

Chapter 2

Celia fluttered in anticipation as she coasted toward the hanger then the assigned J-34 Jacht lander came into view. This was not the frigate or destroyer she envisioned commanding one day. Still, it was hers for the next twelve hours or until her command test mission was over, whichever came first. Her stomach cramped, and she took a deep breath. *What's the worst that can happen?*

Celia parked the off-roader inside the hanger, near the nose of her pro tem ship, the UGC Tempest. She grabbed her flight bag and gave the off-roader's well-loved fender a thump. *Wish me luck, Fred.* Her field boots creaked like a duck asking questions on the polished hanger floor as she started the walk-around inspection. There was action at the ship's stern, and Celia's heart sank; it was an all Nørn ground crew.

The Galactic Corps was an even balance of all seven races. Still, in Celia's experience, ground crews and motor pools mostly comprised insular and often inflexible Nørn. They were a stout race with flat-tipped noses, lower tusks, and coarse fur. While not tall in stature, they were strong-willed and mind. The Nørn were the Union's master builders and most ingenious tinkers. Often misjudged, their demeanor was never 'cuddly.'

"There you are." A deep voice was soft like the hum of a horse spoke from behind.

J. Hamilton Merriweather squeezed out of the Tempest's main entry. The opening had not been designed with his race in mind. Unlike the Nørn, the Gurch were the Giants of the Seven, and Hamilton was a larger-than-average example; in height *and* girth. He made most Terrans look like children by comparison. Moreover, Hamilton had no aptitude for physical or sartorial displays. Illustrated by the rumpled lab coat he wore over the Stonegate Academy-issued indigo flight suit. Hamilton was a walking contrast in many ways; adopted by two Terran scientists; he was ostensibly Gurch in appearance and appetite. A brief smile flashed across Hamilton's worrisome face as the doctor headed her way.

"If it wasn't for the thirty-six non-simulated field hour requirements, I'd be in my lab now." Hamilton's big foot hooked the ship's umbilical, and his massive

body tripped forward just as an access boom swung past his head. He regained balance with an annoyed look. "That hose is a menace. I could have twisted my ankle."

Celia hid a smile as her friend remained oblivious to his good fortune. As a race, the Gurch were considered the luckiest of The Seven in the galaxy, and Hamilton proved no exception.

"The streets were packed with the Rezama *and* Hamii faithful." Celia tossed her bag into the hatch and looked around the hanger, "That's a hell of a lot of people to see that new Unity Sculpture."

"Ugh, the news feeds have been jammed with images of that hideous thing. " Hamilton looked to see if anyone was near, "Something's wrong with whoever made it. "

"Listen to us, two art critics. Not that either of us could do better, but your right." Celia kept looking around the hanger. "Oh, and those smaller sculptures, they're everywhere you look."

"I read there're over seventy-thousand of those Unity Pillars around Terra Prime alone." Hamilton looked at his holo screen, "Today's the first Unity celebration, then one on each of the six other homeworlds across the galaxy on the next few months." The big Gurch pointed a thumb toward the city, "If that's what it will be like, may we be as far away from them as possible."

"I give them half a star, only because they're black, and that's cool." Celia tapped her holo screen, "My father's been on my tail for months to take this command test early, and it lands on today of all days. What are the odds of two religious holidays *and* Unity Day land on the same day?"

"Mmmm... Roughly, seven-million, six-hundred-and-ninety-two-thousand, and-nineteen to one."

Celia stared at her friend with a raised eyebrow.

"Hey, that's a prime number, and so is today's date *and* year; forty-nine, seventy-three!" Hamilton opened another holoscreen, "I'll need more time to calculate *those* odds."

"Maybe tomorrow," She was going to miss him. Tomorrow, she would leave

the system on that archeology dig. Then after Stonegate's graduation, Celia would be off on some warship, and the Corps would squirrel Hamilton away in some super-secret skunkworks facility. At least they had this last test mission together; too bad Kr'I'Traax wouldn't be with them.

"Listen, I need more space for my equipment." He closed the additional holo screens.

Did the mission supervisor know of the crew change, or did Celia need to inform her? Celia stopped short, and Hamilton bumped into her.

"Is *she* here yet?" The question tasted like bile.

"Who, Major Skandii?" Hamilton squinted in a conspiracy.

Celia's face twisted at the question.

"Yup." His massive head made an awkward jerk toward the ready room.

"Damnit, I could really use a cup of kavee." Celia's forlorn tone bordered on a petulant whine that sounded all too similar to her mother's, a quality she despised.

Major Skandii's dark metal silhouette sat alone in the dim ready room, illuminated by a slew of holoscreens. The Major was a Protean, the most enigmatic of the seven races. A mystery perpetuated by the fact that they were never seen outside of their exo-suits. The most anyone could hope for was a brief glimpse of a giant eye through a dark face shield. So Protean's were never considered the most personable race due to this lack of visual connection. But they were renowned for their music, literature, and they were the first to span the great distance of galactic space. Major Skandii had a reputation of being cold, removed, and strict, and Celia considered the Major the most significant obstacle to overcome in the day.

"I heard that when the term *by the book* was proposed, the Major was there to approve it," Hamilton muttered.

Celia was confident that the Major was the Commandant's direct response to her father's interference. Being an Admiral's daughter would not help today. *No reason to put it off*. She took a step toward the ready room when the sound of

seizure-inducing music filled the hanger.

"Sounds like Ensign Cort has arrived." Hamilton made a disapproving face and looked around, "Where's Kr'lTraax?"

"She's not coming." Her feet stopped again, and her stomach tightened.

"She's what?" Hamilton's giant arms dropped in unnecessary emphasis.

"She's been *reassigned* to the Admiral's Unity Day staff to attend the seven cultural ceremonies at the Palace. She'll be knee-deep in Royals, nobles, senators, and dignitaries." Celia let out a hollow breath. "No doubt she's polishing the Unity sculpture now."

"This is a bad omen; let's cancel the mission." Hamilton rubbed his upper arms as he opened a couple more holo screens.

"Since when are *you* superstitious? You give two-hour lectures that prove the gods don't exist."

"They don't." Hamilton spied her through the holo-screens, "And don't look at me to be XO; I have *enough* to manage today."

"Don't worry, we've been *assigned* a replacement." Celia wanted to vent about her father, "Maxtron Blain." She needed to sonic her mouth clean now.

"No, *that's* a bad omen" Hamilton closed the holo screens, "Why him?"

"His numbers looked good." Celia kept an eye on the ready room.

A lanky young Terran with burnt umber hair ran up to them, stopped the multi-tok holographic timer around his neck, and snapped a salute. His broad shoulder acted like a hanger for the rest of the flight suit to hang loose below. Celia returned the respectful gesture as Hamilton fumbled to keep up. Unfortunately, the pilot's words were drowned out by the music, and Celia reached over to turn the music off.

"Oh, sorry. Ma'am, I was saying that I would have been here sooner, but on account of those crazy Gurch..." Jacey froze and recoiled. "Uh, sorry, sir, I didn't mean you, but the ones in the dresses and nutty masks." He looked back at his commanding officer with caution as the three stood in silence.

“Oh, Ma’am?” Jacey broke the quiet.

“Yes?” Celia raised an eyebrow.

“These old ships have an odd drive issue, and I wanted to check if they’ve been upgraded.” His expressive face looked eager to please, “Anyway, I’ll have the ship ready in no time.”

“Music to my ears, Ensign,” Celia said.

Jacey dashed away in a blur.

Celia’s lips bunched to the side as she eyed the ready room.

“Oh, Captain, my Captain.” A voice oozed from behind.

“Ah... I need to find a thing...” Hamilton retreated back into the Tempest.

Celia had never seen Hamilton move so quick before. She guessed he just needed the proper motivation. Maxtron Blain was fit, on the Commandant's List, and cursed with perfect features. But all those looks and abilities came with a price, and usually, everyone else paid.

Rather than heading to the ready room, Celia faced the new Executive Officer. It looked as if he'd been prepared for weeks. Maxtron's flight suit was tailored, spotless, and creased—even the pull-seal tabs were polished. He made no rush to salute her, and her response was tantamount to swatting a bug—*an excellent beginning*.

Maxtron kept a meter-and-a-half away, and Celia fought the urge to roll her eyes. She spent enough time with upper-crust Terrans, who fancied themselves stylish by acting like aloof Enari to recognize the young officer's trendy effort. Celia's eyes glanced at the brushed metal drink container in his hand and regretted the impulse.

“No better way to start the day than a cytomino drink.” His manicured eyebrows raised, “I *could* make you one,” Maxtron looked around, patting an expensive leather flight bag, “and maybe the Major would want one too?”

“Thanks,” It sounded good, but she would die of starvation before letting him

know that. "but no thanks."

"Is everyone here?" Maxtron's neck craned about, "When the Commandant's office reached out last night, I had a lot to do. I'm sure I'd be the last one here, but I guess not."

"Everyone is already here." Celia hadn't seen the Operations Officer yet. Still, she would be damned if she would give the self-interested executive officer the satisfaction.

"About Lieutenant Commander Merriweather," He took a long pull from the drink, "you should've reconsidered using him."

"Gods, you sound like my father." She checked the time on her wrist display.

"I couldn't ask for a better compliment."

"It wasn't a..." Celia let slip.

"Hey, trust your XO." Then he flashed a dazzling smile, "I've been prepping for weeks to make you look good."

"Weeks?" As satisfying as it would be to punish Maxtron for how she felt about her father, it wouldn't change anything. "You know what, go aboard the Tempest..."

"The Tempest?"

"Our ship..?" She pointed to the nose art.

The loud music returned with additional clanking from the stern, and Maxtron latched onto the distraction.

"Jacey, I mean, Ensign Cort's checking the drives." Celia pointed over her shoulder with her thumb.

"He's the normie pilot, right?" Maxtron talked behind his hand.

"He's our *pilot*, and his lifespan shouldn't factor into this."

"Sure, right. Who knows, Max does good for us today; that's one step closer to Extension." Maxtron took another drink.

Maybe it would be good to punish him, regardless of her father, but they

needed to take off and complete the mission.

"I have a pre-flight checklist to complete—Double-check Lieutenant Commander Merriweather's equipment payload against the manifest and run through the mission plan a couple of times. I'm going to need a little more than your looking good today." Celia let a little smile out as she walked around the starboard aileron to see Jacey perched on the edge of the airframe with his head in an open access panel.

"What's wrong with my engines, Ensign?" Celia called over the din.

The young pilot's head hit the hatch in surprise. '*CLANG!*'

"Ow!" Jacey wiggled free from the hatch, pushed away from the ship, and landed on the deck at attention.

"There's nothing wrong with your engines, Ma'am." His cheeks flushed.

"At-ease, Ensign. Then why is that hatch open?" She hoped his inexperience wasn't revealing itself, "Run the diagnostics from your station?"

Jacey looked befuddled as his hand lowered.

"I did... Ma'am. I'm checking if the drives had the upgraded thermo-coupling unit." Furrows formed across Jacey's brow, "I should have guessed because someone bypassed the hatch alarms...."

Celia raised her hand to motion him to stop.

"Sorry, Jacey. Just make sure she's ready to fly on time." Celia wondered how they would get off-planet.

"She will be, Ma'am." He relaxed against the fuselage in an unprecedented moment of stillness.

"And please do something with this... music." She raised her hand as she turned back toward the ready room.

Jacey jerked upright and fumbled with his multi-tok to lower the music.

The music was replaced by the whir of a vehicle motor spinning down. Celia

turned to see her Operations Officer, Ph'avell, piloting a payloader toward the Tempest's main hatch.

"Well, if the lost one hasn't come home." Celia smiled, "Have we been out shopping, Chief?"

"Morning, Cap'n," The stocky, black-furred, Thandarian shut down the payloader with a twitch of his muscular shoulder. Thandarians were profoundly spiritual and blessed with feline athleticism. But, Ph'avell never struck Celia as particularly devout to anything but the Special Operation unit he served. His sable tail trailed behind him as he leaped from the control pod with uncanny grace.

"Sorry for the delay, but I wasn't too keen blasting off into the Great Vacuum with that Academy-issued kit." Ph'avell thumped the side of the Tempest, "I mean, they give us the flight codes to this venerable ship, but Stonegate keeps the training wheels on with old enviro suits and comms systems. Not to mention that hand-me-down recovery equipment was old when your father took this test. It's positively prehistoric, like that timepiece on your wrist."

"Hey, I like old things." She half-covered her grandfather's watch.

"I like an aged Arthropian ale as much as the next guy, but there're limits. " Alabaster fangs flashed as Ph'avell smiled.

"After this watch and the ship, *you're* the oldest thing here." Celia fired back, and Ph'avell mimed a shot to the heart. "Looks like a few more things on that payloader, that recovery gear."

"Yeah, after last night's run-through, I picked up my lucky kit at The Compound and ran into some old teammates. We grabbed a few, talked about the weird net chatter for the last couple of months. Then a round or so later, they offered to help their old buddy Ph'avell with some choice field and enviro kit." His clawed fingers snapped and pointed to the well-traveled roto-cases stacked high on the payloader, "Plus some sensitive site exploitation tech packages to help with the data acquisition portion of the mission." Celia raised a quizzical eyebrow. "Okay, maybe Admiral Vickers kid was mentioned."

"You didn't." Celia glared, "I never... I'd never say...."

"Woah, I know you wouldn't." Ph'avell pointed back to the ForceCon compound, "*They* asked if *I* was tasked to *your* mission. Turns out you're all good in their book. Consider it my peace-offering for giving you shit about joining your test mission crew."

He winked a golden eye, reached up, and pulled out a small silver case.

"We can't bring guns on the test mission...." Celia just wanted to get on the Tempest and take off.

"C'mon, give me a little credit." He handed her the case.

Now she looked to see if anyone was watching.

"It's fine; open it." Ph'avell's tail swished behind him.

Her thumbs prized the latches loose, and the airtight lid made a soft pop. Inside, eight cylinders of dark metallic liquid nested across from a sub-dermal injector in the lid. Celia's expressive eyes betrayed the excited confusion.

"Are these, Gen9 units?" She pulled out a cylinder and peered into the liquid, "But the Corps *just* upgraded to the Gen7, and we're only using Gen6. Are the implants in the fluid?"

"Nope, this is next-level stuff. What you have here is a nano-based, real-time neural conversation system. Audio, visual, text—all of it. You hear the person's voice translated, not a programmed assistant." Ph'avell tapped the lid with a claw, "Plus, the encryption is tied to our genetics, so squad coms can't be hacked or tracked."

"This stuff's gotta be restricted; we can't use it." Celia slid the cylinder back in its well.

"Yes *and* no. Our squadron was tasked to T 'n E these units as we see fit. Well, last night, the team's senior NCO agreed that this was an appropriate field test. So after the mission, we can extract them, then I'll file my report."

Tier 1 units currently ran Gen8 TexComs systems. But Celia wasn't headed for a unit like that, she was destined for the big ships, and they wouldn't see Gen8's for another decade at the tectonic pace the Corps moved.

“We can't use this stuff, Ph'avell. We need to...” Celia closed the lid.

“Need to what? Mission rules don't say anything about procurement, and this team deserves the best chance at success, especially with a Gurch on board.”

“You can't be serious... Are you two thousand years old?”

“Call me superstitious, but they bring bad luck.” Ph'avell studied her face, “Listen, in my experience, it pays to be over-prepared. Those two squadrons are away on training rotations, and all this stuff will just collect dust for months.”

Her mouth opened, but nothing came out. She didn't balk when Hamilton insisted on bringing his own equipment, so why did she treat Ph'avell differently? This fit within parameters, and she needed to trust his experience.

“You're right.” Celia looked at Jacey inspecting the ion drives, then across the hanger at the three assault landers awaiting delivery. “Any chance you could swing one of those?” She gestured to the new aircraft.

“A Dragonfly? I wish... but they belong to the One-Sixtieth, Skystalkers. Shame, they're also on training rotation for another two months.”

Celia mused over the possibility of, one day, commanding one of those.

“Time to figure out how to shoehorn all this stuff in that ship,” Ph'avell scratched the fur tuft under his broad jaw.

“I'll leave you to it,” Celia handed the case back.

“I'll make sure doc gets the TexComs.”

“I need to grab some kavee.” Celia hesitated to look at the ready room.

“Way ahead of you there, Cap'n.” Ph'avell reached into the control pod, “I'll let you in on a closely guarded secret. The Compound has the best kavee on the base; maybe the whole city.” He produced a large kavee in his clawed hands, “Black with a splash of milk, right”? He grabbed a few more, “I have a light 'n sweet for the kid, plus a couple straight-black for Hamilton and me—I figured the Major wouldn't be drinking anything.”

“You're short one.” Celia considered offering her to Maxtron.

“I respect your father, but when I see him next, he's going to hear how I feel

about adding that kid to the crew." Ph'avell's bright eyes looked dark.

"How did you know..." Celia stared at the Thandarian.

"It's my job to know things." Ph'avell hefted a few chunky cases as she took a sip, "Besides, that kid's gotta earn his kavee."

"Rahoe to you, Chief, this is amazing." She regarded the cup.

Without thinking, Celia was headed toward the ready-room, armed with the only external courage she would get today.