

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A TRAITOR IN OUR MIDST

Stigian was quickly collected and taken directly to the infirmary. While he might have been faking his fainting spell, all believed he was indeed suffering from a great deal of stress. To ensure his health and well being was of the utmost priority. Besides, answers were needed, and only Stigian could give them. Air Marshal Collinsworth and General Gerring were both looking to see if they could get to the bottom of this situation, and so the two of them, along with Colonel Pitts, Colonel Tyrell, Captain Mallard, Reverend Rosewood and all the cadets and students, went into the observation area that overlooked a treatment ward at the campus medical facility.

"I hope he's alright," Senia muttered quietly as she watched the doctors examining him. She felt a few look in her direction at her comment and she became a bit more defensive. "I'm aware

he had planned to ensure I'd never become a pilot, but that doesn't mean I can't show some compassion toward him."

"Senia's right," Jada remarked. "Besides, you can hate him for what he's done, but not for who he is."

"Such are things as the hallmarks of leadership, Captain Felix," General Gerring announced as she stood behind the seated cadets. The cadets, save for Senia looked back to Gerring for a moment, catching the smiles from the other officers as if they were offering quiet congratulations. Even Claudia, Robert and Gilbert were smiling, having seen and heard exactly what General Gerring was eluding to. They then each turned their attention to Senia.

"I... got a promotion," Senia said sheepishly as she buried her nose into a data pad.

Hardy caught a few of the words, and a couple of names, including her own. "Why does that pad have me name on it?"

"I'll tell you after you get your promotion," Senia replied with a soft smile, tucking the data pad into her jacket. She glanced toward Hardy and merely smiled. Hardy's only reply was to give a slight huff. Senia had a secret, and Hardy wouldn't be finding out until she absolutely had to.

General Gerring crossed her arms as she

watched the doctors. Something seemed to be very wrong. Colonel Pitts looked to her for a moment, knowing full well that the medical staff had come against a road block in waking Colonel Stigian. When he looked to Gerring, out of the corner of his eye he saw something else.

They weren't the only ones in this observation deck. Several chairs to the right stood an individual wearing what looked like the official suit of a medical physician on an official visit. His appearance was unmistakable, and not just because Gerring and Pitts had served with him during the Great War.

He was different, for he wasn't Vulpine nor Felanus, but he was a member of the third species that occupied Vulpinia Prime. He, and the four medical students that were with him, were all members of a species that mostly kept themselves secluded from the rest of the planet.

Altogether, the five made up the only Procydon that were currently in Chattingham.

I believe it may be best to interrupt at this juncture to explain what, or who, exactly a Procydon is. The Procydon have existed on Vulpinia Prime since the Vulpine and the Felanus. All three species evolved at the same time. The Procydon, however, were very much happy living in their own section of the planet, which occupied a

large portion of the eastern most continent. They were recognizable by their short legs, round bodies, long snouts and what some described as rather beady looking eyes. Like the Vulpine and Felanus, the Procydon also had fur covering their entire bodies, and it was topped off with a rather magnificent tail, and in some way rivaled the thickness of Vulpine tails. It was big, thick, long and had intermittent black and white stripes that seemed to circle around the tail perfectly. Their faces were small, even for having such a long snout, though framed neatly by a pointed and sweeping tuft of fur that went out from the sides of their heads. Combined with their pointed ears, they rather much looked like a star.

I could go into long details about the way they look, but suffice it to say, they had the appearance of a rather sophisticated and well dressed raccoon. This fact alone may be one of the reasons why the Procydon secluded themselves for so long from the rest of Vulpinian society.

You see, for the longest time they were segregated, believed by all that Procydon were nothing better than thieves. Because of this, their society flourished on its own, without any outside influences. They weren't even part of the Five Nations War. And it's only been recently that rough ball was introduced to the population of Procydonia. However, in the past two hundred

years, the false stigma had begun to subside, and a few Procyon elected to serve aboard ships in the Vulpine Fleet. Always, however, in pairs.

That's one thing about the Procyon that differs from Vulpine and Felanus society. When a Procyon decides to enter a field of study, it's almost certain so will the mate. From politicians, to diplomats, to law enforcement officials, to doctors, if a male or female decides to do something as a part of Procyon society, so will that individual's mate. When the nation holds elections, they aren't just electing one representative from a district, they are electing two. It is Procyon law that only mated pairs may enter political positions, that way and equal number of males and females can take part in every aspect of legislation.

From time to time, some Procyon decide not to find a mate, and strike off on their own. Those that do are either very young, or have sadly outlived their mate. The latter situation is often the hardest, because the surviving member by that time has grown accustomed to there always being someone with which to share everything.

In the case of what General Gerring and Colonel Pitts saw, they saw someone who would most likely be able to give the best assistance ever imagined. Former field medic during the Great Lupine Land War, current Dean of the College

of Medicine at Procytonia's finest institution of learning, Dr. Leonard Ringtail.

General Gerring looked to Colonel Pitts and nodded wordlessly. Pitts knew what she had in mind, and returned the nod, feeling that the assistance of Dr. Ringtail would be most welcome. She excused herself from the group that was watching the medical treatment of Colonel Stigian in the theatre, and together with Colonel Pitts approached the doctor. Dr. Ringtail gave a slight jump as he was quietly explaining some of the procedure that was seen to the others. Startled, he looked up, somewhat agitated and was about to explain how rudely he was interrupted, but instead stopped. After all, he recognized Natalie.

"Well I'll be," Ringtail said with a smile. "It has been a long time." He extended his hand to Gerring and then to Pitts, each shaking it in greeting. "A general now, Nattie. You've gone up in the world. As with you, Reginald." He turned to his four charges and offered introductions. "Everyone. This is General Natalie Gerring and Colonel Reginal Pitts. I served with them when I was a field medic during the Lupine Land War." The four nodded, seeming to recognize the names having been taught that nasty little bit of history during their education. "Nattie.

Reginald. This is Doctors Herman and Katlyn Ringtail." Leonard seemed to beam with pride. "My son and his mate." Both Gerring and Pitts made their introductions to the pair and allowed Dr. Ringtail to continue. "And this is Michael and Sarah Littlepaw, both accomplished nurses. All four just graduated from the Procyon College of Medicine and are trying to choose their field of interest."

"We've been keeping our options open," Herman spoke up, his voice with a similar tone and pattern to his father's. "But we've discussed possibly serving about one of the ships in the fleet."

"Yes indeed," Leonard stated with a firm nod. "One of the reasons why we're here in Chattingham. There is a great number of contacts which we can discuss matters with that are here. Though it's fortunate you are here, Nattie." Leonard smiled and offered another firm nod.

"I'm sure we can offer any assistance to see what options we can give the four of you," Gerring replied as she looked to each of the four recent graduates. "However, it is your own expertise that I'm hoping we might be able to have on this day." She turned to the theatre as the doctors continued to look over Stigian. "Some may believe that Stigian faked a fainting spell, but I've seen the look in his eyes before. It's all

too familiar," she explained as she looked back to Dr. Ringtail.

"Are you assuming that there is some sort of Jackai mind control device involved?" he asked. Gerring nodded, knowing that Ringtail had a great deal of expertise in this area. "Incidious devices, as I recall. Surgically implanted into the base of the brain stem, they send subliminal suggestions through a series of controlled shocks and seem to rewrite the brains neural patterns to make these suggestions more appealing to the victim. As I recall, the Hyna tribes used it to attempt to overthrow the Jayna tribe's central government. And, were nearly successful in doing that to the Lupinian's tribal councils as well." He turned to his four charges. "I'll need your assistance, plus this will be an excellent chance for you to see some of the dangers that you will not find here on Vulpinia." The four nodded in reply without any hesitation.

Gerring approached a small comm panel near the glass and pressed a button. "Doctors." The medical staff that was examing Colonel Stigian looked up, and one of the doctors moved to a communication panel. "If you don't mind, I have someone here who may be able to assist you. Dr. Leonard Ringtail has seen the condition Colonel Stigian is in before."

"We'd appreciate it," the doctor replied.

"Especially from someone like Dr. Ringtail. We've found something, but have no idea where to start with the removal of a small device located in his neck along the vertabrae."

Gerring looked to Leonard with a smile. "Your reputation preceeds you, Doctor."

Leonard smiled and gave a small chuckle, then reached over to the comm panel. "My hands aren't as steady as they once were, doctors. But I can guide you through the process if you can handle the physical work." The doctor in the theatre nodded enthusiastically. "And I'll be bringing four observers with me, who may also be called upon by yourselves to assist should it be warranted." Again, an enthusastic nod. With that, he turned to his charges. "Very well, we have work to do. Let's go and get ourselves cleaned up. We'll need to make sure we're prepared before entering the examination room." Leonard turned to Gerring and Pitts, offered each a smile and a nod, then ushered the four toward the exit of the observation deck.

Gerring and Pitts returned to their seats with the others, and as she was sitting down, Gerring made a comment directed to Captain Felix. "Four recent graduates of the Procydon College of Medicine. The Procydon are known for their expertise in medicine. It would be wise to consider them for the Nighthawk's medical

staff."

Senia turned to look at Gerring, offering a nod in reply, then back to the windows that looked down into the examination room. The other cadets looked over to Senia once again, and she caught Hardy mouthing the word Nighthawk with a quizzical look in her eye. She only sighed, knowing she couldn't speak on the matter at present, and so she wordlessly motioned for the others to turn their attention to matters in the examination room.

Doctor Ringtail and his four charges entered the theatre quickly, making certain not to touch anything in the room until they had approached the main operating table. He looked over Stigian carefully, taking note of his even breathing, then looked to the screen displays that showed x-ray images of the device attached to Stigian's spine. He hummed carefully, thinking about the new evidence upon closer inspection, and finally turned to one of the other doctors.

"This shouldn't be as difficult as I first thought," Leonard said to the other doctors as he pointed out the device on the screen. "Whoever did this, wasn't very good at it. As you can see here..." Leonard said as he pointed to the device, especially where it attached to Stigian's spine. "Normally, this is to have direct contact

with the victim's cerebellum. But in this case, they only attached it to the spinal column. It was probably done several months ago, if not a year. These devices, insidious things, attempt to rewrite neural patterns and make the victim more complacent to suggestion."

"So we should be able to remove," one of the Vulpine nurses stated.

"Indeed, miss," Leonard replied with a firm nod. "We'll still have to be careful, because the wrong move and we could paralyze the Colonel for life. At least, the worst case scenario is no longer death for the patient. Now, Drs Ringtail, if you could assist..." he said motioning toward one of the other doctors.

"Dr. Simms," a red furred Vulpine replied with a nod. "Dr. Byron Simms."

"Yes, if you two could assist Dr. Simms," Leonard added after the introduction. "Dr. Simms, should you need anything, just call upon these two fine young doctors and they'll assist you." Simms nodded with a smile and gathered two of Dr. Ringtail's charges to his own workstation. "Now, if nurses Littlepaw, if you could assist..." Again, he motioned to a Vulpine nurse for introductions.

"Nurse Hiller," the beige furred Vulpine replied and turned to the mated pair Littlepaws.

"Excellent," Leonard said before turning to the

last doctor in the room. “I apologize we didn’t do introductions before, young miss. You are...”

“Dr. Hilda Crimms,” the black furred Vulpine replied. “Your reputation is quite well known among our medical staff. I’ll be happy to assist you, Doctor.”

“Excellent,” Leonard said with a broad smile. “As I said before, you’ll have to be my hands for this. I’m not as steady as I used to be.” Having gathered everyone together and prepared the operation, he then turned to a communication console and nudged a button with his elbow. “General Gerring, this will take a while. I suggest once the operation is done that you don’t try to talk to the Colonel for at least twelve hours so he has a chance to rest. I’ll update you once we have completed this procedure.”

“Of course, Doctor,” Gerring’s voice came over the comm. “We’ll await your results after you’ve completed the operation.”

Leonard gave a firm nod toward the observation deck, then turned to the others in the room. “All right, everyone. Let us begin.”

General Gerring and Colonel Pitts opted to stay in the observation deck as the procedure went forward, but suggested the students and cadets could leave, the General noting to Senia that she had a great deal of work

ahead of her. This only piqued the interest of the other cadets, each of whom could barely contain their questions until they walked out of the medical facility.

“Now,” Aria said as she took a deep breath and stretched. “Now that we aren’t sitting in cramped theatre chairs, perhaps we can resolve this mystery as to why General Gerring has been dropping hints like pound cakes to someone with a sweet tooth. Perhaps you can explain, Captain.” The last she did not say with spite, but the title was emphasized to show all of their interest for this sudden promotion.

Senia looked to each cadet, even Jada. The only ones not staring at her with suspicion were Claudia, Robert and Gilbert. Finally she sighed and resigned herself to answering their questions, albeit in a rather secretive manner. “All of the events that we’ve been witness to has lead up to a suspicion that the General has had for a while. That we are being infiltrated by some outside source. She has taken it upon herself to enact Article 16 of the Royal Vulpine Armed Forces.”

“When dire measures are warranted, the commanding officer can promote as seen fit in order to protect the Vulpine Star System,” Mia said, recalling the article from her own studies.

“Exactly,” Senia replied with a nod. “Therefore, as I am one of those closest to this,

General Gerring has given me promotion and commission of a ship.” She looked to the cadets, all of whom were staring in stunned silence. “A ship that will need a chief engineer,” Senia added as she handed a data pad to Hardy.

Hardy froze for a moment, looked to the data pad, then to Senia, finally took the data pad and read it over. She gasped quietly as she read over the information. “Nighthawk class escort vessel. Fastest ship in the fleet, heavily armed an’ armoured...” She stopped reading and looked to Senia. “Chief Engineer?”

Senia nodded in reply. “You’re the best engineer I’ve ever seen. And I’ll need you to gather a team to work with you. Put together a list of names and present them to me at 0900 tomorrow morning.” She then turned to Clarfax, and handed him a data pad. “The Nighthawk is going to need someone familiar with astrophysics and communications.”

Clarfax had the same look in his eyes that Hardy had first given, but eventually took the data pad and began reading it over. “Senia, this is... this is...” Clarfax stumbled a bit over his words as he couldn’t take his eyes off the data pad.

“I think that’s Clarfax speak for ‘I’m impressed an’ grateful’,” Hardy said with a chuckle as she nudged Clarfax.

Senia smiled and motioned Clarfax, hoping to bring him back to the conversation. “I’ll need you to put forward the best names for a science crew.” She then turned to Mia and handed her a data pad.

Mia took it, but didn’t look at it right away. “It’s either security or helm,” she said without hesitation. “I know my strengths, and I know how you think, Left-tenant.” Mia paused a moment, then added sheepishly. “I mean Captain.”

“Helms officer, actually,” Senia replied with a soft smile. “I need someone who can pilot a ship with precision, but also knows when to punch through in order to get the job done.” She paused and looked to the three for a moment and tapped a few buttons on her own data pad. “You are now officially promoted to Left-tenants. Now, you’ve got some work ahead of you, Mia, I want you to study the ship’s schematics and familiarize yourself with her. You’re going to be at the helm, but I also want suggestions who else would make good helms officers.” Mia nodded firmly, then turned to Hardy and Clarfax. There was a pause, each one smiling, partially in shock, but partially excited. Finally, the three went off to complete their assignments.

“That’s going to be a lot of work,” Aria said as she looked to Senia. Even Jada nodded in agreement. “Going through all of those names

and putting together a crew.”

“Well, that’s why I’m glad the Nighthawk only has a crew compliment of fifty,” Senia said with a small smile, then looked directly to Aria. “Besides, I’ll have a first officer who will assist me.”

“I don’t know who you have in mind,” Aria replied with a shrug, then realized the look Senia was giving her. She stammered slightly before she finally could speak properly. “Me? You bloody well picked me? I’ve no experience in command situations.”

“You have, Commander,” Senia said, calling Aria by her newly given title. “I’ve seen your scores and I’ve witnessed how you work with command structure. Plus, I’m adding in your background being a part of the Ocata Royal Family, you have diplomatic skills which will be necessary. I need someone who can have a different opinion than I might come up with, someone who I can rely on and trust.”

“But you know Hardy and Clarfax so much better,” Aria replied.

“I also know their skill sets,” Senia said. “Hardy will be invaluable in the engineering room, Clarfax will be perfect for detecting any anomalous readings. I need you at my side, Aria.” Senia gave Aria an encouraging look. Finally, Aria sighed and nodded, whispering ‘alright’.

With that, Senia entered it into the record. Captain Senia Felix offers field promotion to Commander Aria Sharspear.

Senia spent a good portion of the late afternoon and much of the evening in the House Ocelot lounge in a quiet corner reviewing those students who's records were exemplary and would make excellent crew members. The Nighthawk had a small contingent of fighter craft, so a team would be needed from communications to pilots to a commanding officer. She settled on Corporal Martin "Sparky" Sparks to head the crew, with Corporal Fredrica Greta as Sparky's second in command. Miri Ridgewell would be excellent as chief of security, a job that would have gone to Mia Talon, had Mia's abilities as a pilot were not priority.

As for pilots, Senia chose two from her own house that she knew would make the cut; Mills and Pinkerton. She'd have to send for each of them to attend the meeting in the morning along with Sparky and Ridgewell. She felt confident that Hardy and Clarfax could come up with a list of potential candidates to fill up their rosters for both science and engineering stations. She'd definitely have to go over the lists with Aria.

She sighed heavily, as this was all just a little

overwhelming and moving much faster than she'd hoped. Most of the potential positions had been filled but there was still a great deal more that needed to be done. A full medical team for example. General Gerring had suggested Senia look at the four young doctors that had come with Dr. Leonard Ringtail. She wasn't sure, however, because they weren't military. But that wasn't important when it came to the safety and health of the crew.

The other position was the ship's cook. It would be a grave mistake to leave port and not have a cook. She chuckled to herself as she thought of each of them taking turns coming up with a menu for the course of the journey.

Senia's attentions were interrupted as a group of people entered the lounge. She rose to her feet when she saw General Gerring and Colonel Pitts, talking in quiet tones with Dr. Ringtail and the other four medical graduates. Respectfully and quietly, she approached the group, standing at ease and not saying a word until she was addressed.

"I believe that Stigian should wake up at 1000 hours tomorrow," Ringtail said with confidence. "He's doing much better since we removed that device from his spinal column."

"Good news, Leonard," Gerring said with a smile. She turned and stopped as she saw Senia.

“Captain Felix. I trust you’ve had an eventful afternoon.”

“And evening, ma’am,” Senia replied. “I have a meeting tomorrow morning with the senior staff of the Nighthawk. Chief engineer, science officer, and first officer have been informed. Commander Aria Shardspear has been entered into the record as accepting her position as my number one.” Gerring and Pitts both nodded in reply, impressed with how efficient Senia had been. They both took note of the data pad she held. It was obvious she’d been reviewing candidates for the different positions. “There are two areas which I have not been able to fill as of yet. One of those is the ship’s cook. Naturally it would be foolish to leave dock without a nutritional expert on board. The other happens to be medical staff.” At this she turned to Dr. Ringtail and addressed him directly. “I was wondering if I might talk to your charges about the positions which we have vacant on the Nighthawk.”

Leonard Ringtail looked directly at Senia, impressed that she addressed him first, as that was customary practice with Procyon affairs. If an older representative was present, he or she would act as the primary arbiter in any negotiation, even if he or she was not the beneficiary of any rewards or position. He knew exactly what Senia might be asking. “I assume, Captain, that you

have an offer for these four as permanent medical staff aboard a vessel.”

“Yes, Doctor,” Senia replied with a nod. “The Nighthawk is a deep space escort vessel. I expect she’ll enter some combat situations, and I understand that none of your associates are military but I’m more concerned with having medical professionals on board. Matters of protocol can be taught, and as such the only place that they’ll have full access to will be their own quarters and the medical bay. That will be their domain.”

Leonard thought on this for a moment, then looked over to Gerring and smiled. “Always looking out for talent, aren’t you,” he said with a chuckle as Gerring only shrugged lightly. He turned to his four charges. “Ultimately, this decision will be up to you four. The downside is, you’ll be on a military ship, you may enter combat. But, the opportunities outweigh everything else. You may be privy to some new and different ideas about medicine.”

The four gathered together in a small huddle for a moment, discussing the proposition quietly amongst themselves for a moment. Finally, after some minutes, the Doctors Ringtail approached Senia. “We’ve given it a bit of a talk,” Herman Ringtail said with a nod as he stood not far from Senia.

“Our original plan had been to continue studies and then take residence in one of the major hospitals in Procytonia,” Katlyn added.

“However,” Herman spoke up with a confident voice. “This is an opportunity that we can’t pass up. The experience we’d acquire would be valuable, plus we can’t leave a crew without a good medical team.” He looked to his companions, each of whom gave a firm nod, then turned back to Senia. “We accept your offer.”

Senia smiled and seemed to let out a breath she’d been holding. “Good. I’ll see to it that a full list of materials is made available for you, and preparations made for crew quarters.” She sighed again and looked to her data pad. “Now I just need a cook for the ship’s galley.”

“You know, Captain,” Leonard said as he stepped forward. “I may be able to help you there as well. Let me make a call and get back to you on that.” Senia nodded, smiling as she showed her appreciation to Doctor Ringtail.

“Now that we’ve settled that,” Gerring said. “It may be best to get a good night’s sleep. We’ve got a lot to do in the morning.”

