**The Palace Murders**

**Glenn Jackson**

By Glenn Jackson

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**Glenn Jackson**

**The Palace Murders**

A Novel

*The Palace Murders,* is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Glenn Jackson

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**Dedication**

This book is dedicated to the mysteries and the unexpected events that occur in life, such as meeting and falling in love with my lovely wife, Kristina.

**The Palace Murders**

Tales of Tales

397.088.13

Sam was in the kitchen when the notification alerted him to someone at the door. He looked at it and saw it was the reporter he expected. He walked down the hallway to the front door and opened it.

“Good morning, My Lord.”

“Good morning to you. Please, come in.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“You obviously know my name, but I wasn’t informed of yours.”

“Oh, yes sir, I’m Deluvi Delhaven, with the Intergalactic.”

“Pleased to meet you, Deluvi. Can I get you anything before we get started?”

“No, thank you. Unfortunately, sir, my time is limited, so I would prefer to get to the story, if that’s possible.”

“I see. Well then, let’s go back into my study, its quieter there.”

They walked down a hallway to the first room on the left. Sam said, “You know, it’s been quite a while, but I still remember the story clearly. I haven’t actually tried to document it before, but it seems the time is right. After all, it is the fiftieth anniversary of the events.”

“Exactly, sir. Our readers would love to hear the true story of the events, from your perspective, of course.”

“Truth and perspective are very slippery words. They can sometimes overlap, but oftentimes they are wildly apart. So, I would stipulate before we begin, that this is the story from my perspective, which I believe to be true, but others may have a different interpretation.”

“Of course.”

“Please have a seat.”

They sat in the quiet room of the house, where Sam went to think and find quiet time. Each took a high back, deep cushioned chair that faced a lovely granite fireplace, with a couple of small logs currently burning. On the wall in this room were hundreds of photos representing a life well lived. It was cozy.

Sam began, “Well, looking back, it’s easy to get lost in the sheer romance of it all. I mean, the Empire was at peace. The Empress seemed to be doing everything right to make sure the people thrived, the King of the Milky Way Galaxy and the Queen of the Andromeda Galaxy were well liked by their subjects, and everyone was just busy with their own lives with no thought of a danger lurking in the shadows.”

“I include myself in that group of contented people as well. You see, I had been busier and busier in the years leading up to the events in question, and successful as well. My reputation was growing with each solved case. My work, my investigations that built my reputation, were earned on only one planet, but still, that is what eventually got me noticed and brought into the story.”

“Mind you, as aware of events as I was, I was not aware of this developing story until I was summoned. I was busy. Cases of murder, intrigue, theft, blackmail, betrayal; all of which lent themselves to solving this case. But while it turned out to be a very important case, it didn’t start out that way. That’s why most people were not even aware of it until it was over.”

“And as with so many crimes of passion, it all began with human frailty and greed. Someone wanted something they couldn’t or didn’t have, and made choices to get it regardless of who got hurt in the process. Most crimes of passion evolve along these lines. However, let’s begin at the beginning.”

“You mean at the Imperial Palace?”

“No, to be honest, and it probably sounds odd, but the story didn’t begin at the Imperial Palace. Instead, it began on the Planet Secunsa.”

“Really? How so?”

“Yes, really. How so? Well, you see, the beginning of the story involved the Tarrequein people, the original settlers of the planet Secunsa. They arrived there in the year one hundred and seven. They were descended from a tribe of indigenous people from the North American continent from the old ancestral home on Planet Earth. Naturally, when they arrived, which was more by being shoved aside rather than desiring to migrate, they established their old ways, peaceful as always, that they had lived for centuries before. They created a civilization based on those old, trusted ways.”

He got up and walked over to the mantle and fetched a cigar, lighting it from a twig in the fireplace. “Then, as time passed, the planet received new settlers, those with more ambitious ideas than sitting around being happy and being close to the land. These new settlers grew in number until there were vastly more of them than the Tarrequein. Once that happened, changes began. Soon the Tarrequein were restricted to a single large portion of land. Over time, that portion was whittled away, as land was taken away for more growth.”

“Finally, it came to the point where they only had a very small amount of land left. This is when they finally began to push back and protest. They had shown their patience and turned their cheek so many times, but enough was enough.”

“This is what led to the forced taking of the land, and the ugliness that ensued. Brutality did occur, and some Tarrequein were killed. The news of this was strictly controlled, however, so the Empress would not find out.”

“Instead, some other things developed as a result of the Tarrequein issue, one of which was a perceived opportunity. This was where the story truly began, because these passions led, ultimately, to murder, the beginning of the story that most people know about.”

“But even this was not the true beginning of the story. It began well before this, and was due, as I have said, to the greed that resides at the core of human nature. The Tarrequein were, as they have been before, an excuse or a means to an end.”

“But I will try and tell the story in sequential order, although it might get a little mixed up at times.”

Early Rumblings

346.175.11

The King of the Milky Way Galaxy, His Royal Majesty Ignatius Rolanda Delthorian, was named King by the Imperial Emperor Leon I during the twelfth year of his reign. As such, he would rule for eight years under Emperor Leon, and twelve years under his heir, whoever that would be. The Queen of the Andromeda Galaxy, Her Royal Majesty Natalia Ivanovich Sarovsky, was named Queen by Empress Alexandra III during the fifth year of her reign. As such, she would reign for fifteen years under Empress Alexandra, then five years under her heir, whoever that would be.

When Emperor Leon I named his daughter, Princess Alexandra, to be his heir, many people were surprised and troubled by this occurrence. No one wanted a dynasty to develop, where only one family held power and controlled events for a very extended period of time. That is why Empress Stephanie I, the first ruler of the known universe, had established the precedent of ruling for twenty years, then passing leadership on to someone other than immediate family.

While all had been going according to this precedent until Leon I, sadly, it automatically created a group of people with a negative view of Empress Alexandra III, even before she was coronated. However, she was a delightful person, and most people soon dropped their concerns and accepted her whole heartedly, as their new Empress. But there were some who did not.

During her first five years as Empress, Alexandra spent all of her time in the Andromeda Galaxy. She departed for Meladeran only after she had participated in the coronation of Queen Natalia. Her time spent there was well spent, nurturing relationships and growing bonds that would last lifetimes. In her absence, she had allowed her brother, Prince DeMarco, to attend some events, representing her and the Empire. However, King Ignatius conducted most of the official business.

Once she returned to Meladeran, she began the work of building relationships in the Milky Way Galaxy. Most people had, by now, accepted that she was their Empress, and as she was childless, felt certain that her family would not continue the monarchy once she left the throne. But not everyone.

“This cannot be allowed to stand.”

“Of course not, my friend. But what can we do? We are but a few. Most are not even concerned about this precedent.”

“I know. That’s what makes it so difficult. We are going to have to do a lot of work if we want to change things.”

“I agree. Let’s meet again in a few weeks and see if we can come up with any ideas on what we can do. In the meantime, talk around and find out if there is anyone else who shares your sentiment. We may be able to make a difference, perhaps in the next monarch, but we must begin soon.”

“Very well. But we can’t let this just sit there without a response.”

“I agree. Farewell until our next meeting.”

“Good morning, Your Majesty.”

“Yes, good morning, admiral. I need someone I can trust to carry out some specific and secret orders for the Empire. Can you do that?”

“Of course.”

“Very good. This is a long-term project, and the rewards are high, but failure could lead to death.”

“I understand.”

“Very well, here are your orders.”

He handed him a packet that the admiral reviewed. He said, “I can do this, and I believe, successfully.”

“Very well. Once you begin, we will take other steps. It may seem chaotic, but stay the course and it will all work out right. You will know my contact when you see him.”

“He bowed, saying, “Your Majesty.”

Tazni Twillow

347.088.06

Tazni awoke early, far too excited to spend any time in bed sleeping! She had spent the entire previous day with the man she believed to be the love of her life, a slightly older gentleman, but one with so much experience, passion, and joy for living that she was almost always overwhelmed whenever she thought about him. He knew what she needed and wanted. Yesterday he had treated her to a complete makeover at Doreen’s salon, and then they had eaten at one of the finest restaurants in the city. It was the most perfect day! She couldn’t wait to tell her parents about him when she went home in a couple of weeks. She just knew they would love him too, and not have any issues with the age difference.

But today she had a full schedule, which was her normal life, meaning very busy. Her life here, although fun, was also hard. She worked at the palace to cover her expenses, even though her true passion was her classes in archeology at the university. She was a third year, so the research they were doing was much deeper. Next year she was going to go on an actual dig for three months, looking into the origins of humanity. It was so empowering to think that maybe she could find even a small relic that could help tie the history of humans together, to answer the age-old question, ‘where did humans originally come from?’

This morning her first class was at six in the morning, and she finished her classes at noon. Then she had a workout at the Galactic Gymnasium, a gorgeous facility with full walls of glass revealing the glory of the sun, showing the architecture and beauty of the Imperial City. She had followed the instructions of the holographic workout coach and had one of her best workouts ever. When she finished, she left and walked the three blocks to her building, where she took a bounce up to her apartment.

She realized that she was nearly late for work, so hurriedly cleaned and dressed, grabbed a dinner pill, wiped a star across her face for decoration, and bounced down to the underground for a chute that would take her to work. She had a late shift at the Royal Chamberlain’s main office.

Someone had recently discovered a data retrieval and management issue in their system. Before they turned it over to the Imperial Systems Management team, they wanted someone to take a shot at fixing it. She was tasked to give it a try and fix it if she could, since she was the most qualified, based on her experience with multiple data systems operations and repair. She also had experience and education in programming language. She knew she could easily get a job working in technology, but archeology was so much more fun.

Tonight though, technology; and not only would the repair take time, but there were multiple accounts to process overnight for billing, coordination, official correspondence, and other requirements. It would be a busy night.

Her office was on the fifth floor of the main building, just down the hall from the main elevators and close to Human Resources. She arrived at precisely seven o’clock in the evening for a night shift, scheduled to get off at four in the morning. As she walked in she met Sarah, who was just leaving.

“Hi Tazni.”

“Oh, hi, Sarah. How goes it tonight?”

“Oh, you know, lots of the same things. I think you will be busy, though, trying to fix that programming issue.”

“Yep. But being busy helps the time go by faster.”

“I agree. Are we still on for that star ball game tomorrow?”

“Absolutely! I’ve been working out for a couple of weeks just to be ready for you!”

“Oh, my dear,” she laughed, “You are already way better than me. Okay, well, see you tomorrow at three. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

She settled down in the seat at her cubicle desk and began running transactions. It took a while, but once things seemed to be running smoothly, she switched to another system and began her research on the program repairs. She knew the issue was inside the programming language, so that was her focus. At about nine thirty she got up and went to the bathroom and the kitchenette for some mestava.

After she returned, she checked on the other programs that were running, just to make sure all was working as it should, and then really focused on the bug. It was very detailed work, and she was concentrating so hard on the program language that may have the problem, that she never noticed the figure who entered and paused quietly in the shadows by the door. She never saw the figure move within the shadows to the area directly behind her either. Nor did she hear the figure approach from behind.

She didn’t actually feel the sliclei, as the figure quickly reached out and slit her throat. She couldn’t yell, her throat was cut open, and she died quickly; although there was some time while she gasped for breath and tried to hold her neck to stop the bleeding. But that didn’t last too long. Eventually, she was dead on the floor, a last look of shock and horror on her face.

The figure stood and watched her death struggle, then looked at her dead body on the floor and its position relative to the working space and doors. After a few moments, the figure turned and departed.

First Investigation

347.089.04

Inspector Vornthisen was the Chief Inspector for the Chamberlains Directorate. He covered all of the serious criminal aspects of the directorate, mostly fraud and theft. However, today his focus would change.

He was awakened from a very good sleep at four in the morning. He was always grouchy when he didn’t get his sleep, so when he arrived at the Chamberlains office, he was very irritable. He entered the building through the main doorway, and waving his credentials, went directly to the scene.

“Good morning, Inspector Vornthisen.”

“Huh, not sure why you think this is a good morning, Lieutenant. Show me what we’ve got.”

“Yes, sir. We found the body over here.”

He walked over and found the body, young female, still holding her throat to stop the bleeding, a vacant stare in her eyes, but otherwise, no obvious sign of a struggle. He glanced at her workstation, and everything seemed to be in order, again, no sign of a struggle.

“Has anything been touched or disturbed?”

“No, sir. We have already had a full forensic scan, all DNA matches complete, time of death at exactly eleven PM, body found at three thirty AM.”

“Very good.” He stood there, looking at the scene, observing the relationship of the body to the shadows and hallway.

“Someone could get behind you here without being observed.”

“Yes, and to kill someone the way they did, it seems that is exactly what happened.”

“Visual records?”

“None.”

“What do you mean, no records? Everything is scanned in the palace.”

“Yes sir, but for some reason, which we are checking into, the entire visual recording system in the Chamberlain building shut down at ten twenty-five last night, and didn’t come back on until one in the morning.”

“So, whoever did this had access to not only the security systems, but the video systems as well.”

“Yes, sir, that is a possibility. We are running a list of such individuals for your review.”

“Have you found a murder weapon?”

“Nothing here, so we assume the killer kept the weapon, but it appears to be a sliclei.”

“Humph, not very many of those in use anymore. Very well. Inform the coroner I want a full autopsy report first thing, then forward all the information you’ve collected to my office under my stamp. You may release the body now.”

“Yes, sir.” The lieutenant waved his hand to the coroner, who entered with her team to remove the body.

“Has anyone provided notification for letting the family know?”

“No, sir. We were waiting for you.”

“Very well, I will coordinate with the Chamberlain. Anything else?”

“Not that I am aware of.”

“Okay. Good morning.”

The Inspector left and walked directly to the Chamberlain’s office to inform him of the event. When he arrived at the Chamberlains office, the Secretary was already there, preparing for the day.

“Good morning, Clara.”

“Oh, good morning, Inspector. May I help you?”

“Is the Lord Chamberlain in?”

“Yes, he arrived just a few minutes ago.”

“Okay. I need to see him, it’s urgent.”

“Very well, I think it’s alright if you go right in.”

“Thank you.”

He entered to a perfunctory ‘morning, have a seat’ from the Chamberlain. Once he was seated, he waited until the Lord Chamberlain looked up.

“Please tell me you are not here with any bad news. There are enough things happening right now that I just do not need any more.”

“Sorry, Your Lordship, but unfortunately I do.”

“Well, then, what is it?”

“My Lord, there was a murder in our building this morning, on the fifth floor, not too far from here.”

“Really? Who was involved?”

“The victim was a data retrieval and management processor working overnight, a young woman, twenty-three years old. Her throat was sliced, apparently using an out-lawed weapon, a sliclei; although I will know for sure once the coroner completes an autopsy.”

“Who would have done such a thing, and why?”

“It’s too early to tell, My Lord. I have all the information from the crime scene and will begin evaluating once I get to my office. However, someone needs to notify the family of this event.”

The Chamberlain lowered his gaze and looking up, said, “Very well, I will take care of the notification. I expect you to conduct a thorough investigation and find out who did this. I do not want people being murdered in my office. Report back to me when you have some useful information.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

He left, wondering all the way to his office one key question; who could have had access to the security and video systems? That seemed the best avenue to find out who was involved.

Over the next few weeks, he tracked down everything he could. He learned that Tazni came from a normal family on the planet Paradon, no aristocracy in her veins. She was supported by her family as best they could, but worked hard to pay her own way. So, there was no unexpected political intrigue involved.

He ran lists of personnel who had access to all the systems to crosscheck them. There were quite a few matches, and he ran those names against everyone who was in the building, or anyone with any documented concerns, no match. Then he ran checks on everyone who had entered the building; but everyone who entered was there for a legitimate reason, no one was suspicious.

He ran through her personnel file, but everything was in order and there were no reports of anything out of the ordinary. She had not reported anyone as suspicious in her time on Meladeran. So, after weeks of effort, he had to conclude that there was no suspect or motive for the murder that he could find. Reluctantly, he dropped it into the cold case file, and waited to see if anything ever materialized to support further action.

Grieving

348.092.10

The ship carrying Tazni Twillow’s body arrived on Paradon four days after her death. Her parents met the ship, but upon seeing the casket of their beloved Tazni, they broke down into tears and sobbing at the loss. The funeral director, a good friend of theirs, loaded the casket onto a waiting transport and departed, going to their home with her, for one last moment before her burial.

Their friend had coordinated with officials on Meladeran and knew it was okay to open the casket. Even so, he insisted that he be allowed to do this before they saw her, just to make sure nothing had shifted during transport. Once all was prepared, the family was allowed in to see the body of their lovely girl.

They only kept the casket in their house a short time, then closed it and moved to their local church, where hundreds of her friends and the extended family gathered. They spoke of the life she had, the joys, memories, and possibilities. Then, once the service was ended, took her casket, and buried it in the family plot in the main cemetery.

It was a heart-breaking day, and ended in a heart-breaking fashion. Her parents were devastated, and didn’t think they could ever have joy in their life again.

Club Dorral

347.208.21

The Club Dorral on Meladeran existed as a place for those to meet and talk who did not want anyone to hear what they said, or know who they were. Its discretion was known far and wide. The Imperial Police and Star Fleet had tried many times to place devices inside or plant someone, but had never been successful. Many believed the Club had protection by someone so high up, it must be the Empress herself. Otherwise, how could this place remain so free from interference?

People who came to the Club were highly skilled, superbly wealthy, or exceedingly dangerous. Some of them were all three. Tonight’s crowd was no different than any other night.

Arrivals were conducted inside a secrecy shroud, and once inside, members were taken to secure shielded spaces where they could still see and hear the main bar and lounge area, but were not observable and could not be heard by anyone outside their shield. It made for a perfect setup.

Gathered in one room was a group of people attempting to steal a ridiculous amount of money from the Imperial Bank. In another were two people discussing the elimination of a trading partner. In another were three people talking about the Empire.

“But it makes no sense. How will these simple acts translate into a bigger action?”

“That’s the beauty of it. Anybody that looks at these actions will assume they are random and not part of a pattern. It will be too late before they pull things together into a true picture and can respond.”

“Yeah, especially if they are like the police.”

They all laughed.

“Those guys are so incompetent.”

“Yes, except for a few. There are those who are very good.”

“Yes, well we’ve made arrangements as to who is handling this case, and he is one of the worst.”

“Funny how they think they are so good. Hell, my friend Leo, the hitman in a murder, was caught red handed with a weapon in his hand, and still convinced them that he was acting in self-defense!”

“Yea, and he even sued them and was recompensed for time spent and emotional injury!”

“My God, these are not serious enforcers. If they wanted serious enforcement, they could come to us and ask us to take care of it for them. I mean if they paid us enough, we could end crime!”

“You’re right. Hey, by the way, how’s your new guy working out?”

“Very well. He was sent to me, I trained him, turned him loose, and his handlers have paid a lot, and I mean a lot, for this success.”

“Any more lined up?”

“Well, they said it would be an on-call or as-needed basis. I just keep him in shape and the money keeps rolling in. No idea when it will stop.”

“You better be careful. These types of contracts can go south in a flash, and you’re left holding the bag.”

“I know. So, I’ve created a few escape routes and plans. Not too worried.”

“Well, that’s good. Just remember, be careful, we don’t want to lose you from the syndicate. We’ve got some very big fish to fry coming up.”

Eloiese Eme

348.088.04

Eloise was from a noble family on the Planet Secunsa. As such, she was under the protection of the Baron of the planet, so had a security detail whenever she felt she needed one. Any time she went out into crowds or busy nightlife streets, they were close by.

Even with the limitations of being part of the aristocracy, Eloiese lived her life to the fullest. She participated in numerous charity causes, volunteered her time as often as she could, and seemed to enjoy every day to the fullest. She was one of the good ones, devoted to helping others, self-less, caring, and good natured.

Yesterday, she spent with her lover. He was so very passionate! His touch and kisses on her neck drove her crazy! He was a slightly older gentleman, but he loved her so much it gave her tingles whenever she thought of him. She planned a romantic interlude with him after her shift the following night, so she had found time to go to Doreen’s Salon and had Sasha give her a special look. She knew he was going to love it!

Today she started her day early. She got up at four to make sure her new hairstyle had not been messed up by her sleeping on it, then dressed and prepared for her day. She had an early class at six, followed by a seven-thirty, nine, eleven and twelve-thirty. Her classes lasted until two, not leaving her much time to hustle to lunch, and then off to work. Her best class was the archeology class she was taking. As a third year, she was prepping for a real dig for the following year. She loved searching the past for clues on where humans came from.

She had gotten gobs of comments about how she looked with her new hairstyle, and provided all the girls with Sasha’s contact information. She was feeling fabulous and loved the day.

After she finished her lunch, she prepped for work. She had a really cool position at the Chamberlains office, and she loved working at the Imperial Palace. She had gone to the Royal Court one day, and watched the Empress hear the various concerns of her people! It was fabulous! Her job wasn’t nearly as glamorous as that, but wow, to be so close to power! It was awesome!

She worked in the Household Management Department, responsible for staff management in all the lesser palaces. She had an evening shift today, and would be reviewing the decision to release several of the household staff from three of the lesser palaces. Apparently, they had been coordinating their efforts to steal certain items and sell them on the black market.

She arrived at three forty-five, entered her code at the door, and entered the restricted area where she worked. The doors weren’t yet sealed, but the staff were still required to enter their code, so when the room did seal, only authorized individuals would be inside.

She waved to her friend Thomas, and then sat down at her cubicle and began the review. Interestingly, they seemed to have only taken items that would not quite be missed, but which were valuable enough to turn a good profit. This inferred that someone was very smart in directing them on what items to take. She would have to turn all this information over to the police once she was complete. It might be a bigger theft ring than the small one she was researching.

At five PM the doors to her small work unit sealed, preventing anyone from entering the area except those with proper clearance. Everyone else was off tonight, it was Thursday after all, and everyone who could attended the weekly parade. She always attended, but agreed to work this extra shift when she heard the Lord Chamberlain was interested in its resolution. So tonight, she was working just to finish this investigation and review these personnel actions before the weekend, and then she had a very hot date!

She waited until it was really quiet, almost six, before she went to the bathroom. When she was finished, she walked back towards her area, past the stairwell across the hall from the security door that led to her cubicle. She didn’t see the shadow in the stairwell waiting. She didn’t hear the three footsteps the figure took to reach her, as she was reaching out to provide the security access codes to enter her area. Nor did she really feel the sliclei as it cut her throat.

But she, like Tazni before her, struggled to stop the bleeding and fell to the floor, there to slowly die from blood loss, her eyes wide open staring into space, a look of horror and disbelief on her face as she died.

The killer observed her dying; but once she was dead, turned and entered the stairwell.

Second Investigation

348.088.20

Inspector Vornthisen was at home helping his wife prepare a very nice meal. It was going to be a late supper, since they had been out on a long walk along the streets and byways of the city. They loved their time together, and taking long walks soothed them, and helped him relax from his tense job. But just as they were sitting down, his comm unit beeped.

“Do you have to take that?”

“Yes, dear. You know I am always on call.”

“I know, but sometimes, I wish you weren’t. Go ahead, take the call.”

He reached for his comm unit.

“Yes?”

“Inspector, there has been a death in the Chamberlains palace offices. It seems to be similar to the one last year, with the throat cut.”

“Very well, I will be right there.”

He walked over to his wife and gave her a quick kiss, and said, “Sorry dear, it appears I will not be able to have dinner quite yet. Another murder at the palace. I’ll call when I know more.”

On his way, he pulled up the data from the murder the previous year and reviewed it.

Once he arrived at the scene, he asked his standard questions.

“Has anything been touched or disturbed?”

“No, sir, and we have already completed the full forensic scan, all DNA matches complete, time of death at exactly ten minutes after six PM, body found at seven thirty this evening by roving guards.”

“Very good.” He stood there, looking at the scene, observing the relationship of the body to the shadows in the stairwell and hallway. He could see that she had been caught outside her security door, so whoever did this knew she would have to go through this door to get inside.

“Visual records?”

“No.”

“What? Again? Everything is supposed to be scanned in the palace.”

“Yes sir, but for some reason, which we are checking into, the entire visual recording system in the Chamberlains building shut down at five twenty-five this afternoon, and didn’t come back on until seven.”

“This happened last year.”

“Yes, sir.”

“We never identified a suspect then, but now, with two murders, perhaps we can find a connection. Even so, whoever did this had access to systems, so run a list of everyone with any access to these systems.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Murder weapon?”

“Nothing here, so we assume, again, that the killer kept the weapon, which appears to be a sliclei.”

“Very well. Forward all information to my office, under my stamp. I assume no one has provided any notifications?”

“No, sir. We were waiting for you.”

“Very well, have the coroner begin their work, including an autopsy, I’ll coordinate with the Chamberlain to notify the family. Anything else?”

“Not that I am aware of.”

“Okay. Good evening.”

The Inspector left and again walked directly to the Chamberlain’s office. When he arrived, he walked into the Chamberlain’s lobby and noticed there were several people still waiting to see him. He walked up to the Clara, and said, “Clara, I need to see the Lord Chamberlain immediately. Also, you may as well go ahead and reschedule the people waiting, because they will not be seen tonight.”

“Very well. Go right in, he was taking a few minutes break before the next appointment.”

“Thanks.”

He opened the door and strode into the office. The Lord Chamberlain had one of the most magnificent offices in the palace. It was on the top floor and overlooked vast gardens, smaller palaces, and the Imperial Palace, where the Empress lived, as well as the formidable fortress of the vast hall where the Empress sat to welcome guests and hear from her subjects.

The furniture was lavish, in deep crimson; his desk was majestic, with minimal yet significant items on display upon it. The walls were lined with memorabilia, gifts from heads of state, and statuary. It was, simply magnificent.

The Lord Chamberlain looked up from his desk and saw who it was and scowled. “What do you want?”

“My Lord,” he said, “There has been another murder in our building; and it is almost identical to the one last year at this time. As a matter of fact, the last murder was on this exact day, last year.”

“What do you mean, the exact day?”

“I mean, that I quickly reviewed the previous murder on the way here, and it occurred exactly on this day, last year.”

“Two murders, exactly one year apart, killed in the same building? That makes no sense.”

“I agree, My Lord.”

“Who was the victim?”

He pulled his notes, and said, “An Eloiese Eme, from the planet Secunsa. She worked in Household Management, Lesser Palaces. She was also under the protection of the Baron of Secunsa.”

“Hm. That might be tricky. I’ll need to clear my schedule for tonight.”

“I already did, My Lord.”

“Well, well. Trying to manage me are you Inspector?”

“No, My Lord. It’s just with this twist, I thought you might want to have a longer conversation, and additional ones with certain politically placed people once I departed.”

“Perceptive. Okay. Are there any similarities to these two murders?”

“Yes, they were both young females, killed at roughly the same time, and they both had their throats cut, with what appears to be, a sliclei.”

“A sliclei? Aren’t those illegal?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t stop a murderer.”

“Yes, yes. Okay, I think we need to call in the Imperial Police. If we don’t, the Baron might raise hell. Also, God forbid there is another murder, the questions will be too difficult.”

“I agree. How about if I give them a call and see if Inspector Humbolt is available? I’ve worked with him before; a very thorough and resourceful inspector.”

“Humbolt, yes, I’ve heard that name before. Very well. Brief me on any changes or discoveries.”

“Yes, My Lord. Also, you will need to notify the family of the death.”

The Chamberlain looked pained, but replied, “Yes, I know. I do not like this. I will contact the Palace Bishop and have her make the contact.”

“As you see fit.”

As he left, he put in a call for Inspector Humbolt.

“Hello?”

“Richard, it’s Freddie, from the Chamberlain’s office. I was wondering if you have some time to discuss a case?”

“Of course. When would you like to get together?”

“How about right now? We’ve had a second murder, one that is nearly identical to a murder last year.”

“When?”

“Tonight, not three hours ago. I just left the Chamberlain, and he said it’s time to call in the Imperial Palace Police, I thought of you.”

“Where would you like to meet?”

“How about my office? I’ll have all the files available.”

“I’m on my way.”

Inspector Vornthisen called his wife as well, “Hi dear. It looks like this may take a while, better put dinner in the cooler until tomorrow.”

He arrived at his office at the same time as Inspector Humbolt.

“Evening, Freddie.”

“Evening, Richard. Well, let’s see what you’ve got.”

They spent several hours reviewing the details of the murders. They looked at who had access, any personnel issues or concerns, and the specifics of the murders. They cross-checked individuals with access from the previous year and found quite a few names, a point to begin investigating, but all of them seemed to have legitimate access. After some time, they realized they didn’t really have anything that could tie these to a person or a particular motive. It might even be a serial killer.

“I just don’t see anything.”

“Me either. I think the only difference between the two is that Eme was an aristocrat, and Twillow wasn’t. But that shouldn’t make that much of a difference, under the circumstances.”

“Agreed.”

“Well, it’s late. Let’s meet in the morning and start gain. We have several months before we need to brief the Chamberlain.”

“Sounds good, but he’s not going to like it if we can’t solve this.”

“I won’t like it either. This is too neat, to compact. There should be something that ties the two victims together in a fashion to provide some clue as to a motive or some suspicious character.”

“I know, but I just don’t see anything.”

“Alright, well, good night, see you in the morning.”

“Good night.”

Grieving

348.090.09

The casket containing the body of Eloiese Eme arrived on Secunsa to a near royal procession. The Baronetess Eme, her mother, was dressed in all black, with a black veil covering her face. The Baron and his retinue were in attendance as well. The casket was moved onto a transport and taken slowly through the capital, with thousands of troops lining the streets, to the main cathedral.

Once there, the casket was taken to a small room within the vestibule and opened for a quiet and small family viewing. Once it was closed, it was taken by a guard of honor and placed within the church for the service.

All of the royal households of Secunsa were in attendance. Flowers adorned the alter and covered most of the space surrounding the alter, even hiding the choir. It was, by all events, the biggest ceremony Secunsa had ever seen.

The horns of the Honor Guard played a sad lament of loss. The choir sang sad songs of lost love, and lost life. The only story of hope came from Archbishop Merintop, who talked of the life hereafter and the certainty of everlasting life for young Eloiese, safe in the cradle of the Almighty.

The Baronetess tried to walk to the podium and say a few words, but was overwhelmed with emotion, and simply collapsed. The Baron, and several aides, picked her up and sat her back in her pew. The Baron then walked up and said a few words.

“Baronetess Eme, Alexandria, we all share your grief. There is never a season when a youth should lose their life before us. Eloiese was such a young and vibrant young woman. Her life was filled with love, life, and laughter. Please accept the condolences of all of us, for your tragic loss.”

The Baronetess could be heard to sob as the ceremony concluded. Once complete, the casket was taken to the family cemetery, on a private space at the rear of the family vineyards. Here, Alexandria mourned privately the loss of not only her daughter, but of her husband, who had only recently passed away. Only a few close friends were there.

“They were so alike, these two. They both had a zest for life I never quite understood. They loved history, archeology, sports; all things I was never interested in. But they loved it. They would sit around the fire and tell stories and laugh so much.”

She stood there and just cried. Her friends held her to comfort her. It was a long day.

Star Fleet

348.167.09

The Imperial Battleship Broadside, the newest battleship of the Imperial Fleet, was patrolling the Eclandian Sector, thus far with no concerns. Captain Thompson was on the bridge, all was good, and he could look and see the Marine transports, cruisers, and other ships that made up this battle group.

At that moment, a young lieutenant approached him, saying, “Sir, we’ve received an eyes-only flash communication for you from Star Fleet Headquarters.”

“Very well, let’s see what HQ has to say.”

He followed the lieutenant only a short distance to a private viewer. His iris scans complete, the message appeared in front of him. He read it twice, then pressed the destruct sequence that would erase the message from all systems and from recovery actions.

He walked back to the bridge, and informed the watch officer. “Major, we are receiving a guest from HQ. Should arrive within ten minutes. Please dock the ship in hangar seven. I am on my way there now.”

“Yes, sir.”

Only a few minutes later a ship exited hyperspace close by and requested to board. Identification was confirmed that it was a star fleet ship, and it was berthed in hangar seven.

Once the ship was secure the platform lowered, and an admiral walked down the ramp. He walked straight up to the captain and said, “We need to talk.”

They went to a private area in the hangar, and the admiral handed the captain a packet. “Here are your orders. These come from the highest levels of the Empire, from the Imperial Palace itself.”

“Can you tell me what they are?”

“They are orders for you to take your battle group and begin to put down some uprisings intelligence has observed in this sector. They are not large uprisings, yet. But we fear if we do not take definitive and tough action, they will grow into a larger uprising that we would need to quell, and we want to avoid that at all costs.”

“I understand. Is this the only sector, or is it a bigger issue?”

“It’s bigger. That’s why I was appointed the special envoy. I’m leaving in a few minutes to the Thrailian Sector to visit Captain Valterneous on the Battleship Vigilant. They have some issues there as well. Then I have five other sectors to visit. Any questions or concerns I need to address before I depart?”

“No, sir. I believe that covers it.”

“Very well. The written orders are very specific as far as coordination, level of authority, targets, mission requirements, reporting, and the level of secrecy required; after all, we don’t want word of these uprisings to get around the Empire, it could make our job much more difficult.”

“Not to worry, Admiral. We will not fail.”

“Very good. Now I am off to the next visit.”

Investigation Conclusions

348.187.09

Inspectors Vornthisen and Humbolt entered the office of the Lord Chamberlain together, took their seats, and waited.

It wasn’t long before the Lord Chamberlain entered his office. They stood, waiting for him to be seated. He walked around his magnificent desk, took his seat, and looked at them.

“Well?”

Inspector Vornthisen began. “My Lord, over the past one hundred days, Inspector Humbolt and I have conducted a thorough investigation of the two murders in question. We have reviewed all the data available to us, investigated the background of each of the victims, searched for any possible sliclei sold in the dark market, spoken with people they knew, and we can find neither motive nor suspect.”

“So, you are saying these two murders are not connected?”

Inspector Humbolt spoke, saying, “My Lord, it isn’t quite that simple; but for now, we simply do not know. While we have found no information that demonstrates a connection, the simple reality is that these two young ladies were murdered on the same date, by the same weapon, in the same building; the coincidences appear to shout to us there is a connection; yet we cannot identify it.”

“Hm. What do you believe is the danger to our current employees?”

“I would say the risk is minimal. The murders appear to be targeted. One can only hope they are over.”

“However,” added Inspector Vornthisen, “We will be on our guard this coming March to prevent another occurrence.”

“Very well. I expect you to continue your investigation, as we must catch this criminal. I understand the entire recording system was down during both murders. That must be more easily traced. Who did it? They had to have credentials to get into the system.”

“Yes, My Lord. We both thought that would be the easiest means to identify a person of interest, someone accessing the systems during both these events, but alas, no such connection of name or credentials occurred. While there were numerous individuals with access to all the necessary systems, any who were in the building at the time of these murders were there openly and on legitimate business.”

“I don’t like it. Do all you can do, and to be prepared next year to either prevent another murder or catch the murderer. For now, we will proceed as normal. Let me know if you find any further information. That will be all.”

Kalennish Kisdemec

349.088.06

Kalennish was ecstatic!! She had been asked by the love of her life to attend the Imperial Ball! She would be dressed in the most glamorous gown she had ever seen, dancing in the arms of her boyfriend, and soon, she hoped, her fiancé, Major Antonia Sertilop, a slightly older leader in the Imperial Star Fleet. Yesterday she got her hair, nails and makeup finalized. She looked so glamorous! She went home afterwards and made sure she carefully laid her hair out so it would not wrinkle or be damaged by sleeping on it.

This morning, she awoke and did all the right things, and ensured her hair and makeup remained perfect. She looked at her gown, hanging in the closet and again imagined how fabulous it was going to be to be dancing at a Star Fleet Ball! She could hardly wait.

She was so busy imagining it she was almost late for work. When she did arrive at work right at noon, she saw there were police everywhere, and she had to show her credentials twice, just to get in the main door. “What’s going on?”

One of the officers checking credentials, a beat cop by the looks of his uniform, replied, “Nothing ma’am, just a routine enhancement in security; its only temporary.”

“Okay.”

She noticed there seemed to be more security guards roaming the hallways than normal too; but she chalked it off to the temporary security increase. She made her way to her cubicle, which was on the main floor, not far from the main entrance. She settled in and prepared for a few hours of some boring administrative management processes. She was still so excited to be leaving early for the ball.

A little before her quitting time at four, she got up and went to the lady’s restroom. Once she completed her business, she stood looking in the mirror at her hair and makeup. She pulled a small bag out and looked through it to find some lip makeup, not really seeing the door to the stall behind her open slowly.

She was quietly singing a joyful tune about love and joy, and didn’t hear the steps get closer or feel the sliclei cut her throat. She grasped her neck, trying to stop the flow of blood, and sank to the floor, slowly dying from blood loss. She fell back, looking up at her killer, a look of shock and disbelief in her eyes as she died.

The killer again stood and watched, then quietly exited the facility via the maintenance door, un-noticed.

Third Murder Investigation

349.088.16

Inspector Vornthisen had returned to his office from prowling the hallways of the Chamberlains administration building, and was in his office reviewing some boring security information, when he received the call at ten minutes after four.

“Yes?”

“Inspector, there has been another death in the Chamberlains palace offices. It seems to be similar to the two previous ones, with the throat cut.”

“When did it happen?”

“Just a few minutes ago, apparently.”

“Very well, Lieutenant, seal the building, no one in or out without verification of credentials and thorough identification. I will be right there.”

He picked up his comm device as he walked out the door and called Inspector Humbolt. “Richard, we failed. There was a murder a few minutes ago, I’ve sealed the area. Come right over.”

He arrived at the scene at the same time as Inspector Humbolt, and asked his standard questions.

“Has anything been touched or disturbed?”

“No, sir. We completed the full forensic scan, all DNA matches complete, time of death at exactly three fifty PM, body found at four o’clock by evening janitorial staff.”

“Very good. Did you seal the building as directed?”

“Yes, sir. No one has been allowed to enter or depart until we thoroughly vet them per your instructions.”

He stood there, looking at the scene in the bathroom, observing the positioning of the body, in relation to the sinks, stalls, etc. There were no visual recorders inside the restroom, but still, he asked, “Visual records?”

“No.”

“What? How can that be?”

His Lieutenant continued, “I don’t know, sir, but the entire visual recording system in the Chamberlains buildings shut down at three fifteen this afternoon, and hasn’t come back up yet.”

Richard said, “Perhaps we are closer to the perpetrator than we think?”

Freddie agreed with Richard, saying, “You could be correct. Lieutenant, who is in charge of security enhancements today?”

“That would be Sergeant Emanati.”

“Please ask him to join us.”

“Yes, sir.”

“The recording system shut down last year as well, didn’t it?”

“Yes. Both times, all recording systems shut down for no reason.”

“We never identified a suspect then, but now, with three murders, perhaps we can find a connection.”

“Was it the same the murder weapon as before?”

“Yes, and since we didn’t find anything, we assume, again, that the killer kept the weapon.”

“Very well.”

At that time Sergeant Emanati entered the bathroom, and looking around saw the gruesome scene. “Did you call for me, Inspector?”

“Yes. How long were you and the extra security here?”

“Inspector Humbolt we have had additional staff on duty since midnight, with the understanding we would continue maximum presence until midnight tonight.”

“Do you have a roster of all assigned personnel?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Very well, please forward the list to my office. Did anyone report anything suspicious prior to this event?”

“No, sir. It has been a relatively quiet day.”

“Very well, that will be all.” Turning to Freddie, he said, “I think we need to go visit with your Lord Chamberlain.”

“Yes, I agree, but not yet. I want to review all this information first. I have to give him notice of the murder, but I don’t want to get stuck in his office answering questions until we have a chance to go over this information.”

“As you say.”

“Let’s visit tonight and see what we can find, then we can go see him in the morning, first thing, and have a conversation. I mean three murders. There must be a link.”

“Okay.”

“Lieutenant, please forward all information to my office, under my stamp.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I assume no one has provided notifications?”

“No, sir. We were waiting for you.”

“Very well, I will coordinate with the Chamberlain. Have the coroner begin their work. Anything else?”

“Not that I am aware of, no sir.”

He and Richard left. He said, “Richard, meet me in my office in an hour. I will go inform the Chamberlain of the death so he can notify the family, and then meet you there as soon as I can.”

“Okay, I’ll grab us some Chinese takeaway and be there soon.”

“Good.”

He went to the Chamberlains office, but the Chamberlain was not there.

“No, Inspector, the Lord Chamberlain is out of town and won’t be back until the morning. May I help you?”

“No, Clara. Or yes. We need to notify the family of the latest murder victim. The Lord Chamberlain always took care of that.”

“Very well. Please give me the information and I will forward it to him so he can make the notification from his current location.”

“Thank you, but I think I will wait until I see him in the morning.”

“Very well, inspector. Good evening.”

He left and went to his office. Soon after Richard arrived, and they brought up all the information they had on a large three-dimensional wall screen.

“Okay, what do we know? Let’s see, Kalennish was from the planet Cordoran. Her family, while well off, were not members of the aristocracy. She won her scholarship to the Imperial College of Archeology through her own work in school, and her university education was paid for. She also worked at the Chamberlain’s office, was a young female, went to university, was murdered on the same day; this is a serial killer.”

“I agree. But all this information is just too similar. There has to be a link we are missing. What ties these young women together?”

“I don’t know. Let’s go over everything again and see if anything pops out.”

They spent several hours reviewing the information but could find nothing that would give them any specific link to a motive or suspect.

“I just don’t see anything.”

“Me either.”

“Can you send this latest information to my office? I will add it to what I have so we have two complete case files and can work independently to study this case.”

“Of course.”

“Okay, well, it’s late. I’m heading home. What time do you want to meet in the morning to brief the Chamberlain?”

“I was thinking about eight in the morning, before he gets too busy.”

“Very good, see you then. Good night.”

“Good night.”

They arrived at precisely eight o’clock in the morning and walked past the secretary into the Lord Chamberlain’s office.

“Lord Chamberlain, there is news.”

“What news?”

“As you may have heard, sadly there was another murder yesterday. Similar to all the others in age, date, means of death; we are convinced we are dealing with a serial killer.”

“I thought you took steps to ensure this could not happen?”

“We took steps, My Lord, but the killer pre-empted us and still got through.”

The Chamberlain stood and walked over to a window, looking out over the palace gardens. After a few moments he turned, and said, “Very well. You have until early next year to find this killer. If you do not, I will have no choice but to inform the Empress of the situation. Any further wait would be unacceptable.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“No, hear me. You must find this killer. That is your only pursuit for the next nine months. You must turn over every stone and follow every lead. If you have not, then I will report your failure to the Empress. So, go do your job. That is all.”

“Excuse me, Lord Chamberlain, but someone needs to notify the family of this event.”

“Damn. Yes, I will see to it.”

They bowed slightly and departed.

“Well, it looks like our jobs are on the line.”

“Yes, Freddie, it does. Let’s go back to my office and start again. We have to find something to give us a lead.”

Grief

349.091.09

Kalennish made it home three days after her murder. There was no fanfare, just family and friends to welcome her body home and mourn.

They arrived at the spaceport in time for the ship’s arrival. The captain of the ship, Captain McGregor, met them at the loading dock and solemnly transferred the casket to the undertakers, who silently transported the casket to a waiting ground transport. The motorcade then made their way to the funeral home, where all had been prepared.

The casket was open for some time, to allow family and friends a final viewing. The service was well attended by family and friends. No one could believe she was dead. Stories of her life and her passions were spoken to all.

Finally, the service ended, and her casket was transported to the family cemetery, where she was laid to rest. It was a solemn day, filled mostly with tears of sorrow, especially the tears of her mother and father, who lost their brightest star.

Dornathion

349.195.11

They arrived at the orbiting control center for the Imperial Prison Planet Dornathion. After clearing security, they were led to a central viewing space where the entire planet and space operations could be observed.

“Your Royal Highness, we are thrilled for you to visit.”

“Thank you, Admiral. I have always wanted to come and see what this place looked like.”

“Of course. The planet itself is a tough one, with minimal resources. There is enough water, viable soil, forests, and other necessities. However, they live harshly, growing their own food, living by their own law, and dying younger with no rejuvenation allowed.”

“How do you keep them here?”

“We have hundreds of orbiting weapons systems that prevent anyone from approaching the planet without specific authorization.”

“So, once a criminal is dropped off on the surface, they enter a world of live or die based upon how well they can survive?”

“Essentially, yes. No information is provided on survival techniques, how to grow food, carpentry, nothing. You are on the surface to live or die based upon the knowledge you have when you land.”

“No wonder this place is such a deterrent to serious crime.”

“I wish it were more so. We still receive thousands of new arrivals every month.”

“How many are still alive down there? I mean, is there a way to know?”

“Yes. Before each criminal is released on the surface, we sterilize them and inject them with a beacon that automatically fails twenty-four hours after the body stops functioning. That allows us to know how many and where they are. Currently there are five million, three hundred and seventy-two thousand, eight hundred and twenty-three living souls on the planet.”

“And food for all?”

“Not really. We do drop off seeds and fertilizers occasionally, but they soon fight over it. The leading cause of death on this planet is murder. They follow no law, just the law of the jungle. They kill each other and take their goods. It’s an animal kingdom down there, Your Highness. Not a place I would want to be.”

“I would think not. Do you ever send patrol to the surface?”

“We have, but we don’t do it without a seriously good reason. We don’t want our staff killed for investigating a fluke. No, I think the last time we went down there was because of data we received from a beacon that showed the cause of death to be a disease we had never heard of before.”

“A group of scientists appeared from Cransfall, and we escorted them while they recovered the remains of this individual.”

“What did they do with them?”

“Oh, they boarded their ship and departed. I think that is the only planet worse than this one. At least here you can see who wants to kill you. But on Cransfall, their bioweapon division would scare me to death.”

The prince laughed. “I happen to agree with you, and no, I am not going to visit Cransfall.”

They laughed. “Well, my time is up, thank you for the information. I know it’s a tough job doing what you do, but I want to thank all of you for helping to make the civilized world a safer place.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.”

SB

349.205.11

One of the sons of Lord Nottlenet, Lord Timothy Nottlenet, Fourth Earl of Rittendon, was accused of embezzling an inordinate amount of money from the Bank of Tuton. He was unceremoniously restrained by the police and transported to their headquarters. But because of his rank, he was allowed some conveniences, and use of his comm unit. He called his lawyer.

“Yes?”

“Landrey, Timothy here. They’ve arrested me for an embezzlement of funds from the bank. I know nothing about this! Get me out of here.”

“Of course, of course. Before I do, though, let me look into this a little bit. You have your comm unit, so I will contact you as soon as I can. In the meantime, relax, have some mestava, and take it easy. I will get you out soon.”

“Very well, but hurry. These conditions are appalling.”

“Of course.”

Landrey Milton was probably the best-known attorney on the planet Tuton. Which meant he was very busy. Which meant he was very wealthy. But which also meant he knew who to call for certain situations.

“Yes?”

“SB, Landrey. I have a quick turnaround case for you.”

“Good morning, Landrey. You know I don’t do quick turnaround cases, as one never knows how long a case will take once the investigation begins.”

“Yes, yes, I know. But this one is different. They’ve arrested a client and friend of mine, Timothy Nottlenet, the Fourth Earl of Rittendon, for embezzlement of significant sums of jhetas from the bank. If you knew him, you’d know he would never do something like that. But I need help proving it. Hence calling you.”

There was silence for a few moments, then, “Usual fee?”

“Yes, plus a bonus, a big bonus.”

“Very well, I will begin. Please inform the client I need to speak with him and to be prepared to tell me only the truth; you know how I work.”

“Of course. Thank you, SB.”

The line went dead.

“Hello?”

“Timothy, Landrey. I spoke with a particular resource, a sleuth I have used before. He will be contacting you after he has a chance to review the record.”

“A sleuth? I need a court order! I need to be released from this confinement!”

“Timothy, I am not only your attorney, but your friend. Believe me, the safest place you can be right now is exactly where you are. While you are there, you cannot be accused of tampering with evidence or possible witnesses. You are in a safe place. I want you to stay there and be patient.”

“I am not good with patience.”

“I know. Also, when he calls, do not lie. He will have access to facts and if you try and sidestep an issue or give a half response, he will drop you. If he drops you, you’re done.”

There were a few moments of silence. Finally, Timothy said, “Okay, I will be patient. But this had better work!”

He hung up.

SB lived in a quiet cottage at the end of a winding drive. He actually lived in an old, former gate house for the estate. The large estate had been sold off and cut up into lots for other housing. But the gate house, an old, antiquated structure with cobblestone tiles and a slate roof, with about an acre and a half of land filled with trees, remained. It was a peaceful place, far enough from the noise to be quiet, close enough to have good access to the necessities of life.

One thing it also had was the very latest technology. In an inner room he had built to his personal specifications, below ground level in the basement that was only accessed by a secret passage, was his workspace. Inside this room he had monitors and screens he used to monitor multiple systems, activities – he was probably one of the most up to date individuals on the planet. Right now, he was reading the information collected by the police, used for the arrest of Lord Timothy Nottlenet.

Apparently, he used his position on the board of the Tuton Planetary Bank to funnel fifteen billion jhetas from the bank into his personal account, and then had it transferred to a secret account on Meladeran. It was done over a period of four months, transferring four billion a month for three months, then three billion only two days ago. The police were notified by a Ms. Lucinda Broward, Senior Operations Clerk, Tuton Planetary Bank.

That was about all the information he found in the files, absent the minor minutia the police liked to document. Next, he went to review the details of the personal life of the earl.

He was married. His wife, Natalie Natal Nottlenet, daughter of the Lord and Lady Francis and Elizabeth Framington. Lord Framington is the Fifth Count of Derniveil, a large vineyard and agricultural empire. She has no file in the records containing any negative information.

‘Everyone seems to be squeaky clean, which means there is something missing,’ he thought. ‘The Earl is on the board and must work with people there. What about this Broward person?’

He researched and discovered that Lucinda Broward transferred to the bank after Timothy got on the board. Her previous employment was negligible. ‘Interesting.’

After he reviewed this and other information, he called the Earl.

“Hello?”

“Hello. Is this Lord Timothy Nottlenet, Fourth Earl of Rittendon?”

“Yes, and who might you be?”

“Someone you were told would call.”

“Oh, yes. How can I help you?”

“I believe I am the one trying to help you. I have some questions.”

“Of course, go ahead.”

SB asked several questions, validating that the Earl was not lying, then said, “So tell me about your relationship with Lucinda Broward.”

“Why would you want to know that?”

“Remember, Lord Nottlenet, I ask the questions. Your job is to respond, truthfully.”

“Very well. Lucinda came to the bank shortly after I did, and as we shared the investment portfolio, we became friends.”

“Is there anything else you would tell me about her?”

A pause. “No, there is nothing.”

A pause. “Very well.”

The line went dead.

‘He is hiding something, and I suspect it is one of the oldest lies in humanity. But I have to find the proof first.’

He had noticed that the oldest daughter also worked at the bank. Her file was also clean. ‘She is young, maybe not enough time to do anything wrong. But I think will call on her personally.’

He found where Lucinda lived, and changed his look to that of a maintenance man and went to her building. He easily made it inside, as he created his own pass card. He walked through the building, coming to her apartment. He knew she was at work, and had already disabled her alarm. He entered the door and planted several devices in various places, then departed, careful to rearm her system after he left.

Next, he wanted to talk with the daughter, Debbie. He decided to take a direct approach, so he went to the bank and asked to speak with her. It took several minutes, but soon she appeared. She was nothing like he expected. He thought she would be dressed in an elegant fashion, but she was dressed down to the clothes of a normal working woman, not aristocracy.

“Yes, may I help you?”

“Of course. I am looking to speak with you in private if that is okay. My business, an investment for sure, is secret.”

She looked like she would object, but then said, “Okay, come this way.”

She led him to a side room, asked him to have a seat, closed the door and sat opposite him.

“Now, what can I help you with?”

“Did you know your father is in prison?”

The question did as it was meant to do, it shocked her.

“What? What are you talking about? My father is on vacation, mother said so this morning. Who are you to say such terrible things?” She stood, “You should get out before I call security.”

He smiled, and said, “I see. Please call your family friend and attorney, Landrey Milton. Tell him SB asked you to call to verify the current location of your father. I will wait.”

She appeared to be ready to throw a tantrum, but then pulled out her comm unit and called.

“Landrey, I am with someone who calls himself SB. He said to call you to verify the current location of my father.” She listened for a few moments, then said, “Thank you.”

She glared at SB, then sat back down, and said, “He verified it and I don’t like it or understand it. What’s going on?”

“Your father is in prison because he is accused of embezzling a rather large sum of money.” He watched her reactions closely, and caught a glimpse of something, perspiration perhaps? Unexpected nervousness?

“That’s preposterous. My father would never do such a thing. He is an honest man.”

“Of course, but the question is, why would a large sum of the bank’s money be transferred into his account and then out of his account, unless he knew about it?”

She didn’t have any words for a moment, so he asked, “What can you tell me about Lucinda?”

“Why do you want to know about her?”

He thought, ‘Ah, so there is drama.’

He said, “No particular reason. I just want to find out about those people who were close to your father, see if there are any reasons for his action.”

“Well, she is a snake! She claws at him and treats him like a child. I believe he was terminating her employment, so she could have sought revenge.”

“Interesting. All right, is there anything else, or anyone else you would like to discuss with me?”

“No, there is not.”

“Very well, thank you for talking with me, have a wonderful day.”

He got up and left the bank, with some interesting thoughts running through his mind. He went to his basement office and began looking at the information from the planted devices in Lucinda’s house. Nothing so far.

He put in a call to Timothy.

“Yes?”

“I have a repeat question for you. What is your relationship with Lucinda?”

A pause. He said in a quiet voice, “What do you know?”

“I need your answer.”

He sighed, “She is my mistress. We have been together for several years.”

“Why were you terminating her employment?”

“What? I would never do that!”

“Okay. Another question. If you did not embezzle these funds, how could someone else do it in such a way as to implicate you?”

“Well, it wouldn’t be easy. Someone would need all my passwords and access to my DNA sample and iris scan. Otherwise, it would just be a transaction traceable to whomever did this. But for it to look like me? It would not be easy.”

“But it could be done. Someone could, with access to your information, set you up without leaving their own prints on the process.”

“Yes, it is possible, but again, very difficult.”

“Thank you.”

The line went dead.

He thought about this dilemma for a while, and as he was beginning to get an insight, Lucinda arrived home. He picked up his comm unit and called her.

“Hello?”

“Hello, is this Lucinda Broward? Currently employed at the Tuton Planetary Bank?”

She seemed hesitant. He watched as she reached for and activated a recording device, and then, putting her comm unit on speaker and setting it on the table beside the recorder, said, “Maybe. Who wants to know?”

She pulled out an illegal doxtram and lit it, taking a deep breath.

“I’m Burt Johanssen with the Textron Investment Group. I was given your number by a co-worker at a conference on Meladeran. We are interested in investing in a rather large agricultural area on Tuton, but aren’t sure your bank has the necessary resources to cover our transactions.”

She changed to an all-businesslike demeanor. “Oh, in that case, yes, I am Lucinda. How large of an investment are you thinking?”

“Close to fifteen billion jhetas.”

She seemed to freeze for a moment. “That’s a very large investment.”

“Yes, but some funds have recently come our way, and we believe now is the time.”

“Okay, well, I am home right now, so how about I speak with some members of the board and contact you tomorrow afternoon?”

“That would be fine. This number rings back.”

“Sounds good.”

He hung up and watched. She deleted the message from the recording device, and walked over and sat down in a large recliner. She closed her eyes and stayed there, puffing on her doxtram. Eventually, she went to sleep. His recorders would run all night, but he couldn’t. He made a light meal and went to sleep early. Tomorrow would be a busy day.

He got up very early and reviewed the recordings from Lucinda’s apartment. She didn’t do anything out of the ordinary, just smoke doxtram. It made her high, but it didn’t cause her to do anything unusual.

Next, he sat at his systems desk and began a search for transactions and activities of Debbie. He reviewed her profile, entered her personal system, and noticed that she was just arriving and had logged into her work system. He set his search on follow, and went where she took him.

Soon, he saw where she was going. He thought he had all the information he needed now. He called Landrey.

“Yes?”

“I have the solution. Your client is not guilty.”

“Wonderful! Who was it?”

“His daughter.”

There was a silence, then, “Are you sure? That will crush Timothy.”

“Yes, I’m sure. But your friend Timothy has other issues as well. He has a mistress, an un-qualified woman whom he gave a job at the bank. He then promoted her.”

“This will destroy his family and his father’s reputation.”

“Agreed. I think you need a different solution for the story. Perhaps you should visit with Lord Nottlenet senior, and possibly discuss a solution with the Baron. It might be that something can be salvaged, outside of official court proceedings. But Timothy and his daughter have behaved poorly. As for the woman, Lucinda, she didn’t misbehave. As a matter of fact, she had the strength and good sense to notify the police when she found, by accident, that her lover was embezzling the funds. But she is also over her head in her current position. Maybe she can be transferred somewhere where she can actually live a good life.”

“Thank you, SB. I’m not sure how to repay this. Will you be sending me the results of your investigation?”

“I will be sending it to you and to another, whom I will not name. Should nothing be done, it will be transferred to the authorities for action.”

“Of course, standard procedure.”

“Yes, standard procedure.”

“Very well, I will authorize your payment and talk with you next time.”

“Thank you.”

The line went dead.

Star Fleet

349.225.09

A meeting was called at the Imperial Star Fleet Maintenance and Repair Facility, Megellan, of several battleship captains. The facility was the size of a planet, the largest in the Empire, and with docking available for thousands of starships. A few battleships in port simultaneously were normal, so no one would notice them. The meeting was to discuss a new strategy. They gathered in one of the many briefing rooms at the facility.

“Good afternoon. Let me preface this meeting with a word of caution. What I am about to tell you must remain highly confidential. This conversation involves discussion of a potential rebellion taking place within the Empire. However, we do not want word of these rebellions to become widespread knowledge within the Empire, as should they become so, it may give others the spark they need to start to rebel, and it would cause embarrassment to the Empress, and a lot more difficult work for us. For those reasons, secrecy is required.”

He looked around the room of the assembled Star Ship Captains, then said, “Very well. Gentlemen, we face a serious level of rebellion within each of your sectors. Captain Thompson, of the Imperial Battleship Broadside, our newest battleship within Star Fleet, patrols within the Eclandian Sector. Captain, can you report what you found?”

Captain Thompson rose, and said, “Yes sir. We traveled to the planet Maldovan, where we encountered a local group using brutal tactics to destabilize the Baron. They were being very successful at creating fear and chaos on the planet, even going so far as to attack a local Star Fleet Marine training garrison, causing multiple casualties.”

“We coordinated with the Baron and landed a battalion of marines in the planetary sector where they operated. During our operations we were attacked and sustained several casualties. However, our marines fought back and eventually overwhelmed these terrorists, and placed them in custody. Once they were removed, the threat was reduced – but not eliminated.”

“Soon thereafter another group, previously unknown to the Baron but associated with the cells we had captured, attacked in a different sector, causing multiple civilian casualties. Again, we deployed marines and eventually ended this revolt. However, another sprang up.”

“Finally, in order to put an end to these uprisings, we deployed weaponry from our ship, targeting various locations where these cells were known to operate. Once we did this, the uprisings ceased. All in all, there were many casualties conducting this operation, including our marines, garrison troops, civilians, and the terrorists. This is real.”

He sat down.

Captain Valterneous from the Battleship Vigilant raised his hand.

“Yes, Captain?”

He stood. “Sir, we also encountered this same type of secret infiltration on the planet Garsol. Thousands of terrorists bent on the overthrow of the Baron, and eventually freedom from the Empire. They also killed multiple civilians, attacked our local garrison, and eventually fought with two battalions of marines. We did defeat them, but it cost.”

He sat down.

The admiral said, “So, you see, gentlemen, we have a real crisis on our hands. There are several planets with serious uprisings taking place, and many more where it is only beginning. Our strategy is to move quickly and decisively to eliminate these threats.”

“Of particular concern is the planet Galund. Intel reports the band on that planet has grown to over three thousand, and is preparing to export soldiers to other planets, thereby spreading this revolt. That must not happen. Captain Thompson, who already has experience in this campaign, will lead the battlegroup to deal with Galund.”

“But that will not be enough. We need to mobilize our forces to respond, all while maintaining the highest secrecy. We dare not allow word of this action to leak out, for reasons I already mentioned. Therefore, each of you are being handed a packet that contains your eyes-only orders for next steps. Only you know what your mission is and where you will travel.”

“These actions we are taking will not happen for several months, a gap that is to allow you time to prepare, and for all of our actions to occur simultaneously across the galaxy. So, take the time in the next several months before you are to take action to plan. Be ready. But when the time comes, be firm.”

He looked over the captains in the room, and then said, “Gentlemen, the future of the Empire may very well rest on our actions over the next few months. If we fail, the Empire may find itself in a civil war, battling terror forces within, and forcing us to take our eyes off of external threats, some of which you are not aware of, but that could be as significant as the last war we fought to win Andromeda. Let’s keep our eyes on the ball and put this unrest to bed. That will be all. Godspeed.”

Final Planning

349.331.15

He was waiting for the contact in the Club Dorral. Before too long, his contact arrived.

“Before you speak, listen. Do not use my title or name. I must remain anonymous, in the background. If my name is used in any conversation, my support for this activity will end. Do you understand?”

“Of course.”

“Very well. What is the status of the plan?”

“Your…, I mean, Sir, the plan moves as originally laid out. We will soon begin the final push, where the activities of the Imperial Star Fleet will be made known as a direct attack by the Empire on independent and lawful Barons of roughly fifty planets. It will be announced as a lashing out and anger in an irrational manner, by the Imperial Palace.”

“Good. Any pushback from any of the Barons?”

“No, they are all complicit in the plan, as you expected. Plus, it is well documented as such.”

“Very good. What of the asset’s activities?”

“They continue, and will continue until the plan is revealed.”

“All is in order then.”

“Yes.”

“Then we move forward to a wonderful end. Good work and good luck completing the plan.”

“And to you.”

Investigation Conclusions

350.045.07

Nearly nine months had passed since the Lord Chamberlain gave the inspectors a final directive to solve the murders. The two inspectors did everything they could. They looked at the case from every perspective they could imagine, utilized every tool they had; but they had nothing. No motive. No suspect. Nothing.

They could not find anything linking the three women killed to a person or motive, even with the overwhelming amount of data they held. So, on star date three hundred and fifty point forty-four, the Lord Chamberlain contacted them to attend a meeting in his office the next day.

They met early the next morning, over a cup of mestava.

“I wonder what he will tell us?”

“I don’t know, but knowing how he conducts business, I expect him to find a way to push blame for failure onto us in some manner.”

Freddie laughed. “Yes, typical bureaucrat, just like the rest of them.”

“Yep. I think it is a problem when these individuals get these positions and hold them for so long. It becomes more their show, than the Empire’s. I hope that one day, an Empress or Emperor fires the lot of them and gets some new perspectives in these places.”

“I agree, but that won’t save us today.”

“No, but I don’t fear being fired. He will think of something else to do to deflect blame.”

“I wonder what it will be?”

“Well, let’s go find out.”

They walked into the Lord Chamberlains office together, walked past the secretary, and into his office.

The Lord Chamberlain looked up from his desk at them, and simply asked, “Well?”

Freddie responded. “My Lord, we have used every tool, searched out every possible clue; we cannot find any motive or suspect in these murders.”

The Chamberlain sighed, “Okay, then I have no other option.” He rose, saying, “Come with me, we must inform the Empress at once.”

They gave each other a look, and then followed the Lord Chamberlain downstairs, and climbed into his private, and very luxurious, shuttle, that whisked them directly to an entrance in the rear of the Great Hall. They walked past security without having to stop and be identified, and into the great hall. They were not fifty feet from where the Empress sat holding her morning audience for the Royal Court.

The Chamberlain made his way to the front of the line, claiming privilege. Once there, he waited until the current supplicant had received their decision. Once that was complete, the Royal Herald, announced him to the Empress.

“Your Majesty, the Lord Chamberlain.”

He walked across the floor to the bottom of the stairs in front of the throne, bowed, and said, “Your Imperial Majesty, I beg a moment for urgent notification.”

“Chamberlain Stratada, what is your notice?”

“Your Majesty, the nature of my notice is one that should remain confidential, until it is resolved.”

Empress Alexandra III, looked slightly confused, saying, “Enrique, if you need a private moment, surely you should have searched for a space in my calendar.”

He bowed again, saying, “Yes, Your Majesty, one would. However, this is of the utmost urgency, and waiting indefinitely for an audience would not suffice, Your Majesty.”

She looked at him, and the two inspectors with him, and said, “Very well. This assembly will commence when I return. Lord Chamberlain, please accompany me.”

She rose, and the entire assembly rose. She then turned and walked behind the throne into a private door, with the Lord Chamberlain and the two inspectors following. They walked along a short passageway and entered a small fifty by fifty-foot office. The Empress walked over and sat, then said, “Well Enrique, what is the news you bring?”

“Your Majesty, this is a fairly long story, but please hear me out. Inspector Vornthisen, my Chief Inspector, will explain the situation. Inspector?”

“Yes. Your Majesty, my apologies if I stumble my words. I have never been to the Imperial Palace before, much less been in your presence.”

Alexandra smiled, and said, “Please, we are only people here. Speak freely.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. On star date three hundred forty-seven point eighty-eight, a young woman was murdered in the Chamberlains main building. We investigated, but found no motive or suspect. Then on star date three hundred forty-eight point eighty-eight, another young woman was murdered in the same building, in the same fashion. At that time, Inspector Humbolt of the Imperial Palace Police was brought in to assist. Inspector?”

“Your Majesty, we investigated both murders but were, alas, unable to either establish a motive or identify any suspects. However, based upon this, the Lord Chamberlain authorized a significant enhancement of police personnel on three forty-nine point eighty-eight, to either catch the murderer if he attempted this atrocity again, or prevent another murder. However, we failed. On three hundred forty-nine point eighty-eight, another young woman was murdered, in the same building, in the same manner. We have investigated this for the past nine months, but we still cannot establish a motive or suspect.”

The Lord Chamberlain continued, “Which brings us too today. I believe this is beyond the resources at my disposal. I need your help, Your Majesty, in solving this crime.”

“And what would you expect me to do, Lord Chamberlain? Should I suddenly leap to a conclusion? Assign all of Starfleet to assist?”

The Chamberlain was visibly shaken, but added, “I don’t know, Your Majesty. I am only afraid that if we do not catch this murderer, we could have another one in a few months.”

The Empress rose and walked over to a special system not visible to them, and said, “I may have some means of helping, but for now, I implore you to continue with your investigation. That is all.”

They all bowed low as they left, saying, “Your Majesty.”

Almost as soon as they had left, she was interrupted by the Royal Herald, who said, “Your Majesty, a communique has arrived with very high urgency and security identification for your eyes only. It has been thoroughly vetted and contains no harmful elements.”

She took the communique and opened it, reading the following words: “Free Thoristin Filtram, or the murders of your young women will continue.” After she read it, she asked, “Who sent this?”

“I am not sure, Your Majesty.”

Her anger rising, she said, “And do you often bring me communiques from parts unknown? Never mind.”

She walked past the bowing and frightened Herald, back into the audience hall, and pointing to Imperial Star Fleet Commander, said, “Who is Thoristin Filtram?”

Admiral McDaniel’s turned to his staff and asked them to search their systems and report. After a few minutes, they had nothing. Turning back to the Empress, he said, “Your Majesty, we have no record of a Thoristin Filtram in the Imperial system.”

“Then why is it that I received a communique that said if this person is not released, more young women will be murdered in the palace?”

A murmur went through the audience hall, as people heard about murders of young women there for the first time.

“Silence!”

The audience hall went deathly quiet.

“We have the best systems and personnel in two known galaxies working here, and yet we can have people murdered and we cannot figure out why? We have a note demanding the release of someone and we cannot identity who it is? This is unacceptable!”

The Empress sat down on her throne, and after a few moments, said, “I need this solved. Surely there is someone who can sleuth this out?”

No one spoke. The Empress looked around, and seeing there was no help here with this issue, stood up and left, saying, “Then I must be gone. Someone has to solve this crime.”

Later that day, a small group of elder statesmen were scheduled for a late afternoon tea in one of the gardens. As the Empress was visiting with them, Ambassador Nottlenet requested they have a quiet and private word.

“Your Majesty, I am Ambassador Nottlenet, from the Planet Tuton. In listening to your dilemma this morning, I would like to recommend to you the assistance of a particularly excellent sleuth from my home world. He is exceptionally good, Your Majesty. I do not know of a case he has worked that he has not resolved.”

“What is this sleuth’s name?”

“I do not know, Your Majesty. He goes by initials; but I can assure you, he is the best there is.”

“Very well, Ambassador. Any help at this time would be appreciated. Bring him here immediately and ask him to attend me in my quarters upon his arrival.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Once the evening tea was complete, Ambassador Nottlenet went to his apartments and contacted the Baron of Tuton, to get his help in locating the sleuth and having him report to Meladeran.

Conversations

350.040.19

“Good evening, Your Majesty.”

“Oh, hi DeMarco. Please, come in, have a seat.”

“Thank you. So how goes it?”

“Oh, sometimes I am not so sure how it goes. The ship of state is afloat and sometimes passing through troubled waters, but overall, I think it’s ok.”

“It must be a tough job, balancing all the responsibilities.”

“Yes, I think it is. Although, it’s still fun as well.”

“I heard a rumor of some murders in the Chamberlains office. Is that true?”

“You know, sometimes I am frustrated by the bureaucracy. Our police inspectors can’t seem to solve it, and the Lord Chamberlain is useless. I simply don’t know what to do. Any thoughts?”

“Not really. You know I stay out of politics and such, making sure to never be seen as a conflict for you; part of our agreement for me remaining after your coronation, as you recall. I truly only heard there were a couple of murders and that they were somehow related, but that’s all.”

“Well, actually there have been three, and they were all very related to each other as far as the victims are concerned. But enough of that. How have you been? We don’t get together nearly often enough.”

“Oh, I’ve done my fair share of travel. I went hunting on Rimskull for the famed Fanglebeast.”

“What? Oh my, did you find success?”

He laughed, “Well, I think I might have seen one, but alas, I didn’t bag one. I think the last time anyone actually bagged one was over one hundred years ago.”

“Really! I would have thought they would be more easily caught.”

“Well, they would be, if we could use all of our current weapons. But there are strict requirements for weapons and means on Rimskull. It truly is very primitive hunting there. It almost makes you feel like you could become the prey of the beast as easily as it could be your prey. You know, more have been killed trying than have found success. Not sure I will try that again.”

“Well, it doesn’t sound like fun to me. It sounds dangerous.”

“Yes, I suppose it is, but it was certainly different.”

“I have a question for you. Have you been to see mom and dad or our brothers lately?”

“No, I haven’t seen any of them since your coronation. I think they all decided to be far beyond our reach while you are Empress.”

“Yes, I know. It pains me, but I also understand their decision. Still, it would be nice, don’t you think, to sit down and have a good conversation with them?”

“Yes, I agree, but it is what it is. One fine day your reign will end, and they will be more available.”

“I wonder what they are doing out there. Actually, I don’t even know where they are, do you?”

“Last I heard they planned to join the migration to the Triangulum Galaxy, following in the footsteps of the famous Wilson Family. So, I think they may be far out of reach right now.”

“I didn’t know they planned that. But it makes sense. The new frontier.”

“Yes, and have you given any thought to when the Empire might expand into that new frontier?”

“No. There are far too many pressing matters to deal with here at home for now. Maybe my heir will be the one who expands to three galaxies. But not now. It isn’t the right time.”

“I suppose. Timing is everything, so they say. But it would be very cool, don’t you think? Empress of three galaxies. Now that would be a statement.”

“Maybe. But since there are billions of galaxies, I’m not sure how big of a statement it really is.”

“Perhaps. Any plans for the holidays coming up?”

“Not really. How about you?”

“Well, I have in mind to ask a certain lady to marry me.”

“Really? Oh DeMarco, that is wonderful. Who is she?”

“You know her. The Marchioness of Stanmel, Susan, our old friend.”

“Oh my! That is such wonderful news. We shall have a royal wedding here, at the palace.”

“Whoa, sister. I haven’t even asked her yet. She might not agree.”

“Oh nonsense. She will be thrilled, DeMarco. I can’t wait. How about if you two come to dinner and we can all discuss the future together.”

“I would love that. So, I assume, it is okay if I propose to her?”

“Yes! I can’t wait to hear the romantic story of your proposal and her acceptance!”

He laughed, “Well, I hope she is as enthusiastic for this as you are!”

She laughed as well. “I so love you, brother. I am so glad you stayed behind with me and didn’t run off to another galaxy! Please, let me know when she says yes as soon as you can.”

“I will. Now I must be off. Goodnight, Your Majesty.”

“Goodnight, DeMarco.”

Orders

350.041.09

The Imperial Battleship Broadside, along with its entire battle group, were only days away from Galund, a target for action to remove the rebels operating there. It was the first time many of the officers heard about the event to come.

“Room! Attention!”

Everyone stood up and at attention.

Captain Thompson entered and walked up to the front of the room, a small operational briefing space on the Imperial Battleship Broadside.

“At ease and take your seats.” He waited while they sat, then said, “Ladies and gentlemen, we have been tasked with a highly important mission that could very well save the Empire from civil war. That mission is to put down a serious uprising on the planet Galund.”

Marine Lieutenant Elizabeth Johnston, Lizzy to her friends, sat quietly and listened to the captain’s speech. It didn’t quite add up to her, but she was a Lieutenant, after all.

“Our task, provided directly to me by the Star Fleet Admiral in charge of this program, is simply this, take all steps necessary to root out these terrorists, capture or destroy them, and ensure their members do not depart from Galund to infect other planets in the Empire. If we fail, this uprising will spread. If it spreads, the Empire itself could be threatened. We are the first line of defense, and we will not fail.”

“Each of you will have orders provided for your role within the hour. We will arrive at Galund in two days’ time. Do what you need to do to prepare your troops. But when we get there, we will be at full battle ready, and we will find and defeat this enemy. That is all.”

He turned and walked out the door, with everyone jumping up and standing at attention.

After Captain Thompson left, the room became filled with a buzz of conversations. Soon, the Marine Major in charge of all the marines on the ship called his staff together, and they left, going to a smaller private room to consult.

“Alright, you heard the captain. As I hear it, the admiral gave specific orders for this action several months ago, but the higher ups decided to keep it secret until now. But based on intelligence received over the past several months, the planet Galund has demonstrated considerable rebellious activities. The higher-ups are fearful that there could be several thousand members of this rebellion, prepared to depart to multiple planets and spread it around. Our orders are simple, stop it dead in its tracks.”

He looked around at his junior officers, and said, “So, as usual, we’re the ones who must pull the victory out of the grip of defeat. To that end, here are your specific assignments.”

He handed each Lieutenant an envelope with their information. There was a moment of silence as each opened and read their assignment. A couple of them had questions, but mostly it was standard action. They all filed out until only Lieutenant Johnston was left.

“Yes, Lieutenant?”

“Sorry, sir. But is this really a mission that we should take?”

“Lieutenant, you are a thorn in my side. However, you’re the best I’ve got, which is why you have these orders for this sector. I need you to take care of it, as I believe anyone else would screw it up. Can you do this?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Very well. Enough complaining, get to it.”

“Yes. Sir.”

She re-read the assignment again.

‘Your orders are to go to the Alpha sector of Galund. Alpha sector has the most people on the planet and the capital, lots of agriculture and industry. This sector also contains the core of the insurgency and is located in the town of Deraalon, located about twenty miles west of the capital. There is an unspecified number of insurgents and agitators residing there. Your orders are to locate and eliminate these agitators.’

“Well,” she said to herself as she walked down the hall, “God help us, but this sounds a little bit too odd. What if those several thousand are there? My squad wouldn’t be able to defeat that many. This sounds like a setup, but for who and for what?”

She found her squad, two platoons of fifteen each, and briefed them on the mission. They discussed tactics and reviewed terrain, then selected weapons and made plans as best they could. Two days, they ate and worked out and rested, just to be as ready as they could be on go day.

SB2

350.043.15

Sam was doing what he liked to do. He was sitting in a café, leisurely drinking a hot cup of mestava, daydreaming. He noticed the five guards from the palace enter the café, but thought they were just getting some mestava. One of them held a picture, and looked over at him and pointed; they all walked over and surrounded him.

“Good afternoon, to you. How can I help you?”

“Your services are requested by the Baron.”

“Interesting. I’ve never actually met the Baron, you know.”

“That’s nice, but he requests your presence, now.”

“What are you going to drag me out of the café?”

The lead goon smiled, saying, “Of course not. However, unless you come with us now, we will be forced to use some physical means to get you to the Baron.”

He smiled. “Very well, lead the way.”

They walked the streets of Bordtown, on their way to the palace. There were five guards accompanying him. He thought it odd that so many guards would come to get him. He wasn’t aware of anything he had done wrong. Oh well, it was a gorgeous day.

As they entered the palace, he was asked his name, to be introduced to the Baron.

“My name? I don’t use a name.”

“No sir, you must provide your name to be introduced to the Baron.”

“No, I do not. I will not give you my name, it’s confidential.”

The guards were getting exasperated with him, when the Herald said, “Never mind. Once I introduce him and the Baron finds out he refuses to give him his name, he’ll soon learn a lesson.”

The guards chuckled, and he was pushed forward, behind the Herald. As they entered his private office, sometimes used as a private audience chamber, the Herald said, “My Lord, the person you sought, but a person who refuses to give his name.”

The Baron looked up from his desk, chuckled, and said, “Very well, that will be all.”

The Herald bowed and departed the room with the guards. Once they were alone, the Baron got up from his chair and walked around the desk and they hugged each other in a warm greeting.

“It’s so good to see you alive, Samuel,” said the Baron.

“You as well. I have to tell you; I was quite flummoxed when your guards came for me.”

“Oh that, well, I do need you for a task; but before we get into that, what have you been up to? I don’t think I’ve seen you in, what, two years?”

He chuckled, saying, “Yes, it’s been at least that long. As to what I’ve been up to, well, you know, Rigon, I’ve just been solving cases. But I have to tell you, I have had some strange occurrences lately.”

“What kind of occurrences?”

They sat down while Sam began. “Take this last investigation. It seemed simple up front, office intrigue involving a partners wife; but then, out of the blue…”

Sam was sitting at a table having a cup of mestava, thinking about the case, looking out onto the busy street. He blinked, and found himself sitting at the bottom of a two-hundred-foot sheer cliff, water crashing to his left from a violent ocean, and a cave above and to his right.

“What the…?”

He stood and looked around. The sky was orange/yellow, the air was thick with some kind of gaseous odor; as he watched, he saw lightning shoot several times in random ways – with no clouds to be seen!

When he turned back and looked at the cave again, he noticed someone there, looking at him. The person waved for him to follow.

He didn’t have any other options, so climbed over the remaining boulders to get to the cave, peered inside, then entered. As he walked, he noticed the floor was smooth, not rough. Instantly, the cave entrance closed behind him, leaving him in complete and total darkness. No sound, no light. Nothing for the senses, just the movement of blood through his body. He waited, hoping his senses would adjust and he would be able to see.

Nothing.

After some time, spent telling himself that he had been summoned so relax, don’t panic, he decided to walk further inside. He held his hands out in front of him and moved his feet forward in a shuffling manner. He kept this up for what he thought was an exceptionally long time, and as he was about to stop, he thought he glimpsed light ahead.

In his excitement, he took a full step, and fell. He was terrified by now. He still couldn’t see anything and didn’t know how deep this pit was, but he fell and fell. Eventually he saw light again; but this time it was below him, in the direction he was falling.

Suddenly he came out of the shaft he had fallen through, into a huge space. He felt like he was falling from space onto a planet. He could see volcanoes, rivers, forests; it looked like a planet it was so big.

He kept falling towards it. He had no parachute, no flight kite, no means of slowing down; he just kept falling.

As he neared the ground, he saw he was falling towards a forest, then a field in a forest, he saw a log cabin in the trees by the field in the forest. Instantly, he was sitting in a chair on the porch of the cabin, looking out over the field in the forest.

A voice, “Try again.”

He was standing outside the cave; the sky was still orange/yellow. He looked up to the cave entrance and again, saw the person wave for him to follow. He bounded up the slope over the remaining boulders, hoping he could catch up with whomever was waving for him, but to no avail.

As he entered the cave the blackness surrounded him. He again followed the cave until he saw a light ahead, but this time he stopped and waited. Soon, another glimpse of light. In it, he could make out the hole in the cave floor.

He thought, ‘Well, I didn’t fall in, but how to get around it?’

He waited, and again, a glimpse of light. This time he looked to the edge of the hole and saw what he thought was a very narrow path on the left side that would get him past it. He edged over to the left and felt with his feet and found it was solid. He slowly put his weight on it, and it held. He felt around but there was no place for a handhold: this would be entirely by his feet while leaning his body forward on the wall. He began.

After some time, he moved his foot to the right for a step and it slid off!! He panicked, but to no avail. There was nothing to grab ahold of, so, he fell.

He again arrived at the chair on the porch.

The voice said, “I thought you were a sleuth. Again.”

Everything repeated. He ended up on the chair again.

The voice, sounding exasperated, sighed, and said, “Your reputation far exceeds your abilities. But, since you were highly recommended, I will give you one last chance.”

“Truly, I had no idea what was going on. This was all bizarre.”

“What happened next?”

“Well, I suddenly found myself standing on the boulders again, looking around at the orange/yellow sky. I turned and looked at the figure beckoning me to the cave. I thought for a moment, and realized that each time I had decided to follow, I had looked down to see where my feet should go, so, I never saw the figure enter the cave. This time I stood still, watched, and waited.”

The figure waved for him to follow a few more times, but when he didn’t move, the figure walked to the left of the cave and disappeared.

He ran as fast as he could to the spot where the figure had vanished, and found a round door behind some boulders. It had no handle, but a button in the center. He pressed the button and stepped back quickly. The door opened from the center outward in a spiraling motion. Peering inside he could see a set of stairs. He looked around, saw no other threats or opportunities, and stepped through. As soon as his body cleared the door, it closed.

He was in a room, with light, that held three options. There was a set of stairs leading up, a set leading down, and a hallway to remain in this level.

He stood still, and said to himself, ‘Well if I’m right, taking the downward stairs will eventually lead me to the chair on the porch of the cabin. I have no idea what may be above. At least the cave was flat, so staying on this level must take me past the hole in the floor.’

He thought about the light he had seen past that hole. He had only used that light to see the floor and try and get past the hole; but what had he seen? He squeezed his eyes shut and brought the memories back up. First a bare light, second time it was a purer kind of light, third it was more a shaft of light, but the fourth time, it was a door opening that let in the light! He immediately started walking down the hallway, being mindful of pitfalls that may be along the way.

He carefully inspected the hallway as he walked. It was a white seamless floor, with slick white walls, also with no seam, and no apparent light source, although it was warmly lit. He walked for what he thought was fifteen minutes and stopped. He heard something. He waited. “Ting.” There it was again. It was coming from ahead, but he slowed his pace not knowing what was past the curve in the hall ahead.

Suddenly, out of a door he never saw, people.

“Oh, there you are, Your Majesty. You’re almost late for your court today. Come, come! We must be off.”

They hustled him into a door and down another hallway. But this hall was different. It was darker, and had texture. The walls looked like old, aged oak. The floors were stone with gold flake embedded within. There was old brown, aged paintings of people from days past.

“Come this way, Your Majesty. Oh, Sire, that outfit will not do for your duties today.”

He led him to yet another door and ushered him into the room, where a butler awaited.

“Your Majesty, if you would please come this way.” The butler led him into a huge closet, and had him stand in the center. He clapped his hands and two servants helped undress him, then he selected the clothing for him to wear, and the process was reversed. Soon he was dressed in the most outlandish costume he had ever seen, with billows and ruffles everywhere. He felt like a clown.

“Ah, Your Majesty, you look divine! Please, come this way. The debtors are already lined up awaiting your decisions.”

The Herald led him back through the outer room, into the hallway, but in the hallway were several people he had never met before. As he approached them, the lovely lady in the center of the group approached and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

She said, “Good morning, my dear.”

As he was about to speak, the three younger ladies all rushed into his arms, saying, “Good morning, father!”

Before he could respond, the herald intervened.

“Please, please, Your Majesties, we must be on time, and we are already late. Please come.”

He didn’t speak, but nodded and turned to follow the herald. They walked further down the hallway, past three doors, then stopped and entered a very large hall.

“His Majesty, King Harthenian!”

Everyone stood as he entered the hall.

As he was walked to his seat, he noticed that the hall was beautiful, with rich wood beams supporting the ceiling, stone walls, and a huge hearth aglow with burning logs. At this end, there was a large chair, obviously a throne. It had various designs on it, a purple cushion for a seat, and flags with random meaning on each side. Along the walls on each side were the nobles of the kingdom, seated below multiple flags of various colors.

In front of the throne, to one side, was a smaller chair, more like a stool. This was the chair he was led to. As he sat, everyone else sat. Standing in front of him was a long line of people who did not appear to be nearly as well dressed as he and the nobility. The debtors, coming to ask for favors and forgiveness.

The first person in line was a very old lady, who looked at him and grinned.

Instantly, he was sitting on the chair at the cabin, looking out over the fields.

He turned and saw the old woman standing on the porch, so he said, “I don’t understand. Why is this happening to me?”

She turned and walked into the cabin. He stood and followed her into a small quiet single room cabin. On one side were chairs and a table, on the other was a kitchen. Beyond that a bed, otherwise, it was unfurnished.

The old woman placed two cups on the table and placed what looked like tea leaves inside each. She took the water that was heating on the stove and poured it into each. She set the pot back down, picked up her cup and walked back outside and sat in a chair on the porch. He followed suit.

She said, “There are many things we do not understand, yet knowledge yields clarity.”

He waited, but she didn’t say anything. “What knowledge?”

“The knowledge gained through the power of observation.”

They sat for a while, sipping their tea, when suddenly, she turned towards him, and asked, “What was the color of the third flag from the front, hanging above the nobles’ heads, on the left side of the hall?”

He thought, ran the scene back in his head, and said, “Blue stars on a white background, with a red starburst and golden lace edging.”

“What did your wife smell of?”

“Jasmine, with a hint of lavender.”

“What was on the ground beside the person who waved you towards the cave?”

He thought hard on this one. Then he saw it, and said, “A cat, I think black.”

“What color were the socks of the servants who undressed and redressed you?”

“Blue, with gold stripes.”

“In the second hallway with the paintings, what was out of place?”

He thought and tried to visualize it. There. “On the right wall, high up, a yellow egg was nailed to the wall.”

“Why are you sitting here, answering these questions?”

“To improve, sharpen, and test my observational skills.”

“Very good.”

“But why?”

“Because you must learn to enhance your powers of observation and perception. They will be much needed for your next task, and improved significantly, or much will be lost.”

Instantly, he was sitting at the table having his mestava. He closed his eyes and wondered what had happened. After some time, he realized this would take a lot of thought. But for now, he was still working a case. He thought about the case, all the interviews, data, oddities he had seen, when suddenly he realized the case was not so simple. It was a double deception by the illegitimate daughter of the wife, not a simple affair of the husband.

“Very soon after that your goons showed up and brought me here.”

“Interesting. Well, maybe it was for a good cause.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that Lord Nottlenet has volunteered your sleuth services to the Empress. I believe it may be his way to reward you for the recommendations you made about the findings of the case against his son.”

“Oh, that. Did you resolve it for them?”

“Oh yes, I took care of it in a way that no one will notice. A personal thanks from me for that. If the news of his embezzlement or affair, or his daughter’s involvement would have made the news, poor old Lord Nottlenet would have been crushed. And since he was my father’s dearest friend, that would have been a terrible ending.”

“Well, you are welcome. Some crimes deserve direct punishment. Some deserve something a little different.”

“Yes. But now, the Empress has a need, so you are to leave at once, and report to her at her private residence, not the audience hall.”

“Really?”

“Really. My personal starship is prepared to depart as soon as you are ready.”

“What could an Empress need with a sleuth?”

“I suggest you ask Lord Nottlenet, as he did not provide me any specific information, just the sense of urgency, hence the goons, as you call them.”

“Very well, I will contact him on my way to the terminal.”

“Do good work, Samuel. Apparently, a lot depends on it.”

“Thank you, My Lord, I will do my best.” He bowed slightly, then departed to prepare and learn of his assignment. He stopped by his house and collected various items he thought may be pertinent for this investigation. Afterwards, he made his way to the spaceport.

“Yes?”

“Lord Nottlenet, SB. I wanted to ask you what the assignment is with the Empress. I am on my way to the spaceport.”

“Ah, yes. SB, first let me say thank you for your discretion in the case involving my son and granddaughter. I will forever be in your debt.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“As to the assignment, all I can tell you is that the Empress needs someone who can solve a set of three murders at the palace. Apparently, the police are unable to find a suspect or motive, and she needs this solved. That is all I know.”

“Very good. Murder at the Imperial Palace does sound intriguing, and something that would be rare, but three? Interesting.”

“Yes. And remember, you are to meet her in her quarters. I would suggest you try and get into her private gardens. It is the place she goes for privacy. No one would suspect her to meet someone there.”

“Thank you, sir. I will remember and I will do my best.”

When he arrived at the spaceport, he was expected, and was cleared through without stopping. As he entered the starship of the Baron, he was enthralled at the opulence of it all. He had never seen such. Leather, gold, porcelean, vilgitium, transiabiatium; it had every luxury you could imagine. He was going to enjoy this two-day journey.

He thought, ‘I wonder what the food and wine taste like?’ He wasn’t disappointed.

Sleuth

350.046.08

The journey was marvelous, but all good things must end. He stood in the Royal Viewing Room for the approach to Meladeran. All ships were required to orbit the planet three times before landing, a standard procedure that gave the planet security systems time to analyze and evaluate each craft before providing an okay to land.

He looked out over the planet and was amazed at its size. ‘This is easily twenty times the size of Tuton,’ he thought. ‘Look at all the palaces, roads, industry; yet it is still filled with such greenery, mountains, oceans, and fields. It is beautiful.’

He continued looking out, and thought about what he was getting into. ‘This is far bigger than anything I have ever done. I wonder if that is what the dream was about? If I am to succeed here, my powers of observation must be improved. Miss one simple thing and the case could be blown wide open. I must be on my very best behavior and drive this investigation correctly from the start. But first, getting settled.’

He went back to his room and reviewed available apartments and selected one that would suit his needs. Soon they landed, and he left the starship. There were servants of the Baron wishing to transport him to the Tuton Palace, but he thanked them and departed on his own. He had made reservations at a small apartment, and went there to prepare for the first step in his task.

Empress Alexandra III began her reign in the year three hundred thirty-nine point seventy-five. She was a rarity, as it was not usual for a child of a ruler to be named as the succeeding monarch. Usually, it was to a far distant cousin, or someone of great honor, or perhaps someone who was a good friend. But a child, having the succession kept in the family? Unheard of.

She was the youngest child, and the only daughter of Emperor Leon I. She had four older brothers. But she soon discovered that life in the Imperial Palace was far different as Empress than it had been as a princess. As a princess she had freedom and no real expectations of a future role. She soon learned, that as the Empress, she had politics, intrigue, and duties, nearly all the time. But at the end of it all, she did enjoy her time and honestly tried to make a positive difference in the lives of her subjects.

She had never married, even though she was seventy-three years old, although she looked and felt like a young thirty something. Per custom, she had about nine more years left before she would turn over the reins of the Empire to another. She had no idea yet who it would be.

She did find some small ways to relax and help manage the stress of her life. One thing she loved, more than anything else, was walking in the Empress Stephanie I Private Garden. She felt this was the purest garden and the safest place for her. She felt connected to the first Empress and thrived on the privacy she felt here. This was the very most private and most beautiful garden within the Imperial Gardens. It had high hedges, a few larger well sculpted trees to provide shelter, and a pool with a glistening waterfall, filled with koi; it was relaxing and peaceful, and reserved only for her.

She always had a lot on her plate. She traveled extensively, having spent the first five years of her rein in the Andromeda Galaxy, before coming home to Meladeran. She felt pulled in multiple directions simultaneously. She tried to find a balance between an over burdening autocracy and a moderate democracy for her people. Yet, she always knew she represented an Empire, and the Imperial Star Fleet maintained order.

She had concerns about how it was all financed, how the Imperial Bureaucracy cost so much to maintain, and whether it was good or not. How do you manage to have a free society when the government controls everything? It was a dilemma she thought of often, and tried to manage as best she could.

She had a lot on her mind today, but of a more localized nature. The intrigue in the Royal Court was raising its head. These murders were a real thorn, but she was more worried about another death of a young woman if they couldn’t find the killer. As she was walking in the garden with all these troubling thoughts, she turned a corner to walk to the waterfall and reflecting pool, when she saw a lady sitting upon her favorite bench, reading a book. She had never seen this lady before and was instantly furious that she would be in her private gardens.

“Who are you?”

Samuel stood and then bowed to the Empress, saying, “Your Majesty, I had not expected you so early. Please forgive my intrusion.”

“Who are you and how did you get past the guards to enter this garden?”

Samuel removed his facemask and hair piece, and bowed again, saying, “Your Majesty, your sleuth awaits your direction. As to the guards, they are so repetitive and unobservant anyone could walk past them.”

Alexandra had been irritated, but now she was amused. “So, sleuth, do you have a name?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I am called, SB.”

“SB? What kind of name is that?”

“None, Your Majesty. However, if you are talking murder in the palace, then I cannot afford to trust anyone with knowing my true identity. As even you may, unknowingly, say my name in the presence of someone who may end up being a participant of this investigation, or worse yet, be one of its subjects. Were my identity known, my use would extinguish before your eyes.”

“I see. Well, sleuth, I must trust you.” The Empress sat on her bench, and said, “Where are you from and why should I believe you are capable of success in this investigation?”

“Your Majesty, I am from the Planet Tuton. As to why? Well, I’ve had some good results in finding the truth, to the point that Lord Nottlenet knew of my competency.”

“What do you know of your mission?”

He decided to play ignorant, to hear what she had to say in comparison to what Lord Nottlenet had said. “Nothing, Your Majesty. I only know Lord Nottlenet notified me of a particularly complex and urgent situation, and requested I attend you immediately in order to provide my services. I await information.”

“Very well. I do not know very much. All the information I have is second hand from the Chamberlain and an inspector with the Palace Police. But in general terms, the reason you are here is because we have had three murders occur in almost the same place on the same day on each of three years. All the victims were young girls, all in their early twenties. The cause of death was the same in each, apparently a sliced throat. Yet the inspector and others do not seem to be able to find a connection, which seems unusual to me. What are your thoughts?”

Samuel thought about these few tentative facts and agreed, “Hm… Yes, Your Majesty, I would agree that on the surface it would be more surprising if they were not connected in some way, than if they were.”

“Yes. I would expect the same. That’s why this is so infuriating, it seems it should be a simple task to discover the murderer.”

“One would assume such. However, it would be a great benefit if I could see all the evidence collected thus far, to begin a thorough investigation.”

“Well, Inspector Humbolt, I believe that is his name, is the Palace Police Inspector assigned to the case. I would think he would have all the information you need, and be the place to start.”

“Very well, I will begin with him. However, there is one point. I would ask that you not inform anyone of my, shall we say, participation in this investigation. I will remain anonymous, and discover the truth in my own way.”

“Secrecy? Do you mean to tell no one?”

“That is correct, Your Majesty. If people begin to suspect I exist, that will be okay. But if you tell them I exist, they will begin searching for me and that could possibly hinder my investigation.”

“Very well, I will maintain the secrecy of your investigation.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“As to cost, I intend to reward you for a job completed satisfactorily. Catch the murderer and your reward will be significant. Fail to do so and your reward will only cover your costs. Agreed?”

“Agreed, Your Majesty.”

As he bowed and began to turn away, she said, “Remember, sleuth, if this continues, another young woman could be killed on the last Thursday of March. You don’t have much time, only forty-two days.”

Samuel bowed low again, and said, “I understand the urgency, Your Majesty. I promise you I will do everything in my power to solve this case before that day.” With that he put his disguise back on and walked off into the garden.

He snagged his backpack while walking through the gardens, then ducked into some hidden spaces behind the shrubbery and exchanged his lady costume for that of a Police Inspector, complete with credentials. He also took a moment to alter his facial image, adding some blemishes and using bright green eye inserts to change his eye color. Once complete, he strolled with his head high past several guards, who stepped aside for the inspector.

He decided to go straight to Inspector Humbolt’s office first, ‘May as well start at the top,’ he thought, ‘and he will either be there, in which case we talk, inspector to inspector, or he will not be there, in which case I will snoop.’ Either way, he intended to get the information the inspector possessed, in order to begin his investigation.

He entered the Imperial Palace Police Headquarters building and came to the first challenge, identity check. He had expected this, and was prepared for the event. But he stopped for a moment just to identify which police officer was on duty, and then reviewed information on him he had gathered from his research of the personnel in the Imperial Palace Police department system. Once he was satisfied, he began the challenge.

He strolled up to the policeman and started to simply go around, when the policeman said, “Hold, Inspector. We still need to verify you before you can enter.”

“Oh, my good man, but of course. How could I forget to pass through this rudimentary process designed to enslave the poor bottom-feeders? But of course. As you say, identity first.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a simple card, upon which it said, “I am who I say I am,” and handed it to the policeman.

The policeman was startled at first, then broke out into laughter. “Okay then, so who do you say you are?”

He smiled, “My good man, I am none other than Imperial Police Chief Inspector Antonio Retranemus of the Imperial Audit and Control Department, here to see Inspector Humbolt regarding an exceedingly high profile, and yet secret, case. And you are Officer Strickle, recently transferred from patrol of the outer wall to control of a minor checkpoint, for reasons I will not discuss in public.”

As he spoke, the officer turned a little white.

“Now, you want to know who I am, yet you are not in a position to question me or the authority I bring to my work, especially as it has to do with the decision process on resolving certain personnel actions for certain officers who call themselves policemen.”

The officer stuttered, as he said, “I’m sorry, Inspector, I should have known who you were, Please, you may pass.”

Samuel stood there, looking at the officer, thinking, ‘And this is exactly why bureaucracy fails and why it is so easy to break through. People don’t think, and then make incorrect decisions.’ “Very well, but go ahead and give me one of those temporary access badges so I don’t have to go through this obscenity with the next officer. I may say a good word for you.”

He retrieved his credentials and walked down the hallway, walking as if he knew where he was going. He turned a corner and found the schematic of the building and locations of various offices. He mentally took a picture of it, he had a photographic memory, and moved off towards Inspector Humbolt’s office. It was up two levels and over to the right, and he managed to go straight there.

Walking towards the door, he saw the light was off. He looked around, and unseen, but knowing there was security cameras videoing his actions, gently turned the handle on the door. It was open. He let himself in and turned on the lights, choosing to not try and be unseen, but to behave as if he was supposed to be there.

He took a long view of the inspector’s office; saw various files of the current cases he was investigating openly visible as well as the controls for the three-dimensional wall screen viewer. He turned it on and copied all the files as he read all the information it contained, then turned it off. He copied and read all the information in the three files, the three murders. Once he was satisfied, he turned off the light, closed the door, and made his way to the restrooms.

Once inside, he changed his outfit to be a maintenance technician, changed his hair and eye colors, gave himself a nasty looking scar on his right cheek/neck, and walked out. He walked past the front desk policeman, who was in an intense conversation with a police sergeant while guarding the door, just as Inspector Humbolt and another inspector entered.

The policeman said, “Inspector Humbolt, I am so glad you are here. There is a Chief Inspector from Imperial Audit and Control Department here to see you.”

“Where is he?”

“He entered about twenty minutes ago. He should be in your office.”

“Thank you.” As they walked, he said to Freddie, “That’s odd, I wasn’t told to expect a visitor.”

“Maybe not. Maybe you have things happen here like we do at the Chamberlains office; the bureaucracy just keeps plugging along and odd things pop up randomly.”

He laughed, “Yes, that could be true.”

Samuel left the building and walked through the palace pathways, finally exiting the palace complex, and moving out into the city. He ducked into some trees at a park, and changed again, this time into his normal self, and walked out, heading to his apartment. Once there he spent the evening entering all their data into his personal investigative program, then scheduled a flight and went to sleep.

“Has anyone seen the inspector who arrived only a short time ago to see me?”

“Sir, no one has seen him, except the officer at the identity desk.”

“How can that be?”

“I don’t know, Sir. Perhaps we should review the security cameras and see if he is still in the building?”

“Good idea. Sergeant Emenati, find this inspector, or as I suspect now, this imposter.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And report back to me within the hour.”

“Sir.”

Once the sergeant had departed, Richard turned to Freddie and said, “I have a bad feeling about this.”

“In what way?”

“I’m not really sure, but it just seems odd that this would happen at this stage in our investigation. I think the killer managed to get in here and see our files and research.”

“Certainly not. I mean, he would have had to know when you were away, taken a significant risk of being caught; I just can’t see anyone having the nerve to do that.”

“Perhaps. But also, perhaps a serial killer with ice in his veins could do that. He seems to have been perfect so far. Maybe, like you said once before, we are closer than we think.”

“Hm. Well then, maybe this is his first mistake. We should run a DNA sweep and see what traces we can find.”

“Excellent idea. Let me get someone in here right now.”

It only took about ten minutes for the test to be completed, and the results were even more baffling.

“I don’t understand. We know someone was in here, but NO DNA present?”

“No, sir. Whoever it was must have had gloves, nose filters, and kept their mouth shut. There’s nothing out of the ordinary from anyone not already cleared to be here.”

“Very well. Thank you, Officer.”

“Baffling. Well, until your sergeant returns with his information, I suggest we take a fresh look and see what the killer saw in these files.”

“Good idea.”

It wasn’t long before Sergeant Emenati returned. “Excuse me, sir?”

“Yes, what did you find out?”

“Well sir, several of us reviewed the images and did find the suspect get past the identity desk and walk through the building into your office. The lights did come on and stay that way for about fifteen minutes. All we could see were movements around your desk, but nothing clearly. Then, the suspect turned off the lights and walked down to the restroom. He never exited the restroom.”

“What do you mean, he never exited?”

“Sir, he entered the room and then no one of his description came out. There were other inspectors, officers, maintenance technicians, etc., who entered and departed the facility, but no one matching his description exited.”

“This makes no sense.”

“Well, sir, it does if we make one assumption, that he changed his disguise in the bathroom. You see, one other thing we found, is that a technician departed the facility with the same bag as the one the inspector carried into the facility. He must have been using disguises, sir.”

Richard was stunned.

Freddie said, “Thank you, Sergeant, that is very interesting information.” Turning to Richard, he added, “So, we are being investigated or stalked. Interesting.”

“Richard added, “Yes, so the killer knows what we know, and therefore knows we do not know who he is.” Turning to the sergeant, he said, “Thank you for the work, Sergeant. I would ask you to stay on top of this and try to find out who this suspect is.”

“Yes, sir.”

Travel

350.047.08

Sam awoke early to prepare for the journey. He was traveling to several planets to meet the parents of the murdered women, and see if there was a clue along the way no one had seen. He arrived at the terminal about an hour before the flight was scheduled to depart.

“Good morning. Destination?”

“Good morning. I have a reservation, under Frederick Berrington, enroute to Planet Paradon.”

“That will be twenty-five thousand Jhetas.”

He handed a credit stencil over and the transaction was recorded.

“Boards in twenty minutes, gate two seventy-five.”

“Thanks.” He turned and took the closest jump to the gate area, found his gate just as boarding was called.

“Welcome Mr. Berrington. Hope you enjoy the flight.”

“Thank you.”

He entered and found his stateroom, unpacked, and headed to the bar. He loved to watch the departures through a window. He found an empty seat with no problem, knowing that this ship was not full. This was more of a cargo than passenger ship, but they managed to accommodate both, if your tastes weren’t too high. Soon they lifted off and climbed above the clouds. It was glorious as the atmosphere vanished and the black of pure space appeared, then, poof, they entered hyper-space.

He grabbed a bottle of cabernet and made his way back to his room. Once there, he began his research. His first discovery was that the inspectors had not done any investigating. He thought, ‘It’s not surprising. Too many people depend on their computers to solve their problems for them; they’ve forgotten what real investigating is. They have become too dependent on systems to give them the answers. They have no skills.’

He again reviewed everything they had collected during their nearly three-year investigation and saw several possible connections; yet they had tracked down none. His approach was different, more hands on. Because of that, he would be a bit more thorough. Right now, he was on the way to the first victim’s home on Planet Paradon. He intended to find out a little bit about her and see if anything helped. It was a short hop to Paradon, he should be there within two days. So, to rest, drink, sleep, eat, and prepare for the visit.

Krillean

350.048.11

Sir Maxtamerus Krillean (Rus to his friends), Knight of the Escundrean Order, was the Lord of his manor. In reality, he held a very minor seat in the aristocracy of Secunsa, but it was his, handed down through the generations before him, and he was proud of his heritage. He held nearly five thousand acres of land, a significant amount for a solid agricultural operation.

He and the other lords of agriculture were under significant pressure from the Baron. Baron Darnelia of Secunsa wanted industry and technology, not agriculture. He viewed agriculture as far too antiquated and a waste of land. Even so, they had managed to hold their own, but also knew their action caused pain for another group, the Tarrequein.

As he was thinking about this issue, a friend of his, another lord of agriculture, arrived for a conversation about the same subject.

“Good day to you, Brehon.”

“Good day to you, Rus.”

“So, any thoughts on the latest suggestion from the Baron?”

“Well, I have several, but probably shouldn’t say them out loud, you never know who’s listening, you know.”

He chuckled, “Yep, you’re probably right. I tell you though, if we keep having to bend like the Tarrequein did we’ll end up like them. Only a few acres of land and no way to provide for a living.”

“I know. It worries me terribly, both what’s happening to us, and what’s happened to them. It truly is a shame that our block isn’t stronger so we could resist.”

“Well, if our block contained industry, we would be able to.”

“Sure, we would. Industry is what Secunsa is all about now. Remember when we were young? There were miles and miless of free spaces on this planet.”

“Yep, it was beautiful, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, now you have trouble seeing through the dirt in the air sometimes, and the fish aren’t as plentiful as before, even in the mountain streams!”

“I know. Even our crops have changed. I think the general level of pollution is slowly killing us, but no one will listen.”

“I can’t even imagine what the poor Tarrequein must feel. They’ve seen far worse changes than we.”

“True.”

“I wonder sometimes if we are doing too little too late to push back on these changes the Baron wants.”

“I don’t know. We are so limited in our ability to respond. I mean, if we appear to disagree with him, we get punished. So, we have to be seen as finding a way to show we support him, when in reality, we don’t.”

“I know. I just think we may have run out of options to keep playing this game. I mean, he knows we can’t continue to find ways to resist his mandates.”

“But if we give in, it will never be enough. Before long, he will be back for even more.”

“Yeah. I can’t think of anyone I’ve ever met who was as greedy as the Baron.”

“Right, and he phrases it that he is only doing what is best for Secunsa and the Empire. So, if you argue, you are obviously against both. That’s a lost argument.”

“Which is where the Tarrequein find themselves.”

“Yeah. But I’m afraid that we can’t hang on for very much longer. Once the Baron takes the last land from the Tarrequein, we’re next.”

“Then all hope is lost?”

“Not quite. I contacted an old family friend, the Baroness of Friglianlan, a few years ago, to see what we can do. She has been working on a solution for some time, and says there is hope. She is using one of my field hands in some secret position, but I don’t know where.”

“Well, I hope she is right and that she is successful, because right now it just looks bleak. I mean, we can probably whittle down our land in tenths and survive for the rest of our lives, but there won’t be much to pass on to the next generation.”

“I agree. Let’s hope she truly can do something, and the result helps all of us.”

Love

350.049.16

She was lying in a large, elegant tub, almost a pool, surrounded by a beautiful Greek garden, with columns of stone supporting the marble arches that held the framework upon which rested the flowers and vines that gave them some protection from the sun, but allowed the beauty of the three moons to show. There were statues all around, small fountains, music, wine, and delicious foods of many kinds arrayed for their pleasure.

“Darling, thank you for this get-away. The court is getting very boring, and I needed this break.”

He leaned down and kissed her deeply, running his hands through her hair, and then said, “Not too boring, dear. It’s just right, just enough. No major issues, just increasing intrigue.”

She pulled him into the tub with her, and easily removed his toga, pulling him to her and kissing him again, this time longer and deeper. She wrapped her long, elegant legs around him and held him hostage. They lingered in the tub, exploring, kissing, touching, and loving each other for some time, then got out and dried off, to eat and drink.

“So, tell me, my love, when do we get to take on these new roles you’ve talked about?”

He fed her some golden grapes, while eating some rare delicacy served on a mint flavored red leaf.

“Soon, I promise you. It’s all part of my plan to make her love me even more, thereby to reward me with the greatest gifts.”

“Ah. So, there is a method to your madness.”

He laughed, “Oh yes, there is a method. But the only thing I am mad about is you!”

He kissed her neck and she giggled.

She said, “Kissing my neck is not enough to prove your madness. I want more than that.”

He smiled, stood up, walked over to a drawer, took something out and walked back to her. He then leaned down and got on one knee, and said, “Susan, my dearest love and lover of life, will you be my wife?”

She hadn’t actually expected this, even though she desired it. She burst out with, “Yes!” He put the ring on her finger, and they hugged, kissed, and made it all the way to the bed to spend a long time exploring and enjoying their bodies together.

Later, she said, “So, is this my new role? Bride to be of the Prince of the Empire?”

He smiled, “Yes, my love. And your friend, my sister, the Empress Alexandra III, has invited us for dinner to discuss our wedding.”

“She means to make us a big affair, doesn’t she?”

He smiled, saying, “Yes, a Royal Wedding like no other, for her brother and his beautiful bride.”

“Then our new roles can truly be only a short time away, my love.”

“Yes, it’s not long now.”

“I love you!”

“I love you!”

“Your Majesty, The Lord Chancellor.”

“Lord Chancellor, what an unexpected surprise.”

“Your Majesty. I pray I am not intruding, but there is something we need to discuss.”

“Of course, Bartholamew. Please take a seat. How can I help you tonight?”

“Well, Your Majesty, it occurred to me this afternoon that I seem to recall a conversation with someone about the possibility of sending a worthy delegation to the Triangulum Galaxy to explore and possibly bring into the Empire. As I was thinking about this, I decided to put some jhetas to the idea, and the result simply scared me. So, before a decision is made, I wanted to provide you with this financial overview.”

“Thank you, Bartholamew, but I can assure you that I am not interested in sending anyone to the Triangulum Galaxy at this time.”

“Oh, that is good news, because to do it would cost us a sizeable portion of our reserves and potentially leave us in a weakened fiscal position.”

“I assumed that in my thoughts. But even before considering the financial aspects of the decision, we just don’t have the spare capacity right now to send anyone. Which, of course, begs the question, why haven’t we continued to build up Star Fleet? We have reached a plateau, while our population continues to grow, and our people expand. We need more now, not just for an expedition to another galaxy.”

“I agree, Your Majesty. I was also going to say, while our economy is performing so well, isn’t it time to expand the fleet?”

“Interesting you should come to the same conclusion. Very well, I will discuss this with Admiral McDaniel and see what we need. In the meantime, please make plans for spending these funds on this purpose.”

He rose, saying, “Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Thank you, Lord Chancellor.”

He bowed, “Your Majesty.”

Paradon

350.050.08

He was in the bar as they approached the planet. Paradon was a standard planet, one G-type sun, one moon. The oceans here covered about one-third of the planet. Population controls kept the population at around one billion. Major industries: agriculture and robotics.

This would be a quick visit, unless something unexpected occurred to cause a change. He already had his departure scheduled for the evening, an unexpected boon of a cargo hauler direct to the planet Secunsa. Before he left the terminal he went and checked in, giving up his bags for that journey. He only had his bag of disguises with him as he left the terminal.

He had decided to exit the ship disguised as an old man. He walked with his back slightly bent, had grey hair, blotched skin, wrinkles, and slightly orange-colored eyes. He shuffled softly as he walked, giving everyone the impression that he was a frail older gentleman.

He exited the terminal and found transportation to Ternitus, the hometown of Tazni. The trip was uneventful. ‘It’s beautiful here,’ he thought. ‘The fields are so green; flowers are so bright; I miss this level of life.’ The transport slowed and turned down a long narrow avenue, at the end of which sat a lovely, yet small mansion – probably only twenty bedrooms. The transport stopped, he exited, instructing the transport to wait.

He had asked the Empress to provide a secret notification to the Twillow’s of a continuing investigation into Tazni’s death, but no more. They were not told anyone would visit them, just that it was continuing and whenever the crime was solved, they would be notified. When he knocked on the door, preferring the old ways to buttons and bells or computer screens, he expected to find a normal family. He was not surprised.

“Good morning, Sir, may I help you?”

“Yes,” he stuttered in his old, shaky voice. “I am looking for, um,” he reached into his pocket and brought out a piece of paper, cleared his throat, and said, “Um, I am looking for Sir Marcus Twillow or his wife, the Lady Jasmine Twillow.”

The doorman, trained in courtesy and seeing this was an elderly gentleman, said, “Please, sir, come in and have a seat while I see if they are in residence.”

Samuel knew this meant, ‘Sit down while I see if they want to talk with an old stranger.’ He said, “Yes, of course, and thank you. But would you please add in your notification to them that this concerns a very private matter they would have received notice from recently regarding their late daughter, Tazni?”

The doorman’s eyes widened, but he said, “Of course, sir,” and left.

As he sat, he looked around, and thought, ‘Nice house, respectful, so far shows good values. Photo’s around, all of family at various ages. One photo of the Empress in the entryway, again, standard. Nothing about this setting is out of place or odd. Good, maybe they are normal.’

He heard the footsteps before their arrival. Soon, Sir Marcus and Lady Jasmine Twillow appeared around a corner, walking directly to him. The doorman was not with them.

He rose, bowed his head ever so slightly, and said, “Sir Marcus, Lady Jasmine, is there some place we can speak with a very high level of confidence in complete privacy?”

As he had spoken before they had a chance, they simply nodded and said, “Please, come this way.”

They led him through the house, out the back exit, past a gazebo, and along a paved path out into a wide-open field, and onwards to a small grove of trees. Inside the trees was a small fountain and reflecting pool and two benches. Engraved in the fountain was a photo of Tazni and a short inscription, that said, “Our lost love. May you be forever at peace.”

As they sat, Sir Marcus said, “Please, tell us of your business.”

Samuel sat and looked at them, then said, “Before I do, I assume this space is protected from anyone listening in on our conversation?”

“Yes, we keep this one location on our estate free from any bugs or devices. It is the only truly private place we have.”

“Very well. All that we say here must remain confidential. As you know, the Empress has directed a new and quiet investigation into the terrible crimes you are aware of. I was assigned to come to Paradon to seek out information on Tazni’s past, while others are doing the same in other places. Other than that, I am not at liberty to discuss what we may be discovering, or if there is a suspect or motive involved.”

He saw them both slightly deflate, and continued, “But have no doubt, this will be solved. I understand there is a new detective working this case who has never once failed to solve a mystery, which is why I am here. In order to gain even more information than was available at the time of the crime, I need to know things about Tazni. I would like to meet her closest friends, boyfriends, if any, maybe see her room, look at her favorite places, speak with her teachers. I trust you can help arrange this, as I am unfortunately rushed and would need to accomplish this feat this very day – I depart this evening on a different matter.”

“Of course, we can help. We can gather everyone here who knew our daughter within an hour, and no, she did not have a truly romantic experience with a boyfriend here, but she was dating on Meladeran. In the meantime, we can show you her room – we have not touched anything and swore we would not until her death was solved. We will do whatever you need us to do.”

He saw their pain still alive. “I see she has a brother and sister, are they here as well?”

“Yes, they are. We will bring them to you first, while we gather everyone else. We can take you to her favorite places on the way back to the spaceport. We will do anything, sir, that helps find the culprit or culprits who killed our Tazni.”

“Thank you. Might I meet these individuals within the house?”

“Of course. We will take you to her room, and while you are there we will get to work.”

“Thank you.” He stood, slowly, then paused and said, “Sir Marcus, Lady Jasmine; I cannot say I know how you feel. I cannot imagine your pain. I can only say I am exceedingly sorry for your loss, and that I will do all that I can to find the motive and bring whoever did this to your poor girl, to justice.”

They both bowed slightly, and Sir Marcus said, “Thank you, sir.”

They walked back into the house, and he was led upstairs to a bedroom. As he approached, he noticed the door was sealed.

“You keep it sealed?”

Lady Jasmine responded, “Yes. For a while we kept it open, but every time I entered, I was so overwhelmed with the loss, I had to stop. The only way to stop was to seal the room.”

“So, no one has entered this room for nearly three years?”

“That is right.”

They broke the seal and unlocked the door, and stepping back, said, “Please, see if you can find anything to help.”

He gently opened the door, entered, and closed the door behind him. Inside he found a mausoleum. ‘No,’ he thought, ‘This is a museum, not a mausoleum.” He observed that everything was in its place except for one box. It was a rather large box, left unopened. It was labeled as the personal property from Tazni’s room on Meladeran. He thought, ‘Why had it not been opened?’

Samuel opened the door and found Lady Jasmine waiting. “Can you tell me, why has the box of her personal property from Meladeran not been opened?”

“I hadn’t the heart to do it.”

“Ma’am, it must be done. Would you prefer me to do it, or will you?”

She was tearful, but brave. “I will do it. It is time.”

She entered the room and walked to a dresser for a pair of scissors, then going to the box, she cut the binds that held it together. She stood there, unable to actually open the container.

He said, “Ma’am, let me take a look.”

He opened the box and found some clothes, a digital data holder, papers relating to her education, knick-knacks, and other random items. He said, “Can you tell me, does any of this look out of place or something your daughter would not usually have?”

She looked for a moment, then said, “No, everything here is normal for her. I am certain the data holder would have the same information she sent us regularly, photos and videos. The only thing missing is a photo of her boyfriend.”

“Do you know his name?”

“No, and she never did send us a photo of him. She just talked about this man she had met and how fun he was to be around. Maybe there is a photo on this old data holder?”

“Would you mind if I take this with me, so I can charge it and review it? It will be unharmed, no data will be removed or deleted, and returned to you as quickly as possible, I promise.”

“That would be fine.”

“Thank you.”

Marcus walked up and said that people were arriving, he could take the sitting room by the main entrance. Once that was complete, they would take him to see Tazni’s favorite sites and return him to the spaceport.

It was a very long day, but eventually he was in a minimally furnished cargo ship, alone, heading for Secunsa. It would only be a day of travel, so not much time for anything except some work and a little rest.

He thought about all he had learned today and only one item stood out. According to her best friend, Tazni had a boyfriend on Meladeran who was older than her, although she didn’t know how much older, and that Tazni was planning to return home the week after she was murdered and tell her family about him. She did not know his name or anything else about him, but there definitely was a man in Tazni’s life.

He took off all the makeup and disguises, stretched his back, showered, and went to the galley for some food, then walked back to his room, sat down, and started entering information into his system. He smiled, thinking, ‘I already know, after just one conversation, more than the investigators who have been on this case for three years.’

Growing Concern

350.051.16

It was later in the afternoon when he called. He rarely made contact himself, depending on guidance, not providing information. But he felt this was important enough to make the call.

“Hello?”

“Hello. I wanted to pass on some information to you.”

“Okay, what information?”

“We may have a problem.”

“What do you mean, may have a problem?”

He shuffled his feet, and said, “I mean that I have heard, through various sources, that the palace has obtained the services of an unknown inspector to help solve the murder cases in the palace.”

“Evidence?”

“Nothing tangible. However, I believe it was this individual who was able to walk into the Imperial Palace Police Department Headquarters and secure information about these cases, without anyone knowing or suspecting he was not authorized.”

“This really happened?”

“Yes.”

“Can you find out who it is?”

“No, I have tried. It seems no one knows this person’s name, or anything about him, or even if he exists. It’s only the theft of information at the department – I saw the security videos – that gives me pause that the rumors are real.”

There was a silence on the circuit. After a few minutes, the voice resumed, saying, “Very well. Continue your original assignment, but make finding this individual a high priority. We cannot afford for this to unravel at this point.”

“Yes, sir.”

The circuit went dead.

‘An inspector,’ he thought. ‘I wonder if this one is as incompetent as the others. But if he could do what I just heard, he may be a good one. Still, I should pass this on.’

He picked up his communications unit and dialed a number he rarely called.

“Yes?”

“Good evening, My Lord. I have heard that the palace has hired someone out of normal channels to investigate the murders at the palace, and that this person appears to be very clever.”

“Do you think we should be concerned?”

“Well, I believe that anytime something unusual occurs, it should be understood, before it is cast aside.”

There was a long pause. Then, “Very well, I will make inquiries.”

“Very good.”

The line went dead.

Empress Alexander III was in her private apartments when a herald entered, saying, “Prince DeMarco desires a moment, Your Majesty.”

“Very well, send him in.”

Once DeMarco entered the room, she said, “DeMarco, what a pleasant surprise.”

He bowed slightly, then said, “Thank you, Your Majesty. I just wanted to stop by to inform you that I did find the right time to ask Susan to marry me, and that she has said yes.”

“Oh, DeMarco, that is wonderful news!”

He smiled, and said, “Yes, I agree. If it still suits you, I would still like to arrange a dinner for the three of us to visit together. I was wondering if your calendar could support an evening on say, seventy-seven? That should be the twentieth of March, by my calculations.”

“Let me see.” She walked over to her rather grand desk, pulled up a screen and searched.

“I do have a tentative dinner scheduled with the Grand Master of Exclusia, something about a plan to bring peace and harmony to the universe. I would much rather have dinner with you and Susan, so let me change this. There, done. We can meet here at seven that evening?”

“Perfect, I look forward to it.”

He appeared to be about to say something, then changed his mind.

Alex said, “What is it, DeMarco? It seems something is on your mind.”

“No, not really. It’s such a minor thing.”

“Come on, out with it.”

He smiled, “Okay. But you will laugh when you hear it. I was simply wondering if there was any further news on the palace murders you often talk about.”

She said, “Not that I am aware of. I only get briefed weekly. I might need to push them harder, because if we can’t solve this and another young woman gets killed by a serial killer; I shall just be beside myself with anger and grief.”

“I agree with you. Oh, as an update, I am thinking about taking Susan to Cordoran for our honeymoon. But I still haven’t really figured out a plan.”

“Cordoran? Now that would be a romantic location for a honeymoon.”

“Yes, but how do I get her to go there without her being suspicious? It’s a struggle.”

Alex laughed, “I see how you suffer.”

He laughed, “You have no idea. Okay, well, I shall be off. Until next time, Your Majesty.”

“Good night, DeMarco.”

Secunsa

350.052.10

As they entered orbit around the planet, Samuel looked out the window to take a look. Secunsa, the business planet. Every inch of territory was designed to generate revenue. The planet was rich beyond all compare. It was heralded as the perfect revenue generating planet. This was the reason Secunsa provided more in financial support to the Empire than any other planet. It gave the Baron great power and influence.

To show how organized they were, before a ship could even arrive into orbit around Secunsa, they had to have a prior arranged landing time and more. For example, this cargo ship, before they departed Paradon, had a landing site number, exact time to arrive, scheduled type/quantity of goods to be delivered, and type/quantity of goods to load, as well as a scheduled departure time. Secunsa was organized. Nothing, it seemed, happened randomly.

It was only a short time before the ship began descent through the atmosphere to their designated landing location. Samuel had remained in the bar to enjoy the view a little longer, but eventually made his way back to his quarters to prepare to disembark. Since this ship would not be leaving for Cordoran, he would need to purchase a ticket and move his belongings.

Knowing Secunsa, and in particular that the Baronetess Eme, mother of Eloiese, produced some unbelievably delicious wine, he had decided to alter his appearance to that of a wine connoisseur from Pelanesia, a rich, desert planet, famous for its lively entertainment. He darkened his skin to a dark tan, changed his eyes to a smoldering black, added a wig for long hair to flow under his ghutra, then donned a thobe over his pants. He added inserts in his shoes to give him extra height. He looked like the average rich Pelanesian.

Once on the ground, he entered the central terminal and found another cargo ship destined for Cordoran. It hadn’t landed yet, but was scheduled to arrive late in the evening and depart mid-afternoon tomorrow. It would do. He paid for the flight and turned over what belongings he could, always keeping his bag of disguises and other personal items with him.

He exited the terminal and found transportation to Sevington, the hometown of Eloise Eme. He knew they had also received notification of further investigations into her death, as well. He decided to take a direct approach and travel to the estate as a wine purchaser. If anyone was watching the estate, they should assume this was a normal business transaction, rather than an information gathering trip.

He arrived at their residence, a large vineyard operation in the hills above town, and exited his transport. It was majestic! The vineyards were just getting ready for harvest, and they were all hanging low with deep violet and golden fruit. As he exited, an older gentleman walked in his direction.

“Good morning, Sir. May I help you?”

“Yes, of course. I am shopping for some above average wine and was informed you could provide that.”

“Of course, sir. May I announce you to the Master of the Vineyard?”

“Yes, tell him that Marquis Sheik Ahmed Amir Ibrahim of the Divine Protectorate of Pelanesia, requires his presence.”

The old man bowed slightly, and said, “Yes, My Lord.”

Samuel thought, ‘From photos, he must be the old butler of the estate, Deacon Tarrington. I’ll have to find a way to speak with him later.’

It wasn’t too long before the butler returned with a lovely lady, about his age, who walked with such grace and poise; he realized he was nearly staring at her and corrected himself immediately.

“My Lady, please allow me to introduce the Marquis Sheik Ahmed Amir Ibrahim of the Divine Protectorate of Pelanesia. My Lord, the Baronetess Alexandria Eme of Sevington.”

He bowed exceptionally low, saying, “My lady, your beauty was not spoken of; much to the shame of all who spoke your name.” He took her hand and kissed it gently, then stepped back.

Alexandria blushed, then curtsied slightly, saying, “My Lord, it is truly a loss I have never been introduced to you before. I believe that is both of our loss.”

“Yes, I would agree. So, you are the Master of the Vineyard?”

“Yes, sadly. My husband passed a few years ago, and I am left trying to manage this estate and maintain both the profitability of the operation and the distinct quality of the wine we produce.”

“Well, from what I have heard, you are succeeding. May I have a glimpse of your operation before we taste the wine?”

“Of course. Deacon, would you alert the staff and have them prepare for our guest? I believe executive three would be sufficient.”

“Of course, My Lady.” He turned and departed on his mission.

They were alone. She said, “So, My Lord, what should I call you?”

He had particularly good instincts, and believed she may be trustworthy. However, he still preferred to trust and verify, so, he said, “Tell me, have you received any notification of an investigation into the unfortunate death of your daughter on Meladeran?”

She was startled for a moment, as the question was unexpected, plus it was a strange question to hear from a wine purchaser from Pelanesia.

“Yes, but why do you ask?”

“May I ask what you were told?”

“Only that the Empress had directed a new investigation into the death of my daughter, and that someone may come around asking questions. There is rumor of a new police inspector hired for the job. Are you that inspector?”

“How good are you at keeping secrets?”

She smiled, saying, “I am particularly good at that, as there are many secrets that can kill people, or cause the turnover of a dynasty.”

“Yes, quite right. Can we go somewhere completely private?”

“Of course.” She led him around the house, through the storage and processing facilities, and beyond, out into the vineyards. To others, it appeared that she was showing him the operation and vineyards. She kept going until they had reached a clearing beside a stream, where several chairs were located.

“This is my most private place, where I come to think.”

“This is exceptionally beautiful.”

The small stream was fed from the mountains to the east, still snow covered at the peaks. It flowed from a forest of beautiful pine trees and babbled over the rocks and pebbles in the stream bed. To the left was the vineyards, beautifully manicured on the hills for as far as you could see.

“Thank you. Now, what is your secret?”

He chuckled, “Yes, I do owe you an explanation.” He settled in a chair beside her, and began.

“First, I am so sorry for the loss of your daughter, Eloise, and your husband.”

“Thank you. It has been a difficult time, and I believe it will always be.”

“Yes, I understand. Now, what I am about to tell you must remain confidential. Eloise was not an isolated event. There were two other young ladies, the same age as her, who were killed on the same date, exactly a year apart, who worked in the same office. It appears this was something more than an isolated event.”

“That sounds like a serial killer.”

“Yes. But the Chamberlain Police and Imperial Police Inspectors were unable to find a connection. The Empress, once she became aware of the situation, directed a new investigation. I believe the Empress did hire someone, but I have not met him, although I am part of that investigation so must have received directions for this visit from him, in some manner. All I know is that I was hired to come here to have this discussion with you. I believe there are others doing the same at other places. If all of this is the work of a central inspector, well, so be it. But I have no word on that.”

She was sitting looking down, then looked up at him, a slight mist in her eyes, and said, “Do you really think you can find out who murdered my daughter?”

He reached over and held her hand, saying, “I promise you, on all I hold dear, that we will find the answer to this for you.”

They sat and held hands for a few moments, then she sat back and said, “Very well, My Lord.”

He smiled, and said, “Please, in private, call me Ahmed.”

She smiled, saying, “Ahmed. That’s a good name for a Sheik from Pelanesia.”

He laughed, “Yes, it is. And I am serious and determined.”

“Then you can call me Lexi in private.”

“I will be honored to, Lexi. And I need to change the subject. Tell me, did your daughter have a serious relationship? Was she in any trouble on Meladeran? Did you have any concerns at all about her safety?”

“Well, she did say she had met someone on Meladeran. An older man, but not too old; something about the university. Otherwise, she traveled with the blessings of the Baron, so was protected from court intrigue.”

“Was she involved in any outside activities? What was she studying?”

“She was involved in star ball and work. She loved archeology, which was her core study.” She paused, then said, “I will also share a secret with you. The Baron had a separate investigation as well. He told me the trail was cold and they could find no cause, motive or suspect in the case.”

“Thank you. Now, apparently I have some wine to buy.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that just to cover your story. I can make an excuse if you need to leave.”

He looked at her, and said gently, “Lexi, I am exactly who I say I am and where I wish to be.” He bowed again, slightly, and took her hand and again, gave it a gentle kiss.

She shivered from the thrill she felt inside; something she had not felt for an exceptionally long time, and said, “I am also, Ahmed.”

They walked back to the operational facilities and met Deacon, who led them to the tasting room.

Lexi began, “First up, a buttery Chardonnay. Our premier Chardonnay has a depth of rich creaminess. Sometimes it tastes like a delightful Creme brûlée, at other times it has a butterscotch or toffee flavor. Still, at times, it has a caramel, croissant, or pie crust flavor. But at all times, it is gentle, alluring, and a perfect buttery flavor with a delicious aftertaste.”

They spent a couple of hours tasting wine and talking, but he knew he needed to move on. He purchased a significant amount of wine, instructing them to hold it until he provided shipping instructions, then departed to continue the search.

He went to her old school, places of interest, met with a few of her friends, but only verified she did have a boyfriend, that no one had met. Otherwise, it seemed she had a relatively normal experience.

By the time he arrived at his hotel, it was getting a little dark. He got to his room and changed into a more normal appearance, but still maintained enough of the deceptive attributes he had worn during the day, that he appeared to be Ahmed.

He decided he needed to think. He walked outside and turned to the right, towards the harbor. He went into a cheap looking restaurant and ordered some fish chowder, bread, and a beer. Once he finished, he continued his journey.

He realized, after a while, that he was walking in the dark randomly through the streets close to the harbor. He could smell the stench in the street from rotting fish, piss and smells from cooking food, diesel, and others. There were sounds from bands playing in some of the bars, staggering couples groping each other as they stumbled for a quiet place. Now and then he passed a lady of the night selling her wares on the street with naked skin.

He allowed himself to sense the totality of it, the humanity of it, the pleasure and pain of all of it, as he lost himself thinking about the case at hand. He tipped his hat to one of the ladies he passed, who was standing under a streel light, a lovely naked leg showing through her night cloak, and began to allow himself to go into deep thought about the case. Just then, someone stepped out of the darkness and put a gun to his face.

He froze. A voice said, “You will not receive a second warning. Stop your investigation if you wish to live.”

A brick hit him in the head, and he collapsed on the street, unconscious.

When he awoke, he felt his throbbing head and knew he had been put through the ringer, just not how. He opened his eyes and was shocked to find that he was in bed with a very naked woman, who was lying in bed on her side, leaning on her hand, looking at him.

“Good morning, darling,” she said.

He tried to mumble something, but she reached over and put her fingers to his lips, saying, “Shhh. You shouldn’t try to talk yet. You need nourishment, water, and coffee. Wait here, I’ll be right back.”

She got out of bed and walked into an adjacent room, and soon returned with a plate of toast, cheese and jam, and a large mug of coffee. “Here, this will help you. I have to leave, one last trick before closing, then I will return.”

She walked out the same way she entered, and he heard a door close. He tried to get up, but realized he couldn’t. His balance was off, and he was, indeed, hungry. He gave in and ate the food and drank the coffee, took the pills, then drifted off to sleep.

He finally awoke, only to find himself snuggled up to her, with his cheek on her breasts. It startled him and he jumped backwards.

She laughed. “Well, well, you are finally feeling a little better.”

“What, who, I don’t know, what happened?”

“Calm yourself. I saw you walking down the street last night, you even tipped your hat in my direction as you passed by, then the scabs got you and knocked you out. I waited until they left, then managed to get you up and into my rooms. This is my personal bed. I conduct my business out front in a different bed.”

“So, we haven’t, you know.”

She laughed as she got out of bed and pulled her robe around herself, “Oh my God! No. We haven’t done anything. I have simply tried to take care of you. I hope that is okay.”

“Yes, yes, it is. I’m Sam, by the way. What’s your name?”

“Sam. Interesting name for a Pelanesian aristocrat.”

“Huh? Oh, the makeup. Hang on.”

He took a few minutes to remove all the remaining deceptions and looked at her, saying, “Sam.”

She laughed. “Well Sam, call me Lizzy, short for lizard lady on a leash. But at least I don’t wear disguises.”

“I’ll explain some time, but I don’t get your name. Lizard lady on a leash?”

“Oh, well, until I pay off my debt, I am owned by my proper. He sets things up, I do the trick, he gets the credits and gives me enough to survive.”

“How long until you are free?”

She paused for a moment, then said, “What is freedom? I don’t think I will ever be free.”

“I’m grateful, but tell me again, why you took me in?”

She laughed, “Well, because I felt you were in worse shape than me. I knew I couldn’t do much, but thought I owed it to myself to try and help.”

“Well, let me say, thank you. I don’t know what would have happened to me if I was left on the street.”

“Oh, you would have been stripped and left for dead. And if the wrong people came along, they would have taken you and harvested you for parts to sell.”

“Nice. Then I really owe you, and while this might sound like a bad line in a B movie, I have a proposition for you. Interested in hearing it?”

She laughed. “Sure, I’m all ears, all evidence to the contrary.”

He laughed. “Okay, here it is. I believe I have been compromised. I think the houses of the victims of a crime I am investigating are being watched, so when I made an appearance yesterday at one of those houses, somebody saw me, figured out I was investigating, followed me, and knew it was me when I left my room. But I have to go to one more house on another planet. What I propose is that you go to the house while I watch to see if anyone is watching you, then we gather what information we can and depart.”

“Doesn’t sound too dangerous.”

“Well, I didn’t think so, but I was obviously wrong, and you saved my life to prove it. I will pay you very well for your support.”

“Well, if I could, I would, but I am still in debt to my proper.”

“You should call him and see if he can stop by.”

“Oh, he should be here soon; he always checks on me in the morning.”

Just then, the door sounded. Lizzy got up and went to answer, and he heard arguing as she walked back to her room, with a loud voiced male following.

“Who the hell are you?”

Samuel looked at him, stood up and walked up to him, and without blinking, quietly said, “Either your best dream or your worst nightmare. You choose.”

The Proper said, “I choose a dream; but I’m willing to give you hell if you can’t deliver.”

“How much does she owe?”

“More than you have, dumbass.”

Samuel reached out and grasped a pressure point and the proper collapsed to the floor, saying, “Only twenty thousand credits.”

He released him, reached into his pocket and pulled out fifteen thousand, and said, “Here’s fifteen thousand credits, cash. Take it and release her and we will have no further need to meet.”

He looked at him, and said to Lizzy, “You’re released,” turned, and walked out the door.

She looked at him, “Interesting. So, now what?”

“Pack your bags. We have a lot of work to do.”

Friglianlan

350.053.09

“Good morning, My Lord.”

“Good morning, to you as well.”

“I was wondering if everything is continuing to run according to the plan?”

“Yes, I believe so. Thus far no concerns at all, and I do believe we are laying the foundation for a significant event to occur, as planned, I hope.”

“It does seem the asset performed well.”

“Yes. It is such a shame we must resort to these barbaric steps to get a point across. But it is necessary, so we continue to struggle.”

“Yes, My Lord. On another subject, there appears to be a growing romance involved that might distract some people, an unexpected boon to the process.”

“Really? Who would that be?”

“The Baroness Friglianlan and Viscount of Tantelle. It’s all very secret right now, but I’ve heard from reliable sources that there is definitely an attraction there.”

“Interesting, and yes, that might divert attention from other things. I’m certain the royal court will be aware of it.”

“Of course. Any word on the remaining steps?”

“No, all seems to be in order. It is more of a waiting game, for now.”

“Yes, patience. Very good, My Lord, until next time.”

Viscount Richard Harrington of Tantelle was in a precarious position. He felt troubled by it, and sought out his sister for a conversation.

“Richie, so good to see you!”

As they hugged, Richard said, “Thanks for seeing me on such short notice, Susan.”

“Of course. What is so urgent?”

He chuckled, and said, “Well, it’s about a girl.”

She smiled, and said, “Dear brother, isn’t it always about a girl with you?”

“Yes, it is. But this time it’s different.”

“How so?”

“I think I am actually falling in love with her, but she is part of the effort going forward. It makes it more complicated.”

“Oh. Who is she?”

“Baroness Natalia Renee of Friglianlan.”

“I see. That would make things a little more interesting.”

“Tell me, sister; if you found out the person you loved was also using you for an end, would you be able to forgive him?”

Susan walked over to the bar in her penthouse, poured both of them a cognac, walked back over to him, handed him his drink, and said, “Brother, everyone is being used by someone. Being used, using people; it’s not necessarily bad. If, at the end of the day, she sees that your actions provided even more value or love between you, why would she object? Cheers.”

“Cheers.”

“Also, you are not alone, so, when the time comes, some highly placed individuals will be by your side to defend your actions. I believe she will be very understanding, although, I can also understand you will get an earful and have to swear you will never do anything like that again.”

“Oh, that would be easy, because I wouldn’t.”

“Exactly, so all is well.”

“And that is why I need you, sister. You always manage to cut through the cloud and deliver a clear vision for me.”

“Well, what are big sisters for?”

They talked for a while longer, then he insisted he needed to depart; he had dinner with Natalia that very evening.

“Relax, Richie, enjoy the ride and the life. Have fun tonight.”

“Thanks! Good night!”

“Good night!”

Natalia was in residence in her small retreat on Meladeran. It was situated on only a few dozen acres of land, a thirty-bedroom getaway, with a luxurious pool, and her favorite, a riding stable. Tonight, she had a very special dinner guest, the Viscount Richard Harrington of Tantelle. He was such a wonderful inspiration to her. He was smart, strong, and very good looking. She was tingling with anticipation for his arrival.

Richard thought about her on the journey to her retreat, and realized he was quite intrigued. Truth be told, he was quite taken by the Baroness. After all, she owned a planet, and she was fairly young and beautiful. He had every reason to want to be in her company.

When he arrived, the Baroness met him at the door.

“Welcome, My Lord!”

“Hello to you, My Lady.”

“Please, come in.”

“Thank you. My, this is a wonderful palace.”

She laughed, “No, My Lord, this is a retreat, not a palace. I decided not to be too opulent here on Meladeran. Too many people with flapping jaws, and I hate Royal Court intrigue. At least, I don’t want to be the subject of it.”

He laughed, “Unless it’s good intrigue, right?”

She smiled, saying, “Well, yes, of course. Please, this way.”

As they walked, he said, “Tell me, Your Ladyship, when did you become a Baroness?”

“Please, call me Natalia, it makes it so much easier. As to when, well, I have held the title for fifteen years, having been designated as heir by my father before his untimely death.”

“I’m sorry to hear of your loss, that must have been very difficult at such a young age. And please, call me Richard.”

“Thank you, Richard. Yes, it was. My mother and father died together in a skiing accident. Silly of them, but they decided to run a high-level downhill challenge together, and inadvertently took two different trails through a forest, and when they came out, they collided into each other. They died instantly.”

“I am so sorry.”

“Yes, well, that left me. I have no siblings, so it’s been about trying to understand how all this works. I have been fortunate, there are some dear friends I made while my parents were alive who have stayed close and lent me their support over the years.”

“It certainly seems as though you have figured it out.”

They entered a formal dining room, which was set for a large party. She said, “This is not where we will dine if you don’t mind. I prefer a more intimate arrangement for a quiet meal.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

“Good, so this way.”

She led him though the house and outside, past the pool, to a glowing gazebo. It sparkled with lights, candles, flowers; it was beautiful.

“Do you like it?”

“Oh, my. This is wonderful.”

“Thank you.” She turned to her personal sommelier, and said, “Please begin.”

“Yes, My Lady.”

The sommelier did her part, directing staff to notify the chef to proceed and providing a delicious crisp white wine for their enjoyment as the evening began.

“Is this always how you treat your dinner guests?”

She blushed, saying, “No, My Lord, it is not. But you are not just a dinner guest, I hope.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, oh. I hope that you are at least a friend, and am open to the possibility of even more.”

He smiled, raised his glass, and said, “My Lady, I must confess to you we share similar hopes. To a wonderful night, growing closer together.”

After a while, as the meal wound down, Natalia asked, “So, tell me, how goes the work you are doing to prevent the Baron Darnelia from eliminating those people?”

“Very well. My hope is that we will see success within a short time, perhaps within a few months.”

“That is wonderful news. I have been heartbroken over this. And being unable to do anything publicly about it, well, you have been my only hope. I can’t think of how I can ever thank you enough.”

He smiled, saying, “That, my dear, is something we should worry about after success is gained. We will have a lot of time to explore all of the possibilities that await us.”

“I can’t wait. I will be so glad when this charade ends, and we can just be open about our feelings.”

“And I. But, for tonight, I must be off. There’s a full day awaiting tomorrow.”

“Yes, me as well. Good night, Richard. Until next time.”

“Good night, Natalia, and I hope that next time is very soon.”

Star Gazer

350.054.09

The Lord Chamberlain Enrique Stratada, and The Lord Chancellor Bartholamew Templeton, were enroute to the planet Cordoran for a vacation with their wives. They were traveling on the Lord Chancellor’s brand-new private yacht, the Star Gazer.

“I must say, Bartholamew, your new yacht is very impressive.”

“Thank you, Enrique. Yes, I have saved for many years to finally be able to purchase the ship of our dreams. She’s a beauty. There are twenty staterooms, a pool, sauna, gym, bar/lounge, formal and informal dining facilities; plus, a staff of fifty to keep it all running and provide the very best service imaginable.”

“I suppose it doesn’t hurt that this is technically a working vacation, as we will both be discussing financial and operational issues for the Empire.”

Bartholamew laughed, saying, “Well, that is true. But I will only charge as much as it would have cost us otherwise.”

“Yes, I’m sure, which will be more than the payments for the ship.”

They both laughed, then Enrique added, “Speaking of that fully serviceable bar, what say we go get something to drink?”

“Of course, come this way.”

They walked down a long corridor and up a spiral staircase to the bar/lounge, a room about seventy feet across with windows that allowed an unfettered view of the sky. Of course, right now, they were sealed, as they were traveling in hyperspace, so nothing was truly visible.

When they arrived, one of the bartenders asked what they would like.

Enrique said, “I once had a drink, I think it was called something like, old fashion?”

“Oh, yes sir, I can make that for you. And would you like your normal drink, My Lord?”

“Yes, that will be fine.”

They walked over and sat in a couple of very comfortable seats to wait for their drinks.

“Do you often entertain on board?”

“Yes, since I travel so much, I find it easier to travel and entertain onboard. It’s too much of a hassle to try and coordinate everything off ship, especially when it can all be done here, to my wife’s specification.”

“And how is Celia?”

“Oh, she is wonderful, as always. Oh, and speaking of my wife, here are both our wives.”

They stood up as their wives approached. As was expected for men in their position, their wives were beautiful. It was hard to believe they were all nearly the same age, but the ladies took extra care to always make sure they looked the part they played, wives of their Lord husbands.

After a few minutes, the ladies bid farewell, they were off for a spa treatment.

“I’m glad those two are able to enjoy themselves.”

“Yes, me too.”

“I believe that means we are doing our jobs well, yes?”

“Absolutely.”

Soon their drinks arrived. They took a few sips without saying anything. Finally, Enrique asked, “Tell me, Bartholamew, how goes the effort?”

The Lord Chancellor looked around, just to make sure no one could hear them, and said, “As far as I know, all is proceeding as planned.”

“Any word on the actions of Chou?”

“Ramifications seem to be occurring as planned. It should be noticed soon.”

“This is my third regime, isn’t this your third as well?”

“Yes. I remember fondly Emperor Drexel II. His was a rein that had promise and hope.”

“Yes, then Emperor Leon I. His was a disappointment to me. He just never inspired anyone. It was like he held the title, but didn’t know what to do with it. I still don’t know why he named his daughter as his heir.”

“Yes. Empress Alexandra III’s heir must be better than what we are currently going through.”

“I agree, and if we are allowed to continue as we are, that will certainly be the case.”

“Well, we can only hope. From what I have seen, it should be more dynamic and generate more energy.”

“Yes, but you must wonder, is that what we truly need, or do we just need someone with a vision, someone who can inspire our people to once again be better.”

“Let’s just hope the result is not worse than our current situation.”

“If that happens, we may need your yacht to run away as fast as we can.”

“That’s why I bought it.”

“Speaking of which, how far have you traveled with this yacht?”

“Well, I have not yet gone to the Andromeda Galaxy, but I have traveled to all the corners of this one.

“Are you hearing anything that should concern us regarding policy, security, etc.?”

“You know, it’s interesting. I have heard more about high taxation than I have any other subject. It just seems that even when we use our resources wisely to provide the security everyone needs for the system to operate smoothly, it’s too much.”

“Of course, it is. What Drexel told me one time, which made sense, was that everyone focuses on their personal funds when there is no obvious enemy to defeat. He said he envied people like Empress Stephanie I, because everything was so new, there was so many fights and enemies to deal with, no one ever complained about their contribution to the cause.”

“Yes, I can understand that. I’ve also heard quite a few people asking about the Triangulum Galaxy, and wondering if we will be spending even more money to go there and expand the Empire.”

“I’ve also heard that one. It might be a good idea, it would provide a huge diversion for getting our fiscal path in order, but I do not believe the Empress is interested in that.”

“No, I have heard her say that may be for someone else, but not her. I even went to talk with her about it and she was emphatic that we could not afford it at this time. But she also wants to build up Star Fleet.”

“Too bad, really. Sending a delegation to the Triangulum Galaxy could be a wonderful opportunity.”

“Yes, well, that opportunity could still be in the near future.”

“As you say. There are some who believe we really need to do this, so maybe.”

“Yes, there are always possibilities.”

Cordoran

350.055.09

Cordoran is not a special planet. It’s pretty and small, but doesn’t have many special features. However, it does have something no one else has. It has three moons in close proximity for the most startling sunrises and sunsets imaginable. The colors, shadows and nature of the sky give it a rare and beautiful image. It is for that reason so many couples come to Cordoran for honeymoons, it’s the planet of love!

The forests contain manicured walkways with private chalets sprinkled throughout. Waterfalls have overlooks that emphasize the sky beyond. Beautiful sailing ships take newlyweds on magical cruises with the planets surrounding them in the night and daylight sky. It is magical.

Sam and Lizzy arrived playing the part of newlyweds. He had brought her on board with gusto, as he needed someone to help him in his investigations, and if he couldn’t trust her, whoever could he trust? It was one of the first times he had been completely honest with someone, but in this business, he had to either fully trust you, or not trust you at all. Lizzy was the perfect fit, and had a no holds barred attitude that he loved.

They had departed Secunsa to the planet Detrimetus, and there boarded this luxury cruise ship for the journey to Cordoran. Sam felt if they went directly to Cordoran it would provide anyone paying attention a direct link to him, and he needed to avoid being known at all costs, so he had cancelled his original ticket. He still didn’t know how he had been found out on Secunsa, but with the urgency he had for this current case, he couldn’t devote time to investigate.

However, something told him this adversary would make another appearance. This actually helped him narrow his focus, because it clarified that whoever was behind the murders had some well-connected or highly placed individuals at court. That meant the murders were not simple serial killings, but done for a hidden purpose. Intrigue, his favorite pastime.

They had spent the extra day on board going over the details of this investigation that Lizzy needed to know before they arrived at Cordoran. He had shown her his outfits and discovered that she loved makeup and changing how she looked. She had also been an actress for some time, so could play a role well. It was all good.

As they walked down the gangway from the ship, they were met by dozens of angels dressed in flowing in white, smiling, giving kisses and hugs to welcome everyone to the Planet of Love. Once they passed through this heart-warming welcoming process, they were met and led to the ground transportation that would take them to their resort. They were helped into their carriage, boarded, and departed.

As they were pulling away, Lizzy said, “Wow! Look at that yacht!”

Sam looked over to the rows of private vessels berthed at the terminal. Yes, the rich and famous came here for getaways too. But the one Lizzy pointed out, the Star Gazer, was by far the biggest, sleekest, most beautiful of those yachts.

“Yep, whoever owns that thing must be totally loaded.”

As they continued, Lizzy played the role of the newlywed wife to the hilt, kissing him on the cheek when he squeezed her hand a certain way, always having her arms around him or in his arm, holding hands, and generally being the love bird that everyone needed to see. They were, to all who would see them, an incredibly happy, newlywed couple.

When they arrived at the resort, they were whisked to their room, and provided an extensive schedule of activities they could participate in. But once they were in the room and the door closed behind them, they both went to work. Off came all the makeup and disguises, switching to a different look. This time, he would not approach the family of Kalennish, but instead monitor Lizzy as she made contact.

“Okay, let’s go.”

They departed down the hallway to the first service door on the right, walked down three flights of stairs, then went through a maintenance door. They went through a tunnel and took the first left, which ended at an exit door. Opening the door, they found themselves in an underground parking garage. They walked across to the stairs on the north side, up a flight of stairs and out onto a side road. They walked three blocks then waved down transportation.

“Where to?”

“Artersdale Aquarium.”

“Sure thing.”

It only took fifteen minutes to get there. They paid and walked into the aquarium, and parted ways.

Sam walked to the right and exited the building, closely monitoring for anyone following. He walked four blocks in a highly circuitous manner to make sure he was not followed, and found a quiet, secluded spot to observe the house across the street, and waited.

Lizzy had exited the aquarium in the opposite direction, then backtracked and walked the same direction, so she would arrive at the house across the street from Sam after he had about ten minutes to prepare.

She walked up to the door and pressed the notification system.

“Yes?”

“Oh, hi, I am here to see Kednin or Krinstly Kisdernec.”

“Regarding?”

“The unfortunate and untimely death of their daughter, Kalennish.”

There was a minute of silence, then the door opened. “Please, come in.”

She entered the house and the door closed behind her.

Sam was busy watching. He knew that all of the deaths of these young women were connected, just not how or why. But he believed he was found out on Secunsa because someone was watching all of the families of the victims, and they followed him after he met with Alexandria, because they thought he was getting in the way. If that were the case, they would be watching this house as well. He was extremely still, watching for any movement at all.

Then, he saw a small antenna rise up from a tree branch. He watched as it stayed up for a moment, then withdraw.

‘So,’ he thought, ‘there is someone watching. But who?’

He stayed observant, while he listened to Lizzy.

“Thank you for seeing me, but before we begin, please accept my deepest condolences on the loss of your young daughter. I cannot imagine how much that loss hurts you.”

“Thank you.”

“As to why I am here, I assume you were informed of a continuing investigation?”

“Yes,” said Krinstly, “we were informed by the Imperial Palace that the Empress herself had directed additional investigation.”

“Good, then you know why I am here. I am Lindsey McLaughlin, part of that investigation team. There are several of us now working to find the answers that you so need.”

“Thank you, we’re very glad the Empress has taken a personal notice of our loss. Please, come, sit down so we can talk.”

“Thank you. I do have several questions for you. Can you tell me if she had a serious relationship at the time? Any issues at work, any specific friends she associated with, her activities, concerns, anything?”

They looked at each other, then Kednin said, “We have thought about it over and over again. We cannot think of anyone who would have a reason to harm our daughter. Nothing.”

“Nothing,” added Krinstly. She signed, “But regarding your questions, she told us how much she enjoyed her work, school, the games she played on various teams; she was happy.”

“What about a relationship?”

“We don’t believe she was involved with anyone, but you never know; there could have been someone. However, I believe if she were getting into a serious relationship, she would have told me, her mother.”

“Of course. What about school? She majored in archeology?”

Kednin replied, “Yes, she loved it. I think she picked up a love for digging into the past from my father. He is a renowned archeologist. He led the digging into the discovery of the Altrusian remains on Herdon. He often spoke of that dig and the camaraderie he found. I think Kalennish heard those stories and fell in love with the idea.”

“Okay, so she was enjoying her studies, enjoyed her work, enjoyed her friends; what are we missing?”

“Oh, she also enjoyed the easy access to changing her hair, nails, and makeup. She loved the salon; I think it was called Doreen’s. She spoke highly of her hair stylist, Sasha Sashae.”

“Lindsey, do you believe there is a real chance to find out who did this?”

Lizzy took a moment, then looked at both of them in total seriousness, and said, “I have met members of the team investigating this crime, and I am convinced that we will find an answer. I don’t know how long it will take, but we will leave no rock unturned in our search for the truth. So yes, I believe we will solve this, and bring whoever harmed your daughter, to justice.”

“Thank you.”

Lizzy rose, “Thank you for seeing me. If there is need of further information, I will contact you personally.”

“Thank you.”

They walked to the front door and said goodbye as she left.

Lizzy walked down the sidewalk to the east, heading to a rendezvous she and Sam had pre-planned. She didn’t know she had been observed at the house, but remained vigilant. Two blocks down the road the footpath detoured over a creek and momentarily went into a grove of trees, there to cross over a foot bridge to the other side.

As she approached the bridge, four men suddenly appeared.

“Excuse me, sunshine, but we need a word.”

She stopped and analyzed the situation, and said, “I don’t know you; not sure what words you need to have with me.”

The speaker grinned, a dirty, broken teeth smile. “Whatever. You’ve been working for the wrong team, darling. Apparently, you think you can just intrude in people’s turf without permission.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about.”

He spit on the ground, almost hitting her shoe. “I’m talking about you being in this neighborhood, darling. This is our space. We don’t take too kindly to a spy showing up here. We deal with spies. I guess were gonna have to deal with you.”

“Wait!”

“What for?”

“I have to warn you, if you try and harm me, I will not be responsible for what happens to you.”

They laughed.

He said, “Oh, the little girl thinks she is tough. Enough. Take her.”

The men advanced. She feigned to the right, then hit the man to her left with a vicious kick to the throat, breaking his larynx, and he collapsed unconscious, dying. Out of a sheath hidden down her back, she suddenly possessed an exceptionally long knife, and stood her ground watching them, two of them reached to pull blasters, she hit them with a ferocious attack, then, she cut their arms off at the wrist with a quick slice, and then an equally quick slice of their necks as they fell. She shoved them into the creek to bleed to death.

The fourth, the one who had done all the talking, stood watching her. Just as he was about to turn and run, a rope fell over his head and around his neck. It tightened and he was lifted from the ground, flaying his arms and legs.

Sam stepped around him, looked at Lizzy, and said, “Nice job.”

“Thanks.”

Turning to the hanging man, he said, “Now, you will tell me all you know. That is not a request. Otherwise, you will die. It’s that simple. Now, talk.”

Later, as they walked back to their rooms, he said, “So, tell me, Lizzy. Where did you learn to handle yourself like that?”

“I spent some time in the Imperial Marines. I was on Galund during the third uprising.”

“That was only a short time ago. I’ve heard rumors about that; it was said that there was some very ferocious fighting there.”

“More than that. Leadership failed in many ways. They only sent in thirty troops to quell a riot, when a battalion was needed, only seven of us made it out. Leadership then destroyed an entire section of the planet.”

“Imperial troops and leadership. Sounds intriguing.”

“No, you wouldn’t understand. The empire is not the snowflake powder puff place where everything and everyone is squeaky clean and perfect. That’s what people think it is, but there are serious issues and its unraveling. I know. There are literally hundreds of planets currently fighting with Imperial forces in one way or another. I decided after Galund that I was not going to have anything to do with crushing fighters.”

“So, what did happen on Galund?”

She was quiet until they reached their room, then said, “I’ve never told anyone the whole story. This might take a while.”

“No problem, we aren’t going anywhere until tomorrow.”

She sat on the very front of the chair, balancing. She was wired. She stood up and walked over to the window, turned around and began.

“I was told there was a small outfit in Deraalon, a small city on Galund, that was causing the problems in that sector. We also knew there were several thousand fighters that needed to be taken care of somewhere on the planet. I protested, not knowing if these larger numbers were in our sector or not, but it didn’t matter. My unit was assigned to find them and eliminate them. We were dropped about a mile outside of town, in a field with a forest between us and the town. I knew something was wrong when the transport buttoned up and buzzed out of there at top speed.”

“My team, thirty-one including me, started walking to the tree line. Suddenly, from the north and east side of the field, we started taking fire. I thought, ‘What the hell? This was supposed to be a friendly and safe landing zone.’”

She began issuing orders to her sergeants. “Alpha! Dig in left, cover the flank! Bravo! Move right to the south trees, set up and cover!”

Her Alpha sergeant, Baxter, took a plasma round in the chest and exploded! “Shit! Alpha, form on me! Give them everything you’ve got!”

They formed on her, and she led their response, firing at anything that moved. The firefight was deadly, she lost seven more before bravo yelled cover.

All of them hit the ground as bravo unleashed their plasma cannons into the trees, effectively silencing the enemy.

“Get up! Move it! Get to the trees!”

She grabbed people by their shirts, arms, pushed and ran behind, turning to shoot as she ran a zig zag to cover.

Timbo, bravo sergeant, said, “We’ve lost ten. The enemy is re-grouping. What now?”

She looked around, and said, “We run. Follow me! Speck, take alpha, Timbo, give him four to even out.”

She turned and ran through the trees. At the edge, she stopped and looked at the town, it was on fire.

“Damn. Why the hell did they put us here?”

She pulled out her comm unit, “Tango, Tango, Tango, this is Hurricane. You’ve put us in a shit storm! Need retrieval ASAP!”

She got no response.

“Damn those bastards to hell. Alright, lighten your load, we’re gonna hoof it hard.”

They dropped what they could, and she turned to the southeast and took off in a run, with everyone following. They ran for about five minutes and turned the corner into the burned-out town’s main street.

“Bravo, cross to the other side and work up the street, Alpha take this side. Easy, people. We know they are here, let’s not do anything rash.”

They moved up the street, taking cover as they could.

Suddenly, a burst of weapons from the north end of the street. Two troops fell out.

“Timbo, take your squad, go east, circle up and hit them from the right flank.”

He moved off with his remaining group.

“Speck, take your squad west, do the same to their left flank.”

“What about you?”

“Don’t worry about me, we have to get some breathing room, and the only way to do that is kill them first. Go!”

When they had left, she leaned out and fired up the street, drawing their fire, trying to convince them that they were still here. She repeated that several times, took ammo from the fallen two soldiers, and took hits for it, but they were only flesh wounds. She wrapped bandages and kept fighting.

It took about ten minutes before her squads were in place. Soon, they opened fire on the enemy, a large group of about forty. But hitting them from both sides did the trick.

She moved up the street as the fire fight was roaring, and stepped up onto a burned-out vehicle to see about fifteen of the enemy crouched, firing at her team. She pulled pins on four flash-bombs and threw them, dropping behind the vehicle at the last second. As soon as they exploded, she ran around the vehicle and opened fire on the enemy that remained.

She killed several, but there were three left, who jumped her. She fell to the ground and the fighting was hand to hand. She kicked one hard in the groin, then rolled right and stood facing two. Both pulled knives and attacked her simultaneously. She faded left then moved quickly underneath the one on the right, grabbing his arm, breaking it, and using her own knife to puncture his chest.

The last one swung and cut her across her shoulder and back, but she swirled around and threw her knife, hitting him in the eye.

The one with the groin injury then managed to get up on his knee and pulled a blaster, but he was hit with a plasma burst from Timbo.

The squad reassembled, only seven left, and they bandaged her up as best they could.

“What the hell is this all about, Lieutenant?”

“I’m not sure, but if we get out of here, I’m sure as hell gonna find out.”

“As I finished saying this, and wondering what to do next, my comm unit buzzed and a transport arrived to haul us out.”

“Did you ever find out why you were sent?”

“Yes. We were sent there to be the cause for a greater attack. They knew we would be decimated, and quite frankly, were surprised any of us made it out at all. But they used this as a pretext to completely obliterate a huge portion of the planet, ostensibly to destroy terrorists, but I’m just not sold on that. It was too brutal, too planned, but no logic. It smelled of politics and still gives me a bad taste when I think of it. I lost twenty-four good soldiers in that fight. Senseless waste of good people, done to us by our own people! I’ll never forgive or forget that.”

Sam was quiet for a while, then asked, “So, how’d you get out of the marines?”

“I told my commanding officer to go do something anatomically impossible to himself. That wasn’t enough, so I punched him in the face. That was enough. Dishonorable discharge.” She stopped speaking for a while, then continued. “I didn’t get a pension or benefits, didn’t have any references. I did the only thing I could do to survive, I went into the oldest profession last year, where you found me.”

“You really think the Empire is collapsing?”

“Time will tell, but give it a hundred years and it will be done, as we know it.”

“Interesting. So, what do you fight for now?”

“The under-dog. It’s why I pulled you inside. It’s why I want to continue working with you to find out who killed these young innocent women. It’s why I enjoyed hurting those hoodlums tonight. I want to help the under-dog.”

Sam smiled, saying, “Well, that’s what my passion has always been. I tell you what, I’m going to amend my initial proposal. How about if you come on board with me and help finish this entire investigation?”

“I would love that.”

“So would I. Okay, let’s finish this and then see where we go.”

Not Working

350.056.10

Rumors floated around them, some based on fact, some on fantasy. Nevertheless, however a rumor began, someone had to see if there was some truth to it. After the failure on Cordoran, questions were asked.

“What do you mean, they were killed?”

“My Lord, word we received was that all four were killed. Their last contact was that the spy they followed was a woman, and they would pick her up and bring her in for questions.”

“Are you telling me that the spy was a woman AND that she single-handedly, killed four of our top men on Cordoran?”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“Shit.”

The comm was cut.

“What happened?”

“We lost the spy that stopped in Cordoran to visit the Kisdernec’s, discovered the spy was a female, and that she killed four of our top soldiers there and has now vanished without a trace.”

He sat quietly as he listened to the report, then said, “Very well. What do we know? One, we know someone visited all three families. Two, we believe the Empress has brought someone new on to investigate the murders of these families’ daughters. Three, we now know that this person is a female. So, we may have learned something very important.”

“We may have enough information to say that the inspector we assumed the Empress hired is not an actual police inspector, because a police inspector would not go around killing people. No, this is a sleuth. We can also say that the sleuth the Empress hired is a woman, and is very dangerous. However, and this is the critical piece, we don’t know what, if anything, she found out during her visits.”

“Okay, but we have to get on top of this. I need you to keep pushing to find out who this person is, and let’s try and find out where she went. We have to be relentless in this. If anyone finds her, take her out. We don’t need any loose ends wandering around.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“Leave me.”

Once he was alone, he placed a call.

“Hi!”

“Hi yourself. What gets you to call?”

“We may have a lead on that inspector rumor, and information that it is not an inspector, but a sleuth. A female sleuth at that, and very dangerous.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, oh. We traced a visitor to the three families. On the second visit, on Secunsa, we discovered what we thought was an elderly male from Pelapatia, and gave him a serious threat. We believe he was only a participant. But, on the last one, on Cordoran, a female was the questioner, and when our team intercepted her, she killed all four of them.”

“Really?”

“Yes. So, it appears the sleuth may be a female, and has successfully either personally visited or had people visit for her. In any case, we don’t know what she may have learned.”

“Okay. We need to keep this quiet for now. We have to find that sleuth and silence her. The process is proceeding very well, and we can’t afford an interruption at this stage.”

“I know. I have issued orders to find and eliminate the sleuth. But until we do, everyone should be aware.”

“Okay, thanks. I’ll be in touch.”

“Goodbye.”

“Lizzy?”

“Yes, Sam?”

“I’m really sorry you experienced what you did on Galund. I can’t imagine losing so many friends and comrades so quickly, and for such a terrible reason.”

“Thanks, Sam.”

Open

350.057.10

“Admiral, so good to see you.”

“Your…”

The visitor cut him off. “No, no mention of names or titles or formal greetings.”

“Of course.”

“Tell me, how goes it?”

“We have seventy-five Barons currently on board. They have helped us immensely in creating rebels, having freed their political prisoners and armed them to revolt.”

He laughed, saying, “Well, at least that helps them get rid of them.”

“Of course. We come in to quell the “rebellion,” and eliminate their baggage. It is a win-win for all concerned.”

“Yes, and gives the right impression of the state of affairs for the Empire. Tell me, how many more Barons are coming on board in the next twenty days?”

“We have twenty-five more. These last ones will be the biggest ones yet. Once these get underway, it will likely become news within the Royal Court.”

“Precisely, Admiral, precisely. That timing works well for us. The nice thing is we can utilize the need for a forceful response in our arguments for change in leadership, all the while knowing the rebellion is but a created fluke, so it will all calm down once that leadership is changed.”

The Admiral smiled, started to speak, then stopped, and simply gave a short, quick, bow of his head. “Well planned.”

“Thank you, and well executed. This will be rewarded soon. Stay the course, this will end well.”

Meladeran

350.058.10

They spent the trip to Meladeran going over everything Sam knew about the murders, his plans, thoughts, ideas; they talked tactics, strategy. By the time they arrived, Lizzy was a full-fledged partner in the investigation.

When they arrived on Meladeran they had thirty days before the anniversary of the killings. They made their way to the safe-house Sam used as his apartment. He had two more, just in case.

“Okay, make yourself at home here. There are extra bedrooms, and each has a great shower. Here’s a comm unit that is secure, loaded with my number, call if you need me. I’ve got an errand to run and then we need to talk about next steps when I get back.”

“Where are you going?”

He smiled, saying, “A very special place.”

He walked to the palace, and again found his way inside the gardens. He knew from his own surveillance, that the Empress came here almost every day at about this time. He entered the private garden and took his seat, again dressed as a woman, reading a book. It didn’t take long.

The Empress turned the corner and saw the person sitting on her bench, but this time, she said, “Is that you, SB?”

He smiled, but stood and bowed deeply. “Good morning, Your Majesty. Yes, it is your sleuth.”

She smiled, then said, “Well, sleuth, what have you found?”

“That the Empire is collapsing upon itself, passion still runs deep, and murder is still a tool of the adversary.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Do you know what happened on Galund?”

“Galund? Where’s that? What are you talking about?”

“Did you know that not too long ago, on Galund, the Imperial Marines were dispatched to put down an out-of-control uprising against their Baron, but when they were unable to do so, the Imperial Fleet launched weaponry that obliterated an entire section of the planet, killing everyone there, including women and children?”

“What? That never happened. I would have to approve such action.”

“Did you know there are currently over one hundred such rebellions taking place around the galaxy?”

“Impossible. The Imperial Fleet cannot enter into these types of fights without my knowledge.”

“Well, Your Majesty, you are misled.”

“Never!”

He bowed, saying, “I am sorry to have been the one to tell you this. However, that is not what I came here to tell you about. I came about my quest.”

She was still stewing about what he had said. “Why would you come here and tell me things about the Imperial Fleet that are not true?”

“Truth. Yes. Your Majesty, the things I told you are true. While I am not in a position to do anything about it, I would suggest you find people whom you know are truly and completely trustworthy, and do your own investigation. You may discover things that surprise you.”

“I will do that. But hear me, sleuth. If the things you have said are not true, you will feel my wrath.”

“I would expect nothing less, which is why I always defer to truth.”

“Very well. Now, what have you learned about these murders? Who did it and why?”

“That’s the problem, you see. I don’t know who or why. Motive and suspect are not yet clear.”

“What? We only have thirty days until the anniversary date.”

“I know. But my investigation is going quite well, and I do have a few leads to track down.”

“What about using the Imperial Palace Police? They could help in your investigation. I could put them under your control.”

“Thank you, but I must refuse. The work they did over the past few years was, how do you say it, simply incompetent.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. They did not go out and look for any clues, relying on their systems and technology. This is murder. It is either a crime of passion or a crime for some type of gain. I just do not yet know which it is.”

“Very well. But there is no time.”

“Oh, yes, there is time, there is time. With that, I must be off. There is more to do.”

“Sleuth.”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“If what you say about Galund is true, how can you prove it?”

“I have a witness.”

“May I speak with him?”

“Once my investigation into the palace murders is complete, I will bring my witness to you, and you may ask all your questions.”

“Very well, I will await your next visit.”

“Also, I may need you to do odd things now and then, things that may seem odd, but have a purpose.”

“Such as?”

“I’m not really sure, but it would help immeasurably if there was a way to contact you discreetly and directly, without having to sneak into the gardens to meet you.”

“I am not sure why I am agreeing to this, but here, this is my private number. Call if you need.”

“Your Majesty.”

He departed the gardens as he had arrived, unnoticed. Walking outside the palace walls he contacted Lizzy and headed to the apartment.

When he arrived, she said, “This looks like an excellent hideout for a sleuth.”

He laughed, saying, “Well, it was the only thing available that met my requirements.”

“Sounds good. I made a light lunch if you are hungry.”

“Famished, actually.”

“Okay, I’ll serve, but you said we would talk about the plan, so, what next?”

“Next, is finding that salon and watching it.”

“What are we looking for, exactly?”

He smiled, and said, “I’m not sure.”

She looked at him with a curious smile, and said, “Sam, is there anything you know that causes us to look for whatever?”

“Well, I’m not sure.”

She laughed. “Is there anything you are sure of?”

He laughed. “Of course. We know all three of the victims went to this salon, and to the same stylist, Sasha. I would like to take some time to see who she is, what she is like, is there anything or anyone she is in contact with that is remotely connected to this case. So, while it is a hunch, it is also something we need to spend a little time with.”

“Okay. How should we dress?”

“I think we should be together, dressed as normal people sitting on a park bench, if there is one. But still, hiding our identities. So, changing hair and eye color, skin complexion, height, and practicing different mannerisms.”

“Okay, I’m game.”

It only took about an hour, but they stepped out of their apartment looking quite different from the two people who went in. Their colors were subdued, yet alluring. Not black hair, but dark auburn with perfect highlights of a light orange. Not bright nail polish, but classy elegance. Same with their clothes. They looked like a nice couple out for a walk or dinner together. They strolled for several blocks, then took a transport to a location a couple of blocks from the salon.

“This neighborhood is also where the murdered girls all lived.”

“It seems fairly clean and safe.”

“Yes, nothing out of the ordinary.”

They continued walking, finally coming to a small park located about seventy feet from the salon. They took a bench that was facing slightly away from the salon and waited.

It wasn’t long before a young woman exited the salon, then two entered, one exited, etc. It was obviously a well-known salon. A few men entered and departed as well.

“Okay, we need to find out who owns the place and see if they need some unexpected maintenance. We have to get into their business with credentials and be able to spend a little time there.”

“Okay, I’ll check on that. Anything else?”

“Yes, I think I need to find out what the police are up to. You go ahead and find out about the business and figure out a way inside tomorrow, while I go do some other research. We’ll meet back at the apartment this evening. Maybe get some food delivered?”

“I love Meladeran hot pies.”

“Okay, get us a couple and something to drink. See you later.”

Sam made his way back to the apartment, and changed for another visit to the police headquarters. However, he knew they would have his old photo up and be looking for that character, and also, they should have been smart enough to identify him as the maintenance technician, because of the bag. So, he needed something completely different, but believable. He knew exactly what to do.

He entered the police headquarters slowly, using his cane and shuffling his feet. People held doors and generally deferred to him, and he finally made it to the entrance desk. The same officer was working as worked last time.

“Hello, how may I help you?”

He never made eye contact with the officer, instead, playing the role of an old man who couldn’t quite look up.

In a terribly slow drawl, he said, “I’m looking for the inspector.”

“Which inspector? We have several here.”

“Oh, any one of them will do, but I think his name was Helmstock, or something like that.”

“Do you mean Humbolt?”

“It could be.”

Officer Strickle was getting quite frustrated at the slowness of this conversation. “Come now, what do you want?”

“To talk with the inspector.”

“About what?”

“It is a very private matter. He said to come see him when I could.”

Officer Strickle handed him a visitor’s pass, and said, “Here, take the elevator behind me to the third floor. His office is on the right.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me, just move along.”

He slowly made his way to the elevator and entered, pressing the number three. When the door closed, he reached up with his cane and pulled the ceiling door open, then jumped up, grabbed the edge, and pulled himself up onto the space above the elevator, closing the door below him. He waited. The elevator stopped at the second floor, and several officers entered, continuing to the third floor. They all exited, and the elevator began a journey upwards, to the tenth floor, the top floor of this building. Sam was ready and grabbed the ladder, so when the elevator descended, he remained at the top.

He climbed up and exited through a maintenance access door, and found himself in the equipment room. He quickly changed clothes and facial characteristics; he was now, once again, an inspector. He exited the door and walked out onto the roof, and put in a call to a special client.

“Hello?”

“Hello. Please ask someone to contact Inspector Humbolt and say you need to see him. You don’t actually need to see him, but I need him to believe so, if only for a little while.”

“Now that is odd. Very well, I will do it.”

“Thank you.”

He waited for five minutes, then entered the stairwell and walked down to the third floor, exited the stairs, and walked to Inspector Humbolt’s office. The inspector was just leaving. He waited a few minutes, then entered his office and ran through the files and such, only to discover they had not gained any new information, except they believed they were either being stalked or investigated. They were looking for him.

He decided to leave a clue. He wrote on the wall, “The Clock Ticks.”

He smiled as he left the building, knowing he was still a step ahead of them.

Inspector Humbolt returned to his office slightly frustrated. He had gone all the way to the throne room, only to discover that the Empress had not asked for him. He didn’t know what that meant.

As he entered his office, he saw the words written on the wall and froze.

‘My God,’ he thought, ‘This murderer even uses a false call from the Empress to get inside, and then taunts me!’

He called Freddie and had him come over to see it.

“So, he can easily move in and out of this building.”

“Yes. I called Emanati and had him review security video. Ah, here he is now. Well?”

“Inspector, there was another inspector inside your office only a short time ago, but he neither entered nor departed the building, according to security footage.”

“We are obviously dealing with a genius. We have to redouble our efforts. I want additional security in place here. No one is allowed into this building without specific credential verification, period!”

“Yes, sir.”

“I love these things,” Lizzy managed to say through her stuffed mouth.

Sam laughed. “Well, you still have to breathe, so maybe take smaller bites!”

He took a swig of beer and then a smaller bite of a pie.

Lizzy managed, finally, to talk. “Sorry, it’s just that I love these pies so much. I think they are the only thing that reminds me of a positive thought from my childhood.”

“Thanks for picking them up. I happen to agree, they are delicious.”

After a while the pies were done. They both sat back and enjoyed the moment.

Lizzy said, “So, what did you find out today?”

“I discovered that the police still don’t know anything. What did you find out?”

“Okay, I talked with Lawrence, the building owner, and convinced him that our company could save him literally thousands of jhetas in costs, because we were going to make him a super deal if we could get a positive statement from him about our work. We are in the heating and cooling business, and we need good references to expand our business. Needless to say, he is all on board. We can go day after tomorrow and get started.”

“Excellent. Then one more pie and two beers, then off to sleep!”

“Yay!”

“And I think we should take tomorrow to rest and review all our information. It’s going to get very busy after that.”

“Sounds good to me. Maybe a third beer?”

“Deal!”

Still Worried

350.059.09

“Yes?”

“I heard the sleuth continues the investigation.”

“Does he know anything?”

“I don’t know. But she hasn’t been stopped by any of the actions we have taken so far.”

“Very well.” He hung up.

It seemed there were things happening he knew nothing about. He pulled out a different communication device.

“Yes?”

“Our actions have not stopped the sleuth.”

A pause.

“What does she know?”

“I don’t know, and that’s the problem. No one knows what this sleuth may or may not know. We know nothing new has happened with the police, we have an insider. But the woman who killed our team on Cordoran has disappeared, along with that guy we threatened on Secunsa.”

“We don’t know who they are?”

“No, but we do know who they talked to. It may be time to have a conversation with the families and find out exactly what was said.”

A longer pause.

“Make it so. But stop this investigation.” The line went dead.

“Let’s go get a couple of uniforms we can fix up for technicians, I don’t have anything that can work for that.”

“Okay, and maybe we should go ahead and rent our equipment?”

“Good idea. We can be ready for an early morning visit to Doreen’s.”

They caught a transport to a local maintenance yard where they rented a truck. Sam used the digital side glow to put their own logo, ‘Star-Kissed Technology: We’ll find the flaw in your spice!’ on it. Next, they went to a local material facility and purchased all the tools, components, and test equipment they needed for the part. They picked up ladders, extension cords, and dozens of things she couldn’t identify, but which Sam said were tools of the trade.

Lizzy asked, “Isn’t this a lot of money for one stake out?”

“Sure, it is. But it’s not our money, it’s the Empires.”

“Ah, I see.”

They parked the vehicle in a secure area only two blocks from the apartment.

Doreen’s

350.060.09

“You’re sure about this?”

He laughed, saying, “Yes, I’m sure. No one will suspect anything more than what you allow them to suspect.”

“Really?”

“Yes, it’s called suspended disbelief. People will naturally give you the benefit of the doubt, as long as you play into their expectations. It’s only when you do something that causes them to question your actions, that you run into problems. So, play the part, and play it well, and don’t worry about anything else. If it falls apart, make a quick exit within the role you play.”

“Okay, but I’ve never dressed like a man.”

He chuckled. “That’s good! But here, let me show you some of my disguise tricks to help you master the part.”

They spent almost an hour, talking about all types of disguises, and how to maximize the effect. Finally, she was dressed and ready.

“Alright, let’s go do this.”

When they arrived at Doreen’s, she was there and expecting them. It hadn’t taken a lot of conversation or money, to get the superintendent to play along. Besides, he was promised free upgrades.

“Hi, I’m Doreen. Please, come in.”

“Thanks,” said Sam. “You know we are here to install some upgrades to your temperature control unit, right?”

“Yes, Laurence told me. Feel free to do what you need to do.”

“Thanks.”

He walked through the stalls of the various stylists until he found the unit. He took out an access tool and messed with it, opening it enough to get inside.

“Hey, Doreen, do you control this from your personal console or this unit?”

“Oh, I use my personal console.”

“Can we see it for a minute?”

“Sure, it’s at the front desk.”

“Okay. Ted, go take a look and see what the current settings are.”

“Okay,” said Lizzy.

She walked behind Doreen to the front desk and waited until Doreen opened the console. Just then someone called for her to come to their stall, so Doreen left.

Lizzy quickly pulled out a stick and plugged it into her console. It only took five seconds for the entire scheduling history of the salon to download, and a command to send a copy of all new scheduling to their console; and then, she fiddled with the temperature control system, so when Doreen came back, that’s what she was working on.

“I think that’s it.”

She walked back to Sam, and said, “Bob, the settings are secure and set at ninety-five and thirty-seven.”

“That checks. Okay, we need to go purchase a new scrubber and controller, these are quite dated.”

After he closed the unit, he said to Doreen, “Can you tell Laurence we’ll schedule a return, but we need to go purchase several items to bring this system up to date. Plus, you know, it’s hot and there’s other people who need our touch. It’ll probably be in a week or two.”

“Sure, honey. Whatever you need, you just say. Thanks!”

They returned to their apartments and went inside to review the data from her console.

“What are we looking for?”

“I’m not sure, but I believe all the victims used this salon. I wanted to see if they are listed in here and maybe verify that Sasha was the stylist who worked on them, to see if she noticed anything unusual or heard something that might help.”

“Okay. Oh, here’s Kalennish. Looks like she saw Sasha the day before her death.”

“Okay, how about a year earlier, looking for Eloiese.”

“Interesting.”

“What?”

“She also saw Sasha the day before her death.”

They looked at each other, Sam said, “Coincidence?”

“What was the third girls name?”

“Tazni.”

“Sam, you’re not going to believe this, but she also saw Sasha the day before her death.”

Sam stood up and walked to the window, staring out. He was silent for some time, then turned and said, “It sounds too good, to contrived. Even so, we need to put eyes on Sasha, but I don’t think we will have a conversation with her just yet. I do think we need to purchase all the equipment I talked about with Doreen right now and go back tomorrow and upgrade the salon, while installing a video device so we can observe Sasha.”

“Sam, I don’t know how to install this stuff. Shouldn’t we hire someone to come with us who can do it right?”

“No, because we have already made our impression, and this is too urgent to postpone. And unlike you, I do know how to install this stuff. Just do as I say, it’ll work out fine.”

“Okay. By the way, did you say you learned the police still don’t know what is going on?”

“I learned that they have not discovered anything new, but I also know they are aware of someone able to enter their offices at will, and they are desperately trying to figure out who that is.”

“So, you think they are trying to find you?”

“Yes, of course. But I think they are more interested in knowing who I am and what I am discovering about them, than they are at doing any further investigating.”

“Really?”

He laughed. “Yes, really. They’ve even given one of their sergeants the responsibility to find out who I am. Shear laziness on their part.”

Sasha

350.061.09

The next morning, they arrived promptly at nine. Doreen was surprised to see them so soon.

“Oh, good morning. I thought this would take a couple of weeks to complete?”

“Well, it should have, but we had a cancellation late yesterday afternoon for this morning, so decided to move your job up and finish it.”

“Well, I’m not complaining. Is there anything you need from me?”

“No, just access to the systems again.”

“Okay. Oh, my brother does my scheduling program. He might stop in this morning, something about an update to the program. But other than that, you have total access.”

“Alright then. Ted, let’s bring in the new controller box and those new sensors so we can get started.”

“Sure.”

Sam walked to the control unit and opened it again, peaking at the wires connecting the various parts. He had seen Sasha’s booth on the way back. As he was working, Lizzy brought in the new parts.

“Ted, let’s put one of these sensors over there and right here.” He had pointed to parallel locations in the facility, but one was over Sasha’s location.

“Sure thing.” Lizzy got the ladder and climbed up and installed the sensors. She had just finished the one above Sasha’s space, when she walked in. Lizzy was a woman dressed as a man, but even she could tell that this woman, Sasha, was hot. She stopped and watched her, assuming that is what a maintenance guy would do.

Sasha smiled, saying, “Hey muscular you, need any of my services?” She winked.

Lizzy smiled back, saying, “No, I probably couldn’t afford them.”

Sasha laughed and turned to get to work.

Sam was impressed at how naturally Lizzy had done that. She truly fit the role. He finished installing the new control unit when a guy walked in and walked to the console. He wasn’t sure, but he thought he had seen that face before. Oh well, plenty of time to figure that out.

Once they were done, Sam said goodbye to Doreen. She said, “Oh, that’s my brother, Aristoly. He keeps my schedule working, and a good scheduler is worth its weight in gold helping maximize staff time and eliminate waste.”

“Okay, sounds good. Well, have a great day.”

They left.

“Who was that?”

“Oh, Laurence had sent them over to look at my air controller. They ended up replacing the unit and added some sensors to better manage air flow and quality.”

He seemed convinced, after all, they seemed legitimate. Just then, Sasha called him over.

“Yes, princess?”

“Princess? Not quite. Maybe an old maid. So, tough guy, when are you going to take me out for dinner?”

He smiled, knowing he was at least twenty years older than her. “I tell you what. I’m working on a big deal right now, and when I close it, we’ll go share some bubbly. Sound good?”

She giggled, and said, “Of course. I can’t wait, so hurry it up already.”

“Okay, I will.”

As they drove the truck back to the rental company, Lizzy finally asked, “Okay, what’s wrong? You haven’t said a word since we left.”

“I don’t know. There is something about that guy, his face, that I recognize. But I can’t put my finger on it.”

“Well, he seemed like a legitimate person, Doreen’s brother and all.”

“You’re right. What did you think of Sasha?”

Lizzy laughed. “Oh my gosh, that girl is the trend-setter. I can see why the younger girls would go to her for style assistance.”

“Yes, but could she be a killer?”

Lizzy thought for a moment, then said, “No. I can only see her as an unwitting co-conspirator, but not a killer. Her aura was too pure for that.”

“Oh, now you see auras?”

“Well, yeah. Yours is a particular shade of blueberry right now.”

They both laughed as he turned the vehicle into the yard.

Once they finished turning the vehicle in, they walked across the street to a fairly busy café. Each went to separate closets and emerged as completely different people. She was, at least, now, she.

“Oh, that feels better.”

“What?”

“In case you haven’t noticed, I am a woman, so really am more comfortable dressed like one.”

“Oh, that. Well, truth be told, you did a great job; but I also prefer you to dress like a woman.”

“Thanks! Now, what next?”

“Coffee.”

“How about a pastry?”

“Whatever you want. I think I will have a donut.”

Once they were seated, he said, “Alright, now we have two things to do. First, we monitor Sasha to see what she does, who she sees, or anything we can gain. I want you to take on that role. When she leaves work, follow her, and see if she meets anyone interesting. I am going to get started on the university.”

“What are we doing at the university again?”

“Each of the victims attended university. In addition, they all were majoring in archeology. Could there be a connection? I don’t know. But I am going to enroll tomorrow morning and spend a few days at the university in the archeology department, snooping around.”

“So, you want me to monitor Sasha. Anything else?”

“Yes, keep an eye on the schedule and see if any names we are familiar with, come up.”

“Okay, I can do that. Are we doing anything else today?”

“Well, I am a little rusty, since I haven’t played in a while, but I was wondering if you would like to go to the Galactic Gym and play a game of star ball.”

“Oh, hell yeah. I haven’t played that in a long time.”

“Then let’s go.”

They went home and changed, then went to the gym.

“Wow, this is an awesome place!”

“I don’t think I have ever seen a gym as decked out as this.”

“I know, it’s beautiful and functional.”

They found a court and did a ten-minute warmup. Once that was over, they started.

Star ball is like racquetball, but different. In racquetball, you try and make your shots low and long, hitting multiple angles. In star ball, the goal is to hit the ball into stars located on each wall and the ceiling. It is played all around, not just in one direction. There is no clear glass wall, as it is played everywhere. It takes extreme agility and focus.

These two started slow, but as they got more comfortable with the game, they increased the pace and power. Soon, people were watching through the viewports, amazed at the action inside. In the end, Lizzy beat him three games to two.

“Wow! Great game!”

“And you! Whew, I tried, but you are seriously tough, Lizzy.”

“Why thanks, Sam. Now for a shower and something real to eat.”

“Oh yes. Let’s go, I have just the solution for your hunger.”

They departed and went to the apartment, changed, and walked along the street to a park that was surrounded by local food dispensers.

He smiled, and said, “Take your pick.”

She laughed. “Really, Sam?”

He laughed. “No, come on, we’re eating over there.”

They walked across the street to a small bistro, which happened to specialize in beef.

“I’m having the filet and a baked potato. Plus, lots of cabernet. You?”

“A man after my own heart. I’ll do the same.”

Sam placed the order, and they enjoyed a relaxed evening of great food and conversation, before heading back to the apartment to prepare for the next day.

Archeology

350.062.10

Sam arrived outside of the Imperial City University of Meladeran at ten in the morning. He stood there, looking at the facility. It was a huge complex, housing the largest library in the Empire. It had over ten million students at any one time, and three million educators, researchers, and staff. It was hard to even grasp its size. Many of the students participated remotely, or attended a branch of the university on their home planet. But here, at the Meladeran University Campus, there were nearly three hundred thousand students in residence.

The university was so important that the Chancellor of the University sat on the Imperial Education and Training Board, sitting at the table with the Empress and others to determine the policy for the education of people throughout the Empire. Very prestigious. Very expensive. But very wonderful.

He realized, as he walked the halls and spaces, that he missed university. It was so free, easy, just taking the time to learn, nothing more. He had spent a lot of time in the university system on Tuton, but had never made it here, to the central university. He had completed advanced degrees in Criminal Justice, forensics, psychology, paranormal arts, and business. He was also a certified master of disguise from the drama department.

He had loved music and drama. Nothing was more fun than being with a bunch of hedonists in the drama department sharing a sense of total freedom and creative energy. He smiled, remembering the days and plays. Now, on to something different, archeology.

As he entered the department to sign up, he saw someone he thought he would never see again, Isabella Sigonella. When she saw him, she cried out and ran to him!

They held each other for several minutes, then she pulled back, and said, “Samuel Wilson Bartinella, my eyes don’t deceive me. What are you doing here?”

“Isabella Sigonella. My goodness, it has been such a long time. And look at you! Just as beautiful as ever. I could ask you the same thing. Last I heard, you were a famous star in the acting world.”

“Yes, well, I met a guy and got married, and now we live here, on Meladeran! I decided it was time to learn something completely different, so decided to study archeology. You?”

“I am only here temporarily, still living on our old home world, but also decided to learn something different as well, archeology. So, are you already signed up?”

“Yes, I was just leaving. My first class isn’t until next week, but I have a lot to study before then.”

“Cool. I am just getting started. Maybe we will end up in the same class! That would be a hoot.”

“It would. Well, after you get settled, you will have to stop over and have dinner with us. I would love you to meet my husband. But until then, I must run.”

“Great to see you!”

“And you!”

He continued on and found the registration department and sat down to register for the classes he wanted. He didn’t have a week to get started, so signed up for immediate classes starting that afternoon.

His first class was with Professor Dal Tinian, a transplant from the Planet Darmeton III. The class, which all the victims took, was “Archeological Record, Early Post-Deltonian Empire.” This covered some diggings conducted over seven thousand years previous, on a site located on the Planet Crospolitan. They were dated over two-hundred thousand years old. These were, to date, the earliest known records of any human settlements. It was the singular course that all students were required to attend.

The class was conducted in an old-style setting, with students in a theater-like semi-circle, over-looking the small space where the professor stood talking to them. He used a holographic multidimensional projection to provide images for discussion.

“So, you can see, the relevance of this find is over-whelming. This proves our ancestors were here, in this galaxy, over two hundred thousand years ago. Any questions?”

He knew he shouldn’t, but had no choice, he raised his hand.

“Yes, you there, speak.”

“Yes, professor, have there been any further findings that corroborate these findings?”

“Ah, good question. You speak, apparently, of the Merthinian civilization, which has been estimated to be over three-hundred thousand years old.”

“Yes. Would not that be the best place to start, if we are seeking the oldest humans?”

“One might think so. But remember, these are certified and researched findings, The Merthinian data has never been analyzed to a degree that provides conclusive proof they are, indeed, that old. Any other questions? No, very well, I will see you tomorrow.”

As people filed out, Sam was stopped by the professor. “Excuse me, what is your name?”

“Antonio Sebastini, Planet Ingrelio.”

“Antonio, yes. Well, your questions were very good. I usually don’t get questions in this class, as it is only for younger, new students. What brings you to the school?”

“I am looking to expand my knowledge. It was a choice between psychology and archeology. On the one hand I could be entering the mind of people, or on the other, digging the past.” He chuckled, “Well, after one semester of learning the inner workings of the minds of young women, I decided to try something else.”

The professor also laughed. “Yes, I can only imagine. But you know, we have had some terrible happenings here, to our young female students.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, for the past three years, one of our young female students has been murdered.”

“No.”

“Yes. The same day, eighty-eight. It bothers me that one of these young students could become the next one.”

“Perhaps I should have stayed in psychology to try and help find the killer.”

“Perhaps. But it truly worries me that someone in our own department may be responsible. People are getting nervous as the day approaches. We may have to cancel classes and have everyone stay home.”

“Interesting. This is the first I have heard of this. Any ideas on who may be doing this, or why?”

The professor looked sideways to make sure no one was listening, and said, “It is said the Empress herself received a letter saying to, I quote, ‘Free Thoristin Filtram.’ I would think that these words are a covert or stealthy way to transmit a message. I cannot find a valid reference, so they must hold some meaning we cannot decipher with our current knowledge.”

“Interesting.”

“Yes. Well, sorry to bother your ear, do have a good evening. See you tomorrow?”

“Yes, I will be here, good-night.”

He left, thinking that something had just happened. Why would the professor tell him these things? What was the purpose? Was there a motive? It was odd. He would have to ponder this.

“Yes?”

“We have located the woman. She is on Meladeran.”

“What is she doing?”

“I am not sure. It is reported she appears to be spending time not doing very much, which could be a covert way of investigating.”

“Do you think she is the sleuth?”

“Well, if she is the one who killed our team and evaded us, then yes.”

“Thoughts of action?”

“We have three options. Eliminate her, monitor her, or capture her.”

“Which do you recommend?”

“Well, capturing her means we give ourselves away if she escapes. Monitoring her means she could evade us again and continue actions to defeat us. Eliminating her ends the conversation, which is my recommendation.”

“Agreed. I need to speak with certain contacts, but if you do not hear from me, take action tomorrow at noon.”

“Sir.”

Flushed

350.063.12

The next day, he arrived at the university at about noon and made his way to the archeology department, heading for his next class. As he got to the classroom, he noticed a crowd of students close to the door, unable to get in.

“What’s going on?”

“Professor Dal Tinian is dead!”

“What?”

Just then the campus police, accompanied by Imperial Palace Police, arrived, and cleared the students away. Sam was able to make his way up to the door and see in before they blocked the doors and sealed the room. He took a quick snap and departed the campus.

When he felt safely away, he stopped into a café for a cup of mestava, and looked at the pic he took. It showed the professor, stripped, and tied to the wall. He had been beaten. Above him, written in chalk on the board, were these words, “Free Thoristin Filtram.”

This made no sense.

Just then, his buzzer sounded. It was Lizzy.

“Sam, you’ve got to see this. Quick, come to our apartment.”

He jumped a transport and headed for their apartment, then thought, ‘Something is happening. Is the bird being flushed?’

At the apartment, he found Lizzy waiting for him.

“Look, here. This was just delivered.”

He looked. It was a photo of the professor, just as he had seen him now.

“This is a serious warning. The professor is dead. Quick escape. Use the evade tactics we discussed. Let’s meet at rendezvous nineteen at the scheduled time.”

“Got it.”

He grabbed her arms, and said very quietly, “Trust no one. Use all your skills. We are in grave danger.”

She nodded, took her emergency go bag and left.

He set timers for various self-destructs, grabbed his most needed items, and departed.

He dodged transport. He went right, then left, then gained access to back routes and darkened alleyways. He kept going. Finally, he entered a park, but kept moving. As he was walking down a path, he saw a flash out of the corner of his eye and fell to the ground, just as the tree to his right exploded in fire. He got up, staying low, and ran a zig zag path through the trees to evade the hunter and two more shots. He finally found what he believed to be a completely safe space, then crawled under a bridge of the footpath, and watched. He saw a movement in the distance, moving left to right. He crawled up the creek, staying mostly in the water, but hiding behind brush when able.

Finally, he came to the spot where the creek began, a natural spring, and climbed out of the water to stand against a tree, behind the shooter. He could see the shooter, standing with his back to him, watching and waiting. He stood there, gently dripping water from his clothes and waiting. Finally, the shooter began moving. He followed, getting a little closer with every movement. They went from tree to tree. It seemed the shooter was not certain. Sometimes he glanced around and behind himself, but Sam was tense as a fiddle and his anticipation kept him a step ahead.

Finally, he was only ten feet behind him. He waited, then as the shooter was about to take a step forward, he lunged. The shooter heard a sound and was beginning to turn around when Sam hit him with his shoulder, in full stride. They collapsed into a heap on the ground. He had broken the shooter’s ribs, but thankfully hadn’t broken any of his own bones.

The shooter tried to bring the blaster around to shoot him, but he anticipated it. He grabbed and broke his wrist, releasing the blaster from his grasp. It fell to the ground, just as he fell upon him, pinning him to the ground.

“Who are you?”

The shooter simply looked at him, bit on something, and grinned. Quickly he started foaming at the mouth, dead of his own poison capsule.

“Damn.”

Lizzy had gone left, then stopped and re-entered the apartment, exiting the back way, ducking directly into the sewer system. She zigged and zagged for hours before she decided to go back up to the street level.

When she did, she saw that she had traveled a long way from their apartment, and she realized, she stunk. A quick detour to a pool, not sure who owned it, but they would certainly be irritated their pool had sewer stench in it, but she felt and smelled better.

She continued, stopping in random places, and watching. Eventually she assumed she was free of observation and headed for the rendezvous.

“Damn.”

Freddie asked, “What’s the matter?”

“Someone killed a professor at the university.”

“Why would they do that?”

“Good question. But here’s a better question. Why would they put this on the chalk board above his dead beaten body?”

He showed him the photograph.

“Damn.”

“Exactly.”

“Who would know about this name? Did we miss a connection at the university?

“I don’t know, but it’s too late to worry about that now. You know what we have to do.”

“Yes. Also, Her Majesty will need to know this.”

“For what purpose?”

“Well, first, because this is a message she received, and it popped up randomly, and if we don’t give it to her someone else will and we may lose our heads. And second, because if she does have a different inspector working on this case, she will need to contact him to share this information. And third, that might give us a chance to discover who it is.”

“Ah. I see. Okay, let’s go.”

“I am beginning to question your competence.”

“Sir, the men selected were the best.”

“One dead, the other couldn’t even find the girl.”

“Yes. It frustrates me as well. It was the perfect flush, two birds flying independent. Should have been an easy kill.”

“Do you know where they are now?”

“No, but we know their signal, they won’t be hard to track down.”

“Very well, but the next communication from you had better be your success at terminating both of them.”

“Your Majesty, we have news.”

“Inspector Humbolt I presume?”

“Yes, Your Majesty, accompanied by Inspector Vornthisen of the Chamberlain’s Office.”

“Inspector Vornthisen, you should carefully consider your continued relationship with Inspector Humbolt. Because if you continue to be associated with failure, the penalty, or reward, will rub off on you.”

He bowed, “Yes, Your Majesty.”

“You’ve been warned. Now, what do you have?”

“Your Majesty, here is a photo of a professor killed in his own classroom at the university. Look what is written above his head on the chalkboard.”

She looked at it and read the inscription. “Who did this?”

“We don’t know, Your Majesty.”

“Then you are not needed. Goodbye.”

They bowed and departed. She picked up her communicator and called the number SB had used to call her, but it didn’t go through. She next called Ambassador Nottlenet.

“Your Majesty, an unexpected call. How may I be of service?”

“I need to speak with the sleuth. Get him to come see me at the usual place.” She hung up. She was in a very foul mood.

They both eventually made it to their safe house. Lizzy had showered and smelled fine. Sam took a shower to get into some clean dry clothes. After a while, they sat down and talked about what had happened to each other.

“Seriously?”

“Yes, seriously. He probably could have blasted me, but either he was an amateur or my fear was running overtime and helped me see behind me.”

“Thank God you are safe. But honestly, taking a pill to die rather than talk with someone is pretty harsh. He may have been an amateur, but he certainly was a well-trained professional to do that.”

“Yes, or highly devoted to a cause.”

“True.”

“Well, my journey was without event, it just stunk, traveling though the sewers.”

“That was a stroke of genius, doing that. I would imagine these guys would simply not follow you, rather than go down there.”

“Well, whatever it was, it worked. So, now what?”

“Good question. We still need to follow Sasha, monitor Doreen’s, investigate the university; I know I am missing something.”

“Perhaps what we both need is some down time. Time to think.”

“Yes, probably a glass of wine and a cigar would help the most.”

“Why don’t you go out on the back patio and smoke, I’ll get the wine.”

“Thanks.”

A little while later Lizzy brought out a couple of glasses of wine and some cheese and crackers to snack.

“Wow, perfect.”

“I thought we should have a little food.”

“Thanks, and when we finish all of this, a good night’s sleep. Yes. Our electronics are turned off, no one knows anything about this place, so we should be safe.”

“Sounds like a good idea. I would think that some quiet time and relaxation should benefit both of us. Then we can talk in the morning and see where we go.”

“Sounds good.”

Quick Dash

350.064.06

They got up early. Lizzy was still curious about how they had been located.

“How did they know where we were? I mean, we are taking active steps to hide. That’s what I was thinking about last night; I still don’t understand how they identified us.”

Sam had made toast, that being the only food they had in the apartment. Still drinking his coffee, Sam replied, “That’s the issue, Lizzy, I don’t either. We’re just lucky that they decided to try and take us out individually, instead of blasting the entire neighborhood apart just to kill us. I mean, we have not shown anyone any information that you… Wait a minute.” He got up and walked over to the shelf by the front door, picked up their communication devices, and walked back.

“The only way they could identify our location is when we use these. Someone has gone through a lot of trouble to track down these two devices.”

“You mean, they know these are associated with us?”

“Yes. Right now, they are both turned off, standard procedure at a safe house. But we usually keep them on, and they are always on when we are out. That would give them the ability to track us.”

“Do you think they can eavesdrop on our conversations?”

“Based on current evidence, no. If they could, you, me, and several people we know would already be dead, so they must only have access to the location of the devices.”

“Huh. Okay, so now what?”

“I’m going to head across to the old town, turn on my device and check messages, etc., then turn it off and come back here. Maybe we’ll have some additional information to help clarify our next steps.”

“Are you sure you want to go alone? After all, two pairs of eyes are better than one in these circumstances.”

“Are you sure you want to come along?”

“Only if we can stop at Scrotelli’s for some pastries.”

He laughed, saying, “That would sure beat this lousy breakfast. Okay, let’s get going.”

They went to Scrotelli’s first, and took their time to enjoy some real food.

“I don’t know, Sam.”

“About what?”

“I just don’t know if I like these cream stuffed pastries or hot pies better.”

He laughed. “Well, at least you don’t try and eat a whole pastry at one time!”

She smiled, “Yep, there’s that.”

He waited until they had finished their pastries and the they had walked a block from the store before he pulled his comm unit out. They stood in an open space, where it would be easy to see anyone approaching them from a distance. They stood nearly back-to-back, but not intrusively so. Finally, he turned on his device.

He listened for a few minutes, then turned his device back off.

“Come on.” They started walking a circuitous route back to the safe house.

“Well?”

“They are making a full court press. Interrogating and threatening the families of the victims, trying to get them to tell then what they said to us, be silent and not talk to anyone else, and report anyone coming to them asking questions.”

“What do we do?”

“We are packing and taking a trip to Secunsa.”

“Why there?”

“Because it was the Baronetess Alexandria who called and warned me. She is in danger.”

Lizzy smiled, and said, “Oh, so you are in touch with the Baronetess? Personal or business?”

He turned to look at her and saw her smile, then chuckled, saying, “Well, if you must know, I think I have a crush on her, so yes, this is personal and business.”

“Perfect,” she said. “Then we can both settle some scores on the journey.”

He pulled out two brand new comm units. “Here, this is yours. All of your information was processed through a trap detector and loaded onto this unit. All of your personal data was wiped from the other one. Downside, you’ll need to let whomever you want to know your new contact into, what it is.”

“Oh my gosh, this is Unitac’s newest model! I could never afford such luxury.”

“Not just luxury, but a lot of power. Plus, I had a few modifications made, which I’ll explain on the trip. Come on, let’s go. We leave for Secunsa in three hours.”

“We have detected their devices, traveling to the terminal.”

“Any idea where they are going?”

“Not yet. As soon as they board and depart, we will know.”

“Keep me informed.”

“Your Majesty, yet another unexpected call. How may I be of service?”

“Yes, yes. Did you get through to the sleuth?”

“Your Majesty, I left a message, but have not heard back.”

“So, you have no idea where he is?”

“No, Your Majesty.”

“Damn.” She hung up, angrier than before.

“Yes?”

“They are on a cargo ship bound for Cordoran.”

“Which ship?”

“SS Stairhoven.”

“Well done.” The line went dead.

“Yes?”

“The targets will arrive on Cordoran on three hundred and fifty point sixty-seven. Arrival on the SS Stairhoven. They must not be allowed to leave the planet, do you understand?”

“Yes, clearly.” The line went dead.

Sam and Lizzy had adjoining staterooms, not too far from the lounge and restaurants. This was a luxury liner bound for the Arteluvian Archipelago, a place of romance, love, and beautiful vacations.

“How can you afford this?”

“Not to worry, it will be included on my bill to the Empire for services rendered.”

“If you deliver.”

“I will deliver, just not sure how, yet.”

“Well, are pampering services included on this boat?”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Tomorrow I am going to have a full body massage, facial, hair, toes and fingers, the whole works. You?”

“I’m not sure, but pampering, probably not.”

“That’s too bad. Everyone can use a day in peace and quiet, enjoying a good pampering.”

He laughed, “Well, I can’t argue with that. Maybe some other day.”

“So, what about this evening?”

“Let’s do dinner, then back to our rooms to sleep. It will be a short journey, and there is much to prepare for.”

“Okay, if you say so. I saw they have a steak house on board. In the mood for a really good piece of cow?”

“Now that I can participate in. I hope they have a really good beef tenderloin with a gorgonzola garlic butter melt on top. I haven’t had one in years, and it’s one of my favorites.”

“How about six?”

“Okay, dinner at six. I’ll pick you up.”

She laughed, “Meaning you’ll knock on my door and walk with me?”

“Yep.”

“Okay, see you then.”

At six o’clock Sam knocked on her door and after a moment, she opened it.

“Wow.”

She blushed.

“Seriously, you are beautiful, Lizzy.”

“Why thank you, sir.”

He offered his arm, and they strolled to the restaurant.

“I must say, you are the best partner I could ever imagine sharing dinner with!”

She laughed, saying, “I will take that as a complement!”

“Please do!”

They were sat at a table with a beautiful, if not generated, view of the stars.

“I see the menu has the steak you like.”

“Yes, and a wine I like too. Care to sample a three hundred and fifteen Xena Cabernet? It is, I believe, the best wine ever created.”

“I’d love it.”

He placed the wine order and they both ordered their meal. Soon, the wine was served.

“Well?”

“Oh my, that is divine.”

“Yes, a good wine is a gift, and this one keeps on giving. So, tell me Lizzy, where are you from?”

“Oh, around.”

He smiled, and said, “Look, if you don’t want to talk, that’s okay. But if you ever do, I’m here.”

She sighed, “Thanks, Sam. You see, my story is not that interesting. When I was two, my parents left my life.”

“You mean they died?”

“I don’t know. I was too young to remember. All I know, is that my earliest memories do not include my parents. I was shifted around from place to place, even planet to planet. I grew up on Branscole, living in several different homes, but when I was fifteen, I was transferred to Stireton. That’s where I learned my military skills and where I lived until I joined the marines.”

“Other than that, I haven’t really known what it means to be part of a family. I’ve always just taken care of myself and moved on. The marines were the closest thing I ever had to what I would call a family, and they got taken away from me.”

“Did you ever get toys for Christmas?”

“Not that I remember. I think there were some small handouts, but nothing that I remember that made me remember.”

Sam reached across the table and put his hand on hers. “I’m sorry, Lizzy.”

“Thank you, Sam. But you know, my life hasn’t been bad. I had fun in school, was liked by my friends, got along well with most everybody. It’s just that it was never quite enough to have a family adopt me and make it permanent.”

Just then the appetizers arrived, and the meal began. The conversation stayed away from personal items through dinner. Once the entrée was completed, and the crème brûlée was finished, they were served a delicious Irish Coffee. They took their time with this one, but eventually they walked back to their rooms. As they walked, Lizzy held on to Sam’s arm.

Sam said, “I forgot to tell you a funny story about how we just confused our enemy.”

“How so?”

“As you know, we’re taking an indirect route to Secunsa.”

“Right, but?”

“But I put our communication devices on the first ship for Cordoran. If they were tracking us, then that’s where they will assume that we were going.”

“So, they don’t know we are on this ship?”

“No, no one does. For the first time in quite a while, I know we are safe.”

They walked further, then arrived outside their doors.

“Sam, can I ask you something?”

“Of course, anything.”

Lizzy blushed a little, but said, “Have you ever been in love?”

Sam smiled, but said, “Yes. Why?”

“Oh, I was just wondering. I’ve never been in love before. I don’t know what it means or how it feels.” Then she looked him in the eyes, and said, “But I think it is something like I feel tonight. Goodnight, Sam.”

“Goodnight, Lizzy.”

They entered their separate rooms and slept.

Inspectors Derailed

350.065.12

Inspectors Humbolt and Vornthisen were very stressed. This was unusual. Neither of them had been ordered to the Palace before, even though they had appeared in front of the Empress more than once, much less summoned directly by the Empress. But here it was.

“Any idea what this is about?”

“I suspect it is about the murders we are investigating, and a request for an update.”

Freddie said, “But Richard, we have nothing new to say.”

Richard grimaced, as he said, “I know.”

Once in the palace they were directed to a private sitting room. As they entered, they found Empress Alexandria III sitting, having tea, waiting.

Without batting an eye, she said, “Finally. What news of your investigation into the murders in the Chamberlains office?”

They both bowed, and Richard said, “Your Majesty, we have nothing new to report.”

She was exasperated. “You have had three years to investigate these murders. You are both supposed to be the absolute best in the force. Yet you bring me nothing.”

They could only stand in fear, not knowing what to expect.

She stood and walked over to the serving board and poured herself another cup of tea. It took several minutes, as she had her back to them and seemed to be trying to decide something.

Finally, she turned, saying, “Because of your incompetence, I have been forced to hire a sleuth to investigate this affair. To date, this sleuth has provided me more information than both of you combined. And no, I will not tell you what the sleuth has told me. What I will tell you is this. When my sleuth returns from the current errand to brief me, this sleuth will be in charge of all aspects of this investigation, including both of you, should that be necessary. In any event, should you fail to provide this sleuth all that is asked for or required, you will find yourself in a place you do not want to be. Understand?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Now go.”

They bowed and departed. As they walked, Richard said, “So, that explains a lot of things.”

“Yes, but by the way Her Majesty said it, I can’t tell if it is a male or female sleuth.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does. We distinctly heard that the false inspector who visited my office was male.”

“Perhaps. But if this sleuth is as good as she believes, it could have been an incredibly good cover.”

“If that is the case, we will never be able to identify this sleuth.”

“Truthfully, it doesn’t matter. What matters is that when he or she arrives, we find the murderer. Otherwise, I fear for our very lives.”

“I agree. Come, let’s try again. We have all the data of the murders.”

“So, the Empress admits to hiring a sleuth.”

“Yes, My Lord. But that is all we know. The inspectors don’t even know if it is a man or woman.”

“Okay, but our information already points to the sleuth as being a female. But tell our people on Cordoran to be prepared for either or both. We must put an end to this investigation until we secure our objective. Then it won’t matter.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

They were discussing the very end game.

“Do you think he is trustworthy until the bitter end?”

“I would stake my life on it, My Lord. He has proven, through three murders, that he is a man we can rely on. He genuinely believes he is doing the work of the righteous.”

“Very well. Give him targets number four and five. Assuming we hold this sleuth at bay, we must proceed to the ultimate prize.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“I have a doubt.”

“My dear, there is no reason to doubt. All is in order.”

“Maybe. But still. What if we are wrong?”

She leaned over and kissed him hard on the mouth, arousing him and distracting him from these thoughts. Soon his mind was freed from worry as they explored the wonder of their passion together.

“Good evening, Lizzy. I was wondering if I would see you today.”

“I’m so sorry, but I slept in so late this morning and then had a session in the spa that lasted for hours. I haven’t felt this good in, well, I’m not sure I’ve ever felt this good.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“So, what did you do all day?”

“Oh, I wondered over to the lounge and had a glass of wine and thought for a while. This case puzzles me.”

“In what way?”

He paused for a moment, then said, “We are looking at the wrong thing.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, somehow, we have been pushed to work hard at understanding the mechanics of a murder, when that is not what this is all about. I am convinced that these murders are part of something bigger, but I don’t yet have enough information to pin it down.”

“Bigger as in…”

“I believe we should be looking for someone other than the murderer. I think this is a larger scheme than that, and the murders are only a part of it, almost a cover for it. But what scheme, who’s scheme; I have no idea. It’s just a feeling.”

“And you always go with your gut?”

“Oddly enough, yes. One of the things I have learned over the years is that what you see is seldom what it is. Oftentimes, what you feel is more important, and I feel that we are close, and that whomever we are getting close to is fearful, which explains why they are attempting to eliminate us, but I don’t yet know who that is.”

“So, what now?”

“Well, I am going to take a stroll around the ship, then off to sleep. You?”

“Oh, I am going to the casino. I feel lucky.”

He laughed, “Well, remember, we can’t put casino losses on our bill to the empire.”

She smiled, and said, “Oh, there won’t be losses.”

“Alright, have a fun night, see you in the morning.”

“Okay, see you later!”

The Game

350.066.09

They arrived at Merintine on the last stop to pick up travelers to the Arteluvian Archipelago. Here, they disembarked, and hurriedly ran to board the cargo vessel Deliberate, a ship enroute to Secunsa with a load of clean and pure Trilbinuim. This was a valued product, being a new mineral used in manufacturing of the most expensive technology.

They were assigned to only one stateroom, as a cargo ship had limited space.

“Well, this is small.”

“Yes, you can take the bunk, I’ll kip on the couch.”

“Thank you, but you are older, you can have the bunk.”

“Oh, none of this lady’s privilege? Besides, I might be older, but only by five years!”

She laughed. “Age is age. And by the way, I gave up that lady’s prerogative years ago. I tell you what, we’ll flip for it. Heads you get the bunk, tails I do.”

“Deal.”

They flipped; he got the couch.

“So much for games.”

“Yes, well, you are still welcome to the bunk.”

“No worry, this is comfortable.”

“So, since this ship has no spa, I suppose we are going to be close for a couple of days.”

“Yep. Ships rules apply, wear what you want or nothing at all, in here, to be comfortable. I’m going to the gym. Want to come?”

“Oh yes.”

They changed into exercise attire, and then made their way to the gym, which was a fully equipped workout space, with a racquetball court.

“Let’s make a bet. I win three out of five, you buy dinner. Otherwise, you buy.”

“Deal.”

They went at it fiercely, right from the first serve. After that star ball match, they knew their opponent was capable of toughness. Sam did try and use a few shots to test her skill and agility in racquetball, but soon realized he needn’t worry, she was awesome.

They went at it, with both of them unleashing a flurry of hits. It was close and the rounds were long. Finally, after going back and forth for a couple of hours, it came down to it. Each had won two games. They were tied on the last point to decide the last game. That’s when they both dug in.

Other people had stopped what they were doing to watch this play. Hard, brutal, relentless. They did not yield a point, but fought over each one. This one point lasted thirty minutes. Finally, Sam won.

They were both soaking wet from sweat, and breathing hard.

“Great game!”

“You, too. I thought I could take an old man like you.”

“Well, you almost killed me!”

“I guess that makes it one to one, counting star ball.”

“Yep, and one day we will have to play a rubber match.”

They laughed and high fived, then wandered back to their stateroom to shower and change.

Once they were cleaned up, they went to the galley and had some incredibly good food, but nothing like what you could fine on a cruise liner. Still, it was good.

Once back in their room, Sam said, “Seriously, Lizzy, that was the best game I have ever played. I think it was your level of play that elevated mine.”

“Back at you. I was determined to win, and you kept getting better, so I had to work even harder. Good game.”

“Now what?”

“Well, boss, I am going to put on my ears and listen to some music to relax and calm down, and then I will go to sleep.”

“Sounds good. Good night.”

“Good night.”

After a few minutes, she said, “Sam?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you for being my friend. I really appreciate it.”

Sam smiled, and said, “You are welcome. I’ve never met anyone like you, Lizzy. Please don’t change; because you rock.”

Lizzy laid back and smiled, turned on her music and drifted off to the best sleep she had ever had.

“All is in place, My Lord. We have the port not only completely surrounded, but our agents are fully in charge of all positions that will meet the ship.”

“Very well. What is the plan once you get them into your custody?”

“It might be best if you did not know, My Lord, exactly what we will do. No reason to bring you into the decisions made to deal with them.”

“You’re right. Very well, let me know once they are secured. What you do with them after that is your concern. However, I do want to know once they are no longer part of the game.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

Stairhoven

350.067.09

“Starship Stairhoven, your landing destination has changed. New landing location is Delta four seventy-seven.”

“Stairhoven copies, Delta four seventy-seven. Any reason for the change? That puts us further from the loading docks.”

“None that I know of, just a routine change.”

“Roger that. Make my displeasure known. This will cost more in transportation.”

“Noted, proceed.”

“Roger.”

The starship landed in the new location, well away from any other starships or buildings, and was immediately surrounded by hundreds of military personnel.

The captain was irritated. “What is the meaning of this? I have cargo that is perishable, I need to deliver immediately, or it will be worthless!”

“Don’t stress, Captain. Your costs will be covered. Now, have all your passengers disembark single file, with their identity papers ready.”

“Are you looking for someone? I can assure you these passengers are clean; per every stop we have made.”

“We’ll see. Now, get a move on it, sir.”

The passengers disembarked, single file, one by one. Their papers were checked, identities confirmed. The people they wanted were not there.

“We will need to inspect your entire ship.”

“What?”

“We suspect you carry two stowaways.”

“Impossible.”

“Maybe so, but we are going to verify. Alpha, Bravo, begin your search!”

“I object!”

The one in charge waved a blaster in his face, and said, “Captain, you can take it up with whoever you want. But this inspection is taking place. Now you can be a help or a hindrance, but that will not stop what we are doing. Got it?”

The captain stepped back, as the teams entered his ship.

The search lasted nearly an hour. Finally, a trooper emerged, saying, “Here it is. A bag with two comm units. This is what we tracked.”

“Dammit.”

The officer in charge directed his teams to withdraw and gave the captain his ship back.

Once alone, he called a number.

“Yes?”

“They are not here.”

“What do you mean, they are not there? They were tracked to that port.”

“Yes, sir. But there are no people, just two comm units in a bag.”

There was silence for a few moments, then, “Well done. Thank you.” The line went dead.

“Yes?”

“My Lord, I have bad news. The two we tracked to Cordoran did not actually travel there. It was their comm units we tracked.”

“So, you are telling me we have wasted three days to find out we don’t know where they are?”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“Damn. Now what? How do we find them?”

“I suspect they will try and make contact, in some fashion, with either the Kisdernec’s or the Eme’s. We need people there, now.”

“Do you have resources?”

“Yes, but it will take a day to get them in place.”

“Very well, make it so. We must find them.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“Okay, so tomorrow, we will arrive on Secunsa. I need to meet the Baronetess Alexandria.”

“What do we seek?”

“I have some questions about things on the planet, and the leadership of the Baron, in particular.”

“Specifically?”

“If she has any knowledge of what the letter the Empress received could mean.”

Lizzy leaned her head sideways, and asked, “What caused you to wonder about this?”

He grinned, saying, “It’s that gut thing, remember? There is something about that warning that yells out for investigation, but no one has done so. It just screams out to me to ask someone if it means anything, so I thought I would start there.”

“Okay, you’re the boss. But it seems odd, that’s all.”

“Maybe it is. But sometimes my best results have come from my oddest hunches. Call it a gift, or a twerk in reality, but usually these odd hunches pay off.”

“I suppose we will find out in the morning. Good night.”

“Good night.”

Baronetess Eme

350.068.09

“You know we only have twenty days until the next murder, right?”

“Yes, I think of that every day.”

They were in a transport on the way to the vineyards to see the Baronetess.

“Now remember, I do not want to reveal to the Baronetess who I am, so will continue the charade of being Ahmed. There may come a time when I can alter this, but for now, it is something I need to do.”

“Okay, if you say so.”

“I will drop you off a short distance from the vineyard. Be alert, there may be some bad guys around.”

She smiled, and said, “One can only hope.”

When they were a short distance away, he dropped her and her bags off. Once he arrived at the vineyard, he was met, again, by Deacon Tarrington.

“Good day to you, sir. May I have your name to pass to the Master of the Vineyard?”

“Good morning. Please inform Lady Alexandria that Marquis Sheik Ahmed Amir Ibrahim of the Divine Protectorate of Pelanesia is calling.”

He raised his eyebrows, somewhat surprised, but said, “Yes, sir. If I may, please, come with me.”

He led Sam through the house to the back, and pointed to the trees in the vineyard in the distance, saying, “Lady Alexandria is there.”

“Thank you, Deacon.”

He walked out through the vineyard, and finally came to the small grove of trees where she went to find privacy. As he entered the trees, he saw her, sitting on the bench, looking into the distance, holding a handkerchief in her hands. She had obviously been crying. He paused for a moment and wondered if he should disturb her, then decided it must be done. He made a sound so she would hear him.

She turned, saying, “Oh, my, Ahmed. I didn’t expect to see you again.”

He walked to her, and she stood and embraced him, almost as if she were clinging to a last hope. After a few moments, she pulled away, wiping her eyes.

“Alexandria, what is wrong?”

“I don’t know! There have been people hounding me and my staff. They say that they are working for the Empress tracking a fake sleuth.” She looked into his eyes, “Are you a fake sleuth, Ahmed?”

He took her arm and helped her sit, then sat beside her, saying, “No, Alexandria, I am not a fake sleuth. I am just one of the people Empress Alexandria hired to find the guilty parties in this situation.”

“So, these people who are hounding me?”

“Are people who are trying to prevent the Empress from discovering the truth. If they can find me, and others like me, they can neutralize us. Then the scheme can continue.”

“Who killed my daughter, Ahmed?”

“I honestly do not know. But I believe we are close, not only to the person who did this deed, but to those who are behind it. That is why they are working so hard to find me, and others like me, and the sleuth.”

“Why are you here?”

“Lexi, I need to ask you a question. It is this. Have you heard of the letter sent to the Empress at the same time as your daughter’s death?”

“Letter? What letter?”

“It was a letter that said, ‘Release Thoristin Filtram, or the murders of your young women will continue.’ It doesn’t seem to make any sense. No one can find a Thoristin Filtram anywhere, therefore it must be initials, a hint, a word gram of some sort.”

“I don’t know who a Thoristin Filtram could be, but I do know that our Baron, for example, has trampled on the rights of an indigenous people, the Tarrequein, and taken their land for expansion of yet more industry. Perhaps it has to do with a people and not a person?”

Sam was quiet. He got up and walked over, looking out at the stream, but not seeing it. Suddenly, he turned around. He opened his mouth, but a shot from a blaster hit the tree behind him, and he dropped to the ground, reached out and grabbed Lexi’s hand, and ran as fast as possible for the buildings.

“I’m not dressed for running!”

They stopped for a moment as she ripped off the abundance of clothing she wore, leaving her in bare essentials. “Now, I can run!”

They ran, zig zag, as blasters hit vines in the vineyard. As they entered the closest out-building, they passed Lizzy, who had waited until they were inside to open fire. She had a powerful Delta Esquire Clairiant MD 778 blaster, and opened fire, killing all nine attackers within less than one minute.

“There will be more. We have to leave.”

She moved quickly towards the front of the building. They followed.

“You cannot stay here. Once they know you are with us, you will be a target as well.’

“I cannot leave my farm and these people I love.”

“Lizzy, help me make them look like victims.”

They banged up the staff, a little, and tied them up, all the while telling them to say they were attacked by persons unknown, who kidnapped the Baronetess.

Finally, they were ready.

“You only have one choice, really.”

Lexi smiled, and said, “I only had one choice before you got here.”

They quickly climbed into the ground transport and Lizzy deactivated the auto system and took control.

“Where to?”

“Get us to the port, pronto!”

They sped off at breakneck speed.

They had only gone some twenty miles when a transport landed in the vineyard, crushing the vines it landed on, and deployed three hundred troops, searching for them. They discovered the dead soldiers of their team, and also the tied-up staff. Upon listening to the staff, they boarded their ship and departed.

“Sir, there is no sign of them.”

He was furious, but remained calm, in order to think.

“What do you mean, there is no sign of them? Did they not just kill nine of our soldiers?”

“Yes, sir. But they departed before we arrived, taking the Baronetess with them. We don’t know where they went.”

“Okay. I want you to do a systematic search pattern. See if you can find anything. I will be in touch.”

He ended the call. This is getting almost ridiculous. How is it this sleuth keeps staying a step ahead? And now he had to call his boss. This would be ugly.

“Yes?”

“My Lord, we lost them.”

“What do you mean, we lost them?”

“Yes, My Lord. Seventeen of our soldiers were killed, and our remaining troops arrived after they had departed, with the Baronetess.”

“I see. Is Michael with you?”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“Put him on please.”

“Yes, My Lord?”

“Michael, kill Demitri, now.”

Michael pulled out his blaster and killed his previous boss.

“It is done, My Lord.”

“Very well. Let that be a lesson to you, do not fail me. Now, find me that sleuth!”

“Yes, My Lord.”

They arrived at the port, and Sam had a surprise, a berth on a Deluthian Home Ship, bound for the Arteluvian Archipelago, with a stop in Merintine. They would change ships there for a trip to Meladeran.

“Lizzy, take the vehicle and ditch it somewhere, so it won’t be found for a while. Here’s your ticket. Make your way back as quickly as you can and board. We will board now.”

“Got it, see you soon.” She sped off.

“Lexi, I need you to trust me.”

“Alright.”

“Okay, we need to change how you look. Come here.”

They found a quiet place and he changed her eye color, hair, and other features that would match new identity papers he had created. Once done, they walked through the boarding process as man and wife, enroute for a honeymoon on the Arteluvian Archipelago.

They found their stateroom, a cozy little one-bedroom apartment.

“Well, this will be interesting.”

He smiled, “Yes, maybe. But you will be sharing the two-bedroom next door, with Lizzy.”

“Oh, well, if you insist.”

They walked to the stateroom next door and looked around.

“You know, I didn’t have time to pack anything.”

“I know, which is why you need to go shopping.”

“But I don’t have access to any credits.”

“No problem, I think we can manage. Let me take care of a few things in my stateroom and I will be back for you, and we can go shopping.”

“Perfect.”

It took him about thirty minutes to complete some data reviews, document actions, and a few other items. He stepped out and knocked on the stateroom door. Lexi answered quickly.

“Hi, okay, I’m ready. I really need toiletries.”

“No problem.”

They were just leaving to go find her some clothes when Lizzy arrived.

“Hi Lizzy. Are you alright? You seem a little out of breath.”

She smiled, saying, “Yeah, I’m fine. Far better than those three hoods that jumped me after I ditched the transport.”

“What happened?”

“Oh nothing. I just parked it as far from here as I could on the port and started hoofing it here, when these three hoodlums decided to have some fun with the little lady. They got a little more than they expected and all three of them are currently supporting a couple of broken bones and bruises.”

Sam chuckled, “You always seem to find the nice guys.”

She laughed, “Always!

Lexi added, “I’m glad you’re okay, and I hope you don’t mind, but Sam has us bunked together in this two-bedroom stateroom.”

“No problem. Let me know if you need anything.”

Sam said, “That’s where we are going now. She needs clothes, toiletries, the works.”

“Well then, Ahmed, why don’t you go to your room, and let the girls go shopping?”

Lexi smiled, saying, “Best idea ever.”

Sam laughed, “Okay, go have fun. Dinner at six, I pick the restaurant.”

“Yes, sir!”

They ambled off, while Sam went to his cabin and got busy with his computer. He had an urge to know who was trying to kill him.

There were so many things that were not adding up. Certain people were not behaving correctly, based on the pressure being applied to them. He had doubts about many things and concerns about how much all of this was affecting his ability to think clearly. He felt his observational power was being confused and diluted. Nothing made sense.

Interlude

397.088.16

“Excuse me, Sir, but can we take a short break? I find I need your facilities.”

“Of course, I could use a break as well. Down the hall, third door on the left. I’ll get us some refreshments.”

When they reconvened, the reporter said, “So, you are now only about twenty days away from the fourth murder, the possible murder, and you sound unsure. Did you not know who the killer was at this late date?”

“No, I didn’t. At this point in time, I had a lot of information floating around. I constantly tried to bring everything into alignment of a singularity that would point to a person or some specific direction, but it didn’t happen. This, in and of itself, was very frustrating.”

“No, the complexity of this story was the intrigue behind the scenes. The participants were very good at holding their cards very close to their chests. I have to thank Lizzy for truly helping break many of these logjams. But alas, we finally did find the proof we needed.”

“So, to continue, day sixty-nine…”

Ahmed

350.069.09

“But I don’t understand, Ahmed. Why don’t we just inform the authorities and have Star Fleet pick us up and secure us? Surely we would be safe protected by some Marines?”

Lizzy said, “Lexi, the flaw in your thought process is a naïve belief in and trust of the Imperial Star Fleet. I have seen a completely different side and know, beyond any doubt, that they are not always what you expect.”

“Yes,” added Sam, “Right now we cannot afford to trust anyone not in this room. I don’t even trust the Empress.”

“Really? Why not?”

“Because she may say something accidentally or on purpose, for motives I know nothing about, that could cause us deep harm.”

“What do we do, then?”

“Well, we cannot trust anyone since we don’t know who is behind this. So, our only option is to depend on each other.”

“Ahmed, you know there are only nineteen days until, you know, the day.”

“It’s okay, Lizzy, I feel the pain of loss, but talk freely. It has been nearly two years since someone took my Eloiese, and it is only nineteen days, until yet another young woman could be killed. We must solve this puzzle.”

Lizzy reached and held her hand.

“So, Ahmed; what’s the plan?”

The Empress was furious. She could not reach her sleuth. No one had any useful information. The Inspectors were incompetent. And here she sat, listening to some rudimentary concerns about things that were completely unworthy of her time. She was sitting on her audience chair listening to these minor, irrelevant requests for her help when it just became too much. She stood up, and the entire hall rose immediately.

She said, “Enough! Do you not know there are significantly more important items I need to attend to than sit here and listen to this? Dammit.”

She turned and left through the door behind the throne, and went straight to her private chambers.

The Royal Herald dismissed the crowd waiting for a chance to plead their case, while the other flappers of the court were astounded at this behavior by their Empress.

Ambassador Lord Nottlenet sat quietly in the audience hall, but he believed he knew the concern. He went to his office and again reached out to see if he could contact SB and get him to see the Empress. It was getting dangerous having a Monarch so frazzled.

Empress Alexandria III was alone. She wished she had a counselor, like her ancestors did. But no one had been able to do the job once Archduchess Dhakini disappeared. And honestly, she knew this was a minor thing, having a single person killed every year, but for some reason, it was larger than life to her. It hit her personally, unlike anything she had ever experienced before. If only her sleuth would return.

“Have you any news?”

“Yes, My Lord. It seems the people we are searching for boarded a Deluthian ship bound for the Arteluvian Archipelago. However, they never arrived there. We subsequently discovered they took a ship to Meladeran from Merintine. They will arrive tomorrow.”

“Listen carefully. Will you be able to intercept them before they depart the terminal?”

“My Lord, they arrive in only a few hours. We have no resources there, and no time to get them there. So no, we will not be able to intercept them. However, we still have our asset on Meladeran, and he could be useful in cutting red tape and helping us get our people in the right places to act, when needed.”

“I leave it to you. But do not fail me. There are worse things than sudden death.”

The connection ended.

Shahendra was in love. ‘I just love it when he looks at me that way. Oh my god, it just heats me up in so many places. I can’t wait to take him home. I’m sure he’s the one. I just hope mom and dad see it that way. After all, he is a little older. But so cute and such a turn on!’

It wouldn’t be long now until she could show him off. Just a few weeks, and her world would be perfect.

As he walked along the boulevard, he thought, ‘These women are so easily manipulated. It doesn’t take much. I hope to meet a real woman one day, someone who is not so easy, but requires some work to win. Someone I can respect and work hard both for and with, to build a real family. Well, this will be over soon, one way or another.’

He walked past the salon where he had met all his victims, and wondered who would be next, if the current choice didn’t get the job done. He knew it was wrong, but he did it for a noble cause. He hoped someone, somewhere, would understand.

His personal communicator sounded.

“Yes?”

“Your assistance is needed urgently.”

“By whom?”

“You know by whom. Meet me at the Sancrilian Villa in two hours.”

The connection ended. ‘Now what?’ he thought. ‘Oh well, might as well go see what this is about.’

Bound

350.070.09

The Head Porter said, “But My Lady, we were not notified of a need for transportation.”

Lizzy stepped around Lexi, and said, “How about you and I cut to the chase. My Lady needs a ride. Now, either you produce a ride, now, or we contact her good friend the Empress and let her know that even though transportation information got lost in the system, her staff at the terminal insulted her.”

He was completely flustered, but stammered, “That will not be necessary.” He looked around and saw a worker standing against a wall smoking, and waved, saying, “You, there! Here, come here!”

The worker walked over to where they were talking, and the Head Porter said, “Yes, you, take that vehicle over there and drive this lady and her maid to the Imperial Palace. Quick, move!”

“What about bags?” he asked.

“I will load them, now move.”

The worker nodded his head and walked over to the vehicle, followed by the Lady and Lizzy. The Head Porter pulled the few bags over and put them in the rear of the vehicle and they were off.

Lizzy and Lexi sat in the back of the vehicle looking at the sites of Meladeran. Lizzy said, “I wonder where he went?”

“Who knows. He’s incredibly good, though; so, it was surely someplace where he was needed.”

Lizzy said, “Yes, I believe you are right. When he really gets into his job, he is one of the best. So, I suppose we have to go check into a room somewhere?”

“Oh, yes, I suppose so. No, wait a minute, we have a small apartment here. My older brother used to use it, but it is still in the family. Let’s see, yes, this is it. Driver, please take us to ninety-four seventy-three Serconius Circuit.”

“Right.”

They drove for about twenty minutes to get there.

“Here you are,” the driver said.

He didn’t get out to open doors or get the baggage out.

Once they were out, Lizzy said, “Well, you could have helped.”

He laughed, “Not my job,” and drove away.

“Okay, were here. Come on, let’s get inside.”

Once they had settled, they met in the kitchen.

“So, this is a little place? There must be twenty bedrooms here.”

“Yes, we’ve kept it for family gatherings and Palace events. After all, I am a Baronetess.”

Lizzy seemed to realize that for the first time. She curtsied, saying, “Yes, My Lady.”

Lexi burst out laughing. “Oh my God! Lizzy, please, we are friends. You don’t even need to do that stuff with me.”

“Except in public, so people won’t talk.”

“Only if it is a situation where some people get stuffy about their ‘Royal’ positions. It’s silly really. I mean, how can an entire planet be given to someone to own? It makes no sense. Shouldn’t the people of the planet get the right to agree or disagree at least?”

“Well, honestly, I hadn’t thought about it. But I suppose you are right.”

“Trust me, based on what I have seen, it should be required.”

“Oh? What makes you say so?”

“Well, take the Baron of my planet, Secunsa. He is praised by the Empress as a benevolent and wise benefactor; but the reality is that he is a relentless, power-driven maniac that would as soon as kill anyone who stood in his way. He has no mercy; he is ruthless.”

“If the people had a say, would they vote him out?”

“I don’t know. At this point, they would probably be afraid to vote against him. He has spies everywhere. Our planet is not the peaceful, quiet place most think it is. Underneath there is a current of fear that drives the businesses to achieve success. You are either successful and contributing to the Baron, or someone else gets your business. Simple.”

“Why doesn’t anyone complain to the Empress?”

“That would be certain death.”

“Hmm… Well, that would certainly rule that out.” She paused and then said, “Lexi, I don’t want to be pushy, but does this place have a glass of wine?”

Lexi laughed, saying, “It certainly does. Come on, I’ll show you the wine cellar. If I know my brother, it is always well stocked.”

They made their way through the house and then down a spiral staircase made of the finest stone from Secunsa. At the bottom of the stairs, they came out into a large room, dimmed, with stone pillars and ceilings. Around the wall were hundreds, no thousands of bottles of wine.

“Oh my god! I have never seen anything like this.”

“Yes, well, most of the wine comes from my vineyard, but still, it is a nice place. It’s humidity and temperature controlled, I’m not sure if you noticed that as we came down the stairs.”

“Yes, I felt a difference in them as we walked down the stairs.”

“Good. Well, that helps keep the wine as perfect as it can be. We have a sommelier who comes and inspects every week, just to make sure, turn bottles as needed and such.”

After a few minutes, Lexi pulled a bottle off the shelf and opened it. As she poured, she said, “Now, this is a particularly good wine. It has a history. The vine comes from the original Wilson Estate vineyard on Xena. Not many of those are available.”

They tasted the wine, and Lizzy said, “I’m sorry, but I don’t have words to describe this. I’ve never tasted anything as good.”

“Thank you. It is my personal recipe.”

They took a chair and Lizzy asked, “You mentioned upstairs that your Baron could be ruthless. Can you think of anyone who may want to unseat him?”

“Of course. I would love to, so would several houses on Secunsa. But we remain quiet and bide our time. One day perhaps, but not right now. He is far too powerful right now.”

“Just wondering, how would you go about unseating a Baron?”

“Good question.”

“Sir, we have an interesting development. The house of the family of Baronetess Eme has come alive.”

“When?”

“Only a few hours ago.”

“Very well. Get some people over to monitor the house. We need to know if it is her or some random event.”

“Yes, sir.”

The Empress was worried, angry, and generally irritated at everything. Nothing was working out as she expected. She thought by now she would know who had murdered those women, and have them brought to justice. Instead, it looked like everyone’s incompetence might lead to yet another death. And where the hell was that sleuth?

She was so distracted with her thoughts she didn’t notice the person standing in the garden, quiet and still, waiting. She even sat down on her bench, unaware of his presence.

“Your Majesty,” he said as he bowed.

She jumped! “What? Who?”

“Tis I, Your Majesty, your sleuth.”

“Where the hell have you been?” she nearly yelled. “I’m sorry, but what have you learned? Who did this dreadful deed?”

He walked towards her and said, “Your Majesty, it is not as simple as that.”

She composed herself and sat back down, and said, “Please, come sit with me.”

Sam walked over and sat beside the Empress. She said, “I’m sorry for yelling at you. It’s just, I am surrounded by incompetence, and it is so frustrating.”

“Yes, I can see that.”

“Okay, so what do you mean, it’s not as simple as that?”

“Your Majesty, this is much more complicated than it seems. There are games within games, wheels within wheels. I believe the murderer is also being played, he just doesn’t know it.”

“By whom? For what purpose?”

He smiled. “Those are the very questions I do not yet have the answers to.”

“What do you know?”

“I know that these murders were not the work of a serial killer. They are too similar, too contrived. No, these murders were designed to send a message to someone.”

“How do you know this?”

“Because a serial killer would never distract from his perfection and art by sending a red herring, such as the message you received, to distract from his art. No, I believe the letter you received about freeing Thoristin Filtram, is the true motivation for these murders.”

“But why, and by who?”

“I have a vague idea, but need to clarify a few things before it can become a solid lead. I apologize, but I am afraid I will need you to lie for me, once again.”

“What? Why should I lie?”

“Because I need a diversion that will potentially cause someone to do a certain thing.”

She thought about it, then said, “Very well, but on one condition.”

“Yes?”

“Tell me your name.”

He looked at her for a moment, then said, “Okay. My name is Sam.”

“Sam. Okay Sam, what do you need me to say?”

Delivered

350.071.09

“The Baronetess Eme is at the house, sir. She has another with her, the woman we believe to be the sleuth we seek.”

“Very well. Take them. The Baronetess goes to Prestin, unharmed. The men can do as they will with the other one, as long as she is never heard from again.”

“Yes, sir.”

Orders were issued and a crack team was identified. The team assembled and planned a coordinated infiltration of the house. It helped that they had floor plans and thorough systems monitoring. They knew exactly where the two women were located.

As one, they entered the premises from three locations, one loudly, the other two stealthily.

“What is that?” asked Lexi.

“I’m not sure, but it doesn’t sound good. Stay here, I’ll check it out.”

She left the patio facing living room and made her way through the house, slowly, inching past each door. She heard the snap, but was too close to do anything about it. Instantly, a netting covered her and shrunk to limit the use of her arms and legs, she simply keeled over.

“That was easy. You three go get the other one.”

Lexi was watching the door and saw the three approach and raised her arms to fight them, when they hit her with a tranquil sleeper, and she slumped over, asleep. They loaded her onto a pushair and walked through the house. Lizzy saw Lexi asleep in the pushair and knew there was no way to help her.

She was just about to try and spring at them when something hit her across the back of the head. She fell to the ground, and was quickly administered a low dose tranquil, so she couldn’t move, but she was awake.

“We’ll take this one to Prestin. You guys can take that one back to your place and do whatever you want. But don’t let her escape or be seen, ever again, got it?”

The men chuckled, saying things like, “Oh, she’ll be useful, for a while;” “Escape? She’ll be too sore to run!”

They left as two teams, one with Lexi, and the other with Lizzy. They loaded into transports and departed.

Lizzy was incredibly surprised they had gotten her that easily. She thought it was unreal, but then again, this house probably had plans available, if you had connections or knew where to look. These guys probably had both. And who was Prestin?

Sam had to position himself properly in order to take advantage of the ruse he was running through the Empress. He knew there was a killer, but did not know who that killer was. He knew someone was providing instructions and support for that killer, but didn’t know who that was. But he did not believe something this blatant in the Palace could be only about one person telling another. No, there was something afoot here, and he needed a single clue to begin putting the pieces together.

He felt all of this had something to do with Secunsa. He didn’t know why he felt that, but he learned a long time ago to trust his instincts. Therefore, he decided to get a position at the Secunsa Palace, the residence of the Baron Darnelia when on Meladeran. The Baron, who was often here to conduct business with the Empire, was in town this week.

He began his work by sitting down at his computer in his apartment, a secret, separate apartment from one anyone else knew of, and began looking at the Secunsa system. It was extraordinarily complex, with a lot of trip wires that would alert anyone of an intruder. ‘Interesting,’ he thought, ‘This is more complex than some military security systems I’ve gotten through.’

He managed to get inside the system and eventually appointed himself to a position as footman in the palace. It was a simple position, running errands, carrying things, just doing what needed to be done, as well as opening doors, etc. But it would give him freedom of movement and access to nearly any part of the palace, without making him really visible. He purchased the correct attire, learned the rules of the palace, and then headed out for this first shift.

The soldiers, for lack of a better description, moved Lizzy to what appeared to be a safe house. They took her downstairs into a basement room, and chained her to a wall.

“Now, you be a good lass, and stay quiet.” He laughed, “Or scream if you want, no one will hear you. We have work to do, but when we get back, it’ll be time to play.” He laughed and the four of them went back upstairs.

She looked around. A clean room, nothing to grab hold of, no carpet, no chairs, no tools, cleaning products, nothing. This would make it even more difficult. At least she could lay on the floor. She decided that without anything else she could do, she would sleep and be as rested as possible when they returned.

“My Lord,” she said as she entered the room.

He turned and looked at her, saying, “What the hell have you gotten into this time?”

“My Lord, it took some doing, but we know who the sleuth is, and she is being held right now in a secret and private location. So, all we have to do is hold her until the next stage is complete, then all is done.”

He signed. “I hope it is how you say. But make damn sure that whoever is guarding that sleuth does not let her go.”

She bowed, saying, “Yes, My Lord, orders have been given.”

He smiled, and said, “Things are tense, as you can tell. Soon it will be over, and we can truly live life. Where will you be staying?”

“I will be residing with the Baroness of Friglianlan, as her people are the ones who managed the capture of the sleuth.”

“Very well. Give her my regards, and make sure she knows to keep that sleuth on a tight leash.”

“As you say, My Lord.”

She awoke hearing the noise of the soldiers returning and opening the door above. She waited for them, and she was not disappointed. The four of them entered the room in single file, then stood side by side, looking at her. She stood, leaned against the wall, and said, “Well, what shall it be, all at once, or each take his turn for some truly amazing sex?”

The leader of the group said, “I know what you are trying to do. If you can divide us, you have greater opportunity to defeat us, or escape. But we aren’t going to let that happen. So, instead, we are going to go back upstairs and go to bed. Maybe we will deal with you tomorrow.” With that, they laughed and departed.

Lizzy was confounded by this, but decided there was nothing more to do, so sat down, leaned against the wall, and waited.

Free

350.072.03

It was early in the morning. After midnight? Yes, the sun wasn’t up yet. She figured it was about three in the morning, but she heard the sound. Someone was inching their way down to see her. She waited.

After several minutes, the door upstairs opened, and then gently closed. Quietly. Then the light came on. She had to adjust her eyes to the new glare, but so did whoever was coming down the stairs. She waited.

It wasn’t too long until the leader of the group of four walked down the stairs and turned the corner.

“I figured it would be you.”

He chuckled, saying, “And why’s that?”

“Because little men like to do their dirty work in secret.”

That pissed him off. “Little men? Let me tell you something, bitch, after I’m done with you, the last thing you will say about me, is little man. Now, turn around and face the wall.”

She smiled, and turned to do as she was told.

He stepped up and reached up to shift tie her right wrist to a higher wall anchor when she struck. Left foot up, hitting him between the legs. She spun around and grabbed his arm, spinning him around and bringing him closer to her while wrapping the chain from her arm around his neck. She wrapped her legs around him and held him pinned, barely able to breathe.

“Now, little man, who are you, where am I, and where did they take the other woman who was with me?”

“I’m not going to tell you…”

She broke his left wrist.

“Ahhh…”

“Answer.”

“No.”

She broke his right wrist.

“Please.”

“Tell me.”

“We work for the Baroness of Friglianlan. You are in one of our safe houses. The other woman was taken to Prestin.”

“Who is Prestin?”

“He is our boss, in charge of all intelligence and espionage for the Baroness.”

“Thank you.” She twisted his head and heard the crack, and he dropped to the ground, dead. She took the keys she had seen on his belt and unlocked herself, then grabbed his weapons and made her way up the stairs and found a way out, without sounding an alarm. She ran.

Court intrigue was at a high pitch, but today, there was an abundance of rumors about the stability of the Empire and the Empress in particular. A dark shadow seemed to hang over her head.

The Empress sat on her seat, listening to the various grievances brought to her, and after completing one session, made a statement that startled several people in the audience. She said, “I would like to give the court an update on the terrible murders we have experienced in the Chamberlains office over the past few years. My sleuth is extremely near to solving the riddle of the murders. Unbeknownst to me, the communique I received after the third tragic murder was the key to it. We should know, soon, who the culprit was, and have that person brought to justice.”

The court buzzed with this news, but several people got on their comm units and made immediate calls, notifying their primaries.

“Footman, get in here!”

He quickly entered the room and bowed, “Yes, My Lord?”

“Take these dirty dishes away and bring me the Trade Commissioner.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

He bussed the dishes, then walked down the hall to the waiting area, and called for the commissioner, who followed him to the Baron. He walked over and stood, just at the door, facing away from the Baron. He could hear the entire conversation, and his presence was not noticed.

Later, he was summoned again to the Baron. “Yes, My Lord?”

The baron was in a foul mood. “Why does this communication system fail when I need it the most? Go find me someone who can fix my communication system, now!”

“Yes, My Lord.”

He smiled inside, knowing his own actions had caused this disruption in their systems, but still, he went and found the communication specialist and took her to the Baron.

While the Baron and the technician were speaking, a Lady entered the room and said, “My Lord, the Empress has stated that her sleuth will soon solve the mystery of the murders at the palace.”

“Over my dead body. Get out. Everyone, out.”

He called a specific number. She answered, “Yes, My Lord?”

“You have heard? The Empress says her sleuth has solved the puzzle. I thought she was being held captive.”

“My Lord, she is. I have it on good authority that the sleuth is currently being held incommunicado and cannot do anything to cause us any further damage.”

“That had better be the case. But for the life of me, I don’t know why she is not eliminated, instead of held captive.”

“An interesting observation. I will make a call and see if we can move in that direction forthwith.”

“Good.”

Lizzy knew people. She found an old marine she knew.

“Gerald.”

He turned, “Lizzy! How the hell are you?”

They hugged a rough clasp of arms around each other. “I am great, but in need.”

“What gives?”

“On a case, bigger than Galund and possibly more destructive.”

He whistled, “Well, then, tell me what you need, I have everything.”

“I need to get in and out, invisible, with long ears and close-range weaponry.”

“I can do that.”

She departed with full gear, including advanced weaponry and IR suppression, etc. Then she went in search of Lexi.

The Baron

350.073.09

“Hello?”

“Sergeant Emanati?”

“Yes.”

“Please report to Inspector Humboldt’s office immediately.”

“Of course.”

He walked to the office, thinking, ‘I wonder what this is about?’

When he arrived, he knocked on the door.

“Come!”

“He entered, and said, “You asked to see me, sir?”

“Yes, Sergeant Emanati, please, have a seat.”

“Thank you.”

“Now, I have been going over the case again and I found that you were involved in several aspects of this case. I would like you to tell me everything you know, so I can see if you know something we may have missed.”

“Of course. I truly don’t know much, sir. I was on duty for the third murder, actually patrolling hallways, and did some research for you as far as lists of names and such regarding security and video access. Otherwise, I have been working to identify the imposter who entered our building, but with no luck. I believe that is the extent of my knowledge, sir.”

“Yes, too bad. That’s nothing new.”

“Is the case still not solved sir?”

Humboldt laughed, “Solved! My God, we are simply clueless, even with all the information we have. It’s maddening.”

“Is there anything else, sir?”

“No, no, you can go. Thank you for stopping in.”

He left, but had a feeling there was more that was not said. It made him uneasy. He wondered if they thought he had anything to do with it. Surely not.

Inspector Humboldt made an entry into his log and went home. Yet another non-productive day on a dead-end case. Plus, a sleuth. Would this ever end?

“Yes?”

“I have been informed that the police are starting to investigate their own.”

“To what end?”

“I am not sure, but it is interesting they have suddenly shifted gears.”

“Yes, quite so. Is the target still available?”

“Yes, I believe so. However, is the mission still a go?”

“I will inquire. Until you hear from me, assume it is not, but make all necessary plans to be ready.”

“Of course.”

He hung up. Then he called his one-up.

“Yes?”

“We need to discuss whether next steps will occur. The police are changing their tactics.”

“Very well. Come to see me.”

“My Lord.”

“Footman!” The Baron was obviously angry.

Sam quickly stepped in the door. “Yes, My Lord.”

“I am expecting a guest. Not just any guest, but one in a high position. I expect him to be given the best service and room. Questions?”

“My Lord, may I inquire as to the name and title of your guest?”

“The Viscount Richard Harrington of Tantelle.”

He bowed as he backed out of the room, “My Lord.”

Sam thought, ‘A Viscount. Interesting. What could he have to do with a plot?’

It was only two hours until the Viscount arrived. Sam met him personally and led him to his quarters. He had the Imperial Suite, the best accommodations in this small palace.

Once he was settled, he asked, “When will I see the Baron?”

“I am not sure, My Lord. However, I can pass your message on to find a response.”

“Very well. I shall wait. Please bring me a bottle of some particularly good red wine and something to eat to tide me over.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

Sam went directly to the Baron and passed the query. “My Lord, the Viscount asked when he would be able to see you.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Simply that I am not sure, My Lord. However, I did volunteer to pass the message to you.”

“Good. You have been a good footman. What is your name?”

“Nathaniel Hawthorne, My Lord.”

“Well, Nathaniel. I am promoting you. I want you to be my personal assistant during the Viscounts visit.”

“Thank you! I mean, thank you, My Lord.”

The Baron laughed. “Don’t thank me, I will work you to death. Now, there is a good chance we will all see a promotion soon, a huge step up for us all. Do what I need you to do, and you could find yourself owning a planet. Now, go inform the Viscount we will meet in exactly two hours, in my study. We have some details to work out.”

“Yes, My Lord. Should I attend this meeting?”

“No. I will give you instructions afterwards.”

He bowed and departed. He delivered the wine and food prepared by the kitchen for a medium heavy snack, and informed the Viscount of the meeting. He knew something big was happening, but he didn’t have a context for it. Still, it was interesting. But he decided he was too close to this aspect of the story. He had planted his devices, now to depart and listen to their conversations.

2nd Fight

350.074.10

She went back to the house where she was held captive overnight. She staked it out from a close but hidden location, and waited. It wasn’t long before the soldiers who had held her, now three instead of four, returned to the house. She waited for a while to see if anyone else would arrive, but when no one did, she began her movement.

She crept up to the side of the house, and opened a window in the basement. She didn’t hear an alarm, but assumed one had gone off. Actually, she was counting on it.

Sure enough, as soon as she was in position, she heard the door open upstairs. She took her position and waited. She listened as the steps gently made their way down the stairs. Slowly, the tip of a gun entered her field of vision, followed by the barrel, then a hand holding it, then the body of the soldier.

BANG!! She fired at point blank range and blew his brains onto the far wall. He collapsed. She quickly entered the stairs and ran to the top, busting open the door. Two of them, one left, one right. She fired at the one on the left, BANG!!, direct hit in the forehead. She turned to the one on her right and held her gun pointing at him. He wasn’t ready.

“Now,” she said, “You have two choices and only two choices. You can either tell me where they took my friend, or you will die. It’s that simple. I will give you five seconds to decide.”

He knew she was serious, so said, “They took her to Prestin.”

“Yes, but where is Prestin?”

“If I tell you, will I live?”

“If you do not, you will die.”

He thought for a moment, then said, “Prestin is the head of Baroness Friglialan’s security. They have a small palace here, on Meladeran. I believe it is located in the Newpal Wealth District. The Baroness is in residence there at this time.”

“See, that wasn’t too hard, now was it.”

He seemed to relax. She said, “But the same reward awaits you that the others received.” BANG!!

She left their house and went to find the small palace of Baroness Friglialan. It didn’t take long to search it out. She arrived at the mansion and saw that it had rather good security. She decided to take a position in the trees on a hill overlooking the mansion to see what was happening.

Once in position, she took out her super eyes, and looked closer. She saw the main entrance, several transports coming and going, with lots of guards. She looked around and saw there was a pool in the rear of the mansion. As she was looking, she saw Lexi in the pool cavorting with whoever owns this place, but definitely not in danger.

She thought, ‘Now that’s interesting. Why the charade unless she is involved somehow?’

While she was watching her, Lexi got out of the pool to take a call on her comm unit. She switched from eyes only to comm unit detection and heard the conversation Lexi had, that Lizzy had escaped and knew where she was.

Lexi looked around the hills and quickly dashed inside, waving her arms, and getting everyone else to move inside as well.

‘I have to let Sam know about this.’ She blended deeper into the trees and slowly departed, undetected.

Once she was clear and safely moving, she called Sam.

“Hi Lizzy.”

“Hi Sam. I have news.”

“Okay. I’ve moved operations. I’ll text you the address, see you in a few minutes. Safe-house protocol.”

“Done.”

It took her much longer than normal. She ditched the transport she was in, took a public transport. Ditched that, took another. Ditched that, took a public bus, jumped off, took another, until she finally was within two blocks. Then she walked a circuitous route, constantly checking to see if she was being followed. Eventually satisfied, she cut through to the safe house, knocked and entered.

“Welcome back! How were your few days?”

She laughed. “You are not going to believe this story, but let me tell you, it is a good thing you didn’t reveal yourself to a certain Baronetess.”

“What?”

“Here’s what has happened to me over the past few days, since we arrived on Meladeran.”

She told the story, not leaving out any details, and ended with the discovery of Lexi quite happy where she was.

“Interesting.”

“That’s it? Interesting?”

He laughed, “Well, no. Not just interesting. First, Lizzy, thank God you’re alright. I’m totally happy that you are safe now. No, it’s interesting that she seems to be on the inside of the plot. I never guessed it.”

“I think the reason you didn’t was because you had some feelings developing for her and it clouded your judgement.”

“Sadly, I believe you may be right. Alright, let me tell you what I have discovered.”

He spoke at length about all that he had discovered and the increasing intensity of the plot. He did not tell her about his private meeting with the Empress.

When he had finished, he said, “Okay, before we talk about what all this means, I think we need to have dinner, and then afterwards, let’s go to sleep and each think independently on all this info. Then first thing in the morning, lets discuss and establish next steps.”

“Sounds good. What’s for dinner?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It’s your turn to cook, so why don’t you surprise both of us?”

She laughed, saying, “Okay. Let me take a look in the coolers and we’ll see what I can do.”

“Deal.”

“In the meantime, maybe you can rustle us up a good wine?”

“Already have it. A delicious Cabernet Sauvignon. Do you want a glass while you cook?”

“Of course, I learned from the best!”

Sam went to open the wine while Lizzy surveyed the kitchen.

“Looks like we only have grub, but nothing that is a real meal.”

“Like what?”

“Like maybe some sandwiches, but nothing to actually cook.”

He came back with a glass for each of them. He handed one to Lizzy and said, “Cheers! Sandwiches and wine!”

She laughed, “Sounds good to me. Sandwiches and wine!”

They both laughed. “You know, one of these days we have to go shopping.”

Bar Hounds

350.075.05

Sam was up early, nearly five in the morning. He made coffee and sat in his chair looking outside, thinking about the case. Something was congealing, but he still didn’t yet quite know what it was.

“Good morning.”

“Oh, good morning, Lizzy. How’d you sleep?”

“Like a baby. Quite different than the past couple of nights.”

“For sure. Well, any thoughts?”

“Sam, this just seems like a complex, illogical puzzle to me, and I have no way to understand the pieces. It’s just confusing, so no, I have no thoughts.”

He chuckled, saying, “That’s okay, I have a couple. The first one is to try and understand what role the Friglianlan’s have in this plot. Since the Baronetess is safe with them, and the men who captured her and took you worked for them, I think that is a good place to start.”

“I agree, but we can’t just walk up to the door and ask questions.”

“No,” he chuckled, “But we can go spend some time in restaurants or bars they frequent.”

“Okay, but how do we find out which ones are the ones they go to?”

“It’s funny you should ask. I did a little research last night, and discovered there are five restaurants, two clubs, and seven bars that are licensed to operate here by the Baroness of Friglianlan. It seems they are the only ones recognized as being legitimately Friglianlan.”

“Okay, but that’s fourteen places. You do know time is short, right?”

“Yes, I know. But we still have to take time to try.”

“Okay. How do you propose we cover them, or are we only going to go to a couple of them?”

“Well, I believe we need to try and hit each one, if only for a little while. As to how, well, I want you to dress as a sailor, masculine, short hair, green eyes; and go to the bars. I will cover the others.”

She laughed, “What is this obsession with dressing opposite of our sexes?”

Sam laughed, “You know, it will surprise you to know that people treat each sex differently. And you know the faces and voices of the people that kidnapped you and took the Baronetess. But if you show up looking like yourself, they will recognize you. This way, you are under cover while you are right in front of them.”

“Okay, I can see that. Any idea what we are looking for?”

“No, just gossip, boasting, anything that we can analyze against the body of knowledge we have to see if something clicks.”

Later that day, they left on their quests. Sam had the easiest role. He dressed as a lady, but not in a glamorous way, and went to each restaurant first. He always sat in the bar areas, and walked around with a drink, pausing to seem as if he was looking at something in his communication unit, but actually listening to the conversations around him.

He didn’t really learn anything in the restaurants, so moved on to the clubs. It was noisier than the restaurants, but it was also easier to move around. One conversation caught his ear in the first club.

“Oh, yes. Once this is over, we will all be promoted. I can see it now, glamour and power!”

“What do you mean, once this is over?”

“Huh, I can’t tell you, but I know we have found that sleuth and are holding her, so the plan the uppers have going is running right on schedule.”

He listened some more, but the loudmouth shut up, realizing he may have said too much. The second club was a little better.

He was standing at the bar, sipping on his drink, when two people he recognized walked in and walked straight to the bar, standing almost right beside him. He kept his eyes to himself and listened.

“What is the status on Secunsa?”

“The Tarrequein are almost removed.”

“Hm. That’s not good. We need them to remain for a short time. The gambit is not finished.”

“Very well. I will return and see to it that we extend the play for a while. How much time is needed?”

“Only until the end happens. The hope is soon, but who can tell?”

“Okay, I will see to it.”

“Good.”

He didn’t know what that meant, but it was new, different, and smelled of a plot. He left to go back to the apartment.

Lizzy had a lot more fun than Sam. She hit her first bar just at happy hour. The place was buzzing with off-duty security staff. She even recognized a couple of them, the ones that took Baronetess Eme away to Prestin. She stayed close, but out of the way. Their conversation was also revealing.

“Oh yes, Seldon and his team took the sleuth to their safe-house. She’s still there, and I can only imagine what fun they have been having with her!”

Everyone broke out into laughter, enjoying the story.

“Anyway, we took the lady to Prestin, he gave her an antidote and she was fine. She even gave each of us a kiss on the cheek for being so convincing! Said it would keep the sleuth in the dark, just in case!”

“Yeah, but what is all of it about, anyway?”

“Hell, I don’t know. Something about gaining power or some such. But I tell you, as long as my paycheck keeps getting bonuses, I could give a rats ass!”

Laughter again.

She knew she would not be able to put up with this conversation for long without taking one of them out, so decided to leave. At the next three bars, it was rather quiet. But at the last one, it was quite different. Loudmouth, the leader of the team that captured her, was there, drinking way over the limit.

“Yes, fellas, we nailed that bitch sleuth!”

“Aw, you make it sound too easy!”

“Oh, it was! She didn’t know what hit her.”

Soon, he made his way to the toilets, and Lizzy followed. Inside, she bolted the door, and noticed there was a window exit, good. Loudmouth was standing at the urinal, so she pushed him from behind.

“What the hell?!”

“Oh, sorry, asshole, but you’re in my way.”

“You made me piss on myself, dumbass!”

“Are you finished yet?”

“Yes, but let me turn around and I’ll kick your ass.”

She grabbed him and spun him around before he could get his dick back in his pants. She grabbed it and squeezed hard.

“How’s this feel, dumbass?”

He yelled, “OWE! Shit that hurts!” He tried to grab her or swing to take a punch at her.

She easily rebuffed his attack. “You’re too drunk to have a fun fair fight. But remember this. You screw around with a sleuth, you get punished.”

She released him, then kneed him hard in the groin, and then grabbed his head and slammed it onto the counter. He collapsed in a heap, bleeding from his nose. She washed her hands, then walked over and opened the window, and departed. She was whistling as she walked back to the apartment. Hurting bad people always made her feel so good.

Back at the apartment, they compared notes.

“So, now what?”

“I’m going to go to the Secunsa Villa tomorrow, I have a shift as the footman. I need you to start reviewing the recordings of the conversations I’ve recorded to see if anything is relevant.”

“You mean a whole day just sitting on my ass listening to people talking?”

He laughed, saying, “I know, it’s not nearly as glamorous as beating people up in a bathroom, but it is what we need.”

She laughed. “Okay, I’ll start listening.”

Footman

350.076.09

Sam arrived early for his shift, getting into his role as a subservient but higher-ranking footman. When he walked to the Baron’s office, he was not surprised at what he found. The departing footman was being yelled at.

“Dammit! I told you to coordinate this for today! Not tomorrow!”

When the Baron saw him, he said, “Where the hell have you been?”

He bowed low. “My apologies, My Lord, but I was told to take two days off.”

“Dammit! Look here, this footman has completely screwed up my schedule and I will likely have his head.”

“My Lord, if I may, can you tell me what you need? I will get it corrected at once.” He waved the other footman out of the room.

“Very well. As you know, the Viscount is here. While we have had a couple of minor meetings, the one this afternoon is the most serious. I need a formal luncheon planned for two this afternoon, here, in the gardens. Nothing has been done! I want this done immediately.”

“Yes, My Lord. How many will be attending?”

“Ten plus the two of us.”

“Very good, My Lord. I will see to it.”

“Very well, I am counting on it.”

He turned and departed, going directly to the Housekeeper and Chef. He pulled them together and set them to get to work. He coordinated with the Head Gardener and contacted a local planner. It was go, go, go. But, at one forty-five, he walked into the Baron’s office and stated, “My Lord, luncheon is served. Shall I bring the Viscount to the garden?”

The Baron didn’t say a word. He got up and walked past him, through the hallways and out into the garden. When he saw the accomplishments made, he said, “Bring the Viscount.”

Sam nodded and left to get the Viscount. Soon they were seated across from each other, with about ten underling officials in other chairs at the table. The Baron looked at Sam and nodded his head. Sam bowed and stepped back, staying in the garden, but out of the way. He could hear everything he just wasn’t a participant.

It was an uneventful meeting. However, afterwards, the Baron called him into his office, and said, “See here. You did well today. The Viscount has agreed to arrange a private meeting with the Marchioness of Stanmel, which you cannot mention to anyone, in two days, at his villa. This is an especially important meeting, as all of our futures ride on it. I need you to make all the arrangements for me to get there.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“Has there been any word on the location of the sleuth?”

“No. It’s frustrating. How she managed to kill all four of her holders is still a puzzle; they were part of our best team.”

“Apparently not good enough, or maybe they brag about being the best, but truly are not.”

“It’s possible. There was one development though. The team leader that captured her and the Baronetess was accosted in a bathroom bar last night. He was beaten up pretty bad.”

“Does he know who did it?”

He laughed, “About ten of them, but he got the best of them before they escaped out the window.”

“So, no memory.”

“Well, either no memory, or he doesn’t want to say who really beat him up.”

“You think the sleuth, did it?”

“No, she’s been deadly. I think if it would have been her, he would be dead. But I do think it was someone who knew her.”

“Maybe that guy she was with?”

“Exactly, so he is back in play as well.”

“This is not getting any easier.”

“I know.”

“We have to find these people and terminate them before they unravel what is occurring.”

“Yes. Question, when will it be too late?”

“I think after the move is made. It will either work or not.

“Very well.”

“What next?”

Sam said, “I have to travel to Secunsa tomorrow. I’m leaving early.”

“And me?”

“You need to continue listening to the recordings and listen to them live when you can. Also, you need to provide some ears to a meeting at the estate of Viscount of Tantelle. He has arranged a secret meeting with the Baron of Secunsa and the Marchioness of Stanmel, the day after tomorrow at one in the afternoon. I believe this may be when we get our best chance to find out what is going on and who the key players are.”

“You want me to do this?”

“Lizzy, you are far better at this type of sneaking up and listening from a distance stuff than I am. I prefer up close work. “

“Okay, so you will go to Secunsa. When will you return?”

“I expect it will be by day eighty-two or eighty-three.”

“That’s cutting it close, don’t you think?”

“Yes, it is. Look, I still don’t have a clear picture of what the plot is and the key characters in it, and I still don’t know who the killer is. So yes, there is a lot to do. That’s why your help is so critical. We need to know what is said at that meeting.”

“No problem, I’ll cover it.”

“I know, and thanks. I’m hoping this trip helps me understand the meaning of the Thoristin Flitram letter. I think it has to do with the Tarrequein on Secunsa, hence the trip.”

“Okay, well get some rest and I’ll see you soon.”

“You, too. Be safe.”

Dinner

350.077.09

Sam threw caution to the wind and boarded a liner departing directly to Secunsa. There were several of them, so he hoped the added identity protection he had applied would cover his tracks. He didn’t even bring a comm unit. He would pick one up when he arrived on Secunsa, to be used there and left behind.

He had a luxury suite, one of the top five on the liner. He figured no one would expect a sleuth to spend this exorbitantly, so took that chance as well. He had free spa service and decided he would take advantage of that. But primarily he had brought his case info, and wanted to do yet another deep dive to see what he was missing.

Lizzy decided to split her day between listening to the recordings Sam had provided of the Baron’s palace, to watching the salon. She was intrigued by the fashion sense that Sasha seemed to have. Midway through the morning, her first client arrived. All of her clients were female and about twenty years or so of age. They all seemed to dress the same; but when Sasha finished with them, they were all unique, stylish; it was so interesting to watch how she read each person and created a style just for them.

She thought, ‘Are one of you the next victim? If we can’t find and stop this killer, will one of you die?’ It sobered her. ‘At least if I die fighting, it will be my choice.’ She shifted to taking snapshots of everyone that came into view, while listening to the live conversations from the devices Sam had planted at the Secunsa Palace.

“Hello.”

“Hi yourself.”

“How goes your mission?”

“Very successful, to this point.”

“Very good. So far, we have kept this entire plan afloat, primarily through your excellent manipulation.”

“Thank you, I learned from the best. But there is still one outstanding concern.”

“Which is?”

“The sleuth.”

“Oh, yes, the sleuth. I believe everyone thinks the sleuth is female, right?”

“Yes, but I’m not so sure.”

“Does it make a difference?”

“Probably not, but you heard the Empress, only a few days ago she said her sleuth was very close to solving the murders.”

“Yes, I heard that, but it was most likely a random comment meant to cause a reaction in the weak. We are not weak.”

“We are not, but not everyone is either as strong as you, or knows what is actually going on. Hell, I don’t even know what the entire plan is, and I’m part of it.”

“Yes, I know. But we cannot let everyone know all the details, too large a risk of someone saying something somewhere they shouldn’t. As you said, there is a sleuth around, and who knows where she or he is listening.”

“Right. Okay, I’ll contact you after the meeting.”

“Very well. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye.”

‘Interesting. I wonder if that was the voice of the Viscount? If only I knew what they sounded like.’ She made note of this conversation so she could share it with Sam when he returned, and continued listening to the devices.

Empress Alexandra III rarely had small intimate dinners. Hers was a life devoted to the political world and constantly engaging with diplomats, Barons, and others, to ensure the realm continued in a smooth manner. But tonight, she was excited, because her brother, DeMarco, was bringing their dear friend, Susan, the Marchioness of Stanmel, to dinner. She couldn’t wait.

At seven in the evening, they arrived, and were announced by the household herald. She quickly told the herald to please be off, and greeted her brother and friend as friends.

“DeMarco, it is so good you could come.”

They hugged quickly and exchanged a short kiss on the cheek.

“Susan, it has been too long.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“Please, come in, let’s have a cocktail before we eat.”

They went into the small private family area of the palace, only a few hundred bedrooms here, plus all that could possibly go with it, and stopped in an area with a private bar, fireplace, lounge chairs, and other accoutrements an Empress may desire.

Alex turned to the staff and asked them to please bring out one of her favorite wines, a Cabernet Sauvignon from the original Wilson Vineyard on Xena, which was still the best wine available.

“A toast, to my brother and dear friend, Susan. It is wonderful to see you both.”

“And may I say, Your Majesty, it is so good to find you in such good spirits even while managing to run an Empire.”

She chuckled, then said, “Well, let me say there are definitely challenges. Do you know, I was recently approached by a delegation from the Dragnellian Confederacy, and asked if I would allow them to break away from the Empire and establish a separate, but subservient, federation?”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

DeMarco said, “Where are they located? I’ve never heard of them.”

“They are located on the edge of the Andromeda Galaxy, the furthest location from us in the Empire.”

“Did they say why they wanted to do this?”

“Yes, they said with all the chaos in the Empire, they just wanted to start fresh with more local control.”

“Interesting.”

“Yes, it is. And truly, I can’t really blame them. I mean, the Empire covers two galaxies, so I’m certain there are things that could be better controlled locally.”

“Well, speaking of local things, have the police had any luck with your serial killer?”

Susan said, “Serial killer?”

Alex said, “I thought you would have heard this. There have been three murders in the palace and the police have had no luck in identifying either a motive or person of interest. So, yes, it could very well be a serial killer.”

“I heard a rumor, sister, that there is a sleuth on the case, looking into it, outside of the regular police authorities.”

“I can’t deny it.”

“Has he had any luck?”

“Susan, why do men always assume a position that may be dangerous and take brains is something held by a man?”

Susan laughed, “Well, Your Majesty, you know men.”

“Yes. Let me just say that the sleuth, whether male or female, is actively at work and is getting close. Soon, we will solve these murders and put an end to this.”

“Good, I am glad to hear that. And then maybe we can have a conversation about the future of the Empire.”

“Such as?”

“I still think we should take a look at sending a representative to the Triangulum Galaxy. It seems that a lot of people, including our parents, have gone there. Maybe the Empire should follow.”

Alex looked into her glass, swirling it around. After a few moments, she said, “I have spent a lot of time thinking about it, DeMarco. I’m not convinced that it is the right time to send an official delegation from the Empire. We would need to pull from within for resources we are currently using to properly provide for the security and safety of the Empire here, at home. Sending a delegation to a galaxy we have not heard from could be problematic.”

“We have no certainty that everyone who traveled there is even alive. We don’t know what is there. Perhaps there is already a race of people, or God forbid, something new and different, that has captured or killed everyone who traveled there. Sending an official representative may be perceived as a threat or an act of war. I would rather not threaten anyone right now. I believe that when the time is right, we will know it.”

DeMarco was slightly deflated, but said, “Your right, as usual, Your Majesty. But it’s a thought.”

“Yes, it is. Now, shall we have dinner?”

The Meeting

350.078.06

Lizzy left at first light. She had a geomap of the location, and had selected what she thought was the best location. However, it was only after you could put eyes on the structure that you could actually finalize that. There were often changes, trees growth, new bushes, windows not aligned exactly as you thought, etc., that caused a slight deviation in plans.

She arrived and took out her eyes and had a long hard look at the villa. It was elegant, from all appearances, with outdoor gardens, pools, a horse stable; it was the home of an important and wealthy person. She expected the meeting to be in the study, which according to her plans, was the closest corner room.

The room had large windows, the curtains were open, a large patio with a table and chairs outside; either one would feel private to the participants. It was shielded from the outdoors by being on an elevated patio and had bushes on each side. Only the space facing Lizzy was free of obstruction.

‘Good,’ she thought. ‘This should work out quite well.’

She first looked around her position and determined entry/exit strategies, where cover was located, observing the alignment of trees, fences, etc. Once she was comfortable in her nest, she opened her bag and took out her equipment. She had long ears to hook to her eyes, so she could record both visual and audible.

It was about an hour until the meeting, so she sat quietly, eating her lunch, waiting to see how it evolved.

Sure enough, almost right on time, she saw the convoy of vehicles arrive, and the Baron exit a vehicle and enter the building. She switched her gaze to the study and waited.

“Come in, Baron, come in. Please have a seat.”

“Thank you, My Lord.”

“Now, can I get you anything? After your marvelous hospitality over the past week, I must extend an offer of refreshments in return.”

She thought, ‘Yes, that was the Viscounts voice I heard earlier.’

“Thank you, but no thanks. I would rather get to business.”

The Viscount smiled. “Of course. Give me a moment to bring in the Marchioness. Excuse me.”

“Of course.”

He left the room. The Baron remained seated, looking around the room at the photos, statues, etc. After about eight minutes the Viscount returned, with the Marchioness.

The Baron stood and bowed, saying, “My Lady.”

The Marchioness only looked down on him and said, “My Lord, it is good to see you today. The Viscount has informed me that you wish to get down to business. May I inquire as to what business you propose we get down to?”

The Baron was not used to not being in charge, he was a very direct person with no time for pleasantries. “You know, the business of the new future.”

“Ah, the new future. Well, based upon all that I have observed, I would say the plan is going well, wouldn’t you?”

“I don’t really know, My Lady, since I don’t truly know what the plan is. But I must say, it feels more like there are wheels within wheels all the time.”

The Marchioness laughed, saying, “Well, Baron, let us hope not, for both our sakes. Now, as to next steps, I have it on good authority that beginning in three days’ time, serious rumors will begin to spread in the highest levels of the Empire. That will be your signal to continue on course. Three days after that, a different set of rumors will start. That is your signal to complete the plan as originally laid out. All will be ready.”

“And the sleuth?”

“Sleuth? What concern is that for us? At this stage, even if she is successful, it only alleviates a minor concern for a few people, not the overall reality.”

“So, you believe we should continue as planned with no alternatives made for anything that has happened to date, or for the sleuth?”

“That is correct.”

“Hm. Very well, My Lady, but perhaps the Krillean asset could be used to clean this up as well.”

“I don’t believe that is necessary, but it is an intriguing idea. No, Baron, I believe we are best to stay on course and only use the asset to complete our current plan.”

The Baron bowed, saying, “Very well. I will concede to your greater experience. One day, things will be different. But for now, My Lady.”

“Thank you, Baron. But remember, when the Viscount first discussed this idea with you, he told you it would appear fragmented, chaotic, and undoable at times, and so it has. Yet, the plan is sound, and we move forward.”

The Baron again bowed slightly, and said, “Very well, My Lady. I will stay the course.”

With that, he turned and left the room. Lizzy watched, and it took about ten minutes for him to exit the front of the villa and get in his vehicle. The convoy departed.

She was thinking, ‘Asset? That sounds a lot like an assassin.’

She had watched the Viscount and Marchioness after the Baron left. An aide had entered the room and spoken to them, and they both walked over to the window, looking directly in her direction. The Viscount pulled out a comm unit, pressed a button, waited, then said, “Go.”

Lizzy did not know what that meant, but didn’t like the sound of it. She quickly packed her kit and made her way out to the edge of the trees, but stopped. She looked at her transport and something was not right. She slowly reversed course, changed directions, walked to the nearest drainpipe, and climbed into the drainage system.

She wasn’t sure, but something told her she was the target now. She looked at her compass to orient herself, then began walking in the direction away from where the apartment was located. She walked tunnels for hours. Finally, she exited to a spot above ground that was between two buildings. She hid beside one and again took out her compass and compared her geomap. Okay, she knew which direction she needed to go.

She took off her camouflage and any unnecessary items and pushed them back inside the tunnel, then she walked to the end of the alley and peered around at the road beyond. ‘How did they know I was there? He looked directly at me. If they knew where I was, why continue the conversation?’

She wasn’t sure why that had transpired. But she knew she could not go back to the safe house until she did. She headed east and found a transit station. She boarded a transit and found a seat in the rear, close to an exit, and waited. If they knew where she was, they would intervene. If not, she was clear.

She rode the transit for an hour, then exited. She walked a circuitous route, stopped often, checked her perimeter; she was safe. Still, she never took a straight path towards the apartment. She still felt like she was being followed. Finally, she said out loud, “To hell with this shit.”

She turned and made her way back to find Gerald. She needed something she didn’t have. She needed allies and some additional weaponry. Gerald was connected. Anyone mess with him and it would be their bitter end.

Tarrequein

350.079.09

Sam arrived on Secunsa at nine in the morning. He was scheduled to depart in twenty-four hours, so had to act quickly. He was at a loss, to begin with, on how to find the Tarrequein. Interestingly, there was no mention of them in all the databases he searched. They were being erased, not just eliminated. He did have one contact he hadn’t tried to use yet, but felt it was his only chance.

He took a transport up into the foothills above the city, to the Eme estate. He was dressed normally today, so when he knocked on the door, Deacon did not recognize him.

“May I help you sir?”

“Yes. Deacon, I am the (changing his voice) Marquis Sheik from Pelanesia.”

“Oh, well, sir, the lady of the house is on Meladeran.”

“I know. I need to talk with you.”

“Why, sir?”

“Because I need someone who knows this planet to tell me how I can find the Tarrequein.”

Deacon looked at him for a moment, then his tone of voice changed as well. “Okay, what do you want to know?”

“Where are they, who are they?”

“Come in. To answer your questions, let me say that they are about twenty miles northeast of here. They were a great people, living lives close to nature, no enemies, maintaining the old ways. Well, some years ago, the Baron, for reasons I do not understand, decided to move them off their land to level it and make way for industrialization.”

“They fought back, and still fight; well, what’s left of them. They are proud. This was their planet for a very long time, but with increased immigration, they slowly became a minority. With the Imperial system in place, the Baron now makes the laws and determines who lives and dies. They have no champion, I’m afraid.”

“If I went there, would they talk with me?”’

“Unlikely. They see all outlanders as the enemy now. They will only speak to someone they know.”

“Someone like you?”

He smiled, saying, “Yes, someone like me. I am kindred to them, so they will speak with me. Please, have a seat and let me tell you a story.”

They both entered the sitting room and found comfortable chairs, then Deacon began.

“A long time ago, I lived among the Tarrequein for a season. My father, who was half Tarrequein, wanted me to learn the ways of my ancestors. He sent me to stay with a warrior chief, Lamoso, a strong, fierce, and brave Tarrequein.”

“Deacon, come, sit with me.”

Deacon walked over and sat on a tree log, facing Lamoso, who was standing looking over a deep valley.

“Let me tell you, young Deacon, why we maintain our ways. Our ancestors came from another planet, what we believe is the home planet of all people, Earth. We lived simple lives, living in harmony with nature. We had no enemy, no want or need. But what we did not know was that our land possessed something others wanted, black gold.”

“Because of this, we were hunted down and rounded up. We were forced to live only in certain places, while our land was sold to others who destroyed its beauty, all for the black gold under the earth.”

“Our people endured these hardships, and when it came time for them to take the remainder of our land, we were loaded onto a starship and sent here.”

“When we arrived here, we named our new home Wientanktona, a word we created to mean a new home far from trouble blessed by the great spirit. We explored and settled this land, and our people grew to large numbers, but never more than could live off the land. We shepherded our new home, we gardened, we explored and learned all the beauty from the mountains to the seas. We loved our new home, safe from the evil we had once known.”

“We grew, but we also were complacent and shared our new home with others. When new settlers arrived, we allowed them to settle. We watched as they used their tools and technology to change the parts of the planet where they lived. We watched as they grew and grew into great numbers.”

“Then, one day, a great evil arose. It was the evil of greed. We watched as the new settlers became greedy and lusted after our land. We resisted giving more land to them, but then, the Emperor of the Known Universe decreed that our home would be ruled by one man, a Baron. From that moment, our world changed.”

“We tried to resist, but the Baron, and his children after him, have taken more and more of our land. I fear that one day we will have nothing left. Then, we have no future.”

He stopped for a few moments, looking at the sky, then said, “We are one with the spirit, the great one who formed the earth and sky. We will depend on His help and the love of Mother Earth and wait to see where our salvation lies.”

“So, while I learned these things about the past, I also watched as my people died. Chief Lamoso died fighting for his people. I have no love of the Baron, but stay here to be close enough to visit the Tarrequein from time to time and take them what supplies I can.”

“I never heard of this or knew anything about it. I surmise the Empress does not know either, but that is another story. Deacon, there is one thing I need to know. Who is Thoristin Filtram?”

Deacon laughed out loud. “Seriously? I’m only laughing because Thoristin Filtram is not a person, it is a set of letters providing a meaning.”

“What meaning?”

“Why should I tell you?”

“Because that message was given to the Empress last year when the last young lady was murdered in the palace. The message was, ‘Release Thoristin Filtram, or the murders of your young women will continue.’ So, I need to know, to prevent yet another senseless death.”

“Very well. I will tell you what it means, but I do not know who sent it.”

“Okay.”

“It means…”

Sam headed back to the spaceport to see if there was an earlier departure, but there wasn’t. ‘Damn,’ he thought. ‘I have a clue and can’t get back to follow up on it.’ He decided there was nothing else to do, so took a seat and scanned news.

‘Nothing new in the news. Even that seems odd, like everyone is holding their collective breath until something happens.’

He was finally allowed to board at nine in the evening, even though the ship wasn’t set for departure until eight in the morning. Still, he had a good place to sleep and had nothing else to do until he was back on Meladeran.

“My dear, come in. I have been so troubled lately.”

“I know, darling. But to cheer you up, I met with the Viscount yesterday, and he assures me all is well, and the plan is on track.”

He reached out and held her tight. “Oh, my love, I am so glad to hear something is going well.”

“Yes,” she said, “I think we will be okay.”

He pulled back and gave her a long kiss. “I am still only confounded by that sleuth. Is there any word on her whereabouts?”

“No, no word. But, at this stage, I think she is irrelevant. It truly doesn’t matter what she says, because by the time she says it, we will have achieved our goal.”

They stood and held each other, hoping for the best and believing in their dream.

Rumors

350.080.09

The Admiral was getting antsy. Finally, he called the Marchioness.

“Yes?”

“Well? You didn’t provide me an update.”

“Oh, sorry. The meeting went as planned, so all is moving ahead. However, there could be a complication.”

“Oh?”

“Oh. It’s the sleuth. We believe the meeting might have been observed. We detected eyes and ears after our conversation with the Baron, but we couldn’t pin down a location of a source. By the time we moved into the hill overlooking the villa, no one was there.”

“Dammit. If this gets back to the Empress, it could seriously impact our plans.”

“It could. But I am not sure anything we said would provide any real evidence. Just some words about rumors and such and all being well.”

“Hm. Well, some people could take that and extrapolate things that could get other people killed. What is your plan?”

“My plan is to stay the course and make sure everything goes according to the plan. Then we will not need to worry about it.”

“True. How can one person, one sleuth, be so hard to find?”

“I suppose because this one person is an incredibly good sleuth. It will be interesting, when all is said and done, to meet this woman. She must be one tough case.”

“Not everyone agrees the sleuth is a female. Some believe it is a male in disguise.”

“Well, truly, it doesn’t matter, does it? What matters is that we complete the plan.”

“True. I look forward to seeing you in a few days. Be safe.”

“You as well.”

Sam departed Secunsa on time, with little fanfare. This was not a luxury yacht, but a cargo transport. He was simply happy to be underway. So much was happening, and now, knowing the secret of the communique, well, it opened the door to an entirely new set of possibilities.

News circulated quickly throughout the palace; the murderer had been arrested!

The Empress heard this rumor and was both ecstatic and irritated. Finally, the police had done their job, but apparently, they hadn’t bothered to report to her first. She immediately ordered Inspector Humbolt to report to the royal court.

The Herald proclaimed, “Inspector Humbolt!”

The inspector, along with Inspector Vornthisen, approached the bottom steps of the dais upon which the Empress stood.

“Well? Why am I only hearing of this arrest through rumors? Who was it? Where is the prisoner?”

“Your Majesty, a thousand pardons for failing to get to you first, but you know how rumors go. As to your questions, it may be better to respond to them in private.”

“It may be better, but I want you to tell me here, now.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. We constantly monitor the dark market for items of interest for various cases. Just two days ago a sliclei was put up for sale. As you know, this is the type of weapon we know was used in the murders. We immediately found and confiscated the item, and submitted it for forensic testing.:”

“We discovered that the DNA of all three victims were on this sliclei. We also found the DNA of someone else, whom we identified and brought in. He is a custodian in the Chamberlains Administrative Office, and we have verified he was on the premises on each of the times a murder occurred.”

“Why did he do it?”

“Thus far, Your Majesty, he has not cooperated. He has only said he is innocent, all evidence to the contrary.”

“Is there any chance he is not the murderer?”

“No, Your Majesty. We are one hundred percent confident he is the killer.”

“Good, and well done, both of you. I expect the case to be made for and against his innocence before I issue my decision.”

“Your Majesty, we have secured the services of a resident defense firm who will review all of our information and be prepared to argue in the killers favor in two days’ time.”

“Very well. Coordinate with the Herald on availability for the schedule and we will see you then.”

The Empress looked out over the assembly of the royal court without saying a word, then turned and left to go to her private office.

It had been ten days since she had talked with Sam. There were only eight days until another murder could occur. But now, with this news, was the plot finally broken? The inspectors seemed to be very confident, but she had been around bureaucrats long enough to know they regularly jumped to conclusions.

‘One way or another, I am going to have some heads when this is over,’ she thought. ‘And where the hell was Sam? He dropped off the face of the planet. I need him to finish this, for all our sakes. If this is an innocent man, I need to know before we put him on trial.’

She then turned her attention to another subject, that of the information Sam had provided about Star Fleet. She had some exceptionally good connections in Star Fleet, people she could truly trust, and had called upon several of them recently in preparation for any possible showdown with whomever was in charge of this fiasco.

‘Yes, there will be a need to replace some Star Fleet officers as well. Okay, Sam, I hope you are okay, and we need to end this.’

More Rumors

350.081.07

The Royal Court was in an uproar once again. Rumors about an arrest in the murder case were still running wild, but now, there was a new rumor that there were multiple cases of mass destruction caused by Star Fleet on hundreds of planets, inflicted at the direction of the Empress to punish those who disagreed with her. Multiple Barons were making it known that they had been attacked for no reason. This was completely out of the ordinary and created both fear and apprehension in the minds of many people.

The Empress first heard the rumors as she was having breakfast.

“Your Majesty.”

“Yes? What is it, Manfred?”

“Your Majesty, please forgive me, but there is a rumor, recently heard in the court, of some significant activity by Star Fleet taking place at your direction, that is killing many innocent people on many planets.”

“What?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. It is exactly as I have said.”

“Where did this rumor begin? What could be its purpose? What the hell is going on?”

She stood and pushed her chair away behind her before anyone could respond to take the chair. It fell over and made a crashing noise in the dining room.

“I want the head of Star Fleet, the Chamberlain and the Chancellor in my office in ten minutes!” She stormed off.

Manfred, her morning server, immediately passed the message to the Royal Herald, who began proper coordination.

It took twenty minutes, but soon, all of them were gathered in her personal office. They all three stood at attention, as it was obvious from the moment the Empress walked in the door that she was in a very foul mood.

“Now, what it this about, this rumor, that I have directed Star Fleet to destroy planets of people who disagree with me?”

The three stood still, but the Star Fleet Commander began. “Your Majesty, I know of no orders you have provided that would support such an accusation. There has never been a time when you have issued an order for Star Fleet to participate in these types of operations.”

The Empress looked at the Chancellor.

“Hm, Your Majesty, I know nothing about this. I have no knowledge of its origin, nor do I know of anything you have done that would support such an accusation.”

She looked at the Chamberlain.

“Your Majesty, this is obviously some rumor that floats through occasionally. I would not take it seriously. It will go away, as all rumors do.”

“Of the three of you, I only believe the Commander. I am not sure why I don’t believe you two,” she said, looking at the Chancellor and Chamberlain, “but for the first time in a long time, I just do not. You will go to your offices and remain there until I summon you. I will decide what to do with you forthwith. Go.”

The two of them bowed and backed out of the room, nervous and unsure of their future.

“Admiral, what is the status of our forces stationed here, on Meladeran?”

“Your Majesty, we have the First, Twenty-Seventh, and Three Hundred and Twenty-Second fleets, plus an additional Corps of Marines. We are prepared for any contingency.”

“Very well. Do me a favor and step up your security posture. I have a bad feeling.”

“Yes, Your majesty.”

“Do you think we should get on Star Gazer and make a run for it? She seems completely mad.”

“No, we must wait. If we leave, the entire plan will collapse, and we would be left holding the bag. We would then be the sole targets of a vengeful Empress.”

“Of course, you are right. But I do have a bad feeling.”

“Me too.”

Lizzy was getting antsy. She had heard some remarkably interesting conversations in the past two days, but she didn’t have the overall context Sam did. Still, she could tell that something seemed to be happening. She was anxious for Sam to get back. He needed to know what she had learned. She was certain he would be able to figure out the scheme once he had these additional pieces of information.

She also had seen several young ladies at the salon, but none of them matched any of the photos she had seen. They were not the three in the archeology class. She also noticed the scheduling piece had stopped working after the owner’s brother had updated the software again. They would need to get back inside to load a new program so they could access that.

Soon another rumor, one that said maybe the Empress needed psychiatric counseling, or worse yet, should step down, began to circulate. The court was in chaos, people did not know what to think.

“It wasn’t like this in the old days, you knew who the Monarch was.”

“I’ll bet the old Emperor would have put a stop to these rumors.”

“Maybe she is over her head. After all, she hasn’t really done anything so far.”

Rumors and more rumors. Draining energy and stoking the flames of chaos.

“Good, it is working.”

“Oh yes, My Lord, it is working well. She is confused, angry, and prepared to lash out, probably irrationally.”

“Perfect. Then she is exactly where we want her to be.”

Empress

350.082.09

Sam was anxious to disembark. Finally, after what seemed like hours waiting, it was his turn. He left the Secunsa comm unit behind and took a transport directly to the apartment. Time was of the essence.

“Sam!”

They hugged, “Hi Lizzy. Everything alright?”

“Oh my God, you are not going to believe the things I have heard in these conversations.”

“Okay, I hope you marked them?”

“Oh yes, this won’t take you more than an hour to hear them all.”

“Good. I also have news. I found out what Thoristin Filtram means. But before we talk about that, let me listen to what you have found.”

“Okay.”

He spent a couple of hours reviewing all she had found, then told her about what he had found out.

“So, you do see a larger plot of some kind?”

“Yes, I do, and it is bigger than I thought. I think I can unfold most of the plot now, only a couple of things needed, but we still have to solve the murders. Tell me, did you see any one of the clients to the salon you recognized?”

“No, why? Didn’t they arrest the murderer?”

He chuckled, saying, “I do not believe for a moment that they have the killer. Someone that was set up, yes. But the real killer? Not a chance. Because of that, I believe the game is still on. I think they will sacrifice another young woman to provide a distraction, so they can achieve their goals. We have to find her first!”

“Okay, what do we do?”

“I think it’s time you meet someone. Come on, we’ve no time to lose. When we return, we are going to plan for how we can monitor the salon, go to university, and listen to these conversations. Somewhere in this is the answer.”

“Alright, let’s go.”

They left and went to the Imperial Palace. After some time, they managed to get through into the gardens of the Empress. However, this time, when they entered the garden, she was already there, sitting on a bench, watching the pool.

Sam walked up behind her, quietly, and said, “Your Majesty.”

Empress Alexandria turned around quickly at his voice, then smiled, and said, “Hi Sam. It’s been a while; and where the heck have you been? I’ve needed updates. And who might you be?”

They walked around in front of her and bowed slightly, and Sam said, “Your Majesty, allow me to introduce to you my associate, Lizzy. She is the one who can provide you specific information on activities within Star Fleet, and the Galund expedition.”

“So, what Sam has been saying is true? There are bad players within the fleet?”

Lizzy wasn’t sure what to say, but decided honesty was the best course. “Yes, Your Majesty. There are numerous bad players, up to and including one Admiral that I heard of who has been giving the orders. I never caught the name or met him, but there is definitely an Admiral running this program.”

“Are you sure you don’t know which admiral it is?”

“I’m sure, Your majesty. But I know there is one because I overheard the captain of our ship, that was Captain Thompson on the SS Broadside, telling several other officers that he had received orders from the Imperial Palace, relayed by a highly placed Star Fleet Admiral, to conduct these operations. But I never learned the name of the admiral.”

“Too bad. That might make this easier. Sam, the police caught the murderer. I suppose that ends our investigation.”

Sam smiled, “Your Majesty, please allow me to be very circumspect in my belief that the buffoons who have been investigating this for three years have finally solved the case. More like, someone was set up to take a fall, probably pro-actively by the murderer to cover his tracks, just in case.”

“So, you really don’t believe they have truly caught the murderer?”

“No, Your Majesty, I do not.”

“Very well.” Empress Alexandria stood and walked over to the pool, peering into the water, watching the fish. She said, “Sam, how long do you want me to keep this secret? This is important; I need to take steps.”

“Your Majesty today is day eighty-two. We need until day eighty-eight, six more days, then you can do as Your Imperial Majesty must; but please, give us this much time.”

Turning, she said, “Very well, I will do this. I can postpone the date of the trial until ninety. Now tell me, what news, beside about Star Fleet, did you bring?”

“That the plot grows ever thicker, and it is far larger than a simple set of murders.”

“Specifically.”

“Yes. The murders were very much political, that much I know.”

“For whose benefit?”

“Ah. That is the question that is not yet crystal clear. I have a particularly strong idea of who is behind these plots and what the ultimate prize is; however, until I know, I would prefer not to provide conjecture. Suffice it to say, we will solve this mystery soon. But until we solve the larger issue, the game is still afoot.”

“Will we prevent another young woman from dying?”

“I believe so.”

She lowered her head, and said, “It worries me so. Here we are, me, the Empress of the Known Universe, ruler of two galaxies; and I am unable to prevent the death of a young woman who works in my palace, supporting my government.”

“But, Your Majesty, here we also are, you, the Empress, and me, a sleuth, and Lizzy, a warrior. You are not in this alone. We have gathered a lot of data, and only a single piece of information is needed to solve the entire puzzle. We, together, will solve this mystery and save that young woman’s life. So, we must be off. There are still things to do to solve this mystery.”

She said, “Yes, I understand. Until next time.”

They turned to leave when she said, “Sam, Lizzy, be careful.”

They nodded, and then walked on.

While they were walking back to the apartment, Lizzy said, “You know, Sam, the Empress seems real; not at all what I expected.”

“Yes, I know how you feel. She has struck me as fragile and fearful, not at all what I expected either. But I believe she can be fearless when she needs to be.”

“Yep, I think there is a backbone hidden in her nicety.”

“Nicety? What kind of word is that?”

“Well, it’s better than neat-oh!”

They both burst out laughing as they strolled, and found they were actually walking arm in arm; but once they noticed, they didn’t change it.

Sam asked Lizzy if she had heard the rumors about the Empress having directed those military destruction missions that she had barely survived.

“Oh, yes. I’ve heard them, and I don’t believe them.”

“I agree, but we need to know who did.”

They stopped walking and Sam turned to look at her, saying, “We need to change plans. I need you to go do something different from what we originally set out to do. I need you to go find your contacts in the Marines and figure out who the Admiral in Star Fleet is that is ordering these attacks, and on what authority.”

She smiled, saying, “That should be fun.”

He grinned. “It could be, but please, do as little damage as possible.”

“Okay. But I don’t know how long this will take. I might not be much use to you for a couple of days, easy.”

They resumed walking, arm in arm.

“I know, but this is an important link in this plot.”

“You’re right. What are you going to do?”

“You know, there are several things we need to do almost simultaneously, but I am going to sleep early, because at about three thirty in the morning, I am going to the Lord Chamberlains office and find the work schedules for day eighty-eight. Maybe we can match someone to the story we have so far.”

“Okay. Well, I am not waiting until tomorrow. I’m heading out now. Wish me luck!”

“Good luck!”

Lizzy departed and again went to find Gerald and get him and his team of renegades to help her answer the riddle.

Sam continued listening to conversations and watching the salon. He prepped for the next morning and when it was time, he went to sleep. He had the ability to force himself into a deep sleep even when not tired. He used that technique tonight and slept for six solid hours.

Chamberlains Office

350.083.03

Sam got up at three, made coffee and had a bagel with some vanilla cream cheese. When he was ready, he set out. He knew it wouldn’t be easy to break in, but he had a couple of tricks up his sleeve to get in. He also had a surprise for whomever was watching.

At the main entrance he saw that the two security personnel he had observed were the only ones still here. He had dressed as an officer himself, with facial disguise only, so they were relaxed when he entered the lobby. He waved and smiled, walking over to where they sat.

“Good morning. You two been up long?”

“Yeah, since ten. Should get some relief in a few hours. Who are you?”

“Oh, didn’t you get the memo? I’m on assignment to inspect security for the upcoming eighty-eighth day.”

“I thought that concern ended when they arrested the murderer,” one guard said, sarcastically.

Sam smiled, “Well, maybe, but the bureaucracy says I still have to inspect, just in case a mistake was made in the arrest. Can’t have another employee murdered here. My Inspector said to take a look at the entire security program in your building to see where the weak points are.”

“We don’t have weak points.”

He laughed. “Come on, fellas, just doing my job, just like you are doing yours.”

“You’re right. Got some ID?”

He was right up to them by now. He said, “Sure.” He pulled out two stingers and threw them, hitting each guard in the exposed skin of their throat. These were only tranquil needles that acted instantly. They fell over onto the counter, unconscious. They would be out for one hour.

He retrieved the stingers and walked past them to the elevators and took one up to the fifth floor, human resources. As soon as the elevator door closed, he pulled out a device and executed a command that shut down the entire surveillance system in the building, something he was certain the killer had knowledge of. It would be out for two hours.

Once he exited the elevator, he walked through to the staff management area. There were two young females working tonight. He waved to them, and they waved back. They had no idea they could so easily be in danger.

He walked past them and entered an office, turning on the computer system and working his magic. It only took five minutes to hack through their security, since he already had some of their passwords. Then he began looking for current employee work schedules.

These bureaucrats were all so similar in how they did things. He easily found the files he wanted, and downloaded all the information he needed onto a stick. But, while he was inside their system, he downloaded some other information, including the personal communications of the Chamberlain himself, just to see what was there. Then he exited the system without a trace, and left the building.

He departed by a side exit, not wanting to be seen at the main area again. As soon as he was in a location where he knew no surveillance cameras could see, he changed into clothes resembling a night walker. He strode on, taking a round-a-bout route to get back to the apartment.

Once there, he poured a fresh cup of coffee, popped the stick into his computer and began reviewing schedules and files. Absent something popping up, he intended to stay in the apartment all day and fully catch up on everything that was happening. He was very close.

“Yes?”

“Sir, someone breached the Chamberlains building this morning.”

“What do you mean, breached the building?”

“The two security guards on duty at the main entrance were hit with stingers by another officer. The officer then retrieved his stingers and walked back and took an elevator. At that point, the surveillance system shut down.”

“Sgt. Emanati, who could possibly do that?”

“I don’t know, Inspector; but doesn’t it sound eerily similar to the surveillance being shut down during those murders you are investigating?”

“You’re right. Maybe the murderer entered the building and unexpectedly got caught.”

“I don’t know. We did learn that two of the Human Resource staff saw the officer enter and walk past their area; but they never saw him again.”

“Damn. Did we get any identification on him from the systems before they shut down?”

“No, sir. We ran his face through the system and found no match.”

Inspector Humbolt paced in his office.

“Or, it could have been the sleuth in disguise searching for something.”

The inspector stopped his pacing. “Go there now and find out anything you can. I need to speak with Inspector Vornthisen.”

“Yes, sir.”

Once the Sergeant left, he picked up his comm unit and called Freddie.

“Hello?”

“Freddie, Richard. Someone just broke into the Chamberlains main entrance.”

“What?”

“Yes. I think it was the killer.”

“But Richard, we just arrested the killer, DNA and everything.”

“Did we? Or was it a set-up by the killer to have us ease up before the next murder?”

“Good question, and it raises a lot of questions. What do we know about the person who broke in this morning?”

“Nothing, except that he must have been in disguise, since he was dressed as a policeman.”

“What was he after? Where did he go?”

“I sent Sgt Emanati to find out, but I think I want to go there as well. Can we meet there?”

“Yes, I’m on my way.”

They met in the lobby and talked with the two security officers who were on duty. But all these to remembered was a short conversation and then nothing. Neither of them actually remembered the policeman throwing the stingers.

They found Sgt. Emanati shortly thereafter.

“What have you learned?”

“Sir, we used DNA sniffers, but found no DNA that wasn’t supposed to be here. The two young workers said he was probably about my height, but did not notice anything in particular about him. They both ignored him once he passed, so didn’t see him leave.”

“So, nothing.”

“No, sir.”

“Damn.

Intensity

350.084.07

Sam had found ways to monitor multiple information streams nearly simultaneously. This morning, he caught onto a new rumor, he thought, just as it began. The rumor began early, and it didn’t take very long at all before he picked up information showing it was already being circulated within the Royal Court. This new one centered around the emotional and mental instability of the Empress.

The rumors collectively said that she was incompetent, losing her mind, unable to keep even her palace safe, and now, arbitrarily decimating anyone who stood up to her. The totality of these rumors said it was time for her to go.

Sam knew that these rumors were part of a design. It just felt too simple though. It couldn’t be a serious threat, could it? He shook his head, knowing how the Empress would be crushed by these rumors. He had met her several time now, and he knew these rumors were not true.

So, who was spreading them? Who was behind the curtain? What was the purpose of the charade? He had to delve into this more deeply.

As to the possible next victim, he had narrowed the list down to the twenty in the same age bracket as the previous victims. He had long ago found what he thought might be a hard connection, in that only three of them were at the university, currently studying archeology, but didn’t know why that made a difference, or if it was just a huge and unexpected coincidence.

He wondered what Lizzy was doing, and hoping she was okay. In the meantime, he decided to go investigate this lead after lunch, as he still hadn’t finished reviewing the data that he had downloaded from the Chamberlains office. So, before he left, he decided to take a couple of hours to finish. He was glad he did because he learned some interesting news about the Lord Chamberlain, causing him to re-evaluate his understanding of the entire plot unfolding in the palace.

Finding out what he found caused him to shift gears. He needed to talk with a specific person. He didn’t know if that individual was available, but set out for the palace to see.

“Well?”

“My Lord, I believe we had an incredibly good release of information this morning.”

“Yes, yes; but was it enough?”

“I don’t know.”

His comm unit buzzed. He saw who was calling and said, “I’ll speak with you later.” He hung up.

This must be important, as he never calls. “Yes?”

“The sleuth is close.”

“How do you know?”

“Heard from Star Fleet this morning?”

“No, should I?”

“Perhaps not, but there was a coordinated attack on the leadership of Star Fleet last night, and the sleuth held the leadership for twenty-four hours, interrogating them.”

“Everyone?”

“Yes, everyone.”

“Surely he didn’t find out anything useful?”

“The sleuth is not a “he,” the sleuth is a “she,” and she is damn good.”

“You didn’t answer the question.”

“Nothing that I know of. But key people were there.”

“Very well. The plan continues. I will pass this on.” He hung up.

Damn this sleuth. If he had his way, she would be long dead by now, but no one seemed to be able to find her. Oh well, he needed to make another call.

The Empress was furious! She entered the audience hall and stood at the top of the stairs staring around. She looked wild eyed! She yelled at the closest court official, the Lord Chamberlain, saying, “Where the hell are these rumors coming from?!?!”

He bowed and said, “Your Majesty, we simply don’t know where these rumors are coming from.”

“Dammit! Someone must know something! How can we have rumors of this magnitude simply appearing out of thin air?” Her voice sounded shrill and angry.

The Court was holding its breath. Was she behaving irrationally?

“Very well, but Lord Chamberlain, I don’t see how we can have these ridiculous rumors circulating without finding some way to find out where they start.”

“I agree Your Majesty. I will have the Imperial Palace Police investigate.”

She laughed. “Really? It took them three years to solve a set of murders that occurred in your building and only solved it by accident. What could possibly cause them too suddenly be competent?”

The Lord Chamberlain stumbled his words.

She said, “Never mind, I will, as always, be forced to figure this out myself.”

She turned, departing behind the throne to her private offices. She walked into the office, but it was too confining. She left the office and continued out into the palace gardens, and eventually found herself in her private garden. She sat there, looking at the fish in the pond, and broke down into tears, suddenly feeling exactly as they did. Trapped, controlled, useless.

Star Fleet

350.085.16

Lizzy returned from her adventure at four in the afternoon, just as Sam returned from some other business.

“Hi Sam!”

“Hi, Lizzy! Glad to see you! I hadn’t heard from you and was beginning to wonder if you were okay, but what happened to your face?”

She laughed, “Oh, yes, I’m okay. Just a few extra scars for the cause. Can’t say that about a few other people.”

“Oh my God, Lizzy. Are you alright?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

“Ok, if you say so. What did you learn?”

She smiled, saying, “You’re not going to believe all this. Let me start at the beginning. I left three days ago, with only one idea, find out who was giving Star Fleet the orders to do the things they are doing. I knew this was a team effort, so gathered a few of my old pals for the mission. First, I found Gerald.”

“Lizzy! What brings you back this way?”

“Ger, we have a real problem.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“First of all, have you heard the Empress hired a sleuth to try and solve those palace murders?”

“Oh, yes. There has been a lot of chatter the past few weeks about that. I hope he is successful.”

“Me too. But, well, I happen to know the sleuth, and I have learned to trust him, like we trust each other.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, and one of the things he learned, is that the Empress doesn’t have any knowledge of the attacks, like Galund, being carried out by Star Fleet.”

“What? No freaking way she wouldn’t know. Somebody’s lying to him, Lizzy.”

“That’s exactly what I thought. But I’ve come to know him, and I know he is awfully close to her, and I am convinced that its true.”

“Holy spazjuice, if that’s true, it opens up a world of possibilities, none of which are good.”

“Exactly. Which is why I need to get the gang together. I want us to find out who is calling the shots on these orders, whose authority, etc. But I can’t walk into Star Fleet Headquarters by myself and ask to see certain people, you know?”

He laughed, “Oh yes, I know. But it would take a lot of people or a very good plan to get inside that place.”

“Exactly, which is why I was wondering how many people are available.”

“How many people do you need?”

“Based on the plan I have put together; I think it would be great if we had the twenty. But honestly, I don’t even know how many are still alive.”

“Yeah, well, almost everyone is still alive, but not all of them are available. I can get maybe fourteen together.”

“Okay, that’ll have to do.”

“Alright, when do you want to move?”

“First light.”

“Tomorrow morning?”

“Yes. Time is critical.”

“Hm. In that case, we might be down to ten.”

“Crap. Okay, as many as possible, but the one thing we don’t have is time. In the meantime, I need to get into your arsenal, again. There’s a couple of special tricks I need to build out tonight.”

“Sounds good. Kip out here if you need.”

“Thanks. Gonna be a long few days’ work.”

Next morning, nine members of the old twenty were gathered in Gerald’s shop. After greetings, Lizzy began.

“Alright. We all know what happened on Galund, and we all know of more than one friend who died in other suppression actions carried out by Star Fleet. I know someone awfully close to the Empress who has discovered that the Empress does not know who ordered those attacks, and that every time she asks Star Fleet for an answer, they are telling her that they know nothing about it.”

“So, someone’s lying,” said Gerald. “The question is who.”

Lizzy continued, “Exactly. So, how can we find out who is lying? I have an idea, but it’s crazy.”

The group laughed. “All your ideas are always crazy!” “You never had a sane idea!” “You’ve always been nuts!”

She laughed, “Yeah, well, were still alive. Okay, here’s what I think we need to do. The only problem is the timeline. We have to solve this riddle in two days, tops. That means brass ball courage and speed.”

“What’s the plan, exactly?”

Lizzy took a while and briefed her plan. When she was finished, there was a general consensus of, “oh shit.” She answered questions, and after everyone had accepted their role, she closed the meeting.

“Okay, that’s it. We hit them simultaneously from two completely unexpected places. First shock, twenty-three hundred hours tonight. Gerald, you take Alpha, Gwen, you take Bravo. If we simultaneously distract and hurt them, we have a chance of getting through.”

“That’s never been tried. It might work.”

“Maybe not. What’s the backup?”

Liz looked at them, and said, “There is no backup plan. This either works or it doesn’t. If it does, hopefully we all make it out. If it doesn’t, none of us might make it out. I see no alternative.”

They all looked at each other, a band of brothers and sisters, tested in the harshest of combat conditions, burned in the crucible of the death of so many comrades. They were tough.

As one, almost as a united in spirit movement, they placed their hands out and formed a circle, clasping their hands into a single place. They said, “For our friends who didn’t make it back.” Then, “Let’s do this.” They shared looks, fist bumped, hugged, and departed in three groups. Gerald with four, Gwen with four, Lizzy alone.

Gerald took his team and went to the arsenal he maintained, and they gathered all they would need, and moved off towards their destination. Gwen did likewise with her group. They all had several hours to gain access to the locations they needed, in a surreptitious and unseen manner. Everything depended on stealth.

Star Fleet Headquarters was a very large fortification located adjacent to the Imperial Palace. In the past an open hallway connected headquarters to the palace, but it had long been replaced with a serious fortified entrance. While they did not expect an attack from the palace, the leadership had determined, over time, to make sure they were safe in all directions.

Gerald got his team into position at twenty-one hundred. Gwen got her team in place at twenty-two hundred. They waited. At twenty-two hundred point five five hours, Lizzy walked up to the main entrance to Star Fleet Headquarters.

“Yes? State your business.”

“I was thinking about re-upping. Wandered who I should talk with?”

The guards on duty, marines all, laughed. “Why would we want to re-up your happy ass? If you’re out, that’s probably a good place for you to stay. So, beat it, flunky!”

At that moment, alarms sounded, and systems began failing. Confusion reigned as the guards began reviewing data and trying to understand what was going on. They paid her no attention, believing she was not a threat.

Liz reached behind her into the side pockets of the bag she had on and pulled two devices out. She pushed the activation button on each and threw them into the melee. They had a two second delay, enough time for her to duck behind a wall.

BOOM!!! BOOM!!!

The entrance was destroyed. She pulled her blaster and entered, running past the dead and down the hallway to the first hallway to the left. She was running hard, turned, ran twenty feet, entered a door marked, ‘Security Control,’ and threw another device inside. She pulled back, slammed the door shut, turned, and stood behind the wall. BOOM!!!

Alarms were going off everywhere! She ran down several hallways, dropping and firing smoke grenades and flash bangs in all directions, creating as much chaos as possible. Then, she entered the door marked ‘Maintenance One.’

Inside it was quiet. She quickly opened the door for electrical systems access, and entered, closing the door behind her. She began climbing.

She had decided to go old fashioned. Gerald and Gwen had hit ventilation systems. Usually people went after power systems, armaments, or something more glamorous, but everyone needed air. After they hit those systems, they continued inward, spreading mayhem and chaos wherever they could.

Being all former marines, they knew the response drills to expect and planned accordingly. When the marines arrived, they entered the areas in a planned and marvelously executed maneuver. They didn’t expect to be greeted by ruthless adversaries who knew their drill. In both cases, the marines were first hit with rear-mounted thermal blasts, which decimated their ranks, but for the survivors there was more, forced plasma burners that cut them in half.

Gerald and Gwen each stood and looked at the chaos they had created. Sad because they had to do it, but knowing that something better would come out of it if Lizzy succeeded. They both left for their secondary locations and waited.

Lizzy climbed as high as the electrical shaft would let her. She exited into the maintenance room and then she took a moment to change into her uniform. She walked to the door, opening it gently, and heard people still excited, alarms still sounding, and a sense of general chaos gripping everything. She then opened the door fully and took a step out.

In the hallway, she began issuing orders. People didn’t know who she was, but they always listened to someone who sounded like they knew what they were doing. Soon, the chaos diminished, at least on this floor.

“You there, where is the Commander?”

“They made it into the lockup.”

“Good, so they are safe. Any word on who has attacked us?”

“No, Captain, but whoever they are, they’re good.”

“I’m not familiar with the lockup, can you take me there?”

“Yes, Ma’am, follow me.”

She followed about twenty yards. The lockup was an insignificant door, but one that could only be opened from the inside. She had researched the schematic of the building, but could not determine how the electrical systems were supported in that room, or how large it was. They had kept this a good secret.

But they didn’t know her new boss was a sleuth, and he did find the information she needed.

She stood at the door, and whispered into the grill to the left, “Creatha borneen thergea Nil silentia.”

The door indicator turned green, and the door opened, slowly. She entered, only to find a long hallway. She pulled her blaster out and walked slowly. The door closed behind her. It was eerily quiet. Suddenly, a Marine dressed in all black stepped out and fired in her direction. Only because she was already moving right into a doorway did it miss her, but her return fire was accurate, and left him without a face.

At that time, the hallway filled with six Marines in black, and they rushed her position. No weapons, just bare hands. She didn’t have time to think, so stepped out into the hallway to meet them, but before she dropped her blaster, she took two of them out.

They stopped and sized each other up. Four to one. They charged together.

Lizzy took advantage of the only space she had, above their heads. She leaped one foot high on the right wall, pushing to step high with her left foot on the other. As she was quick climbing, she pulled out two knives. She flipped over the top of them, and reaching down, managed to cut two of them.

She landed behind them, and as they were turning, she stabbed one in the lower side. She fell, out of the fight. Three left.

One of the Marines pulled a longer sword out and swung it at her. She ducked, reached as far as she could underneath the blade and nicked his knee. He wasn’t out, but it would slow him down.

She felt a hard blow to her left shoulder. It knocked her to the ground, and suddenly two of them were on her. She used all her strength to get her legs under her and pushed as hard as she could. Lifting all three of them off the floor. As they rose, the one on her left released the grip enough to fall away. She spun her energy to the right and grabbed his wrist and snapped it, then the elbow as they fell.

She landed and jumped up to meet the sword flying at her with her knife. It still cut her arm and even nicked her cheek, but she prevented further injury and threw the knife, hitting him in his eye. Two down.

She stopped and stood. One was in pain but trying to get up, the other was still healthy and pulling a knife. She immediately grabbed the one with broken bone and pulled him in front of her, just as the knife was released by the other. Three down.

She dropped him and they both charged for each other. No knives, no blasters, just hand to hand.

The fight lasted several minutes, each trading blows, finding weaknesses, trying for a knockout, when she saw the opening. She swung loosely with her right, knowing he would deflect and counter with his right. When he began his swing, she dropped, grabbed the knife from the eye of the dead marine, and stabbed it upwards into the flesh of the underarm, pushing the blade to the heart. Four down.

She stood; blood covered but alive. She picked up her blaster and turned to walk away when the one she had stabbed earlier reached for a blaster. She raised her own and blew her face off and continued down the hallway. At the end was a door. She opened it and found about fifteen Flag officers in the room. She walked into the room, and they all backed away, realizing here was someone they could not fight. She reached to the button beside the door and punched it. The door closed behind her. She pulled a device out of her pocket and snapped it onto the door.

All eyes were on her. A quick glance told her she was not recognized.

“Who are you and how did you get in here?” This was from the Star Fleet Commander, Admiral McDaniel.

“Ah, Admiral McDaniel, glad you are here. As to who I am, let’s just call me Captain Crunch, shall we? As to how I got in, well, let’s just say someone wanted me to get inside, even though your Marines had other thoughts.”

“What is the meaning…”

She held up her hand to cut him off, and said, “What you didn’t ask, is why? Let me just say that the answer is a riddle. So, riddle this for me; how can an organization as competent as Star Fleet, have a program running unknown to its leadership?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“No, you probably don’t. But there is one, as a minimum, in this room, who does. That person should know that I will not leave until this is answered. But to begin, I need to speak with you individually and privately. We will use your side office, Admiral. You, first.”

“I will not cooperate with an…”

She chuckled, “You know, Admiral, I could stick my blaster up your ass and force you to cooperate, or perhaps you should just call the Empress and complain.”

He turned white. “You’re the sleuth.”

“Maybe, maybe not. But right now, I am not in the mood to argue or negotiate this topic, so get your ass into the damn office.” She paused before going into the office, and looking around the room, said, “Oh yes, any of you try and leave, the alarm I placed on the door will sound and you’ll get a plasma injection in the back.”

It took nearly twenty-four hours, but eventually, she had interviewed all the flag officers. Just as she was about to open the door and leave, alarms again began sounding throughout Star Fleet Headquarters. The officers looked at her as she said, “Interesting what you can learn from observation. I found out much more than you believe you revealed. Have a good day.”

She closed the door behind her and saw the chaos that again enveloped Star Fleet headquarters. She made her way down the hall to the fourth door, entered, changed clothes, and climbed onto the elevator as it began to descend. It stopped at floor four, she stepped off and onto the ladder on the wall. The elevator started to climb, but she swung into a maintenance door and made her way to the water purification systems.

When she entered the large room with water tanks and pumps, she met up with Gerald and Gwen who were just returning from starting their second round of chaos.

“Damn, Lizzy, what happened to you?”

“Oh, let’s just say the current Marine force isn’t up to our hand-to-hand combat standards; but they are still pretty good.”

“Here, let me get some bandages on you.”

After all was made safe and she was patched up, they turned to the giant water tank. Now for the extraction.

They made their way to the water intake unit, and shut down the pumps, opened the door to the tank, put on their breathing gear and slipped into the water. They swam downward for quite a way, then the pipe turned, and they continued. It took a while before they saw light, but eventually they reached the end of the tunnel.

There was a steel grate across the pipe at the end. It was controlled by a lever system on the inside of the pipe. It took about ten minutes, but soon it was open enough they could get through. It wasn’t long until they gently surfaced and saw they were unseen, so made their way to the shore and up into the trees and undergrowth.

Once settled, Lizzy said, “Success. I found out what we needed. Now to get this information to where it needs to go. Thank you, brothers, sisters; you have saved millions of lives doing this.”

They each left, blending into the scenery and eventually out and to their own homes, unnoticed.

Sam was beside himself. “Damn. You are far more incredible than I thought. I’m still glad you are on my side.”

She smiled, “Always, Sam.”

“So, you know who it is?”

“Oh, yes. I know who the Admiral issuing the orders is, as well as who is giving him his orders. This is probably the piece of information you need to solve the entire riddle. Seriously, this shocked me, but it’s…”

Interrogation

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Lizzy was having a hard time understanding why they didn’t just take decisive action.

“I don’t understand, Sam. Why don’t we just round up these women, so they are all safe?”

“Because, if we do that, we inform the people involved in this plot, including the killer we have not yet identified, and allow them to evade us. No, we need to find which one it is and then see what we can do. But we can’t just explode the investigation.”

She shook her head, and said, “Well if you say so. But I would prefer to get these girls safe.”

“Me too and we will, Lizzy, we will. And we will take down all the participants in this plot.”

“Okay, so what do we do today?”

“I’m going to the University. I know three of the girls on that list I downloaded are studying archeology. I’m going to see if I can find them and observe their activities. Maybe something will click.”

“Okay, and me?”

“That’s easy, I need you to watch that salon. One of these ladies is going to go in there, either today or tomorrow, if our understanding of the timing is right.”

“Okay, I can do that.”

Sam left and made his way to the university, specifically to the archeology department. As he walked down the passageway towards the department, he was suddenly grabbed and pulled into a side room. The door closed behind him, and it was pitch dark. No sound, no light. He stood, arms a little in front of him, crouching, ready to respond in any direction.

He waited.

Nothing.

Finally, he said, “Okay, who’s there?”

He felt a gentle breeze on his face, then the sun rose. It was majestic, simply the most beautiful sunrise he had ever seen. The colors, the sky, the trees, mountains, grass; it was overwhelmingly beautiful. He had tears in his eyes just watching it.

He closed his eyes and bowed his head, knowing he would never see anything as beautiful again in this life. He opened his eyes to find a face only inches in front of him.

He jumped, “What the…?” He was looking at the most gorgeous, majestic, beautiful angel he could imagine. She was pure white, her hair was the loveliest red he had ever seen, her gown seemed to be floating on a breeze. Her smile was intoxication, her eyes were the most passionate deep green he had ever seen; they were unfathomable. He fell to his knees.

The creature smiled, then said, “Please, rise. Are you lost?”

He slowly stood up, while stammering, “I… I don’t know. If I am, I don’t think I want to be found.”

The Angel laughed, an echo of joy, peace, timelessness, passion, hope; it smothered all that he was into a small spot and nurtured his soul.

“Well, then, young Samuel. I don’t believe you are supposed to be here. Tell me, why are you here?”

“I don’t know. I was walking down a passageway when I was thrust into this dark room. Then you appeared.”

The Angel frowned. “That is odd. That doesn’t sound heavenly. Perhaps what you are seeing is what you want to see, because the reality is too harsh for you? Close your eyes, use your power of observation, and try to see the truth.”

Sam stood there and closed his eyes. He thought, ‘Truth. No deception in the senses, only the reality.’ He took a few deep breaths and opened his eyes.

He was staring at a cesspool. It was ugly, gross, stunk, and slowly turned, as if it were draining very slowly. He was about to say something when he was pushed by someone into the pool! He fell, gasping for breath. Out of the corner of his eye, before he fell all the way into the cesspool, he saw the face of death, laughing at him.

He felt pulled under the stench. He closed his eyes and held his breath. He could tell he was going deeper and deeper. He knew he couldn’t last long. Suddenly, he burst out of the bottom of the stinking mess and landed in a clean, clear pool.

He was instantly clean. He breathed a deep breath, and it was refreshing. But then, the pool above opened and released all of itself onto him. He ducked into the pool, but it was no help, as the clean water was washed away in the filth. Finally, he stood, wet, stinking of sewage, lost, not knowing what was happening to him.

Lizzy was enjoying the relaxation. She kicked up her feet and set the feed from the cameras on the large display unit. She had coffee, pastries, bread, cheese; she was in heaven, just recharging after her adventure. It was kind of boring, actually, just watching the screen to see who walked by in front of it. But hey, it was needed. ‘I wonder what Sam is doing at school?’

Simultaneously, cables came out of nowhere and the ends, little serpent mouths, bit into his sides.

“Ahhh!!” he shouted.

No sound.

Two more bit into his legs.

Two more bit into his arms.

A long tentacle swirled around him and held him tight.

He felt his head begin to swim. He was dizzy and dazed, swirling around in the ocean. He was a fish, swimming freely. No, he was a whale! No, he was…

Abruptly, he stood on a dry cement floor, looking into a mirror. He was bleeding from the bites.

A voice said, “Confess your failure and you will be free.”

He gasped for breath, but said, “What do you…”

Instantly the serpent squeezed him tighter, squeezing the air out of his lungs! The small serpent mouths bit harder. Four more small serpent mouths bit him on his legs and face.

He was in agony.

Instantly, he was released and fell onto the cement floor.

“Confess your failure and you will be free.”

He moaned, and barely able to breathe, said, “I don’t know wh…”

Again, the serpent squeezed him tighter, squeezing the air out of his lungs! The small serpent mouths bit harder. Four more small serpent mouths bit him in his eyes and ears.

He cried! “The pain!!!”

Instantly, he was released and fell onto the cement floor. He was pushed back against a wall and his arms were chained against it. He looked around, to see a dank, dark, wet, mossy covered dungeon.

He didn’t understand anything that was happening. He said out loud, “What do you want? I don’t know what you want!”

Again, the voice, “Confess your failure and you will be free.”

He sat there for a long time, thinking. He was cold, wet, hungry, bleeding; he thought about his life. Finally, he whispered, “I confess, I have failed at many things. I have failed at learning, and taken advantage of others through simple persuasion and observation. I have made choices that made me look good, rather than the right thing. I have not lived a spiritual life, preferring the notoriety of fame. I have failed at many of the simple things of life. I have failed at love, loving myself more than others.”

He waited. Nothing.

He sat there, waiting.

Suddenly his chains disappeared, and a hand appeared.

He reached as best he could, and took it.

He was in the garden of paradise with the angel, laying in a pool.

“You were brave, young Samuel. You discovered your secret truth. Your task now is to be better. Perhaps you can be useful yet.”

He fell onto the floor in the passageway, feeling as if he had simply stumbled.

A fellow classmate came over and helped him up.

He stood there a few minutes, trying to grasp it all. He turned around and walked back to the apartment. When he got there, Lizzy was shocked at his appearance.

“What happened to you?”

He gently sat on a chair. “I don’t know. It was, it was… It was like I was tested for some reason and allowed to pass. But I don’t know why.”

She had gone to get her medical kit and began putting an ointment and bandages on his obvious cuts.

“I’m surprised you can still see, with those cuts on your eyes. Are there other places?”

He nodded. “Yes. I hate to do this, but I need you to help me get undressed so you can bandage each one.”

Together they got his clothes off, and she put a healing ointment and bandages on each cut. She had never seen any cut marks like this. They looked like animal bites.

After a while, they sat down and talked.

“I don’t understand. What do you mean by feeling like you passed a test?”

He reached out and held her hands in his, and said, “I can’t put my hand on it, Lizzy. I felt at once worthy, unworthy, tormented, tested, and worthy. It wasn’t even the pain or the visuals, it was a deeper feeling that a purpose existed, and I might be part of it.”

“Well, whatever you went through, you’re here now. I think you should get some rest.”

“Thank you, for taking care of me.”

She smiled, saying, “Always, Sam.”

He stumbled into his room and hit the bed. When he awoke, he felt incredibly refreshed. He got up and walked out into the room to see Lizzy.

“Hey, I thought you were going to get some rest?”

“I did. I slept for hours. God, I feel more refreshed than I ever have.”

Lizzy just looked at him, then said, “Take a look in the mirror, Sam.”

He looked. All of his injuries were gone!

“What the…”

“Yes. And your long sleep? Five minutes.”

“What?”

“Yep, whatever is going on with you, its supernatural.”

“How can that be? I don’t even believe in the supernatural.”

“Well, sleuth, I think this time, your knowledge is not going to help you solve this riddle. This is one for the heart and spirit, not the brain.”

“Wow. You’re right. All that I experienced must be real.”

He stood there, in thought, then said, “Enough about me, we have a case to solve. Okay, I still have to get to the university and see if I can learn anything.”

“Haven’t you learned enough there already?”

He laughed. “Well, you might have a point. But we still need to find the girl and save her.”

“Okay, well, give me a call if you need my help. But with this supernatural thing going on, I think you are in capable hands.”

He smiled. “Okay, see you later.”

When he returned, he walked down the same passageway, but this time he felt secure, and walked straight through to the archeology department. When he arrived, he wandered around observing the people there. He had photos, but never saw any of the girls he was looking for.

After walking the halls for some time, he went into the central courtyard area and found a seat against a wall and watched. He could tell those who were new and those who had been here a while. The ladies he was looking for were all in their third year, so would not be uncomfortable in this setting.

He thought about the case. ‘I know with high specificity about the plot, but I don’t know who the killer is. I know the plot I know is real, and I know it is divided into separate wheels, one small one, which is where I believe the killer participates, and one larger. I even know who is pulling the strings in the background. I just don’t know who the killer is.’

He sat a while longer, going through everything he remembered, but still couldn’t tie a person to the killer. There was so much. He knew he was only a missing piece of information away from fully understanding it. Yet, here he was, not even sure who the person was who could likely be killed tomorrow, nor the killer. It was frustrating.

Then he switched thoughts. ‘I wonder what was that about this morning, being tested? I mean, I know there are things I need to do different, and I’m trying. But being useful? I don’t know, but for everyone’s benefit I must find this killer. The families and the Empress need closure on this.’

Suddenly, he remembered something. There was a Marchioness involved with the Viscount and the Baron of Secunsa, and he hadn’t followed up. That’s the price of a short timeline. Maybe he should take a closer look at that? He got up and left.

He returned to the apartment and found Lizzy, and said, “I think I need to take a closer look at the Marchioness of Stanmel. I was just thinking, ‘Why would a Marchioness and a Viscount be meeting with the Baron? What was their involvement in this case?’”

“Good questions. What is your plan?”

“Time is so short; I am going to go directly to her palace and see what I can find out.”

“That sounds dangerous, Sam. What if they catch you? We still haven’t found the girl yet.”

“I know it’s dangerous, but I believe it must be done. If you don’t hear from me by midnight, then go see the Empress first thing in the morning and let her know everything we know. Maybe she can still take steps to save a life.”

Lizzy didn’t say anything, just nodded her head.

Sam turned and walked into his room and modified his features, then departed for the palace of the Marchioness of Stanmel.

He knew where this palace was located. Since the Marchioness was friends of the Empress, she rated a rather large palace within the Imperial Palace grounds, although it was a lesser palace. Getting inside the Imperial Palace grounds was easy, he had done this multiple times. He walked the streets and alleyways until he came to the courtyard in front of the residence of the Marchioness of Stanmel.

They called it a lesser palace, but it still had security at a gate, a very large fence, and beautifully manicured gardens surrounding it. The palace itself was more luxurious than nearly any palace of a Baron on a planet. It contained only one hundred and twenty bedrooms, plus an unknown number of bathrooms, kitchens, lounges, etc. It was huge.

He had decided to try a frontal maneuver, so was dressed as a maintenance technician, specializing in waste disposal. He had no tools, just a comm unit and slate for documenting a problem. He walked up to the guards.

“Halt! What is your business?”

“Oh, good evening. I’m from maintenance to check on a disposal clog.”

“We don’t have a clog.”

“Okay, but I was told you did. Can you check and verify? It’s already late and I for one would much prefer to go home than keep working.”

The guard then said, “Okay, well, we haven’t been told about one, but it is a big palace. Go ahead, finish your business.”

“Thanks, I hope this doesn’t take too long. I’m just going to inspect tonight unless it needs urgent care. I’ll come back in the morning to fix it.”

“Alright.”

He walked past and up towards the main entrance. As he walked, he made it appear he was reviewing information from his comm unit and his slate, then stopped, looked at the palace, and turned to walk to the left. He walked about fifty feet, then stopped and looked at his unit again, then walked up to the building itself, and pretended to be investigating something in that area. Anyone watching, like the guards, would think he was taking readings or looking for some kind of damage, information, or some such.

He then stood and looked at his comm unit for a couple of minutes, turned and walked off to the left. Eventually, he turned the corner around the palace to the side of the building, out of site of the gate guards, and where he knew there was an entrance.

He continued to look at his comm unit, stopped, and walked up to the building, which was behind some bushes. Once there, he pulled off the technician overalls, took the coverings off his shoes, and stepped out of the bushes in a suit reflective of a very rich person. He then simply walked around the bushes and entered the side entrance.

The security was very light. He had expected to be challenged at the door, but wasn’t. ‘I guess having guards at the main entrance is enough.’ He walked down a very long corridor and didn’t meet anyone. ‘That’s strange. This place seems nearly empty. It should be hopping with staff and guests.’

He continued, but he had a bad feeling and the hair on the back of his neck rose. ‘I should have kept the technician suit on, maybe then no one would ask me questions.’

Just then, four well-armed military looking security guards stepped out of a room ahead of him, looking at him. He turned around, but there were four more behind him.

He turned back around and a fifth one, the leader of the group, said, “Now, laddie, you have a choice. You can fight us, and who knows, maybe you’ll get lucky and take one or two of us out of the fight. But rest assured, you will lose. So, what’s it gonna be? You want to walk with us, or you want us to break your legs and drag your sorry ass with us?”

He knew he had no choice. “Okay, I’ll come with you.”

“Good lad.” He nodded his head and two of them grabbed his arms while they patted him down. They took his comm unit, slate, the blaster in his waistband, knives, and everything out of his pockets. Once done, they turned and walked him further down the hallway.

Lizzy was nervous. She felt something had happened. She knew what he intended to do was too dangerous to accomplish without proper planning. She waited. Finally, at eleven o’clock, she began assembling her gear. At midnight, she headed out to rescue someone she loved.

She moved deliberately, but quickly. She had called Gerald and he would be bringing several others to provide backup outside the palace, ready to move, if needed. But she knew she couldn’t wait for them.

“We can get there in a little over an hour.”

“Thanks, Ger, please do. But I can’t wait. Listen, I’m going to get inside that palace and begin searching. Bring the team and prepare to hit the gate guards hard, and cause a distraction. I’ll let you know when I find the target and begin extraction. Give me at least five minutes after that, and then hit. Anything will help, but the bigger the better.”

“No problem. Okay, we’ll be ready, be safe.”

“Ditto.”

She easily entered the main Imperial palace and made her way to the smaller one where the Marchioness of Stanmel resided. She paused, and peered through her snooper scope. ‘There,’ she thought. ‘The inner digital security fence, about ten yards inside the physical perimeter fence.’

She edged up to a quiet, out of the way location beside the metal fence, and easily cut a section out for access. Then she crawled over to the digital fence, and using a Zimprek four thousand, bent an opening in the fence, and continued to crawl towards the palace. She had closed her face net and used a breather, all designed to block infrared snoopers, DNA sniffers, even night vision cameras, and slowly made her way into the palace.

Silently she stepped inside a door, paused, and waited and listened. She didn’t hear anything out of the ordinary, except the fact she heard no people. She used a snooper and checked the hallway in both directions and discovered they all had digital sensors on, preventing anyone from walking the halls. ‘Interesting. So, they must have easily discovered Sam.’

She crossed the hallway, avoiding the sensors, and entered the staff hallways behind the main rooms. There were no security enhancements here, so she turned right, towards the center of the palace, and began moving. She kept low, tight to the wall, and silent.

After ten minutes, she heard a voice. She listened; it was coming from up ahead. She continued and heard another voice. Someone was talking. When she was only about twenty feet from the end of the hallway, she noticed a door open on the opposite side of the hallway from where she was, so moved quietly across to stand right beside the open door. From here, she could easily hear the conversation inside.

“I don’t care if he gets hurt, I need information.”

“I understand, My Lord. We have already done quite a few things and he hasn’t talked; but if we truly hurt him and he manages to escape, get a message to the Empress, anything, and she learns that we were the ones who caused such pain to her sleuth, our heads could roll.”

“Listen to me, Major. You will go back to that interrogation room, and you will get information from him. I don’t care what happens to him. You can kill him when you get what we need and dump the body into an acid vat. No one ever needs to know we did his. But, if you don’t go back and get the information he has and provide it to me, I will personally see that you are put in his place, and we will just see what information we can get from you before we drop you into a vat of acid alive. Do you understand?”

The officer knew he could not refuse. “Yes, My Lord. I shall see to this personally.”

She slunk into shadow as the Viscount of Tantelle stormed out, accompanied by four heavily armed security staff. He didn’t stop for about fifty feet, then turned and entered a doorway, his security following.

She waited a moment, then peaked into the room. The major was still standing where he had been, looking at his hands. He said, “Well, I guess we get bloody now.” He turned to a door on the far side of the room and exited.

She quickly entered and crossed the room to the far door. She waited five seconds, then gently opened it. She just caught a glimpse of the major entering a door down the hall, on the left.

She followed and opened the door, only to discover it was a set of stairs, steep ones, going down into a basement. She moved down the stairs and came to a darkly lit hallway. There were only five doors to this short hallway. She went to the far left one and listened, nothing. She moved to the next, nothing. She moved to the next, nothing. She moved to the next, she could hear someone talking.

She checked her gear, all was ready. She didn’t know what to expect beyond the door, but opened it with a blaster in hand. As she entered, she saw that Sam was chained to what looked like an old-fashioned stockade device, where his head and hands were visible, but his body and feet were not.

The major was talking. “So, you see, sleuth, my superior has decided that there is no alternative but to force you to speak. Based on that, we will start with your right hand, little finger, and cut one finger off at a time. And be aware, you will not die. The equipment in this room will keep you alive to feel all the various pains, breaks, cuts; you will wish to be dead, but you will not die. Unless you refuse to speak. But if you tell me what we need to know, you will be dropped, alive, on a very remote planet with a memory block. But you will be alive.”

“So, let’s begin. What is your name?”

Sam was silent.

“Very well, first finger to go…”

Lizzy said, quietly, “If you touch him, you will die. No negotiation, no begging for your life, you will just die. Understood?”

The major was surprised, but said, “Yes. I understand.”

“Very well. Now, turn around.”

He turned around and said, “Who are you and how did you get in here?”

“Unchain him, now.”

“No, not…”

“BOOM!”

The major was dead.

She found the keys and unlocked Sam. He nearly fell to the floor.

“Why? You may be captured too.”

“Sam, what happened to you?”

“Oh, they caught me, brought me here, yelled at me, took my clothes off and beat me, whipped me, small things. Nothing is broken though.”

She saw all the cuts, blood, and bruises on him, and said, “Do you think you can stand up?”

“I’ll try. I’m just so thirsty.”

She took the flask from her waist and held it for him as he drank. It had energy, vitamins, medicines, electrolytes, and protein in it, so he began feeling better almost immediately.

“Here, let’s get some clothes on you. They should help stop some of the bleeding. Hold your foot out, let’s get shoes on you.”

It took a few minutes, but eventually she had him standing.

“Okay, how many are there?”

“There were nine that brought me here, but they all left once I was tied up. This one, this major, he is the one who did everything to me, after the Viscount left. Thanks for taking care of him.”

“Anytime. Also, I heard the Viscount giving him orders to do anything necessary to make you talk, then kill you afterwards and drop your body in a vat of acid.”

“Really.”

“Yes, really. I hope that helps you figure out this plot better than we have had it up to now.”

Sam smiled, then laughed. “Oh, my. That is rich. And you’re right, I do get the plot, only one thing left to have everyone strung up, and that is the killer.”

“Alright, but for now, let’s move.”

Before she opened the door, she pushed a button on her comm unit, and said, “Thirty seconds.”

“What was that?”

“A little something extra, if needed.”

She opened the door and looked out, no one in the basement. Good. She led him to the stairs, and they stumbled/climbed up to the top.

“Wait here. If you hear fighting, go right three doors, turn left, go all the way through, turn right and exit the east door. People will be waiting there.”

She opened the door and peaked out. There were three security personnel standing outside, waiting.

“So, the sleuth has a girlfriend. Come on out sweetie, let’s see what we got.”

Lizzy smiled, a warning sign for those who knew her, and stepped out into the hallway.

“Come on out, sleuth, we know you’re there.”

Sam stepped out into the hall, but stayed against the wall, waiting.

“Alright now, here’s how it goes down, you’re…”

Lizzy exploded on them. She threw a knife that had dropped in her right hand into the skull of the one on the left; pulled a blaster and fired on the one on the right, and reached up and pulled a long sword from a hidden sheath on her back and swung it to point the tip of the blade at the throat of the one in the center, who had been doing all the talking.

“In case no one told you, I hate being called “sweetie” by a pig.” She stabbed him in the throat, pushing the blade all the way through cutting his spine. Three up, three dead.

She turned to Sam, and said, “Let’s move.”

She pulled and pushed him to the right. Just as they were about to reach the door, four security personnel, all with weapons drawn, entered the hallway ahead of them.

“Put down your weapon and you may yet live.”

Lizzy said, “So, four against one? How about we go hand-to-hand? No weapons at all.”

The leader of the four, said, “It doesn’t matter, you will still die.”

Lizzy sheathed her sword and rebolstered her blaster. “Maybe, but where’s the masculinity of killing a girl with a blaster? Any incompetent boob can do that. Or is it that you are afraid to try and prove you are men?”

He smiled, but said, “Put away your weapons guys. Let’s show this one what toughness is.”

They put their weapons away and spread out. She was crouched in a fighting position, when the one on the left moved towards her. She kicked out at him, but knew it was a feint for the one on the right, who jumped towards her.

The fight was hard. She took out the one on the right and left, but the two in the middle were better. One caught her with a very good foot in the ribs on her right side, and she stumbled, while the other one swung and caught her with a blade to her shoulder. She fell backwards onto the ground, but stood and pulled her blade. The two of them advanced upon each other and the blades were wicked, cutting and slashing, metal on metal; all the while she was bleeding and losing her footing.

Finally, she managed to slip under him and caught him off guard with a hard slash to his groin and he collapsed, dying from a cut artery. As she was standing up, she saw the other soldier drawing his blaster, and she knew he was too far away to stop him. But right then, a blaster blew the other soldier away. No one had watched Sam, and he had slowly moved to pick up a blaster from one of the fallen soldiers.

She was stunned, but turned to him, saying, “Thank you. I think I overstepped with these guys.”

“You think? But it’s always good to save someone you care about.”

“I know.”

Just then there was a sound of yelling and loud bangs.

“Come on! We’ve no time to spare.” They made their way to the third door, took it, and went to the end, exiting the east door. Gerald and the team grabbed them, and they made their way out of the palace, finally coming to Gerald’s hideout.

“Nasty cut there, Lizzy. Here, let’s get some bandages on it.”

“It’s nothing compared to what this guy went through. But I am so glad you guys were there to help. Now, we’ve got to get going; tomorrow will be a very busy day.”

“Thank you,” is all Sam could say.

Once they were back in their apartment, Lizzy had him stand in the bathroom and take his clothes off. She washed, applied a healing gel, and bandaged every cut he had, mostly to his torso, but there were a few on his legs.

Once they were done, Sam took a cold compress and gently held it to her shoulder, to help ease the pain that was already there.

They sat on the couch, Sam holding the compress to her shoulder, but both of them looking into each other’s eyes.

“Lizzy, I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“Same for me, Sam.”

After a little while, she said, “Okay. We have only one day to find out whatever it is you need. So, what is the plan?”

“First, take a lot of pain killers to sleep tonight. Second, we still need to watch that monitor tomorrow to see if one of the individuals we have mentioned comes in to get her hair done.”

“Alright. Here, take these. They’ll knock you out for six hours, but when you wake up, you will be very refreshed.”

Sam took the pills and walked to his bedroom, only turning before he went in to say, “Good night, Lizzy.”

“Good night, Sam.”

Eve

350.087.09

“Your Majesty, the Lord Chamberlain wishes a word.”

“Send him in.”

The footman bowed and returned with the Lord Chamberlain.

He bowed, and said, “Your Majesty, is there any word from your sleuth as to who he believes is the identity of this killer? I mean, our police have someone in custody, but I haven’t yet heard what the sleuth thinks about that. Also, if we are wrong, I hate to think that one of our young female employees could be murdered tomorrow.”

The Empress was highly agitated at all comments about this subject, but she didn’t show it. In her sweetest voice, she said, “Lord Chamberlain. Let me see if I understand this. You had two murders in your very own building in the palace and could not solve them. Then you brought in the Imperial Palace Police, and still had a third, and yet you were unable to solve them, so brought this to my attention a mere few months ago. Yet you believe it is my responsibility to solve this crime before a fourth young lady who works in your department could be murdered tomorrow?”

She paused, and walked up to stand directly in front of him, and said, “Perhaps we should look at your incompetence first, eh?”

The Lord Chamberlain knew where this conversation could go, and he was not yet ready to die. He tried to shift the conversation, bowing, and saying, “Contrarily, Your Majesty, I only asked to see if there was any additional information that we could use in order to prevent another murder.”

“My good sir, if there were any new information that would save the life of one of our employees, one of my subjects, do you not believe I would let you know forthwith?”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

“Then it raises a question in me, Lord Chamberlain. Yes, it truly makes me wonder as to the possible motivation you would have to even ask this question. Are you mocking me?”

The color left his face, as he bowed, saying, “Never, Your Majesty. Please, forgive me for even raising the subject. I shall return to my duties straight away.”

“I believe that would be very wise, Lord Chamberlain.”

“Your Majesty.”

The Empress was feeling worse than angry, she was feeling defeated. She walked to her garden and sat in her favorite spot, and slowly began to weep. Not loudly, but silently. All you could see were the tear on her cheeks.

She thought about how her life had always been one of feeling helpless in the midst of so much power, intrigue, and drama. She never had a boyfriend; everyone was afraid to get close to her.

Today she just felt so empty, isolated, lonely. She stood up and walked over to the tree, sat down under it, leaned back, and closed her eyes.

As she sat there, the world in front of her, this favorite garden, faded into the distance, to be replaced with a vivid forest, one that was sparkling with the rays of the sun reflecting off of dew drops in the trees. The sun’s rays shone through the trunks of the trees and reflected colors in the mist through which they pierced. She saw she was sitting on a bed of the softest grass, and was surrounded by flowers the colors of which she could not even identify, they were so vast and beautiful.

Suddenly, in the distance, she saw an angel walking through the forest towards her. As she sat, the angel approached, until she was standing in front of her. She reached out her hand and helped her stand.

The angel said, “Don’t fear, Alex; all is well. Have faith and be patient for a little while longer. Soon, all will be revealed.”

Instantly, she was sitting under her own tree. She thought, ‘No, wait, it wasn’t an angel, it was the Counselor. I swear the face I saw was that of Dhakini.’

Feeling refreshed and confident, she stood up and squared up her shoulders, and feeling much better, went back to work.

“All is prepared, My Lord.”

“Very well, I see we have no choice. Give the order to proceed.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

As if things could not get any more complicated, a new rumor began. This one said that the person arrested for the murders in the palace was not the true killer. He was still at large, another failure of the Empress.

Lizzy was getting tired of watching the monitor. She was about to turn it off and take a break when she saw her, the one with the most important pedigree from the biographies. Her mind did a double take, and her heart pounded. ‘Yes,’ she thought, ‘She is the one.’

As she watched, she noticed another face. It was one she had seen before, somewhere. An older man. ‘That might be the one Sam couldn’t identify either.’

She knew she had to let him know, so went to his room and woke him up.

“Sam, good morning. How are you feeling?”

Sam was still confused. Not only were the drugs and lashes from the previous night still fresh, but something was still eluding him, and he just didn’t know what it was.

“I must say, I feel pretty good, but I have felt better.”

“Here; have some coffee.”

“Thanks.” He took the cup as she helped him sit up on the bed.

He sipped it, then looked at her, and said, “I would be dead right now, if it weren’t for you.”

A tear ran down her cheek, as she said, “I will always be there for you, Sam.”

They stayed together for a little while, then she said, “Here, look at this.”

She handed him a small viewer. He watched, saw the face of the older man, and it clicked.

He looked at Lizzy, and said, “My God, that’s it. Now we know the intended victim, and I finally know who the killer is. You did it Lizzy!!”

He gave her a kiss on the cheek, then he excitedly said, “Okay, we have a lot to do in a truly short time. Help me up, come on!”

There first stop was to see the Empress. He called her as they were on the way and informed her that they needed to meet. They met, as per usual, in the garden.

“Your Majesty.”

“So, what is the need?”

“I believe I know who the killer is, but will know definitively tomorrow. Lizzy and I are setting a trap, that if the plan is going forward, he cannot refuse.”

“I only want to know one thing, Sam; will we prevent the death of one of these young ladies?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Not only will we prevent a death, but we will also capture the killer in the act and make it much easier for you to inform the parents of the deceased ladies that justice has finally been served.”

“Okay. I trust you, Samuel. And you, Lizzy. Everything you have said to me thus far has been true. I will trust you to end this tomorrow.”

“Thank you. But this will not end tomorrow. No, tomorrow will be an interesting day. We do not know when the killer plans to strike, so we cannot say anything until after that event. Suffice it to say, once we catch him, we will notify you, and word can be released, as a rumor, that there was yet another death in the palace. That should drive the plotters to reveal, publicly, who they are, to verify my own findings.”

“You mean there is more to this than capturing the killer?”

“Yes, Your Majesty, there is a lot more than catching a killer. And I am afraid you are not going to like what is revealed day after tomorrow.”

“Can you tell me?”

“No, I believe we need to let this play out naturally, to make sure no one is identified as a part of this crime, unnecessarily.”

“Very well, I shall keep quiet until then.”

Lizzy added, “But one thing we can say with certainty, Your Majesty, is that your Star Fleet Imperial Commander, Admiral McDaniel, is a good one and a solid believer in you.”

“Thank you, I needed at least some positive news.”

“Thank you. Now, we must be off, there is still much to do.”

They stood together, he bowed, she curtsied, and they said in unison, “Your Majesty.”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“Admiral, please come to my office, there is much to discuss and plans to make.”

“Your Majesty.”

It wasn’t too long before Admiral McDaniel arrived at her office.

The Royal Herald preceded him, saying, “Your Majesty, Admiral McDaniel.”

Empress Alexandra III was sitting at her desk as the Admiral entered and walked to a place in front of it and bowed, saying, “Your Majesty.”

“Yes. Please have a seat, Admiral.”

“Thank you.”

She stood up and walked around the desk, to which he started to stand, but she said, “No, please stay seated.” She continued and sat in a chair beside him.

“Admiral McDaniel, Robert McDaniel, Robert. I need your help.”

“Of course, Your Majesty. How can I help?”

“I have come across some information from a particularly good source, who has provided me with the identification of multiple individuals involved in a plot to overthrow me.”

“What?”

“Yes, you heard me. It even involves a Star Fleet Admiral, by the name of Chou, who has been instrumental in passing orders, ostensibly from me, to use our fleet in an improper manner. There are numerous individuals who will be identified soon. These individuals are part of the plot that will be revealed on day eighty-nine.”

“I expect you to attend that court meeting, remain silent about Admiral Chou and the plot, but be prepared to initiate arrests of all the individuals found to be part of this plot immediately upon my order to do so on day eighty-nine. If it turns out that this is unnecessary, we will both find out that day and no action will be necessary.”

“I beg your pardon, but I find it shocking that this is taking place.”

“Yes, as do I. I believe it may be our complacency in never looking in the dark corners that gave these individuals the freedom to plan and take steps towards their goal. Even now, without tangible proof, this seems like chasing shadows. That is why I want you to attend the meeting and be prepared for actions necessary to put down any possible coup.”

“I will be there, Your Majesty, with adequate protection in place for you and prepared for all possibilities.”

“Thank you, Robert. I truly appreciate your loyalty and character.”

“You may count on me, Your Majesty.”

Murder

350.088.06

Shahendra woke up at six in the morning and studied for a while, then practiced some yoga. She enjoyed this life so much. As the niece of the Baron of Secunsa, she was often pulled aside by someone wanting to know how it was to live on the richest planet in the universe. Plus, she was nearly always trailed by security, so never seemed to have privacy. But here, at school, at work, at the gym or the salon, she could be herself.

Part of being herself was that, for the first time ever, she totally loved a man in her life. He was a little older, but he was so loving, kind, generous, and passionate. Oh my God he knew how to turn her on! She always felt a thrill inside when she thought about him. They were meeting tomorrow for a long day together and she was totally excited.

She managed to stop thinking about him long enough to get dressed. Finally, she left her apartment at ten and followed her normal routine. She didn’t have classes today, so she went to the gym for a good workout. She decided to take a good late lunch, since her shift didn’t start until sixteen. After lunch she returned to her apartment to shower and prepare for work.

She took a food star with her in her bag to get her through the evening, and eventually made her way through traffic to the palace, the Lord Chamberlains department. She took the elevator up to the fifth floor. She worked in Data Retrieval and Management. Tonight’s shift should be a slow shift, just processing some overdue accounts.

She noticed that there were no other staff working, which was not unusual, just eerie sometimes, being alone. Once she was in her booth and all was running well, she got up and went to the lady’s restroom. Soon, she returned, sat down, and got comfortable. It would be a long night.

At about ten in the evening, a shadow crept into the area. She never saw it. She never saw the slight motion as it moved within the shadows behind her. She never heard anything until the sliclei suddenly was against her neck.

The murderer pulled, but the only thing that happened was the girl yelling and standing up. It was Sam in disguise! He had a fake neck with strong wires that prevented the sliclei from cutting into his neck. He stood, turned, and lunged for the murderer. The murderer was shocked, but well trained in combat, so he easily repelled Sam, knocking him over a cubicle wall.

As he turned to run, Lizzy, who had been hiding in the women’s restroom and watching on a security feed, met him with full force, taking him down onto the floor. She spun him over and tied his hands and feet. Then she whistled, and Gerald and the team walked in, escorting Shahendra.

“Hold him safe for a moment.”

She walked over to check on Sam. He was dazed.

“Sam, are you okay?”

“Wow, yes, but that was a rush!”

“You think?”

Shahendra walked up to them, and said, “Oh, my God, you were really telling the truth. These people, this man who said he loved me, really did want to kill me.”

“Yes, Shahendra, they did. But not because they even knew who you are. You were a cog in their wheel. Now, we still need you to keep a quiet low profile until tomorrow, can you do that?”

“Oh yes. If it gets him what he deserves, absolutely.”

“Good. Gerald, would you mind keeping Shahendra at your place for safe keeping until tomorrow?”

He winked, and said, “Absolutely.”

Lizzy walked over to the murderer, and with Bowser and Traing helping, picked him up, getting him to stand. They hustled him out of a back door of the building into a waiting transport, and took him to a safe-house location they had prepared for this event.

Once they were inside, he was chained tightly to a pole in the floor. His hands were behind his back around the pole, and he was forced to stand. Everyone left except Lizzy and Sam.

Lizzy began. “So, who are you?”

He didn’t respond.

She chuckled. “Okay, chops, here’s how this is going down. We are going to ask questions. You are going to answer, or, you are going to feel some pain, okay?”

“Good.” She looked at Sam, and said, “Would you like to ask the next question?”

Sam said, “Sure. Okay, what is your name?”

He didn’t respond. Lizzy stepped behind him and grabbed his left hand, and selected the little finger, holding it. She was about to twist it hard when Sam said, “No, stop.”

Sam got up and walked over to stand in front of him, and said, “I know your name. You’re Aristoly Emanati. You work for the Imperial Palace Police, you’re a Sergeant, actually, and work for Inspector Humbolt.”

Aristoly did not say anything.

“Look, Aristoly, the game is over. Everyone you work for will deny knowledge of you, even the Krilleans, who you believe are your friends. You will be left hanging by everyone as the only one involved in this plot. Everyone will deny any knowledge of you and say you are a serial killer, who is accusing others of being participants in the crime as your way of trying to create some sympathy or implicate them out of malice. Trust me, Aristoly; right now, you have no friends. Your only chance is to talk.”

“I will not.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Okay.” He looked at Lizzy. “I guess we have to do this your way.”

She reached for his hand and took the finger. SNAP! “AIYEE!!!”

Word spread throughout the capitol, another murder in the palace! Rumors were flying. Who was it? What house was affected this time? Why didn’t the Empress prevent this?”

Word was soon released; it was the niece of the Baron of Secunsa. Everyone was shocked! The Baron released a statement of sadness, pain, and anger at the Empress, demanding answers. He implied the great houses should show up the next day to hear of the incompetence of the Empress.

First Wheel

350.089.09

The next morning, the court was packed. Every Great House, and even most Minor Houses, were there, to see the showdown that awaited. There were thousands in attendance, filling the Great Hall better than most other events ever had. Sam and Lizzy were there, as well. They sat to the left of the throne, hidden from most people in the chamber.

Lexi arrived after a time, and was the first to demand answers. She stood on the bottom step of the steps leading up to the throne, and yelled about the incompetence of the Empress.

“My daughter died because the Empress could not protect our innocent children, even in her own palace! What kind of incompetence is that? How can we respect someone who cannot even protect the innocent?”

Soon, the Baron arrived, along with the Viscount, and the Baroness of Friglianlan. They took their seats, except the Baron, who replaced Lexi and stood on the bottom step below the throne, demanding action, or the removal of the Empress for failure to protect even her own palace.

“How can we continue to support someone who demonstrates mental incompetence? How can we support someone who uses Star Fleet for personal revenge? Surely, you must agree with me, the Empress is an unstable monarch. She must go!”

There were some cheers, but not many.

Suddenly, the Empress appeared from behind the throne, accompanied by The King of the Milky Way Galaxy, His Royal Majesty Ignatius Rolanda Delthorian. The King walked over to his smaller throne to the left of the Empress. The throne on the right was reserved for the Queen of the Andromeda Galaxy.

The audience chamber went deathly quiet as the Empress walked to the front, standing on the podium above the highest step. She looked down at the Baron, who stood on the bottom step, and said, “Get off the step.”

The Baron refused and stood his ground. He thought he had the upper hand.

Suddenly, over one thousand combat-dressed Imperial Marines flooded the hall and cut through the crowd to isolate the ones located nearest the throne. He stepped down, as he realized he may have been presumptuous. He walked to his seat and waited, like everyone else.

The Empress then turned towards Sam, and said, “Sleuth, please come forward.”

As he stood, he waved to the guard.

Inspector Vornthisen and Humbolt were brought into the room. At this moment, Emanati was escorted into the room as well, bandages and all. Shahendra was also brought in.

Empress Alexandra III sat on the throne, not the audience chair, and said, “Now, sleuth, speak.”

Everyone sat down and waited.

“Your Majesty. At first glance, the palace murders appeared to be a simple set of murders. It was designed to appear as a set of linked murders with several possible linkages, that would cause people to believe it was a simple case of a serial killer. While that is not true, it is true that all the murders were committed by one person. The killer, Sergeant Aristoly Emanati of the Imperial Palace Police, is standing here before you. He was the individual personally responsible for the actual murders.”

“He believed he was doing the work of the righteous, by doing what he was told would stop the genocide of the Tarrequein people on Secunsa. However, what he truly did was particularly egregious, as he was also the man, the lover, the trusted confidant, in the life of each young lady. He courted them, won them over, showed them, so they thought, what true love was. He was also the last person they saw once their throats were sliced as they bled to death at his feet. This man, is evil.”

“Guard Captain, take this man away and hold him in seclusion pending sentence. Continue, sleuth.”

“Your Majesty. Also, standing here is Shahendra Samoan, a niece of the Baron of Secunsa. She, it was, who was supposed to be killed last night. She is the life you saved, Your Majesty, by taking action when you did.”

Shahendra fell to her knees, saying, “Thank you for my life, Your Majesty.”

Empress Alexandria stood and walked down the steps, saying, “Rise, Shahendra.”

They hugged and spoke quietly for a few moments, then Shahendra was escorted out of the chamber and the Empress returned to her throne.

“Continue, sleuth.”

“Your Majesty. As I was saying, but after speaking with the families of the victims, reviewing the information collected by the police, and spending just a little time thinking, it became obvious, to me, that this was not a case of a serial killer. It was, shall we say, a politically motivated crime. At first I thought that someone wanted to send someone a message.”

Sam began pacing back and forth below the lowest step in front of the throne.

“But what message? To whom? Was there more? It was a dilemma, and a major reason why the inspectors couldn’t move forward; they were stuck in the serial killer mode, and still are, I suspect.”

They both lowered their gaze as if in acknowledgement of this truth.

The Empress said, “Guard Captain, take these two away and hold them until I can decide what an appropriate punishment for their incompetence could be.”

Once they were gone, she said, “Continue, sleuth.”

“Your Majesty. This would have been more difficult to accomplish except that the adversary thought they should intimidate or eliminate me, so took a chance and knocked me completely unconscious. I would have died, likely, if not for the intervention of my associate. She both rescued me and brought me back to health, and joined me in the quest. As a matter of fact, many of the parties in this quest thought she was the sleuth. I could not have solved this without her.”

Lizzy beamed with delight.

“There are many details we could discuss, Your Majesty, but suffice to say this directly. Emanati worked for the Krilleans, who thought they were saving the Tarrequein. Remember the communique you received to free Thoristin Filtram. The true meaning of the note is this: Free ‘The Hundreds Of Recently Incarcerated Secunsa Tarrequein Individually Neutralized For Innocent Legal Territorial Restoration Activity Measures.’”

“It is worth mentioning, again, that Aristoly comes from Secunsa, and works for the Krilleans. He heard the story from the Lords of Agriculture on Secunsa for years about how the Baron was destroying them. He believed, beyond any reason, that his actions were designed to help the Tarrequein survive. So, while his motives were true, his methods were evil.”

“Yet the Krilleans are not innocent, as they also continued to refuse to allow any land expansion for industry, knowing full well that the only other choice was for the Baron to further take from the Tarrequein.”

“Well, it turns out, these righteous people were all deceived. They thought they were doing something to help a suffering people, but in truth, they were being used by the Baroness Natalia of Friglianlan. But the Baroness was also being used, as the tool to control the assassin, herself unaware of the ultimate prize. The Baroness was guided by the Viscount of Tantelle, who in turn, it seemed, was directed by the Baronetess Eme, who desired to remove the Baron and take over as Baroness of Secunsa, or so the Viscount appeared to believe.”

“I am flabbergasted in this plot, Your Majesty, because not only did she sacrifice her own daughter to move this scheme forward, but also, the Baron of Secunsa willingly sacrificed his niece for the same reason.”

Several voices started to speak, but the Empress raised her hand and said, “Silence! We will hear it all. Continue.”

“However, the Viscount was not deceived since he was, in fact, the deceiver. He knew more than was thought. He appeared to be deceived, but he wasn’t really. He knew the Baronetess was working hand in hand with the Baron, with what they believed to be the ultimate goal of having the aristocracy and military rise up against you, Your Majesty, and make Baron Darnelia of Secunsa, the new Emperor, with a new wife, the Baronetess, as Empress. He knew they thought this because he was the instigator of it.”

There was a loud gasp in the audience hall and murmured voices. Again, the Empress said, “Silence! Continue, sleuth.”

“Your Majesty, all that I have said to this point is true. Yet, it didn’t make any sense. As you can see here today, the Baron stood on the stairs to the throne and had virtually no impact on the Empire, or on your reign. In my investigation, I had to confront this question. Would these actions taken by this Baron truly yield the results he sought? My conclusion, was no. He may be powerful in his own inner circle, but he has no impact, truly, beyond that small sphere.”

He paused for a moment, then said, “But if this were not the true plot, that meant there must be another, more hidden plot.”

He paused again, then walked over and spoke quietly with Lizzy. Turning to the Empress, he said, “Your Majesty, there are four people who we know are in the palace, but are not here with us today. Might we request their presence?”

“Is it critical for the remainder of this story?”

“Yes, Your Majesty, it is.”

“Very well, who are they?”

“Your Majesty, might it be allowed for Lizzy, my associate, to quietly tell the names of these individuals to these Marine guards and have them escort them here without warning? We don’t want them to flee.”

Alexandria appeared as if she would object, but then said, “Very well. But, sleuth, I grow impatient for the ending of this story.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

He nodded to Lizzy who took off running towards the door.

They waited.

Second Wheel

350.089.10

It only took about fifteen minutes until the four, Prince DeMarco, Marchioness Stanmel, the Lord Chancellor and Admiral Chou, were brought into the audience room. The first to object was Prince DeMarco, the Empress’ brother.

“Your Majesty, sister, what is the meaning of this?”

“Have a seat, DeMarco. Sit here, on the audience chair beside me. We are listening to the result of the sleuth’s work. Continue sleuth.”

Demarco walked up the stairs and sat on the audience chair, which was located about twenty feet from the throne. “Of course, Your Majesty.”

Sam continued, “As I had mentioned, there seemed to be little satisfaction with the Baron being the end of the game. There had to be something more. This caused me to reflect on all that I knew, to evaluate motivations, actions, and ascribe meaning to the whole. It required me to elevate my own sense of observation. But once I did, I found that there was a single oddity.”

“The oddity was that the Viscount of Tantelle contacted his sister, Marchioness Stanmel, twice before certain actions occurred. That didn’t make sense. I tried to see how the Marchioness could be ingrained in the plot of the Baron’s, but I could not find a way to fit her into it. That left a simple conclusion – there was more to it than I knew.”

“So, I dug. It was difficult, as the plotters at this level were smart and incredibly careful. However, I discovered a few things. First, she was part of a larger plot, using the Viscount and these others here, in order to help create a much larger portrayal of you, Your Majesty, as incompetent, not only on a small scale at the palace, but a larger Imperial scale.”

“It seems the “rebellion,” as they call it, was actually a feint to make you look vindictive. But in reality, the Barons of these planets were in on it, releasing some political prisoners and criminals to rebel, and having Star Fleet take them out. The culmination in the plot was for them then to tell others that the Empress was attacking them for minor reasons. She was out of control.”

DeMarco laughed. “Really? Your Majesty, sister, do we have to sit and listen to this insanity? Surely, he is deluded, implying the Marchioness, Susan, my betrothed, whom you have known for many years, would rise up against you! Suggesting hundreds of Barons would participate in a rebellion? Utter nonsense.”

“Perhaps, brother. But I hired this sleuth to find the truth, and I intend to listen until he is finished. And since he believes you need to be here, you will join me in listening to this story. Continue, sleuth.”

“Your Majesty.” He continued pacing. “But what possible ends could someone at this level have? What could be the reward, the end game, as it were? It intrigued me. I had my associate conduct some surveillance, while I also snooped, and we discovered the most amazing thing. We discovered that the Lord Chamberlain knew of the murders before they happened, and knew there would be another one yesterday.”

The Chamberlain stood, and angrily said, “That’s outrageous! Lies! Your Majesty, this is incredibly unfair. How can you sit there when this unknown person, is saying things to damage those very people who support you the most?”

The Empress said, “Sit down, Lord Chamberlain, or I shall have you escorted out. I have decided we shall hear the entire story. Continue, sleuth.”

“Your Majesty. When we discovered this, we knew there was a larger plot. Soon we discovered the Lord Chancellor was also part of this plot. The last puzzle piece we put together was the Star Fleet relationship to the plot. How could it be that Star Fleet did not have any direct orders from you to conduct the type of operations they were conducting, which were destructive in nature and made no sense? What was their authority? Well, we discovered that Admiral Chou had received instructions in your name, but passed to him by another. So, we ascertained that he was also privy to the plot.”

“Who passed him the orders?”

“I will get to that in a moment, Your Majesty.”

“Okay, but what was the plot?”

“To overthrow you, Your Majesty.”

The audience chamber nearly exploded in gasps and yells, outrage.

The Empress stood and said, “Silence!” The hall went silent. “Sleuth, you had better be able to prove what you say. These are high crimes you speak of.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. But the highest and worst was when we discovered the single character who appeared to be behind it all, and the one who passed many of these fake military orders to Star Fleet, was your brother, Prince DeMarco.”

Not a sound. Prince DeMarco, who had been sitting on the audience chair on the dais, stood, and laughed. “You act surprised, sister.”

He turned away from her and addressed the court. “Let it be known to all here, she is incompetent. She has been unable to put down rebellions, unable to prevent murders in her own palace, unable to lead our people! She sits here and smiles!”

Turning back to her, he said, “That’s about all you do. It offends me that you were chosen to be Empress. I should have been named Emperor!”

He again turned to the court, saying, “But it is not too late. With the Marchioness beside me as my Empress, with Admiral Chou released to do what is necessary to break the rebellion that grows in the Empire, we can return to the days of glory!” The chamber was silent.

He then turned back to the Empress. “But no! You had to hire a sleuth and wreck our plan!” He pulled a stinger out of his inside coat pocket, and aiming at her, said, “Well, you are not going to be Empress for long!”

At that very moment, Lizzy, who had earlier shifted to stand behind him, hit him from behind. They fell to the floor and tumbled down the steps. He was hurt, but still stood up and looked around the chamber. He saw the eyes of the people assembled and knew, by their silence and the look in their eyes, that his quest had failed. Seeing as his plan would not work, and knowing the punishment he faced, he turned the stinger on himself, but Lizzy knocked it out of his hands and twisted his arms behind him, holding him for Imperial Guards, who started to march him away.

“Wait! Don’t take him away just yet, as there is more to the story.”

“More? What more could there be?”

Lizzy had moved up to stand behind and to the left of the Empress.

Sam said, “Your Majesty, while it is outrageous that Prince DeMarco could be such a key player in the attempt to unseat you, he was not the mastermind behind the overall plan. He was also being played by another.”

He turned to DeMarco, and said, “What you do not know is that the assassin was given one additional target. As soon as the Empress was removed from the throne, you were to be eliminated within three days. So, your life expectancy was not long.”

The Empress said, “Well if not DeMarco, then who was it?”

Sam looked at him, and he said, ‘Well played, sleuth. But you have no proof.”

Sam smiled, and said, “Ah, but that is where you are wrong. I do have proof. I have, in my possession, the original document you handed to Admiral Chou to initiate the entire scheme.”

He seemed to freeze for a moment, then looked over at Admiral Chou, who lowered his head.

“I see. Then it is pointless to argue.”

The Empress had turned and looked at the King during this conversation, but now said, “You wanted to replace me as well?”

Sam said, “He did, but he used everyone, including Prince DeMarco. After all, the prince is still part of your family. No, King Delthorian hated the fact that your father named you instead of him as heir. Prince DeMarco would have met the same fate as you, only quicker, and then he would have appeared to comfort the grieving bride-to-be, the Marchioness Stanmel, and they would have wed and ruled together for some time.”

Demarco looked at Susan, and said, “Is this true?”

She replied, “Oh, DeMarco. You are such an idiot.”

The King stood, walked down to stand on the second step in front of the Empress, pulled his ceremonial sword, and turned the hilt towards her. He said, “The simple answer is yes, Your Majesty. All that the sleuth has said is true. I decided several years ago that your father made a serious mistake in naming you to sit on the Imperial throne, so took steps to remove you. But alas, as Demarco has said, you ended up hiring a sleuth who was smart enough to weed through our plan and stop it, so our plan is destroyed.” He paused for a moment, then said, “I expect no mercy, Your Majesty.”

She took hold of the hilt and he let go of the sword. He bowed his head slightly, turned and walked down the stairs, to be met by Imperial guards who took him and DeMarco away.

The Empress, distressed at all the events, but calm, said, “Thank you, Lizzy, for standing guard. Now, please, step aside.”

Lizzy did so, but didn’t go very far.

The Empress, said, “Guard Captain, arrest everyone the sleuth has identified as part of this plot and hold them in maximum detention. Admiral McDaniel, implement the arrest of the individuals we spoke of. The prison planet Dornathion will be getting full after this event.”

She stood there, looking over the Royal Court. Finally, she said, “A lot has transpired here over the past few years, and especially the past few months. I hope and pray that those of you here, in this court, understand that I am doing all that I can to make the Empire responsive to our people, and not such an autocratic imperial burden.”

“My father told me the reason he selected me to rule was because I would restore heart to the business of ruling. I believe this is the right thing to do, to free our people as much as possible from Imperial oversight, while maintaining order in the process. I intend to continue on this course until my heir designate is crowned.”

“There has been controversy over my father naming me his heir. I assure you, I do not intend to name anyone related to me as my heir, instead, restoring the original intent established by Empress Stephanie I, of a twenty-year reign, and naming an heir outside of immediate family.”

“However, I do not intend to change what I am doing today. I certainly pray you can support me in this endeavor.”

Suddenly, cheers began in the hall, of, “Long Live the Empress!”

She smiled, then turned to leave, but turned back, and said, “Sleuth, follow me, Lizzy, you may follow also.”

They walked through the palace and stopped inside at a wonderful small fountain within the palace before exiting for the gardens. She said to Lizzy, “Lizzy, please remain here. I wish to speak with my sleuth alone.”

Lizzy bowed, and Sam followed Alexandria out towards her private gardens. Along the way there were some portraits on the wall. Sam suddenly stopped.

“What’s wrong, Sam?”

“Who is this?”

“Oh, that’s the first and last Imperial Counselor, Dhakini.”

“Where is she?”

“No one knows. She disappeared a couple of hundred years ago, never to be seen.”

Sam smiled, looking at the angel he had only recently come in contact with, dressed in pure white, with red hair and green eyes. A remarkable resemblance if nothing else.

“Why do you ask?”

“Oh, no reason, I just hadn’t seen it before.”

He turned and followed her as she walked further into the garden, until she came to her quiet spot, surrounded by high hedges and overhanging trees, with the only sound a rambling brook.

She turned to him, and said, “Well, Sam, you’ve changed my world. But I still don’t understand why DeMarco would want to kill me.”

“I believe he was aware that killing you was his only chance to claim the throne at that point. It might have worked since he had the support of King Delthorian. But when he saw it wouldn’t happen, as no one stood to support his claim, he realized he was as good as dead, so tried to end it himself.”

She lowered her gaze, then looked up at him. “I should feel a sense of loss, but I only feel a sense of relief that this is all over. Is that wrong?”

“No, I don’t think so, Your Majesty. I think there have been so many things happening so quickly, that it stifles the emotions. In time, maybe a little, maybe a lot, you will come to forgive him.”

“I suppose.”

She sat down on her favorite bench. “What will you do now, Sam?”

He smiled, and said, “I have a vague idea.”

“Oh,” she smiled. “But will you promise you will be available if I am ever in need of a sleuth?”

He bowed deeply, and said, “I will forever be in your debt, Your Majesty. Yet, I find myself asking for two final favors before we leave.”

“What’s that?”

“The Tarrequein did nothing wrong, yet they are the ones who have suffered so much for so long. Is there a way to save them, give them a new home with Imperial protection, anything?”

“Yes, I thought about that as well. Secunsa is too complex to eliminate people, businesses, and agriculture to expand the Tarrequein home. What I am doing is offering the Tarrequein a new planet, one that will be exclusively theirs. The planet will be a forbidden planet to all others to visit, except with the specific invitation by the Tarrequein people. No one else will be allowed to settle there. This will be done very soon, and thanks to you, I found out about it before they became extinct.”

“Thank you. Lastly, do you think you can erase the dishonorable discharge Lizzy got?”

“Done.”

He smiled, “Well, we will be off then. Your Majesty.”

“Very well. Farewell Sam. Take care of Lizzy and be safe.”

“And you.”

He left and walked through the gardens until he came to the fountain where Lizzy waited.

Lizzy said, “How did it go?”

“It went well. But there is something I want to clear up.”

“Oh, what’s that?”

“Lizzy, whether you know it or not, I am completely head over heels in love with you.”

“Oh, Sam! I love you!!”

She didn’t hesitate a moment but jumped into his arms, and they shared the first of many wonderful, deep, passionate kisses.

End of the Tale

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“And so, that was not only a story of an Empire nearly collapsing, of an Empress in need, and of murders in the palace, but a love story for Lizzy and me. I think that is why I will never forget the story.”

“Wow! That was incredible. I’ve never heard many of those details, and I’m certain our readers will be thrilled with what you have shared. Are there any other stories you’d like to talk about?”

Sam laughed, saying, “Not right now. There were some adventures that Lizzy and I were on that would make for some good storytelling, but not right now.”

“What about current cases? Are you still an active sleuth?”

Sam laughed, saying, “Oh no, I stopped that line of work years ago. Now I am a full-time dad. We have seven kids, four boys and three girls. They are the task at hand.”

“Okay then, well, thank you so much for your time, sir. I really appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome. I hope your readers enjoy.”

As the door closed, Lizzy walked in, and said, “There was also that one case that we don’t talk about, that someday we need to share. You know the one; it changed the course of history.”

He walked up to her and held her in his arms, and said, “I know. But that’s another story for another day.”

“Okay,” she said, as she put her arms around his shoulders, and they kissed yet another very deep and long passionate kiss.

**Acknowledgement**

Cover design by Matthew Foster, all around visuals extraordinaire…