

Leona Bestolie - Home

JA Bard

Chapter 1

Settling In



Kromeg, *Leuwig* and *Herling*'s shuttle, approached the red cliffs at a slower speed, close to the ground, allowing its passengers a view of the land they would be calling their home.

Cora pointed to the side of the cliff where a lone tree clung to the edge of a rock lip. "That's it! It looks just like the picture."

Together, *M'boto* and *Cora* watched the small tree grow larger as they neared the mountain entrance to *Lonnie*'s home.

Lonnie felt elated at finally seeing her home in the mountain in person. *Leuwig* made sure she had *VIDs* twice a month showing her how progress was coming, all starting with an approach to the entrance, and into the cave entrance. She grinned remembering one of the approaches was a dare devil approach, to show her the new safety that was added for such approaches, that took control of the ship, holding it suspended until her security system had control of the ship.

“We’ve been cleared for landing,” Leuwig said over his shoulder. “It looks like your head of security is alert. She spotted me where most security scans are blind.”

“Head of security?” Cora said.

“Apni Crackle Jones from *Earl Gray*. The cruise company has new owners and she didn’t feel comfortable with their philosophy concerning the personnel on the lower decks, so she didn’t re-up.” Lonnie didn’t elaborate how she offered her a job to help setup the security to her new home, which led to them forming a business partnership in a private security business.

“What about the captain?” Cora asked. “Isn’t he a friend of yours too?”

“Captain Borelie, no, he’s not really a friend. You’re thinking of Commander Co, head of Ship Security. He’s a loyal company man. He’ll stick it out until he’s sure there isn’t any future for him or his partner, Jol.”

“If Commander Maltian Co and Chief Purser Jol Hrorian leave too, you can offer them a place here.” Leuwig smiled. “You won’t be crowded. We created two rooms that overlook their land with a balcony. We finished up two more dozen sleeping rooms, not all as lavish as the first dozen and there’s room for more without damaging the integrity of the mountain.”

“I have a hotel in my Mountain Castle,” Lonnie said amusingly. “Jol would be petrified of the height, I believe. If they stay here, there will be no looking out windows with dizzying heights.”

“What happened to him?” Dr. Cora Wi asked concerned.

“Bad incident on his first hang gliding experience. He walked off a cliff thinking the draft would do everything, like lift his wings, but down he went in a nose dive and it wasn’t even a spiraling one. By the time the auto pilot kicked in, he hit the wall a few times.” Lonnie didn’t add that someone had tampered with the hang gliders autopilot. There was already too much drama in their lives.

Everyone was quiet for a few moments thinking of how frightening it must have been.

“That didn’t happen on one of your side trips, did it?” Cora asked.

“No. He didn’t go with me or I would have had him try it the way Kali did her first time, strapped to a veteran pilot. How much of the interior is finished, besides my hotel suites?”

“Since your last set of changes or Crackles?” Herling asked.

Leuwig laughed with the girls at that.

“We’ve kept the boys busy since you said you’re ready to settle,” Herling said. “They had 75% of your place completed when we left to pick you up. I’m interested in how much they’ve completed before slacking off to help Crackle test out your entertainment centers.”

“Entertainment centers?” Cora asked. “Just how big is this place?”

“Roomy and not confining,” Lonnie said. She looked over at M’boto picking up on his change of vibration.

The shuttle flew into the entrance that opened into a large storage area. There was plenty of spare room for the shuttle *Kromeg* to fit next to *Bezel*, a small space craft Lonnie purchased for business off-planet.

Cora’s dogs in their transportation pens were quickly attended to. Cora was sure they wanted to feel solid ground again. M’boto, a Zophos, was the first off the ship. He was humming under his breath as he moved along the rock wall heading to the lone tree to connect with it. Lonnie suspected M’boto wanted to get the inside information of plant life on the planet.

Crackle was waiting for them near one of the exits from the landing bay.

“Crackle!” Lonnie laughed at her choice of dress.

Crackle braced to attention in her uniform and saluted Lonnie smartly.

“Welcome home, Boss. At last we can speak face-to-face.”

“What happened to you?” Lonnie asked.

“Well, I thought I would need something impressive when we start employing more security.”

“More security?” Lonnie asked looking concerned.

“I’ll brief you on your neighbors later.”

The last report Lonnie had received from Crackle was her blunt commentary on her neighbors. Normally speaking, since she had purchased a large expanse of the land

around the mountain as well as the mountain, it shouldn't be a worry, but Crackle's concern meant in this case it did.

"Where are our boys?" Leuwig asked.

"They wanted to get the sauna working before you got here. They told me by dinner they would have it working. They're really dedicated workers."

Leuwig laughed. "We love saunas. I told them they couldn't work on the sauna until they had at least 95% of the residence ready for habitation; otherwise, they would have done that first and spent all their time in it."

Herling, Leuwig and the girls went in search of their missing family members.

"Do you want a tour of your home?" Crackle asked. "I have this place memorized so I can find my way around even in the dark."

"Is that something anyone can learn?" Cora asked. Being in the center of a mountain and facing a maze of corridors even in light was a daunting thought.

"I don't see why not. I can tell where I am by smell and feel of the ground," Crackle said.

"How about my room?" Cora said. She looked over at Lonnie. "I hope you don't think me rude for wanting to see my place first."

"Not at all. Let's go," Lonnie said. Lonnie had designed her room of suites and though she was curious at what the design team may have added to enhance it, she was more curious at what they had designed for the guestrooms. Her excuse to Leuwig for so many guest rooms was that during the winter months of being shut in doors, she wanted to be able to wander. The real reason was with the continued construction work she could officially put off settling down.

Crackle led them into a hallway. Lights came on showing a well-designed passageway with the walls and ceiling decorated as if they were walking in space. The dogs pushed past Lonnie, Cora and Crackle, anxious to explore further up the corridor. The three laughed at the sight of dogs running through space. The first door Crackle opened so Cora and Lonnie could peer in.

"Impressive space, but why is it empty?" Cora asked.

Lonnie smiled at her response.

“It’s a secured room. Only the owner and security team, that’s Lonnie and me, can see what’s in here or cross the threshold.”

“A safe room. I want one,” Cora said, “just in case the Oberman’s find someone who specializes in home invasions. Hopefully, it’s in my budget in my own home.”

“We have connections and can get you a very good deal,” Crackle assured her. She closed the door and the group moved on, with only Crackle and Lonnie noticing the small spheres that followed them.

Past the security room the view suddenly changed to a path along the side of a cliff with a colorful valley below them.

“This is the imaging they use on ships to prevent people from feeling too closed in,” Lonnie explained.

“Nice for scaring your guests that are afraid of heights,” Cora said.

Crackle grinned. “Easily taken care of.”

The scene quickly changed to the beach, with waves lapping on the shore.

“Oh, do you have something to prevent a guest from thinking it’s safe to take a dip in that ocean?”

Crackle demonstrated the safety by walking into the image of the ocean. She was suspended above the image and slowly moved back to the path they were on.

“Well, that’s handy to know, just in case I have a guest that’s unsteady on their feet,” Cora said.

They continued their journey, up a winding stair that led to another level of living space. This hallway was like walking through nature with the ceiling showing a blue sky. They stepped on a walkway that began to move them forward.

“This ceiling can be dialed to time of day and has moods for weather. You can also choose from 200 different planets. This whole section can be changed,” Crackle explained.

“That would lose me even if I’m on a moving floor,” Cora said.

“Have no fear. Remember those directional bots they use on ships?” She pointed to one of the spheres following them. “Right there. The most recent version from Brid’s Spyshop. Each room or guest is assigned one to prevent anyone from getting lost. Your own guardian.”

“I had one at my farm in the form of a butler,” Cora said. “It did everything but manage my life.”

“We have butler or maid bots too. Your room has a view of the valley on the other side of this mountain. When Maltieani Co and Jol Hrorian have their dude ranch built, your room will have a view of it.”

“Just how far is my room?” Cora asked as they continued along the corridor for over five minutes.

“There’s an escalator and elevator whichever you prefer. I thought the auto-walkway would let you appreciate how nice and big this place is. We’re almost there. See the light blinking? It’s telling us we’re approaching where we can step off the walkway. And, here’s your room.”

The door was pushed opened and the dogs rushed past them, running about and sniffing everywhere.

“Wow! For me,” Cora said, holding onto Lonnie’s arm from surprise.

They entered a lavish sitting room with one wall lined with art, another with a virtual ocean scene that took up most of the wall, and by the buttons on the side could be activated into other virtual views from the menu. Furniture consisted of a desk, couch, and comfortable looking chairs around a small table. Statues were scattered about the room. As much as Cora loved art, she had not dared to have any in her home since the volatile Aliana Oberman would have destroyed it in one of her infamous temper tantrums and later out of spite.

A transparent door led out to a large balcony that could hold a dozen people Cora’s size. It had padded furniture and an open pit for a fire. The area was enclosed with a see-through wall, blocking out the effects of the wind that they could hear blowing up the cliff face. Peering over the balcony she could see a valley below with a lake. Stepping back in the room, they moved to the adjoining room where there were three dog beds set along one wall near her bed.

“I hear you like to rock climb. As you noticed on the approach here, we have plenty of that outside. Inside we have a climbing wall to keep up your practice. If you miss the dizzying heights, you can make the deck to your balcony transparent, so it would seem like you’re hanging on the tip of a ledge.”

“This is all beautiful!” Cora said. “It’s not so painful to leave the ranch with all this around me. I can’t wait until we start on my place. Already I’m making changes to the plans, though, I don’t want something this high up.”

Stepping in the bathing room Cora was taken back at the luxuriousness. In the bath if she wanted to just soak, she could dial her atmosphere, choosing planet and place as well as the weather. It was a style of bathing room that Cora had never imaged she would have as her own.

“Your bath attendant hasn’t been programmed yet. You’ll have to give me your particulars so we can make it your personal attendant. Once activated, you are the boss,” Crackle laughed. “They’re great at massaging out the sore muscles and tension. I have one of my own. It doesn’t have the complications of giving out mixed messages like the real people sometimes pick up when you’re just out for a good relaxing rub, you know what I mean?” Crackle grinned at Lonnie.

“This place is for royalty. Wow, Lonnie. What kind of guests are you planning on having?”

“I gave no suggestions for the guest quarters,” Lonnie said.

As they walked back through the sitting room, Cora spotted a panel in the wall. “What’s that?”

“A food kiosk in case you don’t want to eat in the dining area. There’s going to be days when you have a guest and you won’t want to join us downstairs.”

“For someone that doesn’t cook much, you would think to put one in,” Cora said with a smile. “As for entertaining anyone...that’s the last thing on my mind these days.”

“Do you want to see Lonnie’s room?” Crackle asked, giving Lonnie a teasing grin.

Cora looked at Lonnie. “Yes. You don’t mind, do you?”

“No. You’ll get a chance to see the shortcut to the other side of my mountain residence.”

They took the escalator that Crackle programmed, which was more like a car that jettisoned them to the other side of the mountain.

“Why did you put me way over there?” Cora asked.

“I thought you would like to see open land from your balcony. You can move to any room that’s available. For that matter, sleep in a different room each night,” Lonnie said. “Check and see what’s available. Mine is off limits and Crackle doesn’t even let me see her room.”

“It’s because she keeps adding things to my room. I asked her for a bare room, minimum furniture and such. That’s how it started out.”

Lonnie grinned but said nothing.

“It’s now filled with furniture and art work. It’s gorgeous and I hate leaving it to go to work. My concession is that all the rooms are nice, so I spend time in each one...except the bosses. In each room I test the facilities, the security and enjoy nice views both inside and outside of this mountain castle,” Crackle said. “It’s like being on vacation in hotels I never thought I would be able to afford a visit.”

Lonnie had a larger sitting room area, sectioned into a business area and entertainment section, with statues of athletes scattered about. Along one wall were pictures of dancers, male and female, some Cora recognized and some she didn’t. She found one that reminded her of a younger version of Maxine, Lonnie’s last dance partner.

Lonnie walked to the balcony and looked out, nodding at the view. Then they moved to a large sleeping area and into the adjoining bathing room. It was identical to Cora’s.

“Wow. This place would give a home wrecker spasms of joy to dismantle,” Cora said.

“I won’t say that won’t happen, but I will say, it would be a challenge to even approach this place with ill intent. This place has security built into it, unseen and the obvious. Those four girls of Leuwig and Herling’s were a big help setting up tests and finding what would work better. A bit too enthusiastic on some things. They were like little home wreckers, but we managed to survive,” Crackle said wryly.

“What happens if you have a power failure?” Cora asked. “How would I get around?”

“Shutting down power isn’t going to turn off the security or lights, and you’ll always have a bodyguard with you. The failure of the main power will be just a blink if you catch it, as it switches to a backup system.”

“Are you hungry?” Lonnie asked.

Cora looked at her embarrassed. “Actually, I’m tired. Would you mind if I called it the end of the day? I’ll use the kiosk if I’m hungry later. By the way, if the dogs need to go out, how do I let them out?”

“This way. Your small bot there will show you out and will help you back to your room, or just about anywhere you direct it,” Crackle said. While they went to take care of the dogs’ needs, Lonnie went in search of her designing family.

Chapter 2

The Best Laid Plans....



Six months later, Lonnie stood on the newly completed patio balcony, nearly at top of her mountain castle staring out at the landscape before her, wondering why she wasn't happy when she had friends around her and a beautiful home with a lot of things to do.

Shari had moved in a month after Lonnie settled in, not happy with the invasion of hang gliders that landed on their ocean cliff property at Besita all too often. Lonnie was surprised Shari had adjusted so quickly to having so many people around in the Mountain Castle. But of course, it was easy to not mingle with anyone since each room had its own kiosk for food if the resident wanted to be alone. If Shari missed the vibration from the pounding waves against the cliff at Besita, she didn't say, and she laughed often enough to give the impression, she was comfortable. Her laugh was pleasant to hear, echoing through the halls.

Bella, Ang, and Cookie had moved in just a few months ago. They were Dr. Cora's staff from her clinic at her ranch, Almhomena in Ambleton. They finally had been able to slide under the radar screen of government and private investigators, the news media and other nosey people that wanted to know where Dr. Cora Wi disappeared to and disappear themselves. Cora's marriage to Aliana Oberman ended finally according to the latest documentation from her lawyer, with all of Cora's assets intact.

Lonnie smiled, remembering everyone's excitement to test out various rooms before picking the one they liked. Not everyone wanted a balcony to the outside. Cookie and Ang, her daughter, as well as Shari picked inside rooms that had a view of the waterfall inside the mountain. It powered most of the energy the castle used.

They also readily made friends with other citizens of the new planet at the various malls that could be reached quickly with the public transportation shuttles. All of them became involved with the various agencies of government wanting to make sure their new home was not going to turn on them.

Shari signed up to teach a class on accounting, which would be broadcasted across the planet and recorded for future releases on a galaxy channel. She was testing herself to see if she was up to teaching what she enjoyed doing, working with numbers. Lonnie wondered if she would move to numerology which worked well in her accounting business.

Everyone was settling in well.

“Nice view, no?”

Lonnie didn’t need to turn to know it was Cora. “It is. How was your business trip?”

“So, so. You don’t sound enthusiastic. No one to play with? Or is it a particular person’s company you’re missing?”

Something in her tone had Lonnie turning to look at her. No new haircut or clothes. Yet, she looked happier than when she had left earlier in the morning.

“The weather’s building into another snow storm,” Cora said.

“I didn’t realize it could be so challenging for peace of mind seeing all this land out there and not being able to take a leisurely walk,” Lonnie said.

“You can take a walk, but it’ll be hard work. I’m used to snowy winters. When you took time off on your cruises you choose what type of weather to enjoy, by which side of the planet your ship docked at to visit.”

“Hiking in the mud or knee high in cold wet stuff was not always my idea of a relaxing weekend away from the ship.”

“The storm won’t hit until late tonight or early morning. Are you sure this mood of yours isn’t because Kali Maxine will be performing on a nearby planet?” She held out a bulletin.

Lonnie took it and stared at it for a while. Her eyes studied the dramatic pose, noting the tension in the eyes. It mentioned two male partners with small attached pictures of them dancing with Kali. It was the usual controlled advertisement: the diva was the draw and her partners should consider it an honor to dance with her and being mentioned in the same advertisement.

“Did you sign a contract or make any promises that a lawyer can say you broke if you went to her performance?” Cora asked.

Lonnie looked up startled. “No. Why would I do that?”

“Just asking.”

Lonnie’s gaze moved back to the snow-covered forest. The dark green tree tops poked out of their white blankets giving the land an interesting look to a person that spent most of her life in a space ship. “I thought by now I wouldn’t feel so... I don’t know what it is, actually.”

“What’s stopping you from visiting her at one of her performances? It’s been over a year since you two have seen each other,” Cora said.

“I don’t think it would be a good idea.”

“Why not? You would do it if it were a friend, right? What are you afraid of?” Cora poked her in the arm. “That bar you visit in Panden to play your guitar is only an hour away from where she’s appearing. I would take that as a sign that you should see her. With her performance schedule, I’m sure she’s looking for a few days break.”

“Ask her to come here?” Lonnie looked surprised.

Cora shrugged her shoulders. “If she wants a break from fans, this is the place. Or, if you don’t want her to know you’re there, the theatre is large enough for you to watch from somewhere she won’t see you.”

Lonnie’s face turned red.

Cora laughed. “You were thinking of the same thing. Well, if you’re looking for encouragement, you’ve got it from me. I’d love to go with you, but as our tipsters have reported, the Obermans are hunting for my whereabouts. They think I’m off planet but aren’t sure. It’s not like I’m going to show up at their trial. I got my just dues, and rid of their pestering petitions to the courts.”

“Which is why I can’t be recognized,” Lonnie told her. “They find me, and they’ll know you’re not far.”

Cora waved her hand in disdain. “When you dress up to go to the bar, I don’t even recognize you. Believe me, you and Bella are masters of disguise.”

Cora watched Lonnie’s face as she wavered between going and not. “Go. And take your friend Crackle with you. I think she’s on the verge of doing something rash to our neighbors to the east of us.”

“I’m on the verge of doing something rash to them if they don’t stop trespassing and hunting on my land,” Lonnie growled. “There will be no unauthorized hunting or trespassing.”

“There you go. You need some time away. M’boto and I will handle that problem.”

“What are you going to do?”

Instead of telling her she changed the subject. “I invited Herling and the girls to stay over for the storm. The lure of the Sauna broke down Herling’s resistance. Leuwig is off-planet with their sons on a consulting job and I didn’t want them looking for a place to stay when we have so much room. She also has the new plan for my house. Unlike you, I want my house to be seen and I don’t mind if it’s near a road.”

“Strange coming from a person that is justifiably paranoid about her safety,” Lonnie said.

“By the time my house is finished, the trial will be over and the Obermans will be banned from a lot of things, like traveling abroad. I’m optimistic. A normal prison cell will be their new home. The quadruplets are driving Leuwig and Herling crazy about going shopping at the satellite space mall off Ballantine — Beshire’s Floating Mall IV. They have a new store they want to check out.”

“I got an advertisement that they have a new electronic store there. Little Brid’s Spyware Shop,” Lonnie said thoughtfully.

Cora chuckled. “Your friend Ridly? His company is doing good business. You and Crackle have turned Bella into a miniature spy specialist, I want you to know. What happened to my triage nurse?”

“What’s happening with the hospital since they were bought out by that galaxy corporation?” Lonnie didn’t want to tell her that it was due to Bella’s concern for Cora’s welfare, that she had Crackle teaching her about security. Bella was impressed by how advanced security had become since Cora had her farm house built at Almhomena which was also constructed by Herling and Leuwig over twenty years ago.

“You know we petitioned the local government the day we were notified that an off-planet conglomerate bought our community hospital,” Cora said.

“Right.”

“And we all know it’s against the planet’s rules. Since none of us heard a word of warning from those bureaucrats, I flew to the local government’s satellite office and a group of us presented more than enough evidence that this company’s practices are against the Terrian-4S Declaration of Businesses and Private Practices. We’ll wait four days for the representatives in both the local and planet government offices to reply. If they don’t then we can call the Clerk of the Court to draw up recall petitions for our local representatives. We also requested that the staff that had been fired to be able to return to work so the hospital can reopen until our challenges have been settled, which demands a reply in two days. I can’t understand why this blatant takeover wasn’t stopped at the moment it was proposed in the council chambers.”

“It seems like there’s a lot of breaking down of agencies that are supposed to be acting as checks and balances. I think that’s something to bring to the local council, next time we meet.” She mentally reminded herself to speak with Shari to do some research. Shari was good at ferreting out information on things most people couldn’t find. With all that was going on, she was glad Sheri had moved in. Besides a good friend, she was a treasure of information to have close at hand.

“So, are you going shopping for new spy toys?” Cora persisted.

“Are you trying to get me to take the girls shopping? Do you and Herling have something private to talk about?”

“If you’re going,” she said.

Lonnie thought about what it was like to be ten years old. Positively rebellious. Even if they put trackers on the girls, those girls were smart enough to figure out how to deactivate them and disappear with their own agenda. She didn’t want to find herself worrying about where they were.

“If they go, they’ll have to follow my rules,” Lonnie said.

A buzz on the intercom, followed by the code for a ship’s arrival, then who it was let the two know their anticipated guests had arrived.

Cora was chuckling as she started for the elevator that would take them to the cavern entrance. “Like you know how to organize a herd of cats. Cats, cats. We used to have wildcats on the ranch. Those six limbed creatures were climbing over all the Ibysis trees and clawing them to bits. Do you think that saying refers to them?”

“It’s hard to say with so many sayings and species traveling around these days. I wouldn’t use any saying unless I knew for sure what it’s about. That’s all I need is to insinuate something I have no intention of fulfilling in an off-hand remark.”

Cora laughed heartily. Having experienced that at first hand when she had taken a few cruises with various species and cultures, she knew how easy for off-hand remarks to be misunderstood. She had great respect for space captains and crews whose second nature was to defuse misunderstandings.

Lonnie suspected she would end up inviting the girls anyway. In a lot of ways, they didn’t act as young as they looked. Species memory tended to mature some faster than others, she reminded herself.

When they arrived in the cavern, Crackle was talking to Herling. The four girls looked unhappy, slumped against a crate as the adults talked. The last time they had visited they had set every alarm off in the compound without warning Crackle. Since Crackle had been letting them help her in her various projects, they had taken an active interest in the Castle’s security. They found critical points that took the least resistance to confuse the security system where it was being breached.

At least the alarm had gone off, the girls had told Crackle. They could have disabled that too. Considering that Crackle had plenty of experience with difficult and very arrogant passengers on the space cruise ship *Earl Gray*, she recovered with her annoyance hidden, and asked the girls how they would design a fool-proof security system. That probably reinforced the girls’ belief that the security system was their project, while their brothers, and parents, had their own jobs to attend to.

“Hi, Herling. Hi, girls. Why the long faces?” Cora asked.

“Commander Crackle said we have to stay on the 2nd level,” Lin said.

“We can’t even go to see the dogs!” Liz said forlornly.

The dogs were sleeping in their beds after two hours of romping in the snow with Crackle as she inspected the outer security system. They weren’t young pups and all that activity necessitated a nap on their return to the castle.

Herling laughed. “Nice try at sympathy young ladies, but it won’t work with any of us. The lot of you cause too much trouble if you’re given free rein. No self-discipline. You’re at the age where normally our ancestors would have you in a tent secluded from

the tribe to contemplate marriage prospects. Consider yourselves lucky we aren't bound to those customs."

"It's a good thing we tested Dama Lonnie's security," Libby objected. "How else were they going to know anyone could short out her security?"

Lonnie and Crackle smiled.

"We're going to look at the new security store at that mall near Ballantine. If your mother okays it and Crackle says it's okay, you can come with us and help us find what we may be missing," Lonnie said.

The four squealed and jumped up and down in front of Herling then in front of Crackle. Crackle had an unreadable look in her eyes, but her mouth moved into a smile.

"Okay." Herling waved the girls to silence. "Rules to this visit are thus: whatever Dama Lonnie says goes. You know the difference between right and wrong and our family rules to visiting malls. Those are in affect too."

"Well, before we can figure out what we'll need, you'll have to check out the security," Crackle said. Lonnie gave her high marks for being so accommodating.

"Okay," Libby said businesslike. "Did you make any of the changes we suggested last time?"

"All of them," Crackle said. "I take your suggestions seriously."

"Good," Lin said.

"Okay, let's test," Liz said.

"Lea, go to the control room with Commander Crackle," directed Lin. "We'll test from around the castle – on all levels." She didn't look at any of the adults when she added that.

Lonnie, Herling and Cora left the five to the testing and went to the main sitting room. Cookie always ready with new treats came into the room with something for everyone. Herling was grinning when Cookie placed a large dish in front of her of her favorite treats.

"The girls are going to be very sorry they didn't come with us," Herling said as she picked up a treat and munched on it with a blissful look on her face.

Lonnie thought Cookie was the happiest living in the castle. Her herb gardens had been enhanced by M'boto, and the kitchen could be used for whatever size of group came

visiting. Her kitchen had a view screen that turned one wall into whatever Cookie wanted to see, from underwater scenes to a cooking class she subscribed to. It was amusing to watch Cookie work in her kitchen when the VTS showed an underwater scene with creatures swimming close enough to swallow her.

Cookie also had access to a galactic library of culinary recipes. To Lonnie's pleasure, all the room kiosks had access to Cookie's recipes.

The three were seated in comfortable seats facing the screen that covered one wall, giving the impression that they were looking out at the west canyon. Every ten minutes the scene would change with another view of the land around them.

"I appreciate the offer you made, Lonnie. They're too smart for most people and they don't have patience with people that don't take their advice seriously," Herling said. "I now know how my parents felt about my twin and me. We always thought way ahead of the adults around us and we didn't care if they knew it."

"Crackle hasn't had a challenge like the girls for a long time. They're nothing like the passengers she would have to contend with, so the challenge is a treat."

"I'll have to get Crackle and the girls to setup my house security. Not trusting the Obermans to stop looking for me, I'll have to make sure I have a safe place to return home to," Cora said.

"We have that already taken care of," Herling said, responding to the anxiety Lonnie also felt from her. "We look out for our customers. We added security specific for a clinic to your house. I'm sure you don't want anyone to get to your medications without your knowledge or inside your house from the clinic that you haven't knowledge of."

"I know I'm in good hands, Herling. I'm just nervous that one day I'll either be facing an assassin or we all will be blown up. You did a great job at my ranch." She rubbed her hand over her forehead to ease the headache that crept up on her. "I think it's the added stress from the closure of the hospital. I'm thinking I'll need to get a portable clinic for the folks around here until my clinic is up or they reopened the hospital."

"We heard the hospital was bought to shut it down so it wouldn't compete with a more expensive hospital in Aspen owned by the same company. You're not going to work at the new hospital?"

“This company didn’t ask any of us at the hospital if we want to work at the newer and bigger place. But we did hear that they’re charging a lot for medical care. I wonder who they think can afford it.”

Crackle and the girls returned looking pleased with themselves. “We’ve got the weaknesses marked. Who’s going shopping?” Crackle asked.

“Bella and Shari aren’t back so it’s you, I and the girls,” Lonnie said.

“Actually, I can’t leave,” Crackle said. “Bella is my backup. I can’t see Cora or Cookie taking over security while I’m gone.”

Cora chuckled. “Good thing. I would find a switch to turn the bodyguards bots on then hide under my bed.”

Lonnie frowned.

“I can fly if you can’t,” Lin said to her.

“I can fly,” Lonnie told her firmly. “Are you four ready?”

Four young voices shouted yes.

“How long is this storm forecasted to last?”

“A day or two.”

“We’ll try and be back in six hours at the most,” Lonnie said. “If the storm hits before then, we can stay at the Herald’s Bed and Breakfast in Beasfor. We’ll call on our way back and check in with you.”

Cora, Crackle and Herling agreed.

“Hey, don’t forget to dress up,” Crackle said.

Lonnie nodded and moved to her shuttle, *Bezel* that was sitting next to Herling’s shuttle, *Kromeg*.

“Can the dogs come?” Liz asked, running to be near Lonnie.

“No,” Lonnie said. She glanced down at Liz, “They aren’t space travelers.”

“What did she mean by dress up?” Lin asked.

“Wear a disguise so I don’t get recognized by some crazed fan.”

“Or by a spy...” Libby added seriously.

Lonnie looked at her and then the others. Of course, they would know. Kids make good spies. Lonnie shook her head at the memory of how deadly they could be.

“We know all about those creeps that were after you,” Libby said.

“And about the Obermans who are after Dr. Cora,” Lea said.

“Right. So, that’s why I disguise myself when I leave this planet,” Lonnie said.

“Really!” the four said. “Can we see how you do it?”

Once they were in space Lonnie set the autopilot to head for Ballantine’s. She unlocked the closet she stored her make-up equipment in. Inside was a computer and bot with make-up supplies stored under a shelf.

“The computer has over 2,000 common species and over 200 additional ones I’ve added. It can do hybrid species too. It will also tell me which species trait is dominant over another. There’s history and culture taboos, as well an updated population table on each of the species, which means it gives the chances of me meeting up with the same species, so I don’t meet up with someone I’m pretending to be. Usually I don’t do a species change. The make-up can be too cumbersome. The bot here is a make-up artist. It’s what actors use and people that don’t want to be recognized.”

They leaned forward for a closer view of the closet’s contents but didn’t touch anything.

“Can we dress up like your daughters? That would make sense,” Libby said convincingly.

“You don’t look anything like me,” Lonnie said, wondering how they would neutralize the obvious species differences.

“So, right,” Liz said. “That’s why we have to have something that makes us look related; otherwise, you might be pegged for a child kidnapper. Those mall security bots are sometimes so lame.”

“We’ll think about this,” Lea said.

The four went back to their seats and were quiet for fifteen minutes. Then they huddled and after a whispered conversation, they told Lonnie they had an idea.

“We think we can get away with you as a Libolt and we can be half Libolt and half Sisos.”

“I never heard of them,” Lonnie said.

“We built a house on Trimwold for a family that was Libolt and Sisos. We know how their children acted. The father was Libolt. You don’t want to be a Sisos. They snort a lot.”

The girls giggled.

“I want to see what one looks like before I agree. And, if we do go as such a family, this shuttle has to show it’s coming from Trimwold. Where is Trimwold?”

“A few hours from Ballantine,” Lea said. “We can’t be them because chances are someone will know the family. It’s too close.”

“There’s supposed to be a few new colonies on Terrian 4-S...” Liz said.

“But I don’t want anyone to think of our planet,” Lonnie said.

“If strangers keep showing up in places near Terrian and never from it, it’s going to be a dead giveaway,” Lea said.

It was something Lonnie knew logically was true, but the idea of anyone knowing of where she lived had her avoiding bringing it up. She did a search on her make-up computer then nearby locations. Terrian 4-S did have a scattering of each group on Terrian. They didn’t seem to mind intermingling with other species.

“Okay. Where exactly on Terrian? We need a story and why we live there and not elsewhere. While you’re thinking up that story, run the program on their characteristics and habits so I can listen to take my mind off of twitching at all the make-up that will be plastered on me.”

When it came to the girls turn, there was a lot of giggles and critical comparisons of facial makeup. While they took their turns, Lonnie made calls, taking advantage of the difficulty in tracing any calls made in space. Her first call was to one of the owners of Brid’s Spyware Shop. Since she was one of the early investors, thanks to her investment agent, Shari Sing, she was sure she could get some assistance in keeping herself off anyone’s radar. Little Brid’s Spyware Shop was a small off-shoot of the Brid’s she had visited on it’s opening day a little over a year ago.

Ridy, owner number 2 of 3, was pleased with her call and wanted her to give a report on the new shop. He also offered a corporate ship for her to test out the gadgets they had installed should she feel she wanted to update her own ship or if she felt she needed to duck out on another ship should an obsessive fan recognize her. Meanwhile, he would make arrangements on his side to assure she was not being followed. He was interested in seeing how loyal his connections at this mall were to him. Lonnie was thinking he suspected something was not as it seemed on the small space mall.

A buzz from her control panel let her know that they were approaching their destination. The ship gave their identifier and a docking space was assigned. A bumper came out and gently enclosed the ship drawing it in its berth. Here the ship would be given a checkup for space worthiness and restocked if it was necessary. The enclosure would prevent anyone from entering her ship while they were gone. This was a docking space for privileged people. Ridy obviously had called ahead.

Eagerly the four girls moved down the ramp, looking around. Lonnie knew they had been to the mall before so their curiosity of what was around them was not from the newness. There were some people interested in them because it was their job and there were some whom Lonnie wasn't sure what their job was, which made their interest in her party suspicious.

The girls sauntered to the map of the mall. They quickly located Little Brid's Spyware Shop. Two of them took Lonnie's hand, the other two followed behind as they headed to the shop.

"There's some people following us," Lea said to Lonnie.

"I noticed. We're picking up too many curious people. I didn't ask if this species has a known enemy."

"Oh, no. Not in this day and age," Liz said.

"You never really can tell," Lea said.

The other two hummed in agreement then giggled when they exchanged glances.

In Little Brid's Spyware Shop Lea stayed with Lonnie while the others went in separate directions.

"This goes so much faster if we split up. We always know where each other is," Lea explained. "That guy with the squinty eyes and black hat keeps talking to someone on his com link."

"He's being too obvious," Lonnie said. "He has a partner that we haven't seen."

"Oh, look. This is perfect," Lea pulled out a sonic whirl from the shelf.

"That would make someone unhappy," Lonnie said. "Who do you plan on using that against?"

“It’s a backup for your sitting room. It will identify aggression with species and mood and if needed, neutralize up to a dozen at one time.” Lea added it to the auto-cart that floated behind them.

“We’ll add one for each room then,” Lonnie said. “For that number we’ll have a delivery made.”

Little Brid made up for its smallness by having only the latest spy equipment in stock and showed demos on pros and cons. If you were looking for what was not stocked, you could order it from their catalog.

As the cart filled up, Lonnie’s anxiety increased and discomfort in her disguise was adding to her distraction. She was feeling like something was closing in on them.

“We need to leave now,” she said to Lea.

“This disguise is itching,” Lea said.

“Where are the others?”

“Nearby. They have people following them.”

“Can’t be the security here. They have auto-bots for that,” Lonnie said.

“So right. I spotted them easily enough, and I don’t mean the ones that they have for everyone to see,” Lea said disdainfully.

“We’ll meet at checkout counter 4,” Lonnie said.

Lonnie had picked it because it was the longest line, therefore the most watched by surveillance cameras.

While they waited their turn, the girls giggled like some young girls would. Lonnie casually looked around and counted too many people interested in them. It was odd because there was a variety of different species in the store. Something about them was attracting the kind of people she didn’t want to notice them.

“We think they’re going to make their move when we leave the store,” Liz told Lonnie.

“Who are they?” Lonnie asked. She almost slapped her forehead. Why would they know?

“Maybe slave traders,” Lea said.

“Maybe a gang that kidnaps for ransom,” Libby said. “They look the type.”

“With all that I’m buying, that would mark us as someone with credits,” Lonnie said. As a first investor and loyal customer she had discounts that most people didn’t have so she could buy more than the usual domestic customer.

At the checkout the robot that tabulated the cost asked if they would like security to escort them to their ship, explaining that large purchases were given the courtesy of free security services.

Lonnie accepted the service. Along with their cart that was covered from anyone looking to see what they had, they had an armed security bot accompanying them.

“Do you have any weapons on your ship?” Libby asked seriously.

“Of course,” Lea said.

“I didn’t see any,” Lin said.

“I bet she has it where most people can’t find it,” Liz said.

“You might be over heard. Keep an eye on what’s going on around us,” Lonnie told the girls.

“There’s four about two stores behind us. Maybe we should duck into one of those other stores,” Lea said.

“The cart won’t go in nor will the security bot. It’s someone else’s store. We’ll head to dock 6.”

“That’s not where our ship is docked,” Lea said.

“I’m having mine serviced and upgraded,” Lonnie said. “I’m borrowing Ridy’s corporate yacht.” Lonnie smiled at getting a chance to fly a ship with all the latest and greatest spy and protection gadgets a civilian ship could legally be caught with.

In slip 6 was a typical corporate type ship, *Belgium Queen*. It was the kind used to take important customers and directors around to the nearby planets. It meant that it had a luxurious interior for short excursions. Sleeping quarters would be limited with the main lounge setup for playing games, having meetings, and viewing programs. It was larger than what Lonnie was used to flying but she had been practicing regularly in simulators on different models and sizes of ships since she settled in her new home. Bad weather kept her occupied in doors. What she did learn was that ships flew without the assistance of a pilot, though it was a requirement of owners to pass a flight test, and pilots to know how to handle a ship should it lose power.

At the slips locked gate Lonnie keyed in the combination and let the girls pass onto the boarding ramp, before stepping in and closing it. It wasn't necessary for her to look around and see who was watching. It was the same two men. The cart stopped at the cargo hold and the auto-porter from the ship automatically began to unload it. Since she keyed in the information to access the ship, it wasn't necessary to delay loading the ship with her purchases. Automation on most space malls made purchasing effortless compared to planet side buying sprees. Terrian 4-S didn't have many shopping malls with auto-porters.

Lonnie sat in the pilot's seat, waiting for it to form to her shape and recognize her hand print. A list of what she was cleared for was quickly displayed. Owner's status. That was everything, including the ability to scuttle the ship if a pirate threatened to take it over. Some people found losing their belongings to thieves unacceptable. From one camera's view, she watched the auto-porter finish unloading the cart. Once done the cargo bay shut with the cart and its guard returning to the shop. Lights on her display showed the ship was preparing for departure.

The girls had found comfortable seats and were testing to see what they could access.

"When do we leave?" Lea asked sitting in the copilot seat.

"Two minutes. It looks like someone had remotely prepped it because normally it would take twenty minutes to go through the systems check list."

The four girls came to stand around Lonnie. They all hummed over a lot of the buttons that had no explanation as to what they were for. Lonnie brought up the control menu and they all read what did what.

"There's the rear cannon R5," Liz said.

"We have four of those on our ship," Libby told Lonnie.

"You fly in a freighter four times this size," Lonnie laughed. "Can you image how this yacht would look with four cannons?"

The girls looked thoughtful and Lonnie could swear they were finding places for four cannons.

"Da would be interested in some of these defense armaments," Liz said.

An automatic message was sent to the control tower that they were ready to leave. Lonnie keyed in the response to the tower's inquiry, though it wasn't necessary. Everything had pass codes and sleight of hand tricks for backup should someone not authorized try to pilot the ship. They all could feel the slight change in vibration as the ship began to slowly move out of its berth and then past the space malls markers.

The view they had of the outside showed the space mall growing distant. When it was acceptable the ship immediately went into hyper space.

"Where are we going?" Liz asked. She was frowning at her screen. "I didn't see you program a destination."

"Six minutes in hyperspace then we'll jump out and take a back route to Terrian 4-S. This ship is a lot faster than my civilian shuttle."

They all were impressed with the speed it was logging.

An alarm on the control panel showed they were being followed.

"Let's see what he's got here for evaporating trails," Lonnie said.

"That's this button. Can I push it?" Lea asked.

"You're the co-pilot. Engage," Lonnie said.

The alarm light disappeared. After six minutes their speed slowed and they dropped out of hyper-space.

"Where are we?" Lin asked.

"I have no idea." Lonnie stared at the star chart on her monitor and did an inquiry.

"This *is* a fast ship," Liz said impressed. "We're in another galaxy."

"We went through a travel gate and we didn't even know it," Libby said.

Everyone looked at Lonnie who was removing some of her face makeup to see better, then began studying the menu options in earnest.

"Who owns this ship?" Liz asked curiously. She pressed a button and a cabinet opened. They all looked expectantly at Lonnie.

Lonnie stood in front of the cabinet and they looked in.

"He must be big," Lea said.

"Halkin, business partner number 3 is," Lonnie said. She dumped her mask into the waste bin. She activated a smaller make-up bot. "Well, here's my decision, should I go back to me or try something else?"

“Go as yourself. This is a different galaxy,” Lin said.

“My very thought.” Lonnie keyed in her name and what appeared was a younger version of her. “Well, this is tempting.”

When she finished each of the girls stepped up. Like most children, they carried an ID which had a current picture of them.

“We can pick up a souvenir just to show we were here,” Lea said. She inquired what malls were in the area. More than a dozen space malls were one hour away from their present position.

“Let’s see what your mother thinks, first,” Lonnie said. She sent an encrypted message to her home.

“The messaging is a lot faster with the new message bouys,” Lea said. The others nodded.

Lonnie also sent a message to Ridy, letting him know she liked his yacht.

“Anyone hungry?” Liz asked.

“I am. Shall we sample the galley and see just how well CEOs treat their guests?” Lonnie asked.

“I’ll see if it’s okay,” Lin said. “You can’t trust everything that comes out of a ship’s kiosk.”

A ding had Lonnie looking at the console. She was surprised when Ridy sent a quick response back. “*Stay hidden. We are trying to identify who is following you.*”

“Now what?” Lonnie muttered.

“For a dancer, you sure made a lot of enemies,” Liz said.

“I’m hoping I have more friends than enemies,” Lonnie said.

“Your disguise was good,” Lea said. “I don’t think they know it’s you.”

Suddenly the ship changed course.

“Someone is using an auto-dialer,” Lea said. “We have that too.”

“So, we didn’t end up here by accident,” Lonnie said perturbed. *Ridy what else am I testing for you?* she thought.

“An emergency raft is sending a signal,” Liz said. “It’s being towed in to the cargo bay. According to the identifier, the ER belongs to this ship.”

“Girls, I want you to....”

But they were already heading to the cargo bay before she could finish.

“I’ll bet they know more about the dangers of pirates than me,” Lonnie muttered, trailing them.

They waited behind the security door while the ER settled and then the bay stabilized with breathable air. The cover to the ER opened just as the door to the bay opened for them to enter. The four girls had the ER surrounded as if it were harmless. Lonnie had activated the security bots but they did not arm themselves so this person had to be in the database of the ship. Lonnie was really curious.

The young person that scrambled out of the ER stopped with an open mouth in surprise at seeing the girls and then spotting Lonnie.

“Dama Leona Bestolie?” he said in amazement, which quickly turned to concern. “Oh no! How did you get here? Listen, we need to pick up RJ. He’s...” He didn’t finish but rushed to the bridge.

Lonnie gave a quite sigh. RJ was Ridy’s youngest son.

“What is RJ up to?” Lonnie asked the young man that was keying in a destination.

“You know him?” Lin asked surprised.

“Who are you?” Liz demanded.

“Maulinet. How are you? And who are you all? We’ll talk later.” Maulinet, as usual, moved from subject to subject without really saying anything. He set the ship to new coordinates and armed everything that could be armed. That alarmed Lonnie.

“So, what are you two doing in this part of the galaxy?” Lonnie asked suspiciously. From gossip at the family gatherings she was privileged to attend, RJ was always getting involved in someone else’s fight and Maulinet tagged along with RJ paying his way. It usually was the underdog’s side RJ took.

Mau glanced at Lonnie surprised then looked embarrassed. “Have you heard of Harriman EcoSystems Inc.?”

“They were recently bought out by one of their big competitors, Gab...only Gab work’s both sides, the polluting side and the cleanup side.”

“Right. We found out that in this part of the galaxy, they’ve sent an army of their private arm twisters to get a planet to only purchase from them. RJ and I have been able to locate each Gab associate and mark them. We’re going to run a program over the

airwaves of that planet, exposing them for what they really represent. Then paint balls will explode over each one of them, and their shuttles will leave the planet, with or without them.”

Lonnie shook her head at the repercussions that would cause. Gab was a nasty competitor, and though they had made more enemies than they could face these days, they still could deliver a bad bite to people that interfered with their business. “Do they know what the two of you are up to?”

“We’ve been followed but we sent *BQ* back to throw them off.”

No wonder we were being watched and that this ship didn’t need any prepping, Lonnie thought alarmed. *In addition to me docking in a slip normally used by Brid’s Corporation favorites we borrowed the corporate ship.*

“So where are we going?” Lea asked.

“Who are you?” Mau demanded.

“We’re guests of Dama Bistolie,” Lea said.

Lonnie nearly laughed aloud. The girls must be picking up something about Mau that did not warrant trust. So, the girls weren’t without their own radar for trouble.

Mau turned his attention back to his screen. “He should be here,” Mau said worriedly.

Lea leaned over the control panel and pushed a menu then selected an option – RHOO - Reveal Hidden Outside Objects.

A raft appeared just outside of their ship. “Gods I could have run over it!” Mau said.

“No way,” Lea said breezily. “This is one supper ship that can fly itself without running over anything before it.”

“Send out a bot to retrieve it, Mau,” Lonnie told him.

Mau did as he was told.

“Once it’s secured in the bay, get out of here with all possible speed,” Lonnie told him.

“But we have one more thing to do!”

“Is it going to ram the point down Gab’s proverbial corporate throat?” Lonnie asked.

“Yes, of course. It’s the only thing they understand.”

“You’ll make your point with the broadcast. Let the citizens of the planet make up their own minds,” Lonnie said.

“What if they don’t kick them out?”

“Then they’re not ready for a higher standard of living. Planets, just like societies and individuals, have to grow into a mindset. If you don’t let them grow and process each advance, then how do you expect them to be able to defend themselves from further encroachment of the negative type? They won’t recognize what’s wrong or right because they didn’t go through the process.”

“You sound like my auntie,” Mau said.

The ship automatically hit hyperspace when the cargo bay doors closed. Two of the girls went with Lonnie and Mau to the cargo bay.

No one got out of the ER. When they popped the lid, it was empty.

Mau cursed. Lonnie turned and ran up the corridor back to the bridge. “Stop this ship. We need to return!” Lonnie sat in one of the pilot seats and watched the ship slow to a stop. Turning the ship, Libby expertly had the ship returning back to the planet they just left.

“Scan the planet for RJ and scan space for a ship. I don’t want to run into big guns,” Lonnie said.

It was when they searched space, they found him in a ship that was station keeping above the planet.

“That’s their ship!” Mau said distressed. “We kept it on the other side of the planet and used PTs, pass-through devices, so they couldn’t spot us.”

Lonnie quickly sent a coded message to Ridy, “Family member in danger. Stand-by for rescue.” then did a quick scan of the ship for any weaknesses.

“What’s a pass-through device?” Lea asked.

“PTs? Hasn’t been so successful so it’s still in research but what it does to most scan’s is it repeats the signal directed at it out the other side, so it makes the object it’s protecting invisible to a scan, but if you’re up close, most species can see it by looking outside a window.”

“So, you used it so the other ship can’t see you?” Lea asked.

“We used them in the ERs while we waited for *Belgium Queen* to return. They aren’t dependable. That’s how they probably found RJ. Gods, we have to get him back.”

The four girls looked at him thoughtfully. Lonnie didn’t feel his concern was about RJ’s health. Her priority was bringing RJ to safety, then she would turn her attention to Mau.

“There’s only two people aboard their ship, *Desired Isle*. He’s being held here, alone.” Lonnie pointed at the ship’s schematic.

“According to the ship’s maintenance log, this is the only exit that hasn’t been used since it was purchased,” Lea said. Lonnie pretended not to be surprised at how she got into another ship’s system.

“It’s an emergency exit but in an impractical place, behind the spare ER,” Lonnie said. “Only I don’t see a spare one. They probably decided not to spend the extra credits, or it’s been used and never replaced.”

“What can we do?” Mau asked.

“You lot will wait here and keep a low profile, while I’m going over there to bring RJ back,” Lonnie said. How simple she made it sound, but she didn’t trust Mau.

Mau looked at her surprised. “Da said you were more than what met the eye...but are you sure you want to do that?”

Was he nervous for her? He never struck her as the type to care about anyone but himself.

“Want to...no. I wish I didn’t have to. But the longer he stays there the worst off for him. How long before your event takes off?”

Mau looked at the timer. “In twenty minutes, it starts.”

“If they have RJ they know about the broadcast and will have neutralized it,” Lonnie guessed aloud.

“Do they have beacons?” Lea asked.

“Yes. Above the planet.”

“I found 1,000 small beacons deactivated. You can recycle them and put a new code in,” Lea suggested.

“How do you know so much?” Mau asked defensively.

“They get around,” Lonnie said. “Do you have any extra PTs?”

Perturbed, Mau showed her a cabinet with a dozen of them. “The ones with the red mark are duds. I haven’t had a chance to go through all to find what’s broken.”

“Work on it while I’m away,” Lonnie said. Lonnie opened a cabinet and pulled out a spacesuit, tucking another in a pack she attached to her waist. At another cabinet, she keyed in code and when it opened they all could see a collection of gadgets that could be used to break in anywhere.

“Hey! How did you get the combo for that? I’ve been...” Mau suddenly shut up.

The girls glared at him. By their stance, they were steadily building up a justifiable dislike of Mau. Lonnie was sure he would not be getting into any mischief while she was busy elsewhere. That *was* a comfort. Her back was protected.

Lonnie didn’t hesitate with her choices of gadgets which were secured in side pockets. Boarding a ship was something she had trained at while working on the *Earl Gray* in case it was taken over by pirates. Each security team trained for that just in case they were not captured. Those training sessions helped her deal with the closeness of living on a space ship for months at a time and the closeness of too many people.

Stepping into the exit hatch, she listened for the recycle unit, then felt the slow fall into space. Once out in space Lonnie activated the PT then began her trip, controlling her jets on a steady course to the other ship.

Something exploded near her and the shock sent her flying off kilter and into unconscious.

Chapter 3

A Strange Wind Blows Her Way

Lonnie opened her eyes to a dramatic display of space. For a long moment she was suspended somewhere strange, then like an explosion, she expanded in all directions, like an energy wave, rolling and absorbing everything in her path, and changing as she went. Then just as suddenly, she was back as a lone figure in a vast expanse of space. Awareness of her weightlessness, a headache, and an upset stomach brought her to realization that she was floating in space. Turning her head from side to side slowly, she couldn't see any ship. A familiar planet was eye level, so she was somewhere in the vicinity of where the two ships had been. Careful not to cause too much movement that would put her in a spin, she turned her body so she could see behind her. There were no ships. Alarmed, Lonnie glanced at her bio-regulator. Either she had a leak in her air, or she had been out here a long time. Her jet pac had shut down. Pressing the restart didn't reactivate it.

"Not smart. Where would you go if it did start up. *BQ. BQ.*" she called. There was no return signal. Lonnie could feel the beginnings of panic.

"All right, all right. Steady. What would you do in a situation like this Cornol Caline?" Lonnie laughed. "You probably wouldn't have let yourself get in a situation like this, for starters."

"I've been in my share of bad situations, Lonnie. But not like this."

It was strange in one sense and not so in another, but there was Caline right before her in an identical spacesuit.

"So, you don't have any suggestions?" Lonnie asked.

"Oh, those I have and some you can use. Just wait for your friends to find you. Until then, breathe as little as possible. Hibernate."

"I would rather remain conscious. I don't want to die out here."

"You fear death? Everything moves from one form of life to another. Death is just a transitional gate to pass through."

“I’m not ready. I just got this great place I’m fixing up and Kali is going to appear near by...” Lonnie could feel tears trickle down her face. “I hate this. I can’t wipe my face.”

“When you get an itch, that’s the real crazy part,” Caline said. “I’m surprised you worry about dying when you’ve been at death’s door so many times.”

“No I haven’t.”

“Forgetting was convenient for you to move on, then, but you eventually need to deal with it.”

“You can say that because it’s part of your heritage.”

“Yes, I speak from species experience,” Caline said. “People that have so many near deaths are special people.”

“Right now, I don’t feel so special. My life as I know it is dependent on an obsessed young man that is not figuring in the consequences of his actions, and four brainy young girls.”

Caline laughed heartily, startling Lonnie.

“What’s so funny?”

“You don’t know much about your home designers and I will say there aren’t many who do and are willing to speak of it. Their species live for thousands of your years.”

“Caline, I’m familiar with species that live centuries to my one year — like yours.”

“I would image they have learned to not give unsolicited advice and when they do it’s done either in riddles, so the questioner doesn’t lose his or her chance of learning their own lesson, or they’re very blunt.”

“That makes me feel so much better about the girls looking for me.” Her tone sounded mocking, but it wasn’t how she was feeling. She was hoping the girls would find her soon.

“What is your earliest memory of being close to death?” Caline asked.

“Are we back to that?” Lonnie asked impatiently, then relented. “I remember as a kid I was pushed face down in a pool of water by one of the kids I was playing with. I

woke up in a hospital. And there was that terrorist attack when I first met you. And I woke up in a hospital. But that's it."

"You'll start remembering the events and where you went during that time between unconsciousness and waking. While you were an agent you've had your moments too. Those will also come back to you."

"Caline, you're scaring me."

"Forewarned is forearmed. Learn about memory retrieval. You've reached the tipping point and your system needs to come to terms so that you can truly move on," Caline said.

"Why? Why are you here, Caline?"

"You called me."

"Does this mean you'll lend a hand when I call for help?"

"Or just give you company until you figure out what to do yourself."

Suddenly Lonnie became conscious of a cool breeze of air in her helmet. Opening her eyes, she could see an ERB, Emergency Retrieval Bot, next to her. It latched onto her suit and began towing her.

"BQ?" she called.

"Dama Lonnie! Did you see that? Did you see the gun battle? We could have taken them out!"

His voice was high pitched and excited. He was running high on adrenaline. With all the weapons the *Belgium Queen* had Lonnie was hoping the girls were keeping him grounded or he so he wouldn't do something rash.

"Did you for a moment think about me or RJ and how vulnerable we are? Neither of us want to be casualties of your shoot out. Where is RJ?"

"In the ship still. He hasn't moved." His voice didn't sound like he heard her concern.

"Where is *Desired Isle*?"

"The bot is taking you to us. Who are these girls, anyway? They know this ship better than me and I've been flying this ship longer than they've been legal. They wouldn't let me finish *Desired Isle* off. I could have taken the main power out!"

“Obviously, they think more of RJ than you. How many people are on that ship now, and where is everyone?”

“They only have one guy on the ship. The other took a shuttle planet-side to pick up the others....”

Lonnie ceased to listen to him as a schematic of the ship appeared on her helmet’s visor. Clever girls, Lonnie thought. There were two red marks in different places on the ship.

The *Desired Isle* was a typical hand-me-down corporate ship — outdated. Gab agents these days were just employees not meriting top of the line equipment. They were expected to get their assignment completed quickly and if it got messy no evidence pointing to Gab was to be left behind. Gab was being legally squeezed out of business in their part of the galaxy, which explained why they were trying to get a foothold in another.

Now that she was close enough, she studied the hull, looking for the exit hatch. Lonnie knew how to bypass alarms. You simply tell the ship to open it. Exit hatches had their own emergency systems on most ships so if the power went out, the exit hatches would not be disabled.

The hatch opened to a small space. Lonnie could now see why it wasn’t used much. There was junk stored in it. Not wanting to be caught if the lone person chose to investigate, or better yet send a security bot, she untangled herself from the junk and dropped onto the deck, engaging her image distortion. The air was thin in the corridor with wisps of smoke near the ceiling. Leaving her helmet engaged she listened for any company. Nothing. On her visor a diagram appeared, showing her where she could find RJ.

His prison was a locked closet. Across her visor four 0s appeared.

Lonnie tapped in the four zeros and the door opened. RJ laid curled up on the deck in a corner as far from the door as he could possibly get. He didn’t move. Swinging the door completely open, she tested it to be sure it wouldn’t swing back and close on her.

Looking up and down the corridor, Lonnie didn’t see anyone. She whispered RJ’s name. He didn’t move. His breathing was shallow. Lonnie removed the suit from the

pack on her hip and began to unfold it. Cautiously, she examined RJ. He had been beaten soundly. By the looks of his digits, they were broken.

The door behind her suddenly slammed shut with a lock clicking in place.

Undaunted, Lonnie began dressing the dead weight into the suit. Softly, RJ groaned but didn't waken. Lights in the room went out and she suspected the air would also be turned off. Finished, she dragged RJ to the door. She keyed in the code.

"Amazing. The code hasn't changed. What does this mean?" she wondered aloud.

Another route appeared on her visor. A word appeared at the bottom. Emergency Life Pods. The girls were good at this Lonnie thought, not believing Mau to be the type to offer assistance.

Following the route, Lonnie had to stop and rest a few times. RJ was heavy dead-weight.

At the first ELP Lonnie stopped and lifted RJ in it. She was going to find another for herself but decided the room for another was a sign for her to join him. The moment the lid was closed and locked and the life support immediately turned on. Lonnie hit the launch button and out of the ship they were dropped. Lonnie was hoping the bot was still around and would lead them back to *BQ*.

Lonnie retracted her helmet and RJs. From the emergency medical pack she pulled out a medical reader and let the MR tell her what RJ needed. Thankfully, the MR was maintained. A whoosh of medication was administered to RJ.

"Dama Lonnie?" he whispered surprised.

"Yes. We'll be back on *BQ* soon."

"Da's going to be so angry," he mumbled. "Is he with you?"

"No. RJ, everyone has a calling. Instead of doing this on your own, why not do it right? There's a company, Rapid Motion. Tell them I sent you." *I hope I don't regret this, but it's better than he go out on these causes with an unwise companion.*

The pod shook but continued on. Lonnie worried about another gun battle ensuing. It seemed hours passed before she could feel them settle roughly on a deck. Not knowing which deck she was settling on, she prepared herself for the worst.

Libby peered under the lid as it lifted slowly.

“Libby,” Lonnie said gratefully, “We need a med bot right away. RJ’s been severely injured.”

Lin was standing next to her and had a medical wand.

“For now, we’re going to leave him in the pod,” Lonnie said.

Libby nodded and watched as Lin administered to him.

“Where are the others?” Lonnie asked Libby.

“Maulinet is NOT nice,” Libby said.

“He’s not the person I would want to protect my back,” Lonnie agreed.

“He can’t keep his hands off the weapons,” Libby said. “He wants to blow everything up.”

“Is there a brig on this ship?” Lonnie asked.

Libby looked at her with a disbelieving expression. “This is a corporate yacht, Dama Lonnie. Who are they going to lock up?”

“I didn’t think so.”

Lonnie walked swiftly to the lounge, wondering what she was going to do with RJs young friend whom she suspected sacrificed RJ to save his own life.

Lea was with Mau in the lounge. He looked like he was ready to burst out of his clothes.

“You’re back!” He jumped up and would have joined Lonnie except Lea was blocking his way without appearing to. Unless he forcefully pushed past her, he wasn’t going anywhere.

“Sit down Mau. For the rest of the ride, you’re to sit there and not say a word. Nothing. Complete silence.”

“What did he say to you? I have to talk to him. Explain to him. Is he alright?”

“Of course he’s not alright.” Lonnie said. She glanced at Lea who crossed her arms and watched Mau closely. He wasn’t going anywhere.

Lonnie went to the bridge where Liz was sitting at the console watching a screen. She looked at Lonnie when she sat next to her to see what was showing.

“That stupid boy told us what he had done. It wasn’t the original plan but even that one was incredibly stupid. They don’t know anything about the people on Rijamo no

more than the people from that company that wants to sell them something they have no use for. Da and Ma will be laughing at this.”

“How long before we get back to...”

“Treboton. Da and Ridy Senior would like us to fly there. The people following us were not after us but that stupid boy. He’s a gambler. We won’t be able to go back to your castle for a few days. The storm is in full force now.”

“OK. There’s a few nice hotels there. Are we being followed now?”

“No.”

“We’re hungry.”

“Get something to eat in the galley. Mau is not to leave his seat in the lounge. I don’t want him anywhere near RJ.”

Liz nodded and left the bridge.

Caline, I hope Ridy Senior doesn’t want to kill me when he finds out I referred his son to a special ops group.

I’m sure he’s already noticed that his son likes to live dangerously. At least he’ll get the proper training and be surrounded by the right friends, Caline replied.

I hope his wounds heal up.

Even if he has a limp. If he has a mind to join, there’s a place for him, Caline assured her.

Lonnie stared at the screen as memories of how she met Caline came back to her. The slow-motion images of people and a building exploding had her holding her breath. In a reflection on one of the kiosk dispensers until the concussion knocked her unconscious, she had a good view of the explosion. When Lonnie picked herself up and walked around the blast wall, in the rubble she could see the spirits of people rising and looking around bewildered. They would have remained standing in shock if someone had not guided them into a mist. Hastily she wiped her eyes. It was a waste of lives. Why did it take violence to shake people out of their chosen blindness to others’ dilemma that they could have offered assistance to, to avoid the violence? It wasn’t as if these key people were bogged down in their own misery. They were pampered and cushioned by their comforts. There had to be another way to awaken people besides violence.

While she had time, she did a search on Maulinet and his family. Since his father was no longer a partner in the spy shop's business she heard little of the family.

Chapter 4

Surprises Come in Neat Packages

As they approached Treboton Lonnie went to see how Mau was. Sullen and silent, he was huddled in his seat. He had ranted at Lonnie when she refused to drop him off on a floating city — Cacur to be specific, so she had put a restraint on him, chained to his seat he was. Cacur was a place to disappear if you had credits. Mau had no credits and he had some questions to answer from Ridy Senior about how his son got hurt.

The girls were watching him.

“Maulinet, in five minutes we dock. Ridy will want to see you after he’s seen to his son’s comfort.”

“I don’t have to talk to him. Anything happens to me, you’re responsible and my father will sue you for every credit you have!” His eyes move to Lin and suddenly his bluster turned to fear.

Lonnie left to check up on RJ. Lonnie nodded to Libby who was sitting next to his container, engrossed in her reading.

Peering at RJ’s face in the pod Lonnie noted how changed he was from just a few years ago when she attended a corporate party favored investors were invited to. Mau wasn’t there.

RJ no longer had his boyish looks. He had grown up.

“He has more color in his face,” Libby said. “The bones are healing nicely but he’s going to need a full day more before he’s moved out of the pod.”

Lonnie nodded. “Hopefully, his father will take the suggestion to let him remain in the life pod for another day, undisturbed.”

“You don’t think he will?”

“I don’t know. He’s gotten a lot tougher on his kids and less forgiving about some things. Stealing the corporate ship to perform terrorists’ acts on another company, no matter how vile their reputation, has consequences.”

“RJ didn’t commit to anything violent,” Libby said. “His intentions were to embarrass.”

Lonnie looked over at Libby. “Do you read minds?”

“I looked up his profile. His mother had him declared proficient for living on his own before his adulthood.”

“So, he’s either a smart kid or his parents wanted nothing to do with him. I personally will go with the smart kid. I’ve seen him off and on for five years and the only time I’ve heard him raise his voice was to defend another even when his own family wouldn’t support him.”

The lights in the ship dimmed and came back up, letting them know they were docking. The moment the hatch was opened Ridy and Leuwig were on board. The boys, Monte and Jem were right behind them. Libby greeted her father and brothers with hugs.

Ridy said nothing as he looked down at his son’s face that still had evidence of bruising then went into the lounge to speak with Mau.

The boys followed him, hopefully to restrain him from doing something rash to Mau.

“Good tidings to you, Leuwig.”

“Are the girls keeping you out of trouble?” Leuwig teased.

“They saved our lives. I thank them and you for teaching them the skills it took to get us out of that situation,” Lonnie said.

Leuwig smiled at Libby. “Our girls are smart for their age. The boys and I were doing business with Ridy when you called. When he made some calls, he found the corporate ship had left its berth with passengers days before and returned without passengers.”

“RJ and Mau.”

Leuwig nodded. “It seems to be typical for the children of these big power brokers to borrow things from their parents and their businesses without asking. Underserved entitlement, I would call it.”

“So, what’s your assessment of this ship?” Lonnie looked over at Libby. “I’m having some upgrades on my ship now. Maybe I should add something more,” she added with a grin.

“The girls will have a lot of suggestions for improvement,” Leuwig said smiling.

“They will?” Ridy chose that moment to appear. “And what would that be?”

“This is a nice ship,” Lonnie said, “But it seems passwords are too easily accessed.”

“Too easy,” Libby said.

“It wasn’t my access code and bio-readings that were used for boarding the ship AND arming the auto-defense. We’re lucky they didn’t get past the higher codes.”

“Is someone going to press charges?” Lonnie asked.

“I’m thinking it’s time those two boys learn about real consequences.”

“RJ’s injuries are a result of a consequence. RJ’s not violent, Ridy,” Lonnie said.

“But he chose a friend who is,” he said.

“I think he’s has his eyes opened about Mau. He probably thought he could help him.”

“Maulinet,” Ridy said distastefully. “He’ll be arrested if he’s lucky and spend time in prison working off his debts. Or he’ll be unlucky and his debtors from the underbelly will collect with his life forfeited.”

“RJ needs to stay undisturbed in the pod another day,” Lonnie said.

“Yes. I can see that. Lonnie, I can’t thank you enough for going out there and rescuing my son.”

“It wasn’t just me. I couldn’t have done it without the four girls watching my back. If it was just Maulinet, I would have had to knock him out and hope your remote worked.”

“It was broken,” Libby said.

“See, you girls are my heroes,” Lonnie said.

Libby giggled. “You’re more fun to go with to the mall than...”

“Don’t even think such a thing,” Leuwig said sternly. “That’s all we need is for you girls going out looking for the wrong type of excitement.”

“You get what you look for,” Lonnie said solemnly, thinking that *she* wasn’t looking for any and it still came her way.

“Here’s the ambulance,” Liz said.

“And the police,” Libby said. “Does this mean we can go sightsee?”

“Do you ever sleep?” Lonnie asked.

The girls shook their heads no.

“Lonnie, I would like to speak with you before you leave. I’ve made reservations for us all at the Elephant Inn. I hear a storm is over your place so returning isn’t possible at this time,” Ridy said.

“Okay.”

Ridy left with his son to the hospital and the police hauled Mau off.

“Well I’m ready for sleep. I’m tired from all this excitement. Will you be here when I wake up?” Lonnie asked Leuwig.

“No,” Leuwig said. “We’ll be heading back to Terrian-4S. We have plenty of work there to keep us busy. If the weather is bad on one site, we have other sites to work on where the weather is fine. We can drop you off at your room.”

At the receptionist’s desk there was a note for her. A handwritten note.

Lonnie would have used the stairs to work off some of the nervous energy she was feeling but her room was on the 80th floor. Her room was a mini suite with a real person as a maid. When she stepped into the room dinner was waiting and from the scented air, so was a bath.

Lonnie nodded at the maid and went into the bathing room, expecting to see her surprise visitor.

“I’m over here,” Kali said.

Lonnie turned to the faux balcony that looked like it was overlooking a park with a lake and mini forest.

Lonnie didn’t pause as she went to her and wrapped her arms around her tightly. For a long moment they hugged hard. When they loosened their hold, they remained close, relishing the closeness.

“I see you missed me as much as I missed you,” Kali finally said.

“You’ve taken a bath?”

“No. I was waiting for you.”

Lonnie found she had plenty of energy as she and Kali went into the bathing room, discarding clothing as they went.

“What time do you have to leave?” Lonnie whispered, hours later as they sleepily cradled each other.

“I have another 48 hours. How about you?” Kali asked.

“As much time as you like,” she said sleepily and fell asleep.

The next morning over breakfast they exchanged news. Kali had Lonnie laughing at her description of her dance partners. The time they had together was spent in their room. When their time together ended, Kali left first, dressing as one of the maids.

When she left Lonnie began to make preparations for her departure. First, she needed to locate Ridy then schedule a visit at the hospital to see RJ.

Ridy wanted to see her in the corporate yacht. He had something to show her. When he learned she wanted to visit RJ they arranged to meet at the hospital first.

RJ looked exhausted but the bruises were gone, and he was sitting up. He announced to both Ridy and Lonnie that he was going to get a full-time job working for a legitimate firm. If Ridy suspected there was more to the promise, he didn't mention it on their trip to the docks. Their conversation was on spy equipment and of his laboratory coming out with a new robotic bodyguard that could operate in all climates as well as space.

“Come on board. We'll talk there.”

When they got comfortable in the passenger area, Lonnie noticed a lot had changed.

“What you did for my kid, is impossible to repay, but there is something that I can do for you and that's making sure you have solid security around you.”

Lonnie felt embarrassed.

Ridy went on, noting her red face. “The construction is completed on the space station Terrian 4-S Glosten and Kruge will be using. I thank you for recommending our company for setting up the security.”

“You're the only security company I can trust not cutting corners. Besides, you're the only one with the new security bots that can recognize a pickpocket.”

Ridy laughed. “We're proud of that invention. Our company has three slips there, one for *Belgium Queen*.”

When his silence lasted longer than what he was known for not saying what was on his mind, Lonnie asked. “Is that what you wanted to tell me?”

“We have transferred ownership of *Belgium Queen* to you, with the slip. Though it's an older model, we rebuilt her from inside out so she has more than what a yacht of

her size and age would have. With a partner's codes being compromised, we thought it better to rekey to a new owner. That way there are no backdoors or worries about something infesting the security. We all agreed to transfer it to you."

Lonnie was speechless for a few moments. "Are you sure you want to do that? Ridy, this is an expensive yacht."

He waved his hand. "It's nothing. Or, maybe I should rephrase that. We're in the security business and we know what happens when one key person's code has been compromised. I checked with Commander Crackle. She thinks it's a great idea. She said your ship is four years old. You know for you, that's not good." He smiled watching her torn between politely refusing and accepting it. "You're also one of our best investors and customer and you refer a lot of business our way, like recommending our company for the security of the space port." He frowned and scratched his double chin with thumb and forefinger. "Leuwig is an interesting person. And his daughters...well ...they're quite a family," Ridy said.

"Did you order a house built by them?" Lonnie asked.

"Actually, I invited his family over to test my home security. You had mentioned that his girls had compromised Crackle's security set up at your place, and Crackle is good at security work. I would have hired her if you didn't hire her. When you make a living in the security business, you want to be up-to-date yourself. I'm afraid mine is over done in security gadgets and it's driving my wife crazy."

"Well, you better put aside your ego then. When you ask, they'll tell you the truth."

"I'm more interested in knowing the weaknesses than protecting my ego."

"Then you're in safe hands. I can use a second ship for my expanding household. I didn't realize settling in a remote area would necessitate so much modern electronics to protect my privacy and life."

He handed her a key fob. "The security was dumped and updated. The ship has been transferred to PCom Consulting Industries. Your business manager suggested going that route than in your professional name. Commander Crackle gave me what she wanted coded and she should be on her way over here in a few hours. She said something about not much can keep her away from claiming this package. I'll have your other ship

delivered to you once the upgrades are finished. Your purchases are in the cupboard behind the pilot's seat. Nice choices.”

He stood and nodded to her then left her in her new yacht.

Lonnie remained sitting, looking over the passenger seating with the eyes of a new owner. The interior had been cleaned and polished with new doors installed on the cabinets that passengers could access and store their small packages in. It still had the luxuries a CEO would have available for VIP passengers. Lonnie grinned at how Cora could travel safely in this ship, if she wanted to. She could also leave the ship with the security bots to protect her.

Getting up she went to review the control board. When Crackle arrives they would be doing some serious traveling to see just how fast QB could go and avoid being targeted by pirates. There weren't many left in this part of the galaxy as less and less planets were harboring them. The Interplanetary Council, IC was getting stricter with outlaws and people that advocated violence. Planets wanting to continue interplanetary travel were becoming more forceful in enforcing their own laws against violence.

Which brought her back to the Obermans. One of the things she wanted to look into was the latest news on IC, to see if they would take up Cora's case against the Obermans. If they did and ruled against the Obermans they would as a family suffer the consequences and be moved to a planet that didn't partake in space travel, thus cutting them off from anyone outside of that closed planet.

A buzz on her console let her know someone was asking to come aboard. Crackle and Cookie were waiting on dock.

Chapter 5

A Shake Down Cruise

Lonnie released the lock and the two came up the ramp immediately.

“This is a super gift!” Crackle said as she grabbed Lonnie and gave her a hug. “You know, I can now stop hinting to you to get a yacht. With this ship, we all can travel without feeling we’re sitting in each other’s lap.”

“So true,” Lonnie agreed returning the hug. “Cookie? What are you doing so far from home?”

Crackle stepped further in to let Cookie greet Lonnie.

“A cooking seminar.” She gestured at Crackle. “Her relief came just after you left and when I said I wished I could go to see the Great Chef in person, whoosh. She had us both packed and out of there! I think it’s called cabin fever. Ang didn’t even have time to make up her mind if she wanted to come along.”

“I need real practice at being a bodyguard. I’m getting rusty at doing the mundane stuff and you know it’s important to keep my skills honed. And it was a good thing we were off-planet. I received a call from our friend Ridy, asking me where the hell am I when you’re in trouble.”

“Did he forget to mention that I was in *his* ship and it was on auto pilot? I didn’t interrupt your seminar, did I, Cookie?”

“No. Great Chef isn’t as good as he used to be. So, are you going to give us a tour of this corporate luxury liner you’ve taken on? Have you figured how you’re going to fit it in your private fortress?”

“*Belgium Queen* already has a slip at the new space station. We can use *Belgium Queen*’s shuttle, *Little Emperor* to go back and forth. You know, I couldn’t find a way to refuse Ridy and it would be insulting to do so. I wouldn’t be invited to any more family picnics and he gives good parties.” She looked at Crackle. “Wait until you see what this ship has for power and defense weapons. And Cookie, can you program its refreshment queue? It needs help.”

“Well, then,” Cookie said. “After we have a tour, I’ll give it a review.”

They started in the passenger section which is where most of the obvious luxuries were. Cookie was impressed with the virtual reality bubbles each passenger could travel in, effectively isolating the viewer from fellow passengers.

“Come-on, Cookie, turn it off so we can finish the tour,” Crackle said.

“Hang on. I want to pause on this lesson. I never heard of these cookies. So, what else do you have on this ship?”

“Let’s check out the storage bay, where besides life pods and a rescue vessel- otherwise known as a shuttle, the *Little Emperor*, they have an exercise gym with a bot that can tailor a workout for you and monitor you, a sauna, pool and hot tub. Did you know it doesn’t need a pilot?”

“No kidding, Lonnie. How many private yachts do you know that do need one?”

“What I mean is that you can program this ship to do all the piloting *and* maintenance.”

“I’d rather have some sort of oversight on it especially its maintenance. Nothing is that perfect,” Crackle said.

They sat at the controls and Lonnie showed Crackle what she discovered on armaments and safeties against anything that would constitute a surprise.

“I’ll be in the galley,” Cookie said, noticing that the two were too engrossed in what the console’s menu was displaying.

After reviewing menus and gizmos the two felt ready to take a cruise to test it out.

Crackle rubbed her palms together then made a sign over her console followed by taps on the screen for its various menus and submenus, humming her favorite marching song from her military days. The yacht alerted the automated docking master that *Belgium Queen* was ready for departure. *BQ* was assigned a departure slot.

Cookie appeared. “I can feel the beast rumbling. Are we taking off?”

“We sure are. Let’s take a hop to Darian’s Star System. Luthma in Borik’s spread is pretty to see from space. Unless you have another place to visit,” Lonnie said.

“I’m just the passenger,” Cookie said. “A tourist, to be exact.”

“I may have a place,” Crackle said. “I’ll send my father a message and see if he or the family would like a visit from daughter number eight, and a spin in our new yacht.

The family home is just an hour hop from Darian's Star System. Do you have any other special place in mind?" Crackle asked.

"No," Lonnie said.

While they waited for the three yachts before them to launch, and a few incoming to dock, Cookie searched the beverage menu. "What kind of ship was this? They don't have anything worth drinking."

"That's on another menu, Cookie. You pulled up the ship's liquids not beverages." Lonnie said.

"Oh, this one. This is an improvement. The wine list is commendable. Are either of you hungry? I can fix something around this wine list."

"That sounds good. I am hungry, though nothing heavy. That reminds me. I have the gizmos I purchased at the spy shop." Lonnie led Crackle and Cookie to the meeting room where from a cupboard she removed each of her new gadgets and laid them on the meeting table. She pointed out the small security spheres the girls had thought were good additions. "I've ordered special delivery one for each room to backup what we already have."

"Nothing I can use," Cookie said and left the two to inspect their new spy toys.

Crackle and Lonnie programmed a few while waiting for their turn in the launch queue. When their turn came, the ship moved smoothly out of the slip and away from the planet's outer circle without a pilot's intervention. When they were in the safe jump zone, away they went, as programmed.

Chapter 6

It's Not As It Seems

They arrived at Darian's Star System when the three women's biological time clock said it was bed time. As much as they wanted to stay up, only Crackle stayed up longer than Cookie and Lonnie, and just long enough to recheck the security envelope around them. They had a one-hour warning should anything approach the yacht.

The next day, they spent hours admiring Luthma in Borik's mass of stars in Darian's Star System. Images were captured and forwarded to friends. Cookie expressed her delight by baking small cakes with swirls the colors of the planet and the star system. The other half of the day they visited Ri, a planet where half the population lived in cities underground. Cookie stocked up on souvenirs, not knowing when she would get another chance at being a tourist in a strange star system.

The next morning, Lonnie was sitting on the bridge admiring the expanse of space on the screen. She turned at the sound of someone behind her. Crackle entered, walking slower than she normally moved.

"You have two messages," Lonnie said.

Crackle's hair was wet from her morning work-out in the pool. Lonnie grinned when she groaned sitting down.

"Had a rough night?"

"Laugh now. The next time it'll be you."

Before they retired the previous night, they had a workout on the mat. Crackle wasn't up to her usual form and a few surprise tosses had Crackle landing harder than she was used to landing. That's not to say Lonnie didn't spend some time upended on the mat, but she was used to it.

"Father is traveling and has an auto reply to his mail. I wondered why I didn't get a reply sooner."

"Maybe because you were being a tourist or sleeping?" Lonnie said.

Crackle made a face at her. She went on to read the second message also from her father.

“He wants to know if I’ll pay a favor back for him and visit a family friend to check out his security system around the family property.” She accessed the planetary charts and located the planet of his friend.

“The Planet of Fantasy, Cosmo,” Lonnie read out loud. “That’s a place to not visit alone. Good thing you have us along.”

“Hm,” Crackle agreed. “Hom Unsler lives on the owner’s island and wants the house checked for security weaknesses. Obviously, he wasn’t expecting father to do the inspection. That isn’t father’s forte.”

“Are you the only one that does security in the family?”

“No. One brother and one sister. It looks like they’re busy and it’s fallen to me to honor the family obligations.”

Lonnie knew with Crackle’s family, paybacks were important so she cleared it with Cookie, and sent a message to her Mountain Castle that they would be making a stop at the Planet of Fantasy for business. Cora was going to have fun with them on their return home.

On their way there, Crackle and Lonnie spent their waking time familiarizing themselves with the ship, and their new security equipment Lonnie purchased. When Lonnie tired of Crackle’s memory and skill drills, she researched the planet Cosmo. Crackle became absorbed on trying to understand a gizmo Lonnie didn’t remember adding to her purchases. It may have been something Ridly added without telling Lonnie, they both thought.

Cookie spent her waking time between the bubble where she was running a Cooking With Famous Chefs Around the Star Systems program, and testing out some of the recipes in the galley.

“Are you sure this place is safe?” Lonnie asked, looking up from the planet’s advertisement. “It’s promoted as a wild kingdom with pleasure palaces for any delight. That’s an invitation for troubled people to flock here.”

“Ain’t that the truth. But we’re not going where the tourist’s go. Hom Unsler is a caretaker on an island that the owner, B’rup Nunne and his family stay at. None of the tourist visit there. Hom has been asking father if he can get one of us to visit and test out

the security on the island. He thinks it's not all that the seller of the security system claims it to be."

"We should have brought the girls," Lonnie said.

"Leuwig and Herling wouldn't let them on *this* planet. They would have too much fun dismantling not just security but messing with the dream suites and fantasy rooms it runs."

"I hope you told him we're coming," Lonnie said.

Crackle grinned. Cookie chose that time to come in with small snacks, more results of her testing the menus her favorite chef program demonstrated. Both women selected a tasty treat and hummed their approval.

"No. We're going to test his security," Crackle said after taking a few more bites of the pastry. "The best test is surprise. If someone tipped off security, we wouldn't get good test results. I'll test some of these gizmos you purchased, and this one that you don't know where it came from."

"Whoa!" Cookie said. "I'm not an action seeking adventurer beyond cooking. Dropping in on family friends... unannounced, is like serving a vegetarian dish to a ChuLa, a true species with raptor tastes," she said.

"You're so right, as the girls would say. No way will I risk your life, Cookie. You can rest here and watch your programs. We won't be here long. I learned a lot from the girls that you won't see most security companies paying attention to."

"You're not dragging me into this," Lonnie told her. "I had my adventure already."

Crackle's smile grew wider. "No problem. I need this to test my skills to see if I've lost my edge. You two can sit up here and watch. If I get hoisted where I can't escape, you can rescue me, or better yet, we'll see how well BQ's security works. However, I believe I'll be in and out without them even knowing it, and with a list of what needs improvement in six hours." Crackle took another pastry and smiled at Cookie, then returned her attention to Lonnie's screen.

"I'll set up everything to monitor me, and you two in case you get tempted and visit some of the pleasure sites." She smiled. "I'm going to cover all bases. See this? This is set to my bios. If I disappear, which I doubt will happen with Ridy's software, the

bodyguard bot will look for me. This is a great opportunity to see how this new stuff works.”

A ding and a message scrolled across the screen.

“We have arrived. Let’s set this on an orbit of the planet and look over its security and traffic,” Crackle said.

When Crackle was satisfied the planet’s security wasn’t going to interfere with her unannounced visit she parked the ship outside of the planet’s secured zone.

“I’m going to be very hungry when I get back, Cookie. I’d love to try out that one dish with the little do-dads you serve before the main meal.”

“That’s a spicy affair,” Cookie said. “Your stomach would never forgive me after a fast to dump on your system. Don’t you worry. I’ll have a good welcome back meal.”

“Lonnie, let me off right here.”

Lonnie glanced at her friend. “What do you mean, let you off? If I set this ship down on the planet it will be tracked.”

“The pod, silly. It’s too small to be monitored and you can recall it.” Crackle tapped in a code then coordinates. “There, all you have to do is push this button when this light turns green.”

“Are you going to disable the beacon? What happens if you want to bring someone back?”

“It has the option to turn off the emergency beacon. When I’m ready to come back I’ll turn on the beacon for *Belguim Queen’s* retrieval only, and presto, BQ will haul me back. If I need more space, I’ll send for the shuttle. Everything will be fine,” she said.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Lonnie asked, feeling one person going on a reconnaissance without proper backup was asking for trouble. She forgot about this side of Crackle. An action person like her was probably finding it difficult to run security and not face anything more dangerous than neighbors that crossed over her land to hunt wildlife that Lonnie was protecting.

“Lonnie, I did this before I went to work for a cruise liner. I’m ready for a challenge. You both will be nice and safe up here and Hom will get a thrill that his request is finally being answered.”

Cookie had disappeared and returned with a plate of cookies. “Very nourishing. Take some with you in your pack.”

“Cookie, how much influence do you have over Crackle?” Lonnie asked.

“Just her stomach. Let her have her fun. There’s not much you can do to stop her anyway.”

“See?” Crackle smiled. She pulled out one of the packs, checked it for supplies, adding Cookie’s contribution, then tightening it up and slinging it over her shoulder.

“Take four of those bodyguard bots with you,” Lonnie said.

“Four? How generous. Thanks. That gives me great odds to be back in time for supper.”

Lonnie waited until the light on her console showed the pod was ready for flight. She jettisoned it toward the planet. This was not a good idea she kept thinking.

While the pod was monitored by the ship, Lonnie researched the planet to see what the public had to say about the place. The newsies she read were the gossip ones that liked to report shady goings on. From her own experience, that was where the truth was found, among the trashy stuff.

It was an hour later that the pod beamed it had landed. The recording device on Crackle was activated. They were getting panoramic views around her. The small bodyguard bots, BGBs were spread out scanning everything.

“Now that is a beautiful plant. Cora would love that in her yard,” Cookie said.

“It’s a security plant,” Lonnie said. “It’s not real.”

“Really?” Cookie enlarged the view for a closer look, but Crackle had moved on so her view went blurry. “For sure she’ll want one of those.”

According to the ship’s security board that was monitoring Crackle, the plant she walked by noticed her passing and sent a small insect to follow her. If it registered a danger to her the BGBs would have disabled it.

Lonnie looked for a place to park their ship closer to the planet without being challenged.

“Oh, M’boto would love that valley,” Cookie said.

“*Those* plants are killers. I wonder if they’re native to this planet or someone planted them there for a reason.”

“What difference does that make?” Cookie asked.

“Because when someone takes that much trouble to stop someone from entering an area, when the planet is designed for visitors, I get suspicious.”

“Oh.”

“Crackle, do you read me?”

“Loud and clear. I haven’t seen anyone yet. How are the cameras doing?”

“Panoramic views. We noticed some interesting plants you’ve passed.”

“Yeah. Bubania is used for planting security monitors in and at the base a mobile dart gun and the Trizona eats meat. It didn’t register me passing. Nothing of interest along this path. No recent passing by anything alive.”

“The Bubania did notice you. It moved after you passed, and a small fly is following you.”

“Oh, yeah. I see it.” Crackle considered killing it but if she did, it would send a message back to the plant and a swarm of mechanical flies would engulf her, smothering her to death. *“Distract insect,”* she told the BGB. In seconds it flew off, toward the Trizona plants.

“Love these BGBs. Smaller than the usual civilian stuff they sell,” Crackle said.

“I’ve read more information on this planet. From what the newsies say, some people that have visited this place have disappeared. There’s a lot of rumors about the people that have disappeared. Either they had some shady dealings about ready to be exposed or they were running from shady dealings. Of course, no one’s proved it but the rumor is, if you want to get rid of someone this is the place to take them.”

“Lonnie, every vacation place has people disappearing either because the person arranged it or someone else did. If this place was getting a lot of reports, the place would have been investigated,” Crackle said. *“Though, forewarned is forearmed. Rumors have a kernel of truth to them.”*

“Exactly. Be careful,” she said though she knew that was redundant. Crackle was careful by nature. With that said, Lonnie started an in-depth scan of the area inside the valley. Once the scan was started, she returned her attention to Crackle. She was making good progress and so far, she passed two potential traps without incident on her part.

They couldn't see Crackle's expressions or body language, but they could hear her breath as she took a surprised inhale, then collapsed.

"What are you going to do?" Cookie asked Lonnie.

"One of the BGBs will administer an antidote."

It seemed a long time before Crackle stirred. Weaving to her feet she stumbled as she turned around to see what her surroundings were.

"That dart...I should have seen it," Crackle whispered. *"What the blazes is that?"*

Cookie gulped. Something dropped from a tree branch close to the path and moved toward Crackle.

"A python. I just upped the security on her BGBs. They *were* set to intervene only under life threatening situations. If that python gets within striking distance of Crackle it will get a shock."

It took only one shock and the snake slithered back up a tree.

Crackle's head turned at a sound from behind her. *"Someone's coming. It sounds like a cart."*

"Take the left side of the path," Lonnie said.

The BGBs showed it to be clear of traps. Crackle moved off the path, mindful of what could be hidden in the grass, besides snakes. A BGB went before her, clearing her way of anything that may be harmful with sound waves.

The rumbling became louder and two men, dressed in bright colored clown suits, appeared. One pulled a cart while the other followed. They were arguing in a foreign language.

Lonnie started the translator to find what language they were using.

When they passed Crackle, they all got a view of what was in the cart...a body. When they were further up the path Crackle let out a sigh of relief. *"They're Bonzops. They're bottom feeders."*

"I've never met one," Lonnie said.

"I have. A few came by Cora's Clinic and asked a lot of personal questions. She asked them to leave and called her security bot to escort them out," Cookie said.

"I'm going to see what they're up to," Crackle said. One of the BGBs moved high above Crackle to get an aerial view of the area. A laser shot was fired at the BGB which it evaded and fired back.

"I hear shouting coming from where the Bonzops were headed," Crackle said.

"Are you sure you're recovered enough from the drug?" Cookie asked.

"I feel better already," Crackle said.

"How well do you know Hom?" Lonnie asked.

"I haven't seen him for over 300 stan years. He can't have changed that much."

Lonnie looked surprised.

"She's exaggerating," Cookie said. "Crackle isn't over 150 stan years."

"Whatever the age, people do change especially if they've lived long," Lonnie said.

"I see some buildings and a house," Crackle said.

"We have a topographical of the island. The scans are also showing what's below the surface. Apparently, there are tunnels that go from the house to the mainland and to different parts of the island," Lonnie said.

"If you can scan them that is a breach of their security." Suddenly the visuals from Crackle's helmet changed to the back of a broken-down cart with trash piled around it.

Lonnie and Cookie watched as the BGBs watched from various vantage points.

Four Bonzops were standing outside of the house shouting at whoever was standing in the doorway to the home. It was a large purple Helicom arms waving wildly. The angry voices were sounds that boomed and shook physical structures around them.

"There's a tunnel below that cart," Lonnie informed Crackle. "It has branches to the barn, house, to the shore and a tunnel to an underground chamber. It's big. I can't see clearly what's in them."

"I want in the house," Crackle whispered. She pushed past stacked boxes and discarded clothing and found a wooden cover under the cart. Peering out through the junk she looked for anyone that may be looking her way. Convinced no one was, she slid her hands under the lid and pulled it up just enough to peer in. Actually, one of the bots

peered in and sent back readings. When the BGB moved forward it dropped into the hole as if powered off.

“I’m not getting any reading from #2,” Lonnie reported.

“*It conked out,*” Crackle reported.

“Get moving to wherever you are going,” Lonnie said. “They’re headed to where you are.”

Crackle tucked two bots into her pocket leaving the other two to monitor the area. Opening up the lid high enough for her to slide under, she got a quick glimpse of stairs that led to a darker interior.

When the cover closed her connection to the ship broke.

“Damn! This is supposed to be able to operate even under ground,” Lonnie said.

Cookie shook her head, not looking concerned. “She wanted some excitement and didn’t get any on our trip. Lonnie, you worry too much. She’s good at what she does. Always reading up on the latest and tests this and tests that. We’re just going to have to trust she knows her business.”

Lonnie thought Cookie’s experiences with failed cooking efforts were not comparable to Crackle’s risking her life out of boredom, and then remembered her own pursuits when she was stuck for months onboard a cruise liner with nothing challenging to do.

“Well, I know what that is,” Cookie said. “Trouble.”

A light was blinking on QB’s console.

“We’re being hailed by the police authority and they have armed themselves. They want us to allow them on board for an inspection.”

“What do we do?” Cookie asked.

“I’m not too sure these people are legitimate. There’s nothing in the advertising that says they have space police and this is open space.”

“Pirates then?”

“In all likely. This place is somewhere people with a lot of credits would visit.”

“Does this ship have anything to prevent us from being shot to pieces?” Cookie asked worried.

“It does, but whatever I use, that information will be passed on to all the wrong people in a quick transmission.” Lonnie was looking for something that would block the other ship’s transmissions, however, that what they did have was something a civilian ship usually didn’t have.

“Jammer?” Cookie asked.

“That’s it. But unless we plan on killing them all to prevent them from telling others we have such a tool, it’s not what I would choose.”

“Well, just what do you plan on doing?”

“Run.” Lonnie ran a scan on the suspected pirate ship to see if it would give her an in-depth scan of who was on board.

Another demand to board *Belgium Queen* came across their communication channel. They could see a dozen small pods jettisoned out of its bay.

“What are those?” Cookie asked alarmed.

“People. Pretty stupid, considering all we have to do is leave this orbit.”

Lonnie engaged the engines and they left the ship and it’s pods behind quickly.

“Let’s see if there are any other ships around here. They would have to be working with others, if it’s a pirate group.”

“I hope Crackle doesn’t need us,” Cookie mentioned.

Lonnie glanced at Cookie who had previously voiced that Crackle could handle herself alone fine. “She has the four bodyguard bots and a message buoy that if she should need us, it will beacon us. The two bots she left behind will use BQs scans to find her when she surfaces,” Lonnie reassured her.

“I know it sounds a bit unbalanced of me to sound worried for her after all I’ve said, but we’re not going to be watching over her now.” Cookie sighed. “That woman has grown on me and I’m very fond of her as another daughter. I know that if you weren’t here, she would have gone down there alone, without all those gadgets. She’s one of those people that has this urge to risk her life periodically or she doesn’t feel right. I keep reassuring myself that she is very good at this type of thing, sneaking in and out of places, so I shouldn’t worry so much, but I do.” She chattered as if to reassure herself.

“We both will worry about her and I know she likes testing herself. Chances are the captain of the *Wanderer* is going to wonder what we were doing there. He or she will

scan the surface. Since Crackle is underground, it will only register the people above ground. The good thing is that there's a lot of surface to scan."

"What if they have as good equipment as you and can see the tunnels? And how is she going to get a signal to us if we're so far?"

"If they did, they wouldn't have dispatched personnel to latch onto us. They would have sent them all to the island instead. The island has a relay to the mainland probably to all the bubbles of fantasy where all the visitors are heading. Her signal will use that to get to us."

Lonnie watched the results of the scan of the ship, *Wanderer*, scroll across her screen. "They don't have any shuttles. Their bays are empty." The bio readings were broken down to species. Lonnie sent an inquiry to see if *BQs* defensive gases would neutralize the various species should they board *BQ*. Then she set *BQs* security to detect any intruder that wasn't the three of them, and friend or foe, would be treated as an intruder and neutralize them.

"It's busy out here," Cookie said.

Lonnie looked at the screen showing their surroundings. There were plenty of ships parked in orbit around the planet. Shuttles were taking off toward the planet's surface. If the planet got any busier, the owner should think about arranging for a space port, Lonnie thought.

Lonnie parked *Belgium Queen* in the middle of other ships. All the ships looked like they were on autopilot for station keeping. The two watched as shuttles were sent from the planet to yachts that didn't have their own shuttles or didn't want to use them.

"We'll sit here until we get a message from Crackle."

"The planet can't be as bad as you think," Cookie said. "It says here all celebrations are accommodated, weddings, divorces, birthdays and anything else."

Lonnie glanced at the screen where Cookie was reading from. "I'm sure there are people that have harmless fantasies that visit here. It's the attraction it will have for people that have darker fantasies that are harmful to living creatures that I fear for. I wonder what they have to protect the innocent from being victimized."

"Well, if those were pirates, it attracts them. But they'll be wherever they can earn a living."

While they watched ships arrive, Lonnie logged into the arrival board to see just who was disembarking. Apparently, it was open to anyone to view.

“That’s some impressive list,” Cookie said.

“It sure is. The comforting thought is they will have their own bodyguards. There are a dozen weddings going on. Damn!” Lonnie exclaimed.

The advertisement that she brought up was on a wedding for E’lis and Conquel, both celebrities that had a fortune that would last them a life time. The guest list had Kali Maxine’s name on it.

“Looks like you were expected,” Cookie said.

“What?”

“Your name is on this wedding guest list.”

Lonnie went further down the list. “How come I never saw the invitation?”

“Probably because you need a full-time secretary to keep up with your correspondence. You can’t expect Sheri to do it. She has enough work to do with her own businesses.”

Lonnie glanced back at the guest list. She knew many of the people by name but not personally. She had met E’lis on a river raft campout. She didn’t think they had bonded that close, though they shared a few nights in the same tent. That was before E’lis made a name for herself and when Lonnie was still being mentored as a Ghost, for a private investigative organization.

“Hey, there’s a message coming in.” Cookie’s voice brought her back from her memories.

“It’s asking me if I plan on…” Lonnie frowned. It was from E’lis asking her if she was going to join them or stay aboard her ship.

“How did she know you were here?” Cookie asked.

“I don’t know. The ship is registered to my business not me personally and the ship was just signed over to me.” However, it wasn’t that difficult for a determined person to find out who was behind PCom Consulting, she reminded herself. It did concern her why a person from over twenty years ago who she met only once, put her on a wedding list.

“How well do you know her?”

“We met on a three-day group camping trip. I went along as a favor for a friend that was leading it. His partner got sick.”

Cookie glanced at her smiling. “I heard you were a wild one when you were younger.”

“I wasn’t that wild. I went out a lot but didn’t do half the things attributed to me.”

“Well, you better answer.”

“Do you want to come as my guest?” Lonnie asked.

“No... well, yes. I’ve never been to a party with celebrities. How upscale do we dress?”

“I’ll check my mail.” Lonnie scanned her mail and found the number in her queue was too many, which was why she didn’t spend much time reading through them.

“Two events to attend, the wedding then dinner. We can wear something that is adaptable to the events.”

“I haven’t dressed for something nice in a long time. This is going to be like a luxurious vacation. If I wasn’t worrying about Crackle, I would be looking forward to all this frilly stuff.”

“For you and me.”

“You’ll have to show me how the techno stuff works.” Cookie left with Lonnie in tow to show her how to program the kiosk for party wear.

To both their clothing, Lonnie added the usual hidden pockets for things that could be used for survival. Lonnie was realizing more and more how right Coline and Kudhitea Muto was about her needing to keep up on her spy skills.

“How long is this going to last?” Cookie asked. “Maybe we need more than one change of clothing.”

Lonnie looked at the design Cookie settled on. “It’s fine. This is a one-day event.”

“You and Crackle are a pair. Always prepared for trouble.”

The two walked to the shuttle and settled in for a trip to the planet. Lonnie hated to leave *QB* in space when the suspicious ship was lurking about. The fact that her new ship had a lot of protection hardware didn’t relieve her worry that *QB* was safe from someone boarding her.

Their shuttle gracefully settled on a moving pad that transported them into an underground chamber and where a dozen shuttles were parked. A hissing sound could be heard as a containment shield was settled around them. The ship's sensors read the air outside the ship was safe for them to walk without any breathing aids. As they stepped out, there was another transportation belt that moved out of the underground chamber. They were joined by a mixture of people for different occasions. Ground carts awaited them. They chose a cart with the name of the castle their wedding was scheduled at.

Cookie's eyes were looking over everyone that was flocking to the carts. There were dignitaries and elegant people dressed for a celebration. Lonnie noticed everyone. She was curious about the type of people coming to this planet regardless of its reputation accorded it by rumor magazines.

"Hey, did you see that woman? She almost looks like you," Cookie said.

Lonnie turned to see who she was referring to. "She does. Bastilles Castle," she directed to the cart.

Their cart followed a dozen other people up a green slope. On both sides of the path were plants and elaborate statues. Looking up through the dome's ceiling, Lonnie marveled at the night sky with all the stars.

"Hello. Hello." A voice piped next to their cart.

"Well, hello there. Isn't this a lovely ride?" Cookie asked the tiny creature.

"Yes, it is. And which side are you here for?"

Cookie looked blank.

"I know them both, E'lis and Conquel," it continued. "It really is inspirational of them to have it here. We all are curious at just what this place is like. The newsies have so much to say this way and that, not really giving one an idea of what it's really like."

"I never heard of this place," Cookie said.

"It's been the talk for months," it said. Tiny eyes, a dozen of them popped out of its head and arms and studied Cookie in minute detail.

Chatawans, Lonnie thought. She heard of the species but hadn't seen one until now.

"Just who are you here for?" it asked warily.

"Her," Cookie said, nodding toward Lonnie.

The dozen eyes moved to Lonnie and then melted back into the small body unseen. Lonnie wasn't interested in conversation. Since Chatawans traveled in open space, their interests were only in attending events they considered important. What merits importance to them wasn't understandable to anyone that was willing to admit to it. They didn't trade, buy or sell anything that could be factually verified. Rumors abounded about Chatawans because of their unknown interests. What one could say about them is they were conversationalists but if you were asked what you talked about; the details evaded you.

“Leona Bestolie, the dancer. This should be very entertaining party, along with the clowns and other circus performers.”

Then the path narrowed and the Chatawans cart sped forward.

“I didn't even get a name,” Cookie said in disgust. “Was it categorizing you with the circus?”

“It's name is on the bag in the back. Mora Chuchu. Traveler Extraordinaire. That puts it in the category of circus performers' agent.”

Cookie looked at her surprised. “How did you get all that bit of information so quickly?”

“I keep up with the Major Stars Galaxy News. It lists entertainment agents and rates them. Traveler Extraordinaire is rated as dubious. I didn't know the name or species, but after today, I'm sure there will be a lot of people that will love to call in with their scoop. However, it may be a company and not an individual.”

Their cart stopped in front of an arched bridge that was decorated in colorful lamps, showing just enough light for people to see where they were stepping. Others before them were walking over it and up another well lighted short flight of stairs with heavily loaded baggage bots following close behind.

“We could have brought more clothes,” Cookie said. “I would have liked to try out a lot more styles.”

“I'm sure each sleeping room has a fashion kiosk. However, we're not staying overnight, Cookie. I want to find out why I was invited. I hate coincidences,” she said.

As they walked over the bridge, Lonnie noticed their footsteps made no noise. As they got closer to the castle Lonnie was getting a feeling that she should run the other

way. She glanced at Cookie to see if she was feeling the same. Cookie was looking everywhere humming her appreciation at the decorations and settings. When they stepped on the stairs to go into the castle, the trepidation went away.

The entrance way into the castle was visually enormous with a grand staircase that had people stopped at various points in mid conversations or pointing to something they could see below them in the foyer. Bots were everywhere offering beverages, food, and information. Some guests had colored tags and some didn't.

Lonnie accepted a beverage and asked the bot if Kali Maxine had arrived yet and where the host E'lis was.

"Where are you going?" Lonnie asked when Cookie started off toward a long table with edibles on it.

"That table of food looks just like Chef M set out on her teaching VID."

Lonnie didn't want to be separated from Cookie so she followed her. Chef M was dressed in her uniform, standing off to the side speaking with whoever wanted her autograph. Cookie made a bee-line to her as others were gathering around the table and eating too much to be healthy.

While Cookie spoke to Chef M, Lonnie looked around to see who was attending. A bot stopped near Lonnie and after scanning her, gave her a tag to wear. Blue and it had E and C's Wedding Guest. Lonnie watched as it stopped next to Cookie. A tag with a blue and white stripe was given to Cookie. Curious, Lonnie started over to see what the stripe was about. A hand on her arm stopped her.

"Leona Bestrolie?" a familiar voice asked.

Turning, Lonnie was surprised to see an old friend, Elimie. She had an official badge on her, identifying her as castle security. While one head smiled at her the other was keeping an eye on the crowd.

"Elimie! How nice to see you! Is Dirmar here?" Some of her worry left at seeing an old friend.

"Yes. He's bartending on the second level. We didn't think we would be seeing you again. I see you're here for the C&E party."

"You left Carobs Corner?"

Elimie waved a hand. “New owners. You know how that goes. We wanted to travel, and this gig came up. It’s supposed to be for one year. It’s been interesting. We’ve been here for two months now and it’s not been like some of the newsies say. But then again, we’re assigned to the castle for the celebrations.”

“What do workers do in their spare time?”

Elimie looked puzzled and then smiled and shrugged her shoulders. “This-that-and-the-other. We’re looking forward to our next posting already. We have an agent that is supposed to book us in interesting places for short times. Dirmar and I decided we don’t want to work in boring places and not in too exciting places that I have to worry about my life or Dirmar’s.”

“Cookie, this is Elimie, a friend,” Lonnie introduced when Cookie joined them. “Elimie, this is my friend and exceptional chef, Cookie.”

“Nice to meet you, Elimie.”

“You have a personal chef, Leona?” she teased.

They all laughed.

“I see you work here, Elimie. Can you tell me if they have cooking conventions coming soon? I didn’t get a chance to ask Chef M.”

“They have a list of conventions in the foyer, in the elevators, in the restrooms and on the back doors of every room, AND all the bots have a list. I just keep track of what goes on in this facility. Too many conventions and shows go on at one time for me to memorize.” She snapped her fingers and one of the bots appeared next to her. “Get me a reader with the list of conventions at the other castles that are going on now.” The bot held out a hand reader.

“I see you have a guest of a guest badge,” she said to Cookie. “There are some places you won’t have access to. The badge will let you know what you can’t enter. Like the actual wedding ceremony because of the limit on seating is to the actual guest list and you won’t be able to attend the dinner afterward because that too is based on the actual guest list.”

Lonnie and Cookie looked at each other.

“Unless you’re willing to pay for her attending the main event and dinner afterward, she’ll have to wait down here, or she can visit the other castles. When we have

celebrity weddings, a lot of people bring their own guests and the wedding couple end up having to pay extra expenses, so the celebrants put a limit on the Guest of Guest List.”

“That makes a lot of sense,” Lonnie said. “I wouldn’t want unplanned expenses when I’m just starting my marriage off.”

Elimie smiled from both her faces. “I can assure you; you won’t be bored out here, Cookie. The idea is to sell those waiting around on the idea of returning on their own credit, so they have free tours to the other castles and if you wish to participate you charge it to your room.”

Cookie looked thoughtful at the list she was viewing on the reader. “There’s a cook-off in Castle W. I would like to visit that.”

“You can press this button here and see what seats are available.”

“Nothing.” Cookie looked disappointed.

“The free seats are gone,” Elimie agreed.

“Where do you want to sit, Cookie?” Lonnie asked.

Cookie grinned. “Is this a paid vacation?”

“All expenses paid for,” Lonnie said.

“Nice working for you,” Elimie chuckled. She showed Cookie how to reserve her seat and then Lonnie put in her purchase.

“What’s this?” Lonnie asked suspiciously.

“It’s to prevent anyone from stealing your ID and charging other things to your name.” Elimie pointed to the front desk in the main foyer. “Sign up and put a limit on what can be charged and who can charge. That way, you won’t lose a fortune here. There are crooks everywhere,” she said when Cookie looked worried at Lonnie.

“Don’t worry, Cookie. I have your vacation covered. Let’s go and sign you up for some fun while I have to sit through this...where is the bride?” Lonnie asked.

“She’s having her pre-wed party in the Purple Room and the groom in the Blue Room. I see you’re a guest of the groom.”

That was news to Lonnie. “Thank you Elimie. I’ll stop upstairs and see how Dirmar is doing.”

Both Elimie’s faces grinned and then they both looked away in different directions. Then one turned back to her. “You stay safe. Say hello to the diva when you

see her. She's got some idiot draped over her arm and by his drink consumption he's not going to last to dinner."

"Thanks."

Lonnie and Cookie headed to the foyer.

"I thought the invitation was from the bride," Cookie said.

"So, I thought. I guess the blue means I sit with the blues."

At the front desk Lonnie and Cookie went over what she would be interested in and Lonnie paid for it then closed off any more purchases under her name. She added a prepaid credit for Cookie in case she saw something she liked to add. There were, after all, a lot of souvenir stands.

"The first tour doesn't leave for another hour. Let's go see Dirmar," Lonnie said.

Dirmar had all four hands mixing drinks and both heads swiveling around to see if anyone was slacking off in customer service. Dirmar liked a smooth operating bar.

"Hey, Leona!" he hollered when he spotted her. When his drinks were sent off to their purchasers he moved over to where Lonnie and Cookie were standing.

He embraced her and lifted her off her feet. "You are a sight for sore eyes. Wow. Has Elimie seen you yet? I bet she has. Nothing passes her."

"Hello, Dirmar. You're right. She spotted me right off."

He leaned in and winked one eye. "I saw the diva just a few moments ago. In the corner looking positively bored with her escort."

Lonnie smiled. "This is my friend Cookie, Cookie this is Dirmar. He makes a drink that you can actually say it's one of a kind. Delicious."

"You weren't drinking when we met, if I recall rightly."

"I ordered one, just for show," she admitted.

"How about a Hula Hoop La, Berevian Style," Cookie said. "I read that it's a one of a kind type of drink."

He grinned. "It is. The mix varies with species. I bet I can get this just right for you on first try."

"I'm not betting against the bartender," Cookie said.

In a few moments, her beverage was placed on the bar for her. Dirmar waved aside Lonnie's credit.

“You going to dance?” he asked devilishly, nodding to the open space.

Lonnie smiled. Maybe, she thought. Her eyes sought Kali and found her surrounded by other dancers. Kali, as usual, looked like she was holding court. Her badge was purple.

Cookie took a sip of the drink and rolled her eyes. “This is suprema.” She toasted Dirmar who had returned to mixing drinks. He nodded to her with genuine pleasure at her compliment.

Cookie looped her arm into Lonnie’s and led them to Kali’s table. It was full with no space for even standing room.

Kali looked up at Cookie and then to Lonnie. She looked surprised. Her eyes moved to the blue badge Lonnie wore. Lonnie gave a small shrug and smiled.

Kali got up and waded through the crowd to Lonnie. She turned slightly to Cookie, “Save my seat, will you?” Then took Lonnie by the arm to the center stage. A few people were dancing, some very well.

“Does this bring back memories?” Kali asked in a low tone.

“Yes. Hopefully, there won’t be a replay.”

“*Everything* is recorded here,” Kali said softly, without moving her lips. “I barely know either of them and was dragged here by my dance partner after a dance party. I think I was drugged. What about you?”

“I met E’lis once and don’t know Conquel. I didn’t know we were going to be here until yesterday. Crackle was asked by a family friend to stop by and check out the security here.”

“I don’t like this place,” Kali said. “It’s too controlled. Where is Crackle?”

“Busy on the other side of this planet.”

“I’m going to grab a shuttle off this planet, unless you don’t mind giving me a ride back to the nearest space port.”

“Not at all. Come on.”

“Let me untangle myself from these characters. They haven’t left me alone since I got here.”

“Meet me at the front desk in...”

“An hour. I don’t want to cause a scene and I want to be sure Alie is going to be okay. I hate having to train another dance partner.”

The music wasn’t anything that would put either of their talents on a grand display, but both felt a lot of eyes on them. When the music stopped, they parted and returned to Kali’s table.

Kali introduced everyone at the table...all names Lonnie was familiar with. They were dancers that were on their way up the ladder of stardom...except, Lonnie was sure which one’s wouldn’t be going much further up. Already they were showing signs of addiction to a drug and it didn’t have to be that way, she thought sadly.

Lonnie and Cookie left after introductions were made. Lonnie left Cookie off with a tour group that was beginning to gather for the different entertainments at the other castles. Cola, one of the people that was sitting at Kali’s table appeared at Lonnie’s side.

“You want something?” Lonnie asked, suspiciously. The woman didn’t feel right.

“No. Just getting a bit of air.”

Lonnie went in search of the Blue Room to speak with the groom. His answer would determine whether they would be leaving before the hour she gave Kali. Cola followed Lonnie but she had a purple badge and held back when Lonnie entered the Blue Room.

Chapter 7

No Time Like the Present

Crackle paused in the tunnel. Her fingers felt the change in texture on the wall she was using as a guide. The BGB's came back to life once she was two yards into the tunnel, and neither were registering any danger. One guarded her rear and the other was an arm's length ahead of her. She sniffed the air, thinking it wasn't just the temperature that changed but the quality of air too. She shifted her pack and pulled from the side pocket a respirator. She looped the facemask around her neck, having it ready should she need it, then continued her passage. Where the passage was leading her she no longer was certain.

Sounds echoed in the tunnel. Earlier when someone had dropped into the tunnel minutes after she did, there was a lot of noise from arguing voices. However, the voices faded as if they had taken another tunnel. These new sounds weren't diminishing.

If this tunnel was to the house, she knew she should have already been there. It was difficult to tell from what direction the sounds were coming from now, but the BGB in the lead registered it was coming from somewhere in front of them. As she continued, the noise level increased and Crackle was beginning to pick out words but the echoing cut off most of the sentence. Just as the air changed drastically, she dropped to the ground pressing against the wall, not recognizing yet what had alerted her.

Yelling, screams, and laughing hit her in a blast of air. She was on a cliff looking over a huge cavern filled with people in different stages of undress, though some species didn't wear clothing. It took Crackle more than a few minutes to figure out that no one was being held against their will. There were cameras everywhere, pointing down to the activities on the stages. She thought how easy it would be to blackmail the participants sometime in their future, probably when they put this type of behavior behind them. It was hard to believe people could be so naïve. Backing from the rim, she moved along the path which dipped back down and was dark again.

Voices again from ahead of her were arguing. By now the translator was able to interpret.

“I want it now! I want it broadcasted while they're still here.”

“They'll never know what hit them!” another voice laughed.

“I can’t work that fast. If you want a professional....”

“I don’t give a damn about your problems. You’re being paid more than enough credits to do what I tell you. Get it ready to broadcast in two hours!”

“E’lis if it’s not done properly then they can point out it was faked,” another voice said.

“It doesn’t matter. The first impression will be enough. It will knock her off her high mountain and her agent will have to drop her,” another voice said gloating.

Crackle wished she could see who all this was. She had a creepy feeling about this.

“Then you get your chance at her and I’ll be stepping in to take her place.”

“Well there’s your double for Leona Bestrolie. Nice body. So, what naughty and nasty is she going to be doing and to who, just so I can get my cameras set right?”

“I haven’t seen her in years. Does the real one look that good? Where’s the real one?”

“Cola is keeping her busy worrying about her friend that was sent on a tour of Castles,” the voice laughed. “Maybe we can arrange an accident of some sort, just to really upset her.”

“E’lis, let’s just keep to what we’re paying for. If you start adding accidents we’ll be racking up bills we can’t pay for.”

“So, what do you have planned?”

“Kali Maxine and her secret sweet heart will be doing some bondage and stuff you have never seen before. It will bring back childhood memories for Kali. She’ll never be able to look at Leona Bestrolie again.”

“Whatever did they do to you, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Nothing. It’s a hobby.” Two voices laughed contemptuously.

Crackle’s eyes slitted as she moved so she wouldn’t be seen should someone leave the room they were in. Crackle was wondering if she should rescue Kali first or make sure the VID didn’t record.

“We better get back to our party, someone might miss us,” a taunting voice Crackle identified as E’lis, said.

“Don’t eat or drink anything,” a voice reminded.

“As if I would eat anything I didn’t see prepared in front of me,” a male voice said.

Crackle now recognized the voice, Conquel Eu, from a recently released VID that raised him to stardom and put a lot of credits in his account. She remembered Conquel Eu and E’lis Dongel were reported to be getting married. The stories of E’lis’s jealousy of others was legendary, which had Crackle wondering why anyone hired her.

First the VID then she would head to the orgy room.

Chapter 8

The Deed Comes Back Upon the Doer

Lonnie looked around the Blue Room, seeking out the groom. Everyone looked at her as if in a haze. The groom was nowhere to be seen. Waitbots offered her beverages and small edibles. She found it easier to take one from one bot and deposit it on another's tray, otherwise she wouldn't have been able to leave the room. Rather than exiting through the door she came in she left through the waitbots entrance.

Her feeling of something bad was going to happen had her heading back to the entrance to speak with Elinie. She spotted Cookie speaking to the front desk bot. What was Cookie doing here? She went to join her, standing behind her to listen to what Cookie was saying.

"I know, I know. Leona Bestrolie paid for them. But credit her account back and just let the cook-off stay in place."

"Why?" Lonnie asked.

Cookie turned at Lonnie's voice.

Cookie raised an eyebrow, her way of saying, Don't ask.

"I wasn't feeling well. I gave the ticket to the Chef's Cook Off to a fan and I came back to see if just sitting still would make me feel better."

Lonnie handed the person behind the desk her ID to re credit her account.

Cookie leaned close to Lonnie, "I saw that woman again that looks like you. I asked one of the people near me who she was and I was told it was you. Something's not right here. Are they into creating fantasy doubles of people?"

Lonnie decided to retrieve Kali now and leave the planet, after they made one more pick up — Crackle.

"Elimie," Lonnie waved at the Aberlian. She moved over to Lonnie one face smiling and the other looking over the guests.

"I thought you left for the Bastilles Castle." Her voice sounded disapproving.

"The only place I'll be leaving from is this planet. I'm going to get Kali Maxine and we're leaving. This place is too creepy for me."

“But I just saw you get on a cart with the Diva.” Elimie looked worried. “This is happening too many times. Doubles of people popping up, and people disappearing. And we’re told to mind our business and nothing else.” She lifted a wrist and spoke into it softly. Both her faces grimaced.

“Can you give us a lift off this place? Dirmar said the beverages are being switched again. This place is too on the illegal side of weird. I think we’re going to fire our agent from Traveler Extraordinaire.”

“When did Kali leave?”

“About five minutes ago.”

“Let’s go. You said she’s being taken to what castle?”

Dirmar joined them. He was looking everywhere with both his heads.

“Don’t get too obvious, Dirmar,” Elimie said. “Come on. A security cart is the only vehicle that isn’t controlled by the computers. Get rid of those badges,” she directed Lonnie and Cookie.

They followed Elimie after dropping their badges in a recycle bin.

“Is this entire place covered with security cameras?” Lonnie asked.

“No. I’ve been doing some of my own sleuthing. We don’t have much to do on our own time but sleep or watch VIDs, so to keep up my skills I created some work for myself,” Elimie said. “I broke into their computer system from a kiosk I saw the manager using when he thought no one was looking. They have security tracks where nothing is recorded. It’s dead space.”

“I heard a guest for another wedding talking about an underground sexual cave where what is against the law on all planets is done there,” Dirmar said.

“That’s where we’ll start,” Elimie said.

“That’s good. We’ll start with the worse-case scenario and work our way back,” Lonnie said.

They weren’t the only ones heading to the security carts. A dozen people of various species were gathered, listening to someone in the center of their group.

“That’s not good,” Elimie said. “Those are the new recruits. Each one specializes in a skill, hunting live prey, killing, delivering pain, and so on. The marketing department has been thinking up different types of fantasies to attract the big credit donors back.”

“Donors?” Lonnie asked.

“Hillst Investments has a lot of their investors paying for a piece of this business. They invite regularly different groups of investment brokers to visit here. Each group has suggestions and one of them was to issue badges that monitor all visitors’ presence. The badges have been created but the computer, from what I know, can’t monitor groups over twenty because there are so many guests. So, each castle has it’s own monitoring system. Once out of the castles, the carts are monitored but doesn’t know who is on them, yet.”

“Holes in the security,” Lonnie said.

Elimie nodded. “I think the holes are there to let some of these disappearances occur. Jok and Com were the latest that I know of. Newly married, in debt with both sides of the family squabbling over their family leadership positions in a supposed rich household. They disappeared. I think the Chatawans have something to do with that. They’ve been appearing here a lot lately.”

“Our agent is a Chatawan,” Dirmar said.

“And more than weird,” Elimie said.

“That is so,” Dirmar said.

“They’re breaking up,” Cookie said.

“Come on. I know of a cart that is on the repair docket but all it needs is a checkup. It’s the manager’s,” Dirmar said.

It would seem that hiding a huge person like Elimie or two large people would be a problem, but the area they were heading to was darkened. Elimie and Dirmar didn’t let that slow them down. Dirmar paused to let Elimie look over the door for anything that might let someone know they were there. When Elimie cleared the way, Dirmar led them to the cart while Elimie stood guard.

“No lights,” Dirmar said.

“How do we get to this underground place?” Lonnie asked.

“There’s a tunnel entrance just outside of the shuttle lot. How convenient, no?” Elimie said. “We’ve been planning on leaving since we got here but hired help that want to leave before their contract is up have the habit of disappearing.”

“Maybe they were debriefed about confidentiality, not speaking ill of their previous boss, and then whisked off the planet before they cause strife among the rest of the workers,” Lonnie suggested.

“Could be,” Elimie said reluctantly, “but something is illegal about this place and we need to leave before something happens where we’re caught up in it. It’ll go on our record and make getting a job at respectable places impossible.”

“When we signed up for this gig, we didn’t read the small print because we had thought our agent would be looking out for us,” Dirmar said. “We were wrong.”

“You turned up at a good time,” Elimie said.

“If you signed a contract, aren’t you worried about what the consequences will be by you leaving?” Lonnie said.

“We do have an out,” Elimie said. “If we believe it’s detrimental to our health, or something illegal is going on, we can terminate our contract. That’s with all contracts.”

“Can you slow down a bit?” Cookie asked concerned when the bumps were getting more frequent.

“We’re almost...there!”

The cart suddenly left the road and skidded down a slope, the speed increasing.

“It’s not me! Jump!” Dirmar shouted.

Lonnie wrapped her arms around Cookie and leaped. They rolled and hit a few rocks but came to a stop without anything breaking. Lonnie activated her homing to their shuttle. It was to the left. Grabbing Cookie’s hand, she dragged Cookie behind her, trusting her night vision. The odd lack of sound had her other senses hyped up.

Lights were bobbing in their direction.

Dirmar appeared next to her. “Our route is cut off. Someone set the alarms off.”

“We’ll split up. You know where our shuttle is,” Lonnie asked. She needed to find Kali. The shuttle’s scanner could do that.

“We do.”

Cookie didn’t say anything but placed her hand on Lonnie’s back and followed, allowing Lonnie more freedom to pick a path to where the homing device was sending them.

It seemed like a lot of time had passed. Too long for Lonnie who was worried about Kali, but they had arrived at the shuttle lot. There were enough shuttles arriving for Lonnie and Cookie to not appear out of character. If an alarm had gone off, it didn't stop the shuttles from arriving and some leaving. The customers leaving would wave to the new arrivals and tell them what a great place it was.

"Sounds like an advertisement," Cookie said softly.

"Maybe they did have a good time," Lonnie said.

"Where are Elinie and Dirmar?"

"I'm sure they'll be here. Right now, I need to find Kali. The shuttle can locate her and Crackle. Then we're out of here. I don't care if we're making this into something more than what it is, I don't like being tricked into being somewhere."

"You think Crackle tricked you into coming here?"

"I don't know. When we find her, I'm going to ask a lot more questions about this family friend."

Their shuttle was in a tie down. That meant it was expected the passengers would remain for more than a day. There were cameras that scanned the area and Cookie and Lonnie moved to where Lonnie could get another view of the shuttle without being spotted.

"The shuttle isn't locked down," Lonnie whispered. "It's made to look that way." She was hoping that was a good sign that Crackle was involved but didn't want to take anything for granted.

"How are we going to get closer to see?" Cookie asked.

"The camera tilts to the left and our shuttle leaves its view. I'm going to slide under her and see what's real and what's not."

"You're not leaving me here alone," Cookie said.

"Okay, then you're going to have to move fast and slide at the front end. I'll be at the back. There's an emergency hatch in the deck at the front. You can get on board there. Okay?"

"Okay and if not?"

"If not, we'll rely on the shuttle's security."

They watched the camera that seemed to take a long time before it moved to catch the arrival of another shuttle. Both women darted to the shuttle and slid beneath it.

While Lonnie made sure the tie downs were only for show, Cookie opened the deck hatch and climbed aboard. Under the shuttle was an emergency console. Lonnie activated security aboard *Belgium Queen* to acquire their shuttle, the *Little Emperor*, and Crackle's pod.

Lonnie crawled to the deck hatch and began to climb in when she realized the muzzle of a weapon was pressed against her forehead. Looking up she found a dozen eyes from the Chatawan staring at her and the person holding the weapon was Cola.

"Come and join us, Leona Bestrolie. We've been waiting for you and your crew."

Lonnie came in and closed the hatch at Cola's direction.

"So, you don't like our show for you? It's a fantasy of two of our guests. Of course, I had to do some arranging of events and people to get this going, but, it's like a circus. So many things happening at one time."

"So, what are you holding us here for?" Lonnie asked. Cola's eyes were fluttering. Lonnie hoped that was an indication that the intruder security was working. The Chatawan suddenly dropped to the deck unconscious. Cola was fighting it and the way the weapon waved, Lonnie was worried something would be damaged.

Cookie pushed Cola and she fell without any resistance.

Lonnie sat in the pilot's chair and quickly programmed the security to find Kali, Elinie and Dirmar.

"Hey, look whose here," Cookie said.

The external camera showed Dirmar and Elinie arrived with guests.

Chapter 9

The Show Stopper

Crackle scanned the room for anything that could be a hazard to her before stepping in and neutralizing the two occupants. It was like any other drill. Assess, prioritize and act.

“They didn’t hold back on funds for this stuff,” she said softly. The room had to be destroyed and anything it captured had to go as well. This was something she had knowledge about. From her pack, she pulled out a device that was made for cleaning computer equipment. It was legally used by businesses that purchased used computer equipment and wanted a thorough clean. She brought it along to see if the site’s computers were protected from such sabotage.

The VID coming in that the two men had been watching wasn’t Kali and Lonnie. It was of two prominent figures that shouldn’t be seen in public together since they represented opposing groups. Crackle went through the menu and found a library with a list of members. She didn’t have time to take names so she added that to what was going to be wiped, deciding whatever the owner held information on was suspect. Crackle found a chart with names written on who was in the private rooms. She selected the button with Kali’s name.

“Damn, what did they give her?” she whispered. Kali looked like she was drugged and unconscious. If they wanted to discredit Kali they would have to wait for her to look more alive. Lonnie’s double thankfully, in a voice not at all like Lonnie’s wasn’t going to do any unspeakable’s until her victim was semiconscious, so she paced uttering insults at whoever drugged her into unconsciousness.

Satisfied the wipe was well on its way passed recovering anything, Crackle packed up her equipment. She made one more check to see if her command to have the master computer began its own wipe was working on another bank of computers. Peering up and down the corridor for anyone she closed the door behind her. Beneath the door, she packed in a glue bar to prevent anyone from opening the door. They would have to make a hole in the door to get the two out who were tied far enough away from the computer consoles to interrupt anything.

The private rooms were on the outer ring of the main hall where various sex acts were being played out. Nothing shocking, though some positions she hadn't seen before but nothing she would try. It was species impossible. People were just having an orgy.

Crackle paused just long enough to make sure the recorders were not working outside of the rooms. The fifth room was Kali and the fake Lonnie. Lonnie was shaking Kali as if that would bring her out of drugged stupor.

Crackle stepped into the room. Lonnie's character turned around and seeing it wasn't someone she expected moved to attack. Crackle having the advantage of surprise, jabbed her in the neck to put her out.

"It took you long enough," a tired Kali said.

"You were expecting me?" Crackle said surprised.

"I told Lonnie this place wasn't right."

"I haven't seen her since I was dropped off. I didn't know you were here until I... we have to get out of here."

Crackle gave one more look at the unconscious double and then led the way out of the room.

"That way," Kali said. "They parked the cart but I think all the carts have trackers."

"I'll disable it. Lead the way."

There were many carts parked. They picked the closest to the exit. Crackle easily found the homing device and dropped it where the cart had been parked. Then searched for anything else that may control the cart besides her. She would have to disassemble the entire control box to do that.

"When you saw Lonnie did she come down by shuttle?"

"I would imagine. She had Cookie with her."

"Where do they park the shuttle's?"

Kali shook her head. "I don't remember how I got to this place, only that I was suddenly here. Before that, the last I remember was leaving a party with my dance partner. He was going to drop me off at my hotel before heading to his."

"You have bodyguards. What happened to them?"

"I don't know."

To Crackle's alarm, the cart started up and headed out of the underground facility without her assistance.

"Should we jump? I would hate to break or strain anything. I have a busy schedule," Kali said.

"Let's see how far we go before I knock out this control box." Crackle slid off her pack and pulled out the wiping device. "Do you recognize where we are?"

Kali laughed. "I can't see that well in the dark. I don't even know if this feels like the same bumpy road we took to get to that dungeon."

"That was good acting," Crackle said. "We'll get off here. Hold on." The cart came to an abrupt stop.

Crackle put the device back in her pack and turned on her homing device that would locate the pod or shuttle.

"It's just over that way."

A noise from their left had Crackle pulling Kali behind her and pulling a stun gun from her belt.

"I know you," Kali said to the Aberlian that appeared out of the dark before them.

"I'm glad to see you, Diva" Elinie said. "We were with Lonnie and her friend Cookie until the cart we were on headed into a ditch. They went one way and Digmar and I another. We got separated in the dark."

"Where were you going?" Crackle asked.

"To find Diva Maxine, but I see you have rescued her already."

"Where's Digmar?" Crackle asked.

"Behind you. We need to move quickly. I just heard they've called for backup at your shuttle, *Little Emperor*," Digmar said.

"They have Leona?" Kali asked worried.

"Hmm. I don't know. There are different alarms going off that's calling all agents to meet in the quad. They miss us, I think," Digmar said.

The four moved hurriedly toward the shuttles, weaving a path to avoid any security cameras.

"I told them they shouldn't have so many blank spots in their security," Elinie said.

“They obviously have a reason. To make people disappear,” Digmar said.

“This way,” Crackle said, leading the way to their shuttle.

A door opened with Lonnie rolling out two bodies down the ramp. She waved the four to hurry up the ramp.

“I am so glad to see you all are here. We need to get out of here, now,” Lonnie said.

Crackle didn’t get settled in the pilot seat when *Little Emperor* was engaged and moving out of the shuttle hanger.

Warnings came over the communication board but they were left unanswered.

“Oh, oh. Looks like trouble,” Elinie and Crackle said together.

Belgium Queen was defending herself as they approached her from the shuttle hanger side.

“What nut is firing weapons with so many yachts this close. If one explodes the rest will go up!” Elinie said.

“Looks like they’re going to take advantage of our approach to dock with *BQ*,” Crackle said.

“They shouldn’t do that,” Lonnie said.

“Go sit down,” Crackle advised. “It’s going to get bumpy.”

Little Emperor had its own weapons and didn’t hesitate to fire at the small ships trying to block its approach to *BQ*.

Once they were in the shuttle bay, the mother ship moved quickly out of the collection of station keeping yachts, leaving a few having to adjust to the backwash of their energy vapors.

Lonnie settled on the couch next to Kali.

“Someone is going to hear about the lack of protection I had at the last party I was at,” Kali said to Lonnie.

“You must have ingested something at the party,” Lonnie said.

“Nope. I know better.”

“Crackle, what do you think they used on her?” Lonnie asked.

“Bodeum air,” Crackle and Elinie said together. Both looked at each other and laughed.

“You should come work for me,” Crackle said. “I run a security firm.”

“No way,” Dirmar said. “We’ve agreed to the lighter stuff. Elinie is pregnant,” he said with a grin.

“Congratulations,” Lonnie said, echoed by the others.

“Surely you have something in your business that isn’t too boring and has a bar job to keep Dirmar entertained,” Lonnie said.

“What about the bar that friend of yours purchased?” Crackle asked. “Isn’t he looking for a trustworthy manager that won’t drink his profits away?”

Lonnie laughed. She purchased the bar under another name to get rid of the rift-raft that began to frequent the bar. Life couldn’t get any better, she thought.

Lonnie glanced at Kali.

“What about you? Isn’t your manager going to wonder where you disappeared to?”

“There is no doubt she’s wondering what happened to me. I don’t even know how many days I’ve been gone.”

“Crackle, can you set up a private communication for Kali?”

“All you have to do is activate one of those bubble’s and you and your communication will be private.”

Lonnie had dozed off when she felt a nudge.

“Hi,” she said to Kali. “How went your call?”

“She is furious, though not at me this time. She’s making arrangements for me to be seen publicly as far away from the Planet of Fantasy so if there is any publicity coming from there, I’ll be elsewhere. I asked Crackle if she could drop me off at Port Laser. She gave me ETA of one hour. Just how fast is this yacht?”

“I’m sure she has codes to use through various travel gates. Is anyone going to meet you there?”

“A new set of bodyguards and transportation to a very nice and private residence of Odia. Do you know of her?”

Lonnie’s eyebrows went up. “She was diva before you were born. Is she still alive?”

“Yes. And teaching. That’s my cover. Practicing a new dance routine with a new dance partner. At least this one will be a respectable partner.”

“I don’t think anyone but Leona will be suitable enough for you,” Ditmar said.

Both Lonnie and Kali smiled into each other’s eyes.

“Next stop, Port Laser it is,” Lonnie said.

Chapter 10

Home Again

“Being around you, life is never boring,” Crackle said she shut down *Belgium Queen’s* power. “I’ll be a few minutes. I want to know who leaked the information that you were on *BQ*.”

“Let it go for now. I just want to get home and sleep in my own bed. Let’s get *Little Emperor* powered up and ground side.”

“I second that,” Cookie said.

“You said they have a residence behind the bar? I would like to see if it’s comfortable for us,” Elinie said.

“See, we all want to go dirtside,” Cookie said.

They all moved to the shuttle and Crackle began to prepare for departure from *BQ’s* shuttle bay.

As they descended Elinie and Ditmar were studying the planet.

“Doesn’t look like much from up here,” Ditmar said. “Ohh! That is some cloud.”

“Storm clouds. We’re on the other side of the planet. The snow storm we left behind is melting so a lot of the trails are showing like snakes across a white wilderness.”

“Snow. Elinie, we haven’t been in snow for...”

“A long time,” she finished for him.

“You can stay with me until we finalized your employment and that the rooms behind the bar are satisfactory for you,” Lonnie said.

“See, she a good employer. Just don’t tell anyone who your boss is. Some nit wits out there are trouble makers because they’re bored,” Crackle said.

“A castle in a mountain, huh?” Elinie asked Cookie.

“With all the gadgets you can and can’t imagine to make going to work difficult,” Cookie laughed. “You’ll see.”

Their approach to the cave entrance wasn’t as dramatic as Lonnie remembered it but it was enough for Elinie and Ditmar.

End