

STARSHINE

(EXCERPT)

PROLOGUE

The end of the world began with a library query.

...or perhaps it was the space probe. The alien was being vexingly reticent on the matter, the man thought as he straightened his dinner jacket in the mirror.

“She is hardly the first person to express an interest in that region of space. Why are you so worried about her when the others didn’t concern you?”

The others did concern us, but they were deflected with little difficulty. This woman, however, has exhibited a notable talent for discovering what others cannot. As such, we would prefer she never look.

The man smoothed out a crease in one of the sleeves then fastened the antique pearl cufflinks, an heirloom passed down to him from a grandfather that never was. “Do you want me to have her killed?”

Not unless alternative methods are unsuccessful. Her death could cause the opposite effect of drawing further unwanted attention.

The man nodded cursorily and stepped out of the washroom, crossing his spacious office to the windows lining the far wall. “Very well. I’ll work to ensure she’s distracted from this pursuit. What about the Senecans?”

They are a more troublesome problem as they have already discovered an anomaly exists. They will send others to investigate.

From the top floor of the Earth Alliance Headquarters building the man could see guests beginning to arrive in the gardens below. Another ten minutes and it would be appropriate for him to join them. He frowned, brushing a piece of lint off his lapel before he turned from the windows to face where the

alien might have stood, were he actually here. “You know there’s little I can do about them for the moment.”

You needn’t concern yourself with the matter. Other resources are at our disposal.

“I’m sure. And remember, you only need stall them for a short while. Soon *everyone* will be distracted, and humanity will be focused inward for quite some time.”

Go forward with your plan. We hope you accomplish your objectives. Nonetheless, events are converging rapidly and they are not all within your control. Escalation may be unavoidable.

The man pulsed his wife to let her know he would meet her in the lobby shortly. “At least give me the opportunity to alter our course before you act. It won’t be long now.”

Certainly. Know, however, that the precipice is upon you; it may already have been crossed.

Preparations have begun.

PART I:

DOMINOES

*“There are two kinds of light –
the glow that illuminates, and the glare that obscures.”*

—James Thurber

EARTH*SEATTLE*

“Alex, I’m ready when you are.”
“One more second...okay, Charlie, go ahead.” The muffled response came from within the hull.

The young mechanic wove the crystalline fiber of a conduit into the power control grid. It took only seconds. He squinted into the magnification overlay to confirm the contact points. “All set.”

“Here goes nothing.”

Colonel Richard Navick watched from the entry of the hangar bay as a shimmer passed over the smooth, midnight black exterior of the ship.

Even marred by the docking clamps, the *Siyane* was sleek and graceful, with sweeping curves that converged on acute edges. Technical instruments and sensors were tucked discreetly under the wing-like midsection while the sLume drive was an elusive shadow beneath the tapered tail. The elegant lines disguised its size. Fully forty-two meters from bow to stern, it was enormous—at least for a personal scout ship.

He cleared his throat to announce his presence and stepped into the bay. “Alex, are you in there somewhere?”

A head dropped out of the belly of the ship. It was upside down and encircled by the orbiting screens of a holographic interface. “Richard, is that you?”

“Guilty as charged.”

A pair of long legs appeared next as she swung out of the ex-

posed engineering well and dropped a meter to land nimbly on the floor of the bay. The interface winked out of existence.

He was struck—as he always was after he hadn't seen her for some time—by how much she looked like her father. Tall and slender, with high, distinctive cheekbones and bright silver-gray eyes, she cut almost as dramatic a figure as David Solovy once had. In fact, the sole feature of note she had inherited from her mother was the thick, dark mane of hair. Whereas David's had been dusky blond, hers was the color of fine aged Bordeaux.

It was also currently twisted up in a messy knot, flyaway strands escaping to soften her features. She wiped streaks of a viscous gel off her hands and onto snug black workpants as she jogged over.

When she reached him she embraced him in a quick hug born of years of familiarity. "It's been too long, Richard."

"If you would stay in this sector for longer than a week at a time, I might actually get to see you once in a while."

Her eyes rolled a little as she settled onto her back leg. "Ah, no can do, I'm afraid. All the fun's out there." A corner of her mouth quirked up in a tease of a grin. He believed her.

"So I hear. All the money too, apparently." He jerked his head toward the gleaming hull.

Her face instantly lit up; it often did when she was talking about her ship. "I just painted on a new f-graphene alloy lattice. It will reduce drag by another twelve percent, which will mean faster travel using less fuel."

"Nice..." The reduction from pico- to femto-scale alloys had only become commercially available nine months earlier; he shuddered to think of the credits she must have forked over for the new lattice. "We should have the budget to roll those out to the fleet in a decade or so."

She shrugged as if to say ‘your loss’ and met his gaze. For most people it would have been an uncomfortable experience. “So is this a social call? As glad as I am to see you—and I really am—I’m kind of in the middle of installing a stealth system upgrade. We could maybe have dinner this evening if you’d like?”

He mentally braced himself for the reaction he knew would be coming. “You caught me. It’s not *entirely* a social call. Your mother wants you to come by the office if you have any free time this afternoon.”

Her pupils constricted, the tiny flash of an ocular implant a hint she was checking her comms. They quickly focused back on him, bearing more than a little less warmth. “I don’t have a message from her.”

“I know. She thought the likelihood of you responding would increase considerably if I came in person.”

An eyebrow arched. “She have you running her errands for her now? Isn’t that a bit below your pay grade?”

“No. I *volunteered*, because I wanted to see you.”

She smiled with what he recognized as kindness, but it was transitory to her glance over her shoulder at the ship that dominated the hanger. “Well, sorry, but I can’t. I have to run diagnostics on the new dampener field and recalibrate the power system ratios. Assuming everything tests out okay, *then* I have to secure the fiber line to the hull and shield it.”

His gaze flitted pointedly to the young man swinging in a harness near the stern of the ship. “Can’t your mechanic do some of those things for you?”

At her deepening frown his brow creased in beseechment. “Please? For me? It’ll only take an hour or two, and it..” he knew saying it would make her mother happy would be counterproduc-

tive "...will make my life rather easier."

Her eyes narrowed; her arms stiffened against her chest to complete the impression of staunch resoluteness. But this was not the first time he had faced down her defiant glare. He relaxed his posture, softened his expression and met her scowl with a pleasant smile.

After several seconds she exhaled to striking effect, all the tension leaving her body with the exaggerated breath. For just a moment she reminded him of the impish little girl she had once been.

"*Fine.* For you. I'm going to regret it, though."



Alex stared out the window of the sky-car while they cruised above Puget Sound before veering northwest over the Straight toward Vancouver Island. The unbroken line of skyscrapers to the right shone in the late morning sun from horizon to horizon, all polished silvers and whites flecked by deep green where the scrupulously maintained trees and numerous parks peeked through.

It was and had always been a beautiful view...but she was being a poor companion. She gave up steeling herself for what was sure to be the latest in a long line of unpleasant visits with her mother and shifted from the window to look at Richard.

Her parents' oldest and closest friend, she had known him for as long as she could recall, which was to say about thirty-five years. He was one of the very few people who had consistently accepted her for who and what she was—didn't want *more* from her, didn't helpfully suggest what her life *should* be like, didn't *tsk* disapprovingly at even her most unorthodox activities.

"So what's new with you? Work okay? How's Will doing?"

He relaxed in his seat and let the car auto-navigate the crowded airlines. “Will is good, but busy. He’s been on Shi Shen for the last month overseeing the construction of the new Suiren headquarters and finally got home day before yesterday. I’ll tell him you said hello.”

The muscles in his jaw clenched briefly, which was generally the extent of his outward signals of displeasure. “Work is rather tense, what with the Trade Summit coming up.”

She gave him a blank look. “What is a Trade Summit and why is it coming up? Help me out here...”

“Right, you don’t spend much time obsessing about the oh-so-fascinating machinations of galactic politics. The Trade Minister and his entourage will be attending a conference with the Senecan Trade Director—at a carefully selected neutral location naturally, on Atlantis.” He sighed, his gaze drifting upward to grimace at the heavens. “It’s ostensibly an olive branch intended to thaw relations with the Federation a bit, but I’m afraid in reality it’s going to be little more than a media circus.”

“And your people will be spying on the Senecan delegation, hacking their data streams every chance they get while fending off the same from their agents.” Her teasing smirk served to emphasize the point.

His mouth worked to suppress a grin but mostly failed. “I can neither confirm nor deny any such suppositions on the grounds it would violate Earth Alliance security.”

“*Of course...*” The car dropped through a thin layer of mist which hadn’t yet burned off and skimmed above the choppy waves as the sprawling Earth Alliance Strategic Command complex came into view.

Stretching for three square kilometers across the southernmost tip of the Island, a network of midrise buildings, plazas and hangars

fanned out from the towering structure that constituted the headquarters for what were, as a group, the most powerful men and women in the settled Milky Way. For better or worse, this included the EASC Director of Operations.

She could feel her expression tightening with every meter of their descent onto the open platform jutting out a third of the way up the headquarters building. “So how *is* the Admiral these days? As cheery as ever?”

He shook his head wryly, killed the engine and climbed out of the car. “She’s the same as usual, busily supervising the entire organization while breaking in yet another new secretary.”

“Lovely.” She matched his stride to the glass-floored lift, not bothering to grasp the rail as it whisked them up a quarter kilometer to the command staff offices which comprised the top ten floors. After they had cleared the security scanners and were inside, she turned to him.

Though her mood was already darkening beneath the shadow of the looming encounter, she forced herself to smile with genuine warmth. “You better get on out of here before I start blaming you for ruining my day, especially when it *was* good to see you.”

He laughed and patted her on the shoulder then headed toward his office down the opposite hall. “Try not to be too much of a stranger, okay?”

She waved him off as she crossed the overly bright atrium and stepped through the wide doorway into the EASC Operations suite.



The man behind the desk glanced up as she approached. After a blink his eyes widened precipitously. “You’re *her*, aren’t you? Ms—I mean Captain—Solovy. Ma’am.”

She draped an arm on the high counter. “It’s not a military title. ‘Ms.’ is fine. Would you please let my mother know I have answered her summons and eagerly await being granted the favor of an audience?”

The man—a 2nd Lieutenant according to the bars on his uniform—stared at her in horror, brow furrowing and unfurrowing in mounting panic. “Um, do you want me to say that, *specifically*, ma’am? I’m not certain the Admiral will—”

“Just tell her that her daughter is here.”

“Absolutely. Right away.”

She wandered over to inspect the newest addition to the artwork decorating the lobby. This secretary was unlikely to last any longer than the last one had. Even the most hardened soldier wilted in the face of her mother’s disapproving glare.

She was pondering how many credits the military must have wasted on the spectacularly bad hack Picasso rip-off when the secretary informed her she could go in now. She walked in the large but spartan office to observe without surprise that nothing about it had changed in the near year since she had last visited.

Admiral Miriam Solovy didn’t immediately turn her attention from the display panel in her hand. Her hair was drawn back in a severe bun; her uniform was crisp, its buttons spit-polished. When her gaze did rise to acknowledge Alex’s presence, a tight, thin facsimile of a smile passed across her face for the minimum time required. “You look a wreck.”

Ah, as kind and doting as always. She shrugged. “I was working.”

“I see. Would you like some tea?”

“Water’s fine,” which she proceeded to go to the cabinet and get herself.

“How are you, dear?”

Alex took a long sip from the marbled glass tumbler and leaned in deliberate casualness beside the teak bookcase filled with antique texts on military and political history. “Fine. Busy. You?”

The tiny vein in her mother’s left temple pulsed. She traded the screen for a teacup. “As well as can be expected. The Fionava Province has been a nuisance of late. I would share the details with you, but of course the parking attendant has a higher security clearance than you do.”

The tenor with which the statement was delivered seemed to imply it was somehow a *failing* on her part. “Alas.”

Miriam took a slow, measured sip of her tea then stared pensively into the dainty cup, as though it would magically supply her a suitable topic for small talk. “I ran into Malcolm at the Cascades Memorial Charity Auction last week. And met his new wife.”

She needed a wiser teacup. Alex raised a studiously unimpressed eyebrow. “I’m sure she was lovely.”

“Not so lovely as you, I must say, but attractive enough. He asked about you.”

Her eyes flickered over to the window...*shit*. She bit back a cringe at the display of weakness, not wanting to compound the error. “And what did you tell him?”

“The truth—that you’re still gallivanting around the galaxy, raking in millions and pouring it all back into that damnable ship of yours.” She paused, undoubtedly for dramatic effect. “I do believe he looked a little morose at the notion.”

Alex groaned and plopped down in the hard, purposefully uncomfortable chair opposite the desk. She pulled one knee up to hug against her chest. “I’m going to give you the benefit of the doubt and assume you didn’t ask me here in order to throw failed love affairs in my face. It’s a long list and I haven’t the time. What do you want?”

Miriam placed the teacup on the hutch behind her and sat as well, rigid-straight spine not touching the back of the comparably luxurious chair. “I can’t simply want to spend time with my only child?”

“You can—but you don’t.”

Her mother’s shoulders squared with military precision, an indication she wouldn’t argue the point. “Very well. I asked you here to share a wonderful opportunity for you. The Minister for Extra-Solar Development contacted me yesterday. He finds himself with a vacancy in his department. Apparently the Director of Deep Space Exploration is resigning to ‘pursue other endeavors,’ and the Minister would like to offer the post to you.”

A flashing pinpoint of light in the corner of Alex’s eVi signaled the delivery of the diagnostics she had set to run before departing the hangar. Her right pupil constricted to start the results scrolling on her whisper. “Prestigious position.”

If her mother noticed the somewhat unfocused nature of her gaze, she hid it well. “It’s not nepotism. While you lack oversight experience, you’re otherwise more than qualified.”

“More qualified than the parking attendant at least.” The whisper blurred out of focus and auto-paused as she directed a sharpened gaze toward the woman on the other side of the desk. Her mother couldn’t seem to decide whether to scowl or laugh; the result was an uncommonly animated expression. “But what exactly of everything you know about me says ‘government desk job?’”

“It’s not a desk job. You’ll need to travel to evaluate new discoveries several times a year, I’m quite sure.”

“Several times a *ye*—” her nose scrunched up in disdain “—you know what, never mind.”

“So you’ll consider it then.”

The whisper snapped back into focus...she frowned at the per-

centages displayed. A blink and a small aural materialized, and the diagnostics data began flowing in greater precision and detail twelve centimeters beyond her right eye. “No.”

Her mother’s jaw clacked shut at the response. Or because of the aural. Possibly both. “I didn’t say accept it unconditionally, merely consider it.”

Damn, there must be a power leak somewhere along the fiber. She pulsed Charlie to send the bot in to inspect the line. The dampener *had* to be a minimum of twenty-eight percent more effective or it wasn’t worth the diamond picocrystals which generated it. Her last find had almost been snaked out from under her because Terrence Macolly, too much of a lazy ass to do his own work, had tracked her emission signature and followed her into the asteroid ring orbiting Delta Lacertae. She didn’t intend to risk a repeat intrusion. “No.”

“Alexis—”

Her mouth twitched, though her focus didn’t shift from the data this time. “You know I hate it when you call me that.”

“I have every right to call you by your birth name. I *am* the one who gave it to you after all.”

Alex spared a brief, withering glance. Her mother’s eyes were averted downward, ostensibly studying the patterns of foam in her tea, perchance for more lousy ideas. When she spoke again, her tone was softer and no longer quite the voice of The Admiral.

“Your father was the first one to call you ‘Alex.’”

She shut off the aural in frustration. “Don’t you think I *know* that?”

“Yes, well.” Miriam’s chin notched upward. “I think you should reconsider the Minister’s offer. It is a position of some prominence and will provide a measure of stability you could benefit from.”

She snorted. “I realize you’re used to dictating people’s lives to

them around here, but you *don't* get to make my decisions for me. You haven't for a long, long time."

Miriam nodded with measured grace, appearing to acknowledge for the moment, Alex had the upper hand. "Perhaps it was...inconsiderate of me to insist you come here."

"To order Richard to deliver your summons and drag me before you, you mean?"

She raised a hand in mild protest. "Richard *wanted* the chance to see you. I hope you don't blame him for any unpleasantness."

"Oh, I don't. I blame you."

To her credit, her mother was nearly impossible to provoke. If anything, her expression softened in response to the barb. "I'm not trying to tell you how to live your life. But I worry about you, out there all alone in deep space. That ship of yours is too powerful for one person to handle."

Yet even in her attempt at kindness or at least civility, she managed to choose the exact wrong thing to say.

Deep down, Alex knew it probably wasn't intentional. But there was too much—too many hateful words and spiteful reactions to them, too much water under a broken bridge—and she had no desire to grasp at a tenuous thread only to have it fray and dissolve like all the others.

"The past eight years would beg to differ with you. With all due respect, you have no idea just how *much* I can handle." She stood abruptly. "Is there anything else?"

"No. Not when you won't listen to reason."

She didn't rise to the bait. She simply wanted to be gone. "If you'd like, I will send a graciously worded response to the Minister thanking him for the honor of considering me but regretfully declining due to other obligations."

"That won't be necessary. I'll inform him."

“Suit yourself.” She pivoted and headed for the door.

“Alexis?”

She paused mid-stride—an inborn response to a mother’s plea—but didn’t look back.

“At least be careful out there.”

A tight nod and she was gone.



It was well past twenty-three hundred when Alex got home. The bot had found two micro-imperfections in the fiber which had to be rewoven. Then the diagnostics had to be run again, the ware re-modded, and the power system ratios recalibrated *again* before she closed the ship up for the night. Securing the line to the hull and shielding it would have to wait until the morning.

She opened a bottle of Swiss cabernet and left it to breathe while she ran through the shower, then combed out her hair and slipped on a silk robe to wear back downstairs.

A glass of the cabernet in hand, she stepped out onto the balcony. The glittering night lights of the city spread out beneath her, the light reflecting off the full moon mirrored in the Sound beyond.

She didn’t pour *all* her profits into her ship. The loft eighty stories above downtown had cost more than a few credits; the custom tech installed in it nearly as much again. Though she was only here maybe three months out of a given year, she wasn’t above enjoying at least a few of the finer things her income now afforded her.

As the glass touched her lips her thoughts drifted to Malcolm. She hadn’t done so in some time, but after the mention of him today quite a few memories had crept to the forefront of her mind. Most of them were good...she *had* loved him, after all.

But according to him she loved her ship more, and that was

something he couldn't accept. And since he was mostly right, she hadn't fought him when he left.

She had missed him for a while, missed his warm smile and tender yet expert touch. But she had also welcomed the absence of the invisible leash which had tugged her back to Earth more often than she liked, which had whispered of duties to another and required explanations and justifications for every excursion. And eventually even the good memories had faded into the background, replaced by the thrill of new endeavors.

Her thoughts continued to linger on the past as she walked inside and her gaze fell to the far wall of the open room that constituted the entirety of the loft, save for the kitchen and the elevated sleeping area overlooking the main floor.

It was decorated in visuals she had captured in her travels across the galaxy. They included a supernova in bright, perpetual explosion, a comet on a flyby of a crescent moon, the slow pulse of a ghostly blue and lavender nebula and the gamma flare of a neutron star.

Those and others framed the centerpiece of the wall: a panoramic side-on image of the Milky Way, taken far from the light pollution of any suns or haze of any nebulae. Trillions of stars shone and sparkled to converge on the brilliance of the galactic core.

Malcolm hadn't been exactly right. Yes, she loved her ship more than she had loved him. But what she loved even more was what it *gave* her: freedom, and the key to the marvels of space. It gave her the stars, and she doubted she could ever love anything or anyone more than she loved the stars.

Speaking of...she refilled her glass and settled onto the couch. She sent a passcode to the control interface and the opposite wall dissolved into a three-dimensional holo of the nearest quadrant of

the galaxy. A slight wave of her hand and it zoomed into the Metis Nebula and its environs.

Near to but definitively outside Federation-controlled territory and on the outer edge of explored space, it would take her five days to reach the periphery—far less time than most, but still a trek. It was an allegedly uninteresting, ordinary plerion wrapped in an ancient, gas-heavy supernova remnant which had stubbornly refused to dissipate into the interstellar medium.

But she had made a small fortune by seeing what others did not. The ‘experts’ had said the Lacertae asteroid ring was nothing but dead rocks until she had found the ultra-rare heavy metals in the cores of the largest ones. Now Astral Materials was using it to develop frames for space stations they claimed would be strong enough to withstand a Type Ia supernova shockwave.

The golden-blue glow of Metis had caught her attention several excursions ago and had danced and thrummed at the edge of her consciousness ever since. Now flush with the considerable proceeds of the Lacertae find and the resultant ship upgrades, she figured she could afford to indulge a hunch for a month or so.

Her eyes widened deliberately, pupils dilated and ocular implant flashing as she simultaneously reviewed the data she had pulled in her library query of the scientific archives—which was appallingly sparse—scrolling up her eVi, the rotating full-spectrum image of the Nebula, and her own data flowing alongside it.

“Well, you lovely, mysterious Metis...what secrets do you have to show me?”

2

SENECA

CAVARE, CAPITAL OF THE SENECAN FEDERATION

The kinetic blade slid into the man's throat like a knife through butter. Caleb held him securely from behind as the blood began to flow and the man jerked and spasmed.

He generally preferred clean, painless deaths. But he wanted to watch this man die, and die slowly.

When the man had lost all motor function, Caleb dumped him onto the desk and flipped him over. Eyes wide with fear, confusion and outrage met his. The man's lips contorted in a caricature of speech, though no words came out.

He had a good idea of the intended utterance. Why. It was a question easily answered. Vengeance.

"Justice."

As the pool of blood spread across the desk and formed waterfalls to the floor below, the eyes belonging to the leader of the Humans Against Artificialists terrorist organization glazed over. The last spark of life within them dimmed, then went out.

One down.



Caleb Marano stepped out of the spaceport into the cyan-tinged glow of a late afternoon sun reflecting off the polished marble tiles of the plaza. The chill breeze caressing his skin felt like a welcome home. Cavare was always cool and often cold; Krysk had been a veritable oven by comparison.

He descended the first set of stairs and angled toward the corner to get clear of the bustling thoroughfare, then relaxed beside the ledge to wait for his companions.

Isabela exited the spaceport a moment later. She held a bag in one arm and a fidgeting bundle of arms, legs and long, dark curls in the other. She looked disturbingly ‘momish’ as she struggled to brush out Marlee’s tangled hair—but he could remember when she had *been* that little girl with long, dark curls...and it wasn’t so long ago.

With a groan she gave up the futile endeavor and allowed her daughter to escape her grasp and make a beeline for Caleb.

He crouched to meet Marlee at eye level. She plowed into him with almost enough force to knock him over backwards. He would’ve laughed but for the forlorn look in her pale turquoise eyes.

“Do you have to go away now, Uncle Caleb?”

He tousled her curls into further disarray. “Yeah, I’m afraid I have to go back to work. But it sure was great spending my vacation with you. I learned a *lot*.”

She wore her best serious face as she nodded sagely. “You had a lot to learn.”

He grinned and leaned in to whisper to his co-conspirator. “You remember what all we talked about, right?”

Her eyes were wide and honest. “Uh-huh.”

“Good. Want one more ride before I go?”

Her head bobbed up and down with gusto, instantly that of a carefree child again.

“Okay.” He scooped her up in his arms and stood, made certain he had a solid grasp of her tiny waist, and began to spin around with accelerating speed. Her arms and legs dangled free to swing through the air while she cackled in delight.

After another few spins he slowed—he had learned her limits during the last few weeks—letting her limbs fall against him before he came to a stop. He gave her a final squeeze and gently set her to the ground as her mother reached them.

Isabela wore a half-amused, half-exhausted expression as Marlee started running in dizzy circles around her legs. “Sorry about the hold up. They let us back on the transport and we found Mr. Freckles under the seat.” She patted her bag in confirmation of the stuffed animal’s now secure location. “Are you sure you don’t want to have a quick dinner with us?”

He responded with a dubious smirk. “You can be polite if you like, but the truth is you are sick to death of me and counting the minutes until you are at last rid of me.”

“Well, *yes*. But I never know when I’ll get to see you again...” The twinkle faded from her eyes, replaced by something darker and heavier.

She knew he didn’t work for a shuttle manufacturing company, and he knew that she knew. But they never, *ever*, talked about it. Partly for her safety and his, but partly because he preferred to continue being in her mind the strong, stalwart older brother with the easygoing demeanor and wicked sense of humor, without introducing any moral grayness to the relationship dynamic.

Because he never wanted her to look at him with caution, disillusionment...or worst of all, fear.

He merely nodded in response. “I’ll come visit again soon. Promise.”

She reached down to pause the cyclone at her legs. “I’ll hold you to it. I’m going to take Marlee to see Mom, then we’ll head back home.”

He leaned over the struggling cyclone to embrace her. “Thank you for the extended hospitality. I’m glad I was able to spend so much time with you.”

“Anytime, I mean it,” she whispered in his ear. “Stay safe.”

He kept his shrug mild as he stepped away. “Of course.” Not likely.

Two insistent and tearful hugs from Marlee later, they parted ways. He watched them disappear into the throng of travelers, then headed in the direction of the parking complex.



Caleb stepped in the adjoining lavatory and washed the blood off his hands and forearms. Then he returned to the office, reached under the corner of the desk and triggered the ‘Alert’ panic signal—the one he had never allowed the dead man to reach. There was a surveillance cam hidden in the ceiling, and he looked up at it and smiled. He had a number of smiles in his repertoire; this was not one of the more pleasant ones.

The commotion began as he exited the building. He quickened his stride to his bike, jumped on and fired the engine. Three men bolted out the door, two Daemons and a TSG swinging in his direction.

It wouldn’t do to get shot. A flick of his thumb and the bike burst out of the parking slot. He laid it down as laser fire sliced barely a meter overhead, his leg hovering centimeters above the ground while he slid around the corner and onto the cross-street.

He heard them giving chase almost immediately. So late in the night the street and air traffic was sparse, which was one reason he had begun the op when he did. It reduced the chances of his pursuers taking out innocent bystanders—and gave them a clearer line of sight to him. He wanted to make certain they knew where he was going before he left them behind.

Their surface vehicles didn’t stand a chance of matching his speed and it would look suspicious if he slowed...but as anticipated, they had grabbed a sky-car. He kept an eye on it via the rearcam, making sure it succeeded in following him through two major direction shifts.

Satisfied, he kicked the bike into its actual highest gear and accelerated right then left, fishtailing around two street corners in rapid succession. He activated the concealment shield. It didn't render him or the bike invisible, but it did make them blend into the surroundings and virtually impossible to track from the air at night.

Then he sped toward the Bahia Mar spaceport. After all, he did need to get there ahead of them.



Tiny flecks of light sparkled in the night-darkened waters of the Fuori River as Caleb pulled in the small surface lot. It was nearly empty, as most people took the levtrams to the entertainment district and had no need of parking.

Once the engine had purred into silence he swung a leg off the bike and glanced up. A smile ghosted across his face at the dozens of meteors streaking against the silhouette of the giant moon which dominated Seneca's sky.

He noted the time. He had a few minutes to enjoy a little stargazing, though the conditions were far from ideal here in the heart of downtown. An exanet query confirmed the meteor shower continued for eleven days. Maybe he'd have a chance to get up to the mountains before it ended.

Committed to this plan, he secured the bike in its slot. A last glance at the sky and he crossed the street and took the wide steps to the riverwalk park.

The atmosphere on the broad promenade hovered at the optimal balance between deserted and overrun by masses of people. As it was a weekend night the balance wouldn't hold for long, but for the moment it pulsed with energy while still allowing plenty of room to move about and claim your own personal space. He noted

with interest the outdoor bar to the right, complete with live synth band and raised danced platform. *Not yet. Business first.*

He slipped among the milling patrons until he reached a section of railing at the edge of the promenade to the southeast of the bar. Here the crowd had thinned to a few meandering couples and the music thrummed softly in the background.

The light from the skyscrapers now drowned out the light from the meteors, but he couldn't argue with the view.

A thoroughly modern city to the core, humans having initially set foot on its soil less than a century ago, Cavare glittered and shone like a sculpture newly unveiled. The reflected halo of the moon shimmered in the tranquil water as the river rippled along the wall beneath him, winding itself through the heart of the city on its way to Lake Fuori. Far to his left he could see the gleam of the first arch which marked the dramatic entrance to the lake and the luxuries it held.

It was an inspiring yet comforting view, and one he had spent close to forty years watching develop, mature and grow increasingly more lustrous. He contented himself with enjoying it while he waited for his appointment to arrive.

The message had come in the middle of dinner at his favorite Chinasian restaurant. He hadn't even had the chance to go home yet; the entirety of the belongings he had traveled with were stowed in the rear compartment of his bike. But in truth there wasn't much of consequence waiting for him at the apartment, for it was home in only the most technical sense of the word.

Never have anything you can't walk away from. A gem of advice imparted by a friend and mentor early on in his career, and something he had found remarkably easy to adopt.



He stowed the bike in a nearby stall he had rented in yet another assumed name and hurried to Bay F-18. He made a brief pass through the ship to make sure the contact points on the charges were solid, then sat in the pilot's chair, kicked his feet up on the dash and crossed his hands behind his head to wait.

They were hackers as much as terrorists. It wouldn't take them long to break the encryption to the bay. The encryption on the ship's airlock was stronger—for they would expect it to be—but not so difficult they couldn't crack it.

Planting enough charges at the headquarters to take it out would have involved significant risk of discovery and ultimate failure. But here, he controlled every step and every action.

The hangar bay door burst open. Three...six...eight initially. He sincerely hoped more showed up before they got into the ship.

His wish was granted when three minutes later seven additional members of the group rushed in. The surface pursuit, he imagined. The initial arrivals were still hacking the ship lock. He gave them another two minutes.

With a last gaze around he pulled his feet off the dash and stood. He headed through the primary compartment and below to the mid-level, opened the hatch to the engineering well, and positioned himself in the shadowy corner near the stairs.

They wouldn't all come in at once, lest they end up shooting each other in the confusion. Three, maybe four to start, plus two to guard the airlock. They would fan out to run him to ground quickly.

The first man descended the stairs. As his left foot hit the deck Caleb grabbed him from behind and with a fierce wrench snapped his neck. He made a point to throw the body against the stairwell so the loud clang echoed throughout the ship.

Two down.

Caleb looked over his shoulder to see Michael Volosk striding down the steps toward him. Right on time. Everything about the man's outward demeanor projected an image of consummate professionalism, from the simple but perfectly tailored suit to the close-cropped hair to the purposeful stride.

He extended his hand in greeting as the Director of Special Operations for the Senecan Federation Division of Intelligence approached. A mouthful worthy of the highest conceit of government; but to everyone who worked there, it was simply "Division."

Volosk grasped his hand in a firm shake and took up a position along the rail beside him. "Thanks for agreeing to meet me here. I have a syncrosse rec league game down the street in twenty minutes, and if I miss another game they'll kick me off the team." He wore a slight grimace intended to hint at the many responsibilities a high-level covert intelligence official was required to juggle...then presumably realized the impression it actually conveyed, because he shifted to a shrug. "It's the only opportunity I have to blow off steam."

Caleb smiled with studied, casual charm. "It's not a problem. I just got in anyway. And if the surroundings happen to discourage prying eyes, well, I appreciate the value of discretion."

Volosk didn't bother to deny the additional reason for the choice of meeting location. "It wouldn't hurt if your coworkers didn't know you were back on the clock yet—and that's one reason I chose you. Your reputation is impressive."

He chuckled lightly and ran a hand through disheveled hair made wild by the wind. "Perhaps I'm not discrete *enough*, then."

"Rest assured, it's on a need-to-know basis. I realize we haven't had many opportunities to work together yet, but Samuel always spoke of you in the highest terms."

He schooled his expression to mask the emotions the statement provoked. "I'm humbled, sir. He was a good man."

"He was." Volosk's shoulders straightened with his posture—a signal he was moving right on to business, as though it didn't *matter* how good a man Samuel had been. "What do you know about the Metis Nebula?"

Caleb's brow creased in surprise. Whatever he had been expecting, this wasn't it. *Okay. Sure.*

"Well, mostly that we don't know much about it. It's outside Federation space, but we've tried to investigate it a few times—purely scientific research of course. We know there's a pulsar at the center of it, but scans return a fuzzy mess across the spectrum. Probes sent in find nothing but ionized gases and space dust. Scientists have written it off as unworthy of further study. Why?"

"You're very well informed, Agent Marano. Do a lot of scientific reading in your spare time?"

"Something like that."

"I'm sure. The information I'm sending you is Level IV Classified. Fewer than a dozen people inside and out of the government are aware of it."

He scanned the data file. In the background the synth band shifted to a slow, rhythmic number threaded by a deep, throbbing bass line. "That's...odd."

"Quite. The Astrophysics Institute sent in a state of the art, prototype deep space probe—the most sensitive one ever built, we believe. Honestly, it was solely for testing purposes. The researchers thought Metis' flat profile offered a favorable arena to run the probe through its paces. Instead it picked up what you see there.

"Obviously we need to get a handle on what this is. It came to my desk because it may represent a hostile threat. We've put a hold on any scientific expeditions until we find out the nature of the

anomaly. If it is hostile, the sooner we know the better we can prepare. If on the other hand it's an opportunity—perhaps a new type of exploitable energy resource—we want to bring it under our purview before the Alliance or any of the independent corporate interests learn of it.”

Caleb frowned at his companion. “I understand. But to be frank, my missions are usually a bit more..physical in nature? More direct at least, and typically involving a tangible target.”

“I'm aware of that. But your experience makes you one of the few people in Division both qualified to investigate this matter and carrying a security clearance high enough to allow you to do so.”

It wasn't an inaccurate statement. And if he were honest with himself, it *would* probably be best if he went a little while without getting more blood on his hands.



He slid open the hidden compartment in the wall and climbed into the narrow passage, pushed the access closed using his foot and crawled along the sloped tunnel. When he got to the end he activated his personal concealment shield—which did very nearly make him invisible—and with a deft twist released the small hatch.

He rolled as he hit the ground to mask the sound. The lighting in the bay was purposefully dim, and he landed deep in the shadow of the hull.

As expected, there was a ring of men guarding the exterior of the ship. He waited for the closest man to turn his back, then slipped out and moved to the corner of the bay to settle behind the storage crates he had arranged to have delivered earlier in the day.

He was rewarded by the arrival at that moment of an additional six—no, seven—pursuers. A significant majority of the active members were now inside the hangar bay. Good enough.

They moved to join their brethren encircling the ship—and he sent the signal.

The walls roiled and bucked from the force of the explosion. White-hot heat blasted through his shield. The shockwave sent him to his knees even as the floor shuddered beneath him. Pieces of shrapnel speared into the wall above him and to his right. A large section of the hull shot out the open side of the bay and crashed to the street below.

One glance at the utter wreckage of his former ship confirmed they were all dead. He climbed to his feet and crossed to the door, dodging the flaming debris and burnt, dismembered limbs. The emergency responders could be heard approaching seconds after he disappeared down the corridor.

He didn't de-cloak until he reached the bike. He calmly fired it up, cruised out of the stall, and accelerated toward the exit.

Mission fucking accomplished.



Caleb nodded in acceptance. “I’ll need a new ship. My last one was, um, blown up.”

“My understanding is that’s because *you* blew it up.” The expression on the Director’s face resembled mildly sardonic amusement.

He bit his lower lip in feigned chagrin, revealing what he judged to be the appropriate touch of humility. “Technically speaking.”

Volosk sent another data file his way. “Regardless, it’s been taken care of. Here’s the file number and all the standard information, including the hangar bay of your *new* ship.”

He ignored the mild barb and examined this data with greater scrutiny, but it appeared everything had in fact been taken care of. “Got it. This all looks fine.”

“Good...there’s one more thing. It’s no secret with Samuel gone there’s a leadership vacuum in the strategic arm of Special Operations. He believed you were quite capable of taking on a larger role. Based on your record—a few isolated *excesses* aside—and what I know of you, I’m inclined to agree. So while you’re out there in the void, I’d encourage you to give some thought to what you truly want from this job. We can talk further when you return.”

Caleb made sure his expression displayed only genuine appreciation, carefully hiding any ambivalence or disquiet. “Thank you for the vote of confidence, sir. I’ll do that.”

“Glad to hear it. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to go get my ass kicked by ten other men and a cocky, VI-enhanced metal ball, after which I get to go back to the office and review the Trade Summit file for the seventeenth time this week.”

He grimaced in sympathy. It was impossible to escape the growing media frenzy surrounding the conference, even with it over a week away.

Twenty-two years had passed since the end of the Crux War; it had been over and done with before he was old enough to fight. The cessation of hostilities after three years was officially called an ‘armistice,’ but Seneca and fourteen allied worlds had—by the only measure which mattered—won. They had their independence from the mighty Earth Alliance.

Now some politician somewhere had decided it was finally time for them to start playing nice with one another. He wished them luck, but... “If it’s all the same, I’d just as soon *not* be assigned to that one, sir. It’s going to be a clusterfain of epic proportions.”

Volosk exhaled with a weariness Caleb suspected was more real than contrived. “Don’t worry, you’re off the hook—wouldn’t want to endanger your work by putting your face in front of so

many dignitaries. *I*, however, won't get a decent night's sleep until the damn thing's finished."

Caleb sighed in commiseration, playing along with the superficial bonding moment. It seemed the higher-ups had decided he was worthy of being nurtured, at least enough to make certain he stayed in the fold. Bureaucrats. They had no clue how to manage people; if they did, they would realize he was the last person who needed *managing*.

"Well, I'm sorry I can't help you there, sir. But I will head out on this mission once I've pulled together what I need. It should be a few days at most."

Volosk nodded, transitioning smoothly to the closing portion of the meeting. "Please report in as soon as you discover anything relevant. We need to understand what we're dealing with, and quickly."

He responded with a practiced smile, one designed to convey reassurance and comfort. "Not to worry, I'll take care of it. It's what I do." He decided it was best to leave *when I'm not blowing up three million credit ships and two dozen terrorists with them* unsaid.

After all, he fully intended to *try* to return this ship in one piece.



After Volosk had departed, Caleb remained by the river for a while. His outward demeanor was relaxed, save for the rapid tap of fingertips on the railing.

He had been on leave ever since the post-op debriefs for the previous assignment had wrapped up. Whether the vacation had been a reward or a punishment he wasn't entirely sure, despite Volosk's vague hint at a promotion. Nor did he particularly care. He

had accomplished what he had set out to do, justice had been served—albeit with a spicy dash of vengeance—and the bad guys were all dead. But it appeared it was time to get back to work.

The serenity of the cool night breeze and river-cleansed air juxtaposed upon the pulsing thrum of the music and swelling buzz of the crowd made for an appropriate backdrop. Time to retune himself.

He had enjoyed spending time with Isabela and her family, especially getting to play the bad uncle and fill Marlee’s head with rebellious and unruly ideas sure to drive her mother crazy for months. The little girl had spunk; it was his duty to encourage it.

It had been a welcome respite. But it wasn’t his life.

He pushed off the railing and strolled down the promenade to the bar area. The throbbing of the bass vibrated pleasantly on his skin as he neared. He ordered a local ale and found a small standing table which had been abandoned in favor of the dance floor. He rested his elbows on it, sipped his beer and surveyed the crowd.

It was amusing, and occasionally heartbreaking, to see how people doggedly fumbled their way through encounters. All the cybernetics in the world couldn’t replace real, human connection, which was likely why physical sex was still the most popular pastime in the galaxy, despite the easy availability of objectively better-than-real *passione illusoire*. Humans were social animals, and craved—

“What are you drinking?”

He glanced at the woman who had sidled up next to him. Long, razor-straight white-blond hair framed a face sculpted to perfection beyond what genetic engineering alone could achieve. A white iridescent slip minimally covered deep golden skin. Silver glyphs wound along both arms and up the sides of her neck to disappear beneath the hairline.

He smiled coolly. "I'm fine, thanks."

She dropped a hand on the table and posed herself against it. "Yes, you are. Would you like to dance?"

He suppressed a laugh at the heavy-handed come-on. "Thank you, but..." a corner of his mouth curled up "...you're not really my type."

Her eyes shone with polished confidence. She believed she was in control. How *cute*.

"I can be any type you want me to be." The glyphs glowed briefly as her hair morphed to black, her makeup softened and her skin tone paled.

So that's what the glyphs were for. A waste of credits born of a desperate need to be wanted. He gave the woman a wry grin and shook his head. "No thanks."

She scowled in frustration; it marred the perfect features into ugliness. "Why not? What the hell is your type?"

He took a last sip of his beer and dropped the empty bottle on the table. "Real."

He walked away without looking back.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

A complete list of where *STARSHINE* is available (and links to each listing) can be found at www.gsjennsen.com/books.

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Also, you can always email me at gsjennsen@gmail.com with questions or comments.

I look forward to hearing from you, and I hope you continue to enjoy the world of *AURORA RISING*.