

Starfire
Chapter Four: Intrigue
by Havoc

“I never teach my pupils; I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn.”
- Albert Einstein

Alright, M'raava, first day on the new job, M'raava thought to herself, standing outside of the ready room she had been provided. *Looking good and feeling great. About time to get in there and do it right.*

For the last few days, M'raava had been looking forward to new duties training pilots for the new batch of mechs. After the mishap that she'd been involved in her first time out in one, a lot of younger pilots might have been scared off of getting back into a cockpit, but she was different. As someone with a good deal of experience, the lieutenant colonel had already been through her share of air and spaceborne accidents, so she knew that those kinds of things were just the hazards of the job. She was excited to get back flying again, especially since she'd received word from Lieutenant F'earri that the rest of the mechs had been fully cleared and were ready to go.

She smiled a little as Keri came to mind. Their little romp of several nights ago was still a fresh, exciting memory in her mind. After spending the night together, the other S'hestir female had left M'raava weary and pleasantly sore. M'raava still hadn't told her fiancé, Arpad, about what had transpired between the two of them. It wasn't that she was afraid of what his reaction would be, it was just that she wanted to wait for a good time to tell him. Her interest in arranging a little ménage à trois had increasingly grown since the lieutenant had mentioned it in passing, and waiting until Arpad was in the right mood would vastly enhance the likelihood of that happening. Not for the first time in her life, M'raava thanked her lucky stars for landing a man with such an open mind.

For now, though, business was at hand, and she couldn't stand out in the Eris base corridor all day. Reaching a hand up to straighten an errant strand of her blonde hair, she drew herself up straight and looked down at her uniform one last time. She was dressed in her flight suit, as befit the commander of what was technically a combat squadron, even if just a training one. Everything was just the way she liked it. Spotless fabric, velcro patches affixed perfectly straight, and the front zipper lowered *just* enough to show a bit of cleavage. M'raava was a S'hestir, after all, and even military regulations couldn't keep her from being a tad showy.

With her final inspection taken care of, the lieutenant colonel reached for the door control, and it slid open at the recognition of her biometric signature. As soon as she stepped inside the front door, she heard the uniform sound of everyone in the room standing to attention. M'raava kept the grin from

spreading across her face. She was used to being the highest-ranking person in the room, from her time as an instructor at the Academy, and she always swelled with self-pride at how well she had done for herself in her military career. She was not able to keep her tail from waving side-to-side in pleasure at the sound, but hopefully her new pilots would not notice the little lapse in discipline.

Keeping her eyes forward as she walked inside, M'raava continued further inside. The room was set up at the front just the way she had ordered it: a desk and chair arranged in front of an electronic whiteboard. M'raava waited until she was standing in front of her desk, and then she finally turned to face the room, getting her first look at the personnel who would be under her command.

"Pilots, at ease," she said, looking around the room. All of the other people in the room resumed their seats. "Welcome to your first day of acclimation training for the Mark 3-X mechanized combat unit. I am Lieutenant Colonel M'raava Shigeshti, and it will be my privilege to command you during this next month of intensive training." M'raava looked to the back of the room, where the non-pilot personnel assigned to the training squadron were assembled. Seeing Keri among the support personnel, she gave her a quick wink, which was cheekily returned. Lieutenant F'earri would be acting as her chief mechanic, owing to her specialty in heavy artillery units, which the Mark 3-X mechs were quite similar to. "I understand that all of you have experience with piloting the newer models of mechs. Nevertheless, since the 3-X is based off of an older model, we'll be spending a good amount of the first few days on the fundamentals. I expect you all to get through this with as little grumbling as possible." She leaned forward, giving the front row of pilots a not-so-accidental look down the front of her uniform. "I trust concentration will not be a problem."

M'raava looked out at the pilots she would be commanding. This first batch consisted of five experienced soldiers, selected for her by General Liam, the base commander. As her address to them had said, none of them were rookie pilots. She'd had the chance, over the previous day, to examine their personal files. They all had experience flying mechs, and a few of them even had combat experience. M'raava had wanted to work with trained pilots first, so that they could assist later with turning out more squadrons.

The three pilots sitting on the front row were the newest and youngest, only a few years out of the Academy but already proving to be promising soldiers. They were Flight Officer Davin Porter, human male, Second Lieutenant Lucia Ramirez, human female, and Second Lieutenant J'varra Mareshta, S'hestir male. All three of them had been assigned to inner Solar system posts around the more stable colonies within Earth-controlled space, and while they had several hundred hours of flight experience among them none of them had seen actual combat. M'raava looked forward to putting them through some strenuous live-fire exercises to give them a taste of what combat could be like.

The more experienced pilots were sitting behind the young folks. Captain Jonathan Nerys was a human from Mars who had been out in the frontier regions of the Solar system for the last ten years. He had started out in the Mark XIV mech back when that model was starting to be phased out, same as M'raava, and his squadron had transitioned up through the new Mark XIX before he had been reassigned to Eris. Captain Nerys was a confirmed combat ace who had twenty-seven kills under his belt, all of them pirate craft. Tall and muscular, he had the look of someone who would be just as comfortable holding a rifle in the trenches as he would be sitting in a pilot's seat.

The other senior pilot had been a last-minute surprise sprung on M'raava only the previous evening. Seated against the left wall of the ready room, isolated from the rest of his new squadron mates, was Major Miles Fletcher. Only recently cleared by the medical and psychological boards, Major Fletcher had been the squadron commander at the garrison on Sedna, the deep-space scientific station which had been destroyed by syndicate pirates a few weeks prior. M'raava wasn't sure about having him as one of her trainees, but she couldn't deny that he had a lot of experience. As the second-highest ranked member of the training squadron, he would be serving as her executive officer, the position which Captain Nerys would have filled had Major Fletcher not been brought into the picture. Hopefully Major Fletcher would be able to get past losing the rest of his old squadron well enough to apply himself to his new assignment.

"Before we get too far into it," M'raava continued, "I have your wingman assignments. Since we're a mix of old and new pilots, I want to have our more experienced members paired with the newer ones." She looked at the front row of pilots. "I, of course, will be flying as number one. Lieutenant Ramirez, you'll be on my wing as number two." The human pilot nodded seriously to M'raava. "Number three will be Major Fletcher, with Flight Officer Porter, number four, on his wing. Captain Nerys, I want you together with Lieutenant Mareshta, numbers five and six respectively."

Major Fletcher raised a hand. "Question, Colonel," he said. "I understand we're going to be flying some pretty old models. With all due respect, is that wise, especially considering the accident you had the other day?"

Feeling a little flare of indignation, M'raava's ears flattened to her head. She saw the same flare of anger in Keri, whose responsibility it was to care for the mechs and who had become rather attached to them. Staring the major down, she leaned back against the desk. "You've been through a traumatic experience, Major, so I'll overlook the minor insubordination." The feline's tail smacked against the desk loudly, making them all jump. "But this comes down from General Liam himself. Now, the new Mark 3-X mech which we'll be piloting is based on an antiquated design, it's true. However, they have undergone some significant redesigns and upfits. I think once you know a bit more about them, you'll

come around.”

“Goddamn right he will...,” Keri muttered from the rear of the room, just loud enough that the seated pilots would probably be able to hear her. “Kick his ass if he doesn't, superior officer or not...”

Suppressing the smirk that was threatening to appear at the other S'hestir's words, M'raava waved Keri up to the front of the room. “This is First Lieutenant Neekeri F'earri. She's our unit's chief mechanic and is quite familiar with the specifications and capabilities of the Mark 3-X. If you'll give her your undivided attention for the rest of the day, she'll give you a briefing on the operation of the mech.”

Two days later, M'raava and Arpad were sitting together in one of the officers' messes, having dinner while they chatted with each other about their work. Arpad was settling into his role as chief of security very nicely, with Colonel Reims having departed Eris for good the day before. A change in the Army personnel who served as base security had already been noted. Patrols were a little more frequent, and the soldiers uniforms seemed more pressed and polished. Colonel Reims hadn't been slack, far from it in fact, but none of the security personnel had ever served under an officer as professional and experienced as Arpad. He went on for a while about the new training he was putting them through, getting about as excited and impassioned as someone so reserved and calm could. Which, for Arpad, meant he allowed his emotions to show on his face for a few brief moments.

For M'raava's part, her work with the squadron was also going very well. That morning, all of the pilots had gotten into the hangar for their first flights with the Mark 3-X mechs. While a little shaky with the older-style models, they had made a good go of it. M'raava had decided to keep them in the thin atmosphere of Eris this first day, instead of heading for open space. She'd led them through some maneuvers over a relatively flat plain, venturing into some hillier spaces towards the end of the run. M'raava had been by far the best pilot out of the six of them, but surprisingly the second best had not been Captain Nerys, as she would have expected considering his age and level of prior experience. That honor, in her judgement, belonged to the captain's wingman, Lieutenant Mareshta. The male S'hestir had been able to make his heavy mech fairly dance around, impressing his commanding officer and earning him some words of praise from his older wingman. The weakest flier out of the bunch was Flight Officer Porter, not surprising since he was the youngest of the group, but even then he was as competent as to be expected of an Academy graduate and was able to at least keep up with Major Fletcher. M'raava had no complaints about the performance of Lieutenant Ramirez, who was middle-of-the-road as far as skill level went. She was looking forward to taking them through more strenuous exercises next week, after they got some more flight time.

“Do you have any plans tonight?”

M'raava, who had been thoughtfully attending to her plate of whatever mystery meat was on the menu tonight, looked up. “Sorry?”

“I asked you if you had any plans tonight,” Arpad repeated. He picked up his coffee mug, taking a sip of the strong, black concoction. The human drank it much stronger than M'raava ever had, which was saying something. Navy coffee had a reputation as being just slightly less potent than pure rocket fuel. “I am giving the night watch to Lieutenant Squier tonight. Perhaps it is a little early to put that much faith in him, but he has been showing remarkable aptitude in the training scenarios and I think giving him some more responsibility will bring out some of his leadership abilities. Colonel Reims promoted quality officers, but I am always on the watch for rising stars. Regardless, I have the night free.”

Grinning, M'raava leaned forward, wagging her tail enthusiastically. “Really, now?” she purred. “I don't have any plans, but you've got me thinking that I oughta make some. Plans that involve me and you alone in our quarters, maybe with a bottle of nice wine stolen away from the bartender in the O-Club?”

Arpad arched an eyebrow at her, lowering his mug. “I hope you are joking about that, Lieutenant Colonel. Larceny is a court martial offense, and one that the security detail on this base, I can assure you, takes very seriously.”

“Ohh, then it's a good thing I'm screwing the chief of security, isn't it?” M'raava traced her foot up along Arpad's leg underneath the table, batting her blue eyes at him.

Though his expression remained stoic, M'raava saw a smile tug faintly at the corner of her fiance's mouth. “Well, you do have that going for you, I suppose,” he allowed. “At the very least, the best security officer on Eris would have to recuse himself from the investigation for a conflict of interest.”

“And for drinking half of the evidence.”

“Drinking what now? Count me in, I could use a stiff drink or four.” Both Arpad and M'raava looked up to see Keri sitting down next to them, carrying a tray of dinner for herself. She gave M'raava one of her cheeky smiles. “Hope you don't mind me joining you.”

“Not at all!” M'raava said. She scooted over a little on the bench seat, giving the younger S'hestir a little more room. “Arpad, this is First Lieutenant Neekeri F'earri, my unit's head maintenance officer. Keri, this is Colonel Arpad Apaffy.”

Keri looked at Arpad, giving him a quick once-over as she reached a hand over the table. “You're the infamous fiance, then,” she said. “M'raava has told me about you. Nice to meet you.”

“Pleasure,” Arpad said. He slowly reached a hand out, taking Keri's and shaking it firmly. “My fiancée has told me all about you, as well.”

“All about me?” Keri asked, her expression turning a little mischievous. She glanced sidelong at M'raava, who playfully avoided her gaze. “Hmm...”

The day before, at lunch, M'raava had pulled Arpad aside and told him about her little rendezvous with the other female S'hestir. The look of mild surprise on his face had been worth keeping her secret for a few days. She was gratified that the several years of her fidelity hadn't changed his views regarding the openness of S'hestir sexuality, and in fact hearing what had happened seemed to have an arousing effect on him. M'raava hadn't mentioned anything about arranging a threesome with all of them, but his tacit approval of what she'd done let her know that it was definitely something that might be in the cards.

“Yes, all about you,” Arpad said. He allowed himself a smile. “I might have known that M'raava would not take long to find the only other female S'hestir on base. She has that talent about her.”

Catching the tone of his voice, Keri leaned forward. Casually, she tugged on the top button of her uniform blouse, prying it apart. “She has a few other talents, too, Colonel. But I bet you knew about some of those already, yeah?” She unbuttoned the second button as well, offering a glimpse inside at her gray-furred breasts. “Maybe she told you that I've got a few talents of my own.”

Clearing his throat slightly, Arpad straightened up in his seat, his eyes drawn to Keri's open shirt. He had forgotten for a moment how boldly exhibitionist S'hestir women could be in public settings, as accustomed as he was to M'raava's relative restraint. “She may have mentioned something about that in passing, yes.”

Taking her cue from Keri, M'raava gave a little laugh. “Oh, please, love. You were almost popping out of your pants when I told you the story. I haven't seen you that turned on since our first date. Don't wuss out now.”

“Well, I...”

“Humans,” Keri said, rolling her eyes in mock exasperation. “So hung-up about sex. Not like us.” She surprised the lieutenant colonel, moving over with her shirt still unbuttoned and placing a hand firmly on the back of her head, drawing her in for a deep kiss right in the middle of the crowded mess hall. Arpad's eyes widened just a touch, and he couldn't keep his gaze away as Keri thrust her tongue into M'raava's mouth. When she finished the kiss, she turned her head to look back at Arpad, flicking her tongue out at her lips. “See? Unbridled passion is just natural.”

Taking a moment to recover herself from the unexpected kiss, M'raava nodded in agreement. “She has a point, Arpad. You're way too uptight sometimes. You need to relax every now and then. Let

loose.”

Another grin tugged at Arpad's mouth, though he quickly got it under control. “What would you suggest, M'raava?” He glanced at Keri, then back at his fiancée, waiting for her response. “If I am to learn how to relax, maybe you should think of something that would help me.”

By way of an answer, M'raava turned her attention to the other S'hestir. “Busy tonight?”

“Ladies, please...I believe you have tortured me enough.”

Snickering at the same time, M'raava and Keri both looked up at Arpad, tearing their attention away from what they were doing. He was gazing back down at the pair of them, a rather amusing expression of combined suffering and pleasure on his face as he lay naked on the bed in his and M'raava's shared quarters. Both S'hestir women were curled up on either side of him, near the foot of the bed, their furred bodies similarly devoid of clothing. For the past hour and a half, the duo had been “attending to him”, teasing him steadily to the point of climax and then backing him off again. By this time he was absolutely aching for release, and fighting the urge to pounce on M'raava, or Keri, or both of them at the same time. He had a feeling that breaking their unspoken rules regarding his expected behavior for this little session might just prolong things. Not that such an outcome would be entirely unpleasant...

“Torture?” Keri said, a false tone of shock to her mewling voice. She had one hand cupped underneath Arpad's balls, her thumb lightly stroking along the sensitive bare skin. “Why, M'raava, whatever could he mean by that?”

Grinning, M'raava flipped her tail back and forth, greatly amused by their game. “I'm not sure, Keri. Perhaps we should ask him?” She leaned in closer to Arpad, the cold end of her nose almost touching his throbbing cock. “Is this torture, dearest?” Pushing her tongue out from between her lips, she just barely lapped at his shaft, going from the base up to just below the tip. A drop of precum beaded out, starting to slide down his length.

“Yes,” Arpad breathed, gritting his teeth as his fiancée's touch sent a shiver up his spine. “It very much is torture.”

“Oh, yeah? How about this, then?” Sitting up slightly, Keri lowered her mouth to his member, sucking the head inside. The young S'hestir swirled her rough tongue around, licking up his precum. She murmured quietly at the pleasantly pungent flavor.

“Also torture,” Arpad affirmed, after he regained the ability to speak. “You are being quite cruel, you know.”

“You could stop us at any time,” M'raava snickered. She brushed a hand down along his leg, her

claws lightly scratching his skin. "Don't act like you're not enjoying this."

"I am enjoying it very much," Arpad said, closing his eyes. "But every man has his limits, and I think I passed my theoretical ones about thirty minutes ago."

Lifting her head up, Keri licked her lips. "Poor baby," she said in a mock tone of sympathy. The gray-furred female crawled up along his body, laying herself down with her breasts pressed flat against Arpad's muscled chest. She kissed him full on the mouth, putting her hands on his shoulders as she began to purr. "Oh!"

Barely smiling as Keri jerked up in surprise, Arpad looked down at M'raava and winked. "I was trained to resist torture, you know," he said, squeezing with the fingers of the hand he'd just placed on Keri's firm rump. "And to return in kind." Moving his hand around, he slid his fingertips underneath her tail, tracing along the heated cleft of her sex. "Wet..."

"Really wet," Keri agreed, whimpering in pleasure as Arpad slipped a finger deep into her. The S'hestir felt another pair of hands slide beneath her arms, and she looked over her shoulder as M'raava cupped her breasts from behind.

"Maybe we've tortured him enough," M'raava said. She kissed the side of the other S'hestir's neck, teasing her teeth through her fur to nip at her skin. Keri brought a hand up, tangling her fingers in M'raava's silky blonde hair. Purring along with her, M'raava pulled back at Keri's chest, raising her to a seating position atop Arpad. She lowered her voice, whispering in the younger girl's ear. "I think you ought to do the honors...This time, at least." She nudged Keri back, until Arpad's erection was nestled against her rump. As she did so, she felt the other S'hestir's heartbeat increase dramatically. "My, my, nervous, are we? That doesn't seem like you."

"A little bit," Keri admitted. She bit her bottom lip, looking down hungrily at the man underneath her. "To be honest, I've never been with a human male before. Women, yeah, but..." She shuddered a little as Arpad placed his hands on her thighs, rubbing the soft gray fur there.

Chuckling, M'raava nuzzled her cheek. "You'll love it, I promise." She coaxed Keri to raise up with one hand under her ass, lightly gripping Arpad's cock with the other. "And he'll go easy, won't you, love?"

Tempted as he was to say he could make no such promise, Arpad nodded solemnly. "If that is what Keri wants." Both M'raava and Keri could hear the desire in his voice as he stared up into the young female's amber eyes.

Smiling, Keri splayed her fingers out on Arpad's chest. "Maybe...", she said. She added a growl to her next words. "Just at first. I'm a tough girl, Colonel. I'm sure M'raava can tell you that I can take quite a licking."

“Then I will not hold back, First Lieutenant,” Arpad said. Moving his hands up to Keri’s hips, and with M’raava holding his cock in position, he pushed her down firmly. He almost came right away as he felt her tight, wet warmth sliding around him, but he gritted his teeth and managed to hold himself back. Keeping hold around her waist, he continued easing her down, watching the multitude of different expressions playing across her face as he slipped deeper inside.

“There we are...,” M’raava breathed lustily as Arpad finally bottomed out inside of Keri. She cupped the younger woman’s breasts again, kneading them gently as she hugged herself against her back. “Feels nice, hm?”

“Y-Yeah...,” Keri managed to gasp, her voice shaky with pleasure. “Fuck yeah...” Her eyes were closed, her breathing slow and deep as she grew accustomed to feeling the human inside of her. “He’s big...”

With one of his trademark tiny smiles, Arpad let his hands fall from her waist to Keri’s thighs. “The compliment is much appreciated.”

Grinning from ear to ear, M’raava moved away from Keri, stretching out beside her fiancé. Leaning over, she kissed him deeply, and then she looked him right in the eyes. “Give it to her good, now, Arpad.”

Without giving a response, Arpad did as he was told. He lifted his hips up from the bed, raising Keri into the air, perched atop him, eliciting another gasp from her as the motion drove his cock even deeper into her. Then he allowed himself to drop back down, his member pulling out of her as he did so. As Keri began to come down as well, he thrust back up into her, lifting her up once again. Before long the human’s forehead was glazed in a glistening sheen of sweat, and the room was filled with the sound of the S’hestir’s mewling moans of pleasure.

Keri had never felt anything quite so wonderful as being fucked by Arpad. Tending more towards women as she did, she had nonetheless engaged in a few romps with males of her own species before, and in her mind they couldn’t compare to what she was experiencing now. As his thick cock plied her feminine depths, the gray-furred female thought to herself that she was starting to have an idea of why so many females of her species ended up with human men. She opened her eyes, looking down at Arpad beneath her, seeing the concentration on his face as he made love to her, his fiancée by his side. M’raava looked even more turned on by what was going on than Keri was. The brown-furred S’hestir had one hand between her own legs as she watched them, and although Keri couldn’t quite see what she was doing it didn’t take a large stretch to imagine.

Purring deeply, Keri hunched over, determined not to let Arpad have all of the control over the situation. She planted her hands firmly on his chest, digging her claws in enough to remind him that

they were there. Bending her head down, she rasped her feline tongue roughly from his collarbone and along his throat, ending up with her lips pressed to his in a kiss. She was gratified to feel one of his hands press to the back of her head, pulling her deeper into the kiss. When they broke apart, she growled at him, baring her teeth playfully.

“You're pretty good, Colonel,” Keri rumbled in the back of her throat. Arching her back and pushing herself up on her arms, she began to take some of the control, lifting her rear up off of his cock. With a subtle twist of her hips, she ground back down on him, curling her long tail over and around his legs to anchor herself. Using the strength borne upon her by her Army training, Keri began fucking him in earnest, her breasts bouncing with exertion.

Surprise made itself apparent on Arpad's face, taken aback as he was by the small female's power. “Likewise, Lieutenant.” He took hold of her ass with both hands, filling his palms with Keri's firm rear as he began pounding in and out of her with as much force as he could muster. Her inner passage hugged him tightly, sending peals of bliss along his cock.

“You're both looking pretty good from where I'm sitting,” M'raava purred. She was pressed up against Arpad, rubbing her furred body along his smooth one in time with his and Keri's movements. As she watched them, however, the dull ache of arousal between her legs began to grow more insistent, and her own hand wasn't quite cutting it any longer. Getting a mischievous idea, she sat up and lifted one leg over Arpad's head, straddling him.

Amused, the human looked up, treated to the appealing sight of his fiancée's glistening pussy hovering inches away from his face. “You seem to have some kind of plan in mind here, M'raava.”

“I was just feeling a little left out,” M'raava said sweetly, wagging her tail back and forth. “I think your tongue needs a job...” She lowered herself, bringing her rump down. As soon as her sex brushed up against his face, M'raava felt Arpad's mouth on her, his tongue slipping out to tease her nether lips.

At the same time, Keri leaned forward, putting her arms around M'raava and hugging her tightly. As Arpad tended to both S'hestir women, they writhed against each other, their breasts pressing together as they kissed passionately. All three of them were voicing their pleasure, the two felines mewling and purring while the human gave muffled moans into M'raava's pussy. His motions were growing jerky and frantic as he grew closer to his climax, with the two girls racing to catch up.

Keri was the first to go. All at once she seemed to seize up, her body growing rigid as tremors began to pass through her. M'raava held her up as she came, catching Keri's mouth with her own as the younger female moaned in exquisite pleasure and clutched at her for support. The older S'hestir stroked her back firmly, running a hand up and down along her spine as the young lieutenant rode the waves.

She was followed closely by Arpad, who remained as diligent as ever. He barely missed a beat with his tongue on M'raava's pussy, though his fiancée felt a pleasant buzz as he groaned. The former commando jerked his lower body up, pushing down with his hands and forcing Keri down on his cock as hard as he could. Burying himself as deeply as possible, his cock erupted into the petite S'hestir woman, drenching her insides with his hot, sticky cum. Pulse after pulse of his seed flowed into her, filling her up until it began to leak back out from where they were joined. As soon as the stream of his cum stopped, Arpad removed his hands from Keri and grabbed M'raava around the waist, pulling her tight against his face and lapping at her furiously with his tongue.

The extra pressure was exactly what M'raava wanted. It was her turn now to lean against Keri for support, her tail lashing the air behind her as her fiancée's tongue brought her to her peak. She gripped the sides of his head with her calves, squeezing to the point where it was almost painful for him, but that was a distant concern at the back of her mind. All she could think about was the blinding pleasure rocketing through her body, making her squirm around on top of Arpad. She buried her face against Keri's breasts, the soft fur there muffling her screams of bliss as the human beneath her suckled at her sex, drawing out her climax and draining every last bit of energy from her shivering body.

As Keri watched M'raava coming down from her high, she grinned, brushing a lock of her black hair out of her amber eyes with a shaky hand. "Damn, M'raava...", she said. "You and your fiancée are a handful together. I almost couldn't keep up."

Lifting her head from Keri's breasts, M'raava managed a weak smile. Her own hair was a mess, tousled beyond recognition, and her body was already beginning to feel so sore, but it had been...oh, so worth it. "Mmm, you did just fine by me," the older woman replied. She leaned in and kissed Keri, curling her tail around to twist it around hers. "That was fantastic."

"Hell yeah, it was," Keri agreed. She snickered a little. "But you might want to move."

Confused, M'raava tilted her head to one side. "Why?"

"Because I think you're suffocating your husband-to-be."

After a moment or two, M'raava's clouded mind registered what Keri was saying. With a little yelp of realization, she quickly climbed off of Arpad, uncovering his face from where her exhausted body had been smothering him. The human took a long, pained breath of air as he was finally released from his soft, furry prison. It was a few moments before he was able to speak, and when he did, both females melted into weary laughter.

"You women will be the death of me..."

Nearly a week later, M'raava was in the cockpit of her Mark 3-X mech, skimming over the

surface of Eris at high speed. Her wingman, the human female Lieutenant Ramirez, was keeping pace with her admirably. Up above them, cutting a wide circle in their own mechs as they observed their maneuvers, were Major Fletcher, Flight Officer Porter, Captain Nerys, and Lieutenant Mareshta. The last week had seen the pilots growing more and more accustomed to flying the new model of mechs, until the differences in skill was starting to come down to which one of them had eaten the healthier breakfast. As soon as M'raava had seen the improvements becoming noticeable, she'd lined up some more challenging exercises for them. That was what had brought them to the far side of Eris from the main part of the base, where the dwarf planet was less developed and more rugged. A series of canyons ran along the landscape, twisting with a combination of sharp turns and languid curves that presented a unique maneuvering challenge. M'raava had arranged for several hundred drone targets to be released in the canyon range, and so had combined an advanced flying course with target practice.

"Alright, Number Two," M'raava called over the radio. "Just like the last one. Fly hard, on my lead. What's your status?"

"I'm doing alright, Lead," Ramirez radioed back. "Fuel at sixty-four percent, eighty percent of munitions remaining. I'm ready." The young pilot goosed her thrusters, sending a burst of blue flame from her exhaust ports and putting truth to the confident sound of her voice.

Grinning behind the visor of her flight helmet, M'raava increased her speed as well. "Good. We're going in hot this time. You pick up what I drop, understand?"

"Wilco."

Taking a preparatory breath, M'raava angled her mech towards the entrance to the canyon range. Ramirez kept right with her as they entered the mouth of the canyon, going about half again as fast as the first time. The increased speed meant the curves were coming up a lot quicker than before, but M'raava handled the corners with ease. Checking her six o'clock, she saw her wingman was only a little behind her, taking the turns a bit slower but making up for it on the straightaways. Still, M'raava frowned. A delay like that, no matter how slight, could mean the difference between life and death for the lead pilot. She keyed up her radio.

"Step it up, Two. We're coming in range of the first set of drones."

"Yes, Colonel," Ramirez replied, sounding strained, but still confident. "Do my best."

"Yeah, step it up, Lucy!" cut in the voice of Lieutenant Mareshta. The S'hestir male sounded teasing over the radio. "Some of us want a chance to run it again while there's still time left in the day!"

"My name's Lucia, not Lucy!" Ramirez retorted. "And I don't-"

The solemn, serious voice of Major Fletcher interrupted. "Cut the chatter, Two and Six. Keep the radio clear."

“Thank you, Three,” M'raava said. Her sensors were picking up the pings of the first set of drones. “Weapons free, Two. Fire at will.”

Zippering around the last corner leading to the drone range, M'raava fired her main gun almost as soon as she had targets in her sights. The canyon she'd picked to set up the drones in was a wide, straight pathway filled with rock columns that reached the level of the lip of the canyon. The drones, some stationary and some mobile, were floating on lift engines at varying heights within the rocky formations. Holding her arms before her in their armored sheaths, M'raava guided the arms of her mech, aiming the heavy rifle at targets and blowing them away almost effortlessly. Her sensors told her that Lieutenant Ramirez was picking off whatever she passed by, not missing a single one. As they reached the end of the drone range, a large wave of the targets rose to meet them. Right on cue, both M'raava and Ramirez blew the covers off of two of their missile pods, rippling off a salvo that destroyed all of the remaining drones. The canyon floor was littered with metallic debris as they left the range, zipping through a brief series of turns before emerging from the other side of the canyons. When they were in the clear they both angled up, heading for open sky.

Feeling the thrill that came from combat maneuvers, M'raava opened the channel on her radio. “Excellent work, Lieutenant. I think we got 'em all. Damn fine work.” Ramirez rolled her mech in celebration, giving out a whoop of triumph over the radio. She formed back up on M'raava's wing, as M'raava tapped a control in her cockpit, deploying the next set of target drones into the canyon range. Then she got on the radio again. “Five and Six, how about you two next? Lieutenant Mareshta, you're on point this time.”

“Affirmative, Lead!” the S'hestir lieutenant replied eagerly. “Five, take my wing. Sir.”

Sounding a little annoyed by the exuberant young pilot, Captain Nerys called out his reply: “Acknowledged, Six. I have your wing.”

Forming up high above the surface with Major Fletcher and Flight Officer Porter, M'raava and Ramirez settled into the flying circle to observe the other two pilots starting their run. Mareshta and Nerys entered the canyon range in perfect sync at high speed, going even faster than M'raava and Ramirez had gone. The lieutenant colonel smiled to herself. Oneupsmanship was something she liked to see; it meant that her pilots were focused on doing the very best that they could. The younger S'hestir pilot was a hot hand, making his mech dance through the twists and turns of the canyon, and Captain Nerys was right with him, not lagging at all.

As they got to the more difficult zigzagging section of the canyon, though, M'raava noticed something a little odd. Mareshta was rotating his mech a lot more than was usual for maneuvers of that type. Shrugging it off, M'raava figured he was just showboating a little. Nothing different from the way

he had been acting ever since he first climbed into the cockpit of his Mark 3-X. Though something still lingered in the back of her mind, nagging at her.

When they were nearing the entrance to the drone range, Captain Nerys's voice came over the radio, sounding worried. "Six, slow down, you're taking the curves too fast. We're coming into the firing range."

Now M'raava was worried, too. The captain was right. Just as she was about to give her own warning over the radio, Mareshta's mech reached the entrance to the drone range. As he rounded the corner, the left arm of his mech clipped the rock wall, sending it into a spiral. They could all see him fighting to regain control, and he looked like he was succeeding, but something was wrong.

Major Fletcher saw it first, and he called frantically over the radio. "Six, pull out, *pull out!*"

And then, just as Mareshta managed to level his mech out, he slammed full speed into one of the rock columns. His cockpit crumpled and his missile pods tore away, the medium-yield warheads exploding in a fireball that engulfed his craft, scattering shards of debris all over the canyon.