

Follow the trail...



STAR FRONTIER
THE
ERA ECAM
INTRIGUE



H A M I S H
S P I E R S

THE ERAECAM INTRIGUE: A Star Frontier Story
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Chapter One

Agent Jiang Sarra, of the Federation Department of Security, woke up and switched off her alarm. She swung her legs over the side of her bed, stretching her toes to get some blood flowing, and tied back her jet black hair. She pulled a dark gray jumpsuit out of a cupboard, got dressed and made her way to the *Albatross*' shipboard mess.

"Morning, Janan," she greeted the lady with the almond eyes and the cascading dark hair sitting by the table with a coffee in her hand.

"Hey, Jiang," Janan replied, smiling. "Actually, I think it's evening on the main Eraecam seaboard. But morning'll do for me. Sleep well?"

"Always do," Jiang said as she opened the dispenser cabinet and fixed herself something light to start the day. Another door to the mess slid open behind her.

"Ladies." A man a few years older than them appeared, heading for the dispenser as well.

"Morning, Devan," Jiang and Janan said more or less at once.

"We're still setting down at nineteen hundred hours Eraecam central time?" Devan called over his shoulder.

"That's right," Janan said, finishing her coffee and getting up. She gave him a playful smile. "So don't take half an hour for breakfast. Got to be ready and looking sharp when we get down there."

"Oh, I always look sharp." Devan glanced at Jiang as Janan left. "Any chance of getting in some sightseeing?"

“Depends on how long the assignment takes,” Jiang replied.

Devan got his breakfast and sat down. “You’ve been pretty tight lipped about this thing. You going to let Janan and me on things at some stage? What’s the job?”

“Missing transports. That’s all I know.”

“Pirates?”

Jiang shrugged, taking a sip of coffee and putting her mug down. “Probably. But you never know.”

The two of them came onto the bridge as Janan, sitting in the pilot’s seat, made the approach over the nightline of the world beneath them and switched on the communicator. “Eraecam control, this is the *Albatross* approaching Talingth Port. Requesting a landing platform.”

“We read you, *Albatross*,” came the reply. “We’re activating a beacon on Platform 257.”

Jiang turned to leave, slapping Devan on the arm. “All right. Come on.”

They left the bridge, missing the view on the way down. So their first look at the planet was a spacious landing platform, near empty, with muted blue lights around its perimeter.

Jiang glanced around. “Now where’s... ah.” She trailed off as she spotted an Eraecam security forces officer approaching.

“Welcome to Eraecam,” the man greeted them. “I’m Colonel Theis.”

“Agent Sarra,” Jiang replied before turning to her companion. “And this is my security officer, Devan Riley.”

“Nice to meet you both.” The colonel gestured for them to follow. “Shall we?”

Theis brought up a display on a screen encompassing the surface of the desk in the center of the room. “That’s three transports in just as many months. No distress signals. Nothing.”

Jiang nodded. “No passenger transports though?”

Theis’ expression hardened into something grim. “No, but there’s a definite pattern. We also had a local team on the case and they disappeared. That’s why we’ve brought you in.”

Jiang nodded. “I see. Now what’s this pattern?”

“All three ships were carrying itherian ore,” Theis replied. “So we can assume that’s what these pirates are after.”

“Could be. Any idea how they prevented their quarry from getting any distress signals out?”

The colonel shrugged. “Not sure. Although there’s only one communication relay between here and the Jaerad system. It could be worth checking out.”

“Good,” Jiang said. “We’ll start there. Does it have a recorder or is it just a transmitter?”

Theis tapped at his console. “It should say here. No, there’s no recorder. Transmissions are recorded via the local relays here and at Jaerad. Times are logged too but there’s no recording device in this one.”

“Are your regular transmissions coming through?”

“They seem to be.”

“Then it sounds like someone’s tampering with the relay whenever they attack a ship,” Jiang said. “Colonel, we’ll go and see that relay now and get back to you soon.”

We'll also leave a log of our intentions here and with Corsida as well."

Serec, Security Minister for the Federation, looked up as the door to his office in the Corsidan central command center slid open and Admiral Roth entered. "Admiral," he said, rising to shake his hand. "Good to see you."

"Likewise, Minister," Roth replied, taking his customary seat across from him. "Have you been well?"

"I've been keeping myself busy," Serec replied, returning to his own chair, "but it doesn't seem as though we have any major crises at the moment." He tapped some keys, bringing up some data on a small screen in front of him. "Now, how are our Minstrahn friends going? How go the recoveries in the Kyrias quadrant?"

"The younger Lord Kamais has made considerable progress in bringing its agricultural production back to self-sustaining levels," Roth told him, "but it may be another four to six months before it's finally there. Empress Tenenial has suggested the other quadrants can share some of the burden. But while it's not exactly my field of expertise, I'd suggest the Federation continues providing relief a little while longer."

"Well, since my advisors say the same thing," Serec told him, "I'll see what I can do. All right. Next item. Since the United Frontier has begun transitioning to a single currency, some mercenary types have been attempting to trade obsolete currencies from the region with unsuspecting souls back here in the Federation."

"What a surprising development," Roth remarked, his tone dry. "Still though, their victims should know

better. The currency transition has been widely publicized.”

“Yes,” Serec agreed. “However, in my experience, these type of fraud operations generally go hand in hand with more serious problems.”

“I concur.”

“Now, I know how you feel about these matters but...”

“It’s quite all right,” Roth assured him. “The parading of military strength has its uses. I shall make certain changes to make our border patrols more visible and suggest to our friends along the Frontier that they do the same.”

Serec smiled. “Thank you, Admiral. That’s all I ask.” He glanced at his notes. “Well, that’s all I’ve got. What about you?”

“Just one item,” the admiral replied. “Probably minor as these things go, but we’ll see. Recently, some evidence of the whereabouts of General Einhast emerged. It’s not much but I’ve assigned a team to follow it up.”

Serec frowned. “He’s that renegade warlord from the Leihart system, isn’t he? Does he still pose any credible threat?”

“Well, he’s at large and I’d feel better if he weren’t.”

“His own people ousted him,” Serec reminded Roth, “so he’s hardly going to become a rallying figure for anti-Federation sentiment. He was just an opportunist who tried to take advantage of the mess after the battle of the Phalamkian system.”

“Yes, but he might still be capable of causing trouble.”

Serec made a note of it. “All right. Well, keep me informed on your team’s progress then.”

*

A small vessel decelerated to sublight speed and seated on the bridge, Epcar, a man rising forty, turned to his sole companion, a dark-haired woman a few years younger than him. “What’s our position, Khalin?”

“We’re on the outskirts of this charming system,” Khalin replied, eyeing her instruments. “KL-847. And I’m picking up a star and some planetoids. No trace of General Einhast sadly.”

Epcar nodded. “Fair enough. But he *was* here. Our source’s images didn’t lie. Perhaps if we look around, we might find out *why* he was here.”

Chapter Two

“We’re approaching the relay now,” Janan announced to the others as the *Albatross* decelerated.

Jiang climbed to her feet. “Well, I’d better suit up. Let me know when we’re docked, Janan.”

Janan frowned. “I just hope we *can* dock. Just before we shipped out of Corsida, some idiot commissioned a new line of these relays and changed all the docking componentry for some reason.”

Jiang smiled. “Think positive, Janan. My spacesuit’s probably been replaced more recently than this relay.”

Janan was still talking through her approach over the intercom once Jiang was ready for EVA.

“Looking good,” Devan grinned.

Jiang shook her head. “Devan, why don’t you go and do something useful? Brew some coffee for me when I get back or something.”

Devan laughed as he got out of the way. “Sure thing.”

“Now, I’m on channel three,” Jiang said as she made her way to the airlock.

“Wonderful,” Janan replied, her voice now audible through Jiang’s inbuilt helmet communicator as well. “And we’ve just docked. Looks like you were right.”

“See?” Jiang replied. “I told you not to worry.”

Devan patted her shoulder as she opened the inner airlock seal. “Be careful out there.”

“Thanks.” Jiang stepped inside the airlock, closed the inner seal from the other side and pulled a cord out from

a winch in the floor. She hooked it on her suit to keep her tethered when the airlock was opened to the vacuum of space. She nodded to Devan to open the outer seal.

As the airlock depressurized, she blew around a little before unwinding the tether line and moving out. Then using rungs outside the ship, she climbed onto the relay.

“Well, well,” she said after getting a look at it. The modifications to the exterior of the relay, jutting out from an otherwise smooth surface, were rather hard to miss.

“What is it?” Devan asked.

“Someone’s welded a box into the relay’s casing,” she replied. “I’ve got to pry it open somehow.”

“Do you need anything from us?”

“No, I’m good.” Jiang unclipped a small tool a belt on her suit, pried it under the edge of the box and worked it around like a lever. After a bit of effort and a small buildup of sweat, the cover of the box came free. She secured it to her belt before it drifted away, along with the tool.

“You all right there?” Devan asked.

Jiang wished she could wipe the sweat off her brow. It was distracting. “I was just getting some exercise,” she said, looking inside. “There’s a lot of wiring in here and an antenna. Looks like this thing can be operated remotely, which fits.”

She studied the inside of the device, although it seemed quite rudimentary. “It looks like it just fires electrical surges through the circuits of the relay transmitters.”

“Wouldn’t that cripple the relay permanently?”

“No,” Jiang replied. “These relays have in-built safety systems that can handle that kind of thing. However, I

guess it would take a while before the transmitters come back online after a surge. Say, long enough for a cargo ship to be destroyed or commandeered. Which means I've got to disable this thing. Although..."

"What is it?" Devan asked.

Jiang was quiet for a moment. "Find a spare fuse, will you? Then fry it."

"Fry it? Oh, I get it."

Jiang smiled. "That's right. I can't disable this thing without these people knowing about it. But if I make it look like a simple fault, then they won't know we're onto them."

"Makes sense," Devan agreed. "Hey, Jiang, I've only got Berrels in here. Berrels never blow."

"Don't overthink it, Devan. Just slide one through the floor hatch for me and I'll come and get it."

"All right."

Jiang crawled back to the airlock, found the fried fuse waiting for her, and was back at the relay a minute later.

As she prepared to make her modifications, she was well aware the pirates who'd made the box might have rigged it with alarms. But since it was a necessary risk, she didn't worry Devan or Janan with the possibility. Besides, she'd know soon enough. She removed the fuse that was already inside the box and let out a breath. She hated being right all the time.

"Damn."

"What's wrong?" Devan asked.

"I just found some alarms. They're wrapped around some wire ends. Damn things are almost microscopic. And it looks like they're connected to that antenna."

Janan came on the line. "Then we've got to get out of here, right?"

“Probably a good idea,” Jiang replied. “But give me a couple more minutes out here first. Since these guys know we’re onto them now, I’m taking this box.”

Khalin looked at the three hulks floating in a low but stable orbit around the inhospitable rock in front of her, which in turn was orbiting an enormous inhospitable gas giant. “The one closest to us looks like an S-6 Heavy Freighter.”

“Stumbled on a museum, have we?” Epcar remarked. “Corsidan Heavy Industries haven’t made those things in years.”

“There are still a few around though,” Khalin said. “And the one to the right of it looks like a Shokhan Star Hauler. That other one over there might be off the same line too, although it’s hard to see... Hang on. According to the sensors, there’s no one aboard any of those ships and I’m reading no power emissions of any kind. I think we should have a look inside one.”

They landed in a dark hangar and Khalin turned on the floodlights. After adjusting her eyes to the sudden brightness, she drew in a breath and let it out.

“This thing’s been gutted,” she said, staring at the exposed framework under the main hull.

“Stripped for parts,” Epcar concurred.

Khalin frowned. “I wonder if this has anything to do with General Einhast or not. It’s not what I was hoping to find here but it’s definitely evidence of something.”

Epcar pursed his lips. “Yeah. But evidence of what?”

Chapter Three

It was evening on the main Eraecam seaboard when the *Albatross* returned and they were hailed on their approach.

“This is the *Albatross*,” Janan responded. “We read you.”

“We picked you up as you re-entered the system. Colonel Theis put a flag in the system for you.”

“Is there a message?”

“Yes, he requests that you dock with the Rim Orbital Platform.”

Janan looked at the others and, receiving nothing but a couple of shrugs, turned back to the communicator. “Understood.”

“We’re activating a guiding beacon now.”

Janan nodded. “We see it, control. *Albatross* out.”

“What do you suppose that’s all about?” Devan asked.

“No idea,” Jiang replied. “Let’s find out.”

When they landed in their assigned hangar and disembarked, two Eraecam security officers were waiting.

“Welcome to the Rim Orbital Platform,” one of them said. “Colonel Theis will be arriving shortly. He’s requested us to show you to his office here.”

Jiang nodded. “Lead the way.”

She and the others followed their guides up two levels in the station then followed a long bending corridor with a transparent screen to one side that allowed them to see outside. Only a fraction of Eraecam was visible but the view was incredible. Soon they

reached a wide office with muted lights and several chairs around a small conference table to one side.

“Would you like any refreshments while you’re waiting?” one of the security officers asked.

“No, thanks,” Jiang replied, eyeing the office. “There’s a dispenser unit over there anyway so we can look after ourselves.”

“Okay,” the officer replied. “Colonel Theis should be here in a few minutes.”

Devan watched the door after they left with a pensive gaze. “I don’t think this arrangement’s a matter of convenience. I think the colonel doesn’t want us planetside.”

“I suspect,” Jiang said, “that he’s protecting us.”

“From what?”

Before she could reply, Colonel Theis entered the room. “We’re not exactly sure but I believe there’s cause for concern. I came straight here as soon as I heard you were in the system.”

“What’s wrong?” Jiang asked.

“That’s a good question,” the colonel replied, locking the door behind him and waving them all to be seated at the conference table at the other end of the office. “It seems while you were away, someone sent a transmission to Corsida from somewhere in Talingth Port using your identification codes.”

Jiang frowned. “How do you know they used our identification codes?”

Theis regarded her for a moment. “We didn’t tap any of your transmissions, if that’s what you’re implying. An acknowledgement was sent through the system afterwards. That’s how we found out about it. It also

means your department accepted that other transmission as legitimate.”

Jiang frowned. “That has to be an inside job. That’s not good. Now, what about this transmission? Any idea what it was about?”

“Well, it was encrypted.” Theis hesitated. “However, since you left here the night before and it was sent last night, it was obviously suspicious...”

“So you took the liberty of trying to break the encryption,” Jiang told him. “Don’t worry. I’m not going to arrest anyone for showing a bit of initiative. So last night, you say?”

“Technically this morning. Around oh-four hundred hours.”

“After we left the relay,” Janan murmured, joining the conversation.

Jiang climbed to her feet and walked over to the colonel’s desk. “Then we’d better check something.”

“What’s that?” Theis asked.

“Passenger manifests. Can you bring them up here?”

“Not a problem,” Theis replied, coming over. He typed in a few short commands and a list appeared on the screen. “Let’s run a name search,” After a moment, another list appeared. “Here we are,” he said, scrolling through it. “This manifest is for the passenger liner JM-94-Q1.”

Jiang read the names out as she found them. “Riley Devan. Amira Janan. Jiang Sarra. So according to the records back on Corsida, we left this system on a passenger liner at ten hundred hours this morning. Which means if we were to suddenly disappear, no one would come looking around *here*.”

“I want a look at that box you brought back,” Devan told her. “Find out what kind of tracking device it was bugged with.”

“They probably didn’t need any tracking device to know we were coming back here.” Jiang replied. “Although they did know *when* we were coming...” She shook her head. “But that’ll have to wait. Right now, with that passenger manifest out there, we probably don’t have much time before whoever’s behind this makes their next move.”

“Right,” Devan agreed, moving to the door and looking grateful for the chance to do something besides stand around in a smart uniform.

“Wait a second,” Theis said, raising his hands. “Let’s not panic. If these people, whoever they are, are planning to get rid of you, then they’re going to be waiting for you at Talingth Port. That’s why I put that flag in the system. So Eraecam control would send you here instead.”

“Well, it was a good idea,” Jiang told him. “But if these people worked out that we retrieved their box from that communication relay, then hacked into Corsidan central and broke our encrypts to send off that little message of theirs, why couldn’t they have hacked into your system as well and found that flag?”

The colonel had no answer to that one.

“Now,” Jiang said, “we need to contact Corsida right away and inform them of the—”

The sound of grinding metal cut her off, followed quickly by the sound of blaster shots. The power cut off too for a moment and emergency lighting came on, basking everything in a blue hue.

“Should have stayed on the damn ship,” Devan muttered. “Jiang. Janan. Stay back.” He drew his weapon as he reached the door and motioned for silence as he listened. “The two guards outside are down. And I hear footsteps. Two people. Coming this way.”

The room was quiet and, for a few moments, the footsteps were audible to everyone. Then they stopped.

“Looks like it’s our move,” Devan said.

“How far back are they, do you think?” Jiang asked him.

“Eight, ten meters.” Devan turned to the colonel. “Are there any gas masks in this place?”

Reaching for a gun, Theis shook his head.

“Are you any good with that?” Devan asked him, his scowl visible even in the dimmed light.

“Better than you think, young man,” the colonel replied.

Gritting his teeth, Devan turned back to watch the door while the colonel edged away from his desk. “Does this facility have to contact Eraecam control on the ground at frequent intervals?”

“Every four hours,” the colonel replied. “Talingth will expect the next contact in about two and a half.”

“Will they investigate straightaway when no one calls in?” Jiang asked.

“Or will these guys think of that too?” Devan wondered. “They’ve thought of everything else.” He sighed. “Wonder what they’re up to?”

“They’re not being idle,” Jiang said, crouching by the conference table. “They’ve played around with something on the station and it’s jamming our communicators.”

Devan contemplated the situation. “So they’re not coming in. But they’re not going to let us wait this thing out until the guys down planetside start wondering what’s going on either.” He looked at the colonel. “Could they pump this room with gas or depressurize the place or flush out the oxygen?”

Theis shrugged. “Anything’s possible if they’ve got the know-how.”

Devan turned back to the door. “All right then. I’m going out on three... Two. One.”

He hit the door release and dashed through, crouching low and firing a few cover shots. One of them found its target. Devan saw the second man run down the dark corridor, now hazy with smoke. He took a shot and the man shot back, clipping him in the shoulder, and disappeared around a bend.

“How many?” Jiang asked, appearing at Devan’s side.

“Just two,” Devan grunted, wincing and nodding down the hallway. “I got one but the other got away.”

Jiang looked down the corridor. “Stay here.”

With elegant poise, making no sound on the deck, she worked her way through the gloom. As she went farther along, she saw a faint yellow glow ahead that gradually brightened. She jumped to one side as she came around the bend in the corridor, avoiding a blast in the chest.

“Hold your fire!” she shouted after realizing what had happened. “I’m with Colonel Theis.”

“Put your hands up,” a stern voice commanded and two station security guards appeared as normal lighting returned to the corridor.

Jiang complied, dropping her weapon and kicking it across the corridor toward them.

“Identify yourself,” one of the guards said.

“Agent Jiang Sarra, Department of Security. Civilian branch.”

“Is that Eraecam security?” Devan called out from around the corner. “Where the hell were you guys? We’ve got two men down back here!”

One of the guards frowned at Jiang and moved past her with his gun at the ready, while his companion remained where he was with his weapon still trained on her.

“It’s all right,” Jiang said. “He’s with me.” The guard watched his friend for a moment then tightened his grip on his blaster. Flinching, Jiang held her hands higher.

“You’re wasting time!” Colonel Theis shouted. His voice the Eraecam security guards knew well. The one standing watch over Jiang lowered his weapon and nodded at her to lower her hands. “Get your weapon,” he muttered before following his friend. Sighing, Jiang picked up her gun and followed too. When she got back to the conference room, the lights were bright enough to see the carnage with little difficulty. One of the men who had instigated the attack was dead, as were the two security officers who had met them after they’d disembarked from the *Albatross*.

“Well?” she asked the colonel.

“The surviving attacker escaped in one of our shuttles,” Theis muttered, flicking off his desk display.

Chapter Four

With the arrival of the Class-A Federation cruiser, the *Harbinger*, and two Class-B vessels, the low orbital region around Eraecam was a lot busier than it had been an hour before.

“No, Captain Ilstroem,” Jiang said over the communicator in Colonel Theis’ office. “We wouldn’t object to some of your technicians looking over the device. We’d be glad of their assistance.”

“And have you released that footage?” inquired the captain of the *Harbinger*.

Jiang sighed. “No, not yet. But I think we will make it public. Unless of course, anyone on the *Harbinger* can identify the man.” There was a short pause. “No? That’s all right. Thank you, Captain.”

She switched off the communicator and ran her slender fingers through her hair.

“I still can’t believe they got the jump on us like that,” Janan murmured.

Jiang looked at her for a moment. Outside, two Federation soldiers were directing some curious station staff away. Letting out a breath of frustration, Jiang swung herself off her chair and slapped the switch to close the door with more force than was necessary.

She glanced at Devan, who was holding a healing pack against his injured shoulder. “Devan. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.”

“You handled yourself pretty well.”

Devan grimaced. “The entire reason I’m on this trip is to protect you guys and instead, I end up getting myself injured and being a liability. And thanks to me, the other guy got away.”

“It’s not your fault,” Jiang told him, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“Are you going to make the surveillance footage of him public?” Janan asked her. “Is that what you told the captain of the *Harbinger*?”

Jiang shrugged, leaving Devan’s side. “It can’t hurt.”

Devan then climbed to his feet and walked over to the conference table, where the box Jiang had removed from the communication relay lay open. Jiang watched as he pried at the casing with a flat metal tool she’d left there.

“Devan,” she told him, “don’t you go fiddling around with that thing. Captain Ilstroem will be sending over some technicians in a little while.”

“There’s a homing beacon in this somewhere,” Devan muttered. “And I know enough varieties of homing beacons to recognize them when I see them.”

“I’m sure you do,” Jiang tried again. “But why don’t you let the technicians from the *Harbinger* find it?”

“Because—” Devan grunted as he pried at a seam along the side of the casing edge. With a crack, part of the casing split into two separate sheets of metal and the tool went flying. He planted both his hands on the table. “There. Found it.”

Jiang and Janan had a look for themselves.

“It’s tiny,” Janan said.

“And yet it sent a signal at least as far as the distance between this system and that relay,” Devan said, adjusting his grip on his healing pack. “That means we’re looking at a rather expensive little toy here. Which

makes you wonder whether these guys are really just after ore payloads. They'd probably have to sell off one shipload just to break even after forking out on this thing."

Jiang looked at him, impressed. "You're right. These guys are going to an awful lot of trouble just to raid a trading route. Tampering with the communication relay was one thing, but paying off someone in the department to monitor investigations, preparing that homing beacon, trying to make us disappear... It seems like more trouble than it's worth. Regular pirates who think they're about to be caught just pack up and try another system."

Janan shook her head. "I don't understand why they attacked here when we didn't land at Talingth Port. I mean, they want to get rid of us quietly because we're onto them. And then they just decide to forget it and bring a task force down on themselves. It's not a textbook example of how to get someone off your back."

Jiang nodded. "I'm inclined to agree. But whatever they're up to, they're overly paranoid about being found out. This is more than raiding ship lanes. Now, as for why they attacked us here, I'd say the most likely reason is their homing beacon here."

Janan frowned. "Why? Because it's such an expensive little toy?"

"We could work out its range," Jiang explained, "and determine fixed locations where these guys could have received the signal. And I say that's what our next move should be."

*

A quiet but persistent beeping woke Jiang. She rolled over in her bunk and blinked a few times. She got up, got dressed and went to the bridge. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she saw a blinking light on the communicator and yawned before answering it. “Agent Sarra.”

“I saw some of the photographs compiled from that surveillance footage,” a man said on the other end. “And I recognize the man who got away.”

“We only put that stuff out an hour ago,” Jiang said, frowning.

“I know.”

“And how did you know how to contact me directly? Why aren’t you contacting your local authorities?”

“You’re the agent in charge of this investigation.”

“Well, assuming you’re playing straight with me, what can you tell me?”

“A name for starters. Jorj Steinlin. But if you meet me in two hours, I can give you more.”

“Where?”

“There’s a club in Talingth called Lucinda’s. Talingth Port Control can tell you where it is. It’s reasonably public, loud enough to stop eavesdroppers but not so loud we can’t talk. I’ll be waiting in the booth in the right hand corner on the far side of the place.”

“What if someone’s sitting in your booth already?”

“Someone is. Thankfully however, he’s with me.”

“So I’m meeting your friend too, am I?”

“He’ll be out of the way by the time you get here.”

“Assuming I come.”

“Assuming you come, yes. Goodbye, Jiang.”

Jiang looked at the now lifeless communicator for a few moments, then turned around and saw Devan standing in the doorway. "You should be resting."

"I heard you walking past," he replied. "Not that you're easy to hear, mind you. But anyway, you want to meet this guy?"

"I'm thinking," Jiang replied. She pulled out a data pad and made a note of the name she'd been given. "I'll contact the *Harbinger* and ask them to assign some men to make a perimeter around the place. Then I'll ask Colonel Theis to assign two or three back-up men to go inside before I get there."

"All sensible precautions," Devan agreed. "However, I'd like to go in as well. Preferably before them. You can't be too careful."

"You've got a hole that goes halfway through your shoulder," Jiang reminded him.

"I feel fine."

"Yeah, you've deadened all your nerve endings with that healing pack of yours. I don't see how that qualifies as fine."

"I can still move my shoulder."

Jiang sighed. "Again, I'm not sure if that's a good thing. You might be worsening the damage."

Devan didn't reply.

Jiang sighed when she realized he wasn't giving in. "I didn't know you were the stubborn type."

Devan smiled. "Oh, you wouldn't believe how stubborn I can be."

"All right. You can come along. I'll call Colonel Theis and see if he can lend us a nodescript ship to take down to the surface."

*

As it turned out, a nondescript ship wasn't a problem, nor was rounding up a handful of Federation snipers and commandos and arranging for a few local security guys in civilian gear to go inside after Devan.

Jiang hooked a small communicator to her belt, flicked it on and untucked her shirt to hide it. Then taking a breath, she made her way inside.

The first thing she noticed was that while there were a few female patrons around, Lucinda's catered more to the opposite sex. What the dancer in the center of the room had was impressive and she sure flaunted it. Although, since most of the crowd was watching her, Jiang conceded this allowed others to go about their business in the alcoves of the establishment without worrying about prying eyes. Still though...

She found the booth in the back corner where her contact was waiting. "A strip club? Really?"

The man shrugged. "It's close to the spaceport. Now, I'm going to order some drinks—my treat—because that's what people do in these places. You can leave yours untouched if you want though. I won't mind."

"Then get me something a girl like me would order," Jiang told him, sitting down. "Assuming a girl like me would drink in a place like this."

The man smiled as he climbed up. Jiang waited for a minute or so for him to return.

"I have something to show you," her contact said as he placed the drinks on the table. "Do you want to see the pictures of my kids?"

Jiang frowned. "You haven't told me your name."

"I don't have one."

"That's cute. And next, I suppose you're going to tell me I have to trust you."

The man shrugged. “You don’t have to trust me. You’ve got instincts. Use them. Do you want to see the pictures of my kids?”

“Fine. Show me.”

The man got out a pad and leaned across the table. “Jorj Steinlin,” he identified the man in the first picture he showed her. He scrolled through several more images, most of them surveillance shots. In a number of them, Jorj was with other men. In some, he was armed. In some, he was looking over his shoulder and in others, he seemed unaware he was being tailed.

Her contact switched the display off and slid a small card across the table to Jiang. “Everything’s on that card. It also includes details about how these images were obtained and where and when they were taken. Information your department used to have but appear not to any more.”

Jiang frowned. She had run a records check shortly after the name had been given to her in fact and nothing had come up. “The records have been wiped?”

“Whoever they’ve got inside your department, the person who’s been monitoring your investigation from the inside... They must have done it before you even came here.”

“You seem well-informed.”

“Yes.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you’re right.”

“But how did you have these records when ours had been wiped?”

“Because our databanks are safe from external manipulation.”

“And it’s likely more information has been deleted from the department’s databanks by these people?”

“You don’t need me to tell you that.”

Jiang sighed. “No. I guess not. I don’t suppose you’d know if anything else was deleted?”

The man shook his head. “I only knew Mr. Steinlin’s record had been wiped because you thought it necessary to release that footage of him.”

“I see.”

“However, now you have an edge over him and his friends.”

“Assuming this isn’t another one of their ruses.”

The man climbed to his feet. Neither he nor Jiang had touched their drinks. “You’ll just have to form your own conclusions on that. By the way, your back-up man is good. Noticeably better than your three local hands. I would never have spotted him if I hadn’t known what he looked like before he arrived.”

“I’m not sure what he’d think of that.”

The man shrugged. “Don’t tell him then. Good evening, Jiang.”

Chapter Five

They assembled in the mess on the *Albatross*. Janan and Devan looked pretty tired. Jiang sympathized. She planted a leg on a chair, propping herself up on it. “Any luck with that homing beacon, Janan?”

“The only fixed locations where they could have received the signal are here and down on Eraecam’s surface,” Janan replied. “At least, that’s what the techs from the *Harbinger* said. Don’t know why the hell these guys tried to kill us over it.”

Jiang picked it up and twirled it in her hand for a moment before putting it back down. “Well, we’ll figure it out later then. Now, I’ve got some news. We’re going to be leaving the system for a little while and Captain Ilstroem and his taskforce can keep an eye on things while we’re away.”

Janan tried to stifle a yawn. “So where are we going?”

“Hunting,” Jiang said. “We know the identity of the man who got away and we’ve got a record of his past activities that may provide us with some clues to his whereabouts.”

“Associates?” Devan asked.

“Two,” Jiang told him. “Unfortunately though, they’re not in Federation space.”

“Are they worth the trouble of arranging an extradition agreement?”

“These associates have been doing jobs with our man for eight years now,” Jiang replied. “Possibly more, since our records might not be complete. It’s also possible that they’re involved in whatever he’s doing now. As for an

extradition, it's out of the question until this leak is shut down. But we've got a decent lead on them now. Better than the one they just tried to kill us over."

"They made a mistake then," Devan murmured.

Jiang shrugged. "I don't know. If it wasn't for our anonymous tip, they would have got away with it."

Devan frowned. "By the way, are we authorized to go outside Federation space in this investigation?"

"If we're just following leads," Jiang replied, "it should be fine. Provided we don't attempt to apprehend anyone when we're outside our jurisdiction, we won't be violating any laws."

"Well," Devan decided, "I'm up for it then. I've always wanted to see the Frontier."

"Well, it probably won't be the most scenic part of it," Jiang told him, "but I'm glad you're coming. Janan?"

Janan shrugged. "I'm in. Where are going, by the way?"

"A place called Brae," Jiang told her. "However, we'll set a course for Jaerad first and make an adjustment once we're safely out of the system."

"And who are we after?" Devan asked. "This Jorj Steinlin?"

Jiang shook her head. "No. We've got no information on his whereabouts. We're going to track down one of his associates instead. Ariv Draeis."

"There was another associate mentioned on that card, wasn't there?" Janan chimed in.

Jiang nodded. "There were two associates mentioned. The other one was a guy called Darem Veltran. But we're not going after him right now. He keeps a lower profile than Ariv Draeis and he doesn't have as large an operation as him either. Neither does

Jorj Steinlin. Also, like Steinlin, Veltran shows up here and there but he has no known base of operations. Draeis on the other hand has.”

Epcar walked into the mess with a pad in his hand.

“What’s that?” Khalin asked, looking up.

“Message from Admiral Roth,” Epcar replied. “Trouble in the Eraecam system. Possible correlation. The first part’s public record. Armed men broke onto one of Eraecam’s orbital platforms and two security guards were killed in a firefight. The second piece of information however is from Gamma-Three, who happened to be in the system at the time. Their report paints a more detailed account.” He turned his gaze from the pad to his companion. “And the catalyst in all of this is of some interest. It seems three cargo ships have vanished on the route between Eraecam and the Jaerad system.”

Khalin raised her eyebrows “Three?”

“Have a look,” Epcar replied, handing her the pad.

Khalin studied the report. “Well, well. A Corsidan Heavy Industries S-6 Heavy Freighter and two Shokhan Star Haulers, all carrying Itherian ore. Identical matches to the ones we found.”

“So,” Epcar said. “Possible correlation.”

Chapter Six

“We’re making our approach now,” Janan called into the communicator.

“I’ll be right up,” Jiang replied. “Run our alternative ID. Just in case any friends of ours are monitoring transmissions from incoming ships.”

Janan smiled. “Yes, ma’am.”

“By the way, is Devan with you?”

Janan glanced back. “Yeah. He’s just drifted off.”

“Can you wake him up for me?”

Janan nodded. “Will do.”

“Ah, I’m awake,” Devan said, having a stretch as Janan switched the communicator off.

The door to the bridge opened and Jiang came in. “Have they hailed us yet?”

“No,” Devan replied before Janan could. “This place is a backwater. It puts the ‘frontier’ in the ‘Frontier’.”

“Just because it isn’t Phalamki or Koratav?” Jiang scoffed, taking a seat beside him. “It’s all right. Besides, you can go to those places another time.”

Devan nodded. “True.”

At that moment, an expected transmission came through. “This is Brae Central Control contacting incoming vessel. Please respond.”

“Central Control,” Janan replied, “this is freighter S1-V962. We copy.”

“Do you require special entry documents?”

Janan exchanged a glance with Jiang and shrugged. “I don’t know, Control. Do we?”

“What’s your purpose of visit?”

“We need to stock the galley. Maybe stretch our legs and get a little sleep planetside but that’s about it.”

“Right. No special documents then. Do you have a port preference?”

Janan looked at her colleague again.

“Jarin,” Jiang murmured.

“So how shall we do this?” Devan asked Jiang as they stepped onto the landing platform and were assaulted by a wave of oppressive dry heat. “Where do we find this Ariv Draeis?”

“He operates behind a front company, a small textile distribution business in the Lake District here. It’s about twenty blocks away.”

“We’re not walking there in this heat, are we?” Janan asked.

Jiang squinted in the glare of the sun. “Yeah, it’s something, isn’t it? But don’t worry, There’s an underground travelator system here.”

“Good.”

“And it should be a bit cooler near the lake.”

“By the way,” Devan asked as they made their way from the landing platform, “if there was a file on this Ariv Draeis guy in the Department’s databanks before, why didn’t anyone arrange an extradition earlier?”

“I looked into that,” Jiang replied. “It turns out a lot of agents were pulled off cases at the time so Corinthe could reassign them to tracking down resistance cells.”

“So we have *him* to thank for this mess.”

“Him,” Jiang said. “Among others. Right now though, it’s the others we’re interested in. Corinthe’s not going to bother anyone any more.”

They'd now reached the edge of the platform and an automatic door opened to the surrounding complex, with a suggestion of air-conditioned comfort within. They entered and after a little walking around, found the underground travelators. Soon, they emerged above ground again, this time to a rather different scene.

A large hill rose lay to their right, partially covered in forest—although there were a number of buildings on its slopes—and in front of them, a three hundred meter decline led to a lake stretching to the horizon. However, the first thing they noticed as they stepped outside was the fresh breeze blowing in from over the water.

Jiang turned to Janan. "Wait for us at the café over there and leave your communicator on. Devan and I should be back in an hour."

"Well," Devan said, looking at the small building down the street, "that's the front business."

"Nice piece of real estate, overlooking the lake," Jiang commented. "Although, I think living costs are very reasonable here."

"Compensates for the isolation, I expect. Still though, you're right. It may not be Phalamki but it's pretty nice." He paused. "What's that little character over there?"

Jiang looked at the alien, noticeably shorter than the average human and although there wasn't a feather on him, his leg structure and the way he seemed to move on his toes suggested his species was descended from some large avian predator. Although, unlike most species with his type of feet, this individual chose to wear custom boots, a probable sign he associated with humans and other human-like species a lot.

“That’s a Hie’shi,” Jiang said.

“Ah,” Devan said “I know about them. They make those Tridents. Those ships pack a punch.”

“They do. Although I doubt this individual’s in the shipbuilding business. Also, I wouldn’t go around calling Hie’shi little if I were you.”

“Even if they walk on the wrong side of the law like that one?” Devan asked as the individual in question went around to the back entrance of the phony textile warehouse they were about to investigate.

“*Especially* if they walk on the wrong side of the law.”

“Do you want to follow him?”

“He’s not going anywhere. What we really need to do is find some information on their upcoming shipping schedule. I imagine Ariv Draeis uses legitimate textile deliveries as a cover for his comings and goings. However, we also need to find out how many friends he’s got in this little business, along with the number of ships they’ve got. And what we *really* need when we leave this planet is a destination and an ETA where we can intercept Draeis and see if he can lead us to Steinlin.”

“Sounds fun. Do you have a plan?”

“The seeds of one. Come on.”

They walked down the street to the building the Hie’shi had entered, Jiang explaining what she had in mind along the way. As they approached, they saw the Hie’shi through the front window having a heated discussion with a human. Then the Hie’shi saw Jiang and Devan outside and waved the human into the back room. He sat down, his clawed hands upon the desk, and waited.

When Jiang and Devan came through the front door, he appraised them but with little apparent interest. Jiang looked around as a customer might but there wasn't much to observe. The décor was basic, the room was cooled by ceiling fans alone and there were some cloth samples hanging behind the desk. The Hie'shi didn't seem to mind the lack of a more substantial cooling system, although he did have one fan right above his desk. After waiting a few moments, he spoke to them. "Good day, Sir and Madam. Do you require any assistance?"

"Oh, hi there," Jiang replied. "We're not really here on business, to be honest. My associate and I just happen to be on Brae for a few days. However, we do freelance work for a number of clothing manufacturers back in the Federation and we're always interested in finding new suppliers."

"I see."

"And since we're here, we could hardly pass up the chance to check out a few of the local suppliers," Jiang continued. "After all, Brae wool is very well regarded among the manufacturers."

"It is," the Hie'shi agreed, nodding.

"You wouldn't have any samples on hand, would you?" Jiang asked. "For instance... let's see... I know one of the manufacturers we're working with is planning on bringing out a new summer clothing line so maybe that's something we could have a look at. Do you have any thin fabric that'd be appropriate for that?"

"I shall have a look," the Hie'shi replied, standing up and turning to a row of hanging sheets of fabric, cut into small square pieces. Selecting one, he handed it to Jiang.

“Oh, this is just lovely.” Jiang turned to Devan. “Feel this.”

Devan obliged, picking up the cloth and running it through his hands. “Yes, it’s very soft, isn’t it?”

Handing it back to the Hie’shi, Jiang smiled. “You’ve clearly got access to some high quality fabrics here.” She glanced at Devan, smiling. “And to think, we wouldn’t have even seen this place if we hadn’t come to the lake today. Well, thank you for—”

Devan tapped her arm. “Wait. Since we’re here, why don’t we ask about... well, you know.”

“Oh, yes!” Jiang said, turning back to the Hie’shi. “Since we’re here, could I ask where you ship to?”

“All over,” the Hie’shi replied.

“Are there any customers you ship to on a regular basis back in the Federation? I just ask because some of our clients occasionally manufacture specialty items and they only order small quantities of fabrics for these runs. Now, normally, ordering very small quantities from the Frontier would be out of the question because the cost of the delivery would outweigh the order itself.”

“You wish to hitch your smaller orders on shipments that are already heading to the vicinities of your clients. Do I understand you correctly?”

“Well, basically. I just want to know if that’s possible.”

“I merely take the orders, Madam,” the Hie’shi told her, “but my understanding is that your clients would gain no discounts if that is what you’re driving at. We often include multiple orders in single shipments and I think all our clients pay the same shipping rates.”

“But if it was just a small order, couldn’t some accommodation be made?” Jiang tried. “Perhaps as an

enticement to some of my clients to do business with you again in the future?”

“Possibly,” the Hie’shi replied, pulling out a small card and handing it to her. “However, I think it would be simplest if any interested clients contacted us directly, no?”

Jiang accepted the card with an easy shrug. “Oh well. I was just curious. Thank you for your time anyway.”

The Hie’shi inclined his head. “My pleasure, Madam.”

“He’s sharp,” Jiang said as they walked back up the street. “He was onto us before we even came through the door. I also got the impression he’s not normally on the desk.”

“I got the impression he doesn’t work there at all,” Devan told her. “You saw how he was arguing with one of Draeis’ men when he saw us?”

“Yeah,” Jiang agreed. “And I noticed he shoved him out before we came in.”

“Well, since we were compromised from the outset,” Devan asked, “is it possible that Steinlin or Veltran or some other associate in this little group gave that Hie’shi our photographs? Maybe everyone in the whole conspiracy, including the middlemen, know who we are and what we look like.”

Jiang frowned. “Highly possible.” She handed him the card the Hie’shi had given her. “And I wouldn’t trust this as far as I could throw it.”

“Why don’t you get rid of it then?”

“Because I’d like to know what it is.”

Devan frowned. “But if we take it back to the ship and it’s got another damn tracking device hidden in it...”

“Well, we won’t take it back to the ship. You can get my gear and bring it back to the cafe. Then we’ll pull it apart there.”

“All right. You’re the boss.”

“Yeah, don’t remind me.” Jiang glanced over her shoulder. “By the way, turn right and pick up the pace once you get to that side street.”

“Are we being followed already?”

“Not yet but let’s not wait until we’ve picked up a tail.” As they reached the street in question, they walked faster and took another right, which brought them back down the hill in the direction they’d come from.

“Actually, Devan, a thought’s occurred to me. If that card’s got a tracking device, taking it back to the *Albatross* could work to our advantage.”

“I fail to see how.”

“I want to do a stake-out on that place,” Jiang explained, “and see if Draeis shows up. If you guys trick these people into thinking I’ve left the system, he’ll be more likely to do so since he won’t be worried that he’s being watched.”

“Could work,” Devan conceded. “And if he doesn’t show up?”

Jiang shrugged. “We go back to Eraecam and back to the drawing board.” They were just about to cross a side street when she stopped and put a warning hand out.

“What’s wrong?”

“Down there,” Jiang gestured to her right at a man walking on the same street Draeis’ little scam business was on.

Devan frowned. “Bulge under his left sleeve. Concealed weapon.”

“And this place doesn’t have much in the way of security forces.” Jiang pursed her lips. “Get back to Janan and check out the card. Keep your communicator on but don’t contact me.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to follow that guy.”

“Don’t forget we’re out of our jurisdiction here.”

Jiang smiled. “Don’t worry, Devan. I don’t want a diplomatic row any more than you do.” She turned away. “I’m on channel three.”

Chapter Seven

Jiang glanced over her shoulder as she had done a few times during the past few minutes and saw a slight man step out of a side street. He appeared harmless, even friendly looking... aside from the custom seams on the outer sides of his boots. More concealed weapons and another friend of Ariv Draeis.

She looked ahead again. The man she'd been tailing was another thirty meters in front and his friend was about the same distance behind. She walked for another twenty meters or so and strolled towards a street on her right. There was some type of café on the corner and as she walked out of the second man's line of sight, she entered by an entrance from the side street. In a leisurely fashion, she looked at the board on the back wall, glancing at a window on a 'Staff Only' door to the right of it. She saw the faint reflection of the second man as he slowed down. She waited a couple of seconds and looked to her left, just in time to see him walk past the café and down the side street.

Jiang then left through the front entrance, stepped back onto the cobblestones of the main street and headed in the direction she'd just come from. After walking ten meters, she stepped into a small boutique. Her hair, tied back in a ponytail, she pulled loose. Then she looked outside through the store's main window. The man she'd been following originally had stopped up the street and he was standing by the side, near an entrance to the underground travelator system.

She turned away and looked at the racks. The clothes on display were simple fair of the kind a young woman might wear strolling down a seaside promenade on a summer's day. Jiang selected a thin light blue blouse, a pair of high cut khaki shorts and some semi-enclosed sandals.

"Hi there," she said to the sales clerk as she laid her purchases down. "Just these, thanks."

"Sure," the woman replied. "That's thirty-two credits."

"I only have Federation credits on me at the moment," Jiang said. "Can I use my card here?"

"Yes, of course." The woman smiled as she accepted the offered card and made the transaction.

"Um, can I get changed here?" Jiang said, nodding to the rooms behind the counter.

The woman shrugged. "I don't see why not."

Jiang smiled as she took her card and receipt and gathered her purchases under one arm. "Thanks."

A minute later, with her hair loose, a new shirt, tight fitting shorts and sandals, she no longer looked like the woman who had entered the store. She tied a large knot in the front of her blouse, pulled the safety catch on her small hand blaster in place and shoved it behind the knot. She'd have to reach down her top to get it but it was hidden. After inspecting her appearance in the room's wall mirror, she shoved her old clothes under a small bench and stepped out of the changing room.

She strode to the window of the boutique and stopped just before the door. The first man was still by the entrance to the underground travelators and a group of four women were coming toward her on the same side of the street as the store. Perfect cover. When they were a couple of meters from the entrance, Jiang stepped out

in front of them, kept walking and turned left at the next side street.

She circled, coming onto the main street again two blocks up. Right next to the café she'd ducked into earlier. After an appraisal of the scene, she saw the harmless looking man again. He was sitting on the second floor balcony of a restaurant across the street from her. Jiang strolled across the street and entered the building. When the automatic door closed behind her, she flicked on her communicator. "You got a location fix on this thing?"

"I see you," Devan replied. "I'm almost back at the ship now. The quarry's still in sight?"

"I know where he is," Jiang replied. "But right now, I'm heading into a restaurant to watch his back-up man."

"His back-up man?"

"The back-up man's watching a café on the corner of the main street. He thinks I'm inside."

"And you're going to sit in the restaurant and watch him then?"

"I doubt he'd recognize me now," Jiang assured him.

"You move fast."

"I try to."

"Still, don't take any chances."

"You know me. Anyway, I'll be in touch." Jiang flicked off the communicator and went upstairs. She took a seat on the balcony behind Harmless and looked at the menu.

"Do you know what you'd like to order yet, madam?" a waiter asked, appearing at her side after a few minutes.

"The grilled salfali looks nice to me," Jiang told him.

“Certainly,” the waiter replied with a slight tilt of his head. “And would you like anything to drink with that?”

Jiang smiled. “Just water, thanks.”

She watched the waiter leave then turned her attention back to the man, although the view from the balcony was nice too. The buildings across the street and beyond were single storey, allowing her to look over their roofs and see all the way to the lake. Harmless had ordered his meal too. The same dish oddly enough.

Janan frowned as Devan sat down beside her in the outdoor dining area of the lakefront café. “Jiang’s not back yet?”

Devan shook his head. “She’s trailing someone.” He put the Hie’shi’s card on the table and scanned it with a device he’d brought back from the ship.

Janan leaned over the table. “What is it?”

“It’s nothing,” Devan said, shaking his head. “Jiang and I thought there might be a tracking device or something on this but it’s clean.”

Janan pulled out a pad. “You want to read it? You can use this. I don’t mind.”

Devan frowned. “You sure?”

“Yeah, I’ve got back up copies of everything on it,” Janan told him, “so if it’s not the end of the universe if this card wrecks it.” She took the card from Devan, slid it in and brought up the display of its contents.

“Well?” Devan asked.

“It’s just information about the products they ship,” Janan replied, “along with delivery schedules and prices.”

Devan's shoulders slumped. Of course, he was no expert on these things. He was just security. But still, it didn't feel like much of a lead to him.

Although she'd started on her grilled *salfali* later than Harmless, Jiang finished before him. She ordered a coffee so she could keep watching him without feeling as though she was taking up a table. A few more minutes passed then, with a shrug, Harmless climbed to his feet and flicked on his communicator.

"The bird's well and truly flown," he murmured within Jiang's hearing. "Head to the ship and I'll see you there later." The other man said something in reply and Harmless grinned. "No, Vismach won't be happy but he's not the boss."

Jiang propped an elbow on her table and rested her head in her hands until Harmless had passed her. She followed—paying for her meal before she left—and headed outside. Putting about a hundred meters between her and her quarry, she then flicked her communicator on.

"Was beginning to wonder what had happened to you," Devan said.

"Nothing as yet," Jiang replied. "I had a very nice grilled *salfali* and now I'm following Harmless."

"Harmless'?"

"The back-up man. It's just my nickname for him, although I'd say his the most dangerous member of the group I've seen so far apart from that Hie'shi. I think I've got a name for him too by the way."

"How did you get that?"

“Something I overheard Harmless say in the restaurant when he was talking to his friend. He said Vismach wasn’t going to be happy that they’d lost me but Vismach wasn’t the boss.”

“Vismach being the guy who’s not part of Draeis’ group but who’s got the clout to order his men around.”

“Hence the Hie’shi.”

“Makes sense to me. Now why are you following Harmless?”

“Harmless is going to lead me to a ship.”

“Is he now?”

“That’s right,” Jiang said. “Now, how did you go with the card?”

“It’s clean. It’s just a standard brochure these guys hand out to their customers.”

“Makes sense. They wouldn’t have been expecting us so Vismach wouldn’t have had time to prepare a gimmicked card to give us. Now, I need another favor.”

“What do you need?”

“Head back to the ship. And you know that homing beacon we found back at the orbital station?”

“You want to use it?”

“Sure do. You said you know a bit about homing beacons, right?”

“What do you need?”

“Can you key its signal into the navigation system on the *Albatross* so we can keep a lock on it?”

“I think so.”

“Good. Well, do that. Then see if you can solder a magnet onto it and bring it me when I call you.”

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Devan flinched when his communicator vibrated, having almost dozed off. He picked it up and switched it on. "About time. Where are you?"

"Harmless has shown me his ship. Ariv Draeis is here too and he and his boys are loading it up for a trip."

"Damn it," Devan muttered, scrambling to his feet. "How much time have we got?"

"We're not desperately short on it," Jiang assured him. "They've got quite a lot of stuff to load and only six guys to do it but if you could head on down to landing bay twenty-seven with the homing beacon, that'd be great."

Chapter Eight

“Well?” Jiang asked.

“Any change in their course at this point would be a massive waste of fuel,” Janan replied, looking at her instruments. “They’re heading for the Jaerad system and I’d make their ETA nineteen hours. Twenty-three at most.”

Jiang nodded. “All right. Bring up the *Harbinger*.”

“Ready to transmit.”

Jiang flicked on her communicator. “*Albatross* to *Harbinger*. Come in, *Harbinger*.”

“We read you, *Albatross*,” came the reply.

“Inform Captain Ilstroem that Agent Sarra wishes to speak to him.”

“One moment.” There was a short wait.

“Captain Ilstroem. Go ahead, Agent Sarra.”

“We’re tracking a pirate vessel headed for the Jaerad system and we need the crew for our investigation. The ship’s a Dawnyards Trademaster, V916-81H, belonging to Ariv Draeis. You should be receiving the readings from our tracking system now.”

There was another pause. “Received,” the captain said. “I’m presently at the Eraecam system but I can intercept your target when they arrive. Any further instructions?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary, Captain,” Jiang replied. “Apprehend the crew, search their hold and make an itinerary of its contents. The crew, you can hand over to the local authorities there. The charges they’ll face as associates of Draeis will be enough to keep them in

custody. But keep Draeis on board the *Harbinger* until I can interview him.”

When the *Albatross* docked with the *Harbinger* over the main planet of the Jaerad system, Captain Ilstroem was waiting to greet Jiang in person. “Agent Sarra. Welcome aboard.”

“Thank you, Captain. Was there any difficulty in capturing these men?”

Ilstroem smiled. “Not much. They were fast to react when they spotted us but we had the jump on them, so to speak. How were you able to track them, by the way?”

“We had an informant who planted the beacon,” Jiang replied since planting a tracking device on a ship in Frontier space was not something for the public record. “He gave us the frequency. However, he wishes to remain anonymous.”

Ilstroem nodded. “I understand. Now, we searched the hold as you requested. And... we found some unusual cargo.”

Jiang frowned. “Unusual how?”

“I think it’s best if you see for yourself.”

Ariv Draeis looked groggy when Jiang entered the cell. His hands were cuffed and he slouched forward in his chair. But though his poise was subdued, there was an aggressive glint in his eyes. “How did you find me?”

“We received an anonymous tip,” Jiang replied as she sat down.

“Like hell you did.”

Jiang ignored the remark. "I want an associate of yours. Jorj Steinlin. He's wanted for murder."

Draeis snorted. "He's wanted for plenty of things."

Jiang smiled. "We'd very much like to speak with him."

"I don't know where he is."

Jiang's smile remained. "Could you guess?"

"I don't see what's in it for me."

Jiang raised her eyes in mild surprise. "Why, there's lots in it for you. Judges often offer a little clemency when people are cooperative."

"That's nice."

"Federation Security agents too," Jiang told him. "For instance, if you help me find Mr. Steinlin, I might let you remain here on Jaerad, rather than transporting you to, say, Savaali, where you're wanted for the murder of two civilians and three local security officers."

Draeis visibly stiffened at this. "All right. There's a Tanemi Grandeur floating around a little dead system close by here. KL-847. Steinlin often goes there to do some jobs there for some other guy. I've met him but I don't know his name."

"You're absolutely positive about that?"

"We've never been formally introduced."

Jiang frowned. "What kind of jobs could Steinlin be doing on a passenger liner in the middle of nowhere?"

"I don't know. Some experiments of some kind."

"Experiments?"

Draeis swallowed. "I've never seen them."

Jiang leaned back. "I see. Now, there's something else, Mr. Draeis, that concerns me. The naval team that checked your vessel found a rather unusual item in your

cargo hold. Microscopic organic material. Do you want to tell me about that?"

"I don't know what it is. Maybe some kind of medicine. I'm a middle-man."

"Medicine? That's the story you're running with?"

"I'm the middle-man," Draeis told her. "I pick the stuff up from someone in Brae and take it to this passenger liner. Maybe it's a new drug that might make a fortune if it works."

"New drugs are generally not tested on ships floating around in the middle of nowhere and they're certainly not tested by pirates. And who are they testing this medicine on?"

"Look, I don't know!" Draeis burst out.

Jiang waited for him to compose himself. "I should warn you, Mr. Draeis, that this doesn't look good."

"But I've cooperated with you."

"You have and it should help you. I just hope it helps you enough."

"What does that mean?"

"Use your imagination, Mr. Draeis. Now, where are the coordinates for this drifting liner? Are they recorded in your navigation computer?"

Draeis nodded.

"Very well," Jiang replied, pushing her chair out and rising to her feet. "Mr. Draeis, a shuttle will transfer you to the surface shortly and you'll be handed over to the local authorities. For the time being, you'll remain on Jaerad. However, I imagine the local authorities will want to ask you some more questions. I suggest, with my strongest recommendations, that you give them as much as you can. Any information you have regarding Steinlin. Anything about your mutual friends. Also, although it's

not in our jurisdiction, any information about the source of this mystery biological substance may help you too. Good evening, Mr. Draeis.”

Khalin was reading through old files when Epcar came in. She looked up hopefully. “Did you talk to the admiral?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“And? He’s got some new leads for us? He’s giving us some rest and recreation?”

Epcar smiled and shook his head. “Sadly, no. He wants us to stay put and keep an eye on things here a little longer.”

Khalin sighed. “I was afraid of that. Well, maybe we can stretch our legs and see a bit of the city then.”

“Actually, I’ve already been having a look at the city,” Epcar said. “Talingth may not be a big place but it’s got a good network of surveillance cameras and the admiral’s arranged to give me remote access to it. I’m keeping an eye on the streets from the bridge to see if I can find anything useful.”

Smiling, Khalin stood up and put her hand on his shoulder. “Sounds fun. Knock yourself out.”

“Here’s the problem,” Jiang announced when she was back on the *Albatross*. “We may finally have an edge on the people we’re after but we can’t be sure how long we’ll have it. A passenger liner’s not a planet. It probably won’t be there in a hundred years. It might not be there in ten minutes. So if we want to investigate what’s going on there, we need to go immediately.”

“So what’s the problem?” Janan asked, frowning.

“The problem is something our friend Mr. Draeis alluded to during our brief discussion. His men were bringing some kind of microscopic organic material there and it sounds as if it may be being used in experiments. Possibly this is the real reason behind the raiding of the main shipping lanes.”

“So the targeting of ships carrying itherian ore was a smokescreen?” Devan asked.

“Looks like it.”

“And they’re doing experiments on this ship instead?” Janan asked. “On the people they’ve kidnapped?”

Jiang’s expression was grim. “That’s what it sounds like. So we can’t go in unprepared.” She hesitated. “And leak or no leak, we’ll have to inform Corsida where we’re going and give them everything we’ve uncovered so far.”

Devan didn’t look happy. “Even if we tip off the inside agent these guys have got?”

“Yes,” Jiang conceded. “But I think we can avoid tipping them off until we’ve seen this passenger liner for ourselves and then it won’t be such a problem. I’m going to leave a log of our intentions here on the *Harbinger* and ask Captain Ilstroem to send it on if we haven’t made contact in two days’ time.”

They left the *Harbinger* an hour later, along with the Jaerad system, and took a direct route to the outskirts of KL-847 and the Tanemi Grandeur there.

“Running a scan,” Janan reported. “No weapons readings. Also, it’s running on low power.”

“How many other ships are in its vicinity?” Jiang asked.

“None at the moment.”

Jiang thought it over. “All right. Bring us in for a closer look.”

“Got it.”

“It looks like a derelict,” Devan said as they flew alongside it.

“And the engines have been stripped from their housings,” Jiang said. “So this is meant to stay where it is. Very few running lights as well. Any lifeform readings?”

“No solid signals,” Janan told her. “Although there may be someone alive near the front of the ship.”

“All right,” Jiang said. “Let’s see if we can find some place to land close by.”

“You’ve got it.” Janan brought them in for another pass alongside the ship’s portside, skimming close over the hull until she found a suitable hangar.

“Atmosphere scan?” Jiang asked.

Janan ran a program some engineers from the *Harbinger* had set up to scan for the organic substance from Draeis’ cargo hold. “Don’t know about the entire ship but the hangar’s clear of that substance. Also, if there’s no one alive here, maybe whatever that substance is has dissipated.”

“Maybe. All right. We’ll save the full body suits and just have a quick look around with gloves and face masks. We can come back for the full suits if we want to go farther into the ship. Janan, you stay here and be ready for a quick take-off.”

Jiang and Devan stepped out into the hangar with their weapons drawn.

“All right, Janan,” Jiang said into her communicator. “Close the hatch behind us.”

“Got it.”

She nodded to Devan. “Okay. Let’s go.”

They crept across the silent hangar, gazing at empty space. No shuttles. No maintenance supplies. No people.

“This is like a ghost ship,” Devan said, his voice slightly distorted through the mask. “Was Draeis really going to meet Steinlin here?”

Jiang shrugged. “He thought he was, unless he had the balls to lie to me back there. Doubt it though. However, you know pirates and their schedules.”

“Right,” Devan nodded. “You’re five minutes late so the deal’s off.”

“Something like that.”

They crossed the hangar and Devan stepped in front as they went through a doorway. He nodded to Jiang and she followed him through corridors that alternated between lit and unlit until they came across a dead man lying sprawled across the floor.

“Careful,” Jiang said, raising her hand. “This man might be contaminated with whatever it was Draeis was smuggling.”

“We should ID the body,” Devan said. “See if he’s a crew member of any of those missing ships.”

“That would confirm our suspicions,” Jiang agreed, crouching down beside the man. “Although, maybe we should go back and get the full body suits first.”

“You’ve got gloves and a face mask,” Devan said. “You’ll be all right.”

Jiang crouched beside the body. This kind of examination was never pleasant but it was something she’d sadly become accustomed to. “Bruise marks.”

“What?”

“There are bruise marks around his neck,” she explained to Devan. “He was strangled. And there are tiny bits of dried blood under the ends of his nails.”

“So he died fighting off an attacker.”

“Or attacking someone else,” Jiang said. “This is definitely strange though. Two people in a fight that left at least one man dead. And both of them unarmed.” She stood up and looked around. “There are no ships in the hangars and the engines to this hulk are missing. It’s beginning to look as though someone just dumped these people here to see how long it’d take before they started trying to kill each other.”

Devan swallowed. “Um... Should we check him for ID or get a picture? Or bring the body back for Forensics?”

“Maybe later. Especially if he’s contaminated with something.” Jiang knelt down again to get a picture while Devan wandered up the corridor.

“Hey!” he called out. “There’s a dead woman up here. Tiny bits of dried blood under her nails too.”

Jiang came over to have a look. “They’re all fighting by hand and scratching each other...” She took a step back and let out a breath. “All right, Devan. We’ve got to check the rest of the ship.”

Chapter Nine

Jiang finished her report and sent it.

“Well,” she said to herself once the transmission was complete, “that’s that.”

She leaned back and shut her eyes. Once again, the *Albatross* was sitting at Talingth Port on Eraecam and things were—for a brief and precious moment—quiet.

In silence, Jiang contemplated the past few days. The meeting with Colonel Theis. Inspecting that relay. The attack on the orbital station. Their trip to the Frontier... and what she and Devan had just found on that ship. She wondered what it all added up to. People stealing ships and infecting the crews with something that made them go crazy, killing each other with their bare hands. These were some serious crimes. But the motive behind them eluded her, along with the architect of the whole operation.

The chime of the communicator brought her back to the here and now.

She flicked it on. “Yes?”

The venue was different—thank goodness—and she was now sitting across from a young woman, likely around her own age, but Jiang felt a strong sense of *déjà vu*.

“Let me guess,” she said. “You’re another one of my friends with no names. You work for Naval Intelligence?”

“You could say that.”

“What happened to the last guy?”

Her new companion smiled. “He’s off fixing your leak.”

“I see,” Jiang said. “So what do you want?”

“I’m interested in that ship you found.”

“Yeah, you said that,” Jiang reminded her. “But why?”

“Because I’ve been working on a case of my own and when I intercepted your transmission, it occurred to me that it might be same one as yours. I want to talk shop.”

Jiang shrugged. “Well, if you saw the report I sent to Corsida, you’ve got most of the details already. It seemed some of these people had been deliberately infected with something that drove them crazy. They attacked the other prisoners who were with them, scratching them as well. The scratching was so widespread that it seemed to be one of the symptoms of the madness. And the scratching must have spread whatever drove them mad to the other prisoners because, in the end, they *all* killed each other.”

“It sounds horrible,” the other woman said.

Jiang was quiet and, for a few moments, she was right back on the deck of that ship at the scene of the slaughter. “It was.”

“It was a synthetic virus,” her companion told her. “That batch you found on Draeis’ ship... It was sent to the Jaerad authorities, along with Draeis and his crew, and that’s what came back from the analysis.”

Jiang frowned. “And did you know about it as well? Is that what you meant about us approaching the same case from different ends?”

The other woman paused before answering. “No, we weren’t investigating any virus. We were looking for someone and while we were investigating some coordinates where his ship had been sighted, we found

three drifting derelicts. They were identical matches to the ones you were looking for.”

Jiang felt a chill go through her.

“And,” the woman continued, “having seen your pictures of some of the victims you’ve just found, we’ve ID’d them as being crew members and passengers from those ships.”

Jiang’s features grew grim. “Then you’re right. We’re looking at the same case.”

The woman nodded. “Do you have any theories as to why these people might be manufacturing this virus?”

Jiang considered the possibilities. “I can only think imagine it’s a biological weapon of some kind.”

For a few moments, neither of them spoke. The ambient noise of distant conversations and the slow music of the restaurant filled the silence.

The other woman got up. “Well, thank you for your time, Agent Sarra.”

Jiang gave her a wry look. “So the next time Naval Intelligence takes an interest in the case, will you be showing up again? Or will it be someone else?”

The woman just smiled. “We’ll see.”

Jiang watched her disappear and shook her head. “And why exactly,” she murmured to herself, “is Intelligence so interested in our case anyway?”

When she got back to the ship, Khalin found Epcar manning his post on the bridge.

“Do you sleep here now or something?” she asked, slumping down in her chair.

“I think I might be onto something,” Epcar replied, not looking up.

Khalin frowned. “Well, whatever this is, I hope it doesn’t keep us here too long. We really need to go and check out that Tanemi Grandeur that Jiang and her colleagues found. What if General Einhast goes back there?”

“I’m not sure he’d risk it, to be honest,” Epcar told her, still scrolling through something on his display screen. “And considering the fact he’d already killed off all his test subjects on the Grandeur, I imagine there’d be little reason for him to go back anyway. Especially if he’s finished with his experiments. Perhaps we need to consider where he plans to use this virus.”

“Like the Leihart system perhaps?” Kalin suggested. “As a revenge attack on the people who ousted him?”

“Maybe,” Epcar said. “Oh, and we should be getting another lead soon as well. While you were out socializing, the admiral called again. Apparently, Ariv Draeis told the authorities on Jaerad about the man who manufactured this virus. The supplier on Brae. Some guy called Imraeis Cardalenci. The admiral’s arranging an extradition right now.”

Khalin pursed her lips. “Brae? That’s one of those systems where General Einhast can’t show his face again, right?”

“Yeah. Which is why he has to use a bunch of middle men like Draeis and Steinlin.”

“And how’s Gamma-Three going with that leak in the Department of Security?”

“Oh, they’ve shut it down,” Epcar told her as though it were the simplest thing in the world. “There was a dirty section chief on Marno.”

Khalin chuckled at the manner of his delivery. “Oh. Right then. Piece of cake, I imagine.”

“Something like that...” Epcar was staring quite intently at his display now and appeared to be only half-listening. “Hang on. I think I’ve got something now.”

“What exactly are you up to anyway?” Khalin asked.

“Well,” Epcar said, “I’ve been looking through the landing records to see who’s been in and out over the last few days.” He brought up a display to show her. “See this ship here? It came in this morning and triggered a flag in a little system I’ve been running.”

“What system?”

“It flags anything that matches any of the ships or people from Gamma-Three’s records. The ones with Jorj Steinlin and his friends.” Epcar looked quite proud right then. “So I checked it out and found that the ship belongs to one Darem Veltran. One of Steinlin’s associates mentioned in their report. And since Ariv Draeis is in custody, if we get Veltran, we’ll have two of the three.”

Khalin grinned. “And if we send in a coupon, we can get Jorj Steinlin and complete the set.”

Epcar chuckled, turning back to his console. “Yeah...”

“So what are you doing now?” Khalin asked. “Monitoring the surveillance network?”

“That’s right,” Epcar said, his eyes still on his console. “And I’ve got... quite fast at it... over the last few days.”

“So you’ve spotted Veltran?”

Epcar gave a derisive snort. “That was child’s play. I did that an hour ago.” He tapped at his console again. “What I’m doing... now... is... tracking him. However, I saw something just as you came in and now I think I’ve got something to share.”

Khalin leaned over for a better look. “Excellent. So what have you found?”

“He landed, went for a stroll carrying some small boxes and he dumped them”—Epcar brought up a map of a small section of town, along with an image of an old looking building—“here.”

“Let’s find out what he’s up to then,” Khalin said, getting up. “I’ll go and retrieve the boxes and you can keep an eye on the cameras. Then I’ll see whoever comes along to pick them up. I have a feeling that Veltran’s acting as a middle-man here.”

“And whoever’s picking up the boxes will be the real lead?” Epcar asked.

Khalin shrugged. “Just a theory.”

“All right. But be careful out there.”

Khalin hadn’t got very far when her communicator came to life. She switched it on as she walked. “Yes?”

“Someone’s heading down the street to the building now,” Epcar told her.

“Do you recognize them?”

“I’m checking the records now,” Epcar replied. “No, nothing there. He’s entered the building.”

“The building’s derelict, isn’t it?”

“It certainly looks that way from the street and no-one else has been in or out recently. But... All right. He’s leaving again. He’s got the boxes.”

“What does he look like?”

“Like someone carrying two boxes. And he’s a Hie’shi. You’d better double your pace. He’s heading away from you.”

“How many blocks away is he?”

“Just two.”

Khalin jogged a little bit to gain some ground. She stopped at the first corner to look around and pulled out her communicator again.

“Drop the communicator,” said a voice behind her.

Khalin froze for a moment then placed it on the ground. “Can I turn around?”

“No, and I told you to drop it.”

“That might break it.”

“Rather the point, Miss. Now stop being cute. Stamp your foot down on the communicator hard. Do it now, please.”

“Well, it’s rather wasteful but hey, you’re the man with the gun.” Khalin crushed the communicator under her heel.

“Now, kick it towards me.”

Khalin did so, turning around as her assailant, a thin grinning man who appeared to be in his thirties, crouched down to pick it up. While his gaze was averted, she kicked his weapon from his hand and pulled out her own, flicking it to stun.

The man looked at her in surprise.

She in turn gave him a look of contempt. “You fanned out around the pick-up point to cover your friend when he retrieved the boxes, right? How many of you are out here? Three? Five?”

“Get lost,” the man muttered.

“Why’d you want to cover for the others? If you’re going to prison, wouldn’t you like some company?”

“You’re not a security officer.”

“Fine,” Khalin said. “Have it your way.” She pulled the trigger and the man dropped to the ground. She put

away her gun, picked up her communicator and flicked it on. This one was built to last.

“I thought I told you to give us a heads up if any of these guys were around,” she said.

“Sorry,” Epcar told her. “It took a while to get a good view of where you are at the moment.”

“Well, don’t worry. It’s all taken care of. Just give me a head’s up if you see any more of them. Where’s our Hie’shi, by the way?”

“He’s heading for a monorail station. If you run, you can make it before the next rail car comes.”

Khalin ran. “That monorail’s an intercity line, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Epcar replied. “Are you at the station?”

“Almost.” Khalin reached the building a moment later, passed through the turnstile and took a moment to get her breath back. “Which platform’s our friend on?”

“The north platform. A car’s coming in from the west right now. It’s less than a minute away.”

“Don’t worry,” Khalin assured him. “I’ll make it.”

Panting, she jogged up a flight of stairs and reached it as the car pulled up.

It was well and truly night as Khalin stepped into the rail car so she had to adjust her eyes to the glare of fluorescent light.

The car was fifteen meters long and segmented to allow for tighter turns around corners of the rail track. At the station though, it was of course straight so she could see all the way to the other end. And that’s where the Hie’shi was, standing behind two other passengers.

She watched him for a moment before moving down the aisle in the middle of the car. There were a number of free seats but there were a few other passengers stretching their legs so she didn't look too out of place.

At the next station, under the cover of the people getting on and off, she sidled a little closer to her target. He didn't seem to notice.

By the time the car reached the station after that, she was right next to him. She reached into her pocket to check her blaster's stun settings when he turned to her, giving her the Hie'shi equivalent of a smile, which consisted of a bright look in his eyes and a soft vibrating clicking sound. Then he stepped out from behind the group of passengers he'd been standing between them and Khalin saw two things. He didn't have the boxes with him any more and he was carrying a blaster.

Before she could react, the Hie'shi shot her in the stomach. Khalin gasped, clutched at her wound and keeled over, rolling onto the floor of the car to the shocked gazes of onlookers.

Waving his weapon at the other passengers, the Hie'shi crouched down beside her, unclipped her communicator and placed it in one of her hands. "No hard feelings, I hope, Miss."

He stepped off the car onto the platform and disappeared. The car though did not pull away.

With some difficulty, Khalin held her communicator up and flicked it on. "He doesn't have the boxes," she murmured almost as a whimper.

"I know," Epcar replied, his voice tense with restrained emotion. "Don't worry about him. Just lie back and try not to move. I'm coming."

Wincing, Epcar flicked off the communicator and gripped her middle with a pained grimace. The people around her blurred out of focus and the interior of the car darkened.

Chapter Ten

Doing a round of the *Albatross* after dinner, Jiang discovered a message on the communicator with a responding frequency. When she called back, she recognized the voice on the other end at once.

“I didn’t expect to hear back from you so soon,” she said. “It can’t have been more than a few hours.”

The woman on the other end sounded tense. “I need to talk.”

Jiang found her friend in a hospital bed. “What happened?” she asked.

“I had a run in with a Hie’shi,” the woman told her, wincing. “But I think I’d better introduce myself before I tell you all about it. We can’t *really* be friends with no names. My one’s Khalin.”

“Pleased to meet you, Khalin,” Jiang replied. “Although you already know my name, don’t you? What happened?”

Khalin gave her the short version of the story.

“And he gave you your communicator?” Jiang asked when she was finished. “That’s pretty cocky.”

“It was smart,” Khalin said. “If he killed me, my partner would have gone straight after him. But since he incapacitated me instead, he tied us both up and got away.”

“I wonder if this is the same one I saw on Brae,” Jiang said.

“Oh?”

“I can probably confirm it with a look at the rail car security footage,” Jiang said. “But it sounds likely. This Hie’shi was helping out at the supply end of this little operation. And I’m beginning to think he’s rather high up in the chain of people we’re looking for.”

Khalin frowned. “Did you get his name?”

“Yeah. His name is Vismach.”

“Vismach. Sounds like he’s from the Federation as opposed to the Hie’shi system or one of the Frontier worlds.”

“Yeah, that’s what I think.”

“Incidentally, Jiang, while we’re on the subject of names, what drew us into all this was the possibility that a man called General Einhast may be involved in some capacity. Have you come across any mention of him in your investigations so far?”

“I can’t say I have. Although, I’ve heard of him. He attempted to use that confusion after that fiasco with Corinthe to pull a coup in the Leihart system and then disappeared. And he’s the self-appointed kind of general as opposed to the real deal. You’re still looking for him?”

“He’s a loose end,” Khalin explained. “In our profession, we don’t like loose ends.”

“We don’t like them much in ours either.”

“Well, you’re a woman after my own heart, Jiang,” Khalin said, leaning back on her pillow. “Now, before the medics come back to make me get some sleep, do you think these people would go back to that Tanemi Grandeur?”

“I doubt it,” Jiang said. “I think it’s served its purpose. And if they’ve finished testing their virus, this batch that

Vismach picked up might be used for something else entirely.”

“That’s a scary thought.”

Jiang shrugged. “True. But we’re not entirely out of leads though. Ariv Draeis obviously knows Vismach so perhaps I can just arrange another interview with him.”

“So you’re heading to Jaerad then?” Khalin asked.

Jiang shook her head. “No. Not Jaerad. Corsida. I’ll arrange a prisoner transfer this afternoon. And I’ll have the section chief from Marno sent there too.”

Khalin frowned. “The section chief... Oh, right. He was working with these guys.”

“Yeah, I just found that out this afternoon,” Jiang told her.

Khalin rolled her eyes. “Yeah, me too. But why Corsida? Why not bring them both here?”

“I want them as far away from their friends as possible,” Jiang explained. “And I want them to know it.”

Several days later, Jiang, Janan and Devan were greeted by a familiar sight as they made their approach to Corsida on board the *Albatross*. It was bustling with activity and every bit as busy as they remembered it—with many cargo ships, passenger liners and smaller private vessels coming and going.

“This is the *Albatross* approaching Corsida,” Jiang said into the communicator.

“We read you, *Albatross*,” came the reply, “but you’re going to have to wait in line. We’ll contact you in five or ten minutes.”

“I know you’re busy,” Jiang said, “but could you check for system flags?”

“Um... One moment. The *Albatross*?”

“Correct.”

“Okay. Yes, you’re right. There is a flag. A landing platform has already been assigned to you. Your port is Kardel Bay and the landing platform is D-4-5217. The beacon will be activated as you approach port. Someone will meet you at the pla-”

“Hold tight!” Janan shouted and, with a jerky movement, brought the ship into a sharp turn.

Jiang was thrown into the back of her seat and she clung to the harness as they veered to port and rolled. She got a glimpse of bright light flashing across the view screen.

“Did someone fire on us?” Devan asked from behind her, straining to see. But no one answered him.

The *Albatross* lurched forward and Janan brought the ship into a steep climb and a couple of corkscrews before leveling it out.

They were closing in on the Federation cruisers now. A flight of Wasps came towards them, flew overhead and disappeared off the view screen.

“Is everything all right?” the man on the communicator asked.

“A bit of reckless flying,” Jiang said. “But everything’s fine. Platform D-4-5217?”

“Yes. In Kardel Bay.”

“Kardel Bay,” Jiang repeated. “Thanks.”

“Anytime,” the man replied, unable to hide the bafflement in his voice.

Jiang terminated the transmission. A red light on her control panel indicated another one was coming through. She flicked a switch and caught the tail end of a question. “—all right?”

“The cruisers,” Devan murmured.

“I’ve got it,” Jiang told him. “Janan?”

“We’re fine,” Janan replied. “Tell him we’re fine.”

Jiang hit the switch again. “We’re fine. No damage. Thanks for the assist.”

“Just doing our duty, ma’am. Unfortunately the vessel that attacked escaped to light speed though. Do you require any further assistance?”

“Thank you but we should be all right from here.”

“Copy that. We’ll lodge a report with Corsida Control, along with our flight footage.”

“Much appreciated,” Jiang replied. “Thanks again.”

“Safe flying, *Albatross*.”

Switching off the communicator, Jiang turned to Janan. “What happened back there?”

“One of those ships in a stationary orbit position broke off and attacked us,” she replied. “I saw them just before they started firing on us.”

Jiang shook her head. “It’s lucky you were at the controls.”

Janan shrugged. “Well, we’re alive. I didn’t expect these guys would pull a stunt like that right here though.”

“They were probably counting on that,” Jiang replied, letting out a sigh. “Well, I guess that means they still want us dead.”

Almost a silhouette in the dimmed room, Vismach looked at the communicator in front of him with a narrowing of the eyes, a Hie’shi expression of distaste.

“What did you do that for?” he demanded. “I told you. I’m here in the khalakye’s nest. I’ve already taken care of everything.”

“And the *Albatross* is landing in a matter of minutes.”

“Are you demented?” Vismach ended his question with a click of irritation. “You kill the crew of the *Albatross* and you’ve got a brand new trail leading to you. It’s lucky the pilot’s as good as she is.”

“What did you say to me?”

“It’s not what I said. It’s what I asked. But if you want to verify it, then you just keep doing what you’re doing. After all, it worked so well the first time, didn’t it?”

“What? It served its purpose at Eraecam just fine.”

“Yeah, well. It was right after that stun on the orbital station that these guys showed up on Brae, so I have my doubts about that.”

“Listen, I don’t know who you think –”

“And spare me your spiel about the money you’re paying me. You’re getting damn good service in exchange for that. After all, whose sources tipped us off about this prisoner transfer in the first place?”

“Yeah, well, be that as it—”

“That’s right. Mine. Although I wish I hadn’t told you now. But if there’s a debt at either end of this deal, then it’s at yours.”

“Listen, I don’t care how good you think you are at your job, Vismach—”

The Hie’shi made a derisive clicking sound.

“—you piece of fringe scum. You’re not indispensable. Also, I know damn well what you were up to when you arranged that pick up on Eraecam too. You deliberately chose a hotspot so I couldn’t go there myself.”

“Of course. It seemed like a sensible precaution with you getting these notions in your head that you can pull off this petty scheme of yours without me.”

“There’s nothing in this operation I can’t handle without your help, Vismach.”

“So you could have handled Jaerad if you’d wanted to?”

There was a slight pause. “So that was you, was it? I should have known.”

“Yeah. That was me.”

“And you think *I’m* reckless? I didn’t ask you to do that.”

Vismach shrugged. “Of course you didn’t. You’re still getting your backup batch from Veltran so you don’t care about the batch that was confiscated off Draeis. I know that.”

“Then why the hell did you risk the operation to break into the headquarters of a major law enforcement agency to retrieve it then?”

“Because I can use one of those batches to clear up your mess and still provide you with the other one.”

“Why not just bring me both of them if you’ve got them?”

Vismach sighed. “I did say I’m clearing up your mess, didn’t I?”

“Yeah? Well, if you want the rest of your fee, then you sure aren’t acting like it. You’ve insulted me, you’ve undermined me—”

“Spare me the theatricals. I thought we were professionals.”

“Maybe I should just cut you loose after all, you arrogant little midget. I can pull this off without your help.”

Vismach's eyes narrowed at the remark about his stature. "You? You can't show your face on any civilized world in the Federation or along the Frontier. Including Brae, I might add. As for myself, I can find new work whenever I want to so if you don't want to pay me, blow hot air all you like. Although don't be surprised if no one wants to work with you after you've finished, you spoiled little git. You've got a lot to learn about living on this side of the law if you think you can act like this without it catching up with you."

"Empty threat. I can find someone else with your expertise whenever I want to. I may be new to the fringe but I know enough to know guys like you are half a credit a dozen on Danneri."

Vismach snorted. "You wouldn't last a minute if you walked into a bar on Danneri. But perhaps you're right. Maybe you could find someone to do your dirty work for you. Of course, you'd have to check them out first and bring them up to speed on your entire operation. Oh, and that's right. You'd have to recover your precious virus strains from me."

"Who's blowing hot air now? I can just buy another batch from Cardalenci. I've got the money and all I lose is a little time."

At this, Vismach laughed. "Cardalenci's currently being extradited into Federation custody, idiot. Or hadn't you heard?"

"What?"

"That's right. It's public record if you want to check. Anyway, you've made your position clear enough. So if there's nothing else, I'll be on my way."

"Wait!"

Vismach paused, his talons dangling just above the button that would terminate the transmission. “We’ll do things my way then, shall we?”

“Well, you may be right about Cardalenci as I haven’t been able to get in contact with him. So if you’ve got the last batches of the virus, then I guess I don’t have much of a choice.”

“Well, isn’t that nice?” Vismach said. “Even someone like you can see reason.”

“That doesn’t mean I have to like you though.”

Vismach made a cheerful clicking sound. “That won’t be a problem, General. After all, that was never stipulated in our agreement.”

After entering the atmosphere, the *Albatross* made its descent, flying over the land on the night side of the planet until it approached an impressive series of structures built largely around a massive headland jutting out into the ocean. The landing platforms were positioned near the base of the huge rock, allowing convenient access to the higher buildings above it and the other areas of the city underneath, stretching along the shore. Overhead, all three of Corsida’s moons shone brightly in the sky.

“Major Telairas,” Jiang greeted the man waiting for her as she and the others stepped onto the landing platform. “It’s good to see you again, sir.”

“Agent Sarra,” Telairas replied, shaking her hand and nodding to Devan and Janan.

“Do you have my prisoners?” Jiang asked.

“I’ll take you to them,” the major replied. “They were apparently complaining about rights this and rights

that en route but now they're here, I think they've begun to realize how much trouble they're in."

"Well, Ariv Draeis should be all right," Jiang said. "He was cooperative enough with the authorities on Jaerad. I don't know about this section chief from Marno though."

"I imagine you'll hate him." The major flicked on his communicator. "Captain. The *Albatross* has arrived. The agent and I are on our way now." He waited for a reply but it didn't come. "Captain?" He turned to Jiang, pulling out his gun. "Come on!"

"Janan, wait with the ship," Jiang called out to her pilot, drawing her own gun. Devan did the same.

They followed the major, charging up a flight of stairs and into an elevator. Several seconds later, they emerged far above the landing platforms on a wide flat platform running most of the length of the enormous headland, following it as it jutted into the sea. At the other side of the platform, there were a number of buildings with more rock cliffs above them, another level of buildings farther up and, above that, the top of the enormous monolith itself.

"The holding cells are on this level of the city," Major Telairas said. "Watch out for speeders."

Jiang and Devan took his advice on board as they darted across the platform and into the main entrance to that particular cluster of buildings, an archway to an open courtyard with entrances into the buildings proper to either side. They took an entrance on the left, followed the major through several corridors and then onto a suspended walkway. At the other side, they found a scene of obvious chaos.

Several security officers were darting around the entranceways, and a number of shots echoed from inside. One of the officers, upon seeing the major, turned around and ran over.

“What’s going on, Corporal?” Telairas cried out.

“It’s insane, Major! Our officers in there are firing on us!”

“The virus,” Jiang muttered, exchanging a glance with Devan. “And this time, there are arms involved.” Gritting her teeth, she tightened her grip on her blaster.

Telairas glanced at her then turned back to the fighting. “Someone’s cleaning up their tracks,” he said. “Taking out Draeis and that section chief. But how’d they get the virus *here*?”

Jiang’s expression was grim. “I’m not sure. But right now, we’ve got to seal this building off. Don’t let anyone out.”

Major Telairas nodded and turned to the other officer. ‘Corporal?’

“Got it,” the man replied and ran back to the building.

“Contact the local emergency services and tell them what’s going on,” Jiang told the major. “Then we’ll need to get some kind of strike team down here with their weapons on stun.”

“Do you think the prisoners are still alive?” Telairas asked her.

“Do *you*?”

Major Telairas shook his head.

“Now, while you’re on that, I need access to whatever surveillance footage I can get. Whoever’s responsible for this might still be around.”

“There’s a surveillance station on the other side of that walkway,” Telairas told her, pointing it out. “Right there.”

Jiang turned around and saw it straightaway. With a large radar dish on its roof, six sides and thick entrance doors, it wasn’t hard to spot.

“Thank you, Major.” Jiang replied. She turned to her other companion. “Devan, stay here and help these guys.”

Her friend nodded. “Got it.”

Jiang left them to it and sprinted across the walkway. She then had to negotiate her way between a few other structures but it wasn’t difficult to get where she needed to go. At the entrance though, she hesitated for a moment as she looked at the camera above her head. Then she saw a little box to her side with a microphone and a blank screen.

She leaned toward it and spoke. “Agent Sarra.”

“Agent Sarra, Department of Security,” came a modulated voice in response. “Voiceprint accepted. Fingerprint scan required.”

“Thought as much,” Jiang pressed her finger against the blank screen. The door opened and she rushed in without waiting to hear the good news that her fingerprint had been cleared, though the computer said it anyway.

She ran up a staircase to the second level of the building and emerged in a hexagonal room with small reinforced windows on all sides and numerous screens and consoles underneath them. There were only two occupants inside and while they saw her come in, neither of them seemed startled.

“We’ve raised an alert,” one of them told her.

“Good,” Jiang said. “I need to review footage from the past few hours. Anything nearby. This level of the street.”

“How much footage do you want to review?”

“As much as I need to,” Jiang told him. “But let’s start with whatever we’ve got in and around the holding cells across that walkway.”

“All right,” the man replied, bringing a view of a corridor and the entrances to the cells up on a display.

Jiang leaned over his shoulder and saw several dead bodies lying around.

“Are they the prisoners?” she asked, gesturing to two of them.

“Yeah. That’s...”

“Ariv Draeis,” Jiang said, recognizing one as she got a better look. “So the other’s the section chief from Marno. What happened to them?”

“They went ballistic and attacked some of the guards,” the man told her. “Then those guards went nuts too and started shooting up the place. Then some other guards, or maybe the same ones... They came back and blasted them. It was crazy.”

“I can believe it,” Jiang said. “Now, go back to before the prisoners went mad and see who visited them.”

“All right,” the man said. There was a short wait and then they viewed some more footage in fast forward.

“There!” Jiang said, pointing.

The man slowed the footage.

“That officer scratched the prisoners,” Jiang said. “Play it in reverse and see where he was before. I want to track his progress back to the point where someone contaminated him.”

“Contaminated him?”

“By scratching, clawing, gripping or doing something else to him,” Jiang said. “Infecting him with the disease he infected the prisoners with. That same damn disease that’s got our own officers shooting at each other back there.” She turned to the other man in the room. “Contact the spaceport authorities and order a lockdown.”

“I can’t order a lockdown.”

“I can,” Jiang told him.

Without warning, the room shook and Jiang and the two men on duty reeled from an almost deafening sonic boom. The windows shone with reflected orange glare for a moment and then the view was dark once more.

“Explosives,” Jiang muttered, wincing and massaging her ears. A look of horror crossed her face. “They had explosives in there?”

“No,” the man beside her said, shaking his head and looking at the monitors in horror. “I don’t know where...”

“One of the crazies was doing something to the generator,” the other man said.

“Why?”

The other man looked at him as if he were half-mad himself. “Since when do crazies need reasons?”

The first man turned back to his displays, gritting his teeth. “Maybe the damage wasn’t too...” He trailed off as he saw just how far from the truth his suggestion would have been had he finished that sentence.

Leaning over his shoulder, Jiang saw the carnage as well. She looked at the scorched surface of the platform where she’d left Devan and the major, and at the smoke billowing out of the side of the building and the

burning pieces of debris. Then her gaze drifted to a single figure lying sprawled against the railing that joined the walkway.

Small tears welled in her eyes. She blinked a few times to clear them, swallowed, and turned back to the man. “Are...” She couldn’t finish the question.

“There are three drop ships on the way,” the man told her, still watching his screens.

Jiang nodded, took a breath then looked back at the other display. “The officer?”

The second man in the room was busy talking on the communicator. The first man looked as though he had other things to do as well but he played the footage of the officer backwards for her. “If he disappears off the screen, tell me. And give me a direction.” He turned back to his main displays and started talking on the communicator as well.

“Disappeared. Left corridor.”

The man nodded, glanced at the screen Jiang was watching, fiddled with the controls and brought up footage from another source. He set it to play in reverse and turned back to what he was doing.

The second man turned around. “I’ve got the spaceport authorities on the communicator.”

Jiang turned to the first man. “Pause this.”

The man did so, while she flicked on the communicator. “This is Agent Sarra of the Department of Security.”

“You’re at the scene?”

“What’s left of it. Listen. This is very important. We need a total lockdown for Kardel Bay. Ships. Air speeders. Everything. Nothing to leave without authorization.”

“Got it.”

Jiang then went back to monitoring the officer who'd contaminated the prisoners, telling the man beside her whenever he disappeared. She interrupted him several more times before she found what she was looking for. A Hie'shi who nicked the officer as he passed him on the platform just below the one they were on.

She took a deep breath. “All right,” she told the man and pointed at her acquaintance from that front business on Brae. “Now I want to track *him*.”

Chapter Eleven

A captain in the Department of Security paced back and forth in front of Jiang with fury in his eyes. “If you hadn’t arranged for those damn prisoners to be transferred here, none of this would have happened.” He nodded to the charred building behind him where naval troopers were hauling out dead officers and medics were attending to survivors.

“None of this would have happened *here*,” Jiang countered. “But maybe then you’d be looking at two of these incidents instead. One on Marno and another one on Jaerad.”

“Well, if you had been a little more forthcoming in your investigation...” He trailed off.

“Are you done?” Jiang asked, not bothering to hide her frustration. She’d shared everything she had once the leak in the department had been shut down. “Because I’ve got to track down that Hie’shi before he gets off planet.”

“We’re in damage control right now, Agent,” the officer told her, still glaring. “That Hie’shi can wait.”

“Vismach is the sole reason you’re looking at this mess here tonight,” Jiang pointed out. “He was the one who contaminated the guard who passed the virus onto the prisoners and started the whole chain reaction. And since he’s just wiped his tracks clean here, he might be our only remaining lead on whoever’s behind all this.”

“Well, that may be, but as far as I’m concerned, as of this moment, this case is closed.”

“What? But—”

“These guys have done their worst, Agent. They’re not going to raid the shipping lanes outside of Eraecam any more. Every system in the Federation now knows about the virus and has the means to deal with it. And the big two of the organization have been taken care of.”

Jiang couldn’t help notice how the captain contradicted what he’d said earlier about her not being forthcoming with her investigation. But his last remark irked her more.

“The big two?” she asked. “Draeis was a middleman and that section chief from Marno was as good as a pawn. These guys could replace him with anyone they want.”

The captain made a derisive grunt. “I think you’ll find, Agent, that not everyone in the department is as easily tempted by a bit of money on the side as that desk jockey was. Anyway, it doesn’t matter any more. We’ve got the supplier.”

“Cardalenci?”

“Yeah. Guess you missed that piece of news. He’s been extradited and he’s now in naval custody.”

Jiang shook her head. “No. The supplier’s nothing now. If they’ve got their virus samples, they’re ready for whatever the final stage of this scheme of theirs is.”

“I told you. We all know about their stupid virus now and we can deal with it.”

Jiang nodded to the carnage just a few meters away. “Like you’re dealing with it here?”

“You listen to me, Agent! I—”

Jiang cut him off. “This is what that virus is capable of, Captain. And it could still do a lot of damage.”

“Go home, Agent,” the captain told her. “We’ve got work to do.”

Jiang tried to hold onto the last strains of her patience. “So you’re not even going to look for Vismach?”

The captain held her gaze for a moment then relented with a sigh. “All right. I’ll leave your lockdown in place until oh–nine–hundred. And if we can find this Hie’shi of yours, we’ll grab him. Now, go on. I’m busy.”

With a shake of her head, Jiang walked back to the hexagonal building across the walkway. As she re-entered it, she received looks of sympathy from the two occupants.

“Well?” she asked, her weariness evident in her voice.

“He disappeared off the cameras,” one of the men told her. “They don’t cover the whole city and he clearly knows when they’re around.”

Jiang sighed. “Yeah. I guess he would.”

“I’m sorry, Agent.”

Jiang shook her head. “No, it’s all right. You’ve done well. Thanks for everything tonight. Both of you.”

Once outside, she made herself scarce and headed back along the route she’d taken from the landing platform. She flicked on her communicator. “Janan? You there?”

“Yeah. I’ve been monitoring all the incoming and outgoing transmissions.”

“So you heard what’s going on?”

“Yeah.” Janan’s voice cracked at the end of the word. “You’re all right?”

“But I’m all right. But, Janan—”

“Devan?”

“Devan’s dead.”

Janan was silent for a moment but her sobs were soon audible over the communicator.

"I'm sorry," Jiang said. "There was an explosion. I was monitoring surveillance footage to see how the virus had been transferred into the complex when it went off. Devan would have caught the brunt of it. Major Telairas is dead too."

"I'm sorry."

Jiang sighed. "Me too. Now, there's some damn captain running the show who doesn't want us around."

"What, are we relieved of duty or something?"

"Not officially. But it was certainly implied."

"So what happens now?" Janan asked.

"We find the bastards who are behind all this and bring them in. Then put them away for good and make sure they never hurt a single person again."

"Well, let's put aside the fact that we're no longer on the case for a moment. Even ignoring that, what can we do? If there are no more leads, there are no more leads."

"There'll be leads," Jiang said. "We'll just have to look over what's left more carefully."

"You want to head back to the Eraecam system then?"

"Right," Jiang said, feeling a little calmer now. "If the clowns running the show here can't help us, then our friends out there might be able to. We'll also get Captain Ilstroem to haul that Tanemi Grandeur into the inner system so we can go over it centimeter by centimeter and see what we missed the first time round. Also, that supplier from Brae's been extradited and he's in naval custody. So maybe he can help."

"So you think our friends might be able to arrange a meeting?"

“I’m fairly certain they’ve got the connections we need, yes.”

“All right. But can we just take off like that?”

“The lockdown won’t affect us, Janan.”

“No, I just meant you might be needed here because of your involvement in what happened up there.”

“That captain told me to get out of his way,” Jiang countered, “and that’s what I’m doing.”

“And what could be farther out of his way than Eraecam?”

Jiang pressed her lips together in a grim smile. “Now you’re getting it.”

Once she reached the ship, Jiang contacted the spaceport authorities with a clearance code so she could leave during her own lockdown. And soon after that, she and Janan were en route to the Eraecam system.

“Yes,” Security Minister Serec said, speaking on the communicator. “It’s under control... but we can’t find this Vismach character anywhere.”

“And you probably won’t,” Admiral Roth replied. “At least not in Kardel Bay.”

“We still have to look though.”

“Of course.”

Serec sighed. It was turning into a long night. “Do you think he’s the instigator? I mean, I know the people who make the grand plans don’t often like to get their hands dirty but he seems to be running a rather large proportion of the show.”

“Possibly,” Roth replied, “but not likely. From what we’ve gathered, he’s a middleman, a hit man and a

dozen other things. So it sounds like his job is to make sure the whole operation runs smoothly.”

“A freelance mercenary then?”

“I would think so, yes.”

Serec rubbed his eyes to keep himself awake. “By the way, what’s the situation on Eraecam right now?”

“Captain Ilstroem’s still keeping things under control in the *Harbinger*—for the most part by maintaining a presence more than anything else—and I have some people keeping an eye on things on the surface.”

“Right. Well, I think it’s time we dragged that Tanemi Grandeur that Agent Sarra found into the system and went over it with our best people. See if we can find any new clues that might help us.”

“I would concur,” Roth replied. “However, it appears the people we’re dealing with have finished with it.”

“Destroyed?”

“Disintegrated would be a more accurate way of putting it. A team of my people have just investigated the coordinates Agent Sarra provided to it and found a lot of rather small fragments in its place.”

“It sounds like we’re fast running out of leads,” Serec said. “You wouldn’t know where Agent Sarra’s heading at the moment, would you? According to our logs here, she took off about an hour ago.”

“Oh, it’s obvious where she’s going, Minister,” Roth told him. “She’s going back to Eraecam. One of my teams is there and she’s unofficially liaising with them. If she finds anything else, we’ll know.”

“Are you all right?” Janan asked.

Jiang turned to her, putting her coffee mug down on the table. “Yeah, why?”

“You’ve been staring at that wall for ages.”

Jiang smiled. “No, no. I was just thinking.”

“About Devan?”

The smile faded. “About Devan,” Jiang admitted. “About the case too. A few things really.”

Janan shook her head, putting her coffee down for a moment as well. “What do these people want with this virus of theirs? What’s the point? Kill a few people in the middle of a shipping route. Kill a few hundred more on Corsida. I mean, why?”

“I don’t know,” Jiang replied. “But they were covering their tracks on Corsida. Which might mean they’re getting nervous.” Her smile returned. “You know, I think we’re closing in on them.”

Janan climbed to her feet. “Well,” she said, stifling a yawn. “I hope you’re right.”

Jiang looked up at her. “Where are you going?”

“Oh, I’ve just got to check something on the bridge,” Janan replied, getting her coffee to take with her. “I’ll be back.”

It was very quiet in the mess once she’d left, Jiang thought. And the ship, so homely before, seemed empty and—for some reason—more than a little foreboding. She wondered why.

She was also a little hungry. Perhaps she needed something a little more substantial than a cup of coffee. Climbing to her feet, she opened the refrigeration unit and frowned. It wasn’t easy to see but there were empty spaces near the back of it.

She closed the unit as if she hadn't seen anything out of the ordinary. Then she went to join Janan on the bridge, shutting the door behind her.

In her customary seat, Janan glanced over her shoulder at her. "What's wrong?"

"We've got company," Jiang told her, sitting down at the communicator. "Someone's been raiding our galley."

"I haven't noticed anything."

"You weren't supposed to," Jiang told her. Janan looked nervous and she didn't blame her.

"What do we do?"

"Well," Jiang said, tweaking some controls on her console, "first of all, we call Corsida and tell them we've found Vismach. Then I'm going to search the ship nice and quietly with my blaster on stun. My guess is our guest'll be hiding in the engine compartment." She frowned and tapped the console again.

"What is it?" Janan asked.

"It's dead. He's done something to it while we were asleep."

Janan grimaced. "Now I really miss Devan. He would've known what to do."

"Yeah, well," Jiang replied, "we'll just have to figure this one out on our own." She looked at the communicator again. "What's he done to it?"

"He's probably just fried it."

Jiang shook her head. "No. He'll need it to be working normally once we're approaching Eraecam so we can land without raising any suspicions. Then he can get off quietly."

"So some kind of timed device?"

Jiang shook her head. "He wouldn't have had time to pick up anything like that before he hitched a lift with

us. Hiding on board our ship's clearly an improvised plan he must have dreamt up after I called the lockdown... or possibly before. He'd be smart enough to know his stunt would result in one." She looked under the communicator. "Maybe—"

The door to the bridge slid open with a hiss of air.

"Look out!" Janan cried out but too late.

Jiang felt a heavy blow between her shoulder blades and she slammed her head on the underside of the communicator. Janan screamed and as Jiang turned her head to the side, she saw a clawed hand grip her friend's shoulder, a hard talon pressing down against her flesh. Janan moaned and slumped forward, sprawled out unceremoniously across the controls.

The talons then came at Jiang and, pinned between her seat and the communicator, she was unable to fend them off. Grabbing her by a tender point on her shoulder with one hand, and by her hair with the other, Vismach dragged her to her feet and off the bridge.

Jiang screamed and tried to pull away, lurching this way and that and kicking at her assailant. As she did though, the Hie'shi let go of her hair, grabbed her wrist and slammed her against one side of the corridor and then against the other. Jiang staggered, breathless and shaky on her feet.

"Don't struggle," Vismach told her, while she tried to regain her balance. "It'll be quicker this way."

"You won't land this ship on Eraecam without me," Jiang told him, fighting between strained breaths to get the words out and pulling against his grip as hard as she could. "There'll be people waiting for me."

"We're not going to Eraecam any more," Vismach replied. "Actually, you've only got yourself to blame for

this. If you hadn't looked at that refrigeration unit... But then again, what do they say about curiosity?"

Jiang jerked back as hard as she could. But despite his smaller stature, Vismach pulled her back with little effort, tripping her over her own feet.

"You've been trying to kill me the whole time!" Jiang cried.

Vismach made a sharp hiss, the Hie'shi equivalent of a derisive snort. "*General Einhast* has been trying to kill you." He let her fall onto her back. "I've been protecting you half the time."

As he reached for her again, Jiang tried kicking at him and hit him in the head. Vismach hissed and cuffed her hard across the side of her own. She grunted in pain and her head rolled to one side. Then he hoisted her up by a tender area in her shoulder, seemingly unaffected by her cry.

"Although I did send some of Draeis' men after you on Brae," Vismach said as if the interruption hadn't occurred. "Not that it did any good."

Jiang realized where he'd been dragging her, as she was now face to face with the inner seal of the ship's airlock. She inhaled a sharp breath.

Vismach hit the switch to open the seal. "Sorry. I don't have my blaster with me so this is really the cleanest way to go about this."

Jiang tried with all her strength to break free from her captor's grip but she couldn't force his ratchet like talons from her. In desperation, she took another kick at him. But as she did, Vismach pushed her away from him with some force—throwing her off balance. He then kicked her other leg out from under her and shoved her into the airlock.

Landing on her side, Jiang winced from the pain but was back on her feet straightaway, running for the inner seal to Vismach's right.

The Hie'shi however already had his hands at the controls outside and before Jiang could escape, the seal shot into place. She was trapped.

Jiang bashed at all the switches inside the airlock but only received an electric spark for her troubles. More sparks flew out as she drew her hand away. Then she noticed loose wires dangling from the panel. Vismach had prepared the airlock for her in advance.

Jiang tried to hold onto what control she had but by then, it was all too much for her. With a great cry, she charged at the reinforced glass and beat her fists against it again and again, sobbing with each futile blow.

Then, exhausted, she collapsed. She pressed her hands and her forehead against the glass and waited, her breaths coming in painful heaves and her hair clinging to her sticky sweat and tears.

She watched Vismach reach for the internal controls that would open the outer seal to the airlock. He gave her a curt nod and pulled the lever that would open the airlock to space.

Chapter Twelve

Janan blinked a few times and tried to sit up. The effort almost made her faint again. Wincing and fighting tears, she clutched her forehead and looked around. Jiang wasn't there.

"Jiang..." she murmured, reaching for the empty seat.

Several screams from somewhere back in the ship startled her out of her dazed state. She heard Jiang's protests, although she couldn't make out what she was saying. Then the screams fell silent. Her heart racing, Janan saw a red light appear on her control board. She stared at it for a moment and the little letters next to it:

AIRLOCK

Biting her lip, she tapped at the controls, watching the lights on the panel the whole time. There was a slight delay and another light, yellow this time, started flashing on and off.

"Come on!" she cried, hammering at the controls.

The yellow light stopped flashing and some words appeared on a small screen on the corner of the console:
CENTRAL CONTROL OVERRIDE ACTIVATED. DO YOU
WISH TO LOCK THESE SETTINGS?

"Yes! Lock them!" she muttered, tapping again at the panel.

She glanced over her shoulder. Footsteps were echoing down the corridor, louder and louder. Panicking, she whirled back to the panel and hit some more controls.

"Come on... come on," she pleaded.

There was a hiss behind her as the door to the bridge slid shut but it stopped before it latched into place.

Janan spun around. Vismach was standing in the doorway. She tried to get up but was overcome by a wave of dizziness and keeled forward, placing one hand on her knee and another on her seat to support herself.

The Hie'shi regarded her for a moment. Nauseous and unable to move, Janan couldn't do anything when he strolled over and squeezed the tender area of her shoulder that he he'd injured earlier. She cried out, with a moan that ended in a wail and collapsed on the floor.

Vismach planted his foot on her and rolled her back and forth, a thoughtful look in his eyes. He studied the control panel, tapped at a few keys, shrugged and sat in Jiang's seat.

"We'll need to make a course adjustment," he said.

Janan just sobbed.

"Or do you want to talk about this later?" Vismach asked. He shrugged when he got no reply. "You may as well cooperate. Your friend's dead so it's just you and me now. I mean, I'm willing to take my chances blasting my way out of this ship when we land at Talingth Port or wherever you're going. But your life's going to be my compensation for the inconvenience."

"No?" he asked after another brief silence punctuated by Janan's sobs. "Look at it logically, Janan." He paused, watching her expression. "Yes, I know who you are. Amira Janan. Anyway, going to Talingth won't get you anything except a premature demise and what good is that? I think enough people have died as it is."

"That hasn't stopped you before," Janan muttered through gritted teeth.

“I find any waste of life regrettable,” Vismach said. “But sometimes killing is a necessary evil.”

“And was killing Jiang necessary?”

“More than you’d think. We wouldn’t be having this conversation if she were hovering over my shoulder. But it was her own fault really. My plan was to just wait quietly until we reached Eraecam. You wouldn’t have even known I was here. However, Jiang’s overdeveloped sense of curiosity about that refrigeration unit forced my hand.”

“Your people tried to kill her on Brae.”

The Hie’shi made a clicking noise. “Yes, and then it was necessary, you see? But anyway, this is all rather pointless. I need you to make a decision, Janan. You’ve locked that control panel. I’d like you to unlock it and set a new course. Almost anywhere would suit me. Anywhere except Eraecam, Jaerad, Marno, Brae or Corsida. If you refuse, I’ll just kill you right now. And since you’ve overridden the manual controls for the airlock and all your weapons are no doubt locked away, it’ll have to be by hand.” He inspected his talons. “Although I’m not sure how long that would take, to tell you the truth. I’ve never tried it before.”

“You lied about Jiang,” Janan told him, her voice firmer than it had been before. She had stopped crying too.

“What do you mean?”

“I overrode the controls to the airlock before that outer seal opened.”

Vismach gave her a noncommittal shrug.

“Look, Vismach,” Janan said, rolling onto her stomach and pushing herself up. She gave him a small grin. “Yeah, that’s right. I know who you are too. Now, I’m

prepared to make a deal with you but not without conditions of my own. And the first of those is that Jiang's alive. If she's not, then you can kill me now and be done with it because I'm not going to help you otherwise."

The Hie'shi still said nothing.

"I know she's alive," Janan told him, standing up and leaning on her seat for support. "You know she's alive. And if you want to deal, then what possible good does it do you to pretend otherwise?" When there was still no reply, she nodded to herself. "You talked to her, did you?"

At last, Vismach let out a sharp breath and clicked his tongue. "Fine. I mentioned a name. General Einhast. Since it hardly matters any more, consider it on the house. Very soon, he'll be leaving Federation space and you and Ms. Sarra won't need to worry about him again. There, that's what I told your friend and yes, she's alive. Now, take me somewhere out of the way and you won't have to hear from me again either."

"Not until I've seen Jiang with my own eyes," Janan told him and now her voice was quite firm.

Vismach nodded. "So be it. But I have another condition of my own. She stays in that airlock until I'm off this ship."

"But that's cruel," Janan protested.

"It's practical," Vismach told her.

When she saw Jiang in the airlock, Janan pressed her palm against the reinforced glass panel. Jiang mouthed something to her and Janan nodded back, although she couldn't make it out.

“Well, this is very touching and all,” Vismach said, “but if you want a proper reunion, then we should get moving. You get me to a safe port and then we can go our separate ways. I think I’d like to go to Saeban.”

“Fine,” Janan told him. “I have another condition though. When I’m on the bridge, you’re not. Understand?”

“Do you really think you’re any position to make that demand?”

Janan shrugged. “Do you think you’re in any position to unlock the systems in there? I guess some fringe scum can break into another person’s ship systems but if you’re one of them, then why are we still talking?”

“When did you get so cocky all of a sudden?” Vismach asked, his eyes narrowing.

Seeing the change in the Hie’shi’s stance and the tensing of his back, Jiang waved her arms to try to warn her friend but as Janan was still looking at Vismach, she missed it.

“Right about the time I figured out you can’t get to a safe harbor without me,” she told Vismach. “You need me.”

Vismach curled and uncurled his talons. “Why don’t you want me on the bridge?”

By now, Janan had seen the change in his stance as well and she edged away. “You make me nervous. Is that good enough for you?”

Vismach narrowed his eyes farther, while tendons rippled along his arms. “Not even close.”

For a moment, neither of them moved. Then Vismach lunged forward. Janan screamed, ducked to one side and ran into the mess with Vismach right behind her. She dived under a table but he pinned her ankle to the floor

and hauled her out across the deck. Janan twisted herself around and kicked at him but he grabbed her other leg too and pinned her down in a vice-like grip.

“I will *make* you cooperate with me,” he told her.

Janan froze, eyes wide open, unable to make a sound. Vismach leaned over her, his shorter frame all the way over her torso and slid a cruel looking talon toward her stomach. A moan escaped Janan’s lips. Then, with gritted teeth and a surge of adrenalin, she lashed out, shot her right hand between her assailant’s legs, found her target and made it count.

With a gargled cry, Vismach rolled off.

Janan scrambled to her feet and ran. Despite his incapacitated state, Vismach took another swipe at her. Janan leapt over him and ran from the mess, nearly slipping over in her hurry to get away.

Sweating and panting, she reached the shipboard weapons cabinet and entered the emergency code. However, instead of opening, a small screen lit up:
CENTRAL CONTROL OVERRIDE ACTIVATED.
UNABLE TO OPEN.

Janan screamed and slammed her fist against the cabinet. “Damn it!” she cried, sobbing. She tore at her hair in frustration. From the corner of her eye, she saw Vismach climbing to his feet in the mess. She thought for a moment, biting her lip, then ran for the engine room.

When she lunged through the entrance, catching her arms on the frame and panting from exertion, she took a quick look at her surroundings. There were a few places where she could conceal herself farther back from the entranceway but they weren’t much. Then she glanced

up and looked back for good measure. Her assailant couldn't see her for the moment.

With deft movements, wedging herself in the frame of the entranceway, she climbed above the door and kept absolutely still. A moment later, Vismach entered the engine room below her.

"You're being very foolish, Janan," he said. "You're trapped. However, this doesn't have to be unpleasant. Just cooperate. Do as I say and everything will be fine. There'll be no need for physical coercion. And don't worry. We'll just forget what happened back there. I've survived worse."

Receiving no reply, he walked forward with his back to her. "You can't hide here much longer, Janan. I admire your resolve but this is just pointless."

Janan edged her way back to the deck, the slight humming of engine components and soft vibrations masking what little sound she made. She crept out of the room and back to the bridge. There she unlocked the central control override, unlocked the weapons cabinet, and locked the central control override again. She then headed to the back of the ship.

When she reached the weapons' cabinet again, she crouched in an alcove just next to it and watched for a moment. A second later, Vismach emerged, having now checked the entire engine room. He looked around, and for a moment it seemed he was looking right at her. Then he moved down another corridor.

Janan opened the weapons cabinet, pulled out a blaster and closed it again. Setting her weapon to stun, she followed Vismach.

He stopped when she was just a few meters behind him. "Janan. Have you come round to your senses now?"

In reply, Janan shot him in the torso, dropping him to the deck. “Yeah,” she said. “I’m feeling a lot better now.” She shot him again for good measure and ran to the bridge.

Back inside, she unlocked the system and hit the switch to remotely open the inner seal of the airlock. Then running back through the ship, she bumped into Jiang.

“Janan?”

“Jiang!” She threw her arms around her in relief.

“Hey,” Jiang said, hugging her back. Then she let her go and rubbed tears from her eyes. “Where’s Vismach?”

“I got the son of a bitch.”

Jiang stood over the Hie’shi and gazed at him. “Is he dead?”

Janan shrugged. “I don’t know. I stunned him twice. I know I probably shouldn’t have but I wanted to be certain he wouldn’t get up again.”

Jiang nodded. “Understandable. Thank you, by the way. For saving my life.”

Janan blushed and waved a hand. “Hey, you’ve saved mine plenty of times.”

“Never like that though.”

Janan looked at Vismach again. “What should we do with him? How do you check if he’s alive?”

“Well, I’m no expert on Hie’shi physiology,” Jiang replied. “But they’d have a pulse like we do, at any rate.”

She crouched down and felt around his wrist. It took her a while before she found the artery under this hard skin. “Yeah. There’s a faint pulse there. He should be okay. I’ll secure him and check our first aid kits to see if I

can stabilize his condition a little more. By the way, how far out are we from Eraecam?”

“We should be there in four hours.”

“Wonderful.”

Janan watched her for a moment. “Are you going to report this to Corsida?”

Jiang rolled Vismach over, placed his hands behind his back and cuffed them. “Probably.” She cuffed his ankles together as well.

“Do you think that might be overkill?” Janan asked.

“No,” Jiang told her, “I think it’s just enough.” She smiled. “You did well. If this bastard makes it, he’s the only lead we’ll need.”

“The one to General Einhast?”

Jiang frowned. “How do you know about that?”

“He told me,” Janan replied. “Said it was on the house. He also told me something else that might interest you. He said General Einhast won’t bother us any more since he’ll soon be leaving Federation space for good.”

“So he’s going to use his virus somewhere else then?” Jiang said. “Or he’s going to use it in the Federation then hightail it...” She trailed off.

“What?”

“Just a thought. Assuming Vismach didn’t have a chance to offload his last batch of the virus to someone on Corsida, there’s only one place it could be.”

Janan frowned. “On the ship?”

“On the ship.”

They searched the ship from aft to stern and found the boxes with the remaining batch of the virus in the engine room.

Janan shook her head. “He was mocking me for hiding in here when he was here the whole time.”

Jiang shrugged. “Yes, but we weren’t looking for him. Anyway, the navy has Cardalenci so he can’t manufacture any more of this stuff. And we’ve got the last batch here. So all we need now is to find this General Einhast. And Vismach is going to help us.”

Chapter Thirteen

Jiang stepped onto the landing platform that had been assigned to her in Talingth Port and as her eyes adjusted to the glare of the nearby lights, she saw a familiar figure waiting for her in the uniform of the Talingth Security Bureau.

“Colonel Theis,” she greeted him.

“Agent Sarra,” he replied with a smile. “Welcome to Talingth.” The words echoed their first conversation together but with everything that had happened since, the feeling behind them was not the same.

To Jiang, it almost felt like a reunion with an old friend. She returned the colonel’s smile. “Well, I’ve been here a little while now. I got here about an hour ago, right before your deputy removed the prisoner from my ship.”

“True,” Theis said, “but I didn’t have a chance to welcome you then. Anyway, now that you’re freshened up, I assume you want to *see* the prisoner?”

“*Want* is probably overstating things,” Jiang replied. “But he and I do have some unfinished business to attend to.”

They walked toward the edge of the landing platform.

“So what happened up there exactly?” Theis asked. “You arrive here without warning, with a Hie’shi in a makeshift brig, and then you get us to take him into custody... What’s this all about?”

Given how this had all started as an investigation in relation to missing ships, Jiang understood the colonel’s

confusion.

“This Hie’shi, Vismach,” she explained, deciding the simplest version of the story would suffice for the moment, “has been overseeing an operation to develop synthetic viruses and use them in some kind of political coup.”

Theis shook his head. “Huh. He didn’t really look the type to me.”

“Well, you can’t tell much from appearances,” Jiang pointed out. “But as it happens, he’s not the type. He’s just a gun for hire—a very good one, I’ll admit—but apolitical as far as I can tell. However, now we’ve got him in custody, I hope I might convince him to give up his employer.”

“You don’t have any clues to his identity?”

“Oh, I know who he is,” Jiang said. “He’s a deposed general from the Leihart system by the name of Einhast. But I just don’t know *where* he is.”

Theis nodded. “I see. But I’m still a bit confused though. Why’d you bring Vismach here instead of putting him in a holding cell on Corsida?”

Jiang frowned. It sounded as though Theis had been left farther out of the loop than she’d thought. She wondered if this was related to the departmental leak they’d had with the Marno Section Chief.

“I didn’t plan to bring him here,” she told him. “I had Vismach back on Corsida in Kardel Bay and I initiated a city wide lockdown to catch him. So he commandeered my ship since department ships are still allowed to launch during a lockdown. I got the better of him in the end, of course, but since we were almost here at that point...”

She felt a bit guilty at that particular part of her

summary. Really, Janan had got the better of him. But she was still keeping things as simple as she could.

Theis nodded. "Fair enough."

They walked in silence a little longer until they came to a small air speeder.

"Well, climb in," Theis said. "I'll take you to the facility where we're keeping him."

Soon, Jiang entered a holding cell and saw a short avian-like figure seated restrained behind a table, watching her through narrowed eyes.

"I underestimated you, Jiang," he told her. "From one professional to another, I'm impressed."

"I'm glad to hear that, Vismach," Jiang told him. "But I'm more interested in hearing whether or not you're willing to talk to me. I want to know where General Einhast is."

The Hie'shi gave a cheerful series of clicks. "Well, isn't that nice? I'm afraid however that I'm only going to disappoint you. I plan to exercise my right to remain silent and I'm not interested in any deals."

"Deals are about all that's left to you," Jiang told him.

There was another series of clicks, more drawn out than the first. "Agent Sarra. I know the system and most variations of it throughout the Federation. What could a deal possibly get me? Six life sentences instead of seven? Come on. This is all meaningless."

"But what could protecting General Einhast give you?"

Vismach narrowed his eyes at her and made a contented sounding rumble deep in his throat. "A bit of amusement. Seeing you so close to cracking your case

and unable to make the last step.”

“Do you want that remark recorded?” Jiang asked him.

Vismach cocked his head. “Do you think it would make a good quote or is it too lengthy?”

Jiang got up. “All right, Vismach. I’m gone. You’re wasting my time.”

“Well, if he doesn’t want to talk, he doesn’t want to talk,” Theis said when Jiang came to join him in the next room. “We can’t make him.”

“Maybe not,” Jiang said. “But our prisoner let on more than he thought back there.”

“He let on nothing.”

Jiang shook her head. “No. I noticed two things. The first was he narrowed his eyes slightly each time I mentioned General Einhast. And the other was an air of confidence that wasn’t an act. Vismach expects to be released from his confines here very soon.”

“And what does it all mean?”

“The first thing means that Vismach’s refusal to cooperate is in no way indicative of any desire on his part to protect General Einhast. He detests the man.”

“So why protect him then? It makes no sense just to do it to spite us. If I were in his position, I’d be thrilled at the prospect of taking someone I didn’t like down with me.”

“Exactly,” Jiang said. “He would sell Einhast out in a heartbeat if he thought he had nothing to lose.”

“But what could Einhast have that he...” Theis trailed off and smiled. “Ah. His final payment.”

“To be paid upon the receipt of the last strains of that

synthetic virus Einhas't trying to get developed," Jiang continued. *Been* trying to get developed, she corrected herself in silence. Her exhaustion was getting the better of her. "Strains that Vismach brought aboard my ship. And, I would imagine, that final payment is not an insubstantial amount of money. Vismach won't cooperate as long as he believes he can still get his hands on it. However, if we can disabuse him of this notion, we may find we have a more cooperative prisoner in there."

Theis nodded. "So any idea on how he expects to get out of here?"

"I've got two theories. One possibility that comes to mind is that he may have a small homing beacon about his person and he's counting on some associates of his to break him out of here."

"And what's your other theory?" the colonel asked.

"That he's carrying something on him with which he can make his own escape. And of the two, that's the one that seems more likely to me."

Theis climbed to his feet. "Right."

It took half an hour to complete the search, and that was with a team of specialists on hand to help. In the end, one of them noticed something odd about the sole of one of Vismach's boots and after prying at it, he found some type of blade hidden inside. He put it on a table in the center of the room for the others to see.

Colonel Theis picked it up and frowned. "That's it? There's got to be more to it. How the hell could he expect to break out of custody with nothing but a knife?"

"Careful," Jiang said, gesturing for him to put it down. She picked it up herself. Then she nudged part of the

handle and it vibrated in her hand, while a blue glow enveloped the blade.

“It’s a Minstrahn wrist blade,” she explained. “It could cut right through the wall of this room when activated. Very dangerous.” She deactivated it and slid it back across the table to the colonel. “I wonder how he got it. However, I think we should be able to ensure Vismach’s cooperation in this investigation now.”

“Actually, I think you won’t have to,” one of the specialists said, holding up the Hie’shi’s other boot. He pulled something from its sole as well and put it on the table.

“A navigation card?” Colonel Theis frowned.

“Of course,” Jiang remarked. “He wasn’t planning to meet General Einhast on some world you could find on a computer. The rendezvous is in dead space.” She planted her hands on the table in front of her. “Well, I think I might call the department now and wrap this thing up.”

Her job done, Jiang made one last stopover—visiting another ship on the landing platform. Looking a lot better now, Khalin saw her in the mess and the two of them had a coffee. Possibly far too early in the morning but it felt good to Jiang.

“Seems you’ll get that general you were after now,” she said.

Khalin shrugged. “I don’t think we deserve much credit for that. You and your pilot cracked this case.”

“And Devan,” Jiang murmured.

Khalin gazed at her in sympathy. “And Devan.”

Feeling that she had brought the mood down, Jiang changed the subject. “So what’s next for you now?”

Khalin shrugged. "I imagine we'll get assigned to something else soon enough. There's always something going on."

"And General Einhast?"

"The navy will take care of him. Our job's finished."

Jiang finished her coffee and got up.

"You off?"

"Yeah," Jiang said. "I think it's time Janan and I got going."

Khalin reached over and placed a hand on hers. "Well, before you go, I want to thank you, Jiang. For everything."

After that, Jiang returned to the *Albatross*. To her surprise, Janan was awake.

"Why aren't you getting some sleep?" she asked her.

"We'll have plenty of time to sleep on the way home," Janan replied. "Also... there's a message for your from Corsida."

"The department?"

Janan frowned. "I don't think so."

Curious, Jiang went to the bridge and read the message. Following some instructions within it, she set up a transmission to Corsida.

"Captain Kellis," came a voice on the other end.

"Agent Sarra," Jiang identified herself. "You were trying to reach me?"

"I was," the captain replied. "First of all, I want to congratulate you on closing that case. I'm sorry it turned out to be as much trouble as it did."

"It was nothing, Captain," Jiang said, perhaps a little quickly.

“However,” Kellis continued, deciding not to probe too deeply into the topic, “the main reason I was trying to contact you was to let you know you’ve been given an opportunity for reassignment. If you want it, of course.”

Jiang frowned. “Reassignment? To which section?”

“To which department is the question,” Kellis corrected her. “It seems that someone in naval intelligence has taken an interest in you.”

Jiang took a moment to ruminate on that. It sounded as though Khalin had put a word in for her and she was curious as to what she might have said. Although not as curious as she was about whatever this offer was.

“What’s the job?”