

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE PLOT REVEALED

Morning came very quickly. Too quickly, in fact, for Senia's liking. At 0600 hours both she and her bunk mate Mia awoke to a sharp rapping on their door. They opened it to discover a package for both of them was delivered, which contained their new uniforms. Senia believed this messenger, or maybe one or two like him, had been to a few other dorm rooms across the campus, and in all houses. Nevertheless, both Senia and Mia made their usual morning routine of washing up and dressing. The new uniforms fit nicely; each was a standard

black top with black leggings. For both Senia and Mia, they had red piping down the legs, and each had a crest with the official RAAF logo. The top was a side button up tunic that could hang at the top should the wearer decide upon a more casual feel. Each tunic had shoulder clasps, which matched the piping down the leg.

After dressing the pair went down to breakfast right away. To their surprise, the other members of the senior staff and others mentioned in Senia's communication with General Gerring were present. Mills and Pinkerton, Greta and Sparky, Hardy and Clarfax, Aria and Mirri. Even the doctors and nurses had been presented uniforms of their own, albeit a more civilian variety. Senia looked over each of them carefully; Hardy, Mirri, Sparky and Clarfax each had data pads they were reading over. Sparky was going over his with Greta, and both seemed to be mulling over some great decision.

As Senia and Mia approached, Mirri rose to her feet quickly. "Captain on the deck," she called out as she presented herself in standard military stance. The others who were gathered all rose, with the exception of the medical staff, who were not as accustomed to military protocol as yet. "Well... in the mess hall, rather," Mirri added somewhat sheepishly.

"I appreciate your vigor, Left-tenant," Senia said with a smile as both she and Mia took their seats at the table with the others. As everyone was sitting down again, Herman Ringtail spoke up.

"I'm not certain if we were to stand," he said as his four companions nodded in agreement. "We aren't used to such things, I'm afraid."

"It's quite alright, doctor," Senia assured him. "These things will take time, though I'm more than certain Left-tenant Ridgewell could give you a manual for reading so you're prepared in the future."

For the next half an hour, the group eat quietly, with only minor discussions among them. Sparky and Greta kept going over pilot rosters, passing data pads back and forth as they'd look over different candidates carefully. Mirri was reading diligently from her own data pad, which proved to be the entire articles of protocol for security aboard any deep space vessel. Hardy seemed to be studying the ship's engine schematics. Clarfax was going over science rosters. The only ones who seemed much more casual were the four Procyon medical staff, chit chatting mildly with each other, and every so often striking up a small conversation with anyone else close by.

As the group finished their breakfast, Senia rose to her feet to get everyone's attention.

"I know it's early," she began, making sure to use words that would hide her speech impediment. "However, all of the staff that will be needed to make the final crew decisions is here, so we may as well begin." She looked to Mirri first. "Security teams. How are they coming along?"

"I have a list of potentials," Mirri replied quickly as she motioned to a small pile of data pads neatly piled in front of her. It was obvious some were more for security protocols and some of the more legal requirements aboard a vessel. "I managed to narrow it down to fifteen candidates. I know some will have already accepted positions through their evaluations, but they are mostly wishful thinking."

"Good," Senia replied with a nod. "Once you have those settled, send the completed list to Aria and myself so we can see your choices. Hardy. The engineering team."

"Done," Hardy replied with a smile. "I sent a wave to you this morning with a completed list of potentials. Once it's approved, I can contact those listed and give them their orders. I know for a fact each would jump at the chance to be on a ship like this. Which they most likely will when I show 'em the

schematics." The group chuckled softly at Hardy's enthusiasm.

"I've taken a look at the list," Aria said as she looked to Senia. "A good group, and I've given her the go ahead to contact them."

Senia nodded, then looked to Clarfax. "Knowing Hardy's enthusiasm, it most likely rubbed off on you as well. How does your search go."

"I already sent my list to Aria," Clarfax said with a grin. "A team of six, which will make for a good rotation."

Senia smiled and nodded in reply, then looked to Sparky and Greta. "And you two, how are the pilots coming along?"

"Difficult," Greta replied as she set down her data pad. "Most of the really good ones have already accepted positions, though there are a few who have managed to wait it out. I've already got a meeting lined up with a few of them. I can schedule them to meet together and you can go over each one with me and Sparky if you'd like."

"Set up a meeting at 1500 hours," Senia replied with a nod. "It will most likely look more urgent if we had a few others there." She looked between Aria and Mirri. "I'd like you two there as well." Each nodded quickly, confirming they'd make certain to be present.

"Naturally," Sparky piped up. "We had to cross off the top five names off our list right away." Everyone, save for Greta gave Sparky a quizzical look. "Difficult when you're top choices happen to be the captain, chief engineer, chief science officer and commanding officer. And of course, Jadda."

"Yes," Senia said with a nod. The tribunal was still fresh in her mind, even though she tried not to show it. "That'll be a sword that hangs over our heads for a while. As for the others," she said as she took a deep breath. "Well, can't have everything, now can we. Though, I'm sure we'd all like some practice from time to time." This brought out a few chuckles, which helped lighten the mood. Senia then looked to the medical staff. "I trust you have made an inventory list for the medical bay?"

"Completed it before breakfast," Herman said with a firm nod. "Katlyn and I sent a wave to you and Aria just before breakfast. Once it's approved, we can send requisition forms off to the general." Herman paused a moment and looked to the others briefly, then looked back to Senia. "We searched out Left-tenant Commander Ridgewell last night. She helped us a great deal with making sure we cleared all the channels properly."

Senia smiled and gave a nod of approval to Mirri.

"Excellent work."

"If I may," Katlyn said as she rose to her feet. "Dr. Ringtail... that is, my father-in-law, wished to convey that he contacted a proper cook and he'll join us in a day. I believe he'll arrive during your graduation ceremonies. Mr. Angus Copperbottom is his name. He's an older fellow, but he has experience aboard deep space vessels."

"I believe I know that name," Senia said with a smile. "He served aboard the Tritan years ago, didn't he." Katlyn replied with a nod. "Excellent work, Dr. Ringtail. Thank you very much, and please convey my thanks to your father. He'd been extremely helpful. That is, should I not meet him first."

"You might, Captain," Herman spoke up. "He'll be tending to Colonel Stigian's care when you and the General go to speak with him."

"Which reminds me," Senia remarked with a sigh. "It's getting to that time. Commander Sharpspear, Left-tenant Commander Ridgewell. I'll want you two present when we meet with the General as we see to Stigian." She looked to Sparky and Greta as she continued. "If you two could contact those on your prospective list and have them meet us as we discussed." Sparky and Greta nodded firmly in reply. "Hardy, I

assume you will have an inventory list of supplies we'll need."

"Already put that in," she replied with a grin.

"Excellent," Senia said with a nod. "That leaves one last thing we need. A barber. The last thing we need is the lot of us shedding on board the vessel without a good trimming."

"I actually took care of that," Aria spoke up. "The barbering school in Chattingham recently had their own graduation, and I contacted a couple of barbers. Twins, Chester and Clarissa Manning. They seemed eager for the chance, especially on a deep space mission." Senia nodded to Aria, smiling her approval with the efficiency that each member of her senior staff had gathered their information together.

"Excellent work all around," she said as she looked to each person at the table. "Well, we all have our duties to perform. Let's get a move on. Aria, Mirri. You two are with me. The rest of you. Dismissed."

After breakfast and the meeting of the new senior staff of the Nighthawk, Senia, Aria and Mirri went to join General Gerring, Colonel Pitts, Air Marshall Collinsworth and Dr. Ringtail in the medical ward. It was quiet, as most activity was in the main faculty and in the different campus barracks and

houses in preparation for the final graduation ceremonies. Senia thought of that for a moment, how she, along with her friends, had spent the last six years preparing themselves to become fighter pilots. How things suddenly change.

Fillias Stigian was resting comfortably in the post op ward. He appeared fine, if not a bit drained. Still, there appeared to be a mix of relief and a great deal of regret on his face as Senia entered the ward. Gerring, Pitts and Collinsworth were standing on one side of his bed, while Dr. Ringtail was administering to Stigian's needs. Ringtail gave a clipboard with all the information regarding Stigian's condition to a nurse, who then went to carry out her own duties. Senia, Aria and Mirri stood at the end of Stigian's bed, offering a salute to their commanding officers. Gerring looked over to the trio and smiled.

"Those uniforms look sharp on you three," she said as she gave each a nod. "I received your crew recommendations this morning. You've put together a good group, Captain Felix." Gerring looked to Aria and smiled. "And you, Commander Sharpspear. I'm sure your parents would be very proud of this accomplishment."

"Considering the circumstances, ma'am," Aria replied as

she nodded. "I hope they're proud that I'll be representing Vulpinia in such a capacity."

"You know, Commander," Mirri said in a quiet voice to Aria, but not quiet enough for the others not to hear. "I think it's rather ironic that the only one who doesn't know about your family lineage happens to be your bunk mate."

Aria chuckled lightly, catching sight of the smiles for the others. "I think Hardy's forgotten about that, now that she's seen the engine specs of the Nighthawk."

"I think she fell in love," Senia added. "Clarfax better watch himself." There was a shared laugh with that comment, ending only when a pained groan came from Stigian.

"Ah, Fillias," Dr. Ringtail said as he focused his attention on the Colonel. "Awake at last. How are you feeling?"

"Like I've been in a fight with a Kanatian snow bear," he said as he let his eyes focus for a moment. He looked around the room, taking note of each person there, then focused his own attention on Leonard. "Leonard! I haven't seen you..."

"Since the war, I imagine," Dr. Ringtail said with a chuckle. "Unfortunate that we had to have a reunion like this, but, thankfully you're going to make a full recovery."

Stigian let out a breath of relief, then looked to the three at the end of his bed. "Article 16," he whispered. He knew what had happened, seeing the three in their command uniforms. "It's that bad, isn't it."

"I'm hoping you can tell us that, Colonel," Gerring said softly. "I assure you, now that we know you were being manipulated, we can ensure that you won't be blamed for any responsibility."

"If only that were true, General," Stigian said with a sigh. "About a year ago, I received a communication. Unknown source, but they said... it said, that I could have my revenge for such a disgrace during the land war. Part of me must have believed that, because I went to meet the one who wrote the message. I never saw them directly, but I always remember those eyes." He took another deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment. "Those yellow eyes with that black slit in the middle. That hiss in the voice. Saying all I had to do was remain calm and they'd make sure I would never have to worry about anything again. I felt like I was floating. And then... the past year has been a blur." He opened his eyes and looked directly to Senia. "I regret all of it, but I regret the injustice I did to Jadda. The plan was to embarrass members of the core

cadets with the best futures. Something always held me back." He stopped, acting though he just remembered something. "Sergeant Willham. You need to find him. They did the same thing to him. That was part of the plan, you see. To undermine the cadets, make the forces weak. The process would have taken years." Collinsworth moved to a console, calling for security to find Willham immediately and detain him.

Where did you go, Colonel?" Gerring said quietly, encouraging him to continue just a bit more. "Where did you meet this individual?"

"Just... outside of the city of Rondu," he said, though with a small degree of difficulty. "On Pau Theta II."

"General, I'm going to have to insist that Fillias get some rest," Dr. Ringtail interrupted. He moved to tuck in Stigian's bedding around the Colonel, but felt a hand on his own arm.

"Leonard, I know you mean well," Stigian said in a raspy whisper, followed by a cough. "But they have to know."

"There'll be time enough for that later, Colonel," Gerring said as she nodded to Ringtail. "Captain Felix and her crew still has two days before rendezvous with the Nighthawk at Starbase Omega One."

Stigian nodded and finally seemed to calm himself. He

looked toward Senia and took another deep breath. "I feel so ashamed for what I did to Jadda." Senia nodded her reply, then moved to follow Gerring and Pitts as they left the room. In a small waiting area, Gerring spoke in soft tones.

"The Colonel is going to need more rest, which means we won't be able to gather enough information as we need before you go," she said to the three. "At least we have a place to begin. How familiar are you three with Pau Theta II?"

"I know that it was a colony, the first colony, when Vulpinians began exploring space," Senia offered.

"They separated contact with Vulpinia Prime several centuries ago," Mirri added. "Communication has been rare, we've never had a precise idea of what has been going on with the population."

"It's also home of the Main Authority," Aria stated. "The policing unit of the RVAF. And is the home of the maximum security prison." Gerring nodded to each in kind, then turned to Colonel Pitts.

"During the Lupine Land War," Pitts said as he read off a data pad. "The government of Rondu completely severed ties, official and unofficial, with Vulpinia Prime. Their last message was, I quote 'we're going to go it on our own'. What we do

know of Rondu is that their society is greatly different than ours here. When we dismantled our banking system and decided to move toward a wealth of knowledge and exploration, Pau Theta II did not. It is believed that many of those in power are direct decedents of those who supported the status quo during the Gender War of 1200 years ago, and that they wanted to model their society on that example. Because they still have an archaic monetary system, they have a great divide in wage equality, as the city sits on a river, the north side being home to the affluent and influential, while the south side is poverty and disease stricken. As to the bases of power in the city, that we cannot be certain of, as they have built a defense perimetre around the planet which restricts any and all communication. Even the Main Authority must adhere to a communication liason before sending or receiving messages." He placed his data pad under his arm and seemed to mutter the last as he showed his frustration with the communication system. "It is most annoying."

"So it seems I have no choice but to send you into hostile territory your first time out, Captain," Gerring said as she straightened herself. "I hope you feel up to the task."

"Even with everything we've seen so far, ma'am," Senia

said with a firm voice, not even paying attention to her speech impediment. "I knew we'd be in for a fight. I just hope we can use some diplomacy to get us what we need." Senia looked to Aria and Mirri for a moment, each of them nodding in agreement with Senia's statement. She looked back to General Gerring. "If you'll excuse us, ma'am, we still have a core of fighter pilots to prepare. And we have a lot of information to go over. In two days time we'll be ready to launch."

The day was busy, and it wasn't getting any less so. Senia, Aria and Mirri had to make their rounds, gather the last remaining members of the crew. Clarfax had already brought together his own science team. Hardy her own engineering team. The Doctors Ringtail along with their nurses, the Littlepaws, had put in a full list of inventory they'd need before launch. Mirri had already gathered her own security crew, and Mia had brought in other experienced pilots who she felt could pilot an escort vessel like the Nighthawk. As a precaution, Mia was with her group taking them through the steps with holo tests, making sure they'd be ready. Some of them were also members of different departments; one that Mirri felt would make a good security officer, another whom Clarfax could see

some scientific talent, and two more who had engineering experience.

Now, they just had fighter pilots to concern themselves with. Fortunately, Greta and Sparky had come through.

As Senia, Aria and Mirri entered the small meeting room set aside for this introduction, Greta called out 'captain on deck' and all present rose to their feet. The only exception were two Felanus and one older looking Procydon. Senia recognized them as civilians, but wondered what they were doing there. Little matter, it would be something she'd have to deal with after speaking with the pilots.

Of the pilots, some she recognized, and some she didn't. Each was still wearing the different uniforms of their respective Houses. Three from House Lynx, three from House Kestrel, and six from House Swift. A good mix of Vulpine and Felanus pilots. One such pilot Senia did recognize. A Mayalasian named Chloe Grivana, she created quite a stir when she first arrived at the academy. While Mayalsians have their own science academies, they don't have their own military or air force academies. Chloe wished to join the air force, and when she arrived in Chattingham with her parents, it caused a bit of a worry. The faculty had to remind everyone that Mayalasians

were quiet different. While they were indeed Felanus, they were the only race on all of Vulpinia Prime that had no fur. Instead, they had skin colourations. The reason why this caused a stir, a lack of fur is one of the signs of the mange; a terrible disease in Vulpinian history.

While that information has some interest, it does not in fact pertain to the current situation. After all, Senia didn't think about it as she stood in front of the pilots, the only thing she thought of was all twelve of these individuals and their ability.

"According to Left-tenant Commander Greta and Left-tenant Sparks, you twelve have some of the best piloting test scores," Senia said as she addressed them all. "Please, have a seat," she added as she motioned to the chairs. All twelve took their seats, keeping their attention focused on Senia. "I'm sure you're curious as to why you've been called forward."

"With all due respect, Captain," Chloe Grivana said as she raised her hand; Chloe spoke slowly, so it sounded like her speech pattern was rather lazy, but Senia had heard she could be vocal when she needed to be. Senia also heard Chloe was a very take charge kind of pilot. "Commander Greta informed us that Article 16 had been implemented. We're mostly familiar with the article in question. Left-tenant Sparks filled us in on

the rest."

"I hope this isn't something that puts you off," Senia said as she looked over a data pad. "I know many have their sights set on different fighter squadrons."

"I think we can manage, ma'am," Chloe said quickly. "We're fighter pilots, and I know I can only speak for my mates in House Swift, I believe it's safe to say we'll be doing what we wanted to do. Fly fighter craft."

"Besides, Captain," a grey coated Vulpine male added quickly. "It would be safe to say that our commanding officers all had their own dreams changed on them."

Senia offered a small smile as she looked over these twelve pilots. Each had agreed with everything both Chloe and the Vulpine had said. This was a good thing indeed. "I know that here in Chattingham we have our loyalties to our Houses. But as of today, that changes. From this point onward, your loyalty is with the Nighthawk and the safety of the Vulpine System. Greta and Sparks will both give you all a full briefing on the fighter craft you'll be flying. I'm sure you'll find it amusing that these new craft have been dubbed the mini hawks or hawklings. I trust you lot might come up with a better name for them." There was a small chuckle that went through the

room. "You're also going to need a squadron leader, and again, both Greta and Sparks have given me their suggestions." Senia stepped forward, handing Chloe a data pad. "Congratulations, Left-tenant. You will be working with Greta and Sparks to form this team."

Chloe looked to the data pad for a moment, hesitating somewhat, but eventually taking it carefully in her hands. "I didn't think you'd pick me as squadron leader. I've often been called..."

"Arrogant, egotistical, a tad flippant, and somewhat confrontational," Senia replied with a nod. "I'm familiar with the full report, I had the chance to summarize each during lunch and on my way here. Besides, isn't that the earmark of an exceptional pilot." Chloe smirked and nodded to Senia in reply. "For now, I believe Greta and Sparks have you all scheduled for some holo time to prepare yourselves for the craft you'll be flying. I won't keep you any longer. Dismissed."

Greta and Sparky looked to Senia and smiled. Senia replied with a firm nod, they looked like a good group. As they filtered out, Senia finally turned her attention to the other three in the room. "Now then," she said as she, Aria and Mirri stood facing them. "You three are..."

"We are Simon and Hector Longfur," one of the two Felanus said as he rose to his feet. His fur, along with that of his companion, was incredibly thick, and ranged from a dark brown around the face to a light beige everywhere else. "Aria... or rather, Miss Shardspear..."

"I think she's commander, Simon," the other Felanus interrupted Simon. It appeared as if the two were twins.

"Commander," Simon said as he nodded to Hector. "Yes, indeed. As I was saying. The commander informed us that there would be a pair of positions available on board the ship, which were focused on the grooming aspect of personnel."

"And you two are experts in that field, I take it," Senia said as she approached them, giving Aria a look over her shoulder. Aria was smiling, giving away that she knew this pair. "Are you recent graduates of the school in Chattingham."

"Yes indeed," Hector said with a firm nod. "We had thought of opening our own boutique, however, we realize that there is something to be said for tending to the grooming needs of the crew of a starship."

"I'm sure you'll work out fine," Senia said with a small nod as she motioned to Mirri. "Left-tenant Ridgewell can get you settled and make sure that everything is in order. Mirri, if

you would," Senia said as she looked back to her chief of security.

"Of course, Captain," she replied as she stepped forward to the pair. Both instantly looked right at Mirri's headscarf.

"I like that," Simon said with a nod.

"It's a lot like Mia's," Hector added.

"If you're speaking of Left-tenant Talon," Mirri said as she motioned toward the door, offering that the three could speak openly as they walked. "Then you'll be happy to know she'll also be a part of this ship."

"Oh! Excellent!" the pair of Felanus barbers said. They chattered away excitedly as Mirri lead them down the hallway. Senia looked to Aria, who still had a beaming smile. Senia's only reaction was a sigh and shake of her head, then she turned her attention to the older looking Procyon who slowly rose to his feet.

"I b'lieve that I be next ta talk ta, Cap'n," he said with a husky tone to his voice. "Me name is Angus Longear, former galley cook with the Tritan many years back. I been operatin' a small bistro since then, but me son an' his mate have taken it over. I thought o' retirin', but tha's borin', ta be quite honest." Angus took a step closer to Senia and Aria, sizing them both up.

"Lenny give me a call the other day, an' hopped a transport. Felt this might be a good opportunity ta get meself back into the swing o' things again." He leaned over to Senia and gave her a quick look. "I'm certain you'll wish ta check me credentials. By the by, yer a bit o' a wee one, aren't you."

"I'm... short, yes," Senia said with some hesitation. She also took note of Angus' look when she spoke. "And I'm fully aware I have a speech impediment. I assure you, it does not affect my ability to command."

"Self confidence," Angus said with a firm nod. "I like that. Well, I just wished ta say me greetings ta the captain, so if you'll excuse me, I should get me things together. I trust we'll be leavin' in a day 'r two." Senia nodded confirmation. "Good. I'll have an inventory which I'll need ta get t'gether. Can't launch without a good store o' food. It'll be a bad idea ta head out without a proper tea send off." Without another word he turned toward the door, walking slowly as he hummed an old folk tune, leaving Senia and Aria to give each other a look of amazement.

"This is moving very fast, isn't it," Aria said as she seemed to relax.

"A bit, yes," Senia replied. "But it also seems to be

rather interesting. We've surrounded ourselves with a lot of familiar faces and some very colourful characters, it would seem." Senia took a deep breath and thought of the things they had left to do. There wasn't much left, not with the Nighthawk, at least. There was still graduation, but that seemed less important now. Still, Senia had an idea. "Gather everyone, and have them report to the Flying Fox at 1900 hours this evening. Even medical staff, our two barbers and our new cook. I'll speak with Mrs. Crenshaw, see if she can set aside one of her dining rooms. I want the crew to meet everyone. It's important they get to know one another."