

SPACE CRAZY

BY
K. ROWE

Copyright 2011 by K. Rowe at Smashwords

All rights reserved. This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to Smashwords.com and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of the author.

The final approval for this literary material is granted by the author.

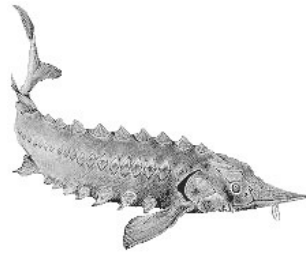
First printing

All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

ISBN 10: 1463673159

ISBN 13: 978-1463673154

Image of Dar drawn by Erika Brown.



Published by:
Sturgeon Creek Publishing

Facebook: K. Rowe-Author

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/K-Rowe-Author/136794706391542>

Twitter: Sturgeon3736

**“It is not in the stars to hold our destiny but in ourselves.”
– William Shakespeare**



1

“Dar? Dar? Dar Meltom, get in here!” Denrika called.

“Yeeessssss, Mmmootthhheerr,” Dar replied, teeth chattering, shrouded in the blackness of night, and watching the stars from their patio. It was the dead of winter on Erotis 3; the temperatures hovered around freezing on the semi-arid planet.

“How many times have I told you not to be out so long?”

Dar appeared in the warm glow of the patio door. “Sorry, mother; I wanted to watch the meteor shower tonight.”

“Get in here before you catch cold.”

He trudged inside, sad that he’d be missing the best part. Dar was sixteen years old, and life for him wasn’t easy. Born of a purebred Satiren mother, and the extremely unlikely crossing of an Earthling father; Dar had been picked on most of his life. He stood close to six feet tall and still had the lanky build of a youngling. “If I put a coat on, can I go back out?” he begged.

She rolled her eyes. “What is it with you? Always looking at the stars.”

“I like them, they don’t judge me.”

“Is your school work done?”

Dar nodded. “Yes, mother, I finished it a couple hours ago.” He gave her his best pleading expression.

Denrika pulled her hands through her head of lush green hair. “All right, I suppose so... But only because it’s the weekend.”

“Thank you!” He grabbed her and gave her a big kiss on the cheek. “I’ll be in by two; it should be almost over by then.” Dar dashed off to grab his coat.

“Don’t forget—tomorrow, you’re going to work with me.”

“Yes, mother,” he said, hurrying outside.

She watched him disappear into the darkness. Closing the door, Denrika put her hand on the glass. “You belong to the stars, my son.”

The Erotin settlement of Aknarra was generally a sleepy little town. It resembled many of the other small outposts that dotted the landscape. The majority of the planet was covered in a semi-desert environment. Occasionally a sand storm would blow in, leaving everything covered in a thin film of dust. Water wasn’t too much of a problem, wells were sunk deep into the planet’s crust, and the rainy season usually started in the month of Judin and ran through Optious. Lakes would form from the run-off and help support the communities through the long, dry winters. There was a large body of water, Lake Aknarra, that remained year-round.

Most towns boasted a population of a few thousand. They were well organized with a town council, schools for younglings, and commerce. For those who lived and worked there, it

wasn't a bad living. But each town could only grow so much as it battled the incursion from the desert; and finding jobs for younglings leaving school tended to be challenging.

Erotis was a refugee planet. Other species of aliens which were displaced from their planets by war, famine, or disease, would move in, set up towns, and call the planet home. Many of the settlements were fashioned after a single race of alien, their trade, education, and laws dictated by the majority species. Trade between the outposts was common, and no one gave any thought to starting wars or squabbles, there wasn't a need.

Dar's mother worked in the general store on Main Street. She shunned the common Satiren occupation of prostitution. Instead, she wanted to raise her son in a normal upbringing, despite not having a father. The hours at the store were long, and the pay just enough to cover expenses. Denrika longed to give her son more than a meager existence. Sure, prostitution paid twenty to thirty times more than she made, but Denrika stuck to her morals. For years, she'd sought out males, hoping they would accept her as a mate. But having Dar made matters difficult. No purebred Satiren male would tolerate a half breed in his home.

Hefting a box of canned goods onto his shoulder, Dar came from the storeroom and onto the sales floor. As a half breed, he wasn't quite as big as the other males in his class, but he was fairly strong. Carefully, he set them down, and opened the box. He made quick work of stocking the shelves. Helping his mother didn't bother him. It tended to be safer than roaming the streets.

The bell above the door clanged as someone came in. Dar poked his head over the shelf to see who it was. Standing in the doorway, a large alien, one he'd never seen before. Erotis 3 also tended to be a stop-over for long haul freighters headed to the furthest reaches of the Ontarrin galaxy. It wasn't uncommon to see a variety of species passing through. Dar thought this one looked curious.

Denrika stood behind the counter. "May I help you?" she said in Universal Ontarrin. It was the common language spoken throughout the galaxy. Most species spoke their native tongue and the universal language.

"Good morning," the alien said in a deep, resonant voice. "I hope you can." His whole frame filled the door, his body clothed in what appeared to be black Catarin hide, contrasting with his tan colored skin. His head sat more on his shoulders, rather than having much of a neck. His eyes were fairly large and brown; his face heavily chiseled with age lines. He bore a few scars on his arms; Dar wondered what they were from.

The big alien carefully closed the door and approached the counter. He towered over Denrika. "My name is Gwog," he said softly. "I'm in need of some supplies."

"Certainly," she replied, picking up a piece of paper and a scribe stylus. "What can I get for you?" She felt quite intimidated by the sheer size of the alien, although he didn't give the impression he wanted to be threatening.

Gwog took a piece of paper out, laid it on the counter, and unfolded it. "Do you have three cases of Iddrian beans?"

Denrika scribbled the information down. "I'm not sure, sir. We can check."

"I'm also in need of some Priddin jerky, a couple bovidis shoulders if you have them, and maybe some game fowl."

“Sounds like you have an army to feed.” She glanced up to see Dar peering over the shelf. “Dar, come here.”

“Yes, mother.” He hurried over. As he drew near to the giant alien, his acute sense of smell took in the deep, rich aroma of the Catarin bovidis hide clothing he wore. They looked new, and smelled wonderful. Dar wanted Catarin hide clothing too; it seemed to be the choice for those canvassing the reaches of space.

“Go in the back and see if we have all of this.”

Dar grabbed the list and disappeared.

Gwog watched him leave. “He’s yours?”

“Yes.”

“Half breed?”

Denrika nodded. “Yes, his father was an Earthling that got sucked through the worm hole near here. They were marooned for a short while...I uh, found him quite attractive and joined with him...Didn’t think a youngling could spawn from a joining like that...You know, considering he was from a different galaxy and all.”

Gwog chuckled. “Mmm, you’d be surprised. My father was Ouzin, my mother, Catarin.”

“Uh, yes, interesting pairing.”

“He took her as spoils of war when Ouzinic and Cataris were fighting it out over space right-of-way.”

“I see.” Denrika fiddled with her fingers. “And you are on a freighter?”

“Yes, I’m captain of the Cunik.”

“How many crew do you have?”

Gwog scratched his head. “About a dozen—most of ’em are half breeds.”

“Any reason for that?”

“Those of us with mixed breeding aren’t viewed upon so nicely. We’re shunned in most respects, despite our intelligence and capabilities.”

“Dar knows how that goes,” Denrika replied.

“The youngling gets picked on?”

“Routinely.”

He nodded. “A hard life for him.”

She was silent for a moment. “Uh, Gwog?”

“Yes?”

“Would you by chance have need for another crew member?”

“Not particularly...Why?”

“My son has his head in the stars. Almost every night he’s out watching them, studying them; and I think, secretly wishing he’d be among them.”

“Being a crew member on a freighter is hard work.”

“I don’t think he’ll mind. He works hard for me here at the store...And once he’s out of school, there’s not much in the way of jobs for him.”

Gwog folded his arms and gave it some thought. “Perhaps...I may have need of an assistant who will help me in charting and plotting courses.”

“He’s done well in his astro-physics course.”

“You say he’s still in school?”

“He’ll be done in a month.”

“Hmm. Well, let me think about it. I’m making a run to Quiddes and will be back this way in just about a month.”

“He’s a good youngling; but I think his place is in the stars.”

Dar trudged from the store room, two bovidis shoulders slung on one of his shoulders, and carrying two cases of beans. “Here’s part of it. I’ll get the rest.” He placed everything on the counter and trotted off to get more.

“Hmm, he’s a strong youngling,” Gwog said, watching.

“I’d love to keep him here to help me, but the store owner won’t pay us both.” Denrika started tallying up the goods. “He’s very bright, but smaller than the other males in his class. And because he’s a half breed, I can’t tell you how many fights he’s been in.”

“Space can be a pretty rough and tumble place, too.” He picked up one of the bovidis shoulders and gave it a sniff. “I can’t promise things will be any easier out there for him.”

“Dar never knew his father, never had a male in his life to teach him things.”

Gwog wagged a finger at her. “I will *not* fuss over him like a new youngling. He’ll be part of my crew, and if it so happens I can *mentor* him, then so be it. But I’m not going to make a concerted effort.”

“It’s time for him to grow up.”

Dar returned, juggling the rest of the supplies. “I’m sorry, sir, but we only have one case of Priddin jerky left.”

“That’s okay. I plan on putting in for supplies on Priddis anyways. I’ll pick some up right from the source.” Gwog studied Dar for a moment. “Youngling, what do you know of Priddis?”

Dar looked up, surprised at being addressed. “Uh, well, sir, I know it’s in the Lambda sector. The Priddins are predominately an agrarian society; farming bovidis, hegorrians, porcinis, and a fair amount of game fowl.” He paused for a moment. “They speak Priddian, a dialect of Perderian, which their ancestors spoke when they migrated from Perderius.”

“Very good,” Gwog said. “Can you speak any of it?”

“A little, sir. I read it better than speak it—we don’t get much of it in language class.”

“Any other languages you speak?”

Dar cocked his head. “Well, sir, I can speak a little Jamaraiian, Sirrixian, Guonin, Gundin, and a tiny bit of Darminian.”

“Do you learn languages easily?”

“Fairly, sir.”

Gwog leaned against the counter; it creaked with his weight, so he stood up. “Your mother says you’re almost done with school.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What would you think about becoming an apprentice on my ship?”

“Ship?”

“I’m captain of the Cunik, the largest freighter in the galaxy.”

Dar looked at his mother, his jaw hanging open. “Mother?”

Denrika sighed, trying to choke back a tear. “Son, you belong to the stars, and this is the only way I can think of getting you there.”

“But, mother...”

“I’ll be fine. You need to grow and become an adult...Please, I’m trying to give you the stars.”

Dar turned to Gwog. "You'd have me as crew?"

"You must prove yourself, of course."

"When would we leave?"

"Your mother says you have a month left of school."

Dar frowned. "Unfortunately."

"I'm headed to Quiddes, and when I return, we'll see if you're ready." He took out a wad of Guonin gold strips. "How much is everything?"

Denrika finished figuring the total. "Two hundred and fifty drig."

Gwog counted the sum and laid it on the counter. "I'll have a couple of my crew come by and pick everything up."

"Thank you, sir," Denrika said, offering her hand. "Uh, my name is Denrika."

He smiled and gently took her hand. "Pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Dar wasn't sure what to do, he was frozen in awe. This was just too good to be true; he would be *going into space*!

Gwog reached out and put his huge hand on Dar's head, messing the shock of green hair on his forehead. "I'll see you in about a month, youngling."

2

The buzzer sounded, indicating the end of the school day. The whole weekend, Dar spent in a dream world. He couldn't believe he'd be going into space. As he collected his reading tablet and several papers, his friend, Garnic, approached. "Hey, I hear Kroodus is looking for you."

Dar swallowed hard. "Shit."

"I hear he's wantin' a piece of you."

"Everyone wants a piece of me. This is 'pick on Dar' year."

Garnic stepped closer. "Come on, it's been 'pick on you' ever since you started school."

"True. But that's gonna change."

"Oh? Just how are you gonna do that?"

"I'm not gonna give 'em a target to pick on." Dar headed from the class into the hall, Garnic followed. "Soon as school is over, I'm out of here."

"Out of here, like how?"

Dar stopped. "Out of here, as in off this planet."

"What?!"

"My mother apprenticed me to a freighter captain. I'll be sailing the stars."

"You're leaving Erotis? What will I do?"

"I dunno, Garnic, your life is your own. My place is up there." He continued on outside. The sun was bright, the weather cool. "I'm tired of being treated like shit." Dar stopped short when he saw Kroodus. "Fuck."

"Well, well, looks like I get to beat on you some more, you runty half breed." Kroodus was the school bully. He'd beaten Dar up more times than he could remember.

"Look, Kroodus, there's only a couple weeks of school. Can't you leave me alone?"

The big Satiren struck an imposing stance. His short cropped green hair didn't even move in the breeze. "I'm gonna beat you every day the rest of your life."

Dar handed his things to Garnic. "I was afraid of that."

"Dar, he's gonna kill you," Garnic said, retreating to a safe distance.

Kroodus tossed his reading tablet on the grass and took a few steps toward Dar. "You have no place being here, *half breed*."

Once again sizing up his opponent, Dar calculated what Kroodus would do. "I have as much right as you do."

Kroodus shot forward and hit Dar in the face. He reeled backward and nearly had to take a knee. The pain in his jaw was exquisite. No, he couldn't let Kroodus win this fight. Getting his feet under him, Dar launched his own attack. He hit Kroodus several times in the chest; his blows had little effect. Instead, the bully only laughed. Kroodus landed a few more punches to Dar's face. The bruises were going to be nasty.

Without much thought, Dar changed tactics. Fighting was dirty business, and he knew he'd need any advantage he could get. Although considered the dirtiest attack in a fight, Dar figured it might give him the advantage. He swung his right leg back slightly and let fly, kicking Kroodus right in the crotch.

“Ahhhh!” Kroodus cried, crumpling to the ground. Dar wasted no time. He jumped on the bully, pummeling him with everything he had; but it wasn’t enough. One solid punch from Kroodus, and Dar found himself on his back in the dirt. The big Satiren stood over him. “How dare you!” Reaching behind his back, he brandished a good sized knife. “Now I really am gonna kill you!”

Dar scrambled to his feet, his heart pounded. Kroodus flipped the knife in his hand a few times. He’d make sure this little half breed got punished for what he did. Launching forward, Kroodus attacked. Dar side-stepped to the left and tried to trap Kroodus’s arm with his; it didn’t exactly work. The bully used his strength and whipped his arm around, slicing Dar on the tip of his right ear. The sting of the blade got his attention, blood trickled down his face. Saying nothing over his pain, Dar balled up his fist and delivered a solid upper-cut to Kroodus’s jaw. He disengaged, momentarily stunned.

“Enough!” Dar barked. The blood continued to drip down his cheek onto his shirt. He reached up and felt the damage. The top third of his softly pointed ear was cut partly through. He debated about just yanking the flopping flesh and cartilage off, but figured maybe it could be saved.

Kroodus flipped the knife in his hand, then charged, the blade aimed at Dar. He had enough momentum that it didn’t take much for Dar to step aside and let the bully roar by. As he passed, Dar slammed his fists into Kroodus’s back, dropping him face first into the dirt. Dust flew into the air as the bully hit. His knife bounced from his hand.

Garnic turned to see the headmaster coming their way. “Dar!”

Snatching the knife, Dar stabbed Kroodus in the forearm. The bully bellowed.

“Dar!” Garnic hollered again. “Come on!”

Dar glanced up, saw the headmaster, tucked the knife behind his back, and ran; Garnic hot on his heels. They ran off school grounds and around a corner before stopping. “I don’t believe you did that!” Garnic said, almost out of breath.

“I’m not gonna let that bully make sandwich meat out of me.” Dar touched his ear. “Great, he fucked up my ear.”

“Your mother’s gonna be pissed!”

He fiddled with his ear more. “She’s seen me beat up plenty of times, what’s new?”

“Beat up, maybe, but not cut up.”

“I’ll be fine.” Taking his tablet from Garnic, he headed home.

Denrika stood looking at Dar. She’d just gotten home from work and saw some drips of blood on the kitchen counter. Going through the house, she tracked him down to the patio. He sat on a lounge chair, his right ear bandaged.

“Now what happened?” she asked.

“A fight, as usual.”

“Who was it this time?”

“Kroodus, as usual,” he replied nonchalantly.

She sat down next to him. “Is your ear okay?”

“I dunno.”

“May I?”

Dar pulled his makeshift bandage off.

“Oh, Dar!” She reached up and gently inspected the wound. “We should take you for stitches.”

“Whatever,” he grumbled, trying to get his school work done.

“You can’t leave it like that.”

“Doesn’t hurt anymore.”

“Yes, but it’s *floppy*.”

He sat up. “So what.” Struggling slightly, he got up and went inside.

Denrika followed him. “Well, at least there’s only a couple weeks left...Then you’ll be off with Gwog.”

“Yeah,” he said softly.

“Don’t you wanna go? All you talk about is the stars.”

Dar stopped just short of his room. “I do, but I guess I’m a little afraid.”

She put her arms around him. “You’ve lived all your life here with me on Erotis; you don’t know anything else...I can understand your fear.”

“And the only friends I have are here—what few there are.”

“Gwog said most of his crew are half breeds, I’m sure you’ll make new friends.” She ran her fingers through his hair. “Hey, your born date is next week; did you wanna have a party?”

“Party?” he scoffed. “I got like *one* friend who would actually come. That’s not much of a party.”

“No females at school?”

“None that would come.”

She kissed him on the forehead. “I’m sorry.”

Dar wiggled from her grasp. “I’ll be fine, mother.”

“Seventeen is an important date, you know.”

“Yes, yes, I know. But no one seems to care when it comes to a half breed.”

“Dar,” she said lowly, reaching up to gently touch his chevron shaped brow ridges.

He decided to change the subject. “Tell me about my father.”

“I’ve told you a hundred times about him.”

“Tell me again,” he pressed.

“Oh, all right.” She motioned to him. “Come sit out here with me.”

Dar tossed his things in his room and joined her in the living room. “Okay.”

Denrika settled into her favorite chair. “Yes, about your father, *again*...He came here from the planet Earth, through a worm hole not too far from here.”

“Earth is in the Milky Way galaxy, right?”

“That’s what he told me.” She fiddled with her hair. “He said he was an astro-naut from a place called *America*.”

“Did he speak Universal Ontarrin? Or Satiren?”

“No, he spoke something he called ‘English’, and in the beginning we had a hard time understanding each other.”

“Did you learn his language?” Dar asked.

“Some, he was much better at learning ours...Although he was here maybe six months.”

“What was his name?”

“Dar, you know his name...It was Edward Meltom.”

“Edward Meltom,” he said softly.

Garnic glanced across at Dar. They were in class, watching a vidograph of a joining. All Satirens, when they reached the age of “awakening,” which was usually about fourteen, received four years of “love school.” Satirens were a unique race amongst many in the Ontarrin galaxy. In addition to the hormones and chemistry needed for normal bodily function; they possessed fifteen other hormones and chemicals exclusively for love. The species had a strong sex drive, designed for finding the right partner, or partners, and forming lasting relationships.

“Pssssttt, Dar,” Garnic hissed.

“What?”

“Hey, look, Miratta.”

Dar looked over his shoulder at the female two desks back. “So?”

“She keeps looking at you.”

“So?” He wasn’t impressed. Not a single female in the whole class would give him the time of day. He knew the purebreds probably had a joining or two, it was quite expected for them to experiment with what they were taught in school. But Dar didn’t have any females interested in him, he knew everyone knew, and it embarrassed him.

“Maybe she wants you.”

“Don’t be silly.”

“A problem, Dar?” the male teacher asked.

“No, sir.”

“Is any of this sinking through that half breed brain of yours?”

“Yes, sir.” Dar was absorbing every ounce of it; he just wasn’t sure when he’d ever get to put it to use. Maybe once he was out in space he’d find a partner to join with that wouldn’t judge him. It wasn’t fun to be the different one.

“Pssssttt,” Garnic pestered.

Dar did his best to ignore him. There was no way Miratta could be interested in him. He felt confident there wasn’t a single female in the Satiren colony of Aknarra that would join with him. A few minutes later, the buzzer sounded and class let out for the day. Dar collected his things and left. Garnic stayed behind to talk to a female, and he figured he’d catch up with Dar on the walk home. As Dar walked down the hall, he felt someone behind him. Please, not Kroodus again, he thought with dread.

“Uh, Dar?” a female voice said.

He stopped and turned, surprised to see Miratta. “Hi.”

“Umm, hey, I was wondering if I could talk to you?”

“Yeah, sure.” He wondered if his luck might be changing. “Wanna go outside?”

“Okay,” she said, following him. They went out, and Dar found a table and bench under a scruffy Gummak tree.

“So, uh, what did you wanna talk to me about?”

“I have Master Franik for Physagrophy.”

“Mmm, I hear he’s tough. Never had him for class. Master Strinin was my Physagrophy teacher”

“Well, uh, he wants us to write a paper on Satiren chemistry.”

“Oh.”

She brushed her bangs off her face. “I was thinking of doing my paper on half Satiren chemistry.”

“You can do that?” he asked, surprised.

“I thought it would make for something different.”

“Ah, I see...So, what do you need of me?”

“Oh, I wanted to hear about your experiences with joinings.”

Dar slumped toward the table, resting his chin on his hands. How embarrassing. Did he want to be truthful and tell her of his lack of experience? Or did he want to lie and use what he’d learned in class? Deep inside, he felt mostly Satiren, but he wondered if his Earthling side played into his chemical make-up. “Miratta?”

“Yes?”

“Are you doing this to be mean?”

“What?!”

“Are you trying to be mean?” he pressed.

“I don’t understand.”

Dar looked her straight in the eyes. “Don’t you think it’s a little mean to ask an unjoined half breed what it’s like?”

She put her hand to her mouth. “Oh, I didn’t know.”

“Well, now you know. I’m a *virgin*, so go ahead and blab it all over school—although I’m sure they have a good idea anyways.”

“Dar, I’m sorry, I really didn’t have any idea.”

“Yeah, right,” he scoffed.

She reached across and tried to take one of his hands. Dar resisted. Miratta gazed into his eyes. “I’m not trying to be mean, really.”

“So, you’re not interested in *me*, just my chemistry.”

“Well, I am writing it for school.”

He shook his head. “Doesn’t matter. In a few weeks, I’m leaving.” Deciding he’d had enough humiliation for the day, Dar got up and headed home. Along the way he ran into Garnic.

“So, what’d Miratta want? I saw you sitting with her on the bench and figured I’d leave you alone,” Garnic said as he strode along.

“She was interested in me all right.”

“Great!”

Dar stopped. “She was interested in my *half breed* chemistry. She’s writing a paper for Master Franik’s class.”

“That’s all she wanted? She didn’t wanna join with you or anything?”

“No. She wanted to use me as her science project because I’m weird.”

Garnic hated to see his best friend down. “Maybe if you worked the angle a little more, you coulda given her a demonstration of your half breed chemistry.”

“No! I doubt she’d wanna have a relationship with someone who is going away soon.”

“I envy you, Dar.”

“Envy me? Yeah, right.”

“I do, really. You’ll be going into space, and just think of all the exotic females you’ll get to join with...Damn, I wish I could come with you.”

“Garnic, believe me, I don’t think it’s going to be that fantastic.”

“My father told me that he’s heard freighter crews telling of wild joinings with other species on the pleasure barges.”

“Maybe so, but I doubt I’ll be living a life like that. I’ll be the lowest man on the crew, so I’m sure I’ll be staying behind to watch the ship while they have a good time...Really, Garnic, that doesn’t matter to me. As much as I’d like to join, I’m not gonna make a big deal out of it if I don’t for a while. I think learning my job is more important.”

3

The school year couldn't get over fast enough for Dar. As the last week came to a close, he realized there were less and less in his class he even considered acquaintances, and Garnic really was his only friend. The Cunik and the unfamiliar territory of space seemed more comforting than the harassment he suffered on a daily basis. At least Krodus left him alone after the stabbing. Dar decided to keep the knife; it might come in handy in space. And if Krodus ever came after him, he'd make sure he returned the knife—perhaps in the other arm.

Walking down the hall, Dar noticed some of the others looking at him differently. It was either his victory over Krodus, or Miratta leaked the secret of his virginity; at any rate, they looked at him. Dar no longer cared. School would be over tomorrow, and he'd hopefully be on his way with Gwog shortly after. Maybe then he wouldn't be teased so badly.

"Hey, Dar!" Garnic hollered.

Dar stopped and turned. "What?"

"My father said he's heard the Cunik is approaching."

He smiled. "Nice to have a friend whose father works in the long-range communications section."

"Oh? Is that all I'm good for?" He gave Dar a jab in the side.

"No, no, sorry. You're my friend, my *only* friend."

"Can't you take me with you?"

Dar scratched his head. "I dunno. Gwog really wasn't too keen on taking me...Mother kinda begged him." He folded his arms. "Besides, you're a purebred, and I'm sure you'll find a female pretty quick."

"Doubt it."

"Why not? You won't be hanging around with me anymore, you'll make more friends."

"But you're my friend, Dar, we've always been friends." Garnic leaned against the wall.

"It's time for us to grow up...I need to go my way, and you, yours. We knew it was coming."

"I just never thought that time would be now."

Krodus walked by. He slowed up, debating if he wanted to mess with Dar. Locking his eyes on the big Satiren, Dar reached behind his back, his hand resting on the knife handle. Krodus changed his mind and kept going. Dar let out an audible sigh.

"Wow, he didn't even mess with you! That was cool!" Garnic said.

"He tries anything, he'll get his knife back—point first."

"Damn, you're sounding like a real space tough."

Dar shook his head. "No, I'm learning no one out there is gonna stick up for me, except me." He regarded Garnic; they were roughly the same height, but his purebred friend was nearly twice as muscular. "You know, you're much bigger than me, why didn't you come to my aid when I got in fights?"

Garnic looked down, scuffing his shoe on the floor. "'Cause I guess I'm game fowl."

"Afraid?!"

"Yeah."

Dar shook his head. "All these years I've gotten the shit beat out of me, and you're afraid?"

"Sorry...But hey, look, you're better for it. You can take care of yourself now."

"I suppose I can."

That evening, Dar stood on the porch. He had a pair of spotting glasses, his eyes trained into darkness. It was a fantastic night. Stars shined brightly, and meteors streaked across the sky. The Erotin moon, Argis was full and hung low on the horizon. As Dar watched one bright star, something obstructed his view. "Hey!" he barked, lowering the glasses. Squinting his eyes, he saw something moving in space. "What the heck is that?" Holding the glasses up, he watched. "Shit! That's a vessel!" He ran inside. "Mother! Mother!"

Denrika was in the kitchen, washing up from dinner. "What?"

"Mother, you gotta see this!"

"What?"

"A ship, a *huge* ship!"

Denrika set down the dish towel and followed Dar. "I wonder if that's the Cunik?" she asked.

"That?!" Dar said, aghast.

"Well, Gwog did say it was the biggest ship in the galaxy."

He held the glasses up and watched. "Wow, if that's the Cunik, that thing must be a mile long!"

"I guess you'll find out soon...Tomorrow's your last day at school." Denrika sat down in one of the patio chairs. "Are you ready to go?"

"I guess so...Seems so inundating."

"You're growing up, time for you to spread your wings and fly."

Dar set the glasses on the low wall. "I don't know when I'll be home again. Will you be all right?"

"I'll be fine. As long as I have a job, I'll be all right."

He sat down across from her. "Have you ever been in space, mother?"

"Yes, many, many years ago. I was a tiny youngling when your grandparents came from Satiris. They were older when they had me, and died when I was about fifteen. I've been on my own for quite a while."

"What was it like?"

"Space? I don't remember, I was so young."

He gazed up to see the Cunik slowly passing over. "I'll come home when I can."

"I know you will...You're a good son, Dar. I'm happy you've been in my life."

"How could you say that? I mean, if it weren't for me, you might've taken up with a male and life-joined...Because of me, they want nothing to do with you."

Denrika got up and went over to him. "Dar, you've brought so much joy to my life. You have to understand that while Satirens are more or less programmed for love; that love can take on many different facets."

"But isn't the goal of every Satiren to mate? To have a wife or two? Or a husband or two?"

“You of all know there’s little perfect in this world.” She ran her fingers through the soft patch of green hair that covered his forehead. “But we’re survivors, and we do what we have to.” Her fingers trailed down the back of his head, feeling the different texture of the dark brown hair that covered the rest of his head.

“Do you think you’ll find someone when I’m gone?” he asked.

“I dunno.” Denrika reached over and took the torn flap of his right ear between her fingers. She tried to make it stand up, but the point refused, drooping down. “I imagine I’ll be lonely without you. Should a male invite me, I might take up with him.”

“After all you’ve done for me, you deserve to be happy.”

She leaned forward and pressed her lips to his brow ridges. “I’ll be happy knowing you’re following your dreams.”

The last day of school let out. There was no fancy graduation for the senior class; simply a few pieces of paper handed to each student indicating their grades and a “diploma” of sorts. They were now “adults” and expected to make their own way in society.

Dar shoved the papers into his coat pocket along with his reading tablet. He figured it might be handy to keep around, especially since it had loads of information on other alien species. Each student was required to purchase a tablet, so when school was over, it became theirs to keep. He made a beeline for the general store where Denrika worked. Half way there, he got intercepted by Garnic.

“Hey! Dar!” Garnic ran over to him.

“What?”

“My father said the Cunik’s put in stationary orbit.”

“I think I saw it last night; fucking huge ship!”

“Really?”

Dar held out his arms. “It looked like a mile long.”

“Wow. I bet you can’t wait, huh?”

They reached the front stoop of the store. Dar leaned against one of the support posts. “I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t afraid,” he said softly.

“Goin’ into the big, bad void of space, who wouldn’t?”

“I just hope I made the right decision.”

Garnic opened the door. “Come on, let’s have one more Erotin sage root float before you go.”

Dar smiled. “I’m gonna miss those.”

“Well, think of all the new stuff you’ll get to try.”

He looked around for his mother, she must be in the back, he thought as he slid behind the counter and started preparing their drinks. Garnic stood at the counter.

“You want three scoops?” Dar asked.

“Of course!”

Denrika came from the back. “What mischief are you up to?”

“Sage root floats, mother.”

“Oh, all right. Don’t make a mess, I just cleaned up back there.” She went to stock some shelves.

“I won’t, I won’t.” He served Garnic a drink, then finished making his own. Choosing to stay behind the counter, Dar happily sipped on it. “Mmm, good!”

Garnic leaned over. “As much as I like your mother’s sage root floats, yours are better,” he whispered.

“I put a bit more sage in it than she does.”

The bell above the door clanged and Gwog strolled in. Garnic turned around and gasped at the sheer size of the alien.

“Good afternoon,” Gwog said in his most polite tone.

Denrika looked up from her work. “Greetings, Gwog.”

“Greetings.” He gave her a nod, and went to the counter. “Hello, Dar.”

“Sir,” Dar said nervously.

“Are you done with school?”

“Yes, sir—finished today.” He pointed to Garnic. “This is my best friend, Garnic.”

“Nice to meet you, Garnic,” Gwog said with a nod. He pointed to their drinks. “I’ll have one of those as long as you’re playing bartender.”

“Sage root float?” Dar asked.

“I may be a big, ugly alien, but that doesn’t mean I don’t like a sweet treat once in a while.”

“Yes, sir! Coming right up!” He quickly whipped up another drink and slid it across the counter.

Gwog picked up the glass, gave it a sniff, and took a sip. “Ah, most excellent!” He took a long swallow. “I shall have you make these for me once in a while.”

“Yes, sir.”

He took a few more swallows before setting the glass down. “Tell me, youngling, have you ever tasted Darminian chocolate?”

Dar shook his head. “No, sir.” He tugged at the tip of his left ear. “But I hear Satirens have ears like Darminian kittens.”

He chuckled. “Mmm, yes. Darminian chocolate coupled with Erotin sage, a taste to die for!”

“I look forward to seeing what the galaxy has to offer.”

Gwog lifted the glass to his lips. “So you’ve made up your mind?”

“Yes, sir. As difficult as the thought of leaving my mother is; if I don’t, I may never get another chance like this.”

“No, you may not...But, youngling, I’m not going to fuss over you—I expect you to work hard.”

“I can do my fair share of work.”

Gwog finished off his drink. “Are you ready to go?”

“I wasn’t sure when you’d be here, sir, so I have some things packed. But I still have a little more to do.”

“Well, youngling, let’s get your things, I want to break orbit by sundown.”

“Yes, sir!” Dar chugged down the last of his float. “Can we come back here so I can say good-bye to mother?”

“Of course.”

Garnic stood with a sad expression on his face. “I’m going to miss you, best friend.”

Dar held his hand out. "I'll miss you too, best friend."

"Promise you'll come visit?" He took Dar's hand.

"Every chance I get." Dar grabbed him and turned it into a hug. Perhaps that wasn't the best thing to do in front of Gwog, hugging was a *youngling* thing, and now he was an *adult* and expected to act like one.

As he slid his grasp from Garnic, Dar looked at Gwog. "The house is at the end of the street; just a few minutes' walk."

"Let's go then. We still have a shuttle ride to make." Gwog opened the door and ushered Dar out. When they were outside, and away from Garnic and Denrika, he put his hand on Dar's shoulder. "You know space is dangerous?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you still want to go?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm not going to coddle or fuss over you like a youngling. I expect you to work. If you don't, I'll drop you back to your mother on my next trip through."

Dar squared his shoulders. "I'm not afraid of work."

"All right, then, let's get your things and get going."

4

Dar's heart pounded, his throat went dry, and he shook nervously. He was in *space*. The good-byes to his mother and Garnic were bitter sweet. He hoped he could come home in a few months and see them. But space life tended to be busy; Gwog took jobs all over the galaxy, and Dar knew he'd be away for quite some time. He felt confident they would be all right.

The small shuttle approached the stern of the Cunik. Dar pressed his face against the glass in the back compartment trying to take in every ounce of the spectacle. He was so excited he felt ill. His stomach churned, and nervous prickles shot through his body. In a few minutes he'd be standing inside his new home.

"Youngling?" Gwog called.

"Yes, sir?"

"Come up here."

Dar took the few steps forward to the cockpit compartment. "Yes, sir?"

"Take a seat." Gwog gestured to the empty co-pilot seat.

He kept his eyes focused out the window, the freighter loomed even closer. Carefully, he slid into the seat. "Wow."

"Now, take your hands and rest them lightly on the helm."

"Yes, sir." Dar did as instructed.

"As part of my crew, you'll learn everything you can about the Cunik, the shuttles, weapons, and cargo handling equipment."

"Yes, sir."

"Your mother said you did well in astro-physics."

"Yes, sir, I had the highest grades in the class," Dar replied.

"Good, good. Then I'm sure you're familiar with mapping and charting."

"They taught us some; most of it was terrestrial mapping."

Gwog made a slight adjustment in course. "Space isn't much different—there's just another dimension to worry about."

"The Y axis, right? The third dimension."

"Correct. Although the Ontarrin galaxy is more of a spiral galaxy, and the concentric rings hold all the planets, you do have a variation in those rings where the planets actually lie...And you need to know where all the drifting meteor and asteroid belts are."

"Ah, yes, I suppose those would be rather dangerous," he said, still holding his gaze out the window.

"So, what do you know of our galaxy?"

Dar felt his breath catch in his throat. He knew as much as school taught, and what research he'd done on his own, but now he was addressing someone who lived and worked daily in the places he'd only read and fantasized about. "Uh, well, I know the galaxy is made up of twenty-four rings, starting with the inner most Alpha sector, which contains the Ontarrin sun and Carfidius, the tar planet."

"Yes, go on."

“And it ‘ends’ about seventy-six thousand light years away with Regalein 9 and Omerik in the Omega sector...From one side of the Omega sector to the other is one hundred and fifty-two thousand light years—give or take.”

Gwog glanced over at Dar. “And how many planets?”

“Umm, excluding the sun, forty-one, sir.”

“Good.” He lined the shuttle up on the approach lights. “And you know the galaxy is roughly divided in half?”

“Yes, sir. Although I’m not sure why they got the names they have—didn’t really elaborate on that in school.”

Gwog slowed the shuttle as it entered the containment field. “The names are rather misleading. The ‘light side’ of the galaxy contains many of the supposedly ‘first settled’ planets. Travelers from other galaxies arrived and set up housekeeping. Once established, they went forth and explored the ‘dark side’ of the galaxy—where they encountered species that weren’t always so friendly to their explorations.”

“But planets like Viguris and Gardinis are on the dark side, and they’re supposed to be extremely peaceful.”

“See? It really doesn’t make sense. But after the intergalactic war was over, a ‘line’ was drawn, and the two halves got those names...It does divide the galaxy into trade regions, though.” He landed the shuttle and turned off the engine. “Welcome to your new home.”

Dar peered out the front window. They were in a grand expanse of a bay. Three other shuttles of varying size were parked to one side. Ahead, the crew of the Cunik stood awaiting them. Never in his life had he seem such a hodge-podge of aliens. They were dressed in varying shades of black and brown Catarin hide clothes. Most he didn’t even recognize as a particular species—except one: he had a shock of green hair atop his tall, slender build. The remainder of the hair on his head was white from age. Dar had never seen a Satiren that old.

“That’s Jartis, he’s my engineer,” Gwog said, knowing Dar would have taken notice. “He’s half Satiren, half Priddin.” He eased himself out of the pilot’s seat. “Come on.” Going to the back, he opened the door, and let down the short gangplank. “I’ll introduce you to the rest of the crew.” They went around and stopped in front of the motley batch of aliens. “Everyone, this is Dar. He’s going to be a new crew member...Treat him with respect, as you would like to be treated.”

“Greetings, Dar,” Jartis said, he stood first in line. “Half Satiren and what?”

“Uh, Earthling,” Dar replied softly. There were hushed comments amongst the others.

“Earthling?”

“Yes, sir. My father came to this galaxy by a worm hole.”

Jartis scratched his head. “By accident?”

“Yes.”

He offered his hand. “Welcome to our crew, youngling.”

Dar took his hand. “Thank you.”

Gwog gave Dar a little bump. “Next to him is Rokit, assistant engineer.”

He regarded the interesting looking alien standing in front of him. Rokit stood about 6 feet tall, was basically humanoid looking with the exception of his *huge* ears. “Umm, are you a Gundin Tree Dweller?” he asked.

Rokit chuckled. “Yes, I am...I’m one of the few purebreds on the ship.”

Gwog pointed. "And next to him is Wenin, cargo engineer...He's half Vigurian Clapsor, half Lanterian...Then we have Barnig, assistant cargo engineer. He's half Appolonian, half Zumikkian." He nudged Dar down the line. "And here's Tregis, he's chief navigator."

Tregis held out his hand. "Hello, Dar, nice to meet you."

"A...pleasure," Dar said awkwardly, reaching up to take his hand. Tregis stood probably 7 feet tall, had dark brown skin, a long neck, arms, and legs, large blue eyes, and pale orange hair. He was indeed a strange looking alien.

"Then there's Vikkis, assistant navigator. You'll be working with him a lot," Gwog said. "He's part Thokin, part Brudin Halgar...Don't let his teeth scare you, he's actually a rather nice fellow."

Vikkis smiled, showing pointed, razor-sharp teeth. "Hello, Dar."

"Hi," he replied. A few years ago, he'd met a couple Thokin Elemenels and took a liking to them. Their creamy blue skin and fleshy tendrils hanging from their heads like hair intrigued him. Vikkis seemed to have most of the Thokin features, except for the teeth.

Gwog continued down the line. "Next to Vikkis is Julaton. He's half Bodnarian, half Uyoninain—one of my deck hands...Then we have Putchic, another deck hand. Half Kiburgin, half Sirrixian." He leaned down to Dar's ear and whispered: "Don't mess with him, short temper."

Dar nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Next to him, we have the twins: Ethoic and Pthoic. They're part Flokinian and Coreonin...Ever see anything like them?" He gestured to the brothers who stood about 6 feet tall. They had shiny dark gray skin, black eyes, spinal and brow ridges, long sharp teeth and sharp claws. Although they stood upright, they more resembled a species of sand lizard Dar used to catch on Erotis.

"No, sir."

"They haven't been with me long, but they're good workers; and awfully nice despite their imposing looks." He stepped in front of the last two. Here's Karnis, and his son Xetroiss. They're purebred Tempricians. Karnis is head cook, Xetroiss is assistant." Gwog regarded Karnis. "The youngling here can whip up a mighty fine Erotin sage root float."

"Ah. You like to cook, youngling?" Karnis asked.

"I used to help my mother a lot." Dar wasn't sure if he'd just opened his mouth and got sentenced to kitchen duty. At any rate, he was happy to be away from Krodus and the other purebreds that made his life miserable. Here, it seemed like he'd fit right in. He knew hard work would be expected of him, and he wasn't afraid to jump in and do his share.

Vikkis sat in the chair at the charting station. Dar stood behind, watching. He'd been shown to his quarters, dropped his belongings off, and reported to the bridge. It was a large area with several stations in which to work. The whole bridge was painted in a light gray. Instead of grated metal flooring, there was a real, solid floor covered with thin, dark gray carpet. Despite the evident age of the ship, the bridge was neat and tidy.

"All right, everyone, let's get going." Gwog wanted to break orbit, so they hurriedly went to work.

"Tell me youngling, this is your first experience in space?" Vikkis asked.

“Yes, sir.”

He worked on the computer. “What draws you to this great, black void?”

“I’ve always liked the stars...They don’t judge me.”

“Get beat up in school a lot?”

Dar sighed. “Yes, sir.”

“Me too. I may be half Halgar, but I was born and raised on Iddris where there were Thokins and many other races of aliens...None of which appreciated a half breed.”

“Same on Erotis, although I lived in Aknarra, which is primarily Satiren, I got the shit beat out of me seemingly every day.”

“Unusual. Satirens are normally a peaceful race.”

“Not to a half breed. A Satiren male won’t even take a female if she has a half breed youngling.”

“Fascinating, I never knew that.” Vikkis programmed some coordinates into the computer. “What do you know of Guonis?”

“It’s where the gold drig strips come from.”

“Correct. We’re heading there, but first we’ll make a stop on Skrinnis to offload some Jamaraiian rum.” He reached down, opened a compartment next to his legs and pulled out a rolled map. “Take that over to the chart table and lay it out.”

“Yes, sir.” Dar did as instructed. As he rolled the map out, he gently passed his fingers over, seemingly touching all the planets in the galaxy. Putting his finger on Erotis, he traced the course to Skrinnis and on to Guonis. If he guessed correctly, they were about sixty-three thousand light years from Skrinnis, due to the planet’s location in the Epsilon sector.

“Well, youngling? How about charting our course?” Tregis said as he stood over Dar.

He turned and looked up. “Uh...”

“Come, come, it’s really not that hard.” Tregis opened a drawer and took out some odd looking tools. Dar had used a compass, dividers, rulers, triangles, and a sextant in school; but this equipment had him clueless. “This...youngling, is a Lanterian compass.” He pointed to the device. “And this, a Sirrixian triangle.”

Dar reached over and gently picked up the triangle. It wasn’t even triangular shaped. “I’ve used triangles before, but not like this.”

Tregis picked up another tool. “This is a Bodnarian ruler.”

“That looks a little more like something I know.”

“Now, watch and learn.” He proceeded to use the tools to map out the course, then he jotted it down on a slip of paper. “Here’s our coordinates, and that’s where we’re going. Skrinnis is sixty-three and a half thousand light years from our current position.”

Dar smiled. “Hmm, not a half bad guess.”

“What?”

He drew his finger across the map. “I’d guessed it about sixty-three thousand light years.”

“Was that an *educated* guess?”

His smile broadened. “Yes.”

Tregis laughed. “Ah, a smart one for once!”

Gwog came over and plopped a big hand down on each of their shoulders. “So? Is the youngling proving his worth?” He looked at Dar. “Although, I shouldn’t call you youngling.”

“I still kinda am.”

“No, no, you’re an adult now...You are, however the *little one* of the crew.”

Dar wasn’t exactly sure he appreciated being saddled with that nick name. It was true; he was the smallest one of the crew. Even at six feet tall, he lacked the sheer musculature the others had. Jartis happened to be the only other close in size. And Dar felt confident no one dared call the chief engineer *little one*.

“He needs to learn the tools, but his dead-reckoning skills are quite good,” Tregis said.

“Good,” Gwog replied as he let his hands slide and disappeared back to his place on the bridge.

Dar picked up the Bodnarian ruler. “Uh, sir?”

“Please, call me Tregis.”

“Oh, um, all right...How come we have to chart our course on a map when this ship seems to have loads of fancy computers?”

“What do we do if the computers are down?”

Dar scratched his head. “Well, then we’d use paper maps and do it the old-fashioned way.”

Tregis wagged a finger at him. “You’re missing the point *youngling*. If we rely on computers all the time, and then one day they don’t work, how many will *remember* how to ‘do it the old-fashioned way.’ Huh?”

“Point taken, sir.” Dar said softly.

“Now, let’s take what we have and go lay in the course.” He led Dar over to the navigator’s control console. “On most freighters, the majority of the controls are on one console. But because the Cunik’s so damn big, she needs a larger crew to make sure she can safely get through space.”

“If I may ask, how big is this vessel?”

Tregis slid into the seat and immediately started inputting the coordinates. “She’s about a mile long...The forward cargo bay can hold a straight load of just over half a mile...The aft is divided into eight sections for smaller shipments...And the engine room and shuttle bay, of course.”

“How fast is she?” Dar almost felt like his brain couldn’t suck up the information quick enough. But he was going to make a concerted effort.

“Well, all that cargo carrying capacity comes at a cost. She can do warp six on a good day with a solar wind at her backside,” he said with a chuckle. “Captain, course laid in for Skrinnis.”

“Aye,” Gwog replied from his chair on the bridge. “Helm, take us out.”

“Aye, captain,” Vikkis called. He’d “changed hats” and was now at the helm controls. In the short time Dar’d been aboard, he noticed most of the crew had more than one job. He wondered what his jobs would be. He was fairly confident once he learned all the tools, he’d be filling some sort of navigational function. And with Gwog’s praise of his Erotin sage root float, he figured the kitchen would be the other. But, from the captain’s talk earlier, he’d be getting experience in every part of the ship. He couldn’t wait.

5

Skrinnis loomed in the front window of the Cunik's bridge. It was a reddish planet with a few swirls of white clouds and the occasional splotch of blue-green water. Dar didn't think it looked terribly habitable, but evidently, there were life forms there.

"Welcome to Skrinnis," Tregis joked. They'd been in transit for ten days and finally arrived. Since there was no "day" or "night" in space, the crew of the Cunik established their own work/rest cycle. Clocks on the ship were set to one time, and everyone kept to a schedule. Even though most times Dar wasn't tired, he was sent to bed, and then awoken at the appointed time. He knew this would take some getting used to.

"Ah," Dar replied with a yawn, still fuzzy-headed after his strange sleep schedule. "There's life-forms down there?"

"Skrinnians tend to be a subterranean species. You won't see much on the surface except a space port or two."

He peered out the window as the planet drew closer. "Are we gonna land?"

"Far easier to off load three thousand crates of Jamaraiian rum if you do," Tregis kidded.

Gwog strolled onto the bridge from his cabin just off to the side. "Good morning, little one; ready to explore a new planet?"

Dar turned, a smile beaming on his face. "Yes, sir!"

"Have you had breakfast?"

"Yes, sir," he replied. Meal times, he was quickly discovering, were the best. As a new crew member, all the old-timers felt the sudden urge to recount stories of their travels in space. Dar could have listened to them all night, but Vikkis would send him to bed. They were amazing and fantastic stories of distant planets and species; some ended in tales of exotic joinings on pleasure barges. As of yet, no mention of his sexual prowess (or lack thereof) had been made, and Dar hoped it stayed that way.

"Come here, little one." Gwog motioned him to the helm control console. "Watch as Vikkis lands us on the surface."

"Yes, sir." Dar stood behind Vikkis and observed as they slowly descended.

"Now, see these?" Vikkis indicated to a double row of eight buttons that ran down the left side of the console. "These are the ventral thrusters...You can fire each one individually. Or..." He brought his hand to the bottom where two more buttons were. "...You simply push these two and have full control of all."

"The Cunik needs all those thrusters to land?"

He chuckled. "At nearly a mile long, I'm surprised she doesn't have more...But she's got very powerful ones, and they can land a full load just as soft as a game fowl feather floats to the ground."

Dar smiled at the expression. He liked Tregis and Vikkis. They were amiable to him, and weren't afraid to joke around. "Awfully big feather!" he teased.

"Yes, and she can spin on a ten particle!"

He dug around in his pocket and produced a particle: it was a small circular coin equivalent to 1/100 drig. There were other denominations of particles: five, ten, twenty-five, and fifty. "Okay, let's see." Dar plopped it down on the console.

Vikkis glanced up at him. "Smart ass!" They laughed. "Firing landing thrusters." He punched the two bottom buttons. There was a loud roar, and the ship vibrated. Dar looked out the window. The port drew closer. He could see two other ships docked and large pieces of equipment offloading supplies.

"Does Skrinnis have any kind of product it produces?" Dar asked.

"It's like Versith, almost a dead planet, but at least the aliens here are much nicer. For some reason it tends to be a congregation point for many species."

"Are they refugees?"

Vikkis didn't immediately answer; he was too busy concentrating on landing. "Yeah, some." He checked the altimeter. "Three hundred feet...two hundred...one hundred...fifty...and..." The ship touched down with a solid thud. "We're here." Vikkis shut off the engines.

Gwog got up and approached Dar. "Come on, little one, let's go down and explore."

"Yes, sir!" He happily tagged along as they made their way to the crew hatch. Gwog worked the heavy door, finally getting it open. "We'll go to the shopping level. Do you have any drig?" They went down the gangplank and inside the port building.

Dar pulled a few out of his pocket. "Uh, I have twenty, and about sixty-five in particles."

"That's not very much." He removed a bag and took out another fifty or so drig. "Here, now you have more to get something."

"Thank you." He was shocked that Gwog would be so generous. "If I may ask, how much did your Catarin hide clothes cost?"

"Oh, they're not cheap, I assure you, little one...But, they're the best for those in our line of work." He tugged at his vest. "Catarin hide is soft, durable, somewhat flame resistant, and..." he paused for a long moment. "...The females find it rather attractive."

Dar grinned. "I guess I'll have to save my drig, then."

"Don't buy it anywhere but on Cataris. The bovidis there are raised specially for their hides...And it's cheaper coming from the source." Gwog stopped as they reached the stairs heading to the civilization below. "Are you in a hurry to look like the rest of us?"

"Uh, umm, kinda."

Gwog chuckled. "You're a special individual—don't be afraid to look like it."

"I've looked like it all my life, and it's gotten me nothing but ass beatings."

He nodded. "I see your point...Don't worry, we'll get you outfitted in freighter crew garb soon." Waving his arm, he tromped down into the shopping district. Dar followed, still completely amazed that he was on another planet.

As they wandered past the shops, a smattering of different alien species mingled on the wide thoroughfare. Dar recognized some: Elemenels, Triduns, a Sirrixian or two, and one very imposing Kiburgin Hoarda, which he knew better than to even bat an eye at. Kiburgins were known for having the nastiest reputations in the entire galaxy. And at well over six feet tall, with strength to match their nasty dispositions, everyone steered clear of them.

The Skrinnians filled in the rest of the population. They were average sized aliens, walked upright, and had reddish skin. Their eyes tended to be large and either bright green or

blue. They didn't have hair; rather, they had protruding fleshy nubs on their heads about half an inch long.

Dar sniffed the air, a wonderful aroma wafted through the district. Gwog took a few sniffs too. "Hungry, little one?"

"Yes, actually I am."

"Smells like Skrinnian curry...I don't suppose you've ever had that."

"No, but I'm game."

"Come, let's have some." Gwog followed his nose, and soon they were at the restaurant. He opened the door and they went in, finding a table. "So, what do you eat?"

"Me, sir? A little bit of everything...With mother working in the store, we got a wide variety of foods from different planets." He picked up the menu, hoping he could read it. Luckily, since Skrinnis was a mixed planet, the menu happened to be in Universal Ontarrin. "Curry, huh?"

"You like things on the spicy side, little one?"

"Umm, not sure." He saw a group of younger Skrinnian females pass by. One coughed a couple times as she followed with her peers. Dar thought they were an interesting species, but not one he'd be game to join with. He would, however, when he got time, do some research on them.

"I suggest you tell the waitress you want it mild, best not be subjecting your insides to food you're not used to."

Dar nodded. "Probably wise."

"You may try a little of mine if you wish." Gwog saw the waitress approach.

"Hi, what can I get for you?" she asked.

"I'll have the house special curry, a peshan nat bread, and a tall glass of water," Gwog said.

"Okay, and for you?" She gestured to Dar.

"Umm, I'll have the mild curry, one of those breads he's having, and a manko soda."

"Right, I'll have that out for you shortly."

Gwog relaxed back in his chair. "Manko soda, huh?"

"Sure. Mother used to get it imported from Uyoninis. Other than Erotin sage root floats, it's my favorite."

"Well, at least you're somewhat cultured...I had a youngling cabin steward a few years back that would only eat game fowl, Priddin cheese pasta, and bovidis meat sandwiches. He drove me nuts!"

"What happened to him?"

The waitress brought their drinks. Gwog picked his up and had a sip. "I sent him back to his mother, he wasn't ready to sail the void of space."

Dar took a small sip of soda, savoring the sweet, tart flavor. "I hope I'm ready."

"Oh, you're ready, I can tell." He folded his arms. "Why space?"

"Huh?"

"Why have you always been fascinated with space?"

"I guess..." Dar rested his elbows on the table. "...Maybe because my father came from the stars; and deep down inside, I'd like to find him—if he's still alive."

Their lunch arrived a few minutes later. Gwog pointed to his. “Have a little taste—if you dare!”

Dar studied him for a moment. Through all the thick wrinkle lines on Gwog’s face, he was pretty sure he saw a fiendish smile. Picking up his fork, he reached across and speared a small piece of meat. It was covered with a yellowish-brown sauce. Slowly, he brought it to his mouth, taking a sniff first. The aroma hinted at spicy, and he hoped it wouldn’t be too bad. Popping it in his mouth, he chewed. “Hmm, not bad,” he said. Then the burn kicked in.

Gwog watched the expression on Dar’s face change from smug to utter distress in a matter of moments. “Hot?”

“Oh shit!” Dar bellowed, and frantically looked for something to cool the burn. “Ow! Ow! Ow!”

“Bread!” Gwog reached over and picked up the plate with the bread. Dar grabbed one and tore off a piece, quickly shoving it in his mouth.

“Arrrrggguuuhhh!” Dar said with a mouthful, still in agony. Gwog tried to stifle a laugh, but it didn’t work. Dar stood and flailed about, snatching his soda, and tipping it back. With a mouthful of bread, some of the soda spilled down his shirt. Quite a few patrons in the restaurant took notice and were laughing at his spectacle. The group of female Skrinnians passed by, laughing.

After a few minutes, Dar finally got relief. He coughed and sputtered. “Oh, shit, how can you eat that?!”

Gwog picked up his fork, took a good sized piece of meat, and stuck it in his mouth. “Well, you get used to it after a while.”

He sat down, grabbed a napkin, and wiped his face and shirt. “Umm, no thanks.”

“I’ll give you credit, little one,” he chuckled. “You gave it a try.”

Dar took another piece of bread and drizzled some Gardinian beegud honey on it. Taking a bite, he was surprised that he could taste anything after that. The honey was sweet and sticky on his tongue, better than the sting of the curry.

The Cunik pulled away from the planet Guonis with five hundred million drig in gold. Gwog, by his virtue of being an upstanding and reliable freighter captain, had secured a license by the Ontarrin Bank to transport Guonin gold to various planets throughout the galaxy. Part of getting the license meant his ship had to be highly resilient to pirates. It didn’t mean the pirates still didn’t try.

Far in the Psi sector were two planets, referred to as twin planets due to their close proximity. Soothis and Renthis housed the dregs of the galaxy. The Soothians were experts in piracy, while their reasonably close relatives, the Renthids, were adept at taking over planets and pillaging to fill their coffers. Neither of the species was particularly bright, but the Renthids were far more brutal than their Soothian brethren. But they did know how to make weapons.

Tregis was at the navigations console, monitoring the sensors. “Captain, I have six contacts closing rapidly just off our port beam.”

“Gee, anyone wanna bet it’s Nekis thinking he can liberate our shipment of gold?” Gwog joked.

Dar turned around. "Who is Nekis?"

"The leader of the Soothian pirates."

"Ah." He was worried, but he wasn't going to let on to the others. As he watched out the big window, Dar began to feel itchy. Something in his throat tickled, and he coughed a few times. Reaching up, he went to scratch his neck, something was there: a small blister-like bubble. He coughed more.

"Are you okay, little one?" Gwog asked.

"Umm..."

"Come here."

Dar went over and stood just to the left of Gwog's chair. The big alien reached out and put his hand on Dar's forehead. "Mmm, a bit warm." He looked him over. "Itchy?"

"Yes, sir."

He grabbed Dar's shirt collar and pulled it down, revealing a red rash. "Shit."

"What?"

"I think you got Skrinnian fever."

"What? What's that?" Dar asked, now becoming alarmed.

"Get to your quarters and stay put...Whatever you do, don't scratch."

"Is it bad?"

Gwog rubbed his face. "I don't know how it'll affect you, since you're half Earthling. But Jartis caught it a few years ago and it nearly killed him." He shooed him off. "Go, and I'll send Karnis around to care for you."

As much as Dar wanted to see if a battle would ensue, he couldn't disobey his captain's orders. Heading down to the crew quarters, he began to feel light headed. About twenty feet from his door, the first explosion rocked the ship. The Cunik jolted sideways, knocking Dar off his feet. He collapsed to the metal grated catwalk, in no position to get up. His body felt weak, skin burning like it was on fire.

The next thing he remembered, he woke up and saw Karnis standing over him. He was in his bunk, the covers pulled high to his chin. His whole body felt hot, cold, and intensely itchy all in the same moment.

"Ah, you're awake," Karnis said. He tapped a small white tablet from a bottle, picked up a glass of water, and offered it to Dar. "Take this."

Dar wiggled his arms free of the covers, took the water and tossed back the tablet. His whole body was now a sea of blisters. "What was that?" he asked.

"Curion Mind Blow."

His eyes widened. "That stuff's illegal!"

"Youngling, at this point in time, you're not in much position to argue...Skrinnian fever is serious shit. If you don't die from the initial fever, then you stand a good chance from dying if you scratch even just *one* of those blisters...The Mind Blow will take the edge off and help you stay calm."

"Is there a cure for this?"

Karnis shook his head. "Tincture of time. It's a nasty virus, there's no cure. If it doesn't kill you, you'll have immunity the rest of your life."

Dar writhed around. "I feel like I did when I messed with that hive of Erotin Ember ants."

"Yeah? Bet your mother warned you about screwing with 'em, didn't she?"

"Uh huh. But this wasn't my fault."

"No, I know. It's one of the dangers of space travel. The more planets you go to, the more chances you have of getting a sickness." He poured another glass of water and gave it to Dar. "Most of the illnesses out there aren't fatal. Unfortunately, this one happens to have a rather high fatality rate."

"Just my luck."

Karnis turned for the door. "You're young, so you stand a pretty good chance. Get some sleep, I'll come check on you in a couple of hours."

"Karnis?"

"Yeah?"

"What happened with the pirates?"

"Oh, Gwog ran 'em off as usual."

Dar snuggled back under the covers. "Where are we?"

"About half way to Iddris."

"Thanks," he said softly and closed his eyes. The Mind Blow seemed to be going to work. His body felt rather numb, and for some reason, he felt like he could do anything at that moment. Thinking hard, he remembered in school they said the drug gave you the feeling of invincibility, but of course, it was all in your mind. They also said it was quite addictive. Dar didn't want that to happen, he needed his hard earned drig to buy some fancy Catarin hide clothes.

6

Four days later, Dar emerged from his quarters; his whole body covered with peeling blisters, and he still felt wrung out. This wasn't the way he envisioned his first few days in space to be. No, it was supposed to be exciting; instead, he spent most of it drugged out of his mind. Clearly his new life wasn't going according to plan.

He'd survived Skrinnian fever thanks to Karnis and his generous offerings of Mind Blow; and Gwog, who came and visited before bedtime, bringing a bottle of Malikin port from Gardinis. Dar argued he wasn't old enough to drink, but Gwog insisted, saying it would make him sleep better. After getting past the initial burn of the alcohol, and the heady buzz he got, Dar discovered port had a rather nice flavor. In fact, he liked it.

Together, Gwog and Karnis nursed him through the worst of it. Dar figured if his mother ever got wind of what those two did, she wouldn't be happy. They probably saved his life, because, had he scratched and popped the blisters, they would have gotten infected and he might have died.

Dar wandered into the galley and sat down at the table. He yawned loudly and stretched.

Karnis was busy in the kitchen making lunch. "Ah, he's alive!" he joked, poking his head through the service window.

"Wondering if I really wanna be," Dar replied.

"Oh, the rest of the blisters will peel off in a couple of days, and you'll be fine. Are you hungry?"

"Yes, very."

"How's a bovidis shoulder sandwich sound?"

Dar licked his lips. "Sounds fantastic." He could feel the ragged shreds of skin on his lips and it was driving him crazy. He hoped soon he'd be looking normal again.

"All right, gimme a few minutes."

"Thank you."

Gwog came in, hoping to grab a bite of something before lunch was served. His stomach growled and he really didn't want to wait. "Hello, little one. Good to see you up."

"Good to be up—as opposed to the other option."

He sat down across from him. "I didn't wanna make a trip back to Erotis, bringing you home to your mother wrapped in a shroud." He picked at his nails. "And I like you, you're good to have around."

Dar smiled. "Thanks."

"Are you to ready to come back to the bridge?"

"I think so. Just a little tired still."

Gwog got up and stuck his head through the kitchen window. "Karnis? How about some food? We're starving out here!"

"Hang on, hang on!" he barked. The sound of dishes clattered in the kitchen. "Why can't you two wait til lunch?"

"We're hungry now," Gwog grumbled.

The communications panel on the wall beeped. “Captain, we’re picking up some traffic headed toward us.”

Gwog got up and answered. “What sort of traffic?”

“Looks like the pirates are gonna try again.”

Dar sat up. “Pirates!” He was excited, since he’d missed the last battle.

“I don’t believe this. Those Soothians are idiots. Don’t they know we’ve dropped our shipment of gold and are empty?”

“Are we gonna fight ’em?” Dar pestered.

“Oh, I dunno, little one. Usually I tell them I’m empty and they leave...But for some reason they seem to have it in for me lately.” He leaned in the window. “Karnis, where’s the food? Come now, we have a battle to fight and I hate fighting on an empty stomach.”

“All right, all right, I’m going as fast as I can,” Karnis barked.

Dar got up and went to the window. “Will I have any job in the battle?”

“Yes, little one, your job is to stay out of the way!”

“Yes, sir,” he replied lowly.

“I know you’re dying for some adventure; and you nearly did die not that long ago. But until I teach you how to fight, you’re of little use to me.”

He straightened up. “I can fight. I fought nearly every day in my life.” Dar brandished his trusty knife. “I fought Krobus and took this from him.”

Gwog realized it was time to give the youngling a little humble pie. In one swift movement, he grabbed Dar’s wrist, turned it forcefully, and watched the knife fall. Then he stepped closer, caught Dar by the back of his shirt, and with minimal effort, flipped him onto the floor. He looked down at him. “So, you know how to fight, eh?”

Dar lay there, not in any hurry to get up. Yes, once again his mouth got his body into more trouble. At least Gwog wasn’t out to kill him; rather he was making a statement. Dar understood he had much to learn in his new life, and being smart enough, he knew that whatever skills Gwog wanted to teach, he needed to learn. And maybe it would keep him from getting his ass kicked in future conflicts, he hoped.

“Come on, little one, your time will come.” Gwog reached down, offering his hand. “Once you feel better, I’ll teach you how to fight...For now, stay with Vikkis and learn targeting and weapons.”

“Yes, sir,” Dar replied, taking Gwog’s hand. He got to his feet, reached down, and picked up his knife, sliding it back in the sheath.

“Fighting in school and fighting in space are two different things, little one.” Gwog reached over and touched Dar’s right ear. “A fight in space is usually to the death; if you don’t have the mind set for it, you’re gonna die.” He turned to leave. “Your mother said you were quite the scrapper as a youngling; good, I like tenacity in my crew...Come on, let’s go teach the pirates a lesson.”

“Hey!” Karnis called. “Your sandwiches!”

“I’ll get ’em,” Dar said as he waited for Karnis.

On the bridge, Dar stood behind Vikkis, watching. Ahead, six Soothian pirate ships formed a line in front of them four or five miles away. Gwog groaned at the spectacle. "I'm so sick of 'em, can't they leave well enough alone?"

Dar turned around. "Sir? Why haven't all the freighter captains banded together and put an end to them?"

"Because each captain is in this business for himself; banding together would imply some sort of alliance—not happening, little one."

"Isn't there an intergalactic security force or something?"

There were a few chuckles on the bridge. "Little one, this galaxy is pretty lawless. I'm not sure what rules you grew up with on Erotis, but there are few in the depths of space," Gwog said, poking the communications button on the arm of his chair. "This is Gwog of the Cunik to Nekis."

"Hello, Gwog," the gravelly voice came over the loud speakers on the bridge. "What do you have for me today?"

"I'm empty. We dropped our shipment of gold off yesterday."

"You are, huh? And where are you headed now?"

"None of your business, Nekis."

"On the contrary, it *is* my business."

Gwog was tiring of the conversation. "Vikkis, bring the cannons on line."

"Yes, sir," Vikkis replied, pushing a couple of buttons. Dar saw some lights on the control console come on. "Cannons at your ready, sir."

"Nekis, I have my cannons pointed in your direction. Are you gonna leave me alone, or will I have to send a salvo your way? I'm letting you make the decision."

There was a long silence before Nekis replied. "Be on your way." A collective sigh went through the bridge. While most of the crew relished a good fight, they tried to avoid them at all cost. The Cunik was a solidly built ship, but it could still sustain damage in battle. Gwog hated putting in for repairs, it cost time and money.

Dar was a little depressed that no battle came of the confrontation. He felt confident Gwog saw his displeasure in his body language. "Come here, little one," he said.

He went over to Gwog. "Yes, sir?"

"Rule number one of being a freighter captain: don't unnecessarily endanger your ship, your crew, or yourself...Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now, get with Tregis and lay in a course to Iddris, and then on to Gamma 3 space station. We need supplies, and I'm sure everyone would like some entertainment. Then it's on to Jamarais; we have another shipment of rum to pick up."

"Yes, sir."

"And plot a follow-on course to Newrillis."

"Newrillis? Also in the dark side?"

"Yes. There's a shipment of arms that'll be going to the Sirrixians—along with the rum."

"Yes, sir." Dar was excited to be seeing more of the galaxy. He wondered if he'd be allowed to go into the space station. There was a pleasure barge, but he figured he wouldn't have enough drig to do much. But that was okay, being the new one on the crew, he didn't expect much.

The Cunik had picked up a load of beans on Iddris and headed to Gamma 3. As Dar got ready for bed, Jartis came by his bunk. "I hear we're going to Gamma 3," Jartis said.

"Yes, Gwog said we needed supplies."

"Yeah, supplies and some entertainment for the crew." He sat down on Dar's bunk. "I'm sure you've never been to a pleasure barge."

"No, never been anywhere," Dar replied softly.

"Ever *done* anything?"

He sighed deeply. "I was the only half breed around. The purebred females wouldn't give me the time of day. It was like I had Skrinnian fever or something."

Jartis chuckled. "So, you've never joined?"

Dar shook his head. He didn't feel like announcing to the whole ship that he'd never been with a female, although, they probably knew.

"It's okay. I was the same way."

"How long have you been part of Gwog's crew?"

Jartis pondered, scratching his head. "Oh, near enough twenty years...Gwog hired me not long after he got out of the military."

"He was in the military?"

"Oh, yes, part of the Ouzinic Special Command...He did dirty little deeds for a planet that really didn't accept him because he was a half breed."

"How long was he in?" Dar asked.

"Mmm, I think he said over twenty years."

"Geez! How old is Gwog?"

Jartis chuckled. "Don't really know. Ouzins live a pretty long time."

"I guess."

"So, are you planning on going to the pleasure barge?"

Dar slid back on his bunk, resting against the wall. "I dunno. I figured that I'd be left behind to watch the ship."

"Oh, no, the twins do that. They don't find pleasure in quite the way we do."

"Really? At any rate, I probably won't have the drig for it."

"You will. Gwog pays well."

"Enough to have a good time?"

"Sure," Jartis replied. "You pay attention in love class?"

"Yes, of course. But it's different when it's really you."

"I know. And since you've never experienced the Satiren blush, it'll be a rather strange experience."

"What does it feel like?"

Jartis smiled broadly. "It's magic!" He held his hands up. "We're probably the most special species in the galaxy. No others can do what we can."

"Someone said it feels like jolts of power going through your body."

"Yes, yes, highly *pleasurable* jolts. And you share them with your partner."

"I saw that on a vidograph we were watching in school," Dar said, "Your whole body gets this rosy aura."

He ran his fingers through his green hair and back over his white hair. “Well, there may or may not be a Satiren at Gamma 3. If there is, I’d suggest trying to get a joining with her.”

“Just so I know what it’s like?”

Jartis nodded. “Yeah. If not, see if there’s an Elemenel, they’re quite fun.”

“I like their pretty blue skin; and their tendrils fascinate me.”

He laughed. “Those tendrils can be a source for stimulation.”

Dar cocked his head. “Really? They didn’t teach us that in class.”

“Oh, four years of love class barely scratches the surface with all the species in our galaxy.”

“I kept my tablet, just in case I wanted to do some reading up.”

“That was smart. You’ll probably need it.”

“So, how many different species have you joined with?”

Jartis smiled. “A few. I know I’ll probably never find a mate, so for me, I occasionally indulge in the pleasure barge.”

“Only occasionally?”

“Dar, once you get my age, you may still have the drive, but the interest tends to fade... And I’m rather picky about who I join with.”

“Ah. Do you suggest I be picky?”

“You do what you want, you’re an adult now.”

“Yeah, I am...Seems so strange,” Dar said softly.

“You’re seventeen, right?”

“Yes.”

Jartis rubbed his chin. “The pleasure barge has rules. You gotta be over eighteen to partake in their services...I suggest, since according to Satiren law, you’re an adult, to simply lie about your age.”

“What if I get caught?”

“Doubtful you will.”

“Umm, okay. I hope it works.”

Jartis turned to leave. “I’ll vouch for you if there’s any question.”

“Thanks.” Dar felt his heart beating faster—a chance to finally join with a female. He was excited and terrified. How would this all play out?

7

Gwog returned to the table with another bottle of port. They were in the bar on Gamma 3. Dar, Jartis, Tregis, and Vikkis sat around, drinking. The night was young, and not all of them had found a female to join with. Gwog saw Dar's glass was empty. He poured him more. "Drink up, little one. It's not often the captain buys."

"Uh, I think I've had enough, really," he protested politely.

"Naw, naw, have more. You'll need to be relaxed for later."

Dar frowned; although Gwog had a point. He was terribly nervous about having his first joining. He almost didn't want to go through with it. Part of him did, part didn't.

A fairly young Elemenel walked into the bar. Dar took notice; she was beautiful. She glanced in his direction, and he wished he could become part of the furniture. No, he wasn't ready for this. Too late. She headed for their table. Dar wondered how much it would cost him. The Elemenel seemed to fix her eyes on him. "Hello," she said over the noise of the music and talking.

"Uh, hi," he said awkwardly.

"Are you new to Gwog's crew?"

"Yes, I am."

"How old are you?" she asked.

"Eighteen," he lied.

She reached across the table and tickled her fingers through his patch of green hair. "I like Satirens."

Dar grabbed his glass, taking a drink, trying to hide a smile, and the fact his cheeks were turning red. "Oh. Uh, I'm only half."

"Yes, I know." She caressed his face. "You're cute."

He wasn't exactly sure he appreciated being called *cute*, but the Elemenel clearly had an interest in him. "Umm, yeah."

"You wanna come back to my room and have a little fun?"

Dar went to open his mouth—Jartis beat him to it. "Of course he does!" He gave Dar a shove. "Go, go."

Knowing there probably wasn't a way out of it, Dar got up and followed the Elemenel back to her room. Once inside, she closed the door. "Oh, that's much better. The bar is so loud."

"Uh, yeah." He felt beyond nervous. His stomach flipped and burned.

"My name's Kikka," she said, starting to undress.

"Dar."

She slipped out of her dress and stood naked in front of him. "Are you gonna lose the clothes?"

He sat down on the bed. Looking at his hands, they were shaking. "Uh..."

"Hey, is this your first joining?" She stood in front of him.

Dar felt too embarrassed to answer. After a few moments, he nodded. Well, the secret was out. "'Cause I'm a half breed—" His words were cut short by Kikka smothering her lips

over his. It felt like his entire body came to life. He could feel every cell, every chemical going to work; every ounce straining to respond to her attentions. These were new and strange feelings, and he almost couldn't control them.

He let his arms slide around her waist, feeling her amazingly soft, creamy skin. More chemicals surged in his body. And then he felt it—the stirring in his loins; something so completely foreign. Satirens had no use for self-pleasuring, they only reached states of arousal when with another. But when they did, it was an incredible out pouring of emotion, and, as Jartis said: *magic*.

Kikka worked to get Dar's shirt off. He tried to help, but was too overcome with what was going on inside his body. She removed his shirt and threw it on the floor. Next, she went to work on his trousers. Dar felt helpless, he didn't know what was going on. Everything felt so good, and he couldn't do anything in return.

"Kikka?"

"What?"

"I...I...I can't move."

She giggled. "You're stiff as a board, you're nervous."

"Duh!"

"Come on, roll over on your stomach."

"That might be a little uncomfortable right now." He looked down and noticed his rather serious state of arousal. Truly, it verged on painful. There was a strange, tingly sensation in his eyes; he figured they were glowing a bright shade of green, matching the intensity of his arousal.

"I'll help you." Kikka nudged at him to roll. He did so, slowly, as she helped tuck him out of the way. "Better?" she asked.

"Uh..." He felt odd having a female touching him *there*.

She climbed on the bed and straddled him. Gently, she started to massage his back. Dar had never felt something so good. Occasionally, when he was sick, his mother would rub his back, but not like *this*. Oh, this was so much better. He moaned softly, and began to purr. Satirens were unlike any other species in the galaxy. If they felt a sense of contentment, they were capable of uttering a low, guttural purr. Kikka rubbed his shoulders and neck. "Feel good?"

"Yeah," he whispered, still purring.

Kikka massaged him for quite some time. "Okay, you wanna try again?"

"Uh..."

"Come on, Dar, I know they taught you what to do in love class."

"Yeah, but—"

"So, let your body go to work. I'd love to feel some of that Satiren magic." She slid off and patted his side, indicating she wanted him to roll back over. Dar flipped on his back and sat up. His level of anxiety had lessened, and perhaps he thought he might be able to control his body. Kikka flopped on the bed next to him. "Your turn."

His mind was going crazy trying to remember everything they taught in love class. As he stared into her beautiful, dark eyes, all his education seemed to go out the window. He let his hands wander over her skin, taking in the warm, delicate feeling. Dar moved around so he could bring his lips to bear on hers, kissing her with a passion he'd never known.

Deep in his body, the chemicals were dictating his movements. He caressed her with purpose, his hand finally drifting down between her legs. Somewhere in class, they taught that Elemenels were similar to Satirens. There was a *bump* inside them, that when stroked just right, gave them intense pleasure—he just needed to find it.

Kikka had an idea of what he wanted to do. Gently, she took his hand and moved all but two fingers aside. Slowly, she guided him inside her depths. He could feel her wet, intense heat on his fingers as he searched for the spot. His arousal nagged painfully. Kikka moved slightly, giving him more access. He continued to feel around until he thought he felt the bump. It was firm, feeling like an Iddrian bean. As his fingers passed over it, she threw back her head and cried out.

He didn't think anymore chemicals could come alive, but they did. Little jolts of energy coursed through his body, giving him an almost buzzy feeling. Dar thought he was drunk on love; a wonderful sensation. His fingers moved more firmly against the bump. Kikka gasped and moaned even louder. She reached over, grasping her hand around his arousal, giving him a few strokes. Dar moaned, he couldn't believe the sensations coursing through his body. He let his hand slide from her, not sure of what was going on, or what to do next.

Kikka looked up at him and giggled. Dar sat next to her, his eyes glowing brilliant green, and his body beginning to show the Satiren blush—a flush of energy that ringed his body in a rosy-pink aura. Dar held his hands out, seeing the blush. “Oh,” he said softly.

“Your first blush, huh?” she asked.

“Yeah. Feels really strange.”

She took his hands, pressed them together, covering hers over them. Then she moved his hands in a rubbing motion. “You do this to channel the blush.”

“I do? How do you know all this?”

Kikka continued to rub his hands. “Oh, I've joined with a Satiren male or two.”

“Not Jartis?”

“No, no, he's an old timer. I prefer much younger. But I've had conversation with him about Satirens. Your species fascinates me.”

“I bet he set me up.”

“Uh, well, he did tell me to come to the table tonight.”

“And he probably told you about me, huh?”

“No, he didn't. I saw you, and liked you. Jartis had nothing to do with that part.”

Dar realized his blush was fading, so he rubbed his hands together more. Kikka took his hands and moved them over her body. He desperately wanted to play with her tendrils. She placed his hands on her little breasts. Dar could feel the firm flesh of her nipples. He leaned forward more, finally able to get one hand to her head. Grasping a tendril, he massaged it through his fingers. Kikka moaned and caressed his body. She could feel little jolts of energy as his blush returned.

Trying to be as smooth about it as possible, Dar swung one leg over, straddling her. Getting a hand on either side of her shoulders, he leaned down and sought out her lips. He kissed her, his tongue finding its way into her mouth. She let hers explore his mouth, tasting the last remnants of port on his lips. Kikka noticed his blush growing larger. Reaching down, she took him in her hand, guiding him into her depths. Dar sat up quickly. “Oh!”

“It’s okay, you’re ready now. Just let your body move nice and slow—nice and slow.” She slid her hands behind his back and gently urged him on. Dar obliged, sinking slowly into her depths before drawing nearly all the way out to feel the cooler air of the room. The sensation was like nothing he’d ever felt. As he made his strokes, he felt his blush intensify.

Sitting up slightly, he held one hand perhaps an inch or so above her body. He could feel the blush emanating. This must be the *magic*. The energy passed from his body into hers, stimulating that little bump inside. Kikka threw her head back and cried out; the energy flowing through her was quickly pushing her to climax. His own body reacted, more chemicals flooded into his blood stream. The energy he released seemed to magnify, giving him a serious buzz.

She nudged at him to quicken his strokes. Dar let his body go; the chemicals and hormones were now in charge. His mind felt fuzzy, but the senses throughout his body heightened. Everything he did to Kikka seemed to elicit a response from her, and his own body. Yes, this was the magic.

Moving more firmly against her, he could feel the heat of the blush concentrating in his loins. His time—the climax, would be any moment—at least that’s what his school texts said. The tension, the delicious tension built higher and higher until it felt like his body would explode. And explode it did—just on a much smaller scale. Dar cried out loudly. Kikka cried out as she joined him. Their bodies shuddered and convulsed in beautiful concert. Dar felt a rush of heat flood over him. Every hormone and chemical in his body existed for this one very moment. And it was amazing. He’d remember this the rest of his life.

The next morning, Dar walked into the galley. Gwog looked up from his meal. “Ah, I see my newest crew member is walking with some swagger. Must’ve been a good night last night.”

He took his seat, trying to hide a smile. “Yes, it was a good night.” The whole room burst into cheers. Dar felt his cheeks flush. Oh, so embarrassing.

Jartis leaned over to him. “Kikka brought the magic out, didn’t she?”

“Words cannot describe what happened last night.”

“Oh, I can imagine...I was young once too.”

“Did you not join with anyone last night?”

“No, couldn’t find someone suitable.”

Gwog growled. “You grow too picky in your old age. An alien like you should be joining anything with legs!”

“Why?” Jartis fired back.

“Because joining keeps you young!” He waved his hands in the air.

“Gwog, you’ll live two hundred years, anyways. Joining just makes you hungry for more.”

Dar rested his elbows on the table, enjoying the banter going back a forth. “Certainly made me hungry for more.”

Jartis gave him a good swat on the arm. “Of course it will, you’re still somewhat of a youngling...See, this is what they do in school—they teach them about love, and how wonderful it is, and then tell the younglings that there’s so much love to be had in space. So,

when they leave school, they seek out the pleasure barges or red districts on other planets to get that love—artificial as it may be; and a load of drig with it.”

All eyes fell on Dar. He looked around. “Uh, it’s true. They do push that direction... Although I was pretty much ignored in class. I guess they figured a half breed wouldn’t command a price.” He poured a glass of juice. “In a way, I feel sorry for them. It’s probably not a real joining, but going through the motions...There’s no love there.”

Vikkis speared a piece of meat from a platter in the center of the table. “They’re whores, there’s no love in that. They simply provide a service.”

“Kikka didn’t seem like that.”

Jartis wagged his finger. “Oh, no, she’s high class. A night with her is special.”

“Did you set me up?” Dar asked.

“Well, I...uh...”

“You set me up!” he barked.

Gwog leaned forward. “Little one, we all set you up...A night with Kikka would cost more than you make in a year.” He stood. “Now, that’s rule number two of being a freighter captain: take good care of your crew and they’ll take good care of you.”

He was silent for a moment. “I wondered why she didn’t charge me much.”

“We figured for your first time it damn well better be special.”

Dar looked around the room at everyone. “Thanks,” he said softly, knowing that he had a dozen *fathers* watching out for him. Life had never been so awesome.

8

As the months flew by, Dar found himself very busy. Gwog had him on the bridge for three months, learning everything he could. Then he moved on to the engine room. He especially liked watching Rokit, the Gundin Tree Dweller, with his massive ears, soaring around the rafters. He'd drop down on top of the huge engines, and fixing things that were out of easy reach. They became good friends. And Dar became very close with Jartis, since they shared so much of their background, and were at least half of the same species.

Dar ducked as Rokit zoomed over, giving him a smack on the head. They were playing a rather convoluted game of tag in the engine room. Jartis tried to hurry along a catwalk, but Rokit caught him too. Fun and games weren't the normal part of being on a freighter, but Jartis realized Dar was still somewhat of a youngling and needed the occasional play time.

"Tag! You're it!" Rokit called as he swooped past Dar again.

"Hey! Not fair, you can fly!" Dar called as he ran up the stairs, trying to get as high as he could.

"Well, you'd better figure out a way to sprout wings then, huh?" He hovered in the air for a moment before landing on a railing on the opposite side of the huge room.

"Yeah, when porcinis fly!"

Rokit wagged his finger. "I didn't say it would be easy." He flapped his huge ears and took off, buzzing near Dar. "Come on, tag me!"

Gwog walked into the engine room. "What's going on here?"

Jartis looked down. "Oh, just a little play time for the youngling."

"Play?" Gwog gazed up, seeing Dar high in the catwalks. "I'm supposed to be making an adult of him; instead, you let him play like a youngling?"

"Oh, take it easy; it was just a few minutes. We'll get started on the Ceriddium intake line...Come on, Dar, back to work."

"Yes, sir!" Dar called, heading down to the floor. Rokit flew up and landed next to Jartis. Gwog wandered out, returning to the bridge.

Dar enjoyed his time in the navigation section, but engineering proved that he had much to learn. The massive warp engines were complicated monsters prone to malfunctions. It didn't help that the Cunik was close to fifty years old. Built at a time in Ontarrin history where trade boomed. Four massive ships were built by the Crinians: The Ragnik, the Farnik, the Ernik, and the Cunik. Over time, the Soothian pirates captured and lay waste to the other freighters, the Cunik was the sole survivor, and Gwog made sure the pirates wouldn't get his precious ship, or its cargo.

Jartis grabbed a small drill and worked to remove a hatch cover. "Damned Crinian screws, don't match anything we have now," he grumbled.

"Well, they are old," Rokit replied, waiting patiently.

"Yeah, and of course there aren't many Crinians left."

He shook his head, accidentally smacking Jartis with an ear. "No, and with threats from Versith over Thidium, who knows how long some planets have."

"Mmm, and I've heard those Versithians are brutal."

“Not so much them, but their hired thugs, the Renthids.”

Jartis finally got the cover off and inspected the pipe. “Great, the interlink coupling is really loose, that explains why the Ceriddium wasn’t mixing correctly.”

“Interlink wrench?”

“Yup.” He stood up and leaned over the railing. “Dar?” Jartis hollered.

“Yes?”

“Rokit will be coming down; can you find the interlink wrench and set it out?”

“Okay!”

Rokit climbed over the railing and took off.

Just as Dar reached the toolbox, the ship was rocked by a huge impact, knocking him off his feet. “Hey!” He scrambled up, and got knocked down by another collision. “What the—?!”

“Asteroids!” Jartis hollered. “Stay down!”

Rokit was mid-flight when another struck the ship. The Cunik lurched to one side and Rokit was slammed into a support column. He hit the ground in a crumpled, lifeless mass about thirty feet from Dar. “Rokit! Rokit!” Dar called, trying to reach him. The ship bucked and bounced a few more times before sailing into empty space. He climbed over and dropped next to his fallen friend. “Rokit?” he said softly, grabbing the Gundin’s huge ear and moving it off his face. Blood ran from a wound on his head and from his mouth.

“Dar! How is he?” Jartis yelled, trying to get down as quickly as he could.

Dar moved his hand around his friend’s neck, he could feel nothing. He bent down, putting his face close to Rokit’s, he felt no breath. “I’m afraid he might be dead.”

“Oh no!” Jartis moved as fast as his tired old body would allow. It took a few minutes, but he finally reached Dar. Lowering himself to his knees, Jartis checked over Rokit. “I think you’re right, he’s dead.”

“I wonder what happened? We should’ve had clear sailing.” Dar collapsed back against the support column. “Gwog’s gonna be pissed.”

“Accidents happen. This is space. We all knew it could be dangerous when we signed on.”

“You just never think...” he said softly, reaching over to flip Rokit’s ear back over his face. Dar had never seen someone dead before, his emotions were confused. He wanted his friend to come back to life, he was learning so much. And he loved watching him fly around the engine room. Now he was gone—in the blink of an eye.

Jartis stood and went over to the communications panel. “Jartis to Gwog.”

“Go ahead.”

“What in Carfidius just happened?”

“Hit an asteroid storm; came outta nowhere,” Gwog replied.

“Rokit’s dead.”

“What?! What happened?”

“He was gliding down to get a wrench and when the ship was hit, he got slammed head first into a beam...Pretty sure he died instantly.”

“Have Karnis help you prepare the body for burial.”

“Yes, sir.” Jartis pushed the button, ending the transmission.

“I’ll help you,” Dar said. “He was my friend too.”

“You don’t have to, Dar, it’s okay. I’ve seen my share of death on this ship.”

He fought back the lump forming in his throat. "It's part of my life now, too." Pausing for a few moments, he took a deep breath, and began to help Jartis. "Are we going to take him back to Gundis?"

"No, he'll be buried in space."

"Why?"

Jartis laid Rokit on his back and began to furl his ears up so he could be wrapped in a shroud. "Because it was his wish to be buried in space."

"Oh...If I died, Gwog said he would've taken me home to my mother."

"Because you're still kind of a youngling. He'll always take you home." He went and got a sheet out of a cabinet, laying it on the floor next to Rokit. "You'll reach a time when Gwog will ask you...As it is now, you're not a youngling, and not really an adult."

"How long must I live in this 'in between' life?" Dar asked. He helped lift Rokit onto the sheet.

"Until Gwog feels you are ready." He carefully folded the sheet over, and took some straps to secure it. "Come, help me get him to the weapons bay."

"Yes, sir," he said softly, grabbing Rokit around the waist. The Gundin's hollow bones made him lightweight and not much to carry; Dar could've managed on his own.

Twenty minutes later, the entire crew of the Cunik was in the weapons bay. They stood around the shrouded body of Rokit. Gwog stepped forward. "My friends and crew, we all know space is a dangerous place...And there are times we'll go out and not come back...This is what has happened to our friend Rokit...He died doing what he loved...So, we will follow his wishes and send his body into space." He motioned to Ethoic and Pthoic to place the body on the torpedo loading ramp. They gently lay Rokit down and slid him inside the large tube, closing the breech. Everyone was silent while Gwog pushed the button, sending Rokit into space.

After, they went back to work. Gwog walked along with Dar. "Are you okay, little one?"

"Yes, sir, I'm fine."

"Have you seen death before?"

Dar shook his head. "No, sir."

"What are your feelings?"

"Confused and a little angry. Rokit was my friend."

"Understandable. But you know now what it means to be part of a freighter crew...Not all is Kruelian roses in this job."

"Yes, sir."

"We'll be putting into Cataris, and they have a pretty good shopping area...How much drig do you have?"

Dar cocked his head in contemplation. "About five hundred."

"Enough to get your Catarin hide clothes you've been wanting."

"Yes!"

"I'll take you 'round to the place I get mine...He's a good friend, and I usually get a deal."

"Thank you."

Gwog stopped for a moment. "Continue working with Jartis. Now that I'm down an assistant engineer, he's going to need help."

"Yes, sir, I will."

Jartis hurried toward them. "Captain, we have a little problem."

"What?" Gwog replied.

"I tried to bring the warp engines on line and I got nothing."

"Think it was from the asteroid hit?"

"Probably," Jartis said. "May have damaged the external flux intake."

"Well, can you go out and have a look?"

"I was hoping to avoid that."

Dar looked at Jartis. "Out?"

"Yes, out looking for damage to the ship."

"A spacewalk?"

Gwog studied Dar for a moment. "Might as well take him, he's gonna have to learn some time."

"I get to go out in space?" Dar said excitedly.

"Yes, yes—and it's not just fun and games, this is truly dangerous," Jartis stated. "Come on, let's get going. I wanna get to Cataris."

Dar followed Jartis to the crew equipment room. Jartis dug around until he found a spacesuit that would fit Dar. He helped him into it, then dressed in his own. They clonked along the catwalks, heading toward the shuttle bay. There, they would leave the safety of the ship via the containment field, and make their way to where Jartis suspected damage.

"Mark my word, Dar; one wrong step and you'll be floating lost in space...The Ontarrin solar winds are strong in these parts, no wonder we ran into an asteroid belt, probably got blown off course."

"It can do that?" he asked.

"Yes, it can. A really strong solar eruption can even knock a planet off axis or out of alignment." They stopped in the shuttle bay and Jartis put on his helmet. "Come on, let's go." He helped Dar with his helmet. "We have quite a walk ahead of us. There isn't any place to run a safety line, so you better be careful with your magnetic boots—they are your lifeline."

Dar nodded. "Yes, sir." He followed Jartis to the edge of the shuttle bay. Ahead of him: the blackness of space. A few stars shined, but mostly it felt like a piece of black cloth had been draped over his face. He reached down and switched the electro-magnets on his boots.

"Ready?" Jartis asked as he checked Dar over one more time. It was bad enough losing one crew member today, he didn't want to lose another. And he liked the youngling anyways.

"Ready."

"Let's go." He stepped outside of the protective force field, his boots making loud clacking noises as they contacted the metal hull of the ship.

Dar waited a moment, watching Jartis. He didn't want to make any mistakes. Taking in a deep breath, he stepped out. "Oh," he said softly.

"Feels funny, huh?"

"I'm floating in my suit." He took a few steps toward Jartis.

"As long as you're not in your suit and floating away, we're fine."

Dar laughed, it felt strange. “This is so cool!”

“Ah, ah, remember, we’re here to work.”

“Yes, but this is really fun.”

“No it’s not. One wrong step and you join Rokit in the frozen depths of space.”

“I’m being careful,” Dar replied. They walked along for quite some time. “Do we have enough air?”

Jartis looked at the gauge on his wrist. “Yes, about half an hour left.”

“And that’s okay?”

“Yup.” He stopped near a large dent in the side of the ship. “Well, that’s what I thought.”

“That’s a huge dent!” Dar watched Jartis descend into the crater made by the asteroid.

“Stay here, I’m gonna check the external flux intake—if I can find it.”

Dar turned around. He didn’t realize it, but behind him was a large moon, probably Zerkin 3 that orbited around Uyoninis. In the distance, he could see the parent planet. An eerie purplish nebula stretched across that part of space. It was beautiful. He found a hefty bolt head to hang onto with his right hand, his left, he stretched toward the stars, Dar wanted so badly to touch them. In his dreams he’d touched the stars. They were shiny, warm, and tingly to the touch. But right now, they seemed to be just out of his reach.

“Dar!”

“Yes, sir?” He snapped out of his trance.

“Can you come down here?”

Dar peered into the sunken metal crater. “Uh, okay, I’m coming.” He carefully made his way down. “Yes?”

“Look,” Jartis said, pointing inside a warped hatch. “See that?”

“Sorry to be ignorant, but what am I looking at?”

“That’s the external flux intake. And it’s not supposed to look like that.” Jartis shifted around, trying to get inside the hatch. “I got a spare, but I don’t think I can get in there to fix it.”

“Do you want me to try?”

Jartis looked up. “Think you can fit?”

He moved closer. “Maybe.”

“All right.” He moved aside. Dar worked his way carefully into the hatch. “Be careful, Dar, don’t let the jagged metal tear your suit.”

“Okay,” he replied, feeling like he was climbing into the jaws of an Erotin sand snake. All around, jagged metal, torn apart by the violent impact of the asteroid waited to slice him.

“Easy, easy now. Can you reach that long tube over there?”

Dar strained. “Uh, er, ah, yes, I can barely reach it.”

“Good. We need to get back and refill our air. Then we’ll return and see if you can get the part installed. If not, Cataris won’t be a three day journey; it’ll be a thirty day or more day journey on impulse power.”

“Oh, that’s not good.”

“Well, right now, you’re the only one small enough to squeeze in and fix it. You get us up and running, and Gwog’ll be quite proud of you.”

“Well, how does that feel?” Gwog asked as Dar came from a dressing booth.

“Nice, very nice,” he replied, running his hand over the smooth, black hide that covered his body from neck to ankles. “So soft.”

“Very durable too...The Catarins breed some bovidis just for their hides, the rest of their parts end up on our dinner table.”

Dar looked at the price tag on the jacket. “Two hundred drig.” Then he checked the tag on the trousers. “Three hundred and ten drig...I won’t have enough to get any boots.”

“Find a pair you like, little one.”

“Are you going to advance me some pay?”

Gwog tapped his finger against his chin. “No, think of it as a gift. You’ve more than proven yourself a good crew member, and I certainly appreciate your help in getting the external flux intake fixed.”

“Really? Thanks!” He began to look around. One pair in particular caught his eye. They were black, knee high boots with laces that ran up the outsides through shiny silver eyelets.

“You like those?” Gwog asked.

“Yeah.” He looked at the price tag. “Oh, but they’re really expensive.”

“Lemme see.”

Dar brought him the boots. He’d seen another pair that he’d be satisfied with, but this pair looked really cool. “There is another pair, ones not so expensive...”

“Will these fit you?”

“I dunno.”

Gwog handed the boots back. “How about trying them on?”

“Yes, sir.” He sat down on a bench and put the boots on, pulling the laces tight. “They fit like a glove.”

“Stand up, let’s have a look at you.”

Dar stood and slowly turned around. He couldn’t believe he was dressed in such wonderful clothes. His mother had always provided for him, but her means only went so far. Now he was dressed like a true space freighter crew member; nothing could be better.

Gwog folded his arms and studied Dar. In the few months he’d been on board, the youngling seemed to have sprouted into an adult. His body filled out; he no longer looked like a gaunt teenager. The expression he wore on his face was one of maturity. His level of responsibility far exceeded some of the other crew, Gwog just never let him know. Someday, he’d make a fine freighter captain, the instinct to explore and travel seemed to be in his blood. His mother was right in sending him, this is what he needed. “You look finely appointed, little one, how about we make our purchases and head back?”

“Yes, sir.” Dar collected his other clothes from the dressing booth. He wanted to wear his new ones out. So far, this felt like the proudest moment in his life. He wondered when he’d see his mother again, he wanted to show off his new clothes. “Sir?”

“Yes?”

“Are there any plans to stop by Erotis?”

Gwog chuckled. "You wanna show off your new trappings to your mother, huh?"

Dar tried to hide a smile. "Well, yeah, and I haven't seen her in a while. I wanna make sure she's okay."

"Hmm, I suppose. We're heading to Darminitus to pick up a shipment of kittens bound for Thokin. I might be willing to swing by Erotis for a few hours."

"Thank you!" Dar beamed widely. He stepped up to the counter and pulled out his wad of gold drig strips. Carefully, he counted out the amount for the jacket and trousers, it left him with five drig. It didn't matter, in a few weeks, he'd have another hundred or so.

"I'll be paying for the boots," Gwog said and he reached down and snatched the price tag off Dar's right boot top. He didn't bother looking at it, money was no object right now.

"Right, that's five hundred and ten drig for the clothes, and another four hundred for the boots," the shop keeper replied as he wrote up the ticket.

"This is the shuttle Cunis to Erotis 3, do you copy?" Dar said as he piloted the shuttle toward the surface. Gwog trusted him enough to let him fly on his own.

"Roger, Cunis, we read you," came the reply.

Dar listened for a moment, the voice sounded familiar. "Garnic, is that you?"

"Dar!"

"So your father got you a job working in the long-range communications section, huh?"

"Yeah, Mokki Grudbit died, so father put in the good word, and I got the job."

"Good for you," Dar replied, punching in the coordinates for landing.

"Dar? Will you come by and visit while you're here?"

"It'll be quick, I only have six hours before the Cunik heads to Darminitus."

"Please! Please! I wanna hear all about your adventures."

Dar sighed. He wanted to see his best friend, but he wanted to spend much of his time with his mother. "Can you meet me at the Aknarra Tavern in four hours?"

"Sure, I can do that."

"All right, see you then." He looked for a place to land. "Ah, perfect, right near the store." Banking to the right, he circled a few times and landed. Shutting down the engine, he hurried out the door, and down the street. He stopped just shy of the store, Dar wanted to get his composure. He was crew on a freighter; he didn't just go barging in the door like a youngling anymore. No, he was an *adult* and expected to behave like it.

Stepping onto the porch, Dar pushed open the door. Denrika looked up from her place at the counter. "Dar?"

"Hello, mother."

She let out a gleeful shriek and ran to him, throwing her arms around him. "Oh, so good to see you, my son!"

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Same as always." She let her hands slide and stepped back to look at him. "My, you've grown up so much in these last few months, I almost didn't recognize you."

"Bovidis shit, mother."

"Dar! Watch your language!"

"Oh, come on, we all talk like that in space."

“Well, you’re not in space right now, so I’ll have you watch your tongue.”

He grinned. “Yes, mother.”

She grabbed his hand and led him to the counter. “Have a seat, I’ll make you an Erotin sage root float.”

Dar licked his lips. “Oh, that would be wonderful!” He settled into the hard-backed stool. “We’re on the way to Darminitus to pick up a shipment of kittens.”

“How long will you be here?”

“Just a few hours.”

“Oh, I wish you could stay longer.” She scooped out a couple spoonfuls of sage and mixed it in with the other ingredients. “Did you hear Garnic got a job in long-range communications?”

“Yeah, talked to him on my way in. I’m meeting him at the Aknarra Tavern in a few.”

“The *Tavern*? Since when do you drink?”

“Umm, since I had Skrinnian fever and Gwog nursed me back to health.”

“Skrinnian fever! You could’ve died!” She paused before sliding the foaming glass over to him. “Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea letting you go into space.”

“I’m fine, really. Yes, it’s dangerous; just the other day my friend Rokit got killed when an asteroid hit the ship...Then I had to do a spacewalk with Jartis to fix the external flux intake so we could have warp engines again.”

Denrika held up her hand. “Okay, enough of the dangers, I don’t wanna hear that my son could be killed at any time...How about you tell me what some of the other planets are like?”

Dar reached up and took her hand, closing his fingers over it. He loved his mother, and perhaps it wasn’t such a great idea to scare her with all his perils in space. “I’ve been to Guonis and taken a tour of where the gold drig strips are made...Skrinnis, were I ended up sick, but it’s really an interesting planet...Jamarais was cool, I saw where they make the rum. Gwog knows everyone it seems, he took me all over.”

“And how much rum did you drink?”

He let his hand slide. “I tasted some. Malikin port is much nicer.” Taking a sip of his drink, he was silent for a moment, collecting his thoughts. “I’ve been to Newrillis and Sirrix; and the Gamma 3 space station.”

“Have you found any females to join with?”

“Mother!”

“You’re Satiren, it’s in your nature to join.”

“Umm, yeah, I have.”

“Oh, I’m so proud of you!” She reached over and grabbed his cheek, giving it a pinch. “And look at you, all decked out in fine Catarin hide clothes—those must’ve cost a fortune!”

“No, they weren’t cheap, and Gwog was nice and bought me the boots.” He thought for a moment and realized he should’ve brought her a present from his travels. “I feel bad, I didn’t bring you anything. I’ve been saving up all my drig to get clothes.”

“It’s okay, just having you here for a little while is a nice surprise.”

They talked for several hours, and Dar told her of life on the freighter and all the friends he’d made. Denrika was pleased that he fit in so well and everything worked out. Still, she

missed her youngling; but before her sat an adult, going on with his life and adventures. She wondered when she'd see him again.

"Mother?"

"Yes?"

"Have any males made note of you?"

She sighed. "No, and I'm not exactly seeking them out either."

"Why not?"

"Because when you get older, you find that you aren't as attractive as you used to be, and the males don't take notice anymore."

Dar played his finger over the rim of the glass. "Too bad Jartis is far older than you. He's half Satiren, half Priddin. He's a great engineer."

"And what makes you think he'd have me?"

"I dunno. And like I said, he's much older anyways."

"Dar, don't worry about me. One of these days someone will come along. If not, I die knowing that I gave you a good life. That makes me happy."

He reached into his pocket and checked his time piece. "I suppose I should get going so I can see Garnic."

Denrika went around the counter and put her arms around him. "I hope you come back soon, as much as I say I'm fine, I do miss you."

He hugged her close, smelling the scent of the Softsuckle flowers she wore in her hair. "I miss you too, mother, and I'll come visit any chance I get."

"Bartender, can I get a Malikin port, please?" Dar said as he took a seat at the bar. Garnic hadn't arrived yet. He'd never been in the Aknarra Tavern; it was dark and dusty with a few patrons sitting at tables nursing drinks. The bars on the space stations were much livelier.

"Are you old enough to drink, youngling?" the bartender asked.

"Yes, sir, I'll be eighteen in a couple of weeks."

"All right then, I better not have your mother come in here and cause a scene."

"My mother knows I'm here. She works at the general store."

"Denrika?"

"Yes."

The bartender got closer and noticed Dar's hair. "Ah, so you're the half breed."

"Unfortunately."

"I heard you got shipped off to space." He gestured to Dar's clothes. "I guess that rumor was right."

"Yes, and I'm doing quite well out there. I'm on the Cunik, the biggest freighter in the galaxy."

The bartender poured his drink. "Well, at least you escaped this dirty old outpost."

"It wasn't that bad, except getting the shit beat out of me all the time."

"And I think my son was responsible for most of it."

"Krodus? He's your son?"

The bartender frowned. “Unfortunately. I tried my best to raise that youngling right, and all he did was become the town bully...I feel bad for everything he did to you—you seem like a nice youngling—err, adult.”

Dar took a sip of port. “So, what happened to Krodus?”

“Mmm, not long after your class graduated, someone from a mining company came through looking for big, dumb recruits to dig Thidium on Ladnis 5...Krodus thought the drig would be good, and he wanted to get out of here.”

“Ladnis 5?”

“Yeah.”

Dar didn’t immediately say anything. “Uh, I hate to tell you this, but Ladnis 5 got overrun by Renthids and is nearly a dead planet...Most of the Crinians were exterminated.”

The bartender shook his head. “I’d heard rumors of that...I don’t know where he’d be now.”

“If there’s still Thidium to mine, they’ll have him digging. If not, who knows.”

“I told the youngling it was a bad idea. He could’ve stayed here and taken over the tavern from me. I’m not getting any younger, you know.”

The door opened and Garnic walked in. “By the light of a full Erotin moon, it’s my best friend Dar!”

Dar stood and greeted his friend with a big hug. “Ah, you look just the same as the day we left school.”

“Was that supposed to be a compliment?” Garnic said as he took a seat at the bar.

Dar sat down and grabbed his glass. “You want something to drink?”

“What are you having?”

“Malikin port.”

Garnic shook his head. “Shit, that’s way too strong for me. I’ll just have a Bodnarian ale.”

The bartender approached. Dar held up his finger. “My friend here will have a Bodnarian ale, please.”

“Coming right up.” He went off to pull a pint.

“You know who that is?” Dar asked.

“No.”

“Krodus’s father.”

“No way! I never knew he owned the tavern.”

“I was chatting with him before you got here. Seems Krodus went off to work in the mines on Ladnis 5.”

Garnic leaned close to Dar. “I heard the Renthids overran the planet to get the Thidium for the Versithians.”

“Yup. So poor Krodus is either dead, or a slave now.”

“Kinda serves him right for being such a bully.”

Dar shook his head. “I may not have liked him, but I wouldn’t wish slavery on anyone... When I was on Sirrix, they had some Priddin slaves being used to support their military. They looked so miserable.”

Garnic’s drink arrived. He held it up for a toast. “To my best friend, Dar, who I’m so glad to see in one piece, and doing well.”

He picked up his half-empty glass. "And to my best friend, Garnic, who I'm happy to see doing well...Have you picked up a female yet?"

"You just had to ask that didn't you?"

"Just curious."

Garnic touched his glass to Dar's. "I've been seeing Martia Boknod, but nothing in stone as of yet...Did you ever find someone?"

"No, but I'm not a virgin anymore...Had a few joinings."

"The blush is great, huh?"

Dar smiled broadly. "Amazing."

"So, tell me, who was your first? A Satiren?"

"Nope, a beautiful Elemenel named Kikka."

"Ohhhh, I hear they're great." Garnic took a sip. "Was it like they said in love class?"

"Uh, pretty much. Except I was scared out of my mind!" They laughed.

"Where are you off to next?"

Dar finished his drink. "Darminitus, and then on to Thokin."

"I still wish you could take me with you."

"Space is really dangerous, Garnic. Be happy and proud with what you have here."

10

“Here we go again,” Dar replied from his position at helm. Ten years had passed, and he was one of the most respected of the Cunik’s crew. He’d matured, filled out, and added quite a few new experiences to his list of accomplishments. Even still being the smallest of the crew, no one messed with him anymore.

“Yeah, same old story,” Vikkis said as he settled down at the weapons console. “Blasted Soothians just won’t take *no* for an answer.”

“All right, little one, slow us to one-quarter impulse and show him our right flank,” Gwog said from his captain’s chair. Three pirate ships faced them.

“Yes, sir.” Slowing the ship, Dar fired the directional thrusters positioning the starboard side of the ship toward the pirates.

“Vikkis, let’s try out those Newrillian cannons. My sense of humor has run out, and I can’t afford to get this shipment of gold taken.”

“Aye, captain.” He punched a few buttons. “Starboard cannons online.”

Gwog reached out with one finger and pushed a button. “This is Gwog to Nekis.”

“Don’t even bother with the formalities, Gwog. I know you have gold,” the reply came.

“All right then, I guess we’ll dispense with any talk and just open fire on you.” He looked around, making sure his crew was ready. “All hands, battle stations. Vikkis, commence firing.”

“Yes, sir.” Vikkis brought up the targeting screen. “Ah, I think I can put a nice spread right into Nekis’s ship.”

“Then do so, and make haste. We need to be at Thokin in less than three days.”

“Right.” He typed a couple of commands on the keyboard and watched the screen. “Commencing firing.” Pushing a button, the ship jolted as a salvo blasted from the starboard cannons. They watched out the side of the view screen as the concentrated plasma “cannon balls” streaked toward the lead ship.

A moment later, the ship exploded. There were cheers from everyone on the bridge.

“Finally, after all these years, I’m rid of Nekis,” Gwog said with a little growl. The communications panel beeped. He poked the button. “This is Gwog; are you preparing terms of surrender?”

“No, in fact we are targeting you this very moment,” the voice said; Gwog didn’t recognize it.

“Who is this?”

“You may have just killed my father, but you won’t kill me.”

“Oh, great, Nekis had a youngling,” Dar said, holding his gaze on the screen.

“I am Nokkis, the leader of the pirates.”

“Why don’t you run along, youngling, and pick on someone smaller,” Gwog replied.

Dar noticed movement on the scanner. “Captain, I’m picking up a small ship inbound.”

“Boarding party.” Tregis hurried over and grabbed a phaser rifle from a cabinet.

Gwog motioned to Dar. “Go with him, and pick up the twins on the way.”

“Yes, sir.” Dar grabbed a rifle and ran after Tregis. They got maybe two hundred yards and the ship took a forceful blast. Dar was knocked from his feet, smashing into Tregis. They tumbled to the metal catwalk. Another blast rocked the Cunik, Dar slid off the walkway. “Ahhhhh!”

Tregis managed to get hold of the railing and got Dar by his belt. “I got you!”

Dar looked down to see the deck probably fifty feet below. He was helpless. A fall from that height meant certain death. “Tregis!”

“Hang on!”

“To what?!”

Tregis strained, trying to pull Dar up. “Sorry, a figure of speech.”

“Please don’t drop me!” he called over the noise of battle. The ship continued to shake violently, the sound of explosions echoing through the cavernous cargo holds.

“I’m hanging on, not sure I can pull you up.”

Dar saw Ethoic and Pthoic below. “Hey, help!” he hollered. They looked up and immediately started running the maze of catwalks. Dar dangled, hoping Tregis had enough strength to hold on. “How are you doing up there?”

“I got you, don’t worry.”

Another blast shook the ship, Dar was swung wildly around. “Not good!” He saw the twins doing their best to cover the distance. They kept glancing up to see if he was okay. “Come on!”

It seemed to take forever to reach them. Ethoic jumped on Tregis, hoping to steady him while Pthoic leaned precariously off the walkway and reached for Dar. “Can you reach my hand?”

“I’ll try.” Dar brought his arm up and stretched as far as he could. “That’s it.”

Pthoic reached back and grabbed Ethoic. “Hold on to me.”

“Right, brother.” He locked arms, almost digging his claws into his brother’s arm.

“Try now,” Pthoic said, leaning further. The ship continued to take heavy fire.

Dar stretched as far as he could, reaching his hand, he could only grasp the end of a claw. “I can’t go any more.”

Pthoic growled and wiggled a little further. He leaned so far he thought he would fall. “Hold me tight, brother.”

“I am.” Ethoic tightened his grasp. Pthoic felt claws puncturing his skin. He ignored the pain.

“Almost,” Dar said, straining.

Pthoic was nearly off the walkway. He made a wild grab and caught Dar by the wrist. “Gotcha!” The ship took a nasty hit, and Dar was jolted in the air. Pthoic refused to let go, digging his claws into Dar’s arm; he wasn’t going to let him fall.

With all his might, Pthoic hauled Dar onto the walkway. They were bucked and bounced by more blasts. They immediately grabbed the railings, hoping not to be shaken off.

“Are you okay, Dar?” Pthoic asked, pointing to his arm.

Dar looked at the four puncture wounds and the blood dribbling from them. “As opposed to the other alternative, yes. And you?” He pointed to Pthoic’s arm where green blood oozed from where his brother had held him.

“Ah, no worse than when we played as younglings.”

“Dar, you don’t have wings, flying not good idea,” Ethoic said, checking Dar over.

“Very funny...We got a boarding party on the way, Gwog said you two were coming with us.”

“Okay.” Pthoic stood. “We haven’t had a good fight in a long time.”

Dar picked up his rifle. “And Gwog would be happy having it that way.”

Tregis struggled to his feet and grabbed his rifle. “One lost gold shipment and he loses his license with the Ontarrin Bank...Not to mention he’s gotta pay restitution for it all.” They hurried toward the shuttle bay, along the way, the twins picked up some rifles. Reaching the bay, they set up a defensive perimeter. The battle still raged on between the ships.

Taking up position behind a large support beam, Dar patiently waited. He hoped the Cunik’s defenses would take out the shuttle before it got close enough to land. But with the way the ship was taking hits, he figured there’d be damage. “How many do you think’ll be in the boarding party?” Dar called to Tregis.

“Usually six to eight.”

“Okay, that’s manageable.” He checked the rifle to make sure it was on maximum setting. As he looked up, he saw it: a fairly large shuttle heading straight for them. Dar had only seen a Soothian once in his life. For the most part, Gwog did a fine job keeping the pirates away from his shipments. Soothians were odd, ugly aliens; standing roughly six feet tall, with gray-green skin which very much reminded him of an overgrown Erotin sand lizard. He’d seen one on Appolion 6 when they were dropping off a shipment of machine parts. Gwog said it was a female Soothian, probably a slave; the males rarely strayed from Soothis or their ships.

The pirates were normally armed to the teeth with weapons they produced on their own. Some of them rivaled the technology of the Newrillians. A Soothian disruptor rifle was a feared weapon; capable of erasing a life in just a bright flash, leaving only a small pile of ash behind. The pirates also took vessels, turning them into pirate gunships, adding to their growing fleet.

Ethoic manned the door gun, trying to stop the pirates from landing. “Their shields are too good, I can’t stop them.”

“We’ll take ’em when they come out,” Tregis hollered over the noise.

“Right!” Dar replied. With a couple of well-placed laser blasts, the shuttle breached the containment field and landed. A few moments later, the door opened and nearly a dozen pirates ran out, with more coming. “Shit!” Dar opened fire, dropping as many as he could. The others fired as well. The pirates poured from the vessel. They shot at the Cunik crew, keeping them pinned down. By now, there were thirty pirates taking up positions of their own. And then Dar noticed it: another large group came from a rear door of the shuttle and was trying to maneuver around and possibly flank their position.

“Tregis, they’re trying to flank us!” Dar yelled at the top of his lungs and pointed.

He strained to see where the pirates went. “Can you go after them?”

“Yeah.” Dar paused for a moment, looking for his best option. Then the pirates split into two groups; one seemed to be making a move on their position, the others, a run for the bridge. He was torn on whom to go after. His friends and crewmates were vastly outnumbered, but if he let the pirates get to the bridge, the ship would be lost.

“Dar, don’t let ’em get to the bridge!” Tregis called, pointing at the dozen Soothians hurrying along the catwalks.

He spun around and made a mad dash for the catwalks. One against a dozen, clearly lousy odds in battle, he thought. But he couldn’t let the ship fall into their hands; he’d sworn an oath to Gwog that he would defend this vessel with his life. Now, at twenty-seven, that life seemed awfully short. He hoped he’d live to see twenty-eight, and maybe a few more.

With legs pumping and feet pounding on the metal grates, Dar tore up the catwalks after the pirates. When he got the chance, he opened fire, dropping the last two in the group. Three others turned and fired, sending Dar diving for cover. He hoped the metal support beam he hid behind would take the blasts from the Soothian disruptors. Hot metal splattered down on him as the pirates blasted away at the column. Dar tried to shield himself, hoping his Catarin hide clothes would give some protection.

Glancing up, he saw a communications panel to his left. If he could just warn Gwog that the boarding party was far larger than expected, perhaps he could send reinforcements. Although there weren’t that many crew on the ship. He had to try. Peering around the corner, Dar saw three pirates holding a position, the rest continued to the bridge. Slowly, he pressed his back against the wall and slid until he was standing. Several blasts came his way. Dar poked his rifle around the corner and fired a few times, hoping to keep their heads down. He fumbled with the button. “Dar to Gwog. The boarding party’s far larger than planned. Tregis and the twins are pinned down in the shuttle bay. I’m chasing a bunch toward the bridge. We need all hands to man rifles and prepare for a fight.”

“Roger, Dar—” the transmission was cut short as a disruptor blast hit the panel. Dar ducked for cover. He couldn’t see where the blast came from. One of the pirates must be making a move on him. Frantically, he searched for better cover, there wasn’t much. He was probably thirty feet up and still had another thirty to go in order to be on the same level as the bridge. More disruptor blasts came his direction. Deciding there wasn’t much point in staying put, Dar took off running.

As he made his way toward a turn-back on the catwalk, he ran right into a pirate hiding behind a column. Neither had time to level their weapons, but Dar was just a bit faster. He whipped out his trusty knife, and without a second thought, buried it to the hilt in the Soothian’s chest. Orange-red blood splattered all over him. The pirate didn’t immediately die. Instead, it took out what looked like a phaser pistol and prepared to shoot Dar.

He grappled with the pirate, trying to get the weapon away. The Soothian managed to discharge the pistol twice into the air before it bled out enough and slumped to the metal grating. Dar took the weapon and shoved it into the waistband of his trousers figuring it might come in handy later. Wiping the blood from his face, he carried on.

Dar didn’t get far when more disruptor blasts came his way. He took aim and fired, dropping another pirate. Eight more were heading to the bridge. Gwog and the rest of the crew better be ready for a fight, he thought, trying to dodge blasts. Below, the battle for the shuttle bay continued. Dar couldn’t see much of the fight; most was obscured by a couple of catwalks stretching high across the bay. Above, he heard loud footsteps; he hoped it was reinforcements.

A few moments later the distinctive sound of Newrillian phaser rifles echoed through the area. And then Dar heard Gwog’s voice as he commanded his crew in the attack. Somewhere,

seemingly out of nowhere, Putchic, one of the deck hands, came running toward Dar. Being half Kiburgin Hoarda, Putchic was a nasty individual. He brandished a phaser rifle. "Follow me!" he said in a deep, raspy voice. Dar didn't hesitate; he readied his rifle and followed the hairy beast. Although they didn't always get along, in a time of battle, differences were set aside.

They ran up two more levels. The pirates were now engaging Gwog's group. "Hold fast, can we make any flanking move?" Gwog hollered over the noise.

"Gwog, we're below!" Dar yelled.

"Pinch!" came the reply.

"On our way!" He tucked in behind Putchic and got ready to advance on the group above. They stormed up another level. Dar saw the pirates right above. He knew it was no time to be fair when it came to a fight. Raising his phaser, he fired several blasts right through the metal grates. Putchic followed his lead. The phasers cut through the metal and went right into the Soothians. They disappeared in a flash of light. Dar didn't think Gwog would be upset over the damage; the ship, and the payload was far more important.

"Good shot!" Gwog called. He wasn't sure who did it, but they eliminated the threat to the bridge. Now the crew could focus efforts on the much larger battle raging in the shuttle bay. He ran down the catwalk, dodging the holes, he saw Dar and Putchic below. "Go help the others!"

They turned and ran; the noise from the battle seemed to be dying out. Dar wasn't sure who was really winning. There weren't as many blasts rocking the ship, and the disruptor fire below lessened. It felt like total chaos. Somewhere behind him were Gwog and the others. Dar ran so hard he stumbled and fell. Putchic grabbed him, yanking him to his feet. They hurried down four more levels until they reached the floor of the shuttle bay.

Dar took one look and the carnage. For some reason, Ethoic, Pthoic, and Tregis didn't have their phasers set to what Dar jokingly called "crispy critter" setting, and quite a few pirates lay in pools of blood either dead or dying. "Tregis? Ethoic? Pthoic?" He caught movement out of the corner of his eye. A pirate was trying to make an escape. Without hesitation, he fired and vaporized the Soothian. Putchic went along dispatching any pirates he found alive. Dar ran over to where he last saw Tregis. A small burnt pile of ashes were all that remained of his friend. A disruptor had found its mark.

"Ethoic? Pthoic?" Dar called. The twins were formidable opponents in battle, surely they survived, he thought, making a sweep of the bay. After a few minutes of searching, all he found were two more piles of ash. He stood where he thought Pthoic had fallen.

Gwog approached. "Are you all right, little one?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

He reached and took Dar's arm, holding it up. Blood still dribbled down his hand. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah," he said softly. "Pthoic saved my life today, and I couldn't save his."

“Why are we here again?” Dar asked as they tromped through the slave auction on Uyoninis.

“We lost three valuable crew members over a month ago, and I haven’t had much luck hiring new ones...Once in a while you get lucky and find some at the auction with skills,” Gwog replied as he stopped and studied a purebred Iddrian. The species was a rare site in the galaxy, and Gwog wondered why he was at auction. “You, Iddrian, have you any skills?”

The tall, dark, brown-skinned alien looked up. He was thin and gaunt from malnourishment. His normally erect fleshy tendrils hung like dead sand worms on his head; his dark yellow eyes were hollow and had a vacant gaze to them. It was hard to believe that Iddrians were distant relatives to Elemenels. “I was a navigator on the freighter Klinnig before the pirates took her,” he replied softly.

“What have you done since?”

“Worked in a Thidium mine for the last two years.”

Gwog reached out and grabbed the Iddrian by the jaw, pulling his mouth open to check his teeth. “Hmm, don’t look too bad. Needs some good meals, but I’m sure Karnis can fatten him up.”

“So, we replace Tregis just like that?” Dar replied with dismay.

“Little one, I can’t have you running everything. Granted, you’re damn fine in navigation, but I prefer you at helm.” He put his hand on Dar’s shoulder. “I know Tregis and the twins were your friends, they were mine too; but understand I have a business to run...And someday you will too.”

“Yes, sir.”

Gwog took a scrap of paper from his pocket along with a battered scribe stylus. He took down the lot number of the Iddrian so he’d make sure to bid on him. “Come on, now we need some more deck hands.” They walked down the line of slaves. Some were chained to walls, others—the more dangerous ones, in cages. Amidst the darkness and filth, Dar saw something: a flash of green hair.

“Uh, Gwog?”

“Yes?”

“Can you wait a moment?”

“Certainly. What is it, little one?”

“I saw something.” He left Gwog and picked his way through the throng of buyers. As he neared the back of the auction building, he saw him. Chained to a wall, covered in filth sat his worst enemy: Kroodus. Standing nearby were a couple of Kiburgin Hoardas. His heart leaned in two different directions. Dar hated Kroodus with every shred of his being. The big bully made life hell when he was young. It would serve him right to be sold to a Hoarda and forced into sex slavery with the big, hairy, short-tempered aliens happily violating him every night. But then, a side of him also realized that Satirens were a race with declining numbers. They’d mostly left Satiris and ventured off, making small colonies on other planets or getting involved in the sex trade. Although not a purebred Satiren himself, he realized they were an

endangered race, and every healthy Satiren needed to be joined with another, hopefully to save the species.

Dar strained to see the lot number scribbled on Kroodus's right arm, but he couldn't. Would Gwog understand what he was up to? Did he even want to tell Gwog, and get talked out of it? He'd need to make up some story to keep them there until Kroodus came onto the auction block. Dar wondered if he had enough drig for the purchase. Kroodus looked pretty thin and emaciated; perhaps his pallid condition would make him a cheaper sale. He hoped so. Standing in the shadows for several moments, he watched Kroodus. The bully never once lifted his head. Perhaps he was too weak, or perhaps his pride had been crushed. Whatever the case, Dar figured the Satiren wouldn't sell for much. The majority of the buyers at the auction were males who owned industry or freighter captains looking for more hands to work. Kroodus looked like he was ready to curl up and die.

Returning to Gwog, Dar followed along as his captain continued inspecting slaves. "What was that all about, little one?"

"Uh, nothing."

"Come now, you're a lousy liar."

Dar pondered the thought of just telling the truth. Gwog had always been good to him, and they had a very trusting relationship. "Saw someone I know."

"What? Here? At the auction?"

"Yeah. His name's Kroodus and he used to beat the shit out of me at school."

Gwog chuckled. "Is he here being sold as a slave?"

"Yeah."

"Well, then he got his just desserts. Serves him right for making your life miserable."

Dar swallowed hard. "Um, yeah."

"What's wrong, little one?"

"Can we stay and see how much he goes for?"

"What's his lot number? Perhaps I should buy him—make him a pet for you; then you can beat on him for a change."

"I don't know his lot number. And I don't think he'd be good for the crew."

Gwog rubbed his chin. "Ah, I see." He gave Dar a nudge. "Come, let's get seats, the auction will start soon."

They found a couple of seats and watched as the first lots of slaves went through. Most were smaller species like Triduns, female Nouians, and the occasional Elemenel female sold off for domestic help. Dar especially hated to see Elemenels sold, they were a wonderful species, and he liked joining with them very much. Next, came the larger aliens to the platform. Gwog took out his slip of paper and kept track, waiting for the lots he wanted. Dar looked at the slaves that were lined up waiting to go on the platform. Kroodus stood about four back. He'd be up shortly. "Excuse me," Dar said, getting up. "Need to take a leak."

Dashing back to the auction office, he hurriedly explained his situation to the clerk, who handed him a bidding number. Dar stood at the back of the crowd and waited. He hoped he had enough drig in his pockets. When Kroodus was shoved onto the platform, Dar listened. The bidding started off at two hundred drig—a rather scant sum for a purebred Satiren, who, with a few good meals, would return nicely to form.

Two-fifty, three hundred, four hundred, the bidding seemed to be coming from the front of the room. Dar strained to see two Kiburgin Hoardas flipping their numbers in the air. Dar almost wanted to laugh at his rather psychic premonition of poor Krodus's fate. Five hundred, six hundred, seven, eight, nine, one thousand came the price. The bidding war continued.

Dar began to wonder if he'd be outbid by the Kiburgins. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a wad of gold strips and quickly counted them. Two thousand drig was all he had. He tuned back in to the auction. The bidding war had slowed. Krodus was now valued at twelve hundred drig. Dar decided to throw his weight in. "Fifteen hundred," he said in a deep voice, trying to disguise it from Gwog. There was a moment of silence before one of the Kiburgins raised it to sixteen hundred. "Seventeen!" Dar called. His bid was met with eighteen. Deciding it was all or nothing, he hollered: "Two thousand!"

A few mumbles were heard through the room, but no counter bid from the Kiburgins. The auctioneer looked around. "Two thousand once, twice, sold!" Dar held up his number, hoping Gwog wouldn't see him far in the back. "Sold to number eight-one-five." The auctioneer slammed a gavel down, and Krodus was ushered off the platform. Dar felt rather pleased about his purchase. He went back and plopped down next to Gwog.

"Ah, you missed it. Your mangy looking Satiren fetched a price of two thousand drig."

"Oh, he did?" Dar said innocently.

"Not sure who bought him, but a couple of Kiburgins up front sure wanted to make a sex slave out of him."

Dar chuckled. "Well, I'm sure he'll go to a good home."

The auction finally ended, Gwog got two of his three lots. The half breed Zumikian which had some deck skills went for more than Gwog wanted to pay. He was pleased that he's gotten the Iddrian navigator, he'd be a big help. He hoped the Iddrian hadn't lied about his skills; otherwise, Gwog would bring him back and sell him off. Business was business, and he didn't have time to play games with a dishonest slave. As it was, if the Iddrian proved to be a good navigator, he'd be well treated and paid for his services. Gwog was not a lover of slavery, but when he needed personnel to run the ship, the auctions were occasionally helpful.

Standing in line to pay for his purchases, Gwog looked around and noticed Dar absent. He wondered where the little one had gone to. As he finally got to the pay table, he lay down the drig for his purchases and gave the lot numbers. The clerk wrote out a receipt and handed it to him. "You may pick up your purchases at the back dock."

"Thank you," Gwog said politely. Dar still had not appeared. He figured he'd catch up with him at the shuttle. As he headed to the back dock to pick up his slaves, he caught sight of Dar disappearing behind a wall. Gwog thought about going after him, but decided against it. Whatever he was up to, he obviously had a reason for his mysterious actions.

Dar waited a few minutes, occasionally peering around the corner to see if Gwog picked up his slaves. He'd been quick and was one of the first in line to pay for Krodus; now he'd wait until Gwog was gone before picking him up. He wondered if it was such a good idea.

They hadn't seen each other in more than ten years, but Dar felt certain the bad blood between them would still be fresh.

Several minutes later, Gwog walked off with his two new slaves. Dar crept out from the corner and approached the large alien handling the slaves. "Number," the slave master said gruffly.

For a moment, Dar wasn't quite sure what he meant. "Oh." He dug the receipt out of his pocket. "Number fifty-six."

"Mmm, the Satiren, huh?" He turned and then stopped. "Funny to see a half breed buying a purebred. Gonna keep him as a pet?"

"Not exactly. I have purpose for him."

"Well, you better feed him a few good meals, otherwise he'll keel over dead on you."

"I intend to. Thank you."

The slave master went back and brought out Kroodus. He handed Dar the "leash"—the chain that came from the collar around Kroodus's neck. "Here you go."

Dar studied Kroodus for a moment. His spirit was so broken he didn't even bother to acknowledge his new master. *Master*, Dar thought, here stood Kroodus, the bully who made life miserable, and now he was his *master*. "Come along, slave," Dar growled, giving the chain a yank; Kroodus lurched forward, shuffling along. Heading to the shuttle, Dar hoped Gwog hadn't gotten impatient and left him. Kroodus lagged behind. "Get on with it, slave," he said, giving another firm tug.

Kroodus stopped. "Dar?"

Dar spun around. "That's *master* to you, Kroodus!"

He tried to straighten up. "Puny little half breed, whatcha gonna do to me?"

"Don't start with me, I'm warning you." Dar shoved him against a wall. "I'd say you owe me for *buying* you from those Kiburgins."

"I owe you nothing."

"Fine. Then I'll go find one of them, sell you for a small loss, and walk away happily knowing they're gonna bend you over a fallen Ickbahk tree and fuck you til your hair turns white."

"You wouldn't."

Dar leaned close. "Oh, yes I would."

Kroodus pushed him away. Dar was quickly losing patience; he brandished his knife.

"Hey, that's my knife," Kroodus grumbled.

He stuck the point right into Kroodus's chest. "Yes, it is. I don't suggest you trifle with me, I'm not in the mood...And if you want your knife back..." He leaned into the blade, piercing the Satiren's skin. "...Then I shall return it—point first."

Kroodus felt a trickle of blood run down his chest. Evidently the little half breed was far tougher now since he'd spent so much time in space. "No, that's okay."

"I thought you'd see it my way." He sheathed the knife. "Now let's go, we have a shuttle to catch."

"What are you going to do with me?"

"I haven't decided just yet." Dar gave a hard snatch on the chain.

They reached the shuttle to find Gwog standing in the door. "So, what have you done, little one?" he asked, pointing to Kroodus.

“I’ll explain later. Let’s get the slaves back to the ship. They need a good bathing, they stink.”

Gwog stepped aside while Dar loaded Kroodus. Then they settled down in the cockpit. “Dar?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Would you explain why you bought your worst enemy?”

“Mmm, I suppose it’s torture of sorts.”

Gwog started up the engine. “Torture for whom? You or him?”

“Right now, a little of both.”

“I understand...Do you think he’ll be a problem?”

“I hope not. I made it very clear that I’m more than willing to give him his knife back; be it buried in his chest.”

Gwog shook his head. “My, my, the little one has some moxie.”

“No more. I can’t and I won’t be bullied by him.”

“Good for you.” He set course and headed back to the Cunik.

Once on board, Dar collected Kroodus and took him to the crew quarters. “First thing on the list for you: a shower.”

“Thank you,” Kroodus said softly. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been able to bathe. Dirt and grime were smeared all over his skin, and his normally luxurious green hair was a matted mess.

Dar led him to the shower room. “Take off that rag and throw it away. I’ll try and find something for you to wear.”

“Dar?”

“What?”

“How come you’re being nice to me? I can understand your hatred for everything I’ve done to you.” He untied the ratty cloth from around his waist. “I guess maybe I deserved everything I got these last years.”

“Quite a while ago, we made a stop by Erotis. I wanted to see my mother and make sure she was okay.”

“Was she?”

“Yes.” He tried not to retch as he got wind of Kroodus. “And I stopped by the tavern and saw your father.”

“How was he?”

“Mmm, at the time, fine. But he told me you’d left the planet in search of drig—taking a mining job on Ladnis 5.”

“Biggest mistake I ever made.” He sat down on a bench. “Some alien came around; not even sure what species he was...He said they were looking for big, strong adults to make fantastic drig mining Thidium on Ladnis.”

“And you had no clue that the Versithians hired the Renthids to overrun the planet and enslave others to work in the mines?” He walked in a small circle. “They enslaved other species because the Crinians couldn’t work under those conditions. They’re a rather frail species—now pretty much extinct.”

Krodus rubbed his face. "Come on, Dar, you know me, I wasn't the smartest youngling in class. I was big, dumb, and a bully. What would I know about who took over what planet?"

"Oh, sorry," Dar scoffed. "You're not the experienced space traveler that I am...I knew what was going on...But when your father told me where you'd gone, I knew they'd enslaved you."

"You didn't tell him that, did you?"

"No, I didn't wanna worry him."

"And it took you this long to find me?" Krodus asked.

"I wasn't even looking for you. I figured if the Renthids enslaved you, that in a matter of a year or so, you'd be dead. I didn't have the heart to tell your father that."

He stood and went to a shower stall. "So what do you plan on doing with me?"

"One of two things. I haven't made up my mind yet."

Turning on the shower, Krodus adjusted the water. It felt so good even running over his hand. "If it's worth anything, I'm sorry for the way I treated you when we were younglings." He stepped in, the water rushing over his body. "I spent the last ten years being treated like shit. I'll never raise a hand to anyone again."

"Do I take your words earnestly?" Dar sat on the bench.

"I'd hope you would. We're both adults, and we've both grown up."

"And I may still not like you, but I understand the value of a purebred Satiren."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Krodus poured out some soap; it smelled like fresh rain on the Erotin plateau. "Gonna sell me to a pleasure barge?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"We're supposed to be picking up a shipment of Jamaraian rum in a couple of days. I'll ask Gwog if we can make a detour by Erotis."

"You're taking me home?"

"Yes, stupid, I'm taking you home where you belong...Your father's old and needs you to run the tavern, and you need to find a nice purebred female and carry on our species."

"*Our species?*"

Dar got up and took a few steps toward Krodus. "Look, I'm sorry that I'm a half breed, it wasn't my choice. But I'm half Satiren, and I'm proud of that half. There aren't many purebreds left out there, so you need to get busy and make some more."

Krodus finished washing and turned off the water. Dar tossed him a towel. "I figured you purchased me out of spite—that you wanted to subjugate me to your will; not to spend all that hard earned drig and then turn me loose," Krodus said, drying off. He could've spent hours under the water, but for now, the quick shower would suffice.

"All I ask in return is your acceptance of me."

Wrapping the towel around his waist, Krodus stood in front of Dar. He looked the smaller half breed in the eyes, and slowly bowed to him.

12

Jartis stood on the gangplank of the shuttle. “Well, come on, let’s go!” he said, waving to Dar. After some polite requesting, Gwog made a detour to Erotis. He was still a bit confused over Dar’s generosity for his most hated enemy; but figured it would also be a good excuse for him to see his mother. Dar hadn’t seen her in quite a long time, and Gwog knew she was an important part of his life.

“Hang on, we’re coming,” Dar replied, giving Kroodus a nudge. It had been two weeks since the auction, and Karnis did his best to feed up the big Satiren. He still needed many more good meals, but at least he wasn’t going to drop dead on them. Dar managed to find some clothes to fit him; they weren’t great, but far better than the fowl smelling rag he came with.

As they walked on board, Karnis, his son Xetroiss, and Vikkis were waiting. “What’s this? A shore party?” Dar asked, taking his seat at the helm.

“No, Gwog is sending us down for supplies. Next stop is Newrillis and then onto Sirrix,” Jartis said as he closed the door.

“Lemme guess, picking up a shipment of arms?”

“Of course. Although Gwog isn’t very happy providing arms for a war he doesn’t believe in.”

“Yeah, I wonder just how long the Sirrixians and Bodnarians will go at it,” Dar said.

Jartis sat down in the copilot seat. “Oh, they’ve been going at it a few hundred years; don’t see them calling it quits any time soon.”

“If Gwog disapproves, why does he do it?”

“The drig’s good.”

“So is running rum for the Jamaraians.” Dar started up the engine and eased them out of the shuttle bay. Making a right turn, he headed for the planet. He sighed when he saw the big, tan, dusty planet. It wasn’t pretty, but it was home. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Kroodus gazing out the window. In a way, he looked sad. Dar supposed that returning him to his father would bring a bit of shame on him. Kroodus thought he’d escape Erotis and be on his own, living his life, and forgetting about everyone. Now he was being returned in a sorry state, to face his father as a complete failure.

Ten minutes later, they were settling on the planet. Dar shut down the engine, and Jartis opened the door once most of the dust cleared. “You said your mother worked at the general store?” Jartis asked.

“Well, she did. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen her. But let’s stop there first.” The motley bunch walked down the street. The weather was quite warm for the month of Jukniss, the rains seemed strangely absent. Not much was going on, in fact, the town looked rather empty. Dar wondered if the settlement might be dying out. Perhaps those who could were leaving to try and find something better. Erotis was anything but a paradise; some farmed the patches of arable land, and the rest ran businesses in towns.

“When was the last time you saw her?” Vikkis asked.

“Oh, shit, I can’t remember.” He reached in his pocket and made sure the Uyonin bracelet he’d brought as a present was still there. “I wonder if a male has taken any interest in her?”

Jartis looked around. “Are there any here?”

“Yes, there are, but my mother isn’t a young female anymore, and we both know it’s rare for a purebred to take up with a female that has a half breed youngling.” Dar walked onto the porch of the store and peered into the window. “I don’t see her.”

Vikkis opened the door. “Well, we need supplies anyways.” He went in, followed by the others. “Hello?” he called.

“Just a minute,” a male voice replied.

“That doesn’t sound like your mother, Dar,” Jartis said, grabbing a few cans of Priddin jerky off the shelf.

“No, definitely not.” He watched as a small, young, purebred Tridun came from the storeroom. “Who are you?”

“Cogg. I was hired to work part time.” Cogg stood probably four and a half feet tall, had large frontal lobes on his forehead, and big blue eyes. His tan skin was stretched over a thin, almost emaciated body. Dar always thought the species looked odd, but that’s the way they were. Triduns were revered in the galaxy for their sharp business skills. The planet Tridius was a mecca for trade and commerce.

“Where’s my mother?”

“Denrika? She’s your mother?”

“Yes.”

Cogg went around the counter. “I suppose she’s home.” Taking a heavy glass, he dipped out two scoops of frozen bovidis cream, added three scoops of Erotin sage, stirring it in, and finished it off with some clear, fizzy sweet water. Then Cogg flipped open a small covered dish, garnished the drink with a Darminian cherry, and slid it over to Dar. “She told me you like these.”

He picked up the glass and took a sip. “Yes, I do...And not a bad job of making it.”

“She said you always put a little extra sage in it.”

Dar leaned against the counter. “And what else has she told you about me?”

“That you’re a crew member on a really big freighter.”

Jartis stepped up to the counter, dumping his cans of jerky on it. “Can I get a sage root float too?”

“Certainly,” Cogg said and went to work.

“We’re part of the crew of the Cunik, the largest freighter in the galaxy,” Jartis replied.

Dar looked over at Kroodus, seeing the wanton expression in his eyes. He pulled a few drig out. “Make a float for him too; he’s been without for quite some time.”

Kroodus stepped up to the counter. “Thank you, Dar,” he said softly.

When the glasses were empty, and the supplies purchased, Vikkis, Karnis, and Xetroiss headed back to the shuttle. Dar continued on with Jartis and Kroodus. His next stop was the Aknarra Tavern, to return the lost son to his father. They stopped outside the door. Kroodus faced Dar. “For all the years I tormented you, I am truly sorry. I can’t repay you enough for

freeing me from the bonds of slavery, and the horrible life I would be facing...From now on, you will never pay for a drink at this tavern.” He offered his hand, Dar took it.

“Thanks.” Dar let a smile curl to his lips. “How about a nice Malikin port?”

Krodus chuckled. “Coming right up!” He opened the door for them. Dar and Jartis went to the bar. Only a few patrons were about. Krodus approached the bar. “Can I get a drink for my two friends?”

The bartender turned slightly. “What would they like?” He didn’t immediately recognize Krodus.

“A Malikin port and—”

“Make that two,” Jartis quickly said.

“Two ports for the friends who saved me...” Krodus leaned in closer. “...Saved me, and brought me home to my father.”

The bartender finally got a better look. “Krodus!” Forgetting all about the drinks, he snatched off his apron and ran around the counter to embrace his son. “My son! Oh, I’d figured you for dead.” Tears streamed down the old Satiren’s face. He couldn’t believe Krodus was alive and home.

“I would’ve, had it not been for Dar.”

He hugged Krodus for a few moments; then he stepped back. “Dar? You found him?”

“Yes, sir. On Uyoninis.” He decided it best not to say exactly where he found Krodus, or the fact he had to purchase him; and that technically, Krodus was his slave. His heart warmed at seeing the bully no longer in a position to make his life miserable.

“Thank you, thank you so much for returning my son to me...And for doing it even though he was your worst enemy.”

“We may have never been friends, but I understand Satirens need to be with other Satirens; otherwise the species will die.”

“Father?” Krodus said.

“Yes?”

“I told Dar he’ll never pay for a drink here, ever.”

His father regarded Dar. “And you won’t.” He went behind the bar and grabbed a full bottle of port. “Drink up, the bar is open for you.” Sitting four glasses on the counter, he poured out the rich, dark, heady alcohol. “There’s always a bottle here for you and your friends.”

Dar raised his glass. “Thank you.”

After a few drinks on the house, Dar and Jartis left Krodus to be with his father. They walked down the street toward his house. “Well, feel better now?” Jartis asked.

“Mmm, part of me does...The good part...The bad part is still trying to envision Krodus bent over a fallen Ickbahk tree with two Kiburgins having their way with him.”

Jartis laughed. “Oh, I don’t even wanna picture that!”

“After everything he’s done to me, I just couldn’t let him suffer. Am I too nice?”

“No, you have a good heart, and you care about others.” Jartis kicked a rock down the street. “Gwog would call that rule number three of being a freighter captain: ‘Turning

enemies into friends will have greater rewards later on.’ You never know when you might need the services of a big, dumb Satiren.”

“True, I suppose.” Dar continued down the long, fairly empty street.

“Think she’s home?” Jartis asked.

“I’d hope so.”

“Think a male has taken up with her?”

They walked in silence for a while. Dar really didn’t want to answer that question. He hoped she’d find someone, but at her age, and with a half breed son, it was doubtful. “I guess we’ll find out.” He pointed to a small house at the end of the street. “There it is.”

Jartis nodded. “Nice house.”

“Her parents left it to her when they died. They came here from Satiris.”

“Hmm, purebreds from the home planet; rather rare nowadays.”

“Where did you come from?” Dar asked.

“I was born on Priddis. I’ve never been to Satiris.”

“Why not?”

“Just never have.”

Dar went to the door and knocked. He felt a bit odd about knocking, but figured it’d be best to announce his presence, especially if his mother had company. A few moments later, the door opened.

“Dar!” Denrika cried, grabbing him in a tight embrace.

“Hello, mother. I’m so sorry I haven’t been to see you; we’ve been busy.” He pulled her closer, kissing her on the top of the head, getting the scent of Softsuckle flowers. “I’ve missed you.”

“Oh, I’ve missed you too, son.”

He gently slid from her embrace. “Mother, this is my friend Jartis, he’s the engineer on the Cunik.”

“Hello, ma’am,” Jartis said politely.

“Hello. I can see why you and Dar are friends.” She gestured to his patch of green hair.

“Ah, not so much that, but I’ve tried to be a good Satiren influence on him—for the most part!”

She laughed and held the door open. “Come in out of the dust and heat,” she said, ushering them inside. “What brings you this way?”

“Had to bring someone home,” Dar replied, taking a seat in the living room.

“What?”

“We were on Uyoninis at a slave auction, and I found Krodus there.”

She stopped just short of sitting down. “Krodus? The very Krodus who used to beat you up?”

“Yes.”

“I thought you hated him?”

“Oh, for many years, I did. But when I saw him there, starved and broken spirited, I realized that purebred Satirens are becoming increasingly rare. As much as I hated him, I know our species needs healthy purebreds to survive.” He shifted in the chair. “So I bought him at auction for two thousand drig—please, if you see his father, don’t tell him.”

“I won’t. You did a very noble thing, Dar.”

He reached in his pocket. "And I have something special for you." Taking out a small rolled cloth, he presented it to her. "Something else I picked up on Uyoninis."

She took the cloth and unrolled it, revealing a fine gold bracelet. "Oh, it's beautiful!"

Dar smiled. "Only the best for my mother."

"Do you have time to stay for dinner?"

He glanced at the time piece on the wall. "I should think so. Gwog isn't hurrying us like last time. We're off to Newrillis to pick up some arms."

Denrika stood and went to the kitchen. "Oh? For whose war?"

"The Bodnarians and Sirrixians. I think this shipment is going to Sirrix."

"Does he provide both sides with arms?"

Dar got up and joined her. "He only delivers them. Each planet has already paid for the shipments. It's not like he's contributing to the war." He put his arms around her. "I know you don't agree with it; and I really don't either. But this is business, and there's lots of drig in it. One day I may be in the same position to transport arms to them."

"I'd prefer you not."

"Well, it's my life, and I have to earn a living too." He reached in his pocket and pulled out a large wad of drig and placed it on the counter next to her. "I make good drig doing what I do."

"I see that."

"And how come there's some little Tridun working at the store?"

She turned to him. "Dar, I'm in my fiftieth year, I'm not getting any younger. Work is getting harder for me."

"Jartis is in his seventieth year, and he's still going strong—well, for the most part."

"With no male in my life, it's not been easy."

Dar sighed. "I wish Jartis was younger. He'd make a good mate," he said softly.

"Mmm, he is rather handsome, but I'm afraid taking up with a half breed would only get the tongues flapping harder around town...They haven't forgotten your father yet, it seems."

"But he was an Earthling, and that was an accident. They shouldn't hold that over you."

"Dar, it's a small town; the gossip never stops."

"Then why don't you go back to Satiris?"

"No, I can't; that's not a place for me." She started getting ingredients ready for dinner. "My home is here, as it has been nearly all my life...Don't worry, I'm happy. Cogg is a good worker, and I enjoy hearing stories of his planet. Have you been there?"

Dar chuckled. "Tridius? Yes, several times. But I do have an inherent problem when there—"

"What's that?"

He held his hand over his head. "I'm much taller than their doorways and ceilings!"

Denrika laughed. "Can you see if Jartis would like some wine with dinner?"

"Mother, I'm not gonna bother asking him. Since when have you ever met someone from a freighter crew that didn't drink?"

"I thought my son didn't."

"Sorry, I'm an adult, and Malikin port is just too nice to pass up."

She went to the cold box and got out a bovidis shoulder. "When do you expect to be back this way?"

“I dunno. It all depends on what shipments Gwog takes.”

“Well, it’s good to see you anytime you’re over this way in the galaxy.”

He took the meat from her, placing it on the counter. Then he took her hands in his.
“Sometimes we’re close, and I beg Gwog to stray off course. But he’s got a business to run, and I understand that. I’ll come see you every chance I get.”

“I’ll look forward to any day I can see my son.”

13

Gwog stood in front of Dar's bunk; his crewmember was fast asleep. "Coming, little one?" he asked softly. There was no response. He reached out and tapped Dar on the shoulder. "Hey, are you coming with us?"

Dar opened his eyes. "Huh?"

"We just docked at Sirrix. You wanna come along?"

"Oh, yeah, what are you going to do?" He sat up and threw off the covers.

"Well, the space station is rather small, but they do offer gambling and a little shopping. Sorry, they aren't licensed for a pleasure barge, but let me tell you, it won't stop you from finding a partner to join with." Gwog straightened up. "I'll probably find a bar and maybe a female."

He rubbed his eyes and face. "Uh, okay, lemme get dressed and I'll tag along."

Crawling from his bunk, he grabbed his clothes and dressed. He stopped by the bathroom on the way out and decided not to bother shaving. If a female wanted to join with him, she'd take him how he was. Making his way forward, he met the rest of the crew at the front hatch.

"Ah, Dar, coming along? You were sleeping so peacefully I didn't wanna wake you," Jartis joked.

"Yeah, I'll have a look around." He waited while Gwog worked the heavy door open.

"All right, crew, I don't want you to cause any trouble. Behave, and I'll see you back here tomorrow," Gwog waved his arm, ushering them out.

Dar walked along with Jartis. "So what are you going to do?"

"Oh, I'm probably gonna find a nice place to get a drink," Jartis replied.

"Can I join you?"

"Sure, I don't mind the company. But I doubt hanging out with this old half breed will attract a female."

"Mmm, I'm not actively looking. If it happens, it happens."

Jartis put his hand on Dar's shoulder. "That's the spirit."

They walked along for quite a while. Finally Jartis spotted a bar. "Ah, that place looks quieter than the others."

"And what is this need for silence?"

Jartis tugged at his ear. "The older you get, the harder it is to hear."

Dar stopped and took a few sniffs. "Does your sense of smell dull too?"

He sniffed the air. "Ah, females!"

"I guess that sense never dulls." Dar opened the door for Jartis. They went in and found a table tucked away in the corner.

A waitress arrived shortly. "What can I get for you?"

"Two Malikin ports, please," Dar said.

"Sure, I'll bring them right out." She disappeared.

Jartis surveyed the area. Most of the patrons looked to be older aliens of varying species. No one looked particularly threatening, so he figured a nice quiet evening was in order. “Dar?”

“Yeah?”

“I think you’re the youngest one here.”

Dar looked around. “Yeah, guess so,” he chuckled.

Their drinks arrived and they sat back, savoring them. They talked about various different things, nothing of any importance. After several more rounds, and a couple of hours, Jartis yawned widely. “Well, youngling, this old body needs some sleep. I’m gonna head back to the ship.”

“Suit yourself; I’m wide awake.”

“Of course you are. You were fast asleep like a cute little youngling—all tucked in your bunk.”

“Jartis, hey!”

“Well, you were.” He got up, reached in his pocket and pulled out a few drig, tossing them on the table. “I’ll see you later.”

“Have a good sleep, my old friend.” Dar waved good-bye as Jartis shuffled out the door. Sitting alone now, he wondered if any of the females he’d seen would approach. They were a bit older, but he wasn’t worried about age; it was the experience and the choice of a free-will joining that had him curious. He didn’t like paying for joinings, he liked it much better if a female approached and wanted him without wanting drig. Although, he mused, there was one time on Thokin where an Elemenel approached and offered payment to join with him. He told her he wasn’t a prostitute, but she just kept after him. Finally, he could take it no longer and gave in. They joined, and Dar gave her every ounce of magic he could. He had to admit, it was amazing. Over and over they joined, and finally in an exhausted state, watched the sunrise, lying naked on a blanket near the top of a hill.

Ah, Regia, Dar pondered. She was the most intense Elemenel he’d ever joined with. When all was said and done, Regia wanted to pay him for his services. He happily declined, stating that he joined of his own free will, and it felt fantastic. A few years later, he returned to Thokin and sought her out. To his dismay, she’d life-joined with a male and was expecting her first youngling. Dar wondered if perhaps he loved her but kept denying it. She filled his dreams many nights after their one night of passion.

He glanced up and noticed two males approaching. One was a Sirrixian, and the other, perhaps a half breed Skrinnian. “Hey, are you interested in some action?” the half breed asked.

“Action of what sorts?” Dar replied warily.

“You look like an alien of means, how about a game of Sirrixian poker?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know how to play.”

“Oh, come on, we’ll show you,” the Sirrixian said.

Dar felt unsure if this was a ploy to get him out of the bar so they could mug him. Space stations weren’t the safest places to be. He reached back and made sure his trusty knife was there. “Where are we going?”

“Just to that table over there. No tricks, my friend.”

He looked past them and saw a table with three other aliens sitting around it. They held cards and appeared to be playing a game. "Uh, okay," he said, feeling safer that he would still be in the bar. Getting up, he followed them.

"What's your name, youngling?" the Sirrixian asked.

"Youngling? I'm not that young...And the name's Dar."

"You're the youngest here."

"So?"

"So, Dar, where do you come from?" the half breed Skrinnian took a seat.

"I'm part of Gwog's crew on the Cunik." He'd learned that by dropping the name of his employer usually meant they didn't start trouble with him. Gwog was a powerful adversary if he had reason to get his dander up. Not many in the galaxy would tangle with him.

"Ah, a good ship," the Sirrixian replied, settling into his chair.

Dar took the empty one. "Been crew over ten years."

"So Gwog has two half breed Satirens on his crew," another member of the table said.

"Yeah, me and Jartis."

"Oh, this is Dar," the Sirrixian announced. "And I suppose we should introduce ourselves. I'm Fornak."

"Pregid," the half breed Skrinnian said. "And to my right is Boknas, he's from Viguris."

"Yes, I've been there a time or two," Dar replied. "By chance do you know a Vuopious?"

"Why yes, I do. He runs the parts store in my village. I haven't seen him in years," the big, hairy Vigurian Clapsor said in a deep voice. Dar liked the Clapsors. Despite their imposing stature, they were surprisingly gentle, very intelligent, and caring aliens. He pointed to the alien next to him. "And this is my friend, Conik, he's from Coreonis."

"Nice to meet you," Dar said politely. "I've never been to Coreonis."

"It's a lovely planet." The alien replied. He was tall, skinny, had grayish skin with large, circular, thickened plates that were green in color. His black eyes bulged from stalks rooted to his forehead. His mouth came out like the bill of a drukk—a type of water game fowl found on many planets. He had long, razor sharp claws on his fingers.

"Perhaps we'll stop there one day."

Fornak pointed to the last member at the table. "That's Oogik, he's a half breed Temprician."

Dar nodded. "So, please, explain how you play this game."

"You will be dealt five cards," Fornak said, gathering them up from the center of the table. He put them together in a stack, then fanned his hand across the table laying them out, face up. "You have four different *cities* in which to mate your cards: Harkot, Spearik, Clugik, and Dimmant."

He studied the cards. "Yes, I see."

"Now, you have cards of more value," Fornak pulled out several to show him. "If you get these, they are better."

Dar looked around the table, noting the expressions of the rest of the players. Gwog had taught him how to recognize a liar—in most cases. He reached out and grabbed five high cards of the same city. "What does it mean if I get this?"

The whole table erupted in laughter. "Then you beat us!" Conik laughed.

He placed the cards back in the deck. "We have a similar game on Erotis, I think I get the idea."

"So, you wish to play, youngling?" Fornak asked.

"How much is the bet?"

"Open for ten drig."

Dar reached in his pocket and brought out a few drig. He had much more on him, but he wasn't going to let them know that. He slid one thin strip out. "Right, here's my ten."

Fornak took the cards, shuffled, and passed them out. The others at the table placed their bids in the center. Dar figured he'd watch for a while until he made sure he knew what a good hand was. As his cards were tossed in front of him, he waited for the others. When they picked up theirs, he followed, not wanting to possibly spoil the game by not playing right.

Looking at the cards he was dealt, Dar didn't think he had much of a chance. They appeared to be low cards, two were the same in number, but different cities. He wasn't sure what to do. On Erotis, those cards would be kept, and he'd be allowed to discard others to try and get better ones.

"Well, youngling?" Fornak said. "Have you usable cards?"

"Uh, I think so."

"Have you some that are no good?"

"Mmm, three, yes," he replied.

"You may toss them down and I'll give you three more."

Dar perked up. "Oh, this is very much like Erotin chokker." He put three down and Fornak gave him replacements. Picking up the cards, he realized he wasn't in any better shape.

"Did that help?"

He shook his head. "Nope."

"Then if you feel you cannot play with a reasonable chance, you may put your cards down and cease."

"I'll cease for this hand." He dropped his cards on the table face down. The rest of the table played on, Dar watched and learned. After a few minutes, it looked clear that Boknas and Pregid were in a bidding war. Both must have good hands, Dar thought.

"I raise you fifty," Boknas said, dropping some gold strips in the center.

"Hah! I see your fifty, and will add another fifty," Pregid replied, tossing his bet into the middle.

"Getting a little excited, Pregid?" Fornak asked. "You must have a sterling hand."

"Shut up, Fornak. Let me play." He fiddled with his cards. "I think I've bet enough. Boknas, what do you have?"

The Clapsor gently laid down his cards. "I have three high royals in one city, and a pair of tens."

"Oh," Pregid said softly. He waited a moment before laying his hand down. "I have four royals—each pairs, from two different cities, and one losing card."

Boknas nodded. "A victory for you, my friend."

He reached forward and pulled the pile of drig toward him. "Are you in for the next round, Dar?"

“Yes, I think so.” Taking another ten drig strip, he dropped it in the center. “I shall wish for better cards this time.”

Conik shook his head. “Keep wishing all you want!

After several hands, Dar was feeling more comfortable. His betting increased, and he even won a couple of hands. It was Boknas’s turn to deal. The cards were dealt, and Dar picked his up. He swallowed hard, trying not to make any excited gestures. His hand was a good one.

“Who is betting?” Fornak asked, dropping twenty drig into the middle. “I’ll give twenty to start.”

Dar figured his hand was safe. “I’ll make your twenty and add fifty.”

Conik moved his cards around in his hand. “I shall make all that, and add one hundred.”

Boknas and Pregid decided not to play, they placed their cards down. Dar debated on just how good his hand was. “I make your one hundred, and I’ll add three hundred.” There were a few gasps heard from the others.

“Getting a little full of yourself, youngling?” Fornak counted out his bet. “I’ll make your bet and add...Oh, a thousand.” He looked at Conik. “Are you betting?”

“Yes, I am...Make a thousand, add *four* thousand!”

Now Dar was wondering if he’d gotten in too deep. He checked his cards—nope, it was a fantastic hand. “I’ll make all that, and add *ten* thousand.” Counting it all out, he dropped it in the center. Then he dug in his pocket and brought out more drig.

“Ten thousand? Hmm, you must have a great hand—or you’re bluffing!” Fornak teased, matching the bet. “If you’re bluffing, youngling, you’re gonna be sorry.” He pushed the rest of his strips to the middle. “That’s fifteen thousand to make.”

Conik counted strips. “I make that fifteen, and add twenty more.”

Dar’s throat went dry. He tried to swallow but couldn’t. Thirty-five thousand drig to make on this bet. Did he want to chance it? The gleaming pile of gold strips beckoned to him. It’s only drig, he thought, I can earn more if I lose. And if I lose, I’ll learn my lesson—expensive as it will be. Carefully sliding his cards together and placing them on the table, Dar counted out the strips. “I make your thirty-five and will add...fifty more.”

“Youngling, are you out of your mind?!” Fornak gasped. He looked at his cards. “I can’t make that bet. I’m out.” He lay his cards down and sat back in his chair.

“Well, Dar, it’s just you and me,” Conik said as he counted out strips. “Although I don’t seem to have enough gold to cover.” He reached into his jacket pocket and removed a small rolled piece of paper tied with a neat red ribbon. “But this should cover my bet.” He placed it in the pile.

“What is it?” Dar asked.

“Title.”

“Title to what?”

“I assure you its value is far more than the bet I’m covering.”

“Then why risk it?”

Conik shrugged his shoulders. “I am a gambler, plain and simple. I think what I hold is better than yours.”

“Are you going to cease?” Boknas tried to see his cards.

“I can raise no more, Dar.”

“Then show your cards,” Fornak said, motioning to Conik.

“All right. I hold five cards, in order, from the same city.” He laid them down for all to see. There were excited remarks about the hand.

Fornak looked at Dar. “Youngling?”

Dar was silent for a moment. Yes, Conik’s hand was good—very good. But he felt confident his was a bit better. One by one, he started placing his cards on the table. When they were all laid out, he looked at Fornak. “Isn’t that better?”

He coughed when he saw the hand. “Five royals of the same city! The youngling wasn’t bluffing!” There was a round of applause for Dar.

Conik nodded politely, acknowledging his loss. “Congratulations, Dar. A very good hand indeed...You’ll find your prize at dock seven.” With that, he got up and left.

Dar scooped his arms around the pile of drig and pulled it to himself. The rolled paper sat on top. He studied it for a moment, wondering what was inside.

“Well, youngling, are you going to see what you’ve won?”

“I’m a little afraid. Could he be lying about this?” He held up the paper.

“Conik is a fair one when it comes to business. Yes, he gambles, but he will always cover his bets. If he says that paper is worth more than his bet, take his word,” Fornak said as he stood and stretched.

Dar took the paper off the top of the pile, slid the ribbon off, and opened it. His eyes went wide.

14

“Gwog! Gwog! Wake up!” Dar pounded on the door of Gwog’s cabin. “Wake up!” He pounded some more.

A few moments later he opened the door. “What’s going on with you? Can’t you see I’m sleeping?”

“Look!” He held up the small piece of paper.

Gwog rubbed his eyes and squinted. “What am I looking at?”

“Title!”

He snatched the paper from Dar. “Title to what?”

“The Marsuian!”

“The what?”

“The Marsuian. She’s over on dock seven...You must come!”

Gwog yawned and tried to wake up. “Little one, just how did you come about this title?”

“I won it in a game of Sirrixian poker.”

“Shame on you, I thought I taught you better than that. Gambling is a sure way to lose all your hard earned drig.”

“I know, and I was prepared to learn that lesson. But I had a lucky hand, and I won. I won *her!*”

“Have you at least seen this prize?” He went back and started to dress.

“Uh, kinda. I went upstairs to the astro-observation deck and could see a little of her.”

“But you’ve yet to step foot inside?”

“I wanted you to come with me.”

Gwog finished dressing and followed Dar to the dock. They stopped just short of the access tunnel where several large windows allowed viewing of the ships. “You’re sure this is it?” Gwog asked.

“He said dock seven.” He focused his eyes on the bow of the ship. “See, it says *Marsuian* on it.”

“Oh,” Gwog groaned. “I’ve never even heard of this ship.” He stepped closer to the window, giving the vessel a good looking over. “Little one, it appears that you’ve won a bucket of bolts.”

Dar brought his arm up, resting his forearm against the window and leaning his head against it. “Is she worthless?”

“Hmm, I wouldn’t say that. But she’s certainly not ready to handle the Soothians if they should try and attack you.” He tugged on Dar’s jacket. “Let’s go have a look inside.”

They went down the tunnel and into the ship. Gwog expected it to look worse than it was. All the metal grated catwalks seemed in reasonable shape. He climbed the steep stairs to the bridge, Dar right behind him. The bridge was sparse and stark compared to the Cunik. The Marsuian had only one reasonably sized control console in the middle, and a captain’s chair a little further back and off to one side. Instead of a solid floor, it was covered in metal grates. It was mostly painted black, with a large window facing out the front. “So, what do you think?” Dar asked.

Gwog stopped at the control console and looked out the window. "I'd say that you're now the captain of the Marsuian."

Dar went forward and stood at the railing. Gazing down through an observation window, he could see the control area for the forward cargo bay, and much of the actual bay itself. "Captain Dar Meltom...I like the sound of that."

"I figured one day you'd have a ship of your own. I just didn't expect it now."

"Well, I guess I do." He joined Gwog at the console. "Look." He pointed to the controls. "Talk about fate, they're all written in Satiren!"

"Aye, that they are...Perhaps that's why the ship was put up as a bet...From whom did you win her from?"

"Conik, a Coreonian."

"Perhaps that explains it. He can't read Satiren." Gwog walked around. "I bet he won her from someone else, and then realized he couldn't pilot her. So he decided to get rid of her in the game."

"You think so?"

"That's my guess, for all it's worth."

They continued their tour of the ship. Gwog checked the warp engine and what few weapons there were. When they finally reached the stern of the ship Gwog stopped. "All right, little one, do you want my honest opinion?"

"Yes, sir."

"Actually, she's not a bad ship. There's lots that needs to be done to bring her up to modern standards...Like retrofitting the cargo bays to accommodate the new tie-down systems; and some repairs to catwalks here and there. The warp engine is sorely lacking, and what weapons you have are twenty years outdated."

"I'd get jumped by the pirates my first time out, huh?"

"You can bet on it."

"How much do you think it would cost to fix her up?"

Gwog leaned against a support column. "How much do you have?"

"Umm..." He scratched his head. "Including everything I just won—about three hundred thousand."

"That won't get you much, little one."

"Yeah, you're probably right. Maybe I can just buy some better cannons and hope my luck holds out with the pirates until I can earn enough to do the upgrades."

"I don't recommend that course of action."

"Well, what can I do? I can't just leave her docked here while I go off and try to earn more drig. I'll be paying like crazy for dock fees."

"Come back to the Cunik with me." Gwog led the way. Dar wondered what he had in mind. They went to his private cabin. "It seems the day has come that you'll be leaving me."

"I guess so," Dar said softly.

"In the beginning, I didn't want to take you."

"Yes, I know, my mother begged you."

"But after all these years, I'm glad I did...I told her I wasn't going to treat you like a new youngling, and I wasn't going to be a father to you either." He knelt down next to his desk. "But it seems that as hard as I tried not to be a father, I was." Pushing aside a small cabinet,

he grabbed a handle and pulled a section of the floor up. “I guess I can’t fault myself for acting as your father. You were the son I never had.”

Dar felt a lump form in his throat. Now, at age twenty-eight, he felt an incredible bond with Gwog. “I feel honored that you called me crew; and even more honored that you’d think of me as son.”

“You were one of my best, you’ll be hard to replace.” He reached in and unlocked a heavy metal door, pulling it open. Getting down onto his hands and knees, he leaned in and started bringing out huge, bound stacks of gold drig. “This should get the Marsuian fixed up.”

“I can’t take that!” Dar stared at the pile.

“You can, and you will...This is not a free gift, little one. I expect this paid back in time.” He closed the safe, collected the bundles of drig, and sat down at the desk. “I will write you a letter of reference. You show this to those who would like your services. My name, as you know, is known throughout the galaxy; and it’s a good name—don’t bring shame upon it.”

“No, sir!”

Gwog scribbled a letter, rolled it, and tied it with a piece of string. “Here’s three million drig. Get that sorry looking ship to Newrillis and have them fix her up proper. If there’s not enough to cover, ask to speak to Gorrin Algok, show him this letter, and he’ll give you a line of credit. Pay back the Newrillians before you pay me. Understood?”

“Yes, sir!”

He stood and faced Dar. “Should you ever want, or need to come back, there’s a job for you and a bunk to lay your head...I can say it has been an honor to have you as crew.”

“Thank you, sir!”

“Now, I highly recommend you find yourself a good engineer. With a ship of that age, you’re gonna need one—and maybe a deck hand or two in the future.” He offered his hand. “Good luck, captain.”

Dar paused a moment before taking it. The flood of emotions going on inside him was almost out of control. “Thank you, sir,” he said softly.

“You know, with a ship of your own, you’re competition.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“How about we stay friendly over the whole thing?”

“What do you mean?” Dar asked.

“I much prefer to do business on the light side of the galaxy. That leaves the dark side for you.”

“You won’t take offence if I have to make a delivery to your side, will you?”

Gwog smiled. “Not in the slightest. In fact, it would be good to see you once in a while.”

Dar met his smile with one of his own. “Yes, it would be.”

“Run along now, captain, your ship awaits.”

“I must say my good-byes here.”

“Hurry up before your docking fees get any higher.” He picked up the stacks of drig and held it out to Dar. “Have Jartis help get your things to the Marsuian—and don’t be stealing my engineer!”

Dar laughed. “I wouldn’t dream of it!”

After all the good-byes had been said, Jartis accompanied Dar to the Marsuian. “I can’t believe you’re leaving us,” the engineer said.

“I kinda can’t either. The Cunik’s been my home for so many years.”

“I’m gonna miss you—I hate to say it, but you were like a son to me.”

Dar chuckled. “I seem to be a son to many: you, Gwog, Wenin, Barnig, Vikkis, Julaton, and Karnis. But Xetroiss considered me brother.”

“You two were close in age.”

They stopped at the viewing windows. “Well, there she is.” Dar pointed.

Jartis peered out the window. “What’s her dimensions?”

“Frankly, I don’t know.”

He sat Dar’s things down, and with his fingers, made some strange movements. “I calculate her to be half a mile long and about a quarter mile wide.”

“You think so?”

Jartis held up his hand. “I know so.”

“Certainly not the Cunik’s proportions, but I’m sure she’ll do.”

“Single warp engine?”

“Yup.”

“Age?”

“Older than the dirt in the bottom of your laundry bag,” Dar joked.

“Very funny...So, are you gonna swing by Erotis and show Denrika your new ship?”

“No, Gwog ordered me to Newrillis for a refit...And then after, I’ve been politely told I’m working the dark side.”

“Ah, he fears a little competition.”

Dar waved his hand at all the other ships. “It’s not like we’re the only game out there.”

“I know, I know. But the dark side does hold many good trade planets.” He collected Dar’s things. “Come, show me your new ship.”

“Certainly, my friend!”

Dar rummaged around the control console. “Okay, where are you?” he grumbled, opening drawers and cabinets. “Ah! There you are.” He took out a comm headset and looked it over. “Hope you still work.” Putting it on, he fiddled with a small switch on the side; then he poked the communications button. He still found it ironic that the ship was Satiren in origin. Dar wondered who had owned it in the beginning.

“This is Captain Dar Meltom of the Marsuian to Sirrixian port control.”

“Go ahead, Marsuian.”

“Requesting to undock and depart.”

“Stand by.” There was silence for a few moments. “Request accepted. Docking fees are paid.”

“Yes, thank you, I paid them just an hour ago.”

“Mag-locks disengaging.” A loud clanking noise could be heard from the door below as the locks released. A moment later, Dar and the Marsuian were floating free.

He switched off the comm headset and worked to bring the engine on line. “Come on, you can do it. You got fuel, I checked. Let’s make some tracks for Newrillis and I’ll get you all fixed up.” Firing the directional thrusters, Dar got the ship away from the space station. He knew what he was doing; it just felt so strange being by himself. Grabbing his reading tablet, he indexed through until he found all his coordinates listings. Spending so much time in navigation on the Cunik, Dar kept a log of where all the planets were, and how to get to them. “Okay, Newrillis, here we come.”

Punching in the numbers, he locked it in. “Warp engine on line—check, course locked—check, no one in my way—check. Let’s go!” He pushed the throttle forward and felt the ship pick up speed. It was slow, but she was going. Dar watched the stars ahead become a streaky blur. “Warp one...two...three...” And then there was a loud rumbling from the stern of the ship. “Oh, what now?” He saw the ship slowing again. “Aw, what happened?”

Shutting it down, Dar tromped aft to the engine room. When he opened the door, all he could see was red—red everywhere. Some of it dripped from the ceiling onto him. “Shit!” He stepped further inside, trying not to slip on the red goo. “Oh, fucking great, the mix tank for the Ceriddium blew...Now there’s no way I can jump to warp. It’s gonna take months to get to Newrillis at this rate.” He growled and took a few swings in the air, almost falling as he slipped in the Ceriddium.

Dar stomped out, shutting the door. Later, after he cooled off, he’d go back and try and clean some of it up. Returning to the bridge, he brought the engine back on line and at least got full impulse power. Newrillis was a long way off. “Gee, what else can go wrong with this hunk of junk?” he grumbled, deciding maybe it’d be best to call it a day.

Going to the door on the right of the bridge, Dar guessed it to be the captain’s cabin. He opened the door and found a few bits of rickety furniture and a bed. “Ah, at least this place has a bed.” Unlacing his boots, he kicked them off. “I need a nap.” He flipped onto the bed. Just as his whole body weight landed, the bed platform collapsed, leaving him in a sunken hole. “Would anything else care to break or fuck up today? Bring it on!”

15

Dar was stuck cruising through space for nearly three months. With no shuttle, and no space stations on his route, he'd been forced to return to Sirrix to get supplies. Adding to his misfortune, the Sirrixians didn't possess the capabilities to fix the mix tank. So he could go no faster than full impulse.

Now, back underway, he had plenty of time to kill. Dar decided to make an out of the way detour to Uyoninis, hoping maybe he could find an engineer and perhaps a shuttle. After fashioning crude repairs to the bed, so he could sleep in it—the floor was proving rather uncomfortable and there were no mattresses in the crew quarters. Dar started to explore his cabin. Opening one of the cabinets, he found a log book. It was old and dusty, but he figured it might hold some information about the ship. The Satiren writing on the control console had him curious.

As he took the log book and opened it, he found the first entries. They were written in Satiren. "Captain Rogoff Sarik. Log entry one." He looked at the date. "Over fifty years ago!" Dar continued reading. "Pulled out of dock and set course for Erotis 3. Hauling a shipment of farming equipment, supplies, and 45. Warp engine working fine..." He sneered. "Yeah, working fine back then!"

Deciding he wanted to try and relax, Dar got up and poured a glass of port. Settling back down, he continued reading. "...Marcy is a fine ship, probably one of the best Satiris has ever made. She's certainly the biggest. Next trip I hope to get a full load of Ouzin caviar and deliver it to Uyoninis." He took a sip. "Marcy, he called you Marcy, huh? Is that your name?" Turning a few pages, he looked at other entries. He noted that Captain Sarik commanded the ship for nearly fifteen years before it was evidently lost to pirates. Then there was a long break before the next log entry, one made by a Captain Ikt, written in Universal Ontarrin. "I have found this ship adrift in the Psi sector, taking it to the Delta 6 space station to see if anyone will claim it." Dar noted the date of entry. "That was only ten years ago. Marcy, have you been drifting all that time?"

As he read a bit more, he got to the bottom and turned the page; it was blank. Turning a few more, he realized that was where the log entries stopped. "Well, Marcy, I guess as your captain, it's my duty to report in the ship's log now." He reached over and grabbed a scribe stylus. Looking at the time piece on the wall, he noted the date, time, and wrote:

I am Captain Dar Meltom—half Satiren. This ship, the Marsuian, of Satiren origin now belongs to me after I won it in a poker game on the Sirrix space station. I'm taking her to Newrillis for a refit. Marcy is old and sorely outdated. I plan on starting a freight hauling business in the dark side, since my long-time friend and mentor, Gwog, chooses to work the light side. I hope Marcy and I will have a long, successful relationship together.

Taking another sip of port, he set the log off to the side. Lying back further, he gazed out the large, triangular window above his bed. The stars were passing slowly. He reached his hand out, as if touching them. "Yes, mother, I do belong to the stars." Finishing off the last of his port, he undressed and went to bed.

Dar checked his navigation computer against his reading tablet. The computer was so old he really didn't trust it. Then he looked out the window to the planet ahead. "Okay, Marcy, if you're not lying to me, that should be Uyoninis." He poked a few buttons on the control console. "Let's get into orbit, and then I gotta figure out a way to get to the surface. It would've been nice if you came with a shuttle."

He made a slight course correction. Putting on his headset, he adjusted frequencies until he found the one for the planet. "This is freighter Marsuian to the planet Uyoninis."

"Go ahead, Marsuian."

"Uh, I'd like to come down for the slave auction, but I got a problem."

"Problem?"

"Yeah, I just became captain of this vessel and it didn't come with a shuttle...Is there a place I can land? Or perhaps a service that can come pick me up?"

"Negative, Marsuian. No place to land, and we don't have a shuttle service." There was a long pause. "But you can try contacting one of the other freighters in orbit and see if they can come get you. We have an equipment auction that takes place right after the slave auction. Once in a while we get a few shuttles for sale."

"Ah, thanks, Uyoninis. I could sure use a shuttle."

"Try contacting the freighter Gokk, their captain is Urin Natto—very nice. He may be able to give you a ride to the surface."

"I appreciate it." Dar flipped through some more frequencies. "Freighter Gokk, this is the Marsuian."

"Marsuian? Who are you?"

"Captain Dar Meltom, I recently acquired this vessel. I used to be crew for Gwog on the Cunik."

"Ah, yes, Gwog. What can we do for you, captain?"

"Are you by chance going to the slave auction?"

"Yes, why?"

"I'm in a bit of a bind. I need an engineer, and this ship has no shuttle. Could you possibly come pick me up? I'm hoping to get a shuttle at the equipment auction."

"Sure, we can do that. Two hours, okay?"

"Yes, thank you, very much. And should we pass a tavern, I'll buy you a round as thanks."

"Much obliged, captain."

Three hours later, Dar was on the surface, in the auction house, looking for an engineer. They'd stopped at a tavern, and Dar bought a round for everyone who came along. He realized that rule number four of Gwog's rules of being a freighter captain applied: "Always

treat your competition politely, you never know when you may need their help.” The captain of the Gokk was most gracious and even offered him a return trip should he fail to find a shuttle.

Walking along slowly, Dar wondered if he’d even get lucky and find an engineer. Most were slaves out of the mines, or forced domestic help. Occasionally, he’d see one and ask if they had engineering skills. After a while, he was getting nowhere, and stopped to talk to the slave master, who stood guard over the cages of dangerous slaves. Dar wondered why they bothered to try selling slaves that would kill you if given the chance. “Excuse me?” he said.

“Yes?” the slave master replied.

“I was wondering if you might know if any of these slaves have skills in engineering?”

“Engineering? Who are you?”

“Captain Dar Meltom, of the Marsuian.”

“Oh. You’re looking for someone who can work a warp drive?”

“Yes.”

“Dunno. Good luck finding one. I just keep ’em in line while they’re here, you know, give ’em a whipping if needed.” He pointed to the whip hanging off his belt.

“Oh, right.” Dar looked at one of the cages. Inside, was a small, brown, furry creature about four and a half feet tall. He had a string around his neck with a piece of paper. His lot number was written on it. “Is that a Nouian?”

“Yeah. Some rich Uyonin bought him a few weeks ago as a *toy* for his youngling. It seems the nasty little fur ball got mad and bit the youngling—nearly killed him.”

“Killed?”

“Didn’t you know Nouians have venomous bites? They got poison sacks in their mouths. When they bite, they can inject venom and either make you really sick, or kill you.”

“Oh, that doesn’t sound too good.” He looked down at the Nouian, whose brownish-yellow eyes twinkled in the dim light. It seemed as if the creature was listening to their conversation.

“Naw, if he doesn’t sell tonight, he’ll probably be taken out back and shot.” The slave master went on down the line of cages.

Dar studied the creature for a moment before turning to move on. A small hand reached out and grabbed his leg. “Hey!”

“Kaptaw,” the Nouian said.

“What?”

He pointed to Dar. “Je, kaptaw.”

“I, I don’t understand. I’m sorry.”

“Je kaptaw uk fregidor.” He pointed to the ceiling. “Fregidor.”

“Fre-gi-dor?” Dar scratched his head. “Freighter?”

“Ga!” the Nouian nodded.

“Yes, I’m captain of the Marsuian.”

He pointed to Dar. “Je kaptaw uk fregidor.”

“I see. And you don’t speak Universal Ontarrin, huh?”

The Nouian shook his head. “Nak.”

“What do you want?”

“Eg’m eginar.” He pointed to himself.

“Huh?”

“Eg’m eginar.”

“I don’t know what you’re saying.”

The Nouian stretched, trying to get a stick lying on the floor.

Dar picked it up and handed it to him. The little alien drew a rectangle in the dirt.

“Fregidor.”

“Okay.”

Then he drew a smaller rectangle inside the first one, toward one end. “Egin.”

“You mean engine? Like a warp engine?”

“Ga!” He pointed to himself again. “Eg’m eginar.”

“You’re saying you’re an engineer?”

“Ga!” He nodded vigorously.

Dar shook his head. “You’ve got to be joking.”

“Nak! Nak! Eg’m eginar!”

“I think you’re just saying that so I’ll buy you.”

“Nak. Je neg eginar, ag eg’m eginar.”

Dar wasn’t exactly sure what the Nouian said, but he got the general idea that he was an engineer of some sorts. “If I buy you, you better not be lying. If you are, I’ll bring you right back here. Understand?”

“Ga, eg unokterstundd.”

Taking out a scribe stylus and a scrap of paper, Dar wrote down the Nouian’s lot number. He hoped the little fur ball wasn’t lying. He really couldn’t afford to come back and try selling him. Continuing, he went down the line, occasionally asking a slave some questions. Finding not much more in the way of possibilities, he went outside to view the equipment for sale. Amidst the odd lots of cargo handling equipment, farming implements, and a few things he didn’t recognize, he found a shuttle. The door was open, gangplank down, so he went in and had a look. There was a rear compartment that looked like it would hold a small amount of cargo, or maybe four or five reasonable sized passengers. Up front, a cockpit that sat two. It didn’t seem in too bad of shape, so Dar took the lot number down and decided he’d try bidding on it.

At the end of the evening, Dar went up to pay for his purchases. The Nouian only cost three hundred drig. It seemed there wasn’t much call for a mean, venomous creature that no one could understand. The shuttle, however, cost a quarter million drig. But he sorely needed one, and figured that if necessary, he’d get the line of credit to fix up Marcy.

“Hello, I’m paying for these two lots.” Dar handed over his scrap of paper.

“Two hundred-fifty thousand and three hundred.”

“Yes,” he replied with a pained expression, handing over the wad of drig.

The clerk counted it out and gave him a receipt. “Pick up your slave in the back. The shuttle is outside. Just show this to the slave and property masters.”

“Thank you.” He took the slip and headed to the back. The slave master met him at the door. “Hello, I purchased the Nouian.”

The slave master chuckled. “Okay, hope you know what you’re gettin’ into.”

“I guess I’ll be taking my chances.” He waited patiently while a cage with the Nouian was brought out.

“I’d keep him in the cage at least until you get back to your ship.”

Dar looked down at the Nouian. “Will you behave?”

“Ga.”

The slave master laughed. “You’re taking his word?!”

He knelt down so he was eye level with the little alien. “What’s your name?”

“Schmuff.”

“I’m Dar, but captain to you. Understand? I need an engineer, and I hope you’ll be able to help me. I’m not one to beat a slave, but I do expect you to work. I’m a fair captain, and if you prove your worth, I’ll give you pay.”

“Eg unkteerstundd. Ka goo.” He folded his hands together, lacing his fingers, trying to show he wasn’t a threat.

Dar looked at the slave master. “Please, let him out.”

“Okay, but it’s your own risk.”

“I’ll take that.”

Returning to the Marsuian, Dar walked down the gangplank into the shuttle bay. “Ah, much better, a shuttle for the bay.” He looked over his shoulder. “Coming, Schmuff?”

The Nouian followed along. As he got down the gangplank, he took off at a mad dash. “Hey!” Dar hollered and ran after him. It didn’t take long to catch him. “What are you doing?” He grabbed Schmuff by the arm, spinning him around. Schmuff growled and lunged at Dar, biting him on the hand. “Fuck!” He let go, drawing his hand back, cradling it with the other. An intense burning immediately started going up his arm. “No, please no,” he said, knowing he needed to get back to his cabin. The pain and burning slowly crept through his body, his stomach cramped, and he vomited half way there. “Oh, why was I so stupid!?”

Staggering along, he finally made it. His legs didn’t want to work, so he partly crawled to the bathroom. Dar didn’t know what to do; the pain was intense, his breath came short, and his eyes couldn’t focus. His whole body seemed to be shutting down. Grabbing his little bottle of Mind Blow, he tapped out three tablets, tossed them into his mouth, and collapsed on the floor.

16

Three days later, Dar awoke flat on the floor of his bathroom. His head and hand hurt, but otherwise, he seemed fine. He sat up and tried to think of what happened. The Nouian, yes, the Nouian bit him. Oh, there was going to be punishment for that transgression, Dar thought, struggling to get up. He wondered where the nasty little fur ball was. Did he steal the shuttle and escape? Or did he steal Marcy? If so, he'd have a rude awakening since the warp drive was inoperable.

Washing his face, he looked in the mirror. His eyes were bloodshot, and mouth felt like a roll of cloth had been stuck in it. He took a drink and dried his hands. "Well, I guess I'll go see if I can find that little Nouian bastard."

Dar walked out to the bridge and found it empty. He studied the stars, seeing they weren't moving. He looked at the controls and noticed the engine off. Everything was how he'd left it. Leaving the bridge, he followed the maze of catwalks down to the shuttle bay. The shuttle was still there. "Okay, what gives?" he said softly. A loud clanging noise reached his ears, he thought it came from the engine room.

Going to the door, he stopped and listened for a moment. Yes, there was noise, definitely. Dar wondered if he should go in there armed. He reached back and slid his knife out. With his left hand, he quietly opened the door and peered in. The Nouian sat on the floor, doing something, his back to Dar. Quickly closing the distance, he grabbed Schmuff by the back of the neck, threw him to the ground face first, and dropped his knee right in the middle of Schmuff's back. "How dare you! How dare you bite me when I showed you kindness!" Dar held the blade to Schmuff's throat. "Why did you do that?!"

"Churee, kaptaw," he grunted. "Eg vag efkraid."

"What?" He got up, keeping his distance. "What are you saying?"

Schmuff skittered over to a corner and held his arms in front of his face in a protective manner. "Eg vag efkraid."

"Afraid?"

"Ga. Efkraid je jzurt mekka." He made motions like someone was beating him.

"Afraid I'd harm you?"

"Ga."

"Schmuff, I only grabbed you because I wanted to know why you were running off. I had no intention of harming you. I meant what I said about not beating slaves."

"Nak?"

"Nak," Dar replied.

"Churee, churee, kaptaw."

"Is that *sorry*?"

"Ga, churee." He stood and slowly approached Dar. "Eg nagt tek ewebbe geed eginar."

Dar rubbed his face. "Oh, I wish you spoke Ontarrin, this is gonna be a long few months."

"Eg'll treech je Nouian."

"Are you saying you'll teach me Nouian?"

“Ga!”

“Well, we got about fifteen months til we reach Newrillis, and I have no idea how long for Marcy’s refit. So, we’re gonna have lots of time together.”

“Kaptaw?”

“Yeah?”

Schmuff pointed to the Ceriddium mix tank. “Eg figged.”

Dar walked over and noticed a rather dodgy looking patch on the tank. “You fixed it?”

“Ga.”

“Are you sure it’ll hold? Doesn’t look very sturdy.”

“Ga, set dak.” He pointed and nodded.

“You say it will? So we can make warp?”

Schmuff nodded again and held up three fingers. “Wak treig, nak mog.”

“Warp three? No, more?” He was beginning to get the gist of Schmuff’s language.

“Ga.”

“All right, thanks. But if that patch blows, you’re cleaning up the mess, okay?”

“Ga, unkerstundd.”

Unlocking the heavy door to the outside, Dar swung it open and was met by two Newrillians. He was docked at the Newrillian space station; a place he’d been a few times before. The alien species stood roughly six and a half feet tall, had dark green skin, and walked upright. Their faces had wide noses, large blue eyes, with a heavy brow ridge above, and what looked like peshine-like gills in front of their small ears. They weren’t a water-based society, so Dar wondered what function the odd appendages served. He’d never worked up the nerve to ask them either. “Hello,” he said softly, speaking in Newrillian. Despite their small ears, their sense of hearing was very acute. Loud noises tended to startle them. “I am Captain Dar Meltom, and this is the Marsuian. I was sent by Gwog of the Cunik to request a refit.”

“Come with us,” one of them said. The Newrillians were a mostly male-dominated society; so much of what Dar encountered on his trips here were males. The females tended to stay home and care for the younglings. They were a highly advanced species, especially when it came to weaponry. Prices weren’t cheap, but the weapons always lived up to their performance specifications.

He was taken to a small office and instructed to have a seat. Several minutes later, another male came out. “I am Kerner Noh. How may I help you?” he asked.

“I have a ship in bad need of a refit and I was told to bring her here.”

“We can help you with that.”

“Good, good. I don’t know how much it’ll cost, but Gwog told me to ask for a Gorrin... Gorrin...” he couldn’t remember the last name, since not all alien species used them.

“Algok?”

“Yes, that’s it! I was told that if the refit was more than I have, I could request credit for the rest.”

“You’ll have to see Gorrin about that. My job is to evaluate the ship and draw up a refit estimate.”

“Well, the Marsuian is pretty old.”

“Shall we go have a look?” Kerner asked, grabbing a clipboard.

“Yes, please. I know she’s at least fifty years old.”

“Fifty!”

“Well, from what I can see of the log book. Gwog said that despite her age, she’s not in bad shape.” Dar led the way to the port Marcy was docked at.

“How much did he say needs to be done?”

“Engine, weapons, and the cargo holds all need upgrading.”

Kerner shifted hands with the clipboard. “So, basically everything.”

“He did say the hull is in good shape.”

“I’ll be the judge of that...And we’ll need to take your shuttle out for a look.”

“Not a problem,” Dar replied. They reached the dock. “Here she is.”

He looked out the observation window. “Quite old. Origin?”

“Satiren.”

“Hmm, Satiren. Don’t think we’ve had a ship of that manufacture in decades.”

“I won her in a poker game on the Sirrix space station.”

Kerner headed down the entry tunnel. “Won it in a poker game, huh?”

“Sounds strange, I’m sure.”

He stopped at the hatch, pulled a scribe stylus from his pocket, and commenced his inspection. Dar followed along, not saying much. He figured Kerner knew what needed to be done. They went through the bridge and over to Dar’s cabin. “Captain?” Kerner asked.

“Yes?”

“I’m sure you’d like your quarters upgraded.”

“Oh, yes! Very much so!” Dar pointed to the bed. “I have three empty crates from Priddin jerky holding my bed up.”

“That doesn’t sound particularly comfortable.”

“No, and not doing wonders for my back, either.”

“We’ll get that fixed up.”

Four hours later, Dar and Kerner finally finished. Both had a clear understanding of what the old ship needed; and Dar now felt the pain of how much it would cost: over five million drig. He groaned as he looked at the estimate. “This is far more than I expected.”

“I’m sorry, but to get your ship up to current standards, it’s not cheap.”

“I know, I know. I guess I’ll be talking to Gorrin.”

“He’ll probably finance you—with interest, of course.”

Dar sneered. “Of course.”

Kerner was silent for a few moments. “Uh, there is one thing...”

“What?”

“I happen to know our engineers are working on an advanced warp engine.”

“So?” He wasn’t sure where Kerner was going with this.

“So, say you were to agree to an experimental testing of the engine. It would give you the top of the line prototype.”

“With what strings attached?” Dar asked, rather skeptical.

“At certain time increments, you bring the ship back here for them to download the information gathered, and they will make adjustments to it as needed.”

“Doesn’t sound too bad. Can you check into that for me?”

“Certainly.” He made a few notes. “And as far as the weaponry goes, they offer a few programs too.”

Dar looked around the ship. “I’ll take all the help I can get.”

Kerner tore a scrap of paper off his clipboard and scribbled some information on it. “Here’s a contact name for Eglig Modew, he might be able to find you a few freight hauling jobs to help start making some drig.”

“Thank you, thank you very much. I appreciate all that you’re willing to do for me.”

Dar left Kerner and headed toward the engine room. He figured Schmuff would be working there. As he entered the aft bulkhead, a wonderful aroma reached his nose. “Oh, where’s that coming from?” He sniffed a few times, trying to find the source. There was only one place it could be: the galley.

He hurried along, the smell making his mouth water. Dar wondered what it was. It smelled like braised bovidis shoulder, one of his favorites. The closer he got, the stronger the fantastic aroma got. Finally reaching the galley, he burst in the door and stopped dead. On the table was a large metal baking pan, a bovidis shoulder nestled inside with a few Gardinian tubers and some Iddrian beans. The skin on the shoulder browned to perfection.

Rubbing his eyes, he thought it was a hallucination. He swallowed all the saliva that poured into his mouth. The feast that lay before him looked like pure perfection. The only other person who could do up a bovidis shoulder like that was his mother. “Hello?” Dar called, not sure if there was someone else on board besides himself and Schmuff.

“Kaptaw, sigg doag.” Schmuff came from the kitchen. “Eg sho dignaar.”

Dar sat down at the table. “You made this? You made dinner?”

“Ga.” Schmuff grabbed a large knife and presented it to him. “Je kaptaw, je shev.” He motioned for Dar to cut the meat.

“Shev?” Dar wasn’t sure of that word.

“Shev.” He made motions of cutting the meat and serving it out.

“Ah, you want me to serve?”

Schmuff nodded, then disappeared into the kitchen. He returned with a bottle of Vigurian wine and set it on the table. Taking his seat, he patiently waited while Dar sliced the meat and served it.

“Where did you learn to cook like this?”

“Mekka mogginar.” He patted his stomach and made a motion like a youngling coming out. “Mogginar.”

“Your mother?” Dar handed a plate to Schmuff. “My mother’s a great cook too.”

“Ga, mogginar. Eg niss mekka mogginar.” He made a motion like he was being pulled away. “Mogginar frookn akway.”

“She was taken away?”

“Ga, nuuw slevea.” Schmuff pointed to himself. “Slevea—je owank mekka.” He pointed to Dar. “Je owank mekka.”

Dar took a bite of the bovidis shoulder, it almost melted in his mouth. "Okay, now you got me confused...Are you trying to tell me your mother got sold into slavery?"

"Ga, mogginar slevea; Schmuff slevea."

"I told you, I may have bought you at a slave auction, but I don't consider you a slave. I needed an engineer, and you seem to know what you're doing...Not to mention you're an excellent cook." He tasted one of the Gardinian tubers; it was sweet and starchy. "I think I got a great bargain for three hundred drig. But if you keep cooking like this, you're gonna make me fat!" They laughed.

Schmuff poured two glasses of wine. He picked his up. "Tek taah Marsuian!"

Dar raised his glass. "To the Marsuian!" He reached across the table and clinked glasses with Schmuff. "May she serve another fifty or more years!"

“This is the Marsuian requesting permission to undock,” Dar said into his headset as he stood at the control console. His stomach jumped and jittered, the excitement inside him almost uncontrollable. Considering the vast overhaul the ship had, the control console remained virtually unchanged. The re-fitters even left all the original Satiren writing on it. The only new part was a small sub-panel with a few weapons controls—namely torpedoes. After six months in dock, Dar was itching to get going. He’d gotten with Eglig Modew and had a few jobs lined up. One happened to be hauling a shipment of massive specialty rockets to Sirrix.

“Roger, Marsuian, you are clear to undock.”

“Thank you. And thank you all for the kind treatment you’ve shown me.”

“Safe journeys, Marsuian.”

Dar fired the bow thrusters, edging the ship out of dock. He backed away nearly a mile before slowly turning. Looking ahead, he saw the stars, just waiting for him. “Well, Marcy, let’s see what you can do.” He nudged the throttle, bringing the ship to full impulse power. “Schmuff? Do you read?” Dar said.

“Ga, kaptaw, Eg’m reegy.”

“Let’s start out slow, just warp one for a little bit.”

“O-kay,” Schmuff replied. There were a few words of Ontarrin that he knew. Mostly it was his choice to speak his native language.

Dar made one last check of the navigation computer. His test should send them near Zumik 6 in the Tau sector, about two days away at warp one—if all went well. He was told to operate Marcy for three months, then return for evaluation. The total cost of the refit, with all the “experimental allowances” cost almost four million drig. He’d only have to repay Gorrin about seven hundred thousand for the loan. And with the way payloads were calculated, it wouldn’t take very long. Then he’d repay Gwog; something he had absolutely no problem with. He almost wished his long-time friend and mentor was here to see this.

“All right, Marcy, let’s open you up.” He rested his hand on the throttle, took a deep breath, and pushed it forward. “Warp one.” Dar watched as the stars became a blur. “How’s she doing, Schmuff?”

“Geed, Marcy wak egin geed.”

“Good? Shall I give her a little more?”

“Ga!”

“All right, warp two.” He upped the throttle. The stars ahead streaked by faster. “That’s it, now you’re moving.”

“Chasta! Chasta!” Schmuff called over the comm headset.

“Faster?”

“Ga!”

“Seriously?”

“Ga! Wak tregi.”

“Okay, warp three.” Dar let out a tense little sigh as he pushed the throttle again. He watched the warp speed indicator. “Warp three and holding.”

“Wak furg!”

“Oh, come on! Warp four?”

“Ga! Marcy kun frook set.”

“You’re confident Marcy can take it, huh?”

“Ga. Regfiktur sakt Marcy nwatss wak teg.”

Dar nudged the throttle more. “You say the re-fitter told you that Marcy goes to warp ten?”

“Ga. Kett’s nwat!”

He laughed. “Let’s go—funny.”

“Kaptaw!”

“All right, all right, we’ll go a bit faster.” Dar moved the throttle to warp five. “There, happy?”

“Ga, weree yippai.”

“I’m glad you’re very happy. Now let me get to work.” He realized he was going much faster and farther than expected, and needed to recalculate his course. Quickly, his fingers went to work plotting out his expected destination. “Oh, Appolion 6? I didn’t think I’d end up there.” He checked to see if there were any other planets along the way, but the space he’d be passing through was sparsely populated.

Letting the engine run for nearly eleven days at warp five, he watched his course plot out. When they were close, he dropped from warp, expecting to see the planet Appolion. Instead, he was face to face with eight Soothian pirate ships. “Aw, shit!”

“Katpaw?”

“We got pirates, Schmuff.”

“Shit,” came the reply.

Dar didn’t think twice. He raised the shields and brought all weapons online. Since the new weapons were expensive, Dar hoped to avoid using them. “This is Captain Dar Meltom of the Marsuian.”

“The Marsuian? What ship is that?”

“My ship. I was crew of the Cunik, now I have my own.”

“So, you know who I am?”

“Nokkis?”

“Yes,” he replied with a little laugh. “And what do you have for me today?”

“Nothing that concerns you.” Dar locked target on what he thought was the lead ship.

“But you are carrying cargo.”

“And its value is not worth you losing a few ships over.”

“Me losing ships? Hardly!”

Dar selected a torpedo. The weapons lab engineers sold him two very experimental ones to try. They were outfitted with a shield destabilizing feature that allowed them to fly right through and destroy their target. “I’m gonna give you one last chance to leave, then I’ll open fire.”

“Give it your best shot, captain.”

“Okay, don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He checked his targeting once more, and pushed the button. A bright flash of light came from under the ship, followed by a streak of light as the torpedo zoomed toward its target. “Come on, come on,” Dar said softly, hoping it would work. A moment later, the ship in the middle exploded. “Woouoooooo!” he cheered, jumping up and down.

His celebration was cut short as the Soothians unloaded with laser cannons and phasers. The Marsuian was rocked as her shields took the brunt of the attack. “Hang on, Marcy, we need to get out of this mess.” Firing the port thrusters, he veered to the right, trying to make an escape. The pirates quickly took up the chase.

“You can’t out run us, our ships are faster,” Nokkis said.

“Shit, I didn’t kill you?”

“No, I’m not as ignorant or arrogant as my father was.”

“I wouldn’t have guessed,” Dar joked as he quickly plotted out his course to Sirrix. It was eighty-eight thousand light years away, and he wondered just how far the pirates would go to get his cargo. He fired a few more salvos from his port laser cannons and prepared to jump to warp. One of the pirate ships fired a large cannon. Marcy took the hit on her port side. The blast was so strong it knocked Dar off his feet. He tumbled to the deck and hurriedly got up. “Ow! That hurt.” He checked the shields. “Schmuff, can you give me more power to the port shields?”

“Ga, kaptaw.”

The ship was rocked again. Dar saw who fired this time. “All right, enough being nice.” He locked target on the ship and fired his last torpedo. “Take that! Marcy doesn’t like getting into fights—she’ll finish it!” The torpedo shot through the blackness of space, penetrated the shields of the pirate ship, and blew it into a million pieces. The other ships continued their barrage. Dar realized that even with all the improvements, Marcy would not survive an attack by six more pirate ships. “Schmuff? I’m gonna get us out of here. We might be going pretty fast, so keep an eye on that engine, okay?”

“Ga, egin geed.”

“Here goes nothing.” Dar shoved the throttle forward. The ship jumped to warp. “One... two... three...four...five...” He watched the speed indicator in disbelief. “Six...seven...eight... nine...ten! Schmuff, are you reading warp ten?!”

“Ga, kaptaw, wak teg.”

He flipped on the rear view screen to see the pirates disappearing in his warp wake. “Yes! Yes! Ha, ha! We’ve out run the pirates!” Dar gave the control console a little pat. “Marcy, you’re the fastest freighter in the galaxy!” He left the engine to run at warp ten for a while. Truly, he wanted to get to Sirrix, off load his cargo, and get to Tridius to pick up a shipment of clothing bound for Lanteris. After that, he figured he’d have enough drig to pay back Gorrin Algok.

Dar stood in his astro-observation bubble on top of the ship and watched as the second Sirrixian rocket was offloaded onto the planet’s surface. Marcy didn’t have a bubble when he got her, but he made a point to get one installed so he could do his charting up there; and it

gave him a great view. Yes, it was extra drig, but he felt he needed one. And it made him feel even closer to the stars.

Checking his charts on the table, he plotted the course to Tridius, and then on to Lanteris. Dar was happy his brush with the pirates had a favorable outcome. The Newrillians did a great job on Marcy, he mused, writing down the coordinates. At least now he stood a chance against the pirates. He stopped for a moment and remembered way back when he first joined as crew on the Cunik, and how Gwog insisted the courses be plotted by chart. Here he was, years later, still doing it the same way. He missed his friend and mentor, and all his other “fathers” on the Cunik. Dar especially missed Jartis, who taught him so much about engineering, and also about being an adult Satiren.

“Kaptaw!” Schmuff called from below.

“What?”

“Vinnitor.”

“What?” Dar didn’t know that word in Nouian.

“He says you have a visitor!” a deep voice called.

“Gwog?!” He hurried down the narrow ladder and onto the bridge. “Greetings my old friend!”

“*Old?* I’m not old.”

Dar offered his hand. “Well with a face like a worn out Catarin hide bag, you look old to me. I didn’t know you were here, I didn’t see the Cunik at dock.”

“She’s up on the space station. I came down in a shuttle because I heard you were here.” Gwog took Dar’s hand, and then gave him a friendly smack. “So, she’s all done, huh?”

“Yeah, wanna have a tour?”

“Do you need to ask?” He pointed at Schmuff. “A Nouian?”

“Yeah, he’s my engineer, and a pretty damn good cook.”

“Kaptaw, Eg glunt wurg tek dok.” Schmuff hurried off.

“What’d he say?” Gwog asked.

“Says he’s got work to do.”

“You speak Nouian now?”

“Eh, kinda. Still learning.”

Gwog shook his head. “You always did have a way with learning languages.”

Dar opened his cabin door. “The Newrillians really fixed her up nice...See, much better.”

He went in and had a look around. “Nice, in fact nicer than mine...How much did it all cost?”

“Just under four million...I’ll have enough to pay Gorrin after my next run.”

“Good.”

“And then it may take me a little while to get you paid off.”

Gwog waved his hand. “I’m not so much worried about that, little one. It was a loan between friends, and I know you’ll pay me back.” He looked up at the window above Dar’s bed. “Nice view.”

“It’s a close race as to which part of the ship is my favorite: the astro-observation bubble, or here.”

“A great view of the stars all right.”

“Wanna see the new warp engine?”

“Of course.”

Dar led him back to the engine room. “You know, I’ll pay you back the very day I have it all.” He opened the door. Schmuff was up on the particle accelerator doing some work.

“A Nouian engineer? I still find that strange,” Gwog said, a bit confused. Nouians were not exactly renowned for their technical capabilities.

“Yeah, Schmuff’s different all right.”

He let out a hearty laugh. “Where’d you pick him up?”

“The slave auction on Uyoninis. Got him back to the ship, and the little bastard bit me. I was out cold for three days—I think.”

“Lucky you didn’t die. Why do you still have him? I figure with what he did, you’d have shot him.”

“He said he was scared that I’d beat him. Actually, he’s pretty darn good—fixed my Ceriddium tank when it blew, and got us to Newrillis a lot faster.” Dar pointed. “And he can make a bovidis shoulder almost as good as my mother.”

“Any more crew?” Gwog walked along looking at the new engine.

“Nope, just us.”

“How fast is she?”

“Did warp ten running from the pirates.”

Gwog chuckled. “Warp ten? Impressive. Ah, didn’t take the pirates long to find you.”

“Uh, I accidentally found them. I was testing the warp engine and dropped out right near Appolion, and there they were.”

“And?”

“I got to use the new torpedoes the Newrillians are developing...Worked great, blew up two ships, but unfortunately neither had Nokkis aboard.”

“I thought I had him in my sights a few months back. But alas, he slipped from me too.”

“Can’t we do anything to stop them?” Dar asked.

“Stop them, no, but buy them off, yes.”

“Buy them off?”

He put his hand on Dar’s shoulder. “I’m old and tired of fighting; so I made a contract with Nokkis to pay him a certain percentage for safe passage.”

“You did what?!”

“Little one, I’d strongly suggest you do the same. He’s become far more powerful than his father, and I see the amount of ships in his armada growing steadily.”

“Pay the pirates? Gwog, have you lost your mind?”

“No, right now, it makes for smart business. That same engagement a few months ago, I tangled with Nokkis, and about lost the Cunik. I can’t afford that. And this last time, the only thing that saved me was his offer for terms of payment. Nokkis is smart, he realizes he can make far more by taking payments than simply taking the ships or destroying them.”

Dar leaned against the main housing for the warp engine. “I’m not gonna give in that easy. Marcy’s fast and well-armed now.”

“I’m sure she is, but she can only take so much punishment, and Nokkis is getting stronger every day.”

“For now, I’ll take my chances.”

Gwog waved his hand. “How about showing me the rest?”

“It would be my pleasure!” Dar led the way. He took Gwog to the shuttle bay and showed him the new shuttle. “How’s Jartis?”

“Doing well, I think he misses you the most.”

He laughed. “I’m sure *all* my fathers miss me.”

“We do,” Gwog said softly. “Watching you grow up made us very proud. And now you’re on your own, making a name for yourself.”

“I have you and the Cunik to thank for that. Had I been on a lesser ship with a captain half as good as you, I’d be just another freighter captain struggling to make a few drig.”

“You are free to use my name until yours becomes one of merit. Treat your customers right and *they* will make your name for you.”

Dar smiled. “Is that rule number five of being a freighter captain?”

“Yes, it is.”

“You know, you never told me how many rules there are.”

Gwog chuckled. “I’ll let you know when I stop coming up with rules!” They laughed. “Well, little one, I see you are set for a life in space on your own. You have a great ship, an interesting crew, and the stars to sing you to sleep. Now go prove yourself.”

Dar stood proudly. “Aye, sir!”

18

Four months later, the Marsuian cruised into Erotin space. Dar's trip to Lanteris 3 ended up turning into three more shipping jobs: a trip to Floknis 9 where he picked up a shipment of ore destined for Kiburgus to be smelted down into workable metal; a trip to Priddis for a smaller shipment of Priddin jerky that went to Skrinnis. And his last job: a whole shipload of rum from Jamarais 4 going to Darminitus.

After dropping his shipment of rum, he returned to Newrillis, had Marcy inspected—where they made a few modifications to the warp engine; and he paid off Gorrin Algok. There was even enough drig left to purchase two more torpedoes. The drig and the jobs were rolling in. He was quite happy. Working in the dark side, and touting he had the fastest freighter, brought lots of business. Marcy may not have been the biggest freighter out there, but she could get a load from one planet to another often four times faster than the other vessels.

Now, returning to the Beta sector, he wanted to visit home. Granted Erotis 3 was on the light side, somewhere he knew he wouldn't be going very often. He'd kept his word to Gwog and only accepted clients from the dark side. It didn't matter where the payload ended up, but the order had to originate on the dark side of the galaxy.

"This is the Marsuian to Erotis 3 long-range control," Dar said into his comm headset.

"The Marsuian? Who are you?"

He smiled, recognizing the voice. "Do you not know your old friend, Garnic?"

"Dar?! I thought you were on the Cunik?"

"I was. I got lucky in a game similar to Erotin chokker, and won this ship."

"You won a ship in a game of chance?"

"Yup. And you should be seeing us on your scanner just about now." Dar checked his coordinates. "I'm gonna put in for low stationary orbit. Is that okay?"

"Sure, we got no one here right now. Are you off loading a shipment?"

"Naw, I'm empty. Gonna get a load of rum from Jamarais to take to Priddis after I leave here."

"Your mother will be thrilled to see you," Garnic said.

"And proud, I'm sure. I wanna show her Marcy."

"Hey, I get off shift in an hour; can we meet at the tavern?"

"All right," Dar replied. "And I wanna see Kroodus."

"You know, he's been really nice since he came back."

"Good."

The shuttle landed just outside town, and Dar got out. He walked down the dusty main street, looking at the sad state of his hometown. Some of the buildings were boarded up, and only a small handful of inhabitants could be seen about. A cold wind blew; Dar fastened his jacket and shoved his hands in the pockets. It was Decidnus, one of the dry winter months, and he figured some of the population had gone to the seaside resort of Culides. His mother had taken him there once many years ago, and he thought the sand and salty water seemed a

bit overrated. He much preferred Lake Aknarra and trying his hand at netting peshines. Once, Dar caught one so big, it almost tore through his net. Sometimes he'd meet up with Garnic and they'd get a boat and go for hours. They'd bring their catch home to Dar's house where Denrika would prepare them a feast no matter how many or few they caught.

"Ah, the good ol' days," Dar said softly as he wandered down the street toward the tavern. As he passed the store where his mother worked, he saw Cogg at the counter. That meant she was probably home. Continuing on, he reached the tavern. Pausing for a moment, he opened the door and went to the bar. Krodus turned, and without a word, picked up a glass, wiped it clean with his apron, set it on the bar, and poured Dar his Malikin port. The place was virtually empty. Dar spotted two older pure bred Satirens sitting in the corner playing what looked like a game of chokker.

"Hello, Krodus. You look well," Dar said as he picked up the glass.

"Thanks to you," he said, then leaned over the bar and whispered, "*Master.*"

"I am that no more. A friend, yes."

"Drink up, my friend."

"Where's your father?"

"Probably on Lake Aknarra netting some peshines...He's been taking more and more time off, leaving the tavern to me," Krodus replied, rinsing a few glasses.

"He's worked hard all these years, now it's your turn."

"I don't mind. I'm happy to be home."

Dar took a long drink, savoring the flavor. "I have news."

"Oh?"

"I'm no longer on the Cunik...I have my own ship." He set his glass down, Krodus refilled it.

"Congratulations. Your mother will be proud."

"Garnic should be meeting me here soon."

Krodus grabbed another glass and poured some port. "I should like to toast my friend and his new ship." He held the glass up. "To a long and prosperous life for you both."

"Thank you." He touched his glass. "To the Marsuian."

"To the Marsuian." Krodus took a drink. "Hmm, that name sounds familiar, but I can't quite place it."

"She's old, *really* old...But six months in a Newrillian refit dock, and she's good as new."

"That name..."

"Well, according to the ship's log, she's Satiren by manufacture."

"Perhaps that's it."

Dar scratched his head. "But how would you know about her? She's been around since before we were born."

Krodus shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps my father made mention. I dunno."

"According to the log book, Marcy did make some trips here a long time ago."

"Oh, maybe that was it."

The door opened and Garnic walked in. "Ah, *Captain* Dar Meltom in the flesh!"

Dar got up and gave Garnic a big hug. "So good to see you."

Krodus put another glass on the bar. "Your usual, Garnic?"

"Yes, please." He sat down. "So, tell me all about this ship."

“Marcy’s not the biggest in the galaxy, but she’s the fastest. I can do warp ten.”

“Warp ten? Gee, I’ve never even been at warp one.”

Dar gave Garnic a playful nudging. “Garnic, you’ve never even been off this planet!”

“Eh, true...Would you take me up to see her?”

“Of course, and I wanna show mother.”

Krodus pulled a pint of Bodnarian ale and sat it on the bar. “Your ale, Garnic.”

“Thank you, Krodus.” He picked up the glass. “Am I too late to toast?”

Dar lifted his glass. “Naw, what’s one more toast.”

“To you and Marcy. At least you got a female in your life now!”

“Ah! Smart ass!” Dar swatted Garnic on the arm.

“Ass? You call me an ass? They only come from Winneiruk. I’m Satiren, thank you.”

“I couldn’t have guessed.”

“Oh, come on, Dar, we’re still best friends, right?”

Dar put his arm around him. “Til the day we die.”

“Do you need crew on that ship? You know, I could help out.”

“Right now, I’m doing fine with just me and Schmuff.”

“Schmuff? What kind of name is that?”

Dar took a sip. “He’s Nouian.”

“Nouian? Never seen one in the flesh before.”

“He’s about four and a half feet tall, covered in dark brown fur, and has quite a nasty temper...I highly suggest you avoid making him mad. His bite’s venomous.”

“Why on Erotis would you have something like that on board?” Krodus asked.

“He’s my engineer, and a great cook...Unfortunately he doesn’t speak Ontarrin, so I’ve been learning Nouian.” Dar looked up at the time piece on the wall. “Hey, I should be going. I need to go see mother.” He finished his drink and stood.

“Remember, I wanna tour of your ship,” Garnic added.

“Yes, yes, I’ll get you later.”

“I live on Roghat Street now—number six.”

“I see you’ve moved up in town...Nice neighborhood.”

Garnic walked him to the door. “Well, long-range communications pays pretty good.”

“See you in a couple hours.” Dar headed down the long street. The sun was setting, and the air held a bite to it. He looked up and saw the first few stars beginning to shine. Yes, this would always be his home, but the stars continuously called his name. One night, as he lay in bed, he thought he saw them spell out his name. They were his past, present, and future, and he knew his life would be spent amongst them.

Reaching the end of the street, he saw a light on in the house. It was almost dark, and he gazed up, trying to find Marcy in low orbit. Still too bright, perhaps another half an hour, he thought, knocking on the door.

“Just a minute,” the reply came.

He stood patiently until Denrika opened the door. “Hello, mother.”

“Dar!” She fell into his arms and cried. “Oh, I’m so glad you’re alive.”

He put his arms around her. “Yes, I’m just fine. And I have wonderful news.”

Denrika looked up, tears running down her cheeks. “I had a dream the other night...I saw you in a battle with Soothian pirates. You were running, and they chased you down and killed you.”

“I’m fine, just fine...Yes, I’ve had some scuffles with them, but the Cunik and her crew always won.” He guided her inside, closing the door. The house was warm and smelled of freshly baked frost berry pies—one of Dar’s favorites. “Did you know I was coming?”

“No. Why?”

He made obvious sniffing sounds. “Because you know how much I love frost berry pie.”

“I just took them out of the thermo-cooker. You’ll have to wait until they cool.”

“I have the time. Not in a rush right now. I can relax.”

Denrika went to the kitchen. “Do you want something to eat?”

“Please. I only had drinks with Garnic and Krodus at the tavern.”

“Is game fowl okay?”

Dar went over and wrapped his arms around her. “Anything you cook will be wonderful.”

“All right, let me get things going, and then we’ll have time to talk.” She wiggled from his grasp and busily went to work. “You said you have some news?”

“Yes, but I’ll wait just a little bit longer to share it with you...I’m waiting for more stars to come out.”

She turned and looked at him. “Huh?”

He smiled broadly. “You’ll see, mother, you’ll see.” Going to the window, he looked out, noticing it was getting darker; sill not enough just yet. “Mother, are my spotting glasses still in my room?”

“Yes, in the top drawer where you left them.” She prepared the dish for dinner.

“Excellent.” Dar went to his room and brought them out. “I’m sorry, mother, but I didn’t exactly bring a gift for you this time.”

“I told you, you don’t have to bring me gifts. You just being here is a big enough gift.” She opened the door on the thermo-cooker and slid the pan of game fowl in. “How long can you stay? Is Gwog waiting on you?”

“I can stay til tomorrow night, then on to Jamarais for a shipment of rum.”

“Oh, that’s nice. How is everyone on the Cunik?”

“Uh, good I suppose,” he tried to dodge answering the question.

“And Jartis?”

“Older and grumpier.”

Denrika giggled. “He seemed so nice when he was here.”

“Normally he is...Some days when the warp engines aren’t behaving; he’ll shout a few unkind words to them.” He went to a cupboard and got out a bottle of wine. “I can’t say that I haven’t had a few days like that too.” Sitting the bottle on the dining room table, he went and got two glasses. “I see the town is pretty empty. Everyone at Culides?”

“No, Aknarra’s in a bit of a slump. We haven’t had much rain in the past few years and many of the farmers have either moved to different settlements, or left all together.”

“Mmm, sad to see. This used to be such a lively place.”

“I’m getting less and less work at the store. The owner is even thinking of closing a couple days a week.”

Dar poured a glass of wine and joined her in the kitchen. “I saw Cogg on my way in. The place looked empty.”

“Only get maybe five or six customers a day. Even most of the freighter crews are going to other settlements since there’s nothing going on here.”

“Maybe you should retire.”

Denrika turned to him. “And where will the drig come from? I don’t have a male in my life to help support me.”

“I’ll take care of you...I can send drig home every month.”

“Dar, I can’t ask that from you. I know you have your own life, and things you need.”

He set his glass down. “My needs are small, believe me...Look, I’ll get an account with the Ontarrin Bank and set it up so you get a monthly allowance. Would that help?”

“But...”

Dar decided it was time. “Mother, come with me.” He grabbed his spotting glasses off the counter and led her outside. “I wanna show you something.” Taking a moment, he let his eyes adjust to the dark. Then he started looking. Yes, there she was, just about forty-five degrees above the horizon. “I came home because I wanted to show you this.” He offered the glasses to her and pointed. “Look, there.”

Denrika held the glasses to her eyes. “I see something. Looks like a ship.”

“That’s *my* ship.”

“What?”

“I won her in a game of chance...She’s called the Marsuian.”

She regarded him. “What did you just say?”

“That’s Marcy, my ship.”

“The name, the proper name.”

“Marsuian?”

“I don’t believe it.”

Dar folded his arms. There was a chilly breeze. “Really, she’s my ship.”

“You don’t understand,” she said in a stiff tone.

Now he was confused. “Mother, what do you mean?”

She pointed. “That ship, the Marsuian, was the very one that brought your grandparents and a very little youngling me to this planet.”

“The first log entry—her maiden voyage.” He put his hand over his mouth. “You were part of the forty-five,” he said softly. “The forty-five that came here with a bunch of farm equipment.”

Denrika nodded. “I was too young to remember, but your grandfather recounted the voyage to me when I got older.”

He looked up at Marcy. “Amazing!” Dar stepped behind her, putting his hands on her shoulders. “What are the chances of that?”

“She’s come full circle, then. Now my son commands her...And I hope you have a long and prosperous career together.”

“Yeah,” he said softly. “I do too.” Leaning down, he kissed the top of her head, smelling the Softsuckle flowers in her hair.

THE END

About the author

K. Rowe retired as a Master Sergeant in the U.S. Air Force. She has been writing for the last twenty plus years. Stationed at various bases around the U.S.A. and in Europe, she draws from over twenty years of active service. Blending fact and fiction, she spends hours researching technology and locations for her work. She lives in eastern Kentucky with her husband, two dogs, two cats, and three horses on a 100 acre farm.

Other works by the same author:

The Dragonslayers Saga (military thrillers)

Project: Dragonslayers (2010)

Dragonslayers: Mind Games (2010)

Dragonslayers: Battle Rhythm (2011)

Contemporary romance

Cowboys and Olympians (2011)

Facebook: Project: Dragonslayers