

Leona Bestolie, #1 A.K.A Galaxy Dancer

(first written 1/2004)

I Christie

Prologue:

The tall foreign woman tilted her head slightly, letting the early morning sun warm her face as she waited for her order to arrive. She wore the modestly tailored uniform of an official courier to one of the many embassies that crowded around the domed spaceport. Most of her hair was secured in a net, resting heavily on her back while her temple tresses, weaved in beads and ribbons, lifted, and fluttered in the cool breeze.

A waiter, another foreigner, stopped at her table and set down a cup of mixed fruit and a beverage. The two spoke briefly.

A short stocky Biaol male stared at the young woman with ill-concealed distaste. Male and female speaking in public - another insult to his religious beliefs. If Traditionists were the owners of the coffee shop such co-mingling of species and genders would not take place.

As much as he hated what she represented he couldn't keep from staring at her. She was so uncharacteristic of his own specie's females. He thought she must be a warrior in her lands.

The vibration of his reader jarred his attention back to reality. Tapping the face of his reader lightly, the count-down appeared in the lower part of the screen.

He noted the courier had risen to refresh her drink in the beverage kiosk cubicle. He frowned. That was where he was to take refuge.

A school bus stopped near the coffee shop. Children - all foreigners - unloaded to visit the museum and the strange garden the foreigners built...on *his* ancestral land.

Glancing back at the kiosk and courier, he curled his lips in a contemptuous scowl as the courier waited for a worker to replace beverage containers.

“

“

“What could they be talking about? Get on with your work!” He muttered in a low guttural growl. His eyes dropped back to the timer. Time was advancing.

If Abra wills it, it will come to be. And so, he repeated many times to calm himself.

Another bus pulled up. He wouldn’t have glanced at it, but the children’s voices were so like his own village children. His eyes widened as he realized it *was* Cofu’s village bus. Mentally he went over the schedule of school trips and remembered his son mentioned it because his friend, a foreigner, was coming today. Anger started to cloud his thoughts that *his* woman allowed *his* children to play with foreigners, but that would end after today.

He hummed the mantra of Abra until his tension lessened.

Abra will honor any native child who loses his life for this great cause, and I will see that a memorial is erected for their sacrifice. They will be remembered as great warriors.

For a moment, he wondered where the souls of the girls went and then dismissed it as unimportant. Females could not be trusted to take care of themselves or anyone else and therefore should remain at home. If they didn’t, then it was their fault something happened to them.

Abra wills it.

The children moved off to the museum, away from the coffee shop.

Unable to restrain his impatience any longer, he rose from his table and approached the kiosk to wait for the courier to exit. He was hoping his near presence would shame her of leaving.

“Pipiato!” two small voices shouted in unison.

Startled, he turned around. There his oldest son of seven years, Dio, and his second daughter, Paupa, holding hands as they often did, waved at him from the shop doorway. Laughing in delight at seeing their father, they ran weaving through tables toward him. Blinking his eyes in dismay, he resigned himself to the inevitable as the beep sounded to warn him the bomb armed. It would only be seconds before it would go off.

“

“

Those near his table looked up in alarm, their faces frozen in terror.

Abra chose the sacrifice of his first-born son, just as it was in the old days. To this he murmured a prayer, thanking Abra for choosing him, and his son as worthy of his attention. His thoughts went to his teacher, feeling he failed him. A half-done job was not a job done, was the master's mantra. Saving himself and not being able to save his son was a choice he didn't feel he could live with. A profound sorrow wound its way up into his throat as he thought of his daughter not having anything in the afterlife to go to.

In slow motion, he watched his children pass by the table where he left his reader. The explosion tore into their small bodies, shredding them, and spreading their vital fluids, bright against the other splash of colors. The movement of air from the explosion set off an unseen gas, igniting it into a greater explosion.

Against the wall he hung. Through blurred eyes he looked out at the settling dust and debris. Dio and Paupa stood, looking around uncertain. Dio suddenly smiled and tugged Paupa's hand, both moving off with brilliant smiles.

A shadow moved over him. He squinted in an attempt to see past the blur. He was sure it was the courier because she was protected by the kiosk, what was supposed to be his safe place, he thought. However, he felt blessed by Abra that he too would die this day, because to bear the burden of his children's death at his hands, he wasn't prepared to live with.

"Hang on. I hear the sirens. Help should be here soon." Unconsciously she wiped blood from her nose on her filthy uniform sleeve and then dabbed at something that was running into her eye. The blast barrier had collapsed after the second explosion, throwing her against the equipment where she slid to the ground nearly unconscious.

He wanted to slap her for her boldness in speaking to him. He was a follower of Abra, Slayer of the Unbelievers. Instead, he asked with great difficulty, "Do you see my children?" Dragging in a gulp of air he whispered, "They weren't supposed to be here today."

She looked around them. "There's nothing left. Nothing."

“Abra wills it,” he rasped. “They have been sacrificed to Abra.” His eyes tried to focus on the courier, wanting to see her again, and how the sun burnt her hair in reddish highlights. But he saw only darkness. He exhaled for the last time.

“A damn terrorist,” the courier said.

Unsteadily she turned around, peering through the smoke at shadows rushing toward her. Through dust and smoke there were no structures left standing as far as her eyes could see.

Was she alive?

* * *

The courier slowly became aware of sounds, soft beeps and breathing. Her eyes rolled to the left, locating the source of the beeps, accompanied by blinking lights on a life support monitor. It hurt to move her eyes. She was hurting everywhere.

A native officer, leaning against the wall, walked over to her. He was short and stocky like many males in his species. She could feel his resentment towards her.

“I want an account of your affairs at the shop.”

She tried to decipher what he was implying. It didn’t sound good. “Not without a legal aid representative from my embassy,” she rasped.

“You have something to hide.”

“No. I don’t want to be misunderstood.” Her throat tightened from the effort to speak. She knew stories couriers liked to scare each other with being locked in a foreign prison and forgotten by all but the jailers.

“You are being charged with terrorist activities. I’m taking you into custody,” he said.

An alarm went off on the equipment monitoring her vitals. The courier sank back into blissful darkness, hoping it was just a nightmare.

* * *

A cool breeze wafted by, and the courier took a deep breath, sighing heavily on the exhale.

A throat cleared nearby.

“

“

Opening her eyes, she turned her head slightly. A thin Rudian, wearing her short hair sculpted to her face, was watching her.

Rudians from Jul quadrant, normally travel in packs, love music, are loyal to family, trace descendants on the mother's side, and are known to deal in quasi-law enforcement pods, or so she learned in courier classes. But a lot of what was taught to the eager naïve students turned out to not be true for those that traveled in an official capacity. They had their own rules.

"How are you feeling, Lonnie Bestolie?" the woman asked.

"Where am I?" she croaked.

"In a hospice, recovering from your injuries." She waved toward the sunny window.

Lonnie glanced out the window where there was a lush garden under the too bright sun. There were no bars to indicate it was a prison. She looked back at the woman.

"Who are you?" She coughed. The woman handed her liquid refreshment. It soothed her throat.

"I'm investigating the terrorist attack on the coffee shop you were in."

"Oh." Lonnie cleared her throat. She moved her feet and shifted her arms. No soreness, nor muscle weakness.

"Am I a suspect?"

"No. You're considered an innocent bystander, and a very lucky one." She pulled a recorder out of her pocket and placed it near the courier. "Lonnie Bestolie, I need you to report what you remember from the morning of Butan, 2000023 of the Antacen Bracon Calendar. I understand you made it your morning ritual to stop for breakfast there every day since your arrival to your embassy post."

"Yes. To my recollection, it was the first day of the Butan week, maybe minutes before the second welcoming bell at the museum. The shop is on my way to work," she readily admitted. She thought of the man at the shop. "That man that was impaled against the wall; he was a terrorist, wasn't he?"

"It is believed so."

“There were three men at his table when I arrived,” Lonnie told her. “All of them were Biaol. Two of them were making disparaging comments about the nonnative customers. The manager asked them all to leave, but one remained. The waiter told me the manager had called the constable to remove him, but it was too late.” Her voice broke.

“No. He called when the disaster could have been averted. The constable is part of an insurrection that is in the beginning stages.”

“An insurrection?”

“That does seem unlikely, doesn’t it? It’s a small group of displaced Biaol natives and their ringleader happens to have a substantial number of untraceable credits to feed his need for creating insurrections.”

“Abra wills it. That’s what he said. I think his children were in the shop when it blew up.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Before the explosion, I heard two children from one of the buses call for their father in Biaolize. He looked surprised at first and then resigned.” She inhaled consciously. “I don’t know how I survived.”

“You were behind the firewall in the kiosk. It was built to prevent kitchen fires from spreading to the customer area.”

“I felt the heat under me and then over me.”

“Below you?”

She nodded slowly, least she brings her headache back. “All this land in the basin is honeycombed with underground caverns dug by peoples that were here before the Biaols.” Lonnie paused to let the muscles in her throat relax.

“Caverns. Not a stable place to build the galactic city.”

“That’s what your representative said.”

“Giving away chamber secrets?”

“

“

“Hardly. You were there too, standing in the corner. First place sneaky people look if they’re going to do something.” She wondered if the agent would catch on to her joke or take offense.

“I don’t recall you being at that meeting,” she said.

“No one notices couriers, unless one of us is needed and we aren’t there.”

“I’ve been properly warned.” Now she smiled, and Lonnie’s sense of her increased. A few moments passed as the two studied each other.

“I remember looking out and not seeing any buildings...after the explosion,” Lonnie said.

“Nothing to see besides rubble and smoke. It’s now covered with an energy envelope preventing anyone from entering.”

“Probably to encapsulate the gas. At a public meeting, it was reported that the meters used to measure the air in the caverns were setting off alarms.”

The woman came closer, interested. “These readings, who monitors them, and for how long?”

Lonnie gave a small smile. So, whoever she’s with does not require her to attend very many meetings. “Someone from the Building and Safety Counsel. They’ve been monitoring it since the spaceport was built.” Lonnie thought about the arguments she heard while she waited out of sight in the Ambassadors’ Grand Council Meeting room. Since couriers were meant to be unseen until needed, leaders sometimes forgot they were present when heavy subjects were discussed. It didn’t take her long to see why the older attachés were so jaded and blasé about the lives of the common citizen. What could one person do but wrap a blanket of indifference around himself or herself?

Lonnie didn’t think she was knowledgeable enough to say anything on matters regarding other people’s lives, because everyone had a reason for their position, and who was she to say one person’s reasons were more just than another? Her method of surviving was to avoid aligning with anyone.

“For a courier that hasn’t been here long you picked up a lot,” the woman said.

“I haven’t picked up your name.”

The woman smiled but didn't offer one. "Most couriers stick to places they're comfortable in, like the row of dwellings in the circle near the Ambassador's Village. Is there a reason why you haven't?"

"You mean besides worrying about the gaseous caverns below the village? My idea of travel is to see the galaxy and experience the culture first-hand."

"What made you go into courier work?"

"On Quizion, all adolescents are conscripted to enter in a four-year program of public service. It's a way of repaying the government for putting you through school. At one time, it was working in your village, town, or city. These days it can be served just about anywhere the Public Lottery assigns you if you choose to travel further than your neighborhood. After tests and interviews, I was placed in courier work. This is my second posting." She waited for the woman to ask her where her first was, but the question never came.

"So, what do you plan on doing after your service?"

Lonnie blinked. "Travel. I've credits from my grandmother and what I've saved."

"Isn't it expected of you to return home and learn a trade or start a family?"

"My family hasn't placed any of those expectations on me."

"If you were to look for a job, do you have any interests?"

"Are you a recruiter?"

"Maybe." The stranger picked up her recorder and handed her a card. "If you're looking for a job that involves travel and observation, call me."

Lonnie still had six months to go. She wondered if she would still say that when her service ended.

Hours later, Lonnie's supervisor and one of the other couriers came by to see her. She had been hospitalized for a month, she learned.

"

"

Following her release from the hospital, the attaché to the Ambassador of Quizion presented her with a ribbon she was embarrassed to display, and discharge papers from her four years of Public Service Duty, five months early.

This unexpected release left Lonnie without a job, and since she was not yet of legal age to apply for a job off her planet, she was without means to support herself. Returning home was not an option. Pulling out the card with no name, she called the number. She left a message and retired to her rented room that was available only for a few more days.

* * *

A soft knock had Lonnie looking up, wondering if it was her door or the neighbors. When she heard another two raps, she laid her guitar to the side and rose to peer out the peephole. Two women were standing outside, one of them she recognized as the woman that interviewed her in the hospital and the other species, she was not familiar with.

Working in a bureaucratic institution for three years, she had never witnessed anyone moving this fast. Just what type of job were they here to offer her?

Not feeling any danger to herself she opened her door.

“Leona Bestolie, recipient of the Cross of Besengi?” a woman asked.

“May we come in?” the woman who had visited her in the hospital asked.

Lonnie stepped back and gestured for them to enter.

The two stepped in and looked around her sparse one room. Her guitar was lying next to a chair with her suitcase packed near the foot of the bed.

“I see you travel light. Do you have anything keeping you here?”

“No.”

“Can you leave now?”

“Yes.”

“Do you need to notify anyone?”

“No.”

“Then let’s go.”

* * *

Lonnie glanced at Cornol Caline, the Rudian that was sponsoring her in her new job. Actually, it was a school she was signing up for. Since she was not of legal age, she would not be able to hold a job on another planet, but she could go to school anywhere in the galaxy. With a student visa that was supplied by her previous courier supervisor, Caline signed her up in a private school. As Caline put it, she was going to learn how to observe without being observed, and how to be noticed without being obvious, and while she was here, develop other skills to earn a living.

“All right, Lonnie,” Caline said, “this is where you’re on your own. Mother is leaving you but don’t forget to write,” she teased.

Lonnie grinned. “Yes, mother. Though, I noticed you’ve forgotten to give me a forwarding address.”

“You’ll be good at this, Lonnie.”

Caline ignored her hint for further information. Perhaps it was a species thing and Lonnie needed to ask directly.

“I’m not an idealist, Caline.”

“I think you are, but you’re also a realist and have common sense enough to keep the two in balance. You come of age in five months, by then you’ll be far enough into the program to know if this is what you want to do. When you’re asked to sign the papers for employment, make sure you sign the attachment that says if the philosophy of the department changes due to management or shifting of politics, you have the right to resign. This is not like the other agencies that are under counterintelligence. This is a civilian based organization that does not believe in casualties of war or sacrifices one for the good of others. If you cross the line from observer to activist, do it with open eyes, because then you are no longer covered by protection you’re accorded as an observer.”

“I’m not going home,” Lonnie said. “And I won’t sign anything without going over it with a legal advisor.”

“Not going home is your incentive. As for having a legal advisor when you sign up, it’s not going to happen because there is an Intergalactic Law protecting Observers.”

“

“

Lonnie picked up her bag and guitar case and followed the housemother, her dorm chaperone, to her new quarters for the year. They went up a staircase that wound around like a corkscrew onto the second floor. On one side of the hallway was a bathing room and on the other, toilet facilities.

Dama Ripley tapped on a door in the center of the hallway and pushed it open when a voice answered from inside.

A young woman was sitting at one of the two desks. Dama Ripley waved her into the sitting room.

“This is your dorm mate, Shari. Shari, this is Lonnie. Give her the intro, will you, Shari? I must get back to fixing dinner.” Dama Ripley was gone before Shari could respond.

“Hi.”

“Hello.”

Lonnie looked around their room.

Shari rose from her chair. “Just you and me. Two to a room. This is our study, front room, and entertainment area. Everything that’s not needed for the moment is retractable into the wall.” Shari pointed to the wall console.

Lonnie stepped closer to study the buttons. “Nice. I’ve been wondering when I would get to experience a room like this.”

“Soon every living space will be like this. One room fits all. That way is our shared bedroom. Two beds. If you don’t toss and turn, you won’t fall out. Closet space is enough for five days of clothing, though I don’t know why they don’t have auto-cleaners in the closet. Toilet and bathing facilities are at both ends of the hall. We share with ten other women. That’s going to be an interesting experience in the morning. I haven’t been able to get anyone to tell me why each room can’t have their own bathing and toilet facility.”

Lonnie tilted her head in askance.

“Have you sisters?”

“One.”

“Did you have to share anything, and at the same time?”

Lonnie's lips curled up into a smile. "No. I never wanted anything she wanted and vice a versa."

Shari laughed. "Well, expect pandemonium. Our day starts at daybreak." She pointed to a sheet of paper on a bulletin board. "That's our daily schedule. We're expected to be on time for everything. For the first week, we'll be tested both physically and mentally to see what we're made of, and then we'll be assigned classes to develop us into proper ghosts. Any questions?"

"Ghosts?"

"That's what I call it."

"How long have you been here?"

"A day. Do you play professionally?"

Lonnie glanced at her guitar case. "No. I just play for myself."

Shari nodded. "Do you have any preferences for a job?"

"Not to be stuck at a desk. But I don't want to be a soldier or law enforcement agent, either. They're expendable players to those higher up."

Shari nodded in appreciation of the observation. "The whole purpose of being the eyes and ears for HQ is not to be noticed, so doing anything besides keeping yourself safe, is frowned on. A trained observer is gold and not fodder, or so the present chancellor believes. I prefer as little travel as possible. Tvivs or vids are fine with me." Lonnie looked at her with disbelief.

Shari grinned. "I like sleeping in *my* bed, with *my* pillow, surrounded by *my* walls. I want to be in complete control on my travel, even down to the pause button should I need a break. With Tvivs or vids you decide if you want the smell, noise, and what to see as you travel."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Sort of. I have a fear of space travel. Does that surprise you?"

"I think of nothing but travel."

"You have the travel bug bad. Are you running away from home?" she teased.

"Is that what it sounds like?"

"

"

Shari nodded, smiling. “Dinner’s not for another hour. After you get your stuff unpacked, would you like a short tour of our small campus?”

“I would.”

* * *

After one year at HQ’s intense focus on observation, the art of discreet and passive schooling, Lonnie was sent to her first off-campus trainer, code name Star Maker. He worked on a starship cruise liner as an entertainer. His job was to polish Lonnie’s natural talent for dancing and get her established with a cover.

Chapter 1

Twenty-nine years later

The early morning summer light flickered through the heavily leafed trees that lined the road. Lonnie picked up her pace as she neared her turn, preparing for the last lap of her run, the hill. Long muscular legs beaded with sweat increased her speed and momentum as the narrow dirt path loomed ahead. Her destination was home where a cold drink, a shower, a soak in the hot tub if there was time, and breakfast waited. The tiny Security Mobile Watcher, SMW, zipped ahead of her to spy out the top of the slope.



water in the other.

Bending forward, she dug in her toes as the gentle slope turned into a steep climb. After she crested the slope, her stride lengthened. Her eyes rested on Shari’s figure still clad in her nightwear. She was leaning against the door jamb with a towel in one hand and a bottle of

That woman could be a heart throb if she had a mind to it.

Oddly enough, those were the very words Shari had told *her* after her last sitting for publicity photos.

Lonnie glanced at her watch. No, she was right on time. Shari was late to bed and late to rise type of person, so whatever had woken her it was not company, or she would have dressed. Lonnie came to a stop in front of her roommate, reaching for the proffered towel, then cold water.

The SMW disappeared into its recessed home, letting other security devices take over the protection of the two occupants.

“Your new dance agent called *again*. Does he think you’ll skip town?” Her voice was husky with sleep.

“Sorry...he woke you,” Lonnie puffed, took a deep gulp of water, and then took a few more breaths. “No....Ben said...he handles....big name stars.”

“What does he want with you then?” Shari stepped back. “Is he going to try to sell your contract to another agent? Don’t forget if he does, that will null and void his legal rights on your contract, and then you’re a free agent. It can only be sold and-or traded once.”

Lonnie followed her into the house, watching the short silk nighty that just covered her buttocks move over her dark skin. Shari disappeared into the front room which doubled for her office while Lonnie continued down the hall. Shari’s voice was muffled as orders were given and the soft hum of the cleaning bot came on. Apparently, she had given up on sleep. The laundry cabinet doors opened with a swipe of Lonnie’s hand in front of the sensors. She stripped off her running attire and tossed them into the cleaning machine. The machine clicked on. She dropped her water pouch into a basket and lined her running shoes up neatly with her hiking boots.

“Breakfast for one, my usual,” she ordered as she passed the kitchen. “Deliver to my room.”

Naked she ran downstairs to where there was a large bathing room that contained a bathtub, hot tub, and a large walk-in shower. Pausing on the dais to the shower, she waited for the soft chirp, signaling it recognized who she was and what water temperature she wanted. She had learned to wait for the program to switch before stepping in. Shari’s preference for cold showers was too exhilarating for her. Finishing her water drink, the bottle was tossed perfectly into the recycler.

After her shower, she skipped her usual hot tub, ate a quick meal, and did yoga stretches in front of the bay window that overlooked the ocean.

“

“

* * *

Too soon the doorbell chimed. She unwound her body from her Āsanas position and plucked a top from a hanger, dropping it over her head.

Shari's voice drifted to the lower level as she greeted the agent and from his response, he was curious about Shari, and her relationship with his client. He would not be getting much information from Shari.



Lonnie stepped into the room and spotted De Erich Bettelheim near a bronze statue of herself, dancing flamenco with skirts and hands flowing dramatically. His eyes were looking over the room with too much interest. She followed his gaze. Aside from the statue, there were no personal effects. One wall concealed a bookcase and office equipment, and two were windows letting in filtered light. One window had a view into their tropical fruit garden and the other over the ocean with an uncluttered view to the horizon. The third wall was a plain off-white surface. For some, the room might appear stark,

but for Lonnie, the natural views were enough to let her know she was no longer on a spaceship.

Leona Bestolie listed this as her home – twelve secluded acres along a cliff with an ocean view, and the way it was situated, no neighbors within even telescopic view. It meant even if she had celebrity status, news agents would find it difficult to get unsolicited photos or information on her. The agent assumed that Shari, a mixed species of Cleatian and Human, was his client's lover and supported her when she was home from her tours. Her dancer's salary would be insufficient to afford the rent or to hire someone for Shari Sing's services, he thought superciliously. Mentally shrugging his shoulders, he decided as long as his long-range plans were met, he would not spend any more credits investigating them.

“De Erich Bettelheim,” Lonnie greeted, entering the room. Lonnie’s field of vision encompassed Shari. She was dressed flawlessly in designer slacks and a top, looking elegant as well as wealthy, which would impress someone like Bettelheim. Shari batted her eyes mockingly at Lonnie, and then closed the door quietly behind her, giving the agent and client privacy.

The tall Aleutian turned to face his new purchase, legally referred to as a “client”. His dark eyes set back in their sockets, scrutinized his merchandise. His broad green scaled forehead was thrust forward, and his hands were clasped firmly behind his back.

De Erich Bettelheim had bought out De Ben M’Clion’s contracts with various entertainers and sport players. Bettelheim was making his rounds to inspect his new stable of performers. While most agents would rather do their business over a vid or through the mail, he preferred a face-to-face meeting to let them know who was going to be boss and to decide whether they were worth keeping. So far, all Ben’s clients were, as he said, safe and provided a steady income.

Dama Leona Bestolie dressed tastefully, though understated, something he didn’t expect from an entertainment figure... but then that was one of her flaws. She didn’t attempt to stand out – a form of free advertising.

“Dama Leona Bestolie, how do you do?” His voice was gruff and carried some rebuff, a reflection of his quick assessment.

Lonnie gave a polite nod. She hated to be called Leona but refrained from pointing that out this early in their meeting. Since his species was sensitive to the moods of others, she didn’t bother with a verbal reply, and was careful to keep her thoughts minimal. As he sized her up Lonnie was doing her own study. The Aleutian dressed and carried himself like a prosperous agent. Exactly what an aspiring performer would want, only she was perfectly happy with her present contract.

Lonnie gestured to the couch where he would be comfortable lounging, while she sat in the chair with a view of the ocean.

“

“

“Shall we get to business?” Erich pulled out a compositor and opened a document - the contract she had signed with Glimpser’s Talent Management Company nineteen years ago.

“Your present dance partner, Mar Righ has no desire to change agents and I don’t want my...” catching his client’s raised eyebrows he amended his thought and smoothly continued, clarifying a point, “Your professional partners will be only those I manage. It makes it less stressful for all concerned when negotiating payment and getting a replacement if something should happen to one of you.”

He left unsaid that should there be a disagreement between him and the performers, he wanted to be able to put pressure on the stubborn performer to do as he ordered. Lonnie knew about those types of agents and was grateful Ben had not been like that.

Erich looked down at the old contract and the sections he had highlighted. He was quite bothered by the freedoms his new client had regarding port excursions. From what Ben told him she liked to climb cliff faces, race vehicles across the wild lands, skydive off high mountains, and disappear into the outback for the duration of her personal time away from work to deal with living in tight quarters for ten-month space cruises. All those activities could cause her an injury that would prevent her from performing or make it difficult to reach her should he need her on a last-minute basis. But it was a better outlet than drugs that most of the high-profile entertainers chose, he thought grudgingly.

Lonnie smiled, guessing what was running through his mind, pegging him for the type of agent she had avoided for so long in her career. Her contract was a twenty-two-year contract to expire in three years, and any changes couldn’t be made without her consent, and she was not about to change one word of it without a favorable incentive for her.

So, why was he here when a simple letter or video call would suffice, letting her know that her contract had been sold? Her present gig had a faithful group of fans that rebooked the liner for various lengths of time over the ten-month cruise which made it profitable for her, Old Ben, and the owners of the space cruise liner. She relaxed,

thinking he would be foolish to change her dance schedule, for all of them would lose money, through breach of contract – with hers and the cruise company.

“If you don’t like my management of your professional life, you have a choice of finding someone to buy your contract from me or breaking it. Breaking it means you only dance for yourself in the privacy of your home for three years.” He gazed around the room they were in, thinking he was making a point that it would be a small stage compared to what she was used to.

“So, who’s my new partner?” *That’s what you’re here for*, she thought.
Otherwise, you wouldn’t have made this long-distance trip.

Lonnie reasoned it had to be a real hummer or he would just have sent her a letter like any other agent, confirming her change of agent and making suggestions in how he would like to get more money out of her, by booking more performances, and then slipping in dance partners that usually were mediocre and he wanted to quit. Not many dancers wanted a spaceship cruise gig.

His calm appearance was betrayed by a slight twitch of his forehead.

She guessed right, she thought with satisfaction. He was easy to read for a hardnosed agent.

“Diva Kali Maxine,” he pronounced grandly.

Her expression gave nothing away, but she nearly burst out laughing at the idea of *her* partnering with the grand, media loving, and very talented Diva Kali Maxine. She was also troubled.

“I’m pairing you two.” Ben M’Clion had said this cruise line dancer never gave anything less than her best, but since she had never been billed as a star Erich had low expectations. If he wasn’t so desperate for a neutral and isolated place for his star to regain her balance while still performing, he would not have picked a cruise liner or this person as a partner.

“Why me?” Lonnie asked in an even voice.

“You’re not a man and you have no ambition; therefore, you pose no threat to her way of thinking.” He waited for her reaction, and when he got none, he continued.

“

“

“Though I like my clients to be ambitious, since I’m in this for the credits, the situation makes you the right person for *this*.”

“This? What is *this* and what’s in it for me?”

“If you stick it out for the ten-month space cruise with her, I’ll give you your contract at the end of this tour — plus a bonus.” He only added the bonus because he had a feeling ending her contract was not enough of an incentive. She was probably comfortable in her present job setting.

“Just what exactly does *this* entail, besides pairing up with her?”

He leaned forward and handed her a dance plan on the compositor. She read it through and laughed heartily, then handed it back to him.

“You have quite a challenge here. You must know something about her that the public doesn’t. These dances are not her style, and I’ve never heard her dance with anyone but men.”

“Remember Jerah and Sarah?”

“Yes. In their time, they were the hottest broadcasted dance duo.”

“I think there’s a place today for the return of their style and timed right can turn into a galaxy wide trend.”

Lonnie’s lips curled up into a smile. “And you think she can pick up these styles well enough to get her back in the spotlight as a trend setter, even if the trend will be short lived. You must be expecting her to carry it further to other forms of entertainment, say vids or stage plays.”

He looked surprised and nodded. “A good guess.”

“Not a guess. You wouldn’t be investing so much trouble in one difficult to manage client unless you knew they were worth more than what they were presently valued at. It’s the nature of your business, yes?”

There were two points in favor of his idea provided it did not end up gutting her career, one was dancing Flamenco with Kali Maxine and the second was ending her contract early. Dancing Flamenco with Kali Maxine won her over without much struggle, but then, she distrusted agents out for big credits. Did he know how tempting the offer was to her? She began her career dreaming of getting to know the youngest dancer to make it on the diva list and here was the offer to partner with her.

She gave him her nicest smile. “I’m game but I gather you haven’t spoken with your diva yet.”

He tilted his head in askance.

“It hasn’t made it to the trades media rags.”

“I confirmed your contract on Stanley’s Liner for the ten-month tour season,” he replied, ignoring her comment. “We’ll start out using your fan base. Depending on how the five months go before the two-week break, we may consider a larger ship Stanley’s Line has for the return trip. I also booked port shows...”

“Stop right there. I have two full days of shore leave at each port, and I intend on taking them. That’s in my original contract until three years is up, which changing agents doesn’t cancel my original contract.”

“No. It doesn’t. It’s the same day as you arrive in port, so you’ll still have your two days. You’ll be disembarking earlier than the other passengers. I have you on the...” he looked down at his notes, “SDL which will allow you those hours spent waiting to disembark with the other passengers, to give a short performance.”

“Special Disembarking List.” She was impressed and so would her friends on *Earl Gray*.

“The shore shows are advertisement with the local media covering it, further building a galactic fan base for Diva Maxine.” There was a noticeable pause before he continued, “I noticed you also have two weeks off at the halfway point, before the trip back. What do you intend on doing during that time?”

“Relax,” she said. She read in his eyes what could have passed for a quiet mental sigh.

“Are you satisfied with the added proposals I have presented?” he asked.

Fingerprint and blood test were required for all contracts and important agreements, but she would wait until it was reviewed by Shari before signing. He made too many assertions and she suspected she needed to heed the small changes that there might be in the contract.

“

“

"I'll accept it once my lawyer approves," she said, curious about Shari's reaction. "You can download it to my mail."

"Please return it signed and certified within a week. There are arrangements that need to be finalized with others."

She showed him to the front door and waited until the security gate locked behind his departing autocab. She then went in search of Shari, guessing she was in her bedroom.

Ten months of the year, Shari had the roomy, two-bedroom three-tiered home to herself. It was built solidly into the rock face of a cliff. The living room, bathing room, and bedrooms had grand unobstructed views of the ocean. It was a secluded location with a security system that was kept updated.

For Lonnie's two-month vacation between cruises, she enjoyed the roominess of the entire house, and sleeping on a bed softer and wider than the bed aboard the space liner. Both women preferred wide open spaces with few collectibles displayed on their wall space.

Even before Shari was recruited to work for HQ, she established as a money maker. She loved to make deals that make other people wealthy, which along the way she had accumulated her own wealth. She had insisted she could make Lonnie prosperous no matter how little she earned; all she had to do was travel. Skeptical, Lonnie took her up on the offer, and in five years, Lonnie had a considerable wealth management portfolio. Lonnie enjoyed her travels across space, rubbing elbows with people that were fully engaged in living. Her natural talent for seeing beyond the surface of smiling faces gave her glimpses of things that continuously amazed her, both the troubling and joyful.

After training with Star Maker for years on a space cruise liner, learning more than how to dance, Lonnie was introduced to a professional entertainment agent, Ben M'Clion, affectionately called Ben by his clients. He wasn't with HQ, but whether due to HQ influence or his own interest in Lonnie, he teamed her up with a veteran dancer on another ship, continuing her training in dance, and how to survive ten months of living on a mid-sized space liner without resorting to drug addiction. The Gypsy, he liked to

refer to himself as was the last of the old dance masters, who could learn any cultural dance and turn it into an enjoyable show for most audiences.

During the tour, the spaceship cruised from one planet to another allowing its passengers two day excursions to nearby planet's special attractions on scheduled shuttles, or to space malls. On her leave time from the ship, while wandering the outback, flying off cliffs, or riding whitewater rapids, Lonnie met people of all sorts. What information she picked up was passed onto Shari on property or company investments and embedded in her report's information for HQ.

Lonnie plopped down on the bed next to Shari's pile of cleaned clothes that she was folding. Though they had an automated maid, Shari preferred to do some things herself, like fold her clothes. It was her way of meditating. Lonnie preferred not to do any chores while at home and took advantage of the service bots.

"You were so right about this agent," Lonnie mused aloud.

"What's that? Did he demand that you give up your adventurous port excursions and want to increase his percentage of all your earnings?" Shari asked.

"He didn't dare ask, though he hinted. We both knew he could buy my contract, but it stays as it is until the contract expires in three years. His wish is to add an offshore performance at each port we arrive at. He didn't say anything about how much he's paying me for this added performance but let's see what he puts in the added notes to the contract."

"The way your present contract reads, unless he books it on the property of Stanley's Space terminal, it opens up new salary negotiations," Shari said. "If that's the case, Stanley's negotiator will need to be present to see what their take will be. After all, you're using their property which requires their employees to...well, anyway. Those changes will involve a lot of people."

"He downloaded the contract to my mail. Right now, he needs me for a project of his and I don't mean HQ stuff, but as soon as that's finished, he intends on buying me out for the three years to end my contract, treating that as if it were a bonus."

"Oh? Just what is this project?"

"

"

“He wants me to partner with Diva Kali Maxine for the ten-month cruise.”

Shari paused in her folding and gave Lonnie a long stare of disbelief then burst out laughing. “Kali Maxine?” She laughed some more then sobered up and asked, “You really think you can keep your head clear around her?”

“I don’t have a crush on her, Shari, I just thought she had great potential at one time. She was *the* diva when I started in the dance business and according to the trade media, she still is.”

Shari gave Lonnie a disbelieving look. “Do you still have that returned fan mail some flunky handling her mail sent you?”

Lonnie laughed with embarrassment. “No, and I don’t have her poster anymore.”

“She may still be on the diva list but not so high that she’ll get a nosebleed. She’s troubled in real life, just like this new agent of yours sounds. What does he plan on doing about your agreement with the liner for the two remaining tours you’ve contracted for?”

“That’s his worry. Besides, all of this is speculative. He still must get her on the liner for ten months.” She grinned. “I have a feeling he wants me to tame her.”

“Tame her? Like a circus lion tamer? She’s a drug addict and has been unlucky for all her previous partners. Since when have you been a drug counselor? Are you pursuing new career paths?”

Lonnie waved her hand dismissively at the rumors. “They were all burnt out performers heavily into drugs before they partnered with her. They couldn’t even clean up enough to take advantage of her fame to get back into serious dancing. Remember Jer and Sarah?”

Shari’s eyes opened wide. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“He also used the name Jerah instead of Jer. Does that tell you something?”

“That he’s not asking you to get a sex change? Since they lost their following when it became known that Jerah was now a Jer I’m sure he doesn’t want to make the same mistake with his diva. Lucky you.”

Shari slapped her arm as Lonnie reached over to help with the folding. “Get your hands off my underwear. You don’t even fold your own – you use the automaid.”

For a few moments they wrestled for possession of the thin fabric. Lonnie nearly lost the fabric in fits of giggles as Shari's fingers poked her ribs. Lonnie finally gave in and tossed the cloth in the air. Shari caught it, rolled it into a small packet and stacked it next to the rest of her panties – out of Lonnie's reach.

“You do cut a handsome figure dressed in those tight-fitting gauchos. Just think of all those people who'll pay so they can drool up close. But that diva, all she has to do is open her mouth and there go your fans.” She stopped folding for a moment. “Though, it's only for one tour...ten months.” Shari's eyes became distant as she envisioned rearranging Lonnie's finances and investment portfolios in anticipation of her early retirement.

“I have a feeling he's going to run into big resistance with her on this plan,”

Lonnie informed her. “I'm not putting anything solid on it just yet.”

Shari gave an undignified snort. “You're going to run into big trouble if you don't lose that wide-eyed look of adoration.”

“I don't adore her!” Lonnie denied indignantly.

“Just be careful, Lonnie. It's not just that it sounds too good to be true...” Shari's voice trailed off. She shook her head, perplexed. “I...this just doesn't feel right. Have you heard anything from HQ about this change of your agent?”

“Not about this. Not even the news rags have mentioned that Ben has retired and sold his contracts to the Bettelheim Agency. It should be a big story, but maybe because Ben's clients aren't media mad just steady earners.”

Shari studied Lonnie, “But why did Erich pick you for his grand project...and it is a grand project.”

“Because I'm isolated; because I don't cause ripples in the industry, because I don't do the drug scene. Let's face it Shari, if he needed a place for her to clean up her act, and if he had a guy with the same qualifications, he would have taken his deal there. Lucky me.”

“

“

“Clean and pure,” Shari laughed. “Oh, gods. This is really funny in a twisted way. But think about this, without an agent most entertainment places won’t hire you because of their charter with the entertainment industry.”

“Who said I need to dance in big places? Small private night clubs are fine.”

“Okay. Consider the realities like how much longer you can keep up your physical regime. You’re an athlete that’s aging. You’ve been at this for thirty years, is it? How long will your knees keep up with your hobbies? No matter that with today’s medical technology you can keep going for as long as your credits hold out, but don’t you want to settle down, find someone to share your leisure hours with before you hurt something?”

“Are you trying to talk me into it or out of it? Am I showing my age?” Lonnie mockingly made as if to preen herself. She never had worried about aging and so far, her body was not hurting from the wear and tear, but that was because she was serious about taking care of herself physically and mentally. “I haven’t really thought about the end of my contract. I was going to give it another two years before I started to make plans, then in my last year, put the plans into action. I could open my own dance hall... no agents allowed.” She gave Shari a wide grin and then shuddered. “Gods, what a headache that would be. All those massive egos to deal with and no agent to babysit. I like the idea that I have the luxury of being able to retire with sound mind and body.”

“Can you live with the idea of no longer traveling all over the galaxy and with staying in contact with your scattered friends that are loyal fans? You’re not exactly a great mail writer or attentive to reading your fan mail.” Shari’s light tone belied the seriousness of the question. Both understood the importance of Lonnie’s job as an Observer for HQ and for their business, as well as the comfort Lonnie found in the schedule she followed for the last nineteen years.

“It’s not a life-threatening change, Shari. I’ll do what I need to do. As for fan mail, I have a computer program that scans and articulates an acceptable response.”

Shari nodded, satisfied that Lonnie was thinking about it.

“Talking about changes...did Jenny find out any more about those two ghosts disappearing?” Shari asked.

“Nothing more than they’re from the same pod but different occupations.”

“Well, add this to your information. There’s a connection between one of the women in the group picture you showed me and one that disappeared. They were roommates for a short time in training, though not assigned to the same pod. That woman was once an Observer but was moved to Agent status about the time of her disappearance.”

“Do you think the situations are related?” Lonnie asked.

“I’m not one to believe in coincidences. Not in the business we’re involved in.”

Lonnie shuddered. Violence was something she abhorred and, on most occasions, had avoided. Only twice in her adult years had she not been able to avoid bloodshed in a violent and impersonal way and both times she had barely escaped with her life. She vowed that whatever she did it was to bring joy into people’s lives by preventing what could be prevented without the consequences of losing a valuable life lesson.

“Make sure you take precautions when you leave ship, Lonnie. I don’t want to hear about you disappearing.”

“*You* make sure you’re careful. You’re isolated up here.”

“But better protected,” Shari returned.

* * *

“How long this time?” Shari handed a small bag to Lonnie. Her sitar case was already in the back of the autocab.

“Overnight, at the most, per Jenny. Are you sure you don’t want to join us?”

“Nope. I’ve too much work to do. This is one of my busier months.”

While it was time for Lonnie to wind down from her two-month vacation from the entertainment business, it was a season of real estate buying and selling fervor in some parts of their galaxy, keeping Shari up all hour’s, day and night, with deals and contracts.

“

“

Lonnie slid into the cab, and it took off as soon as the door was closed. Ten minutes later it stopped at a corner and picked up Jenny.

“Hi. Change of plans.” Jenny pulled out a key and inserted it into a slot in the dashboard and the cab made a neat left and then right onto another road.

“Why the change?”

“Someone was following Cari.”

“Where did it pick her up?”

“Her home. She ran a scan in her place and found it was bugged. She’s notified HQ.”

“How did she know it was from them?”

“She guessed.”

“I have a lot of misgivings about this new management,” Lonnie said. “It feels like they’re moving me into a quasi-police role. I received assurance that I don’t have to do anything but show interest in making a land deal. And Shari will make inquiries since it’s not unusual for her to act as a land agent for her customers.”

“And that’s why we’re going to monitor this game HQ is running. Now, it’s three ghosts missing from the same pod.”

“Three?” Lonnie asked.

“It was passed on by word of mouth to all the pods.”

“Is there any more information?”

“I’m not getting any solid information from HQ. Their official note is it’s an ongoing investigation. They won’t discuss it and we’re the ones whose life is on the line.”

“Lonnie, this is your corner.”

Lonnie instinctively grabbed her bag and looked out the one-way windows.

“Are you ready?” Jenny asked.

“At the light, I’ll go. Looks like a good crowd to get lost in.”

“Right. Meet you at Inga’s Coffee Shop.”

Lonnie pulled her vest in place, identifying her as a street corner musician, and fixed a hat firmly on her head with the brim covering half of her face. She made a quick exit into pedestrian traffic.

Lonnie entered the coffee shop's back room, where the others were waiting. They left through a different door, took another cab, and stopped at an old warehouse filled with new merchandise.

"Where do you find these places?" Lonnie asked Cari as they followed her into the back room.

Cari only grinned.

"Why are we here?" Lonnie asked.

"To find out why they want *you* to go out of Observer status. Is there a guarantee for your safety? And our safety as a pod? And does this mean you're no longer considered an Observer? If you're an agent, you're no longer one of us and that means we can no longer contact you," Niamh said.

Members of pods were closer than family and developed a telepathic connection that allowed them to know when one of their members was in trouble.

"I asked the same questions and I've heard nothing back. I hope the disappearances are because they went to investigate the first one's disappearance and not something worse." Lonnie moved her musical case closer. It had an image distorter on it so that anyone trying to record her wouldn't be able to pull a clear image or sound from her.

"Who did you ask, your handler or HQ?"

"Both."

They were all quiet for a few moments, with Jenny finally voicing all of their big worry, "With the disappearances of those three ghosts, I smell something unpleasant affecting pods."

"You said one of the missing ghosts was asked to do more than just observe for HQ?" Lonnie asked Jenny.

"Yes."

"So, what are we going to do?" Lonnie said.

"Wait but be vigilant." Niamh lifted her eyebrow, asking the others to quietly nod that they knew what she was asking. It had been prearranged that should anything from

"

"

the outside threaten their group, a new code would be initiated. What was an exercise in training classes for them was serious business that as paranoid neophytes they took to heart.

Each woman nodded.

“We don’t let HQ know we don’t trust our handlers. We’ll discontinue using anything HQ issued, clothes and equipment, gifts too. Dump it or hide it in a public locker. There’s plenty of spyware on the market that is in some cases better than what HQ issues us.”

“And don’t use anything deadly,” Lonnie advised. “It would be out of character, and I don’t want to attract that type of energy to our pod.”

The others nodded. Their common interest was political activism through nonviolence. HQ’s recruitment of Observers was through their philosophy of change for the better using nonviolent methods. They weren’t military but civilians with a different set of rules.

“Jenny, you’re not scheduled for an assignment for the next few weeks. Do you think you can risk a remote viewing of a past event?” Niamh asked.

“You mean walk the same steps one of them had taken and see if I can see where she disappeared? I haven’t tried that, but Lela said it’s possible. Would that be considered stepping out of the Observer role into agent?”

“Technically, no. You’re observing,” Niamh assured her.

“Just keep it to yourself or between us,” Lonnie said.

“No kidding. I’m not trusting anyone outside of us,” Jenny said.

“I want to caution you, that maybe that’s what the Ghosts that disappeared had done too,” Lonnie said.

“I have family genetics and a long list of family members that practice self-protection on all levels. I’ll be careful. I’ll keep Niamh abreast,” Jenny reassured them.

Chapter 2

Meeting The Diva

Lonnie stepped out of her hotel room and elected to walk the thirty minutes to the studio Erich Bettelheim rented for three days of practice. For their first day, it was rented only for an hour and a half. It would be a light day of exercise, so Lonnie had spent her early morning hours in the workout room at the hotel and had a run around its track, working off as much of her nervous energy as she could. From the dance rags Diva Kali Maxine was catching a lot of bad publicity for either public displays of tantrums or wild partying. Lonnie was smart enough to know the tantrums were no doubt provoked by reporters looking for some kind of emotional outburst, so they had something to report.

She was sure she didn't have any of the giddy fan infatuation that Shari had accused her of having. After all, she had her dignity to consider. As Lonnie opened the door to the practice hall, shouting echoed in the building. There was no mistake who was shouting. Her heart quickened at the thought of meeting Diva Maxine in person. Was she yelling because she didn't want to dance with her?

Lonnie followed the arrow pointing the way to the dressing rooms. Each of the small rooms was shared with their dance partners or if they were going solo, had the entire room to fill with their costumes. The rooms had a large mirror on the door for performers to check themselves before they went on stage. Lonnie suspected that the mirror placement was intended to discourage door slamming since it echoed throughout the performance hall. Performers could be very temperamental and slam things when upset. Superstition says that breaking the mirror would give seven years of bad luck, and performers were a very superstitious lot. Within the dressing room there was a partition for costume changes. It doubled as a place to drape the next change or to discard the last costume. Lonnie found her dressing room entrance blocked by a big goon with his huge arms folded across his barrel chest and looking at her as if she were the enemy.

"Hi," she greeted and tried to step around him. "Do you mind? I'm Lonnie Bestolie, Diva Kali Maxine's partner. We *share* this dressing room."

He continued to block her way.

Determinedly, she headed to the stage area where she saw the diva, looking too glamorous for a workout, holding up the music sheets and yelling at Andres and the

“

“

bored-looking musicians. This was not the person the publicity photos liked to present their stars as. It was more like what the tabloids liked to show. Since the musicians were paid hourly, they were waiting for their contracted time to start. Lonnie noted Erich had hired two of the musicians she had suggested. She moved in front of the furious diva when it became apparent, she was being ignored.

“What do you want?” Diva Kali Maxine shouted at her.

Pale green eyes bore into her, and a breath reeking of alcohol assailed her. Lonnie wondered if she was a morning drinker or never stopped drinking. Not wanting to appear weak she forced herself to speak.

“I want to start rehearsal on time...” Lonnie began. Now was not a good time to doubt if she really had the forbearance to put up with a spoiled diva.

“And who are you?” the diva interrupted.

“Your partner for the cruise who wants to use OUR dressing room to change,” she returned. “So, tell your bodyguard to let me in.”

The diva’s mouth fell open in shock. “You’re Lonnie? I thought Lonnie was some *sheila glipatrous*. Where’s my agent! Conessa, get my agent! Now!”

Diva Maxine stamped toward the dressing room, shouting profanities, while interjecting instructions and comments to her assistant who followed her. “I’m not dancing flamenco with a woman!” were the last words shouted before the door to the dressing room slammed shut.

Obviously, Erich forgot to mention some important details. He had a month to and didn’t. Whimp, she thought disgustedly. And Diva Maxine thought her new partner was a sheila glipatrous? A homosexual male? Diva Maxine trusted her agent too much not to look up her name to see that Bestolie was female. She was the only Bestolie in the galaxy dance directory!

“Hey, Lonnie. I heard old Ben sold your contract to the Bettelheim Consortium. Erich sure must have been on something to match you two up,” Lila, one of the musicians she had recommended teased. “But he’s a hustler. If you want stardom and willing to work for it, he’ll get you there.”

The clock in the hall noisily clicked the hour. The musicians picked up their tuned instruments and waited. Lonnie quickly changed into her dance shoes.

“Remember this?” and Lila began an allegro dance number on her guitar.

Warmed up from her walk, Lonnie began dancing without stretching. It was an old gypsy guitar serenade to a lover. Her body moved easily to the flamenco tempo. The atmosphere in the room changed as the music and her shoe’s rhythm echoed through the large building. Soon the cheers from an audience cancelled the unpleasant first meeting with the diva. After the first set, Lonnie went to her bag and retrieved her castanets. She began a slow start with the castanets, then with her feet. Her two instruments set the mood to a cachucha rhythm. As the musicians added their sounds she began to move around.

Lila sang to cover the diva’s shouting voice from backstage. As Lonnie danced, she was aware that street traffic had drifted in and sat with the others against the wall to watch her. When she finished, they all whooped enthusiastically. While she caught her breath, she noticed that the shouting from the back area had stopped.

“How about some clogging music, just to work on my lung capacity,” Lonnie suggested. “I want to throw in a pas de chat, and a ciseaux to work on my leg strength for those leaps.” She nodded to the master musician, Andres, to begin.

When Lonnie finished the set, whistles followed by cheers provoked her to bow politely. She took a drink from her water bottle and nodded to Andres for the next set.

Her next solo was one of Jerah and Sarah’s dances, a bolero style. It was set to a slow rumba rhythm, sensual and romantically playful. As she moved, she caught sight of the diva standing stiffly in the wings with Erich. She danced over to the diva and gave her an opening to join her. She could see anger in the darkened eyes and before the diva could refuse, she playfully danced away. Most dancers knew this routine, but Kali Maxine obviously liked to do things her way because she took the lead. Lonnie followed. Sensing Kali Maxine would not be able to sustain the lead, half-way through, Lonnie skillfully took the lead back.

“

“

When the dance finished, the musicians began to pack their gear. Kali gestured to the musicians. "What's going on here?" she asked breathlessly.

"Their time's up. One and a half hours. This was supposed to be your first rehearsal to find out how you two fit. You look fine together," Erich reassured her briskly. "Next two days you can get your routines worked out before the ship sails."

Lonnie pulled a towel from her case and wiped her neck and face, aware of the diva's confusion. Kali Maxine let out a little huff of air as if she was trying to catch her breath to say something.

"Mind if I grab a ride with you back to my hotel, Erich?" Lonnie asked.

He appeared relieved. "Not at all. I interrupted a meeting for this."

After giving the autocab the hotel's destination, Erich leaned back and regarded his client as she changed shoes. "You're good," he remarked with a touch of surprise. Watching Lonnie dance, in a quick moment he realized that her talent and passion was what he wanted Diva Kali Maxine to exude, and he knew the diva had it somewhere within her. Now if only this dancer could impart those qualities on his diva, as old Ben had reassured him that she could, he would be reaping the benefits of a reborn star.

"Thanks for the compliment."

"Well, this is your chance so go to it."

"Go to what?" She blotted her face again and tucked the towel into her bag.

"Tell me what you think of being paired with the diva."

"She's *your* problem. I love to dance, but I can do other things."

"Such as?"

"I can lead tours into the Viking Canyons or join Bellah Abzug's Tour Group staff and take tourists on three-month tour climbs on seventeen planets...just to start with."

He thought about it for a while and decided if she was telling the truth, then he had nothing to worry about. "I did some research on you. I like to know the strengths and weaknesses of my clients. I think you would survive, but I also know a part of you would miss professional dancing."

She smiled wondering what he had up his proverbial sleeve. "Go on." This paring obviously was very important to him...or maybe not.

“What if I were to have your name placed on the settlement list on Abrazan so you can purchase land on Tuloc? I know you have your roommate working on it, but I know Hebr Mo’lu personally. Just stick the tour season out with her.”

“Put it in my contract.”

“I’ll make an amendment to the present contract and send it to you.”

“Send it to my *roommate* to look over. She’s my legal counsel.”

He nodded, smiling. Another bit of information on her that he filed away. He dropped her off at the hotel with a polite *ado* and a wish for profitable and safe sailing.

Lonnie bypassed the hotel elevators and ran up the stairs to the second floor. Shari was going to really be spinning her mental wheels on this and so would HQ. This was her new assignment that Shari and the rest of her pod were not happy about. She was going from Observer to an active participant in the new management’s assignment. Where did Erich fit in?

Rather than worry about it, her thoughts moved to what she was looking forward to. Space travel. The hotel was not far from the air terminal where she would catch a shuttle up to the mid-sized space cruise liner *Earl Gray*. The first five months aboard would take them on a cruise to twenty ports with two weeks off for the crew, and in the last five months they would hit seventeen planets on the return trip. That meant they had thirty-seven planet engagements, and four nights a week of shows aboard ship. As long as she had her days of free time off ship, she knew she could make her dance commitments.

In her room, she sent a message to Shari to expect an addendum to her contract from Erich.

* * *

After the hotel masseuse left, Lonnie soaked in the hot tub. This masseuse had advertised as an athletic masseuse. Having never experienced such a technique, she decided to give her a try and compare her technique to Gish, her masseuse from the cruise liner. The hot oiled rocks were very nice, and her muscles felt pleasantly relaxed. “Message on,” she ordered. “Send to Gish Lav aboard the star liner, *Earl Gray*. Gish, this
“
“

is Lonnie. Have you heard of massaging with hot oiled rocks? I had one and it felt darn good on the deep aches. There's a shop nearby that sells kits. I still owe you so let me know if you're interested. See you soon, gal. End message. Stamp with hotel return information."

Leaning back in the hot tub she smiled, thinking of Gish's massages. They had helped her physically survive years of stress and strain from her dancing and other activities on her days off. Gish was one of the twenty-five masseuses on *Earl Gray* and overworked to Lonnie's way of thinking.

Lonnie lifted a long muscular leg and waved it in front of the sensor to shut the water jets off. Pulling herself out, she picked up a thick towel and while drying off she studied the advertisements for night spots as they flashed across the screen.

* * *

Dressed for the evening, Lonnie stepped out to the line of autocabs parked along the hotel curb. She was taken to *Carobs Corner*, a popular nightclub. Lonnie was neither into drugs nor a serious bar cruiser, so arriving before the hardcore regulars seemed a good solution to her restlessness as well as her distaste for mingling in crowds.

Tables were scattered in an arc around the dance floor. Lonnie's eyes scanned for the exits, closets, telecom area, and the locations of various private rooms, the stairs, and manager's office.

Once orientated, she signaled the bartender she was ready for a drink. The bartender was Aberlian. Having six arms and two heads was an advantage in this service job.

"I'll have a Queen's Lime Banana."

"Not much into the fermented drinks, huh?" One head smiled while the other watched the customers along the bar and waitstaff on the floor.

Lonnie provided her eyes for a scan and once her identity was verified, she was given her drink. Lonnie heard someone slide onto the seat next to her.

"Lonnie? Lonnie whatchamacallit. The dancer. Right?" a young Erulian gushed. Her green antennas were twitching more than they normally should. She stuck her hand out with her fingertips quivering. The woman was hyped up.

Lonnie knew that the tips of her fingers had tiny suction cups that could be coated with an enzyme to make her defenseless. She ignored the woman's hand, wondering how the Erulian knew her because she didn't look like the type that was interested in traveling on space liners.

"Yes?" she asked disinterestedly.

"I just want to shake your hand. Woman, I saw you dance at the festival three months back. You were great!"

"It must have been someone else." She dismissed the woman with a nod and returned to her drink. She thought back to the festival on Cau'M. It was a private celebration and not one Erulian would have been invited to, even as a worker. So, who were the people at her table that put her up to approach her and knew of the party? Lonnie decided on a wait and see approach.

The bartender returned to Lonnie, watching the Erulian walk away disgruntled. "Word of advice?" the bartender offered in an undertone.

"If it doesn't cost me a fortune, I'm willing to listen."

"Hire yourself a bodyguard tonight. That kid runs around with a rough crowd. I don't think she's pleased with you getting past her game. We have good autocops that keep close tabs on who goes into the private rooms, and we usually don't let anyone leave here that's been drugged, but it doesn't mean when we get busy that they can't haul you off someplace."

"Ah."

"I saw you and that blond babe, Hea Conway, at the *Fallen Inn* on Elcons Fati. I didn't want to bother you but seeing as how it's out now." The bartender took a deep breath from one mouth. Suddenly his second head's neck stretched out long and peered over the bar counter as if looking for a snoop, then came back. "I was on my second honeymoon with my spouse of fifty-seven years. You gave us a memorable last two nights." Four sets of eyebrows bobbed up and down suggestively.

"

"

Lonnie laughed. “I remember Hea. She lasted two nights and that was it. She decided dancing like that was too hot for her. Settled down in Nar’oth on Vitma, the last I heard.”

“There’s only mining and heavy industry in Nar’oth — and wild bars. What she going to do there?” the bartender asked puzzled. “It’s not like she’s a miner.”

“Nope. Too skinny for that occupation and not the type to work in wild bars. I would imagine she’s producing more workers. Her family married her off after her two days of hedonistic pleasures in Elcons Fati.” Lonnie chuckled at the match up. Hea loved her husband as he loved her, which made a good marriage arrangement. Hea’s family wouldn’t send their child off if they hadn’t approved of the young man and his family.

The bartender gestured with two of six arms to another Aberlian that joined them. “This is my spouse, Elimie and I’m Dirmar.”

Lonnie nodded at Elimie.

“She needs a bodyguard, Eli.”

Elimie glanced at the crowd that the young Erulian was sitting with. “I saw her try her con game. They’ve been warned often enough to not bother customers. I was hoping the new security system would deter them. I guess they’re on drugs again and have no common sense.” She looked at Lonnie. “I’ll give you free of charge protection just in return for that freebee you gave us on our second honeymoon about a year back.”

Lonnie felt embarrassed. “I didn’t do it for anyone. I just felt like it and someone offered to be my partner.” She then smiled shyly. “I sure had fun for those two nights.” She also made a successful bid on a parcel of land for one of Shari’s clients and gave HQ Intel about the new governor’s son who had all the makings of a psychopath.

“You wouldn’t happen to be in the mood, would you? I mean, I’m not asking. I know you artist types need a break now and then, and the crowd in here may never have seen that type of dancing.” Elimie leaned forward with one head and added in an undertone. “They don’t know what they’re missing.”

Lonnie thought about the new contract with Erich which didn’t really begin until she was aboard the ship. It was an advertisement, which should thrill Erich. “I’ll make a deal with you. Two dances for bodyguard services for the time I’m in here.”

“Woooh! I’ll take that!” Elimie said.

“Okay. You pick the music.” Lonnie grinned nodding toward the music box.

Dirmar shut the music box off and turned another light on. He shouted down the noise and gave Lonnie a proper introduction and a warning that anyone who got too close to the performer would be bounced to the sidewalk for the rest of the night.

Lonnie examined the crowd. They all looked too young, too into themselves, and not the type to take planet space cruises. As the music began, she immersed herself in the tempo. She tested the sounds of her heels during the first dance. Not the same sounds she was accustomed to, but it would do. When she finished the first dance, she could feel the crowd’s interest. The intro to the second was an old flamenco song and she wondered where Dirmar found it. Her dance was sensuous and flirtatious with an imagined partner, but she suspected no one realized that. When she finished, the applause, whistles, and hoots were thunderous in the sudden crowded night club. Smiling to herself she decided she did her part in introducing the young to great art and it was time for her to go. Bowing, she turned to step off the floor when she was grabbed from behind. Because of the position of the arm around her the person was shorter than her, and by her bodyguard’s surprised and happy expression, it wasn’t something for her to worry about. Looking over her shoulder, a puff of alcohol greeted her from Kali Maxine.

“You think you have it made now that I’m your partner. Well just remember it’s for ten months and then you’re back to dancing in bars for pittance,” was the threat.

Another song began and her dance partner pushed her into the next routine. A rough bump of Kali’s left hip against her right would have been bruising if Kali wasn’t so inebriated and lacked full weight behind it.

The sound advice of never upstage a diva, ran through Lonnie’s mind. If Lonnie knew this was where the diva intended to party, she would have picked another bar.

When the music finished and the diva was busy working the crowd, Lonnie moved quickly off the dance floor. Elimie was behind her, and amid the cheers and a pressing crowd she wrapped two arms protectively around Lonnie. Her other four pushed a path clear for them. Autocabs were disembarking, stacking one behind the other as

“

“

people hurried into the club, hearing from friends already present that Diva Kali Maxine was giving a free performance.

Lonnie made a safe escape.

Chapter 3

A Taste of Bad Publicity

The next morning Lonnie was sitting in the weak sun having breakfast after a heavier than usual workout in the hotel exercise room. She was not expecting much today in the way of working on dance routines. She had a feeling it was going to be a waste of time with the diva jockeying for dominance.

A compositor was dropped in front of her. She looked startled. Erich looked furious.

“Am I late for a meeting?” She glanced at her wrist calendar and timer. It could not be the diva reporting her for bad behavior because it was too early for her.

“Did you have to cause a riot?”

“What are you talking about?” Lonnie looked down at the compositor. Laughing, she gestured disdainfully at the compositor. The images were outrageous and obviously fakes. “You’re my agent. Sue them for slander.”

The collection of images was of someone that looked like her and Diva Kali Maxine. The person that was supposed to be her had a bruised eye, and Diva Kali Maxine was shaking a fist at her. Then there was a person not even wearing the same clothing she wore last night, lying under a fist flying diva, mislabeled that it was her. Lonnie was impressed that the diva knew how to fight if the images were real.

“Were you there?”

“Yes, early in the evening, and I left just as the regular crowd was arriving. I also danced two solo dances and a third was commandeered by my partner who showed up with her group. I left after that dance.”

“You two didn’t have an argument?”

“I didn’t speak to her. She did all the talking and it was during the dance where no one could hear what she said.”

“None of what is written happened?”

Lonnie read the entire article, a short one paragraph bit of nothing, but was meant to scandalize. When finished she looked up and grinned. “The only thing truthful was we danced one dance together.”

Erich sighed and tapped his wrist communicator. He ordered papers to be filed to sue the news media for character assassination. He tapped the communicator off.

“The public remembers pictures better than retractions. I’ll schedule some public rehearsals where you both can be great chums. Wear a nice costume tomorrow at rehearsals,” he said.

Lonnie’s brows lifted in amusement. “If it looks too professional, they’ll know it’s been staged and have a lot to say about that.”

“Plain – black – nothing fancy and do something with your hair.” He nodded more to himself as he pictured what he wanted. “Well, what did she tell you?”

“What every self-centered diva would say in her position.”

“That you’re nothing without her.”

Lonnie nodded. She wondered if he would give her a pep talk or just leave things as they are, hoping the relationship would develop better on the cruise.

Erich studied her. “You know, you keep surprising me.” He leaned forward. “You remind me of someone that’s just waiting until her contract runs out so she can leave still in good health, whereas, with Kali Maxine, she has the talent to get back to the top of the dance profession, and into other entertainment productions. She needs a place out of the public’s eye to get it together. I’m putting her where she doesn’t have distractions so she can concentrate on losing this contentious and problem child aura, and where she can see what being professional is really like. Old Ben told me you could be a good mentor to aspiring dancers, but you don’t want to be bothered. I’m asking you to do me this favor and work with her. She’s got to stop putting herself in these situations where she gets negative publicity!”

“She’s a keg of dynamite ready to blow, Erich. She’s so angry at everyone that she doesn’t know what being nice is anymore. I’ll do what I can, but I won’t take the abuse she likes to dish out to people that are around her.”

“

“

He stared at her for a moment, wanting to ask just what she would do should the diva do her usual ranting at everyone around her, except him. He gave a mental sigh.

“I’ll get some publicity shots setup. Everything has been arranged on the liner so you shouldn’t need to see me before you sail. I need to spend some time with my other clients. Why can’t they be as amiable as you?”

“A stable of unambitious performers,” she mocked.

“You’re more than what you give yourself credit for. I trust you to do the right thing.” He then left.

* * *

Kali didn’t show for practice the remaining two days, so Lonnie and Andres reviewed tapes on Kali and arranged a program. Of course, there were plenty of publicity news photos as Erich said there was going to be, but it was of the diva without her new partner. According to the media she planned on taking a year off to work on a new show.

Lonnie took that time to perfect some new steps. The ship’s shows were billed as partner dancing, interspersed with solos. She enjoyed her solos, which made up for not having a particularly good partner, and in this case, not having a particularly pleasant one.

On launch day, Lonnie didn’t see any sign of Kali, or the entourage Lonnie imagined she would be traveling with. She was hoping the diva was reviewing tapes of the practice sessions. Andres regularly taped practice sessions to use as teaching tools for the musicians and dancers. After stowing her gear, she met the musicians for a warm-up, and a sound check on the remodeled stage in *Earl Gray*’s Florentine Showroom.

Still no Kali. Scuttlebutt had it that she was aboard. The ship’s atmosphere was different than other years. Lonnie was certain it had to do with a ‘real’ star being on board.

Chapter 4

Diva Adjustment

Lonnie stood in the center of the stage, dressed in a new black sequined short jacket with solid black pants rather than a dress she had worn with previous male dancers. This was a different gig. Her shortened hair was slicked back, showing off her strong jaw line and cerulean eyes that darkened to purple during extremely passionate

dances. Her castanets were cupped in the palms of her hands curled on her hips as she waited for Andres to begin the introduction of the first dance, a cachucha.

The audience's murmuring had ceased when the lights went low. Lonnie gave up hope that her partner would show early for a warmup and now just hoped she showed up in time to do her solo dance. Lonnie's opening dance was long, not just because she enjoyed the music and the energy her loyal following put out, but it helped her get rid of her first night's jitters. The usual feel of skirts swirling around her legs was absent, and so was the heavy bun at the base of her neck. This cruise was different on a lot of levels.

At its finish, the applause filled the room and broke the spell of her dance, Lonnie's eyes searched for the diva or her assistant. Music for the next dance began and Lonnie continued without her. Her second dance was lighthearted flamenco. Again, applause filled the hall as the audience whistled and whooped following her bow.

Her dance routines and costumes varied from year to year as her dance partners did, to keep it fresh for herself and her audience. Her shows filled enough seats in the two hundred seated auditorium to be assigned the hall twice a week for her performances. The rest of the week she appeared in smaller venues to give other entertainers a chance to fill seats with their fans.

After her second solo, the musicians began to play Diva Kali Maxine's opening solo, an adagio, usually part of the classical pas de deux in ballet. The pas de deux (duet) usually starts out with the male partner supporting the female partner while she did turns and balances, then the male does a solo and then the female does her solo. They then finish with a fast coda, dancing together.

Lonnie's breath caught when she saw the diva across the stage, staring out at the crowd. She was stunning. In that moment, Lonnie understood what Bettelheim saw: a magnetism that radiated from Kali whenever she slipped into performance mode.

“

“

As the diva regally stepped out onto the stage to her mark, Lonnie studied her. Not long



into the dance routine Lonnie became disappointed, and by the sounds from the crowd that she had just warmed up, they did too. For all her airs and perfectly executed dance steps, it lacked passion. An adagio was not meant for a cruise crowd.

Lonnie returned to the stage after having switched the black embroidered short coat with a long tailed red one. She started the next dance with her castanets clicking and her feet echoing. The guitars played softly as Andres sang a cachucha style song from a time before most of the attending audience were born. Lila sang the female part.

Kali Maxine was back on stage in a different costume, on cue, and the dance went without noticeable irregularities; that is, if she disregarded the diva's avoidance of any embraces, holds, or touching in anything more than a hand to the shoulder or hand to hand. That would prove a problem in future dances. Kali apparently had studied the tapes and found somewhere to practice alone because she knew the dance routine perfectly.

Lonnie was surprised as the diva pulled a switch into a promenade hold. Their height difference was in inches, though their body types, one slight and the other more solidly built set them apart. The position placed them side by side, facing the same direction, with the dominant position, slightly behind the partner. Left hands were joined and held up and the right hands were joined and held up behind the forward partner. In that position, the diva led the next *gigue a deux*, a jig for two. It was a mocking gesture that the audience mistook as part of the performance and gave the two performers a resounding ovation when they finished. Both women bowed and when the curtain fell for a final time, Lonnie immediately left.

Back in her cabin, Lonnie was gathering her clothing for a workout in the crew's gym when she heard the diva's voice yelling at someone. She announced in a loud voice that she was looking for her dance partner in the disgusting belly of a beached whale...or something to that effect. Words translated into another language sometimes lose their effect. Lonnie quickly grabbed her bag and towel and tapped on the adjoining cabin door.

Morti, a chef from the fifth level dining room, opened it promptly, his purple eyes wide in alarm at hearing the diva's angry voice.

"Can I escape through your cabin?" Lonnie asked.

"Yes. Do you think she'll give me her autograph?"

"Morti, listen to her. Do you think she's going to do that without damaging you first?"

He gulped audibly. "Maybe you can ask her for me."

"Sure Morti, when I get to be her best friend."

Lonnie peered down the corridor through his door. When the diva disappeared into her cabin, she escaped down the corridor and onto the crew's stairway to the gym.

Lonnie's workout was longer than usual. There were few crew members in the workout room. When she had no more muscle groups to work on, she headed to the crew's hot tub.

She couldn't do this every time the diva came looking for her. If Shari heard about this, she would be laughing and giving her "I told you so" for a long time to come. Miserably, she slid further down into the bubbling water. Deep down, though, she had to admit, every time she touched the diva it thrilled her. If she had not known the steps by heart, she would have missed a step. The worst part was when Diva Maxine took the lead her heart pounded so hard, she was afraid she would have a heart attack.

The soft ding from her timer reminded her that she had an appointment with Gish. Pulling herself out, she dried off and wrapped herself in her robe and hurried to the masseuse's room.

She dropped her workout bag near the massage table.

"Hi, Lonnie. I got your rock kit and tried it out on Hari," Gish said. "He knows about that technique so he's helping me with the timing of moving the rocks to the body without leaving burns. How about tomorrow, after your performance, I give you one?"

"I would love it. Is that your slow time?"

"

"

“Don’t worry about that. We’ve been upgraded with a gizmo. Get this – it has a meter that tells us when we’re working too hard. For you though, being a regular and all, just send me your schedule and I’ll make a slot.”

Naked, Lonnie flopped onto the draped massage table. Under Gish’s hands Lonnie felt her muscles pulled, stretched, and then smoothed out.

“Don’t you feel kind of dictated to with that thing?” Lonnie’s muffled voice floated up from the table.

Gish chuckled softly. “We can override it. It’s merely a device that lets us know when we’re doing too much. Five months is a long time to work five plus hours a day on people’s bodies. At least they finally posted the species each masseuse does, so we don’t have to shuffle around customers.”

“Uh huh,” Lonnie agreed. Her thoughts drifted into a peaceful sleep.

“Hey, my lovely, wake up,” Gish whispered near Lonnie’s ear.

“You interrupted another great dream, Gish.” She yawned. Rolling off the table she paused to stretch to become more alert. After dressing she moved to the eye scan to pay for the visit.

“This trip you get all yours free. You have my sympathies. Rumor has it that you’ll quit before the end of the tour. I plan on protecting my investment.”

“Naturally there would be a bet riding on this.” Lonnie yawned again until her jaw cracked. “I hope whoever is betting against me isn’t planning on sabotaging this gig for me.”

Gish looked worried. “I hope not too. But listen, if she gets rough, don’t feel like you must stick it out because of the betting.”

“I don’t care about the betting unless it interferes with my performance. And she’s not going to do to me what she did to her *male* partners.”

“Okay. You need anything, let me know.”

“Thanks. See you tomorrow.”

As she was scanned for entrance to her quarters, she noted she had company. Since Lonnie had no roommate, a nice bonus for being a regular on the cruise ship for so long, she guessed it would be the diva, no doubt unhappy about something.

“Where have you been?” began a venomous voice. Without waiting for an answer, she began a string of insulting remarks.

Lonnie dumped her damp clothes into the auto-laundrer, hung up her robe, and stored her bag. She turned to study the diva...Kali, she quickly corrected. This was just another partner that would be passing through and needed to be clued to what *her* rules are for the time they were partners. The only difference was that Kali Maxine was Diva and in the business a lot longer than her.

Her green eyes were especially green, maybe because of the clothing she was wearing. Her soft full lips were pulled into a tight angry line, and her cheeks reddened as her tirade continued. Discreetly, Lonnie sniffed the air. She couldn't detect any alcohol or drugs about her uninvited guest, but she did have that alluring scent on that she picked up when dancing with her. Lonnie sighed, giving a small shake of her head to clear her thoughts.

“Be quiet. You're being too loud.”

Kali stopped in the middle of her tirade to say, “Don't you dare...”

In a blur, Lonnie jabbed her in two spots at the base of the neck and then guided her hapless victim gently to the couch in a reclining state. Lonnie knew this was a dangerous thing to do with someone that had control issues. She leaned over the diva, ignoring the feelings her own body was transmitting.

“Number one, we are in a partnership where we show respect for each other in public and private. Number two, you will come to practice sessions and performances sober and on time. We are professional performers and that is how I expect you and me to act henceforth ... and number three, loud voices are heard by many on a cruise liner and gossip is second nature in this small city. You will conduct your private life in a private manner.”

Kali's eyes were wide open and furious, but no more than she had been when she came in. Lonnie's arms trembled at her nearness. She leaned back, putting space between them. Quickly she stood up.

“

“

“I’m tired and I’m turning in. The rehearsal is in fifteen hours. If you still have business to discuss we’ll do it, then.” Lonnie tapped her again over the same points. She pulled the diva to her feet and gave her a firm nudge out into the corridor. After closing the door, Lonnie activated the do not disturb lock and privacy bubble, picked up her guitar, found a comfortable position, and played until her thoughts were peaceful.

* * *

The next day Diva Kali Maxine was at rehearsal on time with her towel, water, her assistant, and an attitude. Lonnie schooled a neutral face and was careful what type of energy she put out as her partner approached. Lonnie had received a list of the dances via her cabin console earlier in the morning. Andres had compiled the list from the liner’s entertainment director’s suggestions, his own experience with this type of audience, and Bettelheim’s long-range plans for the diva required. Lonnie had fine-tuned the list with Andres and now it was up to her to present it to the diva.

“Shall we warm up first before we discuss what dances we’ll be doing tonight?” Lonnie asked.

“And I suppose you think that list of dances *you* picked will pack them in,” Kali Maxine sneered.

Ignoring the remark, she continued. “What we need is to start the show fast and finish with a flourish. In between, we need to keep them awake. Both of us starting off with a solo is not going to work all the time. We need to mix up the routines...”

“Get to the point.”

“Andres and I have no idea what your skill levels are in other styles of dance. The liner crowd likes tango, jigs, beguine, samba, flamenco, and bolero because they personally can’t do them well, and they’re fun to watch. Andres is a master at reading the crowd’s mood. If he senses restlessness, we can depend on him to change the music which means we must be ready to change styles. To do that we have to build up a repertoire of dances. Do you have anything to add?”

“Yeah, where’s the bucket to puke?”

If her face color was not turning a tint of green Lonnie would have thought it was just another rude comment. While the diva took care of her upset stomach with her assistant providing little help, Lonnie went to speak with Andres.

Kali returned looking somewhat better.

They worked on two routines, then at Lonnie's askance, the diva showed them her solo. The moment she started it, Lonnie knew it was wrong for the crowd. Andres stopped the musicians and looked at Lonnie with a furrowed brow. The diva turned and glared at the musicians, and then Lonnie, who was walking toward her.

"We already have two slow dances so if you add another it has to have something about it that will excite them. The idea is to make them want to leave dancing here, if only in their imagination. Can you do bolero?"

"No."

"Then I'll show you." She signaled Andres to let the musicians go.

When they were alone, Lonnie demonstrated a short version of the dance sequence. Kali attempted the first four moves without success.

"Focus on the first three steps, like the maldo but with movement in the hips, then take a big step out, sway the hips out and repeat once more and then two quick steps. That's right. And then speed it up."

A bell sounded, letting them know their time was up and another group would be using the hall.

"The dance steps are available on your viewer, under your name. If you need me to practice with, call me."

The diva's assistant glared at her and nearly pushed the diva out the door as quickly as possible.

Lonnie shook her head at the departing pair.

* * *

Their second night in a smaller auditorium was packed and the Commander of Entertainment, or the Entertainment Director as civilians called him, had to ask people to leave. Kali saw it as affirmation of her talent, but Lonnie knew the people were only

“

“

curious, and unless they improved their dances, they would lose many of them. They needed more practice time together.

At the finish of their performance, the applause reverberated off the bulkhead. Lonnie was used to enthusiastic applause, but there was more to this one. She patiently waited for the diva to tire from taking bows and was relieved when the lights went out on stage, ending the curtain calls. The diva's costumes and whatever else fans had tossed to her, were gathered by a purser whom the assistant was ordering around, and quite rudely to her way of thinking. Lonnie waited until the diva's entourage was gone before she took her leave.

She showered in her cabin and then visited Gish for her hot rock massage. To Lonnie's bliss, Gish proved to be a quick learner.

Before retiring to her cabin, Lonnie rode the elevator to the ninth level to grab a sandwich from the mess hall. Back in her cabin, surrounded by pillows, she munched on her sandwich and read the entertainment available for viewing on the interstellar channels. She switched to interstellar news and was about to change it when a word caught her attention.

She raised the volume.

"...authorities have attributed the rash of attacks on private vessels in this area to a fringe group led by Br'Mon. So far, this group is limiting their attacks to small vessels with little in the way of defense. Some space law enforcement groups feel they are using this as a practice run for the larger cruise ships and yachts that are not as solidly defended as military ships. Admiral Odon of Strategic Command Forces of Rizon Sector has issued a stern warning, should Br'Mon attack any ships from the Rizon Sector, that there shall be no safe harbor for the Br'Mon lot. I think Br'Mon had better be looking under his bed for the devil.

"On Cele, the other side of Orion's belt, the Enas Mik Clan reported their ship Murdelie has been found adrift in... "

Lonnie switched the channel off. "Just what I needed to hear."

Sitting at her desk, she sent an encrypted message to her handler at HQ. It may not be something she needed to concern herself with, but then again, if this group was

still in existence after all these years, and now operating in space, she didn't want to take unnecessary chances with her life.

"Now would be a good time to catch up on the trade news, since I can't go to sleep with terrorists on my mind."

She dialed up her subscription and found her services wiped out.

"What's going on here?" She tried a few more and then went into a menu. Her name was not listed. Sighing, she picked up the com and called the chief purser Crackle.

"Hi, this is Lonnie... Yes.... No, I'm doing fine thank you; however, I just logged onto my program menu, and I have none. I seem to have been removed from your database and don't have an ID or password... Yes, I would appreciate it. I was intending on catching up on trade news.... Alright. Thanks."

For a few moments, she stared at the screen, thinking about the averages of this happening to her. Should she be suspicious? There was nothing in her mail files or communication calls that would indicate she was anything other than what she portrayed herself to be, an entertainer on a cruise ship.

She sat up taller as a new menu appeared on her screen with a message from CP Crackle that until her profile was back in place, she was giving her access to the Super Suites Channels.

"Let's see what the expensive class passengers have to look at. Maybe female mud wrestling."

Instead, she found a collection of professional journals and selected *Dance News*.

The first article she read had her cursing softly under her breath. "How telling, Erich. Did you not think I would hear about this interview?" For a few minutes, she concentrated on her breathing. She read the author's name and then sent her Veda to the writer, just so she got the facts straight. Of course, she suspected that the deal with Erich for the exclusive interview was that her name would not be mentioned in the same report as the diva's, but there were a lot of writers without scruples who would write anything short of getting charged with slander. She also sent her Veda to another well-known snoop who loved to scoop the more established reporters.

"

"

“You don’t stab one client in the back for another, Erich,” she muttered.

Moving on to other noteworthy information she scanned as fast as she could, feeling her eyelids droop yet wanting to get as much free access as she could. Finally, she turned the viewer off, rearranged her pillows, and went to sleep.

* * *

The next morning, she was up early. Others she normally worked out with were already assembled, warming up. Their leader, CP Crackle, paired them up and had them go through basic self-defense patterns, no doubt wanting to see what they forgot during their two-month vacation.

Two hours later, Lonnie had a light breakfast and then headed to the hall for dance rehearsal. She joined a few of the musicians as they walked in the same direction. Everyone was in a good mood. Jeanie, a purser that had worked with her for the last four gigs, had set out water bottles and towels for the musicians and performers.

After waiting twenty minutes for the diva, Lonnie told Andres, “Well, there went that short period of cooperation. While you all practice I’ll go locate our diva and give her another one of my inspiring work ethic speeches.”

“Maybe you didn’t use the right incentive.”

“Give me a little more time. I’ll find out what makes her tick.”

“It is only the third day. Think you can do it by the sixth?”

“Is this a bet you’re wrangling for, Andres?” She could hear him laughing as he tapped his baton on the podium to get his musician’s attention.

Lonnie left behind the sounds of the musicians practicing dance music. She took the stairs rather than an elevator for both physical exercise and mental clearing. Outside of the diva’s quarters, Lonnie waited for the scan to identify her and then pushed the now unlocked cabin door open. Peering in before stepping across the threshold, she could see a spacious room with four closed doors.

It figures she would have the owner’s cabin. It was nice and spacious, but it looked too clean for comfort. From what Lonnie assumed was the bedroom, she could hear snoring from more than one person. Bracing herself for what she may see, she peeked in.

“Gods,” she whispered. It was a disaster area of scattered clothing, pillows, and... She sniffed delicately. Body odor. Someone had been sick, and the air purifier had not been turned on.

In fact... looking closer she realized it looked and smelled too staged. If it were an orgy, wouldn't the front area be in shambles too? Drugs in plain view were on a night table and too perfectly arranged.

In the dim lighting she spotted Kali Maxine, snoring noisily on the bed as naked as the two adolescent boys wrapped around her. This was not how she wanted to see her partner. She realized as she looked around that if she kept getting exposed to this side of Kali Maxine, she would never be looking at another poster of her as a fan.

Lonnie's eyes returned to the table with drug paraphernalia. She thought about dumping the drugs in a waste receptacle except it would notify security that drugs were aboard and have her scent on them.

The third rough shake woke one of the boys. She dropped what she guessed were his clothes on top of him and then went to the other, giving him the same rough treatment. Not saying anything, the two stumbled out of the cabin after fumbling into their clothes under Lonnie's stern eye. One gathered up the drugs greedily. That left more clothes scattered around the bed than what the diva would wear. Lifting a shoe that was too small to fit Kali or the two boys, a small suspicion began to form in her mind.

Lonnie turned back to her diva and could see reddened eyes blinking open at her, looking confused.

“You missed rehearsal.” Lonnie kept her tone neutral.

“Conessa must have forgotten to wake me.” Her stomach made threatening noises, and her face turned pale.

Lonnie lifted a sheet from the floor and laid it on the bed, should she want to cover herself.

“We rehearse daily. You're breathing too hard after each number. You need to build up your stamina, and we need to work on our steps *together*.”

“I'll be at tomorrows.” She pulled the sheet around her.

“

“

“Our show is in three hours; they’ve bumped our time to a noon show and moved us to the *Tea and Orange* room to cover for another group that came down sick. That’s deck seven, aft. If you can’t find it, ask.” Lonnie turned and left.

* * *

Two and a half hours later, Lonnie was stretching behind the stage, keeping warmed up. She was about to send Jeanie to find Kali when she entered backstage looking ill. Her costumes were draped over her arm, dragging on the deck. Jeanie rushed forward to take the costumes. Lonnie glanced at Andres who shrugged his shoulders.

“What happened to you?” Lonnie asked softly. She took one of the costumes from Jeanie and guided Kali into the small area for dressing.

“I got lost. No one could tell me where this place was, and my assistant disappeared.”

“Let’s get you changed. There’s an information kiosk located on every deck where you can ask for directions.”

Jeanie and Lonnie worked quickly, removing Kali’s clothing, and getting her into the dress, then combing her hair back and securing it in place. The good thing about their costumes was they were easily put on and taken off.

“Can you dance to that music?” Lonnie asked, hearing the intro music Andres started on time.

“Yes. It’s beginner’s stuff.”

“Then go.” Lonnie pushed her gently toward the curtain, hoping she wasn’t going to fall flat on her face.

It was a beginner’s dance, a bulerias, but a talented dancer would have replaced the simple steps with more intricate ones. Unfortunately, the diva did not improvise. Her perfectly executed simple steps didn’t woo the audience.

Andres picked jigs and flamencos for the next four sets. It was a disappointing night for Lonnie. By the nervous glances Lonnie was getting from her partner, Lonnie gathered the diva was not immune to her poor performance. Lonnie saw no point in speaking of it further.

“Rehearsal is at seven tomorrow morning in this hall. See you all then,” Andres announced.

Kali’s assistant, Conessa, showed up as the musicians filed out. She made a move to push Jeanie away from Kali, however Kali inserted herself between the two, saying something to her. If Kali had not Lonnie would have said something about Conessa’s rude treatment of the purser.

Kali turned and stepped toward her as if she wanted to say something. The dancing put some color back on her face, and she was standing taller. At that moment, a group of young men entered the backstage, spotting Kali, called out to her. Kali’s charm automatically turned on. Laughing and in a gay and playful mood, Kali allowed them to escort her out, past Conessa who was bunching up the costumes while sending glares toward their disappearing backs. Since the diva didn’t bring a cart to stow her costumes Conessa was left carrying the armload back to their quarters.

Jeanie glanced at Lonnie and made a face. Both women shook their heads. Conessa didn’t ask for Jeanie’s assistance nor any of the service bots.

“She’s going to be a hard one,” Andres said, joining Lonnie at the crew’s elevator.

“Hopefully, she’ll loosen up sooner rather than later.”

“I remember how persuasive you can be, so I’m sure you’ll get her in line soon enough. I want to thank you for recommending me to your agent. He’s impressive with his knowledge about talent.” He glanced at her uncomfortably. “I got the impression he’s very focused on getting this lost diva up in star lights.”

“Uh huh. We didn’t do well on that performance. I can dance with the syncopated rhythm, but it seems to confuse her. For now, we need to keep the music, so the main beat is clear enough for her to follow.”

“Her tapes didn’t show that difficulty. We have five months to work on it, then five more to polish it up but it could also be she’s not feeling well. I noticed she hasn’t been feeling well since she’s been on the ship.”

“She wasn’t on drugs tonight. She could be suffering from space sickness. Let’s give her a chance to do something for herself. If by the next warm-up, she’s still ill, I’ll

“

“

step in. Do you know who those two boys with the metal in their ears and nose are?” They both got off the elevator and walked toward their quarters.

“They’re the nephews of the cruise liner’s owner. Very entitled little snits. Orwin is the oldest, and the taller of the two. He thinks he owns this ship and does a lot of bragging about things he shouldn’t. The younger one goes by Kal, but I got the impression he has another name.”

Chapter 5

Not All Is What It Seems

Following rehearsal, the next day Kali Maxine was hanging onto the sides of the bulkhead heaving her guts out. Lonnie figured Kali’s problem was either psychological or physical. It was not stage fright, she was certain.

Conessa was not around to interfere and with a nod from Andres, he would see they were not disturbed while Lonnie had her heart-to-heart talk with Kali. Jeanie handed Lonnie a damp cold cloth and bottled water before leaving.

Kali Maxine slid down the bulkhead and sat with her head between shaking legs. Lonnie sat on the deck beside her.

“This is about fear, isn’t it?” Lonnie asked softly. “No one is taping this conversation.” She held up her ring that was a voice and image scrambler. “I have my trusty PD here.”

“What is it?”

“A ring that blocks people from capturing my image and voice.”

Kali wiped the sweat from her brow with the damp towel, then took a sip of water. “That’s why they couldn’t take your picture at the bar?”

“Yes. They had to use someone else’s picture and paint my face over. You’ve made yourself an easy mark for the one-night glory seekers by not wearing one.” After a few moments she returned to the current problem. “So, what is it about traveling space liners? Being out in space?”

Kali stared at her hands in her lap, clutching the towel. They were still trembling. “I thought I got over this.”

“What’s *this*?”

“I don’t... I just... I have bad memories about being on a ship.”

“Were you alone? Did someone attack you?”

The diva snorted in contempt. A trembling hand wiped away a tear. “I was with my family.”

Lonnie remained quiet.

“My family was one among many others. I remembered we moved often and always slept crowded with others, probably in the cargo bay. Nokie Drake was performing on that cruise. Every night he invited young girls from the decks below onto the stage to dance with him, but when the more affluent passengers weren’t around. He was looking for a talented child to mentor, he said. I wanted to be that girl. He liked the way I danced. Arrangements were made for him to take legal custody of me.

“He waited until my parents left the ship before he introduced me to *his* ways. I was kept secluded in his room until the end of the voyage. By then I knew what was expected of me.” Her voice sunk so low Lonnie had to strain to hear it.

Lonnie knew about Nokie Drake. She wondered if he was still serving time for child trafficking and molestation. Normally it would have been hushed up, but one victim from a prominent family had committed suicide in public, leaving a publicized suicide note. And with interest pushed by the media his type of business was revealed.

“How long were you with him?” Lonnie asked quietly, successfully holding her anger in check.

“Way past his interest in me. Where was I supposed to go? Nokie said my family were labor nomads with no home planet or a way to locate them. I decided to make the best of where I was. I had a job, a roof over my head, and regular meals. I became another member of his staff that took advantage of learning tricks of the trade from celebrities he associated with.” Her hands were clasped together. “They all were like him, interested in children, so there came a time when I didn’t have to worry about them.”

“Why haven’t you sought help for dealing with this experience?” Lonnie asked before she could stop herself.

“What does it matter to you?”

“

“

Her tone should not have taken Lonnie by surprise. Lonnie, after all, was not a friend and was meddling in a private issue. But she started it, so she was going to finish it. “Do you want to be number one in dance?”

“I want off this cruise liner.”

“You have an opportunity to face your demons. Don’t waste it. You already know how tough it is to get to the top in the entertainment business and stay there. Being captive to your fears sets you up with others that will know your vulnerability and take advantage of it.”

Kali rose to her feet and tossed her towel on her suitcase. Lonnie waited, hoping she would say something. Green eyes flickered to hers, and then away, trying to hide the tears that were trickling down her face.

“Have you been on a ship since?”

Kali silently shut her bag and prepared to leave.

“Tonight, we have off, and there isn’t any rehearsal space available. Practice on your own as much as you can.”

Nothing could be gained by pushing her, Lonnie reminded herself. “Are you going to be all right? Do you want me to walk with you to your cabin?”

“I’m fine,” she snapped.

Finding no other reason to stay, Lonnie was about to leave when she remembered her ring. The woman appeared pale, fragile, and too much like the proverbial damsel in distress. Taking off the PD ring, she slipped it on the diva’s finger.

She stared at it and then looked at Lonnie.

“Thank you,” she said sounding less agitated.

Conessa was anxiously waiting outside the door with Andreas keeping her and the boys with Conessa from entering the hall. When she saw Lonnie exit, she pushed past her, knocking her into the wall. Andreas held Lonnie steady. The boys who were going to follow stopped when Lonnie pointed a finger at them. She and Andreas gave them icy stares.

“If you want to visit with the diva, there will be no more private meetings in her cabin, no drugs around her, and no underage sex,” Lonnie said in a low voice.

“They’re not *our* drugs. Conessa supplies them. We can keep what’s left over,” Orwin, the oldest cousin retorted. “And we’re old enough.”

“Conessa?” *Is she drugging Kali?*

“Her manager,” he gestured to the diva’s helper.

The way Orwin and Kal were fidgeting; she had a feeling Orwin had left a lot out and remembering how she had found them she guessed what it may be about. “Conessa is *not* her manager, and drugs are illegal. You’ll not be spending any more time in her cabin, or it won’t be just security I’ll be speaking with.” Orwin glared at her with contempt.

“Mind your manners,” Andreas told him.

“I’m sure your free trips on your uncle’s ships will end if Englo hears of your behavior.”

Kal grabbed Orwin’s arm and pulled him up the corridor. Orwin wrestled his arm free and stomped after his younger brother.

“Englo? Whose name are you dropping that has them scared?” Andreas asked.

“Englo Brighton is Clamont Stanley’s secretary. For a long time, it’s been rumored he’s one of Clamont Stanley’s partners. I think because he has more say than most secretaries on business matters that the rumor got started.”

“And you know him personally?” Andreas asked.

“No. But they don’t know that. Thanks for giving us some time alone. I’ll see you later. I need to see someone.”

* * *

Lonnie spent an hour with the commander of security. She was aware that he had attended all her performances since she had worked aboard this *Earl Gray*. The first *Earl Gray* was decommissioned a few years back as being too old. It was about time for its replacement, Lonnie’s opinion. The commander’s lover, the Commander of Entertainment, was also an avid fan of hers, which was probably why she had originally been offered a long-term contract with *Earl Gray*. Of course, it helped that she was

“

“

perfectly content to work on the cruise ship. She and Commander Jol Hrorian had a good relationship and often met for lunch with some of the other entertainers.

Jol Hrorian had a good eye for picking out what type of entertainment the passengers liked. Though Lonnie didn't consider herself a main attraction, Jol and Clamont Stanley, the ship's owner did, though she had never met Clamont Stanley in person. Her loyal fans that booked yearly to see her made it important for them to keep her happy, which meant seeing that fans didn't annoy her.

"Drugs and the politics of theatre society," Commander Maltieani Co said. "Nasty business. I'll look into this Conessa's background." He studied her for a few moments. "You may get the bad end of a deal by that diva and her agent, you know? I didn't like the sound of his orders about setting her up in all this luxury and not mentioning anything about your comfort."

"I can take care of myself, Maltieani. But thanks for the thought on my behalf." Lonnie's long legs were stretched out before her. She was enjoying a drink she was sure he didn't share with many visitors. It was a rare vintage wine from a planet the older *Earl Gray* docked at as a regular stop about four years ago, before the planet became a less desirable port stop. She wondered how he managed to get a bottle of their finest. She held up her glass and looked at the color. This was a new shade. She glanced at Maltieani and raised her eyebrows in askance.

"I'm not saying how I got it." He leaned back in his chair, pleased with his drink, and her company, and the problem she brought to him. He was bored with the usual ship business. "By your description of this assistant, would you say that she's acting like she's settling a score? I hear a lot of that goes on with stars."

Lonnie thought about it. "Could very well be. Do you think you can find out where Conessa is keeping the drugs without involving Diva Maxine?"

"I'll get someone I trust to look around. If she's caught, we'll have to drop her off at the nearest port she can grab a ride home on." After another sip of his wine, he admitted, "I'm disturbed that she was able to smuggle drugs past our drug sniffers. That calls for an internal investigation of my staff. Too many new crew members. They've

shown no ship loyalty yet.” He stared at his wine glass for a few moments, his brow wrinkled in deep thought.

“We need to figure out the repercussions if Conessa has something on the nephews and the diva that she’s taking to the press. I’m sure the nephews of the owner were picked for a reason.”

Maltieani nodded. “I’ll start research on Conessa’s employment starting with who hired her. I personally don’t like the woman. She’s stirring up trouble below decks with rumors about you and Diva Maxine and this bet that’s going on.” He looked at her over the rim of his glass. “In case this investigation runs into costs the cruise liner is not covered for, who do I bill?”

“*Our* agent, Erich Bettelheim. Send him a report and tell him it’s at my request. His family is well-connected; let’s see what he does with this.” Looking at Maltieani she caught his grin. “So, just what is she saying that I haven’t heard?”

Maltieani’s grin turned into a big smile. He leaned forward to refill Lonnie’s glass.

“Shall we compare notes to see whose *mouths* are better informed?” he asked.

Lonnie smiled back.

Chapter 6

A Different View

The shuttle *CS Mermaid*, was filled to capacity with ship officials who would see that those on the SDL were handled by the custom agents of Tanzinia quickly. Disembarking to go planet-side normally took several hours for passengers to go through all the security checks each port required. While the regular passengers waited for their clearance, agents from tourist bureaus mingled among the crowd to interest them in what the locals and anyone else that had something to sell, including shuttles to nearby planets that had an interest in the tourist business.

At every port Lonnie had something planned and, in some cases, friends were on hand to greet her to help her unwind. Her need for communion with nature was a bone

“

“

deep urge that prevented her from being content with just space travel, even though the views of nebulae and stellar dust storms were awe-inspiring.

“Hey, Lonnie! It’s so good to see you.” Cora grabbed her in an embrace. “How did you get off so quickly?”

“I finally made the SDL.” Lonnie spread herself around the group getting hugs.

“Aren’t you special? We got your message about the performance at *The Dance Hall*. Luckily, we purchased our tickets right then. Bea said it was sold out by the afternoon. Everyone wants to see Diva Kali Maxine, and of course, those who know you, want to see you dressed in those tight-fitting outfits.” Cora wrapped her arm around Lonnie’s forearm and walked her out of the busy terminal to the autocabs lined up along the curb. “Seeing you without long hair is different. It’s going to make it easier on some of your activities.”

“It is. Where can I dump my grip?”

“In the back.” Lettie took Lonnie’s bag and tossed it into the trunk. “We’re going to have dinner at *La Sinque*. It looks like a dive on the outside, but a client says it has great food, good service, and it’s always packed. We have our reservations confirmed.”

The group separated into various autocabs. As her cab prepared to move out in a caravan Lonnie caught a glimpse of Kali Maxine looking lost amid the people grabbing at her for autographs. Without thinking she pushed open the cab door and hopped out. “I’ll be right back.”

Elma slid out also. “I’ll wait with her,” Elma told the others who waited in their cabs. “Go on and get things hopping.” She slid back into the cab with a grin on her face. She always wondered what Diva Maxine was like in person.

Lonnie pushed and separated the youth surrounding the diva wondering why they were so young. How could they possibly know anything about professional dance? Her eyes spotted a group of news people taking pictures. She was hoping Kali remembered to activate her PD.

“Do you have a ride?” Lonnie asked when she was near Kali’s elbow. Lonnie looked around for Conessa whom she would rather steer clear of.

“Lonnie,” Kali greeted, sounding relieved. “I...no. Conessa told me she had some business to finish up, and I thought I could handle this.”

“Are you protected this time?” Lonnie asked as she guided Kali through the throng of youth.

“Protected? Oh. Yes. I bought one of those rings like yours. I need to return yours.”

“Good.” Lonnie directed her to their cab. “What’s with the kids?”

“Hm?” She looked back at the kids that were now milling around and getting obnoxious with the other disembarking passengers from other transportation services.

“They’re not exactly the age group interested in professional dance,” Lonnie said.

Kali ducked into the cab, then hesitated when she saw someone already in it.

“Hi, I’m Elma Lin. Do we need to check to see if your costumes arrived at the theatre or just head to the restaurant?” she asked.

“Let’s head to the restaurant,” Lonnie answered. “Our trunks are with the musicians so Andres our conductor will see that they’re taken care of.”

Knowing Lonnie’s dislike of discussing business Eli wondered what she could say to relax the two performers. “So, Lonnie, find any new instrument to play?”

“No.” Her short answer and tone didn’t invite any more questions.

The cab ride was thankfully short. Everything was intentionally close to the transportation terminal. The rest of the group were already seated at a table enjoying appetizers and drinks. It was warm outside, so the liquid refreshment flowed. The conversation was lively and about everything and anything that did not personally involve Lonnie or Kali’s private lives. Lonnie had told Bea who made the arrangements that there were to be no drinks containing stimulants or depressants at the table and was pleased that her request had been honored. After Lonnie introduced everyone, she rose to go to the restroom.

“Where are you going?” Kali whispered anxiously.

“To the restroom. Need to go?”

“

“

Kali jumped up to join her. She kept a hand on her arm to not to be separated from her by the busy waitstaff and customers that hurried around.

At the sink while they both washed their hands Lonnie could see Kali's hands shaking.

"Are you okay with the gang? I could drop you off at your hotel."

Kali shook her head. "I'm not staying at a hotel. I was going to just have a look at the theatre and walk on the stage if I could."

"Are you all right?"

"I've never been out alone before. I wanted to see if I could do it." She let out an aggravated sigh. "It should be a no brainer, Lonnie. I listened to the directions. I memorized what to say to the autocabs, and what to look for should I somehow get off course. Yet, when I step into a crowd in unfamiliar territory, I lose my sense of direction."

"It's like a new dance routine, Kali. Practice it enough and it'll be effortless."

"Are you patronizing me?"

"It's advice. At each port stop, set yourself a goal of what you want to accomplish. At this one, you wanted to get to the theatre on your own...and you will. You ran into a stumbling block, and a solution was found by using an outside resource. Me. You'll get to the theatre, but it's a nice delay, don't you think?"

Kali's laugh sounded relieved. "You're a nice resource to use and this isn't all that an unpleasant delay." For a few moments they both regarded each other in the mirror. "Thanks for rescuing me and inviting me to join you and your friends, Lonnie."

Lonnie didn't dare bask in the relaxed conversation of Kali's benevolent nature, least her mercurial temper suddenly turn sour. "We'll be heading to the outback when the performance is over. I usually spend two days at Cora's ranch, unwinding."

"What do you do on a ranch?"

"Depends on my mood or what needs to be done on the ranch. Sometimes I work livestock, help trap an injured animal on the wildlife preserve, run equipment to maintain the ranch, or just climb the cliffs not too far away. Then there are a lot of nice trails to walk or run early in the morning."

“In two days, you do all that?”

“Not all. Just what I have time for. I’m there to relax but not from boredom. Come on. They’re going to think we’ve deserted them. What drug did you take before you disembarked?”

Kali looked at her suspiciously.

“Just so that whatever you eat, and drink doesn’t clash.”

“A tranquilizer Conessa ordered for me.”

Lonnie nodded and held the door open for Kali.

If Kali was on a tranquilizer, it was not doing its job. Her nervousness seemed to worsen as the evening progressed. She ate little and drank a lot of water. Lonnie knew little about the drug, but she had always been under the impression that eating regular meals was recommended. Maybe her habit was not to eat before performances; especially since her stomach was upset daily.

At the hall, Lonnie and Kali headed to the back entrance as the others headed to the main entrance to take their seats.

“When was the last time you saw a doctor about your prescription for tranqs?”

“I hate doctors,” Kali shivered.

“You trust Conessa over a doctor? Cora is a doctor. Do you hate her?”

“Cora? She’s nice.”

“She is. She runs a clinic in the outback.”

“Is she your doctor?”

“No.”

“Oh. Do you have a lover here?”

That question took Lonnie off-guard and for a long moment she was silent.

“If anyone is my lover, no one will know about it.”

“Including her?”

Lonnie glanced at Kali and smiled. “I do tend to like the unavailable. Dream lovers are nice and safe.” She willed her heart to stop beating fast.

“Keeping distance,” Kali said knowingly.

“

“

Their slot was the second of seven performances scheduled that night. That meant Lonnie would get enough sleep before getting up early the next morning.

Kali and Lonnie warmed up while Andres sized up their audience. When he came back, he nodded to Lonnie that they would stick to the program of a tango, flamenco and flamop, a mix of flamenco with old opera.

The intro had them holding hands. Lonnie squeezed Kali's trembling hand. As they danced, Lonnie found it necessary to whisper each move: bounce, bounce, chug, close, point and slide, cross, stamp, stamp, hop-point, and cut, bounce, bounce, step-out, out, out, cut, dip, stomp, stomp, jump and kick, slide, slide and close, cross, swing left, cross and dip.

Kali was leaning too close to Lonnie and holding on longer than usual. Lonnie attributed her lapse to the tranq.

They received a standing ovation. Following their bows, Lonnie kept a tight hold on Kali's hand, though by the way Kali held on she didn't think she would lose her in the crowd. Conessa was waiting near the dressing rooms, which Lonnie steered them away from and directly to the exit, letting the crowd run interference as Conessa, began to elbow her way toward them.

The vancab that would be transporting them to Cora's, was near the curb, and into it she pushed a now sluggish Kali.

"Let's get out of here quick," Lonnie directed.

"Yo, Lonnie. What's with her?" Bella asked from the front seat.

"Bad tranqs I'm guessing. Cora?" Lonnie asked.

Cora felt her pulse and looked in her eyes. Cora leaned over to the van's console and keyed in her ID. The van suddenly picked up speed with a small light flashing. Cora used the body scanner from the van's small emergency medi-kit and gave her something to counter the drug's effects.

By the time they arrived at Cora's ranch Kali was sleeping peacefully. Cora gave a thorough exam to Kali, while Lonnie made use of the TPP, TransPlanet Phone. She didn't wake up Erich, but by the noise in the background, she was interrupting something fun.

“A gang from Eisen, calling themselves the Connections say they own her and making my contract null-and void,” Erich informed her.

“A gang? How did that happen?”

“Their lawyer claims she signed a contract with their Conessa, a representative of their organization. When I hired that woman to assist Kali I didn’t know she belonged to their org. As a new member to their org she guaranteed Kali will be under contract to them.”

“She’s been given bad tranqs by Conessa. For this entire voyage, she’s been ill.” Lonnie hoped her tone didn’t sound as upset as she felt about it.

“I know Kali was a free agent when she signed with me, and she hasn’t signed any contracts since. My lawyers are challenging their claims.”

“She’s been over managed, Erich. Did you know that she hasn’t been out in public without a handler for as long as she can remember?”

“I’m looking for a new assistant for her. I’ve already notified the captain Conessa is no longer employed by me and she is to have her belongings moved out of Kali’s suite before she returns from shore leave. I’ve given him a heads up about that woman. I’ll talk to you later.”

Erich’s disconnect didn’t give her a chance to pursue her inquiry into just what this assistant would do. She stared at the phone after hanging up.

“Hey, gal. Don’t stay up too late. We start early and I don’t want you to be missing anything,” Bella said. *“Your diva, she’ll be all right. She had a reaction to whatever was in that tranquilizer. Someone is buying her cheap stuff, probably pocketing the extra credits.”*

“One more call and I’ll get to bed.” She called Commander Maltieani Co on *Earl Gray* and explained the situation. She added, *“Maltieani, she has an unnatural fear of physicians so if he visits...”*

“It’s a woman, Lyn Pratt, from your neck of the woods, I believe. I know you never visit medical. You must have something against doctors too,” he chuckled. *“I’ll pass that on to the Doc. What about Conessa? She’s fit to be tied when her diva went off*
“
“

with you. She demanded I send out a squad of my people to drag her back here, claiming you were trying to kill her, among other things.”

“Kill her? That’s a bit overdramatic. Conessa’s going to be a problem. Erich said he sent over some information to you on her.”

“Yes, I got it. He said she’s a member of Connections, a gang back in ShpNer on Eisen. If Maxine was on drugs when this group signed her up, she probably didn’t know what she signed. I thought they passed that intergalactic law that says all contracts signed must be accompanied with a bio-scan.”

“That’s what Erich, our agent is checking out now.”

“I’ll dig some more. By the next port I’ll have something. Have a great time and don’t worry. I have the crew watching out for her. Conessa was paying the cabin purser to program the maidbots to leave certain rooms of the diva’s untouched. The purser thinks she was taking pictures.”

“Ah. Perhaps selling to the news media or planting evidence. She’s up to something more than discrediting Kali.” Both signed off.

Chapter 7

A Climbing Break

Lonnie took a deep breath of dust and heat, welcoming it with a cough, and then took another deep breath. It was so different than the artificial air in the ship. This was life, she thought as she closed her eyes, and let the heat warm her face. Her dream was to have her own land that had cliffs, surrounded by uncontaminated wilderness, and enough land left over to keep her self-sufficient.



Her climbing partner jingled the rope attached to her harness. She turned around, anchored herself, grabbed the rope then pulled. Her shoulder muscles flexed and her back braced as the last of their supplies were hauled up. Cora and Marsha were already preparing the area at the top of the cliff for the overnight stay. Ang and Bella were assisting a stubborn Kali to climb. She wanted to come along to see just what was so exciting about climbing a mountain and sleeping in

the elements. Lonnie suspected she was nervous about spending two days at the house with Aliana, Cora's partner, who had not been on her best behavior lately. Couples breaking up were never easy to be around, though with Cora, it did not seem to faze her.

They started later than usual so that Kali could dress properly, and still they had arrived in good time. They saved time by using the carts instead of hiking to the cliff. Lonnie gave a hand up to Bella who then helped her haul up Kali. Lonnie studied the dirt and sweat smeared face of the diva as it appeared over the rock. Though she looked exhausted, she looked better than she had ever seen her. Lonnie could not decide if it was the outside air or not having bad meds in her system that was giving her a more animated appearance. She reminded herself to ask Cora if the drugs Conessa had her on were used to increase her anxiety.

Standing at the top, while the easy camaraderie went on around, Kali looked around her. She was tired and her legs were as shaky as her arms, but she was invigorated. This was the first time she had ventured this far away from any of her residences without a personal attendant.

"See that?" Cora pointed at a peak where the sun was dropping behind.

Kali shaded her eyes. "What exactly?"

"Just as I thought. You can't see worth spit or you would be oohhing and aahhing," Cora said. "You need to see someone about your vision. Believe me when I say it does a whole lot of good to your self-esteem to be able to see what everyone else is seeing."

Marsha pulled out her binoculars. "Try these."

Kali put them to her eyes and under Marsha's direction, adjusted them. "Oh, my gods! It's beautiful!" Kali's hand went to cover her heart while the other held the binoculars and moved the view up the side of the distant mountain to its snowy top. "You can see this?"

Lonnie leaned against a boulder watching the diva, wondering how she could still look so feminine with dirty smudges on her face and over-sized dusty clothing. Her lips

“

“

pulled into a frown at Kali's poor vision. Now she could understand why Kali was slowly picking up steps when she demonstrated them for her.

It was nearly freezing cold as the sun dropped out of sight and everyone sat close to the fire as they all took turns regaling their companions with songs or stories. Kali sang a silly song about a frog that went courting, changing her voice for each character. Everyone enjoyed her voice and laughed at the story. Cora told a story of one of her dogs meeting up with an escaped Borea monkey from a neighboring farm. Lonnie pulled out a harmonica and gave a lively tune that had everyone's feet tapping. When they retired to the large tent, they slept close together, using their combined body heat to keep each other warm.

Lonnie was the first to rise in the early morning hours for a bladder call. Rather than rejoin her sleeping associates she prepared the morning fire. Lonnie heard the others stirring. While waiting for Ang, the self-designated cook, to get up, Lonnie found a place to begin her morning Āsanās. She faced the rising sun that had not yet warmed enough to heat the morning air.

Kali glanced at Lonnie through her binoculars, then quickly shifted them to the sunrise so no one would notice her watching her.

The group began their descent after breakfast, thinking it would take a while with Kali, but she quickly picked up on how to rappel down and was waiting with Cora at the bottom. Since the others had the supplies, it took them a little longer to move things.

"Lonnie," Cora called.

Lonnie walked over to Cora, dragging the line she was rewinding with her.

"Kali asked me about eye surgery. I'm not her physician so I was hesitant..."

"She told me she doesn't have one." Lonnie shook the rope out.

"Yeah, and she told me why." Cora looked irritated with something, but she kept her own counsel. "Do you know much about her life?"

"A little." Lonnie tossed the folded rope to Cora who packed it. Lonnie picked up the other rope and started collecting it.

Cora picked up one of the stakes that fell out of the bag and secured it back inside the bag. Lonnie wondered why Cora was taking so long with this conversation.

“I told her if she wants me to be her physician I would, but I wanted to speak with you first.”

“Why?” Lonnie paused in winding the rope.

“Because she said she would trust your recommendation.”

“I’m not responsible for anyone but myself.”

“Gal, you’re going to have to face that fear of yours one day...but today, decide. We’ll get back in time for me to check her out and if it’s simple, I’ll do it. She can sleep on the way back to your ship.”

“We don’t have a performance the first night back. Can she practice?”

“Yes. Physically, one day’s rest is all she’ll need.” Cora shook her head dismayed. “If she’s as blind as I’m guessing, she’s going to have a whole new world to get used to. It’ll be overwhelming. Like seeing bright colors instead of dull gray. It behooves me to write to her agent at letting this get by him.”

“She doesn’t squint or look like she can’t see. I didn’t know and I’m her dance partner.” Lonnie finished wrapping the last rope and tossed it to Cora. She turned and looked at the others to see if everyone had the equipment packed into the carts that would be taking them back to the ranch house. Kali was sitting between packs with Bea supervising the loading. Both women were laughing at something said.

“I’ll tell her you said it’s a good idea.”

Midafternoon Kali had surgery. Lonnie held her hand for support and Kali slept the rest of the day.

The ride back to the air terminal was quiet. It was dark with stars beginning to populate the blackened sky, and Kali was studying it with rapt fascination.

“We actually travel among those stars,” she said amazed.

Lonnie thought about the subtle and not so subtle changes in Kali. Before the eye surgery she could look anyone in the face, and now she avoided eye contact. That was going to take some getting used to. Lonnie smiled. Kali was so interested in what was going on around her that Lonnie had to tug at her to move along when they were boarding the autocab.

“

“

On their arrival at the air terminal, Lonnie peered out the window and studied the crowd of youth milling around, wondering if they were waiting for the diva or just there for a youth group traveling somewhere.

“Just in case they’re lying in wait for you, we’re going to have to run to our shuttle.” Lonnie got a good grip on her bag and stepped out of the cab. She blocked the view of Kali from the group, giving her a chance to get her balance and then both women ran to the terminal. Lonnie directed her toward *Earl Gray’s* shuttle ramp, noting that a lot of photographers and people were hanging around it. The steward dispatched the security team to quickly surround them and guide them up the ramp. Kali stood close to Lonnie as they paused while their identity was confirmed.

“That’s...Conessa?” Kali asked.

Lonnie turned to see who she was asking about. Conessa was arguing with a civilian with a news agency tag on his arm and dressed for hiking. She wondered if he was sent to find out where they had gone.

“The one making a fashion statement with the pink and green hair? Yep. I don’t recognize who she’s with. Do you?”

“I would have to see how he moves. That’s how I know one person from another. This is a bit overwhelming.” Her eyes were sweeping back and forth, trying to take in everything.

“I can’t imagine, but I would guess it’s a big deal to see so much all of a sudden.”

“I didn’t realize...what’s that?” she asked in a whisper.

Lonnie turned to see what Kali was looking at. She chuckled. “A purser standing at attention. He’s Bodian. They have genitalia of both genders, like Human hermaphroditism.”

Kali glanced at her startled. Lonnie smiled.

“How do you know that?”

“On Malta Red, I met a Bodian masseuse.”

“So...how did you...?” Kali’s face turned red.

“I got to know her personally.” She didn’t add that they were just friends that liked to hang glide in the canyons.

The purser nodded when they came abreast of him. “We’ve had to move you, Diva Maxine to another suite. The owner apologizes, but his suite’s upgrade has been scheduled with the delivery of the necessary equipment from Luko Tams in Tanzinia. It won’t be for longer than a few months. Your new room is AC0001. You’ll be sharing it with Lonnie Bestolie.” He turned to Lonnie. “We’ve taken on additional passengers and moved the two of you in together. It’s going to be a larger cabin than what you’re used to.”

“I’ll adjust.” Lonnie smiled. She wondered if that was something Erich or Maltieani thought up. Now she was officially Diva Kali Maxine’s babysitter. She glanced at Kali to see how the news affected her, but she was too engrossed in the scene around her. Lonnie reluctantly moved her eyes from watching Kali.

At the first public kiosk Lonnie stopped to get directions to their cabin. Though she was sure she could find it, she wanted Kali to see how one could be used, doubting Conessa had shown her.

“Locate cabin AC0001 and provide a guide to lead me to it.”

“Follow the automated guide,” the disembodied voice instructed. A small colorful animal appeared before them and began its way down the corridor, breaking off after a dozen steps to do a jig.

“This is great.” Kali rushed after the image before Lonnie to get a closer look at the hologram.

“If you want, it can take on different forms. They have different names.”

“Really?”

The hologram stopped in front of cabin AC0001, did a dance flourish, then disappeared with a bark.

Security scanned Lonnie’s eye and unlocked the door. She stepped in first to make sure there was no one waiting and then stood aside to let Kali enter.

The front room was twice the size of Lonnie’s previous cabin space and not cluttered with furniture. She peered behind the divider and found two separate sleeping cubicles. To the left was a long door she pushed open. It was a large closet with their

“

“

costumes hanging neatly separated by color and ownership. Adjoining the closet was the bathing facility. It had, in addition to the shower, a hot tub, though not as deep as the one in the crew's relaxation area.

"We can work on steps here. This is perfect." Lonnie turned to watch Kali as she moved around their quarters. This gave her a glimmer of hope that Kali would relax with her and become more intimate in their dances. After their last dance, she knew Kali could do it. Maybe it was just the way she was taught. That was something she had not considered.

Kali touched things and picked some up, then moved on. "It looks nice."

"So, which sleeping cubicle do you want?"

Kali peeked in the first sleep cubicle. "You can get claustrophobic in here."

"Ah. Now you see the downfall of seeing too much. If you want more space around you, the couch turns into a bed out here." Kali looked relieved.

They were interrupted by hard rapping on their door. Usually, people rang or called ahead. Curious, Lonnie opened it. An angry Conessa pushed past her into their cabin and faced Lonnie. Lonnie calmed herself, not wanting to cause a scene if none was called for.

"What are you doing here? You have your nerve taking her where she could have hurt herself. Then what? She wouldn't have been able to dance until she got better. You're jealous of her, that's what you are!" Turning to Kali, "How are you, my dear? She should not have taken you where you could have hurt yourself. Permanently. Ending your career so soon. What would you do then? You're still young and beautiful with so much to give to your public. That woman has not thought of your condition. She's jealous of you. About these living arrangements... I have been screaming at them, trying to get our suite back. They don't have to be making any repairs now on our quarters, and now they won't let me stay with you and take care of your things. Who is going to take care of you as I do?"

She turned back to Lonnie suddenly, as if realizing she had not left. "Didn't I just tell you to get out?" she shrieked. "Leave Diva Kali Maxine alone. You vile ungrateful degenerate. Leave now!"

“This is *our* suite,” Lonnie informed her in a normal voice, more amused than alarmed. She also felt enlightened at what Conessa may have been saying to Kali in private. It comforted her to know that Kali was out of her control and influence now.

Before Conessa could say any more Kali interrupted her.

“We’re fine here. We need to work on our routines without having to wait for an available hall. We should have thought of that when I had the larger suite.”

Conessa frowned at the two women, catching on that her ex-employer had changed since she last saw her, but not knowing exactly what it was. “Well, it’s time for your medicine.”

“I’m doing fine. I don’t need anything. I’ll call you if I need you.” Kali turned and disappeared into the bathing area.

“But you need your meds for your nerves, your stomach. What about your headaches?” But Kali was gone. Conessa looked undecided, and then after glaring at Lonnie stomped out.

Kali peeked out after the door closed, then stepped out. “I really do feel so much better. I don’t feel like I’m wound up one moment and, in a cocoon, the next. Even my stomachache and headache are gone. I think Cora was right. I was getting some bad meds.”

Lonnie picked up the cabin phone and called Maltieani.

“Hi, this is Lonnie. Did you clean our quarters?”

“Yeah. I also removed Conessa Joleian’s authority on Diva Maxine’s accounts by authorization of Erich Bettelheim. Seems she had quite a scam going on by controlling the travel account. Unfortunately, she didn’t want to disembark at this port, so she paid her fare up to Corelon, our next port. She’s under a conspicuous watch. I’m hoping if she and others notice she has a security bot following her, that she’ll stay out of mischief. Did all of your belongings and costumes get moved all right?”

“Yes, thanks. Her name is Joleian? What’s her family name?”

“Wrighton. She used to be the girlfriend of one of your diva’s ex-partners. Zac Montage. He died of a drug overdose about a year ago. She was a street hustler and took

“

“

a liking to him, but my mouths tell me there was nothing sexual between them though Joleian claimed there was. They said Zac was too much into drugs to be interested in anything beyond his next fix.”

“From street hustler to gang member. She said she’s bunking in crews’ quarters.”

“That was the cheapest bunk we had available. I’ve also put her on notice. If she causes trouble, she’ll spend the rest of her trip in the brig. That security bot on her tail is meant to be obvious.”

“Why hasn’t anyone notified Kali?”

“She should have a note. I made sure it was there myself.”

“If Joleian knew it was here, maybe that was why she came up. Where did you put it?”

“Entrance way so you wouldn’t miss it.”

Lonnie looked around. “Nope. Do you know what was in it?”

“Conessa Joleian Wrighton is fired. Call your agent. Your agent said whatever contract that gang had her sign is null and void. The eye scan and blood signature were not hers. I guess they planned on getting that stuff together later in their game.”

“That’s a relief.” Lonnie looked at Kali who was sprawled out on the couch watching a travel log on the viewer. “Thanks for all your work.”

“No problem. It breaks the monotony of the usual ship’s problems. Let me know if you need any more help.”

“I certainly will. Bye.” She hung up and Kali looked up at her. “Just wanted to be sure who has authority to be entering our quarters. The steward left a message for you...”

Kali held it up. “I can’t read. I was going to use the reader only I don’t know how to work it.”

“Can I?” Lonnie took the note, and it was just like Maltieani said. She read it out loud for Kali, then looked at Kali for her reaction but the diva’s eyes slid past her nervously. Lonnie reached out and gently turned her head, so she looked directly at her.

For a few moments neither woman spoke. Lonnie could see fear in the green depths. She released her chin, lightly resting her hand on her shoulder.

“First off,” Lonnie told her gently, “you’re going to get educated so you can take care of yourself. Secondly, well, maybe first off you need to call Erich. Do you want me around when you make the call?” Kali nodded.

Lonnie showed her how to use the caller.

Erich’s image appeared, looking grumpy. They obviously woke him up.

“It’s about time you answered my message. Can’t you call at a decent hour, though?”

“We just got back from shore leave,” Kali informed him in a sweet voice.

Lonnie rolled her eyes at the affect her voice had on Erich...and her. She crossed her arms in front of her to cover the shiver she felt.

“I’m looking around for a new assistant to travel with you. Do you have any preferences?”

“How about someone to teach her basic living skills?” Lonnie spoke up.

“Why?”

“Well, because I can’t read or write,” Kali told him. “And if I was stranded someplace, I wouldn’t know what to do.”

“These days it’s not necessary to learn those skills, but if you want to learn I’ll look for someone. Is that all? Good. The captain said he likes what you’re presenting. Keep working on it. I want Platarat material. Next time call at a decent hour for me.”

His image faded.

“Platarat?” Kali asked.

Lonnie was just as puzzled. She called up the directory and did a search.

Lonnie was stunned. It was the new star dome. Big sports events and entertainment productions were played there.

“Now that’s a goal I can aim for,” Kali spoke confidently.

There was a knock on their cabin door. Kali rose to open it.

“Hi, are you going to be coming to our party?” Orwin gave Kali what could have been called a sexual leer, but it looked ridiculous on someone so young. Lonnie decided to put an end to Conessa’s games.

“

“

Surprised, Kali turned toward Lonnie.

Lonnie stood in front of Kali, blocking Orwin's view of Kali. He looked displeased at seeing her there but not threatened.

"What are *you* doing here?" Lonnie asked. He hadn't taken her threat seriously.

His eyebrows rose and he looked at her up and down. "So, are you a male or female? Conessa told us you had some sort of sex change." His tone had changed to contempt. Lonnie wondered what Conessa had told him to give him so much bravado; unless he was thinking that since he was related to the owner, he somehow owned the performers and workers on the ship. That was a typical arrogant belief among some. It would be an easier situation to handle than if he were on drugs.

"It's not really your business. You should stop believing what Conessa says. Her name is Joleian Wrighton. She's a drug dealer and interested in selling manufactured stories to the press. You should make sure she's not selling embarrassing pictures of you and your friends to your uncle or parents for a bit of credits. Good day." With that, Lonnie closed the door. "That should stop her for a while." She took a deep breath to calm herself.

"What was that about?" Kali looked pale.

Lonnie cleared her throat, turning her attention to Kali. "Ship's scuttlebutt will be around in no time that Joleian Wrighton is out for compromising pictures. She'll be getting all sorts of visitors and some of them are going to be security."

"He's just a boy."

Lonnie raised her eyebrows, surprised. "Yes. So are the others she's been setting you up with."

Kali's brow furrowed. "What others? I've been sick since we arrived on board, so I've been taking something that makes me sleepy. This is the first time I've really had a clear head, so-to-speak." She then smiled, "And I've been able to see so much." Her face quickly changed to a frown. "So, her name is Joleian Wrighton not Conessa?"

"Girlfriend to Zac Montage. Remember him?"

"Yes." Her lips pursed in irritation. "He had business associates that were into drugs and were real shadowy characters. We only did two shows together. He didn't

show for the third performance, so I partnered with one of the dance extras. If I didn't have a contract with my agent, I would have fired him. I was a front for a drug cartel that apparently owned him."

"How did you get involved with them?" Lonnie asked in dismay.

Kali glanced at her and then looked down at her clasped hands. "Nokie talked me into signing a contract with what turned out to be a not so reputable agent. I was so happy to leave Nokie, and not with someone that was a child molester or pimp that I was willing to believe Nokie's assurances that he was a good agent. It took me years to get out of the mess he created for me, but my lawyer finally managed to convince a judge that wasn't so impressed with my agent's bribes, to null and void the contract. I've been looking for an agent since. I found someone that pointed me in the direction of Bettelheim Agency, and they became my new agents. Erich was assigned to me."

Lonnie caught herself staring at Kali, taking in her eyes, then her lips, resting on her throat, watching her pulse...

Clearing her throat, Lonnie resumed, "Well, Joleian works for this gang called the Connections. Their female agents are called Conessa. It would be better if you keep away from her and anyone she introduced you to." Both were quiet.

"You feel all right?" Lonnie asked.

"The best I've felt in a long time, and I can see for the first time in my life." Her voice was tinged with amazement.

"That must make your world a whole lot more intense. Well, good night." Lonnie retreated to her sleep area, activating the privacy dome. She unpacked her guitar. Settling cross legged on her cot, she played softly until she was at peace with herself.

Chapter 8

Another Port and Another Adventure

"Where are you going?" a sleepy voice asked.

"

"

Lonnie looked up from the bag she was packing. Kali was leaning against the closet door, wearing an ankle length nightgown with long sleeves.

“Since Erich wasn’t able to arrange for a performance at Corelon, I’m taking my two days off with some of the crew. We’re going to be hiking through the woods over some rough terrain to the top of the river Mirach, then rafting down to the lake, with a night break where we’ll set up camp. Early in the morning we’ll resume the trip. Want to come along?” Lonnie casually asked.

“Sure. What do I need?” Kali’s sleepy demeanor quickly disappeared.

Lonnie’s eyebrows rose. She felt a mixture of pleasure and guilt.

“A bathing suit, waterproof camping clothes and a change, a warm coat, shoes, and a pack to carry it all in. You only have a bathing suit.” Maybe that would deter her.

“Surely they have a supply store there.” Kali was already in the closet, rummaging for a change of clothes and her bathing suit.

Unable to prevent it, Lonnie’s mouth moved into a smile. “I’m sure they do. We can call ahead your sizes for clothes, and equipment, and add you to the camping list and DL.”

She lifted the phone and began to make the arrangements. She let Crackle know they had an addition to their excursion party. Crackle’s enthusiasm made up for her mixed emotions.

Her problem was recategorizing Kali’s place in her life. Kali was not just her partner and dance diva icon anymore. She was becoming a friend and that could lead to *other* things.

Maybe seeing Kali getting sick from camping food, or dumped in the river, or smelling from days of roughing it would snap her out of this mood. She could picture Shari mockingly shaking an “I told you so” finger at her.

Lonnie hoisted on her heavy backpack. She followed an excited Kali down the corridor to the cargo bay where their shuttle was waiting.

Timu, Crackle, and a few other friends from the crew were introduced as they settled in their seats.

“Hey there, gal, you sure you want to try this rugged stuff?” Timu teased.

“Sure. Why not?”

“I brought along some old boots of mine and a few pairs of socks. We have the same size feet.” Crackle pulled out a well-worn pair of hiking boots with socks bunched inside of them. “Try them on with the socks. If they fit, that’s good. You don’t want new shoes when you’re on a hike.”

“Thanks.”

Kali gave her one of her smiles that could melt anyone’s heart, or so Lonnie thought. She wondered why Kali had to put out so much charm. They were just going on a hike and rafting trip.

“I hear this is your second hike. Where did you go on your first?” Lori asked.

“Up a mountain with Lonnie and her friends.”

Crackle showed her how to double up on socks and lace the boots properly.

“That wasn’t a hike. It was a climb,” Lonnie clarified. “Horizontal is a hike,” she flattened her hand, “perpendicular is a climb,” she raised her hand and gave her a mocking look. “Totally different directions.”

“What difference does it make whether I’m moving horizontally or perpendicularly? I’m still working, getting dirty, and halfway through, wishing I was at the end already.” Then added with a grin, “And when I’m at the end, I realize I enjoyed every minute of the trip.”

“Ey, gal, you’re not a whiner, are you?” Timu asked, “Because we have ways of dealing with whiners.” His bushy eyebrows wiggled up and down.

Kali made a face at him.

“Are you going to take pictures?” Crackle leaned over to get a closer view of the cap Lonnie was attaching a small camera to. “Nice gadget. That the one you program what to shoot?”

“Yes. It’s programmed to get us all. It’s Kali’s second trip and maybe her last. I thought she could use a memento. It has a small mobile bot that will hover over us and get the big picture.”

The others whooped.

“

“

“What? What?” Kali looked back and forth at the three.

“This is for when you’re at the top of your world, looking back, wondering what it was like before adventurous meant having fans follow you into restrooms with recording devices,” Lonnie said.

“Oh, right.” Kali laughed with the others.

The shuttle dropped the hiking party at their starting point. It was cold and Kali was shivering. Lonnie would have taken off her coat and given it to her, but the tour director, CaMo De was prepared for Kali with a pack and proper clothing. By her welcoming Kali, Lonnie suspected she was a fan.

“Good that you have shoes already. It’s not good to break a pair in on a hike, Diva...errr, Kali,” the trail leader said. “Alright, folks, let’s get. The sun’s coming up and we need to be up to the first point before it gets to Eagle’s Nest.”

The other campers rose and hefted their packs onto their backs. Lonnie watched fellow hikers’ group around Kali, helping her with her pack and showing her how to adjust it.

The pace was fast, but Kali’s dancing stamina helped her survive the first hour. Two hours later they were on a slight incline and Kali began to fade. Timu, Crackle, Lori, and Lonnie stayed with her. Timu entertained them with an assortment of travel stories. By the time they reached the river, the three groups ahead of them were already off, riding down the river. Kerner, their guide, was waiting patiently for them, talking with another hiker who appeared not to mind the wait.

“Can I ride in the front?” Kali asked excitedly.

Lonnie grinned. That’s why she had the camera. Whoever was facing forward usually received the brunt of the wash from the foaming river, though what started as the front of the raft did not mean it would always be facing front.

Kerner first reviewed standard rafting techniques and basic lifesaving methods with them. Then he tested each life jacketed passenger and positioned them on the raft. He showed Kali how to hold on to the sides of the raft with her legs and clear herself from the raft if it should stall and tip. Lonnie made sure her hat was secured to capture great pictures, sitting in a good position to get a good view of Kali.

“Okay, let’s go catch up with the others,” Kerner said.

They were less than an hour into the ride when Kali’s enthusiasm infected the others to scream with her as the river tossed their raft right and left, drenching them all in the cold water as the current rushed them along.



“I see the others!” Kali shrieked. “Come on, we can beat them to the camp site!” She dipped her paddle deeper into the churning water and nearly lost it, but gamely held onto it, managing not to fall over the side.

Kerner shouted pull in rhythm, moving them to a faster pace. Lonnie’s head was bowed as she pulled with all her strength, her arms burning from the effort and her lungs gulping for air between the cold splashes of water over the edges of the raft. They all strained to get the raft back to the center of the river where the current was the fastest. Kali screamed as the front end of the raft suddenly lifted perpendicularly. Intuitively, everyone leaned forward, and Kali’s end dipped into the swell. Kali shrieked again from the shock of the cold water that washed over her, but then determinedly resumed paddling as Kerner urged them on. He angled their raft over the surface of a flat slippery

“

“

rock which hurled them past the third raft and just to the left of the second. Then they pulled ahead. The first raft had an able-bodied team, all the same species and power built. Lonnie didn't see them beating them in any race downstream. Kali's voice rang out for her raftmates to paddle faster.

"Where are they going?" Kali shouted disappointedly, pausing in her paddling.

"That's where we're setting up camp for the night," Kerner explained. "Pull left side, right paddles rest, nice and easy. You all did yourselves proud."

Kali was shivering as she jumped into the water with the others and pulled the raft up the riverbank. Tents were quickly set up so those in wet clothing could change. The seasoned campers wore more expensive waterproofed clothing.

"Lonnie?" Kali called softly from their tent.

Lonnie ducked her head under the flap. "Yes? That's to keep you warm." She moved her eyes to the long underwear Kali was holding up and away from her near naked form. "Remember Cora gave you a pair on our climbing trip?"

"Yes, but I must relieve myself. They're a pain to pull down along with my pants. Did they setup the..."

"No porta potties on this trip. You'll have to wiggle out of those clothes and struggle to put them back on like the rest of us. Don't forget to bring toilet paper and put on the thicker socks and your new boots, since we won't be doing any climbing tonight. You can break them in gently. I'll walk with you to a place we can safely go to relieve ourselves. I've got a shovel."

"I can't believe people actually like being this primitive," Kali muttered as she pulled out her new shoes from her backpack. Everything tumbled out onto the tent floor.

"Actually, there are excursions where there is no tent, camping stove, or food carried in." Lonnie made a face. "I'm not really into killing a bug for a snack or grubbing for food." She repacked Kali's pack for her as she put on her boots and then backed out of the tent with Kali following. Lonnie headed into the woods.

"Have you ever slept under the stars without a tent?" Kali asked.

"Yes. In a hammock."

“Really? You didn’t worry about the bugs or whatever was in the tree?” Kali asked.

“No trees. I was rock face climbing. I pounded spikes in the rock and setup my hammock. It was cold, and scary, hanging so high up. I couldn’t even see our base camp’s lights below.”

Kali accepted the shovel from Lonnie. “I saw pictures of that in a sports journal. You must have been nuts.”

“Just young and curious. Do you know what to do with that shovel?”

“Of course. If a strange animal looks like he’s going to attack I whop him on the head, then scream, and you come running to my rescue. Lonnie, I’m kidding. I dig a hole, relieve myself, and cover it up. Crackle told me.” She moved to hide behind a tree.

“Then why did you ask?” Lonnie asked.

“I just wanted to see what you were going to say.”

“Just make sure you don’t do whatever you’re doing on the roots. Do it where the dirt is deep enough to bury,” Lonnie said.

“Now you tell me,” a muffled voice returned.

When they returned to camp, Kerner took over with Kali, giving her tips on camping. By dinner time, Kali was tired from practicing Kerner’s lessons on building a fire, putting one out, and identifying poisonous and edible plants. She ate a light dinner and fell asleep right away.

The others sat around the campfire and told stories. Later Lonnie played her harmonica while some of the others danced, mostly to keep warm as the night was cold.

The next morning came bright and too early for Kali. The camp was packed up quickly, and they started back down the river in the order they arrived the night before. Kali, falling into the water, dropped them to third place, and then Timu was knocked out of the raft when they were rammed from behind by the number four raft. They regained some of their dignity by overtaking the same raft and dumping them all in the water.

Cold, wet, happy, and proud, Kali carried her broken-in backpack through the docking bay of *Earl Gray*, and through the corridor to their cabin, mindful of fans staring

“

“

at her. As dirty and weary as she looked, Kali was beautiful. Lonnie followed a few steps behind, enjoying the swagger of her hips.

At their stop, Lonnie quickly stepped in front of her and cautiously opened up their cabin door. Kali pushed past her. Once out of sight of her public, Kali dropped her pack and collapsed on the couch.

“That was a vacation,” Kali said. A yawn stretched her jaw.

Lonnie picked up her pack and dropped it near the clothes cleaner. She unpacked her own clothing and tossed them into the machine. “You want to clean your stuff with mine?” she asked.

She was startled when two arms were wrapped around her waist. Kali rested her head on her back and rubbed her cheek against her shirt. “I want to thank you for taking me,” she whispered.

For a few seconds Lonnie soaked in the warmth of Kali’s body pressed tightly against hers. Turning slightly into Kali’s arms she glanced into tired eyes. “You look exhausted,” she said.

“It’s a nice exhaustion. I want a quick shower and then a soak in our little hot tub. Want to join me?”

“Uh, no. I have an early workout scheduled. I’ll shower and go to bed.”

“Okay.” Kali wrinkled her nose in a grimace, “Early morning activities are not in my best interest. Your weekend excursions with early morning wakeups I can handle now and again, but not daily. Why don’t you take your shower first?” She dropped her arms from around Lonnie and Lonnie proceeded to get ready for her shower.

In the shower, Lonnie concentrated on breathing and not thinking.

“Hey, are you going to be in there all night?”

“No.” Lonnie shut the shower off, stepped into her robe, and out of the stall before Kali thought of coming in to get her. “It’s all yours.”

Kali waved a pair of her panties at her as she brushed by her to the shower. “I’m trying to figure out if I have the energy to soak alone. I just may drown. Are you sure you don’t want to join me?”

“I wouldn’t be any help to you in that. I would be falling asleep myself. Good night.”

“Okay. Good night.”

When the door to the ensuite closed, Lonnie took a deep breath. “Right. Now, think of something that won’t get you into trouble.” Blinking her eyes a few times she regarded her costumes that weren’t arranged the way she left them. Frowning, Lonnie examined each costume meticulously.

“What are you doing?” Kali asked. She had a towel around her as she peered around the door.

“Oh, I was wondering who was messing with my costumes. I don’t usually hang these together.”

“Probably the automaid service. They do that to clean around your things.”

“The automaid returns everything back exactly as I want them arranged.”

“If they’re not stealing anything, what’s the worry?” Kali stepped into her sleeping area.

Lonnie pulled a small bug detector out of her pocket and ran it over her clothing. She located a locator on two of her costumes. Now who would want to put a location device on her costumes? Rather than remove it, she made a note to remember which ones were marked and to ask the purser in charge of the automaids for deck 3 who was in their quarters while they were gone.

Lonnie reluctantly rose for her early morning workout with her group. When she arrived at their workout area Crackle was dressing in her padded uniform which meant they would be stick fighting.

While Lonnie changed, her thoughts kept wandering to images of Kali sleeping next to her in their tent, wearing a smile. She was sure the details of Kali’s face were just her imagination because it had been too dark to see details on anyone's face.

A slap against her padded shoulder brought her back to the present. If she didn’t stay focused on the mock fight, she was going to be sporting some embarrassing bruises.

“

“

Refocused, she knocked her opponent off the workout mat and kept her other workout partners on their toes. When they finished their practice, Lonnie was more focused.

“Hey,” Crackle called to Lonnie as she stepped out of the gym shower. “You were distracted today. Are you all right?”

“Yes. Just have other things on my mind. Nothing to worry about. The drill is still a go?” Lonnie patted herself dry and began pulling her clothes out of her locker, inspecting each article carefully.

Crackle nodded. “Think you’ll be able to sneak out?”

“Yes. It’s not like we keep tabs on each other.” Then she frowned. “I hope she doesn’t want to come along.”

“Then you’ll have a problem. She’s been a lot of fun on the side trips.”

“She has been,” Lonnie agreed, careful to keep the wistfulness out of her voice.

“What are you looking for? Hairs?”

Lonnie could hear the smirk in her voice. She hesitated, wondering if she should bring it up or just check it out herself. Crackle was assistant chief purser, and also doubled as a security officer, and the closest person on the ship she called a friend. Lonnie looked around them and stepped closer to her. “I found locators in two of my costumes. Is it one of your tests?”

“No.” Crackle was quiet for a moment, her brow wrinkled in thought. “Since Lt. Miles became Commander Co’s second in command of ship’s security, we haven’t done any worthwhile training. Personally, I don’t trust him and hope he doesn’t know too much about the failsafe security Co initiated.”

“If he suspects, he’s not going to know details. When Maltieani asked me to participate, he assured me that it was to be separated from him and his security staff. He’s an ex-military guy and sees pirates and spies infiltrating his staff at every crew rotation.”

“Hey, watch out there. I’m ex-military too. But you know,” she added slowly, “that’s exactly how I feel about these last two rotations. There’s about fifty of them that give me the creeps. Some are too friendly and the other half, too stand-offish.”

“Miles makes me uncomfortable. He informed me that he personally was looking into why my profile was deleted. I said something to Maltieani. Miles hasn’t said anything to me since.”

“You’re not the only one. Other female crew members have complained to Co with the same story. Makes *me* wonder who’s deleting the profiles. I’d like to know how he got into security when he’s not even subtle about his snooping. I’ll put out some feelers and see what’s up with the locaters. You sure it’s not Kali they were after?”

“Our costumes don’t even look the same.”

“That’s a fact.”

* * *

One hour before their performance they did a warm-up. By the end of practice Lonnie felt exhausted. Jeanie draped a damp towel around her neck and handed her a bottle of water. For Kali, she handed her a bottle of juice and a dry towel.

Kali playfully nudged her with her elbow. “Hey, are you tired?”

“No, why?”

“You were a little slow out there. I was wondering if you’re tired.”

“No. I was just off. I’ll be all right.”

“You sure? You toss and turn a lot at night. Something bothering you?”

For a moment Lonnie was at a loss.

“Hey, you two. You need to change for the performance,” Jeanie reminded them.

“Does she look tired to you?” Kali asked her.

“Nothing an hour of playing her guitar won’t cure.” Jeanie wiggled her eyebrows at Lonnie.

“You play the guitar too?” Kali asked, taking the change of clothes Jeanie handed her.

Jeanie grinned and when Lonnie said nothing, offered, “She plays alone and seldom shares those musical talents of hers. She says it’s to keep her from going space bonkers.”

“Am I keeping you from playing?” Kali looked worried.

“

“

“No. I still play. I activate the privacy dome.”

“If you want to play in the front room and I’m in your way, I can go to my room.”

“No! You shouldn’t have to go away whenever I...”

“And that goes for you too,” Kali interrupted. “You shouldn’t have to hide in your cubicle in a privacy dome because you think you’re going to disturb me.” Kali stopped dressing and turned to Lonnie. She rested her hands on top of Lonnie’s that were buttoning up her coat. “I really would like to hear you play.”

Lonnie’s stomach fluttered and her face flushed. “I’m not hiding. Come on. Let’s dance.”

For a change the two were not doing any solos, so neither had a long break as they moved from one dance performance to another. Lonnie, whose stamina was in peak form, by the end of the performances, was winded.

“I think...that wasn’t...such a good idea,” Kali panted to Andres.

“So, I see. You both look like you could use a cart to carry you back to your cabin. Want me to call for one?” he asked teasing.

“I can order one if you need one.” Jeanie grinned at Lonnie’s frown.

“Not funny,” Lonnie grumbled. “Next time we do something like that, we’re going to pick dances where at least one of us just stands while the other runs around.”

Lonnie dropped off her clothes in their quarters, showered, and visited Gish. When she returned to their quarters pleasantly relaxed, Kali was sitting at the desk working on a crossword puzzle. Lonnie was pleased she had taken her suggestion that the best way to educate herself was to do crossword puzzles.

“Did you have a nice dinner?” Kali asked.

“I haven’t eaten yet. Have you?”

“No.”

“Want to order something delivered or go up and get it?”

“I’m too comfortable to change and go out in public.”

Lonnie plopped down on the couch. She read the menu selections and keyed in her selection. “Your turn.”

Kali got up and accepted the controls from Lonnie. “Some of these pictures I haven’t the faintest idea what they are, even if I could pronounce them.”

“Why not try a different one every night or, every other night.”

Kali’s nose wrinkled up. “I’m really not that adventurous.”

“You’ve been eating trail food...that’s adventurous.”

“What if I don’t like it?”

“Don’t eat it. It’s not like anyone’s going to force you to eat everything on your plate.”

She tapped something in and then added something else, looking guilty.

Lonnie laughed at her expression. “Something naughty? Something sweet? Something that will add inches to your...”

“Lonnie! Don’t you dare finish that. It’s rude for a working diva,” she said.

“Okay.” She switched the menu to a movie. She was a few minutes into the movie when she realized she was being stared at. The couch was unofficially Kali’s with the chair that reclined, Lonnie’s. Since she was comfortable, she decided a little stare was not going to get her to move to the chair.

“Nice couch.” Lonnie extended her legs onto the couch and leaned back, exaggerating her stretch. “I like this better than the chair.”

“I can find some bugs to put in your bed...”

“But they’ll crawl over to you when they’ve tired of me.”

“I’ll steal your blankets when you’re asleep.”

“You sleep so soundly that when you stop snoring, I’ll know you’re awake.”

“I do not!” Kali threw a pillow at her.

“Well, you’ll never know if it’s true or not, because you sleep through it.” Lonnie threw the pillow back.

Their door chimed.

Lonnie got up quickly. She tapped the privacy peephole. “Dinner has arrived.”

“

“

She opened the door and greeted the automated service bots with a laugh. “That has to be your order. It’s under two plates. Just wheel yourselves right over to the table,” she directed the bots.

Kali lifted the lid of each of the orders, including Lonnie’s.

“Oh, yum. This looks good.” She picked up a fork and took a bite out of Lonnie’s meal.

“You’re not the type that goes around eating off other people’s plates, are you?”

“No, I just take the entire plate.”

“I see.” Lonnie peered at Kali’s order. She didn’t recognize anything, nor did it smell appetizing.

“You can try some of mine,” Kali offered.

Lonnie took her plate back. “I have a better idea. We’ll share what’s on all three plates.”

After each of them satisfied the first pangs of hunger, Lonnie noticed Kali would glance up at her occasionally, looking like she was going to ask something and then went back to eating.

“So, do you have a girlfriend on board?” Kali asked finally.

“I have a lot of *friends* both male and female on board.”

“Oh.”

“Since we’re in these personal questions mode, are you getting over the touchy thing?” At that moment she said that she knew she had made a mistake but could not back down now that she had put it out.

“What touchy thing?”

“In our dancing together.”

“I don’t have a problem with our dancing together. Why do you think so?”

Lonnie stood up, “Music on, play a tango. Come here, this isn’t danced alone, you know.”

Surprisingly, Kali got up without a fuss and stood near Lonnie, accepting her hands on her, though not moving.

“That’s what I mean. See how much space you have between us? Tango is about seduction, close encounters without actual undressing, and for the audience, they need to feel heat between us.” Lonnie was amazed, she said that without choking.

Kali stepped back and looked at her with astonishment. “Are you saying I have to seduce you?”

“No, nor I you. We’re performers.”

“I’m supposed to *make* it look like it?”

“Why do you dance for an audience?”

“To show them dance at its best.”

“Each dance style has something about it that enamors or grabs the interest of an audience”

“The skill it takes to dance it,” Kali interrupted impatiently.

“There’s something else that underlies it and ALL art.”

“Talent?” Kali replied cynically.

“Passion.”

“You keep returning to sex. You know that?”

“Kali, passion isn’t just about sex. Love isn’t just about sex. Painting isn’t just about sex. Dancing isn’t just about sex.”

“Can we leave sex out of this?” Kali demanded.

“Passion is being alive, focused, and in the moment. We’re creating a happy bubble of energy that the audience can take with them. I see them tapping their feet and going up to the nightclub and dancing their hearts out, trying some of our stuff. We are in effect sending business to Hari and Jun, who are the dance teachers aboard. We’re spreading joy around, Kali. We’re helping others keep their job.”

“So, just what are you saying about my dancing?”

“Do you ever get lost in your dancing?”

“Lost? I don’t forget steps or a routine.”

“After you memorize a segment, do you ever just let yourself flow with the movement, and let it fill you with its energy?”

“

“

“Lonnie, I don’t have the slightest idea what you’re talking about. What’s wrong with my dancing?”

“It’s too perfectly executed. Your distance from your partner is exactly one hands breath apart, your holding hands is just under two inhales, and your steps are I can’t explain it. If you don’t want to take it to the next level, then....” Lonnie stopped in midsentence, realizing she expressed her frustration out loud.

“I’m a diva! I am at the highest level. You’re a.... a dancehall performer! And you’re telling me I have another level to go or that my dancing lacks something?” With that Kali turned and left their cabin.

“Blast. Never upstage a diva, Lonnie. Why can’t you remember that?” She went over to the phone and called security.

“Hi, this is Lonnie. Can you keep an eye on Kali Maxine and make sure no one bothers her?.... Yeah. We had an artistic disagreement.... I have no idea. If it were me, I would go to the workout room and beat up on anyone that was willing to spar Okay. Thanks.”

She hung up and dialed Andres. “Hi, this is Lonnie.... Okay. Good. I was worried about her. Bye.”

The rest of the week went by fast for Lonnie. Kali’s reluctance to be touched or held was less obvious but she still felt they had no connection or passion in their dances.

Their port performance as usual was on the night of their arrival and when they finished, Lonnie planned to catch a hopper to the other side of the planet to begin her two-day adventure.

“So, what are you doing this stop?” Kali asked as she packed her costumes for their show planetside at Coolo.

“Hang gliding,” Lonnie answered distractedly. Her costume had a rip on the underarm. “Darn. I didn’t even know that happened.”

Kali looked over her shoulder. “Looks repairable.”

Lonnie glared at the rip. “I usually catch things like this.” Looking closer she noted it didn’t appear to be ripped but rather cut. This was the second time she found her clothing cut. It wasn’t the one with the homing device. So, was this to irritate her? Warn her that she was vulnerable?

“Wear the red one. It’ll go better with my black dress anyway. You can leave it with the seamstress and when we get back it’ll be ready. So, would you mind if I tag along with you? I mean, I’m not interested in the sport, but I can come along and take pictures if you like.”

Lonnie glanced up at her. Kali’s hair was fixed in a tight bun with the flower for their first number attached, her performance face was done up, and the clothing she usually wore to their performances was expensive and tastefully modest. She was beautiful. Lonnie thought about how nice it would be to soar with her.

“When you’re old and gray and telling your admirers all the crazy things you did when you were younger, you’ll have proof.” Kali smiled.

Whatever resistance Lonnie may have felt, melted away.

“You’re welcome to come along. But be prepared to lose your inhibitions about gliding because once you see what it’s like you’ll be up there too.”

“I doubt that. So, what do I wear?”

“Something warm. Camping clothes are fine. We’ll be staying overnight in a hotel.”

“Oh, even better. A warm bath at the end of the day and no camp food.” From her closet she began to add clothes to her backpack.

* * *

Kali watched breathlessly as Lonnie stepped off the edge of a cliff with nothing



but a harness that held the wings on her back. For a frightening moment Lonnie sailed downward but then began to soar back up into a gradual climb before tilting to make a wide turn to come sailing above Kali who was too

astonished to have turned on her camera.

An older woman who was not dressed for gliding explained to Kali about the wind drafts and how the gliders could feel them and by pulling the bar at their fingertips or pushing it, controlled the dips and climbs.

“Want to try it?” the old woman asked her.

Kali looked at her, startled. “Oh, no!” She shook her head, then returned her eyes to see Lonnie make a slow spiraling drop further into the basin. “I couldn’t do that myself. I don’t want to do that by myself,” she clarified.

“You don’t have to do it alone. Share a ride with someone experienced.”

Kali looked at her puzzled, then turned her eyes to the one couple that was gliding together, hanging side-by-side in their glider. “I...don’t know. Just how safe is that?”

“If it had no sense of danger, where would the fun be?” She smiled. “Well? This may be the only time you get the opportunity.”

“Okay.” She turned to face the old woman with a look of determination.

“Joc, that guy over there. He’s waiting for a rider. That’s what he does.”

“So, he’s had plenty of experience?” Kali sized him up. He looked too young to be watching over a beginner. As she headed toward him, she could see he was not as young as she had first thought.

“Hi,” she greeted the tall man.

“Looking for a ride? Two deuces and ten pins,” he priced.

“Okay. Galactic notes or fingerprint scan?”

He tilted his head and studied her for a few moments. “How about a few pictures of you and me gliding? Pictures I can use for my advertising?” he bargained.

“Sounds easy enough. As long as they’re used for advertising your hang-gliding business and are not used to embarrass me.”

“Agreed. Galaxy Rules of Good Conduct.” He slid over a recorder used to take payments in many foreign forms. Kali repeated her offer, and both sealed it with their biosignatures.

Joc put her in a harness, explaining things as he expertly tested her bindings, and then tested her helmet mic that allowed them easy conversation. He had a camera on the

tip of his glider. “My passengers like pictures taken of themselves while aloft to prove to their friends that they flew over the Two Sisters Gorge.”

Joc was so casual about stepping off the side of the cliff, while Kali was too frightened to close her eyes or scream. Then suddenly she realized there was nothing below her or above, and the wind was blowing stronger against her face. Cautiously she moved her eyes from staring straight down a long corridor of rock formations to look at Joc. He had a smile on his face as he pushed the bar forward and the higher they sailed. Kali’s knuckles were white, wrapped tightly around the bar as if it would save her life should they suddenly fall from the sky. Taking a deep breath, she let it out, hoping it would get rid of the fluttering in her stomach.

“Is that your friend over there?” Joc asked.

Jerkily, Kali moved her head to look to the side of them. Kali recognized the glider as Lonnie’s. She was too frightened to let go of the bar to wave. “Yeah,” was all she managed to get out. She could feel Joc pull the bar toward them and lean his weight a little to the left. Her view of the sides of the cliff face passed by quickly as they began another climb.

“Gods!” she let out explosively after a dozen spirals and climbs that left her breathless with excitement. Once she relaxed, she found the experience comparable to river rafting. It was exhilarating and indescribable. Joc promised her two copies of the pictures he was taking. She wanted to give Lonnie one.

“We’ll take one more pass over the landing site and then when I loop back, I want you to bend your legs and let me take the weight and then get ready to run. Got it?”

“Yes.” She was disappointed that her flight was coming to an end.

The glide in was great, but when the ground suddenly was upon them, Kali stumbled and tangled her feet. Luckily Joc supported the glider and Kali’s weight as he ran a dozen steps before stopping, giving Kali a chance to bring her feet under her.

Lonnie was waiting for her. “I have to say, you’re going to have some great memories when you’re old,” she teased. She tapped the camera on her cap.

Joc made copies of the film and gave two to Kali. “I’m going to get a lot of offers for copies of these,” he told Kali happily.

Kali didn't order much to eat from the hotel restaurant and headed directly to bed after a shower. While she slept Lonnie sat in the bar downstairs, listening to a torch singer into the early morning hours.

On their return to the ship Andres and Erich had new dances for them to learn for their next port stop appearance. Madu wasn't a port she visited during the two days stopover so she knew nothing about what the audience would prefer. Both women were stymied at the vids they watched of the traditional dances they were expected to perform. They were traditionalists and they paid to see foreigners dance their dances, was Erich's explanation. Since they paid for their performance, Erich believed they should give what they paid for.

The dance hall was filled to capacity. When they finished with their requested two dances, the audience gave polite applause. As they moved off the stage, the next performance was their city's dance team that performed the same dances. When they finished, they received enthusiastic applause. Lonnie and Kali exchanged glances after watching the hometown dancer's finish.

Did they want to prove to themselves and the foreigners that they could do it better, both women wondered.

They were subdued as they left the hall. Lonnie wasn't interested in her usual two-day adventure off ship and returned to the ship with Kali.

To make up for their indifferent audience at Madu, Erich promised there would be no performance at their next stop, Beshire's Floating City, however, Kali's new assistant, Yomatta, would be arriving.

Chapter 9

New Challenges

Lonnie surveyed her new quarters with satisfaction. The maidbot had placed all her clothing exactly like she wanted it, and all her costumes were cleaned and repaired. Her bedding was fresh, and she was down the hall from Gish. She couldn't have asked

for a better placement. Kali's new assistant, Yomatta, would be on board later in the day, and she would be Kali's new roommate.

"Hi. Nice little place you have here." Kali stepped in to look around.

Lonnie turned around. Kali wasn't dressed in her usual lounge clothing. "Glad you like it. It's what I'm used to. I don't have to worry about being tempted to clutter it with things and then figure out how to clean it."

"Why would that be a worry...about the cleaning I mean. That's what the bots are for."

"Because I don't like anything visiting my cabin while I'm not here."

"They're just bots, Lonnie."

"So, what do I owe the pleasure of your visit? Are you lonely already?"

She smiled sweetly at Lonnie, causing her heart to beat faster but suspicious at what she was going to ask her. Why else would she be here, except for a favor?

"No. I want to visit Beshire's Floating City. I hear it's famous for items from rarely traveled planets."

"So, did you miss the shuttle?"

"One's leaving in a few moments. I wanted to see if you'd go with me."

"I don't want to go shopping. I have all I need."

"Lonnie," Kali's voice softened, "please?"

"You're the type that wants to visit every store in one visit, aren't you? I'm the kind of person that knows what she wants and orders via the galaxy shopping mart. Don't you want to be here when your new assistant arrives?" Lonnie looked around for something that she could use as an excuse why she couldn't go. "You can ask her to go with you, or one of the..."

"Come on, Lonnie. This will be the last time we can do something this ordinary together."

"Oh, all right. Come on then. Gods protect me from buying a tourist memento."

"I'll protect you from that." Kali smiled at her.

It was in the third shop that Lonnie purchased something...a memento. Kali was mortified. It was a drawing of a young Diva Kali Maxine. Lonnie liked it. She tried to

explain to Kali what a caricature drawing was, but Kali was not having any of it. Later Lonnie had one done of herself by a roving artist and gave it to Kali as a gift. Kali liked it immediately.

When the two returned to the ship Yomatta was waiting for them in Kali's cabin.

"I'm Yomatta Alondra DiMaro Cumarta Helidra, your assistant. You can call me Yomatta. You must be her partner, Leona Bestolie."

Her tone of voice when she spoke to Lonnie changed. Lonnie thought the woman did not like her. It had to be because of the weekend excursions that Erich frowned on.

"I've had time to settle in *and* update your itinerary, Diva Maxine. Would you like to go over it now? It concerns you too, Leona."

Ah. I'm the lowly Leona...I hate that name. And Kali is the Diva. "Since I'm here I'll hear it and let you know if it's doable."

Yomatta gave her the look a schoolteacher would give to an impudent student. She clicked the viewer's hand control which brought up Kali's schedule.

"Museums and schools," Lonnie murmured. "I can understand the schools," she looked up at the stern frown of Yomatta, "but why the museums?"

"It'll give her good publicity. Something you should have thought about."

Lonnie grinned, not offended at all. "I'm making a comfortable living doing what I'm doing. The people that I have a contract with have a steady income from my performances, and I have a returning audience. My public appearances are low keyed, and everyone has fun. Nothing is unhealthy mentally or physically."

Yomatta sniffed and gave a meaningful look at Kali. "The diva is known in all entertainment rags. She has a substantial following of fans, and very important backers. It's in her best interest to keep them interested. She doesn't need to squander her time with people that don't appreciate her with the proper decorum. I have impeccable credentials in arranging the social and private calendar of stars who are unorganized and seek guidance."

"Really? Like whom?" Kali asked excitedly.

“I just finished two years with Horson ‘Okee. I’m sure you noticed that his name is more respectable than it had been two years ago and let me assure you that he has held onto more of his credits than he had before he hired me.”

Lonnie wondered if Kali would go back to the stiff and unapproachable performer she was at the beginning of their tour.

“When it all becomes drudgery, addictive habits begin. Hopefully you don’t make that mistake with Kali. Good night.” Lonnie nodded to the two women and left.

Surprised, Yomatta glanced at Kali.

“She has that right,” Kali said. “As the adage goes, ‘All work and no play make Sheila a dull girl.’ We’ll just have to plan small escapes where I don’t have to worry about fans or the media.”

Yomatta looked at the schedule she had planned for Kali. A busy schedule was set to accelerate her move back onto the *People to Watch List*. She was also to keep Kali away from trouble. Frowning, she decided that this Leona was not a good influence on *her* diva.

Kali was early to their performance that night and accompanied by Yomatta. Yomatta watched Jeanie unpack the costumes from Kali’s bag. She looked pleased with Jeanie’s efficiency and her professional attitude. Lonnie liked it better when Jeanie would have jokes for her and had them giggling before they went on stage. Not likely to happen as long as Yomatta was present with her stern face.

As they warmed up silently beside each other, Lonnie felt Kali’s hand brush her arm, then use it for an anchor as she stretched her legs. Lonnie looked at her in askance.

“I’m not touching that bar,” Kali told her in an undertone. “Yomatta told me there’s all sorts of germs on it and I could get sick.”

Why did handlers have to use scare tactics to keep their clients in line, Lonnie wondered. “You ready?” Lonnie asked. Lonnie tucked a stray strand of Kali’s hair back into the net holding her hair out of her face.

“How do I look?” she asked, turning around for Lonnie to check.

“Good. How about me?” She turned around. She was startled when she felt a hand brush her buttocks as she turned. Kali then tugged her vest lower, revealing more of Lonnie’s cleavage. Lonnie’s eyebrows rose.

“There you go. Now, you look just great,” Kali smiled. “Shall we start?”

“What has my cleavage got to do with dancing?” she asked as she followed Kali on stage.

They finished their act with a flamenco where rather than Lonnie pursuing Kali, it was the other way around. The end called for Kali leaning into Lonnie. Their full-length bodies actually touched. The crowd loved the switch and stood to applaud. Lonnie found she also liked it and was grateful she was not bunking with Kali.

Lonnie smiled to herself. After all this time, she could now feel a connection with Kali.

UrBoka was their next stop where they had a mid-morning warm-up and an early afternoon performance. It would give her enough time to reach her next vacation spot and get in maybe a few hours of flying before dark. Lonnie had standing arrangements to take a shuttle to a cabin in Severt Forest. Ten minutes from the rental cabin was a popular tourist spot for hang-gliding and Lonnie planned on getting plenty of gliding time in. Usually there were four of them that made the yearly pilgrimage, but this year Comi was busy, according to her last-minute message. The other two, Augi and Lorma, didn’t reply to her inquiry, so Lonnie would be traveling alone.

UrBoka had pockets of problems that could easily erupt into violence and warranted interest by HQ. For the last three years a relatively new religious group had been at work amongst the newer arrivals. Public criticism of the group brought retribution to the friends or family members. As of yet, Lonnie had not met up with any of the members, and she was hoping the cruise liner would halt any stops at the planet’s port should there be a threat to tourists. Her job consisted of listening to gossip from the locals.

Errrut!

“This is Lonnie.... Gish, what can I do for you?... Sure, no problem. I know just the store to pick it up at.” Lonnie laughed. “Gish, whoever told you that doesn’t know

what they're talking about. The birdpeople live along the Ukon cliffs. There are too many aeries around there for it to open to hang-gliders... Ha. Even if I knew the chief, I wouldn't get permission to fly there... No, I've already made the arrangements... Listen, you're just trying to make trouble." Lonnie laughed again. "Okay, you want castor green sticks. I'll pick them up... No, I think I'll go to bed early tonight. No, I don't know Kali's schedule. Did you want her to pick something up for you too?" Lonnie teased. "Okay. Enjoy your days off." * *

The hall, *Combly Maveto*, was larger than their previous port venues. Lonnie could hear the echo of deep voices from the interior. As she changed shoes for the rehearsal, she heard someone already on the stage. She glanced at the time. Someone was earlier than she was.

When she entered the stage area, she was surprised by the audience filling the first eight rows. Their practice sessions were always closed and with the feel of those sitting in the front, the city was in trouble. Lonnie wondered if this was the group HQ was interested in.

"What's going on?" she asked Lori who was unpacking her guitar.

"It seems the diva has some interested fans with money and influence that want a preview."

"Were they checked for recording devices or weapons?"

"You want to ask them go right ahead." She gave the group an unhappy glance.

It was Andres that approached her with the news. "Diva Maxine has decided that all dances for tonight will be *slege* and *ballroom*."

"Really. She made that decision all by herself?" Lonnie asked.

"No. Those men out there like those dance styles, and this is their town, so-to-speak." His voice brokered no discussion.

For their practice hour they went over the slow and classical dances. By the nod of approval from their selective audience, they were happy with the show. Lonnie could feel her partner's tenseness and see Andre's shoulders twitch now and then. Looking around she could not spot Yomatta. That was unusual. If she was teaching Kali how to take care of herself at port stops, this was one place Kali should not be alone.

When practice ended, Lonnie worried about finding a secure line to send out a warning advisory to HQ that the port was compromised with gang activity. The ship's passengers were lucky, since few, if any, shopped, or visited the port area. They usually were shuttled to larger cities inland or to neighboring planets.

"Lonnie Bestolie?"

Distracted, Lonnie straightened up from storing her dance shoes, catching the horrified look from one of the musicians. She leaped sideways and rolled into a crouch. The cover on the box she was leaning on sizzled and steamed with an acrid smell. Lonnie froze as the cat-like figure jumped toward her with claws extended. Just before it could get within swiping distance someone ran a side block, allowing Lonnie to roll away. Several others came to her defense, holding the catperson at bay with legal civilian stunners.

"Your name," the bored tone of another local law enforcement agent asked.

Lonnie felt a mixture of fear and frustration at her detainment. She had been moved five times to different stations, and she was sure no one who could secure her release knew where she was. None of the constables gave her a reason for her being held or moved around since she was the one that was attacked.

"I gave it to you...four times already, and to the dozen other constables. Where is my representative? Albert!" Lonnie sighed in relief when someone she knew walked through the door. The man behind the desk suddenly straightened up and looked more alert...or was it guilty? The constable that had brought her to this station slipped into another room, out of Albert's keen sight.

Albert Fleetfeather was a well-known and reputable lawyer and if something illegal was going on, he would straighten it out.

"It's all taken care of. Come on." He guided her out of the building and to his vehicle quickly, looking this way and that. "Your show is just about finished, which is why they're letting you go. They've been giving me the run-around about where you were and why you were being held. From what I've overheard, the intention was for you to miss your show with the diva."

“If they want Kali Maxine to dance alone, just ask me, or even better, pay me to sit it out.”

He squawked. “Get real! They replaced you with one of their local male favorites. With the likes of that lot there wasn’t any notable dance critics that dared show and not much of the citizenry.”

“Is Kali okay?”

“She is indeed. She’s a favorite, you know.”

“I want to get on with my vacation. Is that a TPP?”

“Yes. Who are you calling...your agent?” he asked in jest.

“Yes. I don’t want him to think this was my idea.”

After she finished her call, she studied Albert. His beaked profile gave him a fierce look, but it was really his eyes, dark and piercing, that made him scary. He was good to have on your side if there was a fight.

“So, what’s with the catperson trying to disfigure me?”

He dipped his beak in consternation. “He’s young. He belongs to the local assassin group. A group of mewling thugs that collect assignments to kill off anyone for any reason. There’s a contract out on you.” He looked puzzled. “You only visit once a year. Did you drop into a nesting? Or did you fly into someone’s space on your last visit? Maybe you took your turn out of place?”

“No. You know I keep a low profile. Are you looking into finding out who took out the contract?”

“Started it the moment Andres gave me a call. So, are you going up to the cabin?”

“If I have a contract out on me, being predictable isn’t good.”

“Want to come up to the aerie? Mom’s been asking about you.” The corners of his beak nearly lifted into a grin.

“Yes. It’s really nice climbing around there.”

“Got your equipment up in one of the sheds,” he assured her.

“All right. I’ll cancel the cabin rental.”

“Lonnie, don’t tell anyone where you are, huh?”

“Right. Do you happen to have a hang glider there for one of your nonfeathered friends?”

Al looked horrified. “And worry about you riding air currents into the sides of the cliff and landing in a nesting? No way! Mother would be pulling out my tail feathers and pecking you on the head. Stick to climbing.”

Lonnie laughed. They played the same conversation whenever they met.

* * *

Lonnie paused to wipe her brow on her upper arm. She slowly moved her left hand to feel along the rock for a space to grip. Found, she moved her foot to a place she



marked in her mind. Out here in the wilderness she not only heard the wind as it blew over the cliff face, but she felt its life presence as it buffed against her. She grinned at the relief the breeze gave her. She pulled herself on top of the rock and rolled onto her back, limp.

Above her, purple, orange, and white streaked against the sky's blue background. She rolled to a sitting position and pulled herself into an Āsanas.

Time went by before she realized she was breathing in the too fragrant air that was swirling around her.

“What do you want?” she asked softly, still high from her connection with the planet.

“I heard about the attack on you. I didn't hear about it until after the performance. I just thought you agreed to the change of partners.” When Lonnie didn't respond, Kali continued, “We've been called back to the *Earl Gray*.”

Lonnie opened her eyes to see Kali sitting in front of her. She looked every bit like the beautiful diva she was. The breeze whipped through her long hair, pulling the tie loose and unbinding her hair so it fanned in a rippling wave. Lonnie's heart stirred at the vision.

“It wasn’t about you,” Kali told her softly. Her hand grabbed her hair and pulled it out of her face, her eyes never leaving Lonnie’s. “Those are the type of people you don’t argue with.”

“Why are we being called back?”

“Erich is worried that you’ll be hurt.”

“I can take care of myself. I’m not going back until my...”

“It’s not just Erich,” she interrupted nervously. “The local police are accusing you of staging the attack for publicity.”

“What!”

“We need to leave here. Those men I danced for, they belong to a radical group. They...we have to get out of here.”

“Okay.” Lonnie stood, regretting her stay was so short. She glanced toward the southern Ukon cliff face, wondering if Albert was able to find out enough information in such a short time.

The two climbed into the shuttle and belted in. As the shuttle lifted, it swooped down and alongside of the cliff face she had just scaled. The pilot waved at one of the official bird towers and received a light flash.

“I can’t believe you climbed that.” Kali held up her recorder. “You weren’t wearing your PD. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Since I took so many vacation shots of you, I can’t rightly complain,” she said. “One of the constables removed mine.” She gestured to the rapidly disappearing cliffs, “You just may be inspired to take up climbing again.”

Kali laughed. “Once was enough. Now that I can actually see what is below me, I don’t think so.”

Lonnie watched Kali’s green eyes light up and her full lip’s part into a smile. The combination of eyes, smile, and laugh took her breath away. She struggled to clear her mind of unprofessional images. “Not something you see yourself doing, huh?” She forced her voice to sound normal.

Kali shook her head. “Nope. That one day we climbed the mountain probably won’t happen again. I liked those other visits with you, to the river, and that one racing

around the desert. And I thought you looked funny getting tossed by the...horse. Then us, participating in working on that grape farm, now I know more about wine making..." Her voice trailed off as she mentally reviewed Erich's restrictions on her which Yomatta made sure she followed. Tightening her lips, she decided the goal was worth it. Once attained she would have plenty of time to catch up on vacation around the galaxy. Maybe Lonnie would join her. Her eyes rested on Lonnie who she realized was staring at her.

Lonnie leaned back in her seat and removed her climbing slippers so she could stretch her toes. Agilely, she pulled her foot onto her knee and massaged her foot.

"Do you need some help?"

Lonnie looked up at Kali startled. "Eh, do you know how to give a foot massage?"

"Of course. Every one of my partners always needed one. Not because I would step on their feet mind you, but because I danced them to exhaustion." She gestured to Lonnie to rest her foot on her knee. Kali's hands showed surprising strength as she stretched the foot and then with her knuckles, pushed under Lonnie's instep and slowly moved toward the heel, using her thumbs and knuckles to find any weaknesses in Lonnie's system. Apparently, she knew what she was doing.

Though it was relaxing some parts of her, it was also triggering feelings Lonnie struggled to keep suppressed.

"So," Kali dropped her second foot to the ground with a thump. "How did I do?"

"Better than I could have done," Lonnie said. She was relieved that the thud of her foot jolted her back to her senses.

The shuttle banked to the left on its approach to the airport. Lonnie could see people waiting. Yomatta was standing amongst them.

"I take it all those people are waiting for us?"

"I guess so. Yomatta was a bit upset when I took off to get you," Kali warned with a smile in her voice. "So, she may be a bit harsh toward us."

"In search? How did you know where I was?" Lonnie asked.

"I figured since you like to climb that would be where you would be. And a bird friend of yours..." her voice trailed off.

Lonnie would have pursued the subject, but the touchdown was rather bumpy. Before the craft was secured, Kali was out of her seat. Lonnie let out an exasperated huff.

The local official waiting with Yomatta was about to speak when Yomatta held up a stern finger of warning to him and gestured for both women to get in the shuttle marked the property of *Earl Gray*.

“What’s going on,” demanded Lonnie.

The ship lifted and spun around to head back to the space station. Everyone held on.

“Too much political bugaboo,” Yomatta responded. “The ship captain is going to hear from me on this. Putting Diva Maxine in danger is not going to happen again!”

“Her! I was the one that was attacked!” Lonnie snapped.

“You can take care of yourself. Kali doesn’t have the experience.”

Lonnie bit back on her angry retort. “Thanks for the vote of confidence.” Lonnie glanced at Kali who was watching the exchange.

Yomatta folded her arms across her round body. “I would like to know how De Bettelheim’s schedule was changed without it being cleared through me.”

Kali’s face reddened and she shrugged her shoulders. Lonnie gave a soft snort. She herself had fallen for her own importance once and it was nearly just as disastrous. She guessed the gang had played Kali’s ego and inexperience and put her in a position she couldn’t back out of gracefully, or in this case, safely.

Back aboard *Earl Gray* the Commander of Security Maltieani Co was waiting for them with Captain Mukng Borelie. They both looked grim.

“What’s up?” Lonnie asked.

“Let’s go to my office,” Maltieani said.

After the three women were seated, tea was served.

“This stop normally is without any problems. What happened to you is unacceptable,” Captain Mukng Borelie told Lonnie. “The people we normally deal with were replaced without advance notification.” The captain paused, looking considerably uncomfortable. “And Sincunsie, Chief of Foreign Visitors Affairs was out on vacation. I

thought nothing of it since there were no news bulletins advising caution in this area.” The captain gestured for Maltieani to continue.

“Deloris Sincunsie is the captain’s eldest daughter, who is the CFVA. She had been on vacation due back the day before our ship arrived but sometimes there are delays when traveling with children,” Maltieani said.

“I was able to reach her through an old friend.” The captain rose from his seat and paced anxiously. “On her arrival at the space port she received an anonymous warning not to return home. This disenfranchisement is only within Pizanna, thank the gods. However, it happens that Pizanna is UrBoka’s main port of call, so it attracts all sorts of displaced citizens, looking for jobs or free handouts. It makes it ripe for gang activity. I’ve notified the home office, and they will make whatever adjustments are necessary,” Captain Mukng Borelie concluded.

Lonnie glanced at Maltieani and then Captain Borelie. “Just how does this affect us?”

The captain gestured to Kali. “One of the young bloods involved in this gang activity is a fan of Diva Kali Maxine. Whether out of fan madness or just a wanton display of his power, he had her perform for him. Unfortunately for you, he had his own partner in mind, his brother.”

Lonnie looked at Kali, who was trying not to look uncomfortable. She was tempted to ask Kali what exactly had transpired.

“Andres sent me a message that you were attacked,” Maltieani continued the story. “By the time I was able to find which holding station they took you to, you were gone. When I heard a birdhead came to see you I figured it was your friend Albert. Blessedly, none of our customers or employees besides yourselves were aware of any problems.”

Lonnie continued watching Kali. Stories of fans attacking their favorite star’s friend, lover, or partner was not unheard of, but she wanted to hear from Kali if that was what this was, because that was not the feeling she got. The attack against her was personal. And it didn’t tell her why Kali felt she had to personally come and get her.

“Well, if that’s all you have...” Yomatta spoke up. She nodded to Kali to follow her.

The chief of security gave a sign to Lonnie to stay behind. As Yomatta shooed Kali out before her, Kali looked at Lonnie as if she wanted to say something.

Lonnie accepted a refreshed cup of tea from Maltieani who also refreshed the captains.

“So, what’s up?” Lonnie asked.

“Do you know of any reason why you were the target of that attack?” Maltieani asked.

“No. I either hang glide or climb cliffs. Anyone I meet usually is as focused on the sport as I am. The dance performance is the only difference this trip.”

“Nothing you’ve ever experienced before, huh?”

“No.” She shook her head disappointed in herself. She froze when attacked, and if someone had not intervened on her behalf, she would have been critically injured, perhaps for life. “When I visit these various ports, I stay away from potentially dangerous places.”

“Just goes to show you, you have to always be alert,” Maltieani commented.

The captain made a grunt in agreement. “Well, I need to get to my reports. This is one thing I’m not happy about documenting. Thanks for the tea, Malti.” After the captain left Lonnie made to leave.

“Lonnie,” Maltieani halted her.

“Yes?” she turned.

“Be careful.”

The two silently studied each other.

“Someone on this ship?” she asked softly.

“I don’t know,” he returned. “Nothing feels right on this trip. I thought it was because of the diva’s presence but...” he shook his head.

“I know what you mean. I guess you’ve checked for sound waves, color, chemical or electromagnetic...” she began.

“Yes. Be extra careful. It disturbs me that it’s escalated to violence.”

“I want to say I wish they picked on someone else, but I wouldn’t wish an acid attack on anyone.”

“I’m putting a tail on you. Nothing intrusive, just whenever you leave your quarters.”

“I found a locator on two of my costumes.”

“When?”

“When I was sharing a suite with Kali. I don’t know when it was placed. I usually deliver my costumes to the cleaners and pick them up myself but during the time we quartered together, our costumes were delivered together.”

“Anything else?” he asked. “Anything that’s odd, out of the ordinary, whether you think it has to do with the presence of the diva or not.”

“Some of my costumes have been cut, but that stopped since I moved. And for this port, four of us usually meet up at a cabin and go hang-gliding. One canceled and two didn’t respond to my messages.”

“Can you send me their names? I’ll have someone see if that is connected to your attack. Albert said he was investigating a contract that is out on you. Most disturbing.”

“It is.”

After finishing her tea, Lonnie wished him well on his investigation and left. True to his words, a MSB, mobile security bot, the size of her fingertip followed her down the corridor. It was somewhat comforting.

Before going to bed, Lonnie sent out a message to Shari, telling her of her attack, while underneath it was a message to HQ that she did not feel comfortable with an unknown person’s interest in her. She was depending on HQ’s past policy to protect ghosts.

Chapter 10

Troubled Passions

The next morning Kali was early to practice. She was drinking juice, and listening to the galaxy news as the musicians trickled in. There was a newscaster speaking of riots at Pizanna.

Andres gestured to Lonnie to join him.

“I didn’t get any plans for our dances to review. Is there a reason?” Lonnie asked.

“Our arrangements hadn’t been finalized until an hour ago. We have new dance routines...with the emphasis on our diva. Why don’t you go over there and talk to her about them?”

“Okay.” Lonnie walked over to Kali. “Want to show me what you have in mind?”

“I thought maybe you would be upset that...”

Lonnie waved her hand dismissively. “We’re a team, right? So, let’s get to it.”

Andres began Kali’s intro. Lonnie took a seat in the theatre, setting her mind on the task at hand. After five minutes of free movements to the music, Lonnie wanted to stop it. She could already see where it was going. When Kali finished, Lonnie stood up, clapping. Hopping onto the stage, Lonnie gave Andres a sign to play. Lonnie danced the same style with flourishing gestures and dramatic pauses, giving the dance a more sensuous undertone.

She then had Kali dance it with the changes. They went through the entire routine until Lonnie felt there was more passion in her movements. It was a toned-down version of what Lonnie liked to dance but livelier than Kali’s preference. Lonnie was hoping this was moving her closer to putting passion into their pair dancing. Lonnie had thought they were moving in that direction but somehow Kali made a U turn.

Back in her cabin Lonnie quickly changed into workout clothes and headed to the crew’s workout room intending on working out her frustration.

The next night they had two performances scheduled, two hours apart on two different decks. One of the other entertainment groups was sick and Yomatta offered Kali’s performance, which Jol Hrorian, Commander of Entertainment, interpreted as meaning both dancers would appear and passed that understanding to Andres.

They had six combined dances: one solo for each and then four together. The dance arrangements consisted of flamenco, bolero, waltz, fox trot, and an old Celtic jig. Kali used free dance for her solo.

Every time Lonnie wrapped an arm around Kali or held her body close, she wished for a change in Kali, to feel her body yield to the temptation to flirt with her. Yet

it was only Lonnie that let her desire show in her dances, and at the end of the performance, must shut it off.

As they bowed at the finale of the night's performance, Kali grabbed Lonnie's hand in her excitement from the applause they received.

"Lonnie?"

She brought her attention to her partner as they changed out of their costumes.

"Hm?"

"Can I ask you something?" The diva's voice sank to a low wistful tone.

Lonnie was sitting down, removing her shoes, aware of Kali standing close to her. Knowing her face was flushed with her desire, she didn't look up when she answered.

"Yeah?"

"Are you going to do anything special right now? I mean, I wanted to go soak in the larger crew's hot tub, but I don't want to go alone."

Lonnie's imagination jumped to a hot tub fantasy before she could censor it. Still not daring to look up, she missed the blush creeping up Kali's neck and into her cheeks.

"Sure. Let me take a quick shower, grab my stuff and...did you want to meet there, or do you want me to come and get you?" She dumped her shoes in her bag and finally looked at Kali.

"Can you come and get me? I don't want it to seem like I'm hanging around the corridors."

"Alright. Give me ten minutes."

"Okay." Kali turned and left with a bodyguard.

Lonnie let out a quiet breath of air. She really had to do something about her feelings... or at least, decide whether it was from fan infatuation or just because she had to work off this sensual energy. She had thought after all these years she had this in control. Oh, right, she remembered. She'd go and find a woman that caught her interest, do some dancing with her, and then find a safe place to work off their mutual interest. Next port, she decided.

* * *

Kali's door opened just after one knock from Lonnie.

“I’ll be in the spa,” Kali called out as she hurriedly closed the door behind her and pushed Lonnie forward. Unfortunately, it was the wrong direction, so Lonnie grabbed her hand and pulled her back in the right direction.

Kali giggled behind her. Lonnie looked back at her and grinned. “Are you sneaking away, my dear?”

“Yes. You’re lucky it wasn’t one of those damsels in distress situations where I had to drop my locks through the castle portical.”

In the locker room, Lonnie pulled off her clothes to change into her bathing suit.

“Lonnie, what’s that mark on your butt?”

“A tattoo.” Lonnie turned to look at her and then regretted it. Kali was naked. Lonnie struggled to keep her eyes above Kali’s chin, but found them wandering to her breasts, then focusing on her left breast. Lonnie pointed to the tattoo Kali had on her breast. “And what is that, young lady?”

“You like?” She held her white breast up for her to take a critical view of the art. “I had it done in the ship tattoo parlor before Yomatta arrived. It’s your fault you know.”

Lonnie’s mouth dropped open and then quickly snapped closed. “Come on. Let’s go take a swim, and afterwards, while we soak in the hot tub, you can tell me how that snake on your breast is my fault.”

“It’s not a snake. It’s a dragon.” Kali followed Lonnie out to the swimming area.

Lonnie dove into the water, grateful to cool off her sizzling body. She heard a yelp and then vigorous splashing behind her. She turned around concerned and then swam back to Kali.

“Do you swim?”

Kali came up sputtering, clinging to Lonnie’s arm.

“I guess not,” she gasped. “You...I thought I could just jump in and...” she flapped her arms.

Lonnie laughed so hard she nearly choked on the water Kali splashed her with.

“Okay, okay. I’ll show you.” She looked up and saw a grinning Gish.

“Need help, Lonnie? I hope you’re wearing your life-preserver.”

“Don’t encourage her. No, I don’t need help. Gish this is Kali...Kali, Gish. If you want an honest massage, Gish is the one to ask for. She has a magic touch. Ask for the hot oiled rock special.”

“Hi, Gish. I always need a massage after a performance. Can I schedule one on a regular basis?” Kali asked.

“Sure. Give me the time. I’ll just plan your time in. See you two around.”

Lonnie felt a slight twinge of jealousy, and she knew it was not because she would be sharing Gish’s time. To cover up any slip of face, “Let’s get your first lesson in swimming done before the pool gets too crowded.” Lonnie walked to the edge of the pool on the shallow side. She gripped the edge and showed Kali how to kick. For an hour, Lonnie showed Kali the basic techniques of swimming. She avoided touching Kali as much as possible. She wondered how long she could keep her attraction for Kali hidden and what Kali would do if she knew.

By the time they made it to the hot tub Lonnie was as tired as Kali. They both stretched out in the warm tub next to each other, letting their legs rise to the surface and bump without any effort to move away. After a while Lonnie tapped Kali with her toe.

“Yomatta is going to be upset that you’ve been gone for so long.” Lonnie yawned.

“I told her I was going to the spa with you. She trusts you, you know.” Kali fluttered her eyes at Lonnie seductively.

“Stop that. You’re going to start another set of rumors. Why does she trust me?” She rose from the bubbling pool, handing Kali a towel and then drying herself off with her own.

“Because she said you’re a good person and you don’t like starting rumors.” Kali quickly wrapped the towel around her and trotted behind Lonnie, into the dressing room to change.

“You’re pulling my chain,” Lonnie accused, noticing Kali’s grin as she brushed past her.

Kali laughed. Opening her locker, she pulled out a robe to wear over her suit. Lonnie changed into dry clothes and tossed her wet suit into her bag. They left the locker area together, both silent. Their shoulders touched as they walked side-by-side, and for a

long moment Lonnie wished that she had found someone she could be with for a long time.

“What’s wrong?” Kali asked, suddenly noticing Lonnie’s stillness. Kali put a hand on her wrist to stop their progress. Silently she studied her somber partner. “Lonnie, I don’t want to do anything that will hurt you. Do you believe me?” she asked softly.

Lonnie looked into the green eyes that had a devastating effect on her equilibrium. Leaning close to her but not too close to start rumors, she asked. “Then you’ll dance what I think is best?”

Kali laughed and jabbed her in the stomach with her elbow. “Ehh. You know what I mean.”

Lonnie shook her head. Kali was too ambiguous for her at the moment. She really wanted to know what Kali meant so she led Kali into her quarters, hoping Yomatta would not come looking for them too quickly.

“Sit down and tell me exactly what you mean.” Lonnie’s heart was beating furiously.

“Lonnie, it’s no big thing. I get it all the time.”

“Get what all the time?”

“People falling in love with me.” She leaned forward and kissed an astonished Lonnie on her lips.

The kiss had no heat to it. It was merely a kiss, but the hand on Lonnie’s arm sent chills up her and she could feel a slight tipping of her world. It dawned on Lonnie that Kali didn’t make the distinction between lust and love. For Lonnie, she had no doubt that she lusted for Kali. But Lonnie also realized she was falling in love with the diva. It seemed the Ladies of Fate had a lesson here for her to learn.

“Do you want me?” Kali purred seductively.

“Kali,” Lonnie muttered warningly. She jumped up. “Kali, I want someone who loves me. I don’t want a one-night stand or someone that will move on when she sees a brighter light.”

There, she said it.

Kali blinked her eyes at her again, charmingly.

“Stop,” Lonnie growled playfully, recognizing that Kali was not putting out any sexual vibes, just playful ones.

“Lonnie,” Kali sat back on the couch/bed and watched her. “I’ve never been with someone that I could trust. I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings just now, but I had to know. The dances we dance are sexual, and I wanted to be sure that there was no misunderstanding between us.”

“Okay. But let’s not do *this* again. I’m glad I passed your test. Now, unless you have anything else to discuss...”

Someone rapped on the door and Yomatta walked into the cabin before Lonnie could get off the couch and open the door. Yomatta looked at the two surprised women and nodded. Whatever she saw she was satisfied with. “You both have practice scheduled for the early hours,” she reminded them.

Kali rose and gave Lonnie a peck on the cheek. “Thanks for the swim lesson and for introducing me to your masseuse. Is she good?”

Lonnie nodded. When the two were gone, Lonnie groaned. Her phone rang and she moved over to answer it. “Yeah?” she grumbled.

“I bet you can do with a good massage about now,” Gish offered.

“Your timing is a bit suspicious. Were you watching my door?”

“Come on over. Scuttlebutt is all over the decks about you two having more than just a dance partnership going.”

“And that is so far from the truth. She’s into men, and I have no intention of introducing her to anything else,” Lonnie told her. “I’m on my way.” Just as she hung up the phone, it rang again. “Yeah?”

“Sweet dreams, Lonnie,” Kali told her.

“May you have hot and lustful ones yourself. Stop playing with me or you’re going to find yourself surprised one night.”

Kali laughed. *“I know you better than you think.”*

“Really?”

“Yeah. I worry about you, Lonnie. You’re too passionate to be alone.”

“Why all this sudden worry about me?” Lonnie asked.

"I guess you haven't read your mail yet. Erich has scheduled the night before the two weeks off for vacation to appear at the Sidney Convention Center on Earth. They want your flamenco dances, the ones that are very sexual."

"I prefer to call them sensual. There is a difference. I'll see you tomorrow."

Lonnie nearly stalked her way to Gish's quarters down the corridor.

"Hey," Lonnie glumly greeted Gish.

"Oooh, you look so miserable. Come here." Gish pulled her into her quarters. Slowly Gish undressed her, letting her hands linger on her breasts as Lonnie's blouse fell to the deck.

Lonnie swallowed noisily. "Gish...this...is..."

"No." She pressed her finger against Lonnie's lips. "Tonight, I'm your dream lover... not Gish," she whispered.

Chapter 11

The Two Weeks Off-Ship

As the fifth month of the cruise came to an end both women were kept busy working on steps Lonnie wanted to do for their convention appearance. They were billed as flamenco dancers; otherwise, Lonnie knew Kali would be too tempted to demand her own style. To keep Kali occupied and focused, Lonnie chose complicated steps to show off both of their skills.

* * *

Kali glanced at the note Yomatta handed her as she exchanged it for a costume she was packing for their performance.

"Is this another reading test?" Kali was feeling elated. Their earlier dance practice before docking at the main orbiting space station above Earth was flawless.

Kali frowned at the message. "Has Erich told her this?" She turned to face Yomatta.

"I'm not her keeper," she informed Kali.

Kali didn't miss the sound of satisfaction in her voice. She knew Yomatta didn't hate Lonnie; she just saw her as a hindrance to a perfect schedule she had planned out,

which is why Kali wanted Lonnie around as much as she could get away with, without causing too much opposition in her relationship with either woman. Both had something to offer that she needed.

“And I don’t want to get between those two,” Kali said, after some length.

“That is a very good decision,” Yomatta told her.

The more Kali thought about it her smile widened. “She hates photo sessions and screaming news crews. She hates crowds. Good thing she has two weeks to recover.” “I don’t think *she* will be what they’re there to see,” Yomatta said.

“Sure, she is. They’re curious who my partner is and what secrets she’ll reveal. They are sure to be disappointed. None of the old stuff.” Kali wondered, though, just how Lonnie would respond under pressure. Would she use it to her advantage? This was her career here, not Lonnie’s. Kali sighed. Was it fair to use her as cannon fodder? It’s not like she’s naïve. But, then again, it was why she chose the cruise liners to do what she liked doing, where there was no ambitious performer that was willing to sacrifice her.

Gish was due in a few moments.

* * *

Lonnie read Erich’s note. Apparently, he wanted to test Kali’s popularity, and she was to be the foil. She picked up her workout bag and headed to the spa, choosing the passenger elevators rather than the crew to avoid any conversation. The elevators were busy, stopping on every floor as they made their way to the workout area. Keeping to the back of the elevator, Lonnie appeared bored, but she kept an eye on the different people that came and went, how they were dressed, and what their whispered conversations were about. Apparently, she was the only one not involved in an affair. It was difficult to not give into the energy and dwell on how it would feel to run her hands over Kali’s body, but distractions could be fatal.

The crews’ workout area was crowded and those that were present were focused on their workouts. Once she began her first set, she fell into her rhythm and her mind wandered to their upcoming performance at the convention.

Erich’s prediction that two women dancing passionately together, becoming a force to be reckoned with, was right. There was a revival of Jerah and Sarah’s material and there were plenty of dancers that were able to keep the interest going. However, the

missing ingredient in *their* dance partnership was Kali's passion. She was feminine and displayed a coquette demure when called for, but there wasn't any sensuousness.

Lonnie took a quick shower following her workout, and then soaked in the hot tub, wondering what she was going to do.

The water rose a bit, waking her from her doze. Lonnie studied her fingers, puckered and looked like she had been in too long. She stood up and pulled herself out.

"Don't get out on my account," Loria teased.

"If you hadn't come by, I would have fallen asleep," Lonnie said.

Lonnie picked up the house phone and called Gish to see if she was available. No sense in her waiting outside of her cabin looking silly.

"Hey, you're back?"

"No, silly. This is my answering machine. Hey, hon. Can we do it another time? I'm bushed."

"Okay. No problem. Sleep well."

"Believe me, I will. It's been a rough week with this being our last few days out."

Lonnie nearly slapped her forehead in dismay. She had forgotten that this was Gish's busiest time. She not only had to prepare her station for shut down; she also was serving the customers that put off massages until the last week. They were cheaper on the ship than on most planetside shops, and a lot safer.

Before she went to bed, she went through her mail to see if she had anything interesting to see while on the planetside. Her two-week vacation arrangement was solidified.

* * *

Erich met them at the space port. He had made hotel arrangements for the two women and the musicians. This time Lonnie had her room attached to Kali's. Kali though, had to share her space with Yomatta and two bodyguards.

They left their bags at the hotel and drove to the convention hall to get an idea of the atmosphere.

Erich and Lonnie were in one cab while Kali and her group were in another. Erich leaned back in his seat and took a deep breath. Lonnie prepared for bad news.

“I don’t want you to get upset,” Erich began.

Lonnie sighed as she leaned back in the seat. “I wish you would do these confessions before the last minute.”

“I only learned about it a few moments ago.” He leaned forward and turned on the viewer in the cab. A picture of the convention appeared and advertisements to tourists played out until a speaker came on promoting each of the groups that would be performing. Finally, the speaker announced the demonstrations to be done on Amour dancing.

“Who gave it that name?” Lonnie asked.

The face of the announcer appeared in the upper right corner of the screen as videos of various couples dancing appeared on the main screen. “The couple that has brought back this style will be appearing this evening for a warmup and then tomorrow will give a one-hour show. That would be Diva Kali Maxine with her dance partner Leona Bestolie. Folks, I’ve seen tapes of these two and I have to say, Diva Maxine is at the top of her form. But don’t...”

Lonnie shut the viewer off. “Just what I’ve been avoiding all my life, my name spoken in an advertisement. And they got it right. What has my life come to?” she asked in mock horror. “So, Erich, what is it that you think I should be worried about?”

“I thought you didn’t like large crowds.”

“I don’t like crowds because all it takes is something to set off a few, and the whole group becomes a stampeding mob, trampling everything in its path. Besides, what am I going to do with that many admirers?”

Erich said nothing, merely nodded.

“So, this is the halfway mark...”

Erich smiled. “And you’re wondering if I’m any closer to getting your bonus arranged. Ambassador Hebr Mo’lu is having a party at his home and asked if Kali would mind dancing with her partner at his wedding anniversary.”

Lonnie laughed at Erich’s lie. The slight color change on the small ridge above his left ear gave him away. What intrigued HQ was why he was bothering with this bribe.

“Okay. The invitation was for you and Kali. It’s on his estate in Abrazan. I told him you both would be delighted. He’ll send a shuttle to pick you up. There aren’t any regular flights to Tuloc.”

“Have you ever been there?”

“I seldom travel far from home. However, this show is one of those very few times and I brought my family, so they won’t feel neglected.”

The autocab stopped at the curb where uniformed valets assisted the performers alighting from their cabs. Andres was waiting near the door with Kali and her bodyguards.

“Andres,” Erich greeted, “I appreciate all your help. Thanks for staying longer.”

“I wouldn’t want to miss it. I’ve seen some of the other performers. You have some keen competition,” he nodded to Lonnie.

“We’ll burn them,” Kali informed them all confidently.

“We’re the honoree guests so we have a performance before peers and then we have a warmup thirty minutes before the main performance tomorrow. Magi and Celea are teamed up,” Andres said chuckling.

Lonnie burst out laughing, startling them all. “Are they that good?”

“Everyone is hiding what their routines are so no one copies any steps or costumes. I sure would like to know what happened in the five months that we’ve been gone that got those two that friendly.”

“Advertising, good press reviews, and a diligent agent,” Erich informed them all.

“Erich, they’re here *only* because of the competition,” Lonnie said.

“No one can beat us,” Kali repeated firmly. “I’ve seen them dance. You can’t morph people with no talent into sensual dancing.”

“Oh! So, you looked up the meaning did you,” Lonnie laughed. “Kali plans on heating up the stage for the next two days.”

Andres looked over at Kali who had an indignant expression on her face.

“No, she really is. She’s going to let all her passion freed and show us what she’s been holding back in all these dance sessions. She’s afraid if she lets loose too soon, she’ll overwhelm me. But now that we have two weeks to recover, she’s ready.”

“I dance just fine, thank you, miss hottie. And I know perfectly well what you’re implying. I just might surprise you.”

Lonnie leaned near her ear, “Just for two nights and then you have two whole weeks to recover.”

Kali scratched the ear Lonnie’s breath tickled. “You’ll be the one having to take two whole weeks to recover, my dear,” she said.

Lonnie smiled and then turned her attention to the stage. The two became all business as they walked the length, listening to the sound of their heels on the boards.

“I like the sound here. We need to get here earlier than the thirty minutes we’re given for warmups,” Kali said to Lonnie as she stared out at the empty audience seats. “There’s going to be a crowd to fight through.”

Lonnie’s eyes moved from the audience seats to the stage. It was huge, too huge for her comfort. She turned her back to the seats and walked around the stage.

“You don’t have to worry about your dressing room. I saw names posted on them and the times the occupants are expected to show for their use,” Andres said.

“We’re going to have to add extra steps to go from here to the other side.” Lonnie gestured to where they would dance.

Kali turned to Andres and Lonnie, “Why can’t we do one set here, another in the center and another on the other side? We can expand the dance beginning and some of the middle but end in the center.” She glanced at the mobile camera docking stations lined up to the side of the stage. “Even if they get a view on screen, we need to move back and forth on stage and finish in the center.”

“I see no problem with that,” Lonnie said.

Andres turned to Lori. “Did our gear arrive?”

“Yes, everything. We had to make sure we had guards. Some fans got a bit too free with their souvenir hunting.”

“Our gear?” Lonnie asked.

“No. Another group. So, when do we get back here? I need a nap.”

“Four hours,” Andres said.

* * *

Lonnie slept for two hours and then made the necessary calls to her friends who if not for Shari would have missed getting tickets for the show.

“Hey kitten, how’s everyone?” she asked Niamh.

“We’re all doing great,” Niamh answered. “We got in some great surfing while waiting for you. We have a place near the best surfing beach and have a few locals promising to show you the ropes.”

Cari’s laughing was heard in the background.

“Show me the ropes, huh? What did you tell her, and it better be her?”

“Why? You don’t do anything. You just leave whoever we set you up with weeping in frustration.”

“Where will you guys be, so we can meet after the performance?”

“Kona Catcha. Just give directions to the autocab. You and the diva are the hottest topics around here. I hope you don’t attract too many flies.”

“Me too. I’ll see y’all then.”

For the rest of the time, she sat Āsanas.

* * *

Lonnie and Kali came in the same autocab with their bodyguards. By the time they were recognized they were through the door with a shrieking crowd left behind.

Lonnie handed her bag to an auto attendant; another took Kali’s, and they followed through a maze to their dressing rooms, their names prominently displayed on the doors.

Lonnie was walking on the stage before Kali arrived dressed in her costume. She was wearing a sleek green dress with a slit on the side. Lonnie was wearing the same shade of green pants and short black coat, showing the v line of her breasts. Erich had picked out their costumes, otherwise Lonnie would have settled for a shirt under the coat. It was ironic that more of her skin showed than Kali’s.

Lonnie danced around the floor, testing the sound and feeling pleased with the sounds..

While she drank water, and took a few calming breaths, she watched Kali dance, listening to her feet tap out a catchy rhythm. Kali had come a long way in five months, and Lonnie took pride that she had a hand in it.

Finished they turned to Andres who then warmed the band. Other performers that were waiting took their seats if they had not already.

Kali placed her hand over Lonnie's and Lonnie took in the warmth, and how nice it felt. She looked into Kali's eyes, looking for the spark that would be necessary to prove their worth for the honored role they were given. Kali would not be able to fool this audience. Kali looked back into Lonnie's eyes and smiled. She led Lonnie to where they would begin the first dance.

Andres tapped his baton on the podium, signaling everyone was warmed up, and ready.

Lonnie snapped her castanets, and then danced sensuously around a woman she desired, teasing her with her rooster-like attitude and staccato tapping of her heels. When she stopped and it was Kali's time to respond, Kali raised smoldering eyes darkened with a desire that struck Lonnie with force. Smirking, Lonnie taunted the subject of her desire to step up closer into her space and breathe her air. Well-rehearsed steps and poses done to elicit sensuous feelings brought with it the energy the dancers allowed to surface within themselves.

Kali's dance was of a woman who was disdainful of her suitor that began to show interest. Not quite letting her suitor touch her until she knew she had her suitor's rapt attention.

Lonnie danced as one who was sure of her sexual attraction, and then of uncertainty as her skills were nearly ignored, and finally of being under the spell of enchantment, becoming the conquered.

When they finished, they paused in their final position. Kali had one arm draped over Lonnie's shoulder and the other around her waist possessively. Her face a hairs breath from Lonnie's, staring into her darkened eyes, lips parted. Lonnie's hands rested on Kali's hips, holding her firmly against her, feeling their combined heat. Both women parted, turned to face the crowd, and stepped one foot forward.

The room broke into a roar.

The ovation went on long enough for Lonnie to realize how strong her desire for Kali was, and how realistic the returned interest on Kali's part was. What both Erich and she wanted from Kali was achieved. Now, all that was needed was to hone it, then her job was done and so was their partnership.

Both bowed, it seemed for the tenth time, and then Kali pulled her to do another dance. Taking advantage of Kali's openness, Lonnie moved her hands over her back and buttocks lightly, as they moved in tandem across the stage. Then pulled away and danced her sexual desire around and across the stage, willing the heat to pass out of her feet into the stage. This dance called for Kali to be passive while Lonnie made the overtures, but, when she rested a hand, or brushed her body against Lonnie, it was longer than she had in the past and when their eyes met, they were as dark with passion as Lonnie felt.

Their audience had not sat down to dispassionately watch but rather had stood and clapped to the rhythm of the castanets and then shouted and yelled their enthusiasm when they finished. More bows and Kali waving at the crowd, with Lonnie nodding at those that shouted her name.

After they left the stage, they had more bodyguards around them than Lonnie had ever known any performer to have but as they moved out beyond the convention center, she could see a sea of people that had been watching the performance from the large outdoor screens. As the crowd began to move toward the two dancers the bodyguards hustled the two into the cabs and to an interview.

Lonnie became grounded from their performance during the interview with a local station. The interviewer lacked any knowledge of the art, and for that matter, anything with depth, including himself. He was a celebrity in his own right, and his superficial flirting with Diva Maxine was laughable. From Lonnie's perspective, the face that Kali wore was her diva face, aloof and entertaining, saying all the right things.

Lonnie was pointedly ignored when she didn't play the game, and that was comfortable for her. There were two more interviews, and Lonnie was not asked to participate so she returned to the hotel.

Chapter 12

The Last Performance Before Vacation

Distantly, Lonnie heard the adjoining door open. She rightly guessed it was Kali from the perfume that whisked into her sleeping room. She rolled over on her back and waited. Something wet landed on her face.

“Hey! What was that for?” Lonnie sat up, pulling the washcloth off her face.

“Didn’t think I could do it, did you?”

Lonnie tossed the washcloth back at her. “It was there. I knew it, you knew it. Right?” She walked to the shower and set the temperature, hoping Kali would take the hint and leave. When she stepped into the shower before turning on the water, Kali stepped in beside her. She pressed up against Lonnie and kissed her passionately, and then she walked out of the room.

“Hey!” Lonnie shouted at the retreating back. Kali was laughing. “What is she up to?” Lonnie muttered to herself. Her fingers touched her lips remembering the possessive press of Kali’s soft full lips on hers. If Kali hadn’t added the flicker of a tongue against her opened lips, it would have been easier to shrug off.

* * *

In the morning, instead of preparing for their performance, Erich had them before cameras and giving interviews. These interviewers had done their homework on the politics of dance and what it meant to be an Icon for a particular dance style. After the tenth interview was wrapped up Lonnie went to speak with Erich.

“Erich. Just the agent I wanted to see.” Lonnie was weary of word fencing with the interviewers. They didn’t ignore her as the first one had and sought answers an obsessive fan would want to know. Kali had a penchant for it and was witty enough to cover for her lack of answers.

“We’re still on *Earl Gray*?”

They both settled in the second private vehicle Erich had arranged, before he answered.

“Yes. You’re safe there.”

“Safe from who or what?” she asked.

“I don’t think she’s ready yet to be surrounded constantly by fans and media, and I know you hate this media frenzy business, so I’m going to let you finish off the tour where you’re comfortable.”

“Doggone, Erich, give it to me straight.”

“I’m serious about the safety issue. I don’t want her to jump so soon into the larger crowds yet. The ports you’ll be visiting on the return trip will be important places, and believe me, you’ll find the ship a nice haven to escape to. Meanwhile, she still needs work. You have her emotionally out and that’s important. Now she needs to be consistently out and be able to handle it. Teach her what you know.”

“Right, like I lead an exemplary life. Erich, who is doing all this for her?”

“I’ll tell you one day, but not today.”

* * *

Lonnie was not used to personal attendants. As she stood still while hers, Jay, pulled her new fitted embroidered coat into place and smoothed out wrinkles, she could see Kali in the mirror being helped into her dress. Lonnie moved around as the hands guided her. Her castanets were fitted over her hands and then Jay stood back to critically review her work.

“Are you ready,” Kali’s voice asked from behind her.

Lonnie nodded and stepped toward the door which was opened for them. The two women passed through, both their minds on dance steps. Lonnie’s hand rested against the small of Kali’s back, more for a connection than in guiding her. Lonnie found that if she concentrated on making Kali look good her nervousness would fade. Kali stopped in front of the door and Lonnie slid her arm around Kali’s waist, as they waited for their entrance.

“Lonnie?”

Distractedly, Lonnie looked at her partner. For a moment she didn’t recognize the beautiful woman standing next to her, so close she could smell her skin.

“Hey. Yoo-hoo?” Kali called her.

Lonnie felt Kali's weight against her and focused on the radiant smile before her. Her heart rate increased and her arm around Kali's waist tightened, reflexively pulling her closer to her.

"Did I tell you that you look absolutely striking in your new clothes?" Kali said to her in a soft voice.

Lonnie blinked at her, trying to decipher the verbal message amid the screaming sensations in her body.

"Thanks," she managed.

"Are you going to be all right? Will I have to do a solo until..." Kali teased, her eyes laughing, and her full lips curling up into a smile.

Lonnie pulled her wits back to the present and shook her head dumbly at Kali. "I'm...fine. Just thinking," she finished, regaining her composure.

"Okay, because...this is us."

Lonnie struck her pose, and while the intro was played, they walked onto the stage as a couple strolling through the park.

The first dance called for her to use her castanets while Kali's hands rested on top of hers. They weaved a net of passion with the staccato beat of their heels, echoing castanets, and the long steps across the stage as Lonnie advanced upon Kali, and then Kali turned them both around and advanced on Lonnie. The heat smoldering between the two added to the mood of the dance.

Between each dance, they gave enough time for the audience to applaud but Andres kept them on time. By the end of their time, she was sure that she and Kali were on the same wavelength, and it was a sensuous one. They returned for four encores, each doing a solo and two more pair dances.

Instead of being escorted back to their shared dressing room, their guards hurried them out of the building.

* * *

"Whooooo!" Kali shouted. "Did you see the audience? We had them standing at the beginning of our dance ... whooping! We proved we deserved to be given credit for bringing au pair back."

Lonnie could feel the audience's appreciation too. Usually, it was not this intense. The combination of the sexual power in her belly mixed with the adrenalin rush from the audience's outpouring of energy had her nerves jangling.

"What are you going to do?" Kali asked, her face shining with the excitement of the last two days of ovations.

"Something crazy and wild," Lonnie said. She was amused that Kali found it difficult to sit still.

"What's that?" Kali asked, wondering if Lonnie was thinking of getting a lover for the night, or two weeks.

"Surf. The waves are curling high and knarly."

"Really?"

Lonnie was preoccupied watching the crowd that the news vid was showing that was hanging around their hotel. She leaned forward and spoke to one of their bodyguards. "It doesn't look like something the four of you can handle," she told him. "How about a change of plans?"

Wiwan, the team leader, turned in his seat to face Lonnie. "What do you have in mind?"

"I'm supposed to be heading to Kona Catcha to meet up with some friends that promised me good surfing this afternoon."

Wiwan nodded again. "I know of it. But driving up in something like this is going to have us sticking out like a redwood among willows."

Lonnie grinned. "Well, we can exchange it."

Wiwan traded their preprogrammed limo with two smaller autocabs. Three of the guards rode in the second autocab while Kali and Lonnie gave in to Wiwan insisting on riding with them.

"Kali, do you mind dropping me off first? I was thinking by the time Wiwan takes you back to the hotel there will be less of a crowd," Lonnie said.

"And miss surfing? Not on your life. I've only seen it on vids. Do you think maybe I can try it?"

Lonnie looked at the diva whose appearance was so far from a surfing vision that Lonnie could only nod, thinking no further.

* * *

“Hey, you wanna-be-dancer!” Niamh hollered as she grabbed the taller woman and spun her around. She dropped her to the ground and kissed her briefly. “We must get out of here. Cari’s holding down the beach house, making sure no one noses around. Hi!” She suddenly noticed the bodyguards and the diva. “Wooo. Very smart to avoid your hotel. We can use those autocabs since there’s more of you. Come on. Let’s go.”

Wiwan gestured to the others which vehicles to get in, with the guards doubling in the autocabs, and Niamh pushing Lonnie and Kali quickly into the one she had reserved.

“So, Diva Kali....”

“Kali, please call me Kali.”

“Okay, Kali. Nice dancing. Glad to see you put the nay-sayers to shame. Are you planning on surfing too?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. We’ll have to stop and get you the right clothes. That will be our first stop and then head out to a small place we’re renting at the beach where you two can change.” She gave a new destination to their cab.

Niamh ran into a store to avoid any attention with Kali appearing. While she shopped, their bodyguards purchased more appropriate attire. Kali and Lonnie waited safely in their cab. Kali listened to the entertainment news which was all about them, and Lonnie took a nap, effectively closing out the chatter, and sleeping through their resumed journey to the beach. A poke in her ribs thirty minutes later woke her. She peered through the windows to see where they were. Niamh pointed to the line of boards along the beach.

“This is the small place on the beach?” Kali asked surprised, looking in the opposite direction.

Niamh laughed. “Not that place. We have what is called the day cottage, over that way. It was used by the first owners for changing in or out of their bathing costumes, or

taking a nap, or partying out of the sun, but still being near the ocean. I know the present owner's girlfriend. She's a client." Niamh grinned.

"I hope that someone isn't anyone I know personally," Lonnie said.

"Well, yeah, but she says she is very much in love with her present beau and you're a forgotten fling." Niamh flitted her fingers in the air mimicking Aoife's disdainful gesture.

"Why did you pick this place?" Lonnie asked, looking around apprehensively.

"She's in Wellsmont, the family estate. That's a week away no matter what fast vehicle she hires. We didn't tell her you would be here."

The autocab came to a stop and they all spotted two familiar figures standing on the beach near the driveway. They appeared to be arguing.

"Like, she can't miss the publicity," Lonnie said.

"Whoops," Niamh said softly. "Honey bunny, you'll need to borrow Kali's bodyguards."

Kali looked out the window interested. "Who are they?" she asked as they waited for the bodyguards to get into position.

"Her exes. They're probably going to be coming out of..." she looked over at Lonnie, "all sorts of places." She grinned at Kali, "You think you had an exciting life with the men the tabloids say you've been with...in her wild years she slept with any woman that caught her eye, and did she have an eye for the passionate ones."

"You led a wildlife? In your younger years? Just how old are you?"

Lonnie stepped out of the autocab, still dressed in costume. She turned to take Kali's hand to help her out. Kali looped her dress ends over her arm and squirmed out of the cab.

"Old enough to know I don't want to repeat that life," she said.

"That way would be good." Niamh pointed to the side path.

The two women at the front entrance stopped arguing immediately and tried to join the group on the path to the backdoor but Niamh was leading them quickly with the bodyguards preventing the pair from rushing past them. A door opened and Niamh ushered everyone in.

“Where’s my suit?” Lonnie asked Cari as she hugged her.

Cari grinned at Lonnie’s predicament. “You’re lucky neither of them surfs even on a beginner’s board.”

“Right here,” Niamh told her, holding up the bag of clothing they had picked up at the hotel earlier for Lonnie.

Lonnie grabbed it and headed to the room to change. When she exited the room, everyone was dressed in bathing suits, including the bodyguards.

“Why do they keep ringing the doorbell when we aren’t answering it?”

“Persistence. Listen, we have the boards on the beach. Bessie is watching them with the others,” Cari reported. “No one’s allowed with a beginner board, so we won’t have to worry about those two nuts being turned loose.”

“Can anyone surf?” Kali asked as she fell in behind Lonnie as the group moved out of the house and down the path to the beach.

“If you don’t mind starting on a professional board. We don’t allow those computerized boards here. I’ll give you a few tips.” Niamh stuck her tongue out at Lonnie who was trying to signal a contrary message.

Kali rested her hand on Lonnie’s back as they followed Cari single file down the winding path. They could see what looked like a party had already started.

“Lonnie?”

“Huh?”

“Can you give me a ride on your board?” Kali asked.

“Surfing is a one person...”

“Nah huh,” Kali laughed, tugging at Lonnie’s elbow. “I do watch surfing events now and then and saw...”

“Those were on computer boards. I surf on an old board,” Lonnie interrupted.

“Oh.”

Lonnie quickly found a board and escaped, while Kali was introduced as Mari, Cari’s cousin.

A place was cleared for Kali near the fire where they were roasting food and telling stories. Niamh settled near her and began to explain the rudiments of surfing.



Lonnie attached the leash of the board around her wrist and ran into the water

with the board tucked under her arm, ready to toss into a wave. Once past the raising waves she studied the wave patterns until she knew when the big one would break.

Anxious, she nearly settled on a lesser one, but then she spotted it. She could feel the upsurge as it gathered its power behind her and began to swell under her. Just as it started to roll, she pushed her board so that she would either be pounded into the sand or carried to the beach. Eagerly she surged forward, leaning a little too forward. Too late to do anything but ride it out she felt the sudden loss of her ride and she leaned back as the wave rolled past her.

A few more rolled under her and then she again saw the right one coming. She rode it all the way in, hearing the roar of the wave as it formed a tunnel over her and moved her along. Quickly she moved back into the deeper water for another.

Riding the pipe was addicting. The exhaustion she had felt after their dance performance was gone.

Her ninth ride in was a wipe out. She slammed into the belly of the rising lower swell and she and the board went tumbling to shore. When she caught her breath, she was surrounded by some of her friends, all relieved she was okay.

“What a shot!”

“I have just the thing for...”

Lonnie didn’t wait to hear what Glenna had to say.

As she splashed back out, she felt someone running beside her. She glanced sideways annoyed, and found it was Kali.

“Hey, where are you going? Kali, it’s dangerous out here.”

“Not any more than it is around that group. You’re rescuing me. You owe me.”

A wave hit them, and Lonnie came back up wiping her face. “How do you figure that?”

“You lied to me. I heard that in the past you’ve taken out girlfriends.”

“All right! You don’t have to go into my sordid past. Lay on the board,” she instructed her quickly. She was watching a wave heading their way.

Lonnie paddled them out with Kali's help.

"Okay. This is what we're going to do. Sit up." Lonnie carefully climbed on the board and wished she had taken Cari up on the slower and longer board. "We're going to sit through a few, just to give you a thrill." Lonnie moved closer to Kali's back.

For the next hour, they practiced riding on less serious waves part of the way in and then paddled back out.

"Okay, I'm tired and I'm sure you are too. Let's take the next big one in and you'll see what it's like to ride the big orgasmic rush."

"Ooh! This will be something I will be sure to remember in my old age," Kali told her mockingly.

"You'll see."

Lonnie felt the beginning of the wave. The ride in was not as dramatic as she would have liked, but it was enough to give Kali an idea of the emotional and physical rush riding a big wave in that formed a ceiling overhead.

Both women came stumbling onto the shore laughing with Kali gripping Lonnie's arm for support as waves hit them from behind. Two of the bodyguards came out to assist Kali. Lonnie held onto her surfboard and used it to part the crowd so she could get back to where the boards were stored.

"Wow! So, you aren't so old after all!" Jenny slapped her on the shoulder laughing. "After all that dancing and running from your admirers I would think you would want a nap."

"I think my second wind has been exhausted," Lonnie admitted and fell onto the blanket. Aoife and Sindy scrambled to hand her a drink. She ignored their offers. Jenny glared at the two women. All of Lonnie's friends knew she only drank unopened drinks and nonalcoholic.

"Here." Kali handed her sealed water. She plopped down next to Lonnie. "You were right. What a rush." She took a long pull from her water. "So, what's the difference between the computerized boards and what you use?"

"C-boards do it all for you, even make sure you don't fall off the board. The boards we use, it's all skill."

“They’re not allowed on this beach, or the professional surfing tour.”

“Why?”

“The energy envelope they put around the boarder will knock whoever approaches off. Too many idiots that don’t take it seriously, like to run into others and see if they can deactivate the computer system on the board.”

“Like electric bumper cars,” Lonnie said. “Ever ride one of those?”

Most everyone whooped at some memory they shared.

“No, but I’ve seen pictures,” Kali said.

“Don’t get Lonnie in a bumper car,” Jenny warned. “Have you ridden the rapids?” She asked Kali to change the subject.

“Oh, yeah. Not quite like this ride but it does have its similarities.”

“*Earl Gray* has a stop near Elongman, doesn’t it?” Cari asked.

“A two-hour shuttle ride to get there. The Bella Abzug Run. The shortest ride is three hours,” Lonnie said. She hummed her love of the ride and the others hummed with her.

Someone brought out drums and while they conversed into the early morning the music played around them.

“I like drums,” Lonnie murmured tiredly.

“Uh huh,” Aoife replied in a seductive tone. “You sure do...”

“Don’t bother reminiscing. We’ve all heard it many times and don’t want to hear it again,” Jenny said.

Lonnie agreed. The drumbeat was nice, but she was tired. She rose and headed back to the house, knowing Kali’s bodyguards would take care of Kali.

A hand slipped into hers.

“I’m rescuing you, so shut up and keep walking,” Kali said.

The bodyguards dutifully followed them back to the house. At the house, Erich and Yomatta were waiting. They were sipping tea and talking when they entered.

Erich looked at both women and nodded. “You’re looking better already. Are you ready to go?” he asked Kali.

Kali nodded and turned to Lonnie. “Thank you, Lonnie.” She leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek.

The bodyguards, Erich, and Yomatta exited, leaving Lonnie standing in the center of the room. She turned and went in search of a bed.

Five hours later, Niamh shook Lonnie awake.

“Dress up. Our ride awaits us.”

Lonnie rolled to alertness, feeling the last two days of activity weighing heavily on her limbs. From her backpack, she pulled out clothing and equipment civilians normally don’t wear. That’s not to say that the micro recorders and chips to sense weather and the location of a person weren’t part of normal civilian wear but also wasn’t from HQ’s design. Lonnie heard that many of the undercover operation teams had deeply planted microchips in their body to prevent an agent from becoming unmanageable or rogue, but as observers, they had nothing that invasive. If that were part of the employment, Lonnie would never have signed up.

As they clambered onto the shuttle, Cari chuckled at Lonnie’s fatigue. “Take a nap. It’ll take a while to get to our destination.”

“You don’t have to offer a second time,” Lonnie murmured. She reclined her seat and promptly fell asleep.

Chapter 13

A Failed Coup In The Making

“Major Daden.”

The tall and heavily built Cromo turned around slowly. Since he no longer worked in the field, he found no reason to stay in shape. He rested his hand on his belly casually, while his fingers felt for the small weapon looking like a button.

“Yes.”

“Supervisor Herker is available. Please step this way.”

Daden’s lips curled into a smile of contempt. He had been looking over the defenses of the academy for training Observers since he accepted the position. His mentor was slowly taking over departments and putting them under the control of people

that were loyal to him. Daden saw Observers as cowards and therefore fodder for the more serious battles in intelligence.

Herker was looking out over the grounds of the academy that he and others had nurtured and protected from those like Field Marshal Meka, the new head of intelligence for the United Planets of the Megelan Gathering. His appointment was a surprise to everyone since he didn't believe that compromises resolved differences. He felt might was right and the military solution was the only way to end differences with the winner takes all.

Superintendent Herker turned as soon as he heard Daden enter the room. There was no purpose in playing power games with Meka's agent. Daden's sneer was brief, but it merely confirmed his suspicion. The day Herker met Meka he knew the UPMG was in trouble when they hired him, and he brought in his group of disciples.

"Good morning, Major Daden."

"Superintendent Herker." He didn't bother to hide his contempt this time.

"I can't read minds, Major. You'll have to tell me why you asked for a visit."

"I'm relieving you of your position."

"Under whose..." Herker collapsed paralyzed to the floor.

"You no longer matter, but I need your access."

Herker could not move any facial muscles, which meant Daden missed what would have been a triumphant smile. All the records of the academy's past and present students had been removed from the database with a secondary one set up the day Meka stepped into his new position. Meka didn't waste time in forcing all intelligence agents to have chip implants so they wouldn't go rogue. Those on the committee reluctantly agreed, using the excuse it was to prevent losing an agent behind the enemy lines. It was when Meka demanded that the Observers, a civilian group, be moved under the intelligence wing that the committee balked. But it was only a matter of time before Meka had them under his direction.

Daden dragged Herker into a standing position and posed him in front of the scanner. It wouldn't set off a visible alarm, only confirm with the staff what they all suspected was coming, a total sell-out of the one neutral organization that was designed

to be unobtrusive. The moment Daden hit the scan, unbeknownst to him, alarms went out to the committee to scatter and if anyone was left on campus, Herker would be surprised.

Herker was dropped to the ground as Daden waited for a response.

“Come on you pile of dung,” he told the screen. “Ah.” Herker could hear in his own voice the command, “Send copies of all files and folders to High Commander of the Intelligence Forces, Meka.” Then mimicking Daden’s voice added, “When finished, purge all records. This is an emergency. No one is to leave the premises. I, Major Daden, am now in charge of all operations and no one is to leave without my express permission. All communications are closed.”

He waited until the transmissions were complete. Herker heard a small grunt and then he could feel himself dragged to the door. The door did not automatically open. “This is Major Daden. I command the door to open.” Nothing happened.

“Open the door!” he roared.

Herker laughed to himself. Not only was the building locked up tight, but any further use of a weapon would be neutralized as well as the user. He wondered if the other intelligence departments would take this as an opportunity to rise up against Meka.

Chapter 14

A Small Operation

It was the sudden change of altitude that woke Lonnie, and it came with a combined sickening feeling in the pit of her stomach and her gasping for air. The safety harness had automatically enveloped her, securing her from being tossed onto the deck.

Jenny was piloting and from the bantering going on it was an expected rough ride to wherever they were going.

“Are you going to barf?” Niamh asked. “If you even feel a little bit like it...” she turned and pulled out a bag, “this is the place for it. The air currents are rough around here. That makes it difficult for us to be followed without our knowing about it. The other ship would be setting off all kinds of blips on our radar.”

Lonnie took the bag with one hand and with the other touched a pressure point on each leg. Her stomach settled. Blinking away sleepiness, she studied her monitor of the view below them.

“Farmland. Don’t farmers get suspicious about having a private residence in their backyard that receives a lot of visitors?”

“Most of the farmers are retired operatives. Helps keep the area free from nosy people.”

“How many will be joining us?” Lonnie asked.

“Just us. Two groups of Ghosts had their covers compromised, and then, there’s the attacks on you that HQ hasn’t uncovered. Until they find the leak and figure out who initiated the attack on you, they want us kept separate from the others.”

Lonnie nodded, thinking about her reaction to the catperson’s attack.

“It was good that you let those around you handle your attacker,” Niamh said, reading her frown. “If you had displayed any type of skills, someone watching you may have used that to confirm that you should be watched closer.”

“It wasn’t an act,” Lonnie confessed. “For all those classes I take with Crackle, I still froze when I was physically attacked.”

“It’s not the same thing to practice moves to ward off physical attacks and to actually be in the moment of a personal attack.”

“Well, Crackle has been drumming in my self-defense skills since.”

“I hope that’s not going to compromise your cover,” Niamh said.

“Depends on who’s looking at me and from what level of information. I’m still part of *Earl Gray’s* emergency response team.”

“So just what does Crackle teach you?”

“Nothing that would red flag me as an operative, but it would if you were a pirate.”

“We’ll need to reevaluate your standing.”

“Why now? It never came up for years I’ve been involved with the ship’s emergency response team.”

“Because HQ has been infiltrated and I’m getting bad vibes from people that should be trustworthy. I’m worried someone is implanting Nano cells in our leaders.”

“I don’t think it’s that. There are all sorts of body scanners that can pick up that stuff, and from what we go through, I’m sure HQ’s is tougher.” Lonnie tapped her screen to get a closer view of their heading. They were skimming close to the ground. “Is that our destination?”

A red dot was blinking on the monitor.

An alarm light went off, and Jenny veered to the left, following another road away from their heading. Their speed decreased as they moved through a forest and then down a deserted road.

“Site not secured. We may have been spotted. Pack up quickly,” Cari called out.

“What’s going on?” Niamh asked, quickly pulling out emergency supplies and their hiking equipment.

“Unauthorized ship in the compound where we were headed,” Jenny said as she ran past them to the exit hatch. “Let’s get, y’all. I have the ship on autopilot and it will only wait a few minutes for us to jump out before increasing speed and heading on a new course.”

They tossed out their packs from the moving vehicle, jumped, and rolled onto the ground, running back to pick up their supplies, then disappearing into the brush. Cari led the way back to the training camp.

“Why are we heading back?” Lonnie asked as she jogged close to Cari’s heels.

“I want to know what’s going on. I picked this place because it was supposed to be vacant.”

“What’s wrong?” Niamh asked.

“It was a Black Ops ship ID,” Jenny said.

“Then why are we going to spy on them?” Lonnie asked nervously. Tackling a black ops group was nowhere in her skill level.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. If it’s them, then they have the exits and entrances covered,” Jenny echoed her feelings.

Niamh nodded her head in agreement.

Cari stopped in her tracks and the others stopped with her. “You are all right. We did our part. We observed an unauthorized ship in a restricted area. Come on. What was I thinking? No way are we going to infiltrate anybody’s special ops teams. Let’s head back to the town we passed. I want to see what’s going on there. Usually, when it’s an official visit, they log in there at HQ’s small office.”

“I didn’t log us in,” Jenny reported.

“You didn’t?” Cari asked surprised.

“I forgot. This is the first time we’ve been to one of these remote training facilities without someone from HQ escorting us.”

“First time we’re on our own and we smell out trouble.” Niamh shook her head.

It took them two hours to reach the town. The four circled the town, suspicious of the lack of life. It was just after sundown. There should at least be lights in the homes clustered around the small shops.

Using hand signals to avoid the sound monitors along the road, Cari signaled they needed to regroup further away from the town. Tired, Niamh stumbled in the dark, and crashed into Jenny. Both women lay still, catching their breath.

“I think I hurt my ankle,” Niamh whispered.

Lonnie snapped on a night light and pulled out her first aid kit. The scanner showed she had a small fracture.

“Lose rocks are bad on an ankle especially when someone falls on it,” Jenny said. “Why don’t you two go on, and she and I will wait here for your return?”

“Don’t you have a bone mender?” Cari asked Jenny.

“Yes, but it’s not recommended to stress the repaired bone so soon after repair. I can wrap it, but we’ll have to go slow.”

“Make up your minds quick,” Lonnie told Cari.

“Either of you know how to create a safe hole?” Cari asked.

“No,” Jenny and Niamh answered.

“Then Jenny, you go with Lonnie, and I’ll stay with Niamh. Don’t come back for us. We’ll meet at the mountain lodge or get word to you.”

“Let’s go,” urged Lonnie. It was not just her stomach that was roiling, but the hairs on her arms and back of her neck were rising. They needed to get out of that area now.

“Right,” Jenny told Lonnie.

Lonnie set off at a trot and led them off the road at the first chance she had. They were crossing someone’s field.

“There’s a No Trespassing sign and it had a pretty convincing face warning us off,” Jenny grumbled as her feet grew heavy from the mud on her boots.

“We need to call HQ. There’s usually a telecom junction box just outside of a village or town, or somewhere between the farms. It’ll prevent anyone from tracing the call.”

“Oh, right. That was the third class on what to do if you’re stranded in enemy territory,” Jenny joked.

Lonnie suddenly headed toward the runoff ditch, dragging Jenny with her. Unfortunately, it had ankle deep mud, and in the dark with night vision goggles it looked ominous.

Lonnie signed to Jenny she spotted a parked hopper. Leaning on the muddied sides of the ditch, Lonnie cautiously looked at the junction box, zooming her NV goggles for a close up.

Jenny was peering over the ridge, pointing her scanner at the site for a passive read. They watched the person working on the box.

Lonnie sighed to Jenny that he was talking to someone. From Jenny’s pack Lonnie pulled out a listening device.

“....what about the outgoing calls on the green cell?.... I can destroy it or remove it.... No, I don’t have a replacement. I told you I needed my bag. Turnbl doesn’t carry everything. He travels too light... Just give me a yes or no. I’ve been out here too long already.”

Whatever the order was, he completed his job quickly, packed up his tools, and left in his hopper. The small craft started forward, scattering small bits of debris, and

leaving a clear path along the ground, until it hopped over the fence and onto the road they were just on.

“It’s clear of any monitoring devices,” Jenny reported.

“Did you happen to check the ditch we’re in?”

“Yes. You don’t want to hear what I found but it isn’t something that’ll kill us.”

“I guess they’re not expecting much resistance, but still...” Lonnie looked at the junction box. “This doesn’t have the feel of a practice session.”

“I hear you.” Jenny glanced at her. “It’s now or never.”

Lonnie nodded. “Keep watch while I check that box.” Lonnie sprinted to the box, sweeping the area with her sensor and Jenny right behind her.

The box was a mass of smashed switches.

“I can’t believe he just destroyed the whole thing.”

“No. That’s a box on top of a box. Lift it and check underneath,” Jenny said.

Lonnie checked around the box. “He’s got it rigged tapping into calls.”

“You know how to fix that?”

“Yes. It’s going to take a few moments. Good thing it’s dark.”

Fingers used to pluck strings on a musical instrument gently moved the filaments. Jenny shrugged off her pack, and between glancing around, rummaged in her pack.

“Try this. My latest spy toy purchase.”

Lonnie studied the SmartBox for communications. She rested it against the original junction box and two LED lights lit up. One steady green showed a good connection and the second flickered amber, indicating packets were being passed.

Carefully, Lonnie tapped a new number for their handler. When the connection was made, she conferenced in the connections from the box. She received a go from the recipient.

“You can remove the box and the connection will remain,” Jenny told her.

“Okay.” Lonnie added her own mobile to the conversations. She wanted to know what was going on. Unlatching Jenny’s box she moved her com piece to her ear, and while both women hurried back into the forest, Lonnie shifted her attention from one conversation to another.

Jenny took up the lead, guiding a distracted Lonnie to where she could call for another shuttle.

“So, what’s doing?” Jenny whispered.

“There’s five calls on the line. Apparently, the town has been taken over. The traitors involved are holding everyone in one of the underground shelters. They have someone from inside helping. I don’t know if our handler has picked up on what all is happening here, but he said there’s an important meeting that’s going to take place at this site.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow noon. We would have gone by that time. Maybe Cari got a look at who had reserved it after us.”

“She didn’t reserve it. The idea was to meet somewhere no one knew, so we could compare notes on the Ghost Squads’ missing members and what my investigations found. Which is like we guessed, her fellow team members are working on bringing her back, without involving HQ, who’s responsible for her disappearance in the first place.”

They heard wind displacement. They quickly moved into the brush and were flat on the ground when a hopper sped by.

“Did you see who was in there?”

“Yeah. The thing is, we’re not trained to do rescue operations. If this is a special ops group, we have a 99% disadvantage.”

“Only?” Jenny asked.

“Against superior skilled adversaries, surprise does have a small advantage,” Lonnie said.

“So...”

“I think everyone’s best chance is for us to get to where we can contact our handler directly without worrying about being picked up.”

“Agreed.”

“We need a hopper.”

It was hours later, close to midnight, before they found a farm. The residents were gone.

“No one’s home,” Lonnie confirmed. “There’s sensors around the house and barn but nothing around the dilapidated shed.”

The two poked their heads in the shed and found as expected the family hopper, disabled.

They must have moved the occupants in a van. Can you get this going? It’s been deactivated.”

“I can hotwire any old hopper. Give me a few.” Jenny slid her pack off her back and pulled out her tools.

“While you do that, I’m going to check out what’s under those wraps.”

Lonnie lifted the tarp and peeked under. “Good gods!” Lonnie whispered excitedly.

Jenny quickly rushed to her side.

“Oh, wow!” Jenny breathed reverently. “*This* is what we’re going to use. It’s a beaut!” She quickly moved to see if it was useable. “Someone removed the guicell but...” She reached under the driver’s seat and pulled a small box out. “Hm. Here we go. Backups for every cell a driver can replace.”

“Let’s get going. I’m getting that dreadful feeling again,” Lonnie said.

“It won’t start. It’s got an antitheft lock.”

Both heard more than one hopper in the distance. Lonnie went to the closed shed doors and peered out a crack. There were four sets of lights bumping along the road, taking a sharp turn on the driveway, and heading their way.

“They’re heading for here,” she whispered. She looked back at Jenny who signaled to swing the doors open. Instead, Lonnie ran to the vehicle and slid beside Jenny. “Let them open it up for us.”

“Get down. We don’t know what kind of fire power they’ll have or what protection this vehicle has.”

The doors were slid open and an agent both Jenny and Lonnie recognized from their training days looked around the building shining a light over the interior. Suddenly the lights for the shed came on and the vehicle Jenny and Lonnie were in started to hum.

“He said in the corner,” one of the men mentioned.

“I used to watch him work on that sportster. I always wanted one myself.” Gordon laughed. “Now I get his. Gods can you feel the power it gives off?”

“Now hold on, Gordy. The boss said he wants it.”

They didn’t go any further when Jenny opened up the throttle, zooming out the doors, and past the others standing around the hoppers.

“Oh gods,” Jenny whispered, and whipped the vehicle around back to the group that was standing around one person that was sagging between two men.

“I’ll try and grab him.” Lonnie picked up on what she was doing and prepared to jump out. Almond Vecen, one of their first teachers, lover of building sports cars, looked like he had been beaten up.

The group must have thought it was their own people because they were laughing as it sped toward them. They broke up and ran in different directions cursing the driver, whom they mistook for friends.

“I’m going to have to jump out. He’s down,” Lonnie told her.

“Blast it! I can’t just stop on a dot.”

Lonnie rolled out of the vehicle, and hit the hopper Vecen had arrived in, hard. A hand shook her to her senses.

“Get up,” a hoarse voice told her. “Red Vengeance is coming back.”

The screaming sound of air warned her that Jenny was going to come to a stop. It didn’t stop exactly in front of them. Both Vecen and Lonnie had to run out from cover to get to the vehicle. While Vecen struggled to get into the front seat, Lonnie dived into the small back seat area. Jenny jammed the accelerator forward.

“Hit the yellow button,” Vecen told her.

They accelerated with so much force that Lonnie was flattened against the back window. She could hear shots hitting the exterior of the vehicle. She prayed they would not get through.

“Go up. It can take it.”

“Where are we going?” Jenny asked.

“Not to any known places around here,” Vecen retorted.

“We sent out a communication to our handler. Do you think he would have gotten it by now?”

“I wouldn’t put too much faith in HQ right now. There was a takeover. All agents in the field are in danger. Our security has been breached.”

“Just how high can this thing go?” Jenny asked as they continued to climb.

“Not too high, okay. It’s really cramped back here,” Lonnie reminded them.

“They have our whole town and we’re all pros, even if we’re retired,” Vecen said.

They said they had an insider helping them.”

Vecen looked surprised. “Who?”

“They refer to him as JB.”

“That’s not him,” Vecen said. “It’s her.”

“No. He definitely said he.”

“You must have misheard.”

They were all quiet as Jenny kept hiding in the clouds and making headway to a place Vecen was guiding them.

“Right down there.”

“That’s the ocean. Does this swim too?”

“It’s everything.” Vecen patted the console. “Right now, we need to make sure no one gets to the offsite armory.”

They entered the water smoothly. Vecen took over control and guided the sportster.

What appeared to be a wall gave way to a tunnel, closing behind them. Red Vengeance rose to the surface slowly.

“Who all is here?” Lonnie asked. She held onto the sides as the small vehicle bobbed on the surface.

“No one. Security bots patrol it and keep it from being invaded.”

“How did we get in?”

“I’m one of the few people that has authorization.”

“Vecen,” Lonnie said. “We’re not alone.”

Another small sub was anchored at the dock. They stopped alongside the sub and Vecen slowly got out. Jenny was quickly out standing next to him.

“Stand away from him!”

Lonnie flattened herself on the floorboard.

“Both of you put your hands up in the air!”

“You better do as she says. She’ll kill us. That’s your JB.”

“You traitor, Vecen! You sold us out. Who are you?” JB demanded of Jenny.

“Ah, well, I’m a thief. I stole this sportster and picked him up. And he said... You know, this is not my day. I’m just a passenger,” Jenny pleaded.

“Sure, you are. You’re one of those creeps that took over our town.”

“You’re the traitor,” Vecen accused.

“Right,” the woman answered. “She’s more than a car thief, Vecen, otherwise you wouldn’t be wasting time lying. What happened? Did your buddies get greedy and decide to steal your sportster? You knew Gordy’s the type to want what others have and steal it under the guise of authority. Lie down flat. Both of you.”

“Jerrie?” a voice called.

“Out here Kem. I have two traitors.”

A young girl came running out of the building. “We must get out of here. An alarm is going off, and it started to close doors.”

“Well, Vecen, I would leave you here once the primary door closes, but I don’t trust you.”

The young girl spat at Vecen and moved to get by him to go to their sub. Vecen grabbed her ankle and would have had her around the neck except Lonnie shot him with a stunner from the car. She drew her long legs out of the sportster and pointed it at the woman holding one on her. It was a standoff.

“We don’t have time for this. You go your way, and we’ll go ours,” JB told Lonnie.

Jenny turned to look at Lonnie. “I can hear the alarms.”

“Go.”

Lonnie leaned down and picked up the incapacitated Vecen. “If what she says is true, no matter where we put him, he’s going to be dangerous.”

JB paused, entering her sub and turned to them. “You’re right not to trust him.” She looked at the young girl who was sitting and waiting impatiently in the sub.

“Undress him and place him in one of those suits.” She pointed to the side wall. “I’ll help. Hurry.”

Lonnie ran to the suit and pulled it off the rack. She had enough underwater experience to understand the setup.

Jenny and JB stripped the helpless Vecen. The three put him in the suit.

“Adjust the air to 4.2. That will keep him unconscious. He used to brag about his prowess underwater so I’m guessing he can take a lower air pressure than most.”

She dragged a small underwater pod over. “This is set to return to the surface in three hours. That should be enough time for HQ to be retaken by the older staff.”

She studied the two women and gave them a small smile. “How many people have seen you? You’re Observers, right?”

“Just you three,” Jenny said.

“Then get out of here now.”

The two looked at each other and then quickly returned to the Red Vengeance.

“Are you sure we’re picking the right side?” Jenny asked as she sent the craft underwater, following the small pod Vecen was in.

“I was getting weird feelings from Vecen. He didn’t seem the same as I remember. Did you notice he didn’t know what some of those buttons were for?”

“What do you mean?”

“Yellow in most vehicles is for booster, but in Red Vengeance it was switched to red.”

“I thought we went pretty fast.”

“It should have been like a shot out of a cannon. That was just a fast acceleration.”

“You’re going to have to have a better explanation than that.”

“He didn’t remind me of Vecen except his face.”

“What about the woman?”

“She’s not someone I know, but the girl... I remember her when she was younger. She was Vecen’s granddaughter. Strange to see her spitting at him when those two adored each other.”

“I didn’t pick up on that. I must be slipping.”

“Let’s take this further into the ocean before we break the surface. I want to be sure that...”

“Too late. We’ve been picked up.”

“By whom?” Lonnie looked over the monitor not understanding what she was reading.

“It’s official. They have control.”

“Can we bust out of here?”

“Nope.” Jenny tapped the dial that went to no power.

“This is not my version of a two-week vacation.”

When they surfaced, they waited as a crane picked up the sportster and deposited it on deck.

They were surrounded by drawn weapons.

“Stand down!” a familiar voice hollered. “We’ve been looking everywhere for you two.” Irvi, their handler came barging through the circle, grabbing two of the crew’s hats handing it to the two women. “Cover up, gals. We rescued your other two friends. Come on. We need to get you to cover. All that dirt on your face helps keep you from being recognized but still hide behind those hats. I don’t want to take any more chances.” He hustled them down metal stairs into the belly of the huge ship.

“Are you going to pick up Vecen in the small water pod?”

“He’s out there?”

“Yeah. There’s also a woman, JB, and Vecen’s granddaughter.”

“Vecen was killed in action.”

“So, that wasn’t him?”

“I don’t know who he is. The navy will pick him up. You said two others?”

“His granddaughter...”

“He’s never had a granddaughter.”

“Sure, he did. He introduced her to a few of us the night after our graduation. He said he was on his way home for a vacation and his granddaughter was there to make sure he got home with no side trips.”

“Lonnie, no matter what he said, he had no granddaughter. He never married and was an orphan—he had no family.”

Lonnie thought about it. “Irvi, she looks like him.”

Jenny nodded. “Yep. She does have the same facial features.”

Irvi shook his head mystified. “I don’t know what to tell you except, Vecen’s only love was his hobby, and when he was going to retire, he planned on devoting himself to building Red Vengeance.”

“You know, racers have second families and lovers along their circuit,” Lonnie mentioned.

“Why is this bothering you?” Jenny asked.

“Because, when they were together, there was a bond, and it wasn’t that of a pedophile. They were truly fond of each other.”

“That could be.” Irvi stopped in front of a cabin and rapped on it. “What’s so important about this?”

Cari opened the door.

“My gods, you’re both all right!”

They all gave hugs.

“Where’s Niamh?” Lonnie asked.

“She’s in sickbay arguing with the medic. We were picked up by Gordon. You remember him?”

“Yeah, one of our teachers,” Lonnie said.

“Well, it wasn’t really him. I had him as my language coach. This Gordon couldn’t speak any of the languages he taught. Niamh punched him and the guy in the front seat elbowed her right over the eye. That put us both under guard. Seems there is a run-on people having faces of our instructors. Niamh stayed unconscious while they

argued about what to do with us. So, we were sent off somewhere and as soon as we arrive, presto, another group is there and takes *them* captive.”

“I got a very cryptic phone message from a townie. We were scrambling for our security when another call came piggy backed onto a secure line. By then everyone was on full alert,” Irvi explained.

“I’m glad we all got out alive.”

“Doesn’t this bother any of you? We have people looking like *our* teachers and it just happens that various groups from our school are disappearing.”

“We’re looking into it, Lonnie,” Irvi said impatiently. “Just drop it for now. This place isn’t all that secure.”

Lonnie folded her arms looking annoyed.

“You guys stay out of sight.” Irvi turned and left.

“Touchy, no? *We* should be plenty nervous. So, how about you start this story from the time you left us?” Cari asked.

The two sat on her bunk and began their story. By the time they were finished Niamh was back with her head bandaged. Another round of hugs was given.

“We’re being flown to Aquitine. Irvi confirmed our reservations for a climb up Mt. Oboto. I hope you all are up to it because we need to make this cover look good. Are you two going to wash your faces?”

Chapter 15

End Of A Memorable Vacation

Lonnie arrived on board *Earl Gray* a few hours before launch. As she walked along the corridor to the purser’s desk where she would get her cabin number and whatever news she needed to hear, she was looking around her at the passengers that were openly staring at her. One of them she recognized as being part of her fan-based regulars. Lonnie nodded to her and received a blush in return. That was a first.

“Hi, Lonnie. Jen thought you would miss the launch, but she’s new. Doesn’t know you always arrive a few hours before departure.” Crackle handed Lonnie her room

number, and a packet that the crew received on boarding. “You’ve been upped to the suites, darlin’.” She grinned as Lonnie’s face broke out into a smile at the cabin number.

“Must be a no show,” Lonnie told her. “I noticed you’ve been promoted.”

“Yep. The boss of all the pursers. And no, everyone that’s booked is on board. You’re billed as the number one show. Your cabin neighbor is Kali, *the* diva. We’ve never had big stars aboard,” she revealed teasingly.

“Sure, you have. For five months. Do you think the crew can handle it?”

“We’ll see. We picked up forty new crew members for the upper decks. Captain gave a real strong warning to everyone.” Crackle gave a casual look around them and continued in a lower voice. “He replaced everyone that didn’t pass muster on the first part of the trip, like the security personnel that let the drugs on board.”

“That is good to hear. I’m glad to see that you and Gish are still here. See you around.” Lonnie turned and moved through the crowded lobby.

Using her elbow, she pushed the cabin door open. The first thing she noticed was the strong floral scent that engulfed her as soon as the door opened. Flower arrangements covered all flat surfaces. Puzzled, she lifted a name tag. It had - To: Diva Kali, Love Lu. Lonnie read a few of the others and they too were addressed to Kali.

“Hi. I thought I would share, since it was both of us that earned them,” Kali’s voice explained.

Lonnie looked at the adjoining cabin door not realizing it had opened. The first thing she wanted to ask was if she could throw them away, instead she said, “Hi. Did you have a nice vacation?”

“It wasn’t a vacation for me, but it was okay.”

“All work and no play, not good for the artistic soul,” Lonnie told her seriously.

“I’m ambitious. I want to get back to the top by the end of this year,” she explained. “But I did take *some* time off. I had a date,” she laughed humorously.

“Did you enjoy yourself?” Lonnie asked. Something was different about Kali.

Kali shrugged her shoulders. That didn’t tell Lonnie anything.

“It wasn’t unpleasant. Well, I’ll let you settle in. We have a rehearsal in an hour.”

* * *

Andres was speaking to the musicians when she entered the hall. Lonnie had downloaded Erich's schedule and noted that the stomp and clog was included for their upcoming port stop, Solvora. Solvora was a farming community, passionate about their dances. Their favorite style of dance was along the line of reels, jigs, and clogging.

Andres spotted Lonnie when she walked into the stage area and gave her a nod. She quickly changed into her dance shoes. Lonnie had found that the sound and feel of the floor changed from time to time and she liked to keep up with it. Behind her she heard steps echoing her test, letting her know that Kali had arrived. Both women moved around the stage wordlessly.

Lonnie completed her round and stopped to take a sip of water. Her eyes followed Kali as she moved. Kali had changed. She was still slender, and her movements remained graceful and elegant.

Elegant? Was that the change? No. It was the nervous energy she had when they first met. It was missing. Or was it a more mature person she was looking at?

If Kali was aware that she was being studied, she gave no indication. When Kali finished getting ready, they went to speak with Andres.

"So," he began, "according to the schedule we'll be doing the usual ship performances and work on original material for the shows planetside."

"What do you mean the usual?" Kali asked, frowning.

"Some of Lonnie's style and some that you like..."

Kali was about to say something, but Andres held up his hand. "Most of the passengers that come to see you two dance, booked a year in advance as Lonnie's fans, and if this is going to be her last year, I think they deserve to see her doing what they signed up for."

"If this is the last," Lonnie corrected him. "It all depends on if I stick it out as your partner for the duration of the cruise," she informed Kali smiling. Kali's expression was unreadable. "That is, unless you plan on dumping me for a younger and more agile type?" she teased, now unsure of just what she was picking up from Kali. She had thought they were working well together.

“I noticed you have Solvoraian dances in our selections,” Kali mentioned, changing the subject.

“How long did it take you to learn them?” Andres asked Lonnie, grinning at something he saw.

“What’s so funny?” Kali demanded when Lonnie snickered as if she picked up on it too.

“If you don’t clog to their liking, they’ll pull you off stage and get up there themselves.” Lonnie shook her head in amusement at the thought of anyone attempting to pull Kali off stage.

“Oh. Well, let’s get to it then,” she told them brusquely.

After one hour of practicing for the show that night, Andres moved them on to music for the Solvoraian dances. Lonnie did two for Kali, leaving the reels for later, and then slowed them down so Kali could see what her feet and hands were doing.

As they packed up their equipment, Lonnie noticed that Yomatta was missing. “Where’s Yomatta?”

“Busy,” Kali answered briskly to end any more questions along that line.

“What about the crowds? I can already see them gathering on the outside of the stage door?”

“I want to be accessible to my fans.” Kali glanced at her briefly, then returned her attention to her reflection, concerned with adjusting her clothes and hair.

“I see.” Lonnie was disappointed.

“Do you want to leave before me?”

“No. I’ll wait until you move the crowd.” Lonnie smiled. She watched as Kali in diva mode glided out the door. Voices lifted, and excitement filled the corridor as she waded through them, pausing to give autographs and smiles for their cameras.

Lonnie decided to climb the stairs and leave through one of the audience’s exits. She found a ship com and called Gish. Gish didn’t answer but L’ina did. Gish was booked for the day.

When Lonnie entered her quarters, she found all the flower arrangements had been removed but two. They were from the captain, and the head of security and his spouse, congratulating her and Kali for their success and a big welcome back.

She dumped her clothing in the autocleaner, the flowers in the trash and decided she needed a nap.

* * * Brrup!

Lonnie woke startled. “Alarm off!” she ordered. “Gads I didn’t realize I was so tired,” she muttered. Rolling out of bed she held onto the bulkhead for a moment. Yawning widely, she stared at the costumes hanging in her closet.

“Okay, Lonnie, get yourself in gear,” she encouraged. Lonnie pulled her costumes from the rack and packed the ones she would need in her cart. As she was stepping out of her quarters, she was joined by Diva Maxine. Lonnie took the crew’s elevator as she usually did.

“Lonnie?”

“Yes?”

“Why are we taking this elevator?”

“Because I always take it.”

“It’s not because of my fans?”

“That too. They’re slowing us down. We need to start on time. If you want to be among them, I can start with a solo,” she offered.

“No. I just...thought maybe, since this isn’t your thing...”

“Kali, I’m a professional. It may seem a strange concept to you that a person who prefers to perform in small groups or for friends considers herself professional, but I do. I also don’t believe that my fans own my life. I share my love of dance with them, not my personal life or my down time.”

The elevator door chose that moment to open, and it was to a pushing crowd with pictures of Kali waving at her to be autographed. Lonnie didn’t hesitate to press the security button on the elevator door. Kali maintained her calm exterior as those behind the front of the line pushed and shoved to get a chance to see her. The front of the line was moved into the elevator with them.

Maltieani and some of his staff appeared, clearing a path for the two women. “I noticed an unusual amount of people had gathered,” he mentioned to Lonnie softly.

“Thought we should take some precautions.”

“Thanks,” she mouthed.

Their first three dances were met with mixed reactions and by the time they had finished their last set many of the fans were shouting for what they termed ‘dirty dancing’.

Andres tapped his baton on the music stand for attention. Kali glanced at him and nodded, and Lonnie took up her position next to Kali. They gave a short version of one of their flamenco dances that brought the galaxy’s citizens’ attention to them. There was no heat, just excellent foot work.

Kali was going to give them another, but Lonnie had returned to the dressing room and was packing away her costumes.

“What are you doing? We’ve got them! Listen to them!”

“Kali, we’ve got five months to entertain them. I don’t want to try and put it all in one night. Our scheduled time is up. The musicians’ time is up. I asked for security to...”

“I don’t want security!” she informed Lonnie furiously.

“Then I’ll use their services. I may get bashed for having the nerve to end the program on time,” Lonnie told her in a light tone. She moved to the exit with the autocart behind her.

There was a crowd but this time it was more manageable as Maltieani and his staff watched. The few that asked for Lonnie’s autograph were on the outskirts of the group, and she obliged them.

She dumped her gear and changed to her workout clothes. In the crew’s elevator she was joined by Crackle, also dressed for a workout.

“Hey, dancing princess. Want to partner?”

“What do you have in mind?”

“I learned a new throw in Ju Situ. An old family friend showed it to me,” she told her mockingly.

“That means you’ve been on the docks taking on whoever is foolish enough to think you’re a pushover,” Lonnie returned.

“That’s right. I got beat a few times, but I did come away with some tricks.”

“I think I like my way better – let someone else learn them and then teach me.”

The two worked out and then met in the sparing square. A few crew members rested on the side, exchanging bets. For the seven years that Lonnie knew Crackle, she had been one of Crackle’s students, learning not just the discipline of katas, but also the philosophy of body, breath, and spirit. It was the personal attack against her that made Lonnie realize that she needed more than simple repetition to be able to defend herself.

After taking a round house kick that nearly knocked the wind out of her, Lonnie rolled and bounced up, then avoided Crackle’s kicks by dancing out of range.

“Hey. You can’t keep backing up,” Crackle objected.

“This is my way.” Lonnie grinned, and then suddenly reaching in with a kick to her chest, knocked Crackle onto her back.

“Shall we call it a night?” Lonnie asked her prone teacher.

“Yeah. I need a massage now.”

Lonnie’s eyes lit up. “So do I.”

Following a quick shower and change, Lonnie rang Gish’s extension.

Lonnie didn’t say anything when she smelled the scent of Kali on the massage table. Instead, she closed her eyes and let Gish relax her. When she finished, Lonnie swung her legs off the table and studied Gish.

“Tired?” Lonnie asked.

“Yeah. I asked for tomorrow off. Everyone wants a massage from the diva’s masseuse, including the diva.”

“Listen, if it’s getting to you, I can go to someone else.”

“No, no. I’m just tired today. I’m going to take fewer customers. I have to pace myself is all. That crazy meter informed me I’m way over my limit and this is not even a week into the cruise.”

Lonnie reached to touch Gish’s cheek and then leaned forward to kiss her gently. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Gish's hand reached to cover Lonnie's that was cupping her cheek. "You hang in there. I still have credits riding on this," she teased.

"Yeah." Lonnie sighed deeply. "And I signed an agreement." She opened the door to the massage room and nearly bumped into a passenger.

"You are looking for someone?" Lonnie asked, surprised.

"No. I mean yes, the masseuse." "For what?" Gish asked.

"A massage!"

"Call for an appointment with the scheduling desk."

"Oh, okay."

Gish waited for the middle-aged Turk to disappear down the corridor before she turned to inspect her door which had a sign that she was closed for the remainder of the day. "Life is a lot more complicated this tour, Lonnie. I sure hope we all survive it with our dignity intact."

Lonnie gave Gish a pat on her shoulder and headed back to her quarters. No one was in the corridor. Tiredly she entered her cabin, dropping her workout bag on deck. She collapsed onto the couch and turned on the screen. She dialed up a comedy. A soft knock on the adjoining door brought a tired sigh.

"If you can't open it, go away," she said.

The door opened and Kali poked her head through. "Hi. I see you're still up. You like comedies?"

"Sometimes. Right now, I could use a laugh. What's going on?"

"Nothing. I finished my lessons and I'm too restless to sleep. Can I watch the movie with you?"

"Sure." She rose from the couch and offered it to Kali and then pulled a cushioned chair out for herself. "If I fall asleep and snore, don't wake me to tell me."

Lonnie watched the movie to its end. Kali made it halfway through. She didn't have the heart to wake her, so she simply put a cover over her and called Yomatta to let her know of Kali's whereabouts. It was only a few minutes later that Yomatta tapped on

Lonnie's door. She entered carrying a pillow. She checked on the softly snoring Kali and gently lifted her head and slipped the pillow under her.

"That's service," Lonnie told her and then turned to go to bed. She heard the door close as she was turning off the bed lamp. *She actually trusts us alone.*

Lonnie was not asleep for long when she heard someone moving around. "Light, low," she whispered. The lights came up, showing Kali moving into the toilet.

"Light off," she muttered and lay back down, turning her back to the doorway. She sighed, wondering why she couldn't sleep when she was so tired. Something flopped down next to her head and Lonnie turned over to see. Covers were pulled back and Kali slid into her bed and resumed her sleep, snoring softly. Soon Kali flung her arm over her and nuzzled her head into her shoulder.

She decided she was too tired to care and went to sleep.

Chapter 16

Too Close for Comfort

"Lonnie, one will not hurt you. Join me. We're celebrating! How many people get an invitation by an ambassador to dance for his family, friends, and dignitaries from around the galaxy?"

Lonnie took the glass reluctantly. Erich had already told her of the arrangement, and she didn't want to try and figure out why it took him this long to tell Kali.

"So, what do you think he would like to see us dance?" Kali asked. She stretched out on what was now her couch. Her robe revealed the outline of her body. On her feet were strange fuzzy foot coverings that had blinking eyes. Under normal circumstances Lonnie would have found them annoying, as they reflected off the low ceiling, but right now they were a welcome distraction. No matter how covered Kali was, Lonnie's imagination had her undressed down to her painted toenails.

Lonnie sighed and stared at her drink before taking a tentative sip. She rolled the contents over her tongue and swallowed.

Hmm. Not bad.

She settled back in her chair. “It’s his wedding anniversary,” she started. “We’ll dance something that will reignite their passion of the wedding bed.” She took another sip. There was no fire in the drink as it made its way down her throat.

Licorice. As a kid she liked the licorice candies the corner hawker sold.

“And what kind of dance would that be?” Kali asked, batting her eyes seductively.

Lonnie blinked at her a few times. *Wow. This stuff works fast.* Lonnie focused on Kali’s face, but her eyes strayed and ran the length of the reclining figure. Images of Kali and her on the couch played through her mind.

Kali got up from the couch and reached for the finished drink in Lonnie’s hand. She pulled Lonnie up with her other hand.

“Come on. How about something like this?” She stood with her back against Lonnie’s chest and her hand arranging one of Lonnie’s arms around her waist.

Lonnie shook her head, still having some wit about her. *No. That’s only going to get you and I in trouble.*

She stepped back and picked up her glass from the table. She walked into the small galley and deposited the glass in the cleaner. She had reached her limit of whatever was in the drink.

“Come on, Lonnie. Show me.” Kali pulled Lonnie back into her and tried to hum a dance.

“Oh, no. You hum and we won’t have anyone to dance for,” Lonnie chuckled. “Program, dance music. Play *Sunset Passions*.” It meant there would be distance between them while they danced.

The music started.

“Oh, no. Maybe that should be second or third. We start out with *Night Passions* to get their attention.” Kali held onto Lonnie’s hand, so she did not stray far. “Play.” The music restarted.

“*Testing the Waters* would get their attention,” Lonnie argued, not struggling. “Play.”

The music again restarted.

“Computer. Play *Love*. Come here,” Kali patted her hip.

Lonnie dutifully stepped beside her and held Kali as they moved to the dance. Hip to hip Lonnie breathed Kali's scent as they moved with steps neither had to work at. Both stopped thinking as the music played.

The next song was another guitar piece, "*Pounding Hearts*." Kali danced around her, and Lonnie watched her own part stationary. It was not as easy to keep her feelings for Kali disguised as her carefully constructed fences were being dismantled.

When the song ended both women stood facing each other silently studying the other. Kali's eyes were bright with her excitement. Lonnie's were dark with passion. There was no audience to act as chaperone, and Yomatta was with Andres, confirming arrangements for their next port stop. They were alone.

Lonnie dropped onto the couch and sullenly stared at the small table separating them. Kali plopped onto the couch near her. Lonnie's eyes couldn't help staring at Kali's hand that moved up to flick a strand of hair off her face. Lonnie gulped and leaned back against the couch, regretting the drink. She stared fixedly at Kali's moving lips, hearing nothing.

Lonnie felt a shake of her shoulder, and then she fell into darkness.

* * *

"Are you sure she's all right?" Kali's voice was worried.

"She'll be fine," Yomatta said quickly.

"Sure I'm all right," Lonnie mumbled.

"Make sure she takes this in an hour. I must go to another cabin. Upset stomachs. Zanmack. Seven stomachs they have. A disadvantage if you get zilwis." The doctor closed her case and rose from the couch. She handed Kali something. Lonnie was grateful she didn't hand it to Yomatta. The woman looked aggravated about something. There went the goodwill Yomatta had started to show her, Lonnie thought.

"Zilwis...stomach flu?" Lonnie asked, struggling to sit up. A piercing stab of pain went through her head, taking her breath away. She grabbed her head and fell back onto the couch.

"Lie back down. Doc said at least for another hour. I didn't realize you would get sick on Underground Bimo." Kali knelt near her, looking upset.

“What’s that?” Lonnie covered her eyes, feeling the light as tiny pins of pain in her head.

“It’s liquor from Avente. One of my dancing partners introduced me to it.”

“I’ll make sure to not order anything with ‘underground’ in its name,” she mumbled.

“I’m really sorry, Lonnie. I wasn’t thinking.”

“Oh, come on now. You didn’t get her sick purposely,” Yomatta objected.

“Yomatta, please. Leave us. We’re both perfectly fine,” Kali told her firmly.

Lonnie peered at her under her palm. “What else was in that drink?” The adjoining door closed behind Yomatta.

“Oozzo.”

“I’m allergic to that,” Lonnie said.

“I now know. I...I’m really sorry,” she informed her softly and sincerely.

“You already said that,” she told her wearily. “What did she give you for me?”

“Powder for your headache. She gave you something to neutralize the effects of the drink and didn’t want to give you this at the same time. She wants you to drink it down with plenty of water.” Kali clamped her jaw shut to stop her chattering.

Lonnie wanted to ask her where she got the liquor bottle but was too drowsy. Instead, she fell asleep, feeling a cool towel cover her eyes and a warm hand holding hers.

Chapter 17

Dreams Come True

Lonnie was sitting in the hot tub, steaming out the rest of the Oozzo in her system when she heard the door open. Without opening her eyes, she knew who had come to sit next to her.

“You look like you have a hangover. How are you doing?” Gish asked.

“Like I have a hangover,” she returned. “Good morning.”

“No, it isn’t. We’re down three masseuses due to the stomach flu and this was my day off.”

“Hm.”

“How’s your partner?” Gish asked.

Lonnie turned her head to look at her. “Why?”

“I heard Viscount Bermuda is interested in her and has been wooing her,” she grinned.

Lonnie let out an exasperated snort. “Is that a joke to cheer me up? Why does he bother to wed when he only stays married for a year?”

“Maybe he likes the chase and the weddings.”

“So, did you get an invitation to Hebr Mo’lu’s anniversary dinner? I know you three have a thing going.”

“Right,” she laughed heartily, shaking her head. “You know better than to believe ship’s chatter from jealous crew. It’s work.”

Her yearly invitation to visit the ambassador of the planet Tuloc at their summer home when *Earl Gray* was in the neighborhood was known by everyone with the crew. It made her curious about Gish’s connection to the planet that HQ was interested in enough to embed a trained Observer, out of her passive role, to pose as an interested person to buy land there. Even with the return of HQs seasoned officers that were faithful to its original philosophy of the Observers role, Lonnie’s more active role could take her out of the protection of an Observer to gather firsthand information on an otherwise closed planet was to continue. The action behind the visit was too far advanced to discontinue without putting Lonnie’s life and others behind the scenes in danger. HQ still wanted to know what and who was involved with the ruling party of Abrazan. Mo’lu, reputed to be the ruler of the planet, was throwing an important party that was to be attended by many dignitaries and people which HQ was interested in.

How and why, Lonnie’s was interested in moving there, interested Mo’lu enough to invite Lonnie for two days to visit and to attend his party, as a paid performer and interested in becoming a citizen and buying land. Abrazan was showing interest in joining the planets that were engaged in free trade and space travel. There were rules to belong to the Committee of Planets and one of the primary rules was that their populations and citizens enjoyed freedom without a strict class system that prevented all citizens from enjoying what belonging to the Committee offered.

“I give them each a massage and they go off with each other. I could never figure out why they don’t just hire a regular masseuse since they like it so much but... who am I to complain?”

Lonnie hummed at the comment, thinking the reason was cultural and political.

“Mo asked me if I knew you,” Gish continued.

“Mo? As in Mo’lu? He wanted to know if I could dance?” Lonnie asked mildly, trying not to show she was interested. She had not thought of using Gish for information on the planet because Gish didn’t speak about any of her customers or about her personal life.

“Oh, he knows you can dance, and that was before the diva and you paired up,” she assured Lonnie.

“So?”

“He said a business associate asked him to consider allowing you to become a permanent resident on Tuloc so you can purchase a lot on Abrazan.” She paused and added, “Besides being ambassador, his family owns about half of the planet above and below the waterline.”

“So, the more references I can get the better my chances?”

“He was wondering why you want to live on Tuloc.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him I didn’t know your business. I referred him to your agent. Shari Sing, isn’t it? Why didn’t you ask me to put in a word for you?”

Just how much do you know about this deal and who told you about Shari Sing?

“Because I don’t use people unless they offer.”

“Thank you. That was something we both were curious about.”

Lonnie turned in her seat to study Gish.

Gish lifted a hand apologetically. “Abrazan is my home. Mo and Manda, his spouse, and I go way back. We don’t mingle socially,” she clarified. “Anyway, I wanted to travel, see the sights of the galaxy, and beyond. The only way for someone like me to do that was working on a cruise liner and they gave me the papers to do so.”

“So why bring this up to me?”

“Mo asked me what I thought of your character, and I think he was curious of just why you want permanent residence in his territory. Think of it as wanting to know who your new neighbor is and having the power to decide who it will be.”

“I understand the terms of owning property on Tuloc,” Lonnie assured her. “I have to live on Tuloc permanently. They have no absentee landowners, which means, I can’t be away from Tuloc more than a month per year.”

“So, you’re really planning on hanging up your dancing shoes?” She sounded disappointed. “You don’t mind giving up traveling or having everyone that visits you cleared by the visitors’ bureau? It’s not an open society, Lonnie.”

“It *seems* like I’ll be isolating myself but there is a referendum moving through the legal courts on Tuloc that will be less restrictive on visitors and residents regarding travel. I read it on a business journal for land investments.”

Gish was quiet. “Well, *they* certainly have a lot of open land that you like to experience,” she said slowly. “Do you know where you want your homestead?”

“Yes. A spread or parcel is available to me with a mountain, trails, and a river that I can raft on. I just need to be approved as an immigrant with intent to own land.”

“Immigrant owning land? Are you sure that’s what you’re buying into?”

“Yes. I intend on having that on paper and authenticated by two courts.”

“Who is offering you this?”

“It’s a fan who doesn’t want to leave this parcel of land to his family,” Lonnie answered readily.

“Can I ask who?”

“You can ask, but the seller wants discretion. When the deal is complete, I’ll tell you.”

“Just why is your dance agent getting involved in this?”

“Erich? He knows the ambassador. He said he would ask the ambassador to consider me for immigration and citizenship, the first step to purchase land.”

“What is the payment?”

Lonnie shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know what **they** have going. Between Erich Bettelheim and I, it’s my bonus payment for sticking it out with Kali for the ten month cruise, which hasn’t been too bad.”

“If you stuck it out with the likes of Madi Shamul as a partner, then you can with the likes of Diva Maxine.”

“Between the two, the diva is the hardest. I hate being recognized in public. No more uneventful days of being just another tourist,” she mocked.

“Dancing is so natural and a part of you, I find it difficult to believe you’re ready to stop,” Gish continued. “Are you sure that’s what you want to do?”

“I’ll still dance, just not for a living.”

“I guess it never occurred to me that you really want to end traveling because you always had places to visit when we arrived in port.”

“Everyone reaches a point when they want to retire from one occupation to take up another. My point is coming up. You know, I just may want to teach climbing, rafting, or hiking but not travel so far from home.”

Gish looked at her not convinced she was hearing right.

“Surely someone on your planet is interested in those types of sports?”

“Oh, I’m sure there are. It’s just that...” Gish’s voice trailed off. She looked down at her hands and continued in a soft voice. “You should learn more about the culture before you consider getting involved in land deals. There’s a price to pay that isn’t to be found in the small print on a contract or in a verbal agreement. Do you understand?”

“I’ll heed your warning.” She answered so softly, Gish needed to read her lips. Lonnie rose to dress. Gish’s overt concern was making her nervous.

“Are we still on for this afternoon?” Lonnie asked.

“Yes.”

“How much is riding on me not finishing this gig out?”

Gish winched.

“Ah. That much?”

Gish nodded. “I’m worried that someone is going to interfere with the natural run of things.”

Lonnie nodded. “Have you ever heard of anyone adding Oozzo to Underground Bimo?”

Gish shook her head. “Oozzo is a stimulant with toxic properties, isn’t it? I thought Underground Bimo was a drug free drink.”

“I checked out the label’s contents, and it didn’t say Oozzo anywhere.”

“I didn’t think you were a drinker. So, you’re allergic to it?” she guessed. “I’m not a drinker. I’ll see you later.”

* * *

After rehearsal Andres stayed to referee the duo’s disagreement on what to dance at the wedding anniversary.

“This is a wedding anniversary party so something to rekindle the heat of the wedding night would be right. Though,” he thought for a few moments, “it would be a good idea to have *stridency* in there. It’s a new style coming out and right up Kali’s alley, and with Lonnie’s touch it could bring it up a notch. If you dance it for the ambassador, think of all the dignitaries that could say they saw it first.”

Lonnie listened to the names that would be at the celebration and who they represented, not hearing anyone that provoked undue attention. She would provide HQ with who was there and who grouped with whom.

“Good thinking, Andres,” Lonnie absently told him as he waved at the two dancers and left.

“Just what are you going to do on your two days off?” Kali asked as they walked back to their quarters.

“For this stop, I usually see what the tourist desk has to offer. You want to come?” she teased.

“Eh, no thank you. My babysitter has strict orders to not let me share your shore leaves unless she comes along, and I really don’t want that. Can you just hear her squeals when we sail over a rock in a tiny little boat?”

Lonnie’s eyes brightened at the thought, and both chuckled.

* * *

The ambassador's shuttle was fast, heavy in luxury, and had plenty of room for the hired entertainment. When they arrived at the mansion, the celebration was in full swing. Wandering around was not permitted for hired help. The band and dancers were given a place to wait until they were called while Gish had been escorted elsewhere. Lonnie caught sight of some of those in attendance as they were ushered into their waiting area. Many of those attending she recognized from the society pages of 'who's who'. It was something she liked to keep up on just in case she had the misfortune of sharing a transportation vehicle with one who considered Lonnie below his or her station to acknowledge. A lesson she learned in her early years as an ambassador's courier.

An hour went by and still no summons to perform. Lonnie found a door to a balcony unlocked and stepped out onto it. Whether it was sunrise or sunset didn't matter to Lonnie, it was beautiful.

"Stunning, isn't it?"

Lonnie turned to see a familiar face smiling at her. "Hafta Neri," she spoke warmly. "It is. Where's Nam?" His appearance at the private party confirmed her suspicion that Neri was more important than he let on. She wondered if Gish knew him.

"She's working the guests," he said. "I understand you and the diva are dancing for Ambassador Mo'lu?"

Lonnie chuckled. "I didn't know you would be here." She suddenly looked worried. "I've never danced for so many important people. Will they get upset if I sweat?"

Hafta laughed heartily with Lonnie. "They will only be seeing a pair of dancers. Already there have been many entertainers. If you still dance as well as you have for the last nineteen years, you have no problem. What have you picked? It hasn't been announced."

"We were asked for three." Her eyes glinted with mischief. "You and Nam will like the third one."

"What's that?"

"It's a surprise. But it will give the galaxy critics proof that the diva still has that star talent."

“No one doubts her talent to pick up new steps, Lonnie,” Hafta replied seriously. “It’s her consistency to perform in all public areas of her life that investors’ worry about.”

Lonnie frowned. She shouldn’t be surprised he was well informed on an entertainment personality. “Erich Bettelheim is handling her career, and she now has more stable people around her. It’s not easy to fight the bad guys when you’re the only one in your corner.”

“You like her.” Hafta sounded surprised.

“I hope so. Working with someone you don’t like for a ten-month gig is a headache,” she responded, with forced nonchalance. “Is your interest from being an investor?”

He grinned. “I have many interests around the galaxy. Keeps my mind sharp.”

“There you are honey. Hi, Lonnie.” Nam was dressed exquisitely, and as always took Lonnie’s breath away.

The three had met nineteen years ago in a small bar on a planet where cruise liners docked. Then, Lonnie’s gig was booked on an old lady called Jolly *Roger*. It was her first year on cruise liners, training with Star Maker. Nam and Hafta were on the first *Earl Gray* and had stopped in the bar for some excitement. Lonnie was waiting for her ride to take her to the outback for some rock climbing. Nam danced the tango with Lonnie and her skill enamored Lonnie with her. After that they met occasionally, forming warm acquaintances. The relationship changed when they sent her a picture of themselves and their haulers climbing their local mountain. Shari thought the picture odd since one of the haulers was a ghost and their planet was a closed society so how the ghost was on the planet was puzzling.

“She said she has a surprise for us,” Hafta said.

“You do look very nice, Lonnie,” she told her in a smoldering voice, said just loud enough for the three of them to hear. “What’s the surprise?”

Lonnie wagged a finger at them. “You wait and see.”

“I understand in two more months you’ll have your answer on your contract.”

Hafta changed the subject.

“Right,” Lonnie said.

“Something bothering you?” Nam asked alertly. She was always sensitive to Lonnie.

“Or someone,” Hafta chuckled. He looked down at his wrist. His pager was buzzing.

“Back to schmoozing with the guests,” Hafta informed them.

“We can’t wait to see your dances. I hope you do settle here, Lonnie. Then we’ll be entertained more often,” Nam remarked. She rested a richly bejeweled hand on Hafta’s proffered arm and the two left.

Lonnie stared out at the now darkened environment, wondering how far HQ was taking this. Were they looking for a way to locate the Ghost? She also wondered if Nam and Hafta realized how patronizing they sounded to those they saw beneath them. When had their causal relationship changed? It was as if they felt it was a closed deal. A few moments later Andres came looking for her. “We’re on.”

* * *

The first dance was originally to begin slowly, with a tango, but Andres, being the perfect gauge of audiences, started the tempo fast with a flamenco, wanting to wake up the crowd. The two smoothly picked up the change, feeling the crowd’s interest. The hum of chatter was lost on the two as they focused on each other.

Kali stood alone, with her back to Lonnie, at the opposite end of their small dance area. Her head down, turned just enough to make it appear she was aware of her partner’s presence. Her hands were covered in black lace, holding her skirts just inches above her ankles.

Lonnie stood still with her hands curled around her castanets, waiting for the music to signal the start. She wore a lightweight embroidered coat with matching pants, skintight. The strumming of the guitar started suddenly, and Lonnie jumped into a spinning leap with her landing with her heels clapping half-way across the floor toward Kali. Then suddenly she stopped. Kali’s feet answered with her swirling skirt and whirling figure making circles around Lonnie. When they touched, Lonnie felt Kali’s

closeness with nothing separating them. They stormed across the floor, back and forth, heating the air around them.

By the end of the first dance, they had the crowd.

Lonnie started the next one with the click of castanets, raising them above her head, as Kali's heels echoed her strident rhythm. Kali's hands moved across Lonnie's chest and to her shoulders, then she broke from her abruptly and danced across the floor, with Lonnie following. They set off across the stage, changing positions with pauses accentuated by the stucco beat of their heels. Lonnie was only aware of Kali, and how she wanted to make love to the woman as she pursued her across the floor and dragged her hands across her body as Kali turned to dance her side of the impassioned dance. There wasn't space between them as Kali leaned against her before she danced a few steps away. Lonnie took two steps back to dance again around Kali, watching her with dark eyes, telling her of her desire to know every inch of her body. They ended the dance with a flurry of feet stomping and castanets.

Both caught their breaths and focused on the next dance. It was Lonnie's version of the new dance style making its way to the public. They became aware that there was absolute silence in the room. Lonnie gave a squeeze to Kali's hand. Kali had that triumphant look in her eyes, that the audience was hers.

The music started on the final set for *stridency*. Lonnie's eyes were enflamed with passion. Kali's eyes were hooded, provocative and simmering with heat. Lonnie's grip around Kali's waist was possessive. There was no space between their bodies, as they moved as one. As they faced each other, Kali's eyes stared boldly into Lonnie's, mirroring a desire for more than a dance. When the dance finished, the applause began before the music died out. Breathless, the two stood facing each other, their faces only a hair's width apart, waiting for a moment until they would face the ambassador and his wife.

When they turned to face the anniversary couple, they were aware of the deafening applause. Lonnie spotted Hafta and Nam next to the anniversary couple. She gave them a cocky grin and then lifted her eyes up to the ambassador and his wife.

A family resemblance that is hard to miss. Lonnie's attention was brought back to her partner who pulled at her hand to step forward.

The ambassador and his wife rose, joined by Nam and Hafta a few steps back, greeting the dancers.

Kali squeezed Lonnie's hand and then let it go to take the proffered hand of the ambassador, and then his wife. What went on from there, Lonnie wasn't sure. Kali brushed against her as everyone crowded around them. The crowd of attractive and not so attractive women and men that shook their hands, were making their interests in the two known, and it was not just for a dance.

Nam pulled Lonnie aside for a moment. "You were right. That third dance is going to be the next new craze. Lonnie, I want to warn you, no matter how tempted you are, don't bed any of these people. Not if you want to settle here."

Lonnie understood and nodded. "I know my place, Nam."

"Why don't you come back with Hafta and me? We'll keep you safe." She smiled. "You can also look at the land you want to purchase. It's a few hours from our land. You can borrow some of our servants to take a climb."

"Hey," Kali said. She had two drinks in her hand. She handed one to Lonnie who hesitated.

"It's safe," Nam assured her. "My sister would never let anyone get away with messing with the drinks. I was just offering Lonnie two days at our place. Would you like to come along?"

"I would love to." Kali glanced at Lonnie.

"I didn't bring a change of clothes," Lonnie feebly objected. Lonnie stifled her fear, not knowing what made her more nervous, disappearing on Tuloc or spending two days in Kali's presence after letting Kali see how much she desired her – and Kali's returned interest. Could or should she act on it?

"We have plenty of clothing for you two to change into. We have visitors all the time that never bring the right clothes. Or you can just walk around in nothing. No big deal. It's all very private," Nam said.

"Okay." Lonnie decided to take a chance. "I'll let Andres know."

Nam waved her hand at Lonnie then at an attendant that was quickly at her side. She spoke to him, and the attendant quickly moved off in the direction of Andres.

“There. Taken care of. Come on. The rest of the celebration is going to be boring.”

“How do you know?” Lonnie asked, falling behind Nam.

“Because the two lovers have gone. Hafta, look who I’ve brought along,” Nam announced to her husband who was standing with four other men.

He nodded to the men, and they moved away.

“Lonnie and Diva Maxine agreed to spend their two days with us. Lonnie can go hiking and see if the sunsets are better on our cliff.”

“Well let’s go then.” Hafta waved to a doorman who quickly went to get their vehicle.

“So, what did she promise you to get you to spend time in the outback?” Hafta asked Kali.

“Two days away from my bodyguards and handler,” Kali told them honestly. “Sometimes I just want to be on my own, but for some reason, I get into trouble. I can’t see getting into any with you three responsible people around.”

The three looked at each other, and then smiled, two polite ones and one smirk.

“Uh oh. Did I just call you boring and predictable?” Kali asked.

“Just about. But I’ll take that as a challenge,” Lonnie informed her.

* * *

It was late evening when the two were finally settled in their suites. A large bathing room separated the two sleeping areas. Both women were delighted with the hot tub that was already filled and steaming with an intoxicating scent.

“That is where I’m going to be in three seconds,” Lonnie informed Kali and hurried back into her room to undress.

Lonnie realized as she shed her costume, that they would be together in a tub without clothes and without a chaperone. She grinned. *Well, this is the moment of truth. Can I behave myself or not? Or, do I want to?*

Kali had returned to her room with a servant to assist with removing her dress. Carrying a towel draped over her robed arm, Kali returned to the tub to find an attractive body bobbing above the roiling waters.

The servant accepted the robe from her, and Kali rinsed off quickly under the shower and then slid into the heated water, sighing nosily as the heat quickly infused her tired muscles.

“These are the perks I like about this business,” she told Lonnie who was floating peacefully with her eyes closed. “No fans, no chaperones, and...” she lowered her voice to a husky whisper, “nowhere to be for two days.”

Lonnie hummed her agreement. She opened her eyes and turned her head to Kali. Kali’s long hair spread out in a tangled mass from the agitation of the moving water. Her eyes moved to her breasts, partially showing above the water. Lonnie’s eyes moved to Kali’s. She was being studied too. She closed her eyes as if relaxed.

“So, where are you going tomorrow?” Kali asked. Her big toe slid along the outside of Lonnie’s leg, tickling her.

Lonnie opened her eyes to gage Kali’s intent. “Stop that,” she warned, but a giggle and a stifled yelp ruined her attempt to be serious.

“If I don’t, what are you going to do?” Kali whispered. She leaned against Lonnie, placing her hand where her foot had been. “I mean, what can possibly happen that we can’t handle?”

Lonnie swallowed.

“Does this bother you?” Kali asked, stepping between Lonnie’s floating legs.

“Yes...but, don’t let that stop you,” she whispered so softly she was not sure if she had spoken.

Kali’s hands caressed the outside of her thighs.

Lonnie giggled, cutting off some of the tension. She reached down to grab Kali’s tickling fingers, sliding off her seat, and disappearing underwater.

“Hey,” Kali gave a short laugh, sidestepping to prevent herself from being pulled underwater. Kali searched for Lonnie in the bubbling water. She yelped and moved to a higher step in the tub. Squatting, she looked again. It was a big tub and for some reason,

she could not see below the water line. She wondered what they put in the water for that effect. Whatever it was, it did add to their game.

A hand reached out and pulled her into the water with a big splash. Both women came up sputtering, laughing, and clinging to each other.

Every part of Lonnie's body that Kali was pressed against was sending signals. Reflexively her hands rested on the diva's hips, pulling her tight against her. Kali's face neared hers as she parted her lips. Obediently Lonnie lowered her mouth and felt hungry lips press against her possessively.

Lonnie's world stopped as reality met dreams. The feeling was a combination of exhilaration and a plunging sense of stark reality. It was like catching an updraft hang-gliding, knowing sooner or later you would hit the space of no currents and to sustain your altitude it would be all skill to keep you from crashing. Her heart stopped and then resumed beating like a war drum, nearly drowning out the sounds of her and Kali's groans.

Lonnie slid her hands down to cup Kali's buttocks, easily lifting her, and bringing her pubic hairs against her stomach. Kali wrapped her legs around her waist, tightly, securing her position. Lonnie's mouth explored Kali's taking possession of her vocal groans, and inhaling them into her being, like fuel to a fire.

Lonnie's hands roamed a body she had pictured many times, letting reality verify what imagination had supplied her.

Chapter 18

Consequences

Gish was the first-person Lonnie spotted as she made her way to the gym the morning after her return to *Earl Gray*. She and Kali had arrived back aboard the ship at the last call for boarding. The two women worked quietly on the various machines before meeting in the hot tub.

"Mo said you and Kali spent two days hiking."

"I spent two days hiking. I don't know what Kali did." Now that she had thought about it, she hadn't asked Kali what she did during the day. She was elated that she found

the missing Ghost that was in the photo she showed Shari. She was one of the servants that would climb with her.

It was at night that the two dancers were only interested in working off the sexual attraction they had for each other before returning aboard ship.

“To hear the scuttlebutt, you two have a torrid love affair going on.” She looked at the dancer over the steam.

“If the crew can’t handle having one diva on board without getting this worked up, then the company won’t keep them around for the next tour.” Lonnie opened her eyes and looked at Gish for a few moments to see if she was even interested in what she was saying.

“How do you know that?” Gish asked.

“Because I have stocks in the company and keep track of them. It went up four points when it was announced Diva Kali Maxine would be on board for a tour. After our performance on earth, it has shot up to ten more points. Having entertainment personalities with star power is going to be a trend. Mark my words,” she warned with a big smile.

“Wow. Maybe I should be investing more into the company.”

“The crew should be betting less against someone who contributes to their pay,” Lonnie stated flatly.

“Are you that bothered that people are betting you’ll not survive to the end? It’s not personal, Lonnie. They bet at the drop of a hat.”

“That’s not the point. I heard the odds against my surviving, and I also know the commander of security asked for the betting to cease. Like me, he reads the stock market reports and knows when to not handicap your horse.”

“Horse? Oh.” Gish was quiet for a few moments. “When was the last time you meditated?”

“This morning. Why?”

“Just wondering. You seem a bit edgy this morning.”

As other crew members started to move into the waters, both women stepped out and dressed for their day. Lonnie had a rehearsal in an hour.

Opening the door to her cabin, the strong scent of flowers hit her. For a moment she held her temper in check. There were few people that could override her preference to not receive flowers. She stepped in and read the first card and then three others. Fans.

“I told them I don’t accept anything from fans,” she muttered angrily. She went in search of the purser that oversaw the maidbots for her section. Sotre was checking supplies in the purser’s closet.

“Hi, Lonnie. So, since when did you start accepting flowers?” she asked jokingly.

“You saw them delivered and you didn’t say anything to the deliverer? I want them removed.”

Sotre looked at her surprised. “I...well, it was an automated bot from the florist’s shop. I don’t have anything to do with their program. I thought you had changed your mind.”

“So, who’s going to remove them?” Lonnie demanded.

“I’ll call Miem to clear them...ah, what do you want me to do with them?”

“I don’t care...” she paused as she spotted Yomatta and Kali heading to their cabin. “Send them to the diva’s room. She likes flowers.” She left Sotre to handle it and went to catch up with Kali.

“Wait up,” Lonnie called.

“Oh, there you are.”

Yomatta looked more than irritated about something. Lonnie was having second thoughts on speaking with Kali.

“You didn’t have to waste your credits sending me all those flowers,” Kali told her, looking uncomfortable.

“Flowers? I just told the purser I didn’t want them and to deliver them to your place. They couldn’t have made the switch that fast. I just finished speaking with her.” Lonnie looked back at Sotre who was just hanging up her com.

Kali looked at her strangely and Yomatta gestured to Lonnie to open her door. She did and the flowers were gone, but not the strong fragrance and some scattered flower petals.

“Where did they go?” Lonnie went to the second door that connected her quarters to Kali’s and noted it showed that it was locked on both sides. She went to the other one that connected to the suite next door. It was locked, but not from her side, and she knew she kept it locked. She went out and pounded on the cabin next door. The door opened with a crack and eyes peeped out. Lonnie pushed open the door and found her missing flowers sitting everywhere.

“What’s going on here?” she demanded.

Maltieani with four of his people showed up. They moved past Yomatta. “What are you up to Purser Johan?” he demanded.

“Nothing, sir. Nothing. I just...uh. I was playing a little joke, that’s all. I didn’t know she would get all bent out of shape,” he explained defensively.

Maltieani went over to one of the flower arrangements and removed a card to read it. “This is a joke?” He glanced back at Lonnie. “Do you know a Keito?” Lonnie shook her head.

Maltieani picked out another card. “How about Samuri?”

Lonnie snapped her fingers, suddenly remembering where she heard both names. “Yeah. Now I remember. I autographed a picture for each one of them...nothing more. Are those from them?”

He turned to the suddenly nervous Johan. “You don’t happen to be betting against Lonnie for sticking out the last two months, are you?”

“NO sir! You ordered the betting to be stopped.”

Maltieani turned to Lonnie. “I’m sorry my crew is treating you this badly, especially since you’ve been sailing with us longer than Johan’s been with the company.” He turned back to one of his officers. “Take him to the brig until I get a chance to speak with him.” He turned to Johan. “Be ready to tell me how you got a pass into suites on this deck that you don’t have authorization for.” He picked off the tags on the other flower arrangements and read them. He shook his head. “Every crew member knows Lonnie doesn’t accept gifts from her fans, which would mean Johan, you took a bribe. You won’t be working for this cruise line after we put into our next port.” He turned to the other officer. “Mil, clean out these flowers.”

“What about the flowers in Kali Maxine’s suites? They have Lonnie’s name on them, yet she says she didn’t send them,” Yomatta demanded.

He glanced at Lonnie then at Johan. “Are they your doing too?”

“No, sir,” he mumbled. By the guilty look on his face everyone guessed he knew who did it.

Lonnie shook her head. “I forewarn people if I’m going to send them anything.”

“Mil, get them too.”

“We need to talk,” Lonnie told him in a low voice.

“How about two hours after your performance tonight, in my office? By then I’ll have a handle on what’s going on here and you’ll have time to unwind from your performance.”

“I’ll be there,” Lonnie told him.

“So will we.” Yomatta tapped Kali on her arm. “Let’s return to our suite, shall we?”

Kali leaned towards Lonnie, tugging at her to follow. “You should see what you wrote on some of those cards. Romantic, passionate and all very personal,” she said so low that Yomatta would not hear.

“Really?” Lonnie was interested. “I’ve never been accused of being a romantic. Passionate is more of what they call my dancing... but personal?” She shook her head, “not with my partners. I like uncomplicated living.”

Kali blinked her eyes at Lonnie. “On second thought...how do we know you didn’t send them?” Kali asked in a teasing tone.

Lonnie stepped into Kali’s suite, looking around to see if Yomatta or Kali’s taste would be displayed. It was as sparse as hers with not even mementos from planets they visited. Kali gestured to Lonnie where she could sit. Kali settled on the couch, her usual preference, where she could stretch out.

Yomatta poured three drinks and handed one to Kali and another to Lonnie who found her chair more comfortable than the one in her quarters. Lonnie sniffed at the drink suspiciously. Yomatta handed her a small drug strip to test the beverage.

“Well, what did the cards say?” Lonnie leaned back, feeling better about the drink, and the company.

Kali cleared her voice and then recited, “*Purple is my passion and for you I burn with it.*”

“Hm. I would have hoped I did better than that.”

“Have you ever sent anyone flowers?” Kali asked curiously.

“Nope.” For a moment her eyes softened. She looked down at her drink, wondering how long it was going to take to forget Kali.

“When was the last time you were with someone?” Kali asked, meaning before her and she knew Lonnie understood the question.

“Now, now. I don’t go asking about your personal life.” Lonnie looked up at her and read nothing in the dark eyes.

“What are we going to do about these pranks?” Yomatta demanded from the two.

“I don’t know. I’ve never had fans react this way toward me.” Lonnie looked at Yomatta and then Kali. “Do you have some suggestions?” *Bzzz!*

Being the nearest, Lonnie leaned over and picked up the com. “Hello?... No this isn’t. May I ask who’s calling?... Why shouldn’t I be here? I’m her partner...”

Yomatta took the phone from Lonnie who was looking indignant and ready to say something Yomatta deemed inappropriate for her charge’s career.

“Hello. Who is this?”

The two dancers could overhear a line of curses and threats coming from the earpiece.

“De Sumt, Diva Maxine will not speak to you,” she interrupted the loud voice on the other end of the line. “If you call here again, I will sign a complaint to have you arrested again. We have been through this before... I don’t care what you’ve heard. My suggestion is to wonder why people tell you things that they know will get you angry. Good day!”

Neither woman thought De Sumt heard a word of what Yomatta said since his voice could be heard continuing over Yomatta’s warnings. Yomatta disconnected from the

call and dialed security. She informed them that De Sumt had again threatened Diva Maxine and now her partner.

“This guy has been bothering you?” Lonnie asked in a low voice so as not to interrupt Yomatta’s conversation with security.

Kali waved her hand dismissively. “I’ve been attracting those types since the first day I started dancing.”

Yomatta hung up the phone and glared at Lonnie. “J’sma Sumt has been stalking Diva Maxine for four years. She has seventeen stalkers we know of, two more than Diva HmBolt and one less than Dama Riva. Don’t you read the *Entertainment Rag*?”

“Uh, no. I read things like *Climbing*, *Fit to Travel*, *SpyWare* and *Dancers Quarterly*.”

“Well, people with ambition read the *Rag*,” Yomatta advised.

“So where are the other sixteen stalkers?”

Kali suddenly looked interested in scrolling through the television menu.

“Kali Maxine’s agent has people keeping track of them.” Yomatta waved a hand as if it were not important.

“Our agent,” Lonnie said. “Just how many of them are there on this ship?”

The silence grew too long. “Well?” she prodded.

“Yomatta?” Kali asked.

“I don’t know,” Yomatta responded.

“Well, at last count then,” Lonnie was beginning to get upset.

“Five, but they should have been let off at our last stop,” Yomatta assured her.

“What about this guy here, how did he slip through?” Lonnie asked.

“I don’t know, but he’s spent most of this trip in the brig.” Yomatta informed her carelessly.

“They don’t have phones in the brig, so someone let him out and forgot to make sure he made it ashore and not back on the ship,” Lonnie concluded angrily. De Erich Bettelheim apparently left out the details on why security was necessary for Kali. Lonnie got up abruptly and left.

“You didn’t have to lay it on so thick,” Kali informed Yomatta.

“She needs a dose of reality. Have you ever wondered why a person with her talent wants to remain unknown?”

“Maybe she doesn’t want to put up with the stalking or threatening letters. I don’t want anything bad to happen to her, Yomatta. She doesn’t deserve it. Whatever her hangups are, she’s not on drugs and she...”

“Participates in activities that are dangerous,” Yomatta interrupted. “Doesn’t that tell you that there are other types of drugs one uses to cover what’s broken in them?”

Kali suspected that Yomatta knew they got involved while away from her watchful eyes and was angry about it. Kali’s goal was to hit the top and stay there for at least three years, then as long as she could. It would make a lot of people wealthy, including Kali. But she realized the constant demands would be too much if she didn’t take a page out of Lonnie’s book of survival and disappear every now and then from everyone’s view...including Erich and Yomatta. She hated to have wherever she stayed checked for peepers, snoopers, and hoped that the person checking for them was not taking a bribe to overlook the one in the bedroom or bathing room. Her fingers curled around the ring that prevented image and voice recorders from locking onto her. No one had mentioned to her that they existed. Obviously, Lonnie’s reading material was better than most because Yomatta had not spoken to her about them either.

“She’s a nice person, Yomatta. She’s done nice things for me and didn’t ask me for anything other than to be professional.” Her lips quirked up into a smile. “And dance more her type of dances than mine.”

“Well, the pressure is increasing. Notice how she reacted to the flowers? Let’s see how levelheaded she remains with this attention and not go jump off some cliff to her death.” Yomatta picked up a reader and proceeded to finish her novel.

“Yomatta, she does that stuff to calm herself. You’re being overdramatic. It wasn’t so much as the flowers as...as...us not telling her that there were stalkers aboard. I think that’s rather nice that she’s worried about me.”

“I didn’t see that as being worried about *you*.”

Kali laughed and dialed in for the magazines Lonnie said she liked to read. She could understand why Spyware, and the other two, but the fourth, the dance magazine,

was the most professional dance magazine she had seen. Why wasn't this on her list of preferred readings?

"Oh, gawds!"

Yomatta looked up at her startled. "What's wrong?"

"That dance we did, the stridency, it's been morphed." She watched in astonishment as a video of her and Lonnie showed their version of the dance and how it was renamed the Kalrolie. "Who thinks up these names?"

Yomatta thought about it. "It has both your names in it, and it gives her her privacy. It sounds like Erich. Why don't you call him and find out?"

Kali glanced at the clock. "I think I'll wait or leave him a message." After she made her call, she watched the film footage again.

"We look good together," she murmured.

Yomatta glanced at her with a frown. "You'll get over her."

Chapter 19

The Game Has Escalated

Lonnie's time piece notified her that she had a performance to prepare for. She left the movie at the part where the guy gets the gal. She stopped at her quarters to pack her costume bag.

A crunch under her foot caught her attention. Looking at the broken ampoule, she studied the discoloration forming on the carpet. From her hiking pack she pulled out her utility knife. She scraped a bit of the substance off and carried it to her bathroom. In the cabinet she selected an empty ampoule, breaking the seal that guaranteed it was sterile. She labeled it and returned it to the cabinet to get back to it later. She returned to the front room and picked up the com link.

"Security?... Ensign Rau, this is Lonnie Bestolie. I found an unknown substance in my quarters. Can you send someone over to investigate it?... No, I won't be here. I have a practice session... That's fine. Thank you." She hung up satisfied that Ensign Timu Rau would take care of it personally. He was one of the few people she trusted, though not as far as her life was concerned. She had learned earlier that when it came to

life and death situations, it was better to rely on herself, even if her resources were limited.

Maltieani, who always found time to attend Lonnie's shows, was speaking to one of his officers, standing outside of the performers' entrance. He glanced up as Lonnie passed them to enter behind the stage.

"Lonnie, might I have a word with you?" he asked. He followed Lonnie into the small backstage area. After looking around for anyone that may be nearby, he turned to face her. In the dim lighting Lonnie could tell he was angry.

"What's up?"

"Do you know what was in the container my officer retrieved in your room?"

"That was fast. No. What was in it?"

He took a deep breath and shook his head. "You didn't touch it did you?"

"I'm not totally naïve to the drug scene, Maltieani. I know not to breathe or touch something that I don't know what it is. What is it?"

Kali peered into the small dressing room.

"I'll tell you later." Maltieani nodded to Kali and left.

"Hi," Kali told her softly. She bumped into Lonnie as she went by. Lonnie nodded and moved out of the way and continued dressing, her thoughts on the contents of what she had collected. She was bumped again, and she looked at Kali.

"So, aren't you going to speak to me?" Kali asked.

"Sorry. I was thinking," she replied distracted.

"Hi," Kali tried again.

"Hi."

Kali stepped close to her and peered up into her eyes. "How about if we don't do any hot numbers tonight, and then go back to them tomorrow?"

"What did you have in mind?" Lonnie was annoyed at Kali's game.

Kali listed them and looked at Lonnie in askance. Lonnie shrugged her shoulders. It really was Kali's show now. She was just along for the ride for the next six weeks. The ache in her chest eased as she let go of any interest she had in the show.

Kali went to Andres and gave him her list for the night, waltzes and ballroom types. Andres nodded and glanced at Lonnie who was seated staring at her feet.

Lonnie was on autopilot. She did a quick warm-up and then waited for their entrance music to begin.

“You could at least make it seem like you enjoy dancing,” Kali murmured irritated.

“Right,” Lonnie muttered, tugging at her coat to pull it in place as if it were uncomfortable.

When the lights came on after the first dance and the audience clapped at the introduction dance, Lonnie did pull herself out of her funk. She reminded herself that she was a performer that gave everything she had for each dance. If she was going out of the performing business, it was to be at the top of her form.

Following the final set, they went out for their bows. The entertainment director asked if Kali could remain to answer some questions from her fans. Gratefully, Lonnie escaped unnoticed.

Kali sat like a queen on the chair provided for her, sipping water, and dabbing her face with a towel.

Back in her suite, Lonnie dumped her costumes into the cleaner and turned to the ship com. She tapped in Gish’s number and her appointment was confirmed. She stopped for a quick shower and then headed to Gish’s office. Gish opened at the first knock and pulled Lonnie in quickly.

“What’s going on?” Lonnie asked.

“She’s in love with you,” Gish told her flatly.

Lonnie was in the process of taking off her shirt when she stopped to laugh. “She as in Kali? She’s as capable of falling in love as I, Gish.” She finished undressing, folding her clothing carefully, and laying it on a chair.

“Yes,” Gish answered softly.

No more was said as Gish began to work on the muscular body that was stretched on her table.

“Where did you get this?” Gish gently prodded a sore spot on her back.

“Ouch. Climbing. I was looking over property I want to purchase...” Lonnie realized she had let something slip.

There was quiet for a while as Gish smoothed a liquid over the bruise that would heal it. “You know, they won’t sell in the end,” Gish mentioned casually. “I’ve known those people all my life. They dangle all sorts of promises and contracts in front of you to get what *they* want.” Her voice was soft and devoid of emotion, “But they don’t give you what they originally promised you because you aren’t one of them, will never be, and therefore they don’t feel obligated to be honest.”

“I figured that out before we started our dance. Why do you think they’re dangling all this in front of me, and Shari?”

“Just you. Too many people are interested in seeing Diva Kali Maxine get back to the top.”

“I was offered the property there before I knew the diva and I were going to be partnered,” Lonnie pointed out.

“But the people behind the buying and selling of contracts knew. It’s a chess game. I’m going to dig into these quads of yours. They have knots.”

“Ah, yes. Pain. What’s a good massage without a bit of pain?”

* * *

“Dama Leona Bestolie, might I have a word with you?”

“No.” As she continued her way down the corridor, she could hear the other person hurrying after her. She paused at one of the ship coms and pushed the security button. It identified her and the security camera scanned the area she was standing in. She didn’t turn to face the cretin because in the shiny reflection of the bulkhead she could see he had an image capture pointed at her. She glanced at her hand and realized she had not put her ring back on after the massage. Rummaging in her pocket she found it and slipped it on. She could hear feet running on the deck toward them. Two security officers. The person behind her cursed and ran away with the two officers in pursuit.

Lonnie shook her head and headed up to Maltieani’s quarters, thinking she could ask some questions of him before Kali and her handler arrived.

Lonnie rapped on Maltieani's cabin door. The murmuring stopped. Maltieani opened the door himself and waved her in.

"We were just discussing your situation," he mentioned as he nodded to a seat across from the captain.

"What is my situation?" she asked curiously.

"Too much baggage," the captain said and took a sip of his drink. Lonnie noted it was not the special wine Maltieani had previously shared with her.

"Are you going to tell me what was in the container in my quarters?"

"An addictive drug that should not have gotten on board. I'd like you to not say anything about it until we determine there isn't any more on board. If any of the substance gets on your skin..." Maltieani shook his head worriedly.

"Did you know that Diva Maxine had death threats against her by five different people, today alone?" the captain asked Lonnie.

"No," Lonnie answered alarmed. "Does she know this?"

"She does. This has been going on since she boarded the ship but was not brought to our attention until Yomatta arrived. If her agent was aware of this when he signed for her to perform here, why were we not notified?"

"Maybe he assumed you would know about things like that. Wouldn't the *Rag* have that information?" Lonnie asked.

By their expressions, Lonnie guessed it had not occurred to the two men.

"On. Search records on the magazine *Rag* for any mention of death threats against Diva Kali Maxine. From what I understand, it's not unusual for popular stars to have death threats and stalkers," Maltieani said.

"I'm lucky I'm not that popular."

"Not true." The captain shook his head. "Because you don't take the attacks against you seriously doesn't mean we don't. Right, Malti?" He turned to his commander of security. Maltieani nodded.

The door chime signaled that their company had arrived. The captain hurriedly rose to his feet to leave. He obviously didn't want to be involved with this issue. Lonnie guessed it was Yomatta he didn't want to get involved with.

Kali looked fresh and very elegant in her apparel.

“Well, what have you found and decided to do about the security on the ship,” Yomatta began once she was seated.

Lonnie’s eyes followed Kali as she took a seat and smiled at Lonnie, before thanking Maltieani for seating her.

Maltieani rang for his purser who promptly got everyone something to drink and made sure the diva and her handler were comfortable with a pillow or two and then left.

“My brig has never been this full. And we never had quite so many crew members’ reputations in question.” He didn’t bother to mention that Englo Brighton, the owner’s secretary, gave an official order to tighten up the quality of *Earl Gray’s* crew to host other notable entertainment personalities.

“You’re expecting more to fall to the temptation of money,” Yomatta surmised.

“Greed has no fidelity, because conscience can undermine the greedy,” Lonnie murmured to no one in particular.

“What about the recent threats and the flowers?” Yomatta demanded.

Maltieani glanced at Lonnie. “I take it you didn’t write any of those. Well, then...” he hesitated, wondering how to categorize the notes that were attached to the flowers signed with Lonnie’s name.

“I thought they were quite romantic. Imagine my disappointment when it turns out they’re not from her,” Kali said mockingly.

“Can I read some? Just so that if I’m ever in the position where I must send a romantic clutch of flowers, I’ll know what’s expected.”

“They are being used as evidence.” Maltieani looked at Yomatta, who had told him to burn them before the news media got hold of them. He found two missing and had caught the culprit but not before he had passed them on to a buyer who he was now tracking down. He knew the images of the card had not been transmitted, and the buyer was still aboard, therefore the physical evidence was not public domain yet.

“Evidence? I want them destroyed. Can you imagine what that will do to Diva Maxine’s career?”

Lonnie leaned into Kali and whispered. “You just told me what one of them said.

How about another?"

"Later, you flatterer," she smirked.

Lonnie studied the woman whom she had spent two nights locked in passionate love making and whose image she fell asleep with. She blinked her eyes to shut out those memories. She glanced at her watch. At this time the gym would be crowded with off duty crew. However, she was too wound up to just go back to her cabin. Maybe she should just be happy with playing her guitar.

Lonnie looked back up at Maltieani and found everyone was looking at her.

"Sorry, what did you say?"

Yomatta gave an annoyed sniff.

"We've upped surveillance and have closed off your deck to wanders. There's no reason for anyone to wander on your deck that doesn't have quarters there. Since Kali already has bodyguards, we can offer the same to you Lonnie if you feel you need it."

"Do you think I need it?" she asked Maltieani, believing he would know better than her.

"Have you been receiving any threatening letters or calls lately?"

"Nothing a quick call didn't take care of. But I do have one complaint. When is my profile going to be redone? It's taking ages to logon to my subscription services. I miss the luxury of having them on the menu."

"You and some other people. Someone sent a virus into the profile program, and we haven't found a way to eradicate it." He turned to Yomatta. "Just how many people have sent death threats to Kali Maxine and how many have you recognized on this ship?"

"Five. All have gone but that one we had called in earlier. Your security should have caught them before they were on board."

"Why didn't your agent let us know that there was any danger to your life before you boarded?" Maltieani asked Kali.

"I thought everyone knew. It makes the news rags all the time," she told him reasonably.

"Is that it?" Lonnie asked. She didn't want to waste her time listening to this.

"I would appreciate from now on for you to keep me informed of any threat you get. I have a whole ship to keep track of and don't want anyone's safety to be jeopardized

because of preventable trouble.” Maltieani held out his hands to indicate unless anyone else had something to say the meeting was over. Lonnie was already out of her seat and pulling the door open.

She really needed to do something. Maybe she could wake Crackle up and they could beat up on each other. Instead, Lonnie walked nearly all the decks of the ship. It was two hours later that Maltieani joined her on deck two.

“Hi. I thought I would rescue you and let you know that you’ve been walking for about two hours now. You’re getting my staff tired.”

“I guess I need to get some sleep,” she agreed.

“Come on, I’ll walk you back to your cabin.”

“So, Maltieani, is this going to be the last time the cruise ship takes on a diva?”

“Probably not. As much as it’s been a headache for the staff, every available cabin is full and no empty bunks.” He glanced at her. “How do you like your suite?”

“Nice. I don’t even mind sharing the hot tub, though it’s not quite as roomy as what I’m used to.” She grinned at his smile.

“But the larger one is crowded with the crew, huh?”

“I’ve been here long enough to figure out when it’s not too busy. I really enjoy my time on *Earl Gray*, Maltieani.”

“You sound like you’re saying goodbye.”

“When my contract is up...*if* I stick it out with the diva to the end of the cruise, I want to settle on land, my land with everything I need within a day’s flight.”

“Where are you planning on settling?”

“I’m not sure. I’m still looking. It’s going to be where there’s wide open land and lots of places to explore without running into tourists or my neighbors.”

“Sounds like a certifiable recluse to me,” he joked.

“I don’t do the consistent relationships too well. Once a year for a couple of days or a week and then I move on.” She laughed at herself. Her tone sounded wistful even to herself. *Wistful for what?* Her thoughts went to Kali and how beautiful it felt to touch her and to be touched by her. They moved well together. She shook her head and glanced at Maltieani. His thoughts looked like they were far away as well.

“When are you going to retire and where?” Lonnie asked.

“I have three more years. Like you, I want to be in the outback. I’m not sure Jol is interested. He’s a people person. Loves to arrange things and socialize.”

“Start a dude ranch,” Lonnie suggested. “Let him and his staff do all the work while you fish and hike or whatever else you like doing.”

Maltieani looked surprised and then thoughtful at the suggestion. “It certainly would make him happy to get off a ship. Here’s your cabin.”

Lonnie opened the door and peered in. It looked clean and the security tag assured her it had been swept clean of any monitoring devices. Of course, Lonnie had her own scanner.

“Good dreams, Lonnie.”

“And to you too, Maltieani.”

As tired as her legs were, her thoughts were not. Staring at her ceiling she could no longer put off thinking about the end of the month. She was less concerned about where she would live than the conflicting feelings she had for this trip. Rising, she picked up her guitar and played whatever came to mind. When she felt more settled, she drifted off to sleep.

* * *

“Hey,” a familiar voice whispered near her ear.

Tired eyes opened to look into familiar green ones.

“Hi,” Lonnie whispered back. There was a space of tense quietness before Lonnie asked, “What time is it?”

“Midmorning. I came over to see if you wanted to start planning our final dance. What time did you get to bed?” Kali asked concerned. Her fingers caressed hair to the sides of Lonnie’s face.

It took a while for Lonnie’s mind to get around what was asked and what she was picking up from Kali. Kali leaned close to her and sniffed. But Lonnie was sure that was not what Kali almost did.

“Well, you haven’t been drinking. So, is all this pressure working your nerves?”

Lonnie moved to get up and Kali stepped back, sitting at the edge of the bed. “I’m sure I can make the final lap,” she told her quietly. To relieve the tension from their nearness she moved into her shower facility.

“So, what do you think we should do for a finale?” Kali asked as Lonnie stepped out of the shower. Kali’s eyes studied her dripping form as she handed her a towel.

I’m getting the feeling that I’m being handled. Do I care?

Dressed, Lonnie joined Kali in her front room. It had decidedly gotten smaller. “Do you want to go somewhere to discuss this?” Lonnie asked cautiously.

“No. Are you afraid of the rumors?”

Lonnie sat on a chair across from Kali, seriously thinking about the question. At one time she would have said no. Now she was aware that there was no escaping the fact that how she got out of the business would matter if she got a chance to buy property that only a few select people had the opportunity to buy. Kali’s frown brought her back to the conversation.

“I don’t like causing them if it’s preventable. Bad vibes,” she replied easily.

“We have less than a month and then you’ll be through with it,” she told her brusquely. “So, about the finale, I have some ideas I’d like to put out to you.” She sat forward, revealing more of her leg than was necessary.

“Go on. I’m listening.”

“Would you be offended if I danced with others?”

Lonnie shook her head, though inside she was already packing her grip and buying a ticket back home to Ackron. She could climb the ocean cliff face like she had been telling Shari she was going to do since they bought the property. Then she mentally changed her travel plans and was buying a ticket to a planet she had never been to, just to see what it was like.

“Good!” Kali went on not noticing that Lonnie’s thoughts were elsewhere. Her voice went on, planning the finale, gesturing, and smiling at her official announcement that she was back at the top and this time in control of her own life and career.

Lonnie remembered an advertisement for large land parcels in one of the magazines and made a mental note to go back to it and send out an inquiry. It was in the

new territory. Land dealers were not allowed. It was for the first time homesteaders. She fit that profile...in a way.

Lonnie jumped up as Kali happily got up from the couch and gave her a hug then let herself out of the cabin. The moment she left, Lonnie keyed in her search and spent the next thirty minutes looking for the new territory. A knock on her door halted her search. She glanced at the clock and decided she was not late for anything. Peering out of the one-way peephole she found Crackle standing in civilian dress outside of her door.

“Crackle?” she greeted, swinging the door open.

“May I?” she asked, indicating her quarters.

“Sure.”

Crackle glanced at the monitor. “Looking for retirement property?”

“Yeah. I have this gut feeling I’m being led down a dead end with the property on Tuloc.” *Let’s see where this comment leads.*

“Whoever led you to believe you’d get land on that planet?” she asked outraged for her friend’s sake. “I hope you didn’t pay anything. Those people are the most arrogant and closed society you’ll ever run into. Beats me how they got welcomed into the Universal Galactic Planet’s Association. Ask Gish. She’s a citizen of that planet and had the sense to leave; though they’ve got so many strings attached I’m surprised she hasn’t strangled herself on them.” Crackle shook her head. “Get out of that game before you go into debt.”

“Before I sell something I’ll regret?” she teased Crackle. “So, what can I do for you?”

“The meet tonight. We’re doing the pirate invasion again, but Mcak doesn’t want to be the saboteur again. I was going to ask if you could. It would help you learn to be sneaky,” she teased.

Lonnie chuckled. “Eh. Think I need some of that cunning quality this late in life? Sure, I’ll be the bad guy.” She grinned to herself thinking that she could think of a lot more places to sabotage a ship than what Mcak and his friends had been thinking of lately. “Is someone going to keep Lt. Miles occupied? That creep.”

“He’s got a girlfriend, and they spend their off-time locked in his quarters. A security bot detached from his list will keep watch. Start about six?”

“You start about six,” Lonnie corrected. “A saboteur sets her own time.”

“Oh,” she turned before she stepped out of her quarters, “Terrian-4S is not advertised, but they’re selling large land allotments on their six continents. They’re interested in people who plan on settling there to farm and set up businesses. There’s more than one of the areas rugged, just like you like it. I wouldn’t mind settling there myself. A place just at the edge of the flood plain, so I can see the drama but not be swept away.” She left chuckling.

Lonnie keyed in Crackle’s suggestion. She made sure to stipulate that civilization did not have to be within a day’s ride by land or air. The Icon popped up with more than two hundred sites.

“Wow,” she whispered. Quickly she sent the results of her search to Shari and then turned her attention to business. She wanted to speak with Erich.

“Good day to you Erich...”

“Lonnie! I just got off the TTP with Kali Maxine. She tells me you agreed to her plan for the finale. Is that right?” His voice sounded doubtful.

“Yeah...it’s...well, actually she did all the talking and I just partially listened.”

The only sign of his surprise was the slight tightening of his thin lips. *“Well, you don’t have long to go now with this gig.”*

“Short of a month...”

“You aren’t counting your credits yet, are you? Sometimes well laid plans don’t work out,” he warned, but with the smile his lips stretched into, Lonnie thought he was just giving her the old warning everyone gave about building a house before you had the land.

“If it doesn’t work out then I’ll work the same cruise line for the next two years. Really, it’s no big deal either way.”

“No hard feelings against the diva or me?”

“Is there something you want to tell me?”

“No. Just testing the waters. Wondering how bad you want out of your contract.”

She took a deep breath, wondering just what type of hardships she had to go through in the next few weeks. “I’m not going to be despondent one way or the other, Erich. Is there something other than the death threats, stalkers, saboteurs, uninvited guests, and deadly presents that I should worry about?”

“Eh? What are you talking about? What death threats and what stalkers? Presents?”

“Never mind. Just tell me what I should prepare myself for.”

“Heard anything from your roommate about the property interests you have on Tuloc?”

“No. But I can’t really make an offer until I know I’m no longer traveling.”

“It sounds like your whole life is up in the air.”

“No. I have a gig finishing in about a month. Then two months off for vacation, whether I win my contract or not. Will you tell me what this is about?”

“She’s written you out of the finale.”

Lonnie felt relieved. She didn’t want to go through the crowds and interviews, especially when the news reporters would try to goad her into saying something that would hurt a lot of people’s feelings. And then there was worrying about her face plastered on everyone’s screen.

“You think I’m going to have an issue with that? I don’t. She’s the one relaunching her career. So, what else?”

“Well, besides not wanting you in the finale she wants to dance at the rest of the ports of call with other partners.”

Lonnie had mixed feelings about that but the idea of getting away from the ship early and taking her two days off without sleeping away part of it because she was tired from the previous night’s performance had its advantages.

“Sounds like she’s on the right road to self-managing. Isn’t that what you were aiming for?”

“Yes. But you had a big hand in it, and I don’t want you to feel like you...” he stopped.

“You can’t be worried that I’m going to try and compete with her, are you?” Then it dawned on her that maybe he was afraid she would find someone to coach to compete with Kali out of hurt pride. “I’m a loner Erich. I’ve been that way far too long to change.”

“It’s not that. I want you to drop out of sight...from her.”

Lonnie took a deep breath, feeling the blood pounding through her. She waited a few more moments to collect herself before answering.

“It’s got to be that way, Lonnie. We don’t want the tabloids to think...”

“That she may have had an affair with a woman...her partner?” She finished for him.

“No. That she had an affair with anyone. I want people to forget that she was at the bottom for a while. We’re going to sell the idea that she was working this last year at sharpening her talent, showing she has discipline, and wasn’t distracted. There are a lot of musicals and shows a dancer and singer with talent can be hired for. Potential investors don’t want a star with a lot of baggage.”

“Ah. And here I thought the sex lives of the stars was what sold the star. Wherever I end up Erich, it will be where I want to be. Not somewhere that you feel I need to hide.” *Is that why he wants me on Tuloc?*

“Well, I’m sure you’ll make the right decision, Lonnie. You’ve always been a fair person...or so Ben tells me.”

“Well, I guess we’re both going to have to wait to see if I make it to the end. That’s 3227 of December first. So, what kind of dances do you plan on us doing until then?”

“I sent my suggestions to Andres. He and Kali will go over it and let you know.” He hesitated and then added, *“You were right about Andres being a good leader. I asked him if he would be interested in staying with Kali since he knows her, and he’s worked with singers as well as dancers. He said yes. Thanks,”* he finished brusquely. *“Keep in touch.”*

“Right. Glad to have been able to help relaunch your star,” she muttered after the connection was cut. She rubbed her face and thought about all the other dancers she knew that had been where she was now. Lonnie turned back to the information on Terrian-4S

and studied different parcels for sale in the area. The land parcels were cheap; there were no towns of more than twenty families nearby. Supplies would be difficult to receive on a regular basis in the beginning. She searched for the cost of setting up a residence, one that blended in with the environment. Wind or sun generators would supply enough energy; it was water that was important. She needed a geologist to make sure she had more than one water source on her land. Lonnie grinned to herself. Years of learning about land for others were now going to pay off for herself. She sent an inquiry on the culture and laws on Terrian-4S.

She then sent a note to Cora, remembering Cora had a friend who was in the business of constructing homes. He was a nomad that moved where business was. He owned his own space freighter and his spouse, kids, and building bots helped with the designs and construction.

Finding the area she liked, she sent in a bid then notified Shari she decided not to wait for her to check things out.

If I end up working off my contract for the next two years, when I'm finished, I'll be returning to a brand-new house built the way I like it. Win-win, is what I taste here.

Feeling better, she decided to get in a workout. They had two days off from dancing, though she imagined that the diva was having Andres work on her dance numbers. As long as she could do one or two of her own dances, she didn't really care what Kali danced, or did she? Again, she felt something heavy on her. It was not like they were anything more than partners for a contractual tour, though they did get involved, but it was only to work off some of the sexual energy their dances generated.

Lonnie noticed there were a handful of people waiting for the elevator and detoured to the stairs.

While in the stairwell I can look for a place to plant an obvious bomb device. It'll be interesting to see how long it takes Crackle to find it.

Voices muttering in the stairwell came to her softly at first. The angry tones became more noticeable as she moved down. She was hoping her loud steps would alert them they were not alone. The voices stopped suddenly and a door below her closed. At

her deck she reached for the door and felt a pin prick at the back of her neck. She turned slightly and collapsed in a dark haze.

Chapter 20

The End Game

“Where did you find her?”

“Stairwell, sir. Taking drugs, sir.”

“Did you see her taking the drug?”

There was a moment of silence. The ensign’s lips tightened. “No, sir! But she was crazy when we tried to help her, sir.”

“Have you ever watched her dance, Ensign Bigs?”

“Don’t watch that stuff, sir. Too busy.”

“Did you place a bet on whether she would last the tour out?”

“Sir! That has nothing to do with...”

“I asked you a question, Ensign.”

“Yes, sir. I bet she wouldn’t last.”

“Any particular reason why?”

“Everyone knows she can’t take the pressure. Why else would she be here?”

“So, you think the pressure got to her and she started taking drugs?”

“She used to. Everyone knows that. Scuttlebutt is that those two were getting it on and now that the tour is over the Diva’s leaving her behind. The dancer is taking it hard.”

“That ‘dancer’ goes by the name of Lonnie. Don’t disrespect her by that tone,” the captain informed him. “Did she tell you this?”

“Well, everyone knows, sir.”

“Have you ever seen her drink, drunk, or disorderly during the entire time she’s been onboard with us?”

“No sir. She’s always locked up in her cabin...”

“How do you know? Are you monitoring her? I don’t recall anyone being assigned to spy on her,” the captain informed the ensign sharply. “You’re relatively new on the *Gray*, and know little about our performers, which was on your list of tasks to do.

They all have their idiosyncrasies just as you and your cabin mates, and as long as they don't harm anyone, it's not the staffs' business," he enunciated loudly. "Whatever you think you have seen will not be repeated, hinted at, or discussed with anyone other than Commander Co or myself and at our invitation. No one else, Ensign! You are hereby to remain in your quarters until I say you can get back to your job. Do you read me?"

"Yes sir," he mumbled.

"Dismissed, Ensign."

"Yes, sir!"

He spun around and nearly fell when he caught Commander Co's look. Nervously he grabbed for the door handle and had to make a second grab.

"What do you think?" Commander Co asked the Chief Purser Crackle who was in charge of the disgraced sailor.

"I won't give either his pal or him a 'bad guy' rating, but," she shook her head, "my gut tells me he's not telling the entire truth about something."

"I want every officer's name that did not pull out of that gambling pool." The captain turned to face his Chief Purser. "I made it plain in the staff meeting why it was not to be continued. I also explained to the staff that we are under corporate eyes to see if we are made of the right staff to fly more celebrities. **Anyone** that cannot meet the muster will be gone before we set sail on the next voyage. Am I clear?"

"Yes, sir. And I'll see that you get that list by next meeting," CP Crackle responded calmly.

"Dismissed."

After she left, the captain glared at his commander of security. "Maltieani, what is happening?"

"We've got rats onboard still. And I'm going to find everyone that is involved and I'm going to make sure they regret it," Maltieani finished in a low intense voice.

"Aren't you being a bit presumptuous," the captain told him annoyed.

"I've cleaned up a lot of messes, Captain Mukng Borelie. A lot of them were favors to you. I don't appreciate someone sacrificing Lonnie's life for a bet, and I'm not blind to the fact there are a lot of people that would like to see her not finish out her contract on this tour for their own selfish reasons. I also know that the years she's shipped

with the *Gray* she's done a lot of people favors without asking for anything in return, so it especially angers me that this betting even started. Doping her up on sohema is one heavy duty way of turning her into a drug addict for life. I intend to find out who did it. And captain, if I find out that you're part of it, you will find yourself wishing you had stayed out of it." He left off that the drug was the same substance contained in the ampoule found in Lonnie's cabin. His thoughts went back to the attack on her by the cat assassin, whose only intent was to disfigure her face. Was it connected?

"Are you threatening me, Malti?"

"Yeah, Muk. Because if you mess with Lonnie, you mess with me."

For a few minutes both men glared at each other.

"I have no idea what is going on. On my liner, Malti!" Captain Borelie finally said exasperated. "The problem I have here is I have already transferred off one third of my crew for new members just because of this diva...and now..."

"What you transferred off was scum. You know that. The only reason you were able to get a better selection of sailors was because the owner saw credits pouring in for this tour. Looking at it in a positive way, you have five more years as captain, if the owner sees you handling this diva and whatever comes up from having stars on this midsized ship with little noise, you'll be the one handling the rest. That's a bonus for you with the increased credits the ship makes."

"What makes you think any star is going to be that crazy to be trapped on a space liner for a ten-month tour?"

"The ones that take a year off to change their style, test out new material, and get a handle on their life without outside pressure. Stars like Diva Maxine. We can quarter them on the second deck where it's a lot easier to protect them and let them have privacy without locking them in their suites. The only reason we didn't on this cruise is because we didn't know what we were getting into. The rest of our performers aren't top names that can incite near riots."

"Do you have any idea who would do that to her?" the captain asked.

"I have only suspicions. I'll let you know if I have anything solid."

Chapter 21

Time Stands Still

Lonnie felt something crawling all over her body and it burned. She strained against the straps holding her down. Her struggle was short as a soft whoosh plunged her back into a drugged sleep.

When she awoke again, her arms felt like someone was on each side of her shaking her. Her eyes opened and above her was the ceiling of the medilab. She knew that because... Another whoosh that she recognized as a shot of drugs stopped the shakes. She lost sense of her body and started to panic when a familiar voice called her. "Hey, how do you feel?" Gish asked softly.

Lonnie's eyes rolled to the left and if her hands were not bound to her side, she would have brought them up to prevent her eyes from rolling out of her head. She made a noise in her throat.

Gish handed her a straw, which Lonnie sucked on greedily.

"What...what happened?" she whispered.

"What do you remember?" Gish asked.

"Thank you, Gish. I'll ask the questions. Leave us alone," Maltieani dismissed the masseuse curtly.

"Sure. Hang in there, love. We're behind you."

"Behind me? What's with the restraints?" she croaked.

She heard the door click behind Gish. After Maltieani locked it, he returned to Lonnie's side.

"You were taken down like a piece of trash," Maltieani told her gently. "Someone drugged you. Same stuff we found on the ampoule in your quarters."

"Drugged?"

"Yeah. It's damnable. Can you remember anything?"

"No," she told him softly. Her arms were freed, and she weakly lifted a hand to hold her head. "What a headache," she muttered. "I don't remember ever having a headache like this. My eyes feel like they're going to pop out."

“I need you to sit up. Don’t get up too fast. Doc?”

The two helped the feeble Lonnie to her feet and to a medical elevator. “Where am I going?” she asked as she was maneuvered to the seat on the elevator.

“I’ll take her from here,” Maltieani told the doctor. He kept his hand on her shoulder as the elevator ascended. When the ride stopped Maltieani assisted her to her feet. Lonnie wasn’t sure if she was walking or Maltieani was carrying her.

“Hey, I think I recognize this place,” she whispered. “I’m not feeling much of my body, Maltieani. I know I should be worried, but I feel so tired.”

“It’s the owner’s suite. It’s not being used for the rest of the tour. It’s the only safe place for now. You don’t want to feel your body right now. Sleeping is a better option at this stage of withdrawals.”

Lonnie went back to sleep as soon as Maltieani laid her on her new bed.

The guard nodded at Maltieani.

“You open that door to anyone other than the Doc or me and...”

“Uncle!” the young man responded indignantly. “Mom would kill me if anything happened to Lonnie under my watch.”

“Okay. It’s bloody sad when I must call my own family in to protect a friend,” Maltieani told him sadly.

“Well, you got one of the best,” his nephew told him assuredly.

Maltieani had no doubt about that. His nephew, Kudhitea or Muto, to the family, was a member of a private bodyguard force. Muto’s present employer had given him time off to protect Lonnie. Why he wasn’t told nor was Muto informed, or if he was, he gave no hint to his uncle. The attacks on Lonnie only compounded the death threats against Kali. Maltieani was angry that so much was getting past his security. Someone on his team had to be rouge. He shook his head and took a moment to look over the owner’s reconditioned quarters.

“Are you sure you want her up and dancing in two days?” Muto asked.

“Doc said it’s possible without killing her. I don’t want whoever did this to profit from it. She’s healthy, and she’s not a drug addict. She’ll be sicker than a first-time sailor

on the open seas, but she'll make it. She wouldn't have it any other way, Muto. I've known her to have the flu and still perform."

"That diva, her partner, she was sniffing around here."

"Does she know you're here?"

"No, sir. I watched her try to use a keycard. I've been rotating the code so no one will be coming through that door without busting it down." He pointed at the medical elevator that gave the owner direct access to the medilab. "That's the only weak area. But I got that covered too." He held up a tiny capsule.

Malticani frowned. Lifting his arm, he muttered a code in his com and then waited. He initiated an order to the computer to find out who was selling access codes. "I'll be by later this evening." He glanced at his watch. "I'll signal you before I come up. Before you leave, I'd appreciate some pointers on how to get my troops up to muster." His nephew nodded. From the moment he had stepped aboard he was taking notes.

On the commander's ride down, the medical elevator stopped at each deck so he could rekey the locks to prevent a breach in security. The medilab elevator was inside medical kiosks on each deck. The doc and commander of security had the key. Since his nephew had come aboard with his equipment, even the doc had to be cleared in order for the elevator to be used.

Rather than take the elevator to the medilab, he got off two decks above and took the crew's elevator to the medilab. He found the doctor holding off two angry people, the diva and her handler.

"What's the problem?" he asked, coming to stand beside the doctor.

"I want to know what happened to Lonnie?" Diva Kali Maxine demanded.

"We do have a right," Yomatta informed him.

"Doc?"

"I told them she's resting and seeing no visitors. She will be fine for the performance in two days. She was attacked in the stairwell and it's under investigation. Anything else, they're to see you," she finished, looking tired.

"Well, there you have it. What's the problem?"

"I want to see her."

“Why?” Maltieani asked curiously. “Do you have something worth waking her up for?”

“I won’t wake her. I just want to see her.”

“She’s been under the doctor’s care since last night. Quiet is what she needs. Meantime, we’re looking for whoever attacked her. Please. Let the doctor get some rest.”

“Why aren’t you letting me see her?”

“Why are you insisting on it? I’m investigating and she’s under my care until she’s feeling better. She won’t miss her performance. If you care about her, you’ll let her rest.”

Kali looked uncertain.

Yomatta pulled at Kali’s sleeve. “See that she studies her list of dances,” Yomatta told them as she stepped out of the room with the diva in tow. “I told you the pressure would be too much,” Yomatta informed Kali with distain.

“If I didn’t know better, I would say we’re seeing another side of the diva’s handler,” Maltieani mentioned to the doctor.

“I don’t think so. Remember, her sole responsibility is to her client.”

“Do you think she has anything to do with what happened to Lonnie?”

The doc shook her head. “I don’t know. What’s in it for the diva? When Gish was in here earlier, she told me that once this tour is up, Lonnie’s being cut loose with orders to get out of the business.”

Maltieani snorted. Everyone knew that which was why Lonnie was looking for property. But why where no one would think to find her? And why would her agent, if that was who it was, give her a strong message to get out of the business?

“Doesn’t sound like a good deal to me,” the doc added. When Maltieani looked up at her puzzled she added, “To give up something you have a passion for, just to get out of a contract you only have two years more to go. She’s not unhappy working here.”

“No, she isn’t.” He glanced at his watch and realized he was late for breakfast with his mate. He tapped his com unit and informed Jol he was on his way.

Breakfast was placed on the table by one of the crew. When the two took their seats, she served them their first hot beverage and left.

“So, how is our dancer?” Jol Hrorian, the Chief Purser of Entertainment, asked his spouse.

“What’s the scuttlebutt?” Maltieani asked instead.

“Well, the new one is that all officers that participated in a certain bet will be disciplined.” Jo played with his food for a few moments. “That set off a whole new set of rumors that someone attacked Lonnie which had a lot of people wondering why Ensign Bigs has been isolated to his quarters. His bunkmates can’t get a word out of him.”

“One of the problems of being married to a security officer is you don’t always get the inside information,” he told him and kept chewing his food. “But I’ll tell you this, too many people know Lonnie’s business and she’s not a social butterfly.”

Jo nodded. “Yeah. Usually, the rumor is about Binky’s latest or Mack’s new complaint. I’m wondering why there aren’t any bets going on about who among the crew will be gone for the next tour. I put the word out that this is not just a trial run. That the head office is serious about hosting stars so anyone with tight lips and clean morals will stay for the next cruise of stars and the others will be out. We’ll see who the crew volunteers for the loose lips.”

“You sure you can tell who’s reliable and who’s not?” Maltieani teased.

“Can a malduke beatle foretell earthquakes?” Jo asked sarcastically.

“They’re never around when you want to ask them.” Maltieani gave the standard reply, which both followed with, “Then we’re about to have one.” They finished their breakfast in companionable silence.

* * *

Two days later Lonnie was at the prewarm-up to their performance early with a purser following with her costumes. She skipped the practice session wanting to save her energy for the performance. Her head was clear, but her body ached. For that reason, she was eager to get through the night so she could go back to bed. After setting up her costumes she sat and waited for Kali’s arrival instead of inspecting the stage. According to the dance schedule there were no solos for her. But then, she was not really interested in dancing. Saddened, she looked out over the empty rows of audience seats. It reflected how she felt. Depression, the Doc had warned her, was a side effect of the drug.

“How are you feeling?” Kali asked quietly.

Lonnie glanced at her partner. “Like I’ve been written out of my own show,” she told her mournfully.

“You agreed...” Kali began in an angry undertone, standing close enough to Lonnie to whisper.

“I agreed to mentor you, babysit you, and help you get a professional attitude, with the assurance that I would have at least one of my own dances in the mix,” she returned tersely.

Muto handed her a drink, effectively interrupting her. Gratefully she gulped her drink, tasting the meds. Lonnie didn’t miss the look Kali gave to Andres who then tapped his baton to begin the intro.

“Thank you, Muto,” Lonnie told him softly. “That was a lifesaver,” she added when Kali moved off. Wearily she rose and moved to center stage, where she would be most of the performance, doing little.

When her appearance was no longer required, Lonnie didn’t wait for any curtain calls but walked out with Muto, her costume case packed and ready. Once back in the cabin Lonnie made a bee line for the couch and collapsed.

Muto prepared her another drink and took up his position near her cabin door. The dancer looked miserable. “A cold towel would help,” Muto suggested. “I’ll get one for you.”

“Muto, you don’t have to be my servant,” she told him, and sank back onto the couch gratefully. “But that would be appreciated.”

It took thirty long minutes before Lonnie was relaxed. An alarm went off, causing Lonnie to roll off the couch and Muto to throw his body over hers. That was how Kali found them when she swung the door that adjoined their quarters open. Whatever she intended to say was halted while she tried to decipher what she was seeing.

“Are you all right,” Muto asked Lonnie as he helped her back onto the couch.

“Headache is back.” Lonnie moved her eyes with effort to Kali. She was still dressed in her costume. Lonnie guessed she did another interview after the show.

Muto gently lifted her head and arranged her lopsided pillow. Lonnie was relieved because she didn't have the strength to do it herself.

"I want to know what's going on," Kali demanded. Yomatta was standing behind her, letting Kali do the talking.

Lonnie just wanted them to go. "So do I. We're just going to have to wait until someone that does know tells us. Until then, I have a headache and intend on sleeping it off." Lonnie hoped Kali would take the hint and leave. Her eyes closed.

"What happened to you? You must know that," Kali persisted.

"No. I don't," she answered without opening her eyes. "I'll see you tomorrow." Kali hesitated and then left.

Muto picked up the ice pack and put it behind her neck.

"Have we gotten to the worse part yet, because I'm ready for it to start getting better," she whispered.

"You're sounding depressed, Lonnie," Maltieani's voice informed her.

She opened one eye. Maltieani was standing in the doorway. "You're into sneaking up on me?"

"Muto heard me." He squatted next to her and laid a hand on her forehead.

"Hey, are taking the Doc's place?" she asked weakly.

"She's listening to a family complaining that they were poisoned. She told me to check your forehead for fever and then make sure you had your meds. She doesn't trust her staff I guess." He got an affirmative from Muto, "and then get you to bed."

"I'm all for bed. I feel wiped out."

"Then it's a good thing you didn't stay for the diva's interview. Every other question was why you are not doing your dances and was it true someone attacked you. She handled it well, considering she was taken by surprise. She told them she would see that you got more dance time. Generous of her, isn't it?"

Lonnie would have pursued the comment but the moment her head hit her pillow she was asleep.

Maltieani keyed the adjoining doors so that no one without his override or Lonnie's authorization could open either.

“How’s she doing?” Maltieani asked his nephew.

He shook his head. “She’s stubborn. I was surprised she didn’t need to be carried back.”

“She’s made of stern stuff, that’s for sure. She lucked out that Kali Maxine decided to do all the dancing this evening. It was pretty, but not like Lonnie’s stuff. While she was recouping in the owner’s suite no one came by, according to our security sweeps.” He was disappointed.

“Did they really ask her why Lonnie wasn’t dancing?” Muto asked.

“Yeah, and her response of putting back one solo did not sit well with the audience. That’s when the questions of Lonnie’s injuries and accusations started to be shouted at her. She stood up to them. Took one question at a time and answered either with “That’s not your business,” to giving what she thought was appropriate for the public to hear. You can tell she’s a veteran at facing hostile crowds.”

“I sure would have loved to see that,” he told his uncle wistfully.

“I have a video. I’ll feed it here. Do you think you can study it and see if there is anything worth noting security-wise? I’ve run it through the computer, and it came up with some possibilities. I’d like a second set of trusted eyes.”

“Run it. I’d like to give a look, just to see what space cruise liners security have for spotting potential trouble.” He grinned at his uncle. “Good night, uncle.”

* * *

“Erich! Don’t handle me! I want to know what’s going on!”

“Kali, get a hold of yourself. It’s an ongoing investigation and until Commander Co releases anything else I have nothing more to tell you. We have four more stops. You have videos on your partners, study them. You can work on what you’re going to...”

“No, I can’t. Lonnie helps me and she’s...she said she’s going to bed. I just saw her and she looked horrible. She moved just fine in our performance.”

“She didn’t do much of anything in that performance,” Erich returned dryly.

“When I told you that you could go ahead and work on your stuff, I didn’t mean for you to eliminate her dances in the ship’s shows. This is still her route and her fan base. Show some respect, Kali. You have what you want on the planet shows.”

“I have them eating out of my hand!” she snapped.

“I saw the interview after your performance. They were angry, and they have a right to be. They paid to see Lonnie. Many of them have been taking this cruise on a yearly basis to see her dance. You’re going down the wrong track on this, Kali.”

“So, what do you want me to do?”

“Go back to giving her equal time on the ship performances. You already eliminated her from your off-shore performances and the finale. The finale was to be the last time her fans see her perform and you took that away from them. You might want to rethink that.”

“She hates them. This is doing her a favor as much as me. It’s a win-win for both of us.”

“Hate is a strong word, Kali. Are you sure? When I saw her dance, I would never know what you just said. She’s a professional, Kali. She doesn’t talk badly about anyone and she gives her all no matter how much she hates the material. Don’t be too hasty to write her off because you never know when you’re going to need her, or any of the other people you meet on the way back up.”

“You sound like Lonnie,” Kali muttered.

“Don’t underestimate her, Kali. I have but I’m already committed to my mistake.”

“Why, what did you do to her?” Kali demanded in her defense.

“I told her she could have her contract if she helped out with your dances for the year. I should have offered her credits instead. With her talent I could have had her train up and coming performers for two years. Anything else you need to know or discuss?”

“No. Talk to you later.”

Kali leaned back against the couch. She had a headache. She leaned over and picked up the phone, dialing Andres’ number. His voicemail came on, so she let him know they were going back to the fifty-fifty mix.

Kali decided she needed a soak in the hot tub.

For thirty minutes, she cried soundlessly in the bubbling waters. She knew it was important to let the tears and hurt out now before she put up barriers and lied to herself about leaving Lonnie behind. She knew Lonnie would not survive living under a

microscope nor because of the intense plotting of the media to get something embarrassing on her.

For all the unfortunate happenings in her life, Kali had one big factor that gave her her second chance to make a comeback. An influential family owed Kali a very big debt and were responsible for her introduction to the Bettelheims. But she did not want her comeback to be because she destroyed Lonnie's life.

Chapter 22

Making Plans

Lonnie's eyes blinked open. For a moment she laid still wondering what woke her. She didn't need a bladder break; no one was knocking on her door; no one was calling her on the phone, and there was no alarm clock ringing. Slowly she rose from her bed, taking a deep breath when her rib tweaked. She turned the lamp light on and looked around her, orientating herself to where she was.

A tired looking Muto peeked in. "Good morning. You all right?"

"I'm feeling a lot better. Did they catch that Dankler that attacked me?"

Muto's eyes became more alert. "Actually, whoever attacked you knew where the security cameras were and kept themselves covered. A Dankler, huh? No one reported a trace of one when they found you. That will narrow it down to about twenty-five on board." He lifted his arm com and spoke softly. He appraised Lonnie. "Hungry?"

"Famished."

"Want to freshen up and then we'll see what's cooking on deck nine?"

"Yes."

After her shower, Muto took one. While Lonnie dressed, she remembered her conversation with Kali the previous day and felt guilty. Checking her watch, she wondered if Kali would want to raid the proverbial ice box this early. She reached over for the com and rang Kali's private line.

It was picked up on the second ring.

"Hi, it's Lonnie. I'm feeling a lot better and I'm hungry. You want to go with me to grab something to eat?"

“Sure. I’d like that. Let me get some clothes on...ten minutes?”

“Sounds good. I’ll meet you out front. Don’t be late. I’m *very* hungry.”

Kali laughed and hung up.

While she waited for Muto to clean up, she flipped through the channels to see what was going on around the galaxy. She sat up higher in her chair when news of pirate attacks. The pirate leader was Br’Mon.

“Oh no,” she whispered. “That can’t be right.”

“What’s wrong?” Muto asked. He studied the continuing news footage on Br’Mon and his history with law enforcement.

“Is he expanding out this way?” Lonnie asked.

“It’s not what it seems. Br’Mon contracts out these hit jobs, sending one of his own people to make sure the job is done to his specifications. All his targets have been civilians in the middle class. He doesn’t go after law enforcement, armies, or those with money, he goes after every nation’s stabilizing system, the middleclass,” Muto said.

“They keep calling him a psychopath. Why don’t they talk about how he’s managed to escape capture, how he has credit for these contracts, and how he still has followers that are willing to sacrifice themselves? It takes backing by someone with credits and influence. Do you think this is a class war and what we’re seeing is a declaration?” Lonnie asked.

“It could be his intention to create friction between the classes.”

Lonnie’s stomach chose that moment to rumble.

“You ready?” Muto asked.

Lonnie rubbed her stomach ruefully. Looking at him closer she reached over to tap his clothing. “What do you have in all those pockets?”

“I can land on an island and survive in this outfit.”

That impressed Lonnie. “I’d like one of those. Does it travel well in the desert? Just in case I get lost in one.”

“Yep. It uses your body energy and sweat to keep you at a comfortable temperature. It has water lines that run along the seams so the water you carry is

dispersed about your body that cools you and the suit. You won't feel lopsided as the supply depletes."

Lonnie rapped lightly on Kali's door which opened right away. The three walked down the corridor silently. Kali wondered who would be up at this hour for one kitchen to be opened.

Happy voices greeted Lonnie and Kali. Many of the faces Lonnie recognized during her years of travel on *Earl Gray*. She felt saddened that it was coming to an end. While Kali and she waited for their orders they chatted with those that came up to them. They wanted to see more of her dancing since this was supposed to be her last trip. That gave Lonnie a lighter feeling to know that they enjoyed her performances. She never glanced at Kali to see how she was reacting, though now she realized she didn't really care.

Once they were seated and eating, everyone left them alone.

"I didn't realize I was so hungry," Kali mentioned as she accepted some of the food that was on Lonnie's plate. "You sure you're not that hungry?" she asked, looking up at Lonnie.

"I thought I was famished, but I've reached my limit. Good thing I picked up more than what I could eat," she teased Kali.

"I've been training with Tolori, at Gish's recommendation. He has me doing physical conditioning exercises. I didn't realize it would give me a larger appetite."

Lonnie glanced at a waiter with a beverage tray. "Not for me, thanks."

Kali was going to accept one but caught a slight shake of Lonnie's head. "Not for me either. Thank you for offering." After he left, she leaned forward and whispered. "I'm thirsty."

"Then let's go somewhere where I know the drinks are safe," Lonnie whispered back.

As they left Lonnie and Kali waved at the group and followed Muto who seemed to know where Lonnie had in mind. He started back toward their suites and then stopped the elevator two floors above, walked to another elevator and went up one. He rapped on

the medilab door and stuck his head in. "Come on. No one's here," he told the two women.

"What's with the cloak and dagger stuff?" Kali asked in a dramatic whisper.

Lonnie glanced at Kali and pointed at a light switch. Obediently Kali switched it on.

"Until I know who wants me hurt, I think it would be wise to trust no one."

"Wants *you* hurt?" Kali asked surprised. "Why didn't security tell me?"

"How did you find out?" Lonnie countered.

"Gish. I was getting a massage from her, and she said you OD'd in the stairwell," Kali said. "She was asking me why I was so calm when you were in sickbay, recovering from an overdose of sohema. I knew that was a lie and I told her it was."

"Nice to know someone has faith in me and cares." She smiled at Kali and clicked her water container against Kali's. Their eyes met and in that space of time something passed between them.

"So, did you see who attacked you?" Then Kali laughed. "I guess you didn't, or you wouldn't have a purser attached to you."

Rather than answering, Lonnie asked, "So, what time is our practice?"

"Afternoon. Nothing new. Same steps we've been doing since the beginning of the cruise."

"What do you see practice as?" Lonnie asked, picking up on her flat tone.

"Going over what we're going to do in a performance."

Lonnie shook her head. "It's more than that, Kali. It's both physical and mental preparation for a performance. Practice sessions start out as a discipline and eventually become part of your act...part of your profession. Do you understand?"

"That I should be ecstatic about warm-ups?"

The two women chuckled and then exchanged glances. Neither looked away as they both looked for something in the other's eyes.

"Will you let me know where you go?" Kali asked softly.

"When I settle down, I'll send you an address," Lonnie assured her.

“I’d like to send you a housewarming gift,” Kali offered in explanation to the puzzled look on Lonnie’s face.

“What’s this? A party? And no one invited me?” Doc Pratt asked the two surprised faces that looked up at her. She knelt in front of Lonnie. She lifted her chin so she could study her eyes closer. Her small pen light flashed across Lonnie’s eyes.

“Looks like you’re doing remarkably well. So, what brings you two to my clinic?”

“Water. It’s the only place I know the water is safe and tasty,” Lonnie offered.

“I use a bit of lemon to take out the heavy taste. I gather you’re feeling fine enough to go back to dancing up a storm.”

“No. I just want to get through the practice session and this evening’s performance.”

Doc pursed her lips in thought. “I suggest you just do a warm-up before the performance. Leave out the practice sessions at least until next week. How’s the formula working?”

“Good. I feel a whole lot better than yesterday.”

“You were lucky. Sohema is not a forgiving or forgetful drug. If you had been previously exposed to it, say before two years ago, you would not be free from it today. It’s only recently that a counter drug has been developed and it only works on first time exposures.”

“Sohema?” Kali asked faintly. “So, what Gish said was true? Someone gave you sohema?”

“Injected her in the back of the neck. Cowards,” Doc snorted disgustedly.

“Don’t you have drug sniffers on every deck?” Kali asked concerned.

“Standard equipment on all cruise liners, and all DS equipment is checked out at every port before disembarking and before boarding. It’s part of the entering and leaving port procedures.”

Lonnie’s eyes grew thoughtful.

“Well, I have a full day of work to get to. Keep taking what I gave you until your seven days are up,” she instructed.

When Doc left, Lonnie rose to her feet. She needed to speak with Maltieani. She turned to Kali. "I'm going to stop and see someone before I head back to my quarters..."

"You're not getting rid of me. The only time the drugs could have been smuggled aboard is when Conessa was here because she got hers onboard. Is that what you're thinking?"

Lonnie glanced at Muto and shrugged her shoulders. "It occurred to me." She picked up the phone and tapped in Maltieani's number.

"It's me, Lonnie... No, I'm all right. Is it too early in the morning to talk about my issue?... Yeah, I got hungry Okay." She hung up the phone and looked at the two. "He'll meet us in his office now. You want to ask Yomatta...?"

"No. I'll tell her about the meeting later. She thinks I should distance myself from whatever is happening with you. I happen to think I'm part of the cause."

Lonnie picked up her hand and squeezed it gently. "Don't be carrying someone else's baggage, Kali. You still have a long life to go, and you'll be packing enough of your own before too long."

* * *

Maltieani was directing his purser where to place the kettle of warm tea and cups when they arrived. The purser left when everyone was settled.

"Tea, coffee, water..?" the commander asked.

Muto did the honor of serving.

"I want to know what you're doing about finding illegal drugs aboard and why the sniffers aren't detecting them," Lonnie said.

Maltieani shook his head, looking regretful. "I have an on-going investigation on that subject..."

"If Joleian Wrighton was the original smuggler, it means she has partners still aboard," Lonnie persisted, "or someone else that has immunity for a search."

"Have you remembered anything else besides the idea that it was a Dankler that attacked you?" Maltieani asked.

“A Dankler? Conessa’s friend was a Dankler. He was a...” Kali snapped her fingers in frustration. “What’s the person called when someone rings for assistance in the game rooms?”

“Doriage?” Lonnie supplied.

“That’s it. She would meet him outside the salon while I was getting my nails done.”

“What makes you say that he was a doriage?” the commander asked.

“Well, even though I wasn’t seeing too well then, don’t they wear that bright green line down the uniformed leg?”

“How do you know it was a Dankler if you couldn’t see that well?” he persisted.

Kali wrinkled her nose. “Smell. When you don’t see well, you develop your other senses to compensate. Conessa had that smell clinging to her. I could smell it past her perfume. They have a very distinct smell. Not quite like the Tarner and just short of being annoying like the Jus.”

“Does anyone know how you recognize people?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I hadn’t realized I couldn’t see well until I went hiking with Lonnie.”

“You think someone is misleading Kali?” Lonnie asked. “Using colors as a queue and maybe scents?”

“Could be. The few Danklers we employ use a scent dampener. I’ll get my staff to go over past videos to see who she was visiting. It won’t take long.”

“I didn’t recognize my attackers just by smell,” Lonnie told him quietly. “In my travels, I’ve learned a handful of languages. There were two people in a heated argument that didn’t notice me until I was nearly on them, and I was going down the stairs making noise. One spoke the language fluently and the other as if it were a second language.”

“So, maybe your attack wasn’t planned? Perhaps they thought you heard something.” He was silent as he thought of the coincidence that the drug found in her closet was the same substance they used on her, unless it was planted, or maybe dropped.

His eyes rose to meet Lonnie’s.

“Sotre,” she informed him, following his unvoiced thoughts.

Kali looked back and forth at the two, wondering where and what she missed.

Both knew Sotre as dependable and not someone to succumb to a bribe.

Lonnie rubbed her forehead. It was only suspicion, and it was difficult to separate her nervousness of being singled out three times and the feeling that something was different on this cruise. Added to her unease was a communication with the return address of Albert. It lacked the one-line comment coded to identify whether it was authentic and whether it was urgent. His lack of information on what she asked him to find out meant someone stripped his original message and sent another one. Someone with access to the transmissions was monitoring her communications. Someone knew her HQ job and had isolated her.

The commander was in his own worry and trying not to react to Lonnie's comment. He had the same feeling. His staff had been replaced with forty new faces, all with background checks but he had doubts on the agency doing the checks.

"What makes you feel that way?" he asked cautiously.

"Too many incidents this voyage."

"We have a diva on board," he smiled at Kali.

"Too many scattered incidents that don't add up to one person's presence," she clarified. "I've been listening to the chatter on the lower decks. They've had more occurrences this voyage of small failures than any other. I think someone is testing out the ship and how it works, and I mean the whole component - staff and ship."

"I'm naturally paranoid but that would take a great undertaking. It would have to be for something big as a reward and we're just a mid-sized ship," Maltieani said.

"Whose perusal does the ships systems fall under?" Muto asked.

"Commander Yuel. He hasn't mentioned anything at staff meetings."

"Maybe he's embarrassed," Kali offered. She shrugged her shoulders at the blank stares she received. "People react differently when they're confronted with an unknown... like having to report that you can't explain what's going on to fellow officers who seem much more confident or competent in their jobs than you do."

Commander Maltieani Co took a deep breath and silently cursed his second. Perhaps he was expecting too much from someone on their first time out. What was so

difficult about preparing a comprehensive but brief report? Was his second over his head and too proud to ask for help? Maltieani frowned. This was not his worst season out – yet. The only consolation was his nephew.

“How many people knew you were taking that stairway?” Maltieani asked her.

“I don’t know. I only knew I was going to use it right then.”

“Why?”

Lonnie thought for a few moments, casting herself back to that time. “There were people waiting for the crew elevator...five too many. Actually...” she cocked her head to the side looking puzzled. “They weren’t from the crew. I remember thinking they were passengers not crew. The way they dressed and acted.”

Commander Maltieani Co nodded. “The first security report forgot to mention that the civilian elevator was down and directed passengers to the crew elevator until it was fixed.”

“Are you suspicious of your own team?” Kali asked.

“Right now, I’m suspicious of everyone, including the captain and my spouse.”

“Maybe another approach...” Lonnie hesitated.

“What do you mean?”

“Like I said, there’s something about this ship that doesn’t feel right.” Lonnie shook her head at Commander Co’s uplifted brows. “Too many little things. Like some of the staff isn’t trained right or...” she sighed. “The waiters that do things out of character... Maybe it’s because this is their first time out, but aren’t they trained on their ship’s duties before they ship out?”

Kali suddenly leaned forward, “You mean offering a beverage? Isn’t that their job?”

Lonnie shook her head. “No. Not for a fellow crewmate, and we are considered part of the crew. It was out of character.”

“Maybe because it was the diva,” Muto offered from his post.

Lonnie shook her head unconvinced. “He offered me first. Why me? Most of the crew know I’m firm about not drinking or eating from something I don’t know is safe. Our dinner came from a common pot, and I could see the person preparing it. However,

the beverage was my favorite drink. I also thought it odd that Wrighton was dragging the owner's nephews into something that could be very messy. I remember that Clamont Stanley's children, a boy and a girl had died years ago with his wife in a plane crash, and that he hadn't remarried. I also know he stopped visiting his various ships two years ago. My guess is that he's sick. If that's so, then his relatives will be jockeying into positions to take over his businesses. Not many people know that his secretary is a business partner so a lot of the shifting around will be for not, unless someone kills off the partner."

Commander Co leaned back letting out a small sound of air. "Where did you hear all that?"

"Rumors on the market report, and guessing about some of it, on my part."

"Well, we're lucky scuttlebutt hasn't picked up on that."

"How do you know so much," Kali asked Lonnie.

"I read a lot."

Commander Co nodded and looked over at Kali. "For your part, perhaps you should go over the press releases with Yomatta before you have your interviews. I spotted a few news media journalists in the audience the other day that aren't really journalists. They came onboard at the last port. Since we're booked for the rest of the trip, I suspect a passenger sold his or her cabin to them."

"Commander, there are bound to be more media and free-lance journalists at the last leg of this journey to report on my progress and see if they can scoop their competitors on where I might be heading with my career," Kali said.

By his nephew's wink, he should have thought of that. He is, after all, head of ship's security.

"I'll make sure Yomatta gives you an updated list of anyone that can cause trouble for me, but you do monitor communiqués that are passed to the crew and passengers, don't you?" Kali asked.

The commander grimaced. "Now, Diva Maxine, please don't let that get around. We only do a surface scan of people's mail."

Lonnie snorted in disbelief. "I think we deserve a little more truth on that matter."

“We have a few passengers that we keep an eye on,” he told her. “But we have only the cruise liner’s interests in mind. It isn’t detailed snooping...” He stopped at Lonnie’s expression. Another thing he made a note to personally investigate.

Kali glanced over at Lonnie. “I guess you have a spotless background.”

“Obviously not so spotless if I continue to be someone’s target.”

Kali’s eyes took on a thoughtful look. Erich had done a background on Lonnie to make sure her preference for privacy was not due to a dark past and he found nothing noteworthy except for a fan letter she had sent to her when they were both young. Her lips curled into a smile. It was a very sweet letter that a young fan would write. There was nothing that would embarrass her, so why had she not mentioned it? Did she forget? Lonnie-types don’t forget who they write a fan letter to. She wished she knew if her secretary had answered and what he had said.

“Well, you both certainly added some interesting points in my present investigations. This chat was very informative. I thank you for your time.”

“More grist for the mills, eh?” Lonnie smiled at him.

“Knowledge is a wild thing and must be hunted before it can be tamed,” Kali quoted from an old proverb.

“Pursuits become habits,” Lonnie replied, grinning at her.

“Experience without learning is better than learning without experience,” Kali returned quickly.

Commander Co chuckled. “If you have a proverb that can motivate my team, I can do with one.”

“A person that promises too much means nothing,” Lonnie promptly answered.

“Pride often wears the cloak of humility,” Kali responded.

Both women looked at each other with grins. Lonnie turned to the confused Commander. “Chances are that the person you least expect...”

“The butler, but in your case, the purser,” Kali told him with false solemnity.

They all laughed.

“So, what do you think all this is about,” Maltieani asked Lonnie.

“Politics, power, and money. The usual.” She rose from her chair, signaling she had had enough of the conversation.

“That’s it?” Kali asked disappointedly.

“Yeah. I hate getting involved. I’m going to find myself something to do to forget all this stuff...like watching a comedy or light drama.”

“Can I watch too?”

“Sure. But it’s a movie on river rafting, it will have some scary parts,” Lonnie warned Kali with a grin.

“Watching it is not the same as being there. I can vouch for that.” She peered back at Muto. “Hey, do you want to watch my first adventure on a rafting trip? I had a good camera tech taking the pics.”

Lonnie chuckled. “The very thing I was thinking about.”

“So, what did you get out of that meeting with the commander?” Kali asked as they walked back to their cabins.

“There’s a saying that when the weapon is a bomb, it doesn’t matter where you’re standing, you’ll be affected. I’ve a personal experience in that.”

“There must be somewhere safe,” Kali said.

Only if some poor fool throws herself on it to save the others. “So, Muto, you like river raft rides?” Lonnie asked.

“Sure do.”

“Well, we have us a wanna-be movie star that gets wet in her first raft movie. And she looks good wet.”

Kali gave her an elbow.

Chapter 23

Something More To Worry About

Lonnie turned to her pillow and pounded it down. Leaning back, she tried to take a nap. They had a warm-up session before the performance and though she was feeling fine physically, her thoughts were a jumbled mess.

Gods but I hate to think this ship is what Br'Mon is interested in but it's so middle class with a few wealthy patrons that like to rub elbows with the common folk.

Lonnie turned to her side and looked at the clock. She had twenty minutes before she had to get ready.

Are we passing any dangerous spots? I haven't heard of it, and usually the spy magazine has all the hot spots listed daily. Crackle would have said something on our last training session.

No closer to an answer, she got up and dressed. On the way to the auditorium, she visualized the dance sequences.

Muto, standing near her, kept a close eye on who joined them in the crew elevator and was relieved when they safely arrived at their destination without incident.

Kali had not arrived, but it was still early, so Lonnie warmed up alone. The steps came back easily. Mac, a piper with their band, blew a tune to her foot tapping. When she finished the dance, a lone clapper turned her head.

Kali stood in the wings looking pleased. "You're feeling much better. That was great. Why haven't we done any reels or jigs like that?"

"We can tonight. Want to try?"

"Yes. I remember doing those a long time ago. They were fun."

"Okay. Let's do Ride the Merry Wagon. That's a fun reel and it can be done with two people."

Practice went well with both women feeling cheerful, considering the uncertainty of events happening around them. When their practice time ended and the two were headed back to their cabins, it dawned on Lonnie that Kali may not have the correct shoes for the dance.

"Do you have clogging shoes?" Lonnie asked, breaking the silence.

"Yes and hiking shoes too. Don't all dancers carry a shoe for every occasion?" Kali replied.

"When was the last time you wore them? You'll need them for the Celtic reel."

"That's right. They would make a much better rap on the floor. I'll try them on when we get back... Uh, oh."

Yomatta was heading to them and by her expression she was not pleased.

“Need protection?” Lonnie asked concerned.

“No, no. I’ll see you later.” Kali walked faster to close the distance between them.

Lonnie looked after Kali for a few moments, watching her slip her hand under Yomatta’s elbow and steer her back to the passenger elevator. “I can’t wait to finish this gig and go on a two-month vacation. Never again will I get talked into babysitting divas or such-minded egos.”

Muto chuckled.

Lonnie soaked in the cabin’s small hot tub, watching on the screen dances of the jig and reel to make sure her memory was fresh. The dance she chose was a classic and it was old enough to be a treat to her fans. She was thankful Kali and she were skilled enough to put something new in their schedule without much practice. Dragging herself out of the tub she dressed and sat cross-legged on the couch, playing her guitar and not thinking.

“It’s time,” Muto announced to her.

Stretching, she felt her leg muscles tighten from the unfamiliar steps they practiced.

She packed her costumes and again relied on Muto to get her to her destination safely. The audience lined into the theatre winding through the corridor and many murmured appreciative words as she made her way to the performer’s entrance. Kali joined her from a passenger elevator.

“This turnout is really great.” Kali waved and nodded at the line of people that were calling her name.

“So, how’s Yomatta?” Lonnie asked.

“She’s fine. She was just upset because Commander Co left some videos he wanted me to go over to see if I recognized anyone that was a threat to me. He, umm, made mention of our early morning meeting.”

“Ah.”

“So, where will you be on your two-day leave?” Kali asked.

“I don’t know. Depends on what I’m in the mood for.”

Kali looked at her surprised. “You don’t plan?”

“Not always. I don’t really like the culture at this port.”

“Well, what did you do the other times you visited here?” she asked curiously. She walked through the door that Lonnie held open.

“We usually hire a ship to take us to the moons. They have eight of them. We climb and hop around and do some underground exploring but I’m not in the mood for any of that right now.”

“Are you going to stay aboard?”

“No,” she said firmly. There was a new orbiting shopping mall within hours from Pedmot that had a grand opening for those with special passes. She was one of those that won seven gold passes. Crackle, her SL or squad leader, and Ensign Tamu were two of her guests as well as others. She didn’t want Kali to know about it because she may ask to come along, and she would probably cave in and ask someone to give up their spot and then Yomatto may demand to come along, and she was not going to ask anyone to give up a spot for her. Instead, she changed the subject.

“Andres, why the grin?”

He turned to watch his two dancers walk over to him. “We have some new background video to run while you two dance the reel. CPE Hrorian had some nice stuff on file, so we’ll run it during the first three of your dances,” he commented.

“So, we don’t get surprised, give us a fast preshow.”

Andres signaled to the stage grip. The surreal appearance of a castle surrounded by rolling hills imposed itself over the bare stage.

Lonnie liked the atmosphere around the castle, with the wide-open land.

“Nice back drop,” she commented when it ended. “Shall we?” Kali gave Lonnie a hand squeeze.

The curtains pulled up and the show began against the backdrop of a castle. Quickly the scene changed as the camera moved over rolling hills and came to a stop in the castle’s courtyard. The music started out slow as the scene unfolded, but when Lonnie flew onto the stage from a balloon, a leap where the dancer is suspended for a few moments before touching the stage, the crowd gave a brief appreciative applause, then

quickly became silent as the rhythm sped up. Lonnie's feet tapped out a lively jig, with the musicians keeping up. The audience broke into more claps of delight. As Lonnie moved over the stage dancing and jumping, she felt euphoric and at the top of her world. When her solo finished, she paused in place, catching her breath. The music changed and Kali came out dancing a jig, her feet flashing and stomping against the floor. She came to a stop and curtsied before Lonnie, who moved into a skater's hold, and they both began to dance a reel punctuated with stomps. By the time Kali danced off the stage, the audience was cheering and whooping. The energy was intoxicating and invigorating. Lonnie gave them another jig and left the stage. Kali delayed her entrance for her solo, letting the audience continue with their whooping and yelling in appreciation of Lonnie's dance and to give Lonnie more time to catch her breath. Kali gave her a big smile and a thumbs up.

At the completion of their performances Kali held onto Lonnie to stay for the question period.

"No. Enjoy yourself," Lonnie whispered to her. As she walked out the stage door, she heard cheering from the crowd as Kali greeted them. She paused to listen to Kali's warm voice thanking them for their support for her and her partner. Not wanting to hear anymore, she closed the door.

Lonnie stopped at one of the public phones and called Crackle to confirm their departure time. She was impatient to leave. Crackle was not answering her com. "This is Lonnie, when's our departure time? I'll be in my cabin so call me when you get in. Bye."

"Do you know much about her?" Muto asked as they turned down Lonnie's corridor.

Lonnie glanced at him and saw furrows in his brow. "She's my *budo*i. But don't get too impressed, she says I have a long way to go before I think about getting *dado tats*."

Muto laughed. Only hired assassins, the mortleige group, wore *dado tats*, tattoos that covered their entire body.

"So, why are you interested in Crackle?" she asked as she watched Muto inspect the room.

“I don’t believe we have seen the end of your pursuers,” he answered, slipping a device back into his pocket.

“Are you suspicious of a chief purser who knows self-defense or are you looking for recruits?”

His grin widened. “You never know when you’ll be called into action.”

A chill skittered down her spine. “Well, that’s a fact,” she said softly. *HQ sent him.*

“I noticed you keep up with the latest gadgets,” he took a seat on the couch. “So, how much do you really know?”

“Just what I told Maltieani. Something is happening on this ship, and I can’t figure out what. Why would someone want to eliminate me?”

“I don’t know. It’s the nature of the attacks on you that has HQ alarmed. They weren’t intended to kill you, just remove you permanently from the scene.”

“From the scene?” Lonnie asked cynically. “Addicting me to sohema is a life of addiction and it would have left me worthless to everyone. The catperson’s attack on me on UrBoka would have left me with a scar where no amount of cosmic fix would help. That would have removed me from more than one scene. Who would benefit from me being totally out of the picture and before the end of this tour?” Lonnie rubbed her forehead.

“Sometimes it’s better not to know who your executioner is,” she quoted.

“Do you know who is behind the attacks?” Muto asked curiously.

“I think it’s tied to the diva but I think she’s just another player on the board like me.”

“That’s why you’re an observer. But when I arrived, *I* could feel something off with this ship. I don’t have all the top-of-the-line equipment with me to locate it or identify what it is, but I’m going to bet someone has an energy emitter that is intended to cover something a sensitive species would otherwise pick up. Do you know of any other sensitives on the ship that could or would feel it?”

“Andres.”

Muto looked surprised.

“It’s why I asked him to come along on this trip. He can pick apart an audience and know what they want to hear. When I’m dancing, I just like to dance, not divide my attention with the crowd and what’s going on around me. But he’s been a lot more vigilant about what’s been going on around him than normal. He’s carrying a weapon too.”

Muto pointed at her accusingly, “So, even before you started this tour you knew something was wrong. Why didn’t you signal HQ?”

“What was I going to tell HQ besides I have this feeling? They would have attributed it to my new manager, and it could well have been that.”

“So, brief me, what all is feeling off to you?”

“The biggest is that there’s too much activity going on around me. It feels like someone’s trying to keep me off-balance.”

“How so?”

“Muto, in the entertainment industry, there are always leaks if an agent is going to retire. Ben sold out so suddenly I don’t think HQ knew. Then, my new agent wanted me to babysit a diva that is known to be temperamental, which would take a lot of attention. And oh, by the way, anyone who knows me, is aware I used to have a heavy crush on her. So, we have here, a nobody babysitting a diva on a ship ill-prepared to handle any stars on board. Two oddities. Then I was informed by this new agent that not only would I be given my contract at the end of this gig, but I was to disappear from public sight and never again contact the diva. You don’t think I would be suspicious? You don’t think I would be spinning my wheels on the mystery of that and the rest of my time trying to handle the diva?” she asked cynically. “Another odd thing about the diva... If she was all that important to *our* agent, why didn’t he run a background check on her first handler on this trip, who was a known drug dealer?”

Muto made a little noise and nodded.

“Then the incidents of pirate attacks along the tour routes and the news that Br’Mon has been hiring contractors to knock out businesses that serve the middle class. I looked up why he likes to target the middle class, but it’s simple to figure out what the middle class represents economically for all planets. They stimulate commerce more than

any other group of people. They consume more products, they travel more, and most importantly, they think outside of the fundamentalists' propaganda, and it's because they travel and see what is really going on."

"Which is one reason the Galactic Counsel encourages through sponsorships, tourism," Muto agreed.

"Br'Mon thugs want to knock out the class of stabilizing citizens to create chaos. In chaos, a well planted group of political activists can take over a government and once done, only an armed insurrection will get rid of them, and the GCC is obligated to send troops to prop up whichever side will give more stabilization to the region."

"You're really up on the political scheme of things, so what do you think is up with the ship?"

"I think this ship is going to be taken over under the guise of pirates." She held up her hand as Muto was going to say something. "Somebody wants this ship, not for plunder, but the whole ship. My problem with this is twofold. One, why not wait when the ship is docking for its yearly maintenance, so the passengers won't be a problem? Two is it's unbelievable."

Muto was quiet for a few moments. "This is..." He pursed his lips and shook his head. "I'll agree with you so far as something big is going to happen on this ship."

"But all the other stuff, is it a distraction, or is it a coincidence? I don't believe in coincidences. Nothing is coincidence. My other guess is, someone high up in a government is involved, and it was leaked to other people that think they can gain from it. I think UPMG has a big fat fist in this." She ignored Muto's surprised reaction and went on, "We're going to be boarded. I'm guessing it's going to be before we reach our last port. There's a big stretch of space that *Earl Gray* picks up speed to cross."

"Uncle did say he's disappointed with the latest crew rotations."

"Their replacements may have good background clearances, but they stink at their duties and attitude," Lonnie agreed. She noticed that their strike team lost two members and was not replaced due to Crackle's distrust of Lt. Miles imposing himself in their workouts. Lt. Miles was a replacement as second in security and was suspiciously too nosey about non-security things.

Muto waved a finger at her, “You know a lot to have been caught off-guard with a dart.”

“Even the best has weak moments,” she responded.

“My job is to make sure you safely make it to the end of this cruise.”

“Really? By whose orders? And what makes me so special?” She pointed at his left arm which he always had covered. “Your tat is an aro. A bodyguard service for people with more credits than they will ever use in one lifetime.”

She leaned back in her chair and repeated, “Someone is planning something big and they have their people scattered all over this ship and so does someone else that wants to take advantage of the confusion that will result over the takeover. Whatever is planned, I pose a problem. Who is due onboard this last leg of the journey?”

“A healthy amount of paranoia is good. Just don’t let it incapacitate you.”

“You didn’t answer my question, Muto. I’m a good judge of people and I will say, you don’t intend me harm...so, who does?”

Muto shook his head. “I don’t know. Uncle doesn’t know. HQ certainly don’t know. You’re right about taking on some passengers that are important at the last port stop but it has nothing to do with you and they aren’t people that anyone would recognize.”

“You’re lying, Muto. That tat on your arm is proof that you’re here for something important.” She leaned into his space and added softly, “I know I have no subliminal orders, or a chip embedded in me. Do you?”

“We are on the same team, Lonnie.”

She held up a warning finger. “No, we aren’t. The philosophy has changed. My contract says when it changes, I have the option to resign. Why have I been ordered to do things an observer does not do and think about this – when I end my contract with Erich, I end my usefulness with HQ.”

“My orders are to protect you. Why are you learning self-defense?” he asked.

“It’s a sport and I hardly would say that after the attack on me by that catperson that anyone would find it suspicious if I wasn’t learning self-defense. It was my first experience of being attacked and I froze. I would...” The soft buzz from the cabin com

interrupted her. She leaned over to answer it. “Yeah?... Sure, I’m ready..... Doppler shoes? Okay....Bye.” Lonnie hung up the phone and got up. “Looks like everyone is ready. Want to come along? We’re going to visit the new Pleasure Chest in orbit around Appican. Ever heard of it?”

“No, I don’t believe I have. What kind of pleasure do they serve?

They have toys from historical to the most recent sophisticated electronics.”

“Really?”

“Have you ever read the *Plausi*?” she asked.

“I’ve heard of it.” He tilted his head a little and looked at her in disbelief. “Are you telling me you read that junk?”

“I can tell you’ve never read any of their advertisements. They’re known for their far-out articles, but they’re subscribed to for their advertisements. You won’t find spyware equipment as advanced as in *Plausi* in any of the established journals because governments can’t keep up with the advancements in electronics and bugware so they don’t want the stuff out in public. What the spyware inventors and manufactures have done is buy a partnership in an orbiting mall and parked it off a planet that was not intimidated by the others for endorsing it.”

“Who has the money to back a floating toy mall?”

“There’re a lot of entrepreneurs that invest in the building of floating cities. Some run out of money and instead of everyone including the shipyards losing money, the city is finished and put on the auction block. The starting bid covers the cost of building it. Some are a great investment. This city, Brid and Appicians put a bid on it. They turned the place into a toy city with apartments for the workers and hotels for those that want to shop until they drop. They have game rooms with the latest and greatest, and the spyware shop, Brid’s Spyware Shop to be exact.”

“The Appicians are barely into the space age,” Muto snickered.

“They have a lot to gain, a lot to prove, and they’re the ones that will provide the people to service the city and its workers.”

“So, I’m invited?”

“You’re my bodyguard, right? Can’t leave home without you.”

* * *

“How are we going to get there?” Muto asked Crackle who led them through the corridor to one of the shuttle bays.

“A shuttle.” She looked over at him with a grin. “It helps to have connections and something everyone wants...free passes to a toy mall. Unfortunately, Lt. Miles is coming along with his girlfriend.”

Their transportation was the owner’s private yacht. Small, unpretentious, and easily overlooked. Joh was the pilot and kept it well maintained. It wasn’t unusual for her to take it out during port stops. However, nosey Lt. Miles was monitoring all the shuttles and squeezed Joh for information. His attempts to remove Joh as pilot was unsuccessful but to avoid staff jealousy, the captain arranged for Miles and his girlfriend to visit the mall.

“I have a special pass to move to the front of the line for being a stockholder. It’s unfortunate that your uncle couldn’t come, Muto, but we have his wish list. It’s his ticket you’re using.”

Four people Muto knew only by face climbed aboard the shuttle *EG Mistress D* with bags. Muto nodded at Lt. Miles who had his girlfriend with him. His uncle didn’t like his new security assistant and the captain allowing him to use the captain’s complimentary pass had him cautioning Muto.

Looking around to study just who was on board Muto wondered why most looked like they could take care of themselves in an alley.

“You’re staring,” Lonnie’s voice whispered near his ear.

Muto started and then had the grace to blush. “Sorry,” he whispered back.

“Yo, Lonnie!” Severon, was a tall Maseson that spent most of his time in the engine room. “I read the advertisement on the toy mall. We have a bet going that they’re exaggerating and will claim it’s a translation error. Want to get in the pool?”

“I’ll bet it’s more than what you can image and better,” Lonnie countered. “Want to bet on that?”

“You think?” he laughed. “What makes you say that?”

“Did you read who all invested in redesigning it?”

He waved his hand in disdain. "I don't do the invest sheets. Cone does that stuff." He laughed at the red face of the smaller sailor that everyone knew was a shrewd investor with the little he made in wages. For protection against those larger than his three-foot one-inch height, he befriended Severon who was six feet three inches and husky.

"I would invest in anything that the Brid and Appicians put stakes in," Cone agreed.

"Really?" Crackle asked.

"There's one thing you have to be sure about though," Lonnie grinned. "Make sure it's not just the object itself that they invested in."

"Coming about. All passengers ready your disembarking credentials," Joh announced to everyone as she changed course to fall in behind other ships hovering in free space.

"Joh, tell the station keeper we have an appointment. Ticket 0770. Gold pass."

"Will do."

"What gives you more privilege than a captain's pass?" Lt. Miles asked.

"She's a star, a celebrity with a fan of importance," Crackle said. "How do you think the captain was granted two passes?"

"I think his status is more than some entertainer and should have been given a gold pass," Lt. Miles gripped.

"If the captain was on the shuttle, he might have been granted a gold pass," Cone mumbled.

After a few moments they were given the go-head to move up the line with their running lights flashing.

"Prepare to present your passes, and according to the docking agent, wear your gold pass in view," Joh directed as her hands moved over the controls to dock and secure all stations.

Lt. Miles handed a captain's complimentary pass to his girlfriend and kept one for himself. Muto noticed the others ignored Lt. Miles. As his uncle suspected, Miles was not liked.

The seven picked up their bags quickly and began to exit orderly.

“Okay, we’ve got 48 hours with a check for status in eight hours. That should give us enough time to locate most items on our list. If not, I’ll see just how important my gold pass is and make some arrangements.” She grinned as the others laughed.

“Everyone check your watches,” Crackle ordered. “Let’s get.”

The group all crowded in a circle and did a quick tap of their fists in the center and let out a ‘rah’ before peeling off in different directions.

Lt. Miles and his girlfriend were the first out, missing the ‘rah’.

Muto watched them split up confused. “What’s going on?”

“We can’t visit the entire place ourselves, so we have our stores and a list of what to get in each,” Lonnie explained, holding up her list. She turned into a store that specialized in sounds. “We’re going to see how much we can get quickly and if we left anyone out, do the second day,” she explained further.

Muto looked around and found it was not simply music but small and large electronic and microchips that emitted various sounds to either immobilize or soothe someone to sleep.

“Just what are you looking for?” he asked Lonnie, wondering just who this woman was who gave him the impression she hated this sort of stuff.

“Something to counter any one of these things,” she muttered as she read the descriptions. “Look at this one. It does all that these other’s do but...it’s very cheap.”

“New company. I don’t recognize the name.”

Lonnie keyed into the hand computer they received on boarding the shopping mall her purchases and then moved on. Everything purchased could either be delivered to an address or picked up to take with her when she checked out. “Okay, let’s go over to the surveillance cameras.”

* * *

The entire crew was back to their shuttle in eight hours, exhausted, but excited. Muto had called his employer and was given the go ahead to purchase what he judged to be useful. They would be shipped out that night. He was excited to be the first in his group to use them.

Everyone got what they had on their list and exhausted their credit line.

“So, are we going to call it a done deal?” Lonnie asked looking around at the smiling faces.

“I have depleted my funds and I’m ready to return,” Cone said. The others nodded.

“I can’t understand why you want to leave so soon. We have the yacht until tomorrow. We can spend the night. They have a great hotel and service,” the lieutenant told the group again. His girlfriend jabbed him in the ribs. Everyone was getting tired of hearing him.

“You and your girlfriend can stay,” Crackle told him. “With the captain’s pass you can get a hotel. You don’t need us to have a romantic night, or I hope not.”

“I want to get back to the ship and hook this stuff up,” Jerish replied.

“Me too. We have to get this stuff separated too.”

Lonnie was in the back seat activating two of her purchases. One was the latest in blocking the wearer’s image and voice from any recorder, including the ship’s passenger locator. She also had a soundless immobilizer. Next time she was attacked her attacker would never know what happened to him. She purchased other things for friends scattered about the galaxy and had them mailed to them. For Kali, she found some antistalker-ware that was easily attached to her person and to any com equipment.

She glanced at Muto who was efficiently testing each item he had and then storing them on his person, with his many pockets.

“Crackle went to the luxury shop and picked me up my foot comforter,” Crment remarked. “I can’t wait to see if it’s as good as the advertisement says.”

“Just what does it do?” Crackle asked out of curiosity. “I didn’t get a chance to read the advertisement on it.”

Crment was Mobo. Their feet were very important to them. If you wanted one to fall in love with you it would help if you knew how to stroke, massage, and tickle the hairy ten toed appendages.

“Well, you wrap it around the foot like a blanket, and it becomes like a soft balloon palpating against the major stress points.”

Crment worked at one of the most stressful jobs, the complaint desk.

“If it works, I’ll buy one for me,” Lt. Miles informed her.

“So, Lonnie. What did you get for yourself?” Crment asked.

“The usual anti-fan thing.”

“Ah. Our reclusive dancer,” Crackle laughed.

“Hey, back there,” Joh called to her passengers, “did the Commander say anything about running a drill while the tourists were off-ship?”

Everyone was quickly looking out the port windows. One beacon occasionally flashed. It was the emergency beacon. All the hanger bays were opened.

“Did anyone hail you?” Muto asked quietly from behind Joh’s shoulder.

“Not a peep,” Joh reported.

“Don’t hail them,” Muto softly instructed her.

“The emergency beacon is giving intermittent sends.” Lt. Miles informed everyone loudly. “Come about to the third bay, Joh. Everyone, let’s treat this as trouble.”

“We need counter terrorist attack equipment,” Crackle countered. “Starboard, under the flap, Joh.”

“Stow the goods. I don’t want anyone stealing what I paid for,” Cone muttered. “Hey, you have anything we can use?” he asked Lonnie.

Lonnie was already fishing in her purchases. Her fear for Kali was beating hard against her chest. She handed out image blockers but refrained from the immobilizers since she only had two and the second was already claimed. Small hand weapons used mostly by tourists in the outback, that did not kill, were another’s purchase. Dono had ordered two dozen. Lonnie passed them out.

“Don’t lose them or you’re going to have to face a very disappointed fire queen,” Crackle told the others. “Dono is our fire chief,” she explained to Muto.

“What else do you have?” Lt. Miles demanded.

Lonnie glanced at him. “Nothing else that we can use. How about you?”

His eyes couldn’t meet hers.

“Let’s get,” Crackle whispered. “Listen, since we don’t know about the others, we’re in scatter mode.” She glanced at the lieutenant and at his girlfriend. “I take it you’ve been on the ship practice runs and know what to do?”

“Of course!” Miles said impatiently.

“Then Miles, your job is to secure deck one. You know it better than any of us.”

“Well, wait a moment. Aren’t we supposed to be acting like a team? Stay together and back each other? I am the highest-ranking officer here.”

“We don’t know what’s happening, Miles. None of us have been on deck one and we need someone to get up there and let the rest of us know if the bridge has been taken. Following the general orders the captain and Commander Co have setup is our mission. It’s a no brainer.”

“I’m ordering you not to split up,” Miles told her more forcibly.

“It’s not up to you, Miles. Your rank means nothing in this group. If you don’t think you can complete your assignment, Cone can head up there and check out the scene,” Crackle informed him firmly. “We don’t have time for this so make up your mind. You’re in or out.”

“I’m in.” His quick glance around him told him he was not well liked at this point.

Joh was approaching the flap in a leisurely way so as not to set alarms. Since she was flying the owner’s yacht it didn’t have the usual hailing sequence and since they were acting as if there was trouble, Joh had dampened her readings. She landed the shuttle smoothly and everyone was out in the shuttle bay.

“You’re with me Muto,” Lonnie informed him in an undertone. Lonnie stopped at a row of lockers with the others who quickly donned on protective gear and armed themselves. They all moved to their assignments.

“How do you know this is not a trap?” Muto asked in a whisper as the two waited for an armed man to finish his inspection of cabins on deck nine.

“We don’t. For them to be onboard means it’s an inside job.”

“So, what’s your purpose on this deck?”

“Seal it, neutralize any dangerous situations and...” she held up her neutralizer, “if anyone gets violent, I’m going to zap them.”

“If it’s an inside job then they’re going to know about you guys, right? I mean I don’t trust that Miles guy.”

“That’s why Crackle split us up. We were supposed to be gone until tomorrow.”

“What does anyone want with this little cruiser?”

“Well, that’s what I was hoping you would tell me.”

It took thirty minutes to make a full sweep of the deck. Using sensors, she found no passengers and assumed they were either herded somewhere, or they had left for a tour. She climbed into a maintenance tube. She tapped in a code that said she completed her task and waited for her next set of instructions.

“Beta, beta, beta,” a voice whispered in her earpiece.

Lonnie shut her com link and quickly moved through the tube to exit and out, and then to a lower level. Muto followed, keeping his eyes moving. Finally, they slid into the darkest room he had ever been in, even with night vision goggles. They could feel the ship powering up.

“What’s going on?” Muto whispered, touching Lonnie’s arm.

“A traitor has been identified. We’re on our own. My guess is that this ship is going to be moved, and that must be stopped.”

Suddenly a ship-wide announcement went out. It was repeated in many foreign languages, and it was only one sentence... “Surrender or someone dies every minute”.

“Since they’re not mentioning who to surrender to my guess is that they’re shooting in the dark,” Muto surmised.

“My thoughts too. Ah. Here it is.” Lonnie found the lid and rested her hands on the keypad on top, then typed out her code. The lid lifted and Lonnie then keyed in another code. She could feel the vibration under her fingertips end.

Muto heard a soft hum and then it stopped.

“What did you do?”

“In five minutes, the pirates will know that the ship is dead in space. Lock down will occur first, where all levels are closed for passage and sleeping gas will be dispersed. Now, we need to find out where this traitor is...” her voice faded out as she listened to feet pounding their way. “They may be able to override it if they know I’ve already engaged it,” she whispered to Muto.

“Shall we fight them?” Muto asked.

“Yes,” Lonnie whispered. She only had to fight for her life twice and neither time did she escape unharmed. Hopefully, Crackle’s tougher workouts gave her enough skill to automatically know what to do. Or there was always the neutralizer she had just purchased.

Four hooded people came into the ship’s belly where the ship’s failsafe controls were located. Lonnie guessed the men were here to prevent anyone from the ship to start the lockdown. Too late, she smirked.

Conversation from the interlopers was brief and in a language Lonnie couldn’t understand but Muto could. He gestured to Lonnie as he was listening.

The invaders had goggles on and probably would have spotted her sooner if they expected someone to be there. She took out one person easily. His body went limp and silently flopped to the ground. Quickly she stripped him of his gear. Not having any use for the weapons, she found on him she stuffed them in a trash receptacle that would automatically identify what was dumped and neutralize it accordingly. Though she had her own set of goggles, she kept his. No telling who she would meet that would need a pair.

The invaders had split up, making it easier to take them out one-by-one. Lonnie guessed they didn’t know where exactly the newly installed failsafe control panel was and were wandering around in the dark. She wouldn’t have either had she not been in the owner’s quarters to recoup for two days. Boredom and an intelligent observer could figure out puzzles when the embedded symbols were part of the designs on the ceiling in the owner’s bedroom.

As she moved behind a post, she heard the grunt of someone behind her. Pain laced through her leg, and she dropped to her knee, firing behind her. Balancing on one knee, she spun around and caught the falling man’s body and his weapon. Awkwardly, she lowered him to the ground, panting from his limp weight. Muto came to assist her, then patted her shoulder. He signed for her to remain where she was and then disappeared.

He reappeared when one of the intruders thinking a wounded Lonnie was an easy target attempted to shoot her. That was all of them. They both made sure none of the invaders had weapons or anything that would give their location away.

“We can’t dump them out nor can we let them just lay here,” Lonnie mentioned to Muto, trusting he would have more ideas than her.

Suddenly an alarm went off, and gas flooded the room they were in. The doors slammed shut and locked them in.

“Gestof!” Muto cursed. “We’re being gassed!”

“Right, that’s why you have this.” She tapped the collar of the armor he had on. “You can use that or we can use what they have. Nice of them to come prepared. Two minutes and the noise will start. Activate the collar button.”

While Muto pushed the fourth body into a capsule, Lonnie was accessing a computer console.

“The pods won’t take off without the code,” Lonnie explained to him.

“Are you going to launch them?”

“No. But they won’t be going anywhere. I need to see what’s going on.”

“What are you doing?” Muto asked.

“Well, according to my team leader, Crackle, there’s a program that will show us everyone’s location.”

“What if they’re wearing these gizmos you’re wearing?”

“Who said I’m scanning for bios? Darn! The program has been removed. A spy must have access to the security program.”

“Like you said, we’re on our own. I say we take the bridge.”

“The bridge will be the most closely guarded, Muto. I’m trained to shut things down until the IPs arrive, not storm a castle.”

“You’re bleeding,” Muto pointed out.

Lonnie looked down at her leg. “No wonder it hurts.”

Muto quickly bandaged her wound and gave her a pain pill.

“Have you thought of how we’re going to get there?” Muto asked.

“Have you ever walked on the outside?”

“Not for a long time.”

“Well then, we’ll have to split up. You can take the maintenance tube to the bay, see this? Okay, so you’ll follow this line. Chances are you’ll be running into the invaders that have managed to escape the lockdown and gas. I’m sure whoever is helping them has given them a good layout of the ship and who’s who.”

“I’ll be fine,” he grinned. “This is what I do for a living...remember?”

“Good. If you see any of our guys, don’t trust them. You need to get to the landing bay and deactivate any of the ships these invaders have there. The standing orders are to neutralize without direct involvement.” She paused. “You know, right now, I wouldn’t even trust them.”

They parted at a y-shape in the air shaft. Lonnie went to access a shaft to the outside then paused to think about her next action.

Alright, the primary job has been achieved; send out a beacon for help. Secondary is activating shut down. That’s done. Third is to secure passengers. I don’t know about that one, and fourth is to remove their ability to escape. Muto can take care of that by himself. I must know if she’s okay.

She turned and headed for their deck. Before dropping into the corridor, she paused to hear a sound coming from one of the rooms. Someone was searching it. She knew she needed to get out of the air duct because it would be the first place the invaders would look for anyone missing from their list of who was still onboard.

Lonnie exited the air duct on her deck. As she trotted down the corridor, she noted all the cabin doors were locked as they should be.

A familiar voice drifted to her. Joleian Wrighton. Turning, she spotted a door to the stairwell propped open. She wouldn’t have time to close it. Lonnie’s heart pounded harder as she looked frantically for a place to hide. Back into the air duck, she thought.

“You moron. I told you to keep an eye on her. I want her,” an unfamiliar voice shouted.

Four people entered the corridor and headed in the direction of Lonnie’s quarters.

“You’re the idiot that botched tagging her,” Joleian returned hotly. “Besides, she’s half-blind and can’t find her way out of a bag. She’s got to be here someplace. Meti, are you sure you searched everywhere in her cabin?”

“Fucking idiots don’t even know how to secure a ship even when it’s handed to them. More than half the decks are locked out. Next time we use my people, not dit-wits hired from the local loser’s club,” the unfamiliar voice complained.

“Dorich, just shut up. You make enough noise to alert anyone hiding around a corner,” one of the others muttered. “Did you search Lonnie Bestolie’s quarters?”

“Now there’s a bright thought,” Joleian replied sarcastically. “If she’s going to be hiding it’ll be in *her* cabin,” Joleian told the others.

The four passed under Lonnie. They all had weapons held loosely in front of them.

They take over a cruise ship to kidnap the diva?

They stopped in front of Lonnie’s cabin door. Lonnie wondered how they were going to break in. Using a shooter would put a hole through the bulkhead and would also rupture something vital to the ship’s functioning.

Joleian showed her true talent by faking her voice and calling for the diva to come out. Lonnie nearly laughed out loud until the next comment was a threat on Lonnie’s life if the diva didn’t come out. Deciding to do something, Lonnie started to move through the air duct to get into her cabin when she heard faint movements ahead of her in the duct. Lying flat she waited.

Kali was nearly on her when Lonnie, having the advantage of the goggles, silenced her with a soft warning and then an order to not move. Slowly she slid the extra goggles out of her pocket, passing them onto Kali. She then latched one of her new devices onto Kali’s collar.

Joleian and whoever she was with turned and went back to the stairwell.

“Where is she?” Dorich demanded.

“She returned to ship after her performance,” Joleian insisted. “The manifest doesn’t have her going anywhere else.”

“Well then one of our spies has some explaining to do,” hissed Dorich. “We can’t go back without her. Those Bettelheim’s are going to pay for screwing with us.”

“Maybe one of the crew knows,” one of the others suggested.

“It doesn’t do us much good when access to most of the decks is locked to our passage! Morons. I told them not to trust one person’s information.”

“It wasn’t one person. Just shut up and let’s get back to our command post. Miles and his bunch can pinpoint where everyone is located.”

The four walked to the stairwell and started down.

Lonnie swung down from the vent intending on shutting the stairwell door so that it could lock into place. As she reached the door, she faced a startled Joleian. Before she could say anything and lift the weapon she had, Lonnie did a chop to her throat. Lonnie intended to pull her into the corridor and lock the stairwell door, but Joleian had other ideas. Lonnie could hear someone calling for Joleian as the two fought. The throat chop should have incapacitated her and the frantic way she was battling Lonnie she nearly was.

A cold weapon held to her forehead ceased Lonnie’s fighting. Joleian took advantage of the situation and punched and kicked her until Lonnie grabbed her and threw her into Lt. Miles who shoved her toward his girlfriend who had a weapon pointed at Lonnie. Joleian was shot and Lonnie was able to chop Miles in the throat, felling him. Lonnie had now to worry about the girlfriend, but she turned and ran down the hall instead of down the stairwell. Lonnie scooped up Miles’ weapon, kicked the door stop loose so the stairwell was sealed, and sprinted after the girlfriend not wanting her to get away. Suddenly a tall, battered form appeared before the fleeing woman and felled her with a strong-armed punch.

“Dahsw!” Severon cursed shaking out his fist.

Lonnie stopped and raised her weapon not knowing whether to trust him or not. Severon understood and held a bloodied thumb up then gave her a sign that Tamu, Crackle and Cone were well. He bound the woman up and activated a riot net. He turned and disappeared back down the corridor. Severon’s job was to hunt pirates and immobilize them. Severon loved his job.

“I forgot about those nets.” She limped back to an unconscious Miles and Joleian. She peered up at the vent and could see a frightened Kali watching her. Lonnie gave her a thumbs up to reassure her.

Kali dropped to the ground, with Lonnie steadying her. “What do we do now?”

Lonnie quickly patted down the unconscious woman, noting that the shot Joleian took could be life-threatening. Her med pac showed no bleeding but the weapon damaged the victim from the inside out. She activated a riot net over Joleian.

She didn’t think securing Miles under the net would keep him. He probably had a counter-key for it. Lonnie removed his clothing rather than worry about missing something he had hidden. She used one of his own old fashion restraint locks.

Lonnie looked around for the trash bin. “Let’s see if this works.”

Kali moved to open the lid. “The trash is still here,” Kali whispered.

“It shuts down when the distress beacon is activated. A good sign that the distress call has been enabled. Help me dump him. Hold on. Stand away from him,” Lonnie warned her. She ran to the maid’s room and from the wall pulled a sheet bag down. She and Kali wrapped him up in it and then dumped Miles into the trash bin. “I hate leaving him, but I hate even more taking him with us,” Lonnie admitted.

Kali nodded. Her teeth occasionally chattered with fear. Lonnie’s stomach felt the same but doing something was better than doing nothing at all. Lonnie tied the trash bin lid down so that Miles couldn’t open it. Kali’s cold hand slipped into hers.

Now that Lonnie had Kali to worry about, she wondered if she should continue to look for passengers. The ship’s interior lights started blinking red which meant the air was shutting off in public access. Just enough breathable air would flow in quarters to allow a person sleeping to go unharmed. Lonnie fastened her air mask over her face and made sure Kali’s was on correctly then gave her a boost back up into the air vent and joined her.

She glanced at her com. It was blinking amber. “We need to find a safe place until the ships been secured. Help is outside the ship.” Suddenly Lonnie worried about that and pulled Kali out of the vent. “We need to get to a life pod just in case some nut decides to blow this ship up.”

The two women hurried down the corridor worried about who they may run into.

“I thought we were too close to the center of the ship to be able to get to one,” Kali whispered.

“I thought locking down the ship meant the corridors were closed at regular intervals. So far, the only thing closed is the stairwells and elevators,” Lonnie said as she hurried Kali along. “There’s a maintenance area that was marked with an access to life pods along here. There it is.”

“It’s tiny,” Kali complained softly when she got a view of it.

“It’s a maintenance tunnel for bots,” Lonnie whispered back. If she were not part of the strike team, she wouldn’t have knowledge of what passages would be available for her to move through. But it also meant Miles may have told the invaders of them also.

“You first,” whispered Kali.

Lonnie looked back to where they had come from. “Get in Kali!” She lifted her and pushed her through the tube and then followed quickly, feet first so she could close the hatch. She could hear pounding feet echoing along the corridor.

Kali helped pull her out into a darker area. They were in a small room that hummed. It was one of the small engineering console rooms.

Lonnie pulled Kali along with her as she moved to the neon mark that identified the life pod. She felt for the latch and then helped Kali in. She folded herself in and leaned back in her seat looking through her goggles.

“I don’t care what they say, they are not made for two people,” Kali muttered.

“According to this, all the life pods on *Earl Gray* have been activated. That means the ship has been contacted by the local police.”

“How do you know?” she whispered.

“I’ve been doing these drills for the last nineteen years. Didn’t you do it the second day we were onboard?” Lonnie whispered back.

“We had the owner’s life pod, and it wasn’t like this.”

“When the ship’s being boarded by pirates the life pods don’t release unless the ship is going to explode because they don’t want the pirates to stuff anything in the pods and loosen them. The pods only become activated when a military or police fleet has the ship surrounded.”

“What if the pirates use hostages for bargaining?”

“You’ll have to ask the captain on that. Do you know what Joleian wanted with you?” Lonnie asked.

“No. Was that her who was yelling outside of your cabin door? I had no idea we were boarded by pirates until the yellow light flashed. I thought at first it was a drill...I mean hardly anyone is onboard.”

“What were you doing in my quarters?” Lonnie thought to ask. Lonnie felt Kali squirm into her, trying to get into a comfortable position.

“When the yellow light flashed, I panicked. I just found myself in your quarters. I didn’t know if you would be there and when I went in and looked for you suddenly the door locked, and another light came on.” Kali shuddered. “I started to look for something that I could stand on to get into the vent. I remembered a movie where the hero chased the murderer through the ship’s vents. I don’t remember them being that small.”

“They’re made for robots to service or smaller species if they have a mind to send a living person to do the repair.”

“You learn all this from being on a liner?” Kali asked her curiously.

“More like from sharing living space with people that work on a liner,” Lonnie corrected.

“I see. That’s interesting because the crew sees you as a loner that speaks to few people or should I say that seldom leaves her quarters during sailing.”

“Sounds like you’ve been speaking with Conessa,” Lonnie informed her.

“No. Fans.”

“Well, there you go.” Lonnie wanted to squirm herself, but space didn’t give her the room, and she didn’t want Kali to move away from her. “Kali, if I locked myself in my quarters as much as the rumors say, I would go crazy. No one can possibly know what someone does all the time unless there’s a camera spying on them, and I’m not that important for anyone to be watching me like that. We bunked together for a while. Did I spend all my time alone?”

“You spent a lot of time away. So, were you alone?” Kali asked.

“Why are you so curious?”

“Because I have nothing better to do right now to take my mind off this small space.” Kali gave her a poke with her elbow. “Come on, it’s not going to kill you to tell me something I don’t know about you,” she whispered.

“I read a lot.” She got another poke when she stopped there. “And work out a lot, play games with a few friends. I work at keeping a low profile. Nothing exciting. Highly boring for your type of fan. No more pokes...” she grunted when a finger jabbed her in a ticklish place.

“What do you read; besides those magazines you mentioned the other day?”

“Whatever I’m curious about. Where is Yomatta?”

“Just to state the obvious, you’re changing the subject. Now you worry about her. She was invited to a late dinner with the mayor and a tour of the city in the morning. She tried to get out of it, but the mayor was quite determined. I opted out by saying I needed to get back to the ship for rest. Some rest, huh?”

“You weren’t expected back on ship?”

“I wasn’t expected to remain on the planet.”

“Why?”

“Because I didn’t agree to that. Besides, if they really wanted me to stay, they wouldn’t have had that obnoxious fan amongst the mayor’s party. They would have used something to entice me to change my mind...like they did Yomatta.”

“Were there a lot of people aboard when you returned?”

“I couldn’t tell, it was late, and I just wanted to go to bed.”

“Did the ship’s shuttle pick you up?”

“No. The harbormaster said they couldn’t raise anyone. He thought they were tired after shuttling off so many passengers earlier.”

“Earlier?”

“Yeah, to the various tour groups. The usual. Why?”

“They knew you were onboard?”

“It doesn’t take much to look at the passenger list, Lonnie. They do body counts when you leave and return.”

“I guess I’m just upset they were hunting for you.”

Kali shook her head. “Through my career, I’ve met some really fanatical people that do some crazy things to get noticed and to reach me.”

“By the way, how was your performance?”

“It was okay,” her voice beamed. “It wasn’t the same as dancing with you, but he was good. We had media coverage with a good mixture of reporters afterward. BOsoie Ew, my dance partner, was very polite and didn’t crack jokes or say anything embarrassing. But you’re right about the culture, they’re so boring.”

“What could he say that would be embarrassing,” Lonnie asked curiously.

“In the past I used to think the only person a loose-lipped partner could embarrass is himself, but I’ve been proved wrong many a time.”

“Huh?”

“They would make comments that the media would translate as we slept together.”

“Oh.”

“In fact, he asked me for some dance pointers,” she grinned.

“Ah.”

“You don’t think I can give pointers?” Kali asked.

“I didn’t say that nor think it. Don’t put words in my mouth,” Lonnie told her softly. “So, what pointers did you give him?”

“I told him if he wanted to get to the top, be professional in all areas of his life including personal relationships.”

“I’m impressed. Speaking like a veteran diva,” Lonnie complimented.

“How long do you think this is going to last?”

“I don’t know.”

It was just their breathing they could hear. Kali rested her head against Lonnie’s shoulder than shifted so her head was against Lonnie’s chest. Even through the body armor she could hear the thudding of Lonnie’s heart.

“Hey,” Kali whispered. “Your heart is beating fast. You okay?” She tilted her head up, and then soft lips pressed against hers. Her memory supplied her with what Lonnie looked and felt like without anything on.

Lonnie's hands slid down the slim body until her palms cupped her buttocks, and then she pulled Kali tight against her. Kali's tongue thrust between her lips, aggressively seeking Lonnie's tongue. The two dueled for a moment, then Lonnie gave way, letting Kali's mouth take possession of hers. A groan was stifled as part of her was aware of the danger of being discovered.

Lonnie suddenly broke their kiss, gesturing to Kali for quiet. She pressed her ear against the bulkhead of the pod and listened. Kali followed suit.

"We've got to get out of here," Kali whispered terrified.

"You can understand them?" Lonnie didn't hesitate as she released the lock and was out quickly, pulling Kali behind machinery in the engine room.

Kali pulled on Lonnie's arm to get her attention. Peering around her corner Lonnie could see the invaders and one crew member trying to operate a console but each was rejected with a beep.

Lonnie lifted her arm and keyed her com link. Four bursts of energy activated the alarm in the engine room. The entire room became awash in red flashing lights and a bell that warned the room was contaminated and had to be evacuated.

Suddenly the entrances to the engine room burst open and commandos dropped from everywhere. All around them shots were fired.

"I don't think this is a safe place to discharge any type of hot weapon. They're all suicidal," muttered Lonnie, pulling Kali back toward the bot vent. The pillar hid them as Lonnie pushed Kali into the vent. Then a flash and the room was awash in blinding light. Kali pulled a stunned Lonnie into the vent. The door automatically closed after Lonnie was in and shielded them from the immobilizer.

"Hey," Crackle husked from inside the vent. "You two okay?"

"Geeze, you just about gave me heart failure," Lonnie told her. "What happened?"

"Lt. Miles and thirty others were spies for this gang. Were you the one that got to the failsafe room?"

"Yes. I got suspicious when I saw crew members part of the invaders," she whispered back.

“Let’s leave the police to their clean up job. We can head back to the shuttle and wait for all clear. I don’t want to be shot by mistake,” Crackle said. She crawled backwards until she found an exit she liked. The two followed her down a deserted corridor with lights flashing.

“How are the rest?” Lonnie asked.

“Cone was taken prisoner, but I got him out. Can’t have him inoperative. He knows too much. Severon said he helped you out and was afraid you were going to shoot him. Can’t say we blame you. Your leg’s bleeding.”

Lonnie looked at her leg. “Not anymore. I put a medpac on it.”

At the landing bay where they left their shuttle two military police were guarding it. Crackle raised her hand. “Found two more of our team.”

“I sure hope they aren’t part of the gang,” Lonnie mentioned as they climbed up the ramp to the owner’s yacht.

“Muto knows them. He says they’re legit. Do you think I would trust anyone that boarded us at this time?”

Lonnie joined Joh and Muto.

“Hi,” Lonnie greeted the two. They were monitoring the conversations between members of the commando group. They nodded to her and returned their attention to their work.

She sat down in one of the seats and closed her eyes, thankful no one got hurt. She felt Kali settle near her, wrapping her hand around hers.

Chapter 24

The Parting of Friends

Two weeks later, with nothing more exciting happening than the capture of one of the space gangs, the ship made its way into Portia, Avan where their ten-month tour started and ended.

Lonnie’s bags were already packed and shipped to Besita for Shari to store somewhere until Lonnie told her what she wanted done with them.

The crew insisted on throwing Lonnie a goodbye party, which Lonnie had no intention of attending. Peering around her cabin one more time, she gave a silent goodbye to a life she once enjoyed. She turned at the sound of the connecting door opening.

“You’re going to your party dressed like that?” Kali asked incredulously, and then she got the message. “You can’t leave just like that. These are people you’ve worked with for years.”

“And who spread rumors about me, bet against me, and thought the worst of me. No thanks.”

They were quiet for a few moments as they regarded each other. Kali stepped up to her and gave her a hard hug. “I’m going to miss you,” she whispered huskily. “Don’t you dare forget to send me your address.”

“I won’t forget you either, Kali. When I get bored, I’ll play the video of your first rafting trip. Those cute squeals you made are memorable.”

“I adored the grunts you made when you pulled up my equipment when it fell over the cliff.”

“I had to. Our dinner was in your pack.” She kissed Kali tenderly, which turned into a more serious kiss as both were reluctant to let go. Lonnie broke the kiss for air. “If you ever want a place to get away for peace and quiet let me know.”

“You already have an address?”

“Shari, my business partner will know where to reach me. Stay safe.”

“Where do I get it?”

Lonnie pulled out a card that she was expecting to hand out to a few people if they caught her for the same information as she was leaving. It was a general mailbox she used during her usual two-month vacation.

“Do you answer your mail?” Kali asked suspiciously.

“When I get a chance to check it, I do.”

“That’s not answering my question.”

Lonnie looked at their intertwined hands. Maybe she needed time off to get over not having Kali around. She knew it was not the life she wanted, even if Kali asked her. Looking back into Kali’s eyes she saw the same realization reflected to her.

“Bye. And don’t forget to write,” Lonnie told her. She wondered if Kali would have time to write. The only other time she wrote to her, when they both were young, her secretary answered. She closed the door behind her.

Kali stood staring at the closed door for a long time, then moved to her own cabin to get ready for a performance.

Passengers eager to leave right away were lined up on each deck heading for the cargo bay or elevators to get to the two cargo bays set up for debarkation. Lonnie took the employee elevator to the cargo bay used for moving the passengers’ baggage and packages that went through a different set of scans and custom examinations. A purser she recognized waved her to the copilot seat.

Leaning back in her seat she waited for the pilot to finish his check list and then he would be dropping her off at the space port. Lonnie was not going home yet, wherever that was. She had someone to visit first, Cornol Caline.

The reality of leaving behind a life she had led for the last twenty years had not hit her yet. The pain of leaving Kali behind was what she feared would catch up with her. She wanted to keep busy for a while and stay away from quiet time to think about her feelings for the woman. Lonnie took another deep breath, letting some of the tightness go.

As the shuttle settled in its dock at the space station, Lonnie gathered her bags. As soon as the doors were opened for the baggage handlers to start unloading the bags, Lonnie hopped out and went to look for a ride to Amant, home planet to Rudians. She wanted some answers to questions about her contract to HQ as an Observer.

END

Lonnie’s Travels Continued in: #2 Saying Goodbye to Caline, #3 A Side Trip, #4 Space Station Pour S’Amuser, #5 Tanzinia, #6 Home. #7 A Shake Down Cruise, #8 Family, Friends, Acquaintances, and Enemies