

-Ninth Life-
Chapter Five: Healing Draught
by Havoc

“Treason is like diamonds: There is nothing to be made by the small trader.”
- Douglas Jerrold

Deirdre's whole body felt heavy as she opened the front door of her apartment, stepping inside and locking it behind her. She closed her eyes as she leaned back against the door, and she took a moment just to enjoy the silence that greeted her. The whole evening had been a whirlwind of activity and excitement. The attack at the bar, the discovery of what had happened back at headquarters, and then her surprise find of that data card in the shoe worn by Marcus Remy's corpse...What secrets could the dead man provide them? Would it even be anything they could figure out, without the man himself to tell them how to interpret whatever data they would find?

“I need a drink...,” Deirdre whispered to herself. A drink, yes, and probably a week's worth of sleep. But the drink first.

She went to her kitchen and got a glass and a bottle of whiskey from the cupboard. Not bothering with any frivolities like ice, she poured a generous portion of the amber liquid into the glass and took it all down in a few gulps. Deirdre let out a long sigh as the strong, fiery liquid burned in the pit of her stomach. She realized that she hadn't eaten much this evening, but that was the least of her concerns right now. All she really wanted was to get drunk fast and collapse in her bed. The alcohol would help dull the pain in her right shoulder where she'd been shot.

Deidre poured another large serving of booze. As she raised the glass to her lips, ready to down it in similar fashion to the first, she heard a sound coming from her bedroom. The back of her neck prickled, and she slowly set her glass down. One of her hands eased into her jacket and rested on the grip of her pistol, and she eased around the corner of her kitchen counter, looking back towards where her bedroom door was.

The door was opening up, and Deirdre drew her sidearm. Thinking that perhaps some compatriot of the people she'd dealt with earlier had snuck into her apartment to finish the job, she leveled the weapon at the door. “Whoever's in there, come out now. I'm not in th' mood for any foolin' around, yeah?”

The door opened up the rest of the way, and as soon as she saw who was on the other side, Deidre lowered her weapon with a relieved exhale. Standing in the entrance to her bedroom was Alice, who had a sheepish expression on her face as she held her hands up in front of her at shoulder level. The younger woman was still dressed as she had been earlier in the evening, in her short shorts and

blouse, though her jacket was nowhere to be seen. How the call girl had gotten in was anybody's guess, but Deirdre was relieved to see that she wasn't going to have to put a hole in anyone else tonight.

"Sorry if I scared you, Dee," Alice said, her voice a little shaky. "I just...I didn't know where else to go. After what happened tonight, I...I didn't much feel like being home alone."

"No, no, luv, it's alright...", Deirdre replied. She put her gun back in its holster, annoyed to feel her hand trembling. The jitters were proving hard to get rid of. She went back to the kitchen and retrieved her glass, bringing it and the bottle into her living room along with a spare glass for Alice. Setting them down on the table, she pulled off her jacket, wincing a little as she shrugged her injured shoulder. "Sit down, won't ya?" She waved to a chair, sitting down in one herself while Alice came closer. "Drink?"

Alice nodded, and Deirdre lifted the bottle and poured for her as she sat down. "Sure. I could use one about now." She gave a nervous little laugh.

"I could use more 'n one," Deirdre muttered. The redhead leaned back in her chair and took a long drink of whiskey, starting to feel that buzz in her head that let her know she was on the way to blissful intoxication. Lucky for her she had strict orders from the deputy director not to report to work for several days, so she could get as loopy as she wanted, for one night at least.

Alice brushed a hand through her blonde hair, lifting her drink and sipping at it. "How's...How's your arm?" she asked, looking at the bandages visible underneath the short sleeve of Deirdre's shirt.

"I'll be fine, dearie." Deirdre smiled at her. "'S not m' first time. Never been quite s' bad, but...I'll live. Th' doc gave me enough meds to keep th' edge off for a while."

The escort blinked. "Should you be drinking?"

"Eh? Oh...Prob'ly not." Deirdre tossed back the rest of her whiskey. "But it won't kill me. Though I dunno. Universe seems t' want me outta th' way, lately."

Alice sat up straight in her chair, looking away. "Don't joke, Dee. We could both have died tonight. We would have died, if your people hadn't shown up just in time." She shuddered, the color draining from her already-fair face.

Deirdre could see that she was upsetting the other woman, so she put her glass down and pushed the bottle away. "Sorry." She unstrapped her shoulder holster and hung it off the back of her chair. "How'd y' get in here, anyway? I always lock m' door, luv."

The girl looked sheepish again. "I...well...I picked the lock," she admitted. "Like I said...I didn't feel very safe being on my own tonight, so when that agent drove me home, I had him drop me off a few blocks away from my building, and then I walked over here instead. I figured I'd wait for you to get back, but you were taking a while, so I let myself in."

“Clever girl,” Deirdre said with some amusement. “You’re full o’ surprises. Be wantin’ to spend th’ night, then?” Alice nodded. “First time for everythin’, I s’pose. You’re welcome, o’ course. I don’t blame y’ for feelin’ skittish. It was a near thing, an’ that’s a fact. Even I’m a little rattled, I don’t mind admittin’.”

Alice nodded, an expression of real gratitude on her face. “So...So what kept you, Dee?” she inquired. “I thought you’d be home quick after someone saw to your injury. You were gone for hours.”

Deirdre shook her head, leaning forward in her chair and looking at the floor. “There was a spot o’ bother back at headquarters.” She took a few minutes to explain everything to Alice, who listened with rapt attention, her eyes going wide as the story came to a conclusion. When Deirdre came to the end of it, the girl looked like her head was spinning.

“My...,” Alice gasped. “So...So they weren’t really trying to kill you at all?”

“I think they wouldn’a been too sorry if they had,” Deirdre said with a slight smirk. “But no...I think they were tryin’ t’ keep us occupied so they could go after their real objective.” She smiled a little wider. “But I think we might’a come out on top anyway. Found somethin’ real nice they left behind. Should be fun for th’ boys back at the labs to tinker with, anyway.”

The blonde girl looked at her curiously. “What is it?”

“Can’t, sorry,” the agent replied. She rested back in her chair once more, and she closed her eyes. The liquor was really starting to take hold now, and in combo with the drugs the doctor who’d fixed up her shoulder had given her, she was well on her way to a sound, if artificial, sleep. “I prob’ly said a lil’ more’n I should anyway, luv. You’re bloody mischievous, takin’ advantage o’ me when I’m outta m’ senses.

Alice laughed at her, shaking her head a little. “I’ve told you before, Dee. You need to watch how much you drink. It can’t be good for you. I worry about you sometimes...” She reached out and laid a hand on one of Deirdre’s, then drew it back quickly and looked away awkwardly. “Er...I mean, well, you being one of my best customers and all.”

The way her voice had changed in that instant provided Deirdre with a stark reminder of the line of work that her companion was in. Alice had gone from quiet and concerned to detached and businesslike in a matter of seconds. As much as Deirdre liked to think that she and Alice could be considered as having a little more than a call girl/client relationship, the truth of the matter was that the younger woman probably thought of her as a friend, at best. And at worst, it was something that...well, to call it a convenience would be putting it mildly. Alice had a hell of an insurance policy in Deirdre. While prostitution was as widespread a profession as it had always been, it was still very much illegal in many parts of the known universe, as it was on Cerelis. As relatively high-ranking as she was,

Deirdre had some pull with the vice investigations that the CFP conducted, and steering the agents tasked with those matters away from Alice was as much for her benefit as it was for the call girl's. While Deirdre was pretty sure that Alice wouldn't snitch on her, she couldn't be certain, and she wasn't about to test the theory.

When one got down to it, a lot of similarities existed in the life of a CFP agent and the life of an escort. Neither had much time for anything that didn't involve their work in some way. They both couldn't afford to get too close to people, lest the ones they cared for got caught up in the seedier aspects of their employment. And, like everyone, some secrets were best left unsaid. Deirdre probably didn't really want to know how Alice really thought of her, since the truth would either hurt or lead to something she couldn't maintain. Hell, in all honesty, though she couldn't be sure, Alice was probably as straight as most other people, and anything she did with Deirdre was strictly business. And so, a fantasy was all she was, something that Deirdre could wish for but never really have.

"Think I'm 'bout ready for bed...," Deirdre finally said. She got to her feet, and very nearly found herself back in her chair again as dizziness overtook. She silently cursed her weakness for drink, something she'd struggled with on and off for years. Spending one's evenings alone most of the time rarely led to anything good, and this time she feared she'd really overdone it.

She felt a hand underneath her uninjured arm, as Alice coaxed her back to her feet. "Let me help you," the other woman implored.

With her help, Deirdre got up again and allowed herself to be led to her bedroom. Pushing Alice gently away, the agent managed to undress herself down to her underthings, and she slid onto her bed. The soft mattress and pillows felt like heaven. At least she wouldn't have any troubles falling asleep. Only moments after she'd settled in, she felt the other side of her bed dip slightly, and another body slid in next to her.

"Y' don' have t'-," Deirdre began to say, but Alice shushed her instantly.

"Not a word out of you," the call girl said. "You're drunk, and you're doped up. If you stop breathing, someone has to be here to call for help." Alice reached over and switched off the bedside lamp, plunging the room into darkness. "You took care of me tonight. Let me return the favor. And besides, I'm dead tired, too. I'll be here all night...what's left of it, anyway. Get some sleep."

Unable to voice the gratitude that she felt, Deirdre just nodded her head weakly, and let herself slip off into oblivion.

When Deirdre woke up again, she was amazed at how not-horrible she felt. Though she still didn't feel quite like herself, she felt much better. She turned her head, looking over her shoulder. Alice

was there, her eyes closed as she breathed in a slow, steady way that meant she was fast asleep. Deirdre remarked to herself, not for the first time by far, that she was the prettiest girl she'd ever known. That familiar longing tugged at her heart. To distract herself from it, she glanced at the clock. It was nearly eight in the morning, as evidenced by the sunlight that was leaking through the closed blinds of her bedroom window. She'd been out for almost six hours. To her, as sleep-deprived as she routinely was, it felt like she'd slumbered for a year.

Carefully, so as not to rouse Alice, Deirdre left the bed and rose slowly. She was still lightheaded, but more than that her mouth was as dry as a desert. That was probably some of the drugs and mostly the alcohol. Stretching her arms, she walked quietly out of the bedroom, not bothering to grab a robe to cover up with as she moved into the living room. The bottle of whiskey was still on the coffee table where she'd left it, along with her empty glass and Alice's mostly-full one. She looked at it for a moment, and then shook her head and wisely continued on into the kitchen.

Deidre opened the fridge and reached inside, where she found a clear plastic bottle with a blue-printed label. She twisted the lid off and tipped it up into her mouth, downing most of it in barely three seconds. She felt instantly refreshed, and though her stomach was not very settled, the nausea that accompanied most hangovers was barely noticeable.

"That had better be water you're drinking."

Barely suppressing a start, Deidre turned around. Alice was standing in the bedroom door, looking into the kitchen with her blonde hair tousled and sleep in her eyes. She hadn't a stitch of clothing on her. Deidre felt a leap in her stomach that had nothing to do with the unwise choices of the previous night.

"It's water," Deidre said with a smile, holding up the bottle as proof. She finished the rest of it, setting the bottle by her sink so she could refill it later. "Can I get y' some, dearie?"

Alice yawned as she shook her head. "No, I'm fine. I barely had a drop last night. You shouldn't be out of bed yet, you know. No reason for you to be awake. They won't be expecting you at work today, surely?"

"Prob'ly not," Deidre agreed. "I think th' deputy director would kill me if'n he saw me anywhere near m' office right now." She brushed a hand back through her red hair. "I'm better now. I still feel a wreck, tho'..."

Alice smiled a little, and she walked towards the kitchen. Her firm breasts moved almost imperceptibly with the motions of her body. Deidre couldn't take her eyes off of her as she got closer to her, until the younger woman was standing before her. She felt her arms come around her waist, and Alice stood on tiptoe to reach the taller woman. Her lips pressed against Deidre's as she kissed her

lightly, leaning against her. Almost on their own, Deirdre's arms came around Alice and she clutched her tightly.

“Come back to bed, and I'll get you sorted out right, then.” Alice took one of Deirdre's hands and pulled her along, guiding her back to the bedroom. The bed was still fairly neat, with the sheets in more or less the right place from how soundly the two had slept. Alice spun her around slowly, and Deirdre sank down onto her back, her head on one of the pillows. With another one of her enchanting smiles, the call girl placed her hands on her waist, sliding them down until her fingers hooked the waistband of the panties Deirdre still wore. She dragged them down and off, the silky garment slipping from her fingers as they came past the redhead's feet.

“Alice, y'know y' don' have to...,” Deirdre said, as much as every fiber of her being was telling her to shut up. The feeling of Alice's soft hands on the inside of her thighs, pushing them apart, made it that much harder to say.

Alice lowered herself on her belly on the end of the bed, as her fingers slid across Deirdre's skin to her sex. A sigh escaped Deirdre's lips as those fingertips began to work at her sensitive folds, and her back arched up slightly. She could feel the other woman's breath against her as she spoke. “I know I don't, Dee. Just hush, and let me.”

A mere second later, Deirdre felt Alice's lips kissing her below, and she whimpered at the pleasure it brought her. The call girl was skilled, very skilled, and her mouth felt like an angel's. Deirdre closed her eyes and let those sensations take her over. Alice pushed her legs wider, opening her up, and her tongue slipped inside. Deirdre laid an arm across her face, moaning as the other woman licked and nibbled at her pussy. As many times as she had enjoyed Alice's attention, this time felt like a new thing to her. Something was different. Perhaps it was because this time wasn't for money, or maybe she was still a little drunk, but it felt like this was something Alice *wanted* to do.

She shuddered as she felt one of Alice's hands skim along the surface of her stomach, rubbing around in slow, easy circles. Her touch made her feel warm, and before long her hips were rising and falling in a steady rhythm. Up with every inward flick of her tongue, down with the slow swirl around her bud and the rub of her hand. The pleasure was unimaginable, making her head swirl all over again, and for a much better reason this time.

“Christ...,” Deirdre breathed, the blasphemous utterance rolling from her mouth in a heavenly sigh. “That feels lovely...” Whether or not Alice smiled, she couldn't know, but she liked to imagine that she had from the way that her tongue delved deeper into her. Her hand went down between her legs, pressing against the back of the other girl's head as she circled her hips around.

Alice slowly dragged her tongue from the bottom of her slit to the top, looking up along

Deirdre's body to her face. She curled a finger inside of her, pushing in and out along the roof of her sex. "Don't think about holding back, Dee," she purred. "Don't make it last. Let it go." She lowered her head again, and her lips closed over Deirdre's silken mound.

"Bloody hell...", Deirdre moaned, her body pitching up as she came in an instant. Shivering waves of bliss shot up and down her spine, causing her legs to quake with the intensity. She gasped as Alice kept it up, not stopping even though nothing else was required. The pleasure built up and up, and up further still, until it peaked in a deafening crescendo that descended just as marvelously as it had begun. A sound much like a laugh escaped Deirdre's lips as she felt like she was sinking into the soft embrace of her bed, her head turned to one side against the cool surface of the pillow.

As she began to gradually recover, her heart beating like a hummingbird's inside of her, Alice slid all the way up onto the bed. The call girl's hand pushed on her hip, rolling her onto her side as she nestled against her back, her breasts against Deirdre's shoulder blades as her arms wrapped around her. The feeling was sensational. Loving would have been the word to describe it, if love had been an option. For now, that was good enough.

"I know it's not much," Alice murmured, her mouth close to Deirdre's ear, "but that's all the thanks I can give right now."

Deirdre smiled, weary enough to fall asleep again. "It'll do, luv," she said. "It'll more than do." She pressed back against Alice, and allowed slumber to take her over once more.

Days later, Deirdre was back at her desk, feeling much refreshed, if a little somber. The mood around headquarters was somewhat reserved these days, considering that she and her colleagues were mourning the loss of several of their own. While there were a lot of agents and other personnel who worked at the headquarters of the Cerelan Federal Police, nearly everyone here had been acquainted with the young agent who'd manned the front desk, and walking in without seeing his face left an empty feeling. The other agents who'd died had been friends as well, and they were missed just as much. People had been pulled from other assignments to contribute to the effort of tracking down leads from the attack, but unfortunately there was scant evidence to go on. The attackers had been remarkably adept at covering their tracks.

For the entire morning of her first day back, Deirdre had been going over the reports that had accumulated during her time away. The first thing she'd done had been to look over Mari's transcript of her interrogation of Marcus Remy, or as much questioning as the Ailian had managed to accomplish before being drawn away. Unfortunately, that had amounted to little more than twenty minutes of back-and-forth with the prisoner, and Remy hadn't exactly been the most cooperative suspect. As would have

been expected. However, some interesting tidbits had been uncovered, some of it alarming. For one thing, it sounded as though Remy thought that the Pteryd were planning something, since he'd apparently still been gathering information for them while on the run. And the banking information that he'd given Mari before she'd left was interesting as well.

The boys in the financial crimes division had traced the routing number for the account Remy had revealed, which had led them to a bank with the rather unimaginative name of GaliCorp Suisse. The bank was a small but fairly successful one, and one that Deirdre could vaguely recall having heard of at one point or another. As the name suggested, it was a bank in the old Swiss fashion of doing things. This meant, somewhat frustratingly, that they took the confidentiality of their clients very seriously, regardless of what sorts of unseemly manners they gained their money. The bank had been very reluctant to give up the name of the account holder, so the financial crimes agents were working hard on getting all the necessary court orders they needed to force the bank to divulge that information.

When she'd read all of Mari's report and the things that went along with it, Mari had moved on to the reports from the medical examiner. With some help from the organized crime division and some information exchange with the Ailian Royal Guards, they'd managed to identify both of the assassins who had attacked her and Alice. The Ailian had been the easier of the two to run down. Photographs of his face had been sent to the authorities on Lirna, and they'd been able to identify him as a former soldier. Curiously, his biometric data had been scrubbed from their records by persons unknown. What they had been able to tell her was that he had been posted with one of their Inner Colony fleets prior to the outbreak of the rebellion in the Ascendancy, and he had disappeared while on leave just after that conflict had kicked off. What he had been up to in the intervening time was anybody's guess.

The human was another matter altogether. They had been completely unable to find anything on him. What they had known was that he was about thirty years old, and had been in excellent physical condition apart from being a heavy smoker. He'd had no criminal record that they could find, as his fingerprints weren't on file, nor was his DNA, and he hadn't seemed to have served in the military or other form of civil service. That might have been the end of it, but as sometimes happened, the smallest thing led to his identification. A woman on Cerelis had filed a missing persons report for her brother some years ago, and when they had run the dead man's photo through facial recognition software, the program had matched him up with the photo the sister had given the police. When they interviewed the sister, they learned that her brother had not been heard from since his disappearance, until approximately two weeks before the attack. It had slipped her mind that she'd filed the report, since she'd all but given up seeing him again, and so she hadn't bothered to notify the authorities that he was no longer missing. All she had been able to tell them was that her brother told him that he'd been off-

planet looking for work, and was back on Cerelis with a new job. He hadn't told her what it was, though she'd asked, and had spent a few days with her and her family before disappearing again. Practically a dead end, but at least they had a name to put with the face.

Finally, there was the autopsy report for Marcus Remy, which revealed some interesting information. For one thing, as healthy as he'd seemed, Remy had been a dying man. The medical examiner had discovered that he was in the final stages of pancreatic cancer, and had he not been murdered he likely would have died of natural causes within a few months. Apparently, years of being on the run hadn't left him much opportunity to see a proper doctor. This might have explained his willingness to cooperate as much as he had, if he had been aware of his condition. Someone that near to death had nothing left to lose, so holding on to the intelligence he could provide would be of little benefit to him. He might have even been hoping to bargain his information for treatment, since the disease could have conceivably been cured with any number of radical courses. As far as his cause of death, that had been obvious: a single gunshot wound to the forehead that transited the brain. What was unusual about his death was the weapon used. Remy had been killed with a 7.65mm bullet, also known as .32 ACP. An odd enough caliber to find these days, when the more common pistols tended to be chambered for nine-millimeter or forty-five. The bullet had been recovered mostly intact from the padded wall of the interview room, behind where Remy had been found, but after running the bullet through the database all they had been able to determine was that it had been fired from *probably* a semi-automatic pistol, which *probably* had a hexagonal barrel, and *probably* had been fitted with a suppressor. This meant the gun had been cold, as in it had never been identified as being used in a previous crime, versus a “hot” gun from which rounds had been recovered at previous crime scenes.

At the end of it, after reading all of the reports, all that Deidre was really left with was more questions. If Remy had been correct in assuming that the Pteryd were up to something, it seemed natural to assume that the Pteryd were ultimately behind the attacks on Remy and Deidre, and Remy's killing on Cerelis. But if that were so, Deidre could not find any sort of motive. The Pteryd had never gone to any lengths to prevent the Ascendancy and the CFP from tracking down and arresting any of the people who had previously worked for them during the war. Remy was an anomaly in that regard. Knowing that he had been seen as a valuable target for them didn't help them if they couldn't find out the reason behind that. Clearly they wanted to prevent them from acting on any information that Remy might have given them, but without being able to decrypt the data card that Remy had hidden in his shoe they couldn't begin to figure out just what had been so valuable.

“What a fuckin' mess...,” Deidre growled, tossing down the file she'd just finished reading. “Christ, what've we uncovered here? There's too many bloody unknowns. Marcus, what did you

know...”

A knock came at her door, and Deidre looked up to see Mari standing in the open entrance. She pushed herself up from her chair, wincing a little at the dull pain in her shoulder.

“It is good to see you back at work, Agent Flynn,” Mari said. She held up a folder in her hand, and ducked her head slightly to enter Deidre's office. “I have something that you might be interested to see. I assume you have been going over the files from the Remy affair?”

“Right y' are,” Deirdre said. “What've y' got, then?”

Mari sat down in a chair that was a good deal too small for her seven-and-a-half foot frame. She crossed one leg over another, and extended her arm to give the folder to Deidre. “Your financial crimes division has just received the information from the bank that we have been working on getting. We now have a name to go with the bank account. They are related to someone you might have heard of before.”

“Let's have a look.” Deidre opened the folder and skimmed through the pages, and her expression immediately turned grim. “Ooh, now that's somethin', an' no mistake. One o' General Ramus' men. Darius Rogers, a colonel. Th' bloody hell was he doin' takin' money from Remy?”

General Adolpho Ramus was a fairly highly-placed member of the United Nations' military division, an infantry commander who had seen quite a bit of action during both the wars with the Ascendancy and during the rebellion, once the UN had allied with the Ailians against the Outer Colony separatists. Prior to the war, he had been a minor officer in a nowhere sector of human space, but once fighting had broken out he'd quickly rose through the ranks through a series of brilliant actions during a few key battles. When talks had first started regarding joining with the Ascendancy, he'd been a vocal advocate against such a move, arguing that the perceived atrocities the Ailians had committed against humans were unforgivable, but when it became apparent that the alliance would go through anyway he'd stowed that talk and had cooperated. Now he was in a staff position, oddly enough as a sort of liaison between the UN and the Ascendancy's Navy. To learn that one of his subordinates was on the take was certainly something to be concerned about.

“I do not know,” Mari said. “And it is possible General Ramus himself does not even know. Colonel Rogers was killed in battle near the end of the war. He was given a full military funeral and a posthumous promotion with honors. That would seem to be an odd thing to do for a known traitor.”

Deidre flipped a few more pages. “Unless th' general approved o' his extracurriculars...”

Her Ailian counterpart frowned. “Agreed, but there is no evidence of that. General Ramus is quite respected both within the United Nations and the Ascendancy. Somewhat grudgingly, in our case, but respected nonetheless.” The captain shook her head. “I think it rather more likely that Colonel

Rogers exploited his closeness to the general to retrieve classified information, without his knowledge. But read on. You have yet to see the most curious part.”

“Oh?” Deidre looked further through the documents in the folder. Her brow furrowed as she got to what Mari was surely talking about. “But that can't be...”

Near the back of the folder were banking documents from GaliCorp Suisse showing the records of the account going back for fifteen years, right at the end of the war. When the war had ended, several months after the death of Colonel Rogers, according to his military file, the account had contained a balance of five million. Since then, it had been stagnant apart from accruing interest. That the account had remained active at all was odd in itself, but what really made Deirdre pause was the records of the past six months. Every week on the same day, and at nearly the same time, a withdrawal of two hundred thousand had been made, and the account was now quite close to being empty compared to what it had once been.

“Where's all th' money gone?” Deidre asked, looking up at Mari.

Her friend shifted in her seat. “That is largely unknown, but what we have been able to figure out has been most...alarming. A number of the withdrawals have been in the form of direct payments. To arms dealers. All of them legitimate ones. Quantities of weapons and ammunition were purchased.”

The red-headed agent felt a tingle go up her spine. “That doesn' sound good at all. Let me guess...All o' th' purchases were made in th' name of a Mr. Darius Rogers?”

“Your investigative instincts do you credit, Agent Flynn. You are correct. All of the purchases were small enough to fall short of the requirement for the dealers to report them, so it went unnoticed that the same person was making the buys.” Mari's mismatched blue eyes narrowed. “One must wonder what a dead man needs with so many weapons. And I think it would be unwise to assume that these were all the purchases. I need not remind you that we have traced only a fraction of the withdrawals from the account in question.”

Deirdre bit her lip, and she looked back at the files in front of her. Mari was right to be suspicious. She would have been as well. What was known to have been bought was bad enough: handguns and assault rifles, both of Ailian and human manufacture, and enough ammunition for all of them to outfit a small military force for quite some time. All of the weapons bought were civilian models, but anyone with even a rudimentary knowledge of gunsmithing could customize them to military specs. Someone buying these types of weapons in these quantities would definitely also be in the market for more military hardware, such as armor and explosives, which were easily acquired through criminal channels. The CFP had been fighting against such black markets for decades, but as soon as one enterprise was taken down, two or three more moved in to take their place. It had always

been a losing battle.

“We'll need t' speak with General Ramus, then,” Deirdre finally said. “He's our only lead at this point. Maybe he knows somethin' he ain't tellin' anyone. Where is he now?”

The tip of Mari's black tail twitched. “He is currently on Lirna, attending a conference among officers of the human, Ailian, and Nuretan militaries,” the Ailian answered. “The talks started yesterday, and are to last for several weeks. Your Deputy Director Medici has been conferring with Commander Me'lia, and they have agreed that you and I should travel there to talk with the general. Perhaps he can shed some light on the situation.”

That evening, Deirdre returned to her apartment to pack and get ready for the trip the next day. She and Mari were scheduled to leave early in the morning on a commercial space flight to Lirna, which would get them to the Ailian homeworld in two days' time. They would be on Lirna for at least two more days after that, which should be more than enough time for them to learn whatever they could from General Ramus. Hopefully he had information that would be useful to their investigation, which was proving to be much deeper than they would have imagined.

Deirdre got a suitcase from her bedroom and began assembling what she would need for the trip. She liked to pack light, taking no more than what was necessary. If she'd had her way, she wouldn't have taken a bag at all, but considering the legendary heat of the desert world, she knew that she would at least need a few changes of clothes if she didn't want to smell like a dog by the end of it all. She also packed her body armor this time. After getting shot, she was keen to avoid a repeat of the ordeal, and if the people they were facing were acquiring the kinds of weapons that the reports had indicated, the likelihood of encountering some kind of trouble on Lirna was not so remote as to be ignored, even if their trip was classified.

Once she was packed, Deirdre settled in to bed to rest up. She was not looking forward to the flight. Her loathing of space travel had not changed at all since her trip to and from Mars. Before she could sleep, however, she picked up her phone. For a moment, she considered calling home to let her parents know she would be unreachable for a while. But the idea of another conversation with her mother regarding her unmarried status made that an unsavory option. Instead, she dialed Alice's number. The phone rang about six times, and then she heard a recording stating that the person she had dialed was unavailable.

Sighing, Deirdre left a message. “Hello, luv,” she began. “Sorry t' cancel on such short notice, but I'm afraid I won't be makin' it t' dinner tomorrow night. I hope y' can find some other business between now an' then. I'm headed t' Lirna for a few days, but I'll hopefully be back by this time next

week. Ring me back when y' can so we can reschedule. Bye for now.”

She hung up and switched off her phone. As much as she would have liked to wait up for Alice to call her, she really did need to get to sleep. Her anxiety about flying was already starting to well up, and if the past was indication, rest wouldn't come easy to her. She rose from bed and went to the kitchen to fix a drink for herself. Anything that would help her nod off would be a welcome relief. Not for the first time, she admonished herself that this would have to be the last time she used booze to help her sleep. Tomorrow, she thought, was always a good time to make a change.