

The Bounty Hunter's Apprentice

A Novella

By

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A prequel to The Magi series.

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Published by Selfishgenie Publishing of, Northamptonshire, England.

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Author's Note

In the Magi series of books, which were written before this story, I included a glossary after each chapter so that new readers could understand the terminology, especially that created just for the books. In this book I am working on the assumption that you have already read those books and so don't need the glossary, or at least won't be so dependent on it.

However, there is a possibility that you are new to An Kohli's galaxy and could do with a little bit of help. So, at the end of the book, you will find the glossary, along with any other notes I might have added along the way.

I hope you enjoy this book.

1- Fallon

The bar was half empty, the sensible drinkers having already gone home and the insensible ones unable to move anyway. An Kohli felt, rather than saw, a figure lower itself onto the neighbouring bar stool.

“Can I buy a pretty girl a drink?” The new arrival growled.

An Kohli was torn between giving the guy a piece of her mind for being so sexist and accepting the drink on the grounds that she was broke and thirsty. The last drops of her previous drink were about to evaporate and she had nowhere else to go to keep out of the torrential rain that was falling outside. This wasn't the sort of bar where the management took pity on you and let you sit even when you didn't have a drink.

She made her decision. “I'll accept the drink on condition you don't try to hit on me.”

A snort of derision assaulted her right ear. “It's not normal to make conditions when someone's trying to be nice to you.” Her neighbour drawled.

“What can I tell you? I'm unconventional. Now, are you going to buy me that drink or do I have to put up with your sexual harassment while stone cold sober.”

There was a low chuckle. “I'll get you that drink.” He said. A hand appeared in front of her. “My name's Fallon.”

She accepted the hand and gave it a brief shake. It was withdrawn and in her peripheral vision An Kohli saw it tap an order into the auto-barkeep system.

“Do you have other names?” An Kohli asked, still not making eye contact.

She felt the figure shrug. “I had one once, but to be honest no one ever used it, so I stopped using it too. Everyone calls me Fallon, even my mother when she was still alive.”

Out of the corner of her eye she tried to take in her neighbour. He was big, that was for sure. Probably an Arthurid, she thought. Alpha male if he was that size. He was dressed in leathers, which meant that he either had a fetish or the work he did was hard on clothing.

“So, what brings a pretty girl like you to a place like this?”

She turned and was about to give him the hard stare when she saw his face. She had seen some beat-up people before, but not this bad. It seemed that most of his face was covered in scars and the ear nearest to her was only half present, cut off neatly half way down. A long crease ran along his scalp, puckered along its edges where it had healed without benefit of cosmetic surgery. It was probably not wise to be rude to someone who clearly had a lot of experience in fights.

The stranger gave a wry smile. "Do my battle scars disturb you?"

"N.. no." An Kohli stuttered. She meant yes, but it would be rude to say so.

"There's a story attached to every one of these, if you'd like to hear them?"

"I don't think I've got time to hear that many stories." An Kohli said.

He laughed. A hoarse, rasping sound that started deep in his chest. Halfway through it turned into a coughing fit and he had to turn away and cover his mouth.

"Don't worry," he said when he had recovered his breath. "This place never closes."

A droid waiter deposited An Kohli's drink in front of her, a beer, then did the same for Fallon. It was a tumbler filled with a clear, golden liquid.

"Th...that's Grovian whisky." She said, trying to stifle her surprise. If this bar sold a single measure a year she would be surprised, but here was someone ordering four year's worth in one glass.

"It certainly is. I never drink anything else."

"But a measure that size, it would cost me half a year's pay."

"It's only money. Besides, I haven't much use for money these days."

"But you must earn a lot to be able to afford that."

"I get paid a lot, that's true. Enough to only work when I choose. That's the story behind most of these." He pointed at his scarred face. "But before I start boring you, what's your story?"

"What makes you think I have one?"

"I've been watching you for an hour and you nursed your last drink for so long it was in danger of drying up. That tells me you're down on your luck."

If nothing else, Fallon was perceptive, An Kohli conceded. "I was signed on a freighter as crew. The Captain sent me down here for some planet

leave, recalled the shuttle as soon as I stepped off of it and beat it owing me six months back pay.”

“Not an unusual story. There’s some bad people around, as I have good reason to know. You want me to find him and kill him?”

An Kohli recoiled in horror. “Is that what you do? Kill beings.”

“Technically no. But I’ve killed those that won’t come quietly. I’m a bounty hunter, fully licensed.” He said it with pride.

The scars started to make sense. Bounty hunting was a dangerous business, and many bounty hunters didn’t make it to old age. “Well, I don’t want you to kill him. I know it’s a big galaxy, but one day he’ll cross my path again and I’ll get what he owes me, plus interest.”

“That’s the spirit. As the man said, ‘don’t get mad, get even.’” He paused to take a sip of his very expensive whisky. “So, you’re out of work then. I could use a hand, if you’re interested.”

She turned to look him in the eye. “I may be young, but I’ve just spent six months crewing a freighter captained by a sexual predator, so don’t treat me like a fool.” An Kohli shuddered inwardly at the memory of his grasping hands and lecherous remarks. It had been a minor miracle that she had been able to keep him at arm’s length for so long. It was almost certainly the reason he had dumped her on this soggy planet.

“Hey, why so hostile?” He held his hands up in protest. “I’m just looking for a co-pilot and you’re looking for a job. We can help each other out. Can you fly a spaceship?”

“Can’t everyone?”

Fallon tried to suppress a smile as he spotted the evasion. While piloting a spaceship itself wasn’t too difficult to learn, they were ninety percent automated anyway, the type of piloting he envisaged demanded a little more skill.

“Well, I need someone to fly my spaceship for me, and maybe help out in other ways.” He held up his hands before An Kohli could take offence again. “I don’t mean like that. Look, I’ll level with you. I’ve got the Big C.”

An Kohli didn’t know what to say. Corofollus disease was one of the few remaining incurable diseases in the galaxy. No one knew what caused it and no one knew how to cure it. It struck seemingly at random and across a wide range of species. Once contracted, it amounted to a death sentence.

But it wasn't just that. In the majority of species, it left male sufferers impotent and female sufferers sterile.

"The doc reckons I've got two years left, if I'm lucky." He almost whispered.

"Why not just retire, live out your last years in comfort? You can clearly afford it." An Kohli indicated the glass of Grovian in front of him.

"For forty years I've been telling myself I was working my way towards a comfortable retirement, just like you're suggesting, but when it came to it I just couldn't let go. I ain't going to sit in the sun counting the number of bees buzzing around my flowers. But it's too late for that now even if I wanted to. When I go I want it to be taking down some scumbag who deserves to go to prison. But I'm going to need help and I don't think you've got a lot on your plate right now, so why not you?"

"Because you don't know me. I'm a complete stranger."

"I've lived as long as I have because I'm a good judge of character. Like I said, I watched you for the last hour."

"I didn't see you."

A lop-sided grin spread across Fallon's face. "I'll teach you how to do that; it's all part of a bounty hunter's art. Anyway, I could see you were down, but I could also see you weren't out. Your body language told me that. You were upright; defiant. You were thinking; planning. Did you know you chew the inside of your cheek when you're deep in thought?"

He'd spotted that foible from ... from where?. He must have been some distance away. But it was true, she did that.

"Anyway, it was clear that you were thinking, planning. You were thinking about how to get revenge on that freighter captain, or you were planning how you were going to survive with no money. Which was it?"

"Both." It was true that An Kohli was broke, but she also knew that a call to her father would make sure that she had money in her bank account within minutes. But she wasn't going to give in that way and prove her family right. And she did want to get her own back on the freighter captain.

"Anyone can be a bounty hunter." Fallon continued. "You go in, pulsars blazing and you take down the bad guy. But most of them are dead by the time they're forty because they don't think things through. They don't plan, they just go in shooting. There are old bounty hunters and there are bold bounty hunters, but there are no old, bold bounty hunters. The older ones,

like me, only get to be old because we do think, and we do plan. That's why I think you'll make a good bounty hunter."

"What would I have to do?"

"Watch my back, mainly. Maybe do some of the surveillance work. I'll teach you as you go along. Hell, I'll even put you up for Guild membership if you shape up." He coughed, a long, hacking sound, covering his mouth and turning away as he did so. He continued for several seconds before catching his breath once again, making An Kohli wonder if he would live long enough to act as her sponsor with the Guild. "As you can hear, it's hard to stay hidden when you make that sort of noise. Well, what do you think?"

"How much will I be paid?"

"You can afford to be choosy?" He laughed. "No, it's a fair question, I suppose. Each bounty gets split three ways. Forty percent goes to keeping the ship maintained and supplied, I take fifty percent and you'll get ten percent, because I'm training you. Still, you'll clear twenty thousand nuks a year. You also get your accommodation and food thrown in."

An Kohli failed to hide her delight at that news. It was twice what she'd been paid on the freighter, and the cost of her food had deducted from her pay. Well, what she was supposed to have been paid, anyway.

"Well, I guess you just got yourself a co-pilot." She offered her hand to seal the deal. Fallon gave it a hearty shake. Setting off another coughing fit.

"You'd better get your gear on board my ship while I have another couple of these." He indicated his glass, which seemed to have emptied itself as if by magic.

"My gear's still on board the freighter." An Kohli admitted.

Fallon took in the grubby overalls that An Kohli was wearing. "Use the ship's supply account to order yourself something and get it delivered to the Moonbeam; that's the name of my ship. I'll knock the cost off your first pay cheque. Make sure it's hard wearing. Leather is good; Superskin™ will do as well, but it's more expensive." He scribbled a number onto a bar napkin. "That's the code for my shuttle and also for the ship's airlock. Don't get it wrong, or you'll be blown to atoms, cos they're both rigged to blow if anyone tries to get in without the number. There's only two cabins, so you'll know which is yours."

He started to key another order into the automated system, seemingly dismissing her.

Fallon eventually realised that she was still sitting next to him. “Well, what you waiting for girl. I ain’t buying you another drink, not now you’re crew. If anything, it’s you who does the buying from now on, but I’ll let you off, this time.” He turned back to the bar and picked up the drink that the droid set in front of him.

An Kohli slid off the bar stool, shaking her head slightly. He had promised to train her, but she had a feeling that it would be her that would be doing most of the teaching, at least when it came to etiquette.

She left the bar and trudged through the teeming rain towards the shuttle port.

* Attributed to Senator Robert Kennedy, brother of President John F Kennedy. Bobby Kennedy was assassinated on 6th June 1968, five years after his brother was assassinated in Dallas, Texas.

2 - Priti

The ship was an old Proton class, but as An Kohli stepped out of the airlock she could tell that it was well maintained. She could hear the quiet hum of air conditioning harmonising with the deeper notes of the main engine. The metal work gleamed and the non-slip flooring was dust free.

The first item on the agenda was to find her cabin. The corridor was short, with a door at each end and three doors spaced along the wall opposite the airlock. The left hand end of the corridor would probably lead to the command deck, she mused, while the right hand end would be the engineering area. That left the three doors on the opposite wall. Traditionally the one nearest to the command deck was the captain's, which left just two more doors. She went to the rearward one first and pressed her hand onto the locking panel.

The door slid obediently open, even though she had never been on board the ship before. So it wasn't programmed to restrict access. She was faced with a small cabin dominated by a bare bed. Next to it was a toilet that looked as though it was designed to accommodate a wide range of the galaxy's species, but what stood out was the shackle attached to a chain, which was in turn attached to the rear bulkhead. The chain was just about long enough to allow the shackled person to use the toilet, but not to reach the door.

An Kohli tried to suppress an unruly thought regarding the room's purpose, but a grin reached her mouth anyway. No, this was a holding cell, she corrected herself. It was something she should have expected, given Fallon's employment.

She left the room, closing the door behind her and went to the middle door. This opened onto another cabin. It's air of emptiness told her this must be hers. To one side there was a walk-in shower, next to a toilet and wash basin. Beyond that was a small locker with enough space to hang a couple of items of clothing, plus a series of shelves for smaller stuff.

On the other side of the cabin, so close to the cupboards and shower that she had to turn sideways to fit into the gap, a raised bunk sat above a desk, in front of which was a chair. A thermal sheet lay folded on the bunk alongside a pillow. The cabin's furnishings were completed by an

entertainment system mounted on the rear wall, at just about the wrong height to be viewed while lying on the bunk.

She would have laid her luggage on the floor, but she didn't have any. Instead she put the pillow on the top shelf of the locker, then spread the thermal covering along the bed. That was it; this was now officially her home. The empty locker mocked her and she remembered what Fallon had said about ordering herself some clothes. That meant finding the ship's computer.

She left her spartan accommodation and headed towards the front of the ship. There was no need to put her palm on the door lock; it slid open as she approached. The command deck was small, just two seats and a control console. Viewing screens were mounted on the walls but were currently dark. Beyond the control console was an opening that led to a small galley area. It reminded her that it was a while since she had last eaten.

She pressed a button on the food dispenser and the dish of the day appeared in the service hatch. It was some sort of stew. While the word delicious didn't normally attach itself to food dispensers, the aroma was enticing, enhanced by her hunger. From the drinks dispenser she was served a cup of coffee. Taking both, along with some cutlery, she returned to the command deck and sat in the right hand chair, the one normally used by the co-pilot, resting her plate on her lap and placing her coffee cup in the holder set into the chair's arm.

As she ate her food she examined the control console until she identified the button marked 'computer', which she pressed. Fortunately for her the controls were all marked in Common Tongue. A touch screen rose from the console and moved across until it sat on her side. A manufacturer's logo appeared on it, then the software screen. Good, it was Peach BIOS version 22.4, which she had used on board the freighter. The logo disappeared and was replaced by a series of icons that allowed her to select the application that she wanted. The supply system was easily identified. Fallon used Orinico, which was the largest galacticnet retailer.

She browsed the clothing selections. She didn't fancy leather as it had the tendency to make her sweat, so she focused on Fallon's other suggestion, which was Superskin. She had to admit that the close-fitting garments would look good on her. She selected three items in different colours, two pairs of knee-high combat boots, which she knew from media broadcasts

were part of every bounty hunter's attire. Items of underwear were chosen, based strictly on their utility, then she selected a combat knife with a sheath that would fit inside her boot. Fallon hadn't said she would need a weapon, but all bounty hunters were armed, so unless he told her otherwise, An Kohli decided she would be armed as well. She thought about ordering a pulsar but decided against it. Fallon would probably provide that for her.

The checkout procedure was automated, not requiring any input from her to charge the purchases to Fallon's account or provide delivery instructions. After the checkout screen she was advised that her goods would be delivered by drone within the hour. She closed the application and looked at what else was available on the computer.

There were the usual inventory packages, diagnostic systems and navigational aids, but the icon that caught her eye was the one for the Guild of Bounty Hunters. She touched it and found herself on the welcome page. Her eyes lit up as she saw a tab marked 'Our Members'. It was time to find out a bit more about Fallon.

The biography provided wasn't extensive. As she had suspected, he was an Arthurid and his age was given as eighty six in standard years, which seemed about right, if you could see past all the scar tissue on his face. They had an average life expectancy in the region of one hundred and fifty, so the Corofollus disease was going to rob him of a lot. His arrest record was what most impressed An Kohli. He had claimed two hundred and thirty six bounties valued at over two million nuks. Of those bounties only five had been claimed on a dead body.

That rather surprised An Kohli as the reputation held by bounty hunters was that, given the choice between capturing their quarry dead or alive, they seemed to prefer dead. Maybe she had them wrong.

She spotted another tab which said 'Code of Ethics'*. Maybe that would set her straight.

Sure enough, the code laid out the conditions under which bounty hunters could choose the 'dead' option for their quarry. Basically they couldn't, unless their own lives or the lives of someone else were at stake.

She jumped as the door to the command deck swished open and Fallon stepped unsteadily in. She hadn't heard or felt the Moonbeam's shuttle depart to collect him or return back. He looked over her shoulder to see what she was reading.

“Ah yes, the Code of Ethics. You’ll need to learn that by heart if you want to be a bounty hunter. Me, I can be flexible, well, a little bit anyway. But the Guild demand total compliance.” He slurred.

“I didn’t know this existed.” An Kohli said, looking up at him. “You know, we hear stories about bounty hunters and some of the things they do, but this ...”

“Back in the bad old days those stories were true. More fugitives were taken back dead than alive and you just don’t want to know about some of the things that were done to the live ones on their trips back to justice.

But some of the planets that issued the arrest warrants started to get a bit worried about the abuse of prisoners and what amounted to executions without benefit of trial and started to refuse to pay bounties which, of course, was bad for business. They just wouldn’t deal with bounty hunters anymore. So, a group of likeminded individuals set up the Guild, oh, it must have been at least a century ago now, and started to bring things to the way they are done today. But the stories linger on and our reputation for not being very nice people remains the stuff of legend. Not every bounty hunter is a Guild member though. There are what we call ‘freebooters’ who are too, shall we say, stuck in the old ways to change, but they find it hard to make a living these days. Keep well clear of them if you ever want to get into the Guild. Mud sticks, you know and having a good reputation means everything for a bounty hunter these days.”

“So, you wouldn’t really have killed Grackle Bon for me?”

“Who’s he, the freighter captain? No, but it’s a great conversation starter, you have to agree.”

Letting out a chuckle An Kohli did have to agree. He’d got her attention and now he was her boss. It had all happened so fast, she wondered if she should be having second thoughts and then realised that she was.

“Anyway, I’m tired and we need to be somewhere, so you set course for Breda Minor while I get some shut-eye. Wake me in about six hours to take over the watch.”

Those second thoughts had come a little bit late, An Kohli realised. She either refused to set course and left the ship, or she was committed to her new life.

Fallon lurched back into the corridor and she heard the door to his cabin open, then close. The bulkhead behind her shook as he collapsed into his

bunk and she soon heard the muted sound of his snores.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained, she had heard said often enough when she was growing up and she had discussed risks with her parents. Going back down to that planet would leave her unemployed and hungry again, while staying here ... Who knew where that would get her. She made her choice.

Setting course wasn't a great demand on her skills. She called up the navi-com interface, searched for their destination in the library and the computer did the rest. Once the course had been calculated she transferred it to the main computer via another interface and the autopilot took them out of orbit and into their self-generated wormhole.

Then she settled down with a book she found in the ship's entertainment system until it was time for the watch to change.

* The Code of Ethics of the Guild of Bounty Hunters is reproduced at Appendix A to this book.

* * *

The shadows in which An Kohli had found to conceal herself weren't very deep. She struggled to remember all the other things Fallon had told her about surveillance. There seemed to be so much of it.

"Remember the seven esses," he had said. "Sound, shape, shade, shine, shift, shadow and silhouette. Each of them will give you away and each of them will help you to stay concealed." He continued. "Shade means colour, not the dark patch where the sun can't reach; that's covered by shadow. Don't wear light clothes against a dark background, or vice versa. You'll stand out like an oil stain on a snow field." An Kohli suspected that he had modified that expression to avoid swearing. She wished he wouldn't do that sort of thing. She had heard a lot of swearing on board the freighter and it was nothing compared to the sort of language her college friends had used. And she had used a lot of bad language herself, especially when she found out she had been dumped on that rain soaked planet.

Fallon had explained that he used drones to conduct surveillance as often as possible. "Fly them high enough and they can't be heard or seen by most beings. But there's some species that can, so physical surveillance is the

only way to do it sometimes. Also, beings often go inside places where a drone can't go without being seen so, again, you have to follow on foot."

"What about security cameras?" She had asked.

"Most can't be hacked any more, but sometimes you get a friendly local law enforcement officer who'll get you access. But most times you have to use a drone or go on foot. Besides, not everywhere is covered by cameras, especially the inside of the sorts of bars that suspects use. If you want to see who a suspect is meeting, you have to be right there with them."

She ran through each ess in her mind. Was there anything she could do to disguise her shape? She recalled Fallon drawing a circle on the touch screen, putting two dots into it and saying "The brain needs only a little bit of information to fill in the gaps. You see that and your brain automatically fills in the gap and says 'face'. So, you have to deprive the brain of information, so it can't draw that conclusion. Break up your shape by standing behind things or disguising it in some way."

"You mean like camouflage?"

"Yes, but you'll get some strange looks if you wander round a town wearing camouflage. That's where your targets are mainly going to hide out, because they think there's safety in numbers. But if you do have to watch a location in the middle of the boonies, then yes, use camouflage. In a town or city use whatever you can find. Standing behind a lamp post is better than not standing behind anything."

Fat chance of that, An Kohli thought, not stuck out here on the street of a poky little one fiju town.

She ran her mind through the other esses and came up blank. The only one that was of any help to her was 'shift'.

"The eye is drawn to movement." Fallon had shown her by flicking a laser pen on to create a moving dot in the corner of the command deck. Her eyes had been drawn to the moving dot, just as he had known they would be. "So, stay as still as you can for as long as you can, but remember to flex your muscles regularly to keep your blood circulating. I don't mean stretch, that would be too much movement; just squeeze them. There's no point in standing still for an hour if you suddenly start leaping around 'cos you have cramp in your foot."

So she stood like a statue, flexing her toes inside her combat boots, waiting.

At her hip she felt the unaccustomed weight of a pulsar. It wasn't charged, because this was only a training exercise, but Fallon had told her always to do her training in conditions that are as close to reality as possible. In reality a bounty hunter always carried a pulsar, unless the law forbade it. Even then they would still carry one if they could conceal it.

She had spent an hour each day of their journey to Breda Minor training with the virtual reality spectacles and their plastic pulsar shaped controller. By the end of the journey she had achieved a kill rate of ninety five percent. The lost five percent was her reaction to a child crossing the road carrying a cute fluffy kitten.

"Don't worry about it." Fallon had told her. "If I'd seen something as nauseating as that I'd have killed her as well." He laughed his gravelly laugh and slapped her on the back. "You're a natural, kid." He had added. "But remember, there's a big difference between firing a pulsar at a computer generated bunch of pixels and firing it at a real being. If you freeze on that, you're dead."

Since their arrival they had spent all their time carrying out mock surveillance on each other. An Kohli had to tail Fallon, and in turn she was tailed and had to try to spot him. But they knew each of them was there, somewhere, which made the training artificial.

Today was the final test on surveillance.

"I've got this mate who lives here; used to be a bounty hunter but gave it up. He's a bit of a creature of habit, which is why he had to give it up. Every evening he goes for a drink at the same bar, about a ten minute walk from where he works. If you can tail him there without being seen, you've passed the test. To make it harder, I'm going to tell him he's being tailed. He won't know what you look like, which makes it harder for him. But if he can describe you to me when he gets to the bar, then you've failed the test. OK?"

An Kohli agreed to the terms, which was why she was now standing stock still in an ever shrinking patch of shadow, feeling cramp building up in her lower leg muscles, waiting for the target to appear from the bank across the road. She risked a look at her communicator to check the time. As she thought, the bank would soon be closing for the day.

More minutes passed, then the door of the bank slid open. Several staff stepped through before her target appeared. He was a big male, seemingly

as broad as he was tall, dressed in the uniform of a security guard. Even from her distant position she could see that the seams of the uniform were under great stress. The door slammed shut behind him. Either it locked automatically or there was someone still inside who had locked it, because when he tried the handle again it refused to open. As he made a show of checking the door, An Kohli could just make out the tiny head movements that showed her that he was checking around him to see if he could spot her.

He turned quickly and headed along the footpath in the direction of the bar. Well, An Kohli assumed that was where he had headed. It could be a ruse to try to flush her out. She turned herself and started walking, staying close to the wall where the best of the evening shadows were lying. The street was quiet, most beings having concluded their business for the day and headed home or, like her target, to a place of refreshment.

“Don’t stare at the target.” Fallon had warned her. “Some species seem to have a sense that tells them when they are being watched. The Gau especially. It gives them itchy skin and they have to reveal their true identity. Just give them a glance, then look away. Keep them in the corner of your eye, never in full view.”

Her target stopped suddenly, making a show of looking in the window of a retail outlet. It was a trick that Fallon had explained to her. “The target will use the window as a mirror to check for anyone suddenly stopping or turning around. But it only works if you’re close, because the field of the reflection is limited, so stay back.”

It was a lesson she remembered. The being started walking again. An Kohli had never stopped, she had only slowed her pace a little.

“If the target suspects he’s being followed, he’ll change direction suddenly, looking to see if he’s taken you unawares.” An Kohli made a bet with herself that would be his next move. It was.

He crossed the street, dodging a hover car as it sped past with a blare of its horn, and turned a corner. An Kohli kept going in the same direction. She touched her communicator and it showed a map of the local area. He had turned into an alley, which cut through the buildings to come out on a parallel street. She took the next turning, parallel to the alley and broke into a trot, so that she would be at the far end before he emerged. He didn’t look like the running type, more the sitting down eating donuts type, but she

couldn't be sure of that. She slowed, checked around the corner and then sprinted across the road to find the shaded side once again.

There was a delay, longer than An Kohli had expected. She started to panic, wondering if he had slipped into a building along the alley. It was possible, it would provide the service entrances for all the buildings filling the gap between the two streets. If he'd done that he could emerge anywhere. Knowing the local area, he had a distinct advantage over her. But that was reality as well.

Her heart skipped a beat with relief as she saw him emerge. He had waited to see if she would show herself. He had expected her to panic and she had very nearly fallen for it.

He continued his journey, picking up the pace a little and An Kohli speeded up to keep her place. She saw a bar ahead. Was that his destination? As they got closer she thought she could hear music playing.

He stopped a final time, in a doorway, turning to stare down the street behind him. An Kohli continued walking, just an innocent being on her way home from work. He seemed to shrug his shoulders and took the last few steps to the entrance of the bar.

She had been told to stay outside while Fallon de-briefed his friend. He would call when he was ready to talk to her. She stayed in surveillance mode and found a doorway to conceal herself.

It didn't take long. Fallon's voice crackled in her earpiece. "OK, An Kohli, you can come in. By the way, you've passed."

She felt like leaping into the air and punching it with her fist, but she restrained herself. She was pretty sure that proper bounty hunters didn't do that sort of thing. She walked quickly across the road and stepped into the air-conditioned interior, feeling the cool air raise the hairs on her scalp.

Fallon got to his feet and shook her hand. The security guard took her in, starting from her feet and continuing upwards until, he reached her face.

"Well done." He said, extending his hand in congratulation. "I'm sure I would have noticed someone as good looking as you following me. I must be losing my touch. I couldn't spot you at all. I thought Fallon here was playing a trick on me. How did you do it? How did you stay behind me without me seeing you?"

An Kohli laughed. She held out her hand to show him a headband with a tiny camera attached to it. In her other hand her communicator showed an

image of his surprised face. “I wasn’t behind you, I was in front. I wore this and the camera pointed backwards to show me where you were and what you were doing.”

Fallon’s jaw dropped open. “I didn’t teach you that.” He said, sounding slightly annoyed.

“I know. But you did teach me to always give myself some sort of edge. Do something that the target won’t expect, you said. You taught me to follow people, so that’s what my target here,” she indicated the bank guard, “would expect me to do. So I didn’t do it. I stayed in front of him instead.”

“But how did you know which way he would go?”

“I didn’t, but the odds were in my favour. There are three bars on this street within a ten minute walk, like you said. There aren’t any in the other direction. At least, not that close. You said to do my homework on my target, Fallon. So I did.”

“And what if Gus had gone the other way?” Fallon asked her.

“I’d have had to follow him instead, but I could have stayed well back. The camera has a good zoom function on it.”

“Well, you deserve a drink for that. A one-off reward. How about a Grovian?”

* * *

A small thrill ran through An Kohli. Here she was, a genuine bounty hunter, on a stake out, waiting for her target to appear. She had to pinch herself to make sure she wasn’t dreaming it.

Only a few months before she had been a bored college graduate, wondering what to do with her life, getting under her parents’ feet as she lounged around the family home. Her father was an architect; a good one. He wanted her to join his business.

“An Kohli, we’re throwing up retirement homes like there’s no tomorrow. The money we’re making is tremendous. We need more people to train.” He had argued.

Mun Dane, her planet of origin, with its mild climate and friendly beings and low crime rate had turned into one of the retirement planets of choice for those beings in the galaxy who could afford to live there and there turned out to be quite a lot of them. But it wasn’t about the money. Well, it was about the money, it always was. But it was about excitement as well.

Architecture just didn't do anything for her. She needed the thrill of the chase. It was something she had discovered while at college.

At school she had never been very 'sporty', but at college she found that the best looking males had been on the sports teams, so she started to hang around on the fringes, with the other female students, hoping to meet some of them. Then she had gone out with a guy who had introduced her to Fraquette, the sport he had played. Much to her own surprise as to anyone else's, she found that enjoyed it. The enjoyment she got by playing a good shot was only matched by the pleasure of beating an opponent, especially an opponent that was ranked higher than her. It awoke a competitive streak in her that she hadn't realised she had.

But it also awoke in her a sense of fair play. She couldn't stand cheats. There weren't many at college, but there were a few. She enjoyed beating them the most.

But college was over. She joined her local Fraquette club and kept her hand in, but the excitement wasn't quite the same anymore. She needed a new challenge. But she wasn't going to get it on Mun Dane and architecture wasn't going to do it for her either.

Mun Dane was a quiet, peaceful planet. It was why it was such a popular destination for the retired. Who needs excitement when you get to that age? Whatever 'that age' meant to different species. Mun Dane was so peaceful that the greatest threat to life was dying of boredom. The local police were in greatest danger from shooting themselves in the foot with their own weapon, should they ever try to take it from its holster. On the average day it was so quiet you could hear the grass growing, or the sound of more retirement homes being built.

So, she had made her decision and signed on as crew on board a freighter to go and find some excitement.

Except that being crew on board a freighter wasn't very exciting. Hazardous, perhaps, with the Captain pursuing her with a lustful gleam in his eye, but exciting? No.

So, she kept her cabin door locked and made sure the Captain didn't get her in any confined spaces and carried out her duties loading and unloading the cargo while she considered new ways to achieve what she was seeking. Truth be told, she was on the point of quitting when the captain had

abandoned her. She had just been waiting for the freighter to reach a planet that had something better to offer her.

But she had never in her wildest imaginings ever thought she might become a bounty hunter, yet here she was.

There was movement across the road, a figure emerging from the small apartment building she was watching. She strained her eyes to see if it matched the one she had memorised from the image that Fallon had shown her.

He had given her the back of the building to watch, while he took the front. Their target, he said, was more likely to emerge on his side. He just needed her to be there, just in case.

But Fallon had been wrong. This was their target. A tall blond female Darvith with a large pulsar strapped to her thigh.

“She’s on the move.” An Kohli reported. She thought she heard Fallon stifle a curse. “OK, stay with her, but don’t make any attempt to arrest her. She’s dangerous and I don’t think you’re ready for her yet.”

An Kohli gave her acknowledgement, hoping that the annoyance in her voice could be heard. Not ready – who did he think he was?

She slipped out of the shadows and followed on the opposite side of the street. The target didn’t look back. Either she wasn’t worried about surveillance, or she didn’t have the skill to try to avoid it. Well, she would show her.

The target turned a corner. An Kohli followed at a safe distance. She was just in time to see the target turn the next corner. An Kohli lengthened her stride to keep up. Maybe she was trying to lose her after all, An Kohli thought, as she turned the next corner and found herself looking straight into the business end of a pulsar.

“Now what have we here?” The female purred. “A little baby bounty hunter, by the look of it. Now, why would you be following me?”

“I’m n ... not.” An Kohli stuttered. She could feel her heart pounding and the acrid taste of adrenalin at the back of her throat.

“So, you just happened to be outside my apartment building and just decided to take a walk at the same time as I came out, is that it?”

Had she given herself away that early in the stake out? An Kohli asked herself. Surely not. She had obeyed all Fallon’s instructions, to the letter. “erm...” she couldn’t think of anything to say. She had been caught red

handed and the presence of the pulsar suggested that her life would soon become more exciting than she could ever have imagined – just before it ended.

“Yes, I spotted you.” The female said. “It wasn’t your fault, but whoever sent you didn’t tell you about the possibility of motion sensors. That doorway you chose to stand in has them fitted. They triggered an alarm. The building super took a look and wondered who you were. Mostly he wondered why you were watching my building, so he started calling up the residents to ask. None of the others could think of a reason. Only me.”

The smug smile on the female’s lips was starting to annoy An Kohli, but she wasn’t really in a position to do anything about it.

“Now, you and I, we’re going to take a little walk back to my apartment, and when we get there you’re going to answer a few questions. Try to run and I’ll kill you without even thinking about it. I’m sure you’ve been told how dangerous I am.”

She had that right. She’d killed at least a dozen beings on as many planets. It was why Fallon was here.

“Now, turn around and start walking.” The female instructed. “I’ll be right behind you.”

An Kohli did as she was told. The female walked half beside her, half behind her, the pulsar pressed into An Kohli’s side, but concealed between their two bodies. An Kohli considered grabbing her and the weapon but dismissed the idea. She’d been in a few fights as a child, but never as an adult. In those fights her opponents hadn’t been armed with a lethal weapon, so the only real risk had been a few bruises. She wouldn’t know what to do to disarm this female. Fallon had told her she would need to learn fighting skills, but they hadn’t got to that part of her training yet. If she got out of this alive, An Kohli resolved to move it up the training plan, assuming Fallon actually had one.

At the door to her apartment, the female propelled An Kohli through it before stepping inside herself. She pushed An Kohli ahead of her and into another room. It was some sort of lounge area.

“Sit! There!” the female commanded, pointing to a chair with the hand that wasn’t holding the pulsar. “Now you’re going to ...”

An Kohli turned to find out why the female had stopped in mid-sentence. Behind her loomed the bulk of Fallon, his own pulsar pressed against the

side of the female's head. He reached around with his free hand and took the female's pulsar from her unresisting fingers, before lowering his own and stepping away from her, out of reach.

"I think you're the one who needs to sit." He said, a chuckle in his voice. He nodded to the same chair as An Kohli was supposed to have occupied.

"Wh .. ho ... erm." An Kohli's brain was taking time to catch up with events, impeding her ability to talk.

"Sorry, An Kohli. I figured Priti here would spot you."

"Y... you set me up as bait!" An Kohli spat.

He shrugged, the grin not moving from his face. "Not deliberately, but when she came out the back door, I guessed she had probably spotted you. You were in no danger. She wouldn't kill you on the street. It would attract too much attention and she'd have to go on the run again."

"And what if she had just taken me down an alley and killed me?"

He shrugged again. "She didn't, did she?"

"I never thought to ask, but what happened to your last co-pilot?" An Kohli spat at him.

"He saved up his share of the bounty money and is now living in a permanent alcoholic haze on Towie." Fallon chuckled at her.

This annoyed An Kohli even more. At least the alcohol made sense if this was the way Fallon treated his co-pilots.

"Erm, I know it's only my apartment and everything, but what about me?" Priti asked from her position on the chair. Throughout the exchange Fallon had never taken his eyes, nor his pulsar, off the female.

"Well, I think we both know the answer to that one." Fallon laughed at her.

"You won't get me out of here. I pay a lot for protection you know."

"I'm sure you do. Which is why I'll call the local police before we try to move you. They'll escort us to the shuttle port."

"How do you know I don't pay off the police as well?"

Even An Kohli knew that was a bluff.

"I'll take the risk." Fallon took out his communicator and had a muted conversation with someone. "Ten minutes." He said aloud. "If you have anything you want to take with you, An Kohli will get it for you."

"How about a pulsar and a box of fragmentation grenades?" Priti sneered.

“I was thinking more of a change of clothing and some toiletries. An Kohli, go and see what you can find and throw it into a bag. Nothing fancy though. Priti won’t want to look too good for her fellow prisoners?”

An Kohli wasn’t too sure what he meant by that. She would have to ask Fallon later. In the meantime she did as she was bid, finding Priti’s bedroom and bathroom and loading up a bag with the necessary items. She was sure that the apartment should be searched more thoroughly. Who knew what Priti had been planning and there would probably be evidence hidden somewhere. She said as much to Fallon when she returned to the lounge.

“The police will take care of that.” Fallon said. “We’re location, arrests and transportation, not crime prevention and detection.”

The police arrived and Fallon showed them a copy of the arrest warrant, to prove that what they were doing was legal. If anyone did have any ideas about trying to prevent Priti from being arrested, they were sensible enough to keep them to themselves.

They were just leaving the apartment when a soft ping came from the entertainment system. Communications systems were built in, so the ping was likely to indicate the arrival of a message. Her curiosity aroused, An Kohli hung back until everyone else had left the apartment.

Making sure she was alone, An Kohli touched the system’s screen and it came to life. She had been right, there was a ‘new message’ icon displayed. She touched that and the message opened up.

She wouldn’t know what to do if it had been in the Darvith language, but she was fortunate; it was written in Common Tongue. It wasn’t long.

“I have your next assignment.” It said. “Ten thousand nuks up front and ninety thousand on completion. If you accept, call the number to get the details” The message was signed ‘Genghis’.

A hundred thousand nuks. That was some assignment. What would she have to do ... of course, she would do what she had done a dozen times before. She was being paid to kill someone, and for that sort of money it had to be someone important. Genghis must be the being who was paying her. She wondered who he might be. She forwarded the message to herself, then closed down the entertainment system.

She had no idea why she had done that, but she had a feeling that it was important that she did. She would discuss it with Fallon when Priti was

safely locked up in the holding cell. Right now, she had to catch up with Fallon and the police before she was left behind on Breda Minor.

It was only as she waited for the elevator that she realised that she didn't know how Fallon had got into the apartment.

3 - Taro

“Breaking and entering is a skill you’ll have to learn, An Kohli.” Fallon said as he sipped at his Grovian. He had rewarded An Kohli with a beer drawn from the drinks dispenser, but he was far more generous with himself.

“It’s difficult to take someone on the street. First of all you have to consider the possibility of collateral damage. You know, civilians who get in the way or may even misread the situation and come to the aid of the target. Then there’s the hired help. A lot of the targets with big bounties on them have people around them; body guards or a gang.. As for the smaller fry, they often hang out in areas where bounty hunters rate slightly above dog excrement in terms of popularity. Try and pick someone up in those areas and you’re likely to spend some time in hospital – that’s if you get that far. No, if you can get inside the place they’re living then you can usually get them on their own. You also have the element of surprise, because they’re gonna feel safe there. But it’s safest to make the entry while they’re out, which is why Priti spotting you was helpful.”

“Will you be teaching me that, as well?” An Kohli took a pull at her beer and grimaced. It tasted artificial, which it was.

“All in good time. There’s a lot for you to learn, as you found out today.”

“You set me up!” An Kohli protested.

“No I didn’t. I just didn’t anticipate that she would have the sort of protection that she did. It was still my fault, I agree, but it’s not the same thing. You played your own part in what happened by getting too close. It’s better to lose the target than to get your head blown off, remember. There’s always another day; another opportunity. Remember what I said about old bounty hunters and bold bounty hunters. Aim to be an old bounty hunter.”

“But you wouldn’t have been happy if I’d lost her.”

“No, but I’d have been even less happy if you’d been killed. I haven’t known you long, but I like you. You’ve got a good head on you and you’re shaping up well. I shall deny saying that when I’m sober, of course.”

She stared into her beer a for a while.

Fallon spoke again. “On the wall of the main conference hall at the Guild’s HQ are more than a thousand shiny plaques, each with a name and a date inscribed on it. That’s the Wall of Honour, where we remember the

bounty hunters that got killed on the job. More than a thousand, An Kohli, that's about ten a year and that don't include the ones who just about survived but are too beat up to work anymore. I don't want to have to be there the day they put up a plaque for you. They wouldn't right now, because you're not a Guild member, but one day ...” He let the sentence hang there as he took a sip from his drink.

But what he had said gave An Kohli pause for thought. Over a thousand dead bounty hunters. She hadn't realised how dangerous the job could be. Too morbid, she scolded herself. She changed the subject.

“Look, after you left, I heard a message come in on Priti's system. I took a look at it.”

Fallon shrugged, unconcerned about the revelation. “Did it tell you anything that you didn't already know?”

“Actually, it did. What do you make of this?” She passed her communicator across to him, the message already displayed on its small screen.

He squinted at it, trying to read the tiny symbols. “So?” He asked after he had understood what he was looking at. “She's a gun for hire. That's what her arrest warrant was all about. She kills people for money.”

“But this Genghis, he seems to be the one who sets up her marks ... is that the right term?”

“It will do. So what? It's none of our business. If we knew who he was it would still be none of our business, unless he had an arrest warrant out on him. Only then does it become our business and then only if we decide that we want to go after him. We don't have to take on any work we don't want to. We're self-employed. No one tells us who to arrest and who to leave.”

“But that can't be right. Surely we have a responsibility to find out who he is and bring him to justice. After all, who is the real killer? The being that pulls the trigger or the being that orders the trigger to be pulled?”

“A fine philosophical argument, An Kohli, but that doesn't make it our business. We're not the police. We don't investigate. We see the arrest warrants posted on the Guild's galacticnet page; we decide whether or not it is worth our while to go after the target; then we either go after them or we don't. End of story.”

“But ...”

“But nothing. We don’t have the resources to run investigations and that means while we’re chasing our own tails trying to find out who this Genghis character is, we’re not going after the targets that will earn us money.” He saw the look of frustration on An Kohli’s face and his eyes softened. “Look, I’ll pass this on to the police when we hand Priti over. If they think it’s worth looking into, they’ll follow it up. Maybe one day we will end up putting the cuffs on this Genghis character, but we’ll need an arrest warrant first. OK?”

An Kohli was far from happy, but without Fallon’s help there was nothing she could do. But she would remember the name. Maybe one day he would come to her attention again.

* * *

“How about this one?” An Kohli tapped a manicured nail on the screen next to a name.

“Roselee. Hmm. It’s a big bounty but she is one dangerous bitch.” Fallon replied. “You know those shiny plaques I told you about? Two of them belong to bounty hunters that went after her.”

“Have you never considered going after her?”

“Several times. Then I thought that I’d like to live to a ripe old age, so I didn’t.”

An Kohli decided not to remind him that he no longer had anything to lose. “What about this one then? Su Mali.”

“She’s a Gau. They’re hard to identify unless you can get up close. She could look like you if she wanted to. In fact, you could even be her.” He chuckled at the idea.

“Are there any Gau bounty hunters? They could go after her, because they can sense each other.”

“Actually, there aren’t any Gau in the Guild. They don’t seem to work on our side of the legal line.”

“Are you saying that all Gau are crooks?” Such a sweeping stereotype was decidedly speciest.

“Of course not, but the Gau keep themselves to themselves. They aren’t trusted much in the rest of the galaxy because of their shape shifting abilities, so they stay home on Camoo. Some planets have actually banned them from landing. But the ones that leave, and there are a few, seem to

walk a thin line between what is legal and what is illegal. You'll come across them from time to time, on places like Towie."

"I've heard of Towie. Is it as bad as they say?"

"It depends on what you define as 'bad'. I quite like the place. You can play roulette in some places that is almost straight and you can always get a card game there. The females are usually quite accommodating, for a price."

"Really! That is exploitation and I hope ..."

"Keep that lovely purple hair on, An Kohli. I don't make the rules."

"But you're happy to go along with whoever does." She snarled, "Which is just as bad."

"Well, it's a moot point these days anyway. Besides, it was you who wanted to know about Towie." Fallon reminded her. "Let's stick to a safer subject, shall we, like picking our next target."

The frown on An Kohli's face told Fallon that she wasn't happy, but she did turn back to the viewing screen and continue browsing through the names of beings that had arrest warrants listed on the Guild database.

As she scanned the screen Fallon spoke again. "I know Su Mali's reputation. She's probably one of the cleverest crooks in the galaxy. She's never seen the inside of a prison cell, not to my knowledge anyway and I've never heard of her being arrested by a bounty hunter. I think we'll pass on her for now."

"Who is this one, Mortens?"

Fallon scratched his head. "Not one I've heard of before. What does it say about him?"

"He's a Lupine from the Cerberus system. Wanted for kidnapping and extortion. Three counts. Oh, he's a real charmer. Once he's collected the ransom money the victim is never seen again."

"Hmm. The Cerberus system is over in Sector Five. Not my normal area of operations. I don't know my way around over there. What was his last known location?"

"A planet in a system called Taro. That's Sector Five as well."

"I've never heard of it, but with several billion planets in the galaxy no one can know them all. See what the galacticnet has to say about it."

An Kohli keyed in a search and was directed to the Planets R Us database. "Says here it's a type F-IV star with four planets. Only one

habitable. That's got a gravity of point nine of standard. The civilisation is advanced in technological terms. The planet is called Taro, after the star and the inhabitants are called Taroans. System of government is a number of nation states with democratically elected governments and an over-arching assembly that resolves disputes between nations. Major exports are Felenium and Drygon; major imports Perium and Venerum." The elements that were exported were sufficiently rare to provide the basis for a sound export economy, while imported ones were common in other parts of the galaxy, but obviously not on Taro.

"Sounds as dull as ditch water. I wonder what a kidnapper is doing there?"

"Looking for their next victim, I would think." An Kohli replied.

"Anything on the planet's news feeds about a kidnapping?"

There was brief delay while An Kohli ran a new query. "No, not as far as I can see."

"Which means he hasn't identified a suitable victim yet." Fallon drained his drink. "OK, set a course for this Taro place, but before you lose the galacticnet connection, run a query on the top ten percent of the population by wealth. If we can identify who Mortens' next victim is likely to be, it may help us to find him."

* * *

An Kohli ached in places where she hadn't even known she had places. Once again she adopted the semi-crouching position she had been taught, storing up energy in her legs that would allow her to spring forwards when she needed to and eyed up her assailant before aiming a kick at him. It helped to think of it as a him; it made her more aggressive. In fact, she mainly thought of it as the freighter captain, Grackle Bon. The unarmed combat droid swayed easily out of her reach and retaliated with a blow to An Kohli's body that made her wince.

"Stop, stop." A voice behind her commanded. The droid obeyed, slouching into a non-threatening pose and dropping its arms to its side.

"Come over here, An Kohli."

She turned and walked to the side of the large room where her instructor was sitting. He patted the chair next to him, indicating that An Kohli should sit down.

“What species is the droid emulating right now?” The instructor asked.

“A Flovian.” An Kohli replied.

“And what are the most vulnerable points on a Flovian?”

“It’s sexual organs.”

Ventra Mole smiled in acknowledgement, commending his pupil’s knowledge. “Correct. And where are those organs situated?”

“In his upper body, protected by his chest muscles.”

“Correct again. So why do you keep aiming kicks at the droid’s legs?”

“Well, I can’t get at his sexual organs because of all the muscle, so I have to start somewhere.”

“And when you start in the wrong place, what happens?”

The agony in the muscles in An Kohli’s back, sides and thighs told her the answer. “The droid punishes me.”

“So why keep following the same strategy?”

“I’m not sure ... What am I supposed to do?”

“If you can’t get at the *most* vulnerable spots, then go for the next vulnerable. Which, in the case of a Flovian, isn’t its legs. You can kick it there all day long and even if you make contact, which you haven’t done yet, it still won’t hurt it. Well, not very much. You are more likely to make a real Flovian more angry and therefore more likely to try to kill you.”

Without warning Ventra stabbed two of his fingers towards An Kohli’s eyes. Her reflexes were fast, but had he not stopped his hand when he did she would have been blinded.

She flinched away from him. “What the ...”

He laughed. “Sorry An Kohli. Just a little demonstration. Virtually every species in the galaxy has eyes and almost all of them are vulnerable. Attack your opponent there and you will at least distract them, which means you can then get a knee or a boot in to another part of the body.”

“But the eyes, I’m not sure ...”

“Then you have to get sure An Kohli. You are thinking as a nice civilised being always thinks. It appals you to think of deliberately blinding someone. But the sort of being that you are going to come up against will have no such sensitivities. They don’t play by nice, civilised rules, which means that you can’t afford to either. If they can blind you they will, so you have to be ready to do the same to them.”

They had been working together for a week, with Ventra Mole teaching An Kohli the fighting skills that she would need and then letting her practise on the droid, which could be programmed to emulate the physical attributes and fighting styles of over a thousand different species. But when she got it wrong, as she had several times, she had received a short, sharp whack. Not hard enough to break a bone, it was a well calibrated machine, but hard enough to cause a bruise. The delicate lilac coloured skin of her back and ribs looked more like a thunder cloud.

“Fallon will be back in a day or two. He has paid me a lot of money to teach you to fight. I suggest that you don’t make him regret his investment.” He pointed back to the centre of the combat area. “Now, go and see how much damage you can do to my droid.”

As An Kohli strode back towards the centre, Ventra gave the command. “Fight!” At once the droid straightened and took up a guard position, its head turning to track An Kohli’s movements. She took up a position in front of it, lowering herself into a semi-crouch once again, ready to leap as soon as she saw an opening. Her mind reeled with all the instructions she had been given over the previous days.

She jabbed towards the droids leg with her boot. The droid moved out of the way again, raising one arm to deliver her punishment for missing, but already An Kohli was in the air, stabbing her fingers towards the point where the droids eyes would be if it were a genuine Flovian. The droid reeled backwards, raising its arms to protect itself and An Kohli shot her right foot forward, slamming a kick into the droid’s groin.

It wasn’t a vulnerable spot, but it would inflict pain and the droid reacted to its programming, doubling over and using its hands to defend itself. An Kohli took a half step backwards and launched another kick, this time upwards towards the droid’s head area. Her boot landed solidly and the droid crumpled to its knees and then bent forward to land full stretch on the ground.

“That’s better An Kohli. See how effective you can be when you forget to be civilised.” Ventra Mole’s voice came from behind her. “There is only one rule in a street fight. That is to get your opponent down on the ground and make sure he doesn’t get up again.”

An Kohli felt elated. It was the first time she had beaten the droid. She wiped a hand across her face to wipe away the sweat that was running down

it.

“Reset” Ventra Mole commanded. The droid responded at once. Clambering to its feet and waiting for the next command. “Let’s try something really challenging now. An Kohli, have you heard of Jackon?”

“Vaguely. They work a lot in mining and tunnelling.”

“That is correct. They work in the building trade, the mining trade and any other trade where brute strength is valued above intellect. They also work as hired muscle, so you are bound to come across them.”

As she watched, the droid seemed to grow in front of her eyes, as it adjusted its form to assume the size and shape of a Jackon. It grew several sim, towering over her. But it was its feet that fascinated her. They seemed to almost form a separate being. She felt her jaw sag open. Behind her Ventra Mole let out a chuckle.

“It is said that Jackon have such large feet because they are so stupid that they forget how to stand upright, so their feet keep them up until they remember again.”

An Kohli reached into a pouch at her belt and drew out a pair of virtual reality spectacles, which she slipped on. She scrolled through the index until she found the Jackon. Her vision filled with a 3D representation of the being. Arrows appeared telling her where she could hit it that would hurt it the most. There weren’t very many arrows and they all appeared to be pointing at places she couldn’t reach without a step ladder. This was going to be a tough one.

“Fight!” commanded Ventra Mole, just as the words ‘Jackon are likely to attack without warning’ scrolled across the bottom of the virtual reality image. An Kohli leapt backwards, feeling the draft of a blow whistle past her body. She snatched the spectacles from her face and dropped into a defensive crouch as she fumbled to get them back into the pouch.

Most of the arrows had been pointing towards places that were hard for someone of her height to reach and she wasn’t exactly short. But two of the arrows hadn’t been. She raised her boot and drove her heel down into the droid’s Jackon sized foot as hard as she could. She was rewarded with the sight of the droid hopping around on one foot while letting out mechanical yelps of simulated pain. As the droid hopped closer to her An Kohli drove her heel into the other foot. The Jackon collapsed onto the ground. An Kohli pulled her foot back, ready to launch an attack on the droid’s head area.

“Stop! Stop!” Ventra Mole shouted. The droid obeyed and An Kohli reluctantly lowered her foot. “Well done, An Kohli. You seem to be getting the idea. I think we’ll call it a day there.”

* * *

“I think I have a lead on Mortens.” Fallon announced as An Kohli re-joined him on the command deck of the Moonbeam. He had been gone for ten days, trying to find out more on the whereabouts of their new target.

“And it’s nice to see you, too.” An Kohli replied, not bothering to hide her sarcasm. She shifted uncomfortably as she sat down, her bruises bothering her still. Fallon gave a sly grin, understanding the cause of her discomfort. No doubt Ventra Mole had provided regular updates on her progress in his fighting academy.

“He’s in a city called Frinchley, on Taro. He seems to have come to the attention of the local police.” He called up a screen which displayed an image of Mortens sitting in a bar, in conversation with two other beings. Their form was unfamiliar to her, which suggested that the two were native Taroans. They were thin, rather spindly looking beings, not as tall as Mortens.

“What’s the connection?” She asked.

“I don’t know yet, but if he’s planning a job then he’ll probably need some hired help. So, he might be meeting with these two to recruit them. No use speculating. We’ll go back to Taro and see if the police are willing to share anything with us.”

“Do the police usually co-operate with bounty hunters?”

“Far more than they should, probably. That’s how I got a copy of this image. The police on Taro did a trawl of the arrest warrants database, the same one that the Guild uses. A call to Guild HQ provided them with my name as being on the case.” Fallon said, feeding instructions into the navi-com. “The police know that having a known criminal on the loose isn’t something that’s good for their crime statistics, so they’re happy when we come along and offer to take them off their hands. Their jurisdiction is limited to their own planets, you see. Almost none of the governments in the galaxy have ever signed extradition treaties or law enforcement partnership agreements, so if they catch a criminal from another planet they almost always have to let them go again if they aren’t wanted for any local

crimes. They could call us to enforce the arrest warrant, but by the time we get there the lawyers have usually sprung their clients and they've disappeared.

But it's good for business. I've lost count of the number of tip offs I've had from cops telling me they know where a wanted criminal is. That way they don't have to do anything themselves. Wherever you go and whatever you do, An Kohli, never upset the local cops. They're your friends, even if they don't always show it."

"On the media shows there always seems to be corrupt cops." An Kohli observed. "You know, the ones who are in the criminals' pockets."

"Yeah, they do exist, but not nearly as many as the media shows make out. Besides, if they can be paid off by the criminals, they can be paid off by me as well. All I have to do is make it more financially viable, by offering to pay a bit more."

"How do you know which ones are on the payroll, or how much to offer?"

"Believe me, An Kohli, the bad cops have ways of letting you know. Now, get some sleep because you're on watch in six hours."

* * *

Behind the desk sat a tired looking Taroan cop. Like all the other Taroans An Kohli had seen, he was tall and thin. He looked like a strong wind would blow him over.

"Your being came up as a result of an on-going investigation into another case, which I can't tell you about. Let's just say that the two in the image are known associates of a certain being of interest on this planet. When we got the image we didn't know who he was, so we had him checked, mainly because he's from off-planet and that usually means trouble."

"You don't sound very tolerant of visitors." Fallon said.

"Well, we have reason to be suspicious. This part of Taro isn't your normal tourist destination, so when beings turn up out of the pink* we tend to think the worst. Present company excepted, of course." He cracked a weak smile. "Immigration didn't have him flagged, which isn't unusual. If they tracked every hoodlum in the galaxy we'd need a database the size of another planet. But when they appear on the police radar, as he did with these two, then we take an interest."

“Were you following those two?”

“No. They’re small fry and we don’t have the resources. But a cop happened to be in the bar looking for an informant; it’s that sort of bar. He spotted them in the company of the stranger, so he grabbed the image. The image matched on the galacticnet to give us his name and the fact that there’s a warrant out on him. We’d rather he wasn’t here, so I told my guys to tip off the Guild that he was here in the hope that someone would come and take him off our hands.”

“Well, we’re here. So where can we find him now?”

The cop shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Well, that’s a tricky one. I’m afraid we don’t know. We didn’t actually try to follow him, and we can’t find him on any of the hotel registers, at least not in his real name. What do you think he’s doing here?”

“You’ve seen the warrant. He’s mainly into kidnapping, so we suspect he’s come here to find a victim, probably a youngling from a wealthy family. Anyone in this city that would fit the bill?”

“We have our share of the rich and famous. They’re mainly business beings, but there are a few sports stars from local teams. We’re not the sort of place that attracts celebrities though. They mainly settle over on the north coast. It’s nice there, good weather, nice beaches, good schools for the younglings, that sort of things. Basically everything we haven’t got a lot of.”

“It looked like a nice enough city.” An Kohli observed. “I mean, from what I saw as we came from the shuttle port.”

“It used to be.” The cop gave a big sigh, as though remembering days past. “But the main industries fell on hard times. The money moved to other places and the city has never really recovered from that. Unemployment is high and when you get high unemployment you get more crime. Some of it from the unemployed themselves, but mainly from beings who want to exploit them, so you know, we got a lot of drug dealers because drugs take away the day to day pain, at least for a short time. That gives us a lot of prostitutes of both genders who are trying to earn enough to pay off their dealers. Then we got the turf wars between the different gangs. And because the city can’t collect enough taxes, the police haven’t got enough resources to keep a lid on it all. I’d like to say this is a nice city, but I’d be lying. Of

course, we've got a lot of good beings here as well, but every year a few hundred more families decide they'd rather live somewhere else."

"In that case, I'm surprised you still have the wealthy business beings." Fallon observed.

The cop grimaced. "Well, that depends very much on the sort of business they're running, if you get my meaning."

Fallon did.

"So, if you don't know where Mortens is right now, where do you suggest I start looking?"

"I was just coming to that." The cop said. He leant forward and pressed a button on a small console. "Send Vaquesh and Drogwitz in." He said, before leaning back again. "They're two of my best detectives. They're working the case on our being of interest, the one who occasionally employs the two hoods seen with your target. They'll give you all you need to know on those two and if you're lucky, they'll lead you to Mortens."

The door to the office opened without a knock and two cops entered. They looked tired, just like their boss.

"Vaquesh, Drogwitz, I'd like you to meet Fallon and An Kohli. They're bounty hunters and are interested in that off-planeter that was spotted with Hooren and Magwill a couple of weeks back."

"Pleased to meet you." The one introduced as Vaquesh extended his hand to be shaken. Drogwitz, who was further away, just gave a small wave.

Not for the first time, An Kohli wondered how the universal greeting seemed to be a shake of the hand. Even beings that didn't have hands, as such, made a similar sort of greeting with whatever limbs or appendages they possessed.

"Give them all the help they need." The senior cop continued. "With a bit of luck, they'll prevent us having to investigate a kidnapping further down the line." He turned to activate a computer terminal, signalling that the meeting was over.

Fallon and An Kohli rose from their seats and followed the two cops out into the squad room.

* The sky on Taro is a delicate shade of pink, due to the way the light from the local star is filtered in the upper atmosphere.

* * *

“Remember, you’re just to follow him.” Fallon leaned across from his electro bike to emphasise the point. “If he meets up with anyone else just grab an image. We’ll pass it on to Vaquesh and Drogwitz and they’ll take it from there. If he meets up with Mortens, try to follow them, but if they split-up stick with Mortens. We’re not interested in Magwill. He’s only a means to an end.”

“OK, you don’t have to keep on repeating yourself.” An Kohli sounded aggrieved.

“I think that after what happened with Priti, I do have to keep repeating myself.” Fallon growled. “Mortens is a whole level of nasty worse than Priti and she was bad enough. Mortens will kill you in the street just for the fun of it, no second chance. Now, I’ll get over to Hooren’s place and wait for him to appear. If Magwill is going to meet up with Mortens then it’s likely that Hooren also will, so we’ll probably end up in the same place, but just in case we don’t and you lose Magwill or Mortens, meet me back at the police station. If we can’t grab Mortens today we’ll have to book into a hotel and try again tomorrow.”

After Vaquesh and Drogwitz had finished briefing them on the two Taroan criminals, they had taken them to the two locations where they were known to live. They were run-down apartment buildings, their condition indicating how low down the food chain Hooren and Magwill were in the criminal hierarchy. After taking them to a place where they could hire two eletro-bikes, Vaquesh and Drogwitz had wished them good luck before returning to their own duties.

“They’ll probably use public transport or hover taxis to get around the city.” Vaquesh explained. “It’s what they normally do if they aren’t on a job. It will make it easier for you not to be spotted if you follow them on electro-bikes. They’re a common form of transport so you won’t stand out.” With that Vaquesh had climbed back into his unmarked police hover car and driven off with Drogwitz.

“OK, An Kohli. I’m going now, but you make sure you don’t do anything stupid.”

An Kohli was about to make a rather sharp response, but she found she was talking to the not very fresh air as Fallon squeezed the throttle of his

electro-bike and sped away,

Instead, she surveyed the scruffy street in which she found herself. It wasn't long, just about a hundred met, lined on both sides by old, run down buildings, most of which had been converted into apartments. There were no retail outlets in the street. It was early morning and the city had yet to come to life.

She eased her electro-bike forward slowly, watching the windows to see if she was being watched herself. The only signs of life were the occasional glow of an interior light around the frame of a shuttered window. The shutters looked strong, a deterrent against burglars no doubt.

She stopped short of the building within which Magwill was supposed to live, according to the two Taroan cops. His apartment was on the top floor of three. She peered upwards to see if she could spot any signs of life but, like the others in the building, the windows were covered by shutters. Who would try to break into a third floor apartment by using a window? She wondered. There was no way to get up to it. But the building had a flat roof, so maybe the method of entry would be to slide down a rope if the window wasn't secured.

She had no idea if Magwill was actually at home. They had assumed he would be, but there was no way of knowing for certain, not without going and knocking on his door. Briefly An Kohli considered doing that but decided against. She was from off-planet and that would immediately make Magwill suspicious. The next best thing would be to bribe a Taroan to go and knock for her, on some pretext, but there were none around this early in the day. Besides, this was Magwill's turf. It was likely that any local would tell Magwill of her presence out of some sense of loyalty. Outsiders weren't to be trusted, if the what the local police had to say on the subject was anything to go by.

There was nothing for it, she just had to watch and hope. Thinking of which, standing on the street she was like a lighthouse in the desert. She had to find somewhere she could conceal herself while still being able to observe the front of the building.

The apartment buildings on both sides of the street were separated by narrow alleys. She opened the electro-bike's throttle slightly and rolled almost silently towards the alley opposite Magwill's building. It was dark, dingy and very smelly. She cringed at the thought of what might be lying in

there. But there was nowhere else. She turned the bike and reversed into the gloomy canyon between the buildings. Something scurried away. It sounded as though it might be quite big. Once in the shadows she climbed off the bike and positioned herself so that she could see the building's entrance.

Reaching behind her she fumbled with a pouch on her belt and drew out her binoculars. Touching the sensor, the twin stereoscopic cameras sprang to life. Raising the device to her eyes she was rewarded with a perfect 3D image, displayed on the two tiny screens that matched up with her eyes. She slid her finger along the outside of the camera's barrel mounting and it obliged her by zooming in to give her a close up of the entrance door. No light came from within.

The belt had been Fallon's idea. "That outfit may do wonders for your figure, An Kohli." He observed, "But it's useless for carrying stuff. You've got nowhere to put anything."

"What do I need to carry?" She had asked naively.

By way of answer Fallon had started emptying the pockets of his leather jacket and trousers. She was amazed to see how much stuff he had stashed on him. There were binoculars like the ones she was now using, handcuffs, his communicator, credit cards, a rectangular device with two metal probes on the end which Fallon said was a zapper, what looked like miniature grenades, a cork screw, a clasp knife and several unidentified metal objects.

He disappeared from the command deck and returned an hour later with a belt in his hand; one of his own, cut down to fit An Kohli's slimmer waist. He had fashioned small bags out of canvas and strung them around the belt. "It'll do until you can get something better." He grunted. "Maybe I should patent it and make some money."

"I think the 'utility belt' has already been invented." An Kohli replied with a smile, before thanking him.

The 'something better' turned out to be three hand made belts which he gave her after taking Priti to jail. There was one in black, one white and one lilac to match the three Superskin outfits she had bought.

"No need to thank me." He held up his hand. "They'll come out of your pay."

The final addition to the belt, which Fallon told her she didn't have to pay for unless she lost it, was her pulsar, which fitted neatly into a holster which

now hung from her belt. The weight of it felt reassuring. If it was necessary to fight her way out of trouble, she felt she had some sort of chance.

There was movement in front of Magwill's building. An Kohli raised her binoculars. False alarm. It was a female who came through the door, adjusting her clothing as though she had dressed hurriedly. She turned in the direction that would take her to a maglev stop on the main street.

Public transport, one of the possible ways that Magwill might travel. The maglev technology made it quick, but it had to stop to pick up and drop off passengers, so An Kohli would have no trouble keeping up with it. The alternative was a hover taxi. Like the maglev, it relied on opposing fields to keep it floating above the ground but opposing gravitational fields rather than opposing magnetic fields. The vehicle was propelled forward by a small impulse engine mounted underneath. If the driver chose, the hover-taxi could be elevated to a height of fifty met and fly across country, but the drain on power made it impractical for use by a driver who needed to put in a full shift without re-charging. She was confident that a hover-taxi wouldn't challenge her ability to follow it.

As Taro's star began to rise higher, signalling the start of a new day, the street started to come to life. Shutters banged open to allow in fresh air and daylight. Figures appeared on the street, their body language showing the pressures of day to day life. Beings on low pay who would toil all day, until it was time to go home, knowing that they wouldn't earn enough to pay all the bills. Maybe some of them did two jobs. Unemployment depressed wages. The beings that got what work was available were the ones who would work for the lowest wages. An Kohli thanked her lucky stars that she had been born on a planet that didn't have those problems. Mun Dane might have been boring, but poverty there was defined as only being able to afford the second best hover car on the market, rather than the best.

Another figure exited the building across the street, but it was another false alarm. A female, old before her years, shepherded a couple of unruly younglings in front of her. One ran left and the other right, leaving their parent shouting after them. They stopped a short distance away, clearly delighted about the upset they were causing. The mother folded her arms and her foot started to tap. The children recognised the signs and calmed down, slinking dutifully back to her. Taking them by the scruff of their spindly necks she pushed them along the street.

The chances were that Magwill wasn't an early riser. According to the two Taroan cops he and Hooren didn't have regular jobs, so unless whoever was paying them wanted them early, they would probably not show themselves until later in the day, if at all. She could be in for a long shift.

A figure shuffled into view. As he passed each alley it looked in, searching amongst the rubbish bins and detritus for anything he could make use of. In the alley on the far side of Magwill's building he stooped and picked something up, examined it and dropped it into a large bag he carried. This could be a problem. If he crossed to this side of the street he was bound to discover her. As she watched through her binoculars her view was suddenly obscured by the arrival of a hover-taxi. It drew to a halt directly in front of the building.

This was it, she felt sure. She was right. The front door opened. Even with her view obstructed by the hover-taxi, An Kohli could still make out the upper half of Magwill, recognisable from the images she had studied and committed to memory.

She raised her hand to her ear and touched the sensor on her earpiece. "Target One on the move." She said.

"Roger." Came Fallon's reply. She thought he might wish her luck, or give her another warning to be careful, but he restrained himself.

Stradling her electro-bike, An Kohli made ready to follow her target.

The hover-taxi turned around in its own length and took off along the road. An Kohli allowed another vehicle to pass along the street and place itself between her and the hover-taxi before she opened the throttle and turned out of the alley to follow.

* * *

If the passenger in the hover-taxi realised he was being followed he showed no sign. She wasn't worried about the driver. It was probably a droid anyway, in the vehicle's driving seat just to provide some visual reassurance that it was under control. The vehicle sped along beneath the mag-lev track before turning onto a cross street, then continuing in a straight line for several more minutes. The early morning traffic was heavy, but the hover-taxi nipped in and out of the large delivery vehicles. An Kohli weaved her way in pursuit, always keeping something between her and her target.

The vehicle came to a sudden stop, forcing An Kohli to overshoot. Further along the road she turned the bike across the traffic flow until she was facing back the way she had come. She was just in time to see Magwill cross the sidewalk and enter a building. As the hover-taxi sped off, An Kohli guided her electro-bike into the space it had vacated.

The building was a fancy hotel. Well, once upon a time it had been a fancy hotel. Now it was looking a bit careworn, with chipped paint and cracked stonework. But it still had an air of grandeur about the it.

What to do now she wondered. Did she follow Magwill inside? She was from off-planet, so she had a legitimate reason for being in a hotel. But she would be noticed and that might cause Magwill to mention her to whoever he was there to meet. She had no doubt that he was meeting someone, why else would he be in such an upmarket establishment?

As she secured her electro-bike to a street lamp, her thoughts were interrupted by a flurry of activity. Two vehicles pulled up alongside her.

The first was a standard sort of hover-car. It disgorged four occupants who hurried to take up stations at the four corners of the second vehicle, facing outwards and eying the street with suspicion. For Taroans they were large; at least a head taller than most of the ones that An Kohli had seen so far. Bulges beneath their clothing suggested concealed firepower.

The second vehicle was far more impressive. It was a large limousine, probably big enough to provide a home for a family of four in comfort. A being, probably the driver, hopped out from the front and opened the rear door. An expensively dressed male Taroan stepped out, followed by a female that positively glittered with expensive jewellery. She stopped to hold her hands out to two younglings.

A uniformed porter practically threw himself towards the rear of the vehicle to start unloading luggage onto a trolley. The family paid him no attention, nor did they even look at their luggage. Someone would take care of that. When you were as rich as these beings clearly were, someone always took care of things for you.

The bodyguards formed a loose ring around the family, and they made their way inside the hotel. The porter continued to unload an increasingly large stack of luggage. An Kohli realised that this was her way to get into the hotel without being noticed. She sidled over to the porter, feeling in one of her pouches.

“Did a Taroan just come into the hotel, just before this family?” She asked him. “Scruffily dressed, looks like he doesn’t really belong here.”

“I’m sorry, Madam, but I can’t discuss our guests.” He replied without looking at her. An Kohli nudged his arm and stretched out her hand so that it intercepted his eyeline. He looked at her hand, his eyes lighting up at the sight of the ten nuk bill he saw there.

“Always be prepared to pay for information, An Kohli.” Fallon had told her as he handed her a wad of notes. “Sometimes it’s the easiest way to find things out.”

“He took a seat in the lobby, facing the door.” The bill vanished as though it had never existed.

“I need to get inside to keep an eye on him. Can you help?” Another note appeared in An Kohli’s fingers; a twenty this time.

“As I wheel this luggage inside,” the porter said, magicking the second note away as easily as the first, “stay to the left of it.” The pile of luggage was almost as high as An Kohli’s head. He was right, Magwill wouldn’t be able to see her. “I’ll be going straight towards the service elevator. Get out on the first floor. There’s a lounge bar there that overlooks the lobby. You can probably find a place where he won’t be able to see you.”

All the time the porter had kept his eye on the luggage as he lifted it out of the limo and onto the growing stack beside him, never once looking at An Kohli. This suggested to her that she wasn’t the first to make such a request. Briefly she wondered who else he might have smuggled into the hotel and why.

The limo’s luggage compartment slammed shut as the last bag was removed and both vehicles moved away from the front of the hotel, probably to a vehicle park somewhere beneath.

The porter stepped behind his trolley and with an audible grunt he started to push it towards the hotel entrance. Its wheels squealed in protest at the weight. An Kohli fell in beside it, on the left as instructed.

The interior of the hotel looked better than the exterior, with gleaming floors, soft lighting and plenty of shiny metal and glass. The trolley squeaked its way across the floor, its motion easier on the smooth surface. An elevator door slid open as they approached and then closed behind them as the trolley bumped against the rear wall. The porter pressed buttons and they began to move.

An Kohli's ride was a short one. With a ping the door slid open, she stepped out and the door slid shut again. Too late she realised that she hadn't thanked the porter. She heard the whine of machinery as it continued its ascent. She wasn't sure, but she thought she might have heard a sarcastic "don't mention it" as the elevator moved.

She could see the bar ahead of her through a pair of oversized doors. She approached cautiously, not sure of the layout and not wanting Magwill to spot her. If she could watch him it meant he might possibly be able to see her.

She had no cause for concern. The whole of one side of the bar was a huge window, but Magwill was sitting with his back towards her. From her angle she could take a seat at one of the tables and see him, but if he looked up and behind him he would only be able to see the table and, perhaps, her legs beneath it.

She sat down and tapped an order for a non-alcoholic drink into the auto-barkeep. She winced as she saw the price, but Fallon's borrowed credit card made sure she didn't have to pay.

Magwill was watching the hotel door nervously, one foot tapping. Remembering Fallon's lesson about not staring directly at her target, she moved her gaze to take in the rest of the lobby. A couple sat at another table, sipping drinks which might have been coffee, but otherwise the lobby was empty at this early hour. An Kohli couldn't see the reception desk, assuming the hotel had one, but that might be directly beneath her, facing the door.

If Magwill was watching the door, it suggested that whoever he was meeting wasn't staying in the hotel. It provided a good meeting place, though. People came and went all the time in hotels.

An Kohli wondered who the rich family were. They certainly travelled in style and also with a lot of security. She smiled grimly, seeing the hired muscle as a disadvantage rather than as a benefit of wealth. She supposed the bodyguards were necessary. After all, the younglings would certainly be an attractive target for k...

Her train of thought went slamming into the buffers. Kidnappers, of course. Was that why Magwill was here? Was the rich family Mortens' target? If so, this was more than just a meeting. This was the job that Magwill and Hooren had been hired to do.

Touching her earpiece, An Kohli spoke. “Fallon, I think I know why Magwill is here.”

“Go ahead, An Kohli” His reply rasped in her ear.

“A very fancy looking family has just arrived at my location. That’s the Frinchley Grand Hotel. I think that’s why Magwill is here. He looks nervous, like he’s expecting something to happen.”

There was a pause. “OK Hooren is also on the move and if he keeps going in his present direction he’ll end up at the same hotel. He’s driving a delivery truck, which fits in with what you’ve just told me, so you could be right. Just keep an eye on them. I’ll call the police. Let them deal with things. OK?”

“What if Mortens turns up?”

“Just do as you’re told, An Kohli. If Mortens thinks he’s threatened he may start shooting and who knows what might happen then. Just keep an eye on Magwill. If it looks like they’ve done the job, try to follow them, but don’t, on any account, try to intervene. Got that?”

“Yeah, I’ve got that.” But An Kohli’s mind was racing. If that family was the target, she could be up there, outside their room. More likely they were in the largest suite in the hotel. She could prevent the kidnapping and take Mortens at the same time.

Screw Fallon. She was here and he wasn’t.

She rose and made her way out of the bar to a bank of guest elevators. One was already standing open, ready for use. She pressed the top button, the one that she had seen the porter press in the service elevator, and the doors slid shut.

It was a longer ride this time. Even though the elevator was fast, the hotel was a tall one and she was going to the very top floor.

Stepping out into a wide, square area, it felt as though her feet sank up to her ankles in the luxurious carpet. How had the porter got the luggage trolley through this? But the freight elevator didn’t open onto this lobby, so perhaps there were other entrances to the suites.

There were four doors, one on each of the two side walls and two in the wall facing her, but spaced well apart. The one to her left had one of the tall security guards standing outside it. He stiffened as he saw An Kohli leave the elevator. She beamed her best smile at him and turned away to the opposite door. It stood open and the sound of cleaning drifted to her ears.

She stepped inside and pushed the door's control button so that it slid shut. Inside the door was a security monitor. She touched the screen and it sprang into life to give her a view outside the suite. She could clearly see the bodyguard on the other side of the lobby.

Fishing inside a pouch An Kohli retrieved another twenty nuk bill. If money could buy information, it could also buy silence.

There was no sign of life in the large lounge area in which she found herself standing. Doors opened off on three sides, no doubt leading to bedrooms. The cleaning noises came from a door to her left, but shut off abruptly. The door slid open and a uniformed female Taroan walked backwards through it, dragging something behind her. She half turned towards An Kohli and gave a yelp of alarm when she saw that she wasn't alone.

An Kohli held a finger to her lips, the universal sign for 'shut the freak up' and held out the money. The maid turned out to be just as good a magician as the porter and quickly made her way into another room, where the sound of the machine resumed.

An Kohli watched the monitor for signs of activity in the plush lobby. Fallon's voice sounded in her ear once more. "Hooren has just gone into the underground vehicle park at the hotel. Have you got eyes on Magwill or Mortens?"

Shit! How could she answer that question without lying to him?

"Hello, An Kohli, can you hear me?"

"Yeah, sorry. Erm ... no sign of Mortens yet." Which was true. The lobby was empty but for the security guard outside the suite on the opposite side.

"I can hear police sirens, so if Morens can hear them as well, he's likely to make a run for it. Where's Magwill?"

"He's in the front lobby." An Kohli had no idea if she was telling the truth, but it was the truth as far as she knew it.

Surely if Hooren was there, then Mortens and Magwill would have arrived on this floor by now if he was going to snatch someone from the suite. A shiver of doubt ran through An Kohli's body. What if this wasn't where the job was to take place? What if it was just where the three were meeting and they were now getting into the truck to go somewhere else?

"An Kohli, are you sure Magwill is in the lobby? Because that truck has just shot out of the vehicle park and I'm pretty sure that I saw Magwill in

the front with Hooren.”

Damn, damn and damn again, An Kohli thought. “Is there no sign of Mortens?”

“No, but he could be in the back.” There was a pause. “An Kohli, I think you’d better get down here. I’m going after the truck. Meet me back at the police station.” Fallon sounded pretty pissed and it was no wonder. An Kohli knew instinctively that Fallon knew she’d had no idea where Magwill was before he left in the truck.

Well, it was clear that she was wasting her time hanging around up on the top floor. She opened the door and strode quickly to the elevator, ignoring the security guard. He watched her every step of the way, his hand creeping towards the bulge under his jacket.

On the ground floor An Kohli stepped out of the elevator into a scene of chaos. A suited female was shouting orders at beings, who were then being given countermanding orders by a male figure on the other side of the lobby. Beings rushed back and forward, unsure who to obey. An Kohli spied the porter who had helped her earlier and grabbed at his arm as he hurried past.

“What’s going on?”

“There’s been a kidnapping.” The porter gasped, trying to wriggle free of An Kohli’s strong grip.

How could that be? She’d been sure that no one had gone onto the penthouse floor apart from her. She would have seen them. “Who’s been kidnapped?” She demanded.

“Gretchel Garbler.” The porter replied. “She’s a famous movie star who’s in town to shoot a film. She was staying here incognito, but someone must have found out.”

“What floor was she on?”

“The eighty fifth.” The porter finally managed to release himself and hurried away, rubbing at his thin arm.

Oh no. The eighty fifth floor was one below the floor she had been on. It probably had penthouses suites for the hotel’s wealthier clients as well. She was distracted by the arrival of the police, who ran in, guns in hand, determined to stop a kidnapping that had already taken place. They ran to the bank of elevators as the suited female crossed over to talk to them. There was a heated argument before the police seemed to accept that the

victim wasn't the one they expected. But there had been a kidnapping, so they were at least in the right hotel.

She caught sight of the two detectives, Vaquesh and Drogwitz, at the same time as they spotted her. Ignoring the uniformed officers, they crossed the lobby towards her. "Was it Mortens?" Vaquesh asked.

"I'm not sure. It was definitely Magwill and Hooren though." She told them about the truck.

"Well, they couldn't organise an orgy in a brothel, so someone else must have been the brains." He held up a hand as he listened to a communicator lodged in his ear. When he had finished he spoke to An Kohli again "Seems that someone, not a local, broke into the suite during the night and waited for Gretchel Garbler and her companion to return from some party they were attending. They tied up her travelling companion" he smirked at the euphemism, "and then left a short while ago with Gretchel Garbler. No doubt when Hooren arrived in the truck. Magwill must have been the lookout to make sure Mortens wasn't interrupted by any of the movie people who might have turned up early. Or by us for that matter,"

"Why didn't they just take her during the night?" It would have made more sense, An Kohli thought.

"The vehicle park is locked and patrolled at night for security reasons, so they had to wait for it to be opened in the morning." Drogwitz explained. "During the night they could only get in or out if they could prove they were hotel guests or making bona fide deliveries. During the day though, the truck wouldn't be challenged. They probably used the service elevator. Obviously, they couldn't take Gretchel Garbler out any other way, or they would have been seen."

"I take it that Gretchel Garbler's travelling companion raised the alarm."

"Yes," continued Vaquesh, "When Mortens and the female left he managed to get to his communicator and get a call out." Vaquesh gave An Kohli a hard look. "Where were you while this was all going on? I thought you were following Magwill."

"I was, but then ..." She didn't know what to say.

"But then you worked out that the job was going down and you thought you'd prevent it." Drogwitz finished the sentence for her. An Kohli had to admit he was a good detective.

"Yeah. There was this wealthy family who are staying on the top floor."

“We know all about them. They own the hotel and are obvious targets, so we’re always informed when they’re in town. Their security people have a direct channel to us.”

“So, you knew that they wouldn’t be the target?”

“Pretty much. There’s no way Mortens could get anyone out of that suite without raising the alarm. But the move star ... well, no one thought to tell us about her.” He gave An Kohli a pitying look. “I guess you’re going to be deep in it with your boss, eh?”

“I think so. But he is following the truck, so maybe you’ll find Gretchel Garbler quite quickly. Then we’ll get Mortens.”

“Sorry, not this time An Kohli. If he’s committed a felony on Taro he’s ours.”

An Kohli’s heart sank. The one saving grace of her mess up was the thought that they would still get the bounty, but that wouldn’t be possible now. Fallon was going to have a fit when he found out.

“An Kohli, are the police there yet?” Fallon’s voice sounded in her ear, taking her by surprise.

“Yes, I’m with Vaquesh and Driogwitz right now.”

“OK, tell them it looks like the truck is heading for the shuttle park. I think Mortens is going to take the victim off planet.”

That made sense. With a whole galaxy to hide in, Mortens could make his ransom demands from just about anywhere with no fear of the authorities being able to track him down. She relayed the message.

Vaquesh grinned. “We keep a cruiser in orbit. As soon as we find out what ship he’s headed for, we’ll intercept him.”

“Won’t he just threaten to kill Gretchel Garbler if he feels trapped?”

“Yes, but killing her would give us an excuse to open fire. Crims don’t get themselves killed if they can avoid it. He’ll negotiate. We’ll get Gretchel Garbler back and then we’ll worry about arresting him. He certainly won’t be allowed to leave orbit.”

4 - Dishy

Fallon had finally stopped shouting at her after what seemed like two hours, but had probably been less. He had eventually thrown himself into the

captain's chair on the Moonbeam's command deck, after telling An Kohli to get out of his sight.

She retreated to her cabin and climbed onto her bunk, burying her face in the mattress. She was determined she wouldn't cry, but tears leaked through her tightly closed eyelids anyway.

As it happened, Mortens had never even left the surface of Taro. Seeing what he intended, Fallon had shot a hole in the side of his shuttle, rendering it useless. A stand-off had begun, as predicted by Vaquesh, with Mortens demanding a ransom and a new shuttle. The shuttle had duly arrived and Mortens had dragged the struggling Gretchel Garbler up its boarding ramp and into the cabin, where he was greeted by a grinning police officer who zapped him before he could react. Unfortunately, because she was being held by Mortens, Gretchel Garbler also suffered the effects of the high voltage electrical charge, but she would recover.

On the short shuttle ride back to the Moonbeam, Fallon had remained tight lipped, saving his wrath for when they arrived on board. The expedition to capture Mortens had been an expensive one and now there would be no bounty to recoup the investment. The movie company's insurers would make a token payment as a reward for Fallon's intervention, but it was nowhere near enough to cover the outgoings.

Several hours later An Kohli tip-toed onto the command deck, to find Fallon sitting drinking Grovian whisky as the Moonbeam sped through a wormhole to whatever destination he had set.

"I'm sorry, Fallon. I screwed up. Just drop me off at a convenient planet, somewhere I won't starve to death and I'll be out of your hair." Too late she remembered that he didn't have any hair; a consequence of his illness.

"Why would I want to do that?" Fallon didn't look up from his contemplation of the contents of his glass.

"I screwed up. You can't want me around anymore after that. I'm a liability."

He drained the glass and walked rather unsteadily into the ship's tiny galley. He returned a few moments later with two glasses of Grovian, one of which he offered to An Kohli.

She looked at him in puzzlement. He gestured with the glass, insistent. She took it suspiciously.

“I’ve just invested a whole lot of money in your training.” He slurred. “If I dump you now I’ll never get that money back. You screwed up, so what? The being that never made a mistake never made anything.”

“But ...”

“But nothing. You think I never made a mistake?” he pointed at his scarred head. “Each of those is a mistake I made. I’m lucky. I lived to tell the tale and so did you.” He sat down heavily in the captain’s chair, gesturing her to take the other seat. “OK, I’m mad at you, for a whole lot of reasons, but I can’t put my hand on my hearts and say I wouldn’t have done the same, back when I was a rookie. The important thing, for you, is that you learn from that and don’t repeat it. The very worst thing you can do is make the same mistake twice. OK?”

“OK, I guess.”

“Right.” He heaved himself up out of his seat once again and headed towards his cabin. “Besides, I’ve kinda grown to like having you around; a fact that I shall deny when sober.” He lurched against the door frame, sending a shudder through the command deck. “You have the watch. We’re heading for Towie. We’ll be there in two days.” The door to the command deck slid shut behind him.

An Kohli sipped at her whisky. Well, she still had her job; for now.

* * *

“The secret to survival in this business is to not let a setback get in your way.” Fallon explained as the shuttle took them down to Towie. “We lost money on Taro, but by coming to Towie we can get some of it back quite quickly. This is the sort of place where there are lots of small timers hanging around. We see who’s here, grab them and turn them over to whoever wants them. We get paid and we’re not out of pocket. In the meantime, I have a think about who else we might go after that is worth the effort. Someone who will give us a bigger payday. See? No time is wasted while we cry into our beer.”

“So what do we do when we get down there?”

“I’ve sent a file with the mug shots of a whole host of petty crims to your communicator. There’s no way of knowing which ones might be here, but the odds are at least a couple will be. You cruise round the bars until you spot someone. Don’t get drunk. I’ll be doing the same. If you do spot

someone, just let me know and keep them under observation. I'll come and between us we'll make the arrest. Got it."

"Yes, I've got it."

"Good. I'll also be talking to a few contacts, you know, bouncers, bar keeps, hookers and the like, see if they can point us in the right direction."

"You have some interesting friends." An Kohli responded dryly.

"Don't mock those sorts of people. They'll keep you in bread and butter if you treat them right."

The shuttle settled gently onto its landing legs and they disembarked, heading towards the shuttle park's exit gate. "There's a list of likely bars on your communicator as well. Book into the Gladrags Hotel for two nights. That should be long enough. Once you've done that. start hitting the bars. Use a hover-taxi to get around."

"Two days doesn't sound long."

"On Towie, if you haven't bumped into a wanted criminal within twenty four hours then you want to check that you haven't made a mistake and ended up on the wrong planet. It's where they come to spend their money. Not the big timers, of course. They buy their own planets, but the small timers have poor judgement, which is why they'll always be small timers. If they see me coming, they'll dive for cover, but you're a new face, so you won't get the same reaction. You're also a pretty face ..." he held up a hand to forestall an accusation of sexism. "... all I'm saying is that sometimes it helps."

"Why aren't there more bounty hunters hanging around here if it's so easy to make an arrest?"

"Hardly worth the cost in time and fuel, when there are so many other profitable targets at large. I wouldn't usually be bothered myself, but we need a cash injection to make up for our loss ... my loss." He rammed the point home. "This is the quickest way to get it."

He climbed into the first hover-taxi on the rank outside the shuttle park and the craft sped off. An Kohli climbed into the next one and punched the name of the Gladrags Hotel into the keypad, tapped Fallon's credit card onto it and the vehicle accelerated away. It didn't even have a droid in the front seat to make her feel comfortable. When it came to no frills, Towie didn't stint.

* * *

There were three words An Kohli could use to describe all the bars she had so far visited: dim, dingy and sleazy. There seemed to be little difference between one and the next. She had thought that most of them would be full of males, they seemed attracted to places like those, but there were plenty of females, and not just those of negotiable affection.

Towie seemed to specialise in gambling. In every bar there was a card game going, while one armed bandits flashed and clattered, occasionally spitting out a harvest of glittering coins. There was no need for them to do that, she knew. Winnings could be transmitted direct to bank accounts, just as bank accounts were being drained in playing the machines. But the gamblers wanted to feel their winnings in their hands, so the bar owners obliged. They knew the coins would soon find their way back into the machines again. The odds always favoured the house and never more so than on Towie.

This bar had a roulette wheel whirling away in a back area, as well as several different card games in progress, each overseen by a croupier built like a body builder; even the females. An Kohli peered through the gloom trying to spot any of the faces that she had tried to memorise from her communicator's image library.

"If you don't buy a drink, you'll be asked to leave." A figure leaned towards her as she passed the bar.

"Thanks for the tip." She commented, pushing her way between two bulky figures to reach the nearest auto-barkeep's keypad.

"No problem. I'll have a beer."

"That's a high price for not very much." She snapped.

"Hey, I'm just trying to be friendly." The figure protested.

An Kohli took a closer look at him. He looked like an Aloisan, widely regarded as the best looking species in the known galaxy. But if he was he must have shrunk in the wash, because he was only about three quarters normal size for the species. But he was kind of cute. "OK, I'll buy you a beer, but in return I want some information."

"Ah, a bounty hunter. I thought as much."

"Is it that obvious?"

“We don’t get many females as good looking as you around here. The Sutrans do a good job of pretending to be good looking, but most females seem to have more scars than they do fingers.”

“That isn’t very gallant of you.”

The being shrugged, taking his beer from the service droid that forced its way through the crowd. “Just an observation. Besides, you look like you’ve never been in a place like this before.”

“I have.” An Kohli protested truthfully. This was her fourth such bar of the night.

“I mean before tonight. So, how long have you been a bounty hunter? Days? weeks?”

An Kohli didn’t want to admit the fact that she was still wet behind the ears, but she was a truthful being by nature. “A few weeks. Is it that obvious?”

“Yes, but don’t worry. Most of the beings in here will be too drunk to notice.”

“But you aren’t?”

“I’ve got two things going in my favour. I’m too broke to get drunk and I only just got here anyway.”

“What are Sutrans, by the way?”

The being took a pull at his drink before answering. “They’re sub species of the Gau. The females have a tremendously high sex drive. Unfortunately, their males would rather watch sport all day while drinking beer and guzzling pizza. So, the female Sutrans come to places like this and earn money doing what they would happily do for free anyway. They don’t regard it as being anything other than common sense. Most of the females in here are Sutrans. At least, the ones wearing very little clothing are. Because they’re a type of Gau they can look like whoever they want. That makes them very popular. Want to screw your favourite movie star? Just pay a Sutran the going rate and you can.”

“Sounds tacky to me.”

“Don’t ever say that to a Sutran. They’re very proud of what they do. They fill an important niche in the market and they always work for themselves. Well, they’ll pay a commission to the house for letting them use this place, but so do the croupiers.”

“What about you? You look like an Aloisan. I wouldn’t have thought this would be your sort of place.”

The being grinned. “I’m not an Aloisan. I’m a Gau.” He shot his hand out. “My name’s Den ... Den Gau.”

Remembering what Fallon had said about the Gau not being trusted because of their shape shifting abilities, it accounted for the disguise. “Isn’t it a bit confusing, having a name that is also your species.” An Kohli took the preferred hand and shook it.

“Yeah, but when your species has shape shifting abilities, parentage can get a bit vague. So, if your mother isn’t too sure who your father is, she just adds Gau to your first name. We’re well past worrying about it. So, what brings a ... what are you exactly? I can’t place your species.”

“I’m Danian. We don’t travel much. I’m not typical of my type.”

“Danian? Nope, you’ve still got me beat. So, which one of these reprobates are you after?”

“None of them specifically. I’m just looking to see if I recognise anyone.”

The Gau leaned towards her conspiratorially. “Buy me a Grovian and I’ll point out someone who might be of interest to you.”

“That’s a very expensive drink. I don’t even know you. How do I know you won’t stiff me?”

“If you can’t trust a shape shifter, who can you trust?” He gave a cheeky grin.

“I’ll tell you what. I’ll buy you another beer and if whoever it is turns out to be on my communicator, I’ll buy you the Grovian. How’s that?”

“How do I know *you* won’t stiff *me*?” The Gau protested.

“If you can’t trust a member of a tall, good looking species that you’ve never heard of before, who can you trust?” An Kohli replied with an even cheekier grin.

“Touché. OK, get the beer order in while I take a quick look round to see where he is.”

The Gau climbed off his barstool and wound his way through the noisy crowd, He was back just in time to collect his beer from the service droid.

“OK. Don’t look just yet, but on the table in the far corner, there is a big Falconan. You can’t miss him. He’s the one with pure white skin.” He

paused, took a sip of his beer then leant slightly to one side. “Can you see him?”

“Yes, I’ve got him.” An Kohli took out her communicator and entered a query for Falconans in the device’s image library. There were two, but one was clearly a match for the one she had just seen.

“Do I get my Grovian?” Den asked.

“Yes, you do.” An Kohli tapped the order into the auto-barkeep system, at the same time as she called Fallon’s number.”

“OK, An Kohli. Who have you got?”

“A Falconan by the name of Dishy. Wanted for various offences, mainly burglary. His bounty is twenty thousand nuks.” It was at the higher end of the scale of earnings that Fallon was trying to achieve.

There was silence, presumably as Fallon checked his own communicator’s records. “OK, An Kohli.” He said at last. “Keep your eye on him. I’m on the other side of the planet right now, so it will take me some time to get to you. He’s got a few warrants for violence, so don’t try to take him on.”

“I hear you Fallon. I’ll just watch him.”

“Which bar are you in?”

“The Silver Nuk.” She replied.

“I know it. I’ll be as quick as I can.” The communicator fell silent and An Kohli replaced it in its pouch on her belt.

“You didn’t tell me you worked for Fallon.” Den said as An Kohli picked up her beer and took a long pull.

“You never asked. Do you know him?”

“Yeah. I sell him bits of information now and again. He always gives me a hundred nuks for a good tip.” Den held his hand out.

“And I’ve just given you a Grovian whisky that cost at least that much.” An Kohli said, ignoring the proffered limb.

“It’s not the same.” Den insisted.

“Shall we see what Fallon has to say when he gets here?” An Kohli took another sip as Den dropped his hand, defeated. “Is that how you make your living? Selling information?”

“One of the ways. I’d like to call myself a professional gambler, but that would suggest that I make enough money to feed myself. No, I buy and

sell; whatever people want I'll buy and then sell to them. Whatever people have to sell, I'll buy and then find someone who wants it."

"Sounds precarious." An Kohli gave Dishy another glance, just to make sure he was still in the bar.

"It is." They were interrupted by the sound of an argument. "Oops. Sounds like Dishy isn't happy about something."

Two burly bouncers headed in the direction of the large Falconan, who was arguing with the croupier that served the roulette wheel he had been betting on. He brushed them off and strode towards the exit, an angry look on his face.

"OK, pleasant as this is, I've to go." An Kohli placed her beer on the bar top and turned to leave.

"Put your arm around me." Den said.

"Why would I want to do that?" An Kohli stared at him in horror.

"If you try to follow him, he'll see a female following him and suspect you might be a bounty hunter. But if he sees you and me, arm in arm well, he'll just see a loving couple out for an evening stroll."

It made sense. An Kohli capitulated. "OK but wait till we're outside. I have my reputation to uphold, you know."

Den poked his tongue out at her but followed her from the bar. Once outside An Kohli, who was several sims taller than the Gau, draped her arm over his shoulder. He slid his own around her waist, before letting his hand slide down to cup one buttock.

An Kohli bent her arm at the elbow and squeezed it around the Gau's neck, tightening it until he let out a yelp of pain. "Move that hand" she hissed, "or I'll squeeze until your neck snaps."

The hand shot up to the middle of her back and she eased the pressure. "Can't blame a Gau for trying." Den wheezed.

An Kohli fumbled for her communicator and spoke a few brief words into it, letting Fallon know that they were on the move.

As predicted, Dishy glanced behind. Seeing them together, apparently in a loving embrace, he looked beyond them at the bar entrance, before turning away and continuing his journey. His body language still spoke of anger. He wasn't a good loser.

"Are you going to try to take him?" Den whispered. The slapping of their own feet against the pavement was loud enough to drown out his words.

An Kohli considered the question, then remembered her recent lessons. “No. We’ll just follow to see where he goes. When Fallon gets here, we’ll take him together. Where does this road lead?”

“Nowhere much. If he keeps going there are a couple more bars, some small hotels and a couple of apartment buildings, then we’re out of town.”

“If he goes into another bar we can’t follow. He’ll spot us too easily. We’ll have to stay outside and keep an eye out for him.”

“Same applies wherever he goes. And if he keeps walking we’ll have to stop, because we’ve no reason to leave the town.” Den observed.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

Dishy slowed his pace as he reached the first bar, so An Kohli and Den had to pass him. He stopped and looked inside. He must have decided he didn’t fancy what he saw, because he continued on his way once more, but now he was behind them.

An Kohli fished around in a pouch with a free hand and withdrew something. It turned out to be headband, which she slid over her head. She adjusted the position slightly, then unfolded a tiny screen in front of one eye.”

“What’s that?” Den asked.

“My own invention.” She replied. “A tiny camera which looks backwards and feeds a little screen. It means I can watch him without turning round.”

“Ooh, clever.” Den sounded genuinely impressed. They passed the second bar. Again, Dishy paused to look inside. He must have liked this one better, because he stepped inside and was lost to sight.

“You’re a Gau, right?”

“Well spotted, Sherlock.” Den grunted.

“That means you can change your shape, doesn’t it?” An Kohli ignored the insult. “I mean, right now you look like a tiny Aloisan, but you could look like some other species.”

“Of course I can. What are you ... Ah, I get it. You want me to change shape and go in there and keep an eye on him for you.”

“Would you?” An Kohli pleaded. “I’m just worried he might slip out a back door or something.”

“Look, lady. There’s something you’ve got to know about me. I’m a lover, not a fighter. When it comes to trouble, I can run away faster than a

speeding bullet. I'm famous for it. I'd have prizes for it if anyone could run fast enough to catch me and give me the prizes."

"I'm not asking you to arrest him. Just go in, buy yourself a drink ... which I'll pay for," she added hurriedly, "and make sure he doesn't sneak out."

"Oh, OK. What shall I disguise myself as?"

"I don't know. What sort of species wouldn't stand out in a bar like that?"

"A Jackon, but forget that. Have you seen the size of a Jackon? There isn't enough of me to make even half of one, let alone a full-sized model."

"Well, not a Jackon then. What else?"

"Not a Falconan either. He might just want to start up a conversation with someone from the old home planet. How about a Smith?"

"Don't you mean Sith?"

"No, they're those red and black dudes with the bad attitude. I mean a Smith." He turned away from An Kohli. When he turned back he looked thin, pale and angst ridden.

"I'm not sure beings like that would fit into a place like this." An Kohli observed.

"Are you kidding me? Dark nightclubs are just their sort of thing. Can't you hear the music from in there?"

An Kohli strained her ears. The sound of beings in emotional turmoil reached her ears. "Yeah, I guess that look does fit with the music."

"Too right it does." He slipped his jacket off and turned it inside out before putting it back on. He looked like a sulky teenager from her own planet, apart from his skin colour, which was a pale shade of grey, as though he didn't get much daylight.

"My turn to be impressed. You've done this before, haven't you?"

"Yes. It is a useful item of clothing for someone in my profession." He said with a grin.

"Buying and selling?"

"It all depends what I'm buying and what I'm selling and who I'm buying it from and who I'm selling it to. Right, how much are you going to pay me?"

"How much would Fallon pay you?"

"Two hundred." Den said without thinking.

"One hundred." An Kohli shot back, knowing it was closer to the mark.

“One fifty.” Den countered.

“One twenty five ... and that’s final.” An Kohli said, extending her hand to seal the deal.

Den spat on his palm and took hers before she had a chance to withdraw it.

“Wish me luck.” Den said as he turned towards the bar’s entrance.

An Kohli looked at her hand in disgust before searching her pouches for something to wipe herself with.

* * *

She felt, rather than saw, a being move into the shadows beside her. An Kohli turned to see Fallon smiling at her.

“I take it he’s inside?” He whispered.

“As far as I know. He certainly went in. How did you know where to find me?”

“It’s the only patch of shadow in the neighbourhood, so unless you’d managed to get inside one of the buildings, this was the only place you could be.”

“I sent a Gau in to keep an eye on him. Says he knows you; name of Den.”

“Yeah, I know Den. How much did you pay him?”

“A Grovian for the pointer towards Dishy and a hundred and twenty five for going inside to keep an eye on him.”

“The Grovian was a bit over the top. I’d have paid him fifty for a tip like that. But one twenty five is OK. He is in a little bit of danger by being in there. You weren’t tempted to go inside?”

“No. He might have seen me at the last bar, so he’d know it wasn’t a coincidence that I turned up here.”

“Good girl. You’re learning.”

An Kohli felt herself glowing with pride at the faint praise. She’d got something right at last. She straightened up as she saw Den appear through the bar’s doorway. Extending her arm into the street light, she beckoned him over.

“Oh, hi Fallon.”

“Den.” Was all Fallon said by way of reply. They might know each other, but it wasn’t a loving reunion, An Kohli thought.

“He’s hired himself a Sutran and gone through the back.” Den reported to An Kohli.

“OK, that’s where we’ll take him.” Fallon interjected. “Do you know the layout back there?”

“Four rooms along a single corridor, if I remember correctly.” Den replied. “But don’t ask me how I know.” He grinned. “There’s no way of knowing which one he’s in, though.”

“Well, one of us can take one end of the corridor, one at the other end and I go along opening up doors until we find him.”

“You can count me out.” Den held his hands up in refusal. “I’m not mixing it with Dishy. Have you seen the size of him? Besides, the corridor’s a dead end. There’s no way out for him.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Fallon said, “Let’s go.”

“Aren’t you going to let him ... you know, finish what he’s doing?” Den sounded genuinely shocked.

“No. If he’s half way through we’ve got a better chance of surprising him. His mind will be on other things.”

“No, I’m with Den on this one.” An Kohli hissed a protest. “If he’s going to jail, at least let him have one last ... you know.”

Fallon let out a theatrical sigh and muttered something about ‘bleeding hearts’ but didn’t argue with them anymore.

“OK, we give him five minutes, but that’s all. After that I’m going in, with or without you, An Kohli.”

She smiled, happy with her little victory. She didn’t actually care whether Dishy got what he had paid for, but she had enjoyed the argument.

“Den, is there another exit?”

“I don’t think so.”

“OK, then stay here and if he gets past us, follow him. There’s another hundred in it for you, regardless.”

“OK, but if he sees me, I’m off at top speed.”

“There’s a brave little soldier.” Fallon muttered, handing over a hundred nuks, plus the one twenty five that An Kohli had promised.

“Time to go, An Kohli.” Fallon said. “You block the corridor while I open the doors.”

“Do I shoot him if he gets past you?”

“Try not to. Have your zapper in one hand and your pulsar in the other. Use the zapper for preference.”

He left the pool of shadow and crossed the road to the bar. An Kohli followed in his wake.

The bar wasn't the sort she had been in earlier. This had a much younger clientele. They stood around, or sat in dark booths, not talking, just nodding their heads in time to the music. A couple of scantily clad females stood at the far end of the room, looking bored. They perked up a little as they saw Fallon enter, but their shoulders slumped again as they spotted An Kohli. The youths weren't paying them any attention. In the darkest booths males and females seemed to be entwined with each other. Or maybe she was making a hasty judgement. In the dim light it wasn't possible to make out their genders.

An Kohli spotted the door at the back of the bar and pointed it out to Fallon. The sea of youth parted as they saw his scarred head, closing in behind them again as they passed through. No one spoke to them, they just continued their appreciation of the dirge that was oozing out of the speaker system at an ear numbing volume.

“I wouldn't have thought this was Dishy's sort of place.” An Kohli shouted as they reached the doorway. They passed through and closed the door behind them, the volume halving as the heavy plastic slid into place.

“You can't judge a being's music preference by their looks, An Kohli. I'm partial to a bit of zombie rap myself.”

An Kohli grimaced.

“Besides, I don't think Dishy came in here for the music. Did you smell the blackweed in there?”

So that was what she had smelt. She had thought it was just the typical smell of unwashed youth.

“I'm pretty sure that what he's doing now is what he really came for, not the Sutran. If so, it will make our job easier.”

Blackweed, An Kohli knew, had a soporific effect.

They turned a corner in the short corridor and found themselves in a cul de sac. There were two doors on each wall, but An Kohli could see that the far end was uncompromising concrete.

She pulled out her zapper and held it in her preferred right hand, transferring her pulsar to her left. “Ready when you are.” She muttered,

feeling the adrenalin start to course through her veins.

Fallon took a very direct approach to entering the first room, barging his shoulder into the door and forcing it open. An Kohli expected to hear shouts of protest, but there was nothing but the echoes of Fallon's assault.

"Nothing." He barked as he returned to the corridor. He repeated the process on the opposite door. This time there was a high pitched yelp. Fallon backed out, holding his hands up placatingly. "Sorry miss." He said, before turning back along the corridor to the third door. That also proved to be fruitless. There could only be one place left.

Fallon raised his booted foot and kicked out hard. The door burst open. There was another female protest, but this time Fallon didn't come out of the room.

In the silence, An Kohli wasn't sure what to do. She edged along the corridor, passing the two open doors. She glanced into the room where the female voice had come from. An angry looking female sat in bed, covering her upper body. An Kohli had never seen a Sutran out of disguise before, so she didn't recognise the species.

She continued to walk softly. Still no sign of Fallon and still no noise from the doorway. She stopped short and leaned forward to look in.

Something told her that it would be foolish to put her head round the corner at that height. She dropped into a crouch and took a peek.

A pulsar was aimed at the precise point that her head would have been had she not crouched. As Dishy tried to adjust his aim she ducked back out of sight. A pulsar blast made a hole in the floor, but she had seen enough.

A naked Dishy had been holding Fallon around the neck. His face was an unhealthy purple, suggesting that his breathing was severely restricted. Behind him, cowering on the bed, was a naked Falconan female. Well, she looked like a Falconan, but was probably another Sutran. Dishy had been missing his home comforts, apparently.

"What's your name?" Dishy called out in Common Tongue.

"An Kohli." She replied. "Look, there's no harm done. I'm sure we can find a way out of this without anyone getting hurt."

"I'm sure we could, An Kohli, but I'm afraid your friend here interrupted me just as I was getting going. That means he gets hurt. If you don't let me go, you get hurt as well."

An Kohli thought hard. She had never been in this situation before. What should she do? The sensible thing would be to let Dishy go. Fallon might take a beating, but if she tried to go in there to rescue him, they might both end up dead. She made up her mind.

“OK, I’m leaving. Just don’t kill him, OK?”

“I won’t kill him, but he might wish he was dead.” Dishy laughed, an ugly sound, like sheet metal being ripped apart.

An Kohli clumped her way along the corridor and around the corner, then stopped. She laid her weapons down and kicked off her boots, before tip-toing back to the doorway.

“Go and make sure she’s gone.” Dishy barked at the room’s only other occupant, the Sutran female.

Damn, she hadn’t thought of that. She heard the patter of bare feet on the floor and knew she couldn’t make it back to the corner before the Sutran saw her.

Sure enough, the female stepped into the corridor and looked her squarely in the eyes. “It’s OK.” She said, calling back into the room. “She’s gone.”

In the brighter lights of the corridor An Kohli saw the growing bruise on the Sutran’s face. Dishy had obviously not paid her for that. The Sutran nodded downwards, indicating the zapper held in An Kohli’s hand. There was nothing An Kohli could do, she had to trust her. She handed the weapon over. The Sutran put her hand behind her back to conceal the zapper, turned, and went back into the room.

“Now, you.” An Kohli heard a thump and the building shuddered as Fallon was thrown against the wall. “You interrupted me, and now you’re gonna get it.”

There was the unmistakable crack-fizz of a zapper being discharged, followed by a scream of pain, then the bang-shudder of a heavy body hitting the floor. An Kohli stepped into the doorway, her pulsar held ready to fire.

Dishy lay on the floor, writhing in agony, trying to reach the spot on his naked back where the Sutran had zapped him. Fallon was rubbing his neck as he bent over and retrieved the Falconan’s pulsar, then his own, which had been thrown onto a sofa in the corner of the room.

“That was some chance you took there, An Kohli. How did you know you could trust her?” he nodded at the Sutran, who had laid the zipper to one side and was climbing into her clothes, her back turned in order to gain some late modesty.

“Part of the sisterhood.” An Kohli snapped. “One day males will get the message that females never appreciate being hit.” An Kohli holstered her pulsar and went over to put her arm around the now dressed Sutran. She had returned to her natural shape.

“Are you OK?” she asked.

“An occupational hazard, I’m afraid.” The female stifled a sniffle and dashed away a tear with her hand. With shoes on her feet she turned and aimed a kick at Dishy’s head, who was still lying on the floor under Fallon’s watchful eye. The kick connected and Dishy let out a yelp. The Sutran was about to repeat the punishment when An Kohli took her arm and pulled her way.

“Enough.” She said. “If he ends up covered in bruises it’s us that will get the blame.”

The Sutran accepted An Kohli’s words and went to sit down on the bed.

“Get up.” Fallon commanded Dishy.

“Can I put some clothes on?” Dishy asked as he staggered to his feet. An Kohli stepped behind him, grabbed his arms and snapped handcuffs onto his wrists. “No you can’t.” An Kohli snapped before Fallon could reply.

Fallon let out a grin. “Clearly not a good idea to upset the sisterhood, Dishy. Let’s go.”

He prodded Dishy ahead of him. An Kohli led the way along the corridor. At the end, faces peered around the corner, looking even paler in the bright lights. The noise they had made must have been heard above the pounding of the music.

“Move along folks. Nothing to see here.” An Kohli said as she approached.

“Oh yes there is.” One of the faces laughed. It was a female, judging by the make-up. She was wearing marginally less of it than the males. But the beings parted to let the three of them through. These were just youths on a night out; they weren’t interested in causing trouble.

“This isn’t right.” Dishy protested, as he was propelled through the crowd of giggling youths, “I’ve got my rights. I’m going to complain.”

“Well done, An Kohli.” Fallon’s voice came from behind her. “You must be doing something right if the crims are complaining about you already.” He didn’t sound overly concerned about the possibility of a complaint being filed.

Fallon had explained to her that the most successful bounty hunters always had a thick file of complaints against them. Very few of them stood up to close examination, but the criminals were always hopeful of getting a bounty hunter thrown out of the Guild for breaking the code of ethics. It was petty revenge for their arrest.

As they passed back through the bar, An Kohli silently scolded herself. She shouldn’t have let Dishy have his extra few minutes with the Sutran. It was her fault that the female had been injured. Fallon had told him that Dishy had a violent streak and she’d seen for herself how angry he had been when he left the other bar. Another lesson learnt the hard way, but this time it wasn’t her who had suffered because of it.

* * *

“I’m going back down.” Fallon said, once they had Dishy safely tucked up in the holding cell, a pair of ship’s overalls provided for his comfort. “I got a lead on another target. With the bounties for both of them we might end up in profit.”

“Do you want me to come down and lend a hand?” An Kohli asked, hopefully.

Fallon gave one of his most enigmatic smiles. “No, that’s OK. I think I’ve got this one covered.”

An Kohli shrugged her shoulders and went into her room. She wasn’t happy about the refusal, but she didn’t want Fallon to know that.

He returned a couple of hours later.

“Got away, huh?” An Kohli said, seeing he was on his own.

He smiled again, infuriating An Kohli. “Not at all.” He reached behind him and removed his back pack, which An Kohli hadn’t noticed him put on when he left the ship, mainly because she had been sulking in her bunk at the time.

He reached in and lifted out a struggling figure. At first An Kohli thought it was some sort of animal, but as Fallon balanced it upright on his palm she realised that it was a tiny being. “Meet Lofty. He’s a Lilliputian.”

An Kohli noticed he was whispering. Of course, a being that small would be deafened if they spoke in a normal voice.

“You’re kidding me right?” She whispered back. “Next you’ll tell me there are twenty met high Brobdignagians as well.”

Fallon snorted with derision, almost toppling the tiny figure. “They’re not real, An Kohli. But Lilliputians are real enough. This one is wanted for several crimes.”

“What could a being that size possibly do that’s criminal?” It seemed highly unlikely to An Kohli.

Fallon chuckled, sending tremors through his hands once more. The Lilliputian decided it would be safer if he sat down. “Think of the possibilities, An Kohli. He’s so tiny he can sneak under laser beams, wriggle through ventilation shafts and hide just about anywhere that hasn’t got a cat.”

“Where do they come from?”

“Where do you think? Lilliput of course. It isn’t a very big planet, and it doesn’t have any cats, or other significant predators for that matter. These little guys are highly prized in the criminal community, but they’re hard to catch because they’re so hard to see.”

“What’s this one wanted for?”

“Mainly sex crimes, I’m afraid. He likes hiding in female changing rooms and places like that. He’s only a voyeur though, but he has big ideas. His family won’t be very happy when they find out. They’ll forgive most things, but not that.”

“What was he doing on Towie?”

“What he likes doing best. I spotted him in the room where we found Dishy. It’s how he got hold of me. I was distracted as this little fellow disappeared under the bed, which gave Dishy just enough time to grab me.”

“I wondered how that had happened.”

“It didn’t help that I’d made so much noise of course.” Fallon grimaced. “I didn’t realise that the doors in that place were so strong. He knew we were coming in.”

“Well, we can’t put him in the holding cell. He’ll just wriggle into the ventilation system and we’d have to tear the ship apart to find him.”

“No. But I’ve got some storage boxes in the engineering lockers. I’ll rig something up. At least he won’t be expensive to feed.”

Fallon turned and left the command deck. An Kohli shook her head in wonderment. She shouldn't be surprised, of course. It was a very big galaxy and the laws of probability said that if there could be beings that were only a few sim tall, then somewhere out there she would find them. Working with Fallon was certainly turning out to be an eyeopener.

5 – Lo Phat

An Kohli woke with a start. She shouldn't have been sleeping while on watch, but then realised that wasn't the point. Before Fallon had recruited her, he must have slept some of the time. Travelling through wormholes in space may be fast, but it wasn't instantaneous. Her more immediate concern should be what had woken her.

A sound intruded on her thoughts, a sort of faint rapping sound, like someone banging on a door, but a long way distant. It took her some time to realise that the sound was coming from the box that was sat on the floor by her feet. She bent down and lifted it onto her lap, then opened the lid.

The Lilliputian, Lofty, was sitting on the bottom of the box, his little fist paused in the act of banging on the box's side. He quickly covered his eyes to protect them from the bright light of the command deck. Peering through his fingers, An Kohli saw that his lips were moving, as though he were speaking, but she could hear no sound.

“What's up, little fella?” She whispered, her breath ruffling the tiny figure's hair. He cupped his hands around his mouth and appeared to shout, but she still couldn't hear anything. Of course, his vocal equipment would be in scale with the rest of him. They probably produced a sound that was too high pitched for her ears to detect.

“I'll have to rig something up to lower the pitch of your voice?” She whispered. She replaced the lid of the box and placed it back on the floor, making sure that the air holes weren't obstructed. If she was careless he would escape the box and there were just too many places on a spaceship for a Lilliputian to hide.

She searched the ship's computer bank of applications to see what there might be to help her. Like most computers, it came with lots of applications bundled onto it, included in the purchase price. Most were useless, or poor grade copies of applications with better functionality. She found one that might help, a music editing app. If she were to relay the Lilliputian's voice through it, she might be able to mix it with another frequency. The combined soundwaves would then produce new frequencies that were the sum and difference between the two original sound waves. The difference

should, if she chose the right frequency to start with, be within her hearing range.

She applied a fifteen kilohertz signal and set a filter so that it would only amplify the difference between that and the frequency of Lofty's voice, plugged a microphone into the computer's audio port and lifted the lid of the box once again. Lifting the box onto her lap again she carefully lowered the microphone into the box, taking care not to crush the Lilliputian.

"OK, little guy. What are you trying to tell me?"

His voice came over the speaker system, metallic sounding, like someone shouting into a metal pipe. But it was decipherable. "If I give you some information, would you let me go?"

"I'm not sure I can do that." She whispered. "You'd have to do a deal with Fallon."

"That big lunk. Not much chance of that. He's had it in for me ever since ... well, maybe you don't need to know why he has it in for me."

"Well, Fallon's the boss, so I can't go making deals behind his back."

"Maybe you could talk him round for me, if I told you what I know."

"Maybe, but I can't promise anything. I'm only the hired help around here and pretty new to it as well. Fallon doesn't know me that well."

"It's got to be worth a try, hasn't it?" The Lilliputian pleaded.

"OK, I'll see what I can do."

Tiny made himself more comfortable at the bottom of the box, sitting on the sheet of bubble wrap that had been provided as a makeshift bed and plumping up the scraps of cloth that Fallon had given him to use as blankets. "It was a few weeks back. I was in The Crimson Garter on Towie. It's a sort of club for, shall we say, beings who are looking for a particular sort of diversion. I'm sure that Fallon has told you why I would be in a place like that."

An Kohli nodded her assent.

"You've heard of the Meklon?" Lofted started.

"Of course, who hasn't?" An Kohli replied. The Meklon weren't a species, they were a type of criminal, usually pirates. They preyed on freighters or passenger transports, attacking them before they could enter a wormhole or surprising them as they emerged at the other end. Sometimes they would swoop down on unsuspecting planets and grab any portable wealth they could find, before taking prisoners who would be sold as

slaves. There was a big market for slaves in some of the remoter parts of the galaxy, where unscrupulous businesses didn't worry too much about paying their workforce. They were also used as replacement bodies for the immortality market.

“OK, look up a Meklon by the name of Lo Phat.”

An Kohli did as he instructed, using the Moonbeam's extensive archive. An image appeared on screen. It wasn't a photograph, as Lo Phat had never been captured. It was an artist's impression. Either the artist had an extremely vivid imagination or the person who was providing the description would be having nightmares and therapy for years to come.

The face seemed to be made up entirely of teeth and what wasn't teeth was bonelike tissue. Two pinpricks above the being's mouth suggested the presence of eyes.

“OK, so Lo Phat exists and he has an impressively high bounty. What of it?”

“Handsome, ain't he? It may surprise you to know that his species is a variation of the Aloisians.”

That did surprise An Kohli. The Aloisian species were found in many parts of the galaxy. While they weren't all as good looking as the pure-bred species, it was hard to imagine this nightmare sharing any genes with them. But, as An Kohli knew, the galaxy was a weird place and there were stranger things in it than ugly Aloisians.

“So he's an Aloisian. What of it?”

“I know where you'll be able to find him. No bodyguards, no armed space craft, just him.”

That was something that Fallon might be interested in, An Kohli was sure. “OK, so where is he.”

Lofty gave a sardonic grin. “You don't think I'm going to tell you that without Fallon's assurance of a deal. But I will tell you how I found out.”

An Kohli smiled inwardly. Despite his diminutive size, Lofty was clearly no fool. “OK, tell me that, then.”

The Lilliputian told his story.

* * *

It was a busy night in the Monty Casino. So busy that there was only one female in the bar, the remainder having already negotiated short term

contracts. The roulette wheels were whirring, mechanical slot machines clattered and electronic machines bleeped and whirred. Every table had a card game in progress. The air was thick with alcohol fumes and an air of barely suppressed tension.

There are very few species in the galaxy that still have the ability to stop a conversation just by walking into a room, but the Hozetiles were one of those that could. It wasn't their looks; the galaxy had long since got over judging beings on their looks. No, it was the air of menace that followed them around like a cloud of Lynx deoderant on a youth who had just bought his first can.

He had checked his weapons, at least his visible weapons, at the door just as every customer was required to do. Despite that, every being in the room knew that the wrong word, or even look, could result in them having a very quick introduction to Mr Pain. Even the Jackson averted their gaze. They may be stupid, but they weren't that stupid.

The Hozetile knew the effect he was having and enjoyed it. He swaggered across the large room, bumping against beings that weren't in his way, just because he could. The single female at the end of the bar, almost certainly a Sutran, decided that she didn't need to work anymore that night and slipped away through a door marked 'staff only'.

The bar was automated, otherwise the Hozetile would probably have intimidated the bartender into giving him free drinks. Instead, he just grabbed whatever was on the bar and tossed it down his throat. He grimaced but passed on. The unlucky owner of the drink passively tapped a new order into the auto-barkeep system and waved his credit ring over the terminal.

A handful of beings seated nearest to the door managed to make an exit without attracting any attention, abandoning their card game. They could cash in their chips another time.

The being leant over a table of card players. "Mind if I join you." he growled. It wasn't a question and didn't leave room for objections.

The card players knew they had no option other than to agree. "Here, take my seat." One rose to leave the table. The being gripped his shoulder and pressed him back into place.

"No, I'll have that chair." The being said, pointing towards the furthest from him. It was facing the door, with no room between the chair and the

wall for anyone to pass behind. It was the favoured seat for anyone who had any enemies that might want to interrupt play; or for beings that wanted to cheat at cards.

The chair was occupied by a large Falconan, a stack of chips in front of him indicating that he was on a winning streak. Everyone could see that he was torn between facing down the Hozetile and being able to leave the bar without the aid of a stretcher. In the end leaving won the argument and he rose, scooped up his winnings, muttered a few words of farewell and went to look for somewhere safer to be.

Beings relaxed and restarted their conversations, happy that there was no further risk of them attracting the attention of the new arrival. At least not for a while.

“My name’s Lo Phat.” The being said, passing a credit device over the auto-barkeep terminal in front of him. A couple of players looked up, recognising the name, but quickly dropped their eyes to the table again. A panel in the tabletop slid open and a stack of high denomination chips appeared. A short while later a drink arrived, delivered by a droid.

“Seven card Crickian draw, five nukes to open, no limit.” The croupier announced.

“I prefer five card stud.” Lo Phat announced.

The croupier swallowed, an audible sound. “Five card stud.” He amended. Chips were tossed into the middle of the table and the croupier started dealing.

If Lo Phat was cheating either no one could see how he was doing it, or they could see how he was doing it but were too afraid to challenge him. The pile of chips in front of him grew, while those in front of the other players shrank. One player tried to cash in and leave, only to be met by a warning growl. He changed his mind.

Eventually the inevitable happened; one of the other gamblers drew a hand that was too good to throw away. As chance would have it, it was the being who had offered Lo Phat his seat at the table. The stack of chips in the centre of the table grew as he and the Hozetile faced each other down. Give him his due, Lo Phat played well, with no ‘tells’ to show whether or not he was bluffing. No one had bluffed against him all evening, so Lo Phat knew his opponent was holding something good.

The challenger slid his last few chips into the centre. "I'll see." He croaked, his throat suddenly dry.

Laying his cards face down in the table, Lo Phat leaned across. "I'm not ready to be seen yet."

"But I've got no more chips and no credit left on my card. Everything I have is on the table." He tried to keep his voice steady, but it sounded more like a whimper.

"You must have something else." Lo Phat grunted. "You aren't from this planet. How did you get here?"

"I have my own ship. It's a freighter. That's my business."

"Bet that!" It wasn't a suggestion; it was an order.

"But if I lose that, I'll have nothing. I'll starve."

"Shoulda thought of that before you started betting. Do you think you have a good hand?"

"I guess it's pretty good."

"Well, it isn't much of a risk then, is it. You've already bet what ... a thousand nuks? If your hand was worth that much, it must be worth your lousy freighter as well."

"House rules. I can see you whenever I want if there's only two of use betting." The challenger appealed to the croupier. The croupier had a sudden coughing fit and decided he was unable to continue to oversee the game, making a dash for the staff door.

"Seems we have no one who wants to make a decision on that." Lo Phat sneered. As news of the confrontation spread around the room, silence had fallen once again.

"Now, you have two choices, bet your freighter, or throw in your hand."

The challenger should have taken the hint and thrown in his hand but, instead, he whimpered his agreement to bet. Lo Phat smiled his victory and picked his cards up again. He made a show of examining them, as though they might have changed while they had been talking. He gave his opponent a look of contempt. "I fold." He said, throwing the cards onto the stack of chips. He stood up and swept his remaining chips into a heap before dropping them through the encashment slot that allowed him to convert them back to credit on his bank card. Without any further words he strode over to the bar and tapped an order into the auto-barkeep.

The bemused challenger started to gather up his winnings and feed his chips into the encashment slot. He carefully avoided looking at Lo Phat's discarded hand; it wasn't done even for the winner to see what he had been betting against if his opponent had declined to show him. Of course, he was curious to know if the Hozetile had been bluffing, but not so curious to find out how it felt to be dead. He knew that Lo Phat would be watching him in the bar's long mirror, just waiting for him to turn the cards over.

Finally, he rose from the table and made his way towards the exit. He was surprised to find Lo Phat blocking his way. He hadn't seen the Hozetile move from the bar.

"So, you've got a freighter?" Lo Phat managed to make even that innocuous inquiry sound menacing.

"Y ... Yes, that's right."

"What type?"

"It's a megafreighter. It's called the Nadia Cort, after my mother."

"Very nice." It sounded as though it was anything but. "So where is it now?"

"In orbit." The freighter's owner didn't like the sound of where this was going. Like the majority of freighter Captains, he had good reason to know and fear Lo Phat's name. "We're leaving in a few hours, as soon as the cargo has completed loading." Too late the freighter captain realised he had said too much.

"You played a good hand there. You take good care of yourself." Lo Phat's words dripped with insincerity. He took his place back at the bar without seeming to move. The freighter captain beat a hasty retreat, intending to leave orbit immediately, whether or not his cargo was fully loaded.

* * *

Leaning back against the bar, Lo Phat surveyed the room. He'd had his fun and his crew would already be on their way to intercept the Nadia Cort as soon as it left the protection of Towie's missile systems. Once the cargo and crew had been sold, it would make a useful addition to his fleet.

The beings in the room averted their eyes whenever he looked at them. He loved that; the feeling of power it gave him to be able to intimidate beings with just one look. Reputation was a great thing.

He knew, like most of his species, that the Hozetile reputation for violence wasn't justified. As a species they were no worse, or no better, than any other. Their looks helped his reputation of course, but it wasn't justified. There were as many saints amongst his species as there were sinners and most just got on with their lives as best they could.

It was his many-times great grandfather that had started the family business, so to speak and in doing so had established the Hozetile's reputation for violence. It had been he who had sunk a twenty sim blade into the chest of Professor Nials Nails before stealing his ship and, with it, the prototype of the navi-com that enabled wormhole travel through space.

Such a wonder made it seem that Hozetile pirates were everywhere. Reports came in of star systems far and wide being attacked almost simultaneously. Space travel was a lengthy business. It took years, sometimes centuries, to travel between star systems. It just wasn't possible for a single Hozetile to be responsible for the attacks, or so it seemed. It must be the whole species, fanning out across the galaxy in a vast wave of piracy.

Of course, the secret of wormhole travel eventually emerged to provide an explanation for the attacks, but by then the Hozetile reputation for violence and criminality had been established in the galaxy's collective consciousness, so they remained feared. Star systems avoided contact with them, and their tourist trade was non-existent, which was a pity because their planet was quite beautiful.

It had been years since Lo Phat had last set foot on Hozetile. He had been born on board a pirate ship and hardly regarded the planet as home. He had his own residence on a planet that he had occupied and defied anyone to come and try to arrest him. He and his crews enjoyed an unparalleled life of luxury, taking what they wanted and buying what they couldn't take with the proceeds of their crimes.

A door swished open and Lo Phat was immediately on his guard. But it was only a female, returning to the bar after taking care of her client.

"You! Come here." He barked.

The female looked at him with fear, but she complied. Seeing who it was, she dare not do otherwise.

"I've ... I've got a client." She stammered, in the hope of avoiding having to do business with the being.

“Too right you have. It’s me. Now, how much?”

There could be no denying a Hozetile, she knew. She also suspected she knew who this particular Hozetile was. In a panic, she scanned the bar looking for assistance, but everyone she saw was looking in another direction. She would get no help from anyone here. “Two hundred nuks.” She admitted defeat. She offered a small credit terminal for him to make the payment but he ignored it.

“Deal.” He said. “I’ll pay later.”

The female very much doubted that, but there was nothing she could do. Without anyone to protect her she was at this being’s mercy. She could refuse to go with him but knew that was inadvisable. Even if he didn’t hurt her straight away, she knew that she would eventually be punished by him. At least going along with him wouldn’t make him angry, no matter how distasteful it was to her. Perhaps it was time to quit the game, she thought, before remembering that she had thought the same thing many times before.

“Follow me.” She said out loud, before turning to the discreet doorway set into the rear wall of the bar, the one through which she had emerged only moments before. They weaved their way through the tables of gamblers, she taking care not to bump into anyone, he making sure that he upset as many beings on the way past as was possible.

* * *

It was late. The female had departed, happy to get out of the room without suffering physical harm. Lo Phat lay on the bed with his communicator in his hand.

“Hi, Krantor, have you taken that freighter yet?” he asked.

“Not yet, Boss. It’s just leaving orbit. We’ll have no trouble with it. It doesn’t seem to have an escort and our intercept point is well beyond missile range.”

“OK, well, you know what to do. Look, I’m going to take a bit of a break. I fancy some me-time and Towie isn’t doing it for me right now.”

“Well, you can rely on me to look after things while you’re gone.”

Lo Phat didn’t doubt that for a moment. The penalty for failure in his organisation was instant and permanent. There were always others who wanted to take their place as his senior lieutenant, so no one was irreplaceable.

“I’ll be gone for a few months, maybe six or so.”

“That’s a long time, Boss.”

“It’s a long time since I last took a break.”

“Who will you take with you? I can send Jasford and Bigton down to meet you.”

“No need for that. I’m going by myself.”

“Isn’t that a bit risky. Bounty hunters and ...”

Lo Phat interrupted impatiently. “It’s only a risk if they know where to find me and it won’t be a proper break if I take a couple of goons along with me.”

“OK, Boss. If you say so.” The voice at the other end tried to hide its doubt over the decision, but knew better than to argue.

“I do say so. Now, is there anything you need to know before I leave?”

“It might be an idea for me to know where you are, you know, just in case I need to find you.”

Lo Phat was reluctant to reveal his planned destination. He wanted to go completely off grid, but he couldn’t do that if his crew knew where he would be. But, on the other hand, if he did somehow end up needing help, they needed to know where he was.

“OK, but this is strictly between you and me. If anyone turns up unannounced, it’s your skin I’ll be wearing as a pair of boots when I catch up with you. Got it?”

There was an audible gulp from the communicator. “Yes, Boss. I’ve got it.”

“Good. I’ll be on Karthusia. I’ve got a cabin there. I’ll be doing some hunting, some fishing and a lot of chilling out. I’ll be hiring a couple of Sutrans for the duration and on no account do I want to be disturbed.”

“Karthusia’s nice, Boss. Don’t worry, I’ll make sure you aren’t disturbed.”

Lo Phat closed the communications channel without saying goodbye, then rose from the bed and started to dress. A few moments later he left the room.

From his hiding place behind a picture frame, Lofty snuck out. It had been an interesting evening in more ways than one.

6 – Karthusia

Of Course, Lofty hadn't actually revealed Lo Phat's destination. That one word had been redacted from his story.

It was a good story, An Kohli had to admit. It sounded like it might be true. The bounty on Lo Phat was too big to resist, but she couldn't make the deal. That was down to Fallon. But she could try to persuade him. The risks seemed quite low. The pirate would be armed, but so would they.

Fallon came through the door onto the command deck, rubbing his eyes. The arrangement of the microphone and the box caught his eye. "Whatya doing?" he asked suspiciously.

An Kohli removed the microphone from the box before Lofty could say anything, replaced the lid and placed the box onto the floor at her feet. "I've been having a chat with Lofty. He told me a very interesting story. Have you heard of a pirate by the name of Lo Phat?"

"Who hasn't? He's one mean dude."

"One mean dude with a very big bounty. How would you like to be the one to bring him in?"

Fallon gave a grunt of rejection. "It would take an army to bring him in. Many bounty hunters have tried. They're all dead now."

"What if you could get him alone, without protection?"

Fallon gave her a curious look. "I'm listening."

"Lofty says he knows where he's going to be for the next few months. No bodyguards, no pirate fleet, no protection whatsoever. The only beings anywhere near him will be a couple of Sutrans."

"Where will this be?"

"That's the one thing Lofty wouldn't tell me. He wants to do a deal in exchange for the location."

"Do you believe him?"

"It sounds plausible. Look, I'm guessing that Lofty wants to trade the information for his freedom. But you don't have to let him go straight away. You can keep him until you've checked the information out. If it turns out he's scamming you then you don't have to let him go."

Fallon's brow furrowed as he thought over what An Kohli had said. "OK, rig up that sound system again. I'll talk to him, hear what he has to say."

Half an hour later the deal had been concluded. As expected, Lofty had demanded his freedom in exchange for Lo Phat's location. Fallon had agreed to that, on one proviso. He wouldn't just release Lofty anywhere; he would be taken back to Lilliput.

"There isn't a warrant out for him there, so he won't be arrested." Fallon had explained to An Kohli. "But the Lilliputians have a strong sense of right and wrong. Lofty will be left in no doubt about how wrong he is to do what he does. It probably won't stop him doing it again, but I'm guessing his mother will have a lot to say to him." He chuckled. "Lilliputian mothers may only be a few sims tall, but they scare the crap out of me."

* * *

Karthusia was one of those rare things, a beautiful planet that hadn't been spoiled by tourists or mining corporations. While it teemed with life of different types, none of it was classed as intelligent. A few hunters and fisherbeings went there each year to enjoy its natural beauty and to kill things that had done them no harm, but the lack of commercial development made it unattractive for most people. It also made it an ideal hideout for someone like Lo Phat.

Deep in the forest a landing site had been cleared for a shuttle, with a cabin built close by. Well, it could be called a cabin, but very few cabins in the wood sported a gymnasium, a twenty seat movie theatre, a two lane bowling alley and a hot tub big enough to swim across.

It was also well protected. At the touch of a button steel shutters would slide up to protect doors and windows and a pulsar turret would emerge through the roof, guided and fired from deep underground, where Lo Phat would be protected by several sims of armour. It was a fortress.

Which is why Fallon sat puzzling over how to approach the cabin without raising the alarm. As far as he could tell, there were no movement or heat sensors placed around the cabin. They would prove useless in such an environment. There was so much wildlife in the local area that Lo Phat would be constantly disturbed by alarms set off by the small forest creatures.

The probability of there being traps, on the other hand, was high. Traps that the small animals wouldn't trigger, but something the size of a bounty hunter would. He had sent down a tiny drone to do a night-time

reconnaissance. Lo Phat always sealed the doors and windows at night, the time when he was asleep and therefore most vulnerable.

The construction of the cabin suggested that it had been built a long time ago. There were patches of lighter wood which showed where repairs had been done and a whole new section of building had been added on one side. Fallon concluded that the cabin had been built by one of Lo Phat's forefathers and had been passed down through the family to him, with each generation adding to it to make it their own.

It accounted for why the planet hadn't been developed. No developer in their right mind would want to cross swords with that dynasty.

Lo Phat obviously felt reasonably secure from being attacked, however, because he hadn't built in any aerial defences. There was no radar or missile system. So far as they could tell, the Moonbeam hadn't been detected. Lo Phat's own ship wasn't even present, which was puzzling Fallon.

"Maybe he sends it into hiding." An Kohli suggested. "Maybe he parks it on one of the other planets in the system. That way the ship isn't spotted and doesn't tell any casual passers-by that there is anyone on the planet."

Fallon grunted. It was a possibility, he had to concede, not that there would be many casual passers-by. The system had been fully explored and if anyone might be interested in coming here, they hadn't done so. It had been left to the hunters and fisherbeings, of which Lo Phat seemed to be the only one present when the Moonbeam arrived.

There was no doubt that someone was in the cabin. The Moonbeam's sensors had picked up three heat signatures moving round it during the day. They stood out clearly against the cooler background of the forest and were far larger than the signatures of the animals. Further away there were larger animals, the creatures that Lo Phat had probably come to hunt. A visual check using the Moonbeams surveillance camera had confirmed that one of the beings was a Hozetile. It would be too much of a coincidence for it to be anyone other than Lo Phat. The other two changed in appearance from time to time, suggesting that they were either Sutran or Gau. But given what Lofty had said, there was no real doubt about their species.

An Kohli had zoomed the Moonbeam's surveillance camera in to take a closer look at some of the animals. There were antelope like creatures, quite large and with extensive spreads of horns or antlers. When do horns become antlers, she asked herself? But there were also predators. There were huge,

shaggy creatures that walked on all fours, but which could rear up to a considerable height, no doubt to scare away other predators that might threaten them. There were also several different hunting species, feline and canine looking. They slunk around the forest, creeping up on the prey animals. Some hunted alone, but others moved in packs.

“How about we creep up at night, then surprise him when he gets up in the morning?” An Kohli had suggested. “He probably won’t even be armed.”

“That would be fine, if it weren’t for booby traps.” Fallon rejected the idea. “I’d bet good money on their being trip wires and pressure plates controlling mines hidden in the trees, or under the ground. Look at the track pattern that’s been made.”

Fallon pointed at the screen. There was a single track leading from the cabin to the shuttle site and one track leading from there outwards into the forest. After about a hundred met there were branches leading off, taking different directions, including one that curved around to the rear of the cabin before heading off through the trees.

“I see what you mean.” An Kohli replied. “He always enters and leaves the cabin area by the same route, even if he really wants to go out the back way.”

“Right. So, there must be a reason and that reason must be because it’s too dangerous to take the direct route. At night, which way is the pulsar aimed?”

“Straight along that track.”

“Right. He knows that if there’s danger coming, that’s the direction it has to come from.”

“But it doesn’t, does it?” An Kohli persisted. “We know the traps are there, so we can get past them. We approach carefully, testing for trip wires and pressure plates and all the rest of the gizmos. He can’t have put them in a complete circle, so there will be gaps, probably where the ground is difficult to cross. As we find each trap, we neutralise it. It’s the last thing he’ll expect, because he thinks he’s got it all covered.”

Fallon gave the idea some consideration. “What happens if I trigger one of the booby traps. If it doesn’t kill me it will do me serious harm. How would you get me out?”

“Well, I was going to suggest I be the one to go in. I’m smaller and lighter than you, so less likely to trigger anything. And if I do trigger something, you’re big enough to carry me out.”

“OK, Miss Clever Clogs, tell me how you go about disarming a mine.”

An Kohli blushed with embarrassment. She hadn’t thought of that. “OK. Maybe it will have to be you that goes first. But if you mark your route, I can come in the same way and pull you out. I can’t stay up here, of course. I’d have to be down on the planet with you, but some way behind. Look, we already know which routes are safe up to a certain point, because Lo Phat is already using them. It’s only the final couple of hundred met that we have to worry about.”

“Those couple of hundred met could get us both killed.” Fallon grunted.

“Good job we dropped Dishy off and found somewhere safe to leave Lofty then.” An Kohli commented. “Otherwise, they could have starved to death up here if anything happened to us.”

“It’s always a good rule to have, An Kohli. Hand over your prisoners before you go after the next bounty. My mate will keep Lofty safe, but his information turned out to be good, so I’ve left instructions on what’s to happen to him if we don’t make it back.”

Fallon may have the appearance of a drunken bum, thought An Kohli, but he was as thorough as anyone she had ever met. If things went wrong, it wouldn’t be because he had messed up. At least, that was her experience so far.

* * *

Parting the vegetation, An Kohli stepped forward, looking for the next strip of white material that marked the safe path. A stick snapped ahead of her and gave her a clue as to the line Fallon had taken, but following his instructions she took care to remain well back. If any of the booby traps that had been prepared contained explosives it was likely that they had an extensive kill zone, so that they would take out anyone who was in the vicinity of the unfortunate being that triggered the trap.

They had studied the ground extensively before landing, looking for the places where it was unlikely that traps would be laid. The drone showed them that beneath the forest canopy the ground was relatively clear of undergrowth as the lack of light discouraged vegetation. There were some

sparse seedlings, straining to reach the pinpricks of sunshine, or where it would be in daylight, but that was all.

There were also tracks left by some of the larger creatures. If they could pass through without triggering a booby trap, it meant Fallon could pass through too. But the tracks didn't go all the way to the cabin. The smell of an unknown being had probably deterred the animals from approaching. In nature, the unfamiliar was always dangerous.

Where gaps in the canopy had allowed light in, there were thicker clumps of bushes and ferns that formed a natural barrier. That was the way Fallon steered them. There was no need to boobytrap areas that nature was guarding for Lo Phat. But the bushes and ferns weren't impenetrable, especially to anyone holding a laser cutter.

An Kohli's nostrils quivered as she scented wood smoke. Lo Phat favoured log fires at night, to keep the cold out. An Kohli would have used artificial logs, but not Lo Phat. It seemed that he liked things to be authentic. If she could smell the smoke, it couldn't be far to the cabin.

She spotted the next strip of white dangling from the low branch of a tree slightly to the right. They had developed a code. If the strip was long she should pass to the left of it. If it was short it meant she should go right.

"OK, I can see the cabin." Fallon's voice crackled in her ear. "The shutters are still up."

Peering upwards. An Kohli realised that she could see the silhouette of the tree tops against the paler sky. Dawn was close. Observation of Lo Phat's habits showed that he rose early. They had to be in position soon or risk being seen.

They had crossed the track that the generations of hunter's trips had created over the years. That had been two hundred met from the cabin and she was pretty sure she had travelled a further hundred since then. That meant that the cabin must be about a hundred met away. Fallon must be within fifty met, she concluded.

The plan was to circle the cabin and wait just by the front door. It was where Lo Phat was seen each morning, standing with a steaming cup of coffee (they assumed it was coffee) in his hand as he breathed in the fresh morning air. That entrance was on the far side of the cabin.

"I'm inside the clear zone." Fallon reported. "I'll wait for you here."

The clear zone was the area surrounding the cabin where there was no undergrowth and no trees. The trees had been cut away when the cabin had first been built, but whether Lo Phat kept it clear or the ground had just been worn smooth by the generations of feet, they didn't know.

Taking a careful step forward, An Kohli made her way towards the next marker, which she could see hanging thirty met from her. It was long, so she stayed left of every tree she passed. A twig snapped beneath her boot and she cursed. To her it sounded like a pistol shot but was probably inaudible to anyone inside the steel shuttered cabin.

There was a silhouette in front of her now. A bulky figure crouched just in front of a tree. That must be Fallon. She crept forward again, switching her eyes between the ground she was stepping on and the solid shape of his back.

Fallon turned to look at her as she arrived, giving her a brief nod. He pointed to his left, then at himself. He pointed to the right and then at her. It was as they had planned it, she would go one way round to reach the front of the cabin while he would go the other. There was no cover there, so they would have to retreat to the edge of the forest to stay concealed. They had to wait until Lo Phat was well away from the cabin's door before they sprang their surprise, otherwise he would retreat inside and seal himself off from the outside world. They would be stranded, kept at bay by the pulsar in its turret, while he summoned help. They would have to retreat to the Moonbeam or risk being captured by whoever Lo Phat called on to rescue him.

Taking one careful step after another, An Kohli made her way around the side of the cabin. Its blank walls and steel shuttered windows made her feel uncomfortable. A bucolic scene such as this should be welcoming, but she felt like she was circling the walls of a prison. She paused as she reached a corner, Dropping to her hands and knees she peered around it. A low roof ran along the side of the building, providing cover for stacks of logs. The burn marks on their ends showed they had been cut using a laser tool. Lo Phat may be old school when it came to his heating, but he was high tech when it came to cutting the fuel for it. There was no strenuous chopping for him.

Still no sign of life, or any indication that her presence had been detected. She crept onwards, taking care where she put her feet. This close to the

cabin any sound might be heard inside. She reached the last corner. She could just make out the shape of Fallon, creeping through the trees in front of the cabin, stopping short of the path which had the pulsar sighted along it.

She moved away from the walls and towards the treeline, reaching it in about a dozen strides. She felt safer here, with the giant trunks rearing above her head. She could see around her quite clearly now, the light telling her that morning had arrived. She flitted from tree to tree until she had a clear eyeline to the door of the cabin. If she needed to fire, she had a clear shot. She eased her pulsar out of its holster, ready to step out from the trees and raise it when Fallon challenged Lo Phat.

Time ticked by. The forest started to wake up around them. Birds twittered in the branches and small animals scuttled through the scant undergrowth. Whether they were heading for their burrows after a night of foraging or emerging to look for their first meal of the day, she had no idea. They must have caught her scent, because none came near.

There was a hum of machinery and the steel shutters slid away from the windows. Lowering themselves until they hung below the bottom ledges. An Kohli doubted that the system was automated, in case there were intruders waiting outside them, ready to enter. Lo Phat would certainly wish to control when the shutters were lowered. He must feel safe, or he wouldn't have opened them. The last one slid into place and then the one protecting the door started to move. It was bigger and heavier, so it moved much more slowly. Finally, the door stood fully exposed, but still shut.

An Kohli looked upwards as a fresh mechanical sound emanated from the roof. Large panels there slid open, and the pulsar turret retracted. The panels slid back into place and all that was left was a large cabin in the woods, not the least threatening. At least, not threatening if you didn't know who the occupant was.

More time passed. Lo Phat seemed not to be in a hurry to take the morning air. Or maybe An Kohli's body clock was telling her lies. She counted her heartbeats but reached no firm conclusion.

At last, there was movement. The solid door swung open with a creak of hinges. Lo Phat stepped out, his coffee cup held in his hand. An Kohli readied herself, but her brain was trying to tell her something. She looked

again, trying to work out what was amiss. “Fallon, there’s ...” she started to say something but got no further.

Lo Phat raised his right hand and squeezed something with his thumb. With a rush of dead leaves something sprang towards the sky. A shout of alarm went up. It could only be Fallon. An Kohli turned to see Fallon suspended inside a large cargo net, dangling from the tree beneath which he had been hiding.

That was what her brain had been trying to tell her. Every morning, they had watched Lo Phat, his coffee cup had been in his right hand. But this morning it was in his left because he needed his right to ...

The sound of rushing leaves came again and An Kohli felt herself flying upwards. Rough material scrubbed at her skin before she found herself swaying upside down in a net just like the one Fallon had been caught in. The rough surface was thick rope. An Kohli smelt leaf mould in her nostrils, trapped by the thick fibres of the net.

“Good morning.” Lo Phat’s voice boomed across the clearing. He stepped down from the deck that ran along the front of the cabin and walked across the open ground towards An Kohli. “My, my. You are a pretty one.” He leered at her, his mass of teeth seeming to fill the space in front of An Kohli’s face. He bent over and picked up the pulsar that had flown from An Kohli’s hand as she had attempted to stop her upwards rush. “I think that I’m going to have a lot of fun with you.” His lips made a kissing motion, before he raised his hand to point the pulsar at An Kohli’s head.

“I’ll have your pulsar or the chick gets it.” Lo Phat called across the short distance to where Fallon hung. Fallon obediently, if reluctantly, pushed his pulsar through the ropes of the net to let it fall to the ground. Only then did Lo Phat cross the space to where he swung in the gentle breeze.

“I’m guessing you’re the boss.” He said, giving Fallon’s net a gentle push and sending it spinning around. “You’ll have the pleasure of watching what I do to your little friend.” He laughed at Fallon’s discomfort.

“I have to say, it was very entertaining watching you creeping around in my forest. I must commend you. You could have been killed several times over. You missed my little toys by just a fraction of a sim on several occasions.”

He paused, looking from one to the other. “What? No questions? No ‘how did you know we were here, Lo Phat?’ No ‘How did you track us, Lo Phat?’ I’m disappointed at your lack of curiosity.”

He took a sip of his coffee and wandered slowly back until he was standing next to An Kohli again. “No doubt your little drone checked out the cabin for motion and heat sensors and for surveillance cameras. No doubt you concluded that motion and heat sensors would be useless in a forest. You were right. I don’t have either. But I do have cameras. Lots of them. But not around the cabin.”

He drank more coffee as he examined An Kohli like a laboratory specimen. “Oh yes, the trees around here have eyes. Lots of eyes. They work on the visual spectrum, they work on the infra-red spectrum. They work on ultra-violet and they work on X Rays.” He turned suddenly, looking towards Fallon again. “So sorry that you’re suffering from Corofollus disease.” He laughed again. “But it won’t be the Big C that kills you. That pleasure will be all mine.”

“How did you know I was a bounty hunter?” Fallon asked, defeat sounding heavy in his voice.

“You aren’t the first to try. There are a couple buried out there somewhere.” He swept his arm around to take in the forest.

“You knew we were here all along?”

“I don’t know when you arrived, but my cameras detected the heat from your drone three nights ago. I’ve been waiting for you ever since. Last night one of my cameras picked up the heat emissions from your shuttle, so I knew you were coming.” He stepped away from An Kohli and drained his coffee cup. “Now, it has been a long night, so I’m going to get some sleep. I’ll get you down from those nets, one at a time and put you somewhere safe, then I’m going to get some well-earned shut eye.”

Lo Phat activated his control again and An Kohli’s net started to lower itself. “You knew where we would take cover?” She asked.

“Not specifically. No matter where you stood, you would have been above a net. I just had to wait to see which one. My controller operates them all.” He stood back, allowing no opportunity for An Kohli to rush him.

“Walk ahead of me.” He ordered, levelling her own pulsar to point it at her.

She did as she was ordered, climbed the two steps to the porch and then went through the doorway and into the cabin. She took in the luxurious appointments, which clashed with the cabin's rustic exterior. Expensive artwork, no doubt stolen, hung from the walls and there were expensive coverings on the floor.

From a doorway two females peered inquisitively at her. From the Moonbeam they had observed the two of them as they went down to the lake to swim. They always adopted their natural form to do that, so An Kohli knew that they were Sutrans. Would they help her and Fallon? They had no need to.

"Take the next door on the left." Her captor instructed. She found herself in some sort of store room. Racks with various bits of outdoor equipment ran around the walls and in the middle of the room there sat a jet ski. It had a layer of dust on it, which suggested that Lo Phat wasn't into water sports. At least, not ones that involved jet skis. The ski sat on a trailer, which in turn was attached to an electric quad bike. That, too, was covered in dust.

"That ring in the floor, next to the ski. Get a hold and pull it." An Kohli grabbed a hold and pulled. A trap door lifted up, the hinged side towards her. It locked into an upright position, held by a support strut. "OK, you know the rest."

An Kohli walked around the black square in the ground that lay in front of her. She was just able to make out the top rungs of a ladder. She climbed down, taking care with each foothold until she reached the bottom. She looked upwards, saw Lo Phat's leering grin and then the square of light disappeared as the trap door was dropped back into place with a thud.

Time passed slowly, but it could have been no more than a few minutes before the trap door was opened again and Fallon came down to join her.

They sat in dark and gloomy silence for a few minutes. It was Fallon that eventually broke it.

"Cameras in the trees, huh? Who'd have thought it."

"We should have." An Kohli responded. It wasn't an accusation, just a comment.

"Yes, we should have. It all seemed so easy. I think we weren't looking for anything other than the obvious. We should also have spotted the cables that haul those nets up and the motors that do the lifting, but we didn't.

There's no point in beating ourselves up over it. Just a lesson to be learnt for next time."

"You think there's going to be a next time?" An Kohli couldn't hide her incredulity.

"Just whistling in the dark."

They fell silent again.

"What do you think our chances are?" An Kohli asked at last. She had wanted to ask the question for a long time but didn't want Fallon to think she was as scared as she really was. She was glad he couldn't see her tear streaked face.

"Not good, I'd say."

"Have you been caught like this before?"

"Usually, I have someone on board the Moonbeam to bail me out."

"We did discuss that ..."

"But I thought it needed two of us to make sure of Lo Phat. My decision."

"And I agreed with you. There was no way I was going to let you leave me on board the ship."

"Well, we're well and truly screwed now."

"Does anyone know we're here?"

"I logged that we were going after Lo Phat; reported it to Guild Operations, as per the rules. But I didn't say where we were going. Unless someone asks Lofty where we are, I don't think help will be coming. Bounty hunters don't share information much, so no one will worry about us for a while. It will take several days, maybe even weeks, for someone to work out that we might be missing. By then it will be too late. Even if Lofty talks before that, it will be too late."

"What about the two Sutrans? Do you think they might help?" Even An Kohli knew she was now clutching at straws.

"Sutrans aren't noted for their bravery. They can be brave, just like any other species, but they need the right motivation. I think it's unlikely they'll risk their necks to save ours."

With nothing more cheerful to discuss they returned to their silence, each contemplating their own mortality.

7 - Granola

The Granola restaurant was empty except for two figures dining and the staff who waited on them. The Granola was far too fancy to use droids to wait on table and far too up itself to serve food prepared by synthesisers.

The two figures were alone because a ring of security personnel made sure they were alone. The restaurant would be compensated for its loss of trade.

The two diners were similar in age, perhaps a half dozen years separating them. They both wore suits the cost of which would feed an average family for several months. They both wore big, cheese eating grins that seemed to be riveted into place, but which didn't get anywhere near touching their eyes. As they ate they chatted amicably, the way old friends will when they get together. While the subjects for conversation included the state of the galaxy they didn't offer any solutions to the things they believed were wrong with it. Politically they would never agree on such things, so it wasn't worth arguing about. That wasn't why they were here.

They had been allies in the past, each pursuing their own agenda with the aid of the other, their political differences never getting in the way of them both obtaining money and power.

The waiters cleared the desert dishes from the table and served coffee and liqueurs, before disappearing into the kitchen as they had been instructed. Whatever was to be discussed now was to be discussed without the risk of the two men, for they were human males, being overheard.

“Well, George,” the younger of the two men said, taking a sip of his coffee and smacking his lips appreciatively, “what's this really about?”

“It's about my next political move, Tiny. I think you may be able to help.”

Tiny Blur gave his companion a calculating look. Whatever was about to be revealed would be worth something to him. He just wondered how much it was worth. George Bush the One Hundred and Twenty Fifth had always been generous in the past. The right doors were opened, the right contacts provided. But most of the profit from that had been extracted. What was left for the former President of the Sol star system to offer? Time to find out.

“You know that you can count on me to do whatever I can.” Blur allowed the words ‘for the right price’ to hang in the air, unspoken but heard clearly.

“I was hoping that you would say that.” The cheese eating grin grew wider. “As you know, Angel Murky died this week.”

So that was it, was it. Bush wanted to take Murky’s place as the Magus for Sector Nine of the galaxy. They would be hard shoes, or rather sling-backs, to fill. But that wasn’t the point, was it? Bush didn’t want the position of Magus because he would be good at it and would represent the wishes of the beings of Sector Nine. He wanted it for the power he could wield; the ability to shape the future of the galaxy into the model that he and his allies wanted to create. In the past the Magi had been elected or selected for their desire to fight corruption and prevent wars, so this would be a hard sell to the voters of Sector Nine.

Bush gave an inward shrug. It was no skin off his nose why Bush wanted the job. So long as he profited from it himself, that was all that mattered.

“There are several names being touted as candidates.” He replied non-committedly.

“Which is why I need you to be on board, Tiny. I’ve got this star system tied up already. They’ll believe pretty much anything.”

This much Blur knew to be true. Had his own election victories not been obtained by lying repeatedly to the voters? Not only his, but those of pretty much every politician in the Sol star system, including the man he was dining with.

“I need you,” Bush continued, “because you can bring me votes from other star systems. You have influence there, through your work on the Peace Council.”

Ah, so that was it. The Peace Council. It wasn’t an aptly named group. The work of the Council had resulted in more covert warfare and terrorism than it had ever prevented, but Tiny Blur’s own membership of it had been very profitable in more than just financial terms.

“It’s true that I have a lot of contacts there.” Blur refused to commit himself until Bush made his offer.

“I was thinking that we might run on a joint ticket.” Bush’s eyes narrowed, gauging the reaction of his dinner companion.

“You mean ...” Blur’s hopes rose.

“Yes. I become Magus for Sector Nine and you become the next President of the Sol system.”

Blur tried not to show his naked ambition. It was a post that he had always coveted, but as a citizen of a small and obscure group of islands he had never been a serious contender. Only in his dreams had he ever stood on the steps of the United Colours building on Old Earth and sworn to ‘preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of Planet Earth and its colonies.’ Could Bush really make this happen for him? There was only one way to find out.

“Could you make that happen for me?”

“You remember when I ran? No one gave me a chance. I was the outsider, the maverick. I was supposed to lose well before the Global Convention. But I got the nomination anyway. The rest was all about telling people what they wanted to hear, not what they needed to hear, so they would vote for me. And they did.”

Yes, they had, Blur acknowledged to himself. And the guy sitting opposite him had actually done what other Presidents had failed to do; he had delivered on his promises. The fact that it had led to disaster after disaster, increasing poverty on an unprecedented scale and making a handful of Bush’s backers richer than ever was never mentioned, at least not by people that wanted to retain the former President’s favour. But he was able to stand tall and tell the voters the truth – he had kept his promises.

“You think you could do it for me?” Blur tried and almost succeeded in keeping the neediness out of his voice.

“Of course. You know how it’s done, you’ve read my books. You don’t try to appeal to a broad spectrum of voters; it’s too difficult to find policies that appeal to everyone. You break the votes down into single issue groups, then devise a single policy that appeals to one group. For example, the planet’s steel mills were being closed down because steel from other planets was undercutting prices and flooding the markets. So, I promised to introduce tariffs on steel imported from other star systems. Boom ... I got the votes of the steel workers.”

Yes, thought Blur, and put thousands of workers from other industries onto the breadline because their companies could no longer produce competitively priced products manufactured with the expensive Earth made steel. But he had to admit it, the promise had won him votes because people

vote for what is good for them as individuals, not what is good for everyone around them and no one had thought to challenge the promise based on the domino effects that would follow, or the retaliation that was inevitable from the other planets.

“I’ll get my advisors to work up a plan based on the current crop of single issue groups. I’m pretty sure we can come up with a manifesto that will work across the home planet and the colonies. The rest is all about digging the dirt on your opponents. I’m pretty sure I know some guys who can leak the right e-mails and open the right closets.”

“You don’t know who will stand against me yet.”

“Doesn’t matter. You’re a politician, you know that they all have skeletons in their past. You just have to kick the right closets and they come tumbling out. I’m pretty sure you have your own locked away somewhere.”

A shiver ran down Blur’s spine. Did Bush know, or was he just shooting in the dark? The cheese eating grin didn’t give anything away.

“Don’t worry, Tiny. I need you, so your little secrets are safe with me. But tell Cherry to be careful because she isn’t always as discreet as you.”

“So how do we go about getting you elected as Magus?” His asking of the question was tacit agreement to Bush’s proposal. Some things don’t need to be said out loud. In fact, it is often better that they are never said at all.

The meeting went on for several more hours. Once the plan had been sketched out, Bush and Blur wouldn’t meet again. It would do neither of them any good if it was thought that they were too close. Future meetings would take place between trusted aids in remote locations. The more sensitive the subject of the meetings, the more deniable they had to be, with useful fools doing the leg work.

In the small hours of the morning the lights of the Granola restaurant finally went out. Had an author been present to witness the descent of the darkness, they might have thought it a fitting metaphor for what was to follow.

8 – Torture

Lo phat regarded his prisoners with an air of affected boredom, but he couldn't quite conceal the gleam in his eye. It was hard, like a diamond drill bit; the sort of gleam that a sadist gets when he knows he is about to inflict pain on a victim. It told Fallon and An Kohli all they needed to know about their short term future. It also told them that they didn't have a long term future.

They had been brought up to the storage area and tied to chairs. Not nice, comfy chairs, of course. Hard chairs with a sharp edge that cut into the backs of their legs. The tying of the knots that restrained them had been vicious, designed to inflict pain more than to keep them from escaping. Modern restraints of the type used by bounty hunters wouldn't have inflicted that sort of discomfort, which is why Lo Phat had opted for ropes.

The jet ski and its trailer were gone, and in its place stood another chair. Perhaps 'throne' would be a better word to describe it. It was large, sumptuously upholstered and covered in more gold paint than was strictly necessary.

To one side was a sofa, on which sat the two Sutrans. They were in the guise of a movie star, identical twins of a person who had been born an only child. No doubt Lo Phat fantasised about the movie star and the Sutrans were to play out the fantasy for him. Perhaps they already had.

Taking his seat, Lo Phat swung one leg over the arm of his throne and placed a finger at one corner of his mouth, as though deep in thought. Perhaps he was. Perhaps he was calculating how much pain each of them could bear before passing out.

"Get on with it." Snapped Fallon. There was little point in him being diplomatic. It would serve no purpose.

"Oh no." Lo Phat grinned. "It's far more enjoyable to let the pleasure build over time. Anticipation is so much a part of the enjoyment. Surely you know that. Perhaps you don't. Perhaps you know nothing of the pleasures to be gained by inflicting pain. Lots of pain."

He turned to look at An Kohli. "And as for you, young female. I have some special plans for you."

An Kohli felt a shiver run through her. She was in no doubt about what lay in store for her.

“Leave her alone.” Fallon snarled. “She’s done nothing to harm you. I’m the bounty hunter. It’s me you have a gripe with.”

“How very gallant of you.” Lo Phat sneered. “But I suspect that if she had needed to, she would have killed me. So, for that intent, she suffers alongside you. But you’re right, perhaps I should be careful with her. She is very beautiful. She would bring a very nice price at the slave auctions. Perhaps I will let her live.”

“I’d rather die.” An Kohli screamed at him.”

He chuckled, a low, nasty sound. “I’m sure you would, but you have no say in the matter. For the moment I shall keep my options open.”

He rose from his throne once again and walked around behind his two prisoners. They heard the rumble of wheels, not loud, but evident. Metal tinkled against metal as Lo Phat reappeared pushing a small trolley, a small, enclosed cupboard built into it. On the top surface were a number of tools laid out with the precision of a surgeon’s instruments. They shone in the bright light of the storeroom.

“You may have wondered why I have kept you in the cellar for so long.” Lo Phat said. He was quite correct, it was something that An Kohli and Fallon had discussed. “It was because I was waiting for these to arrive. I do so love to have the right tools to do any job and I had left them behind on my ship.”

He lifted one of the objects, turning it so that it caught the light. “This scalpel, for example, is so sharp that I could split one of An Kohli’s pretty purple hairs with it. And then I could split that hair a second time. It’s a bit old school, in these days of laser surgery, but I just love to feel the skin part under my fingers and you don’t get that with the newer tools.”

He replaced the scalpel on the trolley and picked up a second object. The last time An Kohli had seen something like it had been when she had a tooth removed as a youngling.

“I’m sure you know what I could do with these.” He waved them under Fallon’s nose, snapping them closed several times, causing the bounty hunter to draw his head back to avoid their touch. “But that is only for hors d’oeuvres.” He opened the side of the trolley. Coils of cable unwound and slithered to the floor, before a pair of clamps clattered after them. Lo Phat

picked the clamps up and tapped them together. An Kohli had expected to see sparks, but none came. Lo Phat chuckled, reached inside the trolley and flicked a switch. He tapped the clamps together again. This time there was the hiss-crack of an electrical short circuit and sparks flew.

“The battery is powerful enough to deliver a thousand volts.” Lo Phat informed them. “But at a current so low it won’t kill you. But you will enjoy some excruciating pain.”

“I’m getting bored now.” Fallon drawled. He had read in a book that torturers often displayed their instruments to victims in order to extract confessions before they had to inflict an iota of pain. Just the threat was enough. But Lo Phat was displaying them because it heightened his pleasure.

Lo Phat’s expression darkened. He bent over and secured the clamps by attaching them to an insulating bar on the side of the battery, then straightened up.

Without warning he delivered a roundhouse blow to the side of Fallon’s head. He recoiled under the force, his head snapping back on his neck, then lolling forward as he almost lost consciousness. As the echo of the sound of the blow drifted away An Kohli heard a sharp intake of breath from the two Sutrans.

“Did that shock you, my dears?” Lo Phat chuckled at them while rubbing his fist. “You will witness much worse than that before then end of today.”

“Do we have to watch?” One of them asked, her voice timid with fear.

“You can either watch, or you can replace these two.” Lo Phat snarled at them. Their evident disgust seemed to annoy him.

The one who had asked the question went pale. She lowered her face so that she could examine her hands, her knuckles turning white with the force of her grip. “Sorry Lo.” She almost whispered.

Lo Phat turned his attention back to his prisoners. “So squeamish, the Sutrans.” He observed. “Did you know, there are no records of any Sutan pirates?” he asked conversationally.

“Perhaps they find the idea of being a sick bastard not to their liking.” Fallon slurred, Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth.

Lo Phat laughed. “You can’t insult me, Fallon. I am what I am, what my father made me and what his father made him. I come from a long line of sick bastards.”

“I’m surprised you even know who your father is.”

An Kohli wondered why Fallon was trying to goad the pirate. It could serve no purpose other than to make him angry.

He laughed again. “Insulting my parentage, now? Well, you are partly right. But it’s my mother that I didn’t know. My father killed her soon after I was born. He told me that he didn’t want to have to share my affection. I can’t say I blame him; I am rather special.”

“You’re that alright.” Fallon spat a gob of blood onto the floor, splashing the toe of Lo Phat’s boot.

Turning back to his trolley, Lo Phat picked up another tool, which looked like a pair of pliers. “With these I can crush your knuckles.” He informed Fallon. He replaced them and lifted up what appeared to be a pair of bolt cutters, but made with surgical steel. “And with these I can snip off a finger or a toe as easily as pruning a rose bush.” Finally, he picked up a saw. “I’m guessing you know what I can remove with this.” His cruel laugh sending more shivers down An Kohli’s spine.

“Is that your plan? You’re going to dismember me, bit by bit.”

“Oh yes. But slowly. A bit today, another bit tomorrow. And in between times, I shall take my pleasure with you co-pilot here, which you shall witness in the finest detail. I suspect that will be far more painful for you than the physical damage that I shall inflict.”

He replaced his implements of torture on the trolley and returned to sit on his throne. “Of course, I won’t do all the work myself. These two ..” he indicated the two Sutrans, “will do some of it.”

The two females looked as though they were about to protest, but a glare from Lo Phat silenced them. “You see, watching is even more fun than doing, especially if the being inflicting the pain is reluctant to do so.”

“How do you normally get your kicks?” Fallon asked. “Pulling the wings off of insects?”

“When I was a child, yes, I did that. But being the captain of a pirate ship has its perks. Not all of the prisoners we take have a value on the slave market. The old and the infirm have no value, except to me.”

This revelation almost caused An Kohli to vomit. She had never heard of anyone who was as malevolent as Lo Phat. Evil seemed to ooze from his body like sweat.

“I shock you, An Kohli.” Lo Phat had observed the disgusted expression on her face.

“You disgust me, you pervert.”

“More insults, how unimaginative you are.” Lo Phat laughed. “You have not even begun to understand the levels of perversion of which I am capable. But don’t worry. You will have ample time to experience them.”

He stood up and stretched. “But my preparations and all this talk has made me tired. I need a nap. In due course I will want to know how you knew where to find me. I assume one of my crew betrayed me. Pirates!” he spat “You just can’t trust them. Whichever one it was is going to feel even more pain than you and for far longer. But that is a treat for another time. Come, my dears.” He turned to address the two Sutrans “You can help me to relax a little.”

He stalked from the room, the two females hurrying to follow him.

“Well, that was fun.” Fallon said dryly.

“Any chance of you working yourself free?” An Kohli asked, more in hope than expectation.

“No. But if that scalpel is as sharp as he said it was, we could cut ourselves free.”

An Kohli’s hopes rose. “Can you reach it?”

“I don’t know. Let’s see.” He rocked his chair from side to side, moving it sim by sim towards the trolley. As he got closer An Kohli could see that his hands would be well below the top of the trolley and with his feet tied securely to the legs of his chair it was unlikely that he would be able to stand.

But standing wasn’t part of Fallon’s plan. When he was close enough he lowered his head to the surface of the trolley and tried to get his teeth onto the handle of the scalpel. It took him several attempts, but eventually he was able to bite hard on the shining metal. He straightened up and shuffled his chair backwards to put some space between himself and the trolley.

Opening his mouth he dropped the scalpel. They froze as it clattered to the floor, fearful that the noise might raise the alarm.

“Clumsy.” An Kohli snapped.

“Not at all.” Fallon grinned at her through broken teeth. He rocked his chair from side to side again, more violently, until his centre of gravity

caused the chair to topple over. Now, lying on his side, he began to feel for the scalpel's handle. "I need you to be my eyes, An Kohli."

She guided him as he shuffled his weight around, getting closer and closer to the instrument. At last, he had it grasped between his fingers in a tight grip.

"Care to join me down here?" he invited. "I can't twist my hands around to cut my own ropes, but I can cut yours."

An Kohli copied him, rocking her chair to and fro until she, too, was lying in her side. Flexing her elbows and her knees she worked her way across the floor until she lay back to back with Fallon. "You be careful with that thing, Fallon. One false move and I'll bleed to death long before you can free me."

Fallon paused. "You're right. My hands are too clumsy for this sort of thing. Take the scalpel and you do the cutting."

"What?"

"Keep your voice down." Fallon hissed at her.

"What?" she hissed back. "That just means I might kill you."

"And Lo Phat will kill both of us if we don't take this chance. Now, take the scalpel and start cutting."

Reluctantly, An Kohli felt for the tool's handle and took it from Fallon's fingers. "I'm not sure which way round it is." She whispered.

"Trial and error. Start cutting. It's so sharp it will go through that rope like cooked spaghetti. If it doesn't then it's the wrong way round."

An Kohli started to cut and at once felt the tickle of stray rope fibres against her skin as they sprang free under the scalpel's razor sharp blade.

"Ouch. Be careful." Fallon protested as the scalpel's blade slipped and cut into him.

"Sorry, but this was your idea, not mine." She snapped.

"Well ... just be careful."

There was a sudden jerk from Fallon as the rope parted and started to unwind from his wrists. "OK! give me the scalpel." He instructed. With his hands free he made short work of the ropes around his ankles, before kneeling next to An Kohli and slashing at the ropes that bound her.

As soon as she was free of the chair An Kohli was on her feet and heading for the large double doors that connected the store room to the outside world.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Fallon asked, his voice threatening to rise from a whisper to a shout.

“We’re going now, aren’t we?” An Kohli asked, puzzled by his inaction.

“We came down here to get Lo Phat and I’m not leaving without him. Especially after him cold cocking me like that. I owe him.” Searching the interior of the trolley, he found a napkin and used it to bind the wound on his wrist. It had probably been intended for Lo Phat to wipe blood from his hands.

Fallon turned on his heel and walked towards the smaller door, that led into the cabin’s kitchen, not caring if An Kohli followed him or not. An Kohli had little choice but to follow. Besides, he had the only weapon, the scalpel.

As they passed through the kitchen An Kohli took the opportunity to arm herself, grabbing a large and very wicked looking carving knife from a knife block. She hurried after Fallon.

As they passed through the cabin they could hear the sounds of passion coming from a room towards the back. At least An Kohli assumed it was the sound of passion. It could equally have been a grunty taking a particularly difficult dump.

Fallon slowed as they approached the source of the noise. The door to the room stood open. The cabin was an authentic replica of ones found in earlier times, if you discounted the armoured shutters and the pulsar turret concealed in the roof. This meant that the interior doors were of the old-fashioned sort, that swung open and close by hand, rather than being electrically operated sliding versions activated by motion sensors.

Fallon took a peek around the corner before sharply withdrawing his head.

“He’s a bit busy.” Fallon whispered into An Kohli’s ear.

“Are we going to wait?” She whispered back.

“No. Fuck him.” Fallon said out loud, stepping into the doorway and entering the room. An Kohli followed close behind.

Lo Phat was kneeling between the bare legs of one of the Sutrans, his clothing in a bunch around his legs. The other Sutran lay beside him, naked, one hand caressing his back.

Surprised, Lo Phat looked over his shoulder to see what the noise was. He was too slow to react. In a stride Fallon was alongside him, the scalpel’s

blade pressed against his throat. “Don’t move.” He commanded. “This blade might slip and we don’t want that pretty female covered in your blood, do we?”

As though trying to avoid the risk of that happening the female wriggled out from under Lo Phat. The other was already sliding off the bed to cower in the corner. She did her best to cover her body with her hands and arms. The one that Lo Phat had been having sex with was in less fear, so it seemed. She grabbed some of the discarded clothing from the floor and threw it across to her partner, before starting to dress herself.

An Kohli was going to threaten them with the knife to gain their obedience, but saw that she didn’t need to. The two females didn’t seem inclined to help their employer in any way. Perhaps they already regarded him as being their former employer.

“Go and see if you can find our pulsars.” Fallon ordered. “And get some of that rope so that I can tie this bastard up.”

“The pulsars are in the lounge, in a drawer under the entertainment system.” One of the Sutrans provided helpfully. It drew a sideways glare and a growl from Lo Phat, but he dared not move in case his throat was cut by accident.

An Kohli went and conducted the search, finding the pulsars just where the Sutran had said they would be. The storeroom had plenty of rope in it, in various thicknesses, so she slashed off a length of suitable diameter with her carving knife and returned to the bedroom.

Nothing had changed since she had left. Fallon and Lo Phat remained in their positions as though they were statues.

An Kohli placed a pulsar in Fallon’s free hand. The big bounty hunter took a step backwards, removing the threat of the scalpel’s blade from Lo Phat’s throat but pointing the pulsar at his head. Lo Phat let out a hiss, like escaping gas, suggesting that he had barely taken a breath while the blade had been pressed against his skin.

“OK, tie him up and don’t be too gentle.” Fallon instructed An Kohli. To Lo Phat he said “One false move and you’re dead. You’re worth just as much to me that way as you are alive.”

With the pirate secured he was ordered to his feet. “Aren’t you going to let him pull his clothes up?” An Kohli asked.

“No. It’s harder for him to run with that around his ankles. Besides, it’s funny watching him shuffle along like that.”

An Kohli didn’t agree but decided not to press the point. Given what Lo Phat had planned for her, a bit of ritualised embarrassment for him wasn’t worth the argument.

The Sutrans had disappeared while she had been away and An Kohli could hear their voices from another room. As they made their way slowly through the cabin they re-appeared, anxious looks on their faces.

“What’s to become of us?” One of them asked. They had reverted to their natural form, making them easier to distinguish from each other.

“Have you been paid?” Fallon asked.

“Yes. We made sure we got the money up front. You can never trust a pirate.” The other one snarled.

“Do you know where Lo Phat’s ship is?” They shook their heads. “In that case make yourself comfortable here. We haven’t room to take you with us, but as soon as we’re back on our ship we’ll get someone to come and collect you. It will only take a few days, I should think. You’ve got everything you need here.”

This seemed to satisfy the two females and they returned to the room from which they had emerged.

“Go and get the shuttle, An Kohli.” Fallon instructed. “Bring it back and land it out front. Make sure you stick to the paths. We don’t want you falling into one of Lo Phat’s booby traps.”

The walk took her nearly an hour, through a forest that was alive with the sounds of birds and animals. The return trip took almost no time as she piloted the shuttle above the trees and back to the clear area in front of the cabin. Fallon and Lo Phat were still posed as though in a tableau. As she walked down the shuttle’s ramp An Kohli averted her eyes. There was no doubt that Lo Phat had looked better from behind. She didn’t fancy having to lean over him to secure him in his seat in the shuttle.

* * *

“Cheers.” Fallon raised his glass of Grovian in a toast to their successful escape. An Kohli raised her own in reply. The sound of the glasses clinking together filled the Moonrise’s small command deck.

“Does that sort of thing happen a lot?” An Kohli asked.

“More than is comfortable, though I have to say it’s been a while since I was in that tight a fix. I must be slipping.” He fell silent, contemplating his own failures during their recent escapade. “Remember those shiny plaques at Guild HQ I told you about.” He reminded her.

“We were lucky that Lo Phat was so arrogant.”

“Yes. Fortunately for us it’s a common failing among the criminal classes. You see it a lot in movies. The criminal has the hero at his mercy, then talks too much or leaves a thick henchman in charge or something like that and the hero gets free. But it really does happen in real life. The clever ones don’t mess about. If Lo Phat hadn’t been such a sadist he’d have killed us while we were still helpless, hanging upside down in those nets. Instead, he messed around and gave us the means to escape.”

“Well, I guess we have to be thankful for stupid, arrogant criminals.”

“Here’s to stupid criminals!” Fallon said, draining his glass and rising to get himself a re-fill.

“I’ll drink to that.” An Kohli replied, taking a sip. She dared not knock her drink back the way Fallon had. She was pretty sure the treat would be limited to a single measure of the precious whisky.

“The tricky bit starts now. Getting the maximum amount of bounty money for him.”

“How so? Surely the arrest warrants will be honoured. That’s nearly half a million nuks.”

“Half a million nuks in total.” Fallon said as he sat down again. “But individually some of the warrants are only worth a fraction of that. Only the star system or planet that we hand Lo Phat over to is obliged to pay the bounty. The rest can just tear their warrants up. So, I have to negotiate and see if I can get a bidding war going. There are about four systems where the atrocities committed by Lo Phat were so bad that I’m sure I can get them to try to outbid each other to get him back under their jurisdiction.”

“What about the cabin. What will happen to that?”

“It will be seized under the galaxy’s Proceeds Of Crime laws. Whichever authority pays Fallon’s bounty will be entitled to claim it. It will probably be offered to me as part of the bounty, but I’d rather have the cash. What about you?”

“I can’t think what use I’d have a for a cabin in the woods right now.”

“OK, cash it is. That’s how I got the Moonrise, by the way. It belonged to a fraudster who bought it with money he scammed from old beings, and I took it in lieu of the bounty money, which wasn’t as much as the ship was worth.”

“Will his crew try to get Lo Phat back?”

“Unlikely. First of all, it’s risky. They might get caught in the attempt. Secondly there will be other thugs only too ready to take his place. There will be bloodshed over it, but that isn’t our concern. The more they kill each other, the less danger they will present.”

“What about Lofty?”

“I’ve already made arrangements to collect him. We’ll take him to Lilliput as promised.”

“A planet populated by beings a few sim tall; I’m looking forward to seeing that.”

“In that case I’m sorry to have to disappoint you. There’s no way we can land. The risk of us crushing Lilliputians under our big feet is too great. They have a satellite in orbit that acts as an interchange point. One airlock has a galactic standard shuttle dock, while the other is a tiny one that fits a Lilliputian shuttle. We open our shuttle door and Lofty walks out and they take him across the satellite to the other dock and back down to his planet. That’s as close as we’ll get.”

“Shame. I never get tired of seeing some of the oddities that exist in our galaxy.”

“Never forget that to many species it’s us that are the oddities. The rest of the galaxy isn’t a zoo, An Kohli.” Fallon sounded disappointed at her attitude. “Other species are our equals, not our playthings.”

“I know. I’m sorry. It’s just that before I signed on that freighter, the strangest beings I had ever met were the beings that came to mundane to retire, and they were so like us that they hardly stood out. But after I signed on that freighter I encountered so many different species that it sort of blew my mind.”

“The galaxy gets you like that that, the first time you leave home.” Fallon nodded. “But never make the mistake of thinking that you are in any way from a superior species. Just because you have lilac coloured skin and beautiful purple hair doesn’t make you special. Believe me, there are blobs of slime on some planets that have a superior intellect to you and me.”

“Where I come from, blobs of slime are politicians.” An Kohli chuckled, the Grovian starting to go to her head.

Fallon laughed as well. “Go and get some sleep, An Kohli. You’re back on watch in a couple of hours.”

Appendix A

Code of Ethics of the Guild of Bounty Hunters

The Guild of Bounty Hunters (hereafter referred to as The Guild) lays down this code of ethics (hereafter referred to The Code) for the protection of Guild members (hereafter referred as members) and the good name of the Guild and the profession of bounty hunting. At the heart of this code is the principle of the preservation of life. All life is considered sacred and no member may take it without good cause and only in the last resort.

1. Beings may only be pursued for a bounty if a warrant for arrest has been issued by a duly authorised legal authority, such as a police force, court of justice or similar government agency.
2. All beings pursued under an arrest warrant are considered to be innocent until proven guilty, unless they are fleeing justice following the issue of a guilty verdict against them.
3. All suspects that are apprehended by members are to be surrendered to the authority that issued the arrest warrant at the earliest opportunity. Any delay in the surrender of a suspect must be explained to the satisfaction of the authority that issued the arrest warrant.
4. The arrest of a suspect must be reported to the Guild at the earliest opportunity. If there are no galacticnet facilities available in the location where the arrest was made, the bounty hunter must immediately proceed to a location where such facilities are available.
5. All efforts are to be made to ensure that the suspect is delivered in a “live” condition. To this end a bounty hunter may only use lethal force under the following circumstances:
 - a. The bounty hunter has reason to believe that their own life may be forfeit if lethal force isn’t used.
 - b. The lives of other sentient beings are at risk if lethal force isn’t used.

c. The suspect is holding hostages and the death of the suspect is the only way to free the hostages.

The use of a weapon by a suspect is not, by itself, grounds for the use of lethal force.

6. Under exceptional circumstances a member may use their Guild membership in order to prevent or intervene in the commission of a crime in progress. However, local law enforcement agencies always take precedence and a member may not claim any bounty following the arrest of a suspect under these circumstances. However, a member is free to accept any gift of thanks that may result from their actions.

7. Before lethal force is used, the suspect must be given the opportunity to surrender.

8. Whenever practicable, the bounty hunter must give a warning that lethal force is about to be used.

9. Once arrested, the suspect must be treated in a manner that will protect them from harm: This includes the provision of:

a. Medical treatment if they have suffered any injuries either before, during or after their arrest. They must also be provided with medical treatment if they fall ill while in custody.

b. Sleeping accommodation suitable for their species.

c. Toilet and washing facilities suitable for their species.

d. Food and drink suitable for their species which is free from any infestations, harmful bacteria or viruses.

e. Entertainment facilities if they are to be held for more than 24 standard hours.

f. Regular daily exercise suitable for their species.

10. The suspect must not be subjected to any cruel or unusual treatment.

11. The suspect must not be engaged in any sexual activity even if they give their consent.

12. The suspect may be interrogated in order to assist in the location of other suspects, but this interrogation must not involve:

- a. Physical violence.
- b. Threats or threatening behaviour.
- c. The use of mind altering drugs.
- d. Inducements
- e. Offers of leniency that might not be honoured by the agency that issued the arrest warrant.

13. If a member makes a request for emergency assistance, or another member suspects a colleague is in danger, they are duty bound to go to their assistance.

Complaints Procedure

It is not unusual for suspects to submit complaints regarding their treatment to the agency that issued the arrest warrant or direct to the Guild. In this event the following arrangements apply.

14. In the event of a complaint being made to the Guild, a tribunal comprising a Deputy Grand Master and two bounty hunters in good standing with the Guild, will be appointed to investigate the case. Their judgment is final.

15. A complaint made to any other recognised authority will be investigated under the normal arrangements and criminal codes for that authority.

16. The bounty hunter(s) against whom the complaint is made is required to co-operate fully with any investigation.

17. The bounty hunter(s) are to provide records of the arrest and evidence of the subsequent treatment of the suspect. These records can include: audio, video and photographic recordings, data sources and eye witness accounts.

18. Any bounty hunter accused of wrongdoing may produce evidence and witnesses in their own defence.

19. A bounty hunter may appoint an advocate to speak on their behalf and question witnesses as part of the investigation proceedings.

20. In the event of the claim not being upheld, the accused member may reclaim reasonable and legitimate expenses that have been incurred in mounting their defence. However, this may not include loss of earnings while the investigation was in progress.

21. While the complaint against a member is being investigated the member may continue to work, subject to their attendance at the investigation if their presence is requested. Attendance may be achieved using conference communications facilities if agreed by the investigating authority.

22. In the event of a complaint made to the Guild being upheld, it can result in suspension for up to 12 standard months, revocation of the Guild membership or referral to a relevant jurisdiction for criminal proceedings to be initiated.

230. In the event that a complaint made to any other authority is upheld, the sanctions that may be imposed are those appropriate to the criminal code for that jurisdiction. Depending on the severity of the sanctions imposed, the Guild may also decide to impose sanctions up to and including dismissal from the Guild.

24. Any Member having three complaints upheld in any aggregate 36 month period will be subject to investigation by the Guild which could result in dismissal or a lesser sanction.

PREVIEW

This novella serves to introduce An Kohli to new readers and tell the story of how she became a bounty hunter. However, it doesn't introduce the 9 book The Magi series, though Ch 7 does introduce two characters that emerge during that.

So, as a taster for The Magi, the following extract of the eponymous book is provided for your reading pleasure.

One - The Out of Place Android

The door of the shuttle craft hissed downwards and An Kohli stepped out along the ramp it formed. Two younglings stared at her with interest, but when they saw that she wasn't carrying goods to barter or sell they lost interest and scuttled off about their own business.

Such was the nature of the galaxy these days; not even the arrival of a shuttle craft attracted any interest. She doubted that the younglings would even mention her arrival to their parents. That suited her for the time being. She wanted to find the one she was looking for and then get off this useless lump of rock and never see it again.

Dust swirled around her, and she wrapped her neck-cloth around her face in a vain attempt to keep the dust from entering her mouth and nose. Already she could feel the grit between her teeth. She looked at the handheld tracker. The steady pulse indicated that her target was about one hundred li to the north, if this lump of rock actually had a north. OK, she admitted to herself, north was a concept not an actuality; her target was about one hundred li diagonally to her left. It would feel like double that in the heat and dust of this shitty rock. She shuddered at the thought of what the conditions were doing to her lustrous purple hair.

She wished she'd landed the shuttle a little closer but she hadn't wanted to let him know she was coming. He was the type who always ran first and asked questions afterwards.

An Kohli took a deep breath, regretting it at once as she inhaled a mouthful of dust, and strode forward, skirting past some mud built houses. She passed the same two younglings struggling to pull a bucket of water from a well and then pour it into a small tank mounted on wheels. When the

tank was full it would need both of them to drag it home. Again, she puzzled at the nature of a galaxy where the arrival of a shuttle craft from an orbiting spaceship could attract so little attention, but where the inhabitants of the planet still drew their water from wells. She gave a mental shrug. The galaxy was a big place and she had encountered stranger things than younglings at a well.

The dust continued to torment her as she crossed the open ground. Across the rock strewn plain she could see the building she was heading for. There were draft animals tethered outside and a crude neon sign announced its purpose, though she couldn't read the alien script. She corrected herself angrily. Here it was she who was the alien.

She pushed open the door and ducked under the low lintel into the dim room. Bars across the galaxy all seemed to conform to a type, she mused. The darker the interior the more shady its clientele and there was no one shadier than the one she was looking for. Now for the fun part.

He was a shape shifter, which meant that he could be any one of the occupants of the bar. There was a trick to identifying a shape shifter, though. Stare at him, or her, for ten seconds or more and he, or she, was bound to reveal themselves. They hated being stared at. The problem was that if you stared at people in this sort of bar you were likely to start a fight, which was why shape shifters liked bars like this one.

Her arrival had caused heads to turn. Her tall, slender figure always attracted attention. One look at the powerful Menafield Pulsar holstered on her hip suggested that there was nothing to look at here and that it was a good idea for people to just go about their business. She stomped her way to the bar, her thick soled boots making the floor vibrate. Sly looks still came her way, admiring her good looks and the waves of glossy purple hair that framed her face perfectly. She ignored them and focused on the task at hand.

An ancient droid bartender creaked towards her and offered her a drinks menu. She knew that this was a pretension and that whatever she ordered would numb her taste buds for days, but she made a show of looking at it before pointing to the glass of the being standing nearest to her and saying "I'll have one of those."

The droid creaked away to get the drink and she scanned the room quickly, not allowing her eyes to rest on any individual for more than a few

seconds. Those that been watching her covertly looked away quickly, but not quickly enough for her not to notice.

So, which one was he? Not the two men sat at the back of the room. They were clearly having an argument, perhaps over the rather frightened looking female that sat between them. It wasn't the female either. Shape shifters can't change sex, though they can make themselves appear in female form if you don't get close enough to find out which bits haven't been changed. She was showing plenty of the bits that a male shape shifter would have to simulate by stuffing a bra with socks.

Not the two men sitting opposite each other in silence, staring into their drinks. They were the defeated, worn down by years of scratching a living out of land that was only fit for growing rocks. Scattered around the room were half a dozen more men, drinking by themselves, each with an attitude that suggested it wasn't worth bothering to talk to them. Two more of them she dismissed as being in the same defeated category, which left four that might be her quarry. The droid returned and placed a foaming glass in front of her.

An Kohli took a tentative sip and narrowly resisted spitting the liquid out. She was not the sort of person who spat in public. The liquid was a sour tasting beer. The man whose drink she had copied raised his glass and took a large mouthful. An acquired taste, An Kohli concluded. She returned her attention to the four men she thought might be him and tried to stare at them without appearing as though she was staring. A difficult task as any lovelorn teenager who has ever tried staring at a pretty girl would be able to testify.

The first one was easy enough. He was the one further along the bar, standing with his back to her, though the way he twitched his head suggested he sensed he was being watched. Just as he started to turn An Kohli switched her attention to another man on the far side of the room. He was sat sideways on but the glazed look in his eyes suggested he wouldn't notice if the roof fell on him. She counted off ten seconds; nothing. She shifted her gaze again, across the room. A young man in dirty work clothes. Not likely, the one she was looking for had never done a day's manual work in his life, but a disguise is a disguise. Nothing.

The final possibility suggested someone from off-planet. He was well dressed in a modern style which she recognised but couldn't quite place. Not local, she concluded. He met her gaze directly but didn't react to it.

Again, nothing. She checked her tracker. The light pulsed steadily and indicated she was standing within a few met of him. She heard the droid creak towards her again and then it hit her. She turned and levelled her gaze at it.

After ten seconds the droid slammed it's fist onto the bar in frustration, making heads turn. Yes, she was right. A backward planet like this wouldn't have the technology to build droids. This one was old and badly maintained and the know-how to maintain it wouldn't exist here either. She doubted that they had even developed as far as steam power.

"Fuck you, An Kohli." The droid said, its voice wheezy and crackling.

"You can drop the disguise, Den."

"Not in front of the natives." he wheezed. "Don't want to scare anyone. How did you find me?"

"Female intuition." She smiled a mischievous smile.

"You bitch. You planted a tracker on me, didn't you?"

"That would be telling." She continued to grin broadly.

The droid figure let out a wheeze of anger, like a hiss of steam from a leaking pipe. "Well, now you're here you better tell me what you want."

"How do you know that I'm not just looking for a bit of company?"

"Quit fooling around. We both know you didn't cross a hundred parsecs of space just for the pleasure of my company, so spit it out."

"I've found them." She whispered.

"Found what?" His jaw dropped with a clang as he realised what she was talking about. "Oh. *Them*. So where are they?"

"Well, when I say I've found them I really mean I know who has them and I have a rough idea of where she may be."

"Oh, so you haven't found them then. Not really."

"OK, Mr Pedantic, maybe not *found* found, but at least I know where to start looking."

"So who has them?"

"Su Mali."

The droid figure nodded its head, making a noise like fingernails on a blackboard. "Makes sense. She could crack the vault of the Bank Of The Universe if she could get past the guards. So why do you need me?"

"One person alone couldn't take on Su Mali, she's too clever and too good a shot. Besides, she's one of yours. Only a Gau can recognise another

Gau at first sight.”

“You know, An Kohli, I have a long lived desire to die peacefully in my bed surrounded by a bevy of Sutran beauties. If I go with you the chances of that happening are reduced to about zero. Not only would Su Mali be out for my blood, our blood, but the Fell would send every dishonest bounty hunter in the galaxy, and a few other galaxies, to track us down and kill us. That’s not a job you would apply for if you saw it on the galactic vacancies board.”

“It’s worth a lot of money.”

“If I was interested in money I wouldn’t be working here for 10 nuks a day. After the last caper, I decided that there was more to life than the pursuit of money.”

“Wow, you’ve changed Den. I never thought I would hear you say you weren’t interested in money.”

“When you’ve had your genitals held in the very tight grip of a Norian warrior you start to re-evaluate your life a little. You can’t make love to a Sutran beauty if you don’t have any genitals.”

An Kohli spotted her opportunity. “OK, how about the women. There’ll be plenty of those if we recover them. They’ll be throwing themselves at you.”

“Will you be one of them?”

“Only in your dreams.”

“That’s what I thought. I’ll stick with the Sutrans. No deal.”

Once she might have considered a relationship with Den Gau, but not after coming back on board her own ship to find him in a very compromising position with her co-pilot, Gala. An Kohli had forgiven Gala but kicked Den Gau off the ship. She had been sorely tempted to eject him from the airlock without a space suit but had relented when Gala had pointed out that Den Gau still owed her money. While An Kohli might be prepared to forego any debts Gala would rather be repaid in full. Some chance of that, An Kohli had thought at the time.

“OK, There’s fame and glory.” That would surely appeal.

“You remember Malik?”

“The Sentinel who rescued Gib Dander?”

“That’s him. Well, that rescue got him fame and glory. He’s dead now. His body is spread across three star systems. That’s what fame and glory

gets you. No deal.”

That was a bitter blow. She had liked Malik. He was one of the good guys. If Den Gau turned her down she had been going to go to Malik next. Sentinels were expensive, but they were the best. To be honest Den Gau was far from her first choice, but he had the dual advantages of being both a Gau and available; if he could be persuaded.

“What about Bubar?”

“In hospital last I heard. Lost an arm. It’s taking time to grow back”

“Linder?”

“On permanent retainer to Gib Dander now, along with Harker and Elway. You won’t find any other Sentinels willing to take on the job, not for what you can afford to pay and not on this side of the galaxy.

She chewed the inside of her cheek, a habit she had when she was deep in thought. “Ok.” She said, finally. “What will it take to get you on board.”

He was about to reply that wild Fiju couldn’t get him to take the job, but then he had an idea of his own.

“Get me into the Guild”.

An Kohli’s eyes opened wide with surprise. She hadn’t expected that. With Den Gau’s reputation it was unthinkable.

“You have to be joking.” She struggled to keep the scorn from her voice. She couldn’t afford to upset him, at least not at the moment.

“Never been more serious.”

“But they’d never take you.”

“With you recommending me they might.”

“Flattering, but I think you overestimate my influence within the Guild.

“Not if you recover the Magi.”

She shushed him and quickly scanned the room to see if anyone had heard him use the M word. “Careful what you say. If anyone gets wind of this we could be screwed before we even start.”

“But you see what I mean.” Den Gau continued, knowing he had the advantage. “If finding the...them can make me rich, get me women and get me fame and glory, surely it can get me into the Guild, especially if you were the one who recovered them, and I was the one helping you.”

He had a point, An Kohli had to concede. But the Guild set high standards and they didn’t, ever, work on the wrong side of the law which was more, much more, than could be said for Den Gau.

“Look, I can’t make any promises....”

“But you can promise to try. Put in a good word for me. For crying out loud if we pull this off then we’ve....”

She cut him off again before he could blurt out what the effects might be. Who knew who was listening.

“OK, OK. I give in. If we succeed I’ll do whatever I can to get you into the Guild, but I can’t make any promises that they’ll accept you.”

“You’re a Guild member. Your word is your bond, so I trust you. Besides, if we don’t succeed it won’t matter anyway because we’ll probably be dead.”

“Good point.” She extended her hand, and the droid figure shook it, letting out another shriek of tortured metal that made the bar’s occupants turn to look once again.

With her business complete An Kohli let her natural curiosity get the better of her. “How did you get the job here anyway? This planet doesn’t have the technology for droids.”

“You know me. I can sell snow on an ice planet. I turned up as myself and offered the owner a droid bartender for 10 nuks a day. All it would need is a storeroom at night where it could recharge. He said yes so the next day I turned up looking like this. Not only do I get a roof over my head I get 10 nuks a day and all the blash that I can drink. Not that any sane person would want to drink more than a glass of that stuff.” He indicated the glass that sat untouched in front of An Kohli.

“What about food?”

“They sell food here as well. Well, food of sorts. I get the leftovers and with food of the quality they serve here there’s always plenty of leftovers.”

“I suppose you know all the regulars.”

“We don’t get many regulars. This is a drovers and traders bar. Most of the customers come in for a few drinks and are then back on the road as soon as they sober up. We get a few in from the village, but not many. They don’t have a lot of cash round here for drinking.”

“What about him? The one behind me with the smart cloths.”

“I’ve been wondering about him myself. He turned up a couple of days back and has been in and out a few times. Looks like he’s waiting for someone.”

“Is there any reason that he might be looking for you?”

“You know me. It’s more than a possibility. If he is then he hasn’t made any attempt to make me show myself, which anyone who knew me would do straight away. Are there any other ships in orbit?”

“The ship’s sensors didn’t show any. I didn’t see any shuttles parked close by either.”

“Well, he pays cash and he’s not caused any trouble, which around here is always a good sign. Who knows, he might be hiding out here as well.”

“If he was then he’d dress down a bit. Make more of an effort to fit in. He doesn’t fit and that bothers me.”

“You’re paranoid, Kohli”

“An Kohli. You know I hate it when people don’t use my full name.”

“Whatever. So, what do we do now?”

“When does your shift end?”

“When we close tonight.”

“Any reason why you can’t leave then?”

“No. I’ll leave a note for the owner of this dump to say the droid’s broken down and has to go off planet for repairs. He’ll have to manage by himself till this is over.”

“You’d come back to this arsehole of a place?” An Kohli found the idea ludicrous.

“Believe me, if we pull this off we’re going to need some out of the way place like this to hide for a while, or we’ll end up spread across star systems just like Malik.”

He was right. This job would make them some powerful enemies.

“So where is Su Mali?” Den asked.

“Not now. I’ll give you the low down when you join me tonight. My shuttle is on the other side of the village. Meet me there when you’ve finished here.”

With that she stood up and walked out of the bar. Several pairs of eyes followed her. Most were for the traditional reasons that men’s eyes follow the swaying rear view of an attractive woman, but the well-dressed man appeared to have less salacious motives. He watched the empty door frame for several seconds after An Kohli had disappeared, before returning once more to his waiting.

Glossary

Gau	A shape shifting species from the Flage star system. They have a telepathic bond with each other which means they can sense the presence of another Gau in the vicinity and they can identify each other by sight.
Li	A unit of measurement of distance roughly equivalent to 5 Earth metres.
Menafield	The Menafield Arms Corporation (part of the Gargantua Enterprises Corporation) produces a wide range of pulsar and projectile weapons for military, business and family use. The Menafield Pulsar, as used by An Kohli, is reputed to be the most powerful handheld weapon in the galaxy and can punch a hole through ¼ inch steel plate.
Met	A unit of measurement of distance. Plural Mett. 5 Mett = 1 li.
Nuk	A unit of currency that is exchangeable throughout the galaxy. One nuk is sufficient to buy two Big Macs on any planet except Earth, where they cost 5 nuks each, but that's Earth for you.
Parsec	An astronomical unit of length used to measure the distance of objects in space when viewed from the surface of a planet. It was developed by astrophysicists on planet Earth and is one of the few astronomical developments from that planet that have made it into the galactic system of measurement. One parsec is approximately 3.26 light years or 3.0857×10^{16} metres. The term was misused as a measurement of time in the film Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope and then misused again, this time ironically (maybe), in Episode VII: The Force Awakens.

- Pulsar A weapon that uses high energy pulses to destroy its target. Smaller versions are handheld and larger versions can be fitted to mounts for use on vehicles and spacecraft. Has an advantage over projectile weapons because it can be used under water with only minor loss of efficiency.
- Sentinels An Inter-galactic sect of mercenary warriors with very high entry standards. You don't apply to join the sentinels, you are invited.

Two - Cloak

“Goodbye Ma, goodbye Pa. Give my love to Tu Kohli, Try Kohli and Fur Kohli.” She named her brothers and sisters in descending order of age, as was the custom. An Kohli broke the galacticnet connection and the viewing screen went blank before the tears on her cheek became visible. She didn't like them to see her cry. It made them worry. It had been three long years since she had been able to find the time to visit her family, thanks to the search for the Magi. She missed them so much.

Of course, like all families they had their disagreements. The biggest amongst them was her decision to find work as a bounty hunter. “If you want to go into law enforcement why don't you just join the police here at home?” They had argued. But that wasn't exciting enough for An Kohli.

She had always been the first amongst her peers to climb a tree, to go rock climbing, to go sky diving. She wasn't going to settle for a badge and a whistle in some dead beat corner of Peacock Epsilon, or Mun Dane as its occupants knew it. So, she had signed on as a crew member on a freighter and went looking for a bounty hunter to become apprenticed to. Five years later she had returned in triumph to show her parents her Guild membership badge and certificate, and her first spaceship, a single seat Comet class. It was old and it was slow, but it was hers. But it wasn't the space craft that had made her parents beam with pride, it was the Guild certificate.

The Guild are a body of licensed bounty hunters that operate throughout the galaxy. They set high standards for themselves in terms of their professionalism and who they would work for. Their Code of Ethics say that bounty hunters must always bring their targets back alive. They must never hand a prisoner over to a regime that uses torture or capital punishment. They must always make sure their prisoner has a lawyer before they leave him or her in the hands of the local law enforcement agency.

None of that was why Den Gau wanted to join. He wanted to join because all Guild members were oath sworn to go to the aid of any other Guild member if called upon to do so. Even at the risk of their own life and even if it meant crossing the galaxy to get there. If you lived the sort of life that Den Gau lived then that was an important consideration.

An Kohli was proud to be a member of the Guild. There were thousands of bounty hunters operating across the galaxy and few of them had the ethical standards that bound the Guild together. Of course it wasn't just about hunting down criminals; alleged criminals she corrected herself. It was also about finding anything that needed to be found, which ranged from missing younglings to works of art and from missing pets to her own current obsession, the Magi.

Every bounty hunter in the galaxy was on the lookout for the Magi. Some to recover them and some to make sure they were never recovered. Whoever succeeded would shape the future of the galaxy for millennia to come.

An Kohli sat in her shuttle craft and tried to relax as she waited for Den Gau to come. She had forgotten to ask when that might be and he had omitted to say. Stupid. But then he would get there when he got there and there was little she could do to speed that up. He could have taken off his apron and left with her but he hadn't offered to do that. Perhaps he wanted to make sure he got his last 10 nuks. Perhaps he wouldn't come at all. Perhaps he would run again. Den Gau was good at running; he got plenty of practice. No; She dismissed that notion. She had a prize to offer him now and it was one he had yearned after for years. If there was a chance that he might now get Guild membership then he would come.

To pass the time An Kohli opened up the shuttle craft's data library and selected the Magi files. It was something she did quite often, just to keep herself focused.

For centuries there had been war across the galaxy. Someone would decide they wanted to rule and so they set about achieving their goal. Maybe they would start off small, with a town or a city. But they wouldn't be satisfied with that. They would move onto larger things, maybe an island or a continent. From there the next step was obvious: to rule the entire planet. For those planets that had developed the technology for inter-stellar travel it was just a short leap to desiring to rule whole star systems and eventually to rule the whole galaxy. If it couldn't be achieved by fair methods then it would be attempted by foul. Wars raged from small local fights between rival factions in small neighbourhoods right the way up to full star fleets blasting each other into atoms. Something had to be done if the rivals for power weren't to annihilate every sentient being in the galaxy.

What happened was that the governments of all the inhabited star systems finally got together and drew up guidelines to select or elect, depending on their own preference, the wisest, most intelligent person they could find. That person would join the Magi and the Magi would rule the galaxy on behalf of them all. First the galaxy was divided up into nine sectors: five in the central core and two in each of the spiral arms. Surprisingly this had resulted in their being just about the same number of planets supporting sentient life in each sector. Each Magus represented the interests of his or her own sector, naturally, but was duty bound to find the best solutions for all the sectors.

It had worked. The wars faded away, the Magi came and went over time and the galaxy settled into peace. With peace guaranteed there was no longer a need to maintain war fleets. The expense was horrendous, and nobody wanted to pay the price.

That was when the Fell came into being.

A group of opportunists, 'business' people and criminals realised that the galaxy was now effectively defenceless and ripe for the taking. Secretly they built war fleets and appeared as if by magic in all nine sectors at the same time, capturing the most important planets and cowing the rest into submission. The Magi were forced to flee. Eventually they were cornered by the Fell, but before they could be captured their intelligences were downloaded into storage devices, called eggs because, well because they were shaped like eggs. All the Fell were able to capture were the empty and lifeless bodies that had once supported those formidable intelligences.

The eggs were smuggled onto an itinerant trading ship and sent across the galaxy into safety, but they never arrived. The ship was found drifting, its crew dead, but of the Magi there was no sign. Since then, the bounty hunters had been searching. Many in the hope of finding the Magi and restoring them to power, but far more working for the Fell to destroy the Magi once and for all.

A warning bleep sounded and An Kohli flicked a switch to view the person who had tripped the external proximity detector. She found herself looking at the familiar shape of Den Gau, now restored to his default humanoid shape. At first glance he would look like an Earthling, but for the prominent cranium that housed the extra brain matter needed to control his shape shifting and telepathic powers.

She switched to body scan mode. At his neck he wore the chain that she herself had given him. She was quite touched to see that he was still wearing it. It was gold and she had assumed he'd sold it years ago to buy food, or more likely drink. Secreted in the waste-band at the back of his trousers was a small knife, no surprise there of course, and tucked into the top of his boot was what she suspected to be a small pulsar weapon.

She zoomed in on the centre of his torso and strained her eye to pick out the only other foreign object that the scanner had detected. A tiny tracking transmitter. She had hidden it in his food years ago and it had attached itself to the wall of his intestine just like a tape worm. He would work it out one day and have surgery to remove it, but it had served its purpose. She had found him when she wanted to find him.

She pressed a button and the shuttlecraft's door hissed open. Den Gau squeezed himself through the narrow inner door and took the only other available seat. The tiny cabin meant that they were only sims apart.

"So, what's the plan?" He asked.

"And hello to you too." An Kohli replied. "Have patience. All will be revealed when we get onto the Aadastra." She busied herself with preparing the shuttle for take-off.

They felt the familiar punch in the behind as the craft leapt off the planet's surface and accelerated upwards. Despite the gravity shields they still experienced some of the tremendous forces that were acting on their bodies, compressing organs, restricting blood flow and causing them to get close to blacking out. It seemed to take an age, but it took only a couple of

minutes for the craft to escape the planet's gravitational pull and burst through its atmosphere into the vacuum of space. The craft's location system locked onto its mother ship and they streaked towards the orbiting craft. It appeared in the tiny window, a sleek Meteor Class ship, the preferred mode of transport for any self-respecting bounty hunter. It wasn't the fastest craft in the universe but it could outpace most.

The shuttle's speed made it appear that it was about to crash into the Meteor's side, but at the last minute the retro rockets fired and the shuttle slowed to walking pace before docking smoothly with its parent craft, the outer curved surface of the shuttle merging perfectly to restore the graceful streamlined shape of the larger space ship. There is no reason for a space ship to be streamlined, as there is no wind resistance without an atmosphere, but designers just can't resist making things that look sleek.

There were a few moments of silence while the airlock filled, then both the inner and outer doors of the shuttle hissed open.

"After you, Captain." Den Gau insisted with a mocking tone. Only the most egotistical of bounty hunters ever referred to themselves as "Captain".

An Kohli gave him a glare but let it pass. She did however step firmly on his foot as she edged herself past him. He gave a yelp, the difference in the quality of their footwear making the punishment more painful than it might have been.

Inside the airlock, An Kohli removed her Menafield Pulsar and placed it into a cavity that had opened up in the wall. The door of the cavity closed and then re-opened a few seconds later. There was no sign of the weapon. "You know the rules Den. No weapons on board unless we're under attack. Put them into the armoury."

"Is Gala still your co-pilot?"

"Yes, she is."

"Then I need a weapon."

"Gala isn't armed either. The worst she can do is strangle you in your sleep, so keep your cabin door locked. Now, hand them over or I'll take them off you myself and you won't like that."

Den Gau knew the truth of that. Reluctantly he bent down and removed the pulsar from his boot top and placed it into the cavity.

"And the knife." Commanded An Kohli.

“You body scanned me, didn’t you?” He seemed genuinely offended by the idea.

“Of course I did. Anyone with any sense would body scan you every time they met you, just as they would count their fingers after they’ve shaken your hand. Now hand over the knife.”

He obeyed with bad grace. With the weapons safely stored An Kohli placed her palm on the security lock and the air lock door slid back to allow them onto the ship. She turned left towards the small bridge. Gala was standing just inside the bridge door, waiting for them.

“Where’s my money, arsehole.” She glared at Den Gau.

“Er, I’m a little strapped for cash right now. Just give me a few days.... A couple of weeks maybe. A month tops. I’ll have it for you.”

“If I don’t have my money in two weeks I’m going to take it out of your skin. Got me?” Gala snarled.

“I promise Babe. I’ll have all thousand nuks for you in a fortnight.”

“Its two thousand and you know it. And don’t call me Babe.” With that Gala tossed her blond curls, turned on her heel and threw herself into the co-pilot’s seat. “Where are we going?” She asked of An Kohli in a more pleasant tone.

“Take us into a higher orbit then make a few turns round the planet. See if there’s another space craft in orbit.”

“You think we might be being followed.”

“Not followed, as such, but there’s someone down there who doesn’t belong and I’m a bit suspicious about him. If you don’t find anything take us out to the edge of the system, out towards sector 6, but don’t leave the system just yet.”

An Kohli left the bridge and beckoned Den Gau to follow her into the small day lounge that was immediately aft of it. She switched on the computer monitor that adorned one wall and a controller slid out from beneath it. She picked it up and made herself comfortable. “Sit” she commanded, patting the seat beside her own.

She called up a map of the galaxy and started to zoom in on one area.

“This is Sector 6, where the freighter carrying the memory eggs was found drifting.” She continued to zoom in until just two star systems were visible. “The Inferon and the Oferon systems. Neither have inhabited planets, but they get the occasional visits from mineral prospectors. The

trader was taking this as the most direct route to the Tallis system, where they were to find a certain person and hand over the eggs. I can't reveal the person's name for security reasons."

"You mean you don't know it." Den Gau smirked.

She glared at him before snapping back. "Security. There had been reports of Meklon pirates operating in this part of the sector. Nothing unusual about that. Since the Fell started their attacks most law and order in space has broken down. When the ship was found it had the look of a typical pirate attack. The cargo was gone, not that it was worth much, mainly low grade ores. Everything that could be stripped out had been, all the electronics, the engines, life support systems, even the toilet seats. The crew was dead, but the courier who was carrying the eggs wasn't among them. We think maybe the courier was in cahoots with the pirates but we can't be sure."

"So how did the eggs get from the pirates to Su Mali?"

"A good question. We don't think the courier knew what it was that he was carrying. The eggs were in a sealed box. We think that he knew the box was valuable, but that was all. He just sold it for what he could get. Probably in a bar somewhere. From there it was probably sold on a few more times as various people worked out that it was worth more than they had paid for it. Su Mali must have discovered, or at least guessed, what it was and outbid everyone else."

"So how can you be sure that Su Mali has it?"

"We intercepted a message. She's trying to contact the Fell. There can only be one reason for that."

"You keep saying 'we'. Who is 'we'?"

"The Guild. We've been retained by the acting Galactic Counsel in exile to try to track down the Magi and return the eggs. Once the people see that the Magi are leading us again it's hoped that they'll rise up and kick the Fell off of all the planets they control. There are only fifteen Fell and they probably don't control more than a few thousand beings at the moment, but they can't be given time to build up their strength, to recruit soldiers and build more ships."

The ship gave a small vibration, more of a shiver, as Gala increased the power on the engines to take it into a higher orbit. Den looked at An Kohli

as if to say ‘there’s no going back now’ but kept his counsel. Instead, he asked her “Where is Su Mali now?”

“We can’t be absolutely sure. You know what these intra-galactic thieves are like. All we can say with any certainty is that she’s not in any of her known haunts. But we have some info about a star system she might be using as a hideout.”

“So why haven’t you just set course for there? Why take us out to the edge of this system?”

“I’m still concerned about that stranger in the bar. He didn’t walk to that planet and he wasn’t waiting for the next ship to Endocron. I’m going up to the bridge. You stay here, it’s too crowded for three people.”

“Where am I sleeping?”

“I asked Gala to set you up a camp bed in the navigation room. We never go in there. You’ll be comfortable enough.”

“Luxury I’m sure.” Den laid on the sarcasm with a trowel. “Is there a lock on the door?”

“It’s operated by palm print. I’ll re-programme it for you before you go to bed.”

The Meteor Class spaceship *Adastra* was small as space ships go. It should have a crew of three; pilot, co-pilot and navigator, but it was possible to manage without the navigator if you had good navigation software on the computers. Most bounty hunters saved the expense of the extra crew member by upgrading the navigation software. Some bounty hunters didn’t even bother with a co-pilot, relying on the auto-pilot to fill the gap. An Kohli preferred to know that she had left a sentient being in charge of her ship when she was away from it. One that could use its own initiative to come and help her out if need be. Artificial Intelligence was OK, so far as it went, but it wasn’t great at lateral thinking and that was one of Gala’s strengths. Besides, Gala was a nice person, An Kohli enjoyed her company and she made a chookie curry that was to die for.

As well as its bridge, the craft had a small lounge, the navigation room, three sleeping cabins for the crew members, a small engineer’s workshop and a hold that was used to store all the consumable requirements, such as water, food powder, space suits and weaponry. Fully stocked the ship could operate without replenishment for two years with a crew of three or three years with a crew of two. Bounty Hunters usually turned the navigator’s

bedroom into a holding cell for their prisoners. The one on Adastra was capable of supporting over one hundred different life forms in humane conditions, as was required by the Guild's code of conduct.

An Kohli stepped onto the bridge and lowered herself into the pilot's seat. "Anything unusual?"

"No ships visible, if that's what you mean. But look at this." Gala pointed to a tiny grey smudge on the screen that was displaying a view of the surface of the planet below them.

"What is it?"

"I'm not sure, but I suspect it may be a ship using a cloaking device. If you look at the surface of the planet its various shades of brown in that area, not grey."

"Anything on radar?"

"No, but I wouldn't expect there to be if it's using a cloaking device."

"Switch to infra-red."

Gala waved her hand over an icon on the screen and the image of the surface of the planet switched to various shades of blue, depending on how much of the sun's heat was being reflected from it. The unusual smudge stayed resolutely grey.

"It's got to be a cloaking device. Only that would prevent heat from being emitted and showing up. Zoom the image."

Again, Gala wafted her hand towards the screen and the grey smudge increased in size as she zoomed in. "See, there. Two tiny red patches. There's some heat escaping. I reckon those are engine vents. No cloaking device can completely conceal engine heat."

"You're right. And look at the shape. The classic V shape of an Andromeda class ship." An Kohli traced the outline of the grey smudge with a well-manicured finger nail.

"Wow, if it's an Andromeda class then someone has a lot of money to spend, especially if its equipped with a cloaking device."

"Yeah. Classic mistake of course, orbiting so low. Anyone with eyes can see it if it has a planet behind it. Cloaking is only good for deep space where there's no colour." She paused to take a closer look at the grey image. "But it still needed a sharp pair of eyes to spot it. Thanks Gala. Now, lock the tracker beam onto it and take us out to the edge of the system. I want to see if it follows us."

The one thing a cloaking device couldn't hide was the mass of the object it was cloaking and it was this that the Meteor Class ships' gravity tracker beam locked onto. Providing the beam didn't exert any direct force on the unknown Andromeda class ship its pilot wouldn't even know its position was being tracked.

Returning to the lounge An Kohli found Den scrolling through images of the Magi, or at least the images they had before their consciousness's were downloaded into memory eggs and the bodies were destroyed by the Fell.

"What are you doing?"

"Just reminding myself what these guys were like before the Fell got to them."

"Guys and gals. Four of them were female."

"Whatever." He flicked his hand and all nine images appeared grouped together. Below each image was the name of the being who had once succored the intelligence of a Magi and the galactic sector that they represented. Sector One: Fah Naru Kota, at least that was how his name was pronounced in the common tongue. Sector Two: Ginja Bis Quit; Sector Three: Marshall Setu; Sector Four: Northen Dans Err; Sector Five: General Lektion; Sector Six: Mai Lotu; Sector Seven: Goffar The Wise; Sector Eight: Ndu Corsa; Sector Nine: George Bush the one hundred and twenty fifth.

Den let out a giggle.

"Something funny about nine dead Magi?" An Kohli's sharp tone indicated her disapproval.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't laugh, but George Bush a Magi. It's so hilarious."

"It should have been Darak Obreen."

"Yeah, she was a genius. A pure, unadulterated genius."

"It was that stupid electoral system they used in Sector Nine. Bush wasn't even a contender otherwise. The Sector Nine Independence Party split Obreen's vote and Bush got in by a whisker. Absolute stupidity."

"Just goes to show that in a democracy the best candidate doesn't always win." He waved his hand and the images disappeared. "So, are we being followed?"

"Not followed as such. If I was being followed then the mystery man, or whatever species he is, couldn't have got to 5-421-19 Gamma before me."

The system they were in was so insignificant that it hadn't been thought necessary to give it a proper name, only a number; 5 for the galactic sector number and 421 for the details of the system based on an agreed method of categorisation. Four was the magnitude of its star based on a standard system of measurement, two was the number of planets that orbited the star and one was the number of inhabited or inhabitable planets. The suffix nineteen indicated that it was the nineteenth system to be categorised in Sector Five. The Ancient Greek alphabet, for some reason lost in the mists of time, was used to designate the position of each planet, starting from the one closest to the star. The fact that the planet she had been on was designated gamma suggested that there had once been three planets in the system rather than two. That would account for all the dust on the surface - it was probably the remains of the missing planet. If the planet's occupants had their own name for it then An Kohli hadn't found out what it was.

"You only follow someone if you don't know where they're going." Den observed. "If this mystery being guessed you were coming to get me and he had some idea of where I was, he might have got here before you and just kept an eye on me until you arrived."

That made sense. An Kohli had planted a tracker on Den Gau in readiness for the day when she might need it, but tracker signals can be picked up by anyone with the right equipment. Information on who the tracker was implanted in might be difficult to come by but it could be purchased for the right price and someone who could afford to own an Andromeda Class spaceship could certainly afford to pay for that sort of information.

The intercom on the wall above the computer screen bleeped and Gala's voice could be heard. "He's following us, matching us pace for pace."

"Thanks Gala. Disengage the tractor beam. I'll give you fresh course instructions in a minute or two. In the meantime, maintain present course and speed." The intercom went silent.

"Well, that puts it beyond doubt, I think." An Kohli descended into thought. "If we jump to hyper drive he'll just follow our ion trail. He doesn't even have to match us for speed. An Andromeda can't keep up with a Meteor anyway, but it can follow our trail and would never be that far behind us."

"It's an Andromeda Class, is it? Why didn't you say so. There's only ever been about a hundred of them built. I might be able to find out who owns

it.”

“You can do that?”

“Give me galacticnet access and half an hour and I can find out who killed John F Kennedy.” The mystery of who really killed the President of an insignificant land mass on an insignificant planet in an insignificant star system in Sector Nine, several centuries previously, was one that still fascinated the population of the galaxy for some reason.

“OK. Also see if you can find out where they all are.”

“That’s easy. That’s public access information if they’re logged on to traffic control, which they should be.”

“I have a feeling that this one isn’t.”

“In that case you want to know which ones *aren’t* logged on to traffic control. It will be a far shorter list.”

“OK. Also see if you can find out which ones are fitted with cloaking devices.”

Den Gau turned to her with a smirk on his face. “I’ll have to hack the manufacturer’s mainframe for that information. You know that’s illegal. But if you want me to.....” He tempted her.

She scowled. “In that case don’t do it.” It was part of the Guild’s ethical code of practice that their members never did anything illegal. She stomped out of the lounge, before calling back over her shoulder. “There’s galacticnet access in the navigation room, your room.”

Gala and An Kohli were interrupted by the bleep of the intercom from the navigation room.

“I’ve found what you wanted.” Den informed her, the tone of triumph clearly audible in his voice.

“Transfer it to my command screen.”

The image of the route she and Gala had been planning vanished from her screen and was replaced by five lines of text; the ownership details of five Andromeda Class spacecraft that weren’t currently logged on to the galactic space traffic control system, or GSTC for short.

The first three she discounted. They were owned by planetary or star system governments. All three had been enthusiastic supporters of the Galactic Counsel. Although they were now ruled by puppet regimes An

Kohli doubted that they would be working deliberately against the recovery of the Magi.

The fourth owner was a commercial operator. It wasn't beyond the bounds of possibility that someone, or maybe several someone's, had hired the Andromeda but it seemed unlikely to her. There were smaller, faster and above all cheaper ships that could have been hired. To hire a Meteor Class like her own would cost about half of what it cost to hire an Andromeda.

An Kohli blinked in surprise as she read the name of the owner of the last unaccounted for Andromeda. She blinked again, just to check that her eyes weren't deceiving her. She felt the small hairs on the back of her neck start to rise. She was in no way psychic, but she had learnt to trust the messages that those tiny hairs sent to her. The owners were Gargantua Enterprises, one of the biggest, most powerful corporations in the galaxy.

If it could be manufactured, mined, bought or sold then Gargantua owned a company that would make it, mine it, buy it or sell it. They were into minerals, chemicals, technology, media, banking and a dozen other fields of commerce and industry. It was their proud boast that every being in the galaxy used one of their products or services every second. An Kohli doubted that applied to the planet she had just been on but then remembered the foul tasting blash. That was a product that could well have been made by a Gargantua subsidiary. They went for quantity rather than quality.

But that wasn't what had made the hairs on her neck stand on end. It was the fact that Gargantua's founder and largest shareholder was Gib Dander. It was the second time that day she had come across his name. It could just be a coincidence, but she felt those small hairs were trying to tell her it wasn't. She leant back in her command chair and closed her eyes and started chewing the inside of her cheek so that she could think better. In the co-pilot's chair next to her Gala bit back the question she had been about to ask. If the boss was thinking then she knew better than to distract her.

Was there a connection? Gib Dander had been kidnapped and Malik, the Sentinel who had rescued him, was then killed. Now someone using a ship owned by the corporation that Gib Dander owned was following her. Assumption, she scolded herself. She wasn't yet certain beyond doubt that the ship was the one owned by Gargantua. How could she check that? She opened her eyes and scanned the array of technology that filled most of the

bridge area, seeking inspiration. Her eyes lit on a small panel in the centre of the bank of communications equipment. Would that work?

She pressed the intercom button. “Den, is it possible to find out the squawk code for the Andromeda owned by Gargantua Enterprises?”

“Should be, at least if you don’t ask me how I found it out.”

Did that fit with the ethics of the Guild? She asked herself. She was allowed to do what was necessary in her own defence, even if it was against the law. Surely finding out who owned a cloaked ship that was following her counted as being in her own defence. She decided she could live with that argument.

“OK. I’m not going to ask.”

“I’m on it.”

“What are you thinking?” Gala asked.

“As you know, each ship has its own squawk identification. If you ping it with the right code then it will respond and identify the ship with its name, position, course and speed. If you don’t use the right code then it won’t respond, and you can draw your own conclusions.”

“So, you find out what the code is for the Andromeda and we ping it and see what happens.”

“Worth a try.”

“OK.” The intercom burst into life once again. “The code is on your screen.”

“Pinging it now.” Gala announced, already ahead of her commander.

The response came back immediately, a positive identification. A few seconds later the Andromeda uncloaked, the pilot obviously aware that his cover had been blown.

An Kohli managed to stifle a gasp of admiration as the simple beauty of the Andromeda Class ship was revealed. It was conical in shape, the flat base at the rear extending forward to a point that was reputed to be sharp enough to pierce skin. Its entire surface was polished to the brightness of a mirror, so that the reflected light of the system’s sun made it shine like a miniature star. An Kohli knew that the μ value of its surface was the lowest of any space craft on the market. Of course, all of that was redundant, as there is no friction in space, but rich people always wanted to show how rich they were by paying for things that they didn’t need. Conversely they

would wait with their hands held out for one victel change from a 1,000 nuk note.

“Well done, Den. It’s the Gargantua Enterprises ship.” An Kohli checked the identity information that the ship’s squawk provided, giving its name as being the Doobria Dawn. Doobria, An Kohli was pretty sure, was the name of Gib Dander’s favourite wife.

“So why would Gib Dander want me followed?” she mused aloud.

“Could be he doesn’t know his ship is being used.”

“You don’t name a ship after your favourite wife then let anyone use it without asking why. No, he knows precisely where it is and what it’s being used for, you can take that to the bank. And who is the pilot? I don’t recognise him as being a bounty hunter.”

“Could be private police.”

“Not with the clothes he was wearing. Too expensive. That was why I picked him out in the first place. No, it doesn’t make sense. He goes to the trouble of cloaking his ship but wears clothes that make him stand out like a light house in a desert. I’m missing something.”

Gala thought for a few minutes, letting her brain tease at the problem. “He wants you to know you’re being followed, but not who is doing the following.”

“That works. So, it’s intimidation then. ‘I have my eye on you and if you do anything I don’t like, or my boss doesn’t like more likely, then I’ll be right there to do something about it’.”

“Sounds like a possibility.”

“That leaves just one other question: Why is Gib Dander having me followed?”

“Answer that one and I think you know who is trying to stop you finding the Magi.”

“We know that already. It’s the Fell.”

“Yes, but we don’t actually know who the Fell are. At least not the ones who are giving the orders.”

“You think that Gib Dander might be one of the Fell?” The thought hadn’t occurred to An Kohli before.

“Possible. You know how grasping he is. But it’s also possible that he’s being pressured by the Fell; being made to co-operate with them.”

“That means we can’t go after Su Mali. If Gib Dander is looking for her as well, we could be leading him straight to her. No, we’ll have to do something else. Something unexpected. Set a course for the Tan Tara system.”

Gala’s snapped her head round to give An Kohli a surprised look. “You’re going to Gib Dander’s planet?”

“Yep. If we want to find out what this guy is doing following us I can think of no better person to ask than the man who leant him the spaceship he’s using.”

“OK.” Gala pulled a galaxy map out of the computer’s files and started plotting the course. It wouldn’t take her long.

On the bridge’s viewing screen An Kohli had noticed that the Doobria Dawn had started to creep closer to the Adastra. Not close enough to appear threatening, but definitely closer. Andromeda Class ships were unarmed, she knew, but that was only theoretical. Someone as wealthy as Gib Dander was quite capable of paying someone the amount of money needed to turn the Doobria Dawn into quite an effective warship. Well, they would be jumping to hyper drive in a few minutes and if this guy wanted to follow them back to his own boss’s house he could eat their ion trail.

“Course laid in boss.” Gala announced at last.

“OK. Make like a shepherd.”

“The flock is on the move.” Gala pressed the “go” button and the ship shot forward into hyper drive, approaching the speed of light within seconds. The universe curved around them as they created their own worm hole that would connect them to the Tan Tara system.

A worm hole is a short cut through space which allows travel at light speed without having to actually exceed the speed of light. Think of it as the difference between running around the outside of your house or taking a short walk through the kitchen. The problem is that while the theory of general relativity shows that mathematically worm holes can exist they don’t exist in reality, so you have to make your own.

It seemed so obvious now, to the mathematicians and astrophysicists of the galaxy, but the problem of how to create a wormhole was one that had befuddled the best brains in the galaxy for centuries. Quite how the problem was cracked is still a matter of great debate, but legend has it that a lab technician by the name of Graz Root was running experiments with high

energy in his lab one day, dropped his pencil, bent down to pick it up and found himself in the changing room of the Jellibel girls over eighteens basketball team on the planet of Dens Dra Gon, several light years from his lab. No sooner had the girls started screaming than he turned around and found himself back in his lab. At least that was his defence in court.

From there it was a matter of reverse engineering what Graz Root had done in order to recreate the worm hole. There is no truth in the rumour that the scientist was simply looking for the way back to the basketball team's changing room.

So now the Adastra shot through its own worm hole at slightly less than light speed, cutting across space to reach the Tan Tara system in a matter of hours, rather than years. An Kohli used the time to catch up on her sleep, even though her mind was filled with questions. She was able to shut out her thoughts and sleep like a baby. Only the ships alarm sounding could wake her up.

Glossary

- μ Letter of the ancient Greek alphabet pronounced mu to rhyme with view. The symbol used for the coefficient of friction; the amount of friction a surface can produce.
- Chookie A domesticated fowl used for egg rearing or the as main ingredient for a range of main course meals. Particularly popular in curries.
- Common Tongue A language that evolved gradually as the various species of the galaxy started to encounter each other and discovered that communication worked better if both parties understood each other. The most extreme example of what happens when both sides fail to communicate was when the Andromeda system went to war with the Antaries system when an Antarian said "Good morning, that's a nice hat" but was interpreted by the Andromedan as having said "Your mother is a twenty toed dwarf who has sex with donkeys". 95% of all known species now use the common tongue to

communicate. The remaining 5% don't have the necessary vocal equipment to actually speak the language but are able to use universal translation programmes to interpret, though occasional failures resulting from incorrect use of context still leads to misunderstandings similar to the one described above (users of Moogle Translate will be familiar with this problem). Planet Earth is one of the few in the galaxy where different languages are spoken in different parts of the planet and Common Tongue has been used to overcome this shortcoming with varying degrees of success. The people of some countries, such as The Netherlands and Denmark, are so fluent that they often use Common Tongue in preference to their own language. The French are fluent but refuse to speak it and the British rarely get past "Two pints of beer and a packet of crisps please, Tonto".

- Endocron A popular tourist destination in the Sierra Gifford system. Features in many phrases and sayings, e.g. as gaudy as a souvenir from Endocron.
- Galacticnet A vast network of data connections that means that, for a price, just about any source of information can be connected to any other source of information and can be accessed by anyone with the means to do so, legally or illegally, across the galaxy (broadband speeds may be limited on planet Earth, please consult your broadband supplier if you can get them to answer the phone). It can also be used as a form of communication, including use as a virtual meeting room. Popular amongst teenagers as a medium for socialising as, let's face it, anything is better than actually talking to your mates. No one owns the galacticnet, though several major corporations own individual components of it which gives them the right, they feel, to spy on your e-mails. Warning: 99.9% of all information stored on the galacticnet is

inaccurate and I know that because I found that statistic on the galacticnet.

- GSTC** Galactic Space Traffic Control. Each inhabited star system with space travel capability has a traffic control system to prevent collisions between space craft and orbiting satellites and to monitor space activity within its system. These individual systems are linked together to provide galaxy wide traffic control information.
- Meklon** A collective noun for a group of people who live outside the law. They live a wide variety of criminal lifestyles but one of the most common is space piracy. The origin of the term is lost in the mists of times. Some say it is taken from Mik Lon, a legendary figure who robbed from the rich, there being very few sane reasons to rob from the poor. Legend has it that he then shared the proceeds of his robberies with the poor but that is just lunacy as that would make the poor richer and then he'd then have to rob them as well. Another version is that a planet called Meklon, location unknown, was a safe haven for a group of these criminals. Neither version is verified by the galacticnet, but then again very little is.
- Moogle** A galacticnet search engine that occasionally finds the source of accurate and/or useful information, but more often directs the user to the sites that pay Moogle the most.
- Sim** A unit of measurement of distance. Plural Sims. There are 50 sims to a met.
- Victel** A unit of currency worth 1/100th of a nuk. A one victel coin is effectively valueless.

Tongue,
Common

See Common Tongue.

AND NOW

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