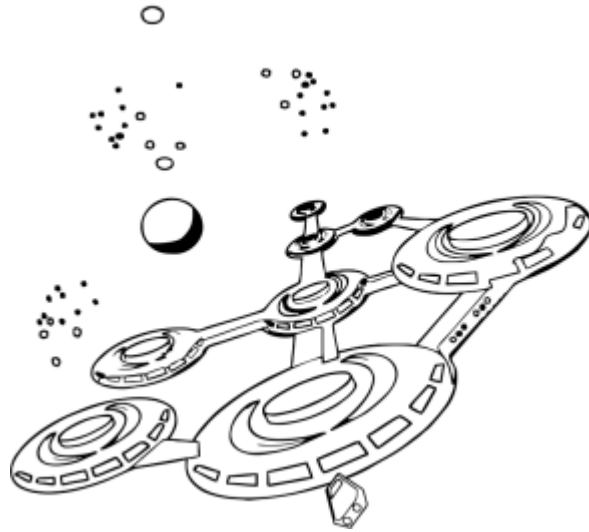




AMONG THE MANY WORLDS

Oliver Davis Pike

Among the Many Worlds



Oliver Davis Pike

Arachis Press 2021

Among the Many Worlds

©2021 Oliver Davis Pike

All rights reserved. The text, art, and design of this publication are the copyrighted work of Oliver Davis Pike and the Arachis Press, and may not be reproduced nor transmitted in any form without the express written permission of the author or publisher, other than short quotes for review purposes.

Arachis Press
4803 Peanut Road
Graceville, FL 32440
<http://arachispress.com>

CHAPTER 1

Jumping without main power is never a good idea. I had no other choice. Two Aiglean cruisers bore down on my position.

The thing is that one has less control coming out the jump. Well, one thing. There is also no getting away from trouble except by making another quick jump. That is an even worse idea, especially if one is pressed for time.

Don't ask me why the engine was dead. My engineering expertise goes no further than cursing equipment failures. I engaged the Li Drive—and every maneuvering tube I had—and instantly was in another system. The ship was tumbling about some, despite the tubes' stabilizing thrust. I used them to bring myself to a steady cruise, gradually, grudgingly. A slow cruise, to be sure.

That is another reason why jumping without main power is ill advised. The thrust of a main engine running full-out certainly smooths those bumps.

Would the Aigleans follow? Unlikely. Nor would a jump necessarily bring them anywhere close to where I ended up. They wouldn't even be sure where I went. Yeah, they could probably guess.

All six main tubes were out, it seemed. It could be fuel or some control mechanism or about anything else. Most of the diagnostics had been stripped. Most of everything had been stripped. It was an older W-4—an A type—converted to long range reconnaissance. That meant jamming in a jump drive and a lot of surveillance hardware, and taking out just about everything else.

Only room left for a crew of one, also. That would be me. Jack McFee is the name. I'm seventeen years old.

Yeah, again. Too young to serve officially. I know. Everyone knows.

I needed to get to one of the Janic systems. Maybe even Thule, though that was pretty far to go on Li Drive alone. Someplace friendly, anyway, someplace I could be towed in and repaired.

Damn! The Aigleans did manage to jump close to me. One of them. The other might be an hour distant. At least the sensors were still working. Were those Aigleans? They might be Aiglean ships with Burkut crews. Not that it mattered.

And I didn't want one of them close enough to make out their markings. This system *was* in the Burkut sphere. And it was fairly busy. I wouldn't want to hang around and be noticed.

The W-4's weapons had also been stripped, not that I would have a chance of using them without power. So here I went again. Did that cruiser fire on me before I got out of there?

If so, I didn't seem damaged. Ha, unless they hit my engine! Now where was I? I'd left it up to the Li Drive to pick the destination. There wasn't time to give any instructions, but the default *should* be the nearest star. In theory, that could be—yes, back to where I just came from. That would confuse any pursuit. I hoped.

The bouncing wasn't as bad this time. Bad, yeah, but I had every tube on full power. That helped a little. Now I switched them off. No point in attracting attention. My craft coasted as I scanned the space around me. Closer to the sun than I would have liked. That was just a throw of the quantum dice.

No inhabited planets here, around that dim red binary, just outposts—mining and military. I still might be noticed, sooner or later. My mission hadn't called for this sort of thing; I was supposed to be way out, collecting data. Not in this system. One a few jumps over.

Now I just needed to figure out how to get home, with that data. It is possible—common, even—to pop into a system and jump quickly to another, with none being the wiser. That was what I was attempting when those cruisers interrupted.

My engine failure was making the whole thing more difficult. I could attempt it again, lay out a course from close star to close star until I reached a friendly system. The nearest would be somewhere in Janic-Thule territory.

Jumps are from the vicinity of one star to another. Preferably two that are fairly close together. In theory, one could jump from any sun to any other in the universe but it becomes increasingly dangerous with distance, and accuracy improves the closer to a star one is—it provides a reference point.

But maybe I should chance a long jump. Get my intelligence home. It was fairly important. At least, I thought it was.

So I interfaced with the Li Drive and we looked at the alternatives together. Its artificial intelligence is pretty sophisticated, though limited in its scope. Yes, five shorter jumps could get me to safety in, um, one of the Janic systems. Not Janus itself. That would be out of my way. I would have to pass through Burkut space. We saved that sequence as one possibility, made sure the brain could automatically take us from one to another without more input if I gave the order. That might be necessary.

And it would be rough.

Then there was jumping long. To where? Not all the way home. I wouldn't chance that! All the more in that the Scotian systems are sort of isolated. You have to take a right at the dust cloud. That did make it more difficult but mostly it was just too far. My chances of surviving—or ending up in any known space which came to much the same thing—dropped exponentially with distance.

Why not go straight? And if I did, why not all the way to Thule? It was a direct jump from here, with nothing in between but nothing, and rather roundabout if I followed the other route.

I and the drive found the dim little orange sun and saved that option too. It should be safe enough, I told myself. Possibly safer than the

other route, being only one jump and spending no time in enemy territory.

Enemy territory like I was sitting in right now. Sitting almost helpless but at least not blind. This machine was equipped for looking at things. I ran a sweep of the immediate area. Nothing natural nearby. What might be a cargo carrier well off. I went wider.

Again, mostly clean. Suddenly something small at 173/84. 82 now. Moving quickly this direction. Damn, a missile, and targeted on me. Where the hell had it been fired from? My instruments hadn't sensed anything there a few seconds ago. A fast one. There had been rumors of new designs being deployed. No way to dodge it, certainly no way to outrun it except—

Decision time, Jack. *Thule*, I told the Li Drive, and away we went. I barely had time to engage all my tubes.

CHAPTER 2

"Aren't you a bit young to be out here?" asked the chief mechanic, looking me up and down with more than a little suspicion. Maybe she thought I had stolen my craft.

"Officially, yeah. That's why I'm listed as a test pilot instead of military." Her boss had already looked at my credentials. That wouldn't matter so much to this officer. She would be ruler of the realm when it came to the repair dock.

"Okay. Let's suit up and go take a look." I followed her into a tack room, gray metal walls lined with suits and tools. Or I bounced along behind her. There wasn't much gravity out near the periphery of this station. None of the generated gravity fields here felt strong. "So what have you got in that old piece of junk? A Regal?"

"Corvanaut. Economy over power for this mission."

"Ah. They're good engines. We use quite a few of them ourselves." Meaning the Janic-Thule forces. They were provided to them by us Scotians, of course. "Here, this one should fit you."

It was smaller than hers. I'm not that big. I could say I'm a growing boy but I'm not likely to grow all that much more.

I hadn't brought a suit myself. No space for one. I stepped into the one she'd pointed out to me and followed her through an airlock. Repairs had to be performed in the vacuum of space. Taking a Li Drive into atmosphere would ruin it. Its brain couldn't be kept at the near absolute zero it required. Even having it this close to a station was a tad dangerous so I had put it to sleep.

The mechanic gestured toward the middle of the vessel. "There's a little scorching here. Looks like someone took a shot at you but from too far away."

"Yes, ma'am. I thought maybe they did."

She snickered. It sounded oddly harsh through our radios. "Call me Elsa," she said. "Or Captain Alander."

"I'm Jack." She made no reply. She might or might not have known my name. My full name. I wouldn't go out of my way to supply that.

The Corvanaut unit was mounted externally on this model, near the rear. That was why it was a better choice than some for retrofitting a jump drive. Room for the element. I could feel the gravitational pull of that element from here, a fine—so fine it could scarce be seen—filament of super-massive material positioned along the center line of the craft.

"You need to get back to Scotia right away?" Alander asked. She was giving the engine nacelle a looking over. Not much to be seen but I guess she wanted to be thorough.

"My critical info has gone ahead via courier," I answered. "They will want to see the rest of the data sometime."

"Uh-huh." The housing rolled back, exposing the engine, six pulse tubes in a vertical array. Vertical supposedly made service access easier. One could get at them from either side. "Well, this one's simple enough," she said, pointing. "Your coolant pump went out and the engine shut itself down. And the backup unit had been stripped, eh? You know—" She hesitated just a fraction, barely noticeable. "You could have switched to vacuum cooling and run it a while. In deep space it shouldn't have given any problems."

I knew that. "I didn't know what the problem was without full diagnostics." And I wouldn't have gotten out to look, without a suit! The airlock had been removed too.

"Whose dumb idea was that?" she wondered. The captain went on without waiting for an answer so I couldn't blame it on my brother. "I'll get a team out here and get it running shortly." She peered at

the engine again. Or I assumed she did. Hard to tell when wearing vacuum suits. "Shouldn't need to replace it, I think. Not that we have any spares to spare!" She snickered again.

Now that I knew the problem, I could limp home anyway, running it the way she suggested. Shoot, I could have done it just on the maneuvering tubes from here. As far as the Scotian system, and be towed the rest of the way.

And I could have run right on out of this system again when I arrived—a bit bumpily but intact. It would have been bad manners not to stop, though. Thule is an important ally.

The opportunity to take a break was welcome too, as long as I was in friendly territory. Jack needed a few repairs himself.

We headed back toward the station and the airlock. The suits moved smoothly, propelled by a pair of tiny varitubes. They were more like miniature space-craft than actual suits. There were no legs. One stood enclosed in them and used ones feet and knees to work their controls. I was clumsy. I'd used the type before but hadn't a lot of time with them. We called them 'coffins' in Scotia.

Yeah, 'in,' not 'on.' I mean the entire Group, not the planet by that name.

Captain Alander spoke to someone on the radio in the Thule dialect, not Lingo like she'd been using with me. That someone responded in the same language.

I didn't know enough words to follow them. I should probably learn some other languages but Lingo was pretty universal. Of course, I'd grown up speaking a version of English in Scotia. It was said to be descended from what the first settlers there spoke when they came from legendary Canadia. That was supposedly on the equally legendary Earth.

Then unexpectedly I was whirling out of control. That ended when I crashed a little too hard into the side of the station. It didn't damage the suit but it dented me a bit. There had been a glimpse of a bright light as I had tumbled.

Where was Alander? She'd been right ahead of me. I got the suit under control and scanned the darkness in all directions. No sign.

There was no sign of the craft in which I had arrived either, other than a few pieces of floating debris. My first thought was that someone should try to retrieve the extremely valuable drive element. Then I remembered Alander.

I rose—rose being a relative term in space—above the station. Was that the captain still wheeling into the void? Chunks of what must have been my ship also sped away. I turned the drive tubes as high as they would go and went after her.

No answer when I called on the radio. No sound whatsoever. Must be busted, I decided. No way to get help. But the crew in the station would be aware something happened. Someone would be coming out here. In time? That I couldn't worry about right now. I might be slowly gaining but that coffin had a big head start.

And I had needed to start from a standstill whereas it had momentum, and nothing to slow it down. I could only hope the blast—it had surely been an explosion—had not sent Alander moving too fast.

For all I knew, she could be dead. Her suit could be ruptured or just the concussion could be fatal. But it hadn't killed me. She certainly wasn't using her tubes. Of course, she could be calling on the radio and I wouldn't know.

Closer. I was past the far perimeter of the station, heading into nothingness. Part of me was ready to panic and bolt back to safety.

The rest of me kept going and took it along. There, I was pulling abreast. Her suit appeared intact. I got on the other side, turned, used my tubes to slow us down. There was a little bit of a jolt when she plowed into me. Gradually, we came to a halt and started moving back toward the station. Wow, we'd gone pretty far beyond it.

Alander's arms moved. Alive. That was good. I'd hate to think I'd propelled myself out here to retrieve a corpse! The angle was wrong to see her face plate and I wasn't going to change my position. Best to just get both of us back as quickly as possible. Where was the lock we came out of? Thule Station just looked like a bunch of boxes.

There. Those were certainly suits rising above the structure. Not that I could make them out that well but what else could they be? I headed toward them, propelling my Thulean officer.

All that had just happened hit me then. I could have died. Twice. Once would have been enough, wouldn't it?

CHAPTER 3

Thuleans are renowned for three things. Two of these are their capacity for drinking and sex. The third is a reputation for driving the hardest bargains in the known universe.

Fortunately, I didn't have to deal with that last one. That left sex and alcohol. Captain Alander and I were taking care of the liquor part right now. She called the stuff we were drinking *schnapps*. We were both pretty bruised up and this was the medicine of choice.

In no way could it rival Scotian whiskey but there was no reason to tell her that. "To our survival," she said, lifting another glass. "And to my rescuer."

Elsa kept making the same toast. I didn't mind. I'd drink to it.

"I'll bet you have strait-laced Scotian parents back home that wouldn't appreciate me getting their kid liquored up."

"I'm almost eighteen," I informed her and then frowned. "No, wait, I *am* eighteen. This is my birf—birthday! Or was it yesterday?" I pondered that question for a little while.

She pondered me in turn. "Hmm, old enough but a little too drunk," the captain decided.

I might have known we'd get to the sex part. "And a little too bruised up. Both of us!" I would have been unlikely to say anything like that if I hadn't had too much schnapps.

"Going to join the Force now you're of age?" asked Alander.

"Maybe Planetary instead. Bu—but I can keep on doing what I'm doing." I leaned forward and whispered, "Secret missions."

She nodded. "As an official test pilot. With the family business, eh?"

"Yep." She'd connected me with the more famous McFees.

"Hmm." Elsa poured herself another shot. "Looks like they're all equally good ways to get yourself killed." She laughed aloud at a sudden thought. "And me with you!"

Yeah, I had nearly managed that. Maybe if we'd been closer. I wondered if the bomb—it's to be assumed it was a bomb—had been intended to take out pilot as well as ship. Fortunately, an explosion like that isn't nearly as bad in vacuum as in atmosphere. There the shock waves would surely have killed us both instantly.

"I don't know who would want to blow up my inoffensive little ship," I said.

"Not my area of expertise," she stated, and swallowed down another shot of schnapps. "I 'spect someone'll talk to you about it tomorrow."

"Then I'd best get a good night's sleep." Or a good sleep. There was no night nor day on the station, only duty watches. There would be no problem finding my bed. I was sitting on it, in the infirmary.

Elsa wobbled to her feet. "I'm 'sposed to sleep here too, but I'm going to my own bunk," she declared, and made her way out of the room. It is to be noted the schnapps went with her.

I felt worse when I awoke. Not only was I stiff all over but my head pounded. The medic gave the usual pill for the latter and it helped. Not much to be done about the bruising and soreness. "Do you know where my kit is?" I asked him.

"Should still be in the quarters you occupied on arriving," he said. "One of the aidies would be able to take you there. Ho, you," he called to one sitting by the door. "Show the, um, gentleman to his bunk."

He didn't know of a rank to assign me. One stands out on a military installation without some title before one's name. The little robot, the aidie, headed off down the hall and I followed. It was a good thing I

had him. I could never have found my way on my own, up and down and around these featureless metal hallways.

The room held double bunks but I seemed to be the only occupant. I was crowded at that. My kit took up almost no space. It was no more than the small hard-case I tucked under my arm when I transferred from the W-4 to the station. Most of its contents had been sent off with a courier vessel to Scotia.

I noted that the clothes I had worn then were laundered and folded on my bunk. No need to change out of the coveralls I wore now until I was ready to go myself. Would there be a ship to take me soon? And where could I get some breakfast or whatever meal it was time for?

Another aidie appeared at the door. "Sir, presence requested by CO. Please follow." It spun around and rolled up the hallway on its six wheels. Fortunately, it had delivered its message in Lingo. I'd be in trouble on a station full of Thulean-speaking robots.

The first thing I noticed about the commander was his dark beard. Then I noticed there was very little else to notice about him. He rose as I entered his office. No others were there. "Ah, Mister McFee. Please to have a seat. I have ordered a breakfast for us." He didn't offer to shake my hand. He was Janic and that wasn't part of their culture. They were more into bowing.

"I am Colonel Tumen," he announced, settling back into a comfortable-looking chair. Mine was anything but. I studied the colonel a little closer as an aide—a human one—brought in our meal. Was there anything else noticeable about Tumen? Epicanthic folds on his eyes. That was common enough on the Janic worlds, as were his high cheekbones. The nose jutted somewhat. Still, he was largely nondescript, not large, not small, neither fat nor thin.

"Are you in any hurry to leave us, young man?" he asked, pouring tea into two white ceramic cups. They had no handles.

"There's no pressing reason at all to get home now," I admitted. "I would have wanted to deliver all the data stored on my vessel, but —" All I could do was shrug.

"There's not enough of it left to salvage anything," he told me. We both sipped our tea. It was green and pretty good. I wondered what planet it came from.

"Not even the drive element?" That was close to indestructible.

"Not found. We can assume it is still flying off into space in one direction or another." I nodded. It made sense. "Same with any fuel."

A small cruiser like the W-4 doesn't have that much mass and, of course, the fuel was inert on its own. There shouldn't be much but a few bits and pieces. "Nothing left of any computers, I assume."

He shook his head. "Including the Li Drive."

I wondered if the colonel would bring up the likelihood of a bomb. Surely he didn't assume my craft exploded on its own. We ate for a while and only spoke of generalities, of his station, of my home.

"I suspect one of my people," he said at last, "and that raises other questions. Do you think anyone would have reason to attack you personally now?"

"They shouldn't," was all I could say.

"But they might not know that. Someone may fear you still have secrets to pass along." Tumen sighed. "I deal with more intrigue than you might think, my boy, running a place like this."

"A lot of vessels come and go." And a lot of personnel.

"That they do. Stay sharp. I should be able to put you on a ship into Scotian space tomorrow. A regular run that won't attract any attention to you." He gave me a long look. "Do you carry a weapon?"

He would know I didn't. He would know everything I carried into his station. I only shook my head.

"Maybe you should. We'll see about getting you equipped." He tapped something into a communicator on his desk.

There was no more talk of anything important. A few veiled questions might have been about my family but the colonel didn't press me on them. People were always curious about them.

An aidie waited in the hall when I exited. "Follow, please," it said, and scooted away. I assumed it was headed back to my quarters. It could have led me anywhere and I would have been none the wiser.

It led me instead into the workshop areas. I could recognize the room we entered as an armory. Elsa was there and another woman, equally tall and blond. "This is Anna," announced the captain. No last name but I could see by her insignia she held a lieutenant's rank. "She's going to fix you up with a weapon."

"A sidearm, right?" asked Anna. "The commander sent the word down to provide one."

I could only shrug. "I've never carried any weapons. I've sometimes thought maybe I should do something about that. In the future." I gave the pair a self-deprecating smile. "If I had one."

"But you've had training, surely," said Elsa.

"As a cadet, maybe?" added Anna.

"Never a cadet," I answered. I didn't see any reason to mention I had been far from any weapons at a rather exclusive private school in the Corvan sphere not long ago. Until the war broke out. "I've used a weapon though. I, um, suppose I should have something small, huh? Something I can carry onto a transport tomorrow."

"It will be full of soldiers carrying weapons openly," Anna told me. "You wouldn't stand out with a regulation sidearm on your hip."

"But Jack would be more comfortable with something less obvious, I am sure."

I nodded in agreement to that. "So," asked the lieutenant, "projectile or beam?"

There followed a long-winded discussion of the merits of each. I might have gotten a word in now and then. Finally, I just pointed at a compact unit and asked, "How about one of those?" I liked the look of it.

"The C-119? A pretty decent choice."

"Not much firepower," observed Elsa. "Nor accuracy."

"True," Anna said, "but enough of both most of the time. Popular as a hideaway." She looked over the four in the rack and chose one, opening the breech to peer inside. "This should do fine. Once we find out whether you know how to use it."

The C-119 was a Thulean design, built in their own arsenal. Or by contractors. I had no idea of any of that when I chose it but I had fired similar projectile weapons. The barrel looked surprisingly large. What size pellet did it fire?

I followed the two into a target range. Two lanes but fairly long. "Here's how the propellant cartridge goes in," said Anna, slipping a yellow tube into the butt of the hand grip. "It's a standard unit, and good for forty-six shots in this weapon. The clip of pellets goes right ahead of it here. They're large, so you only get eleven at a time."

"That doesn't come out even," I noted.

"Which is why most put in a new cartridge after forty-four rounds have been fired. Here. Let's see what you can do." She handed me the little sidearm. Safety switch? Right there. Okay.

I looked up. Anna had moved the target closer. "You'll never shoot one of these long range. Or I hope you don't need to."

I hoped I didn't have to shoot it at all. I let off a round. The slightest recoil. I would have to compensate for that if I fired rapidly. I squeezed off another.

"Both hit the target, anyway," said Elsa. "What size pellet does it fire, Anna? Point six?"

"Yep."

"That's large," I said.

"Heavy, too," Anna told me. "Low velocity but it hits hard. A good choice for up-close fighting in an enclosed space."

"So it won't go punching holes in the wall." Never a good idea and even less so in space.

"But it will stop a human without difficulty. An unarmored human." Her deep-blue eyes went to the target. "Either of those shots would have done the job. Why don't you finish off the clip and get yourself accustomed to it?"

That I did. I had her move the target out after a couple more shots just so I'd know how it performed at a greater distance. Although gravity would effect that and gravity did vary.

I followed the Thuleans back into the other room. "Paper work," murmured Anna, shuffling through some clip-panels. "This one. Sign here." She held it out to me.

"Jack McFee will be sufficient," said Elsa.

I put my signature on the panel and it was duly recorded by some computer somewhere in this place. There was no real paper. At home, there might have been. Scotians tend to be a conservative bunch.

And Thuleans are anything but. "I regret I won't have a chance to practice unarmed combat with you," said the lieutenant. "Captain

Alander and I spar from time to time.”

I didn't want anything to do with sparring with these two robust women. The likelihood of being hurt outweighed any fantasies that might have passed through my head. Hey, I was eighteen. Of course fantasies passed through.

Both were attractive, in that healthy and wholesome Thulean way. One shouldn't be taken in by it. Freckles were spread across Anna's high cheekbones. She had a bit of an epicanthic fold too. Both had their blond hair in short military cuts. Both were young.

But not as young as I was! I was all too aware of that. The aidie guided me back to my quarters, where I prepared for tomorrow's departure. Not much to do. I figured out how to get a book on the room screen and read for a while. Some novel. Those have come back into fashion.

It was all about three young women on some Corvan world and their romantic woes. They spent a lot of time at the beach. After losing interest, I got out the C-119 and checked its operation completely. I've said I'm no engineer nor do I wish to be one. Not the family business for me! But it's smart to have some understanding of one's personal equipment. It was a nicely designed little gun, I thought.

Yeah, gun. That's essentially what it is, even if you don't hear the word so much anymore. A good English word, one or another of my relatives might remark. I hear some are still manufactured with explosive-filled all-in-one cartridges. It's simply a practical solution in some circumstances, in some places.

I'd kind of like to see one of them. Or hear one! I've read they were loud. To be sure, there are old ones in the museums. I got to see lots of museums when I went to school.

Would I ever go back? I'd be too old for my last school now. Some university probably waited in my future. And then—well, not the

family business. Everyone recognized that. Some expected a law career, I'm sure. Others dropped hints about the diplomatic corps.

Right now I was just Jack McFee, test pilot. That would do. I found a mess and had a light meal before returning to my room. I figured on getting a good sleep before taking off.

No sooner had I dimmed the lights and crawled into my bunk than the door slid open. Elsa Alander stuck her head in.

"It's time you got your birthday present. Anna wanted to come too. You don't mind, do you?"

I wouldn't get my needed sleep. But you may be sure I never raised that objection.

CHAPTER 4

I'd tucked the C-119 into a holster in my waistband. I had opted for trousers, by the way, despite the popularity of the kilt among my people. Boarding was low key and low energy, passengers singly or by the pair making their way into the pod. My military pass got only a glance.

Not that I looked particularly military. My uniform was that of a cadet with the Planetary Guard but it bore no insignia of rank or posting. It was what I wore on my mission. I would have chosen to go in ordinary overalls but my brother had insisted I wear this uniform. I should look military in case I was captured. I'd get better treatment, he said.

Of course, I never had any intention of being captured. And I kind of hate uniforms.

I settled into a seat, maybe two-thirds of the way back in the cabin. None were assigned. All sorts filled in around me, some military, some undoubtedly on business, some simply traveling for their own reasons. Despite a war going on, there was no great need for security.

Or none was felt. Things had hardly changed. Most people were untouched by the conflict. I could have stayed at school, had I wished.

The transport was a skeleton of sorts, a thin central tube, a spine, housing the jump element, a command cabin and the Li Drive's brain up front. Pulse tubes for drive and maneuvering attached here and there. Or maybe some were simple onoffs, not pulse units.

To that skeleton, pods of varied sort could be attached. Cargo, passenger. Sometimes tanks or large cargo containers were

connected directly rather than being loaded into pods. Smaller ships, ones without jump drives, might also be attached.

The transport was by no means huge. There were larger ships out there but there was also a limit for jump drives. That was due to the gravitational forces attendant to the element. Beyond a certain point, the mass was just too great to work with. It would have too much inertia to get moving easily. Or stop, for that matter! Taken to an extreme, its gravitational forces would crumple any vessel in which it might be installed.

If you ever saw a really big cargo vessel, you knew it only operated within one system. There was no limit once the jump drive was taken out of the picture. Except practicality. There are always those willing to ignore that.

The drive element housed in the spine of our ship was massive enough to provide some gravity. Enough to make one comfortable. The passenger cabin was positioned so it lay beneath our feet. A Thulean officer settled down across the aisle from me. A guy. I think I'd seen enough of their women for a while. He was big and blond too. I settled down myself.

The screen up front told me we'd be another fifteen minutes. Scotian minutes as this was a Scotian vessel. My cousin Errol had mentioned the idea of expanding into the space liner business once the war wound down and giving the current players some competition. Errol likes to have a finger in just about every pie that comes out of the oven.

Anyway, the Scotian insignia was displayed on the side of the control cabin, deep blue field with a diagonal white cross, and too small to see at any distance. Thirteen minutes. Were these all the passengers?

"You're right handed?" asked the Thulean, out of the blue. I nodded, maybe a little more warily than warranted.

"You might find it better to sit over here on the left side then. It will make it easier to wield a sidearm, if the need comes."

I saw the logic in that right away. The seat in front of me could cramp the use of my right arm, if I turned toward the aisle. Any threat would probably come from that direction. But how did this guy know I carried a weapon?

And why did he think I would need to use it?

"I'm Tarmo Gallen," he said, extending a hand across the aisle. He didn't have to put 'Captain' in front of that. I could see his insignia.

"Jack McFee."

He sort of cocked his head at me. "I know. You don't recognize my name, do you?"

I shook my head. It meant nothing to me.

"My sister is Anna Gallen. She suggested I keep an eye on you." Something close to a smile appeared. "A suggestion Colonel Tumen made an order."

Oh. Anna's brother. Would he know what we'd been up to? Being Thulean, he might not care but it made me uncomfortable.

He carried on. "I would suspect someone higher up than the colonel made suggestions too. Why they think you are important, I haven't the slightest idea."

"Maybe they just want to keep my family happy." We did build half the space craft used by the Janic-Thule military. But I knew that wasn't the real reason.

He gave me a good-natured grin. "If we lost you, they'd still have your brother and cousin."

"Yeah. The famous ones. That's something I'd as soon avoid."

“Sensible. One can be a hero without the public knowing about it.”

Ten minutes to departure. Our first stop would be Oz but this ship was going all the way to Scotia itself. The planet. Oz is part of the Scotian Group so I’d sort of be home when we reached it.

“It’s entirely likely that someone serving on the station was responsible for blowing up your vessel,” said Gallen. “There are more than a few Janics who favor breaking with Thule and joining the Burkut Union.”

I’d heard that sort of thing. One heard all sorts of things at the McFee dinner table. “I would hazard you know something about it.”

“I’m with Security Section.” He pointed to some insignia on his collar that meant nothing to me. “Anna, too.” The captain seemed to think that was enough explanation.

We glanced up as two more passengers entered, a pair of fat, rather sloppily-dressed women. The doors were shut and sealed. The docking tube would be retracted though that couldn’t be seen from in here. No windows on this sort of flight. Those were reserved for luxury service.

An announcement sounded. Moving away from our docking in two minutes. Slowly. It took some time to put a bit of space between the transport and the station. Then we would jump. Off to Oz.

The name Oz, I understood, derived both from a classic novel—I ought to look it up sometime—and the place on Earth from which the colony’s founder originated, Oztralia. Many of the early colonists in the region had roots there or in other English-speaking parts of humanity’s birth planet. Some from Canadia like my own ancestors.

The view screen up front showed Thule Station receding. That wasn’t interesting but there was even less to see ahead of us. “Do you know much about Oz?” asked Gallen.

"Some. I know it and some of the other nearby worlds were sort of responsible for starting this war. Not that it wouldn't have happened anyway, but they lit the match."

Now that we were moving, I decided to shift to the empty seat behind him. It would make conversation easier.

"So you're interested in that side of things?"

"Yeah. I may go into the diplomatic corps after the war." I attempted to sound nonchalant. Maybe even superficial. "Or perhaps wind up as a professor somewhere giving long-winded lectures on history and political science."

"But college first, I would assume."

"Oh, I can lecture already. I've been known to bore whole rooms full of people."

Tarmo chuckled but it probably didn't deserve it. "Maybe you should consider my field. I believe you might have a flair for it. We're about to jump?"

We were. A warning came to remain seated and face forward. It was so smooth I hardly noticed it.

It was anyone's guess where we came out in the Oz system. There were always random variations, sometimes closer to the star, sometimes further out. The image of a small orb appeared on the screen.

"That's Toto," I said. "We landed pretty close to the station. A short layover and then on to my home."

"But you didn't click your heels together three times."

I had no idea what the Thulean officer meant by that.

CHAPTER 5

That layover should be fairly long, because we'd reached our destination early. There was always time allowed in the schedules to adjust for occasions when a ship emerged at a greater distance from the station. Close to four hours this time. No point in remaining in the pod.

The passengers, who had no more than half-filled the seats, began to make their way out. Slowly. No one was in any great hurry to get anywhere. Some would remain here, some would ride on to the next world or that after. The two women who had been last to enter looked like they intended to be the last to leave.

That had also apparently been my escort's intention. He was keeping us at a distance from the crowd exiting. As we drew even with the women, one stepped out, blocking our way. There was quite a lot of her to block us with. The other dawdled over her seat, as if looking for something she had misplaced.

Both wore bright, light colors, yellows and pinks. Loose tunic-like tops hung over their voluminous calf-length pants. They looked liked a pair of vacationers returning from the beach. I thought nothing of it and waited for them to move along.

"Careful," Gallen hissed in my ear. Danger? We stepped back simultaneously. Just a little but it was enough to set this portly pair in action. The one in front of us threw herself bodily forward, trying to take us off our feet or at least knock us off balance. The other rose up with a weapon in her hand. For some reason I noticed the gaudy rings on all her fingers.

Tarmo shouldered me aside and took the brunt of our opponent's lunging attack. I ducked behind a seat. Darn, I was on the right side, just like he warned me against. My gun was in my hand at once. The moment the two in the aisle lurched past I could see the second

woman and fired without hesitation. Down she went. Her eyes had been on the Thulean and her comrade, not me. That was her mistake.

The other woman still grappled with Tarmo. I considered shooting her too, for a brief second or two. Instead I threw myself into the back of her dimpled knees. Down she went. On top of me with Tarmo on top of her. Fortunately, a couple of security personnel showed up to lift them off.

The woman I shot sat up, groaning, about then. I'd hit her dead-center in the chest, I knew. "Wearing armor," stated the captain. "Both. I could feel it when the other one bashed into me." More security showed up and both women were marched off. One limped more than marched.

"You handled yourself pretty well," he continued. "Once you realized what was going on. And once again I wonder why anyone wants to kill a boy like you."

And once again I wondered that myself.

We followed the security detail into the station. It orbited a planetoid, Toto, further out from the sun than Oz, and was the major hub for the system. The jumping off point for much interstellar travel.

The head of security here came to greet us. She seemed to know who I was. Expected me. She only nodded when Gallen explained why he was there.

"They could be Ozzies," she said, "or they could be from any of the Seven Worlds. In or out of the federation."

Her second agreed. "But they are Sevens, for certain. It's easier for them to infiltrate Oz because they look and sound the same."

Pretty much. There were minor differences among the systems of the Seven Worlds. Scotians might not notice them. Both of these

officers were Scotian.

The chief turned to me abruptly. "We have word the courier ship carrying your intelligence never made it to Scotia. And your own ship was destroyed too, right?" I nodded. "Then everything is in your head. It's no wonder they went after you."

Tarmo lifted an eyebrow at me. "That must be some pretty important data."

"That's what we heard," said the Scotian. "No idea what it might be and would rather not learn! But we'll guard you carefully, young sir." She turned to Gallen. "Will you travel on with him, Captain?"

"I hadn't intended to but now—I think it might be advisable."

That was okay with me. It did make me feel safer. "What will happen to our, um, troublesome tourists?" I asked.

"They'll be interrogated. I doubt they're conditioned against our drugs but I also doubt they know anything worthwhile."

"Just sent on a mission, with no need to know more," said Tarmo.

"Exactly."

That didn't really involve me anymore. "So we can make the flight out in a few hours without any problem."

"We're going to put you on a special flight now," spoke her second. He had a lieutenant's insignia. "Military, not commercial."

"Right now?" I'd hoped for a meal.

"It's waiting. Lieutenant Burke will escort you."

We followed the lieutenant to a transit cart. Two security personnel followed us. "The military craft dock on the other side of the station," he apologized. "We'll have to go around. Can you two perch on the back?" he asked our guards.

"It'll slow you down, sir," said one.

"Can't be helped." He got behind the steering levers. "I'm Robert Burke, by the way. Call me Bobby." Away we lurched. He pulled off the curved route we followed a minute later, heading into a corridor marked 'restricted.' A short cut. The Oz station was a big place.

It would make a great target for an attack. I might be a bit nervous were I stationed there.

Fortunately, I was not a target for a second attack this day. It took us maybe ten minutes to get to other side of the place and the docking area. "Over there," said Bobby Burke. Two sentries stood by a docking tube.

I wasn't able to get a look at the exterior of whatever ship we were boarding as we were hustled through the conduit. But when I got inside I looked the interior over, the fittings, the design, and recognized it. "A W-9, isn't it? It looks a little different."

"It's the new B type," said the pilot. "They're letting us take one of the prototypes out for a trial."

"Ah. I've only seen one of those from the outside."

"We have twin Regals for our mains," he informed us. "It'll get you home fast. Two jumps without any layovers."

But they would probably dawdle an hour or two between those jumps, rather than doing in-and-outs. Take the time to plot the next leap to another star. Take the time to check in with the command in each system too.

The captain settled down beside the navigator—the two constituted our entire crew—and engaged the maneuvering tubes to get us away from the station. The navigator was already interfacing with the Li Drive. Gallen and I settled down too, in a pair of seats behind them. In a different ship, a typical ship, these might have had faced control consoles for weapons or data. Here they were just seats.

Behind us I might find a small bunk room, if the space hadn't been used for something else. Pretty much a typical cruiser layout.

And the W-9 was a cruiser. Not quite what some would call a heavy cruiser but it bordered on it. A good choice to equip with a jump drive and use for this sort of duty.

The main drives were engaged and we moved further out. Not too quickly. There was a lot of traffic around the station. All through the system, for that matter. We'd jump when we were more in the clear, when those Regals could be opened wide.

I thought maybe I'd grab a nap but Tarmo wasn't going to allow it. "Explain the Seven Worlds situation to me, will you?" he asked. "As you understand it."

It seemed an odd sort of question. He probably had a good grasp on the situation. "You must think you're one of my tutors back at school," I complained. I tried to sound as crabby as I could.

"I just want to hear it from your viewpoint."

Oh, well. It was as bad a way to kill the time as any. "There has always been a troubled relationship between the Seven Worlds and Scotia. At one time, well back, we basically dominated them and ran things there. Treated them like colonies, they complained, so some broke away and formed their Federation of Seven. Except they aren't seven, because two systems chose to stay with Scotia. But the others always claimed they should be, ah, freed from us. Whether they wished it or not."

"And they didn't, I take it."

"No. You understand they were the two that prospered most from an association with us. They officially became part of the Scotian Group, with the same privileges as any other systems." In theory. I didn't say that. "They are important to the Group. They are a doorway to the rest of the worlds out there. Our most important doorway."

“Especially to the Corvan sphere.”

“And to you Thuleans and the Janic worlds too. There have been minor clashes for decades. More than decades. Terrorist attacks, according to our side.”

“Which were punished.”

“I’m afraid so. Sometimes it came close to being open warfare. Then it did become open warfare, just a couple years ago. In Thirty-six. I guess that’s closer to three years, now, isn’t it? Anyway, they invaded, we invaded back, the Aigleans got involved, the Corvans got involved. Everyone got involved. Even Thule! Everyone had old grievances against someone else. And our conflict—” I had to pause dramatically there, you know? “Our conflict became a backwater of a much greater one.”

Tarmo couldn’t help smiling at that. “And after you got things going.”

“Yeah. Not that I’m going to complain. War between the Aigleans and the Corvans was going to come sooner or later. It could have started anywhere.”

“Oh, you’re the big picture sort, Mister McFee. Maybe you should be lecturing in a university somewhere one of these days.”

“Jump coming,” announced the captain. “Five seconds.”

Six seconds later we were several light years away.

CHAPTER 6

Hermitage is a minor Scotian system. None of the planets are habitable, as are, and not particularly suitable to forming. Maybe someone would try it someday.

But it was conveniently placed. Off to one side lay the vast dust cloud that obscured the other Scotian worlds from many vantages, discouraging direct jumps. I always thought it was pretty. It filled a good bit of the night sky at home and I would lie watching it, watching its subtly shifting colors.

I had been told all my life it protected us. It was the fortress wall of Scotia. That's what we called it. The Wall, that is. Hermitage was also a bit of a fortress. Our gatekeeper.

Our pilot announced our presence at once. We had appeared well out from the sun, a single small red star. There was a noticeable time gap in the communications. We might be able to jump instantaneously from star to star but radio waves still took their time.

"Hey, what's wrong, Duncan?" said our captain. The navigator had slumped over, held by his chair's restraints. Gallen was beside him before I had time to think.

"He's out. Drugged, maybe."

"Poisoned, you mean," I said.

"Probably." He looked to the pilot. "Are you feeling all right?"

The man nodded. He looked worried. He wouldn't be able to avoid the thought there might be some slow-acting poison working on him too. "I'm not stopping because of this," he said. "I have my orders. I'd better lay in our course myself."

Tarmo released the navigator's body and slid it onto the cockpit floor. I could see he was dead. No one alive would look like that, with a blackened swollen tongue protruding from his mouth. There looked to be blood oozing from here and there too.

Our captain swore. "Two runners moving in fast. I'll try to evade them."

He also called for assistance at once but it was unlikely to arrive soon. "I can navigate," I said, and took the empty chair.

Interfacing with a Li Drive's computer could be as simple as talking to it. No need to hook up with it at all. That was best done well ahead of a jump, unless one simply tells it to jump on its own. The way I had on my recent jaunt.

There was a jolt. "Beam weapon," came softly from Tarmo. "Not close enough yet to do real damage."

I just hoped they didn't hit the computer. It was vulnerable, out there in front of the ship in open space. That was necessary to keep it cold enough. There was no way of getting around that, though many had tried to find one.

It was one reason some still preferred the older Saldhana or one of the other drives. I donned the navigator's headband and linked to the artificial intelligence. Together we looked across space, chose our destination. A binary system—we locked onto the brighter, orange star. "I'm engaging," I said. I might have yelled it. Off we went to our next stop.

We kind of skidded in sideways, as our pilot had been in the middle of evasive maneuvers. That made for more than bumpiness. More like tumbling.

"They won't follow us here," he said. He was almost certainly right. He looked over a diagnostics screen. "Nothing damaged much, it seems," he muttered. "I'll call in."

"Once again you were expected," commented Tarmo. "Someone on the Oz station?"

I shook my head. "This was planned ahead. More likely on your station, Captain Gallen. They would have surmised we'd come this way."

"Yes, of course."

The pilot broke in. "I explained our emergency. We're cleared to go again at once. Will you take the navigation?"

I nodded. "Get us moving," I said and went to talk with the computer again. There was our destination, that lovely yellow sun. I didn't try to fine tune the accuracy, which is always bound to be iffy anyway. "Ready? Here goes." We jumped to Scotia.

It was good to be home.

I leaned back. Our pilot could take it from here. My foot lodged against something. Oh, the navigator's corpse. It had slid about some. "Let's get this, um, the body out of the cockpit," I said to Tarmo.

The door at the back of the cabin slid silently open, none the worse for the jolting we'd gone through. We left the body by the bunk beds. Tarmo and I hadn't entered this way; the boarding tube had led into an air lock on the other side of the craft, and further forward. The command cabin was, as typical, near the center of the craft, just 'above' the element for the jump drive.

"I've never seen the interior of one of these," said my companion. "What's back that way?"

"Fuel and computers, mostly," I said. "Everything needed to run and control the machine. I think the weaponry may have been removed. Want to look?"

“Not now. You can get one of your relatives to give me a tour sometime.”

“Oh, you don’t want that. They’ll talk both your ears off expounding on their latest designs.”

We returned to the cockpit. I again settled into the navigator’s seat though I wasn’t needed. It didn’t seem right for the pilot to be alone up front.

“Thanks for taking care of Duncan, lad,” he said. “We’ve been directed to Fundy Base.”

That should take a couple hours. He wouldn’t take this ship all the way to the base. We’d transfer at an orbiting station. Fundy was the larger of Scotia’s two moons. The name was supposed to have something to do with tides. I never met anyone who could explain it.

I sat there for a while and then went back to sit beside Tarmo. He seemed somewhat subdued. “Those runners didn’t get into the Hermitage system on their own,” he said after a while. “There has to be carrier with a jump drive hiding somewhere.”

“They’ve been reported. Out of our hands. And it could have left them and jumped out again.”

“True enough. Anyway, they won’t hang around if they can help it. Their mission failed and there’s no reason to remain.”

Having solved that problem, I think we both napped.

“Hey, is my long-lost brother there?” someone called.

Our captain was turned toward me. “I thought this would best go on the intercom,” he said. He might have smirked a tad.

“Here I am, Brendon. You can’t get rid of me that easily.”

“But you did manage to lose my spy ship. You may have to answer for that after you get your medal pinned on you.”

"Darn. Do I have to be another famous McFee?"

"Hey, I like that. The Famous McFees. The Fabulous Famous McFees!"

"That would be overkill," I observed.

"I suppose. We need to debrief you as soon as we are able. I'm at the station waiting and we'll shuttle down to Fundy Base."

"We're about to dock," announced the pilot.

"See you in a couple minutes," said Brendon and broke off.

"Are all you Famous McFee's like that?" asked Tarmo. "I mean sort of, um—"

"Flippant? Smart-alecky? Errol's a very serious guy. You'll have to come down with me and meet both of them."

"That's up to others than you and me."

"We'll see about that." I intended to get my way on some things.

"We're coupled up," the captain announced a minute or two later. I hadn't felt it. "You can head out."

"Thanks for getting us here safely," said Tarmo. "You did some good flying."

"Considering what you were flying," I added. "Oh, hi, Brendon."

He ignored my insult of his space craft. Brendon did have a hand in the W-9's design but it wasn't really his baby. "This is Captain Gallen. He should be a part of this," I said. "Except when I share my precious intel, of course."

My brother did not question the Thulean's presence though I am sure no word of it preceded him. They gravely shook hands. "Tarmo helped keep me alive on the way here. And I needed all the help I could get."

"Not surprising. We were worried, you know. We all had some misgivings about sending you in the first place."

"I seem to remember you being the one who suggested it."

"That was pretty smart of me, wasn't it?" We followed him into the station and immediately out again, entering a little shuttle tubed up right next to the machine in which we had arrived. Brendon took the controls.

"He'll never let anyone fly him if he can help it," I confided to Gallen.

"That's because I don't know any better pilots. Not even you, little brother."

Was the shuttle one of ours? No, something from the arsenal. M-series, maybe. There was a regular beam-driven carrier than ran up and down but apparently no one wanted to wait for it.

On reaching the base, I was whisked away at once. "Wait in there," Brendon told Tarmo Gallen, pointing him toward the canteen. "We won't forget about you." A room full of important-looking military persons awaited me. My cousin Errol too, though I thought he was only peripherally involved in all of this. I guess the family connection warranted taking the time from his other duties.

In fact, he was the one who led off, getting right into it. "So your core data was intercepted on the way here, it seems, and then all the rest was destroyed with your ship. Correct?"

"That's it," I admitted.

"So we have to rely on what's in your head."

Brendon smirked. He might have made a rude noise were there not so many of those important-looking military persons. "I can tell you that you were right about a hidden base. I did find it and I can tell you where it is. I, ah, suspect the runners that attacked us at Hermitage may have originated there."

“Runners?” That news hadn’t reached any of them, apparently.

“Two. Someone or another has been trying their best to kill me the last three days.” Or was it four? Hard to keep track when you move through so many systems. It starts to feel like one long day. Maybe it is one long day.

I filled them in on what I had discovered in that system several jumps removed from us. The coordinates may not have been exact but they were certainly close enough to work with.

“Not for an invasion, I would think,” said one important-looking—oh, why don’t I just call them IMPs?

“But well situated as a staging area for raids. We wouldn’t know where they originated and be unable to retaliate.”

“So they would hope. They could do a few quick jumps and strike into the Group.”

And so it went on, with the IMPs going over the obvious. I assumed they would go wipe the place out. We could do quick jumps too, in this case through the Federation of Seven mostly.

I had nothing to do with that. I’m not military and had no plans to be. No solid plans. The test pilot thing was not just a cover. I could keep working officially for the family business.

“We need to get the whole story about what happened to you,” said Errol, taking me by the arm. “Military planning can be left to others.”

“Right,” agreed Brendon, linking my other arm. “And didn’t you have a birthday we need to celebrate?” We left the IMPs to their discussions. Tarmo still waited in the canteen.

“Scotian beer is little more than water,” were his words of greeting. He had apparently consumed a fair amount of water.

“Whereas Thulean beer tastes like piss!” replied Brendon.

"And stale piss at that," agreed Errol. We all seated ourselves around the table. "We need to get Jack's full story, which it seems is also yours. But first, we need to celebrate the boy's birthday."

Tarmo snickered. "He already had a good birthday present." I went red despite myself.

"Hmm, that needn't be in the debriefing," my cousin decided. Errol's maturity was more a matter of personality than age; he *was* the oldest of us but still hadn't reached thirty. Brendon was twenty-four. I doubted Tarmo was much older.

"We do need this," Errol went on, taking the bottle and glasses a waiter brought. "And now, boy," he said, pouring out whiskey for each of us, "let's have your story."

CHAPTER 7

"I would like you to be a guest in our home, Captain Gallen."

"Yeah, come stay with us a few days."

Tarmo made a show of giving this careful consideration. "Since no official orders have come calling me home—"

"We don't pay much attention to orders anyway," responded Brendon.

Errol had gone off somewhere again, perhaps to discuss the ramifications of my tale with more IMPs. Maybe he'd drop by my parents' place sometime. Mostly he kept busy in the factory or out with the Force somewhere. By 'Force' I mean the Group Force, as distinct from the Planetary Guard. Pretty much everyone just called them the Guard and the Force.

"Let's get going," I said, "before I fall asleep right here on this table."

"Good enough," said Brendon, rising. "I have a ship ready to go."

"We don't have to go back up to the station?" asked the Thulean.

"My personal transport is right outside. In fact, I think you can see it from here." We went to one of the windows overlooking the base. A luxury—I think these were the only ones in the entire complex.

"Down there. It's being moved into position now."

"Atmospheric," observed Tarmo. "Another McFee-built machine, isn't it?" I was a little surprised he recognized it as such.

"V series. Neither Errol nor I have anything to do with it."

"Or Olaf, for that matter," I added.

"He means Olaf Riley, our chief designer. I have to admit we're using one of his engines for the main drive, Jack."

"Eight tube?"

"No, twelve. The triple-four."

That made sense. Decent power but not a unit in high demand by the military. One could recognize it was meant for atmospheric flight mostly by the enlarged cooling system, mounted externally, in part. There would be some sort of substantial landing gear too. Many craft intended primarily for vacuum use had only rudimentary equipment, for emergency landings.

And, of course, the big ones or those with jump drives wouldn't bother even with that. If they ever made contact with the ground it was because they had crashed.

The next time we would see the craft would be from the inside. We rode a lift down two levels and hurried along a corridor to the dock. "All ready to go, sir," reported the man stationed there. "Off to Summit Up?"

"No, Giles. We're going home."

"Ah, much the better choice, if I may say so."

"Anytime."

"I wouldn't have minded seeing Summit Up," whispered Tarmo as we followed the two into the conduit.

"That would take an invite from my grandfather. Not even Errol would take you without getting an okay from him."

Even if Grandpa Jack—yeah, I'm named for him—didn't direct the family business anymore, one did not cross him. We passed from docking tube into airlock into a luxurious and comfy-looking salon. This was no military ship.

There was no question that Brendon would pilot us. He at once went forward to the control cabin. It was too large to call a cockpit. I was ready to settle down in the lounge but Tarmo followed him so I followed Tarmo.

"This is the sort of thing our McFee Concern built before Errol got us into the military market. That was quite a fight for him."

"Not the only thing we made," I added to his statement. "We built all sorts of stuff. Still do. Lots of parts for other companies. Aquatic vehicles."

"Just about anything, really," said Brendon. He swiveled around to face me. "Weren't we supposed to have been in textiles at some point? Way back, I sort of remember."

"Textile equipment," I said. "Machines to make clothes, not the clothes themselves. I thought you knew that. That was kind of where the company started."

He shrugged and turned back to his console. "I leave history to you and Errol. I just make things fly."

Then we were off, heading toward Scotia itself. My folks' home was in the southern hemisphere and not particularly close to either McFee Concern headquarters nor Summit Up. Dad preferred it that way. I was a little surprised Brendon didn't dive headlong. His approach was almost sedate.

Maybe that was a matter of increased security around the planet. I got tired of watching the screens and returned to the salon. Sergeant Boutade—Giles, that is—was inventorying the bar. Giles had been Brendon's personal attendant for years. "Fix you something, sir?" he asked.

"No thanks, sergeant. People have poured enough liquor into me these recent days."

"I'd guess you're no more of a big drinker than your brother, eh?"

"I suppose not." I had to smile at least a little as I added, "Unlike our guest."

"Ah, he's a Thulean." He didn't feel a need to say more than that on the subject.

I settled into one of the black lounges. No, charcoal gray they were. Ugly. Brendon wouldn't have chosen them. I didn't like the color scheme in here at all. Pale blue trim. No.

There would be a sleeping space somewhere. Bunks at least, maybe an actual bedroom of sorts. This V-type—I didn't know the model number—was just a mid-sized cruiser and not the sort of thing one would use for long trips. Normally. There wasn't all that much room in it, even without the need for any military equipment.

There was some shift in equilibrium. We were entering Scotia's gravity, I assumed. This craft was equipped with artificial gravity, something of a luxury item. Mild, to be sure, just enough to help keep things in place. Like ones lunch. As with the jump drive, it utilized the gravitational field of an ultra-massive element—a tiny amount, neither heavy enough nor in sufficient quantity to allow a jump.

The added mass, of course, did not help the craft's performance at all. It would be slower to accelerate and decelerate, harder to turn quickly. Definitely more troublesome to land on and takeoff from a planet. Brendon undoubtedly hated it. I would.

"Whose boat is this?" I asked Giles.

"Your mother's," he replied. Yeah, I should have recognized the decorating.

Twenty minutes later I was being hugged by that mother.

CHAPTER 8

"Brendon's girlfriend?" whispered Tarmo.

"His wife, so don't get any ideas."

"Yes, yes, I know how you Scotians are." His expression was quite innocent as he added, "Until you meet a Thulean woman, that is."

"Well don't go thinking I'm going to marry your sister."

He near strangled attempting to stifle an explosion of laughter. A few curious glances came our way. "Ha, you could do far worse, boy!"

No doubt. I introduced him to Mom and Dad. Brendon did the honors for his Nira. No, she's not from a Corvan world, despite the name. Her family had been on Scotia as long as mine, and that's a rather long time.

It was a family joke to refer to this estate as Dummit Downs, in parody of Grandfather's mountaintop enclave. Not officially, to be sure.

It was not a grand estate but big enough. Father was an important person. He had come out of a partial retirement at the start of the war to take a ministry position. Nothing at all to do with space craft or our family business. He had long since distanced himself from that. That had not prevented Brendon from becoming fiercely interested in it all.

Me? More likely follow in my father's footsteps. Or mother's. Law or diplomacy or government or something along those lines. Yeah, or a scholar, teaching in some university. None of the choices held a great deal of allure for me.

No need to worry about it while the war continued. Something would be found for me to do. Right now I followed in his footsteps

as we walked toward the house, Brendon giving an account of my recent adventures to the family. I was entirely willing to allow him. "My guess," he finished up, "would be an attack force of jump ships is already on the way. Heavy cruisers. We need to strike quickly before they evacuate."

"If they knew I had arrived safely here they would be scrambling to do just that," I said.

My mother considered all this. "All that really matters is that the base is abandoned, isn't it? Taking out a few enemy ships is not so important."

Mom could be astute, despite her decorating tastes.

"There could be some, ah, effect on morale if a ship or two is destroyed," said Dad.

"The morale on both sides," Brendon added. "And striking fast means they won't have time to mount a strong defense."

I suspected the Aigleans were getting out of there and had no intention of fighting. No point in making that point. Nor in saying I doubted a fleet of heavy cruisers had been dispatched. They would arrive scattered and have to rendezvous before attacking. Brendon would recognize that if he thought about it.

Tarmo whispered to me as we entered the house, "It was an Aiglean system?" I don't think he wanted to join in the discussion but was curious anyway.

"In name only," I told him, keeping my own voice down. "A pair of brown dwarfs with no planets worth developing." An unoccupied system, by custom, belonged to no one. If the Aigleans evacuated it would again be unoccupied.

"But strategically placed."

I only nodded. The system lay a little beyond the Seven sphere but I'd gone more roundabout to reach it, through Burkut space. We thought I'd be less likely to run into trouble there. "Housey," I said, "is there a room available for Captain Gallen?"

"Near yours, Jack?" asked the house.

"Might be best." I might have added, *and not near Nira's*, but restrained myself.

"Across the hall from you," she replied. "I'll make sure it's ready."

"Thank you, um, Housey," said Tarmo.

There was a pause. "You may call me Miss House, sir." I didn't know the house could employ such icy tones.

My guest didn't even blink. "Certainly, madame."

"Don't take her seriously," my mother told him. "I fear Brendon's been a bad example."

"Yes, we have a house with a sense of humor," said Dad.

"It's a sign of intelligence," stated Miss House. "There are refreshments in the rear lounge."

"Booze?" asked Tarmo.

"It is much too early for that, young man," she replied. Housey sounded serious this time. And she was right—it was only mid-morning here. We all proceeded to the lounge, which opened onto a deck overlooking the countryside. The sea could be glimpsed in the distance, a bluish blur on the horizon.

Yeah, Scotia has blue oceans and skies. More or less. It is one of the few worlds humanity has found with indigenous life and that life, though microscopic, had cleared the oceans of dissolved metals and breathed oxygen into the atmosphere. I had not realized what a paradise my home was until I saw other worlds.

Many of those were still in the long process of terraforming. On others, no one had bothered to attempt it.

"Wake up, Jack," spoke Brendon. "We're talking about you." I turned from my woolgathering to see all eyes on me.

"Your ship exploded?" asked my father.

"Hmm, no. A bomb exploded my ship," I replied, attempting to remain deadpan. "To be completely accurate."

"He was fortunate it didn't explode him too," Tarmo added.

I only shrugged. "I'd have needed to nearly be on top of it for that." Not that I couldn't have been taken out by flying debris. Even radiation, were I close enough, but our coffins were heavily shielded against that. "I only ended up with some bruises."

"The boy also ended up being a hero," continued the Thulean. "He rescued the other victim of the blast."

"Indeed, Captain Gallen?" asked my mother. "It's bad enough having one heroic son."

"Brendon needed some competition," was all Dad had to say about it.

CHAPTER 9

"No, I don't have any sisters," I informed Tarmo. He looked disappointed. "And both of my cousins—Errol's sisters—are happily married." I assumed they were happy anyway. They'd never complained to me.

"Hmm." He considered that for a few seconds, gazing out over the countryside, falling into dusk. "Errol isn't married, though, is he?"

"Only to his work." I couldn't guess what the Thulean might be hinting at. Especially with him being a Thulean.

"You look more like him than your brother," he observed.

That brother sauntered out onto the deck. "Cool out here, isn't it?"

"Not for someone who grew up where I did," replied Tarmo. "That's quite a moon you have."

"It is," agreed my brother, glancing at the rising crescent. "We have some pretty big tides on Scotia, not only because Fundy is a large moon but also because it sometimes aligns with the smaller one, Georgie."

"Georgie?"

"Saint George. Or Little George, some like to call it. It should be—" Brendon surveyed the sky above. "Um, yeah, there. Hard to spot in its current phase." He pointed toward the zenith.

"Looks about the size of our largest moon," observed Tarmo. "The others aren't much better than boulders."

I had to show off my vast knowledge. "George is bigger. Its orbit is further out."

"Our guest said it looked the same. Not that it was the same," Brendon stated, and moved on. "I came out here to tell you both that Errol would be here in the morning."

"With news on the, what would you call it? Raid?"

"Action," I suggested.

"Mission," said Brendon. "He may have something to say about it." He turned to me. "It's Jack here he's interested in. We've got to find something to keep the boy busy."

"I can do that myself," I protested.

"That's what we're afraid of."

Gallen chuckled. "Are you on some sort of duty right now, Major? Or shouldn't I ask?"

"Call me Brendon and ask all you want. What I tell is up to me. I can say I'm on leave of a sort. That is, I'm supposed to be spending time on the development of the new W-10. It's going to break completely with all the earlier W types. Errol thought it should be a new series so no one connects it with his work."

"He designed them?"

"In part. The original concept."

"But there's more of Olaf Riley in them now. And some of Brendon," I added.

"I've just suggested things now and again. This new design has more input from me." Brendon paused slightly before announcing, "We're abandoning Errol's modular system."

"Ah, the famous McFee box."

Boxes in boxes in boxes was how Errol once explained it to me. I think he was being tongue in cheek but it's hard to tell with my

cousin. That was about my total knowledge of their design. I did know the system had permitted the quick development of a variety of types when they were needed for the war.

"We're going with an integral hull. Are you interested in that sort of thing, Tarmo?"

"Not in the least. I prefer working with humans."

Brendon only nodded politely. He got enough of that sort of talk from Dad and me. "I don't know what sort of schedule you two have been on," he said. "Whether you're ready to drop into your beds or will want to sit up all night."

"I could sleep right now," I admitted. "And for a long, long time."

"Me too. Neither of us has had much opportunity for it lately."

I could have blamed his sister for that, in part. Well, blame isn't exactly the right word. I wasn't about to complain or anything.

"House," called Brendon. "Have some food sent to our guest's room, will you? My brother's too." He turned back to us. "Jack can show you the way," he told Tarmo and returned inside.

"Would you like your dinner right now?" asked Housey.

"Sure," I said. "Have it all sent to Captain Gallen's room, will you?"

"I shall."

"Thank you, Miss House," called Tarmo. "Lead on, McFee," he said to me.

House giggled. I was more inclined to groan but I'm the polite sort. "I'll wager you've been itching to say that."

"Just waiting for the ideal moment." He peered down the long hallway before us. "Will we need to take a shuttle to our rooms or does it require a jump drive?"

"We have horses," I replied. "The aities have to remove their manure from the hallways every morning." It wasn't really that far but I was willing to humor my guest. "This isn't a very big place, you know. You should try wandering about in Summit Up. Even Dad gets lost and he grew up there."

"I suspect you exaggerate. I also suspect most houses on Scotia would seem large to a Thulean. We pretty much all live in tiny apartments. Oh, stairs too?"

I had turned to the left and gone up three low wide steps, before turning right again. "The house is on several levels but not separate stories. Built on a hillside," I explained. "And here we are. That must be yours." The door was hanging open. "I'm directly across."

"Your supper is on the way," announced House.

Tarmo gave his rooms a quick perusal, a nod of acknowledgment. I am certain they were larger than he was accustomed to but there was no reason for either of us to say anything of that. A row of floor to ceiling windows made up the far wall. "You have a view of one of the courtyards on that side," I told him. My own quarters had only high windows that let in the morning sun. I preferred that. The rooms were a little smaller too.

Otherwise, they were much the same, lounge, bedroom, bath. My guest went to the windows and peered out. "Too dark to see much," he remarked. "Can these be opaqued?"

"Draw the curtains."

"Curtains? Oh, yes. Um, how? We don't have much in the way of windows at home, you know, and definitely not with curtains."

"Button," I said, and pointed to it. "Or you can ask Miss House politely to draw them. And if you want complete privacy, just tell her and she'll turn off her sensors. Not permanently, of course, but overnight or for a few hours."

"I had to do that all the time for Jack's brother," House confided. "Even when he forgot to tell me to."

It wasn't an aidie nor a servbot that brought our meal but a human. There are worlds where that sort of thing is done exclusively by robots but Scotia is not one. Jock had been a fixture at Dummit Downs as far back as I could remember and it was good to see his familiar face.

He held up a bottle of white wine. "From your granddad's own vineyards, lad," he announced.

I nodded. "Excellent. Thanks, Jock. I'll serve."

"Servants?" asked Tarmo, as soon as the man left.

"A retainer. I prefer that title." Any Scotian probably would. It suggests bonds beyond those of employer and employee. We're a wee bit feudal on my home world. I poured wine for Tarmo and myself.

He lifted his glass. "To Lisi."

I raised my own in answer but undoubtedly looked perplexed. His girlfriend maybe? It was House that relieved me of my ignorance. She is better than she has any reason to be at recognizing expressions. "Lisi is the queen of Thule, Jack. Or king, in their language, as they don't differentiate titles by gender."

Oh. I'd known about the gender thing. "To the queen." Elsa had never made that toast.

Thule was one of the few monarchies in the universe. The three Janic systems officially acknowledged the Thulean monarch—Queen Lisi at the moment—as titular head of their alliance, while largely running their own affairs.

We ate in silence for a few minutes. We were both hungry and both tired, and the food was good. The wine was excellent and probably

deserved more appreciation. I was pouring Tarmo a third glass when he asked, "So what do you think your cousin has in mind?"

I sipped a little before answering. "I don't think he wants me in Group Force, like Brendon."

"You'd probably make a decent combat pilot."

I could only shrug. "But a better navigator," he went on. "Maybe on a carrier."

That made some sense. "I guess I'll find out. I may not agree with whatever he has in mind. But," I said, rising, "best to learn on a full night's sleep. I'll see you in the morning, Tarmo."

With that I crossed the hall to my own familiar rooms. I'd chosen the quarters before I went off to school. "Shall I wake you, Jack?" whispered House, as I doffed my clothes—I'd changed into nondescript coveralls—and fell into bed.

"Let the sun do it," I told the darkness. "Or not. If anyone has to wait for me in the morning, let them wait."

CHAPTER 10

The gun I had carried with me from Thule rested on the table beside my bed. I doubted I would need it again. Certainly not in my own home! I slipped it into a drawer in the small ceramic desk in the lounge.

"Is Errol here, House?" I asked.

"Good morning to you too, sir," she sniffed.

"Good morning, Miss House. I'll breakfast with the family—and Errol, maybe?"

"The colonel arrived a few minutes ago. Oh, aren't you going to wear your uniform? You look very handsome in it."

"Not on your electronic life," I told her. I donned as civilian-looking an outfit as I could find and headed out the door. Tarmo's door was open. I peeked in but no one was to be seen.

I could have asked House where he had gotten to but don't like to pester her. Nor for her to pester me. One finds a good middle ground in such things after a while.

Only my sister-in-law and parents were at the breakfast table. "The captain and Brendon are out riding," Nira informed me. "You told him we had horses, it seems."

Had I? Oh, that joke. "I didn't know Thuleans rode," I said, taking a place at the table.

My father spoke. "It's more common in the Janic worlds. I suspect Tarmo learned there."

Tarmo had undoubtedly learned many things in many places. It was his job both to know things and how to do things. I might not mind knowing things myself.

"Coffee, Jack?" asked a servbot. They all tended to be familiar. Many were older than me.

"Make it tea." My stomach felt a tad queasy. Best drink something easy on it.

Tarmo and Brendon came bustling in, all glowing and healthy looking. "Tea sounds good to me too," said the Thulean. "Locally grown?"

"Most of our tea is produced within our own sphere," Father said, sounding much like the government official he was. "Much of it right here on this planet. Coffee too. We were an agricultural world first and strive to remain one."

"How 'bout cocoa?" queried Tarmo. The Thulean affinity for cocoa is well known. Enough to be a bit of a joke.

"Not on Scotia. Elsewhere in the Group."

Brendon sat down with a cup of coffee, stirring too much sugar into it. "Do we export any to your world?"

"I don't think so." Tarmo didn't sound sure of that.

"Too much demand right here," said Dad.

Mom added, "The little we do export goes mostly to the Ning worlds. It helps those engines they build find their way here."

"I'll have to find out where we get ours," decided Tarmo. "Good to know those sorts of things. I thank you for the opportunity to ride your horses. Fine animals. Oh, scones."

"With currants we grow on this estate. Yes, we somewhat pride ourselves on our horses, though my daughter-in-law is largely responsible for them."

Nira only nodded amiably.

I helped myself to a couple of those scones. "You've ridden much, Tarmo?"

"When I can, where I can. I've even ridden a robot horse from Resnovae. One can scarcely tell the difference."

"Surely not!" exclaimed Nira.

"They sound like a splendid idea to me," interjected House. "I always worry when you climb onto those willful beasts. By the way, Master Errol has freshened up and is on his way to you."

My cousin made his appearance a minute or so later. He'd jettisoned the Group Force uniform in which I'd last seen him. Still in a kilt, though.

He nodded a good morning and settled down with his own tea before saying anything. "You probably would like to know that we destroyed your base, Jack. We sent in a carrier loaded with N-4s."

"B-types?" asked Brendon.

"To be sure. Fitted out for atmospheric duty though that proved unneeded. We followed in a couple heavy cruisers, to provide support if called upon. They proved unneeded too."

"I suppose N-4s are all right if nothing else is available," was Brendon's opinion.

"They're sturdy." Errol didn't seem inclined to give them any further praise. After all, they were from Group Supply, the official Scotian military manufacturer that was McFee's primary competition.

"So that brings us to you, Jack," he said. "If you want, we'll get you commissioned in System Defense. An ensign. That way you can continue officially as a test pilot."

"And unofficially?"

“Oh, we’ll find things for you to do. Maybe even actually be a test pilot, now and again. If you don’t want the commission, Group Force is ready to scoop you up. That’s not necessarily a bad thing, of course. We’d be glad to have you but I think you will be more useful elsewhere.”

“Or I could get you on as a aide somewhere in the government,” said Father. “In which case, the ensign’s commission would still be a good idea, just so you have an official military position.”

I knew I should have stayed in school. “Sounds good to me. But I won’t have to wear a kilt, will I?”

“Only on dress occasions,” Errol assured me. “We’ll find some papers for you to sign but consider yourself in the service as of this moment.”

“Yes, sir! So what have I been doing these past days? Getting shot at for no reason?”

“Hmm, we’ll make it retroactive.” He looked around the table. “What I have to say now is officially secret, but I think I can trust a cabinet minister and his family. Maybe even the foreigner over there.”

Tarmo raised his cup in salute and smirked.

“To whom we’ll want to talk before he heads home. On what subjects, concerns only the cabinet minister. Will you have time later, Uncle Dave?”

“Certainly,” replied Dad. “And then our guest will need to head home.”

That was disappointing but not unexpected. The war went on or something along those lines.

“Very well. Now, Jack—we’re very interested in the missile that was launched against you. Intrigued, even.”

"There's not much I can tell you." Especially with all my flight data lost.

"So tell us what you do know. It appeared suddenly?"

I nodded. I might have appeared hesitant about it.

"Not instantaneous? It didn't just pop into space?"

"No, it was launched. I could tell that." What was Errol getting at?

"You thought they might fit a missile with some sort of jump drive??"

"That would be prohibitively wasteful," opined Brendon.

Errol agreed. "Something for a last-resort weapon maybe. But a missile launcher might just be equipped with jump ability. It's possible with the Li Drive."

"Oh. Yeah, I could see that," I said. "It could jump close and fire. Unmanned maybe? Just a jump drive?"

"Hmm." Brendon considered this. "But accurately landing near a target would be difficult."

"More like impossible," Errol pointed out.

Brendon shook his head. "I don't see how it would ever work. Jumps are just too random."

"Even within a star system," added Tarmo.

That surprised me. "Jumping within the same system? I thought that wasn't possible."

"I've heard of it working in a system with multiple stars."

"But generally the drive won't understand the target and just sit where it is," said Errol. "I've even heard of them locking up, so any attempts are very much discouraged. It is simpler to jump to another system and then back again."

That was true. There was no guarantee it would get you closer to where you wanted to be, though. You were just as likely to end up further away. Jumping was like throwing a handful of sand at a target. A lot would hit somewhere near the center but quite a bit would also go wide.

"All this is a guess but intelligence has given us some hints that something of the sort has been developed. By the Aigleans." Errol nodded toward Dad. Yeah, his ministry is Intelligence. "We intend to investigate. Maybe Jack can be useful there. We'll see." He turned to me. "You'll recall we had you take a battery of tests before sending you out on a mission."

I became immediately suspicious. Or cautious, at least. "Yes."

He and Brendon smirked at each other "You show a considerable aptitude for jump coordination. An aptitude you further demonstrated during your recent escapades. A little training and we're sure you could interface with a Saldhana drive."

"Or even something more hands-on," said my brother. "With less artificial intelligence involved."

"And so, Ensign McFee," concluded Errol, "you're off in the morning to learn how."

CHAPTER 11

We were all off the next morning, Tarmo to catch a flight back to Thule, Errol and Brendon and even my parents to their respective duties and posts. Only Nira remained, to run the estate, as she had for some time.

I had expected a school. Instead I ended up in a seemingly abandoned hangar on an orbiting station with a slightly wild-eyed middle aged woman in drab coveralls. She wore no insignia of rank but I figured I'd better accord her complete respect. "You're to get an intensive one-on-one course on jump drives," she informed me, "and nothing but jump drives, all day, every day."

"How long, ma'am?"

"Until you know 'em or I report you incapable. Let's get to it. We'll start with the Saldhana and see how things go from there."

Before the perfection of the Li Drive—not so long ago—the Saldhana was the most commonly used jump drive. Unlike the Li, it can not operate independently but requires a skilled, trained operator. But like the Li, it does depend on an artificial intelligence to aid that operator. All jump drives do, even the very first one developed on Earth, the Orlova Drive that allowed humanity to leave the system of its birth.

More than a few larger jump ships will still carry both a Saldhana and a Li for added safety, sharing the same element of super-massive material. Which is back up for which is up to their captains.

"As you know," my tutor was telling me, "or should know, Doctor Li's advance was to develop an engine that could dispense with a human intelligence. Earlier quantum drives needed to be guided by a human mind. Now let's see what your mind can do."

After two days of jump after jump around the Scotian systems, I learned, if nothing else, a great appreciation for Doctor Li and her invention. The concentration demanded of me was draining. The Li Drive had truly opened up interstellar traffic in a way that had never been possible before, and most of that in the last thirty years as it had come into common and widespread use.

It is likely it was responsible for the rapid expansion of the various trade alliances and, indirectly, the confrontations that brought this war upon them. Of course, all the alliances and federations or whatever one dubs them ultimately exist for economic purposes. The Aiglean and Corvan groups—the Eagle and the Crow—began as trade associations. There are advantages to studying history. I think.

The training largely consisted of practice. My tutor—she had yet to tell me her name—and I both hooked up to the drive and she criticized me for the stupid things I would do. Then we would repeat.

At the end of those first two days, she said. “I could turn you loose right now and you’d probably do a decent job. Good enough to navigate a Saldhana-equipped freighter.” There might have been the faintest of smiles—the first I had seen from her. “The colonel expects more from you. Tomorrow we introduce you to the Garda.”

I knew only that the Garda Drive was one of the little used alternative jump engines. It turned out it was the one that used the least computer and the most of my brain. And it was easy. I was surprised. It felt more intuitive, more organic.

“The Garda is a fairly recent design,” she informed me. “Distills the best of previous drives into the simplest package possible. If you can operate it, you can operate anything.”

But we did practice more with the Saldhana and she introduced the Ceña Drive, which had some popularity still. Mostly with small civil carriers on the edge of things who couldn’t afford the sophisticated brain of the Li Drive nor even the Saldhana. “Best you be familiar

with it," was her only explanation. So we practiced and practiced more, jumping from star to star within the Group. Two weeks later I was sent on my way to Fundy Base. I never did learn her name.

Both my brother and my cousin awaited me at the end of the docking conduit. "Sign here," ordered Errol, shoving a paper under my nose. I probably should have read it but I laid it down on the nearest table and added my name.

"Good. Now you are an official member of Scotia's armed forces, retroactive to your birthday. Couldn't take it back further. Regulations, you know?" He slid the paper into a binder. "We can worry about a uniform later. You should probably learn to salute too, once you're in it. Right now, let's have a drink to celebrate your commission."

"Not that I ever salute Errol," said Brendon.

We settled at one of the tables in the canteen. "So how went the training?" asked my brother. "Errol's been secretive about it."

Errol snorted. "You know more about it than you should already. But Jack did quite well, according to the reports I received."

"Learning the Saldhana Drive?"

"And some others," I said, giving Errol a sidelong look. He didn't seem to mind me talking about it. "We practiced jumping in old W-2s. Those didn't have jump drives originally, right?"

"No," said Errol. "Never produced with them, never intended for them."

"But a drive can be shoved into most anything, if you really need it," Brendon added.

Beers came to our table. Tarmo was right about Scotian beer but I didn't care right then. "To Ensign Jack McFee," said Errol, raising his tankard.

"Jack Mack," toasted Brendon.

Then Errol had to tack on, "And his next mission."

"Ah, there it is," I said, and took a deep drink.

"This one shouldn't include any gun battles," he assured me.

"The last one wasn't supposed to either," came Brendon's reminder.

"By the way, I brought your gun along from home. It's in our ship."

"We have something new for you to fly if you're ready to go on another mission," said Errol.

"New and interesting!" crowed Brandon. "A mystery ship!"

"Is it here?"

Both immediately sobered. "No. It's a top secret project. We probably shouldn't even mention it here, much less park it."

"It *would* attract attention, wouldn't it?" asked my brother.

"I suspect so," agreed Errol. "Ready? Let's go see it."

I followed them into a boarding tube and then into a ship. The interior proved unfamiliar but I was fairly certain it was a McFee. Errol took the controls. He's the only guy Brendon would allow to do that.

"No one else aboard?" I asked, settling into one of the crew seats.

"And what is this we're riding in?"

"W-6A," replied Errol. "Converted for transport duties."

"We've converted a number of them. They're already outmoded for combat," said Brendon.

"Never were all that effective. The Bs are a considerable improvement."

“True. Olaf wants to build a dedicated transport version and call it the C type.”

“There’s neither the demand nor the capacity. Maybe when the war ends.”

“Maybe,” Brendon agreed. “Hasn’t kept him from working on the idea.”

“This one is officially listed as a crew trainer and unofficially serves as transport for high-ranking officials. I get to use it now and again.” Errol spoke a few words to traffic control and then opened the engines up.

“Our cousin likes to go fast,” Brendon confided. “The twin Regals help there.”

“I won’t deny the truth of that. Brendon and I do espouse a different, ah, philosophy as combat pilots, too. He prefers maneuverability, I’m all in favor of speed.”

“I suppose it’s always nice to be able to run away from your opponent.”

“Right now we have a bit of a run to our destination.”

“In the system?” I asked.

“Yes, but out a way. No jumps involved.” Errol said no more for a few seconds. “And this boat doesn’t have the capability.”

I’d figured that. I felt no gravitational pull from the mass of a jump element. There was no gravity at all in the cabin. Aside from the illusion of it from being pushed into my chair by Errol’s acceleration. That was a little too rapid for the dampeners to keep up.

“It’s not a long ride,” he continued. “The base is kept in an orbit synchronized with that of Scotia so it’s never too far from Fundy.”

“But hidden?” I ventured. I’d certainly never heard of its existence. Not that I should have. “Maybe among asteroids?”

“The kid’s not as stupid as he looks,” said my brother.

CHAPTER 12

"A Corvanaut?"

"A Nativ. Same company, of course. Pretty much the same design as the venerable A-1, but modified for ultra-long range observation roles."

Nativ was the parent company of Corvanaut. That I knew. Not much else. The two main drive units were placed further forward, externally, than typical. Vacuum cooled? There was more than the normal array of maneuvering tubes, allowing for subtle lateral movements. One saw that on little cargo carriers but not so much on military craft.

No sign of a jump drive. At least not a Li Drive, with its brain mounted out front.

It had taken the better part of three hours to reach the orbiting base, hidden in an asteroid cluster. Not out in one of the belts—these were rocks that had been shifted here in the past to prevent them from being a navigation hazard. There were several such clusters about the system, some of them being mined. The facility was built in several connected modules. That probably made it easier to hide amid the asteroids than one large structure.

I turned my eyes from the screen. "I assume there is a jump drive."

"A Garda unit. I am informed you can operate it."

"I can." I felt confident of that and little else.

"It's preferable for the stealth missions we have in mind. Less bulk, and it does not have the vulnerability to heat your Li Drive does. You could even pilot it into an atmosphere."

“Not that you would want to with the mass of the drive element,” said Brendon. “It would be hard to control within a planet’s gravitational pull.”

“True. It might not even have enough power to land. Maybe a controlled crash.”

“That would depend on the planet,” I pointed out, “and its gravity.”

“When can we go aboard?” Brendon asked. To me, he explained, “This is the first time I’ve seen it, too. I’m curious.”

“Let’s dock and report in first,” said Errol. “Leave your gear for now, Jack. There’s a uniform with it, by the way.”

There would be. The interior of the base was, as expected, singularly uninteresting. Lots of ceramics—the extensive use of metal I’d seen at Thule Station would be considered extravagant by any Scotian engineer. At least there was some artificial gravity. ‘Reporting in’ consisted of no more than officially informing the officer on duty we were there. Rank has its privileges and Errol had plenty of rank. He received a brisk salute too. “We won’t need quarters,” Errol told her. “We can sleep on the W-6 until Major McFee takes it back to Fundy.”

This was news to Brendon. “I intend to take Jack out for a training cruise,” was all he was willing to tell either of us. “Let’s go look the ship over. You’re going to be far more comfortable in it than the last one you used. There’s even a bunk.”

I’d slept sitting in my cockpit chair in the modified W-4. Don’t even ask where I relieved myself.

“We’re going to look at the outside first.” Errol had led us into a room full of coffins. “You’re unlikely to get out of the ship during your mission but it doesn’t hurt to familiarize yourself.”

“I won’t have a coffin though.”

“No, but there is a flight suit if you must step out.”

“Or if your hull integrity goes,” added Brendon, in a far too cheerful voice. I knew they both wore such suits during combat. Hull integrity did have a way of going under enemy fire.

All three of us enclosed ourselves into the bulky suits and steered our way to the Nativ. It looked large but that was partly an illusion, the result of a somewhat spidery construction. “The main engines are four-tube Corvanauts, vacuum-cooled, putting out forty-eight Ts each. That helps keep it light,” announced tour-guide Errol.

That was about half the power of my W-4’s main drive. But there were twice as many of them. There were also a lot of steering tubes. They’d add power if they were all directed rearward. Almost as much as another main drive, I guessed. These were mounted well out from the nacelle, further than typical.

“Note the far forward maneuvering array. That’ll let you spin in circles if you want. You’ve done that in little loaders, I’m sure.”

“Yeah. And been punished for it.”

“It was fun though, wasn’t it?” came Brendon’s voice. Fun for him, maybe.

“Four main steering tubes, set more or less even with the main drives, and four more for stability in the tail. Set wide for even more maneuverability.”

“That’s a load of tubes to control,” I said. Typically, one didn’t pay much attention to those at the rear. Much less the additional nose-mounted units on this machine.

“It may feel overly sensitive at first. You’ll get used to it.”

“Trust your control computer,” said Brendon.

“Always good advice. Let’s look at the surveillance arrays now.”

There wasn't much to see there and a few minutes later we were back in the station. I strongly suspected I would be learning much more once I was behind its controls. How much time did Errol intend to spend on my training? I'd certainly been hurried through the last schooling.

We got out of our 'outside' gear and went in search of a meal. The personnel that drifted in and out carefully ignored us in the mess compartment. Maybe that was normal in a top secret installation. It certainly didn't bother me anyway. Both my companions had insisted I don my uniform when we returned to the ship. That was the same as the one I wore for my last mission, simple, gray, no insignia of rank or deployment. Then I slept. It had been a long day. Long enough

The conversion of the W-6 medium cruiser included decent beds. I was loathe to roll out of mine when I was insistently called. I was certain I had achieved nowhere near eight hours of sleep, much less the nine or so I usually preferred. "Time to get out of here," Brendon informed me. "All your kit needs to be transferred to your spy ship."

I unstrapped myself and sat up. "And you'll be on your way?"

"So it seems. I haven't the slightest idea what our cousin intends so don't ask me." His grin was not at all reassuring. "You're in his hands now."

Better than yours, I thought. "Let's go get breakfast first," he said. "I don't know where Errol is so we might as well make use of the time until he finds us." He glanced at my bag. "But you'd best bring that along. I doubt you're coming back."

"So do I," I admitted. I grabbed my kit and bounced out. One could feel just a little of the base's gravity out here. That increased as we went down the docking conduit, though it didn't feel quite like it was beneath ones feet. That can be disconcerting. It feels like one is falling over.

The coffee in the mess was as black as the space around us. And maybe as deadly. I was on a second mug when Errol sauntered in.

"Don't drink too much of that," he said. "We're not making any restroom stops."

"You've been around my brother too much," I told him, as he took a seat across the table.

"And your dad." He regarded me somewhat seriously for a moment. "You really are the least eccentric of the bunch."

"Takes after Mom," Brendon told him. "The diplomat."

"Uh-huh. Have you considered that career yourself?"

"I've considered a lot of things." Neither of these two had. They had both been crazy about engineering and space flight as long as I could remember. From before I could remember, when they were little kids.

Brendon rose. "I suspect it's time I was headed back to the Fundy," he said. "And then to my unit. I've been away too long—and I am their commander, after all."

"I feel that way too. I'd rather be on patrol than sitting in meetings." Errol sighed. "But I recognize this is really more important."

"Ha. If you could get away with it, you and Olaf would lock yourselves away and design new craft all day."

"That may be true." Errol rose as well. "But we both know he doesn't really need our help that much. Let's get on our way, Jack."

We parted with Brendon then and there, each heading different directions. "So," I asked, as I followed Errol, "this is more schooling? And a mission after?"

"No. This is the mission. You'll have to learn on the job, my boy."

I decided to avoid asking more questions.

CHAPTER 13

There was room enough for one person to be reasonably comfortable inside the Nativ. Two would be somewhat less comfortable. A pair of command chairs awaited us in the control room.

"A crew of one would be fairly normal," said Errol. "And that is how it will be on your mission." He noted my questioning look. "Yes, I'll be leaving you. Most of the interior is given over to surveillance equipment and computers. No armament, normally, though I've heard of these being used for stealth raids. Or similar ships. Now let's see you move it away from the station."

I had to avoid the asteroids in the process. It certainly was true that one had very fine control of this ship and could edge it sideways inches at a time. It was tedious. None the less, I did as much of it manually as I could get away with. The computer only overrode me two or three times.

"We can leave the rear tubes in fixed position now," said Errol as we pulled out into the open, "and just use them for stabilization. Most of the time, really. Computer control will apply power as needed." He gave me a bit of a smile. "I admittedly know little more of handling this ship than you do. I had a couple hours on it before it was delivered to the base. That's about it."

"Poor Brendon never even got a look at the interior."

"Bring it back in one piece and he'll have plenty of time for that."

I also got a couple hours on it, familiarizing myself with its handling. I remained far from being expert or even particularly knowledgeable. Errol had me head the machine outward, away from Scotia, away from the sun. "You are expected to operate well out in any system,"

he said. "And possibly for fairly long periods. That's one reason comfort was taken into consideration."

It was comfortable. Laid out nicely, I thought, and not cramped. There was a gravitational pull from the drive element, of course. Not anywhere near as strong as what one felt standing on Scotia. The element would be only large enough to jump this relatively low-mass craft. "Will we be jumping?" I asked.

"In a while. General Freneau thinks your experience interfacing with the Li Drive stood you in good stead when it came to your lessons."

"General Freneau?"

"Your instructor. Jeanne Freneau. It's not to be expected you'd have heard of her but she is a legend in a very small circle." He paused a moment. "The only person to ever jump through the Wall."

I'd always been told that was impossible. Best I not bring that up.

"I guess this is as good a time as ever to prove she knows what she's talking about. Jump us to Ataensi. Try to end up as far from the star as possible."

"Stars." Ataensi was a binary, orange with a companion red dwarf. Well, strictly, only the orange star was named Ataensi. Her little red buddy was Jogahe.

"But you have to aim for one or the other, don't you?" He had me there. The brighter Ataensi would make the better target. Locating her was the hardest part. I slipped on my headband. That was no different from what I would use to interface with a Li or any other drive. But I got a lot less help finding the orange star from this Garda unit.

"You can't take this much time in an emergency," came Errol's voice, gently.

"I'm trying to avoid using the charts," I replied. "I might need to jump without them sometime." General Freneau had prohibited me from referring to them. I'd thought I'd gotten pretty good at it.

Errol might have nodded approval but my concentration was elsewhere. There. I could just barely make out Jogahe. Ignore him. We locked on, me visualizing the star and then attempting to shift my focus as far away from her as I could without losing her. "Now." I might have whispered it.

"Where are we?" asked Errol, peering at the instruments. "Oh. You did land us far out, didn't you?"

The readings surprised me too. Visually, the binary hardly appeared larger than any in the sea of stars behind it. "Mostly luck," I admitted.

"It's unlikely we've been noticed this far out. No point in checking in. We might jump to Hermitage before our radio signal reached anyone. Not that there is any hurry. We can sight-see for a while if you'd like."

"I did kind of hurry through this system the last time I was here." Not that there was much of anything to see. Even less so this far out. Some planetoids orbited somewhere out here in the darkness; that I knew. What I needed was a few moments to prepare for another jump. Yeah, I know I might not have that luxury in action. This wasn't nearly as easy as simply telling a Li Drive where one wanted to go. "We could try out some of the spy stuff," I suggested.

So we sat there for maybe an hour, testing surveillance equipment on our own installations in the system. It was way more sensitive than what I had used on my previous mission and I had thought that was sophisticated. This was the latest Corvan technology.

I'm sure no one ever knew we were spying on them. "This is fun," I said eventually, "but I'm ready to move on. Hermitage?"

"And then Oz. We *will* check in there." He watched me prepare for a few seconds. "I know this is as difficult a jump as you're ever likely to make. Take your time."

I intended to. I might not always have the opportunity. Trying to latch onto a red dwarf—by far the most common sort of star—can be difficult. They don't show up well, even on the most sensitive of instruments, unless one is pretty close. Of course, it's not actually the light we target, it's the mass, and a dwarf has less of that too. It's easier with a Li Drive, because its brain does a lot of the work. Or all, if one wishes.

But there it was. Aim straight at it, I told myself and the drive. We were sort of 'one' at that moment. There's no worry about aiming directly at a star. It's mass won't allow you to emerge too close to it. Nor inside it!

In fact, that's true even with a relatively small boulder. But one could land close enough to something to need to hit the brakes suddenly. One can usually depend on computer control to react quickly enough. A human certainly can't.

"And—away." The transition was pleasingly smooth. We'd bumped just a little on the last jump. I'd been on all the controls both times, pilot and navigator. Errol had never offered to help. After all, I'd be doing all this by myself soon. I assumed I would.

"Fairly close," he commented. "I'll call in and let them know we're passing through. Can you jump again immediately?"

"Sure." I didn't like loitering here. We got shot at the last time.

But no one knew about this mission. Errol said a few words on the radio. "Ready." I found Oz's friendly yellow sun and reached for it.

CHAPTER 14

"We'll need to maintain some secrecy, even here. We will not dock anywhere." He scanned the console. "It's busy here. Maybe I should have asked you to aim further out again."

"I'll bet I could have jumped here from Ataensi. Could've skipped Hermitage."

"You're free to risk your life but not mine. And definitely not this ship. Ah." A voice announced that the authorities were satisfied as to our identity. I recognized it as that of the chief of security at the Toto station. I'd never learned her name. "Thank you, Captain Kearney," said Errol. "I regret we won't have the opportunity to stop with you this time. Perhaps on my way back."

"I'll look forward to it, sir." I avoided looking at my cousin. I'd heard he had a certain effect on women. Some women. You'd think it would be my dashing brother, wouldn't you?

"So where next?" I asked him. I had my suspicions.

"Thule. Captain Gallen awaits us. He's to assist your mission."

"You'll leave me there?"

"That's the plan. I'll go home on the regular courier run in a couple days." Errol seemed to be thinking on something. It wasn't easy to tell with him; he wore an impassive expression a whole lot of the time. "We did not anticipate the dangers you encountered on your recent jaunt. Some, of course. There is always danger in entering enemy space. But our expectation was you would get in and out without notice."

"Someone knew to look for me."

“Yes. We had a leak. No idea where. It’s to be noted they didn’t go after you until you were on your way home so it is unlikely anything got out before you launched.” I gave a tentative nod of agreement to this. It made sense. “I think we should sit down and go over your entire jump history on that mission and see if we can figure anything out.”

“You know I didn’t stop at Thule on my way out, just announced myself as I passed through. I assumed the Aigleans detected me after I discovered their base.”

“And that is entirely possible, whether they were looking for you to turn up there or not. They showed far more knowledge when they went after you on your return. Not to mention destroying two ships carrying intel to Scotia.”

“Hmm. So spies on Thule or something of that sort? Great place to be jumping to. Ready?”

I zeroed in on Thule’s orange star. No problems but we did land an awfully long way from our intended destination, the station where I had briefly stayed. The other side of the sun, in fact. “Luck of the draw,” I announced. Freneau had said that a lot. She’d also taught me how to deal with it. “I could jump back to do it again,” I told Errol. “Chances are we’d land closer.”

“No need. Check in, won’t you? I’m going to go get a nap.” With that he left me. I reported to someone Thulean somewhere out there. Not on Thule itself. It was on the other side of the sun too. I let them know who we were and our destination.

“This is going to take a long time,” I told the empty cabin.

“Thirty-six hours as I’ve calculated it,” came a voice. “Would you like me to lay in the course?”

“Oh. You—um, you’re the ship?”

"I am and as you were about to ask, yes, I can speak. Or even converse."

"You haven't said much about it," I told him. He had a masculine voice. Well, a masculine-sounding voice. He chuckled at my little joke. "Show me your course, will you?"

So he did. It cut closer to the star than I might have but I said all right and let him set it. I could have napped too, I guess. Instead, I decided to converse. "What should I call you?" I asked. "Ship? Mister Ship?"

"There's always my registry number."

"No way." I probably had an identifying number too, now that I was enlisted. It was not an idea I liked. Not for me, not for the ship.

"At the yard, they called me a spy master," the ship said. "I rather liked that."

"A bit dramatic, isn't it? I'll tell you, I'll just call you 'M.' Short for Master."

"Ha, ha. Very amusing, sir!"

It was? I didn't know why. "Call me Jack."

I wondered if Errol knew this ship spoke. Conversated. I let M handle things while I went back to the compact living quarters. Errol occupied the only bunk. Wasn't there any food? Maybe the intention was to stock the larder at Thule Station. Central Station, they officially called it. I understand half the systems in known space have a facility by that name. Some, more than one.

Coffee. Already prepared, in little canisters. I could heat it up, I could chill it. I chose to swig it down lukewarm. Too much sweetener. I'd have to make sure I carried some the way I liked it. Despite the coffee, I fell asleep as soon as I settled into my chair again.

Errol's voice woke me. I glanced at the console. I'd been out nearly five hours. "Did you intend to fly this close to the sun?" he was asking.

I yawned. "That's M's doing." I checked the instruments again. "And we're not close yet."

"We will be on this course. What is M?"

"That would be me, sir," spoke the ship.

"Who is M, you should ask," I told him. "He's our friendly ship."

"Wasn't very friendly to me. Barely spoke a half-dozen words when I piloted, um, him? You're programmed male, M?"

"I am."

"Glad of it," I commented. "I prefer gendered intelligences. The neuter ones always seem to—lack something."

"Obviously," said Errol, "but not as obviously as humans."

I could swear I heard a slight 'hmmph' from M.

I decided to go back to sleep.

CHAPTER 15

It turned out there was food on board, the same sort of liquid rations I had subsisted on during my last mission. I felt we could do better this time. We certainly had room.

But I might not want to leave the controls when I was out there in enemy space. The bunk might not get much use on that trip, either.

"A tug's going to take us in," Errol reported. He'd taken charge of communications as we neared the station. "A closed hangar. We don't want too many inquisitive eyes."

"They're likely to think I'm just an old A-1," felt M.

"Which would be an oddity here too. Do you have their beam?"

"I do, sir," The ship followed the signal to an open hangar, where a pair of tiny one-person tugs took over. I could have edged it in just as well as they did. Maybe with just a little help from computer control.

Computer control is not quite the same thing as the ship intelligence. M, that is. M was an artificial intelligence that could make actual decisions. Computer control was all automatic response though, to be sure, vastly intelligent in its own narrow way. It was what applied power to one tube or another, or changed its angle when I 'turned' the ship from my controls.

They're separate brains, by the way, though linked. One can take over for the other, if necessary, in a limited fashion.

"We'll have a tube out to you in a moment," came a cheerful voice.

"Captain Alander?"

"Ah, you couldn't bear to be away from me for long, could you?"

“Could anyone?”

“Laying it on a bit thick,” muttered Errol.

“Absolutely,” agreed M.

I watched the tugs on my screen. They weren't much bigger than a coffin suit, and disappeared as soon as they had us inside. They must use a different way in and out of the station. A door slid closed on the hangar space. We would be completely hidden from anyone outside the station. Inside, who could say? I'd have to be careful not to imagine spies lurking on the other side of every bulkhead.

Or maybe I should imagine them. I should make sure I had the pistol with me—and make sure to thank Anna Gallen for providing it. In fact, I gathered all my personal gear though I could have left it aboard. Errol did the same. “Keep an eye on things,” I told M as we entered the docking conduit.

I was a tad disappointed Elsa Alander wasn't at the other end. She had other duties to keep her busy, no doubt. Tarmo was there but he isn't nearly as nice to look at. He should've brought his sister.

Errol saluted him. The Thulean only cocked his head in return. They don't salute on Thule. My kind of people. “I officially hand the kid over to you, Captain,” said my cousin. “You're in full charge of the operation until he launches.”

“Then it's all up to you,” Tarmo told me.

“And M,” Errol had to add. Tarmo didn't ask about it.

“If there are spies here—and we can assume there are—they are sure to have recognized you. They will have no inkling of your mission, of course.”

“They might guess I was headed into hostile territory again.”

"We want them to," said Errol. "We want them to shoot at you, after all."

"How else can we learn about their weapon?"

I might have looked slightly disconcerted. My cousin kept a straight face but Tarmo grinned. "Never fear. We have a safer solution. We hope! Let's get you squared away first. Need any sleep?"

"We had plenty on the way here," I replied.

The captain showed us to a room. I'd be unlikely to remember where but an aidie could always get me there. "You'll have to bunk together," he told us, as we dropped our gear to the metal floor. "Now let's feed you."

"We'll need to stock the ship," said Errol. "We only brought emergency rations."

I shrugged. "I can get by on those."

"But there is no reason you should." We had a fairly leisurely meal in the canteen, some kind of fish-like thing and some kind of tuber-like thing. Lots of thick creamy sauce. Typical Thulean cooking. The beer was not as bad as Brendon claims.

I vaguely wondered what they made it of. They must grow grains of some sort on the planet. Or not. It could be brewed from the same tubers I was pushing about on my plate. "Let's go see how they're doing on your ship," said Tarmo. "We could watch from right here but I'd rather go down to the hangar and look at the big screen there."

So we did. The hangar remained in vacuum, even with its doors closed, but the workers did not need to don coffin suits. What they wore looked more like flight suits, with arms and legs and a separate helmet, but bulkier. They appeared to be attaching something to M. Yes, I thought of the whole ship as M and would continue to do so. I

squinted at the screen. "Those thingies have drive tubes, don't they?"

"Couple varitubes, I think. Like the coffins. You'd have to ask Alander about that sort of thing."

I was thinking it would be handy to have one aboard. Maybe I *should* talk to Elsa. "So what is that you're mounting on M?"

"Four small modified probes. Without any actual probing capability, just a good brain and a little more power than usual."

Errol squinted at the screen. "Three-tube drives?"

"I haven't the slightest idea." He addressed me. "You can launch a small unit to attract attention—it is to be hoped it will be taken for a small ship of some sort. It is also to be hoped that you can monitor it from far out where you won't be noticed."

I got the idea. "So they'll target them instead of me."

"Exactly. You'll have to visit that system where you were shot at, first. If you don't get any nibbles on your bait there, try another."

"And that," said Errol, "is pretty much the gist of your mission. We're leaving it up to you to make what decisions are necessary." He gave me a wry grin. "You and M."

"But we will look over charts and that sort of thing before you go," added Captain Gallen. "Later. Go rest now or sight-see or whatever and we'll get together later."

I realized I was feeling tired, despite getting some sleep on the ship. The let down after the work and adrenalin of all those jumps, I figured. I slept a good while. I think Errol wandered about.

That was his business and not mine.

CHAPTER 16

There were five of us, the two McFees, the two Gallens, and one Alander.

There were also many drinks. Errol, as ever, drank in moderation. The rest of us didn't. It is not surprising my famous cousin was the center of attention. Captain Alander's, in particular. She pestered him all evening about the latest advances from McFee.

She was quite in the dark about my mission or even why I was there. That was need-to-know. So we spoke of other things.

"I hear Lisi is going to make some sort of visit here," said Anna.

Tarmo nodded knowingly. "There will be some elevations to the nobility."

"Oh, have you seen the list?"

"Ha, I only know we aren't on it!"

"You'll have to wait until after the war for that," observed Elsa. "No one wants to draw attention to you." She turned to Errol—of course—and said, "I expect the captain to be Sir Tarmo then."

Errol, to my surprise, and perhaps that of the Gallens, said, "But you already have an equivalent rank, haven't you?"

"Esquire. That's hereditary because my mother is a thane."

"She could be recognized and named a knight too," said Anna, "but it won't give her any more privileges."

I'd read a little on the Thulean nobility but I was confused anyway. "Will your queen visit while I'm here?" I asked. I wouldn't mind getting a look at her.

Tarmo only shrugged. "That depends on how long you're here, doesn't it?"

"A daughter works somewhere on the station," said Anna. "I've never met her."

"Yes, you have," came Elsa's contradiction. "She's one of the tug pilots. Vilma Lempsen."

"Vili? Oh, that's the consort's family name, isn't it? I never connected her."

"Her first posting. I don't think she's any older than Jack."

Apparently having a princess aboard was of no great interest, for they moved on to other subjects. And many more drinks. I eschewed the schnapps this time in favor of beer.

Eventually, Anna and Tarmo took off in different directions while Alander accompanied us toward our quarters. Accompanied Errol. I followed at a discreet distance.

An aidie approached, well up the long hallway. I thought it looked a little odd, angular, that it moved differently than those I'd seen before, but there could be all shapes and sizes on a Thulean station. I couldn't be expected to know them all.

Elsa noticed too, despite her many drinks. She *would* be expected to know them all. "There's something wrong with that aidie," she stated, stopping and staring at it, before deciding, "That's not an aidie at all."

Errol thought the most quickly. "Run!" It took off after us as we hurried back the way we had come. Quickly—us and the machine. It went into top speed and gave chase. I didn't think we could outrun it. And it was already close. Too close!

I was the only one armed. As far as I knew. My C-119 remained tucked unobtrusively into my waist band, covered by my tunic. I

turned, planted myself, and aimed. Not at the pseudo-aidie's body. That might be crammed with explosives! I aimed at the wheels. There, one pellet hit. A wheel flew off and the little robot was going in circles. I emptied my clip and took off after my companions. The concussion of the blast behind me knocked me face-first into the metal floor.

"Damn," said Elsa Alander. "That's twice the kid has saved me."

A few minutes later, I was a return guest of the infirmary. Tarmo showed up as I was being patched. "He won't need to stay over this time," the medic assured him.

Captain Gallen nodded curtly. With not even a 'thank you' to the intrepid hero, he turned to Errol. "Has our mission been compromised?"

"I think I was recognized as an important Scotian," replied my cousin.

Elsa nodded agreement. "People know who Errol McFee is."

"And they targeted you? Maybe so." Tarmo rolled that around in his head for a moment or two. "It doesn't say much for our security."

"You knew there were spies. And maybe," said Errol, "it would be just as well if they know Jack is on a mission. After all," he continued, giving me a grin, "we do want someone to shoot at him."

And me not able to shoot back.

CHAPTER 17

"We sat up late discussing engines." I gave him a suspicious look. "And that's all we did, Ensign."

Pulling rank, eh? I'd let him get away with it for now. "Certainly, Colonel. I never doubted." Errol had made it to our room eventually, so he might well be telling the truth. That he could be a bit touchy about such things I already knew. About appearances. Brendon and I had been punching holes in his image since we were kids.

"We'll go over your mission today," he announced. "Tomorrow, you could be on your way."

"You will be too, won't you?" I asked, as I pulled on my trousers. I tucked my gun into the waist. I had made sure to reload it last night before turning in.

Hey, maybe Queen Lisi could make me a knight for my frequent heroism. I'd have to ask!

"Out on a military transport," Errol replied. "One of the regular flights."

Colonel Tumen joined us this time. He had no input on our mission—orders for it came from much higher up—but needed to be kept in the loop. He said little as Errol and Tarmo covered the basics. It was up to me to go beyond the basics. That I knew.

"I'll be jumping to Trinity first." I had decided that was a good place to start. It was one of the two systems claimed by the Seven, and the most distant from Scotia of all our Group systems.

"That's pretty far," allowed Tarmo.

"And not the easiest system to lock onto," added Errol.

"But I won't have to pass through so many others and chance getting shot at before I, um, want to be." I had gone through two of the Janic systems last time, and skirted Burkut space.

"He's pretty full of himself, isn't he?" Errol asked.

Tarmo only laughed. "Aren't all McFees?"

We went over the other jumps I had planned, realizing that I might be called upon to improvise at any point. It was good to look at all the alternatives. "And that will put me on the Aiglean frontier, where they gave me such a rousing farewell the last time," I finished. "Um, is there any reason to believe the same weapon will still be there? If I had been expected last time, they might have moved it there just to target me."

At once, I realized they had probably already considered this. Still, it wasn't a bad idea to bring it up.

"If no one takes the bait, move to another system," said Errol, quite matter-of-fact about it. "That's at your discretion, Jack."

I might be gone some time. I hoped M didn't get tired of my company.

Tumen rose and bowed to each of my companions, saying nothing. To me, he said, "I thank you for your quick wits and action yesterday, Ensign McFee. Twice you have kept me from losing my chief of mechanics and a dear friend."

With that he was gone. "I guess I don't count as much," quipped Errol.

"Grandfather may be grateful," I told him. "Or, maybe not," I couldn't resist adding. Errol and Grandpa Jack did not have the smoothest of relationships.

The rest of the day I pestered those who were stocking the ship. They would never have gotten it right otherwise. But I could not get

them to include one of those space suits I had seen. Work suits, they called them. Even when I took my request right to Elsa Alander.

"If you find you need it," she said, "you're probably already dead. Too bulky, too." She smirked then. "And you don't know a damn thing about repairing anything outside the ship. Ah, those lovely engines! I want a good look at them when you get back."

I resisted saying I might not get back because I didn't have a suit when I needed it.

Only Elsa joined Errol and me for a meal that evening. Okay, I keep saying 'day' and 'evening' in a station that has neither. I'm a planet boy. You have to expect it. Anyway, we ate with Elsa and I left the two of them to find my bunk. They didn't need me, I was pretty sure.

I was also pretty sure they did more than discuss engines this time, as Errol was not in our room when I awakened. Since there aren't nights here, I guess I can't say he spent it with her and be completely honest, can I?

A couple hours later I watched him board one the regular courier ships, headed home. I was thankful he didn't salute. Elsa didn't show up.

Tarmo did. "A message has been sent to Trinity that you may be passing through," he informed me. "To the Janic systems too, just in case things change, and to confuse anyone paying too much attention to you. I gave M some codes you might need." He looked me over a moment or two. "You could take off right now if you wanted."

Why not? "I'm ready," I told him. A few minutes later, I was entering my ship via a docking tube and then little tugs were nudging us out of our hangar.

I wondered if one of them was piloted by a princess.

CHAPTER 18

The ship had a third brain, beside the two I've mentioned. That would be the computer that controlled the jump drive. That *was* the drive, or a part of it. With a Li Drive that brain was a powerful artificial intelligence. With this Garda Drive it was little more than a glorified calculator. It was not even a quantum computer. It did not require external mounting to maintain a near-zero environment though, of course, it would work better if it didn't overheat!

One didn't converse with it. One linked and shared vision with it, so to speak. It was the drive's brain that made the jump but I had to show it where and tell it when. I understand the ancient Orlova drive had not incorporated a direct linkage at all. The operator had to work at a console and to speak—or even manually enter—his directions to its somewhat limited brain.

But the concept of a jump drive was understood long before anyone figured out how to control one. Until then, any jump would be random. Anywhere in the universe! Getting back would be impossible but I understand some attempted it anyway. No trace has ever been found of those pioneering idiots. The universe is exceedingly large.

The M computer was powerful too, to be sure, a formidable bit of artificial intelligence, but it likewise did not have the cooling requirements of a Li Drive. Nor did it need to all be in one place. Its components were spread through the ship.

We were far enough from Thule Station to attempt a jump. Trinity has three suns—all of them red. Three dim dwarfs. That's what makes it hard to target. Both that they're dim and there's three of them. Just try to pick one!

But as I have mentioned, it is the mass and not the light that we target in a jump. The light just helps us find it. Ideally, I should lock

in on one of the stars. Aiming in the general direction of the three should work but increase the chance of error—best done only if necessary. As I have also mentioned, the universe is large and I wouldn't want to be lost in it.

So I went looking, linked up to the Garda Drive. It gave me no help, the way a Li or a Saldhana might. Focus, Jack! Yes, that one. Show it to the drive's brain. Lock in. Could we attempt to emerge far out? It was tricky enough as it was. And go.

We landed in the right system anyway. "Good show," remarked M. "Do I need to announce our presence?"

"Not unless we're noticed." We were reasonably far out, the three suns appearing as little red dots. Habitation here was on planets very close to those dots; one red dwarf sun was rarely sufficient but three together created enough light and heat to support human life. Within bounds and mostly underground. It was not a particularly attractive system. None the less, the Seven claimed it and there had been more than the usual amount of fighting here.

I knew my next jump but was in no hurry. I disconnected from the drive to clear my mind. The clearer the mind the better when I jumped into an enemy system. I went back to check the food locker. Hmm, what was this?

"M, do you know what these frozen things are?" I held one up but it might not have been necessary.

"Ice cream sandwiches, Jack. Captain Alander brought them over herself."

I knew ice cream—of course—and I knew sandwiches but never the two together. Did they have mustard or mayonnaise in them? Surely not pickles! I carried it forward to the control center, sampling as I went. Not bad at all. They certainly did not need any added condiments.

Two jumps, if I wanted to chance long and direct ones. I hadn't decided on this. A zigzag course through four might be smarter. Some I had passed through on my last mission. Not this first one I was contemplating, the first step on the direct course. I knew it held a lot of military installations. It was an Aiglean jumping off point, a depot, so to speak.

Okay, I'll go roundabout, I decided. I was less concerned about myself than I was about the mission. Well, indirectly about myself, I'll admit. I didn't want to return to report a failure. And I did want to return.

I picked my destination. It lay within the Federation of Seven. That shouldn't matter if I didn't linger. That orange star—and we were there. Not for long. I immediately searched out the next target. A red dwarf binary in a mostly deserted system. Lock on. My focus wavered. It was close but there wasn't much get hold of. Yes. And go.

Closer than I would have liked. Chances are it wouldn't matter. We were one tiny ship in a great deal of empty space, in a system no one much cared about. Intelligence said there were some miners and a small military station. Fighting craft might not be kept here at all.

"I'm going to grab a nap," I announced. And maybe another ice cream sandwich. Three jumps in close succession does drain one.

I'd no sooner settled into the bunk than M announced, "I'm detecting a space craft moving our direction, Jack. Should I attempt evasion?"

"We both know you aren't fast enough," I growled. I hate losing my sleep. "Unless it's some sort of utility scow and they don't have anything else to check us out with." I was halfway up the short passage to my cockpit.

"I make it out as an older Patrician. A light cruiser."

We quite possibly could outrun that. There would be absolutely no point and I was already interfacing with the drive. Next stop, an unusual trinary of yellow, orange, and red. The eccentric orbits of those three around each other helped make all the system planets quite uninhabitable. But there would be a station again. Maybe ships too.

Anyway, it should be an easy jump. I focused on the bright and fairly close yellow and we were there. "We didn't get shot at, did we?" I asked M.

"No. We were too far away, I believe, and they might not have recognized what we were."

The Patrician's instruments were unlikely to be very sensitive. But it would have had weapons. I assumed it would have. If it were being used for utility in a low priority system, they might have been stripped. I was glad we didn't stay around to find out.

"Damn, it's bright here, isn't it? Some of the sensors have turned themselves off."

"I did that, Jack. We're fairly close to the suns."

"They should hide us pretty well. Still—" It might be best just to jump out now. I could manage it.

And that would put us in our target system.

CHAPTER 19

Maybe I should have gone with the more direct route. I didn't get any chance at all to rest which had kind of been the point. Along with confusing any attempt to guess our target. It wasn't hard to find; not from here. It would have been more difficult with the other approach. Hey, in theory I could even have jumped directly from Thule. After all, I had jumped from here to Thule when it became necessary.

But Thule's orange sun was brighter and more massive. This was another red star system. A binary again. It's only significance was its position. I focused, I jumped. Too close. Way too close. I immediately targeted the system we'd just left and jumped back. And then back again. Ah, we were well out this time. This would do.

And I really was worn out this time. No bunk time, Jack. I grabbed a liquid ration and drank it in my command chair. I did not intend to spend anymore time away from it than absolutely necessary. If I had to sleep, I'd do it here.

As long as I remained in this system. I relaxed a moment, clearing my mind. "So," I asked M, "do we send out one of our probe-things?"

"That was the plan. You have controls if you want to do it yourself. The console to your left." That had been added at Thule Station.

"It looks like a modified weapons console," I commented. "It doesn't do much but launch them, does it?"

"And call them back. The row of buttons at the bottom."

"Oh. Right. Seems kind of silly. Why don't you just send one out?"

"And control its flight?"

"I can do that? This little thingy in the middle, maybe?"

"Exactly. You can pull it out some."

So I could. "Then what?"

"Have you ever fished?"

Ah. I could troll for missiles, turning my probe back and forth to entice an attack. "I get it. But you start things out, okay? I want to check the system."

This was a chance to get all those extremely sensitive instruments into play, and take a look around. I'd prefer to be monitoring them than playing with the probe. I did my first sweep. That must be the unit we just launched. Nothing else anywhere near. Some craft moving slowly, way in from us.

The plan was to launch one of the probes at a time and to run it until it was either destroyed or had no more fuel. If we didn't get our answers, we sent a second. And a third and fourth, if needed. Then the mission was over, unless I could get someone to shoot at this Nativ.

That, I would rather not do. Really, if we didn't get any attention with the first two, the plan was to move to another system. It wasn't a hard order for me to do it. If I felt it better to linger here, that would be my decision.

"Maybe we should send it in closer," I said.

"They would be likely to use conventional missiles if it gets too near their base," replied M. "You were well out in the system when they targeted you, were you not?"

"Uh-huh. Not as far out as we are now." I looked at my instrument screens. "The probe is around the right place," I admitted. But it was smaller and might not be as readily noticed. "It can emit radio chatter, can't it?" That had been mentioned in my brief briefing.

"It can. Shall we do that?"

"Sure. Might as well try to attract some attention."

I could certainly detect it on my instruments. A couple minutes passed. All at once, something appeared on my screen where it hadn't been before. Not too large. It disappeared as quickly, to reappear at a considerable distance from the first sighting. Assuming it was the same object. It kept coming and going, at random coordinates throughout the system, very quickly blinking out and showing up. Then it landed close to the probe. At once, it launched what I was pretty certain was a missile. A few seconds later, the probe was the one to disappear. I analyzed the object I'd been tracking while it stood still momentarily. Then it rather leisurely started on its way further in.

"Did you catch all that?" I asked M.

"I did. I do not understand it."

"That's okay, because I do. Let's wait a bit and head for home. I don't want to end up like our little probe did." Just sit here and not move. Not until we jumped.

Thirty-seven tries it had taken. The launcher was a craft similar in size to this Nativ. More solid, though, with more mass. I wondered if it carried more than one missile. We might be able to tell from the data I recorded, once I got it back to Thule. And Scotia. I did not intend to let it be blown up this time!

I could try that long jump to Thule again. No, best not to risk it. One jump into a Burkut system and then back through the Janic worlds. I started up the main drive and slipped on my interface headband. Get a little speed going and make a smooth jump.

"Jack!" M sounded excited. No, not excited. Urgent. That's the word. "The missile launcher is appearing again. We may have been detected."

I looked into space and saw that dim distant star I knew to be Thule. No time to seek my original target. That launcher could appear next to us at any moment or it might take hours. I didn't want to place any bets on how long it took.

All tubes full, including the maneuvering array. Now!

"Thule?" asked M. "I thought we were going a different route."

"So did I," I answered. "So did I."

CHAPTER 20

"We hardly knew you were gone," said Tarmo.

"It felt like years to me," I responded. "It was long enough to get our answers, anyway." I reconsidered that. "Our answer. There's just one and it's pretty simple."

"So tell me before someone assassinates you or blows up your ship. Consider this an official debriefing."

It looked more like sharing a beer in the canteen but Tarmo could call it what he wanted. "It's a missile launcher with a jump drive. A Li, of course. I wouldn't be surprised if it's all automated and there were no humans aboard. It jumps over and over into the same system—and back out of it, of course—randomly until it lands close enough to its target to take a shot. It would have to make these decisions and jumps very quickly. Much quicker than a human could. The technology for that is the main advance here, I would say." With a satisfied nod at my acumen, I took a swig of my Thulean beer. It was starting to grow on me.

"Doesn't seem very efficient, does it?"

"No. I reckon it's experimental. A test of the concept." I leaned forward as if I was about to confide something and then realized that looked silly, and sat back again. Tarmo would just think I was making myself more comfortable. "But what if it were developed into an attack vehicle? Several could be launched into an enemy system and jump around till they found a target. Landing near one has always been the great difficulty in those sorts of operations."

"True. Especially if you want to send several ships against one target. It can take much too long to get them all together again after the jump. Time for the defenders to come after you."

“But if the ships keep jumping automatically until they pop out close to a target it changes things. Some.”

Tarmo nodded at that. “Yeah, some. Coordinating a bunch of ships would still be near impossible.”

“It might improve the chances of getting a fleet through as a group instead of scattered all through a system, if they all kept jumping until they were near a chosen rendezvous point. Well out, maybe, where they couldn’t be reached as quickly.”

He couldn’t see that. It seemed an unwieldy approach to me, admittedly. I did know I was right about the basic idea, though. I’d fulfilled my mission. Me and M.

“That’s twice now you’ve jumped here directly from 2746.”

That was the system where I’d been shot at. Someone probably gave it a name sometime but I’d never heard it. “Yeah. Have the Aigleans ever done that?”

“We think a couple attacks early in the war were launched from there. Raids. It seems they gave up on it.” He leaned back and considered that. “A difficult jump. Going the other way is harder. Nearly impossible.”

I thought I could do it. And hoped I wouldn’t need to. “It’s a pretty dim target,” I said, nodding my head in agreement.

“If they built up there we might need to go in sometime. There’s no sign of that in the data you brought back.” A bit of a laugh. “That’s the sort of thing I need to leave to those higher up. I’m just a security guy.”

Yeah, sure Tarmo. “So, am I going to be off to Scotia right away?”

“No. We want to keep you and your ship secure here for now. The data is already being prepared to send to Scotia. To our central command on Thule, too. I’ll add a note about your conjectures.”

I may have snorted a little at the word 'conjectures.' Tarmo ignored it.

"Also," he said, "you should be here when the queen visits. The colonel has recommended you for a medal and it would be best if she pinned it on in person."

I raised my mug in salute. "I wouldn't miss it."

A medal? I thought about that as I followed an aidie to my new room. It could have been my old room. Maybe I should scratch my initials this time so I could tell. Or blaze a trail through these corridors! Anyway, Tumen wouldn't have put me up for a medal for my missions. That wasn't part of his command. It must have been for the incidents here on the station. The rescues. I wasn't too comfortable with that term but couldn't think of a better one.

Most of my kit had been gathered from the ship and placed beside the bunk. I doubted I'd have to share the space this time. There were two berths, as in every other room I'd occupied here. I had learned that a simple switch would convert those to a single wider bed if one desired. Elsa and Anna had shown me that, among other things.

I had no sooner settled down than Anna Gallen showed up at my door. "I have something for you!" she announced. I kind of hoped Elsa had sent her with more ice cream sandwiches but no such luck. Instead, it was some official bit of paper. I'd only started to read it when she blurted, "You're a lieutenant now. The promotion just arrived."

Sure enough. It didn't matter much to me. What the document went on to say did. I was officially on the reserve list now. That hinted that someone somewhere had plans for me. Plans to which I was in no way privy.

I shrugged. "I guess I'll be paid more now."

She squinted at me. "Like you have to worry about money."

"Don't let people know that. They'll expect me to buy all the drinks."

"I'll be quiet. But you have to come buy me one right now."

I'd just finished drinking with one Gallen. I hoped I could survive another.

CHAPTER 21

"I was programmed with every known language. They take up surprisingly little space," M informed us. Elsa Alander was getting a tour of the ship. She'd wanted a thorough look inside ever since it first was nudged into a hangar.

I had spoken with M in English from the start. It had never occurred to me to use another language—it was what I used when I spoke to myself, after all. But the captain and I had been speaking Lingo when we entered the ship and he addressed us in that language.

At once she said something in Thulean, which I understand is mostly sort of an old Earth language called Svedish with some stuff from another called Finish. M answered without problem. Not that I expected any.

"Errol should have given me a tour," she complained.

"He did let you bring over those ice cream sandwiches," I replied, "for which I must thank you. But Errol—he can be a little self-absorbed sometimes."

"That is not always a bad thing."

"Probably not. As long as he doesn't get delusions of being a brooding genius."

"Ha, I bet those are the sorts of things you and your brother say about him."

Guilty as charged, Captain. "My command compartment," I announced. "I see the controls for the probes have been removed already."

"You never used them," M reminded me. "Not that I blame you. Rather crude."

"I had a hand in building those controls, you know," said Elsa.

"Indeed? I'm sure you did the best you could."

She turned to me. "Are you sure this AI was Corvan built? He acts like a Scotian."

As if there was anything wrong with that. Elsa's interest in the controls ran longer than my patience. I fiddled with the head band from the jump drive. "You know," I said, "in theory I could make a jump from right here in this hangar."

"Why?" A sensible question. I'm not big on being limited by sensible questions.

"An emergency, maybe. If your Thule Station was suddenly beset by a fleet of heavy cruisers, you and I could make a getaway." A bumpy getaway with none of the tubes running.

"That seems rather unlikely." She wasn't paying me much attention, being distracted by various screens that I tended to ignore.

"Oh, then maybe someone planted a bomb in this hangar and it's the only way to escape."

"That makes more sense," commented M. "I detect no bombs, by the way."

"Let me know if you do."

"Let's see the rest of this ship," said Elsa, straightening up.

At the end of our tour, her only comment was, "I'll have to put on a suit and look at the engines some other time."

"They aren't anything special, are they? Definitely not a new design." I followed her through the conduit and back into the station.

"A new version of an old design. I'd love to get an eye on the modifications that were made." She went to the big screen in what

functioned as the command center for the hangar and looked at the exterior of my ship. "Your cousin isn't into all the subtleties, is he? More a big picture sort."

"I suppose so. He hasn't been that hands-on with the recent designs."

After that, I was pretty much on my own. I was getting bored already, hanging around this station. I tried to find things to do, like going down to the shooting range and practicing with my 119. It might have been more fun if Anna had been around but a guy named Ilmar was in charge. I could tell he was a second lieutenant by his insignia. Hey, I outranked him! Too bad Thuleans didn't salute.

He was pleasant though. Maybe a little more impressed by my recent exploits than I felt comfortable with. We spent some time messing around with some of the other guns available. I liked one that had two barrels—so to speak—one above the other. The lower shot pellets like mine and the upper was a beam weapon. Maybe a little too unwieldy, I decided. I wouldn't ask to trade up.

I toured the docks and hangars. No one told me I couldn't. Thule Station was big. I didn't realize how big until I tried to walk all the way around it. A lot of civil craft came and went here. Military, not so much. It was not intended as a military base despite being run by the military. There were some defensive spacecraft stationed here, some unobtrusive weaponry.

I found where tourists and travelers ate and drank. That was more fun than the military canteen except I had to pay. There were miners—heavy element miners, going after the most valuable substances in the universe. Everything would collapse without those elements. But there were plenty of other valuable elements out there, metals and so on. Someone has to mine those too. Or find them, for that matter. The Li Drive has certainly permitted mankind to search more widely.

There were also freight crews hauling anything imaginable from system to system or just around the Thulean system. There were travelers and those who helped them travel. There were private ship owners out scooting through space for their own business and pleasure. These travelers felt the war more directly than the rest of us, maybe. Much of the fighting targeted shipping.

I made sure not to tell anyone my name, aside from 'Jack.' And I had my new insignia of rank on my uniform. I was just a young soldier. I liked that.

It was not going to last. Duty or Errol would call soon.

CHAPTER 22

Down a gray metal corridor I went, a Gallen sibling on either side. They had told me only that I had visitors. Two of them awaited me, seated at a table in a small utilitarian room, its metal walls unadorned by anything other than a view-screen. One was Errol McFee.

The other individual, I'm pretty sure, was one of those IMPs I'd run into earlier. I figured I'd better salute. Anna might have snickered when I did.

She was dismissed before we progressed to anything serious. This was above her rank. Tarmo and I sat down across from Errol. The Important-looking Military Person was at the end. That's one way you knew she was one.

She jumped right in. "We commend you on a mission accomplished, Lieutenant," she said. "Good work." Errol might have nodded. "We are concerned by what you said about using this launcher as an attack weapon. It could certainly be used against a system."

"But perhaps no more effectively than a carrier-load of combat craft," said Errol.

"True. It would be a weapon of harassment, primarily." She smiled, almost. "Of course, we are hard at work on developing our own version."

Tarmo grinned. "We could always send the boy back to steal an example."

To my considerable surprise—maybe Tarmo's as well—Errol said, "We considered it. Not worth the risk."

"Knowing what was going on was the important thing," said our IMP. She wore no insignia so I've no idea of her rank. The plain coveralls

were probably intended to keep everyone else in the dark too. We couldn't have someone sending exploding airdies after a Scotian general or whatever she was.

And no, her name was never mentioned. I did learn it eventually.

"Ma'am," I asked, "am I going to have other missions?"

She gave me a disinterested look. "Would you want them?"

"I think M and I make a pretty good team." Who else was going to fly that Nativ? No point in wasting us.

"M?" This she directed at Errol.

"The AI. They've definitely bonded."

"Hmmp. That's a valuable ship, young man. Not your toy."

"But it might well prove more trouble and expense to train a new pilot, and maybe need to refit the ship with a Li Drive, than to keep them together," said Errol.

"Very well. I'll keep that in mind." She turned back to me. "You do need to ferry your, um, M back to Scotia. The ship should be thoroughly checked over."

I think both Errol and I had the identical thought, that Captain Elsa Alander could do every bit as good a job of it. "How soon?" he asked.

"As soon as practical. And then, Lieutenant McFee, you must rush right back here to receive your decorations from the hand of Queen Lisi."

"And maybe receive some further training," added Tarmo, with a sly sort of smile. "That's all, isn't it?" He rose without waiting for an answer.

"It is for the boy. We three must go confer with some of your Thulean military."

"Janic-Thulean, sir," Tarmo corrected her, rather sharply. I don't think I would have taken that tone with a presumed general.

"Yes, quite. My apologies." She nodded toward me. "Dismissed."

So I left. I saluted again first. I wasn't sure what to do then so I went out to the Nativ and informed M we were going to leave. And check the supplies.

I was biting into an ice cream sandwich when he said, "I liked the woman who visited. Is she your girlfriend?"

"Not mine." I did hesitate a moment before adding, "Maybe Errol's. And what do you know about girlfriends?"

"I can say the word in several thousand languages." M was trying to be funny. Also, I suspected, evading the question.

"Do I need to introduce you to a female AI?" I asked.

"Not a bad idea. But not while we're on long-range recons. It wouldn't be fair to the lasses."

The ways of AIs can be strange to humans. As intelligent as they may be, their thoughts do not follow the same pathways. They have no sense of self-preservation, other than to be able to continue their duties. They don't actually care whether they continue to exist—it is not a goal in and of itself. Similarly, they are not acquisitive. They don't wish to own things other than what they need to do their work. On the other hand, they can be affectionate, both to living creatures and to each other. They can form bonds. They can experience jealousy of a sort, and a sense of loss. And they like to know things.

Add gender to this and we get more unexpected turns. But it does work better for advanced AIs to be male or female, almost always. It

helps give them a sense of identity. Those that don't develop one never work quite right.

"Permission to come aboard."

"I believe that's Captain Gallen," said M. "Should I let him in?"

"I suppose." Tarmo was already in, actually.

"Elsa's right," he said. "Your Spy Master really does sound like a Scotian now. Or, what's worse, a McFee."

I knew that was inevitable if there was some bonding. M was undeniably quite young and impressionable. "He's sounding like House, isn't he?" Maybe he should meet her.

"Could be. Just make sure your M isn't around your brother too much. Do you need anything before you leave? I came down to tell you you're cleared."

"Nothing. I brought my kit with me." Such as it was.

He nodded. "Just talk to Central when you want a couple tugs to come move you out. No jumping from inside the hangar, you know." Elsa had been paying attention and telling tales. He extended a hand. Thuleans, of course, do shake even if Janics mostly don't. If you're Thule-Janics, I don't know what you do. "I'll see you back here soon, I understand. Not with M."

"Oh?" came M's voice.

"Sorry," I told him. "Orders from on high. Very far on high, I think." I returned my attention to Tarmo. "Are Errol and the anonymous visitor from on high heading back too?"

"They're already on a flight to Thule. I'm not privy to any other plans they might have."

"You might ask Elsa." Tarmo only chuckled but we both knew if Errol informed anyone, it would be the captain.

A couple minutes later my guest was gone and I was talking to the station. "A flight plan has been sent to your ship," the voice on the radio told me. "Don't ask what it says. Very secret." No problem. M would let me know what I needed, when I needed it. The hangar door slid open and a pair of tugs started moving me out into open space. I tried to get a look at them with my instruments. Those were sophisticated enough to give me a peek right into their face plates if I desired. And if they would hold still.

"You're clear, sir," one of them announced. "We'll move off." I'd give them a minute or so. Computer control would know how long was needed. I could probably creep sideways with my small maneuvering tubes right now.

"What's that purported flight plan say?" I asked M. "And is there any need to follow it?"

"It names the jumps but they are the same ones you used to come here with the colonel. It says to use your discretion on that. There are some firm orders on how to proceed once you reach the Scotian system."

"We'll worry about those when we get there," I decided. "Let's light up those Corvanauts." They might not be very powerful and the Nativ might not be at all fast, but shortly we were far enough out to jump. That's when the missile launcher showed up.

CHAPTER 23

I had no doubt I was the target. None at all. The launcher had come and gone from the system at least a couple times already. I'd best get out of here.

And it would certainly be programmed to follow me to Oz. It might be jumping back and forth from that system right now. That's the way I would have done it. It might be unhealthy to jump there, even if it was in my orders.

Back into the hangar? I could probably make it and the Nativ's fine controls should let me park without the need of tugs. The Thuleans should be aware of the launcher's presence by now. My sensitive instruments had given me an early warning.

Use my discretion—I sought a star in an unexpected direction. Not toward Janus. That wouldn't take me home. That orange sun was one of the Seven. I locked, I jumped. All much faster than I have described it.

The launcher was probably still jumping back and forth, trying to find me. I hoped someone got a good shot at it before it gave up. Hmm, I'd landed a little closer to Byron than I might have hoped. I could have jumped to Trinity instead; it was closer but harder to target. We've gone through that before. But I figured it was just possible someone would guess it as a destination. This was safer. Until I was noticed.

Sure enough, there was someone demanding I identify myself. The Sevens may not have the greatest fleet but this ship would be no one's choice to engage with them. I had no idea where to go from here but I needed to lock onto something near and make a jump. There was a friendly-looking yellow star. In the heart of the Federation of Seven, wasn't it? Not the best way to go. I couldn't

identify any others. If I got the opportunity, I'd look at the charts after I jumped.

I picked a solitary red dwarf and went. All I knew was it was probably the closest star. And that it bordered on the Wall. That was more obvious when I appeared in the system.

"I don't think anyone is home," said M.

"A deserted system? I'll have to figure out what it is." That was a pretty dark dwarf. Low temperature. There seemed to be a couple planetoids, some asteroidal debris. I could see why no one had bothered to develop it. No human presence at all? Not at the moment but there had been. We were picking up a weak signature. "There is something on one of those asteroids," I told the ship. "An automatic monitor, maybe." A listening post. Someone would come and check it now and again. Maybe from Seven, maybe from Scotia. Maybe even from Nevada.

It was a perfect place to park for a little while and figure my move. Our move. There was a very slight chance someone could show up, either at random or pursuing us from Byron—not that they were likely to guess where I had headed. I hadn't known myself. I moved the Nativ in close to an asteroid to help avoid detection.

So. There it was in the charts. Number only. That was to be expected. No one officially claimed it, and it had little value either economically or strategically. I turned my screen to a view of the Wall. We were close to the cloud. I'd been as close in some Scotian systems; not home, though it is pretty impressive even there. My only concern now was that it would get in the way of a jump.

There were several possibilities but I could do only so much with charts. I needed to link up with the drive and take a look around. The instruments had already been directed toward the Wall so that was what I saw first. "Hey, I can detect Big Blue."

"You wouldn't try to jump there."

“Not on my life. Yours either.” It was way too dangerous to jump to a blue giant, simply because of the heat and radiation. You might or might not land far enough away to survive. The one Scotians referred to as Big Blue—it was a quite luminous blue star in our skies—lay right on the edge of the dust cloud. It was of absolutely no use to anyone except researchers.

I wondered if Jeanne Freneau had targeted it when she jumped through the cloud. Nah. I wasn't completely sure of her sanity but she couldn't be that crazy.

The ship automatically presented information in keeping with a predetermined orientation. I might physically be upside down and backward but it would keep up and down, left and right, the same for me regardless. That was useful—necessary, even—for everyday operations. Jumping was more complex because I needed to truly know where that star was I meant to target. I needed to feel its presence. If the nose of the ship was pointed toward it, as it should be for a smooth jump, this wasn't too difficult.

I had shifted the Nativ around a little to approximately the direction we wanted to go. “That orange star to, um, sort of the right and down, is a Seven world. It should be the easiest.” I was talking to myself, of course, but M was listening.

“Did your first mission take you into this part of space?” he asked.

“Not me. The ships that later followed my directions did but I went more roundabout. Hmm, I'd like to go for that yellow, up and left. That's a Nevada system.” A long jump but it was a bright and reasonably massive sun. There was a certain amount of thin dust between us; I'd have to jump through the edge of the Wall.

“Nevada is neutral,” stated M. So was his voice.

“They won't mind me passing through if I keep quiet. They're friendly these days.” The Nevada Federation had been an Aiglean ally early in the war but had made a separate peace with Scotia. We

even sold them our surplus space craft now. "I can jump on through their territory into Agora space and around the other side of the Wall to Scotia."

"A veritable pleasure cruise, Jack. I passed through the Independent Trade Association when I was being delivered to Scotia. Agora, as you name it."

"Everyone else does. Yeah, I'm going for the Nevada target. Let's move away from these rocks and get the tubes going. Oh." Something had just occurred to me. "Do you think the thicker dust could hurt the engines? I don't know enough about that sort of thing."

"We should have brought Elsa along," said M. "I don't think it should be a problem. Not like entering an atmosphere."

I suspected he might not be any surer than me. We were picking up momentum. Focus on that damned yellow sun, Jack. It was a little like trying to pick out a landmark back home when the fog started rolling in from the sea. Locked. Jump.

We were closer to the sun than I would have liked. Almost as close as one can land, in fact. I wondered if the extra attempt to focus had a role in that. Ah, probably just luck. I got us headed outward. I wasn't surprised when we were hailed and asked to identify. Best I comply.

I gave him the fake identities and fake codes I had for just such an occasion. They claimed I was a Scotian civilian on private business.

A gruff male voice told me to stand by while he checked things out. "That's a Nativ? Long time since one showed up out here."

"Hey," came another male voice, "I had a Nativ runner before the war. Used it for racing."

"This don't look like no racer," said the first voice.

"It's a survey ship," I informed them. "Doing long range work through some of the unclaimed systems."

"In other words, you're a prospector."

"Yes, sir. You might say that. I, um, got a little too close to some fighting back toward Seven territory and jumped this direction."

"Plan to stay?"

"I'd just as soon jump through, sir. Head over through the Indies and go home."

"As long as you don't cause no trouble, boy. We're keepin' as far from this war as we can. The jump over to Nevada is easy enough."

"This isn't Nevada, sir?" I sounded bewildered and naive—I hoped. I think M snickered.

"This here is Utah. Nevada's the next system over."

"Oh, thank you."

I'd been plotting the jump throughout our conversation. I'd already familiarized myself with my intended route before we jumped here. I think I heard the second voice tell the first 'just some kid out playing at being a prospector.' 'Keeps him out of the fightin' I reckon' came the reply. I could barely hear them. There was the target, an orange star this time.

As I jumped, all hell—okay, maybe just a part of hell—broke out behind us.

CHAPTER 24

"I believe we were followed, Jack," remarked M.

Just how, I couldn't guess. Maybe there were spies in the Utah system. No, no, of course there were spies. Whether they could get word to anyone that quickly was another question. It was more likely they were already out looking for us from earlier in our little jaunt through the stars.

It was M they wanted, not me, and the data stored on this ship. I was fairly confident most of that had been copied already and was safe at least on Thule Station. Quite possibly elsewhere as well. But they would like to know how much we knew.

That there were spies on that station we all knew. Someone had to know I was leaving and be able to alert the automatic launcher. I suspected it had already been sent to the Thule system and had been lurking far out somewhere.

Or I could be completely wrong about that. It's not my job to figure that sort of thing out. Leave it to nameless IMPs.

"They're going to follow us," I said. "It's obvious what way we're going." And they seemed quite willing to ignore Nevadan neutrality. I hoped they didn't have another automatic launcher with them. "Did you see what they were?"

"Heavy fighters of some sort. Li drives. I've put them on your screen."

Uh-huh. I could see the brains for the drives mounted out front. "I don't recognize the types either. We might be able to just sit here and not be noticed." We'd landed decently far out this time. There was plenty of traffic in this system so we'd be more difficult to differentiate. "Or I could jump right away."

“You aren’t too tired?”

I only grunted a denial. I was tired, that was certain. Where now, if I did jump again? Another small system in the Nevada Federation and on into Agora space. There was fighting going on there. It might not prove any safer than some of the other routes I might have chosen. The systems in this area of space, including the Nevada and Scotian worlds, were in a sort of elongated bubble with plenty of stars and jumps available in one plane but not so many in the plane perpendicular to it. That’s why intrusion into the Scotian group was difficult. One pretty much had to come in through a few doors at either end. The Wall kept visitors away on one side. The space in the other direction was largely empty for a considerable distance. I’d never heard of anyone jumping across it.

The Great Wall. I’d never seen it from this side before. It would have been great to get onto a planet and actually look at it in the night sky, like I might in Scotia. I looked into it. Hey, I could still make out Big Blue. If I concentrated it wasn’t so hard. But it was a super-massive and super-bright star. I swept right from it. There were other stars beyond that dust. I could feel them. The star of my own home world. It should be—there. Yes, a strong yellow sun. It was a considerable distance however, even without the dust between us.

“The enemy ships have entered the system,” announced M. “No sign they know where we are.” A moment later, “They are headed directly toward us, each from its entry point. I think they have some way of tracking us, Jack.”

“That would explain a lot,” I said. “We’ll have to strip you down and find if something was planted.”

“I should be able to detect it.” M sounded miffed.

“If you can’t, we’ll be carrying another bit of secret enemy technology back with us.”

I looked again toward Scotia. It was right there. Just another jump. Focus. "Mains on," I whispered. M would know I meant to jump somewhere but knew better than to distract me. A yellow sun. The sun under which I was born, the sun that glints off the sea by Dummit Downs. Hold it in your mind. Jump.

Every other jump I had ever made had been instantaneous. This one felt somehow—slower. There was resistance. Still, it couldn't have been more than a couple seconds. Someone in an official capacity has surely checked the data. We were in the Scotian system, close to the bright yellow orb. "Where am I supposed to check in?" I asked M. "According to my super-secret marching orders?"

"Directly to Fundy Station."

No secrecy. That was fine with me. "We'd better let them know we're coming."

No sooner had we sent our recognition codes than my brother was on the radio. "Damn, did you jump through the wall?"

"Yeah, I was in a hurry." There was a little delay before an answer came. Radio, you know? We might have been close enough to the sun but Scotia and Fundy were orbiting somewhat distantly from us.

"Once again, I'm not sure whether you deserve a medal or a court martial. Keep hurrying and get over here."

"Sure." I signed off and told M, "Watch the store. I need an ice cream sandwich." And a long stretch in bed. The latter I might not get for a while.

We never went down to Fundy itself, just the orbiting station. I'm not sure whether I could have landed the Nativ on the moon or not. It wasn't meant to be landed, true, but control is so fine I could probably set it down softly in the low gravity. Anyway, it went into a hangar in the station with stern warnings to be nice to M and to find a hidden tracking device. Then I was off again, with my brother. The

station, by the way, is somewhat smaller than the one at Thule. Much of the operation at Fundy is on the moon's surface and the orbiter is more of a way-station.

"One night at home," Brendon told me. "Then I am supposed to have you on a liner back to Thule." A few seconds, then, "But you arrived a bit before schedule. Maybe we can get you an extra day." Another pause. I wasn't adding much to the conversation. "General Freneau is going to be jealous. But she did say you were as apt a student as ever she had."

I roused enough to say, "We'll have to compare notes."

"Indeed. She may try to keep you here. She has plenty of pull."

"So only one night home," I decided. "Then off to Thule to get a medal. I'll expect one here when I get back. Mmm, one for M too." I think my eyes went shut for a while then. Brendon was piloting so it didn't matter.

He set us down near the house. It was around noon there. I turned around to get a look at what we'd traveled in, as we headed up the path. It was completely unfamiliar, a compact ship with an internal drive. It didn't look the least McFee-ish. "Huh. What is it?"

Brendon looked back. "Prototype W-10. This is the first one we've experimentally fitted for atmospheric work." He frowned at the ship. "I don't think we'll continue with this version. Not enough need."

"Not enough room for weary travelers either," I groused. "And no gravity."

"It's a combat ship." My brother felt that was sufficient explanation.

Sergeant Boutade met us before we reached the gates, much less the front door. "There's a visitor, sir, and I thought maybe you and young Jack would want a heads up." He peered at me. "Oh, a lieutenant now, are we?" he asked and gave me a smart salute. I managed something in return. I'm not sure what.

“So who is it, Giles?” asked Brendon.

“General Freneau.”

“Tell her I’m on my way to Thule. And to bed,” I said.

But I knew there was no way she’d buy it.

CHAPTER 25

"You've joined a rather exclusive club," said Freneau. Again, no one would guess the woman was a general from her looks. She wore a surprisingly stylish pale blue civilian suit. "And going by the data I've seen, you did it not once but twice."

I did? Oh. "The little jump along the perimeter? I wouldn't think that would count, ma'am."

"I'd prefer it didn't. You did go through part of the wall, however. There can be no question about the second jump. From Nevada. That's where I jumped from too." She smiled faintly, maybe at the memory of her glory days. "No one was chasing me. I just did it for the hell of it."

"Because you could see a target?" I guessed.

"Exactly! I figured if I was able to envision a star in my mind I should be able to jump toward it."

"That doesn't mean you should," my mother commented.

"Probably not. The boy here is more sensible, I'm sure." Freneau returned her attention to me. "I want you to come work in my division."

"And I want him to work for me," announced Mom. That surprised both of us.

"A diplomat?" asked the general.

"Officially."

"Oh, spy stuff." She may not have intended to sound quite so dismissive. Or maybe she did.

I wondered if I'd have a say. "So," I asked, "if we have a club, which of us is president?"

Everyone ignored me. "Dad's in the spy business too, isn't he?" asked Brendon. He had a cocktail in his hand and an arm around Nira. My brother made the most of his visits home.

"It's one of the things his ministry oversees. Are you staying for dinner, Jeanne?"

"Um." She seemed undecided. "Will David be here?"

"Duty allows you to evade each other. Errol just let us know he'll be showing up."

"Oh. All right then."

"Let's go find a room where you can freshen up and all that sort of thing," said Nira, disentangling herself from her husband's arm. The two went off toward the western wing. Mom went somewhere too, to do something.

"Errol's back?" I asked. I wouldn't have expected him this soon.

"First I heard of it too," Brendon replied. "I'm surprised he's coming here with everything else that's going on." He cocked his head at me. "Maybe you're the reason."

I'd just as soon not get into that. "The general seemed reluctant to stay. What was that about?"

"You don't know about Jeanne Freneau and Grandpa Jack? They've had a thing for years. Dad has never been very enthusiastic about it."

I couldn't see any objections. My grandfather had been a widower for decades. From before when I was born. "So we might have a Grandma Jeanne one of these days?"

"I do not think she is the marrying sort," was all he had to say on the subject. I wondered why I had been in the dark about this. I still was. And Grandpa Jack liked me the best, right?

Well, maybe not. Errol showed up eventually. I'm not sure what brought him because it didn't stay. Probably a military courier. He had only a few words for most of us, even through dinner, and spent the rest of the evening closeted with Freneau. "We'll talk in the morning," he'd told me.

That I had no problem with and sought my bed. Pretty much everyone was gone when I opened my eyes and went searching for breakfast. Everyone but Nira and Errol. Soon only Nira would remain.

"I was not at all happy when I heard about your stunt," was Errol's greeting as I sat down at the table. "Looking at the records, you seem to have made the right choices."

"I was sort of pushed where I didn't want to go," I replied. "Any luck on finding how I was tracked yet?" A servbot brought a cup of coffee. They knew how I liked it here. "Toast," I told it. "Jelly." It silently went to do my bidding.

"M gave the needed clue. He reported that fuel consumption seemed a little off for one of the main drives. Not enough that most of us would even have noted it. But sure enough, its power was being used to emit a very broad signal. So broad we wouldn't have noted it, either. A normal tracker tends to go with a narrow emission that draws negligible power."

"That's tricky. We'd have just thought it was background noise."

"But it was strong enough for someone looking for it to pinpoint its source." He waited while I spread apple jelly on my whole wheat. No butter. "It required a fairly sophisticated instillation, almost certainly at the Thule Station. No slipping in a small transmitter."

“Captain Alander wanted to look at the engines. Too bad she didn’t get the opportunity.”

“It would have saved a lot of trouble,” agreed Errol. “We’ve sent a report there. Maybe they can figure out who had access.”

“While they’re at it, maybe they could find whoever blew up my first ship.”

“Good point. Or you could do it yourself.”

That didn’t quite sink in immediately. “Huh?”

“As long as you’re going back in, um—” He took a quick look at his communicator. “About an hour, you might as well do some investigating of your own.”

I considered this for a few seconds. “I guess I’d better pack.”

Sure enough, in an hour a courier ship dropped down in front of the family manor and we both were whisked away. Whisked being a relative term with a low-powered shuttle. Errol explained more on the trip. A lot was still left unsaid.

“Officially, I’m just there to get my medal?” I asked.

“And a bit of training in station protocol. That’ll give you more of a run of the place. But—yes, Jack, there is a but,” he said when I squinted suspiciously at him. “You’re going to be trained in much more. Security, in particular. Anna Gallen is going to personally teach you.”

We parted company at a terminal station, Errol headed back to whatever duty called at the moment. Probably something at Fundy. Before leaving, he said, “Freneau was more impressed than she’ll ever admit by your exploits. So much that she rushed immediately to the Downs, and beat Brendon getting there! Oh, and she said to inform you that you’re president of the club. I’ve no idea what that

means." Not long after, I was on big liner with a bunch of other passengers, ready to jump toward Ataensi.

I knew I wasn't likely to need it but I felt more comfortable with the C-119 snug in its holster.

CHAPTER 26

"I am thankful the trip was uneventful," I reported to Tarmo.

"To uneventful trips," he said, raising his glass. I would always be willing to drink to that.

Tarmo, of course, was willing to drink to anything.

"Officially," he told me, "you're in the care of our head of security, Major Kori. You'll probably never lay eyes on the woman. Me you will see far too much of."

"Kori. Does she have a title like other important Thuleans?"

"No, she's Janic. Only citizens of Thule can be nobles."

"No hope for me then!" I took another long pull on my beer.

"Unless you married a nice Thulean girl and joined us." He looked around the canteen. "Shall I pick one out for you?"

I played along. There were plenty enough women in the place today. "They aren't all Thulean though, are they?"

"About a third of the station personnel is Janic. More here in the military section than over in the civil part."

Large and blond were more likely to be Thulean. Some fit that description. "Oh, how about that young lady over there?" I said, choosing her pretty much at random. Also, she didn't look as intimidating as some of the others.

"Ha, if you want to be a Thulean noble you couldn't pick better. That's Vili. Princess Vilma." He did not sound at all like he was mocking me as he continued, but I wasn't sure. "Shall I make an introduction?"

"Maybe later. She is, um, eligible to be queen someday, right?" I had read about the Thulean monarchy.

"One of those eligible for election, yes. There are brothers and sisters, and if the Assembly doesn't like any of them, they'll look at cousins."

I gave Vili Lempsen another look. "I'd vote for her. Or her friend sitting with her, for that matter."

"I'm sure you would. You'll be meeting her mother soon. In the meantime, we can begin some training."

"I have only the vaguest idea what that is going to entail. Just something to do with security. No one would tell me anything."

"You're to learn the physical skills, more than anything else. The nuts and bolts. Isn't that how the expression goes in English? My sister the lieutenant will take care of most of that."

"Shouldn't you both be on track for promotions? I don't want to be outranking you." I joked, of course, but maybe I was also rubbing in my promotion a little.

"You're much too young to be a captain," he declared. "Even Anna is too young."

"It would be a long time before I got to captain. The next rank up for me in the Guard would be lieutenant commander."

"The Guard?" Hadn't Tarmo known this? He might not have bothered to read my files. I wouldn't have.

"Yeah. You know I'm not in the same service as Brendon and Errol. They're both Group Force and I'm Planetary Guard." He slowly nodded. Maybe he had known but not thought anything of it. "I've never actually met any of my superiors there. Group kind of appropriated me."

“What could you expect, given your family?”

“Well, what I had originally expected was to be a test pilot. I thought that was the point of it. Just to complicate matters, strictly speaking I’m enlisted in System Defense, the local force for my home system, under the umbrella of the Planetary Guard.”

Tarmo leaned back and smiled. “The perfect sort of cover,” he said, “for security work.”

Someone had apparently thought so. “I suppose I’m still officially a test pilot.” Until Mom got me assigned to the diplomatic corps or General Freneau had me training jump drive operators or some other plan I knew nothing about.

“Starting tomorrow you’re a student. You’d better be well rested.”

I rested well enough. Again, I didn’t know if it was a room I had occupied before. I was at a breakfast of sorts and thinking about sleeping some more when an aidie rolled up to me. “Presence at class is requested,” it announced. “Please follow, Mister McFee.”

The room it led me to was near the weapons section, a large room with mats on floor and wall. Large for the station. I suspected Elsa and Anna sparred there. How long ago had they mentioned that? I couldn’t keep the time straight anymore. That happens to people who travel from system to system a lot.

“Welcome, Mister McFee,” chirped Anna. “Ready to dive in?”

“What’s with the Mister McFee?”

“Tarmo tells me that’s what you Planetaries call each other.”

“I guess we do. It’s just the first time for me.” I looked her over. She wore shorts and a halter top and was kind of intimidating. I did not at all care for the glint in those dark blue eyes. “So what are we doing?”

“The official order says you’re to learn station management along with appropriate training in security techniques. I will have to parade you around to different departments for appearance sake. Mostly you’ll be learning those appropriate security techniques from me. Combat skills.”

“Your specialty.”

“Damn right, Mister McFee. I’ll try not to bruise you up too much before the queen sees you.”

“Okay. Um, is this room private enough to share, um, I mean, is it secure?”

“It should be. If you’re concerned, I’ll sweep it for any listening devices.”

“Well, I just want to know there’s a place that’s safe to share information with you or Tarmo, if needed.” I looked around the bare space. “This seems like it could be that place.”

She nodded. “Private, and we’re expected to come in here to meet for classes. I’ll mention that to my brother.” Anna raised an eyebrow. “I guess I’m turning you into spy by osmosis. Now, how many forms of martial arts have you studied?”

“If one counts karate, the answer is none.”

Anna sighed. “Maybe a blank slate is the best place to begin.” Then she punched me in the face.

CHAPTER 27

I could take it easy, after two grueling days of classes. Today I was getting my medal. A botboy had taken my one and only uniform to be made presentable. I was as presentable as I was ever likely to be.

Anna Gallen slid into a chair across the table. She wore a resplendent uniform I'd never seen before, dark green and rust-brown, with braid and such. She filled it out nicely too and that was only in part due to the tailoring. "I'm going to be the gray mouse at this ceremony," I said.

"That is the uniform of your Planetary Guard? The same one you wore before?"

"Not exactly. The all-gray is a cadet's outfit. It was just convenient to stick with it." And it would have to do today.

"Too late to get you one more suitable," she said. "Before Lisi arrives I want to take you around on a sort of tour, so people know you're being trained properly."

"Something's being done properly to me."

"Um, Jack, do you have any problem with religion? There are some religious aspects to the queen's visit."

"Doesn't my dossier say I'm a Nezo?"

"Words in a file mean little."

"True enough. No, I have no problem with religion, mine or anyone else's, unless they sacrifice virgins to their dark god. Married women are allowable."

"Very well. Lisi will probably just call for a blessing on all of you being decorated at some point in the ceremonies. I don't know who

is likely to give it." She looked at her wrist-top. "Two hours. Go finish dressing and we'll begin."

Two hours was one watch, one sixth of a day. Thulean hours, which they adhered to on this station, were a tad shorter than Scotian. It was still quite a lot of time to kill. I could have had a nap. Instead we did a whirlwind tour, sometimes introducing ourselves, sometimes just passing through one area or another. Kitchens, laundries, communications, repair shops, engineering. We ended up where we were supposed to be, the big lobby in the civilian port area.

I looked up at the screens there for a while, showing incoming and departing flights. "There is an awful lot of traffic here. Does Elsa have to look after them all?"

"Elsa is chief of mechanics in the military section. None of this is her concern." Anna chuckled softly. "Your lesson today in operating a station."

If I'd thought about it at all, I'd have known that. Nothing is hurt by asking questions, though. "And most of the military craft aren't actually stationed here," I said. They would be maintained elsewhere. Elsa's domain had shrunk considerably when I looked at it logically. No wonder she had time to spend with her friends. And her engines.

And with Errol McFee. The two of them were strolling toward us. "As I thought," he said, giving me a critical up and down. "You don't have a cap." His own service cap was perched jauntily on his noggin. "Here."

I took the proffered wad of dark blue material. "A tam?"

"Completely regulation. You should be fully uniformed." I shrugged and slipped it on. Errol was in dress uniform, a kilt in the official plaid of his division, a black jacket and cap.

A tall and dark young man in stylish but rumpled clothes came up to our group. "It is about to begin, Anna, is it not?"

"I think so. Jitha Jones, I present the universally famous Errol McFee and the locally famous Jack McFee."

"Most pleased to meet the both of you," he murmured. The man did not offer to shake but neither did he bow as some of the Janics I'd run into. Instead he put his hands together and gave a little nod of his head. Yeah, I suppose technically that's a bow. I was completely familiar with this having gone to a Corvan school and seen innumerable Corvans do exactly the same. I returned the greeting without thinking.

"Jitha handles Corvan diplomatic matters on the station," Anna told us.

Diplomatic matters, huh? That probably meant he was a bit of a spy too. "Mostly I help travelers who have lost something—sometime themselves." That was obviously a practiced quip but I smiled politely.

"Queen Lisi has arrived," came an announcement. "The reception and awards will be the first business. All participants please be present in the terminal lobby."

I was already here. Awards, huh? Might be others getting medals today and Tarmo had said something about elevations to the nobility. What else might be going on? Promotions?

"Lisi Arjan," said the Corvan for no apparent reason. "The royal family is of Janic origin."

"Everyone knows that Jitha," scolded Anna. "Don't try to lecture us."

"Sorry. I'm used to talking to tourists."

I wondered how many tourists from Corvan worlds passed through here. And why. More likely his work involved oiling the wheels of

commerce. Not that either wheels or oil would be handy for the sort of commerce that came and went here.

But Jones was right about the Janic ancestry. I'd known some already; some I'd read up on since I'd been here. I had time to read now and again when Lieutenant Gallen wasn't torturing me. The royal family had originated on Janus, which partly explained the alliance. Her husband was thoroughly Thulean. Ern Lempsen, a pilot and not particularly distinguished. He ran commercial liners around the system.

Here she came, with a small entourage. Colonel Tumen was part of it. Lisi was certainly not tall and blond, not that that means anything. Middle aged. Dark, conservative civilian clothes, though I knew the queen had served in the military when young and was still officially a reservist.

There were a few words of welcome from our side, a few gracious words of acknowledgment from theirs. I was getting bored when I heard my name. "We ask that Captain Elsa Alander and Lieutenant Jack McFee come forward." Together?

From appearances, Elsa was as taken off guard as I. We went up to the queen side by side, me keeping a watch on the captain from the corner of my eye so I could follow her lead. They didn't bow on Thule. That I knew.

Queen Lisi Arjan gave us a nod and a pleasant smile. "Your honors today are intertwined, I understand." She turned to Elsa first. "Elsa Alander, Esquire and Captain in the Janic-Thule Combined Force, for courage and service, I confer upon you the rank and title of Knight of Thule, with all the privileges attendant." She shook Elsa's hand and that was apparently that.

The queen turned to me. "Jack McFee. I believe I've heard that name before." That was for the crowd. Everyone had heard of the McFees. Though if you put Jack in front of the name, most would think of my grandfather. I'd like it to stay that way. "Jack McFee,

Lieutenant of the Scotian Planetary Guard, for valor in action and for twice saving the skin of the captain here—” She nodded in Elsa’s direction. “You are awarded the Order of Bothnia.”

Lisi stepped forward and pinned a silvery gewgaw on my tunic. It had an orange and white ribbon. “That’s it, kid,” she said when she was done, “unless you want me to kiss you.”

“Later maybe,” I whispered back. We shook hands and Sir Elsa and I skedaddled back to our friends. The queen moved on to other awards.

The Order of Bothnia? I knew Bothnia was the not-so-large moon that orbited Thule. I flipped the medal up and looked at it. Yeah, it was a little silver moon with some inscription in Thulean. Upside down from my vantage, not that I could read it anyway.

Errol had moved in close and got a look at it. “That’s a decoration awarded by the monarchy to deserving foreigners. I think our Queen Lisi felt you shouldn’t wait for something to maybe work its way through military channels.”

To be pinned on by Tumen, most likely. This was more fun. Not so much when the focus moved on to other deserving individuals, most receiving titles. Lisi also announced some recent promotions in rank. No one I knew.

I turned to Elsa. “Congratulations.”

“All it means is I can put ‘Sir’ in front of my name. My other privileges are unchanged.”

“She should have bumped you up to athane,” whispered Anna. She looked around Elsa at me. “Congratulations to you too, Jack. Don’t think it means I’ll go any easier on you tomorrow.”

“We ask a blessing now, of Pastor Gertrude and Magus Hilda,” announced one of Lisi’s functionaries. A pair of clergywomen stepped forward. I had no trouble telling which was which. Hilda was

a Nezo, a Mazdan by her vestments. Neo-Zoroastrianism had been one of the most common religions for centuries, the first religion to spread widely since humans had first left Earth, carrying their home's beliefs with them.

What Gertrude was I had no idea, until she mentioned Christ in her blessing. "A local variety of Christian?" I whispered, aiming the question at Elsa as she was the closest.

Jones was the one who answered it. "A Lutheran. Many are on Thule."

I nodded, not really knowing more than before, except that Jitha had obviously not grown up speaking Lingo. I'd look up Lutheran later, maybe. The pastor was dressed mostly in black; the magus, of course, in white.

"It looks like that's an end to it," remarked Errol. "And here comes your brother, Anna." He'd been lurking among his fellow security men. Normally, he operated separately from them but this was an all-hands-on-deck occasion.

"There will be a perfunctory tour," he announced, "not that she hasn't seen the place before. I'm going ahead to sweep some of the areas Lisi will be visiting. I suspect she'll want to see her daughter's department. Congratulations to both of you." With that he was off again.

"Let's go somewhere else, also," suggested Anna. "The military canteen, away from all these civilians."

"Won't we make an exception for Jitha?" asked Elsa.

Anna regarded the diplomat with mock seriousness for a moment. "Oh, I guess we can this one time. Come along, Jones."

CHAPTER 28

"I did have to come and see you get your medal," said Errol as we settled around one of the gleaming metal tables. I was beginning to hate metal. "Your brother couldn't. Fighting a war and all that." He turned to Elsa. "Finding you were to be honored too was an unexpected bonus."

I don't think I'd seen that look on the captain's face before. It wasn't right that Errol could have that effect on an officer of Janic-Thule! And a knight, to boot.

"She said nothing to us about it," spoke Anna.

"But it was posted," Jitha told her.

"Well, then *you* should have said something!"

The Corvan only spread his arms in capitulation. He definitely did not bring any unaccustomed looks to Anna's face but I suspected there was something between her and this Jones guy.

"Don't you have security duties?" I asked her. "What with the queen here and all?"

"You are my security duty, Mister McFee," she informed me. "You are as likely to be an assassination target as Lisi."

Was I? I hadn't thought much about it. Just enough to continue carrying my gun. "But there are those who might try to attack her?"

"As a symbol," said Jones. "The queen is not important so much, otherwise."

"A symbol of the Alliance," Anna added.

Errol took an interest. "I'd like to hear more on that thought."

"So would I," I admitted, despite myself. I wasn't far removed from the student I'd been. Maybe I wasn't removed at all.

Anna considered a few moments before laying out a fairly pithy view of the topic, more so than one of my erudite instructors might have presented. "Even as there are Janics who oppose the Alliance and want to join with Burkut, there are Thuleans who feel Janus took us into a war that was not our own. They too would end the alliance and, moreover, see the monarchy as an emblem of it."

Which it pretty obviously was. No point in saying that.

"Either group might consider the queen a target, whether in an attempt to sow further dissension or simply as a statement."

"Or from pure hatred and frustration," said Jitha Jones, rather quietly.

"Very true," agreed Errol. "We've seen enough of it in our relationship with the Seven."

"Maybe Thule would be as well off as a nonaligned system," said Elsa. "There are others that remain independent, aren't there?"

"Boethius, Alice, Resnovae, all fairly nearby. Others sprinkled through inhabited space."

"But they are at risk who stand alone," Jitha noted. "The balance between the associations and alliances keeps them safe."

"And those do exist," I added. "A fact of life for everybody and every system."

Errol felt he had to tell everyone, "Jack may be a diplomat after the war."

"Maybe sooner than that," I said. "There's Tarmo."

"And Lisi coming in behind. Should we invite her to have a beer with us?" asked Anna.

"I think she intends to have a beer with her daughter." Sure enough, she sat down with Vilma. I hadn't even noticed the girl was in the place. Tarmo took up a position. So did a couple other individuals. Of the queen's entourage there was no sign.

There would have been room for them. The canteen was fairly empty even for mid-watch. A servbot had brought beers to queen and princess before Lisi noticed us. She waved Tarmo to her and talked about something a while before sending him our way.

"The queen asks if she can join you," he reported and smirked. "I think she is just a little star-struck by the famous Colonel McFee."

"What?" I said. "Daunted by the daring hero of a hundred space battles, who designs new combat craft in his spare time and still finds time to write home to Mom? Tell her to come on over."

My cousin gave me a dirty look but no one objected to the invitation. "I thought you weren't as bad as your brother," Errol whispered, "but I was wrong. You're worse."

Both Lisi and Vili came. We slid over to give them space. I was assured it would be bad form to show them any particular respect. "Whatever you do, don't stand up," hissed Anna.

I would have stood up for Anna if she'd been the one coming to my table. That just seems like good manners to me. Or to any Scotian, maybe.

Tarmo sat down with us too. "I have met some of you already," said the queen. "I am sure you know my daughter, Jack."

Both of us professed to ignorance. "You serve together and don't know each other? How strange." I should have blamed it on Anna keeping me busy, but before I could she continued. "Well, now you do," Lisi said and went on to introductions to everyone else.

There was about time for one beer before Tarmo gave a sign that our royal drinker needed to be on her way. She hugged her daughter

and pushed her back down in her seat. "You stay," said Lisi and followed her security detail to her next destination.

But an awkward minute later, Anna nudged me and showed me a message on her wrist-top. It was from Lisi. *Vili is shy. Tell Jack to be nice to her.*

I had assumed we'd all be nice to her. With shy people the best way was to not direct attention to them. Just let them be as much a part of the group as they were comfortable with.

"How is M doing?" I asked Errol.

"He's being rude and dismissive to everyone who tries to deal with him. When he is willing to speak with them at all."

"Ah, that's my boy." The conversation then turned to M and my own recent exploits. I figured if Errol had anything to say on future exploits I'd hear them tomorrow.

"So M is in for maintenance while we sent Jack back here," Errol was saying. "The craft and the AI are both in excellent condition, but M is being rather brusque with his new pilot. Pilots. We've tried out a couple now and he says they are both idiots."

"I like M," said Elsa. "Even if he disparaged my engineering."

"He did?" asked Vili, finally sliding a very small wedge into the conversation. "I thought you were a great engineer."

"No, Vili. Errol here is a great engineer. I'm just a pretty damn good mechanic."

The girl giggled. I may have snickered. End of watch was approaching and we all supposedly had places to be.

CHAPTER 29

"We know each other now. Your mother said so." I hadn't seen Vili in uniform before. Now I could see her rank—sergeant. If I took her home I could make her salute me.

"I already knew who you were." That seemed to be all she was willing to say.

"And I guess I can say the same. You're going on duty?" We had been moving the same direction in the same hall. I'd have to turn shortly. I could actually find my way now from my quarters to Anna's Armory, as I styled it in my head.

She nodded. "I—I got to move your ship a couple times. Is it as smart as they say?"

I could have asked who said it. That would perhaps have been counterproductive to nurturing our friendship. "The smartest ship I've ever known." Which wasn't actually saying much. "You know someone planted a tracker on it here," I informed her. "In theory, you're a suspect. You were close to my ship."

"But not to the one that was blown up, right? I wasn't stationed here yet. So you may take me off your list, Mister McFee."

"Ah, yes. I'll cross you off at once. I take a left here. Off for more lessons in, um, station management."

"As if anyone believes that." And with those words, our paths parted.

Errol was gone again. Like my brother, he had a war to fight. He was also on the Gallens' minds. Both Anna and Tarmo were waiting for me.

"We want to talk to you about your cousin," said Anna.

"And his intentions toward our friend." They didn't have to say Elsa's name. "You know she's, um, taken with him."

"Smitten."

"In love," said I. "Yeah, I know. What's stranger is that he seems to be also." I had to think on things a moment before trying to say anything more. I'd still be likely to blunder. "That's something new, at least in my experience. Errol has always had a certain charm, I guess. Lots of women are—um, rather taken with him? Maybe not the word I want. But they like him. As far as I know, he's never taken advantage of that fact. He likes to keep people at a certain distance, you know."

Tarmo looked knowingly at Anna. "That's the sort of thing I heard when I checked around. Impersonal relationships. Never a serious girlfriend, and he's not exactly a kid anymore." There might have been a little embarrassment in his smile. "I wondered if maybe he liked men better."

"I never did," stated Anna. "He certainly *looked* at me the way I would expect a straight man to. The way Jack does."

Tarmo scowled ferociously at me. I ignored him and went on. "Errol's very focused on himself and his own goals. I think he wouldn't allow himself the distraction of a serious relationship. Which makes the current one all the more surprising, doesn't it?"

"Considering how busy he is," said Tarmo.

"When the right woman comes along, some men recognize it," said Anna. "And let nothing else get in the way."

I had to chuckle a little. "His latest project to focus on."

"Well, let's hope he doesn't lose interest. We'll trust him for now and not take him down a tube to an empty hangar. Now, let's get to your lessons. Today we learn about knives."

"I'll have the medics standing by," promised Tarmo as he passed out into the hall.

We sparred with blunt weapons so I only had bruises, not cuts, nor did I lose any body parts, though I feared for an eye once. I think I learned some things. Like not to try to match large strong women up close but to stay back and watch for my opportunities. I actually found one or two.

More fun was throwing. I think I might have actually impressed Anna a little. She said I had to be on her darts team in the next tournament. She also chose to issue me a suitable hideaway knife.

A full watch of training was enough at one time. We rarely ran that long and usually cut out early, having no strict schedule to adhere to. So today, Anna and I both headed for the canteen at the end of it. Perhaps not surprisingly, Vili was headed the same way at the same time, going off duty. She gave the two of us a curious look but said nothing.

"Wondering who won the fight?" asked Anna.

"Oh, I'm sure you always win," the girl replied.

"For now." That surprised me. Gallen had hopes I'd improve that much?

"I'm getting better at fighting dirty. I think that's going to be my specialty."

"Mister McFee does not lie. He is not inclined to fight fair."

"That seems, um, sensible if you're really fighting." Vili looked from one of us to the other to see if we agreed.

Anna assured her it was quite sensible. "The thing," she said, "is not to let your opponent suspect you plan to cheat as soon as you think it's truly worthwhile."

"Surprise him?"

"Or her. That's the idea," I said. "Even confident and highly competent people can get over confident."

"Or cocky, in Mister McFee's case."

"I do wish you'd stop calling me that."

Vili giggled. "The whole station is. We've never had a Planetary Defender in residence before."

"Planetary Guard," I corrected her. "Though I guess I'm also a System Defender. Not that I've ever heard anyone use the term."

"Do you really have a completely different set of ranks?"

"You'd be a petty officer." I looked at her insignia. "Third class."

Petty officer was an English word and I hadn't attempted to translate it to Lingo. I was a little surprised when Vili said, "A little officer? That sounds much nicer than non-commissioned."

"You speak English?" asked Anna. I guess she was surprised too.

"And a bunch of other languages. But I can't match your M! Captain Alander told me he knows thousands."

"I'm surprised you're being used as a tug captain," said Anna Gallen.

"It's what I wanted. I couldn't take being a translator or diplomatic aide. It would kill me! Flying my little tug around is just fine."

I think for the first time I actually felt more than a casual interest in Vilma Lempsen, Thulean Princess.

"You know why my mom thought we should be friends?" she asked, maybe a tad hesitantly.

"She recognized the outstanding character that went with my good looks?" I hazarded.

"Hmm, I'll have to ask her about that. But we're the youngest two military serving here. Both just turned eighteen."

"Jack is the youngest ever to be awarded the Bothnia," Anna added.

"Oh, is he? You know the medal is supposed to remind foreigners like you of the skies of Thule when you are far away. Or so it is claimed."

"I'm afraid I've never seen the skies of Thule from that angle."

"We will have to take you down sometime," said Anna. Then she sighed. "It might not be until after the war." To Vili she said, "Tarmo got to see the skies of Scotia from Jack's home. They are very blue, he says."

I might never have looked up from the surface of Thule but I knew the skies there had something of a greenish tinge. "My dress uniform is the color of Scotia's skies," I informed them. "Not this gray I've been wearing."

Something started beeping, loudly. "Security alert," announced Anna. "We haven't had one in ages. Since before either of you arrived."

"What's it mean?" asked Vili.

"No telling. But it's never good."

CHAPTER 30

What it meant was that there might be fighting. A raid or an invasion or attack or whatever word you might prefer. Not necessarily initiated by the other side. This might have cut my training short, but not by much.

"We need to spend some time with firearms," Anna informed me at our next meeting, and led the way to the armory.

"We played with that one the last time I was down here." I pointed toward the double-barreled unit.

"Yeah, Ilmar told me. That's more a police weapon. The versions with shoulder stocks are more practical." She waved an arm in what I figured was their direction. "Maybe we'll let you shoot one of those. You *should* practice some with a beam weapon. Really, you should familiarize yourself with as many different models as you can, but we haven't the time for that."

"Is anything more practical than what I've been carrying?"

"In a gun battle on a planet surface you would start thinking it was pretty impractical. You'd be wanting something with more range. Or suppose you had to fight outside your ship."

"Beam weapon?" That two-barreled unit seemed like a better choice now.

"Generally yes. But fighting in space is pretty rare."

"Marines do try to board enemy vessels sometimes." Usually to take possession of a freighter, not a combat craft.

"So do pirates, but you're neither one. Though—" She stopped to give me a rather long look. "There is no telling what you might be called on to do, one of these days."

I hoped she was wrong about that. "What I think we need is to find you something smaller than the C-119 yet more versatile. An all-around easily concealed weapon."

A spy's weapon. Anna didn't say it but I knew what she meant. We tried out some models and I couldn't say one was much better than another. Nor than my C-119. Would they want that back if I were issued something different? It was Thule's gun, after all, not mine nor Scotia's. Janic-Thule's. I should remember to say that properly.

I was peppering a target with one of them when Elsa came in. "Come to shoot with us?" I called to her. "Lieutenant Gallen has reserved the range for the entire watch."

"The Captain is more interested in their design than she is in shooting them," said Anna. "She loves clever gadgets."

"Perhaps so," admitted the engineer, "but neither is my reason for visiting. I have just heard a Scotian carrier arrived in the system. Errol is commanding."

Anna showed no surprise. "There may be more ships coming."

"It's likely. And you have orders, Jack. Check your commie."

Like Errol, I preferred to carry a hand-held communicator rather than a wrist-top. The message was brief. I was to take a flight back to Scotia and collect M. Further orders when I got there.

"It looks like my training sessions are at an end," I announced.

"For now. Do you like that gun?" I only shrugged. "Very well," sighed Anna. "Stick with your 119 for now. But I am going to find you something better—and you will like it."

In the hall, I nearly ran into a hurrying Vilma. "What's the rush?" I asked, falling in beside her. I'd get to Scotia when I got to Scotia.

"Your cousin is going to be docking. I may get to run one of the tugs." A pause before adding, "If not I'd like to watch it."

I might myself. I wondered what he was flying. Vili was moving fast, without actually running. Her legs were longer than her mother's. Maybe she took after her dad.

"Too late," someone called to her as we entered the appropriate hangar. "They're already bringing him in." A group of techs and pilots were watching the ship being nudged sideways into the space, on the large screen.

"What is that?" asked Vili. "I don't recognize it."

"W-5C. Errol's personal favorite fighter." He'd have flown it in from the carrier, wherever it was out there. And maybe more ships coming. They might be assembling a fleet. "It has the more powerful Ganesh main drive, instead of the usual Regal."

"They don't build those anymore, do they?" asked a man standing near us.

"Replaced by the D type. Colonel McFee can fly pretty much whatever he wants, though."

I whispered to Vili, "He won't have time to talk to me, and I have orders to head to Scotia. I need to collect my kit and be on my way."

I couldn't read her expression. At least she wasn't happy I was going. "I hope I see you again."

"I hope so too," I admitted.

"I'll walk with you to your quarters." She seemed uncertain. "I promised my friend I'd meet her but she can wait."

We passed into one of the main corridors, crowded with folk moving both directions. I thought of asking Vili to detour to the canteen with

me, to share a drink before I had to take off. No, I should be on my way. We could do that later.

I noted a small man, dark but with dirty-blond hair, step out of a side passage and parallel us. Sometimes he was a little ahead, sometimes a little behind. He would sneak a glimpse of us now and again. I put it down to my fame.

All right, I really put it down to the fact I was walking beside a princess. People were curious about her.

The crowd began to thin, jostle us less. Vili leaned in and whispered, "That man shouldn't be in the military section. He's a civilian."

I had seen plenty of civilians here. "We drank with one not long ago," I pointed out. "Jitha Jones."

"There wasn't a security alert then. The rules are strictly enforced. You should go arrest him!" She apparently wasn't taking it very seriously as a security breach. It wasn't really in her job description.

"Only if he invades Scotia. That's what the Planetary Guard does." What was the guy doing here? White coveralls. No markings—but a suspicious outline under those coveralls, over by the left arm. A weapon. I could recognize that.

I should have noticed sooner. I might not have if he hadn't kept turning slightly toward us. That was one of the lessons Anna had taught—where to watch for concealed weapons, how to recognize them. Almost no one but us was in the hall now.

There was a side corridor just ahead. "Get ready for the unexpected," I told my companion. As soon as we reached it, I pushed her aside and went for my gun.

The would-be attacker reacted more quickly than I had expected. He lunged forward and drove a fist to my stomach. My 119, not yet leveled, went flying, skidding across the floor. So did I. Or at least I fell on my rump. I could see him drawing his own weapon. For some

reason, the question as to which of was his intended target flashed through my mind.

Vili careened into the man. It didn't do any damage but it kept him from shooting either of us immediately. I didn't even think of trying to retrieve my own gun. My hand found my knife, locked the blade, and I threw, all in one motion. Then I looked for my errant weapon.

I didn't need it. Our assailant was bent over, clutching his abdomen. Blood seeped through his fingers as he sank to his knees. Not much of it. I had aimed for his midsection, the largest and softest target. Yeah, I know the hero of a popular adventure story would have put the knife into an eye or at least the throat.

Vili waited till I was on my feet before saying, "Mom's going to have to give you another medal. Maybe the Gustave this time."

"You too. I think maybe you saved my life." I still wondered which of us had been the intended target.

People came running, of course, and security not far behind. The wounded man was bundled off to the infirmary. I doubted he was going to die.

"This shouldn't delay your departure any," Tarmo Gallen told me, after we gave him a brief account, still standing there in the corridor. "Sergeant Lempsen can fill in any details but I do expect a full report from you. Write it on your trip." He reached out to shake my hand. "Now get going."

I could only give Vili a wave and hurry away.

CHAPTER 31

"I learned what sort of ships followed us to Nevada," M informed me. "Your brother identified them at once."

"He would. So what were they?"

"Jong-Vergara Aztecas. I like the way the Aigleans give names to their ship models. We should do that."

We? "Like Spy Master? Or does that refer to you?"

"Me and the ship and all the equipment together. Not that anyone said so. That's just how I understood it." He seemed to be thinking of something for a moment. Did AIs really do that or was it only for effect? M might not be certain himself. "I like M better. That is just me."

The trip home had been uneventful, for once. I even wrote out the report Tarmo wanted and sent it back on a courier ship. My orders had taken me directly to Fundy and M, and now we were out on a shakedown flight. No jumps, just checking everything out. But I did slide on my head band after a while to see if the Garda was working properly. As much as I could without actually jumping.

I looked toward the closest stars around the Group. No problem targeting them. One lay near the edge of the Wall. Then I looked into the Wall itself. Could I make out suns that lay on the other side? I was tempted to try it. Not today and not from here. I'd want to jump closer first. Ha, Freneau had never done it from this side. I'd be the first!

"Everything seems to be working great," I told M. "I hear you didn't get along well with the other pilots who took you out."

"Fools," he calmly stated. "Except your brother. He's all right but he didn't know how to use the jump drive."

Brendon could barely manage a Li Drive and that didn't require management at all. "We all have different gifts," I said.

"Hmmp. Some have more of them than others. Are we going to go on a mission, Jack?"

"Not right away. I'm going to have to leave you for a couple days and visit home." And maybe go through a briefing or two. "Too bad I can't take you there."

The Nativ could not enter atmosphere, of course. Its vacuum-cooled engines would overheat very quickly and the mass of the drive element would make the ship near impossible to handle near a planet the size of Scotia. Maybe the AI could be transferred to a different ship one of these days. I headed back to the station and guided the ship into its hangar myself. No need for tugs with its fine controls.

I found Brendon waiting for me. "I didn't call a taxi," was my greeting.

"The other cabbies said they would have nothing to do with you," he replied. "Something about being a miserly tipper. I've already got your gear loaded. We're heading straight home."

We moved down the narrow perimeter walkway toward another docking tube. "All well with M?"

"Just fine. He says he likes you. Grudgingly."

"I'm about the only one. I think we're stuck with you and your M as partners."

"Won't that be complicated, long-term? I mean, don't they belong to Group Force? I'd think that would be a problem unless they could be transferred." Or I could. I'd rather not go that way.

"In fact, they're the property of the intelligence ministry. You're working for Dad, sort of. Here we are."

In we went. Oh. Mom's boat again. At least it was comfortable.

"All your communications and deliveries have been forwarded to the Downs," said Brendon. "More secure, not that most of them are at all secret."

Sergeant Boutade was lounging in one of the command chairs. Master Sergeant Giles Boutade, more precisely. I was paying more attention to ranks these days, while still considering them unimportant. Did Giles know how to pilot? I wouldn't be surprised.

But he relinquished the chair to me. I figured it would be polite to ride there and talk to my brother. To be sure, he mostly talked about the craft he was currently flying. He was quite taken with the latest Gali fighter we were importing from the Corvans. He'd liked the last one too.

No one was home at Dummit Downs except Nira, and she and Brendon disappeared pretty quickly. I went to my room and looked over my communications. Some official but mostly outdated. A message from Tarmo Gallen. I read down the page.

Vili Lempsen has been sent home. It was decided it was too dangerous for her here. She was awarded a medal before shipping out, largely on the basis of your report of the incident. You're getting one too, a military medal, not one from the queen. It's just going to be sent along to you. Someone there can pin it on you.

Hmm, no medals among the stuff that had come for me.

We've managed to get some information from the man you knifed. Nothing that can be shared with you right now but know that it is worthwhile. I'm glad you didn't kill him.

It wasn't for lack of trying, Tarmo. There was nothing else of importance in the message until I got near the end.

Your cousin has asked Elsa Alander to marry him. She assented. No date set for a wedding but you had better be there. I hold you

responsible for getting the two together. Incidentally, the colonel says he's likely to call you back here soon.

I wondered if the rest of the McFees knew about this. If not, I wasn't planning to be the one to tell them. Vili. I wasn't going to see her at the station when I got back. If I got back. Whatever.

I went through the rest of the messages. Nothing at all important. A congratulations on my medal from someone in some ministry. I wasn't sure if it was for the first or second one. Maybe I could get another promotion out of it! Lieutenant Commander Jack McFee had a nice ring to it.

I should have an updated uniform. I might even have one already. Hadn't I been issued something? I hadn't looked. Nothing among the clothes in my room. "Miss House," I asked, "do I have a dress uniform anywhere in this place? Or even a regular one?"

"Just those cadet grays you've been wearing, Jack. We've been waiting for you to be here long enough for a fitting."

Maybe I would be this time. I wasn't counting on it. "Thanks."

"I'll send the tailor to you right now," she said.

"A bot?"

"Yes. Did you want a human?"

"No, no. A bot will do fine."

"You've put on weight," she went on, "and are more muscular. Otherwise, we could have used your old patterns. You might even—" There was a moment's pause. I was not sure why until she went on. "Yes, you're a quarter inch taller too. That makes a difference with a finely tailored outfit."

A couple minutes later, the robot tailor was at my door, a squat little fellow with four long triple-jointed arms. I wondered if he actually

made the clothes or just took the measurements. He'd probably tell me if I asked but I didn't bother him as he did his job. In ten minutes he had everything he needed. Even shoe size.

"Be sure to include some new grays for me too," I called after him. I kind of preferred those most of the time, whether they were strictly regulation or not.

Then I laid down and took a nap in the peace of my own home.

CHAPTER 32

"A kilt?" I hadn't expected that. Nor to have a full complement of uniforms within two hours.

"Yes, sir," said the tailor. "That's not strictly a Planetary Guard bit of kit, but part of the System Defense dress uniform. A different pattern for each planet."

I had recognized it as the colors of my Scotian home planet, for the most part a gray and blue plaid that wasn't too bad. "The kilt with your gray jacket is considered suitable semi-dress for System Defense officers," House informed me. "Why don't you wear them this evening?"

Why not indeed? I got myself into the uniform. It did fit very nicely. "Quite an excellent look, sir," the tailor told me. I think he was rather proud of it. "I'll be on my way. Let me know if you need anything more."

"He's more typically making jumpsuits for farm workers," said Miss House when he had whirred out of my suite. "It's nice to let him turn his hand to this sort of thing from time to time."

There were gray stockings to match and the charcoal-colored soft low boots Planetaries wore most of the time. No sign of dress boots. They might take longer to make. A turtleneck shirt, deep blue, and then the dove-gray jacket, flared a bit but nothing like those ostentatious ones the Force wore. I clipped on my lieutenant's insignia. The cap? No sense in wearing that but on a whim, I popped the tam Errol had given me onto my head.

I wasn't sure it matched the rest of the uniform but my cousin had assured me it was regulation. Maybe I should wear it to his wedding.

Mom was in the lounge with Nira and Brendon. Sergeant Giles too. "Here he is," said Boutade, "and already dressed for the ceremony."

"I hope you are getting some pictures, Miss House," said Mom. "I'll have to send them to all my friends. Now you," she said, turning her attention to me. "This was delivered to Guard HQ and they sent it over to me, with a note saying they're proud of you even if they haven't seen you yet."

"I'd just as soon keep it that way," I muttered.

"No doubt. House, is there appropriate music?"

A band struck up some sort of march. Mom made a gesture to lower the volume a bit. "Lieutenant Jack McFee, step forward."

I avoided all temptations to act inappropriately. "Mister McFee, it is my honor to award you the Janic-Thulean Medal of Valor," she said, and pinned it on my jacket. Right next to the Order of Bothnia. "Congratulations, my son." She kissed me and said, "Let's eat."

The Valor was about half the size of the big Bothnian moon, diamond-shaped and gold-colored, on a deep red ribbon. The inscription was in Lingo and said, simply enough, 'for valor,' with four embossed stars in the corners. The four systems of the Janic-Thule Alliance, undoubtedly.

I took off my tam before we sat down to dinner. It was hot. The air was warmer here than what I had started to grow accustomed to on Thule Station. I understand Thule itself is chilly compared to Scotia. I would have to visit, I decided, and maybe say hello to Vili. And gaze up at Bothnia floating by in the turquoise sky. Did it appear as large as Georgie? I would find out.

A guest sat on the deck in the morning, drinking coffee with Mom. Of Brendon there was no sign. "Come out here, Jack," called my mother. "You need to meet someone."

The someone was a big disheveled man with a light brown beard and deep-set eyes. "This is Robert Douglas," she said as I took a seat. "One of our sub-ministers."

"Let me guess—he's in charge of espionage."

He raised a shaggy eyebrow at me. Mom politely refrained from snickering. "You might say something like that," admitted Douglas. "It's probably best not to."

"Forget I said it. If you insist, I can shoot the witness." I smiled beatifically at Mom.

Ignoring me, he said, "Your mother thinks we should officially attach you to the diplomatic service. In essence, you are working for them and the intelligence ministry now."

"Then why change the arrangement?" I asked. I'd just gotten hold of a spiffy new uniform, after all!

"It could get you into more places," Mom pointed out.

"The military rank has its own advantages," said Douglas. "It's a good cover for other things."

"And he doesn't have to give it up," argued Mom. "He can be a military attache of some sort." She turned to me. "There's a lot more to this war than Thule, you know. You're talented, Jack, and we could use you in all sorts of places."

"Without me flying dangerous missions?" I thought maybe that was the heart of it.

"I'll admit that has a role. It's bad enough that Brendon is a fighter pilot."

Robert Douglas gave me a long looking over. "I dare say the lad likes those dangerous missions."

What, me? No way. "I like operating on my own, making my decisions far from everyone else," I said. That was certainly the truth, at least as I saw it.

The man nodded. "He's perfectly suited to those recon missions. You know that, Alice. You've seen the psychological evaluations."

Mom sighed. "And lived with him."

"I can do the diplomat thing after the war, Mom," I told her. "And after college."

"I'll hold you to that, Jack. We're still going to make use of you, of course."

"And your talents," added Douglas. "We would like you to make contact with the Corvan agent on the Thulean station when you get back."

"Jitha?"

"You have met Jitha Jones?"

"We've drank together." Only the once but it had happened. And most of Jitha's attention had been on Anna Gallen. "I assumed he did some spying, considering how chummy he is with Tarmo Gallen."

"We would also advise you to be careful with the Gallens. Thulean interests are not always Scotian interests."

"And here I was thinking of proposing to Anna." A servbot brought my coffee and some biscuits. "By the way," I said, turning to Mom, "Errol has proposed to her friend Elsa. I think I should be the best man."

"Just the occasion for your new uniform."

"It's probably common gossip on Thule Station by now." To Douglas I said, "I bet Jones knows all about it."

The big man laughed. "If he does, he hasn't shared it with us. As he didn't share having met you."

"We do have a Scotian consul on that station, don't we?" asked Mom.

"Not in any way connected to intelligence," replied Douglas, "in any sense of the word."

"So we depend on the Thuleans and Corvans to know what's going on. Maybe it is good to have Jack there. For a while." Mom gave me a sidelong look. "And you can send us reports. You should be writing your dear mother from time to time."

"Excellent idea. We'll suggest that to the military," agreed Douglas. "I think they will go along with it."

"Except maybe my nephew. I believe he sees Jack as his own special project."

"It was your other son who started me on this path," I reminded her. Brendon had gotten me listed as a test pilot. Brendon had suggested that first long-range mission.

"The two of them have always been terribly competitive with each other. They're as likely to fight over you as anything else."

I hated to admit it but Mom was right. Maybe I would be better off working for—whom? Her? This Robert Douglas? For that matter, Dad was high up in the Ministry of Information, which included intelligence. Too high up for any hands-on with me.

Better the pair of devils I knew.

By afternoon I had received orders to report with my Nativ ship to Thule. They came directly from Colonel Errol McFee.

I only took my new grays along.

CHAPTER 33

Three carriers and a pair of jump-equipped heavy cruisers had come together in the Thulean system. This in itself was no great deal; fighting ships passed through with some frequency. But everyone knew this little fleet intended to launch an attack somewhere.

"It's intended as a lesson to the Sevens for violating Nevada neutrality," one pilot told me. Many had a few hours of leave on the station at one time or another. "They chased a civil ship of ours into their space, I understand, and were shooting at it."

I'd heard something similar. But no one was sure this fleet was aimed at a system in the Federation of Seven. It could be poised to jump anywhere. Or several somewheres. The ships could all have different targets. What was certain was the enemy knew it was here by now and was worrying about it.

It might have been sitting here purely as a deterrent for all I knew. Errol certainly told me nothing. Just to be prepared for action. M and I waited at the station, not with his fleet. And yes, it was Errol's fleet, under his command, whatever his official rank. Of that no one had any doubt.

I sort of resumed my lessons with Anna, but not with the urgency of before. They were not so much lessons as sparring sessions and target practice. Not always with her. People looked at me a little differently since my last exploit here. There was more respect. Too much respect. I had rescued a princess and was not going to be able to live it down.

So it went for a couple days, and then three. All I heard of Vilma Lempsen was that she was working in records of some sort on the planet surface. I had hoped they would at least let her operate heavy machinery. I decided to make a call on Jitha Jones.

He welcomed me to his office, a small space above the lobby over in the civilian section. They had stairs over there, where there was enough gravity for them to be useful. "Some organizations would call me a consul," he said, leaning back in his tall rolling chair. "Your own Scotians would. We Corvans eschew that sort of, um, governmentalism. We consider ourselves a trade organization before all else, so an agent of the Corvan League of Traders I am officially."

"But it comes to the same thing," I said.

"So indeed. You have come not to talk of trade, I think."

"More of the things that happen on this station. You keep an eye on them, I know, and are friend to others who do the same."

"Ah, if you mean the fair Anna, she has already moved on. What hope had a skinny Corvan bureaucrat with such a goddess?" He sighed deeply. I didn't completely buy it.

"I was thinking more of her brother."

"Not my type!" He chuckled but immediately sobered. "Is the Princess Vilma your type, Jack?"

That took me by surprise. His intention, probably. "Um, Vili and I became friends, I think. She's a princess, though, you know. Her mother's the queen of all these Thuleans. Janic-Thuleans." I knew how incredibly lame I was sounding.

"You're practically a prince on your home world. Don't sell yourself short, Jack McFee." He abruptly changed directions. "Did Captain Gallen tell you what they learned of your would-be assassin?"

"That he was an Ursan. Not much more." The Ursans were a neutral group but one whose goals frequently meshed with those of the Aigleans. "I wouldn't think the Ursans would have much interest in what went on here."

"So we might guess he was a hired professional, might not we?"

"I suppose. Hired by whom? And, um, for what end?"

He scrutinized my face for a moment, trying to read me. I was having trouble reading myself just then. "You are not sure he just intended to kill the girl."

"It seems the most likely thing, doesn't it? But maybe he intended to kidnap her. Maybe even I was his target."

"Kidnapping would be difficult," he stated. "Not impossible. But why?"

I could only shrug. Jitha stared at me a few seconds before leaning forward on his elbows. "I do think that you were the target is completely possible. The girl he might not even have known. You have upset people, Jack, and as I said, you are a prince of sorts yourself. A tempting target."

I didn't like that. I wished I was out with M being shot at for sensible reasons. "Maybe it's best people think Vili was the target."

"Absolutely. And well it could be true. Either way, the question remains as to who hired the man and why."

"Sevens? Janics? There are all sorts of possibilities."

"Not to mention the Aigleans themselves. They are known to use Ursan operatives." A half-smile. "To us known."

"They would like to disrupt Thule and this station." I pondered this but a second. "But they wouldn't care about me, would they?"

"I would not think so. If they are working through local factions, that doesn't matter."

"I think I am going to leave here more confused than I came," I confessed.

Jitha nodded, smiling. "That is good. You are far too smug a young man most of the time."

I rose. I figured we were done for now. "With good reason, I should let you know."

"Ha! Indeed so. But you will learn much yet, I think." Jones rose as well. "We should maintain contact and it needn't be through Tarmo Gallen."

"Agreed," was all I had to say right then.

On returning to my quarters I found a message that had chased me all the way to Scotia and back here before catching up. It was from Vili Lempsen.

I don't know where your are, it began. Mom told me to write to your home on Scotia and it would get to you. You have a mom too. I hope she doesn't read your mail.

Any mail that came through to us was probably read by someone before we got it. It was wartime. Whether Mom read it was another question. Maybe if an underling thought it worth her attention.

They gave me the Medal of Valor! You too, right? I would rather have my old job back. Now I am routing records here and there all day. It is terribly boring. When the war is over I hope I can wake my mind back up. I'm going to go to university but I might need to go somewhere else first, all by myself, and think about important things!

This was followed by a mind-numbing account of her job. I'd want to go somewhere else too. There was no reference to our incident in the hall, aside from her mention of the medal. That was good. We'd both acquitted ourselves pretty well and there was no reason to dwell on it.

Some stuff about her family. Oh, she was living at home now. Well guarded, I would guess, but Vili had nothing to say of that. I could write to her there but I had to use a special code because she got lots and lots of fan mail, being a princess and all. She didn't really

understand why girls wrote her asking silly questions. And guys proposed almost every day.

If you have the chance write to me. I know you might be out there jumping from star to star. That's something I'd like to learn. You'll have to teach me, you and me and M reaching out to a distant sun and bam, there we are! That's how it works, right? That's what one of the pilots told me. Luck and good wishes to you from her Royal Highness, Princess Vilma Arjan-Lempsen of Thule and the Janic-Thule Alliance. I could add more to that but I think that's enough, huh? ~ Vili

I should be able to talk to her directly now I was at the station. I suspected Vili might prefer writing. So I started to write out an account of my own boring events since we last saw each other, and where to write me now, and all that. As soon as I started, I got to thinking I should write to my mother. Perhaps she should also have given me a special code, if she wanted serious reports on what was going on here. I wasn't sure what I should include in what was supposed to be a letter home nor how private it would be.

I'd worry about that later. I turned my attention back to what I was writing Vili.

I intend to go to college after the war too. Where exactly, I do not know. I used to think one of the great Corvan universities but now I'm not so sure. Nor of what I'll study. Maybe history.

Errol went to school right there on Thule. Engineering was his passion then and you have one of the best schools for that in the universe. But he's taught himself loads of stuff about just about everything since. I am definitely not going to study engineering!

Who knows, I went on—though I wasn't sure I should—maybe we could end up at the same school. We'll have to wait for this war to end to figure any of that out.

I signed off with that. I also included a couple pictures Mom had sent of her pinning my medal on me.

Then I had to think about what I should write to her.

CHAPTER 34

"Our fleet may end up acting more as a decoy than anything else. Not that we do not have valid targets in mind." I was only mildly interested in all this until Errol asked, "Do you think you could jump from here to 2746?"

"Directly?" I'd given it thought, admittedly. "I think so. But what could my little ship do there?"

"You would leave M and the Nativ here, and pilot one of our machines. We can install a Garda unit, in parallel with the Li Drive. General Freneau thinks you would have a better chance of making such a jump with it."

"I think she is right. A carrier?" I wouldn't actually be piloting it, I knew, just making the jumps and leaving the rest to more experienced hands.

"More likely one of the cruisers. We'll be making our final decision any time now. You'll need to stand ready." There was a rather long pause. "If you want to do it. You're not Group Force, and you've had no training in combat. Just about everyone has other things in mind for you."

Whether he knew that would make me obstinate about making my own choices, I'm not sure. But it did. "I'm willing," I stated. Now I would have to, well, stand ready. In the comfort of Thule Station, fortunately.

I had sent an ordinary newsy sort of letter to Mom. If she wanted more details—not to mention top-secret secrets—she'd have to let me know. Not that I had any to share. Despite having another talk with Jitha Jones.

"We know there are agents of the other side on this station," he had said. I could only nod agreement to that. We sat at a table in one of the two drinking spots over in the civil section. They had Scotian beer. "Agents and saboteurs. Have you given any thought to who has easy access?" he asked. "Access to information? Access to you?"

"To me?"

"You have been near the center of much of what has happened lately. Beginning with the destruction of your ship."

"There are an awful lot of repair personnel who come and go without much scrutiny," I answered. "And other support, too, but it would have to be someone with access to a coffin or a work suit." Was there anything I could add to that? "In theory, someone could even come around the outside of the station from over here."

"That would be chancy."

True. I doubted anyone would depend on it as a plan. Though maybe whoever blew up the W-4—yeah, I could see that. A rash action when none more practical had presented itself.

"Elsa Alander has very good access," said Jones. "Plenty of opportunities too she has had."

It was preposterous. "But the attacks. She was in danger."

"Was she? You don't know she was a target."

Could she have feigned they were targeted at her when they were really aimed at me, at Errol? "She was caught in the bombing of my ship."

Jadith shrugged. "A miscalculation? Or one hand not knowing what the other was doing." He plowed on. "She is certainly privy to sensitive info. Her relationship with Errol McFee could be pretense, for the purpose of using him."

Now there he definitely lost me. I was completely convinced Elsa was in love with my cousin. But I remembered her remarks about Thule maybe being better off as an independent system. "I will be leaving confused again," I told Jitha Jones.

"And as before, this I consider a good thing." I didn't much like the smug little smile he gave me. "Do not take my remarks about the lovely Elsa as an accusation. I just want you to think about things. Do not be too trusting of anyone."

Especially Corvans, I told myself. Chances were he knew I was thinking it.

I had gone and talked to M after that. I'd found myself doing that more lately. Maybe it was really just a way of talking to myself and hashing things out in my mind. "I don't believe that of Elsa either," M said, with considerable vehemence. He liked Captain Alander.

"It's too bad you can't keep an eye out yourself," I said. "How did you miss the installation of that tracker?"

"I can't see everything. And I might have been asleep."

I understood that. An AI like M needed sleep just like a biological brain. Something akin to sleep, anyway. "But wouldn't you have been awakened? You have alarms, right?"

"Not if the intruders were careful. They would have to know I was on a sleep cycle too."

I couldn't help thinking Captain Alander would have that knowledge. Aw, so could a lot of other people. "And nothing is recorded, I suppose." I muttered that to myself rather than to M.

"Control might have noted something. Let me check. Yes, there was an adjustment to the starboard engine at 2:28 of the day we launched for Scotia. That's really all I have, Jack. No details, just a log."

“It’s more than we had before.” Despite cautions from here and there, I decided this should be shared with Tarmo Gallen. He was as pessimistic of it being useful as I was but, as I had said, it was more than we had before. That M hadn’t thought of offering it before did not bother either of us. It was just the way of AIs sometimes.

If anyone had noted it at Fundy Station—and there was no guarantee it had even been checked—they must not have realized it had any significance. One of many entries in the log.

The day after I’d spoken with Errol, I was called to his fleet. Or more accurately, a runner-sized machine had shown up and requested me, without out any messaging ahead. I was bundled aboard and off we went, quickly. I hadn’t needed to see the machine in the hangar screen to know it was a W-5D when I boarded, one of the standard fighter types and a pretty fast one. The two man crew was standard; I was strapped into a small auxiliary position.

The fleet was maybe twenty minutes from the station, as the W-5 flies, all five craft together. “We’re putting you aboard the cruiser over there,” the weapons officer told me. “The brigadier is waiting for you.”

I had no idea who that might be. Nor where ‘over there’ was, as I couldn’t see his screen. I could tell they were pulling alongside another vessel and it was extending a docking tube. This fighter was too small to have one of its own.

“Into the lock, kid,” said the officer. “Door right in front of you.” He did something to make it slide open, revealing a closet that wouldn’t hold half my wardrobe. Another door opened as it slid shut behind behind me. A conduit, narrow, to another ship. I dove through it, there being no gravity.

Oops, none on the fighter. There was definitely gravity on this new craft. I kind of tumbled and stumbled into it. “Great entrance, Lieutenant,” said Errol. Brigadier Errol McFee. I had noted the new

insignia right away. It's shaped completely differently from that of a colonel.

I gave him my snappiest salute. "Promoted, eh?"

"Yes, you have permission to come aboard," he sighed. "Gentlemen," he said to the Force officers standing there staring at me, "this is the man who is going to jump you to 2746. Even if he can't jump from ship to ship."

A moment later, with no further instructions, the newly-minted brigadier disappeared into the tube I had just exited. "They'll be taking him back to the carrier," said one of the men. He was a major. I figured he might be the commander here.

"And then we'll all be taking off, sir?" I asked.

"That's the plan, lad. Come on up to the command cabin and we'll get you set." There was a decent gravitational pull in this vessel, though nothing resembling a planetary one. It must have a good-sized jump element, which meant a good-sized ship.

"This is a Xarov heavy cruiser," the major informed me. "Four Ling main drives. Eight man crew." He might have mistaken me for Errol or someone else who was intrigued by such details. "And loaded down with missiles."

Ah. That I understood. They intended to wipe out that base over there. I settled into the seat he pointed me toward and waited. Someone pulled the fleet up on one of the big screens. This command center was roomy. Three carriers and another cruiser. Was it the same as this one? No, smaller. A McFee, in fact, a W-6B, with three engines, but fitted with a Li Drive. I watched them disappear, one right after the other, jumping—somewhere.

"We're to give them ten minutes before we go. Are you ready, Lieutenant?" asked the major.

"Yes, sir," I lied. It was time I got ready and interfaced with this Garda Drive. The controls for the Li Drive were in front of me too. This was probably where its operator usually sat. If I had trouble with the Garda I should be able to fall back to the Li. I should check both out.

I tried the Li first, attempting to reach out and see those little, red, and very distant suns. It kept making contact, trying to lock up and then losing it again. I might or might not be able to make a safe jump that way but I didn't have time to fiddle with it. I switched to the other. "Five minutes," came the commander's voice. "Stand ready."

I could tell we were moving now, accelerating. It took a while to pick up speed with the mass of a jump drive. The major intended to enter the 2746 system at full throttle. Where were those red stars? Focus, Mister McFee, and show these Groupies what you can do. Focus. There they were. Choose one. Lock onto it. Feel that gravity pulling? Feel the charged element in this ship wanting to leap toward it through paths I could sense but not understand? "Jump when able," called the colonel.

Go. We did.

CHAPTER 35

Damn, that took a lot out of me. I sensed the extra mass of this ship and its element had played a part in that. No one had ever made mention of that.

And it was a long jump, a difficult jump, one requiring near total concentration. Total concentration, of course, is impossible. Even for a computer.

Despite the dampeners, I could feel the cruiser turning sharply. "Be ready to jump us back to Thule," called the major from his command chair. "Or anywhere else!"

"Aye, sir!" I attempted to call back. I probably croaked something unintelligible. I would prepare. As soon as I was able. For now, I didn't think about it and looked at the screens. I'd landed us reasonably close to the binary star. Pure luck there. We seemed to have a target somewhere ahead. A base maybe.

"There's the launcher," someone called out. "And gone!"

It would be hard to shoot at it. It came and went too quickly—except when it finally decided to stop and shoot. That might be too late to shoot back. "Again! Missed."

So they were shooting at it, maybe with a beam weapon. It was almost certainly popping up too far away. If it were close enough to effectively target, it would be targeting us. "Missiles rising," reported someone else. The base must be shooting at us. "One gone." Some seconds. "Second gone. Clear!"

"Watch for more," called our commander. I figured I'd better get ready to get us out of there. I'd never taken off my head band. I turned my attention now to the Li Drive. I'd jumped out of this system with it the first time. Why not again? It would be easier on

me, that's for sure. Together, we found Thule and set it as an automatic jump. I'd have to make sure we had remained locked onto it before giving any command.

If we didn't, it would still jump somewhere.

The major was giving his own commands. "Launch! One and two!"

"One! Two!" someone responded. It might have been a crewman, it might have been a computer.

"Hit! Number two!"

"Launch three and four!"

"Missiles rising!" More of them!

"Hits, three and four!"

"Target destroyed!"

"Missile launcher. It's firing!"

I didn't wait for a command and I didn't even think of the Li Drive. I looked at Thule's distant orange sun along with the Garda Drive. Right there. Go.

And there we were.

"Jump!" called out the commander. "Oh. Fast work, young man. Relax, gentlemen, our job is over. Lieutenant Braxton, will you take us to the rendezvous point, please?"

"Yes, sir," responded the officer in the chair to his right. They were Force. They didn't say 'aye' like in the Guard.

The major swiveled his chair around. "We'll get you back to Thule Station in a while, Lieutenant. I think I might like to kidnap you for my crew. Shanghai you. Isn't that the word, Braxton? No idea what it means."

Having studied history some, I did, but I wasn't about to explain it to this officer. He rose and ambled back my way, as if he hadn't just been through a deadly battle. "Come on back to the lounge. We're not going to need you at that console any more." I got up to follow him. "Didn't have time for introductions before we threw you headfirst into action. I'm Major Gaston Brument."

I almost fell over. At least I swayed a little. "Whoa, young man. Were you hurt somehow?"

"Tough jump, sir. The first one." Not that the second didn't take its toll.

"And you had to use this Garda Drive? Never had one on a ship before." I had followed him into a small lounge area. A couple chairs, a small low table. Doors might lead to bunk rooms or a galley.

"I don't know if I could have made the first jump with the Li Drive. Maybe if I completely overrode it, and it would have fought me all the way. The Garda does nothing but what I tell it."

"Ah. I think I understand that." He sank into a chair and waved me to the other. "But you have to know what to tell it." I nodded. "A rare talent."

I think I fell asleep. There were different men in the room when I looked around the next time. It *had* been a hard jump, hadn't it? Harder than going through the Wall, I realized. I also realized that having once done it, it would be easier a next time. I could visualize the jump, the small distant star, better now.

I did hope there would not be a next time.

"The last ship has returned to rendezvous," came an announcement. There were cheers of a sort. "Shot up a bit. More when we know, men." That was the major, wasn't it?

"Where did the other ships go?" I asked.

"We weren't informed," someone told me. "We only knew they had a different target."

"Not even certain of that," said some else.

"True. We only know we went somewhere different from them."

And ours was the primary target of this exercise. But the others must have had targets too. Maybe they did go teach the Sevens a lesson for shooting at me. Trying to shoot at me.

I decided not to relinquish this chair until they were ready to drop me on Thule Station's doorstep. I might have slept again.

CHAPTER 36

"Two fighters missing from Carrier 171. The brigadier was piloting one of them."

"Lost to enemy action?" asked Major Brument.

"Uncertain. We had to pull out. There was heavy resistance. Brigadier McFee himself ordered us to go."

The commanders of the five vessels remained in those five vessels, communicating on their screens. The major, it seemed, was second in command in the fleet with Errol gone. "We could jump one of the cruisers in and search," he said now. "Both of them."

"We don't really have much in the way of search capabilities, sir," Braxton reminded him, voice low.

"Damn it, I know. But there isn't anything near with the proper instruments for it."

I had to speak up. "There is a sophisticated listening ship in dock at Thule Station. It might be able to help."

"The rumored Nativ? I didn't know it was still here. We could certainly use its help. Where is the pilot?"

"You're speaking to him, sir."

"You—damn, you're the kid we've been hearing about. Brendon's little brother."

"The one who jumped through the wall," said someone on one of the other ships.

Had that gotten out? I wasn't doing a good job at all of avoiding fame. "I'm going to take you straight to the station," said the major.

"Braxton, hail them and tell them to have it ready. No, ask them. They'll oblige, I'm sure."

We were alongside Thule Station in a few minutes. I could see a couple tugs already moving the Nativ out of its hangar. "I'm sending the information on our target over to its computer," said one of the cruiser's crew. "Oh, there's someone aboard."

Who? Maybe Tarmo? I'd find out shortly. We got a tube over to it; there were personnel in coffins who helped get that quickly done. Then I was crossing over, crouched, almost crawling this time, as there was gravity at both ends. Less at my destination. I could feel the point of equilibrium between the tug of the two jump elements.

The airlock here was almost as tiny as the one in the runner that had taken me out to the fleet. Door closed soundlessly behind, door in front opened—a door usually left open when docked in a hangar. There stood Elsa Alander. Not who I had expected at all.

"This is a two person mission," she stated at once. "Colonel Tumen agreed I was the best qualified to accompany you. Not that he liked it." She settled down in the secondary chair in the control cabin. "And I may outrank you but you are in charge, Mister McFee. You're giving orders."

"So," I said, taking my own seat. "What's our target?"

"Byron," answered M.

Sounded sensible, I thought, as I eased us away from both station and Xarov cruiser. Those ships that pursued me originated there. Errol would have attacked there so they would know that was the reason. We rarely intruded into the Federation of Seven in force these days. So I understood. I'm not privy to strategic plans.

I called to Major Brument. "I'm ready to go in."

"We'll be along to give support," came back at once. "The other cruiser too. You have the coordinates where the two fighters were

last seen. We'll try to converge on them."

The cruisers could show up anywhere in that system. So could I. "Yes, sir." I might as well jump directly rather than going through Trinity. Which way the cruisers went was their business. They'd be going on Li Drive, of course.

I wouldn't have been at all surprised if the big carriers had Saldhana backup drives. They weren't coming along. They'd just escaped the trouble in Byron space. A decent speed. I barely needed to glance toward my distant target. Jump.

"Here we are," I announced. "Now let's figure out exactly where here is." And whether I should jump again to get closer to where I should be.

"We're on the wrong side of the system," Captain Alander informed me almost at once.

"Then we try again." Not back to Thule. I found Trinity, focused, jumped. It was not difficult from here.

"The Scotian ships are here," said M.

"Must be their preferred route," I said. "There would always be Scotian ships here anyway."

"And an often-targeted base," added Elsa.

I was already focusing on a return jump to Byron system. A little easier from here than Thule, but not enough to matter much. "Here we—go. How close this time?"

Elsa checked the screens. "I'd say close enough. Luck might get you closer eventually."

But add more time than we wanted. "More jumps would give me a headache. Let's look for the missing craft." I'd almost said look for

Errol. Better not to mention him now. There was no telling whether he had survived and, if he had, whether he was free.

"One of the cruisers has entered the system," M announced. "And the other. I am not sure which is which from here, Jack."

"It doesn't matter. We're looking for two runners. They might have beacons." Coded, to avoid enemy detection. I had no doubt that was in the information sent to M.

"I wouldn't turn down their protection," said Elsa.

"They could be a welcome distraction, even if they don't provide any protection. The Seven forces might be looking at them and not notice little us." We were cruising toward the rendezvous point provided by Major Brument. I was making no attempt at stealth as we swept the system for any signals. As I had said, the cruisers might catch the Sevens' attention, and we were small and might not be noticed. Not right away.

"I am picking up a beacon," said M. "Only one." It hadn't taken long.

"We're still some distance out," Alander observed.

"If we assume they remained in the same place. How close are the cruisers now?"

"One is hours away," M reported, "even with their speed." Yeah, we're slow M. "The other much closer. I can recognize it as the McFee now."

"We'll have to let them know we picked up a signal," I said. I doubted they had.

Elsa called and then asked, "Would it reach our target before us?" She was checking the screens and instruments, perhaps trying to calculate that herself.

"Shortly after, I think. The signal is Colonel McFee's"

"That's Brigadier McFee now," I told my ship. I gave the Captain a quick sidelong glance. "Did you now about that?"

"Errol said he might be promoted." She avoided putting much emotion into her voice. "M," she said, "Tarmo told me of the new information you provided. About the tracker. We're trying to figure who might have had access then."

She was trying to take her mind off Errol for a moment, I knew.

"The hangar doors were shut, weren't they?" I asked. "So no one would have flown a coffin in."

"Too bad, because we keep track of those. They would have had to come in from the station side when the hangar was deserted, in a work suit maybe but more likely a flight suit. No one keeps track of them."

"Wouldn't it be difficult to maneuver?"

"They could carry a small hand tube to propel themselves. Clumsy but it works. Do you think we're close enough for contact yet?"

"Try it. You're on com. If you don't mind, M."

"Quite all right with me. I have the vessel on your screen now."

At this range, he might as well not have bothered. "It's intact?"

"So it seems. I sense no breaches in the hull. Little damage at all." A moment. "Activity is minimal. None of the tubes are on." Another pause. "I do not think the cruiser senses it yet."

"It's headed in the right direction," said Elsa. "They'll find the signal soon but we'll get there first. McFee? Do you hear me?"

"Captain Alander? I do."

"Save that line for the wedding. Are you alone? There was another craft reported missing."

"No, the other fighter was destroyed. Captain M'Biko." There was a short pause before he added, softly, "We used to joke and call her McBiko." Someone said something, muffled. "Right, Baldwin. Her gunner was lost too. Gerard. A good lad."

"But you're all right?" Elsa was keeping her voice calm and all-business.

"Yes, both of us. When the carrier jumped away, I simply shut everything down in hopes I wouldn't be detected. It seemed to work." Again, Baldwin made some unintelligible remark. "But If I'd sat much longer, I would have called the Sevens and surrendered. I felt there was some slight chance of recovery so I held off."

Another voice broke in. "This is Major Chen. We're a few minutes out from you but we seem to have attracted attention. Can you handle everything, McFee?"

Errol and I both answered, "Yes."

Chen broke into laughter. "I meant the boy, Brigadier."

"I can handle the rescue," I told her. I could imagine Errol bristling at the word 'rescue' and who would be doing it. Or I liked to imagine it anyway.

"You can direct that attention you've attracted elsewhere," added Errol. "Jump out of here as soon as we do. Ah, I'll have to abandon this ship. I hate to do it but there's no way to get her back. You're alongside, Jack? Or Elsa or whoever is running things over there?"

"That would be M, I think!" said Elsa.

"But it's up to me to get in close to you," I said. With a little aid from Control. This was the ship for it.

"We won't bother with a tube," Errol informed me. "Get our airlock doors close together and we'll come across. We're already in flight suits."

"Will do. Don't move and I'll edge myself in." I had the Nativ's axis more or less perpendicular to his runner. I could get myself within inches that way if I wanted, but this was no time to worry about finesse. Were the doors lined up? "There. I'll hold this position. M, open the outer airlock door, will you?" It would be a tight fit if both men came over together.

"There are ships heading our way," M informed me.

"Three of them," Elsa added to this. "Runner-sized."

Scouts or fighters. Danger, whatever they were. "They have opened their door," reported M. "They are inside. I am closing ours. We can go."

A moment later, two figures in flight suits stumbled into the cabin. One had a little hand-held tube, an onoff. It could have been to propel themselves across the gap between ships but I had gotten us close enough I am sure it had been unneeded.

"Enemy is firing," reported Elsa.

Time to get out of here. I powered up everything, just skimming by Errol's fighter, and looked to Thule. Behind me, the abandoned craft disintegrated as a missile struck it. But we were gone.

I assumed Chen followed immediately. As for Brument, I've no idea. His cruiser had still been far off.

CHAPTER 37

"Lieutenant Sacky Baldwin," said Errol, introducing us to his gunner. Both had their helmets off now.

"Short for Sacajawea," she explained. "Everyone asks so I get it out of the way right at the start." She was kind of short and red-haired, with a square face.

We had landed a good distance from both Thule Station and Errol's fleet. I was not going to jump again in hopes of getting closer. We could cruise there, even crowded like this. The Nativ was never intended for a four person crew.

Brument's cruiser came through close enough that he joined us in an hour or so. "Your tail is scorched," he told us. "I reckon you must have been near some action."

"That was my beloved 5C being destroyed behind us," returned Errol. "I may have to switch mounts."

"More likely you won't be permitted in combat again, Errol," came the major's reply. I guess they were friends and not just fellow officers. Brument and Chen and everyone else knew my cousin was safe now, as well as the fate of the other fighter and crew. This action was over.

"They certainly were ready for us when we appeared at Byron," said Errol.

"But that was the point wasn't it?" I asked. "Sort of."

"It did let us pull off our mission at 2746 without a hitch," Brument added to this. "The base was wiped out. Don't know what became of the launcher itself."

I could guess. "It's likely to still be jumping back and forth, searching for a target, since the base directing it has been destroyed." There would be some alternate directive it would switch to eventually.

Elsa laughed. "It would be fun to have one of our own. They could keep popping up searching for each other."

"Until they landed close enough both would shoot. And that would be that."

"Quite possibly the best way to deal with one," said Errol. "Launcher and launcher-hunter. When we have developed the technology ourselves."

Or the Corvans have, I thought. There was a much larger war going on out there. "A good way to destroy two valuable Li Drives," I said aloud.

"There's a miserly Scotian for you," commented Elsa. As everyone else present, in the ship or on screen, was Scotian, there was umbrage to spare.

"It's you Thuleans who are renowned for being tight with your funds," chided Errol. He could get away with that. I wouldn't attempt it.

"No, no. We may drive a hard bargain but are noted for our generosity and free spending after." She might actually have been right about that, though I didn't put much stock in any of these characterizations. "You Scotians are the ones who hang onto every penny. Maybe because you have so few, being poor bargainers."

Errol knew better than to try to take that any further. Instead, he turned to me. "Take us to the fleet, if you will. I want to confer with my commanders there before making the next decision."

"Aye, sir!" I finally got to use that.

I thought it would have been polite to drop Elsa off at the station first but that was between her and her intended, wasn't it? It was a couple watches before all the Scotian ships got together and I can tell you I was thoroughly tired of our cramped conditions. Plus Sacky was eating my ice cream sandwiches.

We were linked up to his flagship, the big carrier, when Errol said, "I want you to come over too. Elsa can take command for an hour or so."

"Me?"

"This ship played a role," he said, "and you were its skipper."

I hadn't thought of it that way before. I was the commander of a vessel, wasn't I? With a crew of one! I told myself to keep my mouth shut over there.

All the commanders were there in the rather roomy lounge or war room or whatever they liked to call it. "Lieutenant Jack McFee of Planetary Guard," Errol announced and then ignored me. Once things got going, everyone did. I guess my cousin just felt I had a right to be informed about all that had happened. No, some of what had happened. There had been planning going on higher up than any of these officers, other than Errol McFee himself.

Errol addressed them. "We had two goals in this little operation, ladies and gentlemen, both of which we accomplished." He looked around the room. "Within reason. And yes, it was a little operation. You all are aware of that; there are much bigger things going on than skirmishes along the Seven's borders.

"First, we did destroy an experimental weapon the Aigleans had deployed." He noticed the look I gave him. "Hmm, not destroyed. Disabled. We have Major Brument to thank for that success. At the same time, we were able to advance some experiments with jump drives, for which we can thank Lieutenant McFee."

"You need to thank him for a hell of a lot more than that," interjected Brument. "And I'm still thinking of shanghaiing the boy."

I believe Errol thought of saying he was welcome to me but his natural decorum stepped in. "Our second objective was a punitive raid against the Federation of Seven, specifically targeting Byron as the source of a, ah, blatant violation of neutral space."

"Chased some prospector, didn't they? All the way to Nevada." There was a little buzz over that.

"There is no reason you can't know it was Lieutenant Jack McFee they chased." Heads turned my way. Again. "Yes, that's when he jumped through the Wall." More murmurs. They'd heard rumors of someone doing it. "Be that as it may, it remained a violation and we needed to point it out to them. That we met some heavy resistance was not unexpected. We did plenty of damage before jumping out."

"Most of us," said Chen.

"And two who did not were Lieutenant George Gerard and Captain Jamie M'Biko. I salute them." Which he did. Everyone rose and did the same, so I did too. I was more than willing to honor them.

"I am leaving Major Brument in command of the fleet until you return to Scotia. He has his orders on how to proceed when you arrive." He gave the group a nod and almost as part of the same gesture, signaled for me to go with him. His business in Thule did not concern them.

I let myself get a good look at the carrier as we pulled away. In most respects, it resembled an interstellar passenger ship, not greatly different from the one I had boarded to travel from Thule Station to Oz Station not really so long ago. A long central spine with the jump element in it, main engines at the rear. There were a bunch of them, big ones. They might be Scotia's own double-sixes. The spine was thicker, to allow passage of pilots and crew to their ships, which were attached all around. Up front, a command module, with plenty

of space for those pilots and crews when they weren't in their craft. All fighters, I thought, W-5Ds, but I can't say I got a good look at every one of them.

I understood this was a relatively small carrier. They could be pushed to maybe twice its size before the disadvantages grew too many. Elsa sat again in the second command chair. Errol could find his own seat.

Elsa. Had I had any true doubts before they were gone now. But there were still spies and saboteurs and assassins on Thule Station. Probably other nefarious elements too but I couldn't think of proper names for them. Was it as bad on Thule's surface or did this installation draw them?

That maybe I could puzzle out some other day. I called for a hangar and tugs as we approached. This adventure was done. I intended to get some beer and a good sleep before another began.

CHAPTER 38

"You know you're going to get a Scotian medal pinned on you this time, don't you?"

I could only sigh. He was probably right. Errol and Elsa sat across from me. I hadn't seen either separately since we arrived. I was sipping beer and scrolling through my mail on my communicator. I'd usually do that on the bigger screen in my quarters but wasn't ambitious enough to get up.

"A letter from my mom," I told them. "Everyone knows about you two now, you should be aware. Errol's grandfather insists you be married at Summit Up."

I suspected Elsa had family with other ideas. I suspected Elsa had other ideas herself. She didn't make them known right then.

What she did say was, "That is your grandfather too, isn't it?"

"It is. Grandpa Jack. I was named for him so I'm his favorite."

I'd expected Errol to make some remark or at least a rude sound but he said, rather quietly, "I think we both know that is Brendon."

Half a dozen flippant remarks of my own went through my mind. I only said, "Yeah." Brendon tended to be everyone's favorite. I looked at my little screen again. Vili had written. I'd read that later. "Anna wants me to come look at weapons again. I should head to the armory."

"She liked what you did with the knife she gave you," said Elsa. "Her prize student." She managed to keep a straight face as she said this.

"You'd better show up," Errol said.

"Yes, you wouldn't want her to use one of those weapons on you!" Elsa made no attempt to look serious this time.

"All right." I rose and stretched. Too much time in a command chair. "Behave yourselves."

They would, of course. Oh, and so would I with Anna Gallen. It wasn't safe not to. "It's time you had that new sidearm," she announced as soon as I came through the door.

"I'm still happy with my C-119," I told her. "Not that I've had need for it lately."

"You did have need for it and weren't able to get it into play," she reminded me.

I didn't think I'd have done better with another gun. Anna went on. "Your Planetary Guard should issue you something standard one of these days. A big hunk of ceramic, I would imagine." She shook her head, perhaps over the general shortcomings of Scotians and their design choices. "You people do like your ceramics, don't you? Your 119 is almost all metal."

"If I ever actually report in to them maybe I'll find out."

"I wouldn't hurry if I were you. My point with all this is you should have something lighter and smaller for tucking away. Something you can get out and use quickly. Like this." She picked up a gun that had been lying on the low shelf beside her. A metal shelf, of course. "C-140. It's what I carry. Tarmo too."

"Not your service guns."

"No. Here, see what you think." She handed it over. It was indeed smaller and lighter than the weapon I had been carrying. Projectile only, not beam. Definitely a smaller bore but it still looked substantial.

"A slightly lighter pellet," she said. "Point four-eight. Clips of sixteen and a standard propellant cartridge for sixty-four shots."

"Oh, it comes out even this time."

“Designed to. Let’s try it out.” So I shot a few rounds and had to reluctantly agree it was pretty nice. Maybe I would switch but I didn’t intend to let her know that right away.

“I’ve heard you’ve had meetings with Jitha Jones,” she said, as I took aim.

I might as well be honest. I squeezed off a shot that landed near the center of the target and said, “My superiors suggested I should.”

“I’ll bet.”

I expected more but it didn’t come so I stuck my neck out a way. “There seemed to be something between you.”

There wasn’t much of a reaction. “There was. Maybe we were just thinking to spy on each other.” She pondered that for a second or two. “Jitha can be fun but he’ll never forget his underlying mission.”

I nodded, so she continued. “There are certainly people in the civilian area passing information and Jitha is aware of them. Some of them. I’d doubt he could know every spy over there.” There was the faintest of smiles, maybe the slightest of shrugs. “But I don’t really know any of them. That’s not my domain. Jones does keep our security—Tarmo mostly—informed and we provide some intelligence in return.”

I figured it was best not to mention what he had said of Elsa. There was no point when I had thoroughly rejected it myself, and it might only create friction. “He’s too old for you,” I told her. I like to leave them laughing.

I also left with my new C-140. Instead of going to my tiny quarters, I sought the privacy of my ship and M’s company, to think and to read my mail. Jitha Jones *was* too old for Anna, wasn’t he? I asked myself. It had only been a quip but he might have ten years on her. I didn’t know Thulean attitudes on that sort of thing. To be sure, Errol was four or five years older than Elsa.

Ha, and Anna had about that much on me. I settled onto the little bunk to look over my new weapon first.

"A new handgun, Jack?"

"Yes, M. I think I like it. Anna Gallen has been equipping me with weapons. She has quite an assortment."

"You'll have to call her Q," M informed me. He seemed to think this was hilarious but once again I had no idea what he was talking about.

I pulled up Vilma Lempsen's message. It was mostly gossipy and not at all interesting. I'd have a much more exciting tale to tell when I wrote back!

Then, I miss being on the station and flying my little tug. I loved all the different ships we'd work with. Yours too! My friend Sandi really liked it. She would just go down when off shift to look at it when no one was around.

"M," I asked, "did you ever notice a woman named Sandi in the hangar?"

"I don't know, Jack. People come and go but don't tell me their names. Just a moment. I'll ask station records about that name."

I hadn't known M could do that. "There are three Sandis on the station. Can you give me any specifics?"

"I think she's a tug pilot." Vili implied that.

"That doesn't fit any of them. Oh, I see. It's her last name. Sandburg. Gunilla Sandburg. Yes, I have seen that face here. She and a man came out in work suits once and looked at me. Only from a distance."

I looked at the faces M put on my screen. Sandi I recognized. I'd seen her with Vili. The man was an unknown. "Could you put a

name to him?"

There was a rather long pause. Long for M. "No, Jack. He does not seem to be station personnel at all."

CHAPTER 39

Tarmo sent the picture of Gunilla Sandburg's unknown companion around. No one in the military section could identify him. Not that it was a very good picture, being taken through the face plate of a work suit by M. I wondered how long he kept those sorts of records.

Long enough, eh? There was better luck when discreet inquiries were made at the civil terminal. Yes, there was a record of the gentleman coming, on a flight from Thule. He left the same day I did, back to the planet. Further inquiry did not show he ever arrived.

"The name he used is meaningless," Tarmo told me. "But he undoubtedly planted the tracker. With aid from Sergeant Sandburg—but perhaps not knowingly."

Anna was with us. "That's why we haven't arrested her."

"Not yet. Better to keep an eye on the woman."

"I'll be doing that." She gave me a wink. "Maybe you'd like to help? Make Vili jealous? The princess carries on a correspondence with her too."

That sounded more dangerous than any mission I'd flown. "But she is involved. That's certain, right?" Had she actually been Vili's friend here? Had she been using her? Could she have helped plan the assassination attempt? How the hell was I to know?

Tarmo sank back into his chair. No so easy with a severe upright metal-framed seat. "Maybe not all that involved. As far as we know she only gave the man a tour of the place."

That was why they had taken no action. I liked to think maybe the girl had been only a dupe and had not been involved in trying to get me killed. I remembered seeing her sitting with Vili the first time I'd laid eyes on the princess.

"What we need to do," spoke Anna, "is learn what she actually knows of this shadow who came and went." She turned to me and said, "Vilma undoubtedly knows more than she knows she knows. Sandburg may have dropped things. She does not seem to have any training in spy-craft."

"So I discreetly ask Vili about her," I said. "And in the meantime, use my natural charm to get close?"

Tarmo could have at least smiled. Oh, well. "That's about it. We have requested that you remain on the station with us until this is over. For a joint operation, as we worded it. Someone Scotian will know what that means."

"Do be careful," Anna appended to all this.

So I sent a letter off to Thule, largely with an account of my exploits but with a few fairly innocuous queries about Sandi. Then I went looking for the woman herself. She was young, no more than a year older than me, according to the records. Those were likely to be accurate. Tall, with ruddy curling hair clipped short. All these Thulean military women seemed to prefer that. She was sitting alone in the canteen and didn't object when I asked to join her.

I decided it was simplest to use Vili as my pretext. How I was writing to her, how she had mentioned her friend, and so on. Then, rather unexpectedly she asked, "Are you two lovers?"

"She never said anything?" If they were best friends, surely Vili would have told her there was nothing between us.

"I think she wanted to keep me guessing. I guessed there was nothing going on."

I had to smile at that. "You guessed right."

She almost smiled in return. "Vili is a romantic. It would be like her to hint there was more than in reality. Maybe even to imagine it, a little." Sandi's almost smile became an almost smirk. "You make a

good subject for a romance. I'll bet you'll have fan mail from girls waiting for you when you get home."

Brendon got lots of that, to Nira's dismay. I did hope it wasn't my future. Don't be distracted, Jack McFee. Pay attention to Sandi. This woman did not seem much like a possible enemy agent, not that I would have any idea how to recognize one. Still, she seemed something more, maybe, than a young tug pilot. Just as Vili did.

But I knew what Vilma Lempsen was. No secrets there! For all I knew, this Sandi might attempt to assassinate me at the first convenient opportunity. "I'm headed to my quarters," she said, rising abruptly. "Would you like to come along?"

I had no idea what she intended by that. Maybe she was hoping for that convenient opportunity. Maybe she wanted to talk or even to make love. I wouldn't find out unless I found out. "Sure. Were you and Vili roommates?"

"We were. You have no idea where we bunked, do you?" There was a trace of amusement. Sandi still was letting very little out.

"Not the least." I did know the general direction from which Vilma would come when we ran into each other. Somewhere beyond Anna's Armory.

"Just follow me." We went the expected way for a short time. Then we took the unexpected way.

"I know shortcuts here most people aren't aware of or just don't think of," my companion explained. "It's easy to slip through the kitchen and store rooms." Down a corridor we went, one I'd never been in. I would have been lost long ago. Maybe I was right now. Lots of servbots scurried about in this area. They didn't cook but they did carry things here and there.

And completely ignored us, other than to swerve around us on soft and silent tires. "This passage will bring us out in a residential area,"

Sandi said, as a metal door slid open. "And then we need to talk, Jack Mack."

Where had she heard that nickname? I hadn't told it to Vili, had I? "All right," was all I could think to say. That was when, from the corner of my eye, I saw her draw a gun.

I didn't think, I reacted. There was no time to say, Jack, you idiot, she *is* an enemy agent and you're in big trouble. I dove to one side, going for my new C-140. It did slide into my hand nicely.

But the Thulean wasn't aiming at me or even looking at me. She fired at something or someone off to my right. Just what, I couldn't tell as a tall set of shelves obscured my vision. They also gave me cover when someone fired back. There was no sound from whatever weapon they used but I saw Sandi spin and fall back against the far wall.

By then I was I had my gun in my hands and stepped out. One man. I shot but he had already slipped into cover. A servbot came gliding by, paying us no attention. What humans might do in the corridors was none of its concern. I crouched behind it. The robot was only about half my height but it carried a tall stack of trays to provide more cover. I heard a pellet strike among them and another. The pile fell to the metal floor with considerable clatter.

"Sorry, little guy," I murmured as I rose out of my crouch and fired pellet after pellet at our assailant's form. Half-concealed he was, around a corner where another passageway met this one. I threw myself to the floor then, knowing he was likely to reveal himself and release another volley. There. I took aim but shots rang out behind me.

Hmm, rang is the wrong word though the pellets certainly rang when they struck the metal walls! The sound of my weapon, and of Sandi's, was more of a pop. Like opening a bottle of champagne. I saw the man ahead of me reel and stumble. I put a couple rounds into him myself, just to certain, before turning around.

Sandi stepped forward and collapsed onto the cold floor.

CHAPTER 40

"I am afraid, between the two of you, the attacker is dead several times over. You put a rather large number of rounds into him."

"Sorry," I mumbled. "He was shooting at us." He *was* shooting at us. At me and at Sandi. I had never been her target. "How is Sandburg?"

"She'll survive." Tarmo had reached us pretty quickly. I had called security on my communicator at once. I suspect the servbot might have registered a complaint about hooligans in the halls even sooner. "Two pellets, upper left torso. So what happened?"

I gave him a complete account. "You don't think she led you into a trap, do you? You know, if she were an agent her fellows might have decided she was a liability and decided to take her out too."

I frowned and thought. "No. She shot first."

"Very well. Whoever ambushed you must have known she favored that shortcut to her quarters." He regarded me for a moment. "The man might not even have expected you."

Captain Gallen might well have been right about that. "Any identity on him?"

"Believe it or not, another Ursan. Probably another hired assassin." He shook his head. "I could not imagine why he would target Gunilla Sandburg until I talked to Thule. But I think maybe I'll let her explain it all to you."

I'd been cooling my heels outside the infirmary while they patched up Sandi. I followed him in now. She was propped up in one of the beds, Anna standing beside her.

Tarmo spoke. "I'm told the silent handgun your attacker carried may have made the difference between your surviving and dying there in that hallway, young lady. They do not have as much punch."

"A Pb.18, wasn't it?" she asked.

"Indeed. Somewhat standard issue for Aiglean operatives." He turned to me. "Jack McFee, may I present Lieutenant Gunilla Sandburg of the Thulean Royal Police. Known to your friends as Gunner, right?" he asked her.

"Yes, sir. I was placed here secretly as Princess Vilma's bodyguard." This she said to no one in particular but I suspected it was directed at me. "Why someone wanted to kill me now, I haven't the slightest idea."

"It might have been nice had we been informed of your mission," commented Anna.

"I was ordered to trust no one and to reveal my mission to no one." Sandi—or Gunner—sighed rather deeply and winced at the pain it caused. "I tried to keep an eye on Vilma, despite Jack here. She got away from me the day they were attacked. A failure on my part. I've expected to be called back to Thule soon. They left me in place here now for appearance sake and, um, to see if I could learn anything. A chance to redeem myself a little."

"You have understanding superiors," observed Tarmo.

The door slid open. Elsa and Errol. They said not a word but slipped into the room.

"I do. But I learned nothing." Her brows contracted into a bit of a frown. "I don't think I learned anything. Someone must have thought otherwise."

Tarmo stated, "You know one man who was involved in all of this."

Sandi only looked puzzled, so I added, "The man who went with you to look at my ship."

She looked even more puzzled. "But he is my contact in the police service—" Sudden realization. "Oh."

Tarmo practically ran from the room. "He's going to go talk to your superiors and get the fellow's name," Anna told her. "Though I would be willing to wager he has disappeared."

"If he hasn't I'll shoot him myself," vowed Sandburg. "Maybe he left enough behind to lead to those he conspired with."

Anna looked up at me. "She's already thinking like the policeperson she is."

I was wondering what I should tell Vili in my next letter. *Your friend Sandi had an accident, maybe. She's leaving the station.* It would not be a good idea to say more.

"I believe that wraps up your one reason for staying here," Errol said to me. "These Thuleans are going to have to chase down their spies on their own from here out."

"And what about your one reason for staying?" I asked.

"I'm taking her with me to meet the family. But we're not letting them plan a wedding for us."

"Not until after the war," declared Elsa. "I have my duties here, after all. But some leave is all right."

Indeed it is. What would I be up to now?

"You might as well ferry the two of us back to Scotia," Errol continued. "Here are your orders, by the way."

He handed me a communication panel. Probably the same orders were on my own. "I'm called to report to the Planetary Guard," I informed anyone who wanted to listen.

“Which could mean anything,” added Errol.

“It will be cramped,” I informed him. I’m sure he didn’t mind, nor Elsa. “Hey, as captain of my vessel, couldn’t I marry you?”

“We’ll think about it. Get your kit aboard and we’ll take off.”

Take off and say farewell to Thule Station, at least for a time. Months, years? Farewell to Anna and Tarmo. To Gunner, whom I barely knew but might like to, and maybe even farewell to Vili. Who could know?

My future was no longer here, but out there.

Out there, among the many worlds.

An Afterword and Some Notes

It is perhaps needless to say that I intend to write more of Jack McFee. There are plenty enough loose ends to begin weaving a new tale. The war will come to an end but his adventures will not. He will grow older.

I am including some miscellaneous notes here on the universe in which he lives. When? In the future sometime—not that distant but not that near either.

1) Addie seemingly does not derive, as some would have it, from the letters AD. Various meanings for those letters are given and all are guesses. A more likely explanation is that it comes from AI, artificial intelligence, and the 'die' (or alternatively 'dy') was only a diminutive ending. Either way, it definitely originated with the English language and alphabet.

2) The 'point six' projectile size in Jack's first gun would be roughly equivalent to fifty caliber. The greater part of humanity has gone to New Imperial measurements (there remain a few metric holdouts) and a base twelve system of numbers. New Imperial is commonly referred to as Nimp, and a Nimp inch is only slightly longer than ours. 'Point six' would be half of an inch.

3) The power of engines is measured in Ts (or Tees). There is some disagreement as to whether this was originally derived from Thrust Power or Test Power. It is a totally arbitrary scale but is believed to come from a now forgotten system of measurement.

4) Scotians and Thuleans (and most systems) operate on a twelve hour day. That is twelve hours from midnight to midnight, which would make the hours twice as long as ours. Of course, this varies from system to system due to differing lengths of day (though habitable systems tend toward a norm). The hour is divided into one hundred forty-four minutes. That would make the minutes slightly

shorter than ours (144 compared to 120 for the same period of time). The 'watches' mentioned on Thule Station are two hours long, which would equal four of our hours.

5) The Thuleans have an 'open aristocracy' to which anyone can rise. It is only for Thuleans, not for citizens of the Janic worlds. Being noble is mostly honorary. Aristocrats have little political power (save a bit of sway in the election of the monarch). The descendants of an aristocrat drop one rank in each generation and deserving commoners can be elevated to the aristocracy, or aristocrats can be raised one level. Only elevation one level at a time is permitted and there is a six year wait before anyone can be raised again, to prevent abuse. Elevation is by the monarch, but with the advice of the Assembly.