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Echoes of *Passion*

Hunters for Hire

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Echoes of Passion

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ECHOES OF PASSION

Eilis Flynn

Prologue

Welcome to the Devil's Pit. Home sweet home. My name is Ulric Vonner and I run The Web, the base of operations for Bounty Hunters, Inc. You need criminals found? We will find them. The crime doesn't matter. Remember that we don't work for free—our fees are high, but we always catch our man, woman, or whatever species it is that you're after. Of course, catching them and bringing them in are two different things. We may be scoundrels but we aren't without conscience.

I started this business fifteen years ago. Hunters come and hunters go, but that's life. No one lasts forever, not in this business. Each of my bounty hunters has his or her reasons for turning hunter. I don't ask what they are and I don't care. They war with their inner demons, carve out a living for themselves, and then they move on—provided they survive their stint as a hunter. I don't get attached, and I don't mourn their loss. I learned long ago not to depend on anyone but myself. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer, which is the primary reason I deal with the Amalgamation.

Behind every great power is corruption, and the Amalgamation is no exception. However, they do pay well, and I'm not without my own agenda. I fight to survive and to hold on to what little I have left. Bounty Hunters, Inc. gives me a purpose and a damn good excuse to move in the circles I do. It's said a man is judged by the company he keeps, so what does that say about me? In a galaxy fraught with danger, Bounty Hunters, Inc. will strive to satisfy all our customers—if it's in our best interests to do so. Though we may wear a veneer of legal process, we are bounty hunters and we hunt those we are paid to hunt. If in the process we bring down those who would do harm to others—so much the better.

What is a bounty hunter? We're just glorified rogues trying to make the best out of what life tossed our way. The galaxy is not without its flaws or its bad seeds, and that's what we're here for—to do the jobs no one else wants.

The best way to learn about Bounty Hunters, Inc. and me is to first get to know the people who work for me. They are good people in their own ways, but if you cross them, be prepared to face the consequences.

Let the hunting begin...

Glossary

Aboolan: The natural inhabitants of the Aboo System and its planets who moved on after beings from Earth moved in to mine the planets for their natural resources.

Aboo System: Home of the Aboo mining planets. Crystolium-rich planets located two Smith Gates from Earth.

Aboo Two: Second planet in the Aboo System where Amalgama, the capital city of the Amalgamation of Planets, is located.

Aboolan War of 2112: War that broke out when Earthlings invaded the Aboo System for the planets' natural resources.

Abyss, The: Section of The Web where prisoners are kept until transported to another planet or prison facility.

Amalgama: The capital city and chief headquarters for the Amalgamation of Planets. A large, dome-covered city located on the planet Aboo Two.

Amalgamation of Planets: The primary governing body of the galaxy.

Amaya: Cintealios capital city on the planet of the same name.

Aurelie: The Web's day shift cook.

Azo Eta: Planet very similar to Earth, located in the Secundus System.

Bounty-hunter class: Class of small ships, specially suited to carry and operate with only a small crew. Preferred mode of transportation of the bounty hunters, hence the name.

Bounty Hunters, Inc.: Organization of bounty hunters set up and run by Ulric Vonner. They work for large fees and at their own discretion and are neither good nor bad, though they will break the law when necessary in order to bring in a bounty.

Bulkhead Disrupting Charge: Fired from a normal missile cannon, the charge attaches itself to a target's shields, weakens the shields, opens a hole through the target's defenses and fires a concentrated charge into the target's hull. Inflicts major, concentrated damage to a ship's hull.

Cintealios: The warrior race. These beings are human/humanoid and live to conquer those who are weaker. Largest opposing force to the Amalgamation.

Comm-tabs: Buttonlike communication devices that are pressed to the skin behind the ear.

Constance O'Rourke: Supply handler for The Web.

Control: Small space station situated near the Smith Gate. Controls the energy field that operates the gates and determines where a ship will emerge from the wormhole.

Copper Arrow: Copper balls that expand into shafts of corresponding light; an arrow that explodes on contact.

Devil's Pit: Seedy neighborhood on Quartus Seven where The Web is located. Location chosen specifically for its rough appearance and dangerous atmosphere.

Dexter Smith: "Dex", The Web's computer geek. If it's electronic, he can figure it out.

"Doc": Holographic doctor in The Web's medical wing. He has numerous robotic shells that he can download himself into, to perform various functions.

Executioner: Ulric Vonner's personal bounty-class cruiser.

Gold Arrow: Gold balls that expand into shafts of corresponding light and act as a claw, anchoring target to whatever solid surface is behind it, such as a wall.

Halcion Cartiere: Top commanding officer of the Interplanetary Military Forces.

Hub: The heart of The Web, located at the very center. Also contains the Conference Room where meetings are held.

Hunter Pack: Small backpack that holds more than it appears to hold.

Icsantheze Dagger: Daggers created on the planet Icsanthia. Sixty-six centimeters total length from tip of the dagger blade to the end of the handle—fifteen centimeter hilt, fifty-one centimeter blade. The blade is curved like a serpent slithering across a surface, golden in color, with pale green streaks through the blade. Handle is wrapped in emerald leather.

Interplanetary Military Forces (IMF): The military power behind the Amalgamation that works diligently to protect the Amalgamation and everything it stands for.

Intergalactic Security Agency (ISA): The job of the ISA is to explore new worlds and collect critical intelligence on any alien species discovered.

Interplanetary Senate: Body of five hundred representatives from across the galaxy. Most major systems are represented in the senate—five representatives each—with a few exceptions.

Jacobi Smith (deceased): Discovered worm holes usable for faster travel times. The worm holes became known as Smith Gates in his honor.

Jiborui: Home world of Krys Xan, the Amalgamation of Planets' leader. Exotic planet that is home to humanoid, hermaphrodite beings who are tall and slender, and have very sharp minds. Key in the production of many space travel inventions that have made traveling throughout the galaxy and colonizing new worlds easier.

Jump Drives: Allows the vessel to navigate through nearby worm holes, effectively reducing travel times significantly. (Note: Control must open the gate. Also controls to which neighboring system the gate connects.)

Krys Xan: Hermaphrodite from Jurgia and leader of the Amalgamation of Planets. He presides over the Senate and all its members.

Military Sciences Lab: Based on Earth, its purpose is to create and cultivate the ultimate soldier.

Nursotics: Robotic nurses.

Orbit Wisps: Spectral, universal snitches. They barter information for energy cubes.

PHD: Personal Holographic Device. When activated, it alters the hunter's appearance, aiding in acquiring a bounty.

Plasma Cannons: Can target an enemy ship's deflector shield and will drain the energy from the shield determinant to the size of the charge. If used on a small ship without a shield, it can slowly deteriorate the ship's hull.

Quartus Seven: Planet where The Web is located. Also known as The City Planet. seventy-five percent of the planet's surface is covered by one continuous metropolitan area. The remaining twenty-five percent of the planet is covered in water. No indigenous life forms or plant life exist here.

Replicators: Basic replication of items such as food and clothing. Complex machinery cannot be replicated, though the replicator can retrieve items from storage compartments.

Sa-Ro Five: Largest agricultural hub in the Secundus System. This planet supplies food rations to many planets, including some from neighboring systems.

Scanners: Allow the ship's crew to scan other ships, space stations or planets for signs of life.

Sealy Garrison: Constance O'Rourke's assistant. If Constance isn't available, Sealy is the man to see.

Secret Sciences Police (SSP): Formed to ensure that no one toys with time travel or biowar sciences, to protect the Amalgamation and its interests.

Secundus System: System to which Quartus Seven belongs. Similar to Earth's system, Secundus possesses nine planets, many of which are uninhabitable due to extreme atmospheric conditions, though the use of atmospheric domes enables limited habitation of some of the planets.

Silver Arrow: Silver balls that expand into shafts of corresponding light and only work as a piercing weapon.

Smith Gate: Device used to access worm holes. It is located near the largest, most advanced planet in the system and significantly cuts down travel times.

Smith Hole: Proper name for the worm holes used by Smith Gates.

Spectra-shades: Special shades used to see Orbit Wisps.

Super Soldiers: Bio-engineered super soldiers, produced on Earth as supreme fighting beings.

The Web: Base of operations for Bounty Hunters, Inc.

Tomozava: A blue fleshy vegetable that is a cross between a tomato and a *zava* vegetable.

Tranq-ring: Ring that administers a dose of tranquilizer to a bounty/person/being but does not affect the ring's wearer.

T-Sdei Delta: The party planet. Located in the Secundus System, neighboring Quartus Seven.

Ulric Vonner: President and founder of Bounty Hunters, Inc.

Vanquiguard: Wristband that, when activated, creates an energy shield to protect the wearer.

Zava: Blue, tomato-like vegetable that is indigenous to the planet Azo Eta. Also known as *tomozava*.

Zeri: Night shift cook for The Web.

Chapter One

The Journey Begins

Half asleep, half awake, for Daegon Bosaru the dream was always the same. It always started in a mist of white, with a pair of moons high in the sky. Then out of the mist would come a woman...a woman he didn't know, but who seemed to know him. At least she always reached out and stroked his cheek, for what reason he never knew. She would tell him that it was time to come home, but she never mentioned what home, or why, or where home was for that matter, or anything else that would give him a clue who she was.

The same dream he had had for nearly half his life.

In his waking life she was no one he could remember ever having met, but in his dreams she was his constant companion, his lover, his...life.

This time, though, the dream was different. This time, she approached him and instead of stroking his cheek and talking about "home", the woman smiled and kissed him on his lips. *I'll see you soon*, she whispered, her voice husky and low.

When? Who are you? he finally asked.

Whoever she was, she was beautiful. Clearly Vozuan, her skin was golden, almost the same hue as her hair. A small single hoop was slipped in the flesh of one ear. In his dreams she was usually dressed in a simple white sheath, one that had as its only decoration an ornate medallion, the symbol of...what? He should know, it was familiar, but he couldn't remember. And as always, there was the fine pattern of minute scars on one of her hands, faint but definitely there.

This time, she brushed his hair off his forehead. *I'll be waiting for you*, she said, her eyes fluttering closed.

That was his cue. Taking a deep breath, Daegon opened his eyes. "Thank you, my lady," he said aloud.

Morning.

The image of the woman, her eyes closed and with a smile on her face, vanished. He was awake and alone, and he had an unpleasant day in front of him, with only the memory of the golden woman to sustain him. Sometimes she was the only thing he had to keep him going, and she was a figment of his imagination.

By the time he walked into the office of his supervisor at the headquarters of the Secret Sciences Police on Aboo Two, he was ready for what he had to do—and where he had to go.

His badge. His electro-cuffs. His service weapon. He dropped them on the desk, where they lay on top of paperwork that should have been filed weeks ago. But that was Dec Mecahe for you – efficient in so many ways, but a file clerk he was not.

Damn it. It shouldn't have come to this.

"What? Daegon, are you insane?"

"You heard me, Dec. I hereby resign my commission as a Secret Sciences Police officer," Bosaru said. He caught a glimpse of himself in the polished chrome wall behind his supervisor. His emerald-colored, short hair was a shade lighter than most of the Neotians he knew due to his mixed Neotian and Vozuan heritage. His skin, too, was also a touch lighter, but today it was almost dusky in his current intensity. Neoti men avoided playing poker, simply because the shift in skin color was perilously close to being a telltale sign of bluffing.

And right now he was majorly stressed, as his reflection revealed.

"Daeg, don't do this," Dec Mecahe exclaimed. He shook his head, the tufts of white hair rimming his curly ears making him look like an overgrown toy. "Let's talk about it. There has to be something we can do."

"It's no use. If you won't authorize an investigation into those allegations against my father, Dec, I'm going to have to do the investigating."

Mecahe frowned. "Don't do this. You'll regret it. I'll regret it the next time I need you for an investigation. You're the best investigator I've got. And when your father hears about your resigning –"

"He's not going to hear about it." The words tasted metallic, almost bitter, as he said them, and not for the first time, Daegon Bosaru regretted ever having argued with his elderly father. "He's in a coma. He's not going to come out of it. My mother's already called for the high priestess in the solar system and begun the separation ritual. He's dying."

Dec Mecahe winced. "Sorry to hear about that. No chance –"

"No. Only a matter of time now." Bosaru took a deep breath. "He may never know it, but at least I can clear his name. Convenient, isn't it, that all these allegations surface when he can't refute them. That's deliberate, and I want to find out who or what is behind this."

Dec Mecahe, a typical specimen of the Furlo, rubbed his neck with the sharp fingernails of his hand. "It was odd timing, I'll grant you that, but there's nothing to indicate some conspiracy. Fine, I'll accept your leave of absence—but not your resignation. You've got enough leave built up to do your investigation and then report back to duty. How is that?"

I won't be back, Bosaru wanted to say. But he didn't, because he knew if nothing else, burning bridges was not a solution. And Dec Mecahe had been nothing but decent to him ever since Bosaru joined the SSP, the closest friend he had on the force. Bosaru's privileged background had isolated him at first, only easing off after he proved himself on the job. Dec had always encouraged him, believed in him.

Bosaru and his father had argued about so much. They had argued about him joining the SSP, too.

Dec had been a good friend for over a decade. Bosaru could do what he requested, because there would be too many uncomfortable questions for the division supervisor to answer if he quit outright. "All right. I'm taking an open-ended leave of absence."

The Furlo nodded, a smile on his blue lips. "Good. Don't forget to check in every once in a while so I know you're still alive. And if there's anything you need. And if there's anything I can do. And if you'd like to come back and do my filing for me."

For the first time in what seemed like eons, Bosaru managed a smile. "Thanks, Dec. I wouldn't be doing this if —"

"You didn't have to. I know. I'm just sorry I couldn't persuade The Powers That Be to start an SSP investigation. Just stay alive, Daeg. If what you suspect is true," Dec paused, taking a careful look around his chamber, placing a finger across his lips for a moment, "you may be in for some rough times."

Surprised, Bosaru looked around. Dec's office was being monitored? Why? But he couldn't say anything, not at that moment.

Dec shrugged and tapped his monitor once, barely waiting a second before an image manifested itself on the gleaming silver wall. "This is him," he said. "Verot Barus Kurog. The granddaddy of the Galaxy's Most Wanted List. Disappeared twenty cycles ago Hikoi time, right after the fall of the Kurog regime. Presumed dead, but no proof."

"Presumed alive until proven dead," Bosaru said, referring to the Amalgamation's philosophy when it came to war criminals. Every war criminal on the list was alive as far as the Amalgamation was concerned, so they were open game for hunting, for bounty or otherwise. If they could be found, of course. "Verot Barus Kurog. Murderer of ten million, destroyer of the lives of two-hundred-fifty million more. Crippler of countless. If my father and mother hadn't left the system before Verot amassed ultimate power, we would have perished in the camps as prisoners of war. My father was the Neoti ambassador to the Amalgamation during the war, but he was always looking over his shoulder, just in case some Vozuan loyalists decided to kidnap him, right off Aboo Two."

"What's your first step?" Dec asked. "You sure there isn't anything I can do for you?"

Bosaru shook his head. "No. My first stop will be my mother, to see if she can give me access to any of my father's papers. Then I'm going to...Hikoi."

The Hikoi system wasn't on Bosaru's itinerary, not yet. But there was no way he was going to tell his supervisor he was going to the most notorious bounty hunters organization in the galaxy. Ulric Vonner, the founder and head of Bounty Hunters, Inc., was not well loved in SSP circles.

Dec nodded. "Give my regards to your mother. And good luck."

Slipping out of the SSP headquarters was easier than Bosaru thought it would be. He had told no one but Dec Mecahe what he planned, and he took nothing from his

desk, trusting that Dec would make sure everything was put into storage until he could retrieve it. The fewer people who knew he was leaving, the more likely it was that he could walk out of there without a flood of regrets overwhelming him. He had no choice. The honor of his father and his family name depended on him.

His father was not a murderer, not a killer, no matter what anyone said. Daegon Bosaru was going to prove it.

Chapter Two

Home

Bosaru's parents' estate was in a quiet, spacious enclave not far from the embassy district, hidden behind high stone walls and identifiable only by the discreet Bosaru family crest carved into the massive wooden gates. Daegon paused for a moment to look around, his hand hovering over the ID panel that would allow him access.

After Rai-Sur retired as ambassador, because Ir, Daegon's mother, liked the neighborhood around Embassy Row, they decided to move to an estate nearby. Yet it was far enough away that the heavy police presence in the area would not interfere with their lives. On occasion the cacophony of a riot or gunplay could be heard in the distance, but for the most part, the cul-de-sac was peaceful, punctuated only with an occasional sound of a vehicle or a momentarily raised voice.

Only one Neoti guard stood watch outside the Bosaru enclave these days, laser rifle eternally cocked and ready. He had been with the Bosaru family for more than five decades, the latest of his line to do so, devoted to keeping the peace for what remained of the Bosaru clan. To Daegon's knowledge the guard, Guere al-Guerten, had been involved in only one altercation in all that time, and that was when the former next-door neighbor, having had much too much to drink, tried to crawl into the Bosaru complex by mistake. The neighbor woke up in front of his own residence gates several hours later, trussed like a porcine, with a throbbing head and no memory of how he had ended up there. It had all been caught on vid-scan.

When the oversized guard saw Bosaru, he cracked a slight smile and nodded. "Officer Bosaru," he said, placing his weapon down by his side. "Good to see you. Your mother is home."

Bosaru smiled back. He didn't correct the Neoti about his change of rank—time enough for that later on. "How is your family, al-Guerten?"

The guard frowned. For a moment he looked as though he wondered if he should give details. And then he said, "Hoping for the best for your father, sir."

Al-Guerten had known his father since long before Daegon had been born. "Me too."

"And you should be aware your mother has a guest," the guard added. "A member of the parliament. I believe you're familiar with him."

Bosaru twitched, in his effort not to grimace. "Representative Haan-Haan, I assume. Thank you." The politician served with Rai-Sur on several committees exploring the options available on rebuilding Neotian society, and from what little Bosaru's father had mentioned—Rai-Sur never having been the most talkative of souls—Haan had

mainly been interested in how he could exploit the budget allotted for the task for his own gains.

What business could that creature have with his mourning mother? Bosaru pressed his hand against the ID panel to establish his identity and stepped into the family complex when the gates opened, passing through the arch that was covered with the purple lilies that had been native to Neotia Prime, carefully brought to Aboo Two.

If he thought the street was quiet, the sudden silence within the walls made him think he had gone deaf for a second. The grounds, trimmed and tenderly cared for, looked exactly the same as the last time he was there, and the time before, and even the time before that, no matter how many months lapsed between visits. The trees and the flora were manicured and maintained with such precision that as a child he had believed they were all artificial, but he learned better when he had plucked a rose, one of the deep pink ones, for a pretty classmate.

His mother had been dismayed for perhaps five seconds until she had found out who the rose was for. Then she had promptly wrapped the rose in a white silk scarf for him to present to...what was her name? He couldn't remember.

He stepped inside the house and let his eyes adjust. The entryway, tastefully decorated, was dimly lit, his mother's preference. He tilted his head, trying to guess where she was. The softest of sounds from one direction alerted him. Following them, he turned and started down the hallway, making his way to his father's library.

Bosaru's mother looked as he expected, considering the circumstances. Ir en-Bosaru's eyes were bloodshot, the coronet of silvering gold hair framing her face disheveled, the first time her son had ever seen it less than perfect. She was sitting in the dim light of the library, no lamps near her on the curving chaise lounge that had long been her favorite spot. In better times, that was where she sat to keep company with her husband, who would be working behind the massive Terran desk carved of exotic woods.

Now, instead of having a visibook reader in her hands, as had been her habit, she held...nothing. Her hands were empty, perhaps as empty as her heart. She was looking toward the now-empty desk, and away from her guest.

As Bosaru expected, it was Representative Haan-Haan who was there with her, not sitting, towering over his mother. The man's hands were curled into fists. What Bosaru had heard had been Haan-Haan, trying to sound persuasive.

"Lady Ir, it would be best for all concerned if you did," Bosaru heard.

That was it. Whatever Haan-Haan wanted, it couldn't be good. If Rai-Sur had wanted to have nothing to do with the man, there was no reason Daegon's mother would either.

"Mother Mine," Bosaru said softly, stopping at the entrance to the room. "Mother Mine, I'm here."

Ir sat up at that, turning her head toward the door. He was glad to see her smile. "Son of Mine, I am so glad to see you."

He approached her softly, knowing her nerves, stretched at best, frayed at worst, would be sensitive to quick movement and loud noises. Grief had always done that to her, and his father, knowing this, had always tried to make sure little of either would confront her.

Rai-Sur wasn't there anymore to protect her. It was up to Daegon. "Representative Haan-Haan," he said, tapping his own shoulder with his hand in greeting. "What brings you to my parents' home? Why don't you sit down? You look ill at ease."

The politician was a tall man, overbearing when he leaned down to deal with those smaller than he was, a trait Daegon suspected he cultivated. His hair was slicked back, like Daegon's a shade somewhere in between the emerald of the Neotian and the gold of the Vozuan—he claimed to have Neotian ancestry somewhere in his past, and while that might have been the case, Daegon always suspected artificial means had aided in getting that color. But he had no proof, and the fact that the politician ignored anyone not useful to him whenever possible did nothing to endear him to others.

Today was no exception. "I was just trying to persuade your mother that your father's papers should be donated to the Amalgamation," Haan-Haan said quickly. The tight, frustrated look on his face indicated that he had been unsuccessful. Bosaru's mother was not as clueless as Haan-Haan thought.

Sitting on the ottoman next to the chaise, Bosaru reached for her hand. It was cold and limp, and he knew no amount of heat would warm it up right then. "Mother Mine, I don't have good news."

"Lady Ir, I'll give you some time to think about my suggestion," Haan-Haan said. "Remember, it is in your best interest and that of the Amalgamation."

"The Amalgamation seems to think its own interest is separate from that of its citizens," Bosaru's mother answered, her voice soft and disinterested.

That was Bosaru's cue. "I'll see you out, Representative," he said, standing up. "This is a difficult time for us. Thank you for coming by." In other words, get out.

Haan-Haan's eyes narrowed for a moment, but it was clear he knew there was nothing that could be accomplished by pressing the point. "I'll leave you alone. Think about it, Lady Ir," he said. "I'll see myself out."

Just to make sure, Bosaru followed him to the front door, and exchanging empty polite words, watched as the politician walked down the pathway and exited through the gates. Then he closed the door.

When he got back to the library, Daegon's mother was still sitting on the chaise, looking less listless, but grieving nonetheless.

He took her hand again, repeated himself. "Mother Mine—my news isn't good."

Ir's shoulders slumped. She squeezed his hand. "I assumed as much. But I had hoped there was still a chance the politicians would call for an investigation. I should have known."

For a moment, Bosaru wanted to hit someone, something, anything—his mother blinked hard but the glint of tears was still visible and he didn't want to see them. She was trying hard to be so strong. "The politicians are still divided about the Neoti situation and the current ambassador seems to be unable to press for a decision. I—"

"Son of Mine, I know," Ir interrupted, raising her other hand. "It's too late to press for truth before your father passes to the Great Void. But that will not stop me from trying to find it. Perhaps your contacts as a police officer will help somehow."

This was the time. "Mother Mine, I've taken a leave of absence from the SSP. I'm going to find out what happened, who's spreading these untruths about Father, without their help. I'm hoping that his papers might be of some help."

She sighed. "Daegon." She squeezed his hand again and this time he saw the tears coursing down her cheeks, glinting gold. "I am so sorry you felt the need for this. I know how much being a police officer meant to you."

"The SSP could do no more," Daegon said. She was right—he had been proud of his job, serving the public in a way that his father could not conceive of—but he wasn't going to tell her that. "I couldn't ask them to do more than they have. I'm going to see what's left of Neotia, then go to the unnamed world, see what I can find out. All the reports coming out of the new Neotia haven't made sense to me. There's been enough time lapsed for the government to be set up, society to be formed again. But we hear nothing," He paused. "Father's papers—"

"They are where they belong. In Neotia."

Daegon frowned. That didn't make any sense. "With—"

Ir nodded. With a pat of his hand, she stood, straightening, in that instant transforming herself into Lady Ir en-Bosaru, the wife of the former Neotian ambassador. "I sent all of your father's papers to the archives at a shrine of Ixtr on the unnamed world. The high priestess there is an old friend. I knew she would look after them," she said. "She can get you entry into the archives. Perhaps you can go through them, see if there's any mention of that call."

The source of the rumors surrounding his father, in some part, was an unexplained, unrecorded call from Verot during the height of the war to Ambassador Bosaru. Rai-Sur had never spoken of what had been discussed and neither had Verot.

"Thank you, Mother Mine." Then he didn't want to ask, but knew she would be waiting for him to do so. "How much of the artifacts did they manage to salvage and bring to the new world, do you know?"

Bosaru's mother sighed. "From what I understand, a fraction of what was. The important works, yes." She bit her lip. "Some of the important works of art. You were too young to remember—it was so long ago—but on home world, the shrines were beautiful and overflowing with statues and paintings from the ancient dynasties. Most of that had to be left behind on Neotia Prime. Most of what's left are viz-images."

"But the archives, Mother Mine. They were brought over with as much of the histories intact as possible, isn't that right?" Bosaru asked, prompting his mother. Her

interests had always been in the arts and literature of the Neoti civilization so she had always left other, more contemporary matters to her husband. If his father had been there, he would have been able to tell Daegon everything he needed to know. If his mother knew what he needed to know, it would be wedged in between knowledge about the great dynasties or the priceless art of Neotian and Vozuan cultures. Extracting the information from his mother would be like sifting through grains of sand.

But his mother surprised him. Ir waved him off. "Of course. What are the Neoti and the Vozuan without their archives? We would be without history, without basis, without future. Our archives define us. They are our history."

Bosaru nodded. "Quite," he said, pleased his mother had seen his point. "So you will contact your old friend the high priestess?"

His mother nodded. She started off in the direction of her own study. "I will contact her now," she said. "Come with me. No time like the now, Son of Mine."

The rest of the evening went quickly for Bosaru. The high priestess was not present when Ir called, but she left a detailed message so the woman would know he would be knocking on the doors of her shrine. That accomplished, he and his mother dined in front of the rainbow waterfalls in the lush garden, the one his father had put in so his mother would have something that reminded her of home.

The original waterfalls had been destroyed in the final, cataclysmic battle of the war, of course. No, perhaps they still existed, but the corrosive radiation that poisoned and ate away what was left of that world ensured that none of them, neither Neoti nor Vozuan, would ever set foot there again. Within a generation, the planet itself would most likely be gone, no more than fragments floating in the dead of space.

At least both Neoti and Vozuan had come together and mourned. Both sides of the conflict, not just one, had lost their home.

At the end of the evening, his mother did something she rarely did—she hugged him. "Good luck, Son of Mine," she whispered.

Bosaru hugged her back, but gently. "I will find out the truth, Mother Mine," he told her. "That I can promise."

* * * * *

Iron Spirit slid smoothly through nullspace, as it always did. The ship was in good condition—Bosaru had made sure of that—and he knew its workings better than he knew the back of his hands. Even with the Smith Gates it was a long trip to what was once Neotia Prime and its successor, the planet in the system that now held what was left of the Neotians and the Vozuans—the planet with no name, as according to the writings of the prophet Sreppa Neot, in punishment of the destruction of the Neoti home planet.

Spirit was on autopilot, so there was nothing he had to do. He lay on his cot in the back of the ship, his eyes closed, and when he saw in the distance a familiar figure emerge from the mist, he was vaguely aware that he was dozing off.

You're traveling, the woman of Bosaru's dreams said without preamble. She smiled. *It's a trip without comparison. It will open your eyes.*

She wore what he had often seen her wear in his dreams, a simple white shift, sleeveless. Besides the single gold hoop in her ear, the medallion was her only other adornment, ending with a gold bead that rested between her breasts. As always, it looked familiar, as though he had seen it somewhere long ago and he could no longer remember where.

He smiled. He could see the shadow of her nipples. They were erect, hard and round. *If I could open my eyes and see you, it would make any hardship worth it*, he told her.

Laughing, she reached out and touched his face. *Soon.*

She reached around her neck and started to unfasten the necklace, but Daegon stopped her. *Leave it on*, he told her.

She did. *Perfection and gold*, she said, smiling. *Is this how you wanted to see me?*

Bosaru smiled. *And the hair*, he said. Hers was held up with three simple golden pins. *Hair like yours shouldn't be bound, any more than your beautiful breasts.*

We're all bound by one thing or another, my lover, she responded.

He wondered what she meant—but for whatever reason, he didn't ask. This was a dream, after all. His only response was to reach up and take the pins out, one by one, allowing her curling tresses to fall past her shoulders, touching the top of her breasts.

I want to kiss you, he said instead. *On your beautiful, perfect mouth.*

She looked at him and there was humor in her eyes. *Is that what you want to kiss, my lover?* she asked, her mouth crooked into a smile. *We'll see each other soon, in our waking days as well as our dreams.*

She closed her eyes, leaning toward him. *Approaching*, she whispered, breathing into his ear. *Approaching...*

The blare of Bosaru's autopilot startled him awake. "Approaching Quartus Seven," *Iron Spirit's* computer announced. "Awaiting further instructions."

Taking a deep breath, Bosaru shook his head, trying to get his bearings. "I've got to turn that thing down," he muttered.

This was only his second trip to Quartus Seven. And he would have the same destination—The Web. Some things needed to be done in person. Talking to Ulric Vonner again was one.

"I know Verot Barus Kurog is at the top of the Galaxy's Most Wanted list," Bosaru had told him the first time they met, only days previous. "I want him."

Vonner had not been impressed. "You're a Secret Sciences Police officer," he commented. "Why come to me? You have official channels. All the information you could want to access. You're no bounty hunter. Why are you *really* here?"

"Because the Amalgamation doesn't believe the accusations against my father merit investigation. As far as they're concerned, it was all true and they don't need to find out anything else. That's why I'm here."

"And you think tracking down Verot Barus Kurog is going to help you? What makes you think he's not dead? Or that he's involved in the allegations? He hasn't been heard from since the fall of Neotia Prime."

"Everything I've read about him says he had—*has*—the tenacity of a slimeworm. He's waiting until everyone's forgotten about him before he surfaces again," Bosaru insisted. "Who else would have as much to gain from blackening my father's good name? My father was the only one in the Neotian government who spoke up against the rise of his regime, one of the few still alive."

At that, Vonner turned away and looked at his computer screen. There was a series of binary codes running down the screen, nothing that made any sense to Daegon.

But clearly it did to Vonner. "I'd say there are a few other people who would gain from it," he said after a moment's pause, turning back around. "All of whom you can name, of course, so no new information there. So you want to be a bounty hunter? Quit your job? All those family contacts won't do you any good out on the field, alone. You know that," he warned. "No official contacts, no official title. You won't be Secret Sciences out there. And who your father was won't make a damn bit of difference if you're working for me. You'll be rogue for the first time in your life. Think you can do it? No one's going to be there to clean up after you. You call the authorities, they're going to shrug."

Bosaru stared at him. "I *will* do it. I have no choice. My father will not rest without having his name cleared."

Vonner shrugged. "Your funeral, Bosaru. You have the facilities of The Web at your disposal. If you need a place to stay, we have a room for you here. You need information, we have resources. Other than that..." He shrugged.

"More than I need," Bosaru said, his jaw tight.

"Don't forget to resign from the SSP," Vonner reminded him. "I'm not going to have accusations of political espionage leveled against me for having an SSP officer in my employ. The Amalgamation may not like me, but I play on a clear and open playing field...when it's convenient."

And so Bosaru had gone back to the SSP to resign. Well, he ended up with a long-term leave, which was close enough for his purposes. He assumed it would be for Vonner. If it wasn't, that was Vonner's problem.

For the first time as a Neoti without a pedigree, Bosaru signaled the headquarters of Bounty Hunters, Inc.

"Requesting permission to enter," he said.

"Identity."

"Daegon en-Bosaru, Son of the Fam..." he stopped.

It didn't matter anymore, he had to remember that. All of his history, all of the generations over which the Bosarus had achieved prominence—nothing. He was a bounty hunter now.

That was going to be hard to remember.

"Daegon Bosaru. Of the ship *Iron Spirit*. Ulric Vonner —"

"Vonner said you'd be showing up. Permission granted. Docking bay three."

If nothing else, Ulric Vonner was efficient, Bosaru mused as he navigated *Spirit* into the designated spot. After a few minutes, he stepped out.

"Bosaru. Report to the quartermaster," he heard from the speakers. "You'll get a quick tour of the place, get your bunk assignment, your equipment."

The place was efficient, well stocked...and well protected. The first thing he noticed as he walked through the corridors was the number of viewers tracking him and the tiny lasers following him. Nothing happened here without repercussions. Serious repercussions.

Before anything else, he needed supplies. "Did the SSP have a fit when you told them where you were going?" Sealy Garrison, the assistant supply master, asked. "You're not going to find these babies as standard issue at the SSP," he enthused, not bothering to wait for an answer. His messy dark hair seemed to swallow the glaring overhead light. "These energy whips will do the trick in making sure your quarry stays in place. The SSP doesn't like them, though."

"They're not infallible. If there's a system energy failure, you lose your quarry. I read the reports on them," Bosaru said. How did the supply master know about his background?

Garrison shrugged. "Energy failures happen all the time. You just have to make sure you have extra cartridges on hand. Laser pistol, one. Laser rifle, one. Energy bow, one. Energy whip, one. It could still come in handy, you never know. Take it anyway. Sign here." He spun around with the form and pointed to a line.

Bosaru shrugged. "Doesn't take up much space, I guess." He pressed his index finger and his thumb into the appropriate spaces for fingerprint stamp before he took the stylus and scrawled his moniker. "I'm not going to need most of the rest," he said. "I wouldn't even know what to do with the energy sword, let alone the energy bow and arrow."

"Those are specialty items, not for everyone. I'll add them to the inventory. So how about the SSP?"

There wasn't any harm in telling this guy. "I'm on an extended leave of absence."

"So what, you could go back when you want to?" Garrison gave him a dubious look. "Think that's likely?"

"I had leave saved up. A *lot* of leave. Figured I'd burn it off."

The supply master scratched his head. "Vonner know?"

"He knew I was leaving the SSP," Bosaru said. "Why, does he need to know the details?"

Not answering, Garrison turned to take a couple of other boxes from the shelving behind him. "You're going to need a tranq-ring and electro-cuffs," he said, setting aside a small box. "Not standard issue for the SSP, I know, but you might find them useful anyway. Sling shot? How about a *thiris*? Those are popular right now – got two requests this morning. You might want to take a look."

Bosaru frowned. "I've seen what happens to someone who gets on the wrong side of a *thiris*. That's deadly."

"Suit yourself. Just don't want you to be saying you wished you'd gotten one when you had the chance."

"If it got to that point, there's something really wrong, and trying to tear someone apart with a *thiris* is going to make things worse."

Garrison stared at him. "Are you sure you worked for the SSP?"

Bosaru winced. The SSP had a reputation that was, unfortunately, well earned, thanks to some unsavory incidents in the recent past. The goal of the Secret Sciences Police was to safeguard dangerous technology, and sometimes the zeal of the individual officers took over. "Never mind. I'll take them. Where do I sign?"

"Right there. I'll get the rest of the equipment you'll need. Seeing Vonner next?"

Bosaru stared at Garrison before signing off again. "In a while."

Finally he took his leave of the quartermaster and as he walked the corridors again, he realized it was later than he had thought. He shifted the containers piled high in his arms, trying to decide what to do next.

"Food is good," he heard, whether in his mind or out loud, he didn't know. "You should find the mess hall next, have something to eat."

What? He turned around. Nothing – no one – there.

"See? You need something to eat. You're imagining things," he heard.

He dropped the containers and looked around, choosing specifically to glare at one of the viewers above his head. "Is this supposed to be a joke? It's not funny. It's dangerous," he said aloud. "I've got an armful of weapons and you're making me think I've got to defend myself."

"I'm so scared. The mess hall's to your left," he heard.

Bosaru looked to his left. Sure enough, there was a pair of doors, with a sign above them stating *MESS HALL*.

At that time of night, the place was almost empty save for a few lone souls, hunched over their trays of food, not making eye contact – there was a good reason why they were eating at that time of night, Bosaru guessed. Well, he certainly wasn't going to bother them. He didn't want to be bothered either.

"Officer Bosaru. I'm so glad to meet you." He heard – not in his head this time, he was fairly sure.

He turned to see a stunning petite female with the largest, most limpid lavender eyes he had ever seen. And with the most annoying grin on her beautiful face that immediately told him what he wanted to know. She was behind the service counter, holding a serving spoon in one hand and a spice shaker in the other. She waved the spoon in his direction.

"It was you, wasn't it? You must be a telepath," he guessed.

"They teach you well in the SSP, Officer Bosaru," the female said, wrinkling her nose and pushing her long, pale hair away from her face. "But you do fall for the simplest telepath tricks. I'm Zeri, the nightshift cook. I'm sensing you could stand to have something not too heavy to keep you going until you need to sleep. I'll make you a nice *tomozava* salad, how about that?"

He closed his eyes for a second. "That sounds delicious. I'm Daegon Bosaru. Though why I'm introducing myself I don't know, since you know who I am."

"Because it's polite," she said. "Are you seeing Vonner next?"

What *was* it with these people? He'd see Vonner when he could. "Why, can't you tell?" he challenged, grinning back at her.

"I only read minds, I don't see the future. Salad coming up," she said, turning away with a smile.

After eating—the salad was quite possibly the best *tomozava* salad he'd eaten in months, save the one his mother's chef created for him—in solitude, he decided it was time to see Vonner. If the man was awake, of course. That was the disadvantage of having come straightaway rather than waiting a day or two.

Apparently the man was always awake. Bosaru's request for an audience was granted, not by an intermediary but by the voice of the man himself.

The place was still dark, still only lit by the screen of the monitor behind Vonner. "Bosaru. Settling in?"

"Getting acquainted with the place," Bosaru said. "I got the impression I should check in with you before I did anything else."

"You're on a leave of absence from the SSP, you didn't resign."

Did the man have viewers everywhere? And watch them constantly? Did he have nothing better to do with his time? Like sleep? "At the suggestion of my former supervisor," Bosaru said. "I had a lot of leave built up. I was going to use it all before I resigned. Is that a problem?"

"Are you on a schedule to check in, inform your supervisor what you're doing?"

Bosaru frowned. "I'm surprised you don't know the answer, considering you seem to know everything else."

"I do know the answer. I just want to hear it from you," Vonner said.

"In that case, my supervisor suggested I contact him once in a while, let him know I'm alive. Is that suspicious or nefarious?"

"What do *you* think?"

Was he ever going to get a straight answer from Vonner? So far he would bet not.

Vonner changed the subject. "Use the orbit wisps," he said. "I know the SSP doesn't approve of them, but you'll find them useful."

Bosaru sighed. "Is that a condition of working for you?"

"No. But you'll be happy if you use the spectra-shades and keep energy cubes around. You're not necessarily on the side of the law anymore, remember. The wisps come up with surprising information. And since the atmosphere on the new Neotia interferes with the wisps' vision, it's not as if you're going to get that much from them anyway."

"The Amalgamation's official stance on orbit wisps —"

Vonner's voice cut through. "The Amalgamation's official stance on anything is not my concern. In particular since you will be hunting for your bounty in an area that has not been settled that long. The Amalgamation's oversight is best on long-settled planets, but the new Neotia Prime is not one. It is verging on lawlessness."

"The planet that the Neoti have settled on is not Neotia Prime. It is unnamed."

"Do me the courtesy of not insulting me," Vonner said. "It is the new center of Neoti civilization, no matter what you call it. The original Neotia Prime is not the center of your culture anymore. It no longer exists. Rather, it will not exist soon."

"The planet the Neoti are currently based on is unnamed. It is the penance for —"

Vonner raised his hand. "I'm not going to argue cultural philosophy with you. Use the orbit wisps. You'll find out more using them than you will any other way. Now go find your quarters. You're going to need some rest before you leave."

With that, he turned back to the computer monitor and returned to watching the streaming binary code.

Bosaru walked out of Vonner's offices after that, shaking his head.

The quarters he had been assigned were small but efficient. He looked around. His apartment back on Aboo Two was subleased, so he had no other place to go. This was home for the time being.

Not a home he ever imagined having.

Next he had to do as much research as he could before he left. As Vonner had told him, the research facilities available at the Web were impressive, certainly more up to date than what he had available at his level of the SSP. "Might as well see if anything's new," Bosaru muttered aloud as he settled into his new quarters. "Computer, give me what you have on Verot Barus Kurog," he said. "Starting with original biography."

The words *Original biography*: flashed on the screen as the computer voice began to speak. "Verot Barus Kurog, self-appointed head of the Vozuans, a subset of the Neotian people, rose to power in his call to the masses for cultural purity, eventually gathering enough supporters to spearhead a new nation, an offshoot of the Neotian culture consisting only of Vozuans, and settling in a theretofore unoccupied area on the

same continent as the Neoti nation and assets. 'Neotian' refers to the general population, and 'Neoti' and 'Vozuan' to the two main subsects. More details available."

Critical decisions: "One. In a heated controversy with Neoti officials, Verot, by then the prime chancellor and head of the council of the fledgling Vozuan nation, laid claim to a key mountain range, taking by force, fertile Neoti farm areas and annexing two Neoti states. It was at this time Verot established an inner-circle organization called 'The Order of Verot'. More details available.

"Two. After the Neoti government attempted mediation in an effort to regain its states, Verot refused, choosing instead to gather an army made up of Vozuans and mercenaries, marching on abutting Neoti states deemed vulnerable, thus triggering the beginning of the Neotian civil war. More details available.

"Three. The concentration camps, sometimes referred to as the 'Vozuan death camps', were established under Verot's direction for the containment of Neoti prisoners as the war was under way. The question of whether he was the only instigator or there were others who were involved has been raised in recent months by Vozuan historians and others. No more details available."

Bosaru gritted his teeth. At least no one had decided to enter the names of any alleged accomplices into the official history, not just yet.

"Four. The call began for Vozuan scientists to use the oscillator corrosive, a weapon that was banned and confiscated by the Secret Sciences Police approximately five decades ago but which was removed from Secret Sciences safekeeping by person or persons unknown. More details available.

"Five. Verot used the oscillator corrosive to destroy the Cay mountains, the original source of contention between the Vozuans and the Neoti. Unfortunately, the oscillator corrosive was recreated without a foolproof failsafe feature, an oversight that only became known when the device was put to use. More details available."

And the oscillator corrosive destroyed not only the mountain range, Bosaru added to himself, filling in the unsaid. Because there was no way to stop it, it continued, devouring the farmlands beyond, the forests, the oceans, every human it encountered along the way...and even now, the oscillator corrosive was burrowing down through the crust of the planet, to the core. The home of the Neotians for thousands of years would soon be rubble floating in the dead of space, thanks to Verot.

Last seen: This entry never changed, Bosaru mused. "Verot Barus Kurog was last seen on the last day of the Neotian Civil War, twenty-one years ago," the computer recited. "Verot was voted out as the chancellor of the Vozuan Alliance and escorted to a holding cell until a trial could be held. But news of the oscillator corrosive's power caused a run to the transport ships, not only those of the Vozuans but to those of the Neoti as well. During the mass exodus to the unnamed planet, the twin to Neotia Prime, Verot's whereabouts was overlooked. He is presumed dead. No further details available."

Bosaru turned away from the screen. Supposing Verot had managed to escape from Neotia Prime—gotten on a transport without being recognized, and managed to disembark on the unnamed world to begin anew—would he have been able to disappear into the crowds?

That last would have been easy enough. From all reports, the first days, the first months after landing on the unnamed planet had been pure chaos. Rebuilding a civilization took time and planning and money, and they had none of those things, not at the beginning. The blistering, suffocating heat meant that at the beginning some refugees buckled from heatstroke before finally adapting, and building shelter initially meant tents and more physical discomfort and illnesses. The planet was closer to the sun than Neotia Prime was, and without an environmental dome in place, some of the more fragile Neotians had not survived.

In those first days, with such chaotic conditions, there would have been no one to take account of anyone else, even a war criminal.

Yes, Verot could have made it there—and disappeared. The wilderness outside the settlements would not have been comfortable but it would have been livable. And considering the riches he had appropriated from not only his own people but also the Neoti, he could have bribed his way into buying his own provisions. There was some evidence he had sent funds off-world for safekeeping.

The mountains north of the main settlement were apparently livable. A few hardy souls, both Neoti and Vozuan, had chosen to go out there after landing, but stayed within a day's walk to the settlement.

Yes, Verot could be there. He could have spent time up in the mountains before making his way back into the larger settlements, disappearing into the shell-shocked masses.

Bosaru stared at the two last-known photos of Verot, one where he was grinning as he waved to the crowds during the first days of the war, and the other image, grim, as he stood on trial. In that one, the hand he had lost during an assassination attempt had been replaced with a metallic shell, the forefinger studded with small rubies—in memory of the Vozuans lost from battle, he had claimed, but those more cynical said the highly prized gems could more easily be used as currency than the volatile, fluctuating Vozuan currency itself.

It was inconceivable, but there it was. The monster who destroyed the lives of millions on the home world, and the home world itself, could still be alive, poisoning the minds of others even now.

Every instinct Bosaru had said that was the case. He gritted his teeth as he passed his hand in front of the screen, turning it off. "I am going to find you, Verot, if it's the last thing I do," he said out loud. "I am going to track you down."

Chapter Three

Going Home...Of Sorts

As a child, Bosaru remembered thinking that the trip from Neotia Prime to Aboo Two had taken so long, it seem to last forever. But then, he had never left the planet before then.

At first, the idea of the trip had charmed him. It was a trip, he was told, to a land far, far away, to visit friends of his father and mother. But there was no telling how long they would be gone, so they had to make sure they packed everything they could, all the belongings they could manage. If Bosaru had been older, the idea of packing all their worldly goods might have made him suspicious.

He never saw Neotia Prime again.

Now, so many years later, he would be passing by what had been Neotia Prime in his ship *Iron Spirit*, but he would not be able to get too close. Even with heavy protective gear, the radiation, one of the destructive effects of the oscillator corrosive, was too high for anyone to do so. The most he could do was swing by what remained. He could try to identify the continent he and his parents had lived on—if it still existed. There was no telling how corrosive the device was—another reason the Neoti Council, in its wisdom, had originally banned it and sent it to the Secret Sciences Police for safekeeping.

Sometimes even committees could come up with good ideas. Banning the oscillator had been one. Too bad it had taken one madman, with a network of followers, to undo good work.

Bosaru flew in close enough to make out the geography of the planet, the lands and the seas. But not too close, because the oscillator's destructive effects carried even through the atmosphere. "There it is," he murmured aloud, going in as close as he could. "Neotia Prime."

Home world. Or what had been home world. Using vague memories, he managed to roughly identify the region where his family had lived. Now it was all gone, and even the land itself had disintegrated. There were odd blobs of what had been land, but that was all that was left of the continent. Not too long from now the muck that was once the land and the sea would crumble, until bits and pieces began to float away as the atmosphere dissipated.

It had been home at one time. Now, it was only fit for scientists to monitor and politicians aiming for reelection to rail about.

Turning his gaze from the remains of his home world to its twin, the planet beyond—the world that now housed the Neoti and the Vozuans both—he suddenly had no desire to visit his people's new home. But he had to. And track down whoever was behind the smearing of his father's reputation, if it wasn't Verot.

Swinging past the sad remains of Neotia Prime, he considered where he would be going. His mother's friend was the high priestess of the shrine of Ixtr, now located not far from Ranger One, a name tacked onto the nearest settlement just so the Amalgamation would have some point of reference on the planet.

The climate of the unnamed planet must have been the hardest thing for the refugees to adjust to. Belen, what had been the major city and capital for the Neoti on Neotia Prime, had been in a lush semitropical valley, rich in vegetation. The settlement was on an arid plain, a desert with a mountain range in the distance, with the shrine one of three things notable about the settlement. The other two were the space port and the regional water reclamation plant.

There was a good reason he had avoided taking this trip before. He just didn't want to do it.

Once he had asked his mother if she wanted to visit the unnamed world. She had declined. "My home is only in my memories now," she explained. "My home is not on what was Neotia Prime, nor on the unnamed world. And I want to remember my home the way it was."

At the time, he hadn't understood. He fancied himself a pragmatist. What had happened could not be changed, and they would all be better off to acclimate themselves to the new reality.

Dolt. Faced with the reality in front of him, he didn't want to do it either. He understood now.

One advantage this new settlement had—the makeshift government, knowing that the amount of space travel in the coming years into and out of the unnamed world would be immense as the locals rebuilt a civilization from scratch, had made sure the new space port was state of the art to make the experience as smooth and efficient as possible. In fact, a useless visit on the part of Amalgamation politicians to check it out was a junket, Bosaru had heard. They usually went away disappointed, because there was nothing much there to attract them—no sex-light districts as of yet, no local cuisine worth speaking of, not even an amusement park.

Bosaru docked, using his family name—whether or not he was the Hallowed Son of the family currently as far as the Secret Sciences Police was concerned, it was still his to use—to expedite the process. At least he could do that, since he could no longer claim a berth to store *Iron Spirit* as an SSP officer.

Once he stepped out of the docked *Spirit*, however...that was another matter entirely.

He looked around in astonishment. "Not what I expected," he said aloud, but he couldn't hear himself.

The receiving center, fairly new and sleek in stainless steel, was *vast*. Intellectually, he knew the place where all incoming personnel had to be processed would have to be large, but he hadn't accounted for the fact that the space port was the only one of a decent size on the planet, and the receiving center would also be huge.

The *noise!* He covered his ears, slowly uncovering them as he adjusted to the din. The receiving center had not been designed for acoustics. Considering the curved ceiling seemed to go on forever, the materials used for the shell had little or no insulation, nothing to cut the free-floating noise that bounced off the walls, over and over again...

"We all use earplugs and noise deadeners," he heard faintly.

Bosaru turned. The customs processor, Neoti by the looks of him, appeared tired and harassed. He half smiled and pressed a button on the monitor in front of him. "Anyone who's gone through this building before knows to prepare for the noise. This must be your first trip to the Neotian unnamed world. Welcome—" he consulted the manifest and compared it to the information embedded on Daegon's palm—"en-Bosaru. *The House of Bosaru?*"

"One and only." Which was true, as far as Bosaru knew.

"In that case, welcome home," the processor said, and the smile looked genuine this time. "My clan was allied with yours many generations ago. This is no Neotia Prime, but sooner or later it may look something like it, with a lot of work." He tapped the monitor one more time and handed Bosaru his planetary ID. "Good luck, en-Bosaru. Enjoy your stay."

That took Daegon by surprise. "How do you know I'm not moving back?"

The processor snorted. "Enjoy your stay," he repeated.

"Is there any public transportation? Cabs?" Bosaru asked, raising his voice as he tried to be heard. Private ships were too large to be used except at the space port.

The processor was used to the noise. Without moving his head, he replied, "What we have is out the front and to the side. We walk a lot here in this settlement. Don't forget your sunscreen. Good luck."

Once Bosaru stepped out of the din dome, he paused. He closed his eyes, letting the harsh heat warm his face, though he was standing under an awning. That was the first thing he had been warned about—the unnamed world was closer to the sun than Neotia Prime had been, resulting in a burning-hot, arid climate. A quick hypodermic of a long-term sunscreen had taken care of most of Bosaru's concerns, but that still didn't mean he wanted to spend the entire time he was there outside in the brutal sun and heat.

"This doesn't look much like civilization," he muttered aloud once he could open his eyes, earning stares of disapproval from passersby.

From what he could see, it looked more like a work that had barely begun, even after twenty years.

There was no public transportation as of yet—there was a hint of things to come, with construction, but largely abandoned, but there were hover cabs, he noted. None of them looked as if there was a cabwash anywhere. The dust on everything looked as though there were layers upon layers, all solidifying into an ingrained coating. While some of them had more dents than others, the dust almost filled in the dips and nicks.

Looking to the right, Bosaru stepped up to the cabstand and was relieved to see a hover cab come screeching up. It was dusty and dented and it was clear it needed some work. Wasn't there was a mechanic somewhere in the unnamed world? Or at least at this settlement?

The driver of the hover cab stuck his head out. "Where to?" he asked, the betel stick drooping out of the side of his mouth staining his teeth and lips black. Bosaru noticed he was also wearing a black cap pulled low, which matched the mask that covered nearly half his face. The driver must have been in the civil war—Bosaru knew there was a good number of soldiers on both sides who had been exposed to the effects of the oscillator corrosive.

"The shrine of Ixtr. Know where it is?"

The driver chewed on his lip. "Bad area of town."

"The whole settlement is less than twenty years old. How bad could it be?"

"You'd be surprised. You sure you want to go there?"

Bosaru shrugged. "I need to go there. Thanks for the warning."

"Fine, get in," the driver said. "Luggage?"

Bosaru tossed his duffel into the backseat. "This is it."

Once he was inside, the glare of the sunlight diminished, but only a little. A sign right above the driver's seat read "What Would Emperius Rey Do?" It took Bosaru a moment to remember the name, a figure from Vozuan mythology who was supposed to have ruled eons ago and merged the various regions of Neotia Prime. There was little evidence to indicate such a figure existed, but he had been a rallying point for Vozuans in the civil war.

He had a pair of sunshades in his duffel, but before he could reach for them, the hover cab took off, jerking him back and then throwing him to the side as the cab took a sharp turn away from the space port. He grabbed the armrest before he got tossed to the other side of the seat. "You always drive like this?" he shouted to the driver.

"Sure, why not?"

"Because some of us value our lives!"

"Overrated," the driver said, waving his black-gloved hand. "We survived a war. That was enough."

Bosaru gripped the armrest with one hand and his duffel with the other. "So you survived a war and you want to die in a traffic accident?"

"We're all going to die sometime," the driver said with a shrug, veering away from an oncoming hover cab, horn blaring. "If it's our time to join the Great Merge, it's our time. It wasn't my time for the Merge."

The reference to the Great Merge, the Vozuan belief in the afterlife, made Bosaru prompt, "So you came over as part of the diaspora? That must have been rough."

Nodding, the driver navigated through the narrow, ramshackle streets that had clearly been put down in the interests of expediency. "It was," he said, hitting his horn.

A hover truck veered out of the way, nearly running into the ruins of a building. "Bad times, bad blood. No faith in our leaders, sad to say. But we got through it. And we'll rebuild. It's our way."

The harsh glint of the glaring sunlight blinded Bosaru for a moment. "How do you drive without a screen on your shield? How can you see with that glare? Why hasn't the government built a dome to make this environment more hospitable?"

"Can't say," the cabbie said, driving just high enough to avoid hitting pedestrians, but coming within centimeters of sideswiping other hover cabs. He also drove very, very fast, which considering the former two activities –

"Can you slow down?" Bosaru shouted.

"Why? No speed limits here, they still haven't gotten around to it," the driver said as he took a corner at a forty-degree angle. "More fares, more money. Simple economics. Cabdrivers do pretty good here, thanks to the visitors we've been getting."

"Ever hit anyone?" Bosaru asked as he kept a grip on the armrest in an effort to stay on the seat.

"Not a pedestrian, but I have nicked a building or two," the driver admitted cheerfully. "And last week I nicked another hover cab. First time for that." He flipped a gold-and-silver triangular coin with his good hand, resting his other on the steering wheel.

"I'm amazed," Bosaru muttered. Aloud, he said, "So what was it like, starting over here? *Look out!*"

The cab turned a loop-de-loop as the driver veered out of the way of two oncoming hover cabs. For a split second Bosaru was in free fall, harnessed to gravity only by his death grip on the armrest. *This is why speed limits and seat belts exist*, he thought when he wasn't scrambling.

By the time the cab stopped, he had lost the initial terror – after all, he had been an SSP officer, he had seen things – but a sense of unreality remained. "Are we there yet?"

"No, there's a traffic light, the only one in town," the driver called back. "But we'll be starting again – *soon!*"

Bosaru lost his grip on the armrest as he found himself shoved back against the seat by gravity, tumbling as the cab tilted to the side as the driver dodged two pedestrians and skinned past a burned-out shell of a roughly constructed building. As the cab sped away, he caught a glimpse of one of the pedestrians and the expression on his face – surprise, but not terror.

How could someone not be terrified of nearly getting hit by a hover cab?

As if it happens all the time.

"Is there a police force in place?" he called out. "Keep crime at bay, keep the population feeling safe, control traffic?"

"We're still under martial law," the driver replied, seemingly unperturbed as he raced past on the side of a building with its windows missing its glass, swerving

around a hover truck. "Provisional government hasn't trained a police force yet. Can't afford it yet, they say. The military's still keeping the peace."

Martial law all this time? But it's been years, Bosaru wanted to say. That should have been plenty of time.

What was going on here? How long did it take to set up a new government? A police force, speed limits and traffic laws? And if the Amalgamation politicians were here, why hadn't they done something about it yet?

He should have been keeping track of what was happening. But he had taken at face value the reports coming out of the unnamed world, like everyone else.

There was more — or less — going on than he realized. Than any of them realized.

Chapter Four

The Shrine

"We're here," Bosaru finally heard from the front of the cab. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

Bosaru looked down at his hands. One was gripping the armrest, while the other was braced against the seat. His duffel had landed against the opposite door. "Could have been worse," he managed to say. *The cab could have hit something broadside.*

"You wouldn't happen to know of a place to stay in these parts, would you?" Bosaru asked.

The payment panel between the front seat and the back opened and flashed the amount owed. "Around here? Can't say. This is no place anyone wants to stay. Willingly, at least."

Daegon fished out some coins from his coin pocket. They weren't Neotian currency—he wasn't sure if the currency was the same as it had been before the end of the war—but he figured they would be good for the fare. "I always got the impression that the neighborhoods around the shrines of Ixtr were sacred and safe. At least that was the way on Neotia Prime."

The driver snorted as the coins hit the payment slot and the amount recorded. "Neotia Prime is no more," he said, sounding oddly poetic as the receipt was spit out. "The way of life we knew there is but a memory. This is a new world. These are new times." The cab door popped open. "Thanks for your patronage, en-Bosaru. Hope you find what you came to find." The door opened and Bosaru had barely stepped out with his duffel before it slammed shut and the cab roared off.

How did the cab driver know who he was?

Maybe he had a connection with the processor at the space port, signaling there was a paying customer on his way. That was possible.

But why did he leave in such a hurry? Considering everything he had heard about this area, the cab driver might have been making a quick getaway. Maybe.

After taking a quick turnaround, Bosaru decided he couldn't blame him. This was a far cry from the parklike grounds around the shrines of Ixtr on Neotia Prime, from the viz-images he had seen. This was...a crime scene waiting to happen.

In an earlier time, the shrines of Ixtr had been sacred, no matter where on Neotia Prime you encountered one. The areas around each had been treated the same way, a beautiful place to stop and enjoy the beauty, giving troubled visitors looking for peace a place to meditate. How could anyone be other than tranquil in such a place?

Now... The settlement was less than twenty years old. How could anything that was practically new look this rundown, this – squalid?

Big, substantial buildings, built of rough-hewn sandstone and granite carved out of the mountains not far from the settlement, were already scarred with graffiti and garbage littering on the grounds around. These buildings, some already abandoned, towered over this shrine of Ixtr, making the place of worship look shabby and insignificant in contrast.

The shrine itself, built of the same local stone, was protected by a high barbed-wire fence and a pair of gates that stood open. The elegant carvings and gilded statues that had marked the entrance of the original major shrine back on Neotia Prime were nowhere to be found here. Instead, a dusty statue that was perched on a pedestal to one side of the doors announced the shrine to those who approached. The shrine grounds were a mishmash of rock and steel – not elegant, but efficient, and not large, which felt odd, considering there should have been wide open spaces from which to claim land. On Neotia Prime, the shrines of Ixtr were always on wide spaces.

He stepped through the gates, getting as close to the statue as he could. He blew on it, then stepped away, coughing, from the puff of dust.

The statue, it seemed, had not been cleaned in some time. He looked around. It could also be that the climate encouraged dust and sand. It was not an area that saw substantial rains more than once a year, if that, if he remembered the data.

Bosaru stood for a minute, looking at the statue, a representation of the legendary Emperius Rey. If it was one from the original shrine on Neotia Prime, it would have been gold – but here it was hard to tell, considering how pitted and soiled the statue was, thanks to the harsher environment here.

But then, on Neotia Prime, there would have been no question of keeping the walls pristine. There would have been no graffiti. Here, scrawls, some indecipherable and some clearly obscene, marred the broad surfaces.

The cabdriver was right. This was a new world, new times.

Twenty years. What else had been going on in those years?

Bosaru pushed at the doors. Unlocked. Good.

The minute he stepped into the foyer of the shrine, the temperature plunged, the searing, uncomfortable heat of the late afternoon barely a memory in an instant. The stones that formed the entry of the shrine were thick and heavy, cutting off the harsh environment outside.

He looked around. Two bright lights shed light on murals of the carved intricate intertwining circles of the Ixtr symbols. The murals had to be original, taken from a famous shrine of Ixtr back on Neotia Prime.

The shrine elders had only managed to save some. Bosaru remembered the story. When the exodus occurred, the high priestess of the main shrine had finagled an officer of the Interplanetary Military Force, in charge of the evacuation of the shrine personnel, to write up the blocks making up the murals in the transport ship manifest as “pets”,

which according to the IMF was allowed space. No matter that the “pets” were heavier than all the evacuees, the human variety, of the area combined. Nor that they never required food or exercise. On the manifest the murals were listed as pets. So the murals shared space with other pets, and livestock, as much as they could squeeze into the space.

The colors of the murals looked dimmer than Bosaru remembered from the viz-images. He didn’t know—his mother had not mentioned—how they had been originally displayed, whether they had received natural light, but their faded glory now looked sad.

He heard shuffling. He looked toward where the inner shrine would be in a traditional Ixtr shrine. A glance at his timepiece told him that the priestesses would be getting ready for evening prayers. Perhaps he would be able to get some information from them, if nothing else, be directed to the high priestess.

Following the noise, he walked past the murals and down a short hallway, stopping when he caught sight of the wide altar at the end of a spacious area. It was bright in there, with a mild, mellow breeze that he surmised allowed what could have been hot and suffocating to be a pleasant place to meditate.

No murals there—the worshippers were more important than works of art—but he was pleased to recognize a variation of a minor shrine work, a scene from the sacred scrolls in which the sun father and the moon mother met for the first time according to Neoti myth. There was a variation in Vozuan faery tales, but for whatever reason, Bosaru’s mother, though of Vozuan descent, had never told him many of those when he was growing up. His mother displayed a viz-image of the scene in her dining room.

A noise to his side startled him, coming from the doorway leading to the offices of the high priestess.

“Peace and light,” he said, raising his voice so she would know there was a visitor. “Your Eminence, I am Daegon en-Bosaru, of the house Bosaru. My mother, Ir en-Bosaru, she who was Irali Parall Murrin, was high priestess of the shrine of Ixtr, who—” he stopped. Was she there? “Your Eminence?”

“Blessed be,” he heard. The high priestess emerged from her office. And the rest of his planned greeting deserted him, wiped clean from his mind.

This was a high priestess? No.

The high priestesses of Ixtr were usually seers, like his mother—thin, pallid—more in tune with the stars above than the here and now. That Bosaru’s mother had chosen to marry his father had never ceased to surprise him, but by all accounts, their mating had been a happy one. High priestesses were high-strung. It was simply a fact.

But this one...she was like no other high priestess he had ever been acquainted with. Priestesses and seers were notable for sensing things, seeing othertime, elsewhere. But this priestess...she saw the here, she saw the now, he could tell. Her hair, deep gold twisted into curls piled high on her head, was full and thick, almost the shade of her skin. Seer priestesses were usually thin. This priestess was voluptuous.

Every movement, every step she took that made her come toward him made her sway. It was familiar – no, it couldn't be.

With strength of will, he forced himself to look at her face. And his mouth dropped open.

He knew that face, that body. "Holy Pthets," he whispered.

That face was in his dreams. *How* –

"You're real," he said, almost inaudible. "All these years and I thought –"

"Blessed be. How may I help you?"

The expression on her face didn't change—looking at him, concentrating on him, the way no shrine priestess he had known ever did. He didn't remember her looking like that in his dreams. In his dreams, she was here, now. Concentrating on him.

Was it because dreams were so easily forgotten that she looked different somehow? He didn't remember her eyes being as the same color as her hair, marking her as a Vozuan, the "other" side of the Great Conflict. But that didn't matter. *She* was his mother's friend, the high priestess of the shrine? How could that be? From the looks of her, she had to be younger than he was.

"Blessed be," she said again, and her voice was low and warm. She stopped in front of him, so close he could smell the distinctive scent of *feren* perfume in her hair. She placed her palms together and nodded at him, her smile cooler than that voice would have suggested. "I am Imreen Dal of the Shrine Ixtr. How may I help you?"

Bosaru frowned. "My apologies, Your Eminence. But I was given the impression the high priestess of this shrine was – someone else."

The woman nodded, a golden curl falling across her forehead. The errant tendril made her look, just for a moment, a little less formidable. "Our lives are without permanence, sir. Our situation seems to change daily, with no end in sight. It is our way." She looked up at him from beneath the curl. He could have sworn the look was almost...mischievous. But why...

He frowned. This didn't track. "I was told by my mother, Ir of the house Bosaru, who was the high priestess of this shrine when it was still on Neotia Prime, that there were matters pertaining to the house Bosaru in your archives I needed to examine, and she requested your help. And that the high priestess, who was her friend in her younger years, would have a message for me..."

Imreen Dal tilted her head. "I am sorry..."

Curious. "Odd. My mother said she spoke to the priestess and requested –"

"Who is your mother again?"

"Ir of the house Bosaru," he repeated. "She was the high priestess for five years and more before she left to marry my father. She left a message." This was more than passing odd. "I'm sorry, when did your predecessor as high priestess go to the Great Void? I'm sorry, the Great Merge." Vozuans were sensitive about the distinction

between the two. "It had to have been very recent, since my mother left the message recently..."

"I'm sorry, but I can't help you with that. You said you needed to access the archives," Imreen Dal said. "I can help you there. This way." She turned and, gesturing, glided to the back of the shrine, leading him down another hall, this one lined with statuettes.

Bosaru recognized these statuettes too. In the original shrines, the halls had been packed full of them from Neotia Prime's long and rich history and legends, both Neoti and Vozuan. During the evacuation, the priestesses and eunuchs had done their best to take away as many of the statues they could.

Bosaru had seen the viz-images of the halls from back then. This hall paled in comparison. But it was still something.

"It is beautiful, I know," she said behind him. "It is a reminder of our heritage."

She stood in the middle of the corridor, looking up at the ceiling, at the murals there.

"Not much Vozuan art survived," she murmured. "Mostly Neoti. Only those that were on loan off-world from the Vozuan museums when the war started, and the murals."

The Vozuans specialized in murals, Bosaru remembered. "At least there are viz-images. And artisans, once they're settled in."

"If they are allowed to create more murals, of course," she said, looking at him. He could see a glimmer of moisture at the corner of her eye and he held his breath for a moment. She looked away. "Perhaps it would be better if we were simply absorbed into Neoti history."

Bosaru took a deep breath. He was not interested in a discussion on the rights of Vozuans in this new home. This was the new home for Neoti and Vozuan alike, and they would all be Neotians, united. "Your Eminence—"

She shook her head, as if to dispel her mood. "I am sorry. My thoughts are too dark." She turned back, continuing in her original direction, signaling for Bosaru to follow her. "The archives are this way. We have an archivist who can help you. She has been organizing the best she can—"

"Thank you, but I don't anticipate needing that much h—"

The priestess paused in front of a flat gray panel, and if not for the black metal handle, he would have mistaken it for part of the wall. "I think you'll need all the help you can get," she said, with a sideways glance at him. "And I'd suggest you remember that. Excuse me."

And with that, she opened the door and slipped in, closing it behind her, leaving Bosaru out in the corridor.

Several minutes passed before it occurred to him that, possibly, she wasn't coming back. He checked the handle. It gave, and he opened the door.

Nothing. He opened the door wider.

There was nothing there. It was a tiny, empty chamber, high-ceilinged, without windows, lit by some source he couldn't identify.

He cursed. It had to be a nexus portal, only appropriate for short distances.

So where the hell did she go?

"May I help you?"

He turned. Another priestess was standing in the hall, this one looking vaguely confused. This woman was clearly a priestess of Ixtr, with that farseeing gaze, the one the high priestess had oddly lacked. This one was older, her once-emerald hair now shot through liberally with silver.

"I'm sorry," Bosaru said, with a short nod. "The high priestess was leading me to the archives, and then she went in here and didn't come back out—"

"The nexus portal," she said. She nodded at the door. "Odd. That portal leads to the city limits. I don't know of any business we have currently that she would need to go there. And she isn't the high priestess."

Bosaru stared at the woman. She looked more like his mother's age. "Am I to understand—"

She dipped her head graciously. "I am Mirel do-Farnot, the high priestess of this shrine of Ixtr. And you are?"

Great start, Bosaru! "You're the high priestess. But I was told—"

The high priestess—because it was clear that indeed, this woman was exactly that—tilted her head in the same way that Daegon had seen his mother do. "By whom?" she inquired.

"By someone who called herself the h—" he stopped. Come to think of it, the woman never had identified herself by title. He had assumed.

He was an idiot. After a decade of exemplary service with the SSP, all that training had promptly gone out the window.

Just because the woman had been the one from his dreams.

"Imreen Dal," he said, recalling the other priestess's name. "She came out of the chambers of the high priestess—your chambers—and I assumed she was you."

The high priestess frowned, the fine lines around her mouth deepening. "I will speak to her," she paused then, looking at him. "I think I know who you are," she said, a smile gentling her features.

"I'm sorry. I should introduce myself. I am Daegon en-Bosaru, and am I right in thinking you know my mother—?"

"I received her message, and indeed was expecting you. So was Imreen Dal, since she was the one who gave me the message."

Her face softened. "If you do not mind my saying, you favor your mother. You have her eyes. I was sorry to hear about your father," she went on, regarding him

frankly. "He was a calming influence during those parlous times. I do not think his kind will be seen again."

For a moment, they were both silent. *At least she doesn't think I am a monster*, he thought. At least his father's reputation was intact in one place.

"About the message from my mother," he began. "It is for him that —"

The priestess nodded. "I know. When we moved the archives from home world to here, we kept the records of the Great Conflict intact, and your father's papers that your mother sent to me. They cover both sides," she told him. "They should be helpful to you. Why anyone would want to stain his name, now of all times, I do not know."

"The timing is suspect," he agreed. "And even if he will not know it in the here and now, I want him to have a clear name when he arrives into the Great Void."

The high priestess smiled. "You are a good son."

If I were a good son, I would have been there for him. Instead, he had been working to make the Amalgamation safe for — what? He had his suspicions, but that was all.

But that seemed to be his theme for the day. He didn't like the idea he was as clueless as he felt.

"And Imreen Dal — is she a priestess here?" he asked.

"She is. She was one who came to us from the great move. She..." the priestess trailed off.

Bosaru understood. There was no delicate way to refer to the side of the conflict that had had the burden of a madman at the helm. "When I first saw her, she looked familiar, and I don't know how I would have known her," he said. No need to mention she had been in his dreams for nearly two decades.

The priestess looked startled. "She came as a refugee, like so many others, en-Bosaru. If she has ancestors of note, or other relatives who could have given her more of a name, she would have told me. When she came into the shrine, she said she had been traveling since the fall of our home world and asked for refuge. And we gave it to her. She has been with us since, and she has never spoken of her life previous. And we have respected that."

Bosaru shook his head. "I can't name wherefrom I know her face."

"I do not know if she had ever been off-world as a child. If so, she has never mentioned it."

"Thank you, Dame Mirel." Bosaru glanced up at the skylight and realized the harsh light of the afternoon was finally dimming. "If I could start my research tomorrow, I would be much obliged. And — do you know where I could find a room for the night?"

The priestess's eyes widened. "You do not have lodging? And you came here first?" She put her hand to her cheek, considering. "There are some places I can recommend. Some of the others in the area —" she shook her head. "Otherwise, I would suggest you sleep in the meditation room here for the night. The streets are no place for anyone to wander after dark."

"That bad?" he asked before he realized he was speaking.

Her gaze met his. "There was chaos after we arrived," she said. "After all, most of a planet's survivors had to be moved. Supplies were few, and what little there was had to be conserved. Starvation was the rule of the day. And..." she trailed off with a shrug.

"It never got any better," he said, finishing her thought. "Pthets, I never knew it was this way. At least my father never had to see this. He would have died a thousand deaths than see it like this."

"So would we all," she replied, her features unreadable. "And for whatever reason, our leaders have not seen fit to tell everyone but a few that conditions are as dire as they are. But this is our reality now. We will fight to make it what we think it should be. But for that..."

"I have to find out more about what happened during the conflict. I need to discover the truth before too many people get wind of this accusation against my father and spread the accusation without proof. And find out how my father is connected, if at all."

Mirel do-Farnot nodded with a sigh. "I do not envy your task, Daegon. I don't want to consider what might happen, considering your father was one of the few who came out of the war with a reputation unsullied by Neoti or Vozuan."

"Come with me," she said, turning and gesturing for Bosaru to follow her. "We'll find you lodging for a night."

"For longer. I'll be here for the time being."

She had started to walk down the corridor, but with that she stopped. "Can you be away from your position with the Science Police that long?"

Bosaru suppressed a smile. "My mother has been talking to you, I think. I am on leave from the SSP while I investigate this on my own."

Her eyes glinted. "You are a good son. May the prophets bless you on your travails." Then she stopped suddenly, her fingers to her cheek again. "Your mother has relatives here," she said. "I just remembered. Did you know? Did she mention it?"

Bosaru brightened. "No, she didn't. Here? I've haven't met any of my relatives from her side of the family since we left Neotia Prime."

Dame Mirel smiled. "Your mother's side of the clan is a far-flung one. And I know they have a room available, because they asked me to keep an ear out for anyone who wants to rent one. It's the back room of their restaurant, in the Vozuan district. Vozuan Town," she added. "The room comes with one meal a day and the option to work as a server during the busy times."

He grinned. "If I decide not to go back to the force, I guess I could have a new career."

The directions to the restaurant, on the edge of where Vozuan Town met the Neoti district, she gave him were simple but disturbing—down the street a quarter kilometer and left at the first burned-out lot, left at the building with the broken windows, past

the abandoned complex, down the third alley, skipping the giant pit where there used to be a building before a fire, then the second door on the right. Street names and addresses were apparently a nicety that hadn't been implemented yet either in the unnamed world.

But the directions were accurate. A glance down the first alley indicated that there had been a fire there too, before every opening had been boarded up.

The alley he ended up in was dark, with the first door on the left boarded up—Dame Mirel hadn't mentioned that detail, but the handiwork suggested the door had been nailed shut very recently.

But the alley was clean—no garbage, no rubble, no alarming smells. It might have looked a touch dismal, but it was still someone's front porch.

Once Bosaru stepped inside the door, though, his wariness dissipated. He took a deep breath. *Smells like home.*

The restaurant—because that's what it was, despite its obscure location—was brightly painted in the reds and oranges of the native Neotian *foola* blossom and festooned with knickknacks and posters depicting long-gone scenes of Neotia Prime cities, with the aromas wafting out of the kitchen making it smell like his parents' home on Neoti holidays.

And it looked like a popular restaurant too. There were customers at every table, some of them clearly Neoti with celadon-colored hair, some clearly Vozuan with golden hair, but none seemed to be overly alarmed at the other. In fact, Daegon was pleased to see they looked comfortable.

A waitress who had just finished serving a customer noticed him. Her hair was petal-pink, with the roots suspiciously golden. "Would you like to be seated?" she asked. She wore a hoop through her eyebrow, marking her as a young member of the Secont, Bosaru's mother's clan.

"Actually," he said, "Dame Mirel sent me—I'm looking for a room. I'm Daegon en-Bosaru."

The server brightened. "Let me get my aunt. She's in the kitchen." Gesturing, she flipped a sauce-stained towel over her shoulder and set off, expecting him to follow. He did. "You're from off-world?" she asked, turning her head just enough for him to hear her over the hubbub. "You're a Bosaru? That makes you one of our cousins."

He had to think for a moment. "I believe we have two forefathers in common a few generations back, from what Dame Mirel was telling me."

"That makes you a cousin. Aunt will like that," the server said with a grin. "I'm Agie Secont Thonoy."

The regional name marked her as a relative from the southern hemisphere from the home world, with Vozuan ties. Now, of course, it just meant his clan, far-flung as it was now, was alive and well. That gave him some comfort.

The kitchen was bright and filled with smells he wouldn't mind doing research into. His mouth watering—it had been quite a while since the *tomozava* salad at The Web—he followed his newfound cousin through the kitchen and ignored the urge to take deep whiffs of interesting smells when he passed them.

A small, thin woman was sitting at a battered wooden table that looked as if it had seen better decades, hunched over a pile of papers and holding her head with one hand and a stylus with the other. She looked up when they approached, her brow wrinkled.

"Aunt Jenatt, this is Daegon en-Bosaru," Agie said. "Dame Mirel sent him for the room. The Bosarus are cousins, aren't they?"

The elder Secont brightened. Her hair was silver and gold, twisted into a messy braid. Her niece's pink tresses were clearly not native, and the gold part marked her as another Vozuan.

"They are, from the northern reaches of the home world, on the Neoti side, but this is the first time I have heard of the Bosaru family on the unnamed world. Cousin, welcome," the woman exclaimed, smiling. "It's rare we see anyone from our own clan."

After a few minutes establishing relationship—Daegon was off by a generation in his estimation, and it had been a forefather and a foremother, not two forefathers—cousin Agie and her aunt, Jenatt, showed him to the room. What he saw *did* please him, considering he had had lurid images of unvented closets and fighting for space with vermin, with his life in danger as much indoors as it would be out. But he was the first to admit he hadn't had to scramble much in his life.

The room was tiny, scrubbed clean and whitewashed, with a small window high on the wall, and by its angle Bosaru judged he would get a glimpse of the morning sun, past the bars and the wire that protected the glass. The bed was narrow and covered with threadbare linens bleached white, and he could tell at a glance it would be lumpy even before his back touched the mattress, but it looked clean and he could live with the rest. There was a faint shadow of boxes beneath the bed, which wasn't surprising. The room was probably storage when it wasn't rented out.

Daegon had to argue with his newfound cousins to accept rent, finally trumping their steadfast refusal—which he found charming at first and then exasperating—with a promise to protect them as much as he could against the acts of vandalism that apparently plagued the neighborhood.

"The bars on the windows. I was surprised to see them," he said. "But then, I was surprised to see the graffiti marring so many walls and buildings. What there's left of them."

Jenatt nodded with a sigh before turning away for a second. "After the militia left the neighborhood and left us to fend for ourselves—"

"They retreated to the base outside the city, and they still act as the occasional, intermediate police," Agie added, confirming what the cab driver had told Bosaru. "But they are not here at night, and that is when the graffiti and the roamers all began. We do not go out at night, not above ground."

"No one with any good intentions wanders out at night, not around here, not anymore," Jenatt said. "Which is why Dame Mirel sent you here so quickly, before nightfall."

Daegon glanced at the high window. The light was fading, sending long shadows across the walls. "If the army knows about this, why don't they move the troops back in?"

Jenatt shrugged. "They said it was time we dealt with our own problems. I understand we cannot be overly dependent on them, but we have no weapons, no training. I, and the others around here, am not certain how we can deal with the vandals who threaten us."

"The burned-out lot down the street... That shopkeeper, he told the roamers to leave. To get out of the neighborhood," Agie told him. "The roamers trapped him in there and set the building on fire."

Daegon's eyes bulged. "And the government did *nothing*?"

Jenatt and Agie both fell silent. "They said it was our own fault, for agitating them," Jenatt said. "And that was that. We are on our own. Except for the taxes, of course. Always the taxes. I think the government itself is at a loss at what to do with the roamers."

Bosaru looked at her. "What do you get for your taxes? You don't have police protection. I guess you don't have protection against fire. Utilities?"

"We have power. Most of the time. We have water, more often than not," Jenatt said. She stood up, and for the first time Bosaru realized she had a game leg.

She noticed his glance. "I was caught outside, some years ago," she said. "It did not heal well. Other than that, I was unharmed, so I count myself lucky."

"If we can get across town, there is a hospital," Agie volunteered. "My mother took me there when I was small and I was very sick." Her face shadowed. "My mother died that night, and that's when Aunt Jenatt took me in."

"What happened?"

Jenatt shook her head. "Back then we were not quite aware how dangerous it was," she said. "I made a mistake, and it is one I will make sure none of mine will ever make again. My sister and I set out together to take Agie to the medical center, thinking we would be safer together. Cousin, we live in wild times. Times of authority come after the wild times have been tamed. That is always the way. We live in dangerous times."

Bosaru couldn't disagree. But... "It shouldn't be like this," he said. He frowned. "There is something wrong here. Something very wrong."

Chapter Five

Into Darkness

By the time they got back to the dining room, only a couple of customers were left and they too were readying to leave, their glances at the lowering light through the small window making it clear to Bosaru that they wanted not to be caught out of doors after sundown.

"Nothing is open after sundown," he murmured aloud. It wasn't the lack of potential commerce. It was the threat of violence that led to the lack of potential commerce.

"Most everything is closed," Jenatt said. "Not everything. Most anything that needs to close eventually."

"Nightclubs are open until dawn, so they are a place of refuge," Agie volunteered.

"There are a few clubs and bars," the older woman admitted. "But they are not official, not paying their share of tariffs. Some move from week to week. They're known as dark clubs. Don't ask me any more, because I don't know anything else."

All of Bosaru's instincts told him she did, but he wasn't going to press her — among other reasons, he didn't want to find himself shut out during the night hours.

Not until he saw what the night hours were like.

After the last of the customers were gone, he helped Jenatt and Agie barricade the door and close the shutters. "You do this every night?" he asked as he pressed the latch home, securing the window, fixing thick planks over the window. "Is the — activity — the same every night?"

Jenatt shrugged as she wiped down the tables. "Some nights are worse than others. When the building down the street burned, we were afraid the roamers would do the same to us. But we were fortunate. Koro was not."

"Koro being the proprietor of the shop down the street?"

She nodded. "He —"

The lights flickered. She glanced at the overhead lights. "We had better clean up quickly. The power may be out earlier than usual."

Bosaru grabbed a wet cloth and wiped down the rest of the tables. "No police protection and regular power outages. So what do you do, sit in the dark and hope for the best every night?"

Jenatt laughed. "Cousin, you make us sound pitiful. At least we are alive. At least we can hope for a better life. We would have been dead long before now on the home world."

He couldn't disagree. "You are far more patient than I would be."

"What else can we do?"

A muffled explosion shook the building, making the lights flicker. "They've started," Agie said, popping in from the kitchen. "That sounds close. Next alley, maybe."

Jenatt frowned. "The general store. I thought they were already closed."

"They closed the store yesterday, the same time the grocer did, and said they would not be back, not after the father died in the plant accident. I ran into the son this morning," Agie said. "But they didn't say why, or where they were going."

"That happen often?"

Jenatt frowned. "Far more than I am comfortable with."

"Jenatt—have you received any threats from the roamers? Been told to leave?"

She shook her head. "Now if that were to have happened, that would make sense. But no. The roamers don't speak. And the grocer, I know he did everything he could to avoid them. The most he might have done is ask too many questions at the community meetings. But..."

The lights flickered again, and in the distance, Bosaru heard the sharp, staccato blasts of weapon fire, then a deep, bone-chilling explosion. He stepped back from the door.

"They've started early tonight," a new voice said.

Daegon turned, his hand reaching for the laser pistol at his hip.

The newcomer was taller than Bosaru by more than a head. By the looks of him, he had to be another cousin, probably younger than Agie but no doubt the protector of the clan. He was young but broad, and Daegon guessed his mere size probably squelched impromptu fights—if what was happening outdoors was any indication, good to have around. He was dressed in a khaki-colored set of coveralls, dusty and dirty, that had the symbol of the water reclamation plant on his breast pocket and a bright red armband with a symbol that wasn't of the reclamation plant... Bosaru blinked. He knew that symbol.

"For tonight, I think we're safe," the young man said. "At least that's what it seems like. You are Daegon en-Bosaru, our cousin, Mother tells me. I'm Thonoy Secont Ferrim."

Bosaru smiled. "Jenatt's son? Pleased to meet yet another cousin. How did you get in?"

"We have underground tunnels to get around during the worst of the heat of the day and the dangerous nights," the newfound cousin explained, his gold-colored hair lank and greasy, his face smeared and bruised. "I have a job at the reclamation plant, outside city limits, and I come home by the tunnels to avoid the roamers."

That was new—Bosaru hadn't read anything about that in his research. "What tunnels?"

"The tunnels are a joint effort with a number of area residents," Thonoy said. "They allow us to get around this sector during the night, but we haven't dug far enough to get to the medical center across town, or the bazaars and stores in the Neoti district. We're hoping to dig more to connect with those when we can. I managed to find a tunnel entrance just as the sun hit the hills, so I was lucky. I was in no mood to be running for the rest of the night."

"Even at his size, Thonoy would be hard-put to be safe," Agie said as she dragged in a bucket and a mop and started to clean the floor, handing the broom to her cousin. Thonoy took the hint and started sweeping the crumbs, with Agie following.

"Is it worth the risk?"

"The pay from the plant keeps us safe," Thonoy said simply, tapping a crumpled napkin and a forgotten half-eaten biscuit onto a dustpan. "For the necessities that get more and more dear every day, with foodstuff prices eating more and more of our profits, the price of energy. And as long as I have the job, we have certain...protection."

It was on the tip of Daegon's tongue to ask the young man to explain what kind of "protection", but his gaze drifted past to both Jenatt and Agie and he held his tongue. This was the frontier, and women had always been in danger in the wilderness.

"The unnamed world is not what I expected," he said finally.

Jenatt glanced at him as she put away the cleaning supplies while Agie and Thonoy reset the eating utensils and the spices on the tables. "Nor is it what we expected," she reminded him. "But it is what we have now. So why are you here? Aren't you a Secret Sciences officer?"

Bosaru shook his head. For a moment, he had forgotten. "I have reason to believe Verot Barus Kurog is still alive, and for reasons of his own is orchestrating a campaign against my father, who is breathing his last."

His cousins flinched. "I have heard nothing," Thonoy said. "About Verot being alive, at least. I don't know of anything against your father, except he was a good man. Is a good man. We were sorry to hear..."

Thonoy's gaze drifted. Bosaru guessed that the news of his father's illness had spread, even here. "Someone is claiming he was in charge of the death camps. Almost immediately after he lapsed into a coma, the rumors began. The timing is suspect, and I can think of no one else who would have anything to gain from it."

"Verot's gone, cousin," Jenatt said. Her color was high. "Too many eyewitnesses say so. I just don't think it is possible—"

"The stories of what happened differ," Bosaru pointed out. "Which one do you know?"

Thonoy shrugged. "The one we heard, over and over. The one in which his own men set upon him."

The tone in the young man's voice, faint as it was, made Bosaru glance at him. This was no time to get into a political discussion, particularly not when he was beholden to

his cousins—his Vozuan cousins, on the losing side of the civil war—at least for the night. “I heard that story too. And another in which he left the home world in a small ship he had secreted away during the final days of the conflict. I also heard one in which he slipped away, leaving his identification on the corpse of one of his followers, whose throat he had slit for just this purpose.”

“The Verot would not have done such a thing!” Thonoy exclaimed.

Jenatt rolled her eyes and Agie sighed, both of which made Bosaru glad. There were loyalists still, many of them young, who had no memory of the conflict or the dark days. “So you don’t know of any whispers, no outlandish stories, that may mean he’s still alive?” he asked.

The older woman shook her head. “We would surely have heard something like that.”

The power died just then, taking with it the light and, Daegon realized after a moment, the heat. The sudden chill in the room was already noticeable.

Jenatt threw up her hands. “The outage is early tonight,” she said in disgust. “We’ll finish cleaning up tomorrow morning. I refuse to wash dishes in the dark. Cousin, I hope you don’t mind sitting in candlelight. Heat we’ll have as soon as we stoke the fireplace, but—”

“It’s community meeting tonight,” Agie reminded her.

The older woman shook her head. “Tomorrow. The grocer’s disappearance put the council out of kilter.”

“Have you heard anything at work, Thonoy?” Agie asked as she uncovered the fireplace that Bosaru had noticed in the corner of the living space of their quarters. “None of our customers did, except one who thought he had heard the grocer was setting up shop across town. But I think he would have told us if he had plans. It seems as though he just...disappeared.”

Thonoy didn’t answer for a few seconds as he concentrated on lighting a fire in the hearth, holding a heatstone in his hands before he touched it to the crumpled paper. The stone glowed red right before a flicker of flames greeted them. “Nobody mentioned the Verot. Nobody’s mentioned Verot in months.”

By the dim light of the tiny fire, Bosaru could see the younger man stare at the flames. Avoiding saying anything or making sure the fire remained alive? “What do you do at your job?” he asked suddenly.

Thonoy shrugged. “Usually I work on the terraforming crew. We’re getting the area around city limits ready for the energy dome they’ve been promising us since we got here,” he said. “Right now I’m sweeping. It’s hot out there, but the pay is good and it’s regular. If I’m lucky I get overtime with one of the other crews, working on an overnight shift on the conversion tanks, making sure the core *scirros* engines keep running, filtering the lanki-gas out of the water.”

Converting and filtering lanki-gas, the one natural resource that the Neotians had discovered when they arrived on the planet, was the single most reliable method by

which water could be recovered. Bosaru knew that the technology wasn't that reliable, and it was by most accounts still crude. But it did the job.

"What's the hot topic at work?" Bosaru asked. "What has your coworkers interested or angry?"

"Having power. Being able to go out again at night," Thonoy said. He blew gently on the flames, then sat back when the paper and kindling finally sparked and began to burn. "Not having to rely on fire for heat and light. Being able to do away with the roamers for good." He shook his head. "I work with older workers," he explained. "They remember home world. Me—I'm lucky. I don't remember much. All I remember are vague things, trees and rain and sitting outside and counting the stars. They remember all that and more. But this is our life now. Sometimes not remembering is better than remembering, I think." He shifted his heavy boot away from the growing fire. Bosaru glanced down and realized why—the boot was held together precariously, with archaic rubber bands and tape.

"Nearly a third of us died the first and second years we were here," Jenatt added. She came close to the fire, Agie following her. They pulled up low chairs and rubbed their hands together, reaching out toward the jumping flames. "Some of them took sick, but some of them...some of them took sick because they were heartsick."

"That's not what the physics said," Bosaru said. "I assume."

"No. The doctors said they died of exhaustion, or a flu," Agie popped up. "But they were so sad, and they didn't sleep well and they didn't eat. I was a young girl, but I remember the look in their eyes."

"They didn't adapt," Bosaru concluded. He kept it at that, because it wouldn't help any of them if he didn't remain neutral.

It certainly wouldn't help his father.

By that time the fire was snapping and sparking, finally warming the room. Bosaru observed as Jenatt, her son and her niece settled in around the fireplace, doing what they must have done every night since they settled in the less-than-friendly environs of the unnamed world. They, at least, seemed as though they were adapting to their new circumstances.

Would he have? If he had been caught on home world during those final, horrifying days of the war, and he had had to evacuate along with his cousins and his parents' friends, would he have been able to adapt? Or would he and his parents have withered away and died, pining for a life no longer possible?

As an SSP officer, he hadn't indulged in flights of fantasy—his trysts in his dreams with his mystery woman, who looked so much like the equally mysterious Imreen Dal, aside—and considering how uncomfortable he felt contemplating another life right now, he would have found it impossible to do his job.

"Those who died didn't adapt," Jenatt agreed, the light of the flames revealing the droop of her mouth echoing the pain in her voice. "For whatever reason, we survived and they did not. They did not want to live."

It was on the tip of Bosaru's tongue to suggest she was being overly dramatic, but he held his tongue. Jenatt did not strike him as being melodramatic by nature. Nor did his two younger cousins.

No, they had worked too hard, and lost too much, to be melodramatic.

"What about the grocer and his family?" he asked. "How were they faring?"

Agie frowned. "They were planning to expand. They were planning their future. That's why I don't understand why they would move and disappear the way they did. To another neighborhood? Where they know nobody? Why not tell us? But then, there's virtually no one left in this neighborhood."

"I would consider moving myself, but this is what we have worked hard to build, and I cannot see starting over again," Jenatt lamented.

"I'll ask around," Thonoy said with a sigh. "And tomorrow, at the community meeting, maybe you'll find out more, Mother."

"Can I come?" Bosaru heard himself ask. "To the meeting?"

His cousins turned to look at him, almost in unison. "Why?" Jenatt asked.

"I'm interested."

"Why? I mean, cousin, you're here hunting for Verot and to find out about these rumors about your father. I think Verot is long gone, but if you suspect otherwise, fine. Why would our community meeting be of any interest to you?"

Bosaru hesitated. "I want to know what's going on. And a meeting is the best place to do that."

Jenatt shrugged. "Be here at closing tomorrow. In the meantime..." She got up, slower than she had sat down, looking tired and every bit of her age by the flickering light of the flames. "I have dinner set aside. We eat together by the fire. Will you join us, Daegon?"

"Yes," he said promptly. "But only if there's enough. I don't..."

"There's plenty. I always make enough for us and more, something for a snack in the middle of the night. Or a visitor," Jenatt said with a faint grin. "Agie, help me."

The young woman bounded up with the energy of youth and followed her aunt. Daegon watched as they made their way into the kitchen, seeming not to need any light at all to do so. But they did this every night. They didn't need the light. They made do.

They were survivors.

"I thanked your mother and your cousin before, but I have to thank you too," Daegon said to Thonoy, who was staring into the fire, his eyes half closed. "For letting me stay."

"You're family," the young man said with a faint grin that reminded Daegon of his mother. "Rare enough to find these days. And from what Mother was telling me before, you're also paying enough for us to buy a generator when we run across one for sale, so we don't have to sit in the dark unless we want to. And if the roamers get persistent, you can help there too."

"That I can," Daegon said. Vonner's people had given him enough weaponry to push back a battalion. If he had taken everything the weapons master had offered, he could have fought back against the entire Vozuan army. He wouldn't have been able to lift his kit, but he could have fought where he stood.

"If you need help looking for Verot, let me know," Thonoy said, still staring into the fire. "I get time off, but I haven't used any in recent days."

"I could use help. But I don't want to put you in any danger. I don't think your mother would appreciate it."

"What she doesn't know won't hurt her." Thonoy winked at him. "I could use the change of pace and you could use the help."

What he lacked in training, the young man made up for in savvy about the settlement, Daegon figured. "Deal." He reached out with his arm and after a second, Thonoy took it, wrapping his hand around his cousin's biceps.

The movement flashed the red armband in Bosaru's face again. "Interesting armband," he said when their affirmation ended, trying to sound as mild as possible.

His cousin glanced at it. "Something to remind us of where we came from. You're not offended by it."

A statement, not a question. "No, I'm not. I just never thought I'd see that symbol outside a history text."

"Around here history is alive in many ways. We'll talk tomorrow," Thonoy said just as Jenatt and Agie came in, carrying platters of food and a carafe.

"About what?" Jenatt asked as she and Agie settled back in around the hearth, putting the food—good Neoti and Vozuan dishes, judging by the smells, making Daegon very glad he had been invited—in front of them.

"Thonoy made some suggestions where I should start asking questions," Bosaru said quickly. "And I will, right after I talk to Dame Mirel at the shrine."

The rest of the evening was spent in eating—and the food was as good as it smelled, for which Daegon was grateful—and sitting back as the family, mother, son and niece, ate and bickered and talked. He remembered family dinners of his own, before he and his father argued, back when he had a tradition of dining with them at least once a week.

But even as he was growing up, his father had been preoccupied in his position as ambassador. Meals had been more formal, with his mother often the only parent around. Meals had rarely been as relaxed as this one was for Jenatt and the younger ones. Despite more desperate circumstances. Certainly despite more danger.

His mother had always been more—strained. And his father had rarely taken meals with them, spending most of his time at home in one meeting or another in his study, with a never-ending stream of politicians, advisors and the never-identified visitors. And that was his father. With his mother, her training as a shrine priestess was never

more obvious during those times when only she and Daegon took meals, even though his father was at home but otherwise occupied.

That reminded him. "Do any of you know a shrine priestess named Imreen Dal?"

The conversation stopped dead. Once more, his cousins turned to look at him. "At the Ixtr shrine?" Agie asked. "I don't spend much time over there, but Aunt Jenatt does."

Jenatt's brow furrowed as she looked into the fire. "Is she one of the young priestesses?"

Bosaru nodded. "We met when I was over there. I couldn't get over the feeling I knew her from somewhere." He didn't mention his dreams. It was a coincidence, it had to be.

"The Vozuan one with golden hair? Her name is Imreen Dal?" Jenatt closed her eyes. "I've seen her from time to time when I bring meals over there for the priestesses on high holy days. Dal. That's an unusual name."

"I know. It's not a Neotian name I recognize either. She looks Vozuan," Bosaru said. "But she could have Neoti blood. There's something about her —"

"Well, cousin, you could ask," Agie said briskly as she gathered the empty dishes and piled them on the platter.

"If she's there tomorrow. She stepped through a nexus door and disappeared when I was at the shrine."

That time all three of them did stare at him in unison. "To the city limits?" Thonoy asked, his voice breaking in disbelief. "The nexus doors at the shrine all lead to the city limits. Cousin, what did you say to her?"

"I just asked questions. And I thought she was the high priestess and she was taking me to the archives when she stepped through the door and then Dame Mirel came around the corner."

"She was passing herself off as the high priestess?" Jenatt exclaimed. "Why?"

Daegon shrugged. "If I see her again, I'll ask. So none of you have any other knowledge of her?"

There was that hush again as Bosaru's cousins shook their heads. Agie took away the platters, walking a little quicker than when she had delivered the food, while Thonoy muttered something indecipherable. "No, we do not," Jenatt said.

They were lying. After everything they had told him, after opening their doors to him and feeding him, this was one thing they were not going to tell him. *Why?*

For a moment he wanted to walk out, not willing to trust them with his life. But then that passed. His instincts were generally good. These people, his cousins, Vozuans, were trustworthy in all other ways.

At least he thought so.

Chapter Six

Complications Ensue

Daegon jarred awake at the sound of gunfire.

He dropped flat on the floor, laser pistol at the ready, before his eyes were completely open. His heart pounding, he scanned the room around him...and then calmed down. It was all outside.

Damn it. This was not going well. His cousins were lying to him as they were lodging him. Secrets abounded around him about Verot, about Imreen Dal, who was a secret—and a dream—in her own right.

He was going to find her if it was the last thing he did.

Nine...ten. Shaking his head, he started to get up...only to go flat on the floor again when the staccato explosive bursts began again.

The gunfire this time was accompanied by an explosion. He heard screams and shouts, but nothing he could understand.

The gunfire and screaming started back up and continued sporadically until nearly dawn. He dozed for nearly an hour, still on the floor and still gripping his blaster, before a stream of sunlight through the high window hit the side of his face.

Bosaru cracked open his eyelids and turned away from the glare. He stayed still for a while, getting his bearings, until his gaze focused on the gray box shoved to the back underneath the cot. On its side was the notation "To be moved last", which made sense, considering it was virtually unreachable. He just hoped his cousins didn't need to access it that often.

Since he was down there anyway, he looked around. There was a lot of room underneath the cot. Bosaru decided to store his weapons kit there during the day, take with him only what he needed at any given time. And if the previous night was any indication, he'd be needing a good part of his weapons anyway.

He sat up, shaking his head. "I don't know how they get used to it," he muttered.

After rubbing his hands over his face, he stood up, barely missing at his feet the energy whip that Vonner's weapons master had assigned him. After a moment's hesitation, he tucked it back into his kit. It might come in handy...but not right now. Then he tucked the kit under the bed.

The smell of hot *hoorash* hit his nostrils as soon as he stepped outside his room. "Good morning, Daegon," he heard behind him.

Jenatt came limping toward him, a sturdy mug in one hand and a carafe in the other. Most Neotians, Neoti and Vozuan, started the day with hot, bitter *hoorash*. "Good

timing. I was going to leave this outside your room," she said as she handed him the empty cup. "Would you like breakfast?"

"Yes. But you didn't have to bring it to me."

"Well, you looked tired last night," she said. "It was a travel day for you, and you had a lot to absorb."

"Mostly I stayed awake listening to the roamers. Do you ever get used to it?"

Jenatt stopped, a look of distress on her face. "I'm so sorry. They *were* loud last night. You get used to sleeping light around here, just in case you need to get up in a hurry."

"Who *are* they?"

She shook her head, then thrust the mug and the carafe at him. "The roamers are homeless settlers. They were turned out of their homes by the provincial government, years ago, for some reason. At least that's what we think. No one seems to know."

Bosaru took the carafe from her and poured some of the hot liquid — it *was hoorash* — into the mug. When the drink hit the cup, the scent wafted through the air. The heat leached through the ceramic, warming his hand. At least the *hoorash* was the way it should be. "Why? Doesn't the government have any idea?"

Jenatt started back to the kitchen and Bosaru followed, blowing on the surface of the black liquid.

"They've never mentioned it, but at least that's what we've heard."

The kitchen was already warm and bustling so early in the morning, and a glance out the door confirmed that there were indeed already customers. "You do good business," he observed.

His cousin shrugged. "We survive," she said. "We've been lucky. Now sit."

Jenatt gestured to the table. Bosaru sat down, taking a gulp of the *hoorash*. He blinked, his eyes watering for a second as the liquid, scorching hot to start with, also turned out to be more bitter than he expected. "Strong *hoorash*."

"Oh, that's right. You Neoti always liked your *hoorash* watery. Sorry about that."

"We tend to substitute spices for *hoorash* strength," Bosaru admitted. "My mother and fa — My mother drinks it with a lot of ice and spices." He watched as she resumed cooking, this time deftly folding what looked like golden egg yolks into the crumbly black-bean *crin* paste that was one of the staples of Vozuan cuisine. "Thonoy asked me to tell you he was working half a day today, and then he could help you. I didn't realize you two had made arrangements already."

Bosaru shrugged. "I needed a local guide, and Thonoy offered."

Jenatt paused for a moment—but it was no more than that before she resumed cooking. "You're going to the shrine this morning?"

"Yes. I still hope to track down Imreen Dal," he added. "You're sure you're not familiar with the name?" He took a sip of the *hoorash*, letting the heat of the hot beverage course through him as he continued to watch her face.

There might have been a twitch, but that was it. "N-no. Good luck, then," his cousin said, with a flash of a smile. "Agie's already out shopping for supplies, but she'll be going out again about noon, if there's anything we can get you."

"Thank you, but no," Bosaru said. There was nothing else he could get from her right now, so he stood, taking one more sip of the *hoorash*. "I want to get an early start, so I should —"

"No hurry yet. The priestesses are still readying the shrine this early. Eat," Jenatt urged. She flipped the omelet with ease, allowing it to settle into a flat saffron-colored half circle. "You're going to have a long day ahead of you."

"I know. My first order of business is going to be to find out who Imreen Dal is, and why you're not telling me the truth about her. And what she has to do, if anything, with the rumors surrounding my father."

This time she did stop—just as she was flipping the yellow mound onto a dish. The omelet fell in mid-turn, landing in a graceless flop, halfway off the plate. "I don't get out much anymore, Daegon," Jenatt said. She didn't look him in the eye. "I don't hear that much."

"You sounded before as though there were plenty of rumors and whispers that drifted through here last night. You and Agie and Thonoy sounded like you knew a lot of what's going on."

"We were lying."

"You weren't," he said. "What's going on, Jenatt? Are you sending me into an ambush? Why?"

At that she did turn, and her eyes were blazing. "Why would you say such a thing? Is it because we're Vozuan, and you Neoti were the victors? We followed the Verot and so nothing we say can be trusted? How could you stay with us, then?"

Bosaru stepped back. "I'm sorry, cousin," he said after a few seconds. "But last night I got the impression you knew the name Imreen Dal. But you weren't going to say anything."

Jenatt frowned. "I can guarantee you that Imreen Dal will not be the instrument of your death. She is not the source of the rumors following your father. But you'll find that out soon enough."

"So she's someone you're protecting."

"Who she is—well, it's not much of a secret, not if you're in the community. Like I said, you'll find out soon enough," she said, turning back to the plate. She shoved the omelet back to the center. "Dame Mirel knows nothing of this," she said, turning back to look at him. "She didn't know who Imreen Dal was when she asked for asylum. It was only later, when the Vozuans in the community saw her and realized who she was..."

"Who is she?"

Jenatt shook her head. She slipped the omelet into a container. "Ask her when you find her. Maybe she'll tell you. Here's your breakfast. Eat before you make your way to the shrine," she urged. "Let us know how it goes. Remember, back before sundown."

"So you're letting me stay? I just accused you of—"

The woman shrugged as she turned away. "You're family. You'll understand soon enough what's going on here, Vozuan or not. We're all Neotians."

That accusation still rankled. The war was long over, the home world itself crumbling into nothingness, but the heart of the disagreement—Vozuan versus Neoti, brother against brother—echoed in their hearts even after all this time.

"You know it doesn't matter to me whether you're Vozuan or Neoti," Bosaru began. "Remember my mother's Vozuan."

"I know. And I know it doesn't matter. But it matters to others. Others who remember. Others who were there."

Bosaru knew it was useless to point out facts—that it was Verot who introduced the oscillator corrosive back onto the home world, that the Neoti attempt to recapture the technology failed because Verot's loyal followers threw themselves into the line of fire. Jenatt had to know it, but that didn't stop the resentment on the part of the survivors.

Wearing a pained smile, she patted him on the shoulder. "Come back safe. Don't forget your firearms. I'll tell Thonoy to look for you at the shrine when he comes home. And one more thing..."

Bosaru looked at her warily. "What is it?"

Jenatt thrust the packet at him. "You need your own breakfast. Eat while you're getting ready."

Wordlessly he took the packet from her. The heat from the omelet and the container of *hoorash* warmed his hands, the intriguing scents of the bitter *hoorash* and the buttery omelet combining. He smiled. "Thank you, Jenatt."

She smiled ruefully. "Give me a few minutes and I'll fix up a treat for Dame Mirel. And Daegon? Be prepared."

Be prepared? How, exactly? For what? By then, Bosaru was afraid to ask.

The weapons he had been assigned by Ulric Vonner, though, along with his own arsenal, should take care of anything he came across.

He loaded the ones he thought would be most useful to him into his holster, and then the energy whip across his back, under his duster. It felt confining, shifting across his clothes, and knew it would feel too warm in the desert climate. He wasn't used to it. But he took it, just in case.

The pulse blaster was the final weapon he hefted. Only faintly worn through use, the blaster, the weapon he was most comfortable with, was not part of the kit that Vonner's people had given him. It was his own, slightly heavier than the equipment from Vonner or the regulation issue from the SSP, custom crafted. His mother had ordered it on occasion of his graduation from the police academy.

By the time he finished suiting up, he had finished the omelet, leaving only golden crumbs and the dregs of the *hoorash*. As an SSP officer, he had never had to load up with a lot of weaponry—the Secret Sciences Police specialized in prevention and tracking, mostly defense, rarely offense—so the weapons weighed heavily on his back. At least he was prepared.

With a wave at Jenatt, he stepped outside.

The heat hit him like a wall. He stood still for a second to get used to it, knowing that his first inclination—to throw off his duster and half his clothing—wouldn't help. Then slowly, he walked to the mouth of the alleyway, breathing evenly.

As he waited, he looked around to get his bearings. At the corner diametrically opposite was a burned-out vehicle he hadn't seen the day before, what looked like the remains of a hover cab. There hadn't been one there the previous afternoon. Could it have been brought in and then destroyed by the roamers? Why? He couldn't begin to guess. Yet.

After the conversation with his cousins and hours of listening to the seemingly random violence on the part of the roamers last night, the battered surroundings and every nick and scar on the buildings he saw took on new light. There were burned-out vehicles he did notice from the previous night. There was at least one empty lot where clearly something had flourished at one point, but not for quite a while. Something had burned there the previous night. The roamers had been close indeed.

In the distance Bosaru could hear voices, but unlike the night before, no one was screaming or shouting. The voices he heard were in conversation, no fear, no stress.

As though the terror that ran through the night was of no consequence now, during the light of day.

Bosaru turned on his heel and followed the voices wafting on the breeze, and didn't stop until he went around the corner.

But no one was there.

Where—

He could still hear the voices, but where were they coming from?

Looking around, he saw...

Nothing. The burned-out buildings were as silent as they had been before, with not even a breeze to move the weeds. There was nothing he could see offhand that could—

He heard it again—a snatch of a conversation, a retort—before he turned around, stepping out from the sheltered recess of the alley.

A gentle breeze moved around him, stirring up the dust, making him blink. And he knew.

The breeze had to be the conduit. It was the only logical answer. So the breeze had to be carrying the voices from somewhere—somewhere with an entry point, somewhere with—

Bosaru looked down. A grate.

He knelt and tilted his head, willing himself to be still, to determine if there was any noise emanating from it.

There was.

“Those tunnels,” he muttered aloud. Nothing around him looked like an entrance, but there had to be something nearby. From what his cousins had said the night before, the tunnels had been a community effort, a way to avoid the roamers. Whoever—whatever—the roamers were, he assumed they did not have access to the tunnels. Where were they during the day? How did they survive? Who were they, really?

He resumed his journey to the shrine. Now that he had seen one way to access the tunnels—if you could count a grate as an entryway—he could see other possibilities. There were other grates, and once in a while, he saw a shadow or a suggestion of a door. Could those be the entrances, easier to access? He should have asked Jenatt.

Whereas the previous afternoon he had been intent on reaching the restaurant from the shrine, today, on his way back, he was in essence sightseeing. Not that there was much to see—but now he understood it better. There had to be currently as many abandoned, burned-out lots as there were buildings still in use. Since it was still early morning, people were cleaning up around their homes in Vozuan Town, sweeping and washing the mess left by the roamers. He got a few curious glances, but no one stopped him.

By the time the shrine came into view, he understood why it looked the way it did. It looked pretty much the same as it had the afternoon before—except the fresh graffiti that had sprung anew overnight, scrawled across the wide stone fence that surrounded the shrine property. *Traytors*, someone had scrawled—misspelled, distorted, and oversized—but the *why* escaped him. Who were the traitors? Why would someone write it, and on the shrine fence? Were the shrine residents the traitors? To whom?

The gates were open. Bosaru began to knock at the doors, but the doors creaked open on their own accord.

He tensed. “Hello? May I come in? Dame Mirel? Anyone?” he called. He stepped in and looked around.

No graffiti on the entryway inside. Nothing that looked like a struggle. So far, so good. He heard voices from down one of the corridors. He followed them.

The high priestess—the real one, Dame Mirel—was standing in the corridor, hands on her hips. The younger priestess, Vozuan by the looks of her, whom she was scolding looked equally exasperated, shrugging. “How could she not come back? From what I understand—”

Bosaru cleared his throat. “Dame Mirel?”

The high priestess looked up. “Daegon, good morn,” she said, breaking into a smile.

He gestured to the packet in his hand. “From Jenatt.”

The priestess nodded. "That was kind of her, and kind of you to carry it here. Please keep searching for her," Mirel said to the younger priestess. "I don't know what she thinks she's doing, but she should not be out there alone. Imreen should know better."

Imreen?

Bosaru looked at her. "So she never came back?"

Dame Mirel shook her head. "No, and I don't understand. She's never done this before. Since she came to us, she's been an ideal member of our order. Now, all of a sudden, she lies, disappears and doesn't come back before curfew."

"Until I came," Bosaru said. The younger priestess disappeared down the corridor, with a glance over her shoulder—he knew that somehow, she would find a way to let Imreen Dal know he had dropped by. "She was an ideal member of your order until I showed up."

Dame Mirel glanced at him. "I'm sure it was a coincidence. I'm sure whatever she is doing—"

"You said before she had no history before she claimed asylum," Bosaru broke in. "No other name, no family history, nothing about her previous life on the home world. Isn't that what you said?"

"But she seemed sincere—"

"I'm sure she was," he said, "until I came."

She sighed. "We won't know anything else until we find her. Are you still interested in the archives?"

He hesitated. "I was, until I met Imreen Dal. She seems to be as big a mystery as who's behind spreading the rumors about my father. And she looks...familiar." Bosaru still wasn't going to mention her presence in his dreams. "I know I've seen her somewhere before, but I don't know where or how. Or why, since I don't know any shrine of Ixtr priestesses, other than my mother. And now you, of course."

The high priestess nodded. "The fates of Gumor have a way of leading us back to the beginning of our journey. It may be that the two things are connected."

Bosaru smiled. "It must be the priestess training. You sound like my mother."

Mirel laughed. "High praise indeed. You can start your search in the archives, if you'd like. And then consider your options."

Lady Arna, the priestess in charge of the archives—young, big-eyed, a touch incoherent—was nonetheless proficient at her job as archivist. She nodded when Dame Mirel introduced Bosaru and obligingly helped him when he explained the materials he needed.

The archives were as he expected—jam-packed with data, both virtual and real, from as much of the original historical data as they could transport from the home world when the populace had had to leave. He took a deep breath, expecting to sneeze. But he didn't.

He had been in archival storage areas before, but the dust had always been thick. These archives were new enough the dust hadn't had a chance to gather.

"The archives seem well-maintained. Clean, neat," he said, in an effort to make small talk. The priestess-archivist smiled and went back to her task of entering new materials into the system.

Bosaru shrugged. Fine. Before he started his research, however, he tapped his comm device. The solar interference that played havoc with the communications on the unnamed planet wasn't too bad right then, so he hit a familiar address.

Fortunately, Dec Mecahe was at his desk, still surrounded by files. "Daeg! You're alive!" the Furlo said, his smiles beaming. "How's the investigation?"

"Proceeding slowly. Very slowly. How are things there?"

Dec shrugged. In the background, Bosaru saw a stack of the files start to topple. "Careful," he said.

He watched as Dec turned, saw what was happening and threw himself on the files, averting certain disaster. "So nothing new," Bosaru said, carefully not laughing.

His erstwhile supervisor shrugged. "I swear the piles grow on their own, behind my back. It's a mystery."

"Speaking of mystery, I'm wondering if you could do some snooping."

"It's not snooping if I'm doing it on company time. What do you need?"

The request was relatively simple. With that taken care of, Bosaru opened the first file on his own pile of files and started to read.

* * * * *

The next thing Bosaru knew, someone was shaking him awake. "Exciting reading, I take it," a female voice said, with only a touch of amusement. Dame Mirel.

"As dry as anything in an official archive could be," he mumbled. He sat up and rubbed his face. "Considering the events I was reading about happened during the height of the war, I would have thought the histories would be more interesting."

"But anything truly interesting would have been expunged from the official records."

Too true. If he weren't so groggy, that smile in the high priestess's voice would have annoyed him.

Just then, the doors to the archives opened and a breath of cooler air swept in. "It's quiet in the shrine, Arna," someone said. "Everyone else is out washing down the graffiti from last night."

A familiar voice, but it wasn't Dame Mirel's...and he assumed it wasn't the voice of the archivist. His eyes popped open, his senses on alert, his grogginess gone for the moment.

"I would be out washing too, if we didn't have a visitor who needed to see the archives." He heard—and that voice he could connect with the archivist, with its high-pitched, squeaky tones.

But that other voice—he knew that voice. A glance at Dame Mirel's face gave him the idea that she knew that voice, too.

He got up and stepped into the open area where Lady Arna, the archivist, had her desk. Mirel was right behind him. "Lady Imreen," he said. "Good to see you again."

And Imreen Dal it was, looking a little tousled and rumpled and right now, trapped. She stood stock-still in the doorway, staring, first at him and then at Mirel. She didn't say anything. She had nothing to say, he suspected.

That explained why she turned on her heel and ran out.

"Hey! Imreen Dal!" he shouted. "Stop!"

He ran out, following the sound of footsteps down the corridor. By that time he was getting used to the distortion of sound in the shrine's many twisting halls, and more important, he was determined he was not going to lose track of the woman this time, not when she might have a clue in the mystery surrounding the allegations about his father.

And why she was in his dreams. He wanted desperately to go back to them right then. She never ran from him in them.

The sounds of her footsteps seemed to go on and on, and he followed them, turning and turning back when the sounds seemed to go behind him. And then the sounds seemed to go round and round and round...and stopped when he stopped.

Damn it!

She'd given him the slip. *Again!* The sound of the footsteps he'd been hearing were the echoes of his own!

Arna and Mirel were still in the archives when he got back there, and from the expressions on their faces, Mirel was angry and Arna alarmed.

"You," he said, pointing at Arna. "You know where she went. Tell me."

Mirel gritted her teeth. "Lady Arna insists she knows nothing about Lady Imreen's whereabouts. Now or before. Or why she disappeared to the city limits. Or anything, for that matter."

Arna, for her part, remained big-eyed and silent, almost hunched over at her desk.

"Is there another way out of here I don't know about? Besides the doors, the nexus to the city limits, anything else?" Something else occurred to him. "What about the tunnels? Jenatt was telling me about the tunnels around the city. Do you have an entrance from here?"

The high priestess opened her mouth and stopped. "We do," she finally said. "But I don't know if—"

"Tell me where it is," he said. "Unless you think she's gone to the city limits again?"

She shook her head. "I closed off the other nexus entrances for the time being. Lady Imreen was not supposed to have access, nor was anyone, for that matter. The nexus is not for casual use. It's a dangerous place it goes to."

Bosaru glanced at her. "What's so dangerous about the city limits?"

"It's not the city limits per se, Daegon, it's the water reclamation plant nearby," Dame Mirel explained. "Unsavory incidents, thanks to the roamers."

"Fine," he said. That was something else he'd have to look into. "Then which way to the tunnels?"

The tunnels were as he expected—the entrance closed off, in an isolated area. But the door had been opened recently, that was clear, the patterns of dust on the surface smeared and disturbed. The steps leading down were rough-hewn but carved from solid stone, so they were stable...but the tunnels themselves? Pitch black.

Bosaru flicked on his lightstick and the close quarters of the tunnels came into view. The space wasn't large—considering the residents of the neighborhoods had dug and shaped all this when they weren't struggling to make a living, that was understandable—but he could stand up straight, and he liked that.

And unlike the uncertain acoustics of the shrine, those of the tunnels were straightforward. He could hear Imreen's footsteps—running, as it were—and the direction was unmistakable. Away from him.

"You're not going to get away this time," Bosaru muttered. He took off after her.

He was—or had been, depending on who he asked—an officer of the Secret Sciences Police, meaning that he protected and kept safe the most dangerous technologies that the mad scientists of the galaxy came up with. The oscillator that had destroyed the Neotian homeworld had been one of those, but between the informants and the espionage and the downfall of an entire society, it had been spirited away from the SSP's vast vaults. Because that was always a possibility, SSP officers were taught to track and pursue. And pursue. And pursue. They didn't let up. It wasn't in their design to let up, and it wasn't in their oath.

As far as Bosaru was concerned, he was no longer an SSP officer, but he was going to keep to the oath he had taken. More than once, the tunnels split and he had a choice. Each time, he took the path that he could hear footsteps still hurrying down.

By this time, he didn't care whether Imreen Dal was guilty or involved. She was hiding something and he was going to find out what it was. If it was something connected to his father, all the better. If not—well, as Dame Mirel reminded him, it was all connected somehow.

The footsteps were getting closer, and this time it wasn't a distortion of the acoustics. Then the sound of the steps changed, and he heard a click and a slam.

She must have gone into one of the buildings. He didn't know which one, and at the moment it didn't matter. He chose the most likely one, just far enough away that it would have given her time to slip in. He grabbed the handle and twisted. He was going to find her—

He cursed again in frustration, the sound echoing through the damp tunnels.
The door wouldn't give!

Chapter Seven

Through The Tunnels

No matter how much he pulled at the handle, it wouldn't budge. Was it braced on the other side? Did Imreen Dal know something about this particular entrance that he didn't?

It didn't matter. There had to be another form of access close by. If she went up that way, he could try to follow her through another. He was going to find her.

He was going to find her if it killed him.

By this time he had figured out the pattern to the exits from the tunnels—one hundred steps, quick right, quick left, twenty steps—and he found the next one. This one was poorly maintained, making him doubt about whether it was still in use. After all, those burned-out buildings he had seen along the way had probably had their own exits to the tunnels. And that didn't seem to have helped the residents of those buildings at all.

That door gave easily, but again into a place with no light—as he had surmised, that entry was into what was left of a building no longer in use. He held the lightstick above his head, and from what he could see, there were steps, covered with rubble. At least the steps were solid as he made his way up.

It was as dark at the head of the stairs as it was at the bottom, but there were gaping holes in the spaces that had probably been windows, allowing for some air and some daylight. He stepped on and brushed by things he preferred not to think about, not until he could conduct a more thorough investigation.

What had this place been? The lightstick didn't put out enough light to give him a concrete idea, but a cautious sniff, and the faint scent of rotten meats, made him think it had been a grocery of some kind, but not a butcher—the smell of meats wasn't strong enough. Finally, he approached the door—or what was left of the front door. Now he could get out of there.

And the door wouldn't budge. Again.

Damn it!

After the place burned, they must have closed off the front door for safety considerations.

He cursed again, the words echoing in the space. Well, he'd lost Imreen Dal for good. Now, he just had to try to get out of there and figure out what exactly was going on.

Bosaru tugged at the door, finally choosing one of the heavier-gauge weapons he had been assigned. He had to admit, he had admired the weapons master's prescience in the pieces he had suggested. Vonner's people knew their stuff.

He stepped back and powered up the laser rifle, which took just a second. And fired.

The first blast blew off the handle, but that was all, leaving the door itself intact.

When the settlers decided to close off a door, they didn't mess around. "Let's see if this makes a difference," he muttered as he twisted the dial. He fired again.

Bosaru narrowed his eyes as he watched the metal glow from the intense heat, but it didn't fall, nor was there a hole in the middle. They made their doors solid, at least. At least that would—or should—have kept the residents safe from roamers. So what had happened that it hadn't?

He twisted the intensity level dial and fired again. And when that still didn't do the job, this time all the way up.

Fourth time was the charm. By the time he kicked the door open and stepped through, he noticed that the day had gone by much quicker than he had expected. It was at least mid-afternoon, judging by the light. Imreen Dal was long gone, but that didn't mean he couldn't backtrack, try to figure out where she had come out, and see what he could find there about her.

He looked around to where he had come out. And with a sinking sensation, he realized he recognized it.

This was around the corner from Jenatt's restaurant. So that door he couldn't open—that door that had stopped his hunt of Imreen Dal—

He swore.

"I should have realized," he muttered. The Secont family was holding onto their secrets as tightly as they could.

Irritated, he shoved open the door to Jenatt's. At that time of day, the restaurant was packed, and the first thing Bosaru saw between the crowd and the steam wafting out of the kitchen was Jenatt and Agie looking harassed as they hurried between the prep station and the individual tables. He headed to the kitchen.

By that time, Bosaru was not in the mood to be subtle. He stepped into the path of Jenatt as she came rushing in.

She didn't look surprised to see him. "She's not here," she informed him as she stepped around him and plated up another order. "She came up here from the tunnels and rushed out. I figured you would be right behind her."

"The door to the tunnel wouldn't open. Was that on purpose?"

She looked genuinely surprised at that. "The exits to the tunnels are always kept unlocked, just in case." She frowned. "But they can be locked. Maybe she locked it. Let me go see."

"No," he said. "I'll do it. Which way is it?"

The door to the tunnels—ironically, near his room—was locked, as he had surmised.

Great. Just great. “Second time you’ve given me the slip, Imreen,” he said aloud. “There won’t be a third time.” The SSP officer in him wasn’t going to let him.

He flipped the lock to unlock it and then went back to the restaurant.

“It was locked,” he informed Jenatt, who grimaced a little, but that could have been because she was clearing a table loaded with dirty dishes.

“I should have realized when she came through so quickly,” Jenatt said with a sigh.

“Never mind. Let me help,” Bosaru said, taking the dishes from her. “I’ve already lost her, you’re putting me up and I’ve got no clues where to go now for the moment.”

There was a momentary flash of something in Jenatt’s expression as he stacked the dishes and started off for the kitchen. Guilt? He doubted it. Well, maybe. He wasn’t above that bit of manipulation, at least.

This was letting him learn a new skill, anyway. If he couldn’t go back to the SSP and the bounty hunter thing didn’t work out, he could always find work at a restaurant. He could always learn how to wash dishes.

“Cousin, you don’t have to do this,” Jenatt said, standing by as he figured out how to stack the dishes into the dishwasher. “I was joking when I suggested you could help in the restaurant.”

“Well, this gives me some time to figure out what to do next,” he said. “So far, to elude me Imreen Dal has taken an unscheduled trip to the city limits, stayed out all night, worrying the high priestess, and taken me on a trip through the tunnels. I’m learning a lot about the new Neotian culture. It’s nothing like the old one, that’s for sure.”

“It’s not a culture I recognize, either,” Jenatt said, but her tone wasn’t harsh. “And Imreen Dal—well, you will track her down, sooner or later. There are only so many places she can hide from you. This is not a large settlement, and not being able to be out at night makes it more difficult. And hiding out in the tunnels isn’t an option, considering it’s cold at night there and suffocatingly hot during the day.”

Are you going to tell her that when you see her? Bosaru was tempted to ask. But he was frustrated, and he decided that a small nudge of guilt was better than a large one. After all, a crack in the window was sometimes as useful as an open window itself.

But it turned out he didn’t have to—right at that point Imreen Dal came into the restaurant by the front door, a smile on her face. “I think I’m free for now,” she announced when she saw Jenatt, sounding happy. “I think I lost him.”

Then she saw him.

“No, you didn’t,” Bosaru snarled, his temper finally at its limit. “You tried. But no!”

For her part, Imreen Dal saw him and did what she was good at—she ran. She whirled and she was gone.

"Later, Jenatt," he said as he abandoned his kitchen duties and ran after the priestess. But this time he took his energy whip from its holder. This time he was going to get close enough to Imreen Dal to make use of it.

Imreen Dal had made one mistake. No, two. She had come back to the restaurant—that was one. And the second was the trip through the tunnels. He wasn't going to forget that chase anytime soon, searing every detail into his memory from sheer fury. It had been an illuminating trip, giving him a good idea of how the citizens of the city got around in the dark hours.

She was running in the neighborhood. And by now he knew the neighborhood. He could track her down. She couldn't elude him for much longer. Process of elimination.

By this time he knew the burned-out lots, the buildings no longer in use, and in passing the building he had just blasted his way out of—he knew she wouldn't go in there, not without a light and equipment—she managed to eliminate, one by one, places she could find refuge.

Just a matter of time before he cornered her. Just a matter of time.

But she surprised him, as she always seemed to. The door to the abandoned building he had made his way through was shoved aside the second time he passed it.

Was this a ruse on her part? Probably not. He was tracking her down. And he would not stop until he had. Imreen Dal couldn't run forever and they both knew it.

Once he yanked off what was left of the door, he knew he was right. There was an echo of someone's heavy breathing, a shuffling of something—or someone.

Just in case, he made sure he had his weapons at his fingertips. If she was as desperate as he thought she was, he wouldn't put it past her to hit him over the head to get away.

She hadn't struck him as someone who would spend her spare time exploring a burned-out husk of a building. Using that logic, this could be her first foray into this place in its present condition, although she had probably been in it before the roamers had done their damage. It was Bosaru's second trip there that day. And he had training. And a lightstick.

He was so going to get her this time. "Come out, come out, Imreen Dal," he whispered, letting his soft words echo in the still space. "I'm not going to hurt you. All I want is for you to answer a few questions."

For a heartbeat he thought she was going to answer and this cat-and-mouse game could end. For a heartbeat he thought Imreen Dal, whoever she was, would tire of the chase and come to him willingly.

For a heartbeat he was an optimist.

There was a shuffle and a banging sound, and he turned toward the sound. But it wasn't getting closer, it was going away.

"Imreen Dal, stop this now," he ordered.

Nope. Her steps were fading into the darkness. There had been upper floors, but their egress had been destroyed in the fire that had consumed most of the building. She wasn't going up there, that was for sure. There weren't any stairs leading up. And she could climb, but he would catch her before she made it that far.

The exit to the tunnels? He knew where it was. He didn't think she did.

Imreen Dal, don't get hurt, he thought. I will track you down, but I don't want to do it because you hurt yourself.

Sure enough, the steps stopped, then started, then stopped again, and each time she did, Bosaru got a little closer. Finally—finally! The sound of her panicked steps were in front of him. “Imreen Dal, give it up,” he said, keeping his voice low. “All I need is for you to answer some—*hey!*”

Something hit him square across his head, bringing him to his knees. Dimly through the pain he realized Imreen Dal had lashed out as he cornered her. *Idiot*, but he wasn't sure whether he was scolding himself or her.

It took him a few seconds to recover, but that was enough for her to have made her way out the front door. Bosaru gritted his teeth. For someone with no training, she was very good in getting away from him.

But not for much longer. He took off in a run, knowing his way out now. She wouldn't have had time to leave him a booby trap, not if she wanted to get away. He hurdled one pile of detritus that hadn't been there before he leaped out of the front door, skidding to a halt as he looked around. *Where did you go? You're not getting away this time, Imreen Dal!*

A flash out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. So what was going on, she hit him over his head and then tried to trip him up, but she stayed around to make sure he was all right? That was a mistake.

She took off, but he was faster, and now he was angry. She knew the area better, but he knew it fairly well by now. And he was *very* angry.

Every time she took a turn, he took it a little faster. Every time she tried to double back, he blocked her way. Little by little, he cornered her again—into an open-air alley, with natural light, no windows, no exits, no tunnels nearby. She was trapped.

If he hadn't been blindingly angry, he would have felt bad about it. But just in case, he made sure there was nothing around that she could hit him over the head with again.

There was a small, quivering shadow in the corner, almost hidden behind the trash bins.

Her time was up.

“Imreen Dal. Show yourself!” Bosaru shouted.

For a minute the alley was dead silent. For a minute he didn't think she would comply. Finally he heard a rustle in the shadowed corner before an indistinct form emerged.

Even before she hit the light he knew who it was. The white and gold fabric of her priestess shift glinted, just enough to highlight the curves it was wrapped around.

Imreen Dal. The same priestess he first encountered in the shrine.

Imreen Dal. The woman who had been his dreams' companion all these years.

"Imreen Dal." Bosaru took a deep breath. "Good to see you again."

The expression on her face was pensive. Or was it doleful? "I wish I could say the same, Officer Bosaru," she said. "I did my best to keep away from you, but to this end."

"Why?"

Her face shifted from pensive—resigned, he realized—to something set. There was a glint in her eye. "I thought it was clear. I do not want to speak to you."

Well, that was blunt. "Just a few questions."

"I decline."

"Why? You don't even know what I'm going to ask!"

"I can guess."

"Then why didn't you just decline instead of leading me on a chase?"

"Would you have let it go at that?"

"No," Bosaru said. "And you didn't have to hit me over the head, either."

"I didn't," she said.

They stared at each other for a second. "Then who did?" he asked.

"I don't know."

Bosaru stared at her some more. "You weren't in the burned-out building around the corner?"

She shook her head. "I was hiding around the corner of it when you went inside. I avoid that building. It's not stable."

"But it's got an entrance to the tunnels. I thought that's where you were going."

"I don't like the tunnels either," she said. "I only use them when I have to."

"Then why weren't you gone by the time I got back out?"

"I was worried about you," she said. "I stayed until I saw you coming out and knew you were safe. And then I left."

"Then why didn't you go into the alleyway that was closest? That would have let you in a safe place."

"I don't like that alleyway," she said.

"Is there anything you *do* like?"

"Being left alone."

"What is *with* you?" he asked, exasperated. "I'm not asking for m—"

"I need to get out of here," she said, her eyes growing huge. "*Now.*"

She tried to leave, tried to run, but Bosaru stopped her. "Why?"

Imreen Dal looked up at him, her eyes wide. "Haven't you noticed?" she asked. "The sun's set. We can't be out."

Bosaru looked around. The light had dimmed but he hadn't noticed, so intent was he on not letting Imreen Dal escape one more time.

"The roamers are coming," she whispered. "We have to start moving. *Now.*"

Chapter Eight

Through The Night

The roamers!

"The tunnels," he said. "The entrance to the tunnels. The closest one's in that burned-out building. Let's go!"

"You don't understand. When the roamers come out, they set up sentry around the tunnel entrances. If we look long enough, we can find one that's unguarded—but that takes some searching."

Bosaru groaned. "I should have known." He had weapons—but he didn't know whether he was equipped to take out enough of the roamers to get away safely. And he had to keep Imreen Dal safe, no matter if she wanted to be kept safe.

Of course she did. And he still had questions for her to answer, even if she had no desire to.

Well, at least he had enough weaponry to keep them both safe for the time being. All they had to do was to keep moving. "Any suggestions?"

Imreen Dal shook her head, her lips pressed together. *Fine*, Bosaru thought.

Reluctantly, he drew out the spectra-shades that Vonner's weapons master had pressed on him and slipped them on. Suddenly, the light and air quickly dimmed. Orbit wisps crowded the air around them, so many that Bosaru nearly staggered. He wouldn't have thought there would be so many here, or that they would be so easily communicated with. The SSP didn't trust them, but he could understand why they might be useful.

But he didn't know that yet—"I need to know where the nearest tunnel entrance is that's not surrounded by roamers," he said.

The roamers are not in front of the tunnel entrance closest to you, the orbit wisp nearest him said. Yet. But they are coming.

"How close?" Bosaru asked.

Close enough. Close enough you'll see them soon. Soon.

"Thanks," he said, remembering to toss an energy cube at it. Slipping off the spectra-shades, he grabbed Imreen's hand. "We have to get to that entrance now. I don't care if you don't like it."

"Going to the tunnels isn't going to help. The roamers know where the entrances are and they know how to block them."

"Oh for—let's go," he ordered. "It's not going to help us just standing here. We've got to try to get to safety."

"I can take care of myself," Imreen insisted. "We have to get *you* to Jenatt's."

Bosaru stared at her. "Why not you? I'm armed. I can take on any number of roamers. But you—"

"I know how to get around them," she insisted. "I've done it before. But we have to move *now*. Please, Daegon."

For a moment he hesitated. For a moment he thought about just grabbing her arm and dragging her toward the tunnel entrance.

But no.

"All right," he said, his voice tense even to his ears. And he was straining to hear any sound that indicated the roamers were coming closer. "If you know where to go, let's do it. We can't just stand here arguing about it."

In response Imreen grabbed his hand. "Hurry. In the name of the Signifier, *hurry!*"

She was surprisingly fast. Despite the cumbersome-looking shrine garment, she moved quickly and silently through the ruins of the burnt-out lot, deftly jumping over unidentifiable objects that might have tripped him up, but clearly she had been through here before and knew what to avoid. He thought he had a good idea of the area, but not like her. She knew alleyways and underpasses that even with his SSP training he hadn't spotted, places he knew instinctively would be good to hide in. That explained the nexus jump—when she had jumped to the city limits, she had had no trouble making her way back. He wouldn't have been surprised if it was something she did regularly, at least until now. If Dame Mirel allowed her back to the shrine after all this.

Then they stopped at a tiny bridge that connected two clearings between lots. It was the highest point around, Bosaru noticed as he looked around.

"There they are," Imreen said, pointing in a direction. Bosaru had to squint to see, with the lowering of the sun interfering with his sight. "The roamers are coming. They always come from that direction. That's why we couldn't go to the tunnels. It's too close to the most accessible entrances."

Bosaru looked in the direction she pointed. There was something that looked like a moving dark mass he could see, something with lights that moved along with them. "Those are the roamers?" he asked, straining to see. "But I still don't get why if they know where the tunnels are, why—"

A flash of something moved in the corner of his eye and instinctively he turned.

She was gone.

He swore. "Imreen?" he called out. "Where the hell did you go?"

No answer. She had managed to get away from him again.

He swore. "Now I've got to get out of here," he muttered. The problem was, now he was in an unfamiliar part of the settlement—and he had no idea where the nearest tunnel entrance was. And the roamers were coming.

Well, he had an arsenal of weapons on him. It was time for him to see how they worked. And this time, it seemed, it would be against a group. An entire night. Fighting, running...

Flexing his hand, he adjusted his grip on his pulse blaster.

An unfamiliar whistle made him look up. It was a hover cab, barreling toward him. As it got closer, he saw the identification numbers along the front and realized it was the taxi that had picked him up at the space port. *What the —*

The cab came to a screeching halt in front of him. "Get in, the roamers are coming!" he heard.

A quick glance at the distance told him that was right. "Don't mind if I do," Bosaru said, scrambling in. Right now the cab driver's insane driving seemed like a better alternative to the untested roamers. *Maybe later*, he told himself.

Just as the cab did in Bosaru's first ride, it took off with an gravity-defying speed that had him gripping the armrest with one hand and scrambling to lock the seat belt with his other hand, just like old times.

"You should know better than to be out after dark in these parts, en-Bosaru," he heard from the front.

"I didn't plan for it," Daegon muttered, breathing a sigh of relief after the belt lock snapped into place. "Thanks for the pickup. So who are you? And how do you know who I am?"

The driver laughed, and a glance into the rearview mirror confirmed that it was indeed the same driver who had picked him up at the space port, with the betel stick firmly lodged at the side of his black-stained mouth, black mask pulled low over half his face. "Who doesn't? I'm Beek," he offered. "I'd shake hands, but I think you're happier strapped into place."

"The way you drive? Were you just driving by?"

"I always drive around looking for a last-minute fare at sundown. You'd be surprised at how many I pick up. Always out-of-towners," the driver added. "The first night out is always the test. If they survive, they'll be fine. If they're caught out—well, sad what happens. Why were you out?"

"I was trying to get back to my lodgings. I didn't make it."

Beek shook his head. "You learn the hard way around here. You nearly did."

I have an arsenal on me, Bosaru nearly replied. But something made him hold his tongue. "I'm not easy to kill," he said.

"You nearly put that to the test."

"I had a...guide. Disappeared on me."

Beek nodded. "Guides can be tricky that way. Especially the cheap ones. Next time pay more for their services," he advised. "Might want to kill the old one, if you see him again."

Bosaru coughed. "A little severe. And it was a woman."

"Got to teach them a lesson. Especially the ladies," the driver added. "Can't let something like that go, no?"

"No," Bosaru admitted, choosing to gloss over the comment. He couldn't afford for the driver to dump him out if he got annoyed. "But right now, I need to get to my lodgings."

Despite Beek's driving, he was efficient. The stone edifice of the shrine came into view in less than a minute, but the gates and the doors were firmly shut.

"So how are you getting in?" Beek inquired. "Or is there another way you can get in?"

To Jenatt's? The space port? For that matter, the ruined building where he knew there was a tunnel entrance? "Get close enough inside the gates," Bosaru said. "I'll get in somehow."

The driver obliged, sliding open the door for him with his black-gloved hand. "Careful now," Beek said. "Those priestesses can't be trusted. They've got their own ways of protecting themselves."

Bosaru steadied himself on the edge of the cab, preparing to jump off, when he stopped at that. "What do you mean?"

Beek didn't answer immediately, gingerly lowering the cab a little more. "They're tricky, they are. All those connected with the shrine are. Don't turn your back on them."

"I'll keep that in mind. Thank you," Bosaru said. "I'll pay you next time I see you."

"And you'll see me again," the driver said with a grin, flipping that three-sided coin Bosaru remembered from the first time. "You can count on it."

Bosaru's eye caught the sign in the interior of the cab again. "What *would* Emperius Rey do?"

Beek grinned and said, "He would do what I would, of course. Have fun!"

And with that he gave a little shiver with the cab, knocking Bosaru off. As Daegon landed—on his butt, hard, on what had been the herb garden of some priestess before his boots dug into several of the plants—he looked up to see the cab zoom away, a zippy little honk for a salute.

Bosaru stood up and brushed himself off, shaking his head. At least he was inside the gates of the shrine. A glance beyond the closed gates showed him that there was a group moving in his direction, but it was too dark to see any more than that. And some of them looked as if they were carrying torches.

Toward the shrine? That didn't bode well.

A quick tug at the gate locks gave him small comfort—they were locked, but enough pressure would make them give without too much trouble. He glanced at either direction of the fence, noted there was no break in it. Good.

He started to run along the fence, making sure that the fence was solid all the way around, and gave a good tug to the doors leading into the shrine as he passed. The last

thing he did before he stopped in front of the front gates again was to check his weaponry, making sure they were all intact and ready for use.

Looked like he'd actually get to try them out.

Heart pounding, Bosaru waited.

The voices of the roamers grew louder and louder, with only shouts and moans but nothing articulate, the crackle of the torches they brandished louder and more threatening. It was dry in this settlement, with occasional rains during one three-month period of the year, according to the official statistics. Fire was the single most dangerous element here. Except for the roamers.

Who were they? Why were they?

"Stop," he shouted once the gang got close enough. Through the darkness he could see some details. They were human, oversized, male—leading him to realize he hadn't seen anyone like them during the time he'd been in the settlement. These were the Neoti and Vozuans who would be doing the heavy work, the ones who would be filtering the lanki-gas through the cumbersome filtration system, but their features were horribly distorted. But why would they be roaming the streets at night? "Stop and disperse now."

For a moment there was a hush, the unsettling noise from among the roamers quelled for the moment. A roar burst forth and a ball of fire came barreling over the fence, instantly setting on fire the dry grasses surrounding the grounds of the shrine.

Bosaru ran toward the edge of the flames and began to stamp at them, knowing he had no chance. As he tore off his jacket and started to use it to try to control the fire, the doors to the shrine burst open and what looked like a battalion of eunuchs who were the shrine guards came running out, equipped with extinguishers.

He stared as the eunuchs moved in unison, clearly in command of the situation, as the roamers outside the gates let loose fireball after fireball, some hitting the walls of the shrine before being eliminated by either a shower of foam or a fury of precious, recycled lanki-water.

"Daegon! Are you all right?" he heard. He turned to see Dame Mirel, dressed in coveralls, herself equipped with an oversized extinguisher.

"Yes! Let me take that!" he shouted.

She shook her head. "We've all done this before. But can you at least try to slow them down?"

Without another word, Bosaru turned and ran toward the gates, the laser pistol in one hand and his pulse blaster in the other, and began to fire, aiming through the bars. But they kept coming, with fireball after fireball. A quick glance behind him showed him that the shrine attendants were fighting the fire, but he knew that sooner or later they would run out of foam or lanki-water, or both.

Blast after blast he shot, until the bright red light blinked from first the laser pistol and then the blaster. *Damn it! He was almost out of ammo!*

What was in his pack? The whip. The sword. If the roamers got too close, he could use the energy sword. If he was truly desperate, the energy bow and arrow.

If he needed it—if all else failed—he could use the *thiris*.

But all of a sudden the shouts of the roamers stopped and the gang seemed to vanish, leaving their fallen comrades where they lay. In front of his eyes, the overwhelming mob dissipated, almost as if they were smoke, insubstantial...except for those were left, dead or dying, abandoned.

What?

Dame Mirel came to stand beside him, smelling of smoke and covered with soot. "Thank you for driving them off, Daegon," she said, patting his arm. "They never go away permanently, they just go away for a few months."

He frowned. "But they just—stopped."

"If they don't set the fire in the first few tries, they leave," the priestess answered. She stamped out a lick of smoldering flame with her boots. "It's being prepared for them that's the difference. If Imreen hadn't told us they were heading this way, we would have been in bad straits."

Bosaru looked at her. "She's here? I caught up with her, but then she disappeared and I nearly got caught by the roamers."

Mirel glanced at him again. "She came out of nowhere and told us. I don't know where she is now, but I'm grateful."

He shook his head again. His head was starting to swim, and whether it was the continuing mystery of Imreen Dal or the here-and-gone-again roamers, he didn't know. "This is—" He pressed the palm of his hand against his forehead, but the pressure was starting to branch out.

"Would you like to come in?" Mirel asked. "Use the tunnel entrance to get to Jenatt's? It's still some time to dawn."

That reminded him. "Imreen said the roamers know about the tunnels, know how to block them. It's one thing to be caught out in the open with them on the loose, but I don't relish the idea of being stuck in the tunnels with—"

"Daegon."

He stopped. "Yes?"

"Calm down. They're not going to be down in the tunnels. Go to Jenatt's. Get some rest."

"Why can't I get a straight answer from somebody around here?" he shouted, his patience at an end. "I get led around in a never-ending circle. I nearly get caught by a murderous gang that just disappears. A cab driver appears out of nowhere. A priestess with answers won't give me any. Why should I be calm? I don't have a reason to be calm!"

His voice echoed in the twilight, and he became acutely aware of the way his raised voice reverberated in the now-quiet surroundings. And the way the priestesses and the eunuchs were regarding him.

"It's late. And believe me when I say this will all make more sense in the morning. All we can do now is make sure the fires the roamers set around us are out."

He had to try again. "I'll stay here on guard, make sure you're safe —"

"Daegon." Mirel's voice was calm but firm. "You did what needed to be done. Now you have to rest."

"Rest? *Rest?* I —"

His head suddenly felt as though it had exploded, and before he knew it, he was on his knees, trying to cradle his head.

"You see, it's not just the fires that the roamers set," he heard Mirel say dimly, as though she were off in the distance and not standing next to him. "They do terrible things to your mind as well as your body."

* * * * *

Daegon had on occasion drunk too much, caroused too much. But this was the first time he felt as though he had lived too much when he woke up. "My head feels like it's going to explode," he groaned.

His head was pounding, and he became dimly aware that there was something on his head. He tried to touch his forehead, only to realize his fingers were bandaged when he felt swaddled gauze touch his skin. He touched his hand with the fingers on his other hand, only to realize both hands were gauzed. "What the —"

He cracked open his eyelids. Then he shut them again when the sharp jabs of light pierced his brain in too many places.

"Are you awake, cousin?" he heard someone say cheerily. Too cheerily.

Agie. He groaned again. "Can't you sound a little more dismal? My head is killing me."

"Of course it is. You just met the roamers," she said. "You had a big day yesterday. Would you like some breakfast?"

"No. Why would I want break —"

Suddenly, the idea revolted him more than a little. He sat up bolt upright, coughing and gagging. "What happened?"

"Oh, cousin, nobody ever explained the roamers to you because it was too hard to explain right away." There was a clanking sound. Knowing he had to face the sunlight sooner or later, he finally opened his eyes and watched as she placed a tray on his nightstand. "You'll feel better once you eat something," she said.

He winced. "Agie, I can't eat anything right now," he whispered. "I can barely think."

"Then don't think. Eat instead. If you eat, it gets better," she added.

"This is not a hangover. I haven't had anything alcoholic in weeks. This—I don't know what it is."

"You met the roamers. It's a 'roamer rise'. They can give you a headache."

"You mean meeting the roamers gives you a hangover?" With a groan, he righted himself slowly, swinging his feet over the edge of the bed and shivering when his feet—divested of his boots, but still with socks—touched the floor. He covered his face with his hands again. "Let me get this straight. The roamers rape, rob, pillage and burn. And they also give headaches that feel like hangovers."

"I don't know what a hangover feels like, but yes, they give headaches when you first encounter them. No one knows how," Agie said. Bosaru heard something clink, then liquid gurgle. "If it makes you feel any better, you'll get used to it. This herbal tea will make you feel better."

"I have to open my eyes again, don't I?" he moaned.

"Sooner or later. Now is better."

Reluctantly, he peered through the slits of his eyelids. As he assumed, Agie was holding a mug filled with hot liquid. "That smells foul."

"For Merge's sake, Daegon, drink it and stop whining," he heard.

Jenatt stood in the doorway, her hands full with what he recognized as his weaponry. Fat lot of good it had done him in the end.

"Drink it and eat something and we'll tell you what we know about the roamers," Jenatt said. "You'll feel better that way."

"Why couldn't you have warned me about them? Would that have been so difficult?"

"That they can give you a headache? Would that be before or after I told you they *kill*?" Agie asked. "Telling you would have made them seem much less formidable. Think of it, cousin. If we'd told you the roamers are vandals and gave you headaches, would you have bothered to go out with all your weaponry?"

"No," he mumbled. "How do they do it?"

"We don't know. No one's ever figured it out," Jenatt said.

"But at least—" he tried to stand up, found himself immediately back on the bed, his legs weak. "The bodies of the dead roamers. They should give us a cl—"

"The bodies are gone," Jenatt interrupted. "No matter how many get taken down, they always disappear by sunrise. This isn't anything we haven't thought of before, Daegon. This has mystified us for years."

Taking a deep breath, he closed his bleary eyes for a second before he forced them open again. "I need a couple of things. I'm hoping you can help me."

Jenatt's expression was quizzical. "What?"

"First, I need something for this headache."

Without another word, Jenatt nodded to her niece, who picked up something small and yellow from the breakfast tray. Bosaru looked at it and then at Agie. "You think you're so clever, don't you. You could have given that to me first off."

Agie flashed a grin as she dropped the pill into his waiting hand. "What's the second?"

"I need my sunshades," he said, dry-swallowing the pain remedy. "I'm not going to be able to walk outside without my eyes being shielded." They didn't have a strength option, but they were better than nothing.

Jenatt held something out in her hand, something that looked like the ones that he'd noticed others wearing. "This is better," she informed him. "Your sunshades are good for most climates, but these will cut out the light seepage. There's a reason we all wear these outside. That sun can be ferocious. Especially the way you're feeling right now."

Ignoring the cutting pain shooting through his head at that point, Bosaru took the shades and wrapped them around his head. Almost immediately he relaxed.

"Feel better?"

Bosaru got up—slowly, no sudden moves—and took one last deep breath. "Yeah."

"They say that once they build the dome, we won't need those during the day, but until then, it's the best way to avoid the blinding sun, considering they've been talking about that dome for nearly twenty years. Here, have something to drink."

"Might as well," he muttered. He took the mug, took yet another deep breath and drank the contents in a single gulp.

Once his eyes stopped tearing, he smiled with a wince. "Maybe I'll have something to eat."

"Thonoy will want to hear this too, so you should join us for breakfast," Jenatt said. Agie scooped up the breakfast tray from the nightstand.

His head still ached and his eyes weren't focusing, but he was ambulatory and that was all that mattered. By the time he sat down at the kitchen table with his cousins, he could at least walk a straight line. But when he got there, he was glad to be able to sit down again.

The golden circle of egg looked welcoming, with the accompanying strip of smoked *fike*, a tempting treat. It even tasted good as he bit into it. Chewing was a little more of a challenge, but he managed it.

"It was two years or so after we came that the roamers began to make us miserable," Jenatt began. "Before that, we were building our lives over again—it was a hard living, but we had confidence then we would succeed. Back then, we would all sit out at night, watching the stars, discuss how different they looked from here than it did back home, watching on Neotia Prime and knowing it would be crumbling, whether we could see it or not. We were a strong community then, close, Neoti and Vozuan together. Then..." she shook her head.

Her niece reached over and patted her hand. "Then the roamers came, out of nowhere," Agie said. "One night, Mena and Forn Geshnat—they were walking home after watching a star shower. From what Mena said afterward..."

"Nobody recognized them." Thonoy picked up the story. "Mena said they weren't from the community. They didn't speak. They didn't react when she asked what they wanted. They...beat Forn to death with clubs, without saying a word. Mena tried to stop them, got beaten for her trouble. The Horons were going home just about then, heard the screams, went to help, couldn't save Forn. Then..."

"It happened again the next night. And the next," Jenatt said. "And the militia didn't do anything, because there was never anything to investigate afterward. Even the times we managed to get one of them, lying in wait, there would never be a body afterward. It would just disappear. Eventually the militia, and the government, decided we would have to protect ourselves."

Bosaru frowned. "I don't understand that."

"They have other concerns." Jenatt put down her cup. "They say the Order of Verot is on the rise again."

Finally, some information he could use! Bosaru stood up, even though he was having a difficult time not keeling over. "If the local government thinks that—"

"Sit," she ordered. "Going off half cocked could get you killed."

He couldn't deny that. He sat back down. "So what else should I know?" *That you're willing to tell me*, he added to himself.

Jenatt was silent for a few moments. "All our neighbors are disappearing," she said finally. "One by one. We find one morning that their homes and businesses are closed and shuttered and nobody knows why, only that they've moved across town, but we never see them anyway. And we hear similar in other settlements. More?" She gestured to the *hoorash*.

Bosaru shook his head. He was getting a headache again, and the *hoorash* wasn't going to help. "Why hasn't any of this been broadcast? All we've heard is that the unnamed planet and its new residents are settling in, with some growing pains. We've heard that over and over again. Why nothing else?"

"Didn't you think it was odd that was all you heard?" Thonoy asked, half glowering with resentment, his face covered with dirt and cuts from his shift at the plant, his big broad hand slapping the table and nearly upsetting the *hoorash* pot. "Why did it take this long for *you* to come for a visit? And you only came because you were looking for the Verot, isn't that right? Why not your *madron* and *padron*, why didn't they ever come back? Why none of the other ex-pats?"

Why?

"I don't know. What happened to Neotia Prime was more than they could bear. It broke their hearts. Me—I hadn't seen the home world since I was a child. I have only a few memories of it. It was only home in a theoretical sense."

"And now, that is all that is. Theoretical," Agie whispered. "I am younger than you, and I have no memories of it at all. But I never stopped thinking of it as home."

"I stopped being Neoti," Daegon said, realizing. "I have more memories of Aboo Two than I do of Neotia Prime."

"Do we change when we leave our familiar surroundings?" Jenatt asked. "Is that the sum of it?"

Daegon didn't have the answer, nor did the others, it seemed, for there was a hush. "Well, I'm here now," Bosaru said, standing, headache be damned. "Whether Verot's here or not, whether I find out who's behind the accusations against my father or not, I've got to find out what's behind these roamers, behind what's happening here. Whether I see it that way or not, this is home. And we've got to protect it."

* * * * *

Despite the headache, Bosaru was more or less intact again. The sunshine was going to kill him before too long, though, despite the sunshades and the hat. Not for the first time, he thought nostalgically about the muted, controlled climate of Aboo Two.

"What's the first thing you want to see?" Thonoy asked. The sunshades he was wearing wrapped securely about his head, Daegon noticed, making sure there was little way they would be knocked off that easily.

"Back to the Ixtr shrine," Bosaru said, jamming on a cap with a broad lip to cut a little more glare. "There has to be something around that's left over from the roamers."

"This way. I don't think you're going to find anything," Thonoy warned. "Let's start off this way." Bosaru followed, looking around, trying to find something that stood out, something that didn't belong.

Unfortunately, in this case, it was him, so that didn't help him any.

This just didn't feel like home in any way, and that was the problem. At the moment, it was a place where he had to solve a crime—now that did feel like home, considering the years he had put into the SSP.

Two crimes. As much as he needed to find out why anyone would frame his father, he had to help his cousins. This might not be his home, but it was for his cousins.

"This is the way I came—I recognize the bridge," Bosaru said.

"And this is where the hover cab came out of nowhere and picked you up?"

Thonoy sounded skeptical, but considering the circumstances, that was understandable.

"And it was the same cab driver who picked you up at the space port? Out of nowhere?"

"He said he flew around at sunset a lot to pick up last-minute fares," Bosaru said.

"Then why don't we see more of them?"

"Why *aren't* there more? It sounds like a great way to pick up easy money."

"Because the roamers sometimes have anti-aircraft weaponry," Thonoy said. "Not often, but sometimes."

Bosaru shook his head. "So that's another question to be answered. Why isn't Beek afraid?"

Thonoy gave a start. Bosaru noticed. "What's wrong?"

"The driver," Thonoy said. "His name is Beek?"

"Yeah." Bosaru watched his cousin's face change, shifting from concerned, to guilty, before settling on—too late!—neutral.

"Like the Vozuan nursery rhyme," Thonoy said.

Bosaru nodded, still watching. "I thought I remembered that name from somewhere."

How was a nursery rhyme related to *anything*?

The high point of the bridge gave them a good view of that part of the settlement, and in the distance, the water reclamation plant where Thonoy worked. "How do you get to the plant?" Bosaru asked, putting that question to the back of his mind. "Tunnels, nexus travel, something else?"

"Walk. It's not that far, and sometimes it's the last time I see sunlight for the entire day."

And the workday depended on the amount of processing to be done, Bosaru knew. Jenatt prepared and set aside food for Thonoy, and more often than not the food had to be reheated by the time Thonoy came home, from what Agie had mentioned.

"Most of the settlers here, those who can, at least, work there," Thonoy went on. "But you've got to be a certain size. The machines are big, and you have to be strong."

"Do the plants ever shut down? They're running constantly?"

Thonoy nodded. "Four shifts a day. It's hard work, but it's got to be done. We need water, and converting the lanki-gas is the easiest way to get enough. But that's none too easy either."

The conversion process involved various stages of filtering, Bosaru knew. "I assume you can't get me into the reclamation plant."

"Why would you want to?"

Daegon shrugged. "Research. What's beyond the plant?" He pointed in the direction of the mountains.

Thonoy looked. "More desert. Not a plant, or a rock. All sand. I was out there once on an errand. I never saw anything like it. The mountains are a little more hospitable, though."

Neotia Prime had had few similar arid areas, Bosaru recalled. The desert would have been the most exotic thing that the Neoti encountered—but it had probably not occurred to them in their agitation and haste that the living from such an environment would be a difficult one, at best. But they would adapt. They always had.

He didn't want to imagine how his mother, who loved her lush jungle of a garden on Aboo Two, would react to the suggestion that she resettle here in the desert, in the new Neoti homeworld. Nor his father, for that matter.

"But it has an atmosphere that can support us," Thonoy went on. "And at the time, that was all that mattered. We could make the rest work."

"And you have been," Bosaru said. "Are the roamers everywhere, in all the other settlements, or is it just this one?"

Thonoy shook his head. "Settlements with water reclamation plants, some without. But nowhere else are they so open. Here, they appear nearly every night."

"Imreen Dal disappeared off this bridge," Bosaru said. "Where could she have gone?"

Thonoy hesitated, then said, "There are a number of routes she could have taken out of here."

He was lying again. Bosaru stared at him. "Protecting her is the last thing you should be doing. She knows something about what's going on. If you want to be free of these roamers, you have to tell me where she is. Protecting her —"

"It's not my choice, cousin," Thonoy interrupted. "I swore I wouldn't reveal anything I didn't have to about her. Who she is should not be relevant to what's happening here. I told —" he stopped and turned away, shaking his head.

"Told who?" When Bosaru didn't get an answer, he repeated, "Told who, Thonoy? Your mother? Imreen? Dame Mirel? Who?"

Thonoy shook his head. "I will not be in the middle of this." He started off the bridge, in the direction of the ruins that Bosaru had played hide-and-seek with Imreen the day before—and someone else. The someone else who had hit him, knocked him out.

If Imreen hadn't been lying, of course. "Hey! Where are you going?"

"I told you," Thonoy said over his shoulder, "I'm not going to be a party to this anymore."

"So you're just leaving? The hell you are!"

Thonoy stopped and turned around. "I swore I wouldn't say anything, but I never said I would not show you where to go to get your answers." Shaking his head again, he turned again and resumed walking.

Bosaru followed. Why, he didn't know, but he was sure Thonoy was not going to hit him, trick him into a dangerous situation, or do something else that would endanger his life.

He was fairly sure.

Thonoy led him down an alley Bosaru was unfamiliar with, a distance from the district of the settlement he was used to.

The thing that Bosaru noticed immediately was the quiet. It was as though the noises of the normal existence he had been getting used to—the distant clang of the

water reclamation plant, the sizzling of the sands exposed to the full sunlight, the thin breeze that filtered through the settlement in the early afternoon—had suddenly been cut off. “Where are we?” Bosaru asked, his voice uncomfortably loud in the silence.

“You’re in a protected area,” someone said behind him. He turned, ready for anything, even though he knew that voice—

“Imreen,” Bosaru said.

Chapter Nine

Back Through Youth

Imreen Dal was still dressed in the attire of the shrine priestess, but she looked as though she had slept in them, all rumpled, and her golden hair, normally smoothed and coiffed, all tousled. Where had she stayed? At the shrine? He knew the priestesses lived there. If she had gone back to the shrine, Dame Mirel would have alerted him. Had he managed to drive Imreen Dal away from her own home?

"Thonoy, why did you bring him here?" she asked, exasperation edging her voice. She shoved back the hair from her face. Bosaru saw the pattern of fine scars on her hand, just like in his dreams. "I have done everything I could to lead him away from here."

The big young man shook his head. "Lady Imreen, you must tell him. He deserves to know. All he wants is to clear the name of his father."

"Don't you think I want that too? But it's too dangerous," she said.

"You have information about who's tarnishing my father's reputation? You have to tell me, Lady Imreen," Bosaru said.

She frowned, her gaze shifting away from him. "I wish I could, Officer Bosaru," she answered. "But I...can't."

"Why? Just tell me why!"

When she flinched, he knew he had overstepped his bounds. "There is no bounty on you," he said, taking a deep breath to clear his head. "But then there is *nothing* on you. I checked with the SSP. The Amalgamation has no record of you. *Imreen Dal does not exist*. Who *are* you?"

She sighed and Bosaru had to look away to avoid staring at the movement of her body when she did. She was as beautiful and desirable as the woman in his dreams, although it was clear the recognition was one-sided. "I am myself," she said finally. "My name is immaterial. Like everyone else here, I lost my home, my family, my lineage, before I was granted sanctuary. I began anew the day I stepped inside the shrine of Ixtr. Isn't that enough?" She started to turn, but Bosaru grabbed her by her arm.

Imreen flinched at his touch and looked him in the eye. Holy Pthets, her eyes were beautiful, as deep and golden as her hair.

"If you don't tell me, my father loses all he's worked for," Bosaru said, doing his best to ignore his own, automatic response to her soft skin and perfume. "He loses his lineage, his place of honor in the Great Void. He would no more have consented to the construction of the Vozuan death camps than I would. His reputation as fair and

decent, as a principled being, is at stake. And he's slipping away even as we argue. Can't you see beyond your reasons and see mine?"

Her eyes flashed, and for a second, he was taken aback at the heat in them. She stepped back. "Can't you see beyond *your* reasons and see *mine*?"

"I can't if you don't tell me what they are!"

"Lady Imreen, I'll be on my way," Thonoy broke in. "My being here isn't going to change the thinking of either of you, and I can catch a shift at the plant if I go now. My mother could use the extra cash to shore up the security around the restaurant."

Imreen winced. "The roamers?"

"The past few nights they've been right outside, and considering my shift's not over until halfway past the night, I worry about my mother and my cousin," Thonoy said with a nod toward Daegon. He shifted his pack to his other arm.

"If I'm not spending half the night running from roamers or running after Lady Imreen, I can actually protect Jenatt and Agie," Bosaru said, gritting his teeth.

"They can protect themselves – we've all learned how to do that – but I worry about them." Thonoy leaned against the wall and slid off the straps of his boot, upending it and letting some random pebbles fall out. "And maybe I can have a new pair of boots made," he muttered.

Bosaru saw the source of Thonoy's problem – two holes on the soles of the boot, one larger than the other, interconnected. The larger one allowed the larger pebbles to slip in, and the smaller hole trapped them. That had to be uncomfortable, coupled with the rubber bands and the tape holding it together.

Imreen closed her eyes for a second and rubbed her temples. "Go," she said. "I'll speak to Officer Bosaru. Or whatever you're calling yourself now. What do bounty hunters call themselves?"

"Bosaru is fine," he answered.

Once Thonoy was on his way, Bosaru took the opportunity to look around. It was yet another building in ruins, but this one apparently still had power and water. He realized that the front of the building had been hit, but the rest of the building was intact. It was a convenient little hideout, hidden in the ruins at the edge of Vozuan Town.

"Now what? Officer Bosaru, I can't give you the answers you want, and I can't give you anything else. I am not the one who can help clear your father's name. I can only ask you to go elsewhere. But you won't listen to me about that."

Bosaru put up his hand. "The roamers. What do you know about the roamers?"

Her eyes widened. "They come out at night. They kill and they destroy, but no one knows why."

"You said they know about the tunnels," Bosaru said. "How do you know that?"

Imreen sighed. "I knew I shouldn't have said that. I am such a fool. I know because I've seen them there. But they just walk through there, like everyone else. They don't try

to go up into the entrances into the buildings and homes, they just...walk. I passed them. They didn't even acknowledge I was there. And then I saw them again, and I knew they were under a spell of some sort."

"Like they were hypnotized."

Imreen nodded. "What are you thinking?"

"Do you know about the Cintealios?"

The mention of the ruthless warriors, the current enemy of the Amalgamation, made her mouth drop open. "I've heard of them," she exclaimed. "But I've never seen one. Do you think —"

Bosaru shook his head. "The roamers aren't Cintealios. But something about them reminded me of them."

"I remember reading about them, when I was a girl. My father —" she stopped.

He knew her from somewhere. He knew it. He just couldn't figure out where. "Who was your father?"

"Nobody," she replied immediately, looking to the side, then behind him. Bosaru recognized the mannerism — she was going to try to slip away again. "I am nobody, and my father was nobody. I don't have any information that you w —"

Not again. "*Stop!*"

She froze.

"You're not getting away, not this time."

She stared at the pulse blaster Bosaru was pointing at her. "Isn't that overkill?" she asked, her tone bordering on mockery. "I'm not armed. There's no reason to point that thing at me."

"I know you," Bosaru said, narrowing his eyes. "But I don't know you. Imreen Dal doesn't exist. Not even incomplete archives could excuse that. Who are you? Why do I think I know you from somewhere?" Besides his dreams, but he wasn't going to mention that.

She threw her arms up and sighed. "You do. Think back," she whispered, her eyes flashing, the gold in them glinting in the light. "When you were a child, and so was I, and Neoti Prime was still our home. But there was a chasm between us, one not of our making. Remember." She opened her fist and revealed a small polished stone, dull red, almost glowing in the dim light. Then she tipped the stone over to reveal the other side. "Do you remember this?"

Bosaru hissed and leaned forward, nearly forgetting for an instant that he was pointing a weapon at the woman.

His family crest was etched on the surface. Unmistakable. Two *gehn* feathers crossed, within a roped circle. That had been the Bosaru family crest for ten generations.

His family's surstone. His, the one he thought he had lost as a boy.

"Where did you get that?" he demanded, reaching out for the stone.

But she closed her hand and would not reopen it. "You gave it to me."

"Then give it back."

She looked up at him and for the first time he sensed she was stronger than she looked. She tilted her chin. "No, I will not. You gave it to me."

"Who are you?"

Imreen Dal—or whoever she was, truly—continued to look him in the eye, not flinching. "Think back. I was crying because my brother had taken my doll and you wanted me to stop. You thought you would be punished because someone would think you had made me cry. You didn't want to look after me, but no one else was there, and my nurse was nowhere to be seen, let alone my brother. So you sat down next to me and reached into your pocket and drew out the stone and showed it to me. And you told me the story behind your family crest, and that way you made me forget to cry."

Bosaru stared at her. There was something familiar about the story—he remembered a cloudy day, with intermittent sunbursts, and he remembered sitting next to a little girl, with wide, sad eyes the color of gold, tears rimming them, and then he remembered her smiling, with a missing tooth right in front. "My father was in a meeting," he said. "He was an emissary to the Vozuan administration that year. He had brought me with him because I had never been to that part of the planet, and my mother thought it would be a good experience. But the meeting went overlong..."

Imreen Dal—or whoever she was—nodded. "My father was in the meeting also," she whispered. "He was an advisor. My mother had died not so long before that, and my nurse had been called away. So I sat and waited. But I was afraid."

He shook his head. "That was a small meeting," he said, threads of memory coming back to him as he fought to remember that long ago. "Not publicized, to either Neoti or Vozuans. The governments were trying to clarify national boundaries, trying to forestall violence, but that didn't work. I remember my father's assistants. I would have remembered you if you had been the child of one of them."

"My father was not one of your father's assistants," she said. She looked away. "My father was meeting with yours."

"But—"

In a flash Bosaru remembered a tall, angular golden man, dressed in the rich silver gray and red uniform of the Vozuan military, who had looked uncomfortable in its sumptuousness. As though he had only donned the uniform as a gesture. "You're Vozuan," he said, though he knew that.

And in that snap of memory, Bosaru remembered a shadow almost behind the golden man. Which had not been a shadow at all, but a tiny little girl, trembling and so very shy. "I remember," he said, in a soft breath. "You were so young. You were hiding behind your father. And couldn't be persuaded to leave. And as soon as the door closed behind your father and mine for their meeting, you started to cry."

He frowned. The details were coming quicker now. "Imra Haren Daleen," he said. "Your father called you 'Imreen', now I remember. Your father was—" he frowned. He had just ran across that name for some reason— "Barus Imre Daleen."

An icy chill ran down his spine. He remembered that name from the histories he had been reading. "Your uncle was Verot Barus Kurog," he whispered. "In the name of Pthets, *your uncle was the cause of a civil war that destroyed an entire planet and hundreds of millions of lives.*"

His arm dropped his side, his weapon dangling, as though it was suddenly too heavy for him to carry. "No wonder you didn't want anyone to know who you are," he said aloud. "No wonder you were running from *me*. And no wonder my Vozuan cousins were protecting you. How could I have been so stupid? I'm in Vozuan territory!"

"You said there was no Vozuan, no Neoti territory anymore! Didn't you say we were all in the same place on the same planet now? Hypocrite!"

Bosaru stepped back. "You knew I was looking for someone who could give me information about the death camps. You just kept running when you could have just told me—"

"No. I couldn't have. Don't you understand that?"

"Understand *what*?"

"Don't you see?" Imreen cried, her eyes fiery. "I can't tell you. I *promised*."

Bosaru stared at her. There was something he wasn't quite getting, something that was escaping him. Was it a Vozuan thing?

No. He had been taught from the time he was a child that there was little or no difference between the Neoti and the Vozuan, only a trick of genetics that one was a hue of gold and the other a shade of green. The home world wasn't that big. The difference between the cultures was minuscule.

That's what he had been taught.

"Don't ask me anything else. Please, Daegon."

A cold fury ran through Bosaru's veins. "Verot Barus Kurog is alive, isn't he? *He's alive and you know where he is.*"

"You must think so, because you quit your job and came all the way out here to find him!"

"He's a mass murderer. He directed the deaths of millions and crippled millions more. *You know where he is.*"

"I do," she finally cried. "But you see, he doesn't know where *I* am, and I'm going to keep it that way!"

What?

"You mean...*you're* hiding from *him*?"

"I've seen him. He hasn't seen me. I don't want to see him. He may not remember what I look like. From what I hear, he has plans...plans I want nothing to do with."

"Then who...*who* did you promise? *What* did you promise?"

Imreen covered her face with her hands. Then she dropped her hands to her sides. "I can't get away from you anymore, can I?"

Suddenly she looked small and tired.

He didn't want to make her look that way. "Imreen..."

"I know. You only want to find out who's behind the aspersions against your father. You think it's my uncle. You know what? I think you're right. He couldn't leave well enough alone. Most people thought he was dead...and he could have lived the rest of his life quietly, let the war fade from our memories. But no."

"The Amalgamation has him at the top of the Galaxy's Most Wanted List," Bosaru said.

"I know. But I also know there has been some talk about taking him off, because he was most likely dead. I hate him. I hate he lived and my father died."

"Is that who you promised? Your father? Did you promise your father you would protect your uncle, no matter what he'd done?"

Barus Imre Daleen was already dead by the time the war was at its worst, Bosaru recalled. That was before the rumors of the death camps got loud and ugly.

Imreen would have been not quite a woman by then, but a maturing girl. She would have been on her own, more and more aware of the whispers about the camps—prison camps they had started out to be, before deteriorating into torturous events, like the competition between prisoners and wild animals he had read about—but with the prisoners being used as target practice.

And those would have been the mild rumors. The uglier ones, the ones that came later about how the prisoners were treated, were probably not repeated in her presence.

Hell, Bosaru was a full-grown adult who had seen his share of horror and tragedy, and he didn't want to think about those stories. After the formal end of the war, the Neoti forces sent to liberate the camps had had to be treated for trauma afterward.

Linking his father to those camps? All because of one short phone call, shortly before the whispers about the camps began? "You must have been in his enclave," he said, referring to the Vozuan term for the compound where the families of the top-ranking military personnel were quartered for their own safety. "How much did you hear? For that matter, how did you get away from there?"

She gazed at him, expressionless. "I heard it all. After the first rumors surfaced, no one dared to say anything around me. For a while I thought it was because I spent my time with the children, taking care of them when their parents could not, but then I realized it was deliberate. So I made a point of listening when otherwise I would have ignored it."

Bosaru watched her face. It seemed to become hard, as though she were bracing herself against the unpleasant memories that surfaced in the telling of them.

That wasn't unusual. There wasn't a face that didn't change when the topic of the war came up. At least there were no tears this time. The tears were the hardest to deal with. "And what did you hear?" he asked, almost tentative.

Imreen looked him in the eye. She still looked hard—the set of her jaw didn't soften—but her eyes seemed to be gentling. "Nothing. There wasn't anything about any Bosaru. Daegon or Rai-Sur," she added, referring to his father's given name.

"I heard it all—and there was nothing about your father. Your father had nothing to do with the camps. By then there was no communication between the Neoti and the Vozuans, and he was certainly in no position to agree or disagree to the treatment of the Neoti prisoners by the Vozuans."

"The rumors have him in league with your uncle, earlier, during the peace talks," Bosaru said. "In exchange for something—money, most likely—the rumors had my father agreeing to somehow veer the Neoti troops away from the presumed sites of the Vozuan prison camps, knowing what was happening in them. And he did this in cooperation with your uncle, discussed perhaps during that unexplained phone call."

Imreen glanced away. "My uncle would be able to confirm that your father had nothing to do with the prison camps," she said. Bosaru noted that she never referred to them as the "death" camps, a term popularized by the news media. "But whether he would, or it is his intent to cast blame on your father and shift it away from himself, I couldn't say. All I know is that he is planning something."

Bosaru's eyes bulged. "And discrediting my father is part of that?"

"Your father can't confirm or deny any part of the allegations. Repeat the slander often enough, and it's viewed as truth, isn't that how it goes? And your father was a major force after we—after the Vozuans—surrendered. Weaken his part in the aftermath of the war, question his behavior during the war, and my uncle could find his way back into the public eye, two decades after he was presumed dead. After all, *he* didn't sign a surrender treaty. Those he left for dead, who were rescued by the Neoti forces, did."

Worse and worse. Bosaru ran his hand through his hair. "Are you sure you won't help me? You know your uncle better than anyone else. You can help me, you can even help your uncle. At this point, I can't guarantee what would happen if your uncle's continued existence became a matter of public knowledge."

"I know. You're after him for the bounty, isn't that right? Someone else might be a little less focused, a little less forgiving. If my uncle were to die before he could clear your father's name, there would still be questions."

"Your own father's name would be tainted," Bosaru reminded her. "And you would still protect your uncle's name? Would your father want that, even at the expense of his own? Would his own place in the Great Void be threatened because of it?"

"Vozuans don't believe in the Great Void," she reminded him. "One of the main differences between the Neoti and the Vozuan. We believe in the Great Merge."

He had forgotten. It had been a long time since his comparative religions courses. "In that case, do you think his Merger would be...stalled, if his name were bloodied and tainted with such horror?"

"I don't know. His own mind would be clear, at least." Imreen's voice was thin and small. "I have my own doubts in the Great Merge now. Too much has happened not to make me wonder."

She sat down on the edge of a collapsed bench and clasped her hands together. "If I help you, would you make sure my father's part in this is cleared? I can't ask you to do that for my uncle. He has no excuse," she said, her voice muffled. "But my father was a good man. He believed in the Great Merge. He knew my mother would be there waiting for him when he arrived. If you can promise that," she said, her voice breaking, "I will help you. I will tell you everything I know. That will help both of us."

This had to be hard for her, Bosaru recognized, as he watched the knuckles of her hands whiten as she gripped them together. She had to break her promise to her father to keep her uncle safe in order to keep her father's name intact.

He could sympathize. Very much so. "I promise. Your father's name will be as precious to me as my own father's," he said.

With a deep sigh, Imreen stood up. "I think my father understands what I have to do." Bosaru put out his hand to steady her, and she took it.

The glare of the midday sun was brutal that day, so as soon as there was an entrance to the tunnels, they took it. Daegon saw Imreen glancing over her shoulder right before they ducked in.

"Are you afraid of someone following?" he asked.

These set of stairs were a little more rickety than the others he'd been on. He jumped down the final few steps and put out his hand for Imreen. She took it, neatly sidestepping the skirts she could have tripped on. "I keep away from Vozuans around here I don't know," she said. "For obvious reasons."

"Where are we going? Do you live down in the tunnels?"

She rolled her eyes. Despite the situation, Daegon suppressed a smile. "Until you started to hunt me, I lived in the shrine quarters with all the other priestesses," she said. "I only hope Dame Mirel will forgive me. No, you and I are going somewhere safe to talk," she added. "And I don't want that to be the shrine."

The tunnels seem to go on forever, but Bosaru was getting used to them. "These tunnels have been useful, and they've been the only way we can travel at night. The days, too, if the sun's harsh, even though it can get suffocating in the heat of the day. But you know? There are places down here to be careful about too," she said. "Some tunnel areas are all Vozuans, and some are all Neoti. For the most part, it's safe enough. For the most part, there isn't a problem. But sometimes..."

She stopped dead still and grabbed Bosaru, forcing him to do the same. Sure enough, there was an echo of steps, and voices. She pressed her finger against his lips and leaned forward to whisper in his ear, "The roamers aren't the only ones to be careful of. Sometimes I see the Vozuans I was scared of during the war. I think they would not recognize me, but I have to make sure they don't see me, just in case."

Bosaru nodded, focusing on her words and not her body, so close. The voices and steps died away again, and Bosaru and Imreen resumed walking. "They are my people and they always will be, but sometimes I am afraid of them," she whispered. "It worries me that they won't let this rest. An entire world was destroyed, and we can never go back. And still they won't let it rest." She shook her head.

Bosaru saw a glint of moisture at the corner of her eye, and it was all he could do not to reach out and wipe it away. Life should be enjoyed, not endured, he wanted to tell her, but perhaps that was a Neoti philosophy, and so he didn't want to say it. But it was true.

He opened his mouth just then to form some kind of Vozuan parallel when he heard something echo down the tunnel. A glance at Imreen told him that she too had heard it. It was a voice—two voices. Two voices in distress.

The voices got louder, more frenzied. Then there was a scream, loud—which was cut off.

Damn it!

Chapter Ten

Roamer Or Not?

"Stay here," Bosaru whispered to Imreen, reaching for his blaster. "Get to the nearest exit as soon as you can, in the opposite direction."

She gripped his arm. "No," she said fiercely, her voice low. "I won't let you go alone."

"I'm armed to the teeth, Imreen. But I don't want to put you in danger while I check out what's happening."

"I can protect myself," she said, her jaw set. She darted out, sprinting toward the source of the altercation.

What the — "*Imreen!*"

You idiot! Bosaru wanted to say, but he was too busy running, intent on getting ahead of her. He did easily, blocking her. "Get back!" he ordered.

"No!"

Her voice carried through the tunnels, and Bosaru knew she had been heard when the shuffling stopped and started again. They were coming toward them, and there were more than a few. And the shuffling sounded like —

"Roamers," he said, his blaster pointed in the direction of the noise. "Imreen. Run!"

She shook her head. "I don't know who it is, but those aren't roamers. I know the sounds of the roamers, and these — I don't know who they are."

"Then get behind me and —"

"I can deal with anything we come across — *oh!*"

Imreen stumbled and Bosaru grabbed her arm to keep her upright. "Oh, no," she moaned when she looked down. "Oh, Daegon." She turned her face away.

Bosaru looked down, even though he knew what he would see. "You're sure they're not roamers," he said after a minute.

There were two human bodies sprawled on the ground. A quick check confirmed his first impression — they were dead, most likely throttled.

"The sound is wrong," she insisted.

"Then get out of the way and let me find out —"

The shuffling got louder. Whoever — or whatever — it was, had doubled back.

"Fine," Bosaru said, gritting his teeth. He handed his weapon to Imreen, handle first. "The safety is off. Point it at your opponent. Squeeze the trigger here. And brace yourself against the wall, because the blast can knock you off your feet if you're not prepared."

"I don't want it."

"Humor me, then. Just point the damn thing at whoever's coming this way while I try this," he said, dragging out the energy whip from the weapons cache that the Web's weapons master had packed for him. He hefted it. It felt right. Just in case things got messy, he also had the *thiris* and the energy sword, though his fencing training was again far in the past.

He looked up and around. The tunnels were low, compact, just the size for the average Neoti or Vozuan, nothing more. Bosaru knew that if the shuffling was any indication, the average roamer—if there was such a thing—would be hard put to walk comfortably in these tight quarters. Whoever or whatever these people—if you could call them that—were, they probably weren't as large as the roamers, but they weren't that much smaller, either, by the sound of their steps. Were they Cintealios? What would Cintealios be doing here?

"Brace yourself," he told Imreen, who was standing, the butt of the blaster held in both hands, pointed down at the moment.

"You said that," she said. But she wasn't looking at him—she was staring into the distance, toward where the shuffling noise was coming, past the crumpled bodies.

Bosaru glanced at her again. Her lips were tight. She had fire, he had to admit. This couldn't be a situation like any she had to have encountered, but she was taking to it, even if she had initially refused the weapon.

"I'll be fine," she said. "Just stay out of my way."

The shuffling was coming closer, louder. There was a shadow that came around the corner, stretching across the width of the corridor.

Bosaru flattened himself against the wall and motioned for Imreen to do the same. She did, finally raising the blaster.

The noise got louder, and Bosaru could swear that the ground seemed to shiver a little. Finally, the edge of a foot—was it a foot? He couldn't tell—peered from around the corner, and came no farther. It took a step forward, then stepped back, leaving an impression in the soil.

There was something about the outline that made him stop. A shoe imprint, with two indentations. Why...

The explosion of Imreen's blaster nearly knocked him down out of sheer surprise. Not once, not twice, but three times, she shot at the general direction of the thing, her eyes wild.

Bosaru shouted, "Imreen! Stop!"

"We have to get it!" she shouted back. She shot again. The shuffling had stopped. She started toward it before Daegon pulled her back.

Then they paused, holding their breaths, waiting to see if there was another movement or another sound from around the corner. One minute...two...three...and they exhaled.

Then the shuffling started again, and it was still coming around the corner.

One they could deal with. More than one, they would be backed into a corner.

"Let's go!" Bosaru shouted.

She didn't argue, not this time. They turned and ran, not waiting for anything. They ran as fast as they could, not pausing for any other noise they might have heard.

If Daegon had given it any thought, he would have been embarrassed. But he would confront—it, them—when he had more information. And every weapon he could lay his hands on, complete with ammo.

They found an unlocked tunnel exit and took it.

"This better end up somewhere out in the open," Bosaru muttered. "I don't want to go into a fight with you there."

He could hear her smile. "You might be surprised at how I can fight," she told him. She squeezed his arm, surprising him.

The exit found them coming out in the middle of Vozuan Town, near where Jenatt had her place. Bosaru took a deep breath.

"Safe harbor," Imreen said, taking a moment to lean against a crumbling wall to take a deep breath of her own. "Here."

Bosaru looked over. She was holding out his blaster to him, butt first. "You're a good shot, for someone who's never held a weapon before," he said. He didn't make a move toward it.

Imreen glanced at him but didn't withdraw her hand, either. "I never said I never held a blaster before. Don't you want it back?"

"If you know how to use it, I'm pretty confident you can carry it," he said. "And I have a pack filled with other weapons I can use."

"What do you have?" she asked, perking up all of a sudden. "Is that what you're carrying?"

Bosaru stared at her. "You're not reacting the way I thought you would."

Imreen grinned faintly. "Never assume, Officer Bosaru. You know what they say about assuming."

He barked a laugh. She was a constant surprise. "Let's go. Jenatt's place should be as safe as anywhere."

The way to the restaurant was familiar by now. Once they arrived at the entrance to the restaurant, however, he hesitated. "Before we go in, is there anything I should know about you and my clan?"

Imreen glanced at him. "Only that Jenatt recognized me when I first came here and did not report me to anyone who asked. And Thonoy accepted it when I told him that I had no interest in reclaiming Vozuan politics or stature, that I only wanted to be left alone. They have been kind beyond measure."

"He's still hoping for a nationalist movement, I think."

"I know. But he's young, he's heard too many stories of the glory days, not enough about the dark days. He's got to hear them from someone who went through them, but not me. I didn't see them. Or enough of them."

A note of bitterness in her voice caught his attention. "You can't help that. It wasn't your call."

"But I still feel responsible." She straightened. "But let's not talk about that here. Let's go in."

The dining room of the restaurant was bright and noisy with the noontime rush. Bosaru looked around and caught a glimpse of Jenatt as she sailed into the kitchen.

Agie saw them just as she finished serving a pair of diners broad crocks of thick creamy flower soup. Her eyes widened at the sight of the two of them together, but she just smiled, saying nothing in front of the customers.

Daegon took a deep breath and smiled. "Jenatt's cooking always smells like heaven."

Imreen smiled too. "It always smells like home when I come here. It's nice."

Jenatt came back out of the kitchen then, carrying a platter of steaming dishes of Vozuan delicacies. She paused for a split second when she saw him, smiled and said, "I'll be right with you."

Bosaru nodded and watched as she delivered the meals. Then she turned back to him. "So you're here in the middle of the day," she said with a grin. "Ready to give me a hand in the kitchen? I can always use someone to wash the dishes."

"If you need me," he said. "But..."

Imreen ducked out from behind him. Bosaru watched as Jenatt's face froze.

In fact, a good half of the restaurant patrons seemed to stop, while the other half—clearly Neoti—continued without a pause.

So there were a number of other Vozuans who had been aware of her existence, keeping her secret. And they probably were aware of Verot's existence here too. And they had to all be keeping the secret.

Bosaru could have kicked himself. He should have realized that most of the Vozuan population in the settlement had been aware of Imreen's presence and had carefully led him around her.

By then, the Neoti patrons had noticed the hush among the other customers in the restaurant. The only exceptions were the clueless pair of diners drinking flower soup and working on an Aboolan crossword puzzle, whose exuberant voices carried in the sudden silence.

"Daegon, are you here for lunch?" Jenatt asked, recovering surprisingly quickly. "With your...guest?"

Daegon stared at her for a moment. It was time to get to the heart of a few things. "We are, but we'll eat in the kitchen, so we don't take up space in the dining room," he

told her, allowing his voice to carry. "I'm sure you won't mind. Considering there's usually a line to get in here."

"If you don't mind," Jenatt said, glancing nervously at the pair drinking soup. "This time of day, the customers do come in droves."

"Thank you, Jenatt," Imreen said, flashing a smile. "Thank you, Agie."

"You're welcome," Agie said, her eyes wide and her voice hushed. No doubt she never expected to see an officer of the Secret Sciences Police and someone who was once in the elite of Vozuan society in the same airspace—for that matter, so close they were nearly touching.

But life was different now. Imreen was no longer who she had been. Nor was he, for that matter.

Right then, one of the flower soup diners looked up from their crossword puzzle. Bosaru thought he saw a dim flash of recognition in his eyes, so he grabbed Imreen's hand and pulled her in the direction of the kitchen.

"Do you know what you would like? I'll make it for you right away," Jenatt said, loudly enough her voice could be heard in the farthest corner of the restaurant. She led them into the kitchen, and Bosaru and Imreen followed.

Once they were far enough away from the dining room to be heard, Jenatt put her fists on her hips and glared at them. "Why didn't you come through the tunnels?" she demanded. "Did you see the pair out there? They work for the settlement officials! They're here every day drinking soup and working on their puzzles. They come here to gather information, we think. We've been very careful not to give them any."

"Someone or something was down in the tunnels. Something that sounded like roamers. We didn't have a choice," Bosaru said shortly, walking down the hallway to the entrance to the tunnel and opening the door. He took a couple steps down into the tunnel and looked around. No one. He listened for a minute. Nothing. They were safe for now so he came back.

Just to make sure, Bosaru locked the entry to the tunnels and sat so that he could see the doors leading to both the dining room and the tunnels.

"Roamers during the day?" Jenatt inquired, glancing at him. "Daegon, surely you were mistaken."

"They sounded like roamers, but I don't think they were," Imreen said, taking a deep breath and sitting down, still looking around. She appeared as uneasy as Bosaru felt. "Daegon said they didn't sound big enough."

"And she shot at it, whoever or whatever it was," Bosaru said. He didn't mention the enthusiasm.

"I take it you know who she is," Jenatt said tiredly. "And Lady Imreen, you know who he is. And you're here together."

"You can blame your son," Imreen said. "He decided he wasn't going to lead Daegon around in circles. I don't blame him. He decided to go to the plant to catch a half shift. I don't know if he mentioned it to you."

"He didn't. Thank you, lady," Agie said.

Bosaru closed his eyes for a moment. "Now. Tell me your story, Lady Imreen," he said. "Tell me how you've come to be here."

Imreen shrugged. "If you have an eternity. Are you sure you want to hear it?"

Bosaru nodded. "I do."

"There isn't much for me to tell you. Life changed dramatically after you and I first met and you gave me your family surstone. The mediation attempts didn't work, as you know. War became inevitable."

* * * * *

And even though Imreen—Imra Haren Daleen back then—had been taught the Neoti were the devil incarnate—at least that was what her nursemaid had said—her father had had a different take on the matter. A matter of distance was all that separated them. They all came from the same stock, he had said. Time and distance had made them different, so they could be all the same again by taking away the two factors.

As the Vozuans began to arm themselves, amassing weapons of destruction, her father had tried to send her off-world, to Aboo Two, like the Bosaru family. But the Vozuan Politicam had put a stop to that. It questioned the faith of the Vozuan elite, they said. The Vozu would triumph, and they would all stay, that was how certain they were about it. The Verot was sure. The Verot would know. The Order of Verot told everyone they had no doubt.

That was what the general population were told to believe. Those who did not? They went away, never to be heard from again.

So the Vozuan elite stayed, growing more and more uneasy as the violence escalated, not only against the Neoti but against their own as the fabric of their society disintegrated. The Verot will save us, they heard, but they no longer believed—but had no way to get out.

Then the Verot slipped away in the midst of the final chaos, leaving the Politicam in pieces and the families of the elite open to slaughter when the people, the Vozuan people who had believed and worked as a whole toward a victory, realized the Verot had run away. They blamed the elite, and so many died at the hands of the terrified mobs.

Imra was alone by then. Her father had died at the beginning of the misbegotten war of a cancer and her brother had died in the battlefield, at the Battle of Ferot Permian, where the rivers of Dau came together and the waters had run blood red for days afterward. She never found out what happened to her brother's body.

Then news came that the oscillator corrosive, long gone from Neotia Prime and stolen from the Secret Sciences Police vaults, was activated...and it spread without cease, devouring earth and air and water and fire. And people. And the mass evacuation of the planet began.

By sheer luck, she made her way onto one of the massive transports leaving after the oscillator's results became public. By then the mood of the people, Vozuan and Neoti, was ugly, and getting any of the Vozuan elite onto the ship was a fight. Calling herself Imreen and then Imreen Dal when pressed for a clan name, she slipped on board and if anyone noticed she looked remarkably like the niece of the Verot, well, no one put two and two together in the frenzy of those days.

She picked one of the smallest settlements to settle down on, far away from most of the unnamed planet's natural resources but with a space port. When she discovered the shrine of Ixtr had been moved there, she knew she had found the place she could disappear into—at least for the time being. And with that, she became Imreen Dal permanently, and kept the hope alive the official records would remain incomplete enough that no one would ask about the fate of Imra Haren Daleen, of the clan Kurog.

On occasion she could have sworn that Dame Mirel looked at her with recognition in her eyes, but the high priestess never said anything. Imreen kept her head down and worked hard, avoiding much contact with the settlement, only appearing in public from time to time. She heard about the Vozuans who settled in the area, then about the rebirth and rise of Vozuan pride...and worried. She wasn't going to get involved in whatever was happening. She wasn't going to get involved in whatever plans the Vozuan militants had in mind, because whatever it was, it was not going to be good.

Then came the news she'd been afraid of—Verot Barus Kurog was alive. And he was looking for any word about his family, whoever was left—whatever had not been put to death by the Neoti, as he put it.

What Verot didn't understand was that there wasn't anyone left to put to death. The entire clan had been nearly obliterated by the war, and not by the Neoti tribunals afterward. She and the Verot were the only ones left of the clan left. And she wanted nothing to do with him. Whatever plans he had, she was going to remain clean of.

But someone had tipped him off. Someone had said she was in the community somewhere, but not where or what she was doing...and so he was searching for her. And she was avoiding him. She had to make sure she was never seen in public, never seen in groups where there were more Vozuans than Neoti. Only a small group of Vozuans knew who she was, and they weren't talking. He had his loyalists, and she had hers. He would find her eventually, but she was hoping for later than sooner.

Maybe with the help of Daegon Bosaru, she could get later. Far, far later.

* * * * *

He didn't want to tell her, even though she knew it. "I have to find Verot," he said, looking her straight in the eye. "I understand you don't want to have anything to do with it."

She didn't flinch, didn't wince, only took a deep breath. "No, I don't. In fact, I don't want anything to do with him at all. It's bad enough he knows I'm here and it's only a matter of time before he finds me. No," she said again, pulling away a little. "I'm sorry, Daegon, but I can't have anything to do with this. I know you have to, for your father, but to honor mine, I have to stay away."

"I understand," he said. He hesitated, but decided to go through with it. "Do you have any idea where he is now?"

She shook her head. "From what I've heard, he has eyes and ears everywhere, but I don't know exactly where he is based. I'm assuming it's in Vozuan Town."

Bosaru considered the settlement. The Vozuan sector was by far the largest in the region. And Vozuan Town made sense for Verot to be hiding there. He still had his followers, and if push came to shove, he would be able to get some form of aid or protection from the local Vozuans.

"We can put out feelers. I can show you around at the community meeting," Jenatt volunteered. "I know at least one family who moved across the sector who were Vozuan sympathizers. They wear that red armband and all," she added, frowning. "At least I know where *they* went. They're usually at the meetings. This will give me a good reason to go over, because I want to find out if they know what happened to the grocers who packed up and disappeared."

Bosaru perked up. "Vozuans at the meeting? That could be useful."

"Come back when it's closer to twilight, and we'll go together. I'll introduce you to everyone there."

Bosaru was aware that comm-tabs only worked sporadically on the unnamed world, so when his gave its distinctive squeal, he was momentarily startled. Then he tapped it and flicked on the video. No response. Just the audio, then. "Bosaru."

"Daegon," he heard.

His mother. He closed his eyes. He knew what was coming next.

"Daegon, I've been trying to reach you. Daegon—he's..."

The next thing he heard was her sobbing, crying as though her heart was breaking. As he knew it must have been. Because his was no better.

"Son of Mine...your father has traveled to the Great Void," he heard his mother say, amid the tears.

Bosaru opened his eyes and concentrated. He didn't have time to break down right then.

"Mother of Mine. I...we knew it would happen soon. Tell me what happened."

"Son of Mine, he'd been asleep for what seemed like an eternity," his mother said. "They said he would never awake. But they were wrong, Daegon. They were wrong."

Bosaru—for he was truly en-Bosaru now, head of the Bosaru clan—swallowed. “He woke up?” That was unusual, but not unheard of.

“He did. As I sat there, holding his hand, I felt him squeeze my hand. And then when I looked up, he opened his eyes. Truly it must have been an effort, but he did, and it was a miracle, Son of Mine. A miracle.”

And so painful for his mother.

“Before I could say anything, he opened his mouth and tried to whisper to me. So I leaned toward him.”

“What did he say?” Bless Pthets, his own heart was breaking. *Maintain, maintain*, he kept telling himself. *Hold*.

“He told me his time was finished, but I should persevere, and for you to...I don’t understand what he meant.”

Bosaru stopped pacing. “What did he say, Mother of Mine?”

“Son of Mine, he told me you would pursue the misbegotten to the ends of the galaxy, but the greatest challenge for you remains in front of you. I don’t know what he meant, but he told me to tell you exactly that.”

Bosaru couldn’t imagine. “I don’t know, Mother of Mine.”

“Then he squeezed my hand again and then...he closed his eyes. And he began his great journey.”

Rai-Sur en-Bosaru’s son permitted himself a single tear—no more, because on leave or not, Secret Sciences Police officer or not, he would not allow himself more than a moment of weakness—before he swallowed his own grief and said, “I am so sorry, Mother of Mine. I am so sorry.”

“I am so sorry too, that you could not be here to witness his passing. But he would at least be comforted by your being there, working for his clear passage to the Void.”

Somehow he had his doubts. “We argued, Mother of Mine. We argued, about what my chosen profession. We—”

“Daegon, he was proud you were following your own path. He knew it couldn’t have been easy for you to turn away from his plans for you, but you were strong and determined and he was proud of what you were working for. He never got a chance to tell you,” Ir en-Bosaru said, her voice breaking all over again. “But he was so proud of you. And he knew you would make the family Bosaru proud.”

“Thank you, Mother of Mine.” Daegon en-Bosaru blinked once, hard, to control himself.

“Son of Mine, I had to tell you,” his mother said, her voice becoming stronger. “I am so glad I could reach you finally.”

Bosaru nodded, his heart in his throat. “The communications barrier here is persistent, Mother of Mine. I’m...I’m sorry you had such a hard time reaching me.”

"The separation ceremony will be a quiet one," she told him. "We will do a more formal one when you return, when we ask others outside our kind to join us. Don't worry about me, son. But...my heart, and my home, will be quiet."

"Thank you, Mother. I'll come to you as soon as I can." A second tear trailed down his face, much to his chagrin. But he knew it needed to be there.

"I know. Daegon...please be careful. I can't help but believe it's a dangerous trail you are in pursuit of."

"This is my quest for Father," he told her. "And now, since he is on his voyage to the Void, I am more determined than ever to see it to its end."

"I'll let you go now, Daegon. Be careful. For me, even more than for your father," she said. "All my love to you."

"And to you, Mother of Mine," Bosaru said as he tapped his comm-tab again.

He looked up at the ceiling, imagining where in the twilight sky he would be able to pretend where Aboo Two was, where his mother would be straightening her back, becoming the grand lady of the clan Bosaru once more. It was her public persona, the one designed to cow the arrogant, formed from years of being the wife of the much-embattled ambassador of Neotia Prime to the Amalgamation.

Daegon closed his eyes again, indulging in a second of reflection. "Good voyage to you, Father," he whispered. "May our ancestors speed you on your journey."

"Daegon...bad news?" he heard Jenatt say.

He looked at her. "My father has begun his journey to the Great Void," he said, knowing that he was surrounded by Vozuans whose knowledge of the trip would be, at best, sketchy. "And my mother relayed to me his last words."

"I'm so sorry," she exclaimed, while Bosaru felt Imreen's hand squeeze his.

They spoke of other, less consequential things after that. The dish was a *hoodana* grain-based pottage, with two bowls presented to them, one with spices common to Vozuan cuisine and the other to Neoti, and they laughed a little about the differences.

Bosaru reminded himself what his father had said about differences being inconsequential. He watched Imreen as she laughed with Jenatt and Agie, testing his version of the *hoodana* grain pottage, and smiled when the unfamiliar spices hit her tastebuds and her eyes widened. And he knew he was doing the right thing.

By the time they finished, the sun had dipped low enough that the crackling heat of the midday was dissipated, so Imreen and Daegon took a walk—a simple walk, when neither was chasing the other—around the neighborhood, coming to a rest at the edge of the settlement that overlooked the mountains in the distance.

At that time of the day, the daylight interfered with the spectral range of the gases from the tip of the highest mountain, so there was an unusual banding of color that stretched far into the sky. The rainbow that resulted was gigantic, covering nearly the entire sky.

"In this harsh climate, I would never have expected something that amazing and beautiful," Bosaru said, admiring the vivid hues. "It looks like something that would have been from Neoti Prime."

Imreen nodded. "I remember seeing images of the jungles," she said, almost wistfully. "All that rain must have made so many rainbows. Do you think we can share them this time? Do you think we'll actually learn?"

She was almost leaning against him by now, and he found himself remembering how he reacted when he first saw her — beautiful and golden and somehow ethereal.

And a really good shot. That was something that never came up in his dreams.

"How did you learn to use a blaster?" he asked as he slipped his arm around her. It felt good. It felt right.

His father would have liked her.

He felt her smile against his shoulder. "I would like to be mysterious and not tell you, but I've gotten over that," she said. "I learned to shoot when the enclave was being destroyed toward the end of the war and the guards went down. It was shoot or be shot, and I knew I wasn't going to be shot. And after a blaster I grabbed from a dead guard exploded in my hand, I learned to shoot with either hand."

"Is that how you got the scars?" he asked, gently peeling away the light fabric of her sleeve. He traced the longest and broadest of the gashes on her hand, now faded to a palest of pinks. He could imagine how it must have hurt when it happened. But she couldn't stop shooting. It must have hurt, it must have bled, but it was shoot or be shot.

Now, years later, her skin was soft and smooth again, with the faint spider web pattern of scars smoother than the skin around it. But all he could say was, "You were lucky."

She nodded. "I didn't even break a bone. But it hurt so much, I was crying as I was shooting."

Daegon crooked a sympathetic smile. "What did that do to your aim?"

Imreen laughed, which was *his* aim. "I shot the one next to the one I was aiming for." Then her face crumpled. "I did what I had to do."

She hid her face in his shoulder. Bosaru held her and closed his eyes, feeling her tremble. "You survived," he whispered. "You lived to tell the tale."

They stood that way for a while as the giant rainbow faded over the mountains, gradually replaced with the dimming orange light of the late afternoon. Bosaru stroked her hair, murmuring soothing noises, while he let her cry.

He had to wonder if she had allowed herself to cry during the fall of her nation. He thought not. She would have been alone, surrounded by a regime she no longer had much in common with...and feeling more and more vulnerable. She was the niece of the Verot, but there was no safety in the relationship.

"Feeling better?" he asked after a while, after the sobs had died away.

He laid his cheek against her hair. Her scent was faint, but like the purple lilies that had been clustered around the doorway leading to his parents' estate on Aboo Two. The flowers had been brought from Neotia Prime, one of the few flora they had managed to take away when they left, and the delicate, spicy scent that had greeted him every time he came and went gave him comfort. "You smell like home," he whispered. "Like all the good things of Neotia Prime."

She looked up at him then and smiled, letting the last of her tears fall away. "That's the nicest thing you could have said to me."

Daegon bent and kissed her. She kissed back.

Her skin was smooth, and in the arid atmosphere of the settlement, seemed to be moist.

Time stood still.

Bosaru hazily realized he was gripping her shoulders. He stepped back and took a deep breath.

Imreen, meanwhile, tried to step with him, only to be met with more space. "What are you doing?" she finally asked, frowning.

"This isn't the time or the place," Bosaru said, although his very being was shouting *Yes it is!*

Although it wasn't his being that was actually doing the shouting.

"I don't want to do anything that you don't want to," he reminded her.

She glared at him. "What are you talking about?"

"You've been in a situation that had you working with survival skills. You've been doing whatever you need to in order to survive."

The edges of her mouth turned down. "What are you talking about?"

"I want you to do what you want to do!" he shouted.

"I am!" she shouted back.

"Are you sure?"

Her eyes widened. "Yes!"

"Good," he said, deciding to throw his own caution to the winds.

He kissed her again, and this time he didn't stop. He didn't stop when she murmured, and he didn't stop when she threw her arms around his neck, pulling herself up and letting him pick her up.

The warmth of her skin against the cooling air of the fading sunlight was intoxicating.

The taste of her was even better.

After a time, he set her down. She slid down his chest and looked up with a grin.

"Didn't I tell you this was what I wanted?" she asked, breathing unevenly. She had one hand curled around the base of his neck, and the slight touch of her fingernails against his skin was enough.

He kissed her, this time with more power than he had before. "And this is what I wanted to do," he said, his lips against hers, just a tickle against her cheek.

Her arms went around his neck again. "Good," she said, her voice low and husky. And she kissed him again, but this time they lowered each other to the ground, peeling each item of clothing from the other like the skin of ripe fruit, savoring and tasting the sweetness beneath.

The deep orange sand under them was fine and almost powdery, and in the lingering heat of the day, Bosaru found the texture against her silken skin overwhelming. "This shouldn't be the place," he told her as he kissed the length of her neck, breathing in the perfume of her skin. "Out here, in the middle of nowhere, with nothing to lay you on, nothing to rest your head on. You should be on satin sheets, bathed in floral milks, tended to by attendants."

Imreen laughed and stretched, threading her fingers behind her head, her gaze the glow of molten gold. "But this is the place," she insisted. "Neither Vozuan nor Neoti, the beginning of a new life. And there's no one around, if that's what you're worried about. Modesty has no place here."

With a mischievous smile she arched her back and Bosaru could have sworn she pointed her breasts toward him, gold and round and tipped with amber. She unthreaded her fingers from behind her head and reached out for him. "Come."

* * * * *

The sun was sinking perilously close to the mountains when Bosaru stirred. "We have to get back to Jenatt's," he said, regretfully loosening his hold around Imreen. He started to sit up, only to have Imreen's grip around him tighten. "You should get back to the shrine and stay there," he reminded her, leaning his face into hers and kissing first her forehead, then her flushed cheeks. "If you want to avoid your uncle, this is where we have to break apart. You stay at the shrine, Jenatt and I will go to the community meeting."

Imreen didn't say anything for a while. She burrowed her face into his shoulder, squeezing his arm. And then she sat up. "I don't want to," she finally said, her golden back to him, but her voice so low Daegon could barely hear it. "Maybe it's time. Maybe it's time for me to confront him again."

Bosaru glanced at her. Her face was intent as she looked out at the mountains, and she didn't break her gaze as she said, "I had an argument with him when the Politicam announced the oscillator, and it was an ugly one."

Bosaru paused. "About?"

"I was young, but I knew what the oscillator was for, and I knew what he was going to do with it. I thought I could talk him out of it, I thought he would change his mind when he realized how utterly final his decision would be. But no."

She shifted so she was no longer touching Daegon, instead wrapping her arms around herself. He watched as she tilted her face toward the dipping sun, close to the flashpoint where the mountains and the sun would touch. Once it did, he knew that they had to go back, and he knew she did as well.

"The Vozuan elite were jammed into the compound and everyone knew it was the end. We hadn't eaten in days, and all we could hear outside was the sound of explosives. I kept wondering if the last sound we heard would be a missile hitting the rooms we were shoved into. Then the explosions stopped. I remember closing my eyes."

"The surrender," Daegon guessed. "The Vozuan army surrendered before the compound could be stormed. They refused to obey the last command of Verot and surrendered. That must have been so hard."

"Yes," she said. "I had no one left, but the others, they cried, everyone around me, because all that time, all that blood, all those lives, wasted, for nothing. But all their babies, all their children were in that compound, and by then it was easier to imagine a life after the war than a life without the babies. We were all so tired."

"Then Verot came on the Politicam viewscreen and said that the time was here. We thought he meant the war was over and we were so happy. But then he said it would be better for us to vanish as a culture than allow ourselves to be consumed by the Neoti, who could never approach our greatness, while they would take our best and claim it as their own. And that's when he introduced the oscillator."

"How did he get it and what happened to it? It was stolen from the SSP vaults, and we never found out how. The device was never recovered from the remains of Neotia Prime."

"V never told us." Imreen looked away. "He didn't tell us a lot of things."

Daegon looked at her.

She was lying. *Why?*

Chapter Eleven

Through Destruction

"What did he tell you?" Bosaru asked finally, his lips stiff. Why was she lying? Weren't they beyond that? "Do you remember?"

She was shaking her head before he finished asking. "He didn't tell us much about anything—just that what he was going to do was make sure Neotia Prime, or Vozu Primus as he was referring to the planet by then, was going to be an example of the life and death of a people. And we knew then that he would destroy us all."

Was she lying about this? Or something else?

There was a reason he hadn't joined the Psy Police. He wasn't that intuitive. "What do you need to talk to him about?"

Her chin lifted in that stubborn way Daegon had come to know. "I can't tell you," she said, also in a way he had come to know. "It's something I have to talk to him about. It's time. Do you trust me?"

He looked at her. "Yes," he answered. "Whatever you have to say to Verot, I trust you about."

She had lied to him only minutes before, but that didn't matter. Whatever she had lied about, somehow he knew the lie was nothing he had to worry over.

"To put to sleep the darknesses of the war, I have to see him again."

Bosaru narrowed his eyes. "I can't let you shoot him, you know."

Imreen widened hers. "I don't know why you would think I would do that." She caressed his chest.

Her touch was warm and tantalizing—and distracting. He leaned back. "Why are you lying to me?"

Imreen's hand dropped to her side. "I'm trying to get closer to you. Why are you accusing me of lying to you?"

"You're trying to divert my attention."

She raised her hands and turned away. "I don't know what to tell you."

A liar, and not a good one at that. "What's your game?" he asked bluntly.

She whirled around. "How dare you!"

Pretending she was offended. That was a classic gambit. Whatever she had in mind, she wasn't going to admit to it just yet. "Get dressed," he said, struggling to keep his voice neutral. "We've got to get back to Jenatt's."

The walk back Jenatt's restaurant was tense and quiet. Bosaru kept a wary eye out as they made their way, watching out for early signs of roamers. He said nothing, knowing that nothing he could say would make a difference.

"I can't tell you," Imreen repeated, her arms wrapped around herself, looking down.

"You said that before."

"I just can't tell you. I don't want to lie to you."

He continued to look around as they walked, keeping track of the lengthening shadows. "Let's step it up. We need to make sure we're back at Jenatt's before twilight."

"You're not going to listen to anything else I say, are you?"

"If I'm sure you're not lying to me."

"We're not getting anywhere, are we?" Her voice trembled and Bosaru could have sworn it was genuine.

Bosaru didn't want to see her cry. But... "We're at an impasse," he tried to tell her as gently as he could. "Because I promised too. I *need* to know if Verot is behind the allegations about my father. And you won't tell me if you know what I need to know."

They turned onto the alleyway and were greeted by a nervous-looking Jenatt, who was standing in her doorway, rubbing her arms. "There you are," she exclaimed. "I was starting to worry, but I didn't want to bar the door until I knew you were safe. The last thing I wanted was for you to have a locked door if—" she stopped.

If the roamers were after us, Bosaru filled in. "Thank you, Jenatt. Sorry for worrying you."

Jenatt let them slip inside before she closed and barred the door. Then she leaned against it. "I was worried," she confessed.

"I'm so sorry, Jenatt," Imreen said. "We didn't realize how late it was."

For her part, Jenatt's gaze went from Imreen to Bosaru, then back to Imreen. "That's all right," she said after a moment. "We're all on edge."

"Where is the community meeting held?" Bosaru asked.

Jenatt glanced at him as she picked up a pan filled with dirty dishes and, after a moment, gave it to him. "Down tunnel 34-A," she said as she gestured them to follow her. "Lady Imreen, you know how to get back to the shrine—"

"No," Imreen interrupted, following them into the kitchen. "I'm going too."

Jenatt turned and gaped at her. "You know it's public."

"It's time I stopped hiding," Imreen said, with a thinly disguised resentful glance at Bosaru. "And the community meeting is as good a place as any to do it."

Daegon set the pan onto the counter and without comment, loaded the sonic washer. He could feel Jenatt's gaze on his back, but didn't turn around.

"If you're sure you want to do this...you know who's at these meetings in the back..."

Bosaru turned around. "She knows Verot's supporters will be there. She knows Verot's supporters will report that Imreen identified herself in public. She knows."

"It's time," Imreen said, but she sounded less certain than she had previously. She rubbed her arms again. "I'm never going to get past it if I don't confront him."

"I want to know why he had to involve my father," Daegon said. "It was pointless, but he did it just at a time he had to know my father couldn't defend himself."

"And you're a bounty hunter now," Imreen reminded him, her voice on the edge of resentful—but Bosaru knew the emotions behind her voice. "Bringing in Verot Barus Kurog is an enormous bounty."

Bosaru shook his head, just in case she had her own doubts. "I'm not interested in the reward."

"Oh, come now. Everyone's interested in money," she persisted. "It would make your life so much easier."

Bosaru gaped at her. "Until I came here, my life was good. I had good work, good health, good friends, freedom."

"Then think of what it would mean for your clan here, what's left of them," she snapped. "You have such a soft life off-world. Your home world doesn't offer a life like that."

"This isn't home world," he reminded her, his jaw set. "This is a bad dream's version of home world. And I had no idea how bad it was here. We never knew."

"And why not?" Imreen said, her voice with just a thread of anger in it. "Surely the Amalgamation would have sent someone to investigate if it had had an idea how bad things were. They just didn't care."

Why hadn't they? Bosaru stared at her, realizing. "They did, didn't they?"

She stared at him.

"Someone bribed them. Someone knew, someone wanted to give an honest report, but someone got bought off. Is that it?"

Who would profit most from it?

Who would profit from the unnamed world and the survivors from Neotia Prime be kept in these conditions?

Who would profit from the Neoti and the Vozuans suffering? In constant danger of one day snapping and rising up in rebellion?

But...the Amalgamation parliament had been sending representatives here to investigate. What were they reporting back? Who were they meeting?

"Verot is planning," he said, realizing that what he had suspected all along was true. "And he's fomenting a revolution."

"He's trying," she said, finally admitting it, relief in her voice. "And there are people, good people, who are trying to stop him. But it's not easy."

"Especially if you don't want the authorities involved," he guessed. "Because you don't know who's in it with Verot. Why did you disappear to the city limits using the nexus door the day we met?"

She shrugged. "I was on my way already when you came into the shrine. I was going to my contact at the water reclamation plant, to ask if he had any news."

"Thonoy," Bosaru said, realizing.

Imreen nodded. "He's young, but smart."

"I want to take a look out there," Bosaru said.

"No," she exclaimed. "It's too dangerous. Don't do it, Daegon. Please."

"It's safer if I do it than you."

"They wouldn't dare do anything to me if they found out who I am," she insisted. "But you're Neoti, you're SSP, and you're the en-Bosaru. They would be more than willing to make you disappear. And that would be more than disastrous for *our* cause."

"I'm SSP, and I am trained for a battle. I don't think you have much to worry about," he said, stroking her cheek. She was worried about him. He smiled.

She didn't look that happy. "These are desperate men," she said, her eyes stormy. "I wouldn't put anything past them."

He stood up, putting out a hand to Imreen. "We have time before the meeting," he said, making a decision. "Is there another nexus door?"

She stood, keeping a hold on his hand. "There are several," she said, a fine line between her eyebrows. "I suppose there's nothing I can do to stop you."

"There is not," he said.

"Then take me with you."

He shook his head. "That's not going to happen."

"Then I won't tell you where the nearest nexus door is."

"Then someone else will tell me."

"No, they won't. Haven't you figured it out yet?" she exclaimed. "No one is going to help you unless I'm involved. Except Jenatt, and that's only because she's kin."

"This isn't a choice."

"It is," she said. "The choice is I go with you and you find out what you want to know, or I don't go with you and you will find yourself running in place." She crossed her arms across her chest and glared at him.

He took a deep breath. "I am assuming I have no choice."

"You don't," she said.

"Then let's go."

There had to be some way for him to leave her behind, where it was safe. He was going to find it.

Jenatt didn't look happy when they told her what they were going to do. "It's not safe," she said.

Bosaru knew it wasn't their safety so much as her son's. "We won't get Thonoy involved unless it's absolutely necessary," he told her. "Using a nexus door, we can get there, look around and get back in time for the meeting."

"Thonoy's shift ends before the meeting," Imreen told her. "We'll bring him back with us."

Bosaru knew Jenatt worried about her son returning home and somehow getting waylaid by the roamers. "The nexus door nearest the plant is heavily guarded."

"I'm heavily armed," Bosaru said. "They're not going to stop me."

"I am Imra Haren Daleen," Imreen said, the first time Bosaru had ever heard her admit to her original name. "They're not going to stop *me*."

Jenatt's eyes widened. "You're really going to tell them? Admit who you are?"

Imreen's chin rose. "If necessary. We will go to the plant and we will return, that I swear, Jenatt."

The older woman shook her head. "This is no game, Lady Imreen. Please be careful. If nothing else, please stick close to Daegon."

"I can take care of myself," Imreen said. "But Daegon can lend me a hand if I need it."

Bosaru snorted. "We'll see you at the meeting, Jenatt." He unbolted the door to the tunnels and stepped down a few steps, lending a hand to Imreen to help her down.

The tunnels were cool in contrast to the harsh heat of the above ground. The lights were flickering, but Bosaru had grown used to them, so he didn't hesitate until he reached the ground.

He turned to Imreen. "Which way?" he asked.

Without hesitation, she pointed. "That way," she said. "There's a nexus door near the old school. Or what would have been a school. If the government had ever gotten around to establishing a schooling system."

Bosaru guessed there was a reason, beyond the roamers, why there were so many empty, crumbling buildings. "Do the families in the community get together to teach the children?"

She shrugged. "The shrine teaches the youngest ones and the parents take turns teaching the older ones. That's what I couldn't understand," she said. "Why the Amalgamation would let everything fall apart so much. Then we finally realized the Amalgamation didn't know."

Bosaru shook his head in disbelief. "They'll know after we're through," he said grimly. "The entire Amalgamation will. No matter who's being bribed. And who's doing the bribing."

They started to walk quickly but quietly, doing their best not to let the echo of their footsteps carry through the corridors.

"Do you trust me now?"

Imreen's words, though spoken softly, carried well enough. Bosaru didn't pause, let alone stop, as he answered. "More than before. I'm suspicious when too many questions are still unanswered."

"I don't blame you. There were so many questions unanswered before the great exodus, and I didn't know until we got here what truly happened, let alone what my uncle had done. And now, we have to make good on thwarting his ugly ambitions."

Bosaru's heart winced. "Do you trust me to help you?"

He heard the smile in her reply. "I trust you, en-Bosaru. We haven't met except the once when we were children, and then, in our dreams..."

Dreams. "I thought it was just me," he said, "when you didn't mention—"

"I thought you were my dream warrior, come to rescue me in those terrible days," she whispered. "If not in daylight, then at night, when nothing could separate us."

"The surstone did that," Bosaru said. "I'd forgotten—when I gave it to you, it linked us."

"We know each other, in a way that neither of us could explain, but I trust you with my heart."

His heart in his mouth, with a gentle turn, he whirled Imreen so that she was in his arms. "Seeing you in the light of my day and walking through my dreams is the most amazing experience I could imagine," he whispered, tilting her face so that he could kiss her. "As I sleep, as I wake, seeing you is my heart's desire."

Her lips were soft and trembling, but so very real, the way he yearned for them to be in his dreams. Her scent was like the cool breath of the *fyorina*, that violet-colored three-petaled blossom of the tiny *yrán* tree, one of the few plants his parents had managed to take with them when they moved from Neotia Prime to Aboo Two. When he was growing up, the scent of the *yrán* flower had been his favorite, because it reminded him of home.

Imreen stirred under him, slipping her arms around his neck, slipping the tip of her tongue between his teeth.

With a sharp breath, he ran his hands over her back, pulling her against him, feeling the caress of the silk she wore slither against him.

He backed her against the nearest wall, no longer paying attention to the possible sound of anyone approaching. He felt her fingers running through his hair, her hands soft and her nails first trailing gently and then scoring down to the skin of his arms.

The sound of a footstep, perhaps meters away, made them freeze.

Bosaru could hear his heart beat, the blood rushing through his veins roar, but that distant footstep, to him, seemed even louder.

Imreen heard it, too. The vein in her neck throbbed, and he had to force himself not to reach down to use the tip of his tongue to taste it.

"We have to go," he said almost soundlessly into the fragile pink shell of her ear. He heard her gasp. But she took a deep breath and nodded, stepping away.

They exchanged glances, not saying a word. The footsteps they had heard faded, going in the opposite direction.

"Once we have this solved, we'll continue this...discussion," Bosaru said finally.

Imreen's mouth quirked. "Yes, later," she agreed. Nonetheless, she grabbed his hand. "But we can still hold hands. This way."

Bosaru smiled back. When she started to walk, he stopped her and once more turned her to face him. And he kissed her again, hard.

She kissed him back, once more linking her hands behind his neck, and he picked her up. The kiss went on as long as they could before she broke it off, taking a deep breath.

"Weakling," he whispered in her ear.

She laughed without making a sound. "Later," she said.

His knees were weak for a while afterward, and his erection made it hard for him to concentrate on what he intended to do. Her delicate scent wrapped itself around his senses.

Concentrate, he told himself. Think. This isn't the time to go to the plant.

Verot. Verot could be at the meeting.

That did it, better than a shot of ice through his veins. Imreen's arm, loosely wrapped around his waist, suddenly seemed too confining.

She noticed, of course. "What's wrong?"

Her voice echoed through the tunnels. *Wrong...wrong...wrong*, he heard.

"Verot could be there," he answered, suddenly aware his voice seemed louder than it should have been. "At the community meeting."

Imreen hesitated.

"Do you still want to go?" Bosaru asked.

"Yes," she said without hesitation. "I haven't seen my uncle since the fall of Neotia Prime. We've been playing cat-and-mouse all this time. I...don't want to play anymore."

They took the turn down the right tunnel, and as they approached the doors, they could hear voices. Many, many voices.

"Must be the place," Bosaru said, his head clearing finally. "It's time, Imreen. You have to come out into the open."

He grabbed the handle to the door and made sure it would open—but he didn't, not yet. "Ready?"

Imreen shot a glance at him. Her eyes were wide and she looked nervous, but her jaw was set. "Yes."

The steps leading up from the tunnels were poorly lit, but it didn't matter because they followed the voices. They were loud but they sounded happy, which made sense. The community meeting was one way for the settlers to keep track of each other, find out what was going on with one another.

Bosaru watched as she emerged into the meeting hall. He observed the back of her head when someone recognized her. The loud, happy hubbub cut off almost at once, and her shoulders, usually even and graceful, slumped ever so slightly.

"Are you all right?" He touched Imreen's shoulder.

She half turned toward him. "Yes. But I...never dreamed how hard this was going to be."

He put her slightly behind him. "Is this the community meeting?" he asked no one in particular. "We wanted to attend."

Those assembled stirred, with more murmurs. Dame Mirel came out from among the crowd and approached them, smiling. "I expected you to come, but not you," she said, nodding first at Bosaru and then at Imreen. "So you've decided..."

Imreen wasn't going to hedge the point, Bosaru realized, when she answered, "I'm tired of hiding. So many know who I am...my uncle might as well too. I want to get this over with."

The buzz got louder. Bosaru glanced around, saw Jenatt and Agie in the crowd, and nodded to them. He did his best to read the other, anonymous faces, guess which ones might be in the employ of the Verot.

"Well...good luck, then," Dame Mirel said. She looked concerned, as well she might – the Verot had not been known for understanding and kindness during the war, and there was some suspicion that a shrine of Ixtr that burned down had not been by human error. He could very well take it personally that the local shrine had been hiding his niece from him all this time.

"Shall we?" the priestess asked, gesturing toward the rows of chairs. A good number had already been claimed, but Dame Mirel pointed to a group that was separated by a yellow ribbon. Bosaru assumed it was a section kept for the shrine attendants, since several priestesses he didn't recognize were already sitting there, looking warily at what was going on. "We would consider it an honor if you would sit with us."

Imreen took a deep breath and nodded. "Thank you, ma'am," she said. "But I don't want to endanger anyone more than I have already, considering you have been kind enough to shelter me for all this time."

"Child," Dame Mirel said in a soft voice, smiling encouragingly, "you are not your uncle. You came to us with an unblemished name and a desire to help the shrine, and you did. Whatever you did – whoever you were – that's not who you are now."

There might have been a glint of moisture in Imreen's eyes, but she didn't flinch. "Thank you."

"I think we're ready to begin," a short, dapper man wearing a reclamation jumper said. Bosaru wondered if he knew Thonoy. He probably did. "We have a guest tonight—actually, we have two guests. One you know—most of us know, actually—as Lady Imreen Dal, of the shrine of Ixtr. I'm told she has something to say?"

Bosaru glanced at him, then at Imreen. She looked tense, but he guessed it wasn't because of the man's prompting. She stood up. "I am known now as Imreen Dal, but before...some of you know I was Imra Haren Daleen, niece of the Verot."

The murmuring rose, not surprisingly. "Why did you choose now to come out?" a woman asked. Bosaru recognized her as a customer at the restaurant. She didn't look surprised, so Imreen's true identity really was probably an open secret—known, but not referred to.

"I thought it was time. I know my uncle has been searching for me for a number of years, even though I made it clear through intermediaries I didn't choose to be found."

Once again, there was the murmuring, but nothing that indicated there was any news in Imreen's statement.

"How could you do that to the Verot? He's sacrificed everything for your sake," charged a voice.

A white-haired man who had been leaning against the wall stood up. Dame Mirel whispered that his name was Rop. Dressed in a reclamation jumper and that distinctive red armband with the symbol of the old Vozuan army, he looked like trouble. He was staring at Imreen, his lip curled. If an entire meeting hall had not separated them, Bosaru would have felt obliged to step between them to protect her.

"He's sacrificed his plans, his ambitions for his people, because he's been searching for you, concerned for your safety, la Daleen," Rop charged. It took Bosaru a moment to recognize an antiquated form of Vozuan address for the elite. "And this is how you repay him?"

"He discharged his duties toward me the minute he set the oscillator corrosive," Imreen shot back. "As for his ambitions for his people, I think he will have discharged them in full the day we look up in the sky and we can no longer see the remains of Neotia Prime."

The murmur rose at that—Bosaru knew the oscillator corrosive was not often mentioned in polite Vozuan company. Every day the settlers looked up in the sky and searched for some sign of Neotia Prime, knowing it would not be visible in the daylight, and not daring to go out at night. And they all knew that one day, perhaps soon, the sight of their former home world would not be possible even in the evening, having disintegrated into rubble.

"How dare you, of all people, accuse the Verot. He did what he had to do! No doubt your Neotian companion is telling you lies," the man said, with a venomous glance at Bosaru. "Considering his father's hand in the death camps."

And *there* it was. Bosaru stood and faced him. "Tell me how you claim my father had anything to do with the death camps," he said. "Tell me and you can live today."

A gasp cut through the audience. "Officer Bosaru, this is not the time or the place to be making a challenge," the meeting leader said, sighing. "Please...not now."

Bosaru nodded. "I ask only that if my father's name is impugned, I would know the circumstances."

Imreen faced Rop. "Take me to my uncle," she ordered. "To clear Officer Bosaru's father's name, and clear my own, now and forever."

This was it. Bosaru looked at the meeting leader. "Thank you for your understanding, and my apologies for disrupting your meeting."

The leader shrugged. "Good luck," he said. "Hope to see you again."

Alive, Bosaru amended to himself.

Chapter Twelve

To The Past

Rop gestured for Bosaru and Imreen to follow him. They did, amid choruses for luck.

Imreen looked nervous, and Bosaru couldn't blame her. She had been avoiding this confrontation for the better part of two decades, and now...now it was finally happening.

He squeezed her hand. "It'll be okay," he said, sounding hollow even to himself.

Imreen glanced at him and smiled, squeezing back. "Thank you for coming with me. You could have just hunted him down."

He wanted to laugh. "I still may. He's on the most wanted list, and even though I forget, I'm theoretically a bounty hunter." The supposed reason he started on this peculiar journey in the first place.

They all went back down to the tunnels. The voices from the community meeting, agitated and curious, faded away almost immediately, swallowed by the cool echoes of the tunnel.

One by one, other men and women wearing the jumpsuit of the reclamation plants surrounded them, all wearing that distinctive red armband. The red was the traditional color of the Vozuans during the civil war, the one that characterized every telecast, every flag, every victory...every event. And it characterized the last thing that the desperate Vozuans, the ones who scrambled to jump on the evacuation transports, saw as the fast-moving effects of the oscillator corrosive moved across their homeland, devouring, destroying, devastating every plant, every flower, every rock, everything. The symbol of their pride, the symbol of their downfall.

Bosaru recognized some faces and knew he had been surrounded by the Verot supporters all this time. And none of them had reported to Verot about Imreen? They had to have known.

That was loyalty. Bosaru was astonished, not that the Verot and his family would inspire it, but the conflict within, the knowing but not telling that must have torn each and every one of them apart, day after day. It would have eaten him alive.

And each and every one of them wearing the armbands. "So many," he muttered. "I never realized."

Imreen looked too. "You touched down in a Vozuan stronghold," she reminded him. "You told me that we're alike, that we don't look particularly different...but at times like these, we are. And the chasm can be wide."

"We were born of common stock, you and I and all of these Verot followers. We *are* alike. Our differences *are* minor," Bosaru insisted.

Imreen—or Imra, he didn't know whether she wanted to be known by her original name again—glanced at him, with an expression that said, *Surely you jest. Not here, not now.*

But all she said was, "We'll talk about this later. After..."

Her voice tapered off, the echoes of her words dissipating like mist. Then they didn't speak anymore as they followed Rop, until Bosaru lost track of the twists and turns in the tunnels. Imreen must have been here from the beginning of the creation of the tunnels. Could she keep track? Or were they being led in such a way that they couldn't keep track of where they were?

"Where are we going?" he asked, his voice loud.

Rop, ahead of them, looked back. "To the Verot."

"I know that," Bosaru answered. "But how far are we going?"

"Here," the man said, taking one final turn and stopping at a door. It was nondescript, looking like all the other tunnel doors. This one didn't have a designation, however, and that made it unique.

"What's the address?"

Rop turned and stared at him. "You don't need to know."

"I need to know where I am. Unless you're deliberately trying to confuse me. Unless I'm a prisoner. Unless we're both prisoners."

At that the man snorted. "A prison you walked into willingly. The Verot will find that amusing. Why would we do that, to the Verot's own family?" He opened the door and said, "You're entering our home. The new home of the Vozuans. This is where we make our plans. Our plans for Vozua Primus."

Vozua Primus. The slogan behind which Verot had whipped up hysterical support, reminding his followers that the name of the planet bore the name of the enemy, the name of the original hominoid stock from which both cultures sprang. "Are these *new* plans for Vozua Primus? Or the same plans you had on the home world, for the home world?"

Rop didn't reply, instead making his way up the steps and once more gesturing Imreen and Bosaru to follow. They did. Bosaru could hear the echo of the Vozuan followers behind them—but they stopped.

He glanced behind. Then he realized only a handful had come up the steps with them, leaving the rest in the tunnels.

Why? Were they peons, not allowed in the sanctuary?

Or did they want as few witnesses as possible?

Like most of the steps leading from the tunnels, Bosaru and the others ended up on the surface quickly. He started to go through the final entryway, only to be stopped.

"Lady Imra should be first to see the sanctum," Rop said. "For her and her kind we have done all this."

Bosaru became curious at that. He heard Imreen gasp. *What the –*
One last step, and he understood.

The room was wide open. The windows were intact, and from what Bosaru could see beyond the glass, the district was one he hadn't explored yet, a retail area between Vozuan Town and the Neoti district. In the distance he could see what appeared to be the med center, and beyond that the building that served as the local government center.

So Verot had his headquarters in the middle of the town—at the heart of the settlement. Perhaps there was a misleading sign on the outside of this building, one that no one not in the know would think twice about. Hiding in plain sight.

Bosaru had to hand it to them. They had done a good job of it.

"This looks like the war room back on Neotia Prime," Imreen whispered, horror in her voice. She looked around, and looked and looked, as though she couldn't stop. And perhaps that was the case.

Bosaru looked around too. He had heard of the Vozuan war room, of course, but before now there had been nothing in the way of documentation, all of which had been destroyed in the wake of the oscillator. The Vozuan war room, the room where Verot and the rest of his war council planned war strategy, had been much like this from everything he had read—large and well-lit, built of strong Permian timber, the floors of Permian stone.

Now, the forests of Perm were gone, but structural timbers used here had clearly been painted and carved to resemble those distinctive woods. Every bit of wall space that wasn't outlined in the faux-Permian wood was covered with maps of Vozuan lands, images of Vozuan statuary, and of course, the Vozuan martial flag, with that single distinctive red stripe that cut through the black space at a fifteen-degree angle.

Imreen looked across the room and Bosaru's gaze followed hers. There was a podium at the end, a large one made of the same Permian wood and shot through with the ebony ivory found only in the Cay Mountains, not far from Perm. Part of the territory that Vozuans and Neotians had fought for possession of, Bosaru remembered.

"Is that the original?" Imreen whispered. "The podium that my uncle used?"

Rop nodded, a proud smile on his face. "We managed to bring it on the last transport. We knew it would be the symbol of our new beginning."

"Or the symbol of an unspeakable tragedy," Bosaru muttered.

The man turned to look at him. He did not look pleased. "In the presence of the Verot, you will speak only when you are spoken to," he said. "You are here because you are with the Lady Imra. Otherwise, your life would have been forfeit."

"Imreen. My name is Imreen now," she said, turning back to them. She was pale, but appeared to be in control of her emotions. "Please do not use the name of another life. It brings bad luck to this one."

Rop bowed to her. "Of course, Lady Imreen. I should have remembered. But it's been a very long time since I prayed for the Great Merge."

"True for us all."

New voice. A familiar voice.

"You should not be here," the leader said reprovingly. "You should be at work."

"The *scirros* engines died," Thonoy said, sighing. "We're on holiday until further notice."

The man nodded. "Don't worry. Not for much longer."

Bosaru caught that. "What are you going to do?" he demanded. Thonoy should not be there. Jenatt would not be happy.

Jenatt would be livid, come to think of it.

Thonoy shook his head. "I don't know what you're doing here, Daegon. You shouldn't be here."

"He's here with me, Thonoy," Imreen said. She didn't look happy either.

"What's the matter?" Bosaru asked. "Why shouldn't I be here?"

"This is for the supporters of the Verot," the young man said, a hard glint in his eye. "Not for someone who's here to rip apart everything he's done."

"I'm here because someone—most likely the Verot—decided to dirty my dying father's reputation."

Thonoy rolled his eyes. "Just because you can't accept his part in that horrendous episode of the war—"

"He didn't have anything to do with it," Bosaru interrupted. "Listen to me. How did my father get involved? He was the ambassador to the Amalgamation. He was nowhere near Neotia Prime, let alone the Hikoi system. His whereabouts were mapped and logged every second. He didn't leave Aboo Two. He *couldn't*. How could he have orchestrated the death camps and kept it a secret? In a five-minute call from Verot? How?"

There was an abrupt silence. "You'd do anything to protect your father," Thonoy accused him.

"Yes, but clearly you'd do anything to protect the Verot," Bosaru shot back.

"The Verot is maligned by your kind!"

"Enough. Stop this," a new voice ordered.

Thonoy turned and almost instantly fell to one knee. "Sire! We are graced with your presence."

And Bosaru knew that voice. Not in person, but from vid after vid.

He turned to see a face he never thought he would see...at least alive.

“Verot,” he said.

Chapter Thirteen

To The Unknown

It never occurred to Bosaru that he would encounter history in the flesh. Never mind that the history was still fresh in the memories of many around him, etched in sharp relief and colored with still-raw emotion. Never mind that he himself had been alive, albeit a child and in another solar system, far, far away, the same time that said history had been made. History was best viewed from a distance, so that hindsight could be applied judiciously.

But there history was in front of him, in the flesh, looking...

Strangely familiar.

"So driving a hover cab is how you spend your days? There was a time when you had the power of life and death over millions," Bosaru said. "Beek, you're calling yourself now?"

"Thanks to the Amalgamation, the great family name of Kurog is tainted," said the hover cab driver who had popped up at odd times during Bosaru's time in the settlement. "And the reward on my head is so great I would be tempted to turn myself in, if it didn't entail a nasty trial and speedy execution. And that just doesn't fit into my schedule right now."

"But...Beek?"

The power-crazed dictator who had led to the destruction of the home world grinned, the twinkle in his eye at odds with his bloody history. Using his intact hand, he took out that distinctive three-sided coin and flipped it, again and again. "What that fancy Neotian education didn't teach you! It's an ancient Vozuan name, from the old nursery rhyme."

As if on cue, the others around Bosaru started to chant, "'Beek came up the hill, saw naught was there before him. Beek sat down right there, unwrapped his lunch holorem.'"

The Vozuans around Bosaru began to recite the first verse of the children's poem, telling the story of the legendary peasant Beek and his attempts to find a quiet place to enjoy his lunch and ale. The poor peasant tried to find a place on the hill, only to find that a wolf had claimed the space. The peasant next tried a cave, only to be scared off by a bear. Bosaru couldn't remember all ten verses of the original nursery rhyme, but he did remember the end. At the end, Beek, tired of being run off by every creature, carved out his own space and claimed it so that he could finally enjoy his meal in peace.

The imagery wasn't lost on Bosaru, now that his memory had been refreshed. "But...you had your own space. Beek in the nursery rhyme didn't."

"We had space that was assigned to us by the Neoti regime, not the land that was ours by birthright. We wanted what was ours."

Bosaru frowned, trying to remember. "The original dispute was over the Cay mountains. But those mountains were set aside, separate from both Vozuans and Neoti, because they were sacred to both cultures. Neither side could lay claim to them."

Not that it matters anymore, he added to himself. The oscillator corrosive had taken care of the mountains, and everything else. But he didn't see any point of mentioning that.

"So are you here as a Secret Sciences Police officer or as a bounty hunter, en-Bosaru?" Verot inquired, strolling to stand behind his podium and wrapping his hands around it, looking very much at home. He looked around the room, as if he were ready to make one of his famous speeches, designed to incite the restless masses into action. "The bounty is a munificent one. But you have your duty too. So arrest me as an officer or as a bounty hunter. Or don't arrest me at all, let bygones be bygones, considering it's a whole new life we've been granted."

Without saying a word, the other Vozuans in the room all formed a barrier between Verot and Bosaru. "You will not touch the Verot," Thonoy said, crossing his arms and looking bigger than ever. "Cousins or not."

"Fine," Bosaru said. He wasn't going to touch Verot. First of all, he had become fond of Jenatt, and he would never do anything to make her unhappy, like incapacitating her son. Second, the odds were against him—one versus ten—and while he had no qualms about using his pack of Vonner's weapons to get past the human shield, he didn't want to kill any of them.

That was one advantage—or was it a disadvantage?—of being a bounty hunter. He didn't have to worry about the ethics creed of the Secret Sciences Police, only his conscience.

"Verot," Bosaru began, choosing his words carefully, "You're at the top of the Galaxy's Most Wanted list. You're wanted for war crimes and for questioning about the oscillator corrosive, which was stolen from the Secret Sciences vaults and never recovered. You're responsible for the destruction of an entire planet. Tell me why I should let you go."

"Because I deserve a second chance."

Bosaru's eyes widened. "You deserve a second chance if you make a fumble at *orgoth*. You don't deserve a second chance at genocide."

Verot shook his head, lips twisted. "So harsh. You don't know what happened during those dark days. You didn't have to make the choices I did."

"You also didn't have to mow down hundreds of thousands of protestors, flatten cities that stood up to you, execute thousands of war prisoners *and* their guards in the camps so there wouldn't be anyone who could identify you or testify against you...that was all you. That wasn't my father. Why pin it on my father? Because you heard he was dying?"

Verot straightened and fixed his stare on Bosaru. "I'm getting tired of this. You're obviously not here for a discussion on how I've been maligned. Get him out of here," he ordered, turning to his minions. "Drop his body down the *scirros* engines well."

Thonoy's mouth dropped open. "Sire...surely you don't..."

"Did you hear what I said?" Verot screamed. "*Get rid of him!*"

Bosaru shook his head. Around him, faithful Verot supporters froze, clearly confused by the order.

But only one, an older man with a graying braid and scars crisscrossing his face, was willing to speak up. "Sire, Daegon was raised in the Neotian influence. I'm sure he'd understand how Vozuans have suffered under —"

Ignoring him, Verot turned and pointed at Thonoy, who flinched, despite being nearly twice the size of the war criminal. "You are either with me or against me. Which is it? Do you join your cousin in the *scirros* well or do you join me?"

Bosaru glanced around, letting his hand creep to his holster.

One way or another, this was not going to end well.

"Verot, don't put him in that position," he said, willing his voice to be gentle, not wanting to trigger the madman's further ire. "Just let him go. Let them all go, including your niece. We can talk, just you and me. No need to get them involved."

Verot glanced at him, and for a moment Bosaru thought he looked downright rational.

But clearly he was mistaken, because the next thing the dictator said was, "The only reason I would converse with you would be to negotiate the terms of your surrender. *Get him out of my sight!*"

"I'm sorry, Daegon," Thonoy said, putting a large hand on Bosaru's shoulder. "I don't think you should be here. I'll talk to you later."

"What are you doing? *I told you to get rid of him!* In fact, bring me his head after you shove the rest of him down the *scirros* well."

"No, Verot," said the gray-braided one, shaking his head. "That's not the way."

Verot's eyes glittered. "What did you say?"

"Surely that's not the way, sire," Rop said. "If nothing else, Bosaru has Vozuan blood running through him. We can't do that to one of our own."

"No. The time for negotiation is done. Isn't that obvious? Those who are not for us, are against us. We have been waiting for twenty years to demonstrate that *Neoti* should not be in charge of *our* destiny. Now get rid of him or I'll find someone who will."

There was a sudden, awkward hush. Bosaru glanced at Verot's supporters, who to a man and woman looked uncomfortable, from which he deduced his life was safe, at least from these Verot followers. Faith in their leader, apparently, did not stretch to cold-blooded murder.

That must have become obvious to Verot, because he screamed, "*Kill him or get out! Do you hear me?*"

Thonoy shook his head. "I have followed you ever since I was a child, sire. I believed your work in understanding the Vozuan condition would make the two halves of our people whole again. You can't mean you want to—"

"Is it so hard to take a weapon and silence him? He's Neoti. He's Amalgamation. Where was he when our people needed him? Needed them?" Verot shouted. Reaching behind the podium, he pulled out a laser pistol and pointed it at Bosaru. "Do I have to do *everything*?"

Imreen stepped in front of Bosaru. "What do you think you're doing, uncle? No. Put that down!"

"Niece, get out of my way. You can have any toy you want when we take over the government. But this one is dangerous."

She stared at him. "Uncle, he's not a toy. He's a person. And you're not going to kill him."

"When was the last time you saw him?" Bosaru asked.

Imreen started to shake her head, but then paused. "I was young, but I wasn't a child."

"This is the way he was always reported to be. He hasn't changed at all."

The Verot followers stirred at that. "That's a lie!" the gray-braided man said indignantly. "He's been through twenty years of hiding and years of turmoil! Of course he's not going to be the way he was!"

Bosaru looked around. Except for their leaders, Verot's followers were all younger—none of them had been more than toddlers, if alive at all, when the oscillator corrosive had been activated. "Didn't any of you listen to your parents, your elders? Didn't any of them tell you what they saw?" he asked.

Thonoy shrugged. "It was a long time ago. It's easy enough to misremem—"

"So you decided you should find out for yourself. And you fell into the same trap that your elders did," he said, turning back to Verot, who had started to pace the length of the room. "It's true what they say about history, isn't it?"

Verot turned. "*Why are you still alive?*" he screamed. "Twenty years ago I could have had your body cut to pieces by now. My followers obeyed me back then without question. This lot I can't even get around to killing you, let alone get rid of the body!"

Thonoy stepped back, his face twisted in horror. "You can't mean that. You can't mean—"

"Of course I mean that, you imbecile," Verot roared. "Now do as you're told or—"

"Or what?" Thonoy said, his voice tight. "So you can do what you did to our first home and destroy this one too? No. You're not doing it again."

"I'm not giving you a choice, you twit. You're with me or you're with the Neotians."

"We *are* Neotians, sire," Rop said suddenly, his eyes terrified. "Neoti and Vozuan, we are Neotians all."

The gray-braided Verot follower stepped away, the scars on his face flushing with color. "This is too much. I can't do this anymore," he said. He started toward the doors.

"Stop or die," Verot said. He swung the blaster in his hand and pointed it at the man.

The old man stared at him. "I have done everything you wanted me to do. You're not going to shoot me."

Verot shook his head and smiled. "Of course I will." He pulled the trigger.

The laser blast hit the gray-braided man full in the chest and exploded. Bosaru winced and before he could move, the follower dropped to the floor. Rop burst out of the group and knelt.

He looked up. "He's dead," he said, though no one there had to be told. "What are you, a monster?"

Verot laughed, and the sound of it was chilling. "I have always been what others called me."

He raised his weapon again and pointed it at the second-in-command. "Is that what you call me?"

"Uncle, don't do this," Imreen said, her voice breaking. She stepped toward him, her hands reaching out to him. "Please, for the memories of my father, your brother. For all our family."

"You too? You should know better. But you were too young to understand, clearly. Too bad," Verot said. He fumbled in his pockets, patting himself down with his faux hand, one by one, until he found what he was looking for. "You could have been the beginning of an empire. I could have crossbred you to the princes of the galaxy, my dear. You would have been priceless. You could have been empress of Vozua Primus and beyond, the way our blood was long ago. Now—" he shrugged. "Tainted by Neotians. A whore."

"That's enough," Imreen said. Her face was red, and if Bosaru hadn't been as angry, he would have been taken aback. "Our ancestors would have known their limits and when to admit defeat. Surely you're not saying you're better than the Emperius Rey."

Verot looked her in the eye, and the glint there made Bosaru tense, stand on guard. Whatever was going through the madman's mind wasn't sane. "You misunderstand," Verot said, a half smile sparkling the diamond cap in one of his bicuspid. "I *am* Emperius Rey, come back to life to rule again. And I will do it with or without you."

Chapter Fourteen

Into Verot

Bosaru stared at him. "You're mad. You're a deposed dictator, not the legendary emperor of Vozua come back to life. You've lost your mind."

"On the contrary. I am finally coming into my power," Verot proclaimed. "Now that I no longer have to worry about looking after my niece, who has decided to soil herself with Neotian blood, I can proceed with my plans. And that, clearly, involves none of you." He holstered his weapon and then dug into a pocket.

Bosaru recognized what Verot was retrieving even before it was completely in the open. And before Bosaru even knew it, he had pulled his blaster out of his holster and pointed it at Verot. "Put it down," Bosaru ordered. "Put it down carefully and keep your hands where I can see them. Your hand."

Verot laughed and extended his hand, on which was a small rectangular node, smooth and stainless steel, with a single intricate loop on the top. That loop was the symbol, the logo of the explosive's maker—Luth, another Vozuan on the lam, wanted for war crimes. "Did you ever wonder where Luth went? Or did you assume he died in the great evacuation? He didn't. He's set up in a comfortable home far, far away from here, and he's making a nice second career for himself, producing these delightful items for the highest bidders."

"Thanks for letting me know," Bosaru said, not taking his eyes off Verot. Not for the first time did he wish that it was easier to contact Aboo Two. "We'll start a search for him as soon as possible."

"You'll never find him, I assure you. Unlike me, he decided that a clean break was best for him. Me, I'm just a sentimental fool." Verot looked around the room. "This was a fine job of recreating the war room. Good days," he said fondly. "I'll miss this. But like my good friend Luth, perhaps starting over now is best." And with that, he threw the tiny explosive into the corner closest to where the tunnel steps were.

"No!" Bosaru shouted, but it was too late. With a blinding flash and a deafening boom, the carefully crafted, lovingly restored icon of a martial culture blew up, crumbling into a million pieces.

The impact threw Bosaru against the nearest wall, knocking him out.

When he finally came to, the darkness around him made him think he had lost his sight from the flash. But grayness to his side and then a drifting moan from somewhere else made him realize that no, he wasn't blind, and no, he wasn't deaf.

But there was what felt like a ton of rock pinning him down.

He closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. Then he shoved as hard as he could. That knocked enough off that he managed to crawl out from underneath.

"Anyone here?" he called out. He heard that groan again, from somewhere to his right. "Who's there?"

"It's Thonoy," Bosaru heard. He heard rubble shift, and in the dim light, he saw the large form of the young man stagger to his feet. "Where are you?"

Bosaru waved as he got to his feet, leaning against what had been a wall at one point. "I'm here. Are you hurt? Where's the rest of your group?"

"Over here. I think we managed to avoid the worst of the blast," Thonoy said, coughing.

"Imreen? Is Imreen with you?"

The sudden, sharp breath told him what he was fearing. "No," Thonoy said. "She's not."

A chill went down Bosaru's back. "Imreen?" he shouted. "Where are you? Can you hear me?"

"No, no," Thonoy moaned. "I can't... Lady Imreen?"

"Thonoy, go get help," Bosaru ordered. "We can't reach the tunnel steps now. And some of your group may need medical attention. I'll find her."

There was a pause, and then Thonoy said, "I'll be back as soon as I can. Please...please find her."

Bosaru swallowed. "I will. The door's to the right of you," he said, judging by the sound of Thonoy's voice.

Another deep breath and Bosaru was on his feet. "Go," he said. "I'll find her."

A stumble, a groan, and the rest of what had been Verot's fan club was identified. The body of the gray-braided Veroite was buried under the rubble, but there was nothing that could be done for him, except for apprehending his killer. One by one, they helped each other up, and dragged each other or crawled outside.

Once he could, Bosaru reached for his lightstick, setting it for the widest dispersion of light. "Imreen!" he shouted. "Where are you?"

She had to be here somewhere.

"Imreen?" he shouted.

She had to be.

So where the blazes was she?

"Imreen?"

The edifice had collapsed from the roof down, as though the supports had been yanked away suddenly. Imreen had been sitting at the edge of the gathering room, as far from the doorway as she could manage, just to get away from the hostile gaggle.

That he had dragged her into, in a vain attempt to make her face the horrors of war...

Where had she been when Verot had tossed the explosive?

What had he done?

"Imreen!"

To his side, he saw what was left of the podium, the presentation area that he had made her wait in. That she hadn't wanted to.

Something shifted there. His heart paused.

"Imreen!"

That had to be her. It had to be!

Frantic now, he began to shove aside rubble, pieces of splintered timber and loosened stone, the hearthstones shattered now. There were traces of the Vozuan nationalist movement paraphernalia, which he would have been removing and storing as evidence just a few minutes before, since the Vozuan movement had been formally outlawed by the regrouped parliament. Now...

Where is she?

"Imreen? Speak to me!" he shouted. *"Where are you?"*

Maybe she couldn't. Maybe she had been knocked cold. He seized a stone the size of his head and shoved it aside. Where did that noise come from? *Where?*

She was there. She had to be there. *She had to be!*

"Imreen! Speak to me! Say something!"

Please, Imreen. Speak to me.

His heart was racing as he threw rubble to one side. *"Imreen!"*

Then he heard it.

Less than a moan, more like a single intake of breath, the noise was just enough that he stopped dead, willing himself to be as still as possible so that he could hear it again.

There it was. A single breath.

"Imreen!" he shouted one more time. *"Where are you? Speak to me!"*

The sound was a little more definite the next time, as though, possibly, his shouting might have given her strength.

It had to be her. *"Imreen?"* he called again. *"Is that you?"*

The noise was an answer...not strong, but an answer nonetheless. *"Daegon?"* he heard, not much of a sound but one that filled his heart with hope again. *"Where are you?"*

"I'm here," he said, as clearly as he could, so that she could hear. *"Can you keep talking? I'll get you out of there as soon as you can, but I can't tell where you are."*

"Daegon, what happened?" he heard her whisper, her voice ragged. *"All I can remember is my uncle ..."*

"Verot threw an explosive," he said, but not getting into details.

"Where is he? Is he buried somewhere here too?"

Despite it all, he had to stifle a laugh. "No, dear heart, he's not," he said. She was over here, he knew it. He moved more rubble, listened for a faint noise that would mean he was on the right track.

"What happened to him?"

She was persistent. "He escaped before the blast, dear heart," he said. "Am I getting closer, Imreen?"

"I think...so."

This had to be it. Shoving aside one last layer of rubble, Bosaru was rewarded with a sharp intake of breath, one that told him that yes, she was there! "*Imreen!*"

He focused his light to where he guessed she would be, and his prayers to a Void he had been questioning were answered.

Imreen was wedged in a crevice between the wall and what had been the massive podium. A glance told Bosaru one of her arms was free, while the other was trapped. Her legs, on the other hand...

A tentative push told him what he had been afraid of. "Does it hurt?" he asked, praying his voice didn't give him away.

Imreen winced. "A little. I think my leg is broken."

He took a deep breath. "We'll get you out of there."

Between Bosaru and Thonoy, who had come back to help, they managed to move the last of the shattered pieces of the ceiling that trapped Imreen. Finally, with a single, mighty push, they managed to free her.

With her arms around Bosaru's neck, Imreen was finally lifted out of the rubble. "Thonoy's going to take you to the med center," Bosaru told her, kissing her on her forehead. "He's hired a hover cab, so it shouldn't be that uncomfortable for you."

Turning away, he headed for the door, a gaping hole now.

"What will you do?"

He stopped and looked at her over his shoulder.

She was as beautiful and as desirable as she had always been, in his dreams and in the waking hours. Her eyes glowed, making him think of the glorious sunshine that the Neotian home world had been bathed in during its long, lazy summers.

Now, that was the only reminder he had of those days. The unnamed world didn't have the mild sunglow of the home world, only the harsh, deadening glare that presided over the arid environment of the unnamed planet, the indication of its different place in the solar system.

Bosaru had little in the way of home world memories, but those of playing *orgoth* with his father were by far his favorite. And he was going to make sure his memories of Rai en-Bosaru stayed that way, unstained by blood and terror.

"Daegon?" Imreen asked again. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to hunt down your uncle," he said. "One way or another, he's going to pay for everything he's done."

Chapter Fifteen

A Question

Despite the glint in Imreen's eye, one that made Bosaru think for a moment she was going to talk him out of it, she took a shallow breath and nodded. "It must be done," she said finally. "I know. There...there was a good reason why I avoided making contact with him all this time."

Bosaru looked at her. "So you won't try to talk me out of this? He's your last remaining relative. You must have some good memories about him."

She smiled wanly. "He's my last remaining relative, but he's the one who killed all the rest. If I have a moment's pause, I have to remember my father, who tried to help him as he collapsed into madness. I have to remember my older brother, who was too young to be in battle and not inclined toward military service, but nonetheless he went, and he paid for it. I'm glad my grandmother was not alive to see both her sons end the way they did. No, if I could, I would help you find him. There are no excuses left for him."

Bosaru closed his eyes for a moment. "I will see you soon."

"Good luck, Daegon."

They looked at each other for a moment, then a moment more. He leaned in and touched his lips to hers, a promise.

He left before he was tempted to linger. He knew what he had to do. For his father. For all the others.

Bosaru went outside and waited for the cab to arrive to take Imreen to the med center. Looking around the skyline, he judged where he would have the best reception for communication. He took out his comvid.

The video, surprisingly, worked today. "Daegon! I didn't expect to hear from you," Mec said. He looked good—harassed, as usual, but good. "So what's happening and how much do you have to do with it? I hear rumors."

Bosaru wanted to grin but couldn't quite do it. "If the rumors have it that Verot is alive and come out of hiding after all this time, it's true. He just tried to kill me and his niece with a P-4 explosive."

"I thought the entire family was dead. Is this the name you asked me to check up on?"

"It is. She's been hiding from him."

"If this is his version of family loyalty, I don't blame her," Dec said.

"And he's decided he is the reincarnation of Emperius Rey and will rule again. I'm going after him."

"So why are you telling me this? Does this mean you're back on the force?"

"In case I need backup," Bosaru said.

"There's a big fat bounty on Verot's head, remember. If you're back on the force, you can't claim it when you bring him in."

Bosaru rolled his eyes. "That's not at the top of my list of concerns, Dec."

Dec grinned. "No, but just thought I'd toss that out there. Keep me apprised," he said. "If you find the whereabouts of the oscillator corrosive, we'll be out there in a jiffy. Well, as fast as we can. You're way out there."

"Thanks a lot, Dec," Bosaru muttered as he shut off his comvid. Backup would have been useful, but he couldn't disagree—the Hikoi system was not easy to get to, Smith gates or no.

It was about noon, and it was scorching out on the streets. He patted his duster for his sunshades and finding them slightly scuffed but still intact in the pocket, slipped them on. Where would Verot have gone, now that his favorite clubhouse was destroyed?

Right then the hover cab that Thonoy had ordered for Imreen arrived, and when the driver's window popped open, Bosaru wasn't sure he was disappointed or relieved to see that the driver was clearly Neoti—not a trace of Vozua on his face. "Cab to med center?" the driver said without preamble.

"Yes. They're coming out now," Bosaru said, turning to see the commotion at the door.

"Thonoy, where else has Verot been hiding all these years?" Bosaru asked as the big young man came out of the ruins of the building, holding one end of the stretcher carrying Imreen.

Thonoy frowned, and after Imreen had been safely placed into the hover cab—and the driver was paid, since he wasn't going to leave without money up front—he looked around and scratched his head. "Hard to say. This was his place for many years."

"There has to be a place he went without having anyone else around...did you know he drove a hover cab?" Bosaru asked as he watched the one carrying Imreen fly off.

The younger man nodded. "He started as a means to gather information when he first landed. That was before he revealed to the local Vozuans he had survived."

"And that's what he's been doing all this time."

Thonoy nodded. "From what he's told us."

Bosaru looked around, and then at the distant outline of the spaceport. "Where do the cab drivers hang out when they're not working?"

* * * * *

Bosaru picked up his weapons kit from his bed and hefted it, getting used to the weight. For this confrontation, he had to have his full stash.

"I just hope I can use them the way they're supposed to be used," he muttered.

Bosaru and Thonoy had gone back to Jenatt's so that Bosaru could pick up the rest of his arsenal.

Thonoy, who had been examining the weapon that Bosaru had handed him, the energy bow, looked up. "You mean you don't know how to use any of them?"

Bosaru glanced at the younger man. "The Secret Sciences Police protect the populace from the most destructive weapons around," he reminded him. "We don't concentrate on our own weapons. The academy training is relatively basic. So I know how to use most of these, but no, I haven't done a lot of work with them."

"So why are we taking them to go after Verot?"

"What do you mean, 'we'? You're not going after Verot. No, Thonoy."

Bosaru turned around. It was Jenatt, holding what looked to be a carafe of *hoorash* and some freshly baked *holorem*, wrapped in a cheery orange cloth and still piping hot. A tiny trail of steam merrily escaped from the edge.

She, however, did not look happy.

"Is that for us? Smells good," he said. "We'll take it with us."

"Thonoy, don't do it," Jenatt pleaded. "You're going to get hurt."

"Mother Mine, the Verot's not what we thought he was," Thonoy said, tucking a weapon from Bosaru's kit into his belt loop, where his convertor tool for the water reclamation plants would ordinarily be slung. His convertor tool he moved to the back loop. "He tried to kill us. He tried to kill Lady Imreen. He'll kill us all if he gets another chance. He has to be stopped."

She closed her eyes for a second. "Thank the gods you've finally come to your senses. Now keep away from him. Inform the authorities, let them take care of him."

Bosaru barked a short laugh. "I *am* the authorities, remember, Jenatt? For all I know, the authorities here know he's here and don't care. We're going to go find him."

He glanced at her. Her knuckles were white as she gripped the *hoorash* container. "I wish you wouldn't do this."

"But it's got to be done," Thonoy told her. He leaned down and kissed his mother on her cheek.

"Daegon, look out for him," Jenatt said. She handed her son the *hoorash* and then, stepping aside to let Thonoy leave the room, looked at Bosaru. "He's impulsive, and he doesn't—he's never handled a weapon more deadly than his convertor tool."

Remembering Thonoy's seeming ease with the weapons in his kit, Bosaru decided not to mention it. "I'll do what I can, Jenatt. But...you know Verot has to be stopped. He nearly killed Imreen. She's at the med center now. I have to find him and bring him in before he uses the oscillator corrosive again."

Jenatt nodded. "I know, and I welcome it. That butcher's time has gone. But...Thonoy's my child, big as he is. I don't want anything to happen to him."

Bosaru nodded. It was clear he wasn't going anywhere unless his cousin's mind was set to rest. "I'll try."

He settled his weapons kit on his shoulder and checked his weapons belt. "You knew all this time he was here."

Not a question. Jenatt nodded, looking away for a second. "Some things we couldn't tell you. At first it was all theory—Thonoy and his friends realized that there were ways that Verot could have gotten off Neotia Prime—and I was so happy to see him enthusiastic about something finally, after working at the reclamation plant—it depressed him so much—"

"Until you all realized that it wasn't just theory."

The *holorem* was still warm, and as Bosaru and Thonoy headed for the space port, they split it. "Verot always liked my mother's *holorem*," Thonoy said, chewing. "But I don't think it's ever going to taste the same for me."

Reminded of the Vozuan nursery rhyme, Bosaru shook his head. "It will again. It'll just take a while."

The cab company—the only one thus far in the settlement, considering the prohibitive cost of bringing in vehicles from outside the solar system—was situated in a pocket of space cleared of brush, close to the port. In this area there were no ruined buildings, simply because none had ever been built.

For kilometers around, beyond the port, there was nothing but occasional rock, scant vegetation and the promise of a dome that had to be built if there was going to be any more than a chance of a middling, miserable life. In the distance looking one way was the actual settlement, what might have been a jewel in a new civilization. In the distance looking the other way were the mountain ranges, reflecting amber from the sunlight, with nothing more visible than what had been there once, crumbling things that might have been structures, long before the Neotians came in their transports.

In the middle was the space port. It was how they had all gotten there, and it would be how Verot would try to get away.

Why had Verot decided to come here, when he could have slipped into the crowds anywhere else, never being seen again? Perhaps somewhere deep in what passed as a heart in Verot's chest, he wanted to stay with his own people.

That was the optimistic assumption. The less optimistic one was that he knew he could find his old followers, develop new ones, understand these people better than he could any new group he would ever encounter.

If he wasn't in the hangout for the cab drivers, where would he be?

"Thonoy, let's go this way," Bosaru said, pointing to the road heading to the space port.

"Not where the cabbies are?" Thonoy said, obliging.

"No," Bosaru said. "Verot's going to be at the space port. For him, it all started at there."

"Daegon..."

Bosaru glanced at Thonoy. The younger man was gnashing his teeth.

"What is it?"

"I didn't know Lady Imreen would get hurt," Thonoy blurted out. "I just wanted my mother and the others to—I don't know..."

"Feel better?" Bosaru filled in, with only a touch of irony. "Thonoy, there is no forgetting what happened. What's done is done. Remember our lessons from the war, don't forget them."

Thonoy shook his head. "I don't—I feel—"

"We're stopping here," Bosaru ordered, putting his hand out, glad for a change of subject. "The hover cabs...they all lined up over there."

Thonoy nodded. "They come from over there," he said, pointing to another edifice in the distance, "and when they get the signal from the main cab stand, the next cab flies over and gets in line. There are only a certain number in line at any given time. I know that because Mother Mine had a friend who worked in the reclamation plant before he inherited a cab from a relative. When he left, I got his job."

"Still keep in touch?"

Thonoy shook his head. "His cab took a turn too sharply one day and hit an oncoming truck."

Bosaru grimaced. "Sorry about that. Is there any way to find out which cab is coming next?"

Thonoy pointed at a large readout board halfway between the port and the cab company. "The number of the cab is flashed there when the cab takes off from the company. And then within thirty seconds, it arrives and gets in line at the cab stand."

Bosaru glanced at the cab stand, then at the cab company. "We're getting in the cab line," he said. "Because if Verot is here, he won't be able to resist picking up a fare while he makes up his mind on what to do next."

"Won't he run if he sees us? Or at least you? Maybe we'll get another driver."

Bosaru shrugged. "That's why we're going to be hiding."

The plan was simpler in planning than in execution. The cab line was on a platform, with nothing to hide behind except other passengers. Bosaru remembered standing there waiting for a cab when he had come into the space port. But no major transport was scheduled to arrive for another hour, so the pickings were slim for them to choose a pair of travelers to hide behind. But there were a few.

Bosaru glanced at their choices—and stopped. "I know them," he said, frowning. "They're politicians from Aboo Two. The middle one's Senator Haan-Haan. But—"

"Daegon? Is that you?"

The sleek-haired apple-cheeked man approached Daegon, his sycophants trailing behind, holding his bags. "What are you doing here? I was so sorry to hear about your father," Haan-Haan said, his face creasing into the appropriate shapes of emotion, none of which were reflected in his eyes. "My condolences."

Bosaru nodded, knowing full well that this elder had probably stabbed his father in the back on a regular basis. Most likely. "Thank you for your kind words," he said. "What brings you to the Hikoi system and the unnamed planet?"

The elder frowned, again in appropriate ways. "We've heard how this planet hadn't thrived since the Neotians had to evacuate Neotia Prime, so the Amalgamation decided to send a committee to investigate these claims. I thought I would be a good choice, since I knew your father."

"Speaking of whom, I don't know if you've heard," Bosaru said. "He passed to the Great Void several days ago."

Again the blank face of the politician attempted to emote, and failed. "I hadn't heard," he said. "We've been en route here, and hadn't had a chance to catch up on our correspondence. My condolences. He was a man of note."

The elder's face twitched once, and Bosaru stared at him, looking at his face carefully. There was something wrong. "Is that all?"

The elder laughed. "Well, we were also looking for a new vacation spot, and someone suggested a dry climate, like this one," he said, with a chortle that Bosaru didn't like at all. "Your father would have found this place interesting. Too bad. In any case, it was good to see you again, Daegon. My regards to your mother."

And with a dismissive wave, the elder turned away.

Bosaru stared at his back, then smiled. "I got you," he whispered.

He knew why the elder was here.

The elder knew Verot was hiding here, probably knew he had been hiding there all these years – and he was here for a meeting.

Why the politico was here now suddenly brought so many more questions.

Dec Mecahe had placed a finger across his lips when Bosaru was taking a leave of absence, indicating the office was most likely bugged. Was this part of that?

Thonoy was waiting at the end of the platform when Bosaru returned, his broad face filled with questions of his own. "Who was that?"

Bosaru glanced over his shoulder, where the elder was almost hidden by his followers, surrounded by them protectively. "He knew my father," he said. "And I have my doubts he's here for the weather. I think he's here to meet with the same man we are."

Thonoy's eyes bulged. "Others know?" he exclaimed before lowering his voice, looking around cautiously. "But V – but he told us no one else knew, that we were the only ones."

"He would tell that to everyone," Bosaru said. "He's going to be picking up the elder from the Amalgamation parliament in his cab. Let's get into position."

There was a small outcropping by which the hover cabs passed in order to get into position for the cab stand. Originally, Thonoy explained, it had been designed for a waiting cab to be okayed for duty, whether for cleanliness, to make sure there was enough fuel, to make sure the cabbie's license was up to date, etc. But in recent years, the outcropping had gone into disuse, with no one using it for its original purpose. For all Thonoy knew, no one took care of such things anymore – but that too was suspect.

"Maybe a lot more people knew about Verot," Bosaru guessed. "No wonder this planet's been ignored for so long. The more attention it got, the more likely it was that Verot's continued existence would be known. So it was in the best interests of a lot of people, including Verot, for this piece of rock to get overlooked and forgotten."

Thonoy's eyes couldn't have gotten wider. "We thought it was because we were cursed. That we were suffering because of what had happened during the war."

Bosaru shook his head. "Neoti and Vozuans alike were suffering because of a war criminal and politicians who were in cahoots."

The outcropping was big enough to hide even Thonoy, who was surprisingly adept in making himself as small as possible. Trickier to hide was Bosaru, who had to be in just the right place to be as close as possible to the cab when it drove up. At the end he split the difference – there was just enough of him that was visible to be overlooked if he stayed still enough.

A faint *whirr* alerted him to the reader board change. He looked up just as Thonoy looked up and said, "Another cab is coming, Daegon, but it's not Verot's."

"This will be a good test, then," Bosaru said, getting as close to the edge of the outcropping as possible and still being able to see.

The cab they could see speeding and veering in the distance was clearly not Verot's – it was clean and had no dents – but as it came closer, Bosaru tensed and said, "Get ready, Thonoy. That's got to be him."

"But it's not his cab!"

"Nobody else drives that badly – get ready!"

The cab got closer and closer, and by the time it got near the outcropping, they could see the face of the driver. "It is him," Thonoy shouted.

"Get ready!"

The cab slowed down to get in line, and Bosaru took that moment to jump on its roof. Verot looked up and for a second their eyes met before Verot snarled, yelled something that Bosaru couldn't hear, and broke away from the line, rolling the cab in an effort to knock Bosaru off.

"Aim for the energy pack," Bosaru yelled at Thonoy, who started to fire. Thonoy, who clearly was not used to firing a weapon of any kind, needed practice. Lots of

practice. But then the younger man started to run down the long platform, following the hover cab, aiming for Verot in the driver's seat.

"The energy pack," Bosaru yelled as he scrambled to keep a foothold on the roof of the hover cab, skidding from side to side as Verot tried to knock him off. "Aim for the energy pack!"

"I don't know where that is!" he heard Thonoy yell as the hover cab veered away from the platform, leaving the cab stand behind within seconds.

"Oh f—" Bosaru edged his blaster out of his holster and, instead of trying to draw a bead on the energy pack of the cab, aimed it at Verot through the window. "Set it down," he yelled, though the chances were slim his voice would carry through.

In response, Verot turned the directionals sharply, rolling the vehicle—a move Bosaru remembered from the cab rides. This time Verot succeeded in tossing Bosaru, who landed feet first on the crumbling roof of yet another ruin. Luckily it held, and instead of falling through, Bosaru skidded down one side, firing at the hover cab as he went down. The pulse blaster got knocked out of his hand as he fell, bouncing off rubble and landing amid the ruins.

That wasn't Bosaru's first concern. As soon as he landed, he looked up at the horizon, and was rewarded with the telltale sign of a plume of smoke. *Yes!*

The wild shooting must have actually hit the energy pack. Verot would have had a hard landing, judging by the smoke, and he would have been headed—where?

Where would be the third hiding place for Verot? Where would he go? Would he be headed to where he had hid the oscillator corrosive? He might have chosen to rejoin his people, but he would also have made a choice to keep the oscillator in a safe place.

The lengthening shadows gave Bosaru the idea. It was going to be nightfall soon—and the roamers would more likely than not be out.

The roamers seemed to stay in a specific area. Jenatt had said that her neighbor across the alleyway, the one who had had the grocery shop, had been attacked, forced out of the area. The place was boarded up, closed.

Everything around Jenatt's diner was rubble now. Except for Jenatt's place. As though her place was being protected. As though it were being cordoned off. As though...

Pthets. He knew where the oscillator corrosive was.

Chapter Sixteen

Not What It Seems

Bosaru broke into a dead run, knowing it was coming down to whether he could get back to Jenatt's before Verot did. By this point he had been in the settlement long enough that he knew his way. He had gotten lost enough times that he knew where he could take a shortcut.

But if he knew them, it was a guarantee that Verot did, and better.

A familiar door half hidden in one of the abandoned buildings made up Bosaru's mind. He could make up for lost time by taking the tunnels. That way, he could avoid the roamers in case they appeared earlier than usual.

The tunnels were quiet, as if the entire settlement were holding its breath, waiting to find out what would happen next. But that was Bosaru's imagination working overtime. Usually, at that point in the afternoon, the tunnels were abuzz with activity as the settlers bustled around, doing their shopping after a day of work, getting ready for their evening meal, before settling in for the night, barring the doors and windows against the roamers.

Verot had to be the one behind the roamers. He had to have set up something that eliminated the settlers around Jenatt's restaurant.

How long had the roamers been terrorizing the area? How many years? How many years had Verot been making plans?

How was Verot getting there?

Why wouldn't he be using the tunnels?

Bosaru stopped cold. The possibility that the tunnels themselves were booby-trapped hadn't occurred to him.

No. It wasn't going to help to second-guess himself.

His run through the tunnels came to a stop when the door leading up to Jenatt's came into view. Breathing hard, he carefully searched the entryway. Clean. He opened the door.

Nothing happened.

He started up the stairs.

Once he was at the top he held his breath and listened.

"Don't forget the *hoorash*," he could hear Jenatt scold. There was a clatter of plates and serverware, as though she had brought in a load to be washed.

Bosaru closed his eyes for a second. Thank the Void. She sounded normal.

He opened the door to the kitchen area. His cousin was loading the sanitizer, and beyond her he could see Agie hurry on out to the dining room with a loaded platter.

He frowned. That was odd.

The dining room should have been quickly emptying of customers at that point, considering it was almost evening.

Jenatt looked up at that point and her eyes widened. "Daegon, you're all right," she said with a gasp. "Thank the Merge, you're all right."

She limped toward him, abandoning the sanitizer for the moment. "He said you were dead," she whispered as she hugged him.

Him. "Verot is here?" he asked in a low voice.

His cousin nodded. "He said he had business here, but he was going to have dinner first. Daegon, I didn't know what else to do."

"It's all right. Just do what he wants." He paused. "Did he — ask to see anything?"

Jenatt shook her head. "He said he was going to wait for Thonoy, even after I told him he said he was dropping by the plant before he came home."

"So Verot's going to be here for a while."

Jenatt nodded. "He wants *holorem*."

"Of course he does," Bosaru muttered. "Listen, don't tell him I'm here. Give him a good meal."

His room off the kitchen was clean and neat, with the usual items under the bed that accumulated in an unused room. Bosaru pulled out the boxes one by one, blowing off the dust, with the dust layers growing thicker and thicker as he went farther and farther back.

The box he had in mind was shoved to the back, a little squished at the edges. At the top was the notation "To be moved last," which made no sense and complete sense at the same time finally. It was closed with sealer and a lock that wasn't locked.

He prized off the top with his fingertips, taking care not to jar the box.

Would he recognize it if he saw it?

Bosaru had seen viz-images of the oscillator corrosive, dozens of them, but the device had been stolen before he joined the Secret Sciences Police. It had long been assumed destroyed, consumed in the same conflagration as Neotia Prime itself. At least formally.

The top unsealed, with a gentle little *thwop!* Bosaru froze for a moment, but when nothing happened, he gingerly set aside the top and peered inside.

White cotton padding.

He brushed aside the top layer, then peeled the succeeding layers away, one by one. When finally his fingers touched something solid, he stopped again. Then he peeled back the last layer.

"You're alive, you Neoti son of a cur," Bosaru heard behind him. He turned.

Verot was leaning against the doorjamb, casually blowing on a chunk of piping-hot *holorem*. He didn't look surprised. "I would have thought falling off the cab would have done it."

"You thought wrong," Bosaru said. He stayed still, didn't move his hands, either to take out the oscillator corrosive or lunge for his weapons kit.

Verot wasn't wearing a weapons belt, but he could have something tucked in at the small of his back. Bosaru couldn't tell. And he wasn't going to make a move until he knew, one way or another.

The *holorem* was apparently cool enough to eat, because Verot chomped down on one end and started to chew. "You're a stubborn one, but I can't fault you for your taste," he said. He grinned before he bit into the other end and took a deep breath, smiling. "Excellent *holorem*. My niece is a lovely morsel. Her mother was, too. No accounting for taste, marrying my brother. Too bad."

"She's the only living relative you've got left," Bosaru said. He was acutely aware that his entire stash of weaponry was sitting on the bed behind him. "She could have found someone in the government you didn't have connections with, made sure they knew you were alive. But she didn't."

"Don't be a fool. She would have in a second if she could have figured out who she could trust," Verot said, taking another bite. "She couldn't even trust her own Dame Mirel. Some priestesses of Ixtr have been sympathetic to my cause. Some others have not."

Bosaru remembered hearing about the shrines burning down, and assumed that it hadn't been an accident. "Maybe back on Neotia Prime," Bosaru said, remembering with clarity where he had left his blaster—to his left, immediately behind him, easily accessible if he could move in one movement. "But Dame Mirel is no friend of yours. And I doubt any of them are."

"It just takes a little reminder for them to recall who is truly their champion. So it's time, Officer Bosaru," Verot said, popping the last of the *holorem* into his mouth and chewing mightily, dusting his fingers.

"Time for what?"

"Hand over the oscillator and your cousin continues to live her life of misery," Verot said, finally showing his hand—the one that had been hidden behind the doorway. He shifted to reveal Jenatt, holding her by her throat with his faux hand, her eyes bulging. "What's it going to be?"

"Let her go. She has nothing to do with this," Bosaru said. He started to stand up slowly, his eyes trained on Verot. "Jenatt, are you all right?"

His eyes flicked for a second to his cousin. She nodded. "Let go, Verot. She was one of your own people."

"In that case, she should have no problem giving herself for the common good."

"But it's not for the common good," Bosaru shouted, no longer able to control himself. "It's all about *you*. It's always been about you!"

In a single fluid motion, he twisted, grabbed the blaster and pointed it at Verot. But Verot didn't budge, except to put both of his hands around Jenatt's throat.

"Drop it," Verot snarled. "Or her son's an orphan."

"Take your hands off her!"

Not waiting for an answer, Bosaru shot Verot point-blank at the shoulder. Verot screamed and dropped Jenatt, who fell to the floor, coughing and gagging.

"Get out of here, Jenatt," Bosaru ordered. "Now you, Verot. Stand up straight."

Verot didn't bother to banter, not anymore. Still nursing his shoulder, he leaned against the doorjamb. "I should have shot you when I had the chance," he snarled, spittle flying out of the side of his mouth. "I should have dumped you from the cab."

"And you should have taken the honorable death and died on Neotia Prime," Bosaru shot back. "At least then you would have taken the oscillator and made sure it was destroyed."

"But the oscillator was too valuable to be lost. I wasn't going to let that happen."

"It's a doomsday weapon. Keep your hands where I can see them," Bosaru ordered when he spotted Verot's hand inching toward his belt. So he probably did have a weapon hidden there.

"I haven't moved. Your father was a thorn in my side and I was glad to make sure his last days were filled with suspicion. I should have known you were the same sort."

"If he hadn't been in a coma, he could have refuted every charge. Why? What did he ever do to you?"

"It took me twenty years to get into the position to have my revenge. Twenty years," Verot said, his eyes narrowed. "I had to creep and crawl my way onto a transport. I had to keep my face hidden—even the side that had been exposed to the oscillator might have been recognized by someone. When the damned transport finally landed, I had to deal with the unwashed masses. Whining, weeping...instead of appreciating the opportunity, all they wanted to do was wail about having to move."

Bosaru gritted his teeth. "How short-sighted of them. Keep that hand still," he ordered when he detected Verot's hand inching again.

What was left of Verot's nostrils flared. "And I certainly thought so! I had a whole new life ahead of me, and all sorts of things to try. I don't know why they didn't see it that way."

"One thing I've got to say about you," Bosaru said, shaking his head. "You're an egotistical optimist—*hey!*"

Verot took advantage of Bosaru's momentary loss of attention to yank out the blaster that he did indeed have tucked into the back of his belt. "Concentrate, Officer Bosaru," he said, his weapon pointed. "Now we're even. And you're going to hand over the oscillator."

"No."

"It's either the oscillator or you," Verot explained, not taking his eyes off Bosaru as he adjusted the power setting. "If you don't hand me the oscillator, your head is going to come off your body."

Bosaru snorted. "Even if I hand you the oscillator you'd shoot me. Don't think I'm a fool."

"But you must be," Verot said with a smile. "How else would you have gotten into this situation?"

Bosaru didn't answer, choosing instead to mimic Verot's movements and adjust the power setting on his own blaster.

"Well? What's it going to be, Neoti?"

"What's going to stop me from just blasting you?"

"Oh, you wouldn't do that," he said with a smug smile. "More fool you. If you did, you would have done it already — *aaaaahhhh!*"

Not answering, Bosaru squeezed the trigger and hit Verot's shoulder again, the same one. The blaster fell out of his hand, allowing Bosaru to kick it to the other end of the room. "Now put your hands on your head and get on your knees."

Verot did as he was told, glaring. "You fool," he said. "All my plans —"

"Are finished. Verot Barus Kurog, you are under arrest on charges of attempted genocide. You will be held for an undetermined period until your trial can be set — *hey!*"

In a last-minute effort, Verot threw himself forward, tripping Bosaru. In the confines of the tiny room, Bosaru couldn't right himself quickly enough, hitting his head.

Damn it, so close, Bosaru thought as he blacked out.

* * * * *

"Daegon, wake up," he heard as someone shook him and slapped him. "He's got some kind of rendezvous, and I think he has the oscillator. Lady Imreen's gone after him. Please, Daegon!"

Opening his eyes, Bosaru saw Jenatt, her eyes wide with terror. She looked as though she had been dragged through the dust, which, considering what had happened, was quite likely.

He reached up and stilled her hands before she could shake him again. "Which way did he go?"

"He went out the front door, even though it's almost dark and the roamers will be out —"

Bosaru sat up, fingering the back of his head. "That's not going to matter, not to Verot. Not when he's been the one who's been orchestrating them all this time," he said grimly.

"What? But—"

Shaking his head, he scrambled to his feet. "At the water reclamation plant. He figured out the lanki-gas that the workers have to filter also makes them controllable if they work without their masks, which many of them do because they're uncomfortable, change them physically for a few hours, make them violent. All the times that Thonoy came home looking as though he'd been in a fight? That wasn't work at the plant. That was when he was under the control of Verot and the gas. And none of them would remember anything after the gas wore off."

"Daegon, Thonoy," and here Jenatt faltered. "Thonoy said he was going to do a half-shift at the plant."

Bosaru grimaced. "I need you to get as many people as possible, gather them outside here. Can you do that?"

Jenatt nodded. "But—"

"Make sure they're all armed. And tell them—" he paused. "Tell them I'll try to make sure none of the roamers are killed, but if they're under Verot's control, I can't promise anything."

Jenatt nodded without speaking, her lips tightened.

This time there was no question of what he needed. Bosaru packed up his entire weapon kit—he was confused for a second why Verot hadn't taken his weapons, until he realized that with only one working hand and a pulse-burned shoulder, he would have a hard time keeping a grip on the box with the oscillator as well as the weapons.

Bosaru grabbed the energy lasso and attached it to his belt, and slipped in the energy whip and the Icsantheze dagger alongside it, leaving the rest in the weapons kit.

The last time he had been outdoors during the evening was when he was being chased by the roamers—a once in a lifetime event, or so he hoped. The air was cool, though, and that was pleasant, with the stars coming out, almost sharp in their twinkling.

It had been too long. He couldn't imagine what the settlers had had to endure, never being able to go outside at night, even if it meant trying to get a glimpse of their crumbling previous home.

Bosaru took a deep breath. "If I were a crazed ex-dictator, which way would I go?" he said aloud.

Almost as soon as he had said it, he spotted Verot, not far ahead of him, being hindered by the small box with the oscillator. Certainly not something to be kicked around, that was for sure.

"Verot. Stop now or I will shoot," he commanded.

Verot actually stopped and turned around. "You wouldn't dare shoot," he shouted, his voice echoing in the quickly cooling twilight. "You could hit my payload here."

Actually, there was little danger, because Bosaru felt confident of his shooting abilities. But just in case, he started to walk toward his target.

"I could," he said. "Or I could shoot you between your eyes, which would be my choice. You're running out of options. If you get on your knees now and put your hands on your head, I can make sure you receive leniency in your imprisonment. And I can testify on your behalf, that you came of your own free will."

Bosaru's head ached, his leg throbbed from being dropped from the hover cab, and his temper was growing short. "Make up your mind, now, Verot. I don't have all day."

Verot was close enough now that Bosaru could see his face, even in the dimming light.

"There's another choice," Verot said, and the sudden strength in his voice made Bosaru stop and stare.

"What are you talking about?"

"I've got an appointment with a very important man," Verot said. Clutching the box, he was starting straight at Bosaru now. "You can be my partner. Haven't you wanted power? You can have it, you know. You with your blueblood Amalgamation connections, me with my political connections. We can be the perfect team. Who would have a word to say against me with you on my side? And you, you'll be the face of the new Neotian, combining the Neoti and the Vozuan. With my niece, you can be the perfect new generation of the new home world. Your father, he turned me down when I offered him the chancellorship, back when the war was on, but I'm thinking you're more sensible than that. Your father would be happy."

My father is dead and he would come back from the Void to kill me if I joined forces with you, Bosaru wanted to say, but he didn't. Instead, he kept walking toward Verot. His hands he kept down at his sides, and it took a concerted effort for him to not curl his hand into a fist. He wanted to ram the oscillator down Verot's throat, but no, that would be wrong.

And besides, he needed the oscillator back.

Helluva bounty hunter he was. He was more concerned with the doomsday device than he was with the bounty in front of him.

"Who are you meeting with?" he asked, his steps slowing as he came within a few meters of Verot. "Someone from the parliament, I'm guessing."

"Someone you would recognize in an instant," Verot said. "Someone you've spoken with, someone you've probably dined with in the past, in the days of your father."

So it *was* Haan-Haan. "Someone who's willing to consider you as an ally, even with a hefty price on your head. Someone who doesn't mind the stench of treachery."

The light had dimmed sufficiently that Bosaru couldn't see the expression on Verot's face. "So young, so negative. Well, that's your choice now," the ex-dictator said, his voice creased with a sneer. "You're with me or against me."

"That's easy," Bosaru said immediately. "I'm against you. Now put the box down."

"Or what?"

"Daegon, get out of the way. Just let me shoot him where he stands and then we can all get on with our lives."

Bosaru turned. It was Imreen, leaning on one leg and hampered with a regenerating tube on the other, but not letting that stop her from pointing a full-sized pulse blaster, one nearly as big as she was, past him. She looked grim.

She was going to get Verot if he, Bosaru, didn't.

"Step aside," she said. "I want to be close enough to see his face when he finally gets the execution he so richly deserves."

"Dear niece! So good of you to come see me!" Verot said, lowering his own weapon. "Now why are you being so ungrateful? Think of the wonderful upbringing you had, the rich heritage, all destroyed by the Neotians."

"No," she said. "You did. My father did what he could after my mother died. My brother did what he could after my father died. Until he died too, on the battlefield, a place he should never have been anywhere near. I barely had a childhood, let alone an upbringing. One thing I've got to say, though," she added as she deftly trained the target on him. "I know how to defend myself. And I know how to kill. And I will kill you. Get on your knees and put your hands behind your head, the way you had your victims kneel in front of you."

She drew closer, step by step, past Bosaru, toward her uncle. "You might as well have killed them all. My mother, because the blockade of medical supplies killed her, a blockade that started when you decided Vozuans could live without Neotian medical technology. My father, because he tried his hardest to put your best face to a trusting people, and it killed him in the end—you killed him too. And my brother, who was such a peaceful soul, who should have spent his youth in our library, reading and learning, instead of being shot to pieces in a battle there was no way we could win. It was you, my uncle. You."

Bosaru was close enough to see the expression on Verot's face change. Before, the sneer distorting the visible side of the Vozuan's face had twisted his features beyond recognition. Now the sneer was gone. For the first time, Bosaru saw the normal face of Verot, and could see a glimpse of a terror that might have been there all along—or maybe not.

Could it be after all this time, the idea of confronting his mortality had finally caught up with Verot?

For a moment, Bosaru was tempted. It would take care of so many problems—there would be no expensive trial, no media frenzy, no second-guessing by Verot supporters or politicians whose proclamations would be designed solely to gain themselves attention.

But no. Imreen would care after she gave it some thought.

"Imreen, I love you," Bosaru said, his voice, curiously soft considering the circumstances, carrying through the darkness. "Don't do this."

"He destroyed our home, our families. Let me take care of it right here and now, Daegon," Imreen said, her voice wavering but her hand straight. "Spare everyone else the heartache."

"You would feel the guilt for the rest of your days, Imreen," Bosaru reminded her. "You would see the ghosts of your parents, of your brother, of every single member of your family. The rest of your family. Let the Amalgamation tribunal do its job."

"And you trust them to do their job? Are you insane? That's why he's here and not rotting on Neotia Prime," Imreen exclaimed, her eyes burning. "He managed to use the last connections he had to hide on a transport to get here. The ghosts of my family would cheer if I put a pulse blast between his eyes."

"So you would carry that burden for the rest of your life."

"It's better than letting him go," she said, her voice breaking. "I'm willing to shoulder the burden if it means we all have peace at long last."

"Let me," Jenatt said. She had come up from a tunnel entry, leaning heavily on her own crutch. "He personally shot my husband, for refusing to throttle a child who had gotten in his way. *I* will not have bad dreams, I assure you."

Bosaru sighed. "Is the rest of the settlement going to show up after all this time and want to take a shot at him? Why is he still alive after all this time?"

"He said he had the ultimate weapon," Jenatt said, limping forward. "Only he knew where it was, and he would use it if we were to tell anyone of his continued existence."

"And it was sitting under the bed in your spare room all this time."

She closed her eyes. "I should have known. It wasn't my *holorem* he was coming for."

"We should all have known. There was no good reason for him to stay," Imreen said. "I would hear he stayed to find me, to apologize. And I wanted no part of him."

"My dear niece, so harsh."

Verot was still kneeling on the ground, his hands behind his head. But he was smiling.

Bosaru raised his blaster. "Shut up."

Verot shrugged again – that was really beginning to annoy Bosaru. Then he grinned again. Then he cocked his head to the side and fluttered his eyes.

Bosaru stood still for a second, lowering his blaster, listening. He heard something that he had forgotten about, something he shouldn't have.

Jenatt heard it too. And Imreen. They glanced at each other. "Daegon—" Imreen said. "We—"

"Roamers," Jenatt said. "*Run!*"

Chapter Seventeen

The End Is In Sight

That distinctive noise was unmistakable, the sound of a dozen oversized men dragging their feet through the shifting sands. Bosaru could have kicked himself. They had been too busy arguing about who would execute Verot to hear their footsteps.

"Well, you told me not to speak, Bosaru," Verot reminded him, standing up and brushing off his knees. He did so with a casual flip, one that said that he once more had the upper hand. He picked up the box again. "Now that my true children are here, I will be on my way."

"You're not going anywhere," Bosaru said, raising his blaster again.

"The roamers would disagree, Officer Bosaru," Verot said. "And I would think that Jenatt would disagree, once she takes a good look at this particular group."

The shuffling was loudest, signaling that the roamers had arrived. Imreen's eyes were wide, but she stood her ground.

Jenatt, on the other hand, was white. "Thonoy," she cried out when the roamers came into view. "Thonoy, what are you doing?"

The effects of the lanki-gas conversion distorted the human who was exposed to it, made them temporarily larger, made them controllable, unrecognizable. Among this lot was one who had to be Thonoy. They all shuffled, but only one of them had that distinctive footprint...two small holes, intersecting. "Thonoy, stop!"

"Ah, but he doesn't know you right now," Verot said with that smile that made Bosaru want to blast him right then and there. "But I am impressed you recognized him, considering how distorted he is. In any case, he answers to me. You don't want him to get hurt, do you?"

"The water reclamation plant isn't so dangerous that the workers would come home with bruises and cuts," Bosaru guessed.

"No. But being a roamer can be fairly dangerous," Verot replied. "Especially since there's always some fool group out to kill them."

"Which explains why people keep disappearing," Jenatt said, gritting her teeth. "Why the fellow across the alleyway, who had such plans to expand his grocery business, disappeared one day and his entire family had to move. He died when he was a roamer, didn't he, after doing night work at the plants? And you told his family to move so that we were completely isolated, with all the families around me gone?"

"If you were feeling isolated, I knew you'd hunker down," Verot said. "Stop!"

The roamers, who had been moving in a loose formation, stopped. Bosaru looked at the faces of each of them, realizing that he had seen each and every one of them at the community meeting. "The night shift pays more," he said.

"It pays two and a half times more," Jenatt said. "That's why it's popular, and it's a coup to pull night duty. Thonoy pulled it a lot, because they said he was the right size, and he could –"

She teared up, the first time Bosaru had seen her waver. "He said we could build up the restaurant, expand," she said, her voice breaking. "And we could do it if he put in a year of night shifts. So the head of the plant is in with you, traitor."

Verot shrugged. "Not so much," he said honestly. "But he was willing to look the other way when I started to tinker with the gas filters."

"And that was why the *scirros* engines malfunctioned so much. The lanki-gas makes them easily led, but only for a few hours," Jenatt said. "Longer than a few hours, and they suffocate and die. Is that it?"

Verot shrugged. "Sometimes it happens. But the night shift pays, so no one says much. It's worked well for me. The wages of war."

If Verot shrugged again, Bosaru was going to shoot him.

The roamers were getting closer and closer. "Stop them," Bosaru said.

"Why should I? When they get within earshot, I can command them to get rid of you. You won't want to shoot them because you're weak. They, however, would be perfectly willing to kill you. I win either way."

"How can you control them and no one else?"

"Practice," Verot said.

"No," Imreen said. "That three-cornered coin he carries. I thought he just kept it around as a souvenir, but no. He had an entire lab of scientists working on control devices, because he knew sooner or later, his *people* would come to their senses. I remember my father talking about them, I remember my brother talking about them. And I remember they knew what it meant."

"Well, they're not here anymore, are they? And I am," Verot added.

Bosaru lowered his blaster and pulled the trigger. The shot hit Verot's other leg.

Verot screamed. The roamers stopped.

"The coin," Bosaru said. "Hand over the coin or I will use you for target practice."

"You wouldn't."

"Find out." Bosaru shifted his aim, this time to Verot's right shoulder. He pulled the trigger again, but Verot was ready for him this time and ducked, so the shot only grazed him. He yelped as he edged away, stopping to rub his shoulder. The scent of scorned flesh seemed to confuse the roamers for a second, but they kept still.

"Are you going to keep moving or are you going to give me the coin?" Bosaru said.

"The roamers will kill you, tear you apart from limb to limb."

"In that case, next time I'll aim between your eyes. Give me the coin."

"No! *Attack!*"

The roamers picked up speed just a little. Jenatt and Imreen backed away, but they didn't have to worry – the roamers were headed toward Bosaru.

Now that he knew what to look for, he recognized them—larger and misshapen, their eyes blank. Yes, that was Thonoy—he would know those shoes anywhere, kept together with rubber bands and tape.

"Thonoy, can you hear me?" he said.

No response.

Bosaru aimed and shot at Verot's other arm, and this time, even though his target moved, the pulse hit its mark, making Verot scream again. The roamers stopped again, this time in midstep.

"The coin," Bosaru repeated. "It's either the coin or the sweet spot between your eyes, Verot. I'll do what you've had coming for over twenty years. *Now!*"

Verot's working hand clenched suddenly, and Bosaru knew that the coin was hidden there.

"As I was saying," Verot said, playing with the coin by passing it between his fingers over and over and over, even though his hand was shaking, "before I was interrupted, I have an appointment I'm running late for. Now, if you'll—"

Bosaru rolled his eyes. "I'm going to shoot you. I'm not currently with the SSP. I don't have to abide by their regulations. I'm not going to shoot the roamers, I'm going to shoot *you*. Now what's it going to be?"

Still shaking, Verot smirked and started to flip the coin, though his face was twitching—Bosaru guessed each of the shots, and even the graze, hurt. Good. "I don't believe you. And in a few more seconds it won't matter, because the roamers will tear you apart."

Higher and higher he flipped the coin. In the darkness of the night.

Bosaru sighed. And shot the coin.

Through the center the pulse sliced the coin, leaving a momentary stench of burnt, molten metal before it fell to the ground.

Verot stared at it for a moment, the box he had under his arm dropping to the ground and plopping there in a poof of sand. "Do you know what you've done?" he screamed.

"Yes." Bosaru took a few steps back and as he watched, the roamers shuffled past...heading toward Verot.

"See what you've done! The coin was the last one I had that could control them!"

"You'd better run, Verot," Bosaru said. "Run like all those settlers over the years who got hurt, or crippled, or killed by the roamers, never realizing it was their loved ones. Oh, and I'll take the box. Just leave it there."

Verot didn't answer—but then, he clearly had other things on his mind. He stumbled, taking a few steps back.

"And your appointment with the Amalgamation senator? I'll take care of that too," Bosaru added.

Verot fell and started to crawl away...and as Bosaru, Imreen and Jenatt watched, the roamers caught up with him, encircled him and...

Stopped.

"Too bad," Imreen said. "The gas and the control must have died at the same time. I'm assuming they're all going to be regaining their senses in the next few minutes. So close. So, so close."

Bosaru looked up at the sky. A hover craft was approaching quickly. "I think it's about to be out of our hands completely," he said. He sidestepped the roamers and deftly picked up the box, keeping an eye on Verot, who was curled up on the ground, rocking back and forth.

As they watched, the craft landed. The doors opened.

"So you actually found him," Dec Mecahe said, dressed in the official blues of the SSP and accompanied by what looked like a dozen troopers, heavily armed.

Huh. After having gotten used to Vonner's weaponry, the SSP's were a stark contrast.

Bosaru grinned, feeling a burden lift from his shoulders. "I did. And he's going to turn himself in. Aren't you?" he asked Verot.

Who didn't reply, only continued to rock.

"Well, in that case, I turn him over to you, Dec."

"As Officer Bosaru or Daegon Bosaru, bounty hunter?"

Bosaru paused. "I have a choice?"

Dec shrugged. "I might have forgotten to file your separation papers."

"No one noticed I haven't been at my desk for weeks?"

"Your whereabouts have been classified."

"Under what?"

"I forget," Dec said. "You know me, I'm not that organized."

Bosaru smiled, shaking his head.

He felt a touch on his arm. Imreen was at his side. "You'll be leaving," she said more than asked, an emotion under her words, as well as a certain weariness.

Go back to his job, which he loved? Or stay?

"Imreen—"

She shook her head. "I know what you're asking. And I would love to visit other planets, but...I'm needed here."

Which did he love more?

He didn't hesitate. "Daegon Bosaru, bounty hunter," he said. "I think I'm going to rediscover my roots. And the community can probably use my help."

Dec grinned, his smiles glinting in the dim light. "In that case, Daegon," he said, "you're going to have a very handsome bounty to give you a good start."

Bosaru slipped his arm around Imreen's shoulders. "I've already got one," he said, feeling the gentle squeeze that she reciprocated with.

Chapter Eighteen

The Journey Is Finished

The sunset was nothing like the ones he remembered from his childhood on Neotia Prime, all gold and warmth. This world, closer to the sun, nonetheless had its advantages. There were no divisive mountain ranges on it, so if the Vozuans and the Neoti who settled there wanted to start another war, it would have to be over some other cause.

But this was their new home world. And this time, they would understand what would happen if they didn't take care of it.

Imreen—because she was truly Imreen now, no longer the sad little Vozuan girl he remembered from their childhood—came alongside him and surveyed the setting sun. He glanced at her as he slid his arm around her.

She glanced back at him. "What are you thinking?"

The setting sun made her glow, and best of all, she looked content. "It's not what we knew," he said. "But we can be happy here. I know it."

She smiled, and it made him absurdly happy she looked happier yet. He wanted to spend the rest of his days making her look that way. "I know," she said. "Now we have to convince the others of it."

The glow in her eyes dimmed for a moment. "What is it?" he asked.

"Do you think—do you think we can? We can be happy, but I don't know if all those people, still bitter about the war—"

"The war is over. We're one people again. If you and I can be together, why can't we all be?"

Human nature. Neither of them had to say it.

"Are you going to be happy here?"

Imreen's voice was uncharacteristically uncertain. But that was understandable—everyone in her life had left her. Mother, father, brother, an entire culture—all gone. She had had to be strong. And accept that nothing lasted forever.

But he didn't want to leave her. "That depends. Will you be happy with me?"

Her only reply was an upturned look, a doe-eyed look. He bent to touch his lips to hers. She was warm, luscious.

"If you leave me, I'll track you down and do you harm," she threatened in a husky tone.

"No worry about that. This is home. You are home. We're going to build a life here, Imreen," Bosaru said.

“We’re going to be Neotians again. Together.”

About the Author

Eilis Flynn has spent a large share of her life working on Wall Street or in a Wall Street-related firm, so why should she write fiction that's any less based in our world? She spends her days aware that there is a reality beyond what we see—and tells stories about it for Cerridwen Press.

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