

-Ninth Life-

Chapter Two: Negotiations

by Havoc

“Pride and conceit were the original sins of man.”

- Alain Rene Lesage

“Prosecutor Zhao?”

Seated at his desk, Prosecutor Larry Zhao looked up from the data reader screen he was currently perusing. The files contained therein were the case summaries for the terrorist fugitive Marcus Remy, the man who was currently the source of a lot of grief for him. Apart from the fact that he had killed a number of members of the constabulary of Mars, the criminal was proving to be quite the headache as far as security was concerned. Zhao's office had received word from confidential informants of threats against the man's life. As much as Zhao was tempted to just let whoever wanted Remy have him, losing such a high-profile to assassination would have been a big black mark on his record, and he couldn't have that. Still, he was proving to be a big hassle, and he hoped the hassle wouldn't turn out to be more than it was worth.

“Right, Mary,” he said to the secretary who was looking in on him. He pushed his glasses up his nose, and nodded to her. “I'm ready. Go ahead and show her in.” The secretary left him for a moment, and he leaned back in his chair with a sigh. He'd expected that the CFP would send someone from off-world after he'd rebuffed the request for extradition from Agent Goode, but he wasn't looking forward to the meeting with Goode's compatriot. Yet another hassle to add to the stack of hassles.

Shortly thereafter, the door to his office opened again, and in walked a red-headed woman who looked as professional as he would have expected any agent of the Cerelan Federal Police to look. Not speaking, Zhao just waved her to have a seat in one of the chairs in front of his desk, but then he froze as he saw a second person enter the room. Zhao blinked as he beheld an Ailian woman wearing what would have, on a less intimidating figure, been a comically oversized human-style suit. But the black-furred alien was anything other than comical.

“Prosecutor Zhao,” the red-headed human said with a nod. “Thank you for seein' me.” She had a seat, but the Ailian stayed standing, probably because the human-sized chair would have been fairly uncomfortable for her.

“You must be SSA Flynn,” Zhao said to her, covering his surprise at seeing an Ailian in his office. This wasn't the first time he'd seen one of her species in person, but this was the last place he would have expected to encounter one of the felines. “But I don't believe I know you.” He directed this

statement at the Ailian. "I wasn't expecting anyone else, Agent Flynn."

"I know," Deirdre said, unapologetically. "This is Captain Mari Ayalis, our agency's liaison from the Royal Guards. I asked her t' be here because her people have an interest in Mr. Remy as well."

"I...see," Zhao said. He cleared his throat to cover his discomfort. Like a lot of humans, even ten years after the end of the war, he found the sight of an Ailian to be a little unnerving. "A pleasure, Captain, I'm sure." He clasped his hands on the top of his desk. "I suppose we should get down to it, then. You've waited a while already, for which I apologize. I do have a lot of demands on my time. I've already spoken with Agent Goode on this matter. I'm only holding this meeting as a courtesy to your Deputy Director Medici. He and I were acquainted when I was in law school."

"That so?" Deirdre was unimpressed. "How good of you."

"Yes, well...Professional courtesy and all." Zhao held up his data reader. "I've been reviewing Mr. Remy's case. You understand he's been charged with a number of murders, and several other crimes, here on Mars in the past few days." He offered the data reader over to Deirdre.

The agent took the reader and gave the case summary a read. "I see...He arrived on Mars several weeks ago under an assumed name. Not surprising. How'd your boys catch on to him?"

"That's all in the file," Zhao said. "Mr. Remy reached out to several contacts in the crime world on our planet. He was looking for resources to allow him to remain in hiding. Unfortunately for him, one of those contacts was also working for our police force as an informant. They alerted us, and we began surveilling him for an opportunity to take him into custody."

Captain Ayalis stirred at that. "And you did not think it prudent to notify higher authorities?" she asked. "This human is, after all, a dangerous terrorist."

"We weren't sure how long he was planning on remaining on Mars," Zhao said. "We didn't think it wise to make any moves like that which he might have caught on to. In any case, an opportunity presented itself and we moved in on him. During the operation, Mr. Remy produced a weapon and killed several officer on the arrest team before he was subdued."

"Ya got sloppy," Deirdre said simply.

Zhao arched an eyebrow. "As you said, he is a dangerous man," the prosecutor said. "There's always the possibility of bloodshed when it comes to someone like him. Our men took precautions, but he was still able to do some damage." He shrugged. "It happens. But he's in custody right now, and awaiting trial here."

Deirdre handed the data reader back over to him. "You are aware, I'm sure, that he's already wanted on Cerelis, Lirna, an' a host of other worlds I won't bother t' mention for numerous, more serious charges. I think that takes precedent."

“Does it?” Zhao responded. “He killed several good men whom I’ve worked with for years. He’s going to answer for those crimes as well, and he’s going to answer for them on Mars. Not on Cerelis. Not on Lirna. Here.”

“And you think you can keep him alive long enough for him to stand trial?”

Zhao speared Mari with a withering gaze. “We might not be a big, important planet like yours, Captain, but our security forces are well-trained and professional. They’re up to the job.”

“So you say,” Deirdre said. “Do ya know the sort o’ people you’re dealin’ with, Mr. Zhao? We’re talkin’ about people who organized an espionage operation that fueled a war. These aren’t your run-of-the-mill terrorists. They’re far worse. You keep Remy here, and you’ll be seein’ a lot more killings.”

After a pause, Zhao nodded to her. “I’m aware of that, Agent Flynn, but I have a responsibility to the families of the officers Mr. Remy killed. They want justice.”

“Which they won’t get if you let your pride get Remy killed. Or is that what you’re after?”

That made Zhao grit his teeth in anger. “I hope you’re not suggesting what I think you’re suggesting,” he said, a note of warning in his voice. “If you’re going to insult me like that, Agent Flynn, it’s going to make me even less inclined to acquiesce to your demands.”

It was Deirdre’s turn to shrug now. “I’m not makin’ demands, Mr. Zhao,” she said, this time offering a tone of apology. “An’ I’m sorry if I insulted you. That’s not my intention. But you have to agree that Mr. Remy has a lot more to answer for than just murder. He’s a traitor. A lot more people died by his hand, directly or no, than died in the past week. Or d’you not remember the thousands of people who were killed just when Mars was attacked in the war?”

Zhao blinked, taken aback by that despite himself. “Of course not,” he said. “I remember. I’ve lived on Mars for near twenty years. I was here for the occupation. I had friends who were killed when the Ailians...the rebels, I mean...” He glanced at Mari. “...When those people invaded. But I can’t let my feelings taint my duty as it stands today.”

“You are doing that now,” Mari said. She crossed her arms.

“She’s right, y’know,” Deirdre said. “You’d be tradin’ professional pride for the lives o’ more good men. Because I can guarantee that’s what you’ll be giving away by keeping Remy here. I know you have good security here. What I’m sayin’ is it won’t be enough. If someone wants to get to Remy where he’s bein’ held now, they’ll get to him, and they’ll go through the police here to do that.” She leaned forward. “Will ya be wantin’ to explain to more widows and mothers why their husbands and sons had to die? I’m not giving that as a threat, mind. It’s an honest fact. We know who we’re dealing with, my agency, and I don’t think you quite understand yet.”

Zhao chewed on his lip, looking between Deirdre and Mari. They had a solid point in what they

were saying. "I can't just give him up," he said. "It won't look good in the press, to say nothing of what the constabulary here will think. They want to see Remy hang just as much as anyone for what he did. I need a way to save face if I'm going to keep order."

Deirdre nodded. "I can't make too many promises, but I can say this. Ya let us take Remy with us, get him back to Cerelis, and as soon as we have what we need from him, we'll gladly bring him right back to Mars. There won't be any reason for anyone to want him dead after that, so it won't matter. You'll be in a much more secure position. After that, do what y' like with him."

Zhao thought that over for a few minutes. "Seems...fair...", he grudgingly allowed. He sighed and looked up at the ceiling. "Alright. I don't like it, but you make a good case. I don't want more deaths than we've already had. If you can guarantee Remy will be back here to stand trial for his crimes against Mars, I'll let you take custody. But you make sure to hold up your end of the bargain."

Deirdre allowed herself a little smile. "Thank you," she said. She stood up as Zhao did the same, and extended her hand. "We're on th' same side, sir. We want the same thing: justice. It'll be served in this case, even if you have t' wait a little longer for it. I promise you that."

The prosecutor shook on it, and mirrored her smile even though he didn't feel much like smiling. "Well, this was one of my shorter meetings, anyway," he said. "You've got a better way with words than Agent Goode. You'll understand if I spin it a little different to the press?"

"Fine, fine," Deirdre said, waving his words away. "Y'can say the big, bad feds from Cerelis strong-armed you all you like. I've had worse said about me."

Zhao let his hand drop. "I'll call ahead to the detention center," he told them. "They'll be expecting you. Just get Remy out of my hair as quick as you can, and then get him back as quick as possible. I'll pull some strings and have the indictments postponed. I hope you get what you want from him."

"Glad that's sorted out," Deirdre said, and she leaned back wearily in the seat of the all-terrain car as they traveled to the main detention center in Lockyer, one of the lowlands in the southern regions of Mars. The road was bracketed on both sides by nondescript, red soil, featureless except for the typical rocks and boulders that dotted the Martian surface. She had the window rolled down, her hand hanging out to keep the smoke from her cigarette out of the car, to avoid offending Mari.

The Ailian officer glanced over at her, taking her eyes off the straight, otherwise empty road for a moment. Mari was driving. At her height, she was a bit cramped in the driver's seat of the human vehicle, even though it was a large, boxy sport utility, but as short as she was for her species she was one of the few Ailians who could fit inside any car, let alone drive it. "You look...what is the human

word for it...'rough', Agent Flynn," she said.

"I feel it," Deirdre agreed, as her eyes closed. "I haven't had a lot o' sleep the last few days. Stress, I s'pose...Been busy at work." She raised her other hand and rubbed at her temple. "Y'know how it is, I'm sure."

Mari looked back at the road. "I suppose." She turned the steering wheel as their exit came up, and the car began to jostle as they came onto a rougher patch of road. As old as the Mars colony was, many of the side roads were little more than flattened dirt trails. "You should take better care of yourself. You have many responsibilities. A great deal rests on your shoulders."

"Hence th' stress," Deirdre countered. "But I'm alright. Should have a spot of time off after this assignment." She looked over at Captain Ayalis. "So what were y' up to on Lima, eh?"

Mari gave a very human sort of shrug. "The usual. Going over security arrangements. I like to keep abreast of what happens on the homeworld. I need to make sure I am still prepared, whenever my liaison assignment comes to a close and I return to regular duties." A sign passing on their right informed them that the detention center was a mile ahead. Over the flat terrain, which angled down at a slight grade, they could both see the low buildings of the prison in the distance. "There is much preparation happening now, as we get ready for the ten year remembrance."

"Oh, right you are..." Ten years really *had* passed, hadn't they? In a few months, both the Ailian and human peoples would be commemorating the anniversary of the end of the war that had engulfed the settled galaxies. Both of their governments were preparing for a ceremony that would take place on Cerelis to remember those lost, and to celebrate the new alliance that had formed. The ceremony would take place on the exact day, ten years prior, that the Ascendancy had officially handed back Earth to its rightful inhabitants. "I s'pose the Empress will be there and all?"

"She will. And a good many other dignitaries of my people." Mari slowed the car as they approached the gate to the prison complex. "The security will be tight. The commander has ordered me to see to the arrangements for the visit."

"Makes sense. Y'do know Cerelis better than most members of th' Royal Guards." The security hut came up on Deirdre's side of the car, and she fished her identification out of her jacket pocket and showed it to the guard who stood watch. He examined it closely, peered curiously at Mari, and then gave a nod. The metal arm that blocked the entrance lifted, and their car proceeded through into the walled complex. The prison was composed of ten three-story, squarish buildings, each of them housing several levels of cell blocks, and one smaller building that housed the administrative offices and a few cells that would be used as interview rooms.

"I shall do my best." Mari drove over to the administrative building and parked the car. Both

she and Deirdre got out. The Ailian stretched herself out, cramped from the long drive in the small vehicle.

Deirdre tossed the smoldering butt of her cigarette and stamped it out with her shoe. "Let's get this over with, then. Don't want t' be spendin' any more time on Mars than we have to." Her lips widened into a grin. "I can't wait to have a chat with Mr. Remy."

"I heartily agree."

The two women walked from the car to the main entrance of the administrative building, where they were met by an armed prison guard clad in body armor. After he checked their credentials, the guard showed them inside and they walked through a series of halls containing a multitude of nondescript offices. The walk took them up several floors, to a point where the office doors became a bit nicer and less clinical in appearance. Their journey culminated with them being shown to a set of double doors, which opened into a small conference room. Though more luxurious than could be expected of a prison, the room was still rather spartan in its décor. Other than a long table with a row of chairs on either side, there was no furniture, and only a single window on the far wall, which would have provided insufficient illumination had there not been lights on the ceiling. The room was not unoccupied, but it was not the criminal Remy who waited for them. Instead, Deirdre saw a man dressed smartly in a fine business suit, though his jacket was off and draped over the chair he was seated in. As he stood to greet them, she could see that he had a sidearm and badge clipped to his belt.

"SSA Flynn," the man said, coming to the door to shake her hand. "Good to meet you. I've heard about your work on Cerelis. I'm Superintendent Alan Hudson, the warden at this facility."

Deirdre took his hand, and found that Hudson subscribed to the "power handshake" philosophy, gripping her palm very firmly indeed. "Good t' meet you as well," she said.

Hudson let her hand go and turned to Mari. "And Captain Ayalis, I believe?" He shook her hand as well. Deirdre was amused to see him wince slightly; Mari no doubt was well-versed in the art of the firm handshake. "Prosecutor Zhao told me to expect you, too. Welcome to Mars."

"Thank you," Mari said. "I have been once before. During the war."

"I see." Hudson waved to the table. "Please have a seat. Mr. Remy should be joining us shortly. He's being brought up from his cell." The superintendent returned to his chair, and Deirdre and Mari took seats as well. Luckily for Mari, the chairs were armless, allowing the Ailian to sit comfortably, though the chair creaked a little under her weight. "We're taking precautions with him. Security has been heightened in light of the threats that have been received. I do have to say, I'm more glad than most to have someone here to take him off our hands."

"Oh?" Deirdre said. "That's surprisin' to me. I would have thought you'd want t' keep him for

yourself. Prosecutor Zhao sure didn't want to give him up.”

“No, I imagine he didn't,” Hudson agreed. “But I'm more realistic than he is. I knew that once news reached Cerelis that he was in custody, both the CFP and other folks would want a piece of him. I was expecting this to happen. I'd rather he be gone than to have to deal with an attack on the prison. I know the crowd that he used to run with. If you've read my file, as I'm sure you have, you'll know I used to be CFP myself.”

Deirde hadn't known that, but she nodded anyway. “Then that makes things easy. We'll have him out of your hair soon enough. We did want t' interview him a bit before we left, though.”

“No argument here.” Hudson checked his watch. “I'm kind of curious to hear what he knows, myself. I hope you won't mind if I sit in on the interview?”

“If you wish,” Mari said. “Has he said anything since he was taken into custody?”

The superintendent shook his head. “Afraid not. He's refused to speak to any of my people or the police here on Mars. But he hasn't asked for a lawyer. He doesn't know you're here, by the way. He just knows someone is here to talk to him.”

They waited for about fifteen minutes, making idle chat, until there was a knock on the door and the guard from before came in. Behind him, shackles clinking with every step, came a gaunt man clad in the black-and-white striped uniform of a prison inmate. His feet were cuffed at the ankles, and his hands were cuffed in the front as well, with a long chain of steel links connected the shackles and handcuffs. Deirdre looked him over as he was led to the table. Marcus Remy didn't much resemble the photos that the Cerelan Federal Police had of him in their files. He used to be a handsome man, but now he was quite thin and sported a thick, unkempt beard. He looked as though he hadn't a decent night's sleep in years. He had been on the run for quite a long time, and likely hadn't seen much in the way of peace in that period.

“What the hell is this about?” he asked as he was taken to a chair by the guard. He glanced at Mari, his eyes narrowed, and then looked at Deirdre. The guard knelt down next to him and unshackled one of his feet, and he fastened the free cuff to his chair. “I told the cops I'm not interested in talking. Just take me back to my cell.”

“Mr. Remy, I'm not with th' police here on Mars,” Deirdre said. She leaned forward and folded her hands on top of the table. “I'm Supervisory Special Agent Deirdre Flynn of the Cerelan Federal Police, and this is Captain Mari Ayalis of the Lirnan Royal Guards. We're here t' have a chat with you before we bring you back t' Cerelis.”

Realization flashed into Remy's eyes for a moment, and he flicked his gaze to Superintendent Hudson before looking back at Deirdre. “Cerelis? I...see.” He crossed his arms over his chest, a gesture

made difficult by the tightness of his cuffs. "You're here about that business ten years ago."

"Business is one way to put it," Mari said. She growled quietly at the man. "You are wanted for a number of murders on Cerelis. As well as for your role in the uprising in the Ascendancy. But before all that, there are some questions we would like to ask you."

Remy looked at her, then pointedly ignored Mari and spoke to Deirdre. "Tell the cat to shut her mouth. I'm not speaking to the likes of her." Mari's tail twitched at the slur. "What do you want to know?"

"Manners, Mr. Remy," Deirdre said. She gave him a tight smile. "Y'know you're not in th' best of positions, right now. There have been threats on your life. We're about th' best chance y' have on making it back home alive."

"You don't think I know that?" Remy retorted. "I've been running ever since the war ended. There's been more than one time someone's tried to kill me." He rubbed his face with one hand. "If you're after information about other fugitives, I might have some info you'd want...But it'll cost you."

Deirdre nodded. Bargaining was something she'd been prepared for. "Name your price."

"Immunity."

Mari barked out a laugh. "You are dreaming. Your crimes are far too egregious to expect that. You will be lucky to escape execution on the charges in the Ascendancy, alone."

"I figured," Remy said, looking down at his lap. "But I had to ask, anyway. At the very least, I want protection. And if I don't get immunity, I at least want death to be taken off of the table."

"I can guarantee that," Deirdre said. She held a hand up. "That depends on your information, of course. An' you're not t' hold anything back." She leaned back in her chair. "You give us the answers that we want, and I'll make sure you're treated fairly at trial."

Remy speared her with an intense gaze. "That's assuming I live long enough to make it there. Do you really think you can keep me alive that long? I have a lot of old friends who want me dead now. I don't know if you can ever be prepared to keep me alive." He looked between Mari and Deirdre. "There are only two of you? That's not going to be enough."

"We'll manage," Deirdre said. "Now about our questions..."

"No."

"No?"

Remy smirked at her. "You heard me. I'm not answering any questions until I'm in protective custody on Cerelis. It's the least you can do. If you're so confident that I'll live long enough to stand trial, then you can wait to hear what I have to say until I get home. I think that's fair."

Mari growled again. "You are presumptuous, Mr. Remy. You are being quite demanding for a

criminal.”

The human prisoner shrugged. “If I’m that important to you, then it’s a small enough request. And you have my word that I’ll talk all you want once we’re on Cerelis.”

Hudson shook his head. “I wouldn’t take his word if I were you, SSA Flynn. He’s a terrorist. You can’t trust what he says.”

“Keep out of this,” Remy said to him. “This is between me and the fed. I got no reason to lie. If I make it to Cerelis, I get to live. There’s no reason for me to hold back my information anymore. The war’s been over for a decade. I don’t have a dog in this fight anymore. I want to save myself.”

“You’ve got a point, Mr. Remy.” Deirdre stroked her chin thoughtfully. “Alright, fair enough. I s’pose we can wait t’ hear what y’ have to say until we get back to Cerelis.” She raised a finger in warning. “But if y’ hold back, even with one little thing, I’ll give y’ to her.” She jerked her head at Mari. “An’ I promise y’ won’t find th’ Ascendancy quite as sympathetic as you’ll find me. Is that clear?”

Remy barely spared Mari more than a quick look. “Clear, Agent Flynn.” He looked back at the guard. “Get me out of this shit. I’m leaving this dump.”

Deirdre smiled as Remy got to his feet and was led out. “We’ll see ya soon, Mr. Remy. Don’t be forgettin’ our agreement, now.”

“Will Deputy Director Medici approve of your deal with him?”

Deirdre looked at the rear view mirror of their vehicle, seeing Mari’s two-tone eyes staring back at her. “He’ll get over it,” she said. “The important part o’ the job was getting’ him back to Cerelis with us, an’ we’re doin’ that, aren’t we?”

“Perhaps so, but I did not think you had the authority to make plea deals on your own. Is that not a job for one of your prosecutors?”

“He shoulda sent a prosecutor with us anyway, but he wanted this job kept quiet.” Deirdre shrugged. “Like I said, he’ll get over it. I know they’d’a been pushin’ for the death penalty for him, but if shelvin’ that is what it means to learn what he knows, they’ll go for it.” She looked out of the window. “What’ll the Ascendancy think of it?”

Mari mulled that question over for a few minutes. “I suppose they will agree,” she finally said. “There are very few crimes in the Ascendancy these days which merit a death sentence, but espionage is certainly one of them. However, I believe they will also see the value of keeping him as a living asset.”

“You don’t have to talk about me like I’m not here,” Marcus Remy said, a little sulkily.

“I don’t recall ya bein’ a part o’ this conversation,” Deirdre said. Remy was sitting in the back

seat of the car, with her, handcuffed in front and strapped in with the seat belt. He had lost his prison uniform in favor of the clothes he had been arrested in: a worn but presentable pair of dark slacks and a white button-down shirt without a tie. “The deal was we'd bring y' back t' Cerelis. Nothin' mentioned about bein' nice to you. How long t' th' spaceport, Mari?”

Mari glanced in the rear view mirror again. “Perhaps twenty minutes,” she said. She glanced in the side view mirror, and Deirdre saw a frown cross her face. “There is a vehicle coming up behind us...”

Deirdre looked over her shoulder out the rear window. “Yeah. Figured we'd eventually see someone else. Mars ain't abandoned, not quite yet, y'know.” She gazed back at the other car for a while. The vehicle was a white one, an SUV like theirs, with tinted windows, which wasn't so unusual. The sunlight could be bright on Mars, so many privately-owned vehicles had tinted windows.

“They are coming rather fast,” Mari observed. She increased their own speed a bit. The road was only two-lane, so there wouldn't be any way for a faster vehicle to pass them, if they were obeying the traffic laws. As she sped up, the car behind them also increased its speed.

Deirdre was starting to get a funny feeling crawling up the back of her neck. “Drive a little faster, Mari, yeah?” she said. The Ailian pressed the accelerator harder, and they sped up even more. The other car did the same, and started going even faster, closing the gap between them.

“I think you should call ahead to the spaceport,” Mari suggested. The fur on the top of her head was starting to stand up now, and her heart rate was rapidly increasing. This was starting to feel very wrong to her.

“Right you are,” Agent Flynn agreed. She dug into the inside pocket of her jacket and pulled out a communicator, flipped it open, and dialed the number for the spaceport. As she held the device to her ear, she was surprised to hear silence. Not even the tone of the numbers being dialed out. “That's odd...” She tried dialing the number for the local police. Again, nothing to be heard except for the slight static of a dead line. “Phone's not workin'...Hang on.” She looked ahead of them, and spotted a low billboard to the left, just behind which was a side road. “Turn off up there, and let's see if they follow.”

Captain Ayalis nodded, and as they approached the side road she slowed down a bit in preparation for making the turn. As they began to turn the corner, the leather of the steering wheel squeaked as the Ailian's grip tightened on it. “*Po'krai!*” she hissed sharply, jerking her hands back to the other direction.

She was just a hair too late in her movements. From behind the billboard, a third car darted out towards them, a four-door sedan this time. Before Deirdre could register what was happening, there came the thundering sound of metal-on-metal and shattering glass as the car slammed into the side of

their SUV, spinning it in the road. Mari fought to keep them upright as they continued to spin, three more times, as their vehicle was sent off the road and into the rusty dirt. Over the cacophony of the crash, Deirdre could hear Remy yelling in alarm, and also a squealing of tires different from the ones of their car. She was pressed up against the door, and her arm had shot out from reflex across the chest of the prisoner, though his seat belt held him tightly in place.

Finally their car came to rest on the side of the road, mercifully upright, though the engine had shut off from the shock of the crash. Deirdre's head was spinning and her ears were ringing. She looked from side to side rapidly, trying to figure out what was going on. Mari had her head in her hand, her teeth bared and her eyes squeezed shut from pain. The airbag had deployed right into her face and was deflating. The driver's side of their vehicle, where the impact had occurred, was bowed in. Luckily for them, their vehicle was a lot sturdier than the typical civilian SUV, even though it had still taken quite a beating from the crash. They were pointed back towards the road, opposite the direction they'd come from. Deirdre saw the SUV that had been following them coming to a hard stop with smoke rising from its tires.

"Y'alright?" she gasped out at Mari, who didn't speak but grunted in the affirmative, nodding her head. She looked at Remy and saw that he had a cut on his forehead from the broken glass of his window, but otherwise seemed to be unharmed.

"Fuck me," he groaned. "What the fuck..."

"Shut it," Deirdre ordered him. She started to unbuckle her seatbelt, and then she saw the front doors on the white sport utility swing open. A man dressed in a black suit stepped out, his eyes shielded by dark sunglasses, and she registered a long, black object in his hands that she recognized a split second later as a shotgun. "Hell, Mari, get down!"

Deirdre grabbed the back of Remy's head and forced him down as he yelled in pained protest, and she thrust her right hand into her jacket and unholstered her pistol. Before she could bring it into line, the man leveled his shotgun at their vehicle and fired. Deirdre jerked out of the line of fire in time to hear the pellets whizzing above her head and into the window on her side of the car, shattering the glass. She heard another curse from Mari and felt the vehicle jostling as she first tried to open the driver's door, which seemed to be stuck. Deirdre looked up to see the man with the long gun eject his spent shell and take aim for a second shot. The driver of the white SUV was out now as well, and he had a short-barreled submachine gun tucked tight against his shoulder. The agent took aim at him first and pulled the trigger twice. The man rocked back on his heels as the rounds hit him in the chest, and he triggered a burst of fire into the air out of reflex before he fell back onto the ground, kicking at the road as he pushed himself along the pavement behind the front wheel of his vehicle.

His companion retreated to the rear of his vehicle, keeping his weapon leveled at them as he fired again. The pellets hit the side of their SUV this time, but the armored doors kept them from penetrating. With the second she had before he was ready to shoot again, Deirdre unbuckled Remy and shoved him into the floorboards of their car.

“Don't move!” she yelled at him, and then she pushed open her door and rolled out into the dirt. Mari was half a moment behind her, crawling over the center console and coming out of the passenger side of the car. “Mari, I'll cover you!”

“Right,” the Ailian officer said. She had her eyes on the car that had rammed into theirs. It had stopped as well, the front end wrecked, and two men were emerging from either side. Both of them seemed to be armed with pistols. Mari had her own sidearm holstered at her hip, but she wasn't even thinking of it right now. While Deirdre knelt behind the front of their SUV and fired at their attackers to keep their heads down, the Ailian low-stepped to the back of their vehicle. She pulled open the back hatch and reached inside, where a human-designed patrol rifle was mounted in a rack on the back of the rear passenger seats.

“Hurry up, Mari!” Deirdre shouted. She took careful aim at the man who was wielding the shotgun, waiting for him to pop back out of cover. He'd fired five times at them by now, and unless his shotgun had been modified he would have two or three shells left to use. As soon as she saw his head come around the edge of his vehicle, she fired. She missed, striking the frame of his car instead, but it was enough to make him jerk back around cover and give her a few precious seconds.

“Damned human toy...,” Mari muttered, her head still throbbing. The rifle was just small enough to still be inconvenient for her seven-and-a-half foot frame, but it was what the situation called for. She yanked the rifle out of the rack and extended the stock as far as it could go, then chambered a round and flipped the safety off.

The two men armed with pistols were trying to break cover and shoot at her, and Deirdre quickly shot back at them until her slide locked back. “Alpha!” she shouted, to alert Mari that she would have to reload. She crouched back behind cover and ejected her spent magazine, snatching a fresh one from the other side of her shoulder holster.

Her shout was answered by the thundering staccato of rifle fire, as Mari stood at the back left corner of their SUV and fired repeated bursts from the automatic weapon. The two men with pistols turned to engage her, and that gave Deirdre the opening she needed. She reloaded her pistol and stood up with her hands braced on the hood of their car and dropped one of the men with several shots to the chest, then took care of the other in similar fashion. That left just the man with the shotgun, who Deirdre realized hadn't been heard from in some time.

Mari had noticed the same thing, and she was advancing slowly on the white vehicle, the rifle up and at the ready. "Throw down your weapon!" she shouted, her steps cautious and her tail twitching as she looked for any signs of movement.

Deirdre was moving as well, going the opposite direction of Mari with her pistol gripped in both hands. As she came around their SUV, she could see the first man she'd shot, the one who had been armed with a submachine gun. He was lying motionless in a wide pool of his own blood; her two shots from earlier must have done the job. But the fourth and final assailant was still out of sight.

Then, fast enough to startle Mari, he ran out from behind the white vehicle and triggered a shot at the Ailian that went wild. The Royal Guard captain coolly tracked him with her weapon and held her trigger down. Shots walked up the man's body from his left hip to his right shoulder, and he stumbled to the ground in a crumpled heap, his shotgun clattering as it landed beside him. The silence that followed seemed deafening.

"Christ...", Deirdre breathed as she lowered her pistol. Her arms suddenly started shaking as the adrenaline started to wear off. That was the first firefight she'd been in since she left the CFP's tactical division, but she was glad to find that her aim hadn't wavered after so much time with only the range for practice. "That was a near thing..." She holstered her weapon and shook her head. "That was a damned stupid thing for him t' do."

"Indeed." Mari safed the rifle and walked over to the man, picking up his shotgun. She checked it, and then handed it to Deirdre as she came up. The human agent ejected the spent shell and then examined the weapon.

"That was his last shot," she said in surprise. She looked at the man as Mari knelt down to check his body. "He did that on purpose, yeah? Didn' want us t' take him alive."

Mari nodded as she sat back on her haunches. "You are correct," she said. "He has no identification on him. I imagine the others do not, either. He did not want to take the chance that we might learn anything from him. A shame. I would have liked to take one of them alive, at least long enough to question him." She stood back up. "We should get moving. There might be more on the way."

"Right y'are," Deirdre agreed. She went back to their vehicle, which looked a lot worse now that she had a chance to look without someone shooting at her. She looked inside to check on Remy. "Y'alright, there?"

Remy picked himself up off the floor of the SUV, glaring back at her. "Just fuckin' peachy!" he snarled. "You still think you're gonna get me back to Cerelis alive? That was just the warm up for the people who are after me!"

“Quit your bellyachin’,” Deirdre said. She yanked on the driver's door as hard as she could until it finally opened up, and then she reached in and turned the ignition key. The engine sputtered several times but stubbornly refused to start. “I don't think we'll be takin' this car any time soon, Mari.”

The Ailian officer gestured to the SUV that their attackers had followed them in, which was in one piece apart from a few bullet holes. “I do not believe they will be needing their vehicle any longer,” she pointed out. “We will commandeer it.”

Deirdre pried open the passenger door of their ruined car and helped Remy out, and marched him over to the white vehicle. Once he was safely belted in again, she climbed in after him while Mari got in the driver's seat. The engine was still running, and Mari put the car in drive and maneuvered them back onto the road, flooring the accelerator as they resumed their journey to the spaceport. Deirdre pulled her communicator back out again and tried dialing the number one more time. This time, the call went through and she was able to make contact. After a short conversation, she shut off the device.

“Our transport is waitin' for us,” she told Mari. “They'll be ready t' go soon as we get there. An' I'm havin' contact SSA Goode for us. He'll have a team retrieve th' bodies an' see what can be learned from 'em. Hopefully one o' them will be known to somebody, somewhere.”

“It hardly matters now,” Mari said. “But some answers would be nice.”

Sighing, Deirdre closed her eyes and leaned back against her seat. The scene from minutes ago was replaying in her head, as it would for the next several days, she was sure. Her heart was still pounding. “So much for an easy job...”