

Starfire
Chapter Five: Inquest
by Havoc

“Justice is a temporary thing that must at last come to an end, but the conscience is eternal and will never die.”

- Martin Luther

Though full of people and the cacophony of gunshots during the daytime hours, the primary firing range on Eris Base was usually quiet and largely empty during the night. Built underground, as all of the rest of the facilities on Eris were, the range was built for pistol, rifle, and machine gun shooting, and extended for nearly five hundred meters underneath the rocky surface of the dwarf planet. Tonight, when M'raava entered the range, she found it suitably deserted apart from the range master sitting in his glassed-in booth. That was just as well for her, because she was in no mood for company tonight. The last three days had been absolute hell for her, as well as for the soldiers under her command. On this night she just wanted some time to herself, time to blow off some steam, and she knew of no better way, other than sex, for her to blow off steam than by getting in some shooting time.

Going up to the range master, a grizzled old human sergeant who had been in the service for years, the S'hestir requisitioned and received two hundred target rounds for her sidearm. Under the normal course of duty, her pistol would be loaded with bonded soft-point bullets, but in practice soldiers fired full metal-jacketed rounds, which was what she'd be firing tonight. Ballistically identical to her duty rounds, they provided adequate target practice at a fraction of the cost of shooting the more expensive ammunition.

With her ammo in hand, M'raava walked down the long row of range lanes, going almost all the way to the opposite side of the range from the range master's booth. Once there, she took a cardboard target from a nearby stack and attached it to a clip on a rail which extended the full length of the lane. The target was a basic one, just the black silhouette of a humanoid form on a white background, with a red portion in the very middle. Mounted on the walls of her lane was a small panel of controls, and M'raava pressed one to send the target twenty meters downrange. Donning a set of protective glasses and ear protectors she'd brought with her, she then drew her weapon and ejected the magazine, locking the slide to the rear and setting it aside. She unloaded the duty rounds from the magazine and reloaded it with fifteen target rounds, reinserted it into her weapon and released the slide forward, chambering the first round. M'raava then replaced the weapon in her holster on her hip.

Flexing her fingers, she concentrated on her breathing for a few minutes. Her tail waved serenely from side to side behind her as she focused her eyes on the target, paying particular attention

to the red area in the center. M'raava took her shooting very seriously. In the Academy, she'd been on the naval pistol team and had been a very good shot. During her time in active service as a combat pilot, she'd let her small arms skills lapse somewhat, but as soon as she'd been posted to the Academy again she had re-familiarized herself with shooting a pistol and gotten herself back up to standards. Her fiancée, Arpad, had also instructed her in shooting rifles, but she still had more of her skill in handguns.

At the moment she felt her breathing becoming slow and steady, the feline drew her pistol and brought it up on target. In less than a second, she had the pistol in front of her eyes in a two-handed grip, and had the sights aligned properly. Tightening her index finger on the trigger, she felt, almost as a surprise, the pistol jerk in her hands as the first shot was loosed downrange. She followed it quickly with a second and third shot, then she removed her finger from the trigger and indexed it on the frame of the weapon. All three shots had landed within centimeters of each other, slightly above and to the left of the exact center of the target. Well-placed shots, just about where she had wanted them to go.

Sighing, M'raava lowered her weapon to a low ready position, closing her eyes. Normally she would feel excited at firing a weapon, and elated at her own accuracy. But the last three days had been absolutely horrible, and even though this was an activity that usually brought her a sense of relief, she was feeling no better than she had when she'd entered the range. As she raised her weapon to continue her string of shooting, she thought back to the source of her anxiety...

“Lieutenant Colonel Shigeshti, thank you for agreeing to meet with us. We really value being able to have your input on this matter.”

M'raava leaned her chair back slightly, crossing her arms and legs as she eyed the panel of officers before her. Four human men, and one woman, sat at the table opposite her. In the center sat General Liam, the base commander, who was in charge of the inquest into the death of Second Lieutenant J'varra Mareshta the previous day. Sitting to his left was Brigadier General Karen Campbell, the commander of the base's marine garrison, and to his right was Admiral Joseph Dowdy, commander of the fleet stationed at Eris. Seated at the far right of the table was Colonel Lawrence Wales, the commander of Eris' wing of armored mechs and fighters, M'raava's direct superior. Rounding out the group was M'raava's fiancée, Colonel Arpad Apaffy, head of the Army base security compliment.

“I appreciate the sentiment, General,” M'raava said, “but me being here wasn't my choice. Even if my presence wasn't necessary for the investigation, Colonel Wales ordered me to come.” She eyed her commander coolly, daring him to reprimand her for what she had said. M'raava greatly respected authority, but she also resented that the colonel had felt he needed to order her to come to the inquest. A pilot under M'raava's command had lost his life, and she was all too glad to do whatever she was able

to do in order to get to the bottom of what caused his death.

General Liam seemed taken aback by her response. “Yes, well...Yes.” He shot a look at Colonel Wales, and M'raava got the distinct impression that he shared her sentiments regarding the colonel's order. “In any case, Shigeshti, let's get down to it, shall we?” The general called up a holographic projector set into the table, and the display changed to a paused video image. M'raava recognized it as video taken by the pilot helmet recorder in a mech fighter. According to the notation in the bottom-right corner of the display, this video came from EMF-489, the Mark 3-X mech that M'raava piloted. “Colonel Wales?”

Colonel Wales stood up from his seat, picking up a small remote and walking around the table, to stand in between it and the solitary chair that M'raava occupied. “Lieutenant Colonel, we've downloaded the flight data from your training squadron's mechs during the exercise you conducted yesterday. We also recovered the black boxes from Second Lieutenant Mareshta's craft, however they were damaged and we're still reconstructing the contents. For now, I'd like to direct your attention to the video displayed in front of you.” He pressed a button on his remote, and the video began to play. It was picture only, with no sound. “Please describe what you see here.”

“It's the video as seen from inside of my mech, obviously,” M'raava said after a few seconds. “You can just see Second Lieutenant Ramirez's mech at my three o'clock as I turn my head. From the timestamp on the video, looks like this is the end of our second run through the canyon. There's no sound, but right about now I'm ordering Captain Nerys and Second Lieutenant Mareshta to begin their second run.”

“Good.” Colonel Wales paused the video again. “Up until this point, had you noticed anything unusual about the performance of the mechs, either your own or those of your pilots?”

“None at all.” The S'hestir colonel leaned forward, placing all four legs of her chair back on the floor. “Keri...First Lieutenant F'earri, I should say, our lead mechanic, has her maintenance staff go over all of the mechs each day before we begin our maneuvers. None of them are cleared to fly until she's personally inspected them, especially considering the mishap I experienced with my mech the first time I took it out. All of the mechs were performing perfectly.”

“Very well, Colonel.” Wales pressed another button on his remote, and the picture changed to a different view. This image showed the inside of another mech, from the cockpit-mounted camera this time. Visible in the image were the walls of the canyon, as well as a second mech in full view at the ten o'clock of the one from which the video was taken. “This video is from EMF-491, the mech piloted by Captain Nerys. You can see Lieutenant Mareshta's mech, EMF-494, in the lead position. The video starts just a short time after we left off with the last one. I'm going to start the video in a moment. You

had a different view of the incident from your position circling the canyon, but based on your extensive piloting experience I'd like you to narrate what's occurring, to the best of your ability."

"Yes, sir." M'raava leaned closer, resting her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands. Her tail began to wave faster as her heart rate increased. She was about to get her first really good look at the accident. Colonel Wales pressed play, and she began her narration. Again, there was no sound. "I ordered Lieutenant Mareshta to take the lead position over Captain Nerys, to give him some command experience. The lieutenant is leading the captain into the first series of canyon passages. He took them in at a much higher speed than the previous run. I think he was trying to show me up."

Brigadier General Campbell interjected a question. "To show you up?"

"Yes, ma'am," M'raava said. "I like to encourage competition in my pilots. It keeps them constantly working to improve. I took my second run a little faster than the first, so Lieutenant Mareshta wanted to beat me, to prove he was a better pilot than the boss."

"Thank you, Colonel," Colonel Wales said. "Respectfully, General, let's hold our questions until the end. Please continue, Shigeshti."

Nodding, M'raava turned her attention back to the video. "The lieutenant and captain have just cleared the first series of maneuvers. They're heading into the second, more difficult section of the canyon." She watched the video in silence for a few moments, then pointed at the display. "There, right there. That's where it started to go wrong. You can see how much more dramatically Lieutenant Mareshta's mech is maneuvering compared with Captain Nerys'. He's pitching and rolling his fighter a lot more than he should be. At the time, I thought he was just showing off."

The video continued, and even with no sound on the video it was obvious how much Captain Nerys was struggling to keep up with Lieutenant Mareshta. At several points in the video, the young S'hestir's mech disappeared completely from the view of the second mech's cockpit camera. He was obviously traveling at a much higher speed. From the outside, it was impossible to detect anything visually wrong with the mech, but the maneuvering was not that of a pilot who was entirely in control.

"They're coming out of the canyon now, about to enter the range of the target drones. I think it was about here that Captain Nerys warned Lieutenant Mareshta to throttle back. He said he was taking the turns way too fast. I was about to warn him, too, but...ah...there." On the video, the lieutenant's mech clipped the rocky wall of the canyon with its left arm, sending it into a tumble. The view of the video shifted as Captain Nerys tried to maneuver out of the way, but he was hampered by the confines of their surroundings. M'raava's feline ears flattened to her skull, as she dreaded seeing what was going to happen next. The crash was going to look a lot worse from up close, versus from where she had witnessed it when it happened. "Lieutenant Mareshta hit the canyon wall, and he went out of control."

Major Fletcher yelled for him to pull out, and it looked for a minute like he would make it, but then his mech collided with one of the rock columns, and his missile load detonated.”

On the display, the view from inside Captain Nerys' mech showed just what M'raava was describing. As Lieutenant Mareshta's mech hit the rock column, the missile pods tore away from his craft and exploded, disintegrating his mech in a fireball that was quickly extinguished by the thin atmosphere of Eris. The picture was obscured briefly as the debris cloud blocked out the light and darkened the interior of the captain's mech, but when it cleared spiderweb cracks lined the canopy and the video shook as the captain apparently fought to regain full control. Then the video leveled out, and the captain pulled up to leave the canyon, at which point Colonel Wales stopped the recording.

“Lieutenant Colonel,” Wales said, “based on your knowledge of mechs and their operation, and your familiarity with Lieutenant Mareshta's piloting skill, do you have any opinion as to what may have been the cause of the crash?”

M'raava considered the question for a long few minutes. Ever since yesterday, she had been thinking about the accident and what might have caused it. Mostly, she had been reprimanding herself for allowing Lieutenant Mareshta to take his run at such a high speed. He was young and inexperienced, if a skilled pilot, and she should have done more to discourage his reckless behavior. She blamed herself for perhaps allowing the competition in the squadron to get out of control. Part of it was her S'hestir nature. She couldn't resist a show sometimes, and competition was one of those shows that everybody could enjoy, regardless of whether they were participating or observing.

“If I had to offer my best opinion,” the S'hestir female began, speaking slowly, “I would say that he probably suffered a malfunction in his throttle system. Possibly coupled with an additional malfunction in his maneuvering systems. Similar to the malfunctions I experienced, although in my case my controls went out completely. Lieutenant Mareshta, from what I can see in the recording, appears to have retained at least some control over his mech.” She leaned back in her chair again.

General Liam didn't seem convinced. “You seem eager to blame equipment failure, rather than the actions of inexperienced pilot,” the base commander said. “Why?”

“I'm not saying that Lieutenant Mareshta didn't do anything wrong in this incident,” M'raava clarified. “If he had as much control as it looks like he did, I think a more experienced pilot could have turned a bad situation into a survival. I survived my accident with no use of my maneuvering controls at all. But I don't think Lieutenant Mareshta is to blame for everything.” She waved a hand for emphasis. “He wasn't some fresh recruit on his first day out of the Academy. He had *some* piloting experience, and whatever he lacked in flight time he made up for with skill and raw talent. He was an exceptional pilot for his age and service period. I think that if his mech was functioning flawlessly, he

would have made it through that run just fine.”

“But you also told us that none of the mechs were flown without first being checked by Lieutenant F'earri's crew,” Colonel Wales pointed out. “Are you saying that she is incompetent, that she overlooked or neglected some portion of her checks?”

M'raava saw Arpad stir at that, and start to open his mouth as though to object. Before he could say anything, she spoke up in Keri's defense. “That's not what I'm saying at all, Colonel. Lieutenant F'earri is an artillery officer who was pressed into acting as crew chief for my unit. She's very good at that job, even though it's not exactly what she was trained for, but she's not perfect. Nobody is. I've worked on mechs before as well, and I can tell you that parts and circuitry that look pristine can have flaws that visual and even computer inspections may not detect.” M'raava looked at all the officers arrayed before her. “Considering that two of these new mechs have apparently malfunctioned since being put into service, in very similar ways, I think it's possible that the whole batch may be defective. I think it's much more likely to be an issue with the manufacturer's quality control procedures.”

“But none of the other Mark 3-X mechs have displayed any signs of malfunctioning systems. They've all been cleared by multiple crews prior to even arriving at Eris Base. Crews that are *not* affiliated with the arms manufacturer, I might add.”

“That's exactly my point, Colonel Wales,” M'raava said. “We're dealing with flaws that aren't readily apparent, and may not be detectable by our instruments.” What she was about to next weighed very heavy on her heart, because it meant possibly delaying or even ending her dream of returning to full combat status. “Personally, I think it would be safest to take all of the new mechs out of service until a thorough audit of the manufacturer is conducted. And I'd even go so far as to say that any recently constructed mechs of other models from the same manufacturer should be sidelined as well.”

Admiral Dowdy immediately shook his head, a gesture mirrored by Generals Liam and Campbell. “Colonel, we can't possibly do that,” he protested. “For God's sake, you're talking about hundreds of fighter craft, almost none of which have shown any signs of malfunctions. What you're suggesting would cripple the offensive and defensive capabilities of our fleets, and we're already dealing with a crisis in this upsurge in pirate activity. We can't afford to make the crisis worse.”

“And how many more pilots have to die before the risk isn't worth it any more?” M'raava retorted, almost standing up from her seat. Her brown fur was bristling as she began to grow angry. “I don't know about you, Admiral, but one dead pilot is enough for me!”

General Liam stood up, forestalling any further argument between the two officers. “We're not here to debate defense policy. We're here to try to figure out what caused this crash, and what we can do to assure the safety of our pilots as much as possible.” He looked between M'raava and Admiral

Dowdy. “That means we're going to continue the investigation, but until the investigation is concluded I do partially agree with Lieutenant Colonel Shigeshti. Effective immediately, I'm ordering all the Mark 3-X mechs on Eris grounded. Her pilots will be restricted to simulators and trainer models until we know what's causing these malfunctions. I'm also going to place a request to the quartermaster general's office to conduct an investigation of the manufacturer, to determine whether or not the malfunctions can be traced to something on their end.” He added a caveat to what he was ordering. “However, I also agree with Admiral Dowdy that deactivating all craft built by the same manufacturer would be an unacceptable loss of strength for our forces. Until such time as it can be demonstrated that there is a reason for other models to be suspect, I will not order any further recalls.”

Admiral Dowdy didn't look happy, but he seemed to accept what General Liam said. M'raava felt like objecting, but she knew that it was probably the best result she could have expected from her testimony, and in any case it was at least a partial victory. As soon as the base commander was finished speaking, Colonel Wales turned to M'raava.

“Thank you for your assistance, Lieutenant Colonel,” he said. “You're dismissed for today. Once today's hearings are concluded, we'll inform you and you'll be free to issue orders to your pilots as you see fit.”

When M'raava left the hearing room, she closed the door behind her and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly as she closed her eyes, trying to find some sense of peace. The death of Lieutenant Mareshta still weighed heavy on her. She had lost pilots under her command before, in training as well as in combat, but it never got any easier. M'raava was really dreading having to write the letter of condolence to J'varra's family. If she recalled his personnel file correctly, he had a mother, father, three brothers, and six sisters living on Earth. That was a lot of survivors who were going to be mourning their family member's death, as well as asking angry questions about why and how he had died so far away from home.

Opening her eyes, M'raava was faced with the sight of the rest of her surviving squadmates. As the commanding officer, she had been the first pilot to go through questioning with the board of investigators. Flight Officer Davin Porter, the youngest of the group, spoke up.

“Colonel, how did it go, ma'am?” he asked. “Did everything go all right in there?”

“Fine,” M'raava said shortly. She crossed her arms, giving him a stern expression, twitching her ears forward and tilting her head up slightly. “You shouldn't be asking me about it, though, Flight Officer. You know the procedure for this sort of thing. We're not even supposed to talk about it outside of the hearing room.”

“Yes, ma'am. Sorry, ma'am. I was just curious.”

M'raava nodded. “I understand, Porter, but be patient. The investigation will conclude eventually.” She looked to Captain Nerys. “Jon, they asked me to send you in next. Just tell the truth, and you'll get through it fine, alright?”

Captain Nerys got up from his seat, walking towards her with a barely perceptible limp. With his mech caught in the explosion of his wingman's craft, he had been injured slightly. Owing to the strength of his mech's armor, the fighter had remained intact, however he had been jostled around severely in the waves of the detonation. His right leg had twisted wrong in the armored sheath inside his cockpit, and he was dealing with a very minor sprained ankle. Other than that, he had emerged from the accident unscathed.

“I know the drill, Colonel,” he said, offering a wry smile. “This isn't my first run-in with a review board.” He sobered a bit. “Ma'am, I'm sorry for what happened. I should have made him slow down earlier, but...I thought he should get a taste of some more intense flying, you know? I feel like this whole thing is my fault.”

M'raava shook her head. “If anyone has responsibility for his actions, it's him and me,” the S'hestir assured him. “You were doing what a good wingman should, following your leader. You tried to warn him. As far as I'm concerned you didn't do anything wrong, and I think you deserve a commendation for managing to keep your mech flying after taking it through that debris.” She placed her hands on her hips, looking up at the taller human with a firm look on her face. “Now get in there and answer all of their questions the best you can.” She looked at her pilots, and then sighed again, allowing her emotions to show a little. “As for me, I'm beat. I'll have orders for you all by tomorrow. As you were.”

The slide of M'raava's pistol locked back on an empty magazine, and she lowered her weapon as the last shell casing rattled against the concrete floor. She was a hundred rounds into her shooting session, and by now the center of her paper target contained a ragged hole about four inches across. Releasing the slide lock, she holstered her empty weapon and hit the switch to bring her target back. As it got closer to her, she noticed that several of her shots had gone wide, missing the red center of the target and landing in the black portions of the silhouette. M'raava frowned. Not up to her usual standards. Then again, she was a little more stressed than normal, so perhaps that was affecting her aim somewhat.

“Nice shooting,” a familiar voice behind her said. “Missed a few. But hey, you're Navy. Stands to reason you wouldn't shoot as well as Army can.”

M'raava nearly jumped out of her fur, turning her head to look over her shoulder. Keri was standing there, her shorter tail wagging madly as she grinned widely at the older woman. M'raava noticed that she had a rather large-caliber pistol holstered under her arm, one that seemed much too big for her hands. The lieutenant was examining her target, pointing one finger at the few rounds that had landed off-center.

Forcing a return grin, M'raava tore the target down. "I wasn't expecting anyone else to come to the range tonight," she said. "Especially not smart-mouthed Army brats. What are you doing here?"

"Oh, same thing as you, I guess," Keri replied. "Getting some target practice in. I might be a glorified mechanic now, but it still pays to keep the skills alive." She held up several boxes of ammunition, magnum rounds made for the large semi-automatic hanging at her shoulder.

"I guess you're right," M'raava said. She gestured at Keri's gun. "Pretty big piece, there."

"Eh, what can I say? I like big things that go boom." Another cheeky grin followed her words, then the younger S'hestir moved to the lane right next to M'raava's. Though M'raava couldn't see her, she could hear the metallic sounds of Keri loading her weapon. "So, M'raava, how have you been since the...ah...the accident? I haven't seen you much the last few days."

M'raava groaned quietly. "I've been better," she admitted. She put up a fresh target for herself, sending it out to the same distance she'd been shooting at before. For the next hundred rounds, she was determined to bring her grouping in tighter. Next to her, Keri did the same, sending her target downrange to sit beside M'raava's. "It feels real shitty to have been in command of a flying unit again, only to have it grounded. It's even worse that it happened because one of my pilots died. I feel like absolute crap." She loaded her gun, raising it up to fire the first few rounds of her second hundred.

The shots from her medium-bore pistol were dwarfed by the thundering blast of Keri's weapon, which caused a slight vibration to pass through M'raava's body. "How do you think I feel?" the gray-furred feline asked, before firing another shot. "I was in charge of maintaining the damn things, and in less than a week two of them malfunction on my watch. Doesn't say much for my abilities as an artillery officer if I can't keep the artillery working."

"Not to mention that Mareshta died," M'raava reminded her, putting five more shots through the center of her target.

"Exactly." Keri loosed five shots in rapid succession, and M'raava heard the clacking sound of an empty magazine being ejected. The larger caliber pistol held far fewer rounds than her own sidearm did. "And it's probably because me or one of my people missed a defect. That's like your fiance falling asleep watching the security cameras." The Army lieutenant loaded a fresh magazine, then went back to shooting. M'raava took a moment to pause and watch her friend's shots hit her target. Surprisingly, Keri

seemed to have a fantastic control over the powerful weapon. All of her shots were landing dead center.

“At least you're not letting the stress affect your shooting,” M'raava said, admiringly. “I can't say the same about me. You have steady hands.”

“Like I said, can't expect a Navy pilot to shoot as well as an Army soldier,” Keri teased her. “Don't feel bad, LC. Maybe with enough practice you'll be as good as me, someday.”

The two of them continued their shooting in relative silence, occasionally exchanging playful barbs regarding each others' aim. M'raava found her aim was settling down some and becoming much more accurate now that Keri was here. Probably having someone to talk with was distracting her from the stress of the current state of affairs. Both of the S'hestir women made their shooting a bit of a game, calling shots for each other to make. M'raava would say something like “Give your target some eyes” and Keri would put two rounds on the target's head in the approximate location of where eyes would be. Things of that nature. They were probably fortunate that nobody else was at the range, and that the range master was far enough on the other side of the room that he couldn't see them. If he had, he probably would have resented their rather lackadaisical approach to range safety and kicked them both out.

After the two of them were finished shooting all of their ammunition, they began cleaning up the brass shell casings that littered the floor. Empty coffee cans were placed at each lane for this purpose. M'raava filled her can, then went to dump it out in a bin nearby, placed in a recessed alcove behind the shooting lanes. As she dumped out her can, she felt herself grabbed from behind, as a pair of arms wrapped around her body and a pair of hands cupped her breasts.

“You know...,” Keri said, whispering up into M'raava's ear from where her chin rested on her shoulder, “shooting always gets me real worked up. I'm all hot an' bothered.”

Amused, M'raava almost automatically found herself grinding her rear lightly back against Keri. “Is that so?” she purred, wagging her tail from side to side, curling it between the other female's legs. “Never really happened to me.”

Keri squeezed the superior officer's hefty bosom, turning her head to nibble on her neck. “I bet you're getting there now, though, hm?” She moved one hand down, wedging it between M'raava's thighs and rubbing her firmly through her uniform pants.

Gasping, M'raava started to purr louder, arching her back slightly. “Nnh...You're not wrong about that, Keri...You have a way with me.” She put her coffee can down, turning around in the smaller S'hestir's arms and placing her hands on Keri's rear. “So tell me what you want, Lieutenant.”

“Isn't it obvious? I want you.” Keri tipped her head up, forcefully and insistently kissed M'raava firmly on the lips. The two of them stood there and made out quietly for several long minutes, mewling

as they pressed against one another. After a while, Keri broke for air. "I don't think I'm very patient tonight. It's been days, and we're all alone here." She sank down to her knees, unzipping M'raava's pants.

"Oh, my...", M'raava gasped, her voice catching with excitement. She watched the younger feline, feeling nostalgia for the enthusiasm of her own youth. But her own steadily inflaming desire was tempered by caution. "Someone could walk in any time, though..." Still, she didn't make much of an effort to stop Keri. "It'd be a lot safer to just go back to one of our quarters."

"Don't be a spoilsport," Keri implored her. She reached a hand inside M'raava's pants, curling her fingers over the crotch of her panties, where the older female was growing more and more damp. She slipped a finger underneath, feeling the silky, thin fur coating her pussy. "You want it just as bad as me, and I bet you don't wanna wait, either." She leaned in, nuzzling at her and planting a kiss on her panties before grasping the thin cloth with her sharp predator's teeth, tugging playfully.

"Fuck...", M'raava breathed, leaning her head back as Keri teased her. Her purr was rumbling like thunder in her chest now, and the pilot commander was wishing desperately to just give in and let Keri do what she wanted. But she persisted, reaching down and putting a hand under the gray-furred S'hestir's chin, tilting her head up. "If we go back to my place, though, I bet Arpad will be there. Three is more fun than two."

That made Keri's ears perk up. She well remembered the romp that the three of them had enjoyed five days ago. Grudgingly, she zipped M'raava's pants back up and got to her feet. "Ooh, you win. I bow to the logic of a superior officer." She planted a kiss on the end of M'raava's muzzle. "But I want you all to myself again soon. Dinner tomorrow, at my place?"

"It's a date."

The two of them walked back to their shooting lanes and retrieved their weapons, then began walking together to the exit. Before they could get there, however, a trio of uniformed security personnel came into the range, two in front and one in back. They spotted both S'hestir women and came towards them, seeming to walk with a purpose. As the two small groups got closer to each other, M'raava noticed that the one in back was Arpad, decked out in the full uniform he wore as chief of base security. She smiled at him, raising a hand in a wave.

"Hey, love," she said. "We were just talking about you."

"M'raava," Arpad said. He looked at Keri, his face as impassive as always. "Lieutenant F'earri." The two other soldiers watched both women, though they seemed to be paying more attention to Keri. "I have been looking for you."

"Well, we've been here all evening," Keri said cheerfully, wagging her tail. She was eying the

tall human male with barely concealed lust. “And, ah, why were you looking for us, might I ask, Colonel?”

Arpad, strangely enough, suddenly looked uncomfortable, which immediately set off alarm bells in M'raava's head. She'd already been a little confused when Arpad showed up, especially with two security personnel accompanying him, but now she was a little scared. Although she didn't quite know why, but Keri seemed not to notice. “I am afraid I have some bad news.” He looked as though he was going to say something else, but he stopped and looked away. “Corporal, if you would.”

The soldier on the left, a corporal, moved towards Keri, and in a flash he'd swiftly removed the pistol from her holster. The stunned S'hestir had no time to react before the other security soldier, a private, grabbed her arm, turning her in place and bringing her hands behind her back. He slapped a pair of handcuffs on her wrists as the first soldier safed Keri's weapon.

“First Lieutenant Neekeri F'earri,” the corporal said, his voice neutral. “You're under arrest, on suspicion of espionage, sabotage, murder, and attempted murder. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say may be used against you. You will be provided with a military advocate, or you may choose to hire your own counsel. Do you understand these rights as I've described them?”

Keri's eyes were as wide as the moon, and she looked suddenly terrified. She looked at Arpad, and the hurt and betrayal was evident in the way she was staring at him. “I don't...what? What's going on?”

“Yes or no, Lieutenant.”

“I...yes, I know my rights, but I don't understand what's going on!” Keri twisted her head to look at the security soldier behind her, then she looked at M'raava helplessly.

“What's the meaning of this, Arpad?” M'raava asked tersely. The initial shock had worn off, to be replaced by anger and disbelief. “What is she being charged with?”

Arpad finally turned to meet Keri's gaze. His light blue eyes were unblinking, and he'd regained his composure. “Lieutenant, you are being charged with espionage, sabotage of military property resulting in injury...” He glanced at M'raava, then back at Keri. “And the murder of Second Lieutenant J'varra Mareshta, as well as the attempted murders of Lieutenant Colonel M'raava Shigeshti and Captain Jonathan Nerys.”

“What!?” Keri cried out. Her knees gave out underneath her, and the private who had handcuffed her had to keep her from sinking to the floor. “I didn't...I never...Arpad, I would never do anything like that!”

“I suggest you stay silent,” Arpad said. “You will have plenty of opportunity to speak in your defense at court martial.” He glanced at the floor, adding in a quieter voice, “I am sorry.” Then he

cleared his throat, gesturing to his two soldiers. "Corporal, Private, take her to the brig. I need to inform General Liam that the arrest has been made. M'raava, I will see you later."

All M'raava could do was watch as the four of them left, with Keri having to be half-dragged from the range. The younger officer was so distraught that she could barely walk on her own. M'raava herself was frozen to the spot for the longest time, her head spinning from what had just happened.

Keri, a murderer? she thought to herself. *I can't believe it...*