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Double Dragon Publishing 2005

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The Ark Ship—Book Two of the Sanctuary Series

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A Double Dragon eBook

Published by

Double Dragon Publishing, Inc.

PO Box 54016

1-5762 Highway 7 East

Markham, Ontario L3P 7Y4 Canada

www.double-dragon-ebooks.com

www.double-dragon-publishing.com

ISBN: 1-55404-209-7

A DDP First Edition March 14, 2005

Book Layout and

Cover Art by Deron Douglas

Ark Ship
Book Two of the Sanctuary Series
Special Edition eBook
Sonny Whitelaw

From The Publisher

Ark Ship was originally released by Double Dragon Publishing in 2004. It was well received and became something of a best seller. At the same time Sonny Whitelaw was working on a small project with MGM Studios called "*Stargate SGI™: City of the Gods*". As it often happens, working on one project makes a writer wish they had done things a little differently in another project. These wishes led to a conversation with Sonny that resulted in the eBook you are presently reading.

While the story has on a large scale remained the same, Sonny **has** changed a few things which include names and a few pivotal plot sequences. This *new* title has been re-edited and re-worked, I know you'll enjoy it.

Deron Douglas

Publisher, Double Dragon Publishing, Inc.

Acknowledgments

Sabine C. Bauer for a never-ending supply of caterpillars, and Deron Douglas the most understanding publisher in the business.

Dedication
Cody and Amber

"Then the different flood came, as humanity reached its first billion and passed it—the flood that seemed to need no stemming. That flood, as it surged ever higher, extinguished old freedoms. What replaced them was not new freedom, but license, an arrogant assumption that no title to a place was valid unless written in a newly invented language by one of the most recent arrivals on the planet. For this new flood there was no new Ark. It is already too late for a hoard of splendid creatures—and for how many lesser ones we never knew?—to find sanctuary."

-David Bower, Founder Friends of the Earth

Part 1: Katyl

Chapter 1

December 05, 2499

Avalon Davo sat alone in the ark ship's darkened atrium, her mind catching the cobwebs of space. She sensed the oily darkness of the Others lurking amidst the minds of the VIPs, but there was no danger to the ship so she ignored them—for now. *Asegeir's* captain was not expecting her aboard until they entered Dim5 in three hours, and she wanted to say goodbye to Earth from this unique perspective. After all these years, being back in space was as breathtaking as her first time, almost three hundred years before. And as always, leaving Earth was painful.

As the C20 bonded to the Viking class ark ship, Avalon had expected to be pulled aboard eighteen months earlier, when *Asegeir* tested its Dim5 engines. Ryl, her daughter, was not surprised when it didn't happen. Neither engine tests, said the Meta, nor fifth dimension jumping completed *Asegeir's* life-force. Only life, including sentient life, could do that.

Avalon had felt that life-force grow as a million humans emigrated from Earth to their new home, adding to the billions of creatures, great and small, that made *Asegeir* a living machine.

Then the official launch day arrived. Dignitaries and politicians sipped flat champagne in microgravity, and made tedious speeches thanking the alien Kwilloys and Dwins. Again. And they muttered disappointment at the C20s' absence. Again. Custom, convention, protocol, it was all necessary, Avalon knew, but not for her. Though it wished otherwise, the NASA Gaia Corporation—NGC—had no jurisdiction over C20s, so she stayed in character and ignored all invitations. Her bonding to the great spheroid ark ship was an experience of the mind and soul, too intimate to be shared.

Now, a month after launching, *Asegeir* was about to leave its Spacedock cradle and depart on her maiden voyage.

Avalon looked out through the transparent hull of the ark ship. She had been granted such a fortunate life. Time to help in Earth's restoration, time to explore the galaxy, time to love and raise children. Time to grieve. And now, time for an aching familiar cycle to begin again.

From *Asegeir's* orbit around Mars, Earth appeared little more than a blue-white pinprick of light, barely distinguishable from countless other lights in the vast inky blackness of space. Although she had been gone less than an hour, Earth tugged at her, begging her to come home. Just a year, she promised, just a goodwill tour before the ten-year voyage to find Gaia. We're not going to abandon you, but we need to find the Great Ones and through them, offer the lesser cousins a place on our journey. And more importantly, ask if they might one day consider returning to you and to forgive us our sins.

My sins, for was I not amongst those that almost destroyed you?

* * * *

In his office on the deck below, Captain Christopher Falcon stood grinding his teeth in frustration. Senior Commander Stuart Phelan, *Asegeir's* Chief of Security, had just ordered the VIPs off the bridge. Through the thin bulkhead separating Falcon's office from the bridge, he could hear a stream of invectives from a voice he recognised as belonging to Senator Matheson.

"That's it," Falcon declared, striding to the connecting door. "I will not tolerate the crew being bullied by Earth-side politicians!"

A section of the transparent hull opaqued, and the image of Admiral Calvin Woodstock appeared on screen. "Do not go in there, Captain, that's an order." Woodstock's bushy grey eyebrows lowered over equally grey eyes. "You try to talk with them and you set yourself up."

Falcon swung to face him. "I was set up eight years ago. This is just a delayed reaction. *Sir.*" He glanced past the screen through the laminated diaglass hull to the boxlike, administrative hub of Spacedock. Although the space station was over a hundred kilometres away, it was silhouetted by the rising Mars, and Falcon could easily see the light shining from the Admiral's offices.

Woodstock's weatherworn face settled into its familiar, authoritative glower. "You don't have time to deal with delayed reactions now. A delayed *departure* is unacceptable. I've entered an emergency override to the umbilicals and am resetting countdown from minus forty-eight minutes to minus three minutes."

Falcon glanced at his desk monitors to verify *Asegeir's* status. They were fully sealed and ready to go. Immediate departure was an elegant, albeit temporary countermeasure to the furore. "AI," he said to the computer. "Command override for emergency detachment. Reconfigure our trajectory for three minutes. And warn Jacobsen that *Asegeir* will make a forty-five minute parabolic loop past Mars."

"I'll call Jacob personally and explain." Woodstock's voice betrayed a hint of amusement.

Falcon's lips curled in acknowledgement. Jacob Jacobson would wet himself if he saw *Asegeir* leave Spacedock prematurely then head off in the wrong direction. The gravitational side effect of the Viking Project had already been wildly successful, but the terraforming engineer was depending on *Asegeir's* close flyby of Mars, combined with simultaneous detonation of subterranean charges, to release a huge underground reservoir of water.

It would take Spacedock three minutes to retract the umbilicus to a safe distance, then *Asegeir's* manoeuvring engines would back them away. Thirty minutes later the ark ship would cut in its primary engines, then curve out and back past Mars. It was a straightforward procedure that did not require his presence on the bridge. Still, his place was there, if only to support the crew.

His crew, now, Falcon reminded himself. He unconsciously touched the blue designator and gold status bar on his uniform jacket.

The noise from the bridge turned ugly; scuffles had broken out. The situation was way beyond unacceptable and Falcon wondered why things had gotten out of hand so fast. Too fast, he thought suspiciously. Then he heard the Security Chief yell, "Any unauthorized person still on the bridge in sixty seconds will be shot! A stun shot means you'll miss the short-range shuttle to Earth. And you all know," Phelan added in a pleasant voice, "how uncomfortable long-range shuttles Dim5 shuttles are, especially when you're recovering from a stun gun hit. The Captain is not going to allow badgering and hysteria to endanger *Asegeir* during critical manoeuvres."

Two minutes later it was all over. Falcon opened his office door and surveyed the darkened bridge. On his left the one hundred and fifty metre long, forty metre high laminated diaglass hull was currently opaqued to black. Commonly referred to as the LD, the hull was normally transparent. To his right, coloured glow-worm lights lining the concave bulkhead winked in and out of view as shadowy figures moved about.

"Opening single LD panel, no filtration," announced Captain Peta Vol, *Asegeir's* Chief Commander.

A window-sized section of the LD became transparent. Marslight filtered through, illuminating the deck-level cockpit and long catwalk railings around the inner bulkhead. Falcon strode to the cockpit

command workstation in the centre of the bridge. "As a result of our *guests'* behaviour," he said, pitching his voice so that everyone could hear. "Admiral Woodstock has revised our departure time. The AI has our new trajectory. All stations please verify."

Falcon took his place in the workstation beside Vol. Despite the minimal light, he noticed a growing bruise on her fair-skinned cheek. "I suspect you enjoyed that, Captain."

Vol straightened her blue uniform jacket and tucked a few titian hairs behind her ear. "Who, me, sir?" Her eyes were glowing with mischief. "All systems green, all stations verified, umbilicus now out of range. Orders, sir?"

"Get us out of here. Manoeuvring engines at minimum thrust for two minutes, then increase to maximum in two minute increments for the next thirty minutes. Now that our aero-acrophobic VIPs have left, let's get some light in here. Clear the LD throughout the entire Command Sector."

Asegeir's LD hull acted much like Earth's atmosphere, automatically opaquing to a sky blue 'day' and clearing at 'night' during the ship's twenty-four hour rotation. Standing on the upper deck of the spheroid ship, with the LD almost a thousand metres overhead, was like standing on a planet with a foreshortened horizon. However, to facilitate operations, the Command Sector was butted up against the hull. Its aspect and gravity—including the primary shuttle bays, bridge, Command personnel quarters, atrium and observation lounges—was *perpendicular* to the hull. The effect on civilians was almost universally disturbing, which was why the LD was currently opaqued. At Falcon's order, the entire hull seemed to suddenly vanish, exposing the bridge to an unimpeded, 6,000sq metre view of Mars and space.

"I should have done that earlier," muttered Vol. "It would have sent the VIPs scurrying off the bridge in seconds."

A soft beep caught Falcon's attention. "Display incoming transmission on the LD," he ordered the communication's officer.

The President of Earth, Edwin Norman, and the chief of the Viking Project, Admiral Calvin Woodstock, appeared side by side on opaqued insert sections in the LD. Any doubts the crew might have had about their new captain fell flat in the reassuring three-way conversation between Falcon, Woodstock and the President. When that was over, Falcon ordered an audio channel opened throughout the ark ship, then stood and turned so that the forty-eight men and women on the three levels of the bridge could see him. Although his next words were meant for the crew and inhabitants of the ark ship, the live transmission would also go to Spacedock, Earth, Mars, Luna and the score of NGC ships currently inside the Solar system. It had taken decades to reach this moment, and Falcon was not about to let a bunch of media clowns and dyspeptic politicians spoil it.

"This is Captain Christopher James Falcon of the Viking class ark ship *Asegeir*. At 0915 hours Standard today, December 5 2499, *Asegeir* separated from Spacedock forty-five minutes ahead of schedule. Sixty seconds ago, at 0948 hours, our main engines cut in. *Asegeir* has now departed.

"The tragic loss of Captain Laycock, and the subsequent events requiring our precipitous departure from Spacedock are no doubt uppermost in everyone's minds. However, this moment is occasion for celebration and nothing, I repeat, nothing, should detract from that. I know John was proud of every one of you, as I am of you, and as you should be of yourselves. In memory of a fine man and an exceptional officer, I would ask that you spend the next hour during the loop to Mars reflecting on what has been achieved together.

"On this day ten years ago, bioengineers initiated *Asegeir's* buckeyball skeleton, heralding what many declared as the most ambitious project in human history: the growing of five ark ships, each a

self-contained living machine eighty-seven kilometres in diameter, to detox sections of Earth's biomass. I beg to differ. The greatest project in human history began four hundred years earlier, when humanity embarked on a mission to restore Earth from the deprivations of a past era.

"It took just a few intemperate and self-serving generations to all but destroy Earth. It will take a millennia to restore her. *Asegeir* and her sister ships still being grown, *Jord*, *Baldur*, *Thor* and *Freyr* are the next steps in Earth's long road to recovery. As with all great endeavours, it is not the destination alone that is important, but what we do, what we achieve together on the journey that takes us there. Indeed, even before we left Spacedock's cradle, *Asegeir* had already contributed to another monumental project. There," he gestured to the receding view of Mars through the LD, "is the result."

The crew turned their eyes to a planet no longer completely red, but one where wispy clouds partially obscured tiny patches of blue. Those who looked closely could see pinpricks of green. The gravitational pull of Spacedock and the growing ark ships had created tectonic stresses across the planet, releasing entrapped underground water and gases. After countless millennia, the surface of Mars was once more home to running water and life.

"We have adjusted our path and velocity to compensate for early departure," Falcon continued. "The fly by of Mars, Luna and Earth will take place as scheduled. Entry to Dim5 will be at 1400 hours as planned. Thank you."

As *Asegeir* continued to back away from Spacedock, five gigantic Meccano-like arms came into view. A section of *Asegeir*'s LD opaqued, and an enlarged view of *Jord*'s bridge came into view.

"Attention on deck!" Captain Vol called.

Falcon stood and returned the salute to the ship that had been his home for eight years, to the crew that had become his family, and to Captain Malcolm Tishardson who had replaced him as *Jord*'s commander.

They caught a brief flash of sunlight before *Asegeir*' photosensitive LD opaqued to sky blue. The LD turned transparent again when the great ark ship revolved into shadow.

Sitting back in his chair, Falcon said to his personal assistant, Marcus Wallace, "Sergeant, subject to them behaving themselves, invite the VIPs into the Command observation room but not the bridge. They can nominate one journalist to interview me once *Asegeir* has passed Mars." Then he said to Vol, "Captain, make certain the LD *remains* one hundred percent auto-transparent throughout the entire Command Sector, including my office."

Vol's eyes crinkled in amusement, while soft chuckles echoed around the bridge. When Marcus rolled his brown eyes, Falcon added, "The carpet will take care of it."

Like most of *Asegeir*'s non-structural bulkheads and fixed furniture, the carpets were bio-engineered plants that fed off organic waste, including the inevitable results of vertigo. And most of the VIPs had been imbibing huge quantities of free, expensive booze and exotic hors d'oeuvres.

"Yes, sir, but you know how the smell lingers." Marcus keyed his datapad and waited for the reply. "They've selected Dorothy Waters, UP media."

Falcon allowed himself a grin. Waters had denigrated the Viking Project from the outset, and had spent the last two weeks referring to his mostly classified war record as 'highly suspicious for an ark ship captain that NGC didn't want'.

"I believe you're enjoying this, Captain," Vol muttered.

"Who, me, Captain?" replied Falcon. "Sergeant, keep Ms Waters in the admin foyer until she's ready to kick in the door, then let her into my office. I figure ten minutes before she recovers, then inform her that I'm on the bridge—"

"Because we're travelling at 16,000 kilometres per second and she wouldn't want us making a mistake as we approach Earth, would she now?" Marcus finished.

While the politicians might head for the observation room—only to discover the effect on their booze filled stomachs—experienced journalists would likely congregate around access doors and gravitors. By the time they realized that Falcon had pulled a disappearing act, it would be necessary for them to leave on the short-range shuttle to Earth.

Desperately needing sleep, Falcon returned to his office, stepped into his private gravitor and pulled himself down one deck level to his quarters. Although it would take weeks for the fixed furnishings to fully grow into the desired shapes, Scarty, Falcon's personal orderly, had made certain that everything, right down to the dark blue leather couches, replicated his spacious living quarters on *Jord*.

Falcon pulled off his uniform jacket and unfastened the seal of the black shipsuit he wore beneath. He ran a hand through his dark blond hair and across the stubble on his jaw. A shower and shave were long overdue. But instead of heading for his cleaning room, Falcon walked across to the LD and stared out. *Jord* was slowly shrinking against the backdrop of Mars.

Just two weeks earlier Falcon had been preparing *Jord* for her first Dim5 engine test when *Asegeir's* captain, John Laycock, had rammed his shuttle into a civilian vessel. The controversial orders had landed on Falcon's desk less than an hour later. *Asegeir's* departure could not be delayed by the death of one man, not even the captain. So NGC had resolved the problem with the same logical mandate as other crew replacements; they transferred each captain to the next ship in line.

Simple. Logical. Yeah, right. Falcon rested his hands against the warm LD. Take a crew forged over ten years and honed into an integral unit these last eighteen months, push through an obscenely rapid investigation that ultimately blamed its respected leader for the death of a dozen civilians, toss in a new captain, and oh yeah, don't bother to consult the most critical factor in the equation, the C20s—who've remained conspicuously silent since Laycock's death.

Closing his eyes, Falcon rested his forehead against the invisible barrier. He hadn't had this little sleep since the worst days of the Katyl War. The desk-jockey bureaucrats had patted him on the back and assured him of their utmost support. Great. That would be useful half a million light years from Earth, especially when dealing with a hostile civilian Governor and chief science administrator, who had, just three days earlier, written a joint letter objecting to his appointment.

At first he'd thought the letter a tactless joke. Civilians had no authority to object to *any* NGC appointment. Then he'd dismissed it as political manoeuvring and professional butt covering. In the event of disagreements, the science administrator and Governor could place the onus on Falcon to compromise. However, early that morning someone had leaked the contents of the letter to the media. Re-hashed tabloid style, it had fed into people's terror of the Katyl, and gathered wilder and wilder speculations as the launch countdown entered its final hour. Panicked VIPs had demanded that he delay departure. His refusal to do so had sparked a furore from tabloid sensation mongers and publicity-seeking politicians.

Falcon opened his eyes and stared out into space. Despite the view he suddenly felt cramped, confined. He needed to clear his head before the inevitable confrontation with the civilian Governor. Checking the

AI, he found the atrium free of sentient life forms. With an unhindered view of space almost twice that of the bridge, it was a fitting place to say farewell to a planet that he'd hardly given much thought in eleven years.

Chapter 2

December 5, 2499

Shadows crossed the atrium as *Asegeir* continued to back away from Spacedock. Avalon smiled when *Jord* came into view. Falcon had done a magnificent job during the eight years he had been with *Jord*, nurturing the second of the great ark ships from fragile buckeyball skeleton to complete miniature world. The C20s had rolled a pebble off a mountain the day they had appointed Falcon to the Viking Project. Now, the avalanche was about to hit bottom.

Avalon was pondering the complex train of events that had brought them there, when she sensed someone enter the atrium. Unable to see who it was in the darkness, she called, "Hi there."

"I understood the atrium was empty." The deep, rich voice held no apology. Avalon felt instead regret, resignation and the expectation of an answer—an authoritative voice.

"I was just wool-gathering. Crew, science staff, or one of the Earth VIPs?"

"Crew," he replied. "And you?"

"None of the above." Avalon snorted softly. "NGC have never figured out where I fit in the scheme of things. I'm just along for the ride." As he neared her, she recognized his unusual life-aura. How fortuitous. "My apologies, Captain. I should have reported to you as soon as I came on board."

His step faltered. "Avalon Davo?" It was more an exclamation than a question.

Pleased that he had called her by her name instead of her honorific, Avalon moved into the light. "Hello, Christopher James Falcon."

"C20," Falcon replied formally. "Welcome aboard. You were under no obligation to report to me."

Asegeir had reached the apex of its parabolic, and Mars began to expand again. The shadows in the atrium slipped away, revealing Falcon's face. The only visible sign of his tiredness was the need for a shave. Still, he was only human. His body, and his mind, required the sustenance of sleep. "Common courtesy, Captain Falcon. The last thing you need is a wild card. For the record, I respect your command and will do everything to support you."

"I appreciate that, C20, thank you. I won't disturb you any longer." He went to leave, but then added, "How did you arrive unnoticed?"

"Ryl d-jumped me aboard."

"Of course. But—"

"The AI? My presence on the bridge would only have added to this damnable circus, so I asked her not to alert you. And the AI listens to me, regardless of her programming."

At his quizzical expression, Avalon smiled. "Please don't leave because of me, I suspect you came here for the same reasons that I did."

Hesitating only a moment, Falcon returned her smile, accepted her outstretched hand—and staggered. "What..!" he gasped.

Avalon inhaled sharply. This man brought what Laycock couldn't! "*Asegeir's* life-force is bonding to your life-force—and mine. But I've never known it to happen so rapidly, or with such intensity!" By the Origins, the power that coursed through her was unprecedented! "Let it happen," she added, guiding him to a nearby row of chairs. "Don't fight it or you fight yourself."

Falcon gulped for breath and tried to turn away. Still firmly holding his hand, Avalon reached up, cupped his cheek and forced his eyes to meet hers. The impact was electric, and shockingly intimate. Eyes wide with alarm and confusion, he blindly reached for a chair and collapsed into it.

"The birth of your innate fifth dimensional senses is overwhelming your normal, human senses," she explained.

"Too ... big!" he cried hoarsely, trying to pull his hand from her grasp. "Too much!"

She tightened her grip. "Only because you are struggling against it. Just as you once did in the cockpit of a fighter, ignore your human senses and allow your instincts to take control. Think of *Asegeir* as a ... a very big fighter, and allow yourself to become one with the ship." Delighted by such an unexpected turn of events, she added, more to herself than Falcon, "Telepaths are not the only ones sensitive to the life-force, but it's a rare human who experiences that which you now feel. It wouldn't have hit you so forcefully had you bonded with the ship slowly, over months. Jenna was about to begin bonding you to *Jord*, as I had attempted to bond John Laycock with *Asegeir* seventeen months ago."

Visibly taking control of himself, Falcon looked up sharply. "Attempted?"

Avalon stared at him. He had heard her words? But the power coursing through him should have temporarily crippled his normal senses! "It saddened me greatly that, while John Laycock would have made a fine captain, he could never become *Asegeir's* soul. I'd hoped it might come to pass in the years ahead, but I knew it was a futile wish. You, however ... It's astonishing!" Then her voice took on the cadence of a future memory. "Never doubt, Christopher James Falcon, that you are *Asegeir's* Captain. The life-force of this ark ship feels you and envelopes you, forging a link between all the life-forms aboard, creating a powerful, necessary synergy for our survival as well as our success."

Her involuntary foray into her more mystical C20 traits served only to further confuse him. When her mind and life-aura returned to the normal dimensions of mortal man, she smiled reassuringly and gently stroked the backs of his hands with her thumbs. "Tell me what you sense."

The coppery light from Mars had turned his green eyes, grey. "Whirlpool of ... senses. Light and..." He frowned, shifted uncomfortably in his seat, and turned from her gaze.

Avalon glanced outside. They were passing Mars, and picking up speed. "Welcome to the living ark ship *Asegeir*, Chris Falcon, and please, don't be embarrassed by your physiological reaction; under the circumstances it would be abnormal if it didn't occur."

Blinking furiously, vainly trying to focus on something he could not see, Falcon replied, "Some introduction, C20!"

"And puts this ridiculous fiasco into perspective. As you now feel, they know nothing, *nothing* of what truly matters!"

"How ... long?"

"If I release you the effect will lessen but the bonding will be protracted. Better to complete it now. Then I suggest staying here with me until you adjust, otherwise you might set off the alarms in your medimplant,

or worse, pass out in an inconvenient location. The last thing we need is a rumour about your health."

Nodding stiffly, he took a deep breath, and met her eyes. Despite the resurgent power and sense of intimacy, he did not look away. It took several minutes for his heart rate and breathing to return to normal, then he said, "It's ... lessening."

Avalon did not have to look out to know that they were fast approaching Earth. "For the moment. Soon it will intensify, but in a different way. Now that your conscious is awakened to the life-force, Earth will feel like a gigantic magnet, pulling you. Once we pass by, the life-force of *Asegeir* will become focused within you and you'll regain full control over your normal senses."

She smiled fondly and, breaking his gaze, looked out. "Earth," she whispered. "Despite her imperfections, she's heart-rendingly beautiful, like an opal set amidst the diamond-speckled velvet of space."

Falcon's fists began to clench again. Avalon said nothing while she cradled his raw, tangled emotions. Earth pulled at him far more than it tugged at her. And she saw why. Then they were past the planet and the tearing sensation faded. Falcon met her eyes once more. She ignored the intense sexual arousal that surged through her. Like his earlier reaction, it was a physiological response, a residual *human* response to sensations that few humans comprehended.

Before either of them spoke, the AI announced that the extremely ticked-off VIPs and media were leaving. "President Norman is also on the bridge line for you, Captain," she added.

"This is the earliest stage of bonding." Avalon stood and released his hands. "From now on your awareness of *Asegeir* as a life-force, a complete entity within the greater Life Force of the universe, will slowly intensify. It will take years before you fully comprehend this newborn awareness, but this really is an extraordinary beginning! How do you feel?"

"I'm ... fine. No, more than fine, better. Better than I've felt in years!" He stood and stared at her in dismay.

"The life-force of *Asegeir* is giving to you, sustaining you. You better go before the President tries to undo that." Her eyes crinkled in amusement and she crossed her arms. "Tell him that I insisted on briefing you, and have just now finished."

"Thank you, C20," he said on a low voice.

Avalon watched Falcon leave. There had been captains with great promise before, but this one's bonding was unprecedented. She had a good feeling about Christopher Falcon. Not just a C20 feeling, something more. Sitting down again, she pulled her legs to her chest and hugged them in anticipation. This was going to be interesting.

Chapter 3

1400hrs, December 5, 2499

From his workstation on the bridge, Falcon watched space vanish and the peculiar reality of the fifth dimension take its place. He ordered the LD opaqued. Not even hardened bridge crews could tolerate panoramic Dim5 views for long. Then he sat back and looked around. Despite the hours spent pacifying everyone from Spacedock control to the Mars terraforming offices, the sense of wellbeing and alertness was still with him. The C20 had given him what had been lacking these last impossible weeks: a true bonding to the ark ship, his ship ... *their* ship.

Peta Vol turned to him. "So, the C20 arrived early, huh? They normally wait until they're yanked on aboard at the Rubber Band Point."

"Yeah, well, as they say, with C20s expect the unexpected."

Vol frowned. She glanced around the bridge before whispering, "That's why you're suddenly so relaxed!"

Falcon stood and pulled on his uniform jacket; it was time for the Command Board meeting. "I'm not even going to try and explain." He met her demanding look. "Everything you've ever heard, every warning you've ever been given about bonding is meaningless. *Nothing* could have prepared me for that!"

"That's what every C20 captain says," she replied sourly, and stood.

He snorted and shot her a wry look. Peta Vol had skippered non-C20 ships for almost six years when she'd been offered the role of *Asegeir's* Chief Commander. Although she retained her rank title and full privileges as captain, technically it was a demotion to a subordinate role under another captain. But Vol had leapt at the opportunity of running the largest C20 ark ship ever grown, and he was delighted to have such an experienced combat captain as his CC.

As they walked across the bridge to his day cabin, Vol placed a hand on his arm. "Chris, there hasn't been time until now, but..." She stopped and turned to face him. "After John died, I figured we'd get some admiral diplomat wannabe to get us through this Katyl thing. When they told me it would be you, my first reaction was to thank the Origins that someone in NGC has something other than shit for brains."

"I believe they considered giving it to you," he said levelly.

Vol's eyes widened. "C20s never bond with captains of the same sex. Besides, I lack your tactical brilliance. Not that you should need it on an ark ship but I like having my butt covered."

They shared a look, and Falcon remembered the days during the Katyl War when they'd covered each other's butts. "I may need mine covered sooner than expected."

"My pleasure, sir." Her voice was full of anticipation.

They entered his office just as a second door on the far side opened wide. Governor Jolley stood imperiously at the entrance and surveyed the scene.

In an era where humans lived close to two hundred and fifty years, the ninety-year old Governor was hardly middle aged, but her disdainful expression conspired with her excessive makeup to cause her to appear older. Perhaps it was deliberate. In her letter, Jolley had opined that no man under the age of

eighty should be allowed to command a ship. At forty-six, Falcon was barely out of diapers.

Jolley turned and muttered something to the willowy blonde beside her. Andrea White represented the equally powerful science council. A highly skilled and well-recommended scientist and administrator, White had co-signed Jolley's letter. Her worried demeanour told Falcon she might now be regretting it. Interesting.

Even more interesting was the way Jolley sized up Avalon, and then sent her a haughty look of distaste. The Governor evidently had no idea that the beautiful young woman in jeans and white T-shirt was *Asegeir's* C20. Still unnerved by their encounter in the atrium, Falcon sent Avalon a quick smile. To his delight, she responded with a conspiratorial wink. Like Vol, the C20 was also looking forward to this.

The Governor's imperial presence at the doorway was interrupted by the arrival of *Asegeir's* tall, bald headed security chief, Senior Commander Stuart Phelan. Falcon was pleased to see him; he trusted Phelan with his life and was delighted to have him under his command again.

With Phelan was Senior Commander Michael Rose, *Asegeir's* Chief Medical Officer. While the grey-haired doctor's approach to life seemed as casual as a C20's, it belied a mind sharper than a diadema molecular blade. The chief administrator of *Asegeir's* entire medical community, civilian and NGC, Rose did not rely on reports distilled through a pyramid of underlings. Instead, he continued his lifelong practice of turning up unexpectedly in emergency wards and pulling a full shift. All administrators would do well to emulate Rose.

Falcon sat down at the head of the conference table, and met the eyes of the final board member, Senior Commander Mixis Saav. The telepathic psychologist could not scan him, but when they looked into each other's eyes, they could exchange clearly projected sentences.

—Let the games begin,—she said silently to him.

He nodded imperceptibly, but Saav was already staring into the deep blue eyes of the C20. Falcon wondered what silent conversation was going on there. A member of the Saav family had been assigned as the telepath-psychologist aboard every *Asegeir* that Avalon had bonded with in the last three hundred years.

When Jolley sat down, her neck scarf slipped, revealing the black collar of a shipsuit beneath. Designed to protect the wearer against sudden decompression, shipsuits were redundant on ark ships. Anything powerful enough to breach *Asegeir's* LD hull would kill all life on board. NGC personnel, including the Command crew, wore them as part of their uniform. Was Jolley's shipsuit a bizarre fashion statement or a less than subtle way of expressing her concern about the safety of *Asegeir*?

When everyone had sat down, Falcon said, "Before we begin, not everyone here has met our C20, so I'd like to introduce Avalon Davo."

"Thank you, Captain." Avalon touched him lightly on the hand.

Jolley froze, while Andrea White actually paled. The C20s cultivated a schoolgirl demeanour and informal turn of phrase as a foil to the countless myths surrounding them. But Jolley and White should have known who Avalon was, if for no other reason than that she was seated on his right.

"Since we're going to be working closely together, I'd like to dispel a few misconceptions." Avalon offered each of them a friendly look. "As you know, I'm just along for the ride. I have no specific job, no position in the hierarchical or command structure and no delineated duties or areas of responsibility. The unusual position of C20s has given us a ridiculously disproportionate celebrity status. Historically,

politicians and bureaucrats have tried to use us to promote personal agendas. A media circus almost as intense as the one we have just witnessed would have occurred if I'd attended *Asegeir's* launch ceremony. Assorted politicians and lackeys looking for photo and vid opportunities would have annoyed the hell out of me. I would have become very rude and told off someone—or numerous someones—which would have detracted from the spirit of a truly magnificent joint venture between the humans, Kwilloys and Dwins.

"As to my seeming avoidance of *Asegeir* before now—" Avalon's eyes glazed and she added in the distinctively formal voice of a C20 future memory, "I am tied to this ship in ways you cannot begin to comprehend. Its life-force runs within me. Its rivers and seas are my blood, its structures my bones, and its heart the lives of all that call her home, are one with me. I will hold them and protect them with all that I am. I feel when this ship feels, and I know what she knows. She will live two dozen generations or more, and during those years we are bound together as one. She will know greatness and great losses, but she will bring us one day to that which we seek."

Falcon watched the expressions of those around him. The Command crew had witnessed C20 future memories before, but after two weeks of chaos, they visibly relaxed at what was clearly an auspicious sign. Andrea White was obviously awed by her first C20 experience, while Jolley looked ... cornered.

Avalon smiled self-consciously. "Well, that about sums it up." She reached into her back pocket and pulled out a datapad. "I don't mean to sound pretentious or arrogant but in a very real sense I know more about *Asegeir* than all of you. I will attend weekly Command Board meetings, and from time to time I will come to you with suggestions or give advance warning of things that are ... misaligned. Though we've been doing this for three hundred years, I know some of you find it disconcerting. Just remember, that's why I'm here." She nodded to Falcon, then looked down at her datapad.

"As you are aware," Falcon began, "the operational procedures for Viking class ark ships were thrashed out ten years ago. What was applicable to *Asegeir* is also applicable to *Jord*, *Baldur*, *Thor*, and *Freyr*. While the death of Captain John Laycock shocked us all, the Viking Project command structure was designed so that no individual was irreplaceable. Senior NGC personnel, and civilian science and technical teams from all Viking class ships have worked together from the outset. Except for the unique bio-habitat specialties, I know *Asegeir* as well as *Jord* and have either met or worked with almost all of *Asegeir's* NGC crew, senior civilian scientists and techs.

"Perhaps this is a good time to remind everyone," he added, his eyes fixed on Jolley, "that while this Board of Command was created to ensure the efficient governing of NGC, science and civilian populations, I am the ultimate authority on *Asegeir*. Personal animosity has no place here, where the daily lives and ultimate safety of a million humans and the entire biosphere of northern Australia could be jeopardized. I must therefore question the veracity and motivations of those who objected to my appointment."

All heads, including White's, turned to the narrow-eyed Jolley. Waving a manicured finger disdainfully, she replied, "By taking this personally, you serve only to prove our point."

Falcon nodded slowly. "*Our point*. You mean the civilian council's?"

"As Governor, I merely represent the council."

"Then, as a representative of that council, you would know that article forty-two of the Civilian Charter requires complaints involving NGC personnel to be submitted to my office."

Jolley's smile turned reptilian. "Article forty-two did not come into effect until the C20 came aboard at the RB Point. Until then, NGC was the ultimate authority over *Asegeir*."

"Could you please clarify," Falcon pressed, "if the objections stated in the letter reflect the opinion of the council?"

"You insist on the word *objection* when it was a *concern*. Nothing personal, Captain, but your entire record—what hasn't been censored—is too controversial for the operations of a civilian ark ship. You have a reputation for rash decisions where the outcomes were a result of sheer braggadocio and good luck rather than tact and diplomacy. You also have a predilection for leaving a trail of dead and injured behind. All of this greatly concerns the citizens if this ship, especially given our first destination."

"Please answer my question."

Irritation flashed across Jolley's face. "The council merely expressed *concerns* to NGC that you were young and inexperienced and, under the circumstances, your appointment was ethically questionable. We did not wish you placed in a position where you might react inappropriately. Take some advice from an experienced politician, Captain. Don't take things personally. If you insist on airing petty problems at Command Board meetings we'll never get anything achieved."

"In my *experience*, Governor, in space ignoring petty problems will kill you. NGC short-listed you as a candidate for governor over better-qualified applicants. Presumably you agree with their assessment and the appointments of each person in this room, my aide and the C20 excepted, of course."

Jolley looked around in exasperation. "Of course!"

"Then will you please elaborate on the reason for the council's ... *concerns*?"

"If you insist." Jolley fixed him with a steely look. "When you were a lieutenant, you were transferred *off* a C20 ship. Then you *took* command by *default* of a tiny Alpha class battleship. You have commanded nothing better since."

Vol bristled and opened her mouth to speak. Falcon silenced her with glance; this was getting interesting.

"I know for a fact that the NGC appointments board had no intentions of placing you in command of *any* C20 ship, ever," Jolley added. "Given your relationship with Admiral Woodstock during the War, some read your assignment to the Viking Project as nepotism, at best. Then two years later came that shocking *Cassandra* incident. Members of the appointments board called for your immediate dismissal, but again, Admiral Woodstock had his way and you were allowed to remain. Finally, John Laycock had not been dead an hour when Woodstock—*not* the NGC appointments board—publicly ordered you to take command of *Asegeir*. Despite this, *I* do not believe you had anything to do with Laycock's death."

Falcon had been expecting something from left field, but the staggering insinuation sent shocks of dismay around the room. Jolley visibly preened, clearly enjoying the impact of her bombshell. Only the C20, who was busily typing something on her datapad, appeared indifferent.

"Knowing *Asegeir's* departure could not be delayed," Jolley continued, "despite their grave doubts, NGC and the C20 had no choice but to accept your appointment."

Avalon sent the Governor an encouraging smile. Falcon felt an intangible sense of something slipping into place. *Follow your instincts.*

Emboldened, Jolley went on. "When the civilian population of *Asegeir* learned you had arrived to take command, many—too many—expressed deep concerns to the council. In my capacity as Governor, I would have been remiss if I had not reported these concerns to NGC. I tempered the content of the council's letter, although I now wonder if forthrightness would have been preferable to tact. Admiral

Woodstock is being ordered to resign over this matter—at the Viking Project board meeting now in session on Spacedock."

Ignoring her barbs, Falcon attacked her weakest point. "Who in NGC expressed these *grave doubts* to the civilian population and the council?"

Jolley's curled lip flattened. "I'm afraid I can't reveal that, *Captain*. It would be a breach of confidence."

"I'm afraid, *Governor*, you are in breach of the Civilian Charter. I suggest you go back to the books and clarify sections forty-two to fifty-five. You can send *personal* letters filled with unsubstantiated claims to whomever you like, but official complaints require the DNA signatures from two thirds of the Board, not two members."

Andrea White was cringing, while Phelan was examining the Governor much like an entomologist might study a cockroach.

"You were simultaneously required to submit a copy of the letter to the NGC office aboard *Asegeir*, citing the sources," continued Falcon. "NGC head office ignored your letter, *Governor*, because you failed to follow the required protocol. So, early this morning you took it upon yourself to send a copy to the media."

"I did no such thing!"

"As the Captain, I am within my rights to dismiss your appointment if I have evidence that you are being deliberately antagonistic to the smooth operations of this ark ship—"

"You wouldn't dare!" Jolley began to stand.

"*And* a threat to Earth planetary security."

Eyes bulging in indignation, Jolley slapped her hands on the table, leaned towards Falcon, and spat, "Young man, you could not possibly hope to justify such an action against a duly elected governor!"

"Your letter implied I would delay departure; the ensuing panic almost did just that. In my *experience*, Governor Jolley, the self-fulfilling prophecy business is a very dangerous one. The Katyl require our presence in two weeks and have their collective hearts set on going for a joyride in a new Viking class ark ship."

Jolley's cheeks acquired the same shade of red as her lacquered hairdo. "I'm far more aware than you of the diplomatic requirements of this vessel. My brother is the Ambassador to Katyl."

"Yes, an erudite and insightful man," Falcon said agreeably. "You are legally bound to provide me with the name or names of those persons who released classified information regarding the appointment of NGC Command crew and civilian support personnel. Failure to do so is in breach of Section fifty-three of the Charter, and the C20 is aboard, I am aboard, and *Asegeir* has departed."

"The information was given to me *prior* to the C20's arrival, not after, and I stand on parliamentary privilege!"

While Avalon appeared impassive, inside she was seething. Despite their progress, humanity had not changed one whit in five hundred years. Powerful, vainglorious people like Jolley would always sacrifice ethics, even lives, for ambition.

Her datapad stared at her accusingly. Using her C20 overrides to run a search had triggered something

very big and very ugly. It wasn't an avalanche. The whole damned mountain was crashing down. "Okay," she said, looking up. "I'm going to have to intervene."

All eyes turned to her—Jolley's in predatory anticipation.

"Larger issues are unfolding on Spacedock," Avalon continued. "Oh, and I've been on board for some time, *Governor* Jolley. Considerably longer than you think. Captain Falcon can verify that."

A few hours made no difference to Jolley's reasoning, but it added to Avalon's convenient mystique and implied a pre-existing relationship between her and Falcon. "Your accusations would be funny if they weren't tragic." She met the Governor's look. "When Captain Laycock died, every C20 was instantly aware of the tear in the Life Force. We also experienced a collective future memory. An unusual event because *none* of us were fully bonded to ships at the time, something we had always assumed was necessary. This future memory showed that the Viking ark ship-C20 pairings would be enhanced by orders of magnitude if each captain were reassigned to the next ship in line. Admiral Woodstock did not issue Falcon's orders to transfer to *Asegeir*. I did, following a unanimous decision by the C20s."

"But you weren't consulted!" Jolley burst out. "And ... and C20s don't appoint captains, the appointments board does!"

"Immediately after experiencing this future memory, we—and I mean every C20 in the system—paid a personal visit to twenty of the twenty-four Viking Project board members. They took thirty minutes to consult, leaving four of their members out of their deliberations—at our request."

Grunts of surprise travelled around the table. Everyone here knew that C20s could only have moved around that fast by d-jumping. That meant Metas were involved. And the implications of that were staggering.

"As chairman of the Viking Project board, Admiral Woodstock then delivered Captain Falcon's orders," Avalon continued. "Not surprisingly, *Governor* Jolley, your lovers—two of the four excluded from the deliberations—got their facts wrong. Oops, did I say something I shouldn't have? Oh! I thought your relationships with Admirals Manion and Vicory were common knowledge, especially since you bequeathed these admirals your Earth-side titles and shares in nanofarms conditional on becoming governor. No? Oh well, we C20s are notoriously tactless."

Avalon's eyes narrowed and her voice hardened. "I lived through forty-seven years of twentieth century agenda-ing and backroom horse-trading by infinitely more brilliant but equally self-serving politicians as you, *Governor*, and look what happened to Earth. Then I had a century of the same excrement from NGC before they began listening to their surviving C20s. I loathe interfering, but I am unforgiving of anyone who endangers this vessel, especially for personal gain. I consider Captain Falcon a tactical genius, militarily and politically. He was walking you into a verbal trap that by the end of this meeting could have seen you spaced for treason."

Jolley's eyes frosted. "*Your* agenda covers only the NGC aspects of *Asegeir*. You have no jurisdiction over the civilian governing of this ark ship!"

Avalon's eyes crinkled in genuine mirth. "Oh, boy, have you got it wrong. I have no *legal* jurisdiction over *any* aspect of *Asegeir*. Where did they dig you up? And how did you pass the psych screens? Mixis, I'm requesting Governor Jolley undergo a telepathic scan and telecording."

"Certainly, C20." Saav's almond eyes gleamed in anticipation.

"As you pointed out, you have no legal rights," Jolley spat. "Besides, I've already invoked parliamentary

privilege."

"Noted," Falcon replied agreeably. "As this matter cannot be resolved by telepathic scanning, I have no choice but to return you to Earth until NGC and Earth security questions are resolved."

"I'm afraid it's more serious than that, Captain." Avalon glanced at her datapad. "The Viking board meeting has just been suspended. Admiral Manion is dead and his aides are also dead or dying."

"What?" Falcon demanded. The room erupted in exclamations and chairs were pushed back.

"I've recommended a search for a time-delayed nanovirus of a type manufactured by the business Governor Jolley bequeathed Manion. Your assets, Governor," Avalon said to Jolley, "and the records of this company are now frozen. Your possessions aboard *Asegeir* are being confiscated pending a full inquiry." She saw Jolley tapping a data pen on the back of her hand. "Don't bother with the coded signal to your assistant. I've invoked a C20 emergency override on civilian communications. I may not have *legal* authority, but the ship and the AI listens to me because, in a peculiar way, I'm part of them. Council members and your personal staff are also being placed under a temporary restraining order, pending further investigation."

"You have no right—!" Jolley squealed.

"Actually, under the Earth Planetary Security Act, I do. Then there are three unexplained deaths that have all the symptoms of a nanovirus, and your claim that objections to Captain Falcon's appointment came from the civilian council."

Phelan stood to leave but Avalon held up her hand. "It's okay, Commander. I've given your first officer authorization to act without you. I've also notified NGC to seize all of Admirals Vicory and Manion's files and assets, lock down all transactions and data to and from Nanotechnic Incorporated and its subsidiary or holding companies, and place under immediate investigation all telepaths involved in Governor Jolley's immigration."

In the stunned silence that filled the room, Avalon raised her datapad and smiled. "Don'cha just love these new, Dim5 transmissible, soft pocket datapads?"

Chapter 4

1630hrs December 5, 2499

Mixis Saav ran a hand through her spiky dark hair. "Avalon, that has to be a record, even for you."

Falcon's office had emptied but for the te of ree them. He made no attempt to hide the tension in his voice when he said, "May I ask, C20, how much you knew prior to this meeting?"

She stood from the conference table and pushed the datapad into her pocket. "None of it, for which I'm kicking myself. I owe you an apology, Captain Falcon. I had a bad feeling about Jolley. She's a professional confrontationist, but when NGC approved her appointment I said nothing."

"Civilian politics are not your responsibility," he replied, somewhat bemused and not altogether convinced of her ignorance.

"But the *wellbeing* of *Asegeir* is. By avoiding politics I ignored a vital component in the safety of this ship."

A priority call came in from Spacedock. Admiral Woodstock's face appeared on the LD. "Captain—" Woodstock paused and looked around the room before gruffly adding, "Avalon! I'm not certain pairing Falcon with you was such a good idea."

Falcon wasn't sure what surprised him more, Woodstock's dry familiarity or the C20's rueful expression.

"Sorry, Cal. What's happening?" she said.

"Diagnosis is confirmed. Admiral Manion and his aides died from nanos. A full autopsy is underway. What the hell did you trigger?"

Jamming her hands into her pockets, the C20 leaned back against the conference table. "I don't know, but don't expect it to stop here."

"I'm not, Captain," Woodstock glanced pointedly at Mixis Saav. "Avalon's inadvertently exposed something putrid. I'd like your telepaths to examine any council members willing to undergo a scan, *now*."

Mixis stood. "With your permission, Captain?"

Falcon nodded dismissively. He waited until the telepath had left and the door was closed before demanding, "Would *someone* tell me what the *hell* is going on, *sir*?"

"We've had suspicions for some time—" Woodstock stopped when an aide bent to whisper in his ear. "Three more deaths." His eyebrows furrowed. "And five more are symptomatic. I have to go. Avalon, can you—?" His image vanished.

C20 or not, Falcon wanted answers. Now. He directed his glare at Avalon.

Inhaling deeply, she pulled her hands from her pockets and crossed her arms. "Captain, as you know, C20s normally only experience future memories when bonded to their ships. When we lost our ships during the Katyl War—"

"You lost your precognitive senses."

"Not ... entirely." She met his gaze. "The greater Life Force bonds all things, including individual and planetary life-forces. Without our ships our ability to *consciously* tap into the Life Force is severely limited. Even so, since the Katyl War we've sensed a growing presence of the Others amongst humanity. Until today, we found nothing but smoke and mirrors. When I added Jolley's name to the list of people we suspected but couldn't charge with any wrong doing, and ran a C20 search—which effectively gets me anywhere I want—bang, Manion drops dead and a virulent nanovirus is let lose!"

When she fell silent, Falcon stared at her incredulously. "That's it? That's all you have, a growing *sensation* of the Others?"

"It's more than a sensation," she replied flatly. "You lost both of your legs when Lieutenant Haddock spaced you from *Cassandra*."

"Legs re-grow. Six of my crew lost their lives. And what in the name of the Origins has the *Cassandra* incident got to do with anything?"

"What happened—afterwards?"

"Jenna told me not to pursue the investigation."

"To which you replied, 'I *will* find those responsible. Maybe not today, but I will hunt them down and I will deal with them.'"

The pieces were finally slipping into place. Falcon picked up the diaglass model of *Cassandra* sitting on his desk. In order to remain on active duty during the ten years it took to grow each ark ship, captains and senior officers on the Viking Project were each assigned command of courier class Dim5 shuttles. The ship assigned to Falcon, *Cassandra*, had been a lemon, and her crew the dregs of NGC.

At first he'd thought some of the top brass were hazing him; his appointment to the Project had been the most controversial in NGC's history. But when his requests for crew transfers fell on deaf ears, he'd paid a visit to Admiral Vicory, the senior personnel manager. It had not gone well. Vicory had declared that if Falcon could not whip *Cassandra*'s twenty crew into shape, what hope would he have when it came time to command a hundred thousand on *Jord*? The Admiral had gone so far as to accuse him of being a 'cowardly pup with delusions of grandeur'.

Stunned by the vitriolic attack, Falcon had then gone to Spacedock's fleet commander, Admiral Manion—who echoed Vicory's extraordinary sentiments. Hazing was one thing but to find two admirals held such powerful antipathy towards him had been deeply disturbing.

His first instinct had been to demand a full investigation into Vicory and Manion's behaviour, but to Falcon's dismay, he discovered that the monitoring systems in both admirals' offices had mysteriously 'failed' during the interviews. Any allegations Falcon made would have had to be verified by a full telepathic scan and telecording, something he could ill afford. And both admirals must have known that.

Which was even more disturbing.

Twelve hours later, on a mail run to Titan, four of Falcon's senior crew had run amok. After raping and killing two crew, they'd hacked off one of his fingers and gouged out his eye in order to break into and disable the ship's primary AI. Then they'd closed the air lock on Falcon's legs, and spaced him. His self-sealing shipsuit had kept him alive long enough for a drone to pull him into the cargo bay, courtesy of a secondary AI he'd installed earlier. The renegade crewmen died from a nanovirus. With the primary AI completely shut down, the secondary AI had managed to take control and return *Cassandra* to Spacedock.

Five months later Falcon had emerged from Spacedock's amniotank with regenerated body parts. He'd also been assigned a spit-and-polish crew aboard a completely overhauled *Cassandra*, and a brilliant personal assistant name Marcus Wallace. And he'd received a late night visit from the C20 bonded to Jord, Jenna Hayden.

Falcon stared at the C20. "Jenna said, 'I suspect you will, soon after *Asegeir* is launched.' She didn't want me pursuing the *Cassandra* investigation because the C20s had no future memories until the day you bonded to *Asegeir*—which happened in the atrium when we met!"

"Now you have it." Avalon turned and made for the door. "That cheery little future memory I had at the beginning of the Board meeting was just a veneer. Something ugly, with Jolley's face imprinted on it, lurked beneath. I plugged her name into the equation, and, presto, things started unravelling. I'll be attending the cocktail party tonight, but until you make the welcoming speech, could you avoid mentioning that I'm there?"

"Say again?" he said, confused by her sudden change of topic.

"I'll examine the guest list and make the same request of any others who know me."

"I was considering cancelling it." Falcon walked with her to the door. "After this morning, the media are sucking blood. When they learn that Jolley has been arrested and council members detained, with a possible nano-viral outbreak on Spacedock—"

"People will panic. Going ahead with the cocktail party will give the appearance of business as usual. Your call, of course."

Falcon wanted to demand that Avalon tell him all that she knew, but her expression asked him to be patient. C20s would not speculate because they could not always see the bridges that connected the present to their future memories. "You're right. I'll get public relations onto it immediately." He opened the door for her. As she stepped through, he said, "You've had suspicions since the Katyl War, C20?"

Avalon turned her worried eyes to his. "And not even the Metas know what it's about."

Chapter 5

1900hrs December 05

Cocktail glass in hand, Avalon clung like a doe-eyed limpet to Ross Hodgins, a middle-aged, xenobiologist. No one seemed surprised when Hodgins introduced her as Avvy. C20 names were popular, and there were thousands of Avalons and Jennas, Kirstens and Adams aboard *Asegeir*. Young, friendly and willing to listen, Avalon portrayed the perfect empty vessel for self-appointed experts to fill with their opinions, especially opinions about the new captain.

It didn't take long for Avalon to conclude that, while most people understood Falcon was the only logical replacement to Laycock, a handful of very powerful individuals believed otherwise. Falcon's war records were mostly classified, and the rest was controversial. Mud sticks, even to the innocent. Despite, or because of the current situation, some thought Jolley's opinions held merit.

Perversely, Falcon's biggest disadvantage was his looks. Nobody that young and handsome, said one of the councillors, could possibly be taken seriously. While Hodgins pretended to be deep in conversation with a glum physicist, Avalon coyly asked the councillor whether he would take her seriously. He offered her a private tour of the council chambers. "I can't wait to see them," she replied with a seductive smile.

Falcon's graciousness charmed some, but others read it as a lack of necessary toughness. The same detractors interpreted his reputation for tolerance and patience as weakness and indecisiveness. One councillor opined that no one with a military mindset could possibly run an essentially civilian ark ship. Falcon's lack of female escort and polite indifference to flirting women confirmed he was still mourning the loss of his wife and son. And that was dangerous, especially given their first destination.

Avalon well knew the human propensity to twist positive character traits inside out. But this time, normally moderate people had been fed media hype, their natural fears played like a finely tuned instrument. As with the hysteria resulting from Jolley's letter, it all seemed a little too carefully orchestrated.

Being a C20, Avalon sensed the greater Life Force as a tightly woven tapestry of vibrant, flowing ribbons of smaller life-forces. Whenever a captain of another C20 ship died or the ship itself was destroyed, she had always felt the rip in the fabric of the greater Life Force. But, as with her connection to the other C20s and the Metas, her awareness had always been muted. She had only ever seen one ribbon with true clarity, that which bound her life-force with *Asegeir*'s.

Despite this connection, her precognitive abilities had failed to warn her of Laycock's death. Indeed, her future memories had not returned *until* his death. Then, like a rush of morphine, came a gut-wrenching sense of events spiralling out of control. Thrust into a whirlpool of raw sensations, the tapestry of the Life Force momentarily took on a blinding clarity. It was the birth of something both wonderful and terrifying, but before Avalon could comprehend what it meant, it was gone. Only one thing remained; the knowledge that Falcon *must* command *Asegeir*.

Then, when she'd taken Falcon's hand in the atrium, the life-force connecting her to *Asegeir*, and thence to him, had exploded into a shining, almost physical thing. Now, as she circulated the room, it was like wading through a sea of amorphous pastel ribbons—except for the one that bound her to Falcon. It was so strong that it seemed almost tangible. A bond of that depth normally took years to develop. In fact, she could not recall one of such clarity.

Because Falcon could not see the life-force in the same way as her, he would interpret the sensation as a

need to be close to her. That need could, if misinterpreted, manifest itself as a physical desire for her. She must give him plenty of time—and space—to adjust.

Hodgins had abandoned the physicist and was now deep in conversation with an elderly xenosociologist. Pretending to be bored, Avalon nibbled on a canapé and turned her thoughts to the problem that had plagued her for weeks. Who benefited from John Laycock's death? Certainly not Falcon; despite Jolley's insinuation, he had nothing to gain but stress. Perhaps that's what someone wanted. Seed elements of doubt amongst Falcon's support structure—the Command Board—by implying incompetence, and allude to a conspiracy to assassinate *Asegeir*'s former captain. Compound the stress until Falcon felt isolated, and he'd begin making mistakes. It was the same *modus operandi* as the attempt on his life aboard *Cassandra*, and segued with Jolley's 'concern' that he might react 'inappropriately' towards the Katyl. But whoever planned this hadn't figured on Falcon's tendency to thrive under stress. Nor had they factored the C20 into the equation, or the extraordinary life-force bonding between Falcon, herself, and *Asegeir*.

"Anything interesting?" she asked Mixis Saav when they were alone together.

"Nothing subversive," replied the psychologist. "Just the usual background chatter of avarice and sex."

Avalon smiled. Unless they used a telecording headset, even the most skilled telepaths picked up only superficial thoughts. "What about the councillors?"

Mixis grimaced. "They're livid with Jolley but even angrier with the Captain for suspending them."

"I suspended them. Not to worry, I'll publicly request they volunteer for scanning." Such a request had no legal grounds, but power was mostly a matter of perception. Once a C20 made a request, peer and public pressure did the rest.

"Not necessary, C20," Falcon said as he joined them. "The suspension of the council gives NGC, through me, full military authority over *Asegeir*."

"You can't use that argument to force telepathic scans on civilians, especially politicians. The Civilian Charter of Independence is in effect." He went to interrupt, but she added, "The council has been *temporarily* suspended. Sure, you can impose NGC law, but if you do so, you'll alienate the civilian population. Once councillors have been scanned and cleared, you must reinstate the civilian government."

Mixis shook her head. "That's circular reasoning, Avvy. The most vocal objections to scans are from council members."

Avalon looked around. Lowering her voice she said, "Forcing the innocent to undergo a scan will create resentment. That can fester, leading to unpleasant surprises. There has already been too many so-called accidents since the Viking Project began. I do not wish any more."

Falcon threw her a sharp look, but Avalon walked across to Hodgins, took him by the arm and moved on to the next group.

"Commander," Falcon said to Saav, "you know her better than anyone. What's she up to?"

"I have no idea, but it's bound to be creative, entertaining, legally—and morally—just. Hello, Richard," she said to the wiry-haired diplomat who walked over to join them. "Thanks for coming in so quickly this afternoon."

"Commander Saav, Captain," said Ambassador Jolley. "I cannot tell you how ashamed I am for the actions of my sister. The position she has placed you in, the risks to the Katyl treaty ... ah!" he exclaimed

disgustedly. "Patricia was always ambitious but her involvement in nanite murders is a bewilderment to me. If there's anything I can do to assist, please ask. And that includes—" he turned to Mixis, "—any number of additional telepathic scans. There may be something in my memory I'd never recognize as important but which may assist with your investigations."

"I appreciate that, Ambassador," Mixis replied. "It may be useful in the event we need to check something."

While Mixis and the Ambassador talked, Falcon's thoughts turned to the C20. Until that morning, he'd never given much thought to the metaphysical aspects of C20s, but the phenomenon known as bonding had been nothing like he'd envisaged. Then, when she'd arrived at the reception, he'd had to stop himself from staring. He hadn't been alone. Only a eunuch could have ignored her. She wore no makeup, and her only jewellery was a solitary sapphire ear cuff linked by a gold chain to a diamond studded hair comb that held her raven hair in place. Her white dress glowed with a subtle luminosity, like a pearl, harmonizing with and complementing those around her—a universal C20 trait. When he'd found his eyes following the cut of her dress down her bare back, he'd quickly averted his gaze—and his hormones. Avalon Davo was a C20 and therefore strictly off-limits to all command officers, irrevocably and on pain of death. Besides, Ross Hodgins' hand had draped low across her hip in familiar intimacy. No surprise. Although C20s occasionally maintained relationships with lower ranks, only admirals and scientists were likely to hold their attention for long.

He felt a strange tug, and looked up—directly into her eyes. The hint of a smile crossed her lips. This would take some getting used to.

Placing his champagne glass on the tray of a passing servo-waiter, he excused himself from Saav and Ambassador Jolley, straightened the braided collar of his formal mess jacket, and climbed the podium steps. Avalon had moved to the back of the room and was talking to Phelan. The security chief's eyes took on a predatory look, then he headed for the door. *Too many so-called accidents.* As a soldier, Falcon preferred an enemy exposed to one lurking in shadows. He trusted that whatever the C20 had told him, Phelan would know what to do.

When the conversations in the room trailed off into silence, Falcon began. "Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for coming." He paused a moment and looked out across the room. While the NGC crew of *Asegeir* would accept his command without question, many of those now watching him were civilians. It was to them that he now spoke. "We have come a long way as a species. From our first timid steps into space over five hundred years ago, to growing worlds of our own. Through it all, pandemics, wars and social upheaval, the human spirit has remained strong and, ultimately, free. But as much as the human spirit has brought us here, so too does a darkness try to hold us back. We know this darkness as the Others, inter-dimensional beings that infest our minds, using greed and ambition to sow discontent and confusion in their attempt to destroy that which we have built.

"As we have learned to protect ourselves against the dangers of space, so too have we developed mechanisms to protect ourselves from the Others. Three hundred years ago the Masters gifted us with C20s. However, we must always remember that C20s act only as our guides and our conscience. We are still free to make our own choices, good and bad. And while no one, not even the Metas, can predict and pre-empt every problem we encounter, we have learned to quickly contain such problems.

"The Civilian Charter of Independence proclaims that *Asegeir* is a world unto itself, run on democratic principles by an elected government. In this Charter, NGC is charged with defending *Asegeir* and her citizens, whether threatened from without—or within. Like you, I had hoped today would be marked only by celebration. Unfortunately that was not to be, for events here and on Spacedock can only lead to one conclusion: the democratic principles by which we live have been corrupted."

Mutters rolled across the audience. Falcon had given voice to what many were thinking but few had been willing to admit. In the dark hours since Admiral Manion's death, three highly placed telepaths involved in screening ark ship immigrants and dozens of upper level Spacedock bureaucrats had succumbed to a DNA encoded nanovirus. The entire ark ship immigration process appeared to have been compromised.

Falcon scanned the faces in the audience. "In order to identify the cause and contain the damage, *Asegeir's* elected councillors have been *temporarily* relieved of their position, pending the outcome of telepathic scans. Meanwhile, although the Charter and Constitution give me full authority to operate *Asegeir* under NGC law, I intend to uphold the democratic principles of civilian rule. This includes respecting the rights of *all* civilians, including members of the council, to refuse a telepathic scan."

Telepaths were not the only ones who sensed a palpable relief across the room. Falcon looked at Mixis.—It's working,—she said.

"If all councillors volunteer for scanning," he continued, "then there are sufficient telepaths aboard to ensure the entire council can be reinstated by tomorrow morning. If insufficient volunteer and the council cannot achieve a quorum within forty-eight hours, I will call an immediate general election. Now, I would like to introduce you to our C20, Avalon Davo."

Two hundred and fifty heads darted back and forth as people vied for a first glimpse of the mysterious, elusive C20. When Avalon released Hodgins' arm and wound her way through the onlookers, exclamations trailed into silence. The sea of faces, Falcon noted, was suddenly polka dotted with some very constipated expressions.

Avalon stepped onto the podium and offered Falcon a warm smile. She stood close and rested her hand on his arm. Her entire bearing projected solidarity.

—Perfect,—said Mixis.

"For those of you who have never met a C20 before," said Avalon, "I hope I have dispelled some of the more outrageous myths." Low, nervous chuckles rolled across the audience. "As you can see, I'm not hidden in a backroom of the Command Sector like a Delphic oracle. I look as human as anyone here, and I'm quite approachable. My role is, as always, to help smooth over the bumps that are necessarily encountered on any ship. As senior administrators and science *staff*, if you find those bumps turning into mountains then my door is always open. Having said that, our reputation for aloofness has come about because we refuse to allow anyone to make political capital from association with us. I'm a problem solver, not a vote catcher nor tabloid headliner. I ask only that you respect that."

Falcon watched the audience, his eyes periodically returning to Saav's.

—The mental tone,—said the telepath,—is changing from resentment to understanding. Few missed that Avvy's expression of support did not extend to the civilian and science councils.—

"Most people on this ark ship want the same thing," Avalon continued. "Unfortunately, Governor Jolley was an exception. Other exceptions may be revealed during the course of the investigation. I'm sure everyone here would agree with Captain Falcon in wanting this resolved so that things can return to normal as soon as possible. I'd personally like to express my sincere appreciation to the councillors who so swiftly volunteered to undergo scans. And I apologize for the indigestion that it might cause you after dinner."

The laughter, Falcon noted, was full-bodied this time; even spot scans were notoriously unsettling.

"Your constituents will also appreciate your willingness to protect the integrity of everything you have

worked so hard for. I understand that, coming so soon after Captain Laycock's death, this situation has added to your confusion and uncertainty. While John Laycock's loss deeply affected me, as the C20 bonded to *Asegeir*, I can assure you that Captain Falcon has my *unconditional* support. I know you will give him that same support. Thank you."

The C20 left the podium to a round of applause, and the double doors opened to the banquet room. Falcon was surprised to see her heading in the opposite direction. She glanced back and offered him a reassuring smile.

"She's leaving," Mixis said when he joined her.

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Nothing to do with the current situation. It's, well..." Mixis took his arm and walked with him into the banquet room. "I think the easiest way to explain is that Avalon, like all C20s, compartmentalizes her life. When not bonded to a ship she generally avoids human contact."

"Why?"

"Humans are ... ephemeral, passing moments in her life. Her threads of continuity lay with the other C20s, Metas and their Silvans, Kwilloys, Dwins, Rachnians and Erochs. These same beings will still be her friends a thousand years from now, when every human she knows has long gone to dust."

They arrived at the table and Falcon held a chair for her. "Avalon has been free from her bond to ships for more than eleven years," Mixis continued. "She's been off-world to visit friends, but only by travelling through Meta-generated wormholes. I don't think she's even been in deep space since the old *Asegeir* was destroyed. Now she must readjust to her role as a C20. Although Avalon dispelled some of her mythos tonight, C20s are rarer than Metas, and have been elevated to near legendary status. And you know how boorish that can be." Mixis sat back, allowing the servo-waiter to place the entrée before her.

C20 captains were equally rare, and ark ship captains even rarer—as the occasional gawking tourists on Spacedock reminded Falcon. He avoided Earth in part to avoid the worst of his own controversial, legendary image. "I've never found C20s antisocial."

"They're not, but Avalon has always been bonded to military ships. Ranking NGC personnel and many older, senior scientists are accustomed to C20s. However, this ship is populated by nine hundred thousand civilians. A period of adjustment, for both sides, is necessary."

The sound of dinnerware clinking against glass accompanied a low buzz of conversation. Falcon looked at her thoughtfully. "A Saav has always provided a human thread of continuity throughout her life."

Mixis picked at her salad.—I've never been able to explain why, Chris, for I have no idea myself.—

Chapter 6

2030hrs December 5, 2499

"You realize that you're going to give academics and historians apoplexy?" Avalon finished her tea and set the cup down on Mixis' desk.

Jason Laycock-Saav was standing on the far side of the sparsely furnished, white-walled room, preparing his mother's telecorder. His thesis would be marked on his ability to use the telecorder as a legally valid recording device.

As the son of Mixis Saav and John Laycock, Jason had grown up in the company of aliens and C20s. Avalon was his mother's best friend, as she had been his grandmother and great-grandmother's best friend. He found nothing awesome about the C20 other than her impenetrable mind. Now that was about to change. "Best of all," he replied, sitting on one of two identical dark leather reclining chairs. "With you as my thesis subject, they won't be able to dispute the results."

Avalon chuckled, but her smile faded as she crossed the room and sat beside him. "Are you okay about starting now?"

"A telepathic psychologist should be able to work without letting personal issues interfere. I promised Dad I'd work on my thesis this trip, and it'll take a year to write. And Dad would expect me to use the challenge, not give into it." Jason adjusted the headpiece and handed it to Avalon. "Thank you for agreeing to do this."

"Historians have their facts screwed up. It's about time we C20s set the record straight. Besides, if I'm right, in a few hours there won't be a spare telecording device in all of *Asegeir*." Avalon looked at him kindly, then she donned the headpiece and laid back. "I remember thinking how wonderful I felt."

Jason closed his eyes and prepared himself for a journey no one had ever taken before, a journey into the mind of a C20, to where it all began, three hundred years before.

* * * *

Asegeir: December 2199

Avalon felt refreshed and alert after a good night's sleep. She smiled and slowly opened her eyes—then sat bolt upright in shock. Where the hell was she? The bed was strange. Not just unfamiliar, but *strange*. And three people dressed in weird, dark blue, tight-fitting jumpsuits stood eyeing her with looks ranging from curiosity to rage.

"Eh ... hi?" Avalon's voice cracked. She cleared her throat.

The tall, good-looking man with black hair scowled, but the middle-aged woman smiled, handed her a glass of juice and said, "Hi yourself."

Accepting the glass, Avalon took a few sips. It tasted wonderful, like freshly squeezed oranges. She downed the juice and looked around. Except for an oddly disquieting light flickering from a vertical panel, and what she took to be a flat panel computer screen on a table beside her bed, the room was monotonously featureless. "What's going on? Where am I?"

"What do you remember?" the woman asked, accepting the emptied glass.

"Say what?" Everything about the place screamed hospital room. Avalon didn't feel sick or in any pain. If anything, she felt great.

"What's the last thing you recall?"

"Going to sleep in the back of my Land Rover." Avalon's frown deepened. "What the hell am I doing here? Did you get my cameras? They're insured, but I'd hate to lose them." Their blank looks were answer enough. "Bugger. Well then, how did I get here? Where exactly is *here*? And what's going on?"

The tall man's scowl deepened but the third person, a younger woman with short, dark hair and olive skin, replied, "You are aboard the Dim5 vessel *Asegeir*. We don't know how you got here except that you were left in our cargo hold."

Avalon's face screwed up in disbelief. What sort of vessel, an international research ship? That would explain the odd, unfamiliar accents and strange uniforms, but the room seemed too ... rounded for a ship's cabin. And how in God's name did she get from the middle of the Australian desert to a ship?

"What day was it, what date?" the younger woman asked her.

"Um, Thursday the fifteenth." Avalon glanced at the bland ceiling. Where was the light coming from?

Softly insistent, the woman added, "What month, what year?"

The gut-wrenching realisation hit Avalon. Her fingers tightened on the sheets, and she turned to the man. He looked ... surprised. "Oh shit," Avalon mouthed. "I've been in a coma! December 15, 1999. What's today's date and exactly where is this ship? Is it in Australian waters?"

"You know we've been very rude," replied the spiky-haired young woman. "We haven't introduced ourselves. I'm Mixis Saav, the Chief Psychologist, and this is Dr Dorothy Am. This gentleman," she turned to the man, "is Captain Dak Jassom. I'm sorry but we don't know your name?"

"Avalon, Avalon Davo. What date is it?" When they didn't reply, she pushed the sheet began to get out of bed.

Jassom's eyes narrowed. "Tell her."

Am looked uncertain, but Saav said, "Avalon, you are not on board a ship at sea. You are on a space vessel. Dim5 means we use the fifth dimension to travel between star systems. Today is December 16, 2199.

For a madly confused moment, Avalon wondered if she was still asleep. But somehow she *knew* they were telling the truth. Panic hit like bile in the back of her throat. Her vision blurred and contracted, and she slumped onto the bed. The tiny lives of her twins were as yet too small to feel anywhere but in her heart, but she clutched her stomach protectively.

Am turned her attention to the panel by her bed while Saav reached out a concerned hand. Avalon shook it off and looked to Jassom. His eyes flickered between hers and the panel. Uncertainty tempered his anger.

Ignoring the shock of adrenaline pumping through her, Avalon began reasoning with herself. She was alive, in one piece, and in no pain. Meanwhile, these people—well the Captain at least—were almightily pissed off with her. Why? "What happened to your ship?" she demanded.

One of Jassom's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "We were pulled out of Dim5. That's not a problem because

we use inertialess flight, but we momentarily lost gravity."

So, her arrival had caused problems. "Was anyone hurt?"

Jassom's second eyebrow joined the first one and he exchanged a long look with Saav. "A few broken bones," he replied. "A miniature wormhole opened near our path through the fifth dimension, jerking us into normal space. Sensors indicated that a small object dropped at the mouth of the wormhole was then d-jumped into our cargo bay. When we opened the hatch, you were on the floor in a semi-comatose state."

"Oh. Well. That explains everything!" Avalon's throat felt as dry as ash. This was insane! Logic told her that she was dreaming, but *something* insisted it was real. "One minute I'm asleep in the middle of the Australian desert, and the next, I wake up two hundred years in the future in an Einstein defying space ship!" She wanted to get out of bed, run out of the room and out of the building and ... and where? It wasn't a building; she *knew* it was a space ship! Her hands began to tremble and the nauseating panic returned. *What about David and Marilyn?*

Jassom touched the back of his ear. He seemed to listen to something. "On my way," he said and turned to leave.

"Captain?" He glanced over his shoulder. "For what it's worth," said Avalon. "I'm sorry."

He hesitated, then nodded and left.

Someone took her hand. Avalon looked up into Dorothy Am's eyes. "We don't know what brought you here," said Am. "But you seem to be unhurt. Let's take things one at a time and I'm sure we'll find out what happened."

Desperate for a few minutes alone, Avalon said, "I need to use the bathroom."

"Of course. Mixis?"

Conscious of the fact that she was wearing a white medical gown, Avalon swung her legs over the side of the bed. Doctors and medical gowns; some things, at least, remained a universal constant. Something caught her attention. She looked up. "Whoa!"

A door sized hole in the bulkhead had appeared. "We sometimes use holograms in place of doors," explained Mixis.

Avalon looked inside to a garden of ferns. This was a bathroom? Mixis touched a protrusion on the wall, and a seat appeared. Touching the seat, a large hole appeared. A toilet was also still a toilet. It was oddly reassuring.

"To wash, touch the holotabs here," explained Mixis, pointing to a series of tabs. "There are mirrors and toiletries, so take your time, shower if you want. If you need help, call me." She smiled reassuringly and left. The hologram 'door' closed behind her.

Avalon sat on the toilet and closed her eyes. She didn't need a shower but it would buy her time, so she lifted the gown over her head and touched a holotab. A huge, floor length mirror appeared. She took one look, and screamed.

Hands grasped her, then someone was covering her in a blanket and helping her outside. "I'm ... sorry," she mumbled, trying to reign in her cascading emotions. What had happened to her?

"The shock was—"

"It's not that. It's just ... what's missing." When Am and Saav glanced at each other, Avalon added, "I've lost about fifteen pounds and twice as many years. And I think ... no, I'm certain, I've lost the babies." *I can live with that, but I've also lost David and my little girl.*

And that was when she cried.

The second time Avalon woke, it was in darkness. No noise, no sense of motion hinted at what she instinctually knew was true. Why did she know? Who has done this? And more importantly, where were David and Marilyn?

"Do you require lighting?"

She sat up. "Who's there?"

"I am this ship's AI."

"AI?"

"Artificial Intelligence. Do you wish lights or a medtech?"

The darkness was comforting, womb-like—except for the palm-sized panel on the bulkhead. It displayed the same disquieting image, like slimy grey oil flowing by, that she'd seen where she'd woken the first time. She turned away, slightly nauseous. "What is that stuff?"

"The panel is a transparent window in the LD hull. What you see is what your eyes perceive as Dim5."

Not space. Dim5. *Why?* She called silently to a God remembered only from Sunday school. *Why bring me here? What do you want from me? Where are my husband and daughter?* Avalon pulled the silvery white bedcover back and stepped onto the floor. It felt like moss under her bare feet. "Yes, lights please."

Except for the Dim5 window, the bed, the bathroom holotab and a door that looked more like a hatch, the room was utterly featureless. She touched the holotab that 'opened' the bathroom—what they called a cleaning room—and walked in.

Ten minutes spent in front of the mirror was an unnerving experience. It was her body all right. The shape of her legs, hips, breasts, and the form of her hands and arms were familiar, although the inevitable effects of gravity and age had vanished. But what shocked her the most was the absence of blemishes. Freckles and moles, the countless small scars from her tomboy childhood, an appendix scar, all were gone. She had been *changed*.

The most bizarre thing was that she felt ... fantastic. Rattled, spooked beyond words, but otherwise she felt like she could run up the side of Mt. Everest without working up a sweat. *Why?* "AI, is the water rationed?"

"No. It is recycled."

She stood under the shower for a long time, letting the warm water wash over her neck, soothing her spirit if not her mind. *I need information*. Stepping out of the shower, she looked around for a towel. It took a few moments of experimenting with the holotabs, but she found a cupboard with commonplace items. Toiletries, soft blue towels and a midnight blue jumpsuit similar to what the others wore. There were no seams in the suit, but the material stretched like lycra. It felt warm, almost furry when she pulled

it on.

Back in the bedroom, she checked the door. Locked. She wished she had access to a computer. Thirty seconds later, it hit her. "AI, can you answer my questions?"

"What do you wish to know?"

The only way she would understand the present was by knowing the past. "Can you tell me about the last two hundred years?"

"General history, specific history, by planet or by system?"

Oh. "Earth history." At least, for starters.

"Full screen or partial?"

"Full screen?"

The disquieting pattern vanished and the entire bulkhead glowed. Moments later an image appeared. Avalon climbed back onto the bed and stuffed some pillows behind her. The AI began speaking while images marched across the screen.

The new millennium came and went, apocalypse averted. Or delayed. Avalon stared in horror at the images of hijacked civilian airliners destroying the World Trade Centre, triggering a new era of global terrorism and warfare. Kashmir nuked, a cholera epidemic throughout the US, TB and AIDS exploding across the globe, economies teetering and social services crumbling. Then came the Rhesus virus, a planetary immune response, said the AI, to the human plague. North America and Europe plunged into an ice age after the Gulf Stream fails, while the rest of the planet suffers from extreme weather triggered by global warming. Society collapsing into anarchy as first tens of millions, and then billions become refugees. Starvation and squalid living conditions trigger a resurgence of infectious diseases, from measles and diphtheria to bubonic plague. Amidst the chaos, the cetaceans of Earth disappear en masse in three months.

"Whoa, whoa!" Avalon cried. "Too much! Hold on a minute!" She stared at the images of whales leaping from grey waters speckled with ice floes. "We drove them to extinction in *three months*?"

"No. The Masters evacuated them from Earth."

The images began moving again but Avalon called, "Wait! Who?"

"The Masters evacuated the sentient oceanic inhabitants, the cetaceans, and over a million humans to the sanctuary planet, Gaia. In order to facilitate the integration of cetacea into the life-force of Gaia, the humans were genetically evolved, metamorphosed, to become Metas,

Avalon gaped in wonder when aliens appeared on the screen. Beings from other worlds! Then a tall, blue being turned to face the camera with an expression of amusement. Avalon stood from the bed and stared at it. These were evolved humans?

More images of the blue beings appeared on the screen. "In an attempt to understand the devastating changes to their world," continued the AI, "some humans deified the Metas and Masters. For the creatures they battle, the Others, are an old enemy that mankind once called Satan. The Metas repudiate such deification. While it is true that neither the Others nor the Masters are gods or immortals, these advanced beings are metaphysical and can only be experienced as fifth and sixth dimensional manifestations. Mixis Saav wishes to enter."

The abrupt announcement reminded Avalon where she was. "Yeah, okay," she replied absently. This bizarre future history was pure fantasy. And yet she *knew* it was true.

"Good morning, Avalon," said Mixis cheerfully. The psychologist walked in carrying a well-laden breakfast tray. The tray appeared to grow legs, and expanded into a small table. Mixis touched a tab on the wall. It opened to reveal two chairs that looked suspiciously like escapees from IKEA. "History lessons?"

"I'm ... It doesn't make any sense! I mean it does," Avalon mumbled, rubbing a hand across her face. "But ... just 25 million people inhabited Earth in 2120?"

Mixis set the chairs around the table and gestured for Avalon to sit. "The Rhesus virus sterilized most of humanity."

"My husband and daughter! She's—she *was* only twelve years old in 1999." What happened to David and Marilyn? "I need to find out what happened."

"It may not be good."

Clenching her fists, Avalon wanted to pound the walls and demand answers, but hysteria wouldn't get her anywhere. Swallowing against the tight, desperate sensation swelling her throat, she tried to inject reasonableness into her voice. "That's mankind's history." She pointed to the screen. "It's not *my* history. I can't deal with *now* unless I know what happened to *my* family. Good or bad, I must know!"

Mixis' eyes filled with sympathy, and understanding. "Of course you do. When and where was your daughter born?"

When Avalon gave her the details, Mixis told the AI to search Australian statistical records. Moments later, paperwork appeared on the LD screen. Tears running unchecked down her cheeks, Avalon intently studied the documents. This was her little girl, all grown up. She was pretty, even on the ID photos. Pilot's license, postgraduate registration, PhD ... Avalon felt a surge of relief. David had taken her back to the States and she had studied at MIT. Avalon wished she had been there, but what mattered was that Marilyn had thrived. Then a marriage certificate, and the birth of a child ... her grandchild.

The child's death certificate suddenly appeared. Cholera. Divorce papers. How could bureaucratic bits of paper portray so much pleasure and pain? Avalon felt the sting of unshed tears, the echo of grief for a grandchild she had never known. She had not been there to grieve with Marilyn, to comfort and love her.

The paperwork continued until 2017, then nothing.

"Death certificate?" Mixis said.

"None available."

Mixis frowned. "Like yours."

"What?" Avalon demanded. "What about mine?"

"I know you believe what you told us, but that did not necessarily make it true. An Avalon Davo disappeared in the Gibson Desert on the night of December 15, 1999. The coroner ruled you had become lost, despite the refutation from Aboriginal trackers and your husband's claim that you would never leave your vehicle. The coroner's report also noted that your daughter, Marilyn, insisted that you were still alive. She could feel you, she said, but a lot further away than the desert, 'hundreds of years

away' were her exact words."

Marilyn had known? Avalon grasped the bed to steady herself.

"A passport photo of you at age sixteen shows that you appear now as you did then. Your daughter vanished before her divorce was granted..." Mixis' voice trailed off, and her eyes took on a mischievous glint. "AI, scan missing and presumed uplifted persons for August 08, 2120, for family name Davo."

Newspaper headlines about the nuking of Turkey appeared, followed by feature articles on the extraordinary spate of missing aircraft and space planes. The wreckage of most had been located, including one light aircraft piloted by Marilyn Davo. The mystery deepened when no human remains had been discovered in any of the wrecks. The articles flipped forward over a century, to 2120, and a long list of names flashed across the screen—then froze on Marilyn Davo. A notation appeared beside it with the name, Ryl.

"Ah!" Mixis clapped her hands in delight when an image appeared on the screen. A three metre tall, blue-skinned humanoid, with a mane of black hair extending down her back, faced three quarters to the camera. The Meta's black-tipped tail curled behind the man beside her. The text identified him as the first President of Earth, Samuel Winthrop III.

Avalon walked to the screen, her hand outstretched to the alien face of the Meta. Horror curdled the food in her stomach. What had happened? *What happened to her little girl?*

"Marilyn is alive!" Mixis cried excitedly. "Your daughter is alive, Avalon. Her name is Ryl!"

For the first and only time in her life, Avalon Davo fainted.

Chapter 7

0430-0630hrs December 6, 2499

"As you suspected, C20, we found enough biomatter on the shuttle's seat upholstery to test for DNA. It's Captain Laycock's." Commander Michael Rose handed datapads to Avalon and Phelan.

They were standing inside Rose's office in the Command emergency medbay, directly behind the bridge. Avalon read the report; glad that the remnants of the destroyed shuttle had been left on board *Asegeir*.

"It's brain matter," added Rose. "So I'll have an answer within an hour."

"If you *are* right, the entire command structure of *Asegeir* is compromised," Phelan said grimly. "I'll wake the Captain."

Avalon gently clasped his forearm. "Not until we know for certain; he needs the sleep. Meanwhile," she said to Rose, "I'll test you, Stuart, and a couple of medtechs for nanites, then Mixis can spot scan you to clear you of complicity." Turning back to Phelan, she added, "After that, I'd like you to get me a list of the personnel who worked on John Laycock's shuttle."

"You suspect shuttle engineers of infecting Captain Laycock with neural nanites?"

"No." At Phelan's narrow-eyed look she added, "You'll know what it is if you find it."

* * * *

The average ark ship immigrant rarely altered their standard dwelling biotics because few had the time or credits to ensure specialty carpets received the right nutrition or cupboard interiors had the right dosage of UV light to keep them healthy. High maintenance dwellings were therefore considered a luxury, a status symbol amongst wealthy retirees and civilian councillors.

Phillip Hastings was a fifth class envirotech assigned to the wealthier section of the Hub, the largest of *Asegeir's* four cities, and the one abutting the Command Sector. His job was to maintain specialty dwellings in his area. Like all civilian immigrants, Phillip had been allocated a unit of regolith and space—a sterile, personal plot—in which he could introduce organisms compatible with the biota of *Asegeir*. Immigrants like Phillip depended on their plot to supplement their income, while wealthy retirees either gave their plots up to the general ark-habitat or used them to supply their specialty dwelling's biotics.

Phillip knew that Governor Jolley, an orchid enthusiast, had pooled her allocated plot with almost two hundred other credit-wealthy immigrants to grow tropical flowers, cycads, ferns and freshwater aquatic life unique to northern Australia. He knew this because he had set up her dwelling with these specialty plants. As soon as he had finished, Jolley had informed him that her envirotech friends would maintain it. Phillip had cleared it with his supervisor then given it no more thought; many other dwellings in his sector required his constant attention.

Walking home from work early that morning, Phillip noticed security personnel guarding Jolley's residence. With the Governor and her staff detained, the dwelling's specialty biotics would deteriorate rapidly, and that would eventually cause problems for the entire sector. Phillip ran a check on the wall of the Governor's residence and smiled. Everything was within normal parameters. He issued a request for a work order that would allow him to return the dwelling's specialty plants to Jolley's communal plot. Pleased with himself for showing initiative, he went home to bed.

* * * *

Five kilometres away, in the Command medbay, Avalon was examining the results of John Laycock's pathology tests when a powerful future memory hit her. She staggered and almost fell.

Alarmed, Stuart Phelan caught her. "Hey C20, you okay?"

Avalon gasped for air, and, clinging to his arms, nodded jerkily. Then she looked up into his eyes. Remnants of the awesome power that fuelled her precognitive memories sent a shudder through Phelan. He'd skirted the edges of that power before. Swallowing, he whispered, "What ... did you see?"

* * * *

On the deck below, Falcon stepped out of the shower. A decent dinner, five straight hours sleep and a sense of contentment brought on by whatever had passed between him and the C20; he was beginning to feel human again. Through his open bedroom door he could hear his personal orderly, Corporal 'Scarty' Scarporious Timbo's'ausis, clattering around the kitchen.

Rubbing his hair dry with a hand towel, Falcon walked out of his bedroom, and said, "So, what's the word?"

"I like her," replied Scarty, setting Falcon's meal down at the breakfast bar. "She's nobody's fool."

"Well, she *is* a C20. I meant the general take on things?" Falcon pushed his damp hair back from his forehead, dropped the towel on the table beside the plate and sat down.

"Read the media release."

Falcon scanned his datapad while he ate the bacon and eggs. His lips curled into a smile and he caught Scarty's eye.

Scarty shrugged and repeated, "I like her." His face split into a grin that matched Falcon's, and he picked up the discarded towel.

After breakfast, Falcon dressed in a shipsuit, stepped into his gravitor and emerged in his day cabin just before 0600. When he opened his office door to the bridge, Marcus called, "Captain on the bridge." just loud enough for those nearby to pass it on.

Although a few people looked up, most of the crew remained attentive to their stations. Good. He did not want them leaping to attention every time he entered; a distraction like that could be fatal.

"Sir." Peta Vol nodded but did not stand when Falcon arrived at their workstation. After she updated him on their operational status, he turned to Marcus in silent expectation.

"I've diverted all media calls to the PR office and all Earth politicians to NGC in Miami," Marcus reported. "There are eighteen calls for you from NGC. Most originated from the Viking Project offices at Spacedock. Only three had the correct codes. I've replied to the others that if they wish a response they'll have to go through proper channels. Two of those channels were arrested last evening."

Falcon's eyes narrowed. "Vicory and Hastings?"

Marcus beamed in satisfaction. "Close. Admirals Vicory and *Robinson* are confined to quarters, under house-arrest. Admirals Hastings and Woodstock placed *personal* calls to you during the evening. Admiral Woodstock ordered me not to wake you."

Hastings had probably ordered Marcus to wake him, and threatened the sergeant when he didn't. But

Falcon had been running on catnaps in his day cabin for two weeks. After checking their status at midnight, there had been little he could do but wait. Now that *Asegeir* was underway, he would not risk his ship because he was too tired to think straight. "How many aboard *Asegeir* were detained overnight?"

"Twenty-five."

That didn't add up. "Why so many?"

Marcus read from his datapad, "Three science councillors, six contract engineers assigned from Spacedock and ... that's interesting. Two shuttle engineers who worked on Spacedock courier ships just before your problems with *Cassandra*. They also worked on Captain Laycock's shuttle."

Another piece in the puzzle. Falcon's eyes narrowed.

"Something you'd like to share with the class, sir?" Vol suggested.

"Just because a man is paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get him. Still, it's crazy to think this is some deep-seated plot to oust me."

"I wouldn't be so quick to dismiss the notion," Vol replied. When he shot her a sharp look, she added, "I'm not implying this is an elaborately planned revenge because of your controversial assignment to the Viking Project; however, consider the impact your death would have on *Asegeir's* first mission."

"Killing me would change nothing. The C20 would accept your temporary command, and Ambassador Jolley can deal with the Katyl." But he recalled Avalon's words. *Asegeir's* wellbeing was her primary concern. Losing two captains in two weeks was Not A Good Thing.

Marcus checked his datapad—and visibly paled. "The C20 is updating the list now. She's having the envirotechs detained. *All* of them!"

Vol paled. "Oh fuck."

Falcon's stomach lurched as surely as if they'd lost gravity. "AI, get me the C20." To Marcus, he snapped, "What else?"

Before Marcus could reply, Avalon responded, "I've got a handle on this, Captain. No need to change status or lock down the ship. I'll be there in five. The Command crew are also on their way."

"That's all, sir." Marcus nodded his head assertively.

Falcon shot him a considered look. The C20's call had given the sergeant time to prevaricate. Marcus was obviously filtering information, but until they'd sorted out this mess everything else had to wait. Potential sabotage of an ark ship was not something to play games with. "AI, tell Andrea White to report to my office immediately. And return Admiral Woodstock's call."

Woodstock's sleep-deprived faced appeared almost immediately on the LD. "What's your status, Captain?"

He let Woodstock have it with both beams. "Some engineering and maintenance crew have been detained, including two who worked on *Cassandra*. And *all* of our envirotechs."

The Admiral gulped air for a split-second, then replied, "Avalon kept me updated during the night, but the environmental techs ... Captain Falcon, do you wish to return? The Katyl could be pacified. There's a

million sentients and most of the biomass of Northern Australia on *Asegeir*."

"Sir, every sentient understood the risks when signing on. The C20 says she's on top of this. We're a closed system. If we return to Spacedock we're achieving what was intended and leaving ourselves open to unknown hostiles." Falcon stared unflinchingly at Woodstock, his meaning clear. He did not believe the Admiral was involved, but the old man was the only person who knew he could not be scanned—a fact that Admirals Manion and Vicory had depended on when they'd accused him of incompetence. And Woodstock had kept him out of the loop, even after the *Cassandra* incident.

"I concur, Captain. With Avalon's future memories protecting *Asegeir*, you're well clear of the pandemonium here. During the night, I underwent scans and telecordings by two independent telepaths. Their summaries are being sent to you by secure channel through the offices of the Earth President."

A surge of relief swept through Falcon. It also explained Woodstock's unusually haggard look. "How bad is it, sir?"

Woodstock pinched the bridge of his nose. "To be honest, Captain, I'd sooner be in your shoes. At 0600 hours we had over a hundred deaths, chiefly amongst senior officers. Preliminary autopsies confirm it's a nanovirus."

"Over a hundred!" Falcon sat forward. There had been only fifteen deaths when he'd gone to bed. He had figured it might cap at twenty, maybe twenty-five. "Where in the Origins did it come from?"

"Someone has gone to extreme lengths to prevent exposure," Woodstock replied tiredly. "It goes right through immigration and includes a dozen telepaths, and Admirals Manion, Vicory, Robinson, and Hastings—who was found dead a few minutes ago."

"You invoked quarantine?" A communications officer handed Falcon a datapad. He keyed in the command codes to descramble the telepath's report on Woodstock and displayed it on the screen besides the Admiral's image. The bridge crew needed to see that at least one senior officer in NGC was clean, because the rest of the command structure was apparently unravelling at the seams.

"Just before you called." Woodstock replied. "The nanos are DNA encoded, but the Nanite Act is clear. Although this virus targets individuals, over one hundred deaths classifies it as a plague. *Jord* has been sealed. *Baldur* and *Thor* have atmosphere and gravity in their Command Sectors, so we've requested that their C20s d-jump aboard. *Freyr* is, of course, mostly skeleton. Her C20 has agreed to d-jump here and act as Spacedock liaison. All of the C20s were quick to remind me that since they are not yet bonded to their ships, they're unlikely to experience future memories that would assist our investigations."

The bridge door opened. Avalon walked in with Senior Commanders Phelan, Rose, and Saav.

"Sir," Falcon said, "the C20 is here."

"Alright, Captain, I want hourly updates. And Chris," Woodstock looked gravely at him. "Good luck."

"You know I've never believed in luck." But Woodstock had gone. Falcon motioned for Vol and Marcus to join them in his office. "C20, have you ascertained how far this has reached?"

"I believe so, Captain."

Falcon opened the connecting door and gestured for her to enter first. A pinch-lipped Andrea White was already inside.

When the doors were closed, Avalon said, "John Laycock was murdered."

White gasped and clutched the back of a chair. Vol's jaw clamped, and Marcus moaned softly.

"Perhaps we should all sit down?" Rose held the chair for Andrea.

"How?" Falcon wasn't surprised. He also felt oddly vindicated in his suspicions.

Rose and Phelan exchanged looks. "Last night, Stuart had me check for residual biological material on Captain Laycock's seat upholstery," said Rose. "We found a few milligrams of Laycock's brain matter. It was crammed with neural nanites."

That's what Avalon must have been telling Phelan at the cocktail party. Again, the news didn't shock Falcon as much as it should have. "Then we're all suspect."

"What?" White pushed back her chair and went to stand. Rose placed a cautionary hand on her shoulder.

Falcon stared at her. Andrea White, of all people, should understand. "Neural nanites are programmed to interfere with higher brain function," he said. "Laycock made an uncharacteristic error in piloting his shuttle."

"Yes, of course, I understand that," White said. "But why are we all suspect?"

"Whoever infected Laycock could have infected the entire Command Board of *Asegeir* with mind-controlling time bombs."

Avalon walked to the foyer door. "Two medtechs are waiting outside with a nanotester. Commanders Saav, Phelan and Rose are in the clear. I'm requesting the rest of you submit to nanotesting. *Now*."

All eyes turned to Falcon. He was already standing and fingering the neck seal on his shipsuit. "Commander Saav, following this meeting you will run a full telepathic scan and telecording on me, Captain Vol, and then the entire senior Command crew." He pulling down the upper half of his shipsuit, exposing his bare chest and back. "The civilian council will have to wait; *Asegeir* can function without them but not without a crew. The rest of your staff will immediately begin running scans on junior commanders. Then I want spot scans targeting this area of investigation in descending order of technical priority or rank, until the entire NGC population and their immediate families are cleared. And I want *all* personnel tested for *any* unauthorized nanites." He met Avalon's eyes and added, "Until I am cleared, I'm relinquishing command of *Asegeir* to the C20."

Avalon opened the door for the techs to enter. "With Spacedock under quarantine, the entire population of *Asegeir*, not just NGC and their families, must be tested for nanite infection as soon as possible,"

A flare of apprehension crossed White's face. "I've been an absolute fool, and anything I can do to assist, I will. However, it's necessary to point out the legal ramifications."

Falcon turned his chair around and sat with his arms braced across the backrest. "NGC personnel are required to undergo regular medical and psychological evaluation, and broad-based, even spot telepathic scans, although rare, on demand." The medtechs placed their equipment on the table. One of them injected a local anaesthetic into the base of his spine. "It's a condition of family members travelling on NGC ships that they comply. There were cases brought against NGC in the early days of ark ships, however following the nanite plague on *Kismet* last century, this regulation is immutable."

"Surely you would know if the Captain is infected?" Andrea asked Avalon.

The second tech inserted a larger needle into Falcon's spine and withdrew some fluid.

Avalon smiled. "Captain Falcon's life-force is unblemished. But the crew, indeed the entire population of *Asegeir* will need tangible evidence, especially when I'm about to 'request' it from them."

While Rose tested his sample, Falcon stood and pulled on his shipsuit.

"You're clean," Rose pronounced.

The medtechs moved on to Vol. She had already stripped her shipsuit to reveal a short black tank top.

Avalon paced the room, speaking as she went. "Still, Andrea is right about the legal ramifications. Although time is critical, experience has taught me that, when this is over, the armchair quarterbacks will debate the decisions we make here today. I'm therefore going to spell out the sequence of events these last sixteen hours so there can be no legal comeback.

"Telepathic scans," she continued, "are used to ascertain the honest answer to a question or set of questions. A telecording is a legal validation and record of this process. People object to scans and telecordings because their minds are disorganized. They're worried the telepath will expose unrelated and potentially embarrassing information. Well, we know that telepathic psychologists are considerably more refined than that, but civil law allows people to refuse. Fact is, the vast majority of humans find scanning and telecording so abhorrent that NGC has become an almost hereditary occupation. Civilian ark ship immigrants and contract workers accept having their brains turned inside out and hung up to dry in a hurricane—sorry, Mixis—as the one-time price of living in an environment that's actively cleaning toxins from them."

Saav snorted. "It's not a bad analogy."

"They also know that they're never going have to go through it again, they have a place on an ark ship, and everyone else has been through the same process, so they're not sharing living space with psychotics or paedophiles." Avalon watched Rose process Vol's sample. "To be asked to undertake another scan now ... well, it's no surprise that some councillors are standing firmly on their rights to refuse. It doesn't mean they're guilty of anything, except a reluctance to have their minds vacuumed. However, I'm suggesting Jolley and her cohorts have *never* been scanned. Even a spot scan would expose that fact in seconds and instantly incriminate everyone involved in her immigration application. But we can't prove that unless she *is* scanned—Catch 22."

Rose nodded; Vol was in the clear. White bit her lip when the medtechs walked around the table. She stood and nervously touched the seal on her blouse.

"Ex-Governor Jolley made quite a fuss when the media interviewed her in the detention centre last night." Phelan chuckled. "She accused Captain Falcon of staging a military coup."

"How come the media had access to her?" Mixis asked suspiciously.

"I have a rope fetish," Avalon replied. "I love handing it to people and seeing what they do with it. Some make safety nets, others nooses. When the media left the detention block, Ambassador Jolley and Andrea White handed them a copy of their transcribed telecordings.

"For an ambassador on a sensitive mission to hand the media a telecording is unprecedented. The focus of his telecording was so narrow as to undermine specious arguments by Governor Jolley and any other council member that submitting to a scan would compromise security. That the Ambassador is Jolley's brother, and that Andy White was the only other person to have *apparently* signed the letter objecting to Captain Falcon's appointment, was not lost on the media."

Considering the embarrassing nature of her telecording, Falcon was surprised at the science councillor's gesture, but for once the media had so much blood to suck on that they ignored that aspect.

"With the 0600 Spacedock nano-quarantine," continued Avalon, "and as required by the Nano Act, all Spacedock residents must be tested for illegal nanos. Additionally, since NGC law operates on Spacedock, civilians must also submit to a telepathic scan. Unfortunately, the very nature of this outbreak seems designed to eradicate suspects and witnesses alike, so I doubt the investigative teams will learn much."

"But *we've* got Jolley and her pals," Phelan said. "And we can legally scan them!"

Avalon stopped pacing. Seeing her expression, Falcon said, "Some will side with Jolley's ethical, if not legal, right to refuse a scan."

Nodding agreeably, Avalon said, "Captain Falcon continues to demonstrate extraordinary self-restraint. In deference to the *principle* of civilian law, he has not revoked the civilian rights of Jolley or any one else."

"Any minute now the media will get wind of Spacedock's quarantine," said Falcon. "The families and friends of envirotechs here on *Asegeir* will—rightfully—also start demanding to know why we've detained them. Thanks to the Ambassador and Andrea," he nodded to White, "the media have climbed down from yesterday's hysteria. Let's keep it that way."

White sighed with relief when Rose indicated she was clean.

"We can avert panic by releasing an immediate statement that the techs are assisting the investigation into *Spacedock's* nano-outbreak," said Avalon.

Phelan frowned. "That's a hell of a risk, C20."

"No, Avalon's right." Saav looked thoughtful. "There's nothing more terrifying than a nano plague in a spaceship. By *not* holding NGC law over civilian heads, and reiterating that it's *Spacedock's* nano-outbreak, the Captain is sending a clear message that there's nothing to worry about aboard *Asegeir*."

"At the same time, people also know that we were attached by umbilicals to Spacedock less than twenty-four hours ago," Avalon reminded them. "Under the Nano Act, no one aboard *Asegeir* is required to undergo nanotesting unless they wish to leave the ark ship. That's not NGC law, that's civilian law. By not bullying them, the public will demand universal nanotesting. Equally, they'll demand telepathic scans of anyone suspected in the involvement of the Spacedock outbreak, just as they have always demanded telepathic scans for capital crimes."

"I ... I think perhaps you're right." White ran a shaky hand down her blouse, trying to straighten out the non-existent wrinkles. "As Captain Falcon said, after *Kismet* everyone knows that a nanite plague can destroy all life on a ship within hours."

"It might work," Phelan conceded. "Especially if the PR team phrases it right."

Falcon met Saav's eyes.—She's certainly been a busy little C20.—Indeed,—Saav replied.—And I believe her strategy will work.—

"Alright," Falcon said. "The PR office will release a statement that any civilian under investigation who objects to a nanotest or telepathic scan will have their wishes respected. However for the safety of all, they will be returned to Earth."

White's frown returned. "Won't that encourage the guilty to refuse?"

"Can you think of a better way to flush 'em all out?" Phelan looked smug. "They're caught between space and a vacuum. Innocent people will agree to spot scans in order to stay on *Asegeir*."

Mixis stared at Avalon. "You sneak. If you keep this up Avvy, no one will come and play in your sandbox anymore."

To the surprise of everyone except Falcon, the C20 laughed. "I wish I'd been that clever. These laws exist for good reason. All we're doing is using them." Her expression turned serious. "It's unrealistic to think only Spacedock will be hit with this nanovirus. Once public opinion turns our way, in order to establish that their immigration is legitimate, we need the entire population of *Asegeir* to submit to a spot telepathic scan. It'll be a little uncomfortable but not too invasive—and no telecording."

"Oh boy." Phelan rubbed his hands together. "You ever need a job, C20, come see me."

Marcus was nodding and grinning. His smile turned a little sour when the medtech indicated it was his turn.

"As your people are cleared," Falcon said. "I want them climbing through every millimetre of *Asegeir*, and I want every shuttle and fighter checked with a molecular scanner. All civilian techs are to be removed from NGC shuttle and fighter docks, until they agree to telepathic spot scans and nanotests. Make sure they've got work elsewhere, we don't want them screaming. Even if we clamp a lid on this thing, we still don't know what we've trapped in the box."

When the techs were finished, Falcon dismissed everyone, but his eyes asked the C20 to remain.

Chapter 8

0730, December 06, 2499

"Jolley was wearing a shipsuit yesterday," Falcon said. "Did you have the envirotechs detained because you suspected sabotage?"

Avalon shook her head. "Last night I had a future memory. Jason Saav was telecording me and—"

"He *what!*" Falcon sat forward. It was impossible to scan C20s. A telecording was out of the question.

"It's just the first days of my life as a C20. The historians have their facts screwed up, and Jason needed an adept in fifth dimensional physics for his thesis. Traditionally, that means telepaths, but C20s fall into the same category."

When he continued to stare at her, she added, "Captain, you're going to be disabused of a good many C20 myths. As you discovered yesterday, many aspects of the C20-captain relationship are difficult to articulate—and uniquely intimate." Her face took on a haunted look. "Future memories are dangerous things. Acting to avoid them is risky. I intervene only when the disaster seems so complete that alternatives pale by comparison. I sacrificed the last *Asegeir* during the War for that very reason."

"You ... saw a way to save the old *Asegeir*?" His stomach tightened.

"Something you were, of course, witness to. *Asegeir's* engines were redlining. She'd been running in the amber for weeks, but, as you know, we'd run out of resources to overhaul them. While its true that Captain Bruckner could have ordered *Asegeir* to jump to Dim5 in the hope that it might save our engines, there was no guarantee anyone would survive the trip, and the jump would have made *Warrior* and *Blackhawk* sitting ducks. It was a hard call, not made any easier because I had no future memory predicting a positive outcome for *Asegeir*, no matter what option Paul chose."

Falcon recalled the inspired manoeuvring Paul Bruckner had done to give *Warrior* and *Blackhawk* time to reposition. Then *Asegeir* had been hit by a plasma beam and exploded, taking out the Katyl cruiser with her. As her C20, Avalon had instantly been pulled into the nearest vessel, *Blackhawk*. At the end of the War, just weeks later, he'd had a long, alcoholic evening with Malcolm Tishardson, *Blackhawk's* captain. Tishardson had kept recounting, over and over, how Avalon had been unceremoniously d-jumped onto his bridge, screaming Paul Bruckner's name, inconsolable over his death and the fate of *Asegeir*. It was the blessing—and curse—of all C20s, that they could not die with their ships.

"What you could not know, Captain Falcon, was that *Asegeir's* destruction *guaranteed* the safety of *Blackhawk* and your ship, *Warrior*. The rest," she smiled dismally, "is history."

Trying to still the pounding of his heart, Falcon stood from the table and walked over to his desk. "Did Captain Bruckner know his choices?" He turned to watch her face, to see the truth he dreaded.

"Of course." Her eyes were swimming. "I would never hide the truth from a captain. I saw only a *lack* of future for humankind if *Warrior* was destroyed. I admit to pleading with Paul that a third, as yet unseen option might exist. But the events that defined your life, Captain Falcon, and your subsequent actions could never have been duplicated. Paul chose to sacrifice his ship for the millions your future actions would save. But I had become very fond of him ... and to lose a ship..." She closed her eyes and turned away. Her voice was heavy with pain as she whispered, "I all but begged him to jump to Dim5. It was an emotive plea, one made from my heart, not because I knew *Asegeir* would survive." She smiled bitterly.

"Which is why C20s never willingly take command of ships. We're not suited to it. Bruckner made the wisest choice by ordering all but engineering, gunners, and bridge crew to abandon ship."

"But the price..." Falcon's voice cracked, and he took a few paces towards her.

"No," she replied quickly. "I did not know the price you would later pay was one that should be asked of no man. I just knew that *something* would cause you to act in a certain way, and that the consequences would end the War."

Avalon met his anguished eyes, then stood and walked past him to the LD. She placed her hand on the warm surface of the small, transparent section. Three metres away the peculiar reality of Dim5 flicked past. "Time," she said softly, staring at the disquieting images. "Would that you could go back in time and change things. And millions would perish. Or perhaps another path would open? Little wonder the Masters have never allowed the lesser beings the dimensional paths of time-travel."

"This morning, I saw ... something." She dropped her hand and turned to face him. "Two distinct paths. One, I did nothing and *Asegeir* was left an empty, lifeless vacuum filled with ghosts and despair, while a fleet of Katyl cruisers descended on the Solar system. The other, someone in an envirotech uniform was detained and *Asegeir* lived and thrived."

Falcon joined her and stared at the dark, oily other dimension. "Just one tech? Why detain them all?"

"Future memories are narrowly focused fuzz. This one had an envirotech uniform."

Enigmatic answers, so like a C20. Dim5 seemed more fathomable. But the intimacy that had passed between them in the atrium returned. Disturbed by the sensation, or perhaps by her refusal to be honest, he snorted.

"I'm not trying to be cryptic, Captain."

"No offence C20, but you define cryptic." He went to move away but she caught his hand. The feeling was electric.

"I have no truths, Captain, just instincts."

He met her gaze. "I've only survived because of instincts, C20. Yesterday, you reminded me of that. Share your instincts with me."

She seemed to assess him for a moment before replying. "Someone wants you discredited and hostilities with the Katyl reopened. Given your role in the War, those two factors are too damned coincidental to be a coincidence."

"Go on."

"Whoever killed Laycock knew you'd be assigned to replace him. You're the only logical choice. And they knew the C20s wouldn't object, because at the beginning of the Viking Project, you were the only one on our list—"

"List, what list?"

Her lips thinned. "Another fallacy. C20s never order—or even ask—NGC to assign specific captains to specific ships. We submit a choice of names to the appointments board."

"But NGC didn't appoint me, Jenna did."

Avalon shook her head. "Because C20 captains are infrequently appointed, the board requires a unanimous vote. We lost so many potential C20 captains in the Katyl War that our list was short—just you and John Laycock. You were at the top of the list, despite your youth and bottom rung status as an Alpha class captain. Laycock was *second*. That doesn't mean we were scraping the barrel. We would have delayed the Viking Project rather than nominate an unsuitable captain. The board selected Laycock for *Asegeir* in the hope that we would present a third name before *Jord's* buckeyball skeleton was initiated. We didn't. Therefore they had no choice and no reason to procrastinate. However, like any antiquated bureaucracy, instead of bowing to the inevitable they insisted on established procedures: a ballot. For six months four voted against you, arguing that since C20s had never disputed their decision before, we would have to find another name.

"Huh." She released his hand and folded her arms in disgust. "This coming from cowering bureaucrats who had sat safely behind the blockade during the Katyl War, who'd never fired a shot in anger or had to rebuild a devastated world and rally a fighting force in the face of insurmountable odds. They had worked their way up through the ranks with uninspired, insipid leadership. Old men, they were insanely jealous that one so young could outshine them all on his worst day. You had proved yourself to us." She looked at him. "That's all that mattered. When Jenna tired of their procrastination, she called that unprecedented press conference and announced your appointment to the Project. Thereafter, people incorrectly assumed C20s assigned their captains and used the appointments board as a front. So no, Captain, it was not NGC that never wanted you, but four bitter old admirals, men we C20s and Metas deliberately did *not* consult after Laycock was killed."

"And were these admirals," he asked in a low, dangerous voice, "those who approved all maintenance and crew assignments to Courier class ships?"

"Now you have it." She nodded. "Admirals Manion, Vicory, Robinson and Hastings. The same four admirals who ruled that Laycock was responsible for the shuttle collision."

Falcon was finally getting some answers, but things still didn't add up. "Killing a man in space is easy. Why the complicated scenario aboard *Cassandra*? And if they wanted me dead, why kill Laycock knowing I'd be reassigned to *Asegeir*? It doesn't track."

"Killing you and John was incidental to *discrediting* you."

His eyes fell to the model of *Cassandra*. "I allegedly raped and butchered two crew, then spaced myself in a fit of remorse. John Laycock supposedly killed a bunch of school kids in a civilian shuttle."

Then it hit him. He put the model down, and turned to face her. "C20s *apparently* appointed us. Discrediting us destroys *your* credibility! But why?"

"Captain, there will always be elements in NGC who loathe C20s. We're outside the chain of command, yet we have the power to hobble an entire board of admirals. We're directly related to the Metas, live longer than Methuselah and are almost impossible to kill. You know how superstitious most people are about C20s and ark ships and the mystique of future memories."

"All four admirals are now dead," he said softly. "Who was behind them?"

"We don't know" Avalon conceded. "But it's clear that whoever they are, they're trying to discredit the C20s, bring NGC to its knees and—"

"Reopen hostilities with the Katyl," he finished.

"I know, it sounds crazy." She unfolded her arms and walked to the door. "What sane person would

want that? And no insane one with the power to influence four admirals and a significant percentage of the top NGC brass would have the wherewithal to carry out such a complex conspiracy. Now you understand why I've been reluctant to voice my concerns. They fly in the face of reason."

"But not instincts," he said, walking with her.

A ghost of a smile crossed her lips. "No. I don't know where this is going, but if—*when*—the public panics and starts screaming for suspects to be telepathically scanned, they can scream at the civilian council or take it out on them in the next election, while you embody reasonableness, cooperation and versatility. Meanwhile, I'm hoping volunteer scans will give us a lead on what's really going on."

"For someone who hates politicians," he said, opening the foyer door, "with that convoluted thinking, you'd make a good one."

Avalon stepped outside, and turned to glare at him. "I'm insulted. Just remember, Captain Falcon, I took a leaf from your book on how to turn an inferior tactical position into a Really Bad Day for your enemy."

He laughed when she winked at Marcus and left.

Chapter 9

0940, December 06, 2499

Falcon was in his office talking to the President of Earth, Edwin Norman, when Marcus caught his eye. The sergeant mouthed, "C20," and touched the place behind his ear where his comunit was implanted.

"Sir, excuse me for a moment. The C20." Falcon tapped his own subcutaneous implant.

"Why don't we all hear what she has to say?" Norman said.

Transferring the call to the AI speaker, Falcon said, "C20, I'm in conference with the President and Senior Commander Phelan."

The President's moue of annoyance turned into a scowl when Avalon replied, "I'm sorry to interrupt, Captain, but would you consider rejecting Andrea White's resignation?"

Although the reason for White's DNA signature on Jolley's letter was now clear, the science administrator was a hostile councillor who'd allowed herself to be used. Was Avalon hoping to turn White into an ally? "You examined her telecording?"

"It was very focused, but I could tell a lot from the fuzzy edges."

Fuzzy edges huh? So much for the science of inter-dimensional physics. "Alright, but I won't tear it up."

"Thanks." She severed the connection.

Norman pouted. "I understood you had not met the C20 until yesterday, Captain."

"That's correct, sir."

"Never met one myself. They ignore my invitations and never respond to my calls." Norman's voice betrayed his irritation.

"They prefer to remain ... apolitical."

"So they would like us to think. Yours seems to be breaking out of that mould."

Falcon wondered what wormhole this was coming from. Or was the President ticked off because Avalon had ignored him? "Sir?"

"Come now, Captain! The C20 requested you reject Andrea White's resignation. If that's not playing politics, I don't know what is."

"When the wellbeing of their ship is at risk, C20s recommend courses of action. History has shown it is wise to accept those recommendations."

Norman's artificial smile vanished. "Was it the C20's *recommendation* to arrest the entire life support unit?"

Falcon's eyes narrowed in anticipation, but it was Phelan who replied, "Sir, based on information provided to me by the C20, as chief of security it was my decision to detain, not arrest, *envirotechs*, not the *entire* life support unit."

"Commander," said Norman. "Did you inform the Captain of the C20's orders?"

"Captain Falcon was aware that I acted on the C20's *information*," replied Phelan.

"Did you consult the Captain first?" The President was clearly becoming agitated.

"Sir," Falcon said. "Ark ships are governed by the Charter of Independence—"

"Which you ran roughshod over by dissolving the civilian council! The environmental unit is responsible for the safety of *Asegeir*—which is cleaning a significant chunk of *Earth's* biomass! What did the C20 tell you, Commander Phelan?"

Instincts screaming, Falcon's voice hardened. "NGC Command Sector crew on ark ships are empowered to act without consulting me on every matter. Avalon had a future memory. Sir, is there a point to this?"

Norman's nostrils quivered in anger. "*Captain* Falcon, I addressed my questions to Senior Commander Phelan. The entire structure of NGC has been corroded, leaving Earth vulnerable to hostilities. As Commander in Chief, I have appointed a committee to investigate NGC. Senior command personnel within the NGC bureaucracy are being ordered to stand down until the investigation is complete."

"Then who'll be running NGC?" Phelan blurted.

"The same investigative committee."

Falcon's mind whirled. NGC controlled by politicians, not the military? A frightening prospect at best—and legally questionable.

The President's normally sanguine features had turned an angry shade of puce. "Captain, you and your senior Command crew were appointed by the NCG board, many of whom are now dead. You ceded control of your ship to a C20 while you attended banquets and cocktail parties, then retired for the evening. This after you departed Spacedock prematurely—apparently to avoid a nanoplague—ejected the media and VIPs from the bridge, allowed Senior Commander Phelan to manhandle and threatened these same VIPs, agreed to a media interview then did not attend because you were with the C20—at her *request*." His agitation rose with each point. "Then you arrested the civilian governor, dissolved the civilian council, and ordered illegal scans and telecordings!"

Phelan had stiffened during the litany, but Falcon began to relax. He'd been down this road before. He recognized the signs—and the hazards. Twenty-four hours earlier, in front of the entire bridge crew, the President had approved his actions in ordering the VIPs, including Matheson, removed from the bridge of *Asegeir*. Norman had also agreed with Woodstock's decision for *Asegeir* to depart early. The President was a political animal, adept at shifting in the winds of necessity. Regardless of how Norman twisted the facts, there was no way in hell that the remaining NGC admirals would accede to a politician running NGC.

While Norman continued to interrogate Phelan, Falcon felt his senses expand. He was aware of Stuart beside him, hear the rhythm of his heart, and taste his confusion and apprehension. Falcon could also sense beyond the room to something larger, warmer, encompassing him, until he saw a vague thread connecting events. "Mr President," he said, "where does the C20 come into this?"

The President's expression slipped into uncertainty, but he recovered quickly. "I don't know, and I'd very much like to because there's a call for your immediate dismissal and a replacement NGC Command team sent from Earth—Spacedock having been compromised. My priority is to ensure the safe delivery of

Ambassador Jolley to Katyl space. There is also a call to incarcerate all C20s until their intentions and involvement in this ... situation is understood. And since they cannot be scanned or telecorded, that may take some time."

"Mr President, who made these recommendations?"

"Senator Matheson has called for a full investigation, and he has some extremely powerful supporters."

Falcon nodded sagely. "Including you, sir?"

Norman visibly deflated. "Dammit, Falcon, surely you see how your actions appear? All the ark ships but *Freyr* have been sealed by their C20s in an apparently concerted move. Fear of the Katyl is causing widespread panic, we have a nanoplague circulating Earth, with ninety dead—"

"On Earth?" Falcon interrupted. Another ten deaths meant quarantine of the affected cities, possibly the entire planet.

"From a generic, not DNA-encoded nanovirus." Norman ran a hand across his face.

That meant anyone could catch it. It explained the President's uncharacteristic burst of anger, and some, but not all of the paranoia. "Mr President, opportunistic individuals will move to use the current power vacuum in NGC for their own agendas, including attempts to prevent *Asegeir* from reaching Katyl space. Perhaps such individuals should be investigated, parliamentary privilege notwithstanding.

"What in the name of the Origins are you talking about? No one wants to antagonize the Katyl!"

"Then why the actions to delay our departure?"

"Are you accusing members of Earthgov to be involved in some sort of ... conspiracy?" Norman demanded.

"Senator Matheson demanded we delay the departure of *Asegeir*, then threatened my bridge crew when I refused. Now he's using his status to influence parliament."

"Your actions speak for themselves! Illegal telepathic scanning, particularly of politicians—"

"No objecting civilian—including councillors—has been subjected to a scan."

"But I was informed..." Norman's eyebrows furrowed. "Never mind, go on," he added in a flat voice.

"I would respectfully suggest, sir, that you are not in receipt of all the facts. Most councillors *volunteered* to be scanned. I expected a quorum early this morning, but with the security risk posed since our discovery of nanites in Captain Laycock's biomatter, all our telepaths are busy scanning senior crew and envirotechs. I expect the council will have a quorum and resume full authority under the Civilian Charter in around eight hours. Of course, it will then be legally impossible to scan objecting civilians, including councillors, thus ending any investigative possibilities *Asegeir* might have in assisting Earth and Spacedock investigations into *your* problems.

"Further," Falcon added in a deferential voice. "I suspect the civilian council will view any attempt to send a ship from a planet infected with a nanoplague to an uncontaminated *Asegeir* as irresponsible at best."

"Not if we send it before implementing quarantine," Norman snapped.

"Then you must inform the civilian council and population of this *autonomous* ark ship, of *your* decision to endanger them by circumventing the Nano Act. Sir."

Norman had the grace to look abashed.

"As to the murder and conspiracy investigation on Earth and Spacedock, and the detention of civilians unwilling to be scanned, we will be sending these civilians to Earth when a short-jump Dim5 window opens in nineteen hours."

Norman stared at him for several seconds. "All right, Falcon," he warned. "You have twelve hours to reinstate your council."

The connection was broken. Phelan waited until Marcus left before saying, "Shit." He ran a hand across the back of his neck.

Falcon shook his head knowingly. "Norman had to play Devil's Advocate.

"And you played all the right cards. It'll take him twelve hours to convene the emergency session of Earthgov. Meanwhile Matheson can call in a lot of favours. For a moment there I wondered if we'd entered a time warp and were back on Arisa Station with Admiral Thornton." Phelan stood and straightened his jacket. "Did you know that Matheson was Admiral Thornton's brother-in-law?"

Nodding stiffly, Falcon replied, "Too many ugly things are falling into place, Stuart."

"You think it was wise telling Norman what's in the pipeline here?"

"He needed something to muzzle Matheson until the emergency session convenes. Once the Nano Act is invoked on Earth, even if they find a decent Dim5 window to reach us anytime soon, they can't legally send a replacement team to take over *Asegeir*. But they *can* legally scan Patricia Jolley and her cohorts."

"Public opinion is notoriously fickle, Chris. Last time you tried pulling a stunt like this, you won. I wouldn't be so sure this time."

"Won?" Falcon replied bleakly.

Phelan stopped at the door and turned to face him. "A chance for humanity. If you'd lost, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

Falcon closed his eyes and breathed deeply. Something had come over him during the meeting, an awareness more tangible than instinct. "Norman's crafty. And he's got just as much of a rope fetish as our C20."

"Something all three of you have in common."

"We have twelve hours. It'll take Mixis three hours to run a telecording on me. Thank the Origins she's under oath, because once she sees what's lurking in my mind, she won't be getting a whole lot of sleep."

Phelan stared at him. "Good thing Norman doesn't know about your ability to block scans. How are you gonna fool Mixis?"

"Block scans?" A sour taste filled Falcon's mouth, but he chuckled. "What makes you think I can do that?"

"C'mon buddy, we've been through too much together."

Falcon saw the knowledge in his friend's eyes, felt his absolute trust—and the pain the suspicion was causing him.

"No, no one else knows," Phelan added. "Except maybe telepaths who've tried a casual scan on you. They'd be the last to admit it, unless they're on Matheson's payroll—which is a possibility I wouldn't discount. And don't give me some lame explanation that a telepath taught you to block casual scans. I'm betting that wildcat talent of yours is why Vicory and Hastings turned off the security recording systems before sending you out to die on *Cassandra*."

"How did know about that?" Falcon growled.

Phelan snorted. "I wouldn't be much of a security chief if I didn't. I did a little checking while you were in the amniotank, retraced your movements via security tapes just before you headed out. Seemed kinda strange to me that two admirals disabled their security systems just as you stepped into their office, then rebooted them again the moment you left. Now why would they do that, I asked myself, unless they could blackmail you?"

Falcon continued to stare at the security chief. Stuart had been watching his butt all this time. Was he fishing, or did he really know?

"I was also on Katyl, remember?" Phelan added softly. "NGC put me in charge of guarding Kal and Temsit because I understood Katyl. Figured I'd be a good spy."

"And were you?" Falcon asked. Stuart could have; *should* have reported his suspicions years ago.

"Yeah, yeah, I learned a lot, you know that. Don't seem to recall passing it all on to the brass, though. Never was one for telling them what wasn't good for them. The only thing I've always wondered was how come you've gotten away with it all these years."

Falcon hesitated only a moment before replying, "I can allow myself to be scanned and telecorded just like anyone else."

Phelan's face cleared; he was visibly relieved. "Thanks for being straight with me. But by definition that means you can hide things even deep, broad scans would never pick up. That makes you a wildcat telepath; you should never have been promoted to command rank."

"Do you want the C20 to monitor my scan?"

Meeting his eyes, Phelan nodded slowly. "Yes, sir, I would."

"Well, let's get going, Commander." Falcon slapped him on the back.

* * * *

"You what?" Avalon stared at the security chief.

"I'm just as happy for you to be there for mine, if that's what it takes," Phelan replied.

Mixis eyed him apprehensively. "May I ask what brought this on, Commander?"

"Just an added precaution, that's all." Phelan looked uncomfortable.

"Apparently," said Falcon, "Stuart has known about my ability for years."

Saav returned Phelan's glare, and they spoke simultaneously, "You knew?"

Avalon grinned. "You still want me to stay?"

Phelan turned to her. "You know, too, don't you?"

"We've had an eye on Chris for a very long time." Avalon went to the door. "I have a meeting to attend. Call me at the end, and I'll look again."

"Again?"

"C20s can see the structures in human minds that the Others use in order to infiltrate this dimension. Captain Falcon has natural blocks to prevent that. Mixis won't have an easy time of it, but she'll be able to see past them. Believe me, Commander, I'd know if he were hiding anything. Now," she took Phelan by the arm and led him outside. "Haven't you got better things to do than wait here? Or is Commander Saav's charm so overwhelming that, even immersed in a full scan, she's irresistible?"

Phelan stiffened in surprise. Saav chuckled and closed the door behind them.

Chapter 10

1100hrs December 06, 2499

"Don't let me interrupt," Avalon said when she entered the council meeting.

Twenty-eight civilian and science councillors stopped yelling and gesticulating at each other, and turned to stare at her.

"That's perfectly alright C20," said Andrea White. "I would like to stress that the error was mine alone. It should not undermine the operations of this council. I hope you will look upon my replacement with equanimity."

"I hope so, too," Avalon said. "Because both Captain Falcon and I want you to remain."

In the silence that followed, a solitary voice rumbled, "Very magnanimous of you."

Avalon turned around, and her face split into a wide grin. "You sly old dog. Who let you on board?" She opened her arms to a bear hug from one of the largest men she'd ever known. Angus Gordon, a civilian engineer, stood two and a half metres tall, had a massive, barrel chest, thick, grey hair and a greayer beard. "It has to be forty years. How are you? And why weren't you at the cocktail party last night?"

Gordon sat back down. The robust chair creaked beneath him. "A whole lot better now that you're here to talk sense into our love-struck chairwoman. And to answer your second question, having my brains sucked."

White was blushing in shame. Well, she wasn't the first to have been conned like that. "Dr White," Avalon said. "I could stand here all morning and repeat a whole bunch of things that this council has likely been telling you for the last eighteen hours. I loathe wasting time and resources, so I'm only going to say this once." She looked around the table before continuing. "You elected Andrea White for good reasons. Those reasons have not changed. Governor Jolley's deceit was far greater than drugging a lover to fraudulently acquire her thumb and retina image, and then convincing that same lover not to report her."

"C20, I appreciate the gesture," White replied. "But, as you know from my telecording, although I am ashamed of not reporting Governor Jolley's malfeasance, I have genuine reservations about Captain Falcon. My foolishness has undermined this council's credibility and thus its ability to voice concerns without appearing hostile to the Captain."

Exactly. A council muzzled by fear was ineffectual, even dangerous, for it would force Falcon into making uninformed decisions, which in turn could vindicate Jolley's accusations. Except for a bored-looking Selena Chaney, who was clearly disgusted with her peers, and Angus Gordon, who had more sense, Jolley's seeds of doubt had taken root. "From the way that many of you talked last night, I gather that most of you entertain similar reservations?"

After a protracted, and somewhat embarrassed silence, White replied, "Captain Falcon has done a number of ... questionable things, most of which have been censored, leaving those who lost family in the War to speculate. He even allowed the Katyl who ordered his wife and son butchered, to go free!"

"What Andrea's getting at," Gordon said, "is that we'd been promised an end to the War even if Falcon executed the Katyl responsible for the massacre. Why did he let them live unless he had a deeper motive? Go back further, to the beginning of the War, and a whole bunch of other questions remain unanswered. Why was Falcon's ship the only one left intact at the Battle of Degan? Why did he wait

seven months to leave Degan, when the blockade was lifted after only one month? He knew Vega shipyards would be attacked, so was he too cowardly to come to Vega's assistance—which fits in with his later actions in deserting Arisa Station? It's a documented fact that he broke out of Arisa's detention block, led a mutiny, hijacked the two Explorer ships and escaped just minutes before the Katyl arrived. Why were 5,000 on *Asegeir* sacrificed on the say so of its C20—you—to save Falcon's ship, *Warrior*? And why did he later risk four of our vessels to save a Katyl colony ship? Let's just forget that his actions saved humanity; Falcon had no way of knowing that at the time. Too many questions have been swept under the carpet by an apparently corrupt NGC whose leaders are now dying like flies. Feeling is, Falcon's either a loose cannon ready to spark another war, a gutless wonder, or secretly in league with the Katyl. Take your pick.” He shrugged. “Like any conspiracy theory it has more contradictions than wormhole physics.”

Discomfort permeated the room like a foul smell. Avalon wondered how she could have been such a fool. Age, she berated herself, does not always bring one wisdom. She knew the civilian population had never been told the entire story, and she'd picked up more hostility than expected during the cocktail party. But this! It wasn't far from the truth, just a little bent around the edges.

Well, a *lot* bent.

Not for the first time, she wondered by whom. “Thanks for filling me in, Gus. Do you believe any of that?”

“It doesn't matter what I believe, Avalon.” Angus Gordon glared at the others. “It only matters that, when powerful people have been led to *think* something is real and they act on it, the consequences can be disastrous.”

“Of course, even the most astute can err.” Avalon stared at White. “Perhaps it's time you had a history lesson. Most of this is classified, but I never understood why. I've pulled more prerogatives as a C20 in the past twenty-four hours than I did in the last hundred years, so I may as well add one more.

“AI, please note the DNA of everyone here and release to them all files cross-referencing Falcon, Christopher James; Woodstock, Calvin; and Thornton, Philemon Albert. Also, archives on *Warrior*, Degan and Vega colonies and Arisa Station, July 2486 to December 2488 inclusive. And declassify the findings regarding the loss of the previous *Asegeir* in November '88.”

She paused when a future memory came swiftly into focus. It vanished before she could grasp it. Still, it had left something in its wake so she added, “Time code permanent declassification for May 01, 2500 and send copies to *Asegeir* and Earth media. No matter what happens during our four months on Katylgar, it's time people knew what role Chris Falcon really played in the War.”

Avalon pulled up a chair, and motioned for those still standing to also sit. “Unless you can see where we've come from, you're armed with the wrong tools to safely lead this ark ship into the future.” She lifted the water carafe and filled a glass. “The historians and xenosociologists amongst you can release this data to your teams; it will assist in your research of the Katyl. However, you cannot release the resulting papers until May next year, when we leave the Katyl system. Is that acceptable?”

The looks on some of their faces were positively anticipatory. Was it because she was a C20, or because everyone loves a mystery unravelled? Perhaps a little of both. She sipped the water, and began.

* * * *

In Command medops, Falcon accepted the telecording helmet from Saav. “The C20 said this—whatever the hell it is—goes back to the Katyl War.” He donned the cap and lay on the reclining chair. “Back to the day I was to be officially promoted.”

Mixis sat in her adjoining chair. "The same day the Katyl attacked Degan colony."

He snorted. "It wasn't an attack. It was a rout."

Mixis began the telecording machine and closed her eyes.—Then that's where we'll begin.—

* * * *

Warrior, July 2486

"Commander Falcon, Lieutenant Commander Falcon!"

Falcon lifted his hand to rub the grit from his eyes. He had splitting headache. Overhead, lights flickered at just the right frequency to turn it into a howling migraine. The pain in his skull wasn't improved when he slammed his forehead with a plaster cast. "What the..?" he groaned.

"Take it easy, sir," said a medtech. "Your arm is fractured, and you have a mild concussion."

Stared at the bloody-faced tech, comprehension hit Falcon like a sledgehammer. "How long have we been under attack?" He sat up. "I have to get to my fighter!"

The medtech's voice fractured. "It's all over, sir. The Katyl have gone."

"What do you mean?" Ignoring the pain, Falcon stood and looked around. They were in the amniotank room of *Warrior's* Command medbay. The tanks were blown, which explained the cast on his arm. Bodies, and more tellingly, blood and body parts, lay scattered amongst upturned equipment, smashed medipad consols and injured men and woman. Somewhere an electrical outlet hissed with a static fizz. "Where's your commanding officer?" His shoes crunched over broken diaglass and fragments of diagnostic instruments. Busted arm or no, he could still pilot a fighter.

A half dozen listless, shell-shocked faces stared at him, but only the medtech replied. "You're the only officer we've found alive, sir."

Disbelieving, Falcon stared at him. "The bridge?"

"Gone," whispered the tech. His face crumpled and tears glistened in his eyes. "All gone."

Four weeks earlier, Falcon had been sitting with Lee Walker, *Jord's* chief engineer, in a bar on Arisa Station. Armed with bottomless flasks of alien booze, they'd been exploring the equally bottomless world of inter-dimensional physics when the news broke. The Katylgar had blockaded Earth with a Dim5 disruptor, and warned Degan colony that they would be attacked in one month.

The commandant of Vega shipyards, Admiral Woodstock, had immediately ordered all NGC vessels to the shipyards, to be fitted with armaments. Falcon and Walker were out of the bar and running for their ship when Admiral Thornton, the commandant of Arisa Station and the only other admiral outside the blockade, ordered all outlying ships to Arisa *not* Vega.

Minutes later, with Falcon and Walker on board, *Jord* had detached from Arisa Station and jumped to Dim5. Her C20, Jenna Hayden, had sent a ship-wide message explaining why. "Admiral Thornton believes that a Katyl attack on Arisa Station is imminent. Thornton's belief is based on the assumption that the Katyl wage war for the same reasons, and using the same strategies, as humans. I was in the First Katyl War. Thornton is wrong. We must defend Degan, because the Katyl will send in *everything* they have and tear the colony to shreds. In the manner of their warcodes, they have given us one month to prepare. We must use that month wisely."

Once it was learned that a C20 ship had left Arisa Station for the Vega shipyards, most of the fleet vessels followed. Three weeks later, Admiral Woodstock dispatched one hundred and twenty fully armed ships to Degan. On the eve of their departure, Falcon was transferred from *Jord*, which was still undergoing a refit, to one of the departing vessels, *Warrior*, where his younger brother, Joshua, was stationed. Falcon was also promoted from lieutenant, to lieutenant commander.

Woodstock had planned on using the next Dim5 window, three days later, to send the remainder of the fleet to Degan. They never made it. The Katyl blockaded the Degan system a day earlier than expected. Then a fleet of almost a thousand Katyl vessels attacked.

Falcon had been in medbay at the time, undergoing a full medical and telescan—a condition of his promotion. He'd been knocked unconscious in the first seconds of the attack, and missed the entire battle.

Leaving medbay for the secondary bridge, Falcon asked the AI, "What's our status?"

"Space and Dim5 engines offline, life support minimal. I have located thirty-two life signs. Life support will therefore be sufficient until I can effect self-repairs.

Thirty-two? Warrior's normal complement was two hundred and seventy! Falcon turned the corner into the bridge. "What's the status of the fleet?"

A petite, curly-haired woman wearing a torn shipsuit and determined expression glanced up from the main consol. "Lieutenant Linda Williams, sir. No carrier ships except *Warrior* survived." She swiped at a gash in her forehead.

"*What?*" Falcon's blood froze. The horrible truth stared at him through the LD. Littered in orbit around Degan were the fragments of broken ships, their contents vomited into space. Gleaming brightly in the sun, they looked like discarded pieces of tinsel. He gazed out through the LD, unable to fully process the extent of the devastation. "Shuttles? Lifepods? Fighters?" His voice sounded tight and desperate, even in his own ears.

"Thirty-four surviving fighters are ferrying lifepods to atmospheric shuttles," replied the AI.

He clamped down on his emotions, and focused on the fighters. Without carrier ships, they were orphaned in space. Once they ran out of air, they were dead. "What's the status of our fighter bays?"

"Gravity in the inner bays is not functioning. Both inner and outer bays are full of debris, but otherwise viable," replied Williams.

Falcon shot her a look of approval; she'd been thinking the same thing. The AI also registered five life-signs in the bays, so he immediately ordered every able-bodied crewman to forego all other rescues, recover the injured from the fighter bays, and get the bays operational. But it was soon apparent that without proper equipment to remove the debris, rescuing the injured would be impossible.

"I can turn gravity on," Williams suggested. "The crews' biopacks will keep them suspended while debris falls to the deck."

"Can you turn gravity off again?"

Williams shook her head. "Nuh, uh. The systems are damaged."

"Fighters can't manoeuvre in gravity. They'll crash the moment they pass through the magnetic field doors separating the docking bays from space." He suddenly grabbed the edge of the consol, and moaned.

“Oh.... God.”

“Sir?” Williams looked at him in alarm.

“There is one way,” he whispered hoarsely.

At the academy, they had taught him that one day he might be obliged to face appalling moral dilemmas. But this was not some academic exercise! Falcon closed his eyes and clinically examined the options. Outside, fighters running short of air were lining up to enter, while inside, five trapped crewmen were hours from rescue. Tactically and morally, he had only one choice. He turned to Williams. “I’ll manually open the gravity field doors.”

Beneath the blood and filth on her face, Williams paled. The fighter bays would retain micro-gravity while air and debris—and the injured crewmen—were sucked out. She swallowed and nodded stiffly. “You’ll need help, sir, with that busted arm.”

He shook his head. He’d passed a death sentence on the crewmen and the burden was his alone. What made it all the more horrific was that one of those he was about to space was his brother.

Twenty minutes later, the first fighter into the bay more or less crash-landed. By the time the service crew reached it, the pilot was irretrievably dead but his co-pilot could be resuscitated. Two more fighters were lost due to failed life-support systems; they’d used up the last of their reserves towing lifepods to shuttles. Ultimately, thirty-one fighters and sixty lives were saved at the expense of the five who had been flushed from the bays.

On the planet below, the survivors were having their own problems. Thinking the Katyl were invading them, Degan colonists fired on the arriving shuttles. They killed five people, including the chief commander piloting one of the shuttles. After sorting out that mess, Falcon ordered the refuelled fighters to search for the crew he’d ejected, and to further check every piece of wreckage in space for other survivors. Although they rounded up another two-dozen pods and almost fifty people, they never found the crewmen, nor did they find anyone above the rank of lieutenant. Chris Falcon was the only senior officer left alive in the entire battle group. He turned thirty-three years old that day.

Chapter 11

1300hrs December 06, 2499

In the council chamber, Avalon paused for a drink. "Looking back," she said. "It's a moot point whether a larger defensive fleet at Degan would have made any difference, because the Katyl vastly outnumbered and outgunned everything we had.

"We now know that the Katyl wage war with inflexible rules of engagement. First they choose a target race and use Dim5 disrupters to blockade their primary system. Next they pick a relatively defenceless, strategically unimportant outpost or colony and warn its people to prepare to die. Chances are good that someone like Admiral Thornton decides it's a red herring, and what remains of any defensive fleet is split. Then they come riding in, shoot the hell out of everything, climb back in their ships and leave.

"It's not about territory, it's about machismo. The Katyl don't have the resources or desire to fight a long, dirty ground operation to conquer a planet, and they sure don't want to enslave a hostile race. But they're sloppy. They leave a Dim5 block in place for a month, which generally ensures that a shot-up colony expires before help arrives. After that, they take no further interest in it, assuming it's either dead or as good as.

"While Admiral Woodstock was desperately trying to find a way past the blockade into Degan space, a Katyl courier ship delivered a data disc to Vega shipyards, detailing the devastation of Degan and warning Vega it would be next. Woodstock had no choice but to return to abandon his attempts to reach Degan, and return to Vega to defend the shipyards.

"According to their gaming rules—and again, this is something we only learned later—before attacking their next target, the Katyl must observe a period of mourning equivalent of one hundred and eighty two Earth days to commemorate comrades lost during the last shootout. Six months after the attack on Degan, through Falcon's organizational abilities and sheer force of personality, the Degan colony had pulled itself together and centralized its resources. Scavenging parts from the destroyed ships, *Warrior's* damaged sections were re-grown and, except for her dim5 engines, she was fully operational. Under Falcon's command were the two hundred and fifty NGC personnel who had survived the Battle of Degan.

"Falcon had also spent those months digging through wrecked Katyl ships and scouring NGC computer archives on the First Katyl War in 2285. Back then, the Katyl didn't have Dim5 disrupters. Although their blockade methods differed, after analyzing their attack on Degan, Falcon concluded their strategies had remained unchanged. He then dedicated himself to understanding Katyl tactics and language. He learned all that I've just told you and reasoned that the Vega shipyards would be their next target. Assuming the Katyl would sustain casualties during the forthcoming attack on Vega, Arisa Station would be targeted six months after that.

"It took another three weeks before *Warrior's* Dim5 engines were repaired. When the engines came online immediately, Falcon knew he had been right; the Dim 5 disruptors around Degan had been lifted. I assume you all understand that Dim5 engines are not only used to travel, but for real-time communications?"

When the council members nodded, Avalon continued, "The first thing Falcon did was call Woodstock. When he failed to get through, he sent out a wider call, informing anyone who could hear him of *Warrior* and Degan's status. He wasn't worried about the Katyl hearing him; they have no use for radios because they're telepathic. Distant ark ships replied that the Vega shipyards had gone incommunicado three

weeks earlier. Falcon knew why, and he knew that Vega would be accessible in one week—although he dreaded what they would find.

"Admiral Thornton also heard *Warrior*. He ordered Falcon to bring the ship to Arisa Station, where a qualified captain would take command and assist in the station's defence. Falcon, however, was adamant the *Katyl* would not attack Arisa for five months and one week. In fact, he told Thornton the exact time and date. Meanwhile, those who had survived the attack on the Vega shipyards would need all the help they could get.

"Thornton was incensed, but Falcon disobeyed him, took a seven-day Dim5 window to Vega shipyards—and got through.

"Of the fifty two carrier vessels, C20 ships and the huge construction yards at Vega, only two—albeit badly damaged—Explorer class ships survived. For Falcon and the crew of *Warrior*, it was an agonizing déjà vu.

"Fortuitously, one of the survivors was Admiral Woodstock. Once Woodstock learned what Lieutenant Commander Falcon had achieved at Degan, he officially promoted Falcon to full captain and confirmed Falcon's temporary promotions amongst his heroic crew.

"Leapfrogging three ranks is not something done every day, especially as Falcon had only been promoted to junior command rank the morning of the Battle of Degan, and had not participated in the actual fighting. I've heard some dismiss Falcon's appointment as a 'battlefield promotion by proxy'—as if they comprehended what 'battlefield' actually means—but there is no question that Falcon and his crew deserved it.

"Admiral Woodstock listened to everything Falcon had learned about the enemy, and initiated a three-part plan. Knowing that the *Katyl* never returned to devastated systems once they destroyed them, Woodstock set up Degan colony as a base. Then he proposed Admiral Thornton evacuate Arisa's personnel to Degan, gut the station of anything useable and booby-trap it with tactical nukes. Thornton refused. And that's when things turned ugly."

* * * *

In medbay, Mixis paused the telecording; Falcon's mind was almost overwhelming hers. In places it reached beyond normal dimensions, and, unlike most people undergoing tele-scans, it was he, not her, who maintained the necessary rigid control.

—You went to Arisa with the C20, Jenna Hayden,—said Mixis.—To talk sense into Admiral Thornton.—Yeah,—Falcon replied.—With *Jord* destroyed at Vega, Jenna was no longer bonded to a ship. We took the surviving Explorer ships to Arisa in order to evacuate the station.—

His memories focused, and Mixis saw.

* * * *

Arisa Station, May 2487

The moment they set foot on Arisa, Thornton charged Falcon and Jenna Hayden with treason, desertion and piracy, and had them locked in the detention block. The Admiral then commandeered the Explorer ships, intent on using them to lure the *Katyl* away from the station.

During the frogmarch to the detention block, Jenna turned to Falcon and muttered, "Your supposed to say, 'Now look at the fine mess you've gotten us into!'"

"Laurel and Hardy." He snorted. "Isn't that a little clichéd for a C20?"

Jenna cocked her eyebrow. "I was right about you."

Inside their cell, Falcon sat beside Jenna on the single, less than salubrious cot, and mused, "When I was transferred off *Jord*, I figured that was the end of my career."

"Why, because you can block a telepathic scan?"

He shot her a sharp look. "Promotion or not, transfers off C20 ships tend to have a chilling effect on one's career." Then he smiled bitterly. "So do charges of treason and conspiracy."

Her eyes turned knowing. "Thornton hates me because he fears that which he does not understand. You, however, are very different. Thornton hates you because you were right about the Katyl, although at the time of your transfer I didn't know that."

"By the Origins! *You* ordered my promotion?"

"No." She shook her head. Her soft curls glistened in the light. "Captain Wallace did, at my suggestion." Falcon went to speak but she added, "That's not an apology, Chris. Nor was it a mistake." She pulled her knees to her chest and hugged them with slender fingers. The gesture made her appear younger. "The evening before your transfer from *Jord* to *Warrior*, I had a future memory. Three paths, two outcomes. The first, you were promoted and humankind became extinct by the end of the century. The second, you were transferred, but again, humanity was annihilated. The third, you were transferred to *Warrior* and promoted, and humanity lived."

Falcon's eyes rounded, and he stared at her.

"Now you are beginning to understand. I can't tell you anything beyond that, because I saw nothing more. And I will have no more future memories now that *Jord* is gone..." Her voice trailed off in misery.

"The promotion wasn't because I deserved it, but to save my life?"

"Your achievements since then have justified every one of your promotions."

Jenna stood from the dilapidated excuse for a bed and paced the tiny cell. The walls had once been a cheerful pus colour. Graffiti, neglect and a variety of bodily fluids had added a grubby patina. "As to the future of mankind, who knows? Perhaps you needed to live only long enough to save the lives of those fighter pilots, one of whose future children will be pivotal to humanity. Don't allow prophecy to influence you, Chris." Her eyes were wise and knowing. "Trust your instincts, wherever they may lead." Before she could add anything, Admiral Thornton arrived.

When Arisa's population had discovered that Thornton's plans for the Explorer ships would rob them of their one chance to escape, they'd promptly panicked. The only way Thornton had been able to maintain control was to declare Martial Law and invoke the death penalty for treasonable offences. He intended making immediate examples of Jenna Hayden and Christopher Falcon.

"Let's see that C20 mumbo-jumbo work now!" Thornton declared arrogantly as he strode to their cell. "If you had not forced the Captain of *Jord* to desert his post, we could have destroyed the Katyl months ago and *Jord* would still be in one piece!"

Jenna stiffened, but she said nothing. Then Thornton turned to Falcon. "As for you, you cowardly, snivelling little pup. You didn't lift a finger in the defence of Degan! I ordered you to bring *Warrior* here and instead—"

"Instead," Jenna interrupted, "he's worked out a brilliant strategy to save your sorry ass! Your plan to use the Explorer ships as decoys sucks, Thornton. Kill yourself by all means, but let the civilian population take one ship to Degan."

The lieutenant commander with Thornton, Stuart Phelan, had only recently been transferred to the detention block. His nose wrinkling in disgust at the state of the cell, he said to Thornton, "Sir? With respect, you can't pass sentence without a court-martial."

Eyes popping indignantly, Thornton turned on Phelan and spat, "Unless you wish to accompany the prisoners on their little walk outside the station, Lieutenant Commander, you will carry out their sentence immediately! I have more important things to attend."

Phelan looked like he was about to refuse, but Jenna snarled, "Yeah, yeah, places to go, people to see, lives to screw up. Stop blabbering, Thornton, and get on with it!"

Falcon stared at her, but on the walk from their cell to the airlock, she winked at him and whispered, "Trust me."

Trust me? They were about to be spaced!

Just before the airlock opened, Jenna said, "Hang on tight, this will be a rough ride!" She threw herself into his arms, wrapped her arms and legs around him and kissed him. The two of them were instantly blown out into space.

Because they both wore full body shipsuits, death would have been from suffocation rather than decompression. Falcon had later learned from Phelan that none of the crew had had the stomach to watch their blood ooze from their faces and their eyeballs pop and freeze while they sucked vacuum. Thornton, however, had smiled in anticipation and ordered their images displayed throughout the entire station. A lesson, he'd said, for all potential troublemakers. When the Command centre had failed to locate Falcon and Jenna, Thornton had left the detention block in a fit of rage, and stormed up there to look for himself.

Meanwhile, dishevelled but very much alive, Falcon and Jenna were d-jumped back inside their cell.

"By the Origins!" cried Phelan, torn between horror and relief. "I just spaced a C20!"

"So what are you waiting for?" Falcon demanded.

Phelan ordered the dumbfounded security detail to disengage the plasma shield lock on the cell. Holding a C20 against her will was about as treasonable as it got. "How long before the Katyl attack?"

"Five hours," replied Falcon, running out.

"Less than that to evacuate everyone and make the Dim5 jump to Degan," added Jenna. "We could use a little help, Lieutenant."

Phelan immediately left with a platoon to arrest Thornton, but the Admiral had locked himself and most of the remaining NGC crew in the station's Command centre. With Phelan overriding the external air locks, Falcon and Jenna evacuated Arisa's civilian population to the waiting ships. Falcon also 'forgot' to lock down Arisa's Dim5 capable fighters and Alpha class ships. As he hoped, Thornton then used the same Dim5 window to send those ships in pursuit of the escaping Explorer ships. Minutes after the pursuit vessels left, Dim5 contact with Arisa Station was lost.

When the refugee ships and their erstwhile pursuers arrived at Degan, Woodstock showed them the

grisly message from the Feldan colony. It had taken the Katyl all of thirty seconds to blow Arisa apart and wipe out the three Alpha class ships that had remained behind. The Katyl were so sure of Arisa's annihilation that they hadn't bothered to leave a Dim5 disrupter in place. A reconnaissance mission later confirmed that no life forms had survived and very little wreckage remained, although the station records, including Thornton's personal log, were recovered. If Thornton's fleet had been intact, even with the Explorer ships as decoys, the fight might have lasted another few seconds, but its result had always been a foregone conclusion. Still, one good thing came out of it. Falcon had set booby-traps before he left—homing nukes, which took out a Katyl battle cruiser. That gave them six months of Katyl mourning before the promised attack on Feldan.

Now it was time to fight back. Woodstock and Falcon devised the simple strategy of hitting the Katyl in their blind spot. Over the next five months, they entered the Katyl system at random times and destroyed war cruisers before a retaliatory shot was fired, then they got out. They avoided civilian targets, concentrating their efforts on the bigger battle cruisers and supply stations.

Back on Earth, a young physicist named Selena Chaney had found that every three or four weeks, gaps occurred in the coverage of the Dim5 disruptor. Through those gaps—later called Chaney Holes—messages were sent to and from Earth, and ships would sneak out and join Woodstock's raiders.

One of the greatest mysteries of the War, and one that most certainly contributed to the debate over Falcon's actions, was how he managed to lead these raids into the Katyl system when the Katyl should have protected themselves by installing Dim5 disrupters—which have no effect on Katyl Dim5 engines. The reason was straightforward, and something that Falcon depended on. The Katyl are not human and they don't strategize like humans. Simply put, they didn't think of it.

The Katyl were obliged to go into mourning after each of Falcon's hit-and-run forays, so they kept postponing their attack on Feldan. Then something very odd happened.

Having earlier escaped the Solar system through a Chaney Hole, the battleclass C20 ship *Asegeir* went into Katyl space on one of these hit-and-run forays. The plan was for the Alpha class ships, *Warrior* and *Blackhawk*, to take out Katyl fighters while *Asegeir* destroyed the main enemy battleship. But because of engine problems, *Asegeir* was a doomed ship. Before she blew up, most of her crew escaped in Dim5 capable shuttles and fighters, while *Warrior* and *Blackhawk* grabbed the lifepods. However, they inadvertently missed a pod with a broken distress beacon.

The Katyl never took prisoners because they had no interest in understanding their adversaries. But being telepathic, they had no trouble picking up the distressed mind-cries of those inside of *Asegeir's* marooned pod. They also picked up something else.

Two weeks later, the Katyl warned Earth it was about to be attacked—in three-hours. Instead of blowing everything to bits in their usual fashion, when the Katyl arrived, they abducted the families of the officers aboard Woodstock's raiders, packed them into a ship and sent it on a trajectory into the sun. Two Katyl battle cruisers accompanied the unshielded ship until the last moments. In their culture, it was a mark of respect for valiant warriors.

Meanwhile, Falcon had taken *Warrior* on a sortie into Katyl space, where intelligence had said they would confront a single battle cruiser. Their mission was to sting the cruiser, then get out. Just as the Katyl battle cruiser came into range, Falcon received the news about his wife and son. For precious seconds his vision greyed into the depthless void of Dim5. When Linda Williams, his chief commander, saw his expression, she froze. Then she read the message. Her mother and baby sister also were listed amongst the dead.

Warrior attacked the battle cruiser with the ferocity that only grief can ignite. Yet Falcon's pain did not blind him. He developed an attack pattern that was sheer genius, and it paid off. For the first and only time in the War, a tiny, Alpha class ship had single-handedly taken out a heavily armed battle cruiser. However, *Warrior's* weapons failed to destroy the armoured cargo ship it was towing.

Falcon boarded the cargo ship, intent on salvaging what he could before blowing her up. But when his men opened the hatch, he was faced with hundreds of terrified Katyl females and children.

Mixis jerked. The memory of Falcon's loss was a familiar emotion, one she'd often dealt with when telecording someone. However, for one brief moment in time, she'd glimpsed the awesome depth of his unconscious power. The memory of Falcon's loss was pivotal, not just for the survival of humankind, but also for something far greater, something as yet unrealised.

The path collapsed, and her connection to Falcon's mind faded. On the way out, she saw the suspicions that lurked in his conscious. If he was right, they were, as Stuart was fond of saying, in deep doo doo.

* * * *

In the council chamber, Avalon took a deep breath and looked around the room. No one blinked, no one moved. Each face reflected surprise, sadness and growing comprehension.

"There's a lot been written about the War and exactly what point it was really over," said Avalon. "In my opinion it ended the moment Falcon set foot on that workers' ship. Wars are horrific things, inciting normally sane men and women to acts of abomination that only the Others could have devised. I know that a lot of people wanted to tow that ship into the nearest star. It would have repaid the Katyl for their attack on Earth civilians, and forced them into mourning for a year or more. Even today, some historians argue that it might have enabled Earth and NGC to regroup and develop a better offensive strategy. Especially as Professor Chaney here," Avalon smiled at the astronomer, "was close to learning how the Dim5 disruptor worked. But remember, only the males in Katyl society fight. The genetically less intelligent females are mated to them in an almost slave-like existence. While human families would have fought tooth and nail, as they had on Earth, the Katyl that Falcon found in the ship were relatively doltish females and young. If they had shown any will to fight, any aggression whatsoever, it might have been a different story, for although Falcon had just learned the fate of his wife and son, he had also thoroughly examined Katyl psychology and warcodes. So, he towed the ship to the primary Katyl planet, Katylgar.

"Falcon's actions were so far outside their warcode that the Katyl were stunned into immobility. After a week's deliberation, Kal, the warleader, and Temsit, the Captain of the cruiser that had attacked Earth, presented themselves to Falcon. The horrible irony that Kal and Temsit had mates and offspring inside the vessel he had spared was not lost on Falcon. As an act of contrition, Kal and Temsit had planned to sacrifice themselves by taking a ship into their sun. Instead, Falcon asked for a boon, an acceptable request under their warcode.

"This is where history gets muddied. You heard that the Katyl agreed on an eleven-year ceasefire because Falcon had spared their women and children. You also heard that the ceasefire was independent of the decision to execute Kal and Temsit. It's becoming frighteningly clear to me why this myth was propagated. Earth was not offered a ceasefire until *after* Falcon asked for the boon. Specifically, that instead of sacrificing themselves, Kal and Temsit should study human warcodes and attempt to integrate such codes into their present system. Falcon's point, you see, was to prevent the Katyl from waging such bloody actions upon a civilian population, human or any other species, ever again. And if you're wondering why he didn't try to get them to forego war altogether, forget it—that's totally outside their cultural imperative.

"Impressed by Falcon's understanding of Katyl warcodes, the clan chief sat down with him, and they

hashed out the details. Eleven years from the date of their meeting, humans would come to Katylgar in the newly built ark ship—which the Katyl knew was on the drawing boards from their telepathic mind-raid of *Asegeir's* lifepod escapees. Humans would teach the Katyl nanotechnology and amniotank healing. In exchange, Earth would send their xenosociologists and xenobiologists to learn of Katyl ways. Additionally, if we left an ambassador on Katyl, they would send an operational but inactive Dim5 disrupter and details of their own Dim5 engines to Earth. Now, that's the sort of technology that could be mighty handy if we ever come across a really obnoxious species, say, a race like twenty-first century humans.

"Being the pedantic beasts that they are, they added a codicil: should we either enter Katyl space prior to December 19, 2499, or fail to arrive at that date, they'll blockade Earth and reopen hostilities.

"I know many here think such precise requirements are ridiculous. You're wrong. Dead wrong. The Katyl are not human. They do not think like humans, and if you anthropomorphize them, as Admiral Thornton did, you do so at great peril. They could have taken *Warrior* and reverse-engineered everything on board. But they adhere to a code of conduct that views theft—including theft of technology—as an abomination. Kill an enemy, no problem, but steal from him? Nuh uh, that would be dishonourable.

"As for Falcon's bravery and diplomacy, or lack of it—well, you decide. But consider this: after decades of observation, three or four C20s might recommend potential C20 captains to NGC. Falcon is the first person in history that every living C20 and eighteen Metas personally *insisted* be appointed to command a C20 ark ship.

"Falcon doesn't want a hostile council, but he doesn't want a bunch of nervous butt-watchers who won't tell him when he's on the wrong track, either. Like everyone in this room, he wants what's best for this ark ship and humanity. He has proven his willingness to put aside personal revenge and petty bloody-mindedness in order to do that. The question is, are you?"

Angus Gordon leaned back in his chair. The sound of his rustling clothes was unreasonably loud in the awkward silence. Moments later, the AI said, "C20, Commander Phelan wishes to inform you that they are almost through."

"On my way." Avalon left without a backward glance.

Chapter 12

1500hrs, December 06 2499

"C20, thanks for coming." Phelan met Avalon's gaze, and mentally shook himself. He and Jenna Hayden had taken comfort in one another's arms during the worst moments of the Katyl War. They had never fallen in love—at least that's what he told himself. He knew he'd been knocked over by her childlike beauty and ageless wisdom, but he'd always known such a woman was never for him. Now, years later, he was a senior commander and C20s were off-limits.

Phelan had his own theories about that. The times he'd made love with Jenna, he'd felt the edges of an awesome power; just a tiny squeeze and he'd known he'd be snuffed out. But on those nights when the Katyl had also been trying to snuff them out, he'd figured if he was gonna go, better it be in the arms of a very special lady.

More than a decade later, as he watched another C20 do whatever it was to get inside the skipper's head, he felt a whisper of that incomprehensible power. Then it was gone, and Avalon was smiling.

Mixis shakily pulled the telecording helmet from her head. Jason took the lightweight frame from his mother and dropped it into the sterilizer. Mixis' normally spiky dark hair was lank against her damp brow. On the couch, Falcon removed his headpiece and sat up.

"Tough one, huh?" Phelan shoved his hands in his pockets to hide his anxiety.

"He's fine, but we both had trouble keeping his natural barriers from shutting me out." Mixis grabbed a towel and wiped her face. "I'm going to need a few hours rest and a decent meal before I can run a full scan on you, Stuart."

Avalon touched Phelan's shoulder reassuringly. "It hurts them both to build artificial structures to overcome his natural barriers," she explained. "But the Captain sustained Mixis quite well."

"He sustained *her*?" Phelan's eyebrows lifted in surprise; that was a new twist.

"He's pretty tough, our skipper. Let's hope you shape up as well." Avalon's lips twitched in amusement.

Phelan tried to smile, but it turned into a grimace. He felt a whole lot better knowing Falcon was in the clear, but there was no way he could hide his feelings for Saav. He'd barely managed during the spot scan earlier that morning. Not that she couldn't have picked them up if she'd wanted, but he'd maintained a professional friendship, hoping something might develop naturally.

Accepting a towel, Falcon rubbed the sweat from his face, then he looked at Phelan with a quirky grin. "What's hit the fan in the last three hours?"

Phelan snorted. The skipper always hit the deck running. "Nothing much. Telepaths are running scans thick and fast, but nothing's shown up in anyone, including the techs. No unknown nanos have turned up, either."

"I expected as much. Anyone with something to hide was going to object like hell to a scan. The media?"

"You and the C20 are turning into goddamned heroes, especially as half the techs are already back on the job and spreading the news about the nanovirus." Phelan pulling his hands from his pockets and crossed his arms. "Thousands of calls are coming in from people asking what medops they should report

to for testing. The PR gals have worked it so well that everyone's keen to prove they didn't buy their way into immigration."

Falcon stood and touched the tab on the neck of his shipsuit. The seam separated and he ran his finger down the front, opening it. He rubbed the towel across his chest. "I stink and I need a shower." He glanced at the C20 and his eyes shone in gratitude. "Thank you," he mouthed softly.

Avalon had long learned to dissemble. Deep in thought, awed by what she had just witnessed, the way Falcon had unconsciously tapped into the life-force, she watched him leave with Phelan.

"I need a bath," said Mixis.

Jason was removing the telecorders from their sterilizers. At Mixis' words, his back stiffened. Mixis could hide her thoughts from her son, but she could not hide her troubled aura.

"Why don't you get some rest, first?" Avalon said.

"I can transcribe this in the bath. Shouldn't take long for what Earthgov needs, but I'm going to do it in my quarters." Mixis pursed her lips. "John Laycock was good, Avalon, the best I've ever known. But Chris Falcon is orders of magnitude beyond that. If he's right, and I have a bad feeling that he is..." She trailed off, shook her head, and left.

"Thanks, Avvy."

Avalon turned around and smiled at Jason. "For what?"

"I dunno. Just for being here, I guess. Things don't seem to be quite so bad when you're around."

"That's the way I felt about your great-grandmother. Here..." she held her hand out for one of the headsets. "I'll give you another session."

Jason's eyes lit with anticipation. "Aren't you too tired?"

"Things are coming to a head, and I don't want to be woken from a deep sleep. I'd sooner stay awake for the next few hours."

"I never thought about it before but C20s are full category telepaths, too." Jason prepared the chairs.

"No, not really. Unlike you, our abilities are uncontrolled. We're wildcats."

"Don't you have *any* control?"

"No more than I have over my other senses. If something is burning, I smell it. If music is playing, I hear it. If a future 'memory' is pivotal to my bonded ship, I 'remember' it. But I can't always recognize the smell of a specific flower or distinguish musical instruments in an orchestra. And sometimes I can't identify the significant elements in a future memory. You trained telepaths are more fortunate. When we first learned of our abilities it was unnerving to say the least. And I for one had never believed in fortune telling. But after I met Ryl, a lot of my ideas changed."

* * * *

Asegeir: December 2199

When Avalon regained consciousness, the Mixis Saav of three centuries past stood over her. "What happened?" Avalon sat up.

"You passed out."

"I don't faint."

Mixis helped her to stand then led her to the table. "Your blood sugar count is low. Before we continue, I want you to eat breakfast. All of it."

Once she began, Avalon realized how hungry she was. Between mouthfuls she said, "You're staring."

"I'm sorry, but seeing you here, knowing where—*when*—you've come from, your relationship to the Metas, it's extraordinary!"

Avalon glanced at now featureless LD screen. What had happened to her daughter, her world? And what had happened to her? She felt a reassuring hand on her arm, and looked up.

"Ryl has not turned into a monster, Avalon." Mixis' eyes were shining. "The Metas are very special, very wonderful beings. In the eighty years since they returned to us, mankind has made a home amongst the stars."

The LD screen came to life again, seemingly of its own accord. "Those images," Mixis continued, "cannot begin to tell the whole story any more than images of the twentieth century show a warmongering, atavistic race bent on self-destruction. There is always another side, but it takes a kind heart and careful eye to find it. As the population declined, people became less materialistic; there was so much for the taking because homes and cities and eventually, whole countries emptied. Skills were lost but more important ones learned. With the Metas' assistance, through trade with space faring beings, mankind dedicated itself to the restoration of Earth's biosphere. It will take you a long time to absorb what's happened. In many ways, you will never fully adjust, but you're not alone."

Startled, Avalon stopped eating.

"Twenty five vessels like this one have also had a people delivered to them. Each of them is claiming twentieth century origins."

"Who took us? And how did we get here?"

Before Mixis could reply the door opened and Dorothy Am walked in. "Good morning, Avalon." She turned to Mixis and said, "It seems that all the new arrivals are directly related to Metas."

"I'm not so sure they're involved in this." Mixis rubbed her chin in thought. "The Metas say they've never perfected temporal d-jumping. I'm betting this has something to do with the Masters."

When the women exchanged knowing looks, Avalon said, "Hang on. Masters? They're the guys who took the whales and changed my daughter into that, right?" She pointed to the LD. "Who are these Masters? And what the hell are they doing messing with my life ... and my body?"

"Back in 2017," Mixis explained, "the Masters took approximately a million people from Earth, to a doppelganger planet the Metas call Gaia."

"I got that much. Why?" Avalon poured herself another glass of juice.

Mixis hesitated before replying, "Earth was literally dying. There's a lot more to it than that but for now you should understand that the humans who were taken required almost a century to evolve into Metas. Then they were returned to Earth just moments after they were taken, to help transport the cetaceans to Gaia."

Avalon took a moment to process the information. "So these Masters can move people across time as well and space. Which means they can take me back."

Mixis looked doubtful. "There are laws governing the other dimensions. We ... we're still learning about them. We do know that, eighty years after the humans began their metamorphosis, Gaia was attacked by beings called the Others. Of the original million humans taken, only six thousand survived to become Metas. We think there's about eighteen thousand now."

"And they live where? On Earth or on Gaia?"

"Gaia, although there are never less than one hundred and fifty three on Earth."

"*One hundred and fifty three?*" Avalon's eyes rounded. She wondered if they knew the religious symbolism of that number.

"The Others reside in a universe reached by a dimensional pathway defined as 666," continued Saav.

"Oh ... brother." Avalon carefully put her glass down. "They're *aliens*? Von Däniken wasn't a complete nut after all." Mixis looked at her oddly but she waved off the reference. "Go on."

"G'b Rl—we call him Gabriel—was the chief pilot of the Master's ship that carried the humans to Gaia. Gabby's an Eroch, a type of alien that look like angels. Gabby plays the trumpet, although most of his family grouping prefer harps."

Avalon pushed her plate aside. Suddenly, she wasn't feeling too well. Then an alarm abruptly screeched through the room. "What? What is it?" Avalon demanded, standing.

"Hold the table, it's magnetically bound to the floor!" Mixis cried, but the expected loss of gravity never came.

Something in Avalon's brain seemed to *snap*. The disquieting image in the narrow LD panel filled with stars. A second alarm replaced the first, then cut off just as quickly. "What's happening?" Avalon demanded.

Dak Jassom's voice came from some indefinable source. "Commanders Am and Saav to the bridge, on the double. I assume you have the girl?"

"Sir." Mixis was already making for the door.

"Bring her; we have a visitor."

"It wouldn't be a Meta, would it, sir?"

"Her name," Jassom replied, "is Ryl."

Chapter 13

December 6, 2499

Falcon looked up when his door opened and Saav and Phelan strode into his office. With them was a nervous looking envirotech.

"We got something!" Saav closed the door behind them. "Governor Jolley brought bio-organics on board but courtesy of another Spacedock security hole, not every piece of her luggage was checked. Phillip Hastings here," she gestured to the foot-shuffling curly-headed tech, "is one of the envirotechs who volunteered for a scan. He works on Level One in the Hub, the area encompassing the Governor's residence. After he set up a specialty unit for Jolley, he ... Well, Phillip, you explain." She smiled encouragingly at the wide-eyed Hastings.

Standing from his desk, Falcon indicated they should all take a seat at the conference table. Phillip coughed uncertainly, then began. "The Governor's staff told me not to bother maintaining her dwelling 'cos she was friends with two envirotechs who'd pooled their allocated plots with her."

Wondering how many envirotechs could afford to use their plots for decorative ferns and orchids, then spend their spare time helping out a 'friend', Falcon said, "Tell me, Phillip, what do you do with your plot?"

"Me and my buddies are immigrants, not contract workers, so we pooled and we're growing consumables separate to the ark ship habitat." He hesitated, uncertain if perhaps he had done something that wouldn't meet with approval. "Pepper and tropical nut trees, with coffee, cocoa, vanilla and pharmaceutical plants in between."

Falcon smiled his encouragement; pretty much what he would have expected. "All right, Governor Jolley said the techs would maintain her plot and dwelling; go on."

"I figured that was fine and reported it to my supervisor. He okayed it, but said I should check every six months. You know dwellings can fool you sometimes. They look healthy then one day you find the biomass recycler's not getting enough nutrition and hasn't been reprogrammed to tap into general recycling. Carpets give it away first by going dull, then walls start to get spongy."

At the look on Falcon's face, Phillip added hastily, "Anyway, late last night I was testing her neighbour's dwelling. I remembered the Governor had been arrested, so on the way home, I thought I'd check out her place; make sure it could run by itself okay. I mean it had been six months."

"What did you find?" Falcon prompted.

"It's what he didn't find," Phelan said. "Which is why he didn't report anything was wrong."

"Explain." Falcon directed his question to Phillip.

"I did a tapscan on an exterior wall," he replied. "And the readout was standard, all systems normal."

Falcon frowned. "Aren't specialty dwellings, by their nature, supposed to read completely different parameters to standard? That's why they take so much upkeep."

Phillip looked down, embarrassed. "I ... didn't think about it at the time. I was tired and on my way home, I was just happy there wasn't a problem."

"You didn't do anything wrong," Phelan replied reassuringly. "That's what spot scans are for: not to hit on you but to pick up something you didn't think much of that might be a piece of jigsaw puzzle."

Mixis said, "Phillip placed a work order authorizing the specialty plants be returned to the joint plot."

Meeting her eyes, Falcon said,—Not before we check the place thoroughly.—

Was Phillip the tech in Avalon's future memory? Falcon stood. "I'll notify your supervisor that you took an opportune moment to do your job without treading on anyone's egos *and* volunteered for a spot scan that's helped us considerably. Now," he added, making for the door. "How about we go see what Governor Jolley's dwelling is doing inside?"

Phillip nodded nervously, obviously happy that he'd helped—and wasn't in trouble. He looked around. "You know, you really could do with some bio-work in this office. The carpet's too big to get sufficient nourishment from the feeder plants and local recyclers. It's kinda patchy here and there, first sign of an imbalance, and it probably won't show up on a tapscan yet."

"Would you like to be transferred to Command Sector, Phillip?" said Mixis. "I know the C20 is anxious to expand her dwelling and she could certainly use your advice."

Phillip's eyes widened, and he stuttered, "Su ... sure! That'd be great!"

In the Hub, Falcon, Saav, Phelan and Phillip Hastings caught a deck-shuttle for the two-kilometre journey to Jolley's dwelling. At the entrance to the residential section, Phillip stopped the shuttle to collect a nanite biosensor from his maintenance bay.

While he was gone, Falcon said, "We may have to seal this quadrant."

"I hate it when you think like me," Phelan's eyebrows furrowed. "It means we're probably right."

It had been twelve years since Falcon had worked closely with a C20. While Jenna Hayden hadn't been *his* C20, both she and Avalon had impressed upon him the same thing. Future memories were poorly understood until you were on top of them. "The C20 didn't say the envirotech was guilty of anything. Just that *not* bringing them in would cause ... a problem. If contaminated plants had been returned to the general ark habitat—"

"We all might be in deep doo doo," Phelan muttered.

Falcon shared a knowing look with Mixis. She'd seen it when she'd scanned him.

Inside Jolley's dwelling they discovered no additional organics to the basic structures, except standard feeder plants. Phillip was visibly upset. "I don't understand! I set up hundreds of ferns and orchids."

Checking his datapad, Phelan said, "No plants are listed on her impounded possessions."

Phillip walked to the back door, then froze "I ... I'm not sure we should go back there." His voice cracked, and, hands shaking, he held out the biosensor to Phelan.

The security chief paled. Falcon didn't need to be told why. "AI, security override," he called. "Seal this level from the rest of the ark habitat immediately. And get a nanotech team to sweep inwards to this dwelling. No personnel or organics in or out until either Commander Phelan or I give the all clear. Send in a second nano team with enough sealant for the entire dwelling and portable enviro-unit and nano-sanitizing units."

* * * *

Avalon sat on the edge of her bed. Like Mixis, she, too had taken a bath. It had both refreshed her and made her sleepy. In another hour the emergency session of Earthgov would begin. Falcon had already reinstated the civilian council—minus a few members—and they had elected a new governor. Angus Gordon specialized in planning and bioengineering, but more importantly he was a lateral thinker, a leader and problem solver, not a manipulative bully.

Her ear comunit chimed. She stared longingly at her pillow. "Yes?"

"C20, it's Falcon. We're at the ex-Governor's residence. Ah ... can you come down?"

She was about to ask why, but comunit communications were notoriously easy to monitor. "On my way."

* * * *

Falcon was not exposing Avalon to a potential nanovirus; C20 physiology didn't work that way. And if his most paranoid suspicions were true, no human was at risk, either.

"I still don't get it," Phelan said as they sat in the lounge room, waiting for the teams to arrive. "Why did Jolley go to all the trouble of setting this place up like a tropical rainforest, then convert it back to the most basic format available? There's not an orchid or spider fern in the whole morphing place, not even her cleaning room. It's practically sterile."

His security chief no doubt knew the answer but was probably hoping someone would talk him out of it. "For the same reason," said Falcon, "that she submitted a fraudulently signed complaint against me using sloppy, inaccurate procedures. A filing clerk would have known better."

Phillip sat at the table, incessantly fiddling with the sensor. Nothing he did would change the readout, but it provided a convenient outlet for his nervous energy.

"She wanted to be caught." Saav's brown eyes flashed. "I'd give a lot to scan that ... lady."

Falcon knew Mixis was indulging in wishful thinking. No telepath would risk accusations of an illegal scanning; it had taken too long for them to gain credibility and acceptance.

Moments later the first nanotech crews arrived. The C20 followed minutes after that.

"How to draw attention to yourself without trying," said Avalon, looking around. "Maybe Jolley had a plant phobia? Okay, having used my prerogative to break into a sealed area, I assume you've found nanites?"

Commander Casey Camicci, the chief nano engineer, walked into the room. "Oh yeah," he replied, pulling off his mask. "Sealed up tighter than a drum. This place is so clean you could use it as a nano manufacturing plant."

"Funny about that," Phelan said. "What've you found?"

"Well, she's got something in those tanks. I've ordered a transport unit to take it to a secure environment, where we can poke around and see what we have."

"How long before you know, Commander?" Falcon asked.

"An hour to get it outta here and set up in the lab. If it's a known nano, it will show up fast. If not..." Camicci shrugged. "Could take a while, sir."

"I'll get the data on the Spacedock and Earth nanos sent to you, though I doubt it's the same type," said

Phelan.

"You want to explain?" Camicci's eyebrow lifted quizzically.

Phelan shook his head. "If you dead-end, I'll send you some other data and you can run a crosscheck."

Camicci nodded and returned to the upstairs room.

Falcon glanced at Phillip, who looked ill. He might only be a fifth class tech but Phillip understood what might have happened. If he had come here as planned, with no reason to check the tank for nanites, he would have flushed the contents into the recycler, spreading them throughout the sector, possibly the entire ark ship.

"Phillip," Falcon said kindly.

"Sir?" Phillip stood and nervously met his eyes.

"You don't have to call me 'sir'; you're a civilian. Why don't you go home and get some sleep? Just don't talk to anyone about this until the discovery is officially announced, okay?"

The tech nodded uncertainly. At the door, he hesitated, then said hopefully, "If I'm still allowed to work in Command, would it be okay if I still called you 'sir'?"

Falcon smiled. "Sure."

Back in the security of his office, Falcon voiced what they'd all been skirting around. "Someone doesn't want to reopen hostilities with the Katyl, they want to wipe them out with a nanoplague."

"And," Phelan said, "they were trying to set you up as the patsy."

"Except that Governor Jolley had other ideas." Falcon sat back in his chair. There was still more to it, a lot more. Jolley genuinely disliked him. She'd probably been approached to discredit him, then found herself in way over her head. Replacing him was one thing, but humans now recognized that eradicating any species, even disease-carrying pests, might have potentially lethal consequences for the bio-organism of Earth. The idea of wiping out *anything*, even hostile beings like the Katyl, was anathema. "Alright everyone. We can't draw any conclusions until we know the nature of those nanites. Patricia Jolley and her staff, along with the engineers and nanotechs who refused to be scanned, will be on this morning's long-range shuttle to Earth. Anyone with any ideas on how to delay their departure, now is not the time to hold back."

Chapter 14

December 7, 2499

The insistent alarm had pulled Phelan from a spectacularly libidinous dream involving Mixis Saav. "This better be good," he muttered, touching his comunit.

"It's not," replied Casey Camicci.

"Talk to me." Phelan opened one eye and checked the time. It was almost dawn.

"Those nanites are unlike anything I've ever seen or heard of."

"You crosschecked with the data I sent you?" Phelan rubbed the grittiness of too little sleep from his eyes.

"Yeah. They're not DNA encoded. Although they do have a time-code, I haven't translated it yet. By the way, I just heard from one from my buddies on Earth that their lab traced the DNA encoded nano-deaths on Spacedock to Nanotechnic Incorporated. And the nanites found in Captain Laycock's biomatter? Same deal."

Phelan smiled grimly and picked up his shipsuit. Better get started on this sure-to-be crappy day.

"Thanks, pal. I owe you." Although Jolley was no longer a shareholder in Nanotechnic, her past association and the presence of a larger number of unidentified nanites in her quarters further incriminated her in *something*.

* * * *

During the few hours that Phelan had slept, *Asegeir's* media had learned that Jolley's neighbourhood had been sealed for twenty minutes and her neighbours nanotested and spot scanned. News spread swiftly, and the general population of *Asegeir* began to demand that, for the safety of all, *everyone* must be nanotested. At 0400, Falcon agreed to be interviewed but referred to the reinstated civilian council in the matter of both nanotesting and spot telepathic scanning.

Since nanite technology had begun in earnest, humanity's greatest fear was of a plague nanite virus. Consequently, self-replicating bionanites were always set to individual DNA, with a fixed, non-reproductive life span. Sadly, as with any technology, unscrupulous people had developed more insidious applications. Fears of an uncontrolled, non-specific virus spreading across Earth had waxed and waned for centuries. Now it seemed the nightmare had been unleashed. While the death toll on Earth climbed, nano engineers worked feverishly to analyze the virus. Identical to the Spacedock virus in all ways but one—it was generic, not DNA encoded—the question was, who would be insane enough to develop, let alone release it? In the minds of people who had only recently emerged from a war, the answer was obvious; it had to be an alien attack. A panicked population does not think clearly. Facts became distorted to fit increasingly hysterical speculation.

Fortunately, there had also been tempering effects. *Asegeir's* civilian council had been reinstated, Falcon's summary telecording was a matter of public record, the viral nanite found in Jolley's residence was benign and John Laycock's murderers—who were all too human—were either dead or in custody. And despite its generic nature, the plague on Earth had—so far—killed only those affiliated with NGC or the Viking Project.

Meanwhile, the Earthgov emergency session remained behind closed doors. News was getting through to

the members but it was anyone's guess what was going on inside.

* * * *

At 0600, Peta Vol relieved Falcon on the bridge. He stood and stretched, then went to his office, not surprised to see Avalon curled up asleep on his couch. Scarty was placing a meal for him on the conference table. Falcon nodded his thanks, then mindlessly forked food into his mouth while perusing a collection of administrative files. It would take months before he was up to speed on the habitat systems. Tidying paperwork in his spare time would help. He was signing off on the eighteenth file, wondering where Marcus had found the time to get so much covered, when Scarty came up his private gravitor, wordlessly placed a second covered meal tray on the table, then left.

Falcon's eyes drifted to the C20. Her chest was gently rising and falling as she slept. Avalon Davo, the three hundred and forty-five year old woman who, so the Meta's said, would live ten millennia. Enough time for man to crawl out of the caves and climb to the stars. Would she see the Great Ones return to Earth? Even with ark ships, the Dwins, who knew more about planet-building than anyone, estimated it could be half a millennia before Earth was clean, then another for the climate to get back on track. He wondered how Avalon had felt about the damage being inflicted in the planet back in the twentieth century. Did she know? Was she one of the few who tried to stop it or the many who accepted it as a small price for technological conveniences?

It no longer mattered; she'd done penance many times over. And yet people continued killing each other to further their misbegotten agendas. What was it this time? The need for vengeance? So powerful, so driving that they willingly slaughtered hundreds of humans in a conspiracy to eradicate another species?

He'd tasted the bitter need for vengeance. Then the opportunity had been handed to him, just like that. It would have been so easy to drag that Katyl ship into the sun. But the rage that fuelled his pain and need for revenge had burned him more than his agonizing grief. Succumbing to the temptation would have stained his soul far deeper than losing Hanna and Asher.

Asher. His son would have been twenty-four now. A man. And his brother, Joshua, killed by his hand when he flushed him from the fighter decks of *Warrior*, would have been almost forty. Yet there could have been no other decision, either to clear *Warrior's* fighter bays or to take the Katyl worker ship home to safety. Millions of other wives and sons and brothers lived because he had refused that moment of bitter, wasteful temptation. They might not have been his brothers and sons, and yet they were a part of him, for they had all evolved from that one spark of life, billions of years ago in some primordial sludge. And before that, they had been born from the one sun, and even before that, from the one source of all matter, somewhere back in the Origins, part of a great whole that was the universe; the Life Force.

Falcon's mind expanded, and his soul took up the heartbeat of *Asegeir's* life-force, linking him to the past, present and future. He closed his eyes to absorb the strange, yet familiar comfort.

Avalon felt the tug on the life-force and woke easily in the knowledge that another C20 was in the room. Moments later she realized it was Falcon. She quietly sat up and watched him. *Well, I'll be damned.* For the second time in as many days, Falcon was tapping into *Asegeir's* life-force and using it to fortify himself.

She recalled the days after the Katyl War had ended, when the C20s had met to discuss new captains. Jenna had been closer to Falcon than any other C20, and she'd shared everything she knew of him. Falcon, she'd said, was special. He, and those who came after him, who had been forged in the fires of war and instinctually tapped into the life-force, who resisted the madness of grief the Others sought to bring them, were a new breed of C20 captain. Time would tell, she'd said. A decade, perhaps two, who knew? Yet here he was, less than forty hours after their bonding, opening himself to the power that

defined the universe. It wasn't impressive; it was unprecedented!

An enticing aroma wafted from the covered heat-tray on the table. Avalon stood and lifted the lid. Falcon opened his eyes and stared at her in surprise. "Sleep well?"

She smiled in apology "I didn't mean to use your couch for a bed."

"Anytime, C20. I've spent a lot of nights on that couch."

His now familiar man smell had permeated the leather. It wasn't unpleasant; in fact she found it soothing. Her eyes returned to the tray and she sat down.

"My orderly brought it up for you a few minutes ago. I recommend you eat while you can. I don't see Earthgov in session for much longer before they'll want to speak to one or both of us."

"Please thank Scarty," Avalon said after tasting the food. "This is good. Now, what have I missed? Am I to be arrested yet?" When he tossed her a disbelieving look, she added, somewhat indifferently, "Wouldn't be the first time and probably won't be the last. There's an old saying; those who do not learn from history are destined to repeat it. Well, there's another; those who do learn from history are cursed to stand by and watch those who don't, repeat it. Humans are good at repeating themselves. Not everyone, of course. People like you are intelligent enough to learn from the mistakes of the past. Unfortunately, not everyone is like you."

He snorted softly. "And how much worse is it for you, C20, having lived through that history?"

She smiled, but said nothing.

"Only a few hours until the shortest window to Earth is closed." Falcon pushed back his chair. "I can't understand why Jolley is still refusing a scan; she knows we've found the nanites in her dwelling. I wish there was some way we could legally scan her."

Avalon shook her head. "Let Earth use the Nano Act to revoke her rights, then the whole ugly mess should be exposed. Under the current circumstances, it's more important for Earth to have her than us. We'll probably get hit with a civil suit for illegal nanotesting of her and her pals. Trust me on this, Captain, I've been down similar potholed legal roads before—learn from my mistakes."

He was about to reply when the AI chimed, "President Norman wishes to speak to you."

Avalon folded her napkin and rested it on the plate. "Ah, a hearty meal for the condemned C20 and her captain." At his raised eyebrow she added, "What are they gonna do, space me? Ban you to some distant outpost? I'd like to see the look on their faces when the Kwilloys and Dwins hit them with their response *this* time."

Falcon stared at her. Avalon had just confirmed what he'd suspected for years. While he'd been in the amniotank recovering from the *Cassandra* incident, the C20, and the alien races who were so crucial to the design and construction of the ark ships, must have persuaded the board members of the Viking Project to treat him in a manner befitting his rank. A tiny smile tugged at his lips. When President Norman's face appeared on the LD, Falcon knew that no matter what was said now, he and the C20 and were of one mind and one heart.

Chapter 15

0900 December 07, 2499

President Norman was sitting at the head of an ostentatiously long table decorated with datapads, files, water carafes and tumblers. Sitting either side of the table were two dozen grave-faced senators, including Matheson. A fistful of conservatively dressed aides cluttered the background. "Captain Falcon," Norman said, pointedly ignoring Avalon.

"Mister President." Falcon stood and straightened his jacket.

"You've been kept abreast of the situation here I take it, Falcon?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you will know that we are currently investigating the deaths on Earth and Spacedock of over five hundred NGC and civilian personnel connected to the Viking Project. This investigation extends to companies previously owned by Governor Jolley, three ex-councillors and the two so-called envirotechs. However, as you are aware, the nanites found in Jolley's dwelling are harmless to terrestrial life. Thus, no evidence supports the premise that *Asegeir* is endangered by a nano-viral outbreak."

Here it was, the legal mumbo-jumbo that would get Jolley off the hook. That didn't bother Falcon as much as his inability to access whatever she was hiding in her head.

"Amongst numerous legal writs citing your actions, Jolley is prosecuting *Asegeir's* council for forcing her to undergo an illegal nanotest."

"That was to be expected," Falcon replied.

Matheson piped up. "Clever of you to have placed the onus back on to the council."

Falcon looked at the man who had been appointed to investigate and run NGC. He might loathe the son of a bitch, but he was answerable to him.

Ignoring a scowl from the President, Matheson added, "Surely, Captain Falcon, you have something to say for yourself?" His normally pallid features began to flush with anger.

"The President gave me to believe that reinstating the civilian council was a priority, one to be achieved within a certain time frame," Falcon replied demurely. "This has been done."

"Yes," Matheson snapped. "Making a telepath investigation of Jolley's activities impossible."

Norman frowned. "Captain, the civilian council of *Asegeir* has agreed that all suspects in the current investigation are to be returned to the Solar system. Jolley's lawyers requested her arrival point. Your flight controller nominated Spacedock. The lawyers took out an injunction preventing her delivery to any location under quarantine."

No surprise. Jolley's lawyers were justified in preventing their client from being exposed to an infectious agent. It also made it legally impossible for Earth investigators to scan her, as the Nano Act was only in effect in quarantined areas. "Where do you wish the shuttle to land, Mr President?"

"Luna, where no outbreaks have occurred."

"Don't think for a minute, Captain, that this clears you," Matheson growled. "My committee intends to get the bottom of this, and unlike the previous NGC board, we will not be deferring to antiquated notions involving the so-called C20s." He turned to Avalon. "They are as subject to Earth law as humans, and, not being members of NGC, have no authority that we recognize."

The seconds stretched into an embarrassing silence. Nostrils quivering in frustration, Matheson finally demanded, "Well?"

"Can you repeat the question, Senator?" asked Avalon.

Falcon only just controlled his mirth. The aides milling around the presidential table were not as successful. Norman suddenly found the floor fascinating, while Matheson's chubby cheeks turned pink.

"You won't be getting away with your clever little games for much longer, C20," snapped the Senator. "Obstructing justice is a serious crime. We intend to clean out NGC from top to bottom, *beginning* with a thorough investigation of the so-called C20s!"

The silence that followed was no longer embarrassed, but brittle. Finally, Norman cleared his throat and said, "That's all for the moment, Captain. Please ensure the detainees meet the current Dim5 window to the Solar system. I will not accept a delay. Under the circumstances, use a civilian shuttle piloted by civilians."

"Sir." Falcon nodded, but the connection had already been severed.

Avalon picked at the last of her dinner. "Well, that went well."

Falcon cocked an eyebrow at her.

"Back in the twentieth century, when the police arrested someone, they used to say, 'Anything you say can and will be used against you.'" She pushed the dinner tray back and stood. "It's a lesson Matheson seems never to have learned."

* * * *

Chief shuttle engineer Shilo Fields and her tech assistant, Judy Holloway, had just spent six hours climbing over every square millimetre of the ship designated to transport Jolley and the other suspects to Luna. They stood back as the civilian pilot ran a pre-flight Dim5 entry simulation on the engines.

A slight waver in the portside translator outlet caught the pilot's eyes. He motioned to his co-pilot to continue the other pre-flight checks while he ran a separate test on the outlet. "Typical," he muttered, and opened the cockpit hatch to motion for Fields.

Pulling herself up the portable gravitor, Fields stuck her head in. "Problem?"

"Portside translator is running at 99.9%."

Fields cursed. The translator unit was well within the green, but, given the passengers, her butt was in a sling if anything went wrong. The translator was a simple device she could replace within minutes, without shutting down the engines. Getting the replacement from stores and testing it in a simulator first was another matter. "How long you got left on the Dim5 window?"

"Twenty minutes, tops."

"Terrific." Shields chewed the inside of her cheek. The next decent window was almost a week away and meanwhile a nanoplague was killing people. She turned to look at the shuttle in the next bay. It was

an identical model NGC military shuttle. "Keep doing your checks," she said to the pilot. "I'll need three minutes."

Fields pulled herself back down the gravitor, ran across to the military shuttle and removed the portside Dim5 translator outlet. She would never have considered pulling a part from a shuttle she had not personally worked on, but she had Dim5 flight-tested this vessel an hour before *Asegeir* had left Spacedock. To be doubly certain, she passed the translator outlet under a DNA scanner and verified hers was the only residue; no one had touched the unit since she'd installed it. She ran back and connected the outlet to the waiting shuttle. The pilot signalled it was running at 100%.

After watching the shuttle leave, Fields went down to stores to get a new translator outlet. The ship from which she had scavenged the part was not needed until they reached the Katyl system, but she wanted everything in order before she hit the sack for a well-deserved rest. Although her actions were not strictly by the book, she had not broken any regs and had already noted her actions in the maintenance logs. "Hey, Holloway." She tossed the replaced Dim5 translator outlet to the tech. "Run a diagnostic on that, will ya?"

The tech nodded, but both women froze at the news coming through their comunits. Holloway stared at her boss in sympathy, while NGC security personnel ran towards them.

Chapter 16

0600 December 16, 2499

"How have you been?" Avalon watched Jason carefully.

"Okay, I guess." He pulled out a chair and sat opposite her. "I've kept busy going over those twenty-second century records from the first *Asegeir*. It's interesting stuff."

They were in an outdoor café in the Hub. A thousand metres above, the LD displayed a very realistic image of the dawn sky as seen from Earth. Real warmth came from the 'sun' as it slowly rose above the eucalypt trees lining the street. The light scattering of low clouds was real; the weather generator had selected a hot, humid day followed by an evening storm.

Avalon looked into Jason's dark, drawn eyes. "Jason, grief is like getting sick. Not the sort of sickness an amniotank or nanites can be programmed to repair. It's an illness that takes months, sometimes years, from which to recover. And some people never fully recover." When Jason looked up sharply, she added, "I don't mean only you."

"Falcon."

"If the Captain hadn't adjusted, we would never have allowed him to be in this position, you know that." She keyed their order into the table datapad. "But other people thought—still think—they can use his grief as a springboard for their twisted agendas. It's like throwing a rock into a pond; you never know how many bigger rocks will wash in when the first waves hit shore. The families of those who died now know that your father was not responsible for that shuttle accident. But none of you have the satisfaction of seeing the perpetrators brought to justice. The puppeteers behind *them* are hoping those same families will lash out, perpetuating the illness, spreading grief and vengeance like the mind disease that it is."

Jason glanced up. A flock of colourful lorikeets descended on the trees and noisily began feasting on the nectar-filled flowers. "But we'll never know who they really are, will we? When Jolley's long-range shuttle blew up it destroyed any chance of learning the truth."

"During the cetacean evacuation of Earth in 2017, thousands of aliens—at no mean cost to themselves—set up a protective mental cordon around the planet. Once the last cetacean had gone, they released the barrier. Today, some humans believe that these aliens and the Metas deliberately allowed the Others past this barrier to slaughter humankind."

The servo-waiter arrived and Avalon lifted their meals onto the table.

"That's crazy!" Jason declared, helping her with the drinks. "The Others were already there, working overtly through people's minds! The aliens only inserted the barrier to stop the Others from attacking the Metas and cetaceans during the vulnerable stages of the uplift."

Avalon's lips pursed in regret. "Try telling bigots that. The upshot of it is, if humanity had *not* been drastically reduced in numbers—mostly by the Rhesus plague and various and sundry self-perpetrated idiocies like global warming and WMDs—then the entire life-force of Earth, not just humankind, would have died within a few hundred years." She squeezed lemon into her tea and took a sip before adding, "Now consider the Katyl. Although they have a shockingly brutal warcode, they've never been *self*-destructive. They're not inherently evil any more than humans are inherently evil. In fact, the Katyl are the first species that offer mankind friendship on equal terms."

"Friendship!" Jason almost choked on his coffee. "One wrong move, and we're dead!"

"No, Jason, you're not right. You're not entirely wrong, either, but the Katyl and humanity are on an essentially equal technological and social footing. Sure, the Katyl have Dim5 disrupters, they're highly telepathic and warlike, and it will be difficult for some humans to accept their physical and intellectual sexual dimorphism. But humans use biotechnology and nanites. Katyl have no knowledge of these things. And humans murder each other and set up others to take the blame. And they steal and lie and attack without warning.

"Because they're telepathic, the Katyl rarely kill their own. They don't deceive one another and they would never be so dishonourable as to attack without warning. Even when they executed Falcon's family, they gave Earth a few hours notice. And they never, ever torture prisoners. Kill, yes, swiftly or in their ways, honourably, by slinging them into the sun. But never viciously, not like humans.

"I think of the Katyl as a ... test for humanity. And maybe it's a test for the Katyl, too. If each species can learn to overlook what they don't like about each other, and incorporate into their cultures what they do like, then humanity will have made its first step out into the big, wide universe."

"But we've had contact with dozens of aliens for centuries—"

"Ah—" Avalon held up her fork. "But not your equals. The Clintarans returned to an agrarian lifestyle, and the Malicanoorians have only just begun to understand the concept of space. The Dwins, Rachnians, Erochs and Kwilloys, even the rare manifested Master and a dozen other races have taught humans most of what you know. The Katyl are humanity's *intellectual* equal, even if they do act like a bunch of immature hooligans."

Jason's face twisted. "Hooly-whats?"

Avalon laughed. "Spoiled teenagers with too much testosterone and not enough discipline, and a weakness for letting the Others drive their actions. Just like humans, but in different ways. Captain Falcon saw that in them. And he saw that a balance could be affected between humans and Katyl—if you could cut through this pain and grief and vengeance.

"Don't think that the death of his family was shaken off lightly. A part of Falcon will always grieve for their loss. But lesser men and women have allowed the deaths of loved ones to hamstring them. Emotionally crippled, blind to the possibilities, they're consumed by vengeance."

"But we don't even know for certain who did this to my father," Jason retorted.

She sighed. "While humanity's archaic laws prevent you from using the tools your minds have evolved—telepathy—the guilty will remain free and untouched. One or two people we suspect, like Matheson, know they're under suspicion."

Jason glanced up when a shadow flittered across the sun. A panicked wave of red and green wings instantly took flight. The lorikeets had no desire to become the eagle's breakfast. "Matheson can make any accusation he wants under parliamentary privilege, and no telepath can go near him or we play into humanity's fears about us."

"Precisely," she replied. "The senator played on people's fears and prejudices by accusing the Captain of ordering illegal scans."

"By not scanning objectors, Captain Falcon undermined the accusations," Jason retorted, watching the parrots nervously circle the trees. "What about the Metas? No human would ever argue with a Meta

translator getting into Matheson's head and digging out the truth."

Avalon leaned forward and touched his hand, drawing his attention back to her. "Now just think about what you said and ask yourself why they're staying right out of it."

His face dropped in understanding. "Because they want us to figure it out for ourselves. A test."

"That's right. A test on multiple levels, and we C20s and you telepaths are the only help humans are allowed to get."

"What about the Katyl, they're mostly telepaths."

"Now you're getting it." She smiled her approval. "We befriend them, we learn their laws when using their Fifth Dimensional abilities, and they learn our warcodes. With any luck we'll both adopt better systems."

"You believe that?"

"Five hundred years ago I would have said no. But people really are trying to improve both the Earth *and* themselves. Sure, they stumble when the likes of Matheson infect those round them with this disease of grief and vengeance, but for the most part humankind is better than it was even three hundred years ago. The really scary thing is, if it fails this first test with the Katyl, the cost may be so high, they never get another chance."

* * * *

Falcon couldn't recall the last time he'd slept in a bed. By rights he should be in worse shape, but he figured it was his bonding to the life-force that sustained him. "I know this is repetitive, Lee," he said to *Asegeir's* chief engineer, Senior Commander Lee Walker. "But going over it together may reveal something we've missed."

The Command Board was sitting around the conference table in Falcon's office. Only Avalon looked rested. Governor Gordon and Andrea White were slumped in their chairs, while Phelan constantly fidgeted in an effort to stay awake. When the meeting was over Falcon intended ordering them all to take six hours bunk time.

"Stuart and I have dissected the evidence with a diaglass blade," Walker replied. "Following normal procedures, in order to set course to the Solar system, the shuttle carrying Jolley and the other suspects exited *Asegeir* then dropped from Dim5 into space. When we lost contact with them, a drone was dispatched to search for them. It recovered sufficient wreckage to establish the ship exploded while attempting to re-enter Dim5 on the new vectors to Earth.

"The engineer, Fields, will not be charged, although the incident is noted on her record. I went to the shuttle that Shields took the portside translator from, and personally removed and tested the starboard Dim5 translator outlet. Interesting discovery. Firstly, only Fields' DNA signature was on it. Secondly, the entire structure had been molecularly altered. On engine run-up and Dim5 test it showed 100%. However, on entering simulated Dim5 flight, it sheared through, damaging the inner cowling and knocking the whole engine out of alignment. The results were ... explosive. Scared the pants off everyone in the bay."

"And this would have been sufficient to destroy a shuttle?" Angus Gordon said.

Walker failed to stifle a yawn before replying, "An experienced test pilot might have been able to save the machine but a commercial shuttle pilot would have had no hope. The only reason we know what happened is the data entered the central AI. The local workstation was destroyed but we were able to

review the sequence of events."

"Hadn't the engineer, Shields, tested both the part and the shuttle she'd taken it from in real Dim5 flight?" Gordon pressed. Everyone might be tired, but equally, they wanted, *needed* to understand what had happened before they could rest.

Phelan's fingers had found a metal paperclip to mangle. "Yeah," he replied, mindlessly twisting the wire. "She insisted on an immediate scan and telecording—her second in two days—and she came up clean. Anyone could have gotten a DNA trace from her work clothes or tools, even a coffee mug, and applied it to the sabotaged parts. I don't think the intent was to incriminate her because a telescan automatically cleared her. I think the DNA trace was there in the unusual situation where she or anyone had reason to verify that the part had been installed by her, and not tampered with by anyone else."

"Which is what fooled her." Gordon nodded his understanding.

"Exactly. Shields had replaced both port and starboard translator outlets during the overhaul of that military shuttle. Two of the three engineers who objected to scans, the same two who were being shipped back to Earth with Jolley, briefly entering the bay an hour before they were detained. Security footage shows them standing by the shuttle's port and starboard outlets for around three minutes apiece. You can't see them actually replacing the outlet couplings, their backs were to the sensors, but their movements and the time taken add up."

Gordon ran a hand down his salt-and-pepper beard. "Assuming the detained engineers were not suicidal, why didn't they say something before their shuttle left?"

"Why would they?" Phelan countered. "They weren't in the ship they'd sabotaged. And they had no way of knowing a translator outlet on their vessel was being replaced by one of their doctored ones, because the engines were not shut down during replacement—which took roughly the same time as pre-flight checks."

"So you're saying it was pure chance, bad luck, this happened."

"A fluke, one in a million chance. I've told the AI to monitor all movements and report work that hasn't been pre-approved. I know it's too little too late, but it should prevent further incidents."

Falcon noticed the collar of a shipsuit beneath Gordon's pullover. Had Jolley started a paranoid fad? The suits afforded no protection against viral nanites and little against the vacuum of space unless the wearer used a hood and mask. The new Governor was sending the wrong message to his constituents; he had thought better of Gordon.

"The sabotaged shuttle that Fields pulled the outlet from, was it a civilian one?" asked Gordon.

"Nuh uh." Phelan shook his head. "It was in the civilian shuttle bay because the NGC bays were jam-packed when this one arrived. On ark ships, NGC and civilian shuttles are serviced from the same stores by NGC contract engineers and techs trained in the same procedures. So it was decided to overhaul this one where she sat."

"Since all NGC pilots are trained as fighter pilots," Gordon observed. "I suppose it explains why the saboteurs doctored both port and starboard outlets."

"It's my personal ship," Falcon explained. "The NGC bays were overflowing with shuttles and fighters bringing in what was left of Laycock's vessel and the civilian one involved in that incident. I was ordered from *Jord* to *Asegeir* ASAP, so I threw some bags together and came over immediately."

"That was your *personal* shuttle?" Gordon's eyes rounded.

Falcon nodded. "I piloted it. I made the decision to land in the civilian bay and signed off on the order to allow civilian engineers to service it. We suspect it was an opportunity for these guys to finish off what they began on *Cassandra*."

Gordon sat back and looked around the room.

Andrea White looked equally confused. "Would you care to expand on that? I thought the *Cassandra* incident ... Never mind." Her face pinched in angry comprehension. "I believe I was ... misinformed."

"The *official* version of the so-called *Cassandra* incident was an attempt on my reputation as well as my life. The public report failed to mention that *Cassandra's* primary AI had been sabotaged and the mutinous crewmen had been riddled with neural nanites."

Gordon frowned. "I see the parallels, I don't see a connection."

"You will," Phelan said. "Let's finish the reports."

"Mike, explain the nanites found in Jolley's residence," Falcon said to Commander Rose.

"They're a broad-based, long term, self-replicating viral plague nanite," replied the doctor. "Highly contagious, they can be spread by aerosol, although—as with other nanoviruses—UV light decimates them. They were engineered to infect and replicate for six months before becoming pathogenic. This dormancy would have made it impossible to trace the index case, and ultimately resulted in a planet-wide infection."

Andrea White said, "Wouldn't it have been detected when anyone infected underwent routine medical checks?"

"The Katyl don't have nanite medical technology," Rose said. "The virus would have cut them down like a scythe."

Gordon paled. "How long have you known this?"

"We knew it was harmless to humans," replied Rose. "Which probably explains why Jolley was so smug. It wasn't until Casey Camicci tested it on Katyl biomass that it showed up. And, as I said, it's designed to lie dormant for six months. Casey accelerated its metabolism to test for just that possibility and, well, he hit pay dirt two hours ago."

"Based on other data, Commander Phelan, Captain Vol and I suspected as much," Falcon said. "Mixis knew of my suspicions of course, as did Avalon." He met her eyes briefly and added, "One does not voice suspicions as far-reaching as this until they can be confirmed."

"Does Earthgov know?" asked Gordon.

"Mike and I informed President Norman prior to this meeting."

"How did he react?"

"I think he'd guessed. They've had a hell of a time tracking their own nanite outbreaks. And they're extremely suspicious of the explosion that destroyed Jolley's shuttle."

"Every member of NGC on *Asegeir*, the other Viking class ships, Spacedock and the Mars terraforming project has been nanotested, scanned and telecorded," said Phelan. "Civilians are still being covered, but

every piece of evidence to date has ended up dead-ending—literally."

"What about people whose scans revealed the ... dead-end evidence?" Gordon asked.

Phelan shook his head. "As with the envirotech, Phillip Hastings, they're innocent of wrong-doing. They just had useful data. You've seen the reports. Some of these poor bastards have undergone three or four scans to vacuum every scrap of information from their skulls. On Earth, as required by the Nano Act, scans are still being run in quarantined cities. However anyone who might have been suspect based on other evidence, or was in a position to notice something amiss—senior immigration officers, telepaths and quarantine workers—is dead. The owners of Nanotechnic Incorporated, including Jolley, numerous NGC admirals and high placed officers, are all deceased, as are the nanite engineers who worked for the company. Lower echelon employees outside the quarantine areas volunteered for scans. What we do know is that Nanotechnic Incorporated manufactured the DNA viral nanites on Spacedock, the broad-based one on Earth, and the neural ones found in Laycock's remains, but *not* the Katyl-based ones found in Jolley's quarters. Investigators are examining Nanotechnic and NGC personnel records, running victimologies of the deceased and checking connections to civilians killed by the Katyl during their raid on Earth, but they're coming up empty-handed." Phelan tossed the now unrecognisable paperclip aside in frustration.

Ambassador Jolley spoke for the first time. "Any leads there?"

"The problem is," Phelan replied, turning to him, "you can't assume relatives have carried an eleven year grudge to get the Katyl or punish Captain Falcon for not executing Kal and Temsit, and then demand these people submit to scanning. There isn't enough evidence."

"And yet that appears to be the only connection," Jolley said.

"Yes," Avalon said. "Convenient, isn't it?"

Andrea White looked at her. "Didn't you see anything? I mean, if Captain Falcon's shuttle was sabotaged, why didn't you warn him?"

"Captain Falcon didn't need to be warned because he was in no danger. The problem was discovered before he used his shuttle. My future memories serve only to protect that which I am bonded to, this ship. They're not a detective's tools."

"I'm ... sorry," White said. "I just thought—"

"That's fine." Avalon's nose wrinkled. "I get frustrated too. Keep in mind the future memory that resulted in detaining the envirotechs. Even when I have future memories, they don't give us the answers, just options."

"So," Gordon summarized, "it remains unresolved."

Phelan's fingers closed into fists. "Except for a certain politician I'd like to meet in a dark alley one night."

"The one hope we had was Earth media and civilians calling for mass volunteer scanning, same as here," said Falcon. "That's declining as the days pass and no further nanite infections are reported."

Rose yawned, and apologised. "Here on *Asegeir*, we've tested forty-five percent of the civilian population and one-hundred percent of the NGC population for nanites. We've found nothing untoward. Since we've had no deaths attributable to nanites, and the last Earth victim died early this morning, I think it's safe to say *Asegeir* is free of the infection."

"Telepath scans and 'cordings are lagging behind those figures," Mixis said. "Only ten percent of civilians are done. It'll take a month to scan everyone but the PR guys are keeping up the momentum. People's credit chits are showing whether they've been scanned or not. That's impacting their social life."

Falcon hated using bigotry to clear his ship of potential saboteurs, but there had been no other way. "Alright, just make sure that workers and science crews due to go to Katylgar are given priority over wealthy retirees." He pushed back his chair, indicating the meeting was over.

Standing, Gordon said, "Why? The science teams I understand, but workers?"

"Retirees are not contributing to the functioning of *Asegeir*, nor do they pose as much of a potential danger. Essential personnel must take priority." Falcon wondered if the Governor would argue; Gordon was getting flack from his constituents.

While people collected their things to leave, Vol said to Gordon, "Hey, any contract workers that choose to stay at the end of the year are potential voters. And there's more of them than there are retirees."

"Not in my section."

"Gus, you spend most of your day crawling through maintenance bays." Avalon walked him to the door. "You know how important the techs are to the safety of this ark ship."

That explained Gordon's shipsuit. Falcon berated himself for paranoia. Avalon trusted the Governor; that should have been good enough for him.

Gordon smiled at her in wry amusement. "You're right. I can't let politics run me." He turned to Falcon. "I was voted in to represent the best interests of the civilian populace. I'll convince the retirees that it *is* in their interest for techs and maintenance teams to be scanned for nanites, first." His smile faded. "We'll be in Katyl space in less than three days."

Falcon nodded sagely and held the door open. "And the Katyl are telepathic. There'll be no hiding this from them even if we resolve it by then."

When everyone but Avalon, Saav and Phelan had left, Falcon said, "Mixis, did you ever meet the telepath who died from the nanovirus, Bevin?"

Saav stood and stretched. "No. Wasn't it Bevin who telecorded you and Stuart at the end of the War?"

"Yeah," Falcon replied thoughtfully. "Full, broad-based scans are generally only required when an NGC officer is promoted to command rank. When I was promoted and transferred to *Warrior*, I suspected I could block scans, but thought I could hide it. I couldn't. *Warrior's* telepath knew before he even started the telecorder. He ordered me to stay there while he went to the bridge to report to the skipper."

Phelan's eyes lit in understanding. "Then the Katyl attacked, and you were the only officer to survive."

"When Admiral Woodstock promoted me to full captain, I informed him," Falcon said. "I thought about saying nothing, but ... ah, I dunno."

Phelan grinned and put his hands in his pockets. "You always were a Boy Scout."

Falcon snorted softly. "Or maybe I knew the old man was in no position to quibble over what constitutes a wildcat telepath. He would have promoted a psychopath if he'd thought it would give us a chance against the Katyl. Jenna Hayden knew," he added, looking at Avalon thoughtfully. "I think she figured it out when Thornton detained us on Arisa."

"Chris, I hate to disabuse you." Avalon met his gaze. "The C20s have known since you were a child. We confirmed *why* after your family died."

He frowned, while the others regarded her quizzically. A trace of a smile crossed Avalon's lips. "Your ability to block telepathic scans is the same mechanism that allows you repel the Others. C20s can pick up extremes. Minds that are wide open—and ones as tight as a collapsed wormhole."

"So that's why you didn't have to stick around for his scan." Phelan regarded her with a calculating expression. "If you can tell if people have this ability, you can also see when people are infected by the Others."

Avalon chuckled. "Don't get any ideas, Stuart. A guileless mind is no different from a child's. They're more susceptible to evil, but that doesn't make them guilty of wrongdoing. Now, you were saying, Captain?"

Falcon also was thoughtful. Exactly when had the C20s started monitoring him? "At the end of the War, command rank personnel who had been in combat situations or lost family were required to undergo tele-scans before returning to duty. Depending on our circumstances it was anywhere from a five-minute random spot-scan to a full, broad-based one. I was given the full treatment. As was Stuart."

"Because I led the mass evacuation of Arisa Station," explained Phelan.

"Which saved hundreds of thousands of lives," Avalon finished.

"But it *was* mutiny." Phelan smiled. "If the Katyl hadn't attacked, history would have painted us both as pirates, murderers, traitors and cowards. NGC needed to confirm we weren't really that bad."

Falcon shook his head. "Bevin knew, yet he never said a word. I sweated it until he released the telecording transcripts, but nothing showed. And I never knew why." He looked at Avalon, hoping for an answer.

"Blackmail?" Phelan suggested.

"He'd have to admit to falsifying the transcript. It would go harder on him than me." Falcon shrugged. "Maybe he *didn't* pick it up."

"He did," said Avalon. "Bevin's original telecording was not destroyed immediately."

Every eye in the room turned to her.

"We C20s retain and review all broad-based telecordings on anyone promoted to command rank. Once such people reach the rank of C20 captain or are removed from consideration, we destroy the telecordings. Chris, your ability to block would have been picked up by an eight-year old telepath."

Falcon felt a flash of irritation. Why hadn't she told him sooner? But he pushed it aside. He had only been her captain for eleven days, they were in the middle of a crisis, and he could only process so much information. And he really did need some sleep before he could process much more. Still, it begged a question. "Why did Bevin hide it?"

Phelan walked across to the LD, shoving his hands in his pockets as he went. "Interesting that Bevin was assigned first as a post-war debriefer, then appointed to the war censoring board, and later, became an ark ship immigration telepath. Now he's dead from the nanovirus." He turned and added, "What's the bet that he was on someone's—like maybe a certain politician's—payroll and was told to keep that little piece of information back for a rainy day?"

"The moment anyone used it, Bevin would have been compromised," Mixis countered.

"But Bevin's dead now," Phelan replied softly.

"Mixis," Avalon said thoughtfully. "Have you submitted the full telecording transcript on the Captain to NGC yet?"

"Not the full one, no. There hasn't been time. With all the other Command staff to do, I just sent them a brief—the same one the media have—to allay concerns."

Avalon looked thoughtful "How long before you'll finish it?"

"I was planning to tidy the Captain's files before we hit the Katyl system—a few days. But NGC is in disarray, it'll be months before anyone gets around to reading it." When the corners of Avalon's lips twitched, Saav demanded, "Uh oh, you've got that look again. What is it this time?"

"Rope. Lots and lots of rope." She grinned mischievously. "For suspect politicians."

Chapter 17

December 20, 2499

"We'll be out of Dim5 soon." Avalon was sitting in the reclining chair in Mixis Saav's office, watching Jason prepared the telecorder. "Looking forward to seeing a new star system?"

"Sure," Jason replied hesitantly.

"Jace, one of the things you'll need to perfect before you can work as a psychologist is to compartmentalize your mind." She leaned across and tapping him gently on his forehead, "Here is Jason Saav. And about here—" She mimed a huge balloon shape to the left of his head "—is where everyone else is kept."

He looked down, embarrassed. "I know. It's just hard because some of their thoughts get you thinking, you know? We're not just recorders."

Avalon kicked off her leather sandals and leaned back. The chair extended into a recliner. "Of course you're not. You don't have to be a telepath to pick up everyone's fears about meeting the Katyl."

"Once they find out we'd planned to kill them with nanites—"

"They were trying to do that to us with Dim5 disrupters," she interrupted. "The Katyl have their version of bigots, too, but they've also got leaders of the calibre of Captain Falcon and Ambassador Jolley. And they're telepaths, they'll see the truth. You of all people should know that. There's going to be some cultural stumbling, but I think both species are mature enough to look past that."

She took the telecorder headpiece from him and placed it over her head, "C'mon, this will take your mind of the Katyl." She closed her eyes, and remembered.

* * * *

Asegeir December 2199

Avalon looked down into the open elevator shaft. Why would they have something as dangerous as that in the middle of the deck? It ascended almost as far in the other direction.

Dorothy Am ran into the hole and lightly grasped the slim pipe in the centre. "It's a gravitor—a microgravity tube." Am tucked her legs into a ball and swiftly turned one hundred and eighty degrees in mid-air. She disappeared, diving down into the hole without a backward glance.

"Don't worry," said Mixis. "I'll be right behind you."

Avalon had issues with heights—but she could control it. She leapt to the tube, and clung on like a limpet until she realized it was like being underwater. When Mixis' frowned, Avalon rolled over and experimented with pulling herself 'up' the shaft, telling herself that in micro-gravity it made no difference. *In fact*, she mumbled to herself in a calming litany, *you could just say it's along. Hell, you've SCUBA dived inside the propeller shafts of super tankers, this is a breeze compared to that.*

Sure, but that super tanker hadn't been a Dim5 spaceship travelling faster than light, some place *waaaay* beyond Earth, and she hadn't been about to meet her two hundred year old daughter who'd turned into a blue, catlike, three metre tall alien.

Three levels 'down', Avalon nearly bumped into Am.

"Step out and lean forward," the doctor said to her.

She did—and landed face down on the deck.

"You did fine." Mixis helped her up. "You'll get the hang of it by the time we get you home."

Avalon shot her a swift look. Home? She no longer had a home. Home was some place two hundred years ago.

They walked along a corridor until reaching a large, sealed hatch. Am said, "Permission to enter." The light dimmed, then the hatch slid open and Am stepped in. Avalon followed, wide-eyed. They were on the mid-level of *Asegeir's*, three deck-high bridge. Catwalks curved around both sides of a giant window. Below, a cockpit housed three chairs and a workstation. The enormous bridge was dark except for the bewildering array of tiny lights and panels along the bulkhead. The window stretched from the floor upwards, curving overhead. It was like flying in a huge helicopter that travelled through a night filled with billions of stars.

People stood or sat on chairs along the wide catwalk. A few heads turned towards them, then people went back to whatever they were doing. Avalon's eyes were focused on the deck below. Standing in front of the cockpit workstation, two figures were looking out through what she later learned was the transparent LD hull. She couldn't hear them, but she could see their hand and body movements—and the twitching tail of the taller figure. Starlight illuminated their profiles. The shorter one was Captain Dak Jassom. The other, proportionately larger but feminine in build, was a Meta. Avalon blinked when the Meta grinned and the Captain threw his head back and laughed—a shared joke. It was so ... commonplace. Then Jassom turned. The Meta turned too, but Avalon could no longer see her face, backlit as it was by a sea of stars.

"C'mon down," Jassom called, motioning to her.

Avalon looked for the steps, but there were none. Jassom frowned until Mixis stepped forward and showed her the twin pipes, smaller versions of the shaft they'd used moments ago.

"It's a gravitor," explained the telepath. "Just place your hands here, step out, and gently pull down."

Jassom's lips curled in amusement, then he swiftly stepped forward and caught her in his arms. Her momentum was enough to make him stagger. She clung to him momentarily then pulled back, embarrassed.

"Whoa!" he said, steadying her, "These things take some getting used to."

She met his eyes and saw in them surprise—and something more. He took her by the elbow and led her to a door in the portside bulkhead. "We'll take this to my day cabin," he explained.

Avalon was grateful for his proximity. Although she would not analyze her emotions until much later, she unconsciously took comfort in his position of authority; he radiated a sense of strength and safety neither Am nor Mixis could provide.

—Looking back on that time,—Avalon said to Jason in a mental aside,—I can't consciously remember clutching Dak's hand or sitting in his couch with him by my side. All I could recall was the face of my daughter.—

Blue, tall, eyes with vertically slit irises, thick dark hair, almost cobalt it was so shiny, growing down the

Meta's back, all the way to the base of her spine—and a long, prehensile tail. The overall impression, even the way she carried herself, was predatory, catlike. And she was stunningly beautiful, despite her alien features.

Jason adjusted the telecorder when he realized that the point of view had altered. Avalon restricted his perception to superficial levels, but he was still awed, for this was the first time in history that a human had ever been allowed to see the mind—albeit through a third party—of a Meta.

Ryl had known for two centuries this moment would come. She hadn't known how or when, only that it was inevitable. As a human, she had watched her first-born die in her arms, and seen her world on fire, as it, too, lay dying. But she had also been given hope and rebirth on the sanctuary planet, Gaia. And she had journeyed into the world of the Mind to become Meta. She had seen the face of evil, had lost her second, unborn child to it. But she had also known hope, as other children were born and thrived. And now, at last, she was seeing the fulfilment of a dream.

Avalon had been a mother to her for only twelve of Ryl's more than three hundred years. But Avalon was the flesh of her flesh, blood of her blood. A mother who felt she had abandoned her daughter just days ago.

As a Meta, Ryl now had total recall, beginning with warm, dark redness and dull sounds while she rested safely in Avalon's womb. Then pressure and pain, thrusting, squeezing as she tried to be born. Hours and hours of it, then grasping hands and tugging, pulling back up, the wrong way, from her mother's opened belly. Humid warmth on her skin, the light too bright; she remembered being unable to breathe, that she been affected by the only anaesthetic available. Her mother's mind screams of agony, cutting, tearing. And her mind cries of joy because her baby was alive and safe and well. And breathing. Nothing else mattered, Avalon cried in her mind between screams, for her daughter lived and was strong and healthy.

A mother's love; the most powerful part of the life-force, for it was the giver of life itself.

Ryl crouched before the distraught young woman, who was physically unlike the middle-aged mother she remembered. But Avalon's aura—ah, that was unchanged. Knowing that her mother had a well-developed sense of the ridiculous, Ryl smiled and said, "Time travel seems to have suited you; you look years younger."

I ... *left* you!" It was a cry from the depths of Avalon's soul.

Sitting beside her on the couch, Ryl held her as if she were the child. "It's alright," she said, over and over again, feeling the impact of her mother's distress. "I'm here now. I knew you had no choice. I never, ever blamed you. It's alright, really. Better than alright, far, far better."

When Avalon blindly rubbed the tears from her eyes, Ryl d-jumped a tissue from a nearby cleaning room. Avalon jerked in surprise but accepted it and another, until her nose was clear. "How ... how did you do that?" she said.

"It's called d-jumping. We move things from place to place by flicking it into a different dimension. Cuts down travel time enormously but plays merry hell on your frequent flier points."

Avalon burst out laughing. Ryl knew it was a manic overreaction but she felt her mother's tension evaporate—until Avalon saw they were alone in the room.

"I asked them to leave," Ryl said. "They're just outside and if you'd be happier with them—"

"No!" Avalon gently touched her hand. "No, it's fine." Then her face fell and her other hand went to her

stomach. "I ... lost the boys."

Ryl nodded solemnly, and they shared a look that required no words, no platitudes. But she had one small gift that might alleviate some of the pain. "I have three children now. All grown up, one with children of his own."

"You mean not only am I a grandmother, but a great-grandmother?" Avalon smiled hesitantly.

"Oh yes. They're very excited at the prospect of meeting you."

"They ... know?"

"All Metas know of the gifts from the Masters, the gifts from the twentieth century." Ryl smiled.

"Gifts..?"

Ryl stood and walked to Jassom's desk. Reaching behind, she pulled out two glasses then d-jumped a bottle of wine from her abode. "Relax and I'll tell you what I know. And what I don't know." She popped the cork. "And when I'm finished, we better tell Captain Jassom, too, because the poor man is being harassed by some very constipated NGC admirals."

Jason felt Avalon's conscious mind take over again.—Jace,—she said,—I'm not going to let you in on those memories, because they're very personal. As a translator, Ryl is, of course, an extremely powerful telepath, so we shared things on a deeply personal level. There's nothing you don't already know from historical facts.

—Being a telepath places you in the unique position of empathizing with situations you have never, and with any luck, will never have to experience. You've learned to tune out people's thoughts so thoroughly that you're almost as mind-deaf as a non-telepath until you *choose* to scan. It's a necessary ability or you'd go insane, as many unrecognized telepaths did after most of humankind abandoned such abilities 60,000 years ago. That, of course, was their first mistake. But that's another story. For now, just know that Ryl shared with me the memories of her childhood, of the time after I was taken, of pain and loss, pleasure and growth, of her life as an adult and when she went to Gaia, and of Gaia and the Great Ones—the great humpback whales. For your purposes, it was the meeting we had with the Command crew some hours later that gave them all the answers they were going to get, at least for a very long time.—

Avalon took up the story from Jassom's point of view.

When they'd discovered her in the cargo bay, Dak had assumed Avalon was sixteen or seventeen years old. Her self-assurance and concern for the welfare of his crew spoke of someone considerably older. Mixis had telepathically communicated to him that it was more likely a survival strategy, a need to assess her situation. When he'd pressed Saav for details, she'd admitted that she could not read Avalon. Something vast and unfathomable extended like a curtain across the girl's mind.

Dak wasn't surprised to learn that appearance notwithstanding, Avalon was forty-seven years old. He was also relieved. It had been extremely disturbing to find himself physically attracted to someone who appeared little more than a child.

When the Meta had d-jumped onto *Asegeir's* bridge, she had been uncharacteristically deferential. Ryl had asked if, after meeting Avalon, she could stay for dinner, and if the entire Command crew could join them. It would be better, she'd said, to explain what she knew in one sitting. Then they could each submit reports to NGC and that, she'd added, should keep NGC off his back.

With an invitation like that, Jassom was hardly about to say no.

Ryl had refused to discuss Avalon until after the meal. Instead, she'd entertained them with anecdotes, especially about the antics of the creatures that shared her abode, currently trailing *Asegeir* at 30,000 kilometres. The Meta's spheroid space ship was a self-contained forest habitat composed entirely of organic materials. She had just finished telling them about the first time she'd tried to open a wormhole and how the thing collapsed on her before she'd pulled the ship through. The effect on the animals sharing her abode had been more farcical than distressing. The effect on *Asegeir's* chief physicist was priceless. Just hours before, he'd been arguing with the engineer about the theoretical nature of wormholes, and now he was dining with someone who opened them with no more thought than he invested in opening the hatch to his quarters.

Dak couldn't tell if the Meta was a translator/communicator or a healer/creator. Both could readily d-jump their ships across space. Ryl had produced a half dozen bottles of wine for dinner, but he wasn't about to ask whether she'd taken them from her abode or created them.

"Where did you get this wine from?" asked the physicist. He picked up the bottle from the dining table and stared at the label, *Two Paddocks*. "It's excellent!"

"New Zealand." The Meta chuckled at physicist's expression. "I generally stock up whenever I'm there."

Dak wondered if Avalon understood until she said, "I suspect 'created' wine isn't quite the same as the original."

"It defies understanding!" Ryl laughed. "Molecularly identical or not, it tastes like vinegar!"

Avalon's quick mind and easygoing nature made it easy for Dak to forget that she had, just the day before, been displaced two hundred years. But that wasn't the only reason he was attracted to her. No matter how you cut it, she was beautiful. Long, raven hair framed a face that seemed somehow exotic. Perhaps it was her olive skin or the slight almond tilt to her blue eyes, alight with intelligence and a hint of mischief. Or perhaps it was the graceful way she carried herself; the beauty of youth encapsulating the wisdom of maturity. So much genetic diversity had been lost during the years of the Rhesus plague—

There it was again, that odd sensation of being examined. He turned and looked at the Meta.

"Please thank your chef for a fine meal, Captain," said Ryl. "And I thank you for your hospitality." She moved her chair back and sipped the wine. "The Masters do not always answer our questions. As frustrating as that can be, advance knowledge of something can prevent a desired outcome. A long time ago Albert Einstein said, when referring to the cosmos, 'God does not play dice'. A half century later another scientist, Stephen Hawking, disagreed. 'Not only does God play dice with the Universe—he sometimes casts them where they can't be seen.' The search for them can sometimes be dangerous, sometimes fun, and always interesting.

"Humans are no longer one species." Ryl gently rolled the dark liquid around her glass. "While some of us regressed a million years and leaped into a future that might have been, becoming Metas, the Rhesus plague on Earth removed a huge chunk of humanity, taking with it a very special gene. As you reach out to the stars, to explore new worlds, to seek the sanctuary planet, Gaia, you will meet other species and situations that telepaths cannot deal with. A dangerous toy, Dim5 travel, for it opens you to predation. As a small gift to help you on your journey, to warn you when the path to be trodden is perhaps not the safest one, twenty-five men and women from the twentieth century were taken, adjusted slightly and delivered to you. These are the C20s."

"C20s?" The physicist's eyebrows furrowed.

"It's an abbreviation," said the engineer. "Didn't you ever take lecture notes when you studied history? C18, eighteenth century, C19, nineteenth century—"

"And C20, okay, I got it."

"Although all are Rh-negative, the C20's genetic heritage was lost during the plague years," Ryl continued. "The Masters have chosen to reintroduce that into humanity. But they have given you much more than a few lost genes, for the C20s' abilities have also been switched on where they once lay dormant."

Dorothy Am leaned forward in anticipation. "Which abilities?"

"Future memories. Memories of things that will take place."

"How can you remember something that hasn't happened?" Am queried.

"Who's to say it hasn't? You use Dim5 as a shortcut through space-time—Dim4. The 'laws' of Dim5 physics don't defy fourth dimensional physics because they operate outside of them. We use Dim6—wormholes—as a shortcut through Dim4 and Dim5. The Masters also use it to access other universes, in the same way that the Others use Dim6 to reach us from the 666th universe. Future memories are glimpses of Dim4 through the lens of Dim6. You can't interfere or interact with them, but you get a ringside seat to *possibilities*. Choices. Consequences."

"That's it, that's what I was seeing. It makes sense!" cried Saav excitedly. "We can find a way to measure it, just like we could measure telepathic abilities in Dim5 once we set up a—"

The Meta's upraised hand stopped her. "No. You may not measure the C20s' abilities. You may not scan them. You may run medical tests on them but only if they agree. And if they are injured you are not to minister to them. No nanites, no amniotanks, nothing but a drip-feed."

"But...!" Am looked appalled.

Dak watched Avalon. Her face was passive.

"No buts. If I should hear of such a thing—and I will know of it immediately," the Meta warned, "I will be displeased. The Dwins will be displeased and the Kwilloys will be displeased. And so will the Masters."

"How can you do that to them!" Am demanded.

Avalon said, "Because we have been *changed*. We're no longer quite human. At the risk of being melodramatic..." She picked up a laser knife. Unsure how it worked, she handed it to Jassom. "Can you set that to one centimetre deep?"

Guessing what was coming, he did so.

"Thank you." Avalon immediately ran it across her wrist.

Chairs were pushed back, and gasps of horror circled the room. Only Jassom seemed unfazed by the sight of arterial blood spurting out and hitting the table. Abruptly, the blood flow stopped. Seconds later the wound appeared to be days old. A minute after that, it had vanished.

Dak turned to the Meta. "Did you do that?"

Ryl shook her head. "I'm a translator/communicator, not a healer/creator."

—I thought as much,—he replied.

—Avalon is a valuable asset to you, sir, a compliment to your own exceptional abilities. It will take you time to adjust, as it will take Avalon time to find her place in a future barely dreamed by her, but it will be a wonderful synergy, that I can guarantee.—Ryl's eyes crinkled in amusement.

Dak inclined his head in gratitude.

The entire Command crew still clustered about the C20, trying to find a non-existent scar. After a few minutes the room settled down and everyone returned to their chairs.

Ryl looked at her mother. A tender smile crossed her face. “Avalon's abilities will not mature for some years. But in time she will be able to re-grow a lost arm in a week. Make no mistake, there is still pain and trauma, but her body self-repairs quickly.”

“So, Avalon here can see into the future, and she's self-healing, which undoubtedly means longevity.” Am was ticking each feature off on her fingers. “What else? Can she heal others?”

Avalon laughed. “No, I'm not a Meta. I can't manipulate my body; it does it by itself.”

“As to what else,” Ryl replied. “This is perhaps the most difficult for you to comprehend, and I know NGC will gag on it. The C20s are bonded to each of the ships they were gifted to. For life.”

“Bonded?” The physicist looked troubled.

“It's a life-tie. It will take the C20s decades—centuries—to explore this gift, but in some way each of these ships is alive with the life-forces of all that they are grown from and all that live within them. It is not a life-force like a planet, nevertheless it is a real entity. Avalon's future memories will protect the ship, and the ship in turn will nurture her in a strange, wonderful symbiosis.

“The life-tie allows the C20s to leave their ships at any time, but they will be recalled, like an object in a rubber band at the end of its stretch, if they are separated by more than a hundred million kilometres. The d-jump will be instantaneous. Their ships will also recall them if they are badly injured or in immediate danger of dying.”

“What ... if the ship itself is destroyed?” asked the engineer.

“Then they will be d-jumped to the nearest viable habitat, planet or ship, and their ties severed until another ship bearing the same name is grown. During that time they will be free to travel throughout the galaxy. If, during the period when they are not bound to any ship, they are injured, their life-tie to Earth will return them there via a wormhole, just as Avalon was delivered to you from Earth of two hundred years ago.”

Dak was amused at the looks the engineer and physicist were exchanging. All of them, himself included, had learned more in the last few hours than a lifetime of study. Now all they had to do was work out the questions to these incredible answers. His amusement faded when he considered the woman beside him. A gift. Enslaved to a ship for life.

—No,—Ryl said clearly into his mind.—Partnered, not enslaved and not for her life-time, for the life-time of this ship. In exchange for her service she will live as long as we Metas. Ten thousand years, perhaps more.—

Watching the Meta, he asked Avalon, “How do you feel about this?”

Mixis simultaneously said,—I can't even read Avalon's emotions and I not dare risk a more direct scan while the Meta is on board.—And you will not risk one when I have departed,—Ryl spoke to them both.

Saav paled. The Meta was right. NGC were going to choke.

"I ... don't know." Avalon looked uncertain. "I've heard what Ryl has told me. I've seen the physical evidence of what I am, but it's going to me a while to figure it all out."

Jassom's eyes narrowed. "Alright, Meta, you called them gifts. Why gift them to *us*?"

Ryl downed the last of her wine. "They're early warning devices," she replied grimly. "Believe me, you're going to need them."

Chapter 18

0930hrs, December 19, 2499

Falcon sat at his workstation on *Asegeir's* bridge, drumming his fingers on his datapad. In fifteen minutes they would leave Dim5 and enter space. He stared at the opaqued LD. Prior to Dim5 engines being taken offline, he would order it clear, so they could peer into a dimension that normal physics didn't like to talk about. A fifth dimension, without which they could not travel to other star systems, would not have ark ships or the technology to clean Earth, or visit a dozen alien worlds. Without which they would not need C20s.

He turned his eyes to the hidden C20 alcove on the upper portside deck of the bridge, knowing she was there, wondering if she would join him. Unlikely.

For the past two weeks she'd been a soothing, almost invisible presence aboard *Asegeir*. A suggestion here, a comment there, a few hours spent untangling an engineering problem, or forty-three straight hours with the nanotechs, developing a vaccine for the Katyl nanovirus. Avalon Davo was exactly as promised, a multi-purpose tool, an unobtrusive support mechanism, a comforting, ever-present, dependable sling carrying them all. He'd missed that. The last time he could recall feeling like that had been with Hanna.

He checked the time. Eleven minutes to their arrival in Katyl space. Eleven minutes to greeting the species that had killed his wife and son by sending them headlong into Sol eleven years ago. He'd learned from Temsit that, mercifully, Hanna and Asher had died before the launch of the ship. Ash had tackled one of the big Katyl, pulled a knife, and plunged it into the guard's torso. The guard had retaliated, snapping Ash's neck then doing the same to Hanna who'd used the distraction to go for his face. Both had been dead before hitting the deck, and the guard, struck in a vital organ, had died soon after. The hatch had been closed and the ship sent into the sun. It was a small comfort, for the others on board had suffered the horror of suffocation and burning alive, while Asher and Hanna had died fighting; a warrior's death, quick and clean.

The hands of the antique brass chronometer moved ponderously. In ten minutes he would see an armada of ships he had never fought directly, for he'd lingered at the entrance of *Warrior's* medops, believing his career to be over. If he could block scans he was a wildcat telepath, which was just fine and dandy, but wildcats were never promoted above lieutenant precisely because their talents *were* wild, unknown and therefore untameable. As fate would have it, he'd had no choice but to take command of a rag-tag fleet of busted ships and broken bodies. And the one person he could have turned to, the one person who had known his dreams, he'd flushed from the fighter decks like garbage.

They'd never even found his brother's body.

Beside him, Vol said, "Nine minutes, sir."

In nine minutes he would see space again. Stars would burst into the sky, contracting like fireworks in reverse, red shifting streaks moving backwards, then blue shifting until finally the colours would coalesce into shining silver diamonds. It was a star system he had come to know well—too well—while sneaking in and attacking like a mosquito, buzzing, drawing blood but never doing any real damage. The fireworks had been different, too, not just coalescing stars but ships burning the last gasps of oxygen, exploding in space, pieces flying in a million directions to travel for years, centuries, until caught in the gravitational pull of a planet—or a million years hence, in some distant sun. He wondered how many pieces of Katyl bodies orbited their sun in perpetual memorial to all he had killed.

The chronometer hands moved again. Eight minutes. He automatically replied to systems checks, and had a final conversation with the new Katyl warleader, Kalmet. Kal, the previous warleader who had ordered Hanna and Asher killed, had died of old age. Kalmet had spent the last eleven years studying human war strategies. Falcon wondered what the warleader had made of Sun Tzu. And Temsit, the captain of the ship that had carried out Kal's orders, what had happened to Temsit in those eleven years?

I'm sorry Hanna, that I couldn't trade just one of Temsit's five wives and many sons for yours and Asher's lives, but I was not given that choice.

He felt Hanna then, her softness and warmth. For a fleeting moment he heard his son's laughter, felt the touch of Ash's hair. A child, perfect and pure. But the touch turned into the soft hand of the C20 who sat beside him, her eyes filled with concern.

"Hello, C20." He smiled sadly, almost vacantly and turned his hand to clasp hers, drawing from this strange and wonderful feeling, this life-force that she said he was somehow part of.

"The Others. They're here, trying to use you."

"I ... know. I felt my son, heard his laughter, the touch of my wife. They're good memories, C20. Nothing can take that away. No *thing* can distort what they were to me and fashion them into a weapon of hatred and vengeance. Hanna killed, as did I, as I will again if necessary. But never for pleasure. I couldn't do it then and I can't do it now. I ... can hear them, see them, smiling, telling me to go on, to carry their memory in my heart, into memories of the future as beautiful as ones past."

He felt something withdraw, dropping him as if burned. The fog in his mind cleared. Abruptly, he turned to the C20. The words he'd uttered were pieces of his soul, not things to be spoken of aloud.

Avalon grasped his hand tighter. "Warn Commander Phelan to double security. You've just repelled a rather pointed, personal attack and there are some very ticked-off Others—or parts of them, their minions, whatever, I've never been able to individualize them. Anyway, they've gone hunting for prey elsewhere because your little mind game turned around and bit them. They don't like that."

Falcon's eyes hardened. They had deliberately distracted him. He gave the order to Phelan then said to her, "They went after you, too, didn't they?"

"Like your memories of your family, my memories of past *Asegeirs* and all who travelled on them were good." Avalon sat back in the cockpit chair and returned his look. "Memories make us who we are. We can either take strength and love from a dozen years of good memories or let hatred fester because of a momentary bad one. I retain the bad memories only when they teach me something, not when they feed my enemy."

"Five minutes, sir," said Vol.

He caught an odd expression on Vol's face—and looked up and around at a wave of restlessness passing through the bridge.

"Two paths, two choices, two roads into a future you will never see but your sons and daughters will," Avalon called. "Misinterpret what comes now and one road alone remains open. Once taken, you will go free but your children must take on the burden of your mistake, as you are burdened with the mistakes of my generation. Take care what you do these next minutes."

The darkness slunk away, leaving in its wake a bridge crew aware that something *wrong* had just passed over them. The C20's words had pulled them back to attention. The Captain had warned them,

repeatedly, what to expect when they left Dim5. Something had tried to make them forget.

So, the Others didn't want humanity forging an alliance with the Katyl, huh? Well, all the more reason to make sure nothing went wrong. "Call Kalmet again," Falcon ordered.

"Sir, online," the communications officer replied. There were no visuals. The Katyl didn't normally use technology to communicate. The radio Kalmet had installed in his fighter had been a gift from Falcon eleven years earlier.

"You felt them too, Captain?" Kalmet said in his guttural voice.

"I don't like being used." Falcon ignored the muffled gasps behind him; he had no time to explain to the crew. What mattered was that Kalmet understood.

"Neither do we Katyl. It is a good omen." Kalmet's voice held surprise.

Falcon's lips curled in satisfaction. "I hope your welcoming party can fend it off."

"Fend *them* off," Kalmet corrected. "Not many, but nasty, young, inexperienced, or they would not have bothered with you, for your mind cannot be used that way."

The conversation bewildered most of the bridge crew, but it was clear to those who mattered. Falcon saw Avalon's look of intense interest. The Katyl could not only feel the Others, they could define them.

Avalon said, "A distraction can be just as deadly under the right circumstances."

Vol turned to Falcon. "Two minutes to Dim5 exit, sir. Shall I clear the LD?"

"Thank you, Captain Vol. I'll see you soon, Kalmet."

"I'm glad it was you who returned, Warbird. Soon."

The connection was broken, The bridge was dark except for the status and workstation lights, and the disconcerting, depthless void of Dim5. Falcon felt the tension mounting, felt the presence of every one of the crew as the peculiar silence of expectation mounted. His mind expanded until he sensed the delicate touch of every life form on board, millions of soft lights, each one precise yet part of the greater whole that created a powerful rightness. Then he saw a momentary distortion, like oily water. The Others were lurking, ready to pounce. "Alright, people, stay alert and remember what I said. They'll have the entire armada waiting for us and they'll be letting off fireworks."

"Just like a bunch of hooligans." Avalon released his hand, stood from her chair and walked towards the LD.

Falcon's broader perception faded and his awareness focussed within the bridge. "A suggestion, C20. Sit back down. It's not an ... easy experience.

Avalon turned to him, grinning like a child. "I like surprises.

"Lock down all weapons," Falcon ordered.

"Sir?" Weapons Officer Lieutenant Fielding's voice was uncertain.

Falcon frowned. "Lock down all weapons, my command only."

"But sir, what if—"

He turned and stared at Fielding, sensing the oiliness gathered around the lieutenant.

Fielding gulped. "Weapons locked down, sir. Your command only."

"Thank you, Mr. Fielding."

"Five seconds, sir," said the nav officer.

Avalon strode to the centremost point of the bridge and sat down on the floor. Falcon smiled and shook his head. A nineteen year old girl in jeans, white T-shirt and leather sandals was sitting cross-legged in the middle of his bridge just as—streaks of light burst across the LD. The dazzling display slowed then stopped. It was hard to tell how many stars there were, for the space they had entered wasn't only filled with the lights of distant suns and even more distant galaxies, it was filled with the lights of a thousand massive warships.

Silent panic screamed through the bridge. Falcon could smell the stench of terror from the crew, feel the oiliness settling over them, gluey and insidious. Ten thousand photonic beams shattered the darkness as the armada opened fire on them. A rain of devastation lanced at *Asegeir*, but at the last moment, the rainbow lights curved and twisted in spiral patterns, dancing past their vision. Bursting pyrotechnics sent a multitude of geometric shapes across space. Small ships, Katyl fighters, flew straight at them, peeling off at the last moment, sending proximity alarms screeching through the bridge.

"Belay tha—"

Vol had already punched the manual override. "If one of those jocks misjudges and hits us," she muttered. "He'll wind up as a bug splat on the hull."

The photonics, of course, were a different matter. *Asegeir's* LD hull was designed to absorb or deflect a continuous burst—but not from a thousand ships for a sustained period.

The crew were too well trained to be stunned into immobility. And that was the concern, for every instinct demanded they take evasive action, open retaliatory fire, do something—*anything* but stand there and calmly accept imminent annihilation.

Mixis Saav sat in her chair behind Falcon. As Command telepath, her primary job was to keep Command personnel and bridge crews safe, sound, and mentally whole. Many here, herself included, had experienced the wrong end of a Katyl attack. But while they had escaped the old *Asegeir* in a shuttle, Avalon had been standing on the bridge when it was destroyed. Mixis also knew exactly what to expect from a Katyl war cry, a mark of respect for a warrior of equal strength. No doubt it wouldn't have been quite so ... overdone, except it was Falcon, the one they called Warbird, now returning after an eleven-year truce.

She began to relax when she felt the bridge crew control their terror, trusting in the skipper to know exactly what he was doing. Mixis watched their faces, illuminated by the multitudinous explosions. Their eyes were torn between the fiery display, Falcon, and the C20, their fingers poised over control panels, waiting for orders.

One person, however, was losing the struggle. Mixis sensed Fielding's mind snap into panic. Before she could speak, Vol had pinned the lieutenant with her gaze. He was frantically trying to bring weapons back online. "Fielding, stand down," Vol ordered.

No one spoke, no material or paper rustled, no cups clattered and no soft heels walked the catwalks. The bursting lights and screaming fighters were mute, for the fury playing out only metres away was within

the dead soundlessness of space. Just one noise: Fielding desperately punching the manual weapons' controls.

"I said," Vol repeated calmly, "stand down. If they were attacking you'd have been dead long before you attempted the first entry."

Fielding looked up, his terrified eyes wavering between the Captain and Vol.

"Stand down, son, it's alright," Vol added quietly, maintaining eye contact with him.

Fielding swallowed and ceased his desperate hand movements. But Mixis felt his resentment.

Twenty minutes later, it was all over.

"Pity there were no sound effects." Avalon jumped up and walked to her cockpit chair. "It would have been very cool."

"Cool'," echoed Vol, deadpan.

"Very." Genuine pleasure lit the C20's face. "Well Captain Falcon, you sure know how to impress a girl. What's next?" She curled her feet under her in a familiar pose.

"Next'?" Vol replied. "C20, do I take it you were *entertained* by that little ... performance?"

"Sure!" Avalon looked around in apparent surprise at the dozens of faces glued to the LD. "Captain Falcon warned us what to expect, and we got just that, didn't we? So why is everyone looking like they need to change their shipsuit pants?"

Mixis exchanged looks with Vol.

"We have a week's travel to their home world at a nice, steady pace," explained Falcon. "The Katyl warleader's coming over in a few minutes, then most of these ships will break off and return to Katylgar by Dim5."

"Oh." Avalon stood. She sounded somewhat disappointed. "Well, when will you lift the LD restriction outside Command Sector, so that civilians can see our hosts?"

"When Kalmet arrives and most of this fleet backs off from proximity alarm distance."

"I'll speak to the public relations gals if you like but that was the best show I've seen since Ryl took me through an erupting volcano in an energy bubble. Overlay it with the *1812 Overture*—complete with synchronized cannons—and release it for general consumption in the Dome and you'll get standing room only. And," she added as an afterthought, "invite the Katyl Warleader. He's bound to get a buzz out of all the oohs and aaahs. Cool." Avalon nodded her head in affirmation and strode to the exit. "Very, very, cool."

Nervous chuckles quickly turned to a low hum of excited conversation. The relief was palpable. Except for Fielding, Mixis was well satisfied. The prerequisites for working the bridge on any NGC ship were not just intelligence and quick thinking but exceptional personal fortitude. Bridge crew could not afford to panic. Ever. But post-reactions were a natural result of contained stress. Avalon's response to the nightmare reception had done more to alleviate Mixis' workload than a dozen hours of counselling.

Even in the dark, Falcon's smile was evident. "Is she always like that?"

"Best psychologist in this sector of space," replied Mixis.

"How," Vol pondered in a quiet voice, "did the Masters choose the C20s? Or is it the wisdom of age that gives them such selflessness?"

"Maybe a little of both," Falcon replied.

Falcon, too, was well pleased at the crew's reaction—but not his earlier distraction by the Others.

The Others. It was still a mystical term, even after five hundred years. Metaphysical aliens from another dimension that fed, literally, on fear and pain, anger and devastation. Anti-life, the Metas called them. Humans had once called them demons, forces of darkness, lords of chaos. They hadn't been wrong. That was the Others' goal; to return the universe to the chaos of non-life before space and time began. Meanwhile, they glutted themselves on whatever terror they could incite. So why stop now, here? Was Kalmet right in that it was just a handful of lesser Others? A 'hey, what have we got to lose' gesture?

He watched the Katyl armada peel away to resume their normal duties, then he called Phelan. "Any problems?"

"Just complaints about not being able to see out, sir."

"Alright, Commander. Visuals are now online." He manually cleared the rest of *Asegeir's* LD. Only the hemisphere that faced the system's sun remained an almost opaque sky blue—although the image of Earth's sun had gone. In its place was the real, slighter smaller but somewhat yellower Katyl sun, Ka.

"Thank you, sir." Phelan sounded relieved. Behind him, curses and raised voices dropped away to mumbles and phrases like, 'About bloody time'.

Falcon smiled. "Commander, I suggest you liaise with the C20. The PR office will release a recording of the welcoming committee for distribution to entertainment facilities."

"Thank *you*, sir. You hear that? So stop your damned whining and go bother Command Sector PR," Phelan said before the comunit cut him off.

Vol chuckled. "What's a bet the same entertainment licensees will complain twice as loudly when the first patrons lose control of their sphincters?"

"No bet, Captain." Falcon noticed a smaller ship leave one of the battle cruisers. His datapad brought up the readings. "Display arriving ship on view screen."

The image magnified on the LD insert. A cluster of six engines and six weapons ports surrounded the egg-shaped one-man fighter. A second LD insert showed multiple readouts.

"Life forms present. One carbon based. Weapons status; each nacelle shows full photon charges, sir," Fielding reported nervously.

"Thank you, Mister Fielding. We can see that." Falcon's voice contained an edge. It wasn't as if Fielding hadn't been on *Asegeir's* bridge before, both in real and in simulated situations. Perhaps the promotion had gone to his head.

"Should I unlock weapons systems now, sir?"

Vol turned and glared at the weapons officer. "Fielding, why don't you return to your work station and do me a full run-up on our weapons systems? I'd like everything, including backup procedures in the event the primary bridge is rendered inoperable. Ensign Davies, take over weapons pads."

Like Saav, Falcon was pleased that the rest of the bridge crew had weathered the encounter without flinching. And Vol was anticipating his orders by half a second, something he had come to expect of her. She was going to make a fine C20 captain one day. "Open LD doors in the Command shuttle and fighter decks," he said. "Traffic officer, you have control. The incoming Katyl fighter has been briefed on our procedures and is accustomed to gravity shield doors. Use our magnetic grapples, the material of his ship will accept them, then bring him into Fighter Bay One. His command of Standard language is excellent so treat him like any incoming dignitary."

Formally handed control to the duty officer, Falcon motioned Vol to precede him to the gravitor. Earthgov and NGC officials had spent eleven years making elaborate plans for the official 'first' meeting with the Katyl. They'd seemed oblivious to the fact that Falcon had single-handedly ended the War. John Laycock and, later, Ambassador Jolley had spent many a night picking his brains. Those long sessions had given him further insight into the Katyl and helped him to come to terms with his own loss. He'd been gratified when Laycock and Jolley privately informed him that they would be ignoring NGC's protocol in dealing with the Katyl in favour of his approach. While it was true that the Katyl regarded their females as little better than beloved pets, the reptilian beings knew that in order to understand human warcodes they must first understand humanity. The Katyl had never dealt with females in positions of power, so Falcon had decided to press senior ranking women on them at every opportunity, starting with Vol.

Chapter 19

1920hrs, December 19, 2499

"Our problem," said Kalmet, wiping his yellow, lipless mouth with a white cloth napkin, "is that we are a very structured society. Hidebound, as humans would say. Fixed in our ways, oversaturated with traditions, we have become inflexible. Like you, we recognize the metaphysical creatures you call Others. For two thousand years, we avoided warring amongst ourselves by warring on lesser species."

Falcon was more entertained by the reactions of the dinner guests than by Kalmet's lecture. None of the councillors had ever been this close to the species that had tried to wipe them out. Kalmet, on the other hand, had indeed spent the intervening years studying human customs. Now, exposed to the most foreign aspect of all—a female warrior-leader—he had adopted Vol as his preferred dinner companion.

"What happened before you came into contact with off-world species?" Vol asked.

"Once, numerous species of pre-humans shared the lands of your planet. In your oceans, until the Masters took them away many species of cetaceans shared the waters in harmony if not always in peace. On Katylgar there has only ever been one sentient species either on the land or beneath the waters.

"We were much like early humans. All of our aggressions focused on the hunt, the need to work together to survive." He brought his six-fingered hands together in a very human gesture of harmony. "We had no concept of ownership or territory and we were few in number, so we had no need to compete with one other. Katylgar gifted us all that we could want. We used fire, stone and bone tools, and we developed a relationship with migratory herbivores. We protected them from carnivores and in turn took from their herds the old and injured to supply us food and clothing, shelter and tools. I do not think the Others bothered much with us in those days, for when we fought—and we fought often—it was against the carnivores that preyed on the herds."

Kalmet sat back and crossed one double-jointed leg over the other. He was clothed in the beautifully crafted, many-coloured furs and leathers of the animals he referred to. The clothes were elegant rather than gaudy, practical more than decorative.

"Then the Gwyen came from the stars seeking minerals to build their Dim5 drives." He brushed a few crumbs from his pants. "The Gwyen were good beings that found what they needed on the barren moons and asteroids of our system. They came to Katylgar and asked if they might trade with us. We did not understand at first; we had no comprehension that the lights in the sky were the hearth fires of distant worlds. But, like us, the Gwyen were telepaths, and we learned fast. They insisted that one day, when we left our planet we would rightfully claim all the barren worlds in our system, and thus we must be remunerated for what they took. They taught us to develop our natural telepathic talents and to never hurt the land. The technology they gave us was what you now use to build vessels much like this ark ship, although they did not use nanites to hasten the process.

"For hundreds of years we lived thus, travelling to other systems with the Gwyen, learning their technology, learning their wisdom. Then came the ones for whom we have no name. Our old stories say they were the Others manifested in physical form, but I do not think so, for they were not telepaths."

"An arrogant species with stolen Dim5 technology, they took what they wanted without respect or regard for the life-force." Kalmet's hairless, green-speckled brow furrowed in a humanlike frown. "They killed thousands of us—and *all* the Gwyen. It was through these nameless ones that we came to understand how the Others feed upon fear and hatred. We fought back using the tools the Gwyen had given us. But

knowing nothing of warfare, we employed the same strategy that we had devised against our carnivores, sheer brute force and overwhelming numbers, cutting off the leaders first, then killing the pack subgroups before finishing him off.

"We followed the nameless ones to their worlds and waited until their forces were few, then we attacked with no mercy. Having isolated the head, we systematically destroyed the body until nothing remained. I think it was then that the Others claimed us, for despite the pain of destruction that we inflicted on the life-force of their worlds, we had become drunk on the results of our blood thirst.

"There were those amongst us who recognized that, once we were infected by the Others, there was no turning back. We had eaten from your proverbial forbidden fruit and we had to live with the consequences. And so, rather than turning this newborn aggression upon ourselves, we developed warcodes and vented our Otherness on lesser species."

Vol said, "When humans discovered the Katyl had known of the Others for centuries, they derided them for their war against innocents. Then our xenosociologists countered that, although we called the Others by different names—Satan, Beelzebub, the devil—and developed weapons—religious laws—to fight them, we turned these weapons upon ourselves, and wreaked more human suffering and subsequent degradation to Earth's life-force than the Katyl ever did."

"So what are you saying, Kalmet? You've found something in human warcodes you like?" Falcon's eyes twinkled. It had been Kalmet who had been most opposed to his requested boon.

"Even better," Kalmet replied with a deep belly laugh. He raised his yellow-palmed hands into the air. "Sport! We never developed competitive sport, for all our aggressions was turned outward, never against ourselves."

"By the Origins!" Ambassador Jolley stared at Kalmet in shock. "Of course! Why did none of us see it before?"

"Wait a minute." Falcon put down his wine glass. "You have games, you train your troops; you must have developed..." His voice trailed off. Surely it had to be somewhere?

"No, Captain, they haven't!" Jolley said excitedly.

Falcon shot the Ambassador a sceptical look. Jolley had dedicated many more years than he to studying Katyl culture. Still...

"Even in combat training they use simulators and robots," Jolley added. "They have mental games for recreation, and they hone physical skills in non-competitive sports that are nevertheless dangerous and taxing. Rock and ice climbing, free diving to spear those horrible jellyfish creatures, sailing and skiing, and bareback riding on their herbivores. But the concept of competing *against* one another rather than working together to defeat a common enemy—indigenous predators or infection by the Others—is foreign. To take from another Katyl is to take from themselves."

"Which explains your inability to adjust your tactics mid-stride." Falcon's eyes lit in understanding. "You never learned anything but one offensive strategy."

The council members looked uneasy. Kalmet laughed and slapped Falcon on the back. "Yes, my friend. We learned to move as one. One mind, one body, one objective at a time, overcoming by sheer force of numbers. It was how we evolved to protect the herd beasts. We learned early that most other species we supplanted—or defeated—were *not* telepathic. When communications between their home world and outposts were cut, they floundered."

"So, you've traded war for competitive sport?"

Kalmet laughed again. "Not quite. As I said, we are a proud, inflexible race, but it is necessary that we change, evolve, for we were thrust from the plains to the stars without learning temperance along the way. You humans crawled and toddled, walked, then ran headlong towards the cliff for 14,000 years. Instead of flying, you fell and plunged almost to extinction. It has taken you four hundred years to recover and find the right path. We Katyl missed that technological evolution, but we also missed much that was hard learned along the way. It is time that changed. As warleader, I can say that most of our clan leaders now see the value in our learning from each other."

"Most, but not all?" Governor Gordon spoke for the first time.

"Not all," Kalmet replied. "For we are no more of the same heart and mind, than humans are. There are those amongst you who would prefer to destroy us with the small machines you call nanites. And there are those amongst us who would still wage war upon you."

Gordon sucked in his breath. Falcon's eyes caught the warleader's and he said to Gordon, "Of all the Katyl, I hadn't expected Kalmet to be so pragmatic, but his species *is* telepathic. They don't have ridiculous laws to protect the guilty whilst innocent victims suffer, so you're constantly being telepathically scanned."

Mixis patted the Governor's now shaking hand. "Don't worry, Gus. Like human telepaths, the Katyl are accustomed to filtering genuine ill intent from the jumbled emotions in peoples' minds. They may not follow the same code of silence as we telepaths, but they're just as astute in evaluating people's true natures."

Governor Gordon quickly poured himself another glass of wine.

Kalmet added, "I was disturbed, at first, at the intensity of emotions aboard this ship and indeed, amongst many of you, even as you sit here. Your fear and hatred are greater enemies than we Katyl. We never hated our adversaries; we respected them. Although they kill us we do not hate the carnivores that prey on the herd beasts, for they are an integral part of the life-force of Katylgar. As your good Captain Vol pointed out, we hated and feared the un-named ones who slaughtered the Gwyen. It saddens me that you perceive us as we perceived them."

"Although we are telepathic, we do not feel *empathy* for those outside our world. That is why the clan leader insisted you live on Katylgar, so the Katyl will feel your true natures and you, in turn, will feel and understand the true nature of the Katyl. This is the only way to put aside your fear and loathing and help our people realize the changes we must make in our society."

Turning back to Vol, he asked, "Where is the one you call C20? The gift from the Masters?"

"Ah ... the C20s don't socialize, at least not at formal functions." Vol shot Falcon a beseeching look.

Falcon decided to bail her out. After all, he had the luxury of keeping his thoughts private. "The C20 is assisting our medical nanotechs with the development of a vaccine against the Katyl virus smuggled aboard *Asegeir*."

Gordon blanched.

The warleader replied, "How can you develop it without a Katyl?"

"We have Katyl biomass artificially cultured in amniotanks."

"Ah!" the warleader exclaimed. "You have so much that we lack. Amniotanks, nanotechnology ... and sport!" To Ambassador Jolley he added, "We will have many sleepless nights, you and I, trying to discern how much we are allowed to give to one another without incurring the wrath of those we are answerable to."

Jolley smiled broadly, and he sent Mixis a clear thought, which she immediately passed on to Falcon.—Captain Falcon was right in ways not even he envisaged, I think. Such a young man to have been so wise in the face of such pain.—Yes,—Kalmet replied.

Jolley jerked in surprise. Falcon cleared his throat, while Mixis brought her hand to her face to hide her smile.—As I was saying to Governor Gordon,—she said to both of them.

—Quite,—Jolley replied—and reached for the same bottle of wine as Gordon.

"Do you think it will take long to develop this vaccine?" Kalmet asked.

"They're finished but still working out the best method of mass production," Falcon replied.

Kalmet nodded. "Well, you better test it on me. Now, tell me, are many of these C20s ... female?"

Chapter 20

December 25, 2499

"Would you mind if I take the right seat?" Avalon whispered to Falcon.

They were inside the shuttle bay. Ahead of them, Kalmet was deep in conversation with Vol. "When was the last time you flew an NGC shuttle?" Falcon replied.

"'Bout eleven years ago."

He wondered if she was teasing him. "Much simulator work since then?"

"Not much," she replied casually. "You know what they say, it's like riding a bike."

"Um ... sure." The shuttles didn't need co-pilots except in an emergency. He hoped there wouldn't be an emergency.

"This is a not the same ship you used the last time you came to Katylgar." Kalmet took in the clean black lines of the twenty-man shuttle. "No weapons?"

"No weapons, Kalmet. It's just a shuttle," Vol replied.

"Pity, I could have given the clan leaders a little shake-up on arrival." He nudged Vol and winked.

Falcon suppressed a smile. Katyl mannerisms were uncannily similar to humans, but when something that looked like an overgrown, mottled-skinned lizard winked its red nictitating membrane and nudged you with spike-covered double-jointed elbows, it didn't have quite the same effect. As they climbed inside the craft, he said to Kalmet, "Shuttles don't maintain gravity."

Vol sat beside the Katyl and helped him with the unfamiliar buckles. "Ah!" He smiled. Provided that opening your mouth and baring an impressive set of omnivorous fangs could be considered smiling. "At last, a vessel I understand!"

—If anyone had told me a week ago that I'd be best buddies with the Katyl warleader,—Vol said to Saav, who relayed the message to Falcon,—I would have sent them for a complete psych workup.—If anyone had told me eleven of your years ago that a *female* led many of the sorties against Katyl warships,—Kalmet replied to them all,—I would have taken pity on their madness.—

Vol rolled her eyes at Falcon. He chuckled and went forward to the cockpit.

It took Falcon a few moments to adjust the control and seat positions to accommodate his tall frame. During start-up, he kept readjusting them, grumbling about midget service techs. Fighters were tailored to individuals, but NGC shuttles were standard throughout. And that standard was for shorter people.

When the shuttle passed into the outer bay, Falcon saw the waiting Katyl escort ships in the distance. He disconnected the clamps, allowing the shuttle to separate from the dock of its own accord, and then gently nudged the manoeuvring engines until they passed the magnetic field doors.

In payment for hosting him for six days, Kalmet had gifted Falcon his personal fighter. It had been an intense six days. Most ark ship inhabitants were understandably terrified of the Katyl, but Kalmet had been gracious, even to the most hateful. The warleader insisted that their thoughts and emotions taught him how best to repair the damage caused by the War. He'd met with the science teams to discuss the

planned field trips, given talks to school groups, and spent time with the envirotechs. Wherever the warleader went, he'd left behind people whose hearts and minds were a little less fearful and a lot more curious.

The second night after Kalmet had arrived on board the ark ship, Falcon had said to him, "You've changed." The warleader's reply, that it was just the beginning, had pleased Falcon in ways he could not express. Throughout the following days, Hanna and Ash were constant, subliminal undertones in his consciousness. Whenever memories of them had inexplicably turned too poignant, Avalon had appeared by his side, touching him, supporting his emotions, but saying nothing.

The shuttle cleared *Asegeir*, and a thread of anger attempted to tangle his emotions. It was directed at Avalon for babysitting him. Falcon examined it clinically, then turned the annoyance back on itself. It abruptly vanished.

"Pesky little buggers, aren't they?" said Avalon.

"Is that why you're really here?"

"It's been years since I was in an NGC shuttle, but I own a four-seater. I'm just a lousy passenger. Something to do with control issues, Maxis tells me."

"You'd think they'd get tired of harassing me. They must know by now that it won't work."

Her lips compressed. "You use memories of your family as a protective barrier, focusing like a diamond, hard, clear, pure. But even diamonds can shatter. The Others can't force you to go against your character, but they can kill you." She reached beside her and briefly touched his leg. "I do not want that, Chris. I want a captain. I want *you* to be with me for a very long time."

He fired the Dim5 engines. If these remarks had come from anyone but a C20, he would have called it flirting, but the intimacy developing between them had nothing to do with sex. And yet he could not imagine such intimacy with another man. Perhaps this explained why C20s were always the opposite sex to their captains. "Didn't you say my resistance hurt them?"

"Ye—es, but they're nibbling, hoping to wear you down and distract you. It's taking a lot out of them but the entire focus of their existence is to create anger and pain, despair and vengeance. In a twisted kind of way their own pain drives them, especially when they need to feed. Back in my time, some would have said it was the devil, waiting for a lapse to do his dirty work. The names have changed, but the players remain the same."

They made a thirty-second Dim5 jump to Katylgar, emerging just a short distance from its larger, innermost moon, Eos. The sun, Ka, was behind them. Except for status lights, small display screens, and the crescent Katylgar, the shuttle's cockpit was dark and quiet and intimate. He had missed the serenity and solitude of the cockpit during these last, hectic weeks. Perhaps the psychologists were right; cockpits *were* womblike.

From the shadows, Avalon whispered, "It's Christmas today."

"So it is," he replied, recalling the religious significance.

"I remember my first Christmas as a C20," Avalon said wistfully. "I found it hard to believe that humanity had abandoned it."

"What was it like, Christmas?"

"Magic. The traditions had been absorbed into Western culture from a score of myths. It started long before Christ was born, as a religious ceremony to worship the sun. When Christianity supplanted the old ways, the festivals combined and midwinter mass became the Christ mass. A bishop turned saint was pulled along for the ride, a benefactor to small children. In the eighteenth century, someone wrote a fanciful song imbuing Saint Nicholas—Santa Claus—with the symbol of wealth and prosperity—a tubby belly—and tossed in reindeer a little stoned from eating red mushrooms so that they could 'fly', and ... well, you know how traditions are born. When Europeans settled the new world they took their traditions with them, along with holly and mistletoe, plum puddings and turkeys and carols by candlelight—all of it part of Christmas.

"But it was more than that," she added with a fond smile. "It was about family and friends, about giving and sharing with your fellow man. Oh, I know Thanksgiving has taken on that role, but that's a North American tradition. I was an Australian and I cried a lot that first Christmas."

Avalon turned in her seat to face him. "So we C20s made our own Christmas, and the Metas helped, for they'd also missed it. It was relatively easy back then. The ships weren't completely self-sustaining, so space missions were short, three months at the most. The second year after our arrival, the Metas created an underground settlement in what once was Canada. For twelve days we drank eggnog and sang carols, decorated trees and rode sleighs with reindeers—who were really morphed Silvans—in the sky. It was magic, more magical than any Christmas that we'd ever known. Historians said it was just a recreation of the real thing, but they missed the point entirely. Christmas never was a 'real thing', it always was just a creation—of the human spirit."

Gently touching his leg again, Avalon drew his eyes to her. "For the first time in a hundred years all the C20s will be on Earth this Christmas. The Metas are going to create a small city. They're *all* coming with their Silvans, as too are the Dwins and Rachnians, who helped build Gaia, and the Erochs who transported the cetaceans from Earth. More than ten thousand of us celebrating hope and joy, brotherhood, peace in the galaxy and goodwill to all beings. I hope you will come."

He recalled Saav's words. Humans were ephemeral, fleeting, and Avalon's threads of continuity lay with those from her time—her family and the considerably longer-lived alien beings. Christmas was a family event. No matter how much he bonded with her, no matter how close they became, he had no family and he was an outsider in her world. "I appreciate the invitation, C20. But NGC will have me locked away in debriefing. Too much has happened these past weeks, and we've only just started the trip."

Avalon sensed the echo of his sadness. Christmas was not a good time for men like Falcon. Neither was Thanksgiving. What was there to be thankful for when your family had been taken from you? He spoke of Hanna and Asher with fondness, not pain, for his life now was the ark ship. But a deep, well-hidden melancholy lingered, something the Others kept trying to ignite. He would do well to find another woman, start a new family. It would be impossible during the next year, but she resolved to take on as much of his burden as possible.

Ahead of them, Katylgar grew larger. If what she believed about Falcon was true, any moment...

He inhaled sharply.

"It's Katylgar's life-force, the planet itself, welcoming us," she explained. *This* was why she had wanted to be in the cockpit, to see if he was sensitive to *all* planetary life-forces. His innate connection to the greater Life Force was so strong that he did not need the lengthy period of adjustment normally required in a new captain. Perhaps more telling was the way the Others continued to make him the focus of their attentions. They feared him. She had never seen that before.

"I ... know!" His voice filled with awe. "I ... remember. But it feels ... different to Earth."

"Katylgar has never suffered the horrors mankind perpetrated on Earth. This will be the hardest thing humans must deal with; their preconception that the Katyl are a bloodthirsty, violent, and destructive species. These emotions were directed *away* from Katylgar. You sensed this when you arrived here eleven years ago, but you couldn't explain it. Now that you're bonding with *Asegeir*, with me, that aspect of your soul is awakening. Let it in Chris. It will make you whole."

Falcon ran a final systems check, and readjusted their angle of descent to skim through the surface of the atmosphere belly-first. When they reached 30,000 metres, the Katyl escort fighters pulled ahead. On Earth, though many cities had disappeared beneath encroaching jungles, water, or ice, the impact of human habitation on the landscape was still evident. But on Katylgar such impact had never existed. The landscape was raw, magnificent. Through the cockpit monitors, Avalon could see the passengers inside the shuttle craning their heads like gawking tourists.

The escort fighters landed in a broad depression, an astrobleme in the desert beside a small ocean. The Katyl had chosen it as their spacedock because little could live there. As the passengers left the shuttle by the rear exit, a dozen Katyl arrived, riding bareback on large, ponderous animals. Moments later, Avalon and Falcon emerged to the sounds of horrified gasps—and a bunch of near-petrified humans.

Lying prone and bleeding on the ground was Kalmet.

Avalon walked across to the warleader, took the horn blade from his hand, and sliced open her palm. Although self-inflicted wounds could pull her back to *Asegeir*, they had to be major. The cut was deep enough for the blood to well instantly, thickly. Then it fell into the waiting ground and was absorbed without visible trace.

She surreptitiously shook her head at Falcon and the xenological team. Her meaning was clear. It was not necessary that they, too, spill their blood into the body of Katylgar. Her own wound was trivial—it had already healed—but it had achieved a great deal.

Kalmet stood, staring at the ground where his blood had fallen. Although much had been absorbed, a trace lingered. Not so the C20's. "Katylgar has taken you completely into her heart," he said in awe. "She has accepted you into the totality of the whole."

The twelve riders looked at one another, dismounted and came across to examine the ground where Avalon's blood had fallen. They opened their lipless mouths, and a haunting, trilling sound echoed across the sand dunes. The Katyl clan leaders welcomed humankind to their world.

Chapter 21

January—April 2500

During the first weeks in the Katyl system, hundreds of scientists moved to Katylgar. While some travelled with the herds in the temperate and tropical latitudes, others set up winter camps in the colder regions. The Katyl were universally nomadic, following the herd beasts on their migratory paths, living as they had for tens of thousands of years. Worshipping the land and all it provided, they took only with regret, treating always with respect. In return, the land was always bountiful, supplying them with a rich variety of additional protein and vegetables, fruits, nuts and herbs. According to one xenosociologist, but for their reptilian ancestry, the Katyl could have been taken straight from human history, circa 30,000 years ago—except for their Dim5 capabilities.

This extraordinary dichotomy between Stone Age nomadic culture and space travel segued easily because, unlike most humans, the Katyl had retained their empathy with the planetary life force. Born in tents made from herd beast hide, the young male Katyl grew up learning the ways and traditions of their clans, while studying physics, mathematics, and engineering by way of personal datapads. Pulled by an inexplicable restlessness, many males left to fight distant enemies when they reached young adulthood, although sufficient remained behind to protect the herd beasts.

Katyl males were tall, around two metres. Finely boned and long-limbed, they had evolved to run with the herd beasts. Their speed and dexterity enabled them outmanoeuvre the highly intelligent, vicious predators of their planet. By contrast, the females were short, never more than one and a half metres, much stockier and considerably more muscular than their male counterparts. Wide-hipped and built for hard physical labour, they followed the herds while their men roamed far and wide, protecting them. They also lacked more than rudimentary intelligence, having evolved as the brawn to their male counterparts' brain. Superficially, they appeared to live an almost slave-like existence, but xenosociologists quickly came to understand that the simpleminded females were more than just content with their lives—they were happy. Their mates adored them and never, ever mistreated them.

Although the ratio of male to female births was more or less equal, by the time a Katyl reached his or her fifties, there were nearly twice as many females to every males. Protecting the herd beasts took a severe toll. When a Katyl male died of old-age, he might be mourned by fifteen wives, for no widow was ever left to feel abandoned.

A universally nomadic lifestyle precluded the growth of city-states, so no central government or bureaucracy had ever been born. Katyl society was made up of twelve great clans, members of whom were found in every tribe. Chiefs, chosen for their superior telepathic abilities, governed each tribe, ensuring continuous communication across the planet. Despite telepathy, the Katyl were individuals, not always agreeing and not always following the rules or peer pressure. Still, for the most part they were a harmonious people and every human who spent time with them left wondering why these same beings had tried to destroy humankind.

Ambassador Jolley travelled with the household of Jimset, the current Chief of all twelve clans. The title had been bestowed upon Jimset because he was the most powerful telepath amongst his people. During the first weeks Jolley's home was a tent. Then the tribe moved into the mountain caverns of the northernmost continent for winter. Days were short, but often clear-skied, and the younger Katyl males skied and ice-climbed. For four months the herds would remain in semi-hibernation, while the predators moved south and made do with tougher, less succulent game. The Katyl used this time to cull the older or weaker herd beasts. They cured hides and made or repaired tents and tools, dried herbs and brewed

medicines. Jimset had deliberately chosen the winter months in Katyl' northern hemisphere for the humans to return, so they could see the many faces of Katyl life. With no obligation to tend the herds, he could instruct the humans in the Katyl ways and learn of humanity in turn.

Falcon had wanted to spend more than a few days on Katylgar, but although he was familiar with generic ark ship systems, his first priority was to study *Asegeir's* unique habitat needs. By contrast, the C20 spent most of her time away from *Asegeir*, although she never missed the weekly Command Board meetings, and she always appeared whenever a problem presented itself, often before anyone asked.

* * * *

One afternoon, Falcon was sitting in his office, reading a highly workable list of recommendations for bio-systems updates. It suddenly hit him that, unless Marcus was holding a few undisclosed doctorates in bioengineering and systems analysis, the sergeant could not possibly have written it. He called the sergeant in and asked him.

"I didn't, sir."

"Well, who did?" The report's recommendations were too insightful, too pragmatic to have been formulated by the head bio-systems' engineer, who, while brilliant, was an idealist.

The answer hit him before Marcus replied, "The C20, sir."

"The ... Why did you ask her?" Falcon's brow furrowed. It was not Avalon's job to undertake such extensive systems research, even if she was in an ideal position to integrate the diverse parameters.

Marcus looked offended. "Of course not, sir. The C20 offered to help, especially on reports requiring full integration. A week later I noticed she'd accessed the bio-systems files and just, well, started doing them."

By writing such succinct reports, she had also alleviated Falcon's workload. "How many others has she done and why didn't you tell me before?"

Marcus looked down, embarrassed. "Eight. And she's working on another dozen, mainly anticipating problems and devising advance strategies. Basically, a series of off-the-shelf solutions and computer programs I and the bioengineers can use as templates."

"And you didn't tell me, because...?"

"Sir, the C20 said it was her job to help things run smoothly. Nothing the size of *Asegeir* has ever been grown before, and she's monitoring individual and integrated systems. She needs to feel it, she said."

Falcon sat back, pursed his lips and clasped his hands. It was unlike Marcus to be evasive. He continued to stare at the sergeant, waiting for the answer.

Finally, Marcus said, "Avalon said I shouldn't mention it in case anyone thought she liked paperwork, and the bioengineers started assuming she'd do their jobs for them. Not," he added hastily, "that *you* would take her for granted but, well, she just likes things to run smoothly. She doesn't have to justify her role, she's not bucking for a promotion or recognition so she just quietly gets on with it."

Quietly gets on with it. Falcon thanked Marcus and dismissed him. He'd heard similar words from C20 captains and was coming to appreciate them. He must find some way to show his gratitude.

* * * *

When the first scientists returned to *Asegeir* from Katylgar, word spread that the planet was a veritable

Eden and the Katyl, exceptionally gracious hosts. Curiosity gradually overcame fear and civilian requests to visit Katylgar increased. Because of the Katyl-based nanovirus, nobody was allowed to leave *Asegeir* unless they had undergone a brief telepathic scan. Every microgram entering the atmospheric shuttles was checked and rechecked for nanos. No evidence of the virus was ever located outside of Jolley's quarters, but none of the Command Board was convinced that this settled the matter.

Investigations into the nano-fatalities on Spacedock and Earth continued. There had been no further deaths after the first two weeks. Careful analysis of Nanotechnic Incorporated's files allowed investigators to conclude that the Earth-based virus was difficult to transmit and easily killed. Theoretically, anyone could catch it, but, like the Spacedock virus, its purpose seemed to be to remove potential witnesses—albeit with less finesse.

At a Command Board meeting in Falcon's office three months after their arrival, Phelan gave his updated report on the investigation. "Using flow charts, investigators pieced together the chronological sequence of events, but I've never seen so many blank walls in an investigation of this scale before."

"Well, somebody triggered those nanos," Vol muttered.

"That somebody would be me," Avalon said. "Exactly *why* is still a mystery, however my file search released a—pardon the cliché—dead-man's switch. When Admiral Manion's brain flat-lined, a micro-transmitter sent out a coded signal. It only had a range of metres, but the epidemiology was easy to follow. The next deaths, an hour later, were his aides. The DNA encoded nanites in everyone who died thereafter were all set with identical dead-man switches, each in turn sending out signals until eventually the entire station was blanketed."

Governor Gordon frowned. "Why didn't those implicated, panic, and leave?"

"Some did," Phelan replied. "There were four departures to Earth between the time Avalon initiated the file search on Jolley, and before the station lock-down at 0600 the following morning. Only three of these departing ships arrived at their destination. Victimologies of Spacedock fatalities showed that most had undergone medicals within the last twelve months. The chief medical nano engineer filed the flight plan for the missing shuttle and its fourteen passengers. All of the passengers listed were med or nanotechs. I'm betting the pilots walked through an area of transmission on the way to the shuttle, so their nanites were triggered. The vessel enters Dim5 and whammo, they died."

"The other ships that arrived on Earth were two Courier class vessels and a private yacht. The yacht landed in Sydney then did a little whirlwind tour of Earth. In every city they visited, nano-outbreaks occurred less than an hour after their arrival."

"The owners of the yacht?" said Vol.

"Webster and Garret. Both were major shareholders in the dummy companies that were eventually traced back to—Nanotechnic."

"What happened to them? They dead too?"

"One gal, one guy. Webster's body—or what was left of it—was found floating face down off Brisbane Waters about a week back. Cause of death ... Difficult to tell, because it was only a leg, slightly shark chewed. Garret's remains have just turned up off the coast of Southern Florida. Cause of death, well, gee, that's a hard one folks, because guess what turned up in the stomach contents of a big old 'gator a vet was autopsying?"

"Eew." Vol wrinkled her nose.

"Very coincidental wouldn't you say?" Avalon looked doubtful.

"The chances of both ending up as critter food? Not really, it's a legal way of disposing of bodies."

Avalon's frown turned thoughtful. "Or a good way of letting people think you're dead. Stuart, can you get forensics to run a check on the remains?"

"Looking for what?"

"Evidence of recent—no, make it *any* exposure to micro-gravity."

Phelan's face screwed up in annoyance. "Hell, they should have thought of that."

Gordon looked confused until Commander Rose explained. "It's possible the remains were not from once living victims but biomaterial artificially generated in an amniotank. Same DNA, same everything but chemical analysis will show if the biomass has ever been exposed to micro-gravity. If not, well we know Webster and Garret were in space—micro-gravity—recently.

"Which fits in with the timing," Andrea White said. "It would take three months to generate that much biomass, but growing entire limbs isolated from the original donor is high tech stuff."

"So is developing nanites," said Casey Camicci.

Falcon leaned forward. "If you're right, it's a definite lead."

"Yeah, well, it's also a big universe out there, plenty of places to hide," Phelan said gloomily.

"Not if you're xenophobic," Avalon replied thoughtfully.

Phelan shot her a look. "Which brings us to the next item. Nothing, nada, zip, on where these Katyl nanites were manufactured. Both telepaths who ran Jolley's immigration scans are dead but everything else, including her medicals, was clean. Same applies to the envirotechs, and the shuttle engineers. Theory is, Jolley and the others were never implanted with this nanovirus because their final medical check was done on arrival at *Asegeir*, not Spacedock. They couldn't risk our medtechs blowing the whistle."

Andrea White stood and walked across to the side table where the coffee was percolating. "Could the Katyl nanites have been manufactured in her dwelling?"

"Manufactured, yes," Camicci replied thoughtfully. He nodded when White held up a cup. "Jolley had the equipment and her envirotech *friends* were in fact cross-qualified nano engineers. But years of research went into developing it."

"Jolley, or whoever else initiated this.... conspiracy, has to have had access to Katyl biomass," Phelan accepted a coffee from White. "Thanks."

"Stuart's right," Camicci said. "And it would have taken a decade to perfect a time-delayed virus of this nature. So someone started this either during or right at the end of the War."

"The NGC senatorial investigative committee has blocked the release of files on the Katyl War," said Phelan.

Avalon glowered. Politics again. And considering who was running the investigation ... She had a sour feeling in her stomach. "Stuart, are criminologists still running victimologies?"

"Yeah, but they're scraping the barrel. Anytime they come up with the name of a politician, Matheson's staff block it and take over."

"Can they do that?" White handed a coffee to Falcon before sitting down.

"Technically, yeah. It doesn't stop NGC from poking around, asking questions, but NGC itself under parliamentary investigation. It doesn't have the teeth to go up against those same politicians."

"The fox guarding the henhouse," Avalon muttered. "Very convenient." She grabbed a handful of nuts from the bowl on the table and began munching on them.

"Too convenient," Phelan agreed. "While the President is the ultimate authority, because the nano-outbreak on Earth and Spacedock targeted the Viking Project, he's under public pressure to clean out NGC from top to bottom."

"What about quarantine? Is it still in effect on Spacedock?" White asked.

"And in Brisbane, Houston, Sydney and the other half dozen Earth outbreaks. Quarantine will remain in effect for six months. Earth as a whole is under Category Two quarantine, which is not as stringent."

"And the C20s?" White looked to Avalon.

"All are remaining in Spacedock and their ships, as per quarantine," Avalon replied. "Everyone knows we're immune but people feel it's expedient to stay put." She didn't need to add the expediency worked on multiple levels.

The meeting turned to other matters. The Board had enough to cover with the operations of the ark ship to be worried about events thousands of light years away.

* * * *

The next morning Falcon woke to the realization that he could finally take some time off. *Asegeir* was due to depart from Katylgar in two weeks, and he'd only spent a few days on the planet for short, diplomatic meetings. Mixis had been nagging him and Kalmet had invited him to the annual summer games on the southern continent. Falcon called the warleader to say he was coming. Kalmet roared with delight, gave him landing co-ordinates and added, "Park behind my marquee and I'll have a tent set up for you nearby."

Falcon would have preferred to go down in the two-man fighter that Kalmet had given him, but it was on Eos, the moon, for *Asegeir's* engineers and techs to undergo maintenance training. He notified space traffic control that he'd be using his personal shuttle and could take twenty passengers off their hands. The traffic administrator groaned with relief. Falcon chuckled and ordered Scarty to pack his duffel bag.

The Katyl had made provision for hundreds of thousands of additional visitors during the summer games, but there were only so many shuttles. Eighty-seven kilometres away, on the far side of *Asegeir*, over a thousand people waited impatiently to go to Katylgar. Eighteen very influential retirees were ready to take the quarantine administrator's head off. As some of these retirees had been ex-Governor Jolley's friends, the quarantine administrator told them that she'd explained the situation to Captain Falcon, and that he had offered to take them to Katylgar in his very own, personal shuttle. She packed the retirees and three civilian scientists into the ground transport to the Command Shuttle Bay, hoping the Captain wouldn't mind an extra passenger in the front seat.

Twenty-one, huh? Falcon raised his eyebrows at the passenger manifest. He had a mind to call up quarantine and chew a few heads himself, but he knew the pressure they were under. Then he noticed the

astronomer, Selena Chaney, on the passenger list. He'd never met her, but if he was going to spend three hours in a cockpit smaller than a double bed, it'd better be with someone who had space experience and could talk about something other than their dwelling's inefficient recycling unit or what a nice person Governor Jolley had been. He thumb-coded the seating allocation, and continued to work on minor last-minute reports until Scarty arrived and informed him the passengers had boarded.

Falcon took his duffel bag, dropped down the Command gravitor to the shuttle bay and then climbed on top of the ship to the overhead cockpit hatch. Forgetting he had a front seat passenger, he tossed his bag in first, aiming for the co-pilot's seat. A muffled 'oomph' resulted. He slid into his seat, surprised to find a pair of arms topped by a thatch of red-blond hair trying to extricate itself from beneath his bag. Two hazel eyes and an elfin face glared at him from around the handles. Her expression said it all; fighter jocks—they were all the same, even when they made captain and ran C20 ark ships.

Hoisting the bag off the petite body, Falcon stowed it in the bulkhead locker. The amber head and hazel eyes belonged to a woman far too young to be Chaney, and clearly unimpressed by displays of oafishness, even the Captain's. He liked her already. "I really am sorry. I forgot I had twenty-one passengers."

The young woman's eyes lit with understanding. "Oh ... then I should be thanking you, otherwise I'd still be sitting in quarantine."

Falcon began start-up procedures. It took him several seconds to realize what was different. He called a tech and said, "Who do I thank?"

The tech's words came out in a gush. "Ah ... the C20 insisted we redesign it to your specs, but she wasn't happy with what we came up with, so when she was on board earlier this week, she worked on it herself. She implied we should take the credit and I don't think she'd be too happy if she learned we told you, sir, if you get my meaning. I guess that means it's alright, sir?"

There wasn't a whole lot Falcon could say to that. "Yeah, it's ... perfect." It explained why the distance to the locker had been reduced by about thirty centimetres and his head nearly brushed the overhead hatch but no longer bumped it. Avalon had completely reconfigured his seating and the controls. He hadn't been this comfortable since he'd flown his own fighter.

He gave his passenger a cursory glance, making sure she was buckled in and didn't have any accessories to float around in micro-gravity. "Did you take micro-g medication?" Acting as a bus driver was one thing, but he had no desire to play nursemaid or have his personal shuttle smelling like a sick bucket on arrival.

She shook her head. "Don't need the stuff."

Falcon signalled the dock to slip them past the micro-grav field. Once outside, he fired the engines and flew low and close to *Asegeir's* hull towards her North Pole.

"Eh ... just a suggestion," said the girl.

"Mm?"

"Most of the passengers are elderly, and some have only been in a shuttle once in their lives, and that was the migrant ship from Earth. I'm not sure even micro-g pills will work if you maintain this aspect."

Falcon glanced ahead. *Asegeir's* hull appeared to fly at increasing velocity across the top of the shuttle's forward LD. In other words, the shuttle seemed to be 'upside down'. The perspective offered a better

view of *Asegeir* because the shuttle's LD windows curved overhead, but he rolled the vessel one hundred and eighty degrees until it was 'belly-down'. "Better?"

"Yeah, I didn't fancy three hours with someone's stomach contents floating around. Selena Chaney, by the way. Nice to meet you, Captain Falcon."

"Is your mother aboard?"

Selena frowned. "My mother died twenty years ago."

Oops. Noticing the fine lines around her eyes, he mumbled, "You're younger than I expected." *Great, add bumbling idiot to oafishness.* Try again. "Going down for the festivities?"

"My psychologist more or less ordered me out of the observatory."

He snorted. "You and me both."

Selena smiled, a full-bodied, attractive smile. "I told him I'd stress out, suffer withdrawal symptoms if I was away too long."

"Maybe I should try that on mine."

"Forget it," she replied dryly. "They don't buy it."

He altered their flight path and made the brief jump into Dim5. The woman beside him was the most famous human physicist/astronomer of their time. At the tender age of twenty, she had deduced the Katyl Dim5 disrupter within an hour of its implementation. It had taken her a week of hammering NGC to convince them an exit point could be achieved in Saturn's atmosphere. Again, NGC had ignored her until they tried Saturn and discovered that biological organisms would not survive the trip—something she had stressed in her notes. By the end of the War she'd been discovering Chaney holes in the disrupter at the rate of one a week, and had become a somewhat controversial figure by expressing disappointment when the disrupter was removed. According to her, she'd been close to deducing the technology.

"Been down to Eos yet?" he said when they emerged into space.

"Couple of times. There's not a whole lot I can do until they give us a disrupter. Still, with what I've learned I'll have their engines retro-engineered within months."

"Don't tell the media that."

"You don't mind giving them nanotechnology?" Selena glanced at him.

"They can give us more than Dim5 disrupter tech and engines. And they already know about nanite technology and amniotanks; they're telepaths."

Selena groaned and slapped her forehead. "By the Origins! I can't believe how stupid I've been! The C20 said as much months ago. They probably have every detail of every piece of technology we have!"

"But they're honourable. They won't take technology and give nothing in return, so don't bust a gut trying to figure out what they're going to give you anyway."

"Captain, you just made my day." Selena laughed. "In fact you just made my year. I'd be honoured if you'd let me buy you a drink on Katylgar—I suddenly feel good about taking a vacation."

Falcon smiled at the petite redhead. He rather hoped Selena Chaney would be interested in more than a

drink.

Chapter 22

April 17, 2500

"Ooomph...!" Avalon grunted as she hit the ground amidst uproarious laughter from the Katyl males. She picked herself up and brushed off the dust with her left hand. Her sprained right wrist would need a few moments to self-repair. She limped from the arena, nursing a badly bruised hip.

When Avalon had first seen seachons, she'd asked if she might ride one. The omnivorous, four-legged beasts were the closest things to domesticated pets the Katyl kept. They looked like a cross between a giant hairless llama and a small Apatosaurus. With the intelligence of a dog and the disposition of a horse they could readily be ridden—if they like the rider. If not, well, more than one human had been shuttled back to *Asegeir's* amniotanks with shattered bones.

The Katyl offered Avalon a docile looking beast, but she suspected that the Katyl's sense of humour—and their incredulity at a female wishing to ride—would result in some unpleasant surprises. She hadn't been wrong. The seachon had disliked her smell and the way she mounted it. Then she'd tried to ride it like a horse—at which point the animal decided it was time to part company.

Much to the surprise of *Asegeir's* bridge crew, she hit the bridge deck with a thump. Her face screwed up in extreme pain, she told them not to touch her, but to call the warleader and let him know she was okay.

The duty officer knew Avalon was badly injured but he'd seen C20s land on bridges before. Kalmet inquired if he should send a two-man fighter to return her to Katylgar. Avalon would have nodded but her neck bones were knitting so she mumbled, "Yeah—and get me food in the meantime!"

"Don't worry, C20," Kalmet advised when she returned to Katylgar and walked into the camp, glowering at the incredulous male Katyl. "He will grow accustomed to you if you sleep with him a few nights. But you would do well to observe how we ride, for they are not the same as your herd beasts of Earth."

"Yeah, I got that much," she muttered. The male Katyl feared she had been killed when the seachon tossed her onto her neck; the crack of broken vertebrae had been heard even over the snorts and stomps of the seachon. Then when she'd vanished before their eyes, it had caused a sensation. While the Katyl knew of her life tie to *Asegeir*, seeing it in operation was a whole new experience.

That night, she'd sought out the seachon in its outdoor pen and used its broad flank as a pillow. The animal hadn't objected and by week's end had taken to following her like a dog.

When Avalon returned to *Asegeir* for the next weekly Command Board meeting, she'd spent the night on board. The next day, one of the younger Katyl told her that the seachon she had befriended had missed her and had slept in the tent gifted to her. Fearful of creating a dependency in the animal, Avalon asked if someone else might take it over. The young Katyl assured her that it was not necessary. Although the animal was intelligent, it had a short memory and was happy sleeping in a place that smelled of her. In time, when another's smell replaced hers, it would be equally happy. Avalon asked the young Katyl if he might be so kind as to take her tent and befriend the seachon when she eventually left Katylgar. The lad had been so excited that he'd nearly tripped over himself on the way out. A gift such as that, his father told her gravely, was an honour beyond measure. The boy was due for his first tent soon and coming from the C20 it would be treasured for life.

With the help and advice of her newfound Katyl friend, Avalon spent the following months learning to ride the seachon, and practicing moves that would allow her to compete in the Summer Games.

The Games were held during the annual gathering. Before the Gwyen, a Katyl might have attended once or twice in his lifetime, for Katylgar was as large as Earth and the distances that had to be travelled, great. With the advent of shuttles most Katyl attended every year, planning their arrival and departure so that at any one time no more than twenty percent of the planet's population of twelve million came together in the huge desert. The sheer size of such a gathering of nomads would have been a logistical impossibility for a non-telepathic race. The Katyl managed it without fuss, although most humans viewed the carnival atmosphere as controlled chaos. Like any gathering of herdsmen it was colourful, noisy, and vibrant with life, a time for clans to come together, for widows to find new husbands, and for children to be named.

Although Avalon had nothing to trade, the Katyl knew who she was and plied her with food, drinks and items of clothing or bags made from the soft hides of the multi-coloured herd beasts. Initially reluctant to accept their generosity, Kalmet explained such items were not gifts but payment.

"For what?"

"You are a gift from the Masters to humans. The Katyl feel your closeness to the Masters, and all have heard how Katylgar drank of you on arrival. When you pass amongst them, they are enriched by your presence in a way that material gifts cannot do justice. But it is all they have to give, and they feel blessed for being able to repay you in some small measure."

The Katyl never crowded her or treated her like some sort of religious figure, as was often the case on Earth. She never hungered or thirsted and never felt cold after sunset, for blankets or jackets were politely pressed upon her. In the evenings, before she washed in the nearby ocean, fragrant soapstones found their way into her possession and a change of clothes would be set out for her.

As the days passed she learned that the humans had found gifts they could trade for food, clothing, beautifully worked bone tools, and leather bags. Small objects from Earth, natural jewellery and craft items were the most popular. High-tech or processed materials were declined, for the body of Katylgar could not absorb such items without hurting the life-force. The few high-tech items allowed on Katyl were collected when they were no longer in use and returned to the dead worlds for recycling.

* * * *

Falcon landed his shuttle behind a collection of tents bearing Kalmet's markings. He was not surprised to see seachon riders coming to greet them. He was, however, astounded to see one with shining, raven hair.

While the Katyl riders gathered at the rear of the shuttle to meet the passengers, Avalon steered her seachon to the cockpit. Falcon opened the overhead hatch and jumped down. "I see you've adopted the local method of transportation."

"I think he adopted me. Kalmet gave me clothes for you. Might even disguise you if you wear the hat." She held up a roll of dusky hides. "They'll fit, I know your size."

"So I gathered," he mumbled under his breath. Catching the soft leather parcel, he said more loudly, "Thanks!"

"I'll give you a ride to Kalmet's training ring. After that you're on your own; I'm in training, too."

He climbed back up the shuttle's cockpit. "For what?" When she didn't answer, he turned. Her eyes

were laughing but she said nothing.

The soft leather hides fitted perfectly. When he jumped out and walked towards her, she said, "You look like a cowboy."

"A what?" He looked at her uncomprehendingly.

Avalon chuckled and shook her head. "A word long since lost from our language. Have you ever ridden a seachon?"

"My riding has been restricted to shuttles and fighters."

She offered him her hand. He shot her a sceptical look, and she let out a full-bodied laugh. "What, not game, Captain?"

He clasped her forearm, and swung up behind her onto the bare back of the seachon. The animal turned its head to stare at him a moment, and then apparently accepting him, slowly walked around the shuttle. "You planning on entering these games?" he asked.

"They've developed a team sport similar to polo, except instead of the rider using a stick, the seachons use their necks. Doesn't take much rider skill, all you have to do is stay on, but it can get pretty bloody."

Falcon wasn't sure if she was teasing him, but he had other concerns. The seachon had developed an odd trotting motion, and, despite his display of agility in mounting the animal, he was now in real danger of falling off. The only thing he could grasp was Avalon, who sat astride the animal as if she were part of it. When the seachon trotted around a boulder, he instinctively grabbed her waist—and just as swiftly apologized.

Glancing over her shoulder, she said, "Wrap your legs around mine and keep your arms around me or you'll fall off once the seachon picks up speed."

He closed the distance hesitantly—until the seachon broke into a lolling, bone jangling gait. After that, he clung on. Within minutes he started to relax. Soon, he was actually enjoying it. He refused to consider the possibility that he also enjoyed feeling the curves of Avalon's body through the soft-textured leathers, the bare skin of her legs, and the smell of her hair and skin, redolent with the sweet Katyl soapstone.

They arrived at a corral, and the seachon slowed its pace. Although he was reluctant to release Avalon, he was glad to feel the ground beneath his feet. Any more riding and he'd know about it in the morning.

"Kalmet's set up a tent for you between his marquee and the shuttle," she said. "Clansmen are still arriving but they'll leave a decent perimeter around you. I guess I don't need to tell you that you won't need trade items."

The Katyl believed they owed him a life-debt that could never be fully paid. To refuse their gifts would only bring them shame. He nodded, and said, "Thanks for the ride, C20."

"See you later!" Avalon turned the seachon—or perhaps it turned on its own behest—then galloped away past the colourful tents.

Falcon stood watching, unaware that Kalmet had walked up behind him.

"She rides like a Katyl," said the warleader. "She'll do well in the games."

Speaking in Katyl, Falcon replied, "Thank you for giving her, for giving all of us, this opportunity." He

turned around and smiled at the warleader.

Kalmet's mouth opened in an expression of delight. "It is we who thank you, Warbird. It has been hundreds of generations since the Katyl played host to another species. Our people have learned quickly when I feared they would not. And they have learned to discern that which they feel is good and right in humanity, and to ignore that which is wrong."

The warleader looked towards the market stalls with a thoughtful expression, and added, "There have been times these last months when many amongst us questioned your people's strange propensity to allow the Others to turn you against yourselves, but the clan leader has been wise in his answers to them."

"And what were those answers, Kalmet?"

"What he has always said," he replied, meeting Falcon's penetrating gaze. "Why he agreed to your boon. We hold ourselves in high regard, because we never hurt Katylgar as your ancestors hurt Earth. But we were gifted wings while still in the cradle. We have walked the stars, but the Masters have never come to us; never given us such gifts as Metas and C20s. And the technology that you have traded peacefully from other, more advanced beings, beings we have never met, speaks of a greatness in you that we Katyl have missed. We would bask by your hearth fire and learn of that greatness."

"As we, in turn, have learned from you." Falcon firmly clasped the warleader's arm. "The C20 has a theory that an alliance between us is a test, for both our species. I'm not sure if she's right, but your people's generosity of spirit has changed the heart of every human who ventured fearfully from *Asegeir*. My people have returned to our ship with joy in their hearts and praise for your worthiness. Although the road will not be easy, I believe we will, as you say, form an alliance that will help repel the Others."

"I like your C20. I like your Commander Vol, too, and Senior Commander Saav. This has been the hardest for we Katyl to understand, this use of females. The clan chief spoke wisely when he told us to treat your females as another species of human and not as we would consider our own."

"At your suggestion, I suspect?" Falcon looked knowingly at the warleader.

Kalmet shrugged and leaned on a rough wooden railing. "No matter. It has worked, I think, for your people first viewed our women as enslaved, when the truth is it is we who are enslaved to them." Falcon shot him a curious look. The warleader rolled his eyes. "They may only be as intelligent as seachons but I have twelve. Do you know what it is like to service twelve females and keep them happy?"

Falcon burst out laughing and slapped the grinning warleader on the shoulder. Despite their differences there always was common ground between alien species, usually in the most fundamental of places.

At sunset, Falcon returned to the shuttle, pleased to see an amber-headed woman sitting under the rear hatch. He also noticed that the flag above his tent bore the distinctive silhouette of a raptor. "Hi," he said. "Am I late?"

"I'm early." Selena stood and brushed the dust and sand from her shipsuit. "I wasn't sure if I could find my way back here in the dark."

"They fix everyone up with a tent?" He climbed up the shuttle cockpit.

"Yeah." Selena wrinkled her nose. "I think I'll find a nice warm sand dune to pull up tonight, instead."

"Why?" He reached through the hatch to retrieve his bag.

She waited for him to return before answering. "Retirees accustomed to fully-serviced units in a

communal tent with the cleaning facilities two tents away? No thanks."

Falcon chuckled, slung his duffel bag over his shoulder, and set off towards his tent. "I hope they remember the list of proscribed drinks. I trust the Katyl not to serve them anything poisonous but they have a wicked sense of humour, and I've been on the wrong side of their alcoholic beverages." He tossed the flap back and walked in. He'd spent his first visit to Katyl in such a tent. Depositing his bag on the low, fur covered bed, he grinned at the expression on the astronomer's face.

"Is this ... yours?" Selena hesitantly looked around at the colourful cushions and drapery.

"For the duration, yeah."

"I'm impressed. Maybe I'll sneak in here if my sand dune gets too cold."

"Flap's always open," he said invitingly.

Selena's brief smile was non-committal. "C'mon, how about I buy you that drink?"

* * * *

Later that evening, Kalmet decided to check on Falcon before retiring. He rounded the corner of his tent to see the C20 lingering in the shadows. She was watching Falcon, who stood near the entrance of his own tent, embracing a small, fire-haired woman. The C20 stepped back and bumped into Kalmet. Suppressing a gasp of surprise, she looked up and met his eyes.

Kalmet briefly touched the mind of the fire-haired female and learned she had only arrived that day, with Falcon. They were not lovers, although that was about to change. He took the C20 by the elbow and led her into his tent. "A tinsmet before bed, yes?" he said as softly as his guttural voice would allow.

"I've developed quite a taste for tinsmet, thank you," Avalon replied.

Not all of Kalmet's brethren had agreed with this idea of introducing new ways. Indeed, he himself had once been the most vocal opponent. As apprentice to Kal, he had seen into the minds of the ones left behind in the lifepod from this C20's previous ship. There existed in humans a recklessness. Confused, misdirected passions dominated their souls. He had seen how they killed, lied and deceived one another. Such abhorrent traits, he argued, must be wiped from the galaxy.

Then one amongst them, the one his people knew as Warbird, whose true name reflected his spirit, had shown himself to be an exception. Still, Falcon was an *exception*. Honouring the human's actions by terminating hostilities was one thing, but Kalmet did not wish his people to become tainted by the humans' Otherness. When Jimset, the chief of all the clans, agreed to Falcon's boon, Kalmet took it upon himself to learn all he could about these humans, to protect his own people's souls. But in his learning he discovered that humans had much to offer, perhaps more than the Gwyen. Had not the Metas evolved from humans? When they landed on Katylgar, this gift from the Masters, the C20, had shown the twelve great leaders of the twelve clans that she felt the life-force. Having given greeting in the time-honoured way, she had been accepted in full by the body of Katylgar. The months and years ahead would not be easy, but the Others' attempt at intervention during *Asegeir's* arrival in Katyl space solidified his belief that their two species would one day form a powerful alliance. Now, after the time the humans had spent on Katylgar, he was sure of it.

Kalmet poured tinsmet into two earthenware mugs, handed one to Avalon, raised his in a salute and then bade her sit. He could not penetrate the mind of the C20, but like a telepath, he came right to the point. "It is good to see Warbird becoming whole again. He has Katylgar to thank, for it is healing that final place in his heart. It is appropriate, for it was we who stole it from him. I only wish that he could have

spent more time here."

"Katylgar's life-force is powerful, extending a welcome all the way to *Asegeir*. Falcon's life-force, and mine, are part of *Asegeir*, and thus he feels Katylgar even from afar." Avalon sat back in the opulent cushions.

"And you C20? What of you? When will the place in your heart be filled?"

"Oh, I fall in love from time to time." Avalon sipped her tinsmet.

"But not with the one closest to your soul."

She looked up. "The bond between us is not of that nature. I am very fond of Falcon. His potential is greater than that of any captain I have ever known, but it is important that he be whole in himself. For that he needs a different kind of love, the love of a woman as a mate."

"You cannot give him that?" Kalmet pressed.

Avalon gently rolled the mug between the palms of her hands. "I think, perhaps, it is like your love for Katylgar: profound, deeply respectful, but not sexual. Your love for your wives does not detract from that. Indeed, each enhances the other."

"You desire his union with the fire-haired woman?"

"I don't know Chaney well, but I know of her. She's the sort of woman Falcon would do well with. It was she who found the holes in you disrupters."

"Yes," he chuckled. "I know. She's most anxious to have the technology."

Avalon's smile faded. "Do you see that ... as a bad thing?"

"Oh, no! She is dedicated, and although her values differ from our, she is a good being, honourable according to the human code of ethics, and most importantly, free from the Others. I trust Chaney, but we Katyl do not feel the minds of the humans on Earth, so we would sooner her have our Dim5 engines and disruptors. She will find the weaknesses in the technology and we shall all benefit. However, if we give it to her now she will leave Warbird."

"If they could have a week or two together it might foster something more permanent. That's important, both for him and for the wellbeing of *Asegeir's* life-force."

Kalmet watched her shrewdly. It had taken time for human xenosociologists to understand the Katyl relationships with their wives. Despite their poor intellect, it was still the love between a male and female. Although Kalmet could not read Avalon, and he could no longer read Warbird, he sensed the link between them. Was not the life-force bound by the love of a male and female in the ultimate act of creating life? For all her wisdom, the C20 seemed blind to this fundamental truth. Yet he also detected the truth in her desire to protect Warbird, and to do so she wished that he embrace another female.

Although Kalmet had joked about servicing twelve wives, it was rare amongst the Katyl to love more than one, the first one. Others wives were taken when their mates died, for without a mate they were as nothing and shrivelled within themselves; a cruelty Katyl males would not allow. After seeking permission from their husbands, these secondary wives generally found lovers amongst the younger, unmated males. It was almost always given, for they usually fell pregnant where before they might not have had children to love. But Kalmet himself had remained untouched until taking his first wife, whom he loved to distraction. Indeed, she was the only female he had ever embraced.

"Would you mind waiting until Selena is about to return to *Asegeir*?" Avalon said.

"Or until she tires of being here, for her mind never truly leaves her work. If you wish her well then trust me to decide when the time is right."

Avalon downed the last of the tinsmet and stood. "Thank you, Kalmet. I appreciate that."

Chapter 23

April 28, 2500

During their eleven days on the planet, Falcon and Selena wandered the great markets, enjoyed the entertainers, and watched many of the games. At nights they roamed the minstrels' halls, ate Katyl food and drank Katyl wine, retired early, and made love until exhaustion sent them into deep, peaceful sleep.

Since Hanna's death, Falcon had not been celibate, but by the time he'd felt willing to consider a more involved relationship, he'd been buried headfirst in the Viking Project. Every spare moment had been given over to research, not walking carefree, hand in hand with a pretty woman, laughing and taking pleasure in the simple joy of being alive. Even now, it was not something he wanted for more than a week or two, but it fulfilled a momentary need, a need he also sensed in Selena.

In the last few days he'd also felt her growing restlessness. Selena's work was her true lover and it beckoned like a Siren. Every few hours she'd check with her team, only to be told the same thing: nothing's changed, go have fun and watch the games.

The first time they'd seen Katyl polo, Falcon had been horrified at the apparent lack of rules. It seemed to be a chaotic melee of seachons and Katyl, a lot of dust and not a little blood. The players thundered after the ball in a free-for-all that bore little resemblance to the gentlemanly sport of polo, and more like the original, and far bloodier, centuries old human version. The Katyl had a predilection to gang up on the seachon with the ball and attempt to wrest it away, regardless of whose side they were on. Kalmet, who had invited Falcon and Selena to sit in his clansman's tent for the game, had laughed. "We may have taken your sport to our hearts but we are going to play by our rules!"

"How do you know who's won?"

"Whoever's left mounted!"

Now, on the penultimate day of the Games, Kalmet was standing up, roaring his lungs out when the competitor listed as 'A.Vvy' fell from her mount.

Falcon grimaced when Avalon rolled with the fall. She stood and staggered, then shook her head. Her seachon continued to run down the field, pushing the ball along the ground with its long neck, unaware that it had lost its rider.

Kalmet shouted at 'Avvy' to use another mount to reach to her own. Falcon was almost as animated, pointing to the riderless seachon behind the C20 and yelling at her to turn around. Beside him, Phelan, who had arrived on the planet just hours before, gesticulated wildly.

Still groggy from her fall, Avalon was aware of Falcon's presence, of his calls to her, but she did not look around. She'd deliberately avoided him since his arrival on Katyl. It wouldn't be the first time a captain's relationship with a woman had been ruined by the intimacy between him and his C20. She wanted his relationship with Selena to develop. She *needed* it, as much as Falcon.

Wiping the dust and blood from her eyes, Avalon looked about for her seachon. It was at the far end of the arena. She weighed her options. There was no way she was going to reach her mount by foot in the two and a half minutes remaining. Instead, she ran to the nearest, unmounted seachon, spent several precious seconds staring into its eyes, then leapt on to his back. It instantly took off to join the fray. They closed the distance just as the pack dispersed, re-converged in a thundering roar, and ran directly

towards her. Her seachon had lost the ball! Only now did the animal realize that it had also lost its rider. It swung its long neck around, seeking her smell amongst a thousand others. Avalon directed her newly acquired mount to avoid the oncoming pack, and instead make for her seachon.

The ground was littered with Katyl. Some were staggering off the field unaided, while females helped others along. One was on a stretcher.

Seeing her desperate ride, the spectators loudly counted off the remaining seconds in Katyl. Avalon was laughing now; she hadn't felt this alive in years! Her seachon's head stilled when it located her. Then it trotted towards her. With only moments to spare she jumped from the borrowed animal onto hers—and ignominiously landed back-to-front. But it didn't matter; she was still in the game. Seconds later thunderous cheering and applause rolled across the arena. When the dust settled Avalon saw that, apart from her own seachon, only riderless animals wandered around the field. By sheer happenstance, she had won.

Grinning wildly, with her hair in tangled disarray and her cheeks covered in dust and smears of blood, she carefully rotated on her mount, rode to the end of the field where the ball lay, and directed the seachon to push it towards the warleader's tent. Even the Katyl in the surrounding clan tents cheered and yelled wildly. The C20, a female, had won one of the most exacting contests of the Summer Games.

Few human spectators knew that A.Vvy was anything other than an officer from Command. Regardless, their cheers were just as loud.

Her seachon nudged the ball to a stop. From here the final team of players would pick it up again for the last game of seachon polo for the season. This was the only reward a winning clan received, the best view for the opening moves of the following game. Kalmet sent two of his wives down to take care of the animal, while he enthusiastically motioned Avalon to join them.

She climbed over the rail and began to brush the dirt from her leathers. Kalmet embraced her in a bear hug, then slapped her back with a force that sent dust spiralling into the air.

"Tinsmet!" cried the warleader. "A whole jug of tinsmet for Avvy!" he ordered his other wives. "Well done! This will be remembered for many years."

"It was hardly a victory, I won by default."

"But that's how the game is won! Stop thinking like a human and have a drink!" Kalmet took the jug and thrust it at her. "She is special, this one!" he said to Falcon. "But then you already knew that."

Phelan pulled her into a roundhouse hug then planted an almost brotherly kiss on her lips. Avalon, clutching the jug of tinsmet, cried, "Careful! You're spilling my drink!"

"I'll buy you another!" Phelan declared as he set her back on her feet.

Still laughing, running on adrenaline, she embraced Falcon, glad that his hold was a little less enthusiastic. Her smile froze. Seconds passed while something more than the flow of the life-force passed between them. He reluctantly let her go.

"That was *the* most incredible ball game I've ever seen!" Phelan declared.

Avalon took a long swig of tinsmet and then said to Selena, "I'm so glad you made it for the Games."

Selena smiled in genuine pleasure. "Congratulations, C20. I'll have to second Senior Commander Phelan's sentiment."

"I'm not sure if it's a game so much as a riot I just happened to survive."

"You two know each other?" Falcon looked between them, bemused.

Avalon patted his knee, then sat back. "Science Council," she explained.

"Tonight we will feast in the finest warleader's style," Kalmet declared. "And when the evening is done I will bestow a boon." He met Avalon's look.

She understood. *Asegeir* was due to depart in three days and Falcon had called a Command Board meeting for the following evening; the vacation was over. It had been a lot of fun, and there would be many more visits to Katylgar in the years ahead. "In that case," she said, standing. "I'm going to go clean up."

Phelan's shipsuit was designed for winter in *Asegeir's* Australian habitat. Dust had sweat congealed around the cuffs on his neck and wrists until he felt—and looked—as bedraggled as Avalon. "Me too, I feel like I'm in a sauna."

"I'll give you some leathers." Falcon took Selena by the elbow.

Phelan had figured on bunking with Falcon, but any doubts as to the Captain's relationship with the astronomer were confirmed when he followed them into Falcon's tent. It didn't take a detective to notice the science team emblem on the side of a duffel bag, or the distinctly feminine items scattered around. Neither the skipper nor Selena flaunted it, and he figured none of the other crew in Command probably knew. He'd keep it that way unless and until Falcon made it obvious back on board *Asegeir*. Personally, he was delighted. He'd been on *Warrior's* bridge when NGC informed them about Falcon's family.

Outside, the C20 was talking to Kalmet. The warleader slapped her back again, burst out laughing and left. Carrying a bar of soapstone, she walked past Phelan—in the opposite direction to the bathing tents. Confused, he said. "I thought they were thataway?"

"They are. The beach, however, is *that* way." Avalon pointed to the sand dunes beyond the shuttle.

Selena emerged from Falcon's tent, a change of clothes and soapstone in hand. "Why didn't I think of that before?"

Avalon smiled knowingly. "A lot better than sharing with fifty retirees whining about no hot water."

"Would you mind if I joined you?" Selena shot her a look of entreaty.

Phelan stood with his hands on his hips, watching the two women climb the sand dune.

Falcon stepped outside, and looked at him. "What's up?"

"The thought of two naked women cavorting in the waves."

"Better keep those thoughts locked away from stray telepaths, Senior Commander."

Phelan shot Falcon a look. Did the Captain know his feelings for Saav? Technically, they were not breaking NGC regulations. Both of them were senior commanders, and neither was ever likely to be stationed under the command of the other in their chosen career paths. But NGC didn't much like it on principle. And the truth was, he still really wasn't sure where he stood with Mixis Saav. "Easy for you to say," he muttered, and followed Falcon to the men's cleaning tents.

Streaks of brilliant orange and purple lit the sky. The water beneath seemed to have been drizzled with oil

paints. Selena stopped and said, "You go on. I want to watch this."

Avalon sat beside her on the crest of the dune, watching until the sun disappeared.

"I miss them." Selena's voice was wistful.

"Sunsets? Well, they aren't too bad in parts of the outer deck, around the desert habitats."

"But it's not Earth." Selena ran her fingers through the sand. "At home, I spend most of my time on the orbital telescopes, but every few days I take my shuttle back to Earth just to see a sunset over the ocean, to smell the salt and feel the wind. Whenever I can, I sleep outside. The stars aren't bright, of course, especially near the sea—all that salt air." She glanced at Avalon. "Ark ships are wonderful, but being on Katylgar has reminded me how much I miss home. If, as promised, the Katyl send Earth the Dim5 disruptor in three months, I've arranged for my team to take a long-distance shuttle home. There's so much we can do back there that we can't on *Asegeir*."

Kalmet had been right. Avalon felt a twinge of disappointment. This woman was not for Falcon.

If a small part of her was also relieved, she buried it deep where her conscious would never find it.

"He loves you, you know," Selena said softly.

Avalon glanced sharply at the petite woman. Was the astronomer sizing her up—and graciously conceding defeat? Or had the Others found some obtuse way to hurt him? She looked deeper, and saw that Selena was merely being honest within herself. "Not yet," Avalon replied. "Soon, as my feelings for him also grow. It's what we are to one another, to *Asegeir*. But it's not the kind of love that a man and woman have for each other. It's something else again and can't replace a normal, healthy relationship."

"I wonder how many spouses can deal with that?" Selena replied.

"It's not easy, I know, but I would like to see him happy with someone." Avalon stood and took off her leathers.

"We've had a wonderful few days together, C20." Selena also stripped out of her clothes. "Now it's time to return to what's really important to us. Chris won't miss me anymore than I'll pine for him. If he thinks of me at all in the future, it will be in same way that I remember him, as a delightful interlude."

Selena didn't realize she had done much more for Falcon. Or perhaps she did, perhaps they had done something for each other. Who knew what pain life had dealt this remarkable young woman?

Avalon stepped into the water and rubbed the soapstone over her body. She couldn't fail to notice the fine, China doll beauty of the astronomer. Selena's skin was pearl-like, her limbs were small and delicate and her face, elfin. She was forty centimetres shorter than Avalon, and at a guess, twenty kilos lighter. And although she looked nothing like Hanna, Falcon's taste clearly ran to petite, fair-skinned feminine woman, not tomboys that ran around on the backs of seachons covered in dust and blood.

For some reason, that thought saddened her.

After dinner, Kalmet announced that he'd ordered all the pertinent files and a working Dim5 disrupter and engine to be delivered to *Asegeir* immediately. Selena all but leaped on the warleader in gratitude, then turned imploring eyes to Falcon. Kalmet chuckled. He had a Katyl fighter on standby for Selena to return to the ark ship whenever she wished. Selena ran from the warleader's tent, Falcon smiling indulgently as he followed.

Falcon crossed his arms and leaned against the central tent pole of the tent. "I've had women walk out on me before," he said with a broad grin, "but never in quite such a hurry."

"Oh, Chris, I'm sorry!" Selena turned from packing to meet his gaze. She must have seen the laughter in his eyes, because she threw herself into his arms and kissed him.

Falcon knew that the passions that had burned those first nights had faded—for both of them. He'd wondered if these last days together would have been a mistake, a lip service to familiar intimacy. Kalmet's gift couldn't have come at a better time. He looked thoughtfully back outside to the warleader's tent. The Katyl was telepathic, perhaps...

"Okay, that's everything!" Selena declared.

Falcon carried her bag outside. Kalmet, Phelan and Avalon were already waiting near Katyl fighter. Selena hugged each of them in turn, and whispered something in Avalon's ear. Falcon didn't hear what she said, but he heard the C20's reply, "Always."

Selena came at last to Falcon. She grinned, conscious of their audience. "Thanks for the drink, Chaney," he said with a wink and then swatted her buttocks affectionately. She picked up her bag and ran to the waiting fighter.

"Well, Stuart, you can bunk with Chris after all," Avalon said. They watched the ship leave.

"If it's all the same to you C20, I'd still prefer your tent. The skipper snores."

"I do not," Falcon said.

"Yes you do," Phelan retorted.

"I wondered what that was," Avalon said as they returned to the tents. "I thought it was a seachon."

Part 2: Kwilloy

Chapter 24

2330hrs May 01, 2500

"We are therefore ordering Captain Falcon relieved of duty, the C20 incarcerated, and *Asegeir* to return to the Solar system," said President Norman.

The bridge crew and security team stood disbelieving. Vol cut to the heart. "Sir, why incarcerate the C20? She's bonded to *Asegeir*. It's not like she can go anywhere."

"Perception, Commander," replied Norman. "With over a thousand deaths on Spacedock and Earth to answer for, it is important that all suspects are seen to be treated equally."

"How do you think the Metas will *perceive* this ... sir?"

Standing behind her, Phelan muttered, "Not to mention the Kwilloys and Dwins working on the other ark ships."

"Captain Vol, will you carry out my orders and take command of *Asegeir*?" Norman demanded.

Minutes earlier, Avalon had called Falcon and asked him to come to her quarters immediately. Hair mussed and looking exactly like a man who'd been woken from a deep sleep, he'd walked in still pulling on his shipsuit. Avalon placing a finger to her lips banished the last of his sleep. Her gesture meant that the AI had been ordered to report all conversations in their quarters.

Dressed in jeans and a coloured, Katyl shirt, she'd pulled him into her gravitor and up to her private alcove on the bridge. The LD screen was at an acute angle; they could see it without being seen. Behind President Norman sat Senator Matheson, his porcine eyes as slippery and menacing as black ice.

"I will comply with orders issued through the correct channels," replied Vol.

Even in the darkened bridge, Falcon could sense the rage simmering behind Peta Vol's impassive façade.

"Captain Vol," said Matheson. "President Norman is your Commander in Chief. A direct order from him outweighs any other command from NGC!"

"Unless orders are correctly coded through a validated chain of command, the AI will assume I am attempting a mutiny and shut down access to all systems."

Matheson waved dismissively; however, Norman replied, "Of course, Captain. You will carry out my instructions?"

"Ordering *Asegeir* to return to a quarantined area serves only to draw attention to a situation still under parliamentary seal. Kwilloy is twenty-five days Dim5 travel away. The Solar system is a month away, but in one month's time, it will only be a five-day Dim5 jump from Kwilloy to the Solar system. Better for us to continue to Kwilloy, and then, if necessary, return to Sol from there. We'd arrive about an hour later than if we leave now."

The President began to reply but Matheson interrupted again. "I'm not sure I follow your reasoning, Captain. It took you two weeks to get to Katyl space, but now you say it's a month's return to Sol. And Kwilloy space is considerably further from Sol than Katylgar! Now my math may not be that good," he smiled indulgently, "but even I can see that doesn't add up. Correct me if I'm wrong but if you enter

space now and reset your course for Sol you should be here in two weeks."

"Senator, you're wrong." Vol's voice almost—but not quite—betrayed her condescension.

Matheson's false geniality vanished and his cheeks flushed. "Are you trying to be sarcastic, *Captain*?"

Vol's voice turned superbly contrite. "Sir, if you have about three years I could teach you the higher mathematics. In Dim5 the time taken to travel is not a function of distance and velocity. Even at a fixed speed, time taken varies from moment to moment. That's why it's called Dim5, Senator."

"If the matter is resolved while you are on your way here, you can change course back to Kwilloy."

"Senator, you can't *change course* in Dim5. You have to enter space, and then set new parameters. There's no way to hide it. The physics researchers will know the moment we leave Dim5, and as they're running real-time experiments based on this course they will be ... extremely upset. Secondly, as I just explained, travel time in Dim5 varies from moment to moment. If we break this schedule, it could be months before another window opens. Finally, under the Ark Ship Independence Charter, you cannot order *Asegeir*'s return to the Solar system without the agreement of the civilian council and Governor. There are billions of credits in trade goods at risk, as well as physics experiments that have been years in the planning. Even if the council agreed, one of the clauses in the Charter guarantees compensation to citizens, and those here on contract. Earthgov would be liable to pay that compensation."

Pressed hard against Avalon in an alcove designed for one, Falcon processed the information. Matheson was finally showing his hand. Vol was dissembling, buying time by citing a dozen constitutional and alien trade agreements. "Keep thinking on your feet, Peta," he whispered.

"Where do they get morons like Matheson?" Avalon murmured.

"A moron didn't set this up," he replied.

"Neither did Matheson."

Falcon glanced down at her, but her eyes were fixed on the screen.

"My point exactly, Senator," Norman said to the others sitting around the table. "Overruling the constitution of an ark ship when we are concerned solely with the activities of two people aboard that ship is untenable."

"One person," said Matheson, glowering. "And one C20."

Falcon felt Avalon tense—then relax. Her eyes lit with understanding.

"Senator, correct me if *I'm* wrong," said Vol. "An interrogation of both Captain Falcon and the C20 by any known means short of outright torture is impossible."

Several senators winced, but Matheson snapped, "If Earthgov decides the C20 must be detained because of irrefutable evidence pointing to her involvement in a horrific genocide and further, a conspiracy to sell out humanity, then that C20 should be held directly responsible for *Asegeir*'s detention. All requests for compensation should be directed at that C20's considerable estate."

"Oh boy," Avalon muttered. "This asshole is pulling no punches. Matheson's either very sure of himself or a damned good poker player." Her nose screwed up and she shook her head. "But there's too much at stake for him to gamble. He must know that."

The President apparently knew it as well, because he said, "Yes, Senator, as you say. However these are still only allegations, and the C20 is innocent until proven guilty—"

"The proof is all here!" Matheson's eyes bulged with indignation. "The other C20 has been arrested. It's just a question of time before going to trial."

"Then why not use that time wisely?" Vol suggested. "Certainly, if the C20 and Captain Falcon are guilty of murder and conspiracy they must be held accountable."

Avalon's hand gently sought Falcon's. He was conscious of her nearness, the slow beating of her heart. She was as composed as if they were discussing the latest weather report from Miami.

"By allowing *Asegeir* to continue," said Vol. "You have one month to collate evidence without arousing the suspicion of sympathizers or guilty parties still on Earth. Even if the council agreed to our immediate return to the Solar system, it would mean calculating a new window, which could still take longer than if we maintained our course to Kwilloy. And the matter will become public—and very controversial."

"Which is exactly what Matheson wants," Avalon whispered.

Falcon wasn't so sure. The senator was a political animal, accustomed to the public's fickleness. In thirty days his constituents would have become blasé while *Asegeir's* inhabitants would be baying for his blood. Matheson's power base rested in his ability to pull, not push his supporters. Insisting on *Asegeir's* return now would be pushing too damned hard. The next question is bound to be why? Matheson might be, as Avalon said, a moron, but was a cunning one.

The silence that filled the bridge of the ark ship was deafening. Matheson's eyes flattened. "Perhaps you have a point, Captain. You will see to it then that Falcon is returned to Earth on a long-range shuttle."

"I can, sir, but that would take even longer."

"Minutes ago you said it would be one month in Dim5 space!"

"It's not space, Senator. It's Dim5 and the physics of speed are dependent on mass. The greater the mass, the faster the constant speed."

If Matheson looked up a standard time chart, he'd pick a hole in Vol's reasoning as big as Dim5 itself, but strictly speaking, she was telling the truth.

"Look at Matheson, the way he's sizing up Peta," Avalon said. "He's never understood Dim5 but he thinks he understands human nature. Peta could not have made full captain at such a young age unless she was ambitious. A good little NGC robot that requires orders to be encoded through channels that for all intents and purposes no longer exist."

"And Peta knows it; she's playing him." Falcon's admiration for Vol climbed another notch.

Matheson snapped, "Then incarcerate Falcon and the C20 in the detention block immediately."

"House arrest would be sufficient, Senator."

"We don't agree, *Captain*. House arrest does not preclude open access to the AI; the detention block does. When this matter becomes public the record will reflect you acted as impartially as Falcon and the C20 acted towards Governor Jolley. In fact, given the C20's supposed abilities, I insist on twenty-four hour full body blanket surveillance with an open channel to this office."

Falcon's stomach clenched. Blanket surveillance was extremely demeaning, and full body was only used when a suspect's body waste had to be searched.

President Norman said, "Senator, that is going too far—"

"Fine." Avalon left the alcove and pulled herself down the gravitor. "If watching me pee is what it takes for this *committee* to get its jollies then I am formally requiring that *all* recordings, especially those of me using the cleaning facilities, be submitted to the judicial panels, jurors and media releases in any trial."

Falcon was pulling himself backwards down the gravitor. He almost choked trying to suppress his laughter—although he regretted missing the senators' expressions.

"Surveillance is unnecessary," Norman said, shooting Matheson a look of distaste. "We have not specified it for the other C20. However, I agree on Avalon Davo being held in the detention facilities."

"Command detention facilities, of course," Matheson added. "Since it was your suggestion to keep this under wraps. And it would be in your interest, Captain Vol, for the AI to monitor all incomings. Although I am confident that you will not break regulations regarding facility privileges, AI monitoring will confirm, for the record, that the prisoners were accorded no special treatment. Are we clear on that, Captain?"

"Yes, Senator, as soon as the correctly coded orders arrive."

"Along with orders appointing you as temporary commander of *Asegeir*," Norman said.

"We will hold you personally responsible if Falcon hijacks a long-range shuttle," Matheson warned.

"Sir," Vol replied to Matheson, making it clear she thought he, not Norman was in charge.

"We have no doubt, Captain Vol," Matheson added, "that given a satisfactory outcome to this situation, your *temporary* position will become permanent." Casting a narrow-eyed look at Falcon, he added, "Now that Falcon and the C20 have *finally* presented themselves, I want Senior Commander Phelan to detain them."

"Sir ... I mean Senator, they will not leave my security team's sight until your orders are received," Phelan declared.

No one missed the look of venom that Norman shot Matheson as the connection was broken.

"Someone thinks the Senator's getting a little big for his jockstrap," Falcon said.

Avalon smirked. "Rope, oh how I love thee."

"Son of a bitch," muttered Vol. She ran a hand through her short hair. "Sir, whoever does the encoding in NGC will take their time but I estimate we have an hour, tops."

"Listen up everyone!" Falcon moved to where the entire bridge crew could see him. "I don't know what's going down but as you are aware, NGC has been effectively controlled by Earthgov politicians since the nanite outbreak on Spacedock four and a half months ago. I'm not going to comment on the ability of a bunch of politicians to run NGC—" low chuckles permeated the bridge "—or what schemes have been cooked up to discredit the C20s and myself to divert attention from the apparent complicity of a certain politician in the nano-outbreak. However, we will obey all orders as directed by the President. I only picked up the last few minutes of this, but as of this moment Captain Vol is the commanding officer of *Asegeir* and will remain so for the foreseeable future. I'm asking you to give her the same support and loyalty as you have given me since I came aboard."

Falcon turned and, with Avalon and Phelan and the security team hard on his heels, hurried into his office then down the gravitor to his quarters. "I'm banking on thirty minutes."

Phelan pointed to two of his men. "You and you, go help the C20 pack."

Avalon ran out Falcon's door to her quarters.

Bleary-eyed and looking a little shell-shocked, Mixis followed Falcon into his bedroom. "Sir?"

"No time to explain." Falcon pulled a bag from his robe and yelled for Scarty and Marcus. "Marcus, go help Avalon pack whatever she thinks she's gonna need for the next month. Scarty, get your butt outta bed and go down to the gym. Look up the records and find out what the C20 uses and get it up to the Command detention area, pronto."

"Why?" Saav demanded with increasing exasperation.

"We'll explain later." Phelan stuffed shipsuits into a bag while Falcon pulled up all his files and downloaded them onto his personal datapads. "Go help Avalon!"

Turning to leave, Mixis muttered, "I'm gonna scan that man, I swear."

"I heard that, Commander!" Phelan yelled at her departing back.

Fifty-eight minutes later, it was over. Avalon Davo and Captain Christopher James Falcon were formally charged with conspiracy, treason, blackmail and murder, and detained in the Command detention block. Matheson had done his homework. Whereas the main detention block was equipped with a full gymnasium, library, and limited access to the AI for research and entertainment, Command detention was a day holding area only, with bench seats, narrow bunks, and open cleaning room. NGC regulations prohibited prisoners from 'additional items other than existent in the block at the time of incarceration'. This prevented long-term detainees from gaining access to anything other than standard issue equipment.

From the time the formal orders had arrived and were encoded into the AI, every molecule of matter entering the detention area would be logged. No one doubted Matheson would regularly check those logs; his intention was to make life for Falcon and the C20 as uncomfortable as possible.

In that fifty-eight minutes, the Command detention area had accumulated an extraordinary variety of items. "Oh damn, no bath," Avalon grumbled as she regarded the mountainous pile of construction materials, tools, clothing, and foodstuffs. A dozen frazzled envirotechs and engineers were busily working to install decent living quarters. Falcon glowered at her but she grinned and added, "What do you say we set this area up as a handball court?"

"C20," he replied, "they may not be able to execute you, but they sure as hell can me."

"Captain, I'm not immortal. They can dismember me and scoop out my brains and then nuke the bridge of *Asegeir* and not even a Rachnian will find enough to put me back together."

Some of the techs, including Phillip Hastings, looked up in horror. They didn't know what was going on, but Earthgov seemed to have lost its collective mind.

"It's okay everyone, we'll have it sorted out before that happens. Now, let's get this place organized."

Chapter 25

May 02, 2500

"Go on Marcus, you can't do any more here. You too Scarty," Falcon said.

The orderly's face fell. It wasn't as if he wouldn't be seeing the Captain again but the invisible plasma shield was one-way. Once outside he could not return without the AI reporting it. Since Falcon was allowed no special privileges, that wasn't going to happen.

"Scarty," Avalon put her arm around him, "I'll look after the Captain if you take care of Phillip, okay? He's pretty upset." At the look on the orderly's face she quickly added, "I know, everyone is. But we C20s have more than a few tricks up our copious sleeves. I promise you it will turn out alright. We need to run with this, but we can't tell you why just yet, so how 'bout you help Phillip finish off my quarters while I'm down here, hm?"

Mixis was next. She glared at Avalon. "This is a poor excuse for missing early morning workouts. First it was riding seachons."

"Yeah, well I'm sure you won't miss my wakeup calls."

"C'mon, how many times have you had to—"

"Okay, Saav, the stakes just got higher." Avalon walked the telepath to the shield. "Next time I have to wake you, I'll find something worse than a bucket of iced water."

Commanders Vol, Phelan, Rose and Walker entered the detention block and sat with Marcus at the conference table on the other side of the invisible plasma barrier. Mixis moved through the barrier and sat with them. Locked inside the detention block by their DNA, Falcon and the C20 sat on the other side of the table, and opened their datapads.

"Avalon has rerouted the AI. No conversations in this block have been recorded since 2340," Falcon said. "I'm not sure how long we have before Matheson realizes you've interpreted 'no monitors' literally."

The others turned on their datapads. He was pleased to see that all were using personal pads instead of NGC-issued pads. "Captain Vol, firstly, I'd like to commend you for quick thinking. How are the Command crew handling this?"

"Sir, orders from NGC were very explicit; your incarceration is classified. As to morale, this thing stinks like week-old untreated recycling and even the fifth-class techs know it. With NGC still under investigation, the general atmosphere is one of relief. Something's coming to a head and should be resolved within a month. If not," she added in a low voice, "the crew are one hundred percent in agreement that *Asegeir* should completely secede from Earth and declare itself an independent world."

Falcon's eyebrows lowered. "It won't come to that."

"No, sir." Vol sat a little straighter. "No one seriously thinks it will, but you can't stop intelligent people from considering the worst-case scenario. However, I've stressed that for now we follow NGC orders to the letter."

The outfitting of the Command detention area and Falcon and the C20's access to the AI being evidence of how those letters could be interpreted.

"Operationally we're in the green," said Falcon. "And we have a month to figure this out. Captain Vol, please brief the C20 and me on the chain of events."

"At 2230hrs last evening," she said, "President Norman called me on a private channel and asked Senior Commander Phelan and a security team to come to the bridge without either you or the C20 being notified. Unusual request but since he is running NGC at the moment, I complied. At 2234hrs, Senior Commander Phelan entered the bridge. President Norman instructed me to transfer his signal to the bridge LD screen. I told him I'd call you but he ordered me not to. Stuart is better at summarizing evidence than me. Stuart?"

"That creep Matheson has set up you, Avalon and Jenna Hayden to take the fall for the nanoviruses."

"Well." Avalon turned to Falcon. "That sums it up, alright."

"Thank you for the succinct sit-rep, Senior Commander," Falcon said dryly. "Care to elaborate?"

"Sorry, sir, but I'm way beyond pissed. Investigators uncovered two underground nano-labs, one on Stradbroke Island and the other in the Florida Everglades." When Avalon's eyebrows lifted, he added, "You got it C20, yours and Jenna's homes. Special decontamination squads have just finished searching them."

Avalon crossed her arms, rolled her eyes and muttered, "Those guys do not do delicate work; the places will be wrecked."

"They found access tunnels from your homes to secret labs, where data discs showed research going back years. They also found Katyl biomatter in sealed amniotanks, sterile containers of the Katyl nanovirus found in Jolley's dwelling and another weird nanovirus as yet to be identified."

"Hoo boy. They didn't make it ambiguous did they? So where does the Captain fit in?" Avalon asked.

"Remember how you helped me access those classified NGC records?" Phelan said.

At Falcon's look, Avalon explained, "I have never trusted politicians to run an investigation. They're not cops, they're ambitious little sons of bitches who only do it for one of two reasons: to get media exposure and make political capital or to hide something. Go on Stuart. What did you find? Matheson's podgy fingers in the credit chits?"

"You guessed it. During the War, one strategy considered was introducing a nanovirus into the Katyl. It was back-burnered because very few people could stomach the idea. Besides, in the early days no one had access to a live Katyl or even Katyl biomass." Phelan paused then added, "Except Captain Falcon and Jenna Hayden."

"Perhaps I should explain," Falcon said to Mixis and Vol. "The Katyl have no ethics regarding the disposal of bodies. They believe the spirits of the dead take up residence in the departing ships in the same way that a C20 is d-jumped onto another ship if their own is destroyed. Except the C20 brings her living body along."

The others nodded in understanding. It partly explained why the Katyl held Avalon in such awe.

"After the Battle of Degan," Falcon continued, "we found intact Katyl bodies. It was the first time anyone had laid eyes on a Katyl, so naturally we put them into storage. I know a couple of them were returned to Earth during the War through Chaney holes. However, I have no idea what happened to them."

"Yeah, well, Jenna had one in an amniotank under her house," said Phelan.

"That's the evidence." Vol pushed her datapad aside and sat forward. "What stinks is how they found it."

Phelan looked at Avalon. "C20, how do you set up security on your island?"

"Stradbroke is a big barrier island. Dwins, Kwilloys, and Metas have free access to my underground home. When anyone's in residence we turn on perimeter blocks, otherwise we don't mind people using the island."

"So anyone could have come by and dug out a well equipped lab?"

Avalon nodded. "Yep—except that doesn't access my home. Someone must have gotten inside despite the locks. Pretty damned unusual. I would have said impossible."

"That's the way Earthgov sees it."

"But why did they suspect Jenna and I had labs?"

Phelan's expression darkened. "This is where it gets ugly. Some kids were hooting down the sand dunes and—oops, lookee here—they find a ventilation pipe presumably exposed during the April cyclone. So they crawl inside, set off a booby trap, and are infected with a fast-acting virus." With each word he grew visibly angrier. "When dad finds them bleeding from every orifice, he naturally assumes the worst—"

"Bastards," Avalon cried and shot up from her chair, knocking it over. "Those fucking *butchers*! When I get my hands on whoever did this I'll personally space them! Why in hell would I turn off passive perimeter defences that keep out everything bigger than birds, only to install murderous devices like that?"

Concerned, Falcon stood and turned to her. "C20—"

She glared at him. "No, Chris, this is different. My anger is not a manifestation of the Other's control over me. But the *people* who did this *are* part of a human infestation by Others on Earth. Setting me up is one thing, killing kids to do it something else entirely. It wouldn't be the first time I've killed a man—or a woman—and it won't be the last. It's about time you all learned a few home truths about C20s. Stuart, finish off your report first." Seething with impotent rage, she sat back in the chair, rubbing her hands over her legs.

"During the investigation of NGC," Phelan continued. "Records were 'discovered' citing a conspiracy between Jenna Hayden, Avalon Davo, and the other C20s to force NGC into appointing Captain Falcon as *Asegeir's* first skipper. The documents state that Admirals Manion, Vicory, Robinson and Hastings stood their ground and the appointments board passed the skipper over and selected John Laycock. Jenna then publicly appointed Captain Falcon to *Jord*. Further evidence cites blackmail by the Kwilloys and Dwins, forcing NGC to baby the skipper through the building of *Jord*, despite his demonstrated incompetence in handling his crew and his repeated failure to deal with basic operational problems aboard the Courier ship *Cassandra*."

He met Falcon's eyes. "Matheson also claimed you and Jenna were lovers during the Katyl War, which is when this conspiracy began. Further, he suggested you were involved in Captain Laycock's death because it elevated you to your current position as commander of *Asegeir*. You or the C20, through your privileged position, smuggled the Katyl nanovirus aboard. Once Jolley drew attention to your real motives, you abandoned the plan to kill the Katyl—at least then—and planted the virus in Jolley's residence. Finally, they 'discovered' a diary left behind by the telepath, Bevin. In it he cites your pathological hatred of the Katyl and how the C20s threatened him if he revealed your ability to block

scans."

"And Captain Falcon did all this for...?" Avalon demanded.

"Megalomaniacal revenge. And since the skipper can't be telepathically scanned, he successfully hid it."

Everyone sat quietly digesting the allegations. Then Avalon said, "Mixis, have you examined the vidisc from last night?"

"Three times."

"What's your take on Matheson *et al*?"

All eyes now turned to Mixis. Her interpretation would play a critical role in how they proceeded. "He's not intelligent enough to be behind this, but he's making capital out of it. I still don't understand the agenda, but he's diverting attention. The original conspiracy has spread too wide and too deep. It has to be controlled by someone in a position of unimpeachable power, which makes the C20s and Captain Falcon ideal scapegoats."

Rose shook his head. "I don't buy it. It's too complex, too difficult and above all, it's too damned risky setting up C20s to take the fall. The repercussions from the Metas and aliens—"

"Unless that's the plan," Avalon said quietly.

"You mean the intent was to discredit C20s and aliens, and the Captain here is just collateral fallout?"

"The intent, all along, has been to create chaos. Whether by pitting Katyl against humans, or humans against C20s and aliens, doesn't matter. This thing was set up so that every move to stop it would open another can of worms."

"If you're right, and the Others are using corporeal beings as *agents provocateurs*," Rose said. "They need something to work with; prejudice, fear, hatred, jealousy—"

"Bigotry," Mixis said. "Did you notice the way Matheson referred to C20s? Or when he accused the Kwillloys and Dwins of blackmail? He and his cronies were very vocal during the War, playing to a lot of people's anger about the Metas deserting the Solar system just before the Katyl blockaded us."

"But the Metas were involved in a much bigger action on the other side of the galaxy—at least those that weren't protecting Gaia," countered Walker. "A few Others slipped through and incited the Katyl to attack."

Marcus glanced at Falcon for permission to speak. When Falcon nodded encouragingly, the sergeant said, "Sirs, I was studying in civilian administrative centres during the Katyl War. Most people—civilians—don't think in galactic terms; they're too busy looking after their own affairs. All this business about metaphysical wars on the other side of the galaxy, and aliens, and Metas whom they've never seen, is outside their frame of reference. They've forgotten—if they ever knew—that the technology they take for granted was developed through trade with aliens. Commander Saav is right. For the average citizens who voted for Matheson, the ones who can't immigrate to ark ships or join NGC, aliens have done nothing except desert them the moment they're needed. And before you say it, with respect, while neither Metas, C20s nor telepaths are aliens, to a lot of people, they're not human, either."

Silence filled the detention block for a good ten seconds.

"Dammit!" Avalon declared explosively, slapping her hand on the table. "I should have seen this coming

years ago. We, and I include the Metas and aliens as well as the C20s, have remained aloof from the vast majority of the human population because we wanted to remain apolitical and get on with our work and our lives. That's now being used against us. Oh, I realized it after the first full Command Board meeting and cocktail party, but I was still thinking in terms of politics. I did not consider the impact on average humans." She shot an approving look at Marcus. "Every now and then, Marcus, do me a favour and yank me off my pedestal." Frowning, she added, "Matheson is in a position to feed into the subconscious fears and vague discontents of the masses and then use that as a springboard to the next level."

Mixis was nodding. "He kept saying 'we' rather than 'I'. It serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it removes the public perception that he alone is behind your incarceration. Secondly, reluctant members of the Senatorial investigation committee would feel isolated and disloyal to the group 'we' if they voiced opposition."

"And what is that next level?" Falcon asked softly.

"The presidency. Specifically, a presidency that owns the military, has access to space, and can declare a state of emergency based on a possible alien attack—a dictatorship," Avalon replied. "For hundreds of years membership in NGC has brought unparalleled respect, even amongst those who have no time for space exploration. Like legists, NGC personnel are spot-scanned and command ranks broad-scanned and telecorded at least once, so they're above reproach. Still, it's an apparently nepotistic organization recruiting from within. Sure," she added quickly, "it's open to anyone. But most people cannot get past their abhorrence of telepathic scanning to apply. Who sitting at this table isn't descended from at least one NGC parent? Now that we have ark ships that attitude is changing—but not amongst the majority. Then a nanovirus reveals NGC to be as corrupt as any other powerful bureaucracy."

"So in rides Senator Matheson on his white horse," Mixis said, "declaring he'll get to the bottom of it. Next he manoeuvres himself into dictating NGC's restructuring. He's spent his career insinuating that aliens cannot be trusted. Now, the C20s, the most elusive non-quite-humans of all, have triggered a plague. As a charismatic leader—and Matheson is incredibly popular with the average Earther—appointing himself in the role of saviour, no one will worry if he tramples the Constitution a little as he rides all the way to the top."

Vol looked uncertain. "It makes sense except for one thing. It's far too complicated. It could have come unstuck at any time."

"Not when you play on human weakness," Avalon said. "And perversely, this one is built on a solid foundation of weaknesses. Stuart, have you run background checks on Matheson, and victimologies on Admirals Manion, Hastings, Vicory and Robinson?"

Phelan was staring vacantly at the cell block wall, his eyes unfocussed, "Yeah ... yeah, it's all starting to make sense." He blinked, and then said, "Paul Matheson, eighty-four years old, was a failed NGC recruit. He made the Academy but left just before he was due for his first spot-scan. He said that he felt he could better serve Earth by going into politics. I'm still chasing details, but his older sister was married to his NGC sponsor, Commander Phil Thornton, later Admiral Thornton of Arisa Station.

"As for Thornton, no black marks but nothing outstanding, either. When he was promoted to Admiral, he made it known he was relieved he'd never been appointed to C20 ships, because he suspected the C20s had secret agendas."

Avalon wrinkled her nose. "Sour grapes are not uncommon amongst admirals."

"Admirals Hastings, Vicory and Robinson unofficially expressed similar sentiments," Phelan continued.

"None of these admirals was considered psychologically suited for alien postings but Thornton was given command of Arisa Station."

"Thornton, like Matheson was a political animal," Falcon said. "NGC politics is just as intricate as civilian politics."

"Hastings, Vicory and Robinson all lost family during the Katyl War. Vicory lost a son at the Battle of Degan. Hastings' wife died on the ship they sent into the sun while Robinson's girl died on *Asegeir*."

"How did Vicory's son die?" Avalon asked.

"He was a fighter pilot. He survived the battle but his life support failed before *Warrior* managed to clear her fighter bays and get him aboard."

Falcon closed his eyes and sat back heavily in his chair. Avalon placed her hand over his and said softly, "Nothing would have changed, Chris. I've been over those logs myself. Don't go second guessing yourself now."

"A lot of people have reason to feel bitterness towards C20s or the Captain for events during the War," Phelan added. "Some, like the shuttle engineers, lost NGC sponsors and had to take on lower paid civilian jobs. Others feared the Katyl so much that they failed telepathic scans and their careers stalled at sub-command levels. I'm not saying that everyone who lost someone or something in the War has an axe to grind, but it doesn't take a deductive leap to conclude that whoever was behind this, lit a match, stood back and watched it burn."

Phelan turned to Vol. "Still, I agree with you. This is too complex to be one big conspiracy. If you see part of a big fire, a big conspiracy, you can follow its path and extinguish it. But stand in the middle of a forest surrounded by hundreds of little fires, you're so busy stomping on one that you don't notice your ass being burned by another. For the last four months we've been chasing all these little fires thinking they'd lead us to the main one, but instead they've mostly burned themselves out. Right from the start this has been lots of little fires, little conspiracies, some lit by Matheson, others lit by people like Robinson and Vicory." He stared at Avalon. "It hit me the other day, watching you win that Katyl polo game."

Avalon's eyes lit. "By default—because I was the last one mounted."

"Exactly." Phelan sat back. "Matheson saw the other plays being made, and did nothing. Now he's the only one left, he wins by default. And by keeping far enough back from the game, he isn't even getting dirty."

They looked at each other. It fit.

"Not very sporting of him." Avalon snorted.

Falcon laughed humourlessly. "He's a politician, what'd you expect?"

"Game's not over yet and we're not playing by Katyl rules." Avalon chewed her lip. "Someone planted evidence in Jenna's and my homes, and deliberately misread Chris' war files to fabricate circumstantial evidence. Coincidental, isn't it, how Webster and Garret's remains were found off Brisbane and Florida?"

"I still haven't had word back from forensics. I'll chase it now." Phelan picked up his datapad and began typing. "From a legal standpoint the links to the skipper are circumstantial, and Matheson will never prove them." He glanced at Falcon. "I don't think getting rid of you is Matheson's main aim. But once this goes public, you can kiss your NGC career goodbye, no matter the outcome."

"Not if I demand he stay on," Avalon countered.

"Even if you're cleared, Avalon, NGC is being restructured under Matheson's recommendations—"

"That will trash our current working relationship with NGC," she finished, sighing angrily "We went through this two hundred years ago, and it's the same bullshit all over again. Maybe we should pencil it in our diaries for 2699."

Falcon glanced at her, then Phelan. "Then forget chasing dead leads, Stuart. We go straight for Matheson."

"By turning the evidence against you back onto him." Avalon's eyes snapped open. "Mixis, did you send that full telecording and report on Chris' ability to block telepathic scans to NGC?"

Saav nodded.

"Good. Officially reporting it months *prior* to Matheson's 'discovery' will knock some of the wind from his sails." She touched Falcon's hand again. "I also submitted a report."

"You told me, but if Matheson forces a restructuring of NGC, your opinion won't count."

"No, I only told you I was exercising my prerogative as a C20 to maintain you as my captain because your abilities to block scans were a strategic defence against the Others. What I didn't tell you was why, or that I submitted a full, cross-referenced report on the phenomenon going back to 2017. As I said, it's time you learned a few home truths about C20s.

"Back in 2017, Commander Nicholas Page and Kristin Baker foiled a terrorist attempt to detonate a nuclear weapon in Sydney. You should meet Nick some time," she said to Falcon. "You're a lot alike."

Falcon shot her a dubious look, but her expression was serious.

"As a Meta," she continued, "Nick returned to Earth to assist in evacuating the cetaceans. He secretly visited the surviving terrorist, Um Nehro, to try and understand the hatred that had created her. Although he had already evolved into the most powerful of all Meta translators, Nick had to force his way into her mind. And he learned why. You see, *you* can block a human telepath." She gently squeezed Falcon's hand. "Because you have natural defence mechanisms protecting you from the Others. Despite that, you've developed sufficient control to allow a non-hostile telepath like Mixis into your mind. The terrorist, Um Nehro, had a similar blocking mechanism. However, it was not designed not to protect her *from* the Others—"

Phelan dropped his datapad and exclaimed, "It was created *by* the Others!"

"Exactly. Such people are open conduits for the Others. To protect them from discovery they cannot be scanned by human telepaths. And they are the *only* humans who cannot overcome the block in their mind preventing a scan."

"But *you* can tell, can't you?" Falcon asked her.

"I can't read specific thoughts," Avalon replied. "But we see the Others when they infiltrate human minds. For some, the blackness spreads like oil across water. Noxious, stifling, but it can be removed with care. That's what I saw in Jolley. For people like the nano engineers—who were probably giving Jolley orders—it mixes with their psyche; it cannot be removed without killing them. For those like you, Chris, it flows around and through, never touching. If the Others ever attempted an overwhelming attack on you, you'd commit suicide rather than succumb. That's why you can't turn the pain of your family's loss into

revenge. A human would say it's not within your character. We know it's because you cannot be infected."

"Is Matheson a conduit?" Falcon asked.

"I'm sure of it. Problem is, any accusation I make is meaningless. Let him hang himself, Chris, because soon, everyone in NGC will have undergone a scan and telecording, giving them the moral high ground. The good senator can obfuscate as much as he wants, and the general public may like him and agree with him that aliens and C20s are a danger to humanity, but perception, as he so correctly put it, is everything. Now that recently declassified documents about your role in the War have been released, parliamentary privilege notwithstanding, it's gonna look mighty strange that Matheson is accusing you of murder and conspiracy."

"What declassified documents?" Falcon demanded.

Phelan's eyes narrowed. "Ever wondered why files about that little coup we pulled on Arisa Station were classified in the first place? Well, guess who was on the post-war records committee and censored them?"

Falcon chuckled. "That's why Matheson thought Jenna and I were lovers. Just before Thornton spaced us, Jenna jumped me and ... eh ... 'kissed' me."

"I'll never forget!" Phelan laughed.

"Maybe you should explain, C20," Falcon said when the others stared at them.

Avalon was also chuckling. "Jenna's ship, *Jord* was destroyed in the Battle of Vega, so she was no longer bound to a ship. During the times we're not bound, if a C20 is exposed to a lethal situation, the life-force d-jumps us to the nearest viable habitat. In Jenna's case, Arisa's detention block. It's no secret that, if a C20 is in physical contact with another biological entity, their life-forces are stuck together somewhat like a magnet, and this auto-d-jumping will grab them both. But contact must be flesh to flesh. Chris wore a full body shipsuit including hood and gloves, so only his eyes and mouth were exposed. Given the forces exerted during spacing, the only way Jenna could be sure to maintain contact was to wrap herself around him and kiss him. And since Chris was sporting a beard at the time, Jenna, eh, used her tongue to ensure maximum flesh to flesh contact."

"She rammed her tongue halfway down my throat," Falcon grouched. "There was nothing sensual about it!"

The others were laughing out loud. "Gives the term 'kiss of life' a whole new meaning!" Mixis said.

"No offence to Jenna but it's something I never want to experience again." Falcon's smile faded when he asked Avalon. "What classified files?"

"Ah, a fortuitous future memory methinks. I briefed the science council on your role in the Katyl War and figured the files might as well go public after we left Katylgar. I time-logged them, and I'd say that, right about now, Earth media is releasing a whole new batch of declassified human-interest stories about the War. Combined with our overwhelmingly successful mission to Katylgar and the acquisition of the disrupter and Katyl Dim5 engines—remember Selena Chaney will be landing on *Galileo* station tonight—you, Captain Falcon will be quite the hero. And Matheson will have a lot of explaining to do.",

Chapter 26

May 03-15, 2500

Captain Peta Vol stormed out of Falcon's office and slammed her fist into Marcus' desk. She would have punched Falcon's but figured Marcus' would heal faster as his UV lights were on all day. Then she straightened, composed her features and said, "AI, wake the C20 and the Captain."

Vol pulled herself down the gravitor. No guards were posted in the detention area because the AI operated multiple backup systems. Anything catastrophic enough to cut power would cut life support and there'd be no one left alive to guard.

To her surprise, Falcon and Avalon were playing handball. Despite her anger, Vol smirked. Avalon just might find herself outmatched.

"Game!" Falcon called. The flash of motion had distracted Avalon, and the ball shot past her.

"You're ganging up on me." Avalon spread a sour look between the captains.

Vol's fair-skinned face darkened. "Someone is."

Falcon wiped his sweat-soaked face on a towel. "What's happened?"

"President Norman rescinded your arrest order. All charges have been dropped in light of new evidence."

"Hero of the War, procurer of the Dim5 disrupter. Hell, we should have shuttled you back to Earth, there'd be a tickertape parade in your honour." Avalon slapped his back.

"A what?" asked Vol.

Avalon waved off the antiquated reference.

"And the C20s?" asked Falcon.

"Charges have been added: unauthorized release of classified documents and falsifying reports designed to implicate you." Vol ground her teeth. "That snivelling little cocksucker, Norman, didn't have the balls to tell me in front of the bridge crew. He called me in private and said your release orders should be arriving 'sometime soon', which you can bet will be dragged out another coupla hours."

Avalon sniggered. "In my day apologies were in three-point font on the bottom of the obituaries page."

Falcon's jaw set firmly. His C20 had made all the right moves to protect him, even setting him up as a hero. In so doing she'd provided Matheson with more ammunition against her. "Avalon—"

She grasped his hand to silence him. As always, he was surprised by the softness of her skin, the gentleness of her touch, in stark contrast to the almost fierce way she played handball. Or rode a seachon. Despite the power of the life-force that flowed through her, for a fleeting moment he wanted to pull her into his arms, to protect her from the injustices perpetrated upon her.

"It's a game, Chris." She smiled with the wisdom of her many years. "The ugliest, oldest, most addictive game on Earth: politics. Not as bloody as a gladiatorial tournament but unlike Katyl polo, the winner isn't the last one left mounted. Skill not luck, stamina not brute force, will win. We've got time on our side."

Matheson doesn't."

Why was it that each time he wanted to give comfort to this remarkable woman, he ended up taking it instead? He wasn't about to leave her stuck down here with this hanging over her head.

"To divert attention from his part in fabricating evidence against you, Matheson is blaming Jenna and me. You win battles—and ballgames—by staying focused. Keep your eye on the ball, Chris."

He shared a look with Vol. Forget the distractions. Go for Matheson.

Falcon's release orders arrived five hours later. His first call, after stopping at the bridge and speaking to the crew, was to Admiral Woodstock. According to Spacedock's AI, the Admiral was unable to receive him. All inquiries should be directed to Senator Matheson's office.

Unlike Matheson, Woodstock knew Falcon could function when isolated from his support structure. Avalon was part of that support structure now. Matheson's next move would likely be to attempt to drive a wedge between Falcon and his C20. Divide, isolate and conquer.

Sitting at his desk in his day cabin, Falcon considered the first rule of engagement; *Know Thy Enemy*. It had been driven into them at the Academy, over and over. Once you understood what your opponent wanted, you had them at a tactical disadvantage. History was replete with charismatic politicians who'd climbed to power on the backs of fear and suspicion. Controlling NGC gave Matheson the muscle to consummate his ambitions. If Avalon was right, and Matheson was an *agent provocateur* of the Others, then chaos was the desired outcome. And a bigoted leader with big guns and a Dim5 disrupter could cause a hell of a lot of chaos.

A call came in from Earthgov, source: Senator Matheson's office. Unwilling to stomach the senator's enlarged image on the LD, Falcon transferred the call to his small desk screen.

"Captain Falcon," Matheson blurted, all bonhomie. "I can't tell you how sorry we are that evidence was construed to implicate you in this terrible business."

"Construed by whom, Senator?"

Matheson's face adopted a politically correct mixture of gravity and false regret. "The C20s, of course. If the physical evidence against them weren't incontrovertible, the sheer complexity and enormity of such a scheme could only have been designed by *beings* with such vast influence. We are holding the entire upper echelon of NGC accountable for allowing these so-called C20s to climb to a position of unchecked authority. Now, we are being held at ransom by the key to this shocking situation, unable to have this ... *Avalon* brought to Earth because of her power over *Asegeir*."

Intrigued by Matheson's Orwellian inversion of reality, Falcon said, "Senator, I fail to see how the C20's release of my war records conspired to implicate me."

"Captain, I appreciate your disaffection in this matter, but you're an intelligent and resourceful man. You must have known that we would have examined your records thoroughly. It was only a matter of time before you were cleared. The C20 knew this, and, just as she did with the unfortunate Governor Jolley, changed her tactics midstream to divert attention. Clever, extremely clever, but one would expect nothing less of a C20."

"Senator, may I ask what you think is their motivation?"

Flashing a smile, Matheson replied, "Captain, you're the last person whom I need to remind that one can never truly understand alien motivations. However, you, sir, have demonstrated an extraordinary knack

for interpreting them. Indeed, we are depending on you to assist us in this matter. I would be less than truthful if I told you that the investigative committee members are in complete agreement on this, for your inability to be scanned and telecorded raises an element of doubt. Personally, I admire a man who can keep telepaths from poking around his brain. It's a decided advantage in any situation. I believe your record—to date—speaks for itself."

Falcon read the subtext clearly. How much was contrived and how much genuine, he still could not tell. "Senator, I'm not sure what you mean. We've turned up no evidence to implicate the C20s—"

"No evidence, Captain?" The senator eyes widened incredulously. "Very convenient, Governor Jolley's shuttle exploding while entering Dim5. Interesting how these C20s' so-called future memories never work when they're critically needed."

"They're wildcat telepaths, Senator. They have no control—"

"I'm aware of their *claims*. They also *claim* to be apolitical. This one on *Asegeir* has been anything but. Looking at the reports, I've never seen a C20 take such a prerogative interest, and on occasion, outright control of a ship without consulting her captain! After having your own command for so many years, don't you find this *éminence grise* disconcerting?"

With every word, Matheson demonstrated his complete lack of understanding. C20 captains were selected for multiple reasons, including their psychological suitability to the position. It was something none of the dead admirals, including Thornton, had ever grasped. But then, none of them had had any idea of the sense of completeness, of the integration into the life-force of the ship, that Avalon gave him. When he'd ridden a fighter every day, the machine had become an extension of his body. He'd missed that as he'd spent more time on the bridges of larger vessels. Aboard *Asegeir*, the greatest ship mankind had ever grown, he was regaining it *because* of Avalon.

"Captain Falcon," Matheson continued. "The entire structure of NGC is corroded. Full of antiquated concepts and regulations no longer applicable to modern thinking. It has ceded far too much power to non-humans. The previous administration is trying to cover its tracks, patch holes, but the public is not going to stand by while the old guard walks back in and takes over as if nothing has happened. We need young blood in there, people with proven leadership qualities, people the public admire and respect, but most importantly, whom they trust. People like you. You made full captain when you were just thirty-three years old. Full admiral before you're fifty is on the cards."

What in the name of the Origins was Matheson playing at? Falcon recalled Avalon's analysis when they'd been eavesdropping in the bridge alcove. Matheson had seen Peta Vol as ambitious, and attempted to use that. Vol had played along. Now, Matheson intended to rein him in and cull political capital from his hero status, by offering him top dog position in NGC.

Keep your eye on the ball. Falcon stiffened, and frowned, while inside he felt something open, supporting him while his perceptions narrowed and focused on the senator's face. He saw satisfaction, then feigned surprise; he could almost hear the Senator's thought processes. The best bluffs were the ones where you benefited even if the other side called them—and Matheson was bluffing.

"Why, Captain Falcon, I've apparently said something to upset you!" Matheson's concerned façade reappeared. "You are a patriot, sir. You have always put aside your own needs for the benefit of mankind. As a patriot you'll want to set things right. You'll do far more good here than sitting way out in the middle of nowhere."

Matheson would pitch the other ark ship captains the same line, playing them off against NGC, setting them up, isolating them from their fellow officers, and using them as mouthpieces. When that tactic failed,

he'd use them as fall guys, accusing them of attempting a coup within NGC. And this time, the evidence would be real; Avalon and Jenna's homes demonstrated how readily it could be done.

"Senator," Falcon replied. "I'm not experienced at that level of administration. Ten, fifteen years from now, left in my current position, would better qualify me. It's not a question of loyalty but of putting the right people in the right places. NGC was very proficient at that. While I concede there were some problems, once everyone is scanned—"

An expression of disgust crossed Matheson's face. "Captain, administrative details can be handled by others. It needs an injection of new ideas, fresh approaches. I can't see us looking any further than you. Of course if we could clear away this whole C20 mess, remove them entirely from NGC, then professional administrators could deal with the necessary restructuring. However, as things stand..." He shrugged, his meaning clear. Help me get rid of the C20s and you can stay in command of *Asegeir*.

"As for telecordings and scans," Matheson continued, "this has come about despite, perhaps because, of them. We're considering abolishing them and opening NGC entry to all, not just an elite few."

Scanning filtered out those unsuited to life in space and anyone with pathological inclinations. It also steered fine people, like Scarty and Marcus, into career niches ideally suited to their personalities and abilities. Locked inside a buckeyball ship in the middle of space a hundred thousand light years from Earth was not the time to discover you were claustrophobic or harboured secret desires of becoming a serial killer. If *Asegeir* had been filled with a true representation of humanity then Earth and Katyl would have been at war within hours of the first shuttle landing. As a powerful telepath, the clan leader had discerned that, which was why they would not send a Katyl representative to Earth. Now Matheson would undermine that. Why? Because he personally feared being scanned—or because he wanted alien relations, especially with the Katyl, to unravel? Or both?

"You're implying telepaths were in part responsible for the nano-outbreak, Senator?"

"It's still under investigation," replied the Senator. "AI records show that just before Manion's death, the telepath, Bevin, received a signal. The nanites found in Manion's heart were chemical receivers. We believe that Bevin was ordered to send a telepathic trigger to subtly alter Manion's body chemistry, activating the virus that resulted in the Admiral's death."

"And Bevin would have had no way of knowing he was carrying the same virus," Falcon nodded. "Neat trick."

Matheson smiled his approval. "And impossible to trace now that all concerned are dead. Bevin's diary mentioned you, but he couldn't have known that NGC were already aware of your talent at blocking scans. The *aliens* must have threatened Bevin to give him the right *impression*, in other words, they set you up. You see, the C20 aboard *Asegeir* sent the signal to Bevin."

Falcon allowed surprise to cloud his features. Avalon had always maintained her *carte blanche* access to classified files had set off a chain reaction. All tied up in a pretty pink bow, with Avalon set to take the fall. "How did these walking time-bombs get through the regular med-checks?" He knew the answer; the dead medtechs had falsified the files. When the virus was triggered they'd panicked and run.

"*Aliens!*" Matheson whispered, his eyes darting furtively around him. "You see why we require your assistance? Who knows how many more blind triggers *they* set up? Take the nano-viral outbreaks and the inability of *Asegeir* to return to the Solar system until December; *they* control our lives. I'm not suggesting we have nothing at all to do with aliens, but we do need to deal with them on *our* terms. In the case of renegades, like these C20s who contrived to implicate you, we have to make sure they can never do such damage again."

Thank you, Senator. You've just confirmed your motivations. "I appreciate your position, Senator."

* * * *

"You're right, Stuart," Falcon said when they met with Avalon, Vol and Mixis Saav later that evening. "Matheson has agendas, including a hatred of everything he sees as non-human, but I don't think he had anything to do with the nanovirus. He's just walked into the power vacuum."

"You don't think we should go after him?" Vol asked.

"Oh he's dirty," Phelan replied. "And I'm using a few channels he'd never suspect to sniff around. Problem is, if he gets full control of NGC—"

Falcon shook his head. "That's what he wants everyone to think. He's using Katyl tactics. Cut off the head, isolate the body and pick it apart. But I know Woodstock and the other ark ship captains, Tishardson, Fallows, Gray, and King. We went through this in the War. It didn't work then, and it sure as hell won't work now."

Inside the detention cell, Avalon paced restlessly. "Chris," she said. "Take your time with Matheson. Be sceptical but let him think you're coming around. He's cunning, but historically, going toe to toe with a well-entrenched military structure is a mistake. Woodstock will likely wait until everyone is scanned, because Matheson has revealed his weakness—his fear of telepaths."

"If Matheson is a conduit for the Others, won't they know the Captain is bluffing?" asked Mixis.

Avalon stopped pacing and sat down at the table on her side of the plasma shield. "By their nature, the Others are chaotic, disorganized. They're only as effective as the tools—humans, in this case—they can wield in this dimension. And no human can break through Chris' mental blocks unless he allows it. Stuart," she said to Phelan. "Any word from forensics on Webster and Garret?"

Phelan shook his head. "I'm still chasing it."

"What's the delay?"

"Dunno, but I don't like it."

"Okay, everyone." Falcon stood. "We learn everything we can about Matheson. I want to know what colour diapers he wore on his first birthday. Then we take our cue from Woodstock."

Chapter 27—

June 02, 2500

Falcon never gave much thought to the fresh delicacies that Scarty pressed on him to take Avalon. The AI did not record the type of food the prisoner in the Command detention block received, just nutritional intake. Then the evening before *Asegeir* arrived in the Kwilloy system, Scarty mentioned getting a 'good exchange rate' for macadamia nuts. When Falcon asked him for an explanation, he learned that Avalon had purchased Jolley and her cohorts' personal plots and given them to Scarty and Phillip. The men continued to grow ferns and orchids and traded what plants they did not use to decorate Avalon and Falcon's quarters for exotic fresh food.

Suddenly conscious of the luxurious ferns and orchids he had taken for granted, Falcon realized it was one more way the C20 was subtly supporting him. It wasn't as if he couldn't afford the plants, or the more exotic foods that were part of his regular diet, but as he carried the nuts to the Command detention block, it grated him that while he was walking around free and taking luxuries for granted, Avalon was caged like a rabid animal.

Putting his anger aside—it would do neither of them any good—he placed the nuts into the food processor. "Did Stuart tell you about the forensics reports?"

"Yeah, took them long enough." Avalon withdrew the bowl from her side of the processor, and joined him at the entrance. "Six week to run a couple of lab samples?" She sat down and opened a bottle of tinsmet. "Thanks," she added, popping a nut into her mouth.

"The lab lost the first batches." Falcon sat on his side of the invisible barrier, opened his tinsmet and raised it in salute. "Then they misplaced the original biomass source."

"Cheers." Avalon sipped the Katyl liqueur. "Misplaced, huh? I'm surprised Stuart got *any* results."

"He didn't. He faked dummy orders to move a portion of the biomass to a private facility in Auckland, and had them run two different analyses."

"Are the results legal?" Avalon lifted her bare feet onto a footstool, and crossed her ankles.

"Oh yeah, the books have been opened on Webster and Garret, who seem to be very much alive. The auditors are also investigating why the first labs had so many problems."

"What about access to the data and lab equipment that was supposedly found on Stradbroke Island? I'm entitled to see the evidence against me."

"Not until you're formally charged."

"Parliamentary privilege," she muttered. "We got rid of lawyers, and we got rid of hydrocarbon pollution. We're half way to getting rid of artificial chemical compounds, but we still have the greatest piece of garbage mankind invented: politicians. I'm reminded," she said, chuckling ruefully, "of that old joke about politics. *Pol* means *many* in Greek and ticks are blood-sucking creatures."

Falcon laughed, then he added seriously, "Matheson's pushing me to commit. I detect cracks in the façade—and that forensics report is one more."

"You're starting to think like Stuart. Have you managed to get through to Admiral Woodstock?"

"Indirectly—enough to know to sit tight. The Admiral is doing a job on the media."

"So I noticed. Now that Earth has Dim5 disrupter technology and the science journals are packed with glowing reports about the Katyl, NGC's on a definite upswing in the minds of the public. Since your files also paint a very different picture of wartime events than the accepted historical 'facts', there's a groundswell of support for NGC to declassify *everything*. It's just a question of time before Woodstock reveals that Matheson was on the Post-War Censorship Committee."

"The Admiral knows something he can't tell me, something to do with the Kwilloys." Falcon frowned and met Avalon's eyes. "None of this is going to get you out of here anytime soon."

"I've been locked away before. Besides, tomorrow when we arrive at Kwilloy, some friends of mine will d-jump me to the planet, and bring up a lump of replacement biomass to keep the AI happy."

Falcon stared at her. "You have some interesting friends, C20."

"The Rachnian, Grell, is a powerful translator. He'll maintain a passive link to your mind. He won't monitor your thoughts, but if you need me, just call and he'll d-jump me back here."

It should have come as no surprise that an alien translator could scan his supposedly impenetrable mind. What he found more disturbing was the knowledge that tomorrow she would be gone. He was suddenly struck by an almost overwhelming need to reach through the plasma shield and just ... touch her.

Falcon had had little time to consider the whole 'bonding' issue, except insofar as it enhanced his ability to function. Since her incarceration, he had begun visiting Avalon as a matter of courtesy. Courtesy implied obligation—which was not what he felt. He enjoyed her company, and he wanted to see her, yet there was something lacking, something he had been unable to define until now. He missed touching her.

Until her detention, he had seen her only infrequently, perhaps as little as once a week for Command Board meetings. Yet during those times, she had always stood or sat close to him, gently touching his hand or rubbing shoulders with him. It was a normal, accepted captain-C20 thing, enhancing his contact with the life-force, just as Jenna Hayden's 'kiss' had ensured he was d-jumped back to Arisa's detention block.

Now, as he watched Avalon through the plasma barrier, he realized his *lack* of physical contact with her actually seemed to be diminishing his contact with the life-force. The idea that he *needed* it implied a dependency, an addiction. A disturbing thought, at best.

"What is it, Chris? You look troubled."

His voice had an edge to it as he replied, "You shouldn't be locked up in here Avalon."

"Hey, I just told you I'm about to make my great escape!" When he said nothing, her eyes turned wise and knowing. She put her glass of tinsmet down and, sitting forward, added, "Matheson has severed your support structure, physically and psychologically, but you said yourself that Katyl tactics won't work on you or the other captains. Still, Matheson's insistence that I be isolated has had an unexpected impact on you and you alone. It exposed what you see as a weakness; dependency on physical contact with me to *focus* your newfound senses."

"Avalon, I don't see it as a weakness, I—"

"Yes, you do, otherwise you wouldn't be fighting it," she said sternly. "I'm not sorry this has happened, because you need to confront this aspect of bonding and deal with it." And then she reached through the invisible barrier and took his hand.

Falcon gasped at the contact. He wasn't sure what surprised him the most, the sudden clarity of his awareness, her ability to penetrate the plasma barrier, or the absence of alarms from the AI.

Her lips curled into a smile and she withdrew her hand. "Asegeir is a part of me, Captain. It would never allow me to be confined."

Taking a deep breath, he crossed his arms and firmly grasped hold of his emotions.

"Captain—Chris, no one has ever found bonding to a ship and her C20 easy. But bonding is not like a drug that chemically enhances your senses. It's the awakening of *additional* senses that once lay dormant within you, the same fifth-dimensional senses you subconsciously use to block telepathic scans. Like a man blind since birth suddenly gifted sight, the sensations are raw and, until you fully adjust, difficult to comprehend."

It was a textbook reply, but he said it anyway. "Which results in a gestalt interpretation."

"Physical contact with me enhances your perception and therefore your understanding of this new tool. The Masters gifted us to you to facilitate this process, but because your normal senses interpret your need of me as a *desire*, you think of it as a weakness to be overcome."

He snorted softly and unfolded his arms. "You told me at the outset not to fight it, or I'd fight myself. Apparently I didn't get the message. It must drive you nuts, having to break in new captains."

She smiled. "You're adapting far quicker than any captain I've even known, Chris, but you still need to give yourself time."

Chapter 28

June 14, 2500

Falcon was walking through the desert. His Kwilloy companion reached out to a stiffened monster in miniature. The creature's disproportionately huge pink and yellow mouth opened to outrageous proportions while two earthen-coloured flaps of scaly flesh splayed out. The tiny-toothed mouth gaped threateningly. Hissing, the creature turned its head to and fro, unsure whom to attack, the yellow avian or the human. Suddenly, it lunged. The Kwilloy withdrew her hand with lightning reflexes while the frill-necked lizard ran off in the distinctive hip-twisting gait of its species.

The Kwilloy laugh chirpily. Falcon found it tiresome. He had played host to an almost continuous round of Very Important Beings for twelve days. Then he chastised himself. Without Kwilloys, humans would not have Dim5 or LD. Which meant they would have no need for C20s. Beautiful C20s with long raven hair, deep blue eyes and soft, warm skin.

Finally, Falcon was alone, which was fine by him. Acting as host for fifteen hours a day was one thing, but he was entitled to a break when he slept. Avalon nodded agreeably. Her gym suit, soaked in perspiration from hours hitting a handball against the bulkhead of the detention cell, clung to her body. She shouldn't be alone in there. Not the woman who wore Katyl leathers and rode free as the wind on the back of a seachon. No one should confine her. He should have stopped it; he had to set her free! She told him to come closer, lest he fell. He entwined his naked legs against hers, wrapped his arms around her, and rode with her out of the detention cell, across the desert, past the Kwilloys and lizards until the landscape blurred into Dim5. He felt her warm woman-ness, her silky hair, the smoothness of her tanned skin sliding against his thighs, the swell of her breasts above his arms. *So easy. We fit together as one, riding through the dimension that is not space.* Her scent was no longer of Katyl soapstone but of something richer. He leaned down and nuzzled her neck, feeling the pulse of her life against his lips, tasting her warmth as her hair caressed his face and arms.

"Chris." Her voice was like honey, sweet and soft in the darkness.

His mouth sought hers, calling her name. Her tongue teased his lips, inviting and he felt himself harden against her. The intensity of his desire was almost overwhelming. Her hair tickled his nose, and she called his name again.

"Wake up, Chris. It's Avalon."

"Hello, Avvy," he said sleepily, as if her being here was the most natural thing in the world. Was it near dawn? She would be so beautiful in the dim, buttery light of the Kwilloy moons. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, Chris. Wake up, I've brought someone to meet you."

Blinking furiously, he sat up, suddenly aware of Avalon on his bed. "C20! What's wrong?" Even in the dull light he could see her eyes. He was also uncomfortably aware of being inexplicably—and intensely—aroused.

By the Origins, but she was beautiful! He'd missed her so much these last weeks. It had been bad enough when she'd been in the detention block and physically separated from him. At least he'd had the evening visits and a glass of tinsmet before bed. Then, within seconds of entering the Kwilloy system, she was just ... gone.

He had known instantly. Abruptly handing control to a surprised Vol, he'd run to the cell and stood there for a long time, staring at an indistinguishable grey lump of biomatter, feeling alone and a little lost. He'd asked the AI to locate her. It replied she was in the Command detention block. But she wasn't. She was somewhere down on Kwilloy with her friends. Her friends—not the short-lived humans who took away her freedom and gave nothing but solitude in return. Little wonder she preferred aliens to humans.

"C'mon sleepyhead, wake up." She rubbed her hand across his chest.

He grasped her fingers and stared into her eyes. "AI, clear LD—"

"Belay that order, please. Chris, if you react badly it causes him pain, so I want you to take a few moments and remember the last time you met a Rachnian."

Falcon's eyes rounded and he peered over her shoulder, searching the shadows like a child promised Santa Claus.

Avalon pulling from his arms and stood. "We'd like you to come to Kwilloy. Captain Vol is talking to Commanders Rose and Phelan. They'll be coming in a short while but if you wouldn't mind we need to brief you now."

Mind? Mind! Except for the fact that he was buck-naked and sporting the evidence of a dream he couldn't recall, he would have been out of bed and dressed already. "No, no! I ... ah—give me a sec."

"We'll be in the living room."

He waited just long enough for Avalon to turn her back before leaping out of bed and into his cleaning room. As he dressed, he wondered what in the name of the Origins he'd been dreaming about ... never mind. With his days taken up by Kwilloy delegations, he'd been pulling all-nighters to keep ahead of the paperwork. He'd called it quits early that afternoon and, after a long swim, gone to bed at 1700. He checked the time and found he'd only been asleep a few hours.

It was pitch black in his living room, but he could sense the huge being, and mentally welcomed the Rachnian.

"Over here, Chris. You can order the LD clear but please don't order lights as it hurts Grell's eyes. He only came up to hide me from the AI."

Grell directed his powerful translator abilities to Falcon.—This being for the welcome, thank you it does.—

Falcon's eyes widened in astonishment. Avalon had told him of the Rachnian's powers, but not even amongst the Dwin had he felt an alien being *in* his mind. "AI, clear LD."

Kwilloy was setting. The pastel blue and milky white light illuminated the room, revealing an enormous spidery shape. Enfolded within its midnight black leg-arms was the C20.

"Ready?" asked Avalon.

Falcon stepped forward—and onto a beach at twilight. The d-jump had been so smooth that he staggered.

Avalon apologized. "Grell doesn't require physical contact to d-jump."

White-capped waves pounded up a steep, yellow sand beach, sending a fine mist of salt spray over

them; Kwilloy oceans were much like Earth's. But Falcon was more interested in Avalon. She was cradled inside Grell's arms, stroking the being as a child cuddles a fur toy. Not all humans found ugly black tarantulas repugnant, however when they were three metres tall and five metres wide ... He wondered how Grell had fit inside his living room.

—Crouch, did I.—

Falcon stared into the Rachnian's clustered red eyes and took a tentative step towards him.

"It's okay." Avalon took Falcon's hand and brought it to the Rachnian's front leg-arm.

A sense of profound wellbeing flowed through the being's mink-soft fur. Falcon withdrew his hand and the sensation vanished. He touched the Rachnian again and the powerful sense of rightness returned.

"Life-forces interact amongst all things. In the older races, like the Rachnians and Erochs, it flows from them to lesser beings," Avalon explained.

"Does it hurt them?"

"No. They're empathic and your feedback gives them pleasure. Chris, a translator Kwilloy will facilitate Command Board d-jumps between here and *Asegeir*, but before everyone arrives, I wanted you to hear the witnesses. New charges are being brought against me." She smiled. "Besides, you wanted to meet a Rachnian again."

He was about to ask what charges but he turned his eyes up to Grell's eight grouped ones. Images flooded his mind, clean and crisp. The memories were not his. They were Grell's, of the time when Falcon had been an ensign, stationed on his first ship, *Apollo*. When *Apollo's* engines had dropped them from Dim5 unexpectedly, hundreds had been wounded and the amniotanks blown. A nearby Rachnian world had sent help, including Grell and his mate, a healer. Falcon now caught a glimpse of the Rachnian's pain at the fear and repugnance that had exuded from the human crew—with one exception. He saw his own aura change rapidly from an unhealthy colour of terror to curiosity, then awe. Stunned at the depths to which this Rachnian had seen into him; Falcon was even more amazed that Grell could transmit such lucid memory images. "Thank you," he said.

The colours in the Rachnian's eyes whirled in pleasure.—Come far, you have, Chris Falcon. Word images not easy for me. Sensory images I use.—

Delighted to meet the same Rachnian again, Falcon thought the image of his mate.—How is she?—Lost to the Others thirteen of your years ago, as was your mate, in the Never-ending War.—

Falcon felt a poignant camaraderie from the being. Then Avalon rubbed her face into Grell's arm-leg. Had he done something wrong? Yet he felt uplifted.

"It's okay, Chris. While the Rachnians are very hardy on one level, they can die." Her eyes turned sad in the fading light. "C'mon." Avalon led Falcon into the darkening jungle. "There's a tavern down here. It caters to photosensitive and nocturnal species."

Although the planet was superficially pristine, the avian Kwilloys had gone through a heavily polluting phase seven thousand years earlier. The planet's life-force was markedly different to Katyl, for over two billion of the flightless Kwilloy lived deep beneath its surface. They entered a dark, rock-walled tunnel lit by dim lights. Although the shock of contact was not as intense as he had expected, he was acutely conscious of Avalon's touch. It had been weeks since he'd seen her, even longer since he'd felt her.

"You've been to Kwilloy taverns before?" she asked when they reached a gravitor.

"I remember the hangovers." He pulled himself down.

"This one's probably worse. It's frequented by dozens of Dwins, Fri, Jweqs and Dyans, all on leave.

"Jweqs? We haven't had much to do with them."

"No, they're not the nicest beings—probably something to do with the fact no one can pronounce their names, in *any* language—but they trade with the Kwilloys. The Jweqs here are reasonably well behaved. With the Rachnians present, they have no choice."

Off-world taverns could get a little rough but even the most aggressive species were considerate of the sensitive Rachnians, if not by choice than by necessity. Despite their pacific nature, the Rachnians could freeze other beings in their tracks merely with a short mind-burst. Though the results were not fatal, they were thoroughly unpleasant.

They passed the first few exits, Falcon seeing nothing but poorly lit tunnels. "Nocturnals, huh?"

"This is a tourist resort. Should start getting busy now the sun has set." Avalon stepped out into a busy market area. The low lighting, strange sounds, and mixture of exotic smells brought a smile to Falcon's face. This—not leading Kwilloy dignitaries on sightseeing trips through *Asegeir*—was why he had joined NGC. When they entered a nearby tavern, in complete defiance of gravity, Grell scuttled across the ceiling to a large corner table, where two Dwins and a Kwilloy sat.

"Captain Falcon," Avalon said. "This is Charlie, David, and Sarah. Charlie is a she and all three are creators."

Their names, Falcon knew, were fabricated to cater to the human inability to see mind-auras. David and Sarah were Dwins. Tiny, no more than a metre tall, they resembled green elves. Charlie was a Kwilloy, a yellow feathered avian somewhat taller than most humans, which put her on eye level with him. He might have guessed she was female by her softness but in the diffuse light it was hard to tell. Humans commonly called the Kwilloys, 'Big Birds', not because of their size but for their uncanny resemblance to a twentieth-century children's puppet.

"They've just come from Earth," Avalon added. "Charlie moved there with her son after Spacedock was quarantined to humans in December. David and Sarah commute regularly. I'll let them explain."

"I promised Granh, my youngling, we'd see Earth before coming home," Charlie said. "So we moved into Avalon's home on Stradbroke Island. As we're creators we didn't bother with perimeter defences."

Falcon nodded. Creators could masquerade as humans, allowing them to play tourist while real humans were none the wiser.

"Granh was alone on the Island when a regional government shuttle arrived with biotechs. Granh presumed Avalon had told them of our presence, because the techs greeted him like a Kwilloy. They said Avalon had requested they check the biota following the cyclone. My youngling..."

Charlie's feathers hung limply in regret but Avalon patted her arm. "It's okay, Charlie. Granh wasn't to know."

"No," Charlie turned her large eyes to Avalon. "But he should have called you, first."

"If Granh hadn't let the techs in, they would have found another way and we would never have known who was responsible. So he did us a favour."

Falcon's eyes lit. "That's how they got past your household AI."

"Charlie told Admiral Hastings she was coming to my place, and the Admiral knew she and Granh weren't translators and therefore couldn't see through human deception. It would seem perfectly reasonable to most beings that biotechs would come by after a cyclone. Granh helped two techs check for injured wildlife while the others worked elsewhere—elsewhere being my home. The household AI is very secure—from the outside. Once you're in, well, a third-class AI tech could download the system, take it away, and hack into it at leisure."

"That explains how. What about these additional charges against you?"

The Dwin, David, told him. "The C20s and captains of the other ark ships said if we stopped work on the Viking Project, those who did this would use it as further evidence of an alien conspiracy against humanity. They said you would agree, especially when Senator Matheson offered them NGC command if they helped gather evidence to indict the C20s."

Falcon exchanged looks with Avalon. They had been right about Matheson. "There are too many powerful people, honest people, in NGC who won't sit idly by while Matheson takes over. I'm surprised the Admiral hasn't moved yet."

"We now know why. Go on, David, tell him what you discovered," Avalon said.

"Like you, we came to the conclusion that certain elements in human society were becoming insular, anti-alien. It's not the first time a species has developed such traits, it's just taken humanity a little longer. With the approval of Admiral Woodstock and President Norman, NGC agreed to weather the storm while I called in a few friends—first class creator/translator couples who can manifest as humans well enough to fool human telepaths. It's taken time to infiltrate, because we wanted the humans to believe that they've discovered the truth without alien influence. You are aware that two types of nanites were found in Avalon and Jenna's homes?"

Falcon nodded. "A Katyl plague and another, unidentified type."

A waiter came by and set a fresh jug of water on the table. Avalon poured them each a glass. "The lab analysis reported the second type was inert, probably used as a control during the Katyl experiments. Well, the lab got it wrong."

"The same lab that 'lost' the forensic results on Webster and Garret? I thought their government contract had been suspended pending investigation?"

"Matheson's committee found that the couriers were responsible for losing the samples. Subsequently, the lab was cleared and assigned the task of identifying both nanos found in our residences. They identified the Katyl type immediately."

"Of course," Falcon muttered sourly, picking up the glass. "Casey Camicci had already established the template."

"This same lab did not bother to run a time delay test on the second nanite."

Falcon almost chocked on the water. "By the Origins!"

Avalon glowered. "My expletive was more colourful."

"How long?" He sat forward, ready to return to *Asegeir* immediately.

She reached out to stop him. "Raising the alarm too soon will alert those involved, undermining any chance of finding them. *Jord's* nano engineers are working on it now. President Norman and Admiral Woodstock know, and a coterie of trusted NGC officers are being informed as we speak."

"What's the time coding on this one?"

"Same as the Katyl nanite, an incubation period of one hundred and eighty two days."

"If it's spread through the human population, as the Katyl one was designed to, why hasn't it shown up in anyone undergoing a standard medical?"

"It's a dual nanite. During tests the second nullifies the existence of the first."

"A pair of nanites that cancel each other out on a nano-scan? I didn't think that was possible."

Grell lifted an arm-leg to signal a passing waiter. The Kwilloy's head feathers ruffled in acknowledgement.

David continued, "Earth is under a general quarantine, but humans can travel in and out if they're nano checked. The six-month blanket quarantine only covers Spacedock, Mars, and the Earth cities where the first nanite outbreaks occurred. We now believe Webster and Garrett spread two infections on Earth. One rapidly disposed of potential witnesses connected to the Spacedock outbreak. The second was this time delayed dual nanite that was designed to infect the *entire* human population."

"And because it can't be detected—" said Avalon.

"It would have spread to off-world colonies and ships, including *Asegeir!*" Falcon's stomach churned.

"The Rachnians are working with *Jord's* nano engineers to develop a test that checks human life auras," said David. "My people are designing nanites to mass-produce testing units, and then the Metas will disperse them."

"In three days," said Avalon, "the quarantine on Earth cities and Spacedock lifts. As a result of the long isolation, thousands of people are wanting to travel, so walk-through testing stations will be set up at all exit and entry points. The Rachnians are also working on a vaccine to render the catalytic nanite inoperative. I'm very glad they've broken a long-standing rule about not interfering with viruses, otherwise this would have taken years."

—Natural virus it is not, and time, there is not. The Others, using humans, this was created by,—said Grell.

Falcon shot Avalon a look. She laughed bitterly. "I was right, Chris. The Others are behind this. It's a multi-pronged offensive against humanity, the first ever *direct* attack."

"What about 2017?"

"A common fallacy," said David. "The Others had no desire to destroy you, they had infected your minds, inciting you to damage yourselves and the life-force of Earth in order to *feed* off you. I was there, one of thousands holding back the Others who had gathered to attack cetacea—*not* humanity—when we transferred the Great Ones to Gaia."

Charlie added, "I, too, was there. We couldn't stop what happened to humankind, because Earth had already initiated its own defence, the Rhesus virus. We evacuated cetacea because they would have become extinct. Only when you were ready, over a century later, did we Kwilloys begin to trade you technology for culture. But we never gave you outright, we taught you how to make your own tools."

The waiters arrived with platters of food. Falcon's stomach rumbled at the smell; he hadn't eaten dinner before going to bed. Taverns that serviced multiple alien species, generally employed the services of a creator chef or two. No doubt Grell had pulled human preferred cuisine from Falcon's mind and given the order to the Kwilloy waiter. Created or not, Falcon's olfactory nerves told him they were real salmon steaks.

"This time," Avalon said, reaching for the salt, "the planetary organism hasn't introduced a virus to control the human plague. In fact, as things stand, Earth *needs* humanity to recover. In the past the Others used bigotry and resentment, fear and loathing as instruments to feed off humankind's pain. Now they want to eradicate you using a shocking plague. To do so they needed far more powerful tools, tools they could wield directly rather than through the subconscious. This time they've introduced our opposite numbers."

Falcon dropped his knife. "What do you mean, your opposites?"

"The Masters gave us to humanity as tools. The Others cried foul and brought twenty-five C20s of *their* choice forward in time. The Others' reasoning is rubbish, of course. The Masters don't go into the 666th dimension and play chess with the species there. But fairness and balance is not the Other's intent, only chaos and destruction. These Other C20s possess certain traits that protect them from harm. They feed on the life force, vampire-like, rather than giving in return, as we do."

"The Masters and Others have time-swapped humans in the past," David said. "Mythical beings you call witches and warlocks, oracles and saints."

Surprised, Falcon asked, "Didn't the Masters say they'd never interfered with humanity prior to 2017?"

Sarah twitched her elfin ears equivocally. "They only said they were reluctant to interfere."

Falcon frowned. "That's splitting hairs. They deliberately fostered the impression of non-interference."

Charlie's feathers ruffled at Falcon's implied criticism, but Grell mind-spoke them all,—Correct he is.—

"There's a propensity amongst many species to deify the Masters," Avalon explained. "Or at least to think them infallible. They're not. Let's just say they've tried to intervene as little as possible but when the Others pull some dramatic stunt, the Masters put mechanisms in place to foil it."

"You being one such mechanism," Falcon observed.

Avalon shrugged. "The Masters didn't choose Mother Teresa as a C20. They opted for everyday people who couldn't be used by the Others. Just like you, Chris, we C20s have a deep, genetic affiliation with the life-force—as evidenced by our Meta relatives. The Others selected some very nasty people from human history and brought them forward for the sole purpose of inciting chaos."

"Matheson?" Falcon asked.

"No," David replied. "He is, as Avalon suspected, invulnerable to scanning, a fact that will expose him eventually. But he is a man of this time nonetheless, an unwitting pawn whose bigotry is being used. Webster and Garrett however, are not of this time."

Avalon spread something that looked like a thick, dark twentieth-century lubricant called 'grease' onto a single piece of toast. "Vegemite," she explained at his look of distaste. She cut her toast and added, "There are many periods in the twentieth century where really nasty people capable of destroying most of humanity disappeared without a trace. The Others are disorganized and chaotic and would never succeed if they had to supervise their minions. But the Other C20s I have in mind were ideal. Likeminded, highly intelligent, and very adaptable, with their youth returned they would have readily

acquired the necessary skills to carry out this conspiracy. They have the charisma to attract dedicated followers and fuel bigotry. They've also learned hard lessons from their twentieth-century failures." She smiled grimly. "Matheson is right. C20s *are* behind this, it's just that he's blaming the wrong ones."

Chapter 29

June 14, 2500

Avalon was glad that Grell had left before the Command Board arrived at the tavern. The Rachnian could never have tolerated the fear emanating from the humans. She didn't blame them. Based on *Jord's* lab tests, when activated, the dual nanite was a hideous hemorrhagic virus that would kill a human within ninety minutes.

Sipping her ginger wine, she watched Falcon as he briefed everyone. In the months before her incarceration, she had too often wanted to go to him, to talk with him, not just as a C20 to her captain, but on a more personal level. She had resisted that desire because, as she reminded herself in a familiar mantra, he needed time to adjust.

He had come to her each evening in the detention block because he unconsciously sought the companionship that a C20 relationship brought. But then, she was also right in what she'd told him the night before they'd arrived at Kwilloy. He was also fighting his need for her.

When she'd woken him that morning, Grell had told her that he was dreaming of riding with her on a seachon. She'd assumed he was trying not to fall off—until she felt the unmistakable evidence of his arousal.—Tell me no more,—she'd said to Grell.—For dreams are the doorway into his soul and not mine to see.—

It was common, normal in fact, for captains—and a good many of the Command crew—to entertain subconscious fantasies about their C20. It indicated nothing more than a healthy libido triggered by the inevitable proximity and tactile nature of bonding. As he had said, it was a gestalt interpretation. Again, it all came down to giving him time to adjust. Recognizing his early morning, sleep-addled predicament, she'd withdrawn from his embrace and waited in his lounge room.

Falcon's instinctual response to Grell had delighted her, for he had not reacted like most humans, even on a primitive level.—Joy, he brings,—the Rachnian had said with surprise.—Curiosity, wonderment as did he once before. Powerful, he also is. Subconsciously dips into the life force of *Asegeir* and in so doing, gives me welcome. Not since the time of the Great Ones have so much potential I felt. Not healer or creator, nor even translator this one, but something different ... human.—

Time to adjust be damned! Falcon *was* different. As were her feelings for him. Avalon sucked in a deep breath, and looked away. The Kwilloy tavern was crowded. It was the end of the working day for some species. They were ordering a late dinner or drinking ginger wine or bitter ale. Others, nocturnals, were ordering breakfast. Such a strange dichotomy. While the tavern's patrons ate and laughed and planned an evening of entertainment, or a 'day' of trade talks, a handful of humans in the corner contemplated the annihilation of their species. How very sad that bigots like Matheson did not 'believe' in the metaphysical existence of the Masters or the Others, and, rather than embracing aliens as allies in an inter-dimensional war, he *blamed* them.

She glanced at Charlie and David. And how very fortunate that so many aliens knew the true heart of humankind resided in people like Chris Falcon, not Matheson.

When Falcon finished his briefing, Phelan asked Avalon, "If you haven't been able to test for this dual nanite, how do you know it's been released?"

"We don't," she replied grimly. "Yet."

"By the Origins!" exclaimed Rose. "We've just finished testing the entire population for illegal nanites, I doubt people will be so cooperative a second time around."

Avalon shook her head. "They won't have to. You'll have three hundred testing units delivered to you in the next few hours. They're handheld units that require little training and no blood tests. All you need is a random sample to ascertain whether *Asegeir* is infected or not."

As people prepared to leave, Falcon said, "Captain Vol, can you apologize to the Kwilloy delegation and take over my schedule today? Governor." He turned to Gordon, who also stood. "In the event the infection has spread to *Asegeir*, I'd like you and Andrea to coordinate with epidemiologists and public relations on the best strategy for distributing a vaccine. Commander Rose, a Meta is due to deliver a sample of the nanites to *Asegeir* any moment now."

Rose finished his coffee. "I want to replicate the tests to determine the trigger, then I'll start preparations for vaccine production."

When Rose, White, and Gordon had gone, Phelan turned to David. "So you're the one who blocked all my access to NGC's restricted systems."

The Dwin laughed, and his pointed ears curled in apology. "I am sorry, but we had to be circumspect."

Phelan glowered in frustration, and cast a suspicious eye at Avalon. "How much did you know?"

"None of it, until I came to Kwilloy," she replied. When Phelan shot her a look of disbelief, she added, "Contrary to Matheson's paranoia, other beings have better things to do with their time than worry about human affairs. David only acted after he learned from Admiral Woodstock that Chris and I had been arrested. It wasn't until last night that we finally pieced it together. Don't anthropomorphize aliens, Stuart. Once the Rachnians realized that this was a direct attack by the Others, Grell moved—fast."

"What about the charges against you?" asked Falcon.

"When the media learns of this, there'll be wholesale panic. President Norman is briefing epidemiologists now. Like their colleagues aboard *Asegeir*, they have the scenarios worked out for massive nano-viral plagues and will quickly but quietly implement management plans as soon as we know how far the infection has spread."

"It's the timing that bothers me," Saav said. "We know this will go active in the first victims exactly six months after infection, but nothing's happened yet."

Avalon's lips thinned in frustration. "It bothers me, too. The private yacht carrying Webster and Garrett arrived in Brisbane on December 6. The first nano-deaths from the initial outbreak were reported that afternoon, one hundred and ninety days ago. The last case was reported December 17, so legally the quarantine must end in the affected cities in three days. Tests on this dual nanite show that it triggers at one hundred and eighty two days. If Garret and Webster released it with the other virus, we should have seen the first cases eight days ago."

"Unless they changed the time coding?" suggested David.

Phelan looked at the Dwin and nodded in agreement. "If the aim is to create panic, then they'd time it to trigger during the maximum period of flow between quarantine and non-quarantine areas, say, June 18."

"Nope, sorry, doesn't work like that," said Mixis. "Time codings are done in set multiples, you can't adjust them without retro-evolving the nanites. The dual nanite found in Jenna's house is set to trigger at one hundred and eighty two days. If we find one in the human population set to go off at, say—" She

glanced at David. “—June 18, which is one hundred and ninety two days, then according to human law, it's a different species. The C20s can't be blamed.”

Avalon poured another ginger wine and sipped it thoughtfully. “Let's put that aside for a minute and get back to Matheson. He's a bigot who wants NGC rid of telepaths, C20s, and alien influence. The only way he can succeed is to turn the public against us and resurrect NGC in his image. So, he releases a human pandemic that can be blamed on C20s. When activated, the plague creates a feeding frenzy for the Others, and humans by the millions die a grotesque death that punishes the Metas for having saved cetacea.”

“Why would Matheson want to kill most of humanity? What's the point of being emperor if you've got no one to rule?” asked Phelan.

“Prejudice has its own set of illogical rules,” replied Mixis. “If Avalon is right, the people behind Matheson—Webster and Garrett—had Nietzsche on the brain. Their ultimate goal was to produce a race of Aryan super humans and eradicate, or at least enslave, everyone else. They'd have no compunction killing off ninety-five percent of humanity if those who remained were pure—by their definition.”

“We—ll, that's the popular interpretation,” said Avalon. “They certainly placed a lot of credence on physical superiority, but they wanted to create a race of *intellectually* superior humans. I'd bet they place telepaths in that class. It doesn't matter that Matheson hates telepaths; he's just the ball, not one of the players. They'll eliminate him once he's no longer necessary.”

“Hitler was into mysticism,” she added. “But he was not a disciple of the black arts—witchcraft, satanic worship—which we now know to be a direct connection with the Others. However, unbeknownst to Hitler, some of his closest followers were. Even if it's not them, but some other despotic group of ethnic cleansers from the twentieth-century, I doubt they've been in this era for more than thirty or forty years or they would have been active before now. Although relatively inexperienced with their new abilities, they're cunning and ruthless and by now should be able to directly tap into the destructive power of the Others. I wouldn't like to go toe to toe with any of them. They probably couldn't kill a C20 but they would kill every human around us, and banquet on the pain that would cause us.”

She met Falcon's eyes. “Back to Matheson. He persuaded the lab to ‘lose’ the Webster and Garrett forensic evidence, then ordered that same lab to run minimal tests on the nanites ‘found’ in Jenna's place. And naturally, he can claim he didn't contract other labs to run backup tests in case the information leaked and mass panic erupted. Cute.”

“That explains why he's been so edgy. He's sweating that no one will read the initial test results and discover they weren't run on accelerated biomass to test for a time encoded virus,” Falcon said.

“Too risky.” Mixis shook her head. “It's a fundamental test these days. Nano engineers were bound to discover it, along with hard ‘evidence’ that the C20s made it—”

“And set it to go off just after quarantine is lifted. Like you said, cute.” Phelan downed the last of his wine.

Avalon ran a hand across her eyes. “Wait a minute. Mixis, could a biological trigger set the virus off sooner?”

“That would have shown up in the tests that *Jord's* lab ran.”

“Unless the very act of testing the virus *triggers* it in the sample! *Jord's* lab tested biomass with an

accelerated metabolism, right?"

"To see in six hours what would normally take six months. But it's basic nano-work, Avalon. You do a few accelerated runs on some biomass to calculate the exact moment the trigger is set, then decelerate the control biomass back to normal metabolism just before it fires, so you can watch the disease run its course as it would in living humans. In every test," Mixis added, waving her datapad for emphasis, "the thing triggered the equivalent of one hundred and eighty two days. Then the real-time course of the disease in the control biomass took an hour and a half from trigger to complete bleed-out and liquefaction—just like the Spacedock virus."

"The best place to hide something is in plain sight," Avalon replied thoughtfully. "If you were a nano engineer who knows the disease will be discovered before triggering, you would also know that any decent lab would accelerate it to test for a time bomb, then decelerate the metabolism of the control biomass to plot the disease in real time. But what if *accelerating* the nanovirus triggered something else? What if, even when you decelerated the biomass to track the disease, the virus *doesn't* return to normal metabolic rates?"

"A *metabolic* trigger!" Saav almost knocked the bottle of wine over. "When infected biomass is accelerated, the disease runs at the same six months in six hours speed, but when the control biomass is slowed to normal metabolism, the disease continues to run at the accelerated rate! So we see it killing in an hour and a half—a little longer than most nanoviruses but within the expected range—however that metabolic trigger was designed purely to fool researchers. It has nothing to do with the disease in living humans! Human metabolism is never accelerated like biomass in lab conditions, so the disease runs at the same, slow pace! By the Others, Avalon! I keep telling you you've got a twisted mind but that's so obvious, no one would ever have thought of it!"

Saav leaped from her seat. Running a quick mental calculation she said, "Seven hundred and twenty eight times an hour and a half—that's er, forty-five days. Shit, shit, shit! And it explains why the damned thing is so hideously complex; it needs the program to run for a *month* and a half, not an *hour* and a half! It could already have triggered in every human, in- and outside quarantine areas, but symptoms to speak of won't show for at least another week! I have to get up to see Casey Camicci *now!*"

"Grell will also take us to inform Norman and Woodstock," David said.

Moments later, he, Saav and Sarah vanished.

"We can't do anything more until we see how far it's spread, about five hours from now." Avalon finished the last of her wine and stood.

Falcon caught her hand. "You never answered my question. Where does this leave you, the C20s? What evidence do you have of Matheson's involvement and your innocence?"

"Last night, Grell took us to meet Woodstock and Norman at Spacedock." She stretched and yawned.

"How did you get there and back so fast?" Falcon leaned back in the chair and stared at her. "And what about your life-tie to *Asegeir*?"

She sat down again, disappointing a family of Jweqs hoping for a vacant table. "Wormhole," she replied. "And the Masters can circumvent the life-tie any time it suits them. After all, they're the ones who fashioned it. When Norman got over the shock of Ryl d-jumping him to her abode, where he met a C20 *and* a Rachnian, he nearly fell over himself agreeing to a telepathic scan and telecording. Once it's transcribed he intends to brief the most reasonable senators on the investigative committee, show them his telecording and suggest a voluntary telepathic scan would rule them out of the conspiracy. If they

accede, he'll use them as leverage to get to the other senators, leaving Matheson in exactly the position he wanted you: isolated. If this virus is as bad as it looks and Norman can't convince the senators any other way, he can invoke the Nano Act across the entire human species. No one will be exempt from tele-scans. Like NGC personnel, with his own tele-cording in hand, Norman will have the moral high ground.

"Matheson likely thinks that he and millions of others are vaccinated against this virus and only the unworthy, *including* telepaths, will die, when in fact the opposite is probably true. I'd like to see the good senator's face if it turns out he's infected."

Falcon laughed. "I'd pay good credits for that. I don't see you being locked in the detention block much longer."

Her eyes crinkled in amusement. "You don't see me there now, do you? We've got another month on Kwilloy. I have no intention spending it cooped up in *Asegeir*, either inside or outside the detention block."

After downing the last of his wine, Falcon pensively looked into his cup.

"A penny?" She re-corked the bottle and waved to the still hopeful Jweq family.

"Once this is over things can finally get back to normal. But there's no such thing as normal on an ark ship, or in space."

"You'd go mad from boredom if things ran smoothly for more than a week."

"I lasted eleven days on Katylgar."

"Only just. Learn to enjoy the quiet moments, Chris. Now, I'm about to take my own advice and go to the surface for some fresh air. Care to join me?"

The Jweqs arrived at the table and flashed an ugly set of teeth in gratitude. Avalon and Falcon politely returned their snarls.

When they stepped out of the gravitor, Falcon looked up through the overhead branches. One of the twin moons had set but the other was high in the night sky. A light wind blew the salt-laden air over them and he could feel the pounding of waves on the beach. Although *Asegeir's* seas were as realistic as Earth's, Falcon felt a sense of vastness and depth to Kwilloy oceans that was absent from the ark ship. It suddenly hit him that he missed Earth. The feeling surprised him.

Avalon ran ahead of him and scaled a sand dune. With each step a pulse of pale luminescence wafted into the air. Microscopic flora inhabited the dunes, adding a soft, almost magical hue to the atmosphere. When he joined her at the top of the dunes, she was staring out across the ocean, sparkling in the moonlight.

"My turn with the penny," he said.

She smiled. "I have a theory. I'll tell you for free if you like."

"Sure," he replied, assuming it was about the current crisis.

"Ever noticed how sentience only evolves on worlds that have at least one near-orbiting body to generate decent tides?"

He hesitated. "Come again?"

Avalon laughed, popped the cork and handed him the wine bottle before repeating her question.

"It's not something I've given a lot of thought to." He felt a little light-headed. Maybe he'd had enough wine.

"You're not the only one. Xenobiologists say there's no correlation. But there is." She took his free hand and led him down to the water's edge. The night was warm and despite the time, few beings were about. "Every home-world of every sentient creature we know has tides generated by satellites, or because they are themselves satellites orbiting gas giants. Now, any xenobiologist will tell you that on every mixed terrestrial/oceanic planet, life begins in the water, crawls up on land, and evolves sentience from there. Cetaceans were once land mammals that returned to the ocean. The littoral zone is a very dynamic environment where creatures are regularly left high and dry. If they had not been forced to deal with that adversity every few hours, they would never have taken the first proverbial steps ashore—and thus, never evolved sentience. So, that's my theory. What do you think?"

"Eh ... I'm not sure." He should be worrying about the virus, about the consequences for *Asegeir*, about anything other than how good it felt to hold her hand and walk along a moonlit shore. But he also knew she was right, there was nothing more they could do except get a few hours rest.

She smiled and nudged him with the bottle. "It's the wine. It's been a long time since I drank ginger wine on a beach at night. It reminds me of the deep and meaningless excursions into 'what ifs' my friends and I had way back when."

The shoreline ended in a rocky outcrop, so they walked up the dune, past the high water mark, and sat down in a natural hollow. "What else does it remind you of?"

"Oh, traffic jams and weekend SCUBA diving trips."

"SCUBA what?"

"Before nanogills, humans explored underwater by breathing air compressed in metal bottles. We'd drive down to Jervis Bay in fossil-fuel driven ground vehicles, collect abalone and scallops and drive home on Sunday nights. We'd invariably get stuck in the weekend traffic, stop at the nearest beach, and cook our spoils. Then we'd open bottles of Stone's ginger wine, make love in the dunes and curl up to sleep."

Avalon ran her bare toes through the soft, powdery sand. Faint clouds of bioluminescence wafted into the air. "It was long ago but it was also a time of great change. A time when we realized that we were just visitors on a world hurtling through the universe at a hundred thousand kilometres an hour, and that we had no idea where we were going or what we were doing, except that we were botching things up. A time when we realized that resources were finite and Mother Earth could not sustain us at her bosom forever. We'd already taken the first steps beyond, by landing on the moon, so we thought we could do just about anything. Y'know, some of our biggest arguments on those nights were about the validity of space exploration?"

Falcon almost choked on the alcohol. Pulling the bottle from his lips, he cried, "You're kidding!" He'd definitely had enough to drink.

"Oh no," she said. "You think of it as a modern problem, especially with people like Matheson. But I was there from the start, back when Neil Armstrong, Edwin Aldrin, and Mike Collins took off in a flimsy aluminium box atop an exploding firecracker and fulfilled the dreams of a thousand lifetimes. Before they'd even left the ground people were saying that we had to fix the problems on Earth first."

The alcohol and intimate atmosphere had a subtle effect on him. He made a pillow of sand, lay down, and gently took her hand again. The stars overhead provided a familiar and comforting astral blanket. "What did you tell these gainsayers?"

She chuckled and lay beside him. "Collateral technology. And I don't mean the commercialisation of Velcro, Teflon and microwave cooking, but satellite communications, microchips, and information technology. Sure, the so-called space race was a by-product of the Cold War but it also gave us tools to help improve the human condition. Through satellites we were better able to predict and warn people about destructive weather. We discovered the depletion of ozone layer, and gained a better understanding of global warming. The true impact of war and environmental degradation was broadcast into homes every night. And, with such tools—information and communication—humans became aware of the damage and tried, feebly at first, but they did try, to rectify their mistakes. That was the collateral technology brought about by a handful of men who looked up in to the sky and asked, *What if?*" She sighed deeply. "But by then humans were reproducing faster than rabbits, and it was too little, too late. I wasn't there, of course. I was nowhere and everywhere in between ... somewhere on my way to the future."

Despite the wine, or perhaps because of it, he suddenly realized that C20s never referred to themselves as human. Had people like Matheson drawn barriers over the centuries, causing the C20s to withdraw in self-defence? He was immensely saddened by that thought and went to speak, but she had fallen asleep. He cradled her head on his chest, then closed his eyes.

If she were not a C20, he'd be making love to her now, in this sand dune. But a captain didn't have such thoughts, no matter how much he missed his C20, nor how good it felt to embrace her, nor how much wine he'd drunk. *That's alright, that's just fine because she's here now, with me, and we're lovers of the soul. Anything else, anyone else, is superfluous.*

Keep telling yourself that, his mind repeated like an insomniac counting sheep. *You just keep telling yourself that*. Finally, his thoughts faded into the sounds of the surf, and he slept.

Above, in his orbiting abode, Grell was glad that even at his great age the universe still held surprises to be unwrapped. One such surprise now rested in the sand dunes a hundred thousand kilometres below. He smiled his Rachnian smile, closed his red eyes and then he, too, slept.

Chapter 30

June 15, 2500

Falcon woke to a sensation of soft mink and wellbeing. He carefully opened his eyes. It was almost dawn.

—Hide your human fears well, you do, Chris Falcon. This being thanks you for your consideration.—

"Anytime, Grell." He sat, aware of stiff joints, an aching hip, and mouth he wouldn't wish on his worst enemy. Sleeping in the sand dunes might have seemed like a good idea last night, but his body reminded him that the numbness brought about by Kwilloy wine did not extend to the morning after—especially where his head was concerned.

—Call me you should have, to return you to *Asegeir* last night.—

"That's alright," he replied. He'd happily pull up in a sand dune every night if that's what it would take to sleep with Avalon in his arms. He banished the thought, hoping the Rachnian hadn't sensed it. What the hell, Grell was a translator, and alien translators had taught ethics to human telepaths. It was a sure bet that other humans on *Asegeir* had the occasional libidinous thought about the C20.

He stretched out the kinks in his muscles, turned around, and saw Avalon bodysurfing scant metres away. Deeply tanned from her time on Katyl, the occasional flashes of pale thighs and breasts told him she was naked. He stood and brushed the worst of the sand from his shipsuit, pretending to avoid the sight. He wasn't a eunuch, and if Grell had not been there, the temptation to join her might have been too much.

—D-jump you I will to the bridge of your ship. The one you call Norman seeks you.—

He looked up at Grell—and did a double take. The huge black Rachnian was standing at the water's edge. His red eyes were glowing in the crepuscular light. Over one furry black arm-leg hung a floral bag of toiletries and a fluffy pink towel. Draped over another was a pair of Avalon's ubiquitous jeans, a t-shirt, and lacy white panties.

Falcon was still chuckling when he found himself inside his office, a harassed looking President Norman and Admiral Woodstock staring at him from the LD. He quickly cleared his throat and stood to attention. "Morning, sirs." He was acutely aware of a hangover, an overburdened bladder, tousled hair, unshaven face and sand-covered everything. Shit. Translator or no, but Grell had a few things to learn about human diplomacy.

He refused to entertain the idea that the Rachnian had a wicked sense of humour.

Scarty was setting breakfast for half a dozen people on the conference table. Mixis Saav walked in from the bridge, failing to suppress a yawn. Falcon's bladder required urgent attention, so he said, "Excuse me for a moment." And turned to his cleaning room.

Standing over the toilet, he shook his head. Earth was probably in the throes of a horrendous plague but he had to go pee. Great. Just great. He glanced in the mirror and noticed sand in his hair and glued to his temple. He brushed it off. What the hell, no matter where he'd been sleeping he couldn't have responded any sooner. He was just sensitive to the fact that he'd spent the night with Avalon in circumstances that were not exactly ... what? He resealed his shipsuit and ran his hands under the sterilizer. C20s and captains were a world unto themselves. How would a wife take to a husband sleeping like that with a

C20? None too kindly.

The cold water on his face didn't do much for the thumping in his head. He ran a comb through his hair. Without a shave he looked no more unkempt and ring-eyed than Woodstock and Norman.

When he emerged, Stuart Phelan and Mike Rose were helping themselves to breakfast. On the screen, Norman was drinking coffee. Falcon nodded to Marcus and ignored the sergeant's bland look—until he noticed the hangover pills hidden under his toast. Thank the Origins for observant orderlies.

"Captain, I assume you haven't heard the latest," Woodstock said between mouthfuls of his own breakfast.

"Not since 0200 Standard, sir." Falcon glanced at the time. It was 0510. He'd had just on three hours sleep. "You have operational nanotesting units yet?"

Norman closed his eyes and pain crossed his face. "Some Metas d-jumped testing units into NGC offices inside the quarantine zones about an hour ago, while others d-jumped them to locations specified by epidemiologists. The results produced a small sample but it covers a broad demographic. The virus appears to have infected more than seventy percent of the population outside the quarantine zones and over ninety percent within."

When Casey Camicci held up a continuously updating datapad, Falcon blanched. He didn't need an explanation to see *Asegeir* was infested. "Spacedock?"

"It's everywhere," Rose said.

"Have you extrapolated the virus based on a forty-five day course rather than an hour and a half?"

Camicci replied, "We've discovered an inbuilt delay of twenty minutes in the test biomass, which is the equivalent of ten days' normal metabolism. We have to err on the side of caution and assume that this thing was set off when Webster and Garret left Spacedock, say midnight December sixth, to be triggered on midnight June sixth. So we won't see people coming down with a mild fever before June seventeenth, two days from now."

"Which coincides with lifting the quarantine," replied Falcon thoughtfully. "Sirs, Avalon said the primary aim was chaos. If people start coming down with fevers when the quarantine is lifted, those outside the quarantine zone will assume it's come from within—and vice versa."

"Exactly." Woodstock nodded. "Adding to the panic. People will blame—"

"The C20s. Sirs, we cannot allow that to happen. In view of the virus' true origins, no PR campaign in the world it will restore people's faith in *our* C20s."

Norman set down his cup. "We concur. We're about to begin nanotesting all members of the government and senior civil servants, NGC and essential service personnel. They will be inoculated with the vaccine the Rachnians have developed. Then, implementing epidemiology emergency plans, they will distribute the vaccine to the remaining population, including off-world colonies. I invoked the Nano Act an hour ago."

"Yes, sir, but what about the C20s?"

"Now that I've finally met them," Norman replied. "I'm beginning to appreciate the loyalty shown them by their captains. The first telecordings from the senators on the investigative committee have revealed discontent with the way the investigation of NGC is being run. In regard to the forensic evidence

surrounding the supposed deaths of Webster and Garret, and the shabby lab procedures used to test this dual plague virus, Senator Matheson is guilty of obfuscation at the very least. Under the Nano Act, all nanotechs in that lab have been incarcerated and will be tele-scanned later today to eliminate them from investigations into the conspiracy to propagate a nanovirus. Senator Matheson is in Florida. Local authorities are detaining him for a nanotest. A *full* nanotest." Norman smirked. "Matheson has a childish fear of needles, especially spinal taps. I believe that will clear the C20s and identify the true perpetrators within hours."

A ghost of a smile appeared on Woodstock's face. "NGC is being handed back full control under the powers invoked by the Nano Act."

"You're not home free, Admiral. Matheson's committee uncovered things I'd like rectified."

"We'd all like to see things rectified, Mr President," Woodstock replied. "Including the ability of politicians to invoke parliamentary privilege to avoid telepathic scans."

"Touché. When this is over, I'll be tabling legislation to revoke parliamentary privilege. The public has a right to expect the same degree of forthrightness from politicians as they do NGC officers, security personnel and legists."

Falcon shared a look with Woodstock. As President of Earth, Norman was faced with moral dilemmas every other day, and his decisions were not always pretty. The minute he had handed his tele-recording to the media, his staff had probably begun working on the; 'I've got nothing to hide' slogan for his re-election campaign. Nothing on or off Earth was more self-righteous than a recently tele-recorded politician. Still, such legislation was long overdue, perhaps some good would come of this.

"How effective will the vaccine be now that the virus has triggered?" asked Phelan.

"It'll work until major organs and the circulatory system begin to slough," replied Rose.

"Commander Camicci, can you take us over the projected symptoms and timeframe?" Woodstock asked.

"Twenty minutes after the virus triggers in biomass, a mild fever occurs," replied the nano engineer. "It then takes seventy to ninety minutes from the onset of this fever to bleed-out and total organ liquefaction. A human would be dead by this stage, so we've assumed death will occur at the sixty-minute mark, with fifteen percent statistical spread either way."

The Command crew could follow Camicci's calculations, but for the benefit of the others Rose spelled it out. "Projected onto the human population, if June 17 is day one, most people will notice a slight fever by day five, a week from today. Days six to ten will bring a progressive fever and headache, epistaxis—nosebleeds—and diarrhoea. Some blood is likely to be seen in the stool, and if vomiting occurs, digested blood might be seen. By day fifteen, July 2, these symptoms will be well entrenched. Babies and the elderly will succumb over the next five days as the symptoms progress and dehydration sets in. Disorientation and personality changes will become evident, and gums and eyes will start to bleed. By days twenty to twenty-five, administration of a drip feed becomes problematic because blood vessels will rupture. If the time scenario is correct, the vaccine will no longer be effective past this period, although in some cases, day fifteen will be the latest. For epidemiological purposes, we consider July 2 to be the last day that the vaccine can be guaranteed effective. Between days thirty to thirty-three, most people succumb as they haemorrhage internally. The remainder will hang on perhaps as long as day forty, depending on what organs fail first."

"However," Camicci said. "We've never seen a nanovirus run longer than an hour or two, so

Commander Rose's prognosis is an extrapolation based on a decelerated model. Naturally occurring hemorrhagic viruses like Ebola and Hanta Fever generally run about three times faster. Now if that happens, the vaccine will be no good past June 22."

Norman loosened the collar of his shirt. "How soon before we know?"

Rose's eyebrows lowered. "Epidemiologists will run tests on themselves, at least until June 21."

"Do you mean infected doctors will remain unvaccinated until then?" Woodstock was incredulous.

"It's the only way, sir," Camicci replied. "They'll be placed in a highly controlled, quarantined environment. They're best qualified to describe the symptoms, and their internal organs will be carefully monitored. The moment they start to destabilize, the vaccine will be administered and they'll enter an amniotank. As you know, amniotanks do not cure per se but stabilize body functions and accelerated healing. The vaccine will do the rest."

Mixis added, "Sir, nanoviruses can't be reprogrammed to trigger at different times, and the same applies to their propagation. This virus has been programmed to run forty-five days from trigger to complete biological breakdown, but it's new territory, so it's impossible to give you an accurate prediction. All they can do is revise the course of action as the disease progresses."

"Admiral," Falcon said, "what about long distance NGC ships, especially Explorer class ships that can't access a vaccine before July 2?"

"The Metas will be collecting and distributing the vaccine as it's manufactured. We're not concerned with administering it on off-world colonies or NGC ships because their personnel are trained in disaster management. Our biggest concern is Earth."

Norman said, "There's a huge contingent of Earth First people who are anti-technology in all forms. Some will refuse the vaccine or capitalize on this situation to further their own cause."

"Including those who triggered this," Falcon muttered sourly.

"Even with the Nano Act, there are a lot of places on Earth where people can hole up and just not be found," said Norman.

"Secondary contagion?" Phelan asked.

Camicci shook his head. "This is not a biological virus but a nanite with a specific lifespan. Once triggered it runs its course and disintegrates. We've run accelerated biomass tests using an already triggered virus and found that it remains infectious even after it's triggered, but the course of the disease is accelerated right up until the last minutes."

"So if you don't have this thing yet but you catch it, say an hour before it self-destructs from old age, you get the disease, and it kills you in an hour or less, instead of running the entire forty-five days," Rose explained.

"Nice," Phelan muttered. "But that doesn't mean Webster and his band of merry hellmakers didn't hold a few back. They could reintroduce it anytime so it can trigger in the future."

"That's why it's necessary to vaccinate *every* human," Rose replied. "We've already set up vaccine production on *Asegeir* and other outlying ark ships so they can be used as distribution points. We're notifying every ship in the database, private as well as NGC. Any unregistered ships, smugglers and so forth—nothing we can do about them."

Phelan's eyebrow lifted. "Well, that's one way to cut down on the riff-raff." Mixis glared at him. He shrugged. It was true.

An aide handed Norman a datapad. He looked up and said, "An interesting demographic has come to light. No telepath has been infected, not even registered wildcats."

"Oh joy, 2017 here we go again." Phelan rolled his eyes.

"Avalon expected that," said Falcon. "It's the same multi-purpose thinking we've seen from the start."

"Finding Webster and Garrett is our next priority. Now if you will excuse us, we have a media conference to attend." Norman disconnected the link.

Falcon looked around the conference table in his office. "Congratulations everyone, on resolving this so swiftly."

"The C20 came up with the answer, Captain. We just ran it through the grinder and punched out the numbers," said Camicci.

And as always, Avalon sought neither thanks nor recognition, but faded silently into the background. A trace of her scent remained on his shipsuit. He could still feel her lying against his chest, her breasts gently rising and falling in the moonlight. She would still be down on Kwilloy, surfing naked in the waves. "Marcus," he said. "Call a public relations meeting in half an hour, that'll give me time to get cleaned up. Commanders Saav and Rose, I'm ordering you two to get at least five hours sleep. There's nothing more you can do. If something develops, I want you both well rested. Dismissed ... and again, well done, everyone."

Chapter 31

June 30, 2500

"Wormhole forming at four thousand kilometres," said the AI.

Falcon was sitting at his desk in the day cabin, his back to the transparent LD. He swivelled his chair around to watch as a spherical object emerged from the swirling non-colours of the wormhole. He was about to ask for magnification when a voice in his mind said,—Captain Falcon, permission to board?—The thought, clear as spoken words, accompanied an image of a tall, raven-haired Meta.

—Certainly.—Falcon stood, and came around to the front of his desk. "AI, to expect two Metas in the Command level—" A knock on his door interrupted. "Come!"

Avalon walked in just as the Metas d-jumped into his office.

Falcon had met other Metas, but never in the confines of a ship. At three metres tall, their heads almost brushed the bulkhead. "Captain, good to meet you, I'm Nick," said the male. "This is Kristin."

Kristin shook Falcon's hand. "I've heard a lot about you, Captain."

"The pleasure is mine, believe me. I'll take you down to medops to collect the vaccine. Senior Commander Rose is on Kwilloy with our chief nano engineer, Commander Casey Camicci. A private yacht arrived last night and everyone on board tested positive for the virus. The owner is a biologist. Because we need every nano engineer, medtech and biologist on *Asegeir* to manufacture the vaccine, he's agreed to let Senior Commander Rose track the disease in him."

"He's a brave man," said Nick. "Hemorrhagic viruses are the stuff of nightmares."

They left Falcon's office for the Command gravitor. "That's something I haven't figured out. We can develop vaccines for most nanoviruses within hours, days at the most. Why time-code it to live so long and risk us finding a cure before the virus wiped out half the population?"

Reaching out with his prehensile tail, Nick grabbed the gravitor pole and, crossing his arms thoughtfully, used his tail to propel himself upwards. "I doubt you could have understood a dual nanite in less than six months, much less developed a vaccine."

Falcon was fascinated by the Meta's use of his tail. On one level Nick was human, but his appearance was as alien as a Kwilloy's. Falcon glanced back at Kristin and Avalon gossiping like schoolgirls.

Nick caught his eye. "Any minute now we'll get a rundown on the latest babies."

Glaring at him, Kristin pulled Nick's tail just as he released the gravitor pole. A half-dozen medtechs were witness to the extraordinary sight of a three-metre Meta sprawled flat on his face between the gravitor and the entrance to medops. Kristin and Avalon burst out laughing.

"Thank you," Nick muttered sarcastically to his wife when he picked himself up.

Avalon took him by the arm. "I seem to recall an incident on Arida Six—"

Nick rolled his eyes. "Now don't go reminding her of that. She still insists her tail is a vertebra short."

Next time someone starting talking about the mystique of Metas, Falcon would find it hard to keep a

straight face.

To Falcon, Nick said, "Can you visualize Commander Camicci? I don't know his mind signature."

Falcon felt the same benign sense of power he had experienced with Grell in his mind. Yet this was subtly different, a familiar echo of something he'd felt in the atrium with Avalon almost seven months earlier.

Casey Camicci abruptly popped into existence in the medbay. The Meta had d-jumped the nano engineer using nothing more than a visual recognition! Was it because Camicci was human? Or because Nick was the most powerful of all the Meta translators? Four centuries after revealing themselves to humans, Metas were still a mystery.

"Is the quarantine room ready?" Nick asked Camicci.

"Right there." The nano engineer pointed to diaglass-walled enclosure partitioned off from the rest of the medbay.

Michael Rose popped into existence beside Falcon—who reached out a hand to steady the d-jumped doctor.

"Thank you," Rose said, looking up at the tall, blue Meta. "The other passengers are already in amniotanks but getting a quarantine containment chamber on a shuttle was going to take hours."

Nick walked to the diaglass wall, and asked the man inside, "How do you feel?"

Falcon could hear the mental greeting that the Meta simultaneously sent the biologist.

"Good to meet you, too. I'm Stanley Morgan and yeah, not too bad. Sore muscles and joints, slight headache and some chest pains, but it is only day thirteen."

"No bleeding yet?"

"Cleaning my teeth with a toothbrush is out, although I'm not experiencing the sort of pain and dehydration you'd expect from internal bleeding. Nausea and diarrhoea is getting annoying, but it's a relief—no pun intended—being here and knowing the vaccine is nearby."

"Don't go past day twenty." Nick's tail curled behind him. Falcon wondered if it was a sign of agitation.

Morgan smiled grimly. "I'm not suicidal, but since everyone on *Asegeir* has been vaccinated, I can put up with the discomfort so the med teams here can eyeball this thing."

Turning back to Rose and Falcon, Nick said, "It's the same on Earth. Although some people are already haemorrhaging, we're sure the vaccine will work until day twenty-one in adults. We'd better start deliveries."

"Thank you, Captain," said Kristin. "I hope you'll come."

"I'm sorry?" he replied, captivated by the Metas' twitching tails.

"To Christmas. Kimral, Nick's Silvan, will be giving birth and despite his remarks in the gravitor, Nick's as excited as Mistral."

The Pegasus-like Silvans, Kimral and Mistral, were mated to one another. As with C20s and captains, each male Silvan was paired with a female Meta, and vice versa. Falcon saw a clear image of a luminous green foal, complete with ungainly wings. It was replaced by an image of a Pegasus-drawn Christmas

sleigh flying through the night.

The crated vaccine disappeared, followed by Nick, who sent him a mental farewell. Kristin embraced Avalon then disappeared with a soundless pop.

Leaving medops, Falcon said to Avalon, "The Silvans, Mistral and Kimral, they lost their first-born?"

"During the Metas' transformation, the Others breached the protective barricades around Gaia," she replied. "Kristin and Nick also lost their firstborn son, and my daughter lost her unborn daughter. Most Metas died in the first seconds, their minds shattering rather than succumbing to the darkness. Many Silvans also perished, as did hundreds of Dwins and Rachnians, even Masters."

Her eyes grew sad. "A war rages, Captain, across the heavens, across space and time and dimensions that no human mind can fathom. And yet it is also a war from within. The Silvans and the Metas are soldiers, just like you. The war never ends; it just changes form. This time, we were lucky."

They stopped at the gravitor. Avalon indicated she was going in the opposite direction.

Falcon hesitated. "I felt ... it was as if Grell had reached into me. But much clearer."

"I'm glad you met Nick. He's an extraordinarily powerful translator, almost as strong as Grell. You sensed Nick's connection to the Life Force clearly because Metas and C20s were once human." She turned to leave.

Falcon caught her arm. "You're human."

"Once, but no longer, not by your definition."

His voice dropped. "And what is my definition, Avalon?"

The sadness in her eyes seemed to deepen. He released her arm. She reached into the gravitor, grabbed the pole and turned back only long enough to answer, "One that cannot be refuted."

* * * *

Over the following weeks Falcon rarely saw Avalon except at Command Board meetings. Her quarters were next to his and he always knew when she was there. He considered suggesting a tinsmet before bed—they'd both been gifted huge wooden barrels of the liqueur by the Katyl warleader—but her days and nights were already filled with the problems of the ark ship. When she was not working on some engineering nightmare or planning projects with the Governor, she was helping Marcus with systems reports, or she was down on Kwilloy with her friends. Her only escape was the solitude of her quarters at night. Sensitive to Mixis' words, he did not want to intrude. But their last conversation had disturbed him. One day at lunch with Mixis, he asked the telepath what it meant to be human.

Mixis looked at him oddly. "Are you asking for a clinical definition?"

"Is there an irrefutable definition?"

"Is this something to do with the virus? Are Earth First groups proclaiming it attacks only true humans?"

"No," he replied slowly. "Ever notice how Avalon never refers to herself as human?"

"Well, biologically she's way outside any known parameters for what defines humans. She's reproductively incompatible—"

"She's got children, she had children to Dak Jassom."

Saav stopped eating, pushed her plate aside and said, “*Had*—the C20s were still evolving; they're *still* evolving. Second generation Metas have children only by mating with each other, that's why we have only fifty C20s after all this time. It could be argued that even telepaths are not the same species.”

When he frowned, she added, “Since the Rhesus virus we've become a pretty uniform looking species. Sure, we have brunettes and curly redheads, straight-haired blondes and skin colour from porcelain to a slightly dusky olive, like Avalon and me. But we no longer have the wonderfully rich variation from absolute black to white with a hundred shades of red and brown in between. Humanity hasn't seen a true epicanthic fold for almost three hundred years. The Rhesus virus took from us so much variation in DNA as well as culture, variations that evolved to fit habitat niches a hundred thousand years earlier. And, because we are human, there's an element amongst us that needs to highlight differences, so they pick on more modern aspects—telepaths, C20s and Metas—each of which are variations on the basic human model. Avalon's psychologically more human than Matheson, but physiologically, certain aspects of her are worlds apart. As I told you before, we're ephemeral, while her friends will still be here in a thousand years, as she continues to evolve more and more away from what humans define as ... human.”

Chapter 32

July 30, 2500

Avalon smiled indulgently when Stuart Phelan slapped his Kwilloy counterpart on the back. They were congratulating each other for keeping altercations to a minimum. It had been a good two months. Delighted with *Asegeir*, the Kwilloys were already talking about the next generation ark ships.

A few metres away, Peta Vol was dancing on the tavern's wooden tabletops with a shifty looking Jweq. Vol and the Jweq had been in one of the unreported altercations. When Lee Walker and Casey Camicci had intervened, the Jweq's crew had joined the fray, and the tavern had been partially demolished. Fortunately, two creator Dwins had also been part of the scuffle, and they set things right, even re-stocking the landlord's bottles of ginger wine. As Avalon watched, the Jweq's friends pulled a hesitant female ensign onto the table. Perhaps it was a good thing Falcon wasn't here. He was the Captain and nobody wanted to dampen this party.

A Dyan sat down heavily beside her, knocking over bottles of wine. The being flashed her a multi-fanged grin and motioned to the table with a three-fingered, webbed secondary arm. The Dyan's double joints made him an interesting dance partner. Besides, she'd prevented the alcohol from metabolizing too fast and needed to work some of it off.

While she was dancing, four mating groups of Erochs drift in.—Hey, G'b Rl!—Avalon called.

—Avalon!—replied one of the Erochs.—We weren't expecting to get here until after *Asegeir* left.—We're due out in six hours. What are you doing here?—On our way to Getray, one of the Dwin worlds in progress.—

Sensing Falcon's presence, Avalon excused herself from the Dyan, jumped off the table and made her way through the crowded tavern. She wasn't sure if Falcon's pained look was due to the assault on his olfactory nerves or from seeing his chief commander's wild dancing.

"Captain! Over here." She grabbed him by the arm while the Eroch G'b Rl floated across the ceiling towards them.

They reached a corner that was marginally quieter, where David the Dwin and two Kwilloys sat. Only then did Avalon notice a petite woman in full NGC captain's uniform accompanying Falcon. She smiled broadly when Falcon introduced Linda Williams, Captain of the *Vanguard*. "I wondered if you'd be able to escape from that diplomatic function." Avalon shook Williams' hand, then gesturing to G'b Rl, said, "This is none other than the famous Gabby."

Gabby sent Avalon a withering look. "Infamous, you mean."

Williams stared at the angel. Despite four hundred years of conditioning, humans still could not think of the ethereal Erochs in any other way. "The same Gabriel as the one in Monte Carlo's museum of Gaia images?"

"The very same, I'm afraid." Gabby closed his pale, translucent eyes and sighed. "Why, oh why I ever let Erik take my photo is beyond me. We thought it would dispel all those rumours."

Avalon laughed. "Oh, come off it, Gabby, it's not nearly as bad as it used to be. Now how about you get up there and show us what three and half millennia of practicing a trumpet can really do to liven up a party?"

The Eroch levitated from his chair and drifted to the far side of the room. Avalon turned to the captains. "Have you ever heard an Eroch play?"

They shook their heads, and Falcon poured Williams a ginger wine. Avalon noticed the look they shared. For a moment, she was almost overwhelmed by a sense of longing. And regret. But she pushed it aside when Gabriel, the chief translator pilot for the Master's largest mother ship, began to play his horn.

The music penetrated the tavern and markets beyond, until everyone quietened, even the Jweqs, as the haunting melody filled their souls.

In the silence that followed, David sighed wistfully. "I haven't heard him play that since the day we uplifted the cetaceans and chosen humans. It gave us strength to hold on against the Others. It was a good day, that last day on Earth. A fitting day for G'b RI to play his horn."

Other Erochs joined G'b RI, each one carrying a musical instrument. Falcon lifted Williams to the makeshift dance-floor of tabletops, while Avalon and David moved to another table to talk to Charlie and Granh. The light was further dimmed to accommodate the arriving nocturnals and photosensitives.

While she laughed and talked with her friends, Avalon's eyes kept returning to Falcon. She considered speeding her metabolism to remove the alcoholic fugue, but it seemed the only way she was willing to confront her emotions. Emotions she'd been avoiding for weeks, if not months.

Waking in Falcon's arms in the sand dunes had been one of the most comforting sensations she could ever recall. Had she been flirting with him? Could she tell the difference anymore? It wasn't as if he was the first captain she'd slept beside, or beneath, in some of the strange and frightening circumstances in which they'd found themselves. But the emotions ... *Oh, come off it, Avalon, admit it, the desires you felt—still feel—are all wrong.*

A dozen times in the last weeks she'd sensed him entering his quarters and considered suggesting a tinsmet before bed. But too much was demanded of him already, too many people came to him with their problems and needs. When she checked his medimplant, she found he was not getting nearly enough sleep. He was compensating by drawing from the life-force.

She watched Williams pull him close and laugh. Although Linda Williams had only been on the C20 ship *Vanguard* a short time, her C20 said that he'd never felt such a strong connection between a captain and the life-force before.

The musicians stopped, and Falcon and Williams climbed down from the tabletops. Lost amidst the crew, Falcon had vanished from Avalon's sight. But she could feel him, of course. Despite the alcohol, she could also sense he was looking for her. Fearing what he would see in her eyes, she sat deeper into the shadows. The crowds parted sufficiently for her to glimpse Williams leading him to the exit. His eyes kept turning back, searching for her.

Avalon stayed until late, then took the gravitor to the surface. She would sleep in the dunes for an hour or so, wake at dawn and ride the waves, not caring when *Asegeir* left, knowing it would pull her on board at the RB point.

From the edge of the jungle, she saw an NGC shuttle with *Vanguard's* logo. A wave of regret flooded her. Moments later, the warm comforting presence of Grell filled her mind.

—Saddened you are,—declared the Rachnian.

—I'm sorry, Grell, I did not mean for you to feel the burden of my heart.—The pain you feel is not for

you alone.—

She wanted to go to the dune where they had slept, but she did not wish to disturb something she had no desire to see.

—In the shuttle, they are.—

Avalon nodded gratefully, a solitary tear dropping from each eye as she climbed the crest of the dune.—Why did the Masters make us this way, Grell?—she asked tiredly.—We're neither betwixt nor between. Not human, not Meta. We're allowed to love humans, but not the ones with whom we share the life-force. And Falcon—and Williams—they only have each other this one night. Passing ships.—She laughed bitterly.—Literally. It's even harder for Williams because most of those on *Vanguard* are NGC and therefore under her command. It's ... artificial.—

She lay down to sleep. The blanket of stars offered no warmth, just melancholy. It was just sex, nothing more, and nothing compared to the power of the life-force.—It doesn't make any sense, Grell. It's just a biological drive. Since we can't reproduce, you'd think the Masters could have taken the urge from us as well.—

Grell d-jumped down to the dune.

—Grell! I'm sorry, you shouldn't have come. I know my sadness hurts you, and I would not have that. I'll be fine, and, well, I think I'd like to be alone for a while. Some things I need to work out for myself.—She embraced one of his arm legs.—I'm glad you're coming to Earth for our Christmas.—

Knowing some things must come to pass in their own time, the Rachnian left.

Williams begin the start-up procedures for the shuttle. Falcon asked the AI to display any nearby sentient life forms. If they had to adjust the shuttle's harmonics to accommodate for sensitives, it could mean a slow ascent until they hit thirty thousand metres.

Eight non-sensitive beings appeared on screen, including one the AI identified as a C20. Falcon manually adjusted the readings until the clear image of Avalon appeared. He had felt her nearby, but assumed she was still in the tavern. Instead, she was lying in the dune they had slept in weeks before. There was no sign of Grell.

She looked so small and lonely, curled up like an abandoned waif, a frown on her face and what looked like, though almost certainly couldn't be, tear-stains on her face. What nightmares plagued her that she seemed so lost and vulnerable? Unmindful of Williams' presence he unconsciously ran the back of his hand along the image of her face. What was happening to him? Why was he feeling this way?

"It's hard *not* to fall in love with them, isn't it?" Williams whispered.

He glanced at her, a crooked smile riding his lips. Only another C20 captain might understand. That he and Williams had held each other with abandoned passion just a short while before made it easier to admit a truth he'd only begun to realize. "Yeah, yeah it is. But I can live with that."

Williams adjusted their trajectory. "I never thought I'd willingly forego sex in exchange for a greater intimacy, but the trade-off is worth it, in spades."

"As long as you can hide it from your telepath."

During his trial, Matheson had thrown countless accusations against Falcon, including his ability to block scans. "I had a scan during the NGC shake-up," Williams' said. "I'm a wildcat telepath, too. I can hide it

from him."

Falcon shot her a narrow eyed look. As his chief commander aboard *Warrior*, Williams had vigorously defended his decision to take the captured Katyl ship to their home world. It had come as no surprise to Falcon when, a year ago, after the elderly captain of *Vanguard* had died, Williams had been assigned to replace her.

"It wasn't a talent I showed in the Academy," Williams added. "And back on Degan, when you promoted me to lieutenant commander ... well, there were no telepaths around to run the required scan."

"Huh. Makes you wonder if all C20 captains aren't the same."

"Wouldn't surprise me," she replied. They broke through the atmosphere into space. "My C20 tells me that Avalon has allowed the first days of her life to be telecorded and that it will be published as a thesis. A bunch of ex-Nazis are running around the galaxy looking to set up the Fourth Reich, the Others are pissed off about our alliance with the Katyl, and wildcat telepaths are suddenly acceptable as C20 captains. Who knows what's next? But I'm sure glad I'm hooked up for the ride."

Williams docked with Falcon's Katyl fighter. He opened the overhead hatch and leaned across to kiss her farewell. "See you next time, Captain Williams."

She winked. "Sure thing, Captain Falcon."

Part 3: Mali

Chapter 33

August 15, 2500

In the early days of space travel, mankind discovered a strange maxim; the complexity of government is inversely proportional to the sophistication of the culture. Like Rachnians and Metas, the Dwin had no government. *Asegeir's* visit to their sparsely inhabited home world, Dwi, was more a gesture of thanks than a formal, diplomatic mission.

The Dwins were, for want of a better term, world-builders. They seeded barren planets with life and then tended them as park rangers would tend a forest. It was a hobby, of sorts, that ensured a continuation of the Life Force in a galaxy where the Others periodically wreaked havoc amongst the younger worlds.

The doppelganger Earth known as Gaia, was a product of Dwin technology. Seeded with the life of Earth as it existed before humankind developed agriculture, it was to Gaia that the Great Ones, the magnificent, truly sentient beings humans called whales, had been taken during those fateful months in 2017. But for the population of *Asegeir* such things were ancient history, and Dwi provided nothing more than a well-earned rest. Falcon sent Scarty and Marcus on leave to the planet, while he stayed aboard *Asegeir* to complete his studies of the ark ship's habitats.

Although Falcon regularly used the gymnasium, he preferred to swim at a secluded beach not far from the Command gravitor. One afternoon after his swim, he returned to his quarters early, intent on reading Avalon Davo's history files. He was tossing his clothes and towel into the valet when he heard noises from the kitchen. Bending inside the food processor's storage banks was a distinctly feminine form dressed in blue jeans. He walked up and said, "If you're hungry, my food processor's the last place on *Asegeir* to look."

Surprised, Avalon banged her head on the lid. She turned and replied, "Not anymore."

"C20." He sighed. "You shouldn't be doing this. When Scarty's on leave I can get a yeoman."

"But you never do. Don't worry, I didn't upset the bio-systems, just added a few things."

He leaned past her and read the contents. "These are mostly exotics and luxury items."

She turned around to reach in. "Well, if you don't want them—"

"You do enough for us, for all of us." He clasped her arm.

"Chris, it's not an inconvenience."

Grinning lopsidedly, he slowly leaned close and whispered in her ear, "Then you better help me eat it."

Acutely conscious of his near-naked proximity, Avalon froze. Drops of water fell from his dark hair onto his neck. She could feel his strength, smell his maleness mixed with a clean saltiness from the water. How could he make an invitation to dinner sound so erotic? She dismissed it as her state of mind. He was not trying to be sensuous; it was meaningless banter between friends. "Okay, if you'll share a tinsmet with me before bed."

He released his hold and, still grinning, went into his bedroom. "I thought you'd tired of tinsmet." Moments later he returned wearing a white robe.

"Never. Perhaps next trip out, when you have more time, we might start our evening drink again?" She examined the options now available to the food processor, determinedly ignoring the echo of his sensitive fingers on her wrist.

"Avalon, for you I always have time."

"Real time," she replied. He would always feel obligated to her as a C20. "You've achieved much these past eight months, more than could be expected of any man. Now, what would you like?"

"Surprise me." He pulled a bottle of ginger wine from a cupboard and poured them each a glass.

"Red ginger wine and tinsmet; you're acquiring a taste for alien alcohol." She punched the dinner menu into the food processor.

"I've always had a taste for tinsmet. Unfortunately NGC 'borrowed' the stock Kal gave me back in '86. Research purposes, so they told me. As for ginger wine, I have fond memories."

She doubted his memories had anything to do with their night in the dunes. He had been to Kwilloy many time before, and had most likely drunk ginger wine before. "This will take a while, why don't you shower first?"

Over dinner, they talked about their forthcoming trip to the Mali system. "I read the files you distributed on Malicanoorian culture," said Falcon. "Interesting culture. Janok, their ambassador, is concerned tourism is not a worthy trade item for pollution free technology."

"It's a typical inferiority complex, but their architecture alone will send xenosociologists into a swoon. And the sheer novelty value to tourists is incalculable. I hope they sign."

If the Malicanoorian elders refused to enter a trade agreement with the diplomatic delegation, *Asegeir* would spend the next two and a half months on an astronomic and geophysical exploration of the Mali system, paying particular attention to the gas giant manufactured by the Dwin. If the Malicanoorians signed, exploration of the system would proceed using shuttles while *Asegeir* remained in orbit around Mali's lifeless third planet.

"Is there room for me on the diplomatic shuttle?" Avalon asked.

Falcon looked up in surprise. "Angus Gordon is still in the tank after that brawl on Kwilloy, so I'm going to have to play ambassador. Gus' wife was supposed to be going, too, but she wants to explore the gas giant."

"You don't think she would have played diplomatic wife with a Dwin manufactured gas giant to study, do you?"

He chuckled. "Probably not. Seriously, I'd appreciate the company."

They talked of their hopes for Malicanoor and drank a tinsmet after dinner. Knowing they had an early Command Board meeting prior to the Ambassador's arrival, Avalon stayed only long enough for one glass. Falcon decided to forgo reading her files, content with the knowledge that she would be with him on Malicanoor.

* * * *

Ambassador Janok had been stymied at every turn. Test the humans, the elders insisted, or else Malicanoor was honour-bound to welcome them as equals. Janok knew the humans were superior to Malicanoorians, both intellectually and technologically. It was only because the Dwin had saved

Malicanoor from cometary bombardment—and species annihilation—that his people even knew of distant worlds. The Dwin had created the gas giant and placed it in orbit around their sun, Mali, to act like a cosmic vacuum cleaner, attracting most of the detritus threatening their home world. Then the Dwin suggested that Earth might be a worthwhile place to begin an ongoing interspecies relationship. Grateful to the small, green aliens, the elders agreed, but secretly held grave doubts about this travelling to distant worlds. It had taken Janok half a lifetime to convince them to try one tiny little trade agreement. The elders allowed Janok to go to Earth on one condition; the humans must be tested in the time-honoured way. If they passed, they would be granted the friendship of Malicanoor. If they failed, Janok was to abandon his nonsensical ideas and stay home.

Janok had enjoyed his time on Earth. He had enjoyed the company of humans, as had the two-dozen Watchers accompanying him. Given the richness of what they had seen, the unlimited power and skies free of the blackening fire-rock dust, waters running blue and clean and not brown with factory sludge, it was ridiculous for the elders to insist that their antiquated customs be carried to other worlds. But it was not his place to say so, and the elders had sent Watchers to be sure he complied.

Janok had been gloomily certain the human female he'd selected for the tests would fail, yet it had not come to pass. Then a suitable male had been chosen, and he, too, had passed. The Watchers had been unnerved by this turn of events, but that, Janok said jauntily, was life. Then the senior Watcher invoked the most ancient of traditions, just to be certain the elders would be completely satisfied, and Janok knew all was lost.

In time the elders would die and more modern thinkers replace them. Then, perhaps, this wonderful idea of travel to distant worlds and trading with alien beings might be revisited. But it would be too late for Janok; he would be too old. Still, he reminded himself with a smile, it had been good while it lasted, and, as promised, he would see an ark ship and glimpse the home world of the Dwin.

Then an idea struck him. Captain Tishardson seemed a most suitable candidate. Would the captain of the ark ship they were to rendezvous with be equally suitable? Janok browsed through the information kit on *Asegeir*, awed at such a grand scheme. Janok entered into the courier ship's AI, a request for details on Captain Christopher Falcon. Dozens of cross-referenced links appeared. Ah, he'd heard much about this Katyl War.

Several hours later Janok turned off the AI. He would suggest Falcon's name to the Watchers. Although the Watchers must support the will of the elders, they had slowly come around to his way of thinking. They would not object, nor could the elders when they learned of Falcon's background.

Captain Tishardson announced they were exiting Dim5. Janok requested the LD in his cabin be cleared. His buoyant mood fled. Dim5 was a most gut-wrenching thing. *I'm sorry to do this to you, Captain Falcon. I fear you will fail as my primary stomach would fail if I watch this much longer, but the elders must be satisfied.*

Chapter 34

August 16, 2500

"Calculations add up, sir." Vol looked up from her datapad. "We can examine Zanos III on the way back to the Solar system if we leave Malicanoor ten hours earlier than planned, and we lose nothing at the other end."

"Alright, Andy, subject to NGC's approval, you got yourself a stop-over," said Falcon.

Andrea White smiled broadly. *Asegeir's* year-long maiden voyage had been planned using the narrow parameter of Dim5. A missed window could mean weeks instead of days travelling from system to system. But astronomer-physicists had found a two-day window for *Asegeir* to send an exploration party to the star system known as Zanos. It would be their last call before returning to Spacedock.

The Command Board moved on to the next order of business until, twenty minutes later, the meeting finished. While the others left Falcon's office, Avalon stood and walked to the LD. She looked down at Dwi's third moon. Falcon joined her and followed her gaze. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" she said without turning.

Feeling the benevolent aura of the planet, he replied, "I wonder if some day we'll be able to build worlds as the Dwin now do?"

"*Asegeir's* not a bad start."

"Not quite the same."

"*Asegeir* was grown, not built. And it is a self-sufficient organism with its own life-force."

He nodded slowly. Yes, *Asegeir* had a life-force, one he felt within him a little more every day. He was also starting to intuit problems, which led him to ask, "What is it, C20?"

"The Malicanoorians will be here soon. Do you mind if I'm in the shuttle bay when they arrive?"

"Why would I mind? And why do you feel you need ask?"

She briefly touched his arm. "Thank you, Captain." Then she moved to leave.

He caught her hand. "A future memory?"

"Yes, but not ... bad. Just hard to explain. I better go; you have work to do."

Falcon stood unmoving as she left. He could rationalize their relationship all he wanted but it didn't stop her haunting his subconscious. Last night, he'd dreamed he was making love to Linda Williams but when his dream eyes opened it was Avalon beneath him, pulling him to her, into her. He woke aroused and confused, and promptly dismissed it as an involuntary erotic response to the wine, dinner and a comfortable ambience. This morning she had been unusually reserved and, now, deferential. Falcon shook his head. She was a C20. He should know to expect the unexpected.

* * * *

"I am very pleased to meet you." Janok's deep, resonant voice came from his primary mouth. His shimmering copper pantaloons, iridescent green vest and gold jacket flashed brightly in the shuttle bay's powerful lights.

"The pleasure is mine, Ambassador Janok." Falcon shook the Ambassador's long-fingered hand. Except for second mouth in lieu of a nose, chocolate skin and hairless bodies, the Malicanoorian physiology was very close to a human's. "I regret Governor Angus Gordon could not be here. I understand you were appraised of his circumstances?"

"I have seen these wondrous amniotanks. The Governor is fortunate. On our world he would be dead. Captain, I know you are busy with preparations to leave and that you have but a short time to meet with Captain Tishardson. I do not wish to disturb you or your crew's routine."

Falcon nodded gratefully. "Captain Vol will take you on a tour of *Asegeir* before lunch. After we enter Dim5, I'll show you around Command."

The Ambassador was unashamedly gawking as he looked around the shuttle bay. The Watchers, dressed in less elaborate but equally voluminous clothing, were more subdued, though they failed to suppress childish whoops of delight when they stepped into the gravitor.

Once the Malicanoorian entourage were out of earshot, Falcon and Malcolm Tishardson exchanged a few ribald remarks and turned back to the shuttle. "You examined those files?" Tishardson asked him.

Postal workers were loading mail onto pallets beneath the courier ship. "Yeah," replied Falcon. "They passed the tests."

"Guess what," sighed Tishardson heavily. "They've come up with one more!"

Falcon rolled his eyes and motioned to Saav, who was deep in conversation with Avalon. He was about to introduce them, but to his surprise Avalon embraced Tishardson and planted an unsisterly kiss on his mouth. Then she hooked her arm through his and said, "So, Mal, their guide picked up on their expectations, huh?"

"She's a telepathic xenosociologist. She made certain that Janok understood human cultural imperatives. The Watcher's accepted that and much to her surprise, she passed their tests."

"Why surprised?" Falcon was bemused by Avalon's attachment to Tishardson. It crossed his mind that Mal had been a junior lieutenant on the old *Asegeir*. But a lieutenant wouldn't have known Avalon that well, unless ... He squashed the thought.

"The obscure nature of the tests," Tishardson replied. He accepted the courier bag from his co-pilot and handed it to Falcon. "Their ruling body is old and intractable, but they're not prone to deception, even though they don't possess one gene of telepathic ability."

"They have no idea of the concept," Mixis added. "Not even in their stories and songs, at least according to the Dwins, who, by the way, only agreed that our interpretation of the trade treaty was 'not wrong'."

Tishardson looked at Mixis through lowered eyebrows. "Why is it when some alien being says we're not wrong, it turns out we're also a few light years from being right?"

Avalon laughed. "Well, what's the next test?"

"No idea." Tishardson shook his head. "One of my crew is a wildcat telepath, and he picked it up on the fly."

"What did you get?" Falcon said to Saav.

"Some sort of test for pain endurance—and you picked the short straw."

Falcon was relieved. He trusted his crew, but the responsibility should be his alone, especially if he failed, and more especially if it involved pain. "What do you mean 'sort of'?"

"Sorry, Captain, he's an alien mind, we're going to have to wing it."

"We? I thought you said *I* picked the short straw?"

Mixis chuckled. "I detect no dissembling or harmful intent, and certainly no malice. If anything, Janok regrets the pain and humiliation he's about to inflict on you, because he likes humans and is particularly impressed by C20 ark ship captains. He had considered Mal but there isn't time. The Ambassador is being very fair, Captain. He thinks you have the best chance of winning an impossible situation. But he has no choice. This test is necessary to keep the ruling body happy."

"Great," Falcon muttered. "What about you?" he asked Avalon. "Anything more specific on that future memory?"

Avalon lifted her lips in regret. "Only that you're in no danger and there'll be no long term damage."

That afternoon, Falcon took Janok and the Watchers on a tour through Command. When they reached the gym, Janok asked Falcon if he used the facilities. Mixis sent one word into Falcon's mind,—Now!—

Falcon replied, "Some days, or I swim."

"Ah! Would you consider working out with me for an hour?"

Mixis met Falcon's gaze.—It's now, here, or later on their home world,—

He could slog most things out for an hour. Avalon, as expected, had not attended lunch, nor had he seen her during the afternoon tour.

In the locker room, while he was changing, he considered calling her but dismissed the notion. She was always there when he needed her.

With Janok stripped down to a pair of short pantaloons, the similarities between Malicanoorian and human physiques were even more apparent. Only the absence of nipples and proportionately longer limbs betrayed the Ambassador's alien origins.

"Do you mind others being here?" Falcon gestured around the gym.

"Not at all. Humans have been such fine hosts, I wanted to gift you something from our heritage," replied Janok.

"It's always interesting to experience the recreational choices of other beings."

"Recreation, Captain? I would not have thought of this as recreation but an annoying, albeit necessary pastime for your health." Janok eyed a puffing, sweating scientist on a treadmill.

Falcon smiled genially. "Repetitive exercise can release natural endorphins."

Janok inclined his head in agreement. "We, too, recognize that mental alertness requires physical health. Sadly, as one progresses within the bureaucracy, one has less time to participate in sport. Thus we have developed rituals that maintain our bodies at peak physical performance by strengthening muscles passively. Since our musculature is similar, I believe it will be effective."

Mixis sent a continuous stream of images to Falcon. The Ambassador was truthful, but as with their

written language, he was not portraying the entire picture. For the next hour, Falcon mirrored the Malicanoorian's strange exercises. While they proved increasingly difficult, the unusual twisting and tightening of certain muscle groups in some very weird combinations was tolerable until the last ten minutes. Still, Falcon thought grudgingly, the pain could be endured for the sake of a treaty.

"Well done, Captain!" Janok rubbed his own arms in admission of discomfort. "It will take a week for your muscles to recover. As you will be on Malicanoor, I trust you will allow me to take you through the routine again. You will be surprised at the additional strength and endurance you will enjoy."

"I appreciate this, Ambassador. Humans readily adopt new skills into our culture. I have no doubt this will become popular."

Janok bowed and left with the Watchers.

"Well?" Falcon asked Mixis.

"I don't know, Captain. He left here ... depressed. You handled the exercises but they weren't the test. It's the after-effects that matter."

"My quads will never be the same again, but it's nothing I can't handle."

Mixis' frown turned contemplative. "I've missed something. I'll run a biochemical profile. Janok was depressed because he doesn't want you to fail, but I still can't fathom what constitutes failing."

Falcon returned to his quarters, showered, changed then went to the Command restaurant to dine with Vol. When he stepped from the gravitor, his knees shook and his quadriceps burned. He'd expected that. He'd feel better when he'd eaten and restored his blood sugar level.

"As predicted," Vol said over dinner, "most childless NGC families who didn't have babies this time out are requesting six to eight months Earth assignment so they can fall pregnant naturally."

"Many break-ups?"

"Only those partnered to civilians. Usual story." While the credit and privileges were high, NGC was demanding, and marriages suffered. "Much lower than average for ship life."

Falcon was about to reply, when Saav called him on his comunit, "Captain, I have some data you must view."

Mixis rarely stressed the word *must*. Falcon replied, "I'll come by as soon as I finish dinner."

"I'm having dinner in the C20's quarters *right now*. You can see it when you return."

Touching her ear, Vol indicated that she had also heard. She stood and walked across to two Watchers sitting at a nearby table. Distracting one, she blocked the line of sight of the other.

Falcon reached for his drink, but as he lifted the glass his fingers folded into the ugly claw of an extraordinarily powerful cramp. The pain shooting up his arm was breathtaking. When the spasm passed, the glass felt ridiculously heavy. Then when he tried to stand, his quadriceps felt like hot poker had been jabbed into them. Was gravity functioning properly on this deck? He glanced around. Everyone else moved normally. Not the exercises, the aftermath...

In the gravitor Falcon tugged gently on the rail, but his hand cramped around it. He pried his finger's open then nudged himself upward with all the grace of a space virgin. By the time he reached Command

quarters, his quadriceps were on the edge of spontaneous combustion and his feet all but refused to carry his weight. Avalon's quarters were only metres away. Every step, he was certain his medimplant would scream an alert, starting a panic. His legs buckled just as he reached the C20's open door.

Mixis saw him. She caught him just in time, and staggering under his weight, called, "Avalon!"

Together, Mixis and Avalon walked Falcon to the couch. He collapsed, scattering the colourful Katyl herd beast cushions. Staring at Mixis in pained confusion, he demanded, "What in the name of the Origins is going on?"

Avalon disappeared into her kitchen, while Mixis explained. "I started running diagnostics on those exercises but one of their Watchers insisted on speaking with me. I sent the data to Avalon's personal files then shut down the computer. I couldn't shake the Watcher, and it was only when I begged off for dinner with Avalon that he let me go—though he tailed me all the way. Avalon ran an analysis on her personal computer; it's not linked to the AI. She's also overridden your medimplant alert."

Mixis punched in a manual code on a personal datapad and placed it on the coffee table so that he could see. The screen displayed a human body. "Watchers are stationed at every possible route from Command to medops," she continued. "We thought of sneaking you into medops via your or Avalon's gravitor access to the bridge. Problem is, a Watcher is stationed at the far end near the bridge deck gravitor. He's not contravening the no-go order regarding the bridge area, but he's in line of sight if we attempt to move you into Command medops. Here, look at this."

The diagrams on the screen changed. "You're probably familiar with the chemical changes in musculature during and after strenuous exercise, depending on muscle elasticity and tone, glucose and oxygenation. You play different sports, exercising muscle groups in different ways, so I would have expected soreness in the larger muscle groups. However..." Mixis glanced up. Avalon walked in with a steaming, earthenware mug. "Look at this!"

Falcon tried to ignore the growing agony in his legs and arms, and concentrate on the images. "That doesn't make sense!"

"Oh, yes it does," Avalon said. "Humans deal with injury and disease by shoving a damaged body into an amniotank and accelerating the healing with nanites. Even minor injuries are treated with nanites to repair tissue."

He was about to object to her oversimplification when she added, "Sure, diagnostics, viral breeding, genetic manipulation and nanite programming are specialty stuff. But humans have abandoned the holistic approach. Rather perverse considering humanity now understands the importance of the life-force. Here," she handed him an earthen wear mug containing an evil smelling brew, "drink this."

Falcon tried—and failed—to lift his arm. Mixis took the mug and brought it to his mouth. He screwed up his nose at the pungent, bitter aroma. "What the hell is it?"

"Chamomile, dill weed, eye of newt, wing of bat and a very potent kava," replied Avalon. "It's a non-addictive, non-hallucinogenic powerful narcotic with a muscle relaxant and a soporific to flush out toxins that your body is producing. You'll experience a need for a bowel motion in the morning, so don't go rushing out of your quarters."

If the readouts were accurate he wouldn't be capable of rushing *anywhere* in the morning.

"Don't sip it. It's not hot but it tastes foul. And it's normal for your lips and tongue to go numb."

Falcon went to speak but Mixis forced him to drink it all. He screwed his eyes shut at the muddy, anaesthetic flavour and odorous fumes.

"So," Avalon continued, "the Malicanoorians must use a combination of stresses to treat the body holistically. It's like acupuncture. Place pressure on the bridge of the foot, and nausea for simple travel sickness is reduced. Move muscle combinations this way and toxins are released."

He looked at her in disbelief. Then he gasped as the muscles in his right calf contracted, sending a spasm of pain shooting up his leg and into his groin.

"I know, it sounds like witchcraft." Avalon bent and pulled his boot off, unsealed the seam of his shipsuit, rolled the material up his leg, and began massaging his calf. "Only because it's been discarded in favour of the ultra high tech approach. Most Eastern medical knowledge was lost during the twenty-first century, which is a great pity because it really worked."

"I've finally figured out what this test is about," Mixis said. "It's not the pain, it's how you deal with it. With Watchers everywhere, if we take you to any medops, or if someone comes to your quarters with anything to alleviate your condition, it will be viewed as weakness and you'll fail."

The muscles of Falcon's left leg also began to cramp. "Alright," he replied stoically, trying to talk through numb lips. "I'll put up with it."

"It's not that simple," Mixis said. "The test is for your ability to function while disabled by pain. You're scheduled to have brunch with the Ambassador tomorrow, before flying him to Malicanoor. You might be stoic, Captain, but you're also human. There's no way you'll be in any condition to pilot a shuttle."

"You're also physically incapacitated while approaching a system that does not yet have formal diplomatic relations with humankind," Avalon said. "By rights you should hand control to Peta."

"Whose side are you on?" He glared at her and tried to stand, but he couldn't move.

Avalon seemed annoyingly indifferent. "The narcotic in that witches brew will be in your system for seventy-two hours, so flying is out. They won't know because I'll be in the right seat. However, we have to get you mobile by 1030. Scarty could massage you, but a Watcher has waylaid him. Besides, I'm not sure he would know what to do or that you'd be comfortable with him doing it. So, I'm going to immerse you in camphor and other minerals dissolved in hot water, then I'll massage you with liniment."

"How do you know all this stuff?" He stared at her as she pulled off his other boot.

"I used it when I was human, and I pilfered the ingredients from the gardens, kitchens and medical stores while you were in the gym." When he grumbled she added, "You want this agreement signed?"

The women stood and helped him into the cleaning room. He stared in amazement at the rainforest habitat. A flash of scarlet feathers leaped from tree fern to cycad, orchid to vine.

"My, Phillip's been busy!" said Mixis.

"Ryl set it up," Avalon said. "And Phillip's fine-tuned it. It's connected to the main rainforest habitat by tunnels and shafts."

A rocky waterfall acted as a shower and Falcon noticed a toilet and sink grown amongst the foliage by the door. The pool was lined with slate, while high temperature tolerant mosses grew over the edges.

"I like baths." Avalon turned on the water and added strong smelling crystals. "My perk."

Falcon exchanged a look of disbelief with Mixis before powerful cramps clutched his feet and calves, distracting him. Mixis unsealed his shipsuit, then they lowered him into the steaming water. The heat helped almost immediately. Perhaps this wasn't such a bad idea.

"How will you get him out?" Saav walked to the door. "A Watcher is expecting me for coffee."

"I'll cut the grav. And Mixis," Avalon walked with her. "Invite the Ambassador for a game of handball in the morning. 0930 on the upper portside courts."

The women went outside, and Falcon turned his attention to his surroundings, trying to focus on something other than the pain. His mind felt numb, fuzzy. Was the narcotic working already?

"Okay, Captain." He looked up to see Avalon wearing a faded gym suit. "I hope that's not your favourite underwear because the stuff I put in the water will rot them. The narcotic you've drunk will enhance your senses before making you drowsy. AI, please dull lights to twenty percent."

He wasn't aware he'd been squinting until the lights dimmed. His nostrils flared, and he coughed as the powerful camphor and eucalypt fumes attacked his sinuses. Avalon stepped into the pool, sat on a submerged rock then gently began to massage his cramping leg. He tried to speak but his neck and jaw muscles were spasming, and his lips and tongue were numb. Despite the narcotic, he was intensely uncomfortable with her ministrations. He couldn't quit define why, her strokes were firm, yet soft, like velvet-wrapped steel. Soon, her rhythmic motions and the quiet darkness soothed him. Memories surfaced, of him riding with her on the back of a seachon. Just go with it, he told himself—or was it Avalon speaking? He eased his head back. The moss was soft and cool against his neck. The spasmodic muscular cramping and pain increased, yet it all seemed somewhat distant. Perhaps it was all a dream.

Running her fingers down his cramped muscles, Avalon considered how she would get him to his quarters. If she used micro-g, it would show up on the environmental displays at the entrance to Command level quarters. Too risky. For a non-space faring race, the Malicanoorians had picked up on the fundamentals surprisingly fast. "Okay," she said when she finished working both his calf muscles. "You'll sleep here tonight."

She turned around, pulled his arms over her shoulders, leaned forward, and walked him up the steps of the pool. Falcon wasn't carrying excess weight, however he was a big man. Avalon wasn't small, either, and she was powerful. Still, when she reached her bed, she unceremoniously dropped him on the covers. He groaned painfully.

"Sorry. You're too heavy to lower gently." She began towelling him dry but he was fighting the narcotic, and her.

"I am not a ... baby!" he growled.

"Close you eyes and think of the treaty."

He tried to glare at her but couldn't focus.

"I'm going to help you drink more of this tea, then I'll start with the liniment." She put her arm around his shoulders, lifted him and held the brew, now containing considerably more narcotic, to his lips. He gulped it down, shuddering involuntarily.

"C'mon," she chastised him, "it's not that bad."

"You drink it," he mumbled.

When he finished, she pulled down the now damp Katylgar bedcover, gently rolled him over and began tugging off his underpants.

"What are you doing?" he objected, feebly trying to stop her.

"They're wet. Nothing personal. It's not the first male butt I've ever seen."

He breathed out heavily and closed his eyes in resignation. By the time she'd finished massaging his back, the narcotic had taken effect. Now oblivious to his nakedness, he didn't fight her as she rolled him over and bade him drink another cup of tea.

Although the tea was not an aphrodisiac, combined with the massage, it had relaxed both his muscles and natural inhibitions. Which was why having Scarty minister him was a bad idea. Scarty had no repressed desires for his boss. At the same time, in the darkness, drugged and with inhibitions removed, Falcon had no ability to discern the situation or who was massaging him. The feel of flesh on flesh, pain fading to pleasant somnolence, warmth and the touch of soft, firm hands was slowly seducing him. Her fingers might have been trying to untangle bunched muscles, but a lifetime of cultural constraints could not override four million years of male evolution. Fortunately, he was so drugged that he wouldn't remember. She ignored his hands as he caressed whatever part of her body he could touch. And she ignored him as he fingered her gym suit and mumbled she should take it off.

But she froze when he said, "Avvy ... c'mere..." and caressed her thigh.

He couldn't know it was her; she'd given him way too much narcotic! And the scent of the narcotic should not affect her; she metabolized it too fast. The darkness and feel of his male body, sound of his voice and his inadvertent arousal had their own effect on her. She eased off the bed and stood.

It was natural that, whilst part of him might recognize her, the narcotic had dissolved all inhibitions. His reaction was situational, proximal and had nothing to do with who they were. She took a few measured breaths then pulled the covers over him, encouraging the warmth of the liniment to penetrate his muscles.

Collecting his discarded uniform, Avalon went to his quarters, left a note for Scarty, and returned with a set of gym clothes. By the time she'd finished tidying her quarters, it was time to begin massaging him again.

Falcon only half woke this time. She debated where to sleep, then shrugged and carefully eased into bed beside him. He was more alert than she thought, certainly more than he should have been, because he mumbled, "Avalon?"

"Sleep, Chris. I'll be here when you need me."

Although awkward and stiff, he brought his leg over hers and his arm across her waist. His movements were passive affections; no different than the way he'd held her in the sand dune. She could easily have moved him away. But she did nothing, telling herself he would not remember. Really. She'd given him enough of the drug to make an elephant forget. Soon, she was asleep.

Two hours later, Avalon repeated the ritual. He hardly woke until she helped him sit and drink the tea. This time when he brought his hands to her, he did not let her go. "Avvy ... don't go away again."

"I'm not leaving, Chris. Go back to sleep." She leaned over him to brush the sweat-dampened hair from his face. Despite the powerful sedatives in his system, he pulled her down to kiss her mouth, encircling her body with his arms. The kiss, for all that it lacked passion, was far more sensuous than she might

have wished. Abruptly, he stopped and his hands fell away; he was asleep.

Breathing heavily, Avalon stood and paced the bedroom. The warmth of his mouth, the feel of soft lips and contrasting stubble, and the merest hint of his tongue left an indelible sensation. What the hell was she doing? There could be nothing between them of this nature; it would kill him, as it had killed others before him. Her feelings were wrong, dangerous. The Masters had made her this way! Tears stung her eyes. Fair or unfair, this barrier between them and a barren womb were the price of longevity. Dammit!

Avalon strode into her lounge room and hugged herself in the dark. He wasn't aware of what he was doing but she sure as hell was. And she'd let him. And she'd enjoyed it. How long had it been since she'd been with a man? Nine months, a year?

When she and Mal Tishardson had become lovers years before, it had cemented a friendship; they had never succumbed to the entanglement of love. How long since she had been truly been in love? Decades? She had told Selena the truth; she loved Falcon because he was the captain of her ship, their ship. But she could never be in love with him.

Ever.

Standing at her bedroom doorway, she examined him in the muted light. It would help if he were a little uglier. She went to her couch, rearranged the comfortable Katylgar hides and cushions, then lay down. She could sleep in a sand dune or a gwaka tree, against the pungent body of a seachon or on Falcon's office couch, so why not on hers? At 0630, she gave up, brewed some more tea, and began the final massage. Just as she was finishing, the door of her quarters opened. Scarty came to the bedroom door and whispered, "C20, how is he?"

"Another couple hours sleep and he should be okay." She drizzled the last of the pungent oil on his back. "Can you come back at 0915, change my bedding and clean up? It's unlikely any Malicanoorian will be in my quarters, but..."

Scarty nodded and left. Their talking must have woken Falcon, because he mumbled, "What ... time?"

"Sleep for another hour." She pulled the covers over him. An hour's sleep would also do her some good. She climbed in the other side of the bed. Maintaining her distance, she soon fell into a deep sleep.

At 0900 Falcon woke feeling stiff and sore and smelling strongly of pine and menthol. Although his arms and shoulders felt like lead, he could move them. Getting out of bed was painful. Still, his legs supported him—just. If he walked around some, they'd be useable. Fragments of conversation reminded him that he was in the C20's quarters. He recalled something about the tea. Every step to the cleaning room was painful.

Back in the bedroom he noticed his gym suit draped over the foot of the bed—and someone moving and stretching under the sheet. Grabbing a fresh towel from the chair, he wrapped it around his naked waist.

Avalon, dressed in a gym suit, sat up and yawned. "Morning. How do you feel?"

"Fine." Snatches of odd, very odd memories—more likely narcotic induced visions—flittered briefly into focus.

"Good." Avalon was all business as she stood. "We've got work to do. AI, please refill the bathing pool."

"Why were you in my bed?"

"My bed. Between massaging you and getting you to drink tea, I was catching a few minutes sleep. Now

get back in the pool and wash off all traces of liniment. Malicanoorian olfactory senses are no better than ours, but when you start sweating I want you smelling of you, not liniment."

"What do you mean, when I start sweating?" He winced with each step into her cleaning room. Dropping the towel, he gingerly eased into the rising waters.

She came in and motioned for him to turn his back. When he heard her step in, he instantly cut off the thought that they were naked in the pool together. Last night's dreams had definitely been drug-induced.

Avalon picked up two Katyl soapstones. Tossing him one, she said, "It has an enzyme astringent. Combined with what's in the water, it should remove all smell of the liniment. Then you and I are going to play a game of handball."

Falcon stared at her. "C20, I appreciate all you've done." What exactly *had* she done? "But handball is out."

"Mixis will be on the courts at 0930 with Janok. By then you'll have worked out the worst of the stiffness, and built up a nice, convincing sweat as if you'd been there since 0830, totally undermining their test." She grinned coyly and motioned for him to turn his back again. "You can take a little pain Captain, surely?"

Raising his eyebrows at her insouciance, he turned to reply but quickly averted his eyes as she strode naked from the cleaning room.

* * * *

Mixis hoped this would work. The damned Ambassador had come by her quarters early. She'd managed to stall him, but they had still arrived at the courts at 0925. The thwack-thwock sound of balls pounding against the walls reverberated throughout the courts.

"It sounds like a popular sport." Janok looked around. "Where is it?"

Each handball court was enclosed on all sides, with an upper-level viewing platform circling the perimeter. He looked up. "Ah! May I see it from up there?"

"Certainly," Mixis said. "AI, who's playing?"

"Captain Falcon and the C20 are in court zero three—"

Janok was pulling himself up the gravitor to the viewing platform. Mixis followed, only just managing to beat a Watcher. The Ambassador strode along the platform. He abruptly stopped and peered into the white-walled court, perplexed. The thwok-thwack continued to echo through the courts. Mixis couldn't help a sly grin.

Below, Avalon shouted with mock annoyance as she tried—and failed—to block the Captain's longer reach. Falcon used the same tactic and the two of them danced across the floor, jostling and tugging one another. Finally, Avalon grabbed Falcon's gym suit and pulled, intending to unbalance him. Instead, the faded grey material ripped from shoulder to hip. When she burst out laughing he tackled her, crying, "Cheat!"

They rolled on the dark green floor, and suddenly, Mixis forgot why they were there. She could not scan either of them, but she saw far more. Perhaps only with his C20 could Falcon be so carefree. Still, the way he laughed, the way he looked at her and straddled her and slid his hand along her thigh...

The players caught sight of them. "Good morning, Mr. Ambassador," Falcon called. He pulled himself off

the C20 and offered her a hand up. "What brings you to the ball courts?"

Avalon looked up with a socially polite smile. She shook out her dishevelled hair and retied it with a white band.

"Commander Saav invited me for a game, Captain," Janok replied.

Apparently Janok had recovered from his shock fast. Not so, the Watchers. Their jaws were open in a parody of human gaping. Mixis felt delight, even exhilaration from the Malicanoorian Ambassador. The humans had been tested to the utmost—and passed.

"Ambassador, I apologize." Falcon pushed his damp hair from his face. "I should have been the one to invite you."

"Not at all, Captain. You are a busy man, and I confess I slept late after last night's entertainment," Janok replied jauntily. "Tell me, do you feel any ... ah ... effect from our ... recreation of yesterday?"

Falcon caught Mixis' eyes.

—Admitting to pain is not a weakness,—Mixis said.—Rather, it's a sign of strength. The weakness only comes if it is allowed to dominate you—and your being here proves otherwise.—

"I'm sore, however an aerobic exercise helps work through muscular pain." Falcon gestured around him at the courts.

Mixis touched the Ambassador's wrist and pointed to the large wall chronometer; it was 0934. They reached the lower deck as Falcon and the C20 emerged. Both were covered in a fine sheen of perspiration.

—Janok's examining you. He's noting a ... he sees a finely tuned torso, almost completely bare because of your torn gym suit ... slightly reddened through your light coloured skin. He knows from his time on Earth that pale-skinned humans turn red from over-exertion or tissue damage. He sees the redness fading even as he watches. It's not what he's expecting from inflamed muscles working against each other. Last night, he consulted with his medical clansmen, confirming that you had completed the ritual exercises properly.—You're reading of him has improved dramatically,—replied Falcon.

—He's jubilant, he's practically shouting it from the rooftops.—

"Hello, Ambassador Janok, nice to meet you." Avalon pulled off her black leather glove and held out her hand in greeting.

When Falcon introduced her, Janok's eyebrows lifted and his secondary mouth dropped in an amusing counterpoint.

"I have heard much about you, C20, but never dreamed you would be so ... young!" Janok declared.

"Not as young as I look, Ambassador, by a few centuries. And playing against Captain Falcon, I'm afraid I'm beginning to feel my age. He's the only human who has won every game against me."

Mixis suppressed a smile. To her knowledge the Captain and Avalon had only played each other on one other occasion, After seeing them on the courts, she suspected that would change.

Janok was clearly awed. "I do hope you will join us on Malicanoor!" he blurted. "The elders are ... old and show respect only to those who are older. It would help if you would speak with them."

"Certainly, Ambassador. I'll join you for brunch and accompany you on the first shuttle."

—That threw him,—Mixis said.—He's way beyond delighted.—

Janok stood slack jawed when Falcon added, "Now Ambassador, when Mixis teaches you the rules of this game, note that body contact is *not* allowed!" He glared at Avalon reproachfully. She feigned a look of such contrived innocence that even Janok could see through it.

Mixis watched them walk to the gravitor. Avalon pulled Falcon's torn gym suit playfully. He lunged and tugged her long hair as she tried to jump out of his reach. When they entered the gravitor, they could be heard in a good-natured argument over who had won the game.

Janok turned to Mixis. "They are very close, your captain and this C20, yes?"

When the Ambassador had returned to his quarters at 0100, the AI had warned Mixis that he'd checked Falcon's whereabouts. Now, after watching them in the ball court, Janok had come up with a totally wrong conclusion—wrong, but convenient.

Yet perhaps Janok might not be so wrong after all. Mixis' heart went out to them, for what could never be. "We'd better get on with the game, Ambassador," she replied, "or you'll be late for brunch."

Chapter 35

August 17, 2500

Mixis watched Michael Rose draw blood from Falcon's arm.

"I'm not thinking as quickly as I should," said Falcon. "And my physical reaction time is out."

Rose shared a knowing look with Mixis. "So Avalon beat you, huh?"

Falcon scowled. "A toddler could have beaten me."

"I told Janok that we ran an analysis of yesterday's exercises," Mixis said. "And that we found the toxins produced by human musculature were potentially very damaging. He was most apologetic. I added that although you were probably in a lot more pain than you admitted, you'd be okay. So you're allowed to seem stiff for the next few days, but let Avalon rub you down again tonight."

After fumbling with the seam on his shipsuit wrist cuff, Falcon made two attempts to pull on his jacket before giving up. He glared at the offending piece of clothing, then his expression suddenly softened. Mixis turned to see what had caught his attention.

Dressed in her usual jeans and t-shirt, Avalon was walking into the clinic. "How are you feeling?" she asked him when she joined them.

"Waterlogged and sore."

Mixis leaned back against the table, fascinated by the dopey look on Falcon's face.

"What's his blood work like, Mike?" Avalon asked Rose.

"Five times above the legal limit for driving a push-bike let alone a shuttle," replied the doctor. "Better keep him away from Malicanoorian dancing girls for a few days."

When Falcon's eyes rounded, Mixis said, "Don't panic. The tea didn't contain an aphrodisiac, but some of the chemicals ... well, they impair the domesticated side of your male—"

Avalon laughed. "She's trying to say they've increased your testosterone levels and lowered your inhibitions."

The withering look Falcon tried to send her didn't quite come off. "I'm sure I can control myself." He picked up his jacket and tried to put it on again. He failed.

"Seriously," Mixis stepped forward to help him, "you'll tend to act and react instinctually without the veneer of social restraints. Don't worry, Captain, you're not harbouring any secret, pathological desires, but you'll need to take care what you say."

"What about this ... fumbling," he said when she sealed the front of his jacket. "I didn't have that problem this morning."

"Yeah, you did," Avalon said. "That's what that little song and dance show for Janok was all about."

"Oh." He scratched the stubble on his jaw. "How long will it last?"

Saav stepped away and examined him with a critical eye. "You look normal enough, and your speech isn't slurred, although you forgot shaving gel this morning."

"Eat slowly," Avalon suggested. "I've changed the lunch menu, so you won't need to coordinate a knife and fork. The worst of the narcotic will be out of your system by the time we land on Malicanoor."

"Okay," Falcon replied with a happy smile. He slid off the diagnostic table and followed Avalon out of the clinic.

"Oh, brother," Mixis muttered. She turned to see Rose chuckling. "How bad is his blood work, really?"

Rose bit his lip in an effort to contain his mirth. "He's in low orbit, but I trust Avalon to take care of him."

Mixis was thoughtful while she helped Rose pack for the trip to Malicanoor. In her ninety years she had been stationed with two C20 captains, had a relationship with one and known dozens more. C20 Command crews were accustomed to the tactile contact between captains and C20s. But narcotic notwithstanding, the way Falcon had been on the ball court, and the way he looked at Avalon was ... disturbing.

All newly promoted command level officers asked themselves at least once; why did NGC regulations proscribe sexual relationships between senior command ranks and C20s, on pain of death? Every NGC regulation included volumes of explanations and codicils. Except this one. Not even a footnote to elaborate on the rule—or the rare, extreme penalty.

When NGC officers were promoted to command rank, their superior officer would pass on a well-kept secret: death came not through execution by spacing, but through the act of sex itself. They were further informed that the regulation had been created in 2299 by the C20s themselves. The newly promoted officers almost always laughed it off as a space-myth, because C20s often had relationships with lower-ranking officers. Sceptics were then told to check the death certificates of three unremarked captains, Hayes, Babcock and Rudenmeyer. All had died of heart attacks whilst making love to their C20s.

Two additional, better-known names were also mentioned, Forrester and Mallom. The latter were the only C20 captains to have been promoted off their ships to admiral—with extremely powerful portfolios. The reason? Both had made physically intimate overtures to their C20s, who, to protect their lives, had ordered their promotions. Another space-myth? Perhaps, but given the fondness and affection between C20s and their captains, all too possible.

Mixis knew why sex killed them, and she also knew that she was the only human alive who did. She had never revealed the reason to anyone, but here she was, just eight months into Falcon's lifetime appointment as a C20 captain, seriously thinking about telling him.

As the Command telepath it was her job to discuss confidential personal issues with Falcon, things he could not possibly discuss with anyone else, especially because she *couldn't* scan him. Observing him while the narcotic lowered his inhibitions could prove as enlightening as a shallow scan.

* * * *

"I'm honoured you came," Janok said to Avalon. "I was given to understand that C20s do not normally join such formalities as meals."

Taking the Malicanoorian by the arm, Avalon walked with him to the dining table. "Your invitation was so gracious, Ambassador. How could I refuse?"

When they were seated, Janok said, "Might I be so bold, Captain, to ask if I may sit in the cockpit during the trip to Malicanoor? I've yet to see what it's like entering an atmosphere. I believe the effect is quite ... awesome."

Gently squeezing the Ambassador's arm, Avalon replied, "Captain Vol was going to take you to Malicanoor."

Falcon almost choked on his soup. While the Watchers exchanged panicked looks, the expression on Janok's face went from alarmed to bleak.

"I thought ... I had assumed..." Janok turned to Falcon and blurted, "You are not coming to Malicanoor?"

Again, Avalon replied. "NGC regulations require that any time a C20 captain arrives in a system without formal affiliation with Earth, the C20 must remain within reaching distance." She went on to explain her unique d-jumping abilities. "And NGC," she added, "having invested a great deal of training in their captains, get quite peeved with us when one dies on them."

Janok was crestfallen. "I can imagine."

"From a diplomatic standpoint, it seemed prudent to send Captain Vol to meet with your elders. She is, after all, equally qualified, and almost twice Captain Falcon's age."

Falcon was having a hard time trying to keep a straight face. Avalon was laying it on a little thick.

Mixis caught his eye, and said,—Yeah, and it's working.—

"However," Avalon continued, "as you so graciously invited me to meet your elders, Captain Falcon will travel with me to Malicanoor instead. Of course, under the circumstances, I must be with him in the cockpit."

Janok almost wilted in relief. The Watchers began eating again.

"Ah ... Captain Vol took me on a tour of your shuttles earlier," Janok ventured. "I notice provision for a third seat in the cockpit, perhaps—?"

"It's very uncomfortable, but I'm sure we could manage." Avalon beamed at him.

Three twenty-man shuttles were scheduled for the first flight to the planet. The Malicanoorians would travel on the first two while the human delegation, including Deputy Governor Scott Brady and a team of xenosociologists were on the third. If the elders signed the trade agreement, Brady would act as *chargé d'affaires*, and Falcon could return to *Asegeir*.

Once inside the shuttle, Janok couldn't hide his excitement—until he saw Avalon take the controls. "May I ask, C20, why you are flying us?"

Falcon sat back, comfortable that Avalon was in charge. Had he not been drugged, he most assuredly would have been *uncomfortable*. He still wasn't certain she knew how to drive the thing.

Setting the AI to make the short Dim5 jump to Malicanoor, Avalon motioned for Falcon to take the yoke. She turned in her seat to face Janok, and said, "Pilots must log a minimum number of hours each month, Ambassador, otherwise we lose our rating. At midday today I should be grounded until I'm recertified. Instructors are tied up with more important things than bothering about people who forget their minimums. I was going to take another ship out this morning, but Captain Falcon was kind enough

to let me drive rather than lose my rating."

"Oh," Janok mouthed. The shuttle suddenly flipped 'upside down' and followed the hull to the North Pole at a blinding speed.

"Many beings have cultural taboos on females in certain occupations, so I don't mind losing my rating if you're uncomfortable with me driving."

The Ambassador's reflection was visible in Falcon's side of the consol. Janok's eyes bugged as they approached an external array set up by one of the science crew. Falcon felt the yoke move beneath his hands. Avalon had set the AI controls to run fast and close. At the last possible moment the yoke shifted, swerving them up and over—or down and around, depending on your point of view—the obstruction. Then the shuttle flipped one hundred and eighty degrees and abruptly entered Dim5.

Falcon barely stopped himself from laughing. The Ambassador was gaping. They emerged from Dim5 a few seconds later. The sunlit side of Malicanoor seemed to burst through the shuttle's LD cockpit, and ahead of them was a blue and white planet.

Janok audibly gulped. "No, no! Of course not, C20. In fact I believe our females will be temperamentally more suited to pilot ships than males. Please, don't let me inconvenience you. I shall remain silent now and enjoy the rest of the trip."

Falcon bit his lip. Removing his hands from the AI locked guidance yoke he said softly to Avalon, "You have control."

Winking at him, she disengaged the AI and flew manually for the remaining, uneventful trip to the surface.

* * * *

Although the Masters had encouraged a hands-off approach to emerging civilizations, some of the younger races—like the now extinct Gwyen—did not agree. After the relative success of Earth, the Masters had begun to re-think their position. Malicanoor was a case in point. The life-force of the planet was hurting. Technologically and culturally it was about the same level as Earth circa 1880. They used steam-driven engines fed by fossil fuels to power their industrial revolution. The initial trade agreement was for Earth to supply technicians and engineers to teach the Malicanoorians alternative energy technologies. In exchange for tourism franchises, Malicanoor would receive magnetic power and deep thermal taps for heating a once tropical planet that now was in the early throes of an ice age. Although the Malicanoorian elders could not yet see why tossing waste into apparently bottomless oceans and endless skies should do so much damage, Janok had brought with him a long list of problems that Earth had endured as a direct result of such activities. He and the Watchers had found them sobering.

Avalon landed the shuttle in the port city of Yest, on the coast of a major continental mass. When a crowd rushed to greet them, she said, "Ambassador, please warn your people not to touch the surface for at least fifteen minutes. The hatches are heat-shielded, however some parts of the shuttle may stay hot until we shut down all systems."

Falcon shot her a quizzical look. She said nothing until Janok had left and she called the other shuttle commanders on their comunits with an order to spin the same story. Reaching into her bag, she pulled out a flask and handed it to him. "Here, drink this."

"What is it?"

"More tea, with analgesic but much less narcotic. You're gonna need it."

"I'm not drinking any more of that stuff! I need to clear my head." He went to stand—and abruptly doubled over in pain.

"You sat for an hour at lunch, then two hours in micro-g. Just drink the tea. I'll tell Janok that you're running a systems check while our stuff is unloaded. Meanwhile, do some stretches and walk up and down in the cabin."

He drank the tea, unhappily. "Step on my toes if the domesticated side of my male brain starts dysfunctioning."

Avalon chuckled. "I promise nothing you say or do will be held against you."

He turned his head and stared at her. "That'd be a first."

Their delegation rode a steam-driven train from the shuttle port into the heart of Yest. Accustomed to underground dwellings, the humans were wide-eyed in fascination at the sight of an open-air city. Stone buildings of hideously baroque proportions lined cobbled roads. Pedestrians and tricycles vied with graffins—horse-sized animals reminiscent of thin-legged mastodons—for right of way. Smoke poured from rows of clay and stone chimneys, causing human noses to wrinkle in distaste. The first thing every human had reacted to when they'd opened the shuttle doors was the smell. Now, in the centre of the city, the rancid, burnt-fossil fuel and sewerage odour was almost overpowering. Avalon had warned them it would take time to adjust, but even she was surprised at the intensity of the stench. "Like old Venice on a really bad day," she muttered. On the ark ship, organic waste fed the living machine, which in turn fed and housed the inhabitants. Although inorganic items were built to last indefinitely, they could be recycled; the twenty-sixth century was not inhabited by people with a disposable mentality.

The buildings of Yest, Janok explained, were multi-purpose, as were most things in their society. When the train stopped for a passing caravan of six-wheeled carriages, a group of ragged children ran up, begging for food or coins. Janok reached into his pockets and threw them handfuls of the sweet high-energy bars he'd been given on *Asegeir*. The children laughed and pointed at the alien humans—their laughter not mocking but one of delight in their differences.

The planet was made up of a score of city-states, with elders representing each area. Warfare was relatively rare, but social problems and inequities were increasing as the industrial revolution and encroaching ice took their inevitable toll. Street urchins were a common sight and contagious illnesses, exacerbated by cramped, squalid living conditions, widespread.

The train carried them through the gates of a high walled enclave in the centre of the city. To Avalon's eye, the enclave resembled a cross between Buckingham Palace and the Kremlin. A long line of young adult Malicanoorians servants opened the train's baggage doors and began offloading the delegation's supplies.

Drasco, the chief servant, led the human support personnel to their living quarters, while Janok showed the principal diplomatic team and Command crew around what Avalon had dubbed the 'castle'. Although the Malicanoorians denied having a warlike history, the narrow-windowed structures and tall battlements told her otherwise. The 'castle' had clearly been designed to withstand long sieges. When pressed, Janok admitted it was a relic from a bygone era, but its size and placement within the much larger enclave suited their current form of government.

Richly coloured tapestries featuring scenes from great battles hung from pale stone walls. Archaic weapons adorned the spaces between, while body armour reminiscent of feudal Japan stood on display at the base of elaborately carved stairways. Janok took pains to point out that the weaponry and heraldic icons were decorative, museum pieces. Spoiling the effect were bunches of uninsulated, hand made wire

strung haphazardly across walls and ceilings. Electricity was the latest novelty in their industrial revolution.

The delegation arrived at the guest apartments. Inside, Marcus was explaining to Drasco that, while the accommodation was suitable for Governor Gordon and his wife, Falcon and the C20 did not share the same quarters.

Perplexed, Janok said to Avalon, "I hope we have not given offence. I understood you and Captain Falcon needed to be within reach of one another."

"Why don't you show us?" Avalon smiled at Drasco and walked with him into a large sitting room and office.

A doorway from the office led to a small double bedroom and bathroom. Its simple furnishings reflected what the Malicanoorian's perceived as Scarty and Marcus' status as 'servants'. A second doorway led to a considerably larger and more elegant sitting room and a huge, double bedroom. The massive, gilded four-poster bed was draped with ornate tapestries and covered in sweet-scented flowers.

"It's beautiful, Ambassador," said Avalon. "We feel very privileged to be accommodated in such luxurious rooms, but Captain Falcon and I do not share the same bed."

Janok scratched his head in a disconcertingly familiar gesture. "Did you not share one last night?"

The look on Falcon's face was priceless. Avalon surreptitiously stepped on his foot. Mixis suddenly found the ornate door hinges fascinating, and Marcus and Scarty froze.

"We often work late together," Avalon explained. "I couldn't tell you how many times I've fallen asleep on Captain Falcon's couch. Under circumstances such as these, we don't mind sharing quarters but really would prefer separate beds. And no, we are not offended by your presumption." She took him by the arm and led him outside, "Now, when would you like me to meet with your elders?"

The servants went in search of an additional bed, and Marcus and Scarty began unpacking. They had brought portable power units, communications equipment, so the delegation could directly link to *Asegeir's* AI. This allowed everyone to continue their day-to-day work between diplomatic events.

In the bedroom, Mixis turned to Falcon and said, "He's not convinced."

"About what?" Falcon walked around the room, examining the decorations.

"That you're not lovers."

"Does it matter?" His eyes rested on a set of armour hanging on the wall.

"No, they have no cultural or religious taboos regarding sex, that's why they didn't bat an eyelid accommodating Marcus and Scarty together. Besides, the servants will disabuse him."

"What do you mean?" He turned to face her.

"Servants in cultures like these hand wash your sheets and clothes, change your chamber-pot and scrub your back in the bathtub. Can you image how Jolley would have handled it?"

Falcon snorted. "I doubt she would have objected."

"Probably not." Mixis' eyes glinted. "It won't be long before interspecies experimentation takes place."

"I'll avoid their dancing girls and servants." He ran his hands along the studded breastplate of the armour.

“And content myself with a lovely C20. I wonder what metal this is? It looks beaten, not forged.”

Mixis started at him, but he was intently examining the metalwork. Was she reading too much into it? No, no she wasn't. Captains joked with their C20s, often making the most licentious of remarks, but they never, ever, implied anything sexual *between* them.

She heard footsteps and turned around. Avalon walked in with a triumphant look on her face. “Alright, what have you done this time?” Mixis demanded.

“As you know, their culture requires that visiting dignitaries enjoy thirty days as guests before meeting the elders. The ruling body seem to function like our Senate except the ten oldest members are the ones who make all the decisions, so they're always in residence here in Yest. The oldest of these is the titular head of Malicanoor. Most of elders are female—they generally live longer than men. The current leader, Gexa, is a female who, according to Janok, secretly likes the idea of this agreement, even if the others are ambivalent. Gexa is a ripe old seventy-five. Voting power is based on the number of years, so Gexa has seventy-fives votes. Janok thinks that after the Watchers complete their report, Gexa can swing enough votes to have me invited into a private session with the elders tomorrow morning. After all, I'm almost five times her age. Janok was concerned that Chris would have to accompany me—this proximity thing—but I said that despite NGC rules, we C20s were a law unto ourselves. And I stroked his ego and said I was comfortable with the Malicanoorians' good intentions. So, you kiddies get to play while we old folk chew over the fat.”

“Well done! I wonder if they realize how long-lived we are compared to them—apart from you I mean?”

“They will be by the time I meet with them. They're physiologically like humans of the nineteenth century. Males here reach their prime in the Earth equivalent of their twenties. Average lifespans are thirties to forties and the handful who reach their sixties and seventies are considered ancient. On Earth, humanity added twenty to thirty years to that by the late twentieth century, and it's tripled since then. Once we've introduced a few health and nutrition concepts, the Malicanoorians' active life spans should double in a couple of generations.”

Marcus returned and said, “Sir, it will take an hour to set up here. With your permission once that's done, the servants have invited us to tour their quarters.”

“Fine.” Falcon nodded. “Just make sure our comunits can access the AI. After that, we should all take a few days to familiarize ourselves with the layout of the enclave and any customs and taboos that aren't in current reports. And remind everyone to continually update the AI, especially on language, so we can cross reference with each other.”

“That still bugs you, doesn't it?” Mixis said.

“The language? Yeah,” he replied, somewhat aggravated. “You can't get a handle on it?”

Mixis shook her head. “They don't think in word images like we do and none of the servants can read or write.”

On Malicanoor, there were over eighty spoken languages, but only one written script used by the elders, bureaucrats, traders and professionals. Human linguists were bothered by the simplistic translation of the trade agreement, even if it made sense. It was no secret that Falcon had made it his personal project to dig deeper, for the Malicanoorians would only sign an agreement in their language.

Word spread quickly amongst thee servants that the visitors talked to a tiny telegraph in their ears, and that the person on the other end, the AI, had access to a vast library of information. This concept was

odd, but not as odd as sailing through space in ships, or small green-skinned aliens who made planets thousands of times bigger than Malicanoor to sweep up cosmic litter. But as with all good servants they talked of such things only amongst themselves, politely keeping their faces expressionless.

Until Scarty fell off the graffin.

Chapter 36

August 17, 2500

When Falcon, Avalon and Marcus ran into the stockyard, they were met by the sounds of laughter and cheers. Dust swirling around its feet, the graffin snorted and waved its trunk in agitation. House servants ran to Scarty, who was limping painfully across the ring, and clucked apologies. Avalon ducked through the wooden bars of the fence, went to him, and touched the tab on the neck of his shipsuit. "I'm just a little bruised," he said, and leaned against the fence.

"It's not little, Scarty," said Avalon when she pulled his shipsuit aside. "It's a massive contusion." It was already turning an ugly shade of purple and blue.

Drasco called to a tall, rough looking Malicanoorian sitting on the fence. He stood, smiled, and brushing the dust off his leather trousers, disappeared inside a workshop. Moments later he emerged with a grubby jar of red ointment. Drasco opened the lid and brought the jar to Avalon. "I will put this on," he said. "It will help."

Avalon smelled the ointment. "Thank you, Drasco. We're not used to servants attending us in such a personal capacity. Scarty would be more comfortable if I applied it."

Seeing Avalon's look, Scarty accepted the pot with thanks and allowed Marcus to help him inside. "Mixis," Avalon called on her comunit. "Can you meet me in Scarty's quarters?"

On their way back, Falcon wondered what they could do about the constant train of servants within earshot. Mixis could act as a telepathic communicator for most of them, but unless he and the C20 were within the telepath's direct line of sight, it was impossible. At the entrance to their apartments, he politely explained to Drasco that they would dress themselves for dinner.

Drasco hesitated, then said, "I will prepare hot baths while you dine, sir."

Closing the door behind them, Falcon almost sighed in relief. But he frowned when he saw his orderly's injuries.

"This is deep, Captain." Mixis looked concerned. "Bruised hip bone as well as torn muscle and ligament. His ribs are also badly bruised."

Embarrassed by the fuss, Scarty tried to object.

"Is he better off in a tank?" said Falcon.

"I've got some DNA encoded nanites for minor injuries." Mixis stood. "If he stays in bed until morning it'll give the nanites time to clean up the worst of it."

"Marcus." Avalon held up the jar of red ointment. "Tell the servants I'm going to put something like this in Scarty's bath. And also tell them to please not enter our quarters until we open the doors in the morning." Turning to Falcon she said, "The servants will expect liniment on Scarty's bedding. I won't use the stuff they gave me, but it smells much the same, so—"

"I'll sleep here and Scarty can sleep in my bed," Falcon finished.

Avalon smiled. "Scarty, thanks for the fall."

The orderly rolled his eyes. "Anything for the Captain, C20."

Once outside Falcon said to Avalon, "Scarty's comfortable where he is. I'll be fine, you don't have to do any more."

"You're walking like you've got a corn cob stuck up your..." Avalon frowned and closed the bedroom door. "Listen, nanites won't clean toxins from you, and you don't want to stay drugged up. Being stoic is one thing, being stupid is another. You don't know what fun and games Janok has in store and you need to be back in top physical—and mental—condition. Tomorrow I'll get Mixis to give you a twelve-hour nanite treatment, same as Scarty, to deal with any hidden damage. No more narcotic or analgesic tea, but another massage is necessary."

Falcon nodded in acquiescence. He felt like hell and would have happily foregone dinner for a soak in a hot tub. Fortunately, their current status meant no formal dinners for thirty days.

Making his way downstairs to the dining room, his quadriceps nearly folded. Avalon whispered, "Put your hand on my shoulder and I'll take the weight." When he complied, she put her arm around his waist and leaned into him.

The servants looked on, wondering why they'd had to drag another bed into their rooms. Aliens, they thought, very odd.

Dinner was served in an ornate dining room. On Avalon's advice Falcon avoided the wine. Janok was noticeably absent, although five Watchers joined them, explaining that the Ambassador was still meeting with the elders. The meal was simple, as befitted guests not yet officially welcomed into Malicanoorian society. Falcon found the climb upstairs marginally less painful, but breathed a sigh of relief when he settled into the deep tub of steaming hot water. The pungent aroma brought back hazy memories from the previous night. His eyes tingled, and he tilted his head back to rest on the wooden slats surrounding the tubs. Minutes later, Marcus arrived and stepped into the second tub. "How's Scarty?" Falcon asked him.

"Embarrassed. The C20's massaging him now and giving him a few pointers on riding. It seems these animals have a temperament much like Earth camels."

Falcon opened one eye and looked at his sergeant. "And the C20 would know about riding camels, I take it."

"After Dak Jassom died, she spent four years travelling Australia with camels. I don't think there's much she hasn't done, sir."

"No, I guess there isn't." He smiled, thinking of her riding a seachon.

An hour later, Falcon lay face down on Scarty's bed. Avalon was massaging Falcon's legs while Mixis tested his blood. When the telepath frowned at the results, Avalon admitted to giving him more narcotic in the shuttle.

"I'll check again in the morning when I administer the nanite treatment." Mixis collected her things. "Give Scarty light duties for the next few days."

Falcon smiled and closed his eyes. "Whatever you say."

"Can you give me the recipe for that stuff?" Mixis asked Avalon. "Maybe I can use it to soften him up when I next want something."

"Won't work," he replied dreamily. "Only works when administered by beautiful C20s with magic fingers and soft skin."

Mixis froze. Avalon caught her eyes and smiled reassuringly.—It's okay. The stuff I gave him would make a rock embarrassingly pliable. I'm not concerned by anything he says or does. And neither should you, no more than you are by the uninhibited subliminal fantasies you pick up when scanning people.—

When Mixis had left, Falcon said, "Janok monitored my whereabouts last night."

Avalon continued to work on his legs. "If he hadn't, the Watchers would have reported him. For a culture that's only just invented the telegraph, they picked up our technology fast."

"I should've made Vol come down instead of me. She's older. And a woman."

"Sooner or later they'll have to divest themselves of cultural preconceptions when dealing with aliens." She rolled her hands to his inner thighs, spreading his legs apart. When he moaned softly, she mumbled, "Sorry."

"It's anything but painful." He squeezed his eyes shut and groaned. "I'm ... I ... that was way out of line."

She moved her hands to his hips. "I'm not propositioning you, Captain, but that underwear has to go."

"Maybe it should stay. In fact, maybe that's enough, C20. I'll be fine, really."

"Just as it happened in the atrium, it's going to happen under other circumstances. I'm not offended, and you shouldn't be embarrassed. You don't have to roll over, I can manage from this side."

He said nothing, so she covered most of his body with a sheet, pulled down his underwear and continued. "These and the thighs are the largest muscles, they take the most work. Captain—Chris, it's inevitable that we'll be thrown together in circumstances more personal than this. You're still disturbed by the desire to be in physical contact with me, and the drugs in your system aren't helping because they're undermining your sense of control. Civilians and non-telepathic aliens like the Malicanoorians will often assume we're sexually intimate. The only people who matter are you and any woman with whom you might have a relationship. I know it's difficult for the spouses of C20 captains, but most adjust."

"I don't have time for that sort of relationship."

She covered the lower half of his body with the sheet then began working on his back. "You will. This has been a difficult year for you. Next year you'll have more time. You don't have to work at your relationship with me, it just happens. Don't fear it and don't fight it because you're fighting that which will make you a stronger, better captain."

Despite his drug-addled thoughts, Falcon knew he wasn't fighting his desire to focus newborn senses through her, he was fighting his desire *of* her. As Linda Williams had said back on Kwilloy, the trade-off was worth it. He could live with that. Really.

He might have felt differently if he had seen the loneliness in Avalon's eyes.

Chapter 37

August 18, 2500

"And so," the translator continued, eyeing Avalon apprehensively, "Elder Gexa is curious why one claiming such a great age appears so young. Not meaning to offend," he added quickly.

The elders' elaborate headdresses made them look like seasonally displaced Christmas ornaments. They were seated with Avalon at a long table in a high-ceilinged room with arched gables. Sunlight filtering through the stained glass windows illuminated the ornate heraldry on the stone walls.

"None taken." Avalon put down her glass of juice, stood and considered a display of ceremonial daggers on the wall. "Are these sharp?"

"Of course. Why do you ask?" replied the translator.

Avalon selected one and handed it to him. Unsealing the wrist cuff of her shipsuit—she had forgone jeans and t-shirt in deference to the formality of the occasion—she placed her forearm on the table. "To prevent any suspicion of trickery, I'm going to ask you to do this," she said to the translator. "Just be a little careful because if you damage me too much, *Asegeir* will recall me."

Before the translator could stop her, Avalon wrapped her fingers around his and plunged the dagger into her wrist, between the bones, pinning her arm to the table. Blood erupted—and just as quickly ceased to flow. The elders gasped and stood from the table, shocked by the unexpected violence.

Despite her discomfort, Avalon smiled. The blade was sharp, so there had been less pain. "Please don't be upset. However you might like to withdraw the knife so that I can finish eating." She braced her hand and added, "Do it swiftly or it hurts a lot more than going in."

Wincing, the translator withdrew the dagger. His eyes rounded when the wound healed almost instantly. Gexa and the other elders crowded around, examining the fading scar on her arm.

"It will take a minute to heal internally, but as you can see, my body is self-regenerating."

Gexa spoke at length to the translator.

"Such attributes are, we understand, unique to C20s and Metas," said the translator. He turned to Saav. "But what of you? You are a generation older than the oldest of us, yet you appear like a female in her twenties!"

Mixis explained how nutrition, public health, nanotechnology and amniotanks enhanced the human lifespan to seven times the Malicanoorian average. She also sent Avalon a mental warning that Gexa didn't need a translator.

Avalon did not fail to notice the covetousness in Gexa's eyes. Despite her age, the Senator was still attractive. In her youth she would have captured the attention of many males. Her next question confirmed it. Could such technology work on Malicanoorian physiology and, if so, could it reverse the deleterious effects of aging?

"Yes," replied Avalon. "However, the technology requires an advanced social infrastructure. Before your people can walk, Senator, they must crawl. Though amniotanks and nanotechnology are within your grasp, it will take several generations for your science and industry, and perhaps more importantly, your

ethics to reach a point where both can safely be used. Still," she mused at Gexa's crestfallen expression, "once a trade agreement is signed, there is nothing stopping Malicanoorians from travelling to Earth and availing themselves of such technology."

When Gexa's eyes lit, Avalon added, "*Asegeir* also has such facilities. If you wish, I can ask Captain Falcon if we could demonstrate the effects. However, there is a socio-political implication. If you, for example, were to gain your youth and forty years of life, it would disrupt the structure of your government. Giving you many more years of power would create jealousy amongst the younger elders. This will lead to further discontent, revolution, and social upheaval. You have heard of our history."

Around the table, the elders looked at one another and nodded slowly.

"Our society believes that age does not necessarily confer great wisdom, nor does youth preclude it," Avalon continued. "Captain Falcon is the supreme commander of *Asegeir*, yet he has hardly reached one fifth of the total years he might live, and he is the youngest amongst our delegation. I, at my age and with my knowledge and experience, bow to his will."

"We do not mean to challenge the structure of your society; it's worked well for generations and for the most part kept you free of great wars. Yet even without this trade agreement you already know—and fear—the social and economic inequities now developing because of your changing climate and industrial revolution."

When Gexa shot her a worried look, Mixis said,—she's wondering how you could know of such things.—

"I know this because I know you are prudent leaders. Only the foolish would not contemplate such things." Avalon smiled. "The wise person learns from the mistakes of others. Learn from our mistakes, our history. See the paths we have chosen and look at those available to you. I know, as do the Dwins and Masters, that in your wisdom, you will make the right decisions for your people as well as yourselves."

"And with your youth regained," she added, holding Gexa's eyes, "would you wish to stay locked inside these great walls when you could relive much of your life with the wisdom of age to temper youthful follies?"

Sitting a little straighter in her high-backed chair, Gexa turned to her translator, who then said, "Truly, you have given us much to contemplate."

Avalon stood, signalling that she was leaving. When she reached the ornate doors, she turned and added as an apparent afterthought, "*Asegeir* is here for three months. It takes about two in an amniotank to reverse the deleterious effects of aging."

"Scott Brady will have a fit," Mixis declared on the way back to their rooms.

Avalon shrugged. "He would have taken three months to tell them."

"And Scott is the least of your problems. I think you just broke a few handbooks full of regulations."

"C20s wrote most of them. Mixis, rules are made to deal with familiar situations. When a new situation comes along and you follow the rules, if they don't work, it leaves you to wonder why. The Malicanoorian political structure—their rules—are not working with the changing power base that an industrial revolution brings. Scott Brady can help them. If Gexa wants her youth she can have it—if she agrees to step aside as the current leader. She can do more for her people outside their rigid structure of

politics than from within.

"Human purists decry our interference in cultures like these, claiming they should be left to evolve naturally, as non-sentient species do. When the Masters adopted this policy, they inadvertently encouraged the Others to prey on lesser *sentient* beings. All cultures evolve, for better or worse. Is it not more compassionate to help them make better choices? Human ways are not necessarily the right ways. The Malicanoorians will find their own path. All I did was sweeten it."

"You bribed them," Mixis retorted.

They climbed up the winding stairway. "Is it bribing a toddler when you reward him for good behaviour, especially if bad behaviour might get him, and indeed, an entire society and the life-force of a perfectly good planet, killed?"

When a servant passed them, Saav said,—I should know better than to argue philosophy with you. But I also know you detest diplomatic functions; this was no doubt your way of avoiding future ones.—

Avalon chuckled.—So tell me, what else were they thinking?—That you exposed then sliced through years of procrastination, and with a few deft words handed them a face-saving way out. They genuinely want the best for their people, Avvy. You offered what they see as an elegant reason to amend their political structure.—Mixis' eyes narrowed, and she added aloud, "What are you going to be like in 5,000 years?"

"Hopefully I'll be able to cut down the time it takes to point out the obvious."

* * * *

Two days later the elders announced they would sign the trade agreement. Further, almost half the ruling body resigned. The shock rippled through Malicanoorian society. Senators were like royalty; they *never* resigned! Those pressing for political reform were further stunned by the news that the vacated positions would be filled through elections, not automatic advancement by age. Each citizen was entitled to one vote for each year that they had lived, and only those over forty-five years of age could be nominated as candidates. The resigning senators would, after two months on *Asegeir*, take up new duties working with industrial magnates and social workers to effect social and economic reform. Knowing these ex-senators would have their youth returned, even the most cynical could not find reason for criticism. Of course, they were not human.

Avalon made it clear to the ruling body that she had nothing more to offer them, declaring that Scott Brady was better versed in the intricacies of political reform and bureaucracy. And she made it equally clear to the human delegation that she wanted to explore Malicanoor, but if they needed her, for anything, they should not hesitate to call her back.

That morning, Falcon sat at a desk in the large room they used as an office. He could see through the doorway into his apartment. Avalon, dressed in jeans, thick Katylgan boots and a beautiful Katylgan leather shirt, was packing her few possessions into a Kwilloy bag. Mindful of Marcus and the clerks working in the office, he stood and walked into the bedroom they had shared for the last two nights.

"C20." He closed the door behind him.

Avalon's smile vanished when she saw his face. "Chris? What is it?" She stopped packing.

He thrust his hands into the pockets of his uniform jacket. Despite the conviction that he was falling in love with her, he could ignore the visceral pull of sexual arousal when the greater power of the life-force beckoned. But sometimes her touch awakened a deep yearning for soft kisses and soothing hands. Where

did memory end and fantasy begin? He swallowed and looked away, angered by the betrayal of his body. "I want to apologize for the other night, I—"

"Apologize for what? You're not ... you don't think...?" She went to him. "Why do you think I didn't want Scarty massaging you? Chris, I'm your C20! I'm the one person with whom you can *always* be yourself. You need a confidante, as I do. That's why we have each other. Nothing is taboo, nothing."

Except one thing. But when she took his hand, the brief flash of melancholy vanished. The feel of the life-force flowing through her made his desire superfluous. It had to.

"It's disconcerting, even distracting, I know." Her voice dropped as she added, "Especially as we're opposite sexes. But you *will* adjust. And I am never, ever, going to misinterpret anything you say or do, especially when drugged with the stuff I gave you!"

Her eyes danced in mirth and he found himself smiling in return. "So, where are you going?"

"On new worlds, to wherever takes my fancy." She released his hand to pick up her thick Malicanoorian coat. It was snowing outside. "I'll be back for Command Board meetings but I want you to call me whenever you need anything. *Anything*," she stressed, taking his hand again. "I mean that, Chris. I can always explore Malicanoor another time."

He squeezed her hand, wanting to hold her and ask her to stay. She pulled him into her arms for a moment too short, then released him and tossing him a last smile, grabbed her bag and left.

Chapter 38

October, 2500

As promised, Avalon spent most of her time away from the enclave in Yest. Marcus informed Falcon that she was still helping with technical work, downloading files on her datapad and taking them with her wherever she went. She returned completed reports at Command Board meetings, and she always stayed behind to talk alone with Falcon, to ask if there was anything he needed. He wanted to say that he needed *her* and that he missed her the moment she left the room. Instead he always replied that she did too much already, and told her to go explore the planet.

A month after arriving at Malicanoor, Angus Gordon emerged from the amniotank and replaced Falcon as temporary ambassador. Back aboard *Asegeir*, Falcon often saw Avalon working with envirotechs and biologists. He wondered how much time she could be spending on the planet when it seemed her entire life was dedicated to alleviating his workload. When they dined together one evening, she insisted that her trips back to *Asegeir* were nothing more than 'laundry stops'. He laughed and touched her hand and felt the strength of the life-force grow.

Six weeks later, the emergence of the Malicanoorian retired senators—including Gexa—from *Asegeir's* amniotanks signalled the beginning of festivities that would culminate in the formal signing of the trade agreement. On the final day, gilded carriages drawn by elegantly groomed teams of graffins carried the diplomats to the signing ceremony in a public park at the centre of Yest. A carnival atmosphere filled the city. Market vendors had set up candy-striped tents, and balloons and streamers decorated the streets. Thousands of Malicanoorians lined the cobblestone roads to greet the open carriages. It was a beautiful day. Even the rancid brown haze that normally clung to the city's skies had been swept away by a warm breeze from the north. Spring was coming and with it, a new and exciting beginning, not just for a wealthy few but all of Malicanoor.

Instead of climbing back into the carriage after the ceremony, Falcon took Avalon by the elbow and said, "If you're going to sneak away, take me with you."

She laughed and pulled him into the dispersing crowds, then along back alleys and pokey stalls, until they reached a lively waterside tavern. The earlier breeze had died and brown haze once again obscured the blue sky. "Here," she said, "this is what it's all about." She pointed to the filthy warehouses, decrepit docks, and foul waters made still by oil slick. Garbage tumbled over itself into the harbour, and the sickly sweet smell of rotting food vied with the sour odour of body waste from an open sewer flowing directly into the sea. "The trade agreement will help change all this before the life-force of the planet is too deeply hurt."

"You don't have to sell it to me," he said, watching her tenderly.

Her expression turned sheepish. "It's just ... something Mixis said a few weeks back, about bribing them."

"And the media reports of Earth First people decrying our interference in an aboriginal culture. C'mon," he took her by the hand, "let's get a drink."

Hoping they could spend a few hours alone together, he entered a tavern and placed enough local coinage on the bar for bread and cheese and ale. When he turned to say something, he saw she had gone back outside.

Avalon had attended the ceremony dressed in Malicanoorian clothes, mostly accessories and decorative pieces representing each of the planet's provinces. She now handed each of the ever-present clutter of street urchins an item of clothing or jewellery, until she was left standing in only a shipsuit and boots. Then she dug into her bag and tossed them fistfuls of high-energy food bars. The children didn't mob her or fight with each other for possession of the treats. Instead they laughed and danced in delight.

Falcon smiling indulgently. It didn't matter to her what colour or shape they were, or that they had two mouths and no noses, they were still children. His smile faltered when he remembered she could no longer have children.

When she came back inside, he held out the chair for her. "Thanks," she said and sat down. "I know I can't feed them all, but—"

He covered her hand with his. "Avvy, stop apologizing."

She smiled self-consciously. "My misdirected maternal instincts."

"How many children do you have?"

"Five, including Ryl. Twin boys, then the girls, ten years later." She drank some of the sweet ale, then added, "Y'know, I've never told anyone this, but helping Jason Saav research his thesis has brought a lot of things to the forefront of my mind. My sons were not Dak's sons."

He almost choked on his ale. Loosening the braided collar of his formal dress uniform, he stared at her.

"Sorry," she said, tearing off a chunk of bread. "That came out of left field."

"I should be used to that by now, shouldn't I? Are you going to leave that one hanging, or—?"

She met his eyes. "It's not as scandalous as it sounds. I suspected as much. So did the boys. They knew I'd been pregnant with twins when the Masters brought me forward in time. My husband from the twentieth-century, David, was Rhesus negative and a US Navy aviator, so they managed to dig up a sample of his DNA."

Falcon continued to stare at her. "But weren't your sons born years after you arrived?"

"Historians have all but ignored the Metas' and C20s' human history. Ryl was thirty years old when she was taken to Gaia and metamorphosed. As a Meta she has six surviving children and their children are my great-grandchildren. When I was pulled from the twentieth century, I was forty-eight years old and fourteen weeks pregnant. I'd lost so much, David, Marilyn, my life. To lose the twins too ... *nothing* remained of the things that defined me.

"Don't misunderstand," she added quickly. "I embraced what happened to me with a sense of wonder. But sometimes I'd wake at night with an overwhelming feeling of loss, of irreparable displacement. That first Christmas was particularly hard. My relationship with Dak was not as instant as the history books would tell you. As we became closer ... well, that's another story.

"In a strange way, learning the boys were David's alleviated much of my pain. Not just over Dak's death, but of losing David and some indefinable contact with the past. The knowledge gave me a sense of continuity. Sure, I had Ryl, but the boys were something *I* had brought from the past, a tangible piece of David, while the girls were my link to Dak. I don't suppose that makes much sense, but when you lose a child, while nothing can make up for it, having another opens a new place in your heart."

She abruptly stopped, and her eyes filled with deep regret. "Chris, I am so very sorry. I'm not normally

insensitive."

He smiled sadly. "It was a long time ago."

"Time does not heal all wounds, does it?" she said softly.

He held her eyes for a moment then looked down. "Did Jassom...?"

"No, I doubt he even suspected. The boys' embryos must have retro-evolved along with my body, then lain dormant within me for ten years. Perhaps it was the Master's way of making it up to me."

She tore off another chunk of bread. "There's a lot of mythos surrounding Dak Jassom. Especially his death. Legends are necessary to the human psyche. Legendary *humans* even more so."

Falcon wasn't sure what had prompted her to open up like this, but he was glad. "What do you mean?" He sliced the cheese and handed her a piece in exchange for the bread.

"It's hard to comprehend, but I grew up at a time when extra-terrestrial life was dismissed as a child's fantasy and the idea of good and evil was founded on archaic religions. People could afford to imagine something greater than themselves because it resided safely in fiction. In the twenty-second century, Metas and aliens fulfilled the legendary ideal of miraculous beings of heroic stature wielding magical power. But human egos need *human* heroes of mythic proportion, so when mankind found one, they practically deified him. Dak was a man. He was very, very good at his job, and that kept him and his crew alive when many others were lost."

"He also had you, a C20."

Avalon shook her head. "Dak was your age when I met him. He'd been running around the galaxy all by himself for years. Don't forget, of the original twenty-five C20s, only thirteen survived until our abilities were fully formed. Yes, Dak was an exceptional man and he lived an exceptional life, as you are, as you *do*. He was a soldier who pledged his life to defend those he'd sworn to protect. He was a hero because he fulfilled his commission where another might have hesitated. And his elevation to mythology was based on his willingness to sacrifice himself not just for humans, but aliens. To be brutally honest, he could have found an alternative. Instead, he chose the ultimate path of glory for an old soldier."

Her words floored him. Every logistical study he'd ever read made it clear that Jassom's death was unavoidable. Clintar *would* have been destroyed if Jassom hadn't rammed the Katyl planet killer in time. And only the deliberate explosion of the Dim5 engines would have provided sufficient force. No other ship with Dim5 capability had been in the area, the systems on the original *Asegeir* were incapable of the intricate manual piloting Jassom undertook in those last seconds, and the Clintaran planetary defence system had been disabled.

Avalon studied him while she ate. "You forget," she said after a few moments. "Or perhaps the history you read failed to mention I was on Clintar."

He sat back and soundly cursed himself for failing to examine every byte of her file. Jassom could have sent a shuttle for her; there'd been time. If Avalon had been on board, when *Asegeir* rammed the Katyl planet killer, Jassom would have been d-jumped with her back to Clintar.

"I'm not being ungracious to Dak, or his memory," she continued. "But legend has turned our relationship into something mythical. Hell, most people have this strange idea that *Asegeir's* C20 is locked into the bowels of the ark ship, in perpetual grief for the only man she ever loved, the legend who died to save me and a planet of twelve billion sentients. You can't disabuse people of such a tragic, angst-filled romance."

It's so much more believable than a teenager wandering around in cut-off jeans, who, ten years after Dak died, fell in love just as deeply with an engineer and re-married.

"Of the thirteen remaining original C20s, each of us has a similar piece of legendary baggage trailing us like some damned albatross. But humans need heroes, and Dak was a convenient patsy."

"Then ... why did he do it?"

"Dak was one hundred and twenty years old. Not even middle-aged these days, but back then, he was getting old. When he refused to send a shuttle, I knew he'd chosen to go out in a blaze of glory. As much as it distressed me, I was glad it was on his terms. It was the culmination of an entire lifetime of ... oh hell ... legendary deeds." Avalon smiled sadly. "I've never regretted becoming a C20, but extreme longevity has its down sides."

"What did you *really* do after he died?"

"They say I wandered the galaxy mourning his death. It was ten years and two attempts before the next *Asegeir* was complete. Did you study history, Chris?"

History. How many times had she used that word today? Avalon was part of the history he'd absorbed with such fascination as a boy, yet she had just spend ten minutes disabusing him of many long-held 'truths'. She had probably sat in a tavern on some planet like this, having an almost identical conversation with a captain much like himself, while he had been suckling at his mother's breast. And a thousand years from now she would be doing the same with another captain. Saav's words haunted him; he was fleeting, ephemeral, a momentary event in her life.

Avalon swallowed and looked outside. "History, Captain. It will always mean more to me for having lived it, knowing its truth rather than the idealized, sanitized version you were so judiciously fed." She turned back to face him. "But that does not make the Here and Now any less poignant. If anything, it makes me appreciate the present even more."

Her eyes begged him to see her as she sat before him, not as a living memento to the past. But he dared not interpret her words as his heart demanded. "Avalon, I—"

A shrill scream interrupted. It was immediately followed by shouts and growls, and the sounds of a fight. The handful of altercations between Malicanoorians and humans had usually been resolved quickly, but by the time Falcon and Avalon reached the entrance of the tavern, this one had turned into a street brawl.

When Falcon saw the NGC uniforms amidst the commotion, he tried to force his way through. Behind him, Avalon shouted, "You'll never break it up alone!"

Yellow-jacketed Malicanoorian troopers converged on the fight, pushing past onlookers, who in turn attacked the troopers. NGC personnel appeared from the surrounding streets; the humans at the centre of the fight had called for help on their comunits. Cries and screams punctuated the air and blood splattered as punches were thrown. Falcon saw Lieutenant Fielding trying to protect an injured and heavily pregnant NGC medtech. Then someone pulled a knife and plunged it into Fielding's face.

"No!" Falcon cried and threw himself at the big, ugly Malicanoorian wielding the blade.

The female medtech screamed at Avalon to help. Just before she reached the medtech, someone jerked Avalon's hair, pulling her backwards and out of the fray. The medtech's eyes rounded in shock and disbelief.

Falcon was having his own problems trying to subdue a Malicanoorian who had clearly practiced

Ambassador Janok's fitness regime. Every second counted. The knife had plunged deeply into Fielding's eye socket and out the far side of his skull. If they could get him to an amniotank within seven minutes—five now—they could suspend his metabolism until the damage was repaired. From the corner of his eye, he could see Avalon pushing towards them.

Then she vanished.

Aboard *Asegeir's* bridge, Avalon rolled on the deck as a shaft of pain ripped through her side. She saw the large, curved dagger protruding from her lower back. “*No!*” she screamed in impotent rage. “Damn you to the Others, *no!*”

Crewmen ran to her as she stood and swung on them. “Get this damned thing outta me!”

The door leading to Falcon's office swung open and Vol ran onto the bridge. “What's going on?” she demanded.

A lieutenant gently eased the curved blade out of Avalon's kidney. She was breathing hard, pain etched on her face as she yelled, “A brawl; a stupid, senseless brawl!”

“The treaty—”

Avalon braced herself with one hand on the command consol and covered her rapidly healing wound with the other. “Nothing to do with it! It was just ... *stupid! Dammit!* Fielding was stabbed, and I'd almost reached him but someone pulled me away—and then, this!” She grabbed the long Malicanoorian knife from the lieutenant's hands and angrily hurled it onto the floor.

Everyone within earshot understood her rage and frustration. If she could have reached Fielding in time, she could have inflicted an injury on herself and d-jumped the lieutenant to *Asegeir*. Fielding would have been in the amniotank within seconds.

A screen on the LD opaqued, and Falcon's image appeared. “It's over,” he said, wiping blood from a gash on his cheek. “The one who got Fielding and likely stabbed Avalon is a wanted murderer.”

“Fielding?” Vol demanded.

“Dead,” replied Falcon in a flat, angry voice.

Behind him, they could see the pregnant NGC medtech desperately clutching Fielding's body, her face screwed up in bitter anguish. “The C20 ran away! She could have saved him, but she *ran away!*”

Part 4: Zanos III

Chapter 39

November 21, 2050

The shuttle's sensors continued to indicate that surface conditions on Zanos III were similar to Earth. Avalon looked down. It was a pretty planet. It wasn't Gaia but if it really was devoid of sentient or pre-sentient life forms—which might explain the strange life-force—it would be interesting indeed. Humanity had discovered numerous Earth type planets, though none so apparently perfect as this one.

Too perfect. Avalon checked her descent. Gravity was, on average, an apparent 1.03 Earth gravity, with an atmospheric mix a little on the oxygen heavy side—conducive with the apparent biota.

Apparent.

Why am I questioning the veracity of every reading?

Despite the unfortunate death of Lieutenant Fielding, the Malicanoorian trade agreement had signalled the successful completion of *Asegeir's* maiden voyage. A few weeks Dim5 travel before arriving at Spacedock would give everyone time to wrap up trade deals and science papers, catch up on paperwork or prepare for the post-cruise debriefing and personnel changes. The two-day side trip to check Zanos III marked a change in routine for scientists and Command crew. But when they'd arrived in the Zanos system, the planet wasn't where it was supposed to be.

Avalon adjusted the shuttle's attitude and flight path and thought back to her conversation with Falcon that morning. She'd been in the Hub, eating brunch with Vol. They'd kept glancing at the LD, wondering when it would clear. *Asegeir* had exited Dim5 three minutes earlier, and they'd been looking forward to their first view of the gas giant, Zanos IV. *Asegeir* never orbited living worlds; at over eighty kilometres in diameter, the impact of such a huge ship on the culture of any non-space faring beings could do more damage than her gravitational pull on the planet.

Eventually, Vol had tapped her comunit and called the bridge. "Captain, is there any reason the LD isn't clear in the public areas?"

"Is the C20 with you?"

"Sir."

"Perhaps you might come to the bridge. Both of you."

Four minutes later, Avalon stood beside him, staring at the readings and frowning in disbelief. "How could I have made such a blunder?" She looked out to the beautiful swirling blue-red clouds of the gas giant. Small moons beaded the faint rings of debris orbiting the planet.

"You didn't. We checked the orbit and so did *Asegeir's* astronomers. Selena checked it from *Galileo* before NGC approved the stopover. And we checked it again just before leaving Malicanoor. Sensors from telescopes located thirteen to three hundred thousand light years away indicated that Zanos III *and* IV were in stable, elliptical orbits around the sun, Zanos. The minimum distance between the third and fourth planets was three hundred and twenty million kilometres. At his point in time, Zanos IV should be five hundred and forty eight million kilometres from III. But we're not."

Immediately assuming the obvious, she said, "Which planet changed orbit?"

"Zanos III."

"What's the closest we've eyeballed it in real time? Thirteen thousand light years away at Malicanoor? Maybe a humongous great comet hit it in the last thirteen-thousand years."

"The topography, sea-level, and climate are unchanged. There hasn't even been an ice age, which makes no sense given the current orbit. Besides, a collision that big would've compromised the structural integrity of the planet. At best it would be a dead world. At worst, a debris field where the planet used to be."

"Tell me more about the sensors."

"One minute the biomass on III appears commensurate with a planet of its size. The next, it goes off the scale and shifts back to almost zero."

She crossed her arms and frowned. "That *is* weird. Mixis?"

"Is in the tank for a few days; tore a ligament playing handball with me. None of the other telepaths can get a fix on anything."

"In the current orbit around IV, *Asegeir* is inside the RB point. I'll go take a look."

"We'll send escort fighters—"

"No." She unfolded her arms and motioned with her eyes to his office.

He nodded at Vol. "There's nothing abnormal about Zanos IV. Clear LD around the rest of *Asegeir*." Then he followed Avalon into his office and closed the door behind them.

"Chris, what is it?" She touched his arm in concern.

Pursing his lips, he walked across to the LD. "I have a gut feeling about this one. Something isn't right."

"There's no reason to risk lives or additional vessels." She'd joined him at the LD and looked out. "If you're that concerned, I'll use an atmospheric lifepod. You wait twenty-four hours and then take *Asegeir* out past the RB point."

Face screwing up in disbelief, he said, "I am not sending you down there alone!"

"Captain, that's standard operational procedure. Don't forget who wrote those regs. If anything, *anything*, goes wrong, I'll slingshot back onto the bridge before you can blink. Nothing can prevent that. I don't understand why you have a problem with this."

She could see that her formal address bothered him almost as much as the bizarre readings from Zanos III. But then her face softened and she added, "I know it feels like you're sending me in without backup. But it's my thousandth—or whatever, I've lost count—planet-fall. C'mon Captain—Chris." She reached out and cupped his cheek for emphasis. "I am ... a resource, your resource. Don't be afraid of using me."

Some resource. Avalon glanced across the board. All green. Her instincts turned from amber to red when the shuttle jolted suddenly. She grabbed the controls and was about to order manual override when the ant-grav drive failed and the vehicle dropped in free fall. Her stomach shot up into her mouth, and she stared at the display in disbelief. Universally green. A second jolt hit the shuttle. "Identify cause of drive failure!"

Before the AI replied, jolt number three flipped the shuttle onto its back and tossed it like a leaf in a

tornado. Restraining straps and head pads kept her from being thrown around, but locker doors flew open and disgorged their contents. She silently cursed the supply techs. Despite the regs, modern space travel made them complacent. She'd have every last one of them assigned to the slowest tub in the Sydney to Hobart yacht race next month; that would teach them how to stow things properly! "Stabilize and report status to *Asegeir*! Update atmospheric—"

A broken strut crashed through the cabin, smashed the controls, slammed into her head and crushed her skull.

* * * *

Avalon opened her eyes. It was dark, so dark that she couldn't be sure her vision was okay until speckled light glimmered below her feet. Based on the readings of the planet, she'd selected a temperate environment as a landing site. Instead, it was bitterly cold. And what the hell was she doing suspended upside down?

The lights resolved into stars. She'd also planned to land on the dayside, just after dawn. Her stomach growled and she was almost nauseous with hunger. The facts added up to one thing: she'd been unconscious for some time. That meant she'd been so severely injured that her brain had shut down until her body could effect repairs. So why was she still in the shuttle and not on *Asegeir*?

A cold wave of terror swept through her. *Something* had the power to prevent her return to *Asegeir*.

Avalon clamped down on her growing panic. Pushing her long hair aside, she reached into the sealed pocket at her feet for a torch and a food bar. Each bar contained the energy and nutritional supplements to sustain a human for a day, but a damaged C20 took a lot of feeding. Ignoring the painful pressure from the straps across her shoulders, she gulped down five bars then took her time chewing through another three. While she ate, she sensed the echo of wrongness now repaired. Broken ribs and a punctured lung, both collarbones broken, a broken neck, badly fractured skull. She touched her head. Her hair was matted with something thick and scabby—blood and meningeal fluid. Her injuries were consistent with an aircraft crash. It also meant at least eighteen hours had passed.

She surveyed the damage to the shuttle. All systems were dead. Bulkheads had caved in and the cabin was filled with debris and protruding rocks. Both access hatches were broken inward. The nose had ploughed into rock, smashing the almost indestructible diaglass window. Through the lower inspection port between her feet, starlight shone into the upside down cabin. The port's diaglass hatch had been punched in and hung loosely down. She shook her head in amazement. She *should* be dead.

Releasing the harness, Avalon carefully rolled down onto the ceiling. She located the emergency beacons and turned them on, more as a matter of procedure than hope. Whatever had captured her certainly was powerful enough to block something as basic as a radio signal. And once *Asegeir* left Zanos IV in what she guesstimated to be less than six hours, it was doubtful she'd be yanked back on board. Standing orders gave her no choice. She had only a few hours to get off this planet or signal *Asegeir* and ... And what? What were they going to do? Send a rescue party and have them end up like her?

And let's not forget that you've spent every moment since recovering consciousness fending off a nauseating sense of dread.

An image of a Venus flytrap came to mind. Something was very wrong with this planet, and sitting inside a busted shuttle was wasting time. Making sure her plasma gun was fully charged, she added the torch, extra energy bars and plasma recharges to her belt pouches, and cautiously reached her left hand through the ragged edges of the inspection port. Better to have a hand blown off than her head. After a few moments, she slowly eased the rest of her body out and rested belly to belly on the upside-down shuttle.

God it was cold!

Her nose wrinkled reflexively at the stench of rotting meat. Above, the handful of stars twinkled. At first she thought it was atmospheric haze, but even the orange light from the brightest object in the sky—the planet, Zanos IV—twinkled. Something to do with whatever maintained the illusion of a pretty, benign planet.

Avalon listened for a full five minutes, slowly turning her head in every direction, searching for movement. It was still and quiet. Too quiet. Unnaturally quiet. She crawled to the aft of the shuttle. It was a four-metre drop to the ground. She needed to know what to expect but was reluctant to use the torch; it might turn her into a target. Selecting red light, she shone a narrow beam down to what looked like mud; should be a soft landing. She lowered herself until her legs were dangling two metres above the ground, let go, and hit something spongy—which instantly gave way. Cutting off a yelp of surprise, she continued to fall. The stars vanished and the world turned black.

"Oomph!" she grunted, landing heavily. Sensations vied for priority: spine-chilling fear, an odour so bad it gagged her, soft, sticky surface and a high, keening moans a short distance away. She tried to stand but stumbled in goo and over sharp, protruding objects. Terror cut her like a knife, so she took a deep breath ... and retched. The smell! Despite the bone-numbing cold, it was like a slaughterhouse stewing in tropical heat. Coppery blood and ruptured bowels, the stink of decay and putrefaction and, more, the stench of pain and terror. The very air seemed to carry a dark presence, an evil so palpable it was stultifying.

She played the torch over the immediate area. The red light hid the true colours, but not the carnage. Her stomach heaved and she swallowed hard to stop from throwing up. What in hell had she landed in? A sacrificial pit? Shining the torch upwards failed to penetrate the blackness. She flicked through the settings until it was set to seven kilometres. Nothing. But she hadn't fallen far! Something was absorbing the light.

The inhuman noise came closer. Every instinct screamed at her to flee, but whatever created this planet-wide illusion could not be escaped by running, so she headed towards the sound. Using the light to find a path through the bones and viscera, she ignored the squirming shapes of what passed for maggots on this world. Hopefully the bigger scavengers limited their pickings to daytime; the last thing she wanted to confront were a pack of carrion eaters. Perhaps they were the ones making the sounds...

Avalon sensed something large and looming above her. She pulled the weapon from her belt, dropped to the ground and swung the torch up with her left hand in a defensive posture. The torch vanished, and a sharp, shocking pain ripped down her arm.

Jerking her arm down, she instinctively grabbing at—nothing! Dread overcame nausea. Her hand had been severed with surgical precision. At some level she was conscious of ambient light but the rest of her mind was screaming in terror.

She *had* to calm down and give her body time to deal with the injury! Time. How much time remained? Five hours? Less? She stopped her cascading thoughts and concentrated. Whatever had taken her hand was not the source of the moans. And since she had sensed it coming, next time she'd be ready—and see how it liked a proton pulse for breakfast. Her stomach heaved again and she gagged. Clenching her teeth, she lifted the stump of her arm to her eyes. It was definitely getting lighter because she could see a fine layer of flesh forming across the neatly severed bones. Bleeding had been virtually non-existent and the pain had settled into a dull ache. Good. She could ill afford to go into shock.

Avalon stood slowly and resumed her path across the field of carnage. What manner of vile creatures

inhabited this planet? Were they dawn feeders, like sharks? She recalled images from WWII concentration camps, Khmer Rouge atrocities, Bosnia, and the Rhesus pogroms. Driven by the Others, humans were capable of such things. Then she sensed it coming again and turned—to confront a medieval nightmare machine.

She swung her weapon—too late! The huge, teeth-rimmed set of jaws tossed her into the air, severing her left foot. A large, blue-furred bear-like creature flashed into view. It was straddling Jawteeth, bellowing in rage and swinging something down into the machine's face.

It was only when she hit the ground hard enough to knock the wind out of her that Avalon realized she'd been screaming. Amazingly, she still had her weapon. Where the hell had her attacker gone? Was it d-jumping? She was fast running out of limbs—and time!

"Aaaahroom ... !"

Blue-fur was coming at her. Taking aim, she shouted, "Stop right there, fucker, or you're dead!"

The creature might not have understood, but there was no mistaking her intention. It stopped and slumped down. Only then did Avalon see that one of its two arms was missing and the bloody stump on its cheek was all that remained of its left eyestalk. The right one was intact and in the growing light of dawn, shone with overwhelming grief—and intelligence.

She lowered her weapon. "You tried to stop it from getting me, didn't you?"

The being hobbled toward her, its one remaining arm outstretched, five fingers and opposing thumb open in a universal symbol of peace and greeting. Whatever it was, it had been in contact with the same space-faring beings who had taught humans the universal sign language.

Blue-fur placed a hairless palm on Avalon's forehead. "Oh my God!" she cried aloud. The story flooded her mind in grisly images. The telepathic being was a leader, not the captain but a ... king ... named Kima. They'd been on a brief excursion to unexplored space, a promise to his ... son? On the day he was named ... heir. She saw a small bundle of blue fur, the human equivalent of an eight-year-old. Their atmospheric capable Dim5 ship had arrived at the pretty planet four cycles—days—before. Then Avalon relived the same shocking power failure and descent as her own. Kima's vehicle had employed a backup system that allowed them to regain some control. They'd crashed through the surface and directly into the pit.

Before Avalon could shout a warning, Kima swung with inhuman speed to confront Jawteeth. In the split second before her plasma weapon disintegrated it, she saw that it was definitely a machine.

Kima nodded his approval and satisfaction at Jawteeth's destruction, then he continued his story. They had battled the machine creatures that took pieces of their bodies. Only two of his crew and his son remained alive, but they were fading, victims of the obscene harvest. Vivisection? An experiment in terror? Or just plain evil? Then she saw the truth, a truth she had been avoiding since waking from the crash. No one and nothing could override her life-tie to *Asegeir*, except the Masters.

Or the Others.

A gelatinous bubble of despair and terror engulfed her, for with that knowledge came the loss of all hope but one—that Chris Falcon would obey orders she had helped write almost three hundred years ago.

Avalon clasped Kima's paw and projected clear, coherent thoughts, explaining what she was, confirming his assumption that the Others had gained entry into this dimension in a physical, not metaphysical form.

Then she sensed in Kima a vestige of hope! Although his ship's drive and weapons' systems were irreparably damaged, some monitoring systems still functioned. While he'd sat vigilant over his dying son, he had found a frequency that mapped the true surface of the planet. And from *this* side of the illusory blanket, he'd found blind spots similar to Chaney Holes. If he and his companions could get an escape pod operational and carry it to the nearest blind spot, they might flee this nightmare world

Kima had known it was impossible; they were too badly wounded. Then, when he saw Avalon's torch, he knew another ship had fallen prey to the horrific entrapment. He'd thought they might work together to escape. Her connection to *Asegeir* offered a hope he had not dreamed of. The escape pod was unnecessary; they need only reach one of the blind spots.

He helped Avalon stand on her remaining leg. The pain was not receding as fast as she had hoped; her body was contending with too many injuries. But she was a C20, not a human. She could tolerate it. Kima offered to find a tourniquet. She declined. The stump was already beginning to flesh over, and, like her wrist, the cut was clean.

Avalon looked at Kima. He and his people had dealt with the pain and pervasive, nauseating terror for four days. Like the Metas, Kima's people were incapable of succumbing to the soul-devouring evil. Death from the ravaging machines was preferable to an uglier death of the mind. She swallowed her own fear and forced adrenaline and endorphins into her system. Then she thought the word images,—We'll collect the wounded and your son, and then we go together to the nearest blind spot.—

Kima's face was torn in momentary indecision.—The machines are active until sunrise. You have no foot to walk, but if I leave you...—

Neither noticed a machine d-jump directly behind Avalon. She felt herself tossed into the air, then land in a barrel of glass shards. *Pain!* Excruciating pain tore at every part of her body, until she felt something grab her and pull. Mercifully, she passed out.

When the machine scooped her into its savage blades, Kima let out a bellow of rage and slammed at the thing with his remaining fist. In response, it snatched at his foot and threw him aside. Not willing to abandon the one chance his son might yet have, Kima leaped onto its back, determined to wrest its prize away. When he succeeded, he knew that what remained could not possibly be alive, but he crouched over her and fended off the machine with bones. Suddenly, sunlight hit the machine's black surface. It vanished. Dawn had come and with it, the sure knowledge that this sunrise would be their last.

Kima turned to examine the bloodied and partially eviscerated remnants of the creature calling itself C20. His own race could sustain appalling injuries before succumbing to death. These beings appeared far more fragile and yet she still lived, still breathed ... and had sufficient strength to cry out in mortal agony. For a moment he was tempted to let the horror finally overcome him. But he could not, for he could feel his son's life-force. He was floating in and out of awareness, but he still lived.

Pulling the C20 from the machine had torn her left leg and forearm off. And this time, the wounds were shredded. He had to carry her to their ship, collect his son and the other wounded, get them to the blind spot and pray to the Beginnings that whatever strange connection she had to her ship would carry them from this gateway to the Abyss. And, having just lost part of his left foot, he had to do it before the heat of the day overcame him. It was impossible but he had no choice. While his son lived he *would* go on.

Stripping the last of Avalon's shirt from her shoulder—her remaining clothes had disappeared in the machine—Kima fashioned a crude bandage across his partially severed foot. He considered the C20's terrible injuries but given the fact that she should have been dead, decided it probably made no difference. Using the mental exercises common to his people, he redirected the blood flow and pain. Part

of a foot, a hand and an eye. Not bad, he thought then chuckled manically to himself; it was all relative. His son had lost one half of his bilateral organs. His surviving crew had each lost limbs or redundant body parts. They'd never stopped to analyze it but the harvesting was too systematic to be based on sheer chance.

Kima looked for a makeshift crutch and spied a likely bone. The heat was already distracting. He glanced up and took his bearings. Had they passed the blind spot? He hoisted the unconscious C20 across his shoulder and began to hobble through the sea of death, thankful the strong sun was behind him.

Time passed. The C20 woke. With each movement, he telepathically felt the white shafts of pain shoot from her head, down her chest and into her groin. She mind-signalled him to stop, but he couldn't, they *had* to keep moving before he succumbed to the heat. He hobbled forward, holding her close, mindful of the jagged gash in her side and the protruding viscera. Then he took another step and the world changed.

"*No!*" Avalon screamed at the upraised weapons coming towards them.

Chapter 40

November 22, 2050

"Twenty-four hours, sir!"

"Get us out of here!" Falcon's teeth ground together as the primary engines pulled them from the gas planet's orbit at maximum acceleration. He'd ordered the engines ready twenty minutes earlier. It would still take five minutes to kick them into Dim5. During the wait he all but shredded the indestructible grips on the arms of his cockpit seat. "Countdown to RB point?" he demanded.

"Eighty seconds, sir." The nav officer stared at his readout. Like everyone on the bridge he was infused with Falcon's tension. "Sixty seconds."

Someone entered the bridge. Falcon's head snapped around. It was Mixis. The telepath tried to compose her face. It was a valiant effort but she failed. "Saav?" he demanded.

"Thirty seconds."

In seconds their fears would be allayed. Or confirmed. Mixis stared at him but did not reply.

"Rubber Band Point, sir."

Falcon stood. He'd seen C20s dumped before, and the landing could be a little rough. C'mon, c'mon, c'mon! Where *was* she?

Shocked silence exploded throughout the bridge when the nav officer's voice stumbled, "RB plus ten, sir."

The horrible truth gored Falcon's soul. He swung around and pinned Mixis with his gaze. Desperation cracked his voice. "*Where is she?*"

In the darkened bridge, the telepath's face was alabaster.

"Plus thirty," the nav officer announced in a barely legible whisper.

"*Where is she!*" Falcon demanded, striding towards Mixis, terrified by her expression.

Mixis shook her head and whispered, "*I can't feel her anymore!*"

"*What?* How long?"

"Plus one minute, sir."

"Not that, dammit! Prepare for Dim5. How long, Commander?"

"I ... just got out of the amniotank a few minutes ago ... And she was gone." Mixis' wide eyes were hollow with shock.

"What do you mean, *gone*?" Falcon's eyes blazed at her.

"I can't read her, never could, but I've always felt her, for as long as I can remember. Even separated by light years. But ... she's ... *gone!*" Her face mirrored his anguish and disbelief.

By the Origins, he'd known. He'd *known* this was going to happen and he'd let her fly right into it! Falcon slammed his fist into the workstation consol, tearing the skin off his knuckles. "Dim5?"

"Fifteen seconds, sir," Walker replied.

Why in the name of the Origins did I let her go? Regret was one of the few emotions that can completely and unconditionally bring down a man. But he was still the captain. From parking orbit to complete Dim5 readiness in less than five minutes was as good as full battle readiness during the worst of the Katyl War. "My compliments, Senior Commander Walker. I want a rebound Dim5, no destination outside this system."

"Ready for rebound Dim5, sir," Walker's voice was flat, formal.

"Jump." Falcon swallowed hard. There was always the possibility of a spatial anomaly. Unusual but there were rare instances when a C20 was not pulled back to the ship until thousands of kilometres past the RB point. But the jump to Dim5 guaranteed it.

Every time.

Without fail.

For three hundred years.

On the other side of the LD, the oily blackness of Dim5 replaced the panoramic views of space and Zanos IV. Every eye in the bridge stared at the empty place where Avalon should have landed. Disbelief raged through the crew like a living beast. Every one of them knew standing orders; orders written by the C20s. If a C20 failed to return at the RB point, they were to get into Dim5. And under *no* circumstances, return.

Ever.

Adrenaline pounded through Falcon's blood, demanding he do *something*. "How long until the rebound point closes?"

"Twelve seconds, sir," replied the nav officer.

"Return to space near Zanos IV. But do not stand down the engines; I want to try that again. And report my actions to NGC." He paced the deck like an incensed lion.

Although Peta Vol spoke quietly, everyone heard her. "Sir, standing orders—"

"You heard my order to report my actions," he snapped, turning a glare on her that could have melted diaglass.

"Sir, just pointing it out, sir," Vol replied with narrowed eyes and the same flat tone as Walker.

Vol was right. But what captain would abandon his C20? No ship lost a C20. Ever.

He mentally revised that. No bonded ship had ever returned without their C20. He consciously tempered his voice before replying, "Your recommendations, Captain?"

"One more try, sir," said Vol. "Then I go down with a full attack squadron while you take this ship out to the edge of the system and plot a continuous vector to Earth in Dim5 with engines at full run-up."

His eyes bored into hers but his reply was directed at the engineer. "One more run it is, then. Senior

Commander Walker, you have control."

"Aye, sir."

Under any other circumstances Falcon would have expected some wisecrack from Walker about turning it round in less than ninety seconds. But the unthinkable had happened. The normal jocularly on the bridge had been replaced by the stiff, controlled formality necessary in the heat of battle.

Battle...

When the second run did not return Avalon, Falcon allowed himself a moment of despair. He could not risk a million sentients, even for the life of a C20. But he couldn't abandon her. Not Avalon.

"The fighter wing, sir?" Vol said.

"Any response from NGC?"

"No, sir," replied the communications officer.

"Permission denied, Captain Vol."

"*Sir—*"

"Prepare a volunteer wing only, half atmospheric capable fighters, fully armed, and half to remain orbital. I want four shuttles at opposite pole and equatorial RB points with an escort of four fighters each. Rerun those scans for orbital defence systems." He turned to Vol and added, "I need you here."

His words stilled her. Something powerful enough to hold, perhaps kill a C20, could destroy them in an instant. He needed every resource at his fingertips, not on a suicide run. Vol's fists clenched but she nodded stiffly and spoke into her comunit. With two Dim5 capable fighter units permanently on stand by they could scramble a full squadron in less than four minutes. To a man, they volunteered.

Fighter jocks, flush with youthful arrogance and hard earned pride. Despite their cockiness they were not indestructible. Falcon ordered one squadron to remain on standby. Objections were loud and colourful, but he could not risk that many ships on a first run, not until they knew the enemy's offensive strength.

"No trigger-happy stunts, Commander," Vol said to the squadron leader. "There's no reason to suspect the C20 is being held against her will until we have evidence to that effect."

Falcon shot her an approving look. They both knew she was talking bullshit but NGC had learned the hard way that first contact situations must be handled diplomatically, no matter the circumstances.

The seconds passed. His teeth ground to the jaw line. The pain of losing Hanna and Asher now compounded with a loss of the bitterest kind; for Avalon had become part of his soul. Part of him.

"Fighters are ready to launch," Vol announced.

"Sir, NGC on alternating Dim5 relay line," called the com officer.

"On LD screen," said Falcon.

"Captain, what's happening?" Admiral Woodstock demanded.

Someone had sent up the flag fast. But then it wasn't every day that somebody lost a C20. "Admiral, you have the initial report?"

"Yes. You tried a second run?"

"Just completed."

"That's against orders, son."

"Yes, sir. Feel free to court-martial me when this is over."

Ignoring the bitter sarcasm in Falcon's voice, Woodstock said, "What's your next move?"

"One volunteer squadron, half atmospheric, half orbital, four shuttles and four fighter escorts to RB points while *Asegeir* orbits Zanos IV."

"No. I'll go with you on the squadron and shuttles, but you get *Asegeir* out of there. You can't risk that many lives. Any signs of planetary or orbital defences? Any offensive behaviour?"

"Sir, I ... *Avalon!*" The cry tore from his throat when a bloodied figure appeared. Three security officers instantly drew weapons on a gory, blue furred creature clutching the shockingly mangled C20.

Gasps of horror circulated the bridge. Avalon's left leg was torn off just below the knee, a bloodied stump where her left arm should have been flopped in the air and the entire left side of her face was matted blood and bone and strings of bloodied hair. Part of her bowel and a rib protruded from a gaping wound in her side.

"*No!*" Avalon screamed. "Don't kill him!" She tried to ward off the anticipated attack with the remains of her left arm. "He saved me ... *he saved me!*"

Falcon's blood froze and his face screwed into a mask of horror. He reached them in two strides, but the blue creature turned away. Despite its own appalling injuries, it was obviously trying to protect Avalon.

"No, Kima, no, it's alright! *Oh God!*" she wailed, "I'm so sorry." Sobs wracked her body as she tried to stroke the creature with her stump.

The bridge was frantic with activity. Walker was ordering the fighter squadron to remain at ready, while Vol ordered the nav officer to calculate another Dim5 rebound, giving them a minute's breathing space.

"No! Not yet!" Avalon screamed hoarsely. She pulled back from the blue creature's grip. "Trust them, Kima, let him go and I will stop it. I will call them, *we* will call and they will come."

The blue-furred being wavered and slumped, finally releasing Avalon as it collapsed to the floor. Falcon caught her before she slipped to the deck. Trying to hold her without further hurting her, he, too, staggered. "Oh sweet Jesus," he said.

Intellectually, Falcon knew C20s were naturally regenerative, but the stench of unnamed filth and the carnage of protruding bones and viscera were too much. For the first time in eleven years, impotent grief and anger threatened to overwhelm him. A sob broke through as his hand brushed against a perfect rosebud nipple—her other breast had been torn from her chest. His hands shook and his face almost collapsed as he gently drew her close. "Who did this? *What* did this to you?"

"Chris, no!" Avalon tried to grab him, and cried out in pain as her stump hit him. Clutching at his jacket with other hand, she said, "Others ... trying to destroy your mind ... *Not Dim5!*"

Walker instructed the nav officer to jump to Dim5, but Falcon barked, "Belay that order!"

"Sir?" Walker objected.

"You heard the C20. Not until she tells us!" The Others ... Falcon determinedly pushed took control of himself; he would not let *them* get a foothold in his mind. Avalon was alive and she *would* recover.

The med trauma teams arrived. An xenobiologist and medtech went straight to the blue being that Avalon had called Kima, while Rose and a second doctor kneeled by Falcon. When they tried to take the grossly wounded C20 from his arms, she clung fiercely to Falcon and whispered, "*No!* Chris! I need you ... I need to ... call *Them* to come."

"Whom?" He carefully balanced her weight in his arms. "Whom do you want me to call?"

"Not you ... *we*." Avalon tugged at his collar and peered into his eyes. He staggered at the impact. *Something* reached into him and through him and *focused*.

Avalon consigned the pain to a far corner of her mind. It had no place here. Her body had already shunted nutrients and oxygen to vital areas, while her extraordinary metabolism began the process of repairs. But the damage was extensive. It would take time, time she did not have. It was so hard, yet she had no choice, otherwise thousands, perhaps millions, would die from the Beast she had inadvertently woken. Using Falcon as a conduit, she reached into the life-force of the ark ship—and gently pulled.

Every sentient creature aboard *Asegeir* felt the touch of power. The effect passed in an instant, as though a million light bulbs had momentarily dimmed, leaving the residents blinking and slightly dazed. The experience was painless but unnerving. Only the telepaths recognized it as someone not just dipping into the life-force, but also *using* it.

They heard.

And *They* came.

The grav stretcher with the blue-furred being passed Falcon. It reached out a six-digit paw and grasped Avalon's arm. The medtechs tried to pull it away but Falcon shook his head. He continued to shake his head when more techs tried to take Avalon from him. Falcon did not understand what was happening but he felt the raw power course through them. Then the blue being's eye met his and he again staggered at the profound intimacy of the contact. He would not, *could* not release his hold on Avalon. "Vol, you have command." He glanced at Woodstock's image.

"Go look after her, Captain," Woodstock replied in a fractured voice.

"Chris," Avalon whispered. Her eye was bright with pain as he carried her into the Command medbay. "His name is Kima. Amniotank suited to his biology. It's okay now. They're coming."

"Who?" he said, but she lapsed into consciousness.

He carried her towards the emergency amniotanks, but Rose diverted him. "No, Captain, the C20's biology can't function in our amniotanks."

"You can't just leave her like this!" He stared at Rose, appalled.

"There's nothing we can do, other than clean her up, add a fast nutrient drip and make her as comfortable as possible. Her body's already shut down the bleeding and started to block neural pathways while it repairs the damage."

Falcon gently lowered Avalon onto the medbed. She whimpered when the remains of her torn leg bumped the edge. He glared at Rose. "What about pain blocks? You must be able to do *something!*"

"Anything we do would be one more thing her body has to deal with, inhibiting her natural processes."

Even in her semi-conscious state, Avalon refused to release her grip on Falcon's sleeve. Suddenly, Kima bellowed in mortal agony. Avalon stiffened and cried out in sympathy. Falcon felt a strange sensation pass over him. It was not physical pain that ravaged her. Her face screwed up in torment and she turned to the blue-furred being. "Oh, Kima," she cried in voice that tore at Falcon's soul. "I'm so sorry. If I'd only been sooner ... I'm so very, very sorry. His body is dead; you would never have reached him in time. The fire will be clean ... purify ... his soul was untouched." Sobs punctuated her words, wracking her body, spreading her emotional agony into the physical.

"Captain, get back in here, *now!*" Vol called urgently over the AI.

"No ... must stay!" Avalon grasped at him. "Many escape ... seek weakness ... we must defend."

Falcon's face twisted; *Asegeir* came first. "Then I must be on the bridge, Avalon. I'll come back, I promise."

"*No* ... ! she screamed.

"Captain—*now!*" Vol cried.

There was no choice. Wresting his collar from Avalon's surprisingly powerful grip, he went to the bridge, Avalon's escalating screams accompanying his every step.

Kima watched in despair as the companions of the one who called herself a C20 attempted to hold her down. Despite her injuries she threw them off, then fell to the floor, her leg stump hitting in a sickening crunch. Kima also tried to battle the humans so that he might reach the shockingly injured C20, but his wounds proved too great. He looked on in awe as the strange being, the gift from the Masters, tried to both focus and to defend. How long she would maintain her hold now that the human captain had left her, Kima did not know, but her body was beginning its necessary betrayal. Soon it would shut down. Then everyone would die. Or worse.

Chapter 41

November 21, 2050

Everyone on the bridge stared intently at the enhanced image of Zanos III. More than a hundred immense ships—ships few living humans had ever seen—surrounded the planet. Scores of smaller vessels sat between them. Wormholes continued to open all around. View screen inserts of varying magnification showed massive bombardment of the planet's surface and enhanced images of the alien ships. The implications hit Falcon like a physical blow.

"Son of a ... the Masters! Walker, get us out of here! *Now!* I want Dim5 at flank speed! Security, all stations on alert. Call in all leave and have every security officer report. Shut down all work stations other than life support, systems and utilities. The rest of the civilian population is confined to quarters. A military curfew is now in effect!"

Peta Vol looked at him in growing horror. "Oh, Jesus," she whispered.

"Yeah, well he'd come in handy about now," Falcon replied. "Okay, heads up everyone. What you are witnessing is a planetary enclave of the Others, a virtual gateway to Hell. And we may have inadvertently opened the doors."

In the medbay, five people sought to restrain Avalon's, whose piercing screams grew in volume. Suddenly, a huge blue Meta stood over them. Glaring at everyone, the Meta demanded, "Where the *hell* is the Captain?"

Only Rose retained the presence of mind to answer, "The bridge."

The Meta vanished in a soundless pop—to reappear on the bridge, centimetres from Falcon. He stiffened in surprise. Despite her obvious rage, Falcon stood his ground and looked up unflinchingly into her eyes.

The Meta visibly calmed herself before speaking. "Captain, your place is not here."

"Meta—"

"If you remain here the C20 will be dead in minutes, and this ship will be turned into a charnel house soon after. Your Command crew can deal with any physical attack, although I can assure you it will be unnecessary, for this attack is coming on a different dimension, one only you and the C20 can defend against."

"What are you talking about?" Falcon's eyes narrowed.

"You are the Captain. Through your C20 you bind and focus the life-force. Even as we destroy their portal, the Others reach out, seeking the greatest concentration of sentient life, sweet, succulent, innocent life."

His eyes widened in comprehension.

"Yes, you understand ... *come now!*"

Falcon felt himself roughly jerked as he was d-jumped from the bridge.

"What the—?" Vol cried, "Locate Captain!"

"Command medbay," replied the AI.

Vol breathed out. "Can we jump to Dim5 while the Meta is aboard?"

"Unknown."

"Identify known Meta abodes." Vol turned to Mixis, "Get in there and find out what in the name of the Origins is happening."

"I already know," Mixis replied in awe.

"Well don't keep us in suspense, dammit!"

Falcon felt ill at the sight of the struggling C20. The Meta grabbed his hand and thrust it over the only place on Avalon not injured or thrashing wildly—her remaining breast. His knees buckled when a strangely familiar surge of energy passed through his body—or was it his mind—again. The Meta caught him and supported him until he recovered. She nodded in satisfaction when Avalon's struggles abated.

Mike Rose stared in dismay. "What did you do?"

"Avalon needed the conduit to stage a defence." Releasing her grip on Falcon, the Meta added, "Captain, get your ship into Dim5. You can't outrun them all but you can make it difficult for them."

After reconfirming the order to Vol, Falcon turned to the Meta and demanded, "Now tell me what in the name of the Origins is going on!" He felt *Asegeir's* transition to Dim5—and the shock that permeated the medbay; few humans had the audacity to challenge a Meta. Her eyebrows lifted in surprise. Then something far more powerful and considerably less subtle than a telepathic scan rummaged very thoroughly around his brain.

The Meta stared at him in surprise.—Grell was right, but in ways none of us could ever have guessed.—She withdrew from his mind and walking to the far side of the trauma bed, said aloud, "Your C20 is using the life-force of *Asegeir* as a defensive shield. She tried to use it to attack but that is not possible ... yet!"

Tenderly brushing the bloodied hair from Avalon's mangled face, the Meta added, "A battle rages, Captain, one I must join. There is no guarantee any of us will survive, for this is the greatest onslaught by the Others since..." A shadow briefly crossed her face. "Your C20 reaches through you to the life-force of *Asegeir*. She cannot focus, channel and defend all at once. You must stay with her until his is over. If you leave her, you sever her connection and *Asegeir* will be lost to the Others. But through you ... it's extraordinary! C20s were never meant to have such ability. Pain ... pushed her past the barriers of her humanity, to the true power of the greater Life Force."

The Meta leaned down and kissed Avalon's forehead in unashamed love and affection. "Clean her, move her to her quarters away from the noise and light. I'm not a healer, but she can't self-heal while she defends you, so I'll stabilize her."

As Falcon and the medtechs watched slack-jawed, the obscene wound in Avalon's side closed, and a thin layer of transparent skin sealed her face and the bloodied stumps of her limbs.

"Look after her, Captain, said the Meta. "Hold her, keep her sane, but know there is no guarantee she will live even if *Asegeir* is saved. I must go. If I do not return and she survives, tell her I love her and was proud to have been her daughter."

She vanished, leaving a stunned med lab team in her wake.

"Ryl," Falcon whispered, and shared a look with Rose. They were not out of this yet. And if the Meta was right, Avalon might yet die. *No!* He would *not* let that happen!

"We'll get her cleaned up." Rose motioned for two orderlies.

While the rest of the emergency medbay concentrated on placing the now unconscious being called Kima into an amniotank, Falcon called Vol. "You follow what happened in here?"

"Yes, sir, but I have to say I don't like it, not one little bit. Give me an enemy I can see."

"Run some math on the best course to Earth, appraise Governor Gordon of the situation and place an immediate level one classification on our status. Except for the Governor, no one outside the bridge crew, medops and Command level security is to be informed. By now, everyone will have seen the arrival of the Masters' ships. We do not need a panicked population. Get PR to release a statement along the lines of fact but strictly censored. Masters and Metas in control, any minor incidences of violence can be attributed to some residual influence of the Others, the C20 is monitoring the situation, that sort of thing. I'm going to be occupied—indefinitely."

"Already happening, sir."

Falcon cut the connection, satisfied his Command crew, particularly Vol, would take care of the details. She deserved her own ship, but he was sure thankful he had her. He turned his attention back to the C20.

Rose moved Avalon's legs apart, and he groaned stiffly. "Let's get her into a private cubicle." At Falcon's mute look, he added, "They ... hacked off her external genitals."

Falcon blanched but said nothing as he gripped Avalon's hand more firmly.

"Scanner shows she's missing part of her uterus, lower intestine and liver. Also one kidney, one ovary—in fact one of every paired organ or body part. One foot, hand, eye and her entire left auditory canal. By the Origins, Captain, the damage! If she weren't a C20 the shock alone should have killed her."

Medtechs systematically collected scrapings of gore and viscera from her body. At Falcon's look of uneasy distaste, Rose explained, "Before we wash her, some of this is not human. It may be from that being she calls Kima. If so, we can fine-tune the amniotank. And if it's from any other species..." Rose's voice trailed off as he examined the thin layer of skin still forming over her mangled leg stump.

Angered that his stomach was rebelling at the stench of vomit, faeces, bile duct and other nameless secretions, Falcon swallowed. How much of it was Avalon's he had no idea but he took one of the swabs in his free hand and began to clean the worst of it from what remained of her face.

"Don't worry, sir, we'll have her cleaned up in no time." A medtech offered him a brief, reassuring smile.

Over the next half hour, Falcon was torn between wanting to turn away and give the unconscious C20 some semblance of dignity, and needing to assist in making her as comfortable as possible. Finally, Mixis, who had been helping, said, "Let's get her to her quarters."

Avalon woke once, begging Falcon not to leave her. He clutched her hand tightly and assured her he would stay by her side until it was over. "One way, or another..." she trailed off ominously.

"Any idea how long this ... battle might take?" Rose asked.

Falcon shook his head. "No idea."

By the time they'd settled Avalon into her bed, Falcon was exhausted. When everyone but Mixis had left, he sat in a bedside chair, and promptly began to fall asleep. His hand slipped from Avalon's and she cried out.

"Captain!" Mixis called a warning.

Avalon's cry had already jerked him awake, and he clasped her hand again.

Mixis frowned. "You don't look well."

He shot her a dark look.

"I'm serious. Captain, Avalon is pulling the entire life-force of this ship through you, and although you may not be conscious of the effects, it's hitting you. Hard. You need to sleep and let your body and mind work as one."

He glanced down at his blood-and-gore-stained uniform, and vaguely wondered why his knuckles were also bloodied. With Mixis' help, he pulled off his jacket and boots and climbed onto the bed beside Avalon.

"Commander Rose will periodically replace her drip." Mixis draped his jacket over the chair. "I'll bring you a high protein meal in a few hours. It's important you keep up your strength—not just for her but for all of us." She pulled a strip of medical gauze from her pocket and sat on the end of the bed. "Here, I'll take off your shipsuit foot and tie your ankle to hers; any physical contact should be sufficient."

Fighting off drowsiness, he said, "Mixis, can you explain, in *any* terms, what's happening?"

She stood, came around to Avalon's side of the bed, reached down and gently stroked the C20's cheek. "Although I can't normally scan you or Avalon, I have always been able to sense her. It's hard to explain but she's like a warm presence, non-invasive but supportive, even before I was born. Waking up and feeling her gone was like ... I thought she was dead!"

Before bonding, Falcon would not have understood, but he'd felt the same sense of loss when the shuttle hit Zanos III's atmosphere. It was nothing like the times she'd gone down to Kwilloy or Katyl; it was as if a part of his soul had been ripped out.

"Five hundred years ago," Mixis continued, "most people dismissed FDP—fifth dimensional physics—as fantasy or magic, while the Masters and the Others were seen as religious phantasms, gods and devils. Although we now understand Dim5 physics, few humans truly *sense* it, because the ability is atrophied in their brains. All they get is a fuzzy image—the so-called instinct that drives us to rebuild an environmentally balanced Earth. Only adepts like me and latents like you have the necessary physical structures in our brains to comprehend it.

"Whatever Avalon is doing is in Dim6, the *sixth* dimension. I can't comprehend that except on an intellectual level. But C20s, like Metas, were artificially created by the Masters."

When he frowned, Mixis shook her head. "I'm not saying *they're* artificial but the Masters retro-evolved Metas and switched on the relevant genes. Every C20 is directly related to a living Meta. Based on what Ryl said—and her surprise—I think the C20s are also retro-evolving, except it's taking centuries."

"Avalon has always maintained that her link with the life-force and her future memories are uncontrollable." He failed to stifle a yawn. "But she's exerted enough control to call the Masters and mount a protective Dim6 shield around *Asegeir*."

"Ryl said it was triggered by pain." Mixis walked back around the bed, straightening the covers as she went. "Ancient yogis used sensory deprivation and pain to elevate their perceptions, and Zanos III is a gateway to the realm of the Others, the sixth dimension. Whatever happened to Avalon, besides the obvious, must have also have opened her mind to this dimension. However, in the same way that all Meta healer-creators are mated to communicator-translators in order to navigate and use Dim6, Avalon needs a conduit."

Falcon's eyes snapped open. "By the Origins! She's using me like a partner in a Meta pairing?"

"And who better than you, her captain? The same captain who did not bother to inform his telepath what happened soon after Avalon arrived on *Asegeir*."

He looked up sharply. "You ... knew?"

Mixis stood over him, hands on her hips. "When something that powerful takes place, of course I'm gonna feel it. Which also means," she added thoughtfully, "that *your* mind is dealing with the sixth dimension." She sighed and manually dimmed the lights. "I'm just guessing, Captain. Only Avalon or the Meta could tell you for certain, and, as Ryl said, there's no guarantee either of them will survive this onslaught."

"We were never trained for this, Commander." He closed his eyes again. "A silent war, a lone warrior in single combat."

"No." A tender smile crossed Mixis' face. "Not alone. She has you."

But Falcon was already lost into the world of the mind and inside it, the unfolding horror of the Others.

Chapter 42

November 22-23, 2050

Falcon woke screaming in terror. Beside him, Avalon's head rocked from side to side and agony etched her face. He pulled off his sweat-drenched shipsuit and lifted her into his arms, as much to take comfort as to give it. What he suffered, what Avalon still battled, were not nightmares but real horrors in a dimension barely glimpsed by him.

Avalon's hair tie had come free. He stroked the loose strands away from her face. Torn by her whimpers, he rocked her and whispered in her ear as if she were a child in pain. But this was no normal pain, and Avalon Davo was no child. She was a C20 fighting a metaphysical war that could destroy them all. Falcon clutched her tightly, oblivious to her nakedness, instinctively knowing the flesh-to-flesh contact would succour her. And wanting, needing, to sustain her with his life-force.

Her whimpers quietened, and he noticed a food tray by the bed. "AI, status report," he said tiredly.

"All systems normal."

The readout scrolled across the LD. Security alerts were posted after sporadic, unexplained violence erupted in *Asegeir's* cities. Two cases of domestic violence had left one child and one man dead.

Falcon closed his eyes. One child dead and another—Kima's son, if the images he had seen were accurate—left to die on a world of unspeakable evil. Yet it could have been worse, so much worse. He had learned long ago not to count lives lost but lives saved. Nevertheless, the pain lanced him. And no doubt that poor bastard in the amniotank would never forgive himself for leaving his son behind, for not being with the lad when he died.

Any more than he'd ever truly forgiven himself for not being able to save Asher.

How many sons must you take in your feeding frenzy? How many children must die before you're gluttoned?

Falcon shook off his growing despair. It was only feeding those that sought to destroy *Asegeir*. Instead, he checked the time and found he'd been under for almost ten hours. He called the bridge.

"Captain? How's it going?" Vol replied in relief.

"I ... I'm not sure." He looked at Avalon's distressed face. "What's the situation?"

"You checked our status?"

"Yeah, I want your take on it."

"Weird, sir, that's all I can say. Tensions are high, tempers short. I've reduced shifts to four hours. Command crew is doing okay. If it weren't such a crappy situation I'd recommend it as an operational procedure for sifting potential command material from the ranks. It'll give the psych staff a field day. Security—much the same, some broken heads and the day lockups are filling. The worst part for the crew is the frustration. They know exactly what's going on and can't do a thing to help."

"I know," he sighed. "No word from the Meta?"

"No, sir. We've checked Zanos III. It's not there anymore."

"You can't get through? Maybe it's been blockaded."

"No, sir, *it's not there*. They've destroyed the entire planet!"

"Oh..." His stomach contracted. "How long ago?"

"About six hours."

"They've closed the portal, which means a bunch of Others are unable to return even if they wanted to. Their only way back is via the sentient minds aboard *Asegeir*."

"Yes, sir. How many get through is anyone's guess. We dunno how strong they are, how strong the C20 is—"

"Vol! When was the last time you had a break?"

"Sir, I'm fine, really, just ... give me an enemy I can fight face to face."

"Every time you control your temper, every time you get frustrated and overcome it, you're fighting—and winning. Don't let them get a foothold. If we turn on ourselves, nothing the C20 does can save us. This is a battle from within. We can fight; you *are* fighting it. And we *will* win."

"I'll pass that on, sir, sweetness and light will be the order of the day. Anything we can get you?"

He smiled as an image of Peta Vol ordering everyone to be sweet and loving came to mind. "No—you're doing fine Captain; better than fine."

Avalon cried out, stiffened and then abruptly went limp. Falcon cut the connection to Vol and frantically searched for a pulse. "Avalon? Avalon!" he cried. The Meta's words gripped him—*if she survives*. "C'mon Avvy, please! You can't die, not when you've discovered what you can do!" He pulled her to him desperately. "I can't lose you Avvy!" The hot sting of tears burned his eyes. "Not now, not when I understand how much you mean to me."

She lay unmoving in his arms.

"No!" he yelled at her. "I *refuse* to let you die!" He closed his eyes, and, swallowing back a sob, willed his own life-force into her. "I'm expendable, Avvy," His voice cracked in desperation. "Take me, take everything that I am and *live*!"

Something surged through him, and he opened himself totally, baring his soul, unconditionally offering her every atom of his being so that she might live. And then his senses expanded as though a shroud had fallen from his mind. He felt the pulse of her life flow through his veins, felt her heartbeat begin again, until it matched his own and they were one.

For a time he seemed to float in a world where the deadly greyness of Dim5 became beautiful, where ephemeral things barely glimpsed in the past, shone clear and bright and real. Too soon the sensation passed and he was back in her quarters, caressing her neck, feeling for the thready pulse of her life.

Lifting her and clutching her to him, he buried his face in her hair, then pulled back and gently kissed her eyelid. New flesh covered the ghastly wounds on her face. "By the Origins but you're beautiful, no matter what they did to you. You're always hiding it behind those faded old jeans and shirts. But it doesn't work, Avvy, nothing can hide what's inside of you."

She took a few deeper gulps of air. Although her face remained pinched, her breathing fell into a regular

pattern. He pulled the blood-splattered bedding over them, rested his chin on her soft hair. "Even Walker's fallen under your spell. Never thought I'd see that crusty old bastard smile at anyone the way he smiles at you." He looked at her longingly and whispered, "You're wrong, Avalon, it's not just your connection to the life force, it's not just a captain-C20 thing, and it's not some sort of metaphysical love." He stroked her face tenderly, lovingly. "I'd lose everything if you, or anyone, ever discovered how I feel about you, so it's our secret, alright? I won't tell if you won't. But you woke something up in me, Avvy, something long dead, a place in my heart the Katyl tore out. How many captains have fallen in love with their C20s and successfully hidden it, hm? How many have fallen in love with *you*? How could they not?"

He closed his eyes and leaned back against the pillows. For a moment he forgot what it was that she fought, forgot that her death would mean the death of them all. "How could they not? That's okay, our secret, remember? But Avvy, stay with us honey, don't go and die, you'll break far too many hearts. I'm not sure if I could take that. Not again. I ... I don't want a lifetime without you in it."

On the bridge, the nav officer called. "Wormhole forming!"

"In Dim5?" Vol demanded. "Prepare systems for normal space—wait! The Meta's ship left us in Dim5, maybe..." She slammed her hand on the manual override a millisecond after it sounded intruder alert.

"Vessel appears to be a Meta habitat, in tandem with us, no effect on Dim5 systems," the nav officer added.

Vol called Falcon's comunit, "Captain?"

"Yeah, the Meta's here."

She waited for more but Falcon cut the connection. Although Vol knew he would report as soon as he could, it was frustrating as hell. Then the tension on the bridge suddenly evaporated. Was it the presence of the Meta? Or had the Others gone? She tapped her foot impatiently and called Phelan to explain the aborted intruder alert. Why should she be the only one kept in suspense?

Falcon gently released Avalon into Ryl's arms. The Meta looked deathly tired, but her expression told him that Avalon was alright. "How ... how is it ... out there?"

Ryl glanced at him then back at her mother. "Not good. We lost dozens in the onslaught. I don't know how many of the younger beings, including Kwilloys but at least fifty Rachnians, Erochs and Dwins, and twenty second and third generation Metas gave up their lives at the defensive barrier around *Asegeir*."

He clenched his teeth. Erochs, Metas and the gentle Rachnians had died defending a human outpost while he had done ... nothing!

"No." Ryl clasped his shoulder. "You gave of yourself utterly, completely. We saw your mind open to a power no human should have experienced and survived, yet you held on, never faltering, willing to die if necessary. Through you, Avalon erected a mighty defence, forcing those Others who did not escape back into our collective mind trap. But the cost ... was high."

"I don't understand. How could the Others have used an entire planet as a portal to their universe?"

"Zanos III was a powerful enclave of those who served the Others willingly. They began by building devices to attract and experiment on different beings, to discover their weaknesses. Such devices then became tools to create that upon which they fed, pain, terror and mind-shattering horror. They had only recently opened a permanent portal to the 666th universe. The life-tie between Avalon and *Asegeir* was broken because she entered the gateway to this universe, where the bonds of the life-force are severed

and anti-life rules.

"The Others intended Zanos III as a base from which to seed other planets, opening yet more direct portals to their universe, devouring this galaxy in their burning need to destroy the greater Life Force. Your discovery prevented a much larger horror from being played out sometime in the near future."

"And that's why the Masters created the C20s, isn't it?" Falcon scowled. "Not for humanity, but as early warning devices ... canaries."

A wry smile touched the Meta's lips. "You resent that, human?"

He said nothing; the Meta was also a construct of the Masters.

Ryl sighed and looked away. "We had no idea the C20s would develop such powers as demonstrated this day. Perhaps the Masters knew, but some things must awaken in their own time. You *should* be dead," she added. "Instead, with Avalon you created a synergy as strong as the weaker Meta pairs. Perhaps you consider the Masters wrong for gifting you C20s. But for all living things, for the Life Force of this universe, is it not a gift to be cherished, as you cherish this woman?"

Falcon's scowl deepened. Ryl's alien eyes danced in amusement—and approval. "Avalon's body is healing," she continued. "But her mind has been ripped, her soul torn, for the Others cut her from the life-force whilst their minions cut from her flesh. She needs to re-establish contact with *Asegeir's* life-force, with the greater Life Force of the universe, with her ... sanity. Stay with her until she wakes fully. Your connection with her is the creative manifestation of the life-force and, thus, far more powerful than mine."

Ryl gently laid her mother down "You may also return to Zanos III, to see for yourselves what remains. I'll open a wormhole for *Asegeir* and instruct Captain Vol how to navigate it. You will have six hours, then a window will open in Dim5. It will return you a week earlier than your scheduled arrival in the Solar system."

The Meta untied the gauze on their ankles and lifted Avalon into her arms. "I will wash her and change her bedding. I suggest you take five minutes—no longer—for yourself. Then I must leave to attend to those of us who have died."

On the way to his quarters, Falcon called Vol on his comunit.

"Captain?" came her breathless reply.

Stripping off the rest of his shipsuit, he said, "The Meta's coming up there to help you navigate *Asegeir* through a wormhole to Zanos III. I want this documented and measured with every instrument we have."

"Sir?"

"The battle is over, even if the war never ends." He winced in distaste at the stench coming from his naked, sweat-drenched skin; his terror. There'd be some horrific nightmares in the weeks ahead. "Tell security to stand down, withdraw the curfew, and suggest they go easy on prosecuting minor offenders." Stepping into his cleaning room, he added, "Then announce that a consortium of Masters, Metas, Dwins, Rachnians and a dozen other species have removed the Others. I'll dictate a report for NGC and public statement as soon as I can."

"The C20, how is she, sir?"

He prevaricated. "The Meta requested I stay with her a while."

When Falcon returned, Ryl was gently pulling fresh covers over Avalon, who was shaking and whimpering. As soon as he touched her, she quietened.

"I have eased her mind but am reluctant to go further than superficial levels," Ryl said.

Falcon looked at her, recalling how easily she'd scoured his mind.

Ryl smiled self-consciously. "She is my mother. It would be ... impolite. She needs *you*. Meanwhile, you should eat and sleep. I'll return when I can. Open," she called to the AI, and then she vanished in a soundless pop.

Saav walked in, her mouth thinned in annoyance. "So much for answers," she muttered and placed the tray on the bedside table. "Despite the ten hour catnap you still look like shit ... sir." She ignored his glare and added, "How is Avalon?"

"According to Ryl, she needs to re-establish her link with *Asegeir* through me." He yawned loudly.

"Drink this protein shake and call me when she comes out of it."

He took the drink and downed it. Then he loosely tied their ankles together again and immediately fell asleep beside her.

* * * *

"Bugger!"

Falcon sat bolt upright, and looked down to see Avalon splayed out on the dark green floor. By the time he reached her, he was laughing.

She shot him a dirty look. "Well—I forgot! You find that funny?"

His lips continued to twitch as he helped her to the bed. "I'm just very, very happy to see you ... well, better than before Are you in any pain?"

"No. I forgot I'm missing a foot—amongst other things. It wouldn't be so bad if I had two hands to balance."

The AI told them that Mixis Saav, with a trolley of food, was waiting permission to enter.

"Well, let her in before I turn cannibal!" Avalon cried. Her stomach rumbled loudly. He stared at her when she shouted in delight, "My saviour!"

"Sir," Mixis pushed the trolley to the bed. "Captain Vol has requested that, if you are feeling up to it, you might report to the bridge." She met his eyes and added, "Peta's refused to leave the bridge since this began. Now she's being harassed by dozens of very demanding people, including Admiral Woodstock, Governor Gordon, and a whole gaggle of physicists screaming for an explanation regarding our little ride through Dim6."

Falcon turned to Avalon. He wanted, need to talk to her, to establish that she really was alright, but she smiled reassuringly. "Go on, Captain, you've got a ship to run. I'm fine, really."

He hesitated a moment longer, then turned and left.

Chapter 43

December 04, 2500

When Mixis walked into Falcon's office, he looked up, and his face split into quirky grin. Mixis mentally shook herself. The man was distractingly handsome, especially when he smiled.

"So, Commander." Falcon stood from his desk and came across to the conference table. "How are those immigration profiles going?" Scarty had just finished setting the table for their meals.

"Should be done as we hit Spacedock. Thanks Scarty." Mixis sat down. She enjoyed dining with Falcon not only because it made for an informal atmosphere, but also because she enjoyed his company. She had developed an unending respect for him as a superior officer and captain, and she cared deeply for him as a friend.

Falcon poured them water from the carafe. "Peta tells me we have only three hundred requested transfers and about the same number of contract non-renewals. That's only three percent. Ten percent is the norm for both NGC personnel and contract renewals."

"Few NGC personnel request transfers off a C20 ship unless they're not expecting to advance through the ranks."

"True, but the next leg out is ten years, and all the contract workers opting to renew are guaranteed work on *Jord* or *Freyr*."

"*Asegeir* is more like a country, Chris. She has none of the physical or psychological constraints of other ships. It's a plum assignment and the usual reasons for transferring within NGC don't apply. Even conflicting interpersonal relationships can be dealt with by reassigning people to different areas."

While they talked, Mixis touched the vidisc in her pocket, and thought about the strange visit she'd had before coming there. Avalon had promised to explain what had happened at Zanos III—after her body had restored itself. It didn't take a psychologist to know that it wasn't only Avalon's body that needed time to heal. Mixis had assumed Ryl's daily visits were a form of mutual therapy. Now she knew it was more than that. Their C20 was evolving into something that might one day become as powerful as a Meta.

And Chris Falcon, where did he fit into it? Mixis depended on her telepathic senses so much that her inability to read Falcon sometimes left her feeling blind. Still, she had seen into him once, enough to know that he was exceptional. Avalon and Ryl had both said that without him, *Asegeir* would not have survived Zanos III.

She touched the vidisc again. So many possibilities, either wonderful or tragic.

"Can I ask you a personal question, Mixis?"

"Of course."

"How would you have dealt with your own status if you'd remained involved with John Laycock?"

Was this a round-about approach to his own emotional quandary? "It's a rhetorical question, Chris, one I have no answer to."

"You never considered that you might still have been together when *Asegeir* was launched?"

"As you know, C20s have close ties to particular telepath families. NGC wouldn't have dared attempt to transfer me. They know my priorities will always be *Asegeir* and *Avalon*, regardless of my personal relationships. Secondly, John and I were together between assignments long before he was assigned to the Ark Ship project. While regulations forbid crew from maintaining sexual relationships between anyone within their specific chain of command, NGC has always bent regulations around corners to accommodate C20 captains. And thirdly, I'm a telepath. Although John's appointment made him my direct superior officer, telepaths are a little like C20s in that we're outside the normal command structure. Now, NGC," she added with a cheeky look, "had only two choices. Assign John to *Asegeir*, knowing of our pre-existing relationship, or assign you."

"Hooo boy." He put down his fork, sat back and grinned. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that you know the C20's true role in assigning captains—or in NGC's restricted choices."

"When John and I separated, we still cared about each other, but there was no spark. I don't know there ever was—we just *liked* each other a great deal. We had a lot of fun and we managed a viable child between us."

Falcon's avoidance of relationships since his wife's death superficially indicated an emotionally broken man who'd channelled his passions into his career. Mixis knew otherwise. "Chris, even though I can't normally scan you, I'm still your psychologist. You fell deeply in love at an early age and married. The relationship survived long periods apart because it had solid foundations and the promise of a future stationed together somewhere down the career track. After your wife's death you needed to heal, and by the time you were emotionally ready for another relationship you were appointed to *Jord*. The demands on you made it impossible to develop, much less nurture a relationship similar to the one you had with Hanna, so, sensibly, you didn't try."

Despite her analysis, Mixis knew he wasn't dead from the waist down. Hoping to lead him, she added, "John and I separated in good part *because* of his appointment as a C20 captain."

Falcon looked at her oddly. "But *Avalon* was his C20!"

"Exactly. It was too ... incestuous."

She also knew that Falcon had been blindsided by the intense and uniquely intimate nature of the C20 relationship. Thanks to her visitor, she was now certain that what existed between him and *Avalon* was unprecedented. Surreptitiously fingering the vidisc in her pocket, she said, "How do you think Hanna would have dealt with your current posting?"

"I doubt she could have."

Pleased by his insight, it confirmed Mixis' belief that Falcon was exceptionally well grounded, even for a C20 captain. "More to the point, could you?"

"I had no idea..." He shook his head and his words trailed off. "It's been a hell of a year, Mixis."

"There's nothing wrong with being dedicated, Chris, so long as it doesn't turn obsessive. Oh, you're no fool," she added quickly. "You delegate authority and trust your commanders to do their jobs, as you should, because you have every right to expect the excellent support system the command structure was designed to provide. You get more than the minimal required physical exercise, although your diet could improve. And no, I'm not blaming Scarty because I know you'd sooner skip a meal and down a protein shake than skip an hour beating a piece of horsehide to death with the little leaguers."

"It's good PR." He shrugged and grinned.

"You love it." She smiled, but it faded when she added, "You coached Ash's team, didn't you?"

His face softened at the memory. "I promised I'd coach every season, as long as we were stationed together somewhere he could play ball. Then the Katyl War broke out and there were no more ballgames. We talked the night before the Katyl came to Earth, through a Chaney hole. I promise him that, when I came home, I'd coach his grade. I never did go home, never found a reason too." He smiled sadly and, looking around, added, "This is home now, and I figured it was time I made good on that promise."

While his mind was impenetrable, his face was clear of grief. He'd never really get over the loss of his son; could any parent? But he had integrated into his personality and dealt with it in a healthy manner. Still, the gap in his heart would be better filled if he had other children.

"So, Dr. Saav, you want me to settle down with some nice, C20-compatible woman? Avalon suggested the same thing."

Mixis stopped eating. Had Avalon suggested it before, or after Zanos III?

Misunderstanding her reaction, he said, "C'mon, Commander, I don't have to be a telepath to know where this conversation is heading. Face it, you're *a priori* relationship with John Laycock and friendship with Avalon notwithstanding, how many captains get married after their appointment to a C20 ship? I checked. None. Not one in three hundred years. Except for sex, any relationship I have with another woman would be superfluous."

Mixis stared at the food on her plate, her appetite, gone. Just before the meeting, Ryl had d-jumped into Mixis' quarters and suggested that she give Falcon her grandmother's vidisc. Before Mixis had time to recover from her surprise, the Meta had added, "Some things must awaken in their own time. But sometimes they need a little help getting out of bed or, in this case..." Ryl's eyes had shone in amusement, and then she'd vanished.

If Ryl was wrong, letting Falcon see the vidisc changed nothing. If she was right—and Mixis was certain that she was—it might change everything. Either way, he needed to confront himself. "Avalon is leaving in a two days." She pushed the plate aside. "*Asegeir* will be in Spacedock for the next year. It will be the quietest year you've known since you were dating Hanna. Use it, Chris, to establish *something*."

He met her look. She had the distinct feeling he was thinking, *you show me yours and I'll show you mine*. Frowning, he said forcefully, "I know damned well, Commander, that *you* know I have not forgone sex."

"If you had then I would have genuine reason for concern. But three times in twelve months? I know it's been a busy year but you're still a healthy adult male in the prime of life." He had been discreet. The women involved had seen him as an inventive and considerate lover, and while enjoyable, nothing more than a passing interlude in their busy, dedicated lives.

"A little more than that." He continued to frown.

"I suspected Selena as well, but she was gone before I could scan her, and you just confirmed that Captain Williams was more than a cab driver."

Falcon feigned annoyance. "Next time I'll make certain they're less prominent."

"In which case more than one telepath will know the details of your sex life—via the women. I'm sure that

doesn't bother you because you know that passive monitoring is necessary for your protection, but that's beside the point." She tapped the back of his hand with her finger. He looked down, and she indicated he should open his palm. Dropping the vidisc into it, she added, "There are certain things that NGC, who can never know the intimacy of a C20 relationship, should not be privy to. Things that should never leave the sanctity of a captain and C20—and their friendly neighbourhood telepath. Things you've said and not said. And things like what's on that vidisc. I'd like it returned, when you've finished. Avalon is unaware it exists, by the way, although Ryl knows. The recording was accidental, and there are no copies. And I trust there never will be."

Mixis stood and walked to the door. "One day you may feel it appropriate to tell Avalon. I trust you'll to know when and if the time is right."

Without another word she left.

Falcon stared at the vidisc. Mixis had been sizing up the risk of showing him. Saav was good at her job. Damned good. Like her reaction to his brief liaisons with a couple of the civilian science staff; if she hadn't known about them, he would have been concerned that she was slipping. Superior officer or no, his relationship with her was, in its own way, as unique as his and Avalon's. Which was why, contrary to her opinion, Mixis would have adjusted to the odd, three-way relationship with Avalon and Laycock.

Or perhaps not. Perhaps the mental and emotional bonds would have been, as she said, too incestuous. The point was moot now. He would not betray her trust, no matter what the vidisc revealed. Pocketing it, he went to his quarters. Maybe he'd find answers to the questions gnawing at his soul.

Chapter 44

December 5, 2500

Avalon sat alone in the ark ship's darkened atrium, staring at the sunlit rings of Saturn. Ryl had saved them a week off the journey, so Falcon had complied with the Governor's request for a cruise around the Solar system on the way back to Spacedock.

Who would have thought so much could change in a mere twelve months? It had taken her years to adjust to her displacement in time, decades to adjust to her role as a C20 and more than a century to accept that her life tie to the ships was not a bond but a conduit to the greater Life Force.

In the days following Zanos III, she and Ryl had talked of many things, as friends, as women, and as combatants in a war that had raged since the beginning of time. Now that her mind had the tools to comprehend, Ryl had filled in the details of the Others' attack on Gaia, centuries earlier, when humans were still undergoing their metamorphosis.

Tens of thousand of beings, including many Masters, had died that day. Ryl had spoken of the hours that followed, and the power that momentarily had encompassed them all when a single Meta amongst them had gathered their minds and bound them together as one. The Masters had been surprised, she said. Zanos III was yet another surprise.

She and Ryl had also talked of the erstwhile untapped abilities of the C20s, and the implications of her mental bonding with Chris Falcon.—Let the fear go,—Ryl had said.—Your life-forces are joined, your auras almost one. All that separates you is the ultimate manifestation of that love, a celebration of the life-force itself in the very act of joining and creation.—

Suddenly sensing his presence in the atrium, Avalon smiled. But then she hesitated. If they were wrong, the consequences would be appalling and, all things considered, unforgivable. "Hello, Chris," she called softly.

"C20," Falcon replied.

"Happy anniversary, Captain, and congratulations." She stood but remained in the shadows, sharply aware of his formal greeting.

"Congratulations must be mutual. Thank *you*, C20, for your considerable, behind-the-scenes work to make this goodwill cruise so successful. How are you?"

Ah, the perfectly correct captain to his C20. Her disappointment weighed heavily. Was his diplomacy a deliberate placement of professional barriers? A rebuilding of walls she had thought broken? The way he'd held her, whispered words of love to her when they'd battled the Others ... Was she so badly mistaken? Recalling the China doll delicacy of Selena Chaney, she felt a sudden stab of dejection. "I am ... well, but a little saddened, for though a year has passed, you call me not by my name, but by that which defines me."

Falcon's step faltered. Avalon had warned him, gently, at Malicanoor, that his feelings for her could not be mistaken for anything other than the unique bond they shared. But confronted with the possibility of losing her, he could no longer deny the truth. All he could do was avoid it. "C20," he said, "I should have come to see you—"

Her hand reached out from the darkness in acknowledgment. "I know. You are the Captain." Her words

echoed with understanding.

And that was the problem, wasn't it? It was not a socially polite response, for Avalon demanded nothing, always giving then stepping silently away. All she had ever asked of him was to be treated as a friend and equal and to be called by her name.

"Given the number of ... ah ... *demands* to explain my role at Zanos III," she added, "I'm the one who should be apologizing. My refusal to answer has placed a greater burden on you."

"I can't explain what I don't understand."

She moved into the light.

"Wha—?" he gasped, and reached out to cup newly grown ear. "I would never have believed it!" Her face was whole, not even a scar remaining to give evidence of the appalling damage.

"This too." She brought her hand over his.

Sensitive to her touch, and the tangible heightening of his senses, he examined each of her fingers. "It's only been a few weeks, how...?"

"Don't ask me, but it sure beats an amniotank for twelve months."

Still holding her hand, he stepped back to stare at her. The life-force flowed through her, easily, freely, reaching into him and nourishing him—and making him whole once more. He sucked in his breath. How could this *addiction* be wrong? The answer was self-evident. He was unable to distinguish between the power of the life-force through his C20 and his desire for Avalon as a woman. His heart had crossed a fatal line.

"My internal organs are functioning, and my left breast has re-grown." She grinned coyly. "Like to see?"

Realizing he was staring at her bra-less chest he smiled sheepishly and slowly released her hand—and instantly missed the contact.

"Thank you," she said.

She was thanking *him*? "For what?"

"Staying with me until I re-established my ties with *Asegeir*."

"You ... knew?"

"What we did, Captain ... Chris. What we achieved together surprised even the Masters." She paused then asked, "Were you looking for me?"

He had been drawn to the atrium. Now he knew why. He looked beyond her to Saturn, searching vainly for the right words. "I was just taking a break."

"You came to be alone." She nodded and moved to leave.

Falcon caught her arm and pulled her to him. "Please don't leave, Avvy. You should know by now that your company is far more desirable than solitude." His heart had spoken before he could stop it. Had he gone too far? He searched her face. The question that had plagued him for weeks now leaped to the forefront of his mind. How much had she heard?

"Such a beautiful place." She turned in his arms to stare at the planet beyond. "Yet so few come here. Like most humans I was once uncomfortable in the face of such vastness. And those who take pleasure in it, like the bridge crews, have little need when their view is almost as good."

"Your view from the bridge is almost as good."

"You've been so buried in paperwork, you didn't notice when I was there."

He'd known when she was there, alright. "Been using that private alcove of yours?"

"Rank, or in my case, position hath its privileges, but you should know your company is preferable to solitude."

His words returned—yet they could not possibly hold the same meaning. Better to tread on safer ground. "Commander Rose ordered everyone not to disturb you, except in an emergency, in which case you would have known about it before we did."

Avalon chortled. "I'm not sure who he was trying to protect. I'm poor company when I'm regenerating. I suffer bad judgement, I'm argumentative, fractious, downright unpleasant. So I worked on something ideally suited to my frame of mind. It required only persistence and concentration and was the perfect project to vent tantrums."

"Tantrums, C20?" He looked sceptical.

"I try to aim them at stubborn problems." She smiled up at him. "It's a ... present to you, of sorts. I hope you'll like it."

If it were any other woman, this would be flirting. But the ground rules with C20s were different.

Weren't they.

His forbidden emotions blurred the lines. "C20, you should take time for yourself—"

She stopped him with a hand to his arm. "I've just had eleven years to myself. What about you? When do you take personal time—a few days on Katylgar and Kwilloy, and a diplomatic month on Malicanoor? You didn't even set foot on Dwi."

He tried a dismissive gesture but she would have none of it, so he shrugged resignedly.

"Then take time from paper shuffling and have dinner with me at *Eric's* tonight. My treat."

"Tonight? We'll be in Spacedock tomorrow and I'm up to my—"

"Does the Captain decline a formal invitation from the C20?"

Adrift on a sea of conflicting desires, his only refuge lay in the truth. "You use protocol unfairly, C20, considering your avoidance of formal functions."

"Of course! I have my reputation as a recluse to uphold. Ah, Chris, it's not the formality I avoid. Now if you had ever asked me to accompany you—"

"You would have found some pressing reason to be covered in a dirty T-shirt, buried in the heart of the drive system, or climbing some rock face in the middle of the desert habitats."

Turning away from him, Avalon stared at the swirling gasses of the gas giant. The soft light could not hide

the look of dejection on her beautiful face.

Was it asking so much to call her by her name, to have one dinner with her? His illicit feelings were no excuse for ungracious behaviour. "Avalon, I'd love to have dinner with you tonight."

"Don't feel guilty about taking a few hours off." She offered him a simple, guileless smile. "My small gift will save you many times that and accrue thousands of Brownie points with NGC."

She gave so much, but she was his C20. What more was there to say? Breathing in her familiar scent, he ruthlessly consigned his feelings to a small, distant part of his heart. "Then may I inquire what it is?"

"Mm ... not telling until after dinner. And about those formal functions? Never presume, Captain. I would have remained with you in the enclave at Malicanoor if you'd only asked."

Her invitation was clear, but he was determined to read it only in the correct C20 context. Until he found a partner, a wife, she would be willing to take on the role of hostess. As for dinner, he needed to discuss a dozen things with her before she left the ark ship.

"And," Avalon added, "I promise, tomorrow morning I'm all yours, but tonight, no business. Tonight we leave operations up here and enjoy a pleasant dinner in a nice restaurant, like two regular beings."

Glaring at her through lowered eyelids, he said, "You'll never convince me you're *just* a wildcat telepath. If you wear a dress I'll take you dancing afterwards."

Her eyes lit. "I'd like that."

Chapter 45

December 5, 2500

"AI, Commander Rose, please." The door to Falcon's quarters closed behind him.

"Captain? What's up?" Rose replied.

"Some background on C20 faculties when they're unconscious." Falcon went to his cleaning room, stripping off his shipsuit as he went.

"Hadn't we decided to shelve that until her report?"

"Yeah, it's ... I've just seen her and you're not going to believe it but she's completely healed!" He tossed the shipsuit into the valet. The LD abruptly turned oily grey. *Asegeir* was making the short Dim5 jump from Saturn to Jupiter.

"Oh, I believe you. Casey Camicci's been monitoring her. Her food intake has slowed and her metabolic functions are dropping to normal—if anything about C20s can be considered normal. You say she *looks* healed? I haven't seen her since Tuesday, and then her eye was still growing."

"Mike, I had to re-hinge my jaw. I'm about to have dinner with her in the Hub."

"Don't mistake looking fine for being fine, Chris. The physical damage was bad enough, but the horrendous psychological trauma..."

Falcon frowned; he was never likely to forget. "Brief me on what we *do* know."

"Everything currently on file can be tossed. You were there when she hit the deck. C20s' self-repairing faculties normally cut in immediately. Now that didn't happen—"

"I don't mean that. How aware are they when they're in that ... state?"

"Why, make a libertine remark?" Rose guffawed. "Avalon's been around long enough to—"

"Commander."

"Seriously, Captain, I meant it. It's a whole new ballgame. In their self-healing states they're fully cognizant. But Avalon was not self-healing, she was ... Look, why don't you ask her?"

The swirling clouds of Jupiter suddenly appeared in the LD. Falcon stepped into the shower and closed his eyes. "Yeah. Good idea." Great idea, Mike, just ask her what she heard. When had emotions become words? How much had the Meta discerned—and later told her mother? If Avalon had been offended or disturbed, she would not be inviting him to dinner. Then again, that would be her way. A meal provided an informal atmosphere in which to remind him that her feelings for him were like her feelings for the ship, deep, binding, intimate—but not *intimate*.

He spent too long showering and even longer drying himself. Finally, he jammed the towel into the valet and went into his bedroom. Pulling on his formal mess pants, he wondered how in hell he'd let himself feel this way. Then there was the vid Mixis had given him. Despite her explanation, was it something the Saav family showed every C20 captain with whom they were stationed? A coincidence—or warning?

The AI announced the C20 at his door. He considered asking Avalon to wait but he wouldn't have kept

Vol or Saav standing at his door, and it wasn't the first time Avalon had seen him sans shirt—or anything else. “Open...” He stopped dead in the doorway.

"Do you mind?" Avalon looked uncertain.

Falcon almost dropped his shirt as he stood gaping like a besotted teenager. She wore the same stunning dress she'd worn that first evening aboard *Asegeir*. “The Origins help me, but you're beautiful!”

"You promised to take me dancing, and this is the only dress I own."

His thoughts, normally so clear, so readily able to cut through the most complex, multi-layered problems, were muddled. He pulled his dress shirt over his head. Avalon was no tease. She took pains to hide her natural beauty. But he'd whispered to her that nothing could hide her beauty. Wearing that gown, surely she knew the impact she must have? Yet it was entirely possible that it *was* the only dress she owned. He had never seen her in anything other than gym suits and shipsuits, jeans and Katyl leathers.

He could get through this; it was only dinner after all.

Eric Barni's eyes shone. “Avvy! And you brought your ridiculously handsome Captain. About time!”

"Eric, I cannot thank you enough for those wonderful treats you sent me,” she replied.

The flamboyant owner of *Eric's* took them both by the elbow. “Wearing my favourite dress is thanks enough, although I'm very jealous,” he tittered, glancing at Falcon. “But don't tell Craig! Now my dear, how are you, really?” His voice dropped to a confidential whisper. “We heard the most horrific tales.”

"We're pretty tough, we C20s.” Avalon touched his arm solicitously.

When Falcon's brow furrowed, she said to him, “It's okay, no security regs have been broken; Eric is an old friend.”

"I shall inform Craig that you are here.” Eric led them to a secluded table that looked out over *Asegeir's* main rainforest habitat. “Will you let us take care of you? Or does the Captain wish a menu?” He held their chairs, then placed crisp, white napkins on their laps.

Falcon had only eaten at *Eric's* a few times, each occasion memorable. He was wearing his mess uniform because the rules were simple. Eric served his customers according to the elegance of their dress. Menus were not normally available. When he hesitated, Eric added, “For the most beautiful woman aboard *Asegeir*, a menu for her companion is acceptable. Especially when said companion is even more beautiful than the woman.”

Avalon failed to suppress a grin. “Captain, a word of advice. Let Eric choose, he's never wrong.”

Numbly nodding acquiescence, Falcon realised that he knew nothing, absolutely nothing about the stunning woman who sat opposite him.

"Why so surprised, Captain? Are you still falling for those C20 myths?” Avalon's eyes twinkled.

"Which myths might those be, C20?”

"Captain ... Chris, can't we dispense with titles? I had hoped we'd become closer than that.”

Closer in all ways but one. His eyes dropped to her cleavage, and just as rapidly he looked away. Sex had been the last thing on his mind while he'd slept with her, wounded and naked in his arms. But here she sat, fully clothed in a public place; a hell of a time for his body to remind him she was infinitely

desirable. "I'm sorry, Avalon, I tend to revert to formalities when I'm preoccupied."

"What is it that preoccupies you? Besides Spacedock tomorrow, C20 myths and that little defensive exercise we pulled off a few weeks back?"

He chuckled. "That about covers it."

Eric arrived with an enormous seafood platter. Falcon stared in amazement. Such delicacies would have put a significant dent in even his healthy credit.

"I warned you I'm not civilized when I'm regenerating." Avalon looked embarrassed. "I need enormous quantities of high protein food to replace the lost mass. The more I eat, the faster I regenerate and Eric sent up a platter of Craig's specialties every few hours."

He really *didn't* know anything about her. "Why didn't you tell me? I could—"

"You have enough concerns, Chris. I was never hungry."

"This is something I should have known!" he whispered when Eric left.

"I am not your responsibility, so I wish you'd stop blaming yourself for what happened at Zanos III!"

"Everything on this ship is my responsibility." His eyes darkened. "What exactly did happen, Avalon?"

"I'll tell you, everything that I know and understand—and conjecture. But not tonight, deal?"

"Deal—except, one last thing: how often have you been injured like that?"

She stopped eating and stared at him.

Even her public records were dauntingly thick and he had certainly studied C20 history at the Academy, just not the specifics of *her* history. It was evident that the gaps in his knowledge were unprofessional, at best.

"I've been living on prioritization since coming aboard," he said apologetically. "Your files *should* have been the first thing I examined, but as the months passed—"

"I'm gratified you found it unnecessary, for it tells me that I'm doing my job. To answer your question, the injuries are worse than I've ever suffered at any one time. But more than that, it was the Others. What they did defies comprehension." Avalon closed her eyes. "It tears me up that I didn't arrive sooner. I might have been able to save Kima's son."

Falcon swore to himself that next time ... Next time. He could not protect her; she existed to protect *them*. If he had stopped her from going to Zanos III the entire population of *Asegeir* would now be dead or in some grotesque chamber of horrors beyond comprehension. A gateway to Hell would have been unleashed in this sector of space, and who knew how many other beings would have died?

"We had a deal, no shop talk!" She frowned.

Eric arrived with another platter of exotic fare. He winked at Avalon and his eyes slid suggestively to Falcon. Avalon smiled sweetly. Eric left with a smug look.

Falcon looked on, bemused. "You have definitely won a heart."

"Oh no!" she chuckled. "You misunderstand. That was Eric's way of establishing *your* availability. Don't

be surprised if Scarty starts serving you exotic pastries, and hand-made chocolates appear in your food-processing unit."

"You didn't..."

She pulled her lower lip into her mouth. "Craig tells me Eric is a wonderful lover."

"Avalon!"

"Oh, don't worry, your nine months on Earth will be time enough for him to go moon-eyed over someone else."

"I'm not going to Earth."

"Yes, you are. The head-shrinkers will not allow you to stay. A week, maybe two, for debriefing on Spacedock, and then they'll shunt you planet-side."

"It's not necessary," he replied dismissively. "*Asegeir* is my home now."

"If you try and wangle your way out of it, *I'll* insist."

"You wouldn't."

"Captain," her tone turned serious, "I have never exercised my ultimate authority over you and I pray I never will—you know my feelings about that. But I'd bet credits that Mixis told you the same thing. No, Mixis would never break a professional confidentiality and tell me. But the welfare of *Asegeir* is my concern as much as yours—more so and on a deeper level. To command this great ark ship you need a different perspective, one you have avoided for more than a decade."

The sudden return of her formality surprised Falcon. He was under no illusion that she would exercise her power—every one of them was answerable to some greater authority—but Avalon was generally subtler. Was she deliberately goading him? Why?

"You are still a child of Earth; as am I," she added. "And you need to re-establish your connection with the life-force of the planet. I mean it, Chris. I'm not throwing you some psychobabble sop. I felt it in you, faded and weak. I refuse to be drawn on it tonight but what we achieved at Zanos III ... in all of it there was only one weak link: your tie to Earth's life-force. What we did may never be repeated—although I have other applications in mind, things I need to discuss with Ryl, and you. But I need you to return to Earth to recapture what you're losing because without it, you're flawed."

It had crossed his mind during the past weeks that if he could not resolve his feelings for her, he should resign as *Asegeir's* captain. But it was a fleeting, cowardly temptation, for she now confirmed what he had suspected. Somewhere in the depths of his psyche was a tool they could use to fight the Others.

Falcon had never allowed his emotions to override logic. Like any tactical problem, he attacked it with the tools of his profession, and the first rule of engagement was *Know Thy Enemy*. Trouble is, it was his heart, not Avalon, who was the enemy. Would he have fallen in love with any C20? Was this a fatal flaw in him as a C20 captain?

"What's wrong, Chris? Really? I need to understand."

"When you lose a family you try and make up for it in other ways. This," he motioned around him, "is my family now. And my duty to *Asegeir* comes first, second, and last."

"And taking personal time upsets your sense of duty. There's nothing you can do on *Asegeir* that your Command crew and staff couldn't attend to. You'll have ten years to catch up with un-filed memos and consumption reports. Chris, you're still fighting yourself, still seeing your needs as weaknesses when in fact your *unwillingness* to strengthen your bond to the life-force is what weakens you. And you know it."

Suddenly, he relented. If he returned to Earth he could clear his head—and perhaps his heart—and prepare himself for the next leg of *Asegeir's* journey. "You're right, on all counts. Since we've arrived in the Solar system I've felt a growing need to return to Earth, to see endless mountains and wide open skies and swim in an ocean that stretches forever, not just to the other side of *Asegeir*. I'd like to ride a camel across a desert and canoe down the Amazon."

Nodded her approval, she said, "Earth calls to you as she does to me. If it makes you feel any better, I went through the same emotional turmoil soon after Dak died. Despite the powerful life-force ties, I resented being hauled off-planet at the beck and call of a *ship*. Consider it, Chris. While I don't think you'd ever willingly leave *Asegeir* for good, the fact is you *can*. I do not have that option." She sipped her wine then added, "Don't get me wrong, any resentment I once felt has long vanished. I truly have the best of all worlds. But it took me a long time to learn to compartmentalize my life and enjoy each phase to the utmost. Zanos III has opened up a whole new world of possibilities. Nevertheless, I am not a metaphysical being. And I remain a child of Earth."

"My children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren are on Stradbroke Island already, repairing the mess Matheson made of our home. While *Asegeir* is in Spacedock there is no need for me to be onboard. Ryl will d-jump me to Earth tomorrow, and although I'll be available for consultation, I won't return until the RB point on departure a year hence. Ryl will allow NGC to debrief you until December twenty-third, then she'll d-jump you to our Christmas village. After that, my immediate family and a few friends, including the Rachnians Grell and Brin, are coming over to the Island to celebrate the new century. Come the New Year, Ryl will take you to whatever desert or mountain top you like."

The last time they had shared a meal, on Malicanoor, Avalon had talked of history. Once again her words reminded him of the yawning chasm that separated their worlds. Centuries, millennia, would pass, and there would still be Christmases with her almost immortal family. She might look human, she might be alluring beyond words but, she was a C20 and he just a captain on an ark ship that would know many such captains. He was a passing friend, a momentary companion in her long, incredibly rich life.

Avalon knew there could be no more playing this adolescent game. She had to tell him the truth, the reason why the C20's outlawed sexual intimacy with anyone above the rank of lieutenant commander. They could not go on like this, not for ten years. And if Ryl was right, she was as guilty as Falcon of fighting something that might strengthen their bond to the larger Life Force. She was, in effect, denying humankind, indeed, perhaps all beings within the Life Force, a formidable weapon.

When he'd pulled her to him in the atrium that afternoon, there could have been no mistaking either his look of raw hunger or the intensity of the life-force flowing between them. But as she looked at him now she could see that he was hearing all the wrong things.

She was not human yet she suffered human doubts. Perhaps he was not so wrong after all. The gulf of centuries that lay between them suddenly felt like the largest albatross of all.

"Avalon?" His eyes were dark and troubled. "What is it?" he whispered.

She smiled forlornly. "You promised to take me dancing."

Falcon had seen the same expression on her face once before—when Williams and he were leaving

Kwilloy in the shuttle. Avalon had been lying in the dune, lost and alone. He stood and came around to her chair, then took her arm and led her to the floor. He noticed Eric speak to the conductor. The music changed from a light, upbeat tempo to a waltz.

At first he held her at a socially acceptable distance, but he had not considered her grace, the ease with which she followed his lead, or how good it felt to hold her. Each step brought her closer until they moved as one, as in his dream rides on the seachon. The wine had relaxed him more than he'd thought. Her closeness and her scent, the curve of her waist and hips, the texture of her soft skin under his hands and his desire for her conspired to catch him off guard. He released his hold on her and turned his hips aside, hoping that if she noticed, she would not be offended.

"Thank you," she said. "I think we both needed this."

"Then why don't we do it more often?" he heard himself say. She looked up. He bent closer, drawn to her parted lips like a moth to—he stopped and consciously moved back.

"I'd like that," she said. "I've yet to show you my surprise."

For all the occasion he'd spent in her quarters, even the nights spent in her bed, the circumstances were very different. If Avalon were anything other than a C20 there could be only one outcome to the evening. He pushed the fancy aside, as he had countless times since ... since when? Before Kwilloy, before the night spent in the dunes. And every night since.

It was warm in her quarters. Avalon kept the temperature similar to the ark ship's natural habitat. He took off his uniform jacket and laid it over the Katyl cushions scattered across her couch. She hadn't asked the AI for lights, there was no need. Through the clear LD he could see Io, Ganymede, Callisto and a half dozen smaller moons strung around Jupiter. The swirling gasses and irrepressible red storm cell lit the room with a soft, ethereal glow.

Avalon sat in front of her datapad and turned it on. "I haven't uploaded it to the AI." She stretched and rotated her shoulder blades to loosen her muscles.

"Why don't you get yourself a better chair?" He gently placed a hand on her neck and tentatively stroked the corded muscles.

"Because I would miss the pleasure of this." She closed her eyes and hummed her enjoyment. "My self-healing has been working overtime elsewhere."

He increased the pressure, working the bunched muscles, bringing his other hand into play, delighting in the chance to touch her, stroke her. Leaning close to her ear, his voice pitched low, he said, "Well then C20, a small repayment for your marathon efforts."

She reached behind her head and gathered her hair up. His hands slid over hers and he felt a shock of pleasure through his fingertips.

"You were right about written Malicanoor." She seemed oblivious to the effect she was having on him. "While the commonly accepted translation makes sense, it's superficial."

Reluctantly turning his eyes from her to the screen, he saw Malicanoor pictographs displayed like sheet music.

"I know how much signing that treaty bothered you," she added. "Their whole society, even their architecture, is multi-layered. If they're not telepaths, and their spoken languages and music is so rich, how can their written language be so childishly simplistic? So I started thinking about orchestral

composition. One instrument may hint at the overall theme but others, say percussion, reveal nothing when played alone. It occurred to me that, if written Malicanoor is like an orchestral piece, then all you have to do is meld the layers together along the X,Y and Z axis over time, and lo..." She hit a key and the transparent layers moved.

His lips parted in shock. Avalon had done what no linguist or mathematician had achieved in months of trying. He gazed in awe as passages of the highly complex treaty scrolled across the screen.

"What we saw as white light is really a rich spectrum of colours. It's intriguing because it's based on such a complex system of realities that anything untrue—a lie—makes no sense, like an out-of-tune instrument. Sure, they must fabricate ideas in spoken language, because they have extraordinarily rich theatrical—"

Falcon was no longer listening. Avalon had known how much the treaty bothered him—obsessed him, really. Sure, her findings were of incredible significance, but she had worked on the translation because it bothered *him*.

A dozen memories surfaced; a hostile civilian council turned into his biggest fan club, the redesigned cockpit in his shuttle, the orchids and ferns in his quarters, the meals when Scarty was on leave and the regular delicacies in his food processor, the hours she spent on bridge duty when he'd been rostered and caught up elsewhere, and the reports she'd helped Marcus write. The list was endless. She was always there, quietly, invisibly working beside him, making his days easier. Her projects always catered to his needs first. Not just the ship, but *him*.

She was so very beautiful. The smell of her warm, woman-scent was intoxicating. He whispered, "Thank you," and leaned down to kiss her cheek.

At his words, she turned and her lips inadvertently met his.

It was a simple, chaste gesture of friendship and thanks but the contact ignited simmering desires, and his mouth lingered even as he knew he had to withdraw. Then he felt her lips move between his, felt her body arch towards him. Common sense screamed at him to pull back from this fatal error—but he could not.

A moment caught in time, a misinterpretation that could destroy him.

Despite what she believed, Avalon wondered if what she had felt on the dance floor was simply a male hormonal response to her as a woman, flattering but unintentional, no different to the times she'd massaged him. She needed to be absolutely certain, so she returned the kiss, her lips touching his in feather-light movements. Bringing her hand to his cheek, she brushed the entrance of his mouth with the tip of her tongue.

It was his undoing. He embraced her roughly, pulled her from the stool and pinned her against the bulkhead beside the computer, his kiss no longer fettered by the conventions that were supposed to separate them. Too long had they held back from this, too long had she loved him and desired him. But as her hips arched against his, he froze.

Breaking the kiss, she whispered, "I am not a child in this body, Chris. I am a woman before I am a C20." She looked up into his eyes. Even in the dim light, she saw her emotions reflected there. But the implications of what they were doing ... "Let go," she whispered. "For once, stop fighting and let go."

"Avalon," he whispered and dipped his mouth, tasting the flesh of her neck. She made no attempt to stop him as his hands slipped down, then brought the dress up and over her head.

His nostrils flared as he looked down and savoured her. Despite, or because of the horrific context, the memory of her naked body after Zanos III had disturbed his dreams even more than the massages. "Avalon, you are beautiful."

He nuzzled her neck then moved to her breast. It would not have mattered if it was larger or smaller or if her nipples were shaped or coloured differently, for whatever this woman was, she defined perfection in his eyes. Her hands pull back his shirt and reached inside, teasing his nipples, then dropped lower and unfastened the seal of his trousers. She lifted her leg around him and—the door opened and armed security guards ran in, shouting something unintelligible.

Chapter 46

December 05, 2500

"What the *hell*...?" Falcon automatically reached to his hip for a weapon that wasn't there.

The security detail froze, wide-eyed in disbelief. Their external comunits screamed, "I repeat, belay that order! Medimplant sensors have returned to normal!"

Falcon positioned himself between the guards and Avalon, but his obvious arousal could not so easily be hidden, despite the deleterious impact of the intrusion. He didn't have to be a telepath to know that the security guards would both have gladly have willed themselves into a wormhole. "I suggest you answer that before all hell breaks lose." He refastened his pants. "And I suggest you know exactly *how* to answer."

One of them gulped and replied, "Medops, repeat that stand-down order! If there is something wrong with the Captain, we have to check it out."

"Listen to me, Cain!" came a woman's reply. "The damned program glitched. It ... it's nothing to do with the Captain, it's a system malfunction. Check his medimplant yourself if you want!"

"No one has clearance to do that. Only a spike would raise an alert," said the second guard.

Falcon's admiration for the security team quickly overtook his initial fury. They were simultaneously putting on a convincing show for the medtech, and informing him of the circumstances.

"I blundered while checking some software. If there were a ... a real problem, everyone from Saav to Rose would have alarms screaming through their quarters," replied the medtech.

"I want to see what you're working on. Failure to report a false alarm is not something I want on my record."

"Sure ... okay, medops clear."

Falcon's rage had settled into furious indignation at such a serious breach of ethics. More so in that it involved himself and the C20 under circumstances that could only be described as staggering. Medimplant alerts in senior command officers set off alarms in medops, backup Command crews' quarters, the C20 and the assigned telepath's quarters, because a life-threatening event could compromise the safety of the ship. Alarms did not sound for even the most athletic sexual activity, unless it induced a medical problem. Why would a medtech call in the troops when his medimplant hadn't?

"Okay, what the *hell* triggered that?" he demanded.

"Ensigns Joel Mathews and Cain McDonald, sir," McDonald said, staring past Falcon's shoulder as she snapped out the words. "We were given an emergency code Perseus in relation to your medical implant, *sir*."

In the bedroom, Avalon was calling medops to feed data directly to her. "Firstly," said Falcon, "you're to be commended for quick thinking."

Mathews and McDonald risked lowering their eyes to meet his; the situation was light years beyond awkward.

"I am not," Falcon continued, "going to insult your intelligence by denying what you witnessed. Nor do I need to point out the far-reaching consequences of you mentioning this to anyone, I repeat, *anyone*, on board or off this ship." His jaw clenched and unclenched. "In order to secure your complicity in this I will be entirely honest; what you've witnessed was all that has occurred. If rumour spreads that for the first time in centuries a C20 and captain have entered into an intimate relationship, it will create havoc, introducing large-scale corruption from those wishing to buy their place aboard *Asegeir*. After what we went through at the outset of this voyage I will not have that. I will not tolerate people's lives revolving around some arcane belief that such a union has some sort of mythical ... power, especially when no such union has taken place."

Reading their uncertainty he added, "I'm not denying it was *about* to take place, but I am denying that it is anything other than what it superficially appears to be. Whether it evolves, only time will reveal. On a purely personal level, I'm asking you to keep this under wraps. Let us find out, as two people, if we want to further this relationship beyond a momentary intimacy, or allow it to slide. If we have NGC and a million inhabitants of this ship peering over our shoulders, we will deliberately choose not to pursue it."

McDonald, the romantic part of her soul bubbling to the surface, answered, "Of course we'll be circumspect, sir. We understand the implications, but even a false alarm means medimplant data will be examined."

The data would clearly show it was within the parameters of sexual activity. Falcon winced. He could see it now; this first spike is where she'd run her tongue along his ear, and this one when she reached down and ... He couldn't fob it off as autoerotic or a passing dalliance, because he was inside the C20's quarters. "Alright. Report the false alarm to Senior Commander Phelan exactly as logged with medops. You were sent here on a code Perseus that was cancelled prior to entering the C20's quarters. Place a Level One security code on the report—eyes only and tag it with my code. Meanwhile, I want the medtech held incommunicado until morning. Senior Commander Rose will examine the data to establish what raised the flag. It means involving two others, but..." He did not need to say anything further. Both senior commanders followed strict, ethical codes of conduct. More importantly, he trusted them.

Falcon's eyes bored into theirs. How long could he and Avalon keep it under wraps? Hell of a way to start a relationship. Still, like the C20s, he was a firm believer in developing bonds with those under his command, especially in the lower ranks. His lips curled at the corners, a rueful admission of complicity. "Thank you. And lock down access to the medical log files. Are you qualified to do that without a technician?"

"I've already done so and tagged it as a breach in security." Avalon, now dressed in a shipsuit, came into the room. "There's a signature from an unauthorized access program; looks like the medtech was doing research for a thesis. Meanwhile, I, too, appreciate your tact—and compliance—in this matter." She smiled at McDonald and Malcolm.

The security officers saluted and left.

"Close door."

Avalon's voice warned Falcon that something more was amiss. When she looked up he saw the shine in her eyes.

"Chris, I am so sorry!" she said. "I should never have led you into thinking that something intimate was possible between us. It was unbelievably self-indulgent and heartless and—" Wrapping her arms around herself she walked past the breakfast bar separating the living room from the kitchen. "There are ... so many things you still do not know, things I must tell you and hope you will forgive me for."

"You mean the real reason why C20s and their captains do not enter sexual relationships?"

She stared at him, open-mouthed.

"You don't think," he said, walking towards her, "we're not briefed on the lethal consequences?" He saw her searching her memories. "Oh, you won't find it in any manual. It's passed down, word of mouth, between C20 commanders."

"How—?"

"Did we find out? C'mon Avvy, three dead captains in identical circumstances? Then the C20s incorporate a deliberate hands-off policy into law?"

Avalon's mouth tightened. "More than three, seven." She sidestepped him and walked around the other side of the bar again. He made to follow, but she shook her head. "Hayes, Babcock and Rudenmeyer are the obvious ones, I suppose. Heart attacks. Four others died the same way. We falsified evidence and had their bodies disposed of with the assistance of the Metas. I cannot tell you how distressing that was for all concerned. And Chris," she looked at him with haunted eyes, "I was responsible for Babcock's death. I am ashamed I conspired to hide the reasons, but at the time the Metas and Dwins felt the backlash against C20s would be too great, especially since it came hot on the heels of the Drew affair."

"But you didn't know. You weren't sure—"

She looked at him sharply. "How do you know that?"

He returned her gaze. They could no longer hide the truth from each other. "Tell me about the others first and I'll tell you what I know."

She pulled a seat out and sat down. "Despite my objections, after Drew's court martial, NGC reassigned Jason De Vries to another ship. At that time, NGC were still balking at their inability to control C20s. Sure, they were shocked at Drew's actions, but transferring Jason was, to put it bluntly, NGC flexing its muscles. Gary Babcock, a sweet guy, replaced Drew as *Asegeir's* captain. A few months passed, and although the bonding we experienced was a mere echo of what exists between you and me, Gary and I became close, as is the case with all captains and C20s. I missed Jason terribly—that was the same time I became somewhat embittered by the ship's hold over me. One thing led to another, and Gary and I ended up in bed."

"Chris, it was not a romance, more an attraction between good friends. No big deal, except the second time we made love, Gary suffered a major heart attack at the exact moment he..." She looked away.

He nodded, understanding.

"I couldn't believe it! I mean, I was ... um, above him and his whole chest turned blue. His heart had literally exploded. We had him in an amniotank within minutes, but even shunting to an artificial heart couldn't revive him, because he'd also suffered a massive stroke and haemorrhage in his cranium. It was diagnosed as some rare disorder. Sad, a great loss and although it upset me deeply, I never felt I was to blame. No one, least of all NGC or the doctors, thought otherwise. In fact in a rare moment of human compassion, NGC reassigned Jason to *Asegeir*."

"Eight months later on *Jord*, Kim Hayes suffered a heart attack. A year after that, Rudenmeyer died from a stroke. Neither Hayes nor Rudenmeyer's deaths were associated with sexual activity between them and a C20—the evidence was hidden because, although both were separated from their spouses, they were

still legally married. But we C20s soon pieced it together. Didn't matter if intercourse was over one night or a week later, didn't even have to be intercourse, *any* mutual sexual gratification could trigger it, but only the second time.

"To be honest, we had real difficulty accepting it. By then most C20s had lost their first spouses to old age or the First Katylgar War. Over the next eighteen years other situations developed, second-generation C20s and chief execs—what we now call chief commanders, first in line after the captains. Again, we hid the evidence but also placed a self-imposed moratorium on *all* sexual relationships with anyone of command rank." She closed her eyes in shame.

"Except—" he said softly, reaching across the table for her hand. "You figured out why."

Her eyes flashed open, and she jerked her fingers away in shock. "How did you...?"

Reaching onto the pocket, he pulled out the data disc. It contained a confession made almost a hundred and forty years earlier. "Mixis is a telepath, and I've been a fool not to see what she's been trying to tell me. Her grandmother made this."

Falcon handed her the disc. When her wide eyes narrowed in anger, he added, "Mixis' grandmother didn't betray you, Avvy. You walked into her quarters while she was running a diagnostic on the monitoring systems. The recording was inadvertent, but something prompted her to keep it. Mixis said—and I believe her—that no other human has ever seen it. Only her mother and her ... and now, me."

Avalon stared at the disc and remembered the night, and the context of the epiphany. Or was it self-delusion? And what right did she have to test it on this man? "Chris," she pushed the chair back, stood. "Something happened to your medimplant tonight ... a ... a warning. Someone tried to stop ... I cannot, I will not risk—"

But he was already there, lowering his mouth to hers, kissing her fully, arousing her, then speaking softly before she could pull away. "You told Mixis' grandmother that the Metas had deduced the reason, that the powerful C20s' life-forces disrupted that of the captains' at a moment of vulnerability." He stroked her face with his lips, rubbing his nose gently across her cheek. "You said that if their life-forces were as one, and they loved each other, their joining would have transcended, become synergistic."

Shuddering at his ministrations, she objected weakly. "But we don't know that for sure—"

"You said it yourself. Any previous encounters were based on attraction, not love. Maybe I've been blind but you can't tell me everything you've done, everything you've been to me has just been the obligation of a C20. Or tell me it is, tell me you're just doing your duty and that what you feel for me is no more than ... momentary lust."

She raised her hands to his face, cupping it as she looked at him tenderly. "And thus I cannot, *will* not be the instrument of your destruction."

He chuckled. "Now who's fighting? Tell me what happened when we first met on this ship. That's never happened to you before, has it? And what about Zanos III? Our bonding was far more powerful than any sexual encounter."

"How did you—?"

"Ryl told me. You love me C20, deeply, profoundly, as much as I love you. Your life-force began bonding to mine the moment you touched me, and at Zanos III it transcended anything any human or

C20 has ever experienced before. You won't kill me, Avalon. You can't."

* * * *

Sometime later Mixis Saav was woken from a deep sleep by a profound sense of rightness within the life-force. Smilingly contentedly, she fell asleep again. Just before dawn, a similar, but infinitely more powerful sensation woke her a second time.

She sat up and said, "Clear LD." The spectacular Marslight filled her quarters. Had the life-force of Earth reached from afar and given greetings to its tiny cousin? No, it was more than that, far more. Something had happened within the greater Life Force, joining, multiplying, and enhancing the smaller life-force of *Asegeir*. But the source eluded her, for it was already fading into a dimension she could not fathom, until only a warm echo remained.

Whatever it was, Mixis thought as she got out of bed on this, the last day of *Asegeir's* maiden voyage, it boded well for the future.

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