

-Ninth Life-  
Chapter Three: Secrets and Innuendo  
by Havoc

“Once you've lived the inside-out world of espionage, you never shed it. It's a mentality, a double standard of existence.”

- John Le Carré

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By the time Deirdre and Mari made it back to the spaceport with their charge, the entire facility was on lockdown. Apparently the agent's call to the city had done its job, because as soon as they reached the entrance to the spaceport, they were met by a tactical team and several suited Cerelan Federal Police agents, including Supervisory Special Agent Goode. The civilian travelers at the spaceport seemed thoroughly confused, and Deirdre couldn't blame them. This was likely the most excitement that the whole planet had seen in a good long while, at least since the end of the war.

“You made it,” SSA Goode said, as Mari and Deirdre emerged from their borrowed SUV with their prisoner, Marcus Remy. Two of the Mars police tactical officers took custody of him and led him into the spaceport to their awaiting transport, while the human and the Ailian stayed behind. “I was starting to get worried. You two are alright?”

“Fine,” Deirdre said shortly. Her jittery nerves in the aftermath of the firefight had been replaced by anger. “What th' bloody hell happened? This whole extraction was supposed t' be a secret! Somebody leaked.” She didn't mean for her tone to sound so accusatory, but she couldn't help it. She was fired up now, and not only because she'd just had to kill three men.

SSA Goode looked abashed. “We're trying to figure that out, of course. Prosecutor Zhao's office already has investigators headed back to the prison to interview the staff there, and we have a team securing the scene on the highway. A special scene investigation team is enroute from Earth to go over everything there and see what we can learn.”

“I doubt they will find anything,” Mari said. She brushed some red dirt off of her suit jacket. “I took the liberty of examining the glove compartment and center console of the vehicle we commandeered. They are both empty. I suspect your people will find just as much with the bodies and the third vehicle.”

“It still won't hurt to check.” SSA Goode looked around, checking the area. On the street outside of the spaceport, many passers-by were milling around, no doubt drawn by the heavy police presence. “In any case, we'd better get you out of here. Word's out now, so I think we can kiss the secrecy goodbye. Get Remy back to Cerelis. It'll be a lot safer there, at least. I'll hold down the fort here and contact Deputy Director Medici with anything we learn.”

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Once everyone was secure aboard the transport, they lifted off in a matter of minutes and quickly left Mars' atmosphere, getting underway as they traveled out of the gravity well. Deirdre stayed up in the cockpit with their pilot until they were safely in hyperspace, and then she walked back into the passenger areas. Mari was seated in the common area of the compartment, in a seat just outside of the door to a cabin where Remy was being kept while they were traveling.

“Well, excitin' day, yeah, Mari?” Deirdre asked, sitting down heavily in a seat of her own. She unholstered her sidearm and placed it on a small table in front of the chairs, retrieving a small kit from a compartment underneath so that she could begin cleaning the weapon.

“Indeed,” Captain Ayalis agreed. She watched idly as Deirdre took apart her weapon and began swabbing the components with a solvent. “It is lucky we were prepared for trouble, even if we did not expect any.” She jerked her head towards the closed door behind which Remy was being kept. “Our prisoner is not happy. He almost did not allow me to tend to his minor injuries.”

Deirdre grimaced. “He'll get over it,” she said. “I'm gonna have a chat with him in a mo'. Th' deputy director wanted me t' interrogate him a little before we arrive. Get an idea o' what kinda intel he can provide. This whole thing better have been worth it.”

“Shall I assist you?”

“Sit in if'n ya want,” Deirdre said, drying the parts of her weapon before beginning to put it back together again. “But I think I can handle him. I've dealt with th' likes o' him before.”

Once her task was complete, Deirdre replaced her weapon and got up from her seat. She went to the door to Remy's cabin and opened it, stepping inside. Mari followed her in. The cabin was furnished lightly, with a bed, a chair, and a small attached room with basic facilities inside. Remy himself was lying on the bed, and he looked like he was feigning sleep. His wrist was cuffed to a small rail attached to the wall next to the bed. Deirdre walked up to him and lifted her leg, nudging his hip with her foot.

“Get up you,” she ordered him. “I got a few questions.”

Sighing, Remy opened his gray eyes and slowly sat up. He looked even rougher than before. Several bandages were covering parts of his face where he'd been cut by broken glass, and he had a sizable bruise on one cheek from being forced down into the floor of the CFP car during the earlier fight. “Can't a guy get a decent hour or two of shut-eye?” he asked. “This is the first time I haven't been in a dank prison cell in almost a week.”

Deirdre scowled and took a seat in the chair, next to the bed. “This ain't a pleasure cruise, Remy,” she reminded him. “You're headed back t' prison soon as we get to Cerelis, an' I'm not in th' business of providin' comfort to arrestees.”

Mari crossed her arms, remaining standing while she leaned against the wall next to the door, keeping her head bowed slightly so her ears would not brush the low ceiling of the ship. The feline alien regarded Remy impassively, and he spared a glance to her. She blinked at him, but chose not to speak. Remy sneered at her. With another casual blink, Mari gradually bared her sharp teeth at him, and let a low, intimidating growl escape her lips. The human prisoner's eyes widened a bit and he seemed to shrink a little.

"I told you I wasn't answering any questions until we make it to Cerelis," he said, looking back at Deirdre. "Or did you forget our little deal?"

"I remember," Deirdre said. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a small recorder, hitting the button to start it up and placing it on the bed. "An' I'm stickin' to it. I'm not interested in what happened durin' th' war right now. What I want t' know is what you've been up to since then. How did you stay hidden for so long?"

Remy narrowed his eyes. "Hm...Fine. I guess that's okay. Not like it will be useful to you beyond satisfying your curiosity." He leaned back on the bed, the handcuff chain clinking as he adjusted his position. "You've already got the reports of how I left Cerelis. Killed three CFP agents who were between me and my exit ship, and then I got the hell out of there. Seems like you're more skilled than those scrubs. Guess the feds upped their training standards since then, huh?"

Agent Flynn smiled at his efforts to get under her skin. "Before my time, Marcus," she said. "A good try, though. If you're lookin' for some satisfaction, y' won't find any from me. Go on."

"Whatever. After I left Cerelis, I had a few contacts on Earth who put me up for a few weeks while I figured out where to go next. Don't bother trying to find them." Marcus gave a little smile of his own. "They're dead."

"Dead?"

"I don't like leaving witnesses behind me. 'Nuff said about that." Remy looked up at the ceiling, as though he was looking back through time. "Even with the war over, I still had some people in human space and in the Ascendancy who could provide me with resources. Don't ask me who, I don't know their names. All I had were comm numbers and some anonymous net mail addresses. I bounced from here to there in the UN and the Ascendancy. I never stayed anywhere for more than a month if I could help it." He glanced over at Mari. "I even spent a week on Lirna. God, that place is a fiery hellhole. I was glad to get out of there."

Mari cocked an eye at him. "Impressive to not be found there," she said. "There are not many humans on Lirna anymore. Many of the former slaves were repatriated to their home colonies."

"Can't blame them. Lirna's not exactly a 'happy place' for most humans." Remy smirked.

“Anyway, that's about it. I went from place to place for the last ten years. Not a very comfortable life, but hey, it was better than the alternative, and I wasn't too keen on joining any of my former comrades in their flight to the Pteryd Combine. I like those bug freaks even less than I like you cats.” He shrugged. “Thought I could finally settle down on Mars for a while. Figured the heat had died down enough to make that doable. Guess I was wrong.”

“Guess you were,” Deirdre said. “That's it, then?”

“For now. Sorry to disappoint you, lady. The life of a fugitive isn't as exciting as you might imagine.” Remy closed his eyes again. “How about that sleep, now? Everything else you want to know is gonna have to wait until we get home.”

Shaking her head, Deirdre reached over and picked up the recorded, switching it off. She stood up from the chair and headed for the door. “Fine with me. But you'll be a lot more cooperative when we get t' Cerelis, if y' know what's good for you.”

Remy waved a hand dismissively as she and Mari walked out, closing and locking the door securely behind them.

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One thankfully uneventful day later, the transport ship emerged from its last hyperspace jump and entered orbit around Cerelis. Once they'd received the proper clearance from spaceport control, they descended to the planet's surface and landed in a secure area of the main port in the capital of Tranquility City. Deirdre heaved a sigh of a relief when they touched down, glad to finally be done with the tedium of spaceflight. While the pilot shut the ship down and secured everything in the cockpit, she and Mari prepared Remy to disembark. Unlike on Mars, they left his feet free of shackles, instead cuffing his hands in front of his body. They fitted him with a thick, heavy protective vest, one that would stop the rounds of most weapons, including bolts from an energy weapon, though those were far less common than traditional guns. They weren't taking any chances with him, not after the incident on Mars.

When the pilot gave them the okay, they walked Remy down the boarding ramp and out onto the landing pad. They were met there by a squad of uniformed CFP agents, who escorted Remy into a waiting armored vehicle. Together, they were transported through the streets of the city at a rapid pace, past skyscrapers and down numerous side roads until they arrived in an enclosed garage attached to Cerelan Federal Police headquarters. At that point, Deirdre and Mari left Remy in the other agents' custody and took an elevator up to one of the top floors, where the office of the deputy director was located. The two of them waited for only a short time until they were shown in by the deputy director's secretary.

Deputy Director Medici was at his desk looking over some files, and his head came up as the two women walked in. “Ahh, SSA Flynn, you're back.” He looked at Mari. “And Captain Ayalis, good to see you again, as well.”

“Director,” Mari said.

“Please, sit, both of you,” Medici said, gesturing to a pair of chairs. “Nice job bringing Remy back. I've read the report from SSA Goode about what happened on Mars. Sounds like you handled yourselves well.”

Deirdre smiled a bit. “Weren't expectin' such a send-off when we got there,” she said. “Seems like some people didn't want us bringin' Mr. Remy home.”

“Somewhat of an understatement...,” Mari murmured, as she took a seat and folded her hands in her lap.

“Yes, it seems like we failed to account for just how badly some people would want him out of the picture. The information he has must be really something.” Deputy Director Medici stacked up his files and stowed them away in a drawer next to him. “It's actually convenient you came in just now. I have a call holding that you'll want to sit in on.” He tapped a button underneath his desk, and a panel in the wall of his office slid aside to reveal a comm screen. The screen brightened to life.

When the display stabilized, the image resolved into a waist-up depiction of an Ailian female. With black fur and a plain uniform to match, she made for an imposing figure, which was also due in no small part to the gleaming, mirrored patch covering where her left eye would have been. The look in her remaining gold-yellow eye more than made up for the lack of one, as she had a strong, fierce air about her. Deirdre had met the leader of the Lirnan Royal Guards one time, years ago, during an assignment that took her to the Ascendancy, and she was every bit as impressive as she recalled.

The Ailian folded her arms over her chest. “Deputy Director,” she said, in lightly accented English. “Finally. Is long time you make me wait. You have good news, yes?”

“My apologies, Commander Me'lia,” Medici said. “Thank you for your patience. Some bad news, actually, but a little good news as well.” He looked to the side. “For starters, Captain Ayalis and SSA Flynn have just arrived back from Mars.”

Aria Me'lia looked to the side slightly, to where Deirdre and Mari were sitting, and the barest of a smile crossed her feline face. “Ah, is good news! I hear you have trouble on Mars.” She waved a hand at Mari. “Well?”

Mari nodded. “Yes, Commander,” she said. “Agent Flynn and myself managed to retrieve the wanted human terrorist, Marcus Remy, from where he was being held in prison. There was some minor difficulty on the part of the federal prosecutor in negotiating his release, but nothing that Agent Flynn

was not able to handle. However, while we were in transit with the prisoner, we were accosted by some armed humans.”

The commander's eye narrowed. “But return with prisoner, yes?”

“Barely,” Deirdre said. “It was a near thing. I am glad Mari was there, or we might'nt have made it out alive. But we got th' greasy bugger back home, mostly in one piece.” She got the usual wince from Medici for her rough language, but a look of amusement from the Ailian.

“Is good. Mari is best in Royal Guards, yes?” She chuckled. “I sometimes sorry she work on Cerelis. But good news is good. What is bad news?” Me'lia looked back to the deputy director.

“I'll send you the full report later, Commander,” Medici replied, “but the short story is that we haven't had much luck identifying the men behind the attack on Mars, or who might have sent them there. I find it unlikely that they initiated the attack on their own behalf.” He shrugged. “Not to say that we haven't had *any* luck. We managed to get a positive ID on one of the assailants. Boris Nedbalek.”

Deirdre sat up a little straighter. “I know that name. Paid assassin, yeah? I'd heard he was killed on Europa three years ago.”

“That's what we thought,” Medici agreed. “He went to work as a hit man for the Czech mob on Earth when peace broke out, but went rogue when CFP operations broke his organization up. He's a former operator for the Spetsnaz. Was, I should say. The two bullets you put in his chest will make finding work a little harder for him, Agent Flynn.” Medici gave her a grim smile. “We still haven't been able to identify his companions, but we're sending their biometrics to all the security services and the military. I imagine we'll get a few matches eventually. A surprising number of former soldiers have found their way into organized crime in some fashion or another.”

“So needless to say they were probably hired by people whom Mr. Remy used to work for or with,” Mari surmised.

“That's a safe bet,” Medici agreed. “Which makes tracing the culprits all the harder. I doubt they even knew who Remy really was. They were probably just told that a prisoner was going to be transported and were instructed to kill him and whoever was with him.”

“And how they even know that?” Commander Me'lia wondered.

“That's got me beat,” Deputy Director Medici admitted. He leaned back in his chair, rubbing his face with one hand. “The only people on Cerelis who knew what was going down were myself, the director, SSA Flynn, and a couple of other people in our intelligence division. On Mars, it was only SSA Goode, Prosecutor Zhao, and the prison's warden, and even he only found out about it a few hours prior to the pickup. And, of course, you and Captain Ayalis knew about it. I can vouch for everyone on my end except for the warden, and I can't imagine the leak coming from him since he wouldn't have

had enough time to set up the hit.”

“Was not me or Mari,” the Ailian commander insisted. “Want Remy alive as much as you.”

Medici shook his head. “Wouldn't dream of suggesting you were behind it,” he assured them both. “But the leak came from somewhere, and it's entirely possible that it was gleaned from communications intercepts rather than an actual person. We encrypt as much as we can, but our tech comes from private firms, like any other government agency's do. The codes are breakable with enough work, and there was enough lead time prior to the operation for someone to have figured out what was going on. We'll keep looking into, of course.”

“Could be Remy himself might have an idea,” Deirdre said. “He an' I made a deal that he'd tell us everything he knows once back on Cerelis. He's t' give us all th' info he has on remaining fugitives, an' in exchange...” She paused here. She suddenly remembered that she hadn't exactly told the deputy director about the deal she'd made with Remy. “Well...in exchange, I told him we'd take capital punishment off th' table.”

“You what?” Medici sputtered, abruptly standing up from his chair. He thumped both of his hands on the table. “You didn't. You had no authority to make a deal like that, Flynn! He's a spy and a murderer, and those are offenses that call for the death penalty. The director is going to have our asses for this one...”

Commander Me'lia looked displeased as well. “Empress will not like, either.”

Mari shot Deirdre a look that clearly said “I told you so”, but Deirdre ignored it for now. “It was th' only way, sir,” she said. “He wouldn't agree t' talk if death was an option. It makes sense, sir, an' you know it does. Gettin' th' info he has is more important. We've made that deal with people like Remy before, an' so has th' Ascendancy.”

“And those deals were made with the full cooperation of our agency *and* the federal prosecutor's office,” Medici shot back. He sat back down, trying to compose himself. “I just hope you're confident that Remy will stick to the agreement. If he has a sudden change of heart and decides not to talk, you're in it deep.”

Deirdre stiffened and raised her head slightly. “I wouldn't have made th' deal if I wasn't sure of it, sir. Remy will talk. He's facing th' needle if he doesn', and a man like him is concerned with self-preservation. He'll do whatever he can t' make that happen.”

“For what it is worth, Deputy Director Medici, I agree with Agent Flynn,” Mari said calmly. “Remy has taken great pains to stay alive for the past ten years. He is not the sort of person to give up on that, not if he can find a way to survive. I believe he will talk.”

Medici regarded her for a few minutes, and then he sighed. “Fine. You both seem convinced. I'll

do what I can to straighten it out with the director.” He pointed a finger at both of them. “But you better pray for a good conclusion. If Remy's intel doesn't lead to something, we're in trouble.” He rubbed his face again. “That'll be all for now. The commander and I have a few things to discuss in private. You're dismissed for now. Remy should be being debriefed by our intelligence division right now. As soon as they're ready, I want the two of you talking to him. Get whatever you can out of him as quickly as possible. That's all.”

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Out in the hallway, with the office door closed securely behind them, Deirdre and Mari both felt the pressure from what had just occurred. They walked together to the elevator and back down to street level, coming out into the bustling midday sidewalk traffic. Deirdre fished out a much-needed cigarette while Mari stood a ways off, to keep out of her smoke.

“Well, that could have gone much worse,” the Ailian captain allowed.

“Coulda gone better, too,” Deirdre said, with a long exhale. She leaned back against the building, kicking the toe of her shoe against the pavement. “I don' think my boss was too chuffed with what I did. Ah well...I been in trouble before.”

Mari nodded. “Indeed. At least we are still alive.”

“True,” Deirdre said with a little laugh. “Least my career is th' only thing in danger o' dyin', now.” She took another drag of her cigarette. “I'm beat. I think I'll head back t' my place an' relax a little. Not much else for us t' do, now, is there? Not 'til they're through debriefin' Remy, anyway.”

“You are right about that,” Mari said. She clasped her arms behind her back. “I will return to my office and prepare for the interview. I imagine you did not sleep much on the flight back?” She received a nod from Deirdre in return. “You never do. Take the night off. I shall handle the preliminary interview tonight, and you can come in with me in the morning.”

Deirdre felt a huge relief wash over her. “You're a doll, Mari,” she said. “I feel like I been runnin' nonstop for a week. I owe ya one.”

“More than one, I think. Sleep well, Agent Flynn.” Mari turned around and headed back into the building.

Deirdre considered hailing a cab for the ride back to her apartment, but changed her mind and began walking. She felt the need to stretch her legs after being cramped up in the ship for a day's time. As she walked, she thought about what to do with her unexpected evening off. As tired as she was, she didn't feel like she could handle more than a nap. Her mind was a whirl of thoughts, about Remy, about what had happened on Mars, and about who could have been behind the attack. Obviously, logic suggested it would be someone in the old rebellion who Remy had been associated with, but that list of

suspects was still a mile long even after ten years of arrests. Too much for one agent to figure out, and there was slim chance of making any progress until they got more information from the man. What Deirdre needed was something to take her mind off things and refresh herself. She thought she knew just the thing.

Fishing out her phone, Deirdre dialed a number and lifted it to her ear. After several rings, the person on the other end picked up. "Alice? Hello, luv, it's Dee. Yeah, made it back in one piece. Busy this evening? I've had a devil of a time, an' I could use some company. Drinks tonight? You know th' place." She paused for a few seconds. "Sounds lovely. See ya there 'round seven. Cheers, dearie."

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That evening, just a few minutes past seven o'clock, Deirdre was seated at a streetside table outside of one of her favorite bars on the main thoroughfare through Tranquility City. The bar was a fairly quiet one, especially on a weekday night, with most of the outside tables empty. Deirdre liked it because it had a fancy air while remaining affordable, with glasstop tables outside and a waist-high, decorative rock wall surrounding the seating area. She had a glass of her favorite whiskey in front of her, half-empty, and she tried to keep herself from checking her watch for the seventh time. She was dressed casually, in a pair of slim leggings and a shirt, with a jacket to keep the evening breeze from chilling her. After getting back to her apartment earlier in the day, she'd had a shower and a nap of a few hours that had done wonders, and then she'd gotten dressed and headed out. About now, Mari ought to have been sitting down to interview Remy, but Deirdre wasn't concerned about that. As much as she would have liked to be in that interview room, she knew that Mari could handle it just as well as she could. The matter was in good hands.

Glancing to one side, Deirdre felt her heart jump as she finally saw Alice walking down the street towards the bar. The younger girl looked as gorgeous as always, with her blonde hair tied back in a ponytail. She had on a pair of scandalously high shorts, tight to her body, and a thin-strapped blouse covered by a midriff-length jacket. She caught Deirdre's wave, and waved back with a smile, coming right over and having a seat at her table.

"Hello, Dee," she said sweetly, leaning in for the kiss that she knew was coming. "Good to see you back. I was surprised to hear from you so soon. I thought you weren't supposed to be back until next week."

"Th' trip took a lot shorter than I thought it would," Deirdre said. She placed her hand on top of Alice's on the table. "Glad you were free."

"Been a slow few days," Alice said with a little laugh. "I was getting kind of bored at home, actually." The waiter approached them, and Alice ordered a martini, her usual when she and Deirdre

met like this. “So, nice trip?”

“Eventful,” Deirdre said. “We ran into some trouble on Mars. That's why we came back so quick, actually.”

“Oh, tell me all about it!” Alice said, leaning forward with genuine interest. “You know I love hearing about your work, Dee. Was it really quite exciting?”

Deirdre nodded as the waiter came back with Alice's drink, and she took a sip of her own. “Yeah, well, it was fairly rough, actually. We went out there t' bring back a wanted man. Almost didn' make it back alive.”

Alice covered her mouth with one hand. “You didn't get hurt, did you?” She immediately scanned up and down Deirdre's body as though checking for signs of injury. Deirdre laughed.

“I'm fine, luv,” she assured the other woman. “There was a bit o' shootin', but I came outta it alright. Bloody nerve-wracking, though. An' I don' even know if it was worth it. We're hopin' th' fellow we brought back has some good information that'll help us.”

“I'm sure he will,” Alice said. “But you've got the night off? I guess someone else is talking to him right now?”

“Mm-hm, he's back at headquarters. My partner is interviewin' him. Hopefully I'll know soon how it all went.” The red-head lifted her glass, hearing the musical sound of the ice clinking. “I like your outfit, Alice.”

The call girl propped her chin up on one hand, huffing a little. “Do you think so? I dunno. I think it covers up too much. I like...ah...showing a little more skin, you know?”

Deirdre felt a little thrill rise in her chest at that. Her thoughts were immediately overcome by memories of previous evenings she'd spent with Alice, and she remembered just how lovely she looked when she was showing a little more skin. “Right y' are, luv...If I had it my way, ye'd not have a stitch on y' right now.”

A sly smile spread across Alice's face. “But then you'd have to arrest me for public indecency, miss officer-of-the-law. And you'd be aiding and abetting, so you'd have to bring yourself in as well.” She leaned a bit lower, affording the girl across the table a clearer glance down her blouse. She wasn't wearing a bra. “But then, you've shown me before you don't care much for decency.”

Deirdre shuddered slightly. “Damn girl...you do lay it on thick, don't you? Can't wait t' get you home with me...” Her ears perked up as she heard the deep rumble of an engine, coming from a car somewhere down the road. “Someone likes t' show off...”

Alice rolled her lovely blue eyes. “I hate people like that. There's this guy I meet about once a month, right? He's got this gorgeous sports car, but he does nothing with it except roar the engine and

show it off. Ugh..." She lifted her glass and sipped at her martini. "Can't stand him. Our engagements are always as short as I can manage them."

"Right..." Deirdre smiled as she looked down the street. The car that was making the noise was coming into view, a long, wide-bodied dark sedan. Like a lot of vehicles of its size and power, the engine was loud. She watched as the car pulled up to the curb outside of the restaurant across the street., and then she looked back at Alice. "So, shall we head back t' my place? An' this time y'*are* spendin' th'..." She glanced back over at the car as she heard one of the doors open. The unusually large size of the vehicle was explained as a tall, broad-shouldered Ailian with gray fur got out of the back passenger area, accompanied by a human getting out of the other side. Deirdre wasn't sure why she'd bothered looking over again, until she saw the feline lock eyes with her and raise his right arm. Held in his hand was a fearsome looking handgun of Ailian design.

Instantly, Deirdre reached over and grabbed Alice's shoulder, eliciting a yelp of surprise from the other woman as she pulled her out of her chair and onto the ground. Just in time, too, as the Ailian fired a shot in their direction that shattered the relative calm of the area. Bar patrons around them screamed and dove for cover as the Ailian fired again, and Deirdre jerked as she felt glass from the bar window falling around her.

"Come on!" she yelled over the noise, grabbing Alice's hand and pulling her along as she ran to the side, heading for a spot along the far wall. She dove behind the wall, bringing Alice down with her as a bullet struck the ground at their feet. "Y'alright?"

Alice was shaking madly, her eyes as wide as saucers, but she managed to nod her head. "I...I think I'm okay..."

Deirdre could still hear people yelling, and she dug into her jacket and drew her pistol from the holster at her shoulder. "Christ, twice in two days?" she said with some incredulity. She chanced a look up over the top of the low wall. The Ailian was still advancing towards them, and she could see the human who'd arrived with him circling around to come at them from the other side. He was armed with a short-barreled machine pistol of the compact style carried by security officers. "Stay down, Alice."

Deirdre ducked back behind cover for a moment, and then she popped back up and shot at the Ailian. He reacted immediately, returning a shot of his own as he moved behind a parked car. The human raised his weapon and fired a burst at her, over her head and into more of the bar's windows. Deirdre shifted her aim and shot three times while he was still moving, missing with her first two shots but striking a glancing blow on his arm with the third. He gave a sort of shrug and set his teeth, and she ducked down once more as his aim improved. One of the rounds whizzed right past her ear and hit one of the metal chairs, and Deirdre felt a sting as her left arm was peppered with bullet fragments.

*We can't stay here*, she thought to herself. Deirdre looked at Alice, who was white as a sheet and curled up in a ball. She needed to get her out of here. "Wait 'til I say so, then run with me!" She got a little squeak and a nod from Alice. Deirdre shuffled low past her until she reached the edge of the wall, and then she leaned out. The human was going down to one knee near the bumper of a delivery truck. She pushed her gun hand out and caught him in her sights, and pressed the trigger back three times. A group of shots that would have made her academy instructors proud landed right in the center of his chest, and he fell onto his back as his gun clattered out of his hand. "Alice, now! Come on!"

The two woman got up to their feet, Alice tottering a little in her fright, and they began running as fast as they could down the sidewalk. Looking back over her shoulder, Alice saw the Ailian breaking cover as well, pausing momentarily to look at his fallen comrade before he gave chase. He was fast, but Deirdre had a good lead on him. As soon as she had the opportunity, she grabbed Alice's hand and pulled her down a side street, nearly sprinting as she dragged the other woman along with her.

"Where are we going?" Alice asked, gasping for breath as she ran.

"Well, we're bloody well not waitin' 'round here!" Deirdre answered her. She let go of Alice's hand and pulled her phone out of her pocket. She dialed and held it up to her ear as she ran. "Come on...Come on come on, pick up..."