



# Elite: Dangerous

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# One

## A Suspicious Job

*Karsuki Ti.* For Commander Anwen Hunter it was the epitome of dread. She had spent a fair amount of her youth here, and she had hated every moment of it. Her parents had dropped her off in this system to give her a proper education that went beyond repairing a burnt-out power plant without a space dock and survival in deep space.

Sure, the school had been expensive and the teachers were good, but she never got along with all the people. The cities, the spaceports, the stations: everything was loud and crammed.

When she first arrived in Wilson Gateway at the tender age of twelve, she had been running back to the space ship and hid under her bed. She hadn't known that there were so many people in the world! And all of them were

talking, shouting and -worst of all- smelling.

She had gotten used to it eventually, of course. It was months for the noise and years for the smell, but she learned to cope. But still, she felt safe and calm only in the enclosures of a spaceship.

She hated the fact that she couldn't be with her family and that she couldn't see the stars from her window. Adapting to the constant gravity of the planet was hell for her, and, although she was an athletic kid, in the 1.1 standard g of the planetary surface she was clumsy and the other kids laughed at her. Being the only child in her school that was born in space, she was an outsider from the start. And the people she formed relations with were not so much her classmates than the people who lived and worked around the school.

Much of the work in the school, such as cooking and cleaning, had been done by slaves, something that had been the way of the empire for centuries. Since politics, and especially slavery, had never been a topic aboard her home ship she had no idea that such a thing even existed. The idea that a human being could be owned, like screwdriver or a re-breather, abhorred and disturbed her.

When she learned that one of the girls who worked in the school, and who she had been friends with, was a slave owned by the school she made a scene to her teachers that brought her six weeks of detention. The girl, whom Anwen had been very close to, was sold and she never heard of her again.

Anwen had never complained about the slavery at her school again, but her dislike of slavery had turned into a fierce hatred, and she became a passionate abolitionist.

When she had completed her sixteenth year, her parents did not return from a trip. She waited for months for a life-sign, but nothing was heard or seen from them again. The year Anwen graduated from school they were pronounced dead. Anwen held a small wake for them, but she was never convinced that they were really gone. In her imagination they were still out there, waiting for rescue.

After graduating she couldn't leave the planet fast enough. From her parents' estate she bought an old Lakon Spaceways Type 6 freighter, and started doing trade runs in the systems around Cubeo. The first few years were a struggle, mostly because she refused to transport slaves or make deals with slave-holding-corporations.

Everything changed rather suddenly, only a few years ago, when, after the sudden death of her father, Harold Duval, Aisling Duval became heir to her father's tenure. An abolitionist herself, her first legal act had been a ban of slavery in all the systems in her county. Besides some civil unrest, it had -much to the dismay of her enemies- brought progress and wealth to her subjects. With manual labour becoming more expensive, wages were rising and many systems under Duval's influence boomed economically.

The abolition of slavery was the main reason Anwen had pledged allegiance to Duval. Another was said boom. An ever increasing economy craved raw materials, and mining companies fed that hunger by exploiting new systems. Duval herself made much of her fortune with mining operations, and was said to own more mining shares than the Empress herself. Her government therefore paid good money for accurate maps of unknown systems. If

you were willing to spend months on end on a space ship, hundreds of light years from the next outpost, you could make a good fortune.

Anwen herself had made enough money to buy a second ship, and -while a hired crew guaranteed a steady income by running hauls between Karsuki Ti, Cubeo and the surrounding systems, she had been on the rim, exploring. The fact that her freighter had been attacked by pirates had brought her back here, and showing up in court to claim the insurance for her ship had stressed her out greatly.

Luckily, the crew was unharmed, but they had to submit 50 tons of terraforming equipment worth half a million credits to the pirates. And of course the insurance company had tried to stall any compensation.

Anwen sat in the command-seat of her space ship, staring through the windows at the buzzing terminal on Wilson Gateway's docks, lost in her memories.

A beeping sound brought her back to reality.

"Yes, ASTRA?"

"You asked me to inform you about available missions that lie on our path to Maia." The soothing voice of her ships AI informed her. "You have one new message pending"

"Thank you, ASTRA." Anwen replied. "Show it on screen, please."

"As you wish."

Anwen was still surprised how the gentle voice of her ships computer always made her talk in a polite and edu-

cated manner. ASTRA was programmed to bring out the best in people, and Anwen loved her for it. Of course the simple AI didn't really understand what was said to her, she could, in many aspects, easily be outwitted by a three year old, but maybe these child like properties brought forth the urge in people to be nice to her.

The job offer now flashed in the screen area above her dashboard:

MessageID: 72cb7d262ce8e8a22551f289fb328242  
From: Office for Homeworld Security/Prismatic Vanguard/A.Vernon  
To: Cmdr. Anwen Hunter  
Encrypted: Yes

— Begin of Encrypted Message —

Greetings Commander,

your Lady Aisling Duval calls for your assistance. We need a trustworthy pilot with a fast ship to transport three passengers to the Auserid system.

You will rendezvous with the ship to pick up your passengers in HIP5549 at 1100 hours standard time on Feb 5th 3302.

You will receive a fee of 120,000 Cr upon arrival in Abe Landing/Auserid System.

You are informed that this job is to be treated with the highest level of confidence, and any reporting of even the existence of this message

is seen as an act of treason against Lady Duval herself.

The exact coordinates of your rendezvous will be transmitted to you, should you decide to accept this mission.

regards,

A. Vernon

(Major of the Prismatic Guard)

— End of Encrypted Message —

“My masters voice!” Anwen sighed. She didn’t think she had much choice but to take the job. Of course she could decline the offer, but that would seriously damage her standing with the Duval faction. She knew from the GalNet-News that Auserid was planning on joining Aisling Duvals faction, and this might have something to do with it. The Prismatic Guard were the household troops of the Duval family, so this mission came from really high up. Anwen was surprised that they even knew about her up there. She came to the conclusion that this must have something to do with espionage, and she should be prepared for anything.

But hey, after all it was good money, although it meant a detour and a few extra jumps, but two or three jumps more wouldn’t be that bad for an extra 120,000 Cr, which meant she would be able to upgrade her surface scanner before she went to the rim.

She sighed again, and pressed the *confirm* button.



# Two

## Rendezvous

The ships engines howled when the *Merope*, a Diamond-back Explorer that had seen half of the known galaxy, pulled itself out of frame shift. The blue glow of electrically charged particles, that were forced back into normal space and below light speed, engulfed the cockpit. Using the momentum from being pushed out of the frame shift, Anwen turned the ship retrograde and fired the normal space engines, parking the ship in a near-polar orbit around the small moon that had been named as a rendezvous point to pick up her passengers. Not perfectly circular, but close enough.

“ASTRA, scan for contacts, please.” She instructed her ship’s computer.

“Affirmative, Commander.” ASTRA’s soothing voice replied. It took about five minutes before a blip appeared just above the horizon.

“Scanning.” ASTRA informed her, and seconds later

the contact's stats were displayed on the cockpit HUD.

"What the hell?" Anwen looked at the data. The ship was small. In fact it was a shuttle of the kind you would find on larger space liners and the huge clippers, designed for atmospheric landing, but without frame shift drive. However, there was no sign of a mother ship. The ship was transmitting the coded beacon she had been given as authentication.

"How did they get here?" Anwen asked aloud.

"I'm sorry commander, I have insufficient data to answer that!" ASTRA replied. Although the AI was usually pretty good at distinguishing a conversation between two people from a command directed at her, she had no concept of rhetorical questions. As she lacked any humour and sense of irony.

"Never mind, ASTRA. Do you see a frame shift wake around?"

"Negative."

"So, they must have been here for quite a while." Anwen thought.

She had been instructed in the second message to keep absolute radio silence, so she did not hail the ship.

"ASTRA, put us on an intercept orbit." She said out loud.

A satisfying metallic *clonk* indicated that the docking module had connected with the hatch of the shuttle. Since all ship manufacturers had agreed on a standard docking system, for a couple of hundred years now, all space ships could be docked with each other flawlessly.

Anwen unlatched the holster of her blaster, and readied her weapon. You'll never know what comes through an airlock, when you open it.

She unlocked the airlock, and the door slid open immediately. Before she could draw her gun the man behind it had her pinned against the wall, his assault rifle right in front of her face. He wore full riot gear, and looked like serious business.

"Identification!" He bellowed.

Anwen tried to regain her composure, and raised her hands above her head.

"Hey, no need to be so rude!" She said, trying to sound confident. "And don't point that thing at me!"

"Identification!" The man repeated.

"I'm Commander Anwen Hunter, and this is my ship."

"Stand down, soldier!" A female voice from inside the shuttle said. "We still want to hire her, remember?"

The grunt grabbed Anwen's gun, and took a step back. "Hey!" Anwen said, but she did not try to get her gun back.

The owner of the voice now appeared in the doorway. A young woman in her mid-twenties, wearing a fancy white dress, and blue hair. Anwen gasped. What in the galaxy was the princess Aisling Duval doing in this god-forsaken place?

The princess smiled warmly. "You'll have to excuse Major Hitchens; being concerned with my safety is his job. So he doesn't like surprises."

The princess turned around, and waved at the third passenger, a woman who looked around fifty years old and very old fashioned.

“This,” the princess introduced her companion, “is Genna. She is my handmaiden, former governess, and trusted friend.”

Anwen reached out her hand. “Hello!”

The older woman looked at her, but she didn’t take the hand.

Instead she turned to her mistress. “Princess, I must protest! This is not, in anyway suitable for you! This ship is a pile of junk, dirty, and that space-scum is hardly a suitable commander. This is beneath you!”

“Genna, this is quite enough!” The princess cut in. Her tone left no doubt that she would not take any argument.

She looked back at Anwen. “You must excuse her. She is not used to this mode of travel. May we continue?”

Anwen looked confused, but nodded. Now Hitchens, the grunt, took initiative again.

“Any more crew aboard?” He asked.

“Just me.”

“Mind, if I have a look around?”

Anwen shook her head. “Just don’t press any buttons.”

The soldier ushered her forward, so she took the lead, and led them into the ship. It was the weirdest tour of her space ship Anwen could remember. While she explained the interior of the ship to her guests, and showed them the facilities, Hitchens insisted on looking inside every cupboard and drawer in search of whatever he was looking for.

Anwen was beginning to get a little annoyed. “You like my underwear?” She said, when the grunt opened

the drawers in her personal quarters.

The princess shrugged. "I can't stop him either."

When the tour was over, they ended up in the mess. "That was the full tour." Anwen concluded. "We all meet here, breakfast is at six-thirty, lunch at noon and dinner at 7. The bridge and the engine room are off-limits, unless I tell you otherwise. Any other questions?"

The princess looked to her soldier, who shook his head. "No objections." He said.

"All right," Anwen looked directly at the princess now. "Your Highness, may I ask a question then?"

Aisling Duval nodded. "You want to know why I hired you to take me to Auserid?"

"Something like that, yes."

"Well, let's just say, I have the need to travel incognito."

"But you have a whole fleet at your disposal. Why not take one of your own ships?"

"I have my reasons. Can we talk about the route you're planning to take?"

"Well, the old lady may not look like much, but she has a jump range of 27 light years. Four jumps, and we're there."

The princess nodded. "I thought so. Do you think we can take a little detour?"

Anwen was puzzled. "A detour?"

"Yes, I think it would be an advantage, if it looked as if you jumped in from the rim. As far as I know, you could credibly be on your way home from the Pleiades."

"You want to go to Maia? That's quite a long detour!"

“No, I only want you to plot a course that makes it look like you were coming from there. So no one will suspect you to actually have come from here.”

Anwen’s head spun. Why would Aisling Duval want to hide her traces. She could show up everywhere, and be treated like the empress herself. Unless, of course. . .

“Pardon me for asking bluntly, but are you on the run from someone?”

The princess smiled. “Let’s just say, I don’t want to announce my journey to Auserid publicly.”

Anwen nodded; for the moment that was all she could hope for. And was this really any of her business? Most likely not. She pulled out her mobile data pad, and projected a galaxy map into the air.

“We could jump to N’Galakan, Zhuaha and then Sokram. It’s more or less a direct route, but not the most common. We will arrive at Abe Landing around 4pm universal time tomorrow.”

Duval seemed satisfied. “That sounds good. Major Hitches?”

“Acceptable, although I am not convinced the delay is necessary.”

She turned back to Anwen. “Make it so.”

# Three

## Under Fire

They had just jumped into Zhuaha when the troubles began. Anwen had a gut feeling that something wasn't right, while ASTRA plotted the next jump.

Two contacts appeared from behind Zhuaha A 1, as if they had been waiting here. Possibly pirates. Anwen was confident she could out-manoeuvre them in a dog-fight, but she would prefer to avoid a fight altogether. The pirates here usually used Viper's or an occasional Cobra, and more often than not, they left you alone, when you were flying empty. But with bi-weave shields, and a pretty large beam-laser the *Merope* was no easy match.

The ships were now on an interception course. The scan results gave her a shudder: Both ships were armed to the teeth Imperial Cutters. Not the kind of ship pirates flew around with in this part of the galaxy.

"ASTRA, can we outrun them?" She asked.

"Negative." The computer replied. "Interception in

15 seconds.”

“Shit!” She hit the intercom button. “Your Highness, I am sorry to spoil your trip, but it’s going to get a bit rough! Hold on to something!”

BLAM! The ship’s hull reverberated like a gong, when the interdicator locked on.

“Interdiction detected.” ASTRA’s voice said.

“No kiddin” Anwen said through gritted teeth, while she tried to align the ship with the escape vector. The engines roared like an angry cat, but she couldn’t break free.

Suddenly, the faces of Princess Duval and her guard dog Hitchens appeared in the door.

“What is going on?” The princess demanded to know.

“Little busy here!” Anwen didn’t even look at them.

“Pirates!” Hitchens gnarled.

“I don’t think so.” The princess responded, pointing over Anwen’s shoulder at the screen, where the scan results were still visible.

“Those are Cutters, best equipped for war. They belong to the empire.”

“Can’t you call them back?” Anwen asked between two wild flying manoeuvres.

“I am afraid they will not listen to me.”

Anwen nodded. “ASTRA, prepare to submit.”

“No!” The princess now looked rather scared. “I don’t think they are here to negotiate.”

“I know, but I prefer dropping out of cruise with a working FSD.” Anwen made one last attempt to escape. “ASTRA, engines full stop!”



With a howl the ship fell out of super cruise. “I want an escape jump route plotted!”

“Destination?” ASTRA’s voice ask calmly, as if she was talking about the weather.

“Do I look as if I care, just make it far. Further than they can jump!”

“I can only estimate our adversary’s jump capabilities.” ASTRA replied.

“Then fuckin’ do it!”

Anwen opened a comms-frequency and hailed the other ships.

“To intercepting ship. This is the deep space explorer *Merope* on route to Sokram. We’re not a threat. Please respond.”

Instead of answering the call, both ships opened fire without further warning.

“Deploy hard-points” Anwen instructed her ship. She launched the boosters, and deactivated the flight assist, turning the ship, so she could return fire.

It was, of course, a useless fight.

Hitchens now got involved. “The cutters are fast, but not very agile, can you get behind them?”

“I can try to boost past them, so they need to turn to follow, but we’re too heavy. We need to discard the shuttle! But even then, I need enough distance to them to make a jump!”

“OK,” Hitchens turned to leave. “How long do you need?”

“About twenty-five seconds”

“If I buy you those twenty-five seconds, do you swear to get the princess home in one piece?”

“Yes, yes of course. Just go and undock the bloody shuttle!”

Hitchens nodded, then he was gone.

Anwen turned the ship back to give it another boost.

“Shields at forty-seven percent” ASTRA said.

“God Hitchens, hurry up” Anwen whispered.

Then she heard his voice on the intercom. “Ready to go!”

“Undock the shuttle on my mark!” Anwen replied.

“Roger”

“Shields down to fifteen percent.” ASTRA said.

She gave the ship another boost, forcing her pursuers to accelerate. Then she turned the ship 180 degrees.

“Three, two, one, mark!” She fired the boosters. Ejecting the shuttle gave the ship an extra kick.

“Twenty-five seconds, pilot!” She heard Hitchens on the intercom. “Make it count!”

The princess stared at the scanner, where it was clearly visible that the shuttle had changed course and flew directly at one of the clippers.

“Oh God, he’s in the shuttle!” Aisling Duval gasped.

“Shields offline” ASTRA informed, emotionless.

“Major Hitches, you were supposed to dispatch the shuttle, not fly off with it! They gonna shoot you to bits!” Anwen cried into the intercom.

“Get your arses out of here, and let me handle that!” Was the answer.

At that moment the *Merope* passed the two cutters. They immediately started to turn, which was exactly what Hitchens had expected. He positioned the shuttle in the path of one of the Cutters, whose pilot instinctively tried

to avoid a collision, blocking the path of the other Cutter in the process.

In response, both ships concentrated their fire on the shuttle.

Anwen flew a large curve to align with her target system.

“Retract hard-points!” She commanded. To her left, she could see how Hitchens buzzed around the two attackers like an angry bee, until one of the beam-lasers hit the shuttle. Its small shields collapsed immediately. The ship exploded in a blaze.

“ASTRA, execute the jump!”

“Affirmative. Jumping in four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . . jump!”

The stars became distorted, and the scenery fell away.



# *Four*

## Betrayal

“ASTRA, damage report!” Anwen demanded.

“Shields are at four percent and regenerating. We have lost the hull plating on starboard aft. Starboard frame shift capacitor is damaged, and currently operates at 44 percent nominal capacity. The reactor containment is stable.”

“That was a close call.” Anwen stated. She turned to the princess. “If it wasn’t for Major Hitchens, we’d be toast by now. He saved our lives. I’m sorry he didn’t make it.”

The princess still stared in disbelief. “Hitchens, he . . . he died!”

Anwen nodded and clumsily laid a hand on the princesses arm. She had no idea if that was appropriate, but she thought the young woman might need it. “He was a good man. I’m sorry for your loss.”

The princess still stared through the canopy, where a

monstrous red sun filled half the view. A single tear was rolling down her cheek. Anwen felt the sudden urge to hug the girl, but she thought that really would have been inappropriate.

A few hours later, Anwen sat in the mess, opposite to Princess Aisling and her handmaiden.

“I think we have a situation here.” She started. “I want to put the cards on the table. Where those your own people?”

The princess shrugged. “I don’t know exactly. Maybe they where just pirates?”

“Not likely. Those ships were a bit too shiny and new. And a wee bit too well armed for mere pirates. No pirate flies around with military grade shields and weapons.”

She paused for a moment.

“I’m not very good with politics, but aren’t you the heir to the throne? Maybe the Empress is after you?”

The princess managed a smile. “You don’t follow the news, do you?”

“Not at the rim, no.”

“I abdicated from my right to the throne and endorsed my aunts coronation. She’s mainly on the throne because of me. She’s not my enemy.”

“Ah, so you rejected the throne. Why?”

“In troubled times like these, emperors tend not to live for long. And, to be honest, in my current position, I have a lot more power to change things.”

“Don’t expect me to understand that.” Anwen shook her head. “Anyway, who knew that you where going to

take the trip on the *Merope*?”

“Only a few trusted people from my staff. The captain of my flagship, and Major Hitchens of course.” She swallowed hard, when saying the name of her bodyguard. “I trust all of them.”

“Well, somebody must have tipped them off. And if the whole world believes, you are on your space liner, it must be someone from the inner circle. What about Vernon?”

“Who?”

“The guy who sent me the order to pick you up?”

“No. She’s absolutely trustworthy!”

“If you say so.”

Now Genna barged in: “What about you, eh? You’re some petty crook no one’s ever heard of. How are we supposed to trust you?”

“True. Except for the crook part. Truth is, you can’t.” Anwen answered. “Since you will not believe my word anyway, all I can offer is this:”

“If I wanted you dead, all I had to do would have been shooting down your shuttle. Nobody would ever even noticed I was there. No need to endanger my ship.”

“It still can be a trick, to obtain our trust!” Genna hissed.

“And then what?”

“I don’t know? What do they pay you?”

“Genna!” Aisling interrupted her. “This isn’t helping!”

She turned to Anwen. “I’m afraid, we have to trust each other. You’re the only one, who can take this ship home after all.”

Anwen nodded. "Give me four hours, to do some repairs, then we'll be on our way. I think we'll have one more stop on the way. I suggest not jumping through Sokram, but HIP 6369. Just in case, they know our original route."

"If that's all, Your Highness, I suggest you get some rest."

She got up and walked out towards engineering.

Two hours later Anwen was replacing a capacitor in the frame shift drive, when she heard footsteps.

"With all due respect, your Highness, but passengers are not allowed in engineering. Not even when they have royal blood in their veins."

"I think we need to talk." The princess approached Anwen. "I believe you know more about what's going on, than you're saying. And I also think I need to know."

Anwen turned around. "Do you think I'm a traitor?"

"No. You couldn't have possibly known enough to even know who you were picking up."

"Vernon could have told me."

"No. She couldn't. You see, I wrote that message myself. There is no A. Vernon in my guard."

"I thought so. So you actually trust me."

"For now, yes."

"All right. I didn't want to say something, before I was absolutely sure I was right. You see, the traitor must be someone, who knows the plan. Someone who is close to you. It wasn't Hitchens though, or he wouldn't have



sacrificed himself to save you. And since it's not me that doesn't leave us with many suspects."

Aisling Duval went pale. "Genna has been my hand-maiden for years now. She was assigned to me the day my governess released me from my education. Why would she do something like this?"

"Why don't we ask her?"

"No, no, this cannot be!" Aisling walked up and down, hand-wringing.

"I'm sorry. After I told you about the new course I picked up an unauthorised transmission on a hyperspace channel. Someone here is running a deep space comms device."

"No, there must be some other explanation! I, I can't believe it."

Anwen handed a data tablet to Aisling. The intercepted comms was directed towards the Zhuaha system.

Aisling Duval rose up with a determined expression and started to leave engineering.

"Where are you going?" Anwen asked.

"I'm going to end this once and for all. If Genna has something to do with this, she's got some explaining to do!"

"Wait!" Anwen rushed after the younger woman, but Aisling Duval was not willing to discuss this.

Anwen caught up with the princess right when she was about to open the cabin door.

"We need to be a little careful when we interrogate her. We don't know what she has planned."

But it was too late. Aisling Duval was had already hit the door opener, and the cabin door slid away.

“Genna!” She said with a tone of authority that made even Anwen shrink back a little.

The handmaiden whirled around. “Your Highness!” She said in a sweet voice. “What can I do for you?”

Aisling threw the tablet on the small table. “Explain this to me!” She demanded.

Genna stared at the data tablet for a moment, then turned towards the princess. “I’ll have to admit that little bitch is cleverer than I thought! She found the transmission, right?”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter, they’ll be here soon anyway. Until then...” She suddenly produced a blaster from somewhere under her dress.

“Genna, why?” Aisling Duval asked.

“Why? Why?” Genna laughed. “Your grandfather was weak. He was a shame for the empire. Or what’s left of it. We need to restore the empire to it’s old power and glory!”

“You’re with Emperor’s Dawn!”

“Finally, she’s getting it.”

“Why are you going after me then?” Aisling wanted to know.

“Because you are the natural heir to the throne! We spend years to prepare the court, undermine your own and put everything in place to be able to control you, once you become Empress. And what do you do? Hand it over to your aunt without even putting up for a fight. But Arissa is weak, she knows she needs your support, if

she wants to keep the senate on her side. With you out of the way though. . . ”

“Why would you work these people?”

“Still so stupid. You have no idea about the true values. We must restore the empire to it’s former glory, or we will all fade away! What has the world become. Humans from all the stars literally invade our territory, slaves who wander free and start businesses. These are times of decadence and filth!”

“In the old empire you would have been a slave yourself. Is that really what you want?”

“Pfft.” Genna sneered. “I’m not important, I am only a tiny cog in the big machine. I do my part and that will be my glory.”

“Two ships just dropped from hyperspace.” ASTRA’s voice suddenly boomed over the intercom. Time to interception minus 71 seconds.”

Genna now pointed the gun at Anwen. “They want you alive if possible, princess, dead if necessary. But she, well, she’s just in the way.”

Anwen instinctively grabbed the princess, pulled her back, and slammed the door shut.

“Run!” She told the princess.

“Your blaster!” Aisling screamed.

“Hitchens took it! Run!”

The two ran towards the mess, hearing the cabin door open behind them. Anwen shut the airlock behind her and pushed the princess forward. They ran past engineering and entered the bridge. Anwen jumped into her seat.

“Your Highness, seal the airlock!”

“Done!”

“ASTRA, full speed ahead and plot an escape course.”

“Affirmative.”

“Open airlocks one and two!”

“This is not advisable!” ASTRA stated kindly. “It would lead to decompression of decks one and two.”

“I know, just do it.” Anwen screamed, while she started flying evasive manoeuvres.

“Ships in range in minus 5”

The ship was shaken by something that sounded like an explosion.

“Airlocks open, decks one and two depressurised.”

Aisling Duval jumped into the navigator seat below Anwen. “What did you do that for?”

“She has a blaster, she can burn her way through the airlocks. I can’t depressurise the living quarters. And now there is vacuum between her and us. And the space-suits are on our side.”

“Good thinking!”

Laser beams flashed left and right of them.

“Shields down to 2 percent” ASTRA said.

“They are targeting our engines, they want us alive!”

“Can you operate a gun turret?”

“No!”

“Well, now you learn”

All the gizmos in front of Aisling Duval lit up, and yellow cross-hair began to hover in front of the canopy. She grabbed the stick, and tried moving it.

“Course plotted. Align ship with jump vector” ASTRA soothed.

Anwen switched off all flight assists, and swung the ship around. Immediately their attackers came into view.

Aisling tried to move the cross hair on one of the ships. It turned red, and she pulled the trigger. Two multi-cannons and a beam-laser began spitting doom onto the other ship, and she could see how the shields lit up in an eerie blue glow.

Both enemy ships scrambled, and the acceleration pressed her into her seat, as the turbo boost propelled the *Merope* past her attackers.

The hard points retracted, and ASTRA's soothing voice started counting down.

"Four... Three... Two... One... Engage!"

The world fell away, as the ship jumped. What seemed like hours, but was merely seconds later they fell into frame shift and a wave of blinding light and heat rushed over Aisling, before the canopy shielding turned dark enough to allow her a glance at the red dwarf they orbited now.

"Prepare for another jump!" Anwen called from above.

ASTRA counted again, and again, the stars fell away. But this time something seemed wrong. In mid jump a terrible noise, like tearing metal, screamed through the entire ship. It's passengers felt thrown around in their seats, and a loud boom ended their jump.

The *Merope* immediately fell out of frame shift into normal space, and half of the HUDs in the cockpit went dark. Pieces of metal and broken glass lazily drifted around the cockpit.

"What happened?" Aisling asked.

"Something blew up during the jump!" Anwen looked through the canopy into the light of a glaring white super-

giant. Suddenly a black shadow crossed their field of view.

It was a, terribly distorted, human body. It slowly drifted through the ships emergency shields, just to to burn up in the glaring heat, as it drifted into open sunlight.

“Was that?” Aisling began.

“Genna.” Anwen finished the sentence. “Seems she found a way to harm us without getting to the cockpit. She blew something up.”

Aisling’s heart sank.

# Five

## Adrift

“ASTRA, damage report!” Anwen commanded. There was no response from the ship’s AI.

“Shit!” Anwen began working the controls. A few instruments in the cockpit lit up. She grabbed the stick, and fired the thrusters. Slowly the *Merope* stopped its slow spin, and the super giant slid out of view. She carefully increased forward thrust.

“This will shield us from the solar radiation for the moment. The emergency shields are holding.”

She looked at her passenger. “Are you injured?”

The princess just stared blankly into the void.

Anwen grabbed the younger woman firmly by the shoulders. “Hey, snap out of it, your highness. We have work to do!”

“Sorry.” The princess finally responded. “I...I think I’m OK.”

“Come on.” Anwen helped her up. “Let’s see what’s left of my ship.”

The damage turned out to be disastrous. The explosion had torn a gaping hole into the ship’s mid-section, depressurising the living quarters.

“I need to have a look at this. Do you think you can operate the wireless?”

“Can’t we call for help?” Aisling Duval asked.

“No. With the FSD and the reactor down, we can’t send a signal beyond this system. Plus, the two ships closest to us are those who want to blow us out of the sky. So I think radio silence might be best.”

“Oh.”

Anwen led her passenger to the pilot chair. “OK. You see these controls?” She pointed to a display. “If the red bar climbs over 1000, you call me, OK?”

“What is it?” Aisling asked.

“It shows the radiation that gets through the shields.”

“With these controls, you should be able to turn the ship, left and right.” Anwen continued.

“Wait, you want me to pilot the ship?”

“Just turn it a bit if I say so. Give it a try.”

The princess pushed the joystick to the left, and the ship slowly started rotating.

“Woah! Gently!” Anwen warned.

She let go of the stick, and the rotation stopped.

“The basic controls still work, so the rotation stops, once you let go.”

“Why do you want me to do this?” The princess asked.

“I’m going outside to assess the damage. And I need you to keep an eye on the radiation, and keep me in the



shadow while I'm out there. Emergency shielding or not, this close to a star I'll get cooked in an instant outside the ship's shadow."

"Oh." The princess breathed.

"If I tell you on the wireless to turn the ship you move that stick. Nice and slowly, clear?"

The princess nodded.

"Good." Anwen left the bridge, leaving a very scared princess behind.

A few minutes later, Aisling was highly concentrated. It was weird how much the human body, let alone the mind, could take, if it was about survival. She looked at the readings on the display, while she listened to the captains heavy breathing on the intercom.

"Rotate starboard by two degrees, please!"

She gently pushed the stick, and watched the ship rotate. It was difficult to hold it in position without increasing rotation.

"Stop." Anwen commanded. She let go, and felt the slight shiver in the ships hull, as the thrusters fired to stop the rotation.

Anwen's voice came from the intercom. "The plant and the FSD look OK. It's just the wiring that connects the main computer with power that's broken. I think can fix that. And we need to seal off the living area. The damage to that part of the ship is exhaustive. Wanna hear the bad news?"

Aisling didn't, but she knew she would get to hear it anyway. As if their situation wasn't bad enough.

“Your friend knew what she was doing. She couldn’t blow up our engines, so she went for the second most important system on the ship. The blew the water tanks. We’re out of fresh water, I’m afraid.”

“That is bad.” Aisling whispered.

“Given that we’re five days away from the next outpost, yes. I’m coming back in.”

About fifteen minutes later Anwen came back onto the bridge. She carried something that looked like a sleeping bag, and some technical gadgets.

“Sorry, the living quarters are closed. So you have to sleep on the floor here on the bridge. Not the most comfortable place, but hey, the view is fantastic!”

“Huh?” Aisling asked dumbly. She was still trying to get to terms with the fact that she was, most likely, going to die out here.

Anwen smiled encouragingly. “You need some rest princess. After all, this was a pretty shitty day. Probably the worst you ever had.”

“I don’t think I can sleep.” The princess said. “My head is humming.”

“You’re going to need your strength. There’s a lot of work to do, and I need your help.”

Aisling snorted. “What for?”

“To get this old gal moving again, duh?” Anwen shook her head.

“Why would we do that? To die of thirst on the way?” The princesses face was reflecting her hopelessness.

“We’re not going to die!” Anwen returned.

“Are we? You said it yourself, even if you can repair the engine, we’re gonna die from thirst before we can reach a habitable system!” Tears welled up in the princesses eyes. “Sorry” she sobbed. “I usually don’t don’t cry in front of other people, but I don’t think, I can handle this.”

Anwen put a hand on the young woman’s shoulder. “I don’t know much about politics, and all this fancy and scary stuff you usually deal with. But this is not the Royal Court. This is my territory. You don’t grow up on a prospector spaceship, without learning how to survive in deep space. We’re far from done yet. We’ll do this, one task at a time, first we regain control of the engines, than we tackle the water problem. We aren’t going to die, and we’re not giving up!”

Aisling looked up. “How in the universe are we going to do all of this?”

Anwen smiled. “I make something up on the way. I’ve seen worse, you know?”

“How can it be worse than this?”

“We could be on an unstable orbit.”

“You’ve been in a situation like this before?”

“Without the water problem, but low on oxygen, and with a collapsing orbit, yes.” Anwen shrugged. “You don’t live very long in deep space, if you can’t improvise a way out of a bad situation.”

“You really believe we can make it?”

“Would I lie to my sovereign?” Anwen grinned.

“Thanks.” Aisling replied. “One more thing.” She added.

“Yes?”

“Can you call me Aisling? I don’t think my title is of much use out here, and I’d feel better having, well, a friend around me.”

Anwen formally stretched out her hand. “I’m Anwen.”  
Aisling took the hand, and managed a smile.

# *Six*

EVA

A fierce hissing sound was the harbinger of death. Aisling looked in horror as a small crack made a path through the canopy, the hissing ever louder. The crack branched into many, and with morbid fascination Aisling admired the beautiful pattern that emerged on the glass. When the cracks merged at the top of the glass dome, she braced for the inevitable. With a loud bang the canopy shattered, and Aisling felt how she was blown out into the emptiness of space.

Aisling sat up abruptly, listening to the echo of her scream. It took a while before she realised where she was. She looked around. The cockpit of the *Merope* was engulfed in the soft orange glow of the heads-up displays, and a quietening, friendly hum from the consoles filled the room. The canopy was undamaged, and the glare of the

super-giant that reflected in the cockpit's frame seemed less blinding.

Aisling took a deep breath. Her mouth was bone dry, and behind her forehead a hammering pain made it almost impossible to think. She stared through the windows. Maybe it was the headache that made her slow, but it took a while until she realised the familiar streaks of rainbow-coloured light flying past the windows, indicating that the ship was in frame-shift. Slowly, she stood up, and looked around. The pilot's seat was empty, and the consoles told her that ASTRA was in control of the ship.

"ASTRA?" She asked.

"Yes, your highness?" The computer's soothing voice answered.

"What's going on? Where is Anwen?"

"Commander Hunter is in the cargo bay, she will be back on the bridge shortly."

Aisling sat down again and moaned.

"Are you in need of medical attention?" ASTRA's voice asked.

"No, I just need some water."

"Water level in the freshwater tank is at 0.0%" ASTRA informed her.

"Yeah, tell me something new."

"I am sorry, I have insufficient data for that request. Please specify a topic and a time-span, on which you require information."

"Ah, forget it. Are we in frame-shift?"

"Positive. Frame-shift-drive operates at 31.3% capacity."

Aisling was impressed. "Wow that girl really did it!"



With a hissing sound the cockpit door opened. Anwen entered. She looked exhausted, and oil and dirt was smeared across her face. But there was a glow in her eyes that yelled enthusiasm across the bridge.

“Ah, you’re awake!” She stated. “Do you feel any better?”

Aisling shook her head. “To be honest, I have a splitting headache. And I my throat aches.”

Anwen nodded and handed her a plastic bottle. “Here, this is the last one. Drink it slowly.”

Aisling took the bottle, and wrestled down the impulse to down the entire bottle in one gulp.

“Sorry that there isn’t more.” Anwen said. “I drank two during the repairs, and I needed some of it for fixing the ship. We have some water left in the space suits, but we need that for later.”

“Thanks.” Aisling said, while she enjoyed the cool water running down her sore throat like a soothing balm.

A moment later, she felt strong enough to talk. “What’s the situation?”

“As you may have noticed, I reconnected the computer to the main engines. All a bit improvised, but it will allow us to jump. While you slept, I repaired the damage to the water tanks, so we are ready for a refill.”

Aisling nodded. Some of the commander’s excitement found it’s way into her own feelings. “You weren’t lying when you said you’d fix the ship. But the tank is still empty.”

“This is why we haven’t jumped yet. We need a refill.”

Aisling shook her head. “There isn’t a single world in the habitable zone in this system, or is there?”

“No, but who says water has to be liquid? Beyond the snow line, there is enough water ice to fill a thousand oceans.”

“Snow line?” Aisling asked.

“That’s how you call the point around a star from which the temperature is below the freezing point of water. Worlds beyond that point usually contain lots of water ice. We’re on the way to one of the moons of the fourth planet now. Scanners indicate it’s surface contains more ice than rock.”

Aisling looked at the commander. “And how do we get it into the *Merope*?”

The space adventurer grinned. “You care for a little EVA?”

Anwen was fully concentrated when she tried to set down the *Merope* on the moon’s surface as gently as possible. Luckily, the moon was comparatively small and not very dense, so its surface gravity was only a few percent of standard gravity. But the terrain was rugged and Anwen tried to land the ship as close to a deep crack in the surface as possible.

With a *thud* the ship touched down, and when the engines shut down a scary creaking sound echoed through the battered ship.

“I’d not say, I wanna do this every day.” Anwen leaned back into her pilots chair, and wiped the sweat from her brows.



“Alright then, let’s not waste anymore time, we need water, and I want a shower.” She got up from her seat, and headed for the exit. Aisling reluctantly followed her.

In the cargo bay, they prepared for the EVA. In the hours before their approach, they had already been packing lots of material onto the small Scarab vehicle. Equipment that, for most part, Aisling couldn’t even name.

It was clear that Anwen was the boss around here. When they began work she had started giving orders to Aisling. Always in a polite manner, but in a way that allowed no objection. Not that Aisling wanted to object; she actually discovered she was kind of enjoying it. Usually everyone expected her to make the decisions and to be strong willed and unforgiving. She couldn’t afford to show weakness at her court. Here on the other hand, the commander had taken full responsibility. Although not to be in charge was a weird feeling for her, it gave her solace. Just do what she says, and you’ll be OK.

As if to proof that the trust put in her was justified, Anwen was extra careful when she helped Aisling put on a space suit. She checked everything twice and patiently explained every detail of the suit; more than once, if she thought it necessary. So Aisling was nervous, but felt prepared when the two women rolled the Scarab off the platform and into the open.

“Wow, this is amazing!” Aisling whispered into her intercom. The Scarab was rolling along the edge of a white cliff that glittered in the bluish-white light of the distant super-giant, and above the Scarab’s glass dome, locked in the sky, was the enormous crescent of a Jovian gas giant. Hypnotising bands of clouds where moving

lazily across its surface. The rest of the sky was entirely black. The sunlight, and the shine of the planet outshone any distant stars.

A few hundred yards from their landing site, Anwen stopped the vehicle. "OK, this is it. Let's get on with it."

She opened the door and climbed out of the Scarab. Aisling had a few problems getting out, struggling with the unfamiliar space suit. She had thought moving around in low gravity was easier than in normal gravity. It turned out the opposite was the case, so she nearly fell out of the carriage.

"I'm sorry." She said embarrassed.

Anwen tried to lighten the mood with a joke. "Say," she said, putting her hands on the hips of her space suit. "How does this fare as haute couture?"

Aisling managed a smile. "A bit clunky, maybe. And too large for me. I look ridiculous."

Anwen shook her head. "Nah, you could wear a coal-sack, and you'd still look great!"

Aisling was happy she wore the helmet, because otherwise the other woman would have seen her blushing.

For the next two hours, they worked alongside each other, putting into place the parts they had brought. When they were done, Aisling's water reserves were used up, and her back and her head ached. But in front of them stood a water distiller that melted ice from below, distilled it, and ran it through a bio filter, so all that was left was pure H<sub>2</sub>O.

A small filter-like device used the rocks to dissolve some minerals, enriching the water with life supporting minerals, while keeping all the poisonous stuff out.

“Almost done.” Anwen said. “We need to connect the hose. Wait here.”

She made her way to the Scarab, and backed it up in front of the distiller, got out again, and pulled a long hose from a drum. “Here, help me connect this.”

With combined efforts they managed to connect the hose to the distiller.

After a short break, Anwen showed Aisling how to operate the system. “I’ll take the Scarab, and connect the hose to the ship. Stay here, and watch that connector. If it gets tangled, and the hose breaks, we’re in deep trouble.”

“OK. What do I have to do?”

“Just keep an eye on the hose, and tell me immediately, if there is any strain on the hose, especially near the connector!”

“Got it, boss!” Aisling tried to sound more enthusiastic, and less exhausted, than she was.

Anwen made her way back to the Scarab, and began to drive slowly towards the ship. Aisling carefully controlled the strain on the hose. The hose lifted from the ground, and started tugging the connector.

“Stop! Too fast!” She shouted.

Anwen immediately slowed down the Scarab, and the hose sank down again.

“Better.”

It took what felt like an hour to Aisling, until the Scarab finally reached the ship. She could see the commander disembark her vehicle, and carrying the other end of the hose to the ship’s fuel neck.

Aisling suddenly felt the last of her powers run out. She had to sit down. Several lights in her suit flashed up, as she dropped to the ground. She fell on her back, suddenly seeing the giant planet floating overhead. It was beautiful. She could make out the swirling cloud patterns, and a giant storm that looked like a giant volcanic lake, she had once seen in the mountains of Cubeo.

While she drifted off into her memories, she faintly heard Anwen's voice through the intercom.

"Radiation . . . stronger. Coming back . . . Don't look"

Aisling suddenly was sure that this was it. She wouldn't be able to get up anymore. And, did it really matter?

"Just let me look at it for a while." She moaned into the intercom.

". . . ground is 58K. Too cold for the suit. So get the fuck up and move your arse!" Anwen's voice became louder now.

"I can't. I won't make it. Just, . . . just leave me here. It's a beautiful place to die."

"If you say that one more time, I'm going to kick your royal backside back into orbit. Get your lazy arse up!"

Aisling felt herself sinking deeper into the nitrogen snow that covered this world. The cold slowly crept into the suit. She couldn't read the temperature gauge in her suit, because her eyes were too dry. The colours of the planet overhead whirled in her mind. So beautiful.

When she came to again, she felt a warm air surrounding her. The planet was still overhead, but the visor of her helmet was gone. Instead, she looked through the dome

of the Scarab's passenger cabin. A regular beeping sound came from behind her, and she was put on a drip.

"Hey! Welcome back!" Anwen looked at her. She still wore her space suit, but without the helmet.

"Why didn't you tell me, you couldn't go on?" She asked. "Never endanger yourself on an EVA. Safety first!"

Aisling tried to speak. It took several attempts for her, until sounds actually came from her sore throat.

"I thought I had to. I mean, you couldn't give me any water, and we needed to do this, otherwise we both die!"

Anwen looked stern. "Always listen to your body, when your out there. And always, and I mean ALWAYS, tell me when you're not feeling well. We abort then, and think of something new."

"Did it at least work?"

"You're just getting the first water we made." Anwen pointed at the drip. "Fully automated medical field kit. Even selects the right medication for the injury. You just need to add water."

Aisling managed a smile. "Thank you." She whispered.

Anwen smiled back, and carefully placed a bottle of water on Aisling's lips. When the water ran down her throat, she suddenly knew, they had made it. They had survived.



# *Seven*

## Sanctuary

When Aisling Duval woke up it felt as if she had slept forever. As felt the weight of Anwen's arm around her waist she was surprised how much she enjoyed the feeling. She carefully turned around in the sleeping bag and faced the commander. Anwen was fast asleep, her relaxed face looked more like that of a little girl than the tough space adventurer she had been yesterday.

Aisling had insisted that Anwen, who had done all the hard work, lie down in their makeshift bed, while the commander had offered it to her, insisting on sleeping in her pilot's chair. Aisling wasn't gonna let her get away with that, and so they ended up sharing the bed, each of them too exhausted to argue.

After they finished filling the water tanks they had taken off from the small moon again. Anwen had decided to leave the distiller, and even the Scarab, behind.

Taking off with the added weight of the water from the moon would have put a lot of strain on the already torn space frame. The ship, Anwen explained, might simply fall apart. So getting back into orbit was a delicate manoeuvre, and Aisling sat in her chair with teeth gritted and hoped for the best.

When they were safely back in space, Anwen decided they needed a rest. She opened a couple of dried rations, filled bottles with fresh water, and the two of them had a feast. To Aisling, the freeze-dried space food tasted better than any banquet she ever attended, and the water was sweeter than wine.

Now she felt a lot better, her headache was almost gone and the burning thirst had vanished. She tried to wriggle out of Anwen's embrace without waking the woman, but when she tried to get up the commander gently pulled her in. Aisling looked at the sleeping girl's face.

"Where in the world do I have to go this morning?" She thought, and curled up inside the sleeping bag again, closing her eyes.

"Want some breakfast?" Anwen asked. Aisling opened her eyes again to see Anwen's face so close to her own that their noses almost touched.

"Sounds good." She smiled. "What do we have?"

"Freeze-dried surrogate coffee and a vacuum-packed ham-and-egg-sandwich."

"I stand corrected: It sounds horrible, but I'll have it anyway."



They stared at each other for a moment, until Aisling had to laugh.

“One of us needs to get up and make some coffee.” She grinned.

Anwen sighed, and turned around. Very slowly she got up. “Eek!” She cried, when her bare feet touched the metal floor. “This is ice cold. ASTRA, turn up the heater!”

“Affirmative.” ASTRA confirmed.

“And make me some coffee.” Anwen murmured.

“I’m sorry, but I am unable to comply. I have no control over coffee making facilities on this ship.” ASTRA said.

“ASTRA you’re useless!” Anwen said, grinning.

“If you say so commander”, the machine answered, and Aisling was sure she heard a slight variation in tone, as if the computer was hurt.

After having breakfast Anwen went back to work. She brooded over the star maps for half an hour, trying to figure out where to go. They desperately needed a space-dock, and they needed to go somewhere outside the reach of *Emperor’s Dawn*.

“OK, I know, where we go.” She finally said. “Colwyn Point!”

“I never heard of it.”

“It’s a small outpost, just outside the empires sphere of influence. It is run by a former partner and friend of mine, Meredith Barker.”

“Former friend?” Aisling raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah, well, we had some minor disagreements in the past, but she will help us.” Anwen tried to look more confident than she actually was.

“Do we have any other choice?” The princess asked.

“Not really, but trust me, it’s alright!”

Every time the *Merope* jumped, Aisling was afraid they wouldn’t make it. The shipped rattled and creaked, but it’s space frame held.

“This was the last jump.” Anwen announced.

“Praise the Holy Mother!” Aisling sighed. “Finally.”

“Let’s see. Colwyn Point.” Anwen said, more to herself. “ASTRA, plot a course!”

“Affirmative.” The spaceships HUD flickered into life, and a marker appeared. Anwen carefully turned the ship towards it, and increased the throttle.

They flew for another hour before they dropped out of frame shift.

Before them a small outpost station appeared, and Anwen set a course towards the landing pads.

Then she opened a communications port, breaking radio silence for the first time in days.

“Mayday, Mayday! Colwyn Point, this is DSV *Merope* do you copy?”

First, there was only static, but then a male voice answered: “This is Colwyn Point Control, we copy. State the nature of your emergency.”

Anwen took a deep breath. “This is Anwen Hunter, of the deep space exploration vessel *Merope*. We are heavily damaged, and in need of repairs. We have heavy hull

damage, and lost pressure in about three quarters of the ship. Massive structural damage to the space frame, on starboard.”

Now a female voice cut in. “Anwen Hunter, what did you do to my ship?”

“Hello Meredith, nice to hear from you too. Can we dock? I’ll explain everything later.”

“How’s your engine status?”

“I’m going to come in a little hot, but I won’t scratch your precious station.”

“Well, then, go to landing pad three, I’ll have an emergency team on stand by.”

The zero-gravity environment didn’t make the landing any easier. Anwen had insisted they wore their space suits, just in case the space frame collapsed entirely.

The ship had lost three out of four starboard thrusters, so they couldn’t compensate for the lateral motion. Anwen corrected that by using only the port thrusters, rotating the entire ship into position.

It didn’t allow to kill all sideways motion, and when the nose gear clicked with the docking clamps, the ship rocked to the side, and, with a horrible creak, the gear was ripped off.

“Colwyn Point, give us some G’s!” Anwen cried into the intercom

“Negative, Merope! Artificial gravity is offline until you’re inside the docks!”

“Override that, if you don’t glue us down, we drift off again! And you don’t want us to crash into your comms-tower!”

The *Merope* had drifted dangerously close to the edge of the docking platform, and without starboard thrust, there was nothing Anwen could do to stop it. Luckily, the guy in the control room seemed not to be as much of an idiot as Anwen had feared. The artificial gravity generators beneath the docking platform send a vibration through the hull of the ship, and before the *Merope* could escape its grip, a gentle but relentless pull glued her to the platform. When the nose of the ship touched the metal, it made a horrible screeching sound, while the ship lost the rest of its kinetic energy to the metal of the platform. Somewhere behind them, the mid-ship space frame gave in to the strain, and the two space adventurers stumbled back, as the wreck of their ship fell into its final resting position. Almost all the red warning lights in the cockpit started flashing immediately.

“Alert!” ASTRA’s mechanical voice cried. “Structural collapse in mid-ship section! All personal abandon ship!”

The lift slowly pulled the stranded ship and its crew inside, and both women were relieved to see the green lights that indicated that the docking bay around them was pressurised.

Anwen gently put a hand on the console. “Thank you, old girl” she whispered. Then louder: “ASTRA, commence full system shutdown!”

“Affirmative!” The artificial intelligence replied. “It was a pleasure working with you, commander!”

“And you!” Anwen sighed.

“System shutdown in 5 seconds.” ASTRA’s voice said, as emotionless as ever.

One by one the three dimensional HUD’s disappeared and the lights went off. Finally even the steady hum of the life support faded.

Anwen opened the emergency escape hatch at the bottom floor of the cockpit, and Aisling followed her into a small, dark airlock. On the other side they jumped the last few feet to the flight deck, since the *Merope* had landed on her nose, so the small ladder underneath the cockpit was useless. Once they had worked their way out Anwen took a look at her ship, while she took her space helmet off.

“That doesn’t look to good.” She mumbled.

“And neither does this.” Aisling patted the commander’s shoulder, making her turn her eyes toward the deck. A dozen security guards with blasters guarded the platform, and a very angry looking woman stood in front of them, arms crossed and yelled:

“Anwen Fucking Hunter! What the fuck did you do to my ship?”



# *Eight*

## Docked

Anwen looked at the woman. “Your ship? Last time I checked, I payed you a shitload of money for her.”

“And than you took her, and left me for dead here.”

“You took the job as administrator, I never forced you to do it.”

“You told me, we could use this station to get contraband through, and split the earnings. And then you headed off to the rim!”

“And you own this goddamn place now. Are you telling me, you’d really wanted to swap that for 10 months on a small spaceship, with no one to talk to but me?”

The older woman looked disgusted. “Pfft. I’d rather talk to ASTRA.”

“That can be arranged.”

Aisling had followed the conversation between the two women with growing puzzlement. She stared at the woman, who was obviously Meredith Barker. Barker was remark-

ably tall, and had the slender, lanky figure of someone who grew up in a low gravity environment. She was grey of hair, and somewhere in her late fifties. She wore a grey business suit and a handbag that seemed totally out of place in a space dock. The woman's appearance reminded her of the officials from various imperial colonies, although this outfit was years behind the current imperial fashion.

She decided to end the little quarrel, and audibly cleared her throat.

The two women stopped in their tracks, and stared at her.

"Thank you ladies." She began. And, to Barker. "Meredith Barker, I assume?"

The older woman was a bit baffled, but nodded.

"First of all, I'd like to express my deep gratitude for your kindness, in rescuing us from a perilous situation. Your actions were, to say the least, most helpful."

Meredith Barker looked at the princess, as if she'd just stumbled over the remains of an alien civilisation.

"That's posh talk, young lady! You're welcome, by the way." Barker stared at her intensely. "You talk like a real blue-blood!"

Aisling decided to be careful. "I went to private school and enjoyed a proper education, ma'am." Aisling curtsied.

Barker looked at her intensely. "Yes. I bet you did, *Your Highness!*" Aisling blushed.

Barker turned to Anwen. "Fuck. This really is Aisling Duval, isn't she? Did you kidnap her? Is this why the



empire shot you to bits? Because I don't want the frikkin' Prismatic Guard on my tails here."

Before Anwen could speak, Aisling stepped forward. "I assure you, I am here of my own free will, and Commander Hunter saved my life, more than once. So I beg of you, withdraw your men, and let us talk in peace. We have much to discuss, and I can assure you that your service to the empire will not go unnoticed."

Barker snorted. "I hope it *does* go unnoticed a while longer."

Anwen stepped forward now. "Are you done with your show now?"

All of a sudden Barker started to laugh. "Yes, yes, of course." She turned to the armed guards. "Guys, show's over! Back to your posts!"

Anwen started to undo the zippers of her space suit. "Good, then we can say hello, and talk over a drink."

Barker grinned. "You were scared I'd have you shot."

"Not the least."

"Admit it."

"OK, maybe a little insecure."

"Ha! I knew it!"

"Fuck off!"

A little later, the three women sat in Barker's office, and Barker poured drinks. "This", she announced, "is real Bourbon Whisky from Earth itself!"

Aisling waved her off. "Not for me, please."

Barker seemed surprised. "Are you sure, Your Highness? Even in the empire, it will be hard to come by this

stuff.”

“I know. I don’t drink alcohol. Ever.”

Barker shrugged. She turned to Anwen. “But you’ll have one?”

Anwen nodded. “Thank you.”

The two women toasted, and sipped their whisky.

“So, what brought you here, and how in the universe did you trash the *Merope*?” Barker asked.

Anwen began telling the whole story, about the job, the treason and their adventures. Aisling thought that Anwen was making it sound much more like an adventure holo, although she wasn’t exaggerating what actually happened. She praised the princesses bravery, and Aisling noticed how she left out the part where Aisling broke down and almost gave up. All in all, it sounded a lot more exciting, and a lot less frightening than Aisling remembered it.

When the commander had finished, Barker turned to the princess.

“So I reckon you made some powerful enemies.” She stated.

“You can say that.” Aisling confirmed. “I didn’t think, me *not* becoming emperor would put me more directly into the firing line than being the emperor.”

She sighed.

“I’m afraid, if the *Emperor’s Dawn* movement gains momentum, we’ll face a civil war.”

Barker raised her eye brows. “All the more reason, to get you off my station as soon as possible. I don’t want any part in that.”

“I don’t think it’s going to be easy. A station, just outside imperial space will be an interesting base of operation for the rebels. *Emperor’s Dawn* might find your place pretty interesting. And I doubt they’ll ask for your cooperation.”

Barker knew the princess was right. “What do you want?” She asked.

“I’m trying to build up an alliance strong enough to prevent a war. That’s why I’m negotiating with systems like Auserid. I still need to get there.”

“I can provide you with a ship, nothing big, but fast. It’s going to be a bit cosy, but I believe you already got accustomed to close proximity with your pilot.” She grinned sheepishly towards Anwen.

“What about the *Merope*?” Anwen asked. “Can you repair her?”

Barker looked at her in disbelief. “I can sell her remains for scraps, honey that’s all I can do for her. This ship is finished!”

She immediately regretted her choice of words, as she could see how hard they had hit Anwen, who seemed to be close to tears.

“You are insured, aren’t you?” Barker asked more sympathetically.

Anwen swallowed. “I am. But I doubt they will cover being shot down by terrorists.”

Aisling leaned over towards the commander, reaching for her hand. “I know it doesn’t really help, but I will compensate you for your losses. Promised.”

Anwen tried to smile. “Do you have an idea, what a ship like the *Merope* costs?” She asked.

Aisling nodded. “I own a fleet big enough to fight a war, so yes, I do know. Did I mention, I’m filthy rich?”

Anwen’s mood lifted a little. “I’ll take your word for it.” She grinned.

A while later, Aisling had had the chance to take a bath, and put on some new clothes that Barker had provided her with. Anwen was in her quarters, and the princess took the chance to look around the small outpost on her own.

It was a liberating feeling, to walk around the place, without a group of bodyguards around her, and without being recognised. In most systems of the empire walking around unsupervised would have been impossible. She would either be assassinated instantly, or hugged to death by a crowd. Here, however, people didn’t recognise her, and she could move about as if she was one of them. Except for the occasional turned neck, or a cat-calling dock-worker, no one took notice of her.

She noticed, however that there were always two or three station security guards close. They were never so close that they were intimidating, but always around. Whether this was to keep her safe or to spy on her, or maybe both, she didn’t know.

She decided to ignore the security, and made her way to the market square. Exotic smells and noises flooded her senses, and she had to close her eyes for a moment to take it all in. She heard voices speak in languages, she couldn’t even identify, while people walked past her.

She bought some strange fruit from a woman, who

showed her, how to eat them. They tasted bittersweet in a way nothing she ever tasted before.

She walked around a corner to find herself in a dark alleyway. The people here were in rags, many of them sitting on the bare floor or in cardboard boxes. Hands stretched out to her as she went past, and people stared at her; some longingly, others threateningly. She turned around to leave, back to the market, when she bumped into someone.

“This is not the place, I recommend you to go, Your Highness”, a familiar voice said. She looked up, and looked into the face of Meredith Barker, who offered her an arm, and led her back towards the market.

“What is this place?” The princess asked.

“People call it *The Gutter*,” Barker explained. “Sometimes people come here in hope of a better life, fast riches, or just a place to vanish into. Often they don’t find work, and they can’t afford the lift home anymore. And then there are those, who a here to prey upon the weakness of others.”

She sighed.

“I’ve been trying to close it down for years, but there are always people ending up here, and you can’t send them all home. Many of them are slaves where they come from.”

The princess looked up. “And not here?” She asked.

“No one is a slave here. People maybe poor, but at least they are free. Many chose *The Gutter* over a live in servitude.”

“Who will blame them?” The princess remarked.

Barker led the princess through the market, and into

a quiet corner that looked astonishingly beautiful, given that it was at the center of an industrial outpost in the middle of space. People had grown lawn on the small square, and small trees framed the place. To her delight, Aisling found the trees, as well as the, grass to be real.

“Let’s sit down, and have a drink. They serve the best orange-juice in this part of the galaxy.” Barker offered.

“Real fruit?” Aisling asked bewildered. “Importing them here must cost a small fortune!”

“That’s why we don’t import. We grow them ourselves.” Barker smiled.

“You grow oranges here?”

“Oranges, apples, berries - you name it. We also have a tiny supply of grapes, so once a year there are a few bottles of wine.”

Aisling was impressed. “That’s an achievement!”

# *Nine*

## Getting Home

Aisling watched the people buzzing around on the square, while she enjoyed the sweet taste of orange juice. She had to give Barker credit for running this place the way she did. Most stations at the rim of the civilised world offered nothing but the bare necessities. Space stations usually used every square inch of space, and plants were grown in hydroponic gardens for food and to produce oxygen, not for leisure.

However, humans had learned early on that bringing a piece of their home planet with them, was as necessary as providing food and water, and every station as big as a *Coriolis* station had at least one park, including artificial sunlight.

Small stations and outposts usually didn't produce enough energy, and simply didn't have enough room to house a working ecosystem. And maintaining the supply of food and oxygen was hard work at the best of times.

Providing plants and living animals for mental well-being was simply out of reach most of the time. It was poorly replaced by virtual reality, and people regularly went insane on small outposts; a phenomenon that was known as *tin-can-rage* among starfarers.

So, having a small garden with actual grass and trees, and provide the occasional citrus fruit was a tremendous achievement that people who lived on terraformed planets or giant *Orbis* star ports rarely understood.

Aisling's attention was returned to the woman sitting opposite her, when she spoke again.

"The square is some sort of sanctum for many people here." Barker said. "It's taken care of and maintained mostly by volunteers. All the local businesses contribute money to it as well."

"I'm impressed." Aisling replied. "It's a wonderful way to keep up morale."

"A great incentive for people, and they are much more likely to identify with the place, than if they were met by police force." Barker agreed. "Crime rates are a lot lower here than on other outposts."

Aisling smiled. "I guess that depends on your definition of *crime*."

Barker laughed. "Are you suggesting we're smugglers?"

"I'm not suggesting anything." Aisling countered. "You're outside imperial jurisdiction, you can make your own laws."

"Good to know that."

"I have a suggestion to make though." Aisling made a pause, allowing Barker to prepare. "I would like to install a contact on this station, so we can stay in touch. If you need anything, we will be able to help."



Barker raised an eyebrow. “And why I should trust that contact?”

Aisling smiled. “Name someone of your trust, and I can make sure, they can stay in touch with us.”

“And what would that cost me?” Barker asked. “An arm and a leg?”

“I want you to be neutral.”

“We are neutral!”

“It means, if there was to be a civil war, don’t do weapons deals, and don’t harbour those who do.”

“What makes you think, I’ll trade in arms?”

“Well, I just want your word it stays that way. In return, we’ll help you out from time to time, and I’ll make sure that the rest of the galaxy stays blissfully unaware of your little operation here.”

“Mh.” Barker took a sip of her juice. “I’ll consider your offer.”

“I hope you will learn to trust me.” Aisling smiled encouragingly.

“Anwen trusts you. That gives you a head start with me. She likes you, you know?”

“I do. After all, she came to me willingly. I never forced her into allegiance.”

Barker laughed. “That’s not what I meant. She *likes* you. Don’t tell me she didn’t hit on you while you were out there.”

“Oh.” Aisling looked puzzled. “I don’t know. She was very kind and caring.”

Barker grinned. “Yup that’s her. She doesn’t make friends easily, but if she does, you can count on her, no matter what. Just be careful, when you get, well closer.”

“Is this the moment, where you tell me not to break her heart?” Aisling couldn’t help but smile. She thought of last night when they had, in all innocence, shared the makeshift bed on the *Merope*, and concluded, she’d definitely liked to do this again. Just maybe not in a life-threatening situation.

“It’s not so much her heart am worried about. Even the bonds of true love wouldn’t be able to stop her from hopping on a spaceship and launching herself into the unknown. She left a couple of broken hearts in her wake. So you either go with her, or she will leave you behind.”

Aisling felt a strong wave of empathy with the older woman. “I see.” She said. “I’ll promise I’ll be careful.”

Anwen had been sleeping for what felt like days. Although she was used to getting along with very little sleep, she enjoyed not having to check on the ship every two or four hours. And the -compared to her quarters on the *Merope*, large and comfortable bed, had embraced her and lured her into a deep sleep.

When she got up again she felt refreshed and her outlook on the future was not as grim, as it had been yesterday. Still, the loss of the *Merope* had hit her like the loss of a friend. Although she knew that the ship was just steel, glass and computers, it still had had a personality, and after all they had been through she couldn’t help but be sad.

But the new day allowed her to focus on the things that counted: The *Merope* was history. And she still had a job to do. The princess still needed a lift to *Auserid*,

and to do that, she needed a ship. Luckily, she knew just where to find what she needed. Before she went to Meredith however, she went down, to the lower docking bays. As she suspected the ship was still there. It was an old Viper Mark IV. She had not set out into space in a while, but on quick inspection the ship looked all right.

After taking a close enough look to be sure, that the ship was in a reasonable condition, she took the lift to the central deck to see Meredith.

“Ah, good morning!” , Meredith greeted her. “I trust, you slept well?”

“Yes, I did.” Anwen answered. “I, uhm, I wanted to say thank you for all you did for us. I know, we haven’t parted on the best terms, and. Well, I guess, I’m sorry.”

“I’m alright.” Meredith smiled encouragingly. “As you see, I built myself a nice little nest here. And I know you: You wouldn’t be happy, doing runs into the empire. You need to be out there.”

She made a gesture that was directed at the stars beyond the walls of the station.

“I never understood that. And we both know that.”

“Still, I’m sorry, I just left you behind.”

“That’s just the way it is. I came to terms with the fact, that you belong somewhere among the stars. And I never did.”

Meredith leaned back in her chair. “And now, you are going to ask me, if the *Chrysaor* still flies.”

“You know me.” Anwen sighed. “I know how much you already did for us. But, yeah, I need a ship to finish my job, and bring the princess to *Auserid*.”

“You know that I always took good care of her, so yes, of course she flies. Hasn’t been in space for a while, but she’s in good shape.” Meredith grinned. “Don’t tell me you didn’t go to the docks to see her for yourself.”

“I did.”

“I want that ship back, Anwen. I’m serious. If you get shot down with her, I’m coming for your arse!”

Anwen smiled. “You’ll get her back in one piece. Promised.”

The princess looked around the ship. “Cosy.” She said. “There aren’t many *Mark IV*’s in this part of the galaxy.”

“I know, it’s no luxury transport. It only has a small bunk to sleep in.”

Aisling grinned. “So you want to cuddle again?”

Anwen blushed. “I’ll. . . , I’ll stay in the pilot’s seat.”

The princess laughed. “You’re adorable, you know that?”

The commander coughed. “Well, anyway. The ship is build to be in space for a week, so we shouldn’t have any problems.”

Aisling looked around. “The *Viper* is a short range fighter, do you think we get to Auserid non-stop?”

“Definitely. This ship was refitted as a reconnaissance ship. Manned by two, it could operate in enemy territories for days. And it has a very thin heat signature.”

“I guess. OK, it’s old, but this is military technology. How did you get your hands on that?” Aisling wondered.

“If I told you, I would have to kill you, I’m afraid.” Anwen grinned.

“I revoke the question. As long as it gets us home.”

“You’re ready?”

“Yes. Let’s do this!”



# Ten

## Covert Operations

Aisling slowly rose up, stretching her legs. The bunk in the *Chrysaor* was made for very short people, that much was clear.

The bunk was so small, that one person could lie in it with their legs tucked up. To sleep in it with two people, one needed to stack on top of each other. As it turned out it meant Anwen was on top. Not that Aisling had any complaints. Although they rolled out on the metal floor once and it took a while before they made it back in.

Now the bunk was empty, and through the small corridor Aisling could hear Anwen rustling in the cockpit. She wrapped herself into the sheets and walked the 10 feet into the small cockpit. The cockpit had only room for the pilot's seat and the princess could just barely stand upright behind it. Anwen sat in the pilot's seat fully dressed, which alarmed Aisling a little. They had both worn the standard space-overalls most pilot's preferred when they

didn't need a life-suit. But that had lasted exactly until they had jumped out of *Colwyn Point* and laid a course to the next jump point.

The two had to cover three days in space and Anwen did everything she could to make sure the princess wasn't bored. At some point she even disabled the artificial gravity on board, insisting that love-making in zero gravity was the best way to do it.

Aisling felt a little less comfortable with it, because she had no experience in moving in zero-G, but she had to agree that it was very exciting. Mostly because it was delightful to watch her girlfriend float around with the grace of a ballet-dancer. In zero-G Anwen was undoubtedly in her natural habitat.

She put her arms around the pilot, and gently kissed her temples.

Anwen grinned. "Don't kiss the pilot during flight manoeuvres."

"Sorry, are we about to jump?" Aisling asked.

"As we speak. You maybe want to get dressed and make yourself presentable." Anwen told her.

The princess grinned. "Why, do I make you uncomfortable?"

"If it were for me, you could go naked all the time." The commander returned. "But you don't want to stand before the *Auserid*-counsel wrapped in bedsheets, do you?"

Aisling pouted. "That means we arrived?"

"I'm afraid so. Do you want me to take a detour?" Anwen asked.

Aisling sighed. "Better not. Politics await me. You will stay with me until this is over though, will you?"



“Of course.”

“Good. That makes me feel safer.”

“I’d bring a gun, if that helps further.”

The princess leaned over the backrest and kissed Anwen on the mouth. Then she turned back to the tiny cabin to get dressed.

“Abe Landing, this is shuttle *Faulcon AWN* on route from *Coldwyn Point*. Request docking permission.” Anwen spoke routinely into the intercom.

She turned to Aisling: “Hey, you want me to announce your presence?”

Aisling shook her head.

The intercom crackled. “Copy that, *Faulcon AWN*. Anything to declare?”

“One passenger, no cargo.”

“Copy that. Please prepare for scan.”

The ship’s computer flashed a few lights. The words *Scan detected* flashed on the HUD. Something that usually made Anwen nervous. “Don’t worry,” she thought. “Everything on board is legal today.”

“You’re OK?” Aisling asked.

“Just hoping, the *Chrysaor* doesn’t raise any suspicion. After all, we’re flying a military class ship that has no current registration in imperial space.”

It took a while until an answer came. “It’s been a while commander, since we’ve seen the *Chrysaor* in imperial space, but your papers are in order. Proceed to docking bay 21.”

“Thank you control. Over and out!” Anwen sighed. “Phew. I was afraid, they’d ask questions.”

“Anything I should know about?” The princess looked a bit worried.

“Not really. Let’s say, not everyone would approve of the way Meredith got hold of this ship.”

“It’s stolen?”

“Not by us.”

“I’d better ask no further.”

“That’ll be best, yes.”

As they approached the space station, they passed a small fleet of battleships and imperial destroyers.

“So they’re still here.” Aisling pointed to the fleet.

“Yours?” Anwen asked.

“Not really. I think this is Lord Beadford-Ferron’s flagship. He insisted on accompanying our delegation. I didn’t want him here in the first place. His motives are as questionable as are his morals.”

Anwen couldn’t help but laugh. “Why don’t you say that he’s an asshole?”

“My education forbids that” was the princesses dignified answer.

“You’re weird” Anwen said, “But also: cute.”

“Don’t say that out loud once we’re inside.”

The *Chrysaor* slid through the port bay of *Abe Landing* and Anwen’s attention was focused on the docking procedure. The princess went to the back, and grabbed her small bag, which contained everything she could salvage from the wreck of the *Merope*. Most of her clothes, the papers and the prepared speeches were scattered around some nameless star, so all she had on her were

some essentials, which luckily included the royal signet ring which had her genetic fingerprint imprinted on it. So she did not fear to have any trouble to identify herself. Thank the goddess for small mercies.

The ship suddenly rocked, and she heard a metallic sound resonate to the hull.

“Docking complete. We’re on external life support.” Anwen shutdown the ship’s systems, and hopped off the pilot’s seat.

“Where first?” She asked.

“High Street.” The princess decided. “I need something more official to wear, if I’d barge in on the Auseridians unannounced.”

“High Street it is.”

But first they had to get through customs. A huge station like *Abe Landing* has a very tight security network. And while smaller outposts usually didn’t give much about following imperial regulations, places like this were wrapped in red tape. When they approached the immigration officer, Aisling held her friend back.

“Let me handle this please.”

“But...”

“Just trust me.”

She approached the officer with a polite smile.

“Good day to you, officer. Isn’t it a lovely day?” She said.

The officer didn’t seem to be in a mood for chit-chat.

“Papers.” He just said.

“Well, technically, I don’t have papers,” she said sweetly. “But I hope this will suffice.”

She presented the ring to him. He looked at it confused.

“What? Is that a joke?” His hand moved to his blaster.

“Scan it, if you please.” Aisling didn’t seem to be alarmed in the slightest.

Reluctantly, he picked up his scanner, and held it over the ring on Aisling’s hand. Information flashed on the screen, and the officers eyes went wide.

“This cannot be!” He cried. “You can’t be her!”

“Shh!” The princess hissed. “I would appreciate, if you did not make my presence known officially. I’m here on an important business for Her Majesty, the Emperor.”

The immigration officer had double checked the read-out on the device. He was white as chalk, and his hands were shaking.

“Please, Your Highness, forgive my rudeness. I . . . , I wasn’t informed about your arrival. I will call the station’s administrator immediately. You shall be greeted with the honours you deserve!”

He bowed.

The princess sighed.

“No, you will not. You will let me and my pilot here,” she pointed to Anwen, “enter the station. And then you will forget that you ever saw us. Understood?”

The guard went even paler. “Yes, yes, of course Your Highness!”

She smiled again. “Thank you very much, soldier!”

And she waved to Anwen. “Come along!”



They arrived on the central corridor, which was a broad street with shops, restaurants, theatres and film decks. Everything here was very posh, and very expensive. There were other places on the station, where you could get cheaper deals and more questionable forms of entertainment. Aisling kept close to her friend and looked to the ground to avoid being recognized, but most people here were too busy with their own affairs to even notice the two women walking down the broad pavement.

Aisling stopped. "Can you get us some credits?"

Anwen laughed. "What, are you broke?"

"Not exactly, but it's hard to stay under the radar, if I have to tell every shop clerk who they're dealing with."

"You owe me an entire spaceship anyway, I guess a dress and a hotel room won't make much of a difference."

They went to one of the numerous cashpoints, that spit out little plastic chips you could spend in the shops. It was strange that, besides the fact that almost everything could be bought and sold through a computer, cash still was king for many people. And that was not only for those who did not want their business to be traceable.

After checking that her balance was still acceptable -actually, it had grown, since the crew she employed had done a good job over the past days- she withdrew an amount she hoped would not raise suspicion and handed part of the money to Aisling.

They got themselves a room in a reasonably cheap hotel and while the princess went shopping for clothes, Anwen sampled the pleasures of a hot bath with real water.

When Aisling returned, she wore a white dress and

her blue hair was no longer tangled.

“Ah, Commander!” She grinned, when she entered their shared room. “How do I look?”

Anwen stared back at the princess: “Beautiful.”

“I was hoping for *daunting*, but I can live with *beautiful*. Shall we go?”

Anwen picked up the blaster she had bought from some dubious tradesman, while the princess was having a make-over and nodded.

The two headed for the council halls.

They arrived at the gates just to find them heavily guarded.

“Looks like going undetected is not an option anymore.” Anwen stated.

Aisling pointed towards a guard with a blue uniform and golden chest plating.

“That’s Captain Christopher Bodski. He used to be with the prismatic guard.”

“Used to be?”

“He worked for my father and now he is part of the Royal Vanguard. It’s likely my aunt sent him here.”

The princess pulled the signet ring from her finger and handed it to Anwen.

“Take this. If you show it to him, he’ll recognize you speak on my behalf. Find out why he’s here, and what he knows. I meet you back at the hotel.”

Anwen took the ring and walked towards the soldier.

“Excuse me!” She said.

Captain Bodski turned his head. “Can I help you, miss?”

“That depends. Are you Captain Bodski from the Royal Vanguard?”

He raised an eyebrow.

“I am. How can I be of assistance?” He answered.

He was still friendly, but obviously alarmed.

“I need to be careful.” Anwen thought. “He’s wary. Aisling is right, something’s not right here, and he knows that.”

Loud she said: “I speak for Her Royal Highness, the princess Aisling Duval. She calls for your service.”

She showed him the signet ring.

“Where did you get that?” He asked, his voice now rougher in tone.

“She gave it to me, so you believe that I am not talking nonsense.”

“The princess is dead!” The soldier said through gritted teeth.

“I can assure you, the princess is alive and well. She has been with me for the most parts of the last few days.”

“And you are?”

“Commander Anwen Hunter. I’m Her Royal Highness’s pilot.”

The captain suddenly was a lot friendlier. The idea that this stranger said the truth made him excited. He had served under her father long enough to see the princess grow up and the news of her death had saddened him deeply.

“Show me the ring.” He ordered.

Anwen complied. The soldier took out a small scanner and read out the princesses genetic fingerprint.

“It’s real!” He exclaimed. “So she is alive?”

“She is.” Anwen nodded. “But the situation is dire. There have been several attempts on her life.”

The captain immediately knew who was to blame. “Emperor’s Dawn!” He said darkly.

Anwen nodded. “We do have conclusive proof that they are behind this. Can you give me an update on the situation?”

The captain nodded. “It’s no secret that the Royal Vanguard is here with a few men to have an eye on the talks.”

“The Emperor doesn’t trust this Baron Beadford guy?”

“When the princess disappeared, we were sent here to investigate. The Baron had been trying to get into the talks earlier and the Goddess knows what his plans are. The well-being of the empire is hardly his major concern.”

“Is he acting under the authority of the crown?”

“Hardly.” The captain snorted. “But the empress can hardly stop him from negotiating a trade agreement here.”

“Is that what this is about? Trade?” Anwen wondered.

The soldier laughed. “You’ve been living under a rock? The strategic importance, and the crowns reach towards it, have been all over the news!”

Anwen shrugged. “I’ve been at the rim.”

“Ah, I see.” The soldier chuckled. Then he got serious again. “The princess, is she here?”

“Around.” Anwen said vaguely. “We need a way to get into the council hall without announcing our presence to Lord Beadford.”

“You think he’s conspiring with *Emperor’s Dawn*?”



“It’s possible.” Anwen nodded. “If he wanted to negotiate an agreement, Aisling, um, the princess would be a serious threat to his plans. If she comes here with the Emperor’s blessing, she’ll be much more interesting to the Auseridians than the Baron.”

“What do we do?” The captain asked.

“Get us into the council. And it might be helpful, if you were armed and ready, just in case we are right about the Baron.”

“I need proof first, of course.” The captain said.

“Of course. Meet me in an hour at the docking bay entrance to the central corridor. I’ll take you to her then. Come alone.”

The captain seemed satisfied, and Anwen said good-bye and headed back to their meeting point. She didn’t take the straight route, to make sure she wasn’t followed, before meeting with the princess again.



# *Eleven*

## Abstract Terms

The two women sat in the lobby of their shabby hotel, drinking synthetic coffee. Aisling nervously looked at the doors. Anwen had already checked a possible escape route, just in case Captain Bodski was not trustworthy. It was a gamble, both of them knew that, but it was a calculated risk. Aisling's trust was nonetheless shaken.

Anwen had met with the captain about an our earlier by the docks, and instructed him to come alone, and not to draw any attention.

Then she had checked all exits in the building, including the sewers. She knew a path through the airducts that would lead them back to the docking bay, where the *Chrysaor* was parked in stand by and ready for an emergency launch. Getting out of the station would be tricky, but Anwen was positive that, once outside the station, the small agile ship could outmaneuver the heavier ships and jump to safety. It would take at least five minutes for

Beadford's fleet to launch their fighters, and she would have jumped out already.

Her escape plan turned out to be unnecessary. The captain just entered the lobby and he was alone. He had changed from his uniform into unremarkable civilian clothes, so Anwen nearly overlooked him. He casually walked over to the table, and asked:

"Excuse me, ladies, is this seat taken?"

Anwen smiled, and offered him a seat. He looked at Aisling, and tried not to sound too excited.

"Your Highness, it is a pleasure to see you alive and well! I was told you were dead!"

"Captain Bodski!" Aisling was genuinely delighted to see the faithful friend of her father's. "It must have been four years, since we last met. It's good to see you here!"

"I was told you were shot down by the traitors of *Emperor's Dawn*. How did you get away?" Bodski wanted to know.

"I would have been, if it weren't for Commander Hunter. She saved my life numerous times."

The captain turned towards Anwen. "Then the empire is in your debt, Commander." He saluted.

"Oh, don't do this again, please!" Anwen rolled her eyes.

"From what we know, *Emperor's Dawn* is well equipped, and it seems they have a mole in high places. How did you escape?"

"Another time, Captain" Aisling stopped him. "We need to get into the council halls. We need a deal with Auserid, and I want to find out if Lord Beadford is behind all this."

Bodski nodded. "Of course, Your Highness! I have contacted eight of my most trustworthy guards. We will get you into the hall, and make sure, that Beadford's people keep their feet still."

"When will we be able to go?" Aisling asked.

"My people assemble as we speak."

"Good, we'll leave immediately."

The small party entered the hall through a side entrance, Bodski's men were in uniform and they were armed with pulse rifles. Anwen noticed, that they walked in formation around them, as to shield the princess with their bodies. The professional no-nonsense attitude of Bodski's men was reassuring to Anwen; these guys were highly trained professionals. And on their side for a change. Bodski led to group to the chamber hall, where the city counsel usually sat. The doors were guarded only by two ordinary policemen, who looked intimidated by the heavily armed soldiers in their shiny armor.

"I'm sorry sir." One of the police officers said. "But the council is in meeting."

His voice was quivering just a little.

"I am aware of that." Bodski said, not unfriendly, but with a tone of authority in his voice, that tolerated no objection. "Please announce that Her Royal Highness, the Princess Aisling Duval demands to speak to the council."

The policeman peeked through the wall of bodies to get a glimpse of the princess and recognised her.

He swallowed. Undoubtedly he had heard of the princesses supposed death, but he knew better than to ask any ques-

tions. Instead he turned around, and signalled his companion to help him open the door. Unfamiliar with Royal protocol, he did what he's seen on holo, stepped into the room, and announced loudly: "Her Royal Highness, the princess Aisling Duval, wishes to speak to the council."

The talk in the room seized. Heads turned towards the entrance as Bodski's men entered the room. They measured the entire room with their eyes for potential danger, and immediately placed themselves in strategic locations around the room. Anwen had originally planned to stay at the princesses side, but she saw that Bodski was better suited for this. After all, he was experienced with keeping people safe. So Anwen decided to stay in the shadows, while the others talked.

One of the men on the table got up. He was of dark complexion, and wore a frock coat over a simple looking waistcoat. He looked like one would imagine a civil servant or a representative to look like.

"What is the meaning of the commotion?" he said loudly. His voice was soft and warm, and Anwen had the feeling this guy was rather amiable.

The princess stepped into the room. "I apologise for the delay. I was," she paused "held up on my way here."

The man in the frock coat bowed. "Your Highness, what a great pleasure to see you alive and well! We were informed of your, ahem, demise and we have been in mourning all day."

The princess looked around the tables where heaps of papers were stacked in front of each representative, indicating they'd been quite busy. "I can see that." She

said she said with barely concealed sarcasm in her voice. “I appreciate your concern.”

The man bowed again. “May I introduce myself, I am Administrator Chesterton Gropp, chairman of the council and mayor of *Abe’s Landing*; at your service.”

The princess nodded at him. “I was under the impression that you were expecting my presence during these negotiations.”

The civil servant looked surprised. “I was informed that Lord Beadford-Ferron would take over, since you were . . . indisposed.”

“That’s a way of putting it.” The princess remarked. She then turned her attention to another man, who was undoubtedly Lord Beadford-Ferron, for, opposed to the grey suits of the council members, his appearance was pompous to the point of ridicule. He wore a white cloak lined with ermine. The cloth was embroidered with gold threads and on his head he wore an enormous powdered wig, that was meant to make him taller, and cover his fading roots. If Aisling didn’t know this was one of the most dangerous men in the empire, she’d laughed at him.

“Your Lordship!” She greeted him. “What a surprise to see you, what brings you here?”

“Well, after we learned your Highnesses disappearance, we hurried here. After all, negotiating an alliance with the good people of *Abe’s Landing* is important for the empire. We were around, and I informed Her Majesty, that we can take over the negotiations at any point, until you came back safe. Which, thank the goddess, you did.”

“What a wonderful coincidence, that you’ve been here just at the right time, Lord Beadford. The empire is in

your debt. I think I will not waste any more time, and get myself up to date with the negotiations, if that is acceptable to you, Administrator Gropp.”

The mayor bowed a gain. “Of course, your Highness. Whatever you wish.”

“Splendid.” The princess said. “I will inform my staff to send the delegation, while you could update me until we have a new delegation here.”

And to Lord Beadford-Ferron: “Lord Beadford, I’d like you to assemble all protocols of your previous meetings, and hand them over to me. Once the Royal delegation arrives, they will meet with your negotiators.”

The lord had gone paler with every word. “Does that mean, I’m off the table?” He asked.

“Your loyal services to the empire are much appreciated, Lord Beadford. Your services will be well paid for, and not forgotten by the Crown.”

The baron bowed, and said through gritted teeth: “It is my pleasure to service the empire. Bask in her glory!”.

Anwen had kept to the shadows so far. Somehow no one had even so much as looked at her during the entire conversation. All these people were so self-important and big headed, that she appeared to them like any maid that would serve the princess. And as such, she was invisible to them.

This gave her the opportunity to move around relatively undisturbed, as long as she kept out of the way. She casually grabbed a tray and began cleaning up the table. All the while she was checking the situation. There



were the councilmen, who actually were almost exclusively men, Bodski and his men, and some guards, guarding the side entrance. The two guards made Anwen nervous. While the main entrance was guarded from the outside and by personnel that was clearly identifiable as station security, these to people wore military uniforms, that were unmarked.

And both of them had entered the room after the princess and Anwen had arrived.

“If I were Beadford,” she thought, “I’d place my people there. And I’d have backup on stand-by behind those doors.”

In Anwen’s eyes, there was no doubt that it was the excentric baron, who was behind the attempts on the princesses life. She was sure Aisling was aware of it, but she felt safe, surrounded by Bodski’s men. Clearly, Beadford would not attack her in public. Or would he?

Anwen started to ponder. For now, only the council members, Bodski and his men and Lord Beadford himself knew that the princess was still alive. Even if Bodski had sent a memo, he couldn’t have confirmed his report, because he only met the princess on their way here. And he couldn’t talk, if he was dead.

Beadford however had enough firepower out here to take over the station and seize control of the *Auserid* system himself. If he wanted to gain control, all he needed was to kill everyone in this room, and use his military power to fake an attack of *Emperor’s Dawn* on the station. He could then play the hero himself and claim that he beat the attackers. But his time-window was closing shortly. If the princess got a chance to contact the em-

peror, the ruler herself would send a battle fleet to make sure no one took control over *Auserid*. So, if he was about to act, it would be now.

She set down the tray, and walked along the side of the room and placed herself between Bodski and two of his men, who were guarding the princess left and right. The guard she was closest to shot her an annoyed look, and pushed her out of his way, towards Bodski. She smiled apologetically, and walked past Bodski as casually as she could. When she was within earshot, she whispered, loud enough that he could hear: "It's a trap!". Then she retreated into the background, slowly drawing her blaster.

Captain Bodski reacted professionally: All he had to do, was shoot some looks at his men, and nod. Anwen could see how the members of the Royal Vanguard silently readied for battle. Anwen placed herself behind the tables, so that she only needed to jump across them to reach Lord Beadford. She had decided a hostage might be necessary to get out of here.

All this had taken place during the exchange between the princess and Lord Beadford-Ferron.

"To Her glory!" The princess just said. "That would be all, Lord Beadford. Thank you."

The baron shook his giant wig and made a face, as if he just received a very sad news.

"I am afraid, Your Highness, it's not."

Aisling looked at him in surprise. "Excuse me?"

"You should have gone home, after all this commotion. You could sit in your palace and lick the wounds from your last encounter with death. Instead you decide to come here, despite the grim warning your journey should

have given you, and try to mess with affairs a delicate young girl such as yourself, shouldn't mess with."

"So it was you, who placed a spy in my own ranks. And you sent those ships from after me!"

"Well, well my dear! Would I ever do something like this? I merely tipped them off. Your handmaid was a really fine ally. Just a little stupid, poor thing."

Aisling was furious: "This is treason! I see to it, that you're executed for this!"

"I'm afraid, that has to wait!" The baron lifted his right hand. The two merchenaries guarding the side entrance opened the doors, and men dressed just like the two guards stormed in. Lord Beadford-Ferron turned to go. "No survivors." He told his men. They opened fire immediately.

Captain Bodski jumped in front of the princess, while his men returned fire. Administrator Gropp, with a terrified look in his eyes simply fainted. The other council members panicked and ran for the main entrance, stumbling over each other. More soldiers appeared from the central corridor, and shot the fleeing men on sight.

Anwen jumped across the table and grabbed Lord Beadford while he was passing her. Using the power of her own momentum, she slammed him into the wall. The barrel of her blaster touched the back of his head: "Call off your men, if you want to live!"

"You will die for this." The corrupt nobleman said through gritted teeth.

"Since your people are under orders to kill me anyway, not a convincing threat. Call them off!"

She pressed the gun to his head even harder.

“H... Hold your fire!” He called into the room. “Hold your fire!”

The sound of gun blasts stopped and all eyes were on Anwen and Beadford.

“Tell them to clear the door.” She told him.

“You heard her! Clear the door!”

When his own life was in peril, Lord Beadford-Ferron was quite the coward. Anwen could literally smell his fear. She just hoped he wouldn't soil his gold embroidered pants, why she still had to hold him down.

Bodski's men assembled in a circle around the princess, while they retreated to the door. Anwen followed them, keeping a close grip on the struggling man. She pondered what to do with him, once they were past his men. The second she released him, he'd have his men chase them. She didn't want to kill him in cold blood either. After all, she wasn't him. Bodski closed the door to the council chamber, and took the decision from her. He walked over to her, and rammed his fist into Lord Beadford's face as hard as he could. Anwen heard a crunching noise, as if some bone was broken, and it was lights out for the traitor.

Two of Bodski's men took over, carrying the unconscious man down the hallway.

“Thank you for your help, Commander!” Captain Bodski said as they hurried out.

Anwen tried to take a glance at the princess, but the three remaining men from Bodski's team still shielded her with their bodies, although at least two of them were injured.

“Aisling, are you all right?” She asked, completely forgetting about protocol.

“I’m fine, thank you my love.” The princess replied.

They reached the end of the hallway, and hurried outside.

“I need a comms-terminal.” Bodski said. “I need to contact the fleet. They can be here in a few hours.”

Anwen nodded. “There is one inside the shopping mall, over at the High Street. We need to get the princess to safety.”

“Can you get her off-station?” The captain asked.

“Right now, I think that’ll be too dangerous. They have a fleet waiting out there. And they’re going to expect we do something like this. They also will be looking for the baron. We better split up. I’ll take the princess to a safe location, you keep an eye on him,” she pointed to the limp body. “and contact the imperial fleet.”

Bodski pondered. “That would leave Her Highnesses safety solely in your hands!”

Both Anwen and Aisling looked at the captain of the guard and said simultaneously: “Seriously?”

The captain of the guard sighed. “Be careful, Your Highness.”

Aisling smiled. “Promised Captain. Contact us, when it’s safe.”

She turned to Anwen: “I trust you have a plan how to get us back unseen?”

Anwen grinned. “How do you feel about a trip to the stations underground?”

“Just when I got a new dress.” The princess sighed.



The next morning Aisling woke in the bed in the shabby hotel Anwen had booked them in when they arrived. No one here knew who she was, or that she had been here, so it was safe to stay. Anwen was staring at a news monitor. Captain Bodski spoke to a journalist about how the Royal Vanguard had captured a traitor, and that Lord Beadford-Ferron had been conspiring with *Emperor's Dawn* against the crown in order to take over the trade in rare metals that was the foundation of *Auserids* economy.

He also stated that Her Royal Highness, Princess Aisling Duval, was safe. That was the signal for Anwen, that they could come out of hiding. The newsreel showed an outside view of the station, that was swarming with imperial battleships.

“Good morning, Your Highness!” Anwen said, without turning around. “I think you made it.”

The princess got out of bed, walked over to the commander and put her arms around the woman's waist.

“I think that was mostly you. I cannot thank you enough.”

## Epilogue

It was night over the capital, and a cool breeze soothed the heat of the day. It gently blew the light curtains and Aisling could see the silhouette of a woman against the pale light of the two moons.

Anwen stood outside and stared at the stars longingly. Aisling got out of bed, wrapped herself in a gown that was hung over a chair and stepped outside. She put her arms around her girlfriend.

“Can’t sleep?” She asked.

“Mmh.” Anwen leaned back into the younger woman’s embrace. Aisling gently kissed her.

“Would you like to come back to bed?” She asked.

Anwen turned around. “I’m sorry, darling. I know I’ve been absent minded lately. I’ll be better.”

They kissed.

“No.” Aisling said gently. “I know what you’re dreaming of. You want to go back out there. To the stars.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t. . .” Anwen began. But the princess silenced her, by gently putting a finger onto her lips.

“Ssh. Don’t do this to yourself. It’s were you belong, we both know that. I was just so selfish to think I could keep you for myself a while longer.”

“Aisling, I don’t want to go, but. . . How can I explain this?” Tears welled up in her eyes.

The princess held her girlfriend. “The stars know your name, my love.” She whispered. “And you have no choice but to answer their call. Meredith taught me that.”

Anwen looked in her eyes. “Why don’t you come with me? We could fly out there, across the rim. See the universe.”

The princess shook her head in great sadness. “I can’t. I have too many responsibilities. People do rely on me.”

“It’s the life I know. I have spent my life in a cage, so I never learned to live in the wild. It’s a golden cage, but a cage still. And I’m used to the safety it brings.”

She took a deep breath.

“You, on the other hand, are a wild bird. You long to fly, and keeping you in a cage would be cruel. I’m grateful for the time you gave me, but I can see that you need to spread your wings again.”

Anwen pressed herself against her girlfriend. “So this is goodbye?”

“Maybe not today. But there is something I need to show you. Get dressed.”

It was still dark outside, when the princess led Anwen to the station. A high-speed train carried them from the



palace to the space-port where the planetary guard had its ground headquarters.

When they walked through the hall, Anwen could see the ships that were docked. They passed a window beyond which a brand new ASP Explorer was currently equipped. It was coloured in white and blue, and wore the insignia of the House Duval. The princess saw, how Anwen marvelled at it, like a child in a candy-store, and smiled.

“Come along, dear!” She said, hurrying the commander away from the window.

They walked down stairs towards the docks, with the occasional guard saluting when they passed by, until they ended up in front of a gate that led outside to the docks. Aisling nodded at the guard. The guard saluted, and then opened the gate.

The two women found themselves in the dock, in which the ASP Explorer was prepared.

“This is the *Ichnaea*, our newest deep space exploration vessel.” The princess explained. “It’s the first of a fleet, that supports our attempts to find new habitable worlds, and resources.”

Anwen walked towards the ship. “Wow, that ship is equipped with everything!”

“You want to have a look inside?” Aisling asked.

“Of course!”

The princess led Anwen inside. The ship was set up to be practical, but it was also equipped with all kinds of luxuries, which make life comfortable when you’re in space for months.

The cockpit lay dormant. Anwen ran her fingers over the controls.

“You want to fire it up?” Aisling asked.

“Are you kidding?” Was Anwen’s reply. “I want to take this baby for a spin!”

“That can be arranged. I was hoping, you’d like her. I still owe you a space-ship, remember?”

Anwen stared at her. “What?”

“She’s yours, if you want her. No strings attached. See her as compensation for all you have been through. And as a token of my gratitude.”

“That’s way to much!”

“I am filthy rich, remmeber? And I own an entire fleet of these things, so I can afford this. Also I know that this ship is in good hands.”

“I don’t know what to say. Thanks.” She put her arms around her friend. “Are you sure?” She asked.

“I’m going to miss you, but yes, I have to let you go. And you know that.”

Aisling hugged her tightly. “Just promise me to be careful, and when ever you’re in the vicinity, come and see me.”

“I promise.” Anwen whispered.

Commander Anwen Hunter had never been one for long goodbyes. Only a few days later she sat in the cockpit of the *Ichnaea* ready for launch.

“Good morning Commander. It’s a pleasure to be working with you again.” ASTRA’s familiar voice came from the cockpit. Aisling had the remains of the *Merope* transferred to Cubeo, and the original A.I. of the ship upgraded and installed in the *Ichnaea*.

“Good morning, ASTRA” Anwen replied. “It’s good to have you back. Feel at home in the new ship?”

“Positive, Commander. I am completely operational and all systems are functioning perfectly.”

Anwen took a last look over to the observation deck. There stood, surrounded by two guards, Aisling Duval. Anwen could see the princess raise a hand and wave. From the distance Anwen could not see if her face was happy or sad. She felt a sting in her heart when she waved back, and blew a kiss to her friend and lover.

“Lakon AWN, you are cleared for take-off. Keep to flight corridor 250.” A voice from her headset announced.

“Copy that, control.” She answered.

“Have a pleasant flight.” The voice from the control center said.

“You heard her ASTRA, let’s go!”

The sadness in her heart was blown away by the excitement as she felt the acceleration of the ship rising into the morning sky. She was home.

