

THOMAS DEPRIMA

A GALAXY UNKNOWN - BOOK 4



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TRADER VYX

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Cover art by Martin J. Cannon

To contact the author, or see additional information about this and his other novels, visit:

<http://www.deprima.com>

An appendix containing technical data pertinent to this series is included at the back of this book.

Many thanks to Ted King for his technical expertise and encouragement, and to Michael A. Norcutt for his suggestions, proofreading, and for acting as my military protocol advisor. And kudos to Martin Cannon for the fantastic cover artwork that features a Tsgardi warrior.

This series of Jenetta Carver novels include:

A Galaxy Unknown

Valor at Vauzlee

The Clones of Mawcett

Trader Vyx

Milor!

Vroman Castle

Against All Odds

Other novels by this author include:

When The Spirit Moves You

When The Spirit Calls

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Chapter One

~ October 4th, 2272 ~

He strained to hear the slightest of noises above his own laborious breathing. They were still out there, somewhere in the darkness. He was sure of that now. Three times during the past hour he thought that he'd lost the ones who hunted him, and three times they'd turned up again at his back. He needed to rest, but the relentless pursuit wouldn't allow it. To stop was to die, and he wasn't ready to surrender up his life just yet!

He sensed, rather than consciously saw the movement, and immediately flung his agile five-foot eleven-inch body sideways into the blackness of the abandoned building! The rotted wood of the doorway frame where he'd attempted to conceal himself just a second before, exploded into hundreds of tiny pieces as three lattice projectiles struck it! Twisting as he flew through the air, Vyx tucked in his head and curled into a tight ball so he could execute a quick roll. A plume of dust and dirt erupted upwards as he landed hard on a sagging wooden floor covered with years of accumulated filth. His roll left him crouched in position to spring again, and a swift look around was all he needed to choose his direction of flight.

As he sprinted towards the rear of the building, and the only other doorway illuminated by the soft rays of diffused moonlight outside, he strained to see the path in front of him. He couldn't afford the time needed to pick his way slowly through the building, so he desperately hoped there were no gaps in the flooring, or accumulations of trash left by former building occupants that would trip him in the darkness.

Emerging at the rear of the deserted building, he flattened himself against the outside wall, gulping the hot, dry air of a peaceful summer night as quietly as possible. He didn't have the luxury of standing in the doorway while he slowly scanned the street. He'd have been clearly outlined in the moonlight for any that had followed him into the building. The wall offered a modicum of protection from visual scanning, but it offered little concealment from a thermal scanner. When nothing moved in response to his sudden appearance, he made a dash for the end of the street. The buildings on the block were all occupied by local citizens, so he couldn't seek shelter here. On the Gollasko Colon, bursting into an occupied house would earn you a quick trip to the Body Disposal Depot. For that matter you might have your ticket punched early by disturbing the wrong party in an abandoned building. Like the nineteenth-century American west at its wildest, people shot first and questioned later. Justice was dispensed from the fastest gun, and everyone here had an irrevocable license to kill.

Making it to the end of the street without seeing anyone, and more importantly without drawing fire, gave him new hope. If he could just make it back to his hotel, he might be safe. Armed guards patrolled the lobby, and sensors linked to automatic weapons safeguarded all other possible entrances to the building after dark. If only he hadn't lost his weapon so early in the fight he might have been able to reduce the odds by now. He knew that there were at least three of them, and that they had to be using some kind of electronic tracking device. If he knew what they had, he might be able to give them the slip, but it could be thermal, infrared, auditory, or olfactory. It might even be a combination of all four. The newest devices, used by the Space Marines, did employ all four sensory systems, and the arms merchant employing these hunters usually had the latest and best for his own people.

Instead of trying to hide, which would be a waste of time, he sprinted down several streets and then ducked into a doorway to catch his breath. Nothing moved behind, but his pursuers had appeared from nowhere before, so he didn't spend any more time there than necessary. No sense giving them a stationary target to lock on to. As soon as he was able to breathe easily, he ran on, his hotel still being

at least eight long blocks away.

It took less than ten minutes to cover the distance to the hotel, but he was again breathing with difficulty when it came into sight. Rather than making an immediate dash for the hotel's front entrance, he stayed in the shadows of a building across the street and observed the movements of pedestrians as he filled and refilled his lungs with air. He was just about to step out when he caught a glimpse of almost imperceptible movement several doorways down from the hotel entrance. Pulling back, he stared intently at the recessed entrance of the closed shop.

It was another fifteen minutes before he saw any additional movement. When you stare into a darkened area for a prolonged period, your eyes and mind begin to play tricks on you, but he was sure that there was someone there; someone who didn't belong there; not at this hour anyway.

Other than the front doors, all entranceways to the hotel were barred after dark, so he didn't have a chance of getting to his room and reaching his backup weapons. If he had a weapon, he'd make a run for the hotel entrance, relying on his skill with a pistol to get him there. Without a weapon he was about as dangerous as one of the painted targets on a weapons practice range.

He backtracked a block without exposing himself to the watcher in the doorway so he could think and plan without danger of being spotted. He hated being weaponless, but the arms merchant that he had met with tonight would have been suspicious if he'd come wearing all of his hardware. They had allowed him to enter with one laser pistol only because there were seven heavily armed bodyguards in the room during the negotiations. He had several blades hidden about his body, but they were of little use in the current situation.

Shev Rivemwilth, an Alyysian trader and arms merchant well known in the illegal arms trade, rarely left the sanctuary of the Gollasko Colony, and never ventured into Galactic Alliance regulated space where his arrest would ensure he never saw free sky overhead again. It was widely rumored that he was a front man, in the loosest sense of the word 'man', for the giant Raider organization that had become the scourge of the galaxy. The ugly creature neither acknowledged nor denied an association with the Raiders.

As members of a race that had migrated in non-FTL ships from many thousands of light-years across the galaxy, Alyysians claimed no home world in Galactic Alliance space, although small colonies existed on several different worlds. Their unique physiology allowed them to be frozen solid and then thawed out and revived when they reached their destination. Typically about four-foot six inches tall when standing upright, they looked a bit like erect versions of Terran toads. They all wore the same dark gray cloaks that covered most of their yellow skin. Being neither male nor female, the Alyysians were true hermaphrodites that could reproduce without contact with another of their species.

The meeting had started well enough. Vyx had set his translation device for Alyysian and they had gotten the pleasantries out of the way quickly. Then Vyx spelled out what he was looking to purchase. After a bit of haggling, and an examination of a merchandise sample, an agreement on price was reached. Shev Rivemwilth specified that payment would be required in two parts, half before, and half upon delivery. Vyx had just agreed, and stood to leave with the promise of returning tomorrow with the first half payment, when a convicted Tsgardi killer named Recozzi, entered from the corridor.

A race more closely resembling tall Terran baboons than humans, Tsgardis often file their normally sharp teeth to even sharper points, to make their appearance more menacing. Their warriors are well known for ruthless ferocity, but not for intelligence. They walk upright, but their gait is normally stooped. When in the company of humans, the more intelligent make an effort to stand and walk erect.

Immediately recognizing Vyx as a Space Command undercover operative, Recozzi uttered a string of profanity and grabbed for his weapon. Vyx managed to pull his first and, with a slight sweep of the weapon, sliced off the top of Recozzi's head just below his eyes. Shev Rivemwilth leaped for safety.

behind a sofa as Recozzi's body, now almost lifeless, continued firing his automatic weapon as he fell. An errant shot hit Rivemwilt in one of his two hearts and putrid yellow-green blood began spurting over floor and furniture. Recozzi's fire also caught two of the bodyguards, who let loose with their own weapons as they fell. By some miracle, Vyx was only hit by a burning graze from someone's laser weapon. Diving for the open door as weapons fire continued the light show inside the room, he lost his pistol as he tumbled. He decided it wouldn't be prudent to re-enter the room in order to retrieve it.

Vyx literally ran for his life, and made it safely to the street after descending the single flight of stairs in just three leaps. He was half a block away when the first shots were fired in his direction. Over the next hour, he played a game of cat and mouse with the Shev's bodyguards. It's no fun being the mouse.

The first light of dawn found Vyx still alive, and still on the run. Long shadows were his only companions as he loped down deserted streets. Although no fire had come his way since the earlier shot at the abandoned building, hours ago, the hairs on the back of his neck continued their erection. He felt sure that the hunters weren't far behind. It was the first time since he'd come dirt-side that he appreciated the shorter diurnal cycle of this planet. A twenty-two-hour forty-minute day revolution meant that the sun rose that much sooner, and with the coming of the new day, the odds that he might actually survive increased dramatically. He'd be able to purchase a new weapon as the store opened in a couple of hours. People moving about on streets mostly abandoned after dark, would provide him with some welcome cover. Armed and less conspicuous, he might yet have a chance to reach his hotel room.

It cost Vyx three times what it usually fetched, but the old laser pistol was worth every penny under the circumstances. The shop owner generously threw in two extra power packs, both fully charged. Vyx tucked the pistol into his belt and warily exited the dilapidated pawn shop. The owner could probably take the rest of the week off on what he had made from the sale of the pistol.

Walking cautiously towards the hotel, Vyx mingled with the early morning pedestrian traffic on the sidewalk. It would seem a surreal sight to someone accustomed to life on most civilized planets, but every person on the street, except for the smallest of children, was carrying a pistol or rifle. Amazingly, there was very little violent crime in the colony. Occasionally a drunk would be rolled, but no vandals broke into homes here. The ones that had tried it, had long ago been delivered to the Body Disposal Depot, and with the entire citizenry armed, the surviving lowlifes were too smart to attempt it.

He got to within eighteen meters of the hotel before one of the hunters from the previous evening stepped out of the doorway where he had waited all night, and opened fire. Prepared for any movement from that location, Vyx dove for cover behind a waiting taxi as the first shot came his way. The second went wide as well, and it was the last 'free' shot that the killer got. Before he could fire a third time towards Vyx, the local citizenry opened fire on him. He must have only recently arrived in the colony because he was apparently unaware that you never fired a weapon on a crowded street here. The populace wasn't specifically trying to protect Vyx; it was just an automatic reaction to an ignorant fool firing into a crowd.

For several seconds, lead, lattice, and laser fire poured into the doorway from every direction. When the Tsgardi warrior fell to the ground, he had more holes in him than a brand new box of darts and rings. His two shots had missed Vyx, but two colony citizens were down. One was dead from a lattice weapon blast to the chest, while the other had received only a grazing laser weapon injury to his leg. People crowded around the hunter's body to see if they recognized him, but no one claimed any familiarity. It was further testimony that he was new here.

Vyx made it into the hotel while everyone's attention was diverted and before the sanitation trucks arrived to pick up the two bodies. The guards in the lobby were on heightened alert as a result of the

shootout in the street, but they didn't stop Vyx from proceeding to his room after he flashed his keycard for the door.

As soon as the reinforced Ferro-carbon alloy door of his room was closed and locked behind him, Vyx took a deep breath and released it slowly. He then retrieved the backup pistol from his spacechest's hidden compartment, and slipped it into his empty holster. The pistol that he had just purchased was placed on the dresser and he would carry it in his belt when he left the room again, but first he had to report in.

Another pocket in the spacechest yielded a miniature radio transmitter. He stuck the three-centimeter wide satellite dish against the window pane and aligned it using its audio location capability. The RF signal from his radio would be transmitted to a tiny satellite, about the size of his fist, which he had placed in geosynchronous orbit around the planet upon his arrival. The satellite would then compress the encrypted message before re-transmitting it on a designated IDS frequency. It would take almost seventy hours to travel the two-hundred-ten light years to the Intelligence Section at Higgins Space Command Base, so it would be at least six days before he received a response.

From a subcutaneous pouch in his chest beneath his left arm, Vyx retrieved a tiny recording wafer. It contained a full account of his trip to the arms merchant, from the time he left his hotel room last night, until his return. A chip attached to the optic nerve of his left eye provided the image, and a chip embedded in each of the audio canals of his ears provided stereo audio tracks. Recorded information traveled through his lymphatic system for delivery to the wireless recording device mounted over the ribs beneath his left arm, so no transmission signal could ever be picked up by detection scanners. He delicately slid the tiny silicon wafer, not much thicker than an ordinary piece of writing paper, into his audio transmitter and pressed the send button.

His report sent, Vyx could relax. He took a hot shower and climbed into bed to get some much-needed sleep. He should be safe as long as he stayed in the hotel, but his pistol went onto the nightstand next to the bed anyway.

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Chapter Two

~ October 6th, 2272 ~

Commander Jenetta Carver set the two huge water bowls on the floor so that Cayla and Tayna, her two Taurentlus-Thur Jumakas, could drink when they thirsted. They had already received the first of their two daily meals. The two enormous pets, with glossy coats of black fur, and large, bright yellow eyes that seemed to glow, brushed lightly against her legs as a sign of affection. She stooped for several minutes, to pet them, before continuing with her morning chores.

Resembling Terran Jaguars, although smaller at only a hundred sixty pounds each, the Jumakas would remain sedately in Jenetta's quarters while she went to work. She would have preferred to take them to work, as she had when she was the commanding officer of Dixon SCB, but that was not possible. They would use the shower stall in the bathroom to relieve their bodily needs during the day. The automated cleaning process in all suites was programmed to remove pet waste, then clean and disinfect the stall, as soon as the animal vacated it.

Before leaving her rooms in the Bachelor Officer Quarters, the attractive blonde checked her reflection in the mirror to make sure that her uniform appearance clean and crisp. Satisfied, she left her apartment, stopping to face the door to another apartment some ten meters down the corridor. The automatic visitor announcement system would identify her and alert the apartment's occupant that she was at the door.

After half a minute's wait the door opened, and another Space Command officer, virtually identical to Commander Carver, stepped out into the corridor and smiled. The only distinguishable difference between the two women was their rank and uniform ribbons. The second officer wore the rank insignia of a Lieutenant(jg), represented as one wide and one narrow stripe, on each epaulet.

From the elevator that delivered the two women to the lobby, it was only a short walk to the officer's mess hall, so they didn't bother hailing a cab. A number of people glanced their way and smiled as they passed, with most of the males sighing silently as they enjoyed a brief fantasy or two. Seeing Commander Carver with one, or both, of her gorgeous sisters was not unusual. The wide discrepancy in rank was owed to the fact that her two sisters, both clones, hadn't yet reached their second birthday.

After breakfast, the two five-foot eleven-inch tall women proceeded together to their new duty assignments in the Intelligence Section of the Space Command Headquarters division of Higgins Space Center.

Located in geosynchronous orbit above the planetary capital of Vinnia, Higgins ranked among the busiest of SC bases. It functioned both as a StratCom-One base and a major freight hub. Easily visible to the naked eye from the planet below, the massive space station resembles an oval-cut, blue opal gemstone, surrounded by a sixty-kilometer silver necklace. The necklace, of course, is the docking ring, where dozens of massive ships can dock with the station simultaneously. Roadway tunnels connecting the base to the docking ring, appear like spokes in a wheel.

Arriving at the Intelligence Section, the two women paused in the admittance area to sign in and be identified. A wall of clear, security polycarbonate, virtually impenetrable by any portable weapons, separated them from the duty officer.

"Commander Jenetta Carver and Lieutenant Christa Carver reporting as ordered," Jenetta said to the lieutenant on duty after pressing the face of her Space Command ring.

"Good morning, Commander. Good morning, Lieutenant," they heard in their CT's as the duty officer spoke. "Please step up to the retinal scanner."

Subcutaneously located against the skull behind the left ear of every Space Command officer is a cranial transducer. Normally referred to as a CT, the devices are no larger than the tip of the needle-like insertion tool used to implant the miniscule devices in every cadet upon entrance to a Space Command Academy. Used mainly for communications, they also permit sensors aboard a ship or base to identify an individual. The identification permits immediate access to low security areas, and unlocks equipment for which the individual is authorized. Additional identification verification is required for high security areas.

As the senior officer, Jenetta stepped to the retinal scanner first. The machine immediately said, "Identity confirmed as being Commander Jenetta Alicia Carver."

After Christa was scanned, the machine said, "Retinal identity confirmed as being Commander Jenetta Alicia Carver. CT confirmed as being that of Lieutenant(jg) Christa Carver."

In response to the confused look on the face of the duty officer, Jenetta said, "Lieutenants Christa and Eliza Carver's retinal scans are identical to mine, as are their fingerprints."

"Yes ma'am. I understand, but I'm not sure how to log the system's noted anomaly. Please allow me a few seconds to check the passdown log." After scanning information on her monitor for a few seconds, the duty officer said, "Ah, here it ma'am." She touched a several points on her monitor and said, "Please enter," as she pressed the button that would open the security door.

Once Jenetta and Christa were inside the clear wall, the duty officer said, "Lieutenant, report to Encryption in room D248. Lieutenant Commander Mirshra is expecting you. Commander, please report to Captain Kanes office. You know the way, I believe?"

"Yes, I do. Thank you, Lieutenant."

Jenetta gave Christa directions to the Encryption Center because it was knowledge that she had gained after Christa was born, and then walked to Captain Kanes office suite. She was only kept waiting for a few minutes before being passed through to the Captain's office.

"Good morning, sir," Jenetta said as she entered the spacious office. The walls remained almost as barren as when Kanes had moved into the office. The only interruptions on the four off-white surfaces were two large pictures that hung behind Kanes' desk. One was of Admiral Moore, the Admiral of the Fleet, and other was of the Current Chairman of the Galactic Alliance Council.

"Good morning, Jen," Kanes said as he finished taking a drink from his coffee cup and set it down on his desk. Pointing to a carafe on a conference table, he said, "Help yourself to the coffee; it's fresh. Then pull up a chair."

"Thank you, sir."

After pouring herself a mug of the steaming black liquid from the carafe, she took a seat in a chair across from Kanes. Taking a sip of the coffee she said, "Delicious, sir. Your own blend?"

"It's one of my few self-indulgences," he said. "I blend a carafe each morning to bring to the office, then tolerate the coffee from my beverage synthesizer for the rest of the day."

"Have you tried tweaking the program that makes your coffee here?"

"No. I didn't know that was possible?"

"You can't alter the established recipes, but you can add your own as long as you assign unique names to the new variations."

"I've never heard that."

"Few people have, and I doubt that it's published anywhere. I only discovered it while trying to alter the established recipes in my office synthesizer on Dixon. I hacked my way into the synthesizer recipe cube only to discover that the encoded recipes were 'burned' in. They couldn't be altered or overwritten. I suppose it's a protection mechanism to insure that people can't be poisoned or made ill by a hacker. But I did discover that it was possible to add new recipes."

"How do I accomplish that?"

"If you'll write out the recipes that you'd like to add, I'll encode them and prepare a data wafer. Then it'll take just a couple of seconds to upload the information into your synthesizer's memory cube. Once loaded, the new recipes are alterable until you tell the system to make them permanent. So you can tweak them until you get them set the way you want."

"Will this affect any other synthesizer on the base?"

"No sir, just yours, unless other units are manually updated with the same data. If your unit experiences a problem, and the synthesizer recipe cube is swapped out by engineering, you'll have to upload the changes again."

"Wonderful, I'll write out my special recipe blends this afternoon."

"Okay, sir. And I'm sure that you must have something else in mind for me to do while I'm here."

"Yes, I do. I realize that this is only a temporary assignment until the Prometheus returns to port, but I hope that your month here will be productive and rewarding. I've had Christa assigned to the encryption section because of your expertise with encoding algorithms." He paused to grin. "We had a devil of a job a few years ago getting past the encryption that you set up on your personal log ring."

"I knew that you'd crack it, sir. It was a fairly simple formula, only intended to keep curious eyes from my diary entries."

"It took our entire lab four days to crack it."

"Four days? Really? The entire lab?"

Kanes grinned again. "I suspect that you knew exactly how long it would take us to read the diary entries."

Jenetta returned the grin. "I estimated four or five days if your people were good. I calculated that the simplicity of the design would actually add to the confusion of anyone trying to read the data. Since the encryption key uses the last date the journal was read or updated, it varies with every access or attempted access. You can't just continually throw varying keys at it and hope to get lucky. It's extremely unlikely that anyone would happen across it by accident. If your people cracked it in four days, they're good."

"The best. I think that Christa will enjoy her time working there. Perhaps she'll decide to request a transfer to stay with us instead of reporting to the Chiron when it arrives in a month."

"Yes sir; but I wouldn't count on it. One day perhaps, but right now my sisters and I only want to be aboard a ship in space. Did you want me to work in Encryption also?"

"No, I have another project in mind for you. We have a problem on the Gollasko Colony. We sent one of our undercover people there to buy weapons from an arms merchant, and right now he's held up in a hotel room, fearful of leaving the building because some very nasty types want his head. That's just part of the problem. The deal he was involved in went bad because a convicted Tsgardi killer named Recozzi showed up just in time to cause problems. There was a shootout and our man killed Recozzi. Being the arresting officer, he'd testified against Recozzi at his trial, so they knew each other well. Recozzi had been sentenced to life without parole."

"How did Recozzi escape?"

"He didn't. He's still at the penal colony on Saquer Major."

"He's still at the penal colony, and he was just killed in a gun battle on Gollasko? That's a rather unique accomplishment."

"Yes. As soon as we got the report we contacted the warden at the facility, and he confirmed that Recozzi is still there, and apparently healthy."

"Has he been cloned?"

"We don't know yet; but God, I hope not. We just got the issue of cloning settled with your sisters and the seventy-seven others that were born on Dakistee."

"How unique are Tsgardi elbow-prints?"

“All of our researchers agree that they're as unique as Terran fingerprints. And when combined with DNA and retinal images, identification should be one-hundred percent positive. Our doctors and researchers are currently examining every elbow-print on file to see if we can learn anything new.”

“Could the records at the prison have been altered?”

“We'll know shortly. We've had the prisoner reprinted and requested that they send us copies so we can compare them to ours. Everything is being analyzed right now.”

“Is our operative safe where he is?”

“Somewhat. He'll stay in the hotel, taking all his meals there. The hotel has its own security force so it depends how badly the hunters want him. We've learned that the main subject in our investigation, Shev Rivemwilth, was critically injured in the melee. One of his hearts was blasted by an errant shot and he lost a lot of blood. It isn't yet known if he'll survive. We're trying to arrange an extraction for our man.”

“One of his hearts? Since 'Shev' is an honorific normally used when greeting an Alyysian, assume that Rivemwilth is an Alyysian?”

“That toad doesn't know the meaning of honor. But yes, he's an Alyysian.”

“Why are we trying to buy arms from an Alyysian, sir?”

“They're Space Command weapons, and we're trying to trace the source. We've heard for some time that SC weapons were being sold on the black market, but we've never been able to get our hands on any. We want to learn if the weapons are original manufacture, from one of our authorized industrial complexes, or if they've been copied by someone and are being produced elsewhere. If they come from us, we intend to stop the flow, recover everything that we can, and prosecute those responsible. And if they're being manufactured by others within Space Command regulated space, we intend to track them down and stop them. Whenever we hear any rumors about the weapons, Rivemwilth's name is associated. He's obviously behind the thefts, or the illegal manufacture. We want him, as much as we want to recover the weapons and stop the flow, but he stays holed up in the Gollasko colony most of the time. We won't shed any tears if he doesn't recover, but it might mean the finish of our investigation. His accomplices might never be found and punished for their crimes.”

“Aren't we prohibited from operating in the Frontier Zone?”

“There's no legal prohibition that prevents us from operating in our Frontier Zone. Space Command simply doesn't have the ships and manpower to enforce GA regulations there, so SC ship captains are ordered to 'ignore' the lawlessness there lest we get dragged into law enforcement activities that escalate beyond our control and reflect badly on the service when we fail to correct the situation. It's better that everyone simply believe we're not permitted to operate there.”

Jenetta nodded. “What can I do to help?”

“I want you to go through all the files from the investigation and give me your assessment.”

Jenetta didn't respond for a few seconds, then said, “Sir, I'm not trained in criminal investigation procedures. My field of study at the Academy was astrophysics.”

“I realize that, Jen, but we've been working on this case for two years and our best criminal experts haven't been able to make any inroads. I'm hoping that you might bring a fresh perspective to the investigation. That, combined with some scrap of information that you may have picked up from the contacts you made while functioning as Base Commander of the Dixon Space Command Base, might reorient our investigation.”

“My contacts were mainly freighter captains and Space Command officers, not arms dealers or manufacturers.”

“Yes, but I know that you also met some of the seedier types who frequent space ports. You couldn't avoid it, being the base commander and chief administrator. You sent me a lot of intel during the year that you were there, hoping that it would help us find your sister Christa while she was

prisoner of the Tsgardi.”

Jenetta sighed to herself. “Very well, sir. I’ll do my best, but I think that you’ve picked the wrong person for this job.”

“Just do your usual thorough job and I’ll be happy.” Standing up, Kanesh said, “Come on, I’ll show you to the office that you’ve been assigned for the next few weeks.”

Kanesh escorted Jenetta to a small office in a restricted corridor that required another retinal scan for entry. The computer, having already been informed of her job assignment, had established the appropriate access levels for information retrieval and movement within the section’s corridors. The computer recognized her voice, and a complete index of everything pertaining to the investigation was available on her screen when it was activated. She had also been assigned an aide, who would work out of an outer office. Kanesh wished her luck and returned to his own office.

Jenetta sat down at the desk, grimaced, and started reading through the thousands of documents that had accumulated since the investigation began. When her eyes started to ache, she had the computer read the reports to her as she stretched her legs and poured a cup of coffee from the decanter that her aide had brought in earlier. Her office didn’t have a beverage synthesizer.

At the end of the first week, Jenetta was still reading, or being read, case documents. She was beginning to feel the frustration shared by all people put into jobs for which they are ill-prepared. It seemed that the professional investigators had covered every possible facet. She knew that she would surely go out of her mind if this was a permanent assignment. Fortunately, her temporary duty would be over in a few weeks, and she’d be reporting back aboard the battleship Prometheus.

Christa was faring a little better than Jenetta. She was being used mainly to break the encryption codes of intercepted messages, but she also had a hand in developing new encryption techniques for Space Command. Of the three women, Eliza had it the best. Upon their return from Nordakia, she had immediately been assigned as third watch helmsman aboard the battleship Bellona. It was still in port, so she had little to do while on duty. She was able to meet Jenetta and Christa in the officer’s mess every other evening for dinner.

“When are you leaving port, Eliza?” Jenetta asked as she cut into the second of two large pieces of chocolate cake she had selected for dessert. They were sitting outside the hearing range of other diners, so they felt comfortable talking in lowered voices.

“I was just notified that we’re leaving Monday. Apparently something’s come up rather quickly because we weren’t scheduled to leave for another two weeks.”

“Any idea where you’re going?” Christa asked.

“You tell me. I’m just a junior officer. You’re both working in the Intelligence Section now.”

“We don’t have any knowledge of ship assignments,” Jenetta said. “Everything is very compartmentalized. I don’t have access to Christa’s area and she doesn’t have access to mine.”

“Not true,” Christa said. “I could simply change my rank insignia and walk into your office. I could also access your computer interface, unless you have it password encoded, and pass myself off as you without any trouble. Our retinal scans, fingerprints, and DNA are identical, remember? Even our voice prints are identical. You could also pass for me, and either of us could pass for Eliza.”

“You’re forgetting the cranial transducer that was implanted after you joined Space Command,” Jenetta said. “It’s not just for communication, you know. You’d never get into my office, and I’d only get into yours because of my security clearance. But even without it, I wouldn’t be worried about pretending to be one another, because I know me, but it raises the issue of the other clones. There are seven copies each, of the eleven scientists on Dakistee who discovered the cloning equipment. Right now they’re all back on the planet working at the dig sites, so no problem, but what about the future?”

“You mean what happens if one secures a position in a sensitive area?”

“Yes. Civilians don’t have CT’s or implanted ID chips. If they’ve been in prison, they have

permanent, criminal marker tags in their body, but otherwise, nothing. There would be seven other people that were indistinguishable from the rightful holder of the position. Any of them could swap positions and no one would be able to tell. We have a problem right now with a convict in the penitentiary colony on Saquer Major. A duplicate was just slain while trying to kill one of our people at the Gollasko Colony.”

“A duplicate?” Eliza said.

“The slain convict recognized the undercover Space Command operative that had arrested him and drew his weapon. Our man had no choice but to draw and fire. The question remains though. How can an incarcerated killer be in two places at the same time?”

“Has to be a clone,” Christa said.

“We accounted for all the clones made on Dakistee,” Jenetta said confidently.

“Did we?” Christa asked.

“We know exactly who was made on the equipment that made us. Are you suggesting that there might be another machine that we don't know about?” Eliza asked.

“It's possible,” Christa responded. “One machine wouldn't have been able to reproduce the entire population of the planet if the original inhabitants had succeeded in neutralizing the cause of the sterility.”

“You're suggesting that a Tsgardi found another site on the planet, learned to operate the equipment, and cloned himself?” Jenetta said, half as a question and half as a statement.

“Why not? The cloning process where Eliza and I were created, was initiated when a laborer innocently placed a lamp on what appeared to be a table.”

“If your hypothesis is correct, there could be a couple of hundred copies of that criminal running around by now,” Jenetta said.

“Not a happy thought if he's as dangerous as you say.”

“I think that I should give Captain Kaness a call, and relate what we've discussed. Excuse me.” Jenetta touched the SC ring on her right hand with her left forefinger and said, “Captain Kaness.” Touching the ring signaled the base communications computer to establish a link to her cranial transducer. The vibrations produced by her vocal cords traveled through her skull and were picked up by the CT before being transmitted on the carrier wave emitted by the base's computer. After a few seconds, she heard a reply in the tiny CT. Sent out only on her assigned frequency, neither Eliza or Christa could hear the response, but to Jenetta it sounded as if Kaness was speaking directly into her left ear.

“Yes sir. Sorry to bother you, but are you available for a private meeting. Something has come up that I think you should hear. I can't speak about it on an open line.” Jenetta paused for a reply, then “Yes sir. Fifteen minutes in your office. Carver, out.” The sign off instructed the computer to stop emitting the carrier wave.

Twelve minutes later, Jenetta arrived at the Intelligence Section and waited in Kaness's outer office until he got there. She stood up quickly as he entered and motioned her to follow. He unlocked his office doors with his handprint and she followed him in.

“What's so urgent, Jen?”

“My sisters and I were speaking earlier, and I mentioned the possibility that the Tsgardi criminal might have been cloned. Christa suggested that he might have been cloned using Dakistee equipment.”

“No, that's impossible. We have all that equipment here at Higgins. I can assure you that no Tsgardi has been cloned at this base.”

“Yes sir. We discussed the possibility that there might be additional facilities on the planet, and that somehow the Tsgardi found one, and managed to activate it. One cloning location would not have been adequate to clone the entire population since it took almost seven days to make a clone and the

were only twenty-five artificial wombs. One facility could only make thirteen-hundred clones each year.”

Kanes looked intently at her for a few moments, then walked around his office for a few minutes as he thought. Jenetta just stood in silence, waiting for him to speak.

“It's possible,” he said finally. “Unlikely, but possible. Not unlikely that there couldn't be more facilities, but that a Tsgardi could locate one and manage to initiate the process. They're not exact intellectuals. A light destroyer has been stationed in orbit around the planet since the cloning incident occurred, but a small shuttle could possibly sneak in and out if they knew the ship's orbital path and schedule, and that could be easily determined by someone on the surface with basic equipment. The facility where our cloning equipment was found has been continually occupied as an outpost, even though the equipment was transported here two and a half years ago, but as you suggest, there could be additional locations. By the way, the criminal at the penal colony has been conclusively identified as Recozzi by every test that we have, so a clone appears to be more a possibility than ever.”

“Then it seems that you have to decide if a complete search of Dakistee should be commenced.”

“Yes, but we're talking about an entire planet. It could take an army of investigators years to cover the surface, and it still might not be found. There may be nothing to find.”

“Normally I'd suggest just searching for emanations from power sources, but we know that the material used in the construction of the facility that housed the cloning lab we dismantled, totally shielded the entire installation, making it invisible to sensors.”

“True. We could be looking at it with sensors from two meters away and never identify it.”

“There's another related topic that we discussed, sir.”

“Yes?”

“We talked about the difficulty of identifying the clones on Dakistee since they're all identical right down to their retinal images, fingerprints, and DNA. Unlike my sisters, they don't have CT's to identify them.”

“That was taken care of long ago, Jen. When the clones were given their physicals here at Higgins a laser was used to slightly alter their retinal images and fingerprints. The alterations took a fraction of an instant, didn't cause any discomfort, and didn't affect their eyesight or sensation of touch. Each clone has a unique identity now.”

“I see. Why wasn't that done to Eliza?”

“It was. Twice. But the unique physiology that she inherited from you immediately reversed the changes both times. The process that the Raiders subjected you to while you were their prisoner, the one that keeps you looking like a twenty-one-year-old and makes your body heal ten times faster than regular humans, defeated all our attempts to create unique identities for Eliza and Christa. You know that your recuperative abilities have erased any signs of changes such as broken bones, including the one that occurred when you were seven and fell out of the tree. Even the tiny scar on the outside of your left leg, which you've carried for most of your life, completely disappeared when your DNA was altered. The scar where you were shot by the Raider officer just before the Battle for Higgins disappeared in just a couple of weeks. Your body seems to have a programmed image and won't allow even the slightest deviation. It immediately begins to restore that programmed image as part of its healing process whenever any alterations are attempted.”

“Yes, I've tried to have the SLAVE imprint that the Raiders put on my chest removed or covered up, but it's resisted all my attempts. Skin grafts fleck off as dead skin in a few days.”

“It's part of the programmed image in the DNA that the Raiders created for you. By now, it would be difficult to find any trace of your original DNA. We'd have to take a sample from deep inside the bone, and even that won't be possible in another five or six years. By then every cell in your body would contain the new DNA.”

“So there's nothing that can be done to make us appear unique?”

~~“With changes disappearing in a few days as the body reverts to the original image, it doesn't~~
make sense to continue making them. We'll have to rely on the identification signal from their CT's.”

“Yes sir. I understand. I assure you that you have nothing to fear from our sharing a single identity.”

“We know that, Commander,” he said smiling. “If we had even the slightest concern, none of you would ever have been allowed inside this highly secure area.”

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Chapter Three

~ June 13th, 2269 ~

Vyx awoke with a start. He immediately reached for the pistol on the nightstand in an automatic reaction. Someone was outside the door of his hotel room! He pointed his laser pistol towards the door and waited, hardly even breathing. A white envelope slid almost noiselessly into the room from under the door and he heard footsteps move away and trail off down the corridor. He waited for several minutes before getting out of bed in case it was merely a ploy to get him over near the door. The room's draperies were closed over the bulletproof glass, but anyone with a decent thermal imager could place his position in the room. A bomb placed against the outside of the door could be detonated by the watcher, and kill him when he retrieved the envelope. For that matter, the envelope itself could be a weapon. It could explode and blow his hands off, leaving him to bleed to death, or it could have been dipped in a poison that will kill him on contact.

Opening his suitcase, he slipped on a pair of impermeable gloves before picking up the envelope. An innocuous looking viewpad placed on the envelope tested the paper and contents for poisons and explosives. No traces were found. Vyx supposed that if they wanted him badly enough to resort to such sophisticated means of assassination, they would probably have just put a rocket into his bedroom from across the street. The bulletproof glass wouldn't stop that, and he knew that they had the necessary weapons.

Ripping open the envelope, he found the note to be from Shev Rivemwilth. In it, Rivemwilth apologized for any misunderstandings. He explained that his associates believed Vyx responsible for the attack on his person. He said that the hunters had been called off once Rivemwilth regained consciousness and could talk. It was only afterwards that they pieced together what happened. They found Vyx's pistol inside the room and discovered that it was set for a narrow beam, accounting for the separated skull portion of the Tsgardi who had started the fight. Rivemwilth and his two bodyguards had been shot with a lattice pistol, the sort preferred by the Tsgardi.

Lattice weapons had long ago been outlawed by the Galactic Alliance, but they remained the favored personal weapon of Raiders and other criminals because they could be fired aboard ship with the certain knowledge that they wouldn't puncture the hull. Like laser pistols, they used energy in place of chemical propellants, but they fired an actual projectile rather than an energy beam. Each fifty-millimeter long projectile consisted of four narrow pieces of flat spring-steel. It was shaped like a circular latticework tube. Loaded under great pressure into hundred-round magazines, the projectiles were stored in compressed form. When pulled into the chamber, it instantly expanded to its full twelve-millimeter diameter. Spun by an electronically rifled chamber, the fired projectile bored through whatever it struck, like a hollow drill bit with a leading edge as sharp as any straightedge razor. Since it wasn't attempting to push its way through the material, as a lead projectile would, it didn't require nearly the mass. Rather, it cut its way through, like the narrow blade of a filleting knife. Where a laser pistol sealed the wound as it made it, the lattice pistol left large gapping holes that allowed a person's life force to bleed out in minutes from wounds in what were normally considered non-vital areas.

Rivemwilth went on to say that he would rather have been shot by the laser. His second head would simply have taken over immediately for the destroyed one. The lattice weapon opened a large hole and Rivemwilth almost expired from the loss of blood. The note said that he was still willing to proceed with the arms deal if Vyx was interested, and invited him to return to the building where they had talked, as soon as Rivemwilth was well enough.

Tossing the note on the dresser, Vyx thought about the offer. It might be a trap to lure him out of the hotel, but if it was genuine, he might be able to salvage his mission. His goal had only been to purchase the weapons, not attempt an arrest of anyone here in the colony. Since the colony was located deep in the Frontier Zone, he wasn't supposed to perform arrests here anyway, except under specific order.

* * *

Jenetta concluded her second week of work in the Intelligence Section without any greater sense of job satisfaction than that of the first week. The only consolation in being stationed at the Higgins Space Station was Lieutenant Commander Zane Spence. They'd dated off and on since the handsome young attorney, posted to the Judge Advocate General's office at Higgins, had defended her during her court-martial.

On this night, she and Zane visited Gregory's, a favorite restaurant on the civilian concourse. The food was always delicious and the retro look of the restaurant appealed to Jenetta's sense of aesthetics. Real wood had been brought to the station for the construction of the interior, and then stained a rich walnut color, giving the restaurant the subdued but elegant look of expensive restaurants from the twentieth century. The earth tones of red, yellow, and brown were pervasive throughout, and the interior was warm and inviting, with none of the glitzy chrome and bright neon used elsewhere throughout the concourse. Gregory, always the most gregarious and congenial of hosts, welcomed them warmly.

"Commander Carver, Commander Spence," he said effusively, when he spotted the tall couple entering the waiting area, "come in, come in. I have your table all ready for you."

Jenetta and Zane looked at one another, then walked past other patrons waiting to be seated, and they followed Gregory to a table that bore a 'reserved' sign. Gregory held the chair for Jenetta, while Zane settled his six-foot one-inch frame into the chair opposite. Being escorted to a reserved table might have been confusing once, since they hadn't made reservations, but Jenetta and Zane knew that Gregory always kept one or two tables in reserved status, even when the restaurant was fully booked, so that he would never have to turn away favored or important patrons. Having important persons dining in your establishment was a recommendation in itself, and well worth the cost of leaving a table unused and ready at all times. Commander Jenetta Carver was both a favored and important patron. Neither Jenetta nor Zane complained as Gregory picked up the sign and slipped it beneath his arm.

"I'm pleased to welcome you tonight. My chefs have prepared a wonderful selection of entrees. Would you like to start with a bottle of wine from the Sebastian colony? We just received a shipment of '58 Pink Channay. It's most excellent."

Zane nodded. "That sounds wonderful."

Gregory smiled. "Your waiter will be with you momentarily. I'll get the wine."

"You seem preoccupied, Jen," Zane said, after Gregory had brought the wine and the waiter had taken their food order.

Jenetta looked into the piercing blue-green eyes of the handsome JAG officer, and smiled. "I'm sorry. I was thinking about work."

"Anything that you can share?"

"No, I'm sorry."

"I understand. Forget I said anything. Say, I picked up a copy of the second book about Dakista today. I only had time to read a few chapters, but what I read is wonderful."

"Eliza did a fantastic job with it," Jenetta said. "It could turn out to be another best seller."

"I wouldn't be surprised. People are fascinated that such an advanced culture existed twenty thousand years ago, and hunger for any information about it. Several other books have been published by the archeologists and the clones, but nobody has shown the insight and depth of knowledge about

those former inhabitants that you and your sisters have exhibited.”

“And yet,” Jenetta said, “for all of their technology, they couldn't stop their race from going the way of the large dinosaurs on Earth.”

“The answer appears to lie in diversification. The Dakistee people live on in their descendants who colonized Nordakia and Obotymot. As we expand our presence in the universe, there's little chance that a single cataclysmic event, or even multiple events, can totally wipe out our race.”

“Universe? Zane, we have yet to even explore five percent of our galaxy. At a hundred-thousand light-years across, it would take our fastest ships two hundred seventy-five years to reach the furthest solar systems, and that's if we don't stop to visit along the way—which sort of totally defeats the idea of exploration. Although we've found hundreds of sentient life forms living within Galactic Alliance space, only a few dozen have the intelligence to one day begin venturing into space, and only a third of those are currently capable of extra-world travel.”

“I heard some scuttlebutt,” Zane said in a lowered voice, “that the Galactic Alliance is planning to move the Frontier further out.”

“Really? How much further out?”

“A hundred parsecs, extending across the entire length of the current Galactic Alliance border with open space.”

“A hundred parsecs? Oh, no. A three-hundred-twenty-six light-year swath of additional frontier along our entire border with open space. That will more than double the current Frontier Zone.”

“No, it won't. The old Frontier Zone will convert to regulated Galactic Alliance space.”

“My God,” Jenetta said in a hushed, yet appalled tone, “they can't be serious.”

“My friend on Earth tells me they're very serious. The hope is that it will push the vermin further back. Once the current Frontier Zone is re-designated, Space Command will immediately assume complete authority over all ships in that space and enforce interdiction laws. In the Frontier Zone we normally only answer distress calls, not stop ships and search their cargo for slaves, illegal weapons, substances, and other illegal contraband. As soon as a criminal crosses over the Zone border, they're essentially safe from pursuit.”

“That guideline was only established because we didn't have adequate ships or people to cover the hundred parsecs of Frontier Zone space along the entire Galactic Alliance border. An expansion like you're talking about would add tens of thousands of stars, planets, and moons in this quadrant of the galaxy. We're stretched far too thin as it is. We've only just begun to get a handle on the Raider problem in our present space.”

“They're addressing that. The Space Command budget will be increased dramatically as part of the expansion because assessments to planets now permitted to join the Galactic Alliance will provide substantially increased funds for law enforcement efforts. The annual appropriation for the construction of new ships is being doubled, and a brand new GSC Space Academy is being planned for construction on Nordakia. The first ten Nordakians were commissioned as officers of Space Command after their graduation on Earth last year, and there are presently over two hundred Nordakian cadets at the two academies. Class size, at the beginning of the new school term, was increased from three hundred fifty to six hundred at each school. The GAC knows that the expansion means we're going to need new officers, and plenty of them.”

“But it will take years to build the ships and staff them.”

“There's an old Chinese proverb: 'A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.'”

“There's another,” Jenetta remarked, grinning, “that says: 'Paper can't wrap fire.' A paper fleet certainly isn't going to control the current Frontier Zone when it's re-designated.”

“I've also heard there's talk of the Nordakian Space Force being merged into Space Command.”

Jenetta shook her head slightly. “It would swell our ranks quickly, but I doubt it will happen.”

“Why not?” Zane asked.

“~~Their training is inadequate by our Academy standards. I know that from first hand experience~~ because I've toured the Space Force bases and schools. Academy trained officers would resist following the orders of a former Nordakian officer who was placed in command if they mistrust his training and experience. It could lead to some very difficult situations.”

“Even if it was you? You hold the rank of captain in the Nordakian Space Force. As I remember you're only on loan to Space Command.”

“That's different, and I'm on permanent assignment to GSC. Like you, I'm a Terran who was educated at the Northern Hemisphere Space Academy on Earth, and I was already a Lieutenant Commander in GSC when I was honored by being made a citizen of Nordakia and commissioned into their Space Force. The GAC arranged that 'on loan' silliness to further cement relations with Nordakia.”

“Still, if the services are combined, you'd probably be advanced to the rank of captain immediately, and we wouldn't be able to see each other any more. You know the unwritten law about minimal social association with officers more than one level of rank from your own.”

“Zane,” Jenetta said, sensitive to his feelings on the issue, “I know you're disappointed that I've been promoted ahead of you, but you'll be promoted soon. You're named on the Promotion Selection List for Commander that just came out.”

“Yes, but I still have to wait for a position to become available. It might be good for me if the GSC is greatly expanded. There'll be a lot of new positions created.”

“How close is this proposed expansion to actually becoming a reality?”

“So close that my source isn't talking about it as being proposed. He says that it can happen in as soon as two weeks from now. They're just debating over the actual language of the resolution before going public. Word has already started to leak out though, so you'll probably see it in the news in the next few days.”

“What about the planets in the newly delineated territory that don't wish to be part of the Galactic Alliance?”

“They really have no choice in the matter if they're located within the new border. Since we don't involve ourselves in the internal matters of planetary governments, it won't affect control of the governments or anything, but other problems will arise. Considering that the Galactic Alliance doesn't permit trade or association with planets that haven't developed rudimentary space travel capabilities, those planets that have already been trading with advanced cultures might suddenly find themselves isolated, except for trade with smugglers who choose to ignore GA law.

“It seems unfair to drag them into the GA,” Jenetta said, “and then restrict access to former trading partners.”

“The GAC believes that restricting access by more advanced cultures allows societies to evolve more naturally, without outside influence. Once they develop their own space travel capability, they'll be welcomed into the Alliance and can become an active trading partner with the more advanced member planets.”

“Except that the GA doesn't accept member planets that are located in the Frontier Zone.”

“That's been a problem; and one that's been discussed at great lengths by the Galactic Alliance Council. The fact is that we just haven't been able to exercise control over all of the territory claimed by the GA.”

“Is that the only reason?” Jenetta asked.

“Basically. They'd love to accept everyone that applied for membership, but we just haven't been able to provide protection and law enforcement in the Frontier Zone, so the Council limited GAC membership to those planets located within the inner border. Until Space Command is able to enforce

all the laws of the Galactic Alliance within the Frontier Zone, I can't see the planets there being affected by a 'paper' expansion. They'll continue to carry out trade with anyone, just as they have before. We're really only establishing a new outer boundary, and announcing that no part of our Frontier Zone can be co-opted by life forms from outside the Galactic Alliance, or integrated into anyone else's coalition, federation, empire, or dominion.

"Of course some solar systems within the Zone may still object to becoming part of GA space. We'll assume that those cases will be treated in the same manner as such solar systems were treated in the initial creation, and again after the first expansion of the Alliance. The objecting solar system will be totally isolated, and no vessel from any Alliance planet will be permitted to enter their system, or even trade with them at space stations or freight hubs. Likewise, their vessels will not be permitted to visit or trade with, or visit any Alliance member planets or space stations. Eventually, most of the previously isolated systems petitioned to have their status changed because they learned what they were missing out on as their civilizations matured."

"If your rumor is accurate," Jenetta said, "Space Command is about to be handed a major headache."

Zane's scuttlebutt was not only accurate, it was extremely accurate. Upon reporting for duty on Monday, Jenetta found an important memo in her message queue. Copied to all senior officers in the Intelligence Section, the memo stated that the Galactic Alliance Council was working on a resolution that would officially shift the Frontier Zone a hundred parsecs further out, and the former area would become regulated Galactic Alliance space.

Jenetta was summoned to a briefing for senior officers in Kanes' office at 1000 hours. The meeting was primarily for officers with the rank of Lieutenant Commander or above, but the two Lieutenants assigned to his Strategic Planning Committee were there as well.

"Good morning," Kanes began after everyone had taken their seats at the large conference table, with chairs in seats around the walls of the room after places at the table were filled. "I'm sure that you've all read the memo about the frontier zone by now. The GAC has privately deliberated on this expansion for some time, and they feel that with the Raiders so weakened from previous engagements, the time has come to act. Since the new territory hasn't been claimed by anyone previously, there shouldn't be any challenge to our authority. A number of worlds within the old Frontier Zone have been petitioning for inclusion in the GA for years, and now they'll be welcomed as full voting members. The official announcement will be made in a couple of weeks, but as with most issues where politicians and the office staffs are involved, the word has already leaked out. Our task is to figure out how to exercise control over the new sectors of space that will adjoin our current mission area.

"In order for us to adequately patrol the new space, our fleet size must be, at the very least, doubled. The GAC has promised that it will, but realistically it will take many years to build enough new ships to cover it satisfactorily. A number of older warships, taken out of service over the past decade, are being refitted for patrol duties in rear areas where we have few problems, so that the newer, faster ships can be freed up for patrol in the new space. Space Command is also finally changing the mandatory ship's officer retirement age from sixty-five to eighty-five, and mandatory retirement age for base personnel is being changed from eighty-five to one-hundred. The former age limits were a holdover from when people rarely lived beyond ninety years. Now that people are averaging a hundred-thirty-six years with nano-bot medicine, and many make it to one-hundred-fifty, this change is long overdue. Time spent in stasis will now be completely discounted from the officer's age when computing mandatory retirement dates, instead of being computed at twenty-five percent as was the case previously.

"I'll be speaking with each section chief over the next few days to discuss how this impacts your section. Any questions?"

“When will this expansion take effect, sir?” Commander Edgar asked.

“As soon as the resolution is officially presented, voted upon, and passed. I understand that the wording is 'effective immediately', but we still have the formalities of government to observe. Of course, the criminals living in the old Frontier Zone will have weeks to escape into the new zone since the word is already out, but we're positioning as many ships as possible so that we can begin interdiction activities as soon as the okay is given by Space Command Supreme HQ.”

“The Alliance currently shares borders with three other nations, sir,” Commander Brantford said. “How is that situation to be handled? We obviously can't expand the Frontier Zone into the territory.”

“Where we cannot expand our borders a full one-hundred parsecs, our new border will abut our neighbor's border.”

“Will home port assignments be changing, sir?” Commander Murray asked.

“I'm sure that they will. Space Command will be stretched pretty thin for quite a while. A lot of ships will immediately be re-assigned to home ports closer to the old Frontier Zone. In this region of space, that means Dixon, since it's the closest base to the old border. We'll have to build a number of new bases, since we don't currently have any in the old Frontier Zone, and they'll need to have ships assigned to them for protection. But that will probably take decades to happen.”

“How does it affect our search for the remaining Raider bases, sir?” Jenetta asked.

“Very little, and they remain a top priority. We'll continue to gather data, and we'll move when we have a definite location. We believe that both Raider Four and Five are in our expanded sector area, so we'll now be empowered to seek them out as well.” When ten seconds passed without any further questions, Captain Kanes said, “If there're no further questions, you're dismissed.”

People would be thinking about how the news affected them and their job functions over the next several days. As the group rose to leave, Kanes said, “Commander Carver, remain behind, please.”

When the office was clear of the others, Kanes asked, “Have you formulated any new ideas on our arms problem?”

“Nothing yet, sir. I'm still reviewing the material from the case.”

“We've received a vid of Vyx's meeting with Rivemwilt so we have the serial number from the sample weapon he was able to examine. It certainly appeared genuine. We're tracking it from manufacture, to locate the point where it went missing. It should help point a finger at our problem.”

“Is there anything that I can do to help?”

“Just continue your review of the case file and make whatever suggestions come to mind.”

“Yes sir. Sir, the Gollasko Colony will fall within regulated space once the border shifts.”

“Yes, that's correct.”

“What about the Alyysian arms merchant that's been using the Colony as his base of operations? Rivemwilt's capture could provide all the information we need to close down the pipeline of stolen weapons and arrest everyone involved.”

“Yes, but I doubt he's still there. He's probably already on his way to what will become the new Frontier Zone. If he's still at Gollasko when the resolution passes and we can get a ship there, we'll take him into custody immediately.”

“Even though there's no formal planetary government on Gollasko?”

“Because of it. In the absence of a planetary government, we can treat it as we would a ship in space. If there was a formal planetary government, we'd have to apply for extradition, or wait until he tried to leave the planet because we can't interfere in the planetary administration.”

“Yes sir. Sir, after we took down Raider Three I expected Space Command to immediately search out and capture Raider Two. We thought we knew the general vicinity of that base.”

“We did search, Jen, but we weren't able to find it. Apparently we were wrong when we speculated

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