

Chapter 21

Clouds of ochre dust clung to the high desert surface as the off-roader charged across the rough dirt track. With neck wraps pulled over their faces and dusty goggles, they looked like a pack of masked bandits. Celia kept her eyes focused on anything unusual, which could be everything on an alien planet. Case in point, Ph'avell pinned the throttle as they raced toward a thick yellow cloud that hung across the roadway. He recommended they hold their breath and muttered something about scarred lungs or acid. *Welcome to Umrii.*

The funny thing about holding your breath is, it's the only thing you can think about while you do it. That, and how much longer you have to hold it. Fred rattled across the blind terrain, and Celia's exposed skin felt sunburned. The opaque lemon light ceased as they cleared the cloud, and the air returned to its normal levels of noxiousness.

"Maybe we drive around those next time?" Maxtron coughed as he wiped the back of his hands against his trousers.

"I have never traveled so quick across the land. Science is amazing." Finwë leaned forward, his head bounced along with the speeding vehicle. "Tis similar to the rush of charging an armored steed into the fray."

Celia and Ph'avell looked sideways at one another.

"Like what?" Maxtron said.

This doesn't bode well for maintaining cover. @Ph'avellCWO5

"Let's try and not blurt those out with others around. Okay, Finwë?" Celia's long, copper-streaked hair whipped about as she pulled down the neck covering and added a smile.

She spotted a plume of dust rising hundreds of meters behind them into the stale sky from the off-roader. If anyone was watching the road, this would make it impossible to avoid detection. That didn't bode well either.

The off-roader ascended the narrow switchback road until they reached the mountain crest just as the morning sun covered the entire plain behind them. Before them lay a generous expanse of long snaking canyons packed with

reddish vegetation. Far off in the epicenter of this endless flat sat Kamadi. Dozens of immense processing plants and refineries surrounded the city like giant boils and pustules belching their dull-colored reek into the sky. With help from her polynoculars, Celia made out a network of improved roads connecting the blemishes of industry. Each roadway sported its own wall of dust from the non-stop flow of vehicles transporting their profitable payload.

Speck-like small aircraft disappeared and reappeared in the arenaceous air as gargantuan transport ships lumbered through the miasma-like living shadows. An incomplete circle of air processing stations around Kamadi waged a losing atmospheric war against the lucrative evisceration of Umrii.

"It takes armies of workers to run those plants, and the city is full of those who support the workers, and in the tall towers in the center are those who take advantage of everyone." Ph'avell slowed the off-roader.

Nobody spoke.

"And, remember, we're working for a team of geologists." He gestured to Celia and Maxtron, "Working for an Enari interest." He nodded toward Finwë.

"What if they ask what we're doing in Kamadi?" Celia asked.

"We're just getting some supplies for our expedition," Finwë said.

Like I said, there's something about this guy. @Ph'avellCW05

I'll say. @CVickersLCDR

"What he said." Ph'avell's knuckles bulged around the steering control as he accelerated away, "Keep things on a first-name basis, and don't overthink this."

Maxtron played two scenarios over and over in his head on the three-hour ride. First, how quick he could clear the blanket away from his carbine to draw it in case of an extremist attack. And second, why the others couldn't see this as the perfect opportunity to safely reach out for help. He had no idea if the Galactic

Senator his father paid to write his school recommendation had been in Nueva City during the attack. But he was pretty sure the Senator's aid had been nowhere near Terra. Maxtron had liked the aid's recent posts of a fancy new winery on an outer planet. Maxtron just needed Celia to sign off. One quick call they could wait things out at the safe house.

Maxtron's reflection was interrupted as they passed a few structures. Lacking geological borders, Kamadi's city limits seemed to be wherever one chose to set up shop. It was a showcase for opportunistic sprawl. Set up a shack selling *whatever* one day, then find five new huts doing the same the next day. Lean-tos with holo signs became huts, huts became shacks, shacks became structures, structures became buildings, and buildings became Kamadi.

Ph'avell slowed the off-roader and complained that all the new streets and alleys made it impossible to find their destination. The Thandarian's frustration grew as they navigated the tight city corridors looking for the bazaar and *his* contact. The net-map seemed no help. People from across the Union filled the streets, buying, selling, and stealing their day away; it all seemed a lot of effort to eke out a life on a shitty planet.

Rolling along with the foot traffic, everyone looked out their respective side when a resigned pack animal pulled a ramshackle cart in front of the off-roader. Maxtron called out, and Ph'avell jammed the grav-locks and cut the wheel as the off-roader scrapped the side of the wagon. Ph'avell rushed around the hood, hollering a choice selection of curses that put a smile on Maxtron's face. But the yelling attracted the unwelcome attention of bystanders, particularly an angry mob of Terrans waving large holo screens with anti-Thandarian and Rezamist slogans. A few protesters drifted away from the gap between two buildings their brethren collected and moved toward the loud exchange. Local Thandarians in the streets filtered their way as well. Maxtron lowered his hand, feeling for the grip of the carbine under the blanket at his feet. He was glad to have planned ahead. Maxtron's eyes darted between the gathering groups, and then he spotted Ph'avell take in the scene. The Chief tossed some paper money toward the driver and sauntered back to the driver's seat. The pitch of the remaining protesters changed as a group of traditionally robed Thandarians appeared on the far side, wielding lengths of sand cane.

Ph'avell gave the conflict a glance as he prepared to move on.

"Jaddah, be praised! There is it." Ph'avell pointed a clawed finger past the dispersing protesters.

The clearing gap between the buildings was the long-sought entry to the bazaar, and the stick-wielding Thandarians were irate shop owners. Ph'avell pulled up to the shop owners and assistants, who beamed bright smiles and welcomed them in. Some harsh sounding words were exchanged, and the assistants remained to keep the entry open.

"I wonder what that was all about?" Celia said.

"Fear and distrust travel at the speed of light across the galaxy," Ph'avell grumbled.

Greetings and cheers welcomed them as the off-roader entered the dark bazaar. The marketplace was larger than Maxtron expected. It felt like a proper city plaza, but unlike anything, he had seen before. The dim air was an odd mixture of cooked meats, spices, ozone, and desperation. The rich, warm colors of the earth, stone, and clothing looked like a painting come to life. The tall buildings effectively blocked most of the sunlight. The opening above was filled with a rising web of patchwork fabric strung together, marking the bazaar with dappled light that moved with each breeze. Callers waved from the dozens of shops overflowing with a cornucopia of wares around them. Ignoring the encouragements, Ph'avell steered the off-roader toward one particular storefront.

They tried to wave off clerks armed with an array of items as they disembarked. Maxtron looked for a blaster or knife in the hands of the strangers crowding in. They were leaving the of-roader and their rifles.

"Hold on, lemme arm the security measures." Celia headed around to the driver's side.

Good idea, we don't want someone to grab our guns. @BlainLT02

No need; the vendors police the bazaar. Nothing will happen to us, our things here.
@Ph'avellCW05

Ph'avell shook off his scarf and tossed it into the off-roader with his goggles. Maxtron stepped away from the others and patted small clouds of red dust from

his ill-fitting attire. Celia's laugh caught his attention. He wasn't sure if she was laughing at him or something else. She and the other two tried to dust themselves off but only succeeded in covering one another. Maxtron wondered how they would remain unnoticed with a Terran woman who stood a clear head and a half taller than everyone around. Eager vendors crowded around her, displaying fabrics, exotic fruits, and other wares. She looked natural in these dusty rags, even elegant. He hated feeling second to her in every way.

Ph'avell led them toward a large shop that displayed a wide variety of clothing. Maxtron was determined to find clothes that fit him. He walked past Finwë, who stood on the dirt ground of the bazaar looking around.

"It's all a little strange, am I right?" Maxtron asked.

"You'd be surprised at what I've seen, Maxtron Blaine." Finwë made a half-smile, "This feels oddly familiar."

"Listen, if we get through all of this, I'll show you some really nice places that make this place look like garbage." Maxtron had no intention to make good on his invitation.

"I thank you, kind sir." Finwë followed the group into the large shop.

The sooner Maxtron could get things back to normal, the better. He would cross all of this off the list and move on.

The hawkers pealed away in loud disgust as the crew walked toward the enticing storefront. Celia looked across the bazaar and saw two small Thandarian girls playing the same hand-clapping game she and her oldest friend played as children. Celia wondered if Emilia was somewhere safe.

"Why *this* shop?" Maxtron asked.

"The owner and I go way back, Country Club." Ph'avell threw his arm over the young Lieutenant's shoulders.

"You meet him on deployment here?"

"More like, *rediscovered* him here. I met Khamid in jail on Thandaria."

Celia spotted Maxtron's ineffective attempt to shake Ph'avell's embrace.

"My second day in, a small gang of inmates set upon a new guy for power, prey, or blood. I wasn't trying to save him; I just wanted to show that *I* wasn't a victim. So I went after *them* in a public way. Turns out, I saved Khamid, and he's tried to repay an unpayable debt. Against my better wishes, we became friends in our time. Khamid bribed his way out of jail before the magistrate gave me a choice between the spice mines of S'va or enlistment in the Corps. In Basic, I received a message that he left Thandaria for Kamadi."

"For real?" Maxtron relaxed.

"Yeah, I never in my wildest dreams thought that I'd ever end up here, but ForceCon visits the finest shit holes in the galaxy."

"He knows what you do?" Celia asked.

"No, he thinks I'm some sort of contract security worker. He's well connected here, so I let him know I was open to picking up bounties and the like."

The large shop was filled to the ceiling with endless items of curiosity.

"Oh, and he's a bit over the top. So..."

"My *friend*, it has been too long!" A stocky, tan and spotted, Thandarian dressed in traditional flowing robes appeared between two tables and locked his pudgy arms around Ph'avell. "Where have you been? I miss our talks and all your stories." Bejeweled hands embellished every word with a flourish.

Khamid scrutinized Ph'avell at arm's length as to if he was evaluating an item's worth. A series of noncommittal hums and clucks issued for his graying muzzle punctuated with a *tisk*. Then he stole a glance at Celia with a hopeful *Hmm*.

"You are too thin. It's because you're not married." He pulled Ph'avell close and whispered so all could hear, "You're not married, are you?"

Ph'avell wrapped his arm over the shop owner's shoulder and turned him to

face the crew.

"May I introduce you to my dear friend and brother, Khamid." Ph'avell placed his other hand on Celia's shoulder, "Khamid, this is Celia. She's my boss. Treat her as you would me."

"Employer?" The shopkeep paused, then his face lit up, "A shame to let such a beautiful flower go unappreciated, my brother."

The older Thandarian performed a deep bow that Celia was sure he would regret tomorrow.

"My dear, it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. *Any* friend of Ph'avell's is a friend of mine. While you are here, you are all my children." He preened.

Khamid yelled to his employees in a merchant cant that the TexCom translator couldn't decipher. The assistants drifted close in curiosity and a practiced distance from Khamid's reach. The shop owner's gauze shifted to Ph'avell and back.

"I must beg your forgiveness and steal him away; there is much to catch up. Please, look around, pick out whatever you wish." He barked at a young assistant holding a broom, smacked him with a robe sleeve, then whisked Ph'avell into a back room.

Once Khamid's voice disappeared into the back, the assistants relaxed. The freshly whipped assistant stepped forward as he smoothed his fur and offered a pleasant smile.

"If there is anything you need, Miss, you but only have to ask." The assistant bowed his head.

He was younger than his height belied. He also sported a round belly that he wrapped his robes tight against with a long sash. His clothing was impeccable, and he exhibited genuine confidence outside of Khamid's presence.

"Thank you, what is your name?" Celia was never comfortable being waited upon.

"Ph'avell. I am Khamid's eldest son, and I too will be a hero like my namesake." Young Ph'avell beamed.

While you are here, you are my children. Celia didn't fancy a robe whipping from anyone.

Celia looked around the shop to see a healthy handful of young Thandarians working the floor. She hadn't noticed them when they first entered amongst the older assistants. Young Ph'avell did not strike Celia as Corps *or* prison material.

"I'm sure your father will be proud, no matter what you choose to do." Celia's words rang loud in her own ear. She wished she had spoken up sooner about her interest in pursuing archeology.

Celia, Maxtron, and Finwë wandered the colorful aisles of clothing and curios with a squad of shop assistants for shadows. Over a rack of tops, Maxtron shifted closer.

"Can we trust Khamid?" Maxtron spoke low.

"If the Chief trusts him, he's gotta be okay."

"Maybe, but we have no idea what they're talking about."

"Think about our cover; we're just the people he works for. Not friends or crewmates." Celia held a soft violet top against her torso in a weak attempt to seem relaxed.

"Do you think we're making things worse for ourselves the longer we hide?" Maxtron spoke low.

"Nobody will fault us for rescuing people." Celia looked about, "That reminds me, have you seen a news screen?"

Maxtron took a moment to shift his focus.

"No."

"There has to be news about what happened." Celia looked for a vid screen in the shop.

"I guess, but we can't run forever." He actually looked concerned, "We could just...."

"We won't run forever." *I hope.* Celia prayed her look reassured Maxtron.

Finwë drifted across the shop, and Maxtron doubled back toward a rack of jackets. If Celia was honest, she wasn't okay with not being invited back to talk. She didn't share Max's concern about betrayal. Flipping through some clothes on a rack, she caught sight of Ph'avell in the back room, sipping tea. Celia's face always followed her feelings. As luck would have it, her unpleasant look did not escape the gaze of an attentive salesman.

"Miss, a thousand apologies, you are correct; this *is* the ugliest dress I have ever seen. I cannot understand why it is in our shop. I'm sure that idiot of the floor sweeper put it here." He cursed in that mysterious cant, snatched the garment from the rack, and threw it over a few display tables piled high with clothes into another salesman's waiting hands.

Celia bowed in thanks but was sure that the same dress would be up for sale as soon as she left the shop. She was here to find clothes and tried to scan the shop for something appropriate to mix in with her fatigues when harsh words caught her attention.

"No, no, no, no...."

A few aisles over, two salesmen did their best to disabuse Finwë from the notion of trying on a dark green gown. Celia rushed over and wormed her way through the small scrum.

"Finwë, this is beautiful, but it is a *woman's* dress," Celia said as the salesmen parted in a panic,

Celia froze for a moment, "Unless that's what you want?"

"Apologies, it is much like a traditional tunic." Finwë puzzled at the silhouette as a salesman snatched it away.

"The color does suit you." She grabbed his hand and slipped past the prattling attendants, "How about we find you something a bit more contemporary?"

By the time Ph'avell returned, a table was piled high with different clothes. Khamid inspected every piece and beamed at the sight of the haul. He eyed Celia again and smiled as if he'd eaten something delicious.

"My friends, it looks as if you found everything you needed, no? An auspicious beginning to your time here. No?" His robes undulated with a practiced flourish.

"We did, thank you, sir," Celia said.

"Anything, *anything* for my children." Khamid clasped his ringed fingers together and shook them, "Is there any way I can persuade you to stay for the night? Maybe you have more sense than our stubborn friend here? Stay here with my family, so we can get to know one another better." His open eyes were kind.

"A generous offer Master Khamid, but fortune waits for no one," Finwë said.

"So true. Well, my home is always open to you." The older Thandarian's brow crept up in the center. "Apparently, you have more to do while here in our bazaar. These will be wrapped and ready before you leave, and my tailor will adjust your inseam and sleeve length to how you prefer, my friend." Khamid nodded to Ph'avell.

Tailor? @BlainLT02

Celia and Maxtron muffled their laughter.

Khamid clapped his hands, and attendants scurried off with the clothing.

"Wait!" Maxtron pulled off his coat and grabbed a black and gray leather jacket from the pile.

It fit him like a glove, and Celia had to admit, it *was* the perfect jacket. She preferred this version of Maxtron. Away from the confines of the Stonegate and the ladder of achievement, he seemed—well, fun.

"Excellent choice. I own that exact piece." Khamid said.

Celia found that hard to believe, as Maxtron was a whole head taller and half as wide. She loved his masterful fawning mistruths and wished they could share supper with his family.

"If you will not dine with us tonight, then you simply must have your mid-day meal with my cousin Sh'hain. Her cafe serves the best food in all of Kamadi. It's like being on Thandaria." Khamid paused, "Remember, my friend, you must be at the location precisely at this time, or I cannot ensure your chance to purchase which you asked me to locate."

The elder Thandarian made a concerned look toward Ph'avell.

Hamilton! Celia almost blurted out the name.

"Master Khamid? I nearly forgot we must find a blanket for one of our workers—a very large Gurch." Celia said.

"Hmmm, we must have some rough-spun cloth in the back for the beast." He said with a dismissive wave.

"Quite generous, but it needs to be of good quality." Celia stepped close, "I lost a bet, and the blanket *was* the prize."

"Ahh... I understand I understand. Debts must always be paid." Khamid waved a clawed finger, "My close friend Xermaxiss sells the finest woven rugs and blankets in the galaxy." The Thandarian's face clouded, "The lucky cat has the first store in the bazaar. Tell him Khamid sent you, and he will treat you like family." He leaned in closer to Celia, "My advice, never wager with the Gurch. They are impossibly lucky."

The crew left the shop and walked toward the small oasis-like island in the center of the bazaar. The off-roader sat unmolested, though Maxtron was confident his carbine would be gone when they returned. It was peaceful and colorful. Maxtron had never spent any time in Thandaria, and he wondered if it was like this.

"You weren't kidding." Celia burst out as her foot hit the green. "He's a real piece of work; I love him. I wish we were here for other reasons; this place is great."

"The bazaar is; the rest of Umrii is a hole." Ph'avell cautioned, "Alright, let's get the stuff on this list and stick with the plan."

Maxtron was convinced that they had overlooked his notable connections. The true power in Union flowed from commerce and politics. Celia and Ph'avell were only well connected in the Corps. This left him as their best bet for a safe avenue back. He just needed the opportunity to start the ball rolling.

"Khamid has his claws in every carcass. He located a seller for the module in no time." Ph'avell's face bunched up as he looked at a holo-screen, "We have time to get the blanket and components before we head over to the warehouse district to pick up the ident module." Ph'avell looked around the bazaar, "The restaurant and tech shops are that way, and the blanket vendor is back at the entry. I guess we could cut out the meal or find any old blanket."

Never let an opportunity pass by. Maxtron's father was full of valuable sayings.

"No way will I listen to him complain any more than he already does. I'll get the blanket while you three take care of the components, then we'll meet for food. Just shoot me the location." Maxtron seized the opening.

Ph'avell gave Celia a look.

"What? You said we're safe here." Maxtron hoped he looked earnest, "Plus, I really want to try that food." He *was* hungry after all.

Ph'avell checked the time readout on his wrist interface. He looked at Celia, then to Finwë for some unknown reason, before digging into the folds of his vest.

"Roger, sir." Ph'avell handed over a thick bundle of credit strips. "But, *only* go to the rug shop, and whatever you do, don't leave the bazaar. If you run into any problems, contact us and get back to Khamid's."

"If you make it to the restaurant first, order me the special. They're always good." Maxtron smiled.

It was a lot easier to get away than he expected. This living on the run made for good stories, but it wasn't for them. It was time for him to do as Celia asked; *if she wasn't doing well, he needed to step up and keep everyone safe.* There was only one way to make sure they would all be safe moving forward.