

Prologue

Razel sat at a small table in a ship cafeteria, gazing out through a small window. She briefly glanced at the planet they were tracking, wondering if it was habitable or just another rock to be mined for resources. They had been following the rocky world for three days now, and she longed for it to be over. Almost five years with the Dathar Corporation, deep in uncharted space, felt like too much. It had seemed reasonable at the time, but the Dathar offered little room for advancement. She had been passed over and rejected too often. At her age, she felt she should be in charge, running things. She knew she was smart enough and certainly qualified for the job.

The ship turned slowly, removing the planet from view, leaving behind a blanket of inky blackness punctuated by small pinpoints of light from distant stars. The cafeteria lights brightened, signaling the end of the night shift and the start of the day shift. Even in space, the ship and crew operated on a day-night cycle, maintaining balance in the human circadian rhythm. Razel didn't really care, although science had shown its importance to the human body, both mentally and physically.

As the lights in the room brightened, Razel's reflection appeared in the window. She studied herself for a moment, noticing that her brownish-tan skin had become a few shades lighter. She had neglected to spend time in the sun-room, but she hadn't expected her skin to lighten so much working the dimmed conditions of the night shift. Although it had been almost five years, her natural skin tone was a light brownish-tan, so she wasn't in danger of turning pale. Skin color, like everything else about the human body, was mostly inherited from parents. However, genetic manipulation allowed people to change their skin color and tone, along with other attributes like eye and hair color, metabolic rate, muscle density, and fat storage (say good-bye to belly fat and hello to full round... Well, you get the idea). Razel preferred her natural appearance, with her dark hair and auburn highlights, always worn in a single braid down her back. She made a mental note to spend some time in the sun room.

This planet survey would be their last. A month here collecting thousands of samples, then a six-month trip through hyperspace back to the known parts of the galaxy. Razel wasn't looking forward to the monotony of it all. She craved real food instead of the vat-grown variety of chemical compounds they were served daily. It might match real food chemically and molecularly, but Razel could taste a difference. Grains might be nearly indistinguishable, but vat-grown meats and vegetables were a different story.

Razel glanced down at her muffin, untouched on the plate. She missed meat. She looked at her mug of coffee substitute, yearning for real coffee or even klavic, a genetic cousin to coffee but with a different taste. Contemplating putting her food into the

recycler, she felt the table shudder slightly. Looking up, she saw one of her coworkers sit down with a full plate of breakfast foods. The cafeteria had become significantly busier, and Razel wondered how long she had been lost in thought, staring at her muffin.

"Didja hear?" the man said, picking up a piece of bacon. Vat-grown fake bacon was still bacon to many. Razel had shortened his name to Amir, as his full name was difficult to pronounce. They had become friends, though Razel suspected Amir wanted more from their relationship. She enjoyed their current dynamic and didn't want it to change. Amir had a strong accent and tended to merge words together. When he spoke, it often sounded like 'didja he-er?' He spoke English well, but it wasn't his primary language. Then again, English wasn't Razel's primary language either.

Responding to Amir's inquiry, Razel made a questioning noise, "Hrm?"

"We're going home," Amir said, sounding enthusiastic. "Look."

Razel turned to see streaks of blues, greens, and violets outside the window; they were in hyperspace. She sighed in relief. "Thank God," she said. "Six months of this, then back home."

"You really should read your emails," Amir suggested.

"What?" Razel said, pulling out her tablet and checking her Dathar email. There was a lengthy message from the captain, explaining that their mission had been cut short, and they needed to return to the nearest facility as quickly as possible. It was a corporate decision. Razel raised an eyebrow, scanning the cafeteria. Everyone seemed excited, speculating about the unusual situation. The Dathar never cut their missions short.

"Highly unusual, yes?" Amir remarked.

"Highly pisses me off," a stocky woman with red hair and a grumpy demeanor said, sitting down across from Razel next to Amir. She looked like she could bench press her own weight and had a scowl that was slowly melting into a half-smile as she drank deeply from her mug of fake coffee. Claiming to be an original Scotswoman, she had the accent and attitude, but Razel doubted she was born on Earth.

People often claimed to be from various geographical or cultural places on Earth, tracing their heritage back to long-lost countries or cultures, but it was mostly speculation. Since the magnetic poles reversed during The Flip, nearly wiping out all magnetic media on the planet, only a few, including the monarchy, could trace their roots back before that tumultuous period.

But everyone had to be from somewhere and where you wanted to be from wasn't nearly as important as where you wanted to go.

Or something like that.

"What do you mean?" Razel asked the redheaded stocky woman. Her name was Meaghan, with the 'ea' pronounced if ye spoke it properly, and she was a young engineer straight out of school. Razel and she hit it off at the start of the cruise and had been close ever since.

"I mean they are pissin' me off," Meaghan said as if that explained it. "I'm surprised ye're not angry as well."

"Me?" Razel said, "Hell no. I can't wait to get back."

"Oye, ye won't get yer bonus," Meaghan stated.

"I'm contracted by the find. I've already made me bonuses," Razel stated.

"I'm salaried," Amir added, "I don't get bonus but am two pay levels higher."

Meaghan looked at her coworkers as if they were aliens. She furled her brow and said, "I must despise ye both now." Razel and Amir shared a knowing look and a smirk. Meaghan was new to, well everything, and thought by taking the bonus she would receive a hearty paycheck. She wasn't wrong, but in the event that the trip didn't produce a good, colonisable planet, the bonus was paltry.

"I wonder when was the last time the Dathar shortened a deep space mission?" Amir asked rhetorically.

"Twenty year ago when the Coalition an' the Alliance started their war," Meaghan blurted out. "And again 'bout fifteen year ago when that war ended," she added. "Since then, the Dathar has built two more explorers, both with the help of the Alliance by the way, and has increased the number of explorations accordingly. They only spend one year in SLEP before they rehire and go oot again."

Amir and Razel were staring at her oddly. "What? I do me homework on prospective employers," Meaghan defended herself.

"Not enough to know better than to take the standard bonus," Amir chided with an infectious smile. Meaghan punched him in the arm then stole a piece of his bacon.

"Do ye think it's another war?" Meaghan asked her friends seriously. "Tensions were high between the Alliance and the Republic afore we left. An' them Coalition forces have never slacked off from their borders."

"Tensions were high between the Republic and Alliance because of trade policy disputes, not due to any hostilities," Razel stated. "I doubt they went to war over it."

"It is odd, no?" Amir asked sounding like 'eat ease'.

"Yes, it is odd," Meaghan agreed, mimicking Amir's accent.

"Maybe they found some new kind of XenoTech," a fourth person sat down at the table. His name was Dale and nobody really liked him, but everyone tolerated him. In every group of people who socialize together as friends there is always at least one guy that was kind of an asshole. Dale was their asshole. "I bet that's what it is. Some new tech that our resident xeno-ologist has identified to be the most important find ever but the thing is probably only a flashlight."

Razel disliked the way Dale always pronounced xenologist as xeno-ologist. He was an engineer like her and should respect the field enough to pronounce it properly. But then again, Dale was an asshole, so he probably did it on purpose just to irritate her.

"Please don't make up silly rumors like that," Razel chided him. "There will already be a hundred different rumors going around in the next hour and none of them will be true."

"It could be true," Dale defended himself, "We may never know and my educated assumption is just as good as anyone else's."

"Educated assumption?" Meaghan asked sarcastically, then immediately regretted it. Dale could be quite the asshole sometimes

"Of course," Dale said smugly, "I am, after all, sensitive to XenoTech and know these things." He smiled the kind of smile that made you want to slap it off his face.

Xeno-sensitive people could see the alien devices by their dark purple lines of energy running along the surface of the object. Some people were extra sensitive and can even turn the devices on and off. It had something to do with receptors in the brain that interpreted the energy signatures. Since it was a brain neuron interfacing type of scientific techno-babel stuff that nobody really understands, it was impossible to reproduce in other people.

Razel rolled her eyes. She didn't know if Dale was sensitive to the alien devices or not. But she didn't feel anything when she would visit the xeno lab while they were examining objects that may have been xeno devices. She was sensitive in a way, but not a full sensitive like some people.

"Well I call bullshit and I'm still pissed they be dicking me out of me bonus," Meaghan snapped, drained her fake coffee, and went to the urn for more.

"I doubt the Dathar is dicking her over," Dale commented, "She'd enjoy it too much." He laughed at his own joke. He was the only one. Dale could be a rude asshole sometimes.

Razel was not in the mood to deal with Dale. "If anyone is getting dicked around it's you Dale," she said, "After all, if it is XenoTech, why aren't they letting you in on it? Hrm?"

Dale looked at Razel through narrowed eyes while Amir stifled a laugh. "Stick to coquetting Razel, sass doesn't suit you," Dale smoldered but stood up and sauntered off. Probably to spread more ridiculous rumors, Razel thought.

"Coquettish?" Razel said as she battered her eye lashes. "Well I never!" she said coquettishly. Amir giggled.

Meaghan sat back down, this time with a breakfast roll filled with egg, cheese, and bacon. And a fresh cup of not-coffee of course. "Whate'er the reason," she said while chewing, "it be odd for a Dathar ship to end its mission six months early."

"It is," Amir agreed.

Razel was in no mood to rehash the same speculations or come up with new ones. She was actually quite happy they were ending their mission early, whatever the reason. She excused herself since her shift was done and left the two younger engineers to continue their rumor mongering. And their breakfast.

Arriving at the restaurant, Razel scanned the room, unsure whom to approach. Consulting the bartender, she was directed to a table where three men were standing.

One man appeared older, likely in his sixties, with tight, curly hair as white as snow against his dark complexion. Despite his casual attire of black slacks and a light tan button-up shirt, he exuded confidence and vigilance, almost regal in his demeanor. Razel presumed he was the one she sought, as the post only provided a name, not a description.

The man to his left, closer to Razel's age, seemed unremarkable at first glance. Yet, there was an aura of authority about him, evident in his posture and interactions with the others. His light, pale skin suggested time spent in sunlit rooms or planetside, complemented by his attire of tan slacks and a dark burnt orange collared shirt. Razel noticed a hint of grey at the sides of his dark auburn hair, a color many women coveted. Wondering about his role on the ship, she couldn't help but find him intriguing.

On the right stood a young man, likely in his mid-twenties, radiating youthful energy. His flawless, blemish-free skin and infectious smile immediately caught Razel's attention. Clad in pointed-toe boots, blue jeans, and a snug black T-shirt paired with a billed cap, he exuded a casual charm that drew her in.

As the trio seemed poised to depart, Razel knew she had to act quickly. With determination, she approached them, ready to seize whatever opportunity lay ahead.