



COVERT OPS
SERIES

by MindStar9



INTRODUCTION

MindStar9, journalist and investigative reporter within the Entropia Universe, is residing on Planet Arkadia and contacted by a long-time family friend who used to be a Senator on Earth, but is now a Senator on a distant planet called Cyrene.

The Senator invites MindStar to Cyrene but she suspects that this isn't just an ordinary visit given the Senator's tone during their conversation. She also suspects that perhaps the Senator's telecommunication was being monitored, and why the chat was more formal than relaxed and open.

After arriving on Cyrene, the truth is learned and the story begins to unfold. The Senator needs a covert ops mission deep into Zekkonian territory. After the mission fails due to a vicious attack in the swamp, MindStar returns to her home on Arkadia, but the Senator knew she would be returning, just not how soon, or under what conditions. Cyrene was still on military lockdown, and another vacation would cause suspicion, so a new plan had to be put into place.

MindStar receives a package from an unknown person who could not reveal what it contained, but it turns out to be a special invite from the Intergalactic Space Mission Agency (ISMA) on Earth, and directly related to Senator Calvin Neff on Cyrene. This was not a visit, this was a relocation.

After settling in at the Intergalactic Space Mission Agency (ISMA) where she meets her staff, MindStar takes her new high-tech office for a test run. The office, located at the Cyrene Ops Center, comes with a few surprises, including the discovery of a Cyrene War Room requiring thumb print and iris scans.

During the exploration of her office, MindStar has her first communication with Senator Calvin Neff who reveals that she will be returning to Cyrene in a couple of days to complete some unfinished business. She also learns some interesting details about her personal assistant that's challenging to wrap her head around.

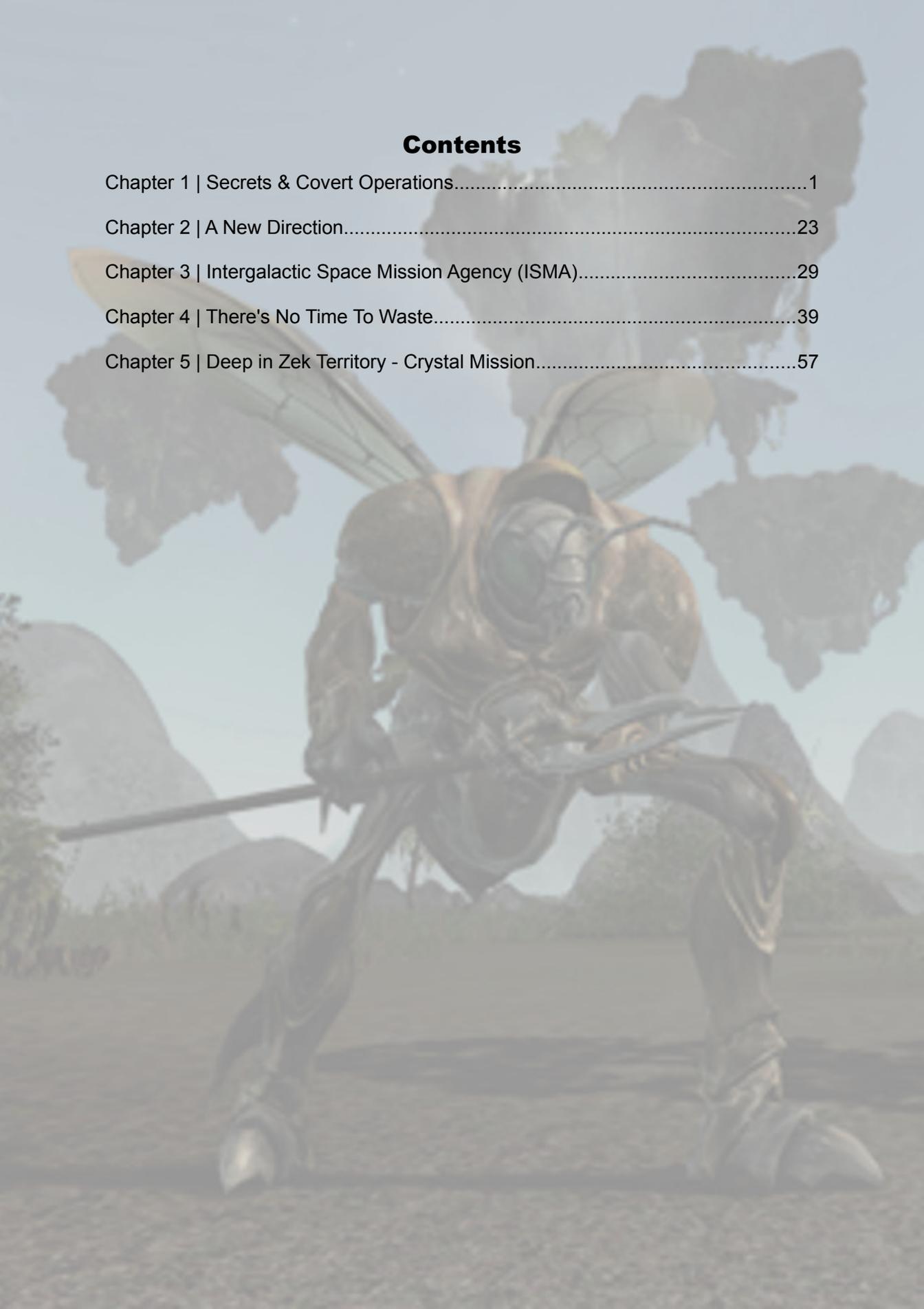
MindStar leaves Earth for Cyrene in an unmarked ISMA spacecraft, but learns just before boarding from Commander Winslow Anderson that she will be docking at a space station in the outer corridor of Cyrene in order to transfer to the Senator's private spacecraft. This transfer was being done so as not to raise any suspicion regarding an unmarked spacecraft. It is on this leg of the flight to Cyrene that she learns more about her cover and the continuation of the covert ops mission.

MindStar and the covert ops team go deeper undercover into Zekkonian territory, this time in search of the rare and highly-valued crystals from the Zek Crystal Gardens. The goal is to bring back samples of the crystals to the Senator who in turn will give them to Vida and her research team at the Cyrene Skylabs to develop an antidote for the mind-controlling drink that the Imperium Supreme Commander is using on certain inhabitants of Cyrene.

This mission is not without a high level of danger and risk, but the fourth member of the covert ops team proves to be a valuable asset, despite being out of the ordinary. Together, the team traverses unforeseen obstacles to achieve their goal.

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Chapter 1 | Secrets & Covert Operations



AN INVITATION

The view from my apartment on Arkadia is breathtaking, and always serves a calming purpose, if nothing more than to provide a reflective moment or two. I've been busy with my media activities lately and it's nice to just relax now and then.

However, the sound of my comm unit startled me. I usually don't get calls this time of the morning when the sun is about to rise. The signal is also not identifiable as anything coming from Arkadia, or any other planet that is nearby.

"Hello, this is MindStar, please identify yourself."

"Hello MindStar, this is Calvin," a rather excited voice echoed, "It's been a while since we've connected and I wanted to bring you up-to-date on what's transpired since our last meeting."

"Well hello Calvin, it *has* been a while, but where are you calling from, because the signal is not identifiable?"

"Well," Calvin responded, "I left my Senate duties on Earth and am now a Senator of a sector on a planet known as Cyrene, and the reason I'm calling is to invite you for a visit so that we can catch up."

"Sounds intriguing," I said as I sat at my desk to check my calendar, "when are we talking about? Is this a vacation, or do you have something more specific in mind?"

"As soon as possible if you can get away," he replied with a level of urgency in his voice, "I know your media work requires you to travel, so I wasn't sure what your schedule might be at this time."

"Yes," I said, "my media coverage takes me to various planets, so if I come for vacation, you have to know that the temptation will be there to write about it."

I scribbled a note to contact my media manager as I waited for his reply. I needed to alert her of this impending trip and that my June magazine content might be a little later than usual, but we work well together in the 11th hour, so I don't think it will be an issue. Lykke is accustomed to my spontaneity and heading out into the universe at the flip of a PED because I'm always going after potential stories. This could actually turn out to be something important.

"If your schedule is clear," Calvin replied, "let's say for about a week, maybe a bit longer. I can send a shuttle for you that would arrive sometime tomorrow, would that work?"

"Yes, that would be perfect," I responded, "and it would give me time to finish up a couple of tasks before departing."

I now felt a renewed energy, and motivated to get some things done that have needed my attention for a while. However, it was unlike the Senator to be so formal in his conversations with me, so I couldn't help but think that something was up.

"Excellent," Calvin replied with delight in his voice, "I'll send another transmission when I have everything secured and give you the details of when and where the shuttle will arrive."

"Ok," I said with an excited tone, "I am really looking forward to seeing you again and exploring yet another planet, so thank you for the invite."

"I feel I must warn you though MindStar," his voice now a bit more somber, "the entire planet is on military lockdown at this time. My Senator position is the only thing allowing me to invite you, but you must not reveal that you are a reporter or working for the media. You will be a friend coming for a visit. I feel it's the safest approach to not bring any undue attention to your presence on the planet."

Well, there it is, confirmation that my radar is still tracking with some degree of accuracy. I *knew* there had to be more to this visit than just a vacation, but wasn't going to push it. And then again, I could be totally wrong. It's been a while since I've seen the Senator, and perhaps a lot has changed.

"MindStar, you still there," Calvin asked, breaking my train of thought.

"Sorry Calvin," I responded, "I was thinking about what you just said. Are you sure it's safe to travel there?"

"Oh yes, you'll be fine, and you will be escorted at all times, so there's no danger to consider," he says with a tone of confidence.

"Ok then," I replied, "I'll get packing and will see you soon."

"Great MindStar, I'm looking forward to it. Goodbye."

"Goodbye," I said, watching the strange signal on my comm unit disappear.

Let's see, old friend, new planet, military lockdown, private shuttle, personal escort - yup, this looks like quite the adventure. Now where are my suitcases? I best not take any of my media gear in case the suitcases are examined. This may be a private shuttle, but I have no idea what awaits me.

THE EMPTINESS OF SPACE

I was at the meeting point at Celeste Harbour and waiting for the Cyrene ship to arrive, but still questioning why, out of the blue, the Senator contacted me to come for a visit. We could have caught up on things any number of ways. There had to be more to this visit than he was letting on. There's always the prospect that electronic communications are not that secure without scrambling or coding in some way, and right now, there was no need for me to carry that type of equipment. I have a feeling that's about to change.

The Senator and I go way back, and I couldn't help but wonder if this was one of those times again where he needed some discreet investigating done. If that's the case, then it makes sense that he was so straightforward and formal in the conversation. I'm sure I will find out the real motivation for my trip once I meet up with him, but if it *is* just a vacation, then I'm going to totally enjoy the hell out of it because I've been working way too much lately.

I was startled out of my daydreaming by someone alerting me that the Cyrene ship had arrived and offered to escort me. The exterior of the ship was incredibly beautiful for being a piece of metal. Ok, more than a piece of metal, but the royal blue and shiny silver gave a presence of regal power that held my vision captive. It didn't look so much like any type of military craft, but rather a personal one.

The trip to Cyrene was rather lengthy and uneventful, but really couldn't expect much else with just me and two shuttle pilots. I tried to engage them in conversation to see if I could find out why Cyrene was on military lockdown, but they weren't biting. Gotta love the flyboys, but this wasn't an ordinary flight.

"Can you at least tell me what part of Cyrene we're headed to," I asked, now annoyed at what seems to be an escalating level of secrecy surrounding this trip.

"We will be landing at the City of Janus," was the reply, "the main city I guess you could say, and where the Senator lives."



"Thank you," I responded, still annoyed that I hadn't really learned much since the Senator's call. It seems that information is being kept close to the vest, but all that's doing is making me more curious. I'm heading into too many unknowns that speak volumes to me that all is not right with this planet Cyrene.

The ship was rather minimalistic, but none-the-less impressive given its average size. It definitely wasn't a shuttle that provides services to the general public, and despite its beautiful exterior, no identifiable markings were present.

There wasn't much else to do but sit quietly in my thoughts and contemplate what might take place after arriving on Cyrene. I was asked not to use my laptop for security reasons but I had so many questions floating around in my head and no one at this point in time to answer them, so I wrote them down.

In between jotting down questions, I would peer out the window at space. It's really amazing how far we have advanced with technology and travel.

"Holy CRAP," was the first thing that came to mind at what I was seeing out the window." I immediately engaged the intercom to connect to the pilots to ask if we were in trouble. There was a fleet of spacecraft off the right side of our shuttle in enough proximity to make out and it just made me WAY too uncomfortable. "Are those our guys," I asked hopefully.

"Not to worry MindStar," the pilot came back, "it's just a fleet of Medium Fighter V's running maneuvers over Calypso. Intel says there is one leader and the rest are ghost ships, so at this point in time they are not hostiles."

Settling back down in my seat from a bit of relief I could see the fleet moving farther away from us. In all my travels I had never seen anything like that.

I decided to get back to jotting down my questions for the Senator, but next thing I know, I'm being tapped on the shoulder.

"MindStar," the co-pilot said in almost a whisper, "we'll be approaching Cyrene in about 30 minutes if you'd like to take some time to freshen up."

I sat straight up in my seat and realized that I had fallen asleep.

"Thank you," I replied, "so where exactly is the ladies room?"

ARRIVAL ON CYRENE

Space trips like this aren't out of the ordinary for me, and very much a part of my journalism travels. Shuttling around the universe comes with the job, although this was the longest flight to a planet I've had so far. However, I feel rather refreshed from the snooze, and I'm ready to meet up with the Senator to get the scoop on what's happening on this planet.

I took my seat and buckled up as instructed after returning from the ladies room, and got back to reviewing the questions I had for the Senator. Right after the announcement that we'd be landing on Cyrene in about ten minutes, I happened to gaze out the window again and noticed something rather spectacular. I wasn't quite sure what it was, but despite my apprehension to ask the pilots any further questions, I just had to.

"Hey, can anybody up there tell me what that is off the right side of the ship, please," I asked, wondering if the City of Janus was somehow a floating city off the planet itself, because I could very clearly see the planet behind this floating structure as we were approaching it.



Cyrene Skylabs

"That's the Skylabs MindStar," the pilot came back, "where research and development take place," offering nothing more than that. Perhaps the Senator will fill me in during my visit.

As I disembarked from the shuttle, thanking the flyboys for their service, I was approached by a woman who said that my transport to the Senator's home was waiting. I followed her to the vehicle and immediately took my seat. I almost felt as if I was being rushed. One thing I did notice though, is that people from Cyrene (so far) aren't too quick to offer their names. I figured since I'm not familiar with customs, I wouldn't push it.



The route to the Senator's home wasn't very scenic, and so far, I hadn't really seen anything too impressive except for the ship and the transport. Since Calvin said that it was best that no one knew I was a reporter, worked with the media, or even that I was on the planet, I had a feeling that this route was intentional.

I hope I get to see more than the back woods, but just as soon as that thought crossed my mind, we pulled up to a beautifully-landscaped home with brilliant-colored flowers that looked fluid enough to brush across a canvas. It was then that I saw the Senator exit his home to greet me.



Senator Calvin Neff

"MindStar, it's so good to see you after all this time," the Senator said as he walked briskly to the transport with his arms outstretched. For a man of 60, his 5'8" frame was still looking as strong as ever. I've always known him to pride himself on keeping fit, and he certainly doesn't look his age.

"Hello Calvin," I said as I reached to accept the hug that had become so customary with our greetings, "it's great to see you as well."

"Please, come in, we have a lot to catch up on," he replied as he held the door.

"Yes, we do, and I have a lot of questions that I hope you'll be able to answer, or at least be able to share some information about this planet that seems to be hidden in the back of the universe." I watched his facial expression to see if I could detect anything that would give a clue as to his level of comfort in doing so.

"Ever the reporter," he smiled, "but I don't blame you. This is new territory for you, and I didn't help by making it seem rather ominous in my communication with you yesterday."

"No, you didn't," I said, giving him the over-the-eyebrow look, "and you have to know that my antenna went up, so what can you share that's fit for consumption?"

GETTING DOWN TO THE NITTY GRITTY

As the Senator and I sat down on the veranda with a nice glass of fruited tea, I was tempted to pull out the list of questions I had for him, but that might have been too forward a move, so I decided to allow the conversation to take its course before I hit him hardcore. However, the Senator surprised me when he got into the nitty gritty right from the start.

"I'm sure you have a lot of questions about Cyrene," he said leaning forward, "but perhaps I can give you a bit of information first that may answer some of those questions, and then we can go from there."

"Thank you," I nodded graciously, "I am very curious about this planet that I hadn't heard of until you called me, so yes, as a reporter, I'm chompin' at the bit for sure, but I do understand that I have to keep my credentials off the record and play my presence as a visitor."

"Yes, so everything must be kept in the strictest of confidence," he said as he sat back in his chair.

The Senator shared with me that he oversees the City of Janus and Cyrene City for the Imperium, but also mentioned that he was in charge of the Inner Sphere, Sector 79 for the Imperium as well. I almost interrupted him to ask about the Imperium, but he didn't skip a beat.

He shared that the Imperium is led by Supreme Commander Will Winters, and that they are the guardians of humankind in the universe. The Senator stated that while he was a huge champion of Will's in the past, he now doesn't fully trust him due to some recent behaviors.

His last statement raised a red flag for me. I know the Senator quite well, and if this was just an ordinary visit, then he wouldn't feel the need to share his mistrust for the Supreme Commander, or anyone else for that matter. I knew that there was more to my trip than he alluded to, and I wondered how long it would take him to admit to it.

"To be honest MindStar," now speaking with more urgency in his voice, "I am really concerned about the state of affairs of our planet. I just don't understand what the Supreme Commander of the Imperium would be doing on a remote planet like Cyrene, and his behaviors have been quite questionable."

"What exactly has he been doing that concerns you," I asked, taking another sip of the delicious fruited tea. I really need to find out what this is, and if I can get some to take home to Arkadia.

"He has detached himself from the Senate," continues Calvin, "and seems to be using his powers a bit overbearingly, which is something the old Will would never have done. He hasn't been the same since terrorists killed his wife at Cyrene City."

As I sat taking this all in, I sensed a planet in turmoil. However, I also sensed that I was about to learn why I was really summoned to Cyrene, and I have a strong suspicion that it wasn't to vacation.

"I'm also worried about how quickly Will came to power," said the Senator, "and that his lockdown of Cyrene City after his wife's death seemed rather excessive, along with all of the new restrictions he placed on Cyrene. It is now guarded by the Sons of Remus, a military force of the Imperium."

When I first talked with the Senator prior to coming to Cyrene, the military lockdown was my first clue that something wasn't right. I could now tell that there was great concern, but I also knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I wasn't here just for a vacation and a visit, so I'm going to push the envelope.

"Calvin," I said looking him straight in the eyes, "will you now tell me what my real purpose is for being here, because we could have communicated any number of ways to catch up. I get the feeling that there's something more here that you aren't telling me. Am I right?"

"I have to confess and say you're right MindStar," I just couldn't be more revealing in our telecommunication because I don't trust that I'm not bugged."

"Ok then," I said, "how can I be of help to you. You must have had a plan in mind to make the trip seem necessary."

"Yes," Calvin uttered almost in a more shallow voice, "it was necessary as far as I'm concerned. With things as they are right now, I needed someone I could trust to be aware that something strange was going on. Some of the Zekkonians are now friendlier, which is odd, but more information is needed. I've lost trust in just about everyone on Cyrene and it would just raise suspicion if I were to visit them."

"So, are you asking me to do a little investigating for you," I asked with a tone of excitement in my voice, "because if you are, you know I'll do it?"

"Yes," he said with an exhale, "I definitely need to know what's going on with the Zekkonians, and it's risky to look into it myself. I trust you, and would greatly appreciate your help, so thank you."

At this point, I was already beyond pumped. With a head full of Imperium, Sons of Remus, Zekkonians, the Supreme Commander's dead wife, military lockdown and restrictions on the planet that have the Senator concerned, I was ready for a super sleuth adventure. Danger is my adrenaline of choice.

"Let's enjoy the rest of the day," offered Calvin, "and we can discuss particulars with the Zekkonian trip in the morning."

The rest of the afternoon and evening was spent in small talk, even though I had looming thoughts about the covert operation to the Zekkonian Island. A vacationing guest of the Senator is a nice cover, and if the Zekkonians are friendly, then what's there to worry about.

MISSION ITINERARY

As morning broke and the sun's rays began peeking through the bedroom window, I had already been awake for about an hour. My chat with the Senator the day before left me with so many unanswered questions, and I'm hoping that over the course of my stay they will be answered.

This trip to Cyrene is turning out to be a rather unexpected involvement, yet unique and exciting. However, I sense a level of intensity in perhaps perceived potential danger expressed by the Senator's concerns.

As the sun's rays now illuminated the entire window, I removed the bed covers and headed for the shower. I've always known the Senator to be an early riser, and I didn't want to waste any more of this day lost in my thoughts. I was feeling excited, yet a bit apprehensive about my trip to the Zekkonian Island, but the Senator's request seemed urgent, and as in the past when I've accommodated his need for investigative activities, he assured me that there is no concern for my safety.

There is nothing left to do then but to get on with it. Feeling refreshed, even though sleep was minimal, I headed toward the kitchen as I could smell the aroma of brewing coffee, a staple the Senator would not be without.

"Good Morning MindStar," the Senator said as he rose from his chair, "did you sleep well?" I didn't want him to think his accommodations were uncomfortable just because my brain wouldn't shut down after our chats the day before, so I just gave him the thumbs up and grabbed some coffee.

"I have everything prepared for your trip to the Zekkonian City," he said, "but we'll need to chat about it quickly because I'm due at the Senate for a meeting."

I wanted to take notes, but I knew that I would never be able to carry such on this trip given the nature of the mission, so I just listened and asked questions if I needed to.

"First, let me give you a bit more information about the Zekkonians," he started, "because it will give you a better foundation for your assessment of their behaviors. Your behavioral science background blends well with your investigative journalism, and offers benefit in detecting veiled attempts at hiding something."

There are many ways people can be deceiving; body language, voice intonation, facial expressions, and often behaviors can be quite predictable given the circumstances. However, it seems I'm not dealing with humans here, so this might be a bit tricky. This was also not a writing assignment, but rather an investigation into something potentially more sinister. Revealing that I was a reporter seems to come with a level of danger attached to it. Whatever the case, my curiosity deepened as the Senator was sharing more information.

"The Zekkonians are bee-like humanoids who are the most technologically advanced species on Cyrene," began the Senator, "and are not the only advanced race on Cyrene. However, they are the friendliest toward the humans. There are different factions of them, but not all are friendly."

Ok, now I was wondering whether there was a chance we could run into some of the unfriendly kind during our trip to the Zekkonian City, but the Senator continued with further information before I could ask.

"They are also capable of using some mystic-type magic with the crystals that are native to Cyrene," he went on, "which they use to power their machinery. The Sons of Remus seem very keen to unlock their secrets."

I had heard of crystals used on the Next Island planet for time travel, but not as a power source for machinery. I was very curious at this point if the Cyrene crystals had any other properties other than what they were being used for.

"Just a power source," I asked, "because it seems quite curious that the Sons of Remus have such an interest, and I also find it curious that you used the word secrets. Is there anything further you can share regarding these crystals?"

"No, MindStar," Cal replies, "all I know is that the crystals are used as a power source, but it seems rather mystical in nature, and one can wonder just what further use they may have."

This was going to be an interesting trip to say the least, but I'm still not sure what the Senator wanted me to be on the look-out for, and thus the questions began.

"When I reach Zekkonian," I asked, now curious as to what the mission details were, "is there anything in particular that you would like me to be mindful of as I vacation?" I took it for granted that posing as a vacationer was rather top priority as to not draw attention to myself per the Senator's earlier instructions, but I also needed to know to what extent I was to infiltrate the environment.

"Try to blend in as much as possible," he replied "but be highly observant of behaviors from those in positions of authority who might approach you to ask the nature of your visit. Even the most subtle gesture or interaction could be telling."

I was so ready for this trip I couldn't contain my energy, and asked the Senator just how soon I would be leaving.

"I've arranged a hover transport to take you off the island of Janus across the water to Zekkonian," states the Senator "and it's actually waiting out front when you're ready. I have to leave shortly myself for the Senate meeting, so when you finish your breakfast you can get started."

I was too antsy to linger any further and asked if I could get breakfast to go. The Senator's housekeeper packed up what seemed an over-sized vegetarian biscuit along with a covered thermal mug of more coffee. I figured by the time I arrived at Zekkonian, the caffeine would kick in and I would be off and running.

The Senator grabbed his briefcase and mentioned that I should be sure not to carry anything on me that would give rise to unnecessary questions should I be stopped. I already thought of that as I left my laptop in the guest room and carried only personal belongings in my bag. Might be nice to have some of those high-tech gadgets like a hybrid multi-function watch, or a spy cam pen, but then, not knowing the technology on this planet, those may be totally useless.

The Senator also mentioned that he made accommodations for me in a local establishment since I would most likely be on the Zekkonian Island for a couple of days or so, but to be careful not only with what I may say, but also with anything that I write down. This told me that anything I decide to write in my journal had to be in code as well. This was going to be a challenge, but I was up for it.

As we walked out the front door, there were two transports waiting. One with the two pilots who had flown the Senator's spacecraft that picked me up from Arkadia, and another that had a few more formidable-looking gentlemen who I surmised might have been comprised of pilots and bodyguards.

The Senator pointed me to what I had guessed was my ride, and bid me a farewell. He said he would meet up with me back at his home when I returned, and a debriefing would take place at that time. In the meantime, there would be no contact with the Senator in an effort to dissuade any questioning.

As I entered my chariot, I said hello to the flyboys, thinking to myself that this was going to be yet another one of those interesting trips where I would have to amuse myself. Since laptops were not allowed, and writing down anything conspicuous is out of the question, I decided just to relax and enjoy the scenery.

MISSION UNDERWAY

As we departed, we seemed to have taken a different route than the one after landing, and everything looked quite brilliant in color and architecture to my amazement. Dare I ask what everything was, or is it all still secret.

"If you look on your left, MindStar," said one of the pilots, "you can see the Colosseum." Looking out the left side of the transport, I was able to see a huge circular structure that looked rather similar to something I had seen on Earth.

"What takes place there," I asked, half hoping for a solid response, and not just a reply that would intimate yet more cloak and dagger drama I seem to get from these guys, but nope.

"Stuff," he said, "and sorry that I can't go into more detail, but security and all, you know, especially since you're a visitor from another planet."

Why am I not surprised, but stuff? You would think that they would be more intuitive as to not raise even more questions, but that seems to be the order of the day for me, so I guess I'll have to live with it for now.

Heading toward the Shore of Janus Island, I saw shopping areas and beautiful waterfalls, which was quite different than my ride from the shuttle to the Senator's home the day before. The hover transport looked more like a tank than what might be considered a normal ride, but then, nothing about this trip seemed normal to me up to this point.

As we reached the Shore, the hover transport made the transition from land to water quite effortlessly, except for the occasional wave that rocked us a bit, but it wasn't startling or anything to be concerned about. At least I didn't think it was, and the pilots were just going about their business, so I enjoyed the ride.

"We will be accessing land on Zekkonian shortly, MindStar," one of the pilots hollered back, "and we will be traveling through the swamp area that leads to your final destination, which can be a little bumpy at times, so you may want to make sure your seatbelt is secure."



Zekkonian Swamp

Roger that I replied back, checking my seatbelt. Swampland didn't sound too appealing to me, and only made me think again about the unfriendly Zeks that the Senator said existed, hoping that we would not encounter them along the way. I've had my share of travels on other planets where we had to fight our way through a faction of unfriendlies, and if that ends up being the case here, then I sure as hell hope these flyboys have enough of an arsenal to take care of business, because I'm totally unarmed. For security reasons, remember. I couldn't use a laptop let alone be caught with some weapon that would potentially land my ass in lockup somewhere.

The journey through the swampland continued uneventful until all of a sudden there was a large noise that sounded almost like a roar, and a hard thud against the transport that shook it quite extensively. It scared the living hell out of me, and before I could ask what was going on, the pilots said to stay away from any windows and get on the floor in the back, covering myself with the blanket on the seat next to me.

I'm sure my adrenaline was off the charts at that point, and I don't think I could have moved any faster, but as I lay huddled in the corner at the back of the transport, I could hear gunfire, and more loud roars and growling, until the gunfire stopped.

There was silence for a moment, and my racing thoughts soon turned to what I was sure could be considered prayer of some sort, even though I'm not a religious person, but I so needed whatever this was to be over and done with. I love adrenaline-pumping fun as much as the next thrill-seeker, but at this moment, this was no cheap thrill, and smacked of danger.

I heard rustling of footsteps outside the transport, thinking it was the flyboys and would get up to greet them, but I was paralyzed from fear. I then heard one of the doors on the transport open and someone calling out my name, but it was an unfamiliar voice, so I didn't respond.

"MindStar," the voice now insistent, "it's ok to come out, we aren't here to hurt you, but we need to move quickly, because the Imperium will be sending a squad out to look into what happened when you don't arrive at your destination at the estimated time."

The Senator said that he didn't really trust anyone any more on Cyrene, so I had no idea what to think of this situation I found myself in, but what choice did I have, really. I found the strength to raise myself from under the cover and stood face-to-face with an armored individual reaching out to me.

"We must leave immediately," he said, "time is of the essence. We will move on foot to a nearby camp where you will meet with our Leader and learn more."

Considering what I just went through from an auditory perspective, I wasn't too keen on experiencing anything like that up close and personal, so I followed the individual out of the transport where I found an incredibly grisly scene.

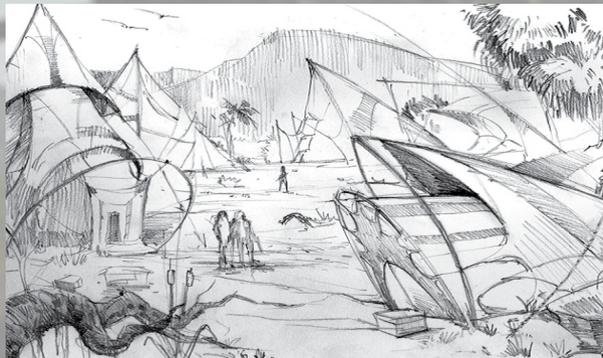
There on the ground were the flyboys, apparently killed by the creature that to my surprise, was standing next to one of my captors as calm as could be. It was one ugly-ass dude, and no way was I going anywhere near it, nor interested in meeting up with one of those anytime soon. I was incredibly sad about the flyboys, and the Senator is not going to be happy when he hears about this.



Sketch of the Korok Creature

That's if I ever see the Senator again, or even be able to travel home. So many questions, but whoever these people are, I'm not going to potentially irritate them with an inquisition, and just see where all of this leads. Ideally, it will all turn out ok and I'll have more than the Senator expected in a debriefing, or - I end up lost in space and held captive by a band of armored aliens, or whatever they are, to do their bidding.

"There's no need to fear, MindStar," as if reading my mind, "the creature is under our control and will not harm you. We will be at the camp shortly and all of your questions will be answered."



Sketch of the makeshift ARC camp

Ok, this was getting more weird by the minute, but just when I thought I would try asking one little question, we arrived at what looked like a makeshift camp where many more people were involved in some sort of activity. I was escorted to the larger of the tent-like dwellings where I was introduced to the Leader.

THE TRUTH BE TOLD

"Hello MindStar," a female voice said, "I'm Zorra Winters, the wife of Will Winters, Supreme Commander of the Imperium." Startled at what I was hearing, I could only respond in one way to this woman outfitted in what could only be described as intimidating, yet regal armor.

"But I was told by Senator Neff that you were killed at Cyrene City by terrorists," I uttered in a rather shallow voice, not knowing what to think, "I'm incredibly confused right now, and quite frankly, I'm not sure who to trust at this point."

"I completely understand your concern, MindStar," she responded as she removed her helmet, "but if you would kindly have a seat I'll explain everything." I was directed to a chair at a small table in the corner, and as Zorra took her seat, everyone left the dwelling. After pulling up her chair, she began sharing some details that she said were incredibly sensitive, and highly confidential. Oh great, more secret stuff, but maybe this was just what the Senator ordered, and I would either be able to squelch his concerns, or confirm that indeed there were strange things going on that fed into his intuitive nature.

"I'm sure this is all more than you bargained for, MindStar," she said, "but when we learned of your presence on the planet from the Turrelions, it was urgent for us to get in touch with you despite the drastic measures we took."

"Wait," I interrupted, "Are you telling me that the attack and capture in the swampland was all staged?" As my head was spinning from horrible thoughts, I just couldn't wrap my brain around what I was hearing. I immediately thought of the flyboys and their deaths as the most tragic part of these drastic measures, and why it seemed so necessary in order to get my attention. Also, who are the Turrelions, and how did they know I was on the planet.

"Yes, MindStar," she responded, "sometimes drastic measures are warranted given the nature of the circumstances, and I am sorry for the loss of the Senator's pilots, but perhaps you'll have a more critical view once I explain the urgency in removing you to a more secure location."

"You see, my husband doesn't know I'm alive," she continued, "nor does he know anything of what I am about to share with you, but it is of critical importance that the Senator learn of this information, and perhaps in some way be able to assist us in our efforts to stop some potentially devastating disaster from occurring. This is where you come in MindStar."

"With all due respect," I asked, "what does the 'us' represent - who are you, and what are these efforts you speak of?" I was now sufficiently freaked out, and certainly didn't expect anything like this, but then it looked as though the Senator didn't either. Here I am again, a messenger in space, but I knew when I signed up for my position at the EP Media Center that it wouldn't always be reporting on mediocre news and personality profiles. Sometimes my work comes with an element of risk, but nothing the likes of this I must admit.

"Fair enough questions," she responded, "We are known as ARC, the Acacia Rebirth Corps. The Acacia have the symbolism of purity, the endurance of the soul, and also symbolizes resurrection and immortality. The ARC started as Turrelion reclones, and individuals who were scheduled to be destroyed by the Sons of Remus. We now need help to be reintroduced back into Cyrene."

I was not naïve to the fact that other planets existed, nor that there were other races and factions in our expanding universe. While I've had my share of fighting off robot invasions on Calypso, I never thought I would find myself involved in a clandestine operation on an unknown planet in the back of the universe. I couldn't at this point in time fathom what my role might be in all of this, but I didn't have to wait very long to find out.

"Time is of the essence," Zorra broke in, "and I must finish giving you information as quickly as possible, because we need to get you back to the disabled transport before the Imperium Guards arrive. They know nothing about ARC, and we can't risk being discovered."

At this point, I was in full investigative reporter mode and ready to collect whatever information I could in an effort to report back to the Senator. However, there was more I wanted to know before we moved on.

So," I asked, "who are the Turrelions, what is their connection to ARC, and how did they know I was here?" I figured if I was going to be a part of an undercover operation, I need to know as much information as possible, but I also knew that there was the possibility that some questions wouldn't be answered, and considered a need-to-know situation. I had to try, because I was fully in it now, and a willing recipient to gain as much intel as possible.

"I can only give you brief input," Zorra said, "because we need to move this along. The Turrelions are not human, and no human has ever seen what they look like because they keep themselves covered in armor. They are helping to smuggle out the reclone DNA that has been scheduled to be destroyed by the Sons of Remus. I think you already know that the SoR is a military force of the Imperium, and act as a protector of the Supreme Commander, who happens to be my husband, Will Winters. However, what you *don't* know ..."

I sat intent on Zorra's every word in an effort to absorb the information she was sharing because I was prevented from recording or writing down anything for fear of discovery. I had a feeling I wouldn't be told how the Turrelions knew I was on the planet, but something else was missing in the grand scheme of things. Why wasn't her husband here? I swear there's mind-reading going on because I received the answer to my silent question almost immediately.

"My husband tried to kill me," Zorra continues, "and it was he who ordered the section of Cyrene City hit with a mini-nuke because he thought that's where I was. I had stolen his Fenris power armor and escaped, but barely made my way through Cyrene City before it was hit."



Zorra Escaping in Fenris Armor

My immediate thought was, why was she escaping, but I didn't need to wait long to get my answer.

"I discovered some disturbing information," she went on, "and I just couldn't stand by and allow it to happen without making an effort to stop it. My husband has a means to bond people to his will without them realizing that they are under his control. It is a drink that seems to be so powerful, that if he were to say to a person 'die' - that person would have a heart attack."

This is one disturbed planet I thought, and now I'm right in the thick of it. All I was doing was coming for a vacation, or so I thought, but still, it was just to be a discreet visit to the Zekkonians to collect some information for the Senator. Never in my wildest adventures did I ever think that I would be involved in DNA smuggling and mind-control drinks, but I have a feeling this isn't the end of it.

"My husband discovered that the drink doesn't work on everyone," Zorra said, interrupting my thought-wandering, "and that some are immune to it. As such, my husband is now out to kill anyone it doesn't work on. I was one of those people, but I didn't let Will know so that I could make my escape."

Now it's all beginning to make sense, I think, but I still wanted to know exactly what it is that I need to do so that I can get the hell off this planet and back to Arkadia where I'm sure I'll feel less threatened.

"Will is branding these immune people traitors," Zorra continues, "and wrongly accusing them of being associated with the so-called terrorists that supposedly killed me when they blew up Cyrene City. He is planning genocide of these people and all traces of DNA. We just can't let this happen, and why ARC was formed to fight against it. The DNA the Turrelions have smuggled out has become a part of our growing army, but it is slow going. We need the Senator's help to reintroduce our members back into Cyrene society in order to be more effective, but there's one more thing we need as well."

I don't think I budged an inch since Zorra began briefing me on the state of affairs that have her leading a band of what I would call freedom fighters to stop her husband from destroying population in order to have everyone under his control.

"What I would like for you to do MindStar," Zorra said, "is take this information back to the Senator and solicit his help on our behalf. We cannot approach him directly, and have no contact with the outside world or universe since the Sons of Remus are monitoring everything."

There it is, almost a direct order, but a mission nonetheless, and I could only think about the shock on the Senator's face when I share all of this with him. At this moment, I couldn't help but think about the flyboys, but I also couldn't dwell on it, because probably for the first time, I think I may now understand the urgency of the drastic measures taken during my capture. However, I no longer feel that I am being held captive, but rather an integral part of this covert operation that will hopefully stop Zorra's husband from carrying out what could potentially become a devastating tragedy.

"The other thing we need," says Zorra, "is for the Senator to contact our friend Vida, who is a scientist at the Skylabs, and fill her in on everything that is happening. We need to see if she can research and develop an antidote to the substance that Will is giving people to put them under his control. I must warn you though MindStar, that there's also the possibility that the Senator is already under Will's control, in which case, it would put your life at risk to even inform him of what I have shared with you."

Normally I would have shuttered a bit at that last comment, but all sense and sensibility was now tied up in accomplishing this mission successfully. I now felt the urgency of moving this information along as quickly as possible and hoped beyond all hope that the Senator was not already influenced by Will.

In the course of the briefing, Zorra also shared that she has not told the Turrelions about the mind-control drink because she feels it would be far too dangerous for all humans, keeping in mind that the Turrelions are not human.

"We must keep ARC a secret, MindStar," Zorra stated, "especially while we expand our numbers. We need anyone and everyone to join our cause, because at the moment, the resistance is too new and too weak, and if the Sons of Remus knew of this, we would be found and removed immediately."

I love the underdog, and at this point, I was beginning to get the picture of what the full scope of this mission was, and suddenly realized that it extended far beyond my debriefing of the Senator. It wasn't directly stated, but rather intimated that recruitment involved engagement of other planets to join the fight against the Supreme Commander of the Imperium, as well as the Sons of Remus. I can see now that my work doesn't end here.

"I must also warn you," Zorra said, "that if the Imperium or Sons of Remus find out that you spoke with me, you too would be permanently erased."

Ok, now I was a bit shaken at the prospect of butting heads with the Imperium and/or the Sons of Remus, but was also thinking about the fruited tea I had the night before at the Senator's house.

"We must leave, MindStar," Zorra said with urgency, "the Imperium Guards are sure to find the disabled transport soon, and we need to get you back there. Do you have any questions before I have you escorted to the transport?"

"I think I'm good, Zorra," I responded feeling anxious to get back to the Senator, "I believe I have everything sorted and able to accomplish what you have asked."

"I realize we are putting a lot of faith in your efforts," she replied, "but it's crucial that we have a fighting chance, and are grateful that you will support our cause. Once you reach the transport and the Imperium Guards arrive, they will most likely question you, but since they know nothing of ARC, they will think that the random creature attack was plausible enough to dismiss it, so you should be fine. Your escorts back to the transport will be just inside the forest with the creature watching in case anything goes wrong."

As Zorra and I rose from our chairs, she shook my hand and reiterated how important this mission was, and that I take all caution for safety. She also said that she hoped we would meet again under better circumstances. We then left the dwelling and met the escort outside, along with the creature.

We set out on foot to the disabled transport, and upon arrival, a couple of the ARC escorts scouted the area to make sure it was safe. I was directed to enter the transport and wait for the Imperium Guards to arrive, but I noticed that the bodies of the flyboys were missing. I turned to ask of their whereabouts but the ARC escorts had already retreated into the forest. This was a strange day.

THE INQUISITION

Even though the wait in the disabled transport was relatively brief, it felt like forever. Most likely because my thoughts were coming one after the other without stopping, and I could feel my pulse race. Despite my excitement of being part of a covert operation turned full-blown kick-ass-take-names-later mission, I was feeling a bit heavy with responsibility. I realized that I so needed the Senator to not be under Will's control, and willing to do his part to thwart the intended genocide of those immune to the mind-control drink that continues to increase Will's power.

Getting lost in my thoughts can be exhausting, but they were interrupted when I heard the sound of what seemed like multiple transports arriving, and it wasn't long before the door of the transport opened and an armed guard entered. He identified himself as a Guard of the Imperium, and that several of them were sent out to investigate why I hadn't turned up at my appointed destination in the Zekkonian City. Looks like more than the Turrelions and ARC know I was on Cyrene. I had to play this smart.

"Well, I was on my way there," I said, "but we were attacked by something that rocked the transport pretty hard. The pilots went out to investigate it, but they never came back. I've just been sitting here waiting, and of course scared half out of my mind." "Have you seen them," I asked as I moved toward the door."

I could tell the guard was watching my every mannerism, especially my eyes, probably trained to do so to sort out the enemy, but I felt I played my role well. They weren't going to get anything out of me, and I was feeling pretty fearless at this point, but as I exited the transport the questions began again.

"So you didn't see anything at all," the guard asked? I now noticed that there were several transports present, which I'm sure accounted for the noise I heard earlier, and all eyes were on me. Now is where I step into the clueless visiting friend of the Senator role and somehow get my ass back to the Senator's house ASAP.

"I guess I was paralyzed with fear," I responded almost in an annoyed tone, "and there was no way I was leaving the confines of that transport to see anything. I just came to this planet to visit the Senator, who's an old family friend, and I am now not interested in continuing this vacation after what I just experienced. So would you please take me to the Senator's residence," I asked almost pleading.

The Imperium Guards continued to stare at me for a moment, but they must have thought I was pathetic enough in my plea to be believable, because they finally escorted me to one of the transports. We immediately left the area and were in transit to the Senator's home, which I was very happy about. As the hover transports left land and began navigating a direct route across the water back to the City of Janus, I could only think about how I was going to break all of this news to the Senator.

I actually began to feel sad again about the flyboys, but I was rather exhausted from the day's activities and closed my eyes as I rested my head against the back of the seat. I had no interest whatsoever in engaging these guys in any type of conversation. The less I had to interact with them, the better. I realized I had fallen off to sleep when an Imperium Guard tapped me on the shoulder and said that we had arrived at the Senator's home. As I exited the transport, the Senator greeted me with a look of surprise.

"I sent you out with two," he said laughingly, "and you come back with a dozen, what gives?" As comical as that may have seemed, I could barely crack a smile let alone a chuckle. I wasn't relishing the fact that I now was charged with filling the Senator in on all that happened, and then make an effort to convince him to join the cause for ARC. However, to keep it light and unsuspecting, I continued to play the Senator's clueless guest, and offered my own humor in response.

"Oh, you know me," I said, "I love men in uniform," as I turned and blew them all a kiss, thanking them for the escort to the Senator's home. I thought I even saw one of them grin. "See you guys again maybe," I said as I smiled and waved, "it's nice to know that you're looking out for everyone."

Those boys didn't know from nothin' - and as they got back into their transports and sped off, the Senator and I walked into the house. Now began the task of breaking it all down, but where to begin.

DEBRIEFING THE SENATOR

We sat again on the beautiful veranda, and I was so ready for the fruited tea that the Senator's housekeeper brought to us, still a bit apprehensive about drinking it in light of the mind-controlling information that Zorra shared with me. However, after a few sips of the tea, I began my accounting of the day's activities, but ever mindful of not knowing whether or not the Senator was already under Will's control. The moment was tense. The Senator sat in horror, but relieved to hear that Zorra was still alive, and I saw no signs of behavior that would indicate that continuing the debriefing would be a risk - thus, full disclosure ensued.

The Senator certainly had many questions of his own, some I could answer, some I could not, but at the end of the day, he was on board and ready to do his part for ARC and their cause. I felt incredibly relieved, and a sort of peace rushed over me that allowed the tenseness in my body to release. The Senator understood full well the urgency of my desire to get back to Arkadia, but suggested that I take the evening to rest up and not invite any undue attention with a quick departure.

That actually sounded good to me after the intensity of the day. Perhaps a good night's rest will give me even greater clarity with where I go from here. The Senator was fully informed, and now I needed to formulate a plan for how I was going to engage citizens of other planets to join the ARC cause. We chatted a bit about that at dinner and it gave me at least a place to start, but now it's time to get some much needed sleep before departing in the morning for Arkadia.

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

The smell of fresh brewing coffee in the morning is invigorating. After my shower, I joined the Senator in the kitchen for a bit of breakfast before leaving. I loved the vegetarian biscuits that his housekeeper made, and she packed up a few for me to take on the trip home. I could get used to this, and often wondered why the Senator didn't have a Mrs, but I've known him to be a career politician with very little time for much else, so I just accepted his choice and left it at that.

The time drew near for me to leave, and I thanked the Senator for his hospitality. I wished him success in his efforts to get Vida on board, and to please keep me in the loop with how things were progressing. We both felt it would be too risky for me to come back anytime too soon, and we accepted the fact that it may be a while before we see each other again.

As we walked out the front door to the transport, I couldn't believe my eyes. There stood the flyboys in all their crazy-ass glory. They smiled, and as I looked at the Senator, he smiled too, but with a look that said don't ask. At this point, I didn't need my mind cluttered with more unbound mystery, and as I bid the Senator goodbye, I joined the flyboys in the transport. We traveled the back road once again to the Senator's spacecraft where we boarded and readied for departure.

Leaving the planet and passing the Skylabs, I wondered how Calvin would do with Vida, and whether she would ever discover an antidote for the mind-control drink. I also wondered how the smuggling of the reclone DNA from the Turrelions to Zorra would continue - successfully I hoped. I was pulling for Zorra in the expansion of her ARC army, and reaffirming in my own mind the commitment I made to help in her efforts. It all seemed so urgent, so I'm sure I'll be back to Cyrene soon.

I took out my journal and began writing a few notes, as I felt safe enough to do so. I gave more thought to the next task on my agenda, but had more questions than solid actions. Who do I tell, and how do I engage the citizens of the other planets to join forces with ARC on Cyrene to battle a power-hungry Supreme Commander of the Sons of Remus? One thing is certain, it must be done, and without fail, or we may be facing our own challenges should Will's far-reaching arm of power invade our sector of the universe.

"MindStar," the pilot said, "we have begun our approach to Arkadia, please buckle your seatbelt and prepare for landing."

It's good to be home, but I'm ready to go back. I will be anxious until I do.

Chapter 2 | A New Direction



HOME SWEET HOME – or is it?

The trip home from Planet Cyrene was anything but peaceful. Watching the usual space corridor traffic through the window of the Senator's spacecraft should have been a natural occurrence, but it wasn't. I couldn't help but wonder if we were somehow being monitored. I didn't want to feel that paranoia was setting in, but after what I had encountered on Cyrene, I wasn't about to let my guard down.

While I felt some relief that I was now out of harm's way and safe from any further encounters by the Imperium, the Sons of Remus, and potential exposure to Will Winter's mind control drink, my thoughts left me exhausted. They raced like a spider weaving a web going nowhere, yet served an ultimate purpose. However, just what that purpose would be was yet to be determined.

I made a commitment to the Senator and Zorra Winters to support their cause, and while I was filled with an urgency to move forward with plans, I also felt paralyzed and apprehensive toward becoming further involved. While the unknown has its level of excitement and adrenaline rush for me, I had to give my next move some serious consideration and just where I go from here.

"MindStar," the pilot came over the intercom, "we will be landing on Arkadia in about 15 minutes."

Yes, home again, where everything is familiar, but I have a deep sense that my life as I've known it is about to take a drastic turn as a result of my most recent commitments. So many thoughts in a maze of dead-ends because of unanswered questions, but perhaps after getting some rest I will be able to sort things out.

The Arkadian moons were breathtaking, and illuminated the path during my walk across the bridge from Celeste Harbour to the twin apartment towers on Celeste Harbour Island. The night air was always refreshing, and I was feeling more relaxed after a couple of deep breaths, but then I saw a shadowy figure and a silhouette across the concrete from the light cast by the lamp posts between the buildings.

Perhaps it was just someone enjoying the night air as I was, and normally I wouldn't be so startled, but I find myself in a constant state of alertness after leaving Cyrene. I continued to walk casually, making every effort to hide the bit of fear that took hold of me. As I walked past the stranger in the shadows I was half tempted to nod and say good evening, but I froze in that thought and kept walking, hoping that I was just over-reacting.

"MindStar," a female voice called out, "I have a package for you." I stopped dead in my tracks, even though my first inclination was to run into my apartment building as fast as my feet would carry me. However, what if this was somehow related to what's happening on Cyrene, and something that would benefit my mission to help the cause going forward. I had to risk it.

"Who are you," I asked as I moved cautiously toward the figure in the shadows, "and what's in the package?" I held tightly to my travel bag in case this was an attempt at robbery, but as I got closer, I could see the package in the hands of the female dressed in black who made no move toward me or the suitcase.

"Who I am is not important," she said, "I'm just the delivery person, and I don't know what's in the package, only that it was urgent to get it delivered to you upon your return from Cyrene." This person obviously knew who I was, that I was on Cyrene, and also when I was returning, but it didn't seem that I was going to find out anything further until I opened the package.

She raised her arm and handed over a large, well-sealed envelope that felt a little weighty, and as I carefully accepted the package she fled away and over the bridge into the city proper without saying another word. There was no question in my mind that this package would need to be scanned prior to opening. Again, perhaps a bit of paranoia setting in, but I wasn't about to set all caution aside and jeopardize a mission I hadn't even started.

After checking to make sure that apartment security hadn't been breached, I entered and secured the alarm system. I did a quick visual of the apartment and all seemed in place as I left it. As I walked to the study, I couldn't imagine what was inside the package, or why it was so urgent to get it delivered to me.

After sitting down at my desk and turning the lamp on, I carefully looked over the package for any kind of clue, but there was no name, no return address, no nothing. As I reached into the lower left drawer for the scanner, it crossed my mind that whoever wanted this package delivered to me, also didn't want to be known by anyone outside of the recipient. I passed the scanner across the package, but nothing out of the ordinary popped up that would be cause for alarm. It was time to find out what was so urgent.

A POTENTIAL NEW DIRECTION

I opened the envelope carefully, and as I pulled out the contents, I immediately recognized the seal of the Intergalactic Space Mission Agency (ISMA) located on the East Coast of the US on Earth. I had dealings with them in the past as a result of my writing and reporting, but I couldn't imagine what was so urgent that they needed to contact me in such a secretive manner.

The cover letter was written by Commander Winslow Anderson, another long-time friend, and someone I worked with in the past. I couldn't read it fast enough.



"Dear MindStar,

We received communication from Senator Calvin Neff on Cyrene of your most recent visit, as well as what has been revealed thus far. Immediately after you left his home, he contacted us with this information and expressed a grave concern, not only for the future of Cyrene, but also for the safety of the other planets in the evolving Entropia Universe. The Senator felt it would be more expeditious to contact you through us than directly since our communication channels are more secure, and the travel distance much shorter.

Senator Neff expressed his gratitude for the work you attempted to do during your visit, and shared the revealing news about the Imperium Leader Will Winters and his quest to control the inhabitants of Cyrene. It appears that there are far greater implications than at first suspected, and the Senator has now solicited our help with specific requests that invite your continued involvement."

Still uncertain as to where this was leading, I no longer felt mental exhaustion, but somewhat exhilarated at the prospect of continued work with the Senator, but how the ISMA fits into this was a mystery. As I continued reading the message, it all became clear to me.

"Based on the Senator's information and request MindStar, we are ready to propose an offer, but it would require you to return to Earth and work specifically from our location. You would be an independent contractor, yet have full use of our facilities and flight services, which would be readily at your disposal in order to accommodate your future missions."

Was I reading that right? Opportunities like this just don't happen every day, and to be sponsored by the ISMA? Then, it suddenly dawned on me – this would also mean a lifestyle change, and I would need to dissolve my work relationship with the EP Media Center. I suddenly felt saddened but I would have to deal with this later. Right now, I was anxious to learn more.

"Should you accept this offer MindStar, there are many more details to work out, but I can give you the important aspects of what this would entail. The Senator requested to work with you exclusively, and would make everything available on his end to facilitate your needs as it pertained to your further interaction with Cyrene. He is interested in additional covert operations to gain intel that would support efforts being put forth by himself, as well as the Acacia Rebirth Corps (ARC) headed up by Zorra Winters, the now estranged and presumed dead wife of the Imperium Leader Will Winters. There was also mention of Vida at the Cyrene Skylabs, but the Senator can fill you in on those details later."

You would be given a small suite of offices in a secure location, along with the option of hand-picking your own staff, with the addition of a communications center that would allow you direct, encrypted contact with the Senator. Even though your primary work will be exclusive to Cyrene, it will also encompass soliciting and engaging the services of individuals and fighting factions throughout the universe to assist with the cause on Cyrene."

The Senator can fill you in on far more detail later, but we first need to establish that you are willing to make this change and take on a more official role in the discovery and fight for Cyrene. I know I don't need to tell you how confidential this information is, and that it should be kept in a most secure location if not destroyed. If you choose to move forward, then we can discuss the final steps to facilitate your transfer back to Earth at your earliest convenience."

In the meantime, I have enclosed documents from the Senator that further expand on potential future missions back to Cyrene, as well as blueprints for your proposed suite of offices and communications center should you accept this offer.

*Sincere regards,
Winslow Anderson, Commander
ISMA – Eastern (US) Mission Control"*

As I leaned back in my chair, there was no question in my mind that I had a lot to consider. First and foremost was whether I was willing to give up my current life as I've known it to work exclusively with the Senator and Cyrene. It would mean no open and engaging activities on other planets as in the past, and taking on a more official role that would focus on the history and evolution of Cyrene.

If there's one thing I can say with certainty, the Senator for as long as I have known him has been an honest and honorable man, and always fighting for the good of mankind. His efforts while a Senator on Earth were well-respected, with commendations that highlighted his successful endeavors. I have no doubt that his work on Cyrene will continue to be intensely approached with a battle well fought, and after my most recent visit with him, how could I refuse this opportunity.

Of *course* I was going to accept, and my more immediate mission was responding to Commander Anderson and then getting everything in order to make the move back to Earth. My Media Manager at the EP Media Center isn't going to be happy about this, but perhaps we can eventually work together in some other capacity after I have settled in and acclimated myself to what I'm sure won't be a normal routine. However, everything must be kept confidential at this point.

As I moved to the next document in the package, I discovered that the weightiness of the envelope was a small telecommunication device that Commander Anderson forwarded for direct communication with his office at ISMA. I was instructed to contact him once I made my decision in order to discuss further details of the relocation should I accept the proposed offer.

Let's see, I believe Earth time right now would put the Commander out of his office, so I will wait until morning to make contact and give him my decision. I need a good night's sleep, but not certain I was able to shut down my racing thoughts and excitement. I headed to the kitchen to brew up a strong cup of chamomile tea with hope that it would do the trick, but I knew I was only steps away from packing up my belongings and shuttling back to Earth, so I may be in for a long night.

DAY OF DEPARTURE

After contacting Commander Anderson, everything was set in motion for the transition. My belongings were sent ahead to be set up in my new residence located on the ISMA compound. Security is of utmost importance, and it was felt that it would be best to maintain a residence within the compound, rather than in a more public area. However, I was absolutely free to come and go as I pleased, and not restricted in my interactions with a more public environment.

Recruiting competent staff is going to be a priority in an effort to get future missions under way, but I've known many dedicated Entropians over the years who would serve our needs quite well – it's just a matter of sorting out the details. Being able to trust those operating from other planets is crucial, so the selection process may take a while. It's all for a good cause, with potential benefit outweighing the risk.

Parting is such sweet sorrow, but hey – I was off to start another chapter of my life that would not only give me a distinctive purpose, but also comes with the potential of furthering my literary career as well. Part of the Senator's request is that I help to document the history and evolution of Cyrene, along with others involved in this endeavor. The documenting and writing would be as needed, but what an opportunity it is to be a part of the unfolding existence, challenges and victories of a newly discovered planet, and being published in the annals of Cyrene lore – or whatever it is they have established that houses this documentation.

As I stood looking at my empty apartment and the spectacular view of my little corner of Celeste Harbour, I was going to miss it, along with the boat rides that fostered many thought-provoking moments that often turned into major decisions. As I walked out the door, I engaged the re-code option that gave possession back to the building owner. We had already sorted out the details ahead of time.

As I walked toward the shuttle launch pad which was close by, I passed several Arkadians who had heard of the news and wished me well. The extent of my departure was not made public, but just that I was heading back to Earth to continue my work as a writer. The community was incredibly special, and I would certainly miss the friendships I had formed, which made this decision even more difficult. However, sometimes moving forward in life requires sacrifice in order to accomplish a mission.

As I approached the shuttle launch pad, I noticed my Media Manager and her husband standing there, and immediately the emotions swelled up. I will miss them but we have also agreed to keep in touch. They have offered their resources as well if ever needed, and while I can't reveal the details of my new involvement, perhaps their services will come in handy one day.

As we engaged in small talk I was given notice that my shuttle would soon be leaving and it was time to board. I headed to the launch pad and couldn't look back because it was difficult enough as it was, so I moved forward and boarded the shuttle after showing my pass. Settling into my seat I noticed that there were many others leaving to return to Earth, and couldn't help but wonder why they were giving up the adventures of space for perhaps a more mundane existence.

As we left Arkadia's atmosphere and entered the space corridor, it became apparent that we were being escorted by a Quad-Wing fleet of fighters from the Arkadia Star Fleet due to known pirates. It would only be until we could achieve warp speed. Since my belongings were shipped ahead, I can only hope that they arrived safely without incident, but I couldn't think of that right now. I was tired from very little rest, and I wanted to take advantage of this trip to catch a snooze.

Chapter 3 | Intergalactic Space Mission Agency (ISMA)



Getting settled at the Intergalactic Space Mission Agency Headquarters took a bit of doing. Planet hopping is one thing, but a full-on move back to Earth from Arkadia almost felt like a step in reverse of personal progression. For over 6 years, Entropia Universe and its expansion has been my life source, and a means to advance my journalistic endeavors to an even greater degree. If it wasn't for Senator Calvin Neff needing my help on Planet Cyrene, and the ISMA lending assistance in a huge way, I'm sure things would be quite different.

The ISMA compound is located on the East Coast of Florida in the United States, with acreage that spans an enormous stretch overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, so when I arrived at my personal quarters within the compound, I was pleasantly surprised to find more than a room with a view. One of the residential areas for ISMA staff was developed on beach-front property, and my little cottage was only a brief walk to the water's edge. Prior to leaving Earth for Entropia Universe, I was a resident of Florida for a long time, so I'm used to this type of environment. The touch of old home comfort eased the transition a bit.

Having a few days to get my new home in order was welcomed, but I knew there was a lot of work to be done, and would soon need to check in with Commander Winslow Anderson at the headquarters office. Besides, I was anxious to see just what kind of a setup he put together for me as an ops center, which would become the hub for my work with the Senator on Cyrene. One thing I *did* notice, is that everything I've seen so far seems to be locked down like Fort Knox, and every communication device is state-of-the-art, including the electronics I found within my residence. Obviously the ISMA takes security quite seriously.

As morning broke, the sound of the ocean waves kept me lingering in and out of sleep. The cool breeze from the open windows left a scent of freshness that reminded me that air quality on other planets paled in comparison. Just as I felt myself slipping deeper into sleep, there was a knock at the door. As I threw off the covers and grabbed my robe, I wondered who could possibly need to see me so early in the morning, and why not just make a phone call.

As I peered through the peep hole in the door, there stood Commander Winslow Anderson holding up a container of coffee in one hand, and a bag of unknown content in the other. I didn't think I would be seeing him for at least a few more days after getting my ops center organized, but there he was like a decorated delivery person in all his military glory.

"So are you going to open the door, or what," he asked with a tone and look that you normally don't experience from a Commander, but then Winslow, just like the Senator, was a long-time friend, and outside of a professional environment, the atmosphere and demeanor were far less formal.

I quickly opened the door and motioned for the Commander to enter. "Looks like you've come bearing goodies, and the kind that are most welcomed so early in the morning. I didn't expect to see you so soon after my arrival, so this is a pleasant surprise." The Commander acknowledged my greeting and walked directly into the kitchen for coffee mugs and plates before heading back to the dining table. I grabbed some napkins and joined him.

"I wanted to make a personal visit before you became intensely involved at your new ops center, and give you a briefing on the lay of the land so to speak." He poured the coffee and opened a bag of what seemed to be over-sized biscuits. I wondered if they would measure up to the biscuits the Senator's housekeeper made.

"It's always good to see you Winslow, and I know we have a lot of personal life to catch up on, but I'm curious about the new ops center and how exactly the covert operations will work with the Senator on Cyrene." I picked up my coffee mug while looking in the Commander's direction and waited for the holes to be filled in. He shared that ordinarily, I *wouldn't* have seen him so soon, but he was contacted by the Senator, and it seems that things are escalating on Cyrene.

"It's good to have you back on Earth MindStar, but I also know that what you're about to engage in is not just a minor smoke and mirrors operation. My communication with the Senator this morning pretty much put everything into perspective." Winslow's initial smile after the welcome back began to diminish as he proceeded to share a few more details, but then I knew from the get go after receiving his transmission on Arkadia that accepting this position meant it came with huge responsibilities and risks. However, not without potential rewards if missions were completed successfully.

"Apparently, the Senator thinks that the situation with the Zekkonians has advanced to the degree that immediate investigation is required, which is why your transfer to ISMA and setting up an ops center was so rushed." The Commander leaned forward placing both hands on his coffee mug as he waited for a response, but I wasn't sure what he was expecting to hear.

"Well, as you know," I started, focusing only on the basics, "my previous trip to Cyrene was to investigate the Zekkonians because the Senator was quite certain even then that something was going on. There must be new information to make this a more urgent mission and a need to complete unfinished business." The Commander took a sip of his coffee and nodded his head in agreement before sitting back in his chair and continuing.

"Yes, there *is* new information," he responded, "but that conversation needs to take place between you and the Senator, and you'll have an opportunity to connect with him tomorrow when you take command of the Cyrene Ops Center at headquarters." Well now, that sounded pretty official. It's not just an ops center any more, but the ISMA-COC, and the hub where all future Cyrene covert missions will originate. I am certainly taking this new position seriously, but come on, how damn cool is it to be running your own special ops center.

"When you arrive at headquarters tomorrow, you'll be given a tour of areas accessible to you, and ultimately end up at the Cyrene Ops Center where you will meet your staff." I actually thought I was going to have to interview and choose my own staff, but I guess not. "I took the liberty of assembling the best team possible since time was of the essence, so I hope you don't mind," the Commander said as he stood up from the table.

"Not at all actually, I trust your judgment, and I'm looking forward to meeting them, so thank you once again for making this transition as easy as possible."

"It's my pleasure," the Commander responded, "but now I must get back to headquarters. However, before I leave, here is a transcript of the communication with Senator Neff from this morning. It will give you a bit more information prior to connecting with him tomorrow."

After the Commander left, I sat back down at the table to enjoy a fresh cup of coffee while I read the transcript, and came to a very clear conclusion. There was no doubt in my mind that I was in for some intense involvement, but I'm taking this new direction quite seriously, and have resolved to the fact that it won't be a walk in the park like some of my past activities within the Entropia Universe. However, I've always been drawn to adrenaline-pumping danger and solving mysteries that unravel the twists and turns that play havoc in our universe.

One thing I know for sure, I can't be a one-woman army, and while I am quite certain I will have trustworthy staff at the ISMA-COC, I will also need to reach out to my fellow Entropians in an effort to align forces with self-sufficient factions that are willing to go to battle should there be a need. There are already strong and able societies on other planets that have proven their warfare efficiency, and my hope is, that their leaders will give consideration to assist in supporting a call to Cyrene should it be necessary. There's something to be said for being prepared, as well as always having a backup plan.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS WITH THE ZEKKONIANS



After reading the transcript, it seems that the Senator is ready to pick up where we left off with my previous visit. I was on my way to the Zekkonian City under cover as the Senator's guest on vacation to see if I could gather any Intel. He had a sense that something was going on, but it would have been way too suspicious for him to make the trip himself. My excursion however, was rudely interrupted when my escorted transport was hijacked by an incredibly vicious creature, and armed guards who led me to Zorra Winters, the Leader of ARC (Acacia Rebirth Corp).

It was all planned once they learned of my presence on the planet, and this was the beginning of a solicited involvement the likes of which I had difficulty wrapping my head around. However, once I debriefed the Senator and left Cyrene for Arkadia, the enormity of this undertaking took its rightful place at the top of my to-do list. There was no mistake that this was more than a simple probe operation, and now that I have relocated to the ISMA compound on Earth, my thoughts were clearly centered on future missions that would bring Cyrene more into focus. The Senator's references to potential danger were hardly sanitized. He had a genius of expression that surpassed any second-step mentality, but it kept everyone on their toes and at the ready. I was ready.

CHECKING IN AT ISMA-COC



After arriving at the ISMA Headquarters building, I learned that my initial ID was only temporary, and didn't get me very far, other than an escort directly to clearance central. It was here where high-tech took on a new meaning, and where my right thumb and eyeball took center stage.

However, what surprised me most was a required full body scan to record whatever it is they needed to record. They weren't very forthcoming regarding this procedure, but my guess is, they wanted to be sure I wasn't wired for sound, or housing any GPS tracking devices under my skin or elsewhere. I figured I would lighten it up a bit and tell them I kept all my music on my iPod, but they weren't in a humorous mood.

Once the clearance procedure was completed, I now had access to areas that were relevant for coordinating my missions with Cyrene. It was cool that I didn't have to worry about losing a badge, or carrying such on my trips to Cyrene and potentially blowing a cover. Upon leaving the clearance center, I was greeted by an individual who identified herself as my personal assistant.

"Good morning MindStar, my name is Hannah, your personal assistant, and if you'll follow me, I will take you to the Cyrene Ops Center." My first impression came with mixed reviews. She almost looked fragile with her upswept strawberry blonde hair and feminine features, and with a name to fit such a description, but her stride was presented with great confidence, and an air of professionalism that was refreshing. However, I need a kick-ass assistant ready to jump into the trenches if need be, so this was going to be interesting to see if it was a good fit.



Upon arriving at the Cyrene Ops Center, I met the rest of the staff who were obviously waiting to meet me, and after all pleasantries were exchanged, they seemed like a solid enough team after learning of their individual responsibilities. I have to say that the Commander did quite well, but I was still skeptical about Hannah. Time will tell.

"So Hannah," I asked, "where do I hang out, and how close is the coffee machine?" For the first time, Hannah cracked a smile as she motioned to a rather large corner office and started navigating in that direction. Entering the office, my first thought was, it's rather quaint and decorated nicely, but didn't look like a setup worthy of an ops center command post. I especially noticed that there was no computer in sight, and wondered if I would need to go elsewhere to access one.

"MindStar," Hannah said as she closed the door, "this is where the rubber meets the road so to speak, and if you move to the other side of the desk and have a seat, you will find a small panel embedded in the right underside of the desk." I felt my pulse increase, because this was beginning to feel like serious business, and certainly nothing I had ever experienced before.

"The red button is a toggle that will shade the interior and exterior windows and obstruct visibility," Hannah continued, "and are a high-grade quality to withstand penetration by bullets, lasers, and explosive devices." Ok, now we're talking. I love gadgets and pushing buttons to see what the results are – sometimes good, sometimes not so good, but after depressing the red button, the windows displayed something akin to built-in sunglasses, and the interior lighting increased in intensity.

"The small glass panel below the red button is for your right thumb print," Hannah instructed, "and it's the only way your top right desk drawer will open." Without hesitation, my right thumb met the glass panel and the top right draw opened. The only thing in the drawer was something that looked like an oversized digital remote control that appeared to be inset in the base of the drawer and stationary.

"This is your office command device, and if you look at the icons, you will notice that each is clearly marked to gain you access to your computer, your communications equipment, and a hidden personal room to retire to should you find your hours long and demanding of your time. Go ahead, test it out."

Hannah stood there with a bit of a grin on her face, and I'm sure in full anticipation that I would indeed give the device a test drive. "Alright, let's see where the computer is hiding," I said with my own anticipation to see where all of this was going. My desk area was L-shaped and rather large, with an intricate inlay design that seemed a bit strange to me. All of a sudden, the desk in front of me started to vibrate a bit, and the desk pad reversed itself to reveal a computer keyboard, while just beyond the keyboard, a sizeable monitor rose like a resurrection.

The monitor lit up and presented a log-in process which appeared to be touch-screen access, and it became clear rather quickly that this was another time when the right thumb would meet the glass panel. "Does everything require my thumb print," I asked as I looked at Hannah.

"Pretty much MindStar," Hannah responded, "except for the Cyrene War Room that will require both a thumb print and an eyeball scan to access."

"Wait, I have a Cyrene War Room," I asked.

"Yes," she replied, "it was requested by the Senator in anticipation that certain segments of operations may need to be conducted off planet for security reasons. The select few who will gain access to the Cyrene War Room will be required to also receive clearance and be required to provide a thumb print and iris scan. The thumb print process is actually built into the door handle, and the iris scan is embedded in the right door of the entrance. The Cyrene War Room is located in the lower level of the building with direct underground access and without anyone having to enter the main lobby, but we can take a tour another time."



I went silent for a moment to contemplate the gravity of what the implications were, and obviously just how serious the Cyrene situation is to require such covert operations. The Senator was sending a clear message, and I couldn't wait to connect with him to get briefed further, but I wanted to familiarize myself with the rest of what might be cleverly hidden before getting down to business.

"Let's give communications a spin, shall we?" As I depressed the comm icon the beautiful mural of the space center on the wall above the L-shaped portion of my desk to the left morphed into a full-on monitor, while the inlay portion of the desktop rotated into a touch-screen. Again, the thumb print security was in place in order to log-in and gain full access to communications. As I sat mesmerized at the ease with which these activities were presenting themselves, Hannah interrupted.

"You will note that there is simple and direct access to the Senator," as she pointed to the center of the touch screen, "with an option to record all communications if need be." One would think that modern technology might be a bit more complex, but so far, I've only needed to lift a finger – make that a thumb – and while I was quite anxious to make contact with the Senator, there was one more icon I needed to check out before I was on my own.

"Now let's see this hidden room where I'm guessing my tired ass can catch a few Zzz's if hours become long and demanding." As I pressed the icon on the device in the drawer, my eyes glanced over the office to see what walls would move, or anything else that would transition into an entrance into the inner sanctum. I didn't have to wait long, because the wall hutch on the right side of the office that housed a small bar and storage space swung open to reveal an entry-way.

A regular door would have sufficed, but after entering the room, it became quite clear to me that this was more than just a snooze chamber, and it was wise that anyone visiting my office would have no clue the room existed. Aside from a personal bathroom and sleep area, a small kitchen facility fit snugly into an alcove, as did a sitting area complete with what appeared to be a rather strangely-designed table until I recognized the intricate inlay pattern on the top.

Hannah remained outside the room but spoke loud enough for me to hear that there was yet another panel on the wall to the right of the entrance that controlled the activities within the interior of the room. This was beginning to feel more like a bomb shelter, or panic room, but I didn't want to take the time right now to explore every little nuance of this inner sanctum when I needed to connect with the Senator as soon as possible.

Exiting the room, Hannah instructed me on how to communicate with her if I required assistance. She said the Senator was expecting my call, and if there wasn't anything else I needed, then she would go to her work station. I told her I was fine and thanked her for everything as she headed for the door, but she stopped abruptly, and without turning around, she said – "Are you ready to kick some ass?"

As she left the office and closed the door behind her, I could only stand there with a big grin on my face, because it was in that moment that I realized that everything was going to be just fine.

WASTING TIME IS NOT AN OPTION

As I sat back down at my desk, fun time was over, and the urgency of why I was here came back into focus. The first order of business was to contact the Senator and get briefed on how soon I would be heading back to Cyrene. As I engaged the communications touch-screen, I immediately connected to the Senator's office.

"Hello MindStar, I see you are settled in your ops center," said the Senator as he visually appeared on the wall monitor.

"Not sure how settled I am," I replied, "but my personal assistant gave me a crash course in basically how everything works."

"Oh, you mean Hannah, how do you like her?" Surprised by his response and that he would know the names of staff, I wasn't quite sure what to make of it.

"How do you know Hannah," I asked, "I thought the Commander chose the COC staff."

"He did, except for Hannah," he replied, "she is from Cyrene and hand-chosen from my personal staff. She is human-like, but not human, and no one at ISMA knows this except for you and the Commander. He took care of her clearance process so she wouldn't alert during a scan. She is equipped to cater to your every need, and despite her high-tech abilities, she is primed to be groomed and molded into an efficient and dependable assistant with capabilities only you will discover over time. It is of utmost importance that this remain highly classified, but we can discuss this more later because we need to focus on your return to Cyrene."

Morphing walls, revolving desktops, hidden rooms, and now a not-so-human personal assistant? I wondered if there was chilled vodka in the freezer in the hidden room, because I was beginning to feel like I walked into a twilight zone or something.

"MindStar, you ok," the Senator asked, "you look a little zoned out there."

"I'm just taking it all in Calvin, and also trying to wrap my brain around the enormity of what's happening here. Obviously there's urgency."

"Yes, MindStar," replied the Senator, "there *is* an urgency, and I need to get you back to Cyrene as soon as possible so that we can carry out the Zekkonian mission. Sorry to cut your R&R so short, but I have made arrangements with the Commander to have an unmarked craft shuttle you to Cyrene the day after tomorrow. I'm hoping that's enough time for you to assemble what you need. I don't want to discuss the details of this mission until you arrive, so have a safe trip and I'll see you soon."

"See you in a couple of days Calvin, I'm looking forward to it. Oh, and ask your lovely housekeeper to have her sweet tea and biscuits ready, I've missed them."

"Will do. Goodbye MindStar."

"Goodbye Calvin." As the communication ended and the wall morphed back into the mural of the space center, I placed my right thumb on the glass panel beneath my desk to close the drawer, and then pressed the red button to de-shade the windows. As I looked beyond my office into the outer area, there were people busy doing things, but just what those things were was unknown. I caught myself staring at Hannah as she stood talking to a fellow staff member, and couldn't help but have thoughts of how utterly human she looked and behaved. I'm going to have to query the Senator more about this.

As the day ended and I headed back to my cottage, I realized how important it was to gain focus, and approach this unfinished Zekkonian business with renewed energy. I am more curious than ever now as to what they are up to, and why there seems to be such a threat.

The next couple of days passed quickly, and the knock at the door told me that my transport had arrived to escort me to the shuttle that would be taking me to Cyrene. I wondered if I was going to be seeing the flyboys again. And now I was also wondering if *they* were just human-like.

Chapter 4 | There's No Time To Waste



As I began the final process before boarding the ISMA unmarked spacecraft, I heard Commander Anderson calling after me.

"MindStar," he said winded, "there's been a slight change in your flight plan."

"Oh," I said surprised, "and what's that Commander?"

"Once the unmarked ISMA spacecraft reaches the outer corridor of Planet Cyrene, you will be docking at a space station and switching to Senator Neff's carrier. He felt it would be best not to approach Cyrene in an unidentifiable spacecraft given the current state of affairs."

"Well, that makes sense," I responded, "thanks for the update." I had to laugh at myself for what I was thinking at the moment, because I was actually wondering if the flyboys would be piloting the Senator's ship again. They are an interesting duo, and while professional and quite accommodating with a humorous flare, there's also a mystery that surrounds them.

Just before I left Cyrene the last time, they were clearly lying dead in the Zekkonian Swamp after being attacked by a vicious creature when my transport was hijacked, but their bodies were missing when I was returned to the transport by the ARC guards.

It was quite baffling, but then when I left the Senator's home after debriefing him and saw the flyboys standing outside the transport that would take me to the Senator's ship, I was completely confused. When I looked at the Senator, his only response was, "don't ask." Maybe I'm onto something regarding the flyboys possibly not being human, just like my new personal assistant Hannah at the ISMA Cyrene Ops Center, but then, I'm not sure just how much the Senator will reveal.

"Will do," I responded as I walked to the entrance of the spacecraft, "and thanks again for all your help in getting me settled, it's really appreciated."

"My pleasure," the Commander replied as he began walking away from the launch pad and toward his transport, "and Hannah will look after everything while you're gone."

"Excellent," I said, "all seems to be working well so far." I was skeptical about Hannah at first, but am more relaxed and confident that the Senator's choice for my personal assistant was a good one. I'm definitely going to explore this human-like, but not human situation with him, and just what I have to look forward to as Hannah and I get more involved. His intimations about her were interesting, but there are so many unanswered questions.

The spacecraft I boarded looked more personal than commercial, with an all black and unmarked exterior that gave a clear impression that navigating stealth might be the order of the day. As I reached the cockpit area to acquaint myself with the pilots, the Captain stepped through the doorway to introduce himself.

"Welcome aboard MindStar, I'm Captain Reynolds," said with a firm yet friendly tone, "and this is Lt. Nash, my Co-Pilot." The Lt. swiveled in his seat to acknowledge my presence and then returned to his preparations for take-off.

"If you'll follow me MindStar, I'll give you a tour of the craft." As the Captain moved forward into the cabin, I could see that no one else was on board, but I also noticed that my first impression was correct. This *is* a personal craft and outfitted accordingly with a very comfortable sitting area and what appeared to be reclining seats, as well as table and desk area for conducting work or dining.

"As you have probably surmised MindStar," began the Captain, "this craft is not for commercial use, but rather extended personal missions, and complete with every amenity to cater to the traveler's need and comfort." As we moved through the cabin, the Captain revealed the restroom and the sleeping quarters, as well as the galley where I discovered that we *weren't* alone.

"This is Rose," the Captain continued, "and she has been the attendant assigned to this craft for 3 years now. If you need anything at all while in flight, she's the one to contact." We shook hands and exchanged greetings, but I noticed that her grip was quite solid and perhaps overly firm for such a petite person. Nonetheless, after the customary smile, she went about her business as the Captain and I walked back into the main area of the craft.

"If you'll choose a seat MindStar," the Captain directed, "we will be departing shortly." For some reason, I always like sitting on the right side of an aircraft, but I have yet to figure out why. I settled in to one of the oversized reclining leather seats and prepared for departure. I wondered if I was going to be restricted this time as well from using my laptop, so I thought I had better check to be sure.

"Captain Reynolds," I asked as I pressed the intercom button to the cockpit, "am I restricted from using my laptop during this trip?"

"Not at all MindStar," the Captain replied, "at least not on this leg of your trip to Cyrene. You might want to check with your pilots once we reach the space station for the transfer though, just to be on the safe side."

"I'll do that Captain, thank you."

I love take-offs, the G-Force is adrenaline-pumping, as is shifting into hyper-drive, but landings are always rather boring for me. Besides, it signifies the end of travel, and I love racing through space, taking in all the wonders of the universe that sometimes defy any rhyme or reason for existence, other than just being.

SPACE STATION ARRIVAL AND TRANSFER

The flight from ISMA to the space station was uneventful, but then I slept through most of the trip. Not a bad thing though, because my sleep patterns of late continue to suck.

"We will be docking at the space station shortly MindStar," said the Captain over the intercom, "in case you need to prepare before landing. I have been notified that the Senator's ship is ready and waiting for your final leg of this trip to Planet Cyrene."

"Thank you Captain Reynolds," I replied as I positioned my seat upright and unfastened my seatbelt. As I began walking to the back of the craft and toward the restroom, Rose stepped out of the galley and asked if she could assist me with anything.

"I'm fine Rose, thank you," I nodded, "and perhaps next time around I might be able to stay awake long enough to enjoy some of the other amenities."

"Not a problem MindStar," she smiled, "see you on your return trip." No way could I think about a return trip right now, other than I hope I get to make it.

After a brief visit to the restroom and retaking my seat, it wasn't long before we docked at the space station. As I headed toward the front of the craft to make my exit, both Captain Reynolds and Lt. Nash came through the cockpit doorway to wish me well on my continued journey. Exiting the craft I walked a long narrow tunnel to reach the inner area of the space station, where to my complete surprise stood the Senator to greet me. I'm sure my dropped jaw, raised eyebrows and stunned look presented an attractive visual.

"I certainly didn't expect to see *you* here Senator," I said as I tried to compose myself. As the Senator extended his arms to greet me in the customary embrace, he began to speak.

"Hello MindStar," replied the Senator, "how great to see you again. Let's chat once we have reached the interior of my ship, ok?" His response seemed rather mysterious, but the Senator always has good reason for his actions.

"Good to see you too," I responded as he took my arm and began walking me to the bay where his spacecraft was docked.



As we boarded the Senator's ship, who do you think was grinning from ear to ear in the cockpit? Of *course* it was the flyboys, who else. I chuckled and waved as I shook my head and followed the Senator into the main cabin where I found some renovations had taken place.

"Well now," I said, "looks like you've done a bit of reconstruction Calvin," (inside personal space I didn't need to be so formal).

"Indeed," he responded, "have a seat here and I'll bring you up to date." The Senator pointed to an oversized table against the bulkhead with an inlaid glass top that had large leather swivel seats on either side. The glass top seemed a bit strange to me, especially if it doubled as a dining table, but given the surprises I encountered in my office at the Cyrene Ops Center at ISMA, I'm expecting just about anything.

I sat down opposite the Senator with great anticipation as to what I would learn. It was a big deal for him to meet me in space, so I am guessing that this briefing will reveal some pretty interesting things.

AND SO THE MISSION BRIEFING BEGINS

"Before I get into specifics," said Calvin, "this ship is now more of a command center between the ISMA and ongoing missions pertaining to Cyrene. I have also installed a similar operation in a hidden room within my home, thanks to Commander Anderson's assistance."

"Ahhh," I replied, "I *thought* there was something different about your office when I chatted with you the other day from the Cyrene Ops Center, now it all makes sense." Calvin smiled and continued to bring me into the loop.

As we sat across from each other at the table, the Senator informed me that my presence on Cyrene going forward was going to be quite different. Previously, the long-time friend and visiting guest on vacation worked relatively well, but now that my presence on Cyrene would be more frequent with longer stays, Calvin said I needed a more suitable cover.

"You need to have more maneuverability across the planet without suspicion," started the Senator, "so I have made it known that I hired you as part of my personal staff to assist with certain historical documenting, as well as periodic event planning that will engage locals in contributing toward advancement of planet colonies."

"You make it sound like fun," I responded, "but will I actually be doing any of this stuff?" The Senator grinned before leaning forward on the table.

"Absolutely," the Senator came back, "your cover must be seen as authentic. And besides, your historical documenting and event planning will be of great benefit to my personal endeavors outside of the Senate. You will be able to travel to many parts of the planet to engage the locals without incident, unless military personnel decide to stop you for whatever reason. There's always risk, but this should cover everything and not raise undue suspicion."

Cal handed me a bracelet that he said was made out of a metal resource found on Cyrene and that my credentials were embedded just beneath the surface identifying me as official staff. It looked like a simple piece of jewelry, but there were special-made scanners that were capable of reading the information. Certain military personnel carried them, and if I were ever stopped to be scanned, then all would be in order. As I attached the bracelet and adjusted the fit, Cal continued with his briefing.

The Senator focused on the glass top table we were sitting at, and started waving his hands over it like a Ouija Board, tapping the top in several places. In the meantime, a black panel screen dropped from above at the bulkhead to my right. All of a sudden, images and text began appearing, and the entire tabletop turned into a high-tech operation. Before I could utter a single word, the Senator started briefing me on the details of my covert operation into Zekkonian territory.



"I thought it would be far more efficient to meet you at the space station where the transfer took place so that we would have time to cover the details of your mission on the way to Cyrene." Cal pointed to a photo on the wall of a Royal Noble Zekkonian named Rak'Zik from the Tan'Hok tribe. Not a high ranking Royal, but important enough to carry certain responsibilities.

"Currently," continues the Senator, "there are wars going on between the Zeks, and Rak'Zik senses there is something not on the up and up with some of the other Royals. As such, his current mission is to make an attempt at creating new alliances. He trusts me more than any other human because he has witnessed time and again that I don't go along with the grain on most issues."

Despite the Senator's powerful position in the Senate, I've always known him to be a stand-alone guy when it came to issues he didn't feel were beneficial, and that were leaning more toward dictatorial rule than citizen equality and participation. There is still much work to be done, but the present focus was on the seeming uprising in the Zekkonian territory.

"The present part of your covert ops mission," stated Cal as he returned focus to the glass top operation, "is to meet with, and befriend Rak'Zik in an effort to gather further Intel as to what the friction is between the Zek tribes. I know that he is planning an ambassador trip to a tribe of Zeks that he hopes will join with an alliance."

The Senator proceeded to tell me that it was his hope that the mission would be a successful one, and that the end result would at least settle things down a bit, but he wasn't too confident that this was the case, and that more would need to be done.

"If Rak'Zik is comfortable with you," continued Cal, "then perhaps he will invite you to join him and his group to this meeting. I know he trusts my judgment, as well as what my motives are, so hopefully there won't be an issue."

The Senator moved more photos and info to the black panel against the bulkhead and continued his briefing about the Zekkonian lands spread out over the planet. He is hoping that my covert ops mission will bring forth more information that will not only give clarity to what the uprising is, but also feed into future missions that will help to bring more of a peace within the Zek territories. If not, then at least enough Intel that will foster strategies to be able to deal with whatever the challenges might be.

"That's about it for now MindStar," Cal said as he shut down the table-top operations, "the rest is up to you. I can't tell you how important this initial mission is in uncovering the Intel we need in order to move forward with other plans that you will learn of later on. I know it puts a lot of pressure on you, but I wouldn't have involved you if I didn't think you were capable of handling it."

"I appreciate the confidence Cal," I replied as I sat back in my seat for the first time since the briefing started, "and I also appreciate the opportunity to be of service to you and your plans for Cyrene. I'm prepared to do whatever it takes, and you also know that I have major resources at my disposal not only on Earth, but connections on other planets, and I'm ready to make use of them if need be."

"I know that," said the Senator, "and we may very well make good use of those resources, but for now, our main focus is getting you to that meeting with Rak'Zik. Your pilots will not only transport you to the meeting, but will also pose as your guards. Rak'Zik is aware of this arrangement and has no issue with it, so if you end up going with him to that ambassador meeting, then your guards must be part of the traveling group."

"Understood," I said with an internal grin. The flyboys were growing on me, and it would be nice to get to know them better. Maybe even find out what they're made of – literally. Perhaps when the time is right, the Senator will let me in on the mysteries that surround not only the flyboys, but my personal assistant Hannah as well, but I'm also curious where Rose came from, because things just don't feel right in that department either.

Just as my thoughts began to wander deeper regarding the impending mission, I heard a thundering sound outside the craft. Cal said not to worry, that it was an Imperium Fighter command that had come to escort us to the landing area on our final leg of the trip. Apparently, there had been an increase in pirate activity and the flyboys had made arrangements for a safer passage just in case of any challenges.

After landing, we entered the Senator's transport and the flyboys headed directly to the Senator's residence. It was still morning, but getting closer to noon, and Cal informed me that the trip to meet up with Rak'Zik would be made almost immediately.

"My apologies MindStar," offered Cal as we departed the landing area, "but there is no time to waste regarding this mission, and I'm afraid that you will need to leave within the hour. There will only be enough time to drop off your things and assemble what you will need to take with you. My housekeeper is preparing a quick brunch for us, and we can have a summary chat prior to your departure."

As I looked out the window of the transport, it was obvious that we weren't taking the back roads this time, and it finally dawned on me that everything was out in the open. Well, everything regarding my presence on the planet that is. I was now allowed a greater level of freedom of movement, and in spite of the looming mission, I felt more relaxed.

After arriving at the Senator's residence, we did exactly what was mentioned. Even though things were a bit rushed, I was able to enjoy the sweet tea and biscuits that Cal's housekeeper introduced me to on my last visit, along with other offerings that left my tummy full and satisfied.

"Time to get this operation underway," said Cal as he pushed himself away from the table, "your pilots are waiting outside for you. There is a set of Imperium Trooper armor in the transport for each of you in anticipation that you may encounter hostiles, along with standard assault weapon gear. Hopefully you won't need to use it, but it's always good to err on the side of safety."

Just the thought of what he said caused an adrenaline rush. It's been a while since I was caught up in hostile fighting, but then there was a time when it was a major part of my activities back in the day when I was a resident on Planet Calypso. It started to wear thin, along with other activities, until such point I made a drastic professional change and decided to go strictly media and cover news, along with starting a radio station. When Planet Arkadia entered our universe, it was an opportunity to expand my media coverage, but then I received the letter from Commander Anderson and everything changed.

"MindStar," Cal said startling me out of my daydreaming, "you with me?"

"Oh, sorry Cal," I said as I snapped out of it, "I was just reflecting on what you just said, but I'm here and ready to go."

"No problem," he responded, "it happens to us all at one time or another. I just wanted you to also know that communication between us will be minimal. The ground transport and the Imperium Fighter ship that you'll take to Tan'Hok'Zis city has the capability of reaching me, but outside of that, you'll be on your own. We can't risk detection of electronic devices in potential hostile territory. Once your mission is complete and you are in the ground transport or the ship on your way back, then we can pick up communications again."

"Not to change the subject or anything," I said with a rather mischievous grin, "but do the flyboys have names? I know I've called them that collectively since my previous visit, but if I'm going to spend any amount of time with them, perhaps I should be able to call them by name. I noticed they are twins, is that correct?"

"I had a feeling this time would come," Cal responded, "but if you can wait until you get back from this mission, I promise to give you an explanation." He had a grin on his face as well, sort of, and it all but confirmed that there was indeed something different about them as suspected. I'm just wondering again if this was the case for Hannah and Rose, and if the Senator will be forthcoming about them as well.

"Sure," I said, "no problem, we can talk when I return, but know I won't forget."

"I didn't think you would," responded Cal, "now grab your things and head out to the transport, time is of the essence. I wish you success with this mission, and I hope you come back with Intel that at least gives us something to work with."

As I headed out the door, the flyboys flanked the transport as usual, and after taking my seat in the passenger compartment, we were on our way to meet up with Rak'Zik. There was much to think about, but since I was only able to rest on my first leg of the trip to Cyrene, I informed the flyboys that I was going to take a little snooze.

"You're going to miss some interesting scenery," one of them called back, "especially when we get to the forest."

"Oh geez," I responded, "do you guys ever sleep?" I got total silence, and no answer to the question. I wanted to pursue it further, but I figured I better not push my luck. I just settled for laying my head back and resting a bit, remembering that the Senator said he would fill me in about the flyboys when I returned.

Unlike our previous escapade through the Zekkonian Swamp, the trip to the Tan'Hok'Zis city was a nice change. Once our ground transport reached the Imperium Fighter ship and we were in flight, the aerials were magnificent. Cruising over the falls in the City of Janus was just breathtaking, and I couldn't wait to have more leisurely time to do some exploring on my own.



A ROYAL MEETING AND INVITE

The flyboys found a nice clearing to land the ship, and upon arrival at the city proper, we were taken to Rak'Zik, a lower ranking Noble who represented the Royals. The floating Royal Islands were quite a vision, but the common city area beneath the floating islands is where the meeting took place.

"Welcome," says Rak'Zik, "it's finally nice to meet you MindStar. The Senator was very forthcoming with how you have helped him in the past, and trusts your representation on his behalf. If your guards don't mind waiting here, you can come with me and I can fill you in on what concerns us most."

"Nice to meet you as well," I responded, "and my guards will be fine waiting here." I followed Rak'Zik and two of his personal guards to a more private meeting place still outdoors to enjoy the environment. He said the floating Royal Islands were more secure, but I wasn't allowed access.



As Rak'Zik began to share the challenges the Tan'Hok tribe faced, I noticed a rather buzzing undertone in his speech, but didn't want to question it for fear of seeming rude. I found myself straining at times to understand fully what he was saying, but I managed.

"The Tan'Hok control a vast amount of land," stated Rak'Zik, "where rare crystals can be found, and we covet the most concentrated supply here in this area in the southeast, which is highly protected. Without going into too much detail, I can tell you that these rare crystals have valuable properties with benefits that are much sought after."

Rak'Zik continued to share that the Zil'Zik Clan of Zeks control a very large portion of land in the southwest and were beginning to move more to the north into the neutral Nie tribe Zek lands. I gathered that they were an opposing tribe with an objective to flank the land controlled by the Tan'Hok in an effort to acquire more of the rare crystals.

It became clear that Rak'Zik saw this as a huge threat, not only to the Tan'Hok, but also to the Nie tribe as well. I have to admit, that my curiosity about the rare crystals and their use continued to increase, but I wasn't sure I was going to get that kind of Intel at this point. I didn't want to come across as overly probing and allowed the Noble to share what he was comfortable revealing.

"I've set up a meeting with the Leader of the Zek Nie Tribe, Kol'Zak," says Rak'Zik, "and I would like to invite you to join me. It's a sort of ambassador trip if you will, in an attempt to create an alliance with the Nie tribe to fight against the Zil'Zik. The meeting is scheduled for this afternoon, and we will get underway shortly if you're willing to accompany me."

"I would be happy to accept your invitation," I replied, "but I have one request if I may. I would prefer that my guards accompany us as well because they are also prepared to assist in battle should the need arise."

My first thought was, the Senator will be happy that we were able to secure an invitation to this meeting with Kol'Zak, and my second thought was, I hope that the Intel acquired will be of benefit in sorting out the issues with the Zeks. However, sitting in the back of my mind was still the intrigue about the crystals, and just how much of a part they play in the whole scheme of things.

"That would be fine MindStar," responded Rak'Zik, "your guards are more than welcome to join us. I don't anticipate that we will meet with interference on our journey into the Nie Zek lands, but it's always good to be prepared. If you want to inform your guards of the trip, then we will get underway shortly."

I rejoined the flyboys and informed them that we got the invitation to accompany Rak'Zik to the meeting with Kol'Zak – ok, I got the invitation, but managed to get them invited as well. I asked the flyboys to bring our equipment from the ship as we would be leaving shortly.

As they walked away, I stood admiring the floating Royal Islands and hoped that one day I might be allowed to visit them. They were truly a site to behold, and it would be nice to get to meet some of the other Royals.



Royal Zekkonian Floating Islands

"Are you all set MindStar," asked Rak'Zik, "we will need to make this journey via land route because there is a no-fly zone over the neutral Nie Zek lands. The transports are waiting, and you and your guards can join me in mine if you like."

"Yes, we are ready," I responded, "just needed to grab our gear."

"Excellent," he replied, "then we shall get underway."

As Rak'Zik led us to his transport, my mind raced in anticipation of how this would all go down. If there is a war over the crystals, there seems to be far too many unanswered questions as to why. What are they used for, what are their true benefits, and why are they such a hot commodity that some of the Zeks are willing to wage war over them?



Zekkonian Forest with Purple Trees

As we headed northwest, the terrain was quite interesting. Not too much swamp area as before, and as we advanced further, it turned into a beautiful forest with purple trees, which seemed to be a good portion of the environment we were traveling through.

Rak'Zik informed me that we were now traveling through a larger portion of Tan'Hok-controlled land, but about to cross over into the neutral Nie Zek lands where we will meet with Kol'Zak. Within minutes after entering the neutral Nie Zek lands, all hell broke loose. The convoy was obviously being attacked as the transport came to an abrupt halt and loud buzzing sounds seemed concentrated nearby.

The flyboys and I equipped our armor and grabbed the assault weapons as we exited the transport behind Rak'Zik. He informed us that the attack was Zil'Zik scouts who apparently moved further north into Nie country than anticipated. There appeared to be 8 or 10 of them all carrying large spears, but didn't seem to be using any other methods of attack.

"MindStar," yells Rak'Zik, "BEHIND YOU!" As I turned, 3 of the Zil'Zik were rushing my way, looking ready to skewer my ass for a company picnic, but I raised my assault weapon and began firing. I heard additional gunfire to my right and noticed the flyboys jumped into action as well. With 3 down, we turned our attention to Rak'Zik's crew to see if they needed any help.



MindStar in Imperium Trooper Armor

The flyboys and I joined Rak'Zik who appeared to be holding up quite well, but since we had the assault weapons at our disposal, we thought we would lend a helping hand. A few Zil'Zik had retreated, but we weren't sure if more were regrouping for a secondary attack. It's a good thing that there are distinctive features between the different Zek cultures, as well as the Royal Nobles, because it sure would make it difficult otherwise.

As we waited momentarily, Rak'Zik said that he wanted to take a couple of the dead Zil'Zik bodies as trophies to the meeting to show proof to Kol'Zak that there was real concern about the Zil'Zik breaking through defenses to control more land.

Just as I began pondering that thought, more Zil'Zik came rushing out of the forest. They were headed directly for Rak'Zik, and I'm sure it was an attempt to take out a Royal Noble, which I'm also sure would look favorably in the eyes of their Leader.

However, swift action on the part of the flyboys shielded Rak'Zik while we and the rest of Rak'Zik's crew made short order of their feeble attempt to be victorious. After making sure the forest was clear of any further Zil'Zik scouts, Rak'Zik began to speak.

"Thank you MindStar," he said, "to you and your guards for assisting us in fending off what clearly proves to be our enemy. I hope that Kol'Zak gets the message as well, and will consider an alliance to prevent further encroachment by the Zil'Zik. Let's continue on our journey, the meeting place is not far from here."

As we re-entered the transports, we left our armor on and assault weapons handy as precautionary measures, but we were able to arrive at our meeting destination without any further interruption. We did however remove the armor and leave the assault weapons inside the transport prior to the meeting for obvious reasons.

TO ALLIANCE OR NOT TO ALLIANCE

Kol'Zak and what appeared to be a few of his aides greeted us, but I was surprised to sense a bit of apprehension. The demeanor and atmosphere didn't seem to feel too friendly, but maybe that was just me. I'm not familiar with the Zek tribes and their culture, so perhaps it was a custom not to appear too overly friendly. After all, I was a human, and if I learned one thing in my travels across planets, not everyone appreciates us.

Rak'Zik extended his hand first to Kol'Zak in a friendly greeting, who returned the gesture, but in doing so, his eyes shifted my way. I briefly smiled and nodded, but said nothing. Rak'Zik did not introduce me, but neither did Kol'Zak inquire as to my presence. I found it interesting that no one moved, but rather started conversation at the very spot where we were standing. Again, the buzzing undertone made it a challenge to comprehend what was being said, and I found myself straining to make sense of everything.

"I am here today," began Rak'Zik, "in hopes that you will consider aligning with our tribe against the Zil'Zik who continue to advance toward Tan'Hok territory in an effort to gain control over more crystal-rich land. They are large in numbers, and once they have breached our defenses, they will move further north and encroach upon the Nie lands."

"I don't see it that way," responded Kol'Zak, "it's the Tan'Hok that have the major crystal supply, and there's no need for the Zil'Zik to invade the Nie tribe lands. Perhaps if the Tan'Hok were more sharing of the crystals there would be less aggression on the part of others."

There was no mistake that the curtness in Kol'Zak's response was intentional, nor the focused glare in Rak'Zik's direction, but I knew what was coming next, and I just stood back and waited for it. Rak'Zik's return stare spoke volumes, but as he shifted his stance, his reply was swift.

"Perhaps this will convince you otherwise," said Rak'Zik as he motioned to a few of his crew to bring forth the trophies collected in our recent battle with the Zil'Zik.

"I bring you proof that the Nie Zek lands are not safe," offered Rak'Zik, "and that their further advancement into the north is a very real threat. We were attacked just outside of your city area in the neutral Nie territory, but were able to fight them off with the help of MindStar and her guards."

Kol'Zak shifted his focus on me and the flyboys prior to returning his attention to Rak'Zik, but it left a cold and rather intimidating feeling, and thoughts that this meeting was not going the way that Rak'Zik had hoped it would.

"I still don't see the benefit of joining an alliance with the Tan'Hok," stated Kol'Zak, "and how do I know that these trophies are from where you say they're from, and not just an attempt to persuade us into furthering your own personal cause at our expense."

"You will just have to take my word for it," Rak'Zik said with a more firm tone, "and besides, it's not just the Zil'Zik who have become aggressive against the Tan'Hok. The Merfolken are also building a camp on the coast and attacking, and it has become difficult to fight the battles on both fronts."

"We have nothing to do with the Zil'Zik or the Merfolken," states Kol'Zak, "we mind our own business and keep to our own, so I see no reason to involve our tribe in whatever escalating war is occurring between the Tan'Hok and others. And to be more frank, we don't take kindly to the Tan'Hok being so friendly with the humans, along with the exchange of technology, which we feel gives you an advantage, so we aren't willing to help advance that in any way either."

Oh boy, there was now no doubt in my mind that this meeting was a bust, and that Rak'Zik was about to walk away empty-handed. My mind was racing, because it seemed rather obvious that Kol'Zak and perhaps the Nie Zeks had something against the Tan'Hok that hadn't quite surfaced yet.

I was sure of one thing though, the value of the crystals played an enormous role in this waging war, and all indications point to the Tan'Hok for any perceived aggressive moves on the part of others.

"I didn't quite anticipate this reaction," Rak'Zik replied, "and truly thought that we could work together for the greater good of both of our tribes, but I see that doesn't seem possible at this point. Perhaps you will give it more thought and contact me if you change your mind."

"I doubt that will happen," Kol'Zak responded, "but your efforts are duly noted. If there's nothing more, then I will consider this meeting concluded."

"Thank you for your time," Rak'Zik said as he watched Kol'Zak walk away, "and the trophies are yours to keep as a reminder that not all is as it seems."

Kol'Zak never looked back, and as we turned toward our transports, Rak'Zik looked at me and said, "This is not good." However, I had already come to that conclusion, so it will be interesting to see where all of this will go from here.

The trip back to the Tan'Hok'Zis city was uneventful, but we were prepared just in case. It was a rather exhausting journey, and I for one was ready to get back to the Senator and some much needed rest.

Prior to leaving the Tan'Hok'Zis city, Rak'Zik made it clear that he would report to the Tan'Hok Council on how helpful we were in the fight against the Zil'Zik, and that it would certainly gain favor with the Nobles. At least this trip was productive in that respect, and perhaps it might aid toward gaining further access into the inner circle, where I'm sure more Intel would be possible.

However, if there's one thing I'm walking away with from this journey today, it would be that the Tan'Hok tribe has enemies, and it appears that the Zil'Zik and Merfolken are first in line to encroach on their territory. There is also no mistake that the crystals that everyone is talking about have value beyond anything I understand at this point, and I'm just wondering if the Senator has any further information that would shed a bit of light on why they have become so much in demand.

The flyboys and I said our goodbyes to Rak'Zik, and as we departed, I mentioned that I would give the Senator a full report, and that I was sure that he would be back in touch with him at his earliest convenience.

SORRY SENATOR, BUT IT'S NOT GOOD NEWS

On the way back to the City of Janus and the Senator's residence, I was able to use the Imperium Fighter's communication system to reach Cal and give him a minor briefing on what took place. He wasn't too happy about the results, but he was glad that I was at least able to attend the meeting with Kol'Zak and learn of the interaction first-hand, as well as build a good beginning relationship with Rak'Zik.

"We'll talk more when you get back MindStar," Cal said, "but I can tell you right now that this operation isn't over based on your preliminary report. There's too much mystery surrounding the crystals not to pursue this further, and I'm afraid we're looking at a deeper penetration into Zekkonian territory to find out why the Zil'Zik Clan and Merfolken want them so desperately. We have a lot of work to do yet. See you when you get here."



Royal Crystal Gardens with Guard



Illuminated Royal Crystal Gardens

After my brief chat with the Senator, there was only one conclusion I could draw. My stay on Cyrene this time was definitely going to be longer. And I don't know about you, but *deeper penetration into Zekkonian territory* could mean only one thing – a potential undercover operation with greater risk.

However, there's no turning back, and I'm just as curious as the Senator about the crystals and why they carry so much value. Also, the Tan'Hok may be friendly with the humans and exchange technology, but is the Senator sure they are of as much a benefit as thought.

As I rested my head on the back of the seat and felt myself drifting off, one of the flyboys yelled back and startled me.

"You're going to miss the SCENERY if you doze off."

Geezus, again with the scenery. Tired or not, the only *thought* that crossed my mind was that the first thing I'm going to do when we get back is remind the Senator that he promised to fill me in about the flyboys. If I find out these guys are not human and programmable, I'm going to make a few suggestions.

"MindStar, that wasn't nice."

Chapter 5 | Deep in Zek Territory - Crystal Mission



RAK'ZIK MEETING | MISSION SEMI-SUCCESSFUL

The early evening sun was setting, creating a beautiful hue across the horizon with scattered light rays peaking through the branches of the trees like voyeurs. Pulling up to the Senator's residence with the flyboys came with mixed emotions. On one hand, we were able to get invited to the meeting between Rak'Zik and Kol'Zak regarding a potential alliance. On the other hand, it didn't go as well as expected.

From all indications during the brief communication from the spacecraft with the Senator, he wasn't too happy about it, other than us getting to attend the meeting. He was very specific that more work would need to be done, so today's debriefing should be quite interesting.

"Welcome back MindStar," Cal said as he exited his front door to greet us, "come inside and let's have a chat." He waved to the flyboys before they left with the transport and then followed me into his home. Little does he know that after we conclude with further debriefing about the mission, I have a little unfinished business of my own with him.

As we sat on the veranda, Cal looked at me and I just grinned; one of those smirky grins ya know, the kind that make people wonder what you're up to. He raised an eyebrow and looked as if he was going to say something, but I did to him what he did to me when I was surprised to see the flyboys after our hijacking in the Zekkonian Swamp where they supposedly ended up dead – NOT.

"Don't ask," I said to the Senator, "it will all become clear soon enough, but I'm sure you're anxious to hear more details about the mission." Cal sat back in his chair with his hands behind his head sporting a rather large smile on his face, like a proud mentor or coach, and I presumed also reveling in the fact that I have confidently stepped into my covert ops role in a more defined way.

The transition for me was a bit slow-going, but now that I'm back into the more aggressive level of space exploration and adventure, my insatiableness for uncovering mysteries and secrets has been elevated quite substantially. I attribute that to my passion for investigative journalism, but what I'm involved with now goes far beyond anything I've experienced in the past, and I'm ready to take it to the next level, wherever that may lead me.

"Tell me a bit about the meeting between Rak'Zik and Kol'Zak," says Cal, "and what you gleaned from it that might be of importance." After taking a sip of his housekeeper's lovely tea, I leaned forward and gave him my interpretation of what I *thought* took place.

"In short," I started, "Kol'Zak was having none of what Rak'Zik was handing him about the gradual invasion of the Zil'Zik into the neutral Nie Tribe Zek lands. Rak'Zik even presented Zil'Zik dead bodies as trophies from the attack we encountered on the way to the meeting just outside his city, but Kol'Zak was skeptical and untrusting of what actually took place."

"Sounds like a tough meeting," states Cal, "so I take it that an alliance was out of the question?"

"Pretty much," I responded, "and to further add insult to injury, Kol'Zak blames the Tan'Hok for the uprising because of their seeming hoarding of the most valuable crystals and not sharing with others. Kol'Zak was also very explicit in saying that they didn't like the relationship with the humans that the Tan'Hok had either, because their work with technology to help them gave them an advantage."

"Wow," exclaims Cal, "seems like there was a bit of tension involved in that meeting." The Senator doesn't know the half of it, but I didn't think it was necessary to go into every detail. The most important factors were shared in an effort to give the Senator a starting point and where we go from here with the next mission.

"Lots of tension," I replied, "but the flyboys and I maintained a respectful posture and did not speak. Kol'Zak didn't seem to be too happy that we were there, surmising that we were humans, I'm sure, but we managed to walk away intact and nonetheless for wear. I only wish I had more Intel for you."

"Sometimes," Cal stated, "these missions don't always go as you would like them to, but at least you've given me enough information to know that we now have to go deeper into Zek territory, and that means a higher risk for you MindStar. This next covert ops run will be far more dangerous, but I've already employed the necessary means to enhance its success. However, before we get into the details, let's take a break for dinner."

HANNAH, ROSE, AND THE FLYBOYS REVEALED

We stayed on the veranda and enjoyed the cool breeze, as well as what was left of the setting sun. It was mostly small talk, but I patiently waited for my opportunity to give the Senator what he *might* deem a poignant reminder of something he *promised* that he would share with me when I returned.

"My dear Senator," I said as I shot him a cheeky grin, "it's time to fess up." He placed his fork on his plate and wiped the corners of his mouth with his napkin before shooting me a cheeky grin right back.

"I have a feeling I know where you're headed," replies Cal, "and I guess it's time to clue you in on a few things."

Did I hear that right? Was I *really* going to finally get some information on the flyboys and Hannah? I perked right up in my chair and gave him my full attention, because I was sure I would have questions once he started. Although, the Senator is quite detailed and thorough, so we'll see.

"Hannah and the twin pilots," began Cal, "are actually gifts from Vida at the Cyrene Skylabs. All three are human-like, and all three are androids, but ..."

"It all makes sense to me now," I cut in, "and I have one quick question, if you don't mind. Did you send someone in to collect the flyboys in the Zekkonian Swamp after we were hijacked?"

"No," Cal responded, "after receiving them from Vida, they were reprogrammed to return to me should anything happen to them, and why they teleported to my residence after their death in the swamp."

Well, as much as I have become attached to them already, it's nice to know that they'll always be around in one capacity or another, they've really grown on me.

"Hannah is a bit different," Cal continued, "while she's human-like and also an android, she's actually the prototype Vida developed without some of the advanced features that the pilots have, especially when it comes to her strength. Therefore, while quite efficient and very trainable, she expresses more of a demure and feminine quality. However, don't underestimate her, because I found her to be quite surprising at times when I least expected it. She's sharp, witty, and can verbally punch if she needs to, but in the end, she will be loyal to you, and the two of you should grow into each other in a very beneficial way."

"Well," I responded, "she already asked me if I was ready to kick some ass, so I'm guessing she's got a bit of spunk in there somewhere." Calvin smiled, almost as if he was saying, *I know what you mean*, but then he continued filling me in on all this android business.

"Rose is also an android," Cal said, "but she's a bit more advanced than Hannah, and she can pretty much hold her own if she has to."

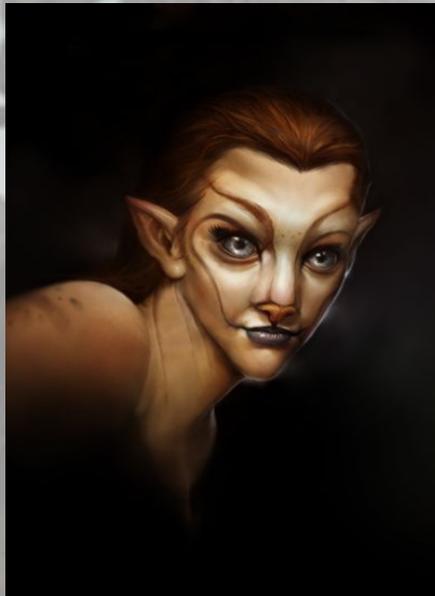
I didn't know that he was involved with Rose too, but that explains the extra firm grip I experienced when I encountered her on the ISMA spacecraft during the first leg of my trip to Cyrene. Nonetheless, I sensed that something was still not right.

"The thing with Rose is," continues Cal, "she's a second generation android, and not actually created by Vida, but I'll get into those details in a minute."

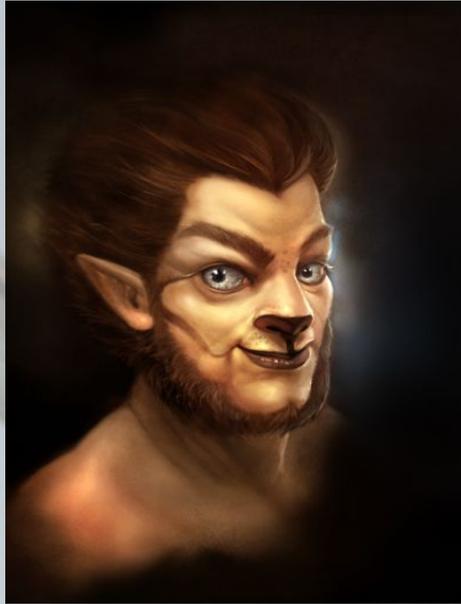
"I'm more interested in the flyboys," I responded, "those guys seem far too human to even *think* of them as androids. They are wise-cracking, can carry on an intelligent conversation when I can get them to *focus* long enough, and it seems that they use a level of critical thinking in situations where it's most beneficial. I can also tell you that they're fast-acting in crucial moments, and they don't have to be told what to do, which is why their dynamics interest me the most."

"As I mentioned, MindStar," states Cal as he shifts more in his seat, "the pilots are far more advanced, and there's a very good reason why. They were not created by Vida, but rather her Boffins. Boffins cannot innovate, but are perfectionists in their work. So they took Vida's prototype of Hannah and created Rose. She has a greater level of advanced features, and considered a second generation android, but then they worked the prototype further until they were satisfied with the twin pilots who are considered to be third generation androids."

"Wow," I exclaimed, "that's incredible. I have only one question though. Who or what are the Boffins?" This ought to be good I thought to myself. I'm not naïve to androids or robots, but Boffins sound like a whole new ballgame to me, and I'm highly anxious to learn what the story is.



Female Boffin



Male Boffin

"Boffins are a genetically-created human species, Cal begins, "and very cat-like in features. The females are taller with more warrior-type tendencies, and the males are more technology-focused, but can stand their ground if need be. While Boffins are living robots, the more you get to know them you cannot help but project your human emotions; eventually wanting to think of them as beings, rather than products. They are extremely adaptive, which makes them perfect for science and other constructive activities."

All I could think of at the moment was when I would get to meet one of these Boffins, but Cal moved back to the flyboys.

"As a result of being third generation androids," says Cal, "the pilot twins are far more adaptable, have much greater strength, and have a level of free thinking if you will, which is probably where the wise-cracking comes in," he shares with a grin, "but their behaviors and dynamics are so human-like, that I also don't think that even *they* know they're androids."

"Kudos to the Boffins," I said, "nothing like getting it right, and then making a carbon copy. How many more of these cuties do you think we can get Cal, I need me some extra body guards when I go on these outings?" Cal just shook his head, but he's used to my off-the-wall comments, and still enjoys them.

"I would hardly call them outings," Cal came back with a chuckle, "your covert ops missions will more than likely get increasingly risky and dangerous, so not quite a walk in the park. However, I can tell you that with this next mission, you will have one additional person with you."

"Before we go there," I responded, "I have a question. I really like the flyboys, but I would prefer to call them by names. Do they *have* names?" Cal looked at me almost knowing that this question was coming sooner or later, but as he sat back in his chair once again, he didn't dismiss it, and even surprised me.

"To be honest, MindStar," Cal shared, "Hannah and Rose came to me already named, but the twin pilots did not, and I just haven't taken the time to address it. Besides, I wouldn't know how to tell them apart anyway, even if they *did* have names."

"Good point," my dear Senator, "but if I'm going to spend an inordinate amount of time with these guys, I think we should name them and figure out a way to tell them apart, don'tcha think?" Calvin raised an eyebrow as if to say, *do we really have to go there*, but then came back with an interesting proposition.

"Tell you what," Cal says, "since you will most likely be spending the majority of the time with them while you're on Cyrene, I'll give you the honor of naming them, and then coming up with a way to tell them apart, how's that?"

Ohhh, this was going to be fun. I gave them the nickname flyboys, but I'm not quite sure how they're going to take to *real* names. I guess we'll find out *eventually*.

MISSION DETAILS

"Before we get lost in android naming," states Cal, "I need to brief you about your next mission, which is going to be rather involved. Vida from the Skylabs needs more samples of the rare crystals found on Cyrene, and although her Father's corporation Enkidd *had* some of these crystals, an experiment gone wrong caused them to lose their most valuable samples."

"Sounds rather dire," I said, "but these rare crystals must have some major value for them to be in such high demand." The Senator began shaking his head yes before he continued.

"The crystals," says Cal, "afford Vida and her research team the opportunity to create powerful technology, and the results can be used both for great benefit, as well as great destruction. The continued research is vital to not only understanding the properties of these rare crystals, but also to be able to minimize or thwart off any potential destruction in the wrong hands."

"Well then," I replied as I sat back in my chair, "what is this next covert ops mission all about, and when do we get started." The Senator grabbed what looked like an electronic notebook, and pulled his chair over closer to me. As he reviewed the mission agenda, he continued with the briefing.

"This time," says Cal, "you must go deeper into the Zekkonian territory in order to collect more samples of the valuable and rare crystals from one of their gardens, which makes this mission a much higher risk level. However, Enkidd has created a new type of armor that blends with the Zekkonians and gives off a scent that leads the less-evolved Zeks to think they are among a Zek Noble."

"Gotta love technology," I said, "so will this actually make it easier to get in and out?" I did not get the response I was expecting, and as the Senator sat there shaking his head no, almost in slow motion, I could only wonder what was coming next.

"Not quite," Cal responded, "unfortunately, the scent will only last so long, and there's a limited amount of time to travel deep into the Zek territory to extract the crystals. Your pilots will also be wearing the specialized armor so that no attention is drawn to them either. In addition, you will be equipped with powerful weapons should you need them."

The Senator shared that we will be carrying Imperium Firestarter Flamethrowers, but they should only be used in extreme situations because they would attract a vast number of attacking Zeks if caught. He further explained that the Firestarter uses a special type of fuel that will self-extinguish after a while, so we didn't need to be fearful that we would burn down the entire village or forest.

Definitely a high risk factor with this mission I thought to myself, but in the past, I was always known to be fearless, and an *in yer face kinda gal*. However, I think I got a bit too soft when I focused purely on media and away from the more adventurous escapades. Well, I'm back in the saddle again, and to quote Hannah, "*ready to kick some ass.*" The Senator snapped me out of my daydreaming with more details of the mission, and I could feel myself getting more excited despite foreseeable obstacles.

"The crystal gardens are heavily guarded," shares Cal, "and although the normal Zil Zik warriors won't be able to tell you from the Noble Ziks, if a Noble were to catch you there, you would quickly be captured. And just for general information, the Zek culture is divided into castes, with the higher evolved Zeks being the brains of the operation, while the un-evolved Zeks are the more drone-like muscle."

"Looks like we have our work cut out for us," I said, "now tell me who this other person is that's joining us." The Senator tilted his head a bit to the right before he began grinning. I *know* this grin, which tells me something extra is coming that he hasn't revealed yet.

"Well," explains Cal, "you will be accompanied by a Boffin named *Enyo*; a female warrior quite capable of assisting where needed, including field engineering and medical duties."

"So when do we take off on this mission," I asked, "I'm ready. You have a way of sharing mission details that get me quite excited, but I'm guessing that it's the old dormant me coming to life again and realizing it's time to come out of the rain and experience a few distorted rainbows along the way."

"Actually," Cal responded, "Enyo will be here first thing in the morning, along with your pilots for a briefing about the mission, and then you're off. I'm sure your previous mission was a bit tiring, and I'm going to recommend that you rest up as much as possible, because tomorrow's mission will be tense, and challenge your stamina, if not your nerves."

Oh great, I'm too wired right now to go to sleep, so maybe I'll do some laps in the pool to wear myself out. I love these little mind-games I play with myself; I already know they don't work, so I'm not sure why I even bother.

"I'm heading to bed, MindStar," said Cal, "I'll see you in the morning."

"Ok," I responded, "I'm going to give some thought to naming the flyboys, but I already think I'm going to name them after my special friends and twin pilots from Planet Calypso, "Rip" and "C" – they were my personal pilots for a good while, and the flyboys remind me of them. My only challenge is now figuring out a way to tell them apart, but I'll sort this all out after we get back from the mission. See you in the morning."

MORNING HAS BROKEN | THE MISSION TEAM ASSEMBLES

Contrary to what I expected to be a rather restless night, it was quite peaceful, and I slept well. However, regardless of the number of hours I'm able to capture, my internal alarm clock always has me rising early. There's nothing like experiencing a dawn's canvas as the sun caresses the horizon, and there's nothing like the smell of coffee to draw you into consciousness.

After finishing my shower and getting dressed, I could hear voices, seemingly coming from the kitchen, which was not far from the guest room. I think the kitchen is usually the first stop in anyone's morning, but today it was going to be a bit different. As I walked toward the kitchen, I could see the Senator on the veranda already having conversation with the flyboys, but then as I entered the kitchen, I was startled.

My attention was captured by a tall woman with cat-like features walking toward the veranda, until she came to a complete halt and turned to face me. She was quite unique, and I could only surmise that it was the Boffin Enyo.

"Greetings," the Boffin said, "I'm Enyo," as she walked toward me with right hand extended. "You must be MindStar."

Wow, did I feel like a shorty, and a bit embarrassed at the moment given my eyes and mouth were wide open in awe of what I was seeing.

"Uhm, yes," I stammered, "I *am* MindStar, and it's a pleasure to meet you. Forgive my awkwardness at the moment, but this is my first encounter with ..." the Senator interrupted me as he walked into the kitchen from the veranda, and saved me from any further embarrassment.

"Relax MindStar," Cal says, "your reaction to seeing a Boffin for the first time is quite common, but grab yourself some coffee and join us on the veranda. We need to sort out the details of the mission so everyone is on the same page."

"Right," I responded, but I couldn't help think about, or admire the cat-like features of Enyo, nor the gracefulness with which she moved across the floor. I couldn't wait to see how she interacts out in the field, and what she'll bring to this mission. I poured myself some coffee and headed for the veranda, but not before I grabbed myself one of those delicious biscuits that the Senator's housekeeper makes.

"This is going to be a challenging mission," begins the Senator, "not only because of where it will take you, but because of the limited time involved." Since Cal already briefed me the evening before, he shared the details of the mission with Enyo and the flyboys, but then added a little something that hadn't come up in our previous chat.

"You will leave here by transport," states Cal, "and head for a secluded area near the falls in the City of Janus where helicopters are waiting for you. The helicopters are super silent, and it's best to travel at night. You'll only be able to travel so far into Zek territory before you'll need to land and go the rest of the way on foot to the crystal gardens. Enyo and MindStar will fly in one chopper, and the twin pilots will fly in the other."



Dragonfly Helicopters (night scene)

The morning passed and we were now into the afternoon hours, but there were still so many details to work out, along with backup plans. Time slipped by rather quickly, and with each passing moment, the more intense it became, realizing just how much danger we may be facing.

I don't know what came over me, but my adrenaline started pumping in anticipation of this mission. Perhaps it's the thrill-seeker in me longing for the action I've missed so much, but maybe it was fear rearing its ugly head at the prospect of the unknown. Whatever the case, I wanted this mission to get underway, and I wanted to savor every moment, be it good, bad, or ...

"Time to head out," Calvin says interrupting my moment of adrenaline-pumping thoughts, "there's no time to waste with this one. The specialized armor, along with the power weapons are already onboard the helicopters. Keep in mind that communication will only be possible between the four of you, and you will not be able to contact me until you are back in the helicopters and returning from the mission. I wish you all the best, and I'm expecting good things. Let's not disappoint Vida, and get her the crystals."

Oh geez, no pressure whatsoever! The Senator's send-offs are never predictable. Sometimes they can be so rah-rah, and at other times, he seems to pile on that invisible weight that we often tend to do on our own when we feel less confident. Nonetheless, we were on our way, and I couldn't wait to see how we were all going to mesh on this mission. The flyboys are cool, but Enyo will be the test.

SILENT AND STEALTH | THE MISSION IS UNDERWAY

It was already early evening and the sun was setting. I guess that's a good thing since it seems that the more stealth this mission is the better. It stands to reason that no matter how silent your flying apparatus is, in broad daylight, you have less of a chance of remaining hidden.

It wasn't long before we reached the helicopters. The flyboys boarded one, and Enyo and I boarded the other. Enyo jump into action immediately, handling the chopper like it was a tinker toy, getting us in the air in no time flat. The flyboys followed behind us. The setting sun was a beautiful aerial view, but it's time to focus on the mission at hand. However, Enyo decided to give me some additional information about how the Boffins interact with people. I am now beginning to feel more secure and comfortable with Enyo; this could be a good thing.

"Here MindStar," says Enyo as she handed me a document, "I give you more information about Boffins." I found Enyo very endearing, but also quite precise, and I was wondering if this was true of all Boffins and their language skills, but I didn't want to be rude and ask. While the Senator had already shared information about them in our meeting the evening before, it seems it wasn't everything.

The document read almost like a manual, but clarified a few more things for me. The Boffins are capable of great strength and agility, but require little to eat, and may need large amounts of rest after extraneous mental or physical work. Boffin owners should also take note that they are not human, and will not display any human behavior when it comes to irrational human emotions. However, they are completely loyal once a command is given, and will perform any task assigned by its master.

Due to the dangers of such power, the Boffins may only be sold to high ranking Imperium members, and must be registered with the Imperium. All Boffins are created from the same original pair, and the only way to tell them apart is from their assigned serial number implanted under their skin. Just as I finished reading the additional details about the Boffins, Enyo broke my train of thought.

"We are close to landing point," says Enyo, "prepare."

What's to prepare I thought to myself, I've been buckled in so tight since we left that I think I may have cut off my circulation. I love flying, but when it's not a vacation, and it's under these types of conditions, it's a whole different story.

After landing, we equipped the specialized armor and grabbed the power weapons. Enyo pointed us in the direction of our travel on foot to the crystal gardens, and off we went. It was an uneventful trek, giving hope that this mission might be accomplished without much challenge, but I thought wrong.

"What the HELL," I yelled out, "where did THEY come from, and what ARE they?" Seemingly out of nowhere, these nasty birds swooped in on us, and there was no way of avoiding combat.



Horned Roc Bird

We managed to make our way through it, but the question was – did it cause too much of a disturbance and alert anyone that there might be intruders.

After the bird encounter, we finally reached the swamp land. As we walked toward the gardens, my adrenaline is off the map, and I can't help but fear that we are going to be spotted. However, as we approach the gardens, we are met by the Guards who stand at attention. No issue, no nothing, and Enyo instructed us to keep walking forward.

Apparently, the less evolved Zik do not look at Noble Ziks directly. They use their antenna to pick up on the scent of what is around them. When they sense a Noble, they stand at attention and never meet eyes with them. I was relieved, and perhaps a bit more relaxed seeing that we were carrying some heavy artillery, but we made it through into the garden.

"Wow," I exclaimed, "look at those crystals, they are amazing." As I stood stunned by the beauty of the crystals, Enyo started collecting samples as quickly as possible. In the meantime, the flyboys, who were standing guard, noticed that a Noble had walked into the garden and looked rather shocked.

"ENYO, MINDSTAR," shouted one of the flyboys as he points toward the Noble, "he's trying to sound the alarm and we can't let that happen." The flyboys and I tackled him and took him down, but it was proving to be quite the challenge.

In the meantime, while all of this is going on, Enyo is still standing and marveling at the crystals without budging. I didn't know quite what to make of this behavior, as I was told that she was a female warrior, but aren't warriors supposed to always be at the ready in the face of danger and act accordingly?

"DAMN, this dude is strong," I said with what breath I could collect, "and far too noisy for *my* liking." As we struggled a bit more, I was fearful that this wrestling match was going to alert the Sentry, but we finally managed to hog tie him and squelch the racket he was making. However, moving the Zik Noble into the brush to hide him was not soon enough.

When Enyo saw that the Sentry decided to inspect the area, she quickly moved into the brush where we had the Zik Noble and took him out with a never before seen fist weapon. She explains that the weapon is one of the latest designs, and not supposed to be used except in an extreme situation.

"Ya," I said as I rolled my eyes, "I *guess* you could call this an extreme situation." Enyo shared further that the fist weapon is silent and capable of massive damage due to a particle blade that it emits from the center of the power glove.



"Follow me," Enyo instructed, "we need to get out of here and fast."

No kidding I thought to myself, and as we spread out a bit and moved toward the exit of the garden, we were met by another Zik Noble on his way in to check up on things. However, this was a primitive Shaman-type who quickly sees what is going on, and in an instant, he shoots a fireball in our direction, but we are able to withstand the assault.



Zik Shaman Fireball Attack

The garden is now on full alert, and there was no question whatsoever that it was time to lay down some heavy suppression fire and hold back the Ziks with our flame throwers. Enyo, who was not near the blast, acted fast with her cat-like reflexes and kills the Zik Noble Shaman, but it now looks as if we have to fight off waves of Zik Guards.

"We must hold Ziks off," shouts Enyo, "I will remote summon choppers."

Wait, remote summon choppers? The more I get involved with these covert ops missions, the more technology is revealed, and the more excited I get. I hope the choppers get here quick, this is ridiculously hazardous.



MindStar in special Zek armor shooting Imperium Firestarter Flamethrower.

The flyboys and I laid down some massive suppression fire while Enyo fought off any Ziks that got through with hand-to-hand combat. One of the flyboys took a hit, but Enyo was able to tend to the wound. The First Aid Pack that she used, quickly and almost like weaving a fabric, healed the wound, and the flyboy was back in action again. Just as it seemed like we were about to be swarmed on all sides, the choppers arrived.



Choppers arrive as MindStar, Flyboys and Enyo fight off Ziks.

"HEY," Enyo yelled in the direction of the flyboys (I *told* Cal they needed names), "grab hold of landing skids on second chopper. MindStar, grab hold of landing skid on first chopper with me, quick." We did as Enyo instructed, and while we were hanging on for dear life with one hand, we continued to fight off the Zik with the other. The choppers quickly flew off, but some of the primitive unevolved Zik who can fly were in pursuit and gaining on us, and making our efforts more challenging.

"Hold tight," shouts Enyo, "we are not able to outrun them; choppers are taking too much damage; I am increasing altitude where they cannot follow."

She *had* to know it was a dangerous decision to do this, because we were all holding on literally by one hand, but as I watched her fiddle with her remote, I could only hope that our strength held out long enough to make it to our landing site. It absolutely amazed me that she was in control of both choppers with the remote while we clung for dear life.

Just as we lose the Ziks, I started losing my grip, but Enyo once again demonstrates her cat-like agility and manages to climb up on the chopper and grab my hand just in time, pulling me into the chopper and to safety. I swear I heard the hallelujah choir as I took my first deep breath. The flyboys were already inside their chopper and we were clear to work our way back to the base, but it wasn't long before yet another glitch in our mission occurred.

"There is bad news," states Enyo, "choppers are too damaged to continue flight to base; we need to find place to land and call for help."

Oh great! There was little ammo left, we were transporting the much sought-after rare and valuable crystals, and if that wasn't enough, we also had to fear being caught by patrolling Sons of Remus Sentinels. There was only one pressing question that loomed heavily on our minds ...

How will we explain what happened if we are caught outside of the protected zones!?

MindStar9 is a veteran player within the Entropia Universe with a media presence, and has written extensively about the Entropia Universe since 2005.



Cyrene is a 3D Sci-Fi MMORPG virtual planet within the Entropia Universe with unique creatures and environment that engage its participants in quest lines and missions that support building and expanding its planetary locations.