

Rogue Marauder

The Adventures of Haunalyn, Korbob, and Sneighd
Book 1

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Chapter One

Korbot Maka scanned the bays of his space port with a keen and stern eye as he strode toward the damaged bay door. The arsenal of tools on his wide leather utility belt clinked together warning the unwary of his approach.

The scathing temperature of Sinnet spawned waves of heat that undulated above the tarmac, stirred only by Korbot's passage. The normally hot temperature had risen to barely tolerable in the summer season. Only the natives of the small, red barren planet were anywhere near comfortable.

Korbot dragged the sleeve of his work shirt across his dampened forehead, ducked through the eight-foot bay door and coaxed the controls of the cooling system down to a more comfortable level in which to work.

He inspected the damaged door, mumbling irately to himself about the scorch marks and dents caused by the blazer battle the previous night.

Near the outer boundaries of Galaxy End, Sinnet appeared on approach to be just another peaceful sparsely populated planet. It was, in fact, the most notorious haven for rogue star pilots, smugglers, and other unsavory characters seeking refuge to

recuperate from run-ins with the Intergalactic Corporation, the questionable galactic government, and their ruthless Corporate Police who patrolled the galaxy in pretense of keeping law and order.

Sinnet was hands off to the Corporation by some obscure private agreement with the self-appointed local government run by Baquar Starka, a native of the planet and enterprising being of means best not studied too closely.

Korbot spied two of Baquar's henchmen hanging around the opposite bay. He yanked on a dent in the bay door, the metal popping loudly and causing the unwelcomed creatures to jump and turn to find the portmaster's black eyes glaring in their direction. They scurried away. A small smile of satisfaction tugged at Korbot's lips as he returned to his work.

Baquar had been warned to keep his men away from Corbia Spaceport, the only part of the isolated city Baquar did not own. The unpleasant syndicate boss bore an uncanny resemblance to a rodent in human form and had a personality to match. He kept his variety of humanoid and alien henchmen scattered about to keep some semblance of order, an eye on the docking bays, and hopefully out of eyesight and arm's reach of the ten-foot Tendrite portmaster.

Korbot, in his younger days, had been one of the wildest star pilots in the galaxy, a member of the nomadic Tendrite tribes who wandered the stars as traders and star merchants. He knew little about the Tendrites as his father and mother determined their family not be without firm roots and a solid foundation. The concept was an oddity among their people, but there were no protests against the independence.

The elder Maka, a master mechanic and technician, built Corbia Spaceport into a prosperous business, fighting anyone who attempted to interfere or take over his business. He gathered the best mechanics, technicians, engineers, and pilots in the galaxy to work in the port, luring many out of Baquar's clutches which caused friction that escalated more than once into violent confrontations. Baquar eventually learned that Elia Maka, and Tendrites in general, were forces not to be reckoned with.

Korbot had grown into the height and strength of his people, his skin sunbaked to a mahogany hue, his helmet of thick black hair worn to his broad shoulders, and broad mustached face stern in countenance, especially when confronting Baquar's men.

He gave the door another powerful yank forcing a stubborn dent straight.

There were days, especially during the summer season, he missed being a star pilot. His successful running days had come to an abrupt halt after his father was killed in a suspicious accident, leaving the port as Elia's only legacy to his son.

That, and the fact that Korbot's Rhadurian partner had been injured in a near fatal confrontation with the Corporate Police, planted him firmly in the role of portmaster.

He maneuvered the weight of the bay door into the frame, then used the plasma torch to repair the ragged gashes rent through the thick metal by blazer fire. He worked in silence, sweating despite the cooling system working overtime. He would have a stern discussion with the technician he had assigned the repairs to the night before. He wondered vaguely where the man had disappeared to and if he had returned. That thought gave him pause. If the technician were still absent, a visit to Baquar would be the next step and that thought didn't please Korbot.

Korbot's men were generally trustworthy, loyal to him and to their jobs. They were the best at what they did, were paid well and treated with the respect they deserved by their employer. None of them dared cross him. When he bellowed an order, there was no hesitation in carrying it out. They respected him because they knew, despite his fierce appearance and looming height, Korbot

was a quiet-spoken, reserved, and normally good-natured individual. His main dislike was people, human or otherwise, such as Baquar and those who worked for the Sinnetian.

A grinding, squealing, clanking racket assaulted Korbot's ears. He straightened and frowned into the glare of the summer sky to watch a battered, scorched Denovan freighter settle into bay slot four directly across from where he worked. By the look of the outer hull, the old freighter had just managed to escape a run-in with the Police cruisers patrolling the space outside of Sinnet's jurisdiction.

Korbot made it a point to memorize the ships that came to his port and get to know as much about the assorted pilots as was available. He had seen this old freighter a few times and knew little enough about its occupant. He stopped working and watched with interest as the protesting main hatch lowered and thumped to the ground.

The fact that the freighter and its pilot were Denovan was enough to raise Korbot's interest, as Denovans had an aversion to their offspring taking to the stars. As far as Korbot was aware, this pilot was the only one in existence to break with that tradition. He suppressed his amusement as the human pilot climbed out of his ship looking in worse shape than it did. If Korbot's information

was correct, the man's name was Sneighd Arkon, age around twenty-four human years, young for a Denovan, barely an adult by Tendrite reckoning.

Arkon kicked the landing gear in obvious disgust and walked somewhat unsteadily through the port, glancing briefly towards Korbot as he passed, probably heading to the nearest canteen.

An unsettling feeling swept over Korbot. He watched until Arkon was out of sight. A skirmish with a Police Cruiser was unnerving; however, when a pilot reached the safety of Sinnet with a Police Cruiser in pursuit, the result was normally jubilant bragging, whistling, and shouting. Arkon had looked exhausted, his eyes hooded, his face haggard and pale, his gait sluggish as he made his way through the bay.

Korbot hadn't seen any evidence of injury, but that was a possibility. If Arkon was injured, Korbot hoped he had sense enough to go to a medical center to be cleared for flight before leaving. He would have to keep an eye out for Arkon. If the younger man seemed little better when he returned to his freighter, Korbot would ground him until he was cleared by a physician.

Stretching his shoulders and neck, he returned to his work. It was usually best not to get too interested in the pilots who landed

in the port, but he wasn't about to let one of them crash into his docking bays.

He gathered his tools and was exiting the bay when he heard the growl of the turbo-ion engine of an old Rhadurian space hauler as it landed expertly into slot five. He took a deep breath, shaking his head in amusement. He knew all too well the history and identity of the old hauler and its pilot.

The main hatch slid upward with a slight hiss and a medium-sized girl, wearing the tight black britches, off white utility work tunic, and knee-high black boots of a Rhadurian pilot, jumped lithely to the ground, adjusting the low-slung holster on her slender hips.

Haunalyn was known to every star pilot and portmaster in this part of the galaxy. Working for her father, she made frequent parts and supply runs to most of the planets in the Corporation jurisdiction, and a few to places he was sure her father knew nothing about.

He knew she was eighteen, and had heard she was hot-tempered, stubborn, and reputed to be better than most at handling a ship. As the saying went, the moon didn't travel out of its home planet's orbit. This reputation, Korbot suspected, was earned more by her coming to Sinnet and hanging around the

canteen crowded with rogues and villains from the multitude of planets, moons, and asteroids scattered about the universe.

He kept a close, but discreet eye on her when she was in port, a favor to her father, and his oldest and dearest friend, the Rhadurian shipmate injured in the battle with the Corporation so many years before. He suspected Deacon didn't know of his daughter's visits to Sinnet. Deacon was well acquainted with the type of riffraff who frequented the planet. He had once been one of them. After being injured, his wife died, leaving him with a five-year-old daughter. He had determined to raise her properly, and Korbot knew he would never approve of Haunalyn coming to the worst planet, nor of some associations she had made there.

Haunalyn flicked her long brown hair away from her face with a characteristic toss of her head. She caught sight of Korbot watching her and offered a quick grin and short wave before disappearing through the bay. He returned her greeting with a slight nod of his head. Once she was out of sight, he crossed the port to the main building to log in the new arrivals.

Chapter Two

Sneighd sat quietly in a darkened corner of the dingy canteen. Aside from the new arrival staring intently at him from the long metal semi-circle bar, he took no notice of the flotsam of creatures crowded inside the cramped building filled with the thick fog of hundreds of different types of acrid smoke, the body odors of as many beings, and the sour smells of drinks and food being served to them.

Throughout the canteen, loud music and various and sundry languages racketed through his brain. Pings, screeches, blasts, and ringing bells of myriad types of electronic games, and the shouts of the players, didn't help. He longed for a switch that would shut it off. He was tired and aching, his head throbbing along with the percussion from the band. He toyed with the tumbler filled with the light blue colored drink in front of him, not really interested in it. He had lost his desire for a drink as soon as he sat down.

He sighed and ran a bruised hand through his tousled blond hair and across his tired green eyes. He had made the worst kind of mistake. He knew it. He had known it before he made it. In a rash moment of bad judgment, in a desperate attempt to salvage his ship, which was in bad need of repairs, he had gone to Baquar Starka for a loan.

Baquar Starka gladly lent him the money. Baquar was always glad to lend money on a 30-day loan to anyone stupid enough to ask for one. He was even glad to provide Sneighd a way to help repay it. It was simple enough, easy for anyone with intelligence and nerve. The job would provide Sneighd what he needed to repay the loan, interest, and have a tidy sum left over as profit.

Except it hadn't happened the way it was supposed to. Sneighd arrived at his destination with no problems, met with the supplier at the designated meeting place, and found Baquar's supplier waiting for him, along with a handful of armed men. Calmly and without threat, the supplier, a massive humanoid of a race Sneighd had never encountered, informed Sneighd that the supplier and his men had decided to keep the merchandise, as well as all the profits, for themselves. They didn't care what Baquar might think about their decision.

It had taken every ounce of human control and common sense for Sneighd not to kill the supplier where he stood. Attempting anything so foolish would have ended in his own death and served no purpose. He had settled for a solid right hook to the other man's beaked nose before battling his way free through the knot of other men and creatures determined to keep him from leaving.

By a miracle, he was alive, but that was little consolation. He was still broke, late with the payment, with no way to pay it. He had thought returning to Sinnet might buy him some time. He figured his only chance was to try and talk his way into a stall by explaining to Baquar it wasn't his fault and that the Sinnetian might want to investigate his suppliers more closely. By the time Sneighd decided that might be easier said than done, it was too late to go anywhere else. His ship was beyond repair, having barely limped to Sinnet without getting decimated by the Police Cruisers lurking in the outer orbit.

Baquar was not a kind or understanding creature. He was not lenient. It wouldn't matter to him the fiasco wasn't Sneighd's fault. It wasn't hard to figure that every two-bit thug in his employ was keeping watch for the late debtor and would find him eventually. With his ship disabled, there was no place Sneighd could hide, and hiding wouldn't help anyway. Baquar's tentacles were far-reaching beyond Sinnet.

Sighing again, Sneighd took along drink, grimacing at the bitter taste, and briefly considered inviting the girl who had been staring at him to join him. She had vanished.

He called for another drink, a plain amber liquid that burned its way down his throat into his empty stomach. Sneighd admitted to

himself inwardly that getting drunk wasn't the answer to his problems. Now, he didn't really care. Baquar was out there, somewhere, and more than likely long since informed the damaged freighter was in port. Baquar's spies were everywhere and thorough. Sneighd was surprised he hadn't already been graced with their company.

The sun was setting when he staggered into the dusty, refuse filled street, feeling in somewhat better spirits as he made his unsteady way to his ship. His plan was to crawl into the freighter, close it up around him like a giant Paradin clam shell, and pass out for as long as he could, hopefully dying in his sleep before morning came along with the hangover he was sure to have.

Blinking the fog from his eyes, he pressed a wavering finger at the hatch release, missing the first time, then cursing in annoyance when he did make contact because nothing happened. He started to hit the unyielding release again, but a slight hiss behind him halted his movement. Closing his eyes, he leaned his forehead against the cool metal of the outer hull of the freighter.

A familiar voice like gravel in a tin can spoke to him with sickening pleasantness.

“Good-evening, Sneighd, my dear young friend. It is good you have arrived at long last. I have missed you. Did you know you were two months overdue with your payment?”

Muttering to himself, Sneighd slowly turned to face the ugly squat Sinnetian. He wasn't surprised to see Faifa, the reptilian Kenza, a humanoid race with thick scaly bluish green skin and a snake shaped head and reptile features. Faifa was Baquar's second-in-command, the only one attending the balding rodent. Sneighd knew, however, there were other of Baquar's henchmen concealed close by.

“Stuff it, Baquar.” Sneighd's words slurred slightly. He was in no mood for playing games.

Baquar was unimpressed. “Tch, tch, tch.” He sighed in mock sadness. “My dear Sneighd, you've been drinking. Such a thing is bad for your health. You might have an accident, and wouldn't that be a shame?”

Sneighd snorted in derision and stared directly into Baquar's ugly face. He was pleased to see the Sinnetian flinch. He thought he saw a glint of amusement in the Kenza's face, but with that race, it was hard to read expressions.

“Is that right? Planning to manufacture one?”

He saw Faifa shake his head and heard a slight snicker. He wrinkled his nose at the Kenza who looked rueful.

A hard edge crept into Baquar's rasping voice. "My boy, it sorrows me that my trust seems to have been misplaced. I took you at your word and you have failed to fulfill your obligation. It is too bad. It really is because now I will be forced to take my payment the hard way. I do hate to do that because I am fond of you."

Sneighd laughed as he glanced around the shadowed bay areas, catching glimpses of men hiding here and there behind equipment and other ships.

"Yeah, I'm sure it breaks your heart. I strongly suggest you have this conversation with the crooked supplier you sent me to, because he was adamant that he was not going to play nice. Because of his double-cross, I don't have your money, as I am sure you're aware. And if the portmaster catches you here, you and your men are history." He put his hand on Baquar's shoulder, whispering confidentially. "Look, Baquar, we can work this out and avoid any unpleasantness. Give me some time. I have a few ideas on how to get your money and your supplies returned, with interest."

Baquar gently removed Sneighd's hand, pulling away slightly from the smell of the drink on Sneighd's breath. His voice retained its mock friendliness, but Sneighd could see the tight lines around Baquar's lips.

“No. No. It will not work, Sneighd. I know your reputation. If I were so unwise as to let you go, I would never see you again. I will deal with this reluctant supplier in good time. I have my own ideas. As for our dear portmaster, he will not catch us, so do not concern yourself.” He motioned with his hand and his men materialized out of the darkness.

Sneighd turned to escape, forgetting where he was, and was stopped short by his ship. A dull ache began in the back of his head. He fought against it, knowing he must keep all his senses. Like as not, they were about to be beaten out of him, again. Swallowing hard, he took a deep breath and braced himself. Better a beating than certain death, and he had no guarantees on that score.

Chapter Three

Korbot glanced up from his cluttered desk to check his chronometer, gladly noting it was time to start locking down the bay doors. He rose to his feet, stretching the stiffness out of his shoulder and neck muscles, yawned, and reached for his keypad.

He was in process of locking the bay on dock four when he heard a loud noise inside followed by a low groan. Through the dim light inside, he caught a glimpse of one of Baquar's henchmen and with a savage bellow, slammed the bay door back. He rushed inside, his huge fists slinging aliens and humans two at a time out of his way with such force he heard their bones audibly snap as they hit the walls and the ground. He cleared a path to place himself between Baquar and the bloodied pilot held against the hull of the battered Denovan freighter.

It was immediately obvious to the portmaster that Baquar had not expected him to appear. Baquar started backing away as fast as his flabby bulk would allow, grabbing at any of his men closest to him and using them as a shield.

"I warned you, Baquar!" Korbot growled.

“Fool! Shield this miscreant at your own risk. We have an agreement.” Baquar motioned his men back, concealing his hand behind the one in front of him.

Korbot saw the palm-laser drop into Baquar’s hand. He grabbed the young pilot by the collar and threw him to the ground, then dived just as the needle-thin beam whizzed over his head striking the hull of the freighter. The scorch mark blended in with all the other damage already there. Korbot yanked the blazer from his hip as he dropped and in seconds the air was filled with crisscrossing bolts from all manner of hand weapons.

From the shelter of the freighter landing gear, Korbot saw that Baquar had reached the bay door. At the same time, another man entered, a Corporation Official who looked startled by the battle he had obviously blundered into. The Official froze for a second, then turned for a quick retreat, only to find himself staring into the palm-laser aimed at him. There was nothing Korbot could do but watch as Baquar fired, the bolt passing directly through the man’s skull between his eyes. The man dropped and Korbot thought he saw Baquar grinning as he fled the chaos.

Chapter Four

Haunalyn sauntered through the port, ready for a good night's sleep before leaving in the morning for home. She hadn't taken two steps into the bay area when an energy bolt hissed past her, grazing her left cheek. With a yelp, she dove to the ground, automatically pulling her weapon as she crawled to the nearest source of protection.

She could have slapped herself for failing to hear the commotion in the bays until it was almost too late. There were men and aliens running every which way, the air filled with the ion smoke from their various weapons. From her vantage point, she spied the portmaster kneeling behind the landing gear of a freighter that had seen better days. At his feet, stretched out on his stomach, frantically taking shots every chance, he had, was the young, blond pilot she had seen earlier sitting alone in the canteen.

She had no idea what was happening or why, but it was obvious that the portmaster and pilot were the targets of an assault. She recognized two of the assailants as belonging to what passed as the Sinnet law enforcement, hired thugs, and she wasn't about to let her father's oldest friend be blasted to bits by a bunch of lowlife misfits.

Dodging and weaving, she made her way to the two men at the freighter.

“Get inside your ship, dummy!” She slid into the shelter of the landing gear next to Korbot.

The pilot glared at her through one completely closed black eye and stream of blood in his other one. “Grow up! I can’t. They’ve jammed the hatch.”

A quick glance at the mechanism next to the hatch proved his words. “Terrific.” She tapped Korbot on the shoulder and jerked her thumb in the direction of her hauler.

He nodded his understanding, reached down a huge hand, and yanked the young pilot up by his shirt collar, pushing him quickly towards the hauler as soon as he was on his feet. Haunalyn was already aboard and seated in the cockpit when the men stumbled through the hatch.

Haunalyn felt a surge of adrenaline and strange excitement as she let loose several short blasts from her ship’s forward cannons, scattering Baquar’s men in all directions. Through the noise she heard Korbot angrily shouting but didn’t understand what he was saying and didn’t care.

The din outside the hauler faded into silence. The thick swirling smoke slowly began to dissipate. For several minutes, Haunalyn kept surveillance to see if Baquar's men would return. When they showed no indication of doing so, she slid out of the pilot's seat, grinning in triumph, and sauntered back to the main hull where the two exhausted men were waiting.

Korbot stood next to one of the portholes staring into the bay area, a grim scowl on his broad face. The pilot sat in the floor where he had evidently collapsed. He looked as if he might pass out and she saw his hand snake inside of his jacket as if he were retrieving something, but his hand came out empty. He tried to wipe the blood from his mouth and cheek. For a moment, he looked vulnerable and helpless to her, and for some unexplained reason, that made her angry.

Standing feet apart, hands on her hips, she eyed him disapprovingly. "Would you mind telling me what the heck that was all about?"

Silence answered her. Korbot turned his attention from the porthole to the pilot who looked as if he wasn't even aware she had spoken to him. He suddenly began to chuckle which soon blossomed into a full-fledged laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Haunalyn wasn’t sure the beating he had sustained hadn’t caused serious brain damage.

Gasping for breath, he looked up. He seemed to be fighting for control as he wiped the tears and blood out of his eyes.

“Me.” He coughed. The cough caused a spasm of pain. “I’ve been in some ludicrous positions before, but this one…” He coughed again and groaned. He squinted up at her through his one good eye. “Hey, aren’t you that girl that was in the canteen?” His face went suddenly white and he doubled over, holding his head and stomach. “Go ahead, sissy,” he muttered to himself. “Faint, you idiot.”

Korbot crossed to him and offered a helping hand. His concern was rewarded by his hand being slapped away.

“Don’t coddle me! I’ll be alright.”

Haunalyn had a strong urge to loosen a few of the pilot's teeth. After all, the portmaster had just saved his life. She took a threatening step toward him with her fists clenched. “Why, you ungrateful…”

His head jerked up and the look he gave her was anything but friendly. “Don’t start with me, girlie. I’m not in the mood.”

“Gir---why you.” Her grab for him was intercepted by Korbot latching onto her arm. He released her then jerked the younger man roughly to his feet.

“Look, punk, you be civil to the young lady. If not for her, you and I would be ashes.”

Sneighd's expression was incredulous. “Young lady? You call ‘that’ a young lady?”

“You lousy creep.” Haunalyn lunged for him. “I oughta slug you.”

Korbot caught her around her waist and held tight.

“Yeah? Go ‘head.” Sneighd sneered at her. “What’s one more bruise. Some lady. Since when did “young ladies” wear their father’s cast-off britches and fly around in hopped up junk pieces: And since when do they go around slugging people? You’re no more a lady than I am.” The pilot laughed again and Haunalyn was pleased to notice it hurt him.

“That’s debatable.” She jeered at him. “At least this “piece of junk” flies, unlike that scrapheap of yours.”

“Brat!”

Haunalyn twisted loose from Korbot's grip and grabbed the front of the other man's shirt with both fists. "I just risked my neck to save yours; not that it's probably worth saving, so you get appreciative real fast. Otherwise, you can go back out there and take your chances with those goons."

"Children!" Korbot's loud voice reverberated through the hull.

They ignored him.

Chapter Five

Sneighd pulled away from the girl's amazingly strong grip and pushed her roughly away. "Look, sister, nobody asked you to stick your pudgy nose into this."

She stumbled and landed on her backside on the floor. "Is that so? And what else am I supposed to do when some slug takes a potshot at me?"

"They weren't shooting at you." Sneighd was fighting to stay upright. The pounding in his head was getting worse. Now was not the time to lose the fight with consciousness.

The girl's expression was dark as she scrambled to her feet. "I suppose I got this gash on my face by mental telepathy, right?"

For the first time, Sneighd noticed the ugly gash on her cheek, but he wasn't going to concede. "Under all that dirt, it's hard to tell."

His remark sent her into a rage. Before he knew what she was doing, she threw a fierce right hook, contacting his already swollen jaw, knocking him backward.

Korbot, who had thrown up his hands in disgusted defeat and gone to the acceleration couch to watch the battle from a safe distance, quickly got between them.

“Alright! Alright!” He pulled them apart. “That’s enough fighting for one day. Baquar’s men are gone and…”

“Baquar?” The girl's incredulous laughter didn’t improve Sneighd’s disposition. “You mean it was Baquar?” she asked. “Are you nuts? You were actually dumb enough to…?”

“Shut up.” Sneighd's head felt like it was being pierced with molten hot iron rods and like his brain might explode at any minute. He knew he couldn’t hold back indefinitely. The pain was reaching critical level. He reached in his pocket again and cursed under his breath at not finding what he desperately needed.

“Knock it off, both of you.” The portmaster’s booming voice silenced them. Appearing satisfied that he had their attention, he spoke directly to Sneighd. “You better get out of here before they come back.”

Silently agreeing, but for an entirely different reason, Sneighd attempted to get to his feet, which sent the hull spinning crazily. This time he didn’t refuse the steadying hand the big man offered.

As soon as he was released, he stumbled, his insides threatening to turn inside out.

“Can’t. They jammed---they jammed---the lo---. He felt himself pitch forward and vaguely perceived hands reaching to catch him before everything went black.

Korbot sat and watched the youngsters argue until he couldn’t stand it any longer. The contention was getting them nowhere. He saw Haunalyn’s hand coming up from her side, but before he could get between the two, she had sent Sneighd to his backside.

“Knock it off.” The reverberation of his voice through the hull caught even him off guard. He jumped despite himself as he reached to help Sneighd from the floor. “You had better get out of here before they come back.”

Sneighd shook his head and Korbot grabbed his arm to keep him from falling again. He began to worry the younger man might be hurt a lot worse than he appeared.

Sneighd tried to answer. His eyes suddenly rolled back into his head and he pitched forward. Haunalyn reached to catch him, as did Korbot, and together they carried him to the acceleration couch.

They stared down at the sick man for several seconds before Korbot shifted his stance and squared his shoulders. He had to check on his men. They should have come to help. He was anxious to know why they hadn't, and to inspect the damage to his port walls. He would also need to notify a med-center that he had a possibly severely injured, or even worse, diseased individual needing care.

He eyed Haunalyn sternly. "Keep an eye on him."

She snapped her head around, her eyes round with surprise. "Where are you going?"

"I need to find out where my men are and check the port."

"Those creeps might still be out there." She pointed to the porthole to indicate exactly where "out there" was.

"If there are, they won't be for long. I must find out if my men are alright, and Baquar better hope they are. He," he pointed at the pilot, "needs medical help. I'll get the hatch to the freighter open and see if we can't get it running. In the morning, if he's still alive, we'll get him safely out of here, one way or another."

Haunalyn caught his sleeve as he started to leave. "You can't leave him here," she protested. "I mean, this is my ship. I don't want him here."

“Just for the night.” Korbot looked down at Sneighd. “I don’t think he’ll give you any trouble.” He grinned. “He probably won’t even wake up. But somebody needs to keep an eye on him. He’s hurt and I don’t know how bad. Watch him. If he starts bleeding from his ears or nose, or gets a fever, come and find me. I don’t think it’s that bad. Just in case...”

Haunalyn let go of his arm. She gave him a petulant look.

“Look, I know you don’t want to, but it’s just for a few hours, and you’re not going anywhere until morning either.” He studied her, thinking how much she resembled her father. He felt a twinge of the regret.

Haunalyn shrugged and offered him a lopsided smile. “I guess it won’t kill me. Might kill him.”

Korbot laughed. He shook his finger at her in mock seriousness. “Behave, or I’ll tell your father.”

He chucked her under her chin. He moved to the hatch. It hissed up and he cautiously descended the ramp. The bays were quiet. A light was on in one at the far end, indicating the owner of a Saris Flyer had returned. He could make out the simian form moving about checking the ship.

He discovered three of his men had disappeared. The others, gathered in his office preparing to start a search for him, admitted to being lured away by a message that he was in trouble.

“By the time we realized it wasn’t true,” his head mechanic, Peale, said, “we were locked out of the bays. Took us a while to get the locks to release.”

“Then we had to chase of few of Baquar’s skags out.” Portman, his second-in-command took up the narrative. “I felt like a bloody idiot. Should never have fallen for a ruse like that. What was it all about?”

“A debtor.” Korbot didn’t feel like or want to tell them. He knew what they would do.

“Are you bleedin’ kiddin’ me?” Portman slapped his palm on the desk. “All this damage over some stupid pilot?”

Korbot almost smiled, but he was too angry and too tired to find the situation humorous. “Where are Keeny, Malak, and Estan?”

Portman looked worried. “Don’t know. They weren’t here when we got the message and we’ve not seen them.”

Quint, another one of the mechanics, spoke up. “They been gone all afternoon.”

“You don’t s’pose...?” Portman left the question hanging.

Korbot understood because he had had the same thought. “I don’t know. I’m going to find out. Right now, get to work on the Denovan freighter and see if you can get it running.”

That brought a few snickers from his men.

“You’ll have to unjam the hatch.” Korbot pointed to two of his men. “See if you can find our missing men.” He turned to Portman. “Station some men to work in shifts around the bays. Shoot any of Baquar’s men on sight. No warnings, no questions, just shoot. I have some work to do here.”

His men dispersed and he used his time to catch up on his past due business. From his office, he could see and hear anyone entering the bays. He noted and checked off the pilots returning for the night. All were accounted for and none of them returned in the company of a stranger.

He tried not to think of the battle. He couldn’t let himself worry about Sneighd or Haunalyn. He had to keep his attention focused on his missing men, on the damages to the bays, and on the mysterious message his men had received. Baquar had been the instigator, obviously, but there was something about the whole

situation that didn't make sense, such as what he had witnessed between Baquar and the Corporation Official.

He straightened suddenly in his chair and stared out the window, not at anything, but inwardly he replayed the battle. He remembered the stranger who had entered during the fight. Baquar had deliberately, or so it seemed, sneaked in behind him and had killed him. Wrong place, wrong time? Korbot didn't think so. He remembered the look on Baquar's face the instant before he shot the unsuspecting Corporate official. What was a Corporate official doing on Sinnet in the first place, and why had he come to the bay? He had not seemed to be startled to find Baquar behind him when he turned, and Baquar had killed him before the man had time to react.

Korbot didn't like it. He didn't like it at all. Baquar had apparently been looking for Sneighd Arkon, or so Korbot thought, until the killing of the official. Was Arkon the real reason Baquar had trespassed into the bays? That didn't seem likely, and was beneath Baquar's character, to be there himself when usually he just sent some of his men to collect on a debt.

Korbot checked his chronometer. It was late and he needed to get some sleep. In the morning, he would be asking questions, and

he knew he would get his answers because Baquar's men weren't insusceptible to persuasion.

He checked with his men, but all was quiet. He dropped onto the cot in the corner. Working late wasn't uncommon for him. There were many nights spent on the cot instead of at his private dwelling.

He was alert and ready for trouble. In a strange, almost reckless way, he found he even hoped for it. Another assault on the bays would give him sufficient reason to wring Baquar's neck, something he had wanted to do for a long, long time.

Chapter Six

Sneighd opened his eyes to a dim orange light. Awareness of his surroundings returned slowly. His body felt hot, but the air on his face was cool. He could hear the hum of the environment regulator and the touch of a cool damp cloth draped across his forehead.

He shifted and heard the squeak of the synthetic cushions of the acceleration couch on which he laid full length. Thermal blankets covered him, and he pushed them aside. They were quickly readjusted by a gentle hand. His head was cradled and lifted to a cup of water held to his lips. He took a few sips, the water soothing his dry mouth. The hand brushed wayward strands of his hair from his sweaty brow.

“Better?” The voice was familiar and female.

He tried to recognize it, tried to remember where he was and what had happened. The effort made his already aching head hurt even more. He rubbed his stinging eyes that felt like they were full of grit. “Where am I?”

“Still on board the Rogue Marauder.”

He remembered. The girl, Baquar, the battle in the bays; he tried to sit up, but the girl pushed him down. He peered at her face

and had to blink to make sure she was the same girl. Her face was clean. The gash above her eyebrow had been treated. In the soft blue and red lights of the instrument consoles, she looked almost pretty.

He smiled. “You got a name?”

She didn’t smile back. In fact, she looked a little annoyed.
“Haunalyn. You?”

“Sneighd Arkon.” His throat caught and he coughed.

“You shouldn’t talk for a while,” Haunalyn said. “You have a fever, and I hope whatever is wrong with you is not catching. You need to rest.”

Sneighd laughed, choked again, and asked for another sip of water. Once his throat was cleared, he grinned. “Don’t worry. I’m not contagious, just slightly battered.”

She didn’t look convinced.

The firebrands and throbbing drums returned to his brain. The interior of the hauler was beginning to spin, slowly at first, then with increased velocity. He clamped his eyes shut against the sensation, hoping the contents of his stomach would stay where they were. He could feel the darkness creeping in on and cloaking

his mind. The girl was right. He needed to rest. He opened his mouth with the intention of telling her he was fine, but the black curtain descended before he could get the words formed.

Haunalyn shook her head in grim annoyance as she tucked the blankets closer around the pilot. She wasn't a nursemaid and could think of more important things she would rather be doing, but it was several hours until morning. She would have to wait.

When she had cleaned . . . what did he say his name was? Sneighd? When she had cleaned him up after Korbot left, she had almost felt sorry for him, until she remembered how he had gotten into the state he was in. He was an idiot, no doubt, another hotshot space jockey who thought he could get by on his good looks and charm.

“Dummy,” she grumbled at him. “You better not have anything catching, or so help me, I’ll give you to Baquar myself.”

She checked his temperature, not as high as last time. She replaced the wet cloth on his forehead with a fresh one.

“I gotta go home in the morning. I don’t think dad would understand if I returned dragging you along like a lost puppy.” She rearranged the blankets and stood staring down at her unwelcome

guest. “I hope you have a plan for getting out of here.” She reached to the overhead light and switched it off. She considered her predicament and sighed in frustration. She hoped Korbot had things under control in the port because if she didn’t reach home on time, she would be grounded. She didn’t want her father to know she came to Sinnet. If he ever found out, she would never get the Marauder back.

She went to her quarters and kicked off her work boots. Before switching off her light, she stared up at the ceiling. “Korbot, please, have everything under control.”

The sun filtered through a porthole directly into Sneighd’s eyes when he woke. With a groan, he turned his head from the brightness and pulled himself into a sitting position, which, he decided, was a mistake. The pressure in his skull felt as if it might explode at any minute. The right side of his face hurt, and he could barely open his left eye. When he breathed, it was as if someone with a red-hot sharp knife kept stabbing him in the ribs.

He did his best to straighten his spine, wincing at the pain as he looked carefully around. He was alone.

He knew from his injuries that he hadn't dreamed the night before. Unsteadily, he climbed to his feet and took inventory of his surroundings. The outside hatch of the hauler was open, and he made his way unsteadily to it. Bright sunlight pierced his swollen eyes, making him jerk his head back into the shadows. He spied what was left of his battered freighter across the bays and groaned. There wasn't much reason to hope for it to be restored. The battle of the previous evening had finished destroying any chance of salvage.

A noise to the left brought his attention to the girl completing some repair on her ship's engines. She saw him about the same time and sauntered over to the ramp, wiping her hands on a cloth after stuffing a fuser in one of the utility pockets of her pants. Her face was oil smeared and her expression cocky.

She leaned a hip against one of the ramp struts. "You know, you shouldn't be up."

He ignored the slight concern he thought he heard in her voice. "I don't need you to tell me what I should or shouldn't do." Immediately pain shot through his bruised cheek and he winced. He hadn't expected talking to hurt.

Raising an eyebrow and looking as if his ill temper amused her, the girl, whose name if he remembered right was Haunalyn, ascended the ramp to where he stood.

“That’ll teach you.” She grinned at him.

He didn’t appreciate any gesture of concern, and she probably figured she would never see him again once they went their separate ways. He wasn’t so sure. Since he had landed on Sinnet, he seemed to keep running into her.

Haunalyn took him by the arm and tried to lead him inside the hauler. “Let me put something on those bruises.”

He yanked his arm loose. “Leave me alone. Ow!” He grabbed the side of his face.

She shrugged and retreated into the body of the hauler. “Suit yourself.”

Feeling like an idiot, he slowly followed her, holding onto the wall for support as he made his way back to the acceleration couch. He sat watching her as she moved to a small compartment and poured hot liquid out of a heating container built into the console.

“Want some?” She held out a thermal mug of the brew to him.

“Yeah.”

She poured some of the liquid into another mug and handed it to him. He cautiously accepted the drink and tasted it. It was dark in color, slightly bitter, but it felt good trickling down his irritated throat.

She was staring at him. “Sure you don’t want me to put something on that?”

The throbbing in his face was nothing compared to that in his head, but any relief was better than nothing. “Go ‘head.” He closed his eyes. Even the dim inside lighting made them burn.

Grateful that he hadn’t slipped into a prolonged unconsciousness, he knew that was still a dangerous possibility. He had to reach his ship, retrieve the crucial thing he needed, and get off Sinnet before anything else went wrong.

He heard Haunalyn moving around and soon felt the cool touch of a fragrant salve as her soft fingers gently smeared whatever it was over his black and blue cheek. His body relaxed and he was almost asleep when the hauler lurched violently, knocking Haunalyn sprawling and him into the floor.

As they fought to regain their senses and balance, the small ship came alive with bright sizzling light. Too late, Sneighd recognized

what was happening. Electrical currents coursed through his body, engulfing both him and Haunalyn. His vision exploded white fire in his brain, and he wasn't sure if it was Haunalyn or him that screamed before he went out.

Chapter Seven

Korbot shot out of his office, hitting the ground running without touching the steps and charged through the bays at the first fire blast. The bays were filled with Baquar's men, all waiting for the currents from the cannon to dissipate from the hull of the Rhadurian Hauler. Electric pulses trailed around the bay walls like great silver and red snakes, leaving scorch marks and smoke in their wake.

Korbot encountered several men coming at him in a dead run, probably to make certain he was incapacitated, and the port sealed off. They obviously weren't expecting to encounter him and slid to a stop with raised weapons. Korbot didn't miss a step as he barreled into them, grabbed the closest two and whipped them around into the others sending them flying into the heated walls.

Intent on watching the hauler, the comrades of those men failed to notice a very unhappy portmaster change direction. He reached the wreck of the Denovan freighter, quickly un-jammed the hatch, and slipped unnoticed inside. The freighter's ion thrusters, miraculously still armed and functional, spewed burning energy, the fire filling the air as it reached out to incinerate anyone close to the ship. Screams reached earsplitting pitch and faded quickly as

men close to the freighter and further away received fatal, major, and minor burns as they fled.

Korbot cursed every second of delay while he waited for the bay floor to cool. As soon as he could, he jumped from the freighter and ran to the Rhadurian ship, racing up the ramp into the interior afraid of what he might find.

Haunalyn was dragging herself to her knees with the aid of Sneighd's arm.

“Are you two alright?” Korbot gave them both a hand.

Leaning against him, Haunalyn shook her head. “What hit me?”

“A Pulsar Cannon.” Korbot visually examined her for injuries as Sneighd stumbled to the acceleration couch and collapsed. Korbot didn't like the look of Sneighd's face, which looked as if every bit of blood had drained from it.

Haunalyn pulled away from him, assuring him she was fine, and went to check her instruments. “Good. No damage.” She threw a glance in Sneighd's direction. “Well, not to the ship anyway.”

Korbot peered from the hatch into the bay. There was nothing in sight save for the charred remains of some of the unluckier victims caught by the thruster fire. He could, however, hear the faint hum of a welding tool. His men were trying to cut through the bay doors. He didn't know where Baquar's men were hiding, but knew they were out there somewhere.

A curse from Haunalyn returned his attention to her just as an energy bolt slammed into the wall an inch from his face. He jumped back into the safety of the ship's interior and hit the hatch release with his fist. The hatch slammed shut in his face with abnormal speed, deflecting another bolt which he heard sizzle against the hull.

Silently encouraging his men to hurry with the bay doors, he prepared to reopen the hatch to meet the next onslaught.

Without warning, the Rhadurian hauler shot out of the docking bay at a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree angle, flinging him violently into the far wall. The force of the take-off snapped Sneighd against his seat and Korbot could see the pilot couldn't right himself. When they cleared the atmosphere and leveled off, Sneighd was snapped out of the seat like a missile and flew across the floor, crashed into the consoles, and landed with a sickening thud squarely on his back.

“What the...!” Sneighd’s declaration was abruptly interrupted when his wind was knocked out of him by the jolt of his fall.

Korbot managed to get his feet under him. Haunalyn had evidently spotted the assailants through the cockpit shield and wasted no time getting clear of the danger.

Muttering dire threats in his own language, Korbot stumbled forward and belted himself into the co-pilot’s seat. Concerned about his men and itching to get his hands around Baquar’s fat throat, he shouted above the roar that was slowly dying as the ship leveled.

“Young lady, what the devil do you think you’re doing?”

He was impressed as he watched Haunalyn’s hands skillfully fly over her controls. She reminded him strongly of her father.

“Sorry, but I’m not going back,” she said. “You can get a transport back from Rhaduri. Those guys are playing for keeps down there. I am not letting them at the Rogue Marauder again. They’ve done enough damage that I’ll never explain to my dad.”

Her manner transported Korbot back 20 years to another battered old hauler and another hot-headed pilot who had kept his co-pilot on a permanent edge of certain destruction with his erratic aerobatics. Haunalyn, he could see, was a lot like Deacon in more

ways than one. He didn't relish the idea of facing Deacon and explaining how he had failed to keep his old partner's daughter safe.

Lights began flashing on the console. Haunalyn spat out a very unladylike curse. Korbot reminded himself to speak to her about her vocabulary as he quickly manned the co-pilot's controls.

"What is it?" Sneighd had somehow managed his way to the cockpit and was standing in the entrance. "Wait, those lights---that's---approaching ships."

"Corporate Police!" Haunalyn shouted, her voice full of anger as she fought to hold her ship level. She punched calculations into her navi-computer and the read-outs weren't encouraging to Korbot.

"What's the big idea?" Haunalyn shouted at the approaching ships.

The hauler rocked from a warning blast fired from Police Cruisers that had appeared from the opposite side of Sinnet.

Haunalyn banked the Marauder, barely missed by the second warning. "There are three of 'em on my tail. What the heck are they chasing me for?"

Korbot switched on the transmitter to call his port.

“Oh, I can’t imagine.” Sneighd’s words were full of sarcasm. “It couldn’t be because you just blasted out of the port like a runaway asteroid, could it?”

“They’re saying you killed a Corporation Exec.” Korbot spoke quietly, suddenly genuinely concerned about his two young shipmates.

“What!” Haunalyn stared at him, her eyes wide with disbelief.

Sneighd moved closer to hear better. Korbot noticed the younger man’s face had gone even paler than it had been earlier, if that was possible.

“My men just told me over the transmitter. Baquar has informed the Corporation Police that last night you murdered a Corporation representative from Capital City, someone name Cocker.”

“Are you sure?” Haunalyn asked. Her eyes were focused on what was going on outside of her ship and her hands seemed to move instinctively over the consoles.

“Cocker.” Sneighd spoke so low Korbot almost missed it. The pilot looked up. “I didn’t...”

Korbot felt dark suspicion creep over his soul as he stared at the younger man. “We know you didn’t, not last night. Baquar said there is a witness who saw you and heard you threaten this man before you arrived on Sinnet. I know the first part is a lie. There was an exec in the port last night, with Baquar, and it was Baquar who killed him. I saw him.”

Haunalyn’s eyes shifted from the cruisers to Korbot's face. “Surely the Police won’t accept Baquar’s word. They couldn't possibly take the word of that creep over yours, not if you tell them what you saw.”

Korbot gave her a dark glance. “They would, even if I did tell them the truth. Baquar has strong ties within the Corporation that go a lot higher than you might think.” He turned to Sneighd. “What about the other witness? Who is this ‘Cocker’?”

Sneighd was studying the console as if it might offer him some answers. “He’s the person who hired me to make the run. When I reached Garma, he was there with the supplier. They refused to complete the transaction. Welching on Baquar didn’t seem to bother them, probably because they knew I would take all the backlash. Baquar said he deal with them. I just didn't think he meant right away, or that he meant by using me as his scapegoat.”

Haunalyn was looking at him like he was insane. “Were you just born that stupid? You get in too deep with Baquar, then make a deal for---and it is illegal! Do you want to die? You threatened the guy, didn’t you?”

Sneighd didn’t answer right away, making it all too evident he had done just that, and judging by the bruises Korbot had seen on his knuckles, he had probably done a lot more, and in front of witnesses. But he hadn’t killed him; that was a certainty.

Korbot was beginning to understand. Baquar wanted Cocker out of his way because the man had double-crossed him. Sneighd had been an easy enough patsy, with his reputation and his ship in dire straits. Baquar set up a meeting with Cocker in the bays during an ambush on Sneighd, and the rest was easy. He paid the Corporate Police well to leave him and his syndicate alone. Cocker had cost him a great deal of money welching on the run. Baquar never let anyone get out of a debt. He probably knew Sneighd had exchanged words and blows with the exec. Who better to blame than a no-account pilot?

But it hadn’t worked out the way Baquar planned. Other people inadvertently became involved, and Baquar knew Korbot was a dangerous adversary. He would want Korbot and Sneighd

immediately eliminated, and if Haunalyn got in the way, well, that was too bad. He would see her as collateral damage.

Haunalyn snapped on her shields just as a Police Cruiser streaked across her bow, raking the Marauder with laser cannons. Putting all matters on hold for the time being, Korbot asked about weapons. He wasn't reassured by the evil little grin that crossed Haunalyn's lips as she opened the cargo hold panels on the outside of the hauler. Four almost invisible panels slid away. Four pulsar laser cannons locked neatly and securely into place.

"Hang on." She swung the Marauder around to meet the first of the cruisers. She fired and the Corporate ship vanished into debris.

Sneighd was staring at her with his mouth agape. Korbot shook his head in astonishment and dismay. No ordinary weapon on a ship as small as the Rogue Marauder was powerful enough to destroy a cruiser unless the pilot made a direct hit to the fuselage. That was next to impossible, even for an expert gunner. Haunalyn's ship cannons appeared ordinary, but that was obviously a deceit, which left Korbot wondering what Deacon had been up to over the years. He also began to wonder if Haunalyn's reputation might not be a myth after all. Deacon had been one of the best star pilots in the galaxy. It appeared he had passed his skills on to his daughter.

“Lucky shot.” Sneighd was having trouble getting his words out.

The remaining cruisers split up and tried to pull along either side of the Marauder. Haunalyn arched the hauler into a 90-degree angle upward and swung to the left. The Police Cruiser was too bulky to avoid her and suffered serious damage as she sliced across its hulk with her cannons. The cruiser veered to the right and attempted to come in behind, but the Police Captain seemed to have forgotten the other cruiser. Swinging his ship to the right, he avoided a collision but came directly into Haunalyn’s sights. The cruiser vanished into dust.

To Korbot’s dismay, Haunalyn headed straight for the last cruiser, expertly skirting the blasts. Korbot imagined panic aboard the cruiser as the crew watched the smaller ship approach directly at them with every apparent intention of ramming them head on. Even he wasn’t sure that wasn’t her plan and he mentally prepared himself for the impact.

Haunalyn pulled up at the last minute and split the cruiser’s hull with cannon fire right down the middle. She shouted triumphantly as she veered off and up.

There was a long silence.

“Are you crazy?” Sneighd’s first two words were almost whispered, the last word shouted.

Korbot snapped his head around just in time to see Haunalyn’s smile vanish.

“You’re still alive, aren’t you? She spoke low and much too calm.

Sneighd seemed to have found his composure as he glared back at her. “No thanks to you, sweetheart.”

Haunalyn narrowed her eyes and Korbot saw the muscle in her jaw clench. He had a bad feeling.

“You don’t like my flying?” She reached for a lever, a wicked grin on her face.

Sneighd wasn’t paying attention to what she was doing. “No, not particularly.”

“Then walk.”

Korbot caught her hand and pried it away from the eject lever. For a minute he thought she was going to fight him, then he felt her relax.

Sneighd was staring at the floor where he was standing. Korbot could see the realization dawn on him that he was directly over the

escape hatch. If Haunalyn had thrown that lever, Sneighd would have found himself floating in space. He backed away; hands raised as if to ward off an attacker. “You---are---crazy. Looney as a Delfian Maga Bird.”

As Sneighd turned to go back to the main hold, Korbot saw him straighten his shoulders and shake off whatever he was feeling. The Portmaster knew the younger man was making a concentrated effort not to run.

Korbot couldn't say he blamed Sneighd. He hadn't been too sure Haunalyn wouldn't have thrown the lever if he hadn't grabbed her hand. Inwardly, he took a deep sigh of relief and let it carefully out. He wasn't too sure of anything anymore.

Haunalyn was all business, her eyes on space, her skilled hands floating over the controls. Korbot studied her a long time. He could see how tense she was, and after several long minutes she finally spoke.

“What?” The irritation was strong in her one word.

“Try not to kill each other,” Korbot advised. “I have a funny feeling we're going to be together for a long time.”

Chapter Eight

Sneighd had no idea when he had fallen asleep after securely strapping himself into the acceleration couch. That girl had given him some very tense moments. No, he amended that, she had scared him to death. Almost as soon as he realized he was standing over the escape hatch, his headache returned with a vengeance. He had been glad for the bumping and swerving the hauler had been doing because it covered the fact he was stumbling back to the main hold.

The lights were dimmed, and he heard the low hum of the engines. They were still in flight. He wondered exactly where. Aside from the engines, running too smoothly for a hauler in his opinion, all else was oddly quiet.

Warily, he unstrapped the restraining belt and rose stiffly to his feet, letting his eyes clear and clapping his hands to his ears to stop the buzzing. His head felt as if it was wedged in a vice. He groped for his jacket pocket and realized with a jolt that he wasn't wearing it. He glanced around, but the flight jacket wasn't in sight. He wasn't even sure he had been wearing it when they left Sinnet. If not, then his jacket and what was in it was still onboard his freighter. That was not a good thing.

He started toward the cockpit at an unsteady pace but met the Tendrite halfway across the hold. The portmaster was irately

grumbling to himself and didn't seem to notice Sneighd standing in his way.

Unsure of the big man's state of mind, Sneighd discreetly returned to his seat. His movement caught the other man's attention and the dark eyes of the Tendrite weren't especially friendly.

"What are you doing up?" He sat down at a read-out panel and frowned at whatever he was seeing.

"Uhm..." Sneighd shrugged, not sure how to answer the question. "I woke up." He watched what the other man was doing for a moment then, curious as to what was so interesting, he went over to look. "Problem?"

"We're losing power, here---and here." Korbot pointed to a read out. "One of those cruisers must have hit something."

Sneighd leaned in to take a closer look. "Looks like the outward thruster."

"Somewhere above the fuel link." Korbot was eyeing Sneighd's face closely. "Does that hurt?"

"Only when I laugh." Sneighd did laugh then and found out he wasn't kidding. It did hurt.

“Do you know who I am?” The other man was still watching him.

Sneighd was surprised by the question, not sure what the man wanted him to say. “Yeah. The portmaster on Sinnet.”

“Korbot Maka,” Korbot said. “That’s my name. Use it from now on. And you are Sneighd Arkon. I’ve logged you in on Sinnet more than once. The girl’s name is Haunalyn. Try and remember that.”

“Is there a point to this?” Sneighd was beginning to be annoyed.

“The point is that we’re stuck with each other for now and we’re going to have to get along as best we can. You and Haunalyn aren’t off to a flying start, so to speak.”

Sneighd couldn’t argue with that. He tried not to let Korbot see the pain he could feel building in his head. He forced his face to relax and his natural humor to return. He offered a brief grin and turned his eyes back to the read-out panel.

“I don’t know what we’re going to do about that. There isn’t a planet anywhere, not even an asteroid. We need to sit this hunk of junk down so we can get a good look. Maybe I can suit up and find the problem while we’re moving.”

Korbot shook his head. “Can’t get to it without landing.”

“She have any suits?” Sneighd wouldn’t be surprised if she didn’t. Haulers seldom needed that type of equipment.

“Even if she did, you couldn’t do a walk,” Korbot said. “In case you’ve failed to notice, we’re in hyperspace.”

The hauler hit an air pocket at that moment, hiding Sneighd’s surprised stumble. The main hold began to spin around him, and he grabbed the console to steady himself. “What?”

Korbot ran a hand through his thick black hair. “That’s right. She has more illegal parts of this piece of scrap than I have in my entire port.”

Sneighd gave a short laugh. “First the cannons, now this. What else has she got running in this thing? What’s holding it together?”

Korbot shrugged, clearly not amused. “I don’t know. I don’t want to know. I already know too much. I always had in mind she wasn’t as wild as everyone said, but now---I’m not so sure.”

“You know her well?” Thinking back, Sneighd got the impression maybe Korbot knew more than he should.

“No. I know who she is. Before that rumpus on Sinnet, I hadn’t spoken to her.”

Sneighd was intrigued. “Who is she?”

Korbot hesitated, then shook his head. “Someone who needs that seat of her pants dusted.” He began working at the controls again.

Sneighd wasn’t ready to let go of the matter, not yet. “Aww, c’mon. Just because her ship is a camouflaged speed demon doesn’t mean anything. Running haulers can be a tough business, especially for a kid, and a girl at that. She needs the speed to keep her out of trouble. Not doin’ too well on that score though, is she?”

“I’d say she’s running even with you at the moment.” Korbot wasn’t smiling.

Mentally Sneighd kicked himself for being so snide, but he didn’t like the comparison. “Below the belt, old man.” He stalked down the corridor toward the cockpit. Out of Korbot’s sight, he leaned against the bulkhead and took several deep breaths. He didn’t need any arguments or confrontations, and if he didn’t find his jacket, he would soon have bigger problems to deal with.

Chapter Nine

Korbot glared at the panel in front of him, but his mind wasn't on the read outs. He had watched the young pilot closely while they were talking and had not missed the fact that Sneighd was having trouble staying upright, or the fact that his face was the color of ash. It could have been his imagination, but he had a feeling it was more than that. Something was wrong with the younger man and whatever it might be was more worrisome than problems with the ship. The three of them were going to need to support and help each other. That meant working together---all of them---even if it killed them---and it might.

Haunalyn was another matter. She was, as Sneighd pointed out, a kid, whether she admitted it or not. Despite all her obvious expertise as a pilot and the heavily modified hauler, she did not have the experience she needed for this type of trouble. Korbot knew her father let her run supplies for him, but he kept close tabs on her. Korbot wasn't oblivious to the other Rhadurian ships in his port whenever Haunalyn made landfall. Either she didn't realize the others were there, or she didn't care. But Korbot knew Deacon was fully aware of every move she made---except this one. Not only would Deacon not know what happened to her, his men

would be scouring every corner of the galaxy trying to find her.
That was some comfort.

He straightened in his seat and searched the console. Surely, she had a tracking beacon on this thing. He found it and groaned. The components were melted together, still warm to touch with strings of smoke curling up from them. The cruisers had ended all chances of Haunalyn being located by her father. The only consolation being that no one else could track the hauler either.

Chapter Ten

Haunalyn sat with her arms crossed and her face set in an angry scowl as she considered all the problems she was facing now. Though it was no big deal, the place on her face hurt. She could ignore that. Her ship was crippled. She couldn't ignore that, but so far, she hadn't found any place to put down so she could check the damage and hopefully fix it. Besides, the Rogue Marauder was her pride and joy, a gift from her father when she turned sixteen, a small old hauler that he had fixed up for her to fly supplies to nearby planets. She had managed secretly to engage some of her father's younger mechanics into helping her refurbish the Marauder. She was pretty, the boss's daughter, and would inherit the port someday. She had been glad to discover those attributes, attractive as they were, held no interests for the mechanics and technicians. They had helped her because she was the boss's daughter and that was the only reason. Their loyalty to him put her in an awkward position as she realized too late that they knew way too much about her hauler. If she got out of line, they could use that knowledge. So far, that hadn't happened, and she was careful not to do anything that would instigate retaliation.

She checked her console for what must have been the tenth time. Nothing had changed, not that she expected it to. The Marauder was leaking fuel and her tracking beacon was slag.

She heard footsteps then, out of her peripheral vision, saw the pilot Sneighd slump into the co-pilot's seat. She attacked before he even sat down. "I don't want no lectures from you, flyboy."

He held his hands up in truce. "I didn't open my mouth."

"See that you don't." She leaned forward to check a blinking light. "I've had my fill from "gramps" back there, scolding me about all the 'illegal' equipment on my ship. Better be glad it is there. Without it, we'd be bits of matter floating around the universe by now."

The muffled chuckle from her companion brought her full attention around on him. "Think it's funny?"

Sneighd shook his head. "No, I don't imagine 'gramps' does either. And by the way, I'd be careful calling him that if I were you. Y'know, you're cute when your face is red."

"Why you...!" She lunged with her fist, but he caught it and held tight. She tried to yank free, but he wasn't letting go.

"Now, now, ladies don't slug people, remember?"

She twisted her fist managing to free it. She flicked her hair from her face and gave him a killer look. “Drop dead.”

“Anything for you, princess. Anytime, but not right now.” His tone was sweetly mocking. “Have you seen my jacket?”

Still pouting, her arms again crossed, she refused to look at him. “You weren’t wearing one.”

“Oh.”

She thought she detected disappointment and glanced at him, noticing for the first time his face was an odd color of gray. She started to ask if he was okay, but he stood to leave. Before she could say or do anything, he leaned over and kissed her, moving deftly out of the range of her fist, but not fast enough to avoid the fuser she threw at him. It bounced off his shoulder and into the wall. He laughed.

“Better watch that temper, ‘lady’.”

To her dismay, he did manage to dodge the boot she threw at him.

Chapter Eleven

Deacon paced the floor of his office, grumbling and angry. He had been aware of Haunalyn's side trips to Sinnet, a place she was strictly forbidden to go. He had trusted her, giving her a hauler for her sixteenth birthday, allowing her to transport supplies to neighboring planets.

His wife had died when Haunalyn was a small child. Raising her alone hadn't been easy. On more than one occasion, he had been criticized for indulging her too much. Without a woman's influence, Haunalyn had taken after him, spending a lot of her time, maybe too much of her time, in the bays of the port with the other pilots. If he had known she was going to disobey his strict orders not to stray out of Rhaduri's realm of space, he would have permanently grounded her, her ship, and possibly have locked her in her room for the rest of her life.

He paused by the bay window and stared out across the port. He shook his head. No, he wouldn't have. He had always seen the fierce independence in his only child. She was that much like him. After the death of his wife, he had not given much thought of remarrying, not for lack of offers. Unfortunately, or maybe

fortunately, there were very few human females on Rhaduri and those were too old, too young, or more concerned with his status as a wealthy portmaster. All of them insisted that he needed to send Haunalyn away to school on one of the Corporate planets, which he refused to even consider. She was his daughter. Her place was with him.

He sighed heavily and leaned his head against the plexi-window.

He had given her the hauler so she could help run the port and feel included. He had given her all his knowledge and skill, taught her about flying, about space travel, about all the different types of ships, about mechanics and computers, about weapons and how to use them, how to fight, everything except how to be a girl. Now, she was being sought by the Corporate Police, accused of abetting a suspected murderer of a Corporation official.

He shoved his hands into the pockets of his work pants and began to pace again. Something was wrong with the report he had received earlier that morning. It was nothing he could pinpoint, but he had a feeling deep inside there was more to the matter than he knew.

He had heard of Sneighd Arkon. The young pilot was gaining an unsavory reputation and had been on Rhaduri on more than one

occasion. As was his custom, Deacon had thoroughly investigated the young pilot who was notorious for staying in trouble, mostly dodging the Corporation for running illegal contraband. That wasn't unusual. Nearly every pilot trying to survive in the galaxy had the same reputation.

What bothered Deacon was the fact his own men assigned to keep an eye on Haunalyn had failed to inform him of the fact she knew Sneighd Arkon. How the young man had managed to gain the Corporation's attention and drag Haunalyn into the middle of the disaster was a question Deacon wanted answered. Where the Corporation was concerned, things weren't always what they seemed. Throw someone like Baquar Starka into the mix and it was a fair wager there was something entirely different going on than what was being reported.

Deacon knew all about Sinnet and about the scum who ran that isolated planet. He had the intense idea that Baquar was involved, if not the cause of the entire fiasco. When he was younger, Deacon had his run ins with the rodent, and had paid a high price for it.

A dull ache in his right leg tugged his memory. Absently, he fingered the old injury. His fists balled; he gritted his teeth as he gazed up toward the heavens. There was one consolation. Korbot

was with Haunalyn and if anyone could get her out of this mess, he could.

Deacon shook his head. What was he thinking? Korbot was just one man. And how in the world had he gotten mixed up in this? He had sworn no more adventures. The last time Deacon saw him, he had said he just wanted to retire peacefully to run the port inherited from his father, if any life could be peaceful with Baquar and his henchmen lurking around every corner.

Grumbling, Deacon turned from the window, a twinge of pain stabbing his leg, reminding him of the deadly bolt that lamed him the last time a Corporation slug had gotten too close. That had been years ago, when Haunalyn was still a baby, when he had promised himself that he would never fly again. He had too much responsibility taking care of his business, the port, and his daughter. That was a lie, and he knew it. The truth was that confrontation with the Corporation had been too close. A few inches to the right and the bolt would have severed his artery, and no one would have been left to watch over his daughter.

He had to do something. He couldn't just sit and wait while his only child was in trouble. He felt trapped, helpless, uncertain as to what he should do---and incredibly angry.

Chapter Twelve

Baquar Starka looked up from the disarray on his desk as the Kenza entered.

“Well, Faifa?”

“The ship escaped them,” Faifa reported, elongating his s’s with a hiss, a common speech pattern for his people. “The pilot destroyed the cruisers. The Rogue Marauder is the name of the ship. A Rhadurian hauler equipped with several renovations that are quite illegal, and very much lethal.”

“Who is the pilot?” Baquar asked.

Rhaduri had a special and unpleasant meaning for him. Very few ships had the capacity to wipe out a Corporation cruiser, and certainly not a ship the size of a hauler. Only one person in the galaxy would have such a ship.

“Her name is . . .”

“Her? Baquar was surprised. “The pilot is a female?”

“Yes.” Faifa nodded his diamond shaped head.

“Well, that could be to our advantage.” Baquar chuckled nastily. There was a gleam in his dull gray eyes. “If we capture that pilot, then Sneighd, being the lady’s man that he thinks he is, will give himself up to save her.”

If Faifa had possessed a nose, he would have wrinkled it. Baquar did not know Sneighd Arkon as well as he thought he did. Baquar did not understand what Faifa was telling him. The reptilian shifted his feet and finished his report.

“The pilot is called ‘Haunalyn’, a Rhadurian.”

Baquar’s smile vanished as he recognized the name and its implications.

“That little devil? That does present a problem, if all I have heard is true, it does not, however, make it impossible.” Baquar crossed to gaze out the window at his grounds. “Is Korbot still with them?”

Faifa nodded.

Baquar turned quickly. “I am through toying with this. I cannot rely on those Corporation idiots to muddle this. Put the word into the channels. I am offering 25,000 credits for Arkon,

but I want him alive and unharmed. I'll get what he owes me out of his worthless hide, but I want a word with him first.”

Faifa nodded and left, disgusted by the tone of Baquar's voice. He did not like Baquar. He wasn't paid to like him, only carry out his orders. He did know no one would heed so small a bounty. It wasn't enough to interest the most desperate. Baquar would have to offer far more than credits if he intended to find Sneighd before the Corporation Police did.

Chapter Thirteen

The rotund balding Police Commander waited apprehensively for the visitor he was about to receive. He was not looking forward to the meeting, but Lieutenant Thaddeus Cocker had been a good friend, an honored soldier, and a trusted colleague. To be so brutally, cold-bloodedly struck down by a common star pilot, the lowest scum as far as the Commander was concerned, was too much. That pilot would pay dearly for daring to murder a man twice his worth.

The com link buzzed. He pressed the switch to answer. “Yes?”

A mechanical flat voice responded. “Commander Aqualine, he is here and ready to see you.”

The Commander felt a trace of fear and swallowed his apprehension. “Send him in.”

He turned, straightened his uniform, and waited. The door to his office slid open and a macabre figure seemed to float toward him.

The Lurker, as he was known, was notorious on every world throughout the galaxy. He was a predator lurking silently in the

darkest corridors of space. Life, it was said, meant nothing to him save for the price he was paid for taking it. As far as the Commander knew, no one had ever seen the Lurker's face, or knew if he was human or alien behind the smoke gray visor of his helmet. No one knew his origins or his identity. Those unlucky enough to have heard his voice, and lived, reported it low and menacing, human but without emotion. The Lurker was said to appear without warning and vanish without a trace, like a menacing shadow. Rumors said his ship winged through deep space like a massive black bat, able to outdistance any known starship. None of his prey were safe from him. His price was high, but he was considered the best at what he did. The best is the person Commander Aqualine wanted to hunt down Sneighd Arkon.

Chapter Fourteen

“When are the two of you going to get done?” Haunalyn was tired and aggravated as she trudged through the muck of the swampy ground of the planet.

Korbot straightened from his examination of the hauler. The look he aimed at her was angry. “Will you go find something useful to do? Go check the gauge and see if it’s registering.”

Haunalyn slumped against the hull of her battered ship and crossed her arms. “I just did, and it isn’t.”

Korbot took a deep breath and let it slowly out. His patience was obviously wearing thin.

Sneighd called to her from where he was working on top of the hauler. “Hey, baby face, if I were you, I’d get lost before Korbot loses his temper. Why don’t you come up here and give me a hand?” His tone was suggestive as he wiggled his eyebrows at her.

“Huh!” She sniffed. “I don’t trust you any further than I can throw you, so I think I’ll just stay down here.”

Sneighd's laugh was derisive. "And what, may I ask, do you think I'm going to do? Honey, you aren't anything to get excited about."

Haunalyn scooped a fistful of the muck she stood in and threw it at him. She missed, which made him laugh, serving only to make her angry. She threatened him with another handful, but Korbot intervened.

"Now look, Lyn, go inside and check the gauge. If it's not registering, let me know. Then how about fixing us something to eat before we all starve, okay?"

Haunalyn shoved away from the hauler, her arms dropping straight to her sides in a posture of stubborn defiance. "I'm not a servant. Fix your own food."

Sneighd peered over the edge of the hauler. "She probably doesn't know how to operate the food replicator or cook." He edged back when she grabbed another handful of muck.

"Why don't you stick that fuser in your ear and push the button," she yelled back at him.

Korbot grabbed her wrist and shook the mud from her hand. His patience was gone. He spoke through tightly clenched teeth and with controlled emphasis over each word.

“We are never going to get this thing fixed if we don’t stop this bickering and arguing.” He breathed deeply before continuing. “Sneighd, you stop teasing her. Lyn, get your little tail in that ship.”

She glared at him, then with a scowl and toss of her head, stomped up the ramp to the interior of the hauler.

Saying a silent prayer of thanks, Korbob returned to his work. He was tired. He was angry. He had been in predicaments before, most far worse than this, but he had put that life behind him long ago. He worried about his port. Without him there, his men would be under constant threat of Baquar’s greedy hand. He had to get word to them he was alive and would be back.

He glanced toward the open hatch of the hauler. Why, he asked himself, why if he had to get into a predicament, did it have to be with two quarrelling children?

Sneighd's health seemed to steadily improve during the time they had been in flight. For that, Korbob was grateful, but with returning health came a taunting, teasing nature that Sneighd turned on Haunalyn. It was all in fun for him but drove her to distraction. To Korbob, they were like two quarreling children,

foolish and selfish, and not the seasoned adults they liked to think they were. There was a great deal more for them to learn about life, about the danger of living as if they were invincible. No one was invincible. That was something he knew all too well. If the two youngsters survived each other, they might accidentally figure that out.

“I think I’ve found the leak,” Sneighd called down. “I was right. It’s over the fuel line. We’ve lost a lot of power there.”

“Enough to cripple us?” Korbot returned his mind to the matter at hand.

Sneighd slipped from the roof, landing neatly on his feet. “Nope, but we’ll have to get it fixed soon or we will be.”

Korbot mused the information over. “That could be tricky. With every port in the galaxy posted to keep watch for us, we’d not have much of a chance in that quarter.”

“You don’t know that.” Sneighd sounded defensive.

Korbot gave him a knowing look. “No, I don’t know it. I do think it’s a reasonable assumption. I know the Corporation and I know Baquar. He’s been waiting for any excuse to cause trouble with me. You’re in debt to him. He didn’t waste time contacting the Corporation about what happened on Sinnet. And the

Corporation won't ignore the death of one of their own. They aren't going to waste time in coming after you, or us.”

Sneighd sat down on a fallen tree. He looked dejected, deflated, as if all the life had suddenly been drained from him. “You're right, big man. Worse than that, I am responsible for this mess. Truthfully, I'm sorry you got involved. You should've let Baquar finish what he started, then you wouldn't be out here and Haunalyn would be home, which is where she should have been in the first place.”

The last statement came out with a touch of irritation. Korbot agreed. What was done was done. There was no going back to make things better. He seated himself on the log next to Sneighd. Fatigue was starting to set in for all three of them. Korbot felt every bit his age.

“Stop feeling sorry for yourself,” he said. “You know as well as I do that Baquar was out for blood and would have let his men beat you to death before he stopped them. Besides, I've warned him to stay out of my port.”

Sneighd's words dripped sarcasm. “Well, that's reassuring. If he stays out of your port, you don't care who he's gets after. Generous.”

“No one who gets tangled in Baquar’s net is a victim,” Korbot said. “You knew what you were getting into and should have had better sense.” He paused, feeling like he was a teacher reprimanding an errant student. “Besides, that’s not what I meant. If I had my way, Sinnet would be rid of Baquar and his slime. I’ve had more than my share of trouble with him. I have seen too many results of his extracting what he thinks he is owed from pilots older and smarter than you. One of these day --- one of these days...”

He let the thought dangle.

“Korbot.” Haunalyn leaned out of the hatch. “The gauge is registering unsteadily. I think we have enough power to get us to a port. Rhaduri isn’t too far.”

“We can’t go there.” Korbot caught himself too late and saw the disappointed anger in her eyes. He held up his hand before she could argue.

“It’s too dangerous. By now, Baquar is aware of who you are. Rhaduri is the first place he’ll assume you’ll go, to your father. We can’t jeopardize Deacon or the port.”

“My father won’t allow that scum near his port.” Haunalyn was glaring daggers at him. “You don’t know my father, and you don’t know anything about Rhaduri. Baquar wouldn’t get close without being blasted to atoms.”

She was wrong. Korbot did know her father, too well, and was more than acquainted with the capability of Rhaduri for holding off any attack, but not indefinitely. He wasn't going to argue with her. Her pride was hurt. It would be a waste of breath.

“Nevertheless, we can't go there. We can't put Rhaduri at risk.” He stood and paced a moment. “What we can do is stay here overnight. The power build-up will be better in the morning and the three of us need time to rest and think.”

He glanced at Sneighd's face as he spoke. He had noted the pilot's pale complexion turning more and more ashen in the past few minutes, as if Sneighd's exertions drained him. Sneighd was using whatever resolve he had to keep hidden the fact he wasn't well, despite his apparent improvement.

“I know this isn't the most pleasant place, but it's isolated and quiet, a luxury there will be little of in the future. This will do for now.”

Chapter Fifteen

Haunalyn awoke with a headache. She felt hot, uncomfortable, stuck on some desolate planet with two reluctant companions and her precious hauler damaged. She longed for the safety and security of her homeport, though she would never admit it to the men.

Rolling onto her back, she grumbled to herself and pushed her damp hair from her sweaty forehead. The heat and humidity outside the ship permeated the interior, making the Rogue Marauder something short of an oven.

Mumbling under her breath, she crawled out of her bunk and eased up the corridor to the main hold where Korbot and Sneighd slept. Each man was in his respective corner and each one, she could see, was drenched in sweat. They had removed their tunics that by the end of the previous day had clung to their bodies like second skins. She wished she had the luxury to do the same. She felt sorry for them and for herself. The men had to be uncomfortable sleeping on the floor, but her co-pilot's quarters, so long vacant, were filled with tools, spare parts, weapons, and

varied other things she should probably dispose of to make a suitable sleeping place for her passengers.

Although her chronometer indicated it was morning, there no light filtered in from outside. She shook her head, feeling slightly lightheaded. The tiny planet was hot, but not as hot as she felt now, not even during the day. She went to one of the portals to look out, but it was covered with a weird gray film that had a strange geometric pattern to it. She hurried into the cockpit and stopped short by what was staring back at her from outside the ship.

Two huge, bulbous, luminous green eyes on a massive snake-like creature neatly coiled around the Marauder, gleamed in the lights of the flight console. Haunalyn stood transfixed as she watched the reptile's forked tongue flick in and out of its cavernous mouth against the windshield as if it were searching for a way inside. She realized the bulk of the creature coiled around the hauler was shutting off the air vents, causing air pressure to build. She kept yawning from lack of oxygen and heard her ears pop.

Her senses returned, she ran, screaming, back to her two companions who were on their feet, startled awake, and headed for

the cockpit when she collided with them in the corridor. Korbot caught her in his arms as she stumbled into him.

“What? What is it, Lyn? What’s the matter?” He held her to him, attempting to calm her.

She fought to regain her self-control and found doing so difficult as fear and revulsion at the sight of the creature shook her.

“In there.” She pointed toward the cockpit. “It’s huge. I---it---I...” She drew in deep gulps of air as she spoke.

“Calm down.” Korbot stroked her hair. “Take deep breaths.”

He motioned for Sneighd to go forward. Sneighd came stumbling back in less than a minute.

“We’re in trouble. There’s a --- *thing* out there that could swallow the hauler whole, might be thinking about doing just that. It’s coiled good and tight. No air.”

His words came between deep breaths.

Korbot transferred Haunalyn to him and went to investigate. Sneighd absently pulled her closer into his arms as he watched the older man go along the corridor. She tightened at being clutched protectively in his arms and attempted to pull away. Her struggles brought his attention fully to her.

“What?” He asked. He wasn’t yet aware of how tightly he held her.

“Let me go?” She pushed her hands against his chest, making him suddenly understand the situation and, with a mischievous grin, drew her closer.

“What’s the matter? Do I scare you?”

Haunalyn narrowed her eyes and smiled deceptively up at him. “If you don’t let me go, I’m gonna break your kneecap.”

He shoved her roughly away from him. “You know, you could use a lesson or two on how to act like a woman.”

She adjusted her tunic, her composure fully returned. “Is that so, and who’s going to teach me, you?”

He planted his fists firmly on his hips and glared at her. “I just might.”

“Ha! What you know about women couldn’t fill a ship’s log.”

“How would you know, you little savage?”

Haunalyn hauled back her hand to slap him, but Korbot returned at that moment.

“That creature’s wound around us like a coil on a spool,” he said. “We have to get it off and fast. The pressure is dangerously high in here. The hauler will blow like a fusion bomb if it gets any higher.”

“What’ll we do?” Sneighd appeared to have forgotten about Haunalyn.

“If the power has built up enough, we’ll try electrical currents.” Korbob headed to the read-out console. “Hopefully, this character is ticklish.”

Sneighd yanked the floor panel to the main engines free and adjusted several controls. On a signal from Korbob, he shouted, “stand clear”, and touched a button. The Marauder came alive with coursing lights and energy.

“The pressure is climbing,” Haunalyn shouted above the crackling and popping from inside the console.

“It’s constricting. Cut the current.” Korbob fought with the controls to relieve the surge.

Sneighd readjusted the gauges and levers and sat up, swaying a little. “That’s great. Just our luck we’d run into a monster who likes energy. Now what?”

“Try the heat repulsor.” Korbot moved to another panel and adjusted several dials.

Sneighd reached into the engine compartment and turned a red knob. The ship glowed outside as the shields reflected the heat outward. The creature voiced its discomfort and anger with a deafening, bone-shuddering high-pitched squeal. Haunalyn clamped her hands to her ears, as did Sneighd and Korbot. Korbot checked the gauges.

“The pressure has decreased, but only slightly. That beast is determined to cling.” He waved for Sneighd to turn off the shields. After a few minutes, the noise outside stopped.

Overcome with concern for her ship and furious at their predicament, Haunalyn stepped up to Korbot and glared up at him. “Get that *beast* off my ship!”

Korbot and Sneighd stared at her as if they thought she had lost her mind.

“What do you think we’re trying to do?” Sneighd asked.

She turned her anger on him but kept her tongue as she stalked off toward the cockpit, mumbling dire death threats at the creature. She climbed into the pilot’s seat, staring straight into the luminous green eyes of the ugly monstrosity outside. Turning three dials

simultaneously, she shouted, “Take that, you slug, and get off my ship.”

Chapter Sixteen

The engines roared to life. With a startled yelp, Sneighd withdrew his hand from the circuit panel he was adjusting and reeled back.

Korbot shot to his feet. Sparks flew everywhere from the circuits and panels. Lights flashed throughout the hauler. The entire ship shook violently.

The men clung to the walls to keep upright. Finally, the commotion died, and the ship stilled. They stood in uncertain silence. Sneighd noticed the beam of sunlight coming through the portal first.

“Hey, I can breathe.” He took in a long breath of cooler air. Pressure behind his eyes that had been building since he woke began to subside, but an ache in his temples continued to throb. He did his best to ignore it.

Korbot was at the read-out panel. With a sigh of relief, he leaned back in his seat. “The pressure’s back to normal. I don’t know what she did, but she shook the beast.”

Sneighd checked some readings then growled loudly. “I’ll tell you what she did. She used up what little power we accumulated from last night. We’re right back where we started.”

Korbot hurried over to see for himself the power had dropped too low for a lift off. With pent up fury, he brought his huge fists down on the console, leaving a slight dent in metal that should have resisted damage. Sneighd backed up a safe distance.

“Blast that brat,” the portmaster roared. “I swear if it’s the last thing I do, I’ll turn her over my knee and ...”

“And do what?” Haunaly had returned to the main hold unnoticed. “You better think twice before making threats you can’t keep.”

Korbot came to his feet, his face red with rage. “Can’t keep? Can’t keep?”

Sneighd retreated to a nice safe corner, tempted to tell Haunaly to shut up, but not wanting to call attention to himself.

“I’ll show you what I “can’t keep”, young lady.” Korbob reached out and grasped Haunalyn by the arm. With a jerk, he had her screaming and kicking across his knee. After a sound spanking, he released her. She backed away, teary-eyed and furious, rubbing her backside.

“You just wait.” She coughed between sobs. “You’ll regret that. My father...”

“Will probably thank me,” Korbob said.

“I hate you.” She ran past him to her quarters.

Sneighd felt sorry for her as some of her contempt was lost to a hissing instead of slamming door. He felt Korbob’s eyes on him and turned his attention to the portmaster. Korbob’s expression had softened and he looked sorry for what he had done.

“I shouldn’t have done that,” Korbob said. “She’s not mine to deal with, but I’ve had all of her insolence I can take.”

Sneighd felt embarrassed on her behalf. He didn’t blame Korbob. She had deserved the spanking as far as he was concerned.

“I’m sorry.”

Korbob frowned. “For what?”

Sneighd shrugged. "I don't know. I just thought I should say it, that's all."

The big man chuckled. "C'mon, let's see what we can do outside."

Haunalyn didn't reappear until evening. Sneighd and Korbot were eating a haphazard meal, neither offering her anything as she approached. She fixed her own food and silently eased onto the bench to the little eating table.

Sneighd eyed her speculatively, noting her red, swollen eyes and pale face. He felt sorry for her, knowing that sitting had to be painful.

She noticed his gaze and didn't appreciate it. "What are you looking at?"

His sympathy vanished. "Nothing."

"Watch out." Korbot quietly warned from his side of the table.

Sneighd saw Haunalyn throw a glance in Korbot's direction before she said anything.

"How's the power?" She was all business.

Korbot acknowledged her. “Holding. We should be able to leave in the morning, barring all problems. Let’s hope our friend doesn’t decide to return or have any friends.”

“That’s an unpleasant possibility,” Sneighd said. “Maybe we should keep watch by turns tonight. By morning, we might be able to leave this swamp.”

His companions agreed with him and the sun was scarcely up the following morning when the Marauder took off, the power allowing uninhibited lift ratio with plenty left over to get them to a port where they could repair the damage completely.

Chapter Seventeen

The Lurker's sleek black ship glided through hyperspace, an undetected dark demon intercepting the transmission that the Rhadurian hauler had been seen on a small outpost port two days earlier. The ship had been easily identified and damaged, which was good. If it had remained in port for repairs, the crew would be quickly taken, and his job would be complete. His luck, however, didn't hold. Even as he entered the system, the Marauder lifted off the outpost and headed for deep space.

Baquar angrily paced the floor of his office. None of his men or his contacts had found the Rhadurian hauler. Worse, he had received word that the Corporation Police Commander Aqualine had hired the Lurker to hunt Arkon down. That was unacceptable.

The Lurker might decide taking Sneighd alive was too much trouble. On the other hand, Commander Aqualine might have questions that Sneighd knew the answer to. Alive was how Baquar wanted Sneighd, but not if he fell into the clutches of the Corporation. He knew Commander Aqualine would have paid a handsome fee to be the first to get his hands on the pilot. Baquar wished he knew exactly how much. He would offer twice the sum for the chance. He was quite certain Sneighd Arkon had figured out exactly what happened by now. The pilot wasn't stupid and had a reputation for taking creative revenge against his enemies.

Sneighd Arkon was a determined young man with an almost supernatural will to stay alive, to which his reputation and past exploits testified. He was intelligent. He was slippery. And he was good with his weapon. He had to be captured before he could let his side of the story be heard, provided the Corporation let him live long enough to talk.

Korbot Maka would be another worry. He had warned Baquar more than once to keep his men out of his port, and the Tendrite didn't make warnings or threats lightly. He, given the opportunity, would like nothing better than to rip Baquar apart and would feel no remorse in doing so. Baquar had to admit Korbot had plenty of reason to feel that way. Because of Baquar, Korbot's father had died, his friend had been crippled, and Korbot himself had nearly

died. Proof was held in the Tendrite's hands, but he chose not to act, not because he was afraid of the Sinnetian or any of his henchmen, but because Korbot was a very patient man.

The door buzzed, breaking his concentration.

“What is it?”

The door hissed open and two of his men entered, one of them out of breath.

“Veli has returned from Rhaduri,” the short, reedy red headed man reported.

“What did he find out?” Baquar had sent Veli to Rhaduri for information on the off chance the fugitives had gone there for help.

“We do not know.” Faifa stood rigidly straight, unreadable, and unemotional as always, next to the new arrival.

“What do you mean?” Baquar was displeased. He had an idea he knew what Faifa meant but wanted to hear it.

“He was beat up,” the first man said. “There was a note pinned to his tunic. His ship was set on auto-homing.”

He handed a plastic chit to his employer.

Baquar slipped the chit into a reader and studied the note. His heart sank. He had been right. A warning, this time from Deacon, the Rhadurian portmaster, a man the Sinnetian knew as well as he knew the Tendrite Korbot. The two of them had once terrorized the galaxy with their outrageous exploits. Maybe terrorized was too strong a word. Deacon and Korbot, the most skilled pilots to Baquar's knowledge, had given him, and many others, a great deal of grief. The two men had become legends to many, heroes to some, and a pain in the backside to people like Baquar and the Corporation.

There was one unexpected turn. Until that moment, Baquar had not known the girl pilot of the Rhadurian hauler was Deacon's daughter. Deacon's warning was simple; stay away from her. If any harm came to her, of any kind, he would hold Baquar personally responsible, and Baquar would pay dearly for it.

The warning did not worry Baquar. He received warnings far worse from far more dangerous enemies, but this was different. Everything had gone wrong with his plans from the beginning and was quickly deteriorating. His biggest concern was the Lurker. He had to deal with that situation before the Lurker completed his task. Baquar had to balance the scales and there was only one way to do that.

“Faifa, find me the Assassin. I know you have your contacts and know how to reach him. Tell him I will pay him twice what the Corporation offered the Lurker, no matter how much. I want Sneighd Arkon and I want him alive. It is imperative the Assassin reach him first. Be sure you make that understood.”

Cold eyes unreadable, Faifa nodded and shoved the red-haired man out of the office. “Go.”

The red-haired man all but ran from him, disappearing into the corridor. Faifa studied the closed door behind him. In his opinion, Baquar was losing his already unstable mind. There was only one person reputed to be more dangerous than the Lurker. The Assassin was not someone Baquar wanted to deal with, not in this matter, not with those involved, and only Faifa alone knew why.

Transmitter signals were intercepted from the system surrounding the boundaries of the outer galaxy. Standing over the console of the small black ship stood a mysterious cloaked figure recording the transmissions from the Corporation to the Lurker. When the messages ended, the figure nodded in silent understanding and reached out a black-gloved long-fingered hand

to flip the transmitter closed. It was only a matter of time before the anticipated message would arrive. Until then, the Assassin would patiently wait.

Chapter Eighteen

Haunaly set down in one of the denser regions of the planet of Garma, a tiny planet barely visible on a star map whose most discernable feature seemed to be a miserable, wet, and steamy hothouse jungle. This wasn't the destination she had been aiming for, but the Rogue Marauder lived up to its designation. Even after the repairs she and her companions had spent three days slaving over, the engines on her old hauler conked out forcing another unplanned landing.

They hadn't been in flight more than two days when the engines began to flutter and barely made orbit and a seat of the pants landing.

As the engines slowly died into silence and the Marauder became enveloped in the sounds of the jungle, she and Korbot cautiously made their way down the ramp.

As a planet, Garma had no redeeming value other than its obscure place in the galaxy and the fact there were a few sparsely populated ports and settlements so far apart, the denizens probably had no idea anyone other than they existed on the planet. Unfortunately, none of those isolated places were anywhere close to where Haunalyn had been forced to set down. Either she, Korbot, or Sneighd would have to fix the Marauder's problem, whatever it was, themselves, or take a potentially hazardous hike through the marshes, swamps, jungles, and whatever other miseries that lay between them and the nearest civilization. Neither prospect appealed to the three of them.

“Perfect, just perfect.” Haunalyn stepped off the ramp onto the soggy ground, sinking to her ankles in the fetid water and tangle of whatever vegetation lurked beneath it. “What a mess. I’m certainly not looking forward to walking around in this muck. Aren’t there any other kinds of planets in this system?”

Korbot started checking the hauler. “Would you rather land in some nice big port city and be handed over to the Police?”

Haunalyn sniffed in derision. “Sneighd and his bright ideas. Well, if we want to make it anywhere to do anything, we’d better get busy and find out what this scrap heap’s problem is this time.

I'll check the main engines. You check the thrusters. Hopefully, we can fix it this time.”

To complicate an already complicated matter, Sneighd had fallen mysteriously ill shortly after leaving the last outpost. He had said nothing, and it wasn't until he passed out completely, she and Korbot had known anything was wrong. Sneighd's sickness left them a hand short. Korbot served as nursemaid, since Haunalyn wanted nothing to do with Sneighd and his possibly contagious on and off again medical problem. Korbot was of the opinion the malady wasn't a danger to him or to her since they had been with Sneighd for some time since leaving Sinnet and neither of them had become ill. Haunalyn wasn't convinced and chose not to take any chances. If all continued in the direction it had been going so far and their luck held, she thought with irritation, they would probably be taken prisoner by wild natives by nightfall. Should that happen, she would gladly bargain Sneighd's life for hers and Korbot's release.

Unnoticed, Sneighd leaned against the opened hatch, exhausted and vehemently wishing for his missing jacket. He had been surreptitiously watching Haunalyn as she grumbled and stamped around her wounded ship. He could almost feel the heat of her

frustration and anger emanating from her. He understood, he thought, how she felt. He was still grieving for the loss of his freighter, not because it had any sentimental value, but because it meant freedom to him.

As the other two started their examination of the ship, he eased down the ramp with the intent of making himself useful by scouting the area. Maybe there would be someone close by who could help them. He felt it best not to announce his intentions since most of Haunalyn's animosity seemed to be aimed solely on him. To be truthful, the predicament they found themselves in was his fault, in a way. However, neither of the other two were obligated to be involved. They made the choice, not him, although he was grateful they had. The alternative didn't bare thinking about.

Sneighd moved into the jungle to the left of the ship, keeping his eyes sharply focused on landmarks and oddities, trails, and differences to the landscape so as not to get lost. It wasn't easy since much of the terrain appeared to be the same tangle of vegetation all around him.

The sounds of the jungle birds and insects and whatever other fauna dwelt on Garma, had a strangely soothing effect to Sneighd's jangled nerves, lulling him into deep thought until his surrounding

disappeared into a mist. He had no idea how far he had gone before the peace was abruptly broken by an energy bolt slamming into the ground near his right foot and sizzling away in a watery grave. Sneighd, jolted out of his reverie, found that he was standing fully exposed in a clearing, not three feet away from a domed crude mud and grass shelter squatting like some type of huge bug. A thin thread of smoke wafted from a pipe chimney, indicating this was someone's home he had stumbled onto. Of the shooter, there was no sign.

Sneighd held his empty hands in front of him, palms outward in a show of surrender and peace. He spoke in a calm voice to let the person, or persons, or creatures know he meant no harm or danger. “Hey, I’m not armed. I just want some help.”

He started forward, but another bolt sizzled the ground near his other foot. He stopped moving. Whoever was out there meant business. Two warning shots, but no guarantee that would be all to come.

Behind him, in the jungle, he heard something heavy crashing through the underbrush and was soon joined by Korbot and Haunalyn. He must not have been too far from them if they heard the commotion.

“Get down.” He motioned for them to duck. They took cover as blasts filled the air.

Haunalyn crawled on her stomach to where he huddled against a protective boulder.

“You okay? You’re not hit are you?”

He shook his head, cautiously peering over the lone boulder sitting in the open near the dwelling. He gave the oddity a momentary thought before he was forced to duck as a shot rang past his ear.

Korbot had inched forward to the cover of a tree.

“You in one piece, Sneighd?”

“Yeah.”

“What are you doing out here?” Haunalyn hit him hard in the center of his chest with the flat of her hand.

“Ow! What was that for?”

“Leave it to you to find some idiot with a weapon in an unpopulated jungle. You shouldn’t have left the ship. You’re barely able to stand up.”

Sneighd ignored her scolding. He didn't feel like arguing.

“Korbot, you see anything?”

Korbot scanned the area. “In this dense jungle, it's impossible to pinpoint where the shots are coming from.”

The clearing had fallen silent. Korbot moved a few more steps forward. Sneighd held his breath as he watched the big man cautiously walk upright toward the shelter. Nothing happened, but Sneighd noticed Korbot's hand didn't stray from the blazer on his utility belt. No further shots were fired, but Sneighd could feel there were eyes watching them.

Korbot knelt, examining something in the soft mud. “Come here, you two, look at this.”

Easing away from cover, Sneighd glanced around the edge of the clearing for signs of the inhabitant or inhabitants. Everything remained eerily quiet. Followed by Haunalyn, he leaned down to see what Korbot had found.

“Looks like---that's funny.” Sneighd studied the prints. “I didn't know there were any small humanoids on Garma.”

“Been here often, have you?” Haunalyn's question was sarcastic. She pointed out the shape of the footprint. “It's a child, numbskull.”

He glared at her. “And what makes you think that smarty britches?”

Haunalya smirked at him and nodded at something. “Because she's standing right there, idiot.”

A sound behind them brought the men's attention around to face the most amazing sight Sneighd had ever seen. That she was a child was obvious. Sneighd guessed her age to be no more than nine or ten. She was human, a freckled oval face capped by long dark brown curls. Her piercing black eyes glowered in their direction. She stood in britches that were slightly too large for her small frame, a tunic that reached her knees, high-topped boots, and a low hanging holster that housed a blazer that should have been far too heavy for her. Child or not, the look on her face was unfriendly and filled with suspicion. She held an unfamiliar type of weapon expertly leveled at them. This weapon was nearly as big as she was. That her aim stayed true, centered directly on Korbot's chest, attested to the fact this wasn't her first time using it.

“Who are you?” she demanded.

The sharp angry question sounded almost funny coming out in the voice of a child. She couldn't be more than four feet tall. Even so, Sneighd didn't laugh. This little girl must have been through something horrendous for her to act so tough.

Sneighd recovered first. “Whoa there. We’re friends.”

The girl’s expression didn’t alter. “Ain’t got no friends.” Her weapon never wavered from Korbot's midsection.

“Put it down, sweetie.” Sneighd kept his gaze locked on hers. He hoped to get her to at least trust they meant no harm. It was sort of like trying to capture a feral street feline in Capital City. Injuries were a definite possibility. “We aren’t going to hurt you.”

“I know you ain’t,” she told him. “But I might hurt you, buster. Answer my question.”

Sneighd glanced at his companions. Korbot watched with interest, but Haunalyn looked as if she was for rushing the kid and disarming her before she shot someone. That would not be a good idea. The little girl spoke like a freighter pilot, her toughness more than just on the surface. Behind the dark eyes Sneighd thought he could see raw desperation. The wrong move could end very badly.

Haunalyn stepped toward the girl. The unfamiliar weapon the child held swiveled toward her. Haunalyn didn't appear in the least bit afraid, although she did stop moving.

“Look, my ship’s down,” she said, sounding as belligerent as the child. “We’re trying to fix it. We want nothing from you, okay?” Sneighd wanted to strangle her.

“Don’t get snide with me.” The little girl wasn’t intimidated. “I know ‘bout your ship, if that’s what you call that *thing*. I been watchin’ you since you landed. You ain’t answered my question. Who are you?”

Sneighd found it an effort not to smile at the two girls trying to out tough one another. He figured the little girl was acting out of preservation, but her terse words were most likely a facade.

“C’mon, peaches.” Sneighd used his most charming voice but was careful not to sound condescending. “Put the piece down. Let’s talk this over like civilized people.”

The child studied him, the anger in her eyes fading. Her weapon lowered as if it had become too heavy for her to hold any longer. She was frowning, but less angry, more curious, Sneighd thought.

“You’re not too bad,” she said. She wiggled the fingers of her left hand in a gesture that she wanted him to approach. “Come over here.”

Obediently Sneighd did as he was asked.

“You gotta name?” she asked. Her hard eyes had softened, as had her expression to where she looked more like a child.

“Sneighd.”

“How ‘bout them?” She pointed to Korbot and Haunalyn.

“Haunalyn and Korbot.” Sneighd knew he had gotten through to her when she reached out and took his hand.

No longer the tough little warrior, she seemed transformed into a lonely little girl who might welcome a friend or two. “C’m on inside. I’ll fix you somethin’ to eat.”

She led him toward her shelter. He glanced over his shoulder to make sure his companions were following. Korbot, who had remained silent throughout the confrontation, wore a mildly amused smile. Haunalyn, her hands in her pockets, a glare in her eyes, stalked after them.

Chapter Nineteen

Her name was 'Impa'. She had been born at Icksman Station near the center of Garma. Her father had been a master weapons smith, hired by the Corporation for developing and improving a great deal of their extensive weaponry. His craft had been more than his livelihood. It had been his art. Through it, he had invented an energy weapon more powerful than any other known, an advancement with so much destructive potential, he feared what might happen if the Corporation discovered its existence. He had destroyed the plans to it, leaving only one completed working prototype that he had kept secret until a nosy Corporation official, having heard rumors, began investigating and, through surveillance, discovered the existence of that one prototype.

All this information had been carefully recorded onto an information file chip by Impa's father, who, she said, always kept meticulous files on his work, but never into a computer system where it could be discovered.

“I knew where daddy hid the chip,” Impa said. “He told me, in case something happened.”

Something had happened. When the Corporation discovered Impa's father was choosing not to share this new weapon with them, they took him to Capital City for questioning.

“Daddy wouldn't tell them anything. So, they sent someone to get us, to use as incentive, Mama said. But Daddy had gotten a message to Mama. We knew the Corporation was coming, and Mama tried to make a way for us to escape.”

Impa paused. There were tears in the corners of her eyes. She took a deep breath and went on.

“Mama was going to have a baby, and I had a little sister who was three. The day we were to escape from Garma, we were stopped. Someone had found out and told the Corporation. They took Mama and my sister, but Mama helped me escape so I could get the information chip to protect it.”

She had gone for the weapon and her father's blazer and the information chip, had sworn vengeance, hiding, and waiting for a chance to stowaway on a freighter. She had no idea what had become of her family.

"Daddy taught me about survival and how to use weapons. He wanted me to be his partner when I was old enough. Mama didn't like it. She wanted me to be more like a girl. I'm glad Daddy won because I know how to take care of myself."

Her tale completed, Impa fell silent. Sneighd, Korbot, and Haunalyn said nothing for several minutes. Sneighd believed her, mainly because her story explained a good many things about her and the strange weapon she carried.

"How long have you been out here by yourself?" Sneighd asked. "How long ago did this happen?"

Impa shrugged her shoulders. "I was only eight, but I think I'm ten now. I don't have a chronometer, so I lost track."

Two years, Sneighd thought, alone, afraid, and not knowing if her family lived, no wonder, as young as she was, she had the level of anger and mistrust she did.

"You don't talk like a kid," Haunalyn said. "You know a lot of technical things no ten-year-old would."

Sneighd frowned at Haunalyn, who had spoken with sullen, almost accusatory words. Impa's reaction was immediate.

“Why are you here?” The demanding tone was back in the little girl's voice. “You can't be here just because your ship malfunctioned. Garma is too far out in the system to stumble over.”

Sneighd had to suppress a grin. The clash between the two girls was going to be difficult, but Impa could defend herself and would. That was a good thing.

“I'm afraid,” Korbot said, “that is exactly what happened, strange as it may seem.”

Sneighd saw him flick a warning glance in Haunalyn's direction for her to keep quiet.

Impa seemed to consider that for a moment. “Could be you might get help at Icksman, but I doubt it. Most people are settlers, outworlders, and they don't talk much about anything to anybody. They keep to themselves and don't offer to help anybody who they consider a stranger. And they can't be trusted.”

Sneighd was impressed. She had dropped the star pilot slang. Her perception and intelligence belied her ten years. Haunalyn was right about that, but considering what Impa had been through,

it made sense. And her father had to have been a highly intelligent individual to have been a master at his craft.

“You seem to know an awful lot about the way things are run.”

Haunalyn evidently wasn't impressed, but suspicious. She disregarded Korbot's warning look.

Inwardly groaning, Sneighd glanced at Korbot who was silently shaking his head. Haunalyn was obviously going to be a problem when it came to Impa.

Impa was glaring at her. “You forget, Papa had a lot of dealing with the Corporation. He used to tell me I had big ears. I don't like secrets.”

Sneighd had to smile. She was probably aware of a lot of things she didn't need to know. She should be playing with toys, going to school, and to parties instead of living like a wild thing in a jungle with only that terrible insecurity and loss, with the uncertainty of her missing family. In his opinion, children should be children, never having to worry about the dark things of life until it became necessary. For Impa, the worries had come too soon. Sneighd knew what it was like to grow up alone, afraid, and not knowing where his parents were, or for him, even who they were.

“Impa, how’d you like to come with us?” Sneighd spoke without thinking, his thoughts escaping through his mouth before he could catch them.

Haunalyn’s fist slammed into his shoulder. “Sneighd!”

“Hey!” He rubbed the spot. “I’ll have a bruise there to match the one on my chest. Stop hitting me.” He sighed. “C’mon, Sis, you aren’t going to begrudge a little kid are you? What could it hurt to give her a ride out of here? She’s just a little girl and alone. She needs our help, and we can help her.”

“Obviously, she doesn’t need our help.” Haunalyn wasn’t going to be reasonable. “She’s managed just fine so far without us.”

Sneighd didn’t understand her attitude. “Look, it wouldn’t hurt you to think of someone else for a change. She needs a way off Garma, and if we ever get that scrap heap moving, we can provide that. She’s a kid, Hauna. Even you can’t be that cold-hearted.”

“Hey!” Impa’s shout silenced them. “If you don’t mind, I am sitting here, y’know. You haven’t asked me if I want to go with you or not. You might give me a chance to decide for myself.”

As far as Sneighd was concerned, the matter was settled. “You said you wanted a way off Garma. Besides that, like it or not, you

are a kid, too young to be out here alone. If you don't starve to death, or get eaten by whatever creatures inhabit this place, or fall into a bog or whatever, the Corporation will eventually find you. Your father's weapons aside, you can't protect yourself for long."

He glanced at Korbot, hoping for a little help. The big man was listening, but saying nothing, which Sneighd found strange. Korbot had said little since encountering Impa. He hadn't even stepped in to stop Haunalyn from arguing with the little girl. Sneighd didn't know what Korbot was thinking or what he might do where Impa was concerned.

"So, decide," Haunalyn demanded.

Sneighd saw Korbot's lip twitch as if he were trying hard not to smile. Maybe the Tendrite's feelings on the matter weren't so hard to cypher. Sneighd felt a little more on solid ground.

Impa and Haunalyn stared each other down for a long minute, then Impa appeared to make up her mind. Haunalyn obviously didn't like her or want her along. She wasn't much older than Impa even though she was trying to act older. Sneighd knew that she was asking for a hard time.

Impa was willing to oblige her. "I'll go."

The expression on Haunalyn's face was explosive. Sneighd shook his head wearily. The gleam in Impa's eyes was telling. She meant to give Haunalyn exactly what she had coming, as far as Sneighd was concerned. Keeping peace between the two girls was going to take monumental effort. He just hoped Korbot wouldn't be passive about stepping in when needed.

Korbot was barely able to keep a straight face. "I would suggest that we all try and get some sleep. It's late. We must get the hauler fixed in the morning and decide if we're going to chance a trek to Icksman. How far is it?"

Impa was all business. "A couple of hours walking. You'll need someone to take you." She threw a glance at Haunalyn. "Course, that'll be me. Won't be hard. There's no security worth worrying about."

"I thought you said the Corporation was looking for you," Haunalyn said.

Impa made a face at her. "They aren't looking for me. They want Daddy's weapon. Nobody knows who I am, and they don't know where I am. I don't plan to walk in carrying this thing." She laid her hand on the weapon lying by her side. "Besides, the Corporation ain't here anymore, not since they couldn't find anything."

“You’re just going to leave it behind?” Haunalyn was goading the little girl.

Before the argument could escalate, Sneighd interrupted. “She’s going to leave her weapons in the Marauder. Korbot and you can guard them.”

Haunalyn opened her mouth to argue, but Korbot stopped her.

“Sneighd’s right. He and Impa can go into Icksman to get what we need as soon as we know what that is. I’d be too conspicuous, and I’ll need your help working on the ship.”

The matter settled, and with Sneighd's help, Impa gathered her few belongings. Sneighd noticed that when she left the shelter she didn't bother looking back. There was nothing left for her. She set her jaw, straightened her shoulders, and walked confidently at his side; her eyes focused ahead. She would be alright, he assessed. In time, she would be fine.

Chapter Twenty

Early the following morning it was decided Impa and Sneighd should make the trek to Icksman Station. There wasn't a need for debate. Impa was the only one who knew the way and Korbot needed Haunalyn to help him work on the Marauder.

Unfortunately, the Marauder needed a few specific parts that Haunalyn didn't have on board and Korbot hoped they could get at Icksman since it was a port.

The day was hot and sultry. After slogging through marshes, swamp grass, and mud nearly all morning, Sneighd and his small companion were both damp with sweat and covered with bits of the terrain they had hiked through.

Icksman Station was little more than a few rustic shops and homes gathered around one three-story complex that Impa explained housed the Galactic Corporation offices. The building looked deserted to Sneighd.

“There's been a recent exodus by the Corporation,” Impa explained as she led the way along the dirt street that served as the main thoroughfare. “I don't think they like the climate here. There's only a few minor officials to run things, but mostly it's the port workers who keep things going.”

“And you know this how?” Sneighd asked.

There was no traffic in the street, or on the wooden pavements that ran in front of the shops. Primitive was the only way to describe the town. That a port existed at all was curious.

“Are you sure about there being a port here?” Sneighd asked.
“Are there even people here?”

Impa laughed. “People here keep to themselves. They ain't much on strangers. And they're afraid of the Corporation.” She turned left at a corner and started down a narrow alleyway.

Sneighd had the distinct impression that, even though no one seemed to be about, he and Impa were being watched from every window and shadow.

“The people have seen me,” Impa said. “They don't know me, but they've seen me around, so they probably figure I belong here.”

“Are there any other children around?” Sneighd asked. He was nervous. Icksman Station was far too quiet.

Impa turned a right corner and Sneighd saw before them what could roughly be called a port. The place looked ancient, and the ports were so dilapidated he thought a good strong wind would blow them over. There were only two ships, Hoppers used for planet travel and little else.

“That's it?” Sneighd felt his heart sink. He doubted seriously this place could provide them what they needed.

Impa tugged at his hand. “Don't be fooled by what you see. It ain't a busy place because there ain't many visitors, 'specially since the Corporation left.” She took him along the narrow street to what looked like a shed in the final throes of survival. Impa looked quickly around as if to make sure they weren't being observed, then tugged the rusted metal door open enough to allow her and Sneighd to slip inside. She pulled the door shut, leaving them in the dark.

“The main port is down here.”

“Down where?” Sneighd asked. He was totally confused.

“What are we doing in this place? It's a shed.”

“Just follow me,” Impa said. She took his hand and led him confidently through the dark to the back wall.

Sneighd counted his steps, judging the shed to be no farther across than a hundred feet. His eyes began adjusting to the dark and he could see what appeared to be discarded equipment on either side of them. Impa had led him unerringly along the narrow path through the junk.

“Impa,” he said.

“Shhh.”

He saw her move something to one side and there was a slight swish of sound. A dim green light rose from a square in the floor. He moved closer and could see a descending metal stairway.

“Go,” Impa ordered. “I have to shut the door.”

Sneighd went down several stairs, then waited until Impa had closed the trapdoor they had entered. He moved to one side to allow her to go ahead of him into the gloom below.

Strip lighting on the ceiling showed their way along a tunnel that had obviously been there for a long time. The materials of

which it was constructed, Sneighd noticed, were archaic. There was a fresh air system, but he couldn't recognize its source.

Corridors branched from the main tunnel to the right and left. Sneighd began to realize Icksman Station was an underground honeycomb. Shops, businesses, and offices of every sort lined the corridors at intervals. He could hear the faint echo of voices, but no one appeared until they reached the end of the tunnel which ended at a circular hub, from which branched other tunnels, like a giant wagon wheel. The center of the hub was a town park, with walkways, benches, and pool with a fountain in the center. Cool fresh air flowed through the tunnels and scents of thousands of flowers in the park wafted on the currents along with smells of food from unseen restaurants and food vendors, and the distinct smell of lubricants and machinery.

Sneighd was fascinated by the underground complex. "I don't understand this. Who built this?"

Impa continued her way through the park to the other side of the hub. "This is Icksman Station," she said.

"There still are no people," Sneighd said. "This place should be teeming with people."

“There's people,” Impa said, exiting through a door into a dimly lit tunnel. “It's lunchtime. The whistle'll blow soon, and the park will be full.”

Sneighd knew they were getting close to their objective. He could smell the exhaust and lubricants emitted from years of ships landing in the port. Familiar bangs, clangs, whirring, and roars from machinery grew louder as they went. They left the tunnel and stepped into as massive underground port lined with bays that were twice the size of the ones at Sinnet.

“This is Icksman Station,” Impa repeated. “And no one knows about it except the people who live here.”

Sneighd grabbed her arm to stop her. “The Corporation...”

She shook her head. “They think just what you did, that what you saw above is all there is. I told you, people here don't like outsiders. Especially the Corporation.”

“So, they hid the city,” Sneighd said. “What about the other stations on Garma, the other settlements?”

Impa shrugged. “I don't know. I never been to them.”

“How do the ships get down here?” Sneighd asked under his breath, more of himself than of Impa.

She heard him anyway. “There are bay doors and elevators that bring them in from above. There are many. Too much traffic attracts attention.” She gave him a sly look. “Those that do come, they don't want anyone to know they're here.”

They stepped from the tunnel into the port, which was a complex that could swallow Korbot's port and have a little room left over. Sneighd could see the bays could handle the bigger freighters, of which one sat in Bay Four. The mechanics and technicians were busy repairing some damage on the hull and on the engines.

A tall bull of a man glanced over and saw them enter the port. From his clothing, Sneighd surmised the man was the portmaster. The man stood several inches taller than Sneighd, had broad shoulders and muscular arms used to carrying heavy equipment. He had a head full of gray hair, a broad ruddy face, and dark brown eyes crowned by bushy gray eyebrows. Those eyes, now, were unfriendly as he approached.

Impa stepped forward to meet the man. Her slim shoulders were squared, and she stood straight, a look of determination on her face. The man stopped in front of her and stared down, hands on hips.

“Well, street rat?” His voice rumbled from deep in his chest.

“I told you don't call me that,” Impa said.

Sneighd bit his bottom lip to refrain from smiling. He was glad to see a smile crease the big man's face.

“Okay, baby girl,” the man said. “You're here for a reason. Name it.” He glanced up at Sneighd and frowned slightly. “Who's he?”

“A pilot,” Impa said. “Had some trouble with his ship. Came down in the swamp and needs some parts.”

She dug out a piece of paper on which she had written what Korbot needed. She handed the paper to the man. He read her carefully printed words, his frown deepening, then turned his attention fully on Sneighd.

“You don't look Rhadurian,” he said.

“Denovan,” Sneighd said. “But currently, the hauler is my ride. Things are a little tight right now.”

The big man's grin said, “yeah, I get it” as he handed the paper back to Impa. He gave an indication with his head for them to follow him and led the way to his warehouse. When Sneighd entered the door he stopped, amazed at the size. Metal shelves, some over twenty feet high, lined the multitude of aisles in the

cavernous warehouse. The shelves held every possible type of equipment, and Sneighd thought to himself it would take them forever to find what they needed. He discovered their guide knew exactly where to look. He left them at the doors and disappeared into the aisles. Sneighd checked his chronometer. It took less than thirty minutes for them to have what they needed. The transaction was completed when Impa handed over the payment Korbob had given her.

“Be careful, baby girl,” the man said as she and Sneighd turned to leave. “You take good care of her, mister.” The words were spoken in a warning. Sneighd nodded without answering and followed Impa back to the tunnel they had exited into the port. He let her lead the way back to the town center in silence, but before they reached the park, he stopped her.

“Who was he? He seemed to know you pretty well.”

“His name is Bollo. He's the portmaster.” She hesitated and glanced back the way they had just come.

Sneighd thought he saw something akin to sadness in her eyes, but it wasn't there long enough for him to be certain.

“He was my daddy's best friend,” Impa said.

* * * * *

It wasn't long before he and Korbot had the repairs completed. There was no reason to remain on Garma. There wasn't any information to help them find what they were looking for because, as Impa said, and Sneighd had seen, there were no records kept on Garma. They had to find another source for information. Tracking that information down wouldn't be easy, but they had no choice but to try.

Chapter Twenty-One

The Lurker didn't like probing in the dark. It took too much time and there were others awaiting his services. He plotted every course the Rhadurian Hauler might have taken. He wanted to find Arkon, take him to the Corporation, collect his payment, and continue to his next client. After some deliberation he decided the best place to begin would be the place where Arkon had met with Cocker.

The Lurker hated working for the Corporation. The officials he had worked for had always been certain they were in control of every situation, and in control of him. He could work for them or kill them; it didn't matter to him, so long as he was paid. And there had been times when he was forced to dispose of a few who had hired him because of their self-assurance that he would do

exactly what they told him as long as he was well paid. He wasn't a puppet. He answered only to himself and chose for himself which jobs to take and which not. The pay wasn't always a deciding factor. Chasing smugglers, pirates, freighter pilots, and other such beings wasn't a job he cared to waste his time on. There were many other jobs that paid better and were more to his liking.

This pilot seemed to present a special problem, not only to the Corporation, but to the head of the Sinnetian syndicate. This created an intriguing situation and a challenge. So far, the pilot had managed to stay one step ahead, unusual, but that couldn't last for long. The chase was proving to be difficult and he had to admit, at least wasn't boring.

Assured of the course he was certain Sneighd Arkon must take, he set his coordinates and was on his way, unaware that his movements, transmissions, and settings were being monitored.

The small black ship hovered in a quiet corridor of deep space, waiting like a ghostly shadow for the Lurker to make his move. The tall, slender figure watched, listened, and finally nodded in satisfaction. A decision had been made. Capitol City on Gravette

was the Lurker's destination. This must be where the Rhadurian Hauler was headed.

Soon the shadow in space vanished from where it had hovered as if it had never existed at all.

Chapter Twenty-Two

"I still think going to Capitol City is a very bad idea."

Haunalyn was in a foul mood as she protested plotting the course Korbot read out to her.

The big man manned the co-pilot's seat, trying extremely hard to not lose his patience. "It's the best place to see if we can find the information we need." This was about the hundredth time he had repeated these words. Her arguing the point was getting on his nerves. He was beginning to feel sorry for his old friend Deacon. Haunalyn had to be a constant trial to her father.

"What makes you think this Cocker idiot kept records of his dealings, illegal I'm sure, with that rat, Baquar? Wouldn't that be considered treason?" Haunalyn argued.

Korbot sighed. The girl's negative attitude would not serve them well if she didn't change it. "True. But do you think Cocker, whoever he is, would be stupid enough to share any shady dealings with someone outside the Corporation with anyone else? Do you think the Corporation officials are above such practices? Believe me, this is not unusual. Their entire system is corrupt, and always has been. The Corporation is not above stabbing its many members and allies in the proverbial back."

In the days since the hauler had lifted from Garma, Korbot and the three youngsters had gone around in circles trying to decide what their next move should be. All four were on edge, frustrated, and exhausted. They had lingered on the dark edges of the galaxy, keeping tight vigil for any signs of Police Cruisers or any other Corporate ships. Digging for ideas of where they needed to go to find evidence to prove Sneighd didn't murder Cocker, and themselves of complicity, Korbot had finally made the only decision that made any sense, to him anyway.

Intercepting transmissions from any passing ship close enough, Korbot ascertained that things were heating up. It wasn't good, especially not for them, but at least they wouldn't be blindsided by where they stood, which was not in a good place.

It had been Korbot who came up with the idea of going to Capitol City, the heart of the Corporation on the planet Gravette and had taken every oratorical skill he possessed to finally get the others to agree. He knew they were grasping at straws, and one Corporate controlled planet was just as good as another. But hiding in plain sight might be their best strategy, or a total catastrophe.

Haunalyn refused to agree in any way with anything put before her. She still held firm that he and Sneighd were both totally insane. She protested and argued until they were tired of listening to her. Korbot had a feeling that she was homesick, frightened, and unwilling to admit that she was either one. After all, there were no guarantees any of them would come out of this situation alive. There was a very real possibility Haunalyn might never see her father again. That was something Korbot had to make sure never happened. If all else failed, if it was with his last breath, he would get her, even kicking and screaming, safely back to Deacon. And he would see that Haunalyn took Impa with her.

Impa hadn't objected to his plan. Korbot noted the intense gleam in her eyes and knew they would all have to keep close watch on her. She wanted to find the person who killed her family. She wanted to extract payment in full of that person. That desire for revenge saddened Korbot. Impa was only ten human years old,

a child. He would monitor her closely and when the time came, if he had to, restrain her to get her to safety.

“I still think it’s a dumb idea.” Haunalyn grumbled again as she completed her calculations for the jump to hyperspace.

Korbot fought to rein in his temper. “Yes. Yes. Alright, it is a *dumb* idea, granted. But it’s our only idea, our best idea, the only logical idea, unless you’ve somehow managed to come up with a better one.”

He almost laughed when Haunalyn stuck her tongue out at him. She didn’t have a better answer, so she resorted to the only thing she could fall back on, acting her age.

“It’s awfully quiet back there,” Korbot said, glancing down the corridor toward the main hold. “What are they doing?”

“Playing some sort of game, last I saw,” Haunalyn said sullenly.

While he and Haunalyn had been arguing, Korbot noticed Sneighd was keeping a low profile, probably as tired as he was of listening to Haunalyn’s constant bickering, not only with the two of them, but with Impa. Haunalyn seemed to strenuously object to the little girl and Sneighd becoming fast friends. The child never strayed far from Sneighd’s side. Even more amazing to Korbot was Sneighd’s taking on the role of older sibling to the little girl.

Korbot would never have imagined Sneighd being less than cynical and self-centered. The truth was the young pilot wasn't either of those things when it came to Impa.

Haunalyn had made it clear she thought the "brat" was getting between Sneighd and her and Korbot on purpose. Korbot had noticed that Haunalyn having any private time to discuss their predicament or anything else was next to impossible. Rivalry had developed between the girls. There was nothing Korbot could do but make the best of it since they were going to be confined together in the hauler for what could be an awfully long time. If there was no bloodshed between them, he felt they could survive until one or both decided to call a truce.

Korbot unstrapped his restraining belt and stood, stretching his long limbs as best he could in the cramped space. He patted Haunalyn's lean shoulder, then made his way to the hold. He was amused to find Sneighd and Impa tossing some type of small silver coins against the wall to see which one could come closest to a mark Sneighd had placed on the floor. Impa, it appeared, was the most skilled at the game for she had the largest stack of coins. Korbot wasn't sure he approved of Sneighd teaching the child to gamble, but it was a way to pass time.

“Aren’t you a little young to gamble?” He sank into the seat at the read-out console.

Sneighd laughed. “She’s winning. Don’t knock it.”

Impa let out a shout of triumph as her coin hit the mark on the floor dead center.

“Pay up.” She held her hand to Sneighd.

Grinning, he placed a few more of his coins in her upturned palm. “I surrender.” He gathered up his remaining coins and rose to his feet.

“Chicken.” Her smile was triumphant.

“Absolutely.” He stuffed his take into his pocket. “What I’ve got in my pockets is all I have left. I’m not giving you all of it.”

The little girl exploded into giggles as she gathered her winnings and stowed them in her britches. She climbed to her feet and sat next to him on the acceleration couch. She brushed a strand of her hair out of her face as she smiled at Korbot.

“He’s fun. He loses a lot.”

Korbot was pleased to see the little girl that she was still existed. He just hoped he could help her keep that side of her.

Haunalyn sauntered in, hands tucked into her pants pockets, and leaned against the bulkhead. Korbot saw her eyeing the little girl.

Impa stared back. She didn't look the least perturbed. As a matter of fact, to Korbot, she appeared to be gloating.

Evidently noticing that her intense glare on Impa was having no affect, Haunalyn turned away. "We'll be in Capitol City in a few hours, for all the good it will do us."

"Optimistic, aren't we?" Sneighd asked.

"I always like going places where I might get killed," Haunalyn said.

"Is that why you were on Sinnet?"

Korbot moaned and shook his head. The last thing he wanted was for Sneighd and Haunalyn to get into another argument.

She had pushed herself upright. "Well, at least I had a legit reason to be there and I don't owe my shirt to a snake like Baquar."

Korbot raised his eyebrows as Sneighd's expression darkened as he rose to his feet. Haunalyn squared her shoulders ready for a battle, but to Korbot's surprise, Sneighd let his face relax into a shadow of a grin.

“Rat,” he said. “Faifa is the snake.” With that he turned for his quarters.

“You’re a real creep,” Impa said. Her eyes were fixed on the older girl.

Haunalyn turned to face her. Korbot readied himself for the outburst sure to come. The look in Impa’s eyes was dark and disapproving. Haunalyn’s gaze was challenging, her fists clenched at her sides, but suddenly her expression changed to what appeared to be amusement. Korbot felt himself relax as Haunalyn wrinkled her nose at Impa and, without a word, wandered back to the cockpit.

Sneighd gritted his teeth to control his temper and shook his head, not willing to get into another fight with Huanalyn. His fists jammed into his pockets; he went to his quarters. Safely behind the closed door, he sank against the wall and pressed his fists to his eyes. The pressure inside of his head had been steadily growing for several days. The constant bickering had done nothing to assuage the pain.

He pulled a small container from the pocket of the jacket, both of which he had secretly purchased from an illegal drug vendor on

Garma while his three companions slept the night before they departed the planet. From the container he took two small pink pills and popped them into his mouth, forcing them down dry as he crossed to his bunk and lay down. In a few minutes, the pressure subsided, and he closed his eyes. He would have to be careful not to lose these pills, as he had the ones in his jacket left on Sinnet. Without his ID card, he wouldn't be able to procure them from a med-center. If caught purchasing them from a drug vendor, he could end up with an indeterminate sentence on a Corporate prison scow. If things kept going the way they were going, that might happen anyway. The trip to Capitol City had to be successful.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Korbot followed Haunalyn to the cockpit and sat in the co-pilot's seat but said nothing. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Haunalyn fidgeting, reading and re-reading the panels, until she finally turned on him.

“What?”

“Problem, Lyn?” Korbot asked, pretending innocence.

“I don't know. You're the one who's staring.”

He glanced at her. “I'm not staring. I haven't even looked at you.”

She leaned into her seat and crossed her arms. “Well, you want to. You want to say something.”

He shook his head. “No.”

She looked confused. “Then why did you come in here?”

“I thought you were preparing orbit.” He kept his eyes on the console and was fighting to suppress a grin.

A light started blinking, alerting them they had entered the Gravette System. Capitol City lay on the surface of the massive emerald green planet dominating the center of the system.

Korbot well remembered the planet, though it had been years since the last time he had been there, and that hadn't turned out in his favor.

Covered with green soil, green water, and dense green forests, Gravette was the largest planet in the galaxy. Because of its location and beauty, it had been chosen as headquarters for the Corporation. There was no way to approach undetected and the many large cities were home to most of the Corporate Police.

Scanner beacons from the surface cut into the receiving instruments of the hauler. Korbot and Haunalyn had expertly changed the information earlier so their identity wouldn't be detected, and they could land without a reception committee waiting to cart them off to Police Headquarters.

The Portmaster advised them that they were logged in and ended his transmission.

Korbot and Haunalyn went to the hold where Impa and Sneighd waited. Both were wearing blazers. Sneighd handed Korbot an extra from an overhead compartment.

Korbot noticed Sneighd's hand had a slight tremor and his face looked pale. Catching his eye, Sneighd grinned, seeming to be the

same as always. Korbot shrugged off his curiosity for the time being. The younger man was probably only tired, as were they all.

“You girls stay by the ship for now.” Korbot buckled on a holster and slid the blazer into it. “Sneighd and I will check the situation out and try to find a way into and out of the headquarters. It won’t be easy. If there is any trouble,” he pointed emphatically to the girls, “I want you two to get out of here fast. Don’t wait for us.”

Haunalyn and Impa glared at him, obviously unhappy with being left behind, even though they had already discussed why he wanted them at the hauler.

“I know you want to come, but I need you here to get this derelict moving in a hurry. Understand?”

Haunalyn’s frown deepened. “Just make sure you get back here on time, okay? I don’t want to have to come with an army looking for you.”

“Just do what I told you, young lady. We’ll be back, but if we take longer than we anticipate, don’t get antsy. If there’s trouble, get off planet.” He chucked her under her chin. “I don’t want to have to answer to your father if you get into trouble.”

He turned to Impa, who wasn't any happier about being left behind. "You be good. We need you to help guard the hauler and help Haunalyn if she needs to move in a hurry."

Impa shrugged but didn't say anything. Korbot studied her dark expression for a long minute trying to ascertain if she would do as he said. She nodded, but he wasn't sure he completely trusted her.

As he and Sneighd moved away from the girls, Korbot noticed Sneighd wink at the little girl. She smiled back at him, which made Korbot wonder if the two had cooked up a plan of their own. He hoped not.

He and Sneighd cautiously made their way out of the bay and into the busy streets. The city was the hub of commerce, teeming with inhabitants from every corner of the galaxy. Crowds of humans and non-human species alike swarmed the streets and walks, making it easier for Korbot and Sneighd to go their way without calling unwanted attention to themselves.

It didn't take long before they had reached the gates of the Capitol Building. The sight of the soaring closed gates, made from plecate, a metal so dense and strong there was no known way to destroy it, was not encouraging.

The only way onto the grounds, as far as Korbot could tell, was through those gates. The wall, also made of plecate, surrounding the complex rose 30 feet high, its surface smooth and unscalable without climbing equipment or hoverboards. The building on the grounds inside the gates was a fortress guarded at every angle by squads of police, electronic surveillance, and guard droids all armed.

“Are you sure we want to go through with this?” Sneighd asked staring at the top of the wall.

Korbot grinned at him. “This was your idea, my friend.”

Sneighd gave a wry laugh. “Doesn’t mean it was a good one.”

“You want to forget it?” Korbot was serious. If Sneighd wanted to back out, he wouldn’t hold it against him. The plan was foolhardy and dangerous. They could find another way to get what they were after---maybe.

Sneighd shook his head. “No, because it’s my neck if I don’t get the evidence to prove I haven’t killed anyone and that you aren’t complicit, if there is any.” He gave Korbot a sideways glance. “Besides, I don’t want to miss all the fun in trying.”

Sneighd did his best to sound cocky, but Korbot saw the trace of fear in his eyes. He pulled him to one side and said in a low voice,

“Alright then, listen closely to me. I think there is a way to get inside legally, but you have to follow my lead and do exactly what I tell you. Got it?”

Sneighd stared at him in genuine surprise. “I’m all ears.”

“Good. Pay attention and stay put. I’ll be back.”

Korbot moved quickly across the street to the gates. He placed the palm of his right hand against a grill near the lock.

A voice that sounded as if it came from a droid inquired as to the nature of his business.

Korbot crossed his fingers. “I wish an appointment with the Trade Commissioner.”

“Does this regard trade, business, politics, or is this a complaint?”

“Business.” Korbot held his breath.

The mechanical voice came again. “You may see the Trade Commissioner. Return in one hour.”

Korbot released his breath. “Thank you.” He hurried back to where Sneighd waited. “I’ve made an appointment with the Trade Commissioner in an hour. What I have in mind will take the help of the girls. Let’s go.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Sneighd carried Impa on his hip as he, Korbot, and Haunalyn stood outside the city headquarters' gates listening to the droid speaking from inside give instructions before allowing them entrance to the grounds.

“State your purpose,” the mechanical voice droned.

“Maka Tendrite. I have an appointment to see the Trade Commissioner,” Korbot replied.

They listened to the whir and purr of the droid checking the information.

“The Trade Commissioner is available and waiting to see you. Proceed.”

The gates swung open and Korbot led Sneighd and the girls along the walkway to the building in the center of the grounds. The wings of the fortress-like building spanned either side of the grounds to the massive walls, making the only way to the rear of the grounds through the building itself. Sneighd estimated the dome of the building rose a good forty stories, while the roof fell maybe ten stories below that. There were no windows except in the dome, which he assumed was probably manned by weapons

pointed at the gates and the grounds. The walls of the building were smooth and unscalable black and gray material that appeared to be both metal and stone of some type.

Impa clung to Sneighd's neck, her legs encircling his waist, her head on his shoulder, looking for all the world like a very tired, very piqueish little girl. Inwardly Sneighd grinned. Impa was a good actress.

“That is one ugly building. No imagination,” he whispered in her ear.

She buried her face in his neck to stifle her giggles.

The little group was met by two guards at the entrance of the Capitol Building and escorted down a long corridor to the Commissioner's office.

“Wait out here in the hall with the ‘baby’,” Korbot instructed Sneighd. He turned to the guard waiting to admit him to the Commissioner's office. “My daughter isn't feeling well. We don't want to risk infecting anyone. I'll be taking her to the med-center as soon as I'm finished here. I don't think it's serious.”

This earned him a dubious look from the guard as he keyed the door to the office to admit Korbot and Haunalyn, then took his

station outside, keeping a wary eye on Sneighd and his little burden.

Sneighd sat down on a bench with Impa on his lap. After a few minutes Impa tugged on his sleeve and pretended to whisper in his ear. He glanced around and did his best to look embarrassed and alarmed.

“You sure?” he asked.

She nodded.

They had the guard’s full attention. Sneighd gathered Impa in his arms and stood. “My little sister’s gotta---y’know---uh---throw up. Where’s the...?”

The guard turned pale as if the thought of the child being sick would make him sick. “Down the hall, take a right.”

“Thanks. I really appreciate---you know...” Sneighd quickly carried Impa in the direction indicated.

Out of the guard’s line of vision, he set Impa on her feet. The corridor was empty. She tugged his pant leg and pointed to the other end of the hall. Keeping an alert ear for any footsteps or voices, they moved to a door and paused to listen for any sound coming from the other side. Hearing nothing, Sneighd reached for

the keypad, planning to bypass the code. The door slid open with a slight hiss. It was unlocked, which Sneighd thought strange, but he reminded himself, they were in the Capital Building in the center of the city. Who would dare steal anything? He shook his head at the conceit of the Corporation.

Inside the door, he and Impa found a catwalk spanning a cavernous circular room over floor to ceiling computer storage files. There were no guards or clerks.

Sneighd cursed under his breath. He knew nothing about how to retrieve the information. Even if he did, he would never be able to go through all the files on his own. They were probably protected by infinitesimal codes, alarms, passwords, and who knew what else.

A hiss below alerted him, and he went to his belly on the catwalk, pulling Impa down with him. Inching forward they peered down to the belly of the room. A single official had entered and begun feeding information into the file retrieval system. He hadn't used a code but investigated an ocular scanner next to the first row of files. Sneighd frowned to himself. So much for breaking into the system.

Sneighd glanced at Impa's face and knew without asking that this was the man who had taken Impa's family from her. Both of

her fists were clenched so tightly her knuckles shown white. Tears slid down her cheeks which were tinged dark pink from the rage that was clearly visible in her dark eyes. Her breathing had quickened, and her jaw was set.

Bad timing, dope, Sneighd thought. The chances of their first encounter being this man was astronomical, and just his luck.

In his peripheral vision, he caught a movement from Impa. Her small hand was easing into her jacket where Sneighd knew she had hidden her blazer.

Sneighd grabbed at her wrist to stop her. “Impa, no,” he whispered harshly. She jerked away from him, rolled away and rolled to her knees. Her blazer was in her hand and pointed at him.

Sneighd rose to his haunches, keeping his head below the top of the ramp and hoping they couldn’t be seen.

“Gimme the gun.” He kept his voice low and one eye on the official below who appeared oblivious to their presence. “He can help us.”

He wasn’t sure she was listening. Her focus seemed to be over his shoulder as she raised her blazer.

“Interfere and I’ll blow you all over the wall.”

Sneighd had a sudden sensation that she wasn't speaking to him, but to someone behind him. He didn't turn but kept his eyes on the little girl. He watched her hands and a second before she raised her weapon and fired, he dove forward out of her way. The corporate guard who had escorted them landed facedown where a second before Sneighd had been.

A klaxon blared into life, the deafening sound echoing off the walls. A pain like a hot needle bored into Sneighd's head as he climbed to his feet. He saw the official below scramble towards the catwalk, followed by police guards that flooded the circular room.

Sneighd shook off the pain of the cacophony of the klaxon and yelling voices and fired several blasts into the midst of the police. He yanked Impa, now on her feet, behind him as he backed to the door. He heard the hiss as the door slid open. No one shouted for them to stop or surrender, so he knew their way was clear for the moment. They raced down the corridor only to find it filled with guards running toward them. There was no cover. Sneighd set a steady barrage of fire at the guards to clear the way. Impa ducked from behind Sneighd's knees and blasted two of the lead guards. Someone shouted in surprise and the guards scattered, taken by surprise at Impa's unexpected appearance and accuracy. He took down the guards closest to a branch corridor, and grabbing Impa's

wrist, hauled around the turn, sliding a little on the highly polished floor.

Impa pulled loose from his hand and ran ahead of him clearing a path. Sneighd overtook her, afraid that she would be injured or worse, and lifted her from her feet, carrying her as he ran. He had no idea where they were or if they would find an escape exit when he saw Korbot several yards ahead beckoning them to where he waited, concealed behind a support girder. As Sneighd and his squirming, screaming bundle came abreast of the big man, Korbot indicated they needed to follow him and took off down another branch corridor.

“What happened?” Korbot shouted.

“No time to explain right now,” Sneighd shouted back above the noise of the Klaxon. His eyes were tearing, his vision blurring from the white-hot pain in his head. “How do we get out of here?”

“We almost to the entrance,” Korbot said.

Haunalyn held the main entrance of the building, firing indiscriminately in every direction to keep the ground patrols, summoned by the alarm and noise, from cutting off their escape. Before Sneighd could stop her, Impa went to her knees and slid

under the Portmaster, leaping neatly to her feet and joining Haunalyn in clearing the path to the gate.

Sneighd, dizzy and barely able to see where he was going, tripped and fell before he reached Korbot. In doing so, he avoided a blast that, had he been on his feet, would have gone through his shoulder. Korbot hauled him upright and pulled him outside. As he stumbled forward, Sneighd saw the big man hit the controls to the shielded doors. They slid shut on the approaching guards and police, cutting off their attack. Korbot blasted the controls.

“That should hold them for a while,” he said.

Sneighd was leaning with his hands on his knees trying to catch his breath. Korbot’s big hand closed over his arm.

“Are you hit?” Korbot asked.

Sneighd shook his head and straightened. “Just winded.”

It was a hundred-yard sprint to the gate and the Police held the ground. There was nothing to do but make a mad scramble for freedom and blast anything that got in the way. Sneighd didn’t think he and his companions hit anything as they ran, but their insane charge seemed to cause some confusion. The police ran for whatever cover to avoid the deadly bolts of energy whizzing

through the air in every direction. The incident would have been funny to Sneighd if he didn't feel so sick.

Impa shouted at Sneighd and pointed to a small red light above the gate intercom. The light, which was swimming around in his vision, he recognized for the miracle they needed. He fired into it. The lock mechanism exploded in a shower of sparks and flames and the supposedly impenetrable gates swept open.

The Police, no longer under fire, rushed out of their cover to overtake and capture their fleeing quarry. Sneighd knew that as soon as he and the other three reached the street, they would be impossible to see within the crowds of pedestrians. Korbot led the way into the throng of people. He was carrying Impa so she wouldn't get separated from them. Sneighd heard the noise of the pursuit fall further and further behind as the police were hindered by the waves of pedestrians.

Korbot slipped into the first available alley and grabbed Haunalyn's hand, nearly jerking her off her feet as he yanked her with him. Sneighd followed. They were all taking deep gulps of air and Sneighd felt a sharp pain in his side from the marathon they had just run. Haunalyn sank into the dirt and leaned against the wall of the building on her right. Korbot stood next to the alley's entrance, keeping an eye out for trouble.

Deposited on her feet, Impa leaned against the building on her left. Sneighd doubled over, his hands again resting on his knees as he tried to take in enough air and get rid of the black spots behind his retinas. He fought rising nausea in the pit of his stomach. His head throbbed. He did his best to shake it off. He had to shake it off.

Haunalyn was the first to find her voice. “What happened?”

Sneighd took a deep, ragged breath and spoke on exhalation.

“Ambushed. Impa saw him---fired.”

Korbot was staring at Sneighd, his eyes narrowed and dark.

“C’mon, let’s go while we can.”

Sneighd straightened, wincing but determined not to let the big man know the shape he was in. “Korbot, I think I know how to get what we came for. Impa saw the man who killed her family. If we could get to him...”

“Forget it.” Korbot’s expression was dark and angry. “I trusted you to follow the plan. You didn’t. Whatever you’re thinking, it won’t work. They’ll be watching for us now. It’s in our favor they don’t know who we are, yet, but they know we’re up to something. There won’t be a second chance.”

Sneighd was growing just as angry. “We were following the plan. The files are in a room that it would take light years to investigate, and it takes a retina scan to unlock the files. That’s a dead end. It was a million and one chance we would stumble onto the murderer of Impa’s family. If we get to him, I don’t think we’d have much trouble soliciting his assistance. He’s lucky he isn’t dead.” He glanced meaningfully at Impa. She held her head high and stared at him.

Korbot gave no indication of being in a mood to argue. “When we get to the ship you’ll explain.” He, too, was looking at Impa. “Right now, we need to regroup. That was too close. We might not be so lucky next time. We’ll have to think of something else.”

Sneighd wasn’t giving in. “I’m not leaving until I talk to that man.”

“Sneighd, don’t be stupid,” Haunalyn said.

“I’ll help,” Impa volunteered, stepping to Sneighd’s side, her face filled with determination.

“Oh no you don’t,” Korbot told her firmly. “If Sneighd wants to get himself killed, fine, but you’re staying right here.”

Impa squared off against him. If the situation hadn’t been so serious, Sneighd would have laughed at how fierce she looked.

“Octar killed my family.” Anger and sorrow laced her words.

Sneighd felt his stomach drop, this time in empathy for the little girl. He wouldn’t allow her to go with him, even though he wasn’t sure Korbot didn’t think so. He knelt so he could look Impa directly in the eyes. “And that’s exactly why you’re staying here. I can’t very well talk to him if you blow his head off, now can I?”

“How are you going to talk to him at all?” Haunalyn demanded.

Impa’s eyes shifted to hers, and Sneighd hurried on to avoid any outburst between them. “I’ll think of something.”

“You’re going to mess around and get yourself in a lot of trouble you can’t get out of,” Korbot said.

Sneighd straightened his shoulders. He didn’t like feeling trapped. “I’m already in a lot of trouble I can’t get out of. This is a chance to do something about it.”

Korbot seemed to sense Sneighd wasn’t going to give up. “I know some people here. Let me arrange a meeting with this ‘Octar’. Right now, I want all of you back in the Marauder. I’ll join you as soon as I can.”

Sneighd wasn't pleased with this arrangement. "Hey, now who's trying to get himself killed? Why the sudden change? I thought you didn't want to try again."

Korbot's eyes were hooded as he stared down at Sneighd. "I have a better chance of staying alive than you do. Don't question me, just do as I tell you."

"What makes you think your chances are so much better?" Sneighd demanded.

He stepped back when Korbot moved to tower over him. The big man's dark eyes were fierce. "I said, 'don't question me.' I know what I'm doing. I haven't always been a portmaster."

Sneighd studied the big man, considered arguing, but decided it might be wiser to let the Tendrite do whatever he planned. There were rumors Korbot had once been a star pilot of some magnitude. It could be he did have connections from those days.

"Alright, but be careful, old man. I don't want your death on my conscience."

Korbot's shoulders relaxed and he grinned. "Don't worry about me. You get these two back to the ship. I'll be along soon."

He moved out of the alley and soon melted into the crowds.
Sneighd watched after him, hoping they hadn't made a mistake.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Deacon paced his office, growling under his breath, worrying about his daughter. The news his pilots brought news from Sinnet weren't good. Rumors were that Baquar Starka put word out he wanted to hire the Assassin. Deacon already knew the Corporation had hired the Lurker. Both assassins were good at what they did, too good. The last thing Deacon wanted was his daughter caught between them.

He paused in front of the panoramic window of his office that gave him a full view of the port.

Something wasn't right. The murder of one Corporate official usually wouldn't have caused a ripple within the Corporation. The person must be higher on the Corporate scale than what was being said. Deacon had delved into the man's background and could find no status other than the man was a minor executive in the Trade Commission. He had been on Sinnet which was not all that unusual. Illegal contraband passed from Sinnet to Gravette by way of Baquar all the time. That wasn't a secret. The multitude of pilots who frequented both planets liked to brag since they were usually the ones providing the transports and facing the greatest dangers in getting the contraband to whichever destination.

Finding nothing special about the dead official, Deacon knew there had to be something else, something Arkon had stolen from the Corporation, or knew that the Corporation didn't want known. But that didn't make any sense either. Why the Lurker? The creature was usually hired to remove more important obstacles than a mere pilot.

Deacon moved from the window and began pacing again. He had burrowed into Sneighd Arkon's background as well. There wasn't much to find. Arkon had been born on the mining planet of Denova. His father had been a mine owner and supervisor. Arkon's mother had died in childbirth. Oddly, against the traditions of Denova, Arkon had become a pilot and left the planet at a young age. The information was scanty and vague. Deacon didn't consider that too unusual. Denova was populated by miners and their families and tended to be clannish and distrusting of outsiders. Deacon had made the Denova run more than once when he was younger. Arkon didn't fit in with what Deacon knew, and that made him even more concerned for his daughter.

As for the Assassin, he was little more than a legend. As with the Lurker, nothing was known about him.

Unlike the Lurker, whether the Assassin existed or was just a rumor wasn't verified. Supposed victims, most of who were

reported to be high ranking government or political beings, believed to have been exterminated by the Assassin, simply vanished without a trace.

Deacon wondered what Baquar knew that prompted this summons of the Assassin if he existed, and if Baquar would be able to persuade the being to work for him. Baquar dwelled in darker places than the Corporation. He wasn't one for doing things without a reason. Deacon had to assume that the Sinnetian knew more about the Assassin's existence than others knew. If the rumors of the Assassin were true, the being, whoever he was, might eliminate not only Sneighd Arkon, but leave no witnesses. The thought of Haunalyn disappearing, never to be seen again wasn't something Deacon wanted to think about.

“Deac.” A soft voice roused him from his thoughts.

He turned to face Avery Dusalt, Assistant Portmaster and Deacon's closest and most trusted friend on Rhaduri.

“What is it, Dusalt?”

“We've confirmed Baquar has indeed sent for the Assassin. That being so, I guess that verifies the rumors. I always wondered if they were true.”

Deacon sank onto the edge of his desk and crossed his arms. He was hanging onto his temper by a thread. “I’d say it was a fairly good assumption. But, if all I’ve heard about the Assassin is true as well, Baquar may regret his choices. If we’re lucky, the Assassin will get rid of Baquar on general principles.”

Dusalt laughed. “Baquar seldom does anything on a whim. The Corporation beat him to the Lurker, so he had to go one better. What I don’t get is what this Arkon knows or has done that is worth all this trouble.”

Deacon pushed himself upright. “What do you know about Sneighd Arkon? There has to be more.”

“Not much. He’s a hotshot, or so the gossip goes among other pilots. He’s reckless, which is odd for a Denovan. The fact he’s a pilot is odd. Denovans don’t fly, and they don’t especially like those that do. As a matter of fact, they have strict rules about their people not becoming pilots. Arkon seems to be the anomaly.”

Dusalt said. “There’s also the matter of Korbot. It’s well-known that Baquar has been after Korbot’s port for years. The two of them have butted heads more than once. I think it’s safe to say that if anything happened to Korbot, Baquar wouldn’t lose any sleep over it.”

Deacon shook his head. “That could be part of it, but Korbot wasn’t involved except by accident, the same as Haunalyn.”

“Maybe,” Dusalt said. “We don’t know the whole story.” He paused. “There is something else.”

“What?” Deacon wasn’t sure he was ready for anything else.

Dusalt shifted his stance, looking uncomfortable. “Calaiph arrived a few minutes ago from Gravette. He said word is the Marauder was seen on Gravette, under a different name, but the description was too close to be coincidental. There was some kind of ruckus involving three people who sound like Korbot, Haunalyn, and Sneighd. Calaiph had no idea what they were doing there, but whatever the ruckus was, the entire city is in an uproar trying to find them. They hadn’t left planet yet.”

He paused again as if trying to decide if he should continue to speak.

“What, Dusalt?” Deacon had a bad feeling.

“Rumors are---that they have a child with them.”

Deacon stared at his friend; not sure he’d heard right. “A what?” His voice raised an octave and he had to clear his throat.

“A child, a little girl by all accounts. No one seems to have any idea who she is or where they found her. She arrived with them, so they had to have found her somewhere between Sinnet and Gravette.”

Deacon’s head was beginning to ache. This was beyond his comprehension. “Kidnapped? No, not Korbot. It would be against his nature, not to mention the Tendrite law. Haunalyn wasn’t much more than a child herself. Deacon knew his daughter. She would be more inclined to leave an orphaned child in the care of authorities or on a doorstep. He imagined Korbot and Sneighd Arkon probably wished they could do the same with her. Deacon was ashamed to admit, even just to himself, that he’d not done the best job raising her. He had given her too much freedom. “Tendrites would take in an orphan,” Dusalt said.

Deacon nodded. That was more likely. Korbot would have seen the need and dealt with it. The child, whoever she was, would find a new home in the end. Korbot would make sure of it. But from where, how, and why had the child come to be with them in the first place.

Deacon felt his temper slip. Haunalyn was right in the middle of this mess, and now an unidentified little girl has been dragged into it. Either of them could be killed. Korbot could take care of

himself. Arkon, well he didn't know that much about the pilot but if he was anything like other pilots, he would manage to get himself out of whatever he got into. It was the girls that changed everything. Korbot and Arkon couldn't protect themselves and the girls if the situation arose that they were forced to do that. They would need help.

"Get my ship ready," Deacon said.

Dusalt's head came up in surprise. "What do you intend to do?"

Deacon noted a peculiar gleam creep into his friend's brown eyes. He knew what that gleam meant, and what Dusalt was probably hoping. Deacon hadn't been inside of his ship since the day he learned of his wife's death. He had vowed to take care of his daughter and never fly again. Flying was second nature to him. He had been one of the best pilots around. Giving up the stars had been the hardest thing he had ever done. Over the years, the yearning stayed with him, but he had ignored it for the sake of his only child. She needed him. The choice was easy.

"I'm going after Haunalyln," Deacon said. "I have to."

"I'll be ready in half an hour," Dusalt asked.

Deacon could see the barely suppressed grin of his co-pilot. Though he never said it, Dusalt had wanted him to take the help

again. Dusalt had, on occasion, mentioned the possibility, but Deacon had ignored him.

Deacon nodded, trying not to grin as Dusalt left the office almost buoyantly, a broad smile creasing his face.

Deacon had been injured in a shootout with a particularly nasty Corporation thug named Grindle. Although the wound hadn't been life threatening, it had left Deacon with a bad limp and gave him trouble from time to time. After the death of his wife, he used his injury as an excuse to not fly. The truth was Haunalyn was only ten at the time. She needed her father. Her only other living relative was his wife's aunt, Lyvidya, who lived on Gravette. She had never married and was wealthy. She had strict ideas on how a young woman should look and act which she had made abundantly clear when her niece, whom she had raised, told her she was marrying him, a mere pilot. Aunt and niece hadn't parted amicably. Deacon would never turn his daughter over to Lyvidya.

At that time, Korbot's father had been mysteriously murdered. Korbot had returned to Sinnet to take over his father's port and see if he could uncover the truth. So far as Deacon knew, Korbot suspected Baquar Starka had been involved, but hadn't found the proof. Deacon hadn't seen his old friend since but had stayed in communication with him over the years.

Deacon confessed to Dusalt that he and Korbot had convinced themselves they had done what was best, but Deacon had been miserable since Haunalyn had become old enough to fly on her own. Something he was beginning to regret teaching her. He ached to take to his ship again but needed an incentive. Baquar had unwittingly provided the incentive. Deacon had some old scores to settle with the Sinnetian himself. Baquar was in for some very nasty surprises

Chapter Twenty-Six

Sneighd paced the bottom of the ramp, restless and edgy. Korbot was late in returning and Sneighd decided if Korbot didn't appear soon, he was going after him. He glanced at his chronometer, then into the open hatch of the hauler. Making up his mind, he adjusted the holster on his hip and stepped out directly into Korbot's path. The two men barely avoided a collision. The abrupt appearance of the big man out of the shadows caused Sneighd's heart to skip a few beats. He stepped out of Korbot's way as Korbot strode to the hauler. The big man's expression was anxious. Something was wrong.

"Where are the girls?" Korbot asked, his voice tight with tension.

"Inside. What's going on, Korbot?" Sneighd asked, his concern growing again.

"Nothing," Korbot said as they entered the hauler.

Sneighd knew that wasn't true. Something had Korbot on alert and he wanted to know what.

Haunalyn met them at the top of the ramp. "Well?" she asked.

Korbot pushed past her, halted in the middle of the hold as if he had suddenly forgotten what he was doing. There were several minutes of silence before he turned to Sneighd and Haunalyn as if suddenly remembering they were there.

“Tonight, late, you, Sneighd, and I are to meet someone who will take us to Octar.” Korbot paused, looking around. He appeared to be listening for something, or someone.

Sneighd stood by the open hatch and listened, too. He heard nothing except the normal mechanical sound mechanics working on the various ships, and the mumblings of conversations and of raucous laughter from returning pilots. He wanted to know what it was Korbot was waiting for. He noticed Haunalyn looking at him and shrugged his shoulders. The Portmaster’s strange mood was making both nervous.

“They’re over by the warehouse.” Impa’s disembodied voice made them jump.

Korbot whirled around, searching. Sneighd pointed at a shelf behind him. They turned together and looked into the dark eyes of the little girl cleverly hidden behind the bundles and equipment on the shelf. Sneighd had to give Impa credit for finding an excellent vantage point, as well as perfect hiding place.

“She’s taken to roosting up there,” Haunalyn said.

Sneighd detected the disgust in the older girl’s voice.

Haunalyn’s antagonism toward Impa annoyed him.

“Oh.” Korbob shook his head, still seeming distracted.

Haunalyn tugged at his sleeve impatiently. “Excuse me, but who is by the warehouse?”

Sneighd was wondering the same thing.

“The people followin’ Korbob,” Impa said.

Sneighd glanced up at the little girl. She was staring out into the dark beyond the open hatch. He turned his eyes in the same direction but saw nothing. He looked again at Impa, wondering how she could see in the dark so well.

Haunalyn grabbed Korbob’s arm and jerked him to face her.

“There are people following you. Aren’t you going to do something?” she demanded.

Korbob seemed to shake off whatever was distracting him. “No, I know they’re there. They know I know it. Don’t worry about it.”

Haunalyn glanced at Sneighd for help but he just shrugged and waited for Korbob to fill them in.

“Who are they?” It was clear Haunalyn wasn’t willing to wait.

“The men who’re going to help us,” Korbot said. He didn’t seem to be paying any attention to her concern. “They came with me. They didn’t follow me.” He turned to Sneighd. “I’ve some planning to do. Keep watch. If you need me, I’ll be in my quarters.”

He moved past them and disappeared into his and Sneighd’s cramped quarters. Sneighd hated not being included in whatever plans Korbot might be making. He didn’t like being kept in the dark, especially with the stakes so high.

“What do you make of that?” Haunalyn asked as the door to the quarters slid shut behind Korbot.

Sneighd shook his head and sank onto the acceleration couch. “Who knows.” He leaned against the cushions and closed his eyes just enough to make Haunalyn think he wasn’t watching.

She threw her hands up in exasperation and stomped off toward the cockpit, mumbling something about at least she’d see to it they weren’t ambushed.

Sneighd heard the soft thump as Impa jumped from her homemade fortress and watched her follow Haunalyn. He smiled as he closed his eyes all the way. He knew he needed to stay

vigilant like Korbot ordered, but he was exhausted from fatigue, worry, and tension. His smile faded as he pushed himself from his seat and concentrated on warding off the dull ache in his head.

“I don’t think Sneighd’s well,” Impa said as she climbed into the co-pilot’s seat and faced Haunalyn.

Haunalyn kept her eyes forward, studying the bay area through the window. The last thing she wanted to deal with was this peculiarly intelligent and observant little girl. Haunalyn had already figured out that Impa was highly intelligent. If she acted more like a child, she wouldn’t be so annoying. As it was, Impa acted like a miniature adult, all traces of childhood deeply buried under a tough exterior. After all, Impa had been through, Haunalyn could understand in a way, but the little girl’s intuitive ways still irritated her.

“I don’t think any of us are,” Haunalyn said. “I think we’re all coming apart at the seams.” She slumped into her seat and crossed her arms on her chest.

Impa frowned at her. “I don’t mean that. I mean, I really think something’s wrong with him.”

Haunalyn studied the little girl who looked her straight in the eye. She could see the real concern in those dark eyes. “What are you talking about?” she asked, but she had a suspicion she already knew. She had noticed Sneighd’s occasional twinges and twitches as if he was in pain.

Impa mimicked Haunalyn’s posture in her seat and crossed her arms. “I mean haven’t you noticed how tired he looks? I thought it was just all the fuss until earlier.”

Haunalyn was instantly alert. “Why? What happened earlier?”

Impa stared out of the cockpit window as Haunalyn had done a few minutes before. “His eyes were kinda glassy, and he kept rubbing his temples like he had a really bad headache. His hands shook, and he looked unsteady on his feet. His face was almost white. I thought he was going to pass out.”

Haunalyn forced her body to relax, trying to give the appearance of not caring. She might not like having Impa on board, but the little girl was only a kid. Haunalyn didn’t want Impa to be worried or afraid.

“You’re imagining things,” she said as nonchalantly as she could under the circumstances. “He probably did have a headache. I have one.”

Impa's face drew into a pout. "It's not the same."

Haunalyn watched her for a long moment, not knowing exactly what to say. "Look, Impa, I'm not saying you're wrong. But think about all he's been through recently. Look at what we've all been through. We're lucky to still be on our feet. We're all worn to a frazzle. I'm sure there's nothing wrong with him that a few days sleep wouldn't cure, if he could get it." She waited, but Impa remained sullen and silent. "You sure have taken a liking to him."

That got a reaction and Haunalyn was surprised by the hint of a frightened lost little girl that she heard when Impa answered.

"I need Sneighd," Impa said. "I got nobody, and he needs somebody." Her tone turned petulant. "He likes you, a lot, but you don't care. All you do is argue with him. Sometimes it's hard to tell which of us really is a kid."

Haunalyn felt her cheeks burning, but from anger or embarrassment, she wasn't sure. She knew Impa was right. It seemed whenever she was around Sneighd, she couldn't refrain from biting sarcasm or criticism. She didn't understand it any more than Impa did, or maybe she did and didn't want to or couldn't accept the fact she was attracted to Sneighd.

She turned her gaze to the console and pretended to study the readouts. There were times that Impa was too perceptive for her age.

“*You* are the kid,” Haunalyn said. “And don’t forget it.”

Impa jumped to her feet, her face a dark storm of emotion. Haunalyn noted the tears puddling in the corner of Impa’s eyes. The reaction surprised her.

“You’re impossible,” Impa shouted as she ran back to the hold, and no doubt, her hiding place.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

It was close to midnight when Korbot emerged from his quarters. He thought he had the plan worked out. All he needed was to put it in place. There were a lot of details to go over with Sneighd first. He trusted the pilot to follow instructions, but a hint of doubt and uneasiness lingered at the back of Korbot's mind as he reached the hold area. He abruptly stopped and stepped back into the shadows.

Sneighd sat on the acceleration couch and, as Korbot watched, pulled himself to his feet and walked unsteadily over to the water dispenser where he drew himself a cup of water. Unaware of Korbot's scrutiny, Sneighd pulled a metal container small enough to be hidden in the palm of a handout of his jacket pocket. From it, he extracted two pink tablets and swallowed them with the water in one gulp, then leaned against the console, swaying as if in danger of tumbling over.

Korbot had worried about Sneighd's face being so pale earlier, the way that pain seemed to appear and disappear into the green eyes of the younger man since the beginning of their unexpected journey. He had wondered about Sneighd's frantic search for the jacket left in his ship on Sinnet, and the way he had vanished for several unexplained hours on Garma, returning with not only a

new jacket, but what to Korbot had appeared to be a firmer hold over himself. He remembered Sneighd's mysterious fever that had come over him out of the blue. There was something wrong, something Sneighd wanted to keep hidden from the rest of them. Whether it was an illness, or an addiction to some type of illegal substance, Korbot didn't know or like. Sneighd would need his faculties to be clear, his agility to be full strength. The slightest miscalculation or movement could cause Korbot's concise plan to fall apart and end in disaster. There was not time to confront Sneighd about whatever his secret ailment might be. Korbot would have to keep a closer eye on his younger companion to be sure nothing went wrong.

He waited until Sneighd had replaced the container in his pocket and seemed to be steadier on his feet before making an entrance. At the sound of his approach, Sneighd came to sharp attention. His habitual grin was in place, but Korbot could see a hint of uneasiness and guilt in Sneighd's eyes.

He wouldn't let Sneighd know what he had witnessed, not yet. There would be time for that after their plan was carried out. "We'll be leaving in an hour. The men outside are mercenaries, dangerous but they know where to find Octar and have arranged a meeting with him without arousing suspicion."

He glanced at Sneighd to make sure he was following what was said.

“As far as they or Octar know, we’re mercenaries looking for work.” He watched Sneighd closely as he spoke, but the younger man appeared to have completely recovered.

“What happens when Octar finds out what we really want?” Sneighd asked.

“Nothing. Octar won’t say a word, because we’ll remind him of a certain ‘family’ for whose deaths he is responsible. He tries to argue, or sound an alarm, I’ll turn him over to Impa.”

Sneighd gave a short laugh. “How about the authorities?”

“Once we have what we want, we’ll take Octar on a little journey, to somewhere safe, but out of the way.”

Sneighd seemed to have recaptured his normal spirit. “If Impa doesn’t kill him first.”

“We’ll just have to make sure she doesn’t.”

Sneighd and Korbot moved into the darkness, silently winding their way through the maze of the bays. Sneighd felt as if he and Korbot were venturing into a dangerous lair of monstrous sleeping

hulking beasts waiting until dawn and the return of their masters. The silence made him uneasy. Korbot strode forward, eyes ahead, seeming to be confident in where he was going, when he suddenly stopped at the entrance to one of the cavernous bays where lurked one of the largest of the sleeping ships. Sneighd, lost in his imaging thoughts, ran into the big man. He grit his teeth to prevent making any noise. He chided himself for letting his thoughts be carried away in fantasized dangers instead of staying aware of the very real ones around him.

Korbot said nothing, only watched, his concentrated gaze focused beyond where he and Sneighd stood. He straightened, suddenly alert. Sneighd, seeing movement in the closest shadows, also straightened, his hand automatically reaching for the holster on his hip. He rested his hand on the butt of his weapon, ready to defend him and his friend from the five roughhewn men who seemed to materialize out of the darkness. The tallest among them, a human male, though standing well above his companions in height, approached Korbot and still had to look up to speak to the Tendrite. The other four strangers, all human, Sneighd noted, kept a cautious eye on him. They were armed, as was he. The air between them was pressing and pulsating with dangerous tension.

Korbot kept his eyes on the man approaching him, but kept his hand firmly resting on the blazer on his hip.

“So, is it arranged?” he demanded. He kept his voice close to a whisper to prevent any chance of his words carrying and echoing through the bays.

The man nodded as he glanced over at Sneighd.

“You needn’t worry about my companion,” Korbot said. “He’s part of this.”

The man’s malicious stare remained on Sneighd’s face as he spoke. “Octar is waiting. He isn’t sure he has any need for any more men but is willing to talk to you---for future reference.”

“You mean should any of his hirelings suddenly “leave” unexpectedly,” Sneighd said

Korbot threw him a warning glance and put his hand against the chest of the mercenary, halting the man’s advance on Sneighd. “Don’t,” he warned.

The man stepped back a pace, unwilling, or more likely unable to move forward against Korbot’s restraining hand.

Korbot lowered his hand but noted the other man’s dark gaze remained riveted on Sneighd’s face. Korbot saw the man’s jaw clench and unclench in a controlled effort not to escalate the taut situation. “Take us to Octar,” he ordered.

His command breached the mercenary's antagonistic glare.

The man appeared to shake off whatever smoldered beneath his surface as he looked again to Korbot. "Let's go," he said.

He turned and motioned to his men to follow. Korbot and Sneighd fell into step with the men as they melted into the shadows.

Moving quickly, the mercenaries led them through the city by way of dark alleys until they arrived at a dwelling that appeared to be an abandoned warehouse office. The building was metal, one story, long in length with no detectable windows. The door was curiously made of some sort of wood. The leader of the mercenaries motioned for his men to wait in the shadows while he moved to the door and rapped on it several times. The door opened slightly, and he spoke to someone inside. He turned to Korbot and waved him and Sneighd forward. "In here."

The door swung wide enough to allow the three men into the building.

Inside an ancient single overhead lamp offered barely enough light to enable the men to see each other. The rest of the building was hidden in darkness.

The man Korbot took to be Octar stood in the center of the bare room. Korbot suspected the Spartan room was meant to give Octar

prominence. The Corporate Official was as tall as the mercenary who had accompanied them, slender in his neat, crisp uniform. His fading blond hair had been cut in military style, the sides of his temples graying. His face had a long slender nose down which his eyes looked first at Sneighd, then up at Korbot. He held himself ramrod straight, hands behind his back, an important man on Granite.

Korbot wasn't impressed. He knew the only power this man had was what his minor government standing gave him, which was little more than a lackey doing his masters' bidding. In their presence, Octar would be tripping over his own feet trying to make a good impression.

Korbot saw Sneighd narrow his eyes as if confused about something. He saw Sneighd's hand close over the butt of his blazer. Sneighd moved his feet into a stance that showed readiness for trouble. Korbot knew something was wrong. He shifted his gaze back to the officious man in front of him.

"Well, gentlemen," Octar said, his voice surprisingly high pitched. "Kluge tells me you are interested in hiring as pilots for special Corporation 'projects'." He emphasized the last word.

"Special projects? Is that your word for what you do now?" Korbot shifted his stance as Octar took a step closer, shielding

Sneighd from the man's view. "We both know what those jobs entail, and they are far from 'legal' in the view of the Corporation."

He thought he saw a slight flinch on the left side of Octar's face.

"If we're to work together at any time, it's best we are up front." Korbob waited.

Octar took a step to Korbob's right to see around him to his companion. "Is it not unusual for a Tendrite to turn mercenary? This makes me a bit uneasy."

"Unusual? Not particularly." Korbob didn't like the way Octar kept trying to maneuver around him and again moved into the man's line of sight. "I have been a pilot for more years than you've been alive. I know what I'm doing, and I know when someone is trying to con me. Don't do it."

"I was of the impression your people were mostly nomadic star traders." Octar said. "That is their reputation is it not?"

"You're ill informed," Korbob said. "Tendrites have a home planet and our industries are many and varied. I'm surprised that you seem to know so little. I would think a man like you would have traveled often to all the planets within the Corporation."

Korbot stepped closer and glared down at the man. “You aren’t who you say you are,” he said loud enough that only Octar heard. Korbot glanced at Sneighd who gave an imperceptible shake of his head. This wasn’t the man Impa had identified as Octar.

Sneighd and Korbot had their weapons drawn as Korbot’s hand shot out and closed around the imposter’s arm before either he or Kluge had time to react. The official screeched at the iron grasp on his arm as he was yanked struggling toward the door. Korbot’s iron grip crushed the smaller man to his chest and he whispered into his ear, “Hold still, rat, or I’ll turn your bones into meal.”

He motioned with his weapon for Kluge the mercenary, unarmed by Sneighd, to open the door and step out. “Tell your men to stand down.”

Kluge stood his ground as if he might be contemplating an attempt at rescue.

Korbot stared him down. “Don’t be a fool. You have no allegiance to this man. He’s not worth your life.”

“Call them off,” Sneighd said to Kluge.

Kluge appeared to consider Korbot’s words. His face relaxed and Korbot detected a slight upturn of the man’s lips as if he was

suddenly amused by something. Kluge did as instructed, ordering his men outside to stand clear.

Korbot shoved the fake Octar forward, facing the men. “My partner and I have some business to discuss with this.” He shook his prisoner for emphasis. “If he cooperates, he’ll be safe. If he doesn’t, that’s not your problem.” He turned to Kluge. “You lied to us. I don’t know how much you were paid. You have your money. We will find Octar, the real Octar. We will deal with him. I suggest that you stay out of this. If I see any of you again, I won’t be so lenient.”

Kluge and his men didn’t move as Korbot dragged the fake Octar into the shadows of the alleys. When Korbot looked back, the mercenaries were gone. None of them had looked to Korbot all that eager to step in on the Corporate’s behalf, not even Kluge who obviously was their leader. Korbot was certain those men wouldn’t risk their lives coming after this prisoner.

Korbot motioned for Sneighd to lead the way back to the Rogue Marauder.

“If anyone follows, we’ll kill him,” Korbot said. The man in his grip struggled. Korbot shook him. “No one will help you, worm. Not even the slime that hired you to pretend you were him. That was a bad decision on your part.”

They hurried along the dark streets.

“You won’t get far,” The fake Octar said, attempting to pull free of Korbob’s iron grip. Korbob jerked him along, causing him to stumble. “How did you know I was not Octar?”

“My friend, here, knows what he looks like,” Korbob said. “He’s seen Octar. I have a question for you. Why were you pretending to be Octar?”

His prisoner didn’t answer.

“Double-cross,” Sneighd said. “You don’t know what we want him for. Whatever you and he had going with the mercenaries you’ve probably been doing for a long time. This time, instead of letting him in on whatever you were planning, you pretended to be him. If anything went sideways, his name would be the one on top and he’d take the fall.” He gave a short laugh. “Corporation seems to be good at that, blaming others. This time, though, it’s not an innocent bystander. Octar is as dirty as they come, and you are in the mud with him. You’ll come in handy for what we want.”

“You have a name. What is it?” Korbob demanded.

“The authorities will find you.” The fake Octar was trying his best to look brave, but his words came out sounding more like a

sob. “If I disappear, they’ll start checking. They’ll find out about tonight.”

“Who would tell them?” Korbot halted to peer around the corner of a building. “Who’ll care about a puny little official like you? I doubt if anyone considers you worth wasting time on. You’ve nothing to worry about. We have no intention of harming you, though you probably deserve it. We only want your aid in retrieving records, legal and illegal, of Thaddeus Cocker. I’m sure you know about him as much as you know about Octar.”

The man stopped in his tracks and was nearly jerked from his feet as Korbot yanked him forward.

“Cocker? Then you---you’re the ones the authorities are looking for. You’re the killers.”

Sneighd’s laugh exploded. “We’ve not killed anyone. And there was only one, if you remember right. Unfortunately, that one was Baquar Starka of Sinnet, not me. Cocker’s files can prove that by telling us why Starka wanted him dead, and why I was chosen to take the blame.”

“You’re out of your minds, both of you,” the fake Octar said. “What you want only Baquar Starka would have. Octar can’t help you. He has nothing to do with Sinnet or the nasty rodent who

runs it. Cocker's private files won't be on Granite anyway.

Octar's home is on Alda, Granite's third moon. He would keep any private records in a protected place only he knew of. You're wasting your time."

"We never said Octar had anything to do with Cocker," Sneighd said. "In fact, he doesn't. But there is another matter that he is responsible for. And we intend to see to it he doesn't get away with that. As for you, we figure you know where those files are and how to access them. You're some type of clerk. Clerks know what goes on and where things are. I think you'll tell us."

Korbot tightened his grip on Octar's arm, causing Octar to yelp and try to pull away.

"Be careful, you big oaf. You'll break my arm."

Korbot shook him. "Then I suggest you cooperate. There's someone with us who has a personal vendetta to settle with Octar. Don't tell us what we want to know, and I will personally turn you over to that person. You stand a better chance dealing with us."

He stopped at the corner of another building and took a quick look. The streets were dark and empty. He hoped they would stay that way.

“Let’s get back to the ship where we can discuss this further.”

Dragging the hapless official along, he quickly slipped into the street, keeping a keen eye out for any sign of movement.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Haunalyn was pacing up and down at the bottom of the Marauder's ramp. When Korbot and Sneighd hurried out of the shadows, she stopped pacing and tried to look unconcerned, but Korbot detected nervousness as she glanced at their prisoner.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

"I'll explain later," Korbot said, looking around.

She tapped his shoulder and pointed behind her. She had rightly guessed what he was looking for. He nodded and shoved Octar towards the ramp.

"Alright, we're going inside. Don't make any sudden moves and you may live long enough to tell us what we want to know. Haunalyn, go in first and keep an eye on you-know-who. Sneighd, stand watch at the hatch. Make sure there are no surprises."

Haunalyn led the way. Korbot entered the Marauder with a firm grip on Octar's arm. He saw Impa immediately perched on the shelf, hidden by the supplies stored there. He prodded Octar past as Haunalyn indicated with her hand for Impa to stay out of sight.

Standing in the middle of the hold, Octar looked around then turned to Korbot with a smug expression.

“As I suspected,” he said. “You were bluffing.”

Korbot raised his eyebrows in amusement. “Look again.” He nodded at the shelf where the glint of a blazer barrel could clearly be seen.

Sneighd spoke quietly from where he stood keeping watch for any of the men who might have followed, though he didn’t expect to see anyone. “The person behind that barrel has a score to settle with you, Octar. If it wasn’t for the fact we need your services, you’d be dead.” He faced the shelf. “Come on down from there.”

Gripping the edge of the shelf, Impa flipped forward and landed on her feet next to Korbot, adjusting her weapon as she touched down so that it pointed directly at Octar’s middle.

Octar was visibly astonished at her unexpected appearance. “You little swamp rat. I had a feeling you survived, and that you knew where that thing was.” He pointed at the weapon. “My superiors were certain the swamp creatures had done away with you.”

“Too bad for you they were wrong,” Impa said. “I’m gonna kill you, as soon as Sneighd has no more use for you.”

Still eyeing Impa and visibly shaken, Octar pointed a finger at Korbob. “You said you would let me go.”

“We said we would,” Sneighd said. “Didn’t say anything about anyone else turning you loose.”

Korbob gave him a dirty look and shook his head slightly for Sneighd to shut up.

“No one is going to kill anyone.” Korbob knelt to eye level with Impa. “We made a deal, his information for his freedom.”

Impa’s dark eyes turned stormy. “After what he did to my family? I thought you cared. I thought you were on my side.”

“We do care, baby,” Sneighd said.

Korbob gently took Impa by the shoulders. “I care, about you. I can’t let you do something you will always regret, no matter what you might think now. You’re ten years old, too young to be burdened with that sort of hatred and guilt. I want to help you. We all want to help. Octar isn’t worth messing up your life, and he isn’t going to get away with anything, I promise. He’ll be taken care of when the time comes. Until then, we’re going to find a place where he’ll safely be out of the way.”

Impa's anger faded into tears as Korbot pulled her into his arms. After a moment of silent sobs, she pulled away and turned to face Octar.

"If it was anyone but these guys, you'd be dead, because nobody would stop me from getting even." She stomped past Korbot and Haunalyn, down the hall to the quarters she shared with Haunalyn.

Octar squared his shoulders and tugged at his uniform tunic to straighten it, attempting a bravado that Korbot could see was false.

"That child is dangerous," Octar said.

Korbot rose and gave Octar a nasty grin. "That's exactly right. And who can blame her. You murdered her family, tortured them she says, and we believe her. I suggest you tell us what we want to know."

Octar slumped onto the acceleration couch as if all the air and his strength had suddenly abandoned him.

"The records you're searching for aren't in the Capitol Building. I told you that."

"But you know where they are," Sneighd said.

Octar nodded. He looked tired and defeated. When he spoke, the officiousness in his voice had disappeared. “They’re stored in Drisla, in the vaults below the city. There’s no way to retrieve them except through official requisition, and that means the Governor’s signature. Even if I managed to get that, the files would be of little use to you. They would only be official. If Cocker had ‘private’ files, he wouldn’t keep them there.”

Korbot paced the hold. He had been afraid of that, and it made perfect sense. “Have you any idea where those files might be?”

“Cocker was an odd man,” Octar said. “He wasn’t what you would term ‘personable’. If he had such files, he would probably send them to the person he seemed most to trust.”

Sneighd straightened from where he was leaning against the bulkhead. “And that would be?”

“Baquar Starka,” Octar said.

Korbot glanced at Sneighd who stood open-mouthed, as was Haunalyn. The news was a surprise to all three of them.

Octar stared at them openly. “You didn’t know? I am amazed. Cocker’s dealings with Baquar were many, and well known, though not officially acknowledged, for obvious reasons.

However, Baquar would be the most logical place for him to hide anything he might not want the Corporation to be aware of.”

Sneighd slammed his fist into the bulkhead. “I should have known that!”

“Hey!” Haunalyn objected to his abuse of her ship. “Watch it.”

He wasn’t paying any attention to her but spoke directly to Korbot. “I should have known. It’s the only thing that makes sense. Baquar had this all figured out. He knew I couldn’t get any evidence against him because he has it. If I’m going to prove I’m innocent, I’ll have to do without those files.” Groaning, he threw up his hands and sank to the floor. “That’s it. I’m sunk.”

Losing his patience, Korbot jerked him to his feet by the collar. “We aren’t defeated yet, mister. We’ll find a way to get Baquar in trouble, discredit him. If we make the Corporation suspicious, they’ll readily believe he’s the one who killed Cocker.”

Octar laughed. “Baquar has too many connections inside the Corporation. Discrediting him would be next to impossible, and most probably fatal.”

“We don’t really have any choice,” Haunalyn said.

“This is getting too complicated,” Sneighd said. “I don’t know if I can stand...”

He was interrupted by Impa charging into the hold.

“Heads up. We’ve got company. I saw them coming through the alley. If we don’t get out of here, we’re gonna be her permanently.”

Everyone was instantly on their feet. Haunalyn disappeared into the cockpit, Sneighd on her heels.

Korbot shoved Octar back into his seat. “Strap in. Impa, you, too.”

Before they could comply, the Marauder shot out of the bay, throwing them across the hold. Impa grabbed the console and managed to keep her feet. Korbot slammed into the far wall, striking his shoulder on a protrusion. Octar was knocked to the floor with such violence he was momentarily knocked senseless.

The ship leveled and Korbot dragged himself away from the wall, holding his injured arm close to him. Impa sat at the console and Octar pulled himself from the floor to the acceleration couch.

“I wish she would give a person warning when she’s gonna do that,” Impa said.

Korbot sat down next to her. “Me, too.” He rubbed his aching shoulder.

“Let me see,” Impa said.

He sat quietly as she helped him off with his vest and examined the injury.

“Gotta nasty bruise coming,” she said. “Can you move it?”

He moved his shoulder around. “I think I’ll live.”

“Nothin’ broken then,” she said. “It’s gonna be sore for a while though.”

“I’ll be fine,” he said as he pulled his vest on.

Haunalyn and Sneighd rejoined them. Korbot noticed Sneighd was limping and rubbing his right thigh.

“Someday, I’m going to teach you how this contraption,” Sneighd said. “You’re going to kill somebody taking off like that.”

Haunalyn faced off with him, hands on her hips. “I didn’t exactly have much time to think about a dainty take off. I could have let whoever it was Impa saw blow us to bits, or better yet, given up so we could spend the rest of our lives in a Corporation prison, or worse.”

Korbot placed two fingers in his mouth and whistled loudly. “Alright you two, no more fighting.” When he was sure he had their attention, “We’ve got more important things to do. You better monitor for Corporate Police Cruisers, Lyn. Taking off like that undoubtedly caught their attention.”

“We’ve already gone to mach,” Haunalyn said. “They’ll have to hurry to catch us now. I had the computer set because I figured we’d be leaving in a hurry.”

Korbot grinned at her, not surprised. He turned to Octar.

“We’ll let you off somewhere we can locate you later. The question is where.”

“I know where.” Impa went to stand in front of Octar. “Darthea.”

“Darthea!” Octar turned to Korbot. “That planet is uninhabited. No one goes there. There’s nothing of value there. I’d be marooned.”

“It’s perfect,” Haunalyn said. “No inhabitants to help you. No dangerous creatures to eat you. No one to rescue you; just the place we need to keep you until we have use for you.”

Octar's face drained of color as he again implored to Korbot.

"You can't do that. You wouldn't."

Korbot turned to Sneighd. "Think you can get us there?"

"Sure. No problem." Sneighd headed for the cockpit with Haunalyn.

Octar came to his feet. "You aren't serious. You aren't going to just leave me stranded?"

"Don't worry," Korbot said. "You'll have provisions. I told you we weren't going to let you go, just keep you alive. You massacred this child's family. I'm not going to overlook that. You'll pay for it. But right now, we're in no position to take care of that problem. When we are, you'll be picked up. That's a promise."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Baquar paced apprehensively in the alley where he had been instructed to wait. He had stationed two of his men near the entrance before entering the blackness for the rendezvous he had set up. At least twenty minutes had passed before he caught the glint of silver out of the corner of his eye, and a second later, felt the pressure of a blazer against his left temple.

“You were instructed to come alone.”

Baquar steeled his nerves and took a deep breath. “I, uh, never travel anywhere alone. That’s why I still live.”

The voice speaking to him was fluid and whispery. He couldn’t see in the dark, despite the trickle of light from the two streets on either side of the buildings through which the alley ran.

He heard a low menacing laugh from the speaker. “I doubt if your worms frighten anyone. They look rather passive to me.”

Baquar spun around and discovered both of his men crumpled into a heap. Shaken, he cleared his throat, suddenly feeling alone and vulnerable.

“Where is the Assassin?” He had difficulty making his words sound firm.

The blazer pressed his temple, forcing him to turn right.

“There’s a door in front of you. Go in.”

Baquar stepped forward and a door slid open. Cautiously he stepped into a gaping darkness and jumped as the door slid shut behind him.

A lamp sprang to life on a small table in the middle of the otherwise dark room. His mysterious companion came from behind him to confront him. The person was tall, covered head to toe with a long black cape, the face hidden by a cowl.

“You are the Assassin?” Baquar asked.

The Assassin removed the cowl and cape, revealing a soft featured face framed by long, silky black hair and deep green eyes that gleamed in grim amusement at him.

“What were you expecting?”

“A man, for one thing,” Baquar said.

He was impressed. The woman was exotically beautiful, the skin on her face a slight olive color. Her eyes were framed by thick black lashes. Her nose was slender, not too long, and her lips were full. He wondered if the red of her lips was natural or if she enhanced them with some cosmetic. He noted that the blazer in

her gloved hands was most certainly custom-made. The rest of her slender body was covered by a tight-fitting black jumpsuit with a silver utility belt across her shapely hips.

The woman laughed as she holstered her blazer, but he could see hardness in her expression.

“Get your lecherous eyes back in your skull, pig,” she said.
“What is it you want?”

Feeling more in an element of control, Baquar took a step toward the woman.

“That is a loaded question.” He allowed himself a leer. She was beautiful and, if handled right, this meeting might end better than it started.

He was brought abruptly to a halt by a lightning speed draw that ended with the blazer shoved against his nose.

“I’ll kill you.” She spoke without malice, her words icy calm.

Baquar reassessed his earlier thinking. She would do it. Of that he had no doubt. Raising his hands in a sign of peaceful surrender, he backed away. She was no longer showing any signs of amusement. Very well, he thought, business first.

“I want you to dispose of a---*pest*, for me. I’ll pay twice what the Corporation has offered the Lurker for the same---*pest*.”

He saw a hint of interest in her eyes, and something else he didn’t recognize.

“This pest must be someone important if the Corporation and you are seeking him.”

“Not special,” Baquar said. “Just a nuisance. He killed a Corporation official. They tend to frown on that. He’s an unimportant pilot, a bit of a rebel, but worthless.”

“Does this “worthless” pest have a name? And why is he so important to you?”

“That’s really not your concern,” Baquar said. “He’s a nuisance, and he killed the official on my planet. *I* frown on that. The Corporation and I have an agreement and I don’t wish to have them prying around Sinnet.”

The Assassin smiled again. “I can imagine why not. But you’re in error, rodent. Had you done your research; you would know that I am particular in the jobs I accept. Who you wish dead and why is my concern.”

“I suppose there’s no reason not to say. He’s a nobody, and the reason I want him; the Corporation has put a considerable bounty on his worthless hide.”

The Assassin straightened and stepped close to Baquar until they were nearly face to face. Her eyes narrowed and her voice lowered dangerously.

“Name him.”

Baquar felt a lump form in his throat and he fought the compulsion to back away. She stood at least a foot over him. He was almost afraid to look up, but what was in front of him was too tempting. His hands twitched. Clearing his throat, he forced his gaze up to her face.

“Sneighd, ahem, Sneighd Arkon. As I said, a worthless...”

She grabbed his tunic with amazing strength and hurled him toward the door. “Get out.”

Baquar’s shoulder slammed painfully into the door. Rubbing the injury, he straightened, unable to decide if he angry or frightened. “I don’t understand.”

“You wouldn’t, you moron.” She had pulled her cloak and cowl over her, but he could see the green fire in her gaze. “Now get out and hope I never set eyes on you again.”

She took a step back and vanished into the darkness as if she had not been there at all. Baquar ran forward, but there was no sign of her. He searched the small room, knocking on the walls, but if there were any hidden doors, he hadn’t enough light to discover them. He stood in the middle of the room trying to work out what had happened. He must have said something to trigger her reaction, but what?

The lamp went out leaving him in total darkness. Disoriented, he couldn’t remember where the door was and had to feel around for several minutes before he found the control. He pressed it and the door slid open. He all but ran out of the building, tripping over his bodyguards in his haste. He vented his frustration and anger on them by kicking them awake.

“Get up, you worms.” He grabbed one of them by the collar and yanked him to his feet. The other he grabbed by the arm and dragged him up. “Worthless, both of you.” He shoved them ahead of him. He wanted to get out of the alley as fast as possible with his dignity intact.

The Assassin's reaction to his offer disturbed him. What had there been about Arkon's name that set her off? Could there be, he wondered, a connection between them? And dare he attempt to find it?

Chapter Thirty

Faifa quietly watched Baquar stride up and down the floor of his office, more agitated than Faifa had ever seen him. He considered confessing to Baquar that he had known all along the Assassin was a woman but decided it might be in his best interest to say nothing.

Baquar had returned from his rendezvous infuriated by his humiliation.

Word had reached him that Korbot Maka, and Sneighd Arkon were in Capitol City at the same time as his rendezvous with the Assassin. The Tendrite and two humans had left in a big hurry, taking the Corporation official, Octar, with them as hostage. Octar worked closely with Cocker and, conceivably, knew where Cocker's personal files were kept. That was Baquar's worst nightmare. Faifa knew the Sinnetian wanted Arkon more than ever. It wouldn't take long for Korbot Maka to extract information from the Corporation official. Tendrites could be very persuasive when the need arose.

On top of that, Faifa had a feeling Baquar hadn't see the last of the Assassin, and their next meeting would not be congenial.

Baquar stopped pacing and abruptly turned to Faifa.

“I want him. I want Arkon, and the others. I want you to bring him to me. I don’t care how or what you have to do with the others, but I want Arkon now.”

If Faifa had the ability to manage an expression, it would have been amusement and annoyance. Baquar was too obsessed with Sneighd’s capture, and in Faifa’s opinion, had made a grave error on choosing Sneighd to pin the murder of Cocker on.

Baquar was not as intelligent as he liked to think. There was no convincing him when he was headed down a dangerous path. Faifa had tried to divert his plan, but Baquar was determined that Sneighd be the fall guy. Baquar hadn’t taken the time to find out more about the young pilot. There was more to Sneighd than most people knew or understood.

Faifa did know, more than Sneighd knew himself. That’s why he knew too well that Baquar was wasting too much time and effort towards recapturing Sneighd. He, of course, wanted him alive. Faifa knew that would be a fate worse than death and could easily turn the tables on Baquar. Sneighd was a survivor. Plenty of others, some worse than Baquar, had learned that the hard way.

“Did you hear what I said?” Baquar had worked himself into a rage, his face crimson red.

Faifa declined to answer. He nodded, his face unreadable, and left the room. Taking Sneighd would be no easy task. It would take planning, a special type of execution, and only men Faifa knew he could trust to obey him. It would also take stealth and cunning. One misstep could kill them all.

The Lurker had arrived at Capitol City an hour too late, which displeased him. Finding the pilot, Arkon, was taking too long. Being one step behind was more than annoying and would not go well for Arkon when the Lurker caught up with him. He hated delays and the information he had intercepted had been too vague. He would have to be more careful. Orders or no, he determined he would find Arkon and kill him. He hated being inconvenienced.

The Lurker returned to his ship unaware of the eyes that followed him. He didn't notice the shadow that dodged him, his only focus being on his objective.

The Assassin watched as the gray figure moved through the crowded streets. She allowed a smile. She wasn't ready to attend

to the Lurker, not yet. He could lead her to Sneighd. It was imperative that she find him before anyone else and complete a task she had begun years before.

Chapter Thirty-One

Deacon felt at home for the first time in years. He ran his hands over the console, feeling the vibration of the engines run through his veins. This was his ship, his freighter, grounded since Haunalyn's mother died, but it still held the familiarity of the years spent in it. Nothing had changed.

Although Deacon hadn't flown in all those years, he had kept the ship maintained. Maybe deep down inside of him, he had anticipated that he would fly again, just never admitted it. The only difference was the person at his side. Korbot Maka had been the one sitting in the seat now occupied by Dusalt.

Deacon had been wild in his youth, as reckless as he had heard Haunalyn was. The thought brought him little comfort, but he understood the desire that drove her. He had wanted to see the universe, explore the worlds beyond Rhaduri, feel the freedom star pilots considered sacredly theirs.

He and Korbot had partnered on a dare. No one believed that the pragmatic Tendrite could tolerate a hot-headed human for very long. At first, it appeared the skeptics were right, but Deacon discovered Korbot wasn't like any Tendrite he had ever heard of. Korbot was as ready for adventure as he had been, and the two made a good team. Korbot's level-headed, even temper balanced

Deacon's recklessness and short fuse. Deacon missed that partnership.

Dusalt glanced at him.

Deacon noticed and smiled. "I was just wondering if Korbot would be interested in reforming our partnership."

Dusalt smiled and his tone was ironic. "You should. I've said it often."

"So, you have," Deacon said. "I guess I was fooling myself all these years that my place was on the ground."

"No. You had a daughter who needed you as she grew," Dusalt said. "You were where you should be, but now she is grown. She no longer needs you to watch over her. It's time for you to return to the stars. Your life is among them, as it has always been."

Deacon stared in admiration at his co-pilot. "Dusalt, you would've made a good philosopher. You always did talk strange."

111 Sneighd didn't feel well. The headache that began before they reached Darthea persisted long after they left Octar marooned. The pills had run out. He knew getting more would be next to impossible. The ones he carried had been acquired through a street

vendor. Fighting the pain only weakened him. He knew he was in a losing battle if he couldn't get what he needed.

He had noticed Korbot closely watching him, noting his increasing restlessness. Three days had passed since they had left Darthea. In his present state he was next to useless. He needed to be fully functional. Several times when Korbot or Haunalyn spoke to him, he barely heard them. Now, he sat, eyes closed, leaning against the softness of the acceleration couch, all too aware of the eyes watching and of the silence. They were wondering, but he couldn't tell them, didn't dare tell them.

He heard Korbot approach and place a huge hand on his shoulder. He felt himself tremble at the touch and cursed to himself. He knew Korbot could feel it.

"You okay?" Korbot asked.

Sneighd didn't open his eyes. He took a deep breath and let it slowly out to quiet his nerves. "I'll survive."

"Maybe you ought to get some rest," Korbot said.

Sneighd opened his eyes slightly. Korbot's expression was one of concern, but Sneighd could see the hint of suspicion in his eyes.

"I'm alright."

“Yeah,” Korbot said. “Your face is white. You look like you’ve been a battle with a dozen Eldaheich warriors, and you’re shaking like a leaf.”

Sneighd grinned. The planet Eldaheich was a legend, said to have been populated by the barbaric Ithian militants who had made war against all the other races on their planet, until there was no one left but themselves to fight, and they had fought themselves into extinction.

Sneighd sighed again. It was useless to argue. He didn’t have the strength. He needed rest. That was true but resting would make him feel guilty. He needed to be ready and able to help in case of emergency. He rose to his feet. He hadn’t taken ten steps when everything began to tilt and whirl around him. Korbot caught him before he hit the deck and the curtain of darkness flooded his mind.

Korbot lifted the unconscious younger man and carried him to their sleeping quarters. His suspicions were confirmed. Sneighd was suffering from malady, but what, he had no idea. Maybe it was something he had picked up on Garma, a virus or fever. Whatever it was, Sneighd had been fighting against it for some time.

Gently he placed Sneighd on his bunk, pulled off his boots, and covered him with a thermo-blanket. This was a serious development, and there was no way in their present situation they could take Sneighd to a med-center.

As he stared down at Sneighd, he wondered again about the pink pills he had seen Sneighd taking. Maybe his first inclination was mistaken. Or maybe it wasn't, maybe this was a result of not having the pills. Korbot had seen withdrawal from illegal substances before. Somehow this didn't fit, but then, he supposed, different substances might cause different reactions when absent.

He turned to leave and found Haunalyn standing in the doorway.

"Fever?" she asked.

"Doesn't seem to be one."

Haunalyn shook her head. "I don't understand. What's wrong with him?"

"I'm not sure I do. But several times I've seen him taking some type of pills."

Haunalyn stared at him. "So has Impa. She told me."

Korbot took another look at the sleeping pilot. “It’s not something that will pass. This is permanent. Something is terribly wrong, and we are going to have to find out what. He needs those pills. We’ll have to find out what they are and see that he gets them. If he needs to see a doctor, we’ll have to manage that.”

“Korbot, what if it’s something terminal?”

Korbot heard the worry in her voice. He turned to her. He had seen the look on her face before, the day he and her father arrived in Rhaduri after learning of her mother’s death. Wide-eyed, confused, frightened, Haunalyn had been brought to her father and Deacon had held her so tight, Korbot was afraid she couldn’t breathe.

She was afraid, then and now, and he didn’t know how to comfort her.

“I don’t think so,” he said.

“Then what?” She glanced at Sneighd and then back at Korbot as if a thought just occurred to her. The worry and fear disappeared and something close to anger came into her eyes.

“You don’t think---do you think he’s---on something?”

Korbot shrugged. “The possibility has crossed my mind.”

Haunalyn lost all her compassion. “Then he doesn’t need those pills and we are risking our necks for him to get them.”

Korbot took her by the shoulders and maneuvered her out of the sleeping quarters. “We don’t know that. And even if it is that, for him to be any good to us, he’ll need whatever he’s on. We can’t have him incapacitated. We need him functioning.”

“He’s not going to be any use to us flying higher than the Marauder,” Haunalyn argued.

“We’ll wait,” Korbot said. “And we’ll see. When he comes to, we’ll have a long talk. Until then, don’t jump to any conclusions.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Sneighd slept fitfully, the haunting dreams of memories he wanted to forget plaguing him.

Denova was a mining planet. To be born there was to remain there and work the mines. To a Denovan, no other way of life was acceptable.

Banger Arkon, a big, brute of a man, owned the biggest of the mines on Denova, the Alsat Mines. He was a brutish man, a bully toward everyone, especially his son.

No mention was ever made of Sneighd's mother, consensus being that Banger had done away with her to marry a woman named Clove who would gladly have dropped Sneighd down the first available mine shaft.

Sneighd began hanging around the docks and bays at the age of 10, engrossed by the freighters and haulers that carried the ore in and out of the system. It was there he met Hap, a young pilot who had taken a liking to him.

When Banger discovered Sneighd's interest, he had beaten him and forbidden him to go near the docks again. Sneighd was used to beatings. They came anytime Banger grew angry, which happened regularly. It didn't deter Sneighd. He continued to

sneak to the docks and suffered the consequences when he was caught.

At 17, he asked Hap to teach him to fly. Hap was reluctant at first, but Sneighd persisted.

At 18, Sneighd could out fly most of the pilots who came to Denova. He begged Hap to take him away from Denova. To do so would be illegal. Until Sneighd turned 20, he was under Banger's jurisdiction. If Hap helped him run away, they would both be in serious trouble. Hap would spend several years of hard labor on a galactic prison barge and Sneighd would be right back where he started, if he lived.

Sneighd waited, grudgingly, secretly flying the freighter whenever Hap was in port. Sneighd considered Hap the father he didn't have.

Banger discovered their secret and with two of his biggest, most loyal workers, went to the docks. Hap tried to get between him and Sneighd, but Sneighd stopped him. He'd had enough and was ready to challenge Banger. It was then that Banger noticed the shiny new blazer strapped to Sneighd's hip, his 19th birthday present from Hap.

Banger was furious. Sneighd had disobeyed his orders and violated Denovan law by wearing a weapon.

Sneighd didn't flinch as Banger raised the pro-bar he carried. Hap attempt to stop him but was pinned by the two burly miners. Banger swung. Sneighd ducked out of the way. Banger roared and swung again. Sneighd ducked, but Banger anticipated the move and tripped him. He fell hard, and before he could recover, Banger was on him.

Hap screamed and cursed and struggled to get free. If not for the arrival of the Prefect, Banger would have beaten Sneighd to death.

Banger, his face, hands, and clothing spattered and stained with blood, stood between the Prefect, Doc Flera, several dock hands, and a battered, bloody, unmoving Sneighd.

The Prefect inched toward Banger. "Put the pro bar down."

Banger, his eyes burning with a killing frenzy, raised the bar higher. "Stay back."

His men shuffled uneasily. Hap broke free of them and tried to go to Sneighd, but Banger blocked his way.

“Stay back, I warn you.” Banger aimed the pro bar at Hap.

“Especially you.”

No one moved. No one noticed Sneighd’s hand inching slowly to his blazer. Barely conscious, Sneighd raised his head. Peering through the haze in his eyes and with every ounce of strength left to him, he pulled the blazer from its holster.

“Sneighd, no!” Hap shouted.

A shot exploded. Banger stared down at his smoking chest in disbelief before his eyes rolled into his head and he fell to the floor. Too heavy for him to hold, the blazer dropped from Sneighd’s fingers. The Prefect went to him. Hap cradled him in his arms. Somewhere behind them, Sneighd heard Doc announce Banger was dead.

Quietly, the Prefect spoke. “Can you hear me?”

Sneighd managed to nod.

“It was Banger, all the time, wasn’t it? He is responsible for all the bruises and broken bones over the years, isn’t he?”

A black void beckoned. Sneighd fought against it. He heard the question; knew he must answer. With the very last of his

strength, he nodded, then surrendered to the darkness that flooded his mind.

When he regained consciousness, he was surprised to find himself in his own bed. The sun shone through the windows into his eyes and he reached up to rub them. His movement arrested. There were no injuries on his arms or hands. He drew a deep breath. There was no pain. He felt his face. The skin was smooth and uninjured.

The door to the room opened. Clove entered carrying a tray of water and broth. She looked momentarily startled to see him awake.

“I see you still live.” She set the tray at his bedside. “Pity.”

Sneighd ignored her. “Clove, I’m not hurt. I don’t understand.”

She looked down at him with disgust showing in her craggy face. “Wouldn’t be, not after a year.”

Sneighd attempted to sit up. A sharp burning pain shot through his head and he fell back. “What? What did you say? That’s not true.”

Before she could answer, Doc Flera and Hap appeared. Clove left the room.

“She said it’s been a year,” Sneighd said. “What did she mean by that?”

He saw Doc’s jaw set as the two men glanced at each other.

“We wanted to break the news gently,” Doc said. “You were badly hurt, nearly died from your injuries. They healed, but we didn’t know for certain if you would wake up. We were beginning to give up hope.”

Sneighd lay disbelieving. An entire year of his life was lost.

Clove reentered the room. “And now the little murderer has returned to the land of the living, you will kindly remove him from my home.”

“Clove!” Doc’s warning was too late.

Sneighd’s head jerked up. “What---what do you mean?”

Clove’s face was twisted with hatred. “He’s dead, you little rodent. And you killed him.”

Doc grabbed her arm and swung her to face him. “Enough. Not another word.”

Clove struggled to free herself. Sneighd looked from one face to the other.

“Banger?”

Hap was by his side. “Don’t you remember?”

“Remember? Remember what? Hap, what happened? Banger was hitting me---I fell. I couldn’t move.” Sneighd’s head throbbing as he tried to recall that day. His heart was racing. He felt cold.

Clove pulled free of Doc’s grip. “You make me sick. You murdered your father in cold blood.”

Sneighd shook his head. The throbbing grew worse. His eyes felt as if they were burning. “No.”

“Shot him, Sneighd,” Clove shouted above Doc’s attempt to silence her.

“No, I didn’t---I don’t...”

“Pulled your blazer and shot him,” she screamed. “And these miserable excuses for men let you get away with it.”

“I don’t remember,” Sneighd whispered. “I don’t remember.”

“Clove be still,” Doc ordered.

Clove wasn't through taunting Sneighd. "I know just exactly what you are. I know the truth from the beginning. I won't have you in my house. I know the truth; do you hear me?"

Doc turned on her. "Shut up, woman."

"No. He is not my son, and never will be. Too bad he lived. I know the truth. I know about Banger and his moth---"

Hap was on his feet and slapped her hard.

Sneighd's breathing was growing shallow and he held his head in both hands. The pain was so excruciating he felt his head would explode.

"Perhaps there's still a chance for you to die," Clove said.

Sneighd began writhing on the bed. Doc was instantly at his side, pulling his hands away from his head and pinning them to his sides. Sneighd screamed against the pain. A spasm lifted him off the bed. Hap caught him and pressed down on his shoulders. Doc administered a strong sedative.

"I should have expected this. The brain scan after the beating showed damage to the brain tissue. I had hoped to be wrong. I was hoping I had operated in time."

Extensive tests run when Sneighd was well enough confirmed Doc's worst fears. The damage was permanent. There was nothing anyone could do. Sneighd would be subject to seizures for the rest of his life. A highly restricted medication would help control the seizures. While Sneighd remained on Denova, Doc provided a steady supply.

Sneighd left Denova as Hap's co-pilot until he saved enough to buy his own freighter and set out on his own. He was given a medical identification card that enabled him to obtain his medication. That crucial card had been left behind in his ship on Sinnet.

Chapter Thirty-Three

“Sneighd? Sneighd? A soft voice called him from somewhere far away. “Sneighd, wake up.”

He felt someone shaking him gently by the arm. He opened his eyes and rolled over. Haunalyn sat on the edge of his bunk, her face relaxing from a frown into relief as he responded to her voice.

“I made you some broth.” She indicated a mug on a stand next to the bunk. “Try to drink it.”

He smiled and struggled into a sitting position. His headache had faded to its normal distant throb. He took the steaming mug and sniffed.

“Herbs,” Haunalyn said. “Korbot carries them in a pouch in one of his pockets. He won’t tell me where they’re from, or why he has them, but he says the Tendrites use them.”

Sneighd sipped the broth. There was a sweet peppery tang to it, but it wasn’t bad. He let the warmth flow through him.

“How long have I been asleep?”

“A few days,” Haunalyn said. “Korbot and I have been keeping a close check on you. We were worried. We had to tie you down a couple of times.” She studied him. “You look awful.”

He grinned at her. “Thanks a lot.”

Her expression remained serious. “I mean it. You had a fever, like before. We were worried. Korbot thinks---well, he has his own opinions. He says you know what it is. You’ve been taking medicine for it.”

He heard the question in her words. She was waiting for him to explain. He held the mug of broth in both hands and stared into his memories. He didn’t answer.

“You aren’t going to tell us, are you?” Her tone had changed to irritation.

He felt the ache in his head growing, but still dull. He sat the mug on the stand. “I have a headache.”

He figured she would stomp out, angry that he wouldn’t do what she asked. She surprised him. She sat behind him and began massaging his temples.

“Better?”

“Much.” He closed his eyes. The ache faded into the distance.

He felt her lean close to his ear, the warmth of her breath as she spoke. “Tell us what it is.”

He pulled away and turned to face her. He should have known better. “Tricky little brat.”

“Maybe we should take you to a Med-Center.” Sarcasm and challenge flooded her words. She was angry. He could deal with that.

“No.” He reined his own anger in. “I’m alright.”

“No, you’re not.” Haunalyn was on her feet, hands on her hips as she glared at him. “You need medical attention. Or is it that?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” He knew. It didn’t surprise him. If Korbot had seen him take the pills, the idea was a logical jump, but wrong.

“You know what I mean.” She wasn’t going to back down.

“Yeah, I know.” He took a deep breath. “Hauna, please, it’s nothing, just something I have to deal with, okay?”

The look she gave him could have frozen Sinnet. “No, it isn’t, but I guess it is *your* business.”

He stood and tried to offer a reassuring smile. Without warning, he found her firmly kissing him on the mouth. The unexpected move startled him, then he put his arm around her and closed the kiss.

Abruptly she pulled away and pushed him back. “You’re sick, remember.”

“Hey, you’re the one who started it.” He was confused and a little hurt by her actions.

“I did not, you---you rat.”

“That’s Baquar,” he said.

“That’s not funny,” she said.

Tears appeared in her eyes and he had a suspicion she had been as surprised as him by what she had done.

“Neither was what you just did.” He spoke too quickly and too loudly, trying to overcome a growing queasiness and throbbing.

“You came in here and proceeded to...”

“I did not,” she argued.

He lost his patience. “Grow up, little girl. I don’t appreciate your games.”

A searing pain shot through his skull, cutting his tirade short. Clutching his head in both hands, he buckled to his knees. Haunalyn was next to him, her arms around his shoulders but he couldn’t hear what she was saying.

His cry of pain brought Korbot running. The big man tried to pry his hands away from his temples.

“What is it, Sneighd? What’s the matter?”

Forcing himself to breathe, Sneighd managed to answer.

“My head. It’s on fire.”

He felt Korbot’s rough hand against his forehead.

“You need a doctor. This isn’t withdrawal is it?”

“No.” Sneighd winced as the pain shot through his brain. “No doctor.”

Korbot wasn’t arguing. “You’re going to a Med-Center.”

“No.” Sneighd nearly screamed, fighting to remain conscious.

Haunalyn grabbed his hand and clenched it tightly in hers.

“Stop being so stubborn. You’re sick. You need help we can’t give you.”

Sneighd yanked his hand free and pulled himself onto the cot.

“I was doing fine until you came in here. Just get out and leave me alone.” He was losing ground, the pain in his head unbearable.

Korbot took a tight grip on his arm and shook his head. “It’s settled. I’m not arguing.”

Impa charged into the room and slid to a stop nearly knocking Haunalyn into the wall. The little girl's face was flushed with excitement.

“Korbot, you've got to come and see.” She grabbed Korbot's hand and tugged him after her. Haunalyn followed, all three racing to the cockpit.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Sneighd dragged himself to his feet and stumbled after them. He found them in the cockpit staring into the darkness of space where they drifted and moved forward for a better view.

Impa moved next to him and he instinctively placed a protective arm around her.

Haunalyn sat in her seat, intently studying the readings on her console, and tracking the progress of the ship outside. “Korbot?”

“What do you suppose they want?” Sneighd asked, knowing full well and fighting the dizziness as he tried to grasp the situation. The effort of standing was making him sick to his stomach. He released Impa and held on to the back of Haunalyn’s seat to keep from collapsing.

Korbot didn’t seem affected. He shrugged. “Let’s find out.” He opened communications before anyone could protest. There was a long silence followed by a deep voice.

“I am Sarelot, Commander of the Corporation cruiser Terragus. We are searching for a Rhadurian Hauler that bears the markings of your ship.”

Sneighd watched Korbot closely for his response and was surprised when Korbot squared his shoulders, crossed his arms on his huge chest and looked annoyed. He didn't seem to be in the least bit concerned.

Haunalyn glanced back at Sneighd, her expression showing the same surprise and confusion. He did notice that Impa was watching the cruiser, her dark eyes full of suspicion, the same as Korbot.

"I don't like it." Korbot checked a readout in front of him. "They're here but haven't attacked. Something isn't..."

"There!" Impa pointed to another area of space. "I knew it."

Sneighd leaned forward, almost losing his balance, shook his head to clear his vision, and stared at the place Impa was pointing. At first, he saw nothing, then what had appeared to be a star moved closer.

"It's another ship." Haunalyn scrambled to take readings from the flashing, burring console. A bright blip drew closer until they were able to see the object with their eyes.

"It's too far to get a good fix on it," Korbot said.

“Betcha they know who it is,” Impa said. She pointed at the cruiser that was pivoting to meet the incoming ship.

The ship slowed, coming to a full stop some distance from the Corporation cruiser and the Marauder. Sneighd recognized the intruder and noticed Korbott did the same. The ship was one of Baquar’s strike cruisers.

The communications like on both ships came alive.

“Move aside,” someone in the strike cruiser ordered.

Sneighd didn’t recognize the speaker but couldn’t help his laugh. Only an idiot would blatantly dare to order a police commander to move.

The deep voice of Commander Sarelott answered coldly. “We will not move aside.”

There was a grating laugh from the other cruiser. “If you are here to claim the pilot, Sneighd Arkon, you are in error. He is ours.”

“Arkon is mine.” Commander Sarelott’s voice sounded enraged. By the authority of the Galactic Corporation law, I am here to take him into custody.”

Watching the confrontation from the Marauder was like watching a bad play unfold. Sneighd couldn't believe these two ships were vying for him yet paying no attention to the Marauder. He tapped Korbob on the shoulder.

“Why don't we quietly sneak out of here while they're discussing who gets custody.”

Korbob grinned at him. “My thoughts exactly.”

Haunalyn already had their course set and was about to enter the command when a red energy beam streaked from the striker towards the police cruiser. The beam never reached its target. An ice-blue beam from an unseen source intercepted and drove the red beam back to its origin. The strike cruiser vanished into microscopic debris with monumental finality.

A flurry of activity flooded the over the com-link from the police cruiser. The Commander demanded an explanation from the yet unseen ship and for it to identify itself. In answer, the blue beam sliced the darkness, ramming the police cruiser which exploded in total annihilation.

Sneighd and his companions were too stunned to react, waiting for the blue beam to search them out.

Korbot grabbed the controls of the Marauder. “Let’s get out of here while we still can. If we move quickly, we might avoid the fate of those cruisers.”

Haunalyn relinquished the controls to him. He plotted a course and guided the Marauder out of the corridor.

Sneighd waited, breath held, for the moment the blue beam would turn them to space dust. No blue beam shot out from space. The more distance Korbot put between them and the unseen ship, the more Sneighd hoped for the best. The ship could be following, matching their every maneuver. Minutes passed. Nothing happened. He began to breathe again.

He heard the release of breath from the other three. They had been as tense as he had been. The excitement past and momentarily forgotten by his companions, Sneighd went quietly back to his quarters and back to sleep.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Faifa arrived on the isolated planet of Darthea during its night phase. Darthea was little more than a rocky moon covered in sparse vegetation and small streams of water whose source no one had ever ascertained. Within an hour, he located the small camp where the Corporation official Octar had reportedly been marooned only to discover someone had been there before him.

It wasn't hard for him to guess who. Octar had been killed with one shot to the head, terror frozen on his features. Faifa stared in deep thought at the dead man. This wouldn't go well for Sneighd. He and Korbot were seen abducting this official. Their intent was not known to the Corporation. If Octar's body was discovered by the Corporation, they would naturally assume Sneighd had killed him.

How the Lurker had managed to arrive ahead of Faifa, he when he had just learned of the Rhadurian ship's destination, he didn't know. The Lurker must be monitoring transmissions from the hauler somehow or had followed from Gravette, which didn't make any sense. He would have caught Sneighd and his party here.

Faifa knew he would have to move fast, or Octar's fate would claim Sneighd, and his companions. The Lurker would not leave

any witnesses. And if Sneighd was killed, Baquar would be most displeased with his right-hand man.

Using his blazer to create a grave, Faifa buried the evidence, making sure the grave was undetectable. He took the provisions left for Octar with him when he left Darthea. Depending on how long ago the Marauder had been on the planet, there should still be an ion trail to follow.

When Sneighd reappeared, he felt haggard and slumped heavily onto the acceleration couch. According to his chronometer, he had been asleep for three and a half days since their encounter with the cruisers.

Impa, rummaging through a med-kit, came over to sit with him.

“Feeling better?” she asked. She placed the med-kit and a tool-kit on the couch and returned to her prowling. “You know, we need to get some supplies for this kit pretty soon. Never know when we might need to use it.”

She glanced up at him to make sure he was listening to her. He grinned to let her know she had his attention.

“Alstar isn’t far.”

Sneighd laughed and hugged her. “You know as well as I do the only reason you want to go to Alstar is there is a full Med-Center there and you want me to see a doctor, right?”

She shrugged. “Wouldn’t hurt, but that’s up to you. We need to get supplies, see.” She showed him the Med-Kit.

He had to admit the emergency essential were low.

“Where are we now?” he asked.

“Almost to Alstar. Korbot decided to go there two days ago.” Her eyes were full of mischief. “But not to take you there. He wants to get some equipment for this flying heap because it’s being cantankerous again.”

Sneighd had to laugh at her assessment. “Sounds like a good idea. I wouldn’t mind being on solid ground for a while.”

Impa grinned and poked him in the chest. “You’d like to go somewhere for a good stiff drink.”

He reached out and tickled her. She giggled and squirmed.

“Because that’s what Korbot said he wanted to do.” She spoke through her giggles and tried to wriggle away.

Sneighd picked her up and whirled her high in the air, sending her into full fledged laughter, then hugged her tight and kissed her head before letting her down.

“And what would you like to do?” he asked, returning to his seat on the acceleration couch.

She shrugged and sank to the floor to sit cross-legged as she pulled her makeshift ‘toys’ into her lap and returned to burrowing through the kits.

Sneighd shook his head, still grinning. This little girl amazed him, one minute a tough, self-reliant urchin, the next, a normal sweet ten-year old child. He wondered which one she had been before the death of her parents.

Korbot entered the hold, glanced at him, and crossed to the read-out console. “I see you decided to rejoin the living.” He sat down to study the readings.

“I got tired of sleeping. When do we reach Alstar?”

Korbot frowned at Impa. “Big mouth.”

She gave him a big smile.

Korbot shook his head and returned his attention to the consoles. He made a few adjustments on the controls. “We’re in

planet fall now. We'll be landing in a few minutes." He turned to Impa. "Did you make a list of everything we needed from the Med-Center?"

She held out a tablet. "Yep."

"You hold onto it," he said. "You and Haunalyn can go for the supplies."

"And we?" Sneighd asked. He grunted as the Marauder jarred his feet as it touched solid ground.

"Drat that girl." Korbot nearly stumbled from the sudden jolt. "She could've announced we were about to land. What'd you say?"

"What are we going to do?" Sneighd said.

"We? *We* aren't going to do anything," Korbot said. "*I* am going to pick up some tools and *you* are going to see if you can find whatever medication you need since you're reluctant to go to a Med-Center. Alstar is a metropolis. I'm sure you'll find street vendors around."

Sneighd flinched. "In case you have forgotten, I'm busted. Street vendors are expensive."

Korbot glanced at him. Sneighd could almost read what he was thinking.

“You’re wrong,” Sneighd said. “You’ve been wrong.”

Korbot straightened, looked surprised. “Wrong?”

“I know what you think,” Sneighd said. “But you’re wrong. I am not an addict. And that is not denial. It’s the truth.”

He looked at Impa who stared up at him with what he thought might be hope.

“Are you going to tell us the truth?” Korbot asked.

Sneighd thought for several long minutes. He had never told anyone. It would make him too vulnerable. “No.”

Korbot studied him, did not look happy with the answer, but reached into his pocket and removed a handful of credit chips. He handed them to Sneighd. “Get what you need. That should be enough.”

Sneighd knew it was a major show of trust on Korbot’s part. The big man wasn’t going to question his silence. It would be up to Sneighd to earn the trust.

He accepted the chips with a nod and pocketed them.

“Thanks.”

“Remember, that is for medication, not...” Korbob said.

So much for trust, Sneighd thought. “I know my priorities, Korbob.”

Haunalyn sauntered into the hold. Korbob turned his attention to her.

“Young lady, will you please give warning when you take off and land.”

She ignored him as she pressed the hatch release. The ramp protesting lowered to the ground.

“Gentlemen.” She bowed and motioned them out.

Sneighd held out his hand for Impa. They made a regal exit, followed by Korbob. Sneighd saw the big man give Haunalyn’s hair a playful tug as he passed.

“It’s a beautiful day, the sky is blue, the air is warm, what next?” Haunalyn seemed to be in a good mood.

“You girls go to the Med-Center for the emergency medical supplies,” Korbob said. “I’ll pay a visit to the portmaster to see if I can finagle the equipment to make repairs on the hauler. Sneighd has other business to attend to.”

He gave Sneighd a look full of meaning. Sneighd offered a mock salute and turned for the city. He did have business, but not the business Korbot thought.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Amazed at the high spirits of his companions and himself after all they had been through, Sneighd threaded his way through the crowded streets, stopping only a couple of times to ask directions to the Med-Center. He hadn't wanted the other three to know. He didn't want to give them satisfaction to know they had been right.

The results of a thorough examination hadn't changed in five years. The scar tissue was putting pressure on his brain. The doctor wanted to run further tests, but Sneighd refused. He knew there was nothing that could be done and didn't have the time.

Voicing his concern, the doctor gave him the small plastic medical alert card, enough tablets to last six months, and warned him not to miss any dosage. He had already been too long without. Before allowing him to leave, the doctor made Sneighd swallow the first dose.

Sneighd spent the rest of the morning exploring Alstar. It wasn't the first time he had been there, but the first time he had time to look around. Being alone in the open breathing fresh air was liberating after being cooped inside the confines of the hauler's artificial environment. The smells of food beckoned to him, and he realized how hungry he hadn't realized he was.

He followed the enticing scents along the street, had almost decided on one stall, when the sound of raucous laughter caught his attention. Music, smoke of all sorts, and the smell of a variety of drink lured him toward a canteen.

Impa had been right. He could use a good, stiff drink. He paused in the doorway watching the plethora of creatures and humans packed shoulder to shoulder in the canteen. The last time he had allowed himself to get lost in such chaos, he had ended up where he was, in trouble, hunted, accused of something he didn't do. He backed away from the door, shaking his head. Not this time.

Crossing the street to a food vendor, he bought something spicy on a stick, not asking or wanting to know what it was, bought a bottle of blue water that had a vague sweet taste, and made his way back to the port.

It was late afternoon when he rendezvoused with the other three. Korbot quickly briefed them on what he had found out.

“It isn't good. The Corporation is so certain that you killed Cocker, they've hired the Lurker to find you.”

“Find us, you mean,” Haunalyn said. “If he catches up with us, he's not going to leave witnesses.”

“We’ll have to be more cautious,” Korbob said.

“Then I suggest we start now.” Sneighd grabbed Impa and dove to the ground as a shadowy figure slipped into the bay area.

Korbob yanked Haunalyn down just as an energy bolt slammed into the lift behind where she had been standing. Bits of metal flew from the controls of the lift into the air.

Sneighd shoved Impa under a street crawler then peered over the side in time to see the Lurker aim the long barrel of his blazer. Sneighd’s blazer was in his hand, but before he could fire, another energy bolt buzzed past him. The bolt hadn’t been aimed at him, but at the Lurker, who ducked, barely avoiding the shot.

Sneighd looked around the bay area and just made out the lean, black figure on the roof of a warehouse opposite their cover. Korbob and Haunalyn slid in next to him.

“Did you see who it was?” Korbob asked.

Sneighd shook his head. “No, but while they’re busy shooting at each other, I suggest we get out of here.”

Korbob snatched Impa from the ground and ran to the Marauder. He slammed his fist on the hatch control and raced up the ramp with Sneighd and Haunalyn bringing up the rear, blazers ready.

Sneighd couldn't tell where the next shot fired from nor at whom it was intended.

Haunalyn grabbed his arm and pointed to the figure crouching behind the damaged cargo lift. She motioned for Sneighd to get inside and the two of them raced up the ramp, diving into the hold as the hatch hissed shut behind them.

Sneighd got to his feet, caught Haunalyn by the hand and helped her up as Korbot and Impa joined them.

"I don't know what just happened," Sneighd said. "But I'm thankful for the help."

Korbot looked out of the porthole. "Everything seems quiet now."

Standing to one side of the hatch, Sneighd pressed the release.

"What are you doing?" Haunalyn shouted. "Are you crazy?"

Sneighd edged down the ramp, watching for any sign of attack. When none came, he called all clear. He took two steps from the ramp and blazer fire tore up the dirt at his feet. Cursing, he flung himself to the ground and slithered behind the hauler's landing gear. He searched the bay, unable to see where the shots came from.

“Sneighd?” Korbot called from inside the Marauder.

“I’m alright.”

“Then get back in here you idiot,” Haunalyn shouted to him.

“Good idea,” he called back to her. “Keep him busy.”

He waited until he heard Haunalyn and Korbot’s blazers, then ducked from his cover and tore up the ramp.

“Close the hatch,” Haunalyn ordered.

“No,” Korbot said. “No, if he comes at us, it’s better if we have a clear shot. With the hatch closed, we’re trapped.”

“We can fly out of here,” Haunalyn said.

“No, we can’t.” Impa’s voice came from the shelf. “Korbot hasn’t made the repairs yet.”

“Listen,” Sneighd said.

For a long, tense moment no one spoke or moved.

“I don’t hear anything,” Haunalyn whispered.

“Shhh!” Sneighd held up his hand.

The silence lengthened. When nothing happened, they all began to breathe again. Sneighd dusted the dirt from his clothes.

Korbot kept a wary eye on the bay area but stayed out of the line of fire.

Haunalyn plunked down into the seat at the console. “Who were they?”

Sneighd and Korbot spoke at the same time.

“The Lurker.”

“The Assassin.”

Sneighd glanced at the big man, startled. Korbot was staring at him, looking just as surprised.

“What?” They spoke simultaneously.

Impa began to giggle. Haunalyn looked at both men as if she thought they had lost their minds.

“The Lurker?” Korbot asked Sneighd, who, at the same time asked, “You saw the Assassin?”

Impa’s giggles increased and Sneighd saw Haunalyn roll her eyes.

“Why don’t you try speaking one at a time?” she asked.

Both men gave her an annoyed look, then spoke again. “You go first.”

“Oh, good grief,” Sneighd said. He was trying to keep a straight face. Impa’s laughter was contagious.

Korbot cleared his throat to indicate he was about to speak. Sneighd nodded for him to go ahead.

“You saw the Lurker?”

“He was behind the lift, evidently trying for an ambush.”

“That’s strange,” Korbot said. “The Assassin was on the warehouse roof.”

“Our lucky day,” Sneighd said. “A crossfire?”

Haunalyn held up her hand. “Excuse me. Who is the Assassin?”

“Another gun for hire,” Sneighd said. “But the way it appears he wasn’t after us.”

Korbot took a seat on the acceleration couch. “Weird.”

“Well, who is this Assassin after?” Haunalyn asked.

“Shall I answer for you?” A feminine voice spoke from the hatch.

Too late, Sneighd pulled his blazer, as did Korbot and Haunalyn. The tall, slender figure dressed in a long black cape that

completely hid her features, stood a few feet away, her blazer aimed directly at Sneighd.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Korbot couldn't decide which had startled him more, the voice of the person standing in front of him, or the fact she had sneaked up on them so easily. That made twice they had been caught off guard. They weren't getting off to a particularly good start at being more cautious.

"Hatia! Don't do that." Sneighd found his voice first.

Korbot turned on him, as did Haunalyn.

The figure in black reached her gloved hand to push the hood of her cloak away from her head. Long black hair cascaded down her back, and her dark green eyes danced with amusement. Korbot had never seen a more beautiful woman. She held out her hand.

"Hatia," she said, her voice deeper than he would have imagined.

He accepted the firm clasp, still wary. She had holstered her blazer when Sneighd called her by name.

"You're...?"

"The Assassin," she said. "Yes. Well, that's what others call me. It isn't a name I would've chosen for myself. Just call me Hatia."

She turned to Haunalyn and held out her hand. Haunalyn ignored it.

“I don’t like being snuck up on,” Haunalyn said. “And I don’t like mysterious “friends” appearing out of nowhere.”

Hatia took her snub coolly. She turned to Sneighd and pulled him in for a brief kiss on his cheek, which Korbot noted, he didn’t resist. He also noted the bright red flush on Haunalyn’s cheeks.

“You have to be more careful, Sneighd, darling,” Hatia said. “Especially now. That creeper is out for your blood, you know.”

“Yes, we know,” Sneighd said.

Korbot watched Haunalyn out of the corner of his eye. The young Rhadurian girl was obviously jealous. He couldn’t really blame her. Hatia was beautiful and Sneighd hadn’t taken his eyes off her.

Korbot had a strange sense something was missing. He glanced around and it dawned on him what that something was. He looked to the shelf and saw the long black barrel of the Impa’s strange weapon aimed in Hatia’s direction. They had completely forgotten about the little girl. He made a slight gesture in her direction for her to stay quiet and out of sight. He didn’t think there was any

danger but didn't want to take the chance of her being accidentally hit if things went unexpectedly wrong.

Hatia placed her arms firmly around Sneighd's waist. "You could have been killed, love. Lucky for you I just happened to be here."

Sneighd laughed out loud as he pulled away from her. "Just happened to be here? Somehow I find that hard to believe."

Hatia smiled and winked at Korbot. "Truth is, I was after the scum who calls himself the Lurker. I have been for quite some time, but I can never seem to get a clear shot at him. Not what you were expecting, I'm sure."

"Quite frankly, no," he said.

Korbot was amazed at the woman's bluntness. And there was something strangely familiar about her, but he didn't know what. He had never encountered her before. He would have remembered.

"What do you want?" Haunalyn asked.

Korbot gritted his teeth and watched Hatia closely for her reaction. Haunalyn's hostility didn't seem to faze her.

“I told you. The Lurker. And I wanted to inform Sneighd that I’d had a visit from an old friend of his.”

Sneighd snapped to attention. “Friend? Who? Why?”

“To hire me,” Hatia said. “For the same reason, the Corporation hired the Lurker.”

“Who?” Korbob had a sneaking suspicion what her answer would be.

“Baquar Starka,” she said. “Offered quite a sum if I’d kill you.”

Korbob caught Haunalyn’s hand as it went for her blazer. He shook his head in warning. Hatia didn’t seem to notice the move. Neither did Sneighd, and that bothered him.

“What did you tell him?” Sneighd didn’t sound as if he completely trusted her.

“I told him to leave while he could still breathe,” Hatia said. “Sneighd, don’t ever think that I’d accept any offer from that slime.”

Korbob saw the worried frown clouding Sneighd’s expression. He also thought he saw a softening in Hatia’s eyes.

“Never you, Sneighd, my love,” she said. “I heard what happened on Sinnet. I knew the Corporation had hired the Lurker

to find you. They don't know Baquar has the same idea. He doesn't know that I know you. The Lurker has been one step behind you for some time. He didn't know I was one step behind him, until today. Someday, I'm going to kill that creature. Until that day, as long as I'm around, he'll not have a chance to kill you. That's a promise."

There was a long silent pause, then Korbot cleared his throat. "I think I need a drink. Anybody want to join me?"

Sneighd quickly agreed. "Yeah. Hatia?"

"Sure," she said. "As long as it's strong."

Korbot went to his quarters and pulled out a bottle of Rhadurian ale he had found hidden in an overhead bin. The bottle had been tucked in the deepest part of the bin and thick with dust. There was no knowing how long it had been concealed and he was certain Haunalyn had no idea it was there.

He returned to the hold and pulled three thermal cups from under the console. "Believe me, if this was any stronger, it'd fly this crate."

"What is that?" Haunalyn grabbed the bottle from him and held it to the light to read the label.

He retrieved it from her. “You don’t need to know. You’re not old enough to drink it.” When he saw her expression, he wished he hadn’t said that.

Her face clouded and she looked as if she might cry. He had hurt her feelings by inadvertently treating her like a child. He knew she was already angered by the presence of a woman who Sneighd possibly knew intimately. The trouble was, she was a child, even though she didn’t think so, and he had a responsibility to her father to keep her safe. He couldn’t tell her that. She would never accept it.

She left the hold and went to her quarters. Korbot glanced at the shelf but couldn’t see Impa. He poured the drinks and passed them to Sneighd and Hatia. The strong ale burned all the way down his throat, the heat from it rushing through his veins, warming his entire body. His limbs relaxed and he sank onto the acceleration couch. He was tired and felt a million years old.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

After Korbot had drunk himself to sleep, Sneighd and Hatia sat alone at the edge of the ramp. The night was warm, lit by the two full moons of Alstar. Sneighd thought the city was strangely quiet. The only sounds he heard were chirping insects, what might be night birds, and a rustling near some refuse cans which was probably rats, or Alstar's equivalent of rats.

Hatia had shed her cloak, revealing a tight black jumpsuit with silver piping down each side, and a custom-made silver holster hugging her shapely hips. Her blazer nestled snugly in the holster.

“That girl, Haunalyn, she's fond of you.” Hatia said.

Leaning against the hydraulic lift of the ramp, Sneighd turned to her. “What makes you think so?”

She gave him a severe look that had always made him uneasy. “You're not that dumb!”

He shrugged. She was right. He wasn't. He had noticed Haunalyn's reactions that evening. “What of it?”

“She's jealous,” Hatia said.

“She's a kid.” He tried to sound nonchalant.

He wasn't fooling anyone, especially himself.

"She's a woman, Sneighd." Hatia's tone was firm and serious.

"And she has strong feelings for you. I can tell."

He sighed. She was right. He knew it. He also knew how he sometimes had trouble keeping his feelings in check whenever he got close to the little Rhadurian terror. She excited and aggravated him all at the same time, confusing him to distraction.

"Okay, what are you leading up to?"

"How you feel," Hatia said.

He searched her eyes, curious to know why she seemed so interested. He had known Hatia a long time, as an acquaintance, but he knew nothing about her. There had always been a strange connection between them, but what it was remained a mystery.

"She's a nice ki---uh---young lady," he said. "I like her, although she can be a pain sometimes. Why?"

Hatia leaned back on her elbows. "Attachments."

Sneighd raised an inquisitive eyebrow. "As in, am I forming any?" He was still confused, but she had his interest. "I haven't given it much thought; not like you mean." He squatted down on

his haunches next to her. “But I might be willing to make an exception, give it serious consideration.”

He leaned closer, letting himself drift deep into the green pools of her eyes. He spoke softly. “What do you think?”

She surprised him by abruptly sitting up and gently pushing him away. “Sneighd, I think it’s time we had a long talk. My ship isn’t far. I want to go where it’s more private.”

He rose to his feet, confused, and intrigued. He smiled slightly as he helped her to her feet. They walked through the dark port to the bay area where her black striker waited. He wasn’t sure what he was getting into, or that he liked it, but she had him completely hooked. He had to know what it was she had to say.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Sneighd was surprised to find Haunalyn waiting for him at the ramp of the Marauder when he returned several hours later. He noticed right away that she had fixed her hair and cleaned her face. She wore a loose tunic that looked as if it belonged to Korbot. The tunic was undone enough to capture the imagination, and she wasn't wearing trousers. Her long legs glistened in the moonlight. Barefoot, she ran to meet him and threw her arms around his neck. For some unexplainable reason, the way she was dressed and behaved angered him. He pulled her arms down from his neck and gently pushed her away.

“What the heck do you think you're doing?” He spoke in a whisper, certain Impa was asleep. He didn't want to wake her or Korbot to what could be a compromising situation.

Haunalyn looked confused and hurt. “What's wrong? Don't I look alright?”

He thought he detected a hint of anger and challenge in her question. She looked fine, perfect---too perfect for his present frame of mind.

“No,” he lied. “What are you trying to pull?” He did his best to sound cross, but he was, in fact, feeling anything but.

Tears spilled down her cheeks, making him feel like a bully. He didn't need this, not right now.

"I just thought, maybe..." She was stammering, her face pink in the floodlight of the bay. She was obviously embarrassed.

"What? What did you think?" He tried to sound like a disapproving big brother. He was feeling like anything but that. He wanted to scoop her into his arms and carry her to someplace dark and private.

She didn't need to answer. The emotions flowing over her face said all that needed to be said. She was starting to breathe harder as she stared up at him. *Get mad, he thought, get angry, start hitting.* He felt sick to his stomach. He had known all along her tough exterior was protective armor.

"Listen to me, Hauna, I know what you're doing. You don't need to. I've never had any trouble noticing you, but you are---well---special."

Her eyes darkened and she shoved him. "What's that supposed to mean? Special? What kind of 'special'?"

Sneighd closed his eyes as he took a deep breath and let it slowly out. *Finally.*

“Hauna, you’re not dumb and neither am I. The simple fact is that you’re off limits. Period. You’re too young. You’re inexperienced. And your father and Korbot would kill me if I even thought about...” He shrugged that thought away. He didn’t want to think what they would do. “I’m not what you need. I’m not what you want, trust me.”

He could see she wasn’t confused or hurt any longer. The flush on her face was no longer embarrassment. She was glaring at him and he was relieved.

“Not what I need?” She laughed. “What are you babbling about? You don’t know anything about me.” She stepped close and poked her finger in his chest. “Inexperienced?” She gave him a smug look. “You need to rein in your ego. You’re not so much.”

He tried his best not to smile. He knew she was lying, and her tough talk made her look even younger than she was.

“You’re more interested in women like Hatia,” Haunalyn said. “Who is she? What’s she doing here? What did she want? Where did the two of you go? What are you plotting?”

That brought him up short. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Her smile told him she thought she had him. “You two were gone a long time, off together secretly in the middle of the night.”

“Did you ever stop to think maybe we wanted to be alone?” He emphasized the word “alone”.

Her laugh irritated him.

“And you come back looking like the universe just fell on you? I don’t think so. What are you up to, Sneighd?”

“Up to?” Now he was angry. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

She planted her hands on her hips, her eyes accusing. “You’re planning on taking off with her, aren’t you? Leaving us high and dry to face whatever consequences because we got stuck with pulling you out of a tight spot.”

Her statement was ludicrous to the point of absurd. Sneighd suddenly felt very tired as he ran his hand through his hair.

“You’re wrong, on all counts”

Haunalyn wasn’t finished. “Like you said, I’m not dumb. Maybe you’ve been planning this all along. Maybe her showing up wasn’t just a coincidence. Maybe...”

“Sit down.” Sneighd was no longer in the mood to put up with her nonsense. He felt the twinge in the back of his head, a warning signal. “Shut up and I’ll try to explain.” He sat on the end of the ramp and motioned for her to join him.

She stayed on her feet for several minutes, her gaze wary, then sat down.

“She crashed on Denova,” Sneighd said. “She was young, and someone was after her. She was pregnant and injured in the crash. She was rescued by a man named Banger, the owner of one of the mines. Her baby was born soon after, but before she could leave, Banger found out she was a fugitive with a hefty price on her head. He gave her a choice, pay him or he would turn her over to her pursuers. As an incentive for her cooperation, he would keep her son as insurance that she wouldn’t try to kill him. She had to leave to earn the ransom, but like most blackmailers, Banger wasn’t satisfied with that first amount. He kept the child, threatening to kill him if Hatia didn’t pay.”

“She told you that?” Haunalyn asked.

She sounded skeptical. He didn’t blame her. He was still trying to believe it himself.

He nodded. “Tonight. That’s what she wanted to talk to me about.”

“Why? Who was chasing her?” Haunalyn asked. “What’s it have to do with you?”

He shook his head. “She wouldn’t tell me who. She wouldn’t say why she was so desperate to protect the baby that she left him with Banger.” He put his head in his hands. “I was told my mother died in childbirth. I never knew---never even suspected.” He lifted his head and stared at the shadows in the bay. “I’m not Denovan! He had no hold on me and I never knew it.”

He saw Haunaly n stiffen as understanding seeped in.

“I know what that means,” she said. “About being Denovan, but I don’t understand about the rest, about Banger. Who was he and who was she running from? What about your father?”

He looked at her. “Someday, maybe I’ll tell you about my sad childhood.” He attempted a smile. “But not now. Like I said, she didn’t tell me why or who.”

She stood up and he could see she wasn’t sure how she should react. “You believe her?” she asked. “After all this time, she suddenly comes up with this story, and besides, she doesn’t look old enough.”

“She’s old enough,” he said. “She’s a Galantan. That much I did know.”

Haunaly n was surprised. “That planet’s a myth. No one’s ever seen it.”

“Galantis is not a myth. It exists, but no one is sure where. No one knows much about it, or the people, but it’s real.”

“How do you know? Have you ever been there?”

He gave her a sidelong glance. “No. Like I said, no one knows where it is, but I’ve been around, and pilots like to talk. There are too many stories to discount them all.”

“If what Hatia told you is true, then, that makes you a Galantan, doesn’t it? What will you do?” Haunalyn asked. “She hasn’t told you enough. Someone was after her, why? Who? Why was she hiding? And why did she let this Banger person keep her baby? From what I know about her, why didn’t she just kill him?”

Sneighd pulled himself slowly to his feet. He was wondering about that himself. Hatia said too much that he could verify for it all to have been a lie. Knowing that made him angry. She had left him in the hands of a monster.

“I don’t have any answers,” he said. He felt in need of a drink and solitude. He needed to think. He felt Haunalyn’s hand on his arm. She must have figured out what he was thinking.

“Sneighd, don’t,” she said. “It’s too dangerous. Stay. I’ll go inside. No one will bother you.”

“I can’t.” He started to move away, but she held him back. Her eyes were filled with worry. He pulled her into his arms and the kiss he gave her was intense and heated, filled with need. He felt her body tremble in his embrace.

Forcing himself to push her away, he commanded, “Go to bed! Please, before I do something I’ll regret.”

“Sneighd.”

“Get out of here! Leave me alone.” He turned and stalked into the night; his hands tightly clenched inside of his jacket pockets. He had to get away from her.

He returned late to the hauler. He had found consolation in drink in a back-alley cantina near the port, had found companionship with an exotic human female from off planet, before making his unsteady way back to the uncomfortable acceleration couch where he finally allowed himself the luxury of sleep.

He woke to discover that everyone else was up. Impa fussed over the medical supplies. Haunalyn made extremely loud repairs on the outside of the hauler, and Korbot, on his way to give her a hand, gave Sneighd a knowing side glance as he stepped from the

main hatch. The big man didn't say a word, for which Sneighd was grateful. He wondered if Haunalyn had told Korbot about their conversation the night before and hoped not.

Reluctantly he struggled to his feet and went to shower. Feeling more human, he went to see what he could do as far as the repairs. Not surprising, Haunalyn persisted in giving him the cold shoulder, answering any question he asked with a curt one- or two-word answer. Her behavior began to get on his nerves.

Chapter Forty

Sneighd was grateful that Korbot refrained from asking any questions about his nightlife. He could tell, by the looks the big man kept darting at him, that Korbot was wondering and had noticed that Haunalyn made it a point to ignore Sneighd. She persisted in giving him cold, angry glares until Korbot told her to stop and start paying attention to the repairs.

Midday, Korbot approached Sneighd. “Look, I don’t know what your problem is, or what you and Hauna are fighting about this time, but I think you’ve moped around long enough.” He handed a specialized tool for adjusting the micro-circuits in the engine of the hauler. “Go to the town center to the ship chancellor and find me one of these. Once I have it, the hauler will be on its feet again and we can get out of here.”

Glad for the chance to get away from Haunalyn’s torment and Korbot’s scrutiny, Sneighd headed into the heart of the city. His head ached, mostly from his hangover, but he knew that could lead to more unpleasant things. He had to clear his mind, to make sense of what Hatia had told him. Their long talk had unnerved him. His feelings were in a chaotic jumble, towards the woman he had considered a friend of sorts, and towards the Rhadurian hoyden.

It didn't take long to find the chancellor shop and procure the part Korbot wanted. Feeling in better spirits by being on his own, Sneighd decided to pay a short visit to the local canteen.

He entered the dingy, smoky building and his nostrils were immediately assailed by thousands of scents and odors of the human and non-human patrons laughing, talking, bargaining, and arguing around the small tables and the long bar. He felt his tension abate. The environment was one he knew; one he could blend in with and be just another pilot among the many.

He weeded his way to the scarred bar and was about to motion to the bartender for a drink when he noticed a familiar figure standing against the wall in the back. Careful not to draw attention, he eased through the crowded room to the entrance and slipped quickly into the street. He didn't think Faifa had seen him, and he couldn't help but wonder how the Kenza happened to be on this planet. He didn't care. The best idea was to get back to the hauler, make the repairs, and get of Alstar as soon as possible.

Sneighd wasted no time in reaching the port. He moved quickly to the docking bay where the old hauler waited. He paused for a moment behind the blast gates and peered cautiously around the corner to see if there might be a welcoming committee waiting. Everything looked clear, but he knew that could be a deception.

The bays were high and offered a good many places for concealment.

Moving at a slow trot, Sneighd moved toward Haunalyn's bay, keeping his eye out for any signs of movement. He almost reached the entrance when a blast struck the ground to his left. He dove sideways, pulling his blazer as he did. He rolled, taking cover behind some dock equipment. He searched the area around him, the entrances to the bays and the roofs of the buildings. His attacker could be anywhere.

A movement caught his eye as someone stepped from behind an exhaust tube on the opposite building roof. Sneighd saw the glint of the sun on the blazer a split second before the shot struck his hiding place and the shooter disappeared again before he could return fire.

He hadn't been fast enough. Faifa had probably seen him the minute he entered the canteen, or had men stationed in the bays watching for him, or both.

Someone moved in a nearby doorway. Sneighd crouched lower and peered around the lift. He recognized the ugly reptilian as Grock, a Kenza from the mountains of Parmet. He was tall, thin, and wiry, resembling a cross between human and snake. In the bright sun, his reddish gold scales gleamed like exhaust fire from a

freighter, and like all his people, he was a natural contortionist, moving with the speed of a reptile and able to fire his weapon from any position.

Sneighd could just make out Grock's flat diamond-shaped head as Grock did a quick reconnaissance, his green-yellow slanted eyes sweeping the bay area before he ducked out of sight.

To Grock's immediate right, concealed behind another lift, a Denovan Sneighd knew as Barka, waited. Sneighd had especially hated him because he had felt the man a traitor to his people. Denovan's were miners, and had little to do with outsiders, especially those like Baquar. The irony wasn't lost on Sneighd. That no longer mattered because he knew now, he wasn't Denovan.

Faifa fired another shot, nearly clipping his ear before he could duck.

"Sneighd, my friend, give it up. You cannot escape."

Sneighd answered with a volley of shots in the direction of Grock's hiding place and was rewarded by a screech of pain from that vicinity.

"Grock?" Faifa called out.

“Not serious,” came the angry reply.

Sneighd cursed his bad luck as Faifa hailed him again.

“Sneighd, come now. We accomplish nothing this way.”

“What do you want, Faifa?” Sneighd answered. “You’re a long way from home. Surely you didn’t come all this way on my account.”

Sneighd searched the area around him. The expanse between him and the bay gate was too open, as was the other direction. Faifa was in a perfect position, and Sneighd had to admit, was an excellent marksman.

“Arkon, give it up,” Barka shouted to him. “We’re not supposed to kill you.”

Sneighd gritted his teeth against that grating voice. Faifa he could tolerate. Faifa was a stranger creature, not entirely bad. The two of them had shared drinks on occasion. Barka, on the other hand, reminded Sneighd of Banger, and that memory created feelings he would rather not think about.

“Baquar saving that little privilege for himself?” he asked. “No chance, boys.”

“Don’t be a fool, Sneighd,” Faifa said. “You cannot reach the bay.”

“I thought you weren’t supposed to kill me,” Sneighd said.

“I did not say I would kill you,” Faifa said. “But I will keep you from escaping.”

“Why don’t you slither back to Sinnet and stop bothering me, Faifa. Baquar seems to be going to an awful lot of trouble. He usually waits for the pilots to come to him. What’s in this for him?”

Sneighd hesitated, considering what he had just said. Baquar was going to a lot of trouble, and that was out of character for the Sinnetian. There had to be more than what Sneighd owed him involved.

“You didn’t answer my question, Faifa. What’s in it for Baquar other than the loss of a little wealth?”

“He ain’t paying us to question his orders, Arkon,” Barka answered. “He wants you. We’ll bring you to him.”

“When are you going to stop licking Baquar’s boots, Faifa?” Sneighd said, ignoring Barka. He knew that would get a reaction

from the Kenza, and he was right. Three blasts hit the wall behind him.

“You cannot escape, Sneighd,” Faifa called out.

Sneighd was gratified to hear the tightness in the Kenza’s voice. Faifa was angry.

A barrage of fire forced Sneighd to crawl under the life to avoid being cremated. From where he lay, he saw Grock, Barka, and several others moving in. He fired at their feet, giving himself time to slide into the open and run, firing as he went.

Faifa had a clear shot, but the Kenza’s orders were clear. Sneighd had counted on that. Faifa shouted to his men to cease firing and to capture their prey. Sneighd heard them running behind him and took on a burst of speed, hoping he might outrun them, but Grock overtook him and tacked him to the ground.

Sneighd twisted to land on his back, giving him some advantage. He flipped Grock over his head and scrambled to his feet, only to be brought down again by Barka. The human was slower and not as strong as the Kenza. Sneighd broke loose, rolled to his left and kicked out with his boot to catch Barka on the chin. Barka flew backward and landed with a thud on his back.

Grock came from behind, grabbing Sneighd around his chest. Sneighd ducked and elbowed the Kenza in the ribs, sending him staggering back.

Barka was on his feet, moving in with fists swinging. Sneighd faced him, eluding the jabs, and landing several solid ones of his own to Barka's jaws and sternum. He felt a stinging blow to the back of his head. The world went dark as he pitched forward into the dust.

As Faifa stood over his fallen prey, he failed to notice the small figure hidden behind a bay gate.

Impa watched the Kenza tape the palm of his hand with his blazer butt, then pull a small black box from his pocket. He opened the box and Impa saw the glint of the sun on the metal of a syringe filled with green liquid. She winced as the reptilian knelt next to his captive and inserted the needle into Sneighd's wrist.

The Kenza motioned to his men to lift the unconscious pilot. He replaced the syringe into the black box. "That should keep him quiet during our flight to Sinnet."

Impa remained motionless until Sneighd's captors moved away from the bay. Sure, she wouldn't be noticed, she followed them to

their ship. She made note of the Kenza's ships markings and type, then as it lifted from the bay, she raced back to the Marauder to inform Korbot and Haunalyn of what she had witnessed.

Chapter Forty-One

Deacon paced in front of the canteen, his anxiety level weaving a path through his nerves as he wondered what was taking Dusalt so long.

He and his co-pilot had made planet fall on Sinnet early in the morning. As soon as the Rhadurian freighter settled firmly on the ground, they parted ways, each to see if he could find Baquar.

Deacon was the first to discover the Sinnetian had abruptly left Sinnet some time ago. He had hoped to find Baquar comfortably sitting in his fortified office, not expecting anyone to dare make an all-out assault on his establishment.

Word around the port city was that Baquar, grown tired of waiting for news of the capture of the Denovan pilot, Sneighd Arkon, had taken his personal yacht to hunt him down himself. Word was also that Arkon was wanted by the Corporation for the murder of a Corporate official last seen alive in Baquar's company. The fact the official had been in Baquar's company was enough for Deacon to question those reports.

Dusalt had volunteered to check for any available information concerning Baquar's possible destination, using the argument that a stranger whose name Baquar wouldn't recognize would have a better chance of successfully gleaning that information. Deacon

thought Dusalt had been too long and was ready to go in search for him if he failed to turn up in the next few minutes.

Deacon had already determined there would be no mercy for Baquar. Involving his only daughter in this mess had made up his mind on that point. The fact Korbot, also, was at risk, deepened his conviction. If something happened to Dusalt on top of all that, there would be no hole in the universe Baquar could hide in that Deacon wouldn't find him. The Sinnetian's comeuppance was long overdue. Deacon would take great satisfaction in being the one who brought it to him. He absently fingered the spot on his thigh, feeling the dull ache of the old wound. He remembered all too well the part Baquar played in the disaster that had nearly ended his and Korbot's life.

The sound of footsteps hurrying up behind him broke his contemplation. He turned, blazer at the ready, to find Dusalt returning.

"Well?" Deacon didn't wait for Dusalt to speak first.

The co-pilot was covered in the dust from the streets of Sinnet and a fine sheen of sweat glistened off his forehead.

"Baquar left Sinnet early in the morning three days ago. By all accounts, he was in an extreme hurry and only had a few of his

men. Since the Kenza, Faifa, wasn't with him, everyone thinks he'll be back soon."

Deacon agreed with the assessment. Baquar never went anywhere without his hired gunman.

"What do you want to do?" Dusalt asked.

"Wait." Deacon was frustrated, but he didn't want to leave Sinnet until he knew for certain Baquar wouldn't be back. "We'll wait."

"For how long?" Dusalt's expression was skeptical.

"Long enough. Baquar wouldn't just leave his lair unless there was a good reason. We'll know what that reason is when he turns up. And he will turn up because you're right. He never goes anywhere without the Kenza." Deacon turned to Dusalt. "Is there any sign or word about Faifa?"

"The only thing I could find out was that the Kenza and several of his henchmen left Sinnet not long after Arkon escaped with Haunalyn and Korbot."

Deacon struck the wall of the bay with his fist. "That means Baquar sent them after Arkon. They may have found him, and

that's why Baquar left so suddenly. Since we don't know where they might have gone, waiting is our best course of action."

"You think they may have caught...?" Dusalt let the words trail away.

Deacon thought just that. If the Kenza succeeded in capturing Arkon, he would bring the pilot back to Sinnet. If the others were with him, they, too, would be brought back, unless---no, Deacon wouldn't let that thought go any further. His daughter and old friend had better still be alive.

Chapter Forty-Two

Commander Aqualine wasn't pleased at the prospect of seeing Baquar Starka. He adamantly disliked the man, but he had been the one who reported the death of Cocker and had provided the name of the murderer. The Commander could do no less than return the favor by listening to what Starka wanted.

Baquar Starka was ushered into the office with noticeable indifference on the part of the receptionist. Commander Aqualine pasted a smile on his face and held out his hand. His handshake was quick, and he resisted the temptation to wipe his palm on his pant leg.

"Please, sit down," he invited, indicating a large, comfortable chair in front of his desk.

Baquar Starka sank into the cushions as the Commander took his own seat. He leaned back, his hands in front of him, fingertips pressed in a pyramid. He gazed at the Sinnetian with tight pleasantness.

"Now then, what can I do for you?"

Baquar Starka shook his head. "There is no reason to force your pleasantries, my dear Commander. I am no fonder of you than you are of me, but what I must tell you is of great importance.

I thought you might be interested in hearing what I have to say rather than waiting until it is quite too late to do anything about it.”

Aqualine let his smile drop as he straightened in his chair. If this was the way Starka wanted to play this, it suited him. He found the man disgusting and the faster he could dismiss him, the better. “Very well. What is it?”

“It is about our mutual ‘friend’, the pilot for whom you and I are so diligently searching, Sneighd Arkon.”

Arkon’s name sent a flush of furry over the Commander’s craggy face. “Go on.”

Baquar sighed, shaking his head as if with great weariness.

“Another of your illustrious officers has met his untimely end,” Baquar said. “I believe his name was Doyle? A minor official. I’m sure you’ve not heard of him; however, he was last seen in the company of Sneighd Arkon.”

Commander Aqualine was on his feet. He planted his fists on his desk and leaned menacingly toward Baquar.

“What possible quarrel could a low-life pilot like Arkon have with a Corporate official of any rank? How and where was this man, Doyle, killed? Certainly not in Capitol City.”

Baquar sat, his fingertips tented. “No. According to my sources, Arkon kidnapped this Doyle person and, with the help of his companions, spirited Doyle off-planet to Darthea. I’m sure you are aware that Darthea is nearly all wilderness, few inhabitants, and they are far apart.”

Commander Aqualine reseated himself. “Sources? You have sources on Gravette, in Capitol City?”

Baquar ignored the question. Pursuing that answer could be detrimental to his business.

“I had thought Arkon’s purpose would merely have been to maroon Doyle.”

Commander Aqualine crossed his arms over his chest, his dark eyes burning with displeasure. “For what reason?”

Baquar shrugged. “I haven’t a clue. I’m sure there is a reason, known only to Arkon, of course, and his companions.”

Commander Aqualine stood again and began pacing, his large hands clasped behind his back. “How do you know this, Starka?”

Baquar watched the man walk slowly back and forth. “I had one of my men following Arkon. Unfortunately, by the time my man caught up to where Arkon left Doyle, it was too late. Doyle

was dead. We don't know why or even by whom for certain, although..." He left the rest of the conjecture filter away.

Commander Aqualine returned to his desk. His hands were balled into fists as he leaned his knuckles again on the top. "How far behind Arkon was your 'man'?"

Baquar caught the sarcasm and shrugged it off. It was no secret that he employed the Kenza as his henchmen. Still, it annoyed him that the Commander didn't seem to be able to stay on track in the conversation.

"My 'man', as you call him, is one of the best Kenza trackers in the galaxy. When he discovered Arkon's intended destination, he went directly there. It was necessary to search for the exact location on Darthea, since the Kenza didn't know precisely where on the planet Arkon hid Doyle. My Kenza will only be a few hours behind and when the Rhadurian hauler next makes planet fall, I assure Sneighd Arkon won't avoid capture again."

Commander Aqualine took his seat and tented his elbows and hands. "When that moment comes, Starka, you will bring Arkon directly to me. I don't care what you do with the others, but I want Arkon, preferably alive so I might have the personal pleasure of killing him myself."

Baquar stood to his feet. He had had enough of the Commander. “Commander, I came to you out of courtesy, to let you know of the death of another Corporate official. However, when I get my hands on Sneighd Arkon, I don’t intend to relinquish him to anyone. As for the others, well, they are of no importance to me, except for the Tendrite, Korbot Maka, who could be an issue. The other two are female and children. I have no interest in them.”

Commander Aqualine rose from his seat and stalked around his desk to confront Baquar. The Sinnetian barely reached the Commander’s chest and was forced to look up.

“I’m warning you, Starka, do not cross me. The Corporation has jurisdiction in this matter. You are not on Sinnet.”

Baquar stared up at the Commander coolly. “And you have no jurisdiction on Sinnet. If they should land on my planet, they are in my hands. We’ll see who retrieves Arkon first.”

Baquar stood to leave. “Commander, I have delivered my message. I will take my leave as I have pressing business elsewhere. I wish you luck in capturing Arkon, but I have little hopes for your success.”

Commander Aqualine seemed to be absorbed in his own thoughts and not to have heard the implied insult. He grunted a vague acknowledgment of Baquar's departure.

Baquar left the office. Commander Aqualine, aware of all Baquar had said, looked up and glared at the door the Sinnetian had exited. There would be recompense for the Sinnetian's insults. However, there was a more important matter to attend to. Commander Aqualine reached for his personal communicator.

Chapter Forty-Three

Baquar departed the Commander's office with a smile and high spirits. Sneighd Arkon was a condemned man with no chance of implicating Baquar in any way to the death of Cocker. The Corporate Police would never find Sneighd. Baquar would misdirect or delay their every effort. When he caught Arkon, and he had no doubt on that score, there was some unfinished business to settle. Sneighd would suffer a slow and agonizing death. The pilot had been a thorn in Baquar's side far too long.

Baquar thought back to his first encounter with the young human. He was intrigued to learn that a Denovan had become a skilled and accomplished pilot and gunman. Rumors abounded concerning the unique pilot.

When Baquar, through Faifa, had 'invited' Sneighd into his home, he was further amazed that this young Denovan looked nothing like his people. Baquar knew the Denovans were shorter, stockier, broad through the shoulders, and darker in hair and eyes. This young human was tall, lanky, broad shouldered to be sure, but fair in hair and eyes. Instead of reserved in manner, Sneighd was out-going, as if life amused him. Baquar considered this trait an asset. He approached Sneighd with the offer of joining Sinnet's Enforcers, all men of Baquar's. It was a prestigious offer. Many

of the transient pilots would covet such an offer. To Baquar's surprise, Sneighd declined. Even after proffering more wages and status, Baquar was firmly told "no thanks".

Baquar didn't take kindly to rejection by anyone. He only offered these situations to those he considered worthy and the best. He had taken for granted that this human, rumored to be just that, would have the audacity to say no. Nonetheless, Baquar allowed the pilot to leave, and decided to keep watch on him as he developed in experience and skill. In the meantime, Baquar would delve deeper into the history of this peculiar Denovan.

What Baquar learned in the next few years, he kept to himself for future use. There were things he doubted Sneighd knew. Those things could be useful as incentives.

To Baquar's surprise, Faifa inexplicably warned him against approaching Sneighd a second time. Baquar ignored the Kenza. Baquar was certain Sneighd would accept as the young pilot, like all pilots, sometimes struggled to find lucrative jobs to keep their ships flying. Again, Sneighd said "no", and came close to laughing in Baquar's face. Baquar silently swore this time he would not be so lenient. He knew eventually Sneighd would need help. That day arrived and Baquar set into motion his revenge.

Baquar arrived at his luxurious yacht docked in the elite bays of the city, those not owned by Korbot. It wouldn't be long, he thought, before Korbot's port belonged to him as well, as soon as the Tendrite was removed permanently by whatever means, either Baquar's or the Corporation.

Baquar made his way through the gleaming halls of the majestic yacht to his private parlor. Everything around him shone white and gold, accented with the rarest crystals of the galaxy, obtained illegally of course, without the knowledge of the Galactic Corporation.

This yacht was Baquar's private palace, his sanctuary. Only by invitation would anyone be allowed aboard. Invitations were few, and only for business associates of high rank.

The private parlor, where only Baquar inhabited, was furnished with striking white plush couches and chairs made from the rarest hides of exotic fauna across the galaxy. These were set in a circle in the middle of the parlor, and in the center of the circle was a crystal and gold round table occupied by crystal decanters of the best wines and brandy brought to Baquar by his Enforcers. He didn't care how these things were procured, only that they were, and he was able to enjoy them.

Baquar poured himself a liberal snifter of his best Callowian Brandy, made from the vineyards of the plantations on Callow in a part of the galaxy where seasons existed, and rain and sun were in equal quantities. The Callowian vineyards were unsurpassed in their wines, brandy, and other such liquids. The Callowians were not an aggressive people, which made it easy for pirates to waylay their transports. In exchange for protection from said pirates, Baquar had made a pact with the Callowian government for his men to escort the transports to their destination in exchange for a cut of their merchandise. It was a fair pact and worked well for both sides.

Baquar sank into the thick cushions of one of the couches, envisioning the smug Sneighd Arkon writhing in pain at his feet. The Sinnetian laughed aloud at the thought, his mind swimming with all manner of tortures he would inflict on Sneighd, after he revealed all the secret history, he had discovered about Sneighd.

The voice of one of Baquar's aides came from the com outside the door.

"Come," Baquar ordered.

The aide hesitantly entered, looking as if he wanted to bolt before he gave Baquar whatever message he had to give.

“You---you have a transmission from Faifa,” the aide stammered. He remained close to the exit as he spoke.

Baquar waved the aid out and opened the transmission.

“What news?” He asked.

“Sneighd is aboard my ship,” Faifa answered. “We are on our way to Sinnet.”

Chapter Forty-Four

Sneighd heard a voice, speaking somewhere far away, distant, then steadily growing louder, becoming a scream echoing through the channels of his brain. The scream was only one word, one familiar word, and Sneighd realized the scream in his mind was his own voice. The word was a name, the only name on which he could focus.

“Hatia!”

Someone slapped him hard across his face. His eyes snapped open. He had screamed aloud. He blinked several times to focus his vision. He tried to move. His arms and legs were secured to a long metal platform on which he lay.

The ugly jeering face of Baquar leaned close over him. Baquar let out a nasty chuckled.

Sneighd felt a cold sinking feeling in his gut as he remembered what had occurred. He had let his guard down. Faifa had been waiting at Alstar. Korbot and the others had no idea what had happened. He was on his own and that was not, now a good place to be. His only hope was that his companions would somehow figure out what happened and come to Sinnet.

“Well, my dear Sneighd, you still live,” Baquar cackled.

“Good. I am pleased that Faifa is loyal to follow my orders. I would have been most distressed if you had been damaged. You are of great value to me, you know.”

Baquar’s sickly sweet demeanor made Sneighd’s skin crawl.

There was nothing Sneighd wanted more than to get his hands firmly locked around the flabby neck and twist the rodent’s ugly head off his shoulders. Sneighd promised himself if he miraculously survived this, he would follow through with his desire.

Baquar waited. “No sarcastic reply? I am disappointed.”

Sneighd looked away from the ugly face.

“You turn away? That is most unlike you. Surely you have something to say.”

Sneighd remained silent. He had a lot to say but didn’t dare.

Baquar sighed and looked aggrieved. “Well, I trust your journey wasn’t too unpleasant. We have much to discuss. You rest. You will need all your strength for our ‘discussion’.”

Baquar patted Sneighd’s arm as if he were a sick child.

Sneighd gritted his teeth, unwilling to give the Sinnetian the

satisfaction of even flinching. He knew he was in no position to put up any kind of a struggle. The long table and the restraints were a bad omen. Whatever Baquar had planned Sneighd was not in a hurry to find out.

Baquar watched him as if trying to read the thoughts rampaging in his mind.

“Rest, Sneighd,” Baquar repeated. “Believe me, later you will be glad you did.”

Baquar turned, motioning to his men that Sneighd realized were lurking in the shadows. All the men except one followed their boss as he left the room.

Faifa lingered, his slanted eyes fixed on Sneighd’s face. Sneighd returned the scrutiny. Faifa was his only hope. The Kenza was a mysterious creature. He and Sneighd had never been friends, but there had been a strange bond between them, a mutual respect. If anyone could be persuaded to help him, it would have to be Faifa.

As if reading Sneighd’s thoughts, Faifa took a step back into the shadows. Sneighd knew the Kenza was still there.

“You know what I want,” Sneighd said.

There was a pause, then Faifa spoke. "I cannot help you."

Sneighd heard the hiss of the door. Faifa had left the room.

Chapter Forty-Five

Baquar returned to his office. As he dropped into his chair behind his desk, he was unhappy about his encounter with Sneighd. It wasn't like Sneighd to be silent. The pilot was a fighter, a survivor, with a tongue that could sweet talk his way out of any predicament or rip an enemy to shreds. And from experience, Baquar knew that Sneighd Arkon hated captivity. Not to struggle was disquieting.

Baquar had been unprepared for Sneighd's reaction. He sat alone in his office for several long hours in contemplation as to what it might mean. If Sneighd was waiting for rescue, he would be disappointed. Faifa made certain Sneighd's companions were unaware of his capture. Without them, there was no one to help. Still, there was something about Sneighd's behavior that was disturbing. If the pilot knew something Baquar didn't, it would be in the Sinnetian's best interest to extract the information from his prisoner as soon as possible.

Chapter Forty-Six

Sneighd knew if he could free himself, the sentries would be no problem, but freeing himself might take some doing. He knew as well as soon as he became fully conscious what contraption he was lying on. The sooner he got himself off it the better he would be. If Baquar should take a fancy to begin his little games before Sneighd could escape, there would be no second chances.

Sneighd struggled with the straps holding him, to no avail. The material was unbreakable. His struggling only served to chafe his wrists raw to bleeding. He cursed under his breath for his stupidity in being caught in the first place and prayed Korbot had learned of his predicament and was on his way. What the portmaster could do to assist was beyond Sneighd. Baquar lived in a fortress. His grounds were surrounded by a unscalable wall with one entrance which was guarded by men and every known weapon Baquar could get his hands on. There was no way in or out Sneighd could think of, but since his only hope lay in the penetration of that fortress by Korbot , or by his somehow freeing himself and managing an escape through that gate, he drove the thought of his mind.

Faifa made his way to the cantina after leaving Sneighd. The Kenza needed a strong stiff drink. Normally not a creature easily shaken, the sight of Sneighd's green eyes burning into his own, had brought unusual feelings of remorse for his part in Sneighd's capture. For the first time in his life, Faifa hated his job and, even more disturbing, himself. Kenza weren't an emotional people. Many of his brother Kenza worked in the same capacity as he since the loss of their home planet. The Kenza scattered throughout the galaxy and lost the unity that held them once as a people. They had become loners, solitary travelers with guns for hire to the highest bidder.

Faifa disliked Baquar. But the Sinnetian paid well. Faifa had done many things during his many years in Baquar's employ that he disapproved of, but that was his job. When Baquar began the campaign against Sneighd Arkon, Faifa had felt an unaccustomed reluctance. In the years since that time, Faifa had discovered the cause of that reluctance. He couldn't share the knowledge with Baquar, didn't dare if he wanted to live. The matter placed a barrier between him and his job.

The Kenza took a deep draught of his drink and thumped the tumbler on the bar. He stiffened when he felt the approach of two humans. He had the deep sense that these two men weren't casual customers coming in for a drink. Each man took a position to

either side of him. Faifa didn't look around but continued to stare straight ahead. He slowly took a drink of his beverage, no longer tasting the bitter flavor.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Dusalt saw the Kenza as soon as he and Deacon entered the dingy cantina. Dusalt knew the reptilian on sight and quickly pointed him out to Deacon. Deacon moved quietly to stand next to Faifa's right side. Dusalt moved to the left of the Kenza.

Deacon and Dusalt retained the same stance as the Kenza, quietly ordering their drinks and sipping them for several long minutes. As soon as deacon felt the tension between the three of them was sufficiently stressed, he softly spoke, his tone flat and even.

"Has Baquar returned to port?" Deacon asked. His gaze was still fixed straight ahead, but he leaned slightly closer to the Kenza to make sure he was heard.

The Kenza seemed to hesitate before he answered. "He did, this morning. Do you have business with him?"

"Yes, I do," Deacon said. He turned so the Kenza could see his face. "My name is Deacon. I want you to tell your boss that. Tell him I want to see him; now."

Deacon saw the Kenza stiffen. Baquar's henchmen obviously recognized Deacon's name.

Faifa turned to face Deacon. “I know who you are. If I told Baquar what you ask, it would unhinge him. If you are wise, you will not make your presence known just yet. Baquar has captured Sneighd Arkon. His plans are not *beneficial* to the man. Sneighd Arkon is in mortal danger. Baquar intends to exact his revenge slowly and painfully. If Baquar becomes aware of you, he might decide to rush what he intends. That will leave no time for rescue and will most certainly end in Sneighd’s death.”

“That’s inevitable isn’t it?” Dusalt asked.

“If Sneighd cannot disentangle himself from Baquar’s clutches, yes,” Faifa said.

“Can he?” Deacon asked.

“Not without assistance,” Faifa said.

“Are you going to ‘assist’ him?” Dusalt asked.

There was a long pause while Faifa considered his answer.

“No.”

“Well, why doesn’t that surprise me,” Dusalt said. “Kenza aren’t known for compassion, or loyalty, not even to their bosses. I bet if someone offered you more than Baquar pays you, you’d dispose of that rodent without a qualm.”

Faifa turned his head sharply to face Dusalt. “Do not presume to know what I will or will not do. I have done plenty and I have been fairly paid for my services. I could dispose of you right now, without a qualm.”

Dusalt laughed. “Maybe. But Deacon would down you before your gun cleared your holster. If you did kill me, you’d be dead before I hit the ground. Survival is imperative to a Kenza. Think hard before you make a foolish decision.”

Deacon slammed his drink onto the bar to garner their attention. “Where are the others that were with Arkon? What did you do with them?”

“The others were not with Arkon when he was captured on Alstar,” Faifa said. “I assume they are still there, or on their way here, if they have reasoned what happened. I do not know. My orders were to take Arkon and only Arkon.”

“You took him captive?” Dusalt asked.

Faifa looked him directly in the eye. “I did. I am the only one who could. Sneighd does not fear me. We have mutual respect for each others’ talents. He knew I could have killed him. I had the advantage. It could have easily been the other way around.”

The statement seemed to relax the Rhadurian a little.

“Where is Arkon?” Deacon asked.

“Inside Baquar’s headquarters,” Faifa said. “There is no way to get in unless you are invited or can pass through walls.”

“You can take us,” Dusalt said.

Faifa shook his head. “I do not intend to return. If you intend to rescue him, you will do so without my assistance. I have not come this far only to commit suicide.”

Dusalt jammed the barrel of his gun in the small of Faifa’s back.

“We could persuade you,” Dusalt said.

“You could kill me,” Faifa said. “But I will not help. I have my own plans to carry out.”

Deacon nodded for Dusalt to put his weapon away.

“Then get out of here,” he told the reptilian. “Get to of here now and don’t come back.”

Faifa gave a short nod and vanished without another a word from the cantina.

Dusalt looked over at Deacon. “What now?”

“We wait,” Deacon said.

“For what?” Dusalt asked.

Deacon shook his head slowly. “I don’t know.” He downed his drink and stalked out of the cantina with Dusalt on his heels.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Haunalyn paced in front of the Marauder. Sneighd hadn't returned. Korbot had gone to look for him and hadn't returned. Impa had vanished sometime in the last hour. Haunalyn didn't know if her nerves could stand the strain if one or all of them didn't turn up soon.

She heard a step on the gravel behind her and whirled around to find Korbot. The Tendrite looked extremely worried.

"No luck?" Haunalyn asked.

Korbot shook his head, his dark eyes clearly showing his worry. Haunalyn hated to tell him about Impa but knew she couldn't possibly postpone it.

"Want some more good news?" she asked.

Korbot looked resolute for anything.

"Impa has vanished," Haunalyn said. "I have no idea when or why she took off, but I'd bet it was to find Sneighd."

Korbot muttered something under his breath, something about if their luck could get any better..."

"I don't know..." Haunalyn began but was interrupted by Impa's shouting at her as the little girl raced to the Marauder.

Korbot caught Impa as she stumbled breathless into him.

“They got him!” Impa gave her news through gulps of air. “I saw them!”

“Them? Who, Impa? Slow down. Breathe.” Korbot held her firmly by her shoulders. “They? Who?”

Impa took several breaths of air before answering.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Some men, or at least one of them was a man. The others looked like snakes and lizards. They ambushed Sneighd in the alley. He tried to get away, but he was outnumbered. They hit him on the head and carried him away---to bay Seven, I think. I couldn’t get close enough to see for sure.”

Korbot straightened at the mention of the Kenza. He knew what it meant. He knew what would happen if Sneighd was taken to Baquar.

“Korbot?” Haunalyn asked. “Do you know who they were?”

He nodded. “Baquar’s men.” He turned to the girls. “You two stay here. I’m going to see if I can stop them. If I’m not back in ten minutes, I want you two to get out of here. No arguments. I mean it.”

Before Haunalyn could protest, Korbot hurried away. She glanced down at Impa, who was staring anxiously after Korbot. Impulsively, Haunalyn placed her arms around the little girl's shoulders and pulled her close to her side. There was nothing they could do but wait.

Korbot ran for bay Seven, praying with every step he would be in time. When he entered the bay, it was empty. He turned to return to the girls and found himself confronted by a squad of uniformed Corporate police blocking the entrance. Korbot started to move past them. A burst of light slammed into him with a force of a small explosion.

Chapter Forty-Nine

Ten minutes had come and gone. Korbot hadn't returned. Haunalyn wanted to remain, to find out what was going on. She sat brooding, an expectant Impa staring at her from the co-pilot's seat. Haunalyn knew where she had to go. There was no choice. With or without Korbot, she laid in the course.

Sinnet was a day and a half's flight. Sneighd would be there. He would need their help, though what she and Impa could do, she had no idea. Sneighd had priority. Korbot would have to wait until Sneighd was located and rescued, if possible, from Baquar's clutches.

Haunalyn straightened her shoulders and turned her eyes forward. She had her orders. She and Impa had to leave. Whatever happened to Korbot could be closing in on them and they would be no use to anyone if they were caught. Reluctantly, Haunalyn guided the Rogue Marauder off Alstar.

Early the following morning, Haunalyn set the Marauder down into the bay where she had first encountered Sneighd and Korbot. The memory of that day made her eyes tear, but she swiped at them. There was too much to do. There was not time to delay.

She locked the ship's console and went into the hold where Impa waited.

"You remember what to do?" Haunalyn asked.

Impa nodded.

"Alright," Haunalyn said. "As soon as I'm gone, you shut this baby up tight. Get forward and keep your eyes peeled for any trouble. When I have Sneighd, we'll be coming back fast. You have to be ready to lift off as soon as we get inside. Think you can handle that?"

"I can handle it," Impa said. "You've only told me a thousand times since we left Alstar."

"I mean getting the ship off the ground," Haunalyn said, exasperated. She knew Impa was as worried as she was, but a little less attitude would be nice.

"Do you think you can find him?" Impa was frowning, her concern and fear showing on her small features.

Haunalyn felt her irritation fade. "I'll find him. I'll find him and bring him back. Don't you worry."

She patted Impa's shoulder, then let the hatch down. She gave Impa a last encouraging smile before trotting out into the Sinnnetian sun.

Chapter Fifty

Hatia was preparing to leave Alstar when she spotted the Lurker near the town center. His appearance could only mean one thing. He knew Sneighd was on planet. She slipped behind her enemy and followed him through the town center but lost him in the early morning market crowds. She snarled under her breath. She returned to her ship, determined to relocate the Lurker, and dispose of him.

Hatia had been following the Lurker across the galaxy for years. He thought he was following her, but he didn't know that she had taken on the persona of the Assassin. He was looking for someone entirely different, a young, frightened girl running from the devastation of her home. The Lurker was hired by the enemies of her people after the invasion of Gaylan. She had escaped the invasion that destroyed her planet and quickly gone into hiding. She emerged from her refuge into a new life, a new identity, and ready to destroy the monster stalking her.

Hatia hurried to her ship, thinking of her conversation with Sneighd the night before. He had been stunned to discover her identity, but she wasn't sure he believed her. He had left her full of anger.

She was just passed the bay on her way to her ship when she saw Korbot rush into bay Seven. Too late to warn him, she saw Corporate Police close in behind him. She ran to the bay, intending to help the Tendrite, but was too far away. She watched helplessly as Korbot was taken away. She couldn't tell if he was alive or not. He was strapped to an anti-grav platform used for carrying cargo.

When the coast was clear, she turned her direction toward where the others must be waiting, if they, too, hadn't been captured. The Rogue Marauder took off as Hatia raced into the bay. She stomped her foot in frustration, then fled to her own ship. She had to catch up with the Rogue Marauder before those aboard found themselves in a situation they couldn't get out of.

Baquar decided the time had come to have a chat with Sneighd. He had let the young man stew about his predicament. The pilot should be ready to cooperate.

Baquar entered the chamber and approached the table. Sneighd turned his head so he wouldn't be looking at Baquar.

"You are going to talk to me, Sneighd," Baquar said pleasantly. "I promise you, before this is over, you will be screaming."

Sneighd kept his head turned. He was not going to give Baquar the satisfaction of his attention. It was a dangerous game. Baquar was the only person who could clear Sneighd's name or possessed the information to exonerate him. Baquar wasn't going to willingly give up that information or speak in Sneighd's behalf. Staying alive was imperative. Staying silent increased chances of Sneighd dying, and not quickly, but he wasn't giving up. There was still a chance, however slim, that he could talk his way out of this mess.

"Perhaps you want persuasion," Baquar said. He moved his hand to the side of the table.

Figuring there must be some type of controls on the table, Sneighd braced himself. He had no idea what was coming, but pain was going to be involved.

Baquar's hands turned. Sneighd felt warmth touch his back from the table. He gritted his teeth. The heat was uncomfortable but not intolerable.

Baquar leaned over him. "Don't make me do it, Sneighd," the Sinnetian said with mock concern. Baquar patted the table. "You see, this little beauty, was purchased from some not so nice people. Perhaps you have heard of the Jaxons?"

Sneighd snapped his head around to stare at Baquar. He had heard of the Jaxons. He remembered what Hatia had told him about the Gaylans. The Jaxons were a warlike people, invaders who had destroyed planets in the far sectors of the galaxy, including Gaylan.

“Ah, I see you have heard of them,” Baquar said. “A nasty race, certainly. You may also have heard of their “peculiarity” shall we say, about what they do to captured prisoners.”

Sneighd began to feel a tight knot form in his stomach. He began to think about the contraption on which he was lying. What came to his mind made him rethink his strategy.

“What do you want, Baquar?” he asked. “Why this?”

Baquar smiled broadly. Sneighd saw the satisfaction on the rodent’s face.

“There. That is much better, Sneighd, my dear.”

Baquar’s hand moved once again. Sneighd felt the surface of the table getting warmer. He flinched and tried to ride out the fire against his back.

“What I want, Sneighd, is whatever you have. I and the Corporation have been chasing you around the galaxy for four

months, always one step behind. That is very annoying, and I know during that time, you must have found something important. Something I would rather you did not possess.”

Sneighd’s voice was tight when he answered. “You’re crazy, Baquar.” He cringed against the heat. “I’ve been running around---trying to find---something, but----” He shook his head, a mistake.

The increasing heat on his body cause his muscles to contract. The contraction of his muscles caused the pounding in his head. He tried to take a deep breath, but that turned out to be impossible.

Baquar was shaking his head. “No, I do not believe you.” He leaned in close to Sneighd’s face. The smell of the Sinnetian’s breath brought bile into Sneighd’s throat.

“You found something,” Baquar said. “You kidnapped and stranded an official on Althea. By the way, that man is dead now. Unfortunately, the Corporation thinks you and Korbot were responsible for that.’

If Sneighd could have gotten his hands around Baquar’s neck, he would have throttled the creature.

“Fuel to the fire?” he asked.

“Ah, irony. Yes, Sneighd. It is necessary for me to fan the flames of suspicion towards you. I really do not think you will escape, but I cannot take that chance. There is a great deal at stake. More than you could possibly guess. I must make certain your tongue is stilled---permanently.”

Sneighd cringed as the table grew hot. He involuntarily gasped. A small cry escaped his lips before he could think to stop it...

The apparent discomfort seemed to please Baquar. “Are you in pain?” he asked. Again, Baquar’s hand moved.

“Why all---this?” Sneighd said through the pain.

The stench of burning flesh flooded his nostrils; his burning flesh.

“Why---not---just kill---me?”

The table became blistering hot beneath Sneighd. Unable to stay quiet any longer, he hissed through his teeth and said, “I’m going to kill you, Baquar.”

Baquar laughed. “I am sure you will,” he mocked.

The heat ceased at once. Sneighd felt blisters forming on the back of his body. He panted, trying to clear his blurry vision.

“Do not cross me again, Sneighd,” Baquar said. “I will allow you to live a little bit longer.” He turned to walk away, paused, then turned back. “By the way, that on which you lie is actually a grill. You see, the Jaxons are cannibals. They cook and eat their prisoners. Some of my men are Jaxon. Some are Ruperians, who, I am sure you know, are also cannibals and they skin their prisoners before cooking them. They use the skin to make their clothing. So, you see, survival is not an option, but you will not know what happens because you will be...” Baquar hesitated, then laughed. “You will be cooked.”

Baquar turned to depart the chamber, satisfied he had broken Sneighd. Sneighd would beg for mercy. He would scream, plead, tell what he knew, then he would die. No one could survive the table.

It suddenly dawned on Baquar that Faifa was missing from the chamber. The Kenza never strayed far from his boss’s side. Baquar attempted to raise him on his communicator. Faifa didn’t answer. Baquar grew uneasy. He communicated to one of his commanders and was told Faifa had gathered his belongings and departed earlier that morning. The stoic Kenza had given no explanation. No one had been foolish enough to ask.

Baquar looked up into the control room to see if Faifa was observing from there. Faifa was not, but someone else was. For a moment, Baquar was startled, then he shouted to his men, pointed to the control room. He and his men raced up the stairs only to find the control empty.

“Get after her,” he ordered.

Baquar’s mood shifted from pleasure to fury. There had been no alarms, nothing to indicate the fortress had been breached. How had the Rhadurian brat managed to get inside? Why had no one stopped her?

One of Baquar’s Enforcers hurried to him from along one corridor.

“How did this happen?” Baquar demanded. “Where are the alarms?”

The Enforcer shook his head. “All security and surveillance to the fortress have been disengaged by an outside signal. We have been attempting to reactivate it when we learned there was an intruder.”

An outside signal? Baquar was confused. That was impossible. Or was it? There was perhaps one person able to disengage the security, surveillance, and sensors if that person boarded his yacht.

There was one person conspicuously absent. The one person he thought he could depend on and trust had betrayed him.

Haunalyn knew what she was about to do was daring and dangerous. She had to bolster her courage and determination to follow through with her fragile plan. There was no one else to help. It was up to her. Her only concern, besides infiltrating Baquar's fortress, was that she might be too late. She shook away the thought. She had to stay positive, believe that she would find Sneighd alive and get him to safety.

Her first obstacle was the wall and the gate. She had planned well. She moved along the high path to where she had discovered a weak point. Baquar had built the impenetrable wall on the three sides. The wall was constructed of the same material as the wall surrounding the Capital City building.

The flank of Baquar's fortress was an obsidian cliff. The surface of the cliff had been worn smooth by erosion over centuries of natural wind and monsoon rain during Sinnet's brief but severe rainy period every year. To scale the black obsidian obstacle was an exercise in futility. Any surveillance inside the fortress would spot an interloper who would probably be obliterated before he hit the ground. Unfortunately, Haunalyn

had no other options. Trying to blow through the walls would be dangerous as well as loud, alerting Baquar and his men at once. Aside from that, she didn't have the tools to accomplish that suicidal plan anyway.

She could, Haunalyn thought, disguise herself as one of Baquar's men and attempt to slip through the gate. She had seriously considered doing so. The problem was, if she happened to be discovered, she would end up a prisoner, or worse, leaving only Impa behind to figure out some way to formulate a rescue. Haunalyn could not take that chance.

Eyeing the cliff from her vantage point, she traced what had to be the way to the top. She ran through the city and turned up an overgrown scrub and rocky path which she estimated wound to the summit of the cliff. She avoided the edge where she might be spotted from the ground, dropped to the ground, and crept forward on her stomach to peer over the cliff. She saw no sign of a patrol on this shielded side. Either surveillance set to capture any intruders or Baquar thought he was secure with the unscalable cliff to his back.

Rhaduri was a planet of high rock formations and mountainous areas where Haunalyn had spent much of her childhood learning to climb. It was an activity that she and Deacon did together. This would be no different, she told herself. She attached the pilons and

ropes she always carried with her onboard the Rogue Marauder to the cliff, then waited.

Dusk would be the best time to execute her plan. She would have to rappel the rope without light. If she didn't fall and break her neck, no one should be alerted. When she was convinced it was dark enough, she slipped over the cliff and rappelled to the sandy ground below.

She ducked into the shadows to see if anyone would come. She had the strange sensation of being watched as she slipped toward the main building, but no one intercepted her. It was necessary to cross a span of open ground. She kept to shadows as much as possible, seeing no guards or Enforcers. The inner compound was eerily silent. She scanned the grounds and the buildings for surveillance monitors. If there were any, they were placed where they couldn't be seen.

She prayed she hadn't been seen or tracked as she crossed to the main building. She encountered one set of blast doors when she reached the back of the building. The doors hissed open when she approached. She froze and listened. No alarm sounded. No Enforcers waited to grab her as she ducked inside the dark corridor she surmised led into the interior beyond. She pressed her body against a wall to catch her breath and let the cooling system within

the walls drive the heat from her body. The lack of security made her uneasy. This wasn't what she expected. She could be walking straight into a trap. Baquar and his men could be tracking her as she eased through the dark corridor to a light probably inside the main area of the building. Her only weapon was her blazer. It would be useless against armed guards.

Haunalyn kept telling herself to stop thinking of all the things that seemed wrong and concentrate on the fact she hadn't confronted any barriers. She told herself this all seemed too easy, but she had to keep going. She had to find Sneighd.

She crept into the bowels of the fortress. Blast doors lined the walls along the brightly lit interior corridors that teed across her temporary shadowed sanctuary. Sneighd could be anywhere in the confines of the building, which she began to think might be a maze of corridors. If she lost her way, she would never escape the rat's warren.

Footsteps echoed somewhere to the right of where she stood. She crouched and held her breath. The footsteps seemed to be moving away from her, probably along another corridor. She hurried to a junction and peered around the wall. A lone person was just disappearing around another corner.

Haunalyn looked to her left. She hoped the person kept going in the direction he was going. She turned to the left.

Her confidence began to slip. She had to admit she was terrified. Despite all her bravado, she was not used to sneaking through a dangerous fortress, alone or otherwise. She had spent her life on her precious Marauder, carrying ship parts from her father's port to other outreach smaller ports. She thought herself independent, tough. She mentally kicked herself. She was learning the real meaning of tough. She would seriously reconsider her entire outlook, if she got out of the situation she was in, alive and in one piece.

She reached doors that were labeled as a control room. She hesitated and considered what kind of a control room it might be. The sign would read surveillance or security if that were what lay beyond the doors. Or would it? There was only one way to find out. She touched the doors. To her surprise, they slid silently open into a room with transparent walls on three sides. The interior of the room was empty, to her relief, and filled with control consoles, computers, and other contraptions. A red light flashed above a far door through which she could see a metal staircase that led to a hanger-size, brightly lit chamber bare of anything except a strange long surgical looking table. Haunalyn's gut wrenched when she saw that table contained the writhing form of Sneighd.

Haunalyn, unable to move, watched stunned in horror as what looked like steam or smoke rose from the table. Baquar bent over Sneighd's body, talking, and laughing. The sight made Haunalyn sick, and angry. She closed her hand over the butt of her blazer. She knew the weapon wouldn't be enough and felt helpless as to what she should do. Tears of fury and frustration lined her eyes. Before she could decide her next move, Baquar cast a look over his shoulder to the control room. She stood in full view.

Baquar shouted something and pointed at her. She saw his men emerge from the shadows of the chamber where they had been hidden. Their appearance jarred her into action. They ran for the control booth with Baquar not far behind.

Haunalyn sprinted into the corridor and down to the nearest junction. The corridor from there led to a dead end. She heard the running footsteps and shouting of Baquar's men and knew she was trapped. If she tried to run from the dead end, she would run directly into them.

To her back was a door. She leaned toward it and it slid open. She dove inside what turned out to be a supply storage bay filled with stacked crates and containers. She crammed her body behind one of the largest containers in the back and held her breath, hoping Baquar would think she had sense to go another direction.

She pulled her blazer from her holster and crouched, ready to shoot the first being that showed his face. She accidentally bumped against the container. It tottered for a moment and scraped against another container. She prayed the sound hadn't carried.

There was silence in the hall, and then the doors to the storage room slid open. The light from the corridor didn't reach her hiding place. She forced herself to remain completely still as footsteps slowly traversed the lanes between the stacks of containers. They would find her hiding place. She would shoot when they did.

A foot scraped the floor close to where she crouched. A second later, the ugly face of Baquar Starka sneered maliciously at her.

"So, my pretty terror, at last we come face-to-face." Baquar smiled as he confronted Haunalyn. "You are that little Rhadurian menace I have heard so much about. Come now, I won't harm you." He held out his flabby hand. "You took Sneighd from me. I am not angry. In fact, I have use for you."

Haunalyn back as far away from his reach as she could, her dark eyes fixed on his face.

"It is useless to resist," Baquar said. "You have cornered yourself, my little kitten. Come out."

The Sinnetian's voice made Haunalyn's blood run cold. She was no fool; nor was she a child. Baquar seemed not to know this.

"Beware the cornered cat," she warned, bringing her weapon up. "It bites." She fired.

Baquar barely eluded the shot as Haunalyn slammed into him and knocked him off balance. She used the diversion to plunge through the startled guards before they comprehended what happened. She raced down the corridor and slid around the corner, almost losing her balance as she ran. Behind her, she heard Baquar bellowing for his men to stop her. She sprinted through a set of blast doors and skidded to a stop. Noting the controls to the door on the wall, she hit the release. When the door slid shut, she fired into the controls. She hoped that would hold Baquar for a few minutes.

Chapter Fifty

Deacon tapped his fingers against the command console of his ship. He considered how he and Deacon were going to approach Baquar's fortress if they should attempt it. It would be dangerous. He and Deacon didn't know the pilot Sneighd Arkon, if the young man was worth taking the risk. The problem was that Haunalyn did know Arkon. If the two had become friends and he allowed Arkon to die, Haunalyn would never forgive him.

He slammed his fist onto the console in frustration, accidentally hitting the transmit button. He reached to turn it off. His hand was halted when he heard a transmission from a Police Cruiser. He listened and swore.

The transmission ended. Deacon sat back with an angry sigh. The news was bad. He called into the ship for Dusalt, who came running.

"It's Korbot," Deacon said. "The Police have him."

Dusalt gasped. "Oh no." He sank into the co-pilot's seat. "The girls?"

Deacon shook his head. "There was no mention," he said. "We've got to find him. The girls had to be with him. There's nothing more we can do here."

He fired the engines and lifted from the bay. Things were getting worse and worse. He could only pray Haunalyn had escaped and had the sense to go directly to Rhaduri and safety. Knowing his daughter, he doubted the possibility slim at best.

Haunalyn scanned the corridor for an escape. She saw another set of blast doors set into one of the walls and ran to them. The doors opened at her approach. Two guards were surprised by her appearance. She blasted them with her blazer before they comprehended, she was an intruder. Behind her the blast door closed. She discovered she had run into the control room she had been in earlier. She rushed over to the controls on the consoles and flipped all the switches. The doors that were set in the wall, slid open. A set of metal steps descended into the bay.

Haunalyn ran down the steps, her boots slipping on the slick floor. She kept her balance and hurried to the table where Sneighd was still firmly strapped. He offered her a weak smile.

“What took you so long?” he asked. His words rasped and his eyes showed he was in pain.

Haunalyn, worked loose the straps holding him and said, “Shut up, idiot.”

She freed him and helped him sit up. “Feel like a quick jog?” she asked.

Sneighd blinked and he shook his head. “I’ll try anything,” he said.

Haunalyn folded his arm around her shoulder and helped him to his feet. His legs promptly buckled. He grabbed the table to avoid a fall.

“How about making the room stop spinning,” he said. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Don’t you dare,” Haunalyn said. She put her arm around his waist, then jerked it away when he screamed in pain. Her arm was covered in blood. Sneighd’s entire backside, from his shoulders to his feet, were soaked in sweat and blood. Haunalyn had to swallow several times to avoid throwing up herself.

Sneighd clung to the table. “I can’t,” he said.

Haunalyn steeled herself as she grabbed the front of his shirt. “You can and you will,” she said. “I’m all you’ve got, so if you want out of this mess, you have to come with me.”

Sneighd shook his head, crying and laughing at the same time. “I can’t, Hauna. I really can’t!”

Haunalyn held on to his shirt. She didn't want to even imagine what he was feeling. His injuries were bad. She realized the torture Baquar had implemented. She saw bits of blackened cloth and flesh stuck to the surface of the table. She had felt the raw blisters across his shoulders, but she couldn't, wouldn't leave him.

“Look, Sneighd, I can't carry you. Korbot's not here. Baquar will be showing his ugly face any time now. I am not leaving without you. We can't fight. We're outnumbered, so stop sniveling and get to your feet.”

“Sniveling?” Sneighd pulled himself upright. “Sniveling. Okay brat, let's go.”

He staggered a few steps. Haunalyn moved to help but he shoved her aside.

“No. I can do this. I don't need your help. Just, get us out of here.”

Haunalyn shook her head. “Fine,” she said, rolling her eyes. “But if you fall, I will drag you by your shirt collar until we're out of here. I don't care how much it hurts you. If I return to the Marauder without you, Impa will kill me.”

Chapter Fifty-One

Haunalyn led the way up the corridor to the closest exit. She turned to make certain Sneighd was still with her. He indicated that he could make it further. She admired his courage.

She checked to see if the way was clear ahead then moved cautiously from the building into the fading sunlight. No guards. That didn't make sense. Surely Baquar would have sounded the alarm. He had to be right behind them. She would need to be doubly alert.

She waved Sneighd forward. She caught him as he stumbled.

“Let me help,” she said.

She saw the pain and resolution in his face. He nodded. She draped his arm around her shoulders. She knew the pressure had to hurt him. She moved the brief span of open to the front gate. There was no reason for stealth. Her presence was known, and she was sure Sneighd's escape was known as well. To her surprise, there were no guards at the gate. This was entirely too easy.

“The gate? Really?” Sneighd asked.

“There's no one here,” Haunalyn said. “This is suspicious.”

“Only one way to find out if the way is clear,” Sneighd said.

Haunalyn touched the controls on the wall. The gate didn't open.

"I knew this was too easy," she muttered. "Baquar must have managed to engage the locks. But where are the guards? I know there are guards and Enforcers in the building. I saw them. I don't understand this at all."

She looked around for some way through or over the gate. There was a gap between the wall and the top of the gate. A person could easily slip through if that person could reach the gap.

"Do you think you can reach the top of the gate?" she asked.

"What?" Sneighd looked at her like she had lost her mind.

"If I give you a hand up, can you reach it?" she asked. "Make up your mind before someone shows up."

"You realize there are probably Enforcers waiting on the other side," Sneighd said.

"We'll never be certain if we stand here," Haunalyn said.

"What we will know for certain is we're dead if Baquar shows up. I don't understand why he has no one guarding the gates. For that matter, getting in here was easier than I thought it would be. Where are the guards?"

“They’re not here,” Sneighd said. “I think that’s all that matters. Give me a hand up. If anyone is waiting on the other side, it won’t matter.”

Haunalyn cupped her hands and lifted Sneighd. He scrambled to the top of the gate. There were no shots, no shouts. He looked down at her and shrugged, then nearly lost his balance. He steadied himself and reached to help her climb up beside him.

There were no guards, Haunalyn noticed. The outside grounds were as empty as the compound had been. Sneighd caught her by the hands and lowered her to the ground. He lowered himself after her, missed his footing and landed on his knees. Panting from the exertion, he took a moment to rest.

Haunalyn scanned the grounds. In the distance she could see the streets of the city. No one was running to the fortress. No one appeared to notice what was happening at the gate.

Sneighd pulled himself to his feet. His face was chalk white. He trembled as if he was freezing. Haunalyn was worried about him. Taking his hand, she helped him walk. She led him as quickly as she dared through the alleys to the bay areas. Again, she was astonished that they were not accosted. No one waited for them at the port. No one tried to impede their escape.

They were both exhausted by the time they reached the Marauder. Impa paced at the top of the ramp, running to give them a hand as soon as she saw them. Once the two were inside and the hatch was up, Impa raced to the cockpit and slid into the pilot seat. Her take off was a little unsteady, her small hands not able to quite make the reach between the controls. The Rogue Marauder shot out of the bay, through the planet's surface and into space.

Haunalyn helped Sneighd to the acceleration couch. He eased onto his stomach. She carefully cut away his shirt. He needed medical attention. She dared not attempt doctoring him herself. She had no way of knowing just how bad he was injured. His exposed skin was one big blister. There were a few areas of blackened skin. Infection was the biggest danger.

She placed a soaking wet blanket over him and gave him a pain killer from the med-kit. She felt the Marauder kick into Mark Drive and heard Impa approach behind her.

“Is it really bad?” Impa asked.

“I wish I knew,” Haunalyn said. “His skin is burned, some of it black. I know that's dangerous. We've got to get him to a Med-Center. We'll go to Rhaduri.”

“No,” Impa said. “Remember what Korbot said?”

“We’re going. That’s final,” Haunalyn, turning to face the child.

“But you’ll put your father in jeopardy,” Impa said. “Val Port is closer.”

“Val Port is little more than a pill and bandage shop. It barely supports the few inhabitants it has,” Haunalyn said. “He needs help, good help, now.”

Impa’s face crumpled into a childish pout.

“Don’t argue with me,” Haunalyn said, softening her tone. “Something strange happened on Sinnet. I don’t understand it and I don’t like it. No one tried to stop us, except briefly when Baquar caught me sneaking around. Even so, he didn’t try that hard to stop us.”

“Or something stopped him,” Impa said.

Haunalyn was on alert. “What do you mean?”

“While you were busy rescuing Sneighd, I monitored the activity. There was a transmission I couldn’t track, but as soon as it went out, every person inside and outside the fortress disappeared.”

“Who sent out the transmission?” Haunalyn asked.

Impa shrugged. “I don’t know. I couldn’t understand the language. I just caught the translation on the translator. Whoever it was told everyone to clear the way and let you leave.”

“Did it come from inside the compound?” Haunalyn asked.

“No. It was outside. Whoever it was helped you escape.”

Haunalyn was perplexed. Who had helped them? And why?

”

“

Chapter Fifty-Two

The journey to Rhaduri Port was one of the longest Haunalyn had taken. She and Impa did their best to keep Sneighd comfortable. They carefully removed all his ruined clothing. Impa ran to the lavatory where Haunalyn heard her being ill. Haunalyn had to swallow hard to keep the bile in her own stomach down at the sight of the destroyed flesh, in some places so raw muscle tissue was exposed. She covered Sneighd with a shock blanket and gave him enough of Korbot's whiskey to keep him feeling no pain until they reached their destination.

Much to Haunalyn's relief, Sneighd slept, lightly at first, but the more whiskey he got in him, the quieter he became.

Despite all the care, Sneighd's wounds grew worse. The blisters ruptured. The raw skin scabbed over then broke, seeping fluid and blood. The Rogue Marauder's med-kit wasn't equipped for these types of burns. Freighters and transports would have had the necessary medical facilities, but the Marauder was a small ship made for short runs.

Haunalyn felt immense relief when she set the little ship down in her personal bay in Rhaduri Port. Through the orbiter windshield she saw assistant port supervisor Frank Peregrine watching the landing with what looked to be astonishment.

Haunalyn rammed the hatch release and met Frank at the end of the ramp.

“Stop staring at me like you’ve seen a ghost,” she said. “We need help.”

“Uh---Haun---Haunalyn, where the devil have you been?” Frank stammered.

“There’s no time for that,” she said. “I need a med-team here and I need them now.”

Frank gave her body a once over. “You don’t look hurt,” he said.

“It’s not me,” she said. She was becoming angry that he was not doing what she needed him to do. “Will you please send for a med-team. They’ll need an anti-grav.”

Frank appeared to come out of his surprise and grabbed his com-link. He firmly ordered the med-team, then returned his attention to Haunalyn.

“Lyn, you do realize you’ve been missing for four months. To be honest, after hearing about all the trouble you had gotten yourself into on Sinnet, none of the dock crew really expected to

see you or the Rogue Marauder again. I'm glad you're alright, but, what in the name of the galaxy did you get yourself involved in?"

Haunalyn saw the med-team approaching and pushed past Frank to meet them.

"Inside," she told the med-tech. "Severe burns. He needs help now."

The med-techs boarded the Marauder quickly with Haunalyn and Frank close on their heels. As the MT's leaned over their patient to assess the injuries, Haunalyn noticed Impa watching from her shelf perch. Haunalyn cocked her head slightly for Impa to join her. Impa slid from the shelf and went to Haunalyn's side, the little girl's dark eyes taking in every move the MT's made.

"Hauna, who...?" Frank said, his eyes on the little girl.

"Not now, Frank," Haunalyn said. She and Impa followed the MT's and the anti-grav from the ship. Sneighd hadn't awakened. Haunalyn didn't know if that was a good or bad thing.

When Sneighd was loaded into the transport that would take him to the Med-Center, Haunalyn breathed easier. Without being aware of what she was doing, she placed a protective arm around Impa's shoulders and drew the little girl close. Impa didn't resist.

She leaned into the older girl's side as they watched the transport head into the port city.

Frank was confused. It was no secret he had feelings for Haunalyn. She had never encouraged him. She often rebuffed his attentions, but he couldn't help being infatuated with the independent, fearless, daughter of the Portmaster. Frank had worried from the moment he heard Haunalyn was in trouble that she wouldn't be able to get out of the hole she seemed to have fallen in. He knew Haunalyn sometimes went to Sinnet against her father's strict orders. Frank had tried to tell her how dangerous Sinnet could be.

She never listened to him. She never listened to Deacon. Frank felt he was partially responsible for what happened. He knew but hadn't told Deacon. That was his mistake. The worst had happened, as he feared one day it would. He would have to confess his deceit to Deacon when the Portmaster returned to Rhaduri.

Haunalyn poked Frank's shoulder hard. "Where's dad?"

Frank faced her and reluctantly answered her. "He and Dusalt left some time ago to find you."

Haunalyn stared at him, her mouth open, her eyes wide.

“What?”

“You heard me right,” Frank said. “When Deacon received news of what happened, he immediately left Rhaduri to track you down. He was upset, angry---you really messed up.”

Haunalyn sagged against her ship. Impa grabbed her hand and held it tight.

“How? When?” Haunalyn asked.

“How else,” Frank said. “He flew. He has kept his ship in good repair. He just never went out in it. You know why. But it only makes sense that as soon as he heard you were in trouble, he would go. You’re his daughter.”

Haunalyn straightened and struck Frank hard in the pectoral.

“Hey!” He caught her fist. “What was that for?”

Her face was beginning to crumple. He saw the tears line her eyes. She pulled away from him and dashed the tears away.

“I’m not mad at you,” she said. “It’s just---dad has returned to space, because of me. If anything happens to him, it will be my fault. I can’t deal with that right now.”

Impa had stepped away from Haunalyn but glared at Frank. He noticed and eased to one side. He didn't know who the little girl was or what part she had in all of this, but by her expression, he feared she might kick.

“Take us to the Med-Center, Frank,” Haunalyn ordered. “We have other things to deal with now. Dad can take care of himself. If Dusalt is with him, he'll be alright.”

Frank wasn't certain Haunalyn believed what she was saying. He wasn't going to argue. He led the way to his personal transport, and they headed into the port city and the Med-Center.

Chapter Fifty-Three

Baquar and his men pursued the girl helping Sneighd Arkon escape when the set of blast doors in front of them slammed shut. Baquar immediately shouted for his men to go back the way they came. They would take another corridor and cut the fugitives off. To late, Baquar discovered the blast doors behind them had slammed shut as well, effectively trapping he and his men in the corridor.

Baquar ran to the com-link in the wall only to find it had been destroyed. He yanked his com-link from his jacket and shouted for help. There was no response.

“Open the doors in corridor B,” he shouted again. He waited. The com-link crackled, but he could hear no one speaking. He whirled to his waiting men. “Get that blasted door open!” he ordered.

“How?” One of his men stepped forward. “We can’t pry it open and if we try to shoot through it there’s danger of ricochet.”

Baquar grabbed the man by his tunic front. “I do not care how you do it. But get that door open. If you do not, we will all suffocate. When these doors close, the air system in the area

between them shuts down. Easier to capture prey that is unconscious. Do you understand?”

The hapless man nodded without a word and was released from Baquar’s grip.

“How long do we have?” This question came from several men.

“I do not know,” Baquar said. “The system is set to capture outsiders, not us.” He slammed his fist onto the broken wall com.

Outside the doors in front of where he stood, he heard pounding.

“Be quiet,” he ordered the men in the corridor. “Listen.”

The pounding outside the doors continued, then a hum. The middle of the doors began to glow red. Fragments of the door shot out as a large hole appeared in the middle. The hole enlarged to man-size and fresh air flooded the corridor.

Baquar shoved his way through the opening. “Well? Report.”

His man Toobott answered. “We saw what happened on the monitors. We came right away.”

“Arkon and the girl?” Baquar asked.

“They escaped,” Toobott said. “We couldn’t pursue. All the entrances were sealed.”

“What?” Baquar didn’t want to hear that. “How?”

Toobott shrugged his shoulders. “They had to have had outside help. All the buildings in the compound were sealed until a few minutes ago. No one could get out.”

Baquar was furious. Toobott was right in his assumption. Sneighd and his companion had to have had outside help to affect an escape unhindered. There was only one person who had been absent throughout the entire incident.

Baquar strode angrily toward his office. He didn’t want to believe it, but there was no other explanation, unless... He hesitated. Could the girl have enlisted the help of Korbot’s men? Could they manage to infiltrate his security systems? He shook his head. No. Not without help, help that had to come from only one person. The betrayal surged through him. He had no idea why. He no longer cared. He punched the com-link on his desk which came to life. The power seemed to have been restored.

“Sir?” The voice on the other end was clear.

“Find Faifa,” Baquar said. “Bring him to me.”

Chapter Fifty-Four

Haunalyn and Impa anxiously waited outside the examination booth inside the Med Center. The Center's head physician, a Med Bot named MCMB2 carefully examined Sneighd. MB2, programed by Deacon to human medical specifications, shook his head every so often as he cleaned and treated the burns.

Deacon didn't like Med Bots and preferred human doctors. Rhaduri was a small planet. The Galactic Corporate Medical Association considered it more prudent that small planets such as Rhaduri employ Med Bots and saved the living breathing physicians take care of more important patients on Gravette.

MB2 stood a little under six feet, was bipedal, with a titanium skeleton human in appearance. The skeleton was held together with strong synthetic muscles and tendons and overlaid with thick synthaflesh. Deacon had re-programmed MB2 with human expressions and speech inflection, made his body move smoothly and naturally, and to speak from a wide mouth with natural tones. MB2s round bright green eyes could brighten or dim with programmed emotions.

"Whatever happened to this young man was merciless and savage," MB2's voice came through the com-link near Haunalyn. "Fortunately for this young man, his exposure was not prolonged.

Had it been, I would be performing an autopsy not putting back together a living body. The injuries will heal. I have irrigated them completely and this salve I have used will heal the burn overnight.”

MB2 placed synthaflesh over the injuries to prevent infection.

“This will fuse with his skin and there will be no scarring.” He completed his task then turned to Haunalyn visible through the plexiglass. “My main concern is for the mental condition of my patient. At the moment, he is too inebriated, he has no idea what is happening. Anesthesia was only minimal, and I certainly do not approve of your method. However, I am glad this young man was unable to feel the pain of these burns.”

He motioned for Haunalyn and Impa to enter. The girls hurried to Sneighd’s side.

MB2 gave them the closest thing to a smile with which he had been programmed. “He will be fine. He will sleep for now. We will give the medication and synthaflesh time to work. When he wakes, he will probably only have a headache from the hangover he is sure to have.”

Haunalyn laughed.

“Sorry,” she said. “I didn’t have anything else.”

MB2 patted her shoulder. “You did fine with what you had.

Haunalyn frowned, remembering her and Sneighd’s escape which had been too easy, and extremely painful for Sneighd. She wondered if they had been followed to Rhaduri. She hadn’t been informed of any other ships landing in the port. That didn’t mean none had.

“I hated to have to move Sneighd,” Haunalyn said. “He was in a bad way, but I didn’t dare leave him to try for help. There wasn’t any. When I felt the blisters breaking, I knew infection was a major concern. My only thought was to get him to safety and help as fast as I could.”

“You did well,” MB2 said again. “And he is safe.”

“I better tell you,” Haunalyn said. “Sneighd has something wrong with him, aside from the burns. He has weird headaches and spells that make him really sick.”

“He takes a pink pill,” Impa chimed in. “We don’t know what it is, or what it’s for. Only Korbot knew, I think. With all he’s been through, it’s a given Sneighd will need those pills.”

MB2 nodded his understanding. “I will run tests. We will find what he needs.”

Sneighd regained consciousness lying on his stomach on a bed. He realized he was in a Med-Center, where, he had no idea. The air in the room where he lay was cool and felt good against his exposed skin. There was no pain from the burns that he could feel, but there was a growing ache in his head. His mouth was dry and sour. He wondered what Haunalyn had given him.

He tried to roll over and push himself into a sitting position. He quickly discovered, that was a mistake. Pain shot through his skull, nearly putting him out again. He waited for his eyes to clear, then scanned the room for his clothes and jacket. With a moan, he remembered Baquar had taken it. His medication was in the jacket pocket, which meant he would have to suffer until he could acquire more pills. He would worry about that later. His main concern now was to get himself on his feet and out of the Med-Center, wherever it was.

Haunalyn would be the one who brought him. He knew she and Impa must be close by. It dawned on him, that since it was Haunalyn who rescued him, she had headed for the nearest planet that had a Med-Center where she would feel safe. That would mean they were on Rhaduri.

Haunalyn's words came to him. "Korbot is not here." Sneighd struggled upright. He held his head until the room stopped swaying.

If Korbot wasn't "there", where was he? Sneighd could imagine all manner of horrible possibilities as to what that meant.

Clinging to the bed for support, Sneighd managed to shove himself to his feet. Haunalyn and MB2 came in at the same time. They rushed to him before he collapsed.

"What do you think you're doing?" Haunalyn asked.

Sneighd grinned at her. She looked human again after a good bath and fresh change of clothes. He didn't want to imagine what he looked like.

"Korbot," he said. "Where's Korbot? You said he wasn't with you. Why? Where is he?"

Haunalyn studied her feet for a minute before looking him in the eye.

"We don't know," she said. "Impa saw your capture. She let us know and Korbot went to help you. He instructed us to leave if he didn't return in ten minutes. I waited a little longer, but he didn't come back. We had to leave. We had to help you."

Sneighd blew his hair out of his face. This was not good news. Korbot hadn't returned. That could only mean something happened to him. Baquar would have bragged if he had captured Korbot. He would have tortured the portmaster and made Sneighd watch. That left only the Corporation Police, or the Lurker. Somehow Sneighd didn't see the Lurker bothering with a Tendrite whose only crime was association with Sneighd.

"I have to find him," Sneighd said. His balance was returning. He straightened and let go of the bed.

"Sneighd, you aren't going anywhere," Haunalyn said. "You can't even stand up."

"I am standing," Sneighd said. His legs trembled, but he forced them to hold him upright.

"She's right, young man," MB2 said. "You were severely injured when Haunalyn brought you to me three days ago. You may think you are strong, but you're in no condition to leave the Med-Center, let alone on a ship."

Sneighd took a deep breath. He pretended the effort to stand was nothing at all. He failed. He wrapped his fingers around the bed to steady himself.

“We haven’t the tie to wait around until I’m fit,” he said. “The big man’s life is in danger. Of that I have no doubt. He’s in trouble and I’m responsible. He put his life at risk for me. I can’t do less. My life if worthless. It wasn’t his responsibility to take that on. I’m leaving, without or without your release.”

He worked his fingers from the bed and straightened his shoulder.

“Haunalyn and Impa will stay here. They’ll be safe here.”

Haunalyn put her hands on her hips and glared at him. “Excuse me? I don’t think that’s for you to decide, mister. You don’t have a ship. I do. And I can make sure no one gives you a ride out of here.”

“Haunalyn...” Sneighd started to argue.

She stepped close to him and poked her finger in his chest.

“Don’t---you---dare!”

“Alright.” Sneighd relented. He knew the girls would come whether he wanted them to or not. Even if he managed to find a hop off Rhaduri, Haunalyn would follow.

“What about your father?” he asked. “What does he think?”

Haunalyn stepped back. “I don’t know. He’s not here. He’s out there looking for us.”

That wasn’t something Sneighd wanted to hear. He hoped to talk the Rhaduri portmaster into making his daughter stay. The mess just kept getting bigger and bigger.

“I need clothes,” he said. “I need a weapon.”

MB2 tried to argue. Sneighd shook his head. “My mind is made up. We don’t have time to argue back and forth. Korbot is in trouble. He needs help. I’ll go.”

He turned to Haunalyn. “This is against my better judgment. If you are coming, we need to go, now.” He turned to MB2 and spoke with a bravado he didn’t really feel. “Don’t worry, Doc. I’ve been through worse. I’m still alive. I’ll be okay.”

“You are a fool, young man,” MB2 said. “You are not invincible. Your last ordeal should have driven that home. Either you are too stupid to know, or one of the bravest men I have ever encountered. Not many are willing to risk their lives for another they barely know.”

Chapter Fifty-Five

The first matter-at-hand, as far as Sneighd was concerned, was to retrieve the records Baquar had bragged owning. Without them, there would be no saving himself or Korbot. Sneighd had a good idea Korbot's mysterious disappearance was due to the Police. Nothing else made sense. No one else would dare take the big man prisoner. It wasn't because of Korbot's station or his stature. Korbot was a Tendrite. He may not have lived with his people, but the Tendrite clan ties were eternal and unbreakable. As the Rogue Marauder left Rhaduri's atmosphere, Sneighd sent an alert to the nearest Tendrite ship.

"You want to go where?" Haunalyn stared at Sneighd as if he had lost his mind. "Are you insane? Have you forgotten what just happened to you?"

"Stop yelling." Impa spoke in irritation. "Why do you have to yell all the time?"

"Shut up," Haunalyn said.

"You shut up," Impa retaliated.

“Both of you shut up.” Sneighd was exasperated. “I told you why. You know as well as I do, without those records, I can’t clear my name, or save Korbot. If Korbot is a prisoner of the Police...” He paused and took a breath. “If he is still alive, we can use the records as leverage to free Korbot.”

“And put an end to Baquar,” Impa said.

“This isn’t a house of cards,” Haunalyn said. “You’ve no solid standing. We get within reach of the Police and we’ll not have a chance to use anything to free any of us. That’s if Baquar doesn’t kill us first.”

“Do you have a better plan?” Sneighd asked. “Without those records, we have nothing. It’s a long shot, but it’s all we have.”

“What about father?” Haunalyn asked. “He’s out there. We can find him, and he can help.”

“And time will be wasted,” Impa said.

“What about our friends in the black ships?” Haunalyn asked. “They’re still out there, too. And they’re still looking for us. They won’t care if we have records or not. They won’t care about Korbot. This is madness.”

Sneighd was growing irritated. Haunalyn had good points. Any way the Rogue Marauder went, there was danger.

“Yeah, madness,” he said. “This whole mess is madness. Baquar instigated it. Why? He put me in this position. Why? Because Baquar wanted me to pay for the freight he lost to a welcher? That wasn’t my fault. Who was the murdered man? Why was he killed? Why did Baquar stick me with the murder?” He slammed his fist onto the console. Nothing made sense and he was tired.

Haunalyn grabbed his hand, pried his fingers open, and dropped a small pink pill into his palm. “Take it,” she said. “I need you on your feet and lucid. MB2 ran tests while you were out. He knows what your problem is. He gave me these to keep for you and to make sure you took one every day.”

Sneighd grew quiet. “What did he tell you?”

“Nothing,” she said. “He said the tests results were confidential, but you needed the medication and to make sure you took it.”

Sneighd leaned back against his seat and rubbed his neck. He didn’t know if he was relieved or upset. It didn’t matter. His problems weren’t important.

“First things first,” he said. “We decide if we follow my plan or waste time arguing.”

Haunalyn’s brown eyes flared fire at him.

“Let’s go,” Impa said. “We can do this.”

Sneighd and Impa waited in silence until Haunalyn made up her mind.

“Alright,” Haunalyn said. “We’ll play this your way. You better hope we don’t get caught. Baquar will kill you without wasting time on torture. Impa and I might not be so lucky.”

She plotted the course for Sinnet.

Chapter Fifty-Six

Baquar paced his office, furious at Sneighd Arkon's escape, and at the hands of a child no less. How the girl could have infiltrated the fortress when grown men could not was beyond his comprehension. He knew she had help. She had to have had help. There was no other explanation.

The only solace Baquar had was the possibility that Sneighd had not survived. The table had been effective. Sneighd's skin was cooked. The blisters were raw and oozing. The percentage for infection was high. The girl would have to practically carry him. The problem with that scenario was that Sneighd Arkon had a way of surviving despite the odds against him. There always seemed to be someone to help him when he was most in need. Sneighd's entire life, as far as Baquar knew it, was uncanny.

Baquar stopped in front of the window of his office and stared out into the fortress grounds. He knew who had helped the girl. There was no other explanation. What he didn't know was why. The Rhadurian brat could not afford the price for that kind of assistance.

Faifa's desertion preyed on Baquar. It was unexpected. It made no sense. Baquar knew Faifa and Sneighd Arkon held some type of truce between them. Baquar had always thought it was

tolerance of each other more than anything. If they stayed out of each other's way, there was no problem.

Baquar began pacing again. The memory of Faifa's warning in the beginning, of it not being wise to go after Sneighd, against hiring the Assassin---and what was that about?

Faifa was a strange creature. Baquar associated with only a few of their race. Faifa was one of a handful in his employ. The Kenza did tend to separate themselves from other species. Were they all like Faifa?

Baquar went to his desk and summoned the Kenza Barka to his office. Barka and Faifa had been at odds more than once. Perhaps Barka might know more about the incident.

The Kenza arrived a few minutes later.

“What can you tell me about the escape?” Baquar asked without preamble.

Barka cocked his reptilian head as if confused, then his eyes lit with comprehension.

“Ah, you mean Arkon. I know little, other than a girl child managed to infiltrate the compound.”

“She had to have had help,” Baquar snapped. “Where is Faifa?”

Barka suddenly seemed intensely interested. His lipless mouth pulled at the corners in what Baquar assumed must be a smile.

“Faifa?” Barka asked. “You think Faifa...”

“I do not know what to think,” Baquar said. “But Faifa has been missing for some time. Where is he?”

Barka shook his head. “I do not know. No one does. We have noticed his absence. We assumed you had sent him somewhere. I am surprised that is not so.”

Baquar watched the Kenza closely. He detected what to him sounded like glee in Barka’s voice. “You do not like Faifa?” Baquar asked.

Barka’s green eyes narrowed. His body stiffened.

“Oh, do not worry, Barka,” Baquar said. “You may be honest. I saw the truth in your eyes when you came in and I asked where Faifa was. You do not like him.”

“Kenza tend to be loners,” Barka said. “We are not a social people. The few of us who work for you do so for the wages you

pay, since our planet was overrun by the Corporation many years ago. We fled, but few survived away from our environment.”

“That does not answer my question.” Baquar was annoyed.

“Faifa is a loner,” Barka said. “Even with the few of us here, he stayed to himself. It is not a matter of dislike. It is a matter of mistrust. It was he who brought us to you. His allegiance seemed to be with you only. This did not sit well with us.”

Baquar had no idea what Barka was talking about. “You do not like working for me?”

“I can only speak for myself,” Barka said. “I work for your wages rather than starve. I find the work satisfying and so I stay. If you ask loyalty from the Kenza, you will not get it. Kenza are loyal only to themselves.”

The meaning of Barka’s words sank in. Baquar decided it would have been wise if he had found out more about their species before hiring them. Mercenary: that was the word for them. Pay them well, they stay.

“I see,” Baquar said. “Do you think Grock would know where Faifa is?”

Barka shrugged his wide shoulders. “Groock would be most loyal, if any of us, to Faifa.”

“Send Groock to me,” Baquar said. “I am putting a bounty of Faifa’s head. He has betrayed me. I put my trust in him and he has thrown it in my face. Find him. Bring him to me, alive, and the reward will be satisfactory to you, I promise.”

Again, the strange smile crossed Barka’s lips. He dipped his head in a quick nod.

Once Barka was gone, Baquar savagely kicked his chair. The chair rolled across the floor and slammed into the wall. The talk with Barka had been enlightening. Obviously Barka would be happy to deal with Faifa and take his position. It did not please Baquar to learn the Kenza were not loyal. Baquar demanded loyalty in his men. Once Sneighd and Faifa were dealt with, he would deal with the Kenza. Barka’s position would be short lived.

Barka was more than happy with his task of tracking Faifa. He knew, though he hadn’t told Baquar, that Faifa was still in Corbian Spaceport. Another of the Kenza, Groock, had mentioned seeing Faifa. Groock tended to be most loyal to Faifa, and Barka knew,

Grock had been helping Faifa prepare to leave Sinnet. Finding Faifa would be no problem. Barka would simply follow Grock.

Barka waited until Grock left the grounds later that afternoon. He fell in behind him and trailed him. As he suspected, Grock led him straight to Faifa waiting in the canteen.

Barka noted two other Kenza in the back of the canteen. Faifa didn't appear worried or concerned. He had to know Baquar was looking for him. For him to remain at Corbian Spaceport after helping the Rhadurian with Sneighd's escape was conceit on the highest level.

The canteen was too public for what Barka planned. He would wait near the entrance of an alley Faifa would pass on his way to his ship. His ship is where Faifa must have been staying. Such a hiding place was obvious. Faifa couldn't possibly think Baquar wouldn't act against him for his betrayal.

Dusk fell. Barka grew impatient. His impatience was quickly forgotten when he saw, much to his astonishment, Sneighd Arkon heading toward the canteen. Arkon was on his feet, moving quickly and without apparent difficulty. At his heels were the two human female children he was known to be traveling with. Barka let a wicked grin crease his face. Baquar would pay him a handsome bonus for these three and Faifa.

Barka fell in behind the humans. They stopped outside of the canteen entrance. Sneighd spoke to the females who nodded as he went inside. The females posted themselves to either side of the entrance, lookouts for danger, no doubt. Barka strode past them as if not seeing them. Once inside, he spotted Sneighd Arkon and moved close behind him. He pulled his blazer and jammed it into Arkon's back. He felt the human stiffen.

“Your intelligence seems to forsake you,” Barka whispered close to Sneighd's ear. “You are unwise to return to Baquar's den.”

The human, however, was not to be taken so easily. Sneighd jammed his elbow into Barka's ribs. Taken off guard, the Kenza folded at the waist as his air was knocked out of him. A second later, he found himself sailing over Sneighd's head to land hard on the floor. Barka scrambled to his feet and swung at Sneighd who ducked and dove headfirst into Barka's midsection. They both hit the ground with a thud, scattering other patrons out of their way.

Barka swung, his fist connecting with Sneighd's mouth. Sneighd fell away and barely avoided being pinned. He rolled to his left, caught Barka in the chest with his boot and heaved. Barka flew backwards, crashing into evacuated tables near the canteen door.

Humans and other species circled the fight, shouting encouragement to both combatants. Barka regained his feet and saw Grock disappear out of a rear door of the canteen. There was no time to wonder where the Kenza was heading as Barka faced off with Sneighd who seemed to be having a hard time getting to his feet. Obviously, the human hadn't fully recovered. That, Barka knew, would be to his advantage.

The Kenza swung again, this time striking Sneighd squarely in the jaw. Sneighd fell to his back. The look on his face told Barka the fall had caused pain. He grinned with delight, poised his boot for a shot at Arkon's ribs---and was dropped by a blow to the back of his neck.

He whirled, raising his blazer to his unexpected assailant. A shot from somewhere behind him caught him in the side. He staggered, holding his wound, raised his blazer again. A second shot from behind dropped his arm and he pitched forward.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

Wiping the blood from the corner of his mouth, Sneighd peered up to see his saviors. Faifa stood over Sneighd, staring at the back of the canteen. Sneighd glanced in that direction and saw Grock standing in the shadows. The Kenza holstered his weapon, waved once, and vanished out the back door.

Haunalyn and Impa stood to his right. Haunalyn reached out her hand to help him to his feet. Faifa also reached out his hand to assist. Sneighd accepted, eyeing the Kenza with warily. He noticed Haunalyn had her blazer in her right hand by her side. He glanced at her and shook his head. She placed the blazer in her holster but kept her hostile gaze on Faifa.

“Okay,” Sneighd said. “I don’t understand.”

Haunalyn and Impa crowded in next to him.

Faifa’s slanted eyes focused on Sneighd’s face. “I have nothing against you, Arkon. Baquar paid well. The man is scum. I have no loyalty to him and see no purpose in torturing someone for no reason.”

“No reason?” Haunalyn asked.

“Baquar is insane,” Faifa said. “Torture is his delight. Sneighd did nothing to warrant such brutality.” He returned his gaze to Sneighd. “You have done nothing.”

Sneighd thought he heard implied knowledge.

“Baquar isn’t going to be happy about what you and Grock just did.” He nodded to the dead man. “I confess I won’t suffer grief over Barka.”

“I do not worry about Baquar,” Faifa said. “Some things transcend money, even for me. I have left Baquar’s employ. I have not foolishly wasted my wages. I am wealthy enough to buy him if I so choose. I have no desire to waste my time. The galaxy is great. I will find another place, perhaps start my own ‘business.’”

Sneighd stared at him. This was a side of Faifa he would never have expected. He had a feeling something else was going on with the Kenza.

“I am leaving Sinnet,” Faifa said. “First, there is something I must do.”

Sneighd was instantly on guard. He still didn’t trust Faifa not to turn him over to Baquar, despite the Kenza’s words.

“Which is?” he asked.

“There is something you need,” Faifa said. “I know where to obtain it. Come with me and I will take you to it.”

“Oh no,” Haunalyn stepped in front of Sneighd. “It’s a trap. He follows you. You hand him over to Baquar. Not happening, Kenza.”

Sneighd swore Faifa looked amused at Haunalyn’s bravado. He eased her to one side. “Why, Faifa?” he asked.

Faifa’s features seemed to soften. “You and I have mutual respect. If we had not, one of us would have killed the other.”

There was a long pause.

“Baquar hates you,” Faifa said. “Not because you know the truth, that he murdered the Corporate worm, all three of them. But because you are the only person to say no to Baquar’s offer of employ. You refused. No one dares disrespect him. You did. To let that pass, in his mind, weakens his authority.”

“That’s insane,” Haunalyn said.

“Men of power often are,” Faifa said. “Baquar has waited. When you came to him for help, he planned to destroy you.”

“He waited a long time,” Sneighd said.

“Baquar is a patient enemy. He does not forget.”

“Then why did you help?” Sneighd asked.

“When you die, Sneighd Arkon, it should be in a way befitting the way you have lived, not for something of which you are innocent. Certainly not for the likes of Baquar Starka.”

Sneighd glanced around. They had been standing in the open too long.

“Shall we go somewhere a little less public to finish this?” he asked.

Faifa led the way through the streets to the Corbian Spaceport to the bay where his ship waited.

“Why---how did you disarm the fortress?” Haunalyn asked.
“How did you know I was there?”

Faifa turned to her. What could only be described as puzzlement masked his features. “I did not,” he said. “When I heard that you had rescued Sneighd, I wondered how you managed, who helped you.”

“You mean, it wasn’t you?” Haunalyn asked. She glanced at Sneighd who was as surprised as she was.

Faifa shook his head.

“Then who did?” Impa asked.

“I cannot say,” Faifa said. “I do know that Baquar suspects I was the one who aided your escape. I did not. Grock told me Baquar’s men were instructed to assemble in Baquar’s assembly hall for an important directive. Once there, they were unable to leave. All power had been disengaged. There was confusion until the power restored. When Grock learned of Sneighd’s escape, he thought you had come with help and overpowered the fortress.”

Faifa looked at Sneighd. “This is not true?”

Sneighd shook his head. “No. It was just Haunalyn. I don’t like this. I don’t like this at all. Who was helping? And why?”

“You have much to deal with, Sneighd. Wait a moment.”

Faifa entered his ship and returned a few minutes later with a computer link which he handed to Sneighd.

“This is proof that you did not murder Octar, or Doyle.”

“Wait. What?” Sneighd said. “Doyle? Doyle is dead?”

“You did not know?” Faifa asked.

Sneighd shook his head. “The last time we saw Doyle he was loudly protesting being stranded on Darthea. Are you sure he’s dead?”

“I arrived soon after you left him,” Faifa said. “He was deceased. I do not know who might have killed him. I do know it was not you.”

He removed a communication disc from his pocket and handed it to Sneighd. “I received this via com-link after I left. I do not know who sent it. It shows your Rhadurian ship leaving Darthea. It also shows Doyle alive after you left. When I arrived, he had been shot dead. You did not shoot him. A red beam pierced through the atmosphere. The hit was direct. Your ship has no such capability.”

“A red beam?” Sneighd asked. He remembered the black ship he and the others had encountered, along with the Corporate Police Cruiser. The black ship had fired a red beam.

“The Lurker,” Haunalyn said softly. “He followed us. He was that close.”

“The Lurker followed you,” Faifa said. “It was his ship that killed Doyle. Why? He has no discretion. I arrived too late.”

“We could all have been dead by now,” Impa said.

“No,” Faifa said. “I would not harm you, or this one.” He pointed to Haunalyn. You were fortunate to be as far ahead as you were.”

“Do you know what happened to Korbot?” Impa asked.

Sneighd shook his head at the little girl to silence her, too late.

Faifa didn't answer. His silence was answer enough. The Kenza had no idea what had become of the portmaster.

“It is time for us all to leave Sinnet,” Faifa said. “Everything you need is on the communication stick. Take it and get as far from here as you can. It will not be long before Baquar's men descend on us. Grock has acted as decoy to allow us time to escape.”

“What about you?” Sneighd asked, tucking the communication disc and computer link in his shirt.

“Do not worry about me,” Faifa said. “Leave now, before it is too late. There is one more thing I must do, then I, too, will depart.”

Sneighd didn't ask what that one thing was. He held out his hand. After a second, Faifa shook it.

“Be careful,” Sneighd said.

He herded the girls out of the bay, through the port to the Rogue Marauder. They had started up the ramp when an explosion shook the ground. Black smoke burst into the air from somewhere

behind the port. Sneighd had a sick feeling in his gut, but there was nothing he could do.

“Let’s go, girls,” he said. He grabbed their arms and yanked them through the hatch into the Marauder. “We have to find Korbot.”

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Hatia watched from her place of concealment the Lurker pacing the area in front of his ship. She could imagine what he must be thinking: too many obstacles in the way of completing the task for which he had been hired. First was the Rhadurian girl, then the strange child, and now---she let a smirk cross her lips---her.

Hatia knew no amount of reward would stop him from tracking Sneighd down and killing him. Commander Aqualine, tired of the lack of results, had withdrawn his offer, telling the Lurker his reputation was grossly exaggerated if he couldn't catch a lowly pilot. Unfortunately for Commander Aqualine, his opinion would never leave his office.

Hatia shook her head at the stupidity of the Corporation officials. They never seemed to understand who it was they dealt with. The Lurker didn't take kindly to criticism or ridicule. The insult had fueled his anger toward Sneighd.

Hatia had followed the Lurker from Gravette to his return to Sinnet. Sneighd was captive, an easy target. Hatia had thwarted that. She had seen the Rhadurian girl in her attempt to help Sneighd escape Baquar. There was no way the girl alone would succeed, so Hatia gave her some unexpected assistance, locking down the fortress so the girl could get in and out unhindered.

The Rhadurian hauler had escaped Sinnet without a problem. Faifa had seen to that. Faifa, who had worked for Hatia on more than one occasion, who knew her beginnings, whose people had once been allies to the Gaylans before both planets were invaded and destroyed with the backing of the Galactic Corporation.

Hatia knew the next course of action for the Lurker would be to follow the Rhadurian hauler. His ship wasn't as secure as he thought. She had been in and out long before he arrived, gathering his information and the plans he would follow.

As she watched him make a decision and start into his ship, she smiled. "Not today, Kellin," she said. Her smile faded into anger. "Not ever." She slipped through the bays to her own ship. When the Lurker left the atmosphere of Sinnet, she was right behind him.

Dusalt heard the commotion in the center of the town and grabbed a passerby to ask what was going on. There was a fight at the canteen, between a Kenza and human. Dusalt pushed his way through the gathered crowd. The first person he saw nearest the combatants was Haunalyn. She was too far away for him to reach. The cheering, jeering crowd was too noise for her to hear if he shouted to her. He turned and ran to find Deacon.

As Dusalt cleared the throng of human and other creatures gathering to watch the fight, he saw Baquar's men headed in that direction. That was not good. Baquar would destroy anyone who interfered with his men. Haunalyn had been present at the fight. That had to mean one of the combatants was the pilot Sneighd Arkon.

Deacon waited for Dusalt at the port entrance. He was instantly alert when he saw Dusalt running to him.

"There's a fight at the canteen," Dusalt said. "Haunalyn was there but I couldn't reach her. Baquar's men are on their way. I don't know who was fighting, but I do know one of the was a Kenza."

"If Haunalyn was there, then one of the fighters has to be Sneighd Arkon," Deacon said. "Come on."

The men hurried back the way Dusalt had come. They arrived at the canteen in time to see Baquar's men clearing away the dead Kenza. Haunalyn was nowhere in sight.

Deacon grabbed Dusalt's arm and pulled him to follow. "We have to get to the ship," he said.

There was a burst of noise from the bays. A small ship shot into the sky. Deacon and Dusalt recognized the ship immediately.

“It’s the Rogue Marauder,” Dusalt said. “She’s safe, for now.”

“Let’s go,” Deacon said. He raced to his own ship. Soon he was following his daughter’s trajectory.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

Korbot regained consciousness on a cold metal floor. His head splitting, he sat up to take in his surroundings. A thrum of power pulsed through the floor and walls around and under him. He had a sinking feeling he was not aboard a Corporation Police Cruiser, but a Corporation Prison Barge.

Growling to himself, he pulled his aching body to his feet. He remembered what seemed to be an explosion inside of his head from whatever the Police had used to bring him down. Nothing else registered until his waking. He was angry, at himself, and at the Corporate Police. He was angrier still at the person responsible for this predicament. Baquar would pay.

Taking deep breaths, he paced his cell in effort to revive. The throbbing in his head was passing into a dull ache. He inventoried his surroundings. The cell consisted of four gray metal walls and floor. The ceiling was an opaque material he didn't recognize. A suspended metal bench hung from one wall. A wash basin was attached to another wall. The floor sloped gently from each side of the cell to a small grate in the center. Korbot didn't have to guess the purpose behind that. The fetid order emanating from the grate told him all he needed to know.

The air was cold. His utility vest and jacket were gone, leaving his torso exposed. He saw no entrance to the cell. He slammed his hammer fist against each wall. He could detect no change in sound.

He looked again at the ceiling. Something about its construction and the unusual material from which it was made bothered him. The ceiling illuminated. The light flared so intense, he was blinded. He flung his hands up to shield his eyes. The intense light bored through. He dropped to his stomach, turned his face to the floor and covered his head with his arms to shut out the light.

He heard metal sliding against metal, then footsteps approaching where he lay. Someone stood over him.

“Deactivate.” The voice was calm, cool, in command.

Korbot waited until he felt the light to dissipate. He slowly turned his head to the right. He used his arm to shield his eyes against the afterglow until it faded.

“You may stop cowering now.” The person standing over him spoke without rancor.

Korbot resisted the urge to reach out and yank the black booted feet from under whoever the man was. It would be a given the man wasn't alone.

Korbot eased to his knees, leaning his hands against his upper thighs, breathing deeply. The initial shock had knocked the breath out of his lungs. He raised his eyes to look at his antagonist.

The man standing over him was human, wearing the crisp light blue military uniform and visored cap of a Penal Division Officer. The man was tall, lean, his features sharp, chiseled. His lips were thin, giving him the appearance of a skull with skin pulled tightly over it. He wore a sidearm on his hip that Korbot didn't recognize.

Korbot looked past the Officer to the men behind him. They were stockier, shorter, wearing similar uniforms without the officer insignia. One was human, dark-haired, with non-descript features. The other was Tallion, a humanoid with bright red skin, white hair, and slanted amber eyes. The two, Penal guards, carried charged particle-beam rifles.

“Stand and compose yourself like a man, Tendrite,” the Officer ordered.

Korbot stood, straightening his drawn muscles. He felt every ache in every joint. His condition didn't make him any happier.

Korbot towered over the humans. Unarmed, he wasn't much of a threat. He might overpower the Officer with sheer strength, but the guards would use their weapons as soon as he moved. He could wait. He would find a way out of this situation.

Korbot noticed the guards did take two steps away from him. That pleased him. They obviously hadn't realized his true size. He flexed his shoulder muscles. The guards took two more steps back. Korbot would have laughed if not for the danger.

The Officer appeared unimpressed. He spoke with the air of calm confidence that his prisoner was no threat.

“Do you know why you are here, Tendrite?”

Korbot thought about his answer. He shrugged his shoulders.
“Bad timing?”

“A sense of humor,” the Officer said. “I am Captain Denarius. You are prisoner aboard the Corporate Penal Barge Hades. You will find life easier if you cooperate. Where is the Denovan pilot, Sneighd Arkon?”

“Who?” Korbot asked.

Captain Denarius glared at him. “Don’t be a fool, Tendrite. You have already witnessed how unpleasant I can make this for you.”

“My name is Korbot Maka,” Korbot said. “I am the Portmaster of Corbian Space Port on the planet Sinnet. I have done nothing to warrant arrest or incarceration aboard this Penal Barge. I am a Tendrite. You have violated the treaty between the Galactic Corporation and the Tendrites by taking me prisoner.”

Captain Denarius took a step closer. Korbot estimated the man stood several inches over six feet for a human, but still had to look up at his eight-foot prisoner.

“The Tendrites don’t know where you are,” Captain Denarius said. “No one does except the Corporate Police who brought you to us. You have aided and abetted a wanted murderer. That puts you as an accessory. The Galactic Corporation has authority to take you into custody despite the treaty.” He stepped away.

“Again, where is Sneighd Arkon?”

“I was alone when I was taken,” Korbot said. “I have no idea where Sneighd Arkon is.”

“You were traveling with him,” Captain Denarius said.

“I was searching for him,” Korbot said. “A witness saw him captured by men known to work for Baquar Starka on Sinnet. I didn’t find him. Starka’s men had already left.”

“Where are the others with whom you traveled?” Captain Denarius asked.

“I have no idea,” Korbot said. “As far away as possible, I hope.”

“I will check your story, Tendrite,” Captain Denarius said.

He pressed a control on his belt. The entire front wall slid open. The Captain pulled a pair of dark-lensed shields from his utility belt. His men did the same. They didn’t strap the shields on but held them tightly to their eyes.

Korbot knew what was coming, closed his eyes, turned to face the nearest wall, and buried his head in his arms. The blinding light lasted only a few seconds. By the time the afterglow subsided, the Captain and his men had returned the protective shields to their belts.

“A warning, Tendrite,” Captain Denarius said. “You can’t escape. It is futile to try.”

“What is that light?” Korbot asked.

“Surely you recognize it,” Captain Denarius said. “It is used on large freighters and barges for landing on thick-density atmosphere planets. In any case, you needn’t worry about it unless you fail to cooperate or attempt to escape. I will blind you. Then I will kill you.”

Korbot straightened. The man was assuming a great deal. Korbot was at the disadvantage, but he always recovered quickly. He was conscious. He wasn’t injured. He would find a way to shield his eyes.

“I will explain to you your situation,” Captain Denarius said. “You are recorded as being a prisoner in the Police Headquarters in Capitol City. This is a deception to lure your friends to attempt a rescue. It would be helpful if you would tell me where they are. You see, I don’t believe your story. Tell me where they are and you will be released, since your real crime was to unwittingly rescue a killer. The Galactic Corporation is well aware of what actually happened on Sinnet the day Arkon murdered Octar.”

“What?” Korbot was surprised. “But Octar...” He didn’t finish what he started to say. They had been looking for Octar. Octar was the official behind the murder of Impa’s parents.

Captain Denarius waited for Korbot to continue. When he didn’t, Denarius went on with his explanation.

“If you don’t cooperate and give me the information I ask, you will be taken to a penal colony on the very edge of the galaxy under a false name where you will remain for the rest of your life. No one will know what became of you. We will capture Arkon, regardless, so your silence will serve no purpose.”

“You’re making a mistake,” Korbot said.

“About you or about Arkon?” Captain Denarius asked. “I might be inclined to believe you. However, we know that you were involved in the abduction of a Corporate Official named Doyle, who you stranded on the planet Darthea. There are witnesses, also prisoners aboard the Hades, who can identify you. I might be convinced that you were forced by Arkon in that abduction, if you tell me what I want to know.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Korbot said.

“Come now,” Captain Denarius said. “Abducting Doyle is one thing. Killing him is another. He is dead. You were the last one seen with him.”

Korbot felt the blood rush into his face. “When we left Doyle, he was still breathing.”

“Possibly,” Denarius said. “But who is going to believe you?”

“You know we didn’t kill Doyle,” Korbot accused. He fought to keep his temper. It was obvious to him that Baquar had been at work again.

“So, you were involved.” Captain Denarius had a look of satisfaction on his face. “I don’t understand. Why are you protecting one such as Sneighd Arkon? You were an honest man, yet you have let him drag you into the mire of his worthless life. He will get you killed. Think on it.”

Captain Denarius motioned to his men and touched the control on his belt. The wall slid open. The guards exited. Denarius turned to face Korbot one last time.

“Cooperate. You will live longer.”

He followed his men out of the cell and the wall slid closed.

Chapter Sixty

Sneighd eased the Rogue Marauder underneath the belly of the prison barge Hades. He smiled to himself in satisfaction.

Haunalyn's father would no be happy to learn his wayward daughter had somehow fitted the hauler with a Terrellian Cloaking Device. It was by chance that Sneighd discovered it.

The Rogue Marauder didn't have the power to hold the cloak more than eight hours. Sneighd waited until he closed in on the Hades before engaging the cloak. From then on, he and his companions were on a time limit and would have to work fast.

The message that Korbot had been arrested and was being transported to Gravette for questioning helped pinpoint exactly where Sneighd and the girls would find the big man. There were no Police Cruisers in the vicinity, but the Prison Barge Hades was close, and going in the opposite direction to Gravette. That could only mean the transmission was a ruse.

The conceit of the Galactic Corporation always amazed Sneighd. He assumed they must think people were stupid and couldn't think for themselves. Or maybe the conceited one was him; he didn't know. He just followed his gut.

He heard the magnetic locks connect to the barge, and turned a triumphant smile to Haunalyn. With reluctance, she agreed that he should be the one to pilot this delicate maneuver. Sneighd was surprised to find her ashen-faced and anchoring herself to her seat with white knuckles.

“Well?” He gently tapped her chin with his fist. “I still have the touch.”

Haunalyn’s face flushed red. “You’re touched alright. Who’s crazy as a Maga Bird now? Explain to me how we aren’t floating around as space dust right now.”

Sneighd sighed in exasperation as he cut the engines. That wasn’t the reaction he expected. “You agreed to let me run this show. You couldn’t do it, you said.” He turned again to face her. “And, while we’re giving lectures, I found your cloaking device. That is how I managed to get us here without getting blown to kingdom come. However, girlie, this heap hasn’t enough power to hold the cloak for long. So, I would advise to save your argument until we have Korbot and are out of here.”

He left the cockpit, not bothering to wait for her answer.

Impa met him in the corridor, her hand outstretched. A tiny pink pill rested in the center of her palm.

“You didn’t take your medicine again,” she scolded.

Since leaving Rhaduri, Impa had appointed herself keep of the medication the Med-Bot had given Sneighd. Sneighd was under strict orders to take the pill once a day without fail. Impa kept tight surveillance on him to make sure he did.

Sneighd shook his head and chuckled as he took the pill and swallowed it dry. “Thanks, punkin. What would I do without you?”

“When you two get through,” Haunalyn said from behind Sneighd. “Would you mind moving? We have work to do.”

Impa rolled her eyes and returned to the main hold.

Sneighd turned on Haunalyn. He was tired of her attitude. She had sounded and acted nothing but resentful since leaving Rhaduri.

He backed Haunalyn into a tight corner, glaring down at her menacingly.

“Listen, little girl. I know what I’m doing and how to do it. It might be unorthodox, but it will work. I am sick of your high and mighty attitude. You could have stayed on Rhaduri.”

“And let you take off with my ship?” Haunalyn huffed. “Not in my lifetime.”

“Which won’t be long if you continue to delay what we have to do,” Sneighd said. “Now, shut up, and get busy.”

He moved aside so she could pass him. She did so without saying another word. He hoped he had gotten through to her. There wasn’t time for bickering.

Sneighd joined the two girls in the main hold. “Stay close to me, Haunalyn, do exactly as I say. If we do this right, we’ll be out of here quickly. We’ve less than eight hours. So let’s move.”

“Are you ready, Impa?” he asked.

The little girl nodded and turned to the control console. Sneighd and Haunalyn climbed to the top hatch of the hauler. The top air lock hissed open. He and Haunalyn warily lifted the manual escape door. Sneighd’s calculations had been perfect. The hatch opened into a supply loading hatch that Sneighd forced open with a hatch override tool he had found in Haunalyn’s abundant illegal tools. He would have to have a talk with her father, he decided, if they survived.

The hatch opened onto a loading ramp. The ramp was ribbed so supplies would slide easily. The ribs made convenient hand holds for climbing, which Sneighd and Haunalyn did. They were inside the cargo hold within a few minutes. They stood still listening.

The cargo hold, soundproofed from the rest of the barge, remained silent. Sneighd led the way through the narrow aisles to the entrance of the hold into the main ship. He used the tool to release the lock and pulled the hatch open, praying no one was on the other side.

Not daring to breathe, Sneighd eased from the hold into the empty corridor of the barge. He surveyed the area. He memorized where he and Haunalyn had emerged, then led an impatient Haunalyn into the main corridors of the barge. He turned right. The corridor seemed empty. He wondered where the prison cells were located and how long it would take to find them.

A sharp jab of Haunalyn's elbow into his ribs told him she had seen something. He turned to her. She pointed to a schematic on the nearest wall. They were in the lower part of the barge. To reach the cells, they would need to follow the corridor to the nearest emergency exit to get to the cells.

Haunalyn pointed to another area close to where they stood. The main engine room of the barge was to their left about one hundred feet.

"Wait here," he whispered. He moved quickly to the engine room and opened the blast doors. This part of the engines was the mechanical area. The control room would be one story above

them. There would be no surveillance to see what he was about to do. He hurried to the main engine housing. He knew about barges. Supply barges had regularly docked on Denova. The barges were not different in design from prison barges. Sneighd learned that most barge designs were the same. That made his current task easier. Within a few minutes, he had deactivated all the main engines. The barge would stop dead in space. Hopefully, that would give him and Haunalyn to find Korbot and get out before being discovered.

He rejoined Haunalyn who stared at him as if he had completely lost his mind.

“You are the most aggravating, irritating, exasperating human being I have ever had the misfortune to know,” she said.

“Thank you.” Sneighd said with sarcasm. “It’s nice to be appreciated.”

Haunalyn poked her finger into his chest. “You *lunatic*. Do you realize what you just did?”

“Yeah,” Sneighd said. “I even planned it. I shut the main engines down.”

“You have just informed them we’re here,” Haunalyn said. “This whole ship just came to a dead stop. They are going to

wonder why. They are going to send someone to find out why. Do you know what they're going to find?"

Sneighd was steering her down the corridor, letting her rant as he looked for the emergency exit. There were elevators, but also stairs. If fire or some other catastrophe struck the ship, elevators weren't always reliable to get personnel to safety. He had no doubt the Corporation Prison Officials wouldn't worry about their prisoners in such a case.

"What they are going to find," he said, "Is an unconscious, black and blue female pilot if she doesn't shut up. Give me credit, Lyn, I'm not stupid."

He stopped at a junction of two corridors and cautiously peered around the corner. He saw the emergency exit a few yards away. Yanking Haunalyn behind him, he hurried to the hatch and opened it. Inside, with the hatch securely closed, he glared at his companion. "Now that the main engines are down, they won't take long to cool. Once the engines cool, it will take at least an hour to get them started, and another hour to get this monster moving. With luck, we'll be long gone with Korbot safely aboard the Marauder." He started up the stairs. "That's if the cloak holds. We're running out of time."

Chapter Sixty-One

“We’re going to get caught,” Haunalyn insisted. “We aren’t even disguised. Sooner or later, someone is going to notice we don’t exactly blend in.”

Sneighd kept walking. He led the way up two flights of stairs doing his best to drown out Haunalyn’s complaining. He stopped in front of an exit. This would be their make-or-break time. If the exit opened into an empty corridor, they had a chance. If someone was in the corridor---he would worry about that when he had to.

He studied the controls to the right of the exit. He placed his hand on the control and the exit hissed open. Nothing happened. No one shouted. He eased cautiously into a dimly lit short corridor leading to his right.

Haunalyn tapped his shoulder, but he shrugged her off. He heard her sigh of exasperation. The short corridor intersected with a longer corridor running crosswise from the one he and Haunalyn were in.

Haunalyn again poked his shoulder.

“This way,” Sneighd said. He turned to his left.

“Sneighd.”

Haunalyn's sharp edged whisper brought him around. At the end of the corridor to their right stood a Penal officer watching them.

Sneighd mentally kicked himself. Time had run out.

"Well?" Haunalyn hissed in his ear.

"We'll figure out something," he said.

The man approached them. Sneighd noted he was human, about the same in height as himself. The man wore a dull green uniform, no insignias. That was good. He wasn't an officer. He was a guard.

"I don't recall seeing either of you aboard before," the guard said. "Let me see your identification." His green eyes studied Sneighd and Haunalyn with suspicion.

Before Sneighd could think of something to say, Haunalyn pushed him to one side.

"We don't belong here." She turned to Sneighd with a wild gleam in her eyes and let out a mad cackle. "None of us belong here." She held her hands in front of his face and worked her fingers as if conjuring a spell, at the same time giving him a "get on with it" look.

Sneighd caught on and turned to the guard. Haunalyn turned with him and moved toward the guard, who stepped back.

“You must forgive her, sir, but you see she escaped from the detention area again. She does that sometimes. We’re quite baffled how she manages it.” Sneighd grabbed Haunalyn by the shoulders and pulled her away from the guard. She smiled at the guard as if she wanted to eat him.

The guard eyed them; wariness having replaced suspicion. “I didn’t know there were any mental cases on this barge,” he said.

Sneighd pushed Haunalyn behind him, holding firmly to her wrist. “Normally, you would be right, sir, but this one is a special case.” He leaned close and whispered to the guard in confidence. “You see, she is the Delta Battle Ax Killer.” Sneighd flicked his gaze around the area as if afraid someone might hear.

The guard stared at Sneighd. “You are saying---she is the one who murdered all the men on Delta with an ancient battle axe; the one who cut off their heads and their---uh---other parts?”

Sneighd had to control a laugh. The guard had heard the legend, obviously, and hopefully didn’t know that there was no such person as the Delta Battle Axe Killer. The myth had been spun after Delta, a tiny prehistoric planet, had been discovered by

accident by the Corporation. All the men on the planet had been found dead, head and genitals removed by some type of battle axe that was never found. That the men were skeletons buried in the caves of the planet was never made public. How the myth of the killer started was never explained, but it took root and sprouted, effectively keeping people away from Delta while the Galactic Corporation Science and Archeology Teams explored the planet further. Sneighd knew this as he had, at one time, hauled artifacts from Delta to Gravette.

“That’s right, sir,” Sneighd said. He squeezed Haunalyn’s wrist tight to prevent her giggles from being heard. “This one’s really a pussycat, except when she gets riled, or restless. WE keep close watch over her, but sometimes she slips away. Of course, we notice right away and send someone after her. We wouldn’t want this one to get her hands on anything ‘sharp’.”

Sneighd could tell the guard was skeptical.

“No. No, you’re absolutely right,” the guard said. “Get her back to her cell.”

“Yessir, right away sir,” Sneighd said, again dragging Haunalyn behind him as he hurried up the corridor. He knew the guard was watching. Since the man didn’t call out, Sneighd had a good idea

he was headed in the right direction. Out of sight, he stopped so he could breathe relief.

“That was close.”

“I can’t believe that moron believed that ridiculous story,” Haunalyn said.

Sneighd glanced at her. “I don’t think he did. He probably thought we were both demented. Unless he’s a complete idiot, he’ll be back with reinforcements. We better find our friend and get out of here.”

He started walking. He found it weird that no cells were visible. The walls were smooth, unbroken by any doors. His gut tightened at the thought he and Haunalyn hadn’t reached the right level.

Around the next corner he came to a dead stop. He pushed Haunalyn against the wall.

“I think we found our objective,” he whispered.

He and Haunalyn peered around the corner. He understood why there were no visible doors. A Penal Officer and two guards stood before a portion of the wall that slid open. The cells were

enclosed. Prisoners would have nothing but four walls to look at. Sneighd shuddered at the thought.

Haunalyn poked his ribs. The two guards had gone inside the cell and reappeared with a bedraggled, and judging by his face, angry, Korbot.

The officer spoke to the big man. “You have stood up very well, my friend, but you will break. I promise you. We will have the information we want concerning the whereabouts of Sneighd Arkon.”

Korbot didn’t reply. Sneighd knew if the big man hadn’t been securely bound, there would be no doubt as to whom would break. Korbot’s fists were clenched into tight battering rams.

The officer shook his head. “I told you if you cooperated, you would be exonerated in any wrongdoing. You would rather suffer. I don’t understand this. Is the scum Arkon worth your life?”

Sneighd felt his own fists clench. His palms itched to grab the officer around the neck. He felt Haunalyn’s fingernails dig into his arm. She was angry, too.

Korbot hadn’t answered. If his eyes had been weapons, the officer would have disintegrated from their fire.

“Return him to his cell,” the officer said. “I’ll speak to him again in a few hours.”

The guards shoved Korbot roughly into the cell. One of the guards touched what had to be a sensor control on the wall and that portion of the wall vanished.

“Train the lights on him for a while,” the officer said. “Perhaps the discomfort will persuade him cooperation is better than blindness.”

The officer and two guards turned down the corridor in the opposite direction of where Sneighd and Haunalyn were concealed. Sneighd saw the officer touch his com-link, then he gave an order to the guards and they ran.

“Uh oh,” Sneighd said. “They’ve been alerted. We have to act fast.”

“I’ll kill him,” Haunalyn said. “I swear, I’ll kill that...”

“You may not get the chance,” Sneighd said. “We have to get Korbot out before we get caught.”

He turned to face her. “Listen. Stay here. Wait.” He held up his hand to forego her protest. “I need you as backup. If

something goes wrong, get out of here. It won't help any of us if we all end up in a cell."

He saw her reluctance, but she nodded.

Sneighd eased around the corner and up to the area where the officer and guards had stood. He examined the wall. He ran his palm along the smooth surface hoping to feel some distortion that would tell him where the control was.

A noise behind him caused him to stiffen. Footsteps approached from the other end of the corridor. He turned, forcing the worry and fear from his face. A guard approached him. The guard had no weapon drawn and looked only curious.

"Who are you?" the guard asked. "What are you doing?"

Palms held forward in submission, Sneighd put on his most innocent expression. "Whoa, friend, you startled me. I think I took a wrong turn. Maintenance. I was told there was a jammed hatch up here. I was sent to fix it."

Suspicion crept into the guard's eyes. "If you're maintenance, where are your tools?"

Sneighd had to think fast. He knew there would be only one way out. "My tools? Well, actually, they're right here." He turned

as if to reach behind him. His hand came up and caught the guard square in the face. The guard, off-guard, slammed into the wall with an audible thud. Stunned, he slid to the floor in a crumpled heap. He searched the guard and found something the size of a credit chip. He had seen one of the other guards hold one next to the wall.

Praying it was a control, Sneighd passed the chip along the wall. A light glowed under the surface of the metal.

Haunalyn rushed to his side and grabbed the guard's weapon. She held it ready in case the guard regained consciousness.

A warning klaxon burst into the silence. The sound nearly deafened Sneighd before he could open the cell.

"I think we've been found out," Haunalyn shouted above the noise.

Sneighd shook his head to clear it and passed the chip along the light. The wall slid open; the light inside almost blinded him. He reeled back, holding his burning eyes. Haunalyn fired a shot into the ceiling and the light disappeared. Inside the cell, Korbot struggled to his knees, his hands bound behind his back.

Haunalyn ran to him and blew the manacles from his wrists. Blinking from the afterglow of the light, Sneighd helped the big man to his feet.

“You alright?” Sneighd asked.

“I will be, just as soon as you get me out of here,” Korbot said.

“Let’s move,” Haunalyn said.

The three friends entered the corridor. No guards were visible. Sneighd knew it wouldn’t be long.

“Sure you remember the way back to the ship?” Haunalyn asked.

Sneighd didn’t answer. He was too busy keeping Korbot upright and moving. He did know where he was. He had noted every detail. It didn’t take them long to return to the supply area.

To his dismay, Sneighd saw they hadn’t managed to escape fast enough. The Officer they had seen at the cell stood with six guards cloistered near him, waiting for the arrival of the escapees.

Sneighd and Korbot stopped short, shielding Haunalyn behind them.

“I’m afraid your daring rescue failed, Arkon,” the officer said.

“You would be well advised to give up now.”

“Sorry, but I have more important things to do,” Sneighd said. He brought his blazer up from his hip and sent a shot into the shoulder of the nearest guard.

Hidden behind him, Haunalyn fired her own weapon over his shoulder, felling three more guards as Korbot brought two huge fists crashing down on one unfortunate guard’s skull before heading straight for the officer.

The officer stood undisturbed by the approaching menace. Sneighd saw the gleam in the man’s eye that gave evidence that he held something concealed in his right hand. He shoved Korbot out of the way and shouted.

“Haunalyn, he’s got a weapon.”

Haunalyn reacted accordingly. Her aim was true and fast. She caught the officer by complete surprise. He stared down at his hand clamped against the wound in his breast. His eyes rolled back into his head and he pitched forward.

Sneighd had the entrance to the storage area open.

“Let’s go, you two,” he ordered. “Let’s get out of here before more guards show up.”

Haunalyn went to the dead officer and pried the palm laser concealed in his hand from his grip. She handed it to Korbot.

“You might need this,” she said.

A small voice came through the com-link on Haunalyn’s belt.

“Would you all get down here,” Impa said. “The engines are gearing up.”

Sneighd and Haunalyn assisted Korbot to the open hatch into the Marauder. Safely inside, Sneighd ran to the cockpit as Impa closed both hatches. The magnetic locks disengaged, freeing the Rogue Marauder.

Haunalyn slid into the co-pilot’s seat. The engines flared to life. The Rogue Marauder took off, the speed already calculated and course laid in. There would be no time wasted in finding a safe part of space before Sneighd cut back into sub light, changed course, and disappeared again into the blur of starlight.

Chapter Sixty-Two

Sneighd knew it wouldn't take long for the Penal Barge to contact the Corporate Police Cruisers. He kept the transmitters open to intercept transmissions and avoid, if possible, surprises.

The Rogue Marauder, living up to its name, began losing power the second day after Korbot's rescue. Sneighd and Korbot were kept busy keeping the engines running long enough for a planet to be charted where they might land and repair the problem. An uninhabited minor planet with a breathable atmosphere appeared on the instruments.

Sneighd searched the data banks for a name for the planet but found none. Uncharted and uninhabited was good. That might give him and Korbot time to make repairs and get some much-needed rest.

The atmosphere of the planet was heavier than Sinnet or Rhaduri, but breathable. The air was hot and humid. Sneighd and Korbot fought with the cantankerous engines in attempt to make them behave. Haunalyn and Impa kept watch over the instruments. Nothing seemed to be working.

Korbot called a break from their task after several fruitless hours. The girls joined the men, complaining it was too hot to stay

inside. Corporate Police Scout ships shot out of the dense low-hanging cloud cover like an angered hive of drones.

“Get to the ship,” Korbot bellowed.

Korbot and Haunalyn took off at a run for the ship. Sneighd stood by the pool and pulled an odd, shaped crystal from his jacket.

“Sneighd, this is no time for games,” Haunalyn shouted. She started to him, but Korbot held her back.

“Get inside,” Korbot ordered. “He knows what he’s doing.”

Sneighd set the crystal onto the soft ground, whirled, and ran to his waiting partners. Korbot threw Haunalyn up the ramp, turned and gave Sneighd a stout kick to his backside as he sprinted past. The kick sent Sneighd headfirst into the main hold. He sprawled on the floor as Korbot closed the hatch.

The engines miraculously fired.

“Impa, get us out of here,” Korbot shouted into the com-link.

Haunalyn fled down the corridor to help the little girl at the controls. Korbot reached out a hand to help Sneighd to his feet when the Marauder took off before either man could get his balance. A second after they left land, an explosion rocked the ship. The Rogue Marauder shuddered then levelled.

“I’ve got it,” Haunalyn’s voice broke over the com-link.

“What in the name of seven galaxies was that?” Korbot demanded, his big hands on Sneighd’s shoulders to steady him.

Sneighd shook his head to clear his ringing ears. He grinned sheepishly. “An accident,” he said. “That crystal was supposed to be a smoke screen. I must have grabbed the wrong one.”

“You have more of those things?” Korbot asked.

Sneighd shook his head. “I don’t, but Haunalyn does. Her father couldn’t possibly have sanctioned half of the stuff she has on board this heap.”

Korbot groaned.

“If you all don’t mind,” Haunalyn said over the com-link, “I could use a little help up here.”

Korbot took to the cockpit to help her. Sneighd scrambled into the seat at the readout console. The monitors showed four scout ships closing in fast.

“Hauna,” he shouted into his com-link, “Warm up the cannons. We’re in for a fight.”

The Rogue Marauder began evasive maneuvers. Sneighd had difficulty staying seated. The hauler rocked from blasts on all

sides. He could hear Haunalyn's curses from the cockpit. He worried that he didn't hear Impa, glanced towards the corridor and saw her scrambling up to her perch on the supply shelf.

"The cannons won't charge," Sneighd yelled to his companions. He hit the console hard with his fist. "We don't have any weapons."

The Rogue Marauder took a direct hit starboard, buckling the shield to half power. Sparks flew out of the engine compartment. Sneighd scrambled from his seat and jerked the floor covering from the hatch to the engines. Smoke roiled out, burning his eyes as he reached in to try to make adjustments when another blast rocked the hauler, this time portside. More sparks flew from the switch he had his hand on. He screamed with pain as the electrical currents grabbed his arm. He tried to wrench free but was held tight.

Impa dropped to the floor and used the butt of her father's weapon to knock Sneighd loose. Tremors took over his body as he tried to catch his breath.

"*Korbot!*" Impa shouted. "*Help.*"

Sneighd fought against his spasming muscles. “I’m okay. I’m okay. I’m okay.” He tried to stop talking but had no control over his mouth.

Impa knelt next to him.

“Your fingers are burned,” she said.

Gaining some command, Sneighd tried a smile. “S-s-sorry.”

Korbot rushed into the main hold. He grabbed a fire extinguisher and put out the flames starting to flare from the engine compartment. The Rogue Marauder lurched forward. Korbot stumbled and hit his head on the edge of a bulkhead.

Stars exploded behind Sneighd’s eyes from the jolt.

“Help me up, baby,” he said to Impa.

The little girl helped him sit up. He swallowed several deep breaths, then clambered unsteadily to his feet. He joined Korbot at the readout console.

“We’ve lost all our thrusters.” Haunalyn’s anguished words reached them.

Sneighd heard the tears in her voice.

Korbot stared at the readout for a long moment, then called to Haunalyn in a tired faraway tone. “Take her down, Hauna.”

Sneighd sighed and sank into the seat next to Korbot. He knew there was no choice. They were done.

“*Korbot,*” Haunalyn wailed.

“Take her down, honey,” Korbot said. “There’s nothing we can do. We lost.”

Chapter Sixty-Three

Haunalyn swallowed her tears and anger, took a firm grip on the controls, and dove for the planet they had just vacated. She still had her forward shields so they wouldn't burn up going down.

The Rogue Marauder picked up speed as it neared the planet's gravitational pull.

"Buckle in," Haunalyn said to her passengers. "It's going to be bumpy."

Korbot sat back, his head aching unmercifully from the stress of the last several days. He wanted to help Haunalyn, but the force from the dive kept him welded in his seat. He was angry.

Sneighd sat silently at his side. Impa stared down at him from her shelf, her eyes huge and wet with tears. If there had been any way to escape, Korbot thought, but there wasn't. The Marauder was dead.

The Rogue Marauder jerked violently, then levelled out. The ship was beneath the outer atmosphere. Korbot unbuckled his belt and went into the cockpit.

Haunalyn sat, her face set in grim determination as she expertly guided her crippled ship along the top of the trees of the forest below.

Korbot snarled under his breath and dropped into the co-pilot's seat. As he suspected, the Police Scouts were following, holding fire, knowing the old hauler wasn't going anywhere but down. As soon as it landed, Korbot knew all hope was lost.

The end of the forest appeared. Haunalyn glided smoothly over a stretch of sandy terrain. Korbot sighed and glanced at his Rhadurian pilot. Her face was expressionless as she brought her ship closer to the ground. Haunalyn sat the Rogue Marauder down with a heavy bump, one last show of anger.

The Police Scouts settled around the Rogue Marauder in a tight circle.

Korbot heard Haunalyn mutter. "Like we're going somewhere."

The Police Scouts emerged, weapons drawn, and started toward the hauler. Haunalyn leaned forward and snapped off several rounds from her forward cannons. The Police Scouts stopped.

Korbot grabbed Haunalyn's hands. "What are you doing? And I thought the cannons were out."

Haunalyn's eyes transfixed on the men outside. "Not all of them," she said. "And I'm dealing."

Korbot wasn't sure he approved of her actions but said nothing as he watched to see what the Police would do. One of them stepped forward with a hand-link. The man's voice came over the Marauder's console.

"Alright. We get the message. What do you want?"

Haunalyn flipped her communications outside link. "Your word we'll get safe passage and a chance to tell our story."

The man laughed. "I guarantee passage, nothing else. Come on out of there."

"Not happening," Haunalyn said. She cut off her link.

Korbot was impressed with her determination, futile though it was. He would let her try. Those men were not coming aboard without a fight.

The Police began moving in. Haunalyn fired several more volleys to keep them back.

"Haunalyn," Korbot said. "We can't fight. You don't have the power to hold them off long."

“Maybe not,” Haunalyn said. “But I’ll kill them before I let them take my ship.”

Korbot buried his head wearily in his hands. He knew she would never give in unless certain the four of them were safe. The chance of them getting such assurance was slim at best.

“Hauna,” Korbot said.

She turned on him. “I know what you’re going to say. Don’t.”

“I know it’s hard,” Korbot said. “I know you don’t want to hear it. Our best chance is to give up. We’ll find a way to make them listen, but this isn’t it.”

Haunalyn’s tears flowed down her cheeks. Korbot could see her will was melting. She looked incredibly young and vulnerable.

“I won’t let them take Sneighd without their word he gets to explain.”

“We haven’t---we can’t---we tried, and we failed, Hauna,” Korbot said.

She stared at him. “That’s right,” she said suddenly. “You don’t know. We have the records. All of them. Faifa gave them to Sneighd.”

“Faifa?” Korbot was surprised. “What---how...?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Haunalyn said. The gloom had left her face. She grew animated again. “He gave Sneighd the memory disc with all of Baquar’s records, including those proving Baquar killed that Officer on Sinnet, and Doyle. We are Sneighd’s alibi. We just have to get to the right person and tell the truth.”

Korbot considered her information for a moment, then reached over to flip the outside communications link.

“You out there,” he bellowed. “Get someone in authority down here, and we’ll talk.”

The Police Scout opened his link. “Come out or we’re coming in to get you.”

Korbot almost laughed. He fastened his dark eyes on the speaker. A Sergeant, by the insignia on the man’s flight suit. “I won’t negotiate with flunkies,” Korbot said. “Get your commander down here now.”

The Sergeant shook his head to indicate his answer as no. Korbot fired a volley that missed the man’s foot by bare inches. The Sergeant jumped back. He stared up at Korbot a long moment, then turned to the man on his right and gave an order. The other Police Scout hurried to one of the Scout ships. Korbot

heard the call to a Police Cruiser over the transmitter. He had suspected a Cruiser hovered close by.

They waited, both sides silent, until a shuttle appeared and settled near the Police Scout ships. A tall man wearing the uniform of a Colonel, disembarked from the shuttle, conversed with the Sergeant, then opened the link he took from his subordinate.

“I am Colonel Wogan. What is it you wish to say?”

“My name is Korbot Maka,” Korbot said. “I am the Portmaster of the Corbian Spaceport on Sinnet. I witnessed what happened the day your official was killed. All we want is for you to listen to our side of what transpired.”

The Colonel appeared to ponder the request before speaking. “And if I don’t?”

“You look to be a reasonable man,” Korbot said. “There is no reason for you not to hear our side.”

The Colonel thought that over. “Very well. You come out and we’ll talk.”

“Not good enough,” Korbot said. “You come in. You’re safe. We can’t go anywhere. We’re surrounded by your Scouts. We aren’t apt to try anything stupid.”

Again, the Colonel hesitated, then seemed to make up his mind. He handed his weapon to his startled Sergeant.

“If they try anything,” he said. “Blow that scrapheap apart.”

“Yessir,” the Sergeant said.

The link closed.

The ramp to the Rogue Marauder ground slowly to the surface. Korbot met the Colonel at the top of the ramp by the hatch. He had instructed Haunalyn to stay at her controls, ready to shoot the first Police Scout that tried anything.

Sneighd hadn’t moved from his seat. Korbot knew he had been listening to the transmissions. There was a trickle of dried blood on Sneighd’s forehead. His hands had been bandaged by Impa who, Korbot noted, had retreated to her perch.

Colonel Wogan looked surprised when he approached and found himself looking up at Korbot who towered over him.

“I was unaware you were a Tendrite,” he said.

Korbot said nothing. He led the way into the main hold. He watched as Colonel Wogan took in his surroundings and noticed Sneighd at the Readout Console.

“Arkon?” Colonel Wogan asked.

The click of a weapon bolt caught Korbot’s attention. Colonel Wogan looked sharply at him. “No weapons?” he asked.

“It’s alright,” Korbot said. “I forgot about that.” He looked to the shelf. He noticed the Colonel follow his gaze to the weapon barrel aimed directly at the Colonel’s chest from the shelf above the acceleration couch.

“Put it down,” Korbot said.

“On one condition. He stays clear of Sneighd.” Impa spoke from the shadow of her refuge.

Korbot glanced at the Colonel who nodded.

“It’s alright, Impa,” Korbot said. “Come down from there.”

The weapon disappeared. A second later, Impa let herself down from the shelf.

Korbot noticed the surprise and possibly fascination on Colonel Wogan’s face. Impa moved to Sneighd’s side, her gaze never

leaving the Colonel's. She had her weapon, which she handed to Sneighd.

"She won't hurt you," Sneighd said. "Unless you do something stupid." He placed the weapon beneath the console.

"I wasn't aware there was a child on board," Colonel Wogan said.

"There's a lot of things of which you aren't aware," Korbot said. He felt pent up rage attempt to worm its way out and fought it under control. "Like the pilot of the "scrapheap" as you called it, is little more than a child herself. She's Rhadurian. Impa is from Garma. Sneighd...." He took a deep breath to control his rising temper. "Sneighd Arkon is not a killer. He's just a pilot that was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

The Colonel raised his eyebrows. "The reports are that he has murdered two, possibly three Corporate Officials."

"No I didn't," Sneighd said. "I was set up. You want the real culprit, talk to Baquar Starka."

"Baquar Starka?" Colonel Wogan asked. "What has he to do with all this?"

"Everything," Korbot said. "Sneighd has proof."

He gave Sneighd a meaningful glance to let him know he had been updated.

“Baquar tried to use Sneighd as a scapegoat, but I witnessed Baquar shoot the Corporate Official on Sinnet. Sneighd owed Baquar money. Baquar wanted to get rid of him. He would have succeeded if Haunalyn and I hadn’t accidentally intervened. Personally, I’m glad I did. Baquar’s dues are way past coming to him.”

“Why would Starka want to kill the man named Cocker?” Colonel Wogan asked.

“Who knows why that little rodent does anything,” Sneighd said. “Whatever his reasons, they are on the memory disc one of his men gave me.”

Colonel Wogan stared at Sneighd. “Why would one of Starka’s men give information against him to you?”

“Baquar’s a nasty piece of work,” Sneighd said. “Even his men don’t like him. This particular one hates him. And we have---an understanding.”

“I see,” the Colonel said. “Where is this memory disc?”

“When we get someplace safe,” Impa spoke up. “You’ll get it. It’s not that we don’t trust you. It’s just that we don’t trust you.”

“Who is this child?” Colonel Wogan sounded perplexed.

“Nobody you need to concern yourself with,” Sneighd said. He placed a protective arm around Impa.

“That weapon she was carrying.” Colonel Wogan ignored Sneighd. “I’ve never seen the likes of it. Where did she get it, and what is such a small child doing with such a weapon?”

Impa grabbed the weapon and pointed it at the Colonel’s chest. “You ask too many questions,” she said.

“Impa, put that down,” Korbot ordered.

Impa lowered the weapon and Sneighd took it out of her hands. He placed it back under the console.

“Stop that,” he said to her.

Korbot spoke quickly to get the conversation back on topic. “We were discussing Sneighd.

“Yes, of course.” Colonel Wogan refocused his attention. “Even if what you tell me is true, there is still the matter of...”

Chapter Sixty-Four

Colonel Wogan's statement was interrupted by an explosion that rocked the hauler, followed by the sound of hand weapons and cannons outside.

"What the devil," Korbot exclaimed. He raced to the hatch to see what was happening.

Sneighd ran to the starboard porthole, Impa at his heels.

"We're under attack," Haunalyn's voice announced over the com-link and noise. "They're Sinnetian Strikers."

Korbot heard Sneighd curse, "Baquar!"

Colonel Wogan joined Korbot, cautiously peering from the hatch at the Police scrambling for the cover of their Scout Ships. The men were pinned down by the diving Strikers. Three Police Scout ships were annihilated.

Korbot handed Colonel Wogan a blazer retrieved from a compartment above their heads. He heard the report of Haunalyn's cannons. Overhead, he saw the Police Cruiser joining the battle. Three Strikers vanished into dust as the Cruiser fired.

Korbot heard Haunalyn snarl over the com-link. "Slowpoke!"

Sneighd raced to the cockpit and dropped into the co-pilot's seat. A Striker headed straight for them. Haunalyn fired and cut the Striker down the middle. She glanced at Sneighd's bandaged hands as he took over the co-pilot console.

"You're not going to be much help," she said.

"Watch me," he said. "He took over the cannons. "This ought to tell the Corporation we're telling the truth."

Sneighd knew what had happened. Baquar thought to outnumber the Scouts and hauler but didn't count on the Cruiser. His men had come from the other side of the planet.

Sneighd hit the transmission playback. Sure enough, Baquar's transmitters had been open. His orders were clearly heard. Baquar had closely followed each transmission from the rescue of Korbot until the hauler was grounded by the Police Scouts. He had

ordered his personal Strikers to dispose of Sneighd before the Police Commanders could question him. Baquar had gambled, and to everyone on the ground, it looked as if he might win.

Five Strikers vanished, taken from behind. The remaining Strikers veered off to face two old freighters, one Denovan, one Rhadurian, and a Kenza one-man Striker.

Baquar's men made a desperate attack against the freighters. Three more Strikers exploded into space dust. The rest made a run for space. The Police Cruiser gave chase.

Korbot escorted Colonel Wogan outside the Rogue Marauder. Everyone on the ground appeared shaken and transfixed by the battle. The freighters that had taken on the Strikers set down outside the circle of the Police Scout ships.

Korbot was stunned when he saw Deacon and Dusalt exit the Rhadurian freighter. Before he could greet them, Haunalyn flew past him and into her father's arms. Father and daughter held each other tightly. Dusalt moved quietly to stand next to Korbot and the Colonel.

"Glad to see you are all still alive," Dusalt said. He grinned up at the Portmaster.

Korbot patted his old friend's shoulder but kept his eyes on Deacon and Haunalyn. "It's about time," he said.

Dusalt nodded. "He loves that girl. Heaven knows why."

Korbot laughed.

Chapter Sixty-Five

Sneighd sauntered over to where Faifa stood next to his Striker.

"You're just full of surprises, aren't you?" Sneighd asked. He offered his hand.

The unfathomable Kenza accepted the offered greeting.

"I should have known." Sneighd turned to watch the reunions across from where he and Faifa stood. "You're too smart to blow yourself up."

To Sneighd's surprise, Faifa emitted a low chuckle that sounded like gravel in a metal container.

"I told you, I have nothing against you, human."

What almost passed as a smile crossed his lipless mouth. “Baquar is another matter. Many debts will not need to be paid due to the loss of his yacht.”

“You confuse me,” Sneighd said. He laughed. “I just don’t get you at all.”

Faifa laid his hand on Sneighd’s shoulder. “Someday, I will explain what you do not understand. You are not an enemy, Sneighd Arkon.”

Faifa walked away before Sneighd could ask what he meant. A tap on his shoulder brought him around to face another surprise. Questions raced through his mind as he stared at an old friend he had not seen since he was almost twenty.

“Hap, you old star-gazer,” Sneighd said. “What are you doing here?”

Sneighd’s childhood mentor who had saved his life on Denova, gave him a lop-sided grin.

“I heard you had some trouble,” Hap said. “So I thought I should help you out.”

Sneighd stared at the man who was his height, had his coloring, and, oddly, his features. He hadn’t noticed that growing up. Hap

was a pilot that made many ore runs to and from Denova. Hap had taught the inquisitive eight-year-old Sneighd about different ships, how to fix them, how to fly them, how to recognize them. By the time Sneighd reached puberty, he knew more than most young pilots.

Teaching a Denovan child to be a pilot was illegal on Denova. Hap made certain Sneighd was not caught. Both would have been in trouble had they been. Then, they were, and Sneighd suffered for it.

Sneighd fingered his pocket that contained his pink pills.

His mood became somber. “Who told you I was in trouble?” Sneighd asked.

“It’s not a secret,” Hap said. “Half the galaxy knows the Corporation has been chasing you.”

Sneighd studied Hap’s face. There was something the man wasn’t telling him. Something more than the answer to his question.

Hap emitted a heavy sigh.

“Well?” Sneighd asked.

“I always thought you were a little dense,” Hap said.

Sneighd wasn't amused by Hap's attempted joke.

Hap shook his head. "Hatia told me. She told me you were in trouble and sent me to watch over you. I was a little late."

Things were beginning to coagulate in Sneighd's mind. Hatia had told him the truth about herself. She had gone to Hap, who had watched over Sneighd as a child, and who resembled him as a man.

Before Sneighd could ask more questions, Colonel Wogan came over to him. Korbot and the others followed to hear what the Colonel had to say.

"It seems you were right," Colonel Wogan said. "Baquar is behind this. I don't know why, what he has done, but I do have to know. If he killed Octar and Doyle, there was a reason. For some reason, he chose you to take the blame. Why?"

"I don't know," Sneighd admitted. "Because he didn't like me doesn't really justify what he's done. But that's all I know."

Colonel Wogan glanced at Faifa standing near his Striker.

"It won't do you any good to ask him," Sneighd said, guessing what the Colonel must be thinking. "He won't tell you." He

reached into his pants' pocket and pulled out the memory disc. He offered it to the Colonel.

“The information is on here. Faifa confiscated all Baquar’s files, not just the ones concerning this disaster. It’s all I have to prove I’m not guilty of anything.”

Colonel Wogan took the disc, studied it, then raised his gaze to Sneighd’s.

“I have the idea that you aren’t,” Colonel Wogan said. “Of course, you must understand I have to take you in until the matter is cleared up. I would rather not take you shackled.”

“I understand,” Sneighd said. “I’m tired of running. That disc will prove my innocence. I have to believe you’re a fair man.”

Two Police Scouts moved to flank either side of him. He stiffened but allowed them to escort him to the Colonel’s shuttle.

Impa ran after him and flung her arms protectively around his waist. “No.” She sobbed against his shirt.

Sneighd held her close to him. “It’s okay. It’s protective custody. I’ll be okay. Colonel Wogan will make sure.”

Impa slipped something into the palm of his hand. He looked and smiled at the pink pill.

“Don’t forget,” Impa said.

Korbot lifted Impa into his arms. Deacon pulled Haunalyn to him. Hap joined Sneighd.

Hap spoke to Colonel Wogan. “I’m coming along. I’m going to make certain Sneighd arrives in one piece.”

“As you wish,” Colonel Wogan said. He turned to Korbot. “You have a strange way of persuasion, Tendrite.”

“And you’re a very strange Corporate Officer,” Korbot said. “I’ve met very few in the Corporation who are so reasonable.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” Colonel Wogan said. “There aren’t many, but there are a few---if you’re lucky. Don’t worry about your friend, Korbot Maka. He will be treated fairly.”

Colonel Wogan motioned to his men. He, Sneighd, Hap, and the Police Scouts entered the shuttle. Korbot, Haunalyn, Impa, Deacon, Dusalt, and Faifa watched them leave until they were out of the atmosphere.

Faifa was the first to speak. “I go now, to my home.” He turned to Korbot. “Let me know how Sneighd fares. Grock will know how to reach me.”

Korbot nodded. Faifa climbed into his Striker and followed the shuttle.

Deacon tapped Korbot on the shoulder. “Since it doesn’t appear that old hauler is going anywhere, want a lift?”

“You can’t just leave my ship here,” Haunalyn protested.

Deacon faced his daughter. “Oh yes, I can, young lady. You have gotten into enough trouble. I think spending some time on the ground will make you think twice about getting into any more.”

“It wasn’t my fault,” Haunalyn insisted.

“If you hadn’t gone to Sinnet, you wouldn’t have become involved in this mess,” Deacon told her. “In a way, it was a good thing, but I don’t like the idea of you sneaking to places I specifically told you to stay away from.”

Haunalyn, her lips pursed in a pout, hung her head. Her face turned bright scarlet.

“Gentlemen, and ladies,” Dusalt interrupted. “I think we should get going. If I remember correctly, there is a young man who might need our help.”

The group prepared to leave. Haunalyn suddenly noticed something no one else had.

“Dad, the Denovan, Hap---he left his freighter. Shouldn’t we take it in to port?” She sounded hopeful.

Deacon turned to Korbot, who turned to Dusalt.

“You feel like flying?” Korbot asked.

Dusalt laughed. “Thought you’d never ask.”

“But---wait---Dad....” Haunalyn protested. “I thought I would...”

“I know what you thought,” Deacon said. “Korbot and Dusalt will take care of it. You get in my freighter.” He pointed to Impa. “You too. Inside, both of you.”

Boarded, the freighters came to life and lifted from the planet’s surface. In a few minutes, the planet was silent once more.

Chapter Sixty-Six

Baquar's memory disc was delivered to the Galactic Corporation Governor's Office on Gravette by Colonel Wogan as soon as the Police Cruiser docked.

Sneighd was escorted to the Capitol City Detention where he awaited questioning. He was nervous at being incarcerated. Colonel Wogan had assured him it was for his safety. Sneighd would see the Judicial Council after the information was reviewed. All the assurances in the galaxy couldn't have made Sneighd feel at ease.

He kept his promise to Impa by ingesting the pill she had given him. Unfortunately, that one was all he had. The rest of his

medication remained on the Rogue Marauder. Or, he hoped, Impa had it. It didn't matter. His headaches had returned and grew increasingly worse.

Time in a cell was tedious. There were visible doors set into the walls, but no bars or windows out of which to look. Sneighd spent much of his time sleeping. When he was awake, it was all he could do to stay on his feet. He had no idea how much time passed, or how many days he remained in the cell. The headaches made concentration impossible.

Sneighd tried to count the number of times guards brought food and water. Without daylight or darkness to measure by, he lost count and gave up.

When the guards came, Sneighd did his best to put forward a strong front and good humor so his physical condition wouldn't be noted. He couldn't allow any weakness to show, especially in front of the Judicial Council when he faced them.

Deacon's freighter arrived in Capitol City three days after the Police Cruiser. He, Korbot, Haunalyn, and Impa went directly to the Judicial Council court building, directed by a message from Colonel Wogan. Sneighd, Colonel Wogan had informed them,

would be escorted from Detention to the Court by the Gravette Security Police.

Surrounded by the Security Police escort, Sneighd was not prepared the blazer bolt that whizzed past his left ear. A second bolt struck the ground at his feet before he was flung to the ground and the Security Police opened fire against the shooter. Two Security Police grabbed Sneighd by his collar and dragged him out of the line of fire behind. Sneighd had a sick feeling of having been in this situation before. This time, however, Korbot and Haunalyn weren't handy with the Rogue Marauder to haul him off planet.

The Judicial Council Court erupted in confusion at the sound of the gun battle outside. Korbot and Deacon raced out of the building to see if they could discover where the firefight was coming from. Korbot saw the black cloaked figure before the Security Police did.

The Lurker had caught up with Sneighd at last.

The Lurker no longer cared about payment promised him by the Galactic Corporation or anyone else. Destroying Sneighd Arkon was his only goal from the beginning. He had been searching for this human, following rumors and trails that ultimately ended with frustration. This time, he wouldn't fail. He would complete a job that had begun before Sneighd Arkon existed.

The Lurker's first shot had missed, the second shot an attempt to scatter the Security Police. The Security Police had been quick securing Sneighd Arkon behind a blast wall. The Lurker would have to move in from a different angle. He prepared to ease out from his place of concealment when a blue beam from an Ion Rifle slammed into the wall where he crouched. He raised his head sharply to scan the rooftops. He saw the outline of another figure in black. He sank onto his heels and studied his options. If he attempted to leave his protection, he would be cut to pieces. His only option was to retreat. That he would never do.

“Come on, Killen, give up.”

The voice he knew well, and the woman behind it knew him. She had pursued him across the galaxy for years, and he had pursued her. They were meant to come to this moment. Only one of them would survive.

“Killen,” Hatia called. “I have you pinned down. Try to run, I will destroy you. You will never hurt Sneighd Arkon.”

“You made a mistake, Hatia,” Killen, the Lurker said.

Several more beams struck the wall above his head.

“Sneighd,” Hatia called. “Are you alright? Tell your guards to get you inside the Court building and leave this scum to me.”

No one said anything. No one moved. Sneighd had no idea what to do. He glanced at the Security Police near him. They shook their heads, obviously as confused as to what to do as he was.

“Do as she says,” one of the Security Police said. “Keep low and stay close to the wall.”

He moved out. Sneighd and his men followed. Sneighd saw a peripheral movement. The Lurker attempted to shadow him and the Security Police. Blazer fire rang out ahead of them. Sneighd saw Korbot and Deacon behind the columns of the Court building. Their gunfire prevented the Lurker from coming close.

Sneighd searched the area across from him. He couldn't see the Lurker's position. The Security Police prodded him forward.

They reached the columns where Korbot and Deacon hunkered when blazer blasts filled the air around them.

Sneighd spied the Lurker a second before an Ion Rifle beam streaked from the rooftop where Hatia had been. There was a sharp cry, then a dull thud as a body, clothed in dark gray, fell to the ground a few feet away.

One of the Security Police approached the body, gingerly pushed the Lurker over onto his back with the toe of his boot. Sneighd and the other men looked to the rooftop. Hatia stood, waved, and disappeared.

Sneighd stood before the Judicial Council as the evidence was presented by Colonel Wogan. The information on the memory disc clearly indicated that Baquar, not Sneighd, was the murderer of the Corporation officials Cocker, aka Octar, and Doyle. The information also proved that Cocker, in collusion with Baquar, had been double dealing with the Galactic Corporation a long number of years. Both persons had interfered with enterprises, treaties, and government matters, growing wealthy at the Corporation's expense.

The memory disc listed the names of persons, human and otherwise, who had died at Baquar's hands. Some of those persons were Corporation personnel. Some were names of pilots,

suppliers, merchants, and citizens of numerous planets. One planet mentioned was Garma, and four names listed were those of Impa's family.

By the end of the Council, Sneighd was ready to return to Sinneth himself to disembowel the slimy rodent Baquar.

The Council requested for Sneighd to remain in Capitol City until Baquar Starka was apprehended and brought before them.

"You are no longer a prisoner," the head of the Council said. "The information you have presented to us proves you are innocent of all charges. However, young man, it is our hope that this episode in your life will prove enlightening to you. Continue on the path you have followed, and fate might not be so kind to you."

Sneighd said nothing. What was there to say? He took a deep breath, his gaze scanning the Court when he noticed an unexpected observer in the back of the room. Faifa acknowledged him with a slight nod, then left the Court.

Sneighd found himself surrounded by Korbot, Deacon, Haunalyn, and Impa. He scooped Impa into his arms and hugged her. She frowned, stared into his eyes, and whispered to him.

"Did you take your pill?"

Sneighd fought to hold his smile in place. “Sure. I promised didn’t I?”

He saw by her expression she wasn’t convinced.

“I’m fine sweetheart. Really.”

He lowered Impa to the floor and turned to Korbob.

“It’s over,” he said. “Thank you, Korbob, for all you’ve done.”

“Yeah,” Korbob said. “You be alright here on Gravette?”

“No problem,” Sneighd said. “It won’t take the Corporation long to snag Baquar.”

“He’s right,” Deacon said. “I heard the Council giving order that Sinnet would no longer be considered hands-off. Baquar cut his own throat with his greed.”

“Unfortunately, he cut many others while he was at it,” Korbob said.

Hap appeared behind Sneighd and clapped him on his back.

“Where’d you come from?” Sneighd asked.

“I’ve been here the whole time,” Hap said. “And I’ll be here until this matter is finished.” He looked to Korbob. “I’ll take care of him while he’s here.”

Sneighd saw Korbot's eyebrow shoot up. He chose not to answer Korbot's unasked question, though he was certain the big man noticed a resemblance between him and Hap. There would be time for explanations later.

Chapter Sixty-Seven

(The last chapter)

Rhaduri bathed in spring sunshine when Deacon, Korbot, and the girls returned.

Haunalyn found herself unexpectedly glad to be home after being chased all over the galaxy. She didn't even ask Deacon about the Rogue Marauder, which, Frank informed her, had been towed to Rhaduri by order of her father. She didn't care. The old hauler would be scrapped. She would get another ship. For now, she was content being grounded.

She worried about Sneighd. She had noticed how pale his face appeared while at the court. He looked tired, drained, and in pain. She knew Impa had seen it, watched the little girl hug Sneighd tight around the neck and whisper to him.

A thought struck Haunalyn. She ran to the port, hoping she was wrong in what had come to her. She found Frank working on a freighter.

“Frank, where’s the Rogue Marauder?” she asked.

Frank gave her a look of strained patience. “Now, Hauna, that piece of junk is...”

“I know,” she interrupted. “But I need to check if something is on it, something important.”

Frank studied her a moment, then nodded for her to follow him.

The Rogue Marauder was housed in a bay that was specifically for ships to be scrapped. The hatch yawned open, the blast door already removed. Haunalyn hurried up the ramp and into the mail hold. She stopped abruptly at the sight of the inside of her beloved hauler. The air was stale and hot. The familiar smells of the ship brought tears to her eyes. The Marauder was abandoned. Soon, it wouldn’t exist at all.

Haunalyn swiped away her tears. She looked around and spotted what she feared she would find. She snatched Sneighd's jacket from one of the console seats and reached into a pocket. Her fingers closed around the card and packet. She had been right. He had lost his pills again. Without them, he could succumb to his illness.

She had to get the pills and his med-card to him. She fled the Rogue Marauder. She had to get her father to return her to Capitol City.

Korbot came in front the docks where he and Dusalt had been going over plans to revitalize and repair Deacon's old freighter. The two old friends had spent several full nights deciding if they were too old to return to freighting.

Korbot found Deacon staring out of the panoramic window at the end of the room onto a balcony outside. Korbot joined his friend and saw Impa. He had noticed Impa's silence, the way she drifted to the balcony to stand and watch every ship that arrived and left Rhaduri Port.

"She been out there a long time?" Korbot asked.

Deacon nodded. “I know she’s not mine, but she’s just a little girl. I wish there was something I could do for her. She hasn’t eaten or slept much in the past few days.”

“She’s a tough little girl,” Korbot said. He smiled. “She’ll be alright as soon as Sneighd...”

He caught a pained expression on Deacon’s face at the mention of Sneighd. “What is it, Deac?”

Deacon turned to face him. “I received a transmission from Hap this morning. Sneighd---slipped into a coma last night.”

“No.” Haunalyn’s anguished cry turned the men toward the entrance to the room. “No, that’s not right.”

Haunalyn ran to her father and grabbed the front of his tunic. “It can’t be right,” she wailed.

She turned to Korbot and held out her hand to show him the med-card and the medication. “We have to go. We have to get his to him. Please.”

Korbot took her wrists gently in his hands. “I’m sure Hap will get him the help he needs. There is a Med-Center in Capitol City, the largest and best equipped in the galaxy.” He glanced to his old friend. “Deacon?”

“Hap said Sneighd has evidently been ill for quite some time. He managed to keep it hidden until it overtook him. It started with headaches, then a fever, then...” He broke off.

“Dad?” Haunalyn looked to Deacon. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Deacon wiped them away and pulled her to him. She wept against his chest.

“Korbot?” Impa’s voice was small and frightened.

Korbot reached out to gather her in. She had entered the room and heard what Deacon reported.

Korbot remembered the strange fevers Sneighd suffered, the pink pills so vital to ward off the effects of the excruciating headaches that incapacitated the younger man.

“What are we going to do?” Haunalyn asked, pulling away from Deacon’s arms.

Korbot wasn’t listening. He was thinking about the fact Baquar not only caused Sneighd to lose his medication more than once, but was also behind the attacks that kept Sneighd under constant pressure. Sneighd had explained how consistent stress and tension brought on the fevers and headaches.

Baquar had driven Sneighd, pushed him, threatened him, tortured him, but Sneighd fought gallantly back every step of the way. For Sneighd to lose in the end to Baquar was unacceptable.

Korbot felt the fires of rage ignite in his veins.

“Korbot?” Deacon shook the big man’s arm. “Are you alright?”

Korbot roused from his thoughts and stared down at Deacon and the girls.

“No,” he said. “No, I am not alright, and I won’t be until Baquar is dead. I’m going to kill him. So help me, I am going to wring his fat neck with my bare hands.”

Baquar sat in his high-backed chair behind his desk, alone in his office. Soon the Galactic Corporation Police would swarm Sinnet like angry hornets, invade his private fortress, and drag him off to Capitol City. There was no use trying to evade the inevitable. He couldn’t escape. His yacht was destroyed. Any shuttle, barge, or passenger cruiser would be suddenly stopped once it left the planet. His whole enterprise had failed. Cocker cheated him even in death. Faifa, his loyal Faifa, betrayed him. And Sneighd, a worthless pilot who had no idea of his true identity, had turned the tables on him.

Baquar wished he had finished Sneighd off after capturing him. He had wanted to enjoy the slow painful death when a quick death would have saved him all this trouble.

Baquar laughed at the irony. He had wanted to destroy Sneighd, and Sneighd had destroyed him.

Baquar's laugh echoed through the empty office. His men were gone, disbanded by his order. They were no use to him now. They did only what he had paid them to do. There was no reason they should face the Galactic Corporation Judicial Council. They knew far too much. Better to let them escape and keep their mouths shut than to let the Judicial Council question them.

Baquar seriously considered suicide, sitting alone in his office. The thought was fleeting. He knew he was too much of a coward to take his own life. His choices were limited. He chose to wait for the Galactic Corporation Police. They wouldn't take him to Gravette. He wouldn't face the Council. He would make certain when they came for him, they would be the instrument of his demise.

The door to Baquar's office opened. He was startled to find himself staring up into the angry dark eyes of his old enemy.

“Ah, Korbot.” Baquar greeted the Portmaster pleasantly. He noticed Deacon. “And Deacon as well, what a surprise. Please, gentlemen, have a seat.” He indicated two chairs in front of his desk.

Korbot narrowed his eyes. “What are you up to Baquar?”

“Me? Why nothing,” Baquar said. “Please, will you not share some wine with me?” He poured a dark purple liquid from a decanter on his desk into two wine glasses.

Korbot and Deacon to either side of the desk, make a wide target in case Baquar attempted something unexpected.

The moneylender inched his hand across the surface of the desk, then dropped his hand to a drawer.

Korbot and Deacon pulled their weapons.

“Drop it, Baquar,” Korbot ordered. “You can’t shoot both of us.”

Baquar’s smile was mad, his eyes glazed with insanity.

“Kill me,” he shouted. He rose to his feet, raised the palm laser, and fired.

The beam barely missed Korbot’s left shoulder. Korbot’s blazer spoke loudly. The bolt slammed into Baquar’s chest. Baquar

collided with the wall. His smile remained, his eyes open, as his lifeless body slid slowly to the floor in a crumpled heap.

Korbot holstered his weapon, stared at the creature for a minute, then he and Deacon walked out of the office.

Haunalyn was waiting for them when they returned to Rhaduri.

“I’ve received word from Colonel Wogan,” she said. “There’s no change. The Med Center physicians are doing all they can. They told Colonel Wogan the illness was caused by old injuries.”

She gave Korbot a strange look. “You knew, didn’t you?”

“When he finally told me, yes,” Korbot admitted. “He told me why he had to have those pills. He didn’t go into detail, just that a childhood injury made the medication necessary.”

“Hap wants us to come to Capitol City,” Haunalyn said. “I don’t know why. I couldn’t ask. I didn’t want to hear his answer.”

Korbot glanced around the room. “Where’s Impa?”

“On the balcony,” Haunalyn said. “She knows. I told her. I thought she should know that---that...” She couldn’t finish her sentence.

Korbot walked onto the door and called Impa inside. She came to him, a set look of determination on her face.

“We have to go to Sneighd,” Impa said.

Korbot looked to Deacon who nodded.

The trip to Gravette and Capitol City was made in silence except when Korbot or Deacon discussed their course. When the freighter landed, Hap waited for them.

“How is he?” Haunalyn asked.

“No change,” Hap said. “The good thing is he is breathing on his own. He moves in his sleep. There is brain activity. He just won’t wake up.”

Hap walked them through the city streets to give them time to talk.

“Did you know about this?” Korbot asked.

“Sneighd wanted to leave Denova,” Hap said. “The first time I saw that little kid coming toward me, I knew he wasn’t Denovan.” He paused. “I knew he was...” He took a deep breath. “Because of the Denova law, I couldn’t take him away from there. The brute that raised him thought nothing of using his fists. When Sneighd

came of age, according to the law, he and I planned for him to leave with me. Bangor had other ideas. He almost beat Sneighd to death---before Sneighd shot him.” Hap grimaced at the memory. “I didn’t know Sneighd had a weapon. I don’t know where he got it. I and other men were trying to talk Bangor down. We weren’t watching Sneighd. He fired the gun and lost consciousness. He was in a coma for two years. Doc Flera, the physician on Denova, thought Sneighd wasn’t going to awaken at all. When he finally came out of the coma, Sneighd was told it could happen again. If it did, the coma could be permanent, or could kill him. Doc told Sneighd that medication was crucial to his survival. He took the pills faithfully, while he was with me anyway. When he turned twenty, he struck out on his own.”

“Do the physicians think this time might be permanent?”

Deacon asked.

The group arrived at the Med-Center.

“They don’t know,” Hap said.

Hap escorted them through the Med-Center to Sneighd’s room. To their surprise, the bed was empty. Hap searched the lockers.

“His things are gone,” Hap said. He pressed a red button located on the wall next to the door.

A Med-Bot appeared.

“Where’s the young man who is supposed to be in this room?”

Hap demanded to know.

The Med-Bot looked as startled as a Med-Bot could, then tapped a code into a wall unit. Blue lights flashed and an alarm blared.

Human physicians, Med-Bots, and Security scoured the Med-Center for their lost patient. No one seemed to know where the young pilot had disappeared to.

Colonel Wogan was informed of Sneighd’s strange disappearance. He initiated an immediate search of the city, especially the Port. A dock worker, came forward announcing he remembered seeing the night before a figure dressed in black leave the docks and return an hour later with a loaded anti-grav platform.

“What was on the platform?” Colone Wogan asked.

“Don’t know,” the dock worker said. “Just a bundle.”

“How big of a bundle?” Korbot asked. He had a sinking feeling in his stomach.

“Could it have been large enough to be a body?” Colonel Wogan asked.

The dock worker gave that possibility some thought.

“Could have,” he said. “I wasn’t very close, and the person loaded the bundle real fast.”

“Was that person in black a woman?” Hap asked.

His question seemed to surprise the dock worker. The man shrugged, thought a moment as if to be sure, then shook his head. “I just don’t know.”

“What are you thinking, Hap?” Korbot asked.

Hap stared into the clear blue sky, an expression of anger on his features.

“Hatia,” he said. “It was Hatia. She’s taken him.”

