

-Ninth Life-
Chapter Six: Desert Knights
by Havoc

“You've got to give loyalty down if you want loyalty up.”
- Donald T. Regan

“Y'alright there, Mari?”

Even sitting where she was, across the aisle from Deirdre, Captain Ayalis seemed not to have heard her. The black-furred Ailian woman was seated with one leg crossed over the other, and she had an impassive, but not blank, expression on her face as she looked out of the window of the shuttle they were riding in. Mari was dressed in her formal Royal Guards uniform, the plain but somehow elegant tunic of ebony that all members of her organization wore while on official business within the Ascendancy. She seemed more at ease in her uniform than in the human-style attire she usually wore when on Cerelis, so Deirdre knew that her apparent inattention wasn't because of any sort of discomfort. Nor, thought the human, was it due to the view outside. All that could be seen through the windows of the small craft was the blackness of space, complimented by the gradually expanding, tannish form of the desert world, Lirna. Deirdre had visited Lirna several times before, though never on an assignment with Mari, and of course the Ailian officer had spent a good part of her life there, so she knew that seeing the planet from space had to be a fairly routine matter for her. What that could leave, Deirdre had no idea.

She was about to repeat her inquiry just as the shuttle began to rock, signaling their contact with the planet's atmosphere, when Mari turned her head to look at Deirdre with those blue feline eyes. “I am fine, Agent Flynn,” she said. “Forgive my silence. I was just thinking.”

“About our job, yeah?” Deirdre said. “I s'pose I've been givin' it a bit o' thought m'self, these past few days.” For her, the trip to the Ailian homeworld had been the usual ordeal that she had with space travel, meaning that the only thing keeping her from fixating on the nausea she felt while in flight was thinking about the job at hand. Deirdre had spent many hours shut up in her cabin on their commercial flight, going over the files they had on General Ramus, and his former subordinate Colonel Rogers. She had a decent idea by now of where to start when they met with the general.

“No, not that,” Mari replied, shaking her head. “I was thinking on other things...Nothing related to business matters.”

“Oh?” Deirdre raised an eyebrow. “What then? Y'got family on Lirna, do ye? Keen on seein' them while we're planetside?”

“You are not far off,” Mari said. “Most of my family is on Syleen, however. That is the planet of

my birth. Distant relations only. Cousins and such. But I must admit, I am looking forward to seeing my daughter again.”

Deirdre blinked. “Didn’ know y’ had a daughter,” she said. She brushed a lock of her fiery red hair out of her face. “We’ve known each other for...what...four or five years, now? Ye’ve never mentioned her b’fore.”

Mari shrugged. “It had no bearing on my assignment with the Cerelan Federal Police,” she reasoned. “But yes. I have a daughter. She will be fifteen this year. She stays on Lirna while I am away. Commander Me’lia is gracious enough to watch after her in my absence.” She looked back out of the window as the shuttle penetrated the atmosphere and began to descend towards the planet’s surface. “Perhaps you shall meet her while we are on the homeworld. If there is time, of course.”

Deirdre smiled at that. “Well, we’ll have t’ make time, won’t we? Y’ can’t be seein’ her more’n a few times a year. Can’t let that opportunity go t’ waste. I s’pose she’s a lot like ye, hm? Y’know...Quiet an’ serious. Never laughin’.”

The Ailian’s tailtip twitched, and Deirdre thought she caught the slightest hint of a chuckle. “Humorous, Agent Flynn. Quite the opposite, in fact. She is an energetic child. Very headstrong and carefree. I try to be strict with her when I am around, but since the commander has no children of her own, she takes great pleasure in indulging her while I am away. But I think she wishes to follow in my footsteps, so to speak, so perhaps I have more of a mother’s influence than might be expected...” Mari went quiet again for a few moments, watching out of the window as the shuttle descended to a lower altitude and began flying on a path towards their final destination. “I do look forward to when my time as the liaison to Cerelis is over, and I might spend more time at home.”

The conversation went stagnant for the duration of the flight, and Deirdre turned her attention to the scenery as well. They were now flying over the sparkling sands of Lirna, though patches of green could be seen here and there. Their journey was taking them to Hayikwiir City, the capital of Lirna, which was situated in one of the more temperate regions of the planet. If Deirdre pressed her cheek against the window, she could just make out the shimmering, silvery reflection of the sun against the tall buildings of the city. She tried not to focus too much on them. Keeping her vision on something so far away, combined with the nearly imperceptible motion of the shuttle in the air, started to make her feel a little airsick. Instead, she looked at the ground beneath them and took a lot of slow, deep breaths. Puking on the flight in would be quite an embarrassment in front of her partner.

After about half an hour of flight, they began to pass over Mat’aar Airbase, the largest military installation on Lirna, which also housed a major civilian spaceport. Large commercial spacecraft could be seen on the ground, as well as smaller private craft. The shuttle circled around the spaceport, giving

them a look at the many buildings that made up the complex, and then they descended towards the ground. Finally they came to rest on a landing pad, with a small bump jostling the craft as the landing gear hit the pavement. The pilot made an announcement that they were free to unfasten their restraints and leave their seats, and Deirdre and Mari rose and retrieved their bags from overhead compartments. As they were the only passengers on their shuttle, they didn't have to wait to disembark, and Deirdre led the way out of the ship and onto the ground outside.

She was immediately assaulted by the heat of the environment outside. Though they were coming to Lirna in the middle of the cold season, that meant little for a human. The temperature was still well over ninety degrees Fahrenheit, comfortably cool for an Ailian but brutally hot for more cool-natured species. The sun was magnificently bright as well, and Deirdre found herself reaching into her pocket for her sunglasses even before she pulled out a much-needed cigarette, having been deprived of the pleasure for the entire flight. The agent was grateful that she had chosen her lightest suit for the trip. Even so, she was soon sweating hard and knew that a change of clothes would be welcome before the day was out.

“Christ, I dunno how you Ailians manage here,” Deirdre groaned, swiping the sweat off her brow with the back of the hand holding her cigarette. “It's hotter 'n hell.”

That elicited another quiet chuckle from Mari. “You humans are so fragile,” she chided her companion. “This is a fine winter day. I could actually stand for it to be a little warmer. I hope there will not be too much of a breeze today.”

“Yeah, yeah...”

The two of them walked from the landing area to the buildings surrounding the civilian area of the spaceport. As they went, Deirdre looked around at all the people who were walking to and fro, going about their business at the bustling facility. She felt very small, even though she saw the odd human here and there. Lirna was still a fairly lightly-traveled destination as far as humans went, but there were plenty of Nuretans. The slender, blueish-skinned amphibian aliens looked somewhat more comfortable in the environment than Deirdre felt, likely owing to their specialized perma-damp clothing. They also didn't seem to need sunglasses, as she saw none of them wearing anything of the like. She wondered at that. Maybe their neon-colored eyes afforded them natural protection from glare and ultraviolet rays.

Surrounding them were also, of course, many Ailians of many different colors. Deirdre found it a jarring sensation to see them. She wasn't uneasy around Ailians, like some humans still were, but she had to remind herself that Mari was on the freakishly short side for one of her species. At seven and a half feet, the Royal Guard captain was already nearly two feet tall than Deirdre, but the average Ailian

was taller still. She felt positively dwarfed around so many of them, and it didn't help that the Nuretans were taller than her, too. She felt rather like a lone child surrounded by adults. Luckily for her, the crowds in the spaceport seemed to be giving Mari, in her striking Royal Guard uniform, a wide berth, saving Deirdre the hardship of not being able to see where she was going.

“We shall need to get transportation to the military side of the facility,” Mari said, as she wove her way through the crowds. They stayed outside, much to Deirdre's discomfort, though it was nice not to have to bother with the hassle of customs like all the regular fliers. All it took was for them to wave their respective identification cards and they were directed by security down a paved footpath that took them around the sprawling main spaceport building and right to the front. “I wish I had thought to arrange that ahead of time, but it slipped my mind.”

Deirdre shrugged the apology away. “Shouldn' be too hard, yeah?” she said. “I s'pose they have taxis on Lirna too, eh?”

Mari nodded. “True enough.”

A wide, multi-lane road traveled directly parallel to the front of the spaceport, and Mari showed Deirdre to the curbside. After a few moments of them standing there, a wheeled vehicle pulled up to them. The windows were slightly tinted, but Deirdre could still see inside to the driver. He rolled the window down and exchanged a few words in Ailian with Mari, who then carried their bags to the rear of the vehicle and stowed them away in a trunk compartment. They both got in the backseat and then the driver sped off. Riding in a vehicle made for Ailians, though she didn't do it very often, always made Deirdre appreciate how Ailians must feel when visiting human worlds, though sort of in reverse. Instead of being cramped up, the agent felt overwhelmed by how much space she had. Her feet barely touched the floor in front of her seat. Mari, on the other hand, looked quite comfortable.

The driver took them down the road, but when they came to a fork, he went right instead of left, which would have taken them into the city. The right road had much less traffic, and what they did see were official-looking vehicles passing them in the opposite direction. After a few minutes of speedy travel, they came to a large gate in a perimeter wall. Deirdre looked out of her window. The gate was rather foreboding, and the wall was tall and sturdy. Anyone who wanted to come in by means other than the gate would have required serious firepower. That made sense; it was the main line of defense on the ground for the airbase, after all. Guards were visible up on top of the wall, some of them obviously armed with rifles. The driver stopped at the gate, where there was a small building separate from the wall. A tall Ailian male in a gray fatigue uniform walked out of the open door and approached their car. Deirdre didn't know Ailian military insignia very well, but he had the look of a non-commissioned officer, and he was wearing a sidearm strapped to his waist.

Mari lowered the window on her side, and she held up her identification for the soldier's inspection. He looked it over, and then he snapped to attention and saluted her before waving their vehicle through. The gate opened up for them and they proceeded inside. Barely a minute later, they came to a stop again, this time in front of a large two-story building. Though somewhat artfully architected, it still had a blocky structure that broadcast "military" to Deirdre. She and Mari exited the vehicle and retrieved their bags from the back, and the driver left them there.

"Is this your first time here, Agent Flynn?" Mari asked her.

"Here? Yeah." Deirdre nodded as she looked up at the building. The walls looked like they were made of some kind of sandy stone, with wide windows spanning the length of the structure on both floors. "I never came t' th' base on my other assignments here. Impressive."

"It is. This is the main administrative office building for Mat'aar Airbase. The base commander is housed here, along with much of the support staff officers. The conference that General Ramus is attending is being hosted here." Mari began to walk towards the front entrance, and Deirdre followed her. "First we must meet with Commander Me'lia. She will be waiting for us inside."

They approached the front doors, which slid open to allow them inside. Once in, Deirdre breathed a sigh of relief. The building was kept at a much cooler temperature than outside, though it was probably still well over eighty degrees. But even that felt like dipping into a swimming pool compared to what they were coming from. Immediately inside the front door was an expansive lobby area, where Ailians in military dress were walking here and there going about their duties. Deirdre followed Mari as she led the way to the rear of the lobby. This time they actually did have to pass through security, since this was an active military base, but one look at Mari's uniform was all the naval lieutenant manning the checkpoint needed to wave her through.

Deirdre noticed that Mari seemed to be garnering a fair amount of attention from the Ailians that they passed as they walked through the halls. This seemed odd to her, since she was among her own people, until she reminded herself of her companion's background. Captain Ayalis had been one of the Royal Guards responsible for retaking Lirna fifteen years ago during the war, and had been personally involved in the operation to rescue the Empress from enemy hands. She was a war hero, and her face was probably well-known among soldiers stationed on the planet.

Mari seemed to know where she was going, and after a few minutes of walking they arrived at an unassuming set of double doors at the end of a hallway. On either side of the doors stood a pair of uniformed Royal Guards, both several feet taller than Mari. Nevertheless, Deirdre could see recognition flash in their eyes. They both saluted Mari, keeping their eyes on the human, and one of them reached back with one hand and knocked sharply on the door.

“A’ret ke shola,” a voice answered from within.

The guards opened the doors, and Mari and Deirdre entered the room beyond. Inside, they were faced with an office which was surprisingly plain, empty apart from a desk with a computer terminal and several chairs set up in front of it. The office seemed to be a temporary work space, perhaps one which was used whenever someone needed a place to work in quiet at a moment's notice. Seated behind the desk, her gaze directed at the computer screen, was an imposing Ailian female dressed as a Royal Guard. She looked stressed out, as evidenced by the way her black fur was standing up on end in spots, and she had her head propped up on one hand. In place of her left eye was a patch of black mirrored material, while her right eye was a piercing golden yellow. She was, of course, Commander Aria Me’lia, the leader of the Royal Guards. As Deirdre and Mari stood in front of the desk, the doors closing behind them, she looked up at them and smiled.

“Ah, se le ke’re na, mari,” Aria said warmly, rising from her chair. Mari snapped to attention and saluted her commander, while Deirdre stood there feeling slightly awkward. A salute wouldn't be proper in her case, but bowing didn't seem right either, so she really didn't know what to do. This was her first time meeting Commander Me’lia face to face. The commander looked to Deirdre, solving that issue with a polite nod that was returned. “You are Agent Flynn, yes? Is good to meet you. I hear many good things from you Director Medici. Welcome to Lirna.”

“Thank you, Commander,” Deirdre replied. “Th' pleasure's all mine.”

Aria reached out for a handshake, a gesture Ailians were not typically known to offer, which surprised Deirdre enough that she delayed for a bit in accepting it. Commander Me’lia seemed to have some knowledge of human customs, at least. “I see your name several time before now, yes? You help Mari before, with some fugitives who hide out on moon of Jupiter. And the banking fraud between Lirna and Mars two year ago. Sit, please.” Aria waved to the chairs in front of her desk. Once Deirdre and Mari were seated, she sat back down as well. “Was good trip?”

Mari nodded. “It was fine,” she said. Deirdre was grateful that they were going to stick to English. Her Ailian was atrocious, and it would have been cumbersome to rely on Mari for translation. “We came directly from the spaceport, Commander. I am eager to get started on our assignment. I assume General Ramus has been informed that we are to be meeting with him?”

“Yes,” Aria said. She looked back at her computer screen, which was half-visible to Deirdre. She recognized some of the documents from the case files that concerned the late Marcus Remy and Colonel Rogers. “General Ramus has agreed to meet with you. Is confused about why, but he make no protest. Seem willing to help how he can. Is...surprising.”

Deirdre and Mari exchanged glances, and Mari shrugged. “Surprisin' how, exactly,

Commander?" Deirdre asked. "I'd imagine he'd want to clear this up, wouldn't he?"

Aria leaned back in her chair and folded her hands in her lap. "Yes, I think...", she said slowly. "But is surprising because he seem to be...expecting this. Not know why. I ask, but he say he explain when he meet with you. Is curious."

"Do you believe he is hiding something?" Mari inquired, her ears twitching forward. "General Ramus always struck me as an honest man. Set in his ways, perhaps, and not the most trusting of Ailians, but a decent sort in other respects."

"I agree," Aria said. "But like I say...is curious how he act when I bring up subject. You will see when you meet him, I think."

Now Deirdre's curiosity was roused. "Well...shall we go see him, then? Best t' do it now, before he has time t' rethink his willingness for cooperation."

"Agree again." The Ailian commander reached for a communicator set into the desk, and she depressed a button with one finger. "*Cha, relax a' te surezhi, ne?*" A voice on the other end spoke a few words back to her, and Aria clicked the device off again. "General Ramus finish with meeting in few minutes. Will see you soon. Follow."

Aria got up from her chair and walked around the desk, and Deirdre and Mari followed suit. The commander led them out of the office and back down the hall, and the guards who had been standing at the door followed suit. Now that she was standing very near to the commander, she could see just how tall she was, much taller than the average Ailian. Deirdre wouldn't be surprised if she was a full ten feet tall. And from what she could see of her with the uniform on, it looked like Aria Me'lia was very well put together. For an Ailian, at least. Deirdre had never had any particular leanings to straying from her species, and anyway, she knew from the history books that the commander was spoken for.

They took a left turn before getting back to the lobby area, and then they walked for at least ten minutes down a seemingly endless hall before going down two flights of stairs. From the rapidly cooling temperature and the change in the smell of the air, Deirdre could tell that they were underground. She pushed her red hair back off her forehead with her free hand, her other being occupied by her small suitcase. It made sense that a base as important as Mat'aar would have subterranean areas. If it was anything like a human military base, the halls would extend underneath all of the buildings, allowing for the base to continue operating should it come under attack.

While they were walking, Aria began talking again. "Your daughter is well, Mari," she said conversationally. "That girl...she so funny. Always ask me about you. Will be glad to see you." She looked over her shoulder with a smile at Mari. "You will come for dinner this evening, yes? My home

your home.”

“I would be honored, Commander,” Mari agreed. “Your family, they are all well? How is Jack?”

“He is very well.” Aria's remaining eye sparkled. “And everyone else well, too. Father retiring this month. Turning over his business to Ana. And I be an aunt soon.” She seemed to swell with pride. “Will be a prince in the palace. Sami and Empress Amani very happy.”

Deirdre spoke up. “I s'pose congratulations are in order then, Commander,” she said. “That'd be your sister, the Royal Consort, then? Pardon me if th' question's rude, but who might th' father be?”

Aria surprised Deirdre by laughing fairly hard at that. “Is good question, yes? You be amazed, I think. Father is Empress.” She smirked at the expression that came across Deirdre's face, a mixture of bewilderment and curiosity. “Genetics. I not pretend to understand, but they use Her Majesty's genes to make happen. But you not say I mention that. Is very personal. But I too pleased to keep secret. Will be public soon, anyway.”

They were walking down another long hallway now, and soon they came to a heavy-looking metal door. Aria pulled a keycard from the front pocket of her uniform and swiped it over the door lock, which flashed from red to green. A clunk sounded as the lock disengaged, and the door slid into the wall. Inside was a conference room with a long wooden table, around which were placed chairs at five foot intervals. Waiting inside were three humans, two in military dress and one in formal civilian clothes, all men, already seated on one side of the table. The oldest one in the middle, with gray hair and thick-rimmed glasses, could be none other than General Ramus. The other officer, a captain by his rank insignia, was unknown to Deirdre, as was the civilian, who seemed the youngest of all of them.

Deirdre, Mari, and Aria all took seats at the table opposite the other three humans. Since the lead of the investigation was technically Deirdre's responsibility, she handled the introductions. “General Ramus, I presume?” she said, folding her hands on top of the table. Beside her, Mari unzipped her bag and pulled out a datapad to record the contents of the meeting. “Nice t' meet you. I'm Supervisory Special Agent Deirdre Flynn, Cerelan Federal Police.” She gestured to Mari. “This is Captain Mari Ayalis, our liaison from the Royal Guards. And y'know Commander Me'lia already, I expect?”

The older military man nodded, offering up a polite smile that brightened an otherwise serious face. “I do, Agent Flynn. Commander Me'lia and I have had the pleasure of meeting several times since I arrived on Lirna. And I've met Captain Ayalis once before, if you remember, Captain. On Arbaros, a few months after the informal alliance was signed during the war. That was quite a few years ago, of course, and you weren't yet a captain then, I believe.”

“I remember it well, General,” Mari said. “Thank you for agreeing to this meeting.”

“No, it's you I have to thank,” the general replied. He waved a hand to the other two men. “This is Captain Mitchell, my quartermaster, and the man to my right is Inspector Bechtel from the United Nations Office of Internal Security.” The man in civilian clothes nodded to them. “You'll pardon me if I get right to business. This is a busy time for me, as I'm sure you're aware. I've taken the liberty of having some files prepared for you.”

Deirdre raised an eyebrow. “Have y' now? I haven't even told ya why we're here, General.”

“No, but when I was contacted by the CFP I was able to make an educated guess.” The general held a hand up and was given a small stack of data cards by Captain Mitchell. He handed these across the table to Deirdre. “You're here to talk about Colonel Rogers, and some missing supplies from back during the war.”

Startled by the general's words, Deirdre looked at Mari. Her expression of surprise mirrored her own. “That's...interestin' to hear you say, General. How could y' know that? S' far as I know, the purpose of our comin' here was t' be secret. I'd be keen to know how y' came to that conclusion.” Mari was tapping away at her datapad, making notes.

“I'll field that one, Agent Flynn.” This came from Inspector Mitchell. “For the past few weeks, the OIS has been conducted audits of the supply division of the United Nations military branch. We do a big audit every decade or so, depending on what's needed. We weren't able to keep up with it so well while the war was on, for obvious reasons. It was more important for military units to have access to supplies without getting caught up in red tape. But now that things have been settled down for a while, we decided to get back to it.” He straightened up in his chair. “During the audit, we uncovered a few discrepancies in our stocks. Specifically, in General Ramus' former command.”

Narrowing her eyes, Deirdre looked at General Ramus, and then back at the inspector. “Go on.”

But the next answer came from Captain Mitchell instead. “Agent Flynn, I took over as quartermaster for General Ramus' former command almost one year ago,” he said. “Up until then, it had been managed by a series of stand-ins. Nobody with any real experience in accounting or record-keeping. The last person who managed the supply division with any sort of experience like that was, of course, Colonel Darius Rogers. When I got ahold of the records from when he managed the division...”

“Allow me to hazard a guess,” Mari interrupted. “I am going to surmise that you uncovered two sets of records. One that he allowed official eyes to see, and another with which he kept track of supplies that were diverted for less than savory purposes.”

“No, that's just it,” Captain Mitchell said, leaning forward over the table and jabbing a hand for emphasis. “Colonel Rogers kept meticulous records. The records only get spotty after Colonel Rogers was killed near the end of the war. Everything in and out, he kept track of it to the very last bullet. I've

never seen records so thorough.” Inspector Bechtel was nodding now in agreement. “But he also kept track of discrepancies. There definitely were supplies being diverted. But Colonel Rogers filed reports for every missing shipment, every piece of equipment that went missing from the storehouses. Whatever was being taken, Agent Flynn, it wasn't Colonel Rogers who was responsible for that.”

Pursing her lips, Deirdre pondered this information for a few moments. “Surely, though, all that must o' been a front,” she reasoned. “I mean...We have confirmation from a good source that Colonel Rogers was bein' paid off by the Pteryd. We have th' bloody accounts, for God's sake! There doesn' seem t' be any question.”

“No,” General Ramus said. He began shaking his head emphatically, and he crossed his arms over his chest. “I don't believe that for a second. Buck...Colonel Rogers, I mean...He was more than just an officer under my command. He was a friend. I can't believe he was on the take.” The general smacked a hand on the table. “Dammit, if he'd lived long enough, he would've helped to push those goddamn bugs out of our homes! He wouldn't have worked *with* them. Hell, Buck was as patriotic as they come. I mean, he volunteered right when the whole war started, when the c-” The general's mouth suddenly clamped shut, and he went pale for a few seconds.

Mari leaned back in her chair. “Cats?” she finished coolly, staring pointedly at General Ramus.

The general worked his mouth for a few minutes, facing down the glares of Mari and Aria, while Deirdre sat in silent embarrassment. “No offense meant, Commander, Captain,” Ramus said slowly. And to his credit, he really did look sorry. Emotion seemed to have got the better of him, and he'd forgotten for a moment where he was. “Old habits...They die hard...” He took a few deep breaths before continuing. “As I was saying...When the Ascendancy declared war on us, Colonel Rogers was one of the first to volunteer. I can't see him turning around and working against humanity.”

“Those accounts, though,” Deirdre said. “They're a fly in th' ointment, General. No gettin' around that. Y' say Buck was a patriot. A strong one. Strong enough t' hold a grudge? I can see someone like that bein' willin' t' work with th' Pteryd t' attack th' Ascendancy, 'specially if the regular military wasn' makin' much headway. Revenge, like.”

General Ramus bit his bottom lip, and he looked down at the tabletop. “I can see what you're getting at, Agent Flynn,” he allowed. “I'll admit, Buck often expressed frustration in the latter years of the war. He couldn't stand how well the Ascendancy seemed to have us bottled up. A lot of guys felt that way, I guess, myself included.” He sighed. “When you put it that way, I guess I have to say it's possible. But then I think about how well he did his job. Buck was as upset as I was whenever supplies went astray. If he was diverting them for his own profit, or for what became the rebellion, he was a damn fine actor.”

Mari nodded, still giving General Ramus her cool expression with her mismatched eyes. She seemed not to have readily forgiven the slight from earlier. "Let us back up for a moment, General," the Ailian captain said. "We have already mentioned the account with GaliCorp Suisse that was opened in Colonel Rogers' name. An account like that is very difficult to open fraudulently, which would suggest to me that the colonel opened it himself. And the account does not have any beneficiaries listed, yet is still active." She tapped one claw on the tabletop. "Tell us how Colonel Rogers met his demise."

General Ramus looked confused, as did the other two humans across the table. "I don't understand," he said. "That's in Buck's personnel record. You must have that, surely. I don't imagine you'd come to an interview like this without it."

"The file contains the date that he is listed as having left military service. The rest of it seems to be missing."

The general blinked. "Missing? That doesn't make any sense. It should be there." The general shook his head. "Regardless, I remember exactly how Buck died. I was there. We were stationed at a forward operating base on the edges of human space. Well...I suppose you would have called it *Ascendancy* space. We got hammered one day, orbital bombardments. We'd been hit before, but nothing like that." The general maintained his composure well, but Deirdre could see the hint of a shiver pass through his body. "We found out later that it was the first wave of the separatist group. It was clear that we were going to be destroyed, so evacuations began. The base started emptying out, but the enemy knew where to target. The supply depots were the first to go. Before we could get everyone out, the whole place went up. Buck was inspecting the warehouses that day...Killed me to have to leave without knowing he and his people were safe..."

"After the base was destroyed, I guess the enemy didn't see much use in occupying the planet we were on. I don't blame them. It was a frozen piece of hell." The general chuckled wryly. "Anyway...We went back to look for survivors as soon as we could. Found a few, but...those buildings were destroyed beyond recognition. And the building where Buck would have been...It was nothing but a crater." General Ramus sighed again, much more heavily than before. "That was the hardest death notification I ever had to do. He wasn't married, but his parents...they took it really hard."

Though up until now she had been listening with careful attention, Aria stirred as General Ramus finished his story. "You bury him, yes? Is what you humans do."

"Bluntly said, but yes, that's what we do, Commander," the general replied. He shook his head regretfully. "But we couldn't in Buck's case, I'm afraid. There wasn't enough of him left to bury. I think the only real piece of him we found was a few fingers. His parents were heartbroken, but they still built a little memorial to him in his hometown."

Aria smirked at the general. “My family learn something important. Not see body, not assume anything. Is hard lesson to learn, General.”

General Ramus' face bore a shocked expression, one that was mirrored by his human companions. “You're not seriously suggesting that Colonel Rogers is alive, are you?” Captain Mitchell asked. He seemed almost to be smiling, like he wasn't sure whether or not he should be laughing. “He's not been heard from for almost fifteen years. The universe is a large place, but it's not *that* large. There's a finite number of colonized planets, Commander, and all of them have their own law enforcement agencies and surveillance networks. That's not to mention the Royal Guards and their sister agencies.” He spread his hands out. “I find it hard to believe that a supposedly dead man could live out there and not be uncovered *somehow*. Colonel Rogers was not the most prominent member of the military, but he wasn't exactly an unknown. He was a frequently-interviewed man, especially during the latter half of the war with the Ascendancy. Reporters liked his colorful commentary. He'd be recognized on many human worlds, I'm sure.”

“It is not so inconceivable,” Mari countered. “Take the recent capture of the late Marcus Remy, for example. I think it is fair to say that there were fewer more notorious human war criminals than he, and yet he managed to evade capture for a good decade. He was within the United Nations and the Ascendancy for all of those years. I can imagine he would escape notice within the Ascendancy, certainly, but to do so on human worlds shows that it is not outside of the realm of possibility. And Colonel Rogers was never being actively looked for.” The captain jabbed a finger at the table. “And let us not forget the banking matter. Those accounts do not remain active for long after the death of a person. That they remained active for so long tells me that Colonel Rogers was at least looking in on them from time to time. The sort of bank that he was using prides itself on discretion. So long as the account holder can demonstrate that it is truly them using it, the bank does not pry too far. They are quite frustrating from a law enforcement standpoint, as I am sure Agent Flynn can confirm.”

Deirdre bit her lip, but she found herself having to agree with Mari. As crazy as it sounded even to her, what the Ailians were saying made sense. She was starting to lean in their direction herself. “I'm afraid Mari has a point,” she allowed. “Ye've got t' look at it from another standpoint, too...Those high-security banks're greedy buggers. Like we said b'fore, Colonel Rogers' account had no beneficiaries. Nobody t' take over if he died. That means that if th' account went dead, th' bank gets t' retain th' money for their own. They'd snap it up in an instant.”

“Exactly,” Mari said. “So all signs point to the conclusion, as unlikely as it could be, that Colonel Rogers is quite alive and well. And using his ill-gotten funds for illicit means.”

The three humans across the table had uncomfortable looks on their faces that told Deirdre that

this information was starting to gnaw at them. “Well...if what you're saying is accurate, and I think we should stress that right now it is only a theory...,” Inspector Bechtel said slowly, “then what would be your next step in this investigation?”

“For that, we'd need your help,” Deirdre said. “We need t' know who all of Colonel Rogers' contacts are...were, I should say. Who did he trust? Who could he have been workin' with? I'm sure you, General, should at least know some o' th' folks who shared his views. No matter how trustworthy they might seem, Colonel Rogers had t' have had help in remaining hidden all these years, if'n he is still alive. I'd think his old military buddies would be a good place t' start.”

The general took his glasses and rubbed a hand over his face. “I see what you're getting at, Agent Flynn.” He put his glasses back on, his shaky hand making the task a little more difficult than it otherwise might have been. “I don't have that information with me right now. I want to say, though, that I think this is going to be a wild goose chase, but I'll certainly help in any way I can. Trust me, if Buck is still alive, I want to find him just as much as you do. He'll have a few questions to answer.” He stood up from his chair. “Give me a day. This time tomorrow, I'll have the information you need. I trust you'll keep me informed on the progress of your inquiry?”

“Of course,” Aria said, standing as well. “Thank you for time, General. Is hard, I know, but necessary. Please do your best.”

“I will, Commander,” the general promised her. Everyone else stood as well, as the meeting was at a good conclusion. “Until tomorrow, then.”

Upon leaving the building, Deirdre, Mari, and Aria were met by a vehicle that would transport them to the commander's family home, where Deirdre and Mari had been graciously invited to stay for the night. The general and his entourage were leaving at the same time, getting into an armored car which was being escorted by several smaller human military transports. The two travelers loaded their belongings into their vehicle before getting in, and at a command from Aria the driver headed off, following after the general's small convoy.

“Well, this's a troublin' turn,” Deirdre said, looking out the window as they departed. “A war hero back from th' dead, not so much a hero. It'd make a good story, if'n it wasn' so horrible.”

“Yes,” Mari agreed. “What is the human expression...’deja vu’? It was not so long ago that our people experienced the same thing.”

Deirdre managed a weak smile. “Whoever's authorin' this story ain't got much imagination,” she joked. “Christ...” The vehicles turned out from the main gate onto the road, and as it turned out they were all headed in the same direction. The general, it seemed, had business in the city they were headed

to.

“But evidence point that way,” Aria said. “General seem very sad. Too bad. This colonel seem like was good friend. Like mother...” She seemed like she was about to say something else, but instead she shook her head a fraction and then looked out the window, going quiet. The interview seemed to have dredged up some particularly troubling memories for her.

As the group of vehicles traveled down the road, Deirdre watched the scenery go by. There wasn't much to see. Just an endless expanse of glittering sand, broken up occasionally by rocks and scrubby plants and trees. She wondered what they would uncover next. The war had ended a decade ago, but now it seemed like some wounds were beginning to be reopened. In all the years she'd spent tracking down fugitive war criminals, she'd imagined that eventually they'd be able to close the book on it. However, it seemed like there were still a few chapters to go.

Suddenly, in the midst of all of their inner thoughts, they were jerked out of them by an abrupt slowing of their car. Aria jerked her head up, her ears standing up on end as a loud explosion sounded and a staccato series of bangs began. “*Cha!?*”

Deidre was nearly thrown to the floor of the car as they came to a complete stop. “Th' bloody hell?”

“*Rel'a ke ara'ne te kah!*” their Ailian driver called back to them. He was a naval officer, and seated next to him in the front passenger seat was another officer. Both of them were sitting bolt upright, their eyes glued to the windshield as they looked ahead. “*Kerash a ra'le zene te kor!*”

Mari immediately went for the holster at her side and drew her sidearm. Deirdre managed to straighten back up in her seat, and she looked between the front seats to see what was going on. When she saw, she could hardly believe her eyes. In front of them, the general's convoy had stopped, and there was smoke billowing from the ruined husk of the escort vehicle in front. The escort vehicle behind had stopped as well, and while the road was blocked, the soldiers inside had left it and had their weapons up. For a moment, Deirdre thought they were out there to protect the general from whatever had attacked the convoy. Then she saw muzzle flashes, and realized with horror that they were firing on the general's armored car.

“Aw, bloody hell!” she barked, digging into her jacket and pulling her own weapon. They were in the middle of assassination attempt. “The general's in trouble!” She reached across Mari and pushed open the door, leaping across her lap to exit the vehicle. Mari was right behind her, while Commander Me'lia remained behind, a communicator in her hand as she yelled into it.

As soon as Deidre's feet hit the pavement, she had her weapon up in both hands. She slid along the side of their car and braced herself on the front, aiming squarely at the back of one of the soldiers

shooting at the general. She fired twice and managed to strike one of them, causing him to jerk forward. He reeled around and leveled his weapon at her, triggering a burst that missed her head by a few inches, likely due to his balance being off from being struck. Deirdre cursed as Mari grabbed her shoulder with her left hand and jerked her back into cover. Of course they were wearing body armor. From this distance, at least a hundred yards, she wasn't as good a shot with a pistol as she could have been with a heavier weapon.

Mari, on the other hand, was a far better shot, and with her Ailian sidearm she had range to spare. She extended her right hand, flat against the side of the car, and fired a single shot. The soldier's head snapped back as her bullet struck dead center in his face, and he crumpled to the ground. The other soldiers kept firing at the general, but his driver seemed to have overcome the shock of the initial attack. The armored car wheeled off the road and kicked up a huge cloud of sand as it drove around the burning escort vehicle, getting back on the road and squealing away at a very fast pace. The attacking soldiers all dove back into their vehicle and gave chase. Deirdre brought her weapon back up and emptied her magazine at the fleeing car, having the minor satisfaction of hearing a few rounds clang on the armored rear.

"Come on!" Mari growled. She grabbed Deirdre again and pulled her back into their vehicle. The door slammed shut and they flew off in pursuit.

Aria had a grim expression on her face. "I call it in," she informed them. She turned to look ahead at the other two vehicles, already some distance away. The driver of their car increased his speed as much as he could, trying not to let them get too far. "Raise alarm. Help on the way. I hope they come in time..."