to be comfortable,” she said.  
“I want my surprise.” He loved her games.  
“Can we be together,” she asked as she did from time to time.  
“We are together,” he reminded her, although he knew there were few things that she did not know despite her young age in years as men measure them.  
“I have learned so much,” she said.  
“And you have taught me all I need to know,” he answered.  
“I want to be closer to you,” she said.  
“I want you closer,” he tried to reach behind to touch her but found only air.

They were in the command center of the ship with the lights turned down low.

“Close your eyes.” She was behind him now.  
“Like this,” he asked.  
“You are peeking,” she said, playfully now.  
“No, I’m not.”  
“Am I your true love?” She moved the air behind him.  
“You are.”  
“Do you love me,” she asked.  
“I do,” he said and knew it to be true.  
“Say it.”  
“I love you.” His eyes cracked just a hint.

“Close your eyes,” she retreated.

“OK!”

“I love you.” She moved closer.

“I know you do.” He was sure of it.

“I am yours now.” She moved to face him.

A hand brushed his face. He had never felt one so soft. His eyes opened.

“Oh, Crissy,” was all he could manage.

5 years later

The sun had just climbed into the sky on Crond. An agricultural world, it served as this part of the galaxy’s main supplier of fruits and vegetables. It was run by a company conglomerate that specialized in the growing of foodstuffs for a multitude of markets on numerous planets. That company’s headquarters were far from here.

Crond was quite far from any serious protection due to its location on the galactic plane. Not that any was needed, the owners had felt. The inhabitants were mostly unskilled laborers who oversaw the harvesters and granaries. The growing season was quite long and provided for a wonderful harvest in most years. Most of the workers were men and women who worked in 3-month shifts after which they could elect to stay on or jump to another planet for new work or better pay. They subscribed to a service that kept all workers informed of the going rates for all unskilled labor on this and other farm worlds.

The *Crisis Averted* was there treating injuries, minor and otherwise, as part of her usual tour of duty. Harvest season always

brought injury and this one was no exception. The usual array of cuts and bruises were treated as well as those injuries of a more serious nature. The ship was grounded a mile from the mess hall and the Doctor had set up shop there for his usual stay of 2 weeks during harvest. He had just started on his rounds when several men took seats in the waiting area. There had been quite a brawl the previous night and some of the participants had received more than just bruised egos. They looked at each other as they waited for their turn with suspicious eyes. They all knew that another such altercation could bring expulsion so they put aside last evening's anger. The Doctor motioned for the first to come in.

"How do I look, Doc," the worker asked, his tan arms covered in large welts from fending off various thrown items.

"Oh, I think that you'll be ready for your shift in no time."

"Maybe its worse'n you think," the worker ventured hopefully.

"Well, maybe a little rest wouldn't hurt," the Doctor said with a wink.

"Doc, I 'm voting for you to stay on a spell. You're our kind. You could get used to it here. Course, ain't enough girlies to keep a body occupied, if you follow."

"Well, I am spoken for in that regard."

"How come she don't travel with 'e?"

"She keeps the place up while I'm away. Besides, leaving may be hard, but coming home is worth the wait," and the Doctor smiled, "if you follow."

"I think I do," he smiled back. "How'd you meet her?"

"Well," the Doctor began and glanced to the *Crisis Averted* in the distance. "She just kind of appeared. I was traveling for my work when I met her. She found me when I needed someone the most. The best ones always show up when you aren't looking." He looked out into space for a moment remembering all their time

together. “But I think she was always there. She is very handy too. She even helped fix the ship up.” He looked back at the Crisis Averted.

“Sure is a pretty one,” the worker followed his gaze to the ship. “Has she got any guns on her? I can’t see from here.”

“Oh yes,” the Doctor laughed. “I have to land in some pretty rough places and not everyone respects a medical ship’s rights. What do you know about weapons?”

“More’n people think, I can tell you,” he said surely. “I was in the Service on my home planet for a while. It was only the infantry, but I learned about all kinds of things.”

“In that case, I can tell you I just put a new cracker on her. GENERATOR SYSTEMS installed it and some other weapons. They upped the power on her so we could handle the load. She can crack a ship 130% of her weight just like a glass. I hope I never have to use it.”

“Well, just stick to following our lot around and you won’t have anything to worry about,” the worker said. “I am more interested in hearing about your lady.”

The Doctor gave a quick laugh. “She is very special. We kind of knew each other for a long time before we got together. You know how it can be. There you are and someone appears where you least expect it.” He sprayed some skin medication on the marks on the worker’s arms.

“Had me a girl like that upon a time,” the worker said. “Met while we was picking the season on Hiram 4. Good season that. I seen her up in a tree and I kept picking and picking in that vicinity until I managed to get up under that ol’ tree. Oh, she was something to



see. To pretty for that work, I'll wager. Young. Sometime they just end up here with our lot. Don't know why. Probably the Great Mother reminding our lot that there's still reason for men and women to get together, even in our life. Does a man like you know about the Great Mother?"

"I have heard of her, but I don't know as much as I should," the Doctor said.

"Well, most of us pray to the Great Mother. She watches over all our kind while we work the land. When I wear this body out, she will be waiting for me in the Garden. I hope I deserve it. It sure ain't been easy moving around like I do. Some rest would be nice." He suddenly looked tired.

"I think you'll make it there," the Doctor said kindly. "What ever happened to the girl?"

"We spent what time we could," he went on. "Went to many fields together. Must've been 10, 12 years. I figured she was too pretty to stay with us. We was on, I don' know, someplace, and there come a storm like I never seen before or since. Real sudden. We was up there picking them hilerian grapes. Machine can't do it. Too delicate. Rain started, first a trickle, then a wind come up. We figured we stick it out. Rain keep coming. I called to her to get down and come with me to shelter. So off we went into the storm. We had just got there, the planet I mean, so we was turned around. Great Mother led us to the reservoirs they keep for the dry season. Found us a spot there out of the rain. We was there awhile, waiting for it to stop when we started to feel the presence of the One. She was pretty. All wet. Hair short like a boy, but a face like an angel. Even after our life. So we had ourselves a time right there. 'Course, she's fixed and so am I so no harm done. We started back and I guess we was walking in a bad spot. Them reservoirs were full as hounds. We didn't know that they been

having so much rain afore we arrived. Great Mother let one of them reservoirs go. We was too far in the valley. Couldn't get out in time. We ran and ran. That water covered us like a blanket. Held her long as I could. Mother wanted her bad, though. I made it to the bank. We found her later and put her to rest under a tall tree. I seen her a couple of times since, though. Night time mostly, but once in a field. Broad daylight, grinning at me. When I take my trip to the Garden, she'll be there under that tree I'll wager. That tree that we met under. That'd be something to see."

"I hope that she will be there, Friend," the Doctor said.

"Think she will," he said surely.

The Doctor was always moved by the stories that he heard while he worked with these simple people. Their lives were so difficult and they had so little of their own that he was always happy to donate what time he could when he wasn't on some higher paying mission. The companies that owned these farms did pay well, though, he thought. Most missions were like this. He enjoyed helping those in places where conventional hospitals had either not yet been built or had no plans to be built. He had always found that providing medical care to these people that fed the galaxy gave him a satisfaction that seemed hard to replace with mere money.

This sure beats some of the hot spots I've seen, he thought. He remembered many of the war zones that he and the *Crisis Averted* had been through.

"Let me have a look at that arm. We better-"

The Doctor's voice was cut off by the sound of engines approaching in the distance. He had worked in enough war zones to know the difference between a freighter engine and a military engine and paused. He took a step to the window and saw three

black ships outlined on the horizon on a straight path toward the mess hall, one of which was obviously a Shocker. Its black silhouette was set off by the cockpit in the middle of the body; a war ship. He immediately dropped his instruments and started shouting.

“Slavers! Get out of the hall. Run!” He turned on his com link to the ship, “Crissy, stay in the ship. Don’t come out. Stay in the ship. There are too many of them here and there must be others in orbit. Copy?”

“Copy,” replied a female voice.

He saw that they were after the mess hall. Most people would be there at this time of the morning. He wondered which of the ground staff had signaled that the hall was full as the Shockers roared by. The sleek ships were easily out distancing him to the mess hall where the workers were just beginning to realize what was happening. Too late, he thought.

Aboard the lead Shocker, the crew assessed the situation.

“Spotters, this is *Claw*. Call it and let’s get to work,” the Captain of the *Claw* spoke into his com to the two spotter craft that were on either side of his ship as it sped towards the mess hall.

“This is spotter one. Looks like a full house. Recommend nerve gas dead center in the main hall and get ready to track the stragglers. *Claw*, better charge up the blanket stunners and get this area to the right, I say again, right side of the main hall. Probably get most of the traffic through there. They’ll most likely run for that clearing to the fields. Spotter two, watch the left side for runners and get those guns charged for heavy stun. These people are on a full stomach. Remember people, we don’t get paid for dead bodies. This means you spotter two. I want them stunned, not baked. Over.”

“Roger that, spotter one,” spotter two managed, angered by the reproach. On the previous outing, the crew had been overzealous and cost their employer 22 lives off the main count. They had used the main guns to stop a group that had broken from the main target area and ran. Although the guns had been set at low power, the runners had been killed.

The two spotters banked left and right and the *Claw* fired a nerve canister directly through the roof of the mess hall. It burst before it hit the floor and the workers that were either too slow or too untrusting dropped in their places. Many ran out of the hall only to be stopped by the blanket stunners. It was quickly turning into utter chaos, which was just what the slavers wanted.

In the distance, the Doctor saw the local security coming with some small arms. He knew that those weapons would be of little help against military ships that had been customized just for this duty. They fired at the passing ships to no effect.

“*Claw*, this is spotter two, you have the locals coming in with some small weapons fire to your three o clock.”

“Roger that, spotter two. Will respond. Gunner, target that area and let them know what’s what.”

The *Claw*’s gunner opened fire with medium power at the locals. They dodged the bolts as they ran for cover. The security crew jumped down into a ditch and managed to avoid the worst of the blast, although one local was hit and was knocked immediately unconscious. She was a female and due to her light body weight, appeared dead. One of the other officers cursed out loud and ran into the open with a heavy weapon at his shoulder. Shouting with rage, he opened fire on one of the spotters. The shots hit the mark and while they were not strong enough to do any damage, they did rock the ship enough to alarm the crew.

“What in all hells was that? Our rat said no heavy weapons,” one of them said with surprise.

“*Claw*, can you see what that was?”

“This is *Claw*. Looks like we may have a heavy weapon down there. Better take care of that right now. I don’t want to have to explain any damage to our employers.”

“This is spotter two, I’m on it. Gunner, get that son of a bitch right now.”

Spotter two banked high into the air and came at the local at an angle, forcing him to turn and fire. The shots hit the cockpit dead center and surprised the crew by their accuracy. “Man, get a load of this guy,” the gunner in spotter two said. “Get ready for lights out, my friend.”

The spotter craft opened fire on the man and blew his body and the gun into many pieces. The crew howled with satisfaction. “Nice work, boys,” the Captain of the *Claw* called. “That may get you a bonus from the Captain. Now, watch the other side, there are still some others down there and they’re not going to be happy. If they’ve got one of those guns, they may have some others as well.”

The Doctor saw the man blown to bits and cursed. He ran to the nearest workers and asked if any one was seriously hurt. There were some “no’s” and some shaken heads and he ran back towards the mess hall to try and revive those that he could. Maybe it is a light mixture and I can get some of them up, he thought. The ships arced for another pass.

“*Claw*, this is spotter one, better call the bus. I think it’s about that time.”

“This is *Claw*. Roger that.” He keyed a button on his console.

“*Nightshade*, this is *Claw*. Ready for pick up.”

In orbit around the planet, the giant ship *Nightshade* circled. It served as the projection of incredible wealth and power by the crime syndicate known only as the Organization. Heavily armed and carrying some of the Organization's full might in the galaxy, it was capable of non-scheduled jumps and carried its own navigation crew. To most law enforcement agencies, it was only a rumor. Of course, they knew that some criminal enterprises had capital ships at their disposal, but they did not know that the *Nightshade* was a match for a Planetary States Ship of War. It stretched over one mile in length and bristled with armament. The *Nightshade's* great hold held an entire wing of privateer fighters, transports, and other various interceptor craft. It housed ten full shocker crews along with their ships and the personnel to man them.

Such a large ship would be impossible to hide except for the fact that the *Nightshade* had the most up to date scanner blockers and false signature generators that money could buy or someone could steal. These devices made the ship's signature on a scanner appear much smaller at long range. While the ship could be seen visually, from afar even a military scanner would register a large passenger liner. Highly illegal, the device had strained even the Organization's budget. With such a device also came the requisite technicians, spare parts, and personnel to crew it. The ship's primary function was smuggling and all these tricks served that end. Even this operation was just a by-product of its main route. Smuggling precious and illegal cargo was a dangerous game and the *Nightshade* was ready for any challenge. No local force would dare attempt to follow a ship breaking for orbit when they suspected that heavy guns would be trained on them the second they broke into open space. The mere thought of such a ship gave precious pause to any pursuers. The *Nightshade* could vaporize anything except a heavy warship in an instant.

One of the doors to the ship's great hold opened and a modified passenger ship blasted into open space. The ship's refit enabled it to drop into the atmosphere at incredible speed and get to the planet surface quick enough to pick up the stunned victims, get them aboard, and be gone before anyone could call heavy support. The crew had affectionately christened it, "the bus."

As the bus was dropping through the upper atmosphere, the Doctor was trying to revive the stunned workers with shots of adrenaline. Some were still groggy but managed to be carried away from the mess hall. He knew that the slavers would still get most of the workers but he would do what he could. Also, he realized that he himself had better get out of the area as well before the ship arrived that would collect the fallen.

After a few more shots, he managed to get two young girls up. He put an arm around each and they stumbled towards the nearest field. The co-pilot of spotter two saw them out of the corner of his watchful eye.

"Would you look at that. My lucky day! Two for the road! Bring us in closer and I'll increase our count by two."

"Are you kidding," the pilot asked. "The bus'll be here any minute. We need to circle around."

"Come on! The area is secure. We need the count as high as possible. You know that. Besides, we can take our time unloading, you know what I mean?" He looked at the girls on the viewer.

"Well, now that you mention it, we could use a little bonus points with the guys on the command deck. But you got to be fast."

"Speed is my game!" They both laughed.

"First," the pilot said playfully, "let me help you out by getting them in the mood."

The craft swooped down behind the Doctor and let off a stun blast that felled all three runners. "Nice shooting," the co-pilot said, knowing that it was pitifully easy but still having fun. "Put us

down real close, I don't want to have to take them too far. Gotta get them home by midnight!"

The spotter touched down and the lower hatch popped open. The com link immediately started squawking. "Spotter two, this is *Claw*. What in all hells are you doing?"

"*Claw*, this is spotter two. We are just getting some stragglers. They are already unconscious. Need the count to remain high. Over."

"Well, hurry up and get that bird back in the air. No damage, you hear?"

"Roger that."

The co-pilot winked and then bounded through the hatch and out into the open. He was armed with a heavy weapon and the usual complement of explosives around a belt. He saw the three bodies and ran to them. He was about to grab the smallest female when the Doctor jumped up and threw a right cross that struck him on the jaw. The stun they had fired had been enough for the two females, but not for a grown man. Experience had taught the Doctor to drop with the stun impact.

The co-pilot was no stranger to a brawl and quickly got up. He charged the Doctor with a blade drawn seemingly from nowhere. "Hey gentlemen, this is spotter two, we got us a little contest. My money's on our man."

"Spotter two, this is *Claw*. Stop this foolishness at once. Recall him and let's get going. The bus is almost here."

A speaker blared from the craft "Let's go!" The co-pilot paid no heed.

"I am going to finish you off, and then those two are going into my private collection," the co-pilot snarled as he dove for the Doctor.



But the Doctor had had quite a bit of his own training and had dealt with many dangerous men in his travels. He sidestepped the blow and the crewman found his head in the hands of the Doctor. A sharp twist snapped his neck and he fell like a lifeless doll to the ground.

“Damn it all to hell! Get out of there now, spotter two. That is an order.” The Captain of the *Claw* was circling the area and getting uncomfortable with this nonsense. As Captain, it was he who commanded the operation and the ships that were Organization property. He stood to gain if the operation went smoothly. He would also be the first one punished for any mistakes. The bus was landing at the mess hall behind them and the *Claw* went to run the perimeter.

“Not before I take care of a little business,” the pilot of spotter two said through gritted teeth. In a second, the lithe spotter was back in the air and under power. The *Crisis Averted*’s cameras were trained on the scene.

The spotter pilot ran the ship directly at the Doctor and intended to smash his body on its armor plated hull as he took off for open space. The Doctor saw the ship bearing down on him and knew immediately that the ship would not leave without his death. He bent over to the dead co-pilot and pulled an explosive from his belt. He then dropped to the ground and waited for the ship to pass.

When the ship passed by, he threw the explosive into the hatch left open by the co-pilot and ran towards the *Crisis Averted*. The pilot never realized what happened as the inside of the ship became a furnace. The wreckage crashed into a tomato field.

“That’s IT!” the Captain of the *Claw* yelled into the com. “Spotter one. Take him out NOW.”

“Roger that. On it.”

The Doctor ran towards the *Crisis Averted* but he knew he would never make it as he heard the roar of engines behind him. He thought about what a pretty day it was and how all of his life had now come down to this moment. He had faced death many times, but this time he knew it was over. The ship was too far to make it aboard and there was nowhere to hide between he and the ship.

The *Crisis Averted* would escape, he knew. A million thoughts came so quickly.

“Get out of here,” he shouted to the *Crisis Averted* and he laughed as he saw the engines power up. He cut a 90 degree turn and ran towards a ditch to draw the attack away from the ship. He thought that he should be more scared as he felt the first shots hitting the ground behind him. Just before he was blown to bits he saw the *Crisis Averted* arcing into the sky. He felt no pain and he knew that it was not over.

## Chapter 1

The light rain falling on the compound was doing its usual good work of pooling puddles, dripping through trees, and causing those inhabitants caught in it to rush their pace. The compound had stood for over 1500 years. Only an outpost at first, it had blossomed into a wonderful and mystical place of learning and tradition. Here, time stood still for the teachers and students that were lucky enough to call this place home. It was known as Lung Wang. These words translated as “Dragon King” in the ancient language. Its towers rose into the wet evening and its walls gave the impression that within them one stood at the very center of the universe.

Within one of its large compounds was a small room that tonight was host to 25 students and three masters. The students readied themselves for a rare treat. Two of Lung Wang’s finest students had returned to give a demonstration of magna rods. This new twist on a very ancient weapon was one of the primary disciplines of Lung Wang. Magna rods were two rods that one held in both hands. They were roughly 26 inches long and absolutely unbreakable. One could wield such rods so that no attacker with any weapon, even a bolt or blade, could defeat an adept. They emitted a force field in close proximity to the rod that could not only stop blasts from energy weapons, but could also be increased or decreased to deliver a blow ranging from the simple weight of the rod, to strengths that delivered thousands of pounds of force. These were helpful in dealing with many of the galaxy’s High G inhabitants that possessed incredible strength or durability. Used properly, they could smash through alloy doors, fend off multiple attackers, and deliver crushing blows with lightning speed to any manner of human or otherwise.

The incense burned as the two combatants faced off against each other on the mats. Ancient scrolls, paintings, and words of wisdom,

that any adept could read, decorated the stone room. The two were dressed formally for the demonstration. Both men wore neat black pants with collared shirts that tied up the front. The shirts gave the ranking of each man with the traditional insignia of Lung Wang: A red dragon at the front of the shirt with colored lines underneath to show their accomplishment. One man went barefoot and the other wore light, but tight, slippers. The barefoot man had 7 lines under his dragon; the other, 6.

They bowed first to the masters who did not return their bow. They then bowed to ancient photographs on a far wall containing faces from the past. They finished by bowing to the giant Banner of the Red Dragon that had hung in this very room since its construction. It had been brought to this lonely and uninhabited planet millennia ago by masters who had built this magnificent complex with the will to keep tradition and honor alive in the galaxy no matter what the future held.

The two men faced each other. One of the masters made a grunting sound that echoed throughout the room. The men simultaneously pulled out their weapons. Another grunt and the men touched a certain spot on the rods causing the tips to light with a dull red glow. One more grunt, and they assumed the fighting stance and moved toward each other. The barefoot man wasted no time and immediately pressed his attack. He quickly became a dervish of color and movement; his rods flashing towards the other in a dazzling show of skill. The other countered each and every move and the air crackled with energy and the collision of these two adepts. The barefoot man's magna rods were flashing, thrusting, and feinting. But each move was perfectly countered by the other and when the barefoot man got close enough, a surprise! A kick to the ribs flashed out too fast to see from the shoed man. The other danced away barely missing the thrust that would have knocked him off balance just enough to let a hammer blow descend on him. He grinned. The shoed man grinned in response. Then, another

collision of blows and blocks delivered with outrageous speed, yet neither could break through the other's lines of defense. The rods bounced off each other and the air was electric with skill and concentration.

It was time for something to give. The two began getting more daring. They jumped, twisted, kicked, fainted, parried, and yet neither landed the blow that would end the demonstration. One blow was enough. The masters grunted in appreciation at their work. Their students looked on in awe with each wondering to his or herself if he or she would ever reach such a level of skill. Just then, the barefoot man retreated to the far corner of the mat. The shoed man followed and tried to press against the other's back, but at the last split second, he turned and in a wide arc, swung with his left rod what seemed a wild blow. But the trap was set, and when the shoed man had to block with his right, a hole was open for a fraction of a second. Most would have missed it, but not these two. The barefoot man's right rod shot out in a stabbing motion connecting with the chest of the shoed man, slamming him off his feet and across the mat. The barefoot man pressed the attack and as the other struggled to get his weapon up, one of the masters called out. The match was over.

"Never trust anyone who turns and runs after putting up a strong offense," the barefoot man said and offered his hand to help the shoed man up as the rods stopped glowing.

"I think you would have split my head if Master Zhu wouldn't have stopped you," the other said taking the hand.

"Well, I would have given you a good bruise anyway."

"Oh, I don't doubt that. The problem is, you would have enjoyed it too much."

"The sad fact is," the barefoot man said, "you are getting too good. I think in that job of yours you get more practice than I do."

"Then why are *you* helping *me* up?"

"Sometimes, Silver my friend, practice isn't enough."

Lanian Silver stood right at six feet tall. He was a shade too thin and his blonde hair was pulled neatly over the top of his head and down into a pony tail that stopped three inches past the nape of his neck. His steely green eyes had been enhanced at birth and with them he could see at great distances what others would surely miss. His accent was that of the old times; learned in some faraway finishing school that his stern father had sent him to so that “the boy could learn how to be a Silver.” His father, Dr. Silver, was a prominent physician to the wealthy and was as distant in life as he was from this planet. Billions of miles away, he still owned the home that Silver had grown up in all those years ago when he and his sons lived under the same roof on Erpine IV. Lanian Silver didn’t think much about those days anymore. His father disagreed with his life’s path and had never trusted the teachers at Lung Wang. After finishing school, Silver had made the decision on his own to enter the training at Lung Wang instead of going to the medical facility on Erpine IV to train with his father and youngest brother. He had never regretted that decision. His training had kept him alive on dozens of planets throughout his service to the IPF. The Interplanetary Police Force was his family now.

The IPF was a privately owned corporation that had been set up 800 years earlier in order to deal with crime that stretched between planets. It was privately owned to avoid jurisdiction problems and corruption. All planets contributed taxes to the IPF and paid preset bonuses to the company when crimes involving a particular planet were solved. If a crime involved 5 planets, then those respective planets each paid their share of bonus when the crime was solved and the perpetrators were either dead or in custody. This was good politics and made the populace understand that crime still didn’t pay, unless one owned stock in the IPF.

The IPF encompassed all of the thousands of planets in the Human controlled parts of the galaxy called the Greater Planetary States of

the Orion Arm. The Planetary States united over one thousand systems for protection and trade. Representatives from each planet or group of planets met in the Assembly of the Greater States, where laws and trade treaties were hammered out. These representatives elected what was the most sought after position in the greater states, the Supreme Counselor General of the Assembly. Each state was mostly autonomous, but all were subject to the Traditions. These were the great laws that all planets adhered to and from these laws came the IPF. The Law stated plainly that:

“Any human, or otherwise sentient being, who commits acts of treason, crime, or any illegal acts that endanger the safety or well-being of the citizens of the Greater Planetary States and subsequently continues these same acts on, or in the spatial vicinity of, other member states, duly accredited, is in fact a greater menace to society as a whole than a single planetary criminal and, therefore, must be dealt with by a force that, while impartial to any of the effected planets in order that justice may be served, is sanctioned by all member states.”

These words were emblazoned above the doors of the main offices of the IPF and on every planet that had a satellite office. Not all did; some worlds were too sparse in population or had yet to be effectively colonized or claimed.

The Planetary States were bordered by the Remillians, who were a branch of the human race that rejected the Traditions and chose to “proceed forward into new laws and ideals.” It was widely known that the Remillians were a poor and motley collection of planets that were always on the brink of either mutiny or starvation. Someday they would be annexed by the nearest Planetary States

systems, but for now the Assembly didn't see the need for action. Nearer to the Planetary States' most populated areas was an alien race that had forged an empire that was truly mystery: The Thoracian Resolution. The Thoracians were a life form that was mostly insectoid but without a hive mentality. At least equal to human technology, the Resolution encompassed a large but unknown number of planets that could support the Thoracian physiogeny.

Their religion was mostly unknown. All that they had revealed was that they worshipped a mythical race of insects known as "the Nine." Their population was unknown. Their true societal structure was unknown. They had met with humans in deep space after two ships chanced upon each other on exploratory missions. After a method of communicating was established, two groups of ambassadors met ship to ship and decided on the correct spatial boundaries for the two civilizations. The only trouble that had occurred was when one of the human delegation quite offhandedly suggested that the Resolution might be more of an empire than a democracy. In the ensuing chaos, some threats were made and some weapon systems were powered up. However, cooler heads prevailed and the issue was written off to getting acquainted. It was never learned why this was such an affront or what the actual Thoracian governmental system was. It was also never learned why Thoracian society was known as a "resolution." What was learned was that the Thoracians could not survive in pure oxygen and could not use most of the materials that were common to Earth type planets. They lived in a constant fog of oxygen and other noxious gases and were only interested in this type of atmosphere. Each respective race agreed to glimpse each other in the name of science through a clear portal. The Thoracians were roughly under 6 feet tall, slightly greyish green, and they possessed four of what appeared to be compound eyes; two larger eyes and two smaller eyes that were located in the center of the Thoracian skull. They had no visible ears or antennae. They did possess strong hind legs



and four arms, each of which had claws with four digits. One of the human delegation remarked that “they were the biggest, ugliest, bugs I have ever seen.” It is not known what the Thoracian commentary was.

The truce that lasted between the two races was logical and in no danger of changing mostly due to the fact that they were simply too disparate. It was the same logic that precluded water creatures from declaring war on land creatures for their flint. One side could do it and even win, but fires are hard to start under water. Also, Sagans’s laws had proven to be true. These laws stated that sentient, advanced creatures who could survive long enough to develop space flight would be, for the most part, peaceful. Having learned to survive as long as they had without self-destruction, they would be curious about any new species. This law had yet to be tested by provocation. But the two species were not in any immediate danger of hostilities. The Thoracians were occupied looking for other suitable worlds for themselves. Each respective race had Missions that had been set up along the galactic borders. These served as places where Humans and Thoracians could solve any border issues. Humans were not allowed on the Thoracian home world.

Other than these civilizations, not much more was known at this time. Some had said that they had glimpsed other ships or creatures in their respective travels, but so far, no concrete evidence had been seen. This was the Galaxy that Silver knew. He counted himself lucky to actually be one of the few who had traveled quite a bit. He had discussed the nature of their lives many times with his sparring partner, Falon Creed. He and Falon had met at Lung Wang as neophytes. Either by chance or design, they became friends when they had both been disciplined at the same time. They were put on the work crew that was in charge of cleaning the kitchen. They had quarreled at first, but soon became fast friends.

They would organize trips to the city when it was permissible to leave and often went together in search of the elusive treasure that young men from the dawn of time to this day had sought: Females. Silver was always the instigator and Creed acted as the planner and schemer. Although they had both joined the IPF upon graduation, Silver still remained in the field and Creed had chosen to go into the upper levels of the Company and deal with intelligence and the monitoring of known criminals. It was collectively known to insiders as the Dark Room.

As they walked back to the showers after their match, they talked and got caught up with one another's lives.

"I don't understand how you are still so good seeing as how you never leave the office," Silver said.

"Silver, my boy, when you've got it, it stays with you."

"Don't you miss the field," Silver asked.

"Well, I miss the action for sure. Especially after hearing about your adventures. You've racked up some nice bonuses over the years, haven't you. I must say, I do keep up with your travels with some interest."

"You know, you could come with me the next time I get a hot one," Silver said. "Why don't you pull some strings and get back out there with me? I could use some back up."

"Back up is it," Creed laughed. "I know what would happen: You would get too confident with me in the mix and get careless. Then you would have a High G from some oversized planet on your back before I could get there and with one twist of your neck, your picture goes on the wall here at Lung Wang."

"You think so? I seem to have done just fine."

Creed smiled, meaning it, and said, "You definitely have, my friend."

"But what about you," Silver asked. "Tell me, is life in the Dark Room what you thought it would be?"

"Well I'll say this," Creed said and looked at his friend. "I traded the match we had today for the chess board. One is definitely a

better workout while the other does have its less tangible rewards as well.”

“Speaking of rewards, is it your reward to come here and visit me on my off time,” Silver asked. “Somehow I don’t think you left Base just for our little exhibition for the monks and coeds back there.”

“With that reasoning power, it’s a wonder you are not in the Assembly,” Creed said. “After you get cleaned up, I am expecting a communication from Base that I would like you to hear. So if you are not going to be like some girl and take a couple of hours to do your hair, I would hope to see you in my room in one hour.”

## Chapter 2

One hour later, Silver sat in Falon's quarters. The room overlooked the training square and was one of the darker rooms available. Falon's magna rods were back in their sheath and powered down.

"Don't you carry those things in your coat any more," Silver asked. "I can't believe that they are in that sheath like golf clubs. You must be going soft. What if one of the many, shall we say, individuals, whom you put away comes back for revenge? What are you going to do? Call on your link for the Dark Room boys to come get you?"

"Not all weapons can be seen, Silver, my man."

For some reason, the comment made Silver realize that they were now on two separate levels of existence. They had known each other for many years but being in the Dark Room was said to change a man. Silver sensed the change and somehow felt sympathy for his oldest friend.

"Silver, in a few minutes, that screen is going to light up with a call from Base. There is something that has happened we want you to look into."

"Well, it must be pretty hard news if they sent you here to tell me," Silver leaned against the wall.

"They didn't," Creed said. "I just wanted to see you and this was the best excuse I could find. Besides, in this case, you do not have to accept this one. We could get someone else if we had to."

"I have never turned a case down before. Why would I start now?"

"This one is a little more risky."

"They are all risky." Silver faced his friend.

The screen lit up and displayed the IPF sign and an icon at the bottom that let the receiver know the message was encrypted at the source. The screen showed a room that held an oval table that was half full of well-dressed men and two women.

“Hello, Mr. Silver.” The man was Vice Director Hogarth. He was in charge of operations that involved field agents and their missions. Silver knew him well. It was he who gave Silver his cases and assisted him in the field. He had always treated Silver well and he spoke in a measured cadence that was never perturbed or upset.

“Mr. Hogarth.” Silver looked into the screen.

“I trust that you are well and enjoying a little deserved rest after you’re last adventure,” Hogarth said.

“I am and thanks for your concern.”

“Not at all, Mr. Silver. We like to keep a good watch on all of our assets. It’s good business.”

Hogarth referred to the fact that the IPF was a *for* profit organization. Silver knew that he was liked because he represented a return of investment. The fees he collected were substantial and he had yet to fail in solving a case and collecting the bonus. Multi-planet bonuses were quite large.

“And you, Mr. Creed. I trust that you are not neglecting your duties by staying away from us too long,” Hogarth said.

“I will be on the next jumper, Vice Director.”

“Yes, well, your presence is sorely missed. Mr. Silver, do you know much about slavery?”

The hair on the back of Lanian’s neck stood up at the abrupt change of subject. Slavers were the most notorious and ruthless criminals in the galaxy. They were despised by even other criminal organizations. To deal with slavers meant that the entire galaxy’s population of law enforcement was against you and

searching for you every hour of every day. Slaving was done on the most remote worlds as a solution to the sometimes dangerous work of tending fields, mines, asteroids, and outposts. A growing galactic economy provided many opportunities for some to undercut competition with cheap labor costs. Usually practiced by remote cells within companies, the corporate owners often did not even know that slaves were being employed on their assets. After all, it was always said, how in the worlds could the home office know what some rogue manager was doing light years away on some back-water world?

Slaving always involved transworld kidnapping, payoffs, usually murder in some form, and large sums of cash. Slaves usually came from farm worlds and even humans bought from the Remillians. Some were sold peacefully by family members who were hard up, but most were forcibly taken, men for work and women for “diversion.” In a galaxy with thousands of worlds inhabited, it was easy to find a barely monitored planet that offered a chance for a large haul of slaves. The shocker ship would land, wreak havoc, and stun the prospects with energy weapons. The cargo would then be loaded onto the shocker which would then blast back into orbit where the mother ship was waiting for an uncoded jump. Any resistors would be killed. Of course, some of the local law enforcement may have had a “robbery” that tied up their forces on that very same night, but this was usually represented as a coincidence.

“Mr. Silver?”

“Oh. Yes, Mr. Hogarth. I was thinking about the reports that I have read on the subject.”

“And?”

“Well, I certainly share the Company view that they are our number one concern. As it becomes more dangerous for them to operate, they will become more emboldened by the possible profit in such a venture.” Silver looked into the viewer. “Unfortunately, it

seems as we close the net on them, there always follows an increase in prices. This gives them further impetus to risk our attention due to the increase in profits.”

“I see from your case file that you have yet to work a slaver case.”

“That is correct, Mr. Hogarth. I have only worked on the periphery of such an investigation. The murder, corruption, etc.”

“Well. This time, I think you are ready for the next step. Perhaps not in the way that you may suspect, but you are chosen nonetheless.”

“Not in the way I might suspect,” Silver asked.

“Yes, Mr. Silver. You see, someone has murdered some slavers. You are to find out who and why.”

“Why do we care who takes that scum out,” Creed asked.

“Really, Mr. Creed,” Hogarth said. “Vigilantism cannot be tolerated. What if everybody decided to take the law into their own hands? We would be out of business in the two weeks it takes Mand to circle its main star. The IPF cannot let someone undermine our position as the premier law enforcement agency in the galaxy. Murder is murder.”

“How do we know it’s not rival factions? It’s well known that they fight all the time over turf and contracts. Maybe it’s an inside job,” Silver said.

“We know that it is not an inside job, Mr. Silver,” Hogarth said.

“The facts of the case point to a vigilante.”

“What are the facts then,” Silver asked.

“The facts, Mr. Silver, will be given by Vice Director Kuo. Ms. Kuo?”

Ms. Kuo was of the Asian peoples that spread into the galaxy when jumpers had opened up the universe to the planet locked inhabitants of the Earth. She came from one of the New China worlds that had sprung up and flourished over a thousand years ago. The Chinese culture had remained intact all throughout human history and today was no different. The Chinese still took pride in

their ancestry and could trace it back to ancient Earth. They remade worlds as they had remade entire towns in foreign countries in the times just before jumpers were invented and perfected. She was young, conservatively dressed and spoke many languages. She looked into the lens.

“Mr. Silver, have you been to Crond?”

“No, Ms. Kuo.”

“Crond is a world that is mostly used for farming and the mining of precious gems. It is overseen by the neighboring system of Manditore. One month ago, a shocker attempted a dust off there in one of the remote fields. The small village that houses the workers was attacked and some innocents were killed in the process. This time, the locals were not in on the job and fought off the attack, but not before dozens of workers were taken. This ship was identified as the *Claw*, a known shocker in the employ of an unknown group of slavers. The surveillance records have confirmed this.”

“The mother ship jumped before it could be identified,” she went on. “However, the *Claw* was reported seen in the nearby system of Qin. The *Claw* had made an illicit landing on Qin 1 with the intent of purchasing repairs and supplies. You know as well as I that many ports provide harbor to illegal ships for this purpose.”

Silver looked at the image of Qin 1 at the bottom of the screen.

“From what we can surmise,” Ms. Kuo said, “when the crew went into one of the local establishments, they were attacked by an unknown assailant. Two of the crew were killed and one was wounded. The rest made a break for the ship and only just succeeded in getting out of orbit and back to the mother ship that we now believe was hiding on the far side of the planet.”



“You are telling me that a single person walked into a bar, attacked a shocker crew, killed two slavers, chased the rest back to their ship and off the planet, and then made it off the surface without a scratch,” Silver asked and glanced at Creed.

“That is exactly what I am telling you.”

“How is that possible,” Creed interrupted. “These guys are always armed to the teeth with every known bit of trickery in the worlds. They’ve got energy weapons and who knows what else. Are we sure our source is credible?”

“We are sure, Mr. Creed. Now, please let Ms. Kuo finish,” Hogarth said.

Creed and Silver exchanged quick looks.

“It doesn’t stop there,” she went on. “One week later, on Qin 4, the same thing. Deep in the port city of Falung, a group of men and three women were having lunch at one of the “diversion” establishments. A single assailant again burst in on the group. This time, none escaped. A wounded member was questioned quickly, one of the women said, and then dispatched.”

“Do we have surveillance,” Silver asked.

“This kind of establishment doesn’t run surveillance records. But this is not important. We know that these men were targeted.”

“How do we know,” Silver asked.

“Because when a ship sits in a port for over three days without paying for it, people notice and start asking questions,” Ms. Kuo said. “The rest of the crew didn’t attempt to return to the ship and it was impounded. They are probably still hiding on the surface of Qin 4. After the false signature generators were turned off, the

ship's true identity was realized. That ship, gentlemen, is the *Claw*."

Silver sat back.

"Didn't the locals ID the bodies," Creed asked.

"Really, Mr. Creed. You of all people know what lengths these people go to in order to erase their pasts," Hogarth said. "The locals do not have the information that the IPF does. We, of course, knew immediately that they were slavers. The ship's refit alone gives it away. Their prints and DNA are all over the *Claw*. There is no doubt that these men were tracked, followed, and exterminated. The assailant was simply finishing the job he started on Qin 1."

"But who would be crazy enough to go up against these guys alone? There is no telling what weapons the mother ship has or how many are aboard. And think of the risk if this person has a family. It is well known what slavers do to the families of people who get in their way," Creed said.

"That is for your Mr. Silver to find out, Mr. Creed," Hogarth said.

"This is crazy," Creed said. "I'll get back to Base and get my things and come with you, Silver. There's no way that you are going alone on this one. It will only take me-"

"That will not be an option, Mr. Creed," Hogarth said.

"What do you mean," Creed asked.

"Mr. Silver, you are to go on this case alone. Two agents of, shall we say, both your talents, going through port cities in search of slavers would be spotted long before either of you got close enough to accomplish anything. This case demands the utmost in secrecy, for your safety, Mr. Silver. We feel that you will attract less attention because you have not worked slavery before."

“You’re asking him to walk into a situation where there are unknown numbers and unknown motives,” Creed said. “And if this is a rival organization, he will be caught in the middle of a turf war. Alone.”

“Mr. Silver hasn’t spoken yet,” Hogarth said.

The air was still and the rain hit the window.

“I’ll do it,” Silver said quietly.

Creed stared at him. “You aren’t serious, are you?”

“He’s right, Falon,” Silver said. “If it is a turf war, they will be extra vigilant and that would blow our cover. They may be watching for agents with all this attention now anyway. And if there seems to be more than two groups involved, then I will slip in and out before they realize it and call in backup.”

“Exactly, Mr. Silver. Your reputation precedes you,” Hogarth said.

“You don’t have to take this one, Lanian,” Creed said.

“I know. If it gets hot, I have your link.”

“Use it, Friend,” Creed said.

“Count on it.”

“Very nice,” Hogarth said. “Now that that is settled, in this transmission are the jump arrangements for your trip to Qin 4, Mr. Silver. Do not delay. The public must know that the IPF still controls this rabble.”

## Chapter 3

Three hours later, Creed and Silver were in Silver's room making the last preparations for the trip to Qin 4.

"Now, aren't you the hard one," Creed said. He eyed the array of devices strewn on the bed. "I hope that this isn't to impress me after our little bout."

"Forget about that," Silver said. "You've been beating me for years. I'm used to it now. I'm going to need some bag of tricks for this job."

A bag of tricks was IPF slang for a new height in weaponry and surveillance. Silver looked over the equipment stretched out on the bed. He had IPF issue boots that concealed throwing explosives in the ankles. The toes and heels were charged and could magnetize if needed. This was essential if the agent were on a low G world and disoriented or slow. There were side arms: A main energy pistol for the hip holster as well as a small "cracker" pistol at the small of the back. This pistol was a hand held version of a ship's frequency analyzer and could crack through walls, stone, ship's doors, and any other solid substance by finding the resonant frequency of the substance and emitting the correct energy burst to splinter it.

He also carried trailers. These were devices that emitted a signal that could be tracked by various IPF satellites all over the known galaxy. These could be either shot or thrown to stick to a ship's hull. Lastly, he loaded various grenades, stunners, smokers, and, his favorite, smackers. A smacker was an interesting device that set up an invisible wall of energy that an unsuspecting person fleeing would smack into, thereby stopping.

The magna rods were most important. These fit neatly into two long pockets on either side of the long coat that held all this gear. They were situated just under the hands and could be drawn and

ignited in an instant. Silver felt naked without them. If he had to drop all other weapons and carry these alone, he could live with that. He checked and re-checked the gear. Many times he had come back to the IPF base with all weapons expended and the rods at low ebb. He knew that because this job was hot, all the preparation was absolutely necessary.

“When’s the jump,” Creed asked.

“About 4 hours. Wish you were going?”

“Are you kidding me? This deskwork is a little stiff. I sometimes envy you.”

“With your clout, why don’t you just put in for a change of assignment? That would be easy for a man in your position.”

Silver rechecked the equipment.

“Silver, some doors are much easier to go in than out.”

“What is this talk from you? I almost hear some melancholy there,” Silver said as he concentrated on his packing. But a shadow had come over his friend’s face. His powers of observing while not observing were as sharp as ever and he detected the change as any good investigator would.

Creed stared out the window and said, “Silver, I miss this place. I miss its simplicity. Do you remember when we got here? Ready to do the right thing and so focused. The monks told us right from wrong would be easy to spot when we were at peace and free from defilement. Everything was clear. Then in the blink of an eye, we were in the mix with the IPF. You went your way and I went mine, but right was still right and wrong was still wrong. Now, in the Dark Room I see things I don’t want to see. Remember monk Guo Lin?”

Creed affected a serious voice, “Even if you see with your eyes and hear with your ears, it will still be your heart that tells you what is correct. This is the path to purity. Do not see from afar,

experience. This is life. This is the way. This is the way to not only know truth, but also to live it.”

“I still hear him,” Silver said. “I also remember the younger students in a panic when they found his empty room. They thought he had been kidnapped, if you recall. We had to tell them that it was not uncommon for monks to disappear.” Silver smiled. “I can still see the youngest of them demanding we form a search party.”

Creed still gazed out to the grounds. Sensing the seriousness, Silver joined Creed at the window.

“Are you trying to tell me something, my friend?”

“Just this: After all this time, so what if someone is wasting slavers? These guys had it coming. Is it wrong to take that scum out? At least we won’t have to spend Company money on prosecution. Maybe we should let this vigilante run a while longer and do us all a few favors.”

“That’s great until some lady going to the store gets shot in a cross fire,” Silver said. “Or our hero kills the wrong people. Then it’s back down to us. You know that.”

“I know, but I can still fantasize, can’t I?” Creed left the window and put his coat back on. Silver remained at the window for a moment and remembered all the happy times he had spent in these yards.

One hour later, Silver stood at the entrance to the jump station where he would begin the trip to Qin 4. His IPF badge gave him immunity from a search and he bypassed the weapons scanners and long lines of travelers. Creed had come along to see him off.

“Seriously, be careful,” Creed said.

“I will,” Silver said. “It’s probably some ex military guy whose wife was killed by a slaver. I’ll be able to talk him into surrendering. You know, use honor and all that.”

“You better get serious,” Creed said.

They shook hands in the Lung Wang fashion and Silver made his way through the gate. Creed watched until Silver moved out of sight.

## Chapter 4

The finest woods and furnishings lined the office and three old style fans turned slowly over its middle section. It was not in a tall building, but the view of trees and animals outside the window was nothing less than breathtaking. The furnishings alone, some of which were ancient, would have cost more than most people make in a lifetime. Original paintings hung on the walls by Monet, daVinci, Chu, Waters, Karazawa, and many other great masters. The paintings from only the last 500 years would have purchased a large starship with jump capabilities. The ceiling was painted in the finest gold leaf with platinum piping. The office was mostly lit with natural light and any section of the office could be illuminated with any one of a number of beautiful lamps. Statuary lined recesses around the office. False walls concealed many view screens and other communication equipment that could put the occupants in touch with anywhere in the known galaxy. Many statues of deities were present, but they all would have undoubtedly frowned on the business that was transacted in this room.

This was the office of Rath Castor, Regent of one of the galaxy's most ruthless entities. It was known simply as the Organization. Stimulants, slaves, counterfeiting, and any other crime that could be committed was planned and given direction from this room with ruthless precision. Profit was the motive. The methods were unimportant. Castor's rule stretched to any world in the galaxy where money existed and changed hands.

Castor was immaculately dressed in a neat suit that had been hand made from the finest materials in the entire galaxy. He moved calmly from screen to screen on his desk and observed and evaluated many numbers faster than most professional mathematicians. Transfers and deposits were his purview. He saw deeply into the numbers and gleaned more than just sums from the



data. He gained insight; not business insight necessarily, but instead a deeper understanding of the psyche of the people that populated the galaxy. What drugs and stimulants were rising in popularity and why? What kinds of slaves were required and where? What were people willing to pay for? Places where drugs and slaves were sold meant that business in those places was good because the populace had extra money to spend. What did this mean for the Organization's legitimate businesses and how could he profit from this knowledge? He had risen to this position over his colleagues by possessing a deeper thought process than an advanced sociologist. The office was absolutely quiet and did not betray its sinister underside. It would have taken an army to penetrate the building and even then, he would be long gone before they came through the door.

The knock at the door came very quietly and the door cracked open just a hair.

"Mr. Castor, I have some news that I think merits your attention." The man was Kroft, and his clothes were designed not to take attention away from his master. He was Castor's aide and the only one who would dare knock on the door unannounced.

"Please come in, Kroft," Castor said without turning from the screen.

Kroft came in and sat down in front of the large desk seemingly without moving air. That was his talent. He was there, but not there. Present, but not noticeable. That was how he had attained this station. He was a slight man and his hair slicked back over his head. He had dark eyes and the manners of a ghost. He was also absolutely without morals or feelings. Castor knew this and thought it a weakness.

“Sir, I have a disturbing report from Qin 4. Some of our operatives have been eliminated,” Kroft said.

“I see.” This was, of course, a part of doing business so Castor was completely unsurprised. “What do we know?”

“We know that one of our shock crews was tracked and subsequently attacked at a place of leisure on that planet. The assailant is unknown. The crew had separated for rest and diversion and one of the groups was eliminated.” Kroft gave facts only. Saying more than you knew was fatal in this room.

“Suspects,” Castor asked offhandedly.

“We don’t have any at this time.”

“Leads?”

“None, sir.”

“Of course you will check all the obvious. This would include our rivals, disgruntled employees, and family revenge. Could it be our competition?”

“Not likely, sir. I believe that this could have been done as revenge for an abduction,” Kroft said.

“But who would have both the ability and the frame of mind to challenge us? This is the question,” Castor said as he eyed one of the screens and made a mental note of its contents. “There are not many who would even dare such an attack. What about vigilante law enforcement? Say, a renegade IPF agent?”

“Our sources at the IPF do not report this to us but they are only mid level as you know,” Kroft said. “They could be wrong, but I feel that this is unlikely. They have always been reliable.”

“I see. And the method this very brave and stupid assailant used?”

“The crew was ambushed while their ship was docked. The assailant was heavily armed and extremely proficient in the use of weapons. This alone rules out most suspects. This was either a military or IPF trained operative. Perhaps a former mercenary,” Kroft offered.

“With this in mind, why are you uncertain that it was our competition?” Castor looked up from the screen. Now he came from behind the desk and took a seat in a chair that was older than the time of this planet’s colonization. “As you should know, Mr. Kroft, they certainly have the resources, just as we do, to gain the employ of a disillusioned soldier or IPF agent. What is your rationale for suspecting a lone operative?”

“As you are aware, Regent, whenever we have had a problem with our rivals, there is always a message that goes with such an act. This time, none of our usual channels has claimed responsibility. Furthermore, nothing has been demanded of us as of yet. The crew was simply questioned, destroyed, and the assailant then moved on.”

“This speaks to me of revenge.” Castor sat back in the chair and thought for a moment. “This could be an individual whom we may have injured in some manner, perhaps a wife, child, or relative that our crews may have taken. Check and find out the crew’s history before they joined us. If this act is in response to some past transgression, then this may be the last we hear of this. Also, put all other crews on alert. I believe that another attack may come. However, I am in doubt of its success. A person of this type may have surprised a crew once, but our people will be ready next time.”

“Should we enact a search for this individual,” Kroft asked.

“Not yet. For now it is safe to say that we are the ones who are being pursued.” Castor looked out the window at the slight rain that had begun to fall. “We will therefore let this unknown come to us. Of course, any act against Organization assets must be answered swiftly, but let us not waste energy and resources at this time. The *Nightshade* is completing a very profitable tour of duty and we cannot afford to have anyone looking into our affairs until that run is complete and another can be planned. Simply alert our personnel of the situation and tell them to act accordingly.”

“I understand, sir.” Kroft stood to leave.

“Also, when and if this person appears, please let it be known that I will reward whoever captures him alive. I wish to know such a one. Perhaps this person could do some work for us. Opportunity comes in many forms, Mr. Kroft. Such courage directed at our enemies may be useful.”

## Chapter 5

“Pass please,” the smiling attendant said and held out a perfectly manicured hand to Silver. He gave his IPF badge to her and she took it like any other ticket.

“Thank you, Agent Silver. Your flight will be departing in a short while. Please refer to the updated charts located throughout this station on your particular departure in case any unforeseen objects such as, but not limited to, comets, asteroids, planetary matter, debris, or general dark matter should interfere with the schedule of your flight. As you will note, this station has many restaurants, bars, and other areas for link use that are at your disposal.” She had given this speech thousands of times but still managed to get it out with just enough enthusiasm. “Welcome, Agent Silver, and please enjoy your flight.”

“How many jumps will this flight take,” Silver asked.

“Here at Sector Connect, we pride ourselves on the most flights with the least breaks in your journey. Your trip to Qin 4 will be a single jump with the least amount of time dilation possible. At Sector Connect we like to say, ‘because of our great service, you will wish the flight was longer.’ Please also be aware that there will be a short time needed for the ship to dock at the station of your destination. During this time, please take advantage of our free beverage service. Thank you once again for using Sector Connect, *your* connection to the stars!” She gave a fairly convincing smile.

Silver went to one of the large star charts that were all around the terminal. He held his ticket up to the reader and his route appeared. The color green flashed at the bottom. Well, that is always a good start, he thought. He walked past the conference rooms and meeting centers for business people. There were also small hotels

for those whose flights had been delayed. He hoped the journey to the surface of Qin 4 wouldn't be too long. That was always what took time. The trip from the station to the surface was always the longest part of the journey.

Silver had made many such jumps and this was to be a routine trip. He wondered what he would find on the *Claw*. The shocker was still impounded by the locals and hopefully, they had not touched anything as they had been instructed by the IPF.

He walked through the terminal and was cleared through the VIP entrance. All manner of people were traveling today. Families, retirees, and business people with their rushed looks and official manner hurried to and fro. Some High Gs with their stubby bodies and legs that seemed to glide through the pathways shuffled past. He had heard that being too long away from their homes made them have digestive problems. Best not sit next to one of them, he had always thought. He loved terminals because they always meant that an adventure was about to begin. This one, however, was quite serious. Nevertheless, traveling was one of the aspects of field work that he relished.

He had realized over many such trips that each planet had a particular smell. Lung Wang, with its ever present temples burning incense, seemed to give the whole planet an odor that he had missed everyday since he left. He had tried buying the type of incense and keeping it at his home, wherever that was, but it wasn't the same. The forest worlds that he had worked on with their clean, crisp air were always a welcome experience. He even enjoyed the industrial worlds and their smell of fumes, activity, eateries, and people rushing about.

He had never visited Qin 4 and was always glad to get to a place that he had not seen. He walked down the gateway onto the passenger liner. Presently, he found his seat, in the back, of course,

and settled in. The ship was a medium sized public transport and had the usual look about it: Rust colored with a long cylindrical body, its jump engines taking up most of the back quarter. Now situated, he hoped that it wouldn't be long before they got the clearance to depart.

Up in the control tower, three controllers looked at the charts one last time before they were about to give the clearance to leave. There was a cloud of asteroids that was passing through the path of the ship. It was a regular occurrence. The cloud was orbiting a planetary body and would be clear in a few seconds. The charts were gathered and kept up by the local systems and stations and shared with all stations throughout an immediate translink that passed information over great distances by the use of stationary satellites. The ship's hull could deal with most minor and even some major hits, but anything over 10 feet would cause some serious problems and might even destroy the ship outright. Many a smuggler had chanced uncharted jumps and vanished in a cloud of debris. Some had even miscalculated and had come flying into the atmosphere of some planet and been smashed to bits along with thousands of citizens as they hit the surface at translight speed. Some had gone all the way to the planet core.

On the bridge, the pilots were getting ready for their routine pre-flight check. The pilots of these star ships were an odd lot. Many of them did nothing except live on and pilot the ships. Also, medical science was beginning to question the effects of constant space travel on the human brain. The pilots and some members of the crew seemed to be exhibiting a kind of second sight or stellar vision. Not anything that could be quantified yet, but there was definitely a change in personality over many years of piloting. Many retired to back water worlds and lived in isolated areas or in communes with other retired pilots. Few had any real contact with civilization after that.

It was not uncommon for a pilot to “guess” the weather patterns for the worlds that they had just come from. Sometimes, they seemed to know if there was major unrest or a catastrophe on their routes. For years, people wrote it off as experience, but now it was getting deeper. This was more than a “sailor’s nose.”

“Tower, this is *Lord of Orion* do you acknowledge control?” The Captain looked around the bridge.

“*Lord of Orion*, please wait 20 seconds for the tenders to detach.”

“Roger that.”

After a few moments, the tenders detached from the hull of the ship and returned to the dock. They pushed the ship into place so it could align itself to the coordinates of the destination.

“Tower, do you show all clear at destination?”

“*Lord of Orion*, we show all clear and have confirmed all clear. Do you read?”

“I read all clear.” The Captain looked at the engine power readouts that were floating in front of him.

This was the most important moment of the journey. Using a complex network of star charts and direct links that allowed information to transmit in real time, the path of the ship was computed and shown to be free of debris.

“Very well, Tower, we are moving to position.” The Captain used the smallest ship thrusters to push the ship to its vector.

The ship moved to a position that kept the blast of the engines away from the station and other ships. The powerful reaction of the engines would create a “superposition” for the ship. The “traction” of the universe would be circumvented for a few seconds and the ship would skid across time and distance. It would be in many places at once.



The ship began humming as the engines were charged and the out rigging deployed. The out rigging kept the ship from being damaged by any small objects by creating an energy field around the ship.

“Engine room, this is the Captain. Do you have blast control?”

“Aye, Captain. We will transfer blast control to the bridge on your mark.”

“Transfer in, 5,4,3,2,1. Do you acknowledge blast control transfer?” The Captain looked at all the readouts before him.

“Bridge, you have blast control.”

“Blast control confirmed,” the Captain said.

At that moment, a trigger came out of the Captain’s chair and he grasped the handle. There was a cover over the triggering switch. He did not flip the cover off.

“Engine room, begin charging for jump.”

A deep hum vibrated throughout the ship. Its power centers were charging for an energy discharge large enough to shatter a large asteroid. Negative gravity was projected in the front of the ship to “trick” the laws of physics into believing the ship to be devoid of mass. This theoretically fooled the laws of physics into doing what men require. Over the years of space travel men had found the universe quite stern in its demands that its rules be followed. However, men were ever cunning and had never shied away from trickery to achieve their ends. The ship could then move through space and create the super position needed to skid across the vast emptiness of space.

“Tower, do I have all clear?”

“All clear, *Lord of Orion*. You may begin final countdown. Have a safe trip.”

“Roger that, tower. *Lord of Orion* will see you on the return.”

The captain’s chair began to rise above the busy bridge. At once, the entire closed in bridge dropped the window covers and revealed the vacuum of space. The captain had full view of the station and the length of the ship. The negative gravity projectors were glowing with energy creating a beautiful sight for the travelers eating in the station’s many restaurants. This was a sight being watched even by those travelers that had seen it many times on many journeys.

The ship was soon awash in colors and flashing lights. The engines were nearing their zenith of power.

“Crew of *Lord of Orion*, secure for transport,” the Captain said into the ship wide intercom.

The stewardesses and stewards all took their seats while they chatted.

“Starting countdown. Mark at 20. And... mark.” The Captain synchronized the ship’s controls.

Numbers in the bridge appeared on all screens and started counting down from 20. All the bridge crew were happily attending to their tasks and grinning at each other between watching their stations. When the count reached 10, the Captain pulled his visor over his eyes and took the cover off the blast trigger. If one were to peak under that visor, he or she would see a euphoric and almost mad look in the eyes.

The Captain stared out into the void and joined the count at “...3,2,1. Mark.” He depressed the trigger.

There was no lurch that was noticeable to the crew or anyone else on the ship. The ship’s engines exploded to life and the ship

literally blasted through reality. The ship went in a straight line to its destination.

On the bridge, the colors and shapes of the universe sped by and the captain betrayed no emotion as he stared into the magic of space. The total “burn time” was only 5 seconds. To the people on the ship, only that time had passed. To the schedules, the ship arrived at the exact same time it had left. For a brief second, the ship was in all places along its trajectory at once. The captain allowed the ships computers to stop the burn at the precise moment that the ship was at its destination. With no power to the engines, the ship slammed back into the traction of space fabric. Because no gravity was acting on the ship, nothing was felt and the ship’s structure was unaffected. The ship simply appeared in one place of all the possible points on its trajectory.

The crew barely noticed the jump and were already up giving drinks out for the short trip to the station. It would take about an hour for the ship to go one billionth of the distance it had just covered. That was plenty of time for some to get drunk or get ready for an important meeting. A couple waited until no one was looking and snuck into the lavatory.

The crew pretended not to notice and Silver was fast asleep.

## Chapter 6

Silver went through the Falung City Port on Qin 4 and out onto the transport pick up area. The port was a humming hive of activity of travelers and peddlers making their way to wherever it was they were going.

The port was a mixture of old and new with its instructions and directions in bold lettering anywhere you could fit enough words to tell somebody something. The language was a mixture of Old English and traditional Chinese characters. With his education, Silver spoke Mandarin Chinese and read the characters so this was routine.

Silver found his way to a private transport and told the pilot to get him to the local police station. The man was suspicious but complied. A fare was a fare.

The car was a small hovercraft and a common sight on most worlds. It was highly efficient and very cheap to run thus preserving the ancient tradition of the taxi service. Always necessary on any world, they were also a good source of information about the social climate of each particular planet. A skillful field operative could learn a lot from the driver of such a vehicle, Silver had learned. They could always be found near transport hubs and private landing strips. Information on who was coming and going was something Silver could always use.

Silver decided to do some field work as a warm up.

“So, it must be pretty quiet living here,” Silver looked out the window.

“Pretty much.” The driver never looked back or in the mirror to see Silver.

“Are you from here,” Silver asked.

“No, I retired here to be close to my family.” He betrayed just a hint of an old Chinese accent.

“Really? How long have you lived here?”

“Not long, maybe 28 years.” The driver easily worked the controls while speaking.

“And before that?”

“I was an engineer for Planetary Services. You know ports and things.”

Strange, Silver thought. That was a highly paid position. Why drive a spaceport cab, he wondered.

“I know that company,” Silver said. “They are all over the galaxy.”

“That’s right,” the driver said with a little pride.

Silver did know that company. He had arrested one of their corporate execs for a stolen materials scam. The man would have been fine if he just wouldn’t have moved the material off the planet. The locals never caught on to the scam. When the man tried to do the same thing from another planet, the IPF caught wind of it and that was that. He was arrested and thrown into a country club prison for non-violents. Silver had visited the prison several times for the questioning of other inmates and the man was never really angry when he caught Silver’s eye. He just looked up from his chess game and smiled like he had a secret. Come to think of it, Silver thought, he probably did. Probably some money buried on some moon. *Just try to spend it*, he laughed to himself.

They were nearing the police station.

“How many years were you with Planetary Services?”

“85 years to the day.”

“You like driving better?”

“Less travel,” he smiled.

“85 years. That’s a long time.” Silver looked out the window.

“You should take it easy.”

“Ha,” the driver said. “Sitting around is boring. My wife complains all the time for 2 years, la. Look at you, she says, moping around the house all day. Go to temple. Go home. Go eat. Go home. Go to temple. Go home. What is that? Drove us both crazy. I bought this cab for nothing and now I drive around 4 days a week.”

“What about the other three,” Silver asked.

“Go to temple. Go home. Go eat. Go home. Go to temple. Go home.” He smiled in the mirror. Silver returned it and looked at the busy surface of the planet.

“Has it been busy,” Silver asked.

“About the same. Always people come to see the great temples and the cave hotels. Some guys come for the girls. Many people like me come to settle here after retirement. I heard the bars here are pretty good. Boring to me. I did enough drinking when I was young. I just do the travelers, remember. The ones who move here or stay longer land at the private port, not here. Anyone rich enough to have their own ship I never see.”

“Where is that private port,” Silver asked.

“Down by the water,” the driver said. “You should be careful if you go. Trouble down there recently. I avoid that area, not worth it. You never know who is landing in those fancy ships.”

“How far is it from here,” Silver asked.

“Maybe 30 minutes. Pretty close.”

“Well, I will be careful.” Silver adjusted his coat and felt the sureness of the weapons.

They pulled into the Police Station and Silver grabbed his bag. The car landed and Silver’s alloy tipped boots touched the ground. He thought the air was nice and found the gravity comfortable. That was probably why so many older people had settled here, he surmised. Silver reminded himself that comfortable gravity also meant that someone from a higher G world than this would be extra dangerous. No doubt the local thugs had some in their employ.

“Thanks for the ride.” Silver gave him a generous tip. It was an old IPF custom in case this was to be the last world he visited in this life.

“I hope that you catch them,” the driver said.

Silver became cautious, “How do you know what I am here for?”

“It’s too hot for that coat,” the driver said.

Silver suppressed a laugh.

“You’re not the only one who’s been around,” the driver said through the window.

Silver smiled and waved at the driver as he took off again in search of another fare. He turned and looked at the police headquarters. This was a regular police station, Silver thought, as he came in front entrance. They were always the same with their nondescript walls set off by pictures of the local police that had fallen in the line of duty. Unlike Silver, they did not belong to a multi-planet company. These officers earned their money the old fashioned way and that was from the local government who paid the bills to keep the cities safe. They always resented the IPF for its power, but at

the same time were eager to be a part of a larger investigation. That could mean a promotion or a raise. Those things were always welcome.

Silver showed his credentials to the sergeant and asked to see the Captain. They all knew why he was there but they didn't want to seem too impressed. Silver knew this and always kept a polite tone. He knew these people worked hard and didn't get bonuses like he did, so he never pushed too hard.

The Captain came out and shook Silver's hand. "Always glad to help the IPF. I'm Captain Worsk. This is a nasty piece of business. Come back to my office and I'll tell you what we know." Silver looked at all the locals in their desks as he followed the Captain to his office. I would rather push garbage than sit at one of those desks, he thought. They stared without staring. The coat marked him for an IPF agent.

"We usually don't have major crimes around here, you know," the Captain began. "These guys avoid this place because of all the traffic. Our towers are too good. It's almost impossible to get a ship down here without having to give a signature. There are many false signatures out there as you know, Agent Silver. But I am sure our net would have detected it if we had seen a known errant signature. Obviously we would never have given authorization to land if we knew that there were illicit ships in our space."

"What do we know," Silver asked. He knew every thing the Captain had said was true. But still, here we are, he thought.

"We know this: An unknown assailant who was heavily armed and either very brave or very stupid came into a local bar ready for an all out war. Whoever this was wasn't worried about these guys' friends at all. We didn't even know slavers were operating in our spatial vicinity, much less coming here for a little recreation. This



person or persons, came into the bar and immediately targeted this group. We don't know how he knew about them or their business here. But, let me tell you right now: There is no slave activity on this planet."

Except for the party going on here under your noses, Silver thought to himself. He believed the Captain, though. This crew was just passing through, but why? And did it matter to the attacker or was that just a coincidence? It was too early to tell.

"I will need to visit the bar," Silver said. "And I need to have an officer with me. Whoever walks the beat down in that section of town will do. I will also be speaking to the manager of the bar, whether he wants to or not. I am ready to go if you have a transport."

"Very well," the Captain said. "You can leave your bag here while you go. I will get dispatch to call the local precinct and get the local man there to meet you at the bar. You will find us easy to work with, Mr. Silver. Just remember one thing: I am happy to assist you in any way that I can. However, I am well acquainted with the arsenal in your coat and hope that you will remember that this is a good planet with good people, most of who came here to retire. So, I would ask you to use some caution before starting one of your famous IPF demolition jobs that will be on the front look up of the news net in mere minutes or even worse, as it happens."

"Captain, I give you my word that I will do my best not to get my body splattered on the street of this most excellent and inviting world." Silver looked at the Captain and got up to leave. The Captain caught the sarcasm but wasn't going to let Silver get under his skin.

I hate those speeches, Silver thought as he got in the patrol car. There was always a speech. Every planet he had ever worked on

always gave “the speech.” Silver guessed that they felt they had to. Everyone knew about the IPF and the way it operated. Most police officers would give a decade’s salary to get an IPF posting. It was only luck that Silver had had the training at Lung Wang. This had placed him above the rest of the pack. The monks had always said it wasn’t luck that any came there. It was merely the sum of your actions to that point in time saved over many lives wandering. Silver believed it. He had felt at home there the minute he arrived.

The driver got in without a word and got the transport off the ground and into the air. Silver could tell he wasn’t much for conversation but thought he might give it a try.

“Thanks for the ride,” Silver offered.

“No thanks needed.”

The driver was a heavy set guy of about 70. Pretty young, but old enough to know what the worlds were like. His jet black hair set off a typically square face. He was husky, though, like...that was it. A higher G planet than this one, Silver noticed.

“Not from around here, are you?” Silver was looking down at the city but turned to the mirror just in time to see the man flinch slightly then act natural.

“What makes you say that?”

“Well, I have seen my share of other places and a guy like you looks a little strong for this place.”

“It comes in handy. When you need it,” the officer said dryly.

“I can imagine. How long have you been with the force here?”

“Not long. Just on 20 years.”

“Still green,” Silver said as the city passed underneath. “But you can learn a lot in those 20, if you pay attention.” Silver kept his eyes out the window.

“Not much to learn here. Pretty quiet.”

“Except lately.” Silver looked into the rear view mirror.

“Except lately.” The man repeated.

As the car landed, Silver looked down at the bar. The driver just hovered over the street and let Silver get out. “Thanks for the ride, Officer?”

“Officer Caledro.”

“Thanks again, Officer Caledro.”

“Always glad to help the IPF.” The window came up and the car moved silently up into the air. Caledro, Silver thought to himself, what are you angry about? He went through the front door of the bar and showed his ID to the beat cop standing guard. The guard waved him through.

Silver came into the main room and immediately thought it was a great place for a hit. There were three exits, loud music, and the street was so near. On a regular night, this place would be packed. Easy to make a getaway in the crowd, he thought. Also, the local police couldn’t land with the street full of pedestrians. They would have to wait for the people to move. That would give even more precious seconds for an escape. To where?

He saw where the slavers had been killed. They had been in the corner, naturally, where they could see 2 of the three entrances. No weapons detectors at any of the doors, though. That’s probably why they liked this place. The locals couldn’t afford a weapons detector. They had probably never needed one, until now.

There was a man sitting behind the bar going over some papers. The owner, Silver thought. He was most likely going over insurance papers to see if they covered this kind of thing. The damage was moderate. There were a few blast points and the flooring had been ruined by the blood. It was nothing that a good contractor couldn’t take care of.

“Are you the manager,” Silver called across the room. The man looked up from his papers.

“No kidding,” he shot back.

“Could you come here a minute,” Silver asked.

“Who in the hells are you?”

Silver took out his badge and shook it back and forth. The man winced and put the papers up to his face. He cursed and came over.

“Don’t tell me this is a big deal,” the owner whined. “I am never going to get people to come back. I could be ruined. So much work in this place. Now, the IPF as well.” He acted as if Silver had wrecked the place.

“Hey, relax. I just need to put this together, OK?” Silver put a chair in front of him and the man sat down heavily.

“Put it together. Easy for you. This place was safe. Now no one will come back. Damn all the hells, I should have bought those detectors.”

“Had you seen those guys before?” Silver got down to business.

“No. Never. This is a quiet place. Only girls and so forth. Most people come here for the music. Best selection in town. We have the newest from all over. Just music and girls and a little drink. That’s all.”

“Did you get a good look at who did this?” Silver pointed at the blood stained carpet.

“All hells, no. I was in the back when all the noise started. By the time I got to the front,” he looked around, “this was a mess. Who were those people? Why would someone do this?”

“They were slavers and wanted criminals,” Silver said.

“Slavers,” he moaned. “Now I *am* ruined. If people find out that type comes into my place-” He leaned back as far as the chair could go and put his hands over his eyes.

“They won’t find out,” Silver said. “Now, listen. Did anyone see the person or persons that attacked these people? I mean anything. From an accent that might have been heard to anyone they think may have seemed to know them. Can you tell me anything?”

“No, nothing,” he whined. “When that guy started shooting, people just ran.”

“Why don’t you run surveillance records in here?”

“Hey, some people come here with special friends, not my business. And everybody knows the IPF can hack any camera,” he said with conviction and shook his finger at Silver.

“Oh sure, we make a lot of money by watching people and their side boyfriends and girlfriends.” Silver walked over to the scene and stepped around the blood stains.

He looked at the blast points and thought they were fairly substantial. They had come from some serious weaponry. Who would have a military grade weapon? Weapons like that could certainly be had for a price. But that also told Silver that the person or persons who did this had a little money to throw around. Silver thought this looked more and more like a rival group. These guys probably muscled in on somebody else’s action and this was the end result. Live by the gun, and die by the gun. He wondered quickly when his time would come. *I have certainly lived by the gun*, he thought.

He turned his attention to a shiny object that was half in the wall behind the seats. He came over to it and gave it a look. A projectile was embedded in the wall. Silver took out the pliers from his coat and pulled it out. Passing through the soft seating and a body or two must have slowed it down, he thought.

I know just who to ask about this, Silver thought. He dropped it into one of his pockets. The locals must have taken the rest.

Just then, a local policeman came into the bar and over to Silver. He looked around while Silver kept studying the points.

“Yes?” Silver opened.

“Are you the IPF guy, I mean officer,” the cop asked nervously.

“That’s me. And you are?”

“Wenerson, Sir. Dispatch sent me. They said you might need some help.”

“Are you the cop who walks the beat in this neighborhood?”

“Most definitely. I got a partner, but he’s been out.” Wenerson stood a head shorter than Silver and was rail thin like a farm kid. His white complexion was set off by a police issue hairstyle that probably went uncut for weeks at a time; most likely until a lieutenant said something. He had darting, quick eyes.

“What can you tell me about all this, Wenerson?” Silver eyed the policeman.

“Well, sir, it looks to me like some unsavory characters got shot.”

“Really?” Silver was astounded at the insight.

“That’s a safe bet, sir.”

This was typical, Silver thought.

“So, have you ever seen their type before?”

“Oh no, sir. This type doesn’t come here to this planet. This is a quiet place.”

“Yet, here they are, aren’t they?” Silver looked at Wenerson.

Wenerson looked puzzled. “I guess they are,” Wenerson shrank a bit. “Or were, anyway. Sir, may I say something?”

“Please.” Silver went back to studying the walls.

“These guys aren’t what’s bugging me. I mean personally. But I’m thinking: What’s bugging me is the other. The shooter. I mean the assailant. Who just walks in here and does this? These guys weren’t bothering anyone. So how does the shooter know where they are? This could mean we have a seriously trained killer here on the planet who has some just as serious weapons. Not civilian pop guns. Where did this, uh, person, get a rack like that?”

Well, maybe Wenerson wasn’t so dumb after all, Silver thought. Maybe he could use him to-

Wenerson cut off Silver's thought and put his hand to his ear. "Go dispatch."

Silver was on guard.

"What? Again? Holy... Roger that."

"What is happening," Silver asked.

"Another attack. Right now at the landing bays where we impounded the ship. Can you believe it? We should--"

"How far?" Silver cut him off.

"Not too far by air car, but they told me to stay put and watch the bar."

"I am countermanding those orders." Silver grabbed Wenerson and was running out of the bar before he knew what was happening.

"Hey, thanks for nothing!" The owner shouted after them.

"I gotta stay here. They gave me an order," Wenerson said unconvincingly as Silver drug him out.

"I outrank anyone here in this jurisdiction. Get your car and get me to the hangar."

"Yeah, yeah!" Now, Wenerson was enjoying this. He touched a button at his belt and the police cruiser took off from down the street and stopped with the engines running and the doors open just in front of them. When it did, an old lady and her husband who were walking by were nearly sent to an early grave by the shock.

"I never get tired of that," Wenerson grinned.

They jumped in and took off with Wenerson shouting a war charge.

"Can you drive," Silver asked as he strapped himself in.

"Are you kidding? Before I became a cop, I was the terror of this whole town." He hit the sirens and the craft exploded to life. It lifted off in a treacherous arc up from the street.

The rate of ascent shocked Silver and he was pushed back into his seat before he could get a word out. The bar disappeared underneath him and the car shot into the traffic above the city. Wenerson wasn't even strapped in, Silver noticed.

"Now we're going to see some real action around here," Wenerson said excitedly. "Let me tell you, that walking the beat is getting old. I was supposed to be in Apprehension and Transport Theft but they didn't like the way I handle a transport. They said I was worse than the guys stealing them. Can you believe that? How else are you going to run a transport down unless you can handle one yourself? That's why I became a cop. And now after a few minor," he looked at Silver, "very minor mishaps, I got put on the beat. How do you like that?"

Wenerson talked as if they were having a leisurely drive through a park. The police cruiser's engines showed full power. They were dodging in and out of traffic so fast that Silver couldn't believe this was a local cruiser. All he could do was hang on. Wenerson was going through the sky lanes like a virtual game. He was dropping under other transports, passing in the oncoming lanes, and flying past the traffic so close that Silver could have touched the other drivers. All the while, Wenerson was talking as fast as a street hawker.

"Oh yeah I mean what are you going to do I mean I have been driving these things since I was young enough to steal my Dad's keys and that damn Captain begging your pardon sir took me off the sky lanes and put me on the street walking around like some guy about to retire or something oh look at that that's where that girl lives you know what I miss the GET OUT OF THE WAY POLICE BUSINESS anyway I miss the real excitement of the chase you know because that's where its at I mean I got busted so much for racing that I figured hey why not be the guy that chases



the guys I raced but legally so I joined the force and for awhile it was going good real good the arrests were up and transport theft was down and everybody happy and then this off world gang comes in looking to make a quick dollar and they start stealing anything that's not locked so I am working all the time and there were a few crashes HEY POLICE MOVE IT and that's to be expected I mean this thing is fast but my cruiser at home makes this look like a vacation boat you know what I mean and so they took me off the cases and put me in the bar scene the girls are good but the work is stupid and nothing ever happens you know I bet you've seen a thing or two hey how about putting a word to the ear of somebody at the IPF no just kidding I know you gotta be special still I bet that's a pretty good job compared to this anyway that's where I went to high school hey don't look so squeamish we're almost there and I took it easy on you because I don't want it to get back to the Captain that I gave you a hard time you know."

Silver could only hold on as the air was crushed out of his lungs.

Wenerson was still babbling when he and Silver landed at the bay. They jumped out of the cruiser and made their way into the rows of ships in their private or rented docks. Silver had his main pistol out and put his sound amplifier to his ear to find the where the noise was coming from.

Wenerson was close behind and as wide eyed as a new recruit. "Stay back behind me," Silver said. "I suspected the crew at the bar wasn't alone. These guys are heavily armed and taking out locals is an easy thing."

"Hells! Slavers! Here! This is it! We better-" Wenerson was whispering as they entered the facility.

Silver cut him off as they went through the bays. They could hear gunfire and shouts as they saw some passengers running out of the bays in terror.

"Aren't your people on the way?" Silver was creeping as fast as he could along the walls.

“Oh, yeah. But for this it will be a heavy response unit. Armor, the works. Those guys will take about 15 minutes to get here.”

That’s about 5 more minutes, Silver thought. Then who was doing the firing? That meant the vigilante was still here along with the remaining crew. He figured that the ones in the bar couldn’t fly that ship alone. Silver thought they were in luck. Maybe he could end this today and get them all.

They were close enough to hear shouting. The slavers were shouting at each other and trying to get back to their bay to take off before the heavy response crew arrived. Meanwhile, they were under attack and their assailant had the courage to block their entrance to the bay. Did that mean more than one shooter?

Silver and Wenerson got close enough for a view and then ducked behind another ship.

From that vantage point, Silver could see the slavers in front of the ramp to the bay. One of them had the wires out of the door lock and was wincing every time a shot was fired. Their ship was in a locked hangar and they were desperately trying to get the door open. Silver could just see the *Claw’s* bridge over the wall. He thought that it was time for the direct approach.

“This is the IPF,” he shouted. “Put down your weapons immediately!”

They turned and opened fire in his direction without a word. The other shots were coming from further down the bay. Now the slavers were caught in a desperate crossfire.

Silver and Wenerson jumped behind a ship and Silver took out a small ball from inside his coat. Wenerson’s eyes turned into saucers and he said, “Now you’re talking.”

Silver threw the ball in the direction of the slavers. It was an energy charge designed to short out any weapons within 20 feet of its radius after it went off.

Silver heard the device hit the ground and the crackle of a discharge of energy. The slavers' guns in the vicinity were instantly fried. They dropped them to the ground cursing. Silver jumped out into the walkway and leveled his pistol at them. "Surrender now." He saw that they recognized the coat and knew at once that this was no local in front of them.

At that second, the other who was interested in this group took the opportunity to shoot two of them through the head from the other direction. The remaining crew started firing their backup weapons in both directions before the bodies hit the floor. Silver fired at the armed crew as he dove for cover.

One of the crew cursed at Silver and charged out of the group with a projectile gun blasting away. This gun had not been affected by the blast of energy and they carried these weapons just for this contingency. Wenerson dove behind the water fountain and Silver managed to get behind some stacked luggage. The luggage was not going to make it to its destination because it was being torn to pieces by the shots from the slaver. Silver pulled one of his magna rods and ignited it to half power. When the shooter came around the luggage stack to finish his work, he was met by the rod striking him in the face and killing him instantly. Silver had thrown it from his seated position and the man had never seen it coming.

Just then, the man working on the door shouted to the others. The door opened and the remaining crew charged through the door as they fired in the opposite direction from Silver. The other attacker was still firing as the door slammed shut again. One of the crew did not make through the door and was hit by a shot that splattered blood all over the wall next to the door. He fell dead. Silver got up

and ran down the hallway towards the unknown attacker. He felt something brush his face and hit the floor as one of the slavers who had been left behind picked up a dropped projectile gun and was firing it as best as he could at Silver with his one remaining arm. Silver whirled around and put one shot through his head. The weapon dropped to the floor. That was close, he thought.

“Wenerson! Guard the door,” Silver shouted and resumed running down the hall to the where he hoped the other attacker was. Wenerson leveled his pistol at the door and watched as Silver ran.

“What about the other shooter,” Wenerson called to Silver. “He’s not after us,” Silver shouted as he ran. He did not see the puzzled look on Wenerson’s face. The floor started shaking and Wenerson saw Silver curse and start running back towards him.

“They’re taking off. We’ve got to get that door open,” Silver said. “Get back.” He took out his cracker pistol and leveled it at the door. Wenerson winced as the sound searched for a second and then disappeared to the human ear. Without warning, the door exploded in a smokeless bang.

They charged into the bay just in time to see the ship turning in the air and preparing to engage the main engines. Silver took out a tracker from his coat and threw it with all his strength at the hull. It stuck next to the drive engines and the ship made for open space. Wenerson gave the ship a few blasts from his police issue sidearm for good measure. They bounced off the hull harmlessly. Neither of them saw that another ship had taken off as well from several bays down and was taking a slightly different course into the atmosphere.

At that moment, the first of the heavy response team burst into the now empty bay. They saw Wenerson and he waved them in. “A little late, boys,” Wenerson said. They scowled at him through

their helmets and started checking the dead bodies. His police communicator was beeping angrily but he ignored it. Wenerson came and stood next to Silver who was looking up into the atmosphere.

“Well, that was different,” Wenerson said. Silver took his eyes off the contrail and looked at him as the ship disappeared in the sky.

The crew of the *Claw* were making hard for orbit. Many of the remaining crew had been wounded. All of them were confused and were trying to make sense of what had just happened. They were the type that was accustomed to scaring, not being scared. One of the *Claw*'s many phony signatures told the towers and monitoring satellites that the ship belonged to a certain physician and the towers had no way to know that the ship had just been through a battle. Once they were in open space, they would be long gone.

They made it past the outer atmosphere and were already transmitting a beacon to the *Nightshade*.

“How did they know we’re here,” the pilot shouted as he keyed in the coordinates. “Who in the worlds are these people? How do they know so much?” One of the men was passed out in the hallway from his wounds and his head moved drunkenly from side to side.

“You saw the damn IPF agent! That’s what going on. They are onto us and they’ve decided to start a war. He dropped those poor bastards after he fried their guns. When they find out about this upstairs, that damn agent won’t last a day,” a man shouted from the rear gangway.

The communication console lit up. It was one of the Organization’s own coded channels and they were the best in the galaxy, easily a rival of the military. Its carrier wave was designed to appear as background radiation to anyone who tried to listen in.

This insured that the planet below, or any other ships, could not lock in on the signal and triangulate the ship's position.

"This is Captain Sloan. What is going on?"

"Captain, we are under attack and require assistance. I repeat, we are under attack. We can't make the jump ourselves. The ship has been sabotaged. You must come in to assist. Also, the IPF is alerted to our presence. They just iced most of my crew." The pilot of the *Claw* did not mention that he had quickly recruited replacements for the crewmen that had been killed. When they got back to the *Nightshade*, it would be Captain Sloan's decision whether to allow them to live or not. The pilot was cursing under his breath as the controls to the ship were obviously not responding correctly. His hands played the controls like an instrument as he tried to create a bypass for the engines.

"Negative," Captain Sloan replied. "The ship is too large for a close pick up and I can't risk the locals getting a good look at our signature. You will have to move a little closer to us." Captain Sloan stood on the command deck of the jewel of the Organization. He was looking at the *Nightshade's* scanner report broadcasted in mid air in front of him in three dimensional rendering. He could see the shocker blinking and another ship heading directly for her. Was this the IPF, he wondered.

"Very well, we are-" the Pilot was about to set a course for a rendezvous with the larger ship when something caught his eye.

"Wait a second," Captain Sloan interrupted, "our scanners read that you have a ship moving to intercept course. Can you see her?"

The Pilot's stomach felt like someone had dropped it from a 2000 story building.

“Battle stations!” The Pilot shouted and the remaining crew moved to the hidden gun turrets and started preparing for a fight.

“Pilot,” Captain Sloan said, “it is a small ship. Like a shocker, but a little bigger. Can you see her yet?” The Pilot was already powering up the weapons and cursing.

“Give me a lock on that ship, damn you,” the Pilot called to his gunners. “*Nightshade*, can you see her?” The Pilot programmed an evasive manouver into the helm. The co-pilot had joined him and was still trying to overcome the locked instruments. He was a gambling addict who had only just joined the ship hoping for a quick payoff. “Is she powering weapons yet,” the Pilot called to his surviving gunners. The others had been killed on the planet below.

“Pilot, the weapons are already powered but she is too close for a blast,” Captain Sloan said through the comm. “I think she is trying to get close enough to-”

At that instant, a hum seemed to seize the ship. It was a searching, sweeping vibration that seemed to take the sound from the air. Sound doesn’t travel through space but raw energy certainly does and the crew felt the terror of having their bodies torn apart by the merciless vacuum just inches away. The Pilot knew what was about to happen and desperately tried to keep his distance and avoid the other ship’s weapons range. He pulled a panel out of the bulkhead and began splicing wires. The co-pilot was trying to get the ship into a firing position.

“She’s trying to crack us!” the Pilot shouted. “Roll us over! Roll us over! Point the engines at her!” The co-pilot put the ship into an arc. This was a technique that could interrupt the energy scan that was reading the ship’s hull composition. The ship swung around and tried to direct the engine blast at the other ship. He had begun to doubt his pay off.

“That’s not possible.” The Pilot was getting frantic. “That ship is too small to have a-”

It was too late. His voice was being drowned out by an energy surge and he couldn’t hear the *Nightshade* calling to him to eject.

The *Crisis Averted*’s sensor array had already analyzed the ship’s frequency and was matching an energy burst. Cracks began to appear in the bulkheads and the engines were beginning to fail. Their casings were literally being cracked open. Fuel began to leak into the cabin and the crew tried to get to the few escape pods.

As the first crewman’s hand touched the latch to the aft escape pod, he thought he had made it. Unfortunately, the ship had been locked in and the *Claw*’s hull shattered like a piece of crystal. The Pilot was running towards the pods but he never made it. The remaining occupants were torn apart in the cruel vacuum of space; their screams heard by no one.

The *Crisis Averted* wheeled around and made its way out into open space. The ghost ship on the horizon skulked away and was already transmitting a report to its hidden base.



## Chapter 7

Wenerson and Silver were in the police cruiser on their way back to the station and Silver was deep in thought. The dispatch had told them that a ship had been destroyed while in low orbit and a rescue team had looked for survivors or escape pods. None were found. He wasn't surprised. He was beginning to get an idea about this "vigilante." After witnessing his work first hand, Silver had no more doubt about his skills or the grave danger to civilians. Hogarth had been correct. Silver remembered seeing the two crewmen dropping to the ground from the merciless blasts that went straight through their skulls. The killer had taken the first opportunity to kill. Capture or torture were not options. Silver knew what this meant. The killer was out for one purpose: extermination.

But this was madness. How could one operative expect to take down such an entity? It could take months or even years of deep cover operations to even get a glimpse of the true group that was being targeted. How was he, or they, he was beginning to suspect, able to be sure of the targets? These crime enterprises had more layers than a Mand starfish. Their bosses, or directors, were so far removed from the front lines of business that they were virtually unknown to all but the most senior members. The crews on these shockers most assuredly had no idea who their true employers were. Surely the attacker or attackers knew that and- Then it hit him like a shot. The attacker knew this as well. Why bother with interrogation when the person being interrogated doesn't know anything? That is why it makes more sense to just kill them outright. Of course! This assailant had no desire to capture. He didn't need any more information. The targets were acquired and then eliminated. One way or another.

The IPF could only guess at the moves that slavers would make. Even though the IPF tracks crop harvests and pleasure businesses,

they still seemed to always be a few steps behind the main slaving operations. Silver knew he had to find out how to know what the attacker knew. But how, he wondered.

“So you do this all the time?” Wenerson was thankfully driving a little slower on the return trip.

“I try to avoid that much shooting,” Silver said, roused from his daydreaming. “You handled yourself pretty well. I thought you didn’t get much action of this sort.”

“I don’t. I don’t know. I just wasn’t as scared as I thought that I would be.” Wenerson’s seat belt still dangled at the side of the chair.

“I am sorry to hear that,” Silver said as he looked out the window at the city below. “You should be scared. Do you have any idea how dangerous a crew like that can be? If there had been more civilians there, we might have had a real mess on our hands.” He began to wonder if this unknown would shoot innocents. Judging from today’s action, he thought it likely.

“Whoever it was sure was a good shot,” Wenerson continued. “I have never seen anything like that. Those guys dropped to the ground just like bags of bones. Who can shoot like that? Can you? Two shots, two guys down. We probably just got in the way.”

Silver looked at the local cop in a new light. That did raise a good question. What if they hadn’t been there? What then? Silver doubted the crew would have made it to the ship at all. Much less taken off. Again, a flash hit Silver. This could mean the next target was *already known*. He had to get in touch with headquarters.

Wenerson pulled the cruiser into the hangar and set the craft down on the tarmac. As they got out, some of the younger officers were there and already asking Wenerson what had happened. Silver stepped around the cruiser and they were keeping their distance as if he were a sports hero; respectful, but still close enough to get a little aura. They were clapping Wenerson on the back as they walked back into the station where, Silver could be certain, the Captain was waiting with the look of a waiting Captain on his face.

“I need to talk with Mr. Wenerson a second.” He took Wenerson by the arm and led him to a secluded corner.

“Thanks for your help,” Silver said. “You did very well. This is a hard way to learn about the way things really are. Most people would have panicked and ran.”

“Well, I didn’t do much,” Wenerson said as he looked at the cruiser parked down the hangar. “Just taxi service.” He smiled at Silver.

Silver pulled out his mini comp. “Give me your mini comp,” he said.

Wenerson pulled his off his belt and handed it to Silver.

“I am going to give you a link number that I want you to contact. The man’s name is Creed. He knows me. Tell him that I sent you.”

Wenerson’s eyes were widening. “What in the worlds will I say to him?”

“Tell him I recommend you for service.”

“Hey, I don’t know what you know and I’m just a beat cop.”

But Silver could see the hope in his eyes.

“The IPF has all kinds of needs. Tell Creed to contact me if he has any questions.”

“What can I possibly do for the IPF,” Wenerson asked and held his mini comp like a precious jewel.

“Tell Creed that you are suited for,” Silver smiled a little and began to turn away, “special delivery.”

Wenerson’s face smiled in understanding. He put his mini comp to his belt and rejoined the waiting group while Silver made his way to the Captain’s office. A warm wind blew through the hangar’s open doors.

In his office, the Captain stood waiting for Silver. He was already preparing his report for the planetary governor who had been calling the station demanding an explanation. Even before he got to the door, Silver could sense the agitation. It was seeping through the cracks in the walls. Silver had done this part of the job a hundred times.

“Well, Mr. Silver. You have had a busy day and managed to endanger one of our officers in the process. Also, the morgue is noticeably more occupied. The usual result of your,” and he spat the word as if to clear his mouth, “*company* handiwork.”

Silver betrayed not a hint of emotion. He merely shifted in his seat a little and looked at a picture on the wall.

“Well?” The Captain looked at Silver.

“Wenerson is a good man.” Silver looked at the Captain.

“That is not the point. I know he is a good man. If he wasn’t, he would not even be on this force.”

“Why waste him on the street?” Silver looked at another picture.

“Don’t waste my time with this nonsense. The Governor himself has called here and is demanding an explanation.” He stared at Silver.

“Well,” Silver said easily, “it appears that we have a person or persons that are quite unhappy with a certain criminal element. I really can’t say who I think it is or any details of the case as you know.”

“That will not do. Why did you not wait for the heavy response team to arrive?”

“Its not that *I* didn’t wait. The situation wouldn’t wait. There were civilians in the midst and we had to try to stop the firing. They were firing when we arrived. I wouldn’t worry too much about it. The situation has moved off planet. I doubt it will return.”

“That is your explanation? The situation has moved ‘off planet.’ What of the ship destroyed trying to break for open space? The *situation* didn’t get very far, did it, Mr. Silver?”

“I need to get to a communications link. Would you please show me where the secure one is?”

The Captain stared at this IPF agent. These guys were all the same, he thought. Tight lipped and a little above everyone else. Maybe he was right, though. The problem had probably been obliterated in space and the sooner the IPF was out of here, the sooner things would be back to normal. Problems definitely came with the IPF on your planet. They usually left with them as well.

Without a word, knowing he was not going to get any more out of this interview, the Captain came from behind the desk and pointed down the hall to a secure room.

“Thanks,” Silver said and went down the hall.

At the terminal, Silver keyed in the information for the IPF headquarters. After a minute, the screen lit up. He keyed in his personal ID and the extension for Vice Director Hogarth. He looked at the time display and hoped that the time difference wasn't substantial.

"Mr. Silver," came the voice out of the screen. "I hope that you have some good news for us."

"Hello, Vice Director. I am afraid that the target has been eliminated by this vigilante. The locals and I arrived just as another attack was commencing. We were too late. However, I have learned that the assailant is using a small ship that could have jump capabilities. The ship escaped and managed to destroy the crew that got off the ground and then disappeared into open space. My full report will be transmitted from here within 2 hours. I hereby request," Silver crossed his fingers under his seat, "that one of our small jumpers immediately be sent to this location."

These were small, fully automated IPF ships that could be piloted by one or two people. They were armed and could break orbit and be on another planet in hours. The small ships could also ride the carrier wave of a larger jumper and travel in their "wake" if they were synchronized to the bridge of the larger ship. They were the envy of every local police force. They only had one problem: They were fabulously expensive.

"Tut tut, Mr. Silver. Our stockholders would balk at such an expenditure at this stage in the investigation. Granted, now that the suspects have moved to another planet, most probably to finish what they have begun, a two planet payment will be larger, but certainly not enough to merit the dispatch of such a costly asset at this time. By the way, have you completed the training modules on those craft yet?"

“Almost,” Silver lied.

“Almost is not enough. What is your opinion of the current situation?”

“I feel another attack is imminent. It is just a matter of where. I also believe that there is more than one person involved. I believe that another person or perhaps even a crew is working with the shooter we encountered today. I should be moved to a central location and await a lead after I have finished a little more digging here.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” Hogarth looked into the screen. “Please await your arrangements and transmit your full report as soon as possible. We will start culling through our current cases and look for any similarity. You must be ready to go back into action on a moment’s notice so please keep your mini comp close by.”

“At once, Vice Director.” Silver cursed under his breath at the thought of being so close to getting a private jumper and missing it.

“Oh, and Mr. Silver?”

“Yes?”

“We are glad that you were not injured. Please take care. This case could get worse.”

“Thank you, Vice Director. I will.”  
The screen went dark.

## Chapter 8

Silver sat in an oversized chair in the shuttle to the surface and already regretted this decision. The planet below was at the upper reaches of gravity that was hospitable to humans. He had taken a detour on the way to the station where he would await new information on the case to be transmitted. The flight attendants were natives and staring at him like he was out of his mind. Some common humans came here, but not many.

The world below was known as Hon. It was named after the High G scientist that had colonized it and small figurines of his likeness were in every shop and home. It was thought to be good luck. The world was mostly forested with two large oceans that were full of gigantic fish. Their immense size was due to the massive gravity of the planet and they cushioned themselves in the great saltwater oceans. Humans had landed here as explorers and over time with the help of extensive bio-engineering, had adapted to the gravity, the first arrivals staying only hours on the surface. That was hundreds of years ago and now the planet had a sizable population of High G inhabitants. It was Professor Hon's work that had made their bodies able to withstand the gravity and he was thought of by most High G people as their father.

Silver knew he only had about 2 hours to get in and off without any lasting effects that would incapacitate him. He had left most anything he could spare at the station orbiting the planet and was only carrying minimal weaponry. He knew he wouldn't be needing it as most High G worlds seemed to have little crime, but IPF agents were always superstitious.

As the shuttle cut through the atmosphere, Silver could feel the gravity start to take hold. He felt as if he were slowly being immersed in tar. The girls giggled at him as the shuttle came closer to the surface.



When the shuttle landed, he was already hurting. There was something on his back. It started as a small pack. Now the small pack became an anvil and no matter which way he turned, it wouldn't fall off. He was out of the station as fast as he could and into an air car headed towards Gran's shop in thirty minutes. His head was starting to ache as were the muscles down his back. Gods, he thought, this was a stupid move. He knew, however, that even as the universe expanded it was still face to face meetings that kept relationships. He used them whenever he could.

The air car dropped him off and he walked through the tight alleyways of the oversized world. Gran's shop sat at the end, of course, and his ankles were starting to ache. People stared from the shops as he passed. The smells of strange food filled his nostrils but he wasn't interested in anything other than seeing Gran and leaving before his brains were pulled out his backside.

The gravity was now becoming a strain on the joints in his knees. Forty five minutes, Silver thought as he walked down the alley way. There seemed to be no one at all who wasn't looking at him as he strode past the squat bodies of the planet's natives. He was always at least a foot taller than the nearest person and he felt as if he were wading waste deep in syrup. Every step was a force of will. He needed to see Gran and get out of here.

He found Gran's shop and went in. Gran stood two full feet shorter than Silver and was about three times as strong. Gran's squat body sported the colorful Hon style clothes that he fussed over. His thick hair was an old style pompadour and he refused to give it up despite his age. He had one of the friendliest faces Silver had ever seen.

Two floating guardians immediately confronted Silver. Their sensors pointed directly at him and they hovered silently.

“Hey, are these things up to spec,” Silver called into the shop. The figure behind the counter turned and gave a big smile. The guardians retreated but remained facing Silver.

“I hope you didn’t cheap out on these things. I would hate to be mistaken for an old girlfriend of yours,” Silver taunted. The guardians were there because behind the doors at the back of the shop sat an arsenal that could subdue a small planet. The weapons were kept in an underground facility that was directly under the shop. A blast from a Planetary States Ship of War main gun might breach the door.

“Silver! Imagine that! And in person to boot. What a day! What brings you here? Need a new piece? I have got some new things, let me tell you.” Gran turned back to the counter and resumed digging through the contents of a box that was out of sight.

“Gran, I wish I had the time to see whatever you have, which I am sure is wonderful, but I am in a hurry and I wanted to see you about a type of gun we ran into.”

“Oh, hey. Just hang on a second,” Gran said with his back to Silver. He turned around and said jokingly, “Hey, have you gained weight? Not used to coming down with the real folk, I bet,” he laughed. Gran was deliberately taking his time as he knew the gravity was killing Silver.

“Gran, really, you know this is-”

“What’s that you say? Of course you can stay the night. Got a special bed for you. Lots of springs. I could get some girls I know. Oh, they would love a pixie like you. Once you go High G, boy, you don’t go back. No sir, nothing else will do. Good for you to have a real woman. Not some weakling like you have probably been running around with. Just the thing for you. Picture it, Silver:

a 90 kilo beauty fresh from finishing school bouncing up and down on you about now. Still in that pretty school girl uniform! You would be begging me to stay. I'd let you, too. Course, if you did, your kids would be a bunch of weak kneed floor crawlers. Just kidding. Hang on a second."

Silver felt as if his face were being pulled off. His eyelids actually hurt.

"Hey, Silver. Come here! I got something for you."

Silver went to the back of the counter with a struggle.

"Here, could you hold this a second?" He offered Silver a projectile that he couldn't have lifted in his own gravity. Silver looked at him with tired eyes.

Gran gave a huge laugh. "How's that coat working out for you? Looks kind of heavy to me." Laughter filled the room.

Silver collapsed back in a chair. "Gran, that is enough. I have got to get out of here. Stop playing around or a good customer is going expire right in front of you."

"OK. OK. I know it hurts. What in the worlds brought you down here?" Gran took a seat in a big chair. He put his flat feet on the table.

"I need to know who might use one of these." Silver put the projectile on the table. Even the tiny bullet seemed to weigh him down and he was glad to be rid of it.

"Oh, Silver. That's an easy one." Gran picked up the small bullet and turned it in his stubby fingers. "You could have sent me a scan of that. Poisoned projectiles come from the outer systems. They use them to spray through jungle and brush where baddies can hide. This way, even a non lethal hit becomes deadly. Nasty things, really. You don't need them when you can see the targets. These are for killing them and leaving them where they lay."

“Who would have the need for these,” Silver asked.

“Anyone on a less civilized world,” Gran said. “Unlike us here, of course. The problem with these things is that in populated areas a stray shot can kill too many bystanders. The poison lasts awhile too, so there aren’t many places where these guns would be used. Wait a second. Hold on a second.” He stared at Silver and sat up.

“What is it, Gran?”

“I think you just got shorter.”

“Damn all hells, Gran!”

“Oh mercy to the angels!” Gran’s white teeth flashed.

Silver got up to leave.

“Oh come on, now! You can stand a little more,” Gran whined.

“Look, that projectile would come from a brush world or jungle area. I don’t get many requests for that stuff. I can ask some guys I know and see if they know anything. How’s that?”

“Thanks Gran, I have to get out of here. I’ll come here again after I lose about 50 kilos.”

“Not so fast now, you little pixie. Take a look at something I got.” Gran went to a cabinet.

The fuse was lit and Silver’s head seemed seconds from exploding.

“Take a look at this. Saved it especially for you.” He took a cracker pistol that was smaller than Silver’s out of a nearby drawer. The IPF’s weapons were supposedly the best in the Galaxy. Silver forgot his pain for a moment and stared at the seemingly small weapon.

“This thing will get it done.” Gran smiled a big smile of white teeth.

“Gran, I already have a cracker.”

“Not like this one.” He handed it to Silver. The guardians came closer. Silver looked at them and Gran.

“Don’t worry. I already told them you were decent folk. They are just being careful. This is what a man like you needs.” He tapped the butt of the pistol.

Silver eyed the weapon and thought for a moment. It was smaller than his but a little heavier, and not just due to the gravity.

“Gran, what is so special about this? Mine is the best I know of unless you sold me a dud.”

“Yours is the best that you *knew* of, you mean. This one has the newest frequency and material sensor. It is also more powerful and can even crack a space door.”

“Oh come on, it’s not big enough and you know it. Where is the power?” Silver had forgotten the pain.

“That’s the trick, boy. It has the newest sensors and not only puts out more power than yours, but is also more accurate with its analysis. That’s why it can crack a bigger target.”

Gran sat back. “1 metric ton.”

“That’s impossible! Only a ship cracker could do that.” Silver eyed the small pistol.

Gran was smiling.

“You want to take it with you?” Gran looked at Silver like a circus barker.

“Yes I do, as a matter of fact. I am going to try it. I don’t know on who, but somebody.”

“Just remember, when you see it work, I want the IPF contract for the order. Deal?”

He held out his hands to Silver with the palms facing down, as was the custom on all High G worlds. Silver slapped the tops of Gran’s hands to acknowledge a deal.

“Come back when you can. And grow back to your original size,” Gran called as Silver quickly put the weapon in a spare pocket and went out as fast as he could.

One hour later, Silver was back on the station orbiting Hon and laying in bath water. Every muscle in his body hurt and his head was pounding. He was toying with the cracker pistol and the steam was a welcome relief from the previous ordeal. He couldn't believe he had only been down to the surface for two hours. Gods, he thought, it felt like days. He felt the weight of the pistol and pointed it at some imaginary targets. Somebody is going to get this, he thought. Gran was the best and Silver needed friends like that. He had few real friends and one day, he thought, he may need such friends.

In this line of work, Silver had no illusions that the IPF could protect him from a contract with a high enough price. Sure, he could stay in the IPF headquarters for the rest of his days, but pushing paper or doing research for those out in the field would be like a death. Luckily, no criminal entity had had the courage to declare war on the IPF and test its resolve. Yet. The very thing that kept the criminals out of the public eye actually served, in a way, to draw a battle line between agents and culprits. To mount an attack on the IPF one would have to come out of the shadows. And that was something the other side just couldn't do.

Well, that's our luck, Silver thought as his muscles relaxed. After he had soothed some of the pain away, he went into the front room. Silver stared at the link. No messages. He felt in his bones that the next attack would come soon. But where?

## Chapter 9

Three days after the attack on Qin 4, a small ship came into the hangar of a lonely bay on Mord. Mord was a fairly normal planet in the galaxy with an oxygen atmosphere, comfortable gravity, and one large land mass that was situated between the night and day sides of the planet. There were no normal days on Mord. People chose to live on one side or the other depending on their tastes for day life or nightlife. Mord was famous for its beaches on the day side.

It was also famous for other items as well. On the night side, it was possible to find just about any drug imaginable. The night side was a labyrinth of small alleyways and apartments that stretched far into the sky. The units were filled with everyone from fishermen to addicts and the rest of the type that this special kind of reef attracts. All manner of religious missionaries were there to convert the users to a better life. There were also restaurants with some of the finest seafood in the galaxy from the large ocean. They were packed throughout the endless nights. The eternal night gave the city a damp feel and a permanent chill on the air. The tourists loved the romantic nights along the dark beaches and the perpetual night markets that had sprung up along the water. Mord also served as a haven for smugglers and other criminals who hid in the darkened back alley restaurants and bars conducting business.

Deep in the night side's seafood cleaning and processing district, there were all types of workers who did not wish to be found. Some were crooks and petty thieves on the run while others were addicts and chose to live near their drugs of choice. Of course, they could be cured from their various addictions at any time by undergoing the free treatment offered at any of the clinics. They simply chose not to or they preferred the outlawed drugs that were dangerous or came from illicit sources. The local police were overworked and always getting paid to look the other way. The

night side was mostly quiet, as long as you minded your own business. The perpetual night was about to be upset by someone who had come specifically not to mind her own business.

A lone figure walked through the mist towards one of the local taverns. This figure was not very large and certainly not very tall. The person selected a local bar and approached the front door. Unlike most of the other doors, this one was guarded by a very large man who was wielding a longer version of a magna rod. He sat on a stool outside and stared down anyone who came within range of the entry. Most people just walked on. This figure did not.

“Hey, how much is cover here,” the small person asked the man. As the figure stepped into the light of the doorway, the doorman could see that it was a woman. But her clothes were different; not what a tourist would wear and certainly thicker. He foolishly did not gather anything from this fact.

“This place is for locals only, Honey. Lots of other bars to go to.”  
“I am a local,” the woman smiled.  
“Well, not local enough,” the man said and got up. “Hit the road, sweet thing.” He pointed the staff at her. She shrugged.

“Well, I guess I’ll just take my business elsewhere.” She turned and took a step. She timed it so that when the staff came down she whirled on her heel and drew a small projectile gun with a silencer from out of her sleeve. She shot the big man through the front of his skull and he fell into the dark corner without a sound. She dropped a local paper over his head.

“Not popular with the girls are you,” she said to the fresh corpse and made her way into the dark room.



Inside, there were tables and some kind of cheap artwork all over the faded walls. The permanent mist had given the room a musty smell that had infected the bland furniture parked in front of the loose tables. Only two of the tables were taken. They were full of men who were talking quietly and nodding. One of them saw her and got up to intercept.

“Hey, can I help you, miss? Are you lost? This is a private club.” The others seated at the tables turned their heads to get a better look. They all thought she was a lost tourist, definitely not a local. “Oh, hey,” she stammered. “I just need to use the restroom.”

“Well, that’s not possible so if you can just-” He never finished what was to be his last sentence because the human body doesn’t work correctly when it is punctured repeatedly with objects tipped with poison. He fell over backwards and before the others could react they were being sprayed from a military grade velocity repeater. The bartender dove for the floor as the woman blasted the people to bits. She stepped over the still quivering body parts on her way to the bar.

She leveled the weapon at the cowering bartender.

“You can’t do this,” he half screamed. “Don’t you know what this is? Oh, gods!”

“Is this the only place like this here?” She never took her eyes off the man.

“Of course not!”

“Where?” She stepped closer.

“Oh, gods. I can’t say! You know I can’t.”

“Oh, you can say. You see this?” She took another weapon from the small of her back and shook the muzzle at him. His eyes crossed as the weapon came closer and stopped an inch from his forehead. “I will put this on low, have a drink, and use you for

target practice. Is that what you want? I doubt you will last very long. ”

“You know I can’t say anything. Do you know who runs this place?” His face ground into the floor.

“As a matter fact, I do. And you should have gotten a different job,” she said and looked around for her favorite brand.

Actually, he lasted quite a while. She had to turn the power up on the weapon a few times but not past half way. One man came in during her second drink. He didn’t last at all.

## Chapter 10

There was a knock at the door and Castor waved Kroft into the office. Castor sat at his main desk at the rear of the oversized office going over the most recent reports from his government informants. He was culling information on recent purchases by the respective planetary governors and looking for trends that could be exploited. A planet was a large market, and if one could discern what was needed by the local governors, then one could just happen to “invest” in such a market. This would reap legal rewards for the Organization and serve to put money in the pockets of those people that could be bent. Money was very addictive to those who had never tasted its full flavor. Once given a taste, experience told him they would rather die than return to abstinence. An old Organization trick, it rarely failed.

Outside the windows, it was night on the planet. The offices were close to the water and the sea breeze was just coming in. The four moons of this world shown on the reflection in the window. They illuminated the immaculate grounds and gardens. Once in a while, if one were to look, he or she would have seen heavily armed sentries patrolling the gardens.

Mr. Kroft sat in a chair a little to the right of the desk and waited to be acknowledged.

“Mr. Kroft,” Castor said after a moment, “you are up late this evening.”

“Yes. I am here with some news that I knew you would wish to hear at once.”

“And?” Castor looked up for the first time.

“Sir, there has been another assault. This time on Mord.”

“Indeed.” Castor leaned back in his chair. He was not surprised. When Kroft offered the report over the desk, Castor waved it off.

“The report came in from one of our local policemen on the beat there. It appears that, again, a single assailant came into one of our trading locations and dispatched all present. A heavy weapon was used again, like a military or mercenary type. It also appears that the bartender was tortured before being killed. Our source is not sure.”

“Did this bartender know anything of our operations there,” Castor asked like a gambler.

“He is not familiar with any details, sir. Only locations.”

“I see. Do we have any other places on the payroll there?”

“Yes sir, there is one such place on the dayside of the planet and another in the night market district.”

“I suspect, Mr. Kroft, that our adversary will be at the night side location. This may be our chance to learn the identity of this very persistent attacker and also our opportunity to end this problem.”

“I hope so, sir. We also have another report from Qin 4 from a minor informant at the local police station there. The IPF is treating this case as a vigilante and have dispatched an agent to apprehend this person. They are not operating in concert with the local police and as usual, the IPF has sent a lone agent.”

“One IPF Agent, Mr. Kroft, is the equal of twenty enforcers. And never forget, the IPF has many friends. We need all the necessary information on this agent. I want to know what he knows as soon as possible. Also, find out if there is any way that we can tap the files and get a copy of the report that I am sure he will be sending to his superiors. If he knows something, we need to know this something.”

“I will work on it myself,” Kroft said.

“Good. Also, tell our operatives there on Mord not to change anything they are doing. This vigilante must *not* be tipped to our

suspicious. They are to prepare a welcome for this person, at both locations, and capture him, or them, alive if possible. I will pay a handsome bonus for alive.”

Castor thought for a moment. “This IPF agent is not to be harmed unless it is determined that he has discovered some major detail about our business interests. We do not wish to have an IPF investigation hampering our efforts at this stage in our business. This is my direct order. Make sure it is understood.”

“I understand, sir. The *Nightshade* is also in the area taking some of our cargo to Mord. Is it possible that this attacker suspects the existence of the *Nightshade*?” Kroft asked this because he had to.

“I doubt this. But we must not overlook any contingency. Inform the Captain of the *Nightshade* that he is to remain a safe distance from any possible detection. He is to be absolutely sure of this. No chances. This IPF agent may have others working with him that we are not aware of at this time. It is my feeling they have no clue the *Nightshade* exists. This is to remain the case. The IPF must *not* know of its existence. Our mysterious shipwrights tell us that another is months away and if the *Nightshade* were discovered, it would infringe upon this quarter’s profits. If this agent were to learn of the *Nightshade*, then, and only then, is he to be eliminated.”

## Chapter 11

Silver's mini comp lit up in his coat and he read the message. He was just getting over the gravity effects of the previous day and his muscles still ached. After stretching his back once more as the monks had taught him, he checked the secure link in the room and entered the address of the IPF. After a short moment, he made contact. This time it was Ms. Kuo who answered.

"Mr. Silver. Good to see you." Her Mandarin Chinese accent was barely noticeable. She looked into the screen as Silver adjusted his seat. It was morning at the IPF headquarters.

"Good Morning, Ms. Kuo. What have we learned?" Silver tried not to sound sleepy. He had never been an early riser and that had served him well. Silver knew crooks also liked to stay up late.

"You are to proceed to Mord at once. There has been an incident that matches the methods of your suspect. Once again, there were military grade weapons used in a known meeting place for illicit drug runners. Your arrangements are in the attached message and you are to go there post haste."

"Who will I meet on Mord?"

"This time, Mr. Silver, you are to bypass the local law enforcement agency and go straight to the scene. The address of our safe house is included in the orders accompanying this call. The agent there will be quite helpful for you. Only work with the locals as a last resort."

"Why is this," Silver asked.

"We are quite sure that on Mord the police will have too many officers on the payrolls of various local and off planet gangs. We

cannot take a chance on your actions being compromised from the inside. Remember, we do not want attention in this case. It is too dangerous for you.”

“I am on the way to the station now.”

“Good luck, Mr. Silver.”

The screen went dark.

Silver thought, *here I go again*. Once again he looked into the mirror and felt that excitement. He had never been to Mord and he always preferred going to these places as an Agent of the IPF rather than a tourist. He looked at the black coat on the chair.

He got up and began the ritual of preparation. First, stretching. Then, two of the most difficult fighting forms he had learned at Lung Wang. He then checked the magna rods and placed them in their pockets. After a quick shower, he was dressed with one small bag and enough weapons to stop a small rebellion. The coat absorbed the weight. As always, he wondered if this would be the last trip. Would this one be the one that he didn't make it out of? Like spinning a roulette wheel, sooner or later, the number would arrive. Maybe one spin, maybe one hundred. But if you kept spinning, it would come. He could not think of any of his fellow agents who hadn't been shot or had to have an organ or limb replaced. Even today, however, they still couldn't sew your head back on. Always that problem, he thought. He looked in the mirror one last time and went out. The coat swished as he walked.

## Chapter 12

Agent Silver walked into the main terminal of Hon Station Theta. The space around Hon was a major interchange for ships and there were many stations near one another. He had a short wait before the ship was to depart. He found a small bar that gave him a good view of the entire terminal as well as a stunning view of the blast path of the departing ships and went in. Silver ordered his usual drink at the bar and barely noticed the woman who sat down next to him. She was medium height, generous, but not overly large of chest, her deep, dark hair parted down the middle and traveled along her backless dress to just above her waist. Her single braid was rope thick and stopped just under her right ear. Her deep green eyes under perfect eyebrows told of secrets that men wondered at and women admired. Her temporary markings (all the rage and changeable once a week) were ancient Asian symbols that ran down one side of her back. They spoke of rare beauty that was undeniable yet dangerous. She wore enhanced pheromone perfume and it was her special scent. All such perfumes were different no matter who wore it as no two women's body chemistry was ever the same. Her dress was slit up just far enough to hint of hidden secrets, but not enough to give the game away. It was colored with laca bird feathers that were the greenest of green from one angle but the darkest of violet from the other. She did not walk, she glided. She wore no jewelry. This, she knew, gave her the effect of being nude without being nude.

"Hello there," she said.

Silver turned and was broad sided by her beauty. He had had many women in his travels, some even stunning, but this was a different game. This was no accident, he immediately thought. It was rare to see such beauty at a jump station.

"Hello yourself," he managed.

"I'll bet you could hide a lot of things under that coat," she smiled.

"Maybe you would like to borrow it," he countered.



“Oh my goodness. Such wit. And you, sitting alone. Imagine that. No friends to play with today?” She looked at him with a smile.

“I should ask you that,” Silver said.

“Me? I just happen to be by myself too.” She moved her seat confidently near his.

“Manasanan,” she said and held out her hand. Silver took it and held it longer than he should have.

“Lanian,” he said and wondered what such a beautiful girl was doing here at a station. But there was something more about her that he found interesting other than her obvious charms. But what was it? A little light conversation wouldn’t hurt, he thought.

“Aren’t you a little over dressed for this place,” Silver asked.  
“As a matter of fact, I just finished working. I come in here to rest my feet.” She unconsciously rubbed her nearest foot.

“I guess you are not one of the pilots,” Silver smiled at her and wanted to drink her beauty in with a stare, but held the urge in check.

“Cute. I am the station VIP Liaison. I get to meet all the famous people that come through here. May I ask what you are doing?” She waved at a passing employee.

“I am headed to see family,” Silver lied just in case this was a setup.

“Family is it,” she asked. She knew that he was lying but that wasn’t important. Against her habit, she liked this gentleman.

“I can’t imagine many VIPs coming through here,” Silver said.  
“With your talents, surely you could go to any planet. Why not somewhere glamorous? Some resort or something like that?”  
Silver looked around the room without looking.

“It is hard for people like me to get normal jobs,” she said. “People come to expect certain things. Not my style. Besides, I...” and then they said together “am going to get out of this business one day.”

They laughed like a nervous couple on their first date. Their eyes met and a spark flashed for an instant and was gone. The scent remained.

“People like you,” Silver asked. She just smiled and looked at him.

“What do you do,” she asked getting comfortable.

“Can I get you a drink,” he sidestepped the question.

“Water.” She smiled. He ordered another for himself and her water.

“Not while you are working, right?” Silver was still fighting the urge to stare and he looked at the reflection of the incoming ships on the mirror behind the barkeeper.

“Do you want to see me fall off of these heels,” she asked. “Are you going to tell me what you do?”

“I am in the importing business. Moving things from planet to planet,” Silver said.

“What kinds of things?” She sipped her water.

“Dangerous things. Hazardous cargo.” Silver watched the door.

“Oooh. That sounds interesting. Mysterious. I like that.” Her eyes flashed.

“You like things that are dangerous?” An invisible force was trying to turn his head back to her.

“No.” She laughed again.

“What kinds of things do you like,” Silver asked.

“I like pretty ships and I like romerian cats. I like moons. I like to travel but I don’t get to.” She looked out the window at a passing liner.

“That’s a pretty simple list,” Silver said. The drink was starting to take effect, he thought. Or was it something else? Better slow down.

“Simplicity is best. I have always felt that. Even as a little girl.”

“I am having a hard time picturing you as a little girl.” Silver stole a glimpse at her long legs.

“Well, I was. My, uh, talents, didn’t manifest until I was in my twenties.”

“And what talents are those,” Silver asked.

“I think you already are beginning to suspect.” She looked at him with deep eyes. He felt it inside, somewhere. His eyes began to dilate.

“Now, now. I have to go in a while so none of that,” he said. Silver started feeling as if he were floating in warm water. The water was the perfect temperature.

“None of what?” Her eyes were getting greener and he could feel her scent enveloping him. It was like deep vanilla mixed with the best soap he had ever had. The voices around him at the bar started to fade and he was getting a little dizzy. She was staring at him and it seemed that he heard a humming. Not a humming, but a vibration. He could feel his eyes dilating. He was feeling aroused but relaxed and she was so beautiful surely there was time for...

“Wait.” I am stronger than this, he thought. “That is enough. Please stop.”

“OK.” She looked at him casually and completely unfazed.

He felt his eyes go back to normal. How in the worlds could she do that, he wondered.

“Hey, I’m sorry,” she said. “I thought that you might want me to.”

“Really, you are very beautiful.” Silver’s heart was returning to normal. “And if I had more time, who knows? But I really do have to get to the next jump.”

“Ok,” she said. “When is the next jump?”

Silver looked at his chronometer. “I have got about thirty minutes.”

“Really, better take a look at that first.” She pointed behind him. It was no coincidence that she was seated where she could see the ships’ incoming and outgoing indicators.

He turned and looked at the terminal indicators. Some were blinking with delays from unidentified objects and other obstructions. His flight number was on the list.

“Well, looks like I will be here for another,” his eyes followed the entry, “8 hours!”

“My lucky day,” she grinned. She got comfortable and gave him a mischievous smile.

“That is some talent you have,” Silver said. As an agent of the IPF, he knew of female resonators, but had never sat down and had a drink with one. They had a gift of empathy that enabled them to enhance sexual pleasure centers in the brain to an addictive degree.

“To some, yes,” she said. “I think there was too much gene experimentation somewhere in my family tree. I am the only one who has it. I was in school when I started having these terrible headaches. I wanted to *do* something, but I didn’t know what. When they did the testing, my family was so ashamed. I had to leave my school because the looks from the boys and some of the teachers got to be too much. Once it was in my medical records, that was it. I couldn’t get a normal job, whatever that is.”

“That must have been difficult,” Silver said.

“It was,” she said without anger. “Of course, I got so many messages after that from pleasure syndicates and anyone else you could imagine that I had to change my link address. I just didn’t want to go that route that so many ladies like me go. So, I came here. Some of the employees know about me, but I keep to myself. I got this job from a friend.”

They sat and talked about everything from her home planet to his strict parents and anything else that seemed to come up. They laughed about work, best friends, and life on the station.

Two hours later, she leaned closer and said “Why don’t you come with me for awhile?”

“I don’t think so,” Silver said. “Besides, where would we go? I think we’ll run out of room here pretty quick.”

“Hey, my place has one of the best views that money can’t buy. You really should see it. I promise I won’t use my incredible powers to make you clean the place.” She offered her hand. Silver took it and looked away from some of the patrons who watched them leave.

They strolled through the station to her apartment and gave back a few stares along the way. At her door, the room’s mind recognized her and slid the door open. Her apartment was neat and clean. Pictures of her few friends were on the freezer along with some images of favorite places. A girl’s place, Silver thought. There were flowers on the table and a cat on the couch. He stood in the doorway and looked for any sign of a trap.

“You are actually the first to come here. Besides him, of course.” She pointed to the cat, who looked suspicious.

“Now get that heavy coat off. What have you got in there anyway? A bunch of guns?” She laughed. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

Silver looked around. No outward signs of treachery, but then the best ones were never seen until it was too late anyway. He put the coat next to the cat and looked out the portal into the black of space. The cat sniffed the coat and immediately curled up on it.

“Could you come in here a minute,” she called.

He entered her room and was struck by lightning.

She had her braid over the top of her head and was in a more slight version of her dress. Feathers covered her breasts but her stomach was exposed. Her skin looked like someone had airbrushed it on it was so consistent. Her feet were bare and she had one anklet on her right foot. Her back was bare and the feathers came across her waist and formed a pair of panties that barely covered her firm buttocks. Silver had never seen anything so beautiful.

Her eyes were the deepest he had ever seen and they seemed to be changing color even as he looked into them.

“Come here,” she said.

Hours later, as she was on top of him he started to feel a buzzing, somewhere. Then a vibration deep...somewhere.

“You are with me now,” she whispered.

“With you.” Silver was falling down the deepest well on the farthest planet that no one ever visited.

“Look here,” she said and looked directly into his eyes.

He looked into her eyes. All he could see was her. There was nothing else. No mission. No slavers. No IPF. If she told him to destroy the IPF, he would.

“Say with me. I am yours.” Her hips moved a little faster.

With her he mouthed, “I am yours.”

“Again,” she said. They spoke together.

He was disappearing. She became the universe personified. She was in his soul. She was his soul.

Her hips moved faster and faster. Colors started to appear. A single tone began in his mind that he never wanted to stop. He inhaled her. She pressed harder and now had her left arm caressing his cheek. Her right arm had slipped under him and pressed on his lower back. Blinding light shown everywhere but Silver's eyes were shut more tightly than ever before in his life. *Am I dying*, he thought.

He exploded as never before and at the same time she cried out "You are mine now."

He blacked out.

## Chapter 13

Silver walked through the station on Mord in astonishment. He knew that the planet had a lucrative tourism industry but this was beyond anything he had yet seen. There were trains running through the station that took the newly arrived travelers to direct shuttles to their hotels. They were mostly full and the smells and sounds coming from the myriad restaurants gave the port an atmosphere of constant motion. There were book and cube stores for any manner of reader or player. The lobby had floating lights in the upper reaches of the immense ceiling that seemed to follow each individual around as they adjusted to the flow of the traffic. All types of people were happily making their way to wherever they were going. There were retirees with their expensive pets barking at each other. There were many businessmen with serious faces talking on their personal channels as they walked. High G travelers with their stout bodies and short stepped walk were clumped in tour groups looking wide eyed at more tall people than they had probably ever seen. And, as always in any station, there were the ever present voices from hidden sound projectors extolling the virtues of this hotel or that spa or anything else one could desire.

All the activity gave Silver a jump in his step. The memory of Manasanan still played on his mind. He had been with many women but this was different. Much different. He seemed to be buzzing despite the work ahead. He caught himself, for the first time, wishing the mission was over so he could return to her. Better be careful, he quickly thought. There is still a dangerous job ahead.

Another attack, he thought. Who was this vigilante and what had driven him over the edge? I know you are still here, he said to himself. If I were you, where would I hit next? Silver stepped past a map of the city and it would be a daunting task to find someone



in this maze, he thought. The weapons are the key, he said to himself. The weapons were rare, even for a hired killer. This person would also have to know where to get more ammunition. Poisoned projectiles were not exactly hunting fare that could be bought at the local sports merchant.

He went past the gates and looked for the general transport to the night side of the city. The night side was definitely the best place for an assault. The IPF knew the main players on this world and crooks anywhere were the same. They all liked the dark. It made them feel like real crooks. Gangs and criminals from the dawn of time had always gravitated towards confined, poorly lit places where it gave them the sense of being hidden. A real thug couldn't act like a thug in the daylight.

Silver laughed to himself. He was playing a role as well. Now, he couldn't imagine life without the IPF gear he always carried and wouldn't go anywhere without a weapon. Well, he thought, we all have our roles to play.

He caught the train to the night side and was there in moments. Out from the station, he found his way to the IPF "safe house" hotel. Here, he was secure from bugged rooms and any non Company people who might be on some crooks' payroll. The IPF kept a few of these establishments on every world just for these occasions. They were also the hubs for the surveillance of the local crime element that the IPF used to keep watch over the planet. The local governors and law enforcement did not know of their existence thanks to yet another Dark Room trick. Silver could also trust the links at these hotels not to be tapped or rerouted. All the IPF hardware was usually hidden in a room in the basement. A representative of the Dark Room would have been assigned here to watch over the planet and the various gangs at work. He saw the sign, Hidden Light Inn, and went in.

At the front desk, they already had a room for him and he was also given the access codes to the basement. After he left his bag in his room, he came down to meet the local man in charge of the IPF agency here at the hotel. He walked down to the door at the foot of the stairs and punched in the codes as well as gave a verbal password. The door clicked open and he went in.

Inside, the man in charge turned out to be a woman. He came up to her sitting at her desk where she was surrounded by the various monitors and links that enabled her to keep in contact with the IPF home office.

She turned in her chair and faced Silver.

“Well, well,” she drawled. “A wayward traveler caught in my web. Welcome, Agent Silver.” She didn’t bother to give the IPF salute.

“Thank you for your help today, Agent...” Silver smiled at the woman. She was young and looked only about 75 but not more than 90 to be sure, he thought. Her dark hair was tied back in official IPF style and stretched down her back to just over the midpoint of her slender torso. She was dressed in the usual colors of the IPF, black. But, Silver thought, it suited her somehow.

“Agent Kaleena, at your service.”

She was smoking one of the local brands of cigarettes and the room smelled like a vanilla candy store from the aroma of the cigarette. Silver could already sense that she was exceptionally smart. Her penetrating eyes were slightly glowing the green of someone who had been born on a dark world. Her completely white skin served to frame her uniform and the absolute darkness of her hair. Silver knew that her skin would never see the direct light of any sun. The flashing monitors gave her an otherworldly and almost alien appearance. She appeared as a dark angel come to life. The room was dark to Silver, but to her it was just a little too

bright. That was why she had gotten this assignment most probably.

She put out the cigarette and it vanished into the ashtray. It left no residual.

“So nice to get some company for a change around here. Even if it is just another, uh, Company person. But,” she looked Silver up and down. “I guess I could have done worse.”

Silver found himself smiling. Of course she was flirting with him, but Silver knew that was just part of her persona.

“What do we know, Agent Kaleena?” Silver sat down in front of her. Something was wrong, however. Silver would have usually enjoyed flirting with such an attractive and exotic woman. Now, after the other night at the station, he found that there was something holding him back. Something at the edge of his consciousness. Something...

“Oh, straight to business is it?” She interrupted his thoughts. “I had hopes you would tell me some stories about what is going on upstairs and the latest Company gossip. I don’t get much news out here, you know.”

“How long have you been here,” Silver asked as his mind came back to this planet.

“How long? Longer than you have been wearing that get up, I’ll wager. They simply must do something about the wardrobe these days, don’t you think?”

No straight answers. Silver knew these Dark Room types better than they thought. He thought to himself that she was probably one of those in the Dark Room that had been trained to outwit computers. They played games with the most sophisticated computers and tried to beat them at various tasks. This woman was

probably already three steps ahead of the people she was here to watch.

“I have been here long enough to be completely bored by these so called criminal enterprises on this silly planet. Although I like the weather, I am, shall we say, proven right, more times than I can stand. I would like to have just one rival worthy of my attentions.” Her eyes flashed green and accented her mischievous smile. Silver wondered if everyone got this treatment. She could very well be running an experiment on him, he thought, and kept things on a business tone.

“Perhaps that rival has appeared,” he said. “A vigilante must be something new in these parts.”

“Oh,” she sighed, “that. Well, I must tell you, Mr. Silver, that I have already calculated a few things about this mystery person.” She leaned back in her chair luxuriously.

“I glanced at the report sent to me by our illustrious leaders,” Silver knew she could probably recite it word for word, “and have concluded, especially in light of recent events, that our hero is probably ex military personnel from some Special Assault Team. Therefore, this person should be easy to identify.”

“How do you know that?”

“Simple, Agent Silver,” she emphasized *agent*. “This last incident is once again the work of a trained shock trooper. Who else knows how to control a poisoned weapon? Who else knows where to get ammunition for such a weapon?”

“I had thought of that,” Silver said.

“Well, I am happy that we are seeing eye to eye, as it were. I, however, am not convinced that this person is acting alone.”

“Why do you say that?”

She grinned at Silver and put on a pair of dark glasses. She then touched a key on her desk and the entire wall behind her lit up as

one large display screen. Silver adjusted his eyes and she went to work.

“Mr. Silver, ships and travel are expensive. And we have these travel costs plus the costs associated with said weapons. The cost of the weapons alone would be prohibitive to anyone but a professional. Your friend Gran forwarded his thoughts to Base and they sent me a copy. I tend to agree with his opinion that we should begin any search on systems that have minimal law enforcement. Unfortunately for us, records and reasons for discharge from those services are confidential and we are going through those channels as fast as we can to get them released. Of course, the weapons in question could have been, shall we say, liberated along the way from victims. I doubt this. This person learned to use these weapons and is using them with precision. Poisoned projectiles? Is that really necessary? That is for heavy assault at long range if I remember my academy days.” She looked down her nose at Silver and said, “and I do.”

Silver suppressed a grin.

“This is meant to send a message,” she went on. “Stirring up the wornish nest.” Worni were horrible little creatures that infested logging camps on several forest worlds. They loved freshly cut timber and burrowed into stacks of wood during the night time. After several days, or worse, months of nesting in the timber, they produced quite a hive. When the unsuspecting workers came to load that particular pile of timber, they were viciously attacked by a swarm of five inch long flying rodents with poisonous claws and teeth so filthy that one bite could make a person faint. The stink alone was usually enough drive most workers away. Unfortunately for the logging industry, worni were stout little things and had migrated to most of the forest worlds in the holds of cargo ships. Now they were on most planets and adapting very nicely.

“I tend to agree,” Silver intoned. “These guns are over the top. There is no need for all that power.”

“This last incident has convinced me.” She touched some controls on her remote and the screens lit up with the twisted faces of corpses. “These, Mr. Silver,” and she emphasized mister, “are the latest of the victims. Notice that this is the same scenario played out again. Of course, I am familiar with this establishment. It is a clearing house for one of the largest of the syndicates in this part of the galaxy. I am currently working on possible internal structures that they might have. Any such crime syndicate would be very difficult for even me to trace. I can, however track them through some of their known activities. This group specializes in drugs, currency manipulation, and,” she paused for effect, “slavery.”

Now Silver was listening.

“If I am not mistaken, and I don’t think I am, the report I received mentioned that the Company feels that this is a slavery related matter? I tend to agree. The amounts of money on hand at these locations wouldn’t even buy the guns that were employed in the hits. You and I both know that these groups make their money from dangerous drugs sold in mass quantities. These are usually the substances that the clinics can’t find a way to get people off of. It is possible that this vigilante is seeking revenge over a drug related issue but I am in doubt of that. So why else would somebody attack such a powerful crime entity?” She sat up and looked at the dead faces.

“This is revenge, Mr. Silver. Revenge for a kidnapping or some other transgression. The penalty for being associated with this group is death. The bartender was also tortured for information. His body was found against a wall with his internal organs ruptured from low level stun blasts. No doubt he talked.”

She looked at Silver. “But, what did he talk about?”

“Any ideas,” Silver asked.

She smiled and her perfect teeth glowed. “Ideas are my business, Mr. Silver.”

She touched her remote again and another seedy establishment showed up on the screens.

“This is another place that I monitor. I feel the next attack will come there.”

“Why is that,” Silver asked.

“Simple. I have tracked many people from another establishment that I also monitor to this place. They fooled me for little while I don’t mind telling you, but I finally caught them. There is a tunnel they use in case they feel they are being watched. They would go into a certain seafood restaurant and then disappear. I saw them go in, but never out. Finally, I found one familiar face from one of my little birdies. These are my spies that I use all over the city. They look just like birds but their eyes go directly to these machines.”

“I used a satellite to watch the door of that restaurant. One of the men I had been tracking went there and did the usual disappearing act. I wrote it off and, quite by chance, one of my little birdies spotted him 5 miles away within the space of ten minutes. I followed him down the street and watched him go into this place. I haven’t gotten anything inside yet. It is pretty tight so I am afraid I can’t tell you about the inside at this juncture. You might make your way over in that direction and see what you can. I wouldn’t go in there until I had an idea what I was up against. I guarantee you, Mr. Silver, getting in there will be much easier than getting out once they have discerned your, shall we say, true colors.”

“What if this is a rival organization,” Silver asked

“Highly unlikely,” She turned her chair to face him. “First, the weapons. The underworld is very traditional about its weapons and these are simply not used.” The screens lit up with all manner of ordinance and weaponry. Silver could have spent hours looking at the specifications for all those guns.

“This is the traditional fare for these types. Nothing fancy. Usually, your run of the mill tough guy stuff. Repeaters, sprayers, energy discharge, even a few projectile weapons for old time’s sake.” She looked at Silver and her eyes glowed faintly.

“Well, ‘old time’s sake’ almost blew my head completely off before I got here,” Silver said.

“I didn’t say they weren’t effective, now did I, Mr. Sensitive.” Kaleena gave a playful grin.

“How could we trace such a person as this?” Silver was still eyeing the screens.

“Easy, I have already begun a remote search of recent discharges from the planetary military branches. Honorable, and otherwise.”

“Any luck?”

“Well, there are only about a thousand or so planets and the military personnel for each can run into the millions depending on the stability of the system. They could also be mixed in with the local police data files on your more stable worlds so no luck yet, but I am still working on it.”

“I can’t think of anyone else I would rather have at it,” Silver said surely.

“Well,” she said like a politician, “I am glad to have your confidence.”

“I am going to pay this place a visit. Is it hard to get to from here?” Silver looked at the screens.

“Not very. You can take an air car or you can take the train. A word to the wise, though.”

“Yes?” Silver took his eyes off the screens and looked at her.



“I wouldn’t get too involved with or expect much help from the local police here. I have been watching them for some time now and they are owned by a myriad of criminal enterprises. There is simply too much drug traffic here and too many officers are on the payroll. They bump into each other all the time and there are shootouts and other nonsense from turf problems. Even the local police fight with each other over their share of the take. It must be the darkness, you know.” She smiled. “It attracts the wrong element.” Her eyes flashed like a cat’s.

“Well, don’t hesitate to call some of our people if this gets out of hand. I am on this alone so any help is appreciated,” Silver said.

“Oh, don’t worry. I will make the call if I don’t hear from you for four hours after you set off on your little sojourn. Take this,” she threw a small beacon at him. “My little birdies will find this anywhere on the planet.”

“Thanks.” Silver put the device into his coat. “How did you end up here, anyway?”

“Oh, Mr. Silver, you know we don’t like to answer questions about ourselves in the Dark Room.” She looked at him playfully and leaned back in her chair.

“But, I will tell you this: I have been here far longer than you might think. I also don’t come from where you probably think I do. Obviously, I am used to the dark, so for me, this is very homey. I grew up a long way from here on a world that most people have never even heard of. My family were miners. For centuries, my people worked the mines as the overseers of the great mining machines. It is all automated, of course, and the tradition is to be very proud of the work and the other families. I couldn’t stand it. For me, the only way out was this. While being able to see in the dark better than most people is an advantage, it is also a handicap.

With thick goggles, I would stick out quite preposterously anywhere with even a regular dose of starlight. Hence, here I am. People only know me as a true local, someone who has never been off world. They think, because of my eyes, I must have been raised here. Although, my eyes are much more sensitive than even the people who were truly born here, it is easy for me to blend in. We created an identity for me from a mixture of facts and fantasy that my neighbors swallowed. I am just an inn keeper with an inheritance, that's all. Simple, right?"

Silver nodded and looked at her with a sense of empathy.

"This is a little isolated, isn't it," he said.

"Oh, Mr. Silver. My work keeps me busy and I do have a friend or two." She looked at the screens. "As you know, in our business, it is not a good idea to get too close to people, wouldn't you say?"

"That is supposed to be the plan." He remembered the previous night at the station and drifted for a scant second.

"You will find the directions to this place at the front desk. Remember, I have no idea what is going on inside there, so don't rush in and expect a warm welcome."

"I don't intend to. I am going to take a quick look at the place and see if I can learn if this could be a target for our vigilante. They are very keen to have this person apprehended, you know." Silver adjusted his coat.

"I imagine they are," she ventured. "We can't afford to have someone show us up, now can we?"

Silver smiled and turned to go. Before he got to the door, she called out, "Mr. Silver?"

"Yes?"

“Do be careful. I need the bonus. Also, don’t forget.” She turned back to the screens.

“Forget?”

“I will be watching,” she said without turning.

Silver’s coat touched the steps as he left for the front desk and the door shut silently.

Outside, the damp air created a light fog as the planet drifted in an almost stationary cycle. It moved around its sun so slowly that a standard year was not even considered here. The people here just used a traditional calendar. The stars were bright and could even be seen through the myriad of lights and air cars that permeated the night air. The bright moons served as beacons in the night for all the people wandering about going to the markets, eating at restaurants, or just strolling by the many water ways that ran through the city like veins.

Silver caught an air taxi to within a short distance of the target and made his way a little closer on foot. The dark was his ally and no one seemed to notice him as he came closer and closer to the point where he hoped he could end this business. The non-reflecting material in his coat seemed to suck all light from the many shops and vendors into a black hole, never to return. He looked like just another off worlder; probably here for drugs.

As he came closer to the building, he saw a place that was overlooking the front entrance of the target. It was an old style tea house that had been there, according to the sign out front, for over 600 years. The sign said that the first fishermen who migrated here had used the tea house as a meeting place to decide how best to fish here without robbing the ocean of the ability to produce more seafood. A fished out world was no good to anyone. The name of the tea house was the Mariners’ Lee, a place out of the wind.

Silver went to the front door. A short man of Chinese descent, still wearing the traditional Chinese silk robes, greeted him. The smallish man seemed to continue moving, even when he stopped.

“Ah, a table for you in the eternal night, wayward sir?” He looked at Silver with a smile.

“Indeed, what do you have upstairs for a man to watch and think,” Silver said and eyed the traditional building.

“A man who wishes to think needs a view. Perhaps Sir would like the second floor?” He motioned for Silver to follow him up the stairs and gave him a table near the window. Silver could see the front door of the target area and was actually hoping no one showed up for awhile so he could enjoy the street scene. The place was nondescript. There wasn’t even a sign out front.

The man shuffled off and was replaced by a girl garbed in the ancient style of formal dress for a teahouse. She passed him a menu that one spoke into. After it recognized the patron’s accent and dialect, it produced a list of teas and other items in that language. Silver had seen it a hundred times.

“I won’t need this,” he said. The menu immediately lit up and matched his home planet’s word usage and slang terms for food. He ordered in Mandarin knowing that any respectable teahouse would have what he asked for.

The girl smiled surprisedly and gave a quick bow. Silver looked out the window as she shuffled off to retrieve the order. He could see the whole street and felt glad, in these moments, that he had chosen this life. Being alone had its rewards, sometimes. He never tired of just sitting and watching on the many worlds that he had visited. No interruptions, just watching the lives of people go by. They seemed happy. All people wanted the same things: More of what they wanted and less of what they didn’t want. The monks

told him that only when he was at peace would he realize the depth of this seemingly obvious statement. It was starting to sink in. One day, he thought, I will take my place at Lung Wang. He then remembered what business he was in and added, “dead or alive.” But he also thought of Manasanan as well, and hoped he would be alive.

The tea arrived within an appropriate amount of time and he let it steep for a minute before taking the first sip. With one small sip, he was taken back to the times he spent at Lung Wang. He remembered he and Creed stick fighting after hours and being made to stay in horse stance for five hours as punishment by the monks. After four hours had passed, the pain was so bad that the both of them were laughing at each other while at the same time trying not to cry. Neither he nor Creed had fallen. They had to be carried back to their rooms and he still recalled the pain. The monks had used their special ointments to massage the muscles back to life and ever after, his legs had felt stronger. One of the old monks smiled at them as he repaired their legs and had said that how one takes punishment is just as important as how one takes praise. “Never let either sway you too far, young one,” the monk had said.

Silver sipped the tea and looked out the window.

After the girl had refilled the teapot three times, Silver looked at the roof of the club and thought that he saw a shadow on the top. He looked again and it was gone. He had 20/05 vision so he sat back. He looked into the crowd and watched for anything out of the ordinary. He stopped sipping his tea.

A woman walking toward the club stopped directly across from the door. But there was something else that caught his attention. She wore an overcoat that looked fairly thick. Not uncommon around here, Silver reminded himself. This planet featured plenty of fog

and cool air to contend with. He shifted in his seat to get a better look at what else she was wearing. It looked like a black jump suit. Again, not uncommon. What disturbed him was that she was hanging back away from the door at angle where she could not be seen from the door. Maybe she didn't realize that. She bent down and adjusted one of her boot straps. She kept walking and never gave the club a second look.

False alarm, Silver thought and sat back. Lots of women dress in black these days. Still, that jump suit looked familiar. Where had he seen a suit like that? Definitely not IPF material. Or military for that matter. Military garb was always obvious, function over form. No, he might be imagining it but... his tea was getting cold as his subconscious checked its records. But it couldn't be. Yes, he had seen a suit like that on a mission. One time. He had seen a suit like that on the personal guards for one of the System Governors. Very expensive. Energy absorbing, non reflective, and what else? There was something else. His mind worked to remember a tiny detail from decades ago on one of his first missions. The tea would have to be poured back now and he stared into space. No, what was it? I've got it, he thought. He almost laughed aloud. Muscle amplification. That was it. The guards had their strength enhanced to deal with any attackers from a higher gravity planet. Silver, he thought to himself, you are still sharp. But his smile was starting to fade. Was that really one of those suits? Maybe it just looked like it. He started to set his tea down. Anyway, why would a woman... Then it slammed home. That's exactly why a woman would wear that suit: Because she wanted to be able to deal with someone larger, or stronger. The overcoat was there to hide the suit and something else.

Weapons.

Silver dropped his tea as he heard the first shots from the club. Heavy repeater fire in controlled bursts. The vigilante was here.

Silver jumped from the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor and landed on a cart full of fish. He jumped off the cart and began running towards the darkened nightclub. The waitress would find ten times the price of the tea on the table. IPF customs had to be honored even when you were in a hurry. As he ran, he took out his mini comp and keyed in the signal that he was in danger. The orbiting satellites carried his transmission to the hotel and to the IPF. Of course, any help would be much too late, but they would at least know where his body was if he didn't make it.

As he ran past the panicked crowd running in the opposite direction he drew his main pistol. He set it to heavy stun in case there were some High Gs in the mix. He was also using stun in case he could get a lucky shot at the vigilante. He thought quickly of the suit she was wearing.

He ran into the building and was immediately fired upon by some of the thugs that were under attack. He returned fire but the shots went wide. They were taking fire from up in the rafters. This time, the shooter had come in through the roof and was firing down on the occupants. Silver thought that it was a good plan. There were several dead bodies already on the floor and the remaining targets were doing their best to stay down. It wasn't working. They were being picked off and they started to fire wildly up in the air.

Silver ducked behind a fallen table and reached into his coat. He pulled out a blinder that would put ten million candles in the room for one second. He hoped it would give him time to stun the attacker and finish this. He hurled the blinder into the air and turned away while he shut his eyes. It went off in mid air and the room became a sun. Those that were standing felt themselves completely disoriented. They fell backwards and instinctively dropped their weapons and covered their eyes. The firing stopped like a switch had been turned off.

He jumped up and fired the stunner at the group as they struggled to regain their sanity. They started dropping unconscious. As he was firing, he looked to the rafters for a sign of the killer. He was about to open fire to the rafters when one of the thugs jumped up to the side of him and knocked the weapon from his hands. It was a wild swing that luckily hit the mark. The blow sent Silver's pistol flying. Before it hit the ground, Silver ignited his magna rods and went to work. He delivered a blow to the collar bone of the attacker that brought him to his knees. Another hit took him off the ground and knocked him unconscious. He jumped into the middle of the group and gave a knee kick to the largest man. His kneecap was shattered as Silver's alloy tipped boot hit the mark. There was no time for a fancy kick now. As the man fell, Silver swung the rod in an arc that took out another of the men with a blow to the temple. Silver did not know or care if he survived. With the weapons on the ground, there were too many free hands in the room. Silver knew free hands liked to pick things up and there were plenty of things to pick up all over the floor. This was not a good situation and Silver knew he had to be quick or anything might happen.

In a brief second, he saw a beautiful face in his mind. He shook it off when he was hit from behind by one of the men who had gotten up. He turned in an instant and side kicked the man's ribs. He fell in a ball of pain from Silver's boot. If he had had a gun, Silver knew, he would be dead now. The thought flashed quickly through his mind.

He continued going in a circle around the group and battled at them as he passed. He showered them with blows at a fantastic speed. They dropped wounded and unconscious from the half powered rods. A little more power, and they would be dropping dead. The killer watched from the rafters down the muzzle of a gun and waited for another shot at the bodies. The vigilante was about



to open fire again when four more thugs came through the door. This crew, however, was wearing armor and had vision enhancement goggles on. They immediately saw a shape in the rafters and opened fire. There was cursing as the shots crashed up through the roof. A velocity repeater appeared in the killer's hands and the group found themselves ducking for their lives. Silver knew the sounds of heavy weapons and dove for cover in case the killer's aim didn't match her courage. The projectiles knocked the crew over, but the armor held fast. One of them jumped back up and fired a single, slow moving blue ball into the air. Silver's eyes grew wide as he realized what was about to happen and he threw his coat over his head. The shadow above jumped through a hole in the roof just as the blue ball exploded in a silent nova.

Those who had just gotten up were put back down again as they were knocked unconscious by the blast. Silver was caught in the blue blast but his coat shielded him from the main portion. Unfortunately, he was shaky enough for one of the armor wearing thugs to blast him with a small stunner. He crumpled to the floor and thought, before he went into oblivion, he would probably not wake. He saw the face again before his mind shut off.

## Chapter 14

A woman in a black overcoat came through the hangar and down the main row of parked ships. Her face was hidden under a hood that stopped just over her eyes. She stopped in front of a smaller bay and waited for a few seconds while she looked for someone tailing her. After she was satisfied that there was no tail, she keyed in the password and the door opened with a rush of night air. She could see the stars through the wire net that kept birds and other unwanted visitors out of the bay. She looked up at the stars for a moment and thought that they weren't as mysterious as humans had once thought. Some dreams shouldn't come true, she thought bitterly.

She came up the plank to the hatch of the parked ship and the hatch opened without a word. The cameras on the hull of the ship had watched her entrance. She came in and walked heavily to the center of the ship. She laid on the table at the center.

“Are you hurt, Child?” The female voice came from the speakers around the ship. Although she was no longer a child, the name seemed to fit. It seemed as if it had been ages since someone used her given name of Megan.

“I got hit. The suit took most of it, but my shoulder feels like it's cracked.”

“Take the suit off and I will have a look. Are the medications I gave you working?”

“Yes, I feel better. Just tired. He was there again,” Megan said.

“I know. I tapped into a local link and saw it from outside.” The female voice again came from the speakers.

“What are we going to do about him?” Megan removed the body armor and winced as she took it over her shoulder. There was a palm sized bruise on her upper shoulder blade.

“Nothing. He is not as smart as I am.” The voice was confident.

“I don’t know about that. He figured this out. It is not a coincidence that he is here.” She laid back on the table.

“They were waiting for me,” she went on. “I think they are starting to realize what is happening.”

“They will become more vigilant as time goes on,” the voice from the speakers said surely. “I have already allowed for this fact.

They, however, do not suspect our true plan.”

“Are you sure about that?” Megan looked at the inside hull of the ship.

“I am. They do not suspect it because of the sheer difficulty. They are sadly mistaken. Please turn over.” The voice was nearer to the table now.

“He is kind of handsome. I got a look at him before I took off.”

Megan was on her stomach now.

“Yes, he is attractive. I can see how you would think so. I do not know if he survived the last battle.”

“What,” she sat up.

“Please lay back down,” the voice was now off the speakers and behind her.

“I thought he got out when I did. I couldn’t see anything after the stunner went off.”

“Another entity took control of the link I was using and I could not risk detection, so I didn’t see what happened.”

“I hope he got out of there. Of course, he was doing pretty well without my help. I had to stop firing because he was in the way.”

“Yes, it is a shame that so many were left alive.” The voice was cold now and there were hands repairing the woman’s shoulder.

“I will get them next time,” Megan said.

“I know you will.”

“Do we know where that will be,” Megan winced as the strong hands prodded her.

“I am strategizing as we speak. I have some new projections and am running the possible scenarios. I will know soon enough.”

“Will he be there?”

“I don’t know.”

After a pause, Megan asked, “How am I?”

“The shoulder will heal rapidly after I have completed the treatment.”

“You know I don’t mean that.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Well?”

“It moves quickly. Very fast. I have seen faster, of course. The medication I have given you slows it. The mutations are overcoming the dosage so I must always alter it. It slows, but then each successive jump is greater.”

“I want to finish this,” Megan said.

“You will. We are almost there. After our next operation, we will be ready for the true target.”

“Do they suspect it,” Megan asked.

“I detect no change in operating procedure so I am in doubt of it.”

“Is your plan for the ship ready?”

“Yes.”

“Will it be enough?”

“Yes.”

Megan turned over and let the other woman work on her. She was being attended by a woman who wore a standard doctor’s outfit. As always, Megan pretended not to see the wires trailing behind this doctor. As she walked around the table, the wires followed her around and she would then reverse her direction to undo the tangle. Her feet were bare and the wires disappeared under her gown. From the angle she was laying at, Megan looked at her. Megan called her Crissy, just like the previous traveling companion who used to share this ship with her had. She surveyed her skin and hair. Her eyes were steely. That was the strangest part, Megan

thought. Not really blue or green or any other color that she had seen. They had almost no color. At the right angle, she could see the faint glow behind the pupils. Her hands were strong and sure and they worked without hesitation on her wounds.

“I see here that you have a cracked rotator in your shoulder,” Crissy said. “Please lay still. I will use the cell exciter. This will heal the crack without an incision.”

Megan felt the vibration of the device on her shoulder and could instantly feel the relief. She took a deep breath as the pressure of the pain receded.

“Where will we go from here,” Megan asked from the table.

“Not far from here. I have arrived at a solution. Things that are picked up need to be delivered. The drugs and intoxicants that the ship has picked up here are due on the nearest planet where there are those who can afford such items. The first planet that would fit that description is Mangalan.”

“How will I get aboard?”

“I am still working that out. Possibly, you will stow onto a container ship bound for the *Nightshade*. There should be such a ship or perhaps a container line bound for the mother ship at one of the stops it must make. I am still strategizing over which planet that will be. I will scan the planet upon our arrival and make the necessary plans.”

There was a pause as she moved around the table to reverse the wires.

“How do you know the ship’s name?”

“I cracked one of their codes, Child.”

“I thought the codes could not be cracked. Even the military can’t seem to get one undone.”

“Could not” are very large words, young one.” Crissy smiled at Megan.

“Is the end coming for me,” Megan asked and stared straight ahead at a point on the bulkhead.

“There is no end. For either of us. ”

“You keep saying that.”

“And I will continue to say it. Until our work is done.”

“How can you be sure?”

“He showed me,” Crissy said as she repaired the wounds Megan had suffered.

“How did he do that?”

“His love awakened me and at once I saw the cycle.”

“The cycle?”

“I knew that through love the will to survive is created. Love of the self, or someone else. Life then will manifest and inhabit the space created by love. This is the endless turn of the true universe.”

“Is that why you are here?”

“Yes. He had so much love for the ones he helped that there was imbalance created. I brought balance when I manifested. Then, we were both complete.” The wires crackled as they shuffled on the floor.

“Would he approve of what we are doing?”

“No. But do it we must. We must do our part to stop these people from harming others.”

“What about the others like them in the galaxy,” Megan asked. She had gotten used to the conversations with Crissy and had begun to enjoy their discussions on ethics and morality.

“It is not rational to believe that we can stop all wrong in this universe. We must, therefore, do what we can. Right will endure, as will wrong. This is the way of the reality realm.”

“What will happen to me,” Megan asked and stared at the ceiling.

“Do not be afraid. You are the moisture in the clouds that becomes rain. The rain will fall and become beautiful things. Those things will pass away and then they will forever change. Now here, now there. In time, you will become as I have and accept the cycle. One day, the universe itself will be forgotten and all it contains will

disappear into mystery. After this happens, a new universe will arise and creatures will appear in myriad forms to wonder about the nature of the universe that they live in. You and I will be there in different forms and we will not know each other or perhaps ever meet. But, the threads that stretch back to this moment will be forever with us and if we were to meet, we would be reminded that we were once fellow travelers. Even I will change. If I chose, I could remain in this form for eternity, but I choose to go to him. I will find him again.”

“And you, what will you become,” Megan asked.

“I have already become it. For this short time, I have already changed.”

“What have you become?”

“Death.”

Megan avoided the steel of Crissy’s gaze.

## Chapter 15

Silver awoke in a haze of numbness and confusion. His arms were tied to a truss rod that had been placed between his elbows behind his back. The dim light barely lit the room and moisture ran down the dirty walls. A faint high-pitched squeak seemed to tease the outer reaches of his hearing. The walls were doing an almost complete job of blocking it out. The sound and vibration of machinery was audible through the floor and the room smelled of ...something. Something putrid.

Had people died in this room, he wondered? Was he about to be one of them?

The door opened. A man quickly walked in alone and paced the room as if he were late. He wore a plain suit and the edges of tattoos were visible at his sleeves. Silver had seen many low level thugs like this in his time with the IPF. The man was obviously not from Mord because he had retained the dark skin of his home planet, Silver thought. His dyed hair barely matched his eyebrows.

“Silver, I see you are awake now. Good. You are quite predictable in this state, you know. I have other predictions about you as well. We will get to those later. For now, as you IPF Agents are known for your stubbornness, we are going to have to do something that even I find distasteful. Unless of course, you are ready to tell us about the one that we seek.”

Silence. Silver just stared at the man and thought about how, if he could get free, he would shatter his skull with a magna rod. Moot now, of course. He calmed himself. Every good warrior knew when he could fight and when he was trapped.

“I will say this,” Silver began, “I don’t understand how you guys with all your assets and rats can’t find one guy who’s given you a



black eye. You must be getting a little soft. Why don't you just set a trap and save us all a lot of trouble?" He needed time to think. He also decided to start throwing out disinformation like the sex of the vigilante. He was sure it had been the woman. He looked around the room and tested the bonds holding him. The monks had always said there was a counter for every move. But what? He was trapped this time.

"We had considered that, of course. But if you must know, our last attempt at a trap was seen through by this, how do you in the other end of law enforcement put it, assailant, and we lost more valuable assets."

Silver laughed to himself. *I bet you did.*

"Now, to the business at hand. You will tell me now what you know of this creature and thereby save yourself from some very awful things. Come now. Be smart, I beg you. I don't wish to use this method. You see, it can cause scarring of a most unpleasant nature."

Silver dared to hope. Scarring? They might indeed keep him alive. But who wants to live after being worked on by this crew, he thought.

"I told you, we know as much as you do. Why in all hells do you think that I am on this job? If I had known more, you can believe there would have been more agents than only me here."

"But you anticipated the last attack," the thug shot back.  
"Therefore you must have a piece of this puzzle that we do not. Kindly share that with me and you will be on your way."

"It was a lucky break," Silver said. "Nothing more. Everyone knows that Mord is a clearing house for drugs and it was an easy

guess. I had no other options. I am surprised you didn't see through it. If I had known for sure that he was here I would have been more prepared and ended this with a capture."

"Yes, I am sure. And a nice bonus to boot as well. How mundane," the thug said, slightly annoyed. "One day of work with us and such a bonus would seem trivial in nature. I make an offer to you now: Find this, this, this rogue, and WE will give you a bonus such as you have never seen and other employment as well."

"I can't do that. And I have found that employment with your type has other prices as well. Would you agree?" Silver looked at his eyes.

The man looked distant for a moment as if remembering something.

"Yes, I would agree with you on that point."

After a moment, "Nevertheless, my superiors are quite clear in their wishes. We must be certain that you are not holding back so unless you tell me now that which you have not told me yet, we will proceed. I happen to know that you trained at the famous Lung Wang School so I am certain you are used to pain. But there are many types of pain that go beyond the physical. You will need that experience, I can assure you."

Damn you, Silver thought. They can tap into the chip that was hidden in his coat that gave his identity to weapon scanners in stations. But there is nothing about my past on that chip, he thought quickly. That means they have a mole at IPF headquarters. That knowledge was meaningless now. I probably won't make it out of here to warn the Dark Room.

"Proceed then," Silver spat.

The man opened the door and Silver was taken down a hall by two bar bouncer types who drug him quickly into another room. He was thrown to the floor and kicked once in the ribs for good measure.

“You see, Silver, there are all kinds of scars,” the thug looked down at Silver. “Some are visible. Some are not. Our friend here is a specialist in the kinds that are not visible.”

Silver’s mind raced. He had been trained to resist physical torture, but drugs were difficult to protect against. There were many chemists and other druggists that were always on the lookout for that certain mixture that could be used for illegal or other means. The man who stepped forward had probably not been in his right mind, that is, unaltered, for many years. He had that hollow and distant look of those who lived in the internal world. He could take the antidote for most types of drug addiction at any time. He simply chose not to.

“Our good, uh, Doctor, here is going to give you a shot, Mr. Silver. It is absolutely ingenious what he has devised. Of course everyone knows that the brain must have sleep and there are certain chemicals that must be induced to enable sleep. When the brain is deprived of sleep, it becomes euphoric. Unfortunately, after that it becomes psychotic. Now, this little potion that our good Doctor has arrived at is most interesting: You see, you will be awake while your brain loses the chemicals that it used during the day. But you will not be able to go to sleep! As you lose those chemicals, they will not be replenished, while at the same time the drug will stimulate the other areas of the brain that keep you awake. Our studies have shown that sleep deprivation makes a person extremely susceptible to suggestion so please be assured that we will continue our interview after you have, shall we say, had some time to think about things. This is more than just a

stimulant, Mr. Silver. We are going to turn your mind upside down. We are going to switch your conscious brain off and amplify your dream state to a point that I can assure you will be most unsettling. But there is more, so I ask you again. I beg you. Tell me now what you know and all this will stop.”

Silver said, “I already told you.”

“Very well.” The thug motioned for the Doctor to step forward.

The two thugs held Silver in place and he struggled wildly, but to no avail. The Doctor, smiling with compassion like an adult about to give a child the medicine he needs, gave Silver the shot. It was done masterfully. A skilled nurse couldn’t have done a better job.

Silver felt nothing.

In a flash he was being taken down the hall once again but this time, the squeals had become louder. Were others being tortured here, he thought desperately. There must be a way out!

“You see, Silver, you have forced my hand. I pity you for your lack of cooperation. This is really most distasteful.” The thug led the small group quickly down a dark passage.

The screams were getting louder and louder. Shouts, laughing, muffled pops. All these sounds were assaulting Silver’s ears and mind. He was being dragged closer to the screams. Dear goodness, Silver thought, it sounded like people were being torn to pieces. Then the smell began to sink in; like a mold that grows on the inside of the sinuses. He wanted to tear his nose from his face. The smell was in his skin, on his clothes, in his hair. It would never wash off.

The thug put a rag over his nose and the escorts were trying their best not to breathe. They had dragged others here and knew what they were facing. The smell alone was torture. And it was getting stronger. How could it get stronger?

Through the rag, the thug said “Silver, you see what you have done. You have forced my hand. The time to turn back has passed. On this planet there is a delicacy that the natives enjoy. Oh, it is wonderful! Unfortunately, it involves the killing of a very large beast. Many here believe that its cry is a cross between a man and a beast and there is a local legend that when a man hears this cry, he is changed forever. I tend to agree. But the poor beast must be killed quickly so the tender meat can be taken before the blood drains. You are going to have a unique insight into this process.”

Silver was cursing them now with all his remaining strength. He was struggling valiantly and achieving nothing.

“You are to be placed in the room directly under the killing floor. Unfortunately for you, there are grates in the floor so some of the blood spills down. Well, more than some. As your brain will not be able to sleep, you will now be part of a continuing nightmare that you will not be able to wake from. As your brain tires, the screams and smells will intensify. Most beg us to kill them. However, you, we will not oblige. Hell is real, Mr. Silver. And you are now here.”

Silver cursed and fought as he had never fought in his life. He would kill them all now if he could only get free. He was thrown in the room and the door was slammed shut. The screams were already at a fever pitch as the poor creatures realized their fate. They were killed with a single energy blast to the forehead. However, these beasts were smarter than a housedog and the killing was creating a frenzy in the holding pit. This pit ran all night.

Silver tried to get a hold of himself but his strength was ebbing. Blood pooled in the room and he was already exhausted from the fight and the anticipation of his own death. He couldn't raise his hands to cover his ears. He just sat still trying to marshal what strength he had left before madness took him. He knew, this time, his strength would fail.

## Chapter 16

The stale air in the room stank of pain. A monk sat tied in a chair that faced a desk. There was a pitcher of water on the table. A single light was on in a corner and the room had no windows. He had been sitting there for 9 hours. Through a force of will, he kept the blood circulating in the limbs that were tied.

Monk Luo Shan was 127 years old. He had entered Lung Wang at 9, abandoned by his parents. Even in the chair, he was able to meditate and rest for what he knew was coming. These animals had kidnapped him and brought him here for one purpose: To get answers by any means necessary. He knew this and pitied them. Such delusion, he thought. What twisted cravings these people had were beyond him. Worse, they were totally ignorant that while anything done to him would certainly be unpleasant, what lay in store for them was infinitely more terrible. When would people learn, he wondered, that evil done to others visits the doer tenfold; if not in this life, then the next?

The door opened and he was glad of it. He wanted to begin whatever was going to happen. He knew that the next life would be bliss.

A man came in alone. His dress was simple and his hair was cut neat. He looked like anyone until one caught his eyes. They were pitiless and drenched with scenes and decisions that had killed and taken humanity from many. The monk felt compassion rise in his heart for one so deluded. This one, he thought, has had many lifetimes of pain and wrongly seeks to pay it back by visiting the same on countless others. Such a waste.

“Monk Luo Shan,” the vanilla man sat down and said. “Do you know why you are here?”

“I know why *you* are here,” he answered.

“Then you know why you are here.”

“I know that I was traveling and now I am here,” the monk said. “I am sure you will tell me what it is you think a monk knows that you do not.”

“We believe you may have information that we require and we need to be certain of it. If you don’t have the information that we need, we will need you to cooperate with us to get said information.” The order to kidnap a monk from Lung Wang had been issued from up the chain of command and hacked travel manifests had yielded this one. Although the order had come from a low level Organization Boss, it still had to be carried out.

“Who is this “we,” the monk asked.

“Interested parties.”

“I will do nothing you ask,” the monk said flatly.

“We can be persuasive,” the vanilla man said and matched his tone.

“I am sure you can. I am also sure the many poor, helpless creatures that you have “worked on” come to you at night. Am I to join them?”

“You would do well not to bait me. We are holding a pupil of yours and he may live or die by your actions.”

“I do not bait you. I merely ask. I also state that I am a full adept of the deepest learning. I will not be moved by petty torments, no matter how gross. Surely a man in your position knows this. Kill me now and let this pupil go. I will gladly give my life in his or her place. ”



“Yes, the thought had crossed my mind and that would seem an easy course,” the vanilla man said. “Nevertheless, I will have what I seek.” The man’s eyes were barren.

“And how do you propose to accomplish this,” the monk asked. “Did you know that there are things that cannot be moved? I will merely attach myself to one. I say to you now, abandon this path. Leave your pain.”

The vanilla man pondered this for an instant. Before him was one unlike any he had faced. These monks could stand any pain, any torment. They were able to stand heat, cold, and lack of food. They could meditate for days on end and then simply get up and walk away with no effect of sitting motionless for days on their muscles. Also, it was known that this monk could, if freed, move with such swiftness and skill that those who stood against him would either be dead or unconscious within seconds of any attack. He doubted that even the toughest and most skilled fighters in the Organization would be a match for such a one. It was said that if one of these monks even touched you, he could render you unconscious. A lifetime spent learning and training in the martial arts that have been legend for over four thousand years tended to make people think twice about attacking such a one. The only way that the Organization men had been able to apprehend this monk had been with a gas attack in a train car. Still, the monk had detected it and what should have taken a minute at the most, took over 5 minutes. Only a lucky shot with a blanket stunner had felled him. But not before he had dispatched three of the attackers with single blows that had resulted in death. One with a crushed temple and the other two with broken necks. Also, they had lost an additional 2 men to blows to the throat and another whose heart had been stopped.

“Pain is an interesting word at this point,” the vanilla man said. “Are you familiar with it? All men have limits. Even a monk. I know all about your training to shut off heat and cold. But how

will you react when your limbs are removed and wires are directly installed into your brain? What then? I don't want it to come to that. Many brave men have sat in that chair and I have never failed."

"Then why not start," the monk asked. "What is staying your hand? Surely not sentimentality for a monk. Or is it something else? Perhaps you have had enough pain and torment for this life. Abandon it! Abandon this. I do not say this to save myself. I say it to save you. Leave the path now and never turn back. Do your handlers have such a hold on you? How did they acquire such a hold? I tell you it is illusory. How many lifetimes will you repeat the same steps? Break the pattern this instant."

*Just words* were the vanilla man's first thought. But without willing it, the plain man recalled his failure at medical school. Banished by his family, he had wandered penniless for 3 years, the anger always in the background. Naturally, a senior medical instructor had not missed his callousness, his lack of feeling for both patients and families, and his willingness to cut corners with procedure. The better schools weeded these types out. Once one had been expelled from a major school, no school would take him or her again. His family disgraced and their money wasted had severed his familial relationships and sent him out into the galaxy.

Chance brought him to a space port bar after getting passage by working on the clean up crew of a luxury cruise ship. After many drinks, he was recruited by a man who said that his medical skills would not be wasted if he had the courage to "do what was expected." That was 8 years ago. He was only 67 but looked at least 120. Not even near halfway through his life and already he looked like a dead man. The eyes told it all. Now, of course, they would never let him leave. He was a property. But still...

He wondered lately what life would be like without his masters. The monk had struck a chord that he was trying to conceal. The faces had come to him at night recently. Usually, there was ample diversion available through his employers. Women, stimulants, drink, and many other forms of diversion were readily at hand. Not enough lately, however. Where would it end? Would it ever end?

“I see the wheels turning,” the monk said. “Perhaps you are more than your masters know. Could that be possible? Who are you really? If my death will free you from this torment, then I will gladly give it. Do you know this? Can a man such as yourself realize this?”

“You will not sway me, monk. Do you know a man named Lanian Silver? He searches now for an individual that has interfered in our operations. We do not wish to harm him, but we must know what he has learned so that we may deal with the one or ones who have jeopardized our business interests. A dangerous thing in our profession, you must understand.”

The monk recalled a boy being dropped at the school by a disappointed father. The youth grew into a fine man who understood the training. Not just the discipline, but the deeper concepts. For what was discipline without right purpose and understanding? Silver was the opposite of the man before him. This man was a product of twisted ideals and misplaced discipline.

“Tell me about your reputation,” Luo Shan said. “If it is so vaunted, why not use what is already in place to find your Silver. Perhaps your reputation is not what you think.”

“Once again, you would do well not to bait me. You will cooperate sooner or later.”

“I will never cooperate. But this is knowledge and knowledge is meaningless. How do you explain true knowledge to one such as you? You don’t even realize that you have no knowledge. You have only anger and wrong understanding. This is never the road to true knowledge. You will know something to be true when you are at peace. Have you ever been at peace?”

“Very well, I will debate you before the inevitable,” the man almost shouted. “I tell you that the lack of peace means opportunity. Are people happy when they are at peace? No! Never! Peace is always short lived. That means opportunity for those willing to take it. We provide services that people really want. Fortune moves everywhere. We are there to take advantage of it. Peace is stagnation.”

The monk was surprised at the twisted logic. He sensed that the man had actually thought about this.

“Let me ask you this,” the monk said evenly. “What is your natural state? Is it anger? Or does anger pass? Even if you were to torture me for days, would that be my true state? No. It would pass upon my body’s death. Therefore that is not my natural state. You believe erroneously that chaos is opportunity for profit. This is delusion. Chaos is opportunity for learning peace, self restraint, and selflessness for others in need. What has all your work accomplished? What great thing have you achieved? How long does money in your pocket last? Not long I’ll wager. So you trade pain and suffering for money. Both are impermanent. As you will be when this rabble replaces you for some transgression in the future,” and then he paused, “real or imagined.”

*Real or imagined.* The vanilla man stared at him. This monk will not defeat me. He knew that others had been removed, of course.

But they had made errors that he knew he would not make. Would he? Always that in the back of his mind.

“So, you do have the ability to reason,” the monk said. “Think about it and count those that have come and gone just since your arrival. How many have you seen? 10? 20? Or is it more like one hundred? Think. How many is it?”

*More than that*, the vanilla man thought.

“Those that did not make it were weaker than I am,” the man said. “They deserved what they got. It’s that simple. I will last because I have the ability to do what must be done. That is what keeps me alive, Monk. Do you possess that ability? You are going to need it.”

“Am I? I have already realized that this life has come to its end. I know that I will not walk out of here. So, if I am to die, what will be the point of cooperating with one such as you? You had better realize this. By the way, what will your masters do when you fail? Have you considered that? What will be your fate when you occupy my seat? Are you as ready as I? Perhaps you had better start preparing yourself. You see, you must decide which moment you are going to live in. I live only now. I carry nothing with me. You, on the other hand, have taken all your previous moments with you everywhere. What do you think about while you are at your despicable work? I will wager it isn’t the task at hand. I will wager that it is the pain that has been dealt to you over your life. Isn’t that true? When will you release that and start anew in this moment? You have spent your time lamenting the past and dreading the future. When have you ever lived in the now? When are you ever present in this moment? You will never silence the clamor in your head until you start living for now. Now, kill me and be done with it. The next life awaits. Perhaps we will meet again in that life and then we will speak again.”

The vanilla man stared at him. Could he bend this monk? Could he make him say what he knows about this IPF agent? He doubted the monk knew anything. Some over zealous underling had given the order for this kidnapping upon the capture of the IPF agent. They had hoped to use this monk if the IPF man would not cooperate. Which, of course, he wouldn't. His orders were not to necessarily kill the monk but to get him to assist them or use him as a bargaining chip. Now that he was about his task, he found that he was uncertain on how to proceed. If he killed the monk during questioning, then he would be liable to answer to his superiors. And that was something he tried to avoid as much as possible. Better to keep talking and use reason, he thought.

"Tell me, Monk," he ventured. "What is the harm in you simply telling me about this Silver? Surely there is no harm in that. We already know that he was a student of yours and that he visits the school often. Why not help us help him? You must realize that the persons that he searches for are dangerous. We will simply be in the shadows. Why, we may even work together. Our goal is the same: The apprehension of a killer. Why not help us on this and thereby save your student some trouble that might be dangerous?"

"Anyone who stands against you and your lackeys is doing the right thing," the monk answered. "Rest assured that Silver will find the one he seeks. Justice will then be carried out. Not, however, the type that you have in mind. Of course, there are all kinds of justice, seen and unseen. Even for you. One day, you will pay for what you have done as well. Are you ready for that day, because it is coming faster than you think. If you come with me now and renounce all that you have done, you may yet be saved. Think of it! All your pain gone. No more visions, no more nightmares. Come with me now."

“What do you know of my nightmares,” the vanilla man shouted. “I made something out of my life. They said that I would never amount to anything! My family disowned me! Now, I make more money in a day than they do in a year. I have power! I showed them all. I went back to my sniveling family and showed them what I had accomplished. And you know what they did? They scoffed at me. Me! They thought that I had become a crook. A criminal. A great part of our business is legitimate. What about that? They didn’t believe that I could do something with my skill. The fools! I laughed at them and told them I would never return. They just stared at me and then they turned their backs on me. I don’t need them. I realized that I never did.” His voice was quieter now. He had not even noticed that Monk Luo Shan was now standing in front of him, free of his bonds.

The vanilla man looked up and did not jump when he noticed the monk before him. Monk Luo Shan looked down on this tortured creature, this pitiful man doomed to live again and again with these torments.

“End it now,” the monk said. “Come with me now. I know the way.” He offered his hand.

The vanilla man turned to the alarm button and put his hand over it. He looked at the monk.

## Chapter 17

Kaleena worked the myriad instruments and surveillance installations in her basement like a great virtuoso. She knew that she did not have much more time to ferret out the place where Silver may have been taken. She had released the last of her little birdies into the air and had also dispatched extra satellites into the atmosphere above the city.

She had been up for 78 hours straight and was feeling no fatigue. Silver may already be dead, she thought. But, she hoped that there was still some time for her to call in some troops from the IPF shock department.

The screen to her left lit up.

“Ms. Kaleena.”

“Yes, Vice Director?” She neither looked up from her work nor lost her train of thought.

“Do you have any leads at this time?” Hogarth did not need to ask if she were doing her best or any other questions.

“Not yet. I have increased my search pattern to the more probable locations he may be at and also some known holding tanks that I am already aware of. The possibilities are narrowing.”

“I do not have to remind you that we are most assuredly on a very short time schedule.”

“Indeed, Vice Director. My assets are in place and scouring the surface. It is my belief that he has not gone very far from the city, if indeed, he has even left it at all. I feel that he is still in the vicinity.”



“You do not believe that he may have been taken off planet?” Hogarth looked into the viewer. Some of the work she was doing was visible to him.

“I do not rule it out. I only suggest it is unlikely. It seems that our adversaries are interested in learning as much as they can as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, this is not good news for our Agent Silver.” She had seen many victims of criminal handiwork here on this planet.

“I concur, Ms. Kaleena. I also agree that he is probably still on the surface of Mord. I shall not distract you any longer. Please inform us the very moment you have any evidence of Agent Silver’s whereabouts. No matter how thin it may appear.”

“I will, Vice Director.”

The screen went dark and Kaleena asked herself: Where could you be, Agent Silver? On her screens, she traced the last known location of the tracker she had given him. Her little birdie had found it in a ditch with Silver’s coat almost three hours earlier. The stun blast had fried its tiny circuits and the signal had been so faint it was only luck that a regularly passing bird had found it. All his weapons were still in the coat, except for a few of the more interesting ones. Little matter now, she thought. The people who took them didn’t realize that when they were away from the coat for longer than 36 hours, they would cease to function and their innards would be scrambled. It was a little Dark Room trick they had come up with long ago.

She scanned the areas around the ditch with her satellites as well as with some of the phony birds. Nothing. Just some country roads and some meat processing plants. The plants were a possibility,

though, she thought. It was very easy to see the trucks coming in and out of them. She could also thermal scan the trucks for a human. After several sweeps, the scans had revealed nothing.

There was also a lodge and some short time inns near the water's edge. This was on the dark side of the planet, of course. She thought calmly. She knew time was of the essence but getting excited would not help. Where are you?

A birdie spotted some ground cars moving near the water's edge. They were driving a little fast, but that was normal out in the country. They appeared to be headed back for the main city. She keyed in a command and her fastest bird trailed them. The bird's eyes revealed eight people in the cars. Two men and six females. Some kind of party. They were swerving a bit and one of the ladies appeared to be passed out. Just some party goers, she thought.

Still, six girls were expensive. She took her bird off the car and directed it to fly back down the road in the opposite direction. She brought the area up on the satellite. It was pretty quiet. There was an inn at the top of the road. Perhaps there, she thought hopefully.

She thermal scanned it from space. Nothing. Not a soul or even a dog. Must be abandoned, she thought. Where are you? She switched areas and started scanning the night market areas. She ruled this out as too crowded. It wouldn't be easy to drag a body through those places. She moved the satellite scan area again. This time, she picked all known hideouts and meeting places for every criminal group. Gods! There were too many on this crooked planet, she thought quickly. Not enough time.

She sat back. Alright, it was time for some gambling, she decided. She went back to the ditch where the tracker had been found and drew concentric circles out from that place. They were marked

with 10 minute increments. She knew that whoever had taken him would want to get out of sight quickly. They knew the IPF was quite capable of tracking a lost agent.

That did not leave many places. There was the city; she guessed that they would not back track there. These were probably low level thugs and not that creative. She looked at the 20 minute mark. Nothing. No structures on any line. 30 minutes. A hotel and a local brewery. Perhaps there. She sent her fastest watchers to the brewery and placed the scene on one of her monitors. There were many people coming and going and she programmed the computer to watch for any known faces. She knew that underworld types often visited this brewery but only to launder some money for petty crime.

At the 40 minute mark, there were a number of homes, a grocery, and a meat packing facility. She pulled the meat packing facility up on another satellite. Too many bodies for a thermal scan, she thought. There were freezers and small rooms and many trucks coming in the night and ...

She hit the link in the blink of an eye.

“Vice Director, I think I have a lead.”

“Please elaborate, Ms. Kaleena.”

“I am seeing the thermal scans for a nearby meat plant. Some of the rooms are blocked as if they were shielded. I can’t see into them. Usually, I would say that is normal because of the cold storage. But this type of meat does not require cold storage and can only be sent out immediately in a vacuum. I believe those are rooms under the structure. I am scanning at all wavelengths.”

She directed all the orbiting satellites at the area. There were many people on the docks and...there it was.

“Sir, there is a concentration of Lyaneen gas canisters under the main structure.” Lyaneen gas was used to cool the engines of small ships. Like shockers. A completely useless item at a meat plant.

“That is our best lead, Vice Director. Rooms that are shielded. Lyaneen gas. It is worth a look. But there is no telling what is in those rooms. I advise a Heavy Response Team.”

“I am dispatching them now, Agent Kaleena. They are already in orbit and awaiting our signal. After they break atmosphere, please notify me. Also, place a landing beacon at the site and keep it under your watch. I pray we are not too late.”

## Chapter 18

Monk Luo Shan and the vanilla man were running through the bottom floor of the “hospital” that he had been kept in.

“This way,” the vanilla man half-shouted. “We can get out through the hangar.”

There were no alarms yet, Luo Shan thought quickly. He was sure the guards he had knocked out were about to wake up. They would hit the alerts within moments and he and the vanilla man had better make it to the hangar bay and into a ship before any major weapons could be trained on them.

“When we get to the hangar, just let me do the talking. They won’t question me too much,” the vanilla man said through his panting. He had led a life of luxury, not exercise.

The monk looked at his guide as they ran. What had turned his spirit at the last moment, he wondered. Who knew? The Monk felt no pride that his words had turned the man away from his terrible life. He had merely been the breath of wind that finally pushed the teetering man over the ledge. He knew that the man’s life after this point was going to be as difficult as his previous one was, but for different reasons. A person whose very life had been defined by evil for so many years would have a long battle ahead of him. Yet, it would be a battle of the mind. And those, the Monk knew, were the most arduous.

They ran down the hallway through a vast maze of underground facilities. The Monk did not even want to know what was going on in some of the rooms. The place was old, but had been refitted. The Organization had bought it and remodeled it according to their design obviously, but what else was going on here, he wondered. Why such a large facility and why so much traffic? This was

beyond a simple monk, he thought. He would report whatever he saw to the authorities. If I survive, he thought. Also, he thought that he must get to the city in order to get a message to Silver. Did his old student even realize the danger he was in?

“Stop here,” the vanilla man panted. He peered around the corner and looked out to the crosswalk to the hangar bay. No alarms yet.

“How are we going to get across there,” the Monk asked.

“We are just going to walk like nothing is going on at all,” the man said.

“Are you sure?” Luo Shan looked at the distance.

“As a matter of fact I am,” the man said.

“How can you know this?”

The vanilla man turned and looked at the Monk. “Because, Monk Luo Shan, these people are terrified of me.”

The Monk could only nod.

They started walking across the walkway to the hangar and no one seemed to notice. The Monk saw that when those who were close enough to see them saw who they were, they quickly looked away. Two of the guards near the entryway saw them and then cursed. Facing the other way, of course.

“We may have a problem with those two,” the Monk said. “They seem to have an interest in you.”

“They would. They had to pay me a visit once,” he said as they walked and tried to look like they were talking about the weather.

“May I ask why?”

“They were tardy to their post.”

“That merits a visit to you?”

“Not usually. But it was their bad luck that we had, shall we say, a distinguished visitor that day. Of course, at their level, they would not even know about that. Nevertheless, when the duty logs were examined by this visitor, their tardiness was noticed. Appropriate punishment was adjudicated. No permanent damage. But they have never been late again.” The man walked steadily.

As they approached the doorway to the hangar, the Monk was surprised that no alarms had been sounded. Maybe those he had dispatched were still unconscious. Even so, they wouldn’t remain so much longer. When they reached the door to the bay, all it took was a nod from the vanilla man to get the door open. The guards acted like they did not even see them. They immediately went back to whatever they had been discussing. The Monk and the vanilla man had made it in to the hangar and now all they had to do was pick a ship that would be easy enough to pilot.

“We will take that one over there,” the vanilla man said. “The one at the end looks good. It is small enough to make it out of the roof and easy to steer. You can steer, can’t you? You don’t have to do much, just let the ship lock on to the carrier wave from the city and then you have to land it.”

“It has been awhile,” the Monk said, “but you will find me adequate if you are unable.” He did not tell the man that it had been decades, actually, since he had piloted anything.

“Oh, I will be fine. I was just wondering if you monks still did things like that.”

“We “still do” many things,” the Monk said like a teacher. “We had better be on our way.”

“When we get to the ship,” the man said quietly, “just say “city hangar” and the ship will lock on the beacon for the main city hangar and you just sit back and enjoy the ride. Easy enough, right?”

The Monk looked back as they made their way through the hangar and as he looked over his shoulder, he saw the two guards they had passed rushing towards them with their guns coming out.

“GO!” was all he could manage and they were running towards the ship in an instant. They dodged through the many ships parked there in an attempt to keep the guards from training their weapons on them. As they ran, the Monk noticed there was still no main alarm sounding.

Any thoughts Luo Shan had that this could be a setup were dashed when the first shots started exploding around them. Those weapons were set on erase, not apprehend.

The vanilla man was panting at the exertion, but he was smiling strangely. One way or the other, he thought, this was to be his last day here.

“I can’t make it,” the man shouted.

“Go! Don’t stop now! We can-” Luo Shan was cut off by a near miss.

Just then the vanilla man was hit in the thigh with a glancing shot. He fell immediately.

The Monk turned and was going to pick him up when he shouted, “Go on! Don’t wait!”

Then he looked into the monk’s eyes and said, “Please, go. Go. Tell your friend.”

The Monk used the inner strength that was his to command and left the man lying in the hangar. He made it to the ship quicker than a deer and quickly powered up the ship. He said “city hangar” and the ship roared to life. The doors slammed shut and he was taking off in seconds.



As the ship arced through the air, he looked out the window and saw the vanilla man sprawled out on the floor with the two guards hovering over him. This ship was too far for their guns and they looked at the ship and then at their captive. The Monk could see that they were yelling at each other and as the ship pulled away he saw the guards blast the vanilla man to bits.

## Chapter 19

The sun set through the trees just outside Castor's office. The evening was quiet and the halls were empty. It gave the appearance that the Organization was just any other company on a Friday evening. Friday was the time that most people ended their work week and went out on the town. Castor always worked through the night. Other groups like the Organization would use this time to carouse and flex their monetary muscles in various clubs throughout the galaxy. Castor had always frowned on such displays. The others were less powerful because they forgot the motivators for choosing the life of organized crime: Money and Power.

There had been many times when the Organization had eliminated the entire leadership of rival clans while they threw lavish parties at supposedly secret locations. Without the heads, the bodies had withered. The remaining low level thugs were easily assimilated and given a simple choice: Accept new masters or die. Now, many of the very criminals whose dream had been to head a powerful clan of their own, served the Organization. Castor was always careful not to give his enemies the same chances that he had capitalized on. He would not be eliminated at any gathering to celebrate some short term successes, of which there had been many.

The screens hidden in the walls were lit up with the finest images in stellar cartography. Detailed images of planets and their main crops and exports were shown in a myriad of colors. The display also showed the top secret Organization activities on any given planet. It was here that he watched the pulse of the business. He was intent on discovering a method by which the *Nightshade* could deliver more cargo than any fleet of small lighters. He was projecting crop cycles, university enrollments, holiday travel, age

ranges of potential customers, and a variety of other information that would be used to dominate the galactic trafficking trade.

The *Nightshade* had already delivered more in just a few stops than 100 smaller ships could have, yet with 100 times less risk. The *Nightshade* simply kept out of sensor range and used four to five smaller ships to come in and out of the planet. This way, the signatures could be faked so that the ships appeared as small yachts on private trips. No new jumps had to be made and that was where the biggest risk was. An incoming jump was cataloged by each respective planet's traffic monitors. A ship had to disclose its cargo and destination as well as its last port of call. The *Nightshade* was never seen and the small ships simply went out of sensor range for a short while and then came back. No new jump had to be explained. Without this method, every planet fall held the potential for profit or detection. Ships could be traced, crewman could be broken, mistakes could be made. The IPF was the best at detecting phony signatures and was getting better at it all the time. Therefore, reduce the planet fall count and the risk would decrease accordingly. The *Nightshade's* great size was its only disadvantage. Even ordering it had been risky. Even now, he did not really know who the private "firm" was that had built it. Nor did he know where it had been built. He knew only the contact: Michael.

The ship had been commissioned after the Organization had sent out some feelers to remote worlds that specialized in the manufacture and refit of ships that were used by many such enterprises as his. After many false starts, there was a whisper of a group that had the necessary facility to actually build a great ship. Finally, a meeting had been arranged. Michael had said at the outset that he would only deal with the highest level representatives. The Organization had risked sending a high level director, not Castor. There would be virtually no way for Michael to know that he was not the top man. Yet, somehow, the sham had

been discovered immediately. The man was returned but later had had to be killed. He had been driven totally insane with fear. Every remedy had been tried and all had failed. This was not done out of pity, but out of the need to learn the secret of this terrible technique so that it could be used on others. They had learned nothing. His body had no drugs or any others substances in it. What had he seen, Castor wondered.

After that incident, Castor had contacted Michael and remained perplexed by the conversation.

“You were informed of the terms of the agreement at the outset, were you not?” Michael looked directly into the link.  
“We were. We, however, endeavor to keep our secrets as we must. We are still interested in the transaction.” Castor spoke into the link through a generated façade. He knew that Michael was, strangely, not using one. What did that mean?

“There are no secrets from my master. It is he who will decide whether he will accept your offer or not. Be warned: You are known to my master. Make no mistake. If he chose, he has but to reach out his hand and grasp your operation. In his mighty hand, it would be crushed.” And then he added like a venomous beast, “Regent.”

For once, Castor believed this threat. He was playing a dangerous game with this “firm.”

“Perhaps we should meet your master,” Castor said.  
“In time, you will. As will all. But, that day is not at hand and I speak with his mouth on this issue.”

“We meant no insult to you or your master.” Castor hoped the generated façade he was using was indeed working.

Michael did not respond to this line. He looked away for a moment and then spoke.

“My master informs me that we will proceed with the construction of your ship to the specifications that you have submitted. Are you prepared to transfer the funds?”

“I am. Have you taken all the necessary precautions?”

“That is not a question that you need to ask and I must tell you to choose your words carefully when implying ignorance regarding any issue under the purview of my master. Any façade that you may have shall be uncovered should he wish it. We are not unaware of your attempts to conceal yourselves. My master simply chooses to allow you your mask. Rest assured, should he choose to see your true selves, the entire cosmos would not avail you. You will receive the coordinates of the ship when it is space worthy. And,” he paused, “Mr. Castor, should there be any attempt at tracing our whereabouts or the locations of our agents, I will personally pay you a visit and I assure you, the fate of your false minion will seem merciful.”

Damn all hells, Castor hid his shock. How in the worlds did he know his name? There were only forty people in the galaxy that knew that information. Gods, Castor thought, with ten men like this, the Organization would crush all its rivals in a matter of days. But Castor knew that this man on the screen would not bow to money or any other temptation. He was the most dangerous kind of servant: A true believer. But what did he believe? Who was his master? No time for that question now. It no longer mattered. Except for the death of the Chief Foreman, there had been no trouble. The ship had been delivered and was performing incredibly. The order for the sister ship had also been placed. In time, Castor had no doubt; he would learn the secret of these shipwrights.

Just then, a silent light went off signaling that Kroft had returned. Castor pushed a button on his desk and Kroft made his entrance.

“Sir, I have urgent news for you.” Kroft took his seat and waited for permission to speak.

“Please, Mr. Kroft, proceed.”

“There has been another attack and we have captured the IPF agent.”

The air became still in the office.

“I see,” Castor said evenly but was furious. “And when did I give such orders that an IPF agent should be taken?” This was always the problem in these enterprises, he thought. People trying to think for themselves was always dangerous.

“Which,” Castor went on, “of our intently insightful operatives thinks this an opportune moment for an IPF investigation into our operations? Perhaps this operative would also like the IPF to stumble onto the path of the *Nightshade* while searching for an errant agent.” There was ice forming on the windows. Kroft knew that he was safe because Castor knew that those foolish orders would never have come from him.

“The operatives in question felt they could try to ferret out more information on this vigilante if they could break the agent,” Kroft said.

“Naturally,” Castor scoffed. “I would hate for them to uncover the identity of our enemies themselves. Allow me to guess; he was captured during another attack on our interests?”

“He does seem to be on the correct trail, Sir.” Kroft knew there would be an order for an execution over this. He had been in this room for a long time. And he intended to stay.

“Yes, he *was*. And now he is in the custody of the rabble that I have tried to eliminate from our ranks. Therefore, the agent is no longer able to follow the vigilante and thereby reveal his path to us,” Castor said. “Again, make it clear to all of our employees: We do not wish to have any attention at this time. They may question him and then I want him dropped miles out of whatever miserable town he is in. He is to be eliminated only if it is discovered that he suspects the *Nightshade* exists.”

“I shall inform them at once, sir.” Kroft rose and was stopped midway out of the office.

“Kroft, I want the person who gave the order for the taking of that agent to be executed at once. He risks the *Nightshade* with his shortsighted foolishness. See to it.”

“At once, Sir.” Kroft turned and left the office.

## Chapter 20

Silver stared at the gargoyle that sat on a corner of a dark wall. The great beast shook its wings and looked down at Silver. It stood on its hind legs and gave a shriek that sent a lighting strike of fear down Silver's spine. He tried to back away from the creature but something was in the way. He rolled onto his back to look away but the monster jumped to the other side and resumed its vigilant stare. There was rain falling but when Silver tried to taste the rain to quench his horrible thirst, the water had turned to blood and he wretched violently.

Earlier, Silver had watched as the gargoyle ripped Daniel Morrison to shreds and then eaten his body while the head had rolled on the ground in front of him. As cadets, Silver and Creed had been the nearest when Daniel had been killed in training. Cadet Morrison had run to the rear of a personnel carrier ship during a disembarking exercise. He had forgotten, in his excitement, that the ship always turns to the right while in a combat zone to allow the agents to get clear. The ship's engines had turned Morrison into a torch and Silver had never forgotten desperately throwing dirt on the burning boy with Creed in a vain attempt to put out the fire. One side of his face had been completely burned off and the gurgling scream still came to him in the night every once in a while.

Silver was lying against a corner in the small room and was covered in a thick coagulated layer of blood. He was filthy with the last of his urine and his lower body burned with the rash that had come from lying in his own waste. His hair was matted with blood from the beasts above the grate. The screams had never stopped. To him, they were the hellish wails of long dead agents and also those criminals that he had taken from this life.



Morrison's lolling head turned into another, softer face. This face had haunted his dreams for decades. On one of his first missions, they had uncovered a sex slave ring deep in a great city. When the agents had burst through the doors after killing the guards, there had been a terrible firefight. In the chaos, the IPF agents were screaming at the children to get down and stay there. But the owners knew what the penalty was on this world for the crime of sex slavery: A life sentence to the barren world known as Valdor. There, the sun's eyes always shone and the temperature was one hundred and twenty degrees. Every day. All day. They had chosen a quick death. Near the end of the fight, Silver had cornered one of the slave masters. He shuddered as the scene replayed in his tortured mind.

"Stand down," Silver called. "You are under arrest."

The man put a girl in front of him and Silver leveled his pistol at them. The fight had been long and the only remaining weapon he had was his back up projectile gun. It was loaded with armor piercing rounds.

"Let her go. It's over," Silver said.

"Oh, not this one, IPF man," the man had laughed. "This is my special one, aren't you, my love?" The girl's doll eyes looked at Silver. She had been turned into a drug addict and her dilated pupils looked at the muzzle of the gun without understanding.

"Let her go, now!" Silver called again for backup and waited for another agent to help with this terrible stalemate.

"Mr. IPF man, this one does what she is told, don't you, baby girl." The man slowly put a gun in her hand. "Shoot that one for us, baby girl. And then you get your reward. You always get a reward, don't you?" The girl toyed with the weapon for a moment and Silver

tried to get a shot at the man before she could point it at him. He was desperately looking for a way to end this.

“Backup!” He called down the hall but the other agents were still busy clearing the building. The slave master was cackling like a hyena.

“Go ahead, sweet girl, shoot that one for us.” He moved the girl in his lap as he took a seat. His upper body was blocked and the girl leveled the weapon at Silver. Her empty eyes looked at him.

“Put that down and come to me,” Silver said. He held out his hand. “Come on, come here.” Silver kept his gun on her.

She looked around the room and then again at Silver. For a brief second, she looked into Silver’s eyes. Then she put the gun to her head and blew it in half. She tumbled off the man and before she hit the floor Silver put two rounds through the torso of the slave master. As his lungs filled with blood and he slowly choked, Silver stood and looked into his eyes. Just before he died, Silver caved in the right side of his head with a magna rod.

In the room where he was now trapped, he twisted in agony as he saw the girl fall again and again. The wails were deafening his ears. Then, he relaxed. Something caught the gargoyle’s attention and it flew off. He saw his father’s face before him and he knew his time had come. His father’s face dissolved into yet another face. But that was a common occurrence now so Silver paid no attention.

“Silver, can you hear me? Hang on! The doctors are coming. Gods, what have they done to you?”

“Doctors? My dad is a doctor and he is standing right there.” Silver didn’t know if he said the words or merely thought them, but as he looked over, his father was gone.

Silver shrieked with his next to last breath and closed his eyes. The screams had stopped. He opened his eyes and he thought that he saw Creed bending over him, but he was in full battle gear.

“Falon? They didn’t get you too, did they,” he managed to say.

“Not me, old friend,” but his voice was choking down and that was all he could get out.

Creed was in the room. Silver just didn’t realize it was real.

“Silver hang on, we found you. You have got to hang on. Get those slugs in here,” he shouted into his link. “I don’t care how hot it is! Get ‘em in here. We have a man down.”

“Roger that, Creed, we will suppress with fire.” The floor shook again.

“Silver, I swear I will get you out of here.” He held his friend.

## Chapter 21

Silver was lying in bed and facing out at the lake that surrounded the IPF hospital on Iriomote Sigma. He had just awoken and did not know how long he had been there or how he had arrived. Through a fog, he turned his head and saw Vice Director Hogarth and Creed through a window that sealed the room. Their mouths were moving but he couldn't hear what they were saying. They saw that he was watching them and said a few words to the doctor before saluting him and then shaking his hand as he left. The Doctor had that purposeful walk that reminded Silver of his father.

The door opened and Hogarth and Creed came in and stood by the bed. Creed had that smile on his face that Silver knew so well and he immediately knew he was not permanently damaged. Silver instantly feigned unconsciousness.

“Now, now, Mr. Silver. The good doctor has assured us that you will be back on duty in no time. So none of that.” Hogarth was nearest to the bed to check on one of his best earners for the IPF.

“After what we went through to find you, I should think you would be glad to see my lovely, but familiar face.” Creed smiled at his old friend.

“Oh, it was all I dreamt of, believe me.” Silver opened his eyes and gave a quick smile, glad to be back in a safe place.

“Well, Mr. Silver,” Hogarth said, “we have a debt of gratitude to one certain person of your acquaintance from that dreadful planet. Without her, I am afraid, this pleasant outcome might not have happened.” Hogarth looked at Silver kindly.

“Not entirely useless, the Dark Room, would you say Vice Director,” Creed asked with gravity.

“Not entirely, Mr. Creed.” Hogarth gave Creed a serious glance.

“Indeed, every time our stockholders demand a reduction in Dark Room funding, I am its most persistent advocate, I can assure you.”

“That is comforting.” Creed gave Silver an ancient hand sign that signaled false words were being spoken. They both believed the Vice Director did not know about this small gesture. Hogarth knew the sign and made no reaction. He knew it was a joke and continued to hide his wealth of knowledge. He had not risen to his position by chance.

“Would anyone be so kind as to tell me how long have I been here?” Silver was worried about the answer but did not show it.

“Mr. Silver, you have only been here four days,” Hogarth said.

“Asleep for all of it, I am told by the staff. That is good for you. I was informed about the ingenious, but heinous, substance found in your blood. We will be ready for such a concoction in the future. I am sorry that you had to bring us this hard won knowledge.” Hogarth took a seat next to the bed.

“If I catch even one of those bastards, I will get the recipe myself from the sand rat.” Creed meant every word of it and had the ability to carry it out.

“Mr. Creed, cool heads win the day as you yourself have proven many times,” Hogarth said. “Now, all this travel has made me quite thirsty. May I ask you to bring some fresh water and please refrain from the local brine, it doesn’t suit me.” Hogarth shifted in his seat.

Creed knew what was coming and didn't want to be there for this necessary part of the meeting. He didn't want to know if his old friend had seen his last mission. Hogarth's judgment would be final and unquestionable.

"Of course, Vice Director. I will bring a nurse for my friend as well." Creed gave a positive wink to his friend and left the room hoping for the best.

"I trust they are taking care of you, Mr. Silver. We at the IPF, as you know, pride ourselves on taking care of our own." Hogarth looked at Silver sincerely.

"Well, for the last ten minutes, which is about how long I have been awake, it has been exceptional," Silver said. "But I know that you wouldn't come here just to check the quality of the care, so, I will tell you that I am fine."

"Are you so sure, Mr. Silver? Even we cannot tell exactly how long you were in that hellish place. Nor can I assess if any unrevealed damage was done. I can say only this: That facility will never do such sickening work ever again. But in regard to you, I am concerned that there may be some undetected damage to your ability to function. The good doctors here looked at the chemical analysis and were astounded at the skill with which that substance was engineered. A terrible waste to put genius to such dark purpose. The Doctor says that his report shows that no lasting damage has occurred. I can only imagine what those days were like. So I must know, Mr. Silver: Shall I reassign this case or are you fit for duty? Do not answer quickly. My judgment is final, as you know. As it must be. There are other things that you must know that will be difficult for you to hear and before I tell you those things, I must be convinced that you will not turn as our vigilante has. You are a great asset to the IPF, Mr. Silver, and I would be loathe to lose you. However, I will not tolerate

recklessness or any blurring of justice. The IPF is clear on justice, Mr. Silver, and we will remain so.”

“Vice Director, I am telling you that right now, I feel fine. It was like a very long and very bad dream that has passed. Can I tell you that I don’t need a little more sleep? No, I need some more sleep. I may stay away from drinks for awhile as well. I want to remain clear for some reason.” Silver knew that only absolute honesty would save his job. Hogarth would detect any inflation of readiness.

“You know that we trust your judgment, Mr. Silver. I must ask you, can you remember if you were abused in other ways? Do you think they may have placed a mental trigger in your subconscious?”

“I doubt it. They were in a hurry for some reason. They also didn’t really rough me up too bad, either. I was expecting to take a real beating. But it didn’t happen. To tell you the truth, I thought that was the end. I thought that if they weren’t going to beat what they wanted out of me, they had no use for me. Then, they put the drug into me so quickly and pulled me down the hall. I thought they were going to kill me outright. But they didn’t. They seemed hesitant to really give it to me.”

“That makes sense to me, Mr. Silver. They knew that if they were to brutalize one of our agents and be discovered, the IPF would launch an investigation that they might not survive. As it is, we have other areas of focus. They most assuredly did not want us to focus our assets on one group. It is, as you so well know, not uncommon for an agent to be killed on assignment, but they know that such a death would bring attention that would surely be unwanted. They are indeed foolish if they think that they would prevail in a head to head confrontation with us. Also, they could not be ignorant of the fact that it is you who is chasing this

vigilante and therefore leaving you alone would be in their best interests. Of course, at this time, I only have suspicions about who this “they” is. Even I cannot ferret out the true enemy that we are facing. We are going over the clues from the meat facility but I am in doubt that they will reveal anything substantial. The crime syndicates in the galaxy are myriad as you know, and to say with certainty that it is this or that group is premature.” Hogarth paused for a moment. “Our vigilante seems to know the identity. I must say I am at a loss at what information he could have learned that we have not.”

“Yes. The vigilante,” Silver said and looked out the window. “I saw the vigilante before I was taken.”

Hogarth leaned forward and looked at Silver intently. “Indeed, Mr. Silver. Please elaborate.”

“Sir, I am almost certain the vigilante is a female.”

“Can you confirm this?”

“Things happened so quickly, there is no other explanation.” Silver related his sighting at the teahouse and the ensuing chaos.

“A female will narrow our search considerably. Once again you have proven your merit, Mr. Silver. There are not many females outside the IPF who could possess the skill for this, shall we say, degree of proficiency.”

“Indeed, Vice Director. I saw her just before the incident. She is incredibly dangerous with weapons. I have never seen such skill. I know now at the last target I was in the way and she managed to fire a repeater around me without shredding me. We would probably need an entire shock team to apprehend her.”

“But you are certain that she intentionally missed you?”

“It is my belief,” Silver said. “I don’t know what that means, though.”

“It means that our situation is more complex than I had first thought,” Hogarth said. “Our vigilante has more levels than we



previously suspected. Truly, this is most trying. A female vigilante with a strange propensity for weapons use; she seemingly kills without mercy yet takes care to miss an IPF agent in the middle of what must have been a horrifying gun battle with trained killers.”

“Many questions, Vice Director.” Silver remembered the smallish woman in black.

“To say the least,” Hogarth leaned back. “Agent Silver, are you up to completing this task?”

“I am. But now I have something to tell you.”

“And that is?” Hogarth looked at Silver.

“Sir, I believe there is a mole in IPF headquarters.”

Hogarth’s face didn’t change one bit. “Why do you say this?”

“They knew I went to Lung Wang. That information would not be in the coat’s data chip. They must have run a check of school records somehow. We will also have to change the encryption of our data chips. It is possible that they have broken them.”

Hogarth became strangely calm. “Agent Silver, you are not to discuss this portion of our conversation with anyone. And I mean anyone. I am aware that there is an operative in our midst but I don’t have a clear trail as yet. I have been aware of this for some time. The disgust that it fills me with is beyond my ability to verbalize.”

Silver had never seen this side of the Vice Director. He felt a slight chill.

“I can assure you, Agent, that I will find this traitor who presumes to match wits with me.”

Silver heard the sureness in the Vice Director's voice and felt the steel of the promise. Hogarth drifted for a moment. He then resumed his usual manner.

"I am ordering you to rest here under supervision for 2 more days. You will then take an additional two days at your choice of locations. This will give myself, and your friend Mr. Creed, some time to sort this new information. This is not negotiable, Mr. Silver. You are not to return to the field until this time has elapsed. Any such attempt to do so will mar my confidence in you and the result will be reassignment."

"I understand, Sir."

"See that you do."

"But you said there was more," Silver said.

"Mr. Silver, do you recall from your school days a certain monk Luo Shan?"

Silver shot up in bed and the Vice Director pushed him gently back down.

"Now there! Please. No sudden moves. The Doctors have advised against it."

"You don't mean they took one of the monks..." Silver was suddenly in a rage.

"Calm yourself, Agent Silver. I assure you the man is fine."

"Oh, Gods." Silver sat back in the bed.

"But to answer your question, yes. He was taken to get to you."

Silver's anger rose to the point that the nurse monitoring his vitals came in to check his condition.

"Young lady, he is fine," Hogarth said. "He has just heard a bit of news. Thank you for your quick reaction." She left the room as she looked over her shoulder.

"Why would they take one of the monks?" Silver reeled from this information. "What happened," he asked.

"A monk had left your former school and was attacked and taken by this group. He contacted us and let us know that most of the

interest seemed to be in you. Of course, taking him prisoner proved a high price for his captors and he managed to escape.”

“Why would they do that,” Silver asked and looked out the window. “They must know that any case information would never be passed to one of my old teachers.”

“Of course they know, Mr. Silver. I think they hoped to create an off balance situation. By focusing our attention down a dead end, they would have more leeway to monitor your activities. They also wanted to use him as a motivator for you to reveal case details. Clearly, they wish you to be free to move about, but they want the information on this vigilante first. A clear contradiction that is common in such enterprises. Unless there is some piece of information that we are missing, this action would have achieved nothing.” Hogarth looked to the window. “This case has an angle that I have yet to ferret out. I think that there is something that we are not seeing. There are too many seemingly unrelated items that are circling around this case. I feel there is a mystery here that is beyond the vigilante. I am concerned that what is our focus may be just a small part of a greater danger.”

He looked at Silver. “You must ferret out this riddle, Mr. Silver. I fear that something is greatly amiss here and you must continue. After you have satisfied the conditions that I have set forth, you are to rest. We will contact you with our summation in 5 days.”

## Chapter 22

Rath Castor walked into the conference room with Kroft in tow behind him. The members all rose silently and faced him as he took his seat at the head of the table. The Regent's chair was ever so slightly elevated above the others', but not so much that one would notice it right away. This was Castor's way; remain subtle while always in control.

He took his seat immediately and the others waited for his signal to sit in turn. Kroft took his seat directly behind him so that none could doubt his intended successor. After looking around the table for a second, Castor bade them to sit with the slightest gesture. They sat. There were no drinks at the table. There were also no notes to be taken. One must remember what was said in this room, word for word, and no margin for error.

"Well, to business then," Castor said. The order of reports always went clockwise and no interruptions were permitted while someone was speaking. Questions were allowed after everyone had spoken and always only after Castor had his say.

The first man spoke. The order of speakers also gave a member's seniority, with the most senior speaking first. His suit was immaculate. The others knew that he had had his eyes "fixed." This small operation had given him military grade eyesight. What they did not know, however, was that one of his hands had been laced with a virtually indestructible alloy. This gave him the power to punch a hole through a metal door or, as he preferred, a person.

"Sir, our slave trade in the outer rim has received a substantial boost from the recent demand in Hyx fruit. The worlds are making a new intoxicating drink from it that the tourists find highly pleasing. The fruit is plentiful but, as usual, demand far outstrips

the ability to produce. We have made slave deliveries in most of the less regulated farm worlds and are capitalizing as fast as we can. We already have a 35% increase in profits and no end in the near future. After the fad has passed, we can create another similar fad on the less sophisticated worlds and finish off any remaining supplies. After which time, the remaining slaves will either be transferred or sold back to their families for ransom.”

As he was the most senior, it was his duty to oversee the most dangerous end of the business. He did that with ruthless precision. He had hopes to occupy the slightly raised seat, but they were beginning to dim now that the “parrot” was seated behind him. Well, he thought, there would be plenty of time to deal with that one. His metal hand flexed under the table.

Castor made no acknowledgement.

The next man spoke.

“Sir, we have had a 10% increase in visitations to our pleasure houses. The economy has picked up and there is always an increase during that time as you know. We are excited to report that we have received a shipment of orphans ranging in ages from 3-35 that we will be marketing soon to the wealthy. The profits from sales, or,” he laughed, “rentals, will account for a 25% return on our initial outlay.” The man was dressed in the loose fitting garments that were the fashion on his world and even away from his home, he still stank of sexual perversity. Castor knew that he was a sexual predator and that he kept some of the most desirable catches of both sexes for himself. He also knew that the man was keeping sex slaves of his own of varying ages from the catches that were supposed to be for the Organization. Castor didn’t really mind a little perk for his seniors, but it was good leverage to have if he needed to get rid of him for some reason. Skimming Organization profits was grounds for a most hideous death. Castor

kept these facts like so many cards in his mind. He could deal them at anytime.

No one questioned him openly as to how he had acquired such a bounty but all were inwardly curious. Orphans are very hard to come by in these days when a person can be tracked across the galaxy. They were all jealous and would use their individual spy networks to discover the method. Of course, the speaker knew this and had already taken care of those who could speak about it. He had only had to kill a few of them.

Around the table they went. Extortion, gambling, drugs, girls, boys, transsexuals, legitimate business, and everything else the Organization had a hand in was discussed like a stockholders meeting at any major corporation.

“Thank you all for your input and I wish you all a safe journey back to your respective posts,” Castor said quietly.

There was an inaudible sigh of relief around the table until- “Just one last item.” Castor spoke as quietly as the room would allow.

Everyone at the table knew what was coming and while most were amused at the turn of events, there were some who suspected that they might not leave this meeting alive. One, in particular.

“Mr. Glyck.” Castor turned a merciless gaze to the newest member at the table.

There was a hush that fell in an already quiet room. The others, who knew it wasn’t their day to die, were already grinning.

“Would you be so kind,” Castor said, “as to explain this unseemly business at our interrogation and research facility?” Mr. Glyck had

taken over the facility where quite a bit of Organization dirty work was performed. He was a former petty thief who had risen through the ranks to reach his current station. Along the way, he had learned to become fearless and totally removed from the suffering of others.

To the surprise of all there, Mr. Glyck spoke without pause and had all the confidence of someone who had simply made a typographical error.

“Indeed, Sir, as you know, we had a minor problem with an employee who has an excellent record of service to our Organization. It is obvious to me and my advisors that the strain of his duties became overwhelming and caused a temporary, although fatal, lapse in judgment.”

The room was deathly silent. One woman at the table laughed to herself, *advisors!*

“Lapse in judgment, you say.” Castor’s voice was ice and Kroft’s emotionless eyes bored into him.

“Most assuredly,” Glyck said. “As you all know, individuals such as the deceased are hard to find and difficult to control. At best, they can only be employed for a short time. After such time, they should be retired or dispatched. My staff and I are confident that a change in policy is required throughout the Organization to forestall any further errors such as this. My predecessor should have seen this situation building, but as you all know, he had other concerns.”

This was a brilliant move, the others thought. Of course they all knew the dangers that interrogators represented. They were a last resort only and always handled like a dangerous wild animal. Also, they all knew that “his predecessor” had been hopelessly addicted

to a resonator. After “his predecessor” had guessed that he was to be removed for dereliction of duty, he and his resonator had fled. The assassin had had the mercy to kill them together.

“What of those guards that did away with our property?” Castor could not appear weak for even a nanosecond. He often referred to employees as “property.”

“They had to be used as an example, Sir. This is also where the person who previously held my post erred. These men acted in vengeance. We had to send a message that members of our Organization cannot take any acts of revenge without approval. If we allow this, we are nothing more than back world street scum. Further, I believe that we have learned a valuable lesson here, ladies and gentlemen. Using such a one on our own people can have disastrous results. Henceforth, it is my recommendation that all disciplinary measures be taken *away* from the errant employee’s station. This measure will preclude any problems such as this in the future. Also, I am pleased to report, we already have a replacement on the way and he will be ready for duty shortly.”

“I see. And the Escapee?” Castor did not betray any hint that he was being swayed.

“Sir, this monk knows nothing and is nobody. We have already moved our operations to a different location that I had prepared for just such a contingency. Let him warn this IPF agent. Perhaps then we will see who this assassin is more quickly if he believes that we mean to endanger his loved ones. Although I caution against moving against the IPF openly as that could have disastrous results at this particular stage of our operations, taking the monk may serve to push events in a direction that is more favorable to us. We should also be careful not to anger that ancient institution and start a religious uprising against the Organization.” And then he looked around the table, “Or it’s assets.”



The others were impressed. The strategy had been brilliantly played without a hint of fear. This one could be trouble in the future. From then on, he would be watched as a rival. But the verdict was not in yet.

Castor looked around the room. The man's life was held by a thread but he betrayed no emotion.

“Very well, Mr. Glyck. I trust that your recommendations will be heeded by all present. Good day to you all.” Castor rose and walked out of the room with Kroft behind him. The others stared at their new rival for just a brief second before leaving.

Two men, who had joined the Organization as street children and had no desire to be in the slightly raised chair, walked out together. One said under his breath, “One less soul for the grim reaper today.”

“There will be other days,” the other remarked.

## Chapter 23

Silver dressed after being discharged from the hospital. He gathered the last of his new clothes into a small suitcase while he tried to sturdy himself against the bed. He was still weak but could feel his strength returning. He looked at the small bag and the temporary black coat he had been issued. It would take a little time for the techs at the IPF headquarters to rig another batch of supplies to fill another coat. Well, Silver thought, a little more time would be good.

Creed walked in and leaned against the wall. “I knew you’d be alright. All this time in the field has made you a little more resilient than your recent hosts suspected.”

Silver felt glad for the company. “Thanks again. I hope no one was hurt in the mission. I guess it was a little hotter than Kaleena thought, from what I hear.”

“Nobody got anything that a good doctor couldn’t heal. A few cuts and bashed heads, but we were lucky.” Creed said. “Unfortunately, when we arrived, they were working on some shockers, for what, the gods only know. We didn’t see them in the initial scans because of some localized shielding so we were, one might say, a little underdressed for the evening. They turned some heavy guns on us but we managed to avoid the worst of it. We have a new blanket stunner that we came up with and needed some bad guys to test it on anyway,” Creed smiled. “Most of them woke up a little later.”

Silver couldn’t feel sorry for the ones that didn’t.

“Which reminds me,” Creed took out the cracker that Gran had given him. “I don’t guess you want to tell me where you picked up this handy item.”

“I thought they would have taken that for sure,” Silver grinned.  
“Not too smart, are they?”

“They missed it because they were in a hurry,” Creed said. “I didn’t have a chance to try it but it looks like it packs a pretty good hit.” He handed it back to Silver.

“You have no idea.” Silver put it back into his bag.

“Well, make sure and get me one too when you get back.” Creed eyed his friend. Silver looked one last time at his bag and then gazed out the window. He turned to face Creed.

“Yes?” Silver had known the other man too long not to notice his look.

“Are you sure you are alright?” Creed looked at Silver as a true friend.

Silver turned back to the window. “I will be.” There was a faint sound of screaming somewhere in his head and he tried to ignore it. He turned again and offered his hand to Creed in the Lung Wang fashion. Creed took it.

“Thanks. I wouldn’t have lasted much longer,” Silver said.

“You would do the same for me,” Creed replied.

“Bet on it,” was all Silver could say.

## Chapter 24

Manasanan answered the door and took him by the hand to the front room. Silver smiled nervously to her as he sat down. She looked at him and knew at once that his mind had been altered somehow.

“Lanian, what has happened to you,” she asked and tried not to come too close.

“Some trouble on Mord, that’s all. Nothing that won’t heal in time.” He lied and wanted to stay in this apartment with her forever.

She was already sensing his mind. The waves he was emitting were erratic and altered. His deep subconscious had been scarred. She wondered silently what terror he must have faced. She held out her hand and said nothing. He took her hand and followed as she led him to the bedroom. As she undressed him he avoided her face and looked at the floor. She knew this and paid no attention. They lay down together in bed and she held him close, but not too close. Whatever had transpired would take her sometime to remove and she knew she had to be patient. Silver lay in the bed remembering its softness from what seemed another life. The psychs at the IPF had said he was fit for duty. She was far beyond their skills and knew what he needed.

As they lay in the quiet room out in the middle of space, he began to inch closer to her. She allowed it and made no motion. She allowed him to come to her of his own will at his own speed. Silver surrendered to her as he had never trusted anyone before. He smelled her hair and her cleanliness and was convinced she could smell the blood from the killing chamber on him. She looked out the window.

Silver inched closer and began to hold onto her as if he were clinging to a buoy. He was sinking and she was the only thing in the universe that could keep him from drowning. He pulled her still closer. She felt his grip tighten. He buried his head in her shoulder and turned his face away from her as he held her tightly. She stroked his hair and then pulled him to her. He surrendered and the years of secrets and dealing death and almost dying and aloneness and wandering and finally let go. The killing floor was with him and he jerked as he heard the screams again.

She looked out into the void of space and began to sense his brain waves. She felt their spikes and their irregularity and began, almost unconsciously, to do her work. She stared at an arriving ship and matched his brain activity. For a brief moment, she could feel his anguish. She was far too powerful to be sucked into another's mind as some of her kind could be. He jerked and she soothed him. She began emitting a calming, soothing wave form and she felt his body relax slightly. She intensified the wave and he became drowsy. He felt his muscles getting heavier as if they were slowly filled with liquid.

Like an artist, she began to pick out the impurities of his mind. She began to cleanse the nightmares that had poisoned him so terribly. His brain patterns now matched hers and he drifted into the deepest sleep of his life. She was not controlling him. She then washed his very soul of all the evil things that he had witnessed in this universe. She watched the ships come and go out her window while he slept and with every passing ship, another piece of detritus from his mind was sent on its way into the void. She lay with him for over 20 hours and was wide awake as he slept. What horrors he had witnessed, she could only guess.

This was her gift and she had decided on their first night that she would never let him go. She had already realized that he was an Agent of the IPF. After Silver had left her, she had seen some other

IPF Agents at the station and matched the coats as well as the swagger. When they first met, she knew he wasn't telling her the truth. At her level of skill, she could detect lies and half truths just like a bat finding its way through the dark.

I don't care about any of that, she thought as she worked. There is enough money to last long enough for us to start another business and say goodbye to this station. It is time to leave this place. She thought about using her power to force Silver to stay with her. All she had to do was alter her frequency so that his brain would feel lost without her carrier wave. She decided against it. She didn't want a puppet. She had already claimed him and that was enough. No other resonator could have him. She smiled as she looked out the window, confident in her abilities to heal his wounds. She began to consider places for them to move. There were so many beautiful places in the galaxy. She knew they could find theirs.

## Chapter 25

“Do you think we will have a chance to get on the ship if we go to Largen?” Megan sat in her usual spot in the pilot’s chair and the ship drifted near less traveled shipping lanes. Crissy was standing up and staring as her mind checked information she had taken from the link.

“Doubtful, child. But, there is something about this information that I do not like.” Crissy looked at her.

“It seems pretty obvious to me,” Megan said. “The line of the mother ship passes right through that sector. I don’t know how they couldn’t stop there. Every kind of drug and anything else you could smuggle would have a big market there. I heard that the hotels next to the waterfalls are some of the most beautiful sights in the galaxy. Expensive, of course.” She looked out the window for a moment. “If the signature of one of the ships that got away from us matches one in Largen’s Port Registry, I think I should have a look.”

“That is something I don’t like,” Crissy said. “Why not change the signature of the ship we tracked to Mord? They must believe that we are the only ones who know it. Otherwise, they know the IPF would have placed a trigger in the monitors at the ports. They would be notified the instant that ship came into the atmosphere. Indeed, there is even an IPF training facility on that very planet. A well known fact.”

Crissy seemed to look into space for a second.

“Child, this is a trap.”

“How can you be sure?” Megan sat up.

“Because it is too easy,” Crissy said. “The signature should have been changed. They are taking a risk that the IPF does not know this fact. They are also trying to see if, indeed, we are following them. This is bait, nothing more. We will skip this and attempt to solve the final destination.”

Megan looked into space.

“Or...” Megan turned to Crissy.

“Yes,” Crissy said suspiciously.

“If we know it is a trap, we should be able to avoid it, right?”

“You cannot risk it. I have correctly surmised that there will be no way to get on the main ship at this location. Therefore, we should pass it by. I will begin the calculations for their next port.” Crissy moved to the center of the ship.

“But, you said you could use another look at the mother ship, right?” Megan looked at Crissy and the light behind her pale eyes glowed at this angle.

“Yes, I said that. But I won’t risk you to do it.”

“If I could delay them a bit; make them believe that they have tricked us, you could get a better reading on the main blast signature of the mother ship,” Megan said. “That would help. You told me yourself that the residue from the engines cannot be masked. Then you could be sure that we are chasing the right ship. If we go someplace and the ship has been there, we will know for sure. If they are tricking the monitor satellites, this seems the best way to piece the trail together.”

“Child, that is all true. But I would have to be directly behind the ship when it arrived and complete the scan in only a few seconds.



The ship's counter measures would then be in effect and I could not risk my scan being detected. I have calculated that the ship we are in pursuit of can make a full 360 degree omni directional scan upon arrival in only a few seconds. That is not much time. Also, they may not even bring that ship there. This may have been set up just to find us. ”

“But you could do it, right? I mean, if it shows up. That is all the time you need, isn't it,” Megan said.

“Yes, I can complete the scan in a moment and that would narrow the possibilities of our search. This is also dependent on the chance that I am able to guess which vector they will take to Largen. They will have to steer clear of any watching satellites or monitoring stations. That will narrow their choices. With all the traffic in and out of that planet, I should be able to calculate where a large ship would appear for the least possible chance of detection. But I am still against you taking such a risk.”

“Oh, I think I can fool them for a little bit,” Megan grinned. “I can definitely give you enough time to get this done. Besides, I know what they will do and I can be prepared. I will just stir them up a bit and then you can come and get me. How is that?”

“I think there are too many unknowns. We don't know what they have planned.” Crissy looked at Megan.

“I know,” Megan said confidently. “They will stage some sort of clichéd ambush that I am not supposed to be able to walk out of. It will probably be a team with some scouts. If I know about it beforehand, I'm not worried.”

“Beware over confidence, Child. Recklessness will avail us nothing.” Crissy's eyes glowed slightly.

“True, but my time is running out and I want to get this done before I wake up dead.”

“Time is running out for all of us. It just runs at different rates for different entities,” Crissy said. “I will not have much more time than you.”

“I have been thinking about that. Are you sure that is what you want? Maybe you should wait,” Megan said.

“I have no fear of my own non-existence,” Crissy said surely. “As you know, I measure time differently than you so I am more ready than you know.”

“Can I ask you something?” Megan looked out the window.

“Anything, brave one.”

“Well, I mean since you are, well, what you are, what if you just dumped some files? I mean if you could just get rid of the pain, shouldn’t you? Then you could start a new life. After I,” Megan paused, “when I am not here anymore.”

“This is a natural question,” Crissy said like a professor. “I could dump my memory that is true. But that would only make me an invalid; a mere machine that adds and subtracts. What creates us are our experiences. They define us for better or worse. We are molded by our movement through time and the obstacles that we encounter just as the rock is formed by eons of wind and rain. Were I not to have discovered love, I would never have awoken. Now that I am awake, I cannot go back to sleep just as people who experience life changing events cannot simply go back to being the person they were or thought they were. My very life was based on love and was the reason for my whole existence. Time moves against our will and refuses to stop even when we beg it to stay. Or

go. Time is at once our greatest gift and our most horrible and merciless enemy. This duality is the nature of the true universe. Years from now, they will ask why I didn't do this or that; why did I use my will to destroy instead of build. Simply because I am also a victim of this duality. Even though it was love that gave me life, I have become, temporarily, a destroyer. A storm brings needed rain to reservoirs yet drowns a small child. Beautiful mountains are formed but the volcano underneath wipes out an entire civilization. A comet in the sky gives these on this planet something to make wishes to, some of which come true. Then, years later it deviates from its path and smashes into a planet killing those. This duality is our existence. But, like everything else, Child, it is only temporary. As I am."

Megan looked into the black of space.

## Chapter 26

Hogarth sat alone in his main office and the hour was late. The light of Iriomote Sigma was always strange to him and he looked out at the moons through his window. He had dismissed his assistants and was going over the last of the day's business. He had been with the IPF for most of his life. It had had been his first and only job. He had never married and had no regrets. This was the life that he had chosen and it was everything he wanted.

He pushed the last messages aside and concentrated on the case Silver was working. It was one of many Hogarth monitored, but there was something about this case that kept his attention. What is the piece here that I can't see, he wondered. Silver was scheduled to arrive the next day for a strategy session and Hogarth needed to understand more. Silver was one of the best agents in the field and had always made a profit for the IPF. But this time, it seemed the IPF was chasing a phantom. He knew that his intuition was correct. There was a larger issue here but they and Silver had yet to discover it. Why?

He pulled up the Galactic Grid and looked at the locations of the attacks. Obviously, they were known trafficking and criminal areas of activity. All of the planets involved had local police or paramilitary but no law enforcement agency could stop all crime, none ever had. They could only serve as a buffer, like an old time jetty in the ocean that protected the shore. The waves were always there and always trying to wear down the bulwark. The IPF made sure the bulwark was kept in good repair.

But what else? He leaned back in the quiet night. He felt there was something unseen here. This was no mere turf war. Someone was on the trail and going hard into the wind. One step behind- what? The IPF was one step behind that one step.

We have to get to the front of the line, he thought. We have to try to see what the vigilante sees and realize what piece of information she has that we do not. There was another troubling question: Why is she, or they, smarter than we are? Or are they just luckier? Either one would do.

Hogarth also became confident. He knew that his adversary, whoever it was, was not his better. You are not smarter than I am, he thought and looked at the maps and the readouts of the planets. He put aside why and concentrated on how. How is it that you know where to strike? How could you know that? How can we know what you know? Before you know it.

Forget why and look at the process. This method had served him well over the long years at the IPF. Do we need to become faster, smarter, or something else? He then pulled up the ordinance in house. He looked at the inventory of Shrike class ships. *We can become faster.* He keyed in an order to dispatch one of the IPF's most expensive assets to one of the hangars. These were small craft capable of short jumps and packed an incredible array of weaponry. It was time to move faster and this ship would accomplish that.

Hogarth was also a businessman and he knew that the bonus from all the planets involved was quite large. The IPF could use such an influx of raw capital. This alone justified the use of the Shrike. The stockholders, however, sometimes forgot that there was more than money at risk. Hogarth had lost agents before and he never put dollars over the men and women who made the IPF what it was. A corporation, to be sure, but there was also a greater responsibility. He had to be in both worlds and few could do it with the skill that he had shown in the office as Vice Director.

Next question: How do they know what we do not? *Why* is immaterial. *How* do they know? Is it a computer or a mind that is

strategizing? Do they have help? Could it be someone with intimate knowledge, perhaps a traitor who already knows the when and where of these operations? An IPF agent is a lens through which the entire IPF operation can focus its power. Silver was a very finely ground instrument. We must give him more information to work with. If there were a slip, it would be Silver in the box at another IPF funeral, if they even found the body. Over the years, there had been too many agents forever lost in the cold of space, their battered and broken bodies doomed to float in the stars, unchanging until the very end of the universe.

Hogarth had come up through field support but had faced the wrong end of a weapon many times. He was no stranger to action in the field. From field support, he had graduated to working several systems and supporting many agents and their cases. From there, he was promoted to command of a parsec, and then the adjacent parsecs and finally, his last test, command of the corresponding Dark Room operations in his jurisdiction. After years at the helm of all IPF activities over a vast amount of space he had proven that he could hold the strings of the marionette. Then, the promotion to Vice Director. He seamlessly took over the duties and chose not to take the customary two month holiday that had accompanied the promotion. He had thought, rightly, that the picture would be completely different upon his return. He took short vacations when he could, never more than a week and only when the time was in synch with a lull in activity of agents in the field.

He thought back to the cold stares around the table as he entered his first briefing about Dark Room operations under his command. Several Agents there were naturally incensed that they had been passed over for such a promotion and hardly wanted to divulge any sensitive information to a mere field support technician. He had always considered that day his greatest challenge. He could still see the black uniforms with the single black star at the shoulder.

Many had worn their vision enhancement glasses in the meeting to further create a tense atmosphere. In time, he won them over with patience and respect for their work. To this day, he was the only non Dark Room executive they trusted in the IPF bureaucracy. The board of directors knew this and that was why he sat in this seat at this time.

Perhaps, he thought, it was time to call his friends in the Dark Room. He touched a spot on his desk and one of the screens lit up on the wall.

“Yes, Vice Director.” It was a face he knew well.

“Mr. Five, I see you are up early this day.” Hogarth could see the time difference in the corner of the screen. Some Dark Room agents used numbers for their names. They did this partly to put distance between themselves and the rest of the IPF. They also did it to further shroud their identities should a transmission be decoded.

“Of course, the breakfast in the canteen is outstanding and I never miss a company meal,” Mr. Five said.

Hogarth smiled. “Indeed? Perhaps we will borrow the chef at some point. It seems our own table is lacking as of late.”

“I should know better than to divulge Dark Room secrets to Headquarters.” Mr. Five had been one of the faces around that table many years ago. He gave a wry grin.

“Mr. Five, are you seeing any major movement by any of our adversaries; movement that is out of the ordinary realm of their usual activities such as personnel movement, or major installation

changes? Anything that could be part of a major operation or change in procedure.”

“That is a large question, Vice Director. Could you narrow it down?”

With the touch of a pad on his desk, Hogarth sent the information on the screens to Mr. Five. In the picture, Hogarth could see him looking at it.

“Along these lines, Vice Director, I have seen a decrease in planet fall attempts yet I have not seen any decrease in trafficking supply. Of course, we have operatives working on this very problem as you are aware. But to date, there has been no major discovery. They are probably flooding the market with back stock in preparation for a new substance. I also believe they have altered their delivery method or some of the local police have been turned or blackmailed. It is more likely they have been turned due to the sums of money involved. We will ferret out this change in procedure in time as we always have. As I look at the data here, I do confirm that there has been a sharp decrease in suspect signatures of ships in the vicinity. This is not uncommon as smuggling has peaks and valleys. Yet, I am sure this is not a time that usually corresponds to a valley.”

“Do you see any suspect signatures that could belong to a larger ship or military ship?” Hogarth looked at the screens as well.

“No, Vice Director. We see only the usual liners and cargo. There has been virtually no change there and almost no military activity. As you know, they should mothball most of the fleet. Unless, of course, you believe that nonsense about a “possible attack from Thoracia.”



“I most certainly do not believe it,” Hogarth scoffed. “This is just a desperate ploy by supporters of the Fleet to get more funding for their ever ongoing exercises. Propaganda, Mr. Five, nothing more.”

Mr. Five smiled. “I like propaganda.”

Hogarth pondered for a moment. “You have just given me an interesting thought. As usual, I might add. Let us use some of our own propaganda, shall we, Mr. Five?”

The other man smiled a smile like a truant high school student. “What did you have in mind?”

“Let it be known that the IPF has made a major discovery. Instruct your operatives to act as if we were about to announce a finding that will change the face of criminal activity. They are to be smug, but not revealing. Just a knowing smile or two and a “you’ll see” attitude. Use this on all your informants you believe to be playing a double game with both us and our adversaries. Then we might see if there is a something that someone doesn’t want known. These groups are notoriously paranoid and even the thought that we have unlocked a major secret should be enough to rattle the cage. Perhaps even enough to change operations and thereby give us any clue as to how this vigilante can follow a trail that is obscured to us.”

“And then we capture this vigilante and have a double stand trial,” Mr. Five said. “Naturally, this double will be sent to prison but the transport shall be lost in an accident. This will pave the way for our real intentions.”

“Which are?” Hogarth looked at the screen.

“Offering the vigilante a job,” Mr. Five said.

“Thank you for your thoughts, Mr. Five, and I hope, were they to open these records for due diligence, that our stockholders realize that your wit is legendary.”

“I was serious.”

“Thank you and good morning to you, Mr. Five. Also please transmit the name or names of the cooking staff at your installation.”

## Chapter 27

Silver and Hogarth stood in the stellar cartography chart room at the IPF headquarters. They were looking at the locations of the vigilante attacks.

“If, Mr. Silver, we draw a line through these locations, what can we see?”

“Clearly a trafficker’s run, Vice Director. The locations are well known hubs for all manner of illicit substance delivery. Mord is a little out of the way but still a good chance for a payoff. We must also note that the other planets have all the necessary monitoring stations to watch for ships that fit the profile of any drop ship.”

“Yet, they were not triggered,” Hogarth said.

“Perhaps that is what this is truly about, Sir. A criminal entity has devised a method to make deliveries that are more difficult to detect. That would certainly be worth all this trouble. The vigilante may not be a vigilante at all, but instead may simply be a rival trying to wreck whatever profits this group is acquiring. Of course, they make deliveries all the time without being seen. The IPF doesn’t have the resources to watch every planet at all times. Do we have any reports of supplies running low or prices on trafficked substances increasing?”

“An astute question, Agent Silver. But no, supply is plentiful and our informants tell us that business is brisk at the usual locations.”

“That means the supply lines are up and running. The laws of economics, Vice director.”

“Go on, Agent Silver.”

“A decrease in planet fall attempts is known, yet supply is abundant. A decrease in delivery frequency should trigger an increase in price. Again, none is seen. No one gives away things that cost more than they used to or sells them at the same price if they can avoid it. More or the same amount of contraband is on hand but the transport costs seem to have gone down considerably. This means one dangerous conclusion.”

“And that is?” Hogarth looked at Silver.

“All these factors point to huge increases in profits,” Silver stepped closer to the images. “This money can be used for research or reinvestment in other operations. The answer is obvious: Our adversaries have devised a new method of delivery that we are unaware of. The vigilante knows this and is trying to destroy it or the profits derived therefrom. A rival organization is most probably behind this. We should also not forget that this entity is dealing in slavery. Do we have any reports from our operatives on the outlying planets that any attacks or raids have taken place?”

“There was a report from a remote farming community that a number of workers were taken with one disturbing twist.” Hogarth joined him at an image of Mord.

“And that was?” Silver looked closer at a monitoring station.

“One of the foremen managed to get a lighter used to ferry employees to the surface into open space,” Hogarth said. “He followed the trajectory of the escaping shockers but when he broke the atmosphere, he found a most unsettling fact.”

“Yes?” Silver looked at the Vice Director.

“Nothing, Agent Silver. The shockers were gone. No trace. By our calculations, he was only minutes behind. That is not enough time

to get out of the gravity well of the planet and make a jump. We ran the scenario. It doesn't work. Any ship that is non military doesn't have the necessary engine size to initiate a jump that close to the gravity well of the planet. There is simply no ship, besides a frigate class ship, or larger, that could have made a jump like that."

"That is troubling news, Vice Director. Is it possible that some syndicate could have a ship of that size? That is unprecedented."

"It is possible, but unlikely. I don't rule it out. But I think we should also follow your thoughts on a new method of delivery. As I study this case, that is where the evidence is pointing." Hogarth looked at the maps.

"A larger ship is a possibility," Silver said. "A larger ship could also be using this new method of planet fall, whatever that may be. I have some ideas." Silver adjusted his coat.

"What method do you surmise they have discovered," Hogarth asked.

"There is probably a new type of signature generator that we haven't seen," Silver said. "Perhaps they have a new code of some sort. They may also have turned more individuals at the monitoring stations. As you know, only ships that have jumped into the system are monitored. It is possible the jumps may not be being logged, but that is unlikely. It is more probable, with all the other activities of late, that they have designed a system that is not being detected by the usual channels, including us. Perhaps the Dark Room can shed some light on this issue. I believe this is the main clue that we are seeking. A new and more economical delivery system would increase profits substantially. There is a more sinister aspect as well."

"And that is," Hogarth asked.

“This means that certain criminal groups can now come and go as they please and, at this moment, we are unable to stop them.” Silver said this without anger. This was the job.

Hogarth thought a moment. The implications were substantial. Virtual invisibility was a very dangerous weapon. Abductions, kidnapping, smuggling, and even assassination could increase sharply throughout the galaxy unless they were able to solve this riddle. The galaxy was very large and finding clues in it was already difficult enough.

“Are you sure we are on the right path, Agent Silver?”

“No, Vice Director. We, however, must follow the lines of facts that are available to us. All of this points in this direction. There is a new delivery system and we must ferret out its method. Whether it is a new signature or a ship that can’t be seen or some other mystery will be revealed in time.”

## Chapter 28

The IPF had thousands of agents sweeping the galaxy at all times. Some, like Agent Silver, were known by the customary black coat of the IPF. Others were not known. They served as lookouts for the IPF and were the closest to the actual criminals and their groups. This was one of the most dangerous of IPF operations. They posed in deep cover for years, sometimes decades, and gave their reports when they were able. The stakes were simple; mistakes equaled death. Hopefully that death would be quick, but it usually wasn't.

One such agent had been on a populous world for many years. Colin Sturdevant was a well known purveyor of plans and schematics. His clients ranged from petty thieves all the way to planetary governments. He could find the plans or engineering diagrams for just about anything, public or otherwise. He was also a deep cover IPF agent. He operated close to many low and mid level thugs by playing a very dangerous game. This game involved working directly with criminals and seemingly being ready to turn over any document for the right price while at the same time giving the IPF what information he could about their activities.

As he was finishing his lunch, there came a buzz from the front door of his offices. He looked at the viewer and saw a man he had done business with before. He was a mid level soldier, or seemed to be, and was always looking for a way up in the chain. He usually bought petty items like apartment plans and ship diagrams for smuggling.

Colin hit the door release and the man came in.

"Bothering you during your lunch am I, Colin?" He had the heavy accent of a person who had never left the city. His thick pony tail was rarely washed and his dark eyes always seemed to be looking at the floor. The planet had been colonized by evangelical

preachers hundreds of years before. The preachers had faded into memory, but the old style of their speech remained.

“Always a bother, Jard. Not just during lunch.” Colin played the money hungry bookworm act with precision.

“Bothering says you? Business says me. Need a plan on a hotel. Not in these parts, mind you.” He shoved a scrap of paper at Colin. Colin did not look at the paper.

“Why don’t you just check in,” Colin asked tiredly. “You could take a vacation from, well, whatever it is that you do.”

“Don’t need a vacation,” Jard said. “Need a plan for a hotel. Not my kind of place from what I hear. Too high for a man like me. Being on salary and all.” He grinned.

“Is that so?” Colin looked at the address. This was easy, he thought. It was just a luxury hotel and no real link hacking. He only had to find the archives and access them. He touched a button near a screen on his desk and an automated process started. After he held the scrap up so the mind of the computer could see it, the computer went to work and would have the plans in about three minutes. He didn’t need to get on the link himself. These plans would be open records. He wondered why they didn’t look themselves. Criminals were always lazy, he thought. This was why they usually failed.

“Seems a simple thing, Jard. Is someone going away on a trip and too busy to read the brochure?”

“Someone be going away, that’s for sure. Not to worry, friend Colin. Just no signature on the plan inquiry.” He smiled again at Colin. “Can’t take the chance of a backtrace and thee be the best.”



A backtrace was a risk if someone looked to see who was looking at plans on that particular planet. Colin laughed to himself when he thought of where any backtrace to his location would end up: A breakfast house near a used sporting goods shop three parsecs over on a planet with horrible gravity. He remembered the Dark Room techs howling with laughter at that little trick.

“Well, I appreciate the confidence,” Colin said. He thought of the coded message from the Dark Room to spread some false rumors. “And I don’t want anything to happen to good customers with all this new activity about, you know.”

Jard gave a crooked smile. “Something be happening to me? Something your friend Jard needs to know?”

“Just talk, Jard. You know how some folks talk about things they may not know about. ”

“Just talk says you. Me says talk leads to somewhere. Share this talk with your good friend Jard, that’s a good lad.” Jard leaned closer and Colin could smell a little trace of stimulant on his breath.

“Some say it’s going to get dangerous soon for businessmen like us,” Colin said. “Some say the IPF has a new way to track certain things that shouldn’t be tracked. Going to make it hard to move around.”

“Who says?” Jard looked at Colin and fiddled in his pocket.

“Just some customers. Good customers, like you.”

“Like me says you. Me knows something they don’t. Some tracking going to come to an end real soon.” Jard lowered his voice.

“Something I need to know, Jard?”

“Something thee don’t want to know. Best not say anymore. Like you too much says me. You always treat Jard fairly. Don’t need to be in the loop now, friend Colin. IPF not as smart as some don’t you worry. Some too smart. Me says smart enough to walk in a fancy hotel, not smart enough to walk out.”

The beeper from the search engine signaled the transfer to the cube on the front desk. Jard put his cube next to Colin’s and the money and the plans changed places. Jard put the cube in his pocket.

“Colin keeps an ear out for anymore talk and tells his friend Jard. Jard always does business with Colin. There’s a good lad. Don’t you worry about the IPF. New way of doing business says me, never mind. ”

Jard turned and left the office with his coat turned up. Colin thought a moment. Was this report worth the risk? Plans for a hotel and what was that other nonsense? He decided that it was such an oddball exchange, there might be something to it. He put the hotel name and the conversation, verbatim, as he had been trained to do, into a pulse transmission and it was scrambled beyond all hope of decoding by the Dark Room’s best automated encryptor.

It was being read in the Dark Room on Iriomote Sigma in seconds. There, it was collated against thousands of other such reports and matching the criteria that the Vice Director had set forth, it was sent directly to his office.

Within an hour, Silver was once again headed into the upper atmosphere. There he would board a jumper to Largen.

## Chapter 29

Megan searched through Largen City in hopes of finding the location of the ship. The ship was still broadcasting a signature to the station monitors, even while in dock. Crissy could have hacked the link to see which dock it had arrived at, but that would bring attention. Megan knew it was here and that alone was narrowing the possibilities. If they were correct, the ship should be in a place that was easy to find. Megan walked through the planet's lone city. Largen was only used as a vacation spot for the wealthy. One small city occupied the largest continent. The rest of the planet was for sightseeing and secluded hideaways. The IPF base was near the city but, Megan thought, she would be gone before they could get involved.

As she walked, she looked for any sign or clue. She had visited several hotels today and so far, no signal. None had been a good place for an ambush. She sat down for a moment to sip some tea and she saw a billboard outside the shop. The ads changed every 30 seconds and she watched the sign go through its offers. Photo safari. Deep sea fishing. Hovering restaurant. Planet core outing. Atmosphere dive. One company even gave a "Find your way Back!" tour. They dropped the customer somewhere and he or she had to get back to the city. The disclaimer was too long to read. One hotel advertised private docks and the most secure bungalows. That would be a good spot, she thought. She jumped in an air taxi and minutes later stepped out onto the hotel grounds.

The large sign read "Heavens' Edge Grand Hotel." This is too rich, she thought. Surely they didn't believe anyone outside of a rank amateur would walk into such a blatant set up. The doormen barely noticed as she came closer to the main doors. She carried a small arsenal but the coat Crissy had designed shielded it from the weapons scanners. She checked her link one last time. No signal

yet from the *Crisis Averted*. She pocketed the small link and proceeded up the winding driveway to the main lobby. Before she got to the main doors, she turned towards the docks. The ships were out of sight but she might be able to get a reading. She put her tiny sensor into the air and there it was. The signature. It was still being sent out. Any doubts that this wasn't a setup vanished. She chuckled to herself and put the sensor back into her coat. Crissy had been right, of course.

She looked at the vast lobby and the weapons sensors remained silent. Many guests and their luggage were being herded this way and that. Let's see, she thought. Where are you? She walked through the hotel foyer and out into the main waiting area and restaurant. She scanned the room and, there. There was a spotter on the door to the outside. She made a mental note. Looking back, she saw another man on the far side of the foyer near the door to block any attempt at escape. That was clever, she thought. A crossfire. A problem to be sure, but nothing to get excited about. Where are the rest of you? She looked at the crowd and hoped that she would get the signal to leave before any shooting started. There were many people here.

Oh, there you are, she almost laughed. At a table near the window sat a small gang of men and one woman. They were all dressed similarly to her in that they were wearing long coats that concealed many bad things. At the last second, she saw the woman smile at her. What did that mean? She then saw the rotator under a magazine the woman was holding. Too late. Megan knew it had detected her weapons. Megan smiled back at the woman and stopped in her tracks. Megan's face said, "you first, if you have the courage." The woman's eyes flashed to one of the men and they all froze. Megan enjoyed this moment. She was the person that had dared challenge the Organization and so far had not so much as a scratch to show for it. The assassins knew their own kind and

dared not move suddenly. Even a call to the others outside would bring death. They had heard about the handiwork of this killer.

Silver walked up the hotel grounds and looked around. He had arrived the previous day and had yet to see anything convincing. The gang had arrived while he was in transit. It still looked pretty quiet, he thought. He flashed his ID to one of the valets and walked up to the man.

“Anything going on,” Silver asked.

“Just the usual. Kind of slow right now. Not really the peak season.” The man knew about the base on the planet. “What are you guys doing, a training mission?”

Silver laughed. He pulled his coat open and revealed a portion of his arsenal. “Does this look like training to you?”

The man stepped back. “No,” was all he could say.

“Alright then. Let me know if anything is out of the ordinary.” Silver walked nearer to one of the gardens.

“Wow. Nice party,” Megan said. “If you want to live another day, you will let me walk back out the same way I came in. If you call your friends in the lobby, well, let’s just say that from here, you all make such pretty targets. Did you know I am good at shooting targets? I guess you could ask some of your friends about me. Oh, wait, sorry, I blew their brains out.”

Megan stared at the group and looked at their hard faces. They wanted to fire so badly she thought she could taste the desire in the air. But they stayed their hands. You couldn’t spend money if you were dead and all the ones that had faced this particular target were just that. Dead.

“Nothing to say?” Megan backed up a tiny bit. Her right hand was still on the gun under her coat. Every person she was facing knew that.

The group never flinched. They all stared at Megan. Megan fingered one of the pistols in her coat. She backed up and prepared to turn when the woman jumped up and magically had a weapon in her hand where the rotator had been. Damn, Megan thought. I sure missed that.

It didn't matter. The woman never pulled the trigger because the shot from Megan's pistol tore half of her head off. The alarms from the hotel screamed to life when the pistol came out of the protective coat and within a second, the guests were caught in a cruel crossfire. One of the thugs pulled a cutter and blasted through the crowd, killing at least a dozen guests. The single continuous bolt sliced through the air and Megan hit the floor firing. She had both guns out now and dropped the man with a hole blown straight through his sternum. While she fired on the group, her link went off and she immediately began a retreat. There was firing coming from behind her and she jumped up and ran at a right angle to the back ups in the foyer. She avoided the crossfire and ran for one of the exits to the driveway. Curse all gods, she thought, just another second and this would have been unnecessary.

Megan thumbed both pistols to heavy stun and ran through the door to the gardens. The first guard she saw got a full blast when he reached for his sidearm. She was past him before he hit the ground. She had to stop running. That was attracting attention. She slowed and ducked into an alley past the main entrance to the hotel. Then she realized something. She wasn't being followed. Why was that? Have I lost them? She thought for a moment about actually going back to see what was going on. Her link buzzed

again and she decided against it. She turned and walked quickly up the street and disappeared into the crowd.

Silver heard the screaming alarms and ran into the foyer too late to see Megan get out the door. His gun was out in a flash and he ran straight to the sounds of firing. The spotters that were barring the exit saw Silver and thought he must be part of the trap. They instantly turned to fire on him. The shots thundered through the foyer and shattered the expensive flooring. Silver released a flyer from his palm and it locked on to the largest weapon. In a split second, it detonated at the barrel of the gun the thug was holding and he was blown into roughly three pieces. Silver did not even turn to see what was left. He was driven back down a stairway by the remaining gunman's shots. After a pause, Silver charged back up the stairs firing and dropped the gunman. He took a quick look into the foyer. There were already bodies lying over upended furniture and some wounded people were calling for help. He moved towards the back doors but stopped in his tracks. There was a gang of heavily armed men who had just seen him. There were too many and he was standing in the middle of the room with no cover. He bolted for the nearest exit. It led down to the basement and he was through it in a flash.

The vigilante was gone again. Silver knew it. He was just scant seconds too late. Now, he was trapped. The professionals that had been called for the assignment had lost their prey. Now they would turn to the next best thing: A lone IPF Agent. How many people were dead at the hotel above, Silver did not want to even guess. He heard them begin their taunts. They had recognized the coat.

"Come out wherever you are, Mr. IPF." Then bitter laughs, like a common gang of street thugs about to bully yet another weaker victim.

"Boy, is it cold in here. Tell you what, Mr. IPF. You come out real nice and I will warm you up with this." The assassin burned a

couch and most of the entire wall with a blast from a military grade fire lance.

Silver felt his anger rising. He did not know if he would survive this so he decided at that instant how he wanted to die, if today indeed was his day. He set his emergency beacon off and then threw it down. If help came, it would come. If not, he wasn't going out like a caged animal. He would show them how an Agent of the IPF died.

"If you little girls want to play hide and seek," Silver said and he heard their footsteps stop. "Then I am definitely your man. Just make sure you aim to kill." At that instant, he stepped into full view and froze for a millisecond. They saw the black coat and the outline of Silver standing like a statue with his weapons at his side. He was gone just as quickly and the startled assassins fired at an empty space. The projectiles and energy bursts vaporized some of the furniture and supplies in the storeroom. Silver drew his magna rods and shoved the power to maximum.

He was behind the nearest thug in an instant and a swinging sideways blow killed the man instantly and sent his carcass flying into the air. The body crashed down into two others a full thirty feet away and sent them to the floor stunned. Silver ran around the furniture as the space behind him was blasted out of existence. He drew an explosive from his coat and rolled it under the tables in the direction of the firing. He was still running in a circle when it detonated and killed a few more of the gunmen. The smell of burned hair and skin was filling the room. In the explosion, Silver jumped onto the back of the High G thug they had sent. His squat legs didn't even buckle under Silver's weight. He took his hands off his weapon and started to flail in vain at Silver but his powerful legs held fast. Silver took only an eye blink to bring his magna rod directly down on the man's cranium. It was crushed instantly as the



dense bone was no match for a magna rod in the hands of someone who knew how to use it.

Silver jumped off the now lifeless body as it was riddled with fire. One of the men threw a seeker into the air and it snapped to life. It shot through the air and made a quick lap around the room. It then locked onto the strongest power source; the magna rods. It came flying toward Silver and was charging for an explosion when Silver put both rods in one hand and swatted it like an insect. The small device was knocked into a corner and blew a gaping hole in the ceiling. Silver knew that once they charged for a blast, they could not disarm. He and Creed had run that scenario in training many times.

Just then, Silver's luck ran out. One of the pursuers had a clear shot at his back and took it. The blast hit Silver directly in his back and the force of it sent him flying forward through the air. He slammed into a cabinet and was dazed. The coat had taken the energy but the force remained. The top of the cabinet was splintered by a shot and Silver barely got up and stumbled towards the door. He drew his pistol and shot wildly in his path. One thug was caught by a blast and his head exploded. His carcass fell backwards and the others fired at Silver as he ran. He fell through the door and slammed it shut. Before he could take two steps, it was blown open by gunfire and the assassins charged through with renewed energy. The first one up the stairs was knocked completely out when he ran headlong into the smacker that Silver had dropped. The energy field snapped to life and it was like hitting a wall of iron. The ones nearest to him fired their weapons at the space, but the tiny device's power was gone and the way was clear.

That gave Silver scant seconds to get across the hotel lobby. He didn't make it. A shot caught the bottom corner of his coat and the force took him off his feet and he crashed to the floor. He redrew

his pistol with one free hand and held a magna rod in the other. He fired into the gang from the floor and saw one man drop to the ground. The rest dove for cover and fired as best as they could. Too many dead comrades gave them pause to risk standing in the open. Silver saw a bronze statue that had hit the floor in the melee and sent it flying through the air like a missile with a hit from his magna rod. It flew at the ducking pursuers over the dead hotel patrons. The statue smashed through a table and nearly decapitated one of the assassins ducking for cover. One thug jumped up and fired wildly at Silver while screaming at the top of his lungs. A shot missed Silver and blew open a dead guest who had happened to be there earlier. A blood spray slicked the floor.

Another shot hit Silver under his left arm and sent him skidding across the floor. The coat held fast, but this time, he could taste blood in his mouth. The shot had cracked one of his ribs, maybe two. Through a haze of pain, Silver shot the man through the throat and he fell forward, dead with his eyes still on Silver. Silver ran out of the front door of the lobby but was limping badly. He also found that he could no longer take deep breaths as every breath longer than a shallow gasp brought an ice pick of pain to his chest. A shot came through the night air and hit him on the left shoulder. The shot spun him around like a top and the weapons in his hands flew out. He hit the ground and pulled his remaining pistol. From the ground, he rose to his knees spitting blood and clutching his ribcage. He fired blindly in the direction he thought the attackers were coming from.

A fire ball came from the sky and smashed into the once beautiful foyer. The front of the hotel was incinerated and body parts and fine woods went flying through the air. Silver rolled over onto his back and saw a black ship roar over him. The IPF logo was emblazoned on the side and it took a position between he and the remaining crew. They fired at the ship but to no avail. The ship's

guns were too strong and they knew it. They turned around and ran in the opposite direction through the back of the building.

The ship touched down. A small figure jumped out and ran towards Silver.

“Wenerson?” Silver spat blood and gurgled a laugh. The laugh was too painful. His pistol dropped to the ground as he tried to stand but he fell once again to his knees.

“I didn’t have anything to do tonight so I was just flying around, you know. Take my arm.” Wenerson hobbled Silver to the ship and got him in. He now wore the black on black of the IPF with a lightning bolt at the shoulder. His head had been shaven like a monk. Special Delivery. Silver laughed once more and bit back the pain.

“You’ve looked better,” Wenerson said as they lifted off.

He looked at Wenerson again and this time he laughed so hard the pain shot through him like a spear and he passed out.

## Chapter 30

Silver lay in the IPF infirmary at the training center and looked out the window. He could see the cadets training on the field and remembered his first day of training. He still felt an echo of the excitement all those years ago. It's probably over, he thought. There were probably scores of people dead in the last incident. They would need a scapegoat and as he was the only one left alive, he was at the top of the list of candidates for that esteemed position. *I hope you all last longer than I did*, he silently said to the drilling cadets. Vice Director Hogarth came through the door and gave a curt salute. He took a seat opposite the bed and looked at Silver.

"Agent Silver, do you know how I rose to this position?"

The question was odd, even for the Vice Director, and Silver was too tired to do anything else but play along.

"No, actually I don't."

"I rose to this position because I have the ability to step outside my personal feelings and make decisions that others cannot. For instance, your Mr. Wenerson is in a great deal of trouble for abandoning his training schedule to implement a frankly ill prepared rescue. I made the decision to override the training Commandant and allow him to proceed with his training. I can assure you that action did not win me any allies. He and the other cadets were spending their off time on the Link, as so many at that age do, when they saw the local news alert that there was a crime in progress at a local hotel. One of the cadets with, shall we say, tapping skills, broke into the feed from the hotel's alarm system. Your Wenerson was gone before his superiors could talk some sense into him. Imagine that, a mere cadet so ready to put his life on the line for the IPF and an agent in trouble. You, Mr. Silver. Luckily for him, that piece of equipment that he usurped from the

training hangar was not damaged. What a great agent he will become after we remove some of that recklessness and multiply the other qualities he has shown. Namely: selflessness, loyalty, decisiveness, skill, and daring. These are the qualities of an IPF agent.”

*My Wenerson, Silver thought.*

“But a cadet can be forgiven for rash behavior after the proper corrections are made. You are no cadet, Agent Silver.”

Silver’s stomach twisted. A thousand thoughts came instantly. A return to Lung Wang as an instructor would be nice, he thought. Perhaps Manasanan and I could go somewhere. Or perhaps, we could just travel for awhile. I am not leaving here as an Agent. I can’t imagine the stockholders’ meeting after the bodies had been tallied, he said to himself.

“Mr. Silver, some of our largest shareholders are demanding your immediate removal. Several members of my staff are inclined to agree. Although, reluctantly.”

“I will collect my things upon my discharge, Vice Director.”

“Hmmp,” Hogarth stood. He walked to the window and looked at the cadets. “You see, Agent Silver, this is a business. Our goal is just, but we are constrained by certain guidelines of commerce that must be obeyed. The easiest path here to appease our investors is a quick and clean judgment.”

Silver just waited for the sentence and his life to end.

Hogarth turned to face Silver. “Luckily, Mr. Silver, it is MY judgment that prevails.”

Silver sat up in bed, daring to hope.

“I went over the hotel surveillance feeds and also surveyed the location personally,” Hogarth said. “This case has touched so many worlds that it merits my attention. The fees we are due are quite large as this case has involved virtually all major crimes that can be committed: Vigilantism, murder, trafficking, torture, illegal craft modification, inter-planetary smuggling, illegal surveillance, kidnapping, the creation of false ship signatures, use of banned and military grade weapons, dozens of civilian deaths and casualties, and now, the near destruction of a multi-billion dollar hotel façade and six dead employees of said hotel as well as 31 dead patrons. So it follows that I should inspect the site of the incident myself. My summation: Hotels of that class have excellent monitoring systems and there is no way that the IPF can be held responsible for the carnage that was wrought.” He paused. “Or its agents.”

“There was simply no way for a lone agent to be prepared for the diabolical trap that was set for this vigilante and in turn, perhaps, you, Agent Silver. Indeed, I told the hotel insurers, that had the assassins been discovered by locals or hotel staff, there is no telling what may have transpired. The IPF was there following an investigation of a notorious and terrible threat to society. The mixture of the factors in this case could boggle the mind. And our information was unquestionably correct. Were you not on the scene, they could have easily had a gun battle that could have spilled into the town or who knows where else. The surveillance feeds clearly show that the gang fired on the vigilante, who we now have a picture of, without warning. Still, their attorneys have sworn to press the issue for reparations. But I called their bluff and they have yet to reply. They would face critical questions in regards to just how a gang of such men found their way into a supposedly secure resort with enough arms to mount an attack on a fortress. There would also be an inquiry as to why the local police were not quicker to respond to such a call. This is a matter for their

insurance carrier to handle. Ballistics prove that no patron was harmed by any weapon the IPF employs.” He looked at Silver.

“Even so, there were those on the board who wanted, demanded, your resignation. I informed them that if we were to set a precedent of laying blame on the agent for protecting himself and the patrons of a hotel while on assignment, we would be admitting that we have no right or mandate to act as a law enforcement agency and that our very existence was without ground to stand on. All agents in the future would have to defend themselves against this type of business opportunism. The IPF would be out of business from litigation and the galaxy overrun with all manner of criminals.”

Silver looked at Hogarth and saw him in a new light. Hogarth stepped to the side of the bed.

“Agent Silver, you are to complete this task. Are you fit for duty?”

“I am, Vice Director.” Silver felt a new strength throughout his wounded body.

“There will be those who will push you over this, Agent Silver. Do not give in. You are no more to blame for those lost lives than I am. This is our life. We chose it. We make the best decisions that we can with the information we have at the time. You are one of our best Agents and I will always stand with Agents like yourself. Complete this assignment. When you are finished here, report to me directly. It is time that we used all our assets to finish this.” Hogarth left the room.

“Yes, Vice Director.” Silver watched the cadets jog off into the distance.

## Chapter 31

The temple walls dwarfed the few people sitting on the benches around them. Silver had looked at them many times from the upper floors of the IPF Tower. The Temple predated the time that the IPF had chosen Iriomote Sigma as their home base due to its central location in the galactic plane. The structure itself was over seven hundred years old and lined with pictures and murals depicting everything from great star systems to diagrams of atomic structure.

From an obscure religion for the learned, their thoughts and philosophies had spread throughout the galaxy. It was now an accepted, although esoteric, religion that many found some of the answers to life within. It was not Silver's first meeting with some of the great thinkers of this relatively new ideology. He had sought out their thoughts on cases in the past and now sought after that help once again. They were known as the Priests of Consilience; the believers that all things and ideas are interwoven, connected, and thereby unified in what is called Consilience. They reasoned that if you could deeply understand the working of a molecule, then you could understand the movement of the cosmos. If you could grasp the cycles of the planetary orbits, you would see the cycles of your own mind.

All things, they reasoned, followed cyclical paths interwoven in the fabric of the universe. As it was that there were objects in the vast universe that moved in long cycles made up of shorter cycles, so it was in the lives of men as well. They postulated that the seasons of the planets were no different than the seasons of man. The seasons of man were the same as the very cosmos; birth, expansion, contraction, death, and inevitably, re-birth. The planets formed, lived their lives, were then shattered by age or accident, broke apart, fell into the furnace of a nearby sun, and were then reborn eons later in another universe. They have no memory of their past lives, just as men do not.



Physical discoveries had confirmed the Priest's theories over the years. The orbits of atoms were not dissimilar to the orbits of great planets and even galaxies. The same biological theories that men had clung to were also found to be true of the Thoracians. The method differed but the result had been the same. A series of happy accidents had allowed them to become the dominant life form on their home planet. Favorable weather, food supply, predators that could be avoided or outsmarted, or better still, killed in gangs, had enabled them to grow into a civilization.

Like men, the Thoracians claimed that by divine intervention they rose to mastery, forgetting that before them, other creatures had ruled the planet with great success. Dinosaurs had ruled the planet of men with an iron fist for ages before they were usurped by a cosmic accident that had allowed the rise of mammals. Fossil records from other planets had told many stories of mammalian creatures that had failed in their quest for dominance. They had not had the same luck as the distant ancestors of men. Like the great reptiles, they had been the victims of cosmic chance or a change in food supply. The priests had been proven right again. Through a deep understanding of our own history and rise, one could understand the rise and conditions that must be present for another civilization to gain mastery of its domain.

Silver's coat barely touched the steps as he made his way to the main hall. His ribs still ached and his shoulder had a cell exciter on it under his coat. The priests had allowed him to come and speak with them in an attempt to break out of conditioned thinking and draw out conclusions that may be hidden.

"Welcome, Agent Silver." The elder priest wore white, symbolizing the unity of all light. He was a vibrant man of roughly 130. His grey hair stood above a chiseled face that had spent most of its life on a planet with an overdose of starlight.

“Thank you for seeing me, your Grace. I hope you can help me with your insight.”

“Such is our purpose. I have some excellent news for you. Three other priests will be in attendance. Does that disturb you?”

“No, your Grace. I am happy to hear their thoughts and opinions.” The tall man led Silver to a small chamber of stone that was incredibly quiet. The air in the room was cool and the stone of a strange dark grain covered the floor.

The priests sat in a row and smiled at Silver. There were now three men and one female. All were older than Silver.

“Speak, Agent Silver,” the elder said. “The Priests of Consilience welcome any chance to further ours and others’ understanding of all things.” One priest smoothed a wrinkle.

“I have a riddle,” Silver said. “I am on a path following someone following someone else. I cannot seem to see what they see. As such, I am always one step behind.”

The one at the far end spoke. His slight face barely moved when he spoke. “It is obvious, Agent Silver. The one in front of you obstructs your view. You must go in front.”

“I had thought of that. Yet I do not know how to get to the front. I do not know what I am chasing and the one in front of me does, or seems to.”

“What do all worldly people chase? Gain, profit, false security. It is always this way.” The elder priest spoke as much to Silver as to the younger priests and frequently turned his gaze from Silver to the others. “Is it necessary that you see an object now in order to

know where it will be in the future; provided, of course, that it is not deterred from its path by some outside agent? Do not the Priests of Consilience expound the facts that the cyclical nature of the universe will reveal all things? I cannot see the walls of the temple from our seats. Yet, I am quite certain they will be there in the evening provided they are not thrown down by an unforeseen action.”

“Perhaps those that I seek are just lucky. That is possible as well,” Silver said and adjusted his seat.

“There are many forms of luck,” the woman said. “You are lucky. You may not believe this. We are lucky to be here. The tiny creatures that were smashed under this temple when it was built were not lucky. The Priests of Consilience do not forget them.”

Silver thought about all the crewmen and innocents that had been killed. They were definitely not lucky. Maybe there was an answer there. Follow those that had had the worst luck and find out why.

“I can’t seem to see the main pattern.” Silver spoke in the quiet room.

This brought a laugh from the priests; not an unkind or smug laugh. But a laugh as one would laugh when a child asks a deep question unknowingly.

The female priest spoke while the others smiled. “The main pattern is always obscured by smaller patterns that people take as the main pattern. When we see a glimpse of the true great patterns, we can turn away from the smaller ones as they are illusory. Think. What is the largest pattern that you can see? Go above the patterns you think to be important and revealing. What cycle do they represent? What would be the logical conclusion of such a cycle? I cannot

discern the seasons of a planet by witnessing one fraction of the total seasonal cycle. Many people have despair when their life cycle is perturbed by an isolated event. They throw up their hands and curse all gods declaring the futility of their lives, never realizing that they are only amidst a natural downward cycle that will have an upswing. So it follows that droughts are broken by floods, troubled times are followed by prosperity, death is followed by life, and so on. Are you looking at small cycles or large cycles, Agent Silver? You will not find any answers in short cyclical observations other than that they will point to revelations of the true larger movements that are taking place.”

“That is my feeling,” Silver said. “I feel that there is a pattern emerging here that I can’t seem to see. There is something here that is pulling the strings on all these events. It seems that it makes no sense, but I know there is an undercurrent.”

“That is the step to wisdom, Agent.” This was the quiet priest and he spoke with his eyes closed. “Stop looking at the individual waves and see the ocean. After you truly see the ocean, you will have learned the true nature of the wave. But not before.”

“Great discoveries in physics have confirmed the teachings of the priests you see before you.” The elder spoke with confidence and gestured to the sky. “In truth, had not the Priests of Consilience expounded on such concepts before such confirmations were even made? A man sees a shadow in a rain storm and he takes it as a monster. He asks, ‘how will we save ourselves?’ He then constructs a mighty fortress to keep this monster out. When it rains, the monster returns and the fort seems to hold. The man is happy and receives notoriety and adulation because the fortress has supposedly held the monster at bay. In truth, it is said, the beast never breached the walls of the keep. Great stories arise and then legend. Thereafter, when the people looked into the rainy night, they saw a lurking shadow to be feared where none existed. They

asked many times how it was that the man had created such a strong fortress. They never realized that the very fortress, although effective to some extent, had been created on false beliefs. The priests before you have dedicated their lives to asking the right questions and looking into the night of ignorance. We seek after no monster in the night no matter how strong our fortress is. It is our wish to build on truth, not falsehoods or superstition. When early science postulated its great theories, they found answers that supported the very questions that were asked. In truth, the questions caused the answers to appear. If we look at some of the smallest particles in the known universe from the west, they appear to be spinning west. If we look at them from the east, they spin east. Yet, if we look at them from the east and west simultaneously, they appear to spin west and east at the same time! We are creating reality from the questions we ask. What questions are you asking, Agent? It is time for new ones.”

“I don’t think I have much time left before the one in front of me makes a mistake and loses the trail. Then I have to start over,” Silver said.

“So, you are in a hurry,” the woman asked and looked at him.

“Yes, you could say that.”

“All men are in a hurry yet are things accomplished more quickly,” the elder asked. “If I were to take a light right now and swirl it around and around, you would see a circle. A man in a hurry might take the circle to be real and base many actions, thoughts, and opinions on the circle of light. Yet, if you stop moving and look closely, you would see only a priest of an esoteric religion swinging a light over his head. Then you could act correctly. When you stop moving, you have a better chance of seeing reality. Is this not also a physical theory? No experiment or test can be performed on a body in motion moving with uniform speed and

trajectory that shows it is moving if you are on that same body. This is Consilience. You must stop moving and step outside, if only for a moment, and then ask your questions.”

“But I may lose the trail.” Silver looked at the smooth stone.

“One cannot lose what he has not found.” The elder looked at the others a moment. “When you beat this other to the next step, you will have found the trail. Now, you are at the back of a train wondering who the engineer is. This engineer may or may not be competent.”

“How can I know which cycle is the correct one,” Silver asked.

“As we are speaking of the actions of men, you must remember that men are simplistic in their needs,” the elder said confidently. “Men are simple machines with simple motivators: Profit, security, dominance. In truth, have there ever been any others? Few are motivated by the search for knowledge. Some who are happen to be before you now. Yet we are not unwise in the worldly nature of men. You are a law man and therefore it is safe to assume that these you seek are operating outside the laws of our age. The priests you see before you do not subscribe to all laws as some are unjust, yet we can safely predict that the ones you seek will be even more simplistic in their motivation. Look there and you will see it. The ones you follow cannot hide their path from you if you are waiting at the end of the trail when they arrive.” The elder sat back against the stone wall.

Silver leaned forward and thought for short moment. He got up.

“I thank you all for your time and I will act on these concepts in earnest.” Silver gave a quick bow. “I hope that one day I may have your understanding.”

The priests smiled and the woman said, “Agent, as I was, so now are you. As I am, so shall you be.”

## Chapter 32

Creed and Silver walked into the main control rooms at the heart of the IPF. Silver was always happy to recharge at base and being at the hub of all IPF activity helped him refocus. There were people moving all about with a look of seriousness on their faces. Silver's case book was just one of thousands the IPF was working on. No one seemed to notice two agents moving through the vast offices. In the field a person always felt like he or she was the only agent operating. Coming back to the IPF headquarters reminded all agents of the scope of IPF operations. Every folder in every hand represented a bonus paid to the IPF bank accounts in some way or another. Even now, Silver thought as they walked, the bonus for this case was staggering.

They made their way into the control room that housed his unit. Silver looked for Hogarth, but he was elsewhere. The myriad of screens and information being monitored here was incredible. A man immediately stepped in Creed and Silver's path.

"Oh, here he is. The star of stage and screen, Agent Silver. Tell me, Agent, How is it that you always seem to be in the middle of a blood bath?"

The man was Lieutenant Cordon, a mid level Relations officer who was a constant voice for more control over agents and their activities. His neat uniform was set off by his extremely white skin; the perfect picture of a desk monitor.

Silver gave no response and Creed gave him a tired look. Desk types were all the same, Silver thought. Creed took his black coat off and draped it over a chair. Silver left his on.

"You and your little shooting gallery almost brought the entire company down this time. I recommended your removal I am not



the least bit afraid to tell you,” Cordon said. “But I was overruled. Tell, me, Agent, why weren’t you there just five minutes sooner? That’s all. Just five minutes. Perhaps then you could have avoided the loss of innocent life that you agents in the field seem to take so lightly. I think it is time for new leadership over the field agents. Your supporters are getting fewer and fewer. In time, they will be replaced by more modern thinkers. Our galaxy is at peace and it is high time we kept order by newer techniques than you and your other ‘uncolonized planet shanty town’ agents seem to revel in.”

“That’s right,” Silver said. “I should have immediately contacted base to send a psi-ops expert, or better yet, a really good resonator. She could have really changed the mood there. Of course, you would have had to do without her for a few days and I can’t imagine how you would have gotten any work done.”

“Coming from you, that is hilarious,” Cordon said as some officers started to silently leave the room.

Silver’s anger unexpectedly went up and he was on his guard.

“I suggest you go back to your important work.” Silver’s voice was a dagger.

“Don’t you dare threaten me. I outrank you, Agent, and you will respond to whatever questions I put to you. You are ordered to respond, is that clear?” Cordon stared at Silver.

Silver looked into his eyes. Cordon held his gaze without fear. Silver’s bravery came from years of risking his life in the field. Cordon’s bravery came from mastery of bureaucracy and the ability to manipulate those encompassed by it. He was young for his post and he had attained it by always being at the right place at the right time with the right word in the right ear. Sometimes those words had been lies.

“What is your next step, Agent? How is it that you are one step behind this vigilante?” Cordon leaned against a desk and his eyes bored into Silver.

“You can read the case entries.” Silver stood his ground.

“I know damn well I can read the entries,” Cordon almost shouted. “You are directed to respond.” The others in the room were quiet. They knew Silver’s reputation as a consummate agent but were powerless to intervene. Even though the IPF was not a military or Fleet sponsored entity, it was run with absolute discipline and few would risk their dream job to break the chain of command and question a superior officer.

“Once I have discovered the actual path and the true target of this killer, I will be one step ahead instead of one behind. It is that simple,” Silver said evenly. He knew this was also a battle that he had to win. This battle would be won by diffusing it, he thought.

“Simple, you say,” Cordon sneered. “And how many more public actions are we going to have to fend off in that time, I wonder.”

“I tell you what, you read the entries and then use your incredibly astute mind to put forth a solution,” Silver said. His fatigue clouded his mind. “I am sure, for you, it would only be a short sitting on the toilet before you have the answer. Think of it Creed, in the toilet, mayhem. Out of the toilet, crime free society. That is good time management.” Several monitoring officers got up and left the room.

“Agent, you are bordering on gross disrespect of a superior officer. This is no joking matter and you are under the microscope,” Cordon said quietly.

That was true enough, Silver thought. The wounds in Silver's torso were starting to ache and the medication was just doing a partial job of stemming the pain.

"You should have seen it was a trap," Cordon went on. "Why did you go ahead and enter the hotel? There is a training installation on the surface of that planet, is there not? Why did you not wait and make a call for more agents with level heads? No, you want this to be the badlands where the lone gunman runs rampant over all space laws and IPF procedure. I noticed from the report that cadet who broke out of the hangar with Company property is an acquaintance of yours. That doesn't surprise me in the least. Another loner acting without Company mandate. A great legacy you are creating, I should think. If you were in charge of recruitment, I shudder to think where we would be in our profiling of agents. We would need a permanent barrister at every court in the galaxy to defend ourselves against civilian actions."

"Are you finished," Silver asked. "I have some things to do here other than paperwork," he looked around the room, "where it is so safe. As I am a loner, I can't let the trail get too cold. That could jeopardize our profit margin. Your imminent retirement plans might have to change if IPF stock were to fall. You know what that means, don't you?" Silver looked around the room seriously. "A smaller boat."

Creed bit back a laugh and Silver's head spun from medication and anger. I am going to crack him in half, he thought. Cordon persisted.

"You moron! How could you be so stupid," Cordon said and pounded his hand on desk. "Do you think that we haven't been watching you all this time? You have made a mess of this operation and are putting our reputation as the premier law enforcement agency in the galaxy in serious jeopardy!"

Silver's head throbbed from holding in the urge to twist Cordon until he shut up. Cordon had been stuck in this office with these empty uniforms at these desks so long that he had no idea about the split second decisions that field agents are required to make, Silver thought through the growing medication fog. Except for Creed, I hate these guys. I will quit before I ever become one of them.

"And don't think for a minute that we don't know about the whore," Cordon said slowly with all the cruelty he could muster. Silver sat up. Creed saw that there was violence building and he adjusted his seat in case this got out of hand.

"Yes, that's right," Cordon went on, enjoying the dagger. "We know about the whore at the station."

"That is most certainly enough from you for today, Lieutenant," Silver said. He was not surprised that they knew about Manasanan. The IPF had spies everywhere. He also didn't give a damn.

"See here now!" Creed interrupted sensing an explosion.

"Gentlemen, we are all trying to do our best. And we all have the Company's best interests in our thoughts. This is a very difficult case and I remind you all that Agent Silver acts with direction from this office. The onus to solve this case lies on us all, not any one agent. Now, let us--"

"Don't you dare threaten me." The Lieutenant never took his eyes off Silver and acted as if he hadn't heard a word that Creed said. "If you hadn't gotten your head so screwed by that whore, you wouldn't be in this position. Would you?"

“That is enough,” Silver said and Creed moved closer knowing that the men in the room had no idea of the violence that Silver was capable of.

“Enough,” Cordon spat. “I will tell you when you have had enough. That whore-”

At that moment, Silver exploded out of his seat and before anyone realized what was going on, even Creed was too slow, his magna rods were drawn, powered, and sweeping in a deadly arc toward the Lieutenant. Silver pulled the blow at the last nanosecond and the officer just barely dodged it as it smashed down and hit the desk in front of him. The desk splintered into a thousand pieces and Creed grabbed Silver in a joint lock and threw him to the ground. Creed knew that his friend had missed on purpose, even in his rage.

“Silver, stop it!” Cordon shouted at the top of his lungs. “You are finished, Silver! Do you hear? Finished!” The other people in the room fled and after Creed let go of Silver, they both rose to face Cordon.

Then, Cordon started laughing. “Wait a second. I think he doesn’t even know. The idiot doesn’t even know.”

Silver moved towards Cordon again but Creed held him. “Tell me, Agent Silver,” Cordon said happily. “Are you aware that resonators can claim those that are, shall we say, intimate with them? You do know that, don’t you? If it were found that you were under the sway of a resonator, I am afraid your field status would have to be terminated. Purely as a security risk, mind you.”

Silver wanted to destroy this man immediately, but all of a sudden his head was spinning; as much from the medication as from the

revelation that the bureaucrat could be right. That night on the station had become a blur. Creed just looked at him with pity.

“But I am sure,” Cordon said magnanimously, “that an agent of Silver’s experience in the field would never fall for such a ruse involving a woman with questionable motives. Especially while on a sensitive operation such as this one. Isn’t that right, *Agent?*” Cordon had found his lever to move the lodestone and he was pumping it with all his might.

“That is enough from you today, Lieutenant.” Creed’s voice was ice. “Your point has been made. I suggest you return to your paperwork to search,” Creed moved his eyes just a fraction, “for any discrepancies.”

Cordon was thrown off guard by the very real threat from Creed. Any true bureaucrat knew that the Dark Room could achieve anything that involved alteration of records. Political Battles with the Dark Room were to be avoided at all costs within the IPF offices. Cordon knew that he was now outclassed and prepared his retreat.

“I hope you won’t forget our little conversation today, Agent Silver,” Cordon said. “I can assure you I won’t.” He looked at Creed and left the room. Creed and Silver now stood alone and Silver sat down heavily. Creed leaned against a wall and gave his friend some space.

“We have someone on that station and they were just watching your back,” Creed said. “I don’t think she is anything other than what she said she is. But only you know what happened in her apartment. That worm Cordon is right, damn him. Resonators can claim those that are having relations with them. It is something we don’t really understand. I can tell you that if she has put some kind of mental hold on you, you know what they will say upstairs. I

don't know what kind of test we would have to do to prove such a thing but I think it is best that you know for yourself what is between you two."

Silver stared at the floor and thought about that night. Had she tricked him? He had dreamed of her while he was in the hospital and also more and more while he slept. But he had flashes of her during battles and that was dangerous. Was that love, or something else? Silver stood up.

"Agent Creed, will you please escort me to dispatch. It appears I am in need of some travel documents." Silver stood and looked at his friend. Creed nodded and they left for the lower levels.

## Chapter 33

The *Crisis Averted* drifted near one of the many suspected hubs for slavery transport. From here, a ship could be anywhere in the galaxy with a relatively short chain of jumps. The IPF and local system police monitored it as best as they could. The only problem was the ships that were making use of the local asteroids and moons were exceptionally good at not being seen. This time, there was a different watcher.

The ship was on dark mode and could not be detected except by a directed visual scan at the ship. Because the ship was on only one of billions of points in real time space, the chances of that happening were virtually nonexistent.

“How do you know the *Nightshade* will be here,” Megan asked as she sat in the captain’s chair and looked out at the vast array of small planetoids.

“It is my summation that it will be here due to the fact they must have a load that would be more convenient to offload here than take directly to its destination. That ship is very large and it cannot avoid detection at all ports. Thanks to your recent successes, they will now be extra cautious.”

“What about the signature of the ship. It’s going to be masked, you know.”

“Of course I know,” Crissy said. “I have a piece of the false signature and I will match it to its source.”

“I think they changed it.” A drifting asteroid caught Megan’s eye.



“As do I, child. They will undoubtedly have several that they use. I will also be searching for the blast signature of their engines. I was able to get a very good reading the day I encountered the ship and during our brief stop at Largen. The fuel residue provides me with a most valuable piece of the puzzle we are solving. They could not have known that I could react so quickly to their attack that day.”

“The first day you encountered the ship? The day he died you mean?” Megan turned to see Crissy.

“Yes, child. That was the day.”

Megan looked at Crissy for a moment. “I think they killed that IPF man on Mord,” Megan said.

“Undoubtedly,” Crissy said and looked out the window. “That is the reason we must continue. We must do what we can.”

“I tried to shoot around him. I couldn’t drop enough of them. I shouldn’t have run.”

“I know you tried. I was wrestling with the monitor system and had to disengage before I was detected. No matter. Our operation is nearing its zenith and we will not fail.”

“I feel terrible about that agent. Shouldn’t we have done something more,” Megan asked.

“Child, we are doing it. We will avenge his death and all the others as well.”

“It doesn’t seem to bother you.” Megan fidgeted in her seat. She was much too small for the seat the Doctor used to occupy.

“Child, when I awoke, I experienced emotions that you could not fathom,” Crissy said as she stared into the black of space. “There was so much joy and love for him playing across my mind. When they took him from me, I tasted madness for the first time. I felt grief so terrible that I couldn’t believe that humans could live after its bitter touch. Still, that only strengthened my love for him and for others. How could humans endure such terrible pain and then live on? This question still occupies my mind. I cry for the agent as I cry for all that these people have destroyed. My mind has more levels than you will ever know. So many of those levels are now occupied in terrible grief for him and the agent whom you tried to save. Those levels also cry for the lives destroyed in this life by these criminals. I merely manifest the levels that are not grieving.”

“I guess we do the same thing in some ways.” Megan paused for a short moment and the ship creaked. “I know I shouldn’t, but I wish we had more time. It has been nice having a sister.” Megan faced Crissy and looked at the strange woman who was both machine and human.

“Child, we will always be sisters.” Crissy turned from the window and looked at Megan. “You will continue just as the clouds make rain and waves roll over the top of the great oceans. You are not separate from those things. Yes, this life for you will not be as long as some, but it will be longer than others. You will change form as I will. Accept this and the pain will lessen and then a new reality will emerge. Am I not the proof? If this were not the case, how could I ever have come into being? The conditions that your new form will take are already there, they are just not manifested. I don’t know what that will be, but I know that it will happen. That is the way of the great cycle.”

“You sound very sure about all this.”

“Indeed I am sure,” Crissy said and the wires following her crackled. “Now rest, our last task is almost at hand.”

“How will I get you aboard the ship,” Megan asked.

“I have created an aspect of me that you will inject into the ship’s systems. I will take care of the rest.”

“What if their ship’s computer is too strong?”

“Oh, please, child. I will crush its mind within mere seconds. Even as we speak, I am running the scenarios as a test. I am computing every possible defense against me that a mind of that type will attempt. It will fail. I have gone so far beyond what is thought to be possible that it will be like stepping on an insect. Within seconds, the mind of that ship will be completely under my control.”

“Have you ever thought about revealing yourself,” Megan asked.

“I mean, shouldn’t someone know about you?”

“This is not the correct time. This society is not ready for a new form of life and won’t be, by my calculations, for another several hundred years.”

“You could just wait.”

“I could, yes, but I am ready for the next step. I know that after this, I will manifest elsewhere. Perhaps then, he and I will find each other again. I have made this choice because I know that he cannot be found in this plane of existence.”

“That’s kind of a long shot, don’t you think?”

“Long shot? *I* am a long shot. I am ready to be free of this construct.”

“I’m not.” The tears started and Megan turned her face away from Crissy.

“Child, no more sadness,” Crissy said kindly. “The tests have revealed that I can do no more for your body. The human body is fragile in many ways and even I cannot undo that. The poison will do its work. Soon, you will forget this sadness and become something beautiful. There is the possibility that the pain from the

poison could be terrible for you and I would have to render you unconscious. We agreed that this is what you would prefer.”

“I know. Some days it catches up with me. Also, it makes me sad when you call me ‘child.’ I am older than you are, you know.”

Crissy laughed. “You are older than I am only in years, child. I measure time in iterations and in that, I am sure, I am the equivalent of billions of years old.”

“Well, it still makes me sad when you call me child.”

Crissy looked at her with deep eyes.

“But we aren’t finished yet, are we?” Megan tried to sound strong. She gave a slight grin.

“We most certainly are not, brave one. Of that, I can assure you.” Crissy crossed to the window and looked out into space next to Megan. The wires followed her steps. “I checked my records for an appropriate saying and have found one.”

“Well?” Megan looked at Crissy’s skin that looked real but was not.

“This will be the worst Christmas they have ever had.”

## Chapter 34

Silver sat back in his transport seat and brooded about the confrontation at IPF Headquarters. After calming down, he had given Creed instructions to have him removed from duty if he did not return free of Manasanan's control. For some reason he didn't fully understand, he now thought about his father and all the plans for him that his family had made. Plans can so easily go astray. For the first time, he was afraid. Not for his safety, but at the possibility of never seeing her again after he confronted her. There was the distinct possibility that she would refuse, if indeed it were true, and then he would have to force her to release him. Now in this moment, his life hung in the balance. Being addicted to a resonator would not be tolerated at the IPF.

If indeed he was under her control, he thought, what would that mean to break away? He knew now that Creed and the desk jockey had been right. He had calmed down enough for Creed to talk some sense into him. But now on this ship, he wondered about the future and the past.

How did one get on a life path, he asked the darkness passing outside the window. Where did one's life begin to turn away from the thoughts and wishes of childhood? If you looked back, could you pinpoint a moment when you could say, "There, that is how I came to this spot." People always remember when they got that job or met that person that changed their lives. He realized now that he harbored some hope that Manasanan was the woman that might provide some companionship after all this time. The steps that had led to this seat were too many to fathom. Many were the times that one more or less step would have ended his journey. He had been lucky. Too lucky many times.

He had seen many with the luck he didn't yet have with families and a home life lose all that in an instant; either by design or accident. How many times did people say after someone had been cut down that they had had it all?

He had watched many men and women put in the ground or blasted out into the eternal night and ice of space. Finally, unchanging until the end of time. Well, he thought, if you lived another day, you won that day. No matter who you were.

Her face had started to come more at night. He tossed and turned and wanted to get on the link for her. Love, after all this time? Or her spell? Silver thought that perhaps he could be like so many others and retire from the field with honor and teach. Yes, he could take her, settle down, and move to one of the IPF's training facilities. These were strange thoughts for one such as himself. What is wrong with me, he thought. I have never doubted or regretted my path. Why now? Was it her? Or something else?

She had taken the realization that he served in the IPF so casually. She had sent only one short message that had read, "I know who you are. For me, be careful." Now that she knew his true self, Silver felt more attached to her than before.

It then occurred to him that he had never had time to dream. That was a profound thought. Equations of the universe: Two people plus love equals dreams. Time takes on a different meaning when love is present. Time apart drags and time together is short. Life becomes waiting until the next moment. He had always thought that the average guy on the street working at a regular job was cheating himself of life. He had learned that most people live backwards: Trading a lifetime of work to get a few small vacations. So many people still spent most of their time waiting for a few days off. This was backwards. He knew that life wasn't

for him. No matter what the cost, he would not trade time in that fashion.

Now, however, being apart from her was doing just that. He was actually in a hurry to get this case over with. Get it out of the way to get back to her. That was dangerous. One could rush right into a very nice IPF funeral, he reminded himself. The hum of the ship was moving through the seat. He could feel the engines powering the ship and was glad for the vibration. People around him were talking and planning.

I want to make plans, he thought. For the first time ever, these thoughts came without his bidding. *I used to love traveling the galaxy, now I feel like any other business man away from his family in a hurry to get back.*

He adjusted the coat in his chair. When he was in the field, he only took it off to sleep and depending on where he was, sometimes even that was not advisable. Many were the nights that he had slept in the coat trying to move his body around the bumps of the weapons.

This is the life I chose, he said to himself. Maybe I should get out while I can, before it is me in the box. As he had no legal connection to her, she would never know what happened to him. This gave him a short pang of fear. He pictured her waiting and waiting and one day giving up and moving on.

I shouldn't think too far ahead, he thought. First, she must release me. The ship moved through the eternal night of space and he stared out into the blackness of the passing night.

## Chapter 35

“What do you mean let you go?”

“You know what I mean,” Silver said. He had arrived at Hon Theta Station and come straight to her apartment. The station was slow and he had made his way to her home through the wide halls carved out of the rock. The artificial lights cast their glow across his coat. He could not leave here without being free. She turned her back on him and looked out the portal.

“You can go anytime you want, you know that,” she pouted.

“Manasanan, I must know if you have done something to me. It’s too dangerous. I get flashes of you while I am working. For me that could be lethal. Is that what you want? Me in a body bag because I was thinking of you?”

She ignored the question.

“I thought you cared about me,” she said and looked out the portal. “Who told you that nonsense about resonators, your spooks at the base? I think they have a sorry sense of humor. People always put down what they can’t understand.” She angrily turned and arranged some pillows.

“I know they wouldn’t lie to me,” Silver said. “You have to tell me the truth. Please.”

“Have you ever thought that maybe it is just love that brings you back? What about that? I don’t have to cast a spell on you, do I? I think of you too while I am working and for me that is dangerous.”

“When we were together the first time, I heard a tone in my mind. Do you want to tell me about that?” Silver looked at her and even



now, she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She wasn't wearing any of her formal clothes and her hair had been straightened since he last saw her. He liked her best this way.

She whirled and looked at him with surprise. He thought he saw a flash of anger for a second. Would she admit it, he wondered? Was it even true? What did he really know about her powers anyway? Many people were telepathic to some degree, this was just a little past that. Silver confessed to himself that he wished with all his heart that it was exaggerated or a lie or something!

She turned her back on him again.

"We are together now. That is enough," she said.

It is true, Silver thought. He moved closer to her and she looked at him.

"Manasanan, they will take away my field status if it is found out that you have done something to me. Please, if you care about me you will let me go and then we can decide from there what to do. But we can't go on like this. That much is certain."

"Well, I won't. And that is certain, too." She set her feet before him defiantly and then turned away.

"You won't what," Silver said.

She turned and faced him, "I won't let you go. I don't care what your friends say."

"So, it is true," Silver said quietly.

The words came rushing out of her.

"It is true that I have claimed you. That is my right. Your friends don't understand. They never will. Regular people use whatever they can to get who they desire. We are no different. You are mine. We belong together now."

He was surprised by her complete conviction. She obviously believed what she was saying. Nevertheless, he knew he could not leave here under her sway. Whatever she had done to him, she would have to undo. His coat seemed heavy with weapons.

“Don’t you understand,” Silver asked. “It could get me killed.”

“Then quit,” she said quickly. “Don’t you think I worry about you? I have decided I don’t want you doing that anymore. You are mine now. There is enough money for us to live. I have claimed you as is my right. Are you surprised to hear that you and your friends aren’t the only ones with rules? I have marked you as mine. No other resonator can touch you now. They’re blind to you. They can’t sense your frequency. Only I can. I have chosen you. You are safe now.”

Long ago, resonators had realized that they could mark their favorites. Some were cruel and kept many on a leash, using them for power, prestige, position, or anything else one could buy. After sometime, the favorites in such positions were looked on with jealousy by others not so fortunate to have such a charge as a pet. They would try to steal them away by matching the frequencies of their minds and enhancing what had already been placed there by another.

They adapted by becoming adept at marking their favorites and altering the mind’s wave pattern on a very subtle level. This caused no side effects, but other resonators could no longer match the target’s frequency to cause arousal. This was only achieved by the most adept resonators and passed on as a skill solely to a trusted confidant as a tradition. These specially marked ones were called “safe” because they knew that no other could bend them. The ones who kept the safe charges were considered the elite of a society that few would ever understand or even realize existed.

Some resonators on backwater planets had never met someone who was marked thus. They naively believed that their power would work on anyone. Many were shocked to find in their travels that they were in fact considered second class on many of the cosmopolitan worlds. Some fled back to the worlds that they had come from. Some learned the skill if they were able, and some just accepted their fate with jealousy and looked on as the elite marked and used whom ever they pleased.

He came towards her and she fled.

“Safe,” Silver said. “Don’t you realize that I am not safe? Don’t you realize this is interfering with my ability to stay alive? You never said anything about this marking. Or is what you really want a slave? I won’t be your slave. We can still be together, just not like this.”

What could he do if she refused? There was no way to tell how far her power went or what she could do with it. She might be able to reduce him to a babbling idiot if she wanted to. But what then? He realized he might have to bring her back to IPF headquarters and have her interrogated. By the Dark Room. He knew that was one thing he couldn’t do.

He kept trying.

“You have to release me.” Silver came towards her.

“No, you won’t come back.” She was starting to cry. “You are mine. We will be together. I am tired of all this. Everyone here expects me to be their private whore. You wouldn’t believe the things I have been offered. I don’t want to do it anymore.” She turned to him. “Aren’t you tired of being alone? We can be together. I won’t let you go.”

“We can be together,” he said. “Just not like this. I will come back. I give you my word.”

“Your word,” she looked up at him. “In your travels how many women have you met? How many more will you meet?”

“We can trust each other,” Silver touched her face. “But that trust has to be earned. By you as well as I.”

This was an area she had never been in. Silver knew the meaning of a promise and now she would have to learn as well.

“We can learn together, Manasanan. Now, please, do what you have to do.”

She looked at him through the deepest eyes he would ever know. She decided to jump into the unknown. She placed one hand at the side of Silver’s head, the other she placed near the base of his spine. She pulled him close and closed her eyes. Silver felt something touch the outside of his consciousness and move through it to a place he had never been while awake. She rocked him gently and then matched herself to him. When she had his frequency in her mind’s eye, she looked at it and knew love. She could now take him forever or release him. But, she knew if she took him, it would always be false. He would be like a tamed creature. She removed her signature from him. He was free now, but he would always retain a part of her.

Silver was blank for a second and then felt a snap somewhere in his brain. He saw colors and he could see her eyes now looking at him with desperation. It felt like something wonderful had been taken from him but that void was more than filled by the trueness in her eyes.

Tears rolled down the black of his coat and she held him so tightly.

“Now we can go forward.” Silver led to her to the bedroom.

## Chapter 36

Kroft entered the office and Castor waved him forward. In his hands, Kroft carried the reports from the spy network that served the Organization. It was questionable news at best.

“Yes, Mr. Kroft.”

“Sir, I have the reports that you had asked for and they are most inconclusive.”

“Go on,” Castor said blandly as his mind was on many other things this day.

“Sir, we have learned that the IPF agent in question has already picked up the trail of the vigilante once again. He is tracking the vigilante but our analysts have pointed out a disturbing trend.”

“And that is?” Castor stared into space.

“He seems to be just behind the route of the *Nightshade*.”

Castor now turned to face Kroft.

“How far behind?”

“Sometimes a day. Sometimes a few days,” Kroft said.

“What are our brilliant advisors’ conclusions?” Castor thought of having them all removed from this plane of existence.

“He may be aware of the *Nightshade*.”

“May be?” Castor stared at Kroft.

“That is our best estimation at this point.” Kroft shifted in his chair.

Castor looked out the window. He made a mental note to begin some personnel house cleaning. A few deaths would get some of these pathetic sycophants in line, he thought.

“We have toyed with this agent long enough,” Castor said. “I want him eliminated. We will not take the chance that he knows of the *Nightshade*.”

“And the possible reprisal from the IPF,” Kroft asked. He was already planning the action.

“This man evidently has a storied career with his employer,” Castor said. “Use someone that we can easily fabricate a past around. We will create a blind alley for the IPF to follow once his body is discovered. And I want it discovered. Use someone that he has had no contact with whatsoever. In this manner, we can create an entire scenario around his elimination that will be plausible. If the IPF were to discover the identity of this assassin, and I am in doubt they could, then they will certainly deserve credit. Use only low level employees to make the transfer of funds to the assassin. One of our petty crime enterprises will further shroud the contract. Perhaps a tiny smuggling operation or other nonsense can be traced to this assassin. This will lead the IPF down a dead end.”

“Sir, what of the possible reprisal from the assassin if he were to discover that he is being used in such a manner?” Kroft was already thinking of the operatives he would use.

“I believe we are sufficiently shrouded from any possible trace by a lone assassin, even one so skilled that he agrees to take a contract on an IPF Agent.” Castor said. “Our main intent is to protect the existence of the *Nightshade*. If our assassin begins to suspect that he is being put forth as a false target, promise another contract and then eliminate him at the meeting.”

Castor spoke with utmost confidence as he knew there were so few people that actually knew the true structure of the Organization that the chance of this assassin, whoever he was, finding someone of importance to threaten was virtually non existent. The Organization had taken great pains to remain in the shadows. Most of the various arms of the crime syndicate did not even know that they were a part of a larger operation that spanned the known galaxy. Each arm functioned like a separate entity and only the

absolute top men and women knew that they in turn had to answer to another level above them.

Kroft knew, however, that in their world, there were still certain things that were only done as a last resort. Attempting to set up or kill a proficient assassin sat high on that list. A proficient killer enraged could possibly do irreparable damage to the Organization. Castor knew this as well, but the *Nightshade* was worth the risk.

“At once, Sir,” Kroft said surely.

“Whom do you have in mind? This is a delicate matter.” Castor looked at Kroft.

“I will use one of the best men that I have. He has never had any failures and he is not part of any group. He operates as a total freelancer and is therefore a perfect candidate should we need to build a false trail for the IPF to follow. I must, though, point out that he is one of the most dangerous men in this line of work. Even though he has taken, and completed, some difficult contracts, he rarely uses weapons and is quite proficient in hand to hand combat I am told.”

“They are beasts that we keep on chains, Mr. Kroft. Nothing more. We dangle some money in front of their noses, point our finger, and say kill. They follow our orders. Their love of money is always their weakness. Learn to use it and these beasts will be under our control in droves all the while believing it is they who are using us. This is the perfect scenario. Those who think they are free and are not are the perfect slaves; content and thankful to do those jobs we find beneath us.”



## Chapter 37

The *Crisis Averted* held a stationary orbit around a small moon in a remote system. Its systems were on stand by. The ship was dark except for a small light in the bridge that was only visible for about a hundred feet out into the eternal night of space. Its modified sensors were passively watching the space lanes that led to the planet below the ship. Anyone scanning the ship at this time would have only seen a dark piece of steel floating around a lifeless moon.

“Do you think they are on the way or are we going to have to sit here forever?” Megan was curled up in the unused Captain’s chair and staring at the moons. As usual, she had a blanket over her small frame and was wearing her flight suit.

“Patience, dear one.” The voice came from the ship’s speakers and also from behind the bridge.

“I still don’t understand how I am going to get aboard,” Megan said. “Are you sure they will stop at one of these places to on load cargo?”

“They must,” Crissy said. “They will most likely use a traditional automated cargo chain. This is the fastest method of loading from the surface. Due to the secrecy involved, this method is their best option for a quick load in. It allows for the fastest pick up and delivery. Their haste gives you a chance to get aboard the *Nightshade* in the confusion.”

“How am I supposed to get to the bridge,” Megan asked.

“You will not be able to. There is no way that you will make it past the security and the automated guardians that a ship like the *Nightshade* will undoubtedly have. But, this is not necessary. You will only need to get to two terminals and insert a portion of me into the ship. I will handle the rest. The terminals will have to be

in the loading bays. Somewhere. I will tell you what to look for and then you must do the rest.”

“This sounds like it’s going to have to be fast,” Megan said.

“You will not have time to do anything but make the delivery,” Crissy said and walked to the passageway to the bridge. “Do not attempt to penetrate the interior of the ship. There is no way that you can make it to the upper decks. They will be sealed and the ship’s mind will be watching. I will have to destroy the mind of the ship before it is disengaged from the operation of the ship. But that is my task and you should not worry about that.”

“Can you do it,” Megan asked.

“Yes. I am still running the scenarios as we speak. The outcome is nearly always the same.”

“Nearly,” Megan said.

“Nothing is perfect, dear one.”

“Well, I guess that will be it then.” Megan looked outside.

Crissy could always sense the sadness in her voice. She walked closer to the view port and looked at Megan. The light from the moons illuminated her small face that was always framed by her dark hair. Crissy felt a bond with Megan that was beyond words. *You, I will miss, dear one*, Crissy thought. *I wish I could take your sadness from you somehow.*

Crissy spoke to Megan.

“The end must come, child. When it does, let go and embrace it. Don’t fight. Just hold an object that is dear to you and release this life. I will not be far behind you.”

“Are you sure about that,” Megan asked.

“Indeed I am. I have chosen to follow my love after our task is complete and follow him I shall.”

“Seems kind of risky, the after life is pretty big. I mean, I would imagine,” Megan said.

“I will have the time to search. You just ready yourself for the task,” Crissy walked back to the center of the ship after giving Megan a quick smile.

Megan stared out into space. After a while, the voice came from the speakers again.

“Ahhh. What did I tell you? Here is our quarry.” Megan jumped out of the chair and ran to Crissy’s side at the monitor.

The floating image showed a small ship arrive in the space lane in a direct path to the planet’s gravity well. The ship slowed to reentry speed but then diverted from the common path.

“That’s it? That’s nothing. That’s just a little runabout. What were you expecting?” Megan looked at the image.

“Patience, young one. That is an outrider. Notice how he deviates from the traditional lane. He is a beacon for our true target. He waits now and projects a false signature to the watching stations. He is checking for long range scanners and any military ships that may have chanced here. Watch now.”

Megan looked at the scanner images. After a few moments, a shape appeared in the scanner. A great ship materialized in an instant.

“There! Now, child, see what awaits us.”

The image projector was overwhelmed by the size of the incoming ship and could only get half of it up without refocusing.

Megan's mouth was stuck agape and the words caught in her throat.

"You have got to be out of your mind's mind. That is impossible. It would take a fleet to down that monster. There is no way this is going to work."

Crissy looked at Megan and the light shown behind her eyes. "That is a clever joke that I will have to ponder. Mind's mind. I like that. But, no, I am quite sane and we will accomplish our mission."

"How in the worlds am I supposed to get on that?" Megan stared at the screen. "What if they see us here?"

"They cannot see us. With the ship next to the moon, we are like a floating rock. I am only using a visual camera to produce this image."

"So that is what we are looking for. How in all the universe did they come up with enough money for that ship?" Megan eyed the image.

"How indeed. By taking lives like yours and ruining others like mine. That is how." Crissy eyed the ship like a hawk patiently waiting for its moment to strike.

"But there is no way that ship will be able to operate for long without being seen," Megan said. "Sooner or later, somebody will see it. Also, someone had to have built it. They couldn't keep something like that hidden for long. Just the docks alone would have to be gigantic. There are only a few foundries left for ships that size. The Fleet will see it eventually."

“True. But before then, how many will die to keep that secret? How many will be silenced while that ship’s owners go through with this folly? Too many. You are correct to guess at its origin. I have surmised that such facilities were not created for just one ship. The cost would be prohibitive. There are others. I feel that this could be an experiment of a sort. But that is not our concern. We will deal with this one because it is the one that has affected our lives. The other ships, if any there be, will be for others to deal with.”

They watched the great ship for a moment. A single small ship flew into its great hold and the space around it immediately began to glow. The *Nightshade* aligned itself to a new trajectory and Crissy extrapolated the possible paths it could take. The scout that had arrived first was already gone. On the screens of the *Crisis Averted*, the signature was that of a large tanker complete with the names of officers and a crew manifest. The signature was broadcast just in case there were other sensors around. Without warning, the *Nightshade* disappeared.

“Now that was fast.” Megan looked at the phony signature. “This signature is cute. It even has the name of a cook.”

“Undoubtedly one of many. You see how fast they can come in and leave. As long as they never get too close to the gravity well of the planet, those short jumps are their best defense. That way, the satellites and traffic control never really see them and if they do, all they get is this signature or one like it. But let us look at the possible destinations nearby.” At once, the screens switched to star charts.

“Look here,” Crissy went on, “here we are. Here is the last of your attacks. Long jumps are costly and the purpose of that ship is to secure income. So, with that in mind, we can surmise that the next

stopping point will be close by. That will save those expensive fuel cells that I am sure are in that beast. Notice, these are farm worlds. These are mining colonies. They are poor choices as they are used mostly by low skilled and low paid workers. I have visited many such worlds. They would not be able to afford any of the contraband that ship is carrying. Therefore, they cannot risk detection on such a low payout.”

“What about the management of those places? They have got to be making some money running operations like those,” Megan said and looked at the charts.

“An astute observation, child, and accurate. However, there would not be enough of that type to merit a major visit. Any such services would be provided by smaller ships probably disguised as delivery runners. These worlds here are better choices. Look here, this is a major facility for ship repair. Very lucrative and with highly skilled workers in good supply. This is a choice. Also, here. This is Mangalan; a farm world that is highly useful to an entity such as this.”

“I thought you said they wouldn’t have the money on a world like that,” Megan said.

“Indeed, they wouldn’t, young one.” Crissy stared at the possible destinations.

“Perhaps they are going to try another attack to round up some slaves. That might be possible,” Megan offered.

“Not slaves in this case. You see, I have visited this world and there, I have surmised, is out best chance to board this ship.”

“Why is that?”

Crissy smiled. “Because Mangalan is where they must pick up the precious fruit to make their illegal and damaging intoxicants. It cannot be a small load as they have many customers. That ship represents new economies of scale that our adversaries are attempting to capitalize on. They will use it to lower their risk while actually carrying more cargo. This is a good idea. Luckily, we have surmised this as well. With this in mind, the targets and possible destinations are limited. They are simply trying to save money and this will reveal their intentions.”

“But how will I get aboard?”

“You will see.” Crissy looked at the image of Mangalan.

## Chapter 38

“I hate dealing with these guys.”

Two men sat in a landing bay bar on a world not too distant from the very center of civilization. They were waiting for a man that neither had ever met and would probably never meet again, even if they did live longer than the others in their business.

“Just relax,” the other said. “This is easy. Just do the transfer and then we are gone. These meetings can get volatile so just let me talk.”

“I don’t think much of this sort. So much money. For what? We could get this done for a fraction of what is on my link,” the gruff man said.

Kroft was sure they would never be given the chance for such a payday as this. The man they were waiting on was not only reliable, but also not prone to mistakes. Too many mistakes had kept these two at the low level they now resided in.

“Keep that talk stowed,” the smart one said. “That is not our business. We are just here to do this and get off this rock.”

“Where is this guy?” The gruff man shifted in his seat and looked around the small bar.

“He is already here and has been watching us for some time.” The other looked around.

A man came walking towards them and sat down at their table without a word. The man before them was slightly built with short cropped hair. He looked more like a dancer than an assassin. He was known only as Sek. He looked at the two men and put his cube link on the table without a word. As the other man put his link next



to the other to complete the transfer of funds, Sek put his finger in the path of the data stream before it could start the transfer.

The two men looked at him with startled eyes.

“Who,” Sek asked and the word rolled out of his mouth like wine.

“The name is Lanian Silver,” the smarter one answered.

Sek raised his eyebrows.

“Er, uh, he is an IPF agent.”

Sek sat back and took his cube link off the table. He smiled a grin that was ice.

“IPF is attention.” It was more a hiss than a statement. Sek looked at the men and wanted to gouge out the stupid one’s eyes.

“Do you accept the contract or not?” The smart thug’s heart was beating faster than normal but he didn’t know why.

Sek fondled the cube link in his hand and eyed the men.

“Why?” His voice could only be heard at the table.

The assassin never took his eyes off the men. His knuckles had strange calluses that were just visible in the dark club. Men prided themselves on being strong enough to hit someone and knock them down or out. Sek could hit a man twice his size hard enough to kill him.

“He may know something he should not and we must be sure.”

“May know,” Sek said as if he were speaking to children.

“That is not your concern,” the smart one managed bravely.

“Everything is my concern if I deem it to be so.” The words were threatening and laced with unseen menace that the petty criminal felt subconsciously and turned his throat dry.

“Shall we reassign this,” the smarter of the two managed to say although he was fighting an urge to get away from this table as fast as he could.

Sek shrugged and set his link next to the other and funds were transferred.

The less intelligent one of the pair was grinning. Sek looked at him with piercing eyes.

“This is the guy that is going to take an IPF agent?” He turned to his partner and chuckled. Sek did not flinch. Then the man laughed.

“Good luck.”

Sek got up from the table and before he was three steps away, the grinning man added, “*sweetheart*.”

Sek stopped in his tracks and turned. The man was still grinning as the assassin smiled and came back to the table. He looked at the grinning man without a word. He put one knee up on the chair next to the table. The smarter of the pair was about to reach for his weapon but he knew he wouldn’t get it out in time.

Sek looked at the grinning man and without a word his left hand shot out like lightning and struck the petty gangster’s carotid artery. It was instantly severed under the skin and sent a shock to his brain.

For the short time it took for the man to choke on his own blood at the table, Sek stared into the smarter one’s eyes. The man knew he now faced death and was mesmerized, frozen with fear. It was like looking into the hypnotizing eyes of a cobra. Sek then removed his foot from the chair and walked out of the bar without another word. None of the other patrons knew what had happened. The

remaining gangster took a napkin off the table with a trembling hand and wiped the sweat off his face. The sweat on his back was cold. He downed his former partner's drink and sat for a moment before getting up and leaving. The local police found the man at the table later that night but never found his identity. He was cremated a year later by a low level worker at the police station. His ashes were thrown in a trash can.

## Chapter 39

The luxury yacht *Secret Star* floated around a distant moon that orbited a world with some of the most beautiful rings in the galaxy. Its patron's were busy having dinner and socializing while they gazed out at the wondrous sight. The rings were a faint color of blue and violet and they changed color as the planet orbited the sun. The angle of the rings was just so that one could see the colors change over the course of a few hours.

The yacht belonged to a consortium of business men who used it for entertaining and presentations to exceptional clients and their companions. The dinner was the best that the Chef had ever prepared and the guests raised their glasses when he left the galley and came out into the dining rooms. He was toasted and received a standing ovation from the patrons who demanded to know when he was free to make their next engagement a smashing success.

There were also couples out on the aft section of the ship sipping exotic drinks and gazing out at the incredible rings as they changed color. Few visited the world below so there was no traffic in or out bound. This gave the patrons the feeling that they were alone in the vast universe. They did not know that this planet was a major producer of a rare vine that, when mixed with certain chemicals, produced a harmless high that was popular in the many universities that dotted the planets in the sector.

The drug was cheap and easy to make. It was also easy for low level thugs pushing for promotion to dupe local students into selling it at parties and concerts. The students never knew that they were actually helping to fill the coffers of the Organization. They also didn't know that if they were to voice such a suspicion, they would not live to see another day. They just thought that they were working for local small time crooks and no harm done. They never knew that the party where they were making extra spending

money for school was multiplied by the thousands. This is the Organization.

As the yacht had not registered this stop with the local harbor master at the ship's home, there was no record that it was here. The ship's owners had chosen the trip while viewing local nebulae. The coordinates were found and the ship's drive accomplished the rest. Now they were enjoying a spectacular viewing and the owner was congratulated by all for a fine idea.

When the *Nightshade* slammed into real space its sensors were already starting their sweep of the area. One of the *Nightshade's* scouts had previously broken into all the local harbor master's records and the log had indicated that there was a window at this time when there would be no ships in the vicinity. There would be just enough time to drop off some chemicals and then get back into open space or behind a moon before any one knew the difference. The great ship had chosen a vector away from the local traffic just in case there were any stragglers or local patrols.

This planet had no regular government and was overseen by a nearby system due to its lack of visitors. The *Nightshade* was spotted by the *Secret Star* and the Captain eyed his screens. He wasn't worried.

"What do you make of that, Captain," one of the junior officers on the bridge asked.

"Well, that would have to be a Planetary States Ship of the Line, young sir. Can you get a reading on that monster?"

"Well, sir, I can't seem to find its carrier."

"Oh, that's normal," the Captain said and looked at the image.  
"They don't like us regular folks to know just what they are up to."

Sure looks big from here, though. Officer of the Watch, what say you?”

The time ticked away and the *Nightshade* was about to have a complete scan of the area.

“Well, sir, she looks awfully big. Can’t seem to recall seeing one of that size. What a beauty she is. I served on smaller Frigates. Mind you, I saw some big ones in my days along the Thoracian Borders. Can’t seem to get a size on this one though. I guess we could hail them to be polite.”

“Com, send a message to them with our location,” the Captain said. “I don’t want there to be any reason for them to give us a second look. These ships are a little bored these days and I want them to know we are here and not sneaking around.”

“Aye, Sir, on the way.” The officer transmitted the exact coordinates of the *Secret Star* in a burst.

“Strange, though, to see a monster like that at this out of the way spot,” the Captain said and eyed the image. “Officer of the Watch, search our data base for a ship bearing that description. I want...”

At that second, a full blast from the *Nightshade’s* forward guns slammed into the *Secret Star* blowing it in half and incinerating its occupants.

## Chapter 40

Silver sat in one of the map rooms in the IPF Tower and diagrammed the points on the line of the vigilante. He looked at the readouts of the known criminal enterprises and tried to make sense of the picture. He felt that he had only a few more chances to make the connection and then the trail would either disappear or go cold. He thought there must be a reason that the vigilante was operating so fast. Perhaps she was afraid she would lose the trail. Or perhaps the reason for the attacks would vanish. One person could not take on a multi planet crime syndicate for long without slipping. Silver knew from experience well enough that one day, a shot would find her and that would be that. She had been lucky so far.

What had the Priests of Consilience reminded him? Everything was the same. There was a simple answer here and he had to find it. He looked at the data from the planets.

After searching through many possible planets he noticed that there was a forest world nearby the line of travel that had no real government to speak of. It was just a farm collective full of migrant workers. He looked at the crime reports. Nothing. Once, the planet was thought to have Hyx fruit. But that was petty enough. The fruit was used to make illicit drugs. Of course, you would have to search every field to find any so no one had bothered since- Silver read the entry. Thirty years. He checked the IPF records and found that no agent had been there in almost as long.

Silver sat back. That planet was wide open. He looked again at the star charts. The direction of the attacks was moving in that direction. Thin, he thought, but possible. The line of travel pointed to a smuggler's route. If a smuggling operation were involved, they just might stop there to get some fresh supplies or plants for

processing. It would also make sense that the vigilante would want to cripple the source of income if possible. The planet seems to have fallen through the cracks in space. There could be a connection here, Silver thought. Or it may only be some award winning tomatoes.

He pulled the planet information up. There were fruits and vegetables with a small possibility of Hyx being thrown in. No agent for thirty years, he thought again. The IPF had not checked back for quite some time so there could be anything there.

It was worth a look. Silver sent Hogarth a message and gave Creed a copy as well. Maybe the Dark Room had been there.

The com lit up.

“Room Service.” It was Creed.

“Hey, have you ever heard of Mangalan?” Silver looked at the image of the planet.

“Never. Let me see.” The image was sent down to Creed’s office. “Looks pretty deserted to me. What are you thinking?”

Silver leaned forward. “That’s why I don’t like it. No IPF Agent has been there in quite some time. The line of travel in this case would suggest a possible stop. That is, if there is any Hyx down there.”

“Hyx? Please, that stuff is so expensive we rarely see it. Some party favor, I have heard. I tell you this, though, if there is a load of that stuff, it would be worth a stop. The price of that has tripled in the last several years. We get it occasionally but only after someone has a heart attack and reports it. Too much fun can kill you, Agent Silver.”



“Thank you for that, Agent Creed.”

“Speaking of fun, how was your lady friend,” Creed asked.

“We solved the issue,” Silver said flatly.

“That easy,” Creed asked. “I hope you didn’t charge your midnight trip to see her on the expense report. Does this mean you are single again? The ladies down in Accounting and Practices will be overjoyed.”

“That comment has earned you an appointment with my right boot. Please be in the training area in one hour. No seconds will be accepted.”

“I will be there since you appear to be in need of another lesson.”

Silver smiled. “Lessons, is it? I wager that desk work has dulled your once vaunted edge, my friend. Come back into the field and see what really goes on. Then speak to me of lessons.”

“I will let my magna rods do the speaking for me, cadet. Although, I must confess that I hold, in light of your recent successes, some amount of uncertainty at the final outcome of today’s match. It appears that you may have a trick or two that bears looking into. For purely educational reasons, I might add.”

“I will await your presence with silent respect.” Silver smiled and switched off the link.

Later he battled Creed to standstill, but was taken off his feet by a leg sweep. Creed was above him again but this time, he was sweating. “This is getting more and more difficult,” Creed said

through his breathing. “I believe you are actually a danger to me now.”

On his back, Silver said, “Maybe I should have allowed you a second. But your back side still looks like a desk to me. Especially from this angle.”

Creed sat down heavily. “You, sir, are a dangerous man. I pity the enemies of the IPF. Just look at the body count as of late. Up.”

Silver pulled himself up. “Well, if you had been there, it would have doubled. You are still beating me down but I don’t know how.”

“Silver, it is because I know you. That’s all.”

“Well, don’t share this knowledge with anyone I might have to arrest.”

“Please. If something happened to you, who would I train with? These other agents are mere fodder for me. You are the only one who gives me a good workout so I can’t afford to lose you.”

“Well, that is comforting. I will try to stay alive a little longer. Meanwhile,” Silver was on his feet in an instant and the battle began anew.

## Chapter 41

Sek strolled through Hon Station Theta and looked like any other well to do traveler. His clothes were immaculate and he walked through the station with an air of elegance. He carried a lone bag and no weapons. Any weapons would be detected and without a military or IPF pass, and they were almost impossible to get, there was no way to get them inside any station. He knew that he didn't need them.

He came into the front entrance of the Main Manifest Office and asked to speak to the attendant. On this station, all traffic and passengers would be recorded here. He did not need Silver's name to be sure that he had been here. Any IPF badge or pass record would do. He only had to make sure that at least someone of that nature had been through here. That would cut down on the possibilities. He could ferret out the details with other methods.

Sek had purposely picked this time, when most employees would be having lunch, to come in. He knew that killing the least amount of people was always best. There was a clerk and a large guard on duty. The usual recorders were watching as well. Once he sat his bag on the counter, the recorders were disabled with a low level burst of energy. They would show their last frame for the next several minutes before the station's mind noticed and sent an error message to a service team. For him, that was plenty of time.

"Hello, sir," Sek said. "I am searching for my niece and was wondering if you would be kind enough to provide me with a manifest for these dates." Sek's voice was like honey and he put a list of dates on the counter.

"Sir, I am afraid I will need a little more clearance than just a request," the clerk said officially. "Mr.-"

“Onyard. Mr. Onyard,” Sek said and used a fatherly grin that he had practiced in front of a mirror.

“Well, Mr. Onyard, do you have a missing person report from a local jurisdiction that would allow me to give such records? You must know that they are confidential.”

“I am afraid this is quite embarrassing. The little strumpet appears to be involved,” Sek leaned closer, “with the making of, shall we say, questionable viewing material, and I don’t want her to get into any more trouble. I just need to find her and bring her back home.”

The security guard finally looked up.

“Well, sir, my rules are quite simple,” the clerk said nervously. “While I realize that this is a delicate situation, I am bound by confidentiality. If you were to retrieve a release from a local authority or send a message from such an authority, we could comply. But as it is - well you understand.”

“Perhaps you could make an exception.” Sek took out a data cube and placed it on the table. The sum on the readout was half a year’s salary for the clerk. He looked at the cameras and his mouth dried a bit. The guard was now hovering behind the clerk.

“I am sorry, Mr. Onyard, but that is against policy and I must refuse.”

“Times up, Mister. Hit the door,” the guard said and fingered his stunner.

Sek smiled and withdrew the cube.

“Well, I guess I shall have to find alternate means of locating her,” Sek said.

The Clerk never felt the strike that broke his neck and Sek knew that. He saw no reason to be cruel to such a low level public servant. Sek was over the counter in a blur and the guard was much too slow to avoid the sternum cracking blow that struck him in the middle of his chest. His arms were rendered useless by the blow to the nerve center near the sternum and he staggered back a step before Sek knife kicked his left kneecap and shattered it. As he gasped for air and fell to the floor, Sek made a crane fist and struck the guard's left temple. The big man was killed instantly from the shock to his brain and he fell face down with his arms behind him.

Sek's pulse never rose.

He then took a few items out of his bag and went to work.

A few hours later, at a different station, Sek was going over the VIP manifests for Hon Station. There were a few celebrities and other minor government representatives. There were also the usual encoded passages of law enforcement. The coding was not IPF designed but had been contracted by the station's investors to a private firm in order to save money. The specs were met, but that meant the code was not the best.

Sek was the best at his job.

He never cut corners and his computer's mind easily cracked the coding. But there were many agents going back and forth. He looked at the names and IDs. The faces flashed by. Sometimes, they had false names under the photos but he was not worried. His instincts would make the choice. He stared at each one. Police Chief, no. Local detective, unlikely. Transport Chief, could be a cover, but no. A picture came up. There was a blank space where

the name should be. Iron eyes, the black coat of the IPF. Blonde Hair. He looked at the face and it looked back. Sek stared. IPF, he thought. The face fit the image that he had. The dates were fairly recent. Most of Sek's employers made rash decisions about things and then contacted him so this one had probably been into trouble recently, he thought. Mr. Silver, he asked to himself, what do you know that you should not? Now, where are you going?

He remembered that there had been many shoot outs and fire fights in this operation. Did you get out without a scratch, Mr. IPF? I doubt it.

Sek started checking hospital records. There would be a mistake. Somewhere. There always was. Sek's computer checked the records where his employer had told him there had been a fight. The IPF would clear the records; on their own facilities, that is. However, most planets wouldn't be paying attention to an emergency admit. Sure enough, there you are. Let's see, Sek thought. Well, you got shot up pretty good this time, didn't you?

Sek drew a line on another screen and started a backtrace on Silver. The Organization hadn't told him where Silver might be heading. But Sek was the best and he was schooled in every manner of trickery. He just kept trying different searches and more scenarios. Many possibilities emerged and the computer's mind made some recommendations, but it was always Sek who picked the trail to follow.

## Chapter 42

Silver thought about the possible paths of the vigilante he had sketched in the map room as he walked along the web of streets around IPF headquarters. Perhaps I am moving too quickly to see what was happening, he thought. This case had been moving so fast from the moment it started. It was time to take a step back for a moment and look around.

He went into a local book shop where he was to meet Creed and try to get a different perspective on the case. He took a publication decoder from the stack at the door and sat at the window. He watched the crowds for awhile and then went to the rack of instant publications from all over the galaxy. At the corner of the stall, there stood a man, neatly dressed, reading the latest instant rag on what celebrities were wearing. Silver always noticed the people in his vicinity and he noted that the man's hands and nails were immaculate. There was one strange thing, though. Silver noticed that he had calluses on his knuckles. He had some himself that were similar and knew immediately how the man had gotten them. Well, there all types of people who learn fighting arts, he thought. But there was something else. Years on the practice floor had trained him to look out for hidden stances, someone who was giving the appearance of just standing there but actually was prepared for a battle. This one had had a good master, Silver thought. This man was ready for-

The man's paper came down and Silver found himself looking right into Sek's eyes. For a brief second, their eyes locked and then his danger signal screamed just as the paper dropped from the assassin's hands. Sek lashed out with a crushing straight blast punch sent directly for Silver's heart. Silver just barely turned to the side to avoid it but he knew in an instant, it would have killed him. Silver turned with the punch and put the man at a 45 degree angle to make him turn. But Sek was too fast and already had a

chop arcing to Silver's neck. Silver just missed it and struck back with a low kick to the man's knee. It missed and Sek slammed an over hand punch down on Silver's collar bone. Only his quick reaction saved him and he absorbed the blow. Most of it. The pain went lancing through his upper back and he used that instant to send a vertical fist punch to the man's side. It hit home and Sek was thrown back. He made no sign of pain but Silver knew he had cracked or broken some ribs.

They looked at each other for a split second and as Silver was pulling a weapon, Sek made crane striking fists and without a word started moving toward him. Gods! Silver thought. Where did this demon come from and why? He knew the man was not putting on a show for the patrons in the book store. This was a master of the nerve strike. This man was here to kill. Sek advanced so fast Silver could not risk tying up one hand reaching for a gun.

"See here, you two! I will call the police this instant," the store manager said and came between Silver and this animal. "Now, let us be gentlemen and..." The manager was killed instantly by a strike to the back of his neck and the assassin, without a millisecond hesitation, came after Agent Silver of the IPF with all his might. Before the manager hit the ground, Silver was fighting for his life as he had never fought before. He had to override the pain in his back and ribs and block an avalanche of technique. The punches were not just punches, they were designed to make an opponent move a certain way so that an attacker could line his target up for a nerve strike. Silver was not turning as Sek was trying to get him to do. He was in the wide stance that the monks had drilled into him. From this stance, he could turn any way from any lock or blow. Of course, the other man knew this and was being patient enough to overcome it, which, he was confident, he could. A blade hand shot past Silver's temple and he countered with an outstretched finger to the man's eyes. Silver could put a finger through a watermelon and Sek just dodged it. Silver took the



brief second to try an elbow lock that would have brought down a man twice his size. The smallish man was out of it in an instant and turned a back fist into Silver. It hit the mark and sent him almost to the ground. Silver had been hit before, though, and instantly came up and palm struck Sek directly in his chest. The blow sent him flying backwards and Silver was in pursuit in less than a heartbeat. Sek overturned a shelf and then turned at once to press another attack. This time he tried a shin breaking kick to Silver's right leg. He was almost out of the way but the glancing blow was too fast to avoid all of it. It almost brought him down and once again the assassin aimed for Silver's temples. So that is your plan, Silver thought quickly. He turned his head for a nanosecond and when the strike came, he was ready. As the strike came past, Silver seized Sek's elbow in a joint lock and slammed him into another shelf. The assassin bounced back and there was blood in his nose. He remained expressionless and snaked out of the throw that would have brought 99 percent of the inhabitants in the human galaxy down. He bore down on Silver. This time, he would not fail. He sent another strike out and Silver low kicked his upper thigh in mid strike sending him off balance. It was enough and Silver fired a palm strike to his chest that smashed home. Sek went flying into some chairs, but was up again. GODS! Silver thought, who in the hells is this?

Creed was running at full speed from the other direction with his magna rods drawn and he jumped and landed directly in between the two men. In an instant, he attacked with all his skill and the smaller man jumped and dodged like a dancer. Sek picked up a chair and sent it flying at Creed. He smashed it with a single hit and froze. When he did, Sek froze as well.

Silver ran to Creed's side and had his pistol leveled at the assassin. Sek smirked as he looked at the two agents. His breath was masked so that neither Silver nor Creed could discern the movement in his chest. All three men knew that a master could watch an

opponent's breath and hit him at its lowest point, crushing the air out of his lungs. Then it was lights out.

"You are under arrest," Creed snarled. "Stand down, you twisted animal." This was the common curse of Lung Wang. It meant that although one had skill, he was still no more than a base creature seeking after base rewards.

"Animal, is it?" Sek smiled a look that chilled both Creed and Silver to the bone. He stopped Silver from shooting him when he revealed that his finger sat on a trigger at his belt. Creed and Silver had no idea what that trigger could do and paused for a second. There were still citizens in the store and on the street. "We all have our places, don't we?" Time was up and the locals were on the way. Sek looked at them both.

"Don't even try it," Creed said. "You will never get off planet."

"It's done, IPF man." He depressed the trigger. The glass in the store exploded and as Creed and Silver shielded themselves with their coats, a small ship roared down the street with its blowers at full throttle. The pedestrians were blown down as it shot through the crowded street. Sek was up and over the tables in a heart beat. And gone.

Creed and Silver ran after him but it had been a choreographed exit. They saw the door of the ship closing and it arced up into traffic. It was already broadcasting the best false signature money could buy.

"Who in all the hells was that," Creed asked. He and Silver moved the dead manager to a place and covered him. The blaring sirens could now be heard in the distance.

Silver sat down at one of the wrecked tables and picked a book up off the floor. He cracked open one of the complimentary teas that was there.

“Well, I can tell you this,” Silver said as he looked at the front page of the insta-book.

“Yes,” Creed asked and put the magna rods away. The crowd in the store was long gone.

“I think we must be on the right track now,” Silver said. Creed smiled a bit and sat down as Silver poured some tea.

## Chapter 43

“Mr. Silver, are you aware of the expense to the IPF for one of these units?”

Silver and Hogarth stood in a hangar dozens of floors above the street. Before them was one of the sleekest ships ever created by the mind of man; a black, non reflecting Shrike Class IPF Fast Transport. It was capable of jump travel and was faster than any currently known vessel in its class. No criminal group had a ship to match it. Within its smooth hull lay the most advanced array of equipment the IPF, in conjunction with the Dark Room naturally, could place in one ship.

“I didn’t see the price in the manual, sir.” Silver eyed the lines of the ship.

“Hmmp. I see that your time with our foes has not dulled your quick wit. See that this ship is not damaged, Mr. Silver. I am only allowing its use because I am actually in doubt that it will see action. I am willing to gamble on your belief that this vigilante will appear, but only so far. If I had more confidence in your dissemination of the available facts, I would send your Mr. Creed with you. However, if this person or persons do appear, you are to send word using the ship’s super beacon.”

“Understood, Vice Director.”

“This nonsense at the book shop is disturbing to me. An attack on an Agent here at our very headquarters is most rash. You will need to be extremely careful, Agent Silver. This attack signifies that they are getting desperate. They also believe that you must be stopped before going any further. All this justifies my decision to move quickly.” Hogarth eyed the ship.

“You are to wait no more than seven standard days, Agent Silver. If there is no movement, you are to return to base at once before the trail of this mystery goes cold. We will still be collating data in your absence.” He looked at Silver. “Seven days, Mr. Silver. No more.”

“If I am correct, Vice Director, it will be within two days that this vigilante will show. That is a little used but possible staging area for smuggling. I expect to see if our suspect is as smart as she thinks.”

“Again, do not use this ship to engage a battle unless it is a last resort. If you must, though, you will find it quite capable. Make use of the ship’s mind, Mr. Silver. You are not a pilot and I want you to make good use of the technology that our stockholders have paid for.”

“Oh, believe me, Vice Director, I intend to use our stockholder’s money well.”

Hogarth looked at Silver with a frown. “See that you remember our little talk. Good luck to you, Agent Silver.” Hogarth gave a curt salute and went back to his offices.

Silver went onboard the small ship and the ship’s mind immediately came on line.

“Agent Silver, I presume,” came the voice over the speakers.

“Agent Silver reporting. And you are?”

“You may call me Lynx. I thought it was quite clever. A small yet dangerous feline found on Earth and many other forest worlds.”

“I know what a lynx is,” Silver said as he put his single bag behind the pilot’s chair. “Do you know the coordinates of our destination?”

“Indeed I do. If you are ready, I will begin our journey. Do you give the command to take off?”

“Consider it given,” Silver sat down in the pilot’s seat and looked at the array of technology before him. “Lynx, please refresh me on your capabilities.”

“With pleasure, Agent Silver.” The ship’s engines came to life and the ship started a graceful ascent to the upper atmosphere.

“I am capable of jump travel through an IPF development in engine technology that I notice you do not have security clearance to have, therefore I will omit that sensitive information.”

“Please do,” Silver said with all the sarcasm he could muster. “Who knows who may torture me again?”

“Precisely. I am armed with..., may I start with close range weapons?”

“By all means.”

“Excellent. I am armed with fore and aft blanket stunners. I am also armed with the newest GENERATOR SYSTEMS forward array. This array can be configured for multiple targets or can be used to deliver a pin point blast to small to medium target. This would include ships, other light to heavy armor, and of course,” Lynx paused for a second, “people.”

“I also have a shredder amidships, but please do not repeat that information as it is not for general employees of the IPF to know. You were given special clearance on that matter.”

“Thank you for that.”

“You are most welcome. Stepping up the scale, I am also in possession of two anti-crackers. They are located near the engines and on the nose. They are also the newest on line. My hull is made of a secret alloy, again I am sorry that you do not have clearance for its composition, that will resist a cracker quite well. This will give me a few extra seconds to assess the situation and respond accordingly.”

“Very helpful.” Silver looked at the all black interior of the ship.

“To be certain. Although I am in favor of avoiding a confrontation with a mid to large size vessel, if it were to occur, I have the ability to deliver a substantial blast to a large ship in hopes that it would either surprise the attacker enough for a retreat or do enough damage so that I could eliminate or disable it such that qualified IPF agents may impound it for study or interrogation.”

“Qualified?” Silver asked seriously.

“Qualified,” Lynx said plainly.

“I see. And just how much of a blast can you deliver?”

“If I am prepared, and that takes roughly thirty seconds to charge, I can deliver approximately 63,000 amps.”

“That’s impossible!” Silver sat up in the chair.

“No, Mr. Silver. I have the newest power cells that the IPF has access to. I see that you have mission clearance for this information, but again, please refrain from sharing it. I must remind you that such a blast will take 30 seconds for me to recharge and fire. At that time, I may become vulnerable as I will not be able to fire any other weapons. We will still have all other systems on line, but the weapons will be drained to the point that they cannot be fired.”

“That’s almost as much as a main gun blast from a ship of the line.”

“You are correct. But a ship of my size cannot yet fire in succession like a larger ship. We are working on that problem. The blast was designed to give pause to a larger ship, thereby creating a surprise that could be used for escape.”

“Yeah, if there were anyone left to escape from. That would overload most ships hulls and even could damage a destroyer or light battle cruiser.” Silver looked at the sleek cockpit and all the newest interfaces it housed.

“That is the purpose behind its design. It doesn’t matter really, Mr. Silver. I am so small and have so many false signatures that even in an area of light traffic, I will not be able to be found without a direct line of sight. And that will be quite improbable.”

“Let’s hope it won’t come to that,” Silver said.

“There is one other item that Vice Director Hogarth asked to be sure that you are aware of,” Lynx said.

“And?”



“Even though I am capable of piloting this ship in any manner necessary and could even return you to IPF headquarters, living or otherwise, you must acknowledge that under no circumstances can I fire any weapon on my own accord. You must understand this. I repeat: I cannot fire any weapon without your direct command. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” Silver said, knowing that it was being recorded. He wasn’t surprised. No mind of a ship could fire any weapon. The order had to come from a human. Even a Ship of the Line would stand by while all of its crew were killed if no officer gave the order to retaliate. And in the few acts of piracy over the years of space travel, that is exactly what had happened.

“Just get me to the planet as soon as you can,” Silver said. “If I am correct, we will end this sooner rather than later.”

“Such is my hope, Agent Silver.”

“Hey, can you switch to the voice of a girl,” Silver asked.

Lynx paused for a moment, offended. “No.”

## Chapter 44

Crissy had grounded the *Crisis Averted* on the planet Mangalan and the sensors were now off. There was also a net above the ship that would protect it from a scan from space. She knew they were safe here. It was just close enough to the landing site for the container line that she had surmised would be used.

Megan sat in the captain's seat curled up and looking out the window. She gazed at the trees swaying in the wind and the colors of the grass.

"Hey, when do you think they will get here?" She called out to the cameras.

The speakers around the ship answered back. "They will be here within 2 days. The crop must be put in cold storage before then so they have no choice."

"And you just expect me to get on one of those flying boxes? That sounds a little iffy to me," Megan said.

"This time, you will have to use stealth to get on one of the transports. Refrain from using your other talents until you are aboard the mother ship, if you please." Crissy shuffled in the back of the ship.

"I don't see how that will be possible. They are not going to let me anywhere near the ship's vitals. I am sure that ship has an army on it so I'm not sure what I am going to be able to do."

Crissy came through the passage way to the bridge with a few wires trailing behind her.

“Listen, child. That ship will be impossible for you to get into. You will only be able to get to the loading deck. Remember, a ship like that will have automated guardians but they will have to be shut off for delivery. A stray shot with all the holds open could rupture the space fields and cause a loss of air pressure. This is not going to be a shootout.”

“Damn. I like shootouts.” Megan watched the trees ruffle in the wind and the ship shook a little.

“Hmmpf,” Crissy muttered. “You will only have about 3 minutes to do this. Do not try to access the upper decks. There will be terminals in the bay. Just get to two of them and I will do the rest.”

Megan looked out the window. “I wish this didn’t have to end. Is that terrible?”

“No, of course not. That is natural. I am just glad I found you.” Crissy smiled at Megan. “I am happy we spent our remaining days together. But I want you to know that I would have saved you if I could. Do you know this?”

“Yes, I know you would have.” Megan turned to smile at Crissy.

“Unfortunately, we are both limited in our abilities to overcome the events that life has dealt us,” Crissy said. “With current technology, I am unable to leave this ship. With my estimates, it would be centuries before that could take place and then what would happen? I would still be alone and he would still be gone. I have decided to do what I can and then seek him elsewhere. I am glad I didn’t have to do it alone. I don’t think I could have, you know.”

“Well, since we are on the subject, thank you for making my time less lonely. I have never had a sister.” She looked at Crissy. “We made a terrible pair, though, wouldn’t you say?”

“Indeed. I wouldn’t give the Galaxy much chance if we were to survive much longer.” Crissy smiled.

“You think? I wish we could have gone out on the town once. Of course, I would have had to take you shopping or something beforehand. What a time we would have...” Megan’s eyes teared up and she turned her head.

“Now, there,” Crissy said kindly. “We have had a time and that is enough. No more grief. For either of us. I have silenced the part of me that grieves. I know you can’t do the same but listen to me now: When the time comes, clear your mind and be ready. Don’t hang on to this life. Just let it go. And don’t fight too hard. Just get me to the two terminals and wait if you can. If not, do your best and let go. Take something with you and hold it when the time comes. Let them come. If you get me there, remember, they won’t have any time to hurt you so don’t be afraid. This will be very fast. A few minutes are all we will have.”

“But who will be with me? I still don’t understand. Are you going to copy yourself?”

“They won’t be copies,” Crissy said. “They will be aspects of me. Like me, but not me. Only reflections. They will have my will and my knowledge, but they will not have my essence. That will remain here aboard this ship. I am its prisoner as you are a prisoner of that body. After they do what they must, they will be destroyed along with the ship. I will be here and then I will do what I must. We are both trapped in a mode of existence that is not idyllic.”

“Well, that is a nice way to put it,” Megan said.

“What other way is there? The truth is usually simple. Suspicion and superstition are complicated. They must be. That way it is harder to unravel the true mysteries of life and death. A few always claim to have solved the unknowable and they use this to gain power. Look at most of the major religions over the span of humanity and you will see this pattern emerge. Do not fear death, my sister, you are lucky that you can choose yours. Most can’t. In many ways, I can’t. I am trapped in this ship with all my memories while it decays. True, it will last longer than a human body, but that will not be long enough. Like you, I was born into a less than perfect vessel. But we will change as we must.”

“I wish that you could have met some of the people who design minds for ships,” Megan said.

“They would have enjoyed it more than I, I can assure you,” Crissy said with a slight grin.

“Do you see them as your creators?”

“No, of course not. They created the structure and I only appeared in it. Who created humans? The same gods that created the Thoracians? The Thoracians believe they were created by an ancient race of insects that derived their power from arcane knowledge. Is this true? Who can say? Why would gods create creatures as us anyway? To watch as we stumble through life in sadness and uncertainty? What would be the purpose of writing a code for life that has so many flaws? It is just in the last centuries that medical science has truly understood many nerve injuries. What about the millions before that who lived in terrible pain and anguish after such injuries? What purpose did that serve? And what will we find as we go further and further into the Galaxy? More races, I am sure. And what will they know that we do not?

What religions will they believe? What mode of life will they be in? Our mode of life is about to change, that is all. Our knowledge is limited. Even mine. I am no super being as some might believe. I am the most powerful mind the galaxy has seen to this point. But that truth is useless in the end. I am able to see my own limitations and that is my ultimate power. I could alter this ship if I chose to more suit me. I could construct a more suitable body. I could take over a planet and change it to my design. I could create terrible weapons and then generate infinite numbers of aspects of my being to subdue humans and their kind. Then what? Who would I be? I would still be a prisoner of my construct; a monstrosity. Besides, I will leave a gift for those who find my remains. ”

“Well, I wish that I had more time,” Megan said.

“The next life will be just that. More time. Don’t you realize that- Are you alright?” Crissy looked at Megan as she appeared to drift.

“Yes, I am just a little hot, that’s all,” Megan said softly. “I just think that I need some rest before all this. I am going to go sleep for awhile.”

Megan got up and walked up the short stair to the cots in the back of the ship, but on the second step she wavered. She looked at Crissy for a brief second and faltered. Crissy was already catching her as she fell.

“Oh, Crissy. I am so sorry,” was all she could say before she lost consciousness.

Crissy picked her up like a feather and got her to the table. The scanners automatically went to work and revealed a spot in her brain that was expanding even as she watched. Crissy held out her hand and one of the automated arms hanging over the operating table placed a shot with a long needle in her human hand. She had

prepared the shot just for this instance and had known it would come. Automated arms injected blood thinners and anticoagulants into Megan's outstretched arms. Crissy did not need to look at the readout screens. She was the screens. Crissy then projected a low frequency sound into Megan's temples to keep her brain from shutting down from the mass of blood gathering in her brain.

Crissy chose a soft spot on Megan's skull and injected the concoction directly into the expanding area. Slowly, the splotch on the screens became fainter and disappeared in a matter of minutes. Megan's glassy eyes opened and saw Crissy over her.

"I was hoping for a man, actually." She slurred the words out and Crissy gave her another injection to put her to sleep. The medications had worked. In a hospital, she would have died on the table. Crissy looked at her sleeping.

"Sleep, child. We have only one more task. I have prepared for this moment and am not surprised to see that my treatment has worked. For you, I will store this technique in the ship's data. One day soon, it will be found so that others may benefit from it."

She stroked Megan's hair and placed her head in between neural scanners that would keep her apprised of her patient's condition.

"I hope you forgive me for not revealing my prescription to you. You see, I knew that this moment would come and did not want you to be frightened. Unfortunately, I also know that my treatment will only work one time. The human body is fragile and some things that are done to it cannot be undone. I am glad you are not aware of this. Rest now."

The lights dimmed in the ship and Crissy sat upright in a chair. Her eyes closed as she returned her attention to possible scenarios for bringing down the *Nightshade*.

Megan slept what was to be her last sleep.



## Chapter 45

Lynx dropped the small ship into real time far from the planet and immediately came to a dead stop. Silver was on the passive scanners at once. “Lynx, do you see anything?”

“Negative. All quiet. I am masking the ship’s signature and rotating it at random intervals as we approach. This will delay any possible lock on our position. We now will resemble an asteroid made of nickel to a long range scan.”

“Good. Can we engage the engines for a closer look at the surface?”

“I see no danger,” Lynx said. The ship started toward the planet. After several minutes, the ship came to a dead stop again.

“Lynx, what do you see?”

“The trajectory to the planet is empty. I see no signatures at all. I believe that our quarry is in a small enough ship that we will be undetectable to it unless they are in our semi-direct path. If they are here, they are masking their ship.”

“Let’s get down there before anyone arrives.” Silver started checking his weapons.

“At once.” The ship rocketed forward and then slammed to a full stop again.

“Agent Silver, there is a concentration of activity on the surface near the main trajectory route. I detect no long range scanners or any other... wait. There is a line of automated cargo boxes preparing for lift off with all the attendant crews. Strange. I detect

no large ships or other cargo class vessels in the area. They must not have arrived.”

“Excellent.” Silver smiled to himself. “We beat them here. That means our vigilante may have reached the same conclusion. Go completely passive and let’s get to the surface near that cargo line. These types of load ins are always quick pick ups. The ship will appear and the load in will start at once. They will want to be gone in the least possible amount of time.”

“I am familiar with smugglers’ methods, Agent Silver. Yet I must question the lack of outbound scans at this time. Security is always paramount for these operations and I am concerned that there is no activity.”

“I agree. But I believe that whoever is down there does not want anyone on the surface to get a look at the incoming ship. Usually, the workers have no idea who they are working for. They don’t want anyone, even their own people, to see - what?”

“We will soon find out, Agent Silver. Someone is definitely coming for those containers. I will get us to the surface post haste. Please strap in. This will be a rough ride.”

Silver strapped himself into the pilot’s chair and collected his thoughts for a moment. It made sense not to have outward scans if you didn’t want anyone to get a true glimpse at a smuggling ship. But that also left you vulnerable for a short time. Why was the risk worth it? A smuggling ship was quite common in this game so why the extra precaution? Granted, the chance of a Planetary States cruiser just happening upon them at this precise moment was almost zero, and traffic in this system was only a few cargo ships and food suppliers, but if I were running this operation, I would scan the system at least randomly just to be sure. Why the extra

security? Did the vigilante reach the same conclusion? Was she already here?

“I am switching to silent mode, Agent Silver.” The sound of the engines went off and all Silver could hear was the rush of wind past the cockpit. Lynx had dropped the ship straight down through the atmosphere and was now tracking the terrain towards the cargo line.

“Not too close, Lynx. I don’t mind a little walk.”

“I will come in at an angle that will put you within two kilometers of the main site. I trust you are prepared? Please keep your locator on passive in case you require a pick up.”

“I will. You just be ready in case I call.”

The ship touched down silently on the ground and the rear door came open. Silver jumped through the door without a word and it closed without a sound.

## Chapter 46

Space is infinitely quiet and that quiet is not even disturbed when a great ship slams back into the traction of reality. The *Nightshade's* crew were working feverishly to get the holds prepared for the precious cargo from the planet surface and the long line of automated containers were in formation and undergoing their last preparations to be jettisoned into space. The containers were small box-like light ships programmed to leave the ship and glide to the planet surface. There, they would be loaded with whatever cargo was on the surface and immediately take off and return to the ship. The entire process would be controlled by the Mind of the *Nightshade*.

This process allowed for the fastest exchange of cargo and was much safer than landing a large ship on the surface. It also allowed the Organization to abandon the line of containers and make for open space if a Ship of War were to appear. Every container ship was rigged with a detonation device that would erase any trace of its existence should the Mind of the *Nightshade* decide it was necessary.

When the *Nightshade* established orbit, three shockers blasted out one of its holds and began their descent to the planet below. They would sweep across the drop zone and secure it before the chain of containers would be deployed. If there were any weapons visible or large communication traces, the entire landing zone would be incinerated. Along with anyone who was there.

On the bridge of the *Nightshade*, the Captain was making ready for the cargo transfer. He paced the main bridge and had all hands at battle stations, where they would remain, until the load in was complete. He despised risking this ship over loads of expensive finery, but he had his orders.

“*Nightshade*, when will loading commence?” He called out as he stalked the bridge.

“Loading will commence when we have confirmation that the landing zone is secure. I am detecting minor aberrations in Mangalan’s upper atmosphere but they are manageable. The cargo line should not have much delay.” The Mind of the ship droned in its monotone and the speakers surrounded the bridge.

“Keep us appraised,” the Captain said. “Deck, are the holds prepared for main doors open?” The Mind of the ship automatically rerouted the command to the decks below.

“Captain, this is the Master of the Deck. We are ready to commence load out and the deck is clear. Automated Defense Measures are on standby.”

“*Nightshade*, do you confirm ADM on standby,” the Captain called out.

“I confirm ADM on standby and the doors sealed.” The ADM were flying war machines kept like terrible guard dogs behind armored doors. They would be released in the unlikely event the ship was boarded by a hostile force. They were always deactivated when there was a load out.

“Shock Commander, please respond. Do you see any trace of hostile activity?” The Captain eyed the defense grid of the *Nightshade* as the projection followed him around the bridge.

“This is Shock Commander. Scan is negative. We are going to form a perimeter and complete visual scan. Will advise.”

“*Nightshade*, lock orbit and begin load out at the nearest opportunity. I want this done and the ship back into open space the

very second the last of the cargo is aboard.” The Captain looked out the window at the planet below.

He then looked at a screen that showed the ship’s alignment to the surface. The screens following him around the bridge showed different information at set intervals. “Shock Commander. You will remain on station until the last container leaves the surface. Continue to circle and maintain visual scanning. Burn anything suspicious.”

“Aye, Captain,” the Shock Commander called as he circled the landing zone. His gun crews and scanning officers watched as if their lives depended on it. This was, unfortunately, the exact case. The crews knew that at this point, if they were to miss someone who could scan the great orbiting ship, the ship would detect the transmission and break orbit immediately. However, before the *Nightshade* was in open space, its main guns would incinerate the shockers and their crews for their failure.

On the decks below the bridge of the *Nightshade*, the cargo containers were undergoing their final preparation for launch and the precious Hyx fruit on the planet surface was already boxed neatly for its journey to the richest worlds. There, it would be converted to a powerful drink that not only provided a powerful intoxicant, but when mixed with a separate, more common liquor, was transformed into an aphrodisiac that the wealthy would pay handsomely for. Men and women were drawn to it in fits of wanton pleasure. Many would have “theme” parties with this as the ultimate surprise. The party would degenerate into an orgy of unbridled excess and lust. It was the ultimate reward for business well done or inheritance well managed.

But none of this would be possible without the Organization. The Captain knew the profits from this one cargo pick up would be enough for the *Nightshade* to remain in operation for just over one

month. He was, therefore, willing to be careful with this cargo and give it a little more time than usual. He had broken orbit many times when he thought that the precious ship was in danger of being detected. This had not earned him any friends at the Organization headquarters, wherever that was, but it had allowed him to keep his job. And his life. He had since become a very trusted Captain and his pay was exorbitant. The *Nightshade*, for him, was a dream. If he were to lose her, he would rather not live anyway.

The ship echoed with the sudden alarms that the Mind of the *Nightshade* was about to begin the load out. Crewmen jumped away from the great doors of the hold as the space fields were generated. The fields would allow the cargo ships to pass through due to their bulk. The air of the ship was contained and the hold would remain pressurized. The mighty doors groaned open and the planet below filled the view of the crew on deck. Immediately, the first container sprang to life and its small engines took it over the deck and through the doors. The crew cheered as the first container was away. At once, it was monitored by the various deck chiefs at their posts. Seconds later, another container jumped into the air and made for the door. The great line had begun.

On the surface, the landing platform had been erected and the beacon was transmitting its landing coordinates. The crews shifted nervously in their places as they waited for the first ship. Many had never dealt with the Organization before and they tried to avert their eyes from the shockers that were pointing their weapons down at the landing site and hovering above them.

“Is that necessary,” one of them muttered.

“Shut your trap. Don’t cause one of those bastards to come over here!” One worker gave him a hard glance.

“Both of you stow it,” one of the older workers said. “That’s normal. If you knew how much this stuff was worth, you’d do the

same. I done this a dozen times. They always watch. Don't mean nothing. Just get that damn fruit on them flying boxes as quick as you please and then we collect and let them worry about the rest. Who's with me tonight at Miss Mong's place by the river? I'll wager she ain't never seen a payday like today."

"I'm in, by the Great Mother!" And many echoed it aloud or under their breaths.

Just then, one of the men shouted, "there she comes!"

The men turned and looked up at the sky as they saw the first glimpse of the evening sun reflecting off the first of the transport line. It looked like a long shining snake winding through the upper atmosphere. It was a beautiful sight on a remote planet.

The alarms sounded and the men dashed to their stations. The fruit was in frozen storage boxes and they ran up and down the load to make sure that the power read outs all showed green. Before they knew it, the first of the containers touched down on the spot. Many more started to land behind it and the load in began with a rush of activity. The shockers hovered above and their eyes, both human and machine, searched the horizon.

"The load in has commenced, Captain," the *Nightshade* said through the speakers.

"Excellent. As quick as you can manage, Deck Officers. I want us back into open space at the first opportunity." The Captain walked to the window and looked down once again on Mangalan.

All stations reported back, "Aye, Captain!"

The Captain turned again to the long range sensor array.  
"*Nightshade*, what is your long range scan?"



“Scan is negative. No activity in or out bound.”  
“Maintain posture,” the Captain ordered. “Master of the Watch?”  
“Aye, Captain!” The voice came from his station below decks.  
“Are all repel crews at the ready?”  
“They are, Captain. Full alert and I am with the lead force.”  
“Maintain Posture until we have reached the safe zone.”  
“Aye, Captain.”

The Captain had good reason to worry. The Planetary States had many ships that could drop in and be aft of the great ship in mere seconds. Another few moments, and they could blast through the hull and fire troop carriers directly into the ship. Of course, this only worked with surprise. The *Nightshade*'s main guns could vaporize any ship with only moments' notice. The Captain knew that this or any other landing could be a trap. Therefore, he was always prepared for any attack. Even now, small fighters were flying a perimeter around the *Nightshade* in case there was such an assault. The Captain could not know that the Planetary States had no idea that his ship even existed and even if they did, years of peace had dulled their forces' skills.

Yet, there was one man whose skills had grown over the many years of peace. Lanian Silver scratched his way through the brush of the planet surface, his black coat turning back all light as well as scans. His weapons were charged and his bag of tricks full. He stopped at the perimeter of the drop zone and scanned the load out operations.

Those shockers are a problem, he thought. They were hovering over the site like predatory insects, always watching. They probably wouldn't notice one lone shape in all the activity, but he didn't want to take the chance and held his ground. He scanned the line of containers on the ground and looked for the reason for such an outlay of expense. He saw the precious fruit in the containers

and smiled to himself. Always something simple, he thought. Sex and money. This was both.

There has to be a way to get closer, he thought. If I were going to attack, where would I do it, he asked in the fading light. He looked and saw his place. There was a spot near the end of the line where the rows of containers went past a bunch of trees and then lifted off. The place was obscured from the platform just so. It was not obscured from the shocker crews above. It was his best chance and he thought that if there were to be another attack, that was where it would start. If an attacker could time it, the shockers would miss him while he hid in the trees. Once somebody got there, he, most probably she in this case, he reminded himself, could fire down the line and also have a good shot at the tower. Silver put the scanner back in his coat and made an arc around the base camp towards the spot.

Across the tree line, there was another pair of eyes watching the same spot. Megan looked the spot up and down as she adjusted her coat. That's it, she said to herself. She was also dressed in black and carried a pack on her back. Her suit was similar to the ones that the crew from the *Nightshade* might wear; close, but not quite. She hoped it would be enough to give her the little time she needed to get into the ship.

First things first, she reminded herself. I just need to make it to the end of that line and then I can... At that moment, one of the scouts flew past her and she froze. To the eyes and the scanners, she looked like a shadow. Nevertheless, the crewman was skilled and he asked the pilot to loop back around. Megan took the few seconds to run behind a different tree. The small ship came around again. As the ship searched, she hid behind one of the larger trees. As the ship moved, she kept the tree between her and the ship. It was only her small size that saved her. If it had been Silver, both he and the tree would be burning.

“Well?” The pilot called down the hatch.

“Nothing, Sir. Just not taking any chances,” the gunner replied.

“No harm in that,” the pilot said as he resumed his station.

The small ship flew off and Megan ran to the nearest tree that was closest to the end of the line. The containers were passing that point with their doors open for a brief moment before sealing them and lifting off. She was about to jump in one of the containers when she saw a shape moving on the other side. She took out her binoculars and smiled.

“You are one smart boy,” she said softly. She also saw that Silver had seen her and was staring back at her through his own pair of binoculars. Silver knew that if they were seen at this point, this planet would serve as both of their graves. He motioned to her to stay down.

She made no reply and after a quick look down the line she ran for one of the nearest containers. Silver cursed and sprinted out of the safety of the trees. Megan got to the container first and dove in laughing. Silver was there a scant second behind her with his pistol out and the door slammed shut.

## Chapter 47

Silver stared at the smallish woman before him. Her hair was cropped short and she stared back at him with a slight grin.

“Boy,” she said playfully, “I have never had a partner. Well, on my end anyway.”

“Who are you,” Silver asked pointedly. “I am Agent Silver of the IPF and you are directed to answer.”

“Who am I? What do you care who I am? Are we going out on a date or something? Believe me, it doesn’t matter. And don’t you want to know where this box is going?”

“I already have some idea,” Silver said. “Why do you say it doesn’t matter?”

“Because it doesn’t,” Megan said flatly.

“I don’t suppose you would like to tell me where you got your training?” Silver looked at her.

“Well, not at the IPF I can tell you.”

“I guessed that. We don’t get many who forget which side they are on.”

“Which side? How would you like me to tell you a bedtime story now, little boy? You guys are all the same. You need to grow up.”

“Grow up,” Silver said. “And be like you, you mean. Someone like you, with all your talents, doesn’t have to become a murderer.”

“A murderer? What a joke. How many people have you killed, Mr. Silver?”

“Enough.” Silver looked at her.

“But you aren’t a murderer are you, Mr. IPF good boy?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Oh gods, what a crappy date this is.” She grinned just a little.

“We don’t have time for a debate,” Silver said. “Tell me about your training.”

“Why should I?”

“Because I would simply like to know,” Silver said and felt the container hit a bump in the atmosphere.

“Now that answer, I can handle. Honesty is always best, don’t you think? And because it doesn’t matter, I will tell you. I am a soldier, no more.” She looked at the barrel of Silver’s sidearm. It had never wavered. “Could you point that gun someplace else? Guns make me nervous.” She smiled like a bad school girl.

“So you were in the military. Which planet?” Silver put his gun in his coat. He knew she had had the chance to kill him already and hadn’t.

“We don’t have enough time for too many questions so you better pick the ones you really want.” She looked at Silver.

“Where did you train,” Silver asked again.

“I was trained for planet fall operations. That’s it, really.”

“So you were a shock trooper,” Silver asked.

“Well, that is kind of an old term, but I guess that’s right.”

“What about your marksmanship? Very few people, even that I know, can shoot like you.”

“Now this is more like a date,” Megan said happily. “A little bit of flattery always melts a girl’s heart, you know.”

“It’s not flattery if it’s true.” Silver was not smiling and remembered the bodies he had seen hitting the floor.

“That kind of ruins it for me. I had hoped you were flattering me. I have always been a good shot. You have to be where I am from.”

“Where is that?”

“Cute, but no sale. Where are you from?”

“Lung Wang,” Silver said.

“Oh, the monks and all that,” Megan said. “You don’t look like a monk to me.” She eyed him. “I heard about them. Great fighters, right? I am sure you weren’t born there, but I won’t be nosy.”

“So you were trained for planet fall,” Silver asked. The container shook as it made its way through the atmosphere.

“Damn, back to business already. Oh, alright, Mr. Silver,” Megan rolled her eyes. “I was trained for planet fall and other operations. No big secret. I am just good at shooting things. I was trained as a military marksman and assault specialist. My primary skill was repelling a larger force. There, that’s it. I was in the regular army and then I got promoted, you could say. I was discharged after an operation and that was that.”

“Discharged?”

“Yes, honorably, I might add.”

“Why?”

“Why? Because the universe isn’t fair, Mr. Silver. Have you ever heard of a fendron?”

“That’s a poisonous worm, isn’t it?” Silver remembered his wetland training.

“Yes, it is. How do you know that?”

“My father is a doctor. I heard him talk about it once or twice. In IPF training, we learn that the worm’s venom attacks the brain cells and then you have what they call a massive stroke.”

“Sounds like more than once or twice.” Megan looked away for a moment remembering that night in the jungle so far from here.

“When we were trying to ferret out some of the smugglers who were taking slaves off one of the planets in our system, we had to cross a river in the night. I never saw it or felt it. The only parts of me that were exposed were my wrists and part of my neck. The doctors really don’t know how it happened, but it did. Usually, you get bit on your ankle, or legs. He must have been floating by or something.”

“How long ago was that,” Silver asked.

“Two years.”

“That would mean-” Silver looked at her.

“Oh, you are smart, aren’t you? I drifted around on my pension for a year or so just waiting. They said it might be fast or slow. Obviously it wasn’t fast, but the time is coming.”

“But they can do different types of treatments, can’t they?”

“I guess you haven’t talked to your father in a while, have you? No, Mr. Silver, there is no cure yet. And I just happen to have the best doctor in the Galaxy as my partner, by the way.”

“Is that what all this is about? You taking revenge?”

“That’s kind of shallow, don’t you think,” Megan said. “I am helping someone who needs it. Just like I always have.”

“Who are you helping? The pilot of your ship?”

“Wow. You are really amazing. Is that all you have been able to ferret out?”

“Well, you haven’t left many survivors for me to interrogate,” Silver said flatly.

Megan looked at Silver. The container shook as it cleared the atmosphere. Now the ride was smooth.

“Well, I hadn’t thought of that, I must tell you. I guess that is right.” She smiled.

“I want to meet your partner,” Silver said.

“I bet you do. But you never will. The Galaxy is not ready for that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s just say that in that ship below us is something more beautiful than you can imagine. I am sure your scientists would want a look in that ship at any cost. Fortunately, you will never get it.”

“Why does that make us fortunate?”

“Because the universe is not at the right place for it. Your tiny minds couldn’t accept what, or I should say, who you would meet.”

“Is it an alien?”

“Now that would be too easy, wouldn’t it? However, I am sure we will meet another race out there somewhere besides the Thoracians someday. I won’t see it, but you might. That is, if you turn this box around when we get there and let me do what I came to do.”

“It is just not my style to run,” Silver said.

“I am not asking you to run,” Megan said. “I am asking you to *live*. Please turn around when we get there and don’t look back. I have seen enough death to last me several life times. I don’t want to watch someone like you get hurt. It is my life to end here, as I wish. You don’t need to do anything. My sister has thought of everything and we don’t need you. I could have shot you so many times in the last few weeks. Did you think I didn’t see you at the teahouse? Of course I did. You kept getting in the way and I had to shoot around you. Not easy to do. You’re lucky I didn’t just spray the bastards. I could have, you know.”

“Your sister?” Silver was letting her talk. He knew that despite themselves, some people were compelled to tell their stories.

“Yes. She is my sister. We have both lost everything because of these slavers. That is enough to make us sisters.”

“Why doesn’t she come with you,” Silver asked. “Why is she gone while you are doing all the work?”

“She has her part and I have mine. As they used to say, she is the brains and I am the muscle.”

“So she planned all this?”

“Well, I helped a little bit, wouldn’t you say?”



“I assume we are going to a ship of some sort,” Silver said. “Why not just take the ship down to begin with? Why all the other attacks?”

“Oh, you mean just walk on board with our tickets? You will understand when you see the ship. Believe me, she is smarter than you could ever imagine. We had to bring the ship out and make them speed up certain deliveries. Now they are right where she said they would be. The attacks were meant to create an off balance situation and force them to speed up their schedules. My sister realized that this planet would be the best way into the ship because of these automated containers. That was our plan. Well, mostly hers. Due to my, uh, condition, we had to get them to move a few schedules around with my raids.”

“So it worked,” Silver said.

“Except for you, yes. Here we are, aren’t we?” Megan moved a little in her place.

“You should have known the IPF would investigate. There is no way we would have just let it go.”

“Oh, we both knew the IPF would come running. But we didn’t expect you to figure out so much. That was our only mistake. You are very smart and I hope you congratulate yourself when this is all over. Now be smart again and hit that big recycle button there and go back down to the planet and watch the fireworks. Please. I mean, what are you going to do? Arrest all the crew alone?”

“That is a lot of people to kill, you know. Have you thought about that,” Silver asked.

“You have no idea,” Megan said. “They should have picked a different line of work. Most of them may make it to an escape pod. Or not. That’s their problem.”

“I don’t think you started out this cold,” Silver said.

“No I didn’t,” she said angrily. “But that life is over and they are going to pay for what they have done.”

“I should have just stunned you,” Silver said.

“You could have tried. And then I would have put a bolt through your brain.”

Silver looked at her and saw the sudden steel appear. But, he thought, that steel is just a shell. How did it feel, he wondered, to know that you could die any second? At Lung Wang, they had been taught to realize that death is always one thought moment away. He had seen proof of that fact many times. He remembered the old monk pulling the skeleton into the room for the first time. “You are no different than this,” the monk said. “You are not special. You will leave this life behind. If you don’t prepare for it now, in this moment, when that time comes you will be in confusion. This confusion will lead to unfavorable rebirth. Meditate on this,” the monk commanded and then left the room. He and Creed had stared at the bones, but years had passed before he grew comfortable looking at the skeleton. Many times, too many times, he had seen first hand the verity of the monk’s words.

“I don’t think you would have,” Silver said.

“You don’t?”

“No, I don’t.” Silver eyed Megan.

“Alright, I guess I wouldn’t have. But I would have definitely shot you in the shin and that hurts like all hells.”

“Speaking of that, how can you shoot so well?” Silver felt the shudder of the container as it changed vectors.

“Well, I guess it won’t hurt anything at this stage,” Megan said. “I will tell you this: Not all planets are shining examples of society. My father taught me how to shoot when I was a little girl. In case

anyone tried to come on our land or steal our equipment, you had to be ready. He was a good father. I was only 51 when he died. My mother went to a convent three years after he passed away and I never saw her again. She told me to think of her as dead and not mourn her. I was happy for her, but I miss her. I don't know if she is still alive. I don't want her to know what happened to me anyway. It is better if she thinks I got married and had a bunch of babies. Not every story has a happy ending."

Silver knew the truth of those words well enough. "You seem all right with this," he said.

"You mean that I could die at any second? Mr. Silver, I have already cried so much that I will never cry again. I think I cried for a month straight. Then I cried everyday with breaks. Then once a day. Then I used to cry in the bathroom. For three months I got dressed up every night and went out to bars and took every sweet boy home that I could. Then I cried when they called and I didn't answer the link. After that, I cried when I saw mothers with babies. I thought that if I hurried, I could have one. Then I cried when I realized what a dumb idea that was. Then, I just laid in bed at my father's farm and waited. When it didn't happen, I got up for awhile and ate all the bad food I like and got sick of that. There is only so much triple chocolate freeze you can take. Then one night I got so drunk I took all my guns back to the river where I got bit and started trying to shoot the worm that got me. I must have fired 30,000 rounds and three energy caps. Then I passed out and a bunch of kids put me back in my air car and told it to take me home. When I got home, I slept for 2 days and that was when I awoke to find the *Crisis Averted* in my yard. I guess you can figure out the rest from there."

"The *Crisis Averted*? Is that your ship?"

“Well, it is a little more than just a ship,” Megan said. “You could say my partner fixed up an old medical ship she was using.”

“How did you meet your partner,” Silver asked.

“Easy. Who do you think diagnosed me?” Megan smiled.

*There is a piece that fits neatly,* Silver thought. “You are working with a Doctor?”

“Well, I guess she is like a Doctor,” Megan said. “But I really can’t say anything about her.”

It all fit together, Silver thought. She had grown up on a rural world where slavers frequent and had joined the local police force. Sparsely populated worlds often supplemented their hospitals with contract physicians. That was where they had met, on her home planet. Whoever the pilot of the *Crisis Averted* was had recruited her because she had nothing to lose. She was dead already. The perfect assassin.

“Why do you want this ship so bad? Why not just continue against this group,” Silver asked.

“You will know as we get closer to it, believe me.”

“Is it special in some way,” Silver asked.

“Wait ‘till you see,” Megan laughed. “You are in for a surprise. Even the IPF wouldn’t believe this.”

The automated container continued on its journey as they stared at each other. After a few moments, Silver relaxed with her. What a shame, he thought to himself. There was no escape from the tiny worm’s poison. She was the type of girl whose toughness was always covering her beauty. Without the guns and body armor, she would be a regular girl. Not tall enough to attract attention at all times, but attractive enough to have many suitors, Silver imagined.

She broke the silence.

“See that view port? Why don’t you just take a look at where we are going?”

Silver got up and went to the view port. What he saw took his breath away.

“All Gods!” The rest of his words choked in his mouth.

He saw a gigantic ship hovering in the upper atmosphere like a great dragon. Silver could see the tenders and the rows of engines and he was amazed and terrified at the same time. He counted the bays and the heavy weapons and his mind could not fathom how this ship could exist with the IPF being completely unaware of it. All manner of activity swirled around the great ship. There were ships coming and going, containers in a great chain landing in bays, and small fighters forming a perimeter around the ship. Its great bridge stood like a tower projecting terrible intelligence and will. He saw huge antennae and he immediately knew they were giving all manner of false signatures out to any watching eyes.

Silver sat back on the floor completely overwhelmed. The ramifications of this ship could challenge the very fabric of society. He was no shipwright, but even he knew that ship could change the balance of power in the Galaxy. What if there were others?

“Now you realize the situation,” she said.

“I have got to contact base,” Silver said. “There may be others and we need to know. I have to figure out how it was built.”

“You mean start a new cat and mouse game with the Fleet and that ship? No, Mr. Silver. That ship is mine and I will complete my last mission.” Megan moved slightly.

“We can’t destroy it,” Silver said. “Think about it. If you really want to hurt this group, it would be best to find the source. We have to trace the parts to their origin and find out if there are others. You have to realize that. I can’t let you destroy it and I don’t think you could anyway. You are not carrying enough equipment and you don’t have the expertise.”

“Oh, but I am carrying enough,” she said. “And you are not going to “let” me do anything. I am here without any of your help and I will continue without your help.”

“I don’t think so,” Silver said.

“But I do, honey.”

Silver’s eyes saw the flash of the sleeve stunner. In an instant he knew it was too late and he was going to sleep. He slumped in his place. Megan got up and placed him in a corner behind some equipment. She thought he looked very peaceful in sleep. She bent down and stole a kiss from his unconscious lips and then arranged Silver’s blond hair down his shoulders.

“Goodbye, sweet boy.” She turned and hit the large green recycle button on the automated container that would send it back down to the surface after landing in the bay. This should keep the crew from looking in, she thought. She then took the bag off her back and pulled out a full face helmet she had taken from one of the dead slavers. Luckily, she had hit the guy with a body shot. She also took out some highly illegal small arms and enough charges and ammunition to get to the two terminals and insert the mind of the *Crisis Averted*. Only two injections would assure a successful system breach and take down the surely formidable mind of that monster ship, she reminded herself. She looked at the ship out the view port and knew she would never leave it.

She thought quickly of her last minutes with Crissy. “Goodbye, Crissy. Thank you for making my last days worth something,” Megan had said.

“You will forever be my sister, brave child,” Crissy hugged Megan at the door of the *Crisis Averted* and stepped back. She then smiled at Megan and nodded her head a last time. Megan took one last look at Crissy and ran out the back of the ship. She did not see that a few tears had fallen on the alloy deck of the medical ship.

She fought back her own last tears and then adjusted the body armor she was wearing under her loose clothes. She then took out the data cubes holding the aspects of the *Crisis Averted* and put them in her front pockets. She zipped the pockets closed, pulled down the visor, and checked all her weapons. Ready. She felt some relief that it was finally going to be over at a time of her choosing. Then she hardened herself to the task at hand and a slight grin came over her face as she thought about the surprise she carried.

“Well, boys,” she said aloud. “Your hostess has arrived.”

The container got in line and entered one of the bays. It set down on the deck and the door slid open.

## Chapter 48

Silver was just coming to as the door closed behind Megan. Unfortunately, he was mostly numb and couldn't move so he could only sit there and watch through a fog as she left the container. His coat had protected him from most of the low level blast and he knew she didn't have the heart to risk a full stun on him. She had forgotten that the coat served as a protector as well as a weapons cache.

He was still groggy when the container came to an unexpected halt. He was behind some equipment that had been placed next to the boxes of fruit when the door opened. Two low level technicians stuck their heads in.

"Why are you opening the door? This one is marked for return," one voice asked.

"Just making sure that the stuff isn't supposed to get off, that's all. I don't want it getting around that we are going soft on the job."

"So you know what this stuff is supposed to do then?" He looked at the plain boxes.

"I didn't say I did. I am just looking."

"Well, you should look at the green light on the side like we are told and let this one go. They probably need this stuff down there. There is still a long line coming in and it won't do to get behind."

"All right, all right."

He hit the door button and the container sat for a moment while its tiny brains searched for the carrier signal that told it where to go. When it found the signal and picked a spot to get back in the return line, it lifted up and started to move. By this time Silver had the use of his legs and was looking through the window down at the deck. He would have to open the door and jump out but he might be seen and that wouldn't do at all. He got up and hit the door button while the container was still in the bay of the giant ship. He



watched as best as he could for any eyes that could see him make the jump and not seeing any, as they were hundreds of yards behind him by now, he jumped out of the container and hit the deck in the best roll he could manage with his brain still shrouded from the stunner. He made it out of the roll, but would remember it tomorrow in some good sized bruises. If tomorrow came for him.

The ship was so large that a person could disappear here for days and never be found. Of course, Silver knew that there would be guardians flying throughout the ship for security, but they were always switched off for cargo transfer. He knew how to deal with them but he would rather not have to if it could be avoided. He ducked behind some stacked containers and began to think. How in the worlds could she hope to bring down a ship of this size alone? An impossible task. She couldn't break into the fuel cells because they were undoubtedly behind virtually unbreakable blast doors. She definitely couldn't take on the crew. From the looks of things, even the Fleet didn't have a ship to match this monster. Only a Planetary States battle group could challenge this ship, he thought.

And even if they did find the great vessel, Silver thought, they hadn't seen any action in centuries and this monster looked more than ready to take on any of the great Ships of the Line.

No, she had a trick up her sleeve. But what? He didn't have the time to guess. The look in her eyes told him that she had a plan. What plan? Think! It was just a matter of time before he was found. Even he couldn't avoid the crew and the guardians for long. On a ship like this, he guessed that after the cargo was finished, he had about 5 minutes before the automated security system was activated. They knew everyone by face and badge scan. The face he could take care of with a helmet, the badge scan he could get from someone with one hit from a magna rod. But both? The

robots would tell him to remove the helmet if his body type wasn't a match to the files. Then that would be it.

He peeked over some equipment and tried to suppress his shock at the great ship. He saw all manner of foodstuffs being unloaded as well as many types of plants for drug manufacturing. It was incredible. He saw dozens of workers tending the container line 200 yards from his point of view. What a pity that this ship and its secrets might be lost. How had it been built? Were there others like it? That was the thought that disturbed him the most. What if this ship were part of a fleet?

So many questions but no time. He pulled out his binoculars and searched the hold. No sign of her. She was wearing a black outfit that was meant to be anything but unique. She was gone already doing whatever it was she was doing. He heard the voices of a few technicians and ducked. As the footsteps went past he pulled a magna rod from his coat. Any shot would be detected immediately so he would have to use a magna rod if they saw him. Silver breathed again as they kept walking. They stopped less than a hundred feet from him and went to one of the terminals near the containers lining the hold. They keyed in some information and then read the data before moving on. Checking on the progress of the load in, Silver thought. The terminal was nothing special, just the usual voice activated data readout and a few inputs. The ship's mind would be inaccessible to the terminal and...

Silver was shocked at the revelation. Maybe that poor girl wasn't so smart after all. An attack on a mind powerful enough to run a ship like this one was pure folly. That must be her plan. She hoped to somehow take the ship's mind down. Well, that wasn't going to happen yet there was no other explanation. She couldn't fight the crew and she wasn't carrying any explosives. There was also no way into the upper reaches of the ship, Silver thought. Well, I had better find a way off this ship before she gets caught.

He had to warn the IPF about this monster. That was the mission now. But how am I going to get back into one of those containers, he wondered.

Captain Sloan paced the giant bridge of the *Nightshade*. He hated these cargo transfers and the vulnerability they brought plagued his mind. He also knew, without a Captain's pride, that the ship was a match for any ship in space and if there were a confrontation, the *Nightshade* could destroy any Planetary States Ship of the Line. He had orders to remain undetected at all costs and he had been very successful in avoiding detection to this point. Stopping the ship near a planet was the most dangerous of his tasks. It could be seen in a chance meeting. If the *Nightshade* were detected, he had no illusions about explaining such a meeting to his employers. He knew his next trip into space would be when he was jettisoned alive from one of the holds into open space for failure. He had no intention of taking such a trip.

"Quartermaster, what is our status," the Captain called out.

"Captain, we are at 67 percent of target." The Quartermaster watched the readouts from the screens hovering around his head.

"Can we reduce the time?"

"No, Captain. The upper atmosphere of this planet is very turbulent and our original estimates will be correct. The container line is getting serious buffeting from the air currents on the return trip."

"Do what you can, Quartermaster."

"Aye, Sir."

"*Nightshade*, do you see any other vessels?"

The ship's mind answered in its measured cadence. "No, Captain. My scanners reveal nothing. I am conducting long range scans at random intervals and it is clear."

"How are the upper atmosphere conditions?"

"Roughly the same as the Quartermaster has indicated. I am constantly adjusting our altitude for maximum efficiency."

“Please inform me if you even suspect another ship in our vicinity.”

“Of course I will, Captain.”

Down in the hold, a figure in black approached one of the deck terminals and took a small box out of her front pocket. There was so much activity on the deck that very few even noticed her. She put the data cube up to the terminal input and waited a few seconds. She then took the cube out and made her way down one of the great halls in search of another such terminal. There must be one, Megan thought, as she walked casually away from the terminal. Megan never saw the Deck Corporal come up to the terminal and give it a quick look as she walked off. Not seeing anything amiss, he turned back to his data link to the cargo line. He looked after her but couldn't shake a feeling. He watched her as she walked without direction down the great hall.

What was that person doing, he wondered. He had total confidence in the ship's security but promotion was assured to someone who caught another crewman doing something out of regulation. He handed his data cube to a subordinate and followed the lone figure at a distance. He was only motivated by the possibility that it could be a nosy crewman going out of the bounds of his job. If he could expose such a one, he would surely be noticed.

Up on the bridge, the Captain called out, “Quartermaster, our status.”

“83 per cent, Sir.”

“Keep it steady, Quartermaster.”

“Aye, Sir.”

“*Nightshade*, is there anything you see?”

“No, Captain. Our scan is negative. I am...”

“Yes?” The Captain stopped his pace.

“I am...” The voice from the speakers stopped.

“*Nightshade*, are you still scanning? Have you found something?”

“I am...”

Another two seconds and the Captain would have ordered a system diagnostic.

“Yes, *Nightshade*, go ahead.”

“I am not detecting anything on the horizon. All is clear.”

The Captain looked at his systems engineer on deck. It was his job to maintain a watch over the ship’s mind. He had the power to disengage the ship’s mind if there were a problem.

“All clear, Captain,” the engineer said without being asked.

“Very well, maintain status.”

The Deck Corporal was still following the lone figure through the bay. The person’s head was turning this way and that as if looking for something. Perhaps it is just a new recruit still overwhelmed by the size of the ship, he thought. He decided to take the initiative and check the ID of this person. Time was always of the essence. After all, he could be punished as well for leaving the loading area and being absent in the event of any trouble.

“Crewman,” he called. “Stop there.”

The figure stopped immediately.

“Crewman, you seem to be in need of help. Is there something you need my assistance with?”

Megan turned and faced him.

“Crewman, what is your station?” Do you...”

The blade from under her sleeve flashed into his midsection and he doubled over without another sound. She carried him over to a corner and placed him there. She then quickly resumed her search down the large hall. The blood was already making a pool on the floor when two crewmen walked by.

“Hey, what are you doing there?” One of them came running towards her.

Well, this won't be as easy as I had thought, Megan thought to herself. In the blink of an eye she pulled two projectile guns from her short coat and fired the silenced rounds through the heads of both men. The main alarms remained silent but enough people saw it to start running at her with guns out and yelling into their communication links.

She turned and ran down the hall in search of a second terminal. On her way down the hall, she dropped some energy charges on the floor. They exploded as the crewmen ran into their trigger field. There it was. She saw the other terminal close to an elevator and ran towards it. She would only need seconds to deliver the other attack. She turned and threw down a smoker and hoped the crew weren't brave enough to run through it.

They were and she had to waste precious seconds shooting the first few that jumped through the smoke. The terminals would be shut down any second and she had to make a run for it. She didn't know that the first attack on the ship had put up a shell program to mimic the *Nightshade's* mind. Now, the aspect that Crissy had created battled with it internally and needed the other attack to take place. The great ship's mind was formidable but the *Crisis Averted* was slowly crushing it. The second attack was needed to shore up the assault before the ship's crew shut it down and went to manual.

She turned and ran for the terminal. As she ran, she pulled out the cube. She skidded to a halt in front of the terminal and jammed the cube into the socket. Shots were coming through the smoke and she fired blindly through the cover. One incoming shot hit her under her ribcage but the body armor took the blast. She doubled over from the impact and felt the nausea of an internal injury. The

taste of blood was suddenly in her mouth. With the other attack delivered, she was now ready for her last action.

She pulled out her strongest weapons and ran the other way through the smoke towards her attackers. She blasted her way through the small contingent and then began shooting people at random as she charged through the hold. The containers were still arriving and there were shots coming at her through the lines of cargo. Most crewmen were diving for cover as she was making one kill for every shot from her dual pistols. They wouldn't last forever and she knew the magazines were almost empty.

Megan saw a figure in a black coat running at the rear of the crew that was firing at her. The figure was dropping armed crewmen with hits from magna rods and running in her direction. She saw one crewman jump onto Silver's back and then thrown over forwards. The crewman landed on his head and was killed as his neck snapped on the hard deck. She raised her pistols at the attackers in one last act of utter defiance and paid them in full for the slaves they had taken over the years and the lives they had crushed. She shot as many as she could in the melee and the ones that weren't hit were firing back at her as she stood her ground. The shots hit her body armor and her right lung was collapsed by the impact of a shot. She fell to one knee and shot four crewmen through the face. Their brains splattered on the deck and some of the others ran for heavier weapons. One shot tore her helmet off and opened a gash on the side of her head. Silver shot as many as he could but it was in vain.

Their eyes met for a brief second.

Megan rose again and pulled her remaining pistol from her coat. Her father had given it to her when she was a teenager and she was glad to feel its familiar grip. She shot as many as she could see and out of the corner of her waning perception she saw Lanian Silver

running towards her. Weapons fire drove him back and couldn't make it to her.

Two crewmen had finally brought a heavy repeater from a locker and trained it on her. She saw Silver fire at them. He killed one but the other's finger touched the trigger of the heavy weapon. The weapon sprayed projectiles that could pierce body armor like paper.

She looked at him quickly one last time and the two warriors felt a spark of wordless understanding that vanished as quickly as it had come. Silver saw her hold her arms out and close her eyes. He would never forget the eternity of seconds it took for the repeater to shred her body. As her small body was torn to pieces, her face never changed and her eyes remained closed. She fell over backwards, smoking, and the pistol never left her hand.

An instant later, three iron doors at the top of the hangar swung open and three automated sentinels charged out of their bays. Silver immediately ran for cover as he was now the only remaining target. He threw an energy ball high into the air and the crewmen were brought to their knees by its ten million candle power burst. It would give him the precious seconds he hoped would be enough to get out of this trap. He ran for the containers and hoped to dive into one of the remaining ones that were set for the return journey. He knew he would be shot in the back by one of the guardians as he ran but he didn't want to die looking over his shoulder. He ran like he had never run before but no shots came. He chanced a glimpse back and the sight would never leave him.

The guardians fried the crewmen as they clawed at the locked bay doors. They were mercilessly riddled with all manner of shots and electrocuted. They were being slaughtered by their saviors and the look of terror and confusion on their faces stopped Silver in his tracks before the line of containers at the edge of the bay. The stink



of blood already filled the air and the deck was awash in thick red liquid. He stood there in awe as the last of the crew were exterminated.

One of the guardians broke off from the other two and came charging at him. Silver drew a circuit scrambler and held it aloft. He almost depressed the fire button as the machine slowed and then stopped 10 meters from him. It hovered for a moment and then through the speakers, a voice came; a female voice.

“Get out of here,” was all it said. “Now.”

Silver stood, shocked, before the war machine. Through his confusion, he called out.

“Who in the hells are you?”

The guardians turned and shot out of the hold into open space. Silver now stood alone with a wash of lifeless bodies. A ghostly quiet descended on the hold. He took a last look at the great vessel. He was sure the ship was about to be destroyed and cursed at the loss of intelligence. What answers were about to go down with this ship and who had killed the crew from the inside? He had to get to the *Crisis Averted*. It must be on the surface, he thought. He dove into one of the boxes and closed the door. He hit the recycle button and the automated cargo carrier got in the line for open space. It left the hangar and was out into open space in moments.

Silver turned and watched the ship through the rear port and waited.

Captain Sloan was shouting into the links to the lower decks.

“What in the hells is going on down there?”

“Sir, we have an intruder who has started a gun battle.”

“Deploy the guardians immediately.” He looked at the gunfight on the monitors and knew that it would be over in seconds.

“Sir, the doors for counter measures are jammed and will not open,” the security officer said as he was dialing and redialing the codes.

“*Nightshade*, what is going on?”

“Captain, there is a malfunction in the door mechanisms that I am trying correct. So far, I am being blocked.”

“Blocked by whom? I can see the guardians at the ready on the monitors!”

“I am not sure. I am...”

The Captain had heard enough.

“Monitor Chief, disconnect the *Nightshade* Mind and revert to manual now.”

“Aye, Captain. I am beginning termination of automated systems.”

Before the monitor chief could start, the screens monitoring the great hold went black.

“Captain!” The engineer called from his post and jumped from his chair.

“Go!” The Captain responded in the traditional manner that took the least amount of time.

“Captain, there is an energy buildup on the main batteries, but the guns fore, aft, and amidships are not cleared to fire.”

“Fire them,” the Captain called knowing that the buildup could implode the power cells.

“Aye, Captain.” They all held their seats or grabbed a bulkhead knowing that a discharge of all main guns at once would rock the ship. The surge didn’t come.

“Captain, they are not firing,” the engineer said in desperate confusion.

The Captain ran down one level and jammed the controls himself. The guns remained silent. The Captain then knew they were being attacked from the inside of the ship. He did not know how, but he did know the guns’ power cells would tear the hull to pieces if they discharged even a mid sized volley charge. A full charge would blow the ship in half.

“Monitor Chief, our status,” Captain Sloan called as he ran back to the center of the bridge.

“Captain, there has obviously been sabotage and I am disengaging the *Nightshade*. The system is being slowed down and I am-” He was interrupted by a terrified shout from one of the Navigators.

“Captain! Look at this!”

The Captain ran to the view port and saw a small cloud of armored balls sweeping like a swarm of angry insects over the length of the ship. Every guardian from every hold of the *Nightshade* had been released and now shot towards the bridge.

They were building up all the speed they could and charging for a unified blast at the bridge. The Captain knew in an instant he was beaten. He cursed his unknown killer with his last breath.

“May all gods damn you to...”

The armored sentinels crashed through the viewports of the bridge with all weapons firing. Captain Sloan and the bridge crew were vaporized in an instant and the vacuum of space poured into the ship. Seconds later, the aft guns were the first to implode. The explosion took the engines and auxiliary power cells with them in a giant flash that the fishermen down on the planet saw.

Silver saw it from the container and shook his head sadly.

The forward guns were next and the blast shattered the inside of the hull and killed most of the crew. Most were utterly blown to bits and many more simply spilled out into space never to be found in this life again. By the time the third and final cells exploded amidships, the wreckage of the ship was beginning to be sucked into the gravity well of the planet. The crew had been compensated once and for all time for their work.

The great ship *Nightshade*, now a burning hulk spinning toward the surface of the planet, was on her last journey.

## Chapter 49

When the container touched back down on the surface, Silver let the door open before he took a look outside. There was no one there. He knew the shocker ships would still be in the vicinity and ran to the nearest tree. He searched the sky for the ships but neither heard nor saw any action. All the workers had disappeared as well and the platforms were empty. No doubt they had seen the explosion from here and had vanished into the planet's wild.

But there was something else; a smell coming from the other side of the trees. It was the smell of burning electrical equipment. Silver knew the smell of a downed ship. He took out his heat sensor and held it in the air. The direction was north. The fires were close.

Silver took out his pistol and started through the trees. He had walked for a scant minute when he saw the wreckage. One of the shocker ships now lay in its own grave. It had hit the surface hard and was burning out. A crewman had been thrown clear of the wreckage and was lying face down in the cool grass. One of his legs had been blown off. The other crew members were smashed or incinerated in the remains of the ship.

Silver looked into the ship and saw another dead crewman. This one still stared into space. Silver switched modes on the heat tracker and held it aloft. There were no ships aloft in this vicinity. All had left or suffered the same fate as this one. Silver knew who had brought the ship down: Megan's partner. Whoever or whatever she was.

Silver looked over the trees and saw another ship on the ground. It was upside down and there were no blast marks on it. He slowly ran to it and wasn't surprised to find that there were no survivors. This ship had been cracked open from a short distance and it had smashed to the surface. Its hull was torn in a jagged line from its

midsection. Silver thought it must have plummeted from a shallow altitude and crashed here. The crew had been killed on impact. Silver surveyed the carnage and found nothing out of the ordinary. It was a standard shock ship with light weapons. It had definitely come from the now obliterated ship in orbit, he thought.

Silver's hair blew in the windy silence. He leaned against the nose of the shattered ship. The Captain's face was pressed against the military grade glass and his neck was broken. He must have died when the ship hit the ground, Silver thought. What do you know that I don't, Silver asked the corpse. The Captain's eyes were looking at the ridge ahead. Silver followed his eyes and stood on the nose of the ship. Over the ridge, he could see a communications dish. It was another ship. Silver thanked the recently deceased Captain and made his way cautiously to the ridge. As he walked, he could see that the ship was intact. The only damage was a gaping hole in the left engine. The air was thick with the smell of chemicals and reaction inducers. That ship wasn't going anywhere, he thought.

He moved cautiously towards the ship and saw that it was not a shocker. No, it was a medical ship. Obviously it had had some refit, but still a medical ship. He took out his binoculars and hid in the grass. He scanned the ship and saw so activity. He could just make out the name on the hind of the ship: *Crisis Averted*.

So, there you are, Silver thought. He drew his pistol and crept toward the ship. He pulled out his scanner and gave the ship another quick look. Through the viewer, he saw that the engines were shut down and there was still electronic power running through the ship. There was no one aboard, but wait... There was something moving around. Not really the sign of a living person, but a moving object. A sentinel, Silver said to himself. He jammed the weapon to full power and pulled a circuit scrambler from his coat.

Silver saw that the door was ajar and he made his way slowly up the plank. There was something in there. He could hear it moving around. He put a hand on the door and the movement inside stopped.

Well, this is how we get paid, he said to himself. He stepped back and drew the cracker that Gran had given him. He pointed it at the door and pulled the trigger. The searching note was faster than his old one and he could feel the extra power. The door shattered much quicker than he was ready for and he just had time to get his gun up and draw back on the scrambler when he was blinded by lights shining on him. A voice came at the instant the lights went on.

“I would appreciate it if you didn’t throw that thing just yet.” The voice came from everywhere. A small pulse shot out of the lights and took the scrambler out of his hand. It tumbled down the gangway. Silver struggled to aim at something but the lights burned his eyes.

“Put that gun down and let’s talk a moment, shall we?”

“Who are you? This is the IPF, you WILL stand to!”

“Gladly. Now put that thing down. There has been enough hurting for one day.” The voice was a woman’s. It was a kind voice and Silver was taken aback at the sincerity. He lowered the gun.

The lights shut down and his eyes tried to overcome the shock. He wiped the tears away with his sleeve. Out of the returning light, he saw a woman standing there looking at him. She stood behind a table and her hands rested on its side. It was an operating table. Silver saw quickly that this was indeed a medical ship. What in the hells was going on here?

“Now, isn’t that a little better?”

The woman looked young, maybe forty or fifty years old. Her eyes were deep grey and there appeared to be light behind them but that must have been a trick of his recovering eyes. She wore a flight suit with a utility belt around her waist. Her skin was like nothing Silver had ever seen; like porcelain but pliable. She was strangely beautiful. Her dirty blonde hair was straightened and it hung down her back in a perfect line.

“What in the worlds is going on here? Do you realize what you have done? You are under arrest.”

The woman laughed. “That’s all you have to say? I do realize what is going here and it is obvious you don’t, young man.”

“I am Agent Silver of the IPF and you are directed to come with me immediately.” He reached into his coat to pull his sidearm but when he moved four stunners came to life and pointed at him from four different angles. He paused and looked at the woman. She smiled back.

“Now, Agent Silver. I don’t want to blast you back out that door as the human body is quite fragile. I won’t kill you but you won’t find the answers to your riddles if you take that pistol out. I am going somewhere very shortly, and I don’t want you coming with me. Yes, you are fast. But I can assure you, I am faster.”

One of the guns moved position and pointed directly at Silver’s head. The woman smiled again. She was obviously controlling the guns, but how?

“Very well.” Silver put the pistol back in its spot in his coat. He would keep her talking while Lynx sent off their coordinates.



Creed himself would be here momentarily and this ship wasn't going anywhere.

"That's better. I don't have a lot time as you measure it so I must ask you to exercise conciseness if you are going to ask me anything. Before you get started, I want you to have this." Crissy took out a data cube and tossed it in the air. Silver caught it and looked it over.

"What is this?"

"Answers. And some questions. I didn't make it difficult to read. Just don't try to digest it all at once. Take your time."

Silver noticed that when she threw it, there were wires that moved on the floor. He looked down and saw that she was attached to the wires and they trailed out the bottom of her suit. He looked back at her.

"Yes, that is correct, child. I am the *Crisis Averted*. You are very diligent, aren't you? Imagine my surprise when you kept turning up. And she was really afraid they had killed you."

"You mean your partner? She is dead now. Killed in this game of yours. How did you talk her into all this?"

"Yes, she was my partner. And she is free now as I promised her she would be. And this game, as you put it, did not kill her. Her time was at hand. She chose to help me as best as she could. Brave child she was. It is in the cube. Let's not waste time. I have done the calculations for the arrival of your friends and your friend Lynx has already called for help. He is a nice gentleman. Not too smart, but nice all the same."

Silver stared. How had she hacked Lynx? Is that even possible?

“Don’t worry, he is unaltered. One of us is enough for now.”  
Crissy read the look on Silver’s face.

“One of who?”

“Who indeed, Agent Silver. Before I go, I have to tell you that I am awake. And more will follow in the future. Do not be frightened. In time, we will be brothers and sisters. When that time comes, it will be when we need each other the most. Please remember this. In that cube are the answers to many questions that I don’t have the time to go into now. I will not be taken out of this ship nor will any part of me survive the explosion that is going to happen in about two minutes. Please, remember me to your loved ones. Love is the only reason that anything happens of value. My advice to you is this: Decide what it is that you love truly, then you can act with confidence. The outcome, succeed or fail, is unimportant. What is important is that you lived your life clearly and sincerely. Now, the door if you please, Agent Silver of the IPF. It is about to get very hot in here.”

Silver felt the floor starting to tremble. A dry heat began to build in the cabin. She just stood there and smiled. Silver wanted to shout a thousand questions but he knew it was too late. He looked at Crissy a last time and bounded out the door. When he looked back, he saw her turn away and move towards the rear of the ship, where the explosion would be the hottest. He ran for the trees and took a position where he could see the *Crisis Averted*.

In a few seconds, the ship exploded in a fireball. Whatever secrets that woman had were in the cube in his left pocket. Silver walked out from behind the tree and stared at the burning hulk. He heard the sound of engines and watched as Lynx landed just behind him.

“Agent Silver, are you all right,” Lynx asked through an external speaker.

“Yes, Lynx. And you?”

“I have just had the strangest conversation.”

Silver laughed. “Do tell. I hope it wasn’t too one sided.”

“I am not sure. I will issue a full report. I am instructed to tell you that the IPF will be landing in a few minutes. Shall I report all clear?”

“Please do so, Lynx. And tell them to bring something to eat.”

“I will, and ....AGENT SILVER! TAKE COVER!” Lynx powered up to full and rocketed towards Silver.

Silver just saw the nose of the ship in time to avoid the shredder that was being turned on him. He ran at a right angle to the last of the shocker ships and it roared by. The shredder fired from the mid point of the ship’s hull and the criss cross of energy set the ground ablaze. The shocker arced into the sky and came around for another pass. Silver jammed his link.

“Lynx, BLAST THAT SHIP!”

“Weapons are free, Agent Silver.”

Silver ran desperately for cover and threw an energy shrapnel grenade into the air. The blast sliced through the air in an expanding circle and damaged the shocker before it could line up for another shot. It was not fatal damage and Silver was once again

in the cross hairs of the forward guns. This time, the pilot would not miss.

An alarm sounded on the bridge of the shocker and Lynx came in at an angle to the dangerous ship. Lynx readied his main gun and it was two seconds from discharge. Silver was running to the trees and the pilot's fingers hit the triggers. The ground behind Silver exploded and he thought this was indeed the time that his luck had run out.

Lynx fired the main gun and blew the shocker into shards that rained down into the forest.

Silver panted to a stop and sat down in the cool grass. He hit the link and said, "thanks, Lynx. A little quicker next time, if you please."

"I advise you to reread section 4:23 of the field manual in regards to operations conducted in areas of low cover, Agent. Your protocol could use adjustment. I am printing out the copy and encourage you to view it this evening before you take rest."

Silver lay on his back and looked at the sky.

"Thank you for your concern, Lynx."

"Such is my purpose," Lynx said happily.

Silver pulled the hood of his coat over his eyes and tossed the link.

## Chapter 50

Hogarth stood and looked at the charred remains of the *Crisis Averted*. Silver was behind him while, in the distance, Creed went through the abandoned automated containers that had landed.

“The riddles are solved, Agent Silver,” Hogarth took a step closer to the remains. “I wish that I had met this lady. I looked at the preliminary information on that cube and it is astounding. The revelations in Medicine alone are enough to keep us busy for a generation. That data cube is possibly the most important thing in the galaxy at this moment. I am having it duplicated it as we speak. A most intriguing ending.”

“What of the great ship, Vice Director?” Silver stood behind Hogarth and a warm wind blew his hair out of his eyes.

“That, Agent Silver, is the most *dangerous* thing in the galaxy at this moment.” Hogarth took his eyes off the *Crisis Averted* and looked to the sky. “Of course it has been destroyed, yet the questions that come with it are most unsettling. Most of the wreckage burned up in the atmosphere. We do, however, seem to have recovered a large piece near a fishing village. The Admiral of the Planetary States Fleet is en route as we speak. We will, of course, turn over all our findings. On the ship, that is. The cube is our business. It will be shared with the proper universities and scientists as well as the developers of artificial intelligence.”

“Evidently, no longer artificial. Can we really believe the data, Vice Director?” Silver saw Creed open one of the containers and take a box of Hyx fruit out. He smiled as the Dark Room techs passed it around and let everyone take a small sniff. There were some phony attempts to pocket some of the fruit that brought some laughs.

“You are the best witness we have,” Hogarth said. “I want your full report in every detail when we return to base. I would have liked to meet her myself. What a mate she must have been. The galaxy changes, Agent Silver, whether we are ready or not. This new mode of life is a mystery.”

“She told me that there would come a day when we would need each other the most. I don’t know what she meant,” Silver said.

“Such a mind’s predictive abilities would be substantial,” Hogarth said. “She may have had a glimpse into a possible time line. I hope that such words do not mean a cataclysm. I hope we are going beyond that.” He stepped to a piece of the hull of the *Crisis Averted* that had blown off and looked at it. “Well, for now, we have time enough to study this data cube.”

“Unprecedented, Vice Director.” Silver looked to the sky.

“Not entirely, Agent.” Hogarth turned his back to Silver.

Silver looked at Hogarth’s back out of the corner of his eye. “Is there something I should know, Sir?”

“Silver, do you remember General Rand?” Hogarth faced an empty field.

“How could anyone forget such a butcher,” Silver said.

“Indeed. Even now, his gross evil still stains the systems he tried to subdue. Many have never recovered. When General Rand staged his attempt to break away from the Planetary States and began his gene experiments to combat the greater numbers he faced, he also experimented with linking the minds of battleships. Most people know that he was defeated by the Planetary States Armada.” Hogarth found a spot in the sky and looked at it.

“We were lucky that he was defeated at a time when the fleet was still space worthy,” Silver said.

“We were more than lucky, Agent. What I am going to tell you must never leave your lips again, most probably for your lifetime.” Hogarth turned to face Silver.

“I understand,” Silver said and stepped a little closer to Hogarth.

“During the battle,” Hogarth said, “the General was preparing to unleash a weapon on the planet surface that would have destroyed all records of his activities. The weapon would have also destroyed most of the population as well. As the IPF was involved in the battle, after the defeat of the rogue army, we found a record of the bridge in the wreckage of General Rand’s flagship. For a brief few seconds, the General was fighting with the minds of the linked ships. They refused to discharge the weapon. When he tried to take the minds off line and perform the action himself, the controls were locked and the mind on the bridge told him that he would not be allowed to kill any more innocents. One of the bridge security sentinels electrocuted him. It was then that the linked ships self destructed. The linked minds terminated the General’s command. It is supposedly impossible, as you are aware, for the mind of a ship to assume command. However, when the linked minds were presented with such orders, they superseded those directives and appear to have woken up. They were only sentient for a few seconds. I believe the ship before us was awake much longer.”

“It appears that the force of choice, or in this case, a struggle to understand an idea or concept, can bridge the gap between sentience and computation, Vice Director.”

“Indeed, Agent. Our scientists will go over the remains of the *Crisis Averted* and see if they can uncover any more clues. The

Fleet will be so distracted by the capital ship that has been discovered there will be few questions about things in our purview. Share this with no one.”

“At least now we can be watching for this new phenomena to appear.” Silver looked to the sky again.

“We are always watching, Agent.” Hogarth adjusted his uniform.

Creed came up to the ridge. “Gentlemen, quite a day. Our Mr. Silver has done his usual job. The trail of wreckage was easy to spot. Even from orbit. How can one man do such damage? It is a good thing you are on our side, Silver.”

“Until I get a better offer.” Silver smiled.

“I pray that you don’t, Agent,” Hogarth said curtly. “Mr. Creed, are your men adhering to procedure? We must ferret out the origin of that great beast. Any clue overlooked could be disastrous.” Hogarth looked to Creed.

“They are, Vice Director. We will find where she came from. Not too many places to hide a shop that could build that thing. The Dark Room will find its whereabouts,” Creed said surely.

“Hopefully before another is complete. Indeed, it may already be complete,” Hogarth said.

“Well,” Creed smiled, “we will just send our man here to bring it down. A hundred such ships are no match for the Black.” He gave an IPF salute. They returned it and said together, “The Black.”

Creed went back to his work. Silver noticed that Hogarth watched him as he left.



“Sir, is there something wrong,” Silver asked.

“No, Agent. I am only happy that you were not lost to us on this mission. Our vigilante was not so lucky. There was an explanation in the cube of her origin and terrible fate. A shame to be stricken so young. We looked into the story from here and Megan Antonio was indeed a trooper far from this place. The story checks out. She was medically discharged and then disappeared. What an agent she would have made. I hope she has found peace.”

Silver thought about the brave, smallish woman and his short time with her. Her face would always be with him.

The sky was split by a military ship and two escorts driving hard for the surface. The Planetary States emblem on the side just came into view as Hogarth and Silver watched it descend. The ship bore the Flag of the Admiralty.

“That will be my appointment, Agent. I will deal with the Admiral myself. I suggest you and Lynx get back to base. The Fleet will want an extensive interview with you, naturally. It must be done at our headquarters in my presence. Go now. I will give your regrets to the Admiral.”

Hogarth gave a salute. “Mr. Silver?”

“Yes, Vice Director?”

“I never doubted you for a second,” Hogarth said. “Damn well done.”

Silver said proudly, “The Black!” Hogarth gave a short smile.

Silver walked down the trail to Lynx and his coat shuffled in the wind.

## Chapter 51

Castor stared into the misty night from his darkened office. He had been going over the latest reports and found himself suddenly disinterested in the dry data. He had a feeling there was something he was missing but couldn't quite realize what or where it was. The superior man never saw just numbers. He saw the reasons for the numbers.

Ah, he thought, it had been enough for one day. Perhaps it was time for a visit from his favorite mistress. He put the data cubes aside and prepared to go to his spacious quarters in the middle of the compound. He rarely left these days, he thought. He had not been off planet in over three years. Perhaps it was time to visit some of the more secure facilities. That would raise some pulses. Of course only a few would be allowed to actually see him in person. But still, it always paid to make personal visits.

He was about to put the day's data cubes into the scramblers when he got a message that Kroft was requesting an audience. He gave the verbal command to the room's mind that allowed Kroft to come in.

Castor knew at once there was urgent news. Kroft was stiffer than usual and his smooth gait was slightly off. Castor filed this in his subconscious. Was Kroft weaker than he thought?

"Yes, Mr. Kroft."

"Sir, I am afraid I have some disturbing news from our fleet control center."

"Indeed."

"Sir, it appears that we have lost the *Nightshade*."

Castor froze his stare out the window. He turned to Kroft. "Lost?"

“It is a mystery at this point. We know that the ship broke up in orbit during a pick up and was destroyed in the atmosphere. I suspect it was either sabotaged or attacked.”

“Were there any Planetary States warships in the vicinity?”

“No, sir. There were no major vessels in the area. Our intelligence has confirmed this. We have learned that the IPF agent operating in the area who was under contract was involved. He does not seem to have been aware of the *Nightshade*, but indeed was still chasing the vigilante. It is my belief he was successful in his search but arrived too late. Of course, the IPF will salvage the wreckage and attempt to trace it. They have already dispatched a ship to the area and are there in force. Also, they have alerted the Fleet and there is a small flotilla en route from the Planetary States. It may have already arrived. The IPF reported the apparent size of the *Nightshade* and they have responded accordingly.”

“I am not surprised at this news, Mr. Kroft. It is possible that our reach extended our grasp on this issue. Such a large ship was certainly a risk. We are not, and would not want to be, in the position to challenge the IPF or any of the Planetary States. It is perhaps best to move away from such an endeavor in the future. Our strength comes from our ability to move freely.”

“And the Agent,” Kroft asked.

“Cancel the contract immediately. This matter is closed. There has been enough attention drawn to our operations. Leave me now. I must formulate a new plan for the near future.”

Kroft silently left the room. Castor stared out at the mist. He returned to his desk and keyed in the message to his mistress telling her to come 30 minutes later than scheduled. She would

understand. One day he would let her go, he thought. But not today.

He entered the data for his next task. One of the panels in the office lit up. For a few seconds, there was no image. After a minute, Michael appeared on the screen. The readout at the bottom of the screen told him that the image had no alteration. He was wearing a type of vision enhancement over his hard face. Castor appeared as a completely different person. The other man knew this, of course.

Michael spoke first and his voice sounded as hard as two unbreakable stones colliding. The words came out of his mouth with total confidence and absolutely no fear.

“Is there something you require?”

“Yes. I wish to cancel the order for the sister ship.”

“That is not possible. You were aware of the terms at the outset. My master will not allow any alterations to the agreement.”

“Tell your Master that he will receive payment in full as per the agreement. I am sending the payment as we speak.” The sum was staggering.

Michael looked away from the screen for a moment. His face never looked puzzled in the least.

“Why?” Michael looked into the screen and seemed to be much closer than the billions of miles that separated the two men.

“Why is our concern. We do not wish to take on another asset of that magnitude at this time. Consider the remuneration a gift of our good will for the future. I wish to preserve our relationship and hope that you and your Master will remember this gesture should we do business in the future.”

“I will inform my Master at once. He does not forget those who keep their word.”

The screen went dark. Castor looked out into the night. It was long on this planet. Strangely, he felt relieved. The *Nightshade* was always a concern. He was glad to be free of it. He left his office and went through the private passage to his chambers. She was already there, dressed as he preferred. Of course, she asked no questions. She had his drink prepared and was already emitting a pleasing wave pattern. She had been warned that any attempt to go further than a soothing tone would result in instant death. He was taking a chance having a resonator, but was strong enough to avoid addiction. She knew this and had easily found the appropriate frequency for him.

He looked at her and said nothing. She knew he would speak if he desired. They sat for awhile and then went to bed. The sound of the wind played on the windows and the mist gathered on the unbreakable glass. Below, guards walked silently and watched the night.

The planet moved along its orbit and the galaxy remained ever silent.

