

-Ninth Life-

Chapter One: Retrieval

by Havoc

“Is it less dishonest to do what is wrong because it is not expressly prohibited by written law? Let us hope our moral principles are not yet in that state of degeneracy.”

- Thomas Jefferson

He pulled his car up to the front of the nightclub, putting it in park and leaving the key in the ignition. As he stepped out, he paid little attention to the stares and words of admiration from the people waiting outside to be let in. He was, by now, far too used to the stares of awe and jealousy he received. His car was a top of the line sport model, sleek and painted glossy black, with two doors and a streamlined design that evoked the feel of a fighter craft. He adjusted the sleeves of his black evening jacket, and brushed one hand back through his close-cropped black hair as he waved to the valet. The younger man hurried over.

“Mr. White, so good to see you again,” the valet said politely.

“Thanks, Thomas,” the man replied. “Take good care of her, won't you?” He left the driver's door open so the lad could get in.

“As always,” Thomas said. He accepted Mr. White's friendly handshake, coming away with a crisp bank note in his own palm. The valet sat down in the driver's seat and shut the door, and he put the car in gear to drive away towards the parking lot.

White watched him go off, making sure that he was driving carefully. None of the valets at the club had yet to cause even the slightest damage to his baby, but one didn't purchase a car of such expense without becoming a little paranoid, even so. When the car disappeared around the corner, he inhaled a deep breath of the clear, cool evening air and looked up at the sky. The stars were slightly washed out by the inner city lights, but he could still see them fairly clearly. They were as lovely as always, and the twin moons shone brightly. Tranquility City lived up to its name at night.

After taking a moment to enjoy the distraction of the pretty night, White turned his attention to his surroundings. He was always careful. Whenever he drove anywhere, he liked to make sure he wasn't followed. He kept a low profile, and anything out of the ordinary would have stood out to him. For now, though, it seemed he had nothing to worry about. The people standing outside of the club were giving him no more than the usual idle curiosity, and he didn't see anyone who sounded any alarm bells in his head. Smiling to himself, he walked to the front door, bypassing the line.

The bouncer at the door, standing at the velvet rope that barred the entrance at the head of the

queue, recognized him immediately. "Mr. White," he said with a curt nod. "Right this way, sir." He unhooked the velvet rope, allowing White to the front door, which slid open as he approached. The interior of the club was full, but quiet. A band played soft jazz as White strode towards the bar. This was the one place, apart from his uptown apartment, that he felt truly relaxed.

The patronage of the club was exclusively human, unlike many of the other establishments in the city. Not a single alien to be seen, which was just fine by him. He preferred the company of his own kind, and avoided mixing with other species as much as possible. That wasn't always easy on a planet like Cerelis, but if one picked their destinations carefully it could be done. White found his favorite seat at the bar, right by the beer taps, empty, and he sat down. That was a small miracle, as the club was very full. He raised a hand, and the bartender spotted him immediately, coming over.

"The usual, Mr. White?" the middle-aged man asked him, as he reached for a tall glass.

"You know me well, Ben," White replied with an easy smile. He watched the bartender draw him a full glass of creamy ale, which was deposited on the counter in front of him along with a coaster. White picked the glass up and took a long sip of the cold drink. "Thanks."

"I'll keep them coming," the bartender said. "Enjoy yourself, sir." He moved away to tend to some of his other customers.

White nodded after him, and then he turned his attention up to one of the television screens that were mounted over the bar. The one in front of him was tuned to a new channel, which was going over some recent sports stories. Intergalactic league football was a favorite of his, and he was curious to see who was leading in the standings. This year, for the first time in the last decade, seemed to be a banner year for some of the Earth teams. They'd gone through some rebuilding lately, and it seemed like the diligent work of their owners and coaches was paying off. While he always favored the Cerelis Starliners, Arsenal seemed poised to make a comeback. That hadn't happened in nearly a hundred years, and despite having to see his team possibly drop from the top spot, it would be exciting. He took a long swallow of his beer. Yes, some real competition was something that had been lacking for a while. The sport needed a good shake-up.

"Bartender? Excuse me? Ah, bloody hell..."

The exasperated voice drew White's attention, and he looked to his right. Standing there, one elbow on the bar, was a real beauty of a woman. She was of average height, with a slender build, and she had on a slimming, shimmery red evening dress that hugged her body nicely. He appraised her looks, intrigued. She had medium-length, fiery red hair which was tied back in a loose ponytail that was draped forward over her shoulders. She had intensely green eyes and a cute face, to say nothing of the plunging neckline of her dress, which showed off her bosom. Her skin was pale, not unhealthily so,

but very fair. She was turned towards him, so he had no sight of her rear, but from the way she was put together White imagined she was just as lovely to look at from behind as she was from the front.

The woman caught White's eye, and gave him a defeated sort of smile. "Damn, but it's hard to get his attention tonight," she said, jerking her head towards the bartender. The woman's voice had a charming Irish lilt to it. "What's a girl got to do to get a drink 'round here?"

White smiled back. "Allow me." He raised a hand, and the bartender immediately came over. "Another beer for me, Ben. And for you, miss..." He let the word hang in the air.

"Deirdre," the woman said. She extended a hand to him, which he took with a gentlemanly grip. "Whiskey for me. On the rocks, luv." The bartender nodded and poured her two fingers of amber liquid over ice. The woman took the glass from him and sipped. "Lovely."

"Very lovely," White said, looking her up and down. "I don't believe I've seen you around here before. First time in Tranquility City?"

The woman laughed lightly. "Oh, no, I've lived here most of my life. I don't go out much, though. First time in this club, anyway." She sat down at the seat next to White. "So, who'm I to thank for the drink?"

"The name's White," White said. "Charles White. Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Deirdre."

Deirdre leaned against the bar, and she brushed her hair back over her shoulder. He noticed that she was wearing a thin strand of gold around her neck. "That's a distinguished sounding name," she said. She swirled her glass in her hand as the bartender handed White a fresh beer. "And what do y' do, Charles?"

"Business," White replied. He kept his answer as vague as he usually did. His actual source of income was one he preferred to keep private. "Investments and such."

"Business is good, I trust?"

"I do alright," White said confidently. He glanced around the room, checking his surroundings again. All seemed well. "As you must, I'm sure, to be able to come to a place like this. What do you do for a living?"

Deirdre smiled. "Oh, a little of this, and a little of that. I've an inquisitive mind. I don't like to do one thing for too long at a time, y'know."

"Well, we have that in common," White said. "I like to keep a broad portfolio. And I'm always up for trying new things." He gave her what he thought was a winning grin. He'd been on a dry streak for a while now, and if he played his cards right it seemed like tonight might be the night to change that.

The two of them continued their conversation for some time, through several rounds of drinks. For White, anyway. Deirdre didn't seem to be a heavy drinker, and she was nursing her first whiskey. He noticed she was hardly drinking any at all, though she was a smallish woman, so it seemed she just knew her limits. A pity. More alcohol would have made it that much easier, though White had never been one for the easy victory. He drank enough to feel the buzz, though he wanted to keep his wits about him. One didn't seal the deal with a pretty lady when one was slop-drunk, after all.

When he felt the moment was right, White leaned forward and placed a hand over Deirdre's. "Would you care to take this someplace more private?" he asked her, looking right into her deep green eyes. "I can have the valet bring my car around. I have a nice penthouse apartment uptown."

"Sounds lovely," Deirdre said. "But give me a moment, won't you, luv? I'm still working on this drink." She held up her whiskey, the melting ice clinking a little.

"Not at all, and..." White paused for a moment. Something suddenly didn't feel right, though he couldn't quite put his finger on it. He looked around. The club seemed as normal as it ever did. Maybe he was being overly paranoid? He looked towards the front door, and noticed a little commotion. The bouncer was standing just inside the door, talking heatedly with someone outside. White craned his head in that direction, and as he did so he spotted two men standing just in front. They were dressed in tactical gear, body armor and helmets, and one of them was carrying a submachine gun. The alarm was raised in his head. "On second thought, my dear, let's put a rain check on it. I just remembered something I need to see to..."

White made to get up from his seat at the bar, intending to head for the back door of the club, but before he could make his first move he felt a punishing blow to the side of his head. Stars flashed before his eyes, and he toppled to the side, falling from the bar stool onto the floor. He heard a few patrons scream nearby and the sounds of shouts and boots thundering. White tried to pick himself back up, but the sharp heel of a woman's shoe pressed into his chest, forcing him back down. White looked up to see Deirdre standing over him, both of her hands clasping a subcompact pistol that was leveled right at his face. Where she'd had it concealed in that dress of hers, she had no idea.

"What the hell is going on here?" White asked, his blood going cold. His eyes were locked on the barrel of the gun. He had a weapon of his own, holstered at his shoulder under his jacket, but to go for that right now would be suicide.

Deirdre's expression had changed. When before she had been flirty, he now saw cold professionalism. "Let me introduce myself again, Mr. White," she said. "I'm Supervisory Special Agent Deirdre Flynn, Cerelan Federal Police. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

White's jaw dropped. "CFP? You have got to be joking."

“Sorry, luv, no joke. Thanks for the drink.” She took her foot off of his chest, just in time for two of the tactical officers he had seen to grab his arms and haul him to his feet. “Lucky for me you're so thick. It took my team longer to get here than I had hoped.” She reached down and pulled up the hem of her dress, revealing a holster strapped high on her thigh. She put her weapon away while the officers handcuffed White, and then straightened up with her arms crossed. “Charles White, you're under arrest for espionage, treason, and murder of a government official. I presume y' know your rights?”

“Fuck you!” White snarled.

Deirdre waved a hand, and the officers hauled the man off as he struggled and protested. The rest of the bar patrons were watching in stunned disbelief. She waited until he was out of the bar, and then she reached for her glass of whiskey and tossed the rest of it back. A little reward for herself for a job well done.

Some hours later, near midnight, Deirdre was seated outside of the office of her immediate supervisor, the deputy director of the Cerelan Federal Police, Joseph Medici. She stifled a yawn, stopping herself from glancing at the clock for the fifth time. She had finished her report about half an hour ago and submitted it electronically, and was now waiting for her official debrief from the deputy director. As she was in her seventh year at the agency, she was quite used to how slow things could be, though it still seemed sluggish for a youthful woman of twenty-seven years.

Deirdre was young for a Supervisory Special Agent, especially in an organization as large as the Cerelan Federal Police. Formed nearly eighty years ago, when the planet of Cerelis had been colonized by humans, the agency had initially served as the name would have suggested: a police force for the purpose of enforcing the laws of the planet's government. Over time, however, as the United Nations had selected the planet as the seat of human government, the agency's mission had changed. They now served as a sort of galaxywide law enforcement agency, with satellite offices on most colonized planets in human occupied space. During the recent wars, some specialized units of the agency had even served with units of the military, though those incidents had been few and far between. As humanity had forged alliances with alien races in the aftermath of galactic conflict, the CFP had cooperated more with their analogous agencies. These days, the Cerelan Federal Police mostly stuck to handling crimes which crossed planetary borders, although they maintained jurisdiction over any crime which occurred in human space, whether or not it was interplanetary. Those crimes which were confined to single planets, however, they usually left to the locals.

As for the war, that had been before Deirdre's time. She had been a child of only two years on

Earth when the war had begun, contrary to what she had told the unfortunate Mr. White earlier that evening. She had been born and raised in Belfast, Northern Ireland, a city with its share of violence in the past. Her upbringing, however, had been nothing but peaceful. Until, that is, when she was twelve years old, and Earth had been invaded by their alien enemies. Deirdre's family had been some of the lucky few to escape the planet in the chaos of the attack, and they had settled on Cerelis along with many other refugees from across human space. Deirdre had completed her schooling there, and had graduated high school just in time for the war to end. While either college or the military had been options for her, she'd opted instead to pursue a career in law enforcement. She'd briefly considered returning to Earth, which had been her parents' choice, but chose instead to remain on Cerelis. Ambitious, she'd applied for and been accepted into the academy for the Cerelan Federal Police, and had graduated as one of the top recruits in her class, entering the force at the minimum age of twenty.

Deirdre had immediately distinguished herself as someone who was good at tracking fugitives down, and business in that area had been booming at the conclusion of the war. She'd quickly gotten herself assigned to a task force of the CFP that was focused on finding and arresting collaborators who had worked with humanity's enemies during the war. Mr. White had been one of those collaborators, and one she had been pursuing for several years. During the war, he had passed information to their enemies for a hefty sum of money, and had been a key figure in the assassination of several prominent human diplomats. Even though humanity was now allied with the aliens who they had warred against, he still had to answer for those crimes.

Besides her work with the task force, Deirdre had experienced a little of everything that the CFP had to offer. She'd done some work with cyber crimes and organized crime, and for a period of two years had operated with one of the tactical teams that the CFP maintained on Cerelis. Though she was no longer with them, the officers who had assisted in her arrest of Charles White had been her old unit. She had also worked with the agencies of humanity's allies, assisting them in tracking down fugitives who had betrayed them during the war. As the war between humanity and other alien races had been somewhat instigated by rebel factions, with whom the human fugitives had been colluding, the aliens were just as much criminals in the eyes of humanity as they were in those of their allies. Deirdre was very satisfied with her work, and every person that she put behind bars was, in her mind, one step closer to balancing the scales of justice in the universe.

Deirdre looked up as she heard the office door of the deputy director open up, and perceived the rough-looking man gazing at her. He looked just as tired as she felt. He was Cerelan through and through, born to children of original colonists, and though his hair was gray and his brown eyes bore heavy bags from many years of long nights, he still exuded an air of youth that many his age would

have envied. Though a good boss and overall a friendly man, Deputy Director Medici was not one to be trifled with.

“SSA Flynn,” he said. “Thanks for waiting. Sorry it took so long. Your report is so thorough that it took me a bit to read through it, but I’m ready for you now. Come on in.” He stood aside from the door, and Deirdre got up from her seat and walked inside. She was still wearing the red evening dress she’d been in during the takedown, not having had time to change.

“No problem, sir,” she assured him, entering his office. The room was sparse, not containing much more than a desk and a few thankfully comfortable chairs. There was a large bookcase behind the deputy director’s chair, on which sat a large number of books which contained much of the legal code from the most important planets in human space. Deirdre took a seat in a chair in front of the desk, while Medici closed the door and went behind to sit down in his own chair. “Everything fine with my report, then?”

“Looks great to me,” Medici said with a nod, as he folded his hands on top of the desk. “Nice job with the takedown. Everything seems to have gone according to plan, apart from the trouble with getting the team in place. We should have accounted for the road construction, but it got a little lost in the shuffle, what with how quickly the plan had to be formulated. But all in all it went without a hitch.” He smirked a little. “Nice dress, by the way.”

Deirdre managed a little laugh. “Thanks.”

“Well, I read your report, but let me hear your personal account. You know the drill.”

She did, indeed, and as she’d done many times before she launched into a play by play of how the operation had gone down from her perspective. Deirdre had it down to a science by now. She left very few details out, and told Deputy Director Medici exactly what had happened. He knew, of course, much of the background of the investigation, so she gave that a pass in favor of the specifics of the evening. When she was all finished, her boss looked satisfied.

“Very good work, Agent,” he commended her. “I think you’ll be pleased to know that Mr. White is already talking to us. He lawyered up as far as his own charges are concerned, of course, but we already know about all we need to about that. He is, however, providing us with valuable information about some other people we’re looking for. Looking to deal, I imagine.”

“Lovely,” Deirdre said. She leaned forward in her chair, stifling another yawn. “It’s been a long night, hasn’t it?”

“That it has,” the deputy director agreed. “Over now, thank God, and no casualties again. That’s going to make the director very happy. She’s been touting yours and other agents’ work to the UN, and they always like to hear that everyone went home safe.” Medici raised his arms and crossed them

behind his head. "You should be proud of the work you've been doing these last few months. That takedown on Orion was particularly good work, especially considering the hostage situation that developed. And now this business with Mr. White. You'll be sitting in my chair in a few years at this rate."

Deirdre waved his praise away. "I just do the best I can, sir. Anyone else would do the same."

"I wish I could agree with you," Medici said with a sardonic laugh. "Anyway, I think you've earned a week off. That's what I want to say, anyway..."

"But...?" Deirdre prompted him, knowing that there was something else coming.

"But, I've got another assignment for you." Medici held a hand up, as though he was expecting her to protest. "Don't worry, this one should be an easy one. The subject in question is already in custody. You know the name Marcus Remy, I assume?"

There was a flash of recognition in Deirdre's green eyes. "That slimy bugger? The one who escaped Cerelis when the peace accords were signed? I was still in school when he got away. He caused a fair bit of damage to the main spaceport in Tranquility City when he fled, then dropped completely off the radar." She straightened up in her chair, her curiosity immediately piqued. "We learned about him in the academy, and I've reviewed the case files. I'd like to get my claws on him, and that's a fact."

"He's the one, and you're going to have your chance."

The deputy director slid a folder across his desk to her, and Deirdre took it and opened it up. The case jacket contained several stapled documents, along with a photograph. The picture was blurry, but it showed a man of about twenty-five, though the date on the photo made it about ten years old. The man was fair of skin, like Deirdre, with messy brown hair and scruffy facial hair. The photo seemed to have been taken from some distance away. He was wearing sunglasses in the photo, but they were slid down his nose and revealed cold eyes of steely gray.

"Mr. Remy was sighted on Mars some weeks ago, and the local police mounted an operation to take him into custody," the deputy director explained. "They were successful, but in the process he killed several of their officers. He's imprisoned in their main facility there. The problem is, the chief prosecutor on Mars is hellbent on trying him there, when what we need is to get him back to Cerelis to find out what he knows. SSA Goode on Mars has met with Remy, and he's alluded to some information that could be of importance to the security of the UN itself."

Deirdre arched an eyebrow at Medici, shaking her head. "So what's the issue? Bring him back here and we'll talk to him, then."

"There's a couple of problems with that," Medici explained. "First, like I said, the prosecutor

there is a little hot about the deaths of their officers. He wants to make an example of Remy and is adamant that he be tried there. You know Goode. He's not great at convincing people of alternatives. I want you to go to Mars and help Goode make the case to the prosecutor. Technically, we can't force him to give us first crack."

"Alright," Deirdre said, nodding. "And the other problem?"

"That's a little more complicated," the deputy director said. "There have been several mutters in the underworld. Apparently, Mr. Remy has associates who would rather see him dead than in our custody. We're worried that he'll be killed before we can get anything meaningful out of him. I'm also sending you there because I want to make sure that he gets back to Cerelis in one piece." Medici leaned towards Deirdre. "It's not going to be the safest of assignments, what I'm asking you to do. Discretion will be key. You need to get in there as secretly as you can, speak with the prosecutor, and get Remy off Mars with as few people in the know as possible."

Deirdre reached up with one hand, twirling her fingers in a long of her red hair. Definitely not as easy as the deputy director had made it out to be at first. "I can do that," she said confidently. "But I'll need a team to make it happen."

Medici shook his head. "Not at big one. I want this kept as low-key as possible. The threats against Remy's life are more than credible, they're imminent. It needs to be done quickly and quietly. If you really need a team, no more than one or two other people."

Biting her lip, Deirdre considered the idea. "I need someone good, then."

"Just tell me who you need, and I'll make it happen. Just from the mission profile, I assume you'll be wanting someone like Jacobs or Ryan."

"Jacobs and Ryan are good agents, no doubt about that, but I think this calls for someone a tad different." Deirdre went quiet for a few minutes, going through the possibilities. When she got right down to it, one name rose to the top of her head as the best person for the job. The question was if Medici would go for it. "I want Mari."

"Mari?" Deputy Director Medici frowned, his eyes narrowing as he seemed at a loss for a few seconds. Then something pinged in the back of his head. "You mean Captain Ayalis? Our liaison with the Royal Guards?"

"Right in one, sir."

The deputy director looked skeptical. "I've learned not to question your judgment much anymore, Deirdre, but I have some concerns about this decision. For one, someone like Captain Ayalis is going to be very out of place on Mars. I said that discretion was the name of the game for this assignment." He extended a hand, palm up. "I need to know your reasoning before I give the okay on

that.”

“I trust her,” Deirdre replied simply. “She can be discreet, and she's very skilled. I've worked with her before. I know what she's capable of.” She smiled. “I don't worry about her standing out so much. If we get the job done quick enough, it's no concern. And if we're going t' be running into any troubles, I'd rather have someone with her skill set along than not.”

Medici stroked his chin. “Makes sense. And her people have been after Remy just as much as we have. We do owe them a few favors after that credit scam business they helped cyber crimes with.” He nodded. “Okay, I don't have a problem with that, as long as her superiors are okay with it.” He looked up at the ceiling, searching his brain for a minute. “She's on an assignment right now, though. It should be done in a few days. You won't be able to travel together, but if everything goes right she can meet you on Mars.”

“Lovely,” Deirdre said. “Is that all, then?”

The deputy director nodded. “That's it for tonight. I'll put in the call and see if the captain will be available. I'll have an answer for you in the morning. Get some sleep, read over the folder I gave you, and let me know if you have any questions. I'll send someone to pick you up and get you to the spaceport.” He stood up, and Deirdre did as well, shaking his hand. “Good work, Flynn. I'll expect more of the same on this assignment.”

After leaving headquarters, Deirdre called a cab and rode back to her apartment in the heart of Tranquility City. She would have driven herself, but at this late hour and owing to her state of fatigue, she didn't trust herself to operate a car. The cab driver got her home safe, and she took the elevator up to the tenth floor and found her way to her front door. As soon as she walked in, she heaved a sigh of relief. She was exhausted, and she felt like she needed more than just a night of sleep. But despite that, she was excited for her next assignment. Deirdre didn't like staying idle for too long, and she loved her work.

She went to the kitchen, reaching behind her head to undo the pin that was holding her hair up, allowing it to fall in a cascade down her back. Running a hand through her red tresses to get the tangles out, she got down a bottle of good Irish whiskey from Earth and poured herself a glass. Before she could drink, though, the phone on her kitchen counter trilled its electronic ringtone. Frowning, Deirdre picked it up and checked the caller ID, then answered it.

“Hello, mum,” she said, doing her best to keep the weariness out of her voice. “Have you any idea what time it is here?” She paused as the person on the other end of the line spoke. “Alright, I know it's morning back on Earth, but it's after midnight here...No, I just got back from work.” Another pause.

“Don't worry, mum, it wasn't anything dangerous. Nothing I can't handle. How's dad?” She waited while her mother talked for a while. “I'm fine, just...” She gave a barely audible, exasperated sigh after several more seconds. “No, mum, I'm not seeing anybody right now...Well, I'm sure he's nice, mum, but I'm all the way on Cerelis, I can't...okay, maybe I'll give him a ring sometime. But we haven't seen each other since primary school. He probably doesn't even remember me, y'know?” Though her mother wouldn't be able to see, she gave an overly polite smile. “I will, mum...I will. Okay. Listen, I gotta go. I'm exhausted. Tell dad I said hi? Love you, too, mum. Bye.” She hung the phone up, placing it back on its charger. “Bloody hell, mum...”

Deirdre rubbed a hand over her face, and then she picked up her glass of whiskey and drained it in two gulps. Talking with her mother was always somewhat of a chore. She liked to play the matchmaker, and though Deirdre was not really interested in looking for a guy, she seemed to think that a boyfriend was what she needed at this time in her life. Deirdre's parents had married young and had a large family, like a lot of good Irish Catholic couples. She had five brothers, all older than her, and an older sister as well. All of them were married, so she was seen as something of the oddball of the family. Not that Deirdre's love life was lacking, but starting a family wasn't exactly her idea of what was right for her just now. Or any time in the future for that matter.

“Not gonna get to sleep anytime soon, now...,” Deirdre muttered to herself. After talking to her mother, she was wide awake. She poured herself a second glass and sipped at it, looking out her kitchen window at the city lights outside. She looked at the phone again. “Why not...” Deirdre picked up the receiver and dialed a number from memory. She waited as it rang several times, and then someone on the other end picked up. “Evening, luv. Hope I'm not waking you?...I know it's late, but I was wondering, if you have some time, I could use a bit o' company. Sounds lovely. See you in a few.”

Deirdre hung up and then busied herself straightening up a few things in her apartment. She would have liked to have changed before her company arrived, but at this point there was hardly any point in it. And in any case, the dress would be coming off soon enough. Just as she was starting on her third glass of whiskey, there came a soft knock at the door. Tamping down her excitement, Deirdre went to the door and opened it, an easy smile on her face.

The person standing in the hall had a smile that mirrored her own. “Hello, Dee.” The woman there was a few years younger than she was, and if Deirdre was being completely objective she was much more gorgeous. She was someone that Deirdre had been seeing on and off for almost three years. She was shorter, tan-skinned with blonde hair and eyes of a lovely blue shade. As always, she was dressed immaculately, this time in a pressed green blouse and a mid-length black skirt.

“Sorry for the short notice, Alice,” Deirdre said apologetically. She invited the other woman in,

her eyes lingering on her perfectly shaped ass. "I know it's late..."

Alice looked over her shoulder, her red-painted lips forming into an understanding smile. "I always have time for you, Dee. I'm used to late calls by now." She put her purse down on the kitchen counter, turning around to face her. Her eyes glanced to the side, and she saw the bottle and half-empty glass. "Rough day at the office?"

"The office is fine," Deirdre said. "Rough call from my mum."

"Poor girl," Alice said, stepping over and placing a sympathetic hand on Deirdre's shoulder. She turned away and began walking back towards the bedroom, at the same time unfastening the clasp of her skirt and letting it fall down to the floor. Deirdre felt a thrill as she saw that Alice wasn't wearing anything underneath. "Let's see if I can help you forget your troubles..."

"Mind reader," Deirdre said fondly, entranced as she followed after the other woman.

Some time later, Deirdre awoke from a light sleep, her legs tangled in the sheets of her bed. She blinked and looked at the clock on her bedside table, where the red numbers told her that it was just past three in the morning. She heard a soft rustling, and looked over towards her dresser to see Alice standing there adjusting her skirt with one hand, looking in Deirdre's mirror as she touched up her lipstick with her other hand. Alice noticed the redhead's eyes on her, and she looked back at her with a smile.

"Sleep well?" she asked. "You seemed pretty pent-up tonight. I could barely keep up."

Deirdre grinned as she sat up in bed, not bothering to cover up her bare breasts. "You were wonderful, luv. Just what the doctor ordered. I feel like a new girl." She pouted a little, her eyes pleading as they roamed up and down Alice's body. "Sure you can't stay the night?"

"Wish I could, Dee, but I can't." Alice pressed her lips together as she made sure her lipstick was painted on evenly. "Got an early morning tomorrow. Another client I need to see. I'd reschedule if I could, but he's not the sort of guy you do that to."

The way she said that made Deirdre worry. "He hasn't been hitting you again? You know I can do something about that."

"No, no, nothing like that," Alice assured her. She turned and came over to the bed. "And you know you can't, Dee. Not with your job. It would raise too many questions, and I wouldn't do that to you." She leaned down and kissed Deirdre on the cheek. "You're sweet to care like that. But I can look after myself."

Unsure, Deirdre nevertheless agreed with Alice's wishes. "If you say so."

Alice rubbed her shoulder. "Always awkward to ask, but..."

Deirdre answered before Alice could finish the question. “Top drawer, middle. And a little extra for the late call.”

Still smiling, Alice turned and went back to the dresser. She slid open the indicated drawer and reached in, coming out with a folded stack of bills in her hand. As Deirdre watched, Alice counted them and then tucked them away in her blouse. She looked back at her and blew her a kiss. “Thanks, dear. Always a pleasure. When can I expect your call again?”

“Not for a while,” Deirdre said with no small amount of regret. “I’m leaving for Mars in the morning. Have t’ go pick someone up for work. A big one, this time. Should be an easy do, but I won’t be back until next week.”

“Aww, too bad. Well, you have my number.” Alice adjusted her skirt in the mirror one last time, and then she went to the bedroom door. “Make sure and call me when you get back. I worry about all my customers, especially the good ones like you. Don’t get up, I’ll see myself out. Be careful, Dee.” And with that, Alice vanished out of the bedroom. A few seconds later, Deirdre heard the front door open and close, and then the apartment was silent again.

With a heavy sigh, Deirdre fell back against the pillows, staring up at the ceiling. The bed always felt empty after Alice left. The call girl rarely was able to stay the night, but when she did...As much as Deirdre told herself, and her mother, that she was fine on her own, she really was lonely sometimes. Matters weren’t helped by telling herself that Alice only came as part of business transaction. Just for the few hours here and there that they spent together, she was able to convince herself that there was something more. All part of the fantasy she provided.

Closing her eyes, Deirdre tried to will herself back to sleep. Hopefully it would come quicker tonight than on most others.

The day on Mars was typically hot and dry. When she stepped off of the passenger transport, a small one owned by the Cerelan Federal Police, Deirdre looked around. As important as it was to humanity, Mars still had the air of a sleepy backwater. Before the war, the colony planet had been an important source of metals and other raw materials, and that hadn’t changed much in the years after. Mars had been one of the first planets terraformed by humans, and even then it had only been a partial success. While the atmosphere had been rendered breathable and they had managed to introduce plant and animal life, water had never taken much hold, so the planet still relied on imports of water from the moons of some of the outer Solar System planets like Jupiter and Saturn. Mars’ environment could be likened to some of the deserts of North America on Earth. Unfortunately, due to her official duties, Deirdre couldn’t dress for the weather. While the inhabitants of Mars tended to wear summer dress year

round, she was wearing a smart black business suit as she always did when she was working as an agent of the CFP. The suit was comfortable in its tailoring, but she was already sweating in the desert heat.

Shielding her eyes from the sun, she checked her watch for the time. She hadn't set it for Mars time yet, so she did a little bit of quick arithmetic in her head and figured that it was about eight in the morning, Mars time. She was a few minutes early for her meeting with the planetary CFP representative. There wasn't any sense in waiting out in the heat, so Deirdre walked the short distance from the landing pad to the spaceport building itself. She found a shady spot under an awning just outside the door, where a misting device was mounted that sprayed the area with a fine spray of water. Relieved to find a cool spot, she reached into her jacket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes, tapping one out and lighting it. She took a long drag, slowly exhaling as she rubbed her tired eyes. The journey from Cerelis to Mars had taken almost a day, and she hadn't got much sleep. She rarely did when she was traveling.

When she was halfway through her smoke, the door next to her slid open and a man stepped out to her. "SSA Flynn?"

Deirdre looked over, and she stubbed her cigarette out on the wall when she saw who was speaking. "SSA Goode," she said. "Been a while, hasn't it?"

Supervisory Special Agent Benjamin Goode, a tall, solidly-built man with dark hair, took off his sunglasses and tucked them into his front pocket. "Few years, yeah." He extended his hand and Deirdre took it. "Good to see you again. How are things back on Cerelis?"

"Fair," Deirdre allowed. "How're things here?"

Goode shrugged. "Hopefully better now that you're here. The federal prosecutor here is being a real dick." He laughed. "Sucks that we've finally got this Remy guy in custody, and we can't get him back to Cerelis. I've tried as hard as I can, but he won't budge. Guess it's time you had a crack."

"I'll do m' best," Deirdre said. She waved towards the open door. "Guess we'd better get going, then?"

"Sure thing. We have a few hours until your meeting is scheduled. I'll give you a lift to the prosecutor's office, and then I have to get going. I've got another investigation ongoing, and I need to be on post pretty soon."

He led Deirdre into and through the spaceport, which was fairly quiet this early in the day. Out front, he had an official car waiting, and they both got in as the agent in the driver's seat took off down the narrow streets of the city. She looked out the window as they drove. She found it amazing that Mars hadn't built up more than it had, with all the time that humanity had spent there. Most of the buildings

were short, and there weren't a lot of residential areas. Most of the buildings were industrial in nature. Of course, that was because this was one of the major cities. The colonists of Mars tended to live in smaller, quieter communities. Even so, the planet's population was small, especially considering its proximity to Earth, but the harsh climate was mostly to blame for that.

The drive to the prosecutor's office lasted just over twenty minutes, and SSA Goode dropped Deirdre off in front of the building. He apologized for the abruptness of their meeting, and Deirdre told him it was no problem at all. He drove off, with her watching as his car vanished at a rapid pace. She frowned.

For Christ's sake, not even coming in? Deirdre thought to herself. *This guy must really have your number...He can't be as bad as all that.* Shaking her head, she turned and walked into the front door of the two-story, white-walled building.

Inside, the prosecutor's office didn't look much different than a government office on any other human planet. Across the lobby from the front door was a desk behind which several secretaries were sitting. The first floor had a number of doors leading off to offices and hearing rooms, and there was a staircase on either side of the desk that led up to the second floor, where more offices and rooms were located. In the center of the lobby, a large bronze statue of Lady Justice stood, reaching almost up to the level of the second floor. Very extravagant for such a small building, at least in Deirdre's mind. Perhaps that was an indication of how arrogant this prosecutor was going to be.

Deirdre approached the secretary desk, going directly to one of them. "Morning," she said. She fished out her identification folder from her jacket, and opened it up to show her badge. "I'm SSA Deirdre Flynn, Cerelan Federal Police. I've an appointment with Mr. Zhao."

The secretary looked at her badge for a moment, and then she looked down at a computer screen set into the surface of the desk. "Just one moment, please." She tapped away at the touchscreen, cycling through a few windows. "Ah, yes, Agent Flynn. Agent Goode informed us you'd be here today. Prosecutor Zhao is in another meeting at the moment. He should be finished shortly."

"Another meeting?" Deirdre repeated, a frown crossing her face. She checked her watch. "I was told he'd be expectin' me now."

"I'm so sorry," the secretary said. "It couldn't be avoided. He has a lot of demands on his time, and the meeting before yours ran over."

Deirdre restrained the grumble of exasperation that threatened to escape her, looking away from the secretary and towards some of the meeting rooms. If she knew which one the prosecutor was in, she would have gone right in, privacy be damned. "Fine. I'll wait, then." *Bloody unprofessional...*

"This way." The secretary got up from her chair and came around the desk, and she led Deirdre

to a door on the first floor. Inside was a waiting room, furnished with a number of chairs, none of which looked too comfortable. A small table was along one wall with a stack of paper cups and two coffee dispensers, labeled for regular and decaf. "Someone will come get you as soon as Prosecutor Zhao is ready for you. Again, I do apologize for the delay."

"Fine," Deirdre said again. The secretary nodded and left her in the waiting room.

"Dammit...The deputy director said he was an ass...I should've known." With nothing else to do in the meantime, Deirdre went to the table and poured herself a much-needed cup of coffee. Adding a little cream and sugar, she had a seat in one of the chairs. She wanted another cigarette, but lighting up inside a government building would have been poor form, and she wasn't about to surrender to her desire to be just as much of an ass as Zhao was turning out to be.

By her watch, she waited for twenty-five minutes without a word from anyone. Well into her second cup of coffee by then, she heard the door to the waiting room open once more. "About bloody time...", she muttered, seeing the same secretary from before come in. "Is he ready for me, then?"

"I'm sorry, no," the secretary said, at least having the decency to look apologetic. "Someone else to see you, Agent Flynn." She looked to one side, and to Deirdre's eyes she seemed out of sorts.

"Who, then?" Deirdre watched as the secretary moved out of the way of the door. When she saw who was there, her mood improved considerably. "Mari. You made it."

Ducking her head to get into the waiting room, a most unusual person entered, and unusual in more ways than one. For one thing, she stood at just over seven and a half feet tall. While that was tall in human terms, in those of her own species she was quite short. Her eyes were another unusual feature; her left eye was pale blue, almost white in its coloration, and the right was a much deeper, sapphire shade. In other respects, Captain Mari Ayalis was a very typical Ailian woman. Her body was covered in a coat of jet black fur, and she looked for all the world like a panther crossed with a human. Her long black tail was hanging down behind her, though she kept the tip from dragging on the floor.

Captain Ayalis was a member of the Royal Guards, a unit of the military of the Ascendancy, an vast empire covering territory over three galaxies, including the Milky Way. Until fifteen years ago, they had been enemies of humanity at war, but a series of events during that conflict had seen humans and Ailians allying to defeat a rebellion that had threatened the security of them both. Now the Ailians were cautiously, if not quite closely, on good terms with humans. During times of war, the Royal Guards served as commandos and bodyguards under the direct command of the Empress of the Ascendancy. In peacetime, as it was now, they still served to guard the Empress but also had a purpose much like the Cerelan Federal Police, investigating crimes across their empire. For the past two years, Captain Ayalis had been posted as a liaison between the Royal Guards and the CFP.

“Agent Flynn,” Mari said, in expert English that was lightly accented by a tongue used to speaking her own language. She came into the waiting room. She was dressed like she did when she was among humans, wearing a human-style suit of black with a white shirt, whereas among her own kind she would have been dressed in a completely black military uniform. Captain Ayalis had found that humans viewed that as overly intimidating on an Ailian, so she dressed this way in the interests of presenting a softer image. With how solidly she was built, not to mention her fiercely predatory features, she was intimidating enough. “I apologize for my lateness. Some things that needed attending to back on Lirna.” She was speaking of the home planet of her species, a desert planet not so unlike Mars, if quite a deal hotter. “I took the fastest ship I could find when I received my new assignment.”

“S alright,” Deirdre said. “I don't think the prosecutor here is too keen on bein' prompt. Y'know all about why we're here, then?”

Mari nodded. “I have read the brief. The human, Marcus Remy. We have been most interested to speak with him, as well. I am hoping he will have information that could lead to the capture of Tara Shi'ala.”

A large empire, the Ascendancy was divided geographically into three areas. At the center of the Empire were the Core Worlds, containing Lirna and a number of other planets which had been the first to be colonized by Ailians. Next out were the Inner Colonies, a large area containing hundreds of planets that had been colonized later, when the Ailians had advanced enough to develop reliable hyperspace travel. Finally, there were the Outer Colonies, worlds on the edge of Ascendancy space that, while heavily populated, were scattered widely. Historically, the Core Worlds and Inner Colonies had the majority of wealth and political power, while the Outer Colonies were underrepresented and much poorer. Fifteen years ago, in the midst of the war between the Ascendancy and humanity, the Outer Colonies had rebelled against the Ascendancy with the aid of a hostile alien race, the insectoid Pteryd. They'd gotten as far as conquering Lirna, until the Ascendancy had banded together with the humans and another alien race, the Nuretans, and driven them back. Most of the Ailian instigators of the war had since been captured, but several were still at large. Tara Shi'ala, a noblewoman from the Outer Colonies, was a primary figure in the rebellion and her whereabouts were still unknown, even a decade after the end of the war.

“I guess we'll see,” Deirdre said. “That's if the prosecutor will let us take him back to Cerelis with us.” She gestured to the table in the waiting room. “Coffee?”

“Thank you, no,” Mari said. She looked at the chairs in the room, and growled softly. None of them had been designed with Ailians in mind, and were far too small for her. She contented herself with leaning against the wall across from Deirdre, her tailtip twitching irritably. The tips of her feline ears

were barely a foot from the ceiling. “It makes me too shaky. I do not suppose they have any Ailian tea, here?” She sighed as Deirdre shook her head. “I thought not.”

“So how will you want t' be playing this?” Deirdre asked her. “This Prosecutor Zhao already seems like he won't be wantin' t' give us what we need. What's our angle?”

“I have read up on Zhao, while traveling,” Mari said. “I know his type. He is a pompous, arrogant male. There are many like him in the Ascendancy. If you want my suggestion, you will make an appeal to greed. Make him see how disagreeing to our needs will cost him, and how being amenable to what we want will benefit him. He is unlikely to see reason any other way.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “I shall let you do the talking. He is unlikely to listen to an Ailian.”

Deirdre nodded. “Right, then. Sounds like a plan t' me.” She smiled. “Good to work with y' again, Mari.”

“I am looking forward to it, Agent Flynn.”