

Starfire
Chapter Six: Thickening Plots
by Havoc

“The truth is rarely pure and never simple.”

- Oscar Wilde

M'raava was growing increasingly livid with every step that she was taking through the corridors of Eris base. When she'd left the firing range, she hadn't even bothered to take a moment to clean the accumulated grime and gunpowder residue off of her hands. Her heart was pounding rapidly and her head just wouldn't stop spinning, but beyond that she felt incredibly betrayed and frustrated. Arpad hadn't even bothered to stop and talk to her about what was going on, he and his soldiers had just hauled Keri off with hardly a backwards glance. She knew her fiancé took his work very seriously, but could he really not have just taken a few minutes to explain things to her?

The furious S'hestir stormed towards the center of the base, pushing past startled people in the hallways. She bumped into more than a few of them, but she didn't offer even the minimum amount of apology. She was focused on where she was headed, and that was to the office of General Liam, the base commander. When she reached his office, she burst through the door, startling the naval lieutenant who served as his secretary in a small waiting room.

“C-Colonel!” the lieutenant called to her as she went past his desk. M'raava ignored him, and he stood up from his chair as she reached for the handle to open the general's interior office door.

“Lieutenant Colonel Shigeshti, you can't go in there! The general is in a meeting.”

“I don't give a damn, I want some answers!” M'raava snarled, looking back over her shoulder with such a venomous stare that it made the lieutenant sit down again. She turned the handle and swung the door open, almost making it slam into the wall it hinged on. “General, can you tell me what the hell is going on!?”

Inside his office, General Liam was sitting at his own desk, and upon M'raava's abrupt entrance he jerked his head up. She could see that he hadn't been expecting her at all. His eyes were wide and he looked very startled to see her. M'raava glanced around the room, seeing that a man was sitting before the base commander. He, also, seemed surprised at her appearance. She didn't pay him much attention, instead walking into the office and standing in front of the general's desk, placing her hands flat on the surface and leaning towards him.

“Colonel...,” General Liam said, finally composing himself and giving her a stern look. “This is highly improper. You couldn't at least knock? I'm sure the lieutenant told you I was in a meeting.”

“I don't care about that,” M'raava said. “I want some answers! Base security just hauled off my

chief mechanic and told me she's being charged with murdering one of my pilots! I want to know what this is all about!" Her fur was raised, and she was baring her teeth. In the back of her head she knew that she was knee deep in gross insubordination, but she was too angry to have much concern for that. "I know that sort of thing can't happen on this base without your approval. I want to know why I wasn't informed about this!"

Blinking once, General Liam then cleared his throat and gestured behind M'raava. "Colonel, perhaps you've met my guest. General?"

Turning to look again at the other man in the room, M'raava felt a jolt of surprise. She couldn't understand how she had not recognized him before, but she knew him very well indeed. The man was dressed in a well-tailored black three-piece suit, upon the lapel of which was pinned a miniaturized version of the rank insignia for a brigadier general. Though he had retired years ago, the man still had great pride for his former profession. The last time M'raava had seen him had been some time ago, on another of her too-infrequent visits to Earth. He was Arpad's father, Brigadier General (ret.) Buda Apaffy.

"Yes, I...Yes!" M'raava managed to choke out, hastily snapping to attention and giving the retired officer a courtesy salute. "It's a pleasure to see you again, sir."

"Likewise," Buda said, somewhat gruffly. He remained seated, but he gave a nod in return to M'raava's salute. "You're looking well. I am a little surprised at your lack of...decorum. That's your base commander you're speaking to." He nodded again, this time at General Liam.

"W-Well, I...," M'raava stammered, looking between her soon-to-be father-in-law and her base commander. "I'm trying to understand the situation. Nobody told me any of this was going to happen."

General Liam, leaning back in his chair, folded his hands on the top of his desk. "I'm sorry for that, Colonel, but we just didn't have the time to inform you. The information which led to the arrest was only developed this morning." He pointed to the chair next to Buda. "If you'd like to sit down, I can explain things."

Wordlessly, M'raava backed away from the general's desk, taking a seat in the chair next to the retired general. Her head was full of even more questions now, and the presence of her fiancé's father suddenly worried her. She couldn't think of a good reason for him to be there, since he had been enjoying retired life back on Earth for some time now. A much-decorated general, Buda Apaffy had served the majority of his career back in the days of the war, and had retired quite honorably. He still maintained some ties to the military, obviously, and was frequently a guest at numerous official functions. But he kept an arm's length away from active military operations, though occasionally he came in as an observer or adviser. Presumably he was here in that sort of capacity, since he would

hardly have made the long journey from Earth to Eris just to see his son and daughter-in-law.

“We've been rigorously investigating the events which led to the death of the young pilot under your command, Lieutenant Mareshta,” General Liam began. “At the same time, we've also continued the inquiry into your own incident, Colonel. Our investigators have uncovered some startling facts. As you know, we were able to recover the flight data recorders from Lieutenant Mareshta's craft, though they were damaged. And of course we had uninhibited access to the data from your mech from the start.” He leaned forward in his chair. “As you're aware, we also conducted extensive interviews with all relevant personnel, including you and your pilots and maintenance staff.”

“Yes, sir,” M'raava said, recalling the rather involved questioning that she had been subjected to.

“With all of the information we collected, it became clear that we were dealing with something a little more involved than simple malfunctions. Equipment failure might have explained one incident, but two such accidents in quick succession seemed a little too much of a coincidence. I felt that we needed an outside eye to give us some perspective, so I took the liberty of sending the information we gathered back to Earth to be reviewed.” The base commander inclined his head towards Buda. “I happen to be rather well-acquainted with General Apaffy, and he has some experience with investigative matters, and he rather graciously agreed to have a look at what we collected. It's partly due to his conclusions that we arrived at where we are today, and I invited him to Eris to assist with the investigation.”

“I...see,” the S'hestir said slowly, although at this point she still didn't fully understand. “May I ask what the conclusions were?”

At this point, General Apaffy took over. “I looked over all of the reports that General Liam sent to me, with the assistance of some more technically-minded people,” he said. “The analysis of the wreckage of this Lieutenant Mareshta's craft turned up some interesting anomalies. One thing noted was some unusual custom work which appeared to have been made in the mech's guidance and maneuvering systems. The wiring in the craft seemed to have been altered to make it different from similar models.”

“Well that's nothing unusual,” M'raava quickly said. “These were experimental models. They wouldn't be exactly the same as other mechs. They're operating off an older technology set.”

“True, but even so there was something not quite right about what we were seeing,” Buda said. “The anomalies were enough for us to look deeper, into the programming of the onboard systems. That was where we found something rather chilling.” He turned his chair to face M'raava. “Someone altered the code that governed the way that the mech behaves under high-stress conditions. The alterations were made in such a way that they wouldn't show up in the flight data recordings. The techs had to take

the code apart line-by-line to uncover the changes.”

M'raava was still confused. “So it was sabotage after all? But I don't see what that would have to do with K-...with Lieutenant F'earri. She's not a programmer, she's an artillery officer and a mechanic. She doesn't have the experience necessary to make programming changes of that level of detail.”

“No, you're right about that,” Buda agreed. “But she wouldn't have to be. Someone else could have made the alterations and given them to someone with access to the mech fleet. It would be a relatively simple matter to upload the altered code under the guise of making routine updates to the onboard computers. All you'd have to do would be to plug in the new programming and it would automatically rewrite the existing code.” The retired officer shrugged. “You know as well as I do how maintenance-intensive military equipment is. Software is continuously updated and changed. One or two out-of-place maintenance routines would barely cause anyone to ask a question, especially with new models.”

“But this is ridiculous!” M'raava protested. She was starting to get angry again. The way that she saw it, this was all conjecture and innuendo. To suggest that Keri could be responsible for the sabotage simply because she was a mechanic was beyond outrageous. “There are twenty people responsible for maintaining the mechs under my command. Any one of them could potentially have been responsible! That's not to mention the hundred or so other people who have access to the hangar and know how these fighters work. You could just as easily say that they could have done it.”

General Liam spoke up again. “But you have to look at it from the perspective of who had the most opportunity,” he said. “None of the people who have access to the mechs worked on every single one of them during the time they've been stationed here on Eris. Except for one. You said it yourself when you were being interviewed, Colonel. You told us that Lieutenant F'earri personally checks out every mech every day. Access records from the hangar's maintenance system confirm that. The lieutenant was the only person in common when we checked the maintenance logs for your mech and for Lieutenant Mareshta's.”

M'raava felt her blood go cold, and her ears lowered in dismay. “That...That can't be right,” she said weakly. “There must be some mistake.”

“No mistake, M'raava,” Buda said. “Base security checked and rechecked the records. There were no errors, and no evidence that the access records had been altered. Lieutenant F'earri was the only one who accessed all of the mechs. Every mech has its own separate assigned team of mechanics, but Lieutenant F'earri also sees to each of them herself. She's the only one who could have inserted the altered programming. The techs who examined the wreckage of Lieutenant Mareshta's craft confirmed

that the alterations to his mech coincided with when Lieutenant F'earri's access codes were used.”

“But...But...,” M'raava continued to protest, her voice much meeker and troubled than before. She just couldn't believe it. “But Keri...”

“You should know that we found the same coding in all of your pilots' mechs as well,” General Liam informed her. “The altered programming was likely responsible for the incident you were involved in. In all reality, it's a miracle that you all didn't have the same malfunction as Lieutenant Mareshta out on the flight range. Otherwise, I'd be writing letters to six families instead of one.”

M'raava had to take a few seconds to process that. She well recalled the feeling of helplessness that she'd experienced while her mech was malfunctioning, and to think that it was because of sabotage instead of a simple equipment failure... “But why? What reason would she have for committing this act of sabotage?”

General Liam cleared his throat. “On that, I'm afraid, I can't speak too much. Not right now. It will all come out during the trial.” He glanced at Buda, and then looked back to M'raava. “But what I can tell you is that we've discovered some inconsistencies in Lieutenant F'earri's records. Inconsistencies which lead us to believe that she might be much more involved in current events than we might have suspected. You know that we're all but certain that the Sasori Syndicate pirate group is behind recent attacks in the area, including the destruction of our outpost on Sedna. We've uncovered things which suggest Lieutenant F'earri has ties to this group. Though we have no solid evidence yet, we also believe that Lieutenant F'earri may have passed on information which aided the Syndicate in the attack on Sedna.”

“That can't be...,” M'raava said, although her certainty was decreasing with each new fact that she was learning. “She wouldn't...I can't believe that. No S'hestir would do anything of the sort. We are deeply loyal to our adopted homeworld, General. It's inconceivable that any one of us would be involved in treason of this sort.”

“Inconceivable it may be, M'raava,” Buda acknowledged, “but all the evidence points that way. I don't want to believe it, either, but the history of the S'hestir is a strike against her. During the war, your people made a name for themselves as saboteurs and spies. Lieutenant F'earri may just be carrying on that profession.”

M'raava growled in a sudden flash of fury. “That's uncalled for! There's no place for prejudice in an investigation! We fought to protect humanity just as much as we fought to free ourselves. Don't blacken that legacy in the name of finding someone responsible for these crimes.”

“And don't let your loyalty to your own people cloud your judgement,” Buda retorted. “We're all grateful to the S'hestir race for what they did, but that doesn't give someone who swore an oath the

right to freelance. If Lieutenant F'earri is innocent, let her prove that at court martial. Otherwise, she should and will be punished for these crimes.”

“Please,” General Liam interjected before M'raava could respond. “Let's not bicker about it. The last thing we need is to turn on each other during this investigation. We'll continue gathering evidence and building up the case.” He looked at M'raava. “Rest assured, Lieutenant Colonel, that if our investigation turns up anything that will exonerate Lieutenant F'earri, we of course will dismiss the charges. Until then, unfortunately, all signs are pointing to her guilt.” He stood up from his chair. “For now, you're dismissed, Colonel. Don't concern yourself with this investigation. Leave that to base security and to General Apaffy and his team. Just attend to your duties. I'm sure you'll have the opportunity to testify at the trial.”

M'raava desperately wanted to continue the discussion, but the general's words had a definite note of finality to them. She knew that if she persisted right now, all that she would accomplish would be to make her own situation worse, and then she'd be no help at all. Without another word, she rose from her seat and saluted, and she walked out of the general's office.

When she came out into the corridor outside of the general's office, M'raava closed the door behind her. She was even more confused than she had been before, and she had to lean back against the wall to keep from being overcome by the shock she'd just had. Though she scarcely wanted to admit it to herself, everything that she'd heard from General Liam and Buda had seemed to be fairly firmly against Keri. The revelation about the supposed ties between her and the pirate group had been particularly troubling, even though General Liam had not expounded upon it. If Keri was tied to the pirates, that was not good at all, and it might have meant that M'raava made a grave misjudgment in her character.

But it doesn't make any damn sense, M'raava thought. She never did anything to arouse any suspicion at all. She was friendly. I just can't...I don't believe it at all. She looked up, staring at the wall opposite her, and her mind was made up in that instant. *No, I don't believe it, not one word of it! Keri wouldn't do anything like that. She's not a murderer, and she's not a traitor. I'm not going to let her take the fall for any of this. Not after we-*

“M'raava.”

Jolted out of her internal debate, M'raava shook her head a little, and then she looked to her left, where the voice had been coming from. Arpad was standing there, a few meters away from her, his hands clasped behind his back as he watched her steadily. His face was as impassive as always, but M'raava could see the slight indications in his expression that he was worrying. But that little note of

concern couldn't keep her from being as angry at him as she ever had been.

"I thought that I would find you here," Arpad said. "You were speaking with General Liam?"

"You!" M'raava snarled. She whipped around to face him, walking towards him rapidly. When she was in front of him, she reached out and jabbed him accusingly in the chest with one finger. "You knew all of this, and you didn't say a damned thing to me! How could you do that!?"

Arpad took her abuse with little reaction. "I did not know any of it myself until earlier this evening," he said. "I did not even know my father was involved until he arrived on base this morning."

"But you knew the direction the investigation was going," M'raava insisted. "You at least knew before you came to the range and arrested Keri. You couldn't have said something to me earlier? You couldn't have given me some warning?" She lowered her voice to a hiss, gritting her teeth as her tail lashed about angrily. "For god's sake, we had Keri in our bed with us, Arpad. I know you don't feel much, but you don't feel any remorse about *that*?"

M'raava had the slight satisfaction of seeing a hint of hurt in his eyes when she said that. "That is not fair, M'raava," Arpad said. "For one thing, I could not talk to you about it because it is an investigation. Just because you are my fiancée does not mean I may treat you any different in that regard. I did not want to arrest Keri, but I was given orders that I could not ignore." He put a hand on M'raava's shoulder. "You have spoken with General Liam, so I will assume you have heard most of the evidence against her. You have to admit that it is all fairly convincing."

"I know it sounds bad," M'raava said, "but I can't believe Keri would do anything like what she's being accused of. There has to be some other explanation for it. You can't possibly believe it, either, Arpad."

Arpad was quiet for a few moments, but then he gave a small sigh. "No. No, I do not. Keri did not do this. I think that the conclusions of my father and the general are wrong. But I do not have any other explanation for what has happened. The fact that the mechs were sabotaged is very clear, and Keri seems to be the only one who had the opportunity to do it." He leaned to one side, placing his shoulder against the corridor wall. "But the general told you about Keri's past, did he not?"

Pushing past the delight that her fiancé was in agreement with her, M'raava shook her head. "He told me there were some inconsistencies, but he didn't say what they were. He said he couldn't tell me." She leaned forward, close to Arpad. "But you know, don't you?"

Looking from side to side, Arpad checked to make sure that there was nobody within earshot. "I know some of it," he admitted. He pulled M'raava aside, guiding her down to the hall to an office which was vacant. Going inside, he closed the door. "You did not hear any of this from me. If the general or my father find out that I told you, I could get in some very serious trouble, do you

understand?”

M'raava drew her fingers across her lips. “Not a word from me. If anyone hears me talking about it, I'll say I bribed a security officer, or hacked a computer, or something.”

“Alright.” Arpad sat down on the top of the bare desk in the room. “There is really not much about it that I know. All I know is that Keri falsified her application to the Academy.” He looked up at the ceiling. “Most of the information in it was completely false except for her name.”

Stunned, M'raava could do little else except blink at that. “Are you serious?”

“Very.”

“But why would she falsify any of that? It's not like any S'hestir has ever been rejected from the Academy. There are so few of us that join the military that they're eager to let us in.” M'raava felt even more confused and betrayed. “When I went to sign up, the recruiter practically fell over himself getting the paperwork for me.”

Arpad gave a hint of a smile. “I know the way you used to dress when you were a civilian,” he pointed out to her. “Any man would have fallen over himself for you for any reason. I know that I still do.”

“Oh, well, thank you,” M'raava said, laughing a bit. She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. “I'll forgive you, then. But I need to go do something, so you'll have to wait for a fuller measure of my forgiveness.” She turned away from him, her tail wagging cheekily.

“And where are you going?”

M'raava paused, her hand on the door handle. “I'm going down to the brig. I need to have a few words with a certain S'hestir. It's clear to me that the investigation is already focused on Keri. I need to see what I can do to point it in the right direction.”

When Keri was brought into the interrogation room, M'raava felt a little pang at the state she was in. The S'hestir lieutenant had been stripped of her uniform, which had been replaced by a baggy orange jumpsuit which was worn by all prisoners of the brig. Her legs were shackled, and they clinked as she walked forward into the room, and her hands were cuffed in front of her. Keri had only been in custody for half a day by now, but her eyes were very bleary and red. She had evidently done quite a bit of crying since she had been arrested. Thankfully, it didn't look like she had been handled roughly by base security, although M'raava wouldn't have expected that anyway.

The guard who had brought Keri in kept his hand on her arm until she was seated in a chair in front of a small table. Then he withdrew from the room, closing the door behind him and locking it from the outside. Keri reached up with her shackled hands, brushing a lock of her sable hair out of her

eyes. She was looking down at the tabletop, and seemed not to want to meet M'raava's gaze.

"I...I really wish you weren't seeing me like this...", Keri said, sounding numb. She tried to smile, but didn't get much further into it than a grimace. Her pointed feline ears were drooping lower than M'raava had ever seen. "This getup isn't very flattering. Too...Too loose. Color clashes with my fur."

M'raava sat down in the chair across from Keri, crossing her legs under the table. "It's...not that bad," she said, failing miserably at trying to say something comforting. "I mean...I don't know what I mean." She looked down at the table, then she forced her eyes back up. "How have you been holding up?"

Keri shrugged. "Alright, I guess." She looked off to one side. "I've never been in jail before, though. It sucks. There's nobody to talk to, and I don't think any of the guards like me very much." She hung her head, and her shoulders gave a little shake. "I was...I was kinda looking forward to having dinner with you tomorrow. I guess that'll have to wait a while."

"Yeah." M'raava reached across the table and touched her hand. "I came down to talk about it. You need to know that Arpad and I don't believe that you were involved in any of what you were arrested for."

The younger S'hestir slumped down in her chair, and M'raava could see a huge expression of relief wash over her face. "That makes me feel so much better," Keri gasped, her eyes going shiny as they began to fill with tears. "You wouldn't believe the way that the base guards have been talking. It's like they think I'm already guilty. It makes me think that the court martial is just going to be a formality."

M'raava knew that it wasn't like Keri to be scared like this, and she tried to put as much reassurance in her voice as she could. "I'm not going to let that happen. I'm not just your friend, I'm your commander, and I'm going to do what I can to clear all of this up." She leaned back again, crossing her arms over her chest. "But before I can do that, I need you to clear a few things up for me."

Keri straightened up in her chair. She looked suddenly guarded and uncomfortable. "What do you mean?"

"I need to know why your application to the Academy was falsified." M'raava held up a hand to hold off the denial that she knew Keri was about to give. "I already know that it was. Don't ask me where I got that information. But the investigators know about it, and I can guarantee it's going to come out when the court martial happens. If I'm going to help you, I don't want to have to worry about any surprises, fair enough?"

The gray-furred female across from her closed her eyes, and M'raava saw a few tears leak out

and soak the fur on her cheeks. Keri was very quiet for a few minutes, but then finally she gave a sigh and slowly nodded her head. "Okay. You're right. The best chance I have is to be honest."

"You told me when we met that you grew up on Io, and that your parents died in a tunnel collapse when you were young," M'raava said. "Is that true?"

Keri shook her head, looking extremely guilty. "No...It's not." She looked down at her lap. "I didn't grow up on a colony, I grew up on Earth. My parents aren't dead. Pretty much everything I told you about my life before the Academy was a lie." She looked back up at M'raava. "I'm sorry..."

M'raava waved her apology aside. "Don't worry about that for now. We can talk about that later, when this is all over." She had to push past the dismay she was feeling at Keri's admission. The older officer had put a lot of trust in Keri, and a lot of it was being drained away right now. But she had to think of what was most important right now, and that was getting as much information as she could to try to help her. "So tell me what the truth is."

"Okay..." Keri took a deep breath. "The first thing you need to know is that I'm not twenty-three, like my file says. I'm twenty-one. Like I said, I grew up on Earth. My mom is a dance instructor, and my dad owns a little chain of S'hestir specialty restaurants. We lived in Canada, near Toronto." She brushed her hair back again. "I was...I was pretty happy there, I guess, but when I was growing up all of my friends wanted to do the stuff that our people usually do. You know, exotic dancing, acting, business...that sort of thing. I didn't want that. Ever since I was a little girl, I wanted to join the Army. I thought our species' legacy should be more than as eye candy or selling stuff."

"There's nothing wrong with any of those jobs," M'raava said, a little more defensively than she meant to. "I was going to be a singer before I joined the Navy."

"I didn't say there was anything wrong with it," Keri said hastily. "It just wasn't for me. Anyway, when I told my parents what I wanted to do, they absolutely forbid it. They especially didn't like it when I said I wanted to drop out of high school to enlist. I was sixteen, and that was the minimum age for entering the Academy, but they refused to give their permission."

M'raava felt like she probably had the answer to her next question, but she asked it anyway. "So what did you do?"

"I..." The younger female looked away, her face showing an extremely ashamed expression. "I ran away from home. I took some of my parents' money, and I left Earth. I found people who could get me fake papers, records that changed my age and gave me a new past. The only thing I kept was my name." Keri almost smiled, but again, she couldn't bring herself to do it. "F'earri is a common surname, after all."

"Was it the Sasori Syndicate that sold you the false documents?" M'raava asked her. When Keri

gave her a wide-eyed expression, she explained. "General Liam told me that you had ties to the pirate group. Is that what it is?"

Reluctantly, Keri nodded. "I didn't know it at the time, but the people I bought my identity from were intermediaries for them. It didn't seem to matter at the time. I had what I needed, and I got accepted to the Academy that year." She leaned towards M'raava, earnest. "It was the only time I ever dealt with them. I'm being really honest now. That was all!"

M'raava got up from her chair, and she began pacing back and forth across the floor. Truth be told, she had expected something of this nature when she had found out that Keri's records had been fabricated. Maybe not something quite as dramatic as what she had just described, but she knew that the young officer would have been hiding some kind of checkered past. To M'raava, being forbidden from choosing the profession that you wanted seemed like an extreme reason for running away from home and disavowing your family, but perhaps she could understand it. After all, M'raava's own mother was deeply opposed to the career that she had chosen for herself. Luckily for M'raava, she had been old enough to make her own decisions when she'd decided to join the military, but Keri had been sixteen. If she'd wanted to enter the Academy at that age, she would have needed parental consent, and from the story she'd told she definitely wasn't going to get it.

"Alright," M'raava finally said. She returned to her chair and sat down again, folding her hands on top of the table. "Thank you for telling me the truth. It's...not as bad as I could have imagined." She bit her lip. "They have some pretty strong evidence against you right now, though. You should also know who the lead investigator on your case is. It's a retired general named Buda Apaffy." M'raava nodded when she saw the flash of recognition from Keri. "It's Arpad's father. I know him pretty well. He's one of the old crowd, and he finds the crimes that have occurred very offensive. I know he'll see them as an insult to the military itself. His investigation has led him in one direction, and he's going to focus on you."

"Oh god...," Keri said. She started to breath rapidly, like she was panicking, and her gray fur was standing on end. After a few seconds, however, she managed to get herself back under control. "What do they think I did?"

"They found evidence that someone inserted altered programming into the squadron's mechs," M'raava explained. "What I was told was that the programming changed the way the mechs operated under high-stress maneuvers, like what I was doing when I flew it for the first time and the drill I took the squadron through. They caused the malfunctions."

"But why me? What makes them think I did it?"

"What General Liam told me was that they were able to trace back and find the times that the

alterations were made. He said they matched up with your access codes being used on the hangar.” M'raava stared at her. “Can you explain that?”

With a blank look, Keri shook her head. “I...I have no idea how that could be. I'm in there all the time checking on the mechs, doing routine maintenance. But I never did anything to mess with the internal programming, that was up to the people on my teams who were trained for that.” She raised her hands to her mouth, nibbling on one of her nails. “Someone must have forged my security clearance. It would be difficult, but not impossible. They're just coded cards. They're heavily encrypted, but someone could have somehow gotten ahold of my codes and made a copy.”

“Is there anyone who might want to frame you for something like this?”

Keri thought hard for several minutes, but then she shook her head, her ears flattening in despair. “I can't think of anyone who'd want to do this to me. I haven't done anything to piss anyone off.”

M'raava tried not to look too disappointed. She'd figured it wouldn't be that easy. “We'll figure it out,” she assured Keri. She reached across the table again and grabbed her hand. “Try to hold up. And keep thinking. I'll be back again. In the meantime, you're going to need an advocate.” She managed to smile. “Fortunately, I know a good lawyer. Don't worry, we'll get you out of this.”

“Thanks, M'raava...” Keri put a brave face on, even managing to finally smile herself. “I just...I thought I was going to have to deal with this all on my own. I wasn't looking forward to having an appointed advocate.” Her face sobered up a little. “And...And I'll find a way to make sure you can trust me again, Lieutenant Colonel. I promise.”

Smiling wider, M'raava leaned forward across the table. “Well, you helped save my life once before. That gives you a damn fine head start.” She gave the younger woman a little peck on the cheek, not really caring that the room was probably being monitored. “Keep your chin up. Don't give the guards any trouble. I'll be back when I have some news, okay?”

“Okay.” Keri looked like she needed a lot more than a small kiss at that moment, but even she realized that anything more was definitely not a good idea. “And tell Arpad that...that I don't blame him, okay? He was just doing his job.”

“I'll tell him.” M'raava got up from her chair and walked behind Keri to the door. She knocked on it, and the guard came back inside. He got Keri up from her chair. She looked over her shoulder as the guard walked her out, keeping her eyes on M'raava. Her shorter gray tail gave an encouraging wave as she disappeared around the door frame.

With that, M'raava left the interrogation room and exited the brig. She set off for her and Arpad's quarters at a quick pace, a single purpose in her mind.

I need to get a message to Greta as soon as possible...