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5 MINUTES RELOADED



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5 Minutes RELOADED

A Novel by Oldwrench

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Table of Contents

5 Minutes RELOADED.....	5
Chapter 1.....	5
Chapter 2.....	7
Chapter 3.....	8
Chapter 4.....	9
Chapter 5.....	11
Chapter 6.....	14
Chapter 7.....	15
Chapter 8.....	18
Chapter 9.....	19
Chapter 10.....	22
Chapter 11.....	24
Chapter 12.....	25
Chapter 13.....	27
Chapter 14.....	28
Chapter 15.....	30
Chapter 16.....	32
Chapter 17.....	33
Chapter 18.....	36
Chapter 19.....	40
Chapter 20.....	43
Chapter 21.....	46
Chapter 22.....	47
Chapter 23.....	50
Chapter 24.....	52
Chapter 25.....	53
Chapter 26.....	54
Chapter 27.....	57
Chapter 28.....	60
Chapter 29.....	63
Chapter 30.....	67
Chapter 31.....	68
Chapter 32.....	71
Chapter 33.....	74
Chapter 34.....	76
Chapter 35.....	79
Chapter 36.....	81
Chapter 37.....	84
Chapter 38.....	85

Chapter 39..... 88

Chapter 40..... 89

Chapter 41..... 91

Chapter 42..... 94

Chapter 43..... 97

Chapter 44..... 99

Chapter 45..... 101

5 Minutes RELOADED

Chapter 1

It had been three months since the battle at Mar Sara. Arisa had spent a week aiding the bomb disposal squad on Mar Sara, finding and disarming the nuclear bombs planted in the colonies cities. General Parker had conscripted her after he heard that she disarmed the bomb on board the Krikav. By the time she got off the planet and to the general's flagship, the Lincoln, the rest of the Krikav's pilots had been sent back to earth. When she returned to the EDF main base on earth, she found she and the other pilots had been put on indefinite leave pending investigation of the incident at Mar Sara. When the 427 group first returned, they were hailed as hero's for saving the colony of Mar Sara and finding the real instigators of the incident at Tarsonis. But it didn't take long for the conspiracy theorists to cast doubt on the group. Now there were questions of the EDF orchestrating the incident to cover their guilt for the massacre at Tarsonis. Arisa tried to contact Chad, but had been turned away at every attempt. It was as if he had vanished. At one point she was told he had been reassigned and they didn't have any information where. After that, she got nothing more. Arisa returned home, but things had not gone well. There was something she wanted, and she was used to getting what she wanted.

Arisa stood in front of the big oak desk, directly across from her father. She had been in this same place in his large ornate office many times in the last few weeks. Her purpose had been the same each time. Arisa was sure her father had used his connections to have Chad sent away. She frowned and clenched her fists. "I don't care what you think of him, I want you to tell me where he is."

"No," Ian answered, not even bothering to look up from the display on his desk. "I won't have you associating with that sewer rat."

Arisa turned red with anger, "don't you dare call him that! Chad's a lieutenant, a pilot."

"He's a criminal!" her father broke in, looking up and raising his voice. "I've seen his record, he's a thief, probably a murderer."

Arisa scowled at her father, "maybe he is, but then, the only difference between you and Chad is, he did what he had to do to survive."

Ian jumped up so fast his chair crashed over backward. "How dare you compare me to that scum!" He shouted. "I'll have you....."

"What? Grounded?" Arisa shouted.

The door to the office burst open and a man in an EDF military police uniform entered, followed by the Higgins butler. "I'm sorry sir," the butler told Ian, "the officer would not wait."

Ian looked at the soldier, still flushed with anger. "What the hell do you think you're doing, breaking in, unannounced, like that?"

The MP glanced at Ian, then turned to Arisa, ignoring his outburst. "Lieutenant Higgins, I've brought your orders," he informed Arisa. You are to report to Tycho base beta."

"Give me those papers," Ian ordered him. "I'll take care of them, it's about time to end this foolishness."

Arisa snatched the envelope with the papers from the MP. "No you won't!" She barked. "You don't run my life." She turned and started for the door, then turned back, "Not now, not ever!" She assured him. The MP looked back at her fuming father, then followed Arisa out the door.

Arisa sighed as she left the room. "Could you wait a few minutes?" Arisa asked the MP. "I'll get my things and go with you. I want to get out of here before father can do something to keep me here."

The MP looked down at the small pilot and smiled. "I don't think he can do that lieutenant. My orders are to make sure you get on a shuttle for the Tycho base."

Arisa looked up at the officer. He was an older man, one with years of experience. She felt a bit better, even her father wouldn't try defying a man like this one. She headed for her room, wondering why they would send an MP just to make sure a pilot followed orders. Maybe they found another one of those old nukes. At least she was getting away from home.

Ian was fuming, he started to reach for his phone when the door behind his desk opened, he turned to face his wife. She was still a beautiful woman, and you could see where Arisa got her good looks. She was a taller and more mature version of her daughter. She wore her blond hair longer, it's golden curls cascading over her shoulders. She had the same cherry red lips and crystal blue eyes as Arisa.

"You're driving her away, Ian" she told her husband. "Refusing to allow her to contact her friend will only fuel her defiance."

Ian scowled, "I will not have her wasting her life chasing after lower class scum like that boy. I have plans for her, and she's just going to have to get used to that."

"Plans?" She asked. "Plans to marry her off to someone you choose, in order to add to your wealth?"

"That's a woman's place, to further her family's business." Ian barked. "She just won't accept that. Arisa is just going to have to learn to do as she's told"

Arisa's mother shook her head, "you'll never control her, Ian, she's too much like you, too independent. You've ruined any chance you did have of getting her to agree to any of your plans. You might as well resign yourself to the fact that she is going to decide which man is the best for her. If she chooses Chad, there isn't much you can do about it."

"She will do what I tell her. Arisa is going to learn her place." Ian picked up his phone, "I'm going to put an end to this. I'll make sure she never sees that sewer rat bastard again."

Chapter 2

Ben sat next to Megumi as they waited for the shuttle. He thought back over the last few months. Megumi invited him to come with her to her family's orbital colony, since he couldn't return to his home planet due to its distance away. Ben was more than happy to visit Megumi's home, and not just because he wanted her to teach him more of her fighting techniques. Her family hadn't been overly receptive of the foreigner at first. Her father had been cold and formal, her brothers were openly hostile, refusing to greet Ben. Their attitudes began to change the first time Megumi brought Ben to their dojo. When Megumi introduced Ben to her older brother, Seiji decided he was going to teach this big blond foreigner not to mess with one of their women. He snapped a hard kick to Ben's side.

Ben frowned at the smaller man, "Ow..... Hey, that wasn't very nice."

Seiji backed up, damn, that had been like kicking a tree trunk. He wasn't about to be made to look bad by some untrained ape, even if he was the size of a gorilla. He jumped with a spin and lashed a kick to Ben's head.

Now Ben might have been slow at book learning, mathematics, navigation, tactics and such, but when it came to physical training, he was anything but slow. The bit of training Megumi had given Ben on board the Krikav prepared Ben for the attack. He snapped up his arm to block the kick and caught Seiji by the ankle. Ben held the surprised young man off the floor by his ankle. "I told you, that isn't nice. Now, I don't want to hurt anyone, but, if you insist I'm sure I can oblige you."

Seiji's two brothers stepped up to help and Megumi stepped between them and Ben, she wasn't going to let them gang up on Ben just because he wasn't of Asian descent. She didn't have to intervene. As Ben set the young man down, Seiji motioned his brothers to step back. He'd been defeated, now he had to reevaluate his opinion of his sister's friend. He turned to Ben and made a formal bow. "My apologies, Ben Wolfman," Seiji told him. "I allowed my prejudices to overrule my reason. "

Ben frowned, "Huh? Prejudice..... against me? Howcome?"

Megumi's youngest brother laughed at Ben's confused expression, "don't worry, Seiji isn't a bigot, he hates everyone the same."

Ben looked blank of a few seconds, then he got a big smile on his face, "well, that's ok then, as long as it's fair and all. I just wish you'd warned me about that prejudice thing though." It didn't take long for the brothers to gain a respect for the big man, and even Megumi's father was soon won over by Ben's infectious good nature.

The time had been the best in Ben's life, the practice in the dojo and the time spent with Megumi exploring the orbital colony. They had been happy till they both received the orders to return to the EDF base for reassignment. He felt Megumi's small hand slide on top of his. "Maybe we'll be transferred to the same outfit," he told her, hopefully.

Megumi sighed, "not likely, Ben. With all the bad press, because of Mar Sara, they're going to separate us and send us to the remotest outposts.

They don't want any of us to talk with the media. They can't have any of us together."

Ben could hear the catch in her voice. He really didn't want to be separated either, not for the two years left till he could get out of the military. He cleared his throat, there was something he wanted to ask her..... Something important..... He just didn't know the words to use. "Um..... Megumi, I ah..... would you, um..... I'd like, um....." Suddenly the public address speaker broke in with a loud announcement that their shuttle was now boarding. People all around them began getting up and gathering their things.

Megumi squeezed Ben's big hand as they got up to join the lines moving toward the shuttle. She had a suspicion of what it was Ben wanted to ask..... He would get the chance again, when the time was right.

Chapter 3

Kaze sat, cross legged, on a rock as the cold waterfall poured down over his naked body. He held himself motionless as he tried to find his mental center of balance. He fought to keep his mind empty, but it was useless. He stood up and cursed. Coming back to the militia colony had been a mistake. The elders still didn't understand his reasons for joining the EDF. They still looked on him as a deserter. They couldn't see that their very existence depended on the protection of the empire. Without the freedom allowed by the central government, the paramilitary militia communities would be destroyed. The elders still preached their hatred for and withdrawal from the "oppressors".

Kaze pulled on his white robe and fastened the blue sash. When his orders had come to return to the EDF base, he'd told the elders that he must return. They insisted that he stay in the community, that if he returned to the EDF he could never come back. He tried to explain to the elders why he had to return, that if he failed to return he would be a deserter and the EDF would come to arrest him. The elders told him the militia would not allow the EDF to take him. They were fools, and Kaze let them know it. In the end, they took away his last reason for staying. They took away Nyanne. She had been promised to him when they were only children. They'd grown closer with each year, but now, the elders judged him unfit to father children for the clan. Kaze expected Nyanne to oppose their decision, to fight for what they had, but she had meekly agreed to abide by the wisdom of the elders. Wisdom? Was it wisdom to destroy the whole militia for one man? They were senile, they had the wisdom of a stone. They had sealed his fate by bonding Nyanne as the second wife of one of the older men of the clan. Kaze had nothing left to live for.

Rose finished packing her bags. She was reluctant to leave, she felt more at home here than she ever had before. After the excitement of their return From Mar Sara had passed, Rose had tried to make contact with Dominic, but no matter what she tried, she couldn't find him. In the end, she had decided to try to find Johanna's family..... her own ancestral family, in the Russian territories on Earth. She had felt a bit of fear deep

inside when she stepped out of the train into that quaint old city. She didn't know what she could say to Johanna's parents.

Rose's fear was unwarranted, Johanna's smiling parents met her at the train station. Johanna's mother embraced Rose as if she had been her long lost daughter. And more than that, there were more than a dozen members of the Kerlov family waiting to greet her. Rose was the first of the family members from the Americas that had returned to the place of their origins. The family was hoping that this may be the start of a reunion that most members felt was far too long overdue. Rose soon felt like she was part of the family. When her orders came to return to the EDF, Rose felt reluctant to leave. The whole family turned out to see her off, and she was given more gifts than she could fit in her duffle bag. But there was a reason she was drawn back to the EDF, she had to find Dominic.

Chapter 4

Chad took one last look around his barracks room. The room was small and Spartan, like all military barracks, but this one had much more comfortable furnishings than any other he had lived in. Once he was sure he hadn't left any of his few possessions, he left the room and headed down the corridor toward "freedom". Oh, he hadn't been in prison, it just had seemed like it. After the battle at Mar Sara, Chad had been taken aboard a light cruiser and transported directly back to earth. He'd spent the first couple weeks in the hospital at the Victorville EDF base, and then was transferred to The Dragonfly research program under Dr. Tod Moeller. The program had been classified as top secret and was under the tightest of security. Chad was not allowed any outside contact. That, Chad had found unacceptable, there was someone he needed to talk to. It took him a lot of pleading, arguing and finally refusing to co-operate, but in the end, General Parker's aide, Tom, had gotten permission for Chad to contact Arisa. The catch was, all the messages had to be censored by Tom. Chad had sent the messages, a lot of them over the past two months, but Arisa had never sent a reply. Chad had even asked Tom to use the General's influence to find out if Arisa was receiving his messages. Tom was reluctant but did get the system information for Chad. Yes, the messages had been received.

Chad met Dr. Moeller and his assistant Janis in the corridor on the way out. Tod was still fuming about Chad's departure. When the orders had come, that Chad was to report to base for a new assignment, Tod had almost exploded. He'd protested to General Parker, and to anyone else who would listen. The general had tried to get the orders rescinded, but had failed. He had finally explained to the scientist that someone with very high connections had pushed through Chad's transfer, there was nothing he could do about it.

Tod was in a black mood. "They can't do this," he complained. "We still haven't cracked the problem. There has to be something you haven't told us. Some reason you can operate the Dragonfly without losing your mind. They have to let us continue testing you."

Chad sighed, "I told you, there's nothing special about me. I just got lucky."

"No," Tod almost shouted, "there has to be something. We recreated the parameters of your initial situation, even down to the pilot not knowing what will happen, and we lost the pilot. Having the pilots spend hours in the simulator hasn't helped either. It has to be something in your psyche. There is something abnormal in your head!"

Chad stood still, frowning at the doctor. "There's nothing wrong with my head. You just go at this all wrong. You can't just dump people out into empty space, they have to get used to it first, and those simulators are useless. They look nice, but there's something missing. They just feel flat or something, I can't explain it, but you just know it isn't real."

"What can we do about it?" Tod fired back. "We can't just keep scaring pilots crazy till we find one that can take it. How could we make the simulators any more real?"

"Well," Chad mused, "You could try slaving a helmet to an unmanned Dragonfly out in space. That would be the real thing, but the pilot would be aboard ship with you."

Tod looked surprised, "I hadn't thought of that. Maybe that would work, if they knew they were actually in the ship."

"Hmmm, and why don't you start them out at a less transparent setting, maybe like halfway? That way they could see the outline of the mech around them, kind of like sitting in a dirty glass mech or something. That wouldn't be so frightening. Then they could make the thing as clear as they could stand as they got used to it." Chad added.

"That's not possible," Tod informed him, "the system isn't designed with that capability."

"Huh?" Chad looked surprised this time. "It is too, Ghost did just that, when I had to see what I was doing with my mech's hands, that time Captain McFarlaine's mech had a runaway power unit. Ghost could change the transparency to anything I wanted."

Tod looked down at his assistant, Janice, "is that possible? Could the system be modified to have adjustable transparency? How could Chad's unit have done that if it isn't in the system program?"

Chad looked at the young woman. You could almost see the wheels spinning in her mind as her brow wrinkled in concentration. She pushed her oversize glasses up on her small nose, a habit she had when she was thinking. Chad knew Janis would come up with an answer, the mousy girl knew more about the Dragonfly than even Dr. Moeller did.

"It might be possible," She finally replied. "If we duty cycled the sensor view with the real view. I would have to rewrite the display driver code, and there would be complications with syncing the displays so system is smooth enough for....."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" Tod almost shouted as he turned and quickly headed back into the lab. "Come along! We have to rewrite the system! I knew Ross was holding out on us."

Janice turned and started after Dr. Moeller then hesitated and turned back. She looked up at Chad. "Thank you, Chad," she pushed her glasses up on her nose, "and goodbye."

"JANICE!" Tod yelled from down the hall. "No time to waste, we have work to do."

She quickly turned and almost ran down the hall, "I'm coming Doctor."

Chad shook his head. That was just like the doctor, his research was everything, and Janice would do anything for him. Chad sighed and left the building, he got into the air car that was waiting for him.

As they drove off, the MP driving glanced over at Chad. "It must be real downer having to leave the easy life in a setup like this," he said.

Chad almost laughed..... easy life? For two months he'd been subject to every question and every test Dr. Moeller, and every military psych specialist that the doctor could co-opt, could think up. He'd spent hour in the simulators. He'd spent hours wired up to..... who knows what kind of machines, while they tried their best to scare him or drive him crazy. They'd wrung everything they could out of him. The military probably knew more about Lieutenant Chad Ross than they did about any other human. All that time, Chad just wanted to get away, to go back to the 427th, to the few people who had been his friends..... to Arisa. But now, he just didn't care anymore. Arisa hadn't answered any of his messages. John was right, as soon as Chad was gone, she'd forgotten him. She probably found some other guy, someone from her own social rank. "Not really," he told the MP, "it wasn't that great."

"Do you know where they're sending you?" The MP asked.

"No, I don't really care. I'll get my orders when I get to the EDF base on the moon." Chad told the MP. He was a bit curious though, it must have been someone with pretty high connections if even General Parker couldn't get the orders changed.

Chapter 5

Layla leaned close and whispered to her friend, "He's one of them, I know it."

Dana shook her head, "no, I saw them when they came back to base, he wasn't with them."

"But, he is," Layla assured her, "He was injured, that's why he has that cane. He was in the hospital at that time. I saw his picture on the news."

"I don't know," Dana hesitated. She looked the man over. His EDF uniform looked like he had slept in it, he hadn't shaved in a few days and his hair was uncombed. "I don't remember that."

"I'll just go and ask him," Layla said as she got up and headed toward the bar.

"No, wait... Layla!" Dana called after her friend, as she got up quickly to try to stop her.

John Crichton sat at the bar, morosely nursing his second drink. It would be his last, till his next disability check came through. He sighed, there

wasn't much left for him, now that he was a cripple. Damn doctors, they didn't know anything, they said everything had healed up just fine, but it hadn't. They just couldn't get it right. Now he was out of the EDF, medical discharge, and the space administration wouldn't have him back. If only Chad hadn't disappeared. If that stash of old movies he talked about was real, they could make a fortune..... If..... he sighed. If the little froggy had wings, he wouldn't bump his ass every time he jumped. John looked down at his almost empty glass as someone walked up next to him.

"Excuse me, sir, were you at the battle of Mar Sara?" Layla asked him.

John looked down at the girl. She was an EDF academy cadet. A medium height, mocha skinned girl. Her curly black hair was just past shoulder length, she had a cute round face with dark brown eyes. The girl tended to be a bit overweight, but in all the right places. John smiled, "why, yes I was, right in the middle of it."

Dana came up behind Layla. "Oh, wow! You really were one of them? Could you tell us what happened? What was it like to be in the battle?" The girl excitedly asked. This was unexpected, to meet one of the pilots that she, and many other of the cadets considered heroes, no matter what the media tried to make of them. Dana looked into his light blue eyes. She could see there was a handsome and intelligent man under that scruffy exterior.

John looked the new girl over, a tall slender blond. She had very long silky hair, bright blue eyes a small nose and very red lips. She looked about as good as money could make a girl look now days. It had been a long time since any woman had shown interest in him, a long time since he'd been with a woman..... a long time since he'd even tried. John turned on the charm, "I'd be glad to, it wasn't at all like the media boys tell it, I know, we were set up, someone thought we were expendable, but we fooled them."

"Ooooo! Dana squealed. "Please tell me all about it. I'll buy you another drink."

"Hey!" Layla interjected. "I saw him first. Don't go hogging him all to yourself."

John put his arm around the smaller girl's shoulders. "No need to be fighting now girls, there's plenty of old Johnny-boy to go around." He assured her. "Let's find a nice booth and I'll tell you all about it."

Before John could make his way across to the booths, the door opened and three military police entered the bar. The lead MP took a quick look around the room then stepped up to John. "Big surprise, finding you in a bar hitting on the women, Crichton." He sneered at John. "It's been a long time."

"Not long enough, Korth" John told him. "So, they let you out of your cage. What's the occasion, a social call, or are you here to harass someone?" John was confused, if they came for one of the cadets, why would they bring three MP's? What could the girls have done?

"I've got orders to haul your ass into base, Crichton, and I'm not letting you get away this time." Korth told him, with a vicious growl.

John laughed, "go crawl back under your rock, I'm retired, medical discharge. You don't have jurisdiction anymore. Too bad, I'm sure you thought you could get revenge for last time we met."

Korth shoved an envelope of papers at John. "The laugh's on you, bastard, your discharge is rescinded, I'm taking you in, one way or the other. You can come in peacefully, like a whipped mutt, or we can drag what's left of your carcass in when we get done with you. Take your pick."

John stared at the envelope. Rescinded, could they even do that? Why would they? He would never be able to pilot a mech again. Unless..... court-martial, that had to be it. The military needed to blame someone to get the media off their backs, and it looked like the 427th were the sacrificial goats. John leaned on his cane and sighed, a few months ago he would have..... No, now he was useless, no sense in fighting it. "Alright, I'll come along," he answered in a weary voice.

Georgianna sat on the edge of her bunk, head in her hands. It was over, there was nothing she could do now. They must have found out about the black outs, her waking nightmares, battles, fire and destruction, innocent people dying and nothing she could do about it.....post-traumatic stress disorder. She'd tried not to let anyone know, but, how could they miss it. The blackouts had started shortly after they returned from Mar Sara. She had tried to get away, take some R&R time at one of the Mars colonies. She remembers leaving for the colony, but can't remember anything till she found herself back at the moon base. She'd persuaded the EDF to let her function as a firearms instructor. She'd done alright, but there were times she was out of it, like she was in a trance. Someone must have reported it. Enough of them knew about it. After today's incident, they all must know..... The firing range had become a large room, the targets transformed to people, government leaders, military brass, leaders of the empire, and they were plotting to destroy another planet, to kill all the people. They were giving orders for the EDF to attack, to wipe out everyone. She couldn't stand it, couldn't obey their orders. They were murderers and they were laughing about it.

She had to stop them. Georgianna had picked up the rifle and shot them, all of them. She'd emptied the rifle then pulled out her sidearm and emptied it at those laughing killers, but they didn't fall. They became hideous figures, alien. Why weren't the others firing at them? She pulled the gun from the holster of the man next to her and fired till it was empty..... The room slowly dissolved into the firing range, the targets, all of them registering multiple hits. She stood staring blankly.

"Um, sir, could I..... um..... have my weapon back?" The frightened young MP standing next to her asked.

Georgianna looked down at the gun, then at the young man. Damn, she'd have to cover this somehow. "The trigger pull is too heavy and the sight is off to the left. Have it repaired," she told him as she handed the gun back. But it was too late to cover up. They already knew. He was there with her orders to report to headquarters.

PTSD.....they would send her to the hospital..... the “loony bin”. “Captain Georgianna McFairlane,” She whispered, it was who she was, it was all she had left, and now it would be taken away from her.

Chapter 6

Colonel Daniel Hellwind took a sip of his brandy. It was a good brandy, smooth. “But Uncle George, the eleventh, why did they have to assign me to the eleventh? That’s worse than giving me command of an outpost in nowhere.” Dan complained to the General who was sitting across from him.

After the loss of Daniel’s father, General George Parker had raised Daniel as his own. He looked across at Daniel, he knew the young man was getting a bad deal, and yet..... “You should just feel lucky you got a command, Daniel,” the General told him. “It was all I could do to keep you out of a court-martial. Your father had enemy’s Dan, and you’ve made a few of your own. Someone higher up than me pulled the strings to get you a command.”

“But the eleventh?” Dan complained. “It’s just a taxi service. They never see any combat, any action. It’s the cadets that can’t pass combat training. They’ve never been in a fight, not even during the colony wars. All they do is look pretty for the diplomats they haul around the empire. I need more than that.”

“You’ll just have to hang in there till this mess blows over.” The General counseled. “In a few years you might put in for a transfer to a combat unit. Your first assignment is important enough, it’s one of the imperial family, Princess Melpomene. She’s on a diplomatic mission.”

Dan sipped his brandy, “I guess that’s better than babysitting some big wheel’s kids on vacation to an amusement dome.” Daniel sighed. “What kind of mission? I haven’t read the orders yet. Some kind of ladies dinner, or a pony show, or some other boring gathering?”

“A bit more important than that, Dan.” The General told him. “It’s a council of the leaders of the colony worlds. They are discussing breaking away from the empire. The outcome of this council could mean the difference between peace and another bloody war.”

Dan mulled this over as he took another sip of the brandy. “If it’s that important, why would they send Princess Melpomene? She’s the youngest of the emperor’s children, I wouldn’t think she would be their first choice. And, don’t they have diplomats specially trained for things like this?”

“Don’t underestimate the princess,” the General cautioned. “Mel is one of the most gifted people I know. She is one of the best educated psychologists in the empire and has a unique ability to understand people and societies. I’ve known Mel since she was a baby, that little girl could charm her way into the heart of a bronze statue.” General Parker looked out the window as he sipped his brandy. “Melpomene,” he breathed out the name, “Did you know that was the name of one of the muses in ancient Greek mythology? I just hope it isn’t a bad omen.”

"Oh?" Daniel replied, "I didn't know that. Well, that's a good thing, isn't it? We have our own muse."

The General continued to gaze out the window, "Melpomene was the muse of the tragedy."

Daniel returned to his room, he had a lot to think about. Who had stuck him with the eleventh, and why? The military knew the truth about Mar Sara, he might have stretched his authority, but they still had prevented the situation from becoming a bloody mess. There was someone still out there who was behind the sabotage of his mission, and the massacre at Tarsonis. He just wished he had a chance to take on the real people behind the Red Faction.

Daniel sat at his desk, facing his computer screen. He sighed, he was putting off sliding the memory chip into the machine. He was afraid to see what he would have as personnel for his new command. He already knew his command would be short four mechs, and all the pilots were new transfers to the eleventh. He hadn't been told why, perhaps he would find out when he checked the mission orders on the memory chip. It seemed strange that they would short his command, especially since they were transporting an imperial Princess..... Why the eleventh, why short four mechs, why the Princess? Too many questions. Someone had manipulated his first command, had planned sabotage, had set him up for failure. But he'd fooled them, with a bit of luck and the help of an amazing group of pilots. Was some attack planned against him this time? They had ruined the Red Factions plans at Mar Sara, that had to have made him a few more enemies. He not only had to make his new command into the best parade unit in the EDF, he was going to have to forge them into some kind of fighting unit, even if they were misfits and rich kids. Melpomene..... Daniel wasn't a superstitious person, but..... Daniel opened the folder containing the eleventh's personnel and scrolled to the first pilot, he scanned the page and frowned. Daniel scanned the next pilot's page and the next..... Finished checking the pilot's bio's, he leaned forward and put his head in his hands. They were definitely out to ruin him. How could he ever turn that mess into a polished parade unit?

Chapter 7

Chad was in a despondent mood as he exited the tram car. Not only had there been technical troubles at the orbital transfer station delaying the moon shuttle for hours, construction on the tram system had delayed his arrival at the EDF base. He was a couple hours late and missed the shuttle to his ship. He frowned, there was no way he was going to make any crazy effort to get to his ship like he had last time. He just didn't care if they kicked him for it or not.

"Would you be Captain Ross, sir?" Chad looked down at the Ensign that approached him, a girl of medium height and build, a softness to her figure, the boys at home would have called her "squeezable". She had a round face with large, doe like, hazel eyes, and straight brown hair that fell half way down her back. She looked very young and eager.

Chad looked around the room then back at the girl. "I'm Ross, but I'm a Lieutenant," he told her.

"Oh," the girl looked down, "my Colonel sent me to pick up a Captain Chad Ross. He said transportation problems made him late for the shuttle. You fit the description he gave me."

Chad laughed, "It figures, the EDF would screw that up too. I'm Chad Ross, but I'm just a lieutenant."

The girl brightened, "Oh good, I got it right, the Colonel will be happy. Oh, my name is Tammy Wise." She had a nice smile. "The Colonel's shuttle is waiting. I'll take you to the ship."

As Tammy guided the shuttle through the waiting EDF ships she looked over at Chad. "Wait till Layla and Dana hear about this..... they're friends of mine. They were bragging that they met one of the pilots from the battle of Mar Sara, but now, I've actually met the Ghost."

Chad looked at her, "you know about that?"

"Oh yes," Tammy assured him, "everyone knows about the battle, that you shut down all the enemy mechs. That was amazing."

Chad looked away, "it's no big deal..... Do you know who your friends met?" Chad tried to change the subject.

"It was John Crichton," she told him. "They said he was going to tell them all about the battle, but some MP's came and took him away."

Chad chuckled, two girls, and dragged off by MP's, he should have known it was John. "Where did they meet him."

"It was here on the moon, at a bar in Tycho three dome," Tammy told him.

"Oh," Chad sighed, "It would have been nice to see him again." Chad was a bit disappointed, he had a package to give to John. Well, at least he knew where to start looking for him, when he got the chance. "Do you know where we're going?"

"I heard we're going to a planet named Shakuras, somewhere out on the rim." She answered. "Oh, there's our ship," Tammy beamed, "the newest of the White Magic class carriers. It has all the latest armament and sensor systems, a lot of it added after your battle at Mar Sara. Isn't it beautiful?"

Chad looked the ship over. It did look good, clean and new. As they circled toward the hangar deck, Chad looked for the name, he blinked and looked again..... Krikav - b.

Chad admired how expertly Tammy guided the small craft into the hangar. She smiled when he complimented her ability. "I think I'll check out my mech before I head to my cabin." Chad told her.

"I'll make sure your bag gets to your room, Captain..... err, Lieutenant." She told him. "I haven't met the other pilots yet, they probably are in the lounge right now."

Chad looked over the room, the doors to the Mech bays were closed, that was something different. He wondered which door his mech was behind.

"Hey Chad, you finally made it, welcome aboard."

Chad spun around then got a smile on his face. "Bob! What are you doing here?"

"I guess they couldn't turn you loose with a new mech without sending me to make sure you take care of it, seeing how you wrecked the last couple you had." Bob stepped up and shook Chad's hand, "great to see you again."

"A new mech? Chad laughed, "so they actually trust me with a new mech?" He looked around, "is Greg here?"

"Greg retired from active duty," Bob informed him as they walked over to one of the hangar bays, "something about being too old to go crashing into planets. He's teaching at the academy now. Ya, they sent you a new mech, fresh out of the factory. Seems they think you're the only pilot that can handle it." Bob activated the control to the blast door.

"Why are all the blast doors down?" Chad asked. "Is there some kind of trouble?"

"Na," Bob assured him, "just the latest safety directive from the top brass. After our last mission, they're seeing sabotage in their dreams. Well, I guess we didn't get all those Red Faction guys, that Geraldine character did get away, so they may be plotting something else..... There she is, the pre-production model Dragonfly. There won't be any production units till they figure out why you can use it and nobody else can."

Chad looked up at the new machine. The same dull dark grey, the familiar shape and size..... but, it wasn't the Ghost. He sighed. "Maybe the difference is that I didn't have a choice, once I found it, I had to learn to use it."

Bob laughed, "maybe you're right. You were desperate enough to make the system work for you. Why don't you climb aboard and check it out. This new one is a lot better than that old cobbled together mech you had. I think you're going to like it. It's got a better power unit, lots more output, so you have a standard Firefly weapon set. It's got an even better computer and improvements to the control systems."

"I suppose it will be better," Chad admitted as he climbed the steps up to the cockpit platform. He checked over the clean lines, he'd never been assigned a new mech before, no dents or damage. Chad climbed into the cockpit and sat in the pilots chair. It was certainly nicer than the old Ghost had been. The seating was comfortable and the control consoles nicely finished. Not the cobbled together mess that he had become familiar with in the Ghost. He sighed, it just wasn't going to be the same. He supposed the new unit would serve him well once it had been conditioned..... But it wouldn't be the Ghost, that had almost felt alive to him. Chad booted up the controls, might as well start checking out the new systems.

"Hello Chad, it's so good to see you again."

Chad's head snapped up, instinctively he looked around, "Ghost?"

"Yes Chad."

"But..... How?" Chad asked, almost afraid he was dreaming. "I thought you were wrecked on Mar Sara."

"The old mobile suit hardware was damaged beyond feasibility of repair, but my core memory was undamaged, Chad." Ghost told him. "Since I was integrated to Pilot Chad Ross it was only logical that they would install my core memory in your new mobile suit. I have waited a long time for your return."

Chad got a rueful smile, at least one female hadn't deserted him, even if she wasn't quite human.

Chapter 8

Arisa left the pilot's lounge and turned down the corridor toward the hangar. She was in a bad mood and just couldn't sit there with the other pilots. Maybe she'd just go sit in Keon and sulk. Arisa had hoped her new mission would give her a chance to search for Chad. So far, the few inquiries she'd made had gotten her exactly zero. Now, she was assigned to some useless unit and they were being sent to the far end of nowhere. She wouldn't have any chance of digging up information on where her father had coerced the military to send Chad. Or perhaps her father had threatened Chad, or paid him off to stay away from her..... or worse, had him eliminated. She had to find out, one way or another.

As Arisa walked across the hangar floor, she passed in front of one of her new unit's Fireflies. She stopped and looked up at the big machine, then, she climbed the steps to the cockpit level platform. She turned and leaned on the railing, looking out over the hangar floor. It just wouldn't seem right..... not having Chad there. He should be the one piloting the recon mech. She didn't understand why, but ever since she'd first run into the tall young pilot, she'd wanted to be around him. "It's not fair," Arisa complained to the empty room. "Just when I find a boy I really like, dad has him sent away." Arisa was sure it had to have been her father's doing. No one else she knew had the money and connections to make people disappear. "It's just not fair..... I don't care where dad made them send you, I'm going to find you Chad Ross. I don't care if he paid you to go, I won't let you get away....." Arisa wiped at her eyes and sobbed. "If only you'd call me, or e-mail. Why don't you send me a message, even if it's just to tell me you don't want me around....."

Chad checked over the control systems of the new mech, There had been some upgrades to the standard Firefly and, of course, the command set for the stealth system. He booted up the main screens and was about to pick up the helmet to check out the full sensor systems when he froze. He watched her climb the steps to the platform, her lithe petite form, her bright blue eyes, deep red lips and her crown of golden curls. He reached for the canopy release, she was everything he wanted, he stopped and pulled his hand back, and everything he couldn't have. She hadn't answered his messages, it was obvious, she'd forgotten him. "I have to get out of here, transfer to another outfit..... Even if I have to go AWOL, I can't stay here." He mumbled.

"To go AWOL would be against EDF regulations, you should not do that, Chad." Ghost told him. "Why would you need to leave?"

"She doesn't want me anymore, Ghost. She's forgotten all about me, probably found some other guy. John was right, I was just a toy to her. I can't stay here if she's here."

Suddenly the outside microphone pickups turned on and Chad heard, "I don't care where dad made them send you, I'm going to find you Chad Ross. I don't care if he paid you to go, I won't let you get away..... If only you'd call me, or e-mail. Why don't you send me a message, even if it's just to tell me you don't want me around....."

Over the noise of the hangar, Arisa didn't hear the cockpit opening behind her. "I did send you e-mails, a bunch of them," Chad said as he stood up in the cockpit. Arisa spun around, her eye wide with surprise. "but, you never answered them, not a single one." Chad accused her.

"I... I never got any." Arisa quietly answered. Tears blurred her vision as she raced the few steps across the platform. "Chad!" Arisa screamed out as she dived straight over the main console and wrapped her arms around the boy, driving him back down into the pilot's seat. As she scrambled across the console to slide down onto Chad's lap, her foot, fortuitously, tapped the canopy control, shutting the two in. Three months earlier, when they first kissed, Arisa had decided she was going to teach Chad how to be a great lover..... She had three months of lost time to make up for, and she was trying her best to catch up.

It's a good thing Chad wasn't claustrophobic as the canopy closed over them. He found himself squeezed behind the main console, where there is hardly room for the pilot, with Arisa sitting on his lap. It's a good thing he was slim and Arisa so petite, they barely fit, but, with the girl pressing against him and his arms around her, he didn't mind at all.

Chapter 9

Georgianna was in a black mood as she headed for the hangar. She had been elated to find that she wasn't being called to a court martial but to be assigned to a new outfit. The elation hadn't lasted long. She'd been assigned to a worthless unit and now they were being sent to the middle of nowhere. All she could imagine was, they were trying to get rid of her, of everyone connected with the Mar Sara operation. Now they'd been ordered to assemble on the hangar deck..... In dress uniform, what the hell was going on?

Bob chuckled as he stopped the video playback on his camera. He was really glad he thought to grab it when he saw Arisa climbing up to Chad's mech. He figured things might get interesting, seeing how low a mood the girl had been in. He guessed there would be fireworks, one way or the other. It turned out to be the good kind..... Wait till he put this up on the screen in the lounge.

Bob looked up when Captain McFairlane came up to him. He started to smile but thought better of it. For a beautiful woman, the captain could be very scary. "Is there something I can do for you Captain?"

"Have you seen Arisa?" Georgianna snapped. "She disappeared just before we got orders to assemble here in dress uniform."

"Oh, she showed up a few minutes ago... here." Bob restarted the video on the camera and handed it to Georgianna. He thought a bit of humor would lighten up the Captain's mood. He was wrong.

Georgianna scowled at the camera, "Ross," she growled. Georgianna slammed the camera back into Bob's hands and turned toward Chad's mech. "I told her to stay away from him. She just doesn't get it."

Georgianna slapped her hand on the communicator next to Chad's mech. "Arisa, Ross, get down here, NOW!" She ordered. Georgianna closed her eyes for a moment, wishing she could get rid of the headache that had been plaguing her.

Arisa sighed as Chad reached for the control to open the cockpit, they never had enough time. She gave Chad one last quick kiss before she turned and climbed out of the mech.

Chad started to stand up as Arisa climbed out, then sat back down. Maybe he should wait a bit..... If having the little beauty sitting on his lap, kissing him, wasn't enough, seeing her climbing out over the main console was almost too much. Arisa was wearing the same skirt like shorts she had been on the Mar Sara mission when she had climbed into her mech in front of him. But this time, she was so close he could have..... She just didn't know what she was doing to him.

Arisa glanced back before she climbed down from the service platform. She smiled when she saw the expression on Chad's face. She knew exactly what she was doing to him, that's why she'd climbed out over the console instead of off to the side like a pilot normally would. She knew the tricks to catching a boy's eye, and she intended to use every one of them on Chad.

Georgianna frowned as Arisa came up to her. Arisa's happy smile just made her mood worse, she didn't know why. "What the hell were you doing in that mech? Couldn't you even wait till you got to your room?"

Arisa's smile never wavered, "why would we go to my room?" She asked in her most innocent voice. "Well, anyway..... I haven't seen Chad in three months. We have some catching up to do."

"I warned you to stay away from him, he's going to get you into trouble," Georgianna growled. "He's not your kind."

Arisa's smile faded, her look became icy. "And just what "kind" is he, Captain?"

Georgianna closed her eyes for a moment, why was she getting so upset about this? Hadn't she decided, long ago, that it wasn't her business, but she just couldn't let it go. She looked up, trying to think of an answer, something that would cool the situation, but just then Chad walked up. "What took you so long, Ross?" She barked. "I gave you an order, I expect you to move."

Chad looked down at the Captain. "I, ah, had to shut down some things," he told her, his face starting to redden a bit.

"When I give you an order," Georgianna growled, "you will obey it immediately."

"Not necessarily," Colonel Hellwind's voice came from behind her.

Georgianna spun around to look glare at the Colonel as he walked up to them. "What do you mean by that?" She demanded.

The Colonel didn't answer her, he looked at Chad, "glad to see you made it, Captain Ross," he said, making sure to emphasize the Captain. "I suppose you haven't been to your room yet, your insignia and promotion orders are waiting there."

"Captain?!" Georgianna raised the question in an indignant tone. How could he have been promoted? She was about to say more when she was cut off.

Whap!! Chad almost fell over from the blow to his back. "Hey, Chad! I wondered if you'd show up. Great to see you buddy." Ben's voice echoed through the room.

Chad spun around and scowled at the huge man, "I should have you arrested for assaulting an officer," he threatened.

Ben blinked, "Huh? What do ya mean?"

"Oh, Chad was promoted to Captain, Ben," Arisa giggled.

Ben took a step back, putting his hands in the air, "Oh man, sorry sir. I didn't mean anything by it."

Chad laughed as he stepped forward and shook Ben's hand, "I glad to see you too, Bullseye."

John Crichton limped up to the group, leaning heavily on his cane, "this is interesting, most of our unit brought together again. But, what's with the dress uniforms?"

"In a few minutes, Princess Melpomene will be coming aboard." Colonel Hellwind informed them. "She is going to be traveling on board the Krikav."

"What?" John said incredulously. "Why? Don't the imperials travel on their own luxury transports? In fact, doesn't the eleventh just escort the transport liners for the diplomats and imperials? None of them ever come aboard, it's too much of a step down from their luxury ships. Why would she travel on the Krikav?"

"I don't know," the Colonel answered, "Who knows what those imperials are thinking. We are escorting a transport carrying her staff, but no imperial ship. Maybe they think someone will make an attack on the empire's delegates and an imperial ship would be too good a target..... It's never happened, the eleventh has never been in a battle, but....." A sudden thought occurred to the Colonel, what if this was a setup? Someone had tried to set his command up for destruction at Mar Sara. What if that someone was making another try?

"So that's why we were assigned to replace the eleventh's personnel," Megumi added as she came up to stand next to Ben. "They wanted a combat team, without causing suspicion. Who better for the job than the people they appear to be trying to get rid of." She saw that a few of the others were nodding in agreement.

An alarm sounded in the hangar and the inner lock doors opened to admit the shuttle. "We can think about that later," The Colonel ordered, "she's here, everyone line up for inspection."

“Georgianna... Captain, hey, Georgi, wake up,” John tried to get through to the Captain. He saw recognition slowly light her dull eyes. “Colonel ordered us to get in line for inspection. Are you alright?”

Georgianna blinked and looked around. Damn, she’d blanked out again, but this time it wasn’t like the illusions he’d had before, this time, it felt like someone else was inside her, watching her. “I’m fine,” she snapped at John, “it’s just this darn headache. Right, get in line.”

Chad had been watching Georgianna, he thought he noticed something wrong, she just wasn’t acting like she had last time he’d seen her. She’d been spaced out, like the druggies he’d known in the lower city. But, she’d snapped out of it in seconds when John called her name..... strange. Maybe she was just overtired.

The Colonel looked over their rather uneven line and almost groaned. He would never make a parade group from this bunch, everything from the oversize Ben to tiny Arisa, who was still wearing her casual uniform. And worst of all, Chad had been traveling two days, and he looked like it. He just hoped the princess wouldn’t bother with inspecting the troops. “Attention everyone,” he called out and turned toward the shuttle as the door opened.

Chapter 10

Colonel Hellwind wished he’d had time to straighten out the mess of a lineup that the pilots had made. They could at least have lined up by height or something. The shuttle door opened and a very officious looking older man exited, followed by a young woman who was apparently the princess’s aide. Dan held his breath as Princess Melpomene started down the ramp, it had been years since he had last seen her. They had been children when he had accompanied General Parker on visits to the imperial palace. He had played with the emperor’s two sons and their little sister was always hanging around. She’d changed..... Uh, well, of course she had..... Daniel thought she was stunning. Tall and slender, but blessed with abundant curves, her silk dress flowed like a watercolor in a rain shower. She had a beautifully regal face with bright hazel eyes and deep red lips, her dark auburn hair was wrapped in a long loose braid on top of her head held in place by her jeweled tiara.

Dan was so captured by her he almost forgot to welcome her aboard. “Welcome aboard the Krikav, Princess,” He told her as he bowed to her. “I trust you will find the eleventh ready to serve you.”

“We shall see,” she told him in a haughty voice and stepped forward toward the line of pilots, dashing the Colonel’s hope that she might not wish to review the troops. The princess wanted a firsthand look at the pilots. She had taken great pains to find out all she could about each of them. She knew more about them than even Colonel Hellwind.

Melpomene stepped up to the first pilot, she looked down on the smaller man. Kaze, she thought to herself, the pilot from one of the para-military communes, an excellent mixed martial arts fighter. What was he doing in the EDF? The communes wanted nothing to do with the empire, they feared the EDF, what was their purpose of sending him to join?

Arrogant imperial, Kaze thought to himself. They look down on us like we're inferior scum.

She stepped to the next in line Rose Kerlav, a medium height woman, but she was the textbook definition of voluptuous. She was related to Colonel Kerlov who had been killed at the battle of Mar Sara, that might cause some revenge issues, plus, the captain, Torres, that had disappeared seemed to be someone of importance to her. This could cause problems.

Rose looked up at the taller woman, feeling a bit awed, she had never been in the presence of imperial royalty.

Next in line, John Crichton, he was a handsome man, slightly taller than she was. His story with the space agency was an enigma. His injury was another enigma, the doctors insist the nerve regeneration was complete and there is nothing that can be wrong with him, yet Lieutenant Crichton has been in pain and unable to walk without a cane. He'd been in deep depression and had been trying to drink himself into oblivion since he'd gotten out of the hospital. This was a fascinating case, she would have to look deeper into his mental state.

John stood as straight as he could, if only he didn't need this cane. What would a woman like the princess think of a cripple like him? He felt useless.

Next was Captain Georgianna McFairlane, a woman as tall as the princess but much more athletic. Melpomene thought the fiery haired woman could easily be one of the warrior women in the ancient books her brother use to collect. It would be fitting because the Captain had a reputation as a ferocious fighter. There was a problem though, she had gotten reports of Georgianna's blackouts, and worse, her hallucinations. These appeared to have started after she returned from leave she took on her return from Mar Sara. She would have to watch this one.

Georgianna could feel something trying to control her mind, trying to see out of her eyes. She felt hatred for the woman standing in front of her, but she couldn't understand why.

The next pilot, Ben Wolfman, was the largest man she had ever seen, and she'd seen plenty, her father's imperial guards were all selected from the largest of soldiers. It wasn't just that he was so tall, he seemed as wide as he was tall. Good lord, his arms must be as big around as her waist. She wondered how he could fit in a mech, even one as big as a Lancer H. They must have to squeeze him into the cockpit. Melpomene had to fight to keep the smile from her face as an image of a tech jumping on Ben's wide shoulders to force him down into the mech crossed her mind. What an intimidating personal guard a man like Ben would make.

Wow, Ben thought, she's a pretty lady, doesn't seem very friendly though.

Lieutenant Megumi Yamato was next in line, a smaller woman of oriental ancestry. Melpomene almost sighed seeing her beautiful long black hair, straight and shining. This was the girl that had been spending all her time with the giant Ben, definitely an odd couple. He had to be four times her mass. The princess wondered how that went over with her family, the Asian group was very proud of their heritage. They rarely married outside of their ethnic group.

Megumi almost sighed, why couldn't she be tall and have beautiful wavy auburn hair?

The next pilot fascinated her, Captain Chad Ross. He was the pilot that had come up from the lower levels of Detroit, a boy from the poorest of classes, a gang member and felon. Tall and lean, he had boyish good looks, and that scar across his face gave him a roguish slant. The princess smiled for the first time, the pilot who conquered the mind killing Dragonfly. What was it that made him different? This pilot she was determined to get to know better.

Chad thought the princess looked too arrogant, and he'd faced arrogant people before, then she smiled, and Chad saw a completely different person behind the mask.

Last in line was Arisa. Ian Higgins little girl had grown up. Melpomene had to fight to keep from laughing. She strained to keep a straight face, Arisa may have gotten older, but she certainly hadn't grown much. She hadn't changed at all since the Princess had last seen her five years ago at Arisa's highschool graduation. Arisa had always been the smallest in her class, and she still was. So, she was interested in Chad, Melpomene knew Arisa had been badgering the military for information on Chad's whereabouts. She wondered what Ian Higgins thought about that. It wasn't hard to notice the darkening of Arisa's look when the Princess had smiled at Chad. So, Arisa had a jealous streak. Things might just get interesting. Melpomene just hoped they kept the girl away from the ammunition and warheads, she'd seen what Arisa could do with a few chemicals.

Arisa wasn't happy to see the Princess again. Last time she'd seen Mel was at her graduation party, and all the boys had flocked around the older girl. She frowned when Mel smiled at Chad, she didn't care if Mel was a Princess, she couldn't have Chad. She was too old for him anyway, she was over thirty years old.

Melpomene looked around and saw a couple ship's crew wheeling her belongings toward the corridor. "Ensign," she called out to Tammy who was overseeing the move, "you will escort me to my room now." She turned toward the older man who had accompanied her, "Walter, you will return to the Loire with the shuttle."

"But Princess," Walter protested, "I should...."

"You will return to the Loire," Melpomene ordered him, then turned away and left with Tammy.

Colonel Hellwind watched the Princess as she strode from the room. He felt disappointment set in. He'd hoped she would remember him, but that was only wishful thinking, Melpomene wasn't the little girl he remembered. She was so cold. This could be a long assignment. He let the pilots go and headed for the bridge, it was time to start for Shakuras.

Chapter 11

In a heavily cloaked ship drifting among the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter, the First Esper fearfully approached the Supreme Leader. He

remembered well what had happened when the Leader became angry with the previous First Esper. He waited respectfully until the Leader displayed the eye movements that acknowledged his presence.

"Leader, we have been granted some good fortune," he informed his superior. "The subject we chose to control is in the presence of a member of the ruler's family. The person is traveling on a diplomatic mission to one of the distant colonies. It appears to be a mission of some importance. They have departed for the colony they call Shakuras."

At the mention of the ruling family's involvement the Leader turned toward the Esper. Shakuras! Why was one of the rulers involving themselves with that colony? Why now? "This is interesting news, but will you be able to control your subject or will you fail as your predecessor did?" The Leader asked as he kept his emotions in check.

"We are confident that we can keep control of this subject, my Leader." The First Esper assured him. "We have tried a different approach to the problem. We have used a female as a subject."

The Leader frowned at his subordinate, "What foolishness is this? What do you think you will accomplish by controlling a female?" He growled at the Esper. "Females are nothing but breeding stock, they have no influence."

"There is something unusual among this civilization," the Esper quickly explained. "They apparently train some females to operate military weapons. We believe these must be females that are unacceptable as breeding stock. The subject we chose is in a lower command position in the military. She was involved with the group that caused the failure of General Geraldine at Mar Sara. It was relatively easy to use conventional technique to bring out her fears and angers. The implant has grown into place and we have been able to take control when we desire." He decided it would not be a good time to mention that the ruling family member going on this mission was also female.

"You had better be correct, Esper," the Leader threatened. "Call in the other ships, we will proceed to this colony." The Leader ordered his pilot. "We may yet find a way to use the Esper's subject to ignite a war."

Chapter 12

Chad hurried to his room, suddenly not so tired anymore. He wanted to get a shower and shave and then back to Arisa. The one thing he hadn't even been able to hope for had happened. It still seemed like he was dreaming. Tammy had delivered his bag to his room, that was good, and he also found his orders waiting for him. Chad rubbed his finger over the Captain's insignia and smiled. He didn't know why he rated being promoted back to captain, but it felt good. Maybe he would find some respect, at least among his friends in this group. There was another case there that puzzled him. He looked at the tag. It read, "Captain Chad Ross, intel service equipment. Curious, Chad opened the case, he whistled in surprise. He recognized most of the tools, many of them for breaking and entering. He'd used tools like these in Detroit, in his former life, but there were some pieces of very high tech equipment too. With this stuff he could

break into a secure bank. There was also the latest in high tech surveillance equipment. What the heck was going on? Just what did they expect him to do with this stuff on a mission to escort the princess? He closed the case and hurried to get cleaned up, those questions would have to wait, he had something more important to think about.

Georgianna sat back in the lounge chair, glad her headache had faded. It had gone away after they had been dismissed from the hangar. It must have been the stress, she decided. These dreams and blackouts, they had to be from stress. She just had to relax and let go. She thought of the feeling of hatred and loathing she had when the princess stood in front of her and just couldn't find a reason for it. Sure, the woman was arrogant and unfriendly but she'd expected that. What had triggered such negative emotions? And, what about Chad? She just couldn't get past the fact that he'd been a gang member, or of her hatred for gangs after what they had done to her family. But Chad wasn't one of them anymore, she knew that, but still, she couldn't accept him.

Megumi came in and sat next to Ben. He smiled and put his arm around her. "Where's Kitten and Chad?" He asked. "Off to her room like the captain suggested?" He laughed.

Megumi turned a little pink. "No," she answered, "nothing like that. Chad went to get cleaned up and Arisa is in our room fussing over her looks." Megumi giggled.

Ben laughed again, "she sure doesn't have to do that, she's too cute just the way she is."

Megumi punched the big guy's arm, then wrapped her arms around it and leaned against him. "You may be right about that, but she needs to look her best for inspection, Chad is a captain, after all." She giggled.

Georgianna frowned, it irritated her to see Megumi and Ben so close. And, that ensign, Tammy, was sitting with Kaze, looking at him like he was some video star or something. Megumi's mention of Chad caused her to boil over. "How the hell does he get promoted to captain?" She snarled. "He must have brown nosed it because of that mech he had. He hardly did anything at Mar Sara except wreck the thing. We were the ones who did all the fighting. He doesn't deserve a promotion..... he isn't even one of us." Georgianna looked down and wrung her hands. Why had she said all that? It wasn't really the true story. It would do nothing but turn people against her.

John looked up from the side table where he was sitting, alone. "You're wrong, Georgianna," he told her. "You and I disobeyed orders at Mar Sara, we were lucky to get away without being demoted, or even facing court martial. Chad was the only one who had an excuse for being on the planet. He even followed orders while on the planet. His recon was valuable and in the end, it was his idea that shut down the Red Faction mechs. You might not like it, but he earned what he got."

Georgianna stood up, her fists clenched at her sides. "You would side with him, you damn lecher." She almost screamed. "He's a gang member, a gutter rat. He doesn't deserve to be a pilot, he should be in prison with the rest of those animals. He shouldn't be here, and neither should you, you're

a cripple, useless. You should be playing war hero for the bar flies. That's all you're good for." Georgianna's fists were clenched so hard her nails cut into her palms. She turned and stalked from the room.

Chapter 13

Colonel Dan Hellwind stood in front of his mirror, he straightened his tie and combed his hair, making sure he was at his best. He'd been relaxing in his seat on the bridge, admiring how the new Krikav smoothly slipped into warp drive. He had hardly noticed the transition, unlike the old ship that gave a lurch that almost upset your stomach. There were major improvements to almost every system on the new Krikav. He'd barely had time to take stock of his new ship when the young aide to the princess approached him. She informed him that, at such a time as his duties allowed, the Princess would like him to meet with her in her quarters. He wasn't sure what to expect, she wasn't the little girl he remembered from all those years ago. She probably was upset with her accommodations. The room was the largest and best they had aboard the Krikav, but a warship wasn't designed to carry imperial dignitaries. He sighed, this could be a rough trip.

Dan decided to take the corridor around the outside of the ship on his way to the Princess's quarters. He enjoyed seeing the strangeness of warp space outside as he passed through the observation lounge. In the lounge he found the young pilot, Chad, lying across one of the benches, sleeping. It would have been an uncomfortable place to sleep, except his head was resting on Arisa's lap. Arisa looked up at the colonel as he walked past, a happy smile on her face. At least a few of his pilots would be in a good mood, the colonel thought. He remembered his days at the academy and times with Johanna..... Perhaps, if things had been a little different..... but Johanna was ambitious, nothing could stand in the way of her desire to reach the rank of general.

At the door to the Princesses quarters, the Colonel hesitated, once again his memories of Melpomene as a tall, skinny little girl flooded his mind. To her brothers, she'd been a pest, but Dan hadn't minded her being around. She had always been bright and happy, but now..... well, that had been many years ago. He pressed the call button and waited. When the door opened, the Colonel stood staring, his formal greeting caught in his throat. He blinked, and looked around, this wasn't what he expected at all.

Melpomene stood inside the door, she giggled at the rather dumbfounded officer. "I guess I should have had Lynnette tell you it wasn't a formal meeting." She laughed, "well, are you going to come in Dan? We have a lot to talk about."

Dan recovered from his surprise. He'd expected a princess, in all her regalia, but instead, he found the "girl next door". Her auburn hair in a long loose braid hanging to her waist, two tight braids pulled back from her temples to the back of her head. She wore a loose dark blue sweater and tight denim jeans. Dan thought she could easily have been a college

girl. He tried to recall the greeting he'd rehearsed, "ah..... welcome aboard the Krikav, Princess, I hope the rooms are satisfactory....."

Melpomene stepped up and put a finger on Dan's lips, "Dan, this is Mel, remember, you don't need to be so formal." She remembered the boy who had been her friend, who had insisted her brothers include her in their games. She hoped he hadn't changed too much.

"But, in the hangar... with the pilots, I thought..." He stammered.

Mel laughed, "if I didn't put on a show for Walter, the old goat would have a coronary. That's why I made sure the Loire accompanied us, so I could get rid of him, or he'd have been on about what I wear and how I act the whole trip. Now I just have to find a way to keep him occupied when we get to Shakuras."

Dan looked down at the princess and laughed, "well you had me convinced Prin.....ah..... Mel. I guess we do have a lot to talk about. It's been a long time."

The Colonel and Princess spent a long enjoyable time getting to know one another, after all that time. Finally, Melpomene decided to get to business of their mission. "There is a reason I brought your group of pilots together, Dan."

"You were the one who transferred us to the eleventh?" Dan was a bit surprised.

"Yes, and there is a reason we insisted this diplomatic meeting be conducted on Shakuras." She told him. "It wasn't just because of its central location. We intercepted a communication sent to an officer in the OMI who has been under suspicion. On that information, we did some checking of surveillance on Shakuras, take a look at this." She clicked a picture up on the view screen.

Chapter 14

John looked up at the tall burgundy colored mech. They had done a good job putting Epyon back together. He didn't think he would ever see his mech again. John sighed, a lot of good it would do, he would never pilot it again. Georgianna was right, he was useless, crippled. He had no clue as to why someone put him on this assignment. He shouldn't be here.

"Good as new," Bob said as he came up behind John. "I checked it out myself, they did a good job of repairing the damage. They were going to scrap it, but someone sent down orders to rebuild it."

"Who gave those orders?" John asked. "And why? I can't pilot it, I'd be useless, or worse, if we got in a battle."

"Oh, I wouldn't be so sure about that," Bob answered. "In a space battle, you'd do just fine, and even in a ground battle, I'd rather have you on my team hopping on one leg than a lot of the pilots I've seen on two legs."

"It still seems strange they would call me off of medical retirement just to escort the high and mighty around." John answered ruefully.

"That isn't the only strange thing about this mission." Bob told him.

"Oh?" John queried. "What else do you mean?" John had plenty of suspicions of his own, but he would like to know what the tech might be thinking.

"Well, why were the eleventh personnel replaced, and why by this group? Why place combat experienced pilots in the transport service? If you were trying to bury the people that were at Mar Sara somewhere where they wouldn't be seen, you wouldn't have them show up as executive escorts, especially for one of the imperial family. And as for that, why is an imperial being escorted by the eleventh, and not by the imperial guard? Why did the eleventh get a new ship, the latest model? Were there a few surprises added, like the mechs on the Mar Sara mission? The orders for this came from somewhere high up, really high up. I've heard there are some people among the imperial court who don't like the princess, they think she's too smart, that she has too much influence. I was just thinking, someone was trying to start a war, they tried to get rid of this group on the way to Mar Sara, maybe they figure they can get rid of the princess and all of you in one shot."

John leaned on his cane and pondered Bob's words. "That's a lot of questions, Bob, and I'm afraid they make too much sense." He mused. "If someone wants a war, all they'd need to do is take out the Krikav, and the princess, and claim it was the colonies retaliating for Tarsonis and Mar Sara. I know we took out the Red Faction at Mar Sara, but we didn't find who-ever is the leader, and the media is trying to make it sound like the whole thing is the EDF's fault."

"That's kind of what I was thinking," Bob answered. "I checked over the mechs myself, I didn't find any traps. I just hope there wasn't anything done to the ship, that would be hard to spot. It could even be one of the personnel, remember, there was a saboteur on the Mar Sara mission. We just have to keep our eyes open."

John sighed, if there were sabotage to the ship, they would be dead before they knew what happened, unless Yuki caught it in time..... no use thinking about that. "I'll see what I can find out about the ship's crew. Other than that, all we can do is wait."

Arisa looked out of the observation port at the strangeness of warp space. It hadn't been her father who had hidden Chad away from her. It was military secrecy, but who had brought them together again? Certainly not her father. She looked down at Chad's face lying on her lap as he slept. Many of the things her father had said about the boy were true, he has a criminal record, he is a bastard son with no knowledge of who his father is. He was a gang member from the wrong side of society. But he had left all that behind, he was a talented tech and a good pilot, the pilot of the Ghost, a captain in the EDF. Her father was wrong, Chad was successful, he was going to make something of himself.

The announcement over the intercom woke Chad from a pleasant dream. He looked up at Arisa's pretty face with its halo of golden curls. It took a few moments to realize he was no longer dreaming. He smiled, "hello angel," he said, quietly.

Arisa looked down at Chad and giggled, "I am not an angel," she informed him.

"Oh?" Chad's eyebrows raised in question.

"I'm a kitten," Arisa corrected him, "Ben says so."

"Well then, if Ben says so.....," Chad laughed as he sat up, "and he hit the bull's-eye, as always. Kitten fits you perfectly. You're soft and cuddly..... Would you like your ears rubbed?" He whispered in her ear."

"Not in public," John's voice startled the two as he came into the room. "Didn't you hear, we were called to the ready room?"

Chad's face turned a bit red, "I must have missed that."

Arisa frowned, "it's always something, just at the wrong time."

John sighed, "You have lots of time, don't rush things, it only causes trouble."

Arisa jumped up, "well, I'm not use to waiting. I guess we better get to the ready room." She giggled, "wouldn't want people to start talking about us."

Chapter 15

Georgianna looked around the ready room as she entered. Most of the others were there. She noted that John was sitting on one side of the room, next to Arisa and Chad. She moved to sit on the other side of the room. Why did she let herself get so upset over Crichton? If he wanted to chase every woman who walked by, it didn't bother her, she didn't care..... She told herself. Why had she felt so angry toward other people, like the princess? She hardly knew anything about the woman. It just wasn't like her to be this way. She just had to get control before.....

Colonel Hellwind held the door for Melpomene and followed her into the room. He looked around at his group of pilots. How was he going to make a cohesive group from this mixed bag of oddballs. They would never be a polished parade unit, that was for sure. He glanced at Georgianna, he just hoped he could get them to work together.

"Alright people, I've heard the grumbling. We've been reassigned to the eleventh, we're in the transport division along with the rest of the losers. But, we're back together, we have a mission, and I'm your commanding officer. We have a job to do and we are going to be the best damn transport unit in the EDF. Got that?"

"Yes sir," was the unenthusiastic reply from the pilots.

"I don't think I heard that," the colonel growled at them. "At Mar Sara, I thought I had the best pilots in the EDF, pilots who would get the job done, no matter what the mission, no matter what the odds. Was I wrong? Are you going to give up, or are you going to show them we are the best unit in the EDF? Now, again, we are going to be the best unit in the EDF. Got that?"

"Yes sir!" The reply was considerably more enthusiastic.

Daniel looked over the faces, trying to judge the support he could count on. There were some he knew he could count on. Ben grinned and gave a thumbs up, Chad had that hard look in his eyes and nodded when the colonel looked his way, some others looked a bit embarrassed, but ready to go along. The thing that worried him were two people who were important to his plans, Georgianna still had an angry look in her green eyes and John had an air of defeat hovering around him.

"Good, one reason we were transferred to this unit is that, due to the political situation, there is a real chance of combat. That is why we have a new ship, one that wasn't scheduled to be sent to the transport unit." He looked at John, "yes Crichton, Yuki told me to inform you that the ship was double checked by the imperial guard. You don't have to worry about that."

John turned a bit red faced, Yuki must have been listening in on them.

"There are changes in combat teams, Blue Dragon team, Captain Chad Ross, Lieutenants Higgins, Yamato and Kaze , you will be taking lead in any recon situations. Lead in combat situations is Red Phoenix, Captain Georgianna McFarlane, lieutenants Wolfman, Kerlav and Crichton."

Georgianna's look darkened, "Colonel, I request that you place Crichton on recon and Kaze on my team."

"Denied, captain. Those are my assignments." The colonel informed her.

"But Crichton can't fight, he can hardly even walk. Look at him," Georgianna burst out. "He's worthless."

"That's enough captain!" Daniel barked. "If you can't accept my orders you will be relieved of duty and confined to quarters. Am I clear on that?"

Georgianna looked down, why had she done that? She should have known it would only lead to a reprimand, or worse. Maybe John couldn't fight, but it didn't matter if he'd just stay out of her way. "Yes sir, I'm sorry, it won't happen again," she told him.

"See that it doesn't." Daniel growled. He didn't know what to make of Georgianna's attitude. Maybe it was just a bad time for her. He certainly hoped so, he needed her to be able to work with John.

"There will be changes when we reach Shakuras," Dan continued. "There will be four mechs on the ground when the shuttle lands, and they will be rotated on guard duty while we are there. Wolfman, Kerlav, Yamato and Kaze, you will be the pilots on duty, under my direct command."

Georgianna looked like she was ready to speak out, but held herself back. Chad looked around then spoke up. "Ah, sir, wouldn't it be better to have Ghost on the planet? I mean, I could watch things without them knowing I'm around."

"That isn't what I'm trying to achieve, Ross." The colonel explained. "I want them to see a show of force, besides, I have other plans for the rest of you." He looked at Georgianna, then at John, "Crichton and McFarlane will be personal guards for the princess." He noticed Georgianna's frown. "Captain, you are an expert with handguns," he told her, "and we agreed that with your elegant looks, you could easily fit in at the parties for the dignitaries." He sighed, "those old guys will be all over you." He looked at

John, "You're sharp and observant, I would trust you to spot trouble before others would notice it. You look like you fit in with that crowd, and you'll have all the ladies after you, especially with that cane." Dan was happy to note John sit up a bit straighter and a small smile return to his face. "We're sure there is going to be trouble somewhere, we need to be ready for it."

"That's all for our official assignment," Daniel told them, then noticed Arisa sit up in her chair and frown. He knew what the young pilot was thinking, she'd been passed over, not assigned to the mission. He suppressed a chuckle. "Don't worry lieutenant, we have a special task for you two, some special recon. I'll let the princess explain."

Chapter 16

At the mention of recon, Chad's mind snapped to attention. So that was what that case of surveillance equipment was for. Did the princess want him to spy on the other dignitaries at the conference? He didn't exactly like the idea of becoming a spy.

Arisa frowned, "special assignments". She was sure that Mel was going to send her off on some wild goose chase so the princess could have Chad all to herself. Arisa had seen how Mel had looked at Chad when they met.

Melpomene looked over the faces of the pilots as she stood in front of them. Just as she'd planned, being dressed in plain street cloths put them more at ease. She wanted them to accept her as one of them, not as some high and mighty imperial.

"There is a reason I had your unit transferred to the eleventh," the princess told them. She noted they sat up and quickly looked around at each other. She smiled, so they had been questioning their assignment, that was good, they were a sharp bunch. "We intercepted a message to one of the officers in the OMI, an officer who has been under suspicion for some time. It indicated that the weapon you encountered is on the planet Shakuras. We are unsure whether the message was directed to the officer to reach the EDF or if it was due to his connection with the Red Faction. Our people examined surveillance video from the transportation and law enforcement departments of the planet and found these images." She put several pictures on the viewing screen.

There was a rustling in the room as pilots shifted in their chairs for a better look. There were several gasps. One man in the picture, in civilian clothes and with a thick beard, was unmistakably Dominic Torres. "That's captain Dom!" Ben blurt out. "What's he doing there?"

"That's something we would like to find out." Mel answered him. "We know he left Mar Sara in pursuit of the Red Faction weapon. We aren't certain of his motives. His message was rather non-committal, only that he was taking care of things and wasn't ready to move yet. We don't know if he was sending a message for the EDF or the Red Faction."

"Captain Dom wouldn't be helping the Red Faction," Ben stated.

"We can't be sure of that," Mel told him. "We don't think he joined them, he did give you that memory chip with information on the Red Faction

and other important facts, but we can't be sure of its motives. For right now, we want this to be a clandestine operation." She looked at Chad and Arisa. "We want to find Dominic and keep surveillance on him." She expanded one picture on the screen. "In many of the images, he is accompanied by this woman. She is often wearing the uniform of Shakuras' high schools. We hope that may be a key we can use to locate Dominic. Captain Ross and Lieutenant Higgins are going to start by asking around at the schools. I picked you because you two are the only ones who could do this undercover. You can pass off as students without raising too much suspicion."

John looked around then spoke up, "wouldn't Kaze make a better choice? It seems more likely that Chad would stick out, being that tall."

"That wouldn't work," Melpomene answered. "Shakuras has no Asian population. Kaze would stick out like a sore thumb. Chad may be a bit tall, but not unusually so on Shakuras. The population is mostly descended from central Europeans. If they use a cover story they should be able to show a picture and ask about the girl without trouble. We want to locate Torres and keep him under surveillance. We would like to find who he is associated with without warning them off."

Mel looked around the room at the pilots, there was one more thing they might as well know. "Don't expect a warm welcome on Shakuras. They haven't been too happy with us since the last colony war. They wanted to stay neutral in the conflict, but the EDF moved in and built a maintenance and supply base here. There were a few battles fought on the planet because of that fact. Frankly, they are more likely to spit on you than welcome you. I just thought to warn you so you can avoid trouble. We really don't need an incident to draw attention to us. That could jeopardize the mission."

The colonel dismissed the pilots, till they reached Shakuras. As the pilots started to leave, Princess Melpomene approached Chad. She smiled up at the tall young man and reached out to trace her finger along the scar across his face. "Such an interesting scar," she told him. "You'll have to tell me all about it. Come to my rooms and join me for dinner, at eighteen-hundred. I'm so very interested." She turned to leave. Melpomene had to suppress a laugh. She'd seen the daggers in Arisa's eyes. This could get interesting.

Chapter 17

Rose was looking for Georgianna. She had been slowly getting angrier at the captain each time Georgianna had been uncivil to John. John was her friend and she knew he didn't deserve it. The pictures the princess had shown them, of Dominic with that school girl, had only added to Rose's dark mood. She found Georgianna in the training room, kicking a heavy bag.

"Figures I'd find you here," she sneered, "kicking something that can't kick back."

Georgianna spun around, a dark look in her eyes. "If there's something you wanted to say, just come out with it," she growled.

"You need an attitude adjustment..... Georgi, and I'm going to make sure you get it." Rose told her.

"Is that a threat, lieutenant," Georgianna barked. "And, don't ever call me that."

Rose laughed, "I was going to call you Queen Bitch, but I like dogs and I don't want to insult them. Call it whatever you like, GEORGI, you've been ragging on everyone since you got here, especially John."

"Crichton shouldn't be here, he's useless, he can't even walk without a cane. How do you expect him to fight?" Georgianna answered."

"Even on one leg, he's a better fighter than you'll ever be," Rose told her. "You're a danger to your unit. You're careless and reckless. You sent your whole command in to get shot up in the pirate war."

Georgianna's look became darker, "I was cleared of that charge, I didn't do anything wrong."

"No?" Rose voice dripped sarcasm, "what about at Mar Sara? You disobeyed orders and just about got us all killed. You should have been court marshalled."

Georgianna's reply was almost desperate. "No, I had to stop them. I couldn't let it turn into another Tarsonis. If I hadn't been on the planet to take out their Lancers, the colonel could never have attacked them. I had to....."

"Right, you left the ship with a weakened defense that could have cost not only the loss of the ship but the start of a colony war. You can't do anything right by yourself. If it weren't for Ross you'd just be a big hole in the ground along with Crichton and a lot of other people. If John hadn't been there covering your butt, you wouldn't be here right now. He's always there to cover your stupid actions. You're the one who's useless, or worse, dangerous."

"LIAR!" Georgianna screamed as she rushed at Rose.

Georgianna expected to overwhelm Rose because of her size and strength, but she had miscalculated. Georgianna was an expert in the use of firearms, but Rose had excelled at hand to hand combat, and her sensuous curves hid a well-trained and toned body. Rose quickly sidestepped the larger woman, she used her leg to trip Georgianna as she slammed an elbow hard into her back. Georgianna hit the floor mat hard and rolled quickly to jump back up. She winced from the pain, she was going to have to be more careful, Rose wasn't going to be a pushover. The two women circled, the fight became a rapid series of kicks and punches. They landed on the floor in a tangle, both straining to gain an advantage on their opponent. Georgianna finally rolled onto the top, exhausted, and ready to finish the fight, but Rose got her feet between the two and pushed Georgianna off.

The two women turned to face each other, trying to catch their breath. Georgianna found much of her anger had burned itself out. "Why do you

defend him?" She pleaded. "Crichton's nothing but a lecher, he doesn't care about anyone, all he can think about is the next girl he can grab."

Rose stared at Georgianna for a moment, then laughed. "Is that what your problem is? Your eyes really are green, aren't they." She laughed again, "you're either naïve or dumb. Don't you realize that's the way guys like John are. They have to show off, they have to attract all the girls, just to prove they're the top dog, to prove to themselves that they're a man. It's just the game they play. How many of those girls do you think he gets into his bed?"

"You should know," Georgianna angrily bit out, "you're one of them."

"Huh?" Rose looked startled, "what are you talking about?"

"I saw the two of you, in the corridor, outside his room, on the way to Mar Sara," Georgianna accused her. "You were all over him."

"What.....?" Rose had to stop and think for several long seconds, then, she started to laugh. "You mean the time he came charging out of his room and almost ran over me? I'd have been sitting on the floor if he hadn't grabbed me. Sure I flirted with him a bit, but it was all in fun, he and I have known each other since the academy."

Now Georgianna looked surprised, "you weren't....."

Rose laughed hard, "John and I?" She laughed again. "You're an idiot.....We never have done anything, not even go on a date. But right now, I'd steal him away in a minute, if I could. But there is only one person that John wants, only one pilot in this group that he would die his mech in front of a rail gun bolt to protect..... only one woman he would die for, and you don't deserve him. "

"No," Georgianna said softly, "he wouldn't..... he didn't..... it was a battle and....."

Colonel Hellwind burst into the room, Yuki had informed him of the women fighting. "What the hell is going on here?" He demanded.

Both women looked at the Colonel, "nothing, sir, just training," Georgianna told him.

Daniel strode up to the combatants, "Damn it, if you want to hammer out your differences, wait till after the mission is over." He looked over Rose, then lifted Georgianna's head by her chin and turned her face back and forth. "I can't have you looking like you've been in a brawl." He satisfied himself that the two didn't have any serious damage, nothing a woman couldn't repair with a little makeup.

Rose got to her feet and started toward the door, "I thought I could teach the captain something, but, I guess I was wrong."

Colonel Hellwind waited till Rose was gone, then he started to leave. "You can find the battle cam video from Rose's mech in my archives. I'm sure you already know how to access my files." He turned and left the room.

Georgianna sat where she was for a long time, tears running down her cheeks. She couldn't have been so wrong, she didn't want to see the video from the battle. She didn't want to know..... but she had to.

Megumi entered her assigned quarters. It had been a long day. She smiled as she thought of Ben's fumbling words as they parted. She knew what he was trying to ask, but she thought it best to let him find the words on his own. Megumi was surprised to find her roommate, Arisa was already there. She almost laughed, Arisa was sitting on her bed, wearing fuzzy pink pajamas that had a hoodie, complete with cat ears. Megumi thought the small girl was almost too cute, except for the unhappy frown on her face.

"Hi, Arisa," Megumi said trying to sound cheerful. "Is something wrong? I thought you'd be with Chad."

"I wish," Arisa groused, "He's having dinner with the princess." Arisa let out an unladylike humph. "Mel is trying to steal him away from me. The boys are always flocking around her. It isn't fair."

Megumi tried to think back over the last hours, the princess had spent time with all the pilots, she hadn't seemed to spend more time with one than the other. "It doesn't seem to me like she is, Arisa." Megumi told her. "I don't think you need to worry."

"You saw how she smiled at Chad when she met us in the hangar." Arisa reminded her. "It's just like when she came to my high school graduation party, all the boys followed her around, they didn't even know I was there."

Megumi noticed the tears in the corners of her friend's eyes. "I've seen how Chad looks at you, Arisa, I don't think you need to doubt him." She assured Arisa.

"You don't know Mel, she always gets what she wants." Arisa wiped her eyes and put on a defiant look, "but so do I. She isn't going to win this time, I won't let her."

Chapter 18

Daniel watched Melpomene enter the bridge. He knew it shouldn't bother him that she had spent most of her time with the pilots, but it did. She walked up to the main screen and touched the point of light that was Shakuras.

"We must be getting close, how much longer?" She asked.

"Two hours and fourteen minutes," Yuki answered from her station at the ships controls.

Melpomene jumped, she hadn't thought about the controller being on the bridge. "Oh, thank you." She looked back at Daniel, "So soon, I wish we had more time." She sat down in the first officer's chair next to Daniel.

Daniel sighed, yes, he wished they had had more time too, but, she had spent her time with..... No, it wasn't his business who she spent her time with. They were just childhood friends after all.

"I had the EDF insignia removed from the mechs and shuttle as you wished." Daniel informed her. "Though, I don't understand why. Wouldn't it be better to make a bit of a show?"

"No Dan," she answered, "you know the people of Shakuras don't like the EDF since we forced them to let us put a base there during the last colony

war. It will be better if the people of the colony just think we are representatives of one of the other colony planets.”

“I doubt they’ll miss the fact that we have mechs with us.” Dan told her. “They’ll know we’re from the EDF.”

Mel smiled, “some of the richer colonies have mechs to guard their rulers. Hopefully, the locals won’t notice ours are more advanced models.” She drew her legs up into the chair and leaned over closer to Dan. “We don’t want to cause more friction with the colonies. I’m here to try to keep the colonies from starting a war. The Empire is dying, Dan, we know that, but if we let it break up now, it would lead to anarchy among the colonies. If we can keep the peace, we can guide them to transition to some form of federation without the violence.”

“They would have to be fools to start a war with the empire. They don’t have any warships, the empire outlawed anyone but the EDF having warships.” Dan assured her. “Sure, they have plenty of cargo vessels, but you can’t fight with them. The EDF would destroy them in short order.”

“I can’t let it come to that, Dan” She told him. “It would be worse than you know. They have been building war ships in secret for years. We’ve known that, but it would have caused more problems trying to stop them than just to let it go. Can you imagine if they could arm their ships with that cannon you encountered at Mar Sara? It could be a bloodbath. The colonies want their freedom, and some day they will have it. Maybe not in our lifetimes, but soon. The only thing that could keep the empire together would be the threat of some outside force..... aliens, but in all these years and all our exploration, we have never found a sign of another sentient race. That was the purpose of the EDF, our shield when we met an alien race, but it never happened, and we turned it against ourselves. We have to change that.”

“I’m sure you’ll win over those colony diplomats, Mel.” Dan answered. “And don’t worry, we’ll find Torres and that big mech.”

The princess smiled as she closed her eyes. She was sure he, and his pilots, would. Dan, and his group of pilots, reminded her of those really old books and comics her brother collected when they were young. Tales of ancient times, written before the great war, stories of swords and sorcery. She hadn’t thought about those old tales in years. She let her imagination play over those old memories and Daniels unit..... Georgianna, the tall red haired warrior woman with her fierce green eyes; John, the handsome ladies man, a con man and gambler with a cane and elegant style; Megumi, the dark haired ninja girl, and Ben, the powerful giant of a man who followed her; Chad, the tall lean thief, a steely eyed rouge that no lock could keep out, and his companion, Arisa, a little pixie girl with curly blond hair and explosive magic; Rose, the voluptuous seductress, her dark hair and sexy dark eyes belie a more than competent fighter; lastly Kaze, the mercenary, a small quiet man, far more dangerous than his looks lead his opponents to believe. With this eclectic band, the Princess and Daniel, her loyal knight, must strive to save the kingdom from the invaders and their giant dragon.

Daniel looked down at the princess. He hated to wake her, she looked so peaceful..... and beautiful, but the two hours had passed and very soon they would be dropping into normal space, with the danger that might bring. Dan reached over and gently woke the princess.

"It's almost time, things could be a bit tense, you might want to go to your room," he advised her.

Mel rubbed her eyes and straightened herself in the seat. "I would like to stay here with you, if that's allowed." She told him. "I'd feel safer here with you."

Dan smiled, "sure, it's ok, if that's what you would like." He couldn't help feeling a bit of hope..... No, that was just wishful thinking.

Tom, general Parker's top aid, drove up to the isolated research building at the Victorville EDF base. It had been several months since he had last been in the facility, during the incident at Mar Sara and the search for the lost mech, the Dragonfly. He knew that the young pilot, Chad, had been recalled to duty from the research team and wondered if that would hurt their attempts to find the answer to finding pilots able to operate the Dragonfly's advanced systems.

Ah well, that wasn't the reason general Parker had sent him to see the doctor. Tod, and his assistant had done work with advanced gravitics with the Ghost stealth systems and now the general hoped they might be able to help unlock the secrets involved with the operation of the giant mech the Red Faction had used on Mar Sara. After clearing security, Tom proceeded to the large lab area where he was told he would find Tod and his assistant, Janice.

As before Tom was impressed by the clutter of the room as he entered. There were benches covered with a birds nest of wires connecting incomprehensible assemblies of electronic components and sensors. He called out, wondering where the doctor was in the large room.

There was a thump and several expletives from behind a low cabinet and Tod's face appeared above it. "Tom!" He exclaimed, shoving a handful of components and wires onto the mess on top of the cabinet. "Welcome, nice to see you again..... Janice, Tom's here, bring some tea, we can take a break."

"Yes, sir, be right there," Janice's voice came from behind a large bank of readout screens.

Tom smiled at the lean scientist. Tod was always hyper like he drank way too much coffee. "You seem in a good mood," Tom said as they took seats at the chairs and table set for the researchers to take breaks. "Have you made progress with the Dragonfly program?"

"Oh, that's been solved, simple thing really. Chad put us on to it just as he left. Control, it was all a matter of controlling the system so it wasn't quite so transparent. I didn't even know it could be done but Ghost itself had written into it's system to comply with a request from it's pilot. They can start out with the mech opaque and slowly turn it more transparent.

That way they can find their tolerance point, not optically optimum but a lot better than a panic attack."

"So, what's all this?" Tom asked.

"Nanobots!" Tod replied. "The next big thing. They aren't a new idea, but manufacture and control have been problems. We're going to design nanofactories to produce the bots and an external AI system to control them. Imagine nanobot doctors able to perform surgery without an incision..... or nanobot construction building anything you want one atom at a time." Tod was getting excited, "It's going to revolutionize everything..... Just think we could....."

"Excuse me, Tod," Janice broke in, "the tea is ready."

Tom smiled and thanked her as she handed him a cup. He wondered if she ever changed her looks. She had been the same every time he saw her, a mousey young woman in a white lab coat, her dusty brown hair wrapped in a messy bun on top of her head, her large round glasses perpetually slipping down her small nose. She was the stereotype lab assistant.

"The reason I'm here, Tod, has to do with something a bit larger." Tom told him. "We were supplied with the technical drawings and data on the giant mech weapon that the Red Faction used against the Krikav at Mar Sara. It's a complicated and technically advanced system. It uses advanced inertia damping gravitic systems in order to give agility to so massive a machine. The problem is the research notations were encrypted in some form of binary code and our best analysts have been unable to decode it. We are hoping some of our scientists will be able to recreate the gravitic control systems without decoding the notations."

"Do you have the drawings with you?" Tod asked. "Can we see them? Janice should look at this too, she did much of the gravitic work on our stealth system."

"Yes, I have them along," Tom answered as he set his projector on the table and projected the schematics onto the wall next to them.

Tod asked for the controller and scanned through the pages. "Fascinating..... If this is as big as the numbers indicate, I can see the problem. Even with the researchers notes it would be a challenge to program the correct control system for this. It's going to take a long time to reverse engineer this without those notes."

"We may not have that much time if someone is already building an army of these things." Tom told them.

Janice was intently watching as the doctor scanned the pages. As he finished and left the projection on the first page, Janice pulled a pencil from above her ear and her ever present note pad from her pocket. She began to write then stopped and nibbled on the tip of the pencil as she looked at the projection. Again she began to write on the pad.

Tod noticed his assistant's actions. She only chewed the point of her pencil when she was on to something. "What is it, Janice?" He asked. "What do you see there?"

"It's not binary..... the notation..... it's a language. An ancient written language, dead before the great war." She answered.

"Huh?" Tom registered his disbelief. "It's just two symbols, a line and a point, how do you figure that's a written language?"

"It's something my father discovered when he was on Earth, he was an archeologist," Janice informed him. "He had found a few notebook pages of this language and a printed sheet with the letters translated to old English alphabet. There were only a few others who knew about it. Father didn't know what people the language originated with, or where on earth it was used. He always hoped to learn more about it, all he knew was it was called Morse."

"Would your father be able to translate this for us?" Tom inquired hopefully.

"He died with the rest of my family in the pirate attack on Seris Four during the pirate war." Janice informed him. "I was one of the few survivors." She wrote down a few more letters on her pad.

"I'm sorry, I've read the reports of that colony." Tom replied. "The EDF was told that the Serins were manufacturing arms for the pirates. A force was sent to clean out the pirates and take over the colony, but when they arrived, the capital city was in ruins, there were few survivors." Tom sighed, and looked at what she was writing.

"The colony refused to help the pirates, that's why they bombed the city. They planned it so they could blame it on the EDF..... I think I can decipher this. It may take a bit to remember the letters, I use to write secret messages in this script when I was a child." Janice told them as she concentrated on the writing. "I'd like to meet the person who wrote this. It must be one of the men my father had contact with."

"If we find the that person, I'll make sure you get to talk with him." Tom assured her.

Chapter 19

The princess stepped down from her carriage, accompanied by her faithful knight. On each side of the path below them were two of her small band of warriors, the remaining four rode on huge war horses.

As she passed the young thief, she reached up and touched the scar on his cheek. She smiled and held back a laugh as she noticed the Pixie girl move closer to the thief, her normally light blue aura turning decidedly green. This could be interesting.

A rather expensive looking sports car pulled up in front of them, followed by an old and rugged looking truck. Melpomene sighed, back to reality..... it was far less enjoyable than her daydreams. The man who got out of the car and hurried toward the princess was slim and of average height. His black hair was oiled slick and carefully combed. His face was narrow with thin lips, close set brown eyes and a hawk's beak of a nose. His pencil thin mustache was waxed to sharp points. Mel had read about the local preference for colorful cloths, but she had to stifle a laugh,

the man was dressed in dark orange slacks, a light blue blazer and a bright yellow ascot. She wondered if the pilots would fall down laughing.

The swarthy figure approached the princess and as she reached out to greet him with the usual handshake, he lifted her hand and kissed the back of it as he bowed. "Regent of the Empire on Shakuras, Rimbaud Devreaux, honored to be at your service, Milady." He stated.

Melpomene felt like gagging, "oh lord spare me," she muttered under her breath. Aloud, with a haughty, authoritative voice she said, "I expect you have accommodations ready for us."

"Of course, princess. The only rooms I could find for the military that could accommodate their equipment is an abandoned hotel. The area is scheduled for redevelopment but I was able to secure it for the duration of your stay. You, my princess, will be staying at my official villa, of course." He informed her.

Melpomene favored him with an icy glare. She knew of the man's reputation as a womanizer. He was a member of a prominent family of one of the inner colonies and had been "granted" the appointment to this remote rock when he had been caught in an affair with the wife of the ambassador of one of the other colonies. "No, I will be staying with my guard." She informed him.

"But, but" Rimbaud stammered, "that place is hardly good enough for the likes of the military personnel. It is definitely not good enough for someone of our class."

The princess gave him a stony look. "Give the directions to the hotel to the colonel, we will be leaving." As Daniel got the information from Rimbaud, the princess turned to walk to the vehicles but jerked to a stop. "No..... not him too." Mel complained as she watched the little man pulling his large suitcase toward them.

Colonel Hellwind came up by her side. "What's the trouble?" He asked. "Who is it..... Oh, isn't that...."

"Walter," Mel answered with a sigh, "He should be gone. I ordered the Loire to return to Earth, and he was supposed to be on it. Now I'll have to put up with his constant griping about not following imperial protocol. We really don't need that. Pomp and show might be fine for the old inner colonies, but these frontier colonies see it as a symbol of oppression."

Walter came puffing up to the princess, dragging his case behind him. "What's the meaning of this, princess? Why did you order the Loire To return? Why..... the captain refused to let me have a shuttle. I had to threaten him before he relented." He looked around at the truck and car, then addressed Rimbaud. "Where is the reception? She is of the Imperial house after all. Where is the Limousine? This won't do, it won't do at all."

"That's enough, Walter." Melpomene ordered.

Walter looked back at Melpomene, she was dressed in a common business executives attire. "And what is that you're wearing? You look like a common....."

"SHUT UP!" The princess barked. She turned and started toward the truck. "We are leaving."

"Princess! You can't ride in that vehicle." Walter exclaimed. "You must at least ride in the car. Rimbaud smiled, that was exactly what he wanted.

You could almost see the waves of heat rising from her anger as the princess stopped and turned back to face Walter and Rimbaud. "I will be riding with my guard. There will be no more argument." She started to turn away, but stopped. She had to do something to keep Walter out of her way, and thwart the womanizer, Rimbaud too, and a plan had just come to her. "Walter, I have a job for you. I want you to audit the books of the imperial regency of Shakuras. For every year since Rimbaud Devreaux has been regent." She knew Walter had started with the imperial house as a keeper of the accounts and this was within his specialty.

"But princess, that would take....." Walter began to protest.

"Yes it will," the princess cut him off. "And I want no stone left unturned." Rimbaud looked decidedly pale as Melpomene turned back toward the truck. "Let's go, Daniel."

As they started toward the truck, Georgianna didn't move. John turned back, "Come on, captain, we're leaving." She still didn't move and John noticed the look her eyes seemed far away. "Georgianna, it's time to go," he said more forcefully, but she still didn't respond. John took hold of her arm and shook her slightly. "Hey, Georgi, snap out of it." Georgianna looked at him, her eyes coming back to life, she pulled away. "Don't touch me," she barked. "You were spacing out there, captain," John defended himself. "It's time to leave." Georgianna looked around, trying to get her head back into what was going on around her. She knew she had blacked out again and was afraid John had found her out. "Right," she answered as she followed the other pilots, "let's go."

Daniel opened the door to the cab and helped Mel up as the pilots clambered into the back of the truck. He went around the truck and climbed into the drivers seat. Daniel sat a few moments and stared, bewildered by the gauges and switches, the levers and steering wheel. There was no input panel for drive commands. "Umm, I, ah, haven't ever driven a truck like this. It doesn't seem to have auto-driving capability. Just wait here a minute." Dan got out and went to the back of the truck, he was sure that the locals had set this up to embarrass the EDF pilots. "Ross, come out here." Chad looked at the others and shrugged, got up and climbed out. "Would you be able to drive this thing? It doesn't have auto-drive." The colonel asked.

Chad smiled, "sure, no problem." As the colonel climbed into the back of the truck, Chad climbed into the cab. He smiled at the princess, "I guess I'm the chauffeur today, princess."

Mel smiled, "we're lucky to have you along or we might not have gone anywhere. Being a former tech, you must be the only one who could drive this thing."

Chad laughed, "I doubt that. Ben was from a mining colony, I'll bet he's driven these old trucks, and Kaze, those para-military groups would have

trucks like this. I saw those locals, over by the hangars, laughing. I think they picked the wrong group to pull this trick on."

"But Kaze and Ben are in their mechs," she reminded him.

"I guess you're right about that," Chad admitted as he reached forward to flip a switch and push the starter button. There was a whine of gears and a clatter as the truck shook to life. The princess grabbed the hand bar on the dash in front of her and looked at Chad with frightened eyes. "What's happening?" Her voice high with fright.

Chad looked at the terrified woman and couldn't suppress a laugh. He hadn't thought about it, but, of course, the princess had never been in a vehicle that wasn't powered by one of the nuclear power units. "It's just an oil burning engine, they make a lot of noise," Chad reassured her. "Military trucks use them and a lot of the frontier planets use them."

"Oil burning?" Mel questioned. "Aren't those outlawed? Why would they want those dirty things when they could use power units?"

"They aren't outlawed out on the frontier, and they're easy to build and a lot cheaper than importing power units from earth." Chad told her as he engaged the drive motors. "The military still uses them because trucks can't carry the weight of armor needed to shield them and oil burners don't take out everything within half a K if they get hit." Chad pulled away toward the gate at the edge of the field. "By the way, do you know where we're going?"

1. "Yes, I listened to the directions as Daniel got them." She held a local type cell phone and showed it to Chad. "I put the address he gave to Daniel into the map so, no problem."

Colonel Hellwind looked down at the blond haired girl sitting next to him. He noticed the angry look she had as she looked through the back window of the truck cab at the princess. He could almost feel the jealousy emanating from her. This could cause trouble with the mission, he thought to himself. Having jealousy clouding their minds wouldn't do. He looked through the window at the princess and the lieutenant and sighed, no, it wouldn't do at all.

Chapter 20

Georgianna looked across the ornate hall where the reception for the planetary delegates was being held. She frowned as she spotted John. She might have guessed he'd be surrounded by women, he chased after anything that was female..... They were supposed to be security, keeping watch for any threats. He wouldn't notice if a full commando raid was happening right in front of him. She watched as another smiling woman stepped up from behind John and threaded her arm through his. She almost laughed, he didn't need to do much chasing, they seemed to be all over him..... With his rugged good looks and wearing the dark blue uniform of the imperial staff, he was definitely an attraction, besides, his cane and battle injury made him all the more unique. She wondered how exaggerated his war stories were becoming.

Georgianna pulled her gaze away and turned with a sweet smile to the young man who had brought her a glass of champagne. "Thank you, that was so kind of you," she told him warmly.

"Oh, it was my pleasure, miss McFairlane," the young man beamed.

John turned to see who had put her arm through his. He smiled at the young woman, then used the opportunity to make a surreptitious scan of the room. He kept an eye out for anything suspicious, though he sincerely doubted anyone would try to attack any of the dignitaries in the hall. With all of the undercover security people that had come with the guests, an attacker wouldn't stand a chance.

He noticed Georgianna across the room and smiled. She had attracted quite a following, which didn't surprise John at all. She was a stunning sight, she was wearing a dark hunter green dress with a hemline that started about ten centimeters above her knees in the front tapering to ten centimeters below in back, giving a beautiful view of her exquisite legs. A floor length skirt of light green lace wrapped three fourths of the way around her waist, leaving her easy access to the gun John knew she had strapped to her thigh under the dress. she had a shawl of the same lace that set off her fiery copper red hair and bright green eyes. John figured she was the hottest woman in the room, but he knew she was also one of the best people the princess could have chosen for a body guard.

John watched the young man hand Georgianna the drink he had brought her, and he almost licked his lips. He felt a craving for a drink, but he knew he couldn't. He'd already dumped two drinks into planters when no one was looking. He wanted to keep up his image, but couldn't afford to get drunk. He had a job to do.

Daniel wasn't exactly happy to have such a crowd so close around the princess, but he knew there was little chance of treachery from the old diplomats who were jockeying for a preferred spot. they were more likely to try poking each other with a toothpick from their drinks trying to move the other out of the way than to dare assault the beauty in their midst. He wished he could be standing by her side, instead of haunting the fringes of the diplomats surrounding her.

Daniel noticed John starting across the room toward captain McFairlane. He looked around, wondering if something had happened. He hadn't gotten any word on his com from either John or Georgianna. He pushed through the diplomats to get closer to the princess.

John had been trying to keep the women entertained with his account of the battle at Mar Sara, keeping uncharacteristically close to the truth, when he looked in Georgianna's direction. Something wasn't right..... He smiled at the ladies and excused himself, telling them that he had been called by his superiors and would have to leave them for a short time. Georgianna wasn't moving, and he had seen that vacant look in her eyes earlier that day. As he approached he could make out that the young men were trying to outdo each other by bragging about their prowess in various athletic contests. John almost laughed, Georgianna could

probably best any one of them in their favorite sport. They hadn't noticed that she wasn't even hearing what they were talking about.

John pushed his way next to Georgianna and took hold of her arm, gently pulling the champagne from her hand. "Sorry fellows, but our superiors have requested lady McFairlane's presence at the moment." He squeezed her arm and pulled her toward himself. "Come along Georgianna, duty calls," he told her. Slowly she turned uncomprehending eyes on him. John put on a boyish smile. "No, I know you are enjoying the company, but you know we are required to assist our diplomats when they call." John could see comprehension returning to Georgianna's eyes, so he firmly and quickly guided her out one of the side doors.

Georgianna let herself be guided by John until they reached an outdoor balcony where they were alone. She jerked her arm away from him and stepped back. "What do you think you're doing lieutenant?" She snapped at him. "You know our orders are to keep security surveillance."

"Not much need for that," John assured her. "More security guards than guests in that party. Besides, you wouldn't have noticed if pirates invaded the place and abducted the princess."

"What are you talking about?" She angrily shot back. "I was keeping a constant watch."

John sat on the balcony railing, "You can't fool me, I know you too well. You were out of it, 'lost in space', just like at the spaceport earlier today." He sighed, "Georgi, if there's something wrong, I'll help any way I can..... you know that."

Georgianna turned away, he knew..... he'd seen her black out, if he told anyone, her career was over. She couldn't allow that. She would have to stop him. "I'm just tired," she lied, "I haven't slept well. I'll be fine, just leave me alone."

"Right," John replied, "just don't let this endanger our mission. If something is wrong, there are people who can help." John headed back into the hall.

Georgianna gripped the top of the balcony railing so tightly her knuckles turned white. Why was this happening to her? Her annual physical hadn't shown any problems. Why was she blanking out..... but it was a little different today, it wasn't a complete blank. She could remember that it happened..... It was almost like she had been someone else, like someone was looking out of her eyes.

Daniel noticed John return without Georgianna. He keyed his com and called John. "Is there a problem Crichton? Where's captain McFairlane?"

"Nothing important, colonel," John answered. "The captain is just a bit over tired. She's getting a bit of fresh air."

"Ok, I'm going to see if I can get the princess to wrap thing up so we can get out of here." Daniel informed him. "I think we all have a bit of hyper lag."

Chapter 21

Georgianna leaned her head against the limousine window. She fought to keep the tears from her eyes. Her head hurt and she felt wrung out, she always did after her black outs. What was happening to her? It had started after they returned from the battle at Mar Sara, with two days missing from her memory. She had taken out a pressure suit for a walk outside the dome of the moon base, just to get away from the constant questions, and woke up in her room two days later with no memory of the intervening time. The blackouts had come at odd intervals, and she had learned of her often odd behavior after the fact. But, this time it had been different. This time she remembered everything. It had felt as if someone else were looking out of her eyes, as if someone else controlled her body. Was she losing her mind? Was she splitting in two? Georgianna felt the princess watching her. The woman had been questioning her. Oh, she was subtle, trying to seem concerned for Georgianna's health. But she knew, Georgianna was sure, the princess knew, and she would ruin everything. Georgianna couldn't let that happen, she couldn't let them force her out of the EDF, or worse, commit her to a mental hospital.

Melpomene watched the captain seated across from her. She could tell Georgianna was tired, but that wasn't the whole problem, she was sure of it. She had avoided giving any clear answers to the princesses questions, a sure sign there was something she was hiding. Melpomene had heard rumors of odd behavior and at times a trance like state noted in Georgianna. Melpomene was afraid that it was something she had seen before. Maybe she should pick different security guards. No, they fit the part too well. While the other body guards had been all too obvious, stiff and formal, out of their class, Georgianna and John had blended in perfectly, just two more of the upper class. Able to remain close without being shunned by the snobbish elite. John was the picture of upper crust, with his cane and good looks, he made one think of the big families and old money. Georgianna, Mel stifled a sigh, was a natural. Not only was she a beauty with her copper red hair, bright green eyes and tall athletic body, but she instinctively knew how to use them. She had the attention of all the young men in the room, and many a glance from the old men gathered around Melpomene.

The princess knew she could have captured the attention of all the men in the room, she had studied the human mind, all the instinctive cues of seduction. She had trained herself to use every one to it's maximum effect. She could have used them on any of the men in the room if need arose, but it wasn't time yet.

They returned to the old hotel and entered the lobby, some of the pilots were still lounging in the area. Georgianna didn't stop and speak to any of the others, she went straight through toward her room. John sighed and headed for the bar at the side of the room. He picked up one of the bottles of liquor and a glass, then hesitated, he put the bottle down, opened the cooler and took out a soda.

The princess watched John and Georgianna, she was beginning to worry about them. Her research into the group had shown that they had been a

couple, and she had counted on them working well together. She didn't know what their problem was but she was afraid it may affect their performance. She hoped she was wrong.

As she crossed the room, Mel met Chad as he carried drinks from the cooler. She stopped in front of him and reached up to touch the scar on his face. "Maybe I should have had you as my bodyguard," She smiled up at him. "I bet you would look great in John's uniform."

Suddenly, Arisa stepped between them, anger smoldering in her eyes. "Not a chance, Mel," she told the princess, "we have our own orders." Arisa took Chad's arm and turned him away from the princess, as they walked away she turned back. "Leave him alone," she said quietly, so only Mel would hear.

Melpomene smiled, so, Arisa was ready to fight over Chad, she hadn't expected that. This could get interesting.

Chapter 22

Arisa looked in the mirror and frowned at the schoolgirl looking back at her. Sure, she'd matured some in the six years since she had graduated from high school, but she still looked like a little girl. If only she could be tall, and well built, like Mel. She sighed, oh well, time to go.

Chad waited in the lounge of the hotel, uncomfortable in his school uniform. Dark blue slacks and white shirt, those weren't a problem, but the jacket and neck tie were a bother. He looked up as Arisa entered the room. He almost stopped breathing. She was everything that was desirable when he was young, but was untouchable. Navy blue mid thigh length skirt, knee high socks, white shirt with blue piping, navy blue vest and red bow tie. She was the picture of the girls from the upper city, the beautiful girls that the lower city boys dare not approach.

Arisa noticed the way Chad stared at her and smiled, maybe this wasn't all bad. Her smile turned to a frown as Melpomene cut her off, stepping in front of Chad. "You look good in a school uniform," the princess purred. "Watch out for all those schoolgirls."

Arisa took hold of Chad's arm, pushing in front of the princess. "That won't be a problem," she assured her, "they're too young anyway."

Melpomene stepped back, "really..... you think so?" She looked up and down at Arisa, "Maybe we should have gotten a middle school uniform for you, Ari."

Arisa turned rather red faced and, in an uncharacteristic gesture, stuck out her tongue at Mel as she pulled Chad toward the door. Melpomene laughed, Perhaps she shouldn't be teasing Arisa, but it had always been too much fun.

Georgianna stopped them. "You should be carrying a sidearm," she informed Chad, "in case you run into Torres, he might cause trouble. I have a shoulder holster you could use under your jacket."

Chad looked down at Georgianna and shook his head. "No thanks," he said, "I really don't like guns. I wouldn't want to use one around a school at all."

"What if Torres shows up?" Georgianna questioned. "He might be armed. Then you'd be in danger."

"I doubt it," Chad mumbled as colonel Hellwind stepped up to the group.

"We can't chance carrying any weapons into a school here," Daniel informed them.

"They have security measures and we can't afford to draw attention. Just be careful. If you spot the girl or Dominic, try not to let them see you, and inform me right away. If you can follow them do it. I just hope we can find them before they spot us or they might run. Good luck you two."

The conference broke off for lunch and Georgianna followed the group of diplomats into the dining room. The morning had dragged interminably and several times she had felt like someone else was looking out of her eyes. She had fought to keep the "other" away, but it was wearing on her. The young ambassador's assistant that had brought her the drink at the party again approached her with a tall glass of a cold fruit drink. She gratefully accepted the glass from him. That was kind of him, she thought as she looked at him more closely, and, he was rather good looking too.

"I hadn't been told you are an EDF pilot, Lady McFairlane," he said, "and a captain's rank. You are a more interesting woman than I had realized. So beautiful, but so dangerous, I simply must get to know you better."

John saw the young man approach Georgianna and tensed..... Then sighed and slumped. He couldn't blame her for being interested, the guy was young, healthy, and most likely fairly rich. He couldn't hope to compete.

Colonel Hellwind splashed water on his face at the men's room sink. The conference was going to kill him with boredom..... and it had only started. He hoped Arisa and Chad were having a better day. He worried something would go wrong, he had a bad feeling about it, but what was the worst that could happen? Torres might spot them and make a run for it. He dried his face and headed back out to lunch.

Arisa looked again at the map on her cell phone. The shopping area she'd seen as they came from the landing field yesterday must be fairly close now. It had been a useless day. They had visited the two schools closest to their hotel base, and had come up empty. They had asked students from various classes and shown the picture of the girl, no one had seen her. They would have to try the schools farther away. Now, if she could find the shopping area it wouldn't be a totally wasted day.

Chad walked beside Arisa, letting her lead the way. He knew where she wanted to go, he had studied a map of the city and had a pretty good idea of how to get around. He had urged Arisa to take the bus, or at least stick to the main streets, but she had insisted this was a shorter route. Chad scanned the area, eyeing the buildings and alleys. There were too many corners and objects, too many shadows. They were being watched. He didn't like it.

Rat watched the strangers as they approached. He was tense with excitement, trespassers usually meant money, payment to let them pass

through the gang's territory, or ransom from their family if they didn't have enough on them. But this time, there was something else Rat wanted..... the girl. She was a beauty, and highschool age, a pretty face and nicely shaped body.... nice legs. But best of all, she was small, shorter than he was. The only girls Rat knew of that were that small were elementary schoolers. But this girl was older, highschool age. He wanted her.

Chad put his hand on Arisa's shoulder, stopping her. He was right, this was looking bad. "let me do the talking," he told her as four young men approached from the front. One was short but muscular looking, the others average height.

"Huh? What?" Arisa looked up, then around. There were scruffy looking young people surrounding them..... a gang!

"When I tell you to..... run," Chad told her quietly, "ahead to the corner and turn left, two blocks and you'll be in the shopping district."

Rat motioned to his troop to encircle the two intruders. He smiled as he stepped out in front of them, school kids, must be new in the area, or just stupid to cross gang territory. He was glad they did though.

Chad watched the group approach, the short one took the lead. He must be the head of the group, probably not the gang leader, a lieutenant. He was shorter even than Kaze. Chad noticed the way the guy looked at Arisa, he didn't like what he saw. If this gang was at all like the one he had come from, he knew that look bode nothing but trouble for Arisa. He had to get her out of there.

Rat stopped in front of Chad. "You're in our territory, it's going to cost you," he threatened.

Chad took a quick look around then looked down at the shorter man. "It's a public street, I didn't see any no trespassing signs," Chad told him. "We aren't looking for trouble, just let us pass."

Rat laughed, "your bad luck school boy, you pay or you get hurt, your choice."

"Ok, how much do you want?" Chad demanded, but he was afraid he knew what the gang member wanted.

Rat sneered at Chad, "I want the girl."

"No way," Chad barked, "How many credits?"

"You ain't got enough credits, boy." Rat growled.

Chad stepped forward, reaching for his back pocket. "You don't know how much I have," he said. As Chad hoped, the chance of taking money caught the gang members attention, the young man hesitated. Chad quickly used a sweep of his leg and shoved the shorter man, knocking him to the ground. He grabbed the man to his right and spun around throwing him over his hip and on top of the one on the ground. "Run!" He yelled at Arisa.

As soon as Chad had made his move, Arisa had been ready. She took off at a dead run and didn't look back until she reached the corner. At the corner she looked back, expecting to see Chad behind her but was disappointed to see him still fighting with the gang. Several of the gang

members were on the ground but there were too many for Chad to get away. One of the young men was racing up the street after her. Arisa turned the corner and ran. For a small girl, Arisa was fast. She out ran the boy following her and made the two blocks. She came out into a busy shopping district. The gang member stopped before he reached the area.

Arisa checked the map on her cell. She located the old hotel, it was a couple kilometers away. She hailed one of the local taxis and headed back to the base.

Chapter 23

Megumi felt invigorated from her workout with Ben. He was getting to be quite a challenge for her. What he lacked in skill and training he made up for in raw size and power. When she entered her room she was surprised to find her roommate. Arisa had told her she would be out all afternoon with Chad. She had never seen such a hard and determined look on Arisa's face.

"Um, I didn't expect you back yet," Megumi said. "Is something wrong?"

"Wrong? What could possibly be wrong?" Arisa snapped as she headed for the door.

Megumi stepped in front of Arisa, stopping her from leaving. "Something's going on. I'm not letting you leave until you tell me." Megumi told her.

Arisa hesitated, then told Megumi the whole story, how the gang had surrounded them. and how Chad had taken on the gang members so Arisa would have a chance to get away. Megumi could see the hurt and anger in Arisa's eyes as Arisa told her defiantly, "I'm going to get him back. No one takes something away from me and gets away with it." Arisa tried to push around Megumi, but Megumi held her back.

"Hold on, you don't even know where he is. How can you hope to find him?" Megumi questioned her.

"With this," Arisa told her and held up her cell phone. "The units used out here in the colonies are able to communicate unit to unit over a range of about four k. I have an app running that operates as a locator. It gives me direction and approximate distance. I'm betting that Chad is somewhere near his phone."

Megumi looked surprised, "I didn't know there was an app that could do that."

"There isn't, officially," Arisa told her, "the company thought it might be useful. It's built into the phone, but nobody is supposed to know about it."

How did you find out about it?" Megumi asked.

Arisa grinned, "My family owns the company that makes these phones."

Megumi looked at her, wide eyed, for a moment, then went and rummaged in her travel case. "Ok, but I'm not letting you go alone."

Kyle frowned as he looked around the room at his gang. It had been a lousy day. The only thing anyone had come up with was that tall schoolboy Rat's patrol brought in, and it didn't look like they were getting much out of that. The guy wouldn't give them any information, and his cell phone was password locked. Why the schoolboy refused to give them the password he just couldn't understand. The little little cash the kid had was nothing, and without information of how to contact his family they couldn't get more.

The door to the street, on the far end of the room, opened and the guard looked in. "Boss, a couple of girls out here insist on seeing you," he called out.

Kyle sat up, maybe things were looking up, new girls. "Let them in," he told the guard and watched as the girls came in. The one in the lead was a highschool girl, a very small girl. He looked over at Rat, ya, he was right, it was the girl that got away from them. He could see why Rat was so bent out of shape over losing the girl, she was nicely built, cute face blue eyed and curly blond hair. Kyle wasn't interested in little girls, but the one following her, she was worth checking out. Though still on the small side, she was taller and wearing a tight fitting black outfit. He could tell she was well toned and better endowed. But what really caught his eye was her exotic looks, almond shaped dark eyes and long shiny black hair, pulled back in a pony tail. He'd never seen a girl like her and he wanted her.

Megumi checked out the gang as they entered. There were about two dozen around the length of the room. Odds didn't look very good, and she didn't like the way the gang's boss was looking at her. Megumi thought they would be trying to sneak in and get Chad out, not walk in the front door, but she had followed Arisa's lead.

Arisa walked the length of the room and stopped in front of the gang leader. She stood defiantly, feet slightly spread, arms folded across her chest. "You took something that belongs to me, I came to get him back." Arisa told him.

Kyle grinned as he sprawled across his chair, "gee, I don't know what you're talking about. Did you lose your puppy?"

"Don't act the fool," Arisa growled. "You know what I mean. "Now, bring him out."

Kyle laughed, "Oh, I think I'll keep him for a while." He leered at Megumi. "Maybe you should just hang around with us for a while."

"Are you brain damaged or were you just born a moron?" Arisa barked. "I'm giving you a chance to get out of this without getting hurt."

"Oooo, now you've got me scared," Kyle mocked her. "What are you going to do, call your daddy?"

"I don't need my daddy to handle gutter trash like you," Arisa answered menacingly. "This is your last chance, bring him out."

Kyle had heard enough of this, he stood up and replied angrily. "I'm usually not interested in little girls, but I'm going to enjoy making your smart mouth scream." He looked up. "Grab them," he yelled to his gang.

There was a flurry of activity as several gang members jumped up and rushed the girls. A clunk, a thud, a scream of pain, then the sharp crack of a gunshot brought the activity to a sudden stop.

Chapter 24

Megumi caught the free end of her nunchakus. To her right, one attacker lay unconscious, another was backing away, groaning and holding his broken arm. To her left a third attacker kneeled holding his hands over his broken and bleeding nose.

Arisa stood in the same spot she had been in, a gun in each hand. Her left hand gun pointed toward Rat, who had fallen backward and was trying to crawl away. The gun in her right hand pointed at the face of a young man who had stopped dead still, inches from the barrel.

Kyle stumbled back and fell into his chair, blood leaking from the fingers of his hand covering his left ear. "She shot me," he screamed, "the crazy bitch shot me!" He looked around the room. "Why are you waiting? They can't stop you all, get them!"

Before the gang could move, Arisa's sharp voice barked out. "Maybe not. But how many of you are willing to die for this fool?" Arisa's eyes, cold and hard as ice, looked around the room. No one moved.

There was a tearing crash as the door to the street burst open and big Ben Wolfman rushed into the room, followed by Kaze, who took a defensive stance, a short katana in each hand. "We heard a gunshot," Ben said anxiously as he quickly assessed the situation. "Are you alright."

"We're fine," Arisa assured him. "Nothing here we couldn't handle."

"Sorry it took so long," Ben apologized, "this guy didn't want to let us in." He held the limp body of the door guard up by his shirt then tossed the unconscious gang member to the side on top of some of his comrades. "Would you like us to clean out this mess for you, Kitten?" Ben asked.

Arisa's smile was feral. "Not yet Hulk," she answered. "Let's see if there's any intelligent life in this trash." She turned her head and looked sharply at the frozen boy to her right. "Bring him out..... Now!" She turned and looked back at the gang boss. "He'd better bealright," she swung the gun around to center on him, "or I'm going to take you apart one piece at a time," she threatened.

Oren stood frozen, looking down the barrel of the gun, until the girl gave him his orders. He slowly backed away until she swung the gun away from him, then he turned and hurried out the side door. In the hallway he relaxed and shook his head, he knew that tall kid meant trouble, he'd told the boss that. From the moment Rat brought him in, he'd felt something was wrong. From Rat's story, the guy had been too good a fighter. Then there were the scars, and the tattoos on his arms, he wasn't just some rich schoolboy. Now there was that little girl, those guns were high end pieces. H&K seven millimeter magnum automatics. Light weight composite guns with twelve round magazines. A competent marksman could easily take out most of the gang in minutes with those guns..... She looked all to competent. Oren hoped that when he cut the tall kid loose, they would

leave, and that would be the end of it. He unlocked the door and stepped into the room..... and froze. An arm wrapped around him from behind and pinned his arms. He felt the point of a knife blade at his throat.

Chapter 25

"If you yell, you die," Chad quietly told the gang member as he held the small knife to his throat.

Oren, careful not to move, glanced around the room and saw the cut ties, their prisoner had somehow escaped. Quietly he told Chad, "easy, I'm just here to cut you loose. Your boss came to get you."

Chad eased his grip. "Ok," he answered, "but don't try anything stupid." He let go of the boy and backed off. Chad could just imagine the trouble he was in. The colonel was really going to be pissed if he had to leave the conference early just because Chad had messed up.

Oren handed Chad his wallet and cell phone. He looked the taller boy over. "I hope your boss thinks you look alright," he told Chad. She's one scary little chick. I really think she'd trash us all if you aren't good enough.

Chad stopped and looked at Oren. "Ah....ya..... she just might," he stammered, unsure of what was going on. Chad knelt down and slipped the small knife back into its hidden sheath in the heel of his shoe.

Oren stared at the shoe. "So that's how you got loose. Tricky, I need to get some shoes like that."

Chad grinned, "it never hurts to have some insurance." He followed Oren out the door and into the main room. Chad tried to keep the surprise and amusement from showing on his face at the sight of little Arisa pinning down the gang leader with her guns.

Arisa looked Chad over as he entered, she noted his cut lip and bruised face. "Are you alright?" She asked, trying to keep the concern from her voice.

"Ya," Chad assured her, "I've been beat up worse by my sister."

Ben let out a laugh and Arisa smiled at Chad's veiled insult. "Ok, then let's get out of here," she ordered. She returned her guns to the shoulder holsters under her vest and turned to head out the door, pointedly ignoring the injured gang leader.

Chad kept a wary eye out as he caught up with Arisa. "Maybe you should keep a gun on him till we get out," he warned.

"He's a coward," Arisa said firmly. "He wouldn't dare do anything." Arisa and Chad followed the others out the door.

Kyle sat frozen, watching them leave. He'd been humiliated, by a little girl no less. He couldn't let the rest of the gang think he was a coward. He waited till the girl had cleared the door. Kyle pulled out the big handgun he had under his chair and jumped up. "I'll get you!!" He screamed. "You're dead! You hear me? We'll get you and I'm going to....."

Arisa could clearly hear his tirade as he screamed out what he was going to do to her, in graphically obscene detail. Arisa kept walking as Kyle shouted about what he would do to her friends, but when he got to her

mother, Arisa snapped around and darted back into the door before Chad could stop her. There was a loud bang and sharp crack of two gunshots, followed by a terrible scream of pain.

Chad stopped at the door, staring inside. In a few seconds, Arisa emerged, holstering her gun. Everyone's eyes were on Arisa as she walked away, frowning. "He shot first, you heard it," she declared.

Megumi fell into step beside her friend. "You aren't hurt, are you? What happened?"

"He missed," Arisa assured her. "I could see him shaking. He couldn't hit a wall if he were standing in the middle of a room."

"You didn't kill him, did you?" Megumi asked.

"No, probably not." Was Arisa's short answer. "I just nullified his threats."

"Huh?" Megumi was almost afraid to ask. "How?"

Arisa smiled a wicked smile, "let's just say he won't be featured in any paternity suits."

"Oh lordy!" Ben said as he covered himself with his big hands, "she made him into a unique."

"Ah, I think you mean a eunuch," Chad corrected him.

"Well, whatever," Ben answered. "Just be sure to remind me never to get Kitten mad at me."

"I don't think you could, Ben," Chad, laughing, told him.

"Geez, I hope not," Ben relaxed some, then looked down at Arisa. "I would never have guessed you had that in you, Kitten."

Arisa answered without looking up, "you don't know my family, Ben."

As they sat on the bus heading back to their base, Chad thought about Arisa pointing her gun at the gang boss. He remembered all too well looking down the barrel of the gun his sister would point at him as she laughed. He remembered the roar of the gun and the cement chips from the wall pelting him as Eileen tried to shoot as close to him as she could. "I didn't know you were that good with a gun," he told Arisa.

Megumi leaned over from the seat behind them. "Arisa was one of the best marksmen in our class at the academy," she told Chad.

Arisa looked down, "I was trained in marksmanship since I was little. My father was insistent that we could defend ourselves."

Chad sighed, "he was probably right, but I really prefer a knife."

Arisa remembered Chad saying he didn't like guns. "Well, I actually prefer a pound or two of high explosive. It's so much more exciting," she told them with a wicked smile.

Chapter 26

Daniel felt relieved as they got out of the car at the old hotel. It would be good to sit back and relax. It had been a long and boring day, each of the colony diplomats arguing the virtues of their colony and how the Empire has repressed them. Each making their case for independence for their colony. The colonel was afraid this mission was going to kill him

with boredom. He envied Chad and Arisa, at least they were able to get out and do something. He sighed, it probably was boring for them too.

As they entered the foyer, Georgianna turned away from the lounge doors and headed straight for her room. John worried as he watched her leave. He had noticed, several times during the day, she had gotten that vacant, trance-like look in her eyes. There was something wrong, he could tell. If only she would talk to him, he was sure he could help her.

Colonel Hellwind stopped dead as he entered the lounge behind the princess. He scanned the room and it took a few seconds for the implications of the scene to register in his brain. Big Ben was sprawled across a couch, that was normal..... but the rest! Megumi and Kaze looked like they were ready to act in a martial arts movie, Arisa knelt on the arm of an easy chair, a first aid kit in front of her as she worked on a battered looking Chad. Most troubling, and surprising was the fact that he could see a gun, in a shoulder holster, under Arisa's open vest. He didn't remember her being armed when they left in the morning. What the H was going on?

Princess Melpomene hurried over to the chair Chad was sitting in. "Oh! You've been hurt!" She cried out. The princess had been sheltered all her life, she had never seen an injury more severe than a bump or scrape. "We have to get you to the hospital," she said worriedly. We should call the ship surgeon. This is terrible."

Arisa moved between the princess and Chad. "I'm taking care of him, Mel." She growled. "You don't need to get involved."

"But he needs a doctor." The princess argued.

Arisa stood her ground in front of Melpomene. "He'll be fine, I'll take care of him." Arisa told her emphatically.

Chad and Ben stood up as the Colonel approached the group. "That's enough lieutenant," he told Arisa as he looked Chad over. "What happened to you, Ross?..... No..... Captain Ross, I'll see you in my office, immediately." Daniel ordered.

"Yes sir," Chad answered and headed for the room that the colonel was using for his office.

Arisa and Melpomene started after him, but the colonel stopped them. "I said captain Ross."

"But, it was my fault," Arisa tried to tell the colonel as he turned and walked off toward the room he used for his office. Chad looked over at Arisa and smiled, as if telling her it was all right, then followed the colonel.

Melpomene watched the colonel and Chad leave, then turned to Arisa. "What do you mean it's your fault?" She demanded. "What did you do?" Arisa didn't answer, she turned away and plopped down in a chair, arms folded across her chest. Mel sighed and looked over at Megumi. "Do you know what's going on?" She asked. "What kind of trouble did they get into?"

Megumi looked at Arisa, then shrugged. "They were attacked by a street gang," She answered the princess. Megumi told what she knew of the

incident, leaving out the final exchange of gunfire. She didn't think the princess needed to know about that.

Melpomene looked at Arisa and scowled. "your foolishness is going to get someone killed Ari. You aren't back at home, you don't have your dad's security to back you up. You could ruin the whole mission."

Arisa jumped up from the chair and ran from the room as tears welled in her eyes.

"That was cruel," Megumi chided the princess. She couldn't just let it go, even if Melpomene was royalty. "None of us would have expected street gangs in open daylight in the city, it's just too foreign to how we live. And if you have ever loved someone, you would know she couldn't just leave him there." Megumi jumped up and followed Arisa.

Melpomene shook her head, "she could have gotten Chad and herself both killed rushing in like that."

Humph, Ben snorted, "as good as Kitten is with those guns, and with the high explosive she was carrying, those lightweights were bound to do anything she told them to."

Melpomene had to stop and reconsider. She hadn't thought about the fact that Ian Higgins made sure his children had self defense training, and Ari was an EDF trained pilot. She had upset the girl, that could be a dangerous thing. Now she regretted having made sure Arisa was issued that covert ops demolition pack.

As the door shut behind them, colonel Hellwind turned around and faced Chad. He didn't like the hard set of the boy's eyes, he didn't like that attitude, he unleashed all his frustration at the captain. The boring day, his anger and fears at how he had been treated after the Mar Sara campaign, his disappointment at the command he had been assigned, his prejudice against a low born gang member, even his frustrated feelings for the princess drove his rant against the young man. He chided Chad for fighting with schoolboys, questioned his fitness and maturity as an EDF captain. He even went as far as to cite Chad's lineage and upbringing against him.

Finally Dan's anger burned itself out. He stopped and looked at Chad. He saw disappointment and determination in those hard grey eyes. He spoke softer now, "if the school authorities had brought in the police, it could have ruined not only our mission, but the princess's efforts too."

"The incident didn't happen at the school," Chad informed him.

"What?" Suddenly Dan felt as if everything fell out from under him. "What happened?" He remembered the other pilots, Megumi and Kaze dressed for a fight, Arisa with guns, big Ben..... the pilots couldn't have fought.... Dan sat heavily down in his chair.

"We were ambushed by a street gang." Chad answered. "Arisa wanted to visit a retail area on the way back to base. There was plenty of time so I thought it would be alright. We took some back streets as a short cut. Things are different than in the lower cities, I didn't notice the signs, it's my fault. I hadn't expected street gangs in the city and it was too late by the time I recognized the danger, they had us surrounded. I tried to

negotiate, usually they demand a payment to let you pass through their territory, but the leader didn't want money..... what he demanded was, unacceptable. I decided that the best tactic would be to engage them in a fight and give Arisa time to get away. I believed they would hold me as a captive for ransom, a common fate for an abductee, and that would give me a chance to escape and return to base. Before I could get away, Arisa and the others showed up to rescue me."

Daniel was stunned, he had been so wrong, but was also relieved, perhaps there was no danger to the mission. He felt like a fool, all the things he had said in his anger, they were all lies, all strikes against his fitness, not Chad's. He looked down. "I'm sorry captain. I judged you without the evidence and was completely wrong. You aren't the one who is unfit for your rank, I am. I said a lot of things I wish I could take back, a lot of things no one should say. I'm sorry. If you wish to report me, I can't blame you."

Chad snorted as he held back a laugh. The colonel looked up at him. This was a new one, he'd faced the angry tirades of authorities many times, often he deserved it, but sometimes not, but this was the first time he remembered a superior apologizing, even in the face of clear evidence showing his innocence. And the colonel was even taking the blame himself. "Report what, sir?" It hurt to smile. "Everybody needs to let it out once in a while."

"But you didn't deserve it," the colonel admitted.

"Well, better me than some of the others," Chad said, "I've faced a lot worse." Dan looked up at him, questioningly. "You're too good a person to be really vicious," Chad assured him.

"Thank you, I don't deserve it. Sit down, captain let me hear the whole report." Dan invited. Chad gave the colonel a full report of the day, everything he knew and what he had been told. "Do you think we will need some protection? Will they try to retaliate?" The colonel questioned.

"I doubt it," Chad answered. "Arisa scared them pretty badly. they're going to be trying to find out who we are and if we are trying to take over their territory. I don't think they'll show themselves."

Dan sighed, "You better take a few days off. Go get those bruises taken care of." As Chad opened the door, the colonel called after him, "if Arisa wants to go shopping, it's alright by me just keep to the main streets."

"Will do, sir," Chad said as he shut the door.

Chapter 27

Melpomene sat on the sofa next to John. "You certainly were the right choice for our security team, John." She told him. "You fit right in with the ruling class. The women can't seem to leave you alone."

This was a pleasant surprise, to be complimented by a hot babe..... and a princess, no less. "The ladies just can't resist my smile," John bragged, giving the princess one of his best smiles.

"You might be right," Mel laughed, then her look turned more serious, "all, except the one you care about." John's smile faded as he looked away, "ya....well...."

"I know you and Georgianna were a couple once," Mel confessed, "and I can tell you still care. But you notice there is something wrong, I can see the concern when you look at her."

John sighed, "She's changed. Georgi always had a hot temper, but now she just seems angry at everything. I thought we had a chance, on the way to Mar Sara..... but since then..... she's changed."

There was a long moment of silence, then Melpomene added, "that isn't all of it, is it. You've noticed her blanking out, haven't you."

John stiffened. He looked at the princess, then quickly looked down. "Ya, I thought maybe she was just tired, but that isn't it. It just isn't like her."

This confirmed Melpomene's fears. She'd heard of others that had shown similar symptoms, one had been on the Mar Sara mission. Was it some contagion..... or?? Mel put her hand on John's hand, "keep an eye on her, John. Something strange is going on, and we can't let it ruin our chance at a peace accord."

Georgianna felt better after a shower and time to unwind. The headache that had dogged her all day had faded. It felt good to get away from those fawning wimps at the conference. She needed to talk to John. She hadn't been fair with him, and he had gotten her away from those irritating suiters a couple of times. Georgianna stopped short just outside the door to the lounge. Across the room she could see John, sitting close to the princess, her hand on his. Anger flared red behind her eyes. That lecher, grabbing at any female that comes near him. But her rage couldn't stay centered on John, her attention was forced toward the princess. She was the one seducing him, just like she had with all the men on the mission. She was just like the rest of the upper class, decadent elite, treating the lower classes like toys. They weren't trying to prevent a war, they didn't care about the people, they were just working out how to divide the spoils of the next war. She'd heard how the princess was baiting them, getting them to quarrel amongst themselves. She was starting a war, not preventing one. She put her hands up to her temples, her head throbbed with pain. She turned and stumbled back to her room. Georgianna knew she had to stop the princess, stop them, whatever it took. They were all evil.

Melpomene stood up as she saw Chad emerge from the colonels office. She walked over and stopped in front of the tall young man. "I hope you didn't get into too much trouble, Chad." She told him.

"Nah," Chad drawled. "Once he he heard it was a gang and not at school, it was no problem." He looked over her shoulder around the room. "Have you seen Arisa?" He asked.

Melpomene sighed. "I'm afraid I was a bit harsh with her and said things I shouldn't have. I think she went to her room. Megumi went after her." She reached up and lightly touched Chad's face. "Are you sure you don't need to see a doctor?"

"No, I've been beat up a lot worse," he assured her. "Besides, Arisa did a good job fixing things up for me."

Melpomene smiled, "Be careful, Chad. I don't want anything bad to happen to you."

"Oh, there she is," Chad said as he spotted Arisa. He stepped around Melpomene and headed across the room. It hurt to smile, but he couldn't help it.

Megumi found Arisa in their room, curled up in a corner on the bed. There were still tears in Arisa's eyes. She went and sat next to her friend and waited for Arisa to say something.

"We were friends," Arisa said with a soft sob. "Ever since I was little, I looked up to Mel. She was so nice to me..... Why did she change? Why was she so mean to me?"

"I don't think she was trying to be mean," Megumi answered softly, "I think she was scared. I don't think she really thought this mission might be dangerous, not until she saw Chad. I'll bet the princess has never really seen someone who was injured badly before, and you have to admit, Chad looks a little tough right now. She's led a sheltered life, more sheltered even than you have. She just came to the realization that you and Chad could be injured, or even killed out there and it frightened her."

"She was worried about Chad," Arisa sniffled. "Mel wants to take him away from me."

"Good luck with that," Megumi chuckled. "I don't think she could steal him away."

"You don't know Mel, she gets whatever she wants." Arisa told her.

"Why don't you come back to the lounge, Chad will be out of the colonels office soon, then you'll see who Chad is interested in." Megumi offered.

Arisa got up and washed her face, then followed Megumi to the lounge. They stopped at the door as they saw the princess, across the room, standing in front of Chad. Arisa clenched her fists and quietly growled, "if she touches him, I'll kill her." They saw Mel reach up and touch Chad's face. Megumi took hold of Arisa's wrist. "Don't do anything rash," she whispered, "that's nothing to get upset about." Arisa jerked her arm away, "she better leave him alone, or she'll regret it." Arisa threatened as she stepped into the room.

Megumi sat on the sofa next to Ben and snuggled up to her big boyfriend. Arisa plopped down on a sofa across from Ben and Megumi and Chad came over and sat next to her. Arisa didn't snuggle up to Chad though. Chad looked down, wondering what was wrong. Arisa sat pouting, with her arms folded across her chest. The princess told him that she had upset Arisa, Chad wondered what he could do to improve her mood.

"Sounded like the colonel chewed you out pretty good," Ben said to Chad.

"Some I guess," Chad told him, "until I told him what happened, then he cooled down."

"So you aren't going to get into trouble over it?" Ben asked.

"Not this time," Chad answered. "Once the colonel heard the whole story, he said he didn't see anything we did wrong. We just didn't know there were gangs operating out in the open here. I suppose he isn't happy, he said we won't be able to check out the other schools for a few days."

Megumi giggled, "I suppose not, you look a bit messed up. I guess he had some pity on you."

"It looked like the princess does too." Arisa grouched.

Chad looked down at the unhappy girl. Was that what was bothering her? "The princess still thinks I should go see a doctor, but I told her I like the doctor I have just fine." Arisa looked up at Chad and her hard expression softened. Chad saw her begin to smile as she moved closer and snuggled up against him.

The door to colonel Hellwinds office opened and the colonel stepped out. "Lieutenant Wolfman, I want to see you in my office. Ben had a bit of worried look, then shrugged and got up, heading for the office. "You might as well come too, Yamato," Daniel ordered. Megumi made a 'who, me?' gesture, then got up and followed Ben into the office.

"The colonel told me it would be alright to take you to those shops that you wanted to visit." Chad told Arisa as he put his arm around her.

"There wouldn't be any trouble there with the gangs. He told me that there are possible sightings of captain Dom and that girl on cameras in that area."

Arisa smiled, "that would be nice. After what happened today, we deserve a day off..... If you feel up to it."

"No problem," he assured her, "It'll be fun."

Chapter 28

Chad leaned against one of the pillars in the lounge, waiting for Arisa. A day of shopping didn't exactly thrill him, a day with Arisa more than made up for it. He looked around the room at the others, The colonel, impeccable in his dress uniform, the princess looked less like royalty and more like she was dressed for a business conference, John and Georgianna looked ready for security detail, particularly Georgianna with her forty-four automatic in it's holster in plain sight.

Georgianna spotted Chad and walked up to face him. "You should be carrying a handgun if you're going into town, Ross. There might be more trouble."

"It's illegal to carry guns in the city." Chad informed her.

"Not for members of the EDF," Georgianna shot back. "We're exempt from their law."

"It wouldn't look good for us, and we won't need it, the gangs would never make a move in a well populated market area." Chad assured her. "Besides, I really don't like guns."

Georgianna gave a short derisive laugh, "you didn't need one yesterday either, did you. It's a good thing someone knows how to use a gun, or you

would still be tied up in some back room.” Georgianna turned and walked off.

Chad watched her walk off with the others. He could have told her that he hadn’t needed any help to get away from the gang, but it wouldn’t have done much good. It didn’t matter, he was distracted by Arisa walking into the room. She wore blue jeans and a knit top that emphasized her young curves to his total distraction.

Arisa smiled as she walked up to Chad, by the look on his face, she was affecting him exactly as she had intended. “Ready to go?” She asked.

Chad jerked himself back from his over-active imagination, “Ah..... Ya, all set.”

Arisa almost giggled. Chad was the first boy since high school that she had tried to attract. She had been so disappointed when the boys ignored her in high school, but now..... she was so excited.

“I, ah. asked Ben if he and Megumi wanted to go with us,” Chad told her as she started out, “but the colonel sent them on some kind of mission, he didn’t say what though.”

“Oh, that’s too bad..... I guess,” she replied. Why would he want them along? she thought to herself. Doesn’t he want to be alone with me?..... After thinking a bit Arisa changed her mind. Maybe it would have been better to have their friends along. She had been on a date with a boy and it had been..... awkward. What did you do for a whole day with a boy? Arisa looked Chad up and down as they got on the bus. First thing, she thought, was to get him some decent cloths. He looked like a leftover from the tech corpse..... Ok, so he was..... but he didn’t have to dress in the grey slacks and white shirt they issued him.

Chad walked next to Arisa with the handles of a couple heavy shopping bags in each hand. The morning had gone by a lot quicker than he expected. Arisa had insisted on buying him a couple sets of cloths, over his protests. He didn’t want to make a scene, and she sure could be stubborn when she wanted to be. Chad had been amused watching the sales people, who tried to ignore them or even discourage them, who had given Chad disgusted looks because Arisa appeared to young for him, become very courteous and helpful when she ran her credit chip. The Higgins name and unlimited credit impressed people. Chad thought he would be bored when she shopped for herself, but seeing her model elegant dresses and cute outfits kept him fascinated. but what almost did him in was when she decided to try on swimming suits. The first was a two piece, pink with white dots and a ruffly little skirt and white bows, way too cute. The second was a sporty two piece, white with light green and blue cross stripes, Chad didn’t want her to leave to try on another..... but..... The third was his favorite, a white two piece, the top had a wide light blue collar with a thin white trim stripe that pulled together in front to a short straight necktie, and a blue band around the lower edge with the same white stripe down the center. The bottom had the same blue and white band around the waist that formed bows at each hip. It was finished off with sandals tied on with the same blue and white sash. Chad almost

forgot to breath. Chad's reactions weren't lost on Arisa.... she bought all three.

Chad's thoughts were wandering as they walked toward the restaurant they had decided on for lunch. He didn't notice they were being watched till two young men stepped in front of them. Chad stopped short and dropped the bags..... gang members! He recognized the two, one was Oren, the one who had come to the room to get him, the other was called Rat, the short guy who had lead the group that assaulted them. Chad took a quick look around but didn't see any others, they could be hidden. Damn, he hadn't expected this, gangs didn't usually make trouble in busy market areas. He'd assured the colonel there wouldn't be any trouble.

Rat looked the girl over, she was perfect, petite and with a nice body, nice blond curls and a cute face. She was beautiful..... and she scared the hell out of him. He remembered her gun pointed straight at him as he scrambled backward trying to get away. He couldn't forget those ice cold eyes and her ruthless demeanor. He stayed a couple steps behind Oren.

Oren stopped still when he saw the girl shove her hand into her handbag. Maybe he should have brought the gun..... No, he's seen her in action, he wouldn't stand a chance. He held his hands out to his sides, palms forward. "We aren't looking for trouble, just talk." he told her.

Arisa looked Oren over, and Rat, who had his hands out too. She took her hand out of her bag and took the same cross armed stance she had taken in the gang's hangout. "Alright, Talk."

Chad relaxed, talk, there wouldn't be any trouble, at least not here. Chad made the hand signal for "hold position".

Across the street, Ben put his hand on Megumi's shoulder. "He just gave the hold position signal. Do you think he knows we've been watching them?" Ben asked. Megumi chuckled, "I think he spotted us right away this morning. You are a bit hard to hide. We'll wait, maybe they don't need us."

"We didn't know," Oren started out, "we thought you were school kids. I had you tailed yesterday..... You've got mechs, you're government, or syndicate..... or worse, one of the big families. We don't want any trouble, we didn't know..... Look, I've got something you want, some information, but you have to give your word you wont take us out." Oren looked around, as if expecting trouble. "I'll tell you, if you give your word..... it's worth that."

Arisa let him squirm under her icy glare for a few moments before answering. "You'll tell me what you have, I'll decide if it's worth your life." She told him in a cold voice.

"You're looking for someone, a girl, my little sister showed me a picture you were showing around her school..... You won't find her at any school. She works in a bar, the one down on fifth where the girls dress up like maids and nurses, and schoolgirls. She hangs out with a guy named Santana, he bartend's and plays in the band there. They have an apartment on McKnight street, right across from the big Ambassador Hotel."

Oren watched the girl, her expression never changed but he remained hopeful until..... she reached into her handbag. He took a step back and

his heart raced as she pulled out..... her cell phone. He watched as she manipulated the screen for a few moments, then jumped as his phone rang.

Arisas tapped the disconnect and dropped her phone in her bag. She looked up at Oren. "You might be of some use," she told him. "I'll contact you." Arisa walked past him without so much as turning to look at him.

Chad picked up the bags and looked at Oren, shrugged his shoulders and followed Arisa.

Oren slowly relaxed and turned to collect Rat and get out of there. It seemed they were in the clear, for now. How could such a little girl be so damned scary..... and how did she get his cell number?

Chad caught up to Arisa. "That went well," he said, "I guess it's a good thing you brought your gun along."

"I didn't," she confessed, "but they didn't know that. I don't think that would have mattered though. They seemed sufficiently frightened of us."

Chad laughed, "Remind me never to play poker with you. You called his phone. How did you get his number?"

Arisa looked up at Chad and smiled. "Part of the hidden programs in these phones. Along with being able to locate another phone, they can pick up the number for the phones in the locator range. There were three phones close to me, yours and theirs. I tried one of theirs and got lucky."

Chad shook his head, "apps like that shouldn't be legal."

"They aren't," Arisa told him, "officially, they don't exist."

Chad laughed, "right.....officially. Well, they have come in handy." Chad pointed across the street, "maybe we should go over there to eat, we could meet up with Ben and Megumi, tell them we have some good news for the colonel."

"What? They're here?" Arisa asked. "What are they doing here?"

"They've been following us all morning," Chad informed her. "I guess that must have been their special assignment."

Arisa smiled as she grabbed Chad's arm, dragging him toward the street. "Let's go find them, they're going to love to hear about this."

Chapter 29

"Captain, you should take a break," The voice came from far away, "Captain, I'll take over, go get some coffee or something..... GEORGI." John's face came into focus in front of Georgianna. "Don't call me that," she snarled. "Alright, I'll take a break, just keep your mind on what you're doing, not on the women." Georgianna stalked out of the room.

John watched her go, he could keep his mind on the job, but could she? What had she been thinking? The princess had asked him to keep an eye on Georgianna, and he had, but what should he do now?

Georgianna was relieved to get out of the conference room. She went out into the courtyard and sat on the edge of the fountain, she splashed some of the cool water on her face. Everything was going wrong. It had happened again, the blackout, the dreams that she could almost

remember, images just beyond recall. John had seen it, she was sure this time, he had noticed her sidearm holster was unsnapped and her hand on the grip of her gun. He would report it and it would be the end for her. They would find out that she was losing her mind. There would be tests, they would put her away..... she would lose everything. Tears burned Georgianna's eyes, her head ached, and she felt so very tired, but there was something she had to do, something the they insisted she must do.

The esper slumped over at his station, exhausted. He had been so close, then someone had interfered, broken his connection. His superior leaned over him. "What happened?" The officer demanded. "Were you successful?" "No," the esper replied, "I was so close, then that other broke into her consciousness." "This must not disrupt the plan," the officer insisted. "There must be some way to overcome this. You are dealing with a female, after all." "There is a way, I can use her anger to turn her against that one," the esper assured him. "I will cause her to destroy that one along with the others."

Dominic moved the curtain and looked down the street. They were still there, trying to look inconspicuous. He hadn't counted on this. How did they find them so soon? "Rydia, pack your things, we have to get out of here." He called to the girl in the next room.

"Why?" Rydia called back, "I thought things were pretty good here."

"They found us," Dominic told her. "I didn't think they would find us this soon, but they're here. There are two of them down at the corner. They've been watching the door."

Rydia came out of the room, carrying a duffle bag. "How are we going to get away? If they're watching we'll be caught."

"I know another way out," Dominic assured her. "You might not like it, it's through the basement and the utility tunnels."

Tom laid a memory chip on General Parker's desk. The general motioned him to sit down as he picked up the chip and slid it into his terminal. He scrolled through the pages for several minutes. "It certainly was a stroke of luck that you happened to find the one person in the entire EDF who has ever even heard of this forgotten language," general Parker told him. "This will be the key to understanding that weapon."

Tom sighed, "We may be able to build the thing, but we still are missing the system to operate it. Tod told me the programming to control the intersection of that many inertial damper fields and the weapon's field control would be extremely complex. He thinks he and Janice could figure it out, but it could take a couple years. They really would like to meet the guy who designed this thing, especially Janice. she thinks it must be someone who knew her father."

"If Daniel can find his missing pilot, we may have a lead to that person," Parker replied. "Have the Sheffield pick up the Doc and his assistant and take them to Shakuras. If they find that weapon, I want those two there. They might get the information they need. We either have to control that weapon, or destroy it. Also, Tod had developed some kind of tracking device for warp space. If Dominic tries to run again, they have to plant that

tracker on that weapon so we can find it." He sat looking at the terminal again, thinking. "Tom, I want you to make sure the eighth is on alert and ready to assemble. But keep it quiet, I don't want this known outside the eighth." The general ordered. "I've got a bad feeling about this. I didn't think it was a good idea to send Daniel out there with no backup. I know the argument, that it would look antagonistic to send out a fleet of ships, but I think there is more to it than that. I don't think the Red Faction has been destroyed. I'm afraid Daniel was sent to be the sacrificial goat. Someone wants to start a war, and I think that someone here in the EDF is in on it."

Arisa stood in the bus shelter, her arms folded and a frown on her face. She tapped her toe impatiently. "Where could they have gone?" she asked petulantly. "We're going to miss the bus. They said they would meet us here."

Megumi smiled and answered, "they probably went to find something to eat."

Arisa looked straight at Megumi, fists on her hips, "they couldn't, with all they ate at lunch, they'd explode."

Megumi laughed, "you don't know Ben, he's just getting started, and, it looks like Chad could keep right up with him."

"They better get here," Arisa grouched, "there won't be another bus for an hour and we should be there when the colonel gets back. He'll want to hear what we found out today."

"If they aren't here on time, we'll leave without them," Megumi told her.

"That wouldn't be any fun." Arisa pouted. What she really wanted was to see Ben's reaction when he saw Megumi. They had found a really cute little black dress. It had a short skirt and tight fitting body that was cut low enough to be very alluring. Megumi protested, but Arisa had insisted they buy it and that Megumi had to wear it.

"Hi girls, have you been waiting long?" Chad called out as he came around the side of the bus stop shelter. Megumi stood up to greet Ben as he followed Chad around the shelter. "Hey Megumi....." Clank.... "Ouch." As Ben spotted Megumi his eyes nearly popped out, his mouth hung open and he walked right into the bus stop sign post.

"Oh!" Megumi cried as she hurried over to Ben. "Are you alright?"

"Ya..... I guess," Ben answered as he pulled the signpost back to straight. He turned a lustful look toward Megumi. "Oh wow," was all he could think to say. He'd never seen his athletic little girlfriend dressed like this. She was stunning.

Megumi blushed, she had never worn such an enticing dress, she was afraid to. She was worried what Ben would think of her..... But now, she was glad she did, she saw the look in his eyes and she wanted that.

Arisa giggled. "She's pretty hot, isn't she?" Arisa asked Chad.

"Yes, that she is," Chad answered as he glanced at Megumi. Chad turned back to Arisa, she was what he was interested in. Arisa was wearing a party dress and matching shoes she had purchased. It was a light blue that matched her eyes, with short puff sleeve's and a high collar with lace

trim, the full gathered skirt was hemmed a little above her knees. Chad was fascinated, with her golden curls shining in the sunlight, she could be a pixie princess or queen of the fairies. Chad's longing look wasn't lost on Arisa. She smiled up at him, it was exactly what she had hoped for. He was looking at her, even though Megumi was so pretty. Arisa noticed the bus pulling up. "Hey you two, wait till you get back to your room, at least," she told Ben and Megumi. The two blushed and they all laughed as they got on the bus.

Colonel Hellwind sighed as the car stopped in front of their old hotel building. It had been another long and mostly boring day, though it had been interesting to see how the princess had manipulated the diplomats. At times he wondered if she was trying to prevent a war.... or start one. As they entered the lounge area Daniel did a double take. Was there a party tonight that he didn't know about? The girls were stunning.

Melpomene chuckled when she saw the pile of shopping bags by the girls. "It looks like you had a fun day," she told them. She stepped up to Chad, she thought he looked very good in the new cloths he was wearing. Melpomene touched his face. "Your bruises are fading nicely," she observed, "you should be able to check the other schools in a day or two."

Arisa pushed her way between Chad and Melpomene forcing them to back away from each other. "We won't be going to the other schools so you don't have to worry about Chad," she angrily told the princess.

"Oh?" The princess questioned, "what makes you think that?"

"We know where captain Dominic and the woman are living," Arisa told her in a smug voice, "and where they work."

Colonel Hellwind stepped up to the group. "Are you sure? Did you see them?" He asked.

"No, but we know where to find them now." Arisa told him. She recounted the story of how they had been stopped by the gang members and had been given the information.

"Can we be sure the information is true?" The colonel questioned.

"They wouldn't have had reason to try to deceive us," Chad assured him. "They were worried, afraid we would retaliate and they knew we could destroy them. Also, while the girls were shopping, Ben and I went and checked out the apartment, there is a Carlos Santana listed for a second floor apartment."

"I hope he didn't see you. If he's on the run from the EDF, we could lose him." The colonel admonished them.

"I made sure we weren't able to be seen from inside the building," Chad informed him. "And, I kept watch and didn't see the captain in the area."

"He wasn't home anyway," Ben told him. Then, when the colonel looked questioningly at him, he added, "I tried buzzing his room."

"That was a bad idea," the colonel told Ben. "If he saw you on the security camera he might not answer. He might be running, we might have lost our chance."

"No, there were no cameras. It was a simple voice only intercom system." Chad came to Ben's defense.

The colonel sighed, "That's good. We'll have to stake out the apartment building. If we can be sure he's there, we can cover the exits before we confront him to make sure he can't run. We need to find a place where we can watch the building without being seen."

Arisa grinned, "I can take care of that. I have a plan."

Chapter 30

The young man at the registration desk of the Ambassador Hotel looked up as a group of four people entered the lobby. There were two young men, one tall and dark haired, the other a blond haired mountain of a man. What drew his attention was the two girls. One was an exotic looking beauty with long black hair dressed in a very hot looking black dress, and in the lead of the group was a small girl with short blond curls, blue eyes, and wearing a cute blue dress.

Arisa led Chad up to the registration desk. "I want two adjoining rooms facing the street on the second floor," she informed the young man.

The young man was taken aback by the little girl's imperious sounding attitude. He looked at the computer screen. "I'm afraid those rooms are taken," he informed Arisa. "There are only suite's open on the seventh floor, but they are rather expensive."

Arisa folded her arms over her chest and stamped her foot. "Did I say seventh floor? NO! I said I want my rooms on the second floor." Arisa steamed.

"Well, that's not possible," he retorted. "Those rooms are occupied."

"I don't care," Arisa replied tossing her head. "Move them to the suites, or send them somewhere else, I want those rooms."

The manager ran his fingers through his greying hair. He could hear the raised voices coming through the office door and wondered what kind of trouble his assistant was getting into this time. He got up and peered out the door then blanched as he heard his assistant suggest that they look for other accommodations. This would never do, he hurried out of the office to the counter. "It will take a bit of time to get the rooms cleaned and prepared for you," he told Arisa. "Would an hour delay be be satisfactory?"

Arisa sniffed, "I suppose it will have to do." She looked around and spotted one of the bell boys. "You there, go bring in my bags," she ordered.

The bell boy looked at the manager who motioned for him to do it.

The assistant looked incredulously at the manager. "But sir, those rooms are....."

The manager took the young man by the arm and steered him toward the office. "Please excuse us for a moment," he told Arisa.

In the office the assistant turned toward his manager. "Why are you catering to that arrogant little....."

The manager waved him to silence. "You may be young enough to look for a different career, but I'm not." He chided the young man. "Don't you ever look at the company news letters? That arrogant little girl is Arisa

Higgins, her family owns this hotel, and just about every other one you can think of. What ever she wants, you had better find a way of providing for her. Now, hurry and get those rooms ready.” “What should I do with the guests belongings from the rooms?” The young man asked.

“Move them to the suites, it’s a rather big upgrade, I don’t think they will complain.” The manager ordered. He went back out to the counter. “We could contact you when the rooms are ready,” he told Arisa.

“That would be fine,” Arisa told him. “We’ll be waiting in the bar. I hope they have better drinks than those awful things they served on the ship.” She turned toward the lounge and looked at the bell boy pushing in the cart with the dozen big suitcases she had purchased that morning. “I hope there are some decent shops on this planet, Meg,” she said to Megumi, loud enough for the manager to hear, as they headed for the lounge. “The princess is having a dinner party and I simply have nothing to wear.”

The manager picked up his phone to call the bar, he’d better give the bartender a heads up on just who was headed his way. The manager could just imagine what would happen if he refused to serve the girl.

Megumi walked close to Arisa. “You really played that part well,” She told Arisa then giggled.

“That’s where I come from,” Arisa answered. “It’s how my father wants me to be. And, exactly what I don’t ever want to be.”

Chapter 31

“How can I fix it, I don’t know what’s wrong.” Ridia’s voice whined. “The power units are all acting strange. There should be enough power but there just isn’t.” She pushed her big glasses up her nose, tears glistened in the corners of her eyes.

Dominic sighed, “sorry I snapped at you, but they know we’re on this planet, it won’t be long till they figure out where we are. We have to get out of here.”

“We can’t leave Atropos here, we can’t let them get him.” Ridia pleaded.

“You told me they can’t operate it without the operating system and only you have that.” Dominic reasoned with her. “It would be useless to them without you, so we have to get away.”

“I won’t let them have him,” Ridia vowed. “I won’t leave him behind.”

Chad looked down the street, then back to the door of the apartment building across the street. They had watched the building all day yesterday and the last two nights. Dominic and the girl hadn’t shown up. The sensors and cameras on the rear door and fire escape hadn’t shown anyone either. He had a bad feeling that they were too late. Sitting alone with Arisa. in this hotel room, was straining his will power to keep watching the street, and not.....

Ben followed Megumi into the bar. He looked around the room but other than the bartender they were the only ones there. They took stools at the bar and ordered drinks.

"You look a bit young, miss, do you have an ID." The bartender asked, looking a bit skeptical.

Megumi sighed and got out her ID card. Maybe she should be used to being checked, it happened often enough. It must be worse for Arisa, they probably thought her ID was fake.

The bartender took the card and looked at it and frowned. "EDF, we don't see many of your kind around here." He said with a scowl.

"Ya, well we're just looking for a friend," Ben told him, smiling. "I heard he was playing guitar in a band here."

"Oh? Maybe." The bartender looked at them suspiciously. "And where do you know him from?"

"Gunner was my captain at the Mar Sara battle. I haven't seen him since then." Ben answered. "We're escorting a big wheel to some conference here, so I thought I might look him up."

"Mar Sara, huh," the bartender looked Ben over more closely. "What did you pilot?"

"A Lancer heavy."

"What did they call you?"

"Bullseye, hey why all the questions?" Ben demanded.

The bartender smiled, "ya, you fit the description. He told me all about the battle you had at Mar Sara. Of all the EDF you guys are the only ones who are welcomed here. You're heros for saving the colony, in our opinion.

Megumi laughed, "it's nice to know we're welcome somewhere."

"You got a bad deal," the bartender told them, "the way they made it sound, you were the bad guys. Say, Carlos isn't in some kind of trouble, is he?"

"Na, not with us," Ben answered. "What makes you think that?"

"Well, you're the third one in here looking for him." The man answered. "Three guys a couple days ago, two yesterday, now you two."

"Hmm," Ben scratched his chin, "he did tend to get himself into trouble. Wonder if he was gambling or something. Do you know where he is?"

"Can't help you there," the bartender answered. "He and that girl would take off for a few days every now and then. Seemed different this time. He came in for his guitar and told me they would be gone for a while, he seemed in a big hurry."

"Aw nuts, we could maybe help him out if we knew where to find him." Ben shook his head. "Seems we came a bit too late."

Ben and Megumi finished their drinks while the bartender pried stories of the Mar Sara battle out of them. They left the bar, disappointed that they didn't have any more information on where Dominic was than when they had entered. "Who else would be looking for them?" Ben asked Megumi. "Do you think the EDF would have sent someone else?"

"I don't know," She told him. "The OMI seems to do things on their own. but even if they sent investigators, who are the other ones? Something strange is going on here."

"Ya, I got a bad feeling about it..... Something bad is going to happen." Ben warned her.

"They aren't coming back," Arisa grumbled. If she had to sit here alone in this hotel room with Chad much longer, she was going to go crazy and..... "We should do something. Maybe we should go over there and question the other tenants. Maybe they would know where they are."

Chad got up and paced around the room, thinking. He picked up the case of tools he had brought with him. "It might be better to check his room first. Maybe they're hiding out in there..... or worse....."

"That would be a good idea, but they must have a security system," Arisa explained. "They would have their door locked, we couldn't get in." Arisa looked up and saw Chad grinning.

"Really?" Chad chuckled.

"Oh....." Arisa said as she remembered Chad's past. "Ok, let's go."

Even though she knew Chad had experience with breaking into buildings, she was surprised at how quickly he got the door open while she acted the part of talking to someone on the intercom. When they reached the apartment, Chad had Arisa stand to the side as he picked the lock on the door as quietly as he could. He stood to the side as he quietly turned the knob and pushed the door open. He didn't want to be in the line of fire if someone had a nervous trigger finger. There was no sound so he cautiously looked around into the room, he didn't see anyone so he entered then told Arisa she should come in. There were papers scattered around, some magazines a couple old books, odd things in this day, but they were some kind of technical and physics books. There were some canned goods and boxes of food in the little kitchen area and food left in the refrigerator. Arisa looked in the closets and Chad in the drawers.

"Empty," Chad reported, "they were cleaned out."

Arisa frowned, "There are three school uniforms in the closet, that's all. It looks like they grabbed everything and left."

"In a hurry, I'd guess," Chad mused. "Well, maybe we can find something in the papers that will give us a clue to where they are." Did they spot us and run? Chad wondered. Or was it because of those guys who have been watching the building.

Arisa gathered the papers and looked through them, they were schematic diagrams and mathematical formulae. Nothing that could help them.

Chad dumped out the waste basket and looked through the contents. Empty food packages, containers, and store receipts, the basket by the desk just had more of the pages of hand drawn diagrams. "Nothing," Chad sighed.

Arisa frowned, she felt so frustrated she could cry. They had been so close. When they received the information from the gang leader, she was sure they would find captain Torres and the girl. Now their hopes were crushed, Torres was gone and had left no clues. "We were so close," she pouted, "I was sure we were going to find them. Now, they're gone."

"Ya, it looks like it," Chad grumped. "The colonel isn't going to be happy about this."

"Do you think they saw us and that's why they left?" Arisa questioned.

"Maybe," Chad mused as he put the basket back. "Or maybe it was because of the other guys." He spotted a piece of crumpled paper stuck behind the edge of the desk and picked it up.

"What other guys?" Arisa asked.

"The ones who have been down at the corner for the last two days." Chad answered as he straightened the paper and glanced at it. Just another receipt. "We aren't going to find anything here," Chad said as he started to throw the paper in the basket..... then stopped and looked more closely at it, and smiled. "Or, we might just get lucky."

Arisa stood on her toes trying to get a look at the paper. "What is it? Oh, it's just another receipt. What good is that?"

"Just a receipt," Chad answered, "for hangar space rental at one of the airfields."

"Oh, thats good..... maybe?" Arisa exclaimed. "But if they're gone, how will that help?"

"We won't know till we check it out," Chad told her. "We have to go to that airfield. We better leave a note in the room for Ben and Megumi."

Arisa laughed, "yes let's go..... the game is afoot!"

"Huh?" Chad looked a bit dumbfounded.

"Just something from the old books my brother read," Arisa told him. "Something a great detective would say."

Chapter 32

Georgianna quickly looked away when she saw John looking at her. Why does he keep looking me over, she wondered? It's like he can tell..... She closed her eyes, damn this headache. It's like he knew she could hear voices in her head, like he knew she felt like someone else was there..... Like he knew she was going crazy. *Ignore him*, the voices told her, *you hate him, he's a letcher..... if he gets in your way, kill him*. Georgianna tried to block out the voices, they were insanity, but there was something she had to do, and she couldn't let John get in her way.

It was a small airfield, on the opposite side of town from the spaceport, right on the sea shore. There were several hangars and one larger building that was a combination of office maintenance shed. There was a sign that read "Walt's Heli Repair" over the big door. Chad and Arisa entered the office. There was a box with a button on the counter that had a sign saying, "if you want help, push the damn button". Chad laughed as he pushed the button.

There were clanking sounds of tools dropping and a few expletives from the shop before the door opened and Walt entered the office. He was a short, stoutly built man, wearing dirty coveralls and wiping his hands on a shop towel. He looked the two over then grumbled, "what do you kids want?"

Arisa didn't like the man's tone and was about to let him know it, but Chad answered before she could. "We're looking for, ah, Carlos Santana," Chad told him. "He stores a shuttle here."

"Well, he ain't here," Walt told them. "The professor and that assistant of his took off a couple days ago, out to the islands, doing some kind of research..... he says. What do you want him for? You college kids or something?" He looked rather skeptically at Arisa.

Arisa quickly adapted to the situation. "We have documents, concerning his research grant from the university, that he needs to deal with. Do you know where he went?"

"How would I know?" Walt grumbled. "I don't keep track of private shuttles. They go out to the islands somewhere."

"Darn," Arisa complained, "we need to find him to get these....."

"That's alright," Chad broke in as he looked at a map on the wall. "I know where he is."

"What? How do you know?" Arisa asked.

"Oh, the Uni told me where I could find him," Chad answered. "I would like to rent a Heli for a couple hours to, ah, take him the documents." Chad told the man.

Walt looked a bit skeptical, not many college boys, especially off worlders, could manually fly a heli. "You got a license to fly, boy?"

"Yes," Chad answered as he pulled out his wallet. He had hoped the man wouldn't ask to see his license, it could be a problem.

Walt took the license and after looking at it frowned. "EDF! I thought you said you were college kids."

Chad knew they hadn't actually told him they were college students, but he wasn't about to mention that. "Ya, well, I'm from lower Detroit, how else could I afford to attend a Uni. I was lucky, the court gave me a choice, EDF or prison. It was a no brainer."

"So you were a heli pilot?" He asked. "I didn't think the EDF used those old things."

"They have lots of odd stuff. I was a tech, if the EDF had it, we had to learn to drive or fly it." Chad told him.

Walt's attitude visibly brightened. "A tech? Well, guess you're alright then. All I have is a turbine powered heli, no auto pilot stuff. I hope you're alright with that."

"No problem," Chad assured him, "I've worked with turbines before."

"I should have figured you would have," Walt replied. "Say, do you know much about power units?"

"Ya, some," Chad answered.

"Some? He's an expert on power units," Arisa added.

"Well, maybe not....." Chad started to say.

"Good, I've got a big cargo hauler in the shop that's low on power. I don't know a lot about those things. I could give you a deal on the rent if you would check it for me." Walt said hopefully. A military tech should know plenty about power units.

Chad smiled, he was always willing to tackle a tech problem. "Sure, I'll check it out. I might be able to find the problem." They followed Walt into the shop area. There was a cargo heli with a diagnostic tablet hooked to the power unit. It was a common RR-W power unit, an older design. Chad looked over the readout, "how old are the fuel rods?"

"Put in new ones a couple of years ago." Walt told him.

Chad powered up the unit and tried a load test, it wouldn't top forty percent. He used a few commands to open a second page of tests.

"What the heck is that?" Walt asked, looking over Chad's shoulder.

"Factory service page," Chad told him. "Only the factory techs are supposed to access it, but it's the only way to really see what's going on." He scrolled through data and graphs. "Thought so, there's the trouble. Half the dampers aren't opening up." Chad opened a panel covering electronic circuits. He found a jumper wire and connected two terminals, you could immediately hear the power increase. Chad quickly removed the jumper and shut down the unit. He pulled a circuit board out of the panel and looked at it. "There's the problem, a burned board. I'd guess the third bank either has a stuck fuel rod or a bad actuator. You'll need to repair that first then replace the board."

Walt scratched the stubble on his chin, "damn, you do know your stuff. You saved me a ton, I usually have to get a factory tech from off world to get into these things. I'll let you have a couple hours of heli rent free."

"That's nice," Arisa broke in. "The Uni will be happy about that. They are always worried about budgets. Speaking of which, we better get those documents to the professor."

Walt led them to a two seat heli car. It had two turbine electric generators in the tail and four short wings ending in electrically driven ducted fans. The fans pivoted to lift and drive the car. Chad did a look around the car while Arisa got in and ran through the flight checks. Chad got in, "you want to fly it?" He asked.

Arisa looked a bit dubiously at the manual controls, "you said you know where to go, so you take it."

Chad started the turbines and spun up the fans. He smiled at Arisa and then, as boys have done for millenia, had to show off. He pushed the fans to max and took off in a breath taking arc.

Arisa held tight to the seat arms and giggled. She hadn't had this much fun in a long time.

Another man watched from the shadows of one of the hangars as Arisa and Chad got into the heli car. An evil grin crossed his face, he'd gotten lucky. As they took off, he turned and entered the hangar.

Colonel Hellwind hoped the princess knew what she was doing. She had assured him that negotiations were proceeding exactly as she had planned. The rivalry between the colony governments had reached near fever pitch. If things didn't cool off soon, there would be war, not between earth and colonies, but between colonies themselves. Several of the ambassadors were already in a shouting match.

John surreptitiously kept an eye on Georgianna. He didn't want her to know he suspected something was wrong. She seemed too stiff, almost like in a trance. He began to worry as he saw her unsnap the catch securing her holster.

She had to stop them, they weren't here to find a way to peace, they were here to start a war. Georgianna wrapped her hand around the grip of her gun. *They were evil, she must stop them.....* No, what was she thinking, this was wrong she couldn't..... *If she let them live, millions would die.....* This is insanity, it's not up to me, I can't..... *I have to save everyone, I have to do it, no one else is going to.....* No, no, no, this isn't right, don't make me..... *They're monsters, they're inhuman, kill them, kill them all!* Georgianna drew her gun.

Chapter 33

Arisa was excited to be out alone in the car with Chad. Her imagination wandered to landing on one of the little islands. After a quarter hour, her curiosity got the better of her. "Ok, where are we going?" She asked. "How do you know where to find captain Torres?"

Chad chuckled, he wondered how long she could wait before she had to ask. "I don't," he answered, "not exactly. There aren't a lot of big islands out here and he's trying to hide a really big mech. That narrows it down, but there is one island in particular. It has a ship and mech maintenance base that they built during the colony wars. It's one of the reasons the people of Shakuras don't like the EDF. The base was forced on them when they were trying to remain neutral. It was operational during the pirate war, but wasn't needed. It's been mothballed since. If I were going to hide a giant mech, I'd break into one of the maintenance hangars and leave it there."

"OH! That's smart thinking, I'm sure he has to be there." Arisa said excitedly. "What will we do if we find him?"

"I don't plan on landing," Chad told her. "He might shoot first and ask who we are later. I figure we can fly over without raising too much interest. If they landed that big a mech there, it would leave tracks. We can report back to the colonel and let him decide what to do."

"Ok," Arisa was a bit disappointed, "that probably is the best way to do it."

The car shuddered, there was a loud crashing, Chad felt a burning across his arm. It took him several seconds to realize what had happened. He put the car into a dive and a hard left turn. Arisa screamed as Chad pushed the throttle to maximum and pulled into hard climbing turn to the right. "What's happening! What's wrong?" Arisa screamed.

"They're shooting at us!" Chad yelled as he continued to twist and turn, trying to evade their pursuer. The heli again shuddered and rattled as shells hit the right rear wing and fan. The car started to vibrate badly, the fan had been hit. ""Radio in, tell them we're being attacked." Chad told her.

Arisa tried the radio, "it's not working!" She told him.

The two holes in the instrument panel and the smell of acrid smoke told Chad all he needed to know. Chad got a good look at their attacker as he pulled a hard turn..... They didn't have a chance. Against a shuttle, flying with thrusters and inertia dampers, the heli car was no match. He saw shell tracers pass by on his left as he pulled a right turn. Chad wished the heli was armed. The shuttle pilot must not be using automatic targeting. He was either toying with them or stupid. Maybe they did have a chance. Maybe he could dodge the attackers shells till he ran out of ammo. Then he might be able to nurse the heli back to land..... if he could find his way back, the nav system was dead.

John watched with shock as Georgianna drew her weapon, of all the possibilities he had imagined, shooting someone hadn't been a factor. John reacted instantly, He took three fast steps and swung up with his cane, knocking the gun up as she fired. The arguing and noise in the room came to an abrupt halt at the loud report of the gunshot. The diplomats security guards drew their weapons but they were only allowed stun guns, only the EDF were allowed firearms, none were close enough to the woman to use them. The colonel jumped up and drew his gun, stepping in front of the princess. He would have fired, but John was in his way.

"What the hell are you doing?" John demanded. "Put that gun down."

"I can't," Georgianna answered, " I have to kill them."

"That's insane," John barked, "now drop your weapon."

"They won't let me," She wailed, "you have to get away, they're telling me to kill you. I can't let them..... I can't stop them..... They won't let you stop me..... You have to move, John."

"I won't move, Georgi, I won't let you do this." Confused John stood his ground. "What do you mean 'They'? You can't do this, you have to put down the gun."

"No, they won't let me," She moaned. "I have to kill them..... you.....everyone..... I can't stop." Her finger tightened on the trigger. "I can't don't make me..... I won't let you..... go away, get out..... get out of my head." She screamed. Georgianna had an anguished look on her face as she raised the gun to her temple and pulled the trigger.

Chad pulled the heli into a thick cloud. He turned wildly, and blindly in the cloud hoping, if the attacker was using manual aiming, he might not be tracking them with sensors..... Wrong, as the car popped out of the cloud, the shuttle was directly ahead of them, firing at them. Chad reacted as shells crashed through the front of the cockpit. He dived the heli and the shells ripped through the fuselage behind him. A warning light glared brightly in front of him, one of the turbines was hit, it was on fire. "Fire," he yelled, "pull the extinguisher." Chad looked over at Arisa and froze. Arisa was slumped against the door, the side of her head covered with blood and it ran down across her pretty face. Chad's hands lost their grip on the controls as the car dropped toward the water. He had lost his reason to keep fighting.

Chapter 34

In a cloaked ship hidden among the asteroids, an esper screamed in agony. He fell to the floor and covered his head, fighting the red pain and black madness that had claimed other espers on this cursed campaign. A healer rushed to him with an injection to calm him, and put him to sleep..... he tried to tell him no, to get away, but his body wouldn't obey him. He felt the injection and could see the blackness looming over his mind. The esper pulled his superior close, he had to tell him, he had seen the great danger, the thing that could destroy them, he had to warn them. He didn't dare reach out to the superiors mind, not with the blackness reaching out for him, he told the superior..... his voice slurred and barely a whisper. The blackness covered him and dragged him into it's madness.

The esper superior gasped in disbelief. Had he heard right, or was it just the ranting of an insane mind? He turned to the Leader, but that one was stalking away.

"This is a failure, a disgrace," the Leader ranted to his second in command. "Ready those weapons, we are forced to use them."

John tensed, he had gambled with his life that Georgianna wouldn't shoot him, but was this Georgianna? Something wasn't right, she had never acted like this. What did she mean, "they"? He had to stop her from starting the war she had always tried to prevent. He saw the anguish on her face as she raised the gun to her temple..... he reacted. John stepped forward and swung his cane up striking her wrist. The gun swung up as it fired over her head and bucked from her hand. Georgianna put her hands over her ears, "get out" she screamed. She looked up at John with pleading eyes. John dropped his cane and stepped forward. He caught Georgianna as she collapsed, swept her up and carried her out of the room.

Colonel Hellwind pushed his way through the confusion of diplomats and security men as he hurried around the huge table to follow John. The s--- had definitely hit the fan and he had no clue what was going on. He had to get this under control.

Melpomene tried to follow Daniel but one of the diplomats grabbed her arm, demanding to know what was happening. She recognized him as one of the more belligerent diplomats from an older, more populated colony. She jerked her arm away and turned a look on him that made him back off. "We will inform you of any facts that concern you when we have learned what they are." She barked at him. Melpomene turned and picked up a large folder and slammed it on the table with a resounding crack. The room instantly became silent. Melpomene called out. "This meeting is adjourned! We will resume the meeting after we have determined the cause of this incident." She quickly followed The colonel out as the room returned to chaos.

Daniel pulled out his com unit as he ran and called for Tammy to bring the car immediately. He called the space port to have their shuttle ready for immediate departure. He called the Krikav and ordered the doctor to

have sick bay on standby. The only way they were going to make any sense of this was to find out what was going on in Georgianna's head.

Megumi took another worried look at the clock. "They should have been back by now," she said to Ben. "Arisa's message said they would be back in a couple hours, and it's been more than three. Something is wrong."

Ben scratched his head. "I don't know, maybe we should wait a little longer. But it does seem strange, it's dinner time, and Chad wouldn't miss dinner. I suppose you could call Arisa and ask her what's holding them up."

"I didn't want to call them and maybe have their phone ring at a bad time, but I think you're right. I'm going to call," Megumi answered. She picked up her phone and called Arisa. After a few moments Megumi frowned and set the phone down. "It says her phone is out of service. That's bad..... I can't think of why she would shut her phone off."

Ben frowned, thinking. "Maybe she dropped it and it broke or something," he mused. "I'll call Chad and find out." Ben made the call, but he too set his phone down, a puzzled look on his face. "I get the same thing, not in service. They couldn't both have broken their phones."

"I don't like this, it's scary. I'm sure something awful has happened. I can feel it." Megumi cried. "We have to do something, we have to find them."

"I think we have to call the colonel." Ben told her. "He should be back at base by now. The colonel will know what to do."

"Your right," Megumi agreed as she called the colonel, "he isn't going to like this." After a few seconds she put the phone down, she looked frightened. "Not in service," she whispered. She looked up at Ben. "What's going on? What happened to everyone? Ben, I'm frightened."

Ben felt a chill run down his spine. Something really weird was going on. He picked up his phone and quickly dialed. He almost dropped the phone in relief when he got a connection. "Kaze, thank all that's good, we've been trying to call Arisa and Chad and now the colonel but all we get is an out of service message. I was beginning to think something bad had happened to all of you." Ben listened for a couple minutes, finally answering, "Ok, I'll try that..... Talk to you later." He put down the phone and looked at Megumi. "Kaze doesn't know anything about Arisa and Chad, but something big went down at the conference. Crichton came out carrying Georgianna, the colonel followed them out then the princess. The car came around fast and they all got in and raced off to the spaceport. Kaze could hardly keep up. They got in the shuttle and headed out under maximum acceleration. They must be at the Krikav." Ben got up and got the com unit out of the drawer he'd left it in. He called the Krikav.

Colonel Hellwind sat next to Melpomene and in the waiting area outside the Krikav sick bay. It had been almost half an hour since they had delivered Georgianna to the med techs. Waiting had never been easy for him.

The princess watched John enter the room and set down the coffees that he had offered to get for them. "John, you aren't using your cane." She observed.

John hesitated as he set down the last cup. "I I hadn't thought about it." He stepped back, testing his leg. "It should be..... but it isn't hurting. I should be feeling pain, but I'm not."

Daniel was going to make a comment, but fortunately the doctor entered the room before he got the chance. "What did you find?" He asked before John could. "How is she?"

The doctor sighed, "it's not good." He opened a portable viewer and brought up a scan of Georgianna's head. "We found an anomaly, a tumor, on the back of her brain." He told them as he pointed to a dark spot on the scan. "It wasn't there when she had her physical before the Mar Sara campaign. It's very fast growing."

"Cancer? Isn't that rather rare?" John asked.

"Yes," the doctor answered, "but it does show up once in a while."

"You can cure it?" Daniel asked. "You can remove it."

"Yes, if this were just a normal tumor, but, with this, I'm not so sure." The doctor admitted. "Look closely at the scan, see the fine lines leading from the tumor. There are hundreds of fine filaments reaching all parts of her brain. It will be nearly impossible for the nano meds to remove all of it, and if any is left behind, it will just regrow the tumor. I've never heard of anything like it."

"I would like you to take a sample of that mass for analysis, doctor" Melpomene ordered.

"I could take a biopsy with a microprobe," the doctor told her, "but there isn't a need to, it's just a cancer. We can just let the nano meds take care of it."

"Just do it, doctor," the princess ordered. "I want to know what it is for certain."

Yuki, the ship controller, called on the intercom, "Colonel Hellwind, there is a call for you from Lieutenant Wolfman."

"Put it through here, Yuki," He ordered. Good, he thought, maybe they found Torres, he could use some good news. "Lieutenant Wolfman, did you get any information on captain Torres?"

"Ah, well, we found out that the captain and the girl left town a couple days ago. We don't know when they will be back..... or if they will be back." Ben told them, then he hesitated before continuing. "Sir, Chad and Arisa are missing."

"What?" Daniel barked. "What do you mean, missing?"

"They weren't here when we got back, sir," Ben answered. "They left us a message that they had checked the apartment and found a lead. They were going to check it out and be back in a couple hours. They haven't returned."

"Call them and tell them I order them to return on the double." The colonel commanded Ben angrily.

"Ah, we tried to call them, colonel, but their phones are out of service, both of them." Ben told him. "I think something's wrong."

Melpomene was shocked. She hadn't anticipated something like this happening. "We have to find them." She said as she looked worriedly at Daniel.

"Did they leave any information on where they might have been going?" Daniel asked Ben.

"No colonel, nothing." Ben answered.

Daniel put his head in his hands, things were going from bad to worse. Dumb kids, they should have left information on where they were going. What could he do, how could they find those two. He had no idea where to start. Melpomene..... was the muse of the tragedy guiding their mission?

Megumi's voice came over the communicator, "I have an idea how we might find out where they went."

Daniel listened to Megumi's idea, "no," he ordered, "it's too risky."

Chapter 35

The door guard at the gang's hideout rushed into the room not even closing the door behind himself. "Oren, that black haired girl and the big guy are here," he yelled in fear. "They have a mech with them. It's big, with guns and missiles and we haven't got a chance against that thing."

Oren told the guard to shut up, and waved him to the side as he saw Megumi and Ben enter through the door. He felt shaky..... a mech..... they had no defense against that. He gathered his courage. "I thought we had an agreement, a truce," he called out. "We haven't done anything to your group."

"We didn't come for a fight," Megumi called back across the room. "We need to talk."

"Then why did you come armed?" He demanded.

"We aren't armed," Megumi protested holding her arms out to her sides. "You can check if you don't believe me."

"You have a mech," he accused.

"Oh, that," Megumi smiled, "don't worry about it. The colonel wouldn't let us come without a mech for backup."

"Colonel? Then you are military." Oren stated.

Megumi sighed, "yes, we're EDF. We're here as escort for the imperial princess, and to track down the man and woman in the pictures."

Oren smiled, relieved, these were powerful people, but tied to Imperial law, the gang had a better chance with them. "Good, I was afraid you were syndicate or one of the big houses."

"The other girl that was here, Kitten, is Arisa Higgins, heir of the richest of the big houses, so yes, we are from one of the big houses too. We have a problem, Arisa, and the tall boy you captured, are missing. Their phones both are out of service, we need your help finding them."

The richest of the houses, and they needed his gang's help, this could be a real boon for them. "Whatever you need, we'll be glad to help. We can

get the word out to the other gangs,” Oren answered. “Maybe somebody knows something.”

Megumi filled Oren in on all they knew about the disappearance. She was glad that Melpomene had convinced the colonel to let them contact the gang. They had the contacts and resources to cover a lot more of the city faster than anyone else.

Melpomene watched John, sitting across from her. He tried to look relaxed, but she could easily see the worry in his face and posture. As badly as Georgianna treated him, he still was ready to step in front of her gun to save her. People like John always amazed her. She looked over at Daniel, he had pushed her behind him when Georgianna drew her gun. Was it just duty... or something more? It was understandable to see the concern and frustration on his face, in the last three hours everything had been falling apart in his command. She wished she could do something to help, but it was beyond even imperial control. Somehow she would have to sooth over this incident with the colony diplomats.

They looked up as the med tech came through the door. “What did you find,” The colonel asked, “will she be alright?”.

“It looks like the captain is going to get through this.” He answered. “I don’t think the nano meds were even needed. Her immune system is attacking this thing very aggressively. At the rate it appears to be shrinking, it could be gone entirely in a few hours.”

“Were you able to get a biopsy of the tumor?” Melpomene inquired anxiously.

“Yes,” the tech assured her. “We were able to get a couple good samples.”

“Have you analyzed them yet?” She asked.

“I ran one sample through the standard bio analysis and, well, it isn’t cancer.”

“Then what is it?” Daniel asked.

There was a delay before the doctor answered. “I..... I’m not sure,” he admitted. “I’ve never seen anything like it, there is nothing like it in the medical records. It doesn’t have a cellular structure, it doesn’t have DNA yet, it is a living tissue. It’s something totally alien to us.”

“Isn’t it rare for a xenobiological agent to infect a human?” Daniel inquired. “At least that’s what they taught us in the academy.”

“That’s true,” the doctor answered, “usually the immune system rejects any unusual pathogen, but this one must be hidden from the immune system till it is well established. When the immune system does react it is an overwhelming response.”

“But she will be alright.” Daniel prompted the tech.

“Yes, I think so.” The doctor hesitated. “We won’t know for sure if there is any damage until the fever has gone down. I just never have had to deal with something like this.”

“She has to be alright,” John told them. “She won’t let this beat her, she’s stronger than that.”

"Doctor, I want you to make sure to preserve a sample of that organism to be sent to the labs on earth." Melpomene ordered. "This isn't the first case with similar symptoms. There have been others who have had blackouts and have done things they normally would not have. Others have fought off a compulsion to do something they knew was wrong. In each case, they ended with a severe fever and headache. Most couldn't remember what they had done. Daniel, Aiden Pride was one of those cases. The doctors haven't been able to get a clean sample of the organism because of the aggressive immune reaction and the fact each case was detected at a later stage than Georgianna.

"Lieutenant Yamato wishes contact with you," Yuki's voice came over the intercom.

"Put her through here," the colonel ordered.

"Colonel, sir, they found where Chad and Arisa went." Megumi told them as soon as the connection was established. "They took a taxi to an airfield on the far side of the city, by the ocean. Should we go there and try to find them?"

Daniel thought for a moment. "I want you and Ben to go to the airfield, armed, and wait for me. Have Kaze follow you with the mech. Wait outside the airfield till I arrive. If there is trouble, I want you ready, but I will do the talking." The colonel ordered. He broke the connection and called for Yuki. "Yuki, I want the shuttle ready, I'm going down to that airfield and find out what's going on." Melpomene got up at the same time the colonel got up. "You are staying here," Daniel told her. "Things could be dangerous and I don't want you at risk."

The princess frowned, "I know there's a possibility of danger, but I won't be left behind. I'll make it an Imperial order if I have to. I have to know what happened to Arisa. I'm sure, with a mech there, we won't have any trouble."

Daniel remembered how stubborn Melpomene could be when they were young and frowned. "Alright, come along then," he said as he turned away. "I hope this doesn't start a war, if that incident with Georgianna hasn't already. Pilots disappearing, alien organisms, we don't need any more trouble."

The princess sighed, "I wish it were aliens, little green men, bug-eyed monsters or whatever. At least that would bring earth and the colonies back together again."

The colonel laughed, "Dream on Mel."

Chapter 36

From the back seat of the car, Ben watched the colonel and the princess enter the main office of the airfield. He didn't like it. "We should have gone in with them," he told Megumi as he tightened his grip on the rifle. "If anything happens it will take us too long to get in there."

"It won't be a problem," Tammy told him from the driver's seat. The engine was idling and her hand was on the shift buttons. "I'll have us in the building in five seconds if anything goes wrong."

Megumi moved away from Ben and buckled her seat belt, "I'll bet you would."

The buzzer sounded alerting Walt he had a customer. He stood up quickly and banged his head on the access cover, he swore loudly. This had better be those college kids, he'd been waiting way past closing time for those two. They said it would only be a couple hours, at most, and it was almost six by now. That kid was going to be damn sorry..... He slammed open the door, but it wasn't the kids, it was military brass..... EDF no less, and some woman that looked like an executive, or lawyer. This, he didn't need. He could see the shuttle sitting on the tarmac and a limo parked out front. He relaxed a little, "if your looking for hangar space, you won't find any here. You can park it by the cargo trucks, if that's good enough for you." He turned to go back to the repair shop."

"We are looking for two missing pilots," Daniel called after him. "They were last seen coming here. A tall dark haired male and small blond female."

Walt turned back and frowned. "They told me they were college kids," he accused.

"They are operating under cover," Daniel told him, "to avoid causing trouble with the locals."

"Well they've got trouble now," Walt growled, "they stole my heli."

"They would not steal a vehicle," Daniel stated firmly.

"They told me a they were renting the car for a couple hours, and it's been almost six." Walt complained. "That kid was a gang member, he'd steal a car, it's just the way those rats are."

"Was, is a past tense, he isn't now," Melpomene broke in. "The car has not been stolen, something must have happened to them. There must have been a failure in the machine."

"Not a chance lady," Walt replied. "I've got good equipment, and it's well maintained. Besides, they never called in. Even if something went wrong, they would just land on the water and call in. No, they stole the heli, that kid even disabled the locator beacon so I can't trace the thing."

"A locator beacon? Seems you aren't too trusting," Daniel mused. "Did you inform Chad about that beacon, and is it very difficult to shut off that beacon?"

"Hell, why would I tell him about it?" Walt answered. "It's a pain to get at, on top of the stabilizer, so..... but there's no reason for that locator not to be working, unless..... damn it, if they wrecked my heli....."

"Who cares about your damn heli," Melpomene shouted. "We'll replace the stupid thing, it's the pilots we're worried about. We have to find them. Something bad has happened, I just know it."

"Ya sure, who are you to say they'll replace it," Walt shouted back. "You think you're the queen or something."

"You should take care how you address princess Melpomene of the imperial house of Leiski." Daniel stated menacingly as he placed his hand on the gun at his side.

Oh crap, Walt thought, an imperial, and he had been shouting at her. At least he hadn't sworn at her or something. Even out here. these people held the reigns of power. "I'm sorry.....I shouldn't have...."

"It's alright," the princess cut him off, "it's been a bad day, probably for all of us. Right now we should be concerned about the pilots."

"You're right," Walt admitted, "it's those kids we should be concerned about. It's just, I couldn't imagine anything happening to them. Even if there was a failure, the safety systems would set them down on the water and they could just call for help."

"If they had a power failure the radio may not be working." Daniel offered.

"Even in that case, there's an emergency beacon radio," Walt explained. "It would come on automatically if the power failed, or they could just activate it manually."

"Something bad happened to them, it must have," Melpomene said close to tears. "We have to search for them, we have to find them."

"Did they say where they were going?" Daniel asked.

"Just that they were looking for that professor Santana," Walt answered. "The tall kid said he knew where he was, but he didn't say where, just one of the islands."

"They could be on one of the islands, we have to start a search," Melpomene told them.

"There are hundreds of islands, from big ones to just a rock, it would take days to search them, even if they did make it to one." Walt explained. "I can get the police search teams on it, but it's getting late and they won't start till daylight."

"That could be too late," Mel wailed, "they could be in the water, they could drown."

"Searching at night is useless, that's just the way it is," Walt sighed. "I wish it were different, but that's it. The police won't go out till daylight."

"What about an infrared search?" Daniel asked.

"No good," Walt told him, "there's just too much area to cover and those things don't have enough range. Besides, every rock sticking up lights the thing up so it's just a problem."

Daniel sighed, "we can have our two shuttles join the search. We will start as soon as there is light. I can have Yuki scan for any radio activity from orbit."

Ben slumped back in the seat as they watched the princess and the colonel leave the building. "That doesn't look very promising," He told Megumi.

"No, something's gone wrong," Megumi answered. "You can see it in their faces."

The colonel walked up to the car and leaned in the window. "Ben, you will come with me and bring the shuttle back from the ship. At first light You and Megumi will take one shuttle, Tammy, you and Kaze will take the

other shuttle and join the search for Chad and Arisa. You will be assigned a search area at that time.”

“A search,” Ben said as he opened the door to follow the colonel, “you said it, Megumi, something went wrong..... really wrong.”

Daniel couldn’t sleep, he didn’t even try. He looked again at the map of the ocean north west of the airfield. There were so many dots, so many islands. How could they find anything out there. “Remove any island with less than a square kilometer area.” Dan ordered. There were still too many, hundreds. He sat down at his desk and put his head in his hands. “Where the hell were they going?” He asked the empty room.

Yuki’s voice came over the intercom, “I would suggest they would have had island TMB-1671 as their destination, sir,”

Daniel looked up, he hadn’t thought about the ship controller listening in. “What makes you think that, Yuki? He asked.

“There is an inactive maintenance base located on that island,” Yuki informed him. “It would be an obvious location to hide a mech the size of the one we are seeking.”

The colonel stared at the flashing marker on one of the larger islands. “Why didn’t I know about that base?” He wondered.

“It is inactive and therefore sealed,” she answered, “it would not be listed on the active facility list you would use. It is listed on the inactive list.”

Dan got up and traced a line from the airfield to the island. “It gives us a place to start, thanks Yuki.”

Chapter 37

Ben carefully kept the shuttle moving along a straight line, and slow enough to give Megumi a chance to spot any small indication on the infrared screen. The colonel had sent the shuttles out in the middle of the night, on a specific path, hoping for any sight of the missing pilots. They had found nothing but the islands and a few of the local fauna.

“It’s useless, it’s been hours and neither shuttle has found anything.” Megumi complained, “If they’re in the water, their signature would be so small we could pass right over them and miss them.”

“We’ve got to try,” Ben told her flatly. “If they are in the water, they might not make it till daylight.” He sighed, “it will be light soon, then we can watch for any sign of them..... or wreckage.”

Megumi shook her head, “I won’t believe it..... it just can’t be.”

Georgianna slowly opened her eyes. She felt awful, she felt weak, but it wasn’t burning hot and the gray ceiling meant she wasn’t in hell, so she must still be alive. She turned her head and saw John get up from his chair and come to her side. She sat up and put her head in her hands. “I blew it, I’ve ruined everything.” she choked out as she felt tears come to her eyes. “They’ll court marshal me. They’ll put me away forever.”

John sat on the edge of the bed and put his arm around her. "I don't think so. There were extenuating circumstances." John assured her.

Georgianna shook her head, "they won't believe me, they can't. How can I tell them that someone was in my head. That they were trying to make me kill everyone. I tried to stop them, but it was too hard."

"It's ok darlin," John told her as he held her more tightly. "No one was hurt."

"But they would have been, I would have killed them all if you hadn't stopped me." Georgianna sobbed. "They told me to kill you too, but I wouldn't..... I wouldn't let them hurt you." Georgianna turned and wrapped her arms around John. "Don't let them come back, John, they're terrible, I saw them..... they're monsters. I can't live with that again."

"They're gone, Georgi," John comforted her. "They won't be back. You chased them away." John held her close, this was so much like he'd found her after the Tarsonis tragedy. And, just like that time, he was here to pick up the pieces.

"We have six heli's searching," The police commander told Daniel. "Walt figured the distance they could have gone till that beacon quit and we've covered that area on the line to that island pretty well. Nothing there. We can expand the search some but it gets to be an awfully big area."

"I understand," Daniel answered. "Our people haven't found anything either."

Melpomene stepped into the sight line of the transmitter. "You have to continue the search, as long as it takes," She ordered. "The empire will cover any expenses. Those pilots must be found."

"We'll do everything we can, princess," the commander assured her, "but with the currents and the ocean predators..... there may not be anything we can find."

Megumi pounded her fist on the sensor console. "Nothing," she yelled at it, "is this thing even working? Something has to show up, anything, they have to be here."

"There's nothing wrong with the sensors," Ben tried to calm her. "Maybe the colonel guessed wrong, maybe they were headed somewhere else. We just have to widen the search."

"Do you have any idea how much area we would have to cover?" Megumi sighed. "It's impossible."

The police commander looked at his lieutenant and shook his head. "They just don't understand," he told the lieutenant, "people who disappear out there are never found."

Chapter 38

Arisa's head hurt. She slowly opened her eyes, disoriented she looked around her. There was bright open sky overhead with a sun low on the horizon. To her left was a flat rocky ledge leading to open ocean, to her

right the view was blocked by huge oval leaves of low lying plants. Where was she? Oh yes, she had been in the heli, with Chad. Why was she here then? Slowly she remembered the attack, Chad's violent maneuvers attempting to get away..... that was all she remembered. She felt around, she was lying on one of the giant leaves, and covered with another one..... And, she was quite naked! Arisa began to feel frightened. She tried to look over the vegetation, but she didn't see anyone. She did see her cloths, lying on the leaves a short distance away. She knew it was a very small island because when she sat up, she could see the water all around, but she didn't see anyone else. Where was Chad? Someone had brought her here, it had to be Chad.... but he wasn't there. What if he was gone? What if she was alone? What would she do?

Arisa was starting to work herself into a panic when she noticed movement out on the water. It was Chad. He was quite a way out from the island but he started swimming toward the shore. Relieved, Arisa started to get up, but the throbbing in her head when she moved made her hesitate. She started to move more slowly..... then remembered..... she didn't have any cloths on. Arisa lay back down and pulled the leaf close under her chin. She watched as Chad neared the island..... what if he was.....? He started to stand up, he wasn't wearing a shirt..... She knew she should look away, but couldn't..... what if..... Arisa sighed, he was wearing his slacks. Well, they were wet and molded nicely to his legs. Arisa appreciated his lean muscled body, it was obvious that the scar on his face and the ones on his arms weren't the only evidence of his past life. She kept down as she watched Chad climb out and carry some pieces of wire to a pile of objects on the shore. Her cloths were close, but too far. What should she do?

"Um, Chad," she started to say.

Chad snapped around at the sound of her voice. "You're awake," He stated the obvious. "Are you alright?" Chad got up and quickly approached her.

Arisa had started to sit up, she pulled the leaf up tighter and involuntarily she backed away. "My head hurts, but I think I'm alright..... But, um..... would you give me my clothes." She answered her face beginning to turn a bit red.

"Your clothes?" Chad hesitated a moment. "Oh.....," his face turned very red as he turned to reach for her cloths. "You were all wet," he tried to explain, "and it gets cool at night, and I didn't think, um, I mean I thought..... um it wouldn't be good if you got cold. I had to..... I didn't look.....much..... I just." Chad turned even redder as he handed her the cloths while still looking away.

"Thanks," Arisa said quietly. "I'm sure you, ah, were just doing what you had to. It would have been bad to stay wet like that."

Chad nodded his head as he looked back at Arisa. "I had to keep you warm over night, so I had to....." Chad turned even redder and quickly turned back to what he had been doing. "I should get back to work on the radio."

Arisa began to get dressed as Chad returned to his task. She thought it was really very nice that he cared enough to keep her warm during the night, even if it meant he had to take off her cloths to dry them..... Keep her warm..... he must have been very close..... Arisa turned much redder and hurried to put her cloths on. Her head still hurt and she ran her fingers over the cloth wrapped around her head. The left side of her head was definitely tender to the touch. she noticed Chad's torn shirt lying on the rocks, that must be where her bandage came from. As long as she didn't turn her head too quickly, it didn't hurt too badly so she got up and went to look over Chad's shoulder. "Oh, you're hurt," she exclaimed when she noticed the track a bullet had torn across the outside of Chad's upper right arm.

Chad looked at the red gash on his arm, "Ah, ya, it's nothing much. I've had worse."

Arisa laughed, "that's obvious." She picked up his shirt and tore another strip off of it. Arisa gently wrapped the cloth around Chad's upper arm covering the wound. She looked at the parts he was working with. There was a circuit board and wires and he was prying open one of their cell phones. "What are you working on?" Arisa asked.

"Emergency beacon," Chad answered. He held up the plastic case, it was missing a chunk of a bottom corner. "It took a hit," he explained. "The power cells are trashed. I can get about the same voltage using our cell phone batteries, but I don't know if they can supply enough current for very long."

"Why not just call someone?" Arisa asked.

"We're way out of range, and phone transmitters won't penetrate the ionosphere so no help from the ship. The emergency beacon is long range and they would be able to use it to locate us. It's about the only chance we have of them finding us."

"They must know we didn't come back, they must be searching for us." Arisa claimed. "I'm sure the colonel will figure out where we went, he'll find us."

Chad shook his head, "even if they figure out where we were going, it's a lot of area to search, there are an awfully lot lot of islands to cover. Besides, I have no idea which direction we were going during the attack. We traveled quite a ways and we could be a long way off the track to that base. We need the beacon." Chad went back to work on the wiring he was doing.

Arisa watched as he used his technician pocket tool to cut and install wires from one cell phone to the other and finally to the radio board. He was skillful, and she was sure he must know just what to do. The fear she had been feeling faded.

Chad checked the wires one last time. "Well, that's as good as I can make it, all that's left is to connect these two and see if it works." He told her. Chad took the two wires and twisted them together.

Arisa stared at the beacon for a few moments..... she didn't see anything. "How will we know if it's working?"

"Hmm, I guess we won't until someone comes for us." Chad answered. "It should run for a while, at least till the batteries....."

"That isn't supposed to happen..... is it?" Arisa asked as she watched one of the battery cells start to smoke and the case expand.

"Oh, crap," Chad yelled as he scooped up Arisa and ran several steps away. The battery exploded with a loud pop and scattered tiny smoking fragments around where they had been sitting.

For a moment Arisa had a happy gleam in her eye as she looked over the scene of the explosion, then she looked back at Chad with a more sober expression. "That can't be good."

Chad sadly shook his head. "Not good," he affirmed. "Something must have been shorted in the board, It took too much current and fried the batteries. I'm afraid that didn't do any good at all."

"What do we do now?" Arisa asked, starting to feel the fear returning.

"I don't know," Chad admitted. "I just don't know..... I have to think of something." Chad sat down on a rock with Arisa on his lap. He wrapped his arms around her and held her close. There had to be something he could do. Chad looked at the darkening clouds on the horizon, he didn't have much time to think of something.

Arisa leaned her head on Chad's chest, tears forming in her eyes. This wasn't the deserted island adventure she had dreamed of.

Chapter 39

"This is hopeless," Ben growled. "How can we find anything with this much area to cover?" Ben was all too familiar with searches like this. Being an asteroid miner, he knew of the prospectors ships that went missing, and were never seen again.

"We have to cover as much area as we can," Megumi answered his complaint. "We aren't going to have much more time. Those storm clouds are moving in pretty quickly. We should try to check the bigger islands. If something went wrong, I'm sure they would try to reach one of the big islands. That would give them the best chance."

"Right," Ben answered, "I'll speed up, just keep a sharp lookout."

Arisa watched Chad work on the giant leaves. He was punching holes in the edges of two leaves and using fibers pulled from leaves he had cut to sew the two leaves together. He was hoping to use them to cover a gap in the rocks under the two plants and use it as a shelter. Chad looked at the approaching clouds, he didn't like how high the waves were coming up the side of the rocks. He would have to make cords of the fibers and tie himself and Arisa to the stems of the plants, to keep from being washed away.

Colonel Hellwind walked down the corridor toward the med section. He was upset that the local police were pulling their search vehicles due to the approaching weather front. He could understand, the heli's weren't as tough as his shuttles, but he thought they could have stayed out at least a while longer.

Dan knocked then entered Georgianna's room. He suppressed a smile as he noticed John stand up from the bed, where he had been sitting next to Georgianna, and salute the colonel. He knew from their records of John and Georgianna's involvement after the Tarsonis disaster. He was glad John was here now. "At ease, Crichton, I'm not here to break up anything." He looked at Georgianna. "How are you feeling?"

"Better, sir," Georgianna replied, "the headaches are gone, I feel like I've been set free." She looked down, "I assume I will be confined to quarters till the court marshal."

"Not a chance," Daniel told her, "I need every pilot that I have left."

"But I....." Georgianna started to protest.

"You were influenced by an unknown organism," Daniel interrupted. "Hallucinations caused by an unknown ailment is how it is stated in my report, and your medical report. There won't be a court martial." He sat on the edge of a table. "The doc told me you should be fit to return to duty by tomorrow. I won't be able to send you with the princess again, that would cause too much trouble. You'll have to join Ben and Megumi in the the search for captain Torres. I think Chad and Arisa had a lead on where to look for him."

"What about the search for Chad and Arisa?" John asked. as the colonel got up and started for the door.

"I'm afraid we will have to abandon that search." The colonel answered. "Bad weather is closing in, after that moves through, it will be hopeless."

Yuki's voice came over the com, "Colonel Hellwind, could you come to the bridge? There has been an anomaly on the sensor scans."

Chapter 40

Edward Geraldine watched the man stagger into his room waving a half empty bottle. The fool had been out all night again, drinking, and probably with some young boy. He felt disgusted. How had he gotten into this mess?

Kirk laughed at Edwards frown. "You're too sour, old man. You should get out and have some fun," he told him. "You won't believe who I ran into..... that bitch, and the tall pilot boy from the Krikav. I showed her she can't hit me. I shot them down..... they're sunk, fish food." Kirk laughed uncontrollably.

"What?" Edward demanded. "EDF pilots? What happened? What did you do?"

"They rented a heli," Kirk got out between laughs. "I followed them, way out over the ocean, and I shot them down. She was supposed to marry me, then I would get all their money..... but then that tall guy got in the way. I fixed them, he won't get her money cause they're dead."

EDF! The pilots would have called in that they were attacked. Even if they were dead, the EDF would be alerted that there was an enemy. They would be on heightened alert. This severely compromised his ability to search for Ridia and the Atropos. Edward jumped up, face red with rage. "You fool, now you've put them under alert. You've ruined our chances of finding

Ridia and getting away with Atropos.” He stepped forward menacingly, “get out..... get out before I kill you myself. We’re through, I don’t need idiots around me. Get out and never let me see you again!”

Kirk backed to the door. “You need me,” he shouted. “I’ve got money, I can get a ship. You got nothing..... what are you going to do if you find the thing..... we’ll see who’s the fool.” Kirk ducked out the door.

Edward sat down, his head in his hands. How had it come to this, EDF deserter, rouge general of the Red Faction, wanted man, by both law and outlaw. How had they convinced him to desert the EDF? He had been angry.... in a rage, because he had been passed over for promotion. Somehow the Leader had found him, fed his anger, promised him the rank of general. It was madness. What had he thought the Red Faction could accomplish? How had the Leader convinced him to fight against the EDF? And..... Who was the Leader? He couldn’t remember, not his face, not his location, nothing about the man..... or woman? He just didn’t remember. They had ruined his life. If he ever found the Leader, he’d kill the bastard.

Tom entered the small lounge room on the frigate, Sheffield. He found Janice seated there and took a chair across from her. He could feel the hum of the engines as the ship accelerated away from Earth orbit. It would take a while to reach a safe distance for entrance to warp drive. Janice was engrossed in something on the tablet she always carried with her. Once again he wondered what she would look like with her hair down and without her glasses. She was a nice looking woman, if she were a few years younger.... and not hung up on doctor Tod..... Tom had always been attracted to brains..... and good looks. “Where is doctor Moeller?” Tom asked.

“He went to his room,” Janice answered without looking up. “He doesn’t do well with space flight. It’s usually the worst at take off, but I wonder how he’ll take transition to warp drive. He’s never left the system before.”

“That could be an unpleasant time for him. I hope it doesn’t bother him too much.” Tom replied. “Have you traveled in warp drive?”

“Several times,” she answered, “it doesn’t bother me at all, but the doctor has a bit of a phobia of warp space.”

“Some people have unusual fears,” Tom mused. “Warp travel has been proven very safe. I’m sure he’ll relax once we are in warp space.” Tom watched her working for a short time, then curiosity got the better of him. “Do you mind if I ask you, why do you wear glasses? You could have your vision corrected.”

Janice stopped and looked up. “I was an orphan at a young age. My family was killed when the pirates destroyed Arctown on Ceti seven. I grew up in foster homes on several colony worlds so I never could afford to have my vision corrected.”

“Oh,” Tom answered, “I wasn’t aware of that.” He hesitated, “ But you are in an eminent position now, You would be able to have the procedure now.”

Janice pushed the large glasses up on her small nose. "I guess I could, but I've become accustomed to wearing them." Janice looked down. Tom noticed her face was a bit red. "I'm not very..... comfortable with medical procedures."

He smiled, "I'm not either..... Um... how is your work on the operating system coming." He said, trying to change the subject."

"The inertial work on the mech is a problem. It's a complex weave of gravitational forces and if you get it wrong it would tear itself apart." Janice answered, much more willing to get into this subject. "In time I think we could work it out but it wouldn't be soon. If we find the machine we might be able to reverse engineer the OS, but it would be so much better to talk with the designer. I really hope we find him. He must have known my father."

"It sounds like they are pretty sure the mech is on Shakuras," Tom assured her. "Once we have that, we may be able to learn who designed the machine and perhaps be able to pick him up."

"I certainly hope so," Janice replied as she stood up. "It would be unfortunate to travel all this way and not find anything at the end..... I had better check on Doctor Moeller. He may need something."

Brains and beauty, Tom thought as he watched her leave the room, to bad she doesn't have a sister. Why can't I find a woman like that?

Chapter 41

Colonel Hellwind hurried onto the bridge of the Krikav. What had Yuki found? Was it something concerning the search or some sort of attack aimed at the princess or the conference. "What do you have, Yuki?" He asked the controller as he sat in his command chair.

"There has been an anomaly in the static discharges I have recorded from the approaching storm." Yuki replied. "The noise from the storm has been the only radio signal from the area, outside of search vehicle traffic. One of the static bursts appeared to be of excessive duration." A picture of a trace of radio noise appeared on the screen in front of the colonel. "The duration was approximately forty eight point two three seconds long. When I removed the static noise I was left with a regular base frequency." The picture changed to show a regular sine wave. It does not carry an emergency message, but it is the same frequency as the carrier wave used by the standard emergency beacon."

Daniel jumped up. "Where did that originate?" Dan demanded. "Did you get a location?"

"The signal was too short of duration. By the time the anomaly was noted, it was to late to get an accurate fix on the transmission." Yuki answered.

"Damn!" The colonel cursed.

"A sixty square kilometer area is as close as I can locate the transmission." Yuki told him. "Have the shuttles search that area immediately," Dan ordered.

Yuki rapidly keyed in coordinates to send to the shuttles. "The area is outside of our original search parameters." Yuki informed the colonel.

"They could have traveled some distance after the locator beacon failed." Daniel speculated. "Get those shuttles there now."

Arisa watched Chad stripping the long fibers from the leaves and twisting them into tough cords. She felt useless, there was nothing she could do to help, and her head ached badly. She looked up once more at the fast approaching storm front. "Chad! There's something out there," Arisa shouted. "It's a shuttle, there's a shuttle."

Chad jumped up, "where?" He scanned the horizon as Arisa excitedly pointed toward the clouds. Chad finally spotted the distant craft. "It's not coming this way," he told her after a short time. "We have to signal them." Chad looked for the signal flares he salvaged from the wrecked heli, but they were gone. Chad cursed as he realized he had been so intent on what he was doing he hadn't noticed the rising waves that washed over the rocks. "The flares are gone, we have no way to signal them." Chad moaned.

"They have to see us," Arisa cried out as she tried to lift one of the huge leaves and wave it in the air. "They just have to!"

The sun broke through a rift in the clouds blindingly bright. Chad immediately dived for his tech's tool. He grabbed the tool, folded it closed and stood up. Chad held the tool up and rocked it back and forth.

"The island should be coming into view soon," Megumi told Ben as she picked up the binoculars to scan the water for any sign of debris.

"That storm is moving in too quick," Ben answered. "We aren't going to be able to cover even the biggest islands much less the rest of the area." Ben's head snapped around to the right. "Hey, what was that? I saw a flash over there." He exclaimed.

"Where?" Megumi looked to the right but didn't see anything. "Are you sure there was something? Maybe it was a lightning flash."

"Not in that direction, it's away from the storm," Ben answered. "Maybe it was nothing. We'll keep going to that island."

"Wait!" Megumi yelled excitedly, "I saw it, there was a flash..... over there." Megumi pointed to the right and Ben quickly turned the shuttle to head in the direction she indicated. She picked up the binoculars and scanned the horizon. "There's an island there, just a little rock." She increased the magnification. "There's someone there." She adjusted the controls on the glasses. "It's Chad!" She shouted..... "And Arisa! They're both there!"

Ben accelerated to reach the island as soon as possible. He brought the shuttle around to the lee side of the island to avoid the worst of the waves. Ben lowered the floats, glad the colonel had ordered them installed before they headed out on the search. He set down and approached as closely as he dared to the rocks. "Hold position here, Meg," He told Megumi. "I'll go in back and get them in."

Chad watched the shuttle approach. "It's ours!" He told Arisa. "They found us." As the shuttle came around the rock, Chad helped Arisa climb down to the edge of the water. When the shuttle stopped a short distance from the island, Chad scooped up Arisa. "Hey, you don't have to carry me," she protested, but Chad jumped into the water. The water was more than waist deep on him and the surging water washed chest deep. Chad tried to keep Arisa above the water but the waves were too high. The side door on the shuttle opened as he reached the float. Chad saw Ben standing in the door. "Take her," he yelled up to Ben and tossed the small girl up with all his strength.

Ben opened the door on the side of the shuttle and saw Chad in the water carrying Arisa. Chad yelled to him and tossed the girl his direction. Ben effortlessly caught Arisa and set her down in one of the seats. He turned back and found Chad struggling to get a grip on the handhold to pull himself out of the surging water. Ben caught Chad's wrist and quickly pulled him up into the cabin, then punched the control to shut the door. "Take us up, Meg, and call the colonel," Ben called to Megumi. He looked over Chad and Arisa, "damn, are we glad to see you two."

"Not as glad as we are," Chad assured him, as he sat down next to Arisa.

Chad slumped down in the seat, exhaustion creeping up on him. He could feel the surge of the thrusters and hear the whine of the inertial dampers as they accelerated through the clouds. They must be heading for the Krikav. The colonel would probably be furious with him, but at least Arisa was safe.

"Colonel's on the com," Megumi called back to Ben.

"Got it," Ben said as he switched on the com.

"Do you have them on board?" The colonel demanded.

"Yes sir," Ben replied.

"What is their condition? Are they injured?"

"They're mobile sir, Chad has an arm injury and Arisa has a head injury."

"How bad?" The colonel barked.

"Ah, she doesn't seem too bad," Ben told him. He looked at Arisa where he sat huddled next to Chad. She certainly didn't look her best. "Ah, are you alright?" He asked her.

"Do I look alright?" Arisa snapped back. "I'm wet and cold, I'm hungry and I hurt all over. You throw me around like I'm a child..... I'm not alright. She yelled at him.

"Ah, colonel, I don't think she's....." Ben started to say, surprised by her uncharacteristic outburst.

"I'll have the med team standing by, get them here, best possible speed." The colonel ordered.

Chad looked down at Arisa and put his arm around her. He was worried about her. He had seen his share of head injuries. After her outburst, she had put her face in her hands and broken down crying.

Arisa looked up at Ben, tears ran down her face. "I'm sorry, Ben," she cried. "I shouldn't have..... You don't deserve that..... I'm useless," she

put her head back down in her hands. "I couldn't do anything to help. I didn't know how to do anything. I couldn't even get into the shuttle myself." Arisa was trembling as she leaned against Chad. "My head hurts so much..... I'm useless." Chad held her close, he didn't know what else to do.

"You aren't useless, Arisa," Ben told her in a soft voice. If it hadn't been for you, That gang wouldn't have been willing to help us and we would never have found you. It was because of how you handled them that they helped us to find out where you had gone."

"Don't forget that they also gave us the lead to finding captain Dominic." Chad added. "You're part of our gang..... er, unit, we're all needed."

"Thank you," Arisa sniffed, "I still wish I could do more, but I can't even think straight." She leaned against Chad. "My head hurts so much." She cried.

Ben sighed, "Good thing you sent that radio signal or we'd never have found you."

"Radio signal?" Chad questioned. "I thought it didn't work. It just blew up the batteries when I tried it."

"Well, it was enough that Yuki could get us close," Ben told him.

"See, it did work," Arisa mumbled.

Chad looked down at her, "We should hurry." Ben could hear the worry in Chad's voice.

Chapter 42

The doctor finished wrapping the bandage on Chad's right arm. "Take it easy a few days, till that patch has a chance to set," he told Chad.

"I don't think that will be a problem," Chad mumbled. "Is it ok if I see her?"

"Sure," the doctor relented, "but it won't do you much good. She's sedated right now."

"I know," Chad replied sadly, "but I may not be able to see her again till, I don't know when."

"Ya, well, don't stay long," the doctor told him, concerned. "I have to go report to the colonel."

Daniel looked up as Melpomene entered the waiting area. "I thought you were trying to get the conference back together."

"I was," She answered, "but there's a group who are trying to break things up. They won't even meet with me or I could do something about it."

"That's not good," Dan mused. "You should be down there....."

"I heard you found them," the princess cut him off. Her concern was sharply evident. "I heard they were injured. I had to come. How are they? How bad is it?"

"I don't know, but, they didn't look that bad." Dan tried to reassure her , but the worry was easy for Melpomene to see. "The doctor should be here with his report any time now."

"Arisa has a head injury, that's what they said," Mel sobbed. "That's bad..... what if she's....."

Dan saw the tears in the Mel's eyes and moved over to sit next to her. He put his arm around her reassuringly. "She was awake, that was a good thing. I don't think it was too bad." He didn't want to tell her how bad Arisa had looked or how concerned the doctor had been.

The door opened and the doctor came into the room. The colonel quickly stood up. "What do you have to report, major?" Dan questioned the doctor.

The princess jumped up, "are they alright?" She demanded. "Is Arisa ok?"

The doctor smiled a disarming smile at the princess. "They are both going to survive this, so no need to worry." He reassured her. He turned to the colonel. Lieutenant Higgins suffered a head injury caused by a sharp edged object, possibly a piece of the cockpit canopy. The impact caused a laceration and concussion. They were able to get her back here in time, the nano meds should have no trouble dealing with the injury. I don't expect any lasting damage. The laceration looks a lot worse than it is. "

Melpomene slumped down onto the couch, She felt like a heavy weight was lifted off her. If something bad had happened to Arisa..... How could she face Arisa's parents. How could she tell her father's old friend that she had arranged for Arisa and Chad to be together on this mission.

The nano meds should finish repairing the damage in a few hours," the doctor continued. "I'll keep her here twenty four hours just to be sure, but she should be ready for duty in a couple days. Captain Ross is fit for duty, but he'll have to go easy on his right arm for a few days, till the pseudo flesh graft grows in a bit. That was a pretty deep groove the bullet cut in his arm."

"BULLET!?" The colonel yelled in surprise.

"Yes, bullet," the doctor repeated. "They were attacked and..... I'll let him tell you."

"What the hell was he trying to do?" Daniel growled.

The doctor could see the anger in the colonels eyes. "Dan, the kid has had a very bad experience. He's tired and hungry, we all are, before you condemn him, you should listen to what he has to say. Go easy on him."

Daniel was in a dark mood. "Is that your order..... doctor?" He growled angrily.

The Major sighed, "we've been friends long enough that you know better than that, Dan. Let's just say it's my recommendation."

As the doctor left, Melpomene looked up at Daniel. "He's right Daniel," she began, "maybe you should....."

"Are you going to tell me how to run my command?" Daniel snapped at her. He sharply turned away and picked up his coffee cup. It had gotten cold. He dumped out the lod coffee and refilled his cup from the dispenser. I'm so damn tired, he thought. Everything is falling apart and I can't control it. It's worse than it was at Mar Sara. Dan looked down at his

coffee, he felt really bad about snapping at Melpomene. She didn't deserve that. He turned back to apologize to her."

The princess had been shocked when Dan snapped at her. That wasn't like him. He had never treated her that way, and it hurt, but she realized that it was fatigue and worry that caused it. She could feel that the situation was volatile, but there was little she could do to help.

Before Daniel could say anything to the princess, the door opened and Chad stepped stiffly into the room. The colonel looked him over. He looks worse than I feel, Daniel thought, But he has that same hard look he had the first time I saw him. He was about to speak when he remembered a few days earlier, he had lashed out at Chad without a cause.... before he knew the facts of the matter. "Debriefing can wait till you've had something to eat and some sleep." The colonel informed Chad. "But, before you go, I'd like to know what happened, a short version. How did you end up getting shot?"

"Yes sir," Chad replied. His relief was evident as he visibly relaxed. "Nothing was happening so I decided to check the apartment. We discovered it was cleaned out. We did find evidence that led us to the airfield. The, ah, proprietor knew the captain as a professor Santana. he and his assistant had taken their shuttle and left to do research on the islands, as they often had. I made a guess that they would have hidden the mech at the old maintenance base. Arisa came up with a cover story and we rented a heli to check out the base.

"What did you think you were going to do, bring Torres in yourself?" The colonel snapped, unable to completely contain his frustration. "What if the Red Faction had guards there..... is that how you got shot?"

"No sir," Chad answered, stiffening once again, "I intended to do a recon overflight. If they landed that large a mech at an unused facility it would have left evidence, tracks. I didn't intend to land."

Daniel immediately regretted his outburst. He should have asked before accusing. "You did the right thing, captain," he admitted. "Please continue."

"We were about half way to the island when we were fired on from behind." Chad continued.

"Did you see who attacked you?" Daniel asked. "Was it another heli?"

"It was an armed shuttle, long range, diplomatic or military type." Chad answered.

"That's just great," the colonel moaned, "there must be a couple hundred of that type here for the conference. What was the color? Did it have any markings?"

"It was a standard military grey with no markings that I noted." Chad informed him.

"Even better," the colonel interjected, "that narrows it down to maybe a hundred fifty or so."

"It should be easy to find though," Chad assured him.

"How?" Daniel cut him off. "We can't just go around checking the guns on diplomats shuttles to see if they have been fired."

"No," Chad answered, "but it's the only shuttle I've ever seen with missile launcher tubes on the bottom."

Daniel didn't even notice the hot coffee as his fists clenched crushing his coffee cup. "You're sure," Daniel snapped, "sure it was a missile launcher."

Chad stepped back, surprised by the colonel's violent reaction. "Yes sir," Chad replied, "They didn't fire any missiles, but I know a missile pod when I see one."

"Geraldine!" the colonel spat out. "He's here" There was fire in Daniel's eyes. "I want him..... We're going to find him, and he's going to pay..... Pay for what he's done."

"Ah.... Who is Geraldine, sir?" Chad asked a bit warily.

Daniel calmed himself before answering. "He's a deserter, captain, and he was the general of the Red Faction at Mar Sara." Daniel shook his head sadly. "I can't believe Torres would fall in with someone like that."

"I don't think he has, sir." Chad offered. "The evidence just doesn't seem to point that way."

"I certainly hope you're right," Daniel sighed.

Chapter 43

Melpomene entered the room just as the doctor was leaving. He had called her to inform her that Arisa was awake. "She's doing just fine," the doctor told her before he left. "I didn't find any impairment."

Arisa looked up at Melpomene as she approached. "I thought Chad would come," she complained.

"He's sleeping, and the doctor gave orders not to wake him." Mel told her. "He was pretty burned out, and the doctor told me I can't stay long because you need to rest too. He says the nano meds use up your energy."

Arisa yawned, she did feel very tired. "I have to talk to the colonel," she insisted. "He's going to blame Chad and it wasn't his fault. It was my idea, I should be the one in trouble."

The princess chuckled, "I don't doubt that, but that's not the way Chad told it. Don't worry the colonel understood the situation. Besides, when he heard the description of the shuttle that attacked you, he forgot about the rest of it. It seems you found a deserter that the colonel is very anxious to locate."

Arisa lay back down, relieved. "Good, then Chad will be alright. I was afraid the colonel would put him in the brig and court marshal him."

"I don't think Daniel would go that far," Mel assured her. As she opened the door to leave, she looked back at Arisa. "Don't worry about Chad, I'll take care of him."

Arisa sat up turning toward the door. "No you won't!" She snarled menacingly, but the princess was gone.

Daniel stood looking at a shuttle, the one with a missile pod added on the belly. Walt walked in behind him carrying his pad. "The guy told me his name was Greenfield, but he fits your description." Walt told him.

"There was a shorter dark haired guy with him. I tried calling their numbers but they don't answer. I called the super of the apartment building he gave as an address and he said nobody of that name or description lives there."

"Damn," Daniel swore, "it couldn't be that easy, could it."

"Seems it never is," Walt agreed. "I wish I could help. It's going to be tough to track them down in a town this size. I wish you luck. I'll make sure they can't use that shuttle to get away and call you if they show up." They walked out of the hangar to the colonels car. "I'm glad your pilots are alright, colonel. They were good kids. I shouldn't have said those things I said about them. It's just damn lucky your people found them. We lose people out there, and they're never seen again."

Dan nodded, "thanks, just keep me informed." As he opened the car door he turned back toward Walt. "The princess ordered your new heli, it should be here in a few days." Daniel got in the car and as Tammy drove them away he had to laugh at the surprised look on Walt's face.

Melpomene walked toward the office the colonel used in their old hotel base. She had spent most of the last hour talking with Georgianna. The captain had been wary at first, unwilling to talk about her experience with the blackouts and unwanted compulsions. When she realized that the princess was not accusing but was sympathetic and trying to uncover the cause of the events, she opened up. Melpomene had wrung every bit of information she could from Georgianna, yet it was still a confusing picture.

Melpomene found Daniel in his office. He had returned from the airfield. He'd found the shuttle, but not the man he was after. She told him what she had learned from the captain. "I don't think I can tell the delegates that she saw them as alien monsters," Melpomene chuckled. "But, at least we have some idea what they are using to try to control our people. If only we could figure out how they are doing it, maybe the psych boys could find a way to counter it."

"I hope they can," Dan replied. "This must have something to do with Geraldine and the Red Faction. They must have come up with some big advance in psych ability. I wish I had come up with a lead on Geraldine's location. I don't know how we can find him."

"If they are behind this, they found something our psych boys don't know about," Mel mused. "Hmmm, maybe there is a way we can locate Edward Geraldine. I need to talk with some one, it's worth a try." Melpomene left to talk with Megumi.

Chad followed Ben into the colonels office. They had just returned from the recon mission the colonel had ordered. Chad was anxious to get this over with, he had heard that Arisa was back at the base.

The colonel looked up as they entered. "What did you find, captain?"

"There is something big there, sir," Chad informed him. He set his pad down in front of the colonel. He pointed to the picture on the screen.

"There are recent tracks into the hangar. There is also evidence of a shuttle landing and a set of shuttle tracks into the hangar."

"Hmm, it appears they are there," Daniel mused, "but there could be others there too. We may need to wait for more troops."

"I don't think there are others, sir," Chad replied. "Unless they landed multiple shuttles in the same spot and ran them into the hangar on the same tracks, I think it's only captain Torres and the girl."

"You're probably right," Daniel admitted. "I'll have to think this over. You're dismissed, go get something to eat."

Chad went directly to the lounge, but before he could look around for Arisa, the princess stepped in front of him. She had been on her way back to the colonel's office. "How did it go?" She asked. "Did you find anything, was there any trouble?"

Chad grinned, "Ya, we found something, tracks, big tracks. I'm sure it's that giant mech. I'll bet captain Torres and that girl are there too. I only saw tracks from one shuttle so I'm pretty sure they're alone."

"At least you had some good luck," Melpomene told him. "I haven't been able to get anywhere with the peace conference and the colonel struck out looking for Edward Geraldine. I was beginning to think I am the muse of tragedy."

"Not likely," Chad assured her, "Our luck is changing for the better."

The princess noticed the pseudo flesh patch on Chad's arm. She had never seen the it used before. She reached up and gently touched it. "Does it hurt?" She asked him.

"Sure, it hurts some, but not as bad as it would without the patch." He informed the princess. "It's not my first time, and, I suppose not my last."

Suddenly Arisa pushed between Chad and Melpomene, pushing the princess away from Chad. "Chad! I'm so glad you're back. I've been so worried since they told me you went to that island." Arisa cooed in her sweetest voice.

"Arisa!" Chad smiled happily. "I was just looking for you..... Ah, it was nothing, just a recon run. Besides, we had the shuttle fully armed."

Arisa took Chad by the arm and started to pull him away. "You must be starved, I'll bring you something." She told him.

"I'll see you later," Melpomene told them as they started to leave, but at her words, Arisa turned and glared at her.

"No you won't, Mel," Arisa told her menacingly.

Melpomene stepped back from Arisa. She watched Arisa pull a confused looking Chad away. This has gone far enough, The princess thought. Arisa had been her friend since Arisa was a little girl. She was going to have to put an end to this.

Chapter 44

It was getting late when Melpomene left the colonels office. They had discussed and decided on two plans of action for the following day. She

headed toward the lounge, hoping Chad and Arisa would still be there. It was time to settle this with the younger girl. She saw the two sitting in a corner of the room and approached them.

"Lieutenant Higgins, you will escort me to my room," the princess ordered.

"What?" Arisa looked up at the princess in surprise. "You don't need an escort here," she protested. "You can find your own room, Mel."

"Now lieutenant," Melpomene barked, "that's an order."

"Oh, alright!" Arisa got up angrily.

Chad looked very confused, he started to get up.

"Not you, Chad," the princess told him. "This is just between Arisa and me."

Chad sat back down, he didn't know what was going on, but he knew when to stay out of a woman's way.

"I'll be right back," Arisa told him then turned and stalked off after the princess.

Melpomene's demeanor softened as she led Arisa out of the room and down the hallway. "Chad is certainly an attractive young man, isn't he." Melpomene began.

Arisa grabbed Melpomene by the arm and pulled her around so they were face to face. "He's more than that, he's special. He's smart and strong, he's good and he's kind, he's..... he's wonderful, and he's mine!" Arisa told her with fierce passion. "Mel, you always have all the boys, even at my graduation. I know I'm not beautiful like you, or special, but Chad loves me. You leave him alone, or..... or you'll be sorry."

Melpomene saw the tears and desperation in the smaller girl's blue eyes. She turned and started walking. She had learned from Arisa's tone and words all she wanted to know. How much Chad actually meant to her, and more..... So that was why their friendship had cooled since Arisa's high school graduation party. Of course the boys at the party had flocked around the princess, they always did. Arisa had been a late bloomer and Mel had been older, more mature, well endowed, and a princess. The boys had flocked around her, it always happened, and it wasn't something she had intended. It was often more of a problem than a blessing. She wished she had realized the problem earlier. She could have cleared up the misunderstanding. The jealousy had lasted too long. Arisa was angry with her and the thought of Arisa with the special ops demolition pack that Mel had ordered supplied to the lieutenant..... scary. Melpomene smiled as she remembered years ago, when Arisa was an elementary school girl. Mel had told the younger girl that there was a secret treasure hidden in the old stone building in the back woods on the palace grounds but the door was locked and there was no key. Arisa vowed that she would open that door. The little girl collected some chemicals from the kitchen and garden shed. Using a piece of pipe they found in the maintenance shed, Arisa made an explosive. Mel hadn't expected it to work and was shocked when Arisa not only blew the door open, but also blew away a large part

of the front of the building. In minutes, the imperial guard had surrounded them with ground troops vehicles and helis. It took a lot of contrite tears to get the girls off with only light punishment..... You didn't want Arisa angry with you when she had explosives.

"I know Chad is all of those things," She told Arisa in a gentile voice. "He has been a very interesting subject. I have never had the chance to study someone from the lower cities. I've learned a lot about the people and the environment he grew up in. He led a very..... colorful life." They stopped by the door to Melpomene's room. "That's the reason I've spent time with him, Ari. He was interesting to study, but that's all, He really isn't my type." Melpomene started to reach for the door but stopped and turned back. She stepped closer to Arisa, a wickedly seductive smile on her face. She bent down, their faces were inches apart. "But then, dear Ari, maybe you are," she purred in a voice that could have softened stone.

Arisa backed up till she was against the wall, she wasn't that kind, but..... she licked dry lips. Those dark eyes, she couldn't look away, she was drawn in. The princess reached out and leaned against the wall, her face drew closer. Arisa could hardly breath, those dark eyes, those soft red lips, her heart hammered so hard it hurt. This was all wrong but.... she leaned forward, she had to.....

Melpomene stood up and backed away. "Then again, maybe not," her laughter was like silver bells. Melpomene opened her door. 'Have a good night, Ari," she told the shocked little girl. Mel entered her room and closed the door, she leaned her back against it trying to stifle her giggling. Arisa had always been naive and easy to play jokes on, Melpomene just hadn't been able to resist. "There is someone who is the perfect type for me, Ari, if he would just stop thinking of me as the princess," she stated quietly.

Arisa stood against the wall for several long minutes, trying to make sense of what had just happened. Finally she started for the lounge. She was messing with me, Arisa concluded. Arisa's frown started to turn to a smile. Mel had always liked to play tricks on her, that had to be it, and with all that psychology stuff that Mel had studied, she could seduce a statue..... Arisa stopped and looked back down the hall. Mel could seduce anyone, that's what she showed her, even Chad, but she hadn't. She said he wasn't her type. Mel wasn't trying to steal Chad away from her, she was just being nice so she could learn from him. Arisa had a big smile as she hurried back to the lounge. Chad was hers.

In the lounge, Arisa literally jumped onto Chad's lap, hugging and kissing the startled boy. Chad was even more confused, but he didn't mind at all.

Chapter 45

The gang's door guard rushed into their headquarters. "Oren!" He yelled. "That black haired chick is back. She has a guy that looks like military brass and a fancy looking woman with her. They came in a limo, and that big mech is following them."

"What are you doing here?" Oren shot back. "Get back to the door and let them in." Now what? He wondered. He knew they were EDF but why would an officer be here? And why with a lady?..... Unless..... They told him they were escorting a princess. What if she was.....Oh crap. "Everybody, get up and straighten yourselves up. We have important visitors."

Megumi led the way with the princess following and the colonel behind them. They walked up to face Oren. "I would like to introduce colonel Daniel Hellwind," Megumi told him, "and Melpomene Leiske, princess of the empire."

Oren felt a bit shaky. How do you address royalty? He had no idea, this was way above his station. "Ah, um, welcome to our, ah..... hideout, er, headquarters, miss, I mean your, ah um, your royalness." Oren winced, he didn't know if he was supposed to kneel or kiss her hand or what, so he made an awkward attempt at a low bow.

Melpomene couldn't suppress a giggle. She gave the embarrassed boy a warm and disarming smile. "Thank you for the welcome, Oren, but just Melpomene will do." The princess told him. "We can leave formalities to those stuffy diplomats. I came to thank you personally for helping us find our lost pilots, Arisa and Chad. Arisa is a dear friend of mine and I am truly grateful to your group. I would have been devastated if she had died."

Rat was standing next to Oren, his eyes showed his shock. "Kitten is your friend?" He exclaimed. He was horrified at what he might have done to the girl. She wasn't just from one of the big houses, he was a friend of an imperial. That mech might have been here to destroy them all.

"Yes, 'kitten' is," princess giggled.

Daniel looked at her. "What was so funny about that?" Daniel asked.

"Kitten," Melpomene laughed, "where did she get that nickname?"

"Ben gave it to her," Megumi answered, "because she's so small and cute."

"But with sharp claws," Melpomene continued, almost laughing too hard to answer.

"Amen to that," Oren added.

"Oh?" The princess questioned. "You know about that."

"Oh ya," Oren assured her, "when she was here she....."

"You REALLY don't want to know!" Megumi cut him off."

"Oh, but I do," Mel told her.

"You don't!" The colonel interjected. "Plausible deniability and all that."

"The princess smiled, "Oh alright, but I'll find out from her sometime." She looked back at Oren, "how would you like another job? We would, of course, compensate your group at the standard rate the EDF pays for independent investigative contractors."

"A job, ah..... sure." Oren stammered, he had to think for a moment. Investigative contractor? Compensate? The EDF was going to pay his gang? Was it some kind of trick? "What kind of job?"

Melpomene took the picture of Edward Gerladine that Daniel handed her. She passed it to Oren. "We need to find this man." She told him. "He is an EDF deserter and his shuttle was involved in shooting down the heli Chad and Arisa were using. He could be armed and dangerous, we only want you to locate him, we will take care of it from there."

Oren smiled, "we can get right on it. If he's staying in the city, we'll find him." Oren hesitated a bit. "Ah, you mentioned compensation?"

Daniel handed Oren several papers. "This is a contract for services supplied by your, ah, 'investigative firm'. You can read and sign it when you have time. The payment rate is in the contract. You will be compensated for your prior work for the EDF. My number is also included, contact me when you have results."

Oren looked at the paper, the payment figures caught his eye and his mouth fell open in surprise. It was more than he had even imagined. Oren hardly noticed when the princess stepped up and placed a credit chip on the papers. "That's my personal reward to you for helping find my friend." Mel told him. She turned and walked toward the door.

Daniel followed her. "Call as soon as you have anything." He told Oren.

Oren stood looking at the credit and the paper, finally his head snapped up. "What are you sitting around for?" He barked. "We have a job to do." He held up the chip, "and tonight, we eat at the best place in town."

TO BE CONTINUED...