

Galactic Liberty 2

A Teaser

By

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Chapter 1

Thessalonika

The edge of the galaxy was the frontier of known space. Beyond lay an infinite velvet of blackness, dotted with galaxies so distant they had emitted the faint light that a galactic resident could see long before human beings ever existed.

Near the edge of the galaxy, at the end of the Farnor Route, the star Thess Sol moved along its long orbit around the center of the galaxy. Twelve planets and thousands of smaller dwarf planets, asteroids, meteoroids, and comets joined it in its journey through space. The first three planets, Thess I – III, were barren, scorched rocks too close to Thess Sol to sustain any sort of life. Thess IV – VI were terrestrial worlds capable of supporting life. The seventh planet, Thess VII, had been terrestrial millions of years ago, but its low gravity had allowed much of its atmosphere and water vapor to escape. Thess VIII – XII were gas giants. Thess IX was smaller than Thess VIII, Thess X smaller than Thess IX, and so on.

At two hundred thousand kilometers in radius, Thess VIII was voluminous even for a gas giant. Although not a star, it produced enough heat to warm its moons. Its largest and most distant moon, Thess VIII-22, was a terrestrial world with a moon of its own. Called Thessalonika by its natives, Thess VIII-22 was almost the same volume and mass as Earth, and it was the home to the solar system's native sentient society. Thessalonika was a relative newcomer to the Galactic Democracy, as the inhabitants had achieved superlight flight only 150 years ago, but they were scientifically progressive. Over five hundred years ago, they had

colonized Thess IV, V, and VI.

With their desire to learn more about the universe, the Thessalonikans had agreed to let the Democracy's Science Cooperative build Space Station *Isaac* in distant orbit of Thessalonika. *Isaac* was the largest artificial satellite orbiting the moon, and it was one of the Democracy's largest scientific facilities. With its array of thousands of telescopes and advanced sensor equipment, *Isaac* had become a Mecca for scientists in all branches of astronomy, not to mention other sciences. Being relatively close to the massive Thess System Shipyards that orbited Thess Sol between Thess VIII and IX, it was also a good place to work on experimental superlight engines, as Dr. Alex Spencer had determined in his research.

Last year, Alex had quickly become a rising star in physics when he delivered his doctoral thesis, which described a means to increase superlight speed so that nearby galaxies could be reached. It seemed that the minute he had allowed the Exterr University Science Journal to publish his thesis, he began receiving a deluge of unsolicited offers to begin working on the experimental engine enhancements. Fortunately, his academic advisor, Dr. Genna Destina, had generously helped him to whittle down the offers to a manageable amount. In the end, the Science Cooperative's offer appealed to him the most.

The Science Cooperative was a nonprofit government agency that funded science projects from which the entire Democracy could benefit. Alex would retain all intellectual ownership of the scientific principles. He was also well protected in case the experiments did not succeed. Failure was unlikely, and even if it did happen, it would not cost the Science Cooperative much. Success, however, would be just as lucrative for the Cooperative as for Alex, as they would have exclusive rights to market the engine to all customers, including the Space Navy.

As he worked on the project, however, Alex came to the rude realization that the scientists working here, not to mention the astronomy community in general, made the Galactic Congresspeople seem like amateurs at politics. Some of the seasoned veterans seemed to resent that someone of his tender years had achieved a discovery that, in their view, belonged to a person with much more experience. Some of the younger ones were jealous. And unlike galactic politicians, these scientists had little in the way of diplomatic skills. Fortunately, Alex had insisted on improving his communication skills while at the university, and that had equipped him to deal with the biggest ego around.

That biggest ego happened to belong to the station's administrator, Dr. Yulius Morgan. At eighty-five years old, he was easily the oldest human on the station, but he looked no older than fifty. His raw intellect was unrivaled, sharper than a laser scalpel. He, too, had once researched a propulsive leap forward in maximum speed, but alas, his experiment had ended in dismal failure twenty-five years ago. To the science community in general, the setback was minor, but it had devastated Dr. Morgan's pride. He saw that Alex's theory was worthy of research, but he had argued against allowing the research to occur at his station. With the expertise at the station, the Science Cooperative had left Dr. Morgan no choice.

At first, Dr. Morgan had gone out of his way to avoid the project. Alex did not understand why until he learned about Morgan's own failure. He made it a point to treat the older scientist with respect whenever they met, and little by little Morgan took up more involvement, if only administratively. Gaining Morgan's support went a long way towards gaining the support of the other scientists here, since they all looked up to and respected Morgan.

As a result, after only six months of work, Alex had designed experimental updates to an existing superlight engine model that the Space Navy frequently used in its light cruisers, and the

station's administration council had unanimously approved the design. Now, it was time for the Thess System Shipyards to send Alex a light cruiser with an engine that he could play with. That would take two weeks. The light cruiser that the Science Cooperative had requisitioned was the *Hummingbird*, a Space Navy ship that was surveying the space between the Thess System and the neighboring Marop System. That left Alex with a two-week break during which he could fret over the experiment—or relax. After all his hard work, he preferred to do the latter.

As he returned to his quarters, he began to wonder what he might do for a vacation. His musings ended as he turned on his personal computer terminal and noticed the new message indicator. When he pulled up his personal messages, he saw to his delight that one was from his fiancée, Amy Grant, a law student at Exterr University. He opened the message, and the terminal's speakers played back her beautiful voice.

“Hey, Alex, it's Amy. Guess what? I just aced my final exam in political law. I was so worried about it, as you know. I have to thank you for your pep talk. That's what really helped me through it. That was my last exam, so I'm through with school for over three months.

“Alex, I've thought this through. I want to come to Thessalonika and support you during my summer vacation. I have to admit that I'm already packed, and my shuttle is ready to go. I hope you'll say yes. Please reply as soon as you can. Talk to you soon. Love, Amy.”

As Amy's message ended, Alex was already typing a text reply to her message. He barely even thought about it before he keyed the word, “Yes.” He told her about his successful design proposal and his two-week break. He couldn't think of anyone he would rather spend it with. Before he knew it, he had told the computer to send his message. Then, he began researching the Thess System's tourist spots.

Chapter 2

Largus Naval Space Station

The Space Navy operated and maintained a massive space station over Largus, the Galactic Democracy's high-security prison world. The world looked pristine from orbit, belying the careful mining activity that the prisoners were undertaking in the planet's subterranean depths. The station's presence was ostensibly to prevent prisoners from escaping.

However, as Captain Ian Beltor watched the naval freighter lifting up from Largus's surface, he reminded himself of the true reason the station was there. The freighter was loaded with Lartanium, the toughest shipbuilding metal in the galaxy. Lartanium was only found on Largus, hence its name. Beltor's station was there to make sure that the Navy retained full control over the precious metal. The Navy would not allow a single scrap to escape in the hands of any space pirates, smugglers, or—lately—Farnorians.

Inwardly, Beltor grimaced. Until a year and a half ago, the interstellar Kingdom of Farnor was an industrious and welcome member of the Galactic Democracy. As such, Farnor's Royal Starfleet, one of the best-run militaries in the galaxy, had been considered a branch of the Space Navy. Thus, they had been allowed to fit their fleet of warships with Lartanium hulls.

When Farnor seceded from the increasingly imperialistic Democracy, so too had gone their privilege of using Lartanium for a small Naval requisition fee. Now, they had to pay through their feline noses for each scrap of surplus Lartanium that the Navy saw fit to relinquish to the public. Those scraps were becoming fewer and farther between, and now ten percent of

Farnor's fleet was beginning to come to pieces. Thus, the station was on high alert for "incursions" from the Farnorians. This was only the latest in a series of economic woes that Farnor was suffering since leaving the Democracy.

Despite all of President Gary Hutch's work to make things better, there remained numerous elements in the government that balked at any notion of helping Farnor. Many congresspeople continued to voice their support for Congressman Kel Corinth, who had lost to President Hutch during the recent election. With the greatest care, Corinth incited bigotry against everything Farnorian. This only intensified the tensions between the Farnorian Kingdom and the tremendous Galactic Democracy.

To make matters even more interesting, many systems in the Outer Arms, the outermost circle of the galaxy, were pledging their support to the Farnorian Kingdom. In particular, Beltor had heard rumors that Selvra, the primary world of the Selvetol System, was drafting a petition to secede from the Democracy. The Democracy's largest commercial starship builder, Selvetol Yards, was based there, so the system's secession would strike a major blow to the Democracy.

Beltor's mind returned to the moment when Lieutenant Jack George's console, tactical, beeped. "The Naval freighter *Occoquan* requests clearance to dock for inspection," the lieutenant said.

"Clearance granted," Beltor said. "Assign the *Occoquan* to Docking Port J12."

"Aye, sir."

"Commander?"

"On my way, sir," Commander Henry Heinrick said. He pointed to the sensor and science officer, Lieutenant Jane Parker. "Lieutenant, with me."

"Aye sir," Parker said. She logged off her station and followed Heinrick to the docking

bay. Her relief came in immediately.

“Lieutenant George, keep a scanner lock on the *Occoquan*,” Beltor said.

“Aye sir,” George said.

Ensign Lairbik Klon, chief of operations, turned to Beltor. The captain was used to the Yunoran’s floppy ears on either side of his otherwise human-looking head, thanks to being stationed at the Yunor Naval Space Station for nearly a year. He was also used to the fact that Yunora placed the family name first and the given name last. “If I may speak my mind, Captain, is it necessary to inspect every single ship that leaves Largus, including Space Navy ships?”

That was a question that Beltor was asking himself more frequently nowadays. However, he had to give Ensign Lairbik the official answer. “We have our orders directly from Fleet Command, Mr. Lairbik. That alone makes it necessary.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Captain,” Lieutenant George said. Beltor turned to him and saw the worry in his face. “All the sensor feeds around Bleakmoon have fallen silent.”

Bleakmoon was the satellite where Henry Vernon, formerly the Galactic Democracy’s president, was exiled. He had nearly succeeded in transforming the Galactic Democracy into a dictatorial empire, completely at his mercy. “Where is Colonel Jarvis’s squadron?”

“Still on patrol past the asteroid belt.”

“Tell her to get to Bleakmoon immediately.”

“Yes, sir.”

* * *

Bleakmoon

Henry Vernon had long ago grown weary of constantly being alone on the barren satellite known as Bleakmoon. With each passing day, he thought more and more about going out of the

habitable zone into the irradiated section of the moon, where he would die quickly. It was worth it, if merely to wipe from his memory the betrayal that had sent him back here.

His son, Kel Corinth, had liberated him from Bleakmoon some time ago, only to return him when Kel's own scheme to take the reins of the galaxy had failed. In so doing, Kel revealed that his mother, Varina, had become a powerful woman, the Chairman of the Raven Society. Vernon had been unaware of this accomplishment, having forgotten Varina soon after he had lost his virginity to her. Vernon only hoped that the Chairman was content to leave him alone here. For some reason, she had it in her mind that he had raped her, and it was that rape that had harmed her and robbed Kel Corinth of the special abilities that he should have inherited from her.

Vernon considered the definite possibility that she planned revenge. It was, after all, one of the defining activities of the Raven Society.

As he looked in the sky, Vernon noticed a shimmering effect. A shuttlecraft unmasked in the sky above, and it did not bear the Space Navy's markings. In fact, it was marked as a shuttlecraft of Farnor's Royal Starfleet. His instincts told him that the markings were not correct. For one thing, Farnor had limited knowledge of masking technology. Nonetheless, Vernon took cover before the vehicle entered scanning range.

The shuttle touched down outside Vernon's hovel. When the door opened, Vernon started as a red-haired woman in a black cloak emerged. The Raven Society insignia, a raven with blood red rubies set in its eye sockets, was affixed to her cloak over her heart. *If she even has a heart anymore*, Vernon told himself.

Vernon's Secret Service had warned him about this woman. She was not even supposed to exist. If the information that they had found was accurate, she was the Chairman's right-hand

witch. Her moniker was La Dame Cauchemar, which meant Lady Nightmare in the French language. He resisted the urge to look into the woman's eyes, redder even than the eyes of her raven pin.

After a moment, he felt something even more terrible than her eyes as he sensed her presence all around him. Her lips curled into a malicious smile. "No need to hide, Mr. Vernon," she said in a slight Frankish accent. "I sense you hiding around the corner like a frightened rodent. I do not plan to kill you. I offer you a chance to quit this pitiful rock."

Slowly, Vernon came out into her sight. Her power was so great that he could feel it tingling all around him. If the rumors were true, she was stronger than her mistress. Vernon found it difficult to look into her eyes. He could not intimidate her as he had been able to intimidate most of his lackeys. "Madame Cauchemar," he said, more quietly and meekly than he intended. "This is an honor."

Her smile turned more hawklike. It made her even more unpleasant to look at. "I'm glad you feel that way, sir. I am . . . honored, also, that you know my name."

"What are the conditions for quitting this pitiful rock, as you so eloquently put it?"

"It's really quite simple, Mr. Vernon. Doubtless you still desire revenge against Dr. Alex Spencer."

"Of course. He played quite a role in my initial apprehension, after all, and he was partly to blame for my return."

"Then you should have no problem satisfying my mistress's conditions, since you will satisfy your revenge at the same time. Dr. Spencer will soon begin work on powering up a superlight engine so that a ship can cross the intergalactic void to another galaxy in days or weeks, rather than years. The Raven Society cannot permit this, Mr. Vernon. But neither can we

interfere directly, lest Dr. Spencer's special powers alert him to our presence."

"I had read that you can dampen your own powers so that he will not detect you," Vernon said.

He regretted having talked back when Cauchemar turned a wilting glare upon him. "You obviously think him some weakling Valor Squire with only an inkling of ability. Mr. Vernon, in the year since he stumbled upon the archives on Planet Earth, he has learned more about the Valor Guardians' powers than even the Raven Society knows. Even now, he has the qualifications to be elected a Valor Judge, if the New Valor Order gains sufficient membership. Colonel Jeremy Fox and his wife, Crystal, have proven annoyingly effective in finding and recruiting those with Valor potential. But I digress."

"So, why does the Raven Society object to Mr. Spencer's experiment succeeding?" Vernon asked.

"It would be a liberating experience for all the spacefaring races of the galaxy," Cauchemar said. "We foresee that Farnorians, Karsians, and humans would benefit the most. We cannot allow any activity that would allow Farnorians or Karsians to better their conditions. It will be many years before we can implement our plans to eradicate them. As for us humans, well, we are more than prosperous enough to survive until then. Then, when the Society has enough control, we can test Dr. Spencer's technique in absolute secrecy."

"I see. You're right, of course. Farnor and Karsus cannot be allowed to garner power or support. And if I may ask, what are your plans to exterminate them?"

Cauchemar's eyes gleamed with menace. "You may not. Those plans are classified, Vernon."

"In that case, I hope they go well. I can't much stand either race. Unlike the obedient

dogs of Yunor, they seem not to understand their place. And to help your noble goals, I agree to help sabotage Alex Spencer's experiments."

"Delightful. Come with me. We must leave before the Space Navy grows suspicious of the sensor blockage in this vicinity."

Vernon followed her aboard her shuttle. As he sat down but before he had a chance to fasten his restraints, Cauchemar blasted off towards the sky. "Hey, be careful!"

"This is no time for caution. Look at the sensor readings for me."

As he fastened his restraints, Vernon examined the readings. "Looks like a wing of space fighters is heading our way. It will take them a minute and one second to get here."

"Excellent. That's just enough time for us to get away." Cauchemar kicked in the powerful sublight engines to speed their climb. This was considered a no-no in an atmosphere because of the deafening noise output, but on this occasion no one was around to object.

As they broke away into outer space, Vernon could see the distant running lights of three space fighters. "They're approaching the planet at high speed."

"They're faster than I expected," Cauchemar said. "Jarvis must be leading them. An excellent pilot, but she hasn't even a trace of Valor potential."

Vernon was about to reply when his console beeped. "It's Jarvis, all right. She is hailing us. Her signal includes her military ID."

"Don't give her the satisfaction. I'm keeping the scan jammer up. That will keep her from identifying us."

"She's targeting a point off our port bow," Vernon said.

"I know that, Vernon. Be quiet and let me concentrate."

Vernon started to ask how she knew, but immediately he realized how. Her powers

allowed her to anticipate her enemy's attack. Jarvis's fighter opened fire. Cauchemar did not even flinch as the laser shot past. Vernon saw that Jarvis and her fighters were now targeting the shuttle itself.

Cauchemar smiled grimly. "They are welcome to try."

The second the fighters opened fire, Cauchemar turned to port, throwing Vernon against his harness. The fighters' laser fire flashed past harmlessly. Cauchemar maxed the throttle, propelling the craft into high speed. "You're losing them," Vernon said in disbelief. "How can this shuttle accelerate so quickly without flying to pieces?"

"It was designed to outmaneuver space fighters. That means a hit in firepower and shielding, but to a true Raven Lord, that means little. We're about to enter superlight." As soon as they had escaped Largus and Bleakmoon's gravity, she took the shuttle into superlight speed.

Her handling of the craft impressed Vernon. Then he remembered who she worked for. "I can tell you from experience that it's much more satisfying to be the one in charge rather than the second in command. Do you ever consider taking your rightful place as head of the Raven Society?"

Cauchemar harrumphed. "You obviously know nothing of the woman you raped. She trusts no one who has life powers, not even me. She trusts her son only because she can read his mind like a children's book. Which aptly describes his mind, I might add."

"Now, now. He betrayed me, his own father, and I couldn't even see it."

"Don't flatter yourself, Henry Vernon. Compared to anyone with life powers, almost anyone without them has a child's mind."

Vernon did not let the insult faze him. "Even without her trust, there must be a way you can overcome her."

“There are ways, believe me. I’m just not foolish enough to tell you. If she ever chanced upon you again, she’d find out my ideas in a heartbeat.”

“So, you admit that you are considering ways to take over.”

“Of course. That is to be expected. But the instant she hears about viable plans, she immediately finds ways to stop them. Even if it means executing her right-hand person. She has been through ten before me. Nine have met unpleasant deaths because of failed takeover plans.”

“I see. And the other?”

“He’s in a mental facility on Yunor, undergoing neural treatments. With classic brilliance, the Chairman booby-trapped the computer in his congressional office, causing it to explode. He was lucky enough to escape back to his family. No one has any idea who’s responsible. As luck would have it, he was Yunor’s congressman prior to Corinth.”

“So, she kills two Farnorians with one pistol. She gets rid of one puppet and replaces him with another.”

“That is the way she is, Vernon. And she has allowed you to live only because she can still use you.”

“If I’d known she would turn out like this, I would have either killed her or supported her.”

“You know, I underestimated you, Henry Vernon. Your mind isn’t quite as childish as I imagined. No wonder you almost succeeded in becoming the emperor.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere, my dear. Are we headed to Spencer’s experiment?”

“Not just yet. Do you realize what sort of a stir a Farnorian shuttle would cause in the Thess System? No, we’re taking a detour to the middle of nowhere. I have an old Yunor Line shuttle waiting for you there. You can take that to Thessalonika while I attend to other matters.”

* * *

Colonel Sandra Jarvis swore under her breath as the fleeing shuttlecraft blasted into superlight speed. She tapped her comm switch. “Colonel Jarvis to Largus Naval Space Station.”

“We read you, Colonel,” Beltor said after a moment. “What’s the situation?”

“The rogue shuttle has taken off into superlight speed. We could not scan it. I doubt that it is Farnorian, Captain.”

“So do I. Our scans confirm that Henry Vernon is no longer on the surface of Bleakmoon. The only conclusion is that the shuttle has liberated him. Colonel, can you lay in a pursuit vector?”

“We will, sir, but they took heading 95 mark 5. That vector goes off into the middle of nowhere. It sort of follows the Yunor Arm counterclockwise towards the Outer Arms.”

“They can’t go too far in that direction without stopping. The transition zone in that area has numerous pulsars that generate interference. Now this is interesting. The scanner relay in that direction is showing faint signs of power, perhaps from an idle shuttlecraft.”

“It sounds like a possibility. Feed us the coordinates, and we’ll give chase.”

“Will do. Good hunting, Colonel.”

Chapter 3

Exterr

As she loaded her baggage into her shuttlecraft, the *Porter*, Amy Grant began to realize just how much her boyfriend had spoiled her. She was traveling light, but already her back was beginning to ache from the exertion. Alex had often done work such as this for her. Unfortunately, the lifestyle of law school students was not conducive to physical training of any kind; she was often stuck doing research in the library. She would have to put in the effort to strengthen herself during her break from school. With any luck, that science station had a good quality gym.

As she came out of the shuttle, she saw another shuttle descending from the hover lanes to her house. She sensed her Alex's sister, Crystal, at the shuttle's controls. It landed gently and perfectly on the wide street in front of the house. Moments after the engines had shut off, the rear door slid open, and Crystal came out. "Hello, Crys," Amy greeted.

"Hello, Amy," Crystal said. They shared a sisterly embrace for a moment.

"You're getting pretty good with shuttle piloting."

"Well, with Jeremy tutoring me, it's no wonder. Still, with Exterr's predefined hover routes, it's pretty easy. I just dread the day he decides to take me out to the solar system's backwater—what's left of it—to learn how to fly in outer space."

Amy grinned. "You could always come with me and fly part of the way." They started walking towards her shuttle.

"I wish I could. The official story is that I'm too busy to take leave from the city's

planning office.”

They boarded the shuttle. With a tap on the door controls, Amy closed the door. “And the unofficial story?”

“The Air Force has been stepping up their orbital flight exercises. Jeremy is taking advantage of that to take surveillance of the Torahama area.”

“You mean where the Raven Society headquarters is supposed to be?”

“You catch on fast. I’ve been helping him study the passive scans from the space fighters that have been exercising over that area. We haven’t found anything significant yet, but my feelings tell me it’s only a matter of time before someone in the Raven Society slips up. Wherever their base is, they have it well camouflaged.”

“I’m sure. The New Valor Order is a bit vulnerable at the moment with so few members. We need to find the Ravens’ hideout as soon as possible.”

“Indeed.”

“My parents have already spoken quietly with Prosecutor Elsa Peters. The minute we find proof of the Raven Society’s existence and their headquarters, she will authorize their immediate detention.”

“The only problem is that anyone in the Raven Society could sense normal police coming and wipe them out with a mere thought. We need to figure out a way to camouflage the cops going in so the Ravens won’t find them.”

Amy frowned in thought. “You know, let me talk that over with Alex. He might have an idea or two on how to do it.”

“Sounds good.”

“How are the Karsian recruits coming along?”

“They’re doing very well. Karsians in general are not nearly as dull-witted as Senator Corinth would have us believe. Beli’kwa and Orna’drik are highly intelligent. It’s just that they never had the chance to display that intelligence in the slums of Karsus City. That can be a mean place, Amy. Survival of the fittest.”

“I know what you’re talking about. How are they adjusting to life on Exterr?”

Crystal smiled. “They slip up every now and then, but they’ve become graceful at overcoming their embarrassment.” Suddenly, a beep sounded from the shuttle’s communications system.

“Let’s get that,” Amy said. They went forward into the cockpit. Amy pressed a button on the communications console. “Odd. This is coming in on a secure channel.” She tapped another button and looked toward the screen. “This is Amy Grant. Come in, please.”

The screen came on to show Captain Ian Beltor in his office. “Greetings from Largus Space Station, Ms. Grant.”

“Captain Beltor. It’s good to hear from you. What can I do for you?”

Beltor’s expression turned grim. “Actually, I called to do something for you, Ms. Grant. And you too, Crystal.”

Amy could feel Crystal’s concern even without looking at her. “Something’s wrong,” Crystal said.

“Very wrong. An unknown party has once again liberated Henry Vernon from Bleakmoon’s surface.”

“An unknown party?” Amy asked.

“Their ship looked Farnorian, but I don’t think it was. Colonel Jarvis had no success in scanning it. She’s in pursuit to see what it’s up to.”

“I see. Which way did they jump from Largus?”

“They took a heading of 95 mark 5. That would take them along the Yunor Arm counterclockwise towards the Outer Arms. We speculate that they must have some other stop in mind, because they can only go a few hundred light-years in that direction before they reach some interference from a cluster of pulsars.”

“Perhaps they have a craft of some kind hidden there,” Crystal said. “That way, Vernon’s rescuer can go off on a different mission from Vernon’s.”

“Good thinking. But what could Vernon do? Half the galaxy will be on the alert for him. As soon as Jarvis communicates with me again, I must tell my superiors about this.”

“Whatever he may do, you can bet it’ll be no good. He could take Exterr Way, or he could follow the Military Route to the Farnor Route. Either of those could take him anywhere he wants to go. Captain, have you told Alex yet? He’s in the Thess System.”

“Negative. The Spacecom Relays from here to the Thess System tend to get knocked out of alignment every now and then. I wouldn’t trust them with a secure communication.”

“Understood. Amy here is about to depart Exterr for the Thess System.”

“Yeah,” Amy said. “Alex has a break coming because the ship that he’s supposed to use for his experiments is surveying the space between the Marop and Thess Systems.”

“Yes, that must be the *Hummingbird*.” Beltor’s expression turned thoughtful. “So a survey mission is their cover story, eh?”

Crystal cocked an eyebrow. “I take it that’s not what they’re doing.”

“Well, in the loosest sense of the word, you could say that they’re surveying. But they’re not charting space simply to fill up storage in their computers. They are under deep cover along a secret route from Thess to Marop to monitor traffic between Selvra and Marop. Rumor has it

that Selvra and Farnor are trying to gain Marop's support."

"Isn't Marop a bit far from Selvra and Farnor?" Amy asked.

"There's no such thing as too far anymore, Ms. Grant. Selvra will need all the help it can get if it does indeed try to secede from the Galactic Democracy. Farnor would help Selvra for sure. Marop can give Selvra and Farnor materials they need to create weaponry."

"I see. It makes sense. But why wouldn't they try to make a closer ally, like Yunor?"

Beltor smiled. "Yunor? It has no motivation to leave the Democracy, nor can it risk helping Farnor and Selvra. All its revenues come from the trade route taxes. If that weren't enough, it has the largest Galactic Armed Forces presence in the whole Inner Arms. If Yunor lifted a finger to help Selvra secede, the Galactic Democracy would blockade the entire system. All trade in the system would come to a standstill, as would all traffic to and from Selvra and Farnor."

"Right. I guess Selvra and Farnor would want an ally that is not under such scrutiny."

"Absolutely. And I'm not sure if you know this, but Marop's main spaceport is home to all manner of smuggler gangs. They would be adept at running shipments to Farnor or Selvra under the radar. I already suspect that there are smuggler byways branching off the Farnor Route. They can circumvent Yunor and go through the Selvra System instead. If Selvra secedes, I can foresee circumstances in the galaxy quickly beginning to spiral out of control.

"Now, ladies, I do hope you will forgive my rambling. I haven't been able to keep from thinking about these things since I heard about Selvra's potential secession."

"That's quite all right," Crystal said. "I've seen their civilian shipyards. Let me tell you, they're nothing to shake a stick at."

"I'm glad you understand. Now, then. Ms. Grant, since you are headed to Thessalonika,

I invite you to stop and refuel at Largus Space Station. Afterwards, it will be easy to follow the Military Route to the Farnor Route, which will take you straight to the Thess System.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Amy said. “I accept your hospitality.”

“It’s the least I can do. Have a safe journey. Beltor out.” The screen went blank.

Amy crossed her arms. “Galactic politics haven’t improved much since Vernon got put away. Of course, I’m not naïve enough to think that he ever had full control over them.”

“Of course not,” Crystal said. “When you cram the equivalent of a small metropolis’s population into a single congress building, of course there’s going to be squabbling. Selvra is more annoyed about the trade route taxes than many other worlds still in the Democracy. After all, they officially have to go through Yunor to get to their major trading partners, and that hits their bottom line pretty hard.”

“But here’s the thing. Seceding wouldn’t relieve their tax burdens. If anything, it would make them worse.”

“Indeed. That’s why Selvra won’t make a spur-of-the-moment decision to leave the Democracy. Well, Amy, when do you get underway?”

“As soon as I’ve finished packing this crate. I’ve already bidden my parents farewell.”

“All right, Amy. I’ll get out of your hair and let you get on your way. It’s a long road to the edge of the galaxy. Safe journey.”

Amy hugged Crystal. “Thank you, Crystal. You and Jeremy keep the new Valor Guardians safe while I’m gone.”

“We will. Don’t worry about them.” When Crystal and Amy separated, Crystal thumbed open the rear door and departed.

Amy soon finished loading supplies onto the *Porter*. In minutes, she took off away from

Exterr for the dark emptiness of space.

Chapter 4

Open Space, 700 Light-Years from Largus

Lady Cauchemar's shuttle returned to normal space in the middle of nowhere. As Vernon scanned the area, he saw that there was nothing larger than an asteroid within five light-years of the shuttle. "What a charming holiday spot," Vernon said.

"If you enjoy it so, you're more than welcome to walk out the airlock into the space sauna," Cauchemar said in an acidic tone. "It will take seconds for your blood to boil and burst out of your body. If you're lucky, your lungs will explode from the lack of air pressure first."

"No, thank you. You implied that this was our last superlight jump."

"Yes. Let me guide you to your shuttle."

As they passed through space, Vernon soon saw some starlight reflecting off a clear-titanium porthole. Before long, the old Yunor Line shuttle took shape. Vernon restrained himself from complaining about having to use such a commonplace craft, because there was a definite advantage. Being so common, it would attract little unwanted attention in populous areas. Besides, it appeared to be in good shape.

"I'm glad not to hear any complaints," Cauchemar said. "It took some doing to forge this craft's registry to be inconspicuous. Not to mention crafting a new identity for you."

Vernon hated having his mind read so casually. But what could he do about it? "What can you tell me of this new identity?" he asked.

"You will be Pete Jackson, a lab assistant at the Yunor Line's Research and Development

office. We have secured permission for you, as Jackson, to research Spencer's method of achieving faster superlight speeds. You will find an appearance modifier on board the shuttle to change your form. You will also find a subspace communicator that you will use to contact me when you're done. Refer to me as Sun Lady."

"All right."

"In addition, you will find a handheld computer with programs to sabotage the experiments. Don't worry; it won't be overly technical for you. The handheld computer will do most of the work for you. All you have to do is tell it to run program C-1."

"Good," he said. "I wouldn't be able to do such technical work on my own."

Cauchemar crept close to the Yunor Line shuttle so that its rear end and her shuttle's were aligned. Then, she turned on a magnetic field, and with a mild bump, the shuttles were sealed together. Cauchemar handed Vernon a computer pad. "Here are the access codes for your new shuttle. And methods to contact me."

"Very well. What about the security chip inside me?"

"Your shuttle has a molecular teleporter. I have programmed it to remove the chip when you walk aboard. Your scanners will be able to verify that the chip is gone."

"It seems you've thought of everything. Farewell, my lady. I'll be in touch."

"For the benefit of your health, Vernon, I hope so."

Vernon couldn't help looking startled for a moment. Then, he made his way to the back door. He opened it and saw the other shuttle's door waiting. Quickly, he entered the entry code from the pad, and the door opened to admit him. After he had stepped into his new old shuttle, the door to Cauchemar's closed. Moments after he had closed his door, he felt the shuttle lurch slightly as Cauchemar unlinked from it.

In the cockpit, it took moments to bring the shuttle's systems up from standby. No sooner had he brought up navigational control than his sensors detected three more craft emerge from superlight speed. His jaw dropped as he saw the Space Navy fighter registries appear on his monitor.

A woman's voice sounded over the communication system: "Civilian spacecraft, this is Colonel Sandra Jarvis from Largus Naval Space Station. Heave to, and prepare to be searched. If you attempt to flee, you will be disabled."

Cauchemar's voice sounded in his head: *Get out of here, Vernon. I will keep the colonel busy.*

What do I look like, a fighter pilot? he thought to himself. Nevertheless, he turned away as Cauchemar turned to face Jarvis. Looking at his directions, he calculated a superlight jump vector towards the Military Route. It took his computer barely a second to complete the calculations, and then he blasted off into superlight speed.

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Jarvis gritted her teeth as the old Yunor Line shuttle got away. Credits to croissants, she bet it had to be Vernon's. The other shuttle was not intent on escape, though, but was moving in with powerful lasers firing. If Jarvis and her companions stood still, a single of those lasers would pierce their shields and blow their fighters—including themselves—to superheated plasma.

But of course they did not stand still. With their lightning reflexes and their fighters' maneuverability, they jinked and juked around each laser blast as they closed in on the shuttle.

Suddenly, Jarvis felt her grip on consciousness beginning to slip. The realization hit her that she had to be dealing with a powerful Raven Lord. She felt tempted to think of the

implications, but she forced herself to remain alert with all her willpower.

Her companions were not so lucky. The fighters that had been in formation behind her turned away suddenly and aligned along vectors back towards Largus.

“Razor Q, Green Man, form up,” she ordered into her communicator. Static filled the communications channel. Their channel was being jammed. “Uh, oh.” Even worse, her companions leapt to superlight speed.

As she was getting close to the shuttle, her proximity alarms suddenly began blaring. She glanced at her sensors to see that a ship was unmasking behind her, almost close enough to scrape her fighter’s paint. She had no time to react before it locked onto her with a tractor beam.

Her blood began to boil as she scanned for the ship’s registry. It was the *Crow’s Nest*, one of the most infamous pirate ships sailing the Seven Spaceways.

Worse yet, the black shuttle that she had been chasing docked with the ship as if it belonged there.

* * *

Captain Hak’dil of the *Crow’s Nest*, a Karsian expatriate, could never avoid flinching whenever he saw Lady Cauchemar emerge from her shuttlecraft. Even a bloodthirsty pirate captain had to think twice before dealing with a high-ranking Raven, and only one ranked higher than this one. Few could intimidate Hak’dil as she could.

And if she refused to pay for his services, he could do little to press her, unless he wanted to see the afterlife soon.

“My Lady,” he greeted with a bow. He did not lower his head a centimeter lower than necessary.

“You may stand, Captain,” she said in a pleased tone. When he had straightened, she

passed a pouch into his hand. “Your payment, as agreed.”

He opened the pouch and saw many high-denomination galact cards within. His monetary mouth watered. “You are too generous, My Lady.”

“I know, but I am in a good mood. I’ll be even happier when you get Colonel Jarvis into the brig.”

“Colonel Jarvis, is it? She’s the scourge of space pirates everywhere. I’ll be delighted.” He turned to his crew. “Up, you scurvy dogs! Get that fighter in here on the double. Turn on the laser-dampening field. Draw projectile weapons.”

In moments, the tractor beams pulled Jarvis’s fighter into the shuttle bay. She wasn’t wasting thruster energy trying to break free. The beams lowered the fighter to the deck. There, some crewmen fitted Lartanium restraints fastening the fighter’s skids firmly to the deck.

Hak’dil heard a slight ring next to him. Lady Cauchemar had drawn a red-tinted sword that seemed to gleam hungrily. “Take aim,” he commanded his crew. Everyone aimed for the cockpit of the fighter. Hak’dil turned on the loudspeaker. “Now hear this, Colonel Jarvis. We have you surrounded. Come out of your fighter and give yourself up.”

The canopy of Jarvis’s fighter opened. The helmeted pilot stood up.

“Slowly, Colonel. Remove your helmet.”

Jarvis took off her helmet, revealing the face of the tough Space Marine. That alone made Hak’dil glad of all his security.

“Now, climb down to the deck. No funny stuff.”

A crewman rolled a ladder next to her craft. Jarvis climbed down carefully to the deck.

“Search her for weapons.”

Two crewmen searched her professionally and came up with no fewer than three laser

weapons, one projectile pistol, and even a knife. “She’s clean now, Captain,” one crewman said.

“Take her to the brig.”

“Don’t you want to know what kind of woman you’re dealing with, Captain?” Jarvis asked.

“I know what sort of lady she is, Colonel.”

“This woman is a Raven Lady.”

“Aye, I know that, lass. Take her away, men.” His crewmen led Jarvis away.

“Be careful with this woman, Captain,” Cauchemar said. “As a Space Marine, she has had the best in combat training.”

“Not to worry. I will keep the guard on high alert.” He held up the pouch of money.

“This will help ensure that they obey.”

“Excellent. I’m headed to my cabin, Captain. Then, I’ll announce our next destination.”

“Yes, My Lady.” He bowed as she departed.

His first mate, a Farnorian named Ontar, came close to him when the large hatchway had slid closed. “Captain, is this wise?” the feline purred into Hak’dil’s ear at a low volume that only Farnorian voices could achieve. “Why must we continue to serve the witch?”

“Bite your tongue, Ontar,” Hak’dil said. “We were paid well for this assignment.”

“But abducting a Space Marine? There will be hell to pay for this, sir.”

Hak’dil frowned. “One more word on the subject, and you’ll also be quartered in the brig.”

From Ontar’s expression, it was clear that the Farnorian was not concerned with the prospect. Still, after a moment, he shrugged. “As you wish.”

“I’m headed to the bridge. See to the colonel’s comfort.”

“Yes, Captain.”

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Even Lady Cauchemar had to admit that the image of the Raven Society’s Chairman, cloaked in dark clothing, still inspired fear in her subjects, even thousands of light-years away. “Ah, Lady Cauchemar,” the Chairman greeted amiably over the communication channel, routed circuitously through the Spacecom Relay System.

“Greetings, my lady,” Cauchemar said with a bow.

“What news of Vernon, my pupil?”

“The ex-President has been freed from exile on Bleakmoon, and he is on his way to the Thess System aboard the *Oxidation Incarnate*.”

The Chairman smiled. “Oh, I do hope his craft gets him there safely. I’d hate to think what would happen if the *Oxidation Incarnate* lived up to its name and fell apart around him.”

Cauchemar grinned wickedly. “Believe me, Captain Hak’dil’s crew has done more than enough to give him a bumpy ride without actually killing him.”

“I’m pleased to hear that.”

“In addition, we were pursued by Colonel Sandra Jarvis and two of her wingmates. Captain Hak’dil captured the colonel, and we now have her in the brig. Thanks to my telepathic pressuring, her wingmates fled to superlight space before Captain Hak’dil’s ship unmasked.”

“Excellent. Unfortunately, Cauchemar, the news from here is not all good. I have intercepted a transmission from Captain Ian Beltor to Amy Grant. It seems that Miss Grant is on her way to Thessalonika to meet with Dr. Alex Spencer, and she now knows that Vernon has been liberated from Bleakmoon. We cannot afford to let her reach her destination. We must destroy her.”

“My Lady, Miss Grant is still just a girl. We could turn her to the side of the Ravens.”

The Chairman turned pensive. “Yes, that’s right. Thank you for giving me the idea, Lady Cauchemar. Whatever we do, we should act soon. She is now about an hour out of Exterr. She’s planning to stop off at the Largus Naval Station. See to it that she does not arrive. That should focus attention on the space between Largus and Exterr, giving Vernon some breathing room.”

Cauchemar nodded. “It will be done, my lady.”

“I’m sending you her flight trajectory now. If you can get to her before she reaches the transition zone between the Core and the Inner Arms, so much the better.”

“I’ll break out the whip for Hak’dil’s crew.”

“Excellent. Good hunting, Lady Cauchemar. May passion and hatred serve you well.”

“And you as well.” As the Chairman’s image disappeared, Cauchemar allowed herself a faint grimace. *And may the New Valor find the traces of your transmission and hunt you down*, she thought to herself. She still blamed the Chairman for allowing someone of Alex Spencer’s great potential to become a Valor Guardian when he should have been the Raven Society’s next leader. Cauchemar planned to rectify the Chairman’s error, hopefully in a way that would allow her to succeed to the villainous woman’s position, if only briefly.

And it seemed that the Chairman had dropped the opportunity right into her lap. Amy Grant did not quite have Spencer’s level of power, but she had something far more useful: his undying love. Cauchemar would use that to her advantage. Of course, before she could do that, she had to capture Grant.

She tapped a communications button. “Lady Cauchemar calling Captain Hak’dil.”

“This is the captain,” Hak’dil’s voice said.

“Captain, set course for Exterr Way. I want us there one hundred light-years inside the Core from the Inner Arms transition zone. And I want us there within six hours.”

“Six hours?” the captain cried.

“I trust that won’t be an issue.”

“But my lady, we have to go through the transition zone to get there. If we go that fast, our modified sensors won’t be any help at all.”

“Would you rather I give someone else fifty million galacts to get me there?”

“I—fifty *million*?”

“That’s what I said, Captain.”

“Um, no, ma’am. Six hours it is. Hak’dil out.”

Cauchemar smiled at the captain’s predictable greed. Besides, he was just making noise about the danger; his specially modified sensors were sufficient to let him navigate through the transition zone with ease, even at high superlight speed. She watched with satisfaction as the stars visible in the porthole flashed and then became star lines. She prepared herself to face off against Amy Grant.

The novel is still a work in progress!