

~ Finding Honor ~

by Windstar

The usual: The character of Honor Harrington is the property of David Weber. I just took her out for a day on the town. Constructive criticism or just a friendly note is very welcome at adarkbow@yahoo.com.

A big thank you to Ken for his insistence that I get all of the grammar errors sorted out of this story. An even bigger thanks for his help in getting those errors sorted out.

She stumbled then leaned heavily against the smooth steel wall next to her, careful to avoid jarring her ruined shoulder. She could feel the blood soaking through the heavy fabric of her blast vest, and dribbling down her now useless right arm. Her fingers were numb, so she didn't feel the blood dripping from them. The bundle she held tightly against her chest with her still good left arm barely stirred.

"Not much further now," she whispered to the deathly still form she was carrying. Biting her lip against the pain, until she tasted blood again, she forced herself to stand upright and stagger forward. Just a little ways further and she'd reach the shuttle. From there it wasn't that far to the hotel, and then she could disappear. Leave this world, and all that it represented, behind. After she took care of Samantha that was.

Stumbling again, she nearly went down; the blood loss making her weaker, sooner than she'd thought it would. Her shoulder brushed up against the bulkhead, and she gasped in pain, jerking away, and nearly doubling over.

She was so very tired.

There was nothing that she wanted more than to lay down, cradle her shoulder and weep, waiting for death to come. It would be welcomed after all this time, a release from this pain that had been a constant companion for so long. There was a part of her that refused to give up though. Joined to the part that those long dark years of training had created in her psyche, was the concern for the wounded being she held to her chest.

Somehow - she wasn't certain where the energy came from - she got moving again, ignoring the hot bitter tears that left clear trails down her mud and blood covered face.

It had all gone so wrong.

She was a dozen feet from the shuttle doors when the figure stepped between her and her freedom. Her heart lurched as she recognized the tall slim body, dark hair, and angry brown eyes. The pulse pistol aimed at her was remarkably steady.

"Stop right there."

Since there hadn't been much other than forward momentum keeping her on her feet, she sank to her knees, too tired to even fight gravity on what suddenly seemed like a minor issue. She at least managed to cushion the fall for the injured 'cat she carried.

The part of her that had kept her going quietly lay down and surrendered to the inevitable.

"Help, Sam," she managed to say.

Then the darkness came and she welcomed it.

One Year Earlier

She watched the world spinning below her. An elegant long finger tapped thoughtfully against her seat rest, as she watched what would become her home. At least, that was the plan. Once more, she felt more than a sliver of doubt about coming here, but she had rapidly run out of options. The small shuttle shivered around her, as it was released from the starliner that she had come here aboard.

"All passengers please tighten your acceleration straps and make certain they are attached correctly. We will be commencing our decent to Grayson in just a few minutes. Once there, please wait until we have come to a complete stop before gathering your belongings. Thank you for flying with us, and I hope you have a pleasant visit."

She smiled at that. It would be a bit more than a visit. Well, she hoped it would be. If not, well... best not to think about that. There was nowhere left to go after this, short of going all the way to the Solarian league, and she didn't want to risk that. Too far away and too much of a chance that she would be caught en route. No, this was the best choice, short of going to the Kingdom of Manticore itself but that held its own problems. Maybe the Silesian Confederacy would have been a good idea after all. If things didn't work out here, she'd think about it.

"Ma'am, make certain your straps are tight."

With a bit of a forced smile, she assured the very helpful flight attendant that she was indeed strapped in correctly. She'd done this a few times after all, and this wasn't going to be a combat drop. Her lips curled at that, as memories of the last time she'd been strapped in like this, waiting to land on a planet, came rushing back.

The flight attendant took one look at that smile and hurriedly decided to go help another passenger.

My name is Aeris Thornson; my name is Aeris Thornson, my name....

That was her mantra on the short shuttle ride. It was essential that she believe that name with

every fiber of her being. That she become the person that her papers proclaimed her to be. She'd only settled on the name at her last stop, after her previous alias had been compromised. She couldn't trust any of the other false identities she'd created for herself; they were probably all compromised by now.

This one though, this one they didn't know about.

At least that was what she hoped.

Customs was a universal occurrence, something that was constant from one place to another. Oh, the amount of weapons being publicly displayed changed, and they were friendlier in some places than others. The basic set up though that pretty much never changed.

She submitted to the scanning, nice and high tech she noted. Grayson was taking advantage of its inclusion into the Alliance, and rapidly catching up their seriously lagging technology. In a few more years, a decade at tops, they'd be as technologically advanced as Manticore itself.

"Welcome back to Grayson, Ms. Thornson. What was the reason for your trip?"

The painfully young looking customs officer smiled what she supposed was supposed to be a charming smile while he began sorting through her papers never really looking directly at her. Those papers proclaimed her to be a citizen of Grayson. They also showed the customs officer that she had been gone from the planet for just over six months, on a technical training mission on Manticore.

She'd done no such thing of course, but he didn't know that.

"I was being trained on some new security procedures."

The smile disappeared and he studied the documents more intently. *Aeris, my name is Aeris Thornson*, shifted her weight onto the balls of her feet. It was a trained response, and she had to fight to keep from adopting more of a defensive posture.

Remember, they treat women as things to be protected and cherished here, there aren't many are guards. Just smile, look relaxed, don't fidget, and watch his face. You'll do fine Mira, now get going. Shit, don't even think that name again, she doesn't exist, she died.

"You're training to become a guardsman?"

She just couldn't resist.

"Well, a guardswoman."

The scowl she got from that was worth it.

"Thornson? I don't recognize the family name."

By which he meant you aren't a powerful or influential family. No wonder your parents allow you, a woman, to go into such a dangerous position.

"My parents are dead."

She dared him to say anything to that. That it was the truth only added to the anger flaring in her green eyes. The customs agent had the good grace to drop his eyes and encode her passport.

"Welcome back, Ms Thornson." His eyes were already searching out the next person in line behind her. "Next!"

She was shaking when she walked out of the customs area into the rapidly expanding spaceport. It was one of a dozen or so on Grayson, and even more were going to be built, she recalled, using the trivial facts to try and calm herself down as she moved towards the storage lockers. Her small travel satchel was the only luggage she'd brought with her, so she gladly avoided the baggage claim area. That was another thing that was universal, the chaos while waiting for baggage to be unloaded.

The ID chip had the number 1295 engraved on its surface. She traced the inset lines with her thumb as she searched, trying not to look like she was as lost as she felt. Her eyes tracked the security guards as they passed her without a second glance. She was tall for a woman on this planet, but with the amount of strangers coming and going through Grayson these days, it didn't seem to matter much here. It might be a problem once she got out towards more remote regions though.

A quick check to make certain she wasn't being followed, and she slid the chip into the slot. The click of the locker's lock disengaging was loud to her ears, but she resisted the urge to look around worriedly. Acting as if she had every right in the world to be there, she opened the door and reached inside. The black duffel bag had been stuffed inside on end, the only way it would fit into the medium sized locker, just as she'd left it after her last visit to this planet, three... no, five years ago. She hoped everything was as she'd left it; she was counting on that equipment for her future.

It wasn't a good idea to look through it in the middle of the spaceport though, so she hefted the heavy bag's strap over one shoulder and made her way outside, glancing upwards at the dome that separated the city from the toxic atmosphere outside.

She didn't have the money to afford a taxi, so she walked the few blocks to the hotel she'd chosen for her temporary base of operations, ignoring the occasional twinge of pain from the half-healed wound on her right side.

The Refuge was one of a score of hotels that had recently enjoyed the booming influx of travelers to and from Grayson. It was definitely on the lower scale of hotels though. Aeris sighed as she suffered through the hotel clerk openly admiring her body. Upper class proper ladies did not come here unescorted, she remembered, so he considered her fair game.

"How long will you be staying with us, Ms Thornson?"

The way he stressed the Ms, set her nerves on edge. *As short a time as possible you little pig*, which of course wasn't the answer she gave him, as much as she wanted to. She was trying to keep a low profile, and as much as she wanted to smack the leer off his face that probably wouldn't have been a good way to get him to forget she existed.

"Maybe a week or so," she answered demurely, snatching the proffered key card and turning away, ignoring his not so subtle attempt at getting her to go to dinner with him. She also ignored his suggestion that maybe they could just skip dinner all together.

"Jerk," she muttered under her breath as she took the antique lift up to the tenth floor and found her room. A single bed, one chair, and a table along with a mini refrigerator that could maybe keep things lukewarm. Not much, but she had and probably still would, slept in worse.

At least the small communal shower at the end of the hallway was clean enough, and the toilettes looked fairly hygienic as well.

"Alright, first things first."

Aeris shook her head and started sorting through the contents of her black duffel bag. Speaking out loud was not a good idea in her business, but she'd gotten so tired of being alone. Speaking to anyone, even if it was just herself, had staved off the desperate loneliness and served to remind her she wasn't just a ghost, and that she actually existed among people who laughed and had normal jobs.

The false identities were set-aside in four neat piles, one per identity. She would have preferred having more, but she'd tossed the others as soon as she realized they'd been compromised. The totally illegal pulse pistol was set aside as well, along with the four magazines of spare ammunition. The slightly more legal stun gun was put into the satchel. The long monomolecular edged knife found a home in her right boot.

She was left with an armored shirt and very specialized communicator.

She hesitated over that last one. She should probably do away with it as soon as she could, they'd find her if she used it. Then again, it might be useful in the future. With a shrug, she set that aside as well.

With a wince, she pulled the deep green shirt she had been wearing up over her head. The bandage wasn't red anymore, which was about the only good news she'd had since the entire thing had started. Unfortunately, she hadn't been able to find a good doctor; the street hack she'd dug up had put in stitches for her. *Stitches! Might as well use leeches!*

"Better than bleeding to death I guess."

The wound was still red and ugly, a long red slash from the base of her ribs almost to the top of her right hip. With a sigh, she stripped off the bandage, careful not to tear freshly healed flesh.

There was a small mirror in the room and she critically eyed her new face. The plastic surgery had been a bit spur of the moment, and they hadn't been able to change much, but she liked her new look. She now had short shaggy blonde hair over an oval face, through which tired green eyes warily viewed the world. At around five seven, she was tall, for a Grayson woman, but fairly average by most other standards..

When did I start looking so haunted?

She knew the answer to that of course.

"Shower, then sleep. Then we find a place to get some money. Great, now I'm talking to my gun." She had some money stashed away in her bag, but she'd used more than she had expected on escaping. What was left would only stretch so far and then she would be out of luck.

Rolling her eyes at the way she'd apparently lost her mind, Aeris crouched down next to the bed, using the knife to prod the baseboards carefully.

"Where are you, come on... come on.... Ah, gotcha."

With a quick flip, the board under the bed popped up.

"Right where I left you."

The false documents went inside, along with the pulse pistol and the spare ammunition. She didn't dare bring that outside, not unless she had to. Grayson had surprisingly strict regulations about unregistered women carrying illegal weapons around. After a second of hesitation, the armored shirt and communicator were placed inside as well.

After a quick shower, and thankful that it was still early morning Grayson time; she collapsed onto the bed in her room, barely having the energy to drag the covers up over her body, not even caring that she hadn't changed into anything to sleep in.

The dream came, like it always did, starting the same as it always did. She couldn't change it, no matter how hard she tried.

"General, what are you doing?" she cried in confusion.

"Preparing to deal with the enemy. You haven't forgotten who that is, have you?"

She pointed at the mob of cowering refugees.

"Those are not the enemy!"

"Get out of my way, major, this isn't your decision."

"They're refugees!"

"Get out of my way, major!"

This time the soldiers on either side of him leveled their weapons in her direction, not quite aiming at her, but enough so that she understood that accidents could and did happen on the field of battle.

The last of the refugees was rounded up into a huddled circle. There were a few thousand of them, screaming infants, weeping mothers, angrily defiant men. A young girl was holding onto her mother's hand, only a few hundred feet from her. She could see the statement of trust on the young girl's face. The innocence, the belief that her mother would protect her from anything and that the world would soon be right again.

"Aim."

"General!"

The butt of a rifle slammed into her stomach before she could say anything else, dropping her to her knees in the dust.

"Get up and I'll shoot you myself," the general growled.

She should have gotten up, should have found a way, any way, to stop what came next. Instead, all she'd been able to do was watch in sick fascination.

"Fire!"

The screaming tore through her soul, shattering it. The shards tinkled into the darkness as the explosive pulsar darts tore bloody explosions through the shrieking mob. Nothing could be worse than those helpless pleading screams of pain and fear, nothing except for the silence that followed.

A soldier spat on the ground not far from her, clearing his mouth. Another was casually picking through the pile, taking a trinket or two for himself.

The young girl she'd seen earlier was still alive, shielded by her mother. Whimpering and crying for a mother that would never answer her again, the only sound that seemed to come from that pile of dead.

She clawed herself upright, fighting the nausea and pain in her midsection to take several staggering steps forward. Her hand reaching out towards the girl, only to be knocked aside by the General as he stepped past her, the pistol in his hands aimed at the crying face.

"NO!"

Gasping, clawing at the sheets around her, she came awake. The smell of dust and blood still clinging to her as the dream faded, leaving her shaking and covered in sweat.

"No," she pleaded but the image continued, even as she covered her eyes with both hands and tried to force it to stop. The young girl, looking up towards the man who stopped close to her, still crying for her mother.

"No, please make it stop," she moaned.

The pulsar firing and the small body jerking.

She had barely enough time to get to the bathroom before her stomach rebelled.

It was seventeen hundred, local time, when she gave up looking for the day. It was hard to get a job without references, and she hadn't thought to forge any. It was doubly hard to get a good job as a woman, though that was starting to change. There was a woman Steadholder now, after all.

Aeris chuckled under her breath, as she joined the stream of human traffic walking and riding their way through the city streets. Honor Harrington, she'd seen the name quite a few times today, and the woman herself on a few holo vids in the main markets and in a few shops. They'd been showing her latest exploits and the vids of her accepting the position of Steadholder at the hand of Benjamin Mayhew himself, the Planetary Protector, and Head of State for Grayson. Aeris noticed he was causing more controversy, having recently fought another Steadholder in the Keys, the local form of parliament.

Honor Harrington, Aeris had decided quite a while ago, was very good at causing an uproar, wherever she went. That and turning up where you least expected her to be, something which Haven had learned quite to their peril in the last few years of the war between themselves and the new Alliance.

Sighing, Aeris watched as the flow of traffic ahead of her, foot as well as wheeled, came to a complete stop. She could just barely hear the sound of sirens up ahead as well. An accident then, just perfect, her first day here and she was stuck wandering around looking for a job on a planet she hadn't been to in a decade. To top it off, her side was hurting and all she wanted to do was get back to that little hole in the wall hotel, avoid the clerk, take another shower, and go to bed.

Apparently, that was too much to ask for.

Mentally calculating the funds she had left, she reluctantly came to the conclusion that she couldn't afford to hire a cab to take her around the accident, which meant she was stuck walking. A glance around and she found the nearest alleyway, sandwiched between two highrises.

It wasn't the cleanest alleyway she'd ever been in, but the asphalt under her boots was still a good deal cleaner than almost anywhere in the ravages of her home planet. There she wouldn't have dared to walk down an ally looking as relatively well dressed as she did today, without a pulsar at her hip.

She went south, and then headed east, trying to make a loop around whatever accident had snarled traffic on her original route. Aeris was just about to head north when the sound of something heavy hitting flesh came from up ahead.

Cautiously moving forward, she drew the stun gun from her satchel and flattened herself against the dirty, crumbling concrete wall. Peering around the corner of the ally, she spotted the source of the sounds.

Two thugs were holding up a woman, dressed in torn and tattered green and black livery. A third was systematically trying to beat her face into a mangled mass of flesh, every so often expanding his horizons to include a stomach or kidney punch.

"Huh? You like it, bitch? Huh? You work for that she-devil, don't you? We'll teach you...."

Aeris tuned out the rest, her eyes watching the way the man moved and the leers on the two others. She had no doubt about where this was going to go in a moment. They'd probably try to take her right there on the asphalt, then it was even odds that they'd either kill her or just leave her there as a warning to others.

She should leave, go around them, stay to the shadows, and leave. They'd never see her; she was far too good for the likes of these idiots. The woman's low cry of pain as the man slammed his paw into her kidney again settled it though.

"Fuck it," she whispered and slid up along the wall, staying hidden until she was just a few feet behind the man using the woman as a punching bag. Then she moved; long years of training and adrenalin making the world seem to slow around her. The stun gun in her right hand came up and out, pressed against the base of the mans neck. A twitch of her finger and his body shuddered, convulsed, and started to drop. The two men holding up the woman had enough time to start to look surprised before she attacked them.

A spinning kick and one of them slammed into the wall next to him. The other was just starting to let go of the woman and trying to grab at a weapon on his belt when she grabbed his arm. A twist and she slammed him head first into the very solid brick wall next to them, then let go of his arm to let him slide to the ground unconscious.

The first man stopped convulsing, and lay on the ground, his breathing shallow, but he was breathing.

Aeris dropped to her knees next to the fallen woman, wincing at the broken nose, and swollen face. "Hey, can you hear me?" A moan was all she got in answer. "Come on, we better get you to a hospital."

Aeris had just slipped her hands under the woman, who was thankfully smaller than she was, and started to lift her up when the entire area was flooded with blinding light.

"You there, with the woman, set her down!"

The amplified voice echoed off the buildings on either side. Aeris winced at the sudden light, squinting and looking away. The police skimmer drifted lower, its engines kicking up dust and debris, and swirling it around her feet.

"This is the Grayson Police Force, set the woman down and step away from her!"

There was movement behind her and in front of her now. A dozen or so police, she'd guess, well armed, and ready to take her down if she did anything stupid.

She had no intention of becoming a red smear on the wall today though. Gently she set the bleeding woman down, slowly raised her hands up high, and stepped away, moving very gingerly, and making no sudden moves.

The impact as two officers grabbed her and forced her to the ground renewed the pain in her injured side and she nearly cried out in pain.

"Who is she?"

"Her name's Aeris Thomson, she comes from Beltan province. Her family had a little residence out there, under Steadholder Marcus."

Andrew Lafollet watched the woman on the video screen intently as the officer in the cell went over her story with her, again.

"You want us to hold her?"

He shook his head, thoughtfully.

"No, I don't think she had anything to do with the attack on my guard."

The slightly balding chief nodded in agreement, taking another bite out of the apple he was munching on.

"We'll let her go after we get the usual information and get her to sign a statement. The three men are part of a local street gang. They'll be charged with aggravated assault."

"Thank you, can I speak with her first though?"

"Sure, I'll just get my detective to finish up."

The woman in the holding cell was doing her level best to look calm and in control. He recognized that look, and the slight tremor in the hands from the aftermath of battle.

"You here to question me too?"

The voice was dry and had an edge of humor to it. He found his lips curling in response to it. He drew up a chair across from her.

"Why do you think that?"

She nodded towards the uniform he was wearing.

"You're wearing the same uniform she was."

He didn't have to ask whom she was referring to.

"Her name is Victoria Caissie. She's one of my current crop of trainee's to become Steadholder guards."

Green eyes studied him intently. "And you are?"

"Andrew Lafollet, I'm the head of my Steadholders guards."

"Any particular reason she was being used as a punching bag?"

Lafollet smiled thinly. "Some people don't like my Steadholder."

That made a certain amount of sense she allowed, and nodded.

"I'd like to thank you for saving her from something worse than just a beating."

"How is she?"

He noted the concern in her voice, for someone she barely knew.

"Doing pretty well. She'll have to have surgery; they broke her jaw in three places and her nose, but she'll recover."

"Good."

The silence stretched and she raised an eyebrow as he continued to watch her. She laced her fingers together and leaned forward.

"Something else I can do for you?"

"I checked on your papers."

When that didn't get anything other than a curious look, he continued. "You just did security training on Manticore?"

She nodded; the curiosity in those green eyes sharpening.

"You aren't listed as employed anywhere."

The curiosity changed to confusion.

"What exactly are you asking me?"

"I'm still setting up my household guard. I saw the end of the fight that the skimmer recorded while they were getting into position. You move well, and you handled yourself even better."

Confusion changed to dawning understanding.

"You're offering me a job?"

He nodded. "On a trial basis, see how you do, then we'll talk again."

She sat back in her chair at that, clearly surprised. Andrew smiled slightly, as much as he ever did, and waited. He could almost see the gears turning.

"As a security guard?"

"A house guard, yes."

She hesitated, and he almost expected her to say no but then she seemed to shrug and smiled at him. It was the first smile he'd seen her give and it easily took a decade off her features.

"Deal."

"Good, we'll get you started say... tomorrow morning? If that's too soon we can make arrangements."

She nodded, the smile dimming, but not disappearing entirely but her eyes sparkled as she said, "Tomorrow's fine." Just before he left though, she called out.

"One question though?"

"Yes?"

"Who's your steadholder?"

Andrew laughed at that one.

"You don't know?"

She shrugged.

"Lady Harrington of course. I'll see you tomorrow morning at Harrington House."

Aeris stared at the doors long after the surprise visitor had left the room. Her mouth working as if she wanted to say something, but nothing came out. Finally, she laughed and shook her head.

"Well shit."

Since the police background check hadn't turned up anything, Aeris felt fairly confident that her assumed identity was holding up under scrutiny. That helped ease the feelings of fear and excitement that vied for control. She was alternating between happy and scared by the time the airbus she'd gotten a ride with made its final approach to Harrington Steading.

The land that was part of the Steading stretched for quite a distance, and Aeris squirmed in her seat to try and see the few fully constructed domes. Others were springing up, seeming to blossom from the earth, half done, all across the landscape. Using the new Manticore technology and building materials, each of those domes was far larger than had been possible before, and cheaper to construct.

With a slight shudder, the airbus slid into the docking platform.

Licking lips gone dry, Aeris slid from the safety harness, snagged her satchel from the overhead compartment, and was the first in line by the exit. She never felt safe in these civilian models; the lack of armor and the reassuring bulk of pulse laser turrets always worried her, almost on a sub conscious level. Like going out in public without the reassuring weight of at least a stun pistol within easy reach.

The false identities, pulse pistol, and extra magazines had been left in the hotel room. She'd used another chunk of her rapidly shrinking funds to rent the room for a month. Then, resisting the urge to make the clerk swallow his teeth, she'd used the last of her money to pay for the ticket. A two-way ticket, the return chip was tucked securely in her satchel.

If things went wrong here, she could cut and run. Get her gear and find something else. Strangely, she was almost hoping things would go wrong. At least then, she wouldn't have to be nervous.

"I always hated the unknown," she muttered.

The old man getting off the shuttle behind her looked at her oddly. She really did have to

remember not to talk out loud. With an apologetic smile, the blonde straightened her back and headed for the reception area.

It had only just occurred to her that she had no idea where to go, when a young man stepped forward as she approached. He was impeccably dressed in the same green and black uniform that Andrew LaFollet had worn.

"Lady Thornson?"

At her silent nod he continued. "I'm here to escort you back to Harrington house to meet with Her Ladyship and Mr. LaFollet."

The urge to turn around and bolt back to the airbus and leave was surprisingly strong but she forced it down.

"Do you have any baggage to gather?"

She could still disappear. *Let's be reasonable here. My background is still holding, and I really do need a job. I can't re-establish contact with the others for another few months yet. This is the last place anyone would look for me. Besides, I certainly have the training for this.*

"Lady Thornson?"

The kid was looking at her a bit worriedly now.

"Yes, I mean, no. No baggage, I've only my satchel here. Let's not keep them waiting then shall we?"

"We've a car waiting, please follow me."

One last glance over her shoulder, then Aeris nodded and followed. If only she were as self-assured as she was pretending to be at the moment.

The ride was shorter than she hoped, but long enough for the uncertainties to return in full force. Instead of dwelling on a decision she'd already dedicated herself to, she peered up ahead, interested to see her new home from the air.

Harrington House was beautiful. Rambling and elegant were the two words that immediately sprang to mind. Her first glimpse was of the ornate gardens and fences, which enclosed the main building. It was beyond anything she'd ever seen in her childhood, like something out of a fairy tale.

The car pulled smoothly up before a smaller building next to the front gates. Even here, Aeris could recognize a security building when she saw one, no matter how many pains had been taken to blend it in with the rest of the buildings.

"Welcome to Harrington House," her young escort announced proudly.

She followed the youngster out of the car and came to attention as she realized the silver haired LaFollet was waiting for her.

"Sir," she said, her clipped answer giving away her familiarity with the discipline of military or security forces in the past.

There was a faint sparkle of amusement in his eyes as he nodded in response.

"You can relax Aeris, your not one of my guards yet."

"Yes, Sir."

She was nervous; when she was nervous, she tended to get formal.

"Well, come with me, Thornson, we'll see about introducing you to the Lady. She wants to meet all the new recruits."

"The Lady?" Aeris followed him though, slinging her satchel over her shoulder.

"Yes, Lady Harrington. She's here, for a while at least."

Aeris swallowed, hoping that no one noticed how much more nervous that made her. Working for the Salamander was a lot different than actually being interviewed by the Salamander.

"Leave your bag here if you please, Aeris."

Aeris knew an order when she heard one, and she politely handed her satchel over to another liveried guard. She was under no illusions that everything in it would be searched thoroughly. Crossing her fingers that her background check would come up as clean as that satchel, she kept up with Andrew.

"This is all part of Harrington House?"

She looked around her in unbridled amazement at the beauty and peace through which she was walking, and that was just the gardens leading to the entrance of the house itself.

"There are more gardens in back, as well as a stable and some ponds."

So this was how the so-called repressive elite of the enemy lived. It looked surprisingly like how some of the Legislative elitists had lived on Haven. That was before the revolution of course.

Michele coming to her in the night, terrified. The others were only a few minutes behind her. There wasn't time to grab anything but the essentials and leave. That had been the easy part.

Deliberately Aeris steered her thoughts away from those dark moments.

"What will my duties be?"

"We'll discuss that after you talk with Lady Harrington."

Aeris was afraid of that.

"Come."

A low alto voice that resonated up and down her spine called from the other side of the oak door in response to Andrew's discrete knock. With a nod to Aeris, he slid the door open and stood aside.

The woman inside was a stranger to Aeris. Her past and even her pictures were not.

Steadholder Honor Stephanie Harrington sat behind a massive desk directly in front of her. She was the newest and only woman Steadholder in the history of the planet Grayson, and the fact that she wasn't even a Graysonite by birth was secondary compared to that small fact.

She was beautiful. The thought ambushed Aeris the moment dark brown eyes looked up from the report she was reading and fastened on her. If someone asked Aeris at that moment where she was, and what was around her, she would have been hard pressed to answer.

"Ms. Thornson is it?"

The voice was compelling, nearly as compelling as the woman who owned it.

This is a person I would die for. "Yes Ma'am."

"Please, take a seat."

Aeris watched, fascinated as the woman waved towards a nearby high backed chair with her left hand. That hand was artificial, a prosthetic, as was the left eye. It looked as real as her own hands though, and Aeris found herself wanting to touch her skin. See if it was as warm and smooth as it looked. Her body was wiser than her mind though, and she found herself sitting down before she did something supremely embarrassing.

"Andrew tells me that you're the one who saved Vickie?"

Victoria, the one who was being attacked in the alley. The part of her mind always keeping track of the small details supplied helpfully.

"The police were only a few moments behind me, Ma'am."

A sleek furry shape flowed down from the back of the chair that Honor was sitting upon. The six-legged treecat moved with the agile certainty of all his kind. She'd been so taken with Honor herself that Aeris hadn't even seen him until he moved. Then she focused her attention as the treecat came to a smooth stop at her legs.

Nimitz, his name was Nimitz, she remembered. He shared a bond with his adopted human that only death would sever. Some had called the bond empathic; others had called it by other names, in the scant literature that Aeris had been able to find. Treecats came from Sphinx, one of the three first worlds of the Star Kingdom of Manticore.

The intelligence in his eyes was unmistakable. The first two of his limbs were actually hands that came to rest on her knee as he peered up at her. Whiskers twitched as if he was sniffing the air. His fluffy tail curled upwards.

Unbidden Aeris smiled at the close examination.

"Do I pass?"

The treecat bleeked and quickly returned across the distance to his perch on the back of Honor's chair. Surprised brown eyes were studying Aeris with interest as well. Valiantly she pushed aside the oddest sense of being off balance and let her smile die as she met those brown eyes.

"I think you do." Honor's voice was quiet, and there was an odd tone to it that Aeris couldn't decipher. "Tell Andrew to get you settled."

"Yes, Ma'am."

It was over. Just like that.

She rose and left silently, as the dark head dropped slightly and Honor returned to her reading, thinking that was the oddest interview she had ever had to attend.

When the blonde turned to the door, Honor looked back up, watching until the doors closed behind the young woman. Her new arm itched and she absently started to scratch it. She was still having occasional problems with it and with her new eye. She reached up and ran her fingers through Nimitz's fur; smiling at the feelings of approval, she got from that.

"Now, why didn't you let me see any of her feelings?" she wondered aloud.

The 'cat kept on purring as he flowed down from his perch on the back of the chair and settled into her lap. She chuckled at his hedonistic attitude and kept petting him. As far as she knew, she was the only person bonded to a treecat who could sense other peoples' feelings through her 'cat. It wasn't anything she herself could do, but somehow, Nimitz was able to show her the feelings

others had. They'd always had a link between themselves, and she always knew he could sense her feelings. Being able to sense others' emotions through the link she shared with him; that was a new and extremely valuable development.

The young woman who had just left was the first one whose feelings Nimitz hadn't revealed to Honor, since the phenomenon first began. Even when she'd tried to probe Nimitz for them, the 'cat had simply sent back feelings of reassurance.

"I'll take your word on this one, eh, Bleeker?"

The 'cat had no objections as long as his human kept on lavishing attention on him.

With a cry, she half fell, half tumbled out of bed. Blindly she grabbed for the pistol that should have been under her pillow, and came up empty handed. Confused and disoriented she instinctively put her back to the nearest corner, shaking as she tried to focus on the room around her.

The sound of her own breathing, harsh and quick, and the sound of her heart pounding, were the only noises in the suite. Shaking, she edged forward, kicking open the door to the bathroom, then collapsing against the wall when she was certain it was empty. Sobbing, she slid down the wall, curling into a fetal position on the floor and slowly rocking back and forth.

"Aeris Thornson, my name is Aeris Thornson."

Over and over, she repeated her mantra, until she drifted off into a fitful sleep.

In a different part of Harrington House, another woman sat by a fireplace. Sleep had abandoned her quite a while ago, and her arm itched again. She did her best to ignore the images, the memories of battles she'd been in, the people she'd lost, the friends, and the loves.

Another 'cat joined her, this one dappled gray. Samantha was her human given name, and she flowed up the side of the chair and claimed a spot on Honor's lap. Adding her purrs to the quiet ones from Nimitz perched behind her, assisting her mate in his attempts to calm his troubled human.

Her second day was spent working out with the other recruits, in the security building. They did everything from hand to hand combat, all the way up to using the standard Manticoran Marine pulse rifle. It was a grueling day, designed to push them, to the edge and beyond, no matter their physical readiness.

Aeris was hot, sticky, covered in sweat, and ached in more places than she could count. She felt more alive than she had in nearly a year. Actually humming as she showered in the locker room.

"Hey, Aeris, save some hot water!"

Aeris grinned, dunking her head under the water and washing away the soap.

"Hold your horses, Peter!"

Turning off the water, she wrapped the towel around herself and emerged, actually winking as she passed the large man.

"What was that you wanted me to hold again?"

"Don't make me hurt you, Peter," she growled, mock threatening him with the towel she had been using to rub her short hair dry. The man, who easily had eight inches on her, held up both hands while he backed into the shower stall.

"Eh, Aeris, you ever need someone to hold you, you know where I am. I'll do a lot better job than Peter there."

A universal finger signal in the direction of the second voice and she headed for her temporary locker. Temporary, until she was officially accepted of course.

Or tossed out, don't forget, that's a possibility here.

"Aeris!"

She'd managed to finish dressing just in time to look up at the call from the doorway.

"Yeah?"

"LaFollet wants to talk to you."

She tucked her shirt into her pants and got up off the bench.

"Be right there."

Andrew LaFollet looked up at the polite knock.

"Come in."

He watched as she entered, those pale green eyes automatically sweeping around the room even

as she seemed unconcerned with her surroundings. He would have bet a year's pay that she knew exactly what, and where each item was, in his office.

"Sir," she addressed him as she came to attention in front of his desk

"Take a seat, Aeris."

She sat primly, green eyes watching him with interest.

"I watched you train today, interesting style," he remarked.

Since it wasn't a question Aeris just continued to watch him curiously.

"Imagine my surprise, when you managed to take down every student, and quite a few guards."

Green eyes continued to watch him steadily.

"Your security checks came back today."

That got a flicker of interest.

"I was sorry to read about your parents."

"Thank you, Sir."

The flicker of interest was gone as quickly as it had come. If anything, that comment had only served to make her face even more shuttered than usual.

"Tomorrow I want you to start with a senior partner. You'll be starting out helping with perimeter patrol. We'll see from there. Any questions?"

"No, Sir."

"Very well, see you in the meeting room at oh five hundred tomorrow."

Her partner turned out to be a man slightly smaller than your average mountain. It rapidly became apparent to her that, while he didn't seem to have much going on upstairs, he was very good at what he did.

This was the sort of guard that she used to hate. The one's that mixed up their schedules, random patrols, kept a sharp eye on their surroundings, and missed damn little. Her questions were sometimes met with monosyllabic answers at best, but more often with grunts.

Marcus, which was her new partner's name, tended towards the show them how to do it method

of teaching. Which was fine as far as Aeris was concerned. She feared she wouldn't exactly be great company at the moment anyway.

After the training session yesterday, she'd prayed for a good nights sleep. All she really wanted to do was crawl into a bed somewhere, bury her face in a pillow, and sleep for a few months. What she'd gotten was a night of tossing and turning, of images flashing through her mind that she desperately did not want to remember.

Blood, red, and steaming, splashed across the snow. The young girl's body jerking as the General pulled the trigger.

A grunt from Marcus pulled her back from her own private little hell, and into the relative safety of the present. He took her around the large compound that made up the Harrington House grounds. He took her around the outer security perimeter, and the paths the guards generally used, pointing out the sensors, and which sectors they were responsible for.

She gladly focused all of her attention on his short clipped explanations, and followed his large bulk through the gardens and buildings. She still hadn't set foot inside of Harrington House itself, except for her brief interview with The Salamander, something she had no problems with at all. The further she stayed away from Honor Harrington the better, for the time being. The woman made her feel off balance, and that could be deadly.

Thus, the days passed for Aeris Thornson. She trained during the mornings with the other new recruits, under the ever-watchful eye of Andrew Lafollet. Then she'd take her shift with the ever-silent Marcus, and patrol the outer limits of Harrington House. In the evenings she, and the others, were taken through different sections of the Harrington Steading. In the nights, she'd wake from sleep, drenched in sweat, and shaking violently. Aeris was often thankful that the bathroom was so nearby. Sleep began to become her enemy. She feared the dreams and the images it brought, hated the helplessness she felt as she was forced to relive those horrors again and again.

The anniversary of her fourth month at Harrington House brought changes with it. She was officially accepted as a guard, along with a handful of other recruits that had passed Andrew's strict training. They were given two days of leave before the official swearing in ceremony, in which each of the new guards would swear personal fealty to Honor Harrington herself.

Aeris was having trouble deciding how she felt about that. On the one hand, she was proud to have succeeded in the training. This was the first time she'd been asked to defend against intruders, usually she was on the other side of that little equation. Then there was the Salamander herself.

She scares me, it's almost like I think her touch will burn me....

A knock on her door drew her out of her pensive musings.

"Hey, Aeris, you coming?"

Blinking, she gathered her thoughts and looked at the smiling imp in the doorway.

"Coming where, Victoria?"

The young woman had recovered surprisingly quickly from the beating she'd undergone. She'd taken up her training again with Aeris's group of trainee's. Despite herself, Aeris found she liked the impish redhead.

"For leave of course! A few of us have got a shuttle waiting, we're gonna split the cost. Wanna join us? We can drop you off in Beltan Province if you want?"

"Beltan? Why would I want to go there?"

"To go visit your family?" Victoria was looking at her a bit strangely, and Aeris mentally winced. She'd forgotten that her family was supposed to have come from that province.

"I don't have any reason to go back there, Victoria. My parents are dead and I'm not close with my relatives there. You go on. I'm just going to stay here."

Eric, another of the recruits, yelled from further down the hallway. "Come on! They're waiting for us!"

"Just hold it, Eric, sheesh. You sure, Aeris?"

"Go on, have fun, I'll be fine here. See you in two days, Victoria."

Victoria wiggled her eyebrows, laughed, and dashed out; calling over her shoulder, "See you in two days, Aeris!"

They were good people, these recruits. Even the rather macho Peter was a pretty good guy. As long as he managed to overcome his hormones once in a while, he could sometimes be surprisingly sensitive, and she had the oddest feeling that he listened to a lot more than he pretended to.

Besides, she had other things to do. It had been long enough that she dared risk reopening the communications channels she had set up prior to her desperate self-imposed exile. She'd slowly start getting news from inside the Republic of Haven at last. Maybe she'd find out what had happened to her friends, although she doubted that would be publicly known.

Those of her friends who were still alive that was.

I lead them into a trap and they all died because of me. They were counting on me to get them to safety and instead what happens?

Resolutely ignoring the memories that tried to surface, she set to work. It wasn't as difficult as

one might assume to rewire the personal com centers that were in each of their rooms. Making it so that no one would notice her occasional burst transmissions was a bit harder though. The signals would be copied automatically and carried out system by any ship going in the direction she needed. It was risky, if anyone caught the transmissions, but she'd made certain to limit her carriers to freighters. Less chance of someone being on the ball enough to spot the extra data being piggy backed on their star chart updates.

It took a few hours of tinkering before she was satisfied that no one, who didn't know exactly what they were looking for, would stumble across her set up. Then she sat back on her haunches and eyed her workmanship with a small smile pleasure. The smile faded as Aeris's thoughts turned towards the swearing in ceremony that was going to take place.

Look at me Papa, your little girl's about to become a guard sworn to protect the Salamandar. Bet you're turning over in your grave, aren't you?

She shouldn't be thinking like that, the past was best left buried. Standing, she grabbed her ID and headed for the doors. She might not have any other place to go, but if she stayed in her room alone, the memories might take over. That she feared more than anything else in the world.

There was quite a settlement already bustling with activity inside of the same dome that contained Harrington House. There were at least a half dozen major business's working out of this dome alone, with even more spread throughout the Harrington Steadholding.

She's probably one of the richest Steadholders on Grayson by now.

It was through this bustling atmosphere that Aeris wandered. Gladly losing herself in the early afternoon bustle. There was one thing that she really enjoyed about Grayson. She'd noticed it the first time she'd been to the planet, over a decade ago now. No matter where it was, a large or small settlement, they always had a market. A central market square where you could get nearly anything you wanted. A place that wasn't only for shopping, but for gathering as well; where neighbors could gather and chat, eat and drink in the sidewalk restaurants, exchange news.

Aeris wasn't part of them, these people. She walked through the crowds, watching with a detached feeling as people talked with one another. Children, recently out of school, rampaged through the market, laughing and chasing one another. It was like watching life flow around her. It was oddly comforting to know that normal people still existed.

"Tea?"

Slightly confused, Aeris found herself in front of one of the sidewalk cafés.

"Ah, yes."

She was hungry after all, and she'd been getting a paycheck for four months now. She could probably treat herself to tea.

Tea consisted of cookies, an odd green tea, and fruits. It was close to a small meal in and of itself. She winked to the girl at the next table with a smile. This was as close to normal as Aeris had managed to feel in a very long time.

A feeling that lasted just long enough for her to finish off her last cookie.

She'd been watching the crowds on the street out of the corner of her eye. A figure she hadn't seen in five years demanded her full attention though. Thankfully, the figure in question was deep in conversation with another man across the street, so he didn't see the startled shock on her face, or see her face at all for that matter.

As he started to turn, she ducked her head, quickly turning away. Watching carefully as he moved down the street away from her, until she was certain he hadn't spotted her. Then she paid and slipped out onto the street, following a good distance behind the man.

Joseph, what are you doing here?

She didn't know his real name of course. He'd been assigned to her team the last time she'd been on Grayson. Theoretically, he'd been under her command. In reality, he'd answered to people above her level. He'd been assigned as part of her support personnel. His real function had been much darker than the title suggested.

That he was here, now, could mean nothing but problems.

Aeris had to jog to keep up with him, wherever he was going, it was in a hurry. She wasn't that surprised to find him leading her right to the public aircar landing area. In the busy crush of people, she got delayed though, and no amount of strategically placed elbows got her clear in time. She reached the aircar area just in time to see him duck into a car, close the door and the car take off. Cursing she turned and headed back the way she had come. At least she knew what the man he had been talking to looked like and she could try to look for him.

Aeris had a problem now.

To alert anyone to Joseph's presence would give away her own presence here. Something she dearly wanted to avoid. Yet, she couldn't just forget she'd seen him. Whatever he was up to, it was a good bet it wasn't anything pleasant.

What if he's after, Honor?

The thought came unbidden as she moved down the street, heading back towards the café she had just left. Scanning the crowds of people as she went. The streak of panic that flowed through her at that thought was unbidden as well. She'd seen enough death in the past to picture Honor being shot easily. The twisting ache in her stomach at that mental picture was new though.

So letting her Lady get shot wasn't an option.

She didn't have a problem with that. For some reason, Aeris thought she might want to be more scared about that than Joseph's appearance here.

The rest of that day, she spent searching the city for a glimpse of the man she'd seen talking with Joseph. She crisscrossed back and forth, doing a grid search as best as she could on her own, all to no avail. By the time night fell, she was tired, hungry, and her feet hurt.

She returned to her room at Harrington House, wearily took a shower, and collapsed into bed. She groggily managing to pull the sheets up over her naked body before sleep claimed her.

The dream came, as it always did. This time it was different though. Instead of leading the refugees out of the city into the ambush, she was leading Honor. The Steadholder moved alongside her with a sense of purpose that she found herself envying.

Those compelling brown eyes held trust in them, and Aeris shuddered as she realized who that trust was for.

Then they were outside the city, and no matter how much she wanted to scream for Honor to leave, she couldn't force herself to. Then the General was there, shoving her aside and striding forward. The dream merged with the one she'd been having every night for what seemed like forever now.

The pulsar pistol fired and she saw Honor and the little girl jerk, then crumple, convulse, and go still, the white snow stained red with blood.

Aeris didn't have time to make it to the bathroom, so she dry heaved what little had been in her stomach into the waste can. Sobbing she collapsed on the floor, her head pressed against the cool metal of the can itself.

Aeris was using the sparring mats by the time that Honor managed to get away. Her morning had been filled with preparing for the swearing in ceremony tomorrow. Even if Howard Clinkscales and Miranda Lafollet had managed to set most of it up, she'd had to sign off on all of it. Andrew had insisted on a security contingent as well. Then there had been the usual paperwork, and quite a few reports to read for both her position as an Admiral of Grayson, and Commodore of the Royal Manticoran Navy.

At least Samantha's kittens had kept her company all through the morning, as had Samantha and Nimitz. The physical therapy had helped a lot, and she had been doing some Kata's by herself, but she felt edgy today and wanted to clear her head. A good workout was just what she needed.

Her arm ached once in a while, and she was still learning the muscle coordination to make the new eye do what she wanted. Honor had come to the reluctant conclusion that this was as good as it was going to get, which led her to the sparring mats in the security house. It was still early in the morning so she wasn't expecting to see anyone there.

What she did find stopped her at the door.

Aeris had been a puzzle; there were little things about the new guard recruit that refused to add up. She would have removed the woman from the guard program, except for one little thing.

Nimitz.

Whatever it was, her treecat companion trusted this woman that was obvious enough, but why was a complete mystery. So she stayed, and Honor kept on trying to figure out why this woman was different and why Nimitz was protecting her.

As she stood there though, watching her move, Honor forgot about the nagging doubts. Not completely of course, they stayed in the back of her mind, but right then all she did was watch.

Aeris Thornson moved with a fluid grace that was utterly natural to the shorter woman. Flowing through forms of a martial art form that Honor didn't recognize, which was saying a lot, considering that she'd been trained since she was young, and held a 7th degree black belt in Coup de Vitesse.

Whatever this form was, it was fluid and perfectly controlled. Toned muscles showed under the loose Gi she wore, and her exposed skin was shining with a thin sheen of sweat. In mid form, green eyes opened, as if sensing her presence, meeting brown eyes for a drawn out eternity.

"My Lady."

Her voice was quiet and subdued, just as she remembered it. Polite, smooth, and polished, revealing nothing. The eyes though, they were curious, and Honor found herself stepping into the work out room.

"Did you want the room, My Lady? I was just about done."

Honor raised her hand to stop Aeris from leaving, she had the oddest thought that the blonde would flee if given a chance.

"That's an interesting Form you were using just now, Aeris. What was it?"

Again the slight hesitation before she answered.

"It's called G'Quan."

That Honor had heard of, although she'd never seen it practiced.

"They practice that in parts of the Salisian Confederacy don't they?"

"Yes, My Lady." Aeris tensed, hoping that Honor didn't know that it was practiced elsewhere as

well.

"I haven't sparred since...." She trailed off and glanced down at her left hand, which balled into a fist. Aeris waited, quietly, for her to get control of herself once more.

Her voice, when she spoke up, was low and surprisingly soothing. What she said surprised both of them. "Did you wish to spar, My Lady?"

"I don't know much about G'Quan," Honor protested, even as she moved towards the changing rooms at the rear of the workout area.

"That's fine, My Lady, I know very little about Coup de Vitesse."

After Honor had changed into a gi, they bowed to one another then cautiously tested one another, exploring not only the differences in style and Form, but in each other. They were silent as they traded feather light blows and holds, building the confidence in each other that was required for a true sparing match.

The two forms were nearly perfect opposites of one another.

Where as Coup de Vitesse stressed crippling blows, and taking down an opponent as quickly as possible, G'Quan was a softer art. It stressed the redirection of force, and the manipulation of an opponent's own strength. Turning that strength against the opponent.

Both were aware of the other on a level that they hadn't been before. Slowly they increased the tempo, seeming to dance around each other as they sparred. It was the most fun either of them had enjoyed in a while. For a few precious hours, there was nothing but the sparring, the attack, and block, poetry of movement and form. It was with surprise that they both realized almost three hours had passed since they'd begun.

Unaccountably, as the sparing came to an end for the day, Honor felt like the awkward teen she had been what now seemed like a lifetime ago. Aeris seemed to feel it as well, since she was doing her level best to look anywhere but at the Steadholder. Whatever Honor would have said though was interrupted as Mira Lafollet bounded into the room.

"My lady, the latest courier from Manticore has arrived. There's a secure message for you."

The image that stuck with her as she left was the sadness in Aeris's eyes.

"Stupid, Stupid, Stupid!" Aeris couldn't believe how stupid she'd just been. She should have just turned and left when Lady Harrington entered the room. Instead, what had she done, she'd offered to spar. Then, when they'd been done, she'd been acutely aware of Honor. For a split second, while they'd stood watching each other, she'd wanted to tell her. To tell the Salamander everything and throw herself on her Lady's mercy.

It was insane of course. The shortest way to, at the least, get herself fired, and most probably get sent off to ONI's tender care. She was rather positive she wouldn't enjoy a stay with the Office of Naval Intelligence.

"I should have been out looking for Joseph, but no, I had to stay and spar with Lady Harrington herself!"

Aeris shook her head in disgust at her own weakness and stupidity as she grabbed a towel. She'd made her way back to her own rooms for a shower. Tomorrow would be the swearing in ceremony, and she wanted to find out what Joseph and the man he'd been talking to had been up to. To that aim, she was going to have to find out a bit about the man that she'd seen talking with Joseph.

Clean and still invigorated from the spar, Aeris headed towards the Security control office. It was tied into the worldwide security net, and with a quiet hello to the guards on duty, she started going through the database.

It was easy enough to recall the other man's face from her memory; she'd trained to remember such details after all. Then, it was simply a matter of putting what she remembered into the computer and drawing the man's face as best she could. The computer sorted out the features she'd listed and then compiled a list of possible matches. That was where the grunt work started. She would have to sort through all of the matches and see if any of them were her man.

Almost predictably, the man she'd seen was nearly the last on the computer-generated list.

"Why does it always have to be at the end?"

The computer chose not to answer.

I really have to stop talking to myself.

A few taps of the keys and she brought up the man's file.

Mark Tangeir, five foot eleven, listed as a consultant for the Moors Shipping Firm. Based out of the Mueller Steading. Huh, he hasn't officially been checked into Harrington Steading. Odd.

A small frown and she tapped in a few more commands.

Mueller Steading, the current Steadholder is Samuel Mueller.

Scanning down the screen, she grimaced at the picture of the rather rotund old man.

Now I'll just see what name Joseph is here under. At least I remember his ugly mug pretty well.

It didn't take as long as her search for Tangeir had. Within a half hour, she was studying Joseph's

newest alias.

Vivik Weir, that's a new one. Well, well, well, what do we have here? Listed as a consultant for the Moors Shipping Firm out of Mueller Steading as well.

"Aeris, what are you still doing here?"

A flick of a button and she returned to a screen showing the current steadholders of Grayson. In the same motion, she turned to regard Andrew Lafollet.

"I didn't feel like going home for two days, Sir."

"Are you ready for tomorrow's ceremony?"

She'd diligently studied the ceremony as well as the oath of fealty that they were expected to say.

"Yes, Sir."

"I was just about to go and put some time in the workout room, care to join me?"

She rose smoothly from her seat and shook her head.

"I've just come from there, Sir. I was just reading up on the current Steadholders to better understand Lady Harrington's situation."

That he'd seen what she was reading she had not doubt.

"Very well, I'll see you tomorrow noon, for the ceremony."

"Yes, Sir."

The second he was gone, Aeris grabbed a copy of the information she'd called up, and headed out. It was time to call in a few favors and find out what was going on. There was still time before the ceremony tomorrow.

Thankfully, she didn't even have to leave the Steading to call in those favors.

Cracking her knuckles, she got to work. Back in her rooms, she tapped a few commands into the communications unit. A few more and the signal was as hidden as she could make it.

The woman picked up after ten seconds of calling.

"What the Hell do you wan... oh, shit."

Aeris smiled at the stunned look on her face.

"Hey, Priest, how you doing?"

"Jesus, Phoenix, what the hell are you doing back here?"

Aeris ignored the question.

"I need some information."

"Hey, look, I'm out of that business. I just fence goods these days. Do you know how hard it is just to do that now? I mean, Grayson is not a great planet for me."

"Still trying to save up to get off world are we?"

The thin woman sneered in answer.

"Screw you, Phoenix; I would have had the money if not for your stunt five years ago."

"That wasn't your money, Priest."

Aeris had to struggle to stop from grinning though. That had been one of the few missions she'd actually had fun with.

"Look, Priest, I need some information..."

"Wait! Didn't you just hear me? I'm out of that business."

"Sure you are. I need some information on two men. Vivik Weir, and Mark Tangeir, as soon as possible. The whole kit."

When the other woman started to object once more, Aeris held up her hand.

"Priest, you still owe me, remember? I'm calling in that favor now."

"Fine, but this is it, you understand me? I don't owe you anything after this."

"Sure, just get me the information. I need it before tomorrow morning, send it to this terminal address."

The screen went dark on Priest's cursing, and Aeris finally grinned. It was always so much fun to watch Priest's stress level ratchet up.

Priest hadn't gotten back to her by the next afternoon.

Aeris would have been more worried if she wasn't surprisingly nervous and busy getting ready

for the ceremony. For nearly an hour before the recruits were supposed to gather, she paced back and forth in her room.

This is it, after this I'll have sworn my fealty to 'Her.' No going back after that.

Stopping before the mirror, she ran her fingers through her hair, scowling at the result before picking up her brush.

"Oh who am I kidding? There wasn't any going back the second I agreed to come here."

She was glad when it was time to go, anything to take her mind off the butterflies in her stomach.

The ceremony itself was being held in the formal garden of Harrington House. A large chunk of the people from Harrington Steading were in attendance, and all of the staff from the House itself were there. Not only would the new guards be swearing in today, but a few of the newest appointees to the House staff would be as well. Aeris watched with interest as a short diminutive woman and a taller man walked in behind her Lady.

Her parents. The part of her mind that kept track of things like that prompted. If she concentrated, she could call to mind the file she'd seen on both of them.

Allison Chou Harrington, genetic surgeon, born on the planet Beowulf. Arthur Harrington, Neurosurgeon, retired Surgeon Commander RMN, born on the planet Sphinx, part of the Star Kingdom of Manticore.

The diversion let her get past the introduction of the Steadholder, and the beginning of the ceremony. A ceremony that was centuries old, and was being presided over by the ever watchful Howard Clinkscales. A man who had once been the Grayson minister of Security, he served as Regent of Harrington Steading when Honor was away.

He stepped aside, and Aeris realized she had no idea what he had just said. She sat down with the other recruits, abstractly aware of the crowds of people on either side and behind them. This was quite the social event it seemed.

Honor Harrington stepped forward, and everything else faded as she met her Lady's eyes.

Honor wasn't ready for the small thrill of excitement she felt when she met Aeris's eyes. Her eyes were a clear light green today, she noted absently. Nimitz had gone still on her shoulders and she could feel his happiness through her link with him. The cause of that happiness she had no time to question at the moment though.

Howard was looking at her a bit oddly, as she paused before beginning her part in the ceremony. It was unlike Lady Harrington to be uncertain in anything that she did.

Her thoughts flicked back to the last time she'd felt that particular thrill of excitement, even as she began her roll in the ceremony. It was with surprise that she realized that even with Paul she hadn't felt that sudden jolt. With him, it had been a more gradual affair, something they'd slipped into. She'd had every intention of staying with him though, and maybe starting a family.

Then he'd been killed and she'd set aside love. Searching for it was for those who were not in quite as dangerous a profession as hers. Especially during a war, one to which she'd be returning to shortly.

The first of the recruits stood and came forward to go down on one knee before her. Honor watched coolly as he went through the Oath. She felt incredibly silly standing before all these people in the formal dress that Howard and Miranda had insisted she had to wear. Most of the time she managed to get away with wearing either her Grayson or Manticoran uniforms, but this time she'd been stuck.

The amusement from Nimitz as he watched his human get stuffed into a dress hadn't helped. A corner of her lip quirked upwards as she remembered his soft bleek of laughter at the sight of her trying to deal with the long dress. At least it was better than when she'd first started wearing them to formal functions as a Steadholder. That hadn't been fun at all.

Then the recruit, what was his name, oh yes, Paul, rose and saluted her. Andrew stepped forward and offered him the rapier that was part of the ceremonial dress uniform for the guards.

The next recruit stepped forward and they started the entire process all over again. At least she wouldn't have to do this for the servants that they had hired; those would all just recite the Oath at the same time.

The feudal aspects of Grayson society, even after these past few years, were still a bit disconcerting. She could feel her Mother and Father's amusement through her link with Nimitz, and she didn't have to turn around to know that her mother was trying hard not to laugh. To her, this was positively barbaric. Still, there was a tinge of pride to both their thoughts that she basked in. It was good to see them both.

She was glad they were here, and would be glad to get back from the upcoming convoy mission to spend more time with them.

The second recruit stood, saluted, and was given his rapier.

Aeris was next.

Once more, she realized that Nimitz was blocking the slender woman's feelings. For the first time though, Honor didn't care. She could read Aeris's feelings from her eyes clearly enough.

Those green eyes shone with nervousness and something else. It was that something else that caused a pleasant sense of anticipation to flood through Honor's mind and body. Her fingers tingled as she watched Aeris lower herself gracefully to one knee, dressed in the green on black

Harrington Steading uniform. Aeris said the Oath carefully, as one might a rehearsed speech, her eyes never leaving Honor's as she swore herself to Honor's service.

It was only as she rose and started to salute that Honor knew something was wrong.

Nimitz, who had been radiating contentment and happiness, went stiff on her shoulders, his tail fluffing out and his head coming up to scan the crowd, urgently. Even as she turned towards where he was watching, she could feel the emotions of the man he had picked out. Hatred and disgust coiled into a glowing ball of pure darkness that had devoured the man's soul.

The pulse pistol in his hand was remarkably clear. From where she was, Honor could see every detail in stunningly sharp clarity.

I always thought I'd die on the bridge of a warship.

Then a solid weight slammed into her midsection and sent her and Nimitz tumbling. The pulse pistol fired, and Honor could feel the dart as it whizzed past her face. Then there was shouting and screaming, Andrew and the guards were jumping into the crowd after the man.

Honor barely paid any attention to it though. Instead, she found herself looking up into concerned green eyes.

"My Lady, are you alright?"

Those green eyes were dark with worry and the sudden adrenaline rush that came with the urgency of such a moment.

"Fine," she answered absently, her body very aware of the warm length of Aeris's body pressed against her. Then Howard was there, along with a very worried Miranda, and Aeris got up. She wore sheepish smile as she realized she'd been pinning the Steadholder to the ground.

Nimitz was there as well, purring into her ear. Honor found herself sitting upright then standing with a hand from Aeris, Nimitz riding her shoulder and continuing his soothing purr. In the resulting turmoil when the guards were forced to kill the assassin, she lost track of the small blonde.

The sensation of Aeris's body pressed against hers stayed with her for the rest of the afternoon.

Aeris leaned her head against the tile, and let the hot water cascade down her back. The shower felt incredibly good after the past few tense hours. All of the guards, new and old, had scoured the Steading for possible accomplices. None had been found.

She really would have preferred that they had taken the man alive. Mark Tangier hadn't left them any choice though. He hadn't been carrying any identification, of course, but Aeris had easily

recognized him.

It's hard to forget a man who was aiming a pulse pistol in your direction.

She shuddered again and turned up the heat of the water. In her mind, she kept on replaying it, watching, as if in slow motion, as the man raised the pulse pistol. There had been... something... that had drawn her attention that way, she wasn't certain what it was, but she'd been in motion even before she'd seen him.

Aeris had grabbed for the pulse pistol that she no longer carried, costing her a precious split second. The man could have killed her Lady in that instant and she cursed her stupidity. Her first move should have been to tackle her lady and get her out of the way, but she'd gone for a weapon she hadn't carried since her exile.

Then there was the feeling of her own body pressed against Honor's. Those intelligent brown eyes darkening as they looked up into hers.

God, if we were alone I would have kissed her. I almost did anyway.

Thoughts best just forgotten, or buried so deep she never visited them again. There was nothing but pain and heartache down that path. There could never be anything between them. Honor was a Steadholder, and a flag officer in both the Manticoran and Grayson navies. Aeris was... not a person that someone like Honor would, or should, even spend time with.

Angrily she shut off the shower and grabbed a towel.

Best to forget it. To pretend she'd never even thought about it. Bury them, if she couldn't forget the feelings. Resolutely she promised herself to be more careful from now on and turned her concentration to more important things.

Like why Priest hadn't answered any of her recent comms, or gotten back to her with the information she'd asked for. Then there was the troubling fact that the man's identity, fake, as it most certainly was, had been deleted from the planetary security database. The name Mark Tangeir no longer existed as far as Aeris could find out. The only evidence it had ever existed was the hard copy she'd made for herself the day before.

That action now created its own problems.

Andrew would, she hoped, be able to figure out the man's identity soon enough. If he didn't though, or if he got sidetracked by whatever cover story whoever was behind this had concocted in case things went wrong, then what would she do? Should she go to him and give him the information?

That would raise a lot of questions, many of which she wouldn't be able to answer. Wincing she tested the still slightly red scar along her abdomen, it was a bit tender, and her sudden tackling of Honor hadn't helped much. Forcing herself to forget the feeling of that long lean body pressed up

against hers, she readied herself for bed.

With her thoughts in chaos, it was a long time before she slept that night.

Part Two

Honor rose with the sun the morning after the attempted attack. She was still not certain what she was feeling after the man had tried to get at her. She'd faced combat before of course, killed a few men so close she could see their sweat, like that asshole Young, then there were all of those on the ships that had died because of her commands. This time felt different though.

"Come on stinker, I think we have a visit to pay."

Nimitz bleeked in agreement and swarmed up her side to claim his rightful place on her shoulders, clearly eager to go with his adopted human. A wry look at his eager stance and she chuckled.

"I probably should have said thank you last night."

There hadn't been time though. Once the others had arrived and the would-be assassin had been killed, she'd been whisked back to Harrington house while the grounds were searched for any accomplices. Word of what had happened spread quickly, and she'd had to reassure Benjamin himself that she was safe and sound within a half hour of the attack.

By the time she'd been able to get away from the most urgent of those calls, it had been far too late for her to go thank the person who, if not saving her life, had saved her from something quite painful.

A soft bleek and a furry face pressing against her cheek called her back from thoughts of other injuries and pain. With a surprisingly soft smile, she ran her fingers through Nimitz's fur and headed toward the door. Her smile at Nimitz's assurance grew as she saw another six-legged figure making its way towards them as she crossed through the gardens.

"Samantha, come to join us?"

The cat's tail twisted in answer, and Honor was once more struck by how intelligent their eyes were. Then the 'cat started down the path ahead of her and Honor started forward again. The slight twinge of anticipation she felt was just the normal feeling of gratitude to someone who had put themselves at risk to help her, she reasoned. She was tad uneasy at how strong her feeling of anticipation was though.

"I'm going to find out why you seem to be protecting her Nimitz."

The treecat simply purred in answer and Honor shook her head. Something was going on, she knew it, she wasn't certain what, but she was determined to get to the bottom of it. Admiral Whitehaven would be visiting shortly, and while she got him to take a serious look at the new weaponry plans, she'd ask a favor as well. He could get the Manticoran Office of Naval Intelligence to let her have a look at a certain file. She was interested to see what ONI had on Aeris Thornson. I hope that the file would be waiting for her when she returned from the escort duty she'd been assigned to.

It would be nice to see Alister again though.

With a plan laid out, Honor nodded in response to the crisp salutes she was given as she entered the security building. The faint heat she felt coloring her cheeks as she passed the workout room had nothing to do with anything, or so she tried to tell herself.

She moves with a liquid grace. I'd like to challenge her again, maybe learn some of her style.

Not that she had oodles of free time on her hands as it was.

After the second time she hit the admittance chime she was beginning to wonder if perhaps Andrew had been wrong and Aeris hadn't stayed in her room today. She was just about to leave when the room door slid open suddenly.

Startled green eyes met hers and Aeris took a surprised step backwards.

"My lady."

Past Aeris's shoulder Honor got a glimpse of tousled sheets lying scattered on the floor next to the bed in an otherwise immaculate room.

"What can I do for you, My Lady?"

Honor realized, with a start, that she'd been staring. Aeris's eyes, for a split second, had seemed almost haunted. She wondered what haunted the other woman's dreams to give those green eyes such a tortured look.

"I wanted to come and thank you for what you..."

Honor trailed off as Aeris's attention shifted and she stopped paying attention to Honor. With amazement, she watched the blonde woman's normally closed statement become one of joy. Honor watched in shock as Aeris's pupils dilated and she reached a tremulous hand forward.

A gray dappled treecat's true hand reached out in return.

"Samantha?"

To her total amazement, Samantha swarmed into Aeris's arms. Dazed green eyes looked up over

the large 'cat she was now carefully holding, confusion, and wonderment in them.

Aeris smiled in pure wonder as she watched Samantha sleep. The 'cat was resting after spending most of the day keeping track of her litter of kittens. Even though they were getting older, they were still, as far as Aeris could tell, bundles of curiosity and playful energy. It made her tired just watching them romp about the place.

They were undeniably cute though.

It had been a ten days since Samantha had adopted her. Ten days in which Aeris had struggled to understand what had happened and tried to learn everything she could about treecats and what exactly she was supposed to do now. It helped a lot that she could turn to Honor for help when something didn't make sense. It helped even more that Samantha was being incredibly patient and supporting in her own way.

When Honor had shown up at her door, Aeris had been trying to take a nap. Her dreams had filled what little sleep she'd been able to grab though, and she'd ended up curled up on the floor arms wrapped around herself.

There had been a yawning chasm in her chest where her heart used to be, and she was starting to wonder if anything was worth the constant pain, she was going through. More and more she was beginning to wonder if anything was worth it, and had even started to think that death would be preferable to the constant endless dreams.

The door chime pulled her from her personal hell. Then she'd opened the door, shocked to see Honor standing there. At a movement, she gazed past the person who she had worried about enough to prevent her from doing more than think about ending everything, and saw a treecat she'd not met before.

Gray dappled fur and intelligent eyes met hers, and she was shaken. A part of her that she hadn't even known existed reached out and to Aeris's shock she'd felt another beings feelings in a way that she'd never even known was possible, she'd felt Samantha's feelings.

Honor had told her later, after she'd more or less recovered, that the bonding was permanent, until the death of one of them.

"She's adopted you now Aeris, which means your part of the family."

The words hadn't really sunk in then, but they were starting to now.

For the last ten days, even while Honor prepared for the upcoming visit from Admiral Whitehaven and her coming assignment with the RMN again, she'd always had time for Aeris. She'd resisted the suggestion that she take some time off from her duties, mostly because she couldn't stay close to the Salamandar all the time and not get burned. Still she'd seen Honor

every day for the past week, had dined with her every night, and talked with her in the library after dinner about treecats and the bond between them and their adopted humans.

Aeris had managed, barely, to keep an emotional distance from the utterly charming and charismatic Honor Harrington, She wasn't certain how, but she had. Mostly.

There were moments when she'd smile in pure joy from the feeling of not being alone anymore, or stroking Samantha's fur. Then she'd look up and meet Honor's eyes unguarded. Those devastating brown eyes that seemed to pull her closer. More than once she had wanted to rise and go to her, hold her hand, tell her everything - impossible of course. Nothing more than a barely formed dream.

She could be nothing more than a guard to Honor Harrington though, for more reasons than she wanted to think about right there. Only one of which was that she was part of the Steadholder's guard, an employee.

Instead, she turned her thoughts to the past few days, and wondered at how, despite the increased tension, she felt rested unlike she had in years. The dreams were still there, but somehow it seemed like there was another that joined her in the dreamscape. When it became too much to handle, a gentle nudge from Samantha would wake her and she'd hold onto the 'cat, until the shuddering and shaking subsided. She still awoke quite a few times each night, but at least it was not to disabling dreams and sadness.

"That's your doing isn't it, Samantha?"

The 'cat, of course, didn't deign to answer, merely flipping the tip of her tail in answer.

"I don't know why you choose me, Samantha, but I think you might have made a better choice with someone else."

"Why do you say that?"

Damn she moves silently, she's the only one here who can sneak up on me like that.

"My lady."

"Stay seated, Aeris. I see you've a 'cat to scratch. Wouldn't do to force Samantha to get up."

Aeris had to grin at the tail that flicked in what seemed to be annoyance this time.

"I think she understood that, My Lady."

"They understand more than a lot of people give them credit for."

Honor took a seat across from the two of them, watching with a faint smile playing about her lips.

"Why did you say she might have made a better choice with someone else?"

Aeris's hand froze for a split second and then continued in its petting duties.

"She could have bonded with anyone here, My Lady."

"That didn't answer my question Aeris."

"I'm only a guard, My Lady."

That answer at least seemed to satisfy Honor, and Aeris relaxed marginally.

"They adopt you for who you are, Aeris, not what you are. If she adopted you, it means she thinks you are worthy, and that you are special. Question why if you must, but always treasure it."

"I will my lady."

Green and hazel eyes meet in perfect understanding, locking for an endless moment. Samantha's eyes slid open as she felt Aeris's feelings suddenly shift and intensify and she shared an amused look with Nimitz, her mate, who clung to the Honor's shoulders.

Humans were so dense sometimes.

"I should get back, My Lady, my break is over."

Honor nodded softly, watching as 'cat and newly adopted human left, absently wondering why she wanted to go with that slender guard so much.

"What do you mean he's a Massadan?"

Andrew looked up quizzically at the near incredulous tone in Aeris's voice. The 'cat on her shoulder - and wasn't that a sight he wasn't used to - perked up as well, her tail slowly swishing back and forth.

"Here's his file, as you can see he was registered as a Massadan. We're still looking into how he got into the Steading itself."

The generally insane neighbors of Grayson, the Massadans, were more or less limited to their own planet now. Aeris scanned the report that Andrew had offered and mentally sighed.

She should have known that whoever was behind this wouldn't have left his file as it was. The

person she had seen talking to Joseph was now listed as Bernard Charis. When she had looked him up in the security net he had been listed as Mark Tangeir, a consultant of Moors shipping based out of the Mueller Steading.

The head guard watched curiously as Aeris set down the report with a scowl, turned and left. He was rather disappointed with the background search on the would-be assassin, but he wasn't that upset. They'd stopped the attempt after all, and the planetary security forces would be looking into how this Charis person had managed to get onto Grayson.

"I was so stupid! Father would laugh if he was still alive!"

Samantha watched with detached interest as her adopted human ranted. Aeris paced back and forth across her bedroom; scowling at the copy of the original background search, she had called up only a few days ago on a Mark Tangeir.

Grinding her teeth, she sat down on the bed and absently started petting Samantha.

"I should have gone after Joseph the moment I knew he was here! But no, I had to stay and spar the Salamandar."

Samantha closed her eyes and turned onto her back so that her human could scratch her stomach. The kittens had been more demanding than usual today and she enjoyed the relative quiet.

"So now I have evidence that there's a plot against Honor, and I know that one of the wet works people is in town, but I can't do anything with it."

The annoyed tone in her human's voice distracted Samantha. Lightly batting at the hands that were stroking her fur she claimed more attention, trying to calm her down.

"Your right Samantha. I need to think about what to do next. Ok, so what do I know?"

It occurred to Aeris as she paid attention to Samantha that it was infinitely more rewarding talking to the 'cat than it was to her gun. It also left her feeling more relaxed, where as talking to her pulse pistol had often left her with the urge to go out and kill something.

"One, I know that Joseph is here on Grayson. I saw him talking to this Mark Tangier a day before Mark tried to kill Honor. Both of them are somehow linked to this Moors shipping company, based in the Mueller Steading."

Slender fingers paused, feeling the softness of gray fur sliding between them.

"So I should go pay a visit to this Moors shipping company."

It would be hard to pull off; she was still a very junior guard. Still it bore thinking about. Aeris

resumed her petting.

"Before that I can figure out how Joseph managed to get into Harrington Steading without anyone knowing about it. Oh, and find out who managed to change Mark's file on the security net. Anything else?"

Samantha playfully batted at a hand with her true hand, claws carefully sheathed.

"Oh yeah, where the hell is Priest? She hasn't gotten back to me yet."

For once Aeris was sleeping soundly. The warm 'cat curled up on top of the blankets near the foot of the bed. The nightmares still came, but they seemed more distant ever since she'd bonded with Samantha. The insistent beeping of the com console dragged her from the much-needed rest though.

Groggily she sat upright, fumbling under the pillow for the pulse pistol that hadn't been there since she started working at Harrington Steading. She sighed, as her fingers encountered nothing but clean sheets, and ignored the spurt of fear that not having the weapon close by always seemed to cause.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming."

Half stumbling, she made her way over to the panel and irritably slapped the accept call button. She'd been having a pleasant dream for once, and whoever it was had better have a good reason.

"Phoenix?"

Green eyes widened suddenly as sleep fled her system. The battered face looking at her out of the screen bore a faint resemblance to the woman she'd talked to a few days ago.

"Priest? What happened?"

"Just shut up and let me talk."

Priest coughed, and Aeris watched silently as she dabbed a bit of blood away with an already red dotted rag.

"I went looking for that information you wanted."

Aeris nodded, holding her tongue and listening.

"I got some information on this Vivik guy, and I'm disappearing, you got me Phoenix? I'm disappearing, and I think you should too. I don't know who this guy works for, but they knew who I was. They found me, you understand?"

Aeris knew exactly what that meant. Finding Priest would have taken quite a lot of resources and information. It also explained why Priest was freaking out.

"What did you find out?"

"I'm sending it to you now. Then I'm gone."

"Wait, you still have that old account we used that time?"

Momentary confusion turned to understanding and Priest nodded.

"Good, I'm sending you what I've managed to save up this past little while working here. It's not much but it should help."

Understanding turned to thankfulness.

Aeris held up her hand.

"Don't say it Priest, just get going. See you old friend."

The screen went dark on a grateful smile, and Aeris leaned her head wearily against the wall.

"Just one nights sleep, why is that so hard to get?"

Aeris had the next day off, as the rest of the house began to prepare for Admiral Whitehaven's visit, along with Honor's pending trip. It had only just dawned on Aeris that her Lady would be leaving Grayson for at least a month. She had planned on taking a trip to the Mueller Steading and seeing what she could find out about Moors shipping, but her sudden lack of funds ended those plans. Instead, she spent the morning trying to resist the urge to find Andrew Lafollet and explain what she knew to him, and try to get a position on the Steading guard team that would be accompanying Honor. That lasted right up until noon. Leaving Samantha with the kittens, she made her way back to the Security building and tracked down Andrew in his office. He glanced up from the reports he was signing when she entered.

"What can I do for you Aeris?"

Swallowing, she entered, unconsciously standing a bit ill at ease.

"Sir, I wanted to talk to you about the off planet guard assignment?"

The man watched her with an unreadable expression.

"What about them?"

Obviously, he wasn't going to help her at all on this one. She straightened her back and came to attention.

"Sir I would like to ask to be assigned to protect my, er, our lady while she is off world."

If he noticed her hesitation, he made no mention of it.

"Request denied. Is there anything else I can do for you Aeris?"

"What? Denied? Sir...!"

He cut her off.

"Aeris, I have some of my best and most senior guards going with me on this."

That she wasn't senior enough to go with them on this mission was clear. She wasn't certain what she had hoped for, but it wasn't this out of hand rejection. Straightening she allowed a sliver of anger to penetrate her carefully maintained shields.

"Sir, with all due respect, I am an excellent guard."

The hand he raised once more stopped her tirade before she said too much.

"Aeris you are indeed one of the best at hand to hand combat that I have ever seen. There are other considerations though. Would you really want to bring Samantha with you on this trip? What about the kittens?"

He watched her determination visibly disappear, as she seemed to deflate slightly, her posture slumping, when she realized that what he was saying was true. She'd forgotten that she couldn't simply leave Samantha behind while she went to guard Honor. She couldn't take Samantha away from the kittens, not while they were still so young. Straightening once more, she slowly nodded. Some things had been much easier when she'd been completely alone.

Not that she wanted to go back to talking to her pistol though.

"Yes Sir, I see your point."

"Don't worry, Aeris, we'll take good care of her."

She nodded absently then turned to leave wondering why Andrew had seemed to think it was important to reassure her.

The gathering was mostly over by the time Honor found herself alone in the library. She had

always liked the quiet peace that the large room seemed to encourage. The fireplace was an added bonus and she sat in a chair pulled close to it. She'd had a talk with Alexander Hamish, Earl of Whitehaven, Admiral of the Green, for the RMN. It had been an unexpected discussion, one that she found her thoughts returning to as she studied the flames.

He'd gone along with her advice on the new weapons systems, the LACs, and new long-range multi stage missiles. She'd been determined to get him to, one way or another though, so that had turned out as planned.

What hadn't been expected was what Nimitz had shown her the Admiral's feelings. That he felt a strong attraction for her had come as a surprise, and she sighed, considering what to do about it. The Admiral was married, his wife crippled in a tragic aircar crash. She'd been one of the most famous holodrama actors in the entire star kingdom of Manticore before that tragic accident.

Gently stroking Nimitz's fur, she considered the flames, and finally came to the conclusion that she could do nothing. Those feelings were just something that the Admiral would have to work out on his own.

Almost instantly, her thoughts turned to another, one whose feelings she hadn't a clue about.

"The Admiral is going to forward my request to ONI, Nimitz. I'll know everything that the Office of Naval Intelligence does about Aeris when I get back from this escort duty."

The treecat drowsily turned over on her lap and she smiled fondly.

"Then we'll see what kind of human it is that would tempt Samantha to bond again."

A 'cat that adopted a human almost always bonded for life. Most chose to follow their humans into death if something happened to the adopted human. That Samantha hadn't chosen death when Paul had been killed was a sign of how strong she was. That she would bond with another human was unheard of though. At least as far as Honor could tell it had never happened before.

Aeris slipped into the library, cloaked in the darkness of the late evening, almost early morning, hours. The darkness was a good friend to her, and even accompanied by the 'cat she had no problems passing the last of the partygoers without notice. She'd been on duty all night of course, keeping a close watch on everything to make certain the dinner went without a hitch.

After the recent attempt on her lady's life, security had been tightened even more than normal. She was there, inside the library, beautiful, and almost fragile. Dark short hair framing a strong face and beautiful lips that Aeris felt a longing to brush her own lips against.

I would tell her everything and stay forever if I could.

The thought was banished even as it formed and Aeris forced herself to step forward into the

light, baring herself to her Lady's glance, and knowing as she did that she wanted nothing more than to be here with her Lady.

If only....

Samantha, still an unfamiliar weight, flowed down her shoulder, and over towards her own mate. She greeted Nimitz by rubbing her head along his shoulder, a caress that the other 'cat readily returned.

I wish I could be a 'cat.

Her thoughts were disjointed, coming in random jumbles that made it hard to focus on any one thing. She was almost afraid that she'd forget her cover if she stayed longer, making her want to leave, but she couldn't, not while her Lady's eyes looked so sad. Instead, she waited until Honor motioned towards the chair opposite her and sat down smoothly.

"Come to see if I'm alright, Aeris?"

"Just wanted to make certain you were comfortable, My Lady."

A slow smile spreads across her lady's face. Neither the high-sculpted cheeks, nor the genuine warmth that spilled from her sometimes-commanding brown eyes failed to catch Aeris's attention.

They watched the 'cats, each pretending to be more interested in them than the person seated across from them. As the silence stretched to the edge of comfort, Aeris found herself talking without meaning to.

"I wish I was going with you, My Lady."

The crackling of the fire was the only answer she got for a long agonizing moment.

"You can't bring both Samantha and the kittens."

Aeris wondered if she imagined the note of sadness in her lady's voice.

"Once the kittens are older you can come, if Andrew agrees of course."

"I know, My Lady."

The both shared a wry smile at that. Andrew took his liege's security as serious as Aeris would have. Once more, the crackling of the fire was the only sound in the room other than the two 'cats playing together.

"Do you always have to call me that, Aeris?"

"What, My Lady?"

Honor's lips curl into a grin.

"That. Why don't you just call me Honor?"

Time froze. Aeris could feel the sudden heat in her cheeks, and she dared not glance towards her lady for fear she'd see it even in the dim light from the fire. If she had, she might have seen the astonished look that crossed Honor's face as she realized what she'd just said. Instead, she concentrated on trying to say something that would sound somewhat intelligent instead of giving in to the sudden urge to cry.

"I can't, My Lady." Her whisper barely carried over the short distance between them. "I'm just a guard."

The words hung heavy between them, and Aeris fought a losing battle within herself. She couldn't keep who she was from the woman across from her much longer, not when those eyes watched her with such patience, as they did now. Green met brown and both looked away at the same moment.

Aeris wished she could stay and talk with her lady, but knew she couldn't. Not yet, not while she had something she had to finish.

I'll make certain Joseph isn't going to try to hurt you again, and then I swear, I'll tell you everything, My Lady. Even though you'll send me away when I do.

Rising she bowed and silently walked back into the darkness, leaving her lady alone in the dim firelight.

Honor Harrington left the morning after her encounter with Aeris in the Library. It was supposed to be a simple enough mission, just a short escort duty to ease her back into command after the time she'd spent recovering. It was supposed to be a lot of things, none of which included her and her entire command flying into an ambush.

It wasn't supposed to be her making the choice of surrendering or getting all of her crew killed.

It wasn't supposed to be her getting captured.

But it was.

Aeris knew that she would always remember that day. Like others before it, it would be engrained into her very psyche and she would never escape those memories. She'd attended the

farewell ceremony due any Steadholder who was leaving his or now her, Steading for any long period of time. It was only to be a few weeks, but even that had felt like an eternity to her.

Without Honor, the world seemed a dreary place again; one where the old fears and regrets loomed around every corner. She'd met her lady's eyes as she had passed on the way to the shuttle. Trying to memorize her face for the long suddenly empty days ahead of her. The warm weight of Samantha on her shoulder was the only thing that allowed her to smile even slightly.

Then she was gone; her lady was gone, into the shuttle and then off planet. Gone far out of Aeris's reach and out of her ability to protect her. She wasn't sure which worried her the most.

The moment she entered the room she knew that something horrible had happened. Summoned by a near desperate Samantha, she entered the main living quarters to find Allison and Arthur Harrington clasping each other. Miranda was sitting nearby, her shoulders shaking, sobbing. Howard Clinkscales was staring at the holoviewer, his face completely white. Samantha flowed up into her arms, her body thrumming with tension.

A feeling of nameless dread caused her to choke.

"What is it? What's happened?"

Miranda was the one to answer, her words interspersed with gasping sobs.

Aeris's mind refused to understand what she was saying.

The days that passed after that moment, felt like a nightmare to Aeris. A nightmare from which there was no waking. She mechanically got up from what little rest she could manage and went about her duties then returned to her room. Samantha wasn't much better than her, and together she and the 'cat waited. Hoping, praying, that what was going to happen wouldn't.

Then the day came, and Aeris gathered with the rest of the sad and angry household to watch. To watch her people put the one person she had begun to think of as a friend, and perhaps more, to death for crimes that they had convicted her of in absentia years before.

To watch the People's Republic of Haven put Honor Harrington to death.

Aeris didn't know what day it was. She didn't know what month it was; she only vaguely knew what year it was. Her days had become a routine set in stone. She got up, went about her duties as the now second-highest ranking guard at Harrington house, and then went to her quarters. Working out when she had to, eating when she must, and going through the motions of living without really seeing anything around her.

They didn't know what had happened to everyone else who had been taken with Honor, but it was a safe bet that they weren't coming back. Still, no one gave up hope that Andrew might be returned some day, somehow. That the best of the guards were gone, no one mentioned. That the new recruits felt like they were children playing at being adults didn't have to be mentioned.

Samantha curled up on the bed next to her; Aeris stared at the blank wall across from her, sipping from the glass of whiskey. It was sometime in the late afternoon, she knew this because it was after her duty shift for the day. She'd been considering death, but both the fact that she couldn't get the energy up to do the deed, and her bonding to Samantha, stopped her.

She'd considered leaving, but once more, she didn't see the point anymore. Where would she go? Where could she go? Unable to come up with an answer, she stayed, drank, and tried not to think.

The annoying chirp of the admittance chime was easy to ignore the first time. Somewhere around the fifth time it sounded, it was getting harder though.

"Go away."

The chime sounded again.

"Go away!"

Again it sounded, whoever it was appeared to be deaf.

"I said, GO AWAY!"

There was a pause this time, and Aeris thought she'd won, when the chime sounded again.

Aeris wondered if she could use her stun gun, or maybe her knife, on whoever was making that really annoying chime sound. Downing the last of the whiskey she stalked to the door and slammed her hand on the admittance button, scowling. Quite ready to rip whomever it was a new asshole for disturbing her when she just wanted to be alone and not think about anything at all.

Instead, she found herself staring down at the rather diminutive form of Allison Harrington, Honor's mother, who reached up, grabbed her ear, and hauled her down to her level.

Aeris yelped in pain and had no option but to lower her head.

"Now, listen to me young lady, because I only intend to say this once. You are going to snap out of it, and you are going to snap out of it now."

The mother voice, often known as the voice of god, left no other option. Aeris nodded hurriedly as the vice like grip on her ear kept up its pressure.

"Good, now you are going to come with my husband and me, and we are going to take a walk.

Right?"

Aeris nodded again, wondering if the loss of blood flow would cause the amputation of her earlobe.

Later, she never was certain how later, she got a secure packet through the link she'd set up in her room. For minutes, hours, she stared at the com unit, at the reports scrolling seemingly endlessly across it. It was the accumulated reports from everybody who was still in her network inside of Haven. All of those she had managed to get out during the terrible purges that had followed the supposed Navy assassination of president Harres.

The problem was that she didn't know what to do with it now that she had it.

Her lady was gone and so was her reason to read the reports.

After a long moment of hesitation, her mouth twisted into what could have been a smirk. Samantha was spending time with her kittens, or Aeris was certain the 'cat would have purred in agreement.

A quick few clicks, a typed command, and a copy of the entire file was off on another trip.

She hoped the Manticoran and Grayson Offices of Naval Intelligence enjoyed the reading.

It took a while. Actually, it took months and endless attention from the Harringtons, Miranda, and most of the other staff at Harrington house. In her own mind numbing grief, it even took her a while before she realized that everyone seemed to be trying to get her to snap out of it.

That none of them grabbed her ear was a rather large blessing, since Allison's grab had left indents for hours. Somehow, though, slowly, she began to feel again, to see something other than the gray drudgery that life had become. Color seeped back into her life, and throughout it all, was the silent support of Samantha. The 'cat was a constant companion, staying with her even while she patrolled on duty, almost as if the 'cat sensed that, if she were left totally alone for any period of time, she might completely lose it.

That wasn't to say that she didn't come close once or twice.

There had been the day that she'd been at the pistol range. She'd been ambushed by a scent that had triggered a memory of the night her lady had left. When she'd been in the library with Honor, and the quiet sadness in her lady's eyes. Over and over, she'd gone over that conversation, cursing herself for refusing to call her lady by her first name, to take even that small step. Knowing that fear had stopped her. She'd wanted nothing more than to put the pistol to her temple and pull the trigger. It had been a very near thing, and only the arrival of not only

Samantha but also Honor's parents had stopped her.

Then there had been the time that night she'd started drinking. When she'd woken up the next morning the room had been in a shambles, and she'd broken two fingers in her left fist. She never did remember exactly what had happened that night, just blurry images of a near insane rage. Samantha curled almost on her stomach was purring for all she was worth.

Aeris had not touched any alcohol since too afraid she might hurt someone else.

Death had never been far from her thoughts throughout the long nights, or even the bright days, but slowly, and almost against her will, she was dragged back into life. The realization that others were helping her freely was almost as surprising to her as the concept that they hadn't kicked her out of the guard yet.

Now she found herself sitting in the formal gardens of Harrington house watching Samantha's nearly mature kittens playing. The young 'cats still had a lot of growing to do, but one had already adopted Miranda, so she supposed she couldn't call them kittens anymore.

"I just realized it's spring."

The season had snuck up on her, and she looked about the garden with wonderment at the flowers, the scent of which hung heavy in the air.

"Amazing what you miss when you're holed up in a room for months," was the dry answer from the petite woman sitting not too far away. Allison Chu Harrington was a continual surprise to Aeris. The woman's humor was devastatingly sharp as was her mind. That she complimented the quieter Arthur Harrington nicely was obvious. That letting her out among Grayson's elite was like letting a fox loose in a hen house was not.

Allison had been born on Beowulf, a planet legendary for it's rather open sexuality and society. A view that had caused not a few Graysonites to go white with shock, or red with rage, when talking with Honor's mother. That Allison very seldom lost an argument didn't help matters much at all.

"It wasn't months."

"Oh really? There must have been a time dilation effect then."

Aeris grinned slightly at the snort and petted Samantha.

"It felt longer."

The quiet admission took them both by surprise, although it was hard to tell with Allison.

"I know, my dear, I know."

The smaller woman's honest compassion was another thing that Aeris had found herself liking.

"My daughter liked you a lot."

It was the first time that Allison had ever mentioned her daughter around Aeris, a subject that both had avoided completely. Even the sound of her lady's name still caused the bitter ache in the back of Aeris's throat to return. At least she didn't feel like screaming at an uncaring universe anymore, although that might have been because her throat had gone horse after the first few times.

"I liked her too, Mrs. Harrington."

Despite Allison's best attempts, Aeris had stubbornly resisted calling the woman by her first name.

"You did more than like her."

The gentle admonition hung in the air, and Aeris's heart seemed to lurch inside of her chest. She couldn't force herself to meet the other woman's eyes, knowing how much they looked like her Lady's.

"I don't know what you mean."

"You can lie to others, Aeris, but not to me. Despite how you avoided me and Arthur like the plague, I saw how you watched her."

Aeris closed her eyes, hanging her head, swallowing against the pain that once more threatened to sweep her away. Samantha's buzzing purrs anchored her to the moment though and for once, she didn't want to seek the sweet oblivion of death.

"What does it matter anymore?"

She hadn't realized Allison had moved until the older woman pressed a kiss to her forehead.

"We would have been happy to have you as a daughter in law."

Aeris stayed where she was as Honor's mother left, stunned by that comment, and staring blankly out across the gardens.

Honor and her walking through the gardens hand in hand, content simply to be in each other's company.

"Oh, and Aeris?"

Blinking away the images and the tears Allison's words had brought forth, she focused on the small woman.

"Alfred and I are thinking about having another child."

Aeris swallowed and nodded in understanding. Not to replace Honor, nothing could do that, but as another addition to the family.

"Which means I should start doing my duty, huh Sam?"

The 'cat flicked its tail at her and rubbed her head along the side of Aeris's leg. Grinning Aeris petted the cat and nodded.

"Well, at least I can do that much for them after all this. I'll take care of Joseph and his little gang, whatever they're up to, before they try to cause anymore trouble."

She hadn't done anything to try and track down Joseph during the last few months; she hadn't tried to do much of anything as a matter of fact. Sighing she got up from the bench. It would be so easy to just sit and wallow in misery, and she would again in the future, Aeris had a few things to do first.

"Come on Sam, let's do some work. Time I started earning my keep."

Since she hadn't done anything at all that needed money since giving her first few paychecks to Priest, Aeris had plenty for what she was considering. First, she changed from her normal black and green security uniform, to a more appropriate form of camouflage.

She rather hated wearing the full dress that was common for most women outside of Harrington Steading. The only good thing she could say for it was that the large dark blue gown gave her ample places to hide numerous goodies. Most of which had been liberated from the security building. Something that the green-eyed guardswoman appreciated since she had no clue exactly what she was going to find when she reached her destination.

That Samantha was coming along was a foregone conclusion. She might not have been bonded to the 'cat as long as her lady had been, but she knew better than to ask Sam to stay behind. A short detour to the hotel where she had stashed her forged identities was in order before she went to Moor shipping.

The rather creepy little man of a door clerk was there, and she spared a sneer in his general direction as she slipped past his office. He'd been engrossed in a magazine, and from just catching sight of the title, she could tell what kind of magazine it was. Thankfully, her room wasn't currently occupied, and the door lock was fairly easily bypassed.

Quickly grabbing her stashed ID from underneath the floorboard, she slipped out just as silently and went to hire an aircar. On the long trip halfway around the world to Mueller Steading, she had time to think and remember. As always, the sense of loss started to sweep up over her, as

inevitable as the tide.

I wish I had called her by her name that night. My Lady, forgive me, for not being there, for not being able to protect you.

It was going to be hard to be completely inconspicuous with Samantha of course, hard to hide a hexapedal treecat. Still, at least she wouldn't completely stick out in the annoying dress.

I bet My Lady laughed the first time she saw these things. Wonder how she reacted to being told she had to wear one to formal events. Probable laughed again.

The thoughts of Honor were still drenched in a sadness that Aeris knew would never disappear. Pointedly she focused on her mission, setting memories of her lady aside as best she could, with a whispered apology.

Mueller Steading, at least to her eyes, was nowhere as impressive as Harrington Steading. That she was at least slightly biased she admitted with a wry smile. The aircar she'd booked a trip on banked sharply to one side and then the pilot, with the ease of one long accustomed to doing his job, slid the car into the docking platform.

"We're here, Lady."

Aeris always wondered why people felt the need to point out obvious things to her.

"Thank you. I'll be back within a day."

The man nodded, openly watching Samantha as the cat climbed up onto her shoulders. It had been a while since she'd walked the streets of Grayson openly, and she wondered if she would find a lot of changes.

She needn't have worried.

Despite whatever changes were sweeping through the rest of the planet, Mueller Steading was stuck in time. As far as she could see she was one of the few women, walking the streets unescorted. The gray stone walls, and dome above her were from at least a century or so before her arrival here and certainly were out of date in a world where Alliance technology was beginning to see constant use.

So much for staying inconspicuous.

She'd forgotten how few women actually went about unescorted in traditional Grayson society. Sighing and ignoring the rather curious glances she was getting, Aeris moved forward.

It took a bit, but she finally found the place she was looking for. Among the gray stone buildings, the newly built prefab structure that housed Moor Shipping stood out almost as much as she did. The place was at least well lit inside, and Aeris had to admit that the clean interior had little

resemblance to the den of thieves she had almost expected.

The good covers were never that obvious though.

"May I help you?"

The man behind the admitting desk was impeccably groomed and even wore a suit coat. Aeris slipped into her new roll and smiled widely.

"Why yes, thank you. I'm Inti Vasalon, an agent of Hauptman Cartel. I wanted to speak about employing a few of your firm's merchant vessels?"

The name Hauptman did more than her smile to cause the secretary to rise quickly to his feet. His slightly disdainful tone of a moment before disappeared as the name of the most powerful of the Manticoran trading cartels was recognized.

"Please, just wait one moment, and I'll get one of our senior partners."

The name Hauptman was a powerful one and Aeris smiled very slightly to herself. She'd used the ID just to guarantee that very reaction, although it was too high profile for her usual tastes. Still it seemed to be getting results here.

"Ms. Vasalon, what a pleasure to meet you, my name is Patrick Moor."

The tall gray haired man took her offered hand in a firm handshake.

"I studied business on Manticore."

Her eyebrow rose at that gesture. Most Grayson men kissed a woman's hand.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Moor, might we talk somewhere?"

Moor, presumably one of the Moors for which the company was named eagerly held open a side door and shepherded her down the hallway. He kept on rambling about how much he had heard about the Hauptman cartel while on Manticore. Since she wasn't at all interested in his knowledge of a company she didn't work for, Aeris paid keen attention to her surroundings.

Offices were located off the corridor, most with wall hanging screens picturing star charts, and the positions of the Moor shipping vessels. People bustled back and forth, relaying instructions and talking to costumers on holo vid. It looked like a normal shipping company to her. The understated elegance of the office she was led into was consistent with the rest of the décor.

"Please, have a seat. Would you like something to drink?"

"No thank you, Mr. Moor, I had something before coming here."

"Well then, what can our humble firm do for you, Ms. Vasalon?"

"First off, Mr. Moor I want to make certain that you understand I am not here in any capacity related to my status with the Hauptman Cartel."

She had his complete attention. That had gotten him wondering.

"I need to have a cargo shipped outside of my normal channels, and I was told you might be the people to see."

What she had just proposed could mean any number of things, most of them illegal. Aeris watched as Moor calculated the risk on what he knew, and then assigned a value to her based on what he thought were her links and how she was dressed. It must have outweighed the risks because he nodded ever so slightly, watching the treecat curl up on her lap.

"What exactly did you need from me?"

Bingo

"Hey, Aeris, you gonna come along with us?"

Casually using her foot to push a stray piece of the dress she'd worn out of view, Aeris forced a smile. Staying in the doorway in case Vickie decided to come into her room, the blonde smiled as easily as she could force herself.

"Come where?"

"We're going into town, a few of the old recruits, and I thought you could join us for a drink or two."

The impish woman was really starting to annoy Aeris for some reason; the fact that she seemed to be around every time she turned around didn't help.

"No, I think I'm going to rest tonight."

"Oh come on Aeris, you know you spend way to much time alone in your room. Come on down, the company'll do you some good."

Judging from the glint in the shorter woman's eyes, the company that Victoria was hinting at had nothing to do with the other recruits. Even to herself, the smile felt strained.

"Maybe next time."

"Suit yourself."

Closing her eyes in relief, Aeris slumped back against the door as it slid shut and whispered a thank you to whoever might be listening. She'd only been back five minutes before Vickie had been at the door, asking her to go out with them. The blonde had barely gotten her dress and makeup kit hidden before she'd opened the door. Hoping that Victoria hadn't gotten too suspicious about the rather lengthy wait.

Patrick Moor had done everything in his power to impress her, after all, when does a small shipping company get the chance to handle something for the mighty Hauptman cartel, even if it was for an unofficial cargo?

Samantha curled up on the bed, and tucked her tail around her body, relaxing. The treecat had been tense from the moment that Vickie had shown up and Aeris smiled fondly to her companion.

"Yeah, she gets on my nerves a bit too. But she's a good kid, just kind of, well, pushy I guess."

A non-committal flip of a tail was her only answer and Aeris grinned.

"Come on, Sam; let's go see what Allison is up to shall we?"

Part Three

The dream came, like it still often did.

This time though, instead of the people she was supposed to be leading to safety, she was leading her lady through the streets of Haven. Desperately she kept on trying to tell her lady not to trust her.

No matter how she kept on trying to tell Honor that she should flee, her lady kept on following her.

Then they were through the city streets and into the park. The snow was falling, and Aeris watched in horror, unable to change the course of the dream. Leading her lady through the woods as she had the refugees.

Right into the waiting trap.

The marine's flowed out of the shadows, looking like bloodthirsty demons.

She stood paralyzed, unable to move, wanting to try something, anything to stop what she knew was going to happen.

The General stalked towards them. Aeris screamed in her mind for her lady to run, to flee, to fight, to do something, anything. Instead, her lady stood there, trusting in her, as the General

raised his pulse pistol.

"Nooooo!"

Her lady's body fell backwards, the blood splattering across the snow, crimson and white.

Aeris woke up shuddering and sobbing, holding a trembling treecat in her arms. Deciding that trying to get more sleep was useless at that point, she sat the slightly grumpy Sam aside and made her way for the shower.

Standing under the shower nozzle and letting the hot water wash away the remnants of the dream, she forced her thoughts back to the day before. After talking for a good half hour, with Patrick Moor, the senior partner had offered to take her out to the small ground station that the shipping company used. While the merchant ships were hopelessly too big to consider even entering an atmosphere, every shipping company needed a warehouse somewhere. Orbital or planetary, either way they needed a place to store merchandise.

One look around the carefully controlled environmental dome and the way that Moor had been very careful about which areas he showed her, and she knew she was on the right track. Now all she had to do was find a way to get inside without an escort and take a look around.

Ten to one that's how Joseph's getting his personnel and equipment on planet.

Rinsing her hair, she smiled grimly.

I'm not going to let you get a chance to hurt my lady's brother or sister, whichever Allison and Arthur decide on.

It was another three weeks before she had a chance to put her plan into action. Her commitments at Harrington house were steadily growing, and to her surprise, she found herself taking pleasure in making certain that the people in the house were well guarded. That there were those who still wished harm to this, the newest of the Steadings, was still quite evident. It helped that the Church of Humanity Unchained, the official religion of Grayson, officially supported Honor and the changes she had brought to the planet.

Grayson itself was not a planet on which humans were ever supposed to live. The atmosphere was toxic, and the ground contained so many heavy metals that farming had to take place on carefully detoxified soil. No one in their right mind went outside if they could avoid it, which was exactly what Aeris was planning on.

"Sorry Sam, you can't come on this one."

The 'cat obviously didn't like it, but she seemed to understand. Aeris would have to look into getting a suit of some sort for the 'cat. Like Honor had for Nimitz.

The aching lonely pain slammed into her with little warning, and the blonde guard closed her

eyes. Swallowing against the urge to cry and forcing the terrible grief deep inside of her. She'd have to pay for that sometime, but it worked for now.

"Be good, Sam."

She pressed a kiss to the top of the treecat's head and smiled as the cat rose up on its rear paws to place both true hands on her shoulders. Intelligent eyes met hers and she stroked her fingers through dappled gray fur.

"Don't worry. I won't do anything stupid. This is purely a recon mission."

Considering what had happened on other recon missions that she'd taken part of in the past, the purely skeptical look the 'cat was giving her was justified.

Taking the duffel bag that was stuffed full of her newly "liberated" environmental suit she headed for the docks, barely managing to avoid both Allison and Victoria. To her surprise, her lady's mother had become one of the few people that Aeris could call a friend over the past few months. She knew that Aeris was off today, and was probably going to try and drag her along on one of her shopping trips.

I'll have to come up with a really good excuse by the time I get back. She'll know that I didn't take Sam with me.

Victoria had gone right past the charmingly impish impression she'd first made to become thoroughly annoying. Lately it was as if the other woman was everywhere that Aeris went and her thinly veiled suggestions were starting to drive Aeris a bit insane.

She's getting a bit obsessive here.

It was with a lot of relief that she ducked out of sight of both of them and into the waiting air car.

"Where we going this time?"

Since the driver who had taken her to the Mueller Steading had turned out to be fairly decent and hadn't asked any questions, Aeris had hired him again.

"Here. These coordinates."

The thin balding man did little more than glance at the coordinates.

"There's nothing there."

A quick tap and a hundred credits were downloaded from an account she'd set up into his reader.

"There's an emergency shelter set up there. Any problems?"

The driver accepted the credit transfer in the same move that undocked the car from the dome.

"Nope."

"Didn't think so. Keep your mouth shut and you'll get more when we come back."

The emergency shelters were scattered across the surface of Grayson for anyone unfortunate enough to either crash or otherwise get stuck out on the surface. They were small bunkers with life support and a comm. system to call the nearest rescue squad.

Aeris left the aircar parked next to one, and went around the bunker. Telling the driver to come back in twelve hours for her if he wanted another large tip. She'd given him another hundred credits to make certain she had his attention.

From there, it was a long trek across the blasted surface of the planet that few, other than the workers who maintained these installations and repaired the domes, saw. In a strange way it was kind of fun to be walking across the surface of the planet alone. If she ignored the occasional beacon or transmitter tower and the habitat domes, she could pretend she was all alone.

Like Samantha and the Harrington's weren't just a few short hours away by Aircar.

Suddenly imagining she was alone wasn't fun anymore, and she concentrated on her destination. Getting hold of geo survey maps, made it fairly easy to plot a course towards the Moor Shipping dome that would keep her out of sight. As long as she avoided any sensors that they had set out, she should be able to get to the Dome itself without being seen.

Then came the fun part.

Her course took her through some low meandering trenches, through which water heavily contaminated with mercury flowed. The rocky outcroppings along the sides gave her shelter from any prying eyes from the dome itself. There were however, more sensors planted around the dome than she'd expected.

She had a homemade little trick that they weren't expecting though. The rather heavy pack she carried contained a recorder and a mini computer. It had taken her two months of scrounging, but she'd managed to build it almost entirely from spare parts at Harrington Steading. The black box, as she called it, would pick up the remote sensor's signal and override it with a signal showing nothing unusual. Unfortunately, she only had about three hours of battery power, and the range was rather limited.

"Come on, come on, where are you... ah, tricky bastards."

Ever so gently, she twisted the cover off of the remote sensor that she was crouched next to. A quick adjustment inside, being careful not to drop the slender illegal tool she'd brought with her, and the sensor wouldn't show her passage. Whoever had set up the sensor net around this dome had known what they were doing.

Slightly clumsy in the heavy suit, she moved on towards the next sensor. The thick gloves of the suit made it hard to handle the delicate connections that had to be made in order to rewire the sensors. Turning what she had expected to take only an hour, into a three-hour ordeal. The last sensor she was working on was proving even more problematic.

The soft beep in her left ear alerted her to another problem. She had five minutes of battery power left on her black box.

"Shit. Come on, why won't this work."

The adjustable screwdriver in her hands felt awkward through the suits gloves, and more than once she dropped it onto the ground. Swallowing she focused on the job, ignoring the steady beeping which counted down the last five minutes of power. As quickly as she dared work, she rewired the sensor to show everything as normal and mentally crossed her fingers as she closed the box like sensor's cover. Her black box went dead a second later.

She'd just have to pray she hadn't overlooked anything. Constructing most of the equipment she was taking with her on this little sojourn and getting her hands on the environmental suit had taken quite a bit of effort over the last three weeks.

Now to see if the next gadget in the line up works like I want it to.

The handmade box that she detached from the suits utility belt had almost been as difficult to build as the black box. It attached directly to the entrance keypad next to one of the air locks spread around the ground level of the dome. Impatiently she waited for the single indicator light she'd built into it to go from red to green, praying it would work. If it didn't her entire trip out here was a waste.

So when the green light lit up and the heavy external door clunked open, Aeris felt like dancing.

Whee, now we're getting somewhere.

Now as long as no one wondered why the airlock was cycling when the box still attached to the outside keypad would be assuring them that no one was inside it. The hiss of air rushing past her was all she could hear outside of the suit and she forced herself to remain patient and let the airlock cycle. When the inner door automatically opened Aeris skinned out of the environmental suit and hung it up inside. There were already rows of other suits hanging there and she hid hers among them. Then, slipping into the shadows, she set off down the maintenance corridor, hunting for information.

Unlike the holo novels, the air vents were far too small for her to go climbing around in.

Of course, if this were a holo novel I'd know what I was looking for. Come on, there has to be

something here to give me a clue.

Nearly an hour of sneaking and hiding in shadows had only gotten her a bruised elbow and covered her in smeared grease. Hiding under the heavy machinery hadn't been her first choice, but there wasn't anywhere else to hide from the two technicians.

After a half hour of huddling under machinery that leaked oil on her, Aeris had almost been tempted to give up. She'd held a mental picture of her lady and Samantha close though, and cautiously moved further into the dome, staying to the maintenance passages.

She was starting to get discouraged though. Nothing so far had indicated that this place was anything other than a warehouse and launching platform for Moor shipping.

"Hey, wait a second, I won that hand!"

The voice echoed from further down the hallway she was moving down.

"Oh, right, you had a flush."

The second voice sounded familiar somehow and Aeris narrowed her eyes.

Where have I heard that voice before?

She edged forward, staying plastered against one side of the pipe lined access hallway as she did. Not that it would help her any if someone started moving down the hallway, but it was the best she could do.

"Come on, ante up."

The second voice again, the one she was almost positive she'd heard before. Licking her lips, she moved towards the open doorway staying well clear of the light that was shining out of it. Getting down on her stomach, she inched the last bit forward, and took out the small mirror she'd brought with her.

Surprising how useful mirrors are.

Licking her lips, she looked into the small room beyond, through the reflection on the mirror. It wasn't much in the way of size, just a small ten by fifteen foot hole in the wall. A single table, strewn with cards, chips, and empty bottles, was in the middle of the room.

Three men were clustered around it, studying the cards that they had been dealt.

She recognized all three of them.

"Where to now?"

"Back to Harrington Steading."

After another hour spent getting back to the rendezvous, she'd had the driver, who she was starting to call the Thin Man, drive her back to the spaceport. There she had rented her room at the Refuge, ignoring the slimy desk clerk once more, and left all her equipment.

Her mind, for the first time since she had come to this planet, was in overdrive. Spinning with the hints and fragments of clues that she had before her. It was like putting together a puzzle with only a fraction of the pieces.

She loved it.

It was the one thing about her former life she'd liked without reservation. Trying to put together the entire story without knowing all the pieces.

Watching the land blur by under the air car, she considered what her scouting mission had revealed. She hadn't been able to place the face that went with the voice she'd heard until she looked into the mirror. Then Aeris had realized where exactly it was that she'd heard that voice before.

The three men that were attacking Victoria in the alleyway, I knew I had heard that voice before.

The man who had been yelling at Victoria, the one that Aeris had put a tazer to the back of the head, had been there. Along with the two men who had been holding the beaten woman upright, to be pummeled.

What does it mean?

It can't just be a coincidence can it?

Unless they were hired after being released by the police?

Nibbling on her lower lip, she ignored the occasional curious looks she was getting from the driver.

I need more information.

As much as she loved trying to put the pieces together, she was enough of an expert to realize when she didn't know quite enough to draw anything resembling a solid conclusion.

"We're here."

Distractedly she nodded and rose as the driver slid the car into its dock at Harrington Steading.

"Thank you, here's another hundred credits. I may need transport at unexpected times in the next little while."

Shrewd brown eyes watched her as she stepped out of the cab. The thin balding man smiled, slightly.

"If you keep paying this well, I'll be at your disposal whenever you want, just call."

"Good."

Then she had her arms full of a treecat that was feeling neglected and rather upset with her adopted human, and showing it. Faintly aware of the airlock door closing behind her she hugged Sam tightly, feeling an immediate release of her tension at the 'cat's presence. Even Sam's unhappiness with her didn't dampen her spirits and she realized just how much she had missed having her close. She was so occupied with reassuring the 'cat that she wouldn't leave her like that again soon, and planning her next step, that she failed to notice Allison Harrington's approach.

"She missed you."

Startling, Aeris whirled, and sheepishly smiled. She'd had a few hours on the way back to think about what she was going to tell the Harrington's.

"I had to go visit a friend, and I didn't want her to be away from her kittens for so long."

It should have been a warning to her, that Allison accepted the explanation so easily. The normally sharp woman would never have let her get away with what was, admittedly, a rather poor excuse, as excuses go.

Instead the shorter woman grabbed both the excited 'cat and startled guard in a fierce hug.

"You missed the most wonderful news!"

Happiness and joy practically radiated from Samantha and Aeris could no more resist the smile that appeared on her face than not return the hug that Allison captured her in.

"What is it? What's happened?"

Allison Chu drew back, and held both of Aeris's cheeks in her palms, eyes bright with unshed tears of happiness.

"She's not dead. My daughter is coming home."

Her lady was back.

Honor, her Honor, was back from the dead.

Had never been dead in the first place.

The Republic had decided to fake her death; you could do a lot with computerized graphics these days, and send Honor to Char. The prison planet that even Aeris had only heard rumors of. A place where it appeared the Republic had stashed those prisoners that it thought it might have further use for in the future, including someone else that Aeris had never thought to hear from again.

Word had reached her that her father was alive as well.

It was too much to deal with, too many different emotions for her to process. Deciding what to do about her father would have to wait.

The only sign of her turmoil was the way that Samantha refused to sit still on her shoulders. Other than that, she stood perfectly straight next to both Allison and Alfred, along with the rest of the household. The shuttle that was approaching was no normal shuttle.

It had her lady in it.

Swallowing against the sudden ache in her throat, Aeris kept her eyes straight ahead. She didn't know what to think, what to believe, what to feel, but her excitement made it hard to stand still and harder to keep both the tears and the huge grin she had inside from coming to the surface.

The low drumming that Grayson protocol used for a returning Steadholder saved her from the wondering that had kept her awake these last few days. Her excitement, merged with the excitement flowing through her still new bond with Samantha, only serving to amplify it.

Then they were there, the crowds that had gathered raising a cheer as they saw the Steadholder. Their Steadholder had come back from the dead and the cheer raised higher and higher, seeming to echo from the top of the dome itself.

Andrew Lafollet was with her, Aeris saw, and she smiled ever so slightly at the older guard, who returned the slight smile. Then she returned to staring straight ahead, as Samantha, who had nervously returned to her perch as the shuttle landed, swarmed down her shoulders, and headed for Nimitz in a streak, leaping onto the stretcher that held her injured but recovering mate, the two treecats reassuring each other that they were safe and together once more.

Aeris half feared, half hoped, what she might see in her lady's eyes, so she avoided them. Uncertain now that she was back, that the second chance she had hoped, cried, prayed for had come.

Her lady came to stand right in front of her, and Aeris had to meet her lady's eyes.

There was a new weariness in those soft brown eyes, but there was a joy in them that made Aeris's heart contract painfully.

"My Lady."

It felt like a dream, and Aeris desperately didn't want to wake up.

"Aeris."

It seemed like a lifetime since she'd sat in this chair. It had been nearly a year, almost exactly, since she'd sat in exactly the same chair. Nimitz, mostly healed from his ordeal, sat curled up in her lap. The Republic State Security goons had removed the cybernetics in her hand and eye, and then had crippled Nimitz.

She had an entire new set of memories to keep her awake now.

The time spent at Camp Charron had not been pleasant. At least she hadn't been alone though. Most of her command staff had been with her, sent there together. They'd escaped from the ship that had brought them there, blowing it out space to hide their escape. From there they had progressed, gaining the confidence of the local prisoners. Charron was actually a series of small villages, totally dependant on the central Republic held camp for food. Humans could digest nothing on the planet, something to do with the protein structure in all the native organisms. From there had come their desperate bid to gain control of the central camp. Once that had been accomplished, through a brief but bloody uprising, they'd gained control of the orbital defenses. The next Havenite task force that had come to pay a visit had been forced to surrender, or be blown apart.

Honor had taken her people home in the ships of the very enemy who had supposedly sentenced her to death. A sentence she had been horrified to find out had been broadcast not only within the Republic but to everyone, including Grayson, which meant that everyone she held dear had watched her die. The digital images of her death, she had to admit after watching them, were surprisingly convincing.

The treecat purred in her lap and she turned her thoughts from the past.

They both had a lot of healing to go through, but they were back.

It was her first night here, and she luxuriated in the simple quiet of the library, the crackle of the fireplace. In a few days there would be a formal party celebrating her miraculous return from the dead. It was going to be a long day and night she was certain, with everyone from Whitehaven to Benjamin the Ninth already scheduled to be there. For now though, she was going to rest and enjoy the quiet of the night.

A faint smile edged her lips as she stroked Nimitz's fur, the 'cat purring in response to her happiness. Her reunion with the staff at Harrington Steading had been joyous and bittersweet. It hadn't really struck her that she was back, home, until she'd hugged her mother. Then, to her consternation, she'd almost burst into tears. Honor was thankful for the way that Aeris and Samantha had quietly intervened, giving her the seconds she needed to get herself back under control.

"It's good to be home Nimitz."

The 'cat fairly buzzed in agreement.

Miranda had already discreetly let her know how much mail she had to go through, and it seemed that being dead did not save one from forms. Coming back from the dead was even worse, just trying to undo some of the things she'd given away in her will was giving her lawyers stroke's. It would probably take her months to sort through everything.

She knew the instant that Aeris entered the room. Nimitz still wasn't showing her Aeris's feelings, but he did raise his head and look towards the door. The fact that Samantha streaked through the darkness to join Nimitz, who eased himself carefully off Honor's lap, helped a bit of course.

"Come to make certain I'm still here, Aeris?"

"I wanted to make certain you were alright, My Lady."

Honor smiled gently, watching Samantha and Nimitz as they curled up together near the fire. She could feel the two 'cat's contentment and sheer pleasure at being together through her link with Nimitz. It spread through her like a warm glow.

Maybe that's why she kept talking, going where she knew she shouldn't. She didn't know anything about the woman that stood before her, not even if her feelings were returned. It might have been why, or it might have just been that she was so desperately weary of being alone.

"Do you always have to call me that, Aeris?"

"What, My Lady?"

The fact that this was the same conversation they had before Honor had left on that ill-fated mission was not lost on either of them. She raised her head to meet green eyes so deep that she could lose herself in them.

"Don't you think you could call me by my first name now?"

The question was asked innocently enough, but they both knew what Honor was asking. She couldn't believe she was daring this, couldn't believe she'd even asked the question. It would be a line crossed, and suddenly she desperately wanted to see what, if anything, might wait for them

on the other side of that line.

Neither noticed the pair of treecats that watched them intently from near the hearth.

Aeris's mouth was dry, and she couldn't seem to follow the part of her mind that was screaming at her to leave. To get out before... before what exactly she wasn't certain, but she desperately wanted to find out.

Slowly she knelt by the chair, her right hand on the armrest, looking up into the shadowed face of her lady. The light from the fire licked at her features, making them even more alluring than usual. Aeris could feel her heart race as she met Honor's eyes, swallowing at what she saw in them.

"I'm your guard, My Lady." The last vestige of training from her prior life managed to get her to say.

"Your more than that."

Her lady's voice, a voice that had commanded thousands into battle, lead fleets of ships to victory, was low and throaty.

Honor, for her part, was waiting for Aeris's answer, willing, for once, to toss caution to the winds and hope that the beautiful woman who knelt by the side of her chair felt the same. Her fingers, without conscious thought, raised and gently tucked a stray blonde lock behind a perfect ear. Her fingers grazed Aeris's skin, and she sighed in pleasure at the warmth radiating from the other woman, whose eyes fluttered shut at that touch and her features softened.

In that moment, Honor was struck by how much of what Aeris projected during the day was just an act. The tough exterior and almost total lack of feelings, for before her was a woman whose soul was laid bare to her.

"Honor."

Her name from Aeris's lips was a promise, a plea, a benediction all combined into one. Then she moved, or maybe Aeris did, she was never quite certain, but they were kissing. Soft warm lips melded to hers, and strong arms wrapped up around her shoulders, a hand slipping around the back of her neck, urging her closer. She was warm and soft in all the right places, and Honor moaned, urgently tugging the woman closer. With a moan of her own Aeris slipped up onto Honor's lap, never breaking their kiss. The Steadholder opened her lips and lightly stroked the blonde woman's lips, which opened immediately in response.

How long they kissed neither knew. It was a kiss that went on and on, a trading of light nips and deep sensuous heated kisses that left them both gasping for air. Fingers trailed along fabric, learning the contour of the flesh beneath. Honor had just managed to get her fingers underneath Aeris's jacket to feel the warm flesh of her stomach when there was a discreet cough from nearby.

Aeris nearly flew out of her arms, face red, as she saw who was standing nearby.

Honor craned her neck and groaned as well.

"Mother!"

"Honor, I was going to come and keep you company but I see someone beat me to it." The wicked smile her mother was giving Aeris made even Honor's cheeks redden slightly. Aeris started backing towards the doors, taking a wide path around Allison Harrington.

"I have to, I mean, I just..., I'll see you later, sort of, well, later yeah."

Then she made her escape, hurrying out the doors.

"Mother...."

"Don't you Mother me, Honor. She likes you, and it's good to see that I raised you right."

Honor grinned at that, and watched her mother take a seat across from her.

"You like her?"

"She's a good girl, Honor, and yes, I do like her. So does your father by the way. She had some really rough times when you... when we thought you were dead."

Honor reached across the space between them and squeezed her mother's hand in response to the slight tremor in her voice.

"I'm not, mother, I'm alive and I'm alright."

Allison's grip was surprisingly strong for such a small woman but she returned her daughters hold with a more or less normal smile.

"I know my dear; just try to stay that way. Now, how about we talk about your love life?"

Honor groaned and wondered if she could run out after Aeris.

Aeris didn't stop running until she reached her room, ignoring the startled looks she got as she pelted past, her cheeks on fire.

What the hell do I think I'm doing?

She couldn't believe what she'd done; she'd kissed her, her lady, the Salamander. Her lips were

still tingling from the sensation of Honor's lips pressed against hers, and her entire body thrummed with pleasure and need.

Oh God, I want her so bad.

The blonde stripped and ducked into the shower as quickly as she could, standing under the warm pulsing spray. Which didn't help at all, and Aeris turned down the temperature until the water was just a shade away from being sleet.

I can't, I just can't do this. She's my lady. She's a Steadholder. What do I have to offer her? Nothing but a past she'd kill me for, if she found out.

Her heart rate slowly returning to normal, she tried not to remember how nice it was to feel her lady's lips on her own.

It would be best if we both just make believe that never happened.

Swallowing against the pain in her chest at that thought, and the tears that suddenly threatened, Aeris ended the shower and reached for a towel. No matter what, Honor Harrington deserved better than what she could offer. She had no doubt that her lady would figure that out by the morning.

We just let the moment take advantage of us, yeah, that's it.

Half distracted by dreams of her lady she paid little attention to the information package that was waiting for her in her com unit. Sending it with just a bare cursory scan of the material contained inside of it. Aeris couldn't force herself to read the reports that her contacts had sent her. She was busy trying to come up with reasons why becoming involved with Honor was a bad idea, and coming up with a rather depressingly long list.

No matter how she tried to explain it away, the feel of Honor's lips, the way her lady's eyes had sparkled, stayed with her long into the night.

The morning that followed was an odd one in Harrington House. Comparatively of course, since things were seldom what would be considered normal on the rest of Grayson. The entire household was in an uproar, the Steadholder was back, and a party the likes of which Grayson had not seen in a while was in the planning. Miranda Lafollet, on top of having her brother Andrew back from the dead, was in charge of planning the entire thing. Andrew, for his part, was busy reviewing everything he had missed, and had quietly put Aeris back onto the household guard. Which was just fine as far as she was concerned since that gave her more time.

In all of this chaos and bustling activity that had not been seen in Harrington house for months, Aeris and Honor held their own dance.

The entire day they spent trying desperately to avoid one another, and finding themselves in the same area with an alarming frequency. Then both would find some utterly inane excuse to leave, or an excuse for why they were there, and repeat the entire process again and again.

Aeris had the impression that most of the Household was quite aware of what was going on, and most of them were either laughing at them or taking bets as to why the two of them were acting so strange. It was rather childish, she knew that, but she just couldn't help it. If it was childish it was still fun, and she found herself smiling as she wandered through the house on her rounds, looking forward to her next run-in with the Steadholder.

All the while trying to ignore the voice in her mind that kept on pointing out that this was a horrible idea, that it would never work, and she should run away as soon as the opportunity presented itself.

By nightfall, the mixture of being alternately happy and stomach churning nervousness had taken its toll and she desperately needed to release some stress. Even Samantha had given up on her adopted human and had spent the day with Nimitz and the nearly grown Kittens.

Both 'cats thought that their adopted humans were out of their minds, which, Aeris thought, might not be too far out of the question. She was far too keyed up to go to her room, didn't want to leave the Household, and wanted to work off her nervous energy.

It was at times like that when Aeris was very glad that there were the workout rooms in the security building.

A few hours of workout should do it. Actually, I want to sleep tonight. Maybe I can get so tired that I won't even dream, that would be nice.

Although dreaming of her lady could be pleasant...

Stop it!

The gi was actually a relief to get into after the imagined restrictive uniform she'd worn all day long. Stretching, she slowly started her Kata's, using them to focus her mind, something she'd been unable to do all day long. From there she advanced, moving through the more complex forms until she was sweating lightly and had resumed as much control as she could.

She knew the instant that she wasn't alone. The warm feeling spreading across her skin could only mean one thing and she finished her last Form with a flourish that verged on showing off.

"My lady."

Honor was already dressed in a Gi of her own, Aeris noticed with a quickening of her pulse.

"I thought we already talked about you calling me that."

Honor circled her, and Aeris swallowed, feeling almost like the prey as she stood in the center of

the workout room. She kept on turning, to keep her lady in view, as she paced along the edge of the room.

"We did, you're right, Honor."

"Couldn't sleep?"

Aeris turned to keep her lady in view and couldn't help but smile in response to the low tone in Honor's voice.

"I had too much energy to sleep."

"There are so many ways to work off energy, Aeris."

Her throat dry, Aeris could only manage to nod in response, swallowing as her mind helpfully supplied images about other ways to work off energy.

"Did you want to?"

"My lady!?"

Aeris had never heard her voice squeak like that before, and she would have been mortified if she hadn't been so busy keeping Honor in view.

"Work off some energy?"

The teasing smile on her lady's face was not lost on her. Since she seemed to be considerably behind in this new game they were playing, Aeris tried to get back in the game.

"I'm rather sweaty though."

"It's better when you're all warmed up though, don't you think?"

Aeris was rather certain she'd just lost another point to her lady on that one.

"What did you have in mind?"

She might as well find out what they were playing for, she reasoned. While a part of her mind watched in horrified fascination, occasionally screaming at her.

"Sparing?"

The wicked glint in her lady's eyes left no doubt about what she was really thinking about though.

"Sparing?"

"Sparing."

That sounded innocent enough.

"Alright, sparing."

Honor stepped smoothly forward, took a firm hold on Aeris's Gi, and hungrily claimed Aeris's lips. It was over nearly as soon as it started, and Honor stepped back with a wide self-satisfied smile. Aeris's legs were none to stable and she had to take a few breaths to keep herself upright.

"Ah, that's, an interesting way to spar."

"I think that point was mine."

Oh, so that's how you want to play it.

"Really? Well then."

Now that she knew the rules, she stalked towards Honor, who danced backwards. Her lady's agility keeping her out of reach and Aeris had to maneuver her until she had the Steadholder backed into a corner.

"Do I get a point yet?"

Licking her lips, she pressed forward, feeling the heat that seemed to radiate from her lady as she spoke. Honor smiled and slowly shook her head.

"Not yet."

Tilting her head upwards until her lips just barely touched Honor's, Aeris smiled slowly. Loving the feel of her lady's body pressed close against hers, even as their breaths mingled.

"Now?"

There lips were brushing when Honor groaned and tangled her fingers around the back of Aeris's neck, pulling her close. Whereas the first kiss had been teasing and gentle, this was passionate and open-mouthed. Tongues dueled and hands explored, with a twist Honor turned them both, so Aeris was pressed up against the wall. A long strong thigh fitted between her legs and Aeris gasped into the kiss as it made contact with her mound. The rough fabric of her gi only serving to inflame her desire and she arched into the touch.

"More..."

She wasn't certain which of them spoke; she barely knew her own name at the moment. A tug and she was able to undue Honor's belt, sliding her hands up and under her gi to the skin beneath.

Her lady was wearing a sports bra and she gladly explored the hard stomach under the parted fabric. Honor for her part was holding Aeris's hips, rocking her against the thigh she pressed between the blonde's legs.

"Aeris."

The name was whispered into her ear on a hot breath as her lady explored the side of her neck and nipped at an earlobe. Shuddering in answer Aeris tried to think, for some reason it was important she didn't let this happen. The wall was behind her and her lady seemed to be all around her, supporting her and urging her onwards. Her fingers were slowly making their way down the base of her stomach and she knew with crystal clarity that if Honor's long strong fingers dipped just a bit further she would feel her wet heat.

"Aeris."

The name was low and urgent and Aeris's body reacted, urgently demanded release. Her mind though reacted to that name coming from her lady.

Aeris isn't my name.

It wasn't a thought she'd had since coming to Grayson, and the blonde stiffened in shock. With a desperate shove, she tumbled to the side away from her lady. The look of surprised pain on Honor's face cut through her, but she couldn't stay. Barely stopping the tears that threatened she stumbled backwards, backing away from her lady.

"I'm... I can't!"

Then she turned and fled, leaving Honor Harrington alone in the room, staring at the empty doorway in confusion.

Gasping, Aeris entered her room, ignoring the tears that streaked down her face. Samantha barely managed to slip through the door before it slid shut behind her. The 'cat swarmed up into her lap the instant she sat down on the bed, and Aeris clung to her, her shoulders shaking as the sobs that had threatened burst forth.

"She thinks I'm someone I'm not, Sam!"

Her lady might feel something for her, but she felt something for a person who had never existed. No matter how hard she tried to pretend she was Aeris, that wasn't who she was, not really.

"Oh god, Samantha, what am I going to do?"

The 'cat purred so hard it's body seemed to shake as she tried to comfort her human. She might

not understand why Aeris was so upset, but she tried to comfort her as best she could.

"My Lady?"

"Later, Miranda."

Honor nearly snarled as she pushed past the startled woman and into her personal quarters. Nimitz trailed behind her, and she could feel his confusion with her actions. It perfectly mirrored her own confusion with a certain blonde guard, although a thread of hurt at the rejection supplemented hers.

She'd seen the copy of the report from ONI that Whitehaven had sent her in her mail last night. She hadn't been awake enough at the time to pay attention to it though and had set it aside to read later. The report had required a high level of security clearance to even access, and had sat in her personal mail storage for months while she was believed dead. The steadholder supposed she had to be thankful that the mail hadn't all simply been deleted.

"Where is it?"

Scrolling through the tons of mail that still awaited her attention she found the secure file and opened it. A few passwords and security clearance checks later the file opened and Honor sat down to read about everything that ONI knew regarding one Aeris Thomson.

Aeris paced back and forth, fully aware of her audience perched on the bed.

"Ok, so what should I do?"

The 'cat clearly thought her adopted human had lost it. Aeris was starting to think that the treecat was right.

"Right. So I go and tell her everything."

Stopping in front of the mirror, she nodded.

"I can do that. I'll just go tell her that I'm actually.... What am I doing? She'll probably try to kill me!"

The 'cat began preening her fur.

"Well, maybe not kill, but she'll hand me over to ONI!"

Samantha yawned and wondered if her human was going to keep this up all night long.

"Maybe she wouldn't though."

The sound of her door chime cut through what was undoubtedly going to be another round of attempted reasoning with herself. Aeris hesitated a second, then went to open the door, half fearing and half hoping that it would be her lady.

"Victoria?"

The smaller woman was not high on Aeris's list of people to talk to at the moment.

"Hi Aeris, the Steadholder wants to talk to you."

Taking in the hulking form of Marcus behind the smaller guard, Aeris suddenly understood.

She found out somehow and now wants to talk to me.

Figuring that was the only reason she would have the two guards come to fetch her, Aeris nodded and stepped outside. Samantha following after her as she was escorted by the two guards away from Harrington House.

"Victoria, where are we going?"

The smaller woman kept on leading the way, while Marcus brought up the rear. When she failed to answer, Aeris frowned.

"Vickie? Where are we going?"

"Honor wanted to meet you down by the aircar docks."

If she hadn't been as emotionally keyed up as she was, Aeris might not have followed. If she hadn't been so newly bonded to Samantha she might have felt the 'cat's unease and known something was wrong.

She didn't though.

It was a mistake she should have known better than to make. It wasn't until she was at the empty aircar dock that she knew something was wrong though. Carefully keeping an eye on Marcus behind her, she watched Victoria.

"Where is she?"

"I gotta say, Phoenix, your nowhere as intelligent as Joseph said you were."

She started to move at that, but the cold muzzle of a pulse pistol pressed against the base of her neck from behind stopped her. Marcus had move surprisingly fast for a man of his bulk.

"Come on, Aeris, we're going for a ride."

Gritting her teeth Aeris allowed them to lead her into the waiting aircar and kept a close hold on Samantha. She didn't want the 'cat being shot just because one of them felt threatened.

"Where are we going?" she snarled, feeling like an idiot for having fallen for the rather obvious ploy.

"To see some old friends, Phoenix, some old friends."

"Andrew!"

Andrew Lafollet looked up from the reports he was patiently sorting through and stood as he saw who stood at his door.

"My Lady?"

"Where is, Aeris?"

His brows drew together slightly as he observed his lady's stance. She never looked that nervous and agitated, not for as long as he had known her anyway.

"Her room I would imagine."

She shook her head and he could see that even Nimitz was agitated, the treecat's tail twitching.

"No, I just stopped by there."

"On a walk then, My Lady, I think that..."

"Andrew, she's not anywhere in the household."

He raised an eyebrow at that, never having known Honor to interrupt him before.

"I'll start searching for her, My Lady."

Honor watched him go, knowing that something had happened, just not what. Nimitz had gone almost berserk a few minutes before she had come here, and she knew, with a horrible certainty that Aeris and Samantha were in trouble. Turning around she headed after the head of her house guard. Following him into the security headquarters and watching as he punched up the security logs for the last few hours.

Both Steadholder and guard frowned at the same time at the result.

"My Lady?"

Honor nodded, she saw exactly what he did.

Someone had deleted all the images for the past thirty minutes for the entire household.

"They'll know you're behind this."

Victoria and Marcus stayed quiet, and Aeris felt a tendril of fear curl its way through her gut.

"Whatever your planning won't work. Too many people know what's going on."

Victoria turned at that, and smirked. The perky image and Aeris realized now that it had been nothing but an image, dropped.

"Do they? Do you know that your precious lady never interviewed me? Huh? Neither was Marcus here, it was easy to pull off when you know what your doing."

Marcus said nothing, but she was deadly certain she saw the large man smirk. Samantha was fairly thrumming with tension as she kept the treecat in her lap. The aircar aircar banked sharply and she caught a glimpse of where they were headed out of the armorplast view port. She was less than surprised to find herself watching the Moors shipping dome that she had visited only a while earlier draw closer.

I should have been following Victoria, but no, I had to go and nearly make love to My Lady in the middle of the workout room. My classmates must be rolling over in their graves.

"Anything?"

"No, My Lady."

Honor resisted the urge to pace, and waited as patiently as she could. The entire household was roused and Andrew was doing a search of the grounds. While he was doing that Honor had stayed in the control room, hopeful that the technicians would be able to find a way to recover some of the missing video feed. Unfortunately, that was beginning to look less and less likely.

The young man shook his head and turned to face her, helplessly gesturing towards the banks of computers.

"I'm sorry my lady, but it's going to take days, if not months. Whoever did this knew what they were doing."

She nodded in understanding, even as her mind raced. Something was going on, and she was not going to rest until she got to the bottom of it.

"My Lady?"

Reaching over she flicked on the comm. channel and nodded slightly in recognition to the man in it.

"What is it, Andrew?"

"We haven't found any sign of her, but both Victoria and Marcus are missing as well."

"Keep looking Andrew, there has to be something, some clue about what happened. I'm going to make a few calls."

"Yes, My Lady."

With a shove, Aeris was sent sprawling into the chair. Her natural reaction, which at that point was to try and snap Victoria's scrawny little neck, was kept in check by the pulse rifle that Marcus had aimed at both her and Samantha. The 'cat they shoved into a cage near her, and it was obvious that the intelligent 'cat let them only because her Human would have been hurt otherwise.

With a slap of restraints, Aeris was secured to the chair and she felt her lips pulling back.

"What do you think your doing, Vickie?" she asked, tugging uselessly on the clamps that had been put around both of her forearms, securing her to the chair.

"That my dear, Phoenix, is an excellent question."

Joseph looked exactly the same as he had when she'd spotted him at Harrington Steading. The slim man's graying hairline had receded a bit more perhaps, but he still exuded the same sense of total self-control that she had come to associate with him. Both Victoria and Marcus looked nervous as they turned to face the newest arrivals to the little party.

"Well?"

His perfectly controlled tone's belied the anger that Aeris saw lurking in his cool gray eyes as he studied the two Harrington guards.

"We brought her here like you asked."

The pulse pistol came up so quickly that even Aeris barely followed it. The explosive tipped dart

that its tiny powerful gravity coil spat out slammed into the bridge of Marcus's nose. The back of the large mans' head exploded off almost in the same instant and nearly three hundred pounds of muscle and bone slammed into the wall and then the floor.

The room was deathly quiet afterwards, both Aeris and Victoria watching Joseph warily as he returned the pulse pistol to its sheath at his side.

"I will ask you again, why is she here?"

Victoria's face had gone white, and Aeris couldn't help but grin viciously.

"Just figure out your playing with the big boys did you, little girl?"

Joseph smirked at that.

"I am still waiting for an explanation, Victoria."

Aeris almost felt sorry for the girl, almost.

"You said to bring her, so we did."

"I said to bring her tomorrow morning, just before the guests arrived for the party. Not tonight."

Aeris listened closely in slowly dawning understanding.

"It was the perfect time, she'd just had an encounter with Honor, and we just couldn't pass up the opportuni...."

Victoria's last word was never finished as the pulse pistol dart took off most of her head. The body, dead before it hit the floor, crumpled next to the still jerking body of Marcus. Aeris had been expecting it, but she jumped nonetheless.

Tucking the pistol back into its place for a second time Joseph watched her emotionlessly.

"It is such a bother getting competent help these days."

Aeris wondered if she should respond, but instead just returned the even look he was giving her.

"So sorry to pull you away early, Phoenix. I hadn't expected you for another few hours. As you can see we're hardly even set up for you yet."

As he spoke, two of the three men whom she had seen assaulting Victoria in the alleyway all those months ago, came in and began removing the bodies. It took both of them to drag Marcus's corpse out, while only one was needed to drag out Victoria's body. They left red wet stains on the cement floors behind them, only adding to the feelings of dread that were steadily building within her.

"What do you want, Joseph?"

He smiled faintly at her and turned to watch the third man, the one she had put the tazer to the back of his neck, enter wheeling a service cart in front of him. One of the front wheels was loose and made a horrible rattle as it moved, she noted absently.

"I was going to just take the information in your little brain then set you up to be the largest fall-guy, or girl, in history. Unfortunately, it seems that my schedule has been moved up. Instead of turning Harrington household into a glowing crater, along with the leader of this accursed planet and that Admiral Whitehaven, I'll just satisfy myself with killing you."

The dread blossomed into something well and truly resembling panic.

Joseph leaned closer and his lips pulled back into what could never be called a smile.

"First though I intend to make it very painful for you."

"I'm sorry Lady Harrington but I don't know if I can do anything for you."

Honor's jaw twitched as she stared at the all-together too evasive man being shown on the com screen.

"Commander, I need to know why half of this information packet is missing!"

"I assure you Lady Harrington I have no idea what you are talking about."

Grabbing a hard copy of the file she had printed out Honor Harrington held it up into the video pick up.

"This file that was sent to me on Aeris Thornson. Most of it is completely useless!"

The Commander, a member of the Manticoran advisory personnel who had been assigned to Grayson was being frustratingly elusive with his answers. That she had the terrible feeling that what she didn't know about Aeris's background had something to do with the woman's disappearance was just adding to the Steadholder's frustration. Whitehaven's report had turned out to be almost useless. All but small bits had been deleted and marked restricted. Her attempts to get information through the Grayson intelligence agencies had already proved fruitless.

"I'm sorry, Lady Harrington, I will have to forward your request for more information to my superiors. Is there anything else I can do for you this evening?"

"No that will be all, Commander." She slammed her hand down on the disconnect button and messaged her temples. There had to be a clue she was missing. A clue that would give her an

idea of who Aeris Thornson was. Since it was quite obvious, from the little evidence she had been able to read from the folder, that Aeris was not her real name.

"Honor, what's going on?"

"Dad? Mom? What are you doing up?"

Her father and mother glanced at each other before entering the room. Neither had seen her this visibly upset in a very long time. Arthur Harrington took his wife's hand in his and squeezed reassuringly as he answered.

"Miranda came to get us. She said that something was wrong."

When Honor didn't answer, her eyes taking on a distant look, her mother touched her shoulder and gently called her back to them.

"Honor, what's wrong?"

"Aeris is gone."

"Gone? What do you mean gone? Where's Samantha?"

Honor resisted the urge to sigh at her mother's questions.

"I don't know, mother, we're trying to find out what happened. She's just gone."

Arthur laid a hand on his daughters shoulder as well, both parents becoming more concerned at the unusual near desperate tone in their almost always well-controlled daughter.

"What about her room, did you look there?"

"Yes mother, but I didn't find anything and the security logs have been blacked out."

"Did you find anything in her messages maybe?"

Honor looked up sharply at that, and her father nodded.

"Maybe she got a message that could give you an idea of where she went."

Honor wondered why she hadn't thought of that before and she was through the door in a heartbeat, calling out a thank you over her shoulder as she went. Nimitz was hard put to keep up with her in his still recovering condition, as the Steadholder rushed back through the dark gardens and to the security building.

"Your plan isn't going to work, Joseph."

She gave a halfhearted tug at the clamps that held both forearms down. Both were at least a half-inch thick steel, there was no way she was going to break through them.

"My primary plan may not work, Aeris, is it now? That doesn't mean this has been a complete waste of time."

An old man who reminded Aeris quite a lot of her own grandfather entered the room pushing a small hospital cart. Judging by the array of instruments and syringes that were laid out on its top, she could easily guess what it was for.

"What do you mean?"

She was delaying, and they both knew it. Anything to avoid what she knew was going to happen.

Joseph's smile was as filled with happiness as she'd ever seen it.

"Why my little Phoenix, you haven't figured it out yet? Killing Harrington was going to be a bonus, that's true, and blaming it on Manticore was going to be very sweet indeed. Her untimely demise put our plans back quite a few months, but you see...."

He leaned down next to her chair, his hot sickening breath washing over her face.

"What we really want is what's in here."

Gaunt fingers caressed her temple and she jerked her head sideways, wanting nothing more than to wash away his touch. Preferably, while watching him die. Instead, she impotently glared at him, frustrated and scared.

"I don't know anything."

"Oh but you do, Aeris, you do. You used your family connections to smuggle out quite a few people during the purge."

An image flashed through her mind, one of many she had tried to bury these past few months.

Michele coming to her in the night, terrified. The others were only a few minutes behind her. There wasn't time to grab anything but the essentials and leave. That had been the easy part.

Something of what she had been remembering must have shown in her eyes because Joseph chuckled, a sound devoid of pleasure.

"Yes, you remember, Phoenix. All those families of Legislaturalist and Naval officers that you smuggled out of Haven, the one's that you gave new identities to? You must remember them. There were at least a couple dozen of them besides the one that General Garrak caught."

Her silence was her only weapon now, and she used it gladly.

"Well, there are still quite a few people who want to talk to them. State Sec among others, and I am going to give them their locations."

She said nothing, staring straight ahead at the dull gray wall on the other side of the room. The old man was near her now, carefully setting up the tray that he had brought with him and testing the electrodes on the various equipment. Most of which she recognized and all of which were designed for only one purpose, to get her to tell them what she knew.

Aeris held an image of her lady firmly in her head as the old man, flanked by two of Joseph's goons, began attaching the electrodes.

"I hope you make us hurt you a lot, Phoenix."

"Who did you say did this, Lady Harrington?"

"One of the house guards."

All that was visible of the young tech was her legs; the rest of her was under the half dismantled comm. unit that had been part of Aeris's bedroom desk. The room was a bit crowded with herself, two techs, and Andrew, but she resisted all hints that she could leave and they would get her if they found anything. She wanted to be here, to be ready to act if they found anything at all.

"There's some really funky configurations back here, Ma'am. Someone's gone to a lot of trouble to add another channel to this unit and make certain that no one knew about it."

Who are you, Aeris? Why am I so certain that you are in trouble?

Nimitz was with her, and the 'cat also seemed to sense this place might help them find his mate, his body was tense, and he watched the technicians with the same look of alertness as his adopted human.

"Can you get access?"

She leaned forward, as if willing the young tech to be able to give her the answer she wanted.

"I think so, Ma'am, but it's tricky. I think they rigged it so that if someone tried to force access the information would be deleted. Huh, hey, Eric, give me that bypass cable will you? The T-40 spec. stuff, with the reverse couplers on both ends, yeah that's it."

Squirming some more, the tech disappeared until only her boots were visible. A few tense seconds of nothing and there came a series of beeps from inside the desk itself. Honor watched

closely as the comm. screen flickered then came to life.

"I think that'll do it, My Lady."

A bit more squirming and the young tech, Annie, Honor remembered, managed to get back out of the mass of wiring and connections. By then though Honor was too busy scrolling through all the information that had been displayed to pay her any attention.

"Look at this, Andrew."

There were gigabytes worth of reports stored in the unit. Many of them she just scanned, but a few she paused long enough to read a bit of. All of them were from inside of the Republic of Haven. Everything from reports on traffic to the reports of local troop and navy movements was held in those reports.

"I see it, My Lady. The intelligence services would love to get a hold of that."

"They'd kill to get a hold of it."

Honor's jaw clenched as she considered the possibility that perhaps one of the intelligence services had abducted her guard. The thought was quickly discarded though, if they were with either the Grayson or Manticoran governments they wouldn't have had to take her in secret. They could have just come in and claimed everything.

No, that's not what happened. I'm not going to ask why she has all this in her comm. unit right now, but when I find her she's, got a lot of explaining to do.

"Wait, go back."

Andrew scrolled back a page and Honor tilted her head. Nimitz sat up straighter on the bed as he tasted his human's sudden burst of excitement through their link.

"That's here, on Grayson."

What she was looking at was the only bit of information that had been entered that was about a place on Grayson. It looked like a small dome, maybe a warehouse or manufacturing plant of some sort. Marked all around it were the locations of various sensors and a path had been plotted through them using a low ravine as cover.

"Andrew, find out where this is, quickly."

"Yes, My Lady. What then?"

"Then gather a group of guards, we're going on a trip."

Two electrodes were taped to either side of her face, a third to her neck, two to her chest, and one to each of her hands and feet. Through it all Joseph watched with a sense of detached interest as the old man worked. The three goons who she'd seen with Victoria had gathered as well. It seemed that not only was she going to be tortured, she was going to be the main entertainment for the night.

"When I found Victoria, it was a set up wasn't it?"

"Too bad you didn't figure that out before now, Phoenix. Are you ready doctor?"

The old man nodded absently, a specialist absorbed in the details of his specialty. Making some final adjustments to a rather ominous looking piece of machinery, he nodded to Joseph and picked up one of the syringes. Tapping the side of the archaic device to clear bubbles. A part of her wondered at that, syringes hadn't been used in ages.

Her attempts to struggle were aborted when two of the goons grabbed her and firmly pushed her down in the seat, holding her still as the old man inserted the syringe. The blue liquid felt like fire as he injected it and she shuddered as the drugs began to course through her system.

Joseph came forward and nodded to the old man, who flicked a switch nearby. The hum of equipment powering up barely reached Aeris as she tried to keep her mind in focus, as she'd been taught those years ago in the academy. The older man checked her pulse and nodded in approval before answering Joseph's question.

"Yes, the subject is prepared."

"Go to it then, doc."

The elderly man activated a recording device and kept a close eye on the monitors that would record Aeris's blood pressure, heartbeat, even her brain wave patterns.

"What is your name?"

"Aeris Thornson."

"That is incorrect."

A click and her back arched, teeth biting down as the fire in her veins was joined by the searing agony of electricity clawing at her body. It seemed to go on forever, to Aeris, but probably only a few seconds in reality. When it ended, she tasted blood, having bit the inside of her cheek. Swallowing she gasped, trying to catch her breath, her body still shaking, muscles twitching in aftershocks.

"What is your name?"

The voice was dry and almost kindly. Licking her lips she steeled herself for what she knew was coming next. The drugs did as they had been designed to do, making it hard for her to concentrate on anything.

"Aeris Thornson."

This time the shock was longer and more powerful. She would have screamed if she could have, but her jaw was clenched so tight she couldn't breath. When it ended, she sagged against the restraints on the chair, fighting to breath, her entire body still shaking as if she had just had a seizure.

"What is your name?"

"I found it my lady."

Honor finished double-checking the pulse rifle she had taken from the armory and slung it over her now armored back. While she hadn't given in to Andrew's insistence that she wear full powered body armor, she had put on a suit of unpowered armor similar to what a police swat team would use.

"Where is it?"

By the way, Nimitz was twitching to go, and the fact that he could almost feel the desire to be moving in his Lady's voice, he got right to the point.

"It's listed as a warehouse for Moor shipping company, based out of Mueller Steading. I took the liberty of finding a copy of its layout."

She didn't ask where her head of house guard had found a copy of a building's plans that wasn't on Harrington Steading grounds.

"Your men ready?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Lets go then."

None of them said much as they loaded themselves into the two heavily armored aircars. The men and woman had been handpicked by Andrew, and were the best of the house guards. Aeris would have been on the team, Andrew thought as he strapped himself in.

As he reached to seal the door, Honor stopped him with a hand to his shoulder.

"Wait."

Twisting around in her seat, she regarded the guards behind her. All of them proudly straightened as they met their lady's gaze.

"If any of you want to leave now, I won't hold it against you. What we are about to do, may, at the least, get us into trouble."

None of them moved so much as an inch. If anything, they straightened more.

Andrew smiled faintly behind his lady, nodding ever so slightly in approval. Honor smiled as well, a sudden thing that lightened her entire being. It engulfed and encompassed the people around her, almost visibly infusing them with confidence.

"Alright, Andrew, let's go."

The two aircars slid smoothly away from the dome and picked up speed, heading northwest towards the distant Mueller Steading. It would take them a while to reach the dome that was their destination, and once they did, they would have to contend with the sensor net around it.

None of them saw the armed navy skimmers that followed just out of their shorter sensor range.

"Honor?" Andrew kept his voice quiet and she barely heard him over the growl of the air car's engines.

"What is it, Andrew?"

"How are we going to get into this dome without being seen? You see the amount of sensor's they have around that place?"

Honor smiled and held up the data pad that she had been studying, handing it over to him.

"Aeris did the hard part. We're just going to follow her path right up to the door."

Andrew studied the path traced out on the pad and nodded in understanding. If the information that they had retrieved from Aeris's comm. unit was accurate, she had effectively blinded every sensor on that path.

"Good thing we all have environmental suits."

Honor smiled at Andrew's slightly disgruntled tone. He always did hate it when she sprang things like this on him by surprise.

"Suit up people; we're all going for a walk outside."

"Aeris Thornson." Her voice was hoarse, her throat was raw, and her body trembled from the repeated shocks that had been applied. She'd lost track of time, lost track of where she was for that matter. She could barely remember the name she was clinging to, and the life that she was using as a cloak around her soul. Her lady's face never strayed far from her thoughts.

"It will end if you just tell us your real name, dear."

The old man's voice was deceptively soothing.

It would be so easy, I could just tell them my name, that's all. Then the pain would stop.

Everyone had a breaking point. There came a place, when you hit enough pain. After a long enough time, everyone's spirit would snap. Aeris was getting close to that place. Her mind was starting to stray without her permission, a part of her starting to believe that it would be worth it to stop the pain. Only the image of her lady in her mind and the strength flowing to her through her link with Samantha kept her from folding. The 'cat was caged nearby; snarling and pacing in the small cage they'd put her into. She bit the inside of her lip to help her focus a little better because she knew that once she gave in, once she gave them her name, they would have everything. Once the damn broke, she would tell them whatever they asked.

My Lady, I need you. Help me, please.

"My lady? Are you alright?"

Honor held up a hand, waving away Andrew's concern and moving forward. There had been... something... that had caught her attention. It had been like a voice in a raging storm, barely heard; only the impression of words surviving the storm's fury, but there had also been a sense of urgency.

"I thought I heard someone calling my name."

They were all in suits, even Nimitz who made his way alongside her, was in his own specially tailored environmental suit. It had cost her a substantial amount to have it custom designed, but it was well worth it to have the 'cat along with her now. She didn't even consider asking him to stay behind. Samantha was his mate.

They'd made good time through the network of sensors. The path that Aeris had taken was obvious once they were on the ground, having left the two aircars behind at the emergency shelter. The high ridge to either side of them gave them protection from other sensors, and the one's that were in the washed out streambed had each been deactivated. The side of the dome loomed ahead, its sides rising to tower over them.

"Tigawa, get that door open."

The young tech, the same that had rewired Aeris's comm. unit for her, moved forward at Andrew's order and started work on the access hatch. Only a few seconds after she'd started, the hatch popped with a hiss of air from inside. The ten-member guard unit stepped inside and Andrew pulled the hatch closed behind them. It was a tight squeeze but they made it. At Honor's nod, Tigawa hit the control panel activating the air lock cycle, and flooding the chamber with fresh air. Once the amber light blazed green, they began shedding environmental suits and opened the inner door.

A newly installed silent alarm faithfully recorded the opening of the inner hatch door.

"What is your name?"

It was a question that Aeris had come to hate, to loath, and to fear with her very being. Swallowing blood from her previous round, she'd shattered a tooth gritting her teeth, and spat out a chunk of her rear molar. The question always meant that the pain that had become her entire world was going to start again.

When the pain didn't start up after her refusal even to answer this time, she looked up. Joseph was listening closely to one of the thugs, who clearly looked agitated.

"Doctor, I trust you can continue without us?"

The old man reached over and made a minute adjustment to the equipment he had hooked Aeris up to.

"Yes, of course I can."

Joseph was already moving by then though, along with the three goons, Aeris noted with interest. It wasn't much, but she'd take anything by then. Swallowing a bit more blood, she watched the old man fiddle with his equipment.

"Have you been doing this long?"

The white haired interrogator never looked her way, still adjusting something on the console next to her. His answer was absent minded, and she got the feeling that he really didn't care if she existed or not.

"A while."

A glance towards Samantha showed the hexapedal treecat to be watching them both intently. She managed a bloodstained smile for the 'cat, knowing it probably didn't help at all in calming her.

"You forgot something."

"Oh?"

The old man finished whatever he was doing and leaned back on the stool he had been using. Looking at her with what could barely be called interest. If she had been a bug, he would have had her pinned on his wall already.

While Joseph and little band of thugs where there she didn't have a chance, now that they were gone, she had a slim opportunity. Now if she could just get him to lean a bit closer her plan might actually work. She didn't know where Joseph had gone to, and she didn't know how long he would be, so she had to work quickly.

"I think the electrode on my arm is loose."

Her interrogator was too experienced to fall completely for that. She hadn't expected him to, but he did lean forward slightly to peer at said electrode, a habit she'd observed him display every time he had adjusted the equipment. It wasn't more than just a few inches, but it was enough. Her legs, which had not been strapped to the legs of the chair, came up and wrapped around the startled man's neck, her feet locking behind his neck.

"You forgot to tie down my legs."

Twisting her hips, she managed to apply enough pressure on his neck that she could feel the bones and muscles strain in his body.

"A little bit more and I'll snap your neck."

Her lips pulled back in disgust at the man who weakly tried to claw at her legs.

"The arm bands, undo them."

He hesitated, trying to struggle against her, until she increased the angle ever so slightly.

"Now, or you die!"

As a torturer, he was pretty good; he never would have made it as a field agent though. Fingers trembling, the doctor grabbed the pins that held the clamps around her forearms and removed them carefully.

"Good boy."

She owed him pain, hours worth of it. Unfortunately, she didn't have hours to repay his previous kindness. Instead, she undid her other arm herself, then reached forward, and grabbed his face right after letting go of him with her legs.

"I wish I could strap you down and repay you for some of the pain you just caused me. Unfortunately my time's limited and I have to be going."

A sharp jerk of her hands, a wet crack, and she let the old man's body hit the floor. She couldn't risk him setting off the alarms behind her, alerting Joseph to her escape. Moving quickly over to the cage, she unlocked Samantha and gathered the treecat in her arms.

Time to go, Sam.

Sam touched her face with her true hands, her eyes sad with the knowledge of the pain her human had suffered, offering comfort.

"Thanks, Sam, now lets get out of here."

Honor's team moved slowly. Everything in her screamed for her to hurry, to find Aeris and Samantha, but rushing into an ambush wouldn't do any of them any good. Finding her missing....

What is she to me?

That would have to wait until Aeris was safe. For now though, finding Aeris in this Byzantine labyrinth of service passageways and corridors was going to be a challenge.

"Where do you want to start ma'am?"

They were at a crossing of hallways, and Honor peered down each of them with a frown. They all looked the same, and she shook her head slightly, trying to decide. As she was considering there options, Nimitz vaulted off her shoulder and went a short distance down one of the corridors, then stopped and looked back at her expectantly.

"Well, there's your answer, Andrew. We got that way."

Somewhere deeper into the dome a thin warbling alarm began to sound.

"So much for being a surprise, My Lady. We better hurry."

They'd barely gone another hundred feet when a figure stepped out from an access hatch further down the hallway. He turned in surprise at the sight of nearly a dozen armed figures approaching him. The surprise turned to understanding as he spotted the uniform's they wore, and he reached for something at his side.

Honor opened her mouth to tell him to surrender, to tell him that he didn't have to waste his life. Andrew beat her to it though. The explosive tipped dart from his pulse pistol hit the man in the neck, just below the jaw, and sending the headless body sprawling down the hallway in a spray of blood.

"We don't have time, My Lady."

She knew that, but she never liked such senseless waste of life.

"I know Andrew, I know. Come on, let's find Aeris and Samantha."

Aeris looked about her in confusion. This wasn't the way she remembered coming in, somewhere in the twisting passageways she'd taken a wrong turn. Where exactly she wasn't certain, but now she was well and truly lost.

"You'd think that they'd have been helpful and label the corridors, or even marked them, but no, that would be too easy," she grumbled, keeping a tight hold of the scalpel she'd liberated from the dear doctor's body. It was her only weapon, but it at least provided a measure of reassurance. The drugs were still flowing in her system, and she was having the hardest time concentrating. Just walking was hard, her legs feeling leaden and stiff.

"Just have to get to an airlock, or a shuttle bay."

My Lady....

Aeris paused.

Turning slowly, she looked back the way she'd come. She heard something, a sound, faint, and distorted by echoes. It was one she was intimately familiar with. It was the sound of combat and of people dying.

A deadly hail of fire ripped the bulkhead next to her into ribbons.

"My lady, are you alright?"

She waved off the question, making certain Nimitz was still next to her.

Andrew had to scream over the hail of pulsar dart fire to be heard. After the alarms had started to sound it had only been seconds before security forces had descended on them. Honor's guards had been pinned down and they were slowly being forced back. So far, none of her people had been hurt seriously, but more than a few had flesh wounds. It would only be a matter of time before someone got killed though.

Firing a quick burst down the corridor, she ducked behind the supporting pillar as at least four weapons returned fire.

"We're outnumbered, My Lady!"

Honor grimaced in reply, sending another burst down the corridor. Then having to duck once more as chips of the support column were blown off.

"We have to go!"

Honor turned at that, and grabbed a hold of Andrew's arm.

"No! We will not leave her here!"

Andrew grabbed both his lady's arms, forcing her to look at him.

"We won't do her any good at all if we are killed here!"

Honor opened her mouth to deny his words, when she spotted movement down the hallway that they had come from.

"We've got company behind us."

Andrew whirled, bringing up his own pulse pistol, as she aimed down the corridor as well. There was definite movement down there, and quite a few people were heading up the hallway towards them.

Honor raised her pistol, aiming down the hallway, and followed the progress of the nearest individual she could see. Hazel eyes narrowing as she spotted the uniform, then widening in understanding.

"Wait, Andrew!"

Andrew's finger had been on the firing stud, and he relaxed his hold at his lady's command. She knew the uniforms of the people who were coming up the hallway.

"Grayson Marines."

Her guards didn't know who they were, but as long as they were on their side, they really didn't care at the moment. The captain in charge of them took cover behind the pillar where Andrew and Honor were located.

"Madame Steadholder, glad we caught up to you, could you use our help?"

Honor was seriously torn between smacking him and giving the younger man a hug. She'd ask him what the hell he was doing there when people weren't trying to kill them all.

"I will never be without a pistol from now on," she promised Samantha as they slowly made their way back the way they had come. The sound of fighting was growing closer, and she half hoped that it was her lady come to rescue her. How her lady would have found her was something that puzzled her though. If it was her lady though, it sounded like she needed help and Aeris wasn't just going to sit around and wait.

"Or maybe two, two pulse pistols just in case I lose the first one."

In a long line of bad decisions, this was probably one of her worst. She'd been well on her way to getting out of there and escaping. Then, only based on the sound of combat behind her, she'd turned around and gone back towards where she'd been tortured.

"It has to be her, Sam, it has to be."

The 'cat at least seemed to agree, eagerly moving forward with her human towards what now sounded like a full out raging battle. The fact that Aeris only had a scalpel to defend herself with wasn't helping her courage.

Plastering herself against the wall, she peeked into the large room where she'd been held captive. The chair was still where she'd left it, as was the good doctor's body. Nothing seemed to have changed and nothing stirred in the room. With a mental nod, she stepped out into the room, heading towards the exit on the other side where Joseph and his goons had gone. The sound of combat was even closer here; she could hear the whine of pulsar darts and muffled explosions. What had sounded like a skirmish was now sounded like a full out battle.

"Let's go help her, Sam."

"I think you should worry about helping yourself first, Phoenix."

Joseph emerged from the hatch she was headed for, the pulse rifle he carried, aimed steadily at her, even though he seemed to be favoring his right side. Aeris froze, Samantha a few feet off to her side. The thin man smiled crazily, and Aeris could almost feel the desperation rolling off the man.

"You bitch; you led them straight to us didn't you?"

The pulse rifle hummed as it powered up and Joseph raised it to his shoulder, aiming down the sights. The muzzle looked like the mouth of a cannon, as Aeris looked straight down it.

"You think you might have won, but you haven't! I'll get out of here, even if the fucking Grayson Marine's are here, and I'll get her. I'll be back and I'll ruin her, do you understand me! I'll ruin her! Then I'll kill her, after I've taken everything she holds precious!"

Aeris shifted her weight slightly, shifting so that she could spring forward. Not that she would make it very far, certainly not the dozen feet that separated her from Joseph. She wouldn't die without trying though.

I'm sorry, My Lady.

Joseph continued his eyes feverish. "You won't even last that long though!"

She knew the second his finger started to tighten on the firing stud. Could see the muscles of his jaw twitch, the glee in his eyes as he anticipated her death. She sprang forward, a wordless scream as she tried to force her drug-influenced body to try and reach him, and knowing she didn't have a chance.

Until a gray streak slammed into Joseph's side, three sets of five-centimeter long claws shredding his shoulder and left side as he screamed. His finger punched the firing stud even as he twisted away, and the dart slammed into Aeris's shoulder instead of her head. It wasn't the explosive dart that would have removed her entire shoulder, but it was enough to shatter bone and slice through cartilage. The force of it sent her sprawling backwards, picking her up in mid leap, and slamming her back to the ground in pain.

It wasn't until Aeris heard the muffled yelp of pain and felt Samantha's pain through her bond with the 'cat that she forced herself upright. The drugs still coursing through her blood at least let her mostly ignore the blinding pain from her right shoulder. She scooped up the scalpel and crawled forward.

Joseph had slammed Samantha aside with the butt of his Rifle. The gray treecat was lying on her side deathly still, a few feet away. For one terrible second Aeris thought he'd killed her, until she saw the slight rise and fall of Samantha's flank. Joseph was just raising his rifle with his still good right hand to aim at the treecat when Aeris tackled him.

The rifle went skittering away along the steel floor and she drove the scalpel into his neck, twisting as she did to rend as much flesh as she could. Joseph's eyes widened in surprise and pain and he clamped his hands around the wound, trying to stop the flow of blood. Gurgling on blood, he still managed to speak.

"You'll never survive. They know about you now, they'll come for you, and they'll kill her to get what information you know."

"You...,"

She wrenched out the scalpel and thrust it home again.

"Will never...,"

Again and again, she stabbed, slicing at his hands the first few times, as he tried to defend himself, then stabbing into his neck and upper chest when Joseph's strength failed him, His life's blood running from him as he bled out from the wounds in his neck, great splashing arcs that covered her hands and clothes in blood.

"Hurt her!"

His body twitched once more then was still, sightless eyes staring up at the ceiling above. Dropping the blood-covered scalpel Aeris dragged herself over to the still form of her treecat and gathered her into her arms. Trembling from the difficulty, she got to her feet, and somehow lurched down the nearest exit.

Her only thought was to get help for Samantha.

"Not that I'm ungrateful, but who are you and how'd you show up when we needed you?"

Honor moved down the corridor beside the newly arrived Grayson Lieutenant, watching him curiously. With the arrival of the marine's there had been a brief, if ferocious, exchange of fire before the resistance had been wiped aside. The Marine's heavy weaponry doing a great job of clearing the corridors for them.

"We've actually been keeping tabs on Harrington Steading for quite some time now, Ma'am."

She nodded, having thought it might be something along those lines. What she wanted to know was why he'd been keeping an eye on the Steading, although she had a few ideas about that as well. Most of which centered on a certain blonde guard.

"Ma'am!"

Andrew came jogging down the corridor towards her.

"I think you better come see this."

The room was a twenty-foot wide storage area. There was a steel chair bolted to the floor in the center. A dead man in a lab coat was near its base. That wasn't the most disturbing thing though. The equipment set up on the table next to the chair was covered with implements of torture, some quite archaic. There was another body a few feet further away, blood covering the ground around it. Whoever it was had died a very messy death.

The lieutenant glanced at the body by the chair then made his way to the one lying in the pool of blood, grunting as he checked the man's face.

"We were hoping to catch this one alive, Lady Harrington."

"Who was it?"

"He has a list of aliases as long as my arm, we think he was the head of a Haven spy ring though."

Honor's eyes narrowed. So it was official, somehow Aeris was mixed up in all this, and Honor was afraid to find out how.

"Lady Harrington, we're going to secure this entire facility. Please just wait here?"

Honor ignored the Lieutenant's half order, half plea, and headed for one of the nearest exits. Following Nimitz at nearly a dead run as the treecat led the way, she trusted him to lead her to Aeris and Samantha. She ignored the yells behind her, knowing one of those voices was Andrew's and she was going to catch hell from her head of security when this was over.

First, she had to find a very important someone.

At first, she wasn't certain that Nimitz was leading her the right way. Then she realized where the treecat was taking her and picked up her pace a bit more. It was obvious that Aeris was heading for one of the airlocks. A trail of blood soon confirmed that belief. Hopefully, she could beat the woman to her destination.

Aeris was so tired.

She couldn't stop though, not when she had to get Samantha to help, to get them both out of there. The sudden pain through the link she shared with the treecat, followed by the treecat's fall into unconsciousness had thoroughly confused her. The drugs added to the haze that covered her mind, making it nearly impossible to concentrate. All she could think of was to get them both to a shuttle.

She stumbled then leaned heavily against the smooth steel wall next to her, careful to avoid jarring her ruined shoulder. She could feel the blood soaking through the heavy fabric of her blast vest, and dribbling down her now useless right arm. Her fingers were numb, so she didn't feel the blood dripping from them. The bundle she held tightly against her chest with her still good left arm barely stirred.

"Not much further now," she whispered to the deathly still form she was carrying. Biting her lip against the pain, until she tasted blood again, she forced herself to stand upright and stagger forward. Just a little ways further and she'd reach the shuttle. From there it wasn't that far to the hotel, and then she could disappear. Leave this world, and all that it represented, behind. After she took care of Samantha that was.

Stumbling again, she nearly went down; the blood loss making her weaker, sooner than she'd thought it would. Her shoulder brushed up against the bulkhead, and she gasped in pain, jerking away, and nearly doubling over.

She was so very tired.

There was nothing that she wanted more than to lay down, cradle her shoulder and weep, waiting

for death to come. It would be welcomed after all this time, a release from this pain that had been a constant companion for so long. There was a part of her that refused to give up though. Joined to the part that those long dark years of training had created in her psyche, was the concern for the wounded being she held to her chest.

Somehow - she wasn't certain where the energy came from - she got moving again. Ignoring the hot bitter tears that left clear trails down her mud and blood covered face.

It had all gone so wrong.

She was a dozen feet from the shuttle doors when the figure stepped between her and her freedom. Her heart lurched as she recognized the tall slim body, dark hair, and angry brown eyes. The pulse pistol aimed at her was remarkably steady.

"Stop right there."

Since there hadn't been much other than forward momentum keeping her on her feet, she sank to her knees, too tired even to fight gravity on what suddenly seemed like a minor issue. She at least managed to cushion the fall for the injured 'cat she carried.

The part of her that had kept her going quietly lay down and surrendered.

"Help, Sam," she managed to say.

Then the darkness came and she welcomed it.

Time held no meaning in the darkness of her mind.

Sounds and stimulus from the outside penetrated only occasionally, interspersed with small snapshots of consciousness.

A group of Marine's carrying her stretcher while a medic worked on her even as they walked. Trying to staunch the flow of blood from her shoulder. The medic's hands were as gentle as he could be, but even his light touch was too much and agony flared once more, the darkness claiming her again.

Longer, she wasn't sure how much longer; she woke again.

The air smelled faintly of antiseptic, and the white ceiling above her gave the impression of a hospital. She felt weak, even the effort of opening her eyes draining her. Her right arm throbbed with pain, and Aeris was glad that it was still there. Her lady was nearby, slumped in a chair drawn up next to the bed. Her hand holding Aeris's left hand tightly, as if afraid to let go even while she slept.

Aeris had wanted to stay awake, to tell her lady to go and sleep in a bed. Her lady had looked so tired there and she'd wanted to tug on their joined hands, drawing her lady down into the same bed. This time the darkness didn't seem so deep or endless, and more like a deep sleep, not nearly as frightening with her lady to watch over her.

She came awake finally with the feeling of being watched. Her mouth was so dry it was painful and she groaned as the bright lights above made her eyes water.

"Here, careful."

The ice chips at least soothed the desert her mouth had become and she sucked on them greedily.

"Honor?"

"Shh, my daughter will be back soon. Just rest."

Aeris managed to focus on the slightly worried woman leaning over her and grinned slowly, which turned to a wince as she shifted her body and moving the injured shoulder.

"Mrs. Harrington."

"Don't make me hurt you, Aeris, you know better."

"Allison."

"There you go, much better. You better not pull stunts like this often, Aeris, or Arthur and I are going to have to rethink making you the godmother."

Somewhere Aeris was certain she'd lost the thread of the conversation, if she'd ever had it in the first place.

"What?"

"Godmother, you know, for Honor's new sister?"

The gently teasing tone managed to coax another wane smile from her and Aeris shook her head slightly, careful not to jog her shoulder again.

"Have you decided on a name yet?"

"Stephanie."

The voice came from the door to the small room, and Aeris knew it as well as she knew her own.

"My Lady."

Eyes locked across the room and Aeris wished she could understand what the feelings were that she saw swirling in Honor's eyes. Then she caught a hint of motion at her lady's feet and smiled wider.

"Sam."

The treecat moved gingerly, but was still quite capable of jumping up onto the bed next to her and purring, a gray-banded tail tickling the skin on her arm. She desperately wanted to stay awake, to ask what had happened, why wasn't she in military custody, was her lady all right, but her eyes closed of their own volition despite her fight to stay awake.

The last thing she remembered was a pair of gentle lips pressed to her forehead and a whisper.

"Welcome back."

The days passed slowly for Aeris after that. She'd wake up, eat some of the universally bad hospital food, and usually manage to stay awake to talk with Honor's parents for a while then slip into yet another sleep. That her lady wasn't there after the first time she'd woken up began to worry her though, and as each day passed, she became more and more convinced that Honor had decided to distance herself. Ignoring the feelings of hurt, she slowly started to recover. The doctors had explained that they had spent nearly fourteen hours putting her shoulder back together and repairing the damage done to her by the drugs. It would take weeks of physical therapy to regain full use of the injured limb, if ever. They really couldn't guarantee anything.

It was her fifth day after waking up in the hospital that she awoke to find herself alone except for Samantha. Every time before her lady's parents had been there, either Allison or Alfred, or the two together. Samantha was a constant companion as well of course.

"They all abandon us, Sam?" she asked while rubbing the gray head and listening as the treecat quietly purred. She stared up at the ceiling above, surprised by the feeling of tears in her eyes.

"I guess I shouldn't be surprised."

She swallowed against the lump in her throat. After all, who in their right mind would want her around? She had been a member of the Republic, and recent events had shown just how much trouble she could attract.

She could go to the Silesian Confederacy she supposed or maybe head to old Terra, where her father was going. Her thoughts shied away from that though, she still hadn't had time to consider what it meant that her father was back from the dead. Dealing with Honor's resurrection had been more than enough to throw her soul into turmoil. Setting thoughts of her father aside for later consideration, she experimentally moved her shoulder. The physical therapy had started a few days ago, nothing more than passive movements so far. It didn't ache quite so much now though, and she wondered if she might not be able to get up and get out of the hospital. Surely she could be gone before someone else came looking for her, or worse yet, her lady handed her over to ONI?

Sitting upright didn't take too much doing, and ignoring the disapproval from Samantha, she even managed to scoot over to the edge of the bed. Letting her legs slip over the side of the bed she took a breath and gingerly stood upright.

Too fast....

The world spun around her and she instinctively reached out to steady herself, screaming in pain as she put weight on the injured shoulder. She hit the floor hard, squeezing her eyes shut against tears of pain as she tried to cradle her injured arm, just hoping for the pain to end.

"Aeris!"

She barely registered her lady's voice and the sound of people entering the room. Then strong arms were under her and gently she was lifted back up into the bed. Doctors and nurses were right behind the Steadholder and a quick and thorough exam showed no permanent damage to her shoulder. After several stern reminders not to get up alone, the small crowd left her with the one woman she'd been thinking the most about. The taller woman had been silent throughout the examination and Aeris avoided looking at her, keeping her eyes on the bed sheet.

"Aeris?"

The tone was low and soothing and Aeris once more fought tears that sprung to her eyes.

"If you're going to hand me over, just get it over with."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know, hand me over to ONI. Just get it over with."

Aeris stared at the blanket, idly tracing a pattern on the white sheets as the silence stretched. She couldn't meet her lady's eyes, didn't want to meet them and see her lady's feelings written clearly in them.

Honor's voice, when it came, was surprisingly low and nearby.

"Why do you think that I would do that?"

The blonde laughed; a short bitter sound.

"You must know I'm not who I claimed I was!"

"I know that. I'm not handing you over though, Miss Parnell."

Time slowed to a stop, as Aeris's head jerked up and she met Honor's eyes. It stretched onwards, Aeris able to do little other than stare at her lady in shock. Until Honor sat down on the bedside,

giving a tender smile to the injured blonde.

"H-h-how did you know that?"

Honor reached forward slowly, as if she were approaching a wounded and cornered animal. Every so gently tracing the guard's cheek with her finger tips.

"Your father sent you a letter."

My father....

Aeris's thoughts blazed in a whirlwind. Her father, Admiral Amos Daughy Parnell, had once been one of the most powerful admirals in the Republic of Haven. During the Purges that had happened after the assassination of Sidney Harris, and the revolution against the Legislaturalist class. Those had been dark days and even now, her thoughts tried to shy away from them, like a wounded animal.

Her lady was watching her with sympathy, letting her sort out her own thoughts, but keeping a hold of her left hand. For that, Aeris was thankful, not certain what to think now, or even what to feel.

No, that's wrong. I know what I feel for her.

Aeris closed her eyes, trying to organize her thoughts. When she opened them, she started to speak, green eyes distant, as she remembered.

"My name is, was, Jessica Madeleine Parnell, daughter of Admiral Amos Parnell. My father wanted me to go into the navy; it was a family tradition you see. Unfortunately it became obvious that I had no ability to lead people into battle, or even an aptitude for being in the navy."

Her constant problems with parts of what she had then considered an out of date system, occasional blow-ups with superiors, and the never-ending politics had nearly driven her to give it all up. Even now, thinking about the Naval Academy brought with it a sense of nausea.

"Thankfully I got an offer from the intelligence department. My profile fit what they were looking for and I eventually got transferred to the Dragoons."

At her lady's blank look, she smiled slightly.

"We were specialized in infiltration, information gathering, and sabotage."

Aeris waited for Honor to nod before going on.

"When the Purge's started, after the assassinations, I was under suspicion. My father disappeared on the way back from his last battle against Whitehaven, and many of my friends were starting to disappear as well. I was given a chance to redeem myself. In exchange for not being disappeared,

I gathered up the families of several prominent legislaturalists that were in hiding, and brought them to a rendezvous site. I know it was stupid of me, but I believed the reassurances I got that they wouldn't be harmed."

The young body twitching as the pulsar fired.

Swallowing against the ache in her throat Aeris forced herself to continue.

"They were slaughtered."

She was surprised at how steady her voice sounded.

"After that I got the others and got them out of there. They came for me soon after. It was obvious I'd helped the rest of the families escape."

The desperate flight through the streets of Haven, the security patrols just a few steps behind.

"I changed ID's, went through the Silesian Confederacy, and ended up here. I wasn't sure what I was going to do, but then... I got into that fight in the ally, and you know the rest."

She didn't know she was crying until her Lady gently wiped away the tears and brushed her lips against hers.

"When I found out you had left I went to your room. We found the modifications you made to your comm. unit, pretty tricky by the way."

That earned her lady a watery smile.

"We found the data you stored in it about Moor shipping and I grabbed Andrew and came after you. I didn't know what was going on, but I had a feeling it wasn't good. They had a lot of people and firepower though, more than I expected, and we were going to have to pull back."

Her lady's tone showed how difficult that would have been for her to order, and Aeris drew Honor closer, comforting her as her lady had offered her comfort.

"Then a good sized division of Grayson marine's showed up out of nowhere."

Aeris blinked in surprise at that, and she was about to ask how they'd known to show up when Honor answered the question before she asked it.

"You made a mistake. Two actually."

Samantha watched in amusement as her human blinked in surprise.

"What do you mean I made two mistakes?"

The Steadholder smiled.

"You sent your father's letter to them with all the rest of the intelligence reports."

Aeris's groaned in sudden understanding.

"I was so out of it I just sent the whole thing to them and didn't read it. I still haven't read any of it."

"Well they got some information out of it; called up everything they had on one Jessica Parnell and started hunting. No Jessica Parnell had showed up on Grayson recently, but almost a year ago an Aeris Thornson had come home, and she looked an awful lot like this Jessica Parnell."

Aeris groaned, knowing what her teachers would have told her about that kind of screw up. The temptation to rest her head on her lady's shoulder was overwhelming, and truth be told, she really didn't put up much of a fight.

"So they tracked down this Aeris Thornson, who had become a security guard at Harrington Steading. You can imagine what they thought of that. So they kept a watch on you, right up until you disappeared under their noses. Then when they saw the Steadholder bolt out of her steading, armed for war, they decided to follow and call up some reinforcements. Apparently they were sure I was going to lead them right to the trouble."

Aeris's softly muttered "Imagine that" went ignored by the steadholder in question.

"They put everyone in the place under arrest. Mueller of course says he has no idea what was happening on his land and is just as shocked and outraged as everyone else. Unfortunately there's no way to prove otherwise."

"And what was my second mistake?"

"Remember your aircar driver?"

"The bald guy?"

"Yes, the bald guy. Guess who he works for?"

Aeris groaned.

"Let me guess, Grayson Intel?"

"Good guess."

They were both silent after that, both reveling in the closeness of the other. If she angled her body just so Aeris could rest her head on Honor's shoulder and her shoulder didn't hurt, well, it didn't hurt much.

Aeris was loath to speak, wanting only to keep the closeness she felt with her lady and never move again. She had to know though.

"What now?"

Honor smiled and pressed a kiss to the golden haired head.

"You get better. Then you come home."

Green eyes opened and peered up at her lady a tad uncertainly.

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"But what about ONI?"

Honor smiled a bit more widely.

"They've decided that you are worth much more to them where you are, as long as you continue to supply them with those reports that you get. You do realize how big an information coup that is for them right? They've never had that much in depth information about conditions inside the Republic before. Some of them would paint themselves blue and streak through parliament for that sort of information."

Aeris could feel the siren call of sleep once more starting to draw her away, but she fought it for now.

"They would huh?"

"Well, not quite. But I sorted it all out with them."

"That's where you were?"

"Someone had to talk with all the higher ups, so I took care of it."

Aeris closed her eyes once more, this time in gratitude.

"Thank you."

Strong gentle fingers tilted her head up.

"Just don't do that to me again."

"Deal. As long as you don't get yourself killed again."

"Deal."

Lips met once more in a promise, and a new beginning.

Epilogue

"What do you think?"

"I think I should kiss you some more."

"Hmmm I think I agree."

The kiss, which started out as nothing more than a brush of lips, quickly progressed deeper. Tongues touched, stroking, and learning the texture and taste of the other. Skin was bared, and clothes were removed lovingly before being tossed aside. Skin slid against skin as the two found one another, Honor and Aeris, fingers stroking, urging the other higher. Fingers slid into wet heat at almost exactly the same moment, drawing low groans of pleasure from both.

Thrusting, hips churned as each sought to bring the other higher, to show their love. Brown eyes met green as they both soared; lips crushing together at the last second as their bodies stiffened then shuddered as waves of pleasure roared through them.

They both collapsed against the bed, covered in a sheen of sweat and happily holding each other.

"That's not quite what I meant sweetheart."

It took Aeris a while to figure out what Honor was talking about, but when she did, she smirked and pressed a kiss to an inviting nipple.

"Oh? What did you mean?"

"Oh god, if you start that we're never going to get to that dinner tonight."

"So?"

Mumbled around an already stiffening nub of flesh.

"Aeris...."

The blonde rolled her eyes and placed one last, unfortunately chaste, kiss to the smooth curve of Honor's breast.

"Fine, I'll be back soon."

"Are you talking to my breast?"

"No." Aeris smiled innocently and happily tucked herself around the Steadholder's lanky form. Grinning at the snort that her answer brought.

"What were we talking about?"

Aeris prodded her taller companion in the side, drawing a surprised gasp from the dark haired woman.

"You were asking me what I thought when it all started?"

"Oh yeah, what do you think of the plans?"

Aeris contentedly closed her eyes, listening to her lady's voice reverberating through her chest. Her right shoulder was aching again, but she really didn't feel like moving, so she put up with it. The doctors had told her that she would most likely suffer some sort of ache and pain for the rest of her life from the injury.

"Plans?"

It was Honor's turn to poke her lover teasingly in the side, drawing a surprised yelp.

"For the communications room?"

"Oh that."

The steadholder pressed a kiss to the brow resting on her chest and laughed.

"Yes, that multi million credit thing."

Aeris snorted, twisting in her lover's grasp to meet her eyes.

"Your not paying for it, remember?"

It had been a shock when Benjamin had offered to pay for what he had described as, a communications center. Aeris had been thrilled, after being reassured that she would hold complete control of the center, and would be able to receive every report that her people sent her from inside the Republic.

"I think the plans will do nicely."

Ignoring Honor's statement completely.

They both relaxed, and when Aeris yawned, Honor reached down and snagged one of the sheets

that had been kicked off. Drawing it up over both their naked bodies and closing her eyes as well, it had been a long few weeks. Filled with nearly endless meetings and debriefings. ONI had indeed been overjoyed to find out the depth of Aeris's contacts, and had very gladly accepted her as a defector. Officially, she was being listed as an outside contractor, which suited both sides very well, since Aeris had no intention of returning to that particular lifestyle.

Honor smiled joyfully down at the smaller woman using her shoulder as a pillow. It had not been easy, but Aeris had slowly opened up to her, letting Honor see bits and pieces of her history. Aeris had decided to keep her name as Aeris, since there were far too many people still looking for a Jessica Parnell.

The war with Haven was on hold; there was a cease-fire of sorts in effect. The Steadholder personally thought it was a ploy on the Republics part to buy time, and Aeris agreed, but they were not the one's making those decisions. Closing her eyes she tightened her arms around the dozing woman, smiling as Aeris murmured in her sleep. Never before had Harrington house felt so much like home.

The knock on the door startled both of them out of the light sleep.

"My lady!"

Andrew, for the first time in his life barged in without waiting for her to answer, and immediately spun on his heels to stare away from the two naked women. Even if they were covered with a white sheet, the scent in the room gave him a good idea of what they were doing. The head of the House guard started edging towards the door, when Honor's amused tone's stopped him.

"Andrew, what is it?"

Keeping his eyes fixed well above the bed he relayed the message he'd come to give.

"Your mother says to tell you that it's time."

"Time?"

Honor looked at Andrew oddly, wondering what in the world he was talking about. Aeris leaned up and kissed her gently smiling.

"Time for you to become a sister."

Brown eyes widened in sudden understanding.

The newest member of Harrington house was on the way. Stephanie Harrington, sister to Honor Harrington, was born a boisterous eight pounds even, and it was obvious from the first that she would be as much of a handful as her sister.

The End

Hope you enjoyed this little romp through my imagination.
