



SCARPER

THE DELPHIC DAME: BOOK 2

JENNY SCHWARTZ

Scarper

The Delphic Dame

Book 2

Jenny Schwartz

Copyright ©2023 by Jenny Schwartz

Cover design by Enchanting Covers

A fate-defying chase across the universe.

Fate is a tricky witch.

On the run across federation space, Cherry has stuffed far too many dangerous secrets into her scout ship. Now the Delphic Dame is the most hunted spaceship in the universe.

It may also be the only force in the universe capable of saving humanity.

Cherry just has to stay one step ahead of her enemies—and, maybe, of her allies.

Table of Contents

[ONE](#)

[TWO](#)

[THREE](#)

[FOUR](#)

[FIVE](#)

[SIX](#)

[SEVEN](#)

[EIGHT](#)

[NINE](#)

[TEN](#)

[ELEVEN](#)

[TWELVE](#)

[THIRTEEN](#)

[FOURTEEN](#)

[FIFTEEN](#)

[SIXTEEN](#)

[Want More?](#)

ONE

Captain Cherry Pendit sat on the edge of the open lifepod which, fortunately, hadn't been needed. It had taken every scrap of her piloting ability and oracular talent, but the Delphic Dame had escaped its enemies and dived into the relative safety of a universal river. Cherry didn't care where her scout ship was headed, just that it was away from those who wanted her and her passengers dead.

Her sole human passenger wasn't taking the revelation of their enemy's true identity well. "Space elves?" The eerie calm of Hugh's voice warned that he was about to break.

Unfortunately, the katang droid in their midst hadn't been programmed to read human emotions. Or didn't care to. "They are thrios," Giol repeated. The massive crab-shaped droid had crouched down from his twelve foot height, but that didn't reduce the size of his shell or the immensity of his claws. One click-clack of a huge claw and a human would be cut and crushed.

Oozy red blood leaking out... Cherry felt woozy. She reminded herself that Giol had never threatened them. He was onboard because he'd promised to serve Dylan, an adolescent katang who was Hugh's adopted kid and who'd just crawled out of the lifepod.

“I don’t care what they’re freaking called,” Hugh shouted. If Giol intimidated him, it didn’t show. “Space elves, thrios, who cares what they’re called?”

Cherry raised a floppy voting arm. “I don’t. Not right now.” As everything went swirly-whirly, she hastily lowered her arm to grip the edge of the lifepod. “I’m done.” She was exhausted to the point of collapse. “I don’t care what you call anyone, just...if they’re chasing us, Giol, can they find us in this river?”

She’d been confident—and Hugh had agreed—that the human forces chasing the Delphic Dame from the destroyed katang home world of Astacus couldn’t track the stealthed spaceship in a universal river, but who knew what these newly revealed enemies were capable of? Maybe space elves were sneaky.

“In some rivers, perhaps,” Giol said. They’d found him on Astacus, or he’d found them. “But not this river to Pannyk. Katangs rendered it too perilous for non-katang spaceships.”

“Thank the stars.” Cherry stood and, unwisely, leaned across to pat Dylan’s shell. “I want to hear everything you have to tell us, but...” She swayed.

Hugh grabbed her.

Dylan’s worried voice followed her down a long tunnel of spiraling, whooshing darkness. “Is she okay?”

Am I?

She woke up in the med-doc. Someone had stripped off her lifesuit, but left her in her undershirt and shorts. A jaw-cracking yawn momentarily closed her eyes before she blinked at the clock. 22:47. She’d lost eight hours and she was starving.

The med-doc had been busy. Her muscles were no longer jelly and her headache had cleared. What the med-doc hadn’t done was clean her. Clambering out of it, she smelled herself.

“Ew.” Hungry though she was, she preferred to eat sans eu-de-stale-fear-stink.

She detoured to her cabin, and re-emerged showered and casual in a t-shirt and yoga pants.

The heavenly aroma of pizza greeted her in the kitchen.

The man responsible for it looked terrible. Red-eyed, hair every which way, and unshaven, Hugh shuffled when he rose from the table to retrieve the pizza from the oven.

“Haven’t you slept at all?” Cherry demanded.

“The med-doc alerted me when you woke,” was his non-answer. “Dylan’s asleep.”

“How is he?”

Hugh sliced the pizza. “Overwhelmed. Joining the torrent was an intense experience. I checked him over, and Giol checked him with the shell-sense. Given how much Dylan ate before he fell asleep, I’m willing to believe his recovery is normal.”

The kid had been unconscious for six days. But katangs were different to humans.

Cherry poured herself a glass of water and sat opposite Hugh at the table.

He pushed aside his personal comms unit.

She suspected he hadn’t just been waiting for her medical clearance. He’d been working on something, or working through something. *More problems*, she thought, wryly resigned. *The thrios*.

At the moment, space elves were less important than the wonderfully greasy, spicy pizza. She burned her mouth on melted cheese.

The shadows under Hugh’s eyes were as dark as bruises. “We’re headed to Pannyk.”

“Uh yup. The pirate base.” Cherry was captain of the ship. While showering, Pythia, the ship’s AI, had updated her on the Delphic Dame’s status and route. The Pannyk black hole was the first feasible exit point from the universal river. They were

traveling toward it at a moderate speed while Pythia repaired the ship. They'd taken a battering escaping Astacus.

Cherry shivered, but didn't stop eating. Their fate could have gone a whisker the other way and they'd have all died. They'd been hunted by experts.

"The thrios," Hugh said heavily. It wasn't solely exhaustion that made him look terrible. The foundation of his existence had been overturned.

He was the product of the now-fractured Civilized Federation, which had bombed Astacus into the lifeless nightmare of a nuclear winter before going after any katang ships in space. The former federation had annihilated a sapient species. In committing genocide, they'd believed they were saving the universe from a monstrous consortium of killer crabs.

According to Dylan, far from being the heroic saviors of the universe, steeling themselves for the unspeakable barbarity of genocide in order to protect all life from the katangs' ravenous devourment, humans had instead been the dupes of the thrios.

Only Dylan had survived. Years after the genocide, Hugh had rescued him as a larva in a tiny lifepod. Ever since, father and adopted son had been hunted. They'd thought they'd been hunted by humans, but thrios had been pulling their hunters' strings.

"The thrios made humans puppets. Puppets with blood on our hands." He stared at his blunt-tipped fingers, the calloused palms; hands that could build and nurture and serve others.

"Not all humans," Cherry said. Her people had been isolated from the rest of humanity for five centuries and were only now tentatively attempting to re-establish contact. They knew nothing of the katangs or the thrios. The katangs' blood wasn't on their hands.

Metaphorically, though, blood dripped from hers. She had fired on the planetary guard ships that had pursued them from Astacus. It had been kill or be killed, and she'd chosen to kill.

The bright crimson of the tomato sauce on the pizza swam in her vision. She averted her gaze and drank cool, clear water. Her breakdown would have to wait till Hugh finished his crisis assessment.

“Not all humans?” he repeated. “Do you think the thrios will distinguish between us, and leave your people alone?” He shook his head. “We don’t know how many thrios there are. Crucially, we don’t know whether they’ll be waiting for the Delphic Dame at Pannyk.”

Wretchedly, he groaned. “I started all this. Visiting Astacus was my idea. Looked at one way, you could say we succeeded beyond my wildest dreams. Thanks to joining the torrent, Dylan now knows what it is to be katang.”

“That’s good.” She scraped the remains of the pizza into the recycling.

“Except that everything has a price.”

Her plate and glass went into the dishwasher. “Cryptic.”

His mouth twitched in a failed attempt at a smile. “Dylan wants to tell you himself about joining the torrent.”

She nodded. “It’s his story. It’s fair he tells it.” And she wanted to hear it from him, not second-hand.

Hugh rolled his shoulders. “For context, it seems that the clatter ceremony, that is, joining the torrent, was more than a ritual to celebrate adulthood. The torrent served the role of providing a shared understanding of existence for katangs. In a strongly individualistic society, it provided a unifying foundation of knowledge. Humans use language and our social interactions to communicate knowledge. For katangs, the important information of who they were was biologically downloaded.”

She had a hundred questions, but she’d promised to ask them of Dylan. Her thoughts went sideways to something she could ask about. “How does the archive mesh with the torrent?” Hugh looked blank. “You know, the pillar of wiggly lights in the Hall of Charts on Astacus? If joining the torrent transmits a sense of katangness, what does the archive add?”

What did katangs consider essential species information and what was optional?”

Hugh frowned down at the floor, or possibly, through it to the lower cargo hold where Giol lurked.

Cherry had intended to move Giol, and the katang gadgets and materials which he'd brought onboard, up to the empty top cargo hold. She'd had Pythia add atmosphere to it so Dylan, Hugh, and herself could visit the droid there. However, when Giol had used the shell-sense on Dylan, and Dylan had collapsed into a huddled ball of limbs, she'd left the imported katang gear near him in case it was needed. Afterward, after Hugh put Dylan into the lifepod, she'd been too busy escaping Astacus to play shuffle-the-cargo.

Hugh wiped a hand over his face. “I was focused on Dylan. I forgot about the archive. Giol didn't mention it when he added details to Dylan's story.”

Cherry had a personal reason for curiosity about the archive and its purpose. When she and Giol had visited the dead katang settlement for a final salvage expedition, the katang droid had added her genetic profile—or something regarding who she was—to the archive.

None of that mattered, not immediately, not compared to who was chasing them. Hunting them. “So, space elves?”

A gusty sigh ruffled Hugh's messy hair as it hung over his eyes. “If anyone but Dylan had told me, I'd want evidence, but he wouldn't lie to me.”

No, she didn't think the kid would. Hugh was his father, for all that they were different species. Their bond of trust was strong. She'd seen how Dylan had woken up terrified that the thrios would be after Hugh.

“That threat I felt when we approached Astacus,” she began slowly. “It felt like it came from the second moon. No one perceived us till then. The Delphic Dame's stealth technology fooled human technology. I'm guessing that it was thrios on the moon who spotted us.”

“And attempted to kill us before pursuing us all the way back to the millrace.”

She rubbed her knuckles against the underside of her jaw. The muscles there had tightened as she mentally checked her oracular talent’s past activity against the idea of the thrios. She’d called that sense of cold menace the Churl. Now, perhaps, she had another name for it. The thrios.

Rescuing Hugh had been her reason for entering federation space. She hadn’t known who he was. She’d only known that he had to be saved.

Her oracular talent had been insistent.

On Diamond Station there will be a man. The man who must not be found. Hide him, hide him, hide him. Or your family will be devoured.

Hugh interrupted her thoughts. “According to Dylan, thrios look human. Purply-gray skin, pointy ears. Yellow or green hair. Long fingers, maybe with an extra knuckle.”

In the two months traveling to Astacus, Cherry had studied the former federation’s culture. She’d read its books, watched its movies, and skimmed captures of its social media—or rather, she’d had Pythia summarize its themes. Katangs had starred as the villains of the universe. In killing them, humanity had saved all life. What she couldn’t recall was any depiction of thrios in federation media.

She frowned. “Katangs were foreshadowed. There were rumors of them and various art forms took up and expanded on those rumors before the katangs formally made contact centuries ago. But the thrios...”

“There’s no mention of them in federation pop culture,” he confirmed. His whole body sagged in the chair. Only agony of mind and spirit kept him awake. “Not even a shadow.”

It meant that these aliens were master manipulators of human popular culture. To enforce an absolute blackout as to their existence suggested a scary level of control over the federation’s media and communication channels.

“They set up the katangs as the bad guys from the start.” Cherry realized. “For over two centuries, before and after official contact between humans and katangs, there’s not one positive portrayal of katangs. Not even a fictional tale of a kindly aged katang who goes rogue to save a bunch of human children and shepherd them through grand adventures.”

Children’s stories often included a spin that played with the idea of the bad guy in the role of the hero.

“It’s unnatural that no counter-narrative exists,” she said. “Especially in the early years of contact, authors, artists, and movie-makers ought to have occasionally turned out stories where katangs weren’t all bad.”

Hugh rubbed his eyes with his fists.

Cherry finished her thought silently. The absence of alternative stories regarding katangs was highly suspicious if anyone cared to look. But fish don’t notice the water they swim in. Humans hadn’t recognized what was happening.

The thrios had constructed, imposed, and perpetuated a false grand narrative.

To achieve that in an alien society, they must have had human collaborators.

She studied Hugh as he forced his eyes open and squinted at her. “An advantageous lie is generally defended more vigorously than the truth.” The question was, advantageous to who? And what was offered? “A few humans must have colluded with the thrios because it benefited them.”

The collaborators had to be those who held power, whether financially, politically, or socially.

People like Hugh’s family. His mother was the Governor of the Aaru Sector, and his great-grandfather had been the Four Hundred and Twentieth President of the Civilized Federation.

He had worked this out for himself, painfully, while she recovered in the med-doc. He watched her unknot the same puzzle.

She scowled. “The existence of the thrios changes everything.” It changed how she viewed the federation and her people’s future relationship with it.

“Our grand civilization doesn’t seem so grand.” He pushed himself up from the table. “But it existed before the katangs and thrios reached us. Before your people were stranded and separated from us. Human civilization is worth fighting for.”

“Is it?”

“Cynic. Goodnight.” Tired though he was, he’d waited in the kitchen till she’d faced the implications of Dylan’s announcement of the thrios’ existence.

“Hugh.” She sighed. “Goodnight.”

He squeezed her shoulder and left.

She headed for the freezer. A pint of chocolate ice-cream called to her. She unsealed it, and dug in. Was comfort food a good coping mechanism? There were worse. She licked the spoon and considered what she’d just learned about the thrios. It wouldn’t hurt to doublecheck a couple of assumptions. “Pythia, can you show the recording of our entry into the millrace of the Montu black hole, please? Start from two hours before. Show it on the wall screen in the lounge.”

Currently, Pythia’s priority was piloting and repairing the Delphic Dame. Cherry couldn’t justify taking up processing power by having Pythia analyze the recordings, but she needed to examine them herself while her memory was fresh.

Curled up on the sofa, chocolate ice-cream accompanied her reliving of the dance with death yesterday. On-screen, ships darted around, firing at the Delphic Dame. She didn’t think it was her oracular talent that itched as she watched, but rather, normal human perception. Most of the spaceships were human, but that one and that one...over there...were thrios, she’d bet her favorite boots on it.

“That’s where I felt the Churl.” She shivered, chilled by more than the ice-cream. “They were playing with us, hunting us like it was a game they couldn’t lose.”

But she’d evaded them.

The thrios had lost.

The space elves wouldn't forgive—or forget—an insult to their superiority.

Her spoon scraped the bottom of the empty ice-cream tub.
“We are in so much trouble.”

TWO

The bright, blaring sound of cartoons greeted Cherry when she emerged from her cabin. The alarm had done its job and gotten her out of bed at seven, but she needed coffee to finish the job of waking up. She'd gone to bed sometime after one o'clock. There had been nightmares.

"You're awake!" Dylan jumped off the sofa.

"That's a vile lie," she retorted. "I'm sleepwalking."

Gently, he crashed into her and extended his upper legs for a rare hug. Hugs were a human preference. For Dylan, intimate gestures included clasping claws and resting a claw on his shell. Hands could be substituted for claws.

An antenna brushed her face. "Are you all better?"

"The med-doc fixed me up."

Aware of her fragile skin, he released her carefully. "Hugh's still asleep. He said you saved us, that you flew like a buzz-fly."

Darting here, there, and everywhere. Scared out of my mind. "I need coffee."

Cartoons forgotten, Dylan followed her in the kitchen.

She figured he'd switched on the cartoons for the familiar comfort they offered. He'd matured past enjoying them for

themselves. She understood. Rather than ask Pythia to switch them off, she let their cheerful, discordant repetition play on.

“I saw the lifepod. I saw how Hugh modified it.”
Accusation shaded his voice. “There was no room for him or you inside it.”

There hadn’t been, not after Hugh’s modifications. What had mattered was the chance to save Dylan, to give him a chance to return and hide on Astacus if they, as fragile, squishy humans, died.

She deflected his outraged gratitude. “Giol wrapped himself around the lifepod as a second layer of protection.”

Coffee. She needed coffee for this discussion.

“He shouldn’t have done that, either,” Dylan muttered.

She’d have been mad if people had prepared to sacrifice themselves for her. It would be hypocritical to deny Dylan his resentment. She rested a hand on his shell. “Sorry, kid. You’re going to have to accept that we love you.”

“Drink your coffee,” he muttered, embarrassed and pleased.

The divine nectar of the gods streamed into her mug.

An arm reached over her shoulder and stole it.

“Hugh!”

Eyes on her face, eyebrows arched in teasing amusement, he drank *HER* coffee! The man looked a hundred percent better than last night. It still didn’t excuse coffee theft.

Dylan shoved a second mug at her.

“Thank you.” And to Hugh. “At least your son has manners.”

Affection warmed his eyes. “My son.” His voice still held a sleepy huskiness—or emotion. “Has a story to tell you.”

“About joining the torrent?” Cherry looked at Dylan.

He bobbed his eyestalks in agreement.

Cradling her mug of coffee, she reached for a bowl.
“Granola. Then I’m all ears. Have you eaten?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll order up ham and eggs,” Hugh said. Ordering up was what he called using the food synthesizer to prepare a nutritionally balanced, bland meal.

Cherry and Dylan exchanged looks of disgust. They preferred real food. “He’s not an absolute philistine,” she assured the kid. “He doesn’t fabricate coffee.” She shuddered at the idea.

The teasing and joking around was normal, but it vanished when they sat at the table and Pythia switched off the cartoons. The silence was ominous.

Suddenly, Dylan wasn’t so young anymore. “Joining the torrent is strange. Young humans learn by imitating others. So do young katang. I learned by copying Hugh. Then there were additional layers of his conscious teaching, immersion in human popular culture, and my formal education.”

Cherry tried to crunch her granola quietly while Dylan spoke.

He was desperately serious. A great burden rested on him. He was the last of his species, raised as human, by a human, and now, attempting to explain alien knowledge across the species barrier.

Nervously, he tapped a claw against his shell. “Humans talk about reinventing the wheel.”

Cherry nodded. “Keep solving the same old problem, and you can’t advance.”

Hugh’s concentration appeared to be on his fabricated meal.

Dylan selected a fresh nasturtium leaf from the plate in front of him and rolled it into a cigar. “Except that human society does advance, and it’s because of language. Language is how you communicate knowledge. It enables you to build

on other people's knowledge. It also glues human society together. The torrent isn't words."

He nibbled the nasturtium leaf. "When I joined the torrent, I received concepts conveyed via resonance. There's a layer in my exoskeleton that forms as I advance from juvenile to adolescent. I'm not considered fully mature, yet, but I'm old enough to act independently. I literally imprinted the foundation for my adult choices in my body. On my shell.

"When Giol used the shell-sense on me, it substituted for a consortium of katangs clattering at me to guide the earliest imprinting of the torrent, the deep history of katangs. The memory of who we were and how we advanced is stored in a layer of our shells. The more it is repeated, the clearer the imprinting. So, with each katang in a clatter ceremony repeating the same deep history, it is transmitted faithfully. In its entirety."

He finished the nasturtium leaf and began rolling another. "The closer the torrent gets to the present, the more variation there is in individuals' torrents. We share one path in deep history, but many paths as time grows closer to the present. That means it's harder to discern the narrative path to imprint on my exoskeleton. That was why I was unconscious for days. First in selecting the torrent to imprint, and then, imprinting it."

Pushing away his empty plate, Hugh rested his elbows on the table. "Last night, when Dylan described joining the torrent, I questioned if it was a true clatter ceremony."

The interruption confused Cherry. "You think Giol faked it? But why?"

"I merely questioned if it was possible. There weren't multiple katangs contributing their histories to Dylan's torrent. The shell-sense had to substitute for them."

"It was real," Dylan said. "The shell-sense held the record of a previous ceremony. The bit that felt different..." His eyestalks angled in Hugh's direction. "The torrent is strange. I can't be confident I'm interpreting it accurately. Hugh brought me up to think via the filter of language. The torrent

introduced concepts directly into my mind. Now, I have to make them mine.”

Cherry refilled her coffee mug. A shake of Hugh’s head refused a top up. “Giol did say that the shell-sense was used in clatter ceremonies.” She looked at Hugh. “Remember?” Then she looked at Dylan. “Hugh was upset. You were unconscious, and Giol would only say that your unconsciousness was normal and that we had to wait.”

Reaching across the table, Dylan gripped his dad’s wrist. “I’m sorry I worried you.”

“Not your fault.”

Dylan stuffed a nasturtium leaf, unrolled, into his mouth. He was treating the leaves like a human did chewing gum. They were both a treat and a nervous habit. “I think Giol could help me tell Cherry the next bit. Do you mind coming down to the cargo hold, Cherry?”

“Have coffee, will travel. Lead on.”

Dylan scrambled off his seat. “Giol said he’d be my servant, but he’s more like an assistant, like Pythia assists you. I suspect his programming forbids him from being a storyteller’s teacher.”

On initially encountering Dylan, the katang droid had self-selected the role of teacher in the juvenile katang’s life. Then he’d changed his mind.

“What is a storyteller?” Cherry asked.

“That’s what I want Giol to help explain.”

She glanced at Hugh.

“I’d be interested in hearing the explanation again,” he said. “Dylan is special.”

The kid laughed. “But you already knew that.”

Something akin to pain flashed across Hugh’s face, but he turned away from Dylan before his son saw it.

Cherry’s stomach dipped. They’d just escaped a life and death situation. To be honest, they were still in danger. She’d

hoped that Dylan's experience of the torrent would be positive; a break from the grim problem of how to escape the thrios.

Hugh's expression punctured those hopes.

Down in the lowest cargo hold, Giol crouched by the gear he'd brought from the katang settlement on Astacus and which Pythia had secured on the ship to withstand fast maneuvers. According to him, it was gadgets and materials unique to katang needs. In other words, items which Dylan wouldn't be able to acquire elsewhere.

"Hi, Giol." Cherry saluted him with her coffee mug. "Did any of it break?"

"Good morning, Cherry. I have effected a few repairs," Giol responded solemnly, having already greeted Dylan and Hugh.

She gulped the last of her coffee and put the empty mug on the floor by an obstacle course post.

Pythia had repurposed various features of the training course to secure Giol's belongings.

Dylan stopped near Cherry, but Hugh wandered around visually examining the katang gear.

Given that Giol had been modelled on an adult katang, his compound eyes on mobile eyestalks could easily track Hugh even when not appearing to do so.

"Giol, can you tell Cherry about storytellers, please?" Dylan asked.

"Storytellers are those who listen and reveal to others the truth of their lives. They read others' paths—their past, present, and future—and show it to them. Katangs are not so good at seeing themselves."

Dylan clambered onto the post next to the one Cherry leaned against. It rocked with his movements. "Self-reflection is not a katang characteristic."

"There are exceptions." Giol opened and closed a claw slowly. "Dylan would not have been able to adapt to and continue down the social path that humans follow if he wasn't

a storyteller. It's a rare katang trait to perceive and value connections. Storytellers reveal the truth of the individual or of the consortium, the truth the individual or consortium cannot reveal to itself."

"A storyteller is an analyst." Hugh's prowling circuit of the katang gear brought him back to Cherry and Dylan. "Humans need them, too. You can assemble all the facts and still fail to discern the story they tell, even the story of your own life as you lived it. Katang storytellers draw meaning out of data. Us humans are generally left to do that for ourselves."

"Are we?" Cherry countered skeptically. "Media bias, propaganda, the shared narrative necessary to belong to a particular group. We often get our own stories wrong, or worse, we believe other people's false stories about us. That we're stupid or worthless or..." She took a steadying breath. Ranting about the stories that shaped or undermined a person's life wasn't pertinent. It was her hot button issue. She'd grown up in the towers of Angkor, the slums of Capitoline. Her story had been meant to be one of cheap thrills and dying young.

"Katang storytellers tell true stories," Giol said. "Lying is a human skill." He paused. "Thrios share it."

And they were back to the problem of the thrios.

"Dylan, what did you learn from the torrent about the thrios?"

The tilting, teetering post he balanced on tipped him off. He landed in a tidy crouch at her feet. When he straightened, his extended eyestalks were nearly level with her eyes. "They steal. They stole the life from Lusak. Katang travelers brought the news to Astacus that thrios had ravaged Lusak."

Lusak had been an algal world, one marked by the federation organizers of the Tiantang Expedition for terraforming and settlement in a century.

Instead the Tiantang Expedition to colonize a new sector of space had been lost, and those who'd gone in search of it had found the algal world dead, its atmosphere denuded.

Human media had blamed katangs, both for the death of the planet and the loss of the expedition and of other spaceships over the years.

“Katangs were slow to recognize the threat of the thrios,” Dylan continued. “I don’t think they understood them, just as they didn’t understand humans.”

“There was no need to understand,” Giol said.

Trenchantly, Hugh disagreed. “The katangs’ insularity left them vulnerable to the thrios’ attack, and their use of humans to deliver it.”

Giol click-clacked a claw in the katang equivalent of a shrug; not accepting the judgement. It was, after all, a human judgement. But he added what may have been a concession. “Collective action takes katangs a long time.”

Dylan defended his species. “Katangs tried to corral the thrios, to keep them out, but humans were scattered throughout the region. No,” he corrected himself. “That’s how katangs looked at it. I think thrios hid among humans so that katangs would hesitate to act against them. The people of Astacus never thought the thrios would attack them. They should have made both universal rivers traveling to Astacus perilous,” he concluded angrily.

It seemed an obvious precaution to Cherry. “Why didn’t they?”

Giol rumbled into speech. “They didn’t see a need. What reason would thrios have to seek them out?”

To kill them. The answer thrummed in the silence.

“Judgement comes to all,” Dylan said.

Cherry stared at him. “That sounds cue-scary-music foreboding.”

“It is. Giol can help explain things. I’m still trying to understand. The torrent was a lot.” And he was the only person alive who could experience, interpret, and discuss it. Did joining the torrent and learning who the katangs had been make the last of them more or less lonely?

“My parents were storytellers. My mother was to help those on Astacus decide what to do. No, to reveal to them what they’d already decided. They *had* reached a decision,” he said earnestly. “It was evident in the clatter ceremony, the one that repeated when Giol used the shell-sense on me. It transmitted the same intention to me from all the participants.”

Hugh crouched beside his son. Hand and claw held clasped carefully. Hugh had heard this story yesterday, while Cherry was unconscious in the med-doc. That he was giving Dylan extra support and encouragement underlined that the next revelation would be worse.

Worse than an alien species infiltrating and manipulating humanity, resulting in genocide.

“Katangs tread independent paths. They operate as if oblivious to everything but their individual concerns. But when they all feel the same emotion, they act as a consortium, a collective. When the thrios destroyed Lusak, the thrios transgressed an inviolable law. Habitable planets are rare. Destroying one is anathema.”

Cherry thought she understood. “The katangs were ready to act against the thrios.”

“They already had,” Giol said. “They turned some universal rivers perilous.”

Cherry rolled her eyes. “That can’t be all they did?”

The soft brush of Dylan curling and uncurling an antenna around the leg of the post Cherry leaned against was the only sound in the silence. “I don’t know,” he said finally. “I know what they intended. I read the same story from their clatter ceremony that my mother, as a storyteller, would have heard. They were going to leave it to the thrios.”

Disbelievingly, Cherry asked him to repeat that last bit.

Nope, she hadn’t misheard. “They were going to leave the thrios to do whatever they wanted?”

Dylan lowered himself, undershell to the floor. “This is where it’s not really clear from the torrent, and Giol has to fill in what he knows.”

Cherry glanced across at the large droid. “Do you know if the katangs were crazy?”

The droid responded stoically to her sarcasm. “Katangs think differently to humans. You should also consider how little you know.”

The words were a slap.

“I’m trying to learn,” she said.

Hugh sat gracelessly on the floor beside Dylan, just too far away for Cherry to nudge him to back her up against the impossible droid. Hugh sighed. He’d already had this discussion, or one similar to it, with Dylan. “By ‘you’ Giol means all humans. We’ve only explored a tiny region of space, and we’ve settled even less. It seems vast to us, but our perspective is different to katangs’.”

“You have short lives,” Giol said.

It was one thing the federation had known about katangs. They’d lived for centuries.

“Katang space journeys were a lot longer than humans can endure,” Dylan said. “Spending five percent of their lives traveling an unknown region would be a lot longer, and take them a lot further, than a human spending five percent of their lives. So, katangs designed spaceships to support such long journeys. It means katang notions of space were a lot bigger than humans’, and the thrios are the same. Giol says they also live for centuries.”

“Different perspectives,” Cherry began, locking eyes with Hugh.

“...lead to different values,” he finished the thought she’d half-formed. “Dylan says that this is the ‘human’ region of space.”

Puzzled, she frowned at Dylan. “Not katang?”

“Not by thrios rules.”

Cherry threw her hands in the air. “Thrios rules? Who cares what the thrios think?”

Dylan click-clacked a claw. “Yesterday, I think I kind of confused things.”

“Oh, you definitely did.” A hint of amusement threaded through Hugh’s murmur. “But you were still waking up and you had a lot to think about and interpret.”

“Exactly.” Dylan bobbed his eyestalks emphatically.

“And you did convey the important part, that we had enemies we didn’t know about chasing us.” Hugh’s encouraging voice hardened. “Something Giol could have warned us of.”

Unaffected by Hugh’s anger, Giol replied calmly, “The storyteller tells the story.”

Dylan defended the droid, his droid. “Even if Giol had told us about the thrios on Astacus, there was nothing else we could have done. We had to run. Cherry and her oracular talent saved us.”

Cherry wasn’t seeking compliments. Her goal was understanding. “Back to the thrios. What did you confuse yesterday?”

“I told you about the bad thrios hunting Hugh and me, and you, too, now. I don’t know if the good thrios know about us.”

The good thrios?

Giol added his bit to the confusion. Possibly, he believed he was helping. “On Astacus, the people were only aware of rogue thrios in the region.”

“Giol explained it to me, to Hugh and me,” Dylan said. “The thrios are the good guys. There are other aliens out there, Cherry! I want to learn about them, but Giol only knows a little. Giol, tell her.”

“Tell her what?” For the first time, the droid sounded unsure. Not panicky, but as if he was navigating an unmapped region of existence.

He was. A katang raised by a human was a new type of person.

“About the thrios,” Dylan said. He might be growing up, but the teenage tone of “doh” was still in his repertoire.

“As best you can,” Hugh added. He wasn’t a fan of the droid’s, but he was fair. “From what Dylan and Giol pieced together yesterday, katangs didn’t understand thrios’ nature, which is, apparently, communal and empathetic.”

Dylan click-clacked his claw. “The opposite of katangs.”

“The storyteller,” Giol meant Dylan, “with his human father’s assistance, brought me to understand that the thrios’ emphasis on boundaries was a paradoxical result of their innate traits.”

Cherry looked to Hugh for a translation. No wonder he’d appeared so wretched last night. This stuff was difficult, and she was getting the somewhat coherent version.

Hugh didn’t fail her. “As far as I can tell, katangs shared the human region without caring, but thrios believe in boundaries.”

“A lot,” Dylan said. “I expect that’s why the other aliens Giol hasn’t described accept the thrios’ ruling on who has sovereignty over a region of space.”

“I cannot describe the other aliens because the people of Astacus had no contact with them.”

Cherry slid down the obstacle course post to sit on the floor beside Dylan. He was now sandwiched between her and Hugh; a katang between two humans, trusting them, and facing a massive katang droid who claimed to serve him. “But you believe these aliens exist?”

“They are in the archive,” Giol said.

“So, you do know something about them!”

Cherry was glad Dylan beat her to that triumphant accusation. Giol would respond better to him.

“I know that they exist.”

Honestly, a brick wall had more give than Giol’s programming.

“Can we focus on the thrios?” Hugh prompted. “The aliens who are actually a threat?”

Dylan waved his antennae, bumping Cherry and Hugh. “The thrios aren’t a threat. It’s their rogues who are a problem. We need the thrios to deal with their rogues.”

Fidgeting in his earnestness, he clasped the heavy-duty fabric of Cherry’s utility pants, tugging at it just above the ankle. “In the clatter ceremony the katangs called the rogues iklik, meaning corruption, both corrupted and corrupting. The rogues are psychopathic. They want to destroy things and play with people because people make the most interesting toys.”

How much did Dylan actually know, and to what extent was he guessing? Of his new understanding, what came from the torrent and what was Giol’s contribution?

And why was Hugh believing it all?

It strained her credulity—good and bad space elves, other aliens, a kid’s sudden insight into alien manipulations of humanity—yet Hugh accepted it.

How could he accept, in less than a day, that his people had killed an entire sapient species because of another species’ lies? It was a mind-blowing idea.

His boots scuffed against the floor as he brought his legs up to rest his forearms on his knees. “The rogues have made humans’ region of space their playground. Twisting our minds must have amused them for a couple of centuries, at least as long as we’ve known about katangs. The rogue thrios molded our concept of katangs. Now, we’re so deep in our folly and lies that we flinch from digging ourselves out.”

The deepening of Hugh’s voice as he finished his statement freaked Cherry. She leaned forward to clasp Dylan’s claw, which had been plucking at the hem of her utility pants.

Last night, Hugh had been struggling with Dylan’s information. Overnight, he’d resolved that struggle. Anger and grief thickened his voice, but determination prevailed. “Dylan is piecing together the katangs’ understanding of the situation,

which patently failed to grasp the extent of the threat against them.”

“Or that it existed,” Dylan corrected. “They assumed the rogues would continue to ignore them.”

“But they must have realized that the thrios, okay, the rogue thrios,” Cherry waved away the issue of what to call them, “viewed katangs as enemies? Katangs were limiting where the rogues could travel. If they kept turning perfectly good universal rivers perilous—and I’m curious about how they did that—then they had to realize that the rogues would try to stop them.”

Resting a hand on Dylan’s shell, Hugh looked over him to challenge Cherry. “Would you imagine an enemy ruthless enough to drive someone else to commit genocide?”

“That is exactly what you’re asking me to believe,” she pointed out.

Gently, Dylan squeezed her hand. “Yeah, but you’re human. Humans can imagine emotional manipulation and propaganda and all sorts of rogue actions because you do them, too. But katangs aren’t social like that. They just did their own thing and expected others to do theirs.”

It was odd how he drifted between present and past tense in talking about his species. As the last katang, to what extent was he “katang” as his people had been, and to what extent was he “human” by upbringing, his social connections (Hugh and herself), and the region of space he lived in?

“Astacus was waiting for the good thrios, who are most of the thrios, to recognize their rogues and act to contain them,” Dylan said. “Changing the universal rivers to perilous wasn’t a strategy agreed among katangs. At least I don’t think so. Individuals just did it...maybe because...why would they, Giol?”

“A trigger for a katang to render a universal river perilous would be a desire to avoid a rogue thrios spaceship. I am hypothesizing.”

“You do that, big guy,” Cherry muttered, his answer barely registering. She was focused on what Dylan had said about humans, or implied. Humans were like rogue thrios. Unwillingly, she believed him. How could you effectively manipulate someone if you didn’t understand them on a fundamental, behavioral level? “Well, damn. Human or thrios, those chasing us are like us.”

Hugh pushed up from the floor. “We’re not that ruthless. I recognized the model of two of the ships that came closest to destroying us. Drillbits are favored by the Vizards.”

“Hoo!” Dylan whistled, impressed.

It took longer for Cherry to place the name, Vizards, from her study of federation culture. When she did, she thunked her head backwards against the obstacle course post. “The secret elite corps of the former federation was guarding Astacus and is now chasing us?”

“They were *among* those guarding Astacus,” Hugh qualified.

According to the legends shrouding the Vizard Squadron, no one saw them on an active operation and lived.

“We’ve got freaking assassins on our tail.”

Overlooking her accusatory tone, Hugh said, “What I’d like to know is if they’re aware of the thrios on the other two ships or if the rogues have a cover story.”

As she comprehended his question, cold crept through her. “How embedded in the federation are they?”

Hugh skirted around Dylan to extend a hand to Cherry. When she automatically grasped it, he pulled her to her feet. Faces close, they stared at each other. Eyes searched eyes.

“The only way to win a war is to have someone else fight it for you,” she said.

Hugh blinked.

“I overheard a veteran say it once.” One of her brother-in-law Liam’s friends, a former officer who’d attended the Naval Academy with Liam and Crown Prince Francis. It was

cynicism of the experienced and bitter sort. “You can pay for someone else to fight. Or you can trick them into it. But the rogues aren’t *playing*. They have a goal. Humans were the means of achieving it. A couple of centuries is a long con if their goal was to eliminate all katangs, and why would they want to? It seems katangs were supremely disinterested in what others did.”

Dylan agreed. “Until the rogues went too far. All organic, sapient lifeforms share a narrow habitable range. Planets capable of supporting life are hugely valuable. Priceless. Everyone relies on the thrios, the good thrios, to draw boundaries that assign regions to species. Otherwise the competition over planets would be devastating.”

“So, has humanity unwittingly expanded into katang space?” Cherry asked.

“Nooo,” Dylan drew out the word. “This is the edge of human space...or it could be. It’s not assigned to anyone.”

Cherry laughed softly, ruefully. “Because katangs didn’t care about what other people did or their opinions?”

Dylan tapped a claw against the floor. “They didn’t until the rogues stole the life from Lusak. Then they wanted the thrios to judge who had sovereignty for the region. You’re right, Cherry. The rogues were fighting a war from the beginning, a war of occupation while remaining hidden. They couldn’t claim the region for themselves, but they could do so from concealment, pulling the strings of their human puppets.”

His claw tapped faster. “They went too far. In having humans destroy Astacus, they created a situation in which thrios would judge humans to be as rogue as the thrios rogues. But...Hugh saved me. That’s why rogues have to kill him and me.”

“Um, I think you skipped a step there,” Cherry said. “Like, why?”

Hugh answered. “Rogues don’t care. They don’t respect life and they can’t be trusted. Dylan believes that me rescuing him from his lifepod wouldn’t have been important in itself,

but keeping him alive for three years, against the lethal efforts of my own people, holds out the thin possibility of non-rogue status for me.”

“Giol can explain,” Dylan said.

Cherry had forgotten the massive katang droid. Being capable of overlooking something so big and alien showed her confusion and stress.

“Giol, explain about sovereignty.”

“A recognized region has a representative,” Giol said. “Someone whom the other species can negotiate with. Despite what humans did, if Hugh presents himself to the thrios, and his actions protect him from a judgement of rogue status, the thrios may be willing to assign him sovereignty over a human region of space. Inside that territory, what humans do is their business. However, other species will only be able to enter if Hugh and his designated heirs permit it.”

Cherry stared at the proposed human sovereign who looked like an experienced spaceship engineer, but not a representative for an entire species. “Hugh couldn’t do all that.”

“Obviously, he’d have people to help,” Dylan said. “Cherry, you entered federation space to save Hugh.”

“To hide him.”

“Is your oracular talent still pushing you to do so?” Dylan asked.

Hugh scrutinized her.

“I...I’m not sure. My talent may have burned itself out helping us escape Astacus.” She’d lived most of her life with her talent in abeyance. She was accustomed to making her own decisions. But currently, she’d have loved some clarity and solid ground. Instead, her stupid talent was silent.

Dylan reached the crux of his argument. “Hugh has a chance to win sovereignty over the region the rogues wanted to control.”

Hugh finally spoke. “Via their puppets.”

Their puppets. He was imagining his people, including his family in their leadership positions, as puppets of the rogue thrios.

Was this why her oracular talent had insisted she find Hugh on Diamond Station and hide him? It had emphasized that if the Churl, now identified as the rogue thrios, found him there, then her family would be at risk.

Why? If the rogues had eliminated Hugh and Dylan on Diamond Station, what would have changed? Why wasn't her talent driving her to hide Hugh, now? Was it truly burned out?

She frowned at the katang droid. "Giol, if Hugh died before the thrios recognized his sovereignty, would they recognize his designated heirs?"

"No."

"Would the thrios recognize anyone else? What about my people? We've been separated, with absolutely no contact, from the federation for five centuries, well before katangs met humans. We can't be blamed for the genocide. Couldn't the thrios grant us sovereignty over the human region so that trillions of humans have a home?"

"You are confused," Giol said.

"Yes. Yes, I am."

Slowly, Giol opened and closed a large claw. "First, I am unaware of your people's virtues. The thrios would judge them. Five centuries is not a long period of time. The thrios would recognize your claim over the region of space that birthed your society. You seem to assume that humans would lose their territory if sovereignty was not recognized. This is not true. What it would mean is that if no human could be judged an acceptable sovereign, then the destruction of a habitable planet would define all humans as rogues. As rogues, your currently undefined regional status, which partly protects, would be declared unclaimed. It would open the region to exploitation by any and all who cared to enter it."

Hugh nodded. "That clarifies the stakes."

Cherry pondered Giol's massive calm.

Neither by word nor action did he reveal anger or vengeance at the species who'd killed his people, his creators. It wasn't merely a planet that had died. It was a people.

Could she believe what he said?

It explained the rogues' actions. "If they eliminate Hugh as Dylan's savior, then this region opens up to exploitation. They would have preferred to rule it via a human puppet leadership. However, if they learned that the 'good' thrios had discovered they were pulling humanity's strings, the rogues would have to abandon the puppet path to power. At Astacus, they went with destroying humanity's chance at claiming sovereignty. If humanity is judged rogue alongside them, it opens the region to everyone."

She fell silent imagining battles between alien species fought in human space. Could they claim inhabited planets? Who would have guessed that a galactic multi-species legal system existed? Who enforced it? "Why hasn't anyone come after the thrios rogues?"

Dylan tucked his legs under him, crouching down. "We're a really long way from the thrios region. The katangs were going to send someone to contact the thrios."

"But we killed them," Hugh said, depressed.

"Maybe not all of them," Dylan replied. "A few may have set out independently. Katangs are independent. The impression I got from the torrent is that the katangs expected the thrios to turn up to deal with their rogues, regardless. If Cherry's guess is right, they already did. The thrios are a communal species. Someone would check up on people who've been out of contact for a while. It's just that thrios think in a longer timescale than humans."

Cherry rested a hand on his shell. "You keep knocking me off balance. Do you truly think some individual katangs may have survived?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Dylan. I'm so happy for you. I don't know how we'll find them—"

He interrupted her. “We have to find the good thrios first. Or have them find us. They need to judge Hugh and recognize his sovereignty over the region. I need to speak for him.”

“You could record a message,” Hugh said.

Father and son faced off.

“What am I missing?” Cherry asked, looking between them.

Hugh raked a hand through his hair. “The Delphic Dame has the rogue thrios’ attention. We stirred the hornets’ nest at Astacus. The rogues were on watch. If the other thrios were observing them—”

Cherry interrupted skeptically. “Observing them while they guard a dead planet?”

“The thrios responsible for judging humanity would monitor what humans might do regarding Astacus. Would we loot the graveyard we created?”

Involuntarily, she glanced at Giol and the katang gear he’d brought onboard.

“It’s mine,” Dylan said. “It’s not looting. Giol chose it for me.”

Hugh ignored the legalities of Dylan’s possession of katang gear, and repeated his earlier statement with a slight alteration. He widened his claim from rogues to all thrios. “The Delphic Dame has the thrios’ attention.”

“We want the good guys’ to notice us,” Dylan said. “We have to get them to talk to us so that I can explain things.”

“So that we can correct humanity’s status,” Hugh said. “We have to uphold our claim to our own region.”

Cherry frowned. “You’re hoping and guessing that the good guys saw us escape Astacus, but you don’t know they did. We certainly can’t assume they care that we did or who we are. The Delphic Dame means nothing to them. They certainly can’t guess that you two are onboard. How in the stars do you expect to contact the good guys before the bad guys just blast us to smithereens?”

“By staying in perilous universal rivers.”

Eagerly, Dylan elaborated. “I’m positive at least one katang must have reached the good thrios and told them of the situation here. Those thrios must be looking for us.”

Persuasively, Hugh raised an eyebrow at Cherry. It was just visible through the mess of his hair. “If you were a katang asking the thrios to intervene to deal with the rogues, wouldn’t you give the good guys the technology to navigate the perilous universal rivers? They can find us here.”

“As can the rogues, the planetary guards, the Vizards... anyone who is willing to risk a perilous river.” Cherry’s voice rose. It was all too much.

Hugh retreated from the argument. “We don’t have to decide anything, now. We’re four days from the Pannyk black hole. The pirate base near it is our closest source of materials to restock what we’re using to repair the ship. We must also replace the ammunition we used.”

“I’ve read Pythia’s reports,” Cherry said tightly. In escaping Astacus, she and Hugh had thrown everything they had at their enemies.

If they had to escape a second time...

The Delphic Dame’s energy weapons still functioned, but that left substantial gaps in the ship’s defenses.

Resupplying ASAP was a no-brainer. But the information that had just been dumped on her felt like it had come with an agenda.

Hugh had been upfront. The Delphic Dame was central to his plans...those plans that *we don’t have to decide now*.

But he had decided.

She could feel the tug of an invisible leash. He wanted to lead her to a particular decision. Innate stubbornness had her resisting. Innate stubbornness plus too many years in which people had despised her poor origins and believed they had the right to direct her life and everything she possessed.

Just before she'd left the Diamond Expedition, Admiral Arizmendi had been clear that he expected her to cede command of her spaceship to one of his officers.

Now, here were Hugh and Dylan spinning a web of guesswork, fragilely upheld by alien information, the value of which she couldn't independently verify since it rested on Dylan interpreting a type of ancestral memory correctly.

She didn't doubt Hugh's motives. He was driven by duty, not a lust for power.

Sovereignty. She didn't fully grasp what it meant, but it seemed that her oracular talent hadn't needed to comprehend it to warn her of its consequences.

It explained why her oracular talent had driven her to save Hugh. His society had killed katangs, and a habitable planet, but he'd stood against his own people to save and protect a katang child. He'd risked his life to do so. From what Dylan guessed, that made Hugh the best chance for a human to be recognized as having sovereignty over the human region. Otherwise, the only humans free of the guilt of genocide were Cherry's people. That positioned them as a target for the rogue thrions who—if they couldn't control the region through their human puppets—wanted it declared open and lawless.

If the rogue thrions traveled through the Origin black hole to her society's sector of space to eliminate a contender for the region's sovereignty, her family would be in danger.

Her breathing hitched and she gulped as some of the implications of Dylan's information sank in.

The rogues wouldn't wait to go through the Origin black hole to attack. They'd start by disabling or destroying the Diamond Expedition, the people she'd separated from to rescue Hugh. The expedition and Stranded society was a wildcard in the rogues' plan, and they'd act to remove it.

"I have to warn them," Cherry said.

Hugh easily followed her thoughts. Perhaps he'd anticipated them. "The expedition or your people at home?"

“Both. The expedition first.” For her it was a simple decision. She could send a warning ahead of her via burrtalk to Nora and Liam, but she had no means of contacting the expedition short of traveling to meet them.

She peeked at Giol. She hadn’t told Hugh, Dylan, or anyone about burrtalk, but she feared that Giol had hacked into the Delphic Dame’s systems and would learn about burrtalk even if she locked herself on the bridge to use it.

There were no guarantees Cherry would make it home, which meant she had to warn her family about the thrios, and the threat that might yet come at them. She needed to warn them, now, but she’d be wise to keep the ace up her sleeve that was the burrtalk system.

Burrtalk was a gamechanger for space colonization and conflict. Maybe other aliens had instantaneous communication across galaxies. However, she doubted the katangs’ had possessed it. If they had, they could have warned their scattered ships when humanity attacked.

She really wished she knew what agenda and capabilities the katang had installed in Giol.

Since wishing was as useless as farting in a tornado she needed to hide the burrtalk system even as she used it.

Besides warning Nora and Liam, Cherry craved contact with people whom she loved and trusted unconditionally. In the last week, not only had she nearly died, but she’d killed people to survive. It had changed her, and she needed the reassurance of reaching out to people she loved.

The answer was obvious. She’d fake her conversation. She’d pretend that the burrtalk system simply recorded messages. She’d do it right now. “This is overwhelming, Hugh. I need to process everything. Think about it. As you said, we have four days to Pannyk.”

“We can’t let the rogues win,” Dylan said.

Absently, Cherry fist-bumped his claw. “No one wants that.” But what one meant by “win” changed according to

where you stood. For her, keeping her people safe was a win—and the former federation wasn't her people.

She escaped to the bridge and collapsed into the captain's chair. Flipping up the circle in the console that resembled the cover of a cupholder, she activated burrtalk and hurried into speech before Jonah or anyone could greet her. "Nora, Liam, if you're listening to this, I made it home safe. I wish we could be talking, now. Since we can't, I'll pretend we are and tell you everything before I forget things, or not forget, but maybe remember things differently because of what'll happen later. It's a lot."

That ought to be more than enough to warn them to mute their side of the talk. Their cover would be blown if Ekon started crying—or greeting his Auntie Cherry.

Silence answered her. *Thank the stars.*

She told them about Astacus. Jonah, Nora's retroandroid AI, already knew that Cherry had intended to try and cross the no-go zone to reach the forbidden, nuclear-blasted katang home world, but she'd asked him to keep that knowledge from Nora unless he didn't hear from Cherry again. In the worst case scenario, learning that she was likely dead and why was better than never knowing what happened to her. Probably.

Given Nora's pregnancy, Cherry didn't want to worry her, but realistically, Nora and Liam, and everyone in their sector of space, needed every second of preparation time in case the rogue thrios did come after them.

Guiltily, Cherry was aware of a sneaking relief that after her warning to stay silent, they couldn't shout at her for venturing to Astacus.

The risk had been worth it. Otherwise they'd never have learned about the thrios, both the good and bad ones, and the fact that humanity was being judged as to whether it would be recognized as holding sovereignty over its region of space.

"Whatever sovereignty is. Do I sound as confused as I feel? I wish I could be recording better news."

She was incredibly grateful she'd been able to warn them.

If worst came to worst, Nora could reactivate the Vaporilens at the Origin black hole and block thrios' access to the sector. Unfortunately, it wouldn't necessarily stop the rogues. They could go the long way around and enter via the distant Beta black hole. Their ships and their longer lifespans could tolerate the journey. However, blocking the Origin black hole's millrace would gain humans time to prepare. It would also leave Cherry and the Diamond Expedition locked out.

Cherry expected that Nora and Liam would, instead, bolster existing defenses. Her home sector could defend itself.

The strongest burr wielders were able to obliterate spaceships and even planets. It was the sort of power that meant they could defeat the rogue thrios—if they could detect them.

Cherry rubbed her throat. Her voice had thinned from fear. The rogues had been able to detect the Delphic Dame when the federation ships couldn't. What if the rogues could hide from her people's surveillance technology? "I'm so scared that our tech won't be able to see them."

Shakily, she inhaled. Practicality, not fear, was required. "We're headed for the pirate base at Pannyk. I have a few ideas for how to acquire the raw materials we need. Pythia can fabricate everything once I have the raw materials. I'll update you—add to this recording—after Pannyk, and I'll try to learn more about the thrios and galactic space law from Dylan and Giol. Imagine how many weird aliens must be out there. Love you and miss you."

She switched off burrtalk and sank back in the chair.

One upside to monologuing was that she'd been able to confess her oracular talent, and how it was the reason she'd joined the Diamond Expedition and searched out Hugh, without having to defend keeping it secret previously.

Although Nora would understand.

Their mom had drummed into all her children to hug their secrets close. If you weren't a royal, but had a sensitivity to burrs, it meant you were one of the Forgotten, and the only

way to stay safe and avoid being scooped up by people who'd exploit you, was to keep your ability secret.

When the original stranded colonists encountered the Vapori lens that blocked the Origin black hole's millrace, the fifteen people they sent to examine it were changed by its energy. The royal families inherited their burr sensitivity and burr wielding talent from thirteen of the original fifteen who intermarried with the ships' captains' families. But two of the fifteen disagreed with locking the power of burr sensitivity into the captains' lines, and hid, instead, among the population. They hid so effectively that only later did their descendants occasionally face discovery as the Forgotten.

Maybe the two dissenters had possessed a version of Cherry's oracular talent.

“By the pricking of my thumbs, something evil this way comes.” In humanity's long history, there'd always been hints of predictive talents.

And mostly, people had hated those prophets.

Sighing, Cherry stared unfocusedly at the screen that showed the emptiness of the universal river around them.

By now, the Diamond Expedition would have well and truly made contact with people in the Behesht Sector and on the planet Miheva. The Admiral and other expedition members weren't fools. They'd be on alert for treachery and danger.

They wouldn't anticipate genocidal aliens manipulating the fractured federation's leadership.

If, by some miracle, the rogue thrions weren't in the Behesht Sector, the humans of the federation remained potential threats. In comparison to the Delphic Dame's technology, the former federation's technological development had stagnated. Possibly it had been artificially suppressed by thrions meddling.

It meant that the spaceships in the expedition fleet were a powerful temptation.

Was it already too late to prevent human-to-human conflict?

Leaning back in the chair and consulting her oracular talent, basically poking at it as if poking a sleeping bear, she found it had no opinion on any next steps. Certainly, when she tested it she felt neither hope nor dread at visiting Pannyk, nor did her talent suggest the alternative of a longer, undersupplied, and underarmed trip to the authorized station of Fauda.

Maybe her talent was exhausted from directing their escape from Astacus.

As Nora's half-sister, Cherry had spent time in the vaults beneath the Laotian Palace on Capitoline exposed to burrs. She'd felt that exposure strengthen her talent. Maybe she needed contact with a burr to refill the energy she'd used in the last few days.

An extra loud gurgle from her stomach reminded her of other sources of energy.

When she glanced at the clock, it was well past lunchtime.

Exiting the bridge, she halted abruptly.

Dylan sat on the sofa in the lounge, shelling and eating peanuts while watching an action movie.

She doubted he was actually following the story.

His softly waving antennae revealed that he was deep in thought.

She leaned against the bulkhead. The avalanche of information he'd shared had overwhelmed her. She'd forgotten to check his emotional health.

Crossing over to the sofa, she stole a peanut, and shelled it deftly. "What's up?"

"Hugh is busy helping Pythia with repairs. He reckons there are some things a robot can't do as well as a human. Giol advised me to meditate."

Instead, Dylan was watching a movie.

Cherry smiled. "How do katangs meditate? You've got a lot of legs to cross."

He laughed. “It’s not body posture. It’s...letting myself connect to the currents I swim in. Back in the Hall of Charts on Astacus, Giol called them paths. They’re possibilities.”

She remembered what Giol had said about katang paths. Dylan had been unconscious during some of those conversations. He hadn’t been present at all when she and Giol had returned to the ruined katang settlement and Giol had recorded her existence in the archive.

The phantom sensation of that experience swept through her, part memory, part echo of her talent. Her encounter with the archive had imparted something to her, before it had wrung and squeezed her spirit—or that’s what it had felt like. She’d inflated, and then, had all excess siphoned away.

Had she been altered?

She hadn’t considered that possibility. At the time, if anything, she’d felt more herself.

As if my talent was strengthened, she thought slowly. Being able to scoff at the idea would have relieved her sudden, belated caution. She’d allowed Giol to use alien technology on her. She’d been overawed, even if she’d called the archive “a pillar of wriggly light”.

Dylan nudged her knee. “Giol said that katangs had three limbs in the paths, connecting to the past, present, and future simultaneously, but that humans are only fragilely connected to the present.”

“He said the same to me.” She mock-frowned at him. “Hey, kid, are you a time traveler?”

The joke fell flat. “No, katangs progress linearly, same as humans.” He chewed a clawful of peanuts. “It would be cool to time travel, but then, what would you change? What might you wreck by trying to save someone?”

The only person in Dylan’s life, apart from her—and she was temporary—was Hugh.

Dylan was worrying about his dad.

“Every choice has a cost.” She shelled another peanut. “But you also have to own inaction.” Doing nothing went against her nature. Any action was better than the regret of not trying. It was why she would travel to Miheva to try and warn the Diamond Expedition about the thrios. She reached for another peanut. “If it’s a choice between doing and not doing, I choose doing.”

He nudged her with a claw. “I know. Cherry?”

“Hmm?”

“Stop stealing my peanuts.”

THREE

Eating a sandwich at the kitchen table, Cherry studied Pythia's report on repairs and raw material requirements, and considered ways and means, ploys and decoys. A towers brat and the daughter of a smuggler ought to be able to crack a pirate base.

The trick would be to use its particular circumstances against it.

During the two month journey to Astacus, Hugh had compiled a report on settlements in the region. Obviously, he'd focused on the Montu Military Research Base which housed the planetary guards who defended Astacus, but he'd also covered official stations like Fauda and its nearby algal moon that supplied raw materials for food synthesizers. He'd dismissed the Pannyk pirate base as best avoided.

Where he saw outlaws, Cherry saw survivors. In their current circumstances, she saw an opportunity.

She'd grown up in a society where the military was a fighting force. Wars between the six realms were a fact of life. People enlisting could reasonably expect to see combat inside a ten year service.

The federation was different. The military and academia were intertwined. They couldn't imagine separating the two

strands that built and sustained the institutions and enterprises that protected the ideals of their civilization; that is, that liberty was everyone's right and that perpetuating it was everyone's responsibility.

That the vaunted "liberty" was, in practice, adherence to federal authority as it filtered through sector government and was enforced at the planetary and station level was something the pirates recognized and rejected. If liberty meant coloring inside the lines, they chose to throw away their crayons and live by their own rules.

Surviving in opposition to federation authority meant a precarious life on the fringes of society. The Pannyk pirate base had survived for over a century by nicely judging that their nuisance value was less than the effort of destroying them.

In fact, while pirates did transact business at the pirate base, it would have been more accurate to call it a scrapyards. It was where pirates brought hijacked vessels, and bandits brought those they'd stolen. Scavengers brought wrecks that they couldn't legally claim, or which, if they legally claimed them would have seen the profit eaten up by taxes.

It was amazing how far people would go to avoid paying tax.

The Pannyk pirate base dismantled ships, sold scrap, did a few repairs, and supplemented its activities by processing ore mined from asteroids in the area.

It would have what she needed. The challenge was acquiring the materials without losing her ship. She couldn't wave around her list of requirements. It would reveal her ship's lack of ammunition. Buying less suspicious items and breaking them down onboard the Delphic Dame to be reforged into what the ship actually needed was the smart move. Maybe. Hopefully.

So deeply was she scheming that when an antenna nudged her shoulder, she jumped and squeaked.

“Sorry,” Dylan muttered. “Cherry, can Giol study your media to learn about your people? Hugh has already said Giol should learn about the federation.”

“Yeah, no problem.”

You had to understand the federation and its history to comprehend how limited the options were for people on Pannyk pirate base. It wasn't just ships that ended up in scrapyards. People could be beached as well.

She watched Dylan vanish down the ladder, presumably to the lower cargo hold to inform Giol of the good news. *Lucky Giol*, she thought wryly. The katang droid got to study yet another aspect of an alien human civilization. *But at least my society didn't kill his.*

Nor was her society collapsing, unlike the civilization she currently traveled through.

Thirty years into the slow fall of the federation, sector governments still mostly held, but their planets and stations exercised increasing independence, either by economic or military force.

An increasing percentage of the population were mobile. People traveled to improve their economic circumstances, for religion, from fear of societal collapse, and in pursuit of their dreams.

Whether the current disruption of the federation would be judged by future historians as transformation or collapse would depend on the identity its people chose. Did they view themselves as federal citizens, as humans in the one and only human civilization, or as people belonging to smaller collectives in an uncertain universe?

Those families, families like Hugh's, who wished for the return of the glory days of the Civilized Federation, would fear the Diamond Expedition. Its revelation of a separate human society challenged the federalists' preferred transformational narrative in which a single human civilization existed and had to be fought for.

Unless Cherry's people, the Stranded of the Human Sector, could be wrapped into that narrative, the logical action for the federalists was to eliminate the Stranded.

How do you erase people from history?

Federation leadership had proven its readiness to order genocide. The Death, Giol called it.

She shivered, feeling cold to the bone and all the more determined to nip in and out of Pannyk fast. If she proved too late to warn the Diamond Expedition of the worst aspects of the federation and the manipulations of the thrios, she could at least provide an update of the expedition's fate to Nora and Liam.

Also, it was ever so slightly possible that she might change the balance of a fight if the expedition was attacked.

Her oracular talent had saved the Delphic Dame. They'd escaped Astacus. If she rejoined the Diamond Expedition, especially with access to one of its burrs, then potentially her oracular talent might highlight an escape route.

While that was a remote dream, providing Nora and Liam with more information on the thrios and the federation was a feasible and vital objective.

Her fingers tightened around the handle of her empty coffee mug. She couldn't mess up at Pannyk. The Delphic Dame had to be ready to act.

To scarper was to sound a warning and run. Growing up in the Angkorran towers, all brats learned it. Whether the enemy was the police, gang enforcers, or merely an enraged parent, you warned your friends and ran.

You gave a warning because next time you might be the one who needed it.

She'd been staring absently at the ladder Dylan had vanished down. Now, she blinked as, in place of the returning adolescent katang, Hugh appeared.

He joined her at the kitchen table.

She greeted him crossly. “The wretched thrios should deal with their own rogues.”

The Delphic Dame was two months away from Diamond Station, which was the first stop on her return journey home. Miheva, the planet where the expedition had hoped to contact the federation, was even further. It meant she’d be worrying for two months, minimum.

He shrugged. “They’ll have their reasons. Alien laws and customs—”

Her aggressive eye-roll silenced him. Yeah, she remembered Dylan’s response that the thrios came from a long, long way away. Human society also had its frontiers and badlands, the places where those who didn’t fit in retreated to. Pannyk pirate base came to mind. Critically, though, humans knew you couldn’t ignore those areas. You couldn’t say “out of sight, out of mind”. Those were the areas where trouble grew.

If the thrios were trusted enough that other aliens accepted their judgement regarding regional boundaries, then the thrios had to know better than to ignore their own malcontents.

Which meant...

She groaned. “They’re waiting. They won’t intervene until they’ve rendered judgment on humanity, either granting us—maybe you—sovereignty or stamping rogue status on all humans and declaring our region and its resources open. If we don’t get sovereignty, then an open region probably means that what the rogues are doing will become the legal norm. They’ll be free to pursue their own interests in the region, even attack humans.

She propped her elbows on the table. Were the so-called “good” thrios ruthless enough to allow their rogues to provoke an unknown alien species, humans, into revealing their moral nature? “Why are you so sure that Dylan’s information and speculations are right?”

“Because of what my mother said after I informed her I’d rescued Dylan in his lifepod.”

Hugh had told Cherry the story of his mom ordering his death, but only briefly. She knew that it had occurred at his family's retreat, the moonbase at Ihy. Ihy circled the gas giant Hathor and was four days travel from the Aaru seat of government on Thebes.

Kendra Owens, his mother, was the Governor of the Aaru Sector.

“Just before Mom gave the order to eliminate us, she said ‘The larva can't live. We can't afford doubt. They have to be monsters because if they aren't, then we are. Or we've been made to be.’ And that's when she ended the call.”

His hazel eyes drilled into hers. “Mom knew about the rogues. She ordered Dylan and me sacrificed to them.”

The moment when your mother ordered your death, you'd either remember it in excruciating detail or blank the conversation entirely. She didn't doubt that Hugh remembered every word, every inflection.

...we've been made to be.

“She sacrificed you for a lie,” Cherry whispered.

He'd been resting his right hand on the table. Now, it closed into a fist. “If my family knew about the rogue thrios, if they even as much as faintly suspected that katangs weren't evil, and they approved and participated in genocide anyway...I have to know why. What did the rogues offer that was so compelling it twisted the federation's leadership?”

The Four Hundred and Twentieth President of the Civilized Federation had been his great-grandfather.

He uncurled his fist, and flattened his hand, finger by finger, on the table. His nails paled at the pressure he applied. His lips paled, too, as his mouth compressed, keeping in words and emotions.

“Hugh?”

“My family were part of the leadership group that led humanity onto the path to death and the loss of our own region

of space. If there is anything I can do, *anything*, to fix that, I have to try.”

“Is there anything you can do?” she queried. “Realistically, as much as we love Dylan, can rescuing one katang really balance killing his home world and his people? It can’t all rest on one man.” *On you.*

“Delivering the warning does. It has to come from someone they’ll believe.” From one of the elite families.

As he flexed his hand, the blood rushed back to his fingertips. His mouth remained thin-lipped and his eyes bleak.

She nodded, but not in agreement. Whatever he intended, it was self-sacrificing stardust. What she silently resolved was that they’d discuss it later. For now, their shared priority was reaching Pannyk pirate base safely. “Four days till the Pannyk black hole. When we exit the millrace, I intend to stay stealthed and observe the pirate base as we approach. If Pythia can crack its comms system, as she did for the pirate base in the Behesht Sector, some options for acquiring the materials we need may open up. Otherwise what we plan, now, will be how we proceed.”

She rapped the table. “So, ideas?”

FOUR

Cherry wasn't actively trying to avoid Dylan. But she was glad he wasn't around to hear her questions for Giol. The kid might think she was trying to get rid of him.

Unmoving, the massive droid crouched by the katang gear he'd brought onboard. His compound eyes on their raised eyestalks could see her wherever she was in the cargo hold, but she walked around to face him front on. It was a habit of human courtesy.

"I meant to outfit the top cargo hold for you," she said. "But repairs come first, and then, I don't know how long Dylan is staying."

Giol had proclaimed himself Dylan's servant, and even if Dylan had corrected that to "assistant, like Pythia assists Cherry", where Dylan went, the droid would follow.

"Giol, if some katangs have survived on small ships—I'm not asking you how to contact them—but if Dylan could reach them, would they take him in? Would they provide him a home and protection?"

"No."

The blunt response shocked a half-laugh out of her. "Gee, don't sugarcoat it."

“Dylan has completed the clatter ceremony. He is an adolescent. Independence is expected of him.”

“But surely if life had been normal, he wouldn’t have been sent off with nothing?”

Giol indicated the nearest of the secured katang gear.

Impatiently, Cherry huffed. “All right. You brought some stuff along. But Dylan doesn’t have a ship. He doesn’t have a family home to return to. Wouldn’t any surviving katang be glad to see him?”

There was a slightly longer pause, then, “No.”

Her hands hit her hips. “Why not?”

“His path is his own. It is not theirs. If he was an adult storyteller, they might welcome him for that reason. For a visit,” he added hastily as she opened her mouth. “His path is his own.”

“Repeating yourself doesn’t clarify anything,” she grumbled. “Oh fine. Well, I *like* Dylan and I’m happy for him to stay, *and* I’m willing to show it, so, we’d better plan for fixing up the empty cargo hold once repairs are done. You need a place to live since you won’t fit in the lounge. Certainly not in the kitchen. If we need anything from Pannyk, we have to add it to the list, now. That doesn’t guarantee we’ll get it. We have to prioritize what is achievable on Pannyk.”

Giol didn’t respond.

She snapped her fingers. “Ideas? What should we do about the cargo hold? What do you need to be comfortable?”

The twelve foot tall droid so seldom moved that when he rose abruptly to his full height, Cherry stumbled back.

Giol stilled. “I do not live. You have forgotten or not understood. On Astacus, we spoke about the difference between sentience and sapience. Katangs created me only for the former. I am designed to serve, not to desire. Comfort is not a consideration.”

“You’re daft.” She was cranky that he’d startled her into a nervous retreat. She planted her feet. “I’m not the one who

doesn't understand. You are Dylan's assistant."

"Yes."

"Therefore, his expectations of your role is what will define it. You don't get to say what is and isn't important. Dylan has grown up with human social norms."

Giol's eyestalks bent toward her.

She raised her chin. "Dylan doesn't see you as his servant. He called you his assistant. If you have to serve him as he directs, then that means you need to be ready to assist him. An excellent assistant anticipates and provides for their boss's needs."

"Anticipates?" The droid considered the notion.

Cherry kicked along his thinking. "It's precisely what you did when you brought the katang gear onboard. You anticipated what Dylan might need."

One large claw opened and closed as Giol pondered.

Cherry spun away. "It's a big space upstairs. How do we set up the deck to enable you to assist Dylan best, remembering that you need to be comfortable to operate at peak efficiency?"

"Comfort is not a factor."

Her muttering about martyrdom complexes probably meant nothing to a katang droid. Certainly, Giol ignored her.

She waved her hand in front of his nearest antenna. She couldn't reach his eyestalks. "Think, genius." She was cranky. "If you're comfortable, Dylan will be comfortable. You are the nearest pattern we have for what the last katang needs. Think on that."

Giol rested all his claws on the floor. "Hmm."

Gotcha, Cherry thought smugly. Even an alien droid could be driven in the direction you wished. You just had to find the right buttons to push.

"I need to consider," Giol said.

“You do that.”

The discussion with Giol about renovating the top cargo hold was Cherry’s sole discussion of plans for *after* Pannyk.

Although there was plenty of discussion as to plans *for* Pannyk pirate base; namely, who would infiltrate it.

“You will stay on the ship,” Hugh said to her.

“I’m better with people than you are.”

“It’s not people skills that are needed...”

They argued during meals. Otherwise, both were busy assisting Pythia to repair the Delphic Dame.

Dylan meditated. When not meditating he and Giol examined gadgets from the katang gear.

Normally, Hugh would have been in engineer heaven investigating the alien technology. His absence underlined how frantically they were readying the Delphic Dame for exiting the Pannyk black hole’s millrace.

They had to be prepared to dive back into the perilous universal river and run if they were met by hostiles in the Pannyk region.

Cherry couldn’t assume that her burrtalk system was the only method of communicating across vast distances. It would be a definite edge if it was, but she had to prepare as if it wasn’t. There could be enemies waiting for them.

Caution would be their watchword until they committed to reaching the pirate base and collecting the required materials. At that point, speed and her oracular talent were their friends.

She nudged her talent occasionally, but it didn’t stir. Since it had seldom bestirred itself in her life, limiting itself to forewarning of life-changing events, she chose to regard the lack of response as a positive sign and not a sign of the talent having exhausted its energy.

“You’ll be there when I need you, right?”

Her talent snoozed on.

Giol, though, proved unexpectedly helpful. Via the ship's intercom, he requested a meeting with Cherry.

She'd been working in the garden unit, feeling dozy in the warm, humid atmosphere. The garden had withstood the fast maneuvers of their escape from Astacus surprisingly well, but there was still pruning, replanting, and general tidying to be done. Dylan had worked on it for a bit before joining Hugh in his workshop.

As Cherry approached Giol in the cool, crowded cargo hold, she heard the murmur of their voices through the open workshop hatch.

She smiled at the katang droid. "Giol, do you have your plans for our new K-deck?" *K* for katang.

"I do, but I believe the deck is not important."

"It's not a priority." She sat on the floor near him, her back against a bulkhead, and yawned. "You really are huge." Even crouched down, his body filled her vision. "However, once we've resupplied at Pannyk—"

"I can help," Giol said.

Cherry's second yawn spluttered and choked as she imagined the katang droid scuttling around the pirate base. "Um, the idea is to be stealthy."

"And fast. I understand."

"I realize you are stronger than us," she began tactfully.

Giol never cared for tact. "You are the captain of the Delphic Dame. Dylan said I must listen to you. You reminded me of the distinction between serving and assisting Dylan. Securing the safety of the spaceship on which he travels is assisting him."

"Yes, it is." *Poor Giol*. That he felt he had to justify his urge to be helpful revealed a disturbing insecurity. His programming hadn't prepared the droid for life on a human ship.

It hadn't prepared him for anything of the existence he'd been forced into by humanity's actions. From his original role as a gardener, he'd become a caretaker for his ruined katang settlement on Astacus. Now, he was an assistant to one of the last katangs, perhaps the only living katang storyteller—and Dylan was still trying to determine what that role meant for him and for those around him.

“I heard you discussing the materials you require to restock the Delphic Dame to defend and repair itself in the future. You are willing to acquire goods which may have to be broken down to provide the raw materials to then manufacture ammunition and other, more complicated items.”

Cherry straightened from her tired slump. “As long as the deconstruction process can be handled safely onboard.” The caveat was important.

Gravely, Giol waved an antenna in agreement. “I have some ideas.”

As they neared the exit from the universal river, Hugh joined Cherry on the bridge. After all their repairs, the ship's energy weapons might win them enough time to retreat if the Delphic Dame's stealth shield was breached. They exited the millrace, metaphorically holding their breath.

No one fired on them.

Pythia scanned their environs. The first scan showed nothing. The Delphic Dame's AI pushed further.

A single ship, a barge, traveled toward them; traveled slowly. It was about four days away, putting it halfway between them and the pirate base.

“I know it's a fringe station,” Cherry said. “But there should be some traffic.”

The universal river from the Montu black hole was perilous, but the river that connected Pannyk to the Limu black hole and Fauda Station was marked safe on Hugh's maps.

Barges should have been towing in lines of wrecks and carting out parts and raw materials. Pirate ships ought to have been trading and resupplying, their crews rip-roaring through the base.

“My information was a couple of years out of date,” Hugh said. “Maybe a bit longer than a couple of years,” he added doubtfully.

Dylan’s voice came over the intercom from the lounge where he was strapped in securely, in case of emergency maneuvers. He was watching events via the wall screen. “Will they have our materials?”

“We’ll find out,” Cherry said. The place seemed dead, or on the slide into moribundity. “On the plus side, I doubt our enemies are here. On the downside, we may need to scavenge our supplies. Hugh, I should join you on the base.”

“Here we go,” Dylan whispered. The intercom caught his mutter.

Cherry and Hugh grinned ruefully at each other. As a result of overstretched nerves and general unhappiness they’d spent the last few days arguing in between repair jobs. Really, they’d argued any time they came in contact.

Just thinking of the Delphic Dame without Hugh and Dylan hurt Cherry. She rubbed her sternum. They had come onboard as guests, as people she’d rescued, and become so much more. They were idiots who thought they ought to contribute to saving the federation, the same federation that had tried, for years, to kill them. Foolishly honorable, compassionate idiots they might be, but they were her idiots. She wanted them safe.

Hugh jerked her out of what was becoming a horrible, habitual downward spiral of dread on their behalf.

“If Pythia cracks the comms system and we get some idea of what we’re walking into...” He almost conceded Cherry’s right to visit the base.

Not that Cherry needed his permission. But working at cross-purposes might harm their shared objective. They

needed the materials on their list. At least the top five. The others were nice-to-haves.

They had intended to lurk near the millrace for a day, but in such an empty zone, cautious lurking became time-wasting. Cherry checked the screens, again. “We should go for it. Speed is our friend. A perilous universal river doesn’t mean it’s completely unnavigable by non-katangs. Some Vizards or rogues could follow us.”

If there had been rogues, they would have easily caught up with the battered Delphic Dame. However, Hugh didn’t raise that point. He was in shock. “The information I’ve collected is useless. Pannyk pirate base ought to be thriving. No one’s here.” That was an exaggeration. There was the barge. “Where have they gone? Why?”

“Could something have drawn them all into the base?” Dylan asked.

All ships, huddled together?

“We’ll stay stealthed, and go look,” Cherry decided. She selected a pre-programmed oblique route that doglegged a couple of times. It struck a balance between speed and concealment. Leaning back in the captain’s chair, she studied Hugh.

He raked a hand through his hair. “I’ve been basing my game plan on out-of-date data. I took into account that it would be out of date, but not to the extent of a station dying.”

“If it’s dead,” she said. “This isn’t the only route from Pannyk. They can reach other places via interstellar travel. Most people never enter a universal river.”

He shook his head, his gaze never leaving the nearly empty screen. “You’ve seen the map of the region. People might be able to survive out here, but the pirates rely on the safe universal river to Fauda, branching off before it to Torabu and passing it by for Yallah. That’s where they raided.”

Arguably, the failure of his knowledge base wouldn’t have hit as hard if the Aaru Sector wasn’t his home range. His mother remained governor of it—at least, she did as far as

their latest information declared. Hugh expected to know the ebbs and flows of the sector almost by osmosis. He'd been born swimming in its political currents.

Maybe humans didn't imprint ancestral memories on their bodies as katangs did, but they still took some knowledge for granted, and were rattled when it proved false.

Two days out from the pirate base, Pythia cracked the comms system and extracted essential information. The results were added to her scans of the area.

Pannyk pirate base was dying. It was, in fact, a gasp or two away from dead.

For a man who hated pirates, Hugh was furious at their loss.

But then, Pannyk piracy hadn't so much ended as relocated its base of operations. To Fauda.

"Fauda is an authorized Aaru station. What in stars dust do they think they're doing selling pardons?" Hugh shook his personal comms unit on which he was reading Pythia's summary of Pannyk's comms traffic.

The last stragglers on Pannyk were scrambling to get off. A few of the residents intended to remain, but they'd do so in a much reduced space. Keeping the lights on—and the atmosphere and heating—required resources, and those departing took everything they could. Their challenge was to buy entry and a new life on Fauda Station.

"Fauda is condoning piracy."

Dylan hastily retracted an antenna as Hugh brandished his comms unit.

"One person's piracy is another's efficient reallocation of resources," Cherry said.

Hugh swore. "Pirates kill people."

“Governments do, too. They call it war or peacekeeping.” She snatched the comms unit off him. “Hugh, change can be violent. The authorities on Fauda may be doing the best they can to contain the spread of violence. Having the pirates under their eye and regulating the rewards of piracy might be the best stopgap measure.”

She took a deep breath. “Even if it isn’t, our problem is finding what we need on a scavenged station. The upside to this situation is that the defense system has great gaping holes in it. The hardware’s been sold, and the experts who operated it are gone. We can slip in undetected, but finding what we want...I’m going to go on-base.”

Having braced for an argument, she faltered when Hugh merely shrugged.

He was angry at the system and its failure. Small, backwater, violent Pannyk pirate base wasn’t meant to be absorbed by an official station. It wasn’t how the sector he’d been raised in was designed to work.

Warily, she watched his reaction as she outlined her plan, one he’d argued her out of earlier. On the quiet, she’d gone ahead and prepared for it. “I found two potential fixers.”

Dylan’s rigidly anxious antennae relaxed as he focused on her rather than Hugh’s frustration. “You mean the insiders you spoke about?”

“I could offer them gold, one or both of them, whoever we choose. Or since gold isn’t as important right now as getting off the pirate base...I haven’t had Pythia modify the top cargo hold into a katang deck. It wouldn’t be difficult to add a bathroom and move a food synthesizer up there. I could offer to trade transport off the base for the materials to restock the Delphic Dame.”

Now, she had Hugh’s attention. “You’d let strangers on the ship?”

Ironic. She’d let him and Dylan and a katang droid onboard. Humans weren’t as strange as Giol. “When we talked about contracting a fixer, we believed the pirate base was

thriving. Now that it's dying, there'll be people trapped there. If one of them can arrange for us to get what we need, why shouldn't we give them a ride out of hell? I don't have to guarantee a destination. Away is all that will matter to them."

The last three years on the run with Dylan had taught Hugh something of how things operated for people on the fringe of the system, but not for those at the bottom of it. The people who got ground down and spat out. Pannyk pirate base was one of the places they ended up.

If Cherry hadn't been exposed to the reality of royal life in her own sector, she wouldn't have understood the paradox of Hugh's upbringing. He'd been raised with a rare breadth of understanding of the federation, but the view had been from inside an elite bubble.

Cherry had lived the grim reality of life at the bottom.

For those stuck on the pirate base and desperate to leave, lacking anything else to sell, they'd sell themselves.

She'd been there. She'd entered an indentured service contract. Nora had bought her out. Cherry's talent had been right to drive Cherry to take that risk. However, she'd never forget the fear of signing seven years of her life away, of signing away her rights to her body and labor. "You want to save your civilization. Why shouldn't I save one person?"

He folded his arms. "Don't make me out to be the bad guy. The stakes couldn't be higher. We're talking about the future of humanity. We can't ignore the big threat to chase a small win."

Maybe he couldn't. She could. "Speak for yourself."

They watched for threats as the Delphic Dame took its oblique path to the pirate base, but none eventuated. It left them time to argue about their plans post-Pannyk.

Hugh felt that humanity was under a time crunch. Humans had to prove their value to the thrios judges, and to do that,

humanity had to be forced into awareness of the threat they faced. “The best way to stop the rogues is to convince people of their existence. We need others to resist the lies and prove that humans can be good. Are good.”

“You mean the federation,” Cherry said. “You were raised to believe you were the good guys. But how do you define good? The former federation’s definition of good included destroying a habitable planet en route to committing genocide, all to save the universe from the wicked katangs.”

He gritted his teeth. “This is not the time for sarcasm.”

“Not sarcasm. Truth. ‘Good’ is a weasel word.” She stared at the screen and the dot that represented the barge they’d passed as it headed out and they approached the pirate base. “From what Dylan says, the thrios consider destroying a habitable planet to be the definition of evil. Therefore, the opposite, saving a planet, saving life, must be good.”

When he’d have answered, she waved a silencing finger. She wasn’t finished. “My people, the Stranded, have already proved that we value life. Apart from not committing genocide, for half a millennium we’ve possessed technology that can obliterate a planet in a second, and we’ve never done so. Moreover, Nora used a burr to promote life on a planet. She accelerated its terraforming. Hugh, when you say that humans have to prove themselves, you mean your federation. But me, I don’t care about restoring it to power or supporting its leadership.”

He scowled at her. “So, you’re going to run off to the backwater of Miheva and your Diamond Expedition.”

“Have you considered that there’d be no better proof of humans’ rogue nature than if they destroyed their own? If the federation fires on their long-lost cousins, my people, they’d prove their anti-life status. Moreover, if our burr wielders siphon life in defense of the expedition, that would eliminate us as sovereignty options. Win-win for the rogue thrios. Lose-lose for humans. Hugh, I have to go.” The plea for his understanding slipped out.

The Delphic Dame was her ship. Its destination was her choice. She wouldn't abandon Hugh and Dylan, or Giol, but nor did they get to dictate her priorities or the ship's route.

They would have to find their own path.

Currently, when she and Hugh faced each other across the kitchen table or in engineering over the slow-printing simul fabricator, or here and now, on the bridge, they weren't really seeing each other. Not anymore.

What they saw was regret; the path they couldn't take.

Hugh wanted to run and warn his people, specifically, his leaders, that they faced a defining choice. "I don't have to solve the problem of how to claim sovereignty, but I have to warn them that the chance exists. I have to tell the people who, like Mom, know about the thrios. They'll believe me."

"They want to kill you," Cherry said.

"Only because they didn't know sovereignty was up for grabs. It changes everything."

For Cherry, it changed nothing. It wasn't gaining sovereignty, but escaping the threat of the rogues, that drove her. She bit her lip.

The katangs had lived a fundamental truth of existence: a person could only walk their own path. Existence was as lonely as space itself.

FIVE

A day out from the pirate base, Cherry contacted the first of the two fixers Pythia had identified from the station's comms chatter.

Maree accepted the call. She was a thin-faced, older woman who spoke with the fast patter and clipped accent of Thebes, the capital planet of the Aaru Sector.

Hugh had also been born and raised on Thebes but his drawl marked him as one of the federation elite, whereas Maree was anything but.

“I can clean anything. I've done food service. I can cook. You wouldn't believe what I can get out of a food synthesizer. I can do massage, but I don't do sex work. I've been a nail technician. I don't overlook details. No, ma'am, not me. You'd be shocked, shee-ocked, if you knew what cleaners witness. But we don't talk. Nope. Zipped lips. But I can tell you where the stuff is that might have been overlooked. Old cupboards, forgotten storerooms. The cobwebs in some of those places... you wouldn't believe the size of them spiders. Pest control. I can do that, too. Spppsstt and splat! Yep, I'm good all-round crew.”

Except that she was stuck on the dying pirate base, so how good was she?

Raising her voice, Cherry spoke over Maree's stream of self-promoting chatter. "I'm not looking to hire crew. Payment is a ride to the first official station we stop at, if you can find what I want."

"Watch me." Maree was suddenly all business, and blessed silence.

"Okay. I'm looking for med-docs. Non-operational. I'm sure any that work are gone."

"*All* of them are gone. Med-docs are a fairy tale wish. If you want stuff like that—"

"Black boxes." Cherry had pared down Giol's list of options. She'd stuck the one with the greatest likelihood of being overlooked by previous scavengers in the middle. The one she had never imagined could be useful.

Black boxes.

Every federation spaceship was required by law to carry a minimum of three black boxes, plus a black box in every life raft. They provided what was intended to be an indestructible record of the ship's history. On a station that had specialized in dismantling wrecks and rebirthing the stolen and salvageable, black boxes would have multiplied.

They perfectly fitted Cherry's requirement for targeted acquisition. She'd been wracking her brains for what scavengers would have left behind; something that they'd be ashamed of and which wouldn't be welcome on Fauda Station, something considered bad luck. Taboo.

"Black boxes?" Maree's response proved the point. On-screen, she crossed her fingers and flicked them over her left shoulder in an obvious warding-off gesture. Confusingly, though, she then nodded. "They may still be...yes, yes, there is data on them, but who cares? The pirates here, they just traveled the same routes, up and down, around and back." The words spilled forth, but behind them was thought. "Lotsa data, if you don't think it's cursed."

"I don't." Cherry hadn't even considered the data aspect. Her curiosity had been focused on Giol.

The katang droid's sensors must be stunningly acute, and distinctly different to human technology, for him to have sensed the contents of the black boxes on the Delphic Dame. Or else, that sort of unique sensor existed external to him among the gear he'd brought onboard.

He'd explained that there was a gel—a non-Newtonian fluid, to be precise—which absorbed impact shock but also increased the sensitivity of the recording equipment in the boxes. “It is somewhat similar to a material katangs use. From my limited knowledge of humans, I deduce that it is expensive in your society. Expensive and, judging by your expression, little known.”

That ignorance, shared by most of the population, would be what saved the black boxes. Those who knew about the gel kept it secret; hence, the discarded stash of black boxes on the station. No one was about to confide in pirates.

Giol was confident that the gel could be used as an alternative catalyst in the ammunition, which meant they wouldn't need as much of...

Cherry had passed his calculations across to Pythia for analysis. She'd mentioned them to Hugh, too, but he had his own concerns.

“Spent fuel cells,” Cherry said to Maree.

“Man oh man. The black boxes, yeah, no one wants them. I'm not asking why you do. But fuel cells, used up or not, people are hoarding them. It'd cost you more than a flight out.”

It would also cost her processing time on her journey. Time which she didn't have, especially if Giol wasn't there to supervise the complicated procedure for breaking down the fuel cells, and she had to manage it alone with Pythia.

“Concentrate on the black boxes,” she said to Maree. “I don't believe in curses.”

“Me, neither. Especially if it gets me on a ship and out of here. How many boxes? How would we transfer them?”

Cherry consulted Giol's list for quantities. He'd calculated the ratio of black boxes to useful materials to how many the Delphic Dame could handle in terms of storage and processing.

"Can do." Maree nodded, energetically. Her red hair with its dark roots fluttered over her face. She pushed it back with both hands. Her fingerless gloves showed off flower-painted nails, red roses and scarlet poppies.

They agreed on a delivery time and location, and that Maree could bring as many personal belongings as she could carry.

"Ha! I'll be lucky to fill two bags."

Cherry thought a good scavenger would add anything else she could nick before departure. She guessed that Maree wouldn't tell her that. Fair enough.

The call ended, but Cherry remained sitting upright, thinking back over the conversation and her decisions.

The data on the black boxes was a bonus. Pythia could update the Delphic Dame's maps with hazards encountered and a general sense of conditions from where the various ships had travelled. It would be an effective use of the masses of the AI's computing power that sat idle during routine journeys.

She could have offered Maree payment in gold rather than a ride off station, but gold might be needed later. Bribes were often paid in gold. Who knew who she might need to bribe in the future?

Maree traveling with them was the cheaper option.

Cherry squeezed her eyes shut. In truth, when she looked at Maree she saw her future, if fate hadn't been kind. If Nora hadn't paid out Cherry's indentured service contract.

Getting old, alone, stuck on a backwater station, disguising despair behind chatter and bedazzlement, and the courage of painted nails and bright hair.

Cherry couldn't leave her there.

“Aren’t you contacting Bernard?” Dylan had lurked out of camera range for the interview, but observed closely.

Cherry halted in her dash for the kitchen, coffee, and a distraction. “No. Maree is enough. Giol identified the black boxes. They’re a resource that she ought to be able to secure easily. Pythia can break them down, then fabricate munitions. Restoring our defenses is the priority. The spent fuel cells would be a bonus, but you heard Maree. People are hoarding them. A low level fixer like Bernard wouldn’t be able to score them. Hugh is sure he can get what we need. If he can’t, I’ll deal directly with the spent fuel cell hoarders.”

Her words were decisive. The restless tapping of her hand against her thigh suggested indecision. Uncertainty drove her crazy. “Hugh is right. The more we communicate with people on the base, the greater the risk. Low profile.” She unclipped the tight knot of her hair. She’d attempted to appear older and more severe when talking to Maree. “Also, I don’t want to raise hopes and promise a ride out to Bernard or anyone if I can’t honor the promise. Getting one person onboard is easier to coordinate than two.”

“The converted cargo hold would hold quite a few people. Giol and I don’t need it.”

Cherry sighed. She returned to the lounge and dropped onto the sofa. “You don’t have to go to Thebes, Dylan.”

They stared at each other across the coffee table.

“I do. In the same way as Hugh feels responsible for his family’s actions, I realize that if the katangs of Astacus hadn’t been so stupidly self-absorbed, if they’d let their paths veer just a little to communicate in a meaningful manner with humans, the rogue thrios wouldn’t have had the unhindered opportunity to manipulate the federation.”

He traced patterns on the bulkhead above his head with an antenna. “I’m a storyteller, and by how I’ve been raised, I can be a bridge between humans and katangs. Maybe part of the bridge between humans and thrios. I can’t be that if I haven’t done everything I can for humanity against the rogues. We can’t let them win.”

The echo of Hugh's ideals and beliefs bothered her. "After what humans did to Astacus, and personally to you by destroying your family's ship and killing them, no one could argue that you owe humans anything. Least of all to risk yourself."

Very much on his dignity, Dylan stilled his antennae. "I argue it." Then he relaxed his antennae and came forward, skirting the coffee table. "Cherry, don't you want to save us?"

She sucked in a painful breath. "That is a very manipulative question."

"I don't mean just me and Hugh. I mean...there are trillions of people in the former federation. If humanity doesn't claim sovereignty, what will happen to them? Aliens won't have to respect human territory or lives."

"What you and Hugh propose isn't a solution."

"It could be the start of one. Humans can't save themselves if they don't know what they're up against, what's at risk."

Refusing to argue with him, again, Cherry departed for the kitchen and a coffee.

He followed her. "It's why we have to go to Thebes. We have to warn them. If the rogues aren't operating openly, yet, there remains a chance for humans to redeem themselves and win a better judgement. Sovereignty. Cherry, we can't do this alone."

She slammed a mug onto the counter. "Dylan, I've heard the argument from Hugh. Hearing it from you won't change my mind."

For her, scarpering was a valid option. However, an entire civilization couldn't flee its mistakes. Nor would the rogues angling to become humans' masters allow them to escape. The federation would have to confront the rogues. Somehow.

"It's because you don't trust people in authority." Dylan sounded sad and wise.

It infuriated Cherry. Coffee splashed over the rim of her mug. She recalled what Hugh had said, arguing this very point

last night.

“We can’t do this alone. It’s why you want to run. We’re tiny players. But I can put the sovereignty chip on the table. It changes everything. Human leadership will see that we have a chance to change our fate. We need humanity to prove itself to the thrions, and to the other aliens waiting on their judgement of us.”

Hugh meant to rely on the good sense, and self-interest, of the same people he’d defied and fled for three years for Dylan’s sake.

She stared at the earnest young katang.

Dylan was young enough to believe that if you cared enough, if you wished and loved and held on faithfully, then you could reconcile competing demands to satisfy and save everyone.

Cherry had never been that young. “How do you make reparations for genocide? Humanity has gone along with the rogues silencing even the voices of the dead. They’re guarding Astacus against anyone hearing the voices of your people. Echoes of their civilization.”

There were more than echoes of katang civilization on Astacus. Giol’s presence on the Delphic Dame was proof of that.

“If humans learned about katang culture, could they feel guilt?” Dylan poked her in the ribs. “You do. The fact that the rogues want to silence katang voices suggests that there is hope for humanity.”

She frowned at him.

Hugh was counting on a living katang and that katang’s torrent-received knowledge to be a catalyst for human change and action. But changing hearts and minds was a fraught business.

He had Dylan believing it could be done. “We have to try,” the kid said earnestly.

Reluctantly, Cherry accepted that someone capable of piloting the Delphic Dame had to stay onboard at all times while they were docked at the pirate base, and that someone would generally be her since Hugh's engineering experience meant he had a higher likelihood of obtaining the materials they needed.

It was a toss up which of them was grimmer as he suited up.

On a fully operational space station, guests would have been discouraged or outright forbidden from entering whilst wearing a lifesuit. However, comms chatter had made it clear that was no longer the case on Pannyk. Residents and visitors alike were wary. The core module of the station was rated safe, but connections to other modules, and some of the modules themselves, were questionable.

Hugh's lifesuit meant he'd easily foil any security ID checks.

Pirates hated officialdom, but for their own purposes, identifying visitors could be useful.

That had all stopped with the loss of key personnel.

"I'll keep my comms line open," Hugh said after sealing his helmet.

"And take all three drones," Dylan ordered.

"Two. One in front, one behind. One to remain onboard in case Cherry needs it. Although, Cherry, don't come after me. If there's trouble, get yourself and Dylan safe first."

The third drone stayed with Cherry because once they'd moved the Delphic Dame, she might be able to attempt a rescue.

Hugh had repurposed the drones he'd used to investigate the subterranean katang settlement on Astacus. In adding weaponry, he'd changed the drones' function from scouting and recording to include guard duty.

“Best scenario is that no one pays us any attention.” Hugh departed.

Cherry had set Pythia scanning the communications system for danger to Hugh, and to check that Maree wasn't double-crossing them by trying to trade black boxes to someone else.

Of course, Maree could do so in person and thereby leave no comms traffic record. However, escape from Pannyk was Maree's goal, and Cherry had already offered her that.

So far, Pythia hadn't flagged any mention of black boxes, or a spike in mentions of food synthesizers or fuel cells.

Maree wasn't talking.

Cherry clapped her hands together. Staring at a closed hatch achieved nothing.

If Maree was trading in good faith, then Cherry had to have the cargo hold ready for her. She climbed the ladder to it and ordered Pythia to install a bed, chair, food synthesizer, and bathroom cubicle. What she didn't include was access to the Delphic Dame's systems. For entertainment, Maree would need to watch what she'd brought with her on her personal comms unit. She wouldn't be allowed to plug it into the wall screen that currently displayed Hugh's progress through the station.

Cherry had assumed that Dylan would head to the bridge to keep watch over Hugh. Instead, he'd descended the ladder to Giol.

A few minutes later, all was explained as Giol arrived in the top cargo hold via elevator. He'd had to squeeze himself into it, and it took a carefully choreographed unfolding for him to exit.

Stars, but he was big.

Dylan arrived by ladder.

Cherry shook her head. “Giol, I get that it's boring in the lower cargo hold, but it's even emptier up here, and I'm installing human facilities, not katang.” And to the reproachful droop of Dylan's eyestalks. “Don't give me that look. I'm not

kicking you off the ship. If you want to go to Thebes rather than Miheva and Diamond Station, that's your choice. I'd have created a K-deck for you. Giol's been planning it. It's you and Hugh who are choosing to leave."

She bit her lip, angry that she was slipping back into the circular argument. Justifying her decision, however, was irresistible. She wasn't the bad guy here. There were no bad guys on the Delphic Dame, just people with different responsibilities and the courage to meet them. It was why they kept arguing. There was no right or wrong, just competing valid objectives. "You can't expect me to abandon my plans to serve yours."

Surprisingly, it wasn't Dylan who argued his case, but Giol. "He is a storyteller. He is telling you your path."

"He's telling me what he wishes I'd do. He's a kid who—"

Giol's sharp "No" jolted Cherry and Dylan. She twitched. Dylan twitched more, given his many antennae and legs. Only Giol didn't move. "Dylan listened and learned your choice. It is you who refuse to recognize it. Katangs would not be so foolish after a storyteller had spoken."

Patting Dylan's shell to calm them both down from the startlement of Giol's loud assertion, Cherry was shocked enough that in her own silence, in the privacy of her mind, Giol's word choice echoed.

He'd said "recognize", the same word he'd used regarding the thrions' judgement of whether or not humanity could claim sovereignty of its territory.

Dylan's claw gripped her ankle. It was a regression to juvenile habits of seeking reassurance and connection. "I want you with us," he said hesitantly to her. "I feel safe on the Delphic Dame. I am selfish. But it's not just for me. Hugh... Dad gave up his whole life and family to save me. Now, if he has to give up you to save everyone else, it's not fair."

"I'm not Hugh's to give up," Cherry objected, but gently.

"In his heart, you are."

She sank down onto the empty, empty floor. “You’re killing me, here.”

Ever so carefully, he hugged her.

His shell was cold against her skin, though not as cold as the floor of the cargo hold. She hugged him back. His body had grown too wide for her to fully wrap her arms around him.

“Cherry, those are all human-type reasons where I might be selfish. As a storyteller, not as Hugh’s son, he has to try to save everyone or he wouldn’t be Hugh.”

Giol added his unsought confirmation. “Your father has chosen his path.”

Ignoring him, Cherry whispered to Dylan. “I have people relying on me, too. I have to warn the expedition and Nora and everyone at home. You know that.”

Guilt was a sour twist in her stomach. Dylan thought she had to leave to warn Nora and Liam, but he didn’t know about burrtalk.

“I know that it’s the story you tell yourself, but it’s not the story in your heart,” he said.

She closed her eyes. “You want me to go against commonsense—against the basic survival sense to escape the rogues and warn my people to do the same—all so that I can help Hugh and you run yourselves into trouble. Worse, you want me to fly you into it.”

“Yes.”

“It would be selfish.” It would be abandoning her responsibilities and independence to follow Hugh on the hope that she could keep him from running Dylan and himself into a no-win situation out of idiotic idealism. Allegiance to Nora and Liam, to the clan, and to her friends at home would have weighed more heavily if not for her access to burrtalk. What she wished was to go home. To preserve her home and those she loved.

An antenna stroked her hair. Dylan was comforting her. “Katangs don’t think of selfishness. If they walk their true

path, the threads of life weave the whole.”

Brokenly, she laughed. “I don’t know if that’s wisdom or tosh.”

“What does your oracular talent say?”

“It’s silent.”

Dylan rapped a claw decisively on the floor. “If joining Hugh and me was disastrous, your talent would warn you.”

She frowned at Giol, who crouched unmoving and silent once more. “Maybe my talent hasn’t burned out. Maybe it doesn’t matter what I do.”

“Walking your own path always matters,” Giol said.

Her eyes widened. Was her talent silent because this had to be her choice?

She examined Dylan and the urgency of his body language. Here was someone who loved and needed her. She’d made connections and promises here in this far away region, not just at home. “Storyteller, huh?” For katangs, that meant an individual who listened and told his audience the truth of their lives.

“I’m learning to be,” he said quietly.

She took a deep breath. “I guess I’m learning to be me.” *To trust myself, my heart.* She had all the justifications in the universe for running away. Only her heart argued to change the direction in which she ran. In arguing with Hugh, she’d actually been arguing with herself: heart against mind. She had to trust herself to be braver than she believed herself to be. “I’ll go with you to Thebes.”

“We can’t go to Thebes” Hugh said.

He held her pinned against his body. It had taken Dylan two excited retellings of how he’d convinced Cherry to join them, plus her own quieter “with you” before Hugh had dared to believe them.

His embrace was uncomfortably tight, and although Hugh had stripped off his lifestuit during the second telling of the tale, he hadn't had an opportunity to shower or change, so he stood there in the foyer of the Delphic Dame in his undershirt and shorts.

Cherry had no complaints even if her ability to breathe was currently impeded by a hug that said everything words couldn't. It was a hug that squished away her doubts.

What she hated was the stricken look in his eyes.

Hugh was glad that the two people he cared about would be with him, but conflicted because he'd be leading them into danger.

Wriggling back enough to breathe and to free a hand to poke him in the chest, Cherry addressed his unvoiced worry. The responsibility for what happened to them was not his alone. "To be clear, you are not the boss of me. We're going to Thebes to tell them about the rogues and the thrios generally, about sovereignty, and then, we run for my home. *I'm* in charge of the scarpering."

However, Hugh's mood had finally punctured Dylan's happiness enough that the kid listened to him. "Why can't we go to Thebes?"

Hugh released Cherry. The energy with which he'd greeted her decision to join them evaporated. "We have to talk to the people who shape humanity's future."

"People like your mom," Dylan replied. "That's why we're going to Thebes."

"Mom's been arrested."

Cherry gaped at him.

Astounded, Dylan's antennae trembled. "The Governor is under arrest?"

Hugh went to shove his hands in his pockets, and remembered he was wearing only underclothes. He swore. "I want to be dressed for this conversation."

The situation was too tense for Cherry to tease him. At his gesture, she went up the ladder fast. He followed, and headed for his cabin.

It was too early for dinner. She wasn't in the mood to cook, either. "Snack foods."

Dylan stood, one eyestalk extended toward her, the other bent backward toward the cabins. Atypically, he offered no suggestions as to snacks.

She got out fruit and salad leaves, cheese, crackers, and cookies. "Strong coffee." She added two sugars to Hugh's. On reflection, the man showed symptoms of shock.

He returned with wet hair from the world's fastest shower, barefoot, and still pulling on a t-shirt over damp skin.

Her heartbeat accelerated, whether in response to him or in anticipation of the news he brought.

He accepted the coffee, winced at its sweetness, and drank it. "I found the materials we need, including spent fuel cells. I'll bring them back with the first load after I've processed the critical materials on-station. The module across from this one was a school, both for children and for adult spacer qualifications. It's been stripped, but the functionality I need is there. We can resupply the Delphic Dame in two days."

Dylan crunched a carrot stick, masticating it in noisy nervousness.

Plainly, Hugh was starting with the good news.

The bad news arrived soon enough.

"I went to a bar." He picked up the cheese knife. Put it down. "The people remaining on-station aren't political players, and we've been focused on current, local events, not the news and media from further afield. So, we didn't pick up on why Fauda Station changed its anti-piracy policy, or who changed it."

"The government of Thebes, and of the Aaru Sector as a whole, has been overthrown?" Cherry guessed. "Coups are—"

"Illegal," Dylan said.

Hugh nodded at him.

Cherry dropped the cookie she'd been about to eat. "You think that *legality* matters in a coup?"

"It wasn't a coup. There was an election. Mom was replaced as governor. It's what happened afterward that affects us. She was put under house arrest."

"House arrest is pretty good." Cherry bit into the cookie. She spoke a bit thickly through the shortbread crumbs and tangy pieces of cranberry. *Especially house arrest in a mansion*, but she didn't add that bit out loud. If Kendra Owens had been imprisoned, Cherry might have worried for her. However, house arrest sounded as if people were playing political games.

"It's not just Mom. The opposition—the ruling party, now—went after everyone in my family. They used me to discredit them. Although Mom ordered my death along with Dylan's, our enemies claim she warned me first."

Dylan's antennae flickered. "She didn't."

"So my father said. Loudly. On winning, the new Governor signed orders to detain my family. The police swept up Mom and a few of my aunts, uncles, and cousins, but they missed even more, including Dad. He's furious. Apparently, many in the military agree with him. The Governor's support came from planetary citizens. Spacers and space station residents backed Mom...and now, Dad."

Hugh's eyes opened wide, disbelief plain. His searching gaze asked Cherry and Dylan for an explanation. "Dad took over as Commander of Fauda Station and ordered the changes. He brought the pirates in from the cold."

Cherry's mouth twitched. She hid it behind her coffee mug. Hugh's response might be stunned horror, but she appreciated his father's calculation. It was ruthless rather than honorable. Power was power. Give pirates a reason to follow your rules, and they became a wildcard weapon to deploy against your opponents. They'd also bring to Fauda Station lifetimes of knowledge on how to operate inside and outside the system.

“I can’t believe it of Dad. Mom was the politician. It was Dad who would never compromise.”

Cherry was curious. “What do people think of Fauda Station, now that your father is in charge?” She had already noted one fact in Ruben Owens’ favor. The absence of children on the pirate base showed that Fauda Station hadn’t hesitated to take them in.

Hugh’s crack of laughter broke his own stunned disbelief. He rose and paced around the kitchen. “It’s the promised land. Orders have gone out to accelerate the terraforming of Limu, increasing the food supply for Fauda. Plus, Dad’s secured trade agreements with Torabu and Yallah, and further, he’s in talks with Myriad Station.” He slapped the back of his own head, as if to knock some sense into himself and his suddenly surreal reality. “If we’d stopped for news at Myriad…”

“It was impossible.” The busy station had presented a massive threat to their being discovered. Moreover, on the journey to Astacus, they hadn’t anticipated a fraction of what they’d learned about the katang genocide, the thrios and their rogues, or that the Delphic Dame would escape the blasted planet with a katang droid onboard.

What-haves and might-have-beens seldom interested Cherry. “It happened fast.”

“Yeah. Dad and his allies must have been ready to act as soon as the vote was declared.”

She blinked at him. “What? Oh, not the station takeover. I mean shifting everything from Pannyk to Fauda.”

He shrugged. “Stripping a station is fast. Pannyk would be faster than normal due to the expertise of its shipyards in dismantling space technology. Dad has all of that, now.”

“Hmm.” How much of the preparations for seizing command of Fauda Station had been in place prior to the election result? Had Ruben had agents on Pannyk pirate base ready to promise amnesty to the pirate captains who transferred allegiance and profit to Fauda?

The pirates would have seen, as Cherry did, the potential in Fauda Station. It had the resources to survive independently, and the location to foster trade links. Aim the pirates at those commercial vessels and military ships that wouldn't agree to Fauda Station's independence, and there'd be a violent bonanza for everyone.

By bringing the pirates in, Ruben demonstrated his intention that Fauda Station would have teeth. Not only teeth, but the ability to align them to all chew in the same direction. Ruben and his allies had to be confident of their own power and military force to invite pirates.

Hugh stood with his hand on the back of his neck, muscles straining as if trying to pull his head off. He stared at the open hatch to the bridge, but he stared blindly. The son's view of, and belief in, his father had been profoundly shaken.

Cherry stole one of Dylan's nasturtium leaves, rolled it, and handed the cylinder to him.

He accepted it, but didn't eat it. The roll spun slowly in his claw.

They both watched Hugh, who was mentally and emotionally removed from them, but needed them. If he hadn't, he'd have physically removed himself to wrestle with his parents' fates alone.

Was Fauda Station a simple power grab?

If I was a tulip-skipping optimist who believed in fairy tales, I'd wonder if sacrificing their son to the status quo shook them into analyzing their society and deciding on change. If I was an optimist, I'd see Fauda Station as the necessary first step to throwing off the rogue thrios' manipulations. First, establish your power base.

But Cherry was a realist, not an optimist.

All of Hugh's agonizing couldn't halt the inevitable consequences of a disintegrating federation. A few strong leaders and groups might ringfence their territories and maintain separate, stable societies. Ruben's allies would have reached that conclusion. For the savvy, it was why they'd

follow him. The bulk of people would then follow the line of least resistance—and they'd be lucky. Outside the defended territories, violence would ebb and flow, and bring its own multiplying changes.

From the perspective of a ruthless pragmatist, Ruben was doing the best he could for his people in a slow-building, political catastrophe. Grow strong enough, and Fauda Station might even survive a non-sovereignty judgement that opened humanity's territory to aliens.

Hugh swung back around to face the table.

Dylan began nibbling the nasturtium leaf.

“We have to leave the Aaru Sector,” Hugh said. “We're a complication Dad can't afford, and for Mom and the others on Thebes, I could be used against them. I'd hoped that certain of the Aaru leadership would listen to me long enough to consider the sovereignty card that's now in play. But with Mom under house arrest and Dad setting up an independent territory, those leaders would hand me over to my parents' enemies, on sight, just to keep clear of the mess.”

“Then they're short-sighted,” Cherry said.

“They have to save their own skins, and their families.”

Dylan agreed with Cherry. “Short-term salvation. Longer term, caving into threats now limits their future options. But if you think they will cave, then there's no gain, only risk, in making ourselves known here.”

“So, where?” Cherry asked.

Dylan beat Hugh to an answer. “The path begins in the past.”

He's such a katang. Cherry frowned to hide her impulse to smile.

Dylan curled and uncurled an antenna. “What if the rogues feared that either your mom would, or they knew that she'd actually had, second thoughts about ordering your death, and possibly, mine? Destabilizing Thebes and the entire sector and

deposing your family is their preemptive attack. It's interesting."

Interesting?

Hugh sat back at the table.

"There are indications of the rogues' tactics and the constraints they face." Dylan rolled a second nasturtium leaf as he spoke. His meditative tone was of a naval commander in the analytical stage of plotting strategy.

Am I perceiving him wrong? Cherry observed the neat movement of his claws, then the delicate nibble on the nasturtium leaf. *I see the child he was a week ago, but even then, was he a child as a human would understand childhood?*

Juvenile, Giol had called him.

Juvenile. Seeking his adult form.

According to katang cultural norms, having joined the torrent, Dylan was now an adolescent with adult responsibilities that meant he had his own path, even if he was still learning.

But Dylan had been raised human. It had an effect, perhaps especially in adolescence.

He was a young adult katang, but a human teenager; emotionally attached to Hugh—which a katang-raised adolescent would not be. As a species, they were a bare step short of asocial, at least to human understanding.

While Cherry fought through an existential crisis on Dylan's behalf, Hugh merely asked his son, "What do you mean? What constraints?"

It was a good sign that Hugh was listening and curious. He was recovering his mental balance.

"The rogues can't act against us directly. Hunting us at Astacus, they did so under cover of being part of the human planetary guards. Attacking us themselves confuses the story. If they want humans to be judged as not worthy of sovereignty, the rogues can't show their hand plainly. They must force humans to act."

“Or be confident that they can eliminate us completely, leaving no evidence of their actions,” Cherry said.

Dylan snapped a claw. “Which is why we need to attract the good thrios’ attention. Them watching us is our best protection.”

“If the rogues don’t get us first.” But Cherry’s cynicism was distracted. Her focus was Hugh.

“We run for Earth,” he said.

“It’s ages away.” Dylan was still young enough to crave immediate action.

“It’s a huge risk.” Cherry frowned at the man who was evidently as ambitious as his parents, in his own unassuming way.

Earth. The origin of their species. Their home world. The center of the former federation, even if it wasn’t spatially the center. Everything had begun on Earth.

The environmental damage had been remedied centuries ago. Now it was a place of political power and pilgrimage.

“Earth?” she repeated. “The center of the human universe?”

“Symbolically.” Hugh’s momentary amusement at their reaction vanished. “Symbols matter. They might matter a lot to the thrios. Confronting our future on our planet of origin may count for us.”

“Thrios.” Cherry spat the name as a curse. She resented being judged, especially by people who let their own rogues run free.

Unfazed by her anger, Hugh continued. “In the Aaru Sector, I was counting on my relationships and reputation. But I have neither on Earth.”

Cherry contradicted him. “I expect the Vizards, at least, know you as the terrorist who is sheltering a katang.” At his frustrated scowl, she grinned. She might have agreed to transport him to Thebes, and have had that changed to Earth,

but it didn't mean she had to be as solemn about their duty to their species, and his civilization, as Hugh felt.

“Power is shifting,” he said. “The one power that can't be stolen is Earth's cultural position. Anywhere else we go, what we walk into is unknown. But Earth is the hub. It will change the slowest. It's our cultural origin and civilizational nexus. Earth has cultural power, and the Earth leadership, the former federation leadership, will be eager to reassert their power out through the networks of trade, diplomacy, and military force. They want it under their control again. Not directly, but through influence over the powerbrokers in the different sectors and on down to station leadership. Being able to claim sovereignty would give them that.”

Cherry sliced a sliver of cheese. Where Hugh saw restoration and stability, she had doubts. “Sovereignty might give Earth's leadership more power than they've had before, or in centuries.” She'd read her people's reverently preserved ancient history. “Sovereignty could unbalance as much as balance.”

“Doing nothing effectively surrenders us to the rogues,” Hugh said.

“Earth.” Dylan click-clacked his claws. “To decide the future where humanity's future began.” It was a storyteller's endorsement of a grand vision.

Cherry's eyes widened as the enormity of Hugh's intention sunk in.

Hugh aimed to bring an alien, and that alien's droid assistant, to Earth.

And me. I'm next door to an alien. Epigenetically, the Stranded population had changed as they adapted to life on the habitable planets in their region. A few of them, like Cherry, who'd inherited sensitivity to Vapori burrs, were even stranger.

Heading for Earth was either a brilliant idea, or an absolute disaster in the making.

She attempted to introduce a note of pragmatism. It was such a dangerous idea. “How would we get close to your

leaders without the rogues—or the Vizards, they're chasing us, too—taking us out?"

Hugh said firmly, "We'll go in disguise."

SIX

Cherry didn't don a disguise to infiltrate Pannyk pirate base. Given the necessity of lifesuits for anyone venturing beyond the core module of the station, her lifesuit and hypervigilance was all she needed. Not quite all. She also brought along weapons, a drone, and a comms link back to the Delphic Dame.

The ship was docked at a denuded farm module. According to Hugh's out-of-date information, it had once been a garden park. Stripped of everything, including atmosphere, it was a dark shell.

Hurrying through it, she entered one of the arterial passages that snaked out from the station's core module. Unlike the void of the abandoned garden, the passage had minimal lighting.

Switching off her flashlight lowered her stress level a fraction. She was no longer the most obvious, eye-catching target in the area. A narrow strip of lighting illuminated the passage half a foot from the floor. Since she was walking away from the core of the station, the strip of lighting was on her left.

A figure strode toward her, and passed without acknowledging her. Her pulse skyrocketed and slowed. The tiny drone riding flat against the back of her helmet reported the figure disappearing, but two people approaching fast.

Consciously, she regulated her pace. *Show no fear*. If they attacked, she had a tiny pulse bulb, good for two shots, hidden in her right hand. Her blade was tucked into a leg sheath. She could defend herself.

The couple overtook her and vanished around a dogleg in the passage.

Mind your own business and we might all survive. Her mom and other smugglers had lived by that rule. *Live and let live* kept everyone alive in the Angkorran towers.

Pannyk was nothing like the pirate base back in the Behesht Sector where Hugh had sought information. That station had adhered to a standard design and respected safety regulations. Pannyk, by contrast, indulged in a rabbit warren design of hideouts and rat runs.

The station in Behesht had merely played at illegality. Clean and crawling with undercover military types, the Behesht pirate base had provided an unofficially sanctioned site for the overflow of society, the renegades who might yet be useful.

It was a model Ruben would have in mind for Fauda Station. He'd expand on it. Guided chaos could be profitable.

Pannyk was a different beast. It hadn't been built on an underlying respect for authority, but in defiance of it.

Creeping through it, Cherry felt as if she also crept through her past, through the decaying opportunities of the Angkorran towers. Humanity always returned to its survivalist roots.

During the journey to Diamond Station, as part of the expeditionary fleet, she'd played a fantasy game to fill the long hours. One of the players had commented on the realism of the vast virtual city they quested in. He'd claimed it was modelled on medieval Earth cities. "Authorities build straight roads. Ordinary people instinctively build warrens. They know the value of hiding places and obstacles."

The creators of Pannyk pirate base certainly had. Its winding, unpredictable passages and jostling modules that

connected higgledy-piggledy meant you could be ambushed anywhere, but also that you could run and hide.

Residents would have the home ground advantage.

Cherry's hand tightened around her flashlight, but she kept her grip on the pulse bulb light. Ready for action.

The absence of atmosphere in the passage eliminated sound. In the same soundlessness, Diamond Station had been less eerie because other people had chatted on an open comms line. Here, Cherry was connected to the Delphic Dame, but neither Hugh nor Dylan were talking. It was an emergency link.

At least the station is keeping gravity on.

Pessimism interjected, *So far.*

“Entering the prole mod.” Cherry exited the poorly lit arterial passage for the absolute darkness of an empty module. She switched her flashlight on, and angled the thin beam at the floor.

Originally, the proletarian module had housed a mix of maintenance services and residential occupancy. It epitomized the worst of the base.

Those who'd created the station possessed a risk tolerance above the norm. The suppression of risk in the official system failed people who required greater stimulation. If they couldn't get their danger-fix legally, they sought it outside the law. The different mentality showed in the station they'd built.

Survival of the fittest. The law of the jungle.

Pannyk pirate base had used its prole module to weed out the abject failures. Those fell to its hazardous, haphazard design and its implicit incitement of crime. Who can resist stealing from a clueless newbie when you could vanish among the maze of passages and slum structures?

Despite knowing that there was no atmosphere, and hence, no sound, Cherry found herself straining to hear footsteps, the rattle of a trolley, or the underlying hum of a functioning station.

Between one curve and the next, light grew. It was no stronger than the strip lighting in the main passage, but it was enough to announce someone's presence.

Maree or a trap? Or someone intent on their own scheme? In the latter case, they might defend their private den violently.

Her flashlight's beam had already heralded her approach. She added a second, hopefully unnoticeable, vanguard.

The tiny drone that had traveled discreetly on her helmet flew up to the ceiling and zipped on ahead. It reported a lone figure waiting where Maree had promised, at the third door down on the left, after the "S" bend in the passage.

Cherry followed her drone into the light.

Maree, if it was Maree, stood in front a stack of six interlocking crates piled on an auto-trolley. Her lifesuit was a ramshackle thing, taped in spots. She jerked at the sight of Cherry, suggesting that she hadn't noticed the drone or Cherry's flashlight. Had she been daydreaming?

As tense as she was, Cherry couldn't imagine daydreaming in the circumstances.

Then again, Maree had chosen the meeting place. Arguably, for her it was reassuring not ominous. The prole mod may have been her home.

Maree tapped her helmet. It took a few seconds before her aged lifesuit connected on a secure channel to Cherry's. Once it did, Maree confirmed her identity. She didn't stop there. "Thank the jiggy stars you're here. Black boxes, huh? Never heard anyone wanting them. Good thing no one threw them out, though. One person's junk is another person's treasure. Not that I'm saying they're junk."

Maree hadn't been daydreaming. Her jump had been the nervous jump of someone at the end of their rope and scared of everyone and everything.

"I'll check a crate," Cherry said.

"Sure, sure." Maree moved aside, taking her lantern with her before swinging it back. "You'll need to see."

“I have a flashlight.” Cherry checked the contents of one crate. Black boxes filled it. She checked a second crate. More black boxes. “Okay.”

“I wouldn’t cheat you. You’re my chance to get off this place. Thought I’d be stuck till the entropy gods ate me. Don’t care where I go. Just away from here. You can feel it dying around you.” Her voice cracked. “You’re my last chance.”

That was too much emotion for Cherry. She suggested they leave.

“Stars, yes!” Maree started the auto-trolley.

It shook visibly, but absent atmosphere, was silent.

Recovering herself, Maree chattered on. Her fast speech matched her near-jogging pace. Whatever else she was, physically she was fit. “I’m that thankful. Grateful. Stuck here to die along with the station. No, thanks. But how to get out of here? It’s not just the base, like. It’s being out here where no one but the ghosts of katangs go.”

Cherry turned her head sharply.

Maree noticed. “You didn’t realize. That black hole you came through. Everyone thinks about the river to Fauda and beyond, the others to Yallah and Myriad, and that freaking Montu Military Research Base all la-di-dah and don’t talk to the proles. Ha! If only they knew what we do. They,” an unspecified authority, “reckon that the river we can’t enter, no way, no how, from our millrace leads back to Astacus.” Her voice dropped on naming the blasted planet.

However, she quickly picked up confidence, again. Or maybe she was whistling in the dark. “The old timers reckon they remember when katang ships would fly out of the black hole. Not many. Not often. But they were there.” She glanced over her shoulder. “At our back. Now, it’s their ghosts.”

Ghosts didn’t bother Cherry. Her attention was for any nasty human surprises. Maree seemed genuine, but an ambush on the way back to the ship remained a credible threat. As was someone tracking them to try and hijack the Delphic Dame.

Anything to get off-station.

Cherry understood desperation. Her deal with Maree was an example of Cherry's preference for personal and immediate action rather than sacrificing opportunities to help in favor of cold principles and ideals. But being sympathetic didn't make her an easy target.

In spite of her justifiably paranoid fears, the return journey seemed shorter due to Maree's company and the fact that Cherry was retracing a known route. The auto-trolley shook along behind them, wobbling and inclined to stray. Discretion wasn't in its nature. But they reached the empty former garden without attracting attention.

The module's all-encompassing darkness helped the Delphic Dame's stealth technology hide the ship.

"No followers," Hugh said over Cherry's private line.

She maintained her vigilance. Maree could still try something.

A cargobot emerged from the Delphic Dame.

Maree squawked at the sudden movement. She'd left her lantern back in the proletarian module. Now, she swung the narrow beam of her flashlight at the moving mass of the cargobot. "We're at your ship?"

The Delphic Dame appeared half there, half not as its energy shield interfered with the human visual spectrum. If the designers of the lifesuits had known what to allow for, they could have compensated for the energetic interference in their helmet design.

"Almost home." Cherry waited outside as Pythia guided the cargobot.

Hugh and her own tiny drone watched her back.

Transferring the crates and Maree's two bags into the lower cargo hold took a minute. Tops. The auto-trolley was left on the dock. Then she led Maree through the hatch into the top hold and directly into a portable decontamination unit.

Keeping her lifesuit on, Cherry passed through it swiftly. For Maree, the decontamination process had to be more

thorough. “No insult to you,” Cherry explained. “But I’m not sure what’s on Pannyk.”

“No insult taken. I could do with a good wash.”

She emerged a few minutes later in a threadbare crop top and shorts.

Cherry passed over a robe.

Blinking rapidly, the older woman held the robe to her nose. “New and clean. I can’t remember the last time...” She shrugged on the blue, knee-length robe. Her red hair with its dark roots appeared faded in contrast to the robe, but her fingernails were neatly kept and her toenails painted a matching green to the green and white stripes on her fingernails.

Cherry had no idea what the colors meant, if they meant anything at all. While she considered Maree’s nails, Maree gazed around.

“This whole place is shiny clean. Heaven.”

Temporary walls shut off four-fifths of the cargo hold, particularly the part that included the ladder and elevator, and the outer hatch.

Maree peeked at Cherry. “How many people am I sharing with? You and...?”

“This is all yours for the journey. But this is it. You won’t be free to wander the ship.”

“Gotcha. Yup. You said that when we talked. Passage not entertainment, but I don’t have to work my passage. I’m ever so grateful.” She crossed to the food synthesizer. “My own meals.”

“We have sufficient stock. You can order what you want.”

“All for a few black boxes. I am grateful.” Her gratitude was overwhelmingly, embarrassingly obvious. Her lower lip wobbled, hinting that she was near to tears.

Cherry retreated into a mix of hostess and prison guard. For Maree, the Delphic Dame’s hospitality had definite limits. “A

bot will bring your bags up. The intercom is here, if there's a problem. There's a power cube here, if you need to charge anything. You can't plug into any part of the ship."

"Absolutely not a problem." Maree tossed her head and achieved a bright voice. "This'll be my little holiday. Woohoo!" She flung her arms out and twirled.

Cherry smiled. "So, you don't mind that we don't have a definite destination?"

"Nope." Maree popped the "p" and grinned at Cherry. "Now that I've seen the quality of accommodations, sign me up for a long journey."

"I'll let you settle in. If there's anything you need, tell the ship's AI."

Maree responded with two thumbs up and a babble of thanks.

Smile fading, Cherry descended the ladder. Maree was a cheerful, sociable person. Cherry would need to visit her often. It wouldn't be fair to lock her away until...until when?

By the time she entered the living area, a frown had replaced Cherry's smile. *What is our route to Earth? Where can we drop Maree off?* They'd need to sneak in and out of whichever station they stopped at to debark her. Preferably one near a black hole millrace that opened to a perilous river. All scarpering mice needed bolt holes if the cat turned up.

Before, she'd been thinking of where she could drop off Hugh, Dylan, and Giol to acquire their own ship. Now that they were going with her, or she with them, they needed to prioritize plotting a route that avoided their enemies.

"Maree's settled?" Hugh asked.

Dylan had replaced him on overwatch on the bridge.

Hugh was suited up and ready for his turn on-station. Unlike Cherry's deal with Maree, his wasn't a live exchange. The gel from the black boxes would be useful, but it was the scrapped goods Hugh had bought that would supply the bulk of materials.

“More than settled. Maree’s happy.” Cherry smiled. Her smile turned wistful. “I wish all good deeds were as easy.”

He hadn’t sealed his helmet yet. He raised her hand to his lips, kissed her palm, and folded her fingers over his kiss. “You’re Maree’s good angel. But you’re my angel first and always.” The intent look in his eyes remembered their discussion on Astacus. An angel was fate’s messenger. They had changed each other’s lives. “I know how much you worry about your family. Thank you for trusting me.”

“Dylan convinced me that following my heart wasn’t selfish.”

His gloved hand closed around hers.

“I realized something else, as well,” she said. “Not as romantic or idealistic, but fundamentally true. Dylan’s a storyteller.”

Hugh’s eyes crinkled in confused humor.

She scowled at him. This was important. “Dylan joined the torrent. He has the memories of his people imprinted on his shell. While he lives, their voices live. If he is silenced, then the rogues and humanity have killed the katangs. He may be the last katang storyteller. The last katang capable of telling their story. As much as I’d like to hide him away, Dylan’s voice and independence have to be our guiding light.” Her hand twisted in Hugh’s hold, grasping his. “And he’s your son. He wants to redeem humanity.”

“No, I don’t.” Dylan’s voice shattered the poignant moment.

Cherry gasped on a half-laugh. “Eavesdropper. I forgot you’d be listening from the bridge.”

The last katang storyteller wasn’t diverted. “I just don’t want the rogues to win. I want us all to be free.”

While Hugh acquired the spent fuel cells and other salvaged materials, Cherry, Dylan, Pythia, and Giol calculated the

fastest route to Earth.

Cherry thought her oracular talent might light up with a warning, but nope, there wasn't as much as a twinge when the fastest route had them backtracking past Astacus to Shiyo, and from there to the Langat Sector, speeding through a corner of it to the Ezulwini Sector, and so, to Earth.

Giol participated in the calculations. Ironically, keeping to perilous universal rivers would speed their journey. The katangs' closure of universal rivers to thrios and human traffic hadn't been as random as the federation had thought. The katangs had closed the fastest rivers; thereby delaying the rogues' activity.

For the discussion, Pythia was omnipresent on the Delphic Dame, Giol contributed via intercom, and Cherry and Dylan sat together on the bridge, monitoring Hugh's comms line and the feed from the drones.

No matter how they wrangled reality, the journey to Earth was a minimum of four months. Distance equaled time.

"Four months," Dylan said. "Do you think the thrios will give us credit for trying?"

"How would they know we are?" Cherry leaned back in the captain's chair. "I really don't see how we're to attract the good thrios' attention, if our spectacular efforts at Astacus failed, *and* avoid their rogues."

Dylan lounged on the toadstool-like contraption which Giol had brought onboard and Hugh had installed on the bridge. For katangs, it was comfortable. His antennae fidgeted, but didn't touch any of the screens or the control panel.

Just as well that he was too polite to be intrusively curious. The cover over the faux inset cupholder that hid the burrtalk system was only inches from one of his antennae.

"Thrios are long-lived. Maybe they won't reach a judgement for decades." Dylan could see all sides of a story.

"Do you really think so?"

His eyestalks drooped. "No."

“No, it doesn’t feel like that to me, either. I think we’re building toward a crisis.” And rather than wisely running from it, she was running into the heart of it.

“Or a turning point,” Giol contributed over the intercom.

Cherry laughed humorlessly. “Humans tend to need a crisis before we make the effort to change.”

An antenna tapped her arm. “Is it your talent that thinks there’s a crisis coming?”

“My talent is telling me bupkis.”

Dylan and Giol’s knowledge of Angkorran slang failed. Understandably.

“Nothing at all,” Cherry translated. She slid further down her chair to gaze at the ceiling. “Nothing...at...all.”

Unwilling to follow her into a funk, Dylan jumped off his toadstool. “I’m going to go run the bit of the obstacle course Giol and I rebuilt.”

Cherry flapped a hand. “Have fun.”

He disappeared.

She contemplated the ceiling. If Hugh got into trouble, Pythia would alert her.

Cherry wasn’t actually in a funk. She was thinking hard. She preferred her moral dilemmas and questions of loyalty to be clear cut. Currently, her situation was anything but.

Straightening, she stared at the lid covering the burrtalk system. Her hand reached out and switched off the intercom system. Nothing said in here would echo over the intercom.

Four months.

If she was going to Earth on a quixotic mission of humanity’s redemption—or, like Dylan, just to thwart the rogues—then she had to be all-in. Her outstanding, in every sense, big secret was burrtalk.

Except that it wasn’t her secret. It was Nora’s.

She groaned. She was desperate to talk to Nora and Liam, and simultaneously, she dreaded it.

Guilt pressed down on her for choosing Hugh and Dylan over her duty to the Diamond Expedition and her personal sense of obligation to Nora and Liam to update them regarding threats nearer to the Diamond black hole and the route home.

For a few seconds she frowned at the screens.

They showed Hugh transporting the last of his purchases to the school module, and stashing the auto-trolley in an adjacent lab before securing both doors. A bulky figure who'd tried to follow him to the lab had been stunned and left in a side tunnel leading away from the school module. The man would wake up in a few hours with a pounding headache.

In the larger of the two labs, Hugh focused on setting up his makeshift processing plant.

Cherry checked the feeds from his guard drones and scattered mini-cams. Nothing.

A flick of the screen showed Dylan attempting the obstacle course.

She switched back to Hugh's feeds, ensured that her side of their comms link was muted, and flipped on burrtalk. "Recording," she said instantly, as a reminder to Jonah or whoever was listening not to answer her. "Change of plan. A big change. Maybe the wrong decision, but it feels right."

A deep breath. "I'm taking Hugh and Dylan to Earth. Yeah, Earth, the former headquarters for the Civilized Federation, and still the political and spiritual heart of the fractured federation. According to Hugh, power rests there. I wish I could talk to you about my decision."

Somehow she had to ask, without explicitly asking, if she could share the fact of burrtalk's existence.

But first, she owed her sister an explanation of why she'd abandoned the Diamond Expedition to chase a frail hope to Earth. "Hugh thinks that the sovereignty claim being up for grabs is a chip he can play to force some among the leaders to listen. To listen and to act to prove that humans can be good.

That we don't deserve rogue status. We need to earn sovereignty."

She sighed. "We. I don't feel like part of the federation. Us Stranded are different." She half-laughed, half-hiccuffed. "We sure chose an interesting time to launch a renewed contact expedition.

"The journey to Earth will take four months. Given the katang gear onboard, we can use the perilous universal rivers, which are faster. Other routes are longer. Minimum half a year. I hate it. What's that quote you have, Liam? The remorseless calculation of distance. You're right. It forces choices on us. Stars, I hope I'm making the right one. I can't be in two places at once, and my talent's not talking to me. I'm not listening to rational arguments either. My heart has made this choice. Or as Dylan insists, I'm walking my path."

She pulled her legs up onto the seat and wrapped her arms around her knees. "After all my brave self-talk about independence and about joining the expedition and braving Astacus to protect you all, I'm following the man whom I came here to hide. I might end up delivering him, and me, to his enemies. Somehow, on the journey, we have to devise a way to avoid the rogue thrios. Imagine traveling all the way to Earth just to run ourselves into a rogue thrios' trap."

She hesitated. "But if we don't try, humanity is definitely screwed." The vulgarity sat there in a beat of silence. "The rogues are clever. They've almost succeeded in pushing us into a no-win situation."

"Does it have to be you who challenges the rogues?" Nora asked.

Cherry bit her lip, but a strangled sound still escaped. "Hey, sis. I wasn't sure if..."

"Keeping burrtalk secret isn't worth leaving you alone," Nora replied to the unspoken question.

Where Nora was reassuring, Liam was decisive. "We also need to maximize our information exchange."

Cherry sniffed loudly. The disgusting noise was better than crying. She wiped her eyes. “I’m going to miss the birth of my second nephew or a niece. I...I want to come home, Nora, but I can’t.” Her voice was croaky, but her mind suddenly cleared in a panicked fear for her too-courageous sister. “You’re not to risk yourself, now that you’ve heard even more about the thrios and their rogues. You can’t—”

“Nora’s not going to block the Origin black hole,” Liam said. “She’s staying here on Border Station.”

Relieved, Cherry muttered about miracles. Her big sister could be too brave for her own good.

However, what was good for Nora, wasn’t necessarily good for everyone else. “What if the rogues come through?”

“Zac and Ben are delivering a sting ship to the Origin command post, complete with burrtalk. Zac and Ben know about burrtalk, and will stop off at Fanrong Station to bring Lucas into the loop. We expect he’ll volunteer to join them.”

And Lucas Zangmo, though young, was a powerful and independent burr wielder. After Nora, he was the person most likely to have the talent to alter the Vapor lens to once again block the Origin black hole’s millrace.

Liam hadn’t finished. “We’re also installing a burrtalk system on a frigate to go to Palantine and add Dominic to the loop.”

King Dominic, Nora’s half-brother; not Crown Prince Frederick, Liam’s friend and future monarch.

“Jonah will coordinate everything.”

“Hi,” Jonah said.

Nearly giddy with relief, Cherry laughed. “Of course you’re on top of everything.”

“We’re preparing,” Liam said. “No one fights alone.”

SEVEN

Cherry cooked. Like Maree, who was currently stuffing herself with food in her “holiday apartment”, Hugh happily ate meals from the food synthesizer. However, Cherry had energy to spare and was torn between excitement, relief, and apprehension.

Pythia was on-watch regarding Hugh’s security on the station.

In between her cooking activities, Cherry also added a few steps to the right to check the live feed on the wall screen in the lounge to ensure no one crept up on Hugh. In fact, when she shifted to chopping and prepping at the table rather than the counter, she was no more distracted than if she played a game on her personal comms unit while standing watching on the bridge.

Moussaka and scalloped potatoes required a lot of prep time when you sliced the vegetables by hand. She also artistically layered crunchy vegetables in mason jars for pickling.

The longer she worked, the more her apprehension dialed up and excitement dialed down. Dylan usually finished the obstacle course faster than this, even running it a few times.

It might be that he was talking to Giol or even meditating, as the katang droid had advised.

Or Giol had managed to hack into the Delphic Dame's comms system, had listened in to Cherry's burrtalk conversation with her family, and had revealed to Dylan the extent to which she'd been keeping secrets from him.

"She doesn't trust you," Giol would say.

Stop being paranoid. Being sharp with herself didn't help. Absently, she snacked on a leftover slice of cucumber that hadn't met her aesthetic standards for inclusion in the pickle.

She had no evidence that Giol listened in on conversations or observed activities across the ship. It was her fear and guilt driving her nuts. She was braced for Hugh and Dylan to believe she'd betrayed them.

She had, after all, shared their secrets with Nora and Liam. Sure, she could argue that Hugh and Dylan hadn't sworn her to secrecy. But they hadn't known about burrtalk. They'd thought she wouldn't be in contact with her people for months. Instead, Nora and Liam knew of Dylan's existence, his katang clatter ceremony, and what he'd learned from it. Her family knew that Hugh intended to visit Earth to negotiate humanity's future.

"What are you doing?" Dylan asked.

Cherry levitated from her chair, banging her knee against the table, and knocking a knife from it.

Dylan caught the blade. He'd always been fast, but now his speed partnered with dexterity. He replaced the knife on the table. "Are you worried about Hugh? Cooking is your go-to displacement activity."

"Thank you, Doctor Dylan."

Amused, he wagged his antennae. "I smell moussaka."

"You won't soon. You'll smell vinegar. These vegetables are for pickling."

"Nice."

It seemed Giol hadn't shared her secrets with Dylan. He was friendly, even concerned for her.

They both paused to watch Hugh on-screen. He moved slower than in the morning. Lifesuits could supply water and nutri-fluids for twenty four hours. It didn't mean the human body could sustain a high energy output that long.

"He said twelve hours," Dylan said. "Then he'll bring the beryllx bars and spent fuel cells onboard and leave the non-plute tetroxide to process overnight. Two and a half hours."

Two and a half hours till Hugh ought to return to the ship. For that stage of the operation, she'd be suited up and watching attentively. Returning with so many valuable materials was the riskiest part of the venture.

Measuring vinegar for her pickling liquid, Cherry concentrated on how she could help, which was by distracting Dylan. "The moussaka is for freezing, as are the scalloped potatoes. Didn't you smell them, huh? What's wrong with your sniffers?" She grinned at him. "What would you like for dinner? What would Hugh like after drinking sludge all day?"

"Dumplings. Spicy shrimp, mushrooms, and meatloaf." Meatloaf was a comfortingly bland mix of faux beef, potato, and vegetable. Spicy shrimp was Dylan's favorite.

"Raid the freezer. Grab the dehydrated mushrooms as well as the shrimp." Usually, the Delphic Dame had a generous harvest of fungi, but the abrupt, spinning maneuvers to escape Astacus had broken something in the fungi growing unit, and although Cherry had fixed the wiring and restored what she could of the mushrooms, their smooth cycle of growth, harvest, and replacement needed time to re-establish itself.

As much as you might want to rush things, everything had its own pace.

Like her confession to Hugh and Dylan that she'd shared their secrets over burrtalk. She might want to blurt it out, but she couldn't till Hugh had finished his work on-station. Really, the sensible option was to wait till the Delphic Dame was

safely tucked back inside a perilous universal river, on its way to Shiyo and beyond.

“To Earth,” she whispered. Dylan had vanished into the freezer. She was talking to herself, even if Pythia listened in. “And if we reach Earth, will we ever escape it?”

Hugh returned, stripped and cleaned in the decontamination unit in the foyer, and re-dressed in a t-shirt and sweatpants. His eyes were sunken from fatigue and dehydration. In the kitchen, he gulped orange juice. “I forgot to rehydrate.”

He’d been intensely focused on assembling and operating his makeshift processing plant.

“Tomorrow, I’ll remind you over comms,” Dylan said. “Click, click, click till you take a drink.”

“I’m on schedule.” Hugh stuck to his own priorities. “We should be able to load and get away tomorrow. Late tomorrow.”

Cherry shoved a bowl of dumplings at him.

He ate. Every few seconds his gaze flicked to the wall screen and the feed from the cameras he’d left guarding the makeshift processing plant. He drank the broth, and Cherry added more dumplings to his bowl.

Her own bowl was only half full. She’d snacked on vegetables through the afternoon, and anyway, her appetite was small.

Dylan matched Hugh dumpling for dumpling, and silence for silence.

Hugh slumped exhaustedly. It wasn’t the work, but the strain of it. Random malice, greed, or desperation could motivate an assault every bit as lethal as the rogues or Vizards catching up with them. On-station, he worked in literal fear of his life.

He finished the second bowl of dumplings and declined a third. “Thanks. They were great, but I’m done.” In every sense of the word, not just hunger satiated. He scowled at the wall screen and its display of his processing plant operating in the former school module. “Do you know what I hate about the school? That there were kids on this pirate base. Kids who grew up believing this was all there is to life. Destroying other people’s lives to survive your own.”

“Bleak,” Cherry said.

“A rogue’s life.” He stood. “I’ll sleep for a few hours then go back out. Pythia and the drones will stand watch.” In other words, Cherry and Dylan could sleep in, not wake up before he left.

As if. Cherry cleared the table.

“Giol can watch the drone feeds,” Dylan suggested.

“Pythia has it handled.” Cherry hoped to the depths of her soul that today’s peace would hold tomorrow.

Given their small crew, Hugh had insisted that he had to be out there alone, reliant on his modified drones. Cherry was backup. The rescue team.

If Hugh was captured, she was his last chance.

Dylan’s—or worse, Giol’s—presence on the base would cause panic. Personally, she’d risk that panic, and risk alerting the rogues to Dylan’s location and the acquisition of a katang droid, if it meant saving Hugh. But for all Dylan’s training on the obstacle course, he and Giol weren’t experienced in infiltrating and fighting on a human station.

Cherry recalled her lessons. The most important was not to fight until you had to, and then, against these overwhelming odds...show no mercy. She couldn’t leave an enemy who could rise up behind them.

With thoughts such as those, she didn’t need Pythia to wake her when Hugh left his cabin. She’d left her cabin door ajar and heard him. “Hugh?” She got up to join him for breakfast. He wore an undershirt and shorts preparatory to donning a lifesuit. She was in her pajamas.

Warm bodies touched in a hug that was more comfort than desire, though the desire hummed beneath their worry.

Hugh stroked his thumb along the hollow of her cheekbone and smiled into her eyes. “Stop worrying. Pythia hasn’t seen anyone approach the science labs.” Where his processing plant operated overnight.

“I’ll worry till we’re away from the base and safely through the millrace.”

“You won’t have time,” he countered. “I’ve queued a fabrication schedule for Pythia. If you can oversee it? Ammunition first.” He ate his toast and faux scrambled eggs fast, gulped the last of his coffee, and hurried down the ladder to suit up.

Cherry called up the live feeds from the station. Pythia could handle the fabrication schedule until they’d undocked and slipped away. Hugh was just trying to distract her. “Like he didn’t sit here and worry while I was on-station.”

She was sipping a second cup of coffee, freshly showered and wearing a robe over the gym wear she preferred when stuck in a lifesuit, when Dylan joined her on the bridge.

“Giol says no one followed Hugh to the school lab.”

Cherry hummed agreement. “Hugh has scheduled fabrication priorities for Pythia. We’ll run those first, but can Giol go over the design spec for the black boxes’ gel’s use, again? Really simplify and shorten describing what has to be done, but be technical.” After she’d brought Hugh and Dylan into the secret of burrtalk, she would ask Jonah to doublecheck Giol’s calculations. The katang droid could read out to the android the details of the process.

“I’ll ask him,” Dylan said. “And you can. Anytime. Giol will take your orders.”

Because I’m captain of the ship. However, Cherry was sure that, with her, Giol retained the ability to selectively listen and creatively interpret her orders.

Dylan, on the other claw, was a katang storyteller. Even if the droid disapproved of Dylan’s orders, he’d obey them.

On-screen, light sparked.

“It’s okay.” Hugh broke comms silence. “I switched processes. The reaction is within safety parameters.”

“Imaginatively interpreted,” Cherry muttered before unmuting her comms. “Understood.”

On this ramshackle, dying pirate base, everyone balanced precariously on the line between survival and death.

Which reminded her of Maree’s desperation to escape, and Maree herself.

Cherry switched a corner screen to check on their passenger.

Maree was asleep and snoring.

“Sensible woman.” Cherry switched back to watching Hugh, and watching for anyone creeping up on his position. Hours passed. She was too keyed up to focus on alternative activities. Occasionally, Dylan relieved her and she had a bathroom break, stretched her legs, and ate.

Toward evening, as Hugh prepared to close down the processing plant—he wouldn’t bring it back to the Delphic Dame, but he wasn’t leaving it live and volatile, either—she descended to the foyer. Her lifesuit hung there, ready to pull on and seal up. Her weapons were beside it.

She comm’d Dylan. “I’ll stay in the foyer. Can you watch the feeds?”

“Yup. Is your drone there?” The third weaponized drone, which Hugh had left onboard in case she had to rescue him.

She touched it with a fingertip. “It’s here.” As was the smaller drone that could flatten to hide against her helmet.

Hugh would be at his most vulnerable returning to the ship with the trolley-train-load of materials.

She could go out to meet him, but that might inadvertently catch someone’s attention and lead them to the stockpile of valuable materials he’d extracted from junk. “I hate waiting.”

“Tell me about it,” Dylan said.

Always, he had to wait onboard while Hugh ventured into danger.

Life had to change, for all of them, whether the former federation's leaders accepted Hugh's warning or not. Dylan needed to live free, to grow and learn on a planet and among people. He needed opportunities in which to build his independence.

Cherry suited up. She paced the foyer and the passage to engineering.

The weapons waiting there bothered her. Her skin crawled and she had to clench her teeth to keep them from chattering. She would, if she had to, kill to get Hugh off-station.

She didn't like this version of herself. Pannyk pirate base was dying. It was an exaggerated example of how all communities died—excepting those attacked by outsiders, as on Astacus. As a community fractured, individuals or small groups grabbed what they could. The grabbing accelerated the destruction of the community.

And then outsiders like her and Hugh appeared. Maybe everything the Delphic Dame was taking had been discarded as junk by those on Pannyk, but that was because they lacked Hugh's—and Giol's—engineering expertise.

We could leave behind instructions on how to process that same junk, but we won't. We'll hoard our knowledge and run away with our pickings from the carcass of the station. And our ruthlessness goes so far that we'll kill to acquire materials.

Admittedly, the Delphic Dame urgently needed to resupply, but, as long as she wasn't attacked or forced to escape an unexpected space hazard, the ship could make it to another station. Cherry's situation wasn't as dire as that of others on the base.

She glanced up toward the top deck and the temporary apartment Maree occupied. Despite her self-castigation, Cherry hadn't extended an offer of passage off-station to anyone else. It had been hard enough trusting Maree. Without

the shadowy sense of seeing her own future self in the woman—if fate had been less kind and left Cherry without her family—Cherry wouldn't even have brought Maree onboard.

They had trouble enough without adding strangers to the ship.

The selfish logic of survival drove everyone.

“Hugh's on his way back,” Dylan reported.

She had Pythia send the feed from Hugh's primary guard drone through to her personal comms unit. She didn't know how Hugh felt about the return journey, but her heart was in her mouth with every twist and turn in the rabbit warren of passages until finally he was in the denuded, dark garden module and she could rush out to meet him.

Preoccupied, he offered a fist bump. “I have to oversee the loading and ensure everything is secure in the hold.” The materials were going into the three quarters of the top cargo hold that was blocked from Maree's temporary accommodations. “Forty minutes, an hour, and we should be good to go.”

The Delphic Dame's energy weapons could handle anyone who stumbled over the ship in that time. Cherry didn't have to stand guard. In this darkness, they could even deploy Giol.

Actually, did Giol have a combat program installed?

Cherry shook her head to dislodge the question, but filed it for later. “I'll get ready for departure.” Although Pythia could undock alone, and Dylan was on the bridge. For Cherry, adrenaline was fading and she needed a constructive activity to focus on. “Leaving sounds brilliant.”

“Yeah.” A tired smile sounded in Hugh's voice as he entered the cargo hold.

Cherry re-boarded via the foyer. Pythia had scanned the garden deck on arrival, and there was no need for decontam for stepping outside. It was for security reasons—and a superstitious wish not to jinx what looked like being a successful, deathless visit to the pirate base—that Cherry left her lifesuit on, though she opened the helmet.

If she'd hoped Hugh would relax once they slipped away from the base, she'd have been disappointed. She was a smidge, which meant part of her had hoped they could have the burrtalk talk, the one where she admitted to having real-time conversations across galaxies and sharing his secrets in them. But mostly, she recognized why Hugh couldn't settle while they remained in the region of Pannyk.

She had, at least, rescued Maree.

He'd had to leave behind those whom his father had already discarded. Keeping busy assuaged his guilt. His constant activity validated his choice. It was proof that the materials they'd scavenged from the denuded, dying pirate base were vitally important.

We only took what we needed...

That justification sounded good till you poked it. Then the balloon of disillusion burst. If everyone only took what they needed, but didn't give anything back, then the community or the common resource pool died. Unbalanced extraction without giving back defined rogue behavior.

As they approached the Pannyk black hole, Pythia's forward scans provided less and less data. So far, it seemed that no rogues or Vizards had braved the perilous universal river to search for them at Pannyk, but their enemies could be lurking in the river. The Delphic Dame wouldn't know before it dived in.

Cherry checked the ship's systems. Green lights across the board. They weren't fully resupplied on ammunition, but they were two thirds. The Delphic Dame could defend herself again. Cherry had the stealth shields at maximum.

She tried to send her talent ahead of her, asking if there was danger on the far side of the millrace. All she felt was a tightening in her gut. Anxiety had coiled there since they left Astacus. Even sleeping and exercising regularly the last few days hadn't relaxed it.

"Everyone secure?"

Dylan was in the cargo hold with Giol.

Maree had heeded Cherry's warning of rough travel ahead, and buckled into a chair. She didn't seem concerned. The screen showed her laughing at something from a sitcom playing on her personal comms unit.

Sitting on the bridge beside her, Hugh squeezed Cherry's knee. "We're ready."

They had to dive.

Cherry shivered all over from the cold chill of entering a universal river and in relief at leaving Pannyk behind.

No one fired on them, and Pythia's scan showed no nearby spaceships.

"All clear," Hugh said. The intercom was open to Dylan and Giol.

"Thank the stars." Cherry flicked the intercom open to Maree. "We're through the trouble spot."

Maree gave a thumbs up, and continued watching her TV show. "No problem."

Maybe there were no problems for Maree, but Cherry's body sagged, then tensed. Confession time.

Her reaction was blatant enough that Hugh asked what was wrong.

"Nothing." She reached for her bottle of water and swallowed to try and clear the constriction in her throat. "Nothing is wrong...out there." She gestured beyond the Delphic Dame with the water bottle. "I have a confession. Dylan needs to hear it, too. I was waiting till we were away from Pannyk and kind of safe." She coughed and sipped more water.

Concern darkened Hugh's eyes. He rose and touched her shoulder. His grip was warm and firm. "I'm sorry. I've been wrapped up in my own problems. Whatever it is, we'll face it together."

She shook her head. "It's not trouble." She closed her eyes for a second. "Let's talk in the lounge. I'll ask Dylan to—"

“Did you want me?” Dylan called from the kitchen. “I’m grabbing a celebratory snack. We survived Pannyk and there are no rogues waiting for us.”

“Hold the celebration for a bit, Dylan. Cherry has something to share.”

Sharing sounded so much nicer than confessing, and Hugh’s hand holding hers as they walked into the lounge helped, even as it added to her scratching, suffocating feelings of remorse and apprehension. She sat beside him on the sofa, but withdrew her hand. She didn’t want to feel him withdraw when she confessed.

Dylan dragged one of his toadstool seats to sit in front of them.

Father and son regarded her encouragingly.

“I...um...” Squeezing her eyes shut, she blurted her confession out fast. Coward that she was, she didn’t want to see their expressions. “I have a way of talking in real-time to Nora. Burrtalk is her special thing. She told me about it so that we could stay in touch when I left. She hasn’t told anyone else, or almost anyone,” she thought of Zac and Ben. “Using burrtalk, I told her and Liam about you and Dylan, about the katangs and the rogue thrions, and the good guys judging us, and us going to Earth, and...all your secrets,” she finished despairingly.

Hugh gripped her upper arms.

She opened one eye, and squinted up at him.

Bewilderingly, the expression on his face was one of grateful, fervent relief. “I now believe in miracles.” He hauled her against him. “Do you know what this means?”

Both eyes open, she stared at him before peeking sideways at Dylan. Nope, no hint there, either, although his nearest claw clasped one of her shoes reassuringly. “I’m guessing you’re not mad that I told Nora and Liam about you?”

“Mad?” A little shake. “You’re a miracle worker. Now, even if the rogues silence us, your people can act. Your sister

knows about us. Thank God. There's a chance the thrios would recognize her sovereignty over human territory."

"If she sought it," Cherry said. "Nora left Capitoline so she didn't have to play power games. How would she even—" She broke off. "Dylan, you realize that I told Nora and Liam about you? You can be angry with me. Just because Hugh..." was currently cuddling her, one hand smoothing up and down her spine while his abstracted expression spoke of profound new calculations.

"I'm not angry." But unlike Hugh's uncensored, shattering relief, Dylan was cautious, his tone tentative. "Can we talk to them?"

"Yes."

Leaping off his toadstool, he exploded into joy, pincers waving, antennae curling, legs spinning him in a tight circle. "Now?"

Oh. It took Cherry a few seconds. It was a long leap from dreading her confession to accepting that Hugh and Dylan welcomed her news. Once she made that adjustment, she recognized Dylan's reaction.

He was celebrating the expansion of his social circle.

She smiled. "They'll love to talk to you." She glanced at the clock. "I'm not sure about right now. Nora and Liam mightn't be around. It's the workday where they are. Jonah will answer, though. He can tell us what they're up to and when we can chat to them."

Jonah was a known identity from her stories.

Dylan bobbed his eyestalks. "The android. Jonah is why you're so comfortable with Giol. I'd *love* to talk to him."

And Jonah was delighted to talk to Dylan—and Hugh—but briefly. "We've a few things happening here. Would you be free to chat in four hours?"

After an early dinner? "Absolutely," Cherry said, and closed burrtalk. The three of them had crowded onto the bridge.

Hugh stared at the lid that she'd flipped shut. "I thought it was a cupholder."

"Clever, hey?" She winked, then flung one arm around him and rested her other hand on Dylan's shell. "I can't wait for you to meet the family."

The family proved to be bigger than she'd expected.

Zac and Ben were the surprise addition, briefed by Nora, but full of questions. Burrtalk linked their sting ship on its journey to Fanrong Station to collect Lucas, to Nora and Liam on Border Station, and to Cherry, Hugh, and Dylan on the Delphic Dame.

Real-time communication across galaxies. Hugh's mind was boggled.

Cherry grinned. When Lucas joined Zac and Ben, he was going to lose his mind entirely. The chatter on burrtalk would hit new heights.

Lucas had changed a lot from the skinny, punk kid she'd first met on Border Station. These days he was a serious college student. He was tearing through his obligatory courses, aiming at early entrance to medical school. He was also recognized as a burr wielder as strong as any ruling monarch, and almost approaching Nora in odd abilities. The responsibility, and the pressure of Royal Guards and burr researchers intent on both guarding and cultivating his burr sensitivity, had forged an unyielding, stoic exterior. Only inside the clan did Lucas let loose his natural snark and exuberance.

Stars, she missed him. She missed them all.

She sniffed.

"Aww, doodums. You missed me." Of course Zac heard her discreet snuffle, and identified it as hers. He'd never call Nora *doodums*.

"I miss Ben." *I am such a liar.*

And Zac called her out. "Liar."

Dylan was practically vibrating out of his shell with enthusiasm. Zac's teasing might have focused on Cherry, but everyone had welcomed Dylan and Hugh. Even if it was over burrtalk, Dylan's first encounter with multiple humans was overwhelmingly positive. Via Cherry, Hugh and Dylan had been de facto adopted as honorary clan members.

Not that social hour lasted for long.

"I've been thinking about how the rogues hooked the original leaders," Zac said. "If Dylan's right about thrios lifespans, then those same individuals are still manipulating us as generations of humans come and go."

Over a couple of centuries. Cherry nodded. "You're smart."

"I'm so much more than a pretty face and an itchy trigger finger." Zac was kidding. He'd seen, and delivered, enough violence in the war a few years back that non-violent solutions were his goal. He had the opposite to an itchy trigger finger. That didn't mean he couldn't, or wouldn't, deliver smackdowns to clan enemies. "Think about their lifespan. Really think about it. Now, consider that leaders tend to be older." His voice slowed, encouraging them to catch up with him. "Facing their own mortality."

"Extended lifespans," Nora said.

"Not quite immortality." Zac confirmed her guess matched his. "But it's one of the legendary lures for humans. Remember the ancient humans who consumed young blood to stay young? It didn't work, but they tried it."

Ew.

Hugh didn't grimace at ancient humans' depravity. He was stone-faced. "They tried it," he repeated. "You're suggesting federation leaders sold out their people for the hope of individual extended lifespans—which I have not heard of happening."

Nonchalantly, Zac replied, "So, the rogues lied. Big surprise. All they needed was a hook. Once you've hooked your fish, you reel it in with whatever other stratagems work."

Get them fully hooked, and your fish will stay on the hook because the pain of tearing itself free is too great.”

Ben murmured, “I don’t think that’s how fishing works.”

“It is when your prey are selfish gits,” Zac said conclusively.

Hugh’s jaw clenched. “Hopefully, not all of them. I had counted on being able to choose the people I approached on Thebes. I know their background, beliefs, and prejudices. It’s familiar territory physically and culturally. Politically. Earth will be more challenging, but we have to try, and try now. We can’t waste time. Surprise is one of our few advantages against the rogues.”

Surprise was a solid military tactic.

“It worked on Astacus,” Cherry said. “We breached the defensive perimeter around Astacus, and got away again, partly because the rogues didn’t expect us. It’s the unexpected element they can’t prepare for.”

Dylan added a pertinent point. “The katangs chose the fastest rivers to turn perilous. Since we can travel them, we should beat news of what happened on Astacus—that we visited—to Earth. Astacus taught me about who I am. It also gained us Giol, a katang droid, and some katang gear he brought onboard for me. Hugh’s been looking at it.”

Briefly, Hugh pursued the sidetrack. “I’ve been analyzing it alongside Giol. I have a few ideas for combining the principles behind the stealth technology used on the Delphic Dame and katang materials. Katangs seem to have been constitutionally unable to hide, or rather, to conceive of a reason to conceal themselves or their activities.”

His neutral tone failed to diminish the impact of his grim recounting even for Cherry, who’d heard it before. “We, the federation, used the katangs’ obliviousness against them. We successfully committed genocide by communicating the directive to destroy all katang ships a year in advance of the action date. It gave time for word to get out to all battlecruisers and for them to track katang spaceships. The battlecruiser

captains had the authority to inform other, smaller ships in their vicinity. A date was set on which to destroy the katang ships. The military did so, and hunted down surviving ships for a decade.”

The burrtalk system was silent as everyone contemplated authorized genocide.

Hugh cleared his throat. “There was no risk that captains who received the directive would warn a katang. The risk was that some would act early. Thirty years ago, katangs were plain and simply hated. We feared them for supposedly siphoning all life from Lusak and hijacking, harvesting, an entire colony expedition. They didn’t fear us. At all.”

And so, they died.

“Did any defend themselves?” Liam asked.

“Yes. If they weren’t taken by surprise and immediately disabled, katang ships possessed defenses. Those came as a surprise to us.” Hugh raked a hand through his hair. “I have relatives who participated in the hunts. Defenses against space hazards are also effective weapons, if one has the will to use them and your ship survives an initial, botched attack.”

“What weapons did your people use?” Zac asked.

“Everything. Anything. Overwhelming force.”

Overwhelming force, the same answer he’d given Cherry for how humans had defeated Astacus’s defenses to devastate the planet.

Hugh shrugged, although most of his audience couldn’t see it. “We don’t have the resources to match the federation or the rogues. Therefore, we have to use what other people have, and twist it to our purposes.”

“Specifically?” Liam prompted.

“I aim to talk to leaders who already know about the thrios, either because they’ve met them or because they’ve heard family stories about them. If I don’t have to convince them that thrios exist, we’re a step ahead.”

Family stories. Cherry's own family understood that secrets equaled power. Burrstalk was a case in point.

In the federation, across the generations, families kept others out of power by hoarding information. Deals done with the rogue thrions fell into that category.

"I'll pick leaders from families that grew in prominence sometime after two and a half centuries ago. After the rogues likely made contact. My family would make that list."

Hugh was being clever. He'd leverage insider knowledge to argue his case. Everywhere they could save time meant they preserved the advantage of surprise against the rogues.

Nora yawned. "Sorry. I skipped my afternoon nap."

Which mattered because she was pregnant and tired and Cherry had looped her into this huge problem.

"We shouldn't be bothering you," Cherry began.

"I'm pregnant, not feeble-jeebles."

"Feeble-jeebles?" Dylan whispered.

"Opting out of life because it's all too hard," Nora said.

Cherry patted Dylan's shell. "Angkorran slang. Nora has never feeble-jeebled in her life, but she is allowed to be tired and go to bed early."

"Are you really going to nag me across a galaxy?" Big Sister demanded.

"I'll nag you from right here," Liam said. "As will Jonah."

"Pfft." But Nora conceded his right to worry. "Before I'm hustled off to bed—and not for fun shenanigans—sovereignty." Her pause added weight to the word. "It will be a gigantic pain. Much, much worse if humans don't get it, but whoever does—if the thrions do recognize an individual, like you, Hugh—then we'll have to let the diplomats forge a semi-independent existence for the Human Sector." She used her own people's name for their formerly isolated region, situated back through the millrace of the Origin black hole. "The Stranded would be an uncomfortable fit for a resurrected

federation, and we'd lose more than we gained if we started meddling in a collapsing federation."

Nora understood politics.

She'd just laid out her requirements for assisting Hugh in gaining sovereignty for federation territory. In return, and whether she had the power to do so or not, she'd promised that if the Human Sector, as a society that had not participated in the katang genocide, earned sovereignty for all human territory, then the Human Sector wouldn't seek to control or extort inhabitants of federation space.

"Agreed," Hugh said, although, like Nora, he didn't have the right to speak for his society.

"Bedtime," Cherry said. "Because I heard that yawn. And the rest of us won't keep chatting without you because, honestly, escaping Pannyk, telling Hugh and Dylan about burrtalk, and now actually talking is too much for one day."

"We all have a lot to think about," Zac said. "And questions. I've started a list." There was a subdued scuffle. "All right. Ben started the list while I was shouting about everything."

Cherry laughed over Liam's resolute, "Goodnight".

Ben echoed it, and the burrtalk session ended.

Hugh wrapped Cherry in a massive hug, and Dylan joined in. "I like your family."

"Yeah?"

Dylan whistled a happy sigh. "Oh yeah. It's wonderful not to be alone."

Over the next few days, as the Delphic Dame traversed the perilous river to Shiyo, a lot of burrtalk conversations occurred. Some were serious, and others seriously speculative.

"What if it's a game?" Jonah suggested. "You're looking at the problem of the rogues and of gaining sovereignty for

humanity, but pull back. Humans are entering a game that existed before them, and likely will after them.”

“Thanks for that vote of confidence,” Zac muttered.

“Katangs and thrios are long-lived,” Jonah said. “You don’t know what the other aliens are like or how long they live.”

Cherry frowned at the screen that showed the universal river’s emptiness. Long after she was dead, Jonah and Giol would continue. Dylan would be alive.

“There must be other aliens, and they must be powerful for the thrios to be put in a position to judge others, and for their judgement to be enforced,” Jonah reasoned. “It’s fascinating, really. How will humans react to the thrios when their existence is not just a leadership secret?”

One of Dylan’s antennae curled around Cherry’s hand, and she realized that confronted by the immensity of the unknown universe and its inhabitants, she’d reached out for comfort and connection, and Dylan had answered.

Hugh frowned at a blank expanse of bulkhead. “Long-lived aliens in an effectively infinite universe shapes the nature of the game beyond humans’ natural horizon. The game has to evolve and go on. Reductive play would ruin existence for everyone.”

“Ow. Metaphysical shell-ache,” Dylan said.

“Headache-ville. You and me both, buddy,” Zac replied. “Can we avoid migraine-level puzzles for the moment?”

Ben ignored their whining. “If we use the metaphor of a game, then in a near-infinite game, those who try for endplays, killing off life, must be deemed rogues and kicked out. That’s what humans have to walk back from. We must avoid endplays. This game values continuance over a final win.”

“A game that involves a long timescale, across vast distances and types of life has to be able to change its rules,” Hugh said.

“It evolves,” Liam contributed.

Dylan squeezed Cherry's hand. "A game that evolves can be influenced." He was telling her that there was hope. Opportunities.

She wished her talent would show her some of them, but nada. Not a hint. Her free hand covered the tight knot of tension at her diaphragm.

"We don't know the rules of the game or its players," Hugh said. "However, if the game itself can change, then humanity has to declare who we are and what we value. We must act boldly to change the rules in our favor."

Other discussions were less metaphysical, but frustrating in that they came up against the same problem of inadequate information. They were reduced to guessing.

"There can't be a great number of rogue thrios or there would have been sightings," Nora said.

Cherry wished she could concur. "It's a comforting hypothesis, but there were at least two ships we thought were rogues at Astacus, or split between Astacus and the Montu Military Research Base. Plus, rogues may be in position to effectively, though not overtly, command resources like the Vizards. Who do the Vizards answer to since the federation collapsed? If I was a rogue, a secretive force that people instinctively allowed free rein would be my choice of weapon."

"The Vizards," Jonah muttered in the tone of one tabling a matter for later consideration.

"Another of my people's endplay weapons." Generally, Hugh controlled his emotions, but the pressure of being the person choosing to confront the issue of humanity's universal reputation head-on got to him. Guilt and duty were implacable motivators.

Scruffing his hair in frustration gave him a mad professor look. "It would be easier if we faced prosecution, judgement, and punishment. It would be a relief to be told what reparation

we must offer to atone for killing the katangs and Astacus. We'd have a positive path forward instead of this groping in the dark."

"Punishment is tricky. You can't prove that you value life by walking a path of death," Dylan said. "Imagine a man killing another man's extended family. Thirty people. Would the sincerely remorseful killer balance the scales of justice if he presented himself and thirty of his family to the victim for execution?"

Frowning and picking at the fraying knees of her jeans, Cherry considered Dylan's hypothetical scenario, and everyone's instinctive rejection of it. "What we're doing is not actually about justice, though, is it? Balancing the scales might be part of what we consider, but really we're after satisfying unknown criteria so that we—or the leaders whom Hugh can convince to act against the rogues—can be judged by the thrios as worthy of sovereignty over human territory."

She contemplated Dylan. "Rather than blatantly seeking thrios' forgiveness and approval, should we be thinking about what we owe the katangs? I really hope more than just you survived, Dylan. Maybe we should be searching for them to offer our protection..."

"What protection?" Zac snorted.

"The truth," she said simply. "If I was katang..." She considered what she'd want as justice, but a justice that didn't carry wounds into the future. "If the former federation leadership on Earth announced the truth, that rogue thrios infiltrated our society and manipulated us into genocidal action against an innocent species, that we convicted and punished the katangs for the rogue thrios' actions, what would that accomplish?"

Hugh grunted. "It would kill the federation. The speed of disintegration would increase. People would turn on each other." The swiftness of his response revealed that he'd considered the scenario. "Elite families, like mine, would be suspect as rogue thrios collaborators. Witch-hunts would

destroy innocent lives. When you destroy trust, you weaken the bonds of community.”

Liam offered a reality check. “That trust is already broken. It’s just that your people don’t yet know that their leaders sold them out to the rogues. It will come out. If human territory isn’t recognized as sovereign, then the truth of the rogues’ actions and the federation leadership’s complicity will emerge brutally as the rogues seize resources once it is legal for them to do so. They’ll have positioned for that day.”

Nora finished her husband’s thought. His warning. “Hugh, if you’re hoping that recognition of sovereignty restores your federation and its power structure...don’t. Leave those hopes to your politicians. You identified the foundation for humanity’s conscious entry into the game earlier. Our values. They’re the bedrock for your plan.”

EIGHT

Not every burrtalk conversation was serious.

Cherry baby-talked with Ekon while Nora held him.
“Nunny loves you. Who is Nunny’s clever boy?”

“He is not calling you Nunny.” And to Ekon, slowly and distinctly, Nora said, “Auntie Cherry.”

“Boo!”

Nora laughed. “I can live with you calling her Boo.”

“Nunny is clearly Auntie,” Cherry defended her name.

“Boo! Boooo!”

“All right, tadpole. Down you go.”

“Yo!”

“Jonah’s busy.”

“No.”

Cherry giggled.

Nora sighed. “He crawls at the speed of light and uses absolutely anything to pull himself up to stand. He’s searching for Jonah. Can you imagine his teenage years? He won’t take my word for it that Jonah’s gone. Oh no, Ekon has to prove everything for himself.” Her voice was full of love.

A distant “Yo” sounded from somewhere in the bedroom.

Cherry confided her regret that she wasn’t traveling back to the Behesht Sector to help the Diamond Expedition, or at least, to learn what was happening to them. “I don’t care if the federation finally and irrevocably shatters. I think it’s inevitable. Yet here I am.”

“Because you believe in Hugh,” Nora replied as if the answer was that simple. “Some people believe in causes. Others in people. We believe in you.”

“Yo!”

A smile entered Nora’s voice. “Jonah’s returned.”

Just in time to save Cherry from having to find an answer to Nora’s quiet emotional conviction.

In the background came Ekon’s squeals and Jonah’s teasing.

Nora hadn’t finished her answer. “When I met Ethan,” her first husband, “he was a sting ship pilot in wartime. I loved him, and every time we parted, I knew it could be the last time I saw him.” Sting ship pilots had had one of the highest fatality rates of the war. Even Liam, as a much-decorated battlecruiser captain, had held a greater chance of survival. “If I’d had a chance to go with him...”

“Hugh and I aren’t—” Cherry broke off. “I don’t know how you’d describe our relationship. Given how things are, we can’t plan for the future, and he hasn’t...should I seduce him?”

Nora laughed. “That wasn’t where I thought this conversation was going.”

“No.” Cherry groaned, and laughed, too. “My thoughts get tangled up and circle around.”

“It’s feelings and fear tangling you up. Loving without the promise of a future is hard.”

Cherry sighed. “Yeah. I’m an oracle who can’t see the future.”

There was an appreciable pause filled with Jonah singing and Ekon contributing proto-drumming sounds of crashing toys before Nora changed the subject. “In the Hall of Charts on Astacus, you said you felt ‘filled up’ from contact with the archive.”

“Like a sausage about to burst from its casing, but then the pressure condensed.” Reminiscently, she rubbed at the sensation of indigestion. Goosebumps sprung up on her arms. “You suspect it did change me?”

“We don’t know what the archive is, and your katang droid hasn’t helped fill in the gaps. Jonah?”

“Upsy-daisy, Ekon. Nope? Okay, you stay there and play with the spaceship.” Jonah’s voice approached the burrtalk system. “Hi, Cherry.”

“Hey, Yo-yo.”

The android laughed.

Nora got down to business. Undoubtedly because she suspected Ekon wouldn’t leave them in peace for long. “Jonah had an idea about the archive.”

“Could it be powered by a Vapori burr?” he suggested.

“Oooh.” Cherry considered the idea. “Giol had the archive scan me. It was interacting with me on some level. Recording me, he said. But if he didn’t know that I was sensitive to burrs, and if he didn’t know about a burr powering the archive, I could have sucked in a whole lot of burr energy.”

“Kind of like how the original fifteen were changed by contact with the Vapori lens at the Origin black hole,” Nora finished. “We have no reason to think that the burrs only exist in our small region of space.”

Cherry nodded before remembering that they couldn’t see her. “It would explain the weird feeling. But...how might the burr have changed me?”

“We don’t know that it did,” Jonah responded reassuringly. Less reassuringly, he added, “We don’t know how the archive uses its burr—if it has one.”

“Huh. If my oracular talent has changed...”

“Then expecting it to do what it once did won’t work, but you may have new possibilities to discover,” Nora said.

Cherry huffed out a breath and stared at the ceiling.
“Wow.”

“Just remember,” her big sister continued. Cherry waited for a pearl of wisdom. “You’re still Ekon’s Boo.”

Ekon heard his name. “Boo!”

Actually, Nora was right. Cherry’s relationships were her safety net and the guiding light forward. People mattered to her, not ideals.

It seemed Hugh was struggling with the same tension between personal and social goals, but from the other perspective.

Cherry hadn’t meant to listen in. It wasn’t that late at night, just late enough that she’d gone to bed. However, an early dream, one of the crazy ones that re-arrange the recent past and render it scarily ridiculous, woke her up. She padded barefoot into the kitchen for a glass of water to dismiss the dream’s hangover, and heard the low murmur of voices. She was so intent on the remnants of the dream and her wish for comfort that she didn’t think that the conversation might be private. She just drifted to the bridge.

Liam was talking to Hugh. “Nora and Cherry see themselves as survivors, not heroes. Their instinct is to run, but what they call running, others would call fighting. They don’t flee blindly. It’s always to something. Fleeing into the future rather than away from the past.”

Hearing the love and respect in Liam’s voice banished Cherry’s dream haze. He was a rock. He fought for and protected others. He’d built the clan to do so. She’d known he loved her. But his respect was as shattering as kindness might be to someone who’d braced for abuse.

“I’ve been running away for three years,” Hugh said.

“You had no choice.” The surety in Liam’s voice could have steadied a battlecruiser full of first combat ensigns. “You ran to save Dylan. You became a refugee from your own society, and now, you’re heading back.”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way. I don’t know that I want to rebuild a life in the federation. I don’t know that I can return to them, but I have to warn them about the rogues and sovereignty, and of the danger of not winning sovereignty.” He cleared his throat. “Cherry saved me. She saved Dylan and me in ways we didn’t guess we needed. She accepted him instantly. No hesitation. No wariness. Unlike everyone else, she saw a kid who needed love. Not a monster.”

Cherry hugged herself tightly.

“And for me.” Hugh’s tone roughened to a harsh near-whisper. “She showed me that I was worth saving. God, forgive me. In return, I’m leading her into danger.”

“You’re not responsible for Cherry heading into trouble. She’d be the first to tell you it’s her choice. However, Cherry deserves that you be worth the risk she’s taking. Don’t risk her life, or yours, for anything less than necessity.”

Cherry tiptoed back to bed. She wasn’t ashamed of eavesdropping, but she didn’t want a relationship talk while their plans for the future were so undecided. She closed her cabin door silently.

Her visits to Maree were less fraught, and a good escape from the pressure of planning to subvert the rogues’ plans.

Their passenger was thriving in her “holiday apartment” in the converted cargo hold. Maree had redyed her hair an even more brilliant red and daily painted her nails in new designs. She lounged around, watching movies and sitcoms on her personal comms unit. On request, Pythia would change the image on the wall screen to show a tropical island or other

holiday resort, drawn from federation media. Maree then matched her music to the visual mood.

Most of all, Maree was always ready to talk. Left alone, she'd monologue. Given company...well, it was still a near-monologue.

Cherry enjoyed Maree's crazy rants about favorite foods or ironic commentaries on past boyfriends. As the days passed, Maree began to dream of the future. Whatever waited at the end of the Delphic Dame's journey, months after Maree disembarked, Cherry could remember that she'd given Maree renewed hope. That was a good gift to give a guest.

On one particular afternoon visit, music blared from Maree's personal comms unit.

She saw Cherry enter, and grinned. "Party time!" She held out both hands.

Laughing, Cherry accepted the invitation to dance. The pop music was bright and boppy. It would be a crime not to dance to it.

Afterward, tracking Dylan to the obstacle course, she asked him if katangs danced.

"No." Contemplating the question, he curled an antenna. "Huh. I hadn't considered dancing as something I got from humans. Unless katangs did, and they simply didn't pass on that memory in the clatter ceremony. We should ask Giol."

The droid confirmed that katangs did not dance. Giol then watched Dylan demonstrate that this katang did.

Nothing, absolutely nothing, beat a katang droid for non-expression. "It is fortunate katangs do not dance."

"Ooh, burn." Dylan giggled.

Giol was adapting to his new katang owner, and perhaps, to life among humans.

For Cherry, she couldn't shake the idea of a dance. What if it was a metaphor for their problem?

“What if we think of civilization as a dance?” She lay on the sofa in the lounge, one leg crossed over the other, toe flicking in the air. “Your leadership tried to learn the rogues’ dance. They followed their lead. But humans have to dance their own dance. How do we dance to join the alien community? Sovereignty doesn’t work as a concept if the territory is completely isolated. So we must be meant to dance with others. What dance?”

The dance metaphor didn’t resonate with Hugh as he worked at the kitchen table. He grunted a polite, disinterested, *you’re babbling* grunt.

Cherry kept flicking her toe. *Kick, kick. Kick, kick, kick.* A dance step without a dance. “The traders in the clan say that negotiation is a conversation. It’s not one deal and done. You need to be able to deal in the market on an ongoing basis, which you can’t do if you burn people and earn a reputation as a bad faith actor. Rogues are kicked out—unless,” she held up a finger, not that Hugh was looking—“unless you can introduce a new conversational lead before your eviction from the game.”

In the kitchen, Dylan was rummaging around for snacks. “You don’t negotiate with monsters. You name and exclude them as rogues.”

Hugh looked up from his personal comms unit. “Humans as monsters.”

Despite Hugh’s neutral tone, Dylan spun around hastily. “I didn’t mean—”

Hugh waved him to silence. “The rogues had humans believing katangs to be monsters, for no reason. Humans have to accept that we could be judged monsters. If we don’t accept that fact, then we won’t move forward.”

Monsters. The rogues are monsters. The word had weight and force. Cherry’s foot stopped kicking.

Dylan grabbed a chocolate bar that he could eat tidily on the bridge, and went to chat to Zac and Ben.

Stuck on the small sting ship, the men were always ready to chat. Or Zac was. Ben listened and was amused by the nonsense one small, but fast-growing katang storyteller and a reformed pirate could generate. As they swapped stories, each grew a greater understanding of the other and their society. Zac and Ben had a breadth and depth of experience that Cherry couldn't match. Both had lived through making hard choices that resulted in others' deaths.

Dylan was learning a lot.

Jonah was even teaching him how to code, and the finer points of hacking. From experience, Cherry knew how good a teacher he was, and she was pretty sure that Dylan had already surpassed her as a student.

Dylan... Cherry's throat constricted. The idea that occurred to her was diabolical, but not beyond the rogues. She rolled off the sofa, and gestured to Hugh for silence and to follow her. Back against the door, she shut the two of them in her cabin. There was nothing intimate in her choice of location. Only the guarantee of privacy. "Hugh, the rogues manipulated humans into destroying a planet and a sapient species. There's nothing they'd balk at. Once they know not only that you're alive, but that you're communicating with people, what if they send you a message?"

He watched her from two steps away. "What sort of message?"

"Remember, from the rogues' perspective, they have nothing to lose. They're confirmed rogues. They're guilty of initiating the death of Astacus and the katangs. What if they gave you a deal? They choose a planet... maybe Thebes," his home world, "and they present their ultimatum. Either you kill Dylan or they'll destroy the planet. Billions of people versus one katang."

Hugh's head went back, as at a blow.

Her nightmare scenario was credible. The rogues were monsters.

She pressed back against the door. Now wasn't the time to reach out to him. "This is why Dylan can't hear this conversation. If he heard such an ultimatum, he'd say to kill him."

Hugh gulped a raw, ragged breath. He paced in a tight circle, his hand pulling at the back of his neck.

Cherry whispered the inevitable alternative. "Or Dylan would kill himself to spare you. He imprinted on you as a larva. Your moral code is his. He'd die for others."

"Hells damn them," Hugh swore. "I can't—" His energy couldn't be contained.

Hastily, she moved out of the doorway.

He rushed into the adjacent cabin, the one converted to a gym, and closed the door. If he shouted, soundproofing contained his anguish. The punching bag would absorb his anger.

As horrible as the possibility was, it was better considered now than sucker punching them on Earth.

Nonetheless, Cherry was nauseous. "Stars, but that had better not be my talent working." For all her attempts to stir up her oracular talent, she hadn't been able to either wake it or discover how the archive may have changed it. "I'm sick of meditating."

Nor did she want to be alone with her thoughts.

She couldn't talk to Dylan, not right now, which meant she couldn't crash his conversation with Zac and Ben, either.

Interrupting Hugh was out of the question.

Maree? It wouldn't be fair to inflict her agitation on a woman who was cheerfully coping with what amounted to solitary confinement, albeit with entertainment options.

Giol. Cherry headed down to the droid's lair beside the obstacle course. "Giol, you were going to explain the process to extract materials from spent fuel cells."

Giol readily obliged.

She learned it wasn't as easy as he'd initially claimed. "First, catch your ice comet," she muttered. The process was complicated and hazardous from the collection stage to the processing of the ice which had to be done outside the Delphic Dame and the escaping gases separated and contained for use in the subsequent processing of the spent fuel cells. "So, it would require us to construct a mini-barge for robots to work on."

"If you were running out of fuel cells, you might be able to recover enough blazsvitloium from the spent cells currently onboard to travel another two months."

She whistled, suddenly much more in favor of the difficult process. "Explain that bit about comet ice again."

NINE

All their discussions didn't mean they weren't also working. Life in space required constant vigilance, and ensuring that everything, including backup systems, functioned.

Having completed the most dangerous extraction processes on-station, Hugh had continued working steadily on using the materials he'd gain to restore the Delphic Dame.

Cherry had, as well, but she'd been guided by Pythia.

In engineering, materials were refined, fed into fabricators, and the product stream directed to replace the gaps in the ship's defenses and supplies.

In the lower cargo hold, the obstacle course and Hugh's workshop had merged and morphed.

On one visit, Cherry found Dylan in a nest of katang and human gear, breaking down objects to build an amalgam of the two. Recognition stirred and she permitted herself the diversion. She tilted her head to examine his project. That labyrinthine gadget resembled the one that had fascinated Dylan on his visit to the Hall of Charts on Astacus. "What is it? What are you doing?"

"A puzzle. Maybe. It's a raz, a storyteller's toy or tool." He held it up. "It has multiple paths to a single outcome, but some paths don't exist until others are refused. See, the lever. When

I close it you can see how that path connects to form a new path.” Dylan turned the raz this way and that, admiring the labyrinthine gadget. “I’m modifying it. No. I’m repurposing it.”

“As a puzzle?”

“Katangs aren’t social, as humans understand sociability. Their concept of creativity is also different. Exoskeletons versus having all the squishiness over your bones.” He rapped his carapace. “Katangs gave purpose to their creativity by framing it as establishing an outer shell, a metaphysical but real shell, around themselves as protection against entropy. They created some things purely to fall apart. For those items, their beauty was in their decay.”

Morbid, but not my species. Cherry fidgeted with two twined pieces of wire to keep from speaking her thoughts out loud.

Dylan coiled another thin wire around the end of one path and guided the wire to curve down to an open path. “All things fall apart, so you must create more than entropy can consume if you wish to possess the past in the future.”

Dramatically, Cherry fell back onto the floor. She moaned. “No more metaphysical discussions.”

These randomly occurring metaphysical musings were the most esoteric example of the mission creep that had always threatened to complicate the simple, original objective of delivering a warning and scarpering. Whether on the Delphic Dame or involved via burrtalk, each and every one of them were problem solvers. Inevitably, they’d consider the implications of the warning to be delivered and realizable solutions.

Dylan snickered. “I was quoting Giol.”

“Passing the blame,” the droid in question observed. Giol was picking up some human insights and attitudes.

Rolling her head to the side, Cherry squinted at him. “You’re suggesting that some high rate of creation defeats the rate of decay and sustains what was into what might be?”

Dylan tossed a piece of foil at her. “Now who’s being metaphysical?”

“Or not metaphysical at all,” she mused, and scrambled up. Standing, she was nearer, though no match, for Giol’s height. She looked from him to Dylan. Maybe Dylan had just been teasing, but... “I need to think about this.”

His antennae stilled their slight swaying motion. “About creativity or about what I’m making?”

She’d forgotten her original question about what he was doing. “Um, about something else altogether.”

About Giol once saying that in the stream of time, katangs had one leg each in the past, present, and future. An odd feeling near her solar plexus, hinted that maybe katangs had literally brought the past into the future. A leg in each didn’t mean they swam in the stream of time. But maybe they could anchor some things in it. And by that sudden twinge in her middle, perhaps her disturbingly dormant oracular talent was waking into a new version of itself.

What does it actually mean to anchor something in the stream of time? We anchor things in space. Anchoring something in time, which flows on, means that what we secure, is secured in a moving force.

In the Hall of Charts on Astacus, she’d felt the threads of fate condense into a rope. Then she’d lost that sensation. After escaping through the millrace of the Montu black hole, she’d lost all sense of the threads of fate. They hadn’t as much as prickled against her skin or lit the back of her eyelids.

But now, she wondered.

Had those threads coiled so tightly at her center that they’d escaped her attention? If the threads had twined to form a rope, what could it do? What changes could it support?

Speculating fiercely, she frowned at Dylan.

Stasis. Rather than being affected by time, the subject of stasis was carried by it. For someone to act, they had to do so in time. To say that another way, time had to pass for actions

to occur. Therefore, being anchored to a moving point in time removed the ability to act.

Dylan had survived as a larva, unaware and unaffected by time, in his lifepod until Hugh opened it. They had assumed that his stasis was a feature of being a katang, but what if it wasn't? What if it was the lifepod?

Threads of fate. A rope that hooked into the stream of time.

Stasis could be amazing. But what if she could call information to herself?

The past held secrets which time distorted.

Memory recreated events, which was distinctly different to returning in time and experiencing them again. Or for the first time.

What if I can recall someone else's past?

"I think Cherry's sleeping with her eyes open," Dylan said.

She blinked.

Hugh had emerged from his workshop. He smiled crookedly. "I offered to order up dinner and you didn't protest."

"Ah." Because she always protested Hugh's fabbed meals. "Nope. You're handling the engineering problems. I'll handle dinner."

In fact, the Delphic Dame's restoration and maintenance weren't testing Hugh's engineering expertise. Problems occurred, but they were solvable. They were almost expected. It was his "special project" that perplexed, disconcerted, and excited him.

He explained the latest wrinkle in his design while they ate fish tacos.

Giol couldn't fit in the kitchen or living area, but he was looped into the discussion via the intercom. For this project, Giol was a vital consultant.

Dylan and Cherry understood perhaps a quarter of what Hugh and Giol discussed. Or argued over.

The laws of the universe were the same for every species, but they approached them differently. Consequently, knowledge and the technology it birthed varied by species.

Hugh was trying to blend katang and human engineering.

Cherry felt no shame that she only comprehended the theories and hypotheses being flung around after Hugh or Giol dumbbed them down for her.

What she never doubted was that Hugh was deadly serious, and seriously ambitious. He intended to change the energetic profile of the Delphic Dame.

Jonah, the AI smarty-pants, comprehended everything and was a fan as soon as Hugh explained over burrtalk the principles of his redesign of the existing stealth shield. “So, not a redesign as such. An augmentation.”

“If it works, it’ll be damn useful,” Zac said. He and Liam were fascinated. A decade ago, the men had been on opposing sides of the latest war between their realms, although they’d never confronted each other directly. Zac had been a Palantine privateer. Liam a Capitoline Royal Navy officer, and ultimately, a battlecruiser captain. Both would have killed, literally, for the ability to disguise their ships so thoroughly that they spoofed even spaceport security.

Nojono Station would be the test for Hugh’s system.

The station was insignificant, a blip in space located two weeks’ interstellar travel from Shiyo, but the importance of its fuel depot meant it would have an effective security system.

On exiting the millrace of the black hole nearest Shiyo, the Delphic Dame turned definitively from the planet and skittered for the minor station. No rogue or Vizard ships registered on Pythia’s scans.

Watching the screens on the bridge, Cherry wasn’t reassured. “If we can hide, so can they.”

Burrtalk was open.

“I read out modifications to your surveillance programs,” Jonah said. “Pythia has implemented them. The coding

changes were informed by Hugh's augmentation. It's fascinating to realize how much the scanning capabilities gained from a few tweaks. Truly, looking through another's eyes changes the universe."

"I should have helped Hugh to do that earlier," Dylan lamented. "We knew my sensory range was different. Redesigning tech shouldn't have had to wait till Giol—"

Cherry nudged him. "Shouldn't have had to wait till you grew up? It's not just the addition of Giol to the ship that's changed things. You've changed. Hugh's motivation has changed from a sane strategy of running away to running headlong into trouble."

"You're running with us." Dylan cheered up enough to remind her.

Hugh's attention was split between the screens and some final refinements of the new shield system. Now, rather than aiming to conceal their presence from observers, they declared themselves as a cutter, capable of defending itself, of transporting and trading in low volume/high value goods, and possessing a small crew.

All those black boxes Cherry had brought onboard gave him a wealth of dead ships from which to choose new identities.

It was Jonah who'd suggested Giol interrogate the black boxes' data. "Unburdened by human preconceptions, you may find patterns we'd miss. The glaring problem with the dataset is that—allowing for a few instances of bad luck—the black boxes are from weaker ships, those captured or wrecked."

"I am cognizant of the bias," Giol said over the intercom to the bridge. "I shall not attempt to correct for it, but will allow for it."

Four days later, in between assisting Hugh with the redesigned stealth shield, he had his report.

They gathered at the edge of the obstacle course to hear it.

"The black boxes held an unexpected layer of hidden thrios encryption. I cracked it."

“Of course,” Cherry said solemnly.

Dylan kicked her ankle.

What? Did he think that teasing an oblivious Giol was beneath her? She winked at him.

He gave the katang equivalent of an eyeroll, twirling one eyestalk.

“The code was simple. It ensured that the black boxes downloaded their data at each major station their ships docked at.”

Hugh scowled. “Black box data isn’t meant to be transmissible. All the time...” The scowl turned to a full-on glower. “It’s another example of how our technological development was forced to stagnate, while the rogues took advantage of the technological gap.”

“What did the rogues track?” Cherry swung her leg as she perched on a low bar.

“Human patterns of movement—of trade, conflict, migration, and loss. Natural and created disasters.”

“They’re vultures,” Cherry said. “Preparing to swoop in on the carrion.”

Dylan’s antennae thrust the idea away from him. “Gross.”

“How many of those disasters did they cause?” Hugh asked bitterly.

Giol failed to recognize the question as rhetorical. “I am uncertain.”

Two days later, the Delphic Dame entered the Shiyo region as the cutter Ticaret out of Thebes.

Cherry read out Pythia’s scan results. “The only ships we can see are trade and passenger vessels.”

Hugh tapped a screen. “And a frigate identifying as local Customs. It’ll be Border Patrol. If they hail us, it’ll be

interesting how their system perceives us.”

A test before Nojono Station. *Great.* Cherry felt ice slither down her spine. “What if they want to board us?” Even if Hugh’s spoofed energy shield and fake identity for the Delphic Dame passed the test, it wouldn’t hold up to actual boots-onboard scrutiny.

“Then you run like rabbits back through the millrace,” Zac said.

Jonah had an alternative suggestion. “Are there any hazards you could hide behind for long enough to switch into stealth mode rather than having to run?”

“Pythia, identify concealment options and time to reach them, please,” Cherry ordered. Suddenly, those hazards she’d been eyeing as potential hiding places for enemies became shining beacons of hope.

Border Patrol ignored them. The frigate was intent on a merchant ship that had wallowed out of the millrace about a day’s travel ahead of the Delphic Dame.

Cherry grinned at Hugh. “Proof!”

“It’s not a high quality proof of concept. The other ships only cursorily scanned us. The real test—”

She hugged him. “Just take the win. Small wins count, too.”

“No kissing on the bridge.”

Dylan’s mock-order opened the hatch to catcalls from Zac.

Hugh gave Dylan a friendly push.

Cherry shook her head. “Zac, I hate to think of the trouble you’ll get into when Lucas joins you.”

“It’ll do the kid good to take a break from his studies. I’d never have guessed that punk would turn into a swot.” Zac knew very well that Lucas, confronted by the extent of his burr-wielding abilities, had chosen to focus on healing. He didn’t want to kill. His studies were aimed at becoming a doctor.

Cherry leaned into Hugh's lingering one-armed hug. The Human Sector realms had set up a command post at the black hole. There were military and Royal Guard burr wielders there who had the training and experience to wield burrs to obliterate enemy spaceships. If killing became necessary, it oughtn't to be on Lucas's shoulders.

Back home, Cherry hadn't been able to get burrs to siphon energy and obliterate things for her. The researchers had, therefore, classified her as weakly sensitive to burrs. If she had a burr with her now—not that she would have: they were rare—but if she had, what could she do with it?

She had a hopefully boring, two week journey to Nojono Station in which to investigate the idea that the archive had altered her oracular talent.

“Sometimes it's good to be boring,” Dylan said.

Cherry jolted, but Dylan was studying the screens and the fake Ticaret's sedate departure from the vicinity of the black hole. He wasn't reading her mind. “We'll drop Maree off at Nojono. I hope she'll be okay there.”

“How is your passenger?” Jonah asked. Nora and Liam were both busy. He would relay what they'd missed of the conversation.

Cherry grinned. “I think Maree's the most normal person onboard. She's still enjoying what she calls her holiday.” Cherry's smile faded. “She's grateful.”

Gratitude was its own goad. You didn't like to fail people who were grateful to you.

As the Delphic Dame approached Nojono Station, Cherry double-checked the information she had on it from Hugh and from the public data available at the Shiyo black hole's mailbox. Relief flooded through her when the first information packet broadcast from Nojono Station reached them and confirmed that the situation there was unchanged.

It wasn't the best place to be stranded, but it wasn't a dead end. Maree would be fine.

For Cherry, it meant she could put certain other plans into effect. Despite her good intentions, rather than exploring her questionable and currently elusive oracular talent, she'd spent the last fortnight dreaming up a...con was too pejorative. She simply saw an opportunity on Nojono that she could exploit.

Nojono Station had begun as a quarantine center in the early years of settlement on Shiyo when a percentage of the colonists reacted badly to the planet's indigenous pathogens. There had been fears of natural mutations occurring and infecting those not susceptible to the original viral strain. Treatment for the condition had solved and, ultimately, eliminated the problem. Nojono Station had reinvented itself as a medical research base before expanding its remit to general science. It now specialized in breeding plants for spaceships and for small unit housing. And insects. It farmed insects.

Nojono Station had a thriving industry breeding insects. Hence its nickname, Cricket Station.

Ew. Cherry shuddered each time she thought of eating insects. She had too many memories of insects crawling over the floors, ceilings, windows, and people of the Angkorran towers to accept them as an addition to her diet. Even bland fabbed protein derived from algal stock was preferable. But each to their own.

The people of Shiyo, and especially the spacers of the region, favored insect protein. It was more natural.

Double ew.

If she could have traveled to Nojono Station openly as an outsider on the Delphic Dame, Cherry would have swapped cultivars with the plant breeders. After five centuries apart and exposure to very different planets, the variations between their two societies' edible plants had to have generated some intriguing differences.

Nora was keenly interested. "You have to get hold of some of their stock. They'll sell the basic stuff, which will be fascinating in itself. But if you want the good stuff, you'll have to trade."

Hugh inserted himself into the sisters' conversation to repeat, "It's too dangerous."

Cherry tsked at him. "You've forgotten the seeds I liberated from Diamond Station. Three centuries old seedstock. Breeders will want it, and it's the sort of thing the Ticaret would trade in. Small volume, high value—to the right buyer. I'll practice my Myridian accent." She started talking efficiently fast.

"You can't go on-station," Hugh said.

Her grin turned smug. "You can't, Mr. Renegade. Me, I'm an unknown. Just another spacer. I've created a few false identities. Federation standards for spaceship registration might be holding, but I bet personal identity databases aren't collaborating and updating effectively any longer. Not for normal, non-criminal people like me. Besides, I have a shopping list."

Nojono Station was small and boring, but efficient, and being nearer to the fringe than the center of federation activities, it held a few surprises. Having scanned the station's broadcast, including the advertisements, she'd composed her shopping list carefully.

The reason so much money had been poured into solving Shiyo's pathogen problem was the blaze ore deposits prevalent in the region, in asteroids and rocky planets. The federation, like Cherry's spinoff Stranded society, required blaze ore to create the fuel cells necessary for interstellar travel.

Being a center for the blaze ore and fuel cell industry underpinned Shiyo's existence. It had also developed a strong agricultural sector, making full use of its planetary resources.

On Nojono Station, fuel cells topped Cherry's shopping list. The federation standard wasn't a match for those used in the Delphic Dame, but the system would accept them after minimal adjustments. She didn't want to have her options curtailed later down the line by running out of fuel. Even having to stop to process the spent fuel cells in the manner Giol had taught her could easily be a life-ending delay. Catching an ice comet required time in ordinary space, where

they'd be vulnerable to rogues in a way the Delphic Dame lessened by traveling the perilous universal rivers.

“Fuel cells are easy. Second on my Nojono shopping list is a transpirear. That's harder. I need a good second-hand one.”

Hugh and Dylan regarded her blankly.

“Transpirears. Scientists use them to listen to plants, that is, to the liquid and gases flowing through them,” she explained. “On Nojono, they also use transpirears to study individual insects. Ugh. Now my skin's crawling. Crickets and mealworms. Honey ants. Ew.”

“Why do you want a transpirear?” Dylan asked.

“If I get hold of one on Nojono, I'll explain,” she said briskly. “Third on my list, and I really hope the curio store's product list is up to date, there's a Vizard's broken blade.”

Dylan crossed his eyestalks. “I am so confused.”

Cherry grinned. “Is there anything you want on-station?”

“Just the fuel cells,” Hugh said. “And we could manage without them. If the spoofed shield is pierced...”

“We leave,” Dylan finished. “But I bet it works, and if you are going on-station, Cherry, could I have some spacecress seeds?”

It was such a small ask.

She patted his claw. “Absolutely.”

Dylan scuttled off, but Hugh caught Cherry's hand and hauled her in against him. “The seeds will be cheap. I'll give you scrip-coins to pay for them. Now, what are you planning?”

“Nora and I had a thought about my oracular talent. Whether it's changed rather than exhausted itself and taking a long nap.”

His eyes searched hers. “Changed in what way?”

“Nora has no ideas. I'm thinking about it. Trying a few things. An engineer should appreciate the value of testing.”

“As long as it doesn’t hurt you. Cherry, I’ve disrupted your life. You’re traveling away from home rather than—”

“You know, maybe the change to my talent is something awesome.”

His forehead wrinkled. Presumably he was trying to guess what she suspected concerning her talent from the sparse clues of a transpirear and a Vizard relic.

She kissed his nose.

“Unfair disruption of a serious worry session,” he objected. Then had absolutely no objection, only enthusiastic participation, in a real kiss.

TEN

Bored and unsuspecting, station security welcomed the Ticaret to Nojono Station, and the Delphic Dame docked without trouble. As long as it stayed that way, and no one wandered up and to try and board the ship, they were fine.

“I’ll hurry,” Cherry promised.

“Be careful,” Hugh growled.

Insouciantly, she waved to the camera and blew him a kiss. He was on the bridge, while she prepared to exit via the foyer. It took her a few seconds to adjust her backpack to a comfortable position, then she was ready to go. As far as she could be prepared, she was. She’d submitted her fuel cells order ahead of time. Since it was their first visit to Nojono, the ship had to pay upfront.

Her false ID functioned perfectly. After a friendly smile and a “visiting the fuel depot” to the Customs officer, she was approved as a temporary visitor.

The clerk at the fuel depot was even more bored than the Customs officer. He yawned half-way through his two word question. “Long visit?”

“I wish. I haven’t hit a dance club in ages. All work makes for a dull girl.” Cherry pulled a face as she gestured at her blue shirt, gray utility pants, and her most worn-in boots, the ones

comfortable for running in. “The captain has a buyer off on Czeyda.” Which was a good explanation for why the Ticaret had exited the millrace of the local black hole and headed away from the region’s colonized planet. “He figured we’d get a better deal on fuel cells here than out on a hermitage moon, but we’re on the clock.”

“Yeah. They’d rip you off on Czeyda.”

Like the fuel depot hadn’t. Residents and regular traffic got a discount. The Ticaret was paying the visitors’ rate.

Cherry had factored the inflated price into the size of her order. She hefted her backpack onto the counter and unzipped it.

The well-constructed bag hadn’t hinted at the weight it carried.

She finally shocked the clerk into interest. “You walked all that gold here alone, little gal that you are?”

She winked. “No one suspected it. Next visit, the captain will set things up at the bank. No time for banks or parties this visit.”

The clerk tested the gold bars. “We can deliver the fuel cells in the hour. For a price.”

“I’ll have the auto-loader ready to receive it.” She paid the bill, and jogged back to the ship to refill her backpack.

A vending machine near the dock sold seed packets and insect starter packs, as well as dried and smoked insects. Evidently, spacers stocked up on garden unit supplies and munchies while refueling, and no one on Nojono Station wanted to be bothered filling their small orders. The machine accepted Cherry’s scrip-coins, and released the seed packets.

Since Hugh had given her enough scrip-coin to pick up five more space vegetable seed packets, she chose two more salad plants, beets, and radishes. Onboard the Delphic Dame, she put the packets on a shelf in the foyer, and carefully refilled her backpack, chatting over the comms while she did so.

Unlike Pannyk pirate base, Nojono Station was clean, monitored, and registered as healthy. She didn't have to waste time decontaminating herself or her belongings. "Dylan, these are your seeds. Spacecross plus a few others."

He and Hugh were watching her every step of the way through a discreet camera and audio system embedded in her glasses. They knew she'd been safe on-station.

"Gotta go." She waved at the foyer camera and dashed out again. On occasion, time was the enemy. Expose too much of yourself to it, that is, linger too long, and trouble found you.

Cherry had memorized the station's layout. She hurried to the Florantine Module, and found the plant breeder she'd been chatting to over comms in her office. The office warranted the minute Cherry spent gawking. One whole wall was a window that overlooked a garden unit rioting in greenery and yellow and orange flowers.

"Sorry. Your garden is incredible." Cherry smiled. "I'm Susie from the Ticaret. I have the samples from the seedstock acquired at the abandoned station. Three centuries old but possibly viable. At any rate, the DNA—"

"You don't need to tell me the possibilities. Hand it over." The woman gestured imperatively. Silvering hair wisped around her face and her eyes were half-hidden by drooping lids. "The packaging is right. Let me just..." The woman opened the jar. She picked out a single seed and popped it into the mouth of a machine.

"How long will your tests take?"

Over comms, the scientist had promised Cherry twenty minutes, thirty at the most.

"Maybe an hour," the scientist mumbled, intent on a second jar, holding it up to the light, turning it slowly. "Seal seems intact."

"No more than an hour, or the deal's off," Cherry said. "My captain isn't waiting around. We're refueling now."

"Go, go, I'll be done in sixty minutes."

Cherry went—straight to the curio store. The transaction was fast since the owner refused to haggle.

“If you could get this anywhere else...” He showed unappealingly wasp-blue teeth. The cerulean wasp produced a supposedly non-addictive amphetamine.

Cherry handed over an emerald-cut luxblazsiphe gemstone, brought from home for this sort of deal. Luxblazsiphe gems of this size and quality were rarely found, even where blazsvitloium was mined. Those who made their money in the blaze ore industry would covet it as a status symbol.

After confirming its authenticity the storekeeper leered. “A pleasure doing business with you.”

The feeling was far from mutual. She had probably overpaid considering that the Vizard relic lacked provenance beyond “from Nojono Station, 120 years old”. Cherry secured the broken blade in an inner compartment of her backpack, shrugged it on, and broke into a run as soon as she’d exited the store.

Pythia had the seeds for trading waiting on a hovercart in the top cargo hold.

Cherry shed the backpack beside it, and hurried on into Maree’s apartment. “Sorry for the lack of warning.”

Kicked back in her chair watching a sitcom, Maree smiled up at Cherry. “You can visit anytime.”

“We’re at Nojono Station.”

“Huh.” Maree’s mouth dropped open. “Nojono Station? *Cricket* Station? How? But, but, but that’s so far? Did I sleep a lot?” She slapped her cheeks. “Am I dreaming? Are we really near Shiyo?”

While not satisfying Maree’s curiosity about the speed of their journey, Cherry confirmed that Nojono Station was, indeed, just outside the hatch. “And not to be rude, but could you hurry?”

“Rush, rush, rush. One of those visits, hey? In and out before trouble catches up.” Maree hugged Cherry

convulsively, then spun away to gather her belongings.
“Wooahoo! I never expected...this is wonderful. I have friends close by. Friends on Shiyo. Oh, this is amazing.”

Cherry held out four thin bangles. It wouldn't buy a lot in terms of resupplying the Delphic Dame. For Maree, it could be life-changing. Or life-saving. Cherry had checked prices on Nojono Station. “These'll buy you passage to Shiyo and maybe a couple of nights' accommodation.”

Abandoning her haphazard, stuff-everything-in-her-bags packing, Maree covered her mouth with both hands. A muffled “thank you” and a sob made it through.

Uncomfortable, Cherry checked the time. “I have to go. Can you be ready when I return? Fifteen, twenty minutes?”

“Ten,” Maree promised, sniffing back tears.

Cherry smiled. “Perfect.” It was caution that stopped her from waiting and disembarking with Maree. She liked her, and Maree's gratitude seemed entirely genuine, but there were security protocols for a reason, and one of those was to limit who could give out information against you. When Maree disembarked, Cherry needed to be onboard and the Delphic Dame ready to leave.

The fake Ticaret had to be out of there before Maree, chatty, gregarious Maree, started talking about her escape from Pannyk pirate base—all for the price of a few black boxes.

Cherry exited the Delphic Dame with the hovercart following. Then she adjusted their relative positions so that it preceded her back to the plant breeder's office.

The scientist stared avidly at the crate of jars on the hovercart. “They're genuine.”

“I know.”

The woman cackled and shoved a box forward. “My old transpirear. It works.”

“I'll take your word for it.” Cherry had investigated the scientist. She had a good reputation, an honest one, and Cherry

was running out of time. She unloaded the crate. “Sorry to drop and run, but the captain’s pushing to leave.”

The scientist was already crouched, unpacking the crate. “Good condition. Yes, yes. Good. And dwarf sunflowers. Hmm.”

Unnoticed, Cherry departed.

Thirty minutes later, the Delphic Dame undocked and left the station behind. They headed toward Czeyda until a pinned dervish, a minor whirling cosmic dust devil, provided concealment. Then they switched to ordinary stealth shields and headed for the Shiyo black hole.

“Whew.” Cherry flung herself onto the sofa in the lounge.

Dylan scrambled onto his toadstool seat nearby.

Hugh picked up Cherry’s legs, sat, and draped her legs back over his knees. He began unlacing her boots.

“Reeaally not a good idea. They’re my old boots and I’ve been running and sweating.”

He paused.

Dylan snickered. “Nooo. Not the foot-pocalypse!”

“Smarty-shell.” Cherry pulled a tired face at him before sitting up. “I am taking the rest of the day off. A shower, food, maybe a drink, maybe a pedicure.” She threw a cushion at Dylan.

He fielded it neatly and threw it back. “And then you’ll tell us about the transpirear and what you think your talent is doing?”

She hesitated. “Tomorrow. Everyone needs to hear my what-ifs and maybes, and stop me doing anything stupid. But I need to be able to cope with all your questions. So, tomorrow.”

Despite insisting on her downtime, relaxing didn’t mean she wasn’t interested in Hugh and Dylan’s projects, especially once she’d cleaned up and eaten.

Dylan was busy in the gardening unit, setting up his isolation chamber; his fancy name for the closed unit in which

he'd grow the spacecress seeds from Nojono. After a complete lifecycle, if he was satisfied with them, their second generation seeds would join the Delphic Dame's garden.

On the sofa in the lounge, Cherry watched a movie she'd seen four years ago with Nora and others in the clan back on Capitoline. Who'd have thought she'd ever be homesick for the muddy smell of the mangroves at Avestan House? When she turned her head, she could study the frowning intensity of Hugh chasing a problem at the kitchen table.

He was rapidly flicking through and managing multiple screens.

She paused the movie. "Problem?"

He leaned back in his chair. "Puzzle." He scratched his head. "The new energy shield performed well at Nojono Station."

"No one suspected a thing," she confirmed.

"Mmm. But forty minutes before we docked, there was something...it didn't seem to come from the station. I can't even describe it. Combining Giol's insights with my engineering principles is in the early stages. He's looked at the data, too. There's a...well, call it an energy shadow."

"An aura?"

He grimaced. "I hate that word. It's so imprecise."

She'd known he'd hate it. *Aura* had psychic-spiritual connotations, and Hugh preferred the rational, tangible universe.

Pity the poor blighter. He was stuck with her and her esoteric talent. He'd just *lurve* tomorrow's discussion and her suspicions about her altered oracular talent.

"It might be nothing." He was still puzzling over the shadow.

Or it might be a flaw in our shield. Sighing, she switched the movie back on, and fell asleep, waking to a crick in her neck and subdued lighting. The kitchen was dark. She was

alone, although Hugh had covered her with a lightweight blanket.

She sat there for a few minutes, massaging her neck and shoulder muscles, before she stretched back out on the sofa. Her time on Nojono Station had been fast and fraught. She'd been subconsciously aware that the Ticaret could be unmasked as the Delphic Dame at any time, and that her identity was every bit as precarious. And yet, running that con, slipping in and out to conduct a few particular trades, had been easy.

“Smuggling must be in my blood.”

It was what else lurked in her blood that worried her, alongside how to explain the possibilities to everyone onboard and over burrtalk, tomorrow.

She began by describing her over-full, then constricting, experience at the archive on Astacus.

“Bleeding dangerous,” Zac said.

“I don't think Giol means us harm,” Cherry said. “He couldn't have anticipated my talent, even if he knows about Vapori burrs. If there is one powering the archive.”

“But assuming there is...” Nora encouraged.

Cherry confided her speculations about her talent.

The idea of stasis was a showstopper.

“I'll have to examine my lifepod.” Dylan was his engineering father's son. “Giol must answer more questions.”

“Not every droid is as smart as Jonah,” Nora said. “Giol will have limits to his knowledge, and peculiarities inherent to his katang programming.”

Dylan shifted uncomfortably. He was a polite adolescent. He and Hugh already interacted with Giol with those reservations in mind, but all he said to Nora was, “I'll remember.”

Cherry rested a hand on his shell in gratitude and friendship. “If stasis is a thing, and it works the way I’ve outlined, anchoring things in the moving stream of time so that they move with time rather than change as time moves on, then the next question is whether I can cast a hook into the past or future and bring something to me.”

She spread her hands. “I can’t prove any of this.”

“Yet,” Hugh said supportively even as his wide eyes showed his stupefaction at the time bombshell she’d shared.

Her oracular talent had been impressive. For Hugh and Dylan, it had literally saved their lives since it had brought her to rescue them from Diamond Station. But this new development had the potential to be a gamechanger.

Shakily, she smiled at him. “Yet.” She steadied her voice. “I’d expect specific events to weigh on time more heavily. It’s hard to talk about time when people don’t travel in it, but are carried by it. My oracular talent warned me that to save the clan I had to find and hide Hugh. Once we escaped Astacus carrying all this new knowledge about katangs, thrios, and humanity’s stupid decisions, that pull from the future released me.” She hesitated. “The downside to my talent changing is that if rogue thrios get near us, I’m not sure I’ll sense them as the cold, menacing Churl as I did before.”

“So many unknowns,” Jonah said.

Everyone fell silent, presumably processing everything she’d said, which was a lot, and she wasn’t finished.

Now that she’d started talking, all the thoughts she’d been obsessing over spilled out. “Burrstalk transmits sound, not light. We can talk, but not see each other. With burrtalk, Nora collapses physical distance to transmit sound instantly. I aim to try the same across time rather than space. I want to listen in to something from the past.”

Zac was enthusiastic. “Eavesdropping in time. Cool and useful.”

“Potentially.” There was Liam’s characteristic caution.

Cherry was cautious, too. She began with a history lesson. “It seems strange to us, but the federation combines the military and academia,” she reminded her Stranded burrtalk listeners. “Nojono Station had a Vizard research module that closed a bit over a century ago. That means it is credible that one of the Vizard scientists gifted a broken blade to a friend or to a respected colleague on the station at the end of their mission. Breaking their blade signifies the completion of a mission and reaffirms the Vizard’s commitment to service.”

She hesitated because this was off topic. “I suspect that service, service to the federation, is the chain used to keep these particular guard dogs from pursuing their own agenda or turning on their masters.”

“Plus loyalty to one another,” Liam said. As a veteran he’d faced his own challenges as to who he served, how he served, and why. “Hugh said Vizards were among those who pursued you at Astacus.”

“Mmm. I’ve been thinking about them,” Cherry admitted. “They’re the federation’s elite military force. They’re trained, intelligent, dangerous, and driven. I think of them as people like Zac.”

“Me?”

“Potential troublemakers because they have the ability to challenge the system. Even if it eventually crushed them, they could disrupt the rogue thrions’ smooth, behind the scenes control of events. Consequently, the rogues ensure that these highly capable types are recruited into the Vizards. Joining the Vizards takes them out of their home environments, and training reshapes and redirects their energy and ambition.”

Nora objected. “If they’re that good, and they include a research arm, why didn’t the Vizards push the federation through its technological stagnation. Or are you arguing that the Vizards have hoarded special tech?”

Forgetting that Nora couldn’t see her, Cherry shook her head. “Until thirty years ago, when the Vizards participated in the katang genocide, any time a Vizard, or other researchers, approached a significant technological or scientific

breakthrough, one of the strategies available to the rogues to stymie it was to fake a katang act to set back the advancement. Think of the lost Tiantang Expedition, which was blamed on katangs. Think what it might have brought the federation.”

Cherry sipped some water, and held onto the bottle, squeezing it. “The Vizards are a force in the federation that could be tipped for change. I got hold of one of their broken blades. I traded for it on Nojono Station. What I’m thinking of trying is a kind of psychometry. Actual psychometry is a psychic sense through touch. Clairvoyants claim they can ‘read’ an object’s history, and especially, it’s emotional resonance. I want to test whether I can hear a memory. I also bought a transpirear on-station.” She explained its ability to isolate sound and detect the faintest vibrations. “If my talent only hooks a very, very slight transmission through time, just a faint vibration from the surface of the blade’s handle, then I’ll need the sensitivity of the transpirear to record it.”

She realized she was crushing her water bottle, and put it down. “I can’t risk testing my ability on an unimportant object. What if the transpirear captures nothing, and only I hear the transmission? Also, I don’t know how much energy it will take, and I don’t have a burr to draw on. I have to make the first attempt count.”

“What will reading a Vizard’s broken blade give you?”
Nora asked.

“Her oracular talent might be working,” Hugh answered. He turned to Cherry. “How else do you explain your focus on hearing Vizards’ voices? If this was just a traumatic guilt response, well, we disabled more planetary guards’ ships while escaping Astacus than we did Vizards’ drillbits.” He was very mindful of his language choice. *Disabled*, not *destroyed*; never *killed*. And he said *we*, not *you*.

Cherry laced her fingers through his. “Only one drillbit was destroyed. Minimum of three crew onboard. Drillbits are Vizard fighter-class spaceships,” she added for the others’ benefit. “I don’t know if my talent is pushing my focus to the Vizards or if...”

She stared at Hugh's and her joined hands.

"If?" Dylan prompted gently.

"Sometimes the truth is more visible at the periphery than the center. The further a lie travels from its point of origin, the more it frays. Lies have to be reinforced, whereas the truth can be obscured or misinterpreted, but it won't collapse for lack of support. I wonder what a Vizard researcher said in his or her broken blade ceremony out here, far from the center of federation power on Earth."

She swallowed. "I need to understand why the Vizards are hunting us. What motivates them."

"It's your talent and your choice," Nora said.

The responsibility is mine. "But if any of you have any ideas for how time might be manipulated, I'd like to hear them."

"We'll think on it," Liam said.

Surprisingly, Jonah added, "Just don't send yourself through time. Stay with us."

His part plea, part warning echoed in her mind long after the burrtalk call ended.

Stay with us.

Relationships were complicated. They could save you. They could tie you in knots. They were distracting.

Hugh finally cornered her in the top cargo hold where she'd dragged up a beanbag and plopped it in front of the wall screen.

She was painting wobbly clocks on her fingernails while ignoring the movie playing in front of her.

Hugh crouched down. "You're avoiding me. We talk over dinner or about our plans, but you've stepped back from there being a you and me." He pointed between them, but didn't close the physical gap. "Is it to protect yourself or me? Why, Cherry?"

His confusion, and the angry hurt beneath it, were justified.

She'd been the one pushing for more in their relationship, right up until the last few days when she'd abruptly stalled everything. Even if it wasn't particularly coherent, she owed him an explanation. "I don't know who I am." Who she'd be after the choices she made as her talent revealed itself. "Or who you'll become. You don't crave power, but I doubt your father did, either. Nothing in your stories of Ruben suggested he'd take over Fauda Station and rehabilitate pirates. He did what he judged he had to. You'll do the same. I don't know if your choice will have room for me to be me."

He returned her pleading, hopeful, yet resolute gaze grimly. "So, we wait?"

Forgetting that her nail polish hadn't dried, she folded her arms to keep from reaching out to him. It wasn't fair to confuse her wishes with her reasoned, necessary logic. "I have to test my talent."

Running burrtalk, which used mini black holes and impossible burr-derived science, while also attempting to hook a memory from time using a completely different burr talent, didn't seem safe. Consequently, Hugh and Dylan were Cherry's only audience for her attempt to listen in to the blade breaking ceremony.

She sat in front of the handle of the blade with the transpirear focused on it. She couldn't touch the handle. Her touch could disrupt or absorb the potentially delicate sound vibrations. Instead, she stared at it and rested a hand over her solar plexus and the feeling of coiled anticipation.

I want to hear the ceremony. What mattered to the blade's owner?

Across a gulf of more than a century, the Vizard's voice spoke in his present, and Cherry heard him in hers. She heard the full resonance of his voice, and of the vow he renewed.

"In fealty to freedom."

The blade broke.

She let go of her hook in time. Her eyes felt dry, as if she'd been staring. She blinked rapidly.

“Did you hear anything?” Dylan asked.

“Didn't you?” She glanced from Dylan to meet Hugh's searching gaze. “I heard ‘In fealty to freedom.’”

“Which was what you hoped to hear from a blade breaking ceremony.”

She smiled at his neutral tone. “I heard more. Before the owner of the blade broke it, he honored his comrades. Jhan Keeling and Robert Sharpeigh. They died in the mission he completed. I don't know his name, but I heard theirs for the first time. We could check that data somewhere.”

First, though, she bent forward to check the transpirear. “Nothing? You mean only I heard the ceremony?”

“It seems that way. How do you feel?”

The tension in her gut and in the rigid line of her spine had eased. “Good. I feel like me. Nothing hurts. But if only I can hear a memory, that's a problem. I should be able to do this again. I think I can. Which means I can get information, but no one except those of you who trust me have reason to believe me. What I learn won't be accepted as proof.” She was thinking about the rogues and of convincing others of their existence and actions. “It's annoying that only I can hear the memory.” She flicked the blade handle.

“That matches what Giol said. You can only borrow from time.” At her indignant glare, Dylan shuffled his claws. “I couldn't tell you before. Giol didn't want to bias you.”

“You didn't tell me, either,” Hugh said.

Cherry and Dylan stared at him in shared disbelief.

Hugh had been beyond grumpy while Cherry had prepared for her eavesdropping-in-time test.

Of course Dylan hadn't dared enter Hugh's workshop to interrupt him. It would have been like smacking a dragon on his nose. Not advisable.

“You were worrying about Cherry. You wouldn’t have believed Giol.” Dylan clasped Cherry’s hand. “I’d have warned you—Giol would have warned you—if he thought playing with time was dangerous.”

“Okay.” Cherry rose and bumped her shoulder against Hugh’s in friendly encouragement. He put an arm around her, his chest rising and falling in an immense sigh. “Let’s talk to Giol about what he meant about borrowing from time.”

“The Vizard’s blade couldn’t be in two places at once,” Giol said. “It couldn’t vibrate in the past and now. What you heard was a memory you borrowed from the past. I never expected a human to be able to do that.”

“I’m special.” Grinning wryly, Cherry leaned against one of his massive legs. They’d all grown more comfortable with the droid, but she was the only one who showed him physical affection. Maybe a katang droid didn’t need it, maybe he didn’t even register it, but she needed to do it. Giving affection and demonstrating trust mattered to who she was.

An hour later, when they went over everything again over burrtalk, Nora agreed that Cherry was special. “The stars alone know what weirdness Mom carried in her genes. Look at the two of us.”

“Keith is normal,” Cherry said. Keith was her brother and Nora’s half-brother. “Then again, he’s maybe pickled his talent in alcohol.”

Liam rumbled reassurance for the heart of Nora’s concern. “Ekon and bub will be fine. Even if they’re completely strange, our clan can handle strange.”

“We thrive on it,” Ben said. No one could doubt he meant his partner, Zac.

Nora blew her nose. “Ignore me. Cherry, you just did something amazing.”

“It felt normal.”

Nora laughed. “That’s what makes us strange. All right. Next steps?”

They accepted her determination to move on from her emotional response, and Hugh had a next step ready. “I have to change my plan for approaching Earth’s leadership.”

ELEVEN

Picochlorum astral was the algal strain favored by Cherry's society for producing feedstock for a fabricator. Its doubling rate was just under an hour. It meant that she could add a dab to a petri dish and watch it grow in real time.

She could also anchor it in time and prove stasis.

"I am freezing a living being."

"Not freezing. Not as such." Having so many legs, Dylan excelled at petulantly kicking an obstacle course post.

Cherry released stasis. "And now, grow." She smiled. "I'll have to test whether there are any changes to the cells pre- and post- stasis."

"I am noting the times." Giol had an eyestalk extended over her shoulder, scrutinizing every stage of her time test.

"I wish you knew how my lifepod sent me into stasis," Dylan grumbled to the droid.

Dignified and reproving, Giol responded, "I was designed to be a gardener." And even if *Picochlorum astral* was a simple, single-celled organism, it was a plant.

Cherry turned her head to beam at Giol for his professional interest. "This is nice. If I can manage it safely for more

complicated organisms, I could pop a wounded person into stasis till we reached a med-doc or a real doctor.”

“Or you could freeze an enemy and kill them. Although I suspect you’d have to release them back into the stream of time to dispatch them. You would need to use the moments you gained to position yourself, or your enemy, to ensure your own safety.”

At Giol’s suggestion, Dylan ceased kicking the post.

As for Cherry, her bright joy at playing with time snuffed out. “Giol, can you monitor the algae, please?”

“He will,” Dylan spoke for the droid, anger gravelling his voice.

Cherry had never heard his tone so low and adult. She rose from her seat. “I should go do...something.” She didn’t look at the katang or his droid.

Giol’s puzzled whisper pursued her to the ladder. “Why are you angry? My suggestion will assist in keeping her safe.”

She didn’t wait to hear Dylan’s reply.

Up in the top cargo hold, Pythia had dismantled Maree’s temporary accommodation and returned the deck to open space. If Dylan wished to turn it into a katang deck for Giol and himself, the opportunity existed. For now...

“I miss Maree.” Talking to someone who was cheerfully oblivious of their quest to avert humanity’s looming loss of territory and sovereignty would help right about now. Maree didn’t know that Cherry was a freak with a powerful freak’s unique fears and potential. Nora had every reason to worry for her children. “Pythia, play a dance mix.”

She flung herself into dancing. The music and exercise drove out thought, but as soon as she collapsed panting onto the ground, the thoughts rushed back.

Hugh hoped to force the former federation, in the person of its leaders, to confront, own, and heal its guilt regarding the katangs. For him, salvation was both simple and impossible. It meant choosing a new future. Few had the courage to envision a future that didn't tacitly excuse, and therefore, effectively accept, the sins of the past. Hugh intended to drive them to it through the carrot of sovereignty and the stick of the rogues' exploiting humans openly in the future if humanity didn't fight them now.

He thought he'd be able to warn his leaders and step back. That the leaders would act on the information he brought them. According to Hugh, the lure of claiming sovereignty would motivate them.

She was more cynical. It wasn't her oracular talent but commonsense that had driven her to say, "If your warning fails, your options become those your dad confronted. To dismantle or to co-opt the leaders' authority."

"I'm not a leader."

She'd smiled unhappily at his instinctive rejection of the idea. "Aren't you? I'm following you."

Now, she lay on her back and stared at the ceiling far above. She was following him all the way to Earth. In point of fact, she was taking him there.

Most people who visited Earth didn't actually reach the planet. An array of stations and a couple of bases, like the Europa moon base, handled the bulk of arrivals.

The frozen wonderland of Europa and its underwater component were unashamedly designed for tourists and their religious brethren, the endless convoys of pilgrims. Two other stations catered to tourists, one adult only and the other child friendly. Awesome Gaia Station served as the pilgrimage center for multiple religions.

Sector embassies occupied two additional stations, with each sector giving station space to their own planetary and station representatives.

Inevitably, the academic-military sector had a major presence. Two stations and a base were relatively open. *Castra*, the Vizard Military Research Base, wasn't shown on public maps, but lurked near the largest of the military stations, *Bastion*.

The media and entertainment station begrudgingly allowed three scientific modules to attach. The scientists, those semi-independent of their military colleagues, agitated regularly for their own station, but were ignored as civilian slackers.

In fact, the military was deeply embedded in the media station, as well, both identifying and countering psyops by different sectors and lobby groups.

Each station or base was granted annual quotas for visitors to Earth. Permission to actually settle on Earth was rare, and those born on Earth were encouraged to emigrate.

At three billion people, Earth's population was the lowest among established planets. Much of it had been turned into nature reserves. It was the origin and treasure-house of what it meant to be human.

Liam and Zac had hammered Hugh on his new plan, testing both it and his conviction.

There is no soft landing. Nora had returned relentlessly to that point.

The rogues wouldn't continue to hide once sovereignty was denied to humans. In an open region, the rogues would no longer have to mask their actions. Already, the Tiantang Expedition had been lost to the rogues, and the rogues had ensured that the federation blamed, and feared, katangs for it.

What had happened to those people? Were their descendants slaves somewhere, or had the rogues simply killed the colonists to acquire the resources of their ships?

A civilization grew by stealing the productivity of its workforce. The majority of people had to consume *much* less than they produced. Growth could be achieved benevolently by increasing productivity, either by tapping new resources or by increasing efficiency. Flipside, a civilization could shrink

and die by having those resources siphoned away—as the rogues intended.

Hugh's plan to save the federation was simple. Or more accurately, his role had started off simply.

I signed on when the plan was skeletally thin and likely to fail.

Initially, his idea for reaching Earth had been for her to deliver him and Dylan to a pilgrim convoy. They'd infiltrate it, boarding one of the larger and more chaotic passenger liners, and hiding away. He'd hoped that among the katang gear Giol had brought onboard the Delphic Dame were materials that could fool human surveillance tech into overlooking Dylan when the kid wrapped himself in it. Hugh and Dylan had intended to deliver their warning in person—if Hugh had judged it safe-ish to do so.

After Nojono Station, Hugh had upgraded his plan. Rather than hide himself and Dylan on a passenger liner, why not have the Delphic Dame join a pilgrim convoy spoof-shielded as an unremarkable yacht? He and Dylan had a better chance of escaping if they had their own ship to run away on, rather than having to steal one.

“Borrow,” Hugh had insisted. “I would have left it somewhere retrievable.”

“After I picked you up?”

He'd smiled lopsidedly. “Saving us, again.”

She shivered, sitting up. Having recovered from her energetic dancing, the floor of the cargo hold was uncomfortably cold. She folded her legs tailor-fashion.

Both of Hugh's plans had rested on dangerously unproven assumptions; not only that he could get himself and Dylan in and out of meetings with the leaders and that the selected leaders wouldn't betray them, but that he could contact those leaders without the rogue thrios intercepting his messages.

His answer to the latter problem had been the prayer network. “It centers on Earth, funneling in communications from everywhere. I'm sure the rogues monitor it, but I should

be able to hide exactly when and where I send my messages from in the convoy, and I'll use my birth name, Andrew Owens. I might as well exploit my infamy to get the leaders' attention."

His "infamy" was to be the lone katang-lover in the federation; one who was daily laying his life on the line to save Dylan.

Cherry stared at the neutral gray bulkhead. She lacked Hugh's inherited sense of duty. Her view of what had happened, and what lay ahead for the former federation, was that of an outsider. Moreover, she was an outsider who had no desire to become an insider.

From her perspective, the federation's actions regarding Astacus and the katangs was the moment when the federation acted to destroy itself rather than uphold its vaunted principle of freedom for all.

They had, in effect, declared katangs non-people, and therefore, with no right to freedom or existence.

If you could entertain that mindset, the rot was well-established.

The federation had allowed fear to take root: fear of the other, of the katangs; and a deeper, broader fear of not being in control of their environment.

Instead of challenging the latter fear, and leading people to confront it, the leadership failed them.

Face your fears and you grow.

Cherry had done so in her own life. It was how she came to be here. She had fought her way from the survival strategy of her *I'm a cute little girl, please be kind to me* persona to facing her fears and defending herself and those she loved.

Fear was an opportunity for change.

She stood and stretched. Collapsing onto the cold floor after dancing herself hot and sweaty had stiffened her muscles. She worked slowly on her flexibility.

Fear was a radical call to change.

Hugh's third plan, the final plan, acknowledged fear and focused on those who'd fight it. Not the religious, although they had their own courage. In Hugh's third and final plan, he no longer intended to join a pilgrim convoy to sneak to Earth.

"Is it because of my interest in them?" she'd asked.

"Nope. You don't get to steal my glory. I was already thinking of the Vizards as an opportunity before you unleashed your time superpowers."

"They aren't so super."

"When you've learned more about them..." A reassuring cuddle.

She thumped his chest. "You're distracting me. The Vizards?"

"They have the best communications network in the federation."

"Best in what sense? People in trade—"

"Best as in secure and extensive. It's everywhere. It forms part of their edge."

She drummed her fingers against his bicep. "Except that if rogues have infiltrated the Vizard's leadership, you know, corrupting a few key people, they'll learn what you intend. And the rogues will surveille the Vizards' comms system."

"Those are the same risks as using the pilgrim convoy plan. However, if we get the Vizards onside we gain a genuinely effective force. One that is still federation-wide despite the fracturing of federation power."

"If you can convince the Vizards to believe you. If they don't kill you on sight, like their orders command."

Hugh had remained confident in his new Vizard befriending plan. "I'll analyze the best method of approach."

In essence, where his pilgrim convoy plans had relied heavily on luck, this latest plan required an accurate assessment of the Vizards' post-federation fracturing. Then

he'd use that to wriggle in through a crack in their identity to get them to truly listen to him.

The core of their identity was that they protected the federation. Even with it fracturing, they continued to do so.

“How are they funding themselves? Via their research? If they're taking mercenary contracts...” Cherry frowned at the bulkhead in front of her. She started pacing, swinging her arms.

Mercenary contracts didn't bother her. Zac had employed her as a receptionist back in the pre-Clan Avestan days when he and Ben had run a new mercenary corps.

But Hugh had funny ideas about honor and authorized actions. He hated that his dad had taken over Fauda Station. How would he feel if he discovered that the federation's elite force had become mercenaries?

“Maybe they haven't. Or maybe, if they have, they're still trying to protect the old federation, even from itself?” She halted. “From fear.”

The Vizards understood fear. They employed it to build their reputation so as to psychologically weaken their opponents. But they also protected ordinary people from fear. When the toughest guys were on your side, you felt braver.

Hugh wasn't wrong to want the Vizards to believe him and work with him.

Fear was what he had to talk about with them because the Vizards weren't just tough. They were smart. They'd have done their own analysis of the federation's fracturing, and fear was at the heart of it.

Hugh had to convince the Vizards that the rogue thrios existed, and that their concerted actions for over two centuries to present katangs as a reason for fear, ensured that the katangs became the federation's scapegoat for its own fear.

“What did the federation fear thirty years ago? What caused the leadership to succumb to the rogues' manipulations and order genocide? How else could that inciting fear have been handled?”

Strategies for facing fear included growth, innovation, and exploration. Cherry knew that. She'd done the research as part of her therapy. On a personal level you could retreat, hide, and limit yourself in an effort to placate your fears, or you could grow past them.

She started laughing. She leant against the bulkhead and laughed till she slid down it, and into silence, huddled on the floor with her head against her knees. "You hypocrite," she accused herself. "Critiquing Hugh's planning. Critiquing the federation and its Vizards. And all the time. Ha! Time." She suppressed a second bout of laughter. "All the time, you were running from your fear."

She raised her head to stare blindly ahead. "I can't be afraid of my own talent."

But she was. Earlier, Giol had put her fear into words. Almost any ability could be weaponized.

She bit her lip against tears. "I don't want to kill." She was ready to face Vizards and confess that she'd killed their comrades at Astacus, but not to add to her tally. If she had to, though, she would, and that terrified her. Her stomach literally ached at the thought, tightening like her intestines had turned into a boa constrictor.

"Dylan sent me to find you." Hugh's quiet voice.

She hadn't noticed his arrival.

He sat on the floor beside her, both of them leaning against the bulkhead.

Time passed. The normal amount of time. She didn't meddle with it. *Could I learn to? Could I learn to make a bubble in which to think my way through a problem?*

Hugh broke the silence. "You can explore your talent. You don't have to use it." He had been talking to Dylan.

She turned her head creakily. She felt like a rusting android. "Giol wasn't wrong."

"Just because something can be done, doesn't mean it should be. Only you get to decide how you use your talent."

More silence.

Then she shifted to lean into him. He was much warmer than the bulkhead. “Hugh, you have a blind courage that I lack.”

He pulled her closer and opened his mouth to respond.

“No, please don’t interrupt me.” She took a couple of deep breaths. “You’re traveling into an unknown future because you believe that people are fundamentally good. That is the basis of all your plans. Hope and faith in people. Even after—” Reminding him of his mom ordering his and Dylan’s deaths was too cruel. “Even after they’ve hunted you and Dylan, for three freaking years, you still believe that that same cohort of leaders can and will choose to stand against the rogues.”

His voice was rough. “For sovereignty, which is basically, self-interest. The families don’t like to lose, and they’d be losers alongside everyone else if the rogues succeed. They’re also, and I know you don’t like to hear this, raised with notions of honor and duty. It’s drilled into us. They’ll fight because protecting those you lead is the price of leadership.”

She snorted.

“I said you wouldn’t like to hear that truth. The families aren’t bad. They’re like your royals.”

“Bzzzt. Instant fail.”

A hint of annoyance sharpened his amused response. “If you don’t trust our ideals, why are you here?”

“Daftie.” She smiled. “Nora understood. I don’t have to believe in ideals or duty. I’m here because of you. For you.” Her smile widened at his tortured groan. “Because I believe in you.” She kissed him before jumping up. “Crisis over. I just remembered that I also need to believe in myself.”

He stared up at her, his heart in his eyes. “I believe in you.”

“Good.” She held out both hands and helped pull him up from the floor. When he’d have hugged her, though, she skipped back. “I have an idea. Being here, where Maree was, has inspired me.”

“Oh, has it? Aren’t I inspiring? You just said—” he teased.

She interrupted him. “Do you paint your nails?”

Splaying his fingers, he studied his nails. “No.”

“I had the thought while I was sulking.”

“While you were processing heavy stuff. Allowing yourself to feel the bad stuff isn’t sulking,” he admonished.

“Yes, Doc Psych.” She seized his hands and pretended to study his fingernails. “Think of your spoof shield as Maree’s blinged-out nails, as attention-grabbing rather than for concealment and evasion. The Delphic Dame needs to sparkle to get the good thrios’ attention. What better way than to present the Delphic Dame as a rogue thrios ship? If good thrios are in the area, they must be on the alert for their rogues.” She beamed up at him, grabbed his hand, and hauled him toward the ladder. “Come on. We need to ask Giol if he knows the specs for thrios spaceships.”

Giol didn’t. “I am sorry.”

Dylan, though, was inspired. “But we have a recording of the rogue spaceships that hunted us at Astacus. We could fake it, couldn’t we?”

Before diving into an analysis of the recording, Hugh wasn’t committing himself. “Possibly. But should we? We’ll also risk gaining the rogues’ attention.”

Cherry bounced on her toes. “This whole enterprise is risky.” She tilted her hands. “Risk versus reward. We haven’t bumped into any good thrios in the perilous universal rivers, so we have to do something. Doing this, if the good guys see us and investigate and discover humans presenting as rogues, think of the message we’re sending!”

A human, a katang, and a katang droid regarded her bemusedly.

“What message?” Dylan asked.

“That we know rogues exist, that we’re willing to challenge them, and, if the rogues are only out and active at key sites like Astacus, it tells the good thrios that we’ve been to somewhere like that. We want to poke the good guys into being curious about us.”

“It could work,” Hugh allowed. “We do need to get thrios’ attention as soon as we can. We’d have to be on the alert for rogues.”

“Believe me, I have Pythia watching intently,” Cherry said.

A grin twitched Hugh’s mouth at her eagerness. “I’ll look at the recording of the rogues’ ships. If we can spoof them—”

She tackle-hugged him.

Dylan joined in.

Giol began replaying the recording.

They called their spoofed spaceship the Rogue Human.

TWELVE

Lucas didn't hesitate to join the adventure. Zac and Ben collected him at what was sometime after midnight on the Delphic Dame, and Lucas waited to seven to interrupt Cherry's breakfast. "Hey, you've been having adventures without me."

"We can't all be overachieving college students."

Lucas laughed. "Is everyone there with you?"

"Everyone's listening." *So, don't tease me too much.*

He didn't. "I am freaking excited to be part of this." He sounded it. "Zac and Ben have been filling me in. And I've checked in with Nora—or she checked in with me. As if I'd say no to being included. Fussy henning."

"I *am* listening, Lucas," Nora said. She spoiled the admonition by laughing.

Dylan didn't require any coaxing to join the conversation with Lucas. They were close in, if not age, then in maturity. Both had proven their abilities, but lacked their elders' life experience.

"Don't lead Dylan into too much trouble," Cherry pleaded.

"Me? If Zac hasn't already done so." A loud smack interrupted Lucas's defense of his intentions. He chuckled.

“Besides, a Zac-bird told me that you’ve lured in a rogue thrios ship to check on you. Talk about trouble!”

“We got away, though,” Dylan answered excitedly. He described the rogue ship of the same class that had pursued them at Astacus, and which the Delphic Dame had been spoofing. “We were at Sogog. It’s almost as close between two black holes as near Astacus. We had to risk three weeks, or just over, in interstellar space so that we could enter the perilous universal river that would take us to Zogii. We figured that with Sogog being so busy, the rogues would recognize our ship. It took them a week. I guess the chatter of spacers about the new type of spaceship had to filter through to them. The rogues really do keep a low profile. Although not as invisible as us!”

Laughing, he boasted about how they’d faked them out. “We made as if we were running back to the black hole we’d actually emerged from, then lost them in a shimmer hazard by changing the energy shield to full stealth. When we saw that the rogue ship continued on to the first black hole, proving that they can’t pierce Hugh’s new stealth shield, we raced for the second black hole. It was an excellent proof of concept.”

“But we haven’t been contacted by, or seen, the thrios who will judge our sovereignty claim,” Hugh said.

Dylan refused to be disheartened. “But the rogue ship finding us, then losing us when we went pure stealth, proves that both the spoof shield and full stealth fools them.”

“Pythia has almost finished reading out the code and engineering specs to me,” Jonah said, and added a teasing admonishment. “If you’d all stop talking and leave the line clear for us poor AIs.”

Nora responded with a very mature raspberry noise.

The easy laughter allowed for a natural subject change. But the subject Lucas changed it to was serious. “I’m not sure I can convince the lens to block the millrace again.

“You can,” Nora said definitely. “Your method will be different to mine, but you’re strong, smart, and stubborn.

You'll do it. And I'll be here, you can talk through any problems with me. Not that I think you'll get stuck. Remember, the Vapori lens has already changed once at a human's command. Because I told it to. That proves it can, and it also opens a path, what Jonah calls a program route, for it to run the same set of actions in reverse."

"Undo what you did. I guess you're kind of right here." Lucas gave a thoughtful grunt. "I'm not used to instantaneous talk across the sector. Heck, across galaxies. Burrstalk is a gamechanger."

"Especially if we keep it secret," Zac said. "And speaking of secrets?"

"Were we speaking of secrets?" Jonah interposed.

"I am," Zac said. "Nora, don't think we haven't noticed that you're not saying why you're confident that you'll know if a rogue ship comes through. Honest to Joe, what other secrets are you keeping, woman?"

"Pregnancy cravings," she replied instantly. "I'm not telling you what they are."

"Peanut butter and pickles," Liam whispered.

"Bad husband," Nora scolded, laughing.

But when the call ended, she hadn't answered Zac's question.

Hugh didn't care. "Nora and Liam wouldn't be so relaxed if they weren't positive whatever precautions they have in place will work. I'm more than happy to take their word for it. Our own issues are enough for me."

He and Cherry climbed the ladder to the top cargo hold to discuss the issues raised in the burrtalk conversation. Dylan and Giol were to join them.

The empty cargo space was undergoing intermittent and odd renovations. Dylan had rejected the idea of a K-deck. "I fit into human space. I know Giol doesn't, not on the bridge or our living area, not comfortably. But if we could, I'd like to create a mixed species space up here. We're kind of doing it

by degrees down below with the obstacle course, Hugh's workshop, and Giol's katang gear. We could do it deliberately up here. But no rush. Just as we get an idea, we can try it out."

The unconventional, discordant interior design showed their attempts to do as he'd suggested. Some of the katang gear and workshop projects had migrated to the experimental space. Dylan was trying out different furniture ideas, including the current "sofa" that blended human and katang ideas of comfort.

From what Giol said, Dylan's love of cuddling was very non-katang.

Cherry, though, appreciated that as Dylan matured, part of his maturity valued giving comfort as well as receiving it. Unfortunately, appreciating Dylan's motivation didn't render the sofa any more comfortable. She edged closer to Hugh than to the lumpy katang end of the sofa.

He tucked her even closer, but didn't interrupt his thinking for quality cuddling time. "Listening to Lucas and Nora, I believe he can block the millrace for the black hole into your sector. It's a pressure off us. Even if the federation doesn't win sovereignty over its territory, the block on the Origin black hole will give your people time to organize to fend off an attack, and perhaps, even time to form an alliance with the federation—if your people can forgive us."

Absently, he ran a hand up and down her arm. "Liam and Zac realize how much your burrs' obliterative power could decide humanity's fate. If we do lose sovereignty, and the thrios won't give it to Nora, then being able to obliterate targets becomes a vital weapon that the rogues never anticipated."

Dylan crashed out of the elevator.

The two humans stared at the high-piled hovercart that trailed him.

"New furniture?" Cherry asked uncertainly.

A scathing wave of an antenna answered her.

The elevator doors closed.

“Giol is coming up next. He couldn’t fit. He’ll help me set up the recording studio.”

“The what?” Hugh rose to inspect the cart.

Dylan directed it to an empty corner of the cargo hold. “For you to record your message to your chosen leaders.”

Hugh stopped dead.

The elevator doors opened to disgorge Giol. The droid had grown accustomed to fitting his size to the inadequate cabin of the elevator, but it never looked comfortable.

“Don’t worry.” Dylan patted Hugh’s back. “You and Cherry can write the first draft of your message while Giol and I set up the recording studio. I’ve been researching what’s needed.”

“A camera,” Hugh said.

“Ha! That’s why you need me. Humans receive all sorts of subliminal signals from how other humans present themselves. We have to present you as capable, intelligent, and confident.”

“I am.”

Cherry had her hands over her mouth to keep in the giggles.

Dylan gave his father’s back a final, encouraging pat. “And I’ll make sure everyone believes that.”

Defeated, Hugh returned to the uncomfortable sofa. “It’s not funny.”

“I believe I shall find significant amusement observing the experience,” Giol said.

A wail of laughter escaped Cherry at Hugh’s expression.

He had been talking to her.

However, Giol was still learning the finer points of human social interaction, such as, when to feign deafness.

She cleared her throat. “I believe I shall also find significant amusement.”

Hugh tickle-attacked her.

Dimly, between gasps of laughter, she heard Dylan advise Giol.

“Sometimes humans are silly, but it gives them courage.”

And sometimes katang storytellers were disconcertingly insightful.

Days later, Dylan danced impatiently, antennae flicking and curling. “Hugh, stop looking constipated and read the autocue naturally. Beeee normal,” he entreated. This was take eight of Hugh recording a message to selected federation leaders.

Unhelpfully, Cherry sat in a corner giggling at Hugh’s narrow-eyed glare at being called “constipated”.

He transferred his glare to her.

Which intensified her giggles.

Dylan reached back and swatted her with an antenna. “You’re not helping.”

She admitted it cheerfully. “But I am enjoying this. And I did help. I did Hugh’s make-up.”

Hugh scowled at her. “Are you sure Jonah can hide an entire video message? I had intended it to be a brief, written report.”

“Videos are more compelling.” Cherry bit her lip. “Well, non-constipated videos are—” Dylan’s antenna covered her mouth.

“We’ve been over this.” Dylan was losing patience with the supposed adults in the makeshift recording studio. “If Jonah says his hack will work, it will. But Lucas and I will try to crack the security on it, anyway. Remember, the packet isn’t just secure, it’s programmed to delete itself. We won’t leave any trace, other than in the recipients’ memories. Now, focus.”

They’d worked on the script for days, cutting and condensing it, so that while it covered everything essential, it also came in at under four minutes.

“Four minutes, Hugh,” Cherry called encouragingly. “You can last four minutes.”

The innuendo cracked Hugh’s composure. He read the autocue almost naturally.

At the end, as scripted, Dylan walked on-screen. He extended a claw, Hugh grasped it, and the katang claw closed gently around a fragile human hand. Trust.

Afterward, while Dylan edited the video, Hugh lingered in the kitchen watching Cherry cook. “He’s happy. He’s never been so happy. He’s Clan Avestan, you know?”

She did, actually.

Nora had thought it cute to the point of tears, and blamed pregnancy hormones for crying a little when she told Cherry, “He asked Liam if he could join.”

“And Liam told him he was already ‘one of us’.” Hugh’s mouth compressed. He swallowed hard. “I’d send him off to your family if he’d let me. Odd, isn’t it? We’re more likely to succeed now than when I started this whole idea of warning our leadership, and now, I feel worse.”

“Dylan won’t leave you. Nor will I, if that’s your next suggestion.”

Sadly, he smiled at her. “It should be. For both of you. But I need you.”

She hugged him, keeping her hands, covered in tomato juice from chopping half a dozen, protectively away from his shirt. These worries were why he’d been stuffing up his recorded message. “Single-minded resolve.”

“Pardon?”

“No regrets,” she clarified. She needed to remember that resolution herself. No second-guessing the plan. Whole-hearted commitment. She kissed him before returning to her dinner prep. The knife flashed. “Conviction is what engages people, deeper than rationality. It hits the emotions. So, no regrets. No worrying about the price we’ll pay for doing this.

You have to believe that the chance of claiming sovereignty is worth everything.”

Even their lives.

The final video message packet rang with Hugh’s understated determination and utter conviction. Dylan had edited it brilliantly, splicing bits from different sessions into a seamless whole.

On-screen, in his denim-blue utility shirt, his hair trimmed and his eyes alert and determined, Hugh began with a personal memory. “My mother ordered my death. She told me she would. She said that katangs had to be monsters ‘because if they aren’t, then we are. Or we’ve been made to be.’ Made to be,” he repeated.

“Thirty years ago, we, the federation, committed genocide. Out of fear, humanity killed a sapient species. All except for the child I rescued, and who you’ve tried to kill for three years. And for all that time, a third species was pulling our strings. They set us up.

“We are part of an intergalactic game. A multi-species game across the universe in which the thrors who lied to us are outlaws from their own people. Humanity has a chance to claim sovereignty over our region in space. To do that, we must prove that we value life.

“The Civilized Federation was founded to protect freedom. We surrendered that freedom to a web of lies. Those lies tore us apart. They ripped our foundational values from us. We are not free, and we will become even less free, unless we fix our mistakes. Now.”

Cherry considered taking up nail-biting as her new hobby as Zac, Ben, and Lucas approached the Origin command post. Finally, they were in comms range to learn the latest news.

Had the Diamond Expedition made it home?

“The Royal Guards recognized Lucas,” Zac said.

“They recognized you, too.” Lucas’s retort lacked his usual energy.

Undeterred, Zac continued his version of events. “They want him to stay with them on the battlecruiser, and not with a wicked former privateer.”

“Who is also my clansman,” Lucas said. “A fact I reminded them of. I took your name in vain, Cherry, and said I was here because we were worried about you.” A breath. “The expedition hasn’t returned.”

Ben delivered the details of the bad news. “It’s two months overdue. The agreement was that if they were staying longer, they’d send a ship back with a message, and that they’d only overstay in extreme circumstances. Everyone is worried.”

“They want me to remain at the post,” Lucas said. “If any ship comes through that isn’t one of ours or transmitting the agreed passwords, they’re ready to use the burrs on them.” Employed by a strong burr wielder, the Vapori burrs had the greatest range and pinpoint accuracy of any weapon available to humans. “They want me ready to engage the Vapori lens to block the millrace again if an armada seems to be coming through.”

Which would lock the Diamond Expedition outside among potential enemies—if they weren’t already dead.

Lucas’s voice was lifeless. “I gave the researchers your notes for using the lens, Nora. They muttered, ‘finally’, before they realized that your notes boiled down to guided intent. ‘Tell the lens to close the millrace.’ They can’t believe it’s not more complicated.”

“Burrs aren’t complicated,” Nora said tiredly.

Cherry pondered that reminder. Burrs weren’t complicated. Her talent wouldn’t be either. Her original oracular talent had been a simple, mostly inactive, instinctive gift. *I shouldn’t overcomplicate its new possibilities, either.*

Her oracular talent used to warn her of threats to herself and her well-being, including against those she loved. For all

her nervous energy and concerns, nothing screamed at her to change course and avoid Earth.

It could be that her talent would guide her safely home, even through the conflagration of the federation, even if her actions triggered that final shattering. All that mattered to it was that she survived.

Her talent, Cherry firmly believed, was as selfish as she was.

She looked at Hugh and Dylan. Would they forgive her if she saved them and left Hugh's society to burn?

The burden of burr sensitivity was a real one, whether it took the form of weaponizing the burrs or her own weird relationship with time.

"Lucas," she said quietly. "If you're asked to close the millrace, do it. If we make it home, we can always ask you to open it for us to slip through. Hopefully, we'll be lucky enough to bring the Diamond Expedition with us—if they don't beat us home."

"If you're sure?" Lucas had been worrying about shutting her out among enemies. Life returned to his voice.

"A hundred percent." She pushed conviction into her voice. It wasn't hard. She just had to think of a rogue ship slipping through to hunt baby Ekon as the rogues at Astacus had hunted her. "Besides, you said it yourself. Burrtalk is a gamechanger. No one expects us to be able to coordinate from both sides of a black hole. We've got this." *We just need a miracle to save everyone else.*

THIRTEEN

“We’ve found a habitable planet,” Nora said.

“Holy stars.” Alone on the bridge, Cherry’s exclamation was an awed breath, followed by practical considerations. “How much terraforming does it need?”

Nora gulped audibly. “You won’t believe—Roscoe, who found it, didn’t believe the analysis—but the habitability program all scout ships carry rated it Verdant.”

“Verdant? Like Palantine and Capitoline?” Those were the first two planets settled by the Stranded. They’d required immunizations and staged introduction, but Palantine had been settled inside five years and Capitoline in four.

“Exactly like.” Nora sniffled. “It’s out in the Arcane, beyond Border Station.”

“Outside the legal authority of the six realms,” Cherry finished the thought.

After the seven colony ships came through the millrace of the Origin black hole half a millennium ago, and discovered they couldn’t return, six habitable planets were claimed over the centuries, one for each of the colony ships. Those planets formed the basis for six realms, which were collectively encompassed by an arbitrary border, the Hadrian Line. Everything outside it was the lawless Arcane.

The seventh colony ship, the Aventine, had been dismantled a couple of centuries ago. Its people, or rather, their descendants, had scattered among the six planets.

Zac was one of them.

“Aventine,” Cherry tried out the name for the planet.

“Maybe,” Nora said.

Her hesitation puzzled Cherry. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“We could offer the planet as reparation for the federation’s actions,” Nora said. “Humanity owes katangs a world, if any more than Dylan survive.”

Cherry hoped they did. But she suspected they’d need the thrios to confirm it. “Would the royals agree to giving away a planet? What about the surveyor who found it, this Roscoe?”

“Roscoe is a born spacer. He doesn’t want a planet.”

“He’ll want the money it represents,” Cherry said cynically.

“He’ll get it.” Nora and Liam were among the wealthiest people in the Human Sector. Clan Avestan was flourishing. “Money isn’t a problem. Talk to Dylan and Hugh.”

“Oh man.” It was Cherry’s turn to gulp as the implications of the planet’s discovery and Nora’s generous offer kicked in.

By tradition, the new planet, the seventh habitable planet in the Human Sector, ought to be Aventine and belong to the descendants of the seventh colony ship. But the Aventine royal line had been lost, or much diluted, intermarrying with the established royal ruling families of the six realms.

“It’s a second card Hugh can play,” Nora said. “A grand gesture. You don’t get much bigger than giving away a habitable planet. When the frigate reaches Dominic, which should be within the fortnight, we’ll have to talk about our sector’s relationship with the federation. Collaborative would be best, but that kind of alliance only lasts for as long as it delivers us both benefits. If we buy in via donating the new planet we’ll have bought a lot of goodwill. What can they provide moving forward?”

The Stranded had been alone for five centuries. They had a successful, stable society.

“Room to expand and to meet others?” Cherry suggested. “The thrios are an immediate issue, but who knows what the future holds? There could be other problems that we need the huge federation population to counter.”

Nora laughed. “Sis, you’re the oracle. Sorry, it’s just you asking ‘who knows what the future holds?’” Her momentary laughter vanished. “Make Hugh and Dylan promise they won’t tell *anyone* about your talent.”

“They’ve promised.”

“I like them,” Nora said. “But from everything you’ve shared with us, I’m wary of their federation. Former federation. It’s too different to the Human Sector for us to rely on its character and goodwill. We’ll have to formalize alliances with sectors of it.”

Preparation for the Diamond Expedition had included briefings on the nature and purpose of diplomacy. Cherry understood Nora’s meaning. Alliances, unlike vague notions of friendship, protected everyone because even before terms were defined and signed into a contract, both parties understood that they gained more (or lost less) by honoring the alliance than by breaking it. Mutual benefit.

The Stranded genuinely had to ask, and find compelling answers, beyond countering the rogue thrios, to the question of what the federation could bring to an alliance.

“Dominic is a king,” Nora said. “He’ll think of political aspects we haven’t dreamed of. We need to have some answers ready for him.”

Cherry nodded, remembered Nora couldn’t see her, and hummed acknowledgement of her sister’s prompting. “Giving away a planet requires a big justification and compensation.”

“Yes. It mightn’t be necessary, but if this is the level of commitment we’re bringing to the table, the federation has to match it.”

“Yeah.” Cherry sighed noisily at the weight of that thought.
“Yeah.”

The sisters’ burrtalk call ended, but Cherry remained seated in the captain’s chair on the bridge.

Dylan came to find her. “What’s for dinner? Uh, Cherry?”

“Do you ever think about where the thrios are, the ones who’ve set themselves up to judge us rather than their rogues?”

“Not really.” He climbed onto his toadstool seat. “I mean, sure I wish they’d see us as we zoom through spoofing a rogue ship energy signature, but maybe they have seen us and just haven’t made contact.”

“You’re an optimist.”

“What’s got you worried?”

Ruefully, she smiled. “An opportunity. An amazing one.” Nora was also rattled by it. She’d told Cherry alone, rather than announce the seventh planet’s discovery and the possibility of giving it to katangs; in effect, to Dylan. Humanity would be giving away a habitable planet in pursuit of elusive thrios’ approval, and the sacrificial gift would come from the section of humanity that wasn’t complicit in genocide. “Hugh should hear this as well.”

However, she didn’t move, and watching her, nor did Dylan.

“Nora is confident that there aren’t thrios ships, rogue or otherwise, in our sector.” In Cherry’s home space. “I’m happy about that, and yet, it means that what the thrios learn about humans has gaps. Big gaps. Maybe, once they hear about the Diamond Expedition, they’ll try to follow it back through the Origin millrace. But it’s not just my people. Scattered things are happening everywhere. Things we don’t know about. Things like Hugh’s dad taking over Fauda Station. We might give everything to the effort, and someone far away will do something stupid and bam!” She thumped the armrests of her chair. “Sovereignty gone.”

“If we do nothing, that’s guaranteed.”

Except how much was the fractured, and fractious, federation risking versus what her people, the Stranded, were and would give to the effort? If the federation leaders tried to kill Hugh and Dylan for attempting to warn them, would those same leaders then turn their attention to the Stranded because Cherry helped Hugh and Dylan, the last katang?

Did they face galactic civil war?

Her unreliable time talent was silent.

She fretted about another variable. “The frigate Nora and Liam sent to Dominic, the one with burrtalk installed, will reach him on Palantine around when we reach Earth.”

“In three weeks,” Dylan said.

No one onboard the CP Magpie knew about burrtalk. Information on it was enclosed in an encrypted message for Dominic alone. Since Nora and Liam’s knowledge of the situation in the inner realm was months out of date, it would be Dominic’s decision, as the king on the spot, as to who to invite into the secret. If anyone.

Cherry expected he’d call Nora straightaway.

Nora would be eight months pregnant. The stress of their situation wasn’t good for her or the baby. Liam and Jonah would run interference, if she let them. But Nora was invested.

If I die trying to reach Earth...

Cherry shivered convulsively. *If I look into the future, do I still exist?*

An antenna patted her shoulder. “If your good news is that bad, maybe we should tell Hugh now?”

After a couple of blinks, Dylan came into focus. A few seconds later, so did his words. Cherry tapped the claw that rested on her knee. “Nora’s news is good.”

“Right,” he responded skeptically.

Cherry forced a smile. “But you’ll never guess it.”

She was right. All of Dylan’s claws click-clacked in shock when she told them.

“A planet? Nora has discovered a habitable planet and wants to give it to katangs?”

Hugh was stunned, too, but his disbelief included a political element. “Your sister can’t give away a planet.”

“She’s suggesting it’s a card you could play,” Cherry told both of them. “She means it, and I expect she’ll convince Dominic to back her, and really, if it’s out in the Arcane, the planet is, legally, up for grabs. It’s the weight of tradition that makes it Aventine. Nora isn’t offering false goods. She could make it happen if it would help.”

“A whole planet.” Dylan seemed to have stalled at the news. “She’d give it to katangs. She would.” He was talking to himself more than to Cherry and Hugh. “I never imagined... it’s not—”

Cherry tapped one of his claws. “That’s how I felt. It’s such big good news that it’s hard to comprehend. A new planet represents possibilities.”

“For your people,” Dylan said. “Giving it to katangs would be...you said it’s near Border Station where Nora and Liam live, where Ekon and the baby will grow up?”

“Nearish. It’s about three months travel and some bad hazards in between. We have a clan house on Capitoline. It’s not like we don’t have a planet we can live on.” And when he still seemed more worried than excited at the news of a new planet. “Nora isn’t trying to give you the planet, Dylan. It’s not meant to be your burden. It’s just another card Hugh can play, if he needs to.”

Now, Hugh was unhappy. “Another gift from the Stranded. Cherry, your clan doesn’t represent your people, yet they keep giving us...” He stopped and closed his eyes for a second. “I appreciate you, your family, your ship, burrtalk, the fact that your people’s burrs mean they can defend themselves, but it’s out of balance. And now, a planet?”

It was unbalanced. Nora knew it, and she was saying she wouldn’t let it stop the clan from helping, but they would be looking for balance later. For now, proving humanity’s claim

to sovereignty meant playing every card. There was no point in holding them in reserve.

Cherry tried to explain. “The rogues have thoroughly infiltrated the federation. Us Stranded, as outsiders, are the wildcard. Remember, burrtalk isn’t on the table to tell anyone about. You can’t mention that you’ve spoken to anyone back home. Even our people don’t know about it.”

“I won’t blab your secrets,” Hugh said firmly. “The contract we’re making with federation leaders has definite limits.”

Could you call it a contract when the other party was unwitting of the role they were to play?

In spite of his personal reservations, Hugh was confident in their plan, and reiterated it. “We warn them. Then the leaders have to supply the background on the rogues. That’s the information gap we suffer. We can’t plan a strategy to counter the rogues because we don’t understand the thrios. The families must have passed down knowledge about them. They’ve been keeping secrets.” He looked steadily at Cherry. “I will keep yours.”

FOURTEEN

In the final, most dangerous stretch of their journey, Jonah enlisted Dylan's aid in nagging Cherry to maintain a fitness routine; one that Lucas insisted on sharing, which meant it included fight training from Zac and Ben. Lucas received in-person assistance.

“Abuse!” he shouted.

Not that Cherry believed him, since he was laughing when he complained.

She used the virtual training sessions Ben had installed in the gym before the Delphic Dame left home.

Hugh had his own routine. He used the gym for fitness, but his martial arts practice was one specifically designed for the confines of a fully crewed spaceship. He practiced in a clear area in the obstacle course.

Cherry understood that Dylan's nagging and everyone's meddling in her training was their way of caring when there was little else they could do.

From the Gaia Transit 1 black hole, the Delphic Dame had to travel three weeks through regular interstellar space to reach Tengri Station, the first of the near-Earth stations. It wasn't their target, but the sensor array based on it would be a brutal test of the Delphic Dame's stealth shield.

If they didn't have to turn and run—and try again with Plan A of hiding in a pilgrim convoy—then their actual target was Castra, the Vizard Military Research Base.

In those endless three weeks, they lived with the fear that if anyone pierced their stealth shield they'd be exposed, and exposure in the very protected, high traffic area around Earth, meant death.

Timing mattered, but it was timing that Cherry couldn't affect.

Useless, dratted talent.

They just had to race as fast as they could and hope to retain the element of surprise.

At least they were positive they could reach Earth before news of their escape from Astacus reached any rogues lurking in the region.

Whether they could beat news of the Diamond Expedition reaching Earth was less certain.

The Vizards' comms network was the best in the federation, and news of an independent human colony would have rated urgent status.

If the Vizards had used mailboxes to send the urgent message, as soon as a spaceship carrying the encrypted message entered in range of a mailbox's relay and broadcast technology, ships leaving at the far end of the mailbox's range would pick up the message and carry it on. Given that efficiency, news of the Diamond Expedition was likely to have reached Earth already.

However, if the Vizards chose to deliver the news themselves rather than trust it to their comms system, then maybe the Delphic Dame could beat the Vizards' ship to Earth.

Hugh redid the calculation when he was bored. Yes, you could be bored even while afraid of being discovered. "Just because we could reach Miheva from here in a couple of months doesn't mean others could. Giol doublechecked my reckoning. We'd be taking the perilous universal rivers, the

fastest ones, but also the ones nobody else would risk. It's why Diamond Station was abandoned. Their journey from Miheva would be a minimum of six months."

But was there any advantage to be exploited in knowing about the Diamond Expedition when the authorities on Earth didn't?

They won't know who I am, Cherry thought. Or my ship's origins, if we're sighted.

The Delphic Dame successfully passed through the Tengri Array undetected.

On the bridge, the tight coil of worry and burr talent at Cherry's solar plexus relaxed a fraction. She rubbed her throat and moved her achingly tense jaw. "Next stop, Castra."

If only it was that easy.

Either she or Hugh was always on the bridge, although Pythia ran the Delphic Dame on auto-pilot, weaving it through gaps in traffic on the fastest route to the Vizard base. Dylan and Giol joined them in searching for a target ship among the mass of traffic data. They needed a Vizard ship to hide behind to sneak through Castra's defenses.

Despite the centuries of its existence, Castra had let slip remarkably little of its layout.

In the public domain was the information that it was of geometric design, but odd; optimized for the efficient movement of resources within it, but also for concealment and, vitally, for defense. It was a space fort.

"Target acquired!" Dylan shouted. "Giol found it."

The target was a Vizard drillbit, no bigger than the Delphic Dame.

"We'll have to get close," Hugh said.

Dylan bobbed his eyestalks enthusiastically. "If anything flags us, we'll be an echo of the drillbit. Just noise in the data."

That was optimistic.

But Cherry crossed her fingers, and over the next day, in full stealth mode, the Delphic Dame snuck into Castra, tucked close in the metaphorical shadow of the Vizard ship.

They even docked beside it. Either luck was incredibly going their way, or the Vizards had pierced their stealth shield, and this was a trap.

“Keep trying,” Cherry said to Dylan. The two of them had been hacking away, taking tips from Jonah and Lucas, but unable to break into the Vizards’ comms system. “Infiltrating pirate bases is a walk in the park compared to this.”

Hugh was in costume and in the foyer, ready to deploy. He wore the uniform of a sanitation worker. Sanitation workers tended to be among the invisibles of society. But in case social prejudice wasn’t enough camouflage, under his gray shirt, strapped to his lower back, he wore a portable stealth shield.

“It can’t hurt and it might help,” had been his justification for adding it. “It won’t slow me down.”

His goal was to plug a flash drive containing his video message and additional details of the thrios, sovereignty, and the katangs’ innocence into the nearest comms port, and hit send. As much as they hoped to get the Vizards onside, their first priority was to engage sympathetic federation leaders.

“Ten minutes, some luck, and we’re safely out of here,” Hugh said over the intercom from the foyer.

Pythia’s outside eyes, the Delphic Dame’s cameras, reported the all clear.

Hugh popped the hatch, exited, and closed it. The open hatch disrupted the ship’s stealth shield.

No one reacted. No one seemed to notice him or the ship.

Cherry could feel her heart beating in her throat, even if it wasn’t physically possible. Her gaze flicked between screens.

Hugh approached a door into what, logically, had to be an office or the maintenance unit for the dock.

On a corner screen, the cargo hatch of the drillbit in the next mooring opened. An auto-trolley exited. The hatch didn’t

close.

I've always been terrible at resisting temptation.

“Cherry! What the heck?” Dylan’s shout followed her.

She had a second flash drive in her pocket. On some level, she’d contemplated what she’d do if a chance like this presented itself.

Hugh aimed to insert his message into the Vizards’ comms system at the nearest secure port. He’d worked on a gadget with Jonah and Zac which they were positive could brute force access. It was a one-time thing. The Vizards would patch the security vulnerability fast.

But all Hugh needed was one successful attempt.

However, putting all your eggs in one basket had never appealed to Cherry, not if you had a choice, and at present, she had a shipful of other possibilities just next door.

“I’m maximizing our opportunities,” she shouted back to Dylan.

She scrambled down the ladder and into the foyer, took a final check of the screens in there, crossed her fingers for luck, and walked out into the heart of Vizard territory. Her target was just a few steps away. Just a short distance. *Walk like you belong. Like you have business here. But quickly.*

She walked into the unknown, unscouted territory of the drillbit’s cargo hold.

No one shouted. No one accosted her.

Her palm was sweating on the flash drive she clutched inside her pocket.

The cargo hold was in the process of being restocked. She skirted the bulky crates of ammunition, and reached the relatively reassuring area where the first labelled can read, *Coffee*. Tubs of feedstock for food synthesizers indicated that the hatch beyond led to the galley.

She really, really didn’t want to go deeper into the ship. Already, she couldn’t see the dock outside the cargo hold. But

she lacked Hugh's handy-dandy comms hacking gadget. She needed an unsecured port, and she hadn't seen one.

Maybe I didn't think this through.

She'd compromise and check the galley for a port. But no further.

If there was anyone in the galley... *I run.*

She put her hand on the handle of the hatch and tried to ease it open.

It didn't move.

Rather than take it as a sign from the universe, she studied the hatch. If her talent wasn't working, she refused to substitute superstition for it.

Oh. Duh. The hatch was locked. *Weird.* It was locked, but locked in a way that she could flip the lock open from outside in the unsecured cargo hold.

Her skin crawled. This was wrong. But not wrong enough for her to turn back.

One day my stubbornness is going to get me...

She edged open the hatch, blinked, and hurried on in, shutting it silently behind her.

The sole occupant of the galley didn't notice Cherry till she was halfway across the narrow space. Then they put their mug down beside the coffeepot with exaggerated care.

Confusion, gladness, and worry raced across Eloise's face. "Cherry? They kidnapped you, too?"

"Too? Who else is here?"

Narrow-eyed, but warily hopeful, Eloise abandoned the coffee. The two Stranded women met in the center of the galley. "Just me. As far as I know. Axel had orders to kidnap a burr wielder and bring them to Earth. They caught me and here I am. Here we are. But his superiors don't seem pleased." Her hopefulness faded into intensified suspicion on top of her normal disapproval of Cherry. "What did you do?"

Cherry laughed. She didn't mean to, but shock and Eloise's attitude triggered her. "I did nothing. *I*," she stressed the pronoun, "didn't get caught."

Eloise reached out, almost touching Cherry's sleeve as suspicion transformed into puzzled eagerness. "Then how are you here? We're nearly at Earth."

"You're on Castra, the Vizards' military station."

"Did Oaks bring you?" Oaks was Captain Oaks Blue, the fiancé Eloise always seemed to disdain. But now, as she looked around eagerly, he was desired. Or her freedom was. Or something else.

Cherry rubbed her gloved hands together. "I have so many questions. How did the Vizards pick you up? What have you learned about them? Why are you not locked up?" Although the hatch had been locked from outside.

"Axel accepted my parole."

Cherry slapped the wall. *Royals!* Royals and their stupid notions of honor. "You promised not to escape? You self-defeating idiot. How can I—" What could she do?

"I didn't think anyone would come for me. Oaks hasn't. You haven't said why you're here."

"And I'm not going to. Not if you're going to stay here and blab everything to your precious Axel."

Eloise leaned forward and hissed. "He's the captain."

"Big deal. So am I. You remember, captain of my own ship, the one you tried to steal from me?"

Flushing, Eloise retreated a step. "I'm sorry."

Now, Cherry was truly shocked. And awkward. It wasn't like she could say it was okay...a grin escaped. "Actually, it's okay. I maneuvered you into it."

"What?"

"I needed an excuse to leave the expedition."

“You—!” Eloise’s expensive education failed her. She couldn’t think of words bad enough.

Looking around again, Cherry shrugged. Anyone could enter the galley from further in the ship or from the cargo hold. “I didn’t expect to find you here. So, a couple of important questions. They grabbed you. Did they also get a burr?”

“Not as far as I know. They wouldn’t give me one to use, would they?”

“But Captain Axel has your parole,” Cherry mocked her before swiftly refocusing. “What about the expedition? How were they received at Miheva? You did make it to Miheva?”

“We did. It was all going well. They let us have information on their federation. They’re still clinging to it, you know, even as it dissolves.”

“I’m aware.”

The two women exchanged a long look, remembering that they were on the same side and, despite differences in class origin, that they shared a societal history and culture.

“I think they’re behind us technologically,” Eloise said. “Which is weird because they weren’t stranded and having to build a society in unsurveyed territory. Could burrs give us that much of an edge?”

“Burrs are the reason for royals’ status.” It was a kneejerk reaction for Cherry to remind the other woman of her privilege. “But no, the situation is more complicated.”

Eloise perched on a bar stool. “I’d ask what you’ve learned, but if you’re going to leave me here, you can’t tell me. I’d be even more of a security risk.”

“Yeah. And we’ve been talking for time I don’t have.” Cherry hadn’t learned how to create a bubble in time, a literal time-out, if that was even feasible. “I think you should break your parole and escape with me.”

Eloise’s scowl showed she wanted to.

Cherry decided to waste a minute more. “Did you hear about the katang genocide?”

Disgusted horror pursed Eloise's mouth. "Yes."

"Then consider whether you have the right to give these people your parole. You're a burr wielder, Eloise. A potentially game-changing weapon. Shouldn't you do everything you can to avoid them learning more about people like you?"

"And you. You're a sensitive, too."

"And I'm leaving," Cherry said firmly.

Uncertainly, Eloise stood. "But you risked coming here first."

The hatch to the cargo hold opened, and a man in dress uniform with a blade at his belt entered and swept off his cap. "Ladies."

"Axel."

"Eep." Escape seemed unlikely since the Vizard stood in front of the closed hatch. *I should have brought a weapon.*

"You should go with her," Axel said, and stoically withstood two highly surprised, deeply suspicious stares. "We'll stage a breakout."

"We' who? And why?" Cherry asked.

For once, Eloise aligned herself in solidarity with a commoner; namely, Cherry. "Axel, you had orders to bring me here. Why would you help me escape?"

Axel pushed his cap to the back of his head. "My orders have changed, and I told you earlier, I always questioned the original ones. Kidnapping a diplomat is as stupid as it is illegal." He looked at Cherry. "Do you have a ship?"

Cautiously, she nodded. Given that he was right here in the room with them and that others had to know she was here, confessing to a spaceship's existence was the least of her problems. *Hugh is going to kill me.*

"Good. Do you need help reaching it?"

Not really, since it's just next door. If you could turn your back, we'll sneak out. Out loud, what she said was, "No. We're

good. If you're really going to let us go?"

"My latest orders are to return Eloise to her people, discreetly. You're obviously her people." His mouth twitched. "I was listening in, I'm afraid. You quarrel like colleagues."

Cherry and Eloise side-eyed each other.

"Sneaking Eloise all the way back to Miheva would be challenging. If you have an escape plan she can join, it simplifies things."

"For you, maybe." Cherry was facing up to the thought of sharing her ship with Eloise for *months*. Hugh and Eloise would probably get along fine. Both of them had ridiculous notions of honor.

At the thought of Hugh, a wave of fear crashed over her. It was worry for him that had impelled her into action, and into this farce of a Vizard pushing her to rescue Eloise. Eloise, of all people. *Ha!* Of course he wished to be free of her.

Except that his smile for Eloise was both kind and respectful before he refocused on Cherry. "How can I help?"

"Pardon?"

"You inferred that adding Eloise to your escape plan complicated things. How can I uncomplicate them?"

Cherry sighed. She had no reason to trust Axel except that Eloise evidently did. And trust had to start somewhere. Hugh's whole plan rested on a substantial proportion of Vizards being loyal to humans—once they were in possession of all the facts regarding the rogues' infiltration. Cherry fished the flash drive out of her pocket. "This holds a message for select members of your leadership. I mean, federation leaders, not Vizard, although some Vizards are included. You need to do nothing for ten minutes, then plug it into your comms network and send it."

His eyes popped.

Eloise rolled hers. "He's not going to jam stars knows what into his network."

"Then he'll never learn what it contains, and it's good."

Axel frowned at the flash drive. “You said some of the Vizard leaders are included as recipients. Who?”

“General Hellebore and Colonel Gahr.”

Eloise’s gaze flicked from the flash drive to Axel’s face, and then, to Cherry’s.

“John Hellebore?” Axel asked.

“Yes.”

“He’s my father.”

Cherry huffed a breath. “For a massive federation, you have a very small network of connected families.”

“How would you know?” Axel asked quietly.

“Do you promise to let Eloise and me escape regardless of my answer?”

Silent seconds ticked past.

Cherry contemplated what she’d do if he said no. She might be able to send him into stasis, as she’d done for plants, for the ten minutes she needed to escape, but who else was listening and observing, and who else stood guard outside?
How many people can I anchor in time?

Axel studied Eloise for a long moment before nodding. “I promise to facilitate Eloise and your escape.”

“Today.” Cherry didn’t want any wriggle room in the promise.

“Today.”

“The message on the flash drive is from Andrew Owens,” deliberately she used Hugh’s real name, “Governor Kendra Owens’ son.”

Recognition flared in Axel’s eyes. Recognition and something more. “Do you know what he says?”

Cherry countered with an equally pertinent question. “You said your orders regarding Eloise had changed. What about Andrew? Do you still intend to kill him?”

“No. Believe it or not, we wish to safeguard him and...his friend. That’s not all Vizards, but Dad is one of them.” His winced at the shocked sound Cherry made. “Yeah. Hard to believe, but...” He stared down at the flash drive. “If this is from Andrew, we owe him. And if he’s reaching out—via you—he may be able to help us.”

It’s a warning. Cherry managed to strangle her response unsaid. Axel could listen to his father’s account of the recording, if anything Axel said was true. She grabbed Eloise’s wrist. “We’re going. Now. Ten minutes of no looking.”

“We’ll be looking,” Axel said. “It’s too dangerous to you, as well as us, for us to go blind. But we won’t act.”

“You better not.” Cherry wished she sounded scarier. “Let’s go.” She released Eloise’s wrist as the other woman fell into step.

A guard waited outside the door. He stared through them.

“Good discipline,” Cherry said. She hoped it meant that Axel did have both the authority and the intent to keep his promise.

She retraced her route out of the ship.

Eloise wore the active duty uniform of the Vizards, a blue and gray camouflage utility shirt, combat pants, and black boots.

In a blue shirt and black trousers, Cherry just missed blending in. She led the way briskly out of the cargo hold and to the Delphic Dame. As she did so, she opened and closed her left hand like a beak—or a claw.

Dylan opened the hatch to the foyer.

Eloise’s slight gasp registered the moment she saw the hatch open to an invisible spaceship.

Cherry pushed her in, and took her first full breath when the hatch closed behind them. She winced as Hugh shouted over the intercom.

“Tell your friend to buckle in.” A flip-down seat thudded open. “She better not have brought a tracking device in.”

“Pythia will scan her,” Cherry said.

Obediently buckling in, Eloise volunteered to hand over anything Pythia found. “Unless it’s inside me.”

“Cherry, get up here,” Hugh growled. “We’re leaving.”

She raced for the bridge. “I spoke to one of the Vizards—”

A slashing gesture from Hugh cut her off.

She buckled herself into the captain’s chair as Hugh undocked and took the direct route to freedom. Then he zipped. And zagged.

Studying the screens, she couldn’t see any response from Castra’s defenses.

Hugh multi-tasked being furiously angry while directing their escape. “You idiot! Why did you risk yourself? You were to stay safe on the Delphic Dame. The danger should have been mine.”

Dylan backed him up with angrily curling antennae.

“It’s tradition,” Cherry tried. “You leave me behind, and I choose my own adventure.”

“You are not getting out of this by being cute,” he said.

“I told her not to go,” Dylan added.

Pythia reported that Eloise scanned clean. “No tracking devices or weapons.”

That eliminated the one thing Cherry would have felt guilty about—bringing a Trojan Eloise onboard. She smiled at her boyfriend and friend.

They were angry because they cared about her.

“I had to,” she said simply. “Castra was a one-off chance. You were risking yourself to send the messages, Hugh, and Dylan was trying to hack the Vizards’ systems to insert them. When the cargo hatch was left open, how could I not try?”

“By sitting your butt in the chair and staying there.”

Dylan had recovered his temper. “Unless her talent pushed her to it?”

Ooh. That's an intriguing thought, but...honestly, this recklessness just feels like me. Cherry peeked from watching the screens to assess Hugh's reaction.

Nope. He wasn't falling for Dylan's suggestion.

He knows me too well. She preferred to be the one in danger rather than watching from the sidelines.

Since she couldn't justify her actions to his satisfaction, she went with a distraction, one that had the advantage of being important. "Eloise's friend, the one who found us, is Captain Axel Hellebore. Dylan, did you hear—"

"I didn't hear anything! As soon as you were on their ship, it blocked the signal from your micro-drone."

She patted the top button of her shirt. It was the micro-drone, compact in its immobility and matching the rest of the genuine buttons on her shirt. "That's why you panicked."

Hugh took a hand off the controls to give her knee a shake. "We panicked because you were out of the ship, stars knew where—"

In the ship next door. Wisely, what she said aloud was a recap of her conversation with Axel.

And all the time, the Delphic Dame steadily increased the distance between herself and Castra. They weren't safe yet, not by a longshot, but their chances of hiding and surviving were higher.

Dylan, at least, was able to concentrate on other matters. "Eloise? You found the snobby royal on a Vizard ship?"

Cherry shrugged a tad guiltily. She may have exaggerated a few details when she told Dylan stories about the wretched woman. *Oh well.* Rescuing Eloise didn't make them friends. "I didn't get the details, but the Vizards kidnapped her. Apparently, they had orders to bring her here. The captain of the ship obeyed, but had doubts about the orders. She is a diplomat. There ought to be some protections for her. He returned from questioning his orders to find me with Eloise, and he encouraged us to run. I gave him the flash drive."

“What?” Dual squawks of outrage and shock.

“He seemed somewhat sympathetic, and honestly, if he wasn’t and he captured me, he’d have had the flash drive anyway.”

Hugh groaned and muttered.

“We’re escaping successfully,” she pointed out. “If Axel had sounded the alarm, we wouldn’t be.”

Hugh kept them zigging and zagging and undetected for an hour before agreeing that they could probably unbuckle and move around freely.

Just maybe, Captain Axel Hellebore would keep his word.

The hour had given them all time to think.

“How do you want to meet Eloise?” Cherry asked Dylan.

“Casually, in the lounge. I think we should hide Giol from her.”

“Definitely,” Cherry said fervently. “But Hugh, you should be there, although I know I’m going to forget and call you Hugh rather than Andrew.”

Dylan waved an assenting claw. “Me, too.”

“Hugh is who I am now.” It was the false identity he’d assumed after his mother had ordered his and Dylan’s deaths. “Andrew Owens is just to engage the leaders’ attention.” By invoking his family’s name.

Cherry kissed his cheek, and went to retrieve Eloise from the foyer. “Sorry we had to leave you here so long. We’re probably as safe now as we’re going to be this near to Earth and everything. Do you need the bathroom?”

Eloise looked up from unbuckling. “No, thank you.” She stretched a bit.

“Then come and meet Hugh and his katang son, Dylan.”

The meeting could have gone better, but was probably more than they could have hoped for from an already scared human.

When Cherry had met Dylan, he'd been a cute kid. All of his mannerisms had encouraged an "aww" response.

Now, he was bigger physically, and mentally and emotionally he'd matured. Events, the clatter ceremony, and his training had changed him.

The occasional jerkiness of his antennae betrayed his nervousness. He waited by the far end of the coffee table, allowing Eloise the fragile nonsense of a barrier between them.

She froze when she saw him.

Despite her own negative history with the royal, Cherry tried to be fair.

Eloise had just spent six months on a Vizard ship, undoubtedly absorbing the federation's media, culture, and prejudices. That she merely froze was a good reaction. It took her two tries to get her voice to work, and to respond to Cherry's introduction. "Good morning, Dylan." She approached the coffee table and extended her hand.

"Hi," Dylan said. "Fist-bump?"

Eloise laughed shakily as she curled her fingers and tapped his claw. "Hi." She smiled.

Hugh brought them all coffees from the kitchen. "I'm Hugh. The federation has an execution order out for me as Andrew Owens." Since his hands were full of mugs, he nodded a greeting.

Eloise nodded back, accepted a coffee, and sat in an armchair.

Dylan stayed between Hugh's armchair and Cherry's seat on the sofa.

"All right," Hugh said. "Explanations."

In between snippets of information, they watched the wall screen, which showed the Delphic Dame's progress away from Castra to hide among pilgrim traffic.

“The rogues’ own actions prove Dylan is telling the true story of events. By keeping humans from Astacus, they’re silencing the katangs’ voice and suppressing the truth that they were innocent, if asocial, victims,” Cherry said.

“I believe you.” Sipping coffee and in the familiar Stranded-style lounge, Eloise was recovering her sangfroid. “The existence of the rogues actually explains a lot, from the technological stagnation of the federation to its collapse. A healthy system can sustain some degree of parasitical growth, but when it reaches a tipping point, the system fails.”

She ate one of the cheese and salad sandwiches Cherry slapped together for lunch. “The idea of a multi-alien society observing us—judging us—is huge. If humanity’s right to its own territory is slipping through our fingers, I can understand why you’ve taken the risk to come here to warn your people. What I don’t understand is Cherry’s involvement, although I’m sure that after I’ve had time to think it through, we can recover from her mistakes.”

Cherry’s tasty chutney and cheese sandwich dropped back onto her plate. “What? What mistakes?”

Dylan cackled.

FIFTEEN

“Let me recap,” Eloise said. “Hugh uploaded his message to the Vizards’ comms network and it sent it immediately to the various leaders he’d selected. You’re confident that it wiped itself after a single viewing?” She waited for their confirmatory nods, including Dylan’s eyestalks bobbing. Her gaze lingered on him before she focused on Cherry and raised an admonitory finger. “But Cherry gave Axel a flash drive containing the same message, so he might wait to upload it, or he might try to copy it, or—”

Cherry fought the temptation to swat Eloise’s accusatory finger. “Okay, okay. I interfered and potentially created a problem. I also rescued you.”

The finger lowered. Eloise’s stern expression collapsed. “From rogue aliens. Thank you.”

Cherry squirmed. The royal’s sincere gratitude was worse than her know-it-all attitude.

“Being Axel’s prisoner was bearable. Just. But even he had doubts about surrendering me to his superiors on-station. It was why I was still on the ship. He’d gone to investigate his orders.”

Which proved Vizards were not just capable of independent thought, but willing to risk independent action.

“We go ahead with the plan,” Hugh said. “Although who we choose to meet may change.” His gaze locked with Cherry’s.

She recalled the last line of his message. *I will contact one of you to speak in person. My katang son and I will meet with you.*

They had debated who that person should be. When Hugh had envisaged using the pilgrim convoy for concealment, Sadhu Kibo, as a person of courage and integrity whose judgement the other leaders trusted, had been the obvious choice.

“Now that we have a Vizard contact...” Hugh glanced at Eloise.

The trained diplomat frowned. “I only knew Captain Axel Hellebore in the context of his small ship. What he’ll do in the more strained and constrained environment of his headquarters I cannot guess.”

“Hugh was thinking more of his father,” Cherry said.

“General John Hellebore. The Hellebores. Cherry—” Hugh slammed his mouth shut. By the guilty look in his eyes, he’d just remembered they weren’t discussing her talent in front of Eloise.

She nodded, though, because she’d had the same thought, the one obviously percolating in his brain. The coincidence of her stumbling into the son of one of the leaders on Hugh’s shortlist suggested that her oracular talent was at work.

Dylan shared their mind-meld. “It’s an encouraging thought.”

“What is?” Eloise asked. Her narrowed eyes showed she was well aware they were speaking around her.

Hugh responded easily. “We’d considered contacting a religious leader, Sadhu Kibo, but his guards would protest him taking the risk of meeting us. General Hellebore, however, is a Vizard. He would have the courage and decisiveness to meet a katang.”

“Even one as scary as me,” Dylan said.

Cherry rested a friendly hand on his shell, appreciating the nervousness behind his joke and respecting his courage.

“The question is, where could we safely rendezvous with him?” Hugh jiggled his knee. “I chose to message the leaders I thought we could trust, but we have to allow for the fact that one or more will side with the rogues or simply confide in the wrong person. We have to assume that the rogues will be watching key people closely for the next few days.”

“Weeks and months,” Eloise said. “I can’t help you with the decision, well, other than by removing myself so you can speak freely.”

The less than subtle hint got Cherry moving. She showed Eloise to the last empty cabin, and gratefully accepted Eloise’s excuse of requiring a couple of hours of privacy to process everything she’d learned. “Sure, no problem. Afterwards, we’ll get you sorted out with fabbed clothes and anything else you need.”

“Thank you.” Eloise closed the cabin door.

After asking Pythia to keep an eye on their guest, Cherry reported to the bridge to join Hugh, Dylan, and everyone in a burrtalk confab.

Hugh recapped events and presented the problem of rendezvousing with General Hellebore.

“You need to catch him while he’s on the move,” Zac said. “You’ve proven you can shadow a Vizard ship undetected, and your general might be on the older side of active service, but a spacewalk oughtn’t to be beyond him.”

Cherry stared wide-eyed at the burrtalk system, then at Dylan, who was flicking his antennae in shock. “Can we ask a general to spacewalk to us? We won’t be docked.”

“The federation must have the equivalent of one of our scooters,” Zac said.

“We do,” Hugh said. “If General Hellebore is willing...it’s a bold choice.”

“You said surprise is one of your biggest weapons,” Lucas reminded him.

Hugh grinned. “I did. The best option would be if we intercepted General Hellebore on a routine flight. He travels regularly between the various stations and Earth. Climb high enough in the ranks, and leaders still prefer face-to-face meetings, and have the resources to achieve them.”

“A general’s schedule won’t be easy to access,” Liam said. “You want to limit your comms contact with him.”

“What about his son?” Cherry asked.

Captain Axel Hellebore couldn’t read their minds, but he anticipated their logical next step: to get in contact. He took his ship on a shakedown, maintenance flight the next day.

The Delphic Dame initiated tight beam contact.

Axel responded, and they scheduled a meeting with General Hellebore two days later.

“I don’t have to ask Dad. He’s kept up his rating for spacewalking, and he’d kill me if he missed the chance to meet you in person.”

Consequently, for two days, the Delphic Dame drifted around Earth’s region, staying close to Europa where General Hellebore was located, and from which he’d depart for the media station near Bastion.

For those two excruciatingly long days of waiting, Dylan debated how he’d contribute to the meeting. He’d altered the raz which he’d picked up in the Hall of Charts on Astacus. The traditional katang storyteller’s toy now fit inside his largest claw. Only when he opened his claw to display the raz did his modifications spring to life. “It’s a map of the route from Astacus to Earth. Not the one we took, but one humans would use, stopping at their planets and stations.”

Eloise was his test subject.

“It’s a gift with many meanings,” Dylan explained.

She watched his snappy claw.

Cherry watched her face. *Ha! You think Dylan’s scary. I’m going to be there to take a photo of you if we ever introduce you to Giol.*

Confronted by the raz, humans like Hugh, that is, engineers and scientists, would focus on the katang materials used. They were fascinating.

Cherry had observed the process for modifying the raz, and she recognized the hardened material as one which became malleable at specific vibrations. It was amazing stuff.

But most humans would ignore the materials used, and hone in on the symbolism involved. The raz was a katang portrayal of what humans considered their territory. Worse, it connected the heart of humanity, Earth, to the planet humans had destroyed, Astacus. Some humans would read that connection as a threat.

“May I touch it?” Eloise asked.

Dylan extended his claw. “Of course.”

Cherry doubted he realized exactly how much courage it took Eloise to stick her hand inside his claw to feel the smooth texture of the raz and trace one of its maze-like paths.

The diplomat offered a compliment and a warning rolled together. “Your raz is clever, engaging, and daunting. It says you know where we live and how we travel, and it reminds a human that your technology is a mystery to us.”

“You’re saying I shouldn’t use it?” Dylan was disappointed, but resigned.

“Maybe not at the first meeting. It never hurts to be underestimated.” Eloise flicked a glance at Cherry. “Just ask Cherry.”

General Hellebore's entrance to the Delphic Dame guaranteed that none of them would underestimate him. He might have a desk job these days, but he was a fit, active sixty-year-old, and the sharpness of his gaze took in everything as he scrutinized his surroundings. He kept his lifesuit on while standing in the foyer for Pythia to scan him, although he unsealed its helmet. "Interesting ship. Similar to our small civilian vessels, but some differences. Thanks for trusting me onboard."

Cherry had agreed—heck, she'd insisted—that Hugh meet the General and take the lead in the conversation. She, Dylan, and Eloise waited in the lounge, watching his arrival on the wall screen.

"Thank you for joining us," Hugh said. "Cherry and Eloise, your son's former prisoner, are on the deck above."

General Hellebore climbed obediently. "And Dylan?"

Dylan greeted him at the ladder, on the living area level. "Good morning, General Hellebore."

Courage and trained instincts kept the General moving. He entered the lounge smoothly. "Good morning, Dylan."

On meeting her first katang, Eloise had displayed fear in her rigid stance and quickened breathing.

General Hellebore could have been facing a human leader. "I apologize sincerely for my people's actions against yours, and specifically, for our pursuit of Andrew and yourself. The genocide," General Hellebore employed the word unflinchingly, "was our fault. We bear the shame of it. I do, personally, because I was part of a crew that destroyed a katang spaceship. We have since learned the depths of our mistake. We have been trying to contact you and Andrew," the General looked at Hugh who stood by Dylan. "Thank you for reaching out to us."

"Please, sit," Hugh said. "And tell us who you mean by 'us'?"

"Lady Eloise. Lady Cherry." The General sank into the indicated armchair.

Hugh sat in the other armchair, and Dylan stood beside him.

No one corrected the General's assumption of Cherry's title. In her book, captain rated much higher than lady. Let him underestimate her. Eloise hadn't been wrong to point out that Cherry encouraged and exploited people's misconceptions.

General Hellebore focused on Hugh. "By us, I mean those of us who've recognized that something is fundamentally wrong in our society and who have the knowledge to trace it back to the aliens whom you call rogues. It took us far too long, and the unspeakable horror of genocide, to identify their lies, and nearly thirty years since then to tentatively, secretly form alliances. Your parents are part of the group, Andrew."

Hugh jerked back.

Eloise kicked Cherry's foot.

The unwelcome, unexpected chastisement snapped Cherry's focus back to the sneaky general.

Attacking Hugh's emotional underbelly demonstrated General Hellebore's ruthlessness.

It also meant she had to pick up the slack if Hugh and Dylan were distracted. She couldn't afford to let their visitor rile her.

Stars forbid Eloise emerged as the most competent among them.

The Vizard general snorted. "Your mother gave the order she had to. Publicly, Kendra sacrificed you to old fears of katangs. She couldn't let the elves guess at our brewing challenge."

"Brewing challenge? It's been three years," Hugh sneered.

Cherry would have doubted the General, too, except that she recalled Hugh's father's takeover of Fauda Station. It had been too smooth not to have been planned.

If there was an emerging federation-wide challenge to the rogues, it had to act slowly. Not only did they have to conceal their plans from the rogues, but distance prolonged everything.

For example, when originally settled, Hugh's home sector of Aaru had been relatively close to Earth. It was a well-established and successful sector. However, when the katangs had turned the fastest universal rivers perilous, the route back to Earth from the Aaru Sector had been disrupted. The katangs' uncoordinated efforts to limit the rogues' reach and activity had inadvertently increased the isolationist pressures on the federation.

Messages coordinating an uprising would take years to pass between Aaru and Earth.

Hugh shook his head. "Forget the challenge for the moment. You're here to bear witness to Dylan's existence and to ask any questions you need to to be confident in our information about the thrios and sovereignty."

"I already am. I believe you," General Hellebore said. "While brief, your message covered the pertinent points. Although it didn't explain how you encountered Lady Cherry?"

"I found him on Diamond Station after the rest of the expedition continued on. Rather than going home as I'd planned, he convinced me that Dylan deserved a chance to visit his home world. I was curious, so I agreed." Her shrug attempted to diminish the extent of the favor she'd granted Hugh and Dylan, two strangers.

"I have a question." Hugh redirected General Hellebore's attention. "Can you explain how the rogues originally won our ancestors' confidence?"

"Ah." The older man leaned back. "You never wished to lead, so your mother wouldn't have shared the information. Dylan's information matches what we've learned of the elves. They live a long time. Those who treated with our ancestors still treat with us. Though contact has lessened through the years."

"Because they're burrowed in," Dylan said.

"Yes. Digging them out is our challenge. Originally, they presented their small number—we've counted no more than

five hundred individuals, although more remain in the background. They introduced themselves as survivors of katang atrocities, and apologized that they couldn't save us from the rapacious—pardon, Dylan. This was the beginning of their campaign to warp humanity's view of katangs. The elves said they wished to warn us, and to work discreetly in the background to assist us. They promised our families' leaders extended lives and youth."

As we guessed, Cherry thought.

Hugh nodded.

"Gradually, they instilled in us a belief that anything related to katangs was filthy, disgusting. Disgust is visceral, and once fostered, difficult to dispel. It contributed to our willingness to destroy a habitable planet. Above and beyond killing a sapient species, destroying a habitable planet is crazy."

"Add shame and suspicion to that disgust and Astacus is taboo even without the defenses set against intruders," Cherry said.

"Astacus," General Hellebore repeated musingly. His attitude didn't hide the shrewd gleam in his eyes. "Other people have tried to break through to the planet. None have succeeded."

A light bite of sarcasm sharpened Cherry's response. "My ship is special."

"Indeed. Axel briefed me on your Diamond Expedition. Do you have one of these burrs? A demonstration..."

Cherry pulled a face. "No. They're too rare to be wasted on ordinary people."

"Axel said as much."

Cherry side-eyed Eloise. Just how much had she told him about the Stranded?

Eloise scowled back.

Abruptly, Cherry blinked. She was the stupid one, here. Again. The realization was a nasty jolt. The General was sowing suspicion and discord between them, and she was

falling for it. She grimaced an apology at Eloise, whose scowl eased.

A frown pinched together the General's well-groomed eyebrows. "I need to be mindful of the time. I'm expected back on-ship in an hour. I'll be blunt. We need you, Andrew."

It wasn't what Cherry expected to hear. They'd anticipated questions on what they'd learned, or taken, from Astacus.

Instead, General Hellebore launched into a speech. "Conviction dares where experience falters. My generation is too old. We can lead in ordinary times. You could say that we embody authority. We uphold the status quo. But to lead federation citizens somewhere new requires a different skillset. A different starting point, which you have." He addressed Hugh, and Hugh alone.

For the General, Cherry and Dylan were extensions of Hugh, or tools Hugh could use. There was a ruthlessness beneath the genial charm. "Andrew, if I'm an example of who you chose to contact, your selected leaders are people of experience in positions of influence. The problem with your thinking is that experience accepts compromise. Despite identifying the need for change, those of us accustomed to authority fall back on old ways of doing and being, of organizing ourselves and others. The rogues drove us down one path. Radical change is required to forge a new path."

Cynically, Cherry added, "And the bigger the change, the bigger the price that has to be paid to achieve it. Why should Hugh and Dylan pay it for you? They've warned you. They've given you information on what's at risk—sovereignty. They've done their part. The rest is on you."

Did generals give recruitment speeches? General Hellebore certainly had his finetuned. It ignored pesky interruptions like hers.

"It's not enough to colonize the stars once. We have to send out the memory and vision of who we are, again and again. The rogues interrupted that process, and we are witnessing the disintegration of the federation as a result."

Eloise nodded. “As the Stranded, we never forgot that Earth and its original space-faring civilization, which became your Civilized Federation, was where we began. It is our touchstone.”

General Hellebore regarded her approvingly. “Well said.”

She gave him an enigmatic smile.

I am in over my head, Cherry thought. They had wandered into diplomatic territory, and for all of Nora’s teaching, Cherry wasn’t comfortable with it.

General Hellebore returned to practicalities. “Andrew, I don’t know who else you messaged.” He paused, but Hugh didn’t obligingly divulge the names. “Not everyone will be trustworthy.”

The older man sighed. “A leader has to defend against external enemies and against internal dissatisfaction. It is a sad commentary on human nature that it’s easier to mobilize people against an external enemy, against outsiders like the katangs—my apologies, Dylan—than it will be to mobilize against an embedded enemy like the rogue thrios.”

The General cleared his throat. “The elves can disguise themselves as human.” He spoke over their shocked exclamations. “We don’t believe it is all of them, but occasionally some have slipped and revealed their grayish skin. They surgically alter their bodies, cropping their pointed ears and removing their extra knuckles. They paint over their skin.”

Cherry looked at her fingers and shuddered as she curled them protectively into her palms. “So, they could be anyone.”

“Anywhere,” Eloise breathed.

Holy stars. Cherry clenched her fists tighter. *Don’t hyperventilate*. She’d thought the enemy was out there, obviously alien, even if hidden. But they could be anyone.

Offering discreet comfort, Dylan stretched out an antenna to tap her foot.

General Hellebore didn't notice. His attention was fixed on Hugh, who stared at the blank wall screen, lost in thought. The General abandoned the topic of the thrios. "Humanity is expansionist. We colonize first with ideas, then with bodies, but we've forgotten that the ideas have to be renewed. The great Why? of existence was answered on Earth, and for all time, before we ever departed for the stars. It is to love life with all its myriad possibilities. Loving something, or someone, means defending it. We need to renew our society's commitment to freedom."

He leaned forward. "Those of us aware of the rogues and prepared to act against them are the spearhead for the Renewal. We borrowed the name from the ancient Renaissance, which was a time in which the best and brightest borrowed from ancient masters to reaffirm human values and ideals, and to express them in a rare burst of paradigm-challenging creativity."

Hugh's expression twisted at the self-aggrandizement.

Was he thinking of his father's more practical response to the federation's disintegration? Ruben Owens had taken over Fauda Station. From there, he'd create a safe zone for those who adhered to the rules he enforced.

"We thought we were alone in the universe," the General admitted. "More painfully alone than ever since we had killed the katangs. But if there are other aliens beyond your rogues, it changes the nature of the war we must fight."

A cold chill rattled Cherry's teeth and slid down her spine. A harshness in Hellebore's tone and expression hinted at an unexpected evil. She understood desperation, but had the Renewal's answer to the rogues' actions really been to plan to kill them?

If the Renewal truly believed the rogues to be what they'd claimed—the last survivors of their species—then killing them would have meant committing a second genocide.

Dylan's claw click-clacked open and shut as his antenna tightened frantically around her ankle. He shared her suspicions.

“Dylan, I need coffee. Come help me carry the mugs.” She sprang up, covering her desire to escape by heading for the kitchen. “General Hellebore, how do you like your coffee?”

“None for me.” The General was on a time limit to sell his plan to Hugh.

Hugh and Eloise also declined.

Cherry returned with a mug that she curled her hands around, seeking its warmth.

Companionably, and to bolster their cover story for escaping the lounge, Dylan carried a mug of coffee and pretended to drink it. He preferred water or fruit juice.

General Hellebore ignored him to smile at Cherry and Eloise, seated together on the sofa.

Cherry’s spine stiffened. That was a scheming smile, and a condescending one. The coffee she’d drunk soured in her stomach.

“Ladies, I presume you’re planning on heading home?”

“He is a dangerously clever man,” Eloise said after the General departed. She gave her shoulders a shake. “I’ll grab a coffee and write up a report of all he said, and hinted at.” She offered Cherry a fleeting smile. “In my cabin.” Thereby, granting them privacy.

“Is his son like him?” Cherry asked.

Eloise frowned. “On the same path. They remind me of royals. Duty and ambition. Some people land more heavily on the side of ambition. I didn’t think Axel was one of them, but his father is.” She gazed at the ladder General Hellebore had left by. “He wants the rogues gone, but he also wants their power.”

SIXTEEN

Hugh and Dylan crowded onto the bridge with Cherry to recount the General's visit over burrtalk.

As if the day hadn't been hard enough, Nora and Liam dumbfounded Cherry by not being shocked at news of the anti-rogue Renewal.

"So, the Vizards were helping Hugh all the time," Nora said.

"What? No." Cherry pshawed the idea.

Liam demolished her incoherent protest. "You're too close to see it, too emotionally engaged, and Hugh certainly is." Hugh was listening, face impassive. "His mom ordered his death. It skewed his whole perception of events. But really, how likely is it that Hugh could evade the federation's elite force for three years?"

Dylan defended his dad. "He's smart. With my lifepod onboard, he traveled perilous universal rivers. The rogues seem to have believed that he escaped by his own efforts each time."

"Which proves to me that the Vizards are experienced at working clandestinely," Zac said. "Which is good, if they're truly our allies."

His comment brought them back to the bigger issue.

Cherry growled. “Hellebore is a fast thinker. He has it all worked out. Hugh is to stay on Earth to lead, or I’m betting, to be the figurehead for the Renewal. By his side will be the pretty Lady Eloise representing us, the federation’s long-lost cousins, the Stranded. Add in Dylan as Hugh’s loyal ‘pet’ katang, and Hellebore thinks he has a compelling new celebrity.”

She took a gasping breath. “Meanwhile, I’m to travel home to give the good news that the federation wants to be friends. To prove it, the General will send his son along with me.”

“And do you get any say in these plans?” Liam asked sardonically, well aware of his sister-in-law’s independent prickliness, and supportive of it.

“Hellebore doesn’t think so, but I do.”

“Good for you,” Liam said softly.

“What’s the alternative plan?” Nora asked.

Hugh scrubbed both hands over his face. “General Hellebore wishes to separate Dylan and me from a ship he can’t track, and get his son onboard it. He doesn’t know that the Delphic Dame’s security system would foil a hijacking. He ought to guess it, but he’s acquisitive. We hid from Castra’s security system. He wants that technology.”

“Eloise said he’s ambitious.”

Lucas whistled. “Cherry, if you’re quoting Eloise, we know this is serious.”

Nora cut to the chase. “Are you coming home? And I’m including you, Hugh and Dylan, in that question?”

“In case I haven’t said it,” Dylan began. “I love you.”

Nora burst into tears and wailed about pregnancy hormones.

Hugh’s mouth compressed to a thin line as he reached out and clasped Dylan’s claw and Cherry’s hand. “I’ve given the warning we came here to give, but I hadn’t expected an active resistance ready to move against the rogues. I—”

“Liam, tell them,” Nora said, and blew her nose.

“The CP Magpie reached Dominic,” Liam said, very much in his naval command voice. The CP Magpie was the frigate with a burrtalk system installed that they’d gifted to Nora’s half-brother, the Palantine king. “Dominic came onboard immediately. We had a long talk. We didn’t loop you in because you were preparing to infiltrate Castra.”

Nora recovered her voice. “Dominic came back to us, today, with a kingly thought.”

No one laughed at her exasperated, affectionate mockery. Her dread came through too clearly.

“I’d told him about the new planet, the one we’re willing to give away. It’s a politically explosive move, but it may be necessary. He agreed. But it got him thinking about how our sector of space has hosted three sapient species before us. The Vapori, the Iguanese, and the Silicaese. Dominic brought up the theory that regions of space capable of supporting life are rare, hence the re-population of the same planets.

“Then he added the twist that the thrios, and katangs before the federation killed them, live much longer than humans. If they don’t respect us, they can wait out, or even instigate, our self-destruction as a species.”

“It’s ruthless royal logic,” Zac said. “But not a new idea. We know that if the thrios don’t back our claim to sovereignty, human territory will be open to raiding and exploitation. Dylan told us that.”

Liam intervened. “Dominic’s concern is that we’ve misunderstood the nature of sovereignty. It isn’t actually granted by anyone. It’s not god-given or thrios-blessed or anything external. It’s a calculation redone every day, by everyone in the ecosystem, that the way a territory is being managed—the life it sustains—supports the regional, or universal, system better than disrupting it would.”

Dylan tangled two of his antennae and put his and Cherry’s frustration into words. Neither of them were royals or diplomats. “Yes, but what does all that mean for us?”

“Guest status,” Nora answered.

Hugh stuttered. “W-what?” Whatever he’d been braced for, it wasn’t that two word answer. He glanced questioningly at Cherry.

“Don’t look at me. I have no idea what she means.”

“While Hugh and Dylan were running, they were part of the original federation mistake of genocide against the katangs. A loose end to be tied up,” Liam said. “But when Hugh and Dylan stopped running away, and ran, instead, to Earth, their story in the federation changed. Their changed status was confirmed by General Hellebore meeting them.”

“He came onboard Cherry’s ship,” Hugh said slowly. “But in a truer sense, we entered his area of power. You’re saying that by meeting us, rather than killing us, we became his guests.”

“Exactly,” Nora said. “According to Dominic—who’d love to be here but can’t justify hanging out on a frigate rather than in his palace—guest right is the critical test of sovereignty. The law of hospitality is fundamentally about sustaining life. If a host cannot, or worse, refuses, to offer food and shelter to a guest, then the host’s claim to sovereignty is void because they have acted in denial of life. The test of guest right ramps up to the nth degree when the guest is a survivor of the host’s genocidal actions.”

Liam stated the warning plainly. “If you run, Hugh, you signal to any watching thrios that you don’t trust the federation to honor guest right.”

“And if we stay, and they kill us?” Dylan asked.

“Then the federation also kills any chance of claiming sovereignty, and it’s open season on humanity and our planets and resources,” Nora answered.

Cherry looked at Hugh and Dylan. “So, what do we do?”

Taking the burden off his wife, Liam answered, “Hugh, can you guarantee that the Renewal can and will protect Dylan? Is it a risk worth taking? Because if you can’t trust your leaders, you need to leave, now. Dominic guarantees that you and

Dylan will be safe among the Stranded. We can't protect the federation, but we can defeat the thrios in our own sector of space."

"But if I run, I'm conceding that the federation can't be trusted." Hugh bleakly deduced the cost of saving his and Dylan's lives—and Cherry's if she wouldn't leave without them.

She stared at him. *Please, run.*

He avoided her gaze. On the screen in front of them, Earth showed as a blue and green dot in the top right corner. Hugh's hand came to rest on Dylan's shell, and his son curled an antenna around his wrist. "I have to stay."

Want More?

[Shield](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0CH7JTZND), the third and final book in *The Delphic Dame* trilogy, will be out in January 2024. You can pre-order it at <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0CH7JTZND>

And yes, I'm a terrible, horrible author to make you wait till the New Year for answers to so many questions. How will they defeat the rogues? What will Nora's baby be called? Is Eloise in love with Axel when she's to marry Oaks? Is Dylan keeping secrets? (He absolutely is). Can Cherry and Hugh achieve a happy ever after?

Thanks for reading, and I hope the rest of 2023 treats you kindly before we jump into a fantastic 2024!

Jenny

October 2023

To stay up to date on new releases from me, please follow my author page on Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Jenny-Schwartz/e/B0042MAD86>

Catch up with me at my [Facebook page](#) or on my [website](#).