

-Ninth Life-
Chapter Four: Assassins
by Havoc

“Assassination's the fastest way.”

- Moliere

With a stack of files and reader cards tucked under one arm, Mari stepped onto the elevator in the hall outside of her office. She checked the digital clock on the panel above the floor buttons. Fifteen minutes until six, going by Cerelan time. A bit later than she had expected to hear from the intelligence division that Remy was ready for his interrogation, but not overly so. She did a quick calculation in her head. If it was almost six o'clock here on Cerelis, that meant the sun would soon be rising back on Lirna. If she was efficient with her time, no more than four hours, that would give her just enough time to finish questioning the human, write up her report for the Cerelan Federal Police, and get clearance from Deputy Director Medici to transmit a copy of it back to the Royal Guards on the homeworld. She would not make it to bed until well past midnight, but such things were quite familiar to her after over fifteen years in her line of work.

As she rode the elevator down to the fourth floor of the CFP headquarters building, she thought back on her years of service to the Ascendancy. Mari had been a member of the Royal Guards for nearly her entire military career, drafted into the agency almost immediately upon her completion of basic training. Mari had entered military service about eight years into the war with humanity, a sniper by training. She had uncommonly good eyesight, even for an Ailian, and especially in her darker blue right eye. Though her short stature, nearly half a meter below average height for an Ailian, had been a stumbling block early in her career, she'd proven herself well enough to her superiors to be placed on the Royal Consort's protective detail. Had she not been forced into an officer's position due to the high casualties the Royal Guards took late in the war, she would have been well on her way to lieutenant's rank in her own right. As it was, the rank of captain was fairly impressive for an Ailian of only thirty-seven years old.

However, Mari would have liked to have a more prestigious job than liaison to the CFP. True, she was very good at her work, but it seemed a fall to her when considering that she had once protected the Empress herself, and then the new Royal Consort, once Empress Amani had taken a mate. Her job was an important one, she knew, as she was the face of the Ascendancy within the CFP, so there was that. At least she had good people to work with. Humans were made of strong stuff, as she had learned quite well during the war, and her partner of late, Agent Flynn, was one of the best she'd ever had.

“*Kres'te me lea'n...*,” she muttered to herself, rubbing her mismatched eyes. She was already

tired, but sleep would have to wait. She still had a lot of work to do tonight. Best to get it done quickly, and then she could refresh herself. The past few days had been trying ones indeed.

“You are being most intransigent, Mr. Remy,” Mari said, nearly an hour into the interrogation. “Need I remind you of the deal you made with Agent Flynn? We are offering you most favorable terms, but they hinge upon your cooperation.”

Across the table from her, Marcus Remy crossed his arms and yawned dramatically. “Oh, yeah, it's a great deal,” he said sarcastically. “I tell you everything you want to know, and in exchange I get to spend the rest of my life locked up in a cell. Forgive me if I'm not enthusiastic about that.”

The Ailian cocked an eye at him. “You will pardon my pointing this out, but it was your idea in the first place,” she said, trying to be reasonable. She was having some difficulty in maintaining her composure. This human criminal was quite the frustrating one. “Surely life in prison is more appealing than death?”

“Marginally,” Remy said. “Where's your partner, anyway? I'd rather deal with her than an...animal like you.”

Mari's jaw tightened for a second, and then she relaxed it with an easy smile. “So you have said, many times tonight.” She got up from her chair and began slowly walking around the table. “Agent Flynn has the night off for tonight. She thought you might enjoy the diversion of conversing with someone else for a change, and I was most pleased to offer my services.” She came around so that she was standing behind Remy, and placed her hand on his shoulder. “Now, I shall ask again: What information do you have about fugitives hiding on Cerelis? We shall pick an easy one to start. You had contacts in the human government whom you used as sources for information. Give me some names.”

Huffing, Remy reached up and pushed her hand testily off of him. “Don't fucking touch me,” he snarled at her. “And when will you get it through your thick skull, cat? I've told you once, I've told you a hundred times. People in my line of work don't deal in names. We deal in contact information. The people above me put money in my accounts, I transferred them to numbered accounts in exchange for information. All I know about the people I got intelligence from is where they worked. I can't give you any names.”

“So you have said. Maybe I believe you, and maybe I do not.” Mari walked back around the table. “I am sure you have a good memory. Let us start with the account numbers, the ones which can be traced.” She sat back down and pushed the running recorder closer to him. “Start talking, before we reconsider the deal we made.”

Remy rolled his eyes, but he seemed to sense that he was walking on thin ice. “Fine. But quit

threatening me, or I'll shut up and take what I know to the grave." He looked down at the table. "I might remember a few account numbers. I saw the same ones more than a few times. One of them was 204-A-7895-Q3. Routing number was...I think it was 7890-03-6. I have no idea which bank that is, exactly. But that one belonged to someone in the UN Naval Command. Must have been someone either high-ranking or well-placed, because they got over twenty payments during the time I worked. If I recall correctly, they were sent nearly five million altogether before I left Cerelis."

"Interesting," Mari said, her ears perking up. She made a notation in her files. "And this was someone who was not, obviously, part of the formal rebellion?" She got a nod from Remy. That was news to her. So far, all of the people who had been prosecuted in relation to the war had been serving in open combat against the Ascendancy and the United Nations. This would be a juicy lead for the intelligence people to run down. "This is more like it, Mr. Remy. What else can you tell me?"

"Well..." Remy hesitated, stroking his chin. A grin started to form on his face. "I might have something you'll like even more than that. I wasn't just running and hiding these past ten years. Some of my contacts were still active. What would you say if I told you that the Pteryd Combine still contacted me from time to time, using me as a middleman for more current information?"

Mari felt a chill run unbidden up her spine. "I know nothing of this," she said. She narrowed her eyes at Remy. If the Pteryd, the primary instigators behind the rebellion in the Ascendancy, were still soliciting intelligence, could that mean that they were actively working on plans for further hostilities? There had been hardly a peep heard from the Pteryd since the closing of the last war, apart from the usual skirmishes that were to be had on the borders of allied space. As far as the Ascendancy and the United Nations were aware, they had lost their appetite for war for the time being. "Perhaps you can elaborate on that."

"If I do, what kind of guarantee will I get?"

The Ailian captain considered that for a moment. "If what you are saying is true, then you are admitting to further acts of espionage against the United Nations, and the Ascendancy as well," she informed him. "Acts in which you are not currently being charged. You realize that, as our deal currently stands, any associated punishments are not a part of that, yes?"

"Oh, the thought had crossed my mind, believe me," Remy said, chuckling. "That's what I'm getting at. If I give you this information, I'm going to need to have some sort of promise of immunity. I will, after all, be giving you leads that have a very high value. And a more pressing need to be looked into." He leaned back in his chair. "Wouldn't you agree, oh Captain?"

Mari drummed her fingers on the surface of the table. "I would have to confer with my superiors on that," she reasoned. "We took a great risk at making the initial deal with you, after all. I

cannot guarantee that it would work a second time.” She raised a palm to him. “All I can offer is that if you tell me what you know, I shall pass the request up. I can make no promises right now, but on my honor I would do my best for you.”

The human gave a snort of mirth. “Oh, I’m incredibly skeptical on the subject of Ailian ‘honor,’” he said. “That’s not good enough for me. You’re gonna have to do better than that.”

“It will have to be good enough,” Mari growled at him. “I could walk away now. We know there is something to look for. We can track it down without you, Mr. Remy.”

“But it would take a lot more time. And that’s time you might not have. Wanna take that chance? I’ll be honest with you, I don’t like your odds. You don’t have any idea what kind of thing you’re dealing with, here.”

“I can gamble with the best of them, and-” Mari paused as she heard a quiet, warbling trill. The sound was coming from the communication device tucked into her coat pocket. She stood up from her chair and pulled out the phone, checking the incoming number. The call was coming from Deirdre. She stepped away from Remy, facing the far wall of the interrogation room, and hit the button to accept the call. “This is Captain Ayalis. Go ahead, Agent Flynn. I am in the middle of the interrogation.”

Remy watched the Ailian’s back as she listened on her phone. He couldn’t hear the voice on the other end of the line, but he could see her stiffen. Whatever was being said, it was making the fur on the top of Mari’s head raise, and he saw her tail jerking.

“Slow down, Agent Flynn, I cannot...” Mari paused to listen again. “Say that again. What are you...What was that?” She turned back towards Remy, and she raised a hand and waved it slightly, her eyes widening as they flicked from side to side. “Where are you now?.....Hello? Agent Flynn!” She stood stock still, her mouth open slightly, and then she looked at the phone. The call had been disconnected.

“The hell was that about?” Remy demanded. He watched Mari put her phone away and walk to the door with quick steps. “Whatsa matter, cat got your tongue?”

“Be silent,” Mari snapped at him. She opened the door and stepped out into the hall, slamming the door shut behind her. The uniformed agent standing watch in the hall jumped in surprise. Mari turned to him and jabbed a finger against his chest. “You do not move from this spot, you understand? Call the watch commander and have a tactical team sent to the area of Main and River. Tell him there is an agent that needs assistance, is that understood?”

“I...I got it, Captain, but what...,” the agent stammered, but Mari was already down the hall and getting into the elevator before he could finish his question.

Frustrated, Deirdre tossed her phone aside and cursed at herself for forgetting to charge it up after getting back from Mars. She looked back at Alice, who was still managing to keep up with her despite looking absolutely winded by the run. The call girl was in good shape, but she wasn't used to *this* sort of physical activity.

"Are y' alright, luv?" Deirdre asked her, looking past Alice to the alleyway behind them. The Ailian who had been pursuing them was out of sight, Deirdre having gotten fairly far ahead of him while she was on the phone with Mari. She really hoped that the Royal Guard captain had managed to hear her location before the call had dropped.

"I...I'm fine, Dee....," Alice gasped. She was half bent-over, one arm clutched against her side, but she was still moving. For having to run in four-inch heels, she was doing a marvelous job. "Th- There's never a street cop around when you need one, is there?"

"That's th' truth...Help should be on th' way, tho." Looking around, Deirdre spotted another side alley. She could hear thumping footsteps behind them, and knew that would be their pursuer starting to catch up. "Down this way, come on." She took Alice's hand and pulled her around the corner to the left, praying to God that it wouldn't be a dead end. Luck was on their side, and they ran about twenty yards down the alley before hiding behind a dumpster. Deirdre reloaded her pistol, and kept Alice up against the wall while she peered out around the edge of the dumpster.

The footsteps of the Ailian grew louder, and then Deirdre saw an orange-and-black blur as he dashed past the side alley they'd run down. Holding her breath, she waited to see if he would double back and check the entrance he'd passed, but his footsteps grew quieter as he apparently continued running. Deirdre let out a sigh of relief.

"I think we're all clear for now," she muttered to Alice. "Let's wait here a bit, an' then we'll get goin' again. Catch your breath."

"Thank goodness for that," Alice said. She was shivering, her hair a mess as she tried to calm down her breathing. Her hand was gripping Deirdre's tightly. "Who was that? Why is he after you?"

"No idea," Deirdre said, shaking her head. "When we were on Mars, th' folks who attacked us were all human. An' besides that, they were after th' guy we brought back with us. They must not be too pleased we got him back in one piece." She looked back out from the cover of the dumpster, and saw the way was all clear again. "Come on, Alice." She tried to stand up, but was stopped by the other woman's grip on her arm. Deirdre looked back at her.

"You saved my life, Dee," Alice said quietly. "I'll never, ever forget that."

Blinking, Deirdre managed to smile a little at her. "Let's save that for when you're home safe, yeah? We're not out o' it yet, luv." She helped the younger girl to her feet and then they set off back

down the alley together. Deirdre kept Alice behind her, her pistol up and ready for anything that might pop out at them. They crept to the end of the alley they'd come in, and she popped her head around the corner to look. The coast seemed clear, so she led Alice out. To her, it seemed foolish to go back the way they came, so instead she went left to continue in the direction they'd been heading before turning down the side alley. This would put them out on River Ave, a street that ran roughly parallel to Main St until it curved and intersected with the thoroughfare. She'd told Mari they would be in the area of Main and River, so hopefully she and other agents would be waiting for them there, or near to arriving, by now.

“Come on, Alice, I think we're...Oh, *fuck* me!”

As they came out onto River Ave, Deirdre turned her head to the right, and was greeted by the unfortunate sight of the Ailian who had been chasing them. He had been waiting at the alley's exit for them to do just exactly what they had done. He grinned at them both, and raised his gun hand. Deirdre spun around and brought her gun up, firing off a quick shot that went wild and spanged off of a street lamp post. In the back of her mind, she heard tires squealing, but she was in full-on tunnel vision now and couldn't tell where it was coming from. She barely had the presence of mind to shove Alice out of the line of fire before she pulled the trigger again. Her heart plummeted as she heard a depressingly dull “click” from her sidearm. A quick glance saw that the slide was out of battery, a spent shell casing lodged in the ejection port, a classic stovepipe jam.

Bloody hell, of all the-

Deirdre didn't even have time to finish her thought before she felt what seemed like a sledgehammer pounding into her right bicep. She was spun to one side as her pistol fell out of her grip, and she knew she'd been shot. She'd been shot before, when she was in the CFP's tactical division, but those times she'd always had body armor covering her from the waist up and down her upper arms. In civilian clothes, she was completely unprotected, and her arm instantly felt like it was on fire. She staggered and fell down behind a street parking kiosk. The agent kicked her legs to try to get further behind cover, and she heard the boom of a second shot as a bullet thudded into the sidewalk right next to her foot. She heard a scream that had to be Alice. Deirdre gritted her teeth, trying to fight back the pain.

A split second later, she heard a series of rapid gunshots followed by a few shouts, and then her surroundings went eerily quiet. For a moment she stayed frozen in place, and then she chanced a look out from behind where she had fallen. The Ailian who had attacked her was prone on the sidewalk, and blood drenched the wall of the building next to him. Captain Ayalis was standing over him, one of her feet jammed into the small of his back as she aimed her Royal Guard-issue short rifle down at his body.

An armored van was standing in the middle of the street, the sliding doors on the side wide open as a group of three uniformed CFP agents fanned out and covered the avenue with their submachine guns.

“Christ...,” Deirdre groaned. She pushed herself up to her feet on her good arm. She walked over to where Mari was, unsteadily. She could feel the blood streaming down her arm. “I’ve never been so glad t’ see you, Mari.”

Mari took her eyes off the fallen Ailian. “Are you hurt, Agent Flynn?”

“I’ll live,” Deirdre said. She knelt down to pick up her jammed pistol with her left hand.

“Not for long, with that wound,” Mari said, taking a closer look at her. She looked back at the other CFP agents. “Agent down over here!”

One of the tactical agents immediately slung his weapon over his shoulder and hurried over. He made Deirdre sit down on the sidewalk and unclipped a field trauma pack from a leg pouch. Deirdre let him take her weapon from her hand, and then he got out a soft tourniquet and wrapped it around her arm near the shoulder, above the injury. She clenched her teeth tightly, hissing in pain as he pulled it brutally tight. With a pair of blunted medical scissors, he cut off her sleeve and then pressed a square of thick gauze against the wound to help stop the blood flow.

“Bloody hell, that hurts!” she bit out. “Fucking goddamn jams...”

“Are there any more?” Mari asked her.

Deirdre shook her head. “I don’t think so...I put one down at a bar back on Main. I think there were only two of ‘em.”

She heard a quick tapping of footsteps, and then Alice was down on the sidewalk next to her. The agent who was tending to Deirdre immediately put a hand out to try to grab her, but Deirdre shoved his hand away before he could reach her. The call girl was looking at Deirdre with real concern in her eyes.

“Dee, are you okay?” she said. Her eyes looked watery as she saw the bullet wound on her arm, and she clapped over her mouth. “Oh my god...You...You’ve been shot. Is she going to die?”

Mari blinked, taken aback by the young woman’s sudden appearance. “Who is this?”

“It’s...er...” Deirdre fumbled over what to say for a moment. She suddenly realized that she was surrounded by her fellow agents, and it probably wouldn’t do to tell them that Alice was a prostitute that she’d hired for the evening. But she couldn’t very well say nothing. “She’s a friend. We were at th’ bar together when those guys attacked me. I couldn’t bloody well leave her there.”

The Ailian looked at Alice for a moment, and then back at Deirdre. “It is probably not a good idea for her to remain here,” she said. “We do not yet know if the area is secure. I will have an agent take her home.” More cars were arriving, and there were a lot more agents on scene, with more coming

every minute.

Deirdre gave Alice a reassuring smile. "I'll be fine, Alice. Don't worry. I'll call later."

Alice looked hesitant to leave, but she finally let a plainclothes agent lead her away and into a car, which sped off from the scene. The agent with Deirdre finished stabilizing her arm, and then they both stood up while crime scene officers covered up the dead body.

"Where to now?" the uniformed agent asked Mari. "Hospital is kind of far from here. We could take her back to headquarters. There's an ER on the ground floor. Wound looks like a clean through-and-through but someone should look at it and patch it up right. We can't leave the tourniquet on for too long."

"That should be sufficient," Mari agreed. They all began walking back to the van. "Once we take care of you, Agent Flynn, I should get back to Mr. Remy. I was in the middle of questioning him when you called."

In the excitement, Deirdre had completely forgotten about Marcus Remy. "Right y'are," she said. "How's that coming along, by th' way?"

They sat down in the van, and the door slid shut. "It is promising," Mari said, nodding her head. "Apparently, Mr. Remy was still quite active in the espionage business during his time on the run. He has alluded to something that may be of extreme importance. He was about to tell me of it when I left him." She pulled out her communicator to call ahead to headquarters, while the van began to move. Deirdre saw her hold the phone to her ear for a few moments, and then Mari frowned. "The desk officer is not picking up..."

Deirdre's brow creased as she also frowned. "That's odd," she said. "There should be someone on duty there twenty-four hours."

"Indeed." Mari hung up and tried the number again, with the same result.

Deirdre felt a tingle at the back of her neck, and slowly something occurred to her. "Two. There were only two people after me." Her eyes started to widen. "Doesn' that strike y' as not enough people t' send after a trained federal agent, 'specially in th' middle of Cerelis' capital city?" She sat up straighter in her seat. "How many people are on duty at HQ right now?"

"There is the desk officer, the watch commander, and a few other uniform agents, and probably some clerical personnel," Mari said. Her ears flared up as the realization began to dawn on her as well. "Not nearly enough." She pounded her fist against the glass window separating the passenger area of the van from the driver. "Speed up. Get us back to headquarters as fast as you can, and pull some of the agents away from the scene to meet us there."

Mari hopped out of the van with two of the uniform agents near the corner on which the headquarters of the Cerelan Federal Police stood, while Deirdre remained inside with one of the remaining agent and the driver. They sped off around the building, headed for the entrance to the underground parking garage. The Ailian liaison officer and the human agents tucked against the front wall of the building and began creeping towards the large glass doors that led inside. Seconds behind them, two unmarked SUVs pulled up to the corner, and several plainclothes agents jumped out, shouldering shotguns and patrol rifles. They came up to the front of the building as well, and the motley collection of agents bracketed the front entrance. Most of the lights in the main lobby seemed to be off; not unusual at this hour of the evening.

With her captain's rank, though from another branch of uniformed service, Mari was roughly equivalent to a Supervisory Special Agent. She took tactical command at once, and nobody questioned it. The Ailian pointed to one of the uniformed agents, who flipped on a light attached to his submachine gun and aimed it through the glass door, playing the beam of illumination around inside.

"No one in sight," he reported. "I can see the front desk at the back of the lobby, but there's nobody sitting there."

"Very well," Mari said with a nod. "We will enter on my count. Fan out and secure the lobby area, then await further instructions." Everyone nodded at her instructions. "Three...two...one...now."

Mari and the other agent pushed open the double doors, and the rest of the agents rushed in ahead of them. They spread out once inside, their weapons pointed into the building to cover any possible threats. No shots came their way, and they couldn't see any movement in the beams of their weapon lights. While the plainclothes agents covered the lobby, Mari and her tactical agents made a beeline for the front desk. As one of the tactical agents came around the desk, he knelt down on the floor beside a body.

"Agent down," he said. Mari looked at the body. It was the desk officer, a younger agent from the street patrol division. He appeared to have been shot twice in the chest from range, probably from the door, and then once in the head from closer range.

With it apparent that the main lobby was clear, Mari waved up the plainclothes agents. "All of you, check the rest of the first floor and make sure the way is clear for other responding agents. You two are coming with me." She looked at the more heavily-armed tactical agents. "We will be responding to the fourth floor, where the interrogation rooms are. There is one logical target for whoever has come here."

When the elevator doors opened onto the fourth floor, Mari peered out into the hallway, looking

left and right. She was as quiet as she could be, and she heard no sounds of movement. The lights were still on up here, and she didn't see anything, either. With her rifle tucked against her shoulder, she emerged from the elevator. She and the other agents didn't bother with checking the rooms as they moved down the hall. They had a specific purpose in mind. A more thorough clearing of the building could wait for later.

Further down the hall, Mari saw another body laid out on the floor, crumpled against the wall next to an open doorway. She knew without looking that it was the agent she had left guarding the room that held Marcus Remy. Though she already had an idea of what she was going to find when she entered the room, she paused at the door. With a preparatory breath, she slipped inside of the interrogation room, the other two agents hot on her heels.

Mari lowered her weapon as she looked inside. The room was much the same as she had left it, and not the same. Remy was sitting in the chair, at the table, but he was slumped over to one side. Mari walked around to the opposite side of the table and looked at his face. His eyes were wide open, and there was a neat little hole directly in the center of his forehead. One of the CFP agents came up to him and pressed two fingers to the side of his neck as a formality; he was obviously quite dead.

"Po'krai me le tok..." Mari cursed under her breath. She clenched her hands around her rifle until her fingers hurt. "It was all a diversion..." All of her files were missing from the table as well. Just looking around the room, there did not seem to be any clues as to who had been there. Maybe something had been captured on the overwatch cameras, but she doubted it. This had been a professional job, and surely whoever had done this would have thought of that. The recordings would either be erased or power would have been cut to the recording devices.

One of the agents with her touched the radio bud fitted into his ear. "Backup's on scene," he informed Mari. "They're sweeping the rest of the building."

"They will not find anything," Mari said. She shook her head, baring her teeth in frustration. "Whoever did this will be long gone by now. I must inform the director of what has happened. Do what you must." She whirled around and stormed out of the room.

Hours later, Deirdre came into the morgue, located on the lowest level of the headquarters building. Teams of agents had thoroughly checked every floor of the building, and just as Mari had predicted earlier, no trace of the intruders had been located. Her arm felt a lot better now. The agency's medics had sealed her wound and given her a local anesthetic to help with the pain and swelling. Luckily for her, the bullet had passed right through fairly cleanly, missing the bones. Her arm would hurt like hell for a while, once the painkillers wore off, but they had assured her that she should heal

relatively quickly and have no lasting effects.

Laying on three tables in the morgue were three bodies, still clothed and not prepped for autopsy just yet. Mari was already in the morgue, standing over the body of Marcus Remy on the leftmost table. Next to him were the bodies of the Ailian and the human who had attacked her outside of the bar.

Deirdre walked up to Mari, looking over the three corpses. “Any idea who they are, yet?” she asked her. She felt terrible. For one, she felt like a failure for not holding up her end of the deal she'd made with Remy, terrorist though he'd been. For another thing, now they had lost a prime source of information for tracking down some of their most wanted fugitives. And that was to say nothing of this new information that he'd alluded to before being killed.

“None,” Mari said. “It is the same story as the men on Mars. No identification, and checks of their biometrics have come up negative. They might as well be ghosts.”

Deirdre smacked her right hand on the table bearing Remy, pain radiating up her arm despite the drugs. “Damn it all,” she said. “Our witness dead. Two agents killed. I feel like a bloody incompetent fool.” She rubbed a hand over her face, feeling exhausted all over again. “Any word from Medici or th' director?”

“Not yet,” Mari said. “I think they are still in shock. The Cerelan Federal Police has not been attacked directly like this since during the war.” She looked over Remy's body. “If only I had been allowed another hour to question him. Now we may never know what he knew.”

“It's all my fault,” Deirdre said firmly. “If'n I hadn' had th' night off, I might've been here t' help stop it.”

“Yes, or perhaps you would be joining the dead,” the Ailian said. “Do not blame yourself. Someone clearly wanted Mr. Remy dead very badly. Perhaps nothing could have been done to prevent this. We will never know.”

“Maybe.” Deirdre walked around Remy's body, to the foot of the table. “What secrets were y' hidin', Marcus...” She looked up towards his face, where his eyes were still open and staring blankly at the ceiling. Her eyes fell down to his feet. “Didn' have much time t' buy new shoes while you were on th' run, I see.” She tilted her head to the side. “What's that?”

Mari frowned, coming around to where Deirdre was standing. “What is what?”

The red-headed agent pointed at the sole of Remy's left shoe. “That.” She touched her finger to the heel, where there seemed to be a small indentation. Curiously, she dug her fingernail into the groove, and heard a quiet click. As though it was spring-loaded, the heel swung to one side, revealing a small compartment underneath. Fitted into the compartment was a tiny little square of plastic.

Mari's tail twitched in surprise, and she reached for the tiny object, pulling it out and holding it up in front of her eyes. She turned it over in her fingers. One side was solid plastic, but the other side had tiny, almost microscopic copper strips on it. "This is...a micro card," she said.

Deirdre felt a thrill of excitement. "We couldn't be that lucky," she breathed. "What d'ya think th' chances are that Remy had his information written down?"

"We will not know until we have this analyzed," Mari said. "But it is a good deal more of a chance at learning what he knew than we thought we had." She held the card in her furred palm. "We must get this to the intelligence division. Remy was a fool if he did not encrypt whatever files are on this card, and the sooner they can crack it, the better."