

# DreamPhase

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**DreamPhase**  
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She woke with a start. Sitting up, she looked around the moonlit room. The room was ten by ten foot. At one end of the room there was a very large window which gave a magnificent view of the city outside. At the other end of the room there was a steel door; next to the door was a small keypad. The walls were very plain, only having a slight variation in the color so as to make them not seem so harsh. She looked out the frost-covered window at the moon, trying to figure out what time it was. She guessed it must have been about 4:00 in the morning. Slowly she stretched her legs before quietly climbing out of her bed. She quickly got dressed and tip-toed toward the door. As she neared the door, she pulled a rubber band off of her wrist and put her strawberry blond hair back into a ponytail. Upon typing a code into the keypad, she heard a small beep. She let out a sigh of relief. She slowly opened the door. The door cracked open allowing a reddish light to fill the room. She stepped out the door and closed it behind her.

Stepping out into a dimly-lit hallway she started walking off to her left. From what she could remember of last night, this was the way she had been brought into the room. She continued walking down the hallway, passing doors similar to the one she had come from. When she reached the end of the hall, there were two doors, one for the stairs and one for the elevator. She opened the door to the stairs and slowly descended.

About ten minutes later, she reached the bottom floor. She peeked around the corner at the bottom of the steps. There was a guard standing next to the exit. She knew she wouldn't be able to get past the guard, so she looked around the room for something to use as a distraction. Brushing back a piece of hair that had fallen from her loose ponytail, she heard the elevator next to the stairs chime. The door opened and a janitor came out with a mop and bucket. The man pushed his bucket with the mop handle across the floor over the exit. The guard stopped him. "Hey, I was told there were two of you, where is your partner?"

"She is cleaning the last of the windows and should be down in a few minutes."  
The guard gave him a confused look, "I thought cleaning the windows was your job."

"It is, but today I had lot of stuff to do, so I had to start late. I wanted to get done on time, so I asked one of my fellow workers to give me a hand tonight."

"Okay, I'll see you next week."

"Yep, sure thing."

With that, the janitor left and she had an idea. Running back up the steps, she came out on the second floor. This floor was empty. She ran down the hallway as quietly as she could until she came to a supply closet. She opened the door and found a squeegee and some window spray. She kept digging and found a spare change of clothes the janitor kept there. She put them on, but they were too big for her thin body. She looked around some more and found a small cord that she was able to use to tie the pants up. The shirt was a little big, but she couldn't do anything about it. She grabbed the squeegee and window spray and made her way down the steps. When she reached the steps, she changed her mind and went to the elevator. There was no reason for her to use the steps with her disguise.

She heard the elevator chime as she reached the bottom and the doors opened slowly. She then remembered the patient ID bracelet on her wrist. She pulled it up her arm, hiding it under her sleeve, then exited the elevator. She walked over to the door and the guard stopped her.

"Aren't you a little young for a janitor?"

"I am seventeen and I am still training, that is why I am using this instead of the power-sprayer." She said, holding up the squeegee.

"Alright." He let her pass.

Once outside, she looked back through the glass doors. The elevator doors opened and a janitor stepped out. Looking away from the building she began to run. She couldn't let them catch her. About an hour later she was exhausted. She slowed her pace. As she breathed heavily, she could see her breath. It was cold; her fingers were starting to go numb and she had an immense hunger growing in her stomach. She had to find someplace to go.

She looked up at the sky. The sun was starting come up and colored the sky with a light shade of yellow, it must be later then she had thought. Her eyes fell back down to the street level and she noticed the *open* sign on a diner a few blocks ahead of her. She made her way to the door and looked in. There was only the waitress and the cook; other than that, the diner was deserted. She opened the door and walked in.

On the inside, the diner had an old fashioned style to it, even though the diner itself was located in the bottom of a newly-constructed sky scraper. The moment she stepped into the diner, she felt better. The restaurant was warm and it felt good on her cold cheeks and her fingers were becoming easier to bend. Walking up to the counter, she climbed on to one of the stools.

"Good morning, miss, what can I get for you?" the cook asked.

"Well, I don't have any money on me. Do you accept direct bank transfers?"

"Sure, we can do that." He reached under the counter and pulled out a sheet of paper. "Here is the account info."

"Thanks," she said taking the paper from him. "Is it all right if I transfer a little extra? I need some cash."

"Sure, what would you like to eat?"

"How about some scrambled eggs and sausage?"

"Sure, I'll have it ready by the time you're done with the transfer."

She got up from the stool and walked over to the phone at the end of the diner. Picking up the phone, she dialed the number to her bank.

Back over at the counter, the cook placed a plate of eggs on the table just as she sat back down. "Here are your eggs."

"Thank you. I transferred the money into your account."

"Enjoy your meal, I'll bring you your change when you are done," said the cook taking an order sheet from the waitress who was now busy with the other customers who had come in from the cold. She ate her meal; the eggs were made just how she liked them. About 15 minutes later, she finished her meal, got her change, then left the diner.

Upon stepping out into the street, she was blasted with a cold breeze. The wind blew right through the baggy janitor clothes. *I have to find some new clothes*, she thought to herself. She walked down the street looking for a place to buy clothes. The first place she saw was a thrift store; *they should have something* she thought as she opened the door and stepped in. Her nostrils were filled with the scent of dust and musty old things. She looked around; the clothes were located in the back of the store. As she walked to the back of the store she noticed a sign.

**All items that have blue on them are 20% off**

*I guess I am going to be wearing blue*, she thought as she looked through the different racks of clothes. She found a few shirts she liked, but knew they would be inappropriate for what she would be doing. She knew it would be easier to find a job if you were dressed nice and she was going to be trying to find one very soon. After looking through most of the clothes and trying on a few different items, she settled on a light blue dress shirt and a pair of black dress pants that had a blue tag on the inside. As she walked back up to the front of the store, she passed a rack holding an assortment of jackets. Remembering how cold it was outside, she looked through the coat rack and picked out a black leather jacket. The jacket didn't have any blue on it, but it was the nicest jacket she found and it was barely used, so she was willing to spend a little extra.

After paying for her clothes, she changed and then sold her janitor clothes back to the thrift store. They weren't worth much, but it made up for the extra she spent on the jacket. Now that she was in normal clothes, she would try to make it back to her house so she could pick up some of her stuff.

Yesterday and today had seemed like an eternity. Early yesterday morning, life had seemed so simple, but now everything seemed more complicated. It happened when she revealed a project she had been working on for months. It was called DreamPhase. DreamPhase allowed people, while in REM sleep, to be able to either link with another person's dream, or link to a computer.

Now it did take some learning to be able to use the DreamPhase technology, but the technology was still in the early stages of development. She had been working on it for a research thesis she was going to turn in for her doctorate. She had worked hard her whole life, always wanting to be an astrophysicist. She excelled in school and skipped multiple grades and was then dual-enrolled in college and graduated from high school early. Once in college, she was able to test out of the first three years of classes. Because of the amount of time she put into her schooling, she didn't have any really close friends, but she figured once she got her doctorate, at the age of 18, she would be able to spend more time with her friends. The day she showed her family DreamPhase, told her she was crazy. Despite these claims word quickly spread and soon companies were offering her money for the technology. Her family encouraged her to accept the

generous offers that came in after other companies failed at creating their own version of the technology.

She was the only person who knew how to enter the DreamPhase, so a lot of companies started offering her money for the information on how it worked. She turned them down, wanting to start her own company based on the technology. There were a few companies that tried to manipulate the information from her, but with strong determination on her part, they had all failed.

Later, a very large company called Cromwell, Inc. offered her family a large amount of money if they turned her in. Her family wasn't her real family; she had been adopted as a young girl when her parents both died. They betrayed her. The company framed her for a murder. She had no evidence on hand of what Cromwell, Inc. had done because her family destroyed the proof. She would have been sentenced to life in prison, but she pled guilty under grounds of insanity. Due to the dream experimentations she had been working on and that fact that she had been accused of being a savant, which has previously been connected to other mental issues, her plea was accepted. That was how she ended up in the mental hospital. What Cromwell, Inc. didn't know was that she had the proof backed up. The problem was, she had sent the proof to a computer on another planet then told the computer not to reconnect to the internet. She had managed to escape from the mental hospital, but still had to get to the other planet to get the proof.

## Chapter 2

**Stepping out into the street again, the wind didn't seem so harsh with the new jacket.** She started walking down the street again, this time heading to the hover train station.

The train station had two levels, with one hover rail to each. The bottom level was almost empty, but the top was full of people waiting to board the train. She walked up the wide staircase that led to the upper level. As she reached the top step, she noticed there were police standing at all the entrances. She would have to sneak past them somehow. She looked around the station, trying to think of how she would get past them. Off to her right were a few different storefronts and food stands. The hover train was off to her left. People were crowding the large room. At the end of the room on the right side was a pharmacy. If she was lucky, they might sell her a pair of glasses off the display shelf.

She made her way through the busy room, heading for the pharmacy. She stopped to look up at the clock. She still had twenty minutes before the train was going to leave. Inside the pharmacy, she was able to convince them to sell her a pair of display glasses.

After getting the glasses, she purchased her ticket. She approached the boarding entrance. A policeman stopped her and compared her to a picture he was holding. She got a glance of the photo and saw that it was a picture of her.

"Miss, could you remove your glasses for me?"

"Sure," she said, pulling them off and getting ready to run.

The man compared her to the picture. "Sorry to bother you, you looked like the person we have been searching for, but your eyes clearly separate you. Here take this so we don't bother you again," said the policeman, handing her a yellow tag. "Just show it to an officer when they are checking people."

Taking the tag from him, she smiled and replied, "Really, it was no bother, but thank you."

She walked onto the train and found her seat. She was confused as to why she hadn't been caught. Then she remembered, he mentioned her eyes. Her eyes changed colors depending on what she was wearing. In the picture the officer had, her eyes had been green, but now her eyes were blue because she was wearing a blue shirt. The sale at the thrift store had saved her. She sighed in relief as the train started moving forward slowly.

The train ride was uneventful. She slept most of the ride. When the train reached its destination, she got off. A policeman was checking the passengers as they got off. She was stopped and pulled off to the side. She gave the officer the yellow tag she had gotten earlier. The policeman apologized and let her go.

When she stepped off the train, she knew exactly where she was going. She had the layout of this whole city in her mind. This was the place where she grew up. Walking down the street towards where her old house was, she knew what she had to do, but that didn't make it any easier. The closer she got to the house, the harder it became to suppress her emotions. She kept walking; she had to get the rest of DreamPhase.

She stopped in front of the house that used to be her home. She looked in the windows; she could see people moving around. Luckily for her, she had moved DreamPhase out of the house and hid it in the back of an old car that was kept out behind her old house. She ran to the backyard where she found the car. She opened the back door and climbed in, checking under the seat, she found a bag, just how she left it. She took it and left.

At first she wasn't sure where to go. Who could she trust? The police were looking for her. Everyone thought she was a murderer. She wished she had taken more time to form relationships with her peers. Maybe if she had, she would have someone to turn to. But instead she had spent her time getting a degree that wouldn't do her much good anymore.

It was when she was thinking about school that she remembered her physics teacher. She got along great with him. He had assigned her to many different projects he was working on. And most of those times, she had been able to solve something he hadn't. He had encouraged her when she was ready to give up one semester. Since that day, she had worked harder and learned so much from him. He didn't say it until all of her classes were finished, but he told her that she was one of his best students. Of all the people she knew, he was the only person that she could think of that she might be able to trust.

Now that she had her bag, she reached in and pulled out a small cell phone and a small headset that looked like a piece of wire. She turned on the phone on then put it back in the bag. She hoisted the black backpack onto her back and then placed the headset behind her ear. She



started walking again. Tapping the headset she spoke. "Dr. Steve Shaum," there was a pause for a moment. "Hello?"

"Hello, this is Rachial Williams" the voice on the other end interrupted her. "Hey, are you all right? I heard about what happened. Is there anything you need?"

"I'm okay. I would like to talk to you. Can I meet you?"

"Sure, I have three more classes today, but I will be free for the next two hours, so you could swing by the campus."

"Okay and thanks."

"No problem." The line cut out and the headset went dead.

She wasn't sure what she was going to tell him, but she was planning to ask him to take DreamPhase for safe keeping. She didn't want to be running around the universe with a very valuable piece of technology. She also didn't want it to fall into the wrong hands because she wasn't sure what it could do, or what its limitations were.

Twenty minutes later outside of Dr. Shaum's office, she knocked on his door. There was no response at first, so she knocked again. This time she heard him call out. "Come in, the door's unlocked."

She opened the door to find him seated behind his desk helping one of his students. "Oh, hi Rachial, have a seat," he said, motioning to the open chair next to the student he was helping. "I was just helping Josh with one of his problems. Maybe you could explain it to him."

"I can try," she said, leaning forward to look at the papers lying on the desk. She then proceeded to explain the problem to him. Once he was sure he understood, he thanked her then left.

"I think you would make a great teacher," said Steve.

"Thanks, but it doesn't look like that is going to happen anytime soon," she said, taking in her surroundings. His office hadn't changed much since she had been here getting help with one of her own problems.

"Not at the moment, but I am guessing you have a way to prove you're not guilty?"

"Yes, I backed up the proof onto a computer on the planet *Aeolus*. Then I told the computer to permanently disconnect from the internet. I would have asked someone to retrieve it for me, but you are the only person I can trust and I knew that you were busy with classes."

"Well, at least you know where the proof is, so you only have to get to it and not search for it. You do realize that the police will be after you the whole way there?"

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"Yes, I will also probably have bounty hunters hired by a few different companies after me. My plan is to leave the planet to get the police off of me and then I will work until I get enough money for the fuel to get to the planet where the data has been saved. The only problem is with bounty hunters."

"They are after DreamPhase?"

"Yes, I got it 100% working. A few companies tried to get me to sell them the technology, but I said no. That is when they framed me."

"I knew you wouldn't have done it, but I wasn't sure why somebody would want to frame you."

"Yeah, that is kind of why I am here. I don't want DreamPhase to fall into their hands." She lifted her backpack onto the desk. "I would like you to take DreamPhase for safe keeping while I am gone. You can use it, or work on it. I just don't want these companies to get it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," she said, pulling a laptop and small black box out of the bag and placing them on the desk. She opened the small box and pulled out a handful of rubber bands. "The DreamPhase blueprints are on the laptop. These rubber bands have DreamPhase built into them. If you wear one of these when you fall asleep, you will enter DreamPhase. The rest of the information is on the laptop."

"Okay I will look it over."

"Thanks. I had better get going," she turned to leave.

"Hang on a second," he said, leaning over and digging something out from one of his desk drawers. He pulled out a small memory card and handed it to her. "Take this, you might find it helpful."

She took the small card and examined it in her hand. "What is it?"

"I designed it a year ago when I learned about the DreamPhase project you were working on. I figured if you completed it, there would be a means of implementing it. I haven't had a chance to test it, but if you load it into DreamPhase you should be able to learn everything on that card. It is filled with every piece of knowledge I could find on piloting and flying."

"Thanks, I'll have to try it out." she slipped the card into her pants pocket then left.

Chapter 3

**A few hours later she was sitting at the pilot's seat of her newly purchased vessel. The ship had cost her complete life's savings. The ship was an old military vessel, a Wombat**

class fighter. It was a very small ship, only large enough for one person. There wasn't any cargo space either, just a small compartment under the pilot's seat. The ship wasn't equipped with any weapons and only had a shield system capable of protecting her from radiation. The ship did have a working communication array, but it was the older kind so it wouldn't reach very far. The engine system was working without any problems and that is what she figured she would need the most. It had a class-two portal engine. It wasn't the fastest, but it would work. The ship used to be a military fighter, so the engines were faster than most engines out there. She just hoped that the engines would be enough to outrun the police if she encountered them. But for now she was worried more about learning how to fly. She didn't think it was that complicated, but she knew it required a lot of practice and that was something she didn't have a lot of time to do.

She had the pilot's manual resting on her lap, but some of it didn't make sense. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the memory card she had gotten earlier from Dr. Shaum and then pulled the rubber band out of her hair. She wrapped the rubber band around the card. A small portion of the rubber band lit up a blue color. The spot flashed, then a few seconds later the blue flashing stopped and turned green. The green light flashed twice then stopped. Rachial then removed the rubber band from the card and placed it around her wrist. *Now to see if this works*, she thought to herself as she settled back in the pilot's chair. She closed her eyes and tried to relax. It was hard after that day to just slow down. She wanted to quiet her mind to help her fall asleep, but her mind was racing with the things that had happened today. But finally she started to doze off. Within a few minutes, she had entered sleep.

About an hour later she awoke in her dream. Instantly she took control of the dream world and linked it with DreamPhase. She was standing in a large, open area. Below her were thousands of, what looked like, scrolling strands of text, on what appeared to be a screen. There were walls made out of text also. The whole world was bluish. The walls were covered with sheets of paper. Each sheet of paper had a title and then a description below in a fingerprint. Some of the walls had more paper on them than others; she walked over to a wall that only had a few pieces of paper on it. She reached out for the piece that was furthest to the right. The paper title read: *Flight school, Complete ED*. She tapped the paper twice.

Then the world around her changed. This time, was seated in a classroom with a bunch of students, and the teacher was at the front of the class, explaining to the students why they were there. He told them that he was going to teach them how to fly.

The world slowly sped up, everything started moving. Quickly, within moments, it was a complete blur. But not for Rachial, her mind was following every event that happened, as if it happened in normal speed.

The blur kept going for a few minutes and then it slowly started returning to normal speed. Rachial was standing on a landing platform. There was a man wearing a flight suit standing in front of her. "Congratulations, you have just passed the entire test, you now have your pilot's license." the man told her.

Then the world started to fade away, it slowly returned to the blue text-like world. But as it did, she heard a disembodied voice. When she heard it, she recognized the voice of her teacher.

"Hey, congrats, you now know how to fly. The only problem is that since you have taken all of these classes and practiced only in your dream, you will only remember it as a dream. When you sit down in the pilot's chair, just do what seems natural, unless it is something crazy, you should be doing the right thing. Bye." The voice left and Rachial woke from her dream.

Rachial looked down at her watch; it was 7:00 am. It seemed like it should be later, she had so much stuff pouring through her mind. She felt a little dizzy. She looked out the window of her ship, the sun had just come up and the sky was a beautiful purple color. There were no clouds to be seen. After a moment, the sensation of dizziness passed. She looked around the cockpit of her ship. Things that had looked foreign to her last night now looked very familiar. She even knew what they were for. She would have to contact Dr. Shaum sometime to tell him that it worked. She tapped a button and the cockpit opened. She climbed out. She was going to have to buy some food for her journey, so she set off to find a grocery store.

She returned to the ship twenty minutes later with a small stack of M.R.E's; she was probably going to need them when she got to the planet because she was going to have to eat while she tried to find a job. She climbed into the ship and loaded them under the seat. Then she strapped in and did the preflight checks. Everything checked out working, so she started the ship's power plant, then started up the antigravity engines. The ship slowly rose from its spot in the used ship lot. As soon as the ship had gained a high enough altitude, she engaged the main engines. The ship started moving forward quickly. As the ship started going, she increased the speed quickly and left the atmosphere, so as not to draw attention to herself. As soon as she left the atmosphere, she engaged the portal engine. She watched as the portal formed around the front of her ship. She knew how portal travel worked, but had never actually seen it before.

Once in portal travel, it would take her about ten hours to reach the next way point. She became bored rather quickly, and decided the best use of her time would be to work on DreamPhase some more.

Before she had been captured, she had been working on getting DreamPhase to work while you were awake. She was almost certain it was possible, but hadn't been able to configure DreamPhase correctly yet. The reason is because day dreams are harder for the system to grasp, because they are concentrated in a different way.

Rachial worked on calibrating DreamPhase for the next 7 hours. She had entered DreamPhase while she was awake. She had to concentrate to do it, but it had worked. She had a little more fine-tuning to do. Then she had another idea. What would happen if she linked DreamPhase to the ship? She started working on a design for the interface for the ship when an alarm started going off. She looked up and the HUD was flashing the ETA at *one minute*. The portal drive was faster than the salesman had told her. That was nice; it would make her journey quicker. She dropped the ship out of its portal and gave the breaking thrusters a quick fire. The ship slowed just as it reached the planet. She brought the ship into an orbit above the planet *Ecasty*, as she waited to get clearance to land. She got the clearance moments later and flew the ship down to the spot she where she had been told she could land.

Once the ship had landed, she paid a small fee before she took her bag and left the hangar. The search for a job began. She knew it was going to be hard to find a job where she wouldn't need to tell them who she was, but that didn't discourage her; she knew she needed to get one. The first thing she did was set up a fake account so that people would think she was a citizen. After that, she started walking down the street and applied at every place that was open on the first block.

An hour later, she had finished and went to the second level. The city was very large, so there were multiple levels of streets. The second level had raised walkways running along the side of building and connecting the corners of separate buildings. There were four levels in all. She spent the rest of the day applying everywhere she could. After the first twenty places she applied at, she got very fast at filling out applications. Having skipped lunch she was getting quite hungry around supper time, but there were still a few places left on the third level before she was finished. She applied at an outlet store, a janitorial service center, and only one remained: a cargo delivery service. She walked in and grabbed one of the applications. The manager saw her grab it and called her over to the counter.

"Are you looking for a job?" he asked. "Yes, sir," she answered.

"Have you ever flown a ship before?"

"Yes."

"What kind of ship did you fly?"

She explained that she had flown her own ship before, and told him it was an old military fighter.

He was very intrigued by this. He asked if it was a Wombat fighter. She told him that it was.

"Well I might have a job for you. We have the cargo pod for one of those fighters, but our pilots all have trouble flying it. The last time someone tried using it, they crashed and destroyed the fighter. The cargo pod is fine, but we don't have a fighter to connect it to. If you can figure out how to fly the ship with the cargo pod, you can have a job."

"How much would it pay?"

"The pay would be 100 per hour and your time would depend on how many deliveries you have to make. You see, we were using the ship for our express delivery, but the pilot died a few years back. We tried to put other pilots in his position, but they were never able to fly it and the last pilot crashed it. Since then we have been contracting our express shipping to other companies."

"I'll take it. When do I start?" she asked, knowing that 100 dollars was far more than she was expecting to make at any other place she had been to. She just hoped that she would be able to do it.

"You can start as soon as you figure out how to pilot the ship. You can start practicing as soon as you bring your ship here."

"Okay, thank you, um..." she hesitated, remembering she didn't catch his name.

"The name's Al," he said, offering his hand in a friendly manner.

"Rachial," she supplied her name.

"Okay, how about you come back later with your ship and I'll show you where the cargo pod is. I'll also bring the paperwork you will have to fill out. "

"Okay, I should be back in a little while."

She left the building and started heading back to her ship. On her way back, her stomach made a deep grumble reminding her of how hungry she was. Back at the ship, she had some M.R.E.'s, so she didn't stop at any of the restaurants that lined the streets. When she arrived at her ship, she climbed in and pulled out one of the M.R.E's. It wasn't the best food she had ever had, but it was filling. After she finished her meal, she found a trash can in the hangar and threw out her M.R.E. wrappers. She then climbed into her ship and started up the engines. The whole piloting thing still seemed a little strange. She just hoped that she would be able to pilot her ship with the cargo attachment. She would soon find out.

Ten minutes later she was climbing out of her ship onto the huge deck of the delivery services hangar bay. Al was coming across the hangar deck to greet her.

"Hello, I see you brought your ship," he stated as he ushered her into a small office that was connected to the large hangar. "That means you will be able to start training after you sign some papers. Don't worry; I'll walk you through it."

Minutes later she had signed an 8-month contract with Galactica Transportation. She had also learned that Galactica offers their pilots room and board at no charge. She was very excited about this because she would be able to save the money to fund her trip, and be able to continue sooner. She was also glad she would not need to search for a place to live, because she had no idea where to start. After she finished signing the papers, she was brought into the hangar again. Al walked over to a small hover car outside of his office. They both got in and he started it. Moments later they were flying through rows and rows of ships. Finally they reached the end. At the end there was a ship that looked like an inverted version of her ship. On the front it had one cargo door; there was a similar door on the back of the ship.

"That's it," he said stopping the hover car. "It has its own booster system, so it won't slow down your ship at all. That is why we use them for shipping, they are very fast. This one has a class-4 portal engine."

"Well, I'll see what I can do."

"If you are able to figure it out, I am going to want you to teach some of the other pilots how to fly it, because one express delivery ship isn't going to be enough."

"We'll see how I do first."

Al brought her back over to her ship. "I'll set up a room for you while you try it out. Just ask someone about it and they'll show you where it is."

"Thanks," she said, climbing out of the hover car and climbing up into her ship. She then flew it over to where the cargo pod was sitting.

She positioned her ship above the imprint on the cargo pod and lowered her ship down. There was a small shudder as her ship docked with the cargo pod. A panel in her cockpit opened and revealed a row of buttons. There were marks below the buttons indicating what the buttons did. *Undock cargo pod, open cargo doors, close cargo doors and enter cargo hold, link\unlink engine systems*. She was very nervous. What made Al think she would be able to do it? She didn't know but hadn't told him that she had only flown a ship once before flying it over to the hangar. Maybe flying with the cargo pod attached wasn't much different than flying without it. If that was the case, then the program Dr. Shaum had made was amazing. But she couldn't bring herself to think it would be easy. She decided the best thing she could do was take it nice and slow. She hit the Link Engine Systems button and she heard a small beep. She activated the antigravity engines and the ship slowly rose off the deck. Easing the throttle forward, the ship slowly moved toward the hangar bay doors. She tapped her comm button and radioed for clearance to leave the bay. It was granted and the bay doors opened to the city. The city was colored golden from the sun that was now setting. She moved the ship forward out of the hangar. The ship moved out into the sky and maneuvered between the massive buildings that were standing all around like trees. Avoiding other traffic, the ship slowly rose above the buildings out into the open sky.

The ship was suspended in the midst of small clouds that were positioned like water splattered onto a hard surface. Most of the clouds had a golden color to them, but some being shadowed, were a dark grey color. The sun was reflecting off the hull of the ship, giving it the same golden color as its surroundings. Rachial sat in the cockpit checking some of the readings from sensors. Everything looked good. She decided that she would see what the ship could do. She slammed the throttle forward and the ship's engines rocketed the vessel forward. The ship was very fast. The inertial dampeners had taken a few seconds to adjust to the sudden change in speed.

She sent the ship into a few different maneuvers. When the ship spun or flipped around, it looked like a flashing light because of the way the sun reflected off of it. After about twenty minutes, when she thought she had gotten enough control over the ship, she piloted the ship back to the hangar. Once inside, she landed the ship where it had been before, then undocked her ship and flew it back over to where it had been earlier. Getting out, she walked over to the manager's office. He was nowhere to be found. She turned to leave and almost bumped into a man standing behind her. The man looked to be in his early forties.

"Are you looking for Al?"

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"Yes, do you know where he is?"

"Yeah, you must be new here. Al goes home at 7:00 pm."

"Oh, he didn't say how long he would be here. Yes, I am new. I just started today. "

"Well, welcome to Galactica," he extended his hand. "I'm Brandon."

"I am Rachial, thanks," she said, accepting his hand.

"Al will be back tomorrow at 6:00 am. But I might be able to help you, what did you need from him?"

"I was going to tell him I had mastered the ship and I was ready to take the test."

"Which ship are you going to be flying?"

"I am flying the Wombat fighter over there," she said pointing to her ship.

"Ah, you must be the new express delivery pilot. Where did you get your training from? I have heard that ship takes a lot of training to master."

Not wanting to tell him about DreamPhase, she answered him, "I learned from a friend." It was true, her teacher had given her the memory card, but she didn't like deceiving the man.

"Oh, I thought you would have gotten it from the military; that is where most people who fly those ships get it from. I can't help with the test, only Al can give someone the test, but I wouldn't worry about it. If you can fly one of those ships, it should be a cakewalk."

"Okay, do you think you could show me to the pilots' rooms? Al said he would set up a room for me before I left earlier."

"Sure."

He led her through a maze of hallways then to an elevator. He stopped outside the elevator and spoke again. "The men's rooms are on level 44 and the women's rooms are on level 42. The hangar is level 41 and the package processing is on level 40. Oh and the mess hall is on the hangar level. You will have to ask somebody else for help finding your room, though. I have to go now, see you later."

"Thanks for your help," she said, stepping into the elevator.

The elevator doors opened on 42nd floor to an empty hallway. Rachial stepped out of the elevator and began looking for someone to ask about her room. There was a bulletin board hanging on the wall off to her right. She stepped over to look at it. There were different notes



posted all over the board, most of them having to do with delays in shipments. But a new note on top of the others had her name on it.

"*Rachial, your room number is 207. I will be back tomorrow at 6:00 am to give you your test-Al.*" She pulled the note free and took it with her as she walked down the hallway in search of room 207.

She found her room and opened the door. The room was very small, about seven foot by seven foot. There was enough room for the small bed and small dresser about the height of a desk. There was also a small chair. The bed was up against the far edge of the room. Behind the bed was a small window that gave view to the now dark gold-colored city. She set her bag down on the bed and dug around until she found her toothbrush and toothpaste. She then left the room to find the bathrooms.

About ten minutes later she returned and climbed into bed. She set the alarm on her watch to wake her at 5:30. Then she lay back and went to sleep, wondering what tomorrow would bring.

## Chapter 4

**The next morning, Rachial woke to the sound of her watch alarm. The sun poured** through the windows lighting the small room. Rachial pulled a bottle of shampoo and another pair of clothes out of her bag and left her room to find the bathrooms again. Ten minutes later, she came back to her room and put the shampoo along with her other toiletries in the top dresser drawer. She would have to buy some more clothes today, because she only had two sets right now. *But that would have to wait till later*, she thought, looking at her watch. She had a few minutes to grab breakfast and get down to the hangar. When she reached the hangar level, she went searching for the mess hall. It wasn't hard to find. She just followed the trail of people carrying their breakfast with them as they rushed to get to their ships. She went in and decided on a breakfast bar. After eating she went back out into the hangar.

The hangar was very busy this morning and a lot of the ships that had been there yesterday were nowhere to be seen. Rachial walked over to Al's office and looked inside. Al was sitting at his desk talking to one of the other pilots. She knocked lightly on the door and Al called for her to come in. Al told her to take a seat and that he would be right with her. A moment later, the other man left.

"Are you ready for the test?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"Good. Then right out this way," he said, getting up from his desk and walking out into the hangar. He walked with her over to her ship. "I am going to go get my ship; you can pick up the cargo pod. I'll meet you outside the hangar."

"Okay." Then he walked away.

Rachial climbed into her ship and flew it over to where the cargo pod was. She slowly docked her ship with the pod and then piloted the ship over to the hangar bay doors.

After getting clearance, the doors opened to the outside. She moved her ship just outside the door and then stopped. Seconds after she started waiting, Al's ship came out. The comm system started beeping, indicating an incoming transmission. She tapped a button to open a channel.

"Alright, here is what we are going to do. Once we get above the city, I am going to deploy holographic beacons. The beacons are going to create a few different test courses that you are going to have to fly through. If you are able to do all of them without crashing the hologram, you will pass."

Al's ship started moving upwards. Rachial gave her ship a little down thrust to follow his movement. After clearing the city, Rachial could see little beacons being fired from Al's ship. She watched as the little beacons created the holographic test course. In a matter a seconds, a huge test course was in the air in front of her. There were three different courses, each with their own colors. The one closest to her was blue and the one furthest from her was red. The one in between the red and blue courses was green.

"Okay, you will fly through the blue course, then the green, and then the red. If you crash into the wall on any of the sets you will fail. You will get one retry for each of the course levels. You can start whenever you are ready."

Rachial moved her ship into the entrance of the blue course. She then gave her ship some thrust, moving it forward. As she entered the course, holographic instructions appeared in front of her ship. She followed the directions as they lead her through basic maneuvers. She was able to complete the course without any trouble. The next course consisted of different evasive maneuvers, docking, and landing procedures. The last courses had her pick up some cargo and then deliver the packages. While she was on a route, the simulation put obstacles in her way and even had simulated smugglers attack her. She had been able to pass all of them with one try, but it had been really hard for her. At one point, she started doing a maneuver that she didn't realize she knew until she did it. It was clearly from the memory card.

After Rachial completed the last course, the holographic images from the beacons faded away and she could see the beacons heading back to Al's ship.

"Good job, you passed. Now all we need to do is set your pickup and drop times," came Al's approving voice over the radio.

"Thank you," she responded.

After the test was done, they flew back to the hangar where Al went into his office and started working on setting up the express shipment service again. Al had told her to go grab something to eat while he worked. He said that when she came back, he would give her a run-thru of how the system was going to work.

She decided that since the food was paid for, she should eat in the cafeteria. For the most part, from what she had seen, the food was about the same at it would be buying someplace else.

She entered the cafeteria not sure what she was going to eat, but after looking over the many different options, she decided on getting mashed potatoes and gravy with some type of roast and peas. Finding a table, she sat down and started eating. As she ate, she looked at the other people who were eating. There were two guys who sat down at a table with the rest of a group.

The first man exclaimed "Wow, that stinks! What is that?" The rest of the guys around the table laughed.

"It's not that bad, it is just broccoli soup. I like the smell," said the second man trying to defend himself.

On the other side of the room, another man called out. "It's so bad I can smell it over here." There was uproar of laughter.

Rachial laughed with the group, but she didn't smell anything. That was how it had always been for her. When she was younger, she had seen the doctor about it and he told her that her nose was permanently damaged, but because of this, her other senses would try to compensate making her have better hearing and better vision. She had wished many times that she could smell something, especially when people she was around would talk about how something smelled. She had learned to just go along with the groups, or other person's opinion of the smell, since she really couldn't form her own opinion. Once she finished her meal, she brought her tray over to the stack of other dirty trays and placed it on top. She then headed back to Al's office.

After Al had shown her everything she needed to know about the deliveries, she went back to her room. She had almost begun to think that it might not be too bad, that she would just have to work until she could pay for the fuel required to go to the other planet. She figured that by the end of the eight months, she should have enough money to pay for the fuel and possibly weapons systems, or better shields for her ship. She knew when she reached the planet she was going to encounter problems with the police. The reason being was that the same government that was in charge of the planet she had just fled was the government in control at the planet she needed to get to.

She had been giving it a lot of thought, but had yet to come up with a plan of how she was going to get through the security on that planet. She had been lucky when she left the planet a few days ago. But she tried to put those thought out of her mind as she went back to her room. Today had gone good and it looked like tomorrow was going to be similar. But she knew it wouldn't last.

She entered her room and grabbed her toothbrush and toothpaste and left for the bathroom. After she finished brushing her teeth, she came back to her room and climbed into her bed. It was only 8:00 pm, but tomorrow she would be delivering packages. She wanted to get a good night's rest so she could be at her fullest tomorrow.

She woke the next morning to her watch alarm. She didn't bother to check the time because she remembered what she had set the time for yesterday. The early morning was a repeat of yesterday; she took a shower then went to the mess hall and got something to eat. After that,

she went down to the hangar bay. She reached Al's office at exactly 6:00 am. This time he was alone in his office. She knocked lightly on the doorframe.

"Good morning. Are you ready for your first day?"

"Yes, I am."

"Good, it looks like today you only have two deliveries to make, so it shouldn't be too hard for your first day. The packages are already loaded into the cargo pod, so you just need to pick it up and then do the deliveries. You'd better get going."

"I'm going now. Thank you."

Rachial left his office to go find her ship. Once she reached it, she climbed in and powered up the engines. Then she flew her ship over to the cargo pod and docked with it. After she completed docking, she took off and flew to the hangar bay door, where she waited a few moments to get clearance before she flew out into the city.

The deliveries went over without much trouble, and although she did have a little bit of trouble finding the second place, it had only taken her a few hours in all. As she was heading back to the Galactica hangar, a warning light started flashing.

Out of reflex, she jerked the control stick forward. As her ship dived she looked out her windows to see a missile fly past her and slam into one of the skyscrapers. It was the memory card that had trained her to do that, because she had no idea what the alarm meant. She flew the ship in a few more maneuvers, but the light came on again. She pulled off to the right this time, as another missile flew past her into another building.

She had to do something so more people wouldn't get hurt. She sent her ship into a dive and flew all the way to the surface. She leveled her ship at about a hundred meters above the ground. She checked her sensors and the ship was still behind her. She pulled a few tight turns but the ship was still behind her. She would only need to go a little further for her plan to work.

She was flying right into the planetary security area. Their base was just a little bit ahead of her. About half a mile before the base, the other ship stopped pursuing her. She waited a while then flew her ship back to the hangar. She guessed it was a bounty hunter. Someone had been able to track her.

When she arrived, she was asked how it went. Not wanting to tell them about her encounter with the other ship, she told them that she had had a little trouble finding one of the drop points, so it took her a little longer than she had expected. It was true, but it was not all that happened. She landed her ship in the spot where the cargo pod was stored, not wanting to bother undocking it. She then used the moving sidewalk to get back to the elevator. She was going to have to come up with a plan to keep from getting caught by a bounty hunter, or better yet, survive against their assassination attempts.

She reached the elevator and stepped inside. She pressed the button for the 42nd floor. The elevator started to move and she felt something hard and cold pressed against her neck. A hand reached down and grabbed her arms and positioned them behind her back so that she couldn't try to escape.

"Nice piloting back there, but that isn't going to be good enough to lose me. You are worth far too much for me."

Her fears had been confirmed, it was a bounty hunter that was after her. She was starting to be overcome with worry. What was she going to do? She didn't know how to fight and the bounty hunter behind her probably had years of training. She watched as he reached forward and pressed the button for the top floor. But the elevator stopped on the 42nd floor. Before the door opened, the bounty hunter whispered into her ear.

"Don't try anything, or I'll kill you and whoever steps on,"

There was nothing she could do. She nodded her head slowly. The door slid open and Brandon, the man who had helped her the other day, stepped into the elevator.

"Which floor are you going to?" the bounty hunter asked.

"The 41st floor."

"I'll let you go first then, so you don't need to waste time," said the bounty hunter clearing the button he already pressed and hitting level 41.

Brandon thanked him and waited for the elevator to stop at his floor. He looked over at Rachial. Something was wrong, but he couldn't tell what it was and Rachial wasn't letting onto anything. Who was this man? He had never seen him before. And why were they going to the 92nd floor? There was nothing up there. He was sure that only one button was lit when he stepped on and that was for the 92nd floor. Why was Rachial going there? No, he knew something was wrong. The elevator stopped at his floor and the door opened. He stepped out into the hangar and the doors closed behind him. As soon as they did, he took off running to Al's office.

"Al, I think we might have a problem. I was just in the elevator and there was some guy I have never seen before in there with Rachial and they were going up to the roof."

"That is strange. Do you think they were together?"

"It didn't seem like it. When I met Rachial the other day, she seemed very friendly. But just now she didn't even say hi."

"Okay, I'd better see what they are up to. Feel like going for a little flight?" asked Al.

"Sounds good to me," replied Brandon.

Back in the elevator, Rachial had the blade back against her neck again. Time the elevator didn't stop at any of the other levels. It finally stopped on the top floor and the door opened into a small room. The room had a door in the wall opposite the side they just came from. Off to the left of the room was a staircase. The bounty hunter forced her out through the door across the room, out into the cold outside. This time the wind was really strong and sent a chill through her body. The cold, metal blade that was pressed harshly against her neck felt even colder as she was pushed along over the roof.

Looking ahead, she saw a ship parked on the edge of the roof. She tried to struggle, but the knife was just pressed harder against her neck. The bounty hunter pushed her towards the ship, stopping right in front of it. Reaching out, he punched a few buttons on a keypad and a door on the side of the ship opened.

Just as the bounty hunter was about to push her onto the ship, A ship flew very close over her head. The antigravity engines knocked both her and the bounty hunter down onto the roof.

*Someone did that intentionally*, she thought. She knew the only way antigravity engines had any physical thrust was if they were calibrated wrong. She didn't recognize the ship. It continued to hover above them, making it impossible for them to do anything more than look around. The antigravity waves were starting to give her a headache. She looked off to her right and saw the bounty hunter lying on the ground, paralyzed just like herself. Behind the bounty hunter, she saw a group of men coming out of the door she had been forced out of a moment earlier. The men surrounded her. They were all wearing the Galactica shipping uniforms. As soon as the men had them surrounded, the ship that had forced them down to the ground landed next to the bounty hunter's ship. Her headache vanished as soon as the ship had landed. The men had now pinned the bounty hunter to the ground.

She heard a siren in the distance. The siren grew louder as the as the police vehicle came closer until she could see it approaching. The police vehicle landed the other side of the bounty hunter's ship. Two policemen came out and placed handcuffs on the bounty hunter, then started asking questions to Al, who had just disembarked from the ship that had pinned her to the ground. After the officer talked to Al for a few minutes, he walked over to her.

"Miss Williams?"

"Yes, that's me."

"I have a few questions I would like to ask you," he said, pulling out a data pad to record the information.

"Go ahead," she said, not really having much choice.

"Okay, I was told that man there," he said pointing to the bounty hunter, "tried to kidnap you. Is this true?"

"Yes, Officer."

"Okay. In order to press charges, you are going to have to tell me everything that just happened and why he would want to kidnap you."

Rachial didn't know what to say. The government on this planet was different than the one on the planet she had been framed for murder on, but if they found out, would they turn her over. She couldn't take the risk.

"I don't want to press charges."

"Are you sure, miss? You just said he tried to kidnap you and you don't want to press charges?"

"That's right. I don't want to press any charges. It was a mistake," she said, looking the bounty hunter in the eyes. She was hoping the bounty hunter would want to get out of this situation as quickly as possible and play along. She was right, the bounty hunter spoke up.

"She is right, I was after somebody else. I was only playing a practical joke on someone, but I grabbed the wrong person."

The police officer looked at her again with a skeptical look on his face. "Last chance, are you sure, miss?"

"Yes, I am sure," she said, and gave him her best smile.

"Well I am going to press charges for breaking and entering," said Al walking up to the policeman.

"Okay, then I'm going to need to ask you a few questions."

After the officer finished his report, he took the bounty hunter into his ship and left. Al walked over to Rachial and looked her dead in the eyes.

"Are you nuts? Why aren't you going to press charges?"

After she had explained to Al why she didn't want to be involved with the police, he agreed to keep her story a secret, but he was worried about it causing a problem for his shipping company. He didn't want to have any trouble from his superiors. She assured him that there wouldn't be any more trouble and that she would watch her back. He was put at ease, but told her that the next time, he might not be able to help her.

The next morning she woke up, took a shower, and headed down to the mess hall. After looking over the food she decided she would rather not eat any of it. She then left the mess hall and went to Al's office she sat down at his desk waiting for him to finish his conversation on the phone. As she sat there, she noticed a bowl of fruit sitting on his desk. She had just skipped the food in the mess hall because none of it looked very good, but there was a banana sitting in the bowl. It was a perfect shade of yellow. She reached over to the bowl and picked it up. She held it

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in front of Al. and he nodded. As he continued to talk, she peeled the banana. She had eaten most of it by the time he put the phone down.

"Okay, you have five deliveries for today. A small step up, but you should be able to do it."

"It shouldn't be a problem. I'll get going on it right away." Rachial got up and started to leave his office but turned back around, "Thanks for the banana."

"You're welcome."

Several minutes later, Rachial was flying her ship to the different drop-off points. The deliveries went very smoothly and she found all of the places without getting lost. Rachial noted places that she might find useful and tried to memorize where they were so she could find them later. She could have just used the maps in her navigation system, but she had never trusted the maps. She knew that there were some things that would never be on a map, so she didn't like to depend on them. Having gotten the hang of the delivery process, she had finished earlier than yesterday and she didn't have any bounty hunters chasing her, so she made it back before lunchtime.

Once inside the hangar, she undocked the cargo pod and landed her ship next to Al's office. Al wasn't in his office; instead he was over next to one of the other ships, talking to another pilot. She walked over to them. Al turned to her. "Rachial we were just talking about you."

"I hope it is all good?" she asked.

"Yes, I was explaining to Harvey here that you would be training him to fly the Wombat once the ships arrive."

"Which ships are you talking about?"

"I am getting 10 Wombat fighters with cargo pods. Remember what I said about training in the other pilots?"

"Yes, I just didn't think it would be so soon."

"I figured the sooner the better. I don't like having to contract our shipments out to competitors."

"Okay, that's fine. I'll start training whoever you pick out when the ships get here."

"Good."

"I finished the deliveries."

"Oh, okay, you can clock out."



Rachial then walked over to the time clock and clocked out. She then went back to her ship and left the hangar.

Once she was clear of the hangar, she began searching for a thrift store. She was going to need some more clothes and she didn't want to spend a lot of money. She found one and soon had five new sets of clothing. After she had the new clothes, she found a gym where she got a membership and started working out. After an hour of working out, she flew back to Galactica.

## Chapter 5

**The next few months seemed to go by really fast. Rachial continued to deliver** packages, topping out at around 35 packages per day. She trained 10 pilots on how to fly a Wombat. It felt weird to her, because they all had been flying since they were tiny kids, most of them when they were under the age of ten, and here she was only having been flying for a few weeks, now training them. After they had completed their training they began to deliver the express shipments too. Al had been very happy because he no longer had to contract with other companies.

Each morning she would get up before she had to start deliveries and run for forty-five minutes to an hour. After running, she would head back get cleaned up and then head down to the hangar to make her delivery runs.

When she had finished her deliveries for the day, she would go to the gym and work out for an hour, or possibly two. She also attended a weapons training course. She had saved all the money she would need to reach the planet and then return to her old home to prove her innocence. But her eight months were not over yet, so she used the money she earned to enhance her ship. The first thing she had done was install a better shield system. The shield system was powerful enough to protect her from the weapons that the police used. Next, she installed few of her own inventions. She had installed a very advanced communication system, so that if she needed to, she could even use it to hack into other ships' computer systems. She had also installed a remote control system, so that she could control her ship without being in it. She had done all this to help her reach the planet and bring back the proof. She knew that if she was caught without the proof, she would be in a real heap of trouble. She also didn't want to be unprepared the next time she ran into a bounty hunter.

Rachial had also spent a lot of time working on DreamPhase. She had been able to interface DreamPhase with her ship so that she could control her ship while she was using DreamPhase. She put a lot of time into adjusting DreamPhase so she could use it while she was awake. She had been very successful and was now able to enter DreamPhase just by closing her eyes and concentrating really hard. She could now access, or hack into any computer that was within range.

As fast as the months seemed to slip by, Rachial was getting very anxious about completing her journey. She still had two months left, but she was ready to leave right then. She even debated asking Al to let her leave early before the contract expired. Every time she did, she had decided not to. She always convinced herself that she needed to spend more time exercising anyway, so that she would be ready for whatever came her way.

Finally, she couldn't take it any longer and went to Al's office to talk to him about it. When she entered, he knew something was wrong. He told her to have a seat. She sat down in the chair across the desk from him.

"I can tell something is bothering you, what's on your mind?"

"The reason I took this job was so I could earn enough money to continue my journey. I have gotten more than enough, and I am getting a little restless. I want to finish what I came out here to do."

"But you still have two months left on your contract," said Al, catching where she was going.

"Yes, that's what I wanted to talk to you about."

Al sighed. "Rachial, you have been a very good worker over the past six months. You have never made a late delivery and you trained in a whole group of pilots to fly the Wombats. And you have even made suggestions to the system that has saved the company a lot of money. Even then, I can't break your contract."

"I underst -"

Al cut her off. "I wasn't finished yet. That is why I want you for a special delivery run. I have a very expensive package that needs an express delivery to the planet *Aeolus*."

"*Aeolus*?" she questioned, making sure she heard him right.

"Yes, that's right. The package will be here tomorrow morning at 7:30, so I want you ready by then. After you deliver the package, I am going to give you the next week off."

"Why are you doing this for me?"

"I just told you, you have done amazingly well and this sort of pays you back."

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it. You'd better get some sleep though; tomorrow is going to be a long day."

Rachial left his office and went to her room. She wasn't sure how she was going to sleep, but she decided that she should at least try.

The next morning she woke up at 6:00 am and got her stuff packed. She then went out for a run. She ran for about 40 minutes. After she had finished her run, she took a shower then went to her room and grabbed her stuff. She didn't have very much, so she was able to fit it inside her black backpack. She hoisted the bag onto her back and left her room. As the elevator brought her down to the hangar, she felt a small bit of remorse. She had been so busy working and getting

ready for the rest of her journey that she hadn't been able to form any friendships with the people around her. She was thinking of the lady who was in the room across the hall from hers. The lady had been very nice to her and given her some shampoo when her bottle had run out. But soon that would change; soon she would be able to spend more time on people. She kept reminding herself of that.

The doors to the elevator opened and she stepped out onto the hangar deck. Al was standing outside of his office talking to one of the pilots she had trained to fly the Wombats. She walked over to them.

"Good Morning," she greeted them. They turned to face her.

"Good Morning, I was just giving Erne some instructions about the new route he is going to be doing," said Al.

"Which route is he going to be doing?"

"He is going to be doing your route. So if you have any pointers that might help him, go ahead and tell him about them."

"Oh, okay but I don't really have any pointers for you," she said, turning to Erne.

"That's okay. Just be careful, I heard this might be a tricky mission for you."

"I will."

Al held out a piece of paper to her. "Here is the information on the drop point. The package was already loaded onto your ship. Since you are only delivering one package, I filled the extra space in the cargo pod with fuel so you should be able to make it half of the way without refueling."

"Thanks. I guess I'd better be going. Later." Rachial then walked over to her ship and climbed in. She was very excited about getting going again.

Starting the engines, she began the preflight checks. Everything checked out in the green, so she slowly lifted her ship off the hangar deck. Waiting for clearance, she looked out the cockpit window around the hangar. This had been her home for the past 6 months; it seemed a little strange to be leaving. The doors to the hangar opened. She moved the ship out into the busy sky. She could see the sun rising on the horizon, it was beautiful. She gazed at it for a few seconds. She wanted to turn her head away from it for fear of wrecking her vision, but she knew better. Her ship was automatically blocking the harmful rays. She flew her ship in a perpendicular line to the planet and increased her speed. Her ship flew through the clouds up into the sky. In moments, the ship had cleared the atmosphere.

As the ship gained a geosynchronous orbit, she waited for the planetary security to clear her. It didn't take long before she had received clearance to leave. As soon as her ship had been cleared, she piloted it a safe distance away from the planet and then started her portal drive. The portal opened around her and slowly enveloped her ship.

Traveling in the portal was boring, especially in a small ship where you couldn't move around. After her last time portal traveling, Rachial had decided to bring a book along with her. She opened it and began to read, but couldn't get into the story. She thought the book looked like it would be a good read back on the planet, but right now she was having a hard time getting into it. Knowing she wasn't going to be getting any reading done, she put the book back under her seat. She looked around the small cockpit. She looked over at the HUD. There were some sensor readings being displayed. The readings told her information about the portal. Right now it was very stable and interference was very low. This surprised her a little bit, because most of the time, when a ship is in the portal, the interference blocks most sensor readings and all communications. Her sensors were all in standby, they didn't do much good in the portal because of the interference, so she shut them down to save on fuel. Rachial was curious as to what the sensors would pick up while in the portal.

Rachial reached over and tapped a few buttons. The sensors came out of standby and began feeding data to her screen. The screen flickered in front of her. There was too much information to be displayed. Traveling at portal speeds, the ship was passing more stuff than she normally would, so her sensors couldn't keep up. She wished that she could view all the information the ship was collecting, but the ship couldn't display all of it. DreamPhase, she thought. She could use DreamPhase to interface with the ship's sensors. She had only done basic interfaces with the ship, but she was sure it would work. Leaning back in her seat, she concentrated as hard as she could on entering DreamPhase.

She felt a sudden drop. It was always like that and almost every time it startled her. She was standing once again in the open room of the DreamPhase environment. She walked over to a wall that had become as familiar to her as her ship's control interface. She tapped the wall a couple times and the world around her faded away and she was once again in the cockpit, just this time it was a virtual cockpit. She reached over to the sensor panel and placed her hand on the system. She then concentrated on viewing the sensor information. There was a flash of light and she was no longer in the cockpit of her ship. She was viewing the portal as if she were the ship. She could see the interference patterns that she had looked at earlier in the display. She looked further, extending the ship's sensors again. At first she was overloaded with information and couldn't even comprehend what she was seeing. She experienced vertigo for a moment before she regained control of her world. The whole sensation was amazing. She could see in all directions. She could see a large gas giant as her ship approached it. The gas giant looked no larger than a marble, but it was exponentially growing as the ship flew towards it at tremendous speeds. With the sensors as her eyes, she could see the gravitational forces that the giant was creating. She could also see the temperature of the different areas on the giant ball of gas. She was now a tiny speck next to the gas giant, but fractions of a second later she was already moving away from it, the planet shrinking into the background. The whole experience was breathtaking.

The moment was short-lived because interference returned. Rachial put the sensors back into standby. She reached under her seat and pulled out the book again. She would give it another try. She settled back into her seat and tried to read the book.

**A long ways away at the Cromwell, Inc. headquarters, a bounty hunter knocked on a thick, wooden door.**

"Come in," he heard the President of the company call from the other side of the door. The bounty hunter opened the door slowly and walked in.

"Where is the girl?" asked a man sitting behind a marble desk across the room from the door.

Behind the man was a large window. The light coming in lit the room, but made it hard to see the face of the man sitting behind the desk.

"She wasn't on *Ecasty*, she had already left. I would have gone after her, but the puny bounty you placed on her head isn't enough to pay for the cost for fuel to go after her."

"What do you mean it is not enough? The bounty is worth enough to pay for the fuel," said the man behind the desk raising his voice slightly.

"Yes, but if I spend all the bounty on the fuel to get her, I won't have any left to spend as I please," replied the bounty hunter calmly.

"Point taken, I will raise the bounty from 700,000 to 37.2 million. That should more than cover the price of fuel. But I am also going to get more bounty hunters after her, so you are going to have some competition."

"I understand. If you will excuse me, Mr. Lotus, I have a girl to catch." The bounty hunter turned and left. The man behind the desk was left to himself in the room.

He sat there a moment contemplating before he tapped a button on the edge of his desk. "Send in the next bounty hunter," he said into the intercom and then released the button.

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Rachial activated the systems that had gone into standby while in the portal, getting the ship ready to exit the portal. It had been a few hours since she started her journey and she was ready to get out and stretch her legs. Her destination was about ten minutes away. She was headed for the space station in orbit above the planet *Alcarsh*.

*Alcarsh* had only one continent, the rest of the planet was covered with water. The continent was 269,000 square kilometers, but only had one city. The atmosphere was breathable. There was actually a very high percentage of oxygen in the planet's air. The high oxygen levels came from the massive amounts of marine algae. The marine algae is harvested year round for many different purposes, but mainly for its medical properties. It been used for many years to help heal wounds. By applying the algae to the wound, it would stop the bleeding, partially numb the pain, and cause the wound to heal sooner. The algae also caused the water to look green.

The station above the planet acted as a routing post for the algae harvesters. The algae would be transferred to the station, where it would be packed and shipped to different parts of the universe. The station also served as a refueling outpost for ships passing through the area. Because of the planet's position between two highly populated planets, it was a very busy place. It helped that the station was also known to black market traders as a place where they could trade their illegally acquired goods without police interference. She would have to watch herself so she didn't get into any trouble; it was the perfect place for a bounty hunter to trap her.

She piloted her ship into the hangar bay and parked her ship in one of the many designated parking spots. She would have preferred to just dock with the station instead of landing inside of it, but her ship was only a small fighter and they didn't have the type of docking

system required for her to dock outside. She opened her cockpit and climbed out onto the flight deck. The air was stale. She guessed it was from a faulty air filtration system. Rachial walked over to the door leading to the main area of the station. When she reached the main area, she saw multiple food stands and different salesmen trying to sell their merchandise to the passing travelers. She looked at the different food stands, as she was hungry and she didn't want to eat an M.R.E. for lunch. She decided to go with the food stand furthest from her, because the closer one looked kind of dirty. She looked at the food available and decided to get a couple corndogs. She paid the man running the stand and he gave her two corndogs in a small cardboard tray. Rachial pushed the ketchup pump waiting for the red, pasty fluid to come out of the spout. It came out in small splatters making small droplets on her corndogs.

After Rachial finished eating her lunch, she went back to the hangar where she searched for the technician so she could purchase some fuel for her ship. It didn't take her very long. The man was sleeping in the hangar control room. She knocked lightly on the door, but the man remained asleep. She knocked again, this time lot harder. The man stirred in his sleep, then jumped up out of his chair and swung his hand around so it was aiming right at her face. An empty coffee mug was in his hands.

Realizing what he had done, the man blushed slightly as he lowered his cup. "What can I do for you?"

"I need some fuel for my ship, the Wombat fighter over there."

"Okay, how much did you want?"

"Just fill her up, please."

"Okay."

The man pressed a few buttons and the automated fueling system began fueling her ship. "Is there anything else you need?"

"No that's all, thank you."

"Okay that will be 500. And if you are traveling past Creator's Belt, you might want to hire and escort, I was told earlier today there is a group of bandits with a portal stopper. They have been attacking ships as they fly by."

"I think I should be fine, but thanks for the info."

She left the control room and headed for her ship. She really didn't want to climb back in her ship yet. What she really wanted to do was to go for a run and get her legs stretched out, but she was going to have to settle for the walk she had taken, because there was no place for her to run. She climbed into her ship and prepped it for launch.

Moments later she piloted her ship back in the portal and was left waiting to arrive at her destination. This time the trip would not take as long because she was going to stop at one of the planets on the way to pick up a traveler's pass. The portal path that leads to *Aeolus* is blocked by an energy nebula. There were two ways to get past the nebula. The first was to drop out of the portal and maneuver your way through the nebula at slow speeds. The second was to use the resistance tube. The resistance tube is a pathway where the nebula is held back by force fields allowing a ship to travel using their portal drives, to cross the energy nebula in a matter of seconds. Because of the size of the energy nebula, it would take up to 10 hours to make it through the nebula. The down side to the tube is the cost. The resistance tube is owned by a large shipment company. The company charges a fee for every time a ship passes through the tube. This is why Rachial was going to get the traveler's pass. It allowed a person to travel through the tube without any of the fees.

About an hour later, Rachial brought her ship out of portal transit above a brown planet. She didn't know very much about this planet, not even the name, only that the Peregrination Guild had an outpost there. The Peregrination Guild, or the P.G. as most people called them, was known for escorting people around the universe. If she took a test offered by the P.G., they would issue her a traveler's pass for free. This would save her the hefty transit fees for the using the tube.

As Rachial entered the atmosphere of the planet, she noticed a group of fighters approaching her position. Her comm beeped, she pressed the button to open a channel.

"This is the Peregrination Guild, we are picking up a group of six fighters headed your direction. They are not responding to any of our messages and won't identify. We are launching support fighters now, but they are not going to reach you before they intercept you."

"I should be able to hold them off for a little while if they do try anything, thanks for the heads up."

Rachial made a sharp turn in her ship, directing it away from the unidentified fighters. If anything, she should be able to outrun them. The fighters kept moving closer so she increased her speed. After increasing her speed a few times, the fighters were starting to fall behind. It wasn't over so easily though; she looked down at her sensor screen to see how far away the ships were and noticed six new ships ahead of her. They were the same as the ships following her, so they couldn't be the support ship that had been launched. She was headed right for them. Pushing the flight yoke forward, she sent her ship into a dive. She continued the dive with the 12 ships right on her tail. At the very last moment, Rachial pulled the yoke back as hard as she could. As soon as she pulled it back, her training kicked in and she pulled a complete loop and opened fire on the fighters that had been behind her. She hit one of the ships in the wing; it lost control and smashed into the ground. The other fighters had managed to pull off to the side to avoid getting hit. A bright red light started flashing and a klaxon sounded in Rachial's ears. She had a fighter behind her. She pulled a few tight maneuvers trying to escape the fighter that had locked onto her. The red light turned off for a moment, but came on again as the fighter recovered from the evasive maneuvers.

Rachial couldn't get the fighter off her tail, and the fighter had opened fire on her ship. The fighter's weapons had missed so far, but it was only a matter of seconds before they would hit her. Suddenly the alarm and light went out. Rachial looked at her sensor screen. The fighters that had been attacking her were gone, only derbies and friendly fighters were on her screen. Her comm system had come to life again.

"This is P.G. escort fighter thirty-seven. The enemy fighters have been taken care of. If you will follow me, I will take you to the landing pad."

"Thanks for the support. I am locking formation with you now."

Rachial maneuvered her ship into formation alongside the other fighter. Moments later they reached a clearing where she was told to land her ship. She set her ship down on the ground and the other fighters landed next to her ship. She watched as the pilots from the other ships disembarked and she followed suit. The pilot to the ship she had joined formation with came up to her and extended his hand.

"Welcome to P.G. headquarters for this section. If you walk this way, I will introduce you to our area leader."

The man led her inside the base, which wasn't very big from what she could see of it. The whole base could fit inside the Galactica hangar. She was brought into a small reception room where she was told to wait. She sat down on bench that was against the wall opposite the door

she was waiting to go through. She had waited only a moment before the door opened and a lady, who appeared to be in her late forties, greeted her.

"Hi, My name is Kathryn Lars, I am the head representative of the P.G. for this sector, what can I help you with?"

"Hello, I'm Rachial Williams and I wanted to apply for a traveler's pass."

"Okay. To get a traveler's pass you will need to take a test about spacecraft and piloting. Are you ready to take it?"

"Yes, I am ready."

"Good, then I will set you up. Please come into my office."

Rachial followed her into the office and took a seat in the chair Kathryn had motioned to. She then walked behind her desk and pulled open the drawer. Rachial heard papers being shuffled around and then Kathryn placed a sheet of paper on the desk.

"Here is the test. Just fill out the answers and tell me when are done."

Rachial picked up the piece of paper and looked it over. "How long will it take to get the results back?"

"We normally tell people it will take about a week, but since we don't get very many people taking the test at this base, I will be able to look it over as soon as you are done taking it. I am going to leave the room while you take the test. Press the button on the desk here when you are done."

Rachial read each of the questions then answered them. The test took her about ten minutes. After she was done, Rachial pressed the button the lady had shown her before leaving. The door opened and Kathryn came back in.

"All done?" she asked.

"Yes, here it is."

Taking the paper, she sat down behind the desk and pulled open the drawer again. Pulling out another piece of paper, she set it on the desk alongside the test Rachial had just taken. Rachial watched as Kathryn checked the test sheet.

"Congratulations, you passed," she said, setting the papers on the desk.

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Now that she had her traveler's pass, she could go through the resistance tube without the large fee; she set a course and entered the portal transit. She was in the portal for an hour before she reached the tube. Upon reaching the tube, she brought her ship out of the portal.

The resistance tube was placed smack dab in the center of a huge energy nebula. As she approached the belt, she noticed a group of cargo ships that were being attacked by smaller fighters. Her sensors showed that there were 6 cargo ships and 23 fighters. The sensors were also picking up large ships a little further way from the battle. Rachial assumed the fighters had come from them. Rachial could tell the cargo ships were in trouble. She opened a communication to one of the cargo vessels.

"Hello, my name is Rachial Williams, I am in a Wombat fighter and I have a full payload." Just as she thought, the attacked fighter had ceased the attack for the moment. Her bluff had worked. It would not last for very long because their sensors would determine that her cargo pod was empty. The freighter took advantage of the opportunity and moved towards the tube. Three of the cargo ships made it through before the fighters opened fire again. The enemy seemed to have gotten angry about the trick, because the larger ships that had been waiting in the background were now moving into the battle. Rachial armed her weapons and engaged the fighters. She had destroyed three of them, but it was taking her too long. The enemy fighters



were preventing her from entering the portal and the cargo ships were stuck as well. She was trying to protect the freighters, but one of them had taken heavy damage. She had to do something else. She had taken out another fighter, but it was not enough. Rachial closed her eyes and concentrated really hard. She entered DreamPhase. Once she was in DreamPhase, she activated the holographic generators that she had installed. She reprogrammed the emitters and started the program.

Hundreds of portals opened in space and P.G. ships emerged from the portals. A communication was broadcast on all frequencies.

"This is the P.G. These ships are under our protection, leave now or face punishment for attacking ships under our protection."

After the communication ended, the P.G. ships moved forward into positions where they could take out the enemy fighters. The enemy fighters stopped firing their weapons and slowly retreated from the battle area. The cargo ship flew into the tube and activated its portal engine. Rachial flew hers into the tube and activated her portal drive. Just as the portal window opened, the P.G. ships disappeared. The enemy, realizing they had been fooled, opened fire on the Wombat fighter, but the ship had already entered the portal and their shots bounced aimlessly around the energy nebula belt until they were absorbed by the nebula.

Rachial's plan had worked, but unfortunately it used up almost all of her fuel to do it. She was going to have to stop someplace to refuel.

On the other side of the tube, Rachial exited the portal. The cargo ships were all waiting at the end for their traveling partner. When she came through, they opened a comm channel to her. "Thank you very much for assisting us back there until the P.G came. We are in your debt."

"You are welcome. Those were not P.G ships back there. They were holographic ships I created. It worked, but it uses a lot of power, so I am very low on fuel. Do you know how far it is to the nearest planet where I can refuel?"

"The next planet is a 4 hour jump from here, we are headed there. I would offer you some of our fuel, but it wouldn't work with your fighter."

"I don't have enough fuel to make it there; do you think I could get a ride?"

"Sure, we have enough room inside the cargo bay for your fighter. I will open the doors now so you can fly inside."

"Thank you so much."

"It is the least we can do."

Rachial piloted her ship up into the cargo bay of the freighter she had just saved. The cargo bay was large enough to hold at least 5 ships the size as hers. She watched as the outer bay door closed. Her sensors showed the atmosphere slowly returning to normal. When it reached a breathable atmosphere, the inner bay doors opened and a man and a woman walked into the bay. Rachial opened the cockpit and climbed out. The two people walked over to greet her. She recognized the man as the captain that she had talked to over the comm.

"Welcome aboard the *Saratoga*, I'm Captain Isaac Haling, and this is my lovely wife, Jessica."

"Rachial Williams," she said, shaking their hands.

"As I mentioned earlier, we have another 4 hours till we reach the next planet. So make yourself at home. I have to go back to the bridge to pilot the ship, but my wife can help you if you have any questions."

"Thank you," she said as the man left the room.

He turned back and looked at her. "You're welcome."

Jessica watched as her husband left. After the door closed again, she looked over to Rachial. "How about a tour of the ship, it isn't much, but it will pass the time."

"That sounds good to me."

They walked out of the cargo bay and into a small corridor. "You are lucky, because you are getting a tour when we are fully manned. Usually our crew is a lot smaller, but we are transporting live animals, so we have crew assigned to take care of them."

"How often do you transport animals?"

"Not very often, but we do transport more animals than most cargo ships. We take good care of the animals so people request that we transport them. We don't mind, because we charge a higher price than we need to."

"Most companies do. I am working for Galactica shipping and Galactica is making six times more on express shipping than they were on their flat rate service."

"Oh, I worked for Galactica for a while, but that was many years ago. How long have you been working for them?"

"For 6 months now."

They approached a door and Jessica pressed a few buttons on the keypad and the door slid open. They both stepped through into another cargo hold. This one was full of small crates. Most of the crates had steel bars on one end. She assumed the animals were being kept in the cages.

"Are you on a delivery run now, or are you on vacation?"

"I am delivering a package to *Aeolus*. My break starts after I drop off the package."

"*Aeolus* is a long way from *Ecasty*. Is it a special delivery?"

"Yes it is. Normally I just do the express shipment runs, but I was heading out here for my break anyway, so I was asked to deliver a package."

"I see. Well here we are in the second cargo hold. All the animals are in this room. Most of them are just animals from *Earth* that you might find in zoo, but we have a special in here this time. Come on I'll show you," Jessica said, leading Rachial through the maze of crates. As she walked past, she saw a zebra, a couple goats, an emu, and a pair of badgers. There were hundreds of different types of animals. They continued walking, finally stopping in front of a glass case.

"This is it, he is in there," said Jessica.

Rachial leaned forward, but couldn't see anything. "Are you sure? I don't see anything?"

Jessica just laughed and reached over to a switch on the side of the case. Flipping the switch, an ultraviolet light came on lighting up the insides of the case. That was when the creature became visible. It was about a meter long and about 20 centimeters wide. It looked like a giant yellow worm.

"Wow, what is that?"

"That is a Celestialannelid, but we just call it a space worm. They eat anything organic that can fit in their mouths and live in the vacuum of space. It is a result of Ambi-tech's experimentation with D.N.A manipulation. There are five in existence."

"It is amazing."

"Wait until you see it eat," said Jessica, flipping the UV light off. She then picked up a box of plants that were next to the case. She opened the lid on the case and dropped a plant inside and closed the lid. The plant slowly lifted off the ground and then started getting smashed and crushed, as it was just floating in mid-air. It looked very strange.

"I am just glad Keith Williams was able to get Ambi-tech to leave. As amazing as this worm is, it is strange and really doesn't fit in," commented Jessica.

Rachial felt sorry for the creature, it was all alone. It would probably never encounter any of its kind again. She was glad that Ambi-tech had been forced to leave along with the Jahory they had created. She wasn't even around when it happened, but Ambi-tech had created a race of genetically-altered beings called the Jahory and there was a war over it. The war lasted three years. A man named Keith Williams was able to get Ambi-tech and the Jahory to leave. He had stopped the war, but the aftermath was still there. She had grown up in the aftermath. She had been told that nobody knew who her parents were, but that they probably died in the war. She hated the war for this reason. If it wasn't for the war, she might have been able to meet her parents. This was the reason Keith Williams was her hero. When she was younger she had fantasized that she was Keith's daughter, because they had the same last name, but later she found out Keith did have a daughter and that she was murdered along with him.

Rachial's thoughts were interrupted when Jessica asked her something. "If you are ready, I can show you the rest of the ship."

"Sure," she said, turning to follow the lady.

They walked out of the cargo hold, back into the corridor. "What ever happened to Keith Williams's murderer anyway? Did they ever find out who murdered him?"

"No, they never did. For all they know he could still be out there. It is sad, because Keith Williams was a great man," Jessica frowned.

"I know. He is my hero. I hope that someday, I will be able to do something as good as what he did."

"You are a good person. I don't think should have any trouble when your time comes. Look, you already saved us. If you hadn't come along, the rest of the crew from the different cargo ships wouldn't be here right now," she smiled.

"Yeah, but it doesn't feel like I'm doing enough. I want to be able to help more."

Jessica laughed silently, "Don't worry, I believe you will."

"Thanks. It means a lot to hear someone say that."

"One day you are going to make some man a very happy one," Jessica teased.

Rachial blushed and tried to laugh her embarrassment off.

They continued walking down the corridor, both laughing a little as they continued the tour of the ship.

Three and a half hours later on the bridge of the *Saratoga*, Rachial and Jessica walked into the large room and approached the pilot's station. Isaac was sitting at the helm.

"Welcome to the planet of..." he looked at his screen, "*Cartouche*. The planet does have a refueling station, so you will be able to refill your ship," he said, standing up from his chair.

"I would like to stay and talk a little longer, but I have to go. Thank you so much for having me; it was a very enjoyable time."

"It was no problem at all. Maybe we will see you around sometime."

"I hope so, Have a safe journey."

"You too."

Rachial turned to Jessica. "Thanks for the tour, it was a lot of fun and I enjoyed talking to you."

"I enjoyed talking to you as well. I hope to see you again soon and be careful on the planet; there are a lot of gangs down there."

"I will," she promised. Rachial left the bridge and went down to the hangar where her ship was waiting.

The cargo bay doors opened moments later and Rachial flew her ship down to the planet where she located the nearest fuel station. The station was a very rundown place, but she landed anyway. She paid for her fuel and had her ship filled up. As she waited, Rachial ran a few sensor sweeps of the area, looking for possible traps or any enemy ships, but so far nothing had shown up. Her ship was almost finished fueling when two large cruiser class ships flew over her. She watched on her screen as they turned around and swooped down on her position. They began scanning her ship. She wasn't sure if they were looking for something, or if they were checking to see if they out-gunned her. Either way she didn't like it. Her ship was done refueling so she activated her shield and slowly moved it away from the station. The ships opened fire. Her ship took the impact; she was too close to evade the shot. Rachial accelerated, and they fired again. The weapons were only disabling shots. Whoever they were wanted her alive, or her ship in one piece. Rachial put her ship in a loop and came out behind the two cruisers. She fired two missiles, but they had no effect. Her sensors were still returning the data from her attack when the ships unloaded another volley of blasts. Her shields were weakening. The sensor's data came back; this was not good. Nothing she had in her armaments would have any effect on their shield. She was going to have to run.

She could try and fly out into space and then go into portal transit, or she could try and evade them by flying into the city and then try and make the jump. She decided to try and evade them in the city, because the ships seemed to be pretty large, but they seemed to be able to keep up to her. She flew her ship straight towards the downtown area. Her pursuers followed her, flying their ship right into the narrow streets. She pulled a few tight turns through the streets, avoiding the massive buildings. They kept following her; she had to try something else. Her weapons couldn't damage the ships, but they could damage the building she was flying around. She looked around for a building that would be empty, if she timed it right, she could get one of the buildings to fall over onto one of the ships trapping it and possibly damaging it.

There it was, a building in the distance, she would reach it in about 45 seconds. The building looked to be about 200 stories tall, but half of them were under construction. She used her sensors to scan the building. It was empty. She fired one of her missiles. After the missile had launched, she punched the throttle. Her ship rocketed past the high-yield warhead. She flew her ship right next to the building. She passed within 4 feet of the building. The other ship increased its speed to follow her. The missiles impacted the building and exploded into a huge fireball, and the building started tipping. The cruiser didn't have time to avoid the building as it fell right into its path. The cruiser slammed into the building. The impact caught the ship right on its side and the cruiser went into a lateral spin. The massive ship slammed into the building next to the one that had been under construction and came to a complete stop.

Rachial didn't have time to check if the ship had been damaged, because she needed to escape while there was only one ship. She kept the throttle at full for a few seconds longer before she had to slow down to avoid hitting the buildings while she turned onto a different street. The other ship had appeared right behind her where the first ship had been moments ago. Her shields were very weak now; they could only take a few more hits before they collapsed completely. Maybe she could use the holo-emitters again. She activated the system and then flew her ship up above the city into the open sky. When she flew up into the sky, there was a small fleet of P.G. fighters. The same communication as last time played again over the radio. The cruiser stopped following her for a moment, but then started after her again. It didn't work and now she was in

the open. She put her ship into a dive. Just before her view of the horizon was blocked by the skyscrapers, she noticed 6 more cruisers moving in towards her.

She had to do something quickly or there wouldn't be anything she could do. She saw a tunnel. Maybe she could get the ship to follow her into the tunnel and then she could use another missile to trap the ship. She scanned for life signs. There were 30 possible: too many, she couldn't do it. One person was too many and the possible deaths of people in the building that that cruiser had smashed into were too much. She kept flying, she wasn't going to give up, but she knew that unless something happened, they were going to get her. There was nothing she could do, so she just kept flying.

In a matter of minutes, they had surrounded her side and were channeling her forward. As Rachial pulled back on the flight yoke raising the ship above the building, she did a barrel roll to escape the volley of laser bolts that were fired on her ship. There was an ocean a little ways away from where she was. There wouldn't be any cover, but at least if they shot her down she might survive. Her ship took another hit and the shields gave out, leaving her defenseless. Four of the ships were behind her now, she had lost track of the other three. She slammed the throttle back and hit the reverse thrust. The four cruisers flew right past her. She pushed the throttle forward again and pulled the flight yoke back. Her ship had made it away from them. Maybe, just maybe she could make it far enough away from the planet to activate a portal.

Rachial heard a loud pop and all her ships systems shut down. *That would be a no*, she thought to herself. There was no way to escape now. Her ship was just going to fall until it hit the ground. The cruisers surrounded her as she fell and activated some kind of force field that had slowed her descent, but only marginally. She looked out through her cockpit and saw the ocean rapidly growing closer. Rachial braced herself for impact as the water drew closer. *Spuloosh...* her ship hit the water. Rachial hit her head on the dash of her ship and passed out. Her ship slowly started sinking to the bottom of the ocean.

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Light years away, Mr. Lotus was sitting at his desk with a large holographic projection of a bounty hunter displayed in front of his desk.

"Tell me you have the girl."

"I can't. She was attacked by a gang of thieves before I could make my move. I don't know where she is right now, but they took her ship and her cargo, so it should only be a matter of time before I have her."

"It better not take too long."

"It won't," the hologram faded away.

"You had better hope so," said Mr. Lotus to the air around him in the empty room. He then reached over and pressed a button on his desk. "Send him in."

## Chapter 7

**Pain, immense pain that was the first thing she felt. Her head hurt. She didn't know** why it hurt, but she wanted it to stop. She opened her eyes, ready to close them if the light was too bright but it wasn't. It was very dim. She was lying on her back. She could see a black sky. There were only a few stars. She could see two small moons. They were smaller than any moons she had seen before. She tried to remember what had happened, but she couldn't because the pain

in her head was too strong. It hurt when she tried to remember. She rolled over onto her side; there was a building in front of her. She looked around, trying not to jerk her head around. She was in some type of alley. She lay there for a while. Slowly the pain settled down a bit and she tried to remember what had happened. She was in her ship and someone was chasing her then... then she remembered. Her ship went down and she hit her head. *I probably have a concussion*, she thought. *Where am I?* Was her next thought. Her third thought had to do with what she would do for a drink of water. Her throat hurt. Slowly she sat up. She instantly regretted it. She felt very dizzy. She placed her hand on her forehead trying to ease the pain. It helped a little, but not much. She looked at her watch; it had been almost 14 hours ago when she had crashed. She thought through her situation trying to think of what to do next. At least whoever it was that attacked her only wanted her cargo or ship. *DreamPhase*, she thought, and reached for her ponytail. The rubber band was still there. She sighed in relief. They must have been after the package she was supposed to deliver. Somehow she was going to have to get it back, along with her ship. She reached into her pocket, but it was empty. They had taken the remote for her ship. It figures, it couldn't be that simple. She decided the first thing she should try and do was to stand up. She tried to stand and the dizziness returned. She almost collapsed. She decided it was not time to stand up yet.

He had watched her ship hit the ocean, then he had waited for them to pull her ship back out. He had waited as they dumped her in the alley, then left with a small package. He didn't have much choice at that point; he had to follow them to make sure it wasn't *DreamPhase*. He had placed a tracer on the girl and followed the crooks to their lair. They had impressive security. He had almost decided to just grab the girl and head back, but he knew Mr. Lotus wouldn't pay him until he had both the girl and *DreamPhase* in his hands. Now he was busy infiltrating the thieves' hideout. At least the bounty had been raised enough to make it worth it. He had made it past twelve guards already. If anything, this was the most secure place run by thieves he had ever seen.

The thieves' den was below ground. It was a massive underground bunker. The bunker was probably from some long-since ended war. He was two levels down now and figured the place had at least twenty. The quickest way to find the package would be to go to the security room and find the recordings. The security room was most likely on the bottom floor, so that is where he had to go. He had found an elevator and had climbed into the shaft. That had taken him twenty minutes to do when he was avoiding the cameras. Once he made it into the shaft, he began his decent slowly. He had to stop to avoid cameras that had been placed in the shaft. An hour later, he reached the bottom of the shaft.

Rachial's head had stopped aching enough for her to stand and even walk. She decided the best thing she could do was try and find out where her ship was. She had *DreamPhase*, so she just had to get into range of some communication channels. Unfortunately for her, the place she was laying was completely dead, void of any signals. She had walked down the street until she found a factory of sorts. The building looked like they might have a network. She tried connecting again. This time she was able to get a connection. It would take her a while to hack into their system and she couldn't just stand out in the street. She looked around; there was a place underneath the steps that led up to the entryway of the building. She sat down underneath the steps and closed her eyes.

Moments later she was standing in her large, blue-tinted world again. Looking behind her, she could see the wall with paper pieces. Ahead of her was a very large brick wall. She walked over to her walls of paper and looked around. She walked over to a wall called Security. The wall was empty, because she hadn't done any programming in that area. Rachial closed her eyes in the digital world of hers. Blue letters and numbers surrounded her; they seemed to be made out of energy, or some type of projection. They were code fragments. They swirled around her head. Soon she was surrounded by a blur of swarming code. Then she opened her eyes. The blue code fragments gathered in front of her face then formed a piece of blue paper. Rachial grabbed the piece of paper and placed it on the wall. The paper changed color; it was not a white sheet of paper. It looked like the rest of the paper pieces that were attached to the walls around her.

She reached out and activated the program just as she had done with the training program before. Rachial was moved outside of the walled area back to the spot where she had entered the world. She turned to look behind her. A very large steel wall appeared behind her. This wall shrimped the brick wall that was standing in front of her. Rachial turned back to see a glove forming on the ground. The glove was blue and looked like it was made out of energy. She reached down and picked it up and put it on her hand. She flexed the glove a little bit before she walked up to the brick wall. She took the glove and placed it on the wall. The bricks began to turn into dust. She moved her hand over the wall to clear a spot to open it so she could walk through. Behind the wall, there were many different transparent walls covered with paper pieces. Rachial walked through the gap in the wall and started looking through the aisles of different walls, each covered with paper.

She wasn't looking for anything in this building, only a connection to the internet, so the papers meant nothing to her. She looked through the different aisles looking for the connection. It didn't take her long before she was able to find it. From there she went to another system where she broke through another firewall.

She reached the computer database for one of the used ship dealers. There were transparent walls here, too, covered with paper, but here the walls were greenish instead of blue. The pieces of paper had images of different spaceships on them. These walls represented the database of ships this place had in storage. She looked through the different ships. Her ship was nowhere to be found, so she left and went to the next dealer's virtual ship lot. She had looked through five different places before she found her ship. She found the location of the store, by looking at the return shipping address that was printed on records for outgoing packages. She then looked up the location of the building she was next to. It was about 10 miles away. Rachial knew she wouldn't be able to run or walk that far and she didn't have money to pay a taxi fee. That was when she got an idea. She accessed the company's account information. There would be plenty of funds to pay for a small taxi fee. Rachial felt bad about having to steal the money from the company, but didn't have much choice. She would have to pay the company back later.

About 10 minutes later a taxi cab pulled up to the front of the dark building. Rachial came out from under the steps and climbed into the taxi. When she entered the taxi she was surprised to see a real driver and not a robot sitting in the front seat. She was glad, because the robotic taxis were so slow and there was no way to get them moving faster. At least with a human driver there was a possibility. The driver turned and looked back at her. "Are you Miss Williams?"

"Yes, I am," she replied coolly.

"Okay, your fare has already been paid. Please enjoy the ride."

Rachial sat back in her seat and waited for the taxi to reach its destination. It didn't take long before she was dropped off at the shipyard.

The shipyard was out in the open, but there were multiple security cameras in place around the area. There was a fifteen-foot fence surrounding the shipyard. An entrance was located at the front of the yard. Rachial walked over and looked around. The lock on the fence was an older style and had not been hooked up to a computer, so she would have to find another way in. At least the cameras were tied into the computer system. Rachial closed her eyes and concentrated. Moments later the cameras were disabled. She walked over to the fence and stared climbing. She was really sore still, but she didn't have much choice; she had to get her ship back before the package made it too far to track. Rachial was glad that she had spent her free time exercising and getting ready for this. She wasn't sure that if she hadn't, she would be able to climb the fence when she was in this much pain.

**Once he had reached the bottom of the elevator He opened a tiny crack and peered** out into the hallway. There weren't any guards in the hallway, but there was a camera. He didn't want to fight his way through the thugs who performed as guards here. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small cylinder that looked like a flashlight. He pressed a button on the back of the cylinder and a little screen extended from the middle of the object. He held the device up to the crack in the door and aimed it at the camera in the hallway. Looking on the screen, he could see the reflection of the wall on the camera's lens. He pressed the button again and a little red light started flashing on the screen. He let the light flash for a few seconds before hitting the button again. This time the screen retracted. He pressed the button once more, then tossed the cylinder out into the hallway. When the device landed, it began to emit a holographic image projected right in front of the camera. The bounty hunter then forced the doors open the rest of the way and stepped out into the hallway.

At the end of the hallway there was a door labeled *Security*. This is where the camera footage would be. He pulled his weapon out of its holster. He opened the door, spotted his targets and mercilessly opened fire. The three men who had been watching the cameras were laying on the floor moments later. The bounty hunter walked over to one of the computers and started reviewing the footage. After reviewing most of the footage from the day before, he found what he was looking for. The package had been moved to a room that was on the third story below ground. There were no cameras in the room, so he guessed that there would be extra guards in the room. He would have to work quickly from here on out, because it wouldn't be long before the security guards were found dead. The bounty hunter turned off the security camera's recorder. He then walked back out into the hall way and into the elevator.

**Rachial had climbed over the fence and was making her way down the other side.** She made it little over halfway down the fence and then jumped the rest of the way. She instantly regretted it. The dizziness returned and she collapsed on the ground in pain. She sat on the ground a moment letting the dizzy spell pass over before she stood again and made her way through the shipyard looking for her ship. She found it a few minutes later and walked over to it. There was a docking clamp holding it down. The clamp was an older type, just like the fence,



and couldn't be opened by way of the computer system. She had to think of some way to break the lock. There wasn't anything in her ship, so she started walking down the rows of ships again looking for something that might work.

She stopped in front of an old battle cruiser. The ship was in really bad shape, but she remembered reading about them when she was a little kid. The ships were taken out of service almost right after they were released, because the power core would go into meltdown and the acid-based core would burn through the ship and create holes that could not be patched soon enough before the atmosphere would leak out. She opened the hatch and climbed inside the ship. The inside on the ship was a mess; scraps of metal were lying all over the decks. She walked back to where the power core was. The unit was still intact. Rachial unlatched the power core from the ship and carried it back to her ship.

When she got back to her ship she turned the top of the power core and tipped it over while she held it above the lock that was holding her ship. The acid from the power core burned through the clamps in a matter a seconds. Rachial sealed the core and ran back to the ship and put it back. When she got back to her ship she noticed small holes in the ground below where the clamps had been. Rachial climbed into her ship and started up the engines. Luckily, her fuel was still full, so she wouldn't have to refuel. *Now to find the package*, she thought. She was glad she decided to place a tracer on the package. Rachial started her ship and slowly brought it out of the shipyard. Once she was in the air, she activated the tracer system. The tracer showed that it was right in her ship. That couldn't be right. She checked it again. It still showed right inside her ship. Maybe they placed a tracer on her and it was interfering. She looked around her cockpit, and finally found a tag that had been clipped onto the back of her shirt. She opened her cockpit and threw the tracer out into the air and watched as it fell out of view.

Rachial watched her sensor screen as the tracer fell. After the tracer fell a little while, the interference was gone and she found the tracer for her package. She flew her ship over to where the tracer signal was coming from. Once she made, her sensors told her that the tracer was underground. Rachial landed her ship, then reached under the seat and pulled out a small pistol, an old 9 mm projectile weapon. She then made her way towards the signal.

**The bounty hunter had made it up the elevator and was almost to the room where the package was.** As he made his way down the hallway, a guard came around the corner at the end of the hall. The bounty hunter dove out of view. He stayed in place until the guard had walked past. After the guard walked around the corner, the bounty hunter stepped out from his hiding place. Around the corner he found the door to the room where he needed to go. He decided he might need a grenade because there were probably more guards inside the room. He also pulled out his gun and held it at the ready before opening the door. When he opened the door, the first thing he saw was three guards scrambling to draw their weapons. The bounty hunter chucked the grenade into the room and closed the door. He took a few steps back and waited.

There was a loud bang and the door was knocked right off its hinges. The bounty hunter walked into the room gun raised and looked around. There were scraps of various things all around the room. Along the far side of the wall was a safe. He walked over and examined it. It hadn't been damaged, so he would be able to open it easily. The bounty hunter reached into another one of his pockets and pulled out another device. On the front it had two buttons, a green and red one. He placed it over the safe's keypad and pressed the green button. There was a small

clicking noise the device emitted. A couple minutes passed, then the device made a small beep. The bounty hunter took the device and put it back in his pocket. He then reached over and opened the safe.

**Rachial had made it into the building without being detected. There was only one** guard patrolling the entrance and she had been able to sneak by easily. It was almost too easy; she was paying very close attention to what was happening around her, she didn't want to fall into a trap. She found the elevator, it was empty and she had only seen the one security guard so far. Rachial followed the signal two floors down and then got off the elevator in a hallway and started walking down it until she noticed some debris lying on the ground. She drew the 9 mm and held it in front of her as she rounded the corner. There she found a door lying on the ground; it looked like it had been blown clean off from the inside of the room up ahead.

She looked down at her hand-held tracer and it showed the signal coming from inside the room. Rachial moved to the doorway, gun raised in front of her. What she saw shocked her. Standing up against the far wall in the room was the bounty hunter who had tried to capture her before. A security guard was holding a gun to his neck demanding the package that was in his hand. It was the package she was supposed to deliver.

"I said to give me the package," the guard jabbed him in the back with his gun.

"I already told you no. You aren't going to kill me; I am worth a couple thousand more alive." This angered the guard and he kicked the bounty hunter in the back of his legs.

"When the Boss gets here, he'll teach you a lesson," snorted the guard.

Rachial didn't really want to kill the guard, even though he wouldn't hesitate shooting her, so she crept across the floor. She waited until she was right behind him and then hit him over the head with her gun. The guard slumped to the ground. Rachial stepped back and tried to aim her weapon at the bounty hunter, but it was too late, the bounty hunter had spun around and grabbed her wrists. The bounty hunter twisted her hands and got her to release the weapon very quickly. He then pushed her towards the door.

"This sure was convenient, I didn't even need to come looking for you. Walk."

Rachial walked towards the door with the bounty hunter right behind her. She had to think of a way to get out of this. She was upset at herself for letting the bounty hunter get the better of her. They walked to the elevator and went to the surface. When they stepped into the elevator, Rachial thought of what she was going to do. She closed her eyes and activated her ship's engines and flew it over next to the entrance to the thieves' den. As they exited the elevator, Rachial spun around and kicked the bounty hunter. He jumped back out of instinct. She also jumped back. Rachial closed her eyes and flew her ship over and made it hover right above her. The bounty hunter had a surprised look on his face. He brought both his weapon and Rachial's 9 mm to bear on her.

Rachial was looking at him through her ship's sensors. She raised her ship's shield and armed the weapons systems.

"Please hand over the package and my weapon."

The bounty hunter walked up to the shield and placed both guns on the ground and took a few steps back.

"You'll have to turn off the shield to get the package," he said holding it out in front of him. Rachial looked at him with the ship's sensors and could see the spring-loaded blade that

was strapped to his wrist. If he just twitched the right way, it would spring out and slice his unsuspecting prey.

Rachial fired her ship's weapon once. The blast hit the ground just feet away from the bounty hunter, leaving a black mark on the ground. Her ship moved forward until the shield was right in front of the bounty hunter. Rachial walked to the edge of the shield and stood right before him. Her eyes remained closed; she was viewing everything through her ship's sensors.

"That isn't what I said. If I wanted to be stabbed by the knife mounted on your wrist, I would have asked you to do it. Place the package on the ground and step back."

This time the bounty hunter listened to her and set the package down. As he stepped back he spoke up again.

"I will get you; it will only be a matter of time."

"You had better remember your position before you speak, I am going to spare your life this time, but next time I might decide not to."

The bounty hunter back away a bit then turned and left.

Rachial was pleased her plan had worked and hoped that the bounty hunter hadn't picked up how nervous she had been. She was glad she hadn't opened her eyes, because he would have been able to tell how scared she had been. It had been very close back there; she was relieved she had made it away from him.

Rachial climbed into her ship and left the planet. The next time someone warned her to be careful, she would take better heed of their warning.

As her ship left the planet, she looked at the star chart on her screen. The next stop before her destination would be the Yangtze space colony. The Yangtze space colony was a very large space station in orbit above a large gas giant. The station had originally been built and populated by the Chinese government, but after many years, the station housed as many nationalities as there were back on *Earth*. She would need to stop there for fuel before her final jump to *Aeolus*.

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The man had been waiting outside the office door for no more than ten minutes when he was called in. He spoke to the man sitting at the desk just as he walked in the door. "I understand you needed my services?"

"Yes, I was told you were one of the best, but you don't look like a bounty hunter."

"That is because I am not the one who goes for the bounty. Do you remember Ambi-tech and the Jahory they created?"

"Yes, but that was a few years ago. Why?"

"Let's just say, I have access to one of the Jahory."

"I see. Will it be able to do the job?"

"Mr. Lotus, you know my reputation," said the man in a disapproving voice.

"Yes, I do, Mr. Hakan, but I have fifteen other bounty hunters out there, three of them have outstanding reputations, but still no girl."

"I will bring her back within a week."

"See that you do and if you run into any other bounty hunters after three days, I want you to kill them for failing me."

"They will be taken care of." The man turned and left the office.

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Rachial was on her way to the Yangtze space colony. She was traveling in the portal, when her ship started to violently shake. She checked her display and it was showing a problem with the portal drive. She had to shut it down. As the portal drive shut down, the shaking stopped. *This was good*, she thought. It was still a few hundred light years to the Yangtze space colony. She looked at the readings as her ship came out of the portal. It looked like the damage was caused from the cruisers that had attacked her earlier. That was when she remembered that the old portal drive was still installed. It would take her a while longer to travel, but she would be able to reach the space colony.

Rachial linked the navigation system to the old drive and plotted a course. She was going to have to find another drive when she reached the colony, for now though, she would have to use the slower drive. Rachial was very impatient. She wasn't normally an impatient person, but she really didn't like having the name *murderer* attached to her. The other thing she didn't like was that this would give the bounty hunter time to catch up to her, or even pass her and set a trap.

The next three hours seemed to take forever for Rachial as she waited for her ship to reach the colony. She had decided to try and get some sleep, but the one time she did doze off, she awoke from a nightmare. In the dream the bounty hunter had captured her. She had tried to escape, but she wasn't able to. Rachial guessed the nightmare came from stress and fear. She was scared of what might happen if she didn't make it to *Aeolus* and back to prove her innocence. She tried not to face the fear, she would try to ignore it, so that it wouldn't distract her, but at night it would come back. This wasn't the first time she had the nightmare, she had had it a few times over the past six months.

After her nightmare she hadn't tried sleeping again; instead she looked through ship's computer for any information it had on the space colony. Because the ship had been an old military vessel, it had tactical data on most things. The down side was the information was about 4 years out of date. She found a file about the station on the computer and began to read, hoping it might take her mind off the dream.

Rachial read about the station for the next hour before her ship warned her that she was coming out of the portal. She knew most of the information that was in the file, but had learned about a custom she hadn't heard of before. When someone was convicted of murder, they would be sentenced to death immediately. Also if the security force found a fugitive who was running, they would give them safe haven unless they had been convicted of murder, in which case they would execute the person. Rachial was going to have to watch herself.

As her ship came out of the portal, she could see the space colony in front of her. The space colony was massive; it was about half the size of Earth. The space colony was shaped like a cylinder. There were many different docking bays positioned in different areas of the station. Two of the docking bays were larger than the rest and served huge cargo mining ships. There was one of the larger bays on either side of the station. Miner ships that used the larger bays were used to gather fuel from the gas giant. The fuel was used to keep the station running. A familiar beeping started and Rachial pressed the communication button, opening a channel.

"This is the Yangtze space colony security, Please identify yourself and your purpose of being here."

"My name is Rachial Williams, from Galactica shipping. My portal drive just burned out, so I am planning on buying another one here."

"Okay, your identification has been confirmed. Please dock at hangar bay 7 and enjoy your stay at the Yangtze space colony."

Rachial set her sensors to find a beacon marked hangar 7. It didn't take long. The docking station was near the center point of the station. Rachial flew her ship into the hangar and parked it in a space that had been designated for her. The hangar bay was about the size of Galactica's hangar. After Rachial had pulled the old drive out to look it over and found that it was completely shot. She would have to buy a new one.

Rachial set off to find a parts store. She walked down a few streets before she found a bus that would take her to the parts store. As Rachial rode the bus, she noticed restaurants as they went past in the window. She hadn't eaten in over five hours and the more restaurants they passed, the more she wanted to stop. Most of the restaurants she saw were Chinese. It seemed a little odd to her that there wasn't a larger variety available. Even though the station had originally been all Chinese inhabitants, it had been many years since that was the case. It wasn't that she didn't like Chinese food, because to her it really didn't matter what kind of food it was, it was that everywhere else she had been there was a very large assortment of restaurants. As she got further away from the hangar bay, she noticed more restaurants that were something other than Chinese.

A few minutes later she noticed a sign down the street; *Murphy's Stellar Parts*. She assumed that was the place where she was heading. Sure enough, the bus pulled up to the sidewalk in front of the building a few moments later. Rachial climbed out of the bus. She opened the door and heard a bell ring. There was a man standing behind the counter, he looked to be in his late thirties and wore an oil-stained shirt. Rachial looked around the shop. The front of the store was filled with display shelves. The shelves were covered with tools of every kind. Most of the tools Rachial had never seen before and had no idea what they were used for.

Rachial walked up to the counter. "What do you have for portal drives? Mine quit earlier and I need to buy a new one."

"We have three different models in stock, but I can order anything you need."

"No, it will take too long to order them, which three models do you have?"

"I'll go grab them."

The man then went into the back of the building and came out a while later carrying two of the portal drives. He set them on the counter and went into the back to grab the third model. He came back up a moment later with it. Rachial looked over the three drives as the shop owner explained the ups and downs to the drives. After a few minutes she decided which one she wanted and told the shop owner. He scanned the part and gave her the total.

"You mentioned that you were kind of in a hurry, would you like me to install it for you? It will only cost 100."

"How long will it take for you to install it?"

"It will take me about 5 hours; I just need to know where your ship is."

Rachial didn't really want to pay the money and normally she wouldn't, she would do the work herself, but she figured it would take her a whole day to install it. Rachial accepted his offer and told him where her ship was located.

After the matter with her ship was taken care of, she decided it was time to get something to eat. The restaurants she had passed earlier had made her really hungry. Rachial left the shop and headed for one of the restaurants.

The restaurant she ended up going to was just a fast food burger place. She went there because it was the closest place. There was a small line in front of the counter. Rachial stepped up to the back of the line and listened to the conversations around her.

There was a man standing in front of her wearing a fancy suit, holding brief case. The man was talking into a headset that was attached to his ear. From what he was saying on the phone, it

sounded like he was an insurance broker. Rachial guessed that the man was in a hurry because of the way he rocked back and forth looking towards the counter as he waited in the line.

In front of the man there was a husband and wife with their two little kids and a baby. The father was holding the baby, while the mother tried to wipe some goop off of one of the kid's faces. The goop looked very sticky and the mother was having a hard time wiping it off. Finally the mother gave up and took the child to the restroom. The other youngster followed her mother, leaving the father alone in the line with the baby.

Rachial turned to read the menu. There were different types of burgers, chicken, and salads, along with a multitude of side options to go along with a combo meal. She didn't really feel like eating burgers, so that narrowed down her choices considerably. The line moved forward again and Rachial was able to remove the salads from the menu items to choose from. Rachial looked around the room again. The restaurant wasn't very full, only about three people were seated at different tables. Behind her, another 10 people had made it to the line. She looked around the room for clock. It was about noon, so these people were all here for lunch.

The line moved again, this time only the businessman was left in front of her. Because it was lunch rush, another employee came over and took her place at the second register.

"I can help who's next over here."

Rachial walked over to the second register. "Hello," she said, greeting the girl at the register.

"Hi, will this be for here, or to go?"

"I'll have it here and I would like one of the chicken club sandwiches."

"Will that be all?"

"I'd like a glass of water to go with it, please."

"Okay, your total is 8.97."

Rachial reached into her back pocket and pulled out her wallet and set the required amount on the counter. As she pulled her money out and counted it, her sandwich and water were placed on a tray.

After she paid for her meal, she took the tray and found a seat on the far corner of the dining area. Rachial prayed and thanked God for her food, then began eating. The sandwich was really good. The chicken must have just come out of the fryer, because it tasted very fresh. She sat in the corner eating her food and watching as the other people made it through the line and found a spot. The restaurant was filling up quickly. After a while, two guys came over and sat in the table next to hers. One of them was carrying a newspaper. The front of the paper is what shocked her; it was her face. This was not good, if they looked at the paper, they would be able to recognize her. If this newspaper was floating around, everyone would know who she was and she would be turned in. This was not the best place to be turned in.

Rachial tilted her head away from them as she ate the rest of her food. The two men talked about different things. The whole time, one of them was flipping through the paper. The man who was reading the paper was facing her, all he would need to do is look straight ahead and he would see her. Rachial stood up from the table and grabbed her tray. As she stood, the man looked at her. The man smiled and went back to reading the paper. Rachial let out a breath she hadn't even realized she was holding. She turned and started walking towards the exit when the man stopped her.

"Excuse me, miss. Are you Rachial Williams?"

Rachial wasn't sure what she should do. She turned around and decided she would deny the claim even though she didn't like the idea of lying. "My name is Susan. I don't know who you are talking about."

"No, I am sure your name is Rachial," said the man, pulling out a phone.

"No you must be mistaken," said Rachial trying to convince the man.

It didn't work; the man kept dialing. Rachial was going to have to run and hope that they couldn't find her. Rachial turned to leave again and the employee who had helped her at the register was standing behind her. Complete dread consumed Rachial. What was she going to do? The employee grabbed her arm and started pulling her away from the man. Rachial tried to break her grip, but she had a surprisingly strong grasp.

The employee leaned in and whispered into her ear, "Don't struggle, just follow me, I am here to help."

Rachial didn't want to trust her, but she didn't really have a choice. She had already tried to escape and couldn't. The employee pulled her into the back of the restaurant. Once they were in the kitchen, Rachial's arm was released.

"Who are you and why did you take me back here?"

"My name is Katie, I am a friend of Dr. Shaum and he told me what happened. I heard what you and the man were saying and thought I should help you out of here." Katie then took her arm and led her to the back of the store. "The police will be here anytime now, so you should leave. You can go out through the back door here."

"How could you hear what the man said to me? We were at the back of the restaurant and it was very busy," asked Rachial.

"I was one of Ambi-tech's test subjects. I don't remember any of it as I was too little, but I have extremely good hearing and vision," she answered as she led Rachial to the back of the store. "Here is the door. I hope you are able to make it the rest of the way without any trouble. If you need any more help, just go to the address on this sheet of paper, I get off work in about an hour." Katie handed Rachial a piece of paper and then opened the door.

"Thank you so much. Oh, tell Steve I said hi," she said as she stepped out the door.

Rachial left the restaurant behind as she made her way back to the hangar. It hadn't been enough time for the portal drive to have been installed, but she could hide in the cargo pod while it was being installed. She figured the less time in the open, the better. Rachial motioned for a taxi because it would take too long to walk back to the hangar. If she walked, there would be a greater chance of the police catching her. As the taxi pulled up to the curb where she was standing, Rachial saw the police filing into the front of the restaurant. Rachial climbed into the cab and asked to be taken to the center hangar.

In the hangar moments later, Rachial stepped out of the taxi and paid the fare. The hangar was just as busy as it was earlier when she had landed her ship. People were rushing to and from their ships. Rachial walked over to where her ship had been parked. She stopped upon seeing it and took cover so as not to be seen. The mechanic from the shop was still working on it. There was a group of policemen surrounding her ship. This would make things harder. She could use the remote control and fly her ship away from the policemen, but where was she going to hide until her ship was fixed? That was when Rachial remember the piece of paper Katie had handed her earlier.

Rachial reached into her pocket and pulled out the note she had stuffed there when she was getting into the taxi. The note had an address on it, along with a phone number. Rachial took a mental note of the location of the address, then went in search of a map. She found one next to

the hangar exit. Rachial found where the house was supposed to be and started walking. The place wasn't very far from the hangar, so it would only take her a few minutes to get there.

After she arrived at the house, she walked up to the front door. The door was locked. Katie must not be back from work yet. The house wasn't very big, maybe a three-bedroom home. Rachial walked around to the back side of the house. There was a small. A deck extended off the back of the house. There were table and chairs on the deck. Rachial walked up the steps onto the deck, where she took a seat on one of the chairs. If she was going to have to wait for Katie to show up, she was going to do as far away from sight as possible. A run-in with the police was the last thing she needed right now.

Rachial waited in the deck chair for about 45 minutes before a car pulled up at the house. Rachial stood up from her spot on the deck and walked around the house back to the front yard. Katie was coming up the path to the house. Rachial stepped out next to the path where Katie was going to walk. Katie looked up and recognized her.

"Rachial, what are you doing here? Did something happen?" Katie asked, but before Rachial could respond, Katie spoke again. "You had better come inside quickly."

They both walked into the house. Katie then turned to Rachial and asked her what had happened. Rachial told her about the police guarding her ship and how she couldn't leave until it was fixed. Then Katie asked about how Rachial knew Dr. Shaum. Rachial told her that she had him as a teacher. Then Rachial had asked Katie how she knew him.

Katie and Steve had known each other since they were little and had grown up together on the Yangtze space colony. They had started dating when they were in high school. After high school, Steve had left for college and they had kept in contact. They had visited each other a few times. The last time they had seen each other, Steve had proposed to her and she had accepted. Katie was planning on moving to be near Steve next month.

Katie stood up from the couch where they had been seated. Rachial remained seated on the couch and looked at her watch. Still a couple more hours before her ship would be finished.

"Would you like something to drink?" asked Katie as she walked out to the kitchen.

"Sure, can I have some water please?" answered Rachial.

There was no reply, but Rachial heard the water faucet start running. Katie's head popped around the kitchen door way.

"Did you want any ice?"

"Yes, please."

Rachial then heard the sound of the ice machine running and the soft splash of water. Katie walked back into the room with two glasses. She walked over and handed the glass of water to Rachial, then sat down on the other side of the couch.

"How much longer do you think it will take before your ship is repaired?"

"It will take about two more hours."

"Want to watch a movie? I just rented one yesterday and I haven't gotten a chance to watch it."

"Sure, sounds like a good way to pass the time."

Katie got up and started the movie. The large projection screen flickered a little as it first came on, then it displayed a copyright warning before the movie began.



**The planet Aeolus was very highly populated. The planet served as a hub to most of** the planets that were further out. This would make it more difficult to set up a trap. He had been cleared to land his ship, but he didn't really know where he wanted to land. There was no way of knowing which computer the girl was after, so that would have to be his first task, figuring out where it was. The bounty hunter finally landed his ship in one of the many landing areas. After he secured his ship, he went to the largest college he could find. He guessed that the information would be stored on a computer on campus. There were a lot of colleges on the planet, but he guessed the largest college was most likely to receive data streams from the interplanetary network.

The campus was very large. The whole thing took up about five city blocks. There were lots of different buildings. The largest was in the center of the campus, a skyscraper. He walked into the main building and up to the receptionist's desk. The lady behind the desk looked up and smiled at him.

"Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Yes, I was wondering how the interplanetary network transfers work."

"Okay, I can't answer that, but I can get someone from our computer department to answer it for you. What was your name?" asked the receptionist, picking up a phone.

"Kaleb Nickerson."

The lady dialed a number on her phone and waited. She then started talking and told the person on the other end what he had told her. He thought it was ironic; he had just given his name out and hadn't realized it. It wouldn't make any difference, but he normally didn't like giving people his name, being a bounty hunter and all. The receptionist put the phone down and turned to him.

"One of the teachers from the computer department said he can meet with you and answer your questions. He doesn't have class for the next half hour, so he can talk to you now."

"Okay, where is his office?"

"Here is a map I printed out for you. His room number is on there," she said, handing him the map.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, Have a nice day."

"You too." The bounty hunter left the room in search of the office marked on his map. The office was in the building on the other side of the campus. Kaleb walked out into the campus grounds again. As soon as he left the building, he took off at a run towards the office building. Once he reached the building he started looking for the office. Most campuses were the same and once you learned to make your way through one campus, you could find your way through another easily. Kaleb had been to college before he became a bounty hunter, so he knew how the campuses worked. It had been a couple years since then and looking back brought back painful memories. He tried to think of something else, but it was very hard for him. Those memories liked to haunt him a lot, the source of those memories were the reason why he had become a bounty hunter.

It was his last semester and then he would be graduating as a medical doctor. That was when they had taken her from him, when Sarah had been killed. The memory hurt so badly. Why had she been the one shot? She was just a bystander. They killed her in cold blood. It hurt so much to remember, he try to clear his mind from the memory, but just couldn't seem to. He would always remember her eyes and the words she had spoken in her dying breaths.

*"Don't waste your life trying to avenge me." A weak smile formed on her face. Her eyes were starting to glaze over.*

*"No, you can't die, just hold on a little longer," he pleaded with her.*

*She blinked quickly, clearing the glaze from her eyes. "I love you," she said, her voice was hoarse.*

*"I love you too, just hang on a little longer. I stopped the bleeding and help will be here soon."*

*"I'll try," she squeezed his hand gently.*

That was the last thing she had said to him. All the schooling he had taken had been worthless; he hadn't been able to save the one person who meant the most to him.

The bounty hunter was snapped back into reality from a tap on his shoulder.

"Excuses me, sir, are you all right?" There was a young man standing next to him with a concerned look on his face.

"Yes, I was just thinking about something."

"Okay," said the young man walking away. It was then Kaleb realized he had stopped walking and was just standing in the middle of the path that led to the office buildings. He took a moment to regain his composure and then started walking towards the building again.

Inside the building there was a small lobby. On either end of the lobby, there was the entrance to the hallways. The hallways stretched from one end of the building to the center where the lobby was located. Looking around, he found the directory of the offices. He looked at the map he had been given earlier. He was looking for a Professor Bromfield. He found him on the list and figured out which way he needed to travel down the hallway. He reached the office. A moment later, the door was opened, but the man inside the office was reading something on a computer. The bounty hunter knocked lightly on the doorframe. The man behind the desk looked up.

"Oh, come on in," he walked in the room. The man behind the desk moved his computer off to the side.

"Have a seat. I am guessing you are the one who had a question about the computers?"

"Yes, I was wondering about the interplanetary network and how file transfers worked."

"I see. When someone needs to send a file, the file gets transferred to our system, and from our system, we send it to another planet through series communication satellites. The same works when we receive a file, but in reverse."

"So if someone sent a file here from another planet, it would go through your system and then to its destination?" asked Kaleb.

"Yes, that is how it works. Most planets have their own relay station, but since this college is known for its advanced communication courses, we offer the whole setup here, so that students get hands-on learning experience with the communication setup," explained the professor.

"So if I sent a file here from another planet and it didn't arrive, there would be a way to track where the message went?"

"Yes, it is possible to track it, but we have only ever had 4 messages sent to the wrong place. Our computer system checks everything and then saves it to a database. The database is

then sent to the relay stations on the other planets and they confirm whether or not the delivered location is correct. Just wondering, why are you asking? Did you lose a message?"

"No, I was just asking because I am going to send some very important information and I didn't want anything to happen to it," said the bounty hunter, lying to cover his inquiry.

"Well, rest assured, your information will be safe."

Kaleb thanked him for his time then got up and left the office.

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Rachial and Katie had been watching the movie for about an hour and a half, when there was a knock on the door. Katie got up from the couch and looked around the corner at where the door was. Through the window she could see a policeman waiting outside the door. She turned back to the room where Rachial was still watching the movie.

"The police are outside, you have to go. Check the back door and make sure they aren't waiting for you."

Rachial quickly got up and checked the back door, Sure enough there was a policeman standing outside the door.

"Katie, the back door is blocked, what do I do?"

"This is great, I don't know. That is the only other way out of here. Wait, if they get you, they aren't going to execute you on the spot; they always do it in the public meeting place in front of everyone. Your ship isn't ready yet, so you can't leave anyway. It is too late to schedule it for today, so it will be tomorrow. If they get you, they will keep you in the jail for the night." explained Katie.

There was another loud knock on the door. "Coming," Katie yelled towards the door. "Look here is my plan; you use me as a hostage and let them capture you. They are only carrying Tasers, so you won't get hurt. Then I will come break you out tonight. By the time I get you out, your ship will be ready."

"I don't like the sound of this," said Rachial.

The banging on the door started again. "This is the police. Open the door!" The banging got louder. "If you don't open the door, we are going to break it down!"

Rachial sighed and looked towards the door. "It doesn't look like I have much choice. Do you have a knife?"

Katie nodded, then ran to the kitchen and returned with a knife in hand. Rachial took the knife and grabbed Katie around the neck. "Sorry," she apologized as she held a knife to her newly found friend's neck.

"I am the one who should be sorry, they are going to hit you with a Taser."

Before Rachial could respond, the door came crashing down and policeman with a raised Taser gun stepped through the doorway. "Drop the knife and let the girl go."

Rachial made it look as if she tightened her grip on the knife. "I don't want to hurt her, I just want to get out of here without any trouble. Let me past without any trouble and I'll let her go without hurting her."

The officer didn't lower his Taser; instead he reached over and pressed the button on his radio. "Code nine," he said into the radio quickly. He let go of his radio and spoke again. "Drop the knife and let the girl go."

"I already told you, I don't want to hurt anyone, I just want to get out of here. So let me go and no one gets hurt," Rachial replied.

By this time a couple more policemen had filed through the front door. The officers were slowly walking around the outside of the room, trying to surround her. Rachial moved slowly back, trying to make it look like she didn't want to be surrounded. Rachial heard a crash come from the back of the house. That was probably the back door; it wouldn't be long now.

That was the last thought she had before the pain started. First it was like a large needle was jabbed into her back. Then the electricity came. She lost control of her muscles and fell onto the floor. Rachial was glad the floor was carpeted, but it didn't make much difference with the pain she was going through. The electricity stopped and one of the policemen walked over to her with a syringe in hand. She knew what was coming next and tried to move, to escape the needle, but her whole body was limp. There was nothing she could do. As the needle was pressed into her arm, her last thought was *maybe this was not a good idea*. Then her world went black.

Rachial sat up with a start. Her breathing was heavy. She opened her eyes to find herself in a small jail cell. Three of the walls in the cell were solid, the fourth wall was made completely of steel bars. Rachial consciously slowed her breathing until it reached a normal speed. This was not good. She was stuck in a jail cell on some space station out in the middle of nowhere and to make it worse, the jail cell was outdated and didn't run on a computer system, so she wouldn't be able to use DreamPhase to escape. She was beginning to panic. Again she slowed her breathing, remembering that Katie was coming for her. *Was she really coming?* Rachial asked herself, she had only just met her today. Sure, she was friend of Dr. Shaum, but could she really trust her to come? Rachial decided she didn't really have much choice, if she didn't come she would be executed tomorrow. She leaned back against the wall, waiting for her coming rescue.

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The college campus wasn't very busy at the moment, so it was easy for the bounty hunter to sneak into the server room without being noticed. The trouble for him would be finding out where the data was transferred to. Computers had never been his forte. He had learned how to use them, but didn't enjoy it, so he had never spent the time to learn how to use them.

Once he was inside the sever room, he started looking around for the console where he could access the history. There were computer stations where one could access that system position in different parts of the room. Each of the stations had a label describing what you could do at the station. There were stations to control transfers from different areas. He walked through the rows of computers. In the middle of the room there was a glass area blocked off from the rest of the room. Inside the glass box was a computer. Kaleb guessed the computer was the master control unit. He found the computer a few moments later and began checking the logs.

The logs showed where the file had been transferred to, but the computer that had received the file had disconnected itself from the internet. There was an address for the computer, but there was no way of knowing if the computer had sent the file somewhere else before it disconnected. The bounty hunter left the sever room and headed out of the campus area.

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"Visitor for Ms. Williams," a gruff voice called down the hallway into her cell. Why would she have a visitor? She wasn't supposed to get a visitor; she was supposed to have someone breaking her out. Rachial heard the door sliding and looked up to see a security officer open the door and allow a man who was with him come through the door. Rachial didn't bother

to stand up for the unknown person; she remained seated on the cot that had been provided with the cell. The man was probably going to offer a trade; DreamPhase for her freedom. It would never happen. Now that she knew what DreamPhase was capable of, she would never let it fall into the wrong hands.

Rachial just decided not to speak at all. The man started speaking because she didn't say anything. Rachial looked up to see who it was as he began to speak.

"You don't know me, but I know who you are. I have a proposition."

The man was a bounty hunter; she wasn't going to have anything to do with him. Rachial cut him off before he could finish.

"I am not going to do anything you ask of me."

The man stared at her for a moment. He looked her over. The way he looked at her made her sick. "Tell me where you hid DreamPhase and I will get you out of here and let you go. Or, if you don't tell me, I will get you out of here then turn you over to Cromwell, Inc."

"Even if you were an honest person and I could trust your offer, I would not accept because I don't want DreamPhase to fall into the wrong hands. But I know you can't be trusted, you would just turn me over to them anyway if I were to tell you where it was located."

The bounty hunter got a disgusted look on his face. "Fine have it your way, you will regret it later."

Rachial was worried about Dr. Shaum a little bit. What if they had figured out he was keeping DreamPhase safe, what would they do to him? The bounty hunter turned and said something to the guard.

The guard opened the cell door and let the bounty hunter out. The door was closed and locked. She was alone again, left waiting. Hopefully Katie would be able to break her out before the bounty hunter tried. She had a feeling that if she didn't, he was going to keep his word. Rachial leaned over on the bed again and tried to fall asleep. If someone was going to break her out, it would probably happen at night. Being ready for whatever happened sounded like a good idea to her. It wasn't like she had anything else to do. She wasn't even given a deck of cards to play with.

Katie was at the police station, scoping out the area, formulating her plan to rescue Rachial when she saw a man walking in and asking to visit Rachial. Just from the looks of the guy she could tell he wasn't one of Rachial's friends. Katie waited as the man went in and talked to Rachial. With her genetically-enhanced ears, she was able to hear everything they said. This might be able to work to her advantage, because she really didn't have any idea how she was going to get Rachial out of the jail. Katie waited for the bounty hunter to come out of the building. When he did, she followed him to his ship. When he got to his ship, he went inside. Katie listened and heard him sit down in a chair. It wasn't long before his breathing slowed. He must have fallen asleep. All she would have to do is wait for the bounty hunter to go break Rachial out and she would set a trap for him at his ship.

Rachial woke to the sound of her cell door being opened. She looked up and to her dismay, she saw the bounty hunter stepping through the door into her cell. The man spoke and she recognized the voice as the bounty hunter's.

"Put these on quickly," the bounty hunter tossed her clothes to her in a ball. She unrolled the ball, got the clothes ready, but the bounty hunter didn't turn around.

"You could turn around," the man gave an evil grin. The bounty hunter closed her cell door again and turned around. Rachial quickly changed into her clothes. After she finished, the bounty hunter opened the door again.

The man roughly grasped her arm and dragged her to her feet. The bounty hunter forced her out of the cell. In the hallway, she noticed the guard lying on the ground. She wasn't sure if the guard was alive or not. This was not good; she was supposed to be rescued by Katie, not captured by a bounty hunter. The bounty hunter dragged her through the police building heading towards the exit. They passed a few more guards lying on the ground. Rachial tried to struggle, but every time she did, his grip would tighten on her arm.

Once outside the police station, the bounty hunter shoved her into a car that was waiting next to the police station. The bounty hunter climbed into the front seat and started to drive off. Rachial tried to open the door, but it was locked and a cage screen had been installed so the passenger couldn't interfere with the driver. She relaxed in the backseat, not being able to do anything else. She was only in the car for a few minutes before the bounty hunter stopped the car and pulled her out of the backseat. Upon stepping out of the car, she saw the bounty hunter's ship. This was not good.

Katie had been waiting inside the bounty hunter's ship for him to return. After he had left his ship she had stowed aboard. She had waited probably 45 minutes before she heard something. A vehicle was coming. She got her trap ready. She could hear two different people walking towards the ship, one of them was a bit heavier than the other. She guessed the heavy one was the bounty hunter. They were coming into the ship now. Katie waited; if her plan was going to work, she would have to wait until he was in the right position. She could see them now, the bounty hunter forcing Rachial into the ship by her arm. She raised the stunner, but knew it wasn't the time yet. She had found the stunner among the bounty hunter's arsenal. The bounty hunter stepped forward and Rachial was out of the way, so she pulled the trigger. He pulled the small needles out of his arm, but as he did, he also fell to the ground.

Rachial was forced onto the ship by the bounty hunter, and was being pushed through the ship when the death grip on her arm released. She looked around to see what had caused the release of his grip. "Katie!" she exclaimed overcome with relief and excitement.

"Didn't think I was coming for you, did you?"

"I believed that you would come, but I was worried for a little while there."

"Well, now that it is over, let's get you to your ship; the repairs should be finished by now."

"How are we going to get past the guards?"

"There shouldn't be any guards, because they caught you, but in case there are, we'll use these," Katie handed the stunner to Rachial and pulled the gun out of the bounty hunter's holster. "Okay, let's go."

They both left the ship and headed toward that hangar where Rachial's ship was located. When they reached the ship, they found two guards watching the vessel.

"I'll take care of the guards, that way if they find out what happened, you won't get in trouble."

"I think it is too late for that, I was planning to leave and go see Dr. Shaum."

"I see, just be careful, they might be after you too if they find out that you helped me."

"I'm in, now to the guards."

They split up; Katie walked around and approached the guards from behind with the stunner. Rachial waited till she was behind them before stepping into view.

"Hello, would you mind if I climb into my ship and fly off?" Rachial asked. The guards both raised their weapons. Katie opened fire on the first guard and the second turned to shoot, her, but Rachial hit him on the head with the handle of the bounty hunter's gun. The man collapsed onto the ground. "That takes care of the guards."

"Yep, you'd better get in your ship and leave before they send more guards. I am going to go to my ship now."

"Okay. Thank you very much for your help."

"It was no problem at all. Just remember to visit me after you are done proving yourself."

"I look forward to it." They shook hands then went their own ways. Rachial climbed into her ship and started the engines. She plotted a course to *Aeolus* and engaged the portal drive. The drive activated without any problems, in fact, it started a lot faster than her other drive had.

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After hacking into the computer system and checking the transfer logs, he called for his Jahory. It took about one minute for the Jahory to come out of stasis chamber on his ship and another two for the Jahory to get from the ship to his position. Mr. Hakan was very pleased with his Jahory; it had served him well, always following instructions. Even if he told it to kill, it would follow his orders without question. He had ordered it to kill a few times. The first kill it made was by far the best, because that was before he was out for hire. His first kill was Keith Williams. Mr. Hakan remembered that, as it was one of the best days of his life.

When he was in his last year of college, right before he went out into the real world, Keith had caught him cheating and got him into trouble. He didn't graduate with honors because of that man. That day, he had vowed he would get his revenge. It took many years, but he finally did, thanks to this Jahory standing before him. He was very proud of his creature; he had even named the Jahory. His name was Trep, short for trepidation. He had trained the Jahory as an assassin and it had taken to the training.

The Jahory had a standing height of 1.5 meters, and weighed about 90 kilograms. Its massive arms hung about 45 centimeters past its waist. The Jahory had eyes like a cat so that it could see in the dark and a nose like a bloodhound so that it could smell the different things it would need to mine. The Jahory also had millions of microscopic hairs on its shins knees chest, and on the back side of its wrist. The hairs work like the hairs on a geckos foot, allowing the Jahory to climb walls without a latter, and giving them the ability to hold things against their chest leaving their hands free to do other things. The Jahory was designed to be able to mine on any planet or work in any factory. This particular Jahory had never done any mining, instead it had served him many times as he tracked down his prey.

Once again, he would be sending the Jahory to do his bidding, this time to kill some girl and possibly a few bounty hunters. Mr. Hakan spoke to the hologram in front of him. "Three days are up; if you see any other bounty hunters out there looking for her, kill them. I want that girl captured or killed within the next day. Don't disappoint me." The holographic Jahory nodded. Then the signal cut out.

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Kaleb found the computer where the information was stored and was about to turn it on when he heard glass shattering in the back of the empty house. He drew his gun and brought it to

aim at where the sound had come from and then started creeping towards the back of the house. *Crash!* Something slammed into his head; he went crashing to the floor. Whatever it was had come from the ceiling. He brought his gun back up to aim, when he saw it: a Jahory. He hadn't seen a Jahory since the end of the war. Where did it come from, and why was it here? Knowing how dangerous a Jahory could be, he didn't hesitate to pull the trigger. The Jahory was quick and evaded his shot. The Jahory then charged at him and knocked the gun out of his hand. The creature swung its arm, its claws bearing down on the spot where the bounty hunter had been lying. If it had not been for the many years of experience Kaleb had gained from being a bounty hunter, he would have been dead already. The Jahory was quick and kept swinging his arms at the bounty hunter.

The fight continued a while longer, the whole time Kaleb knew he wasn't going to be able to last as long as the Jahory. The bounty hunter slammed his fist into the Jahory's leg; the Jahory collapsed. This gave Kaleb all the time he needed to draw his knife. He stabbed it on the back and then ran over to the computer. Kaleb opened the case and pulled the hard drive out. Luckily for him it was a nice case, so he didn't have to unscrew everything. The Jahory slammed into his back and sent him tumbling to the floor. He protected the hard drive from the fall and quickly got to his feet again. The Jahory made another swing with his arm, but the bounty hunter was able to evade it.

The bounty hunter then reached into one of his pockets and pulled out a small box. The box was blue with a slit down one of the sides. Kaleb threw the box down on the floor and blue force field appeared, separating him from the Jahory. He then ran, not wasting any time; the force field would only last thirty seconds. Kaleb wasn't sure which would come first, the field shutting down, or the Jahory breaking through the wall. He was curious about which it would be, but didn't stop to look. As he made it out of the house, he heard a large cracking sound as the Jahory beat his way through the wall.

Kaleb took off at a full run towards the vehicle he had rented. The Jahory came running out after him. Kaleb reached the car and jumped inside. He started to drive off and heard a loud thump. Looking in the mirror he could see the Jahory on the back of the car using its claws to climb towards the front of the vehicle. Kaleb turned the car sharply, but the Jahory didn't fall. Kaleb knew he was going to have to do something a little trickier to lose the Jahory. Kaleb checked the map that was built into the car he had rented. The map showed a very large parking ramp a little ways away from his position. *That should work*, he thought as he changed his course.

The parking ramp was huge, probably twenty levels. The ramp was next to an extremely large building. As he piloted the vehicle into the ramp, the Jahory hit the clearance bar and was ripped from the top of his vehicle. He looked in the mirror to see the Jahory chasing him again. Pressing the pedal to the floor, he drove the car up the ramp, squealing the tires as he went around the corners. He made it ahead of the Jahory for a little bit, but the Jahory just started jumping through the center of the ramp instead of following the car. The Jahory was able to jump back on the car again, but the bounty hunter just kept driving. He had a plan.

Moments later, he had driven the car to the top ramp. The Jahory was now on the hood jabbing through the windshield, trying to stab the driver. Kaleb reached into one of his pockets and pulled out another one of his gadgets; this one was shaped like a flare gun. The Jahory made another jab with its claws at the bounty hunter. The bounty hunter tried to move off to the side, but still got hit in the shoulder. Blood started to pour from his wound, but his adrenaline didn't allow him to feel the pain. He took the small gun, aimed it at the Jahory, and fired. A large yellow mesh flew out of the barrel of the gun. Kaleb aimed the gun at the hood and fired



the weapon again. Another small bit of mesh flew out of the gun and seemed to melt into the hood of the car. The Jahory tried to break the mesh, but wasn't able to.

By this time they were near the edge of the roof. Kaleb opened the door and jumped out of the vehicle. The Jahory tried to jump after him, but the yellow mesh caught him in mid-jump and pulled him away. Recovering from jumping out of the vehicle, Kaleb turned to see the car smash through the guardrail and fly off the roof. Kaleb lost sight of the car as it fell. He turned and ran to the elevator. He didn't think that would kill the Jahory and he didn't want to be around when it got up. Kaleb stepped into the elevator and pressed the button for the ground level.

After the elevator started to move, he leaned back against the far wall of the elevator, and that was when he noticed the pain coming from his shoulder. He looked at his shoulder and winced. His arm was going to need some medical attention. Before he had given it anymore thought, the elevator door opened and a young lady was standing outside talking to a young man.

"OH!" she exclaimed when she saw him with blood running down his shirt. The man standing next to her turned at her exclamation and looked at the blood covered man.

"We need to get him to the hospital," he said, stepping into the elevator. The doors closed and the elevator started moving again.

The lady was clearly a doctor; the white lab coat gave her away. The man didn't have a lab coat, but Kaleb guessed that he was also a doctor. "How did this happen?" asked the man as he tied a piece of white cloth around his arm that he ripped from the young lady's lab coat.

"A car accident." said Kaleb, contemplating whether or not that would be considered a lie or not.

"You're lucky you are right next to the hospital, you've lost a lot of blood." The elevator door opened and they walked Kaleb across the parking lot into the building adjacent the parking ramp.

Once inside, the two people escorted him into the emergency room where he was placed onto a bed. They began treating his arm immediately and asked him questions as they worked on his wounded arm. In a few minutes they had his arm bandaged up. The wound hadn't been very bad, just a deep gouge. After they finished working on his arm, he had to sign a few papers and then pay the bill. The bill was kind of pricy, but he was happy that it was fixed. Even if he had found a cheaper place, it would have taken time, and he would have been in a lot of pain. He was released and he thanked the two young doctors who had helped him. After he left the hospital, he went back to his ship so he could check the hard drive and see if the information he was looking for was on it. He was also going to have a talk with Mr. Lotus and find out why a Jahory had tried to kill him. Maybe he was past his deadline, but he had never run into someone who minded too much as long as the job got done. He didn't like the idea of having a Jahory trying to kill him.

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Rachial was very excited; she was almost there. Her ship's computer told her that it would only take a few more minutes before she reached *Aeolus*. In a little while she would have the proof to clear her name. Then she would just have to backtrack to her starting point and somehow give the evidence to the right person. She hadn't even thought of that before. How was she going to get anyone to read the evidence that she didn't do it? That would have to wait for later. For now, she would have to worry more about watching her back as she retrieved the

information. Her little stop at the space colony had cost her valuable time that would allow a bounty hunter to get ahead of her and set a trap for her arrival.

The familiar beeping sound brought her out of her thoughts. She pressed a few buttons and her ship came out of the portal. As her ship exited the portal, it jerked a little bit. Her old drive made for a smoother ride, but it didn't really bother her that much.

After she exited the portal, she opened her communications and requested permission to land her craft on the planet. She was granted permission quickly and flew her ship down into the atmosphere. The first thing Rachial did was deliver the package. After she had dropped off the package, she flew her ship over to the city where she had sent the file, then found a landing pad where she could land her ship. She found one within six blocks of the house where the computer should be.

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The bounty hunter was able to hack into the library's computer system and remove the hold on system files. After he had access to the system, he downloaded the appropriate software to view the files on the hard drive. He shut down the computer and installed the drive, then booted the machine. As he was browsing the hard drive for the file, a librarian walked up behind him. He quickly hid what he was doing and pulled up the book search program. The librarian stood over his shoulder and spoke.

"Searching for books on computer hacking? What are you planning on doing, young man?" Young man? He was 37 years old, not that he was really old, but he hadn't had anyone call him 'young' in a while. He didn't say anything for a moment, but the librarian didn't leave. So he turned to face her. "I asked, what you plan on doing after you read those books about computer hacking?" The librarian standing in front of him was an old lady, probably in her seventies.

"I am researching the topic for my class. One of my students suggested hacking into a computer system the other day in one of my classes. I told him to write a report on the process, but since I didn't know very much about it, I have to read up a bit to see if he actually did any research."

"Oh, well in that case I will let you get back to your work. Just be sure to tell him how much trouble he could get into if he is caught so that he doesn't try anything."

Kaleb laughed to himself and brought up the file browser and started searching for the file again. He found it a little while later, hidden in one of the subdirectories. The file was encrypted, but he had downloaded a program to solve that problem. He opened the file with the encryption program and sat back as it did its job. It took 15 minutes to crack the encryption. The file contained different emails, phone call recordings, and video clips. All of the information in the file proved the girl hadn't murdered anyone. It also proved that Cromwell, Inc. had hired two thugs to do the murder and then place the evidence to frame the girl. The file also had bank statements showing that Cromwell, Inc. had paid the girl's family to go along with the framing and delete the evidence off the girl's computer.

This was disturbing, the effort Cromwell put into getting this girl locked away. What did she know that was so important that they would go to this extreme? They had offered him 37 million. The whole thing seemed a little strange to him. He closed out the file, brought up a search engine and looked for information on the case. The murder had happened after the girl had released an invention called DreamPhase. He had been told that DreamPhase was a

technology developed by Cromwell, Inc., and that she had stolen it from them. They had lied to him. He thought he was trying to capture a thief and a murderer. And not only had they lied, he guessed the Jahory that had attacked him was meant for her and that he had just gotten in its way. That thing had tried to kill him and now it was after an innocent girl. He had to do something.

Kaleb stood up from his seat and started to walk away when he remembered the hard drive. He went back over shut the computer down then removed the drive before leaving the library and getting into his car. Hopefully he wasn't too late.

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Rachial was walking on the sidewalk towards the house, reading a sheet of paper she was holding in her hands. The directions to the house were written on the paper. She knew what the address for the house was, but the map made it faster to find. She had learned that when she was delivering packages. If she drew a map before leaving to drop off the packages, she would be able to get it done a little quicker. She followed the map until she came up to the house.

This house was where she had hidden the evidence needed to prove her innocence. When she found out that her family was trying to frame her for a murder, she quickly found a vulnerable computer and put the file on the computer. To make sure no one else would be able to get it, she told the computer to disconnect from the internet. She had some reservations about using someone else's computer to store the information, and also about disconnecting it, but when she found the computer the logs indicated the computer hadn't been used in over a year. Without many options and Cromwell watching her, she had little choice.

She folded the paper and placed it into her pocket. Rachial climbed up the stairs on the front porch and opened the front door. She walked into the entryway and then started looking around for the computer. She found the computer sitting on a desk in one of the rooms. She went over to it and pressed the power button. The computer screen displayed a hard disk read error. Rachial opened the computer case and checked the inside. The hard drive was missing. Someone had been here already. They were probably here right now. Rachial pulled out the weapon she had acquired earlier at the space colony and held it at the ready. She slowly started walking around the house, checking for any signs that someone might have been there.

Suddenly she was attacked from behind and thrown against the floor. She brought her gun to bear on her attacker and fired. The shot hit the target, but it didn't topple over. Instead, Rachial was surprised to see a large creature standing in front of her with its claws lifted, getting ready to swing. She recognized the creature all too well, she had seen a picture of its kind so many times in her schooling that she would know one the instant she saw it: a Jahory. She rolled over a few times and the Jahory's massive arm hit the spot where she had been lying on the ground. The claws left large scrapes on the hardwood floor. Rachial jumped to her feet, only to be knocked over again, as she was sent flying against the wall.

The Jahory was getting ready to take another swing at her when a large object struck the Jahory and knocked it over. Rachial got up as quickly as she could, taking advantage of the situation. She looked to see where the flying object had come from. She wasn't sure whether to feel relieved or worried more; her rescuer was the bounty hunter who had tried capturing her a few times. Rachial climbed to her feet and started to run from both of them. They both chased after her.

The bounty hunter called out to her. "I have the hard drive and I know you didn't do it. I am not after you, I came to help you!" Rachial made it out of the house and was now running down the sidewalk towards her ship. She wasn't sure what she was going to do without the proof that was on that hard drive, but she needed to get away from that creature. At least in her ship she would have a chance against it.

As she ran, she took a glance behind her and could see the bounty hunter was still chasing her, the Jahory was also following, but somehow the bounty hunter had managed to slow the beast down.

The bounty hunter called after her again. "Hey, I know I can't prove that you can trust me, but once you make it to your ship, I'll give you the hard drive."

Rachial didn't bother to reply, it would just slow her down. If that is what he wanted to do, though it seemed unlikely, then she would worry about it when she got to her ship. She took a glance behind her again. The Jahory was catching up quickly and she still had two blocks left before she reached her ship. Rachial pulled DreamPhase from its place holding her hair in a ponytail and placed it on her wrist. Her hair blew wildly in the breeze. This planet was very windy, making it hard to run. She thought as she ran that it might be a good idea to keep the band on her wrist, despite the fact that using it to hold her hair kept it hidden.

She tried to concentrate as she continued running. She entered DreamPhase and linked it to her ship's computer. After she did that, she started her ship's engines and flew it towards her position. She met up with her ship just before she reached the end of the two blocks.

Once her ship was above her, she activated the shields around her as she had done before. She stopped running and now turned to face her followers. The bounty hunter was right behind her, but instead of stopping in front of her, he ran around the shielded area and stood behind her.

"If you don't mind, I don't want to have to fight that thing." the man said. Rachial turned to face the Jahory that was coming her way. She armed the ship's weapons.

The Jahory ran towards her and jumped. Rachial backed up involuntarily and the Jahory slammed into the shield her ship was emitting. The Jahory fell to the ground and then slowly picked itself back up off the ground. This time it approached the shield slowly and pressed its claws against the invisible wall. The Jahory's claw was slowly breaking through the shield. Rachial fired her ship's weapons at the Jahory, but it just seemed to absorb them and now the claws were moving through the shield faster than before. Rachial didn't know what to do; this shouldn't be happening.

"Why didn't that work?" she asked out loud to herself in frustration. Rachial heard a reply she wasn't expecting, she had forgotten about the bounty hunter who was standing on the other side of her shield.

"Energy weapons don't work on the Jahory, they just absorb them. You will need to use a projectile weapon on them."

Rachial didn't have any and the Jahory was getting closer to breaking through.

"I only have energy weapons installed on my ship," Rachial turned to face the bounty hunter.

"Well, don't look at me, I'm out of ammo."

Rachial had to think of something, because the Jahory had almost broken through her shield.

"Run. I have an idea that might work," Rachial said to the bounty hunter. He gave her a confused look. "Just start running down the street that way!"

The bounty hunter started running, not sure what she was going to do, but not wanting to really be in on the middle of it.

As soon as the bounty hunter was a little ways away from her ship, she turned the shields on the back side of her ship off and started running. She ran away from her ship as fast as she could. The Jahory started chasing her again. This time he was closer than before. Rachial concentrated again and moved her ship. She flew the ship up into the sky. Once it had flown a couple hundred feet up into the sky she sent it on a dive, headed for a spot ahead of where she was running. Rachial put on an extra burst of speed.

As fast as the Jahory was, she was able to make it a little further ahead of the creature.

Rachial then turned to face the Jahory and stopped. The Jahory didn't hesitate for a second, it just kept running. Rachial closed her eyes and concentrated on controlling her ship. This was going to need to be exact, the winds on the planet made it hard to get it right, but when she was using DreamPhase to control her ship, she could see the wind movement and factored it into her calculations. She had calculated it all in her head. All those math classes she had taken were going to save her. She maneuvered her ship into the right position and then released the cargo pod. The cargo pod separated from her ship just before they both crashed into the ground. Rachial pulled her ship out of the dive, but the cargo pod kept falling.

The Jahory was just a little but behind of her, still running towards her. Rachial turned and watched as the cargo pod came from the sky and smashed into the Jahory. One second it was running towards her, ready to jump, and the next it wasn't, there was just a cargo pod that had crashed sitting there. She didn't know if it had actually killed the Jahory, but it would at least stop him long enough for her to work on getting the hard drive from the bounty hunter. Hopefully the bounty hunter listened to her and was still on that street. Rachial turned and started to head for the street, but was stopped when she turned around. The bounty hunter was standing in front of her.

"Looking for this?" he held out the hard drive.

"Yes, I was." She took the hard drive from him.

"Why are you doing this, I thought you were trying to capture me?"

"I was, but things changed. First, I had a Jahory attack me and try to kill me, then I read the evidence on that hard drive and found out they had lied to me about who you were. I don't normally go after people, I mainly work with cargo, but I was told you were a murderer. I found out that was wrong and then that Jahory tried to kill me because I was a day overdue to turn you over to them. I decided I wasn't going to do their dirty work for them."

"I see. Well, thank you."

"You better get going, that cargo pod was hardly enough to kill the Jahory."

Rachial closed her eyes and brought her ship over to land next to where she was standing. Her ship looked a lot sleeker and smaller without the cargo pod attachment. She climbed aboard and started the engines. She waved to the bounty hunter before she closed the window on her cockpit. He returned her wave, then turned and started walking away. She brought her ship up into the sky and then set the throttle to full. Her ship flew up and out of the atmosphere.

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Mr. Hakan was sitting in a meeting when his phone started ringing. There were only two people who knew the number to his phone. He excused himself from the meeting and found a room where he could talk privately.

"Hello?" he spoke into the phone. He heard a gruff voice come over the phone. "I didn't get the girl; she had a bounty hunter helping her. She was able to make it off the planet"

"What do you mean? Why would a bounty hunter help her, she couldn't possibly have more money to offer than the amount Cromwell, Inc. is putting out."

"I don't think she is paying him, it is the bounty hunter who had a lead on her, I thought I might have trouble getting the girl because he might have already captured her, but instead, I found him helping the girl."

"I want you to follow the girl and capture her. If the bounty hunter gives you trouble, kill him. I am going to set a trap on this side, so if you don't catch her in time, I will."

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Rachial was so excited to finally have the proof in her hands. Now all she had to do was present it to the court and get the charges removed. The trip back was going to take less time because she didn't have the cargo pod and she had a faster drive installed. She was still going to have to explain to Al what happened to the cargo pod. She could picture the expression on his face: the look of shock, slowly replaced by a small pouty look as he realizes one of his favorite ships was gone. For some reason, Al thought the Wombat fighters were the coolest things ever. It had surprised Rachial that he had never asked to be taught how to fly one.

Rachial's thoughts were taken back to her ship as it shuddered. This new drive was very rough. It would have shudders every now and then whenever she was in the portal. She had checked the readings on the drive a few times, but everything showed it was fine. She finally decided the shudders were caused by her ship's dampening field that was too weak for the speeds she was traveling with this new drive. Rachial reached under her seat and pulled out the book that she had tried to read earlier on her journey. Maybe now she would be able to read it. She didn't think she would be able to because her mind was racing over today's events, but this was going to be a long flight. The only planet that she was planning to stop at on the way back would be *Alcars*; other than that, she didn't want to take the risk of stopping anywhere. There would be more bounty hunters on the way back because they didn't need to chase her. So it wasn't just a matter of staying ahead of them this time.

Rachial made it to the Resistance Tube a few hours later and a few pages further along in her novel. As Rachial exited the portal, she checked the system for any possible threats, but nothing showed up. She moved her ship towards the tube and aligned it to make the jump right through the tube. She wasn't quite ready to make the jump; she had a feeling that a group of bandits might be waiting on the other side, possibly even a bounty hunter. She began reprogramming the holo-emitters. She wasn't going to have a fleet of ships to protect her this time; instead, she was going to make her ship look a lot bigger. She was going to make it appear to be a battleship. A few minutes later she had finished the modification and was ready to move out. Rachial activated the portal and her ship darted forward into the tube.

On the other side of the tube, an old man sat behind the controls of his vessel. Hopefully these bandits would come through for him. He had offered them a 100,000 if they would turn the girl over to him after they captured her. He told them to keep the ship, but he wanted the girl dead or alive. He figured that 100,000 was a small price to pay considering the amount he would

receive for turning the girl over to Cromwell, Inc. he had laughed at the other bounty hunters who had chased her halfway across the galaxy only to fail in capturing her. He had learned from past experience that it was almost impossible to capture somebody as smart as she was by yourself. He laughed at the other bounty hunters when they went after her alone. That was why he had hired the bandits. She should be arriving soon.

Rachial brought her ship out of the portal and activated the holographic system. Since she was only displaying one ship this time, it wouldn't take as much power as it had the last time she did this. Her ship emerged from the tube to find a completely empty space. There was nothing on this side of the tube. Something wasn't right, it was too empty. There was normally something there. Even on the other side of the tube, there had been a ship that was exiting. Why was this end so empty? Rachial checked her sensors again, but nothing was showing. She decided to just keep moving. If there was a trap, maybe the appearance of a large battleship was holding them back. If that was the case, she wanted to be out of here as soon as possible.

Finally something was coming. He had been waiting long enough. Maybe if he was lucky it would be her. He opened a channel to the bandits. "My sensors are picking up a portal drive. Someone is coming through the tube, so get ready."

The response came back promptly. "We are ready to attack, just waiting till we see her ship."

"Good. I think this might be it."

A portal window formed at the end of the tube and massive ship came through. The ship was very heavily armed; it was built for destruction. The bounty hunter shook his head in disappointment. It wasn't her, so more waiting; he pressed a button to open a channel to the bandits again. "It's not her, it's a battleship, don't attack."

"We could use a battleship, run a scan and see which type of shield it has."

"But what if she comes through when you are attacking this ship?"

"Don't worry; we will take care of it."

"Fine." he accessed his sensors and ran the scan. Something wasn't right. The shields didn't have enough power output; they only had the amount that a small fighter would use. The entire energy output from the ship matched, but the shield energy should be a lot higher. This seemed really strange, but before reporting his findings, he ran another scan to see where all the energy was coming from. A holo-emitter; that means the ship wasn't real, it was just a fighter. It could be her.

"Attack, it is only a fighter with a holographic emitter on it," the bounty hunter watched as the bandits' ships uncloaked and opened fire on the battleship. He armed his own weapons and moved in to attack.

Just moments ago, the area had been empty, now it was flooded with ships. They must have had cloaking devices installed on their ships. Her cover was blown, so she shut down the hologram and transferred the power to other systems. Her ship shuddered as it received massive amounts of weapons fire from the assaulting vessels. She started the portal drive as the ships continued to fire at her. They couldn't stop her from entering the portal and they wouldn't be able

to shoot her while she is in the portal, but they could track her and come out of the portal in the same spot where she came out and attack her then. The question was whether or not the bandits would go up against the P.G. or if they would back down.

The bounty hunter watched as she activated her portal drive. His ship was recording her exit point and he would be able to track where she went. He wasn't sure if he wanted to follow, she could be heading right into P.G. controlled space and the P.G. didn't treat bandits very well. If he went, he would probably be going by himself because the bandits wouldn't want to cross blades with the P.G.

"I have her course, are you still going to help me capture her?"

"You mock us! We know better than to go into P.G. controlled space, especially after the trouble we have been giving them over the past month. You are on your own." The bounty hunter closed the channel and plotted a matching course and engaged the drive.

Rachial's ship came out of the portal above the planet of *Alcarsh*. As soon as she exited the portal, she requested permission to dock with the station in orbit above the blue planet. The P.G. responded quickly and she was able to dock to the station. As she began the docking, her ship's sensors picked up another ship coming out of portal transit behind her. She had a follower. Rachial's ship finished docking on the station and she paid for her fuel, tried to contact Kathryn Lars.

When she had opened the channel, a young man answered. "Hello, this is the Peregrination Guild office, how may I help you?"

"Hi, I am trying to contact Kathryn Lars, is there any way I could talk to her?"

"No, I'm sorry she left yesterday on a mission and won't be back until tomorrow. What did you need from her? I might be able to help you."

"I am on the station in orbit and I have a bounty hunter following me, I was wondering if there was anything you could do to stall him for a little while."

"I see, well I will have to ask my supervisor about it. I will be right back."

*This is going to take too long*, thought Rachial. By the time they do something, the bounty hunter will have tried something. Rachial closed her eyes and tried to connect to the station's computer system. It didn't take long before she had gained access to the docking control system. She changed a few files and put the bounty hunter's ship on lockdown. She then opened her eyes. That should slow him down a little bit.

His ship emerged from the portal and his eyes quickly scanned the space in front of him, looking for her ship. There it was, already flying into the hangar bay of the station. He requested permission to dock and followed her ship inside the station. Now he would just have to wait. He waited as she refueled her ship. After she was done, her ship started to take off. He powered up his engines and a red warning light turned on. Why was that on? He checked his computer screen. *Docking claps locked*. That wasn't fair, he tried to free his ship, but the clamps wouldn't unlock. He watched as the girl escaped. If only he could get the clamps to release, he would have her, but he couldn't get them to release and she left the station. He lost sight of her ship.

It had worked, no more followers, for the moment. Rachial was sitting in her ship, once again waiting as she traveled through the portal. She was on her way to her last stop, the planet that had become her home. After that, she would head back to her old home, Earth. Rachial had been giving it a lot of thought, but still didn't know what she was going to do once she got there. As soon as she showed herself to anyone, she would be thrown in prison or killed. The only thing she could think of was to get all the leaders in one spot and somehow force them to read the information. She couldn't take it to the press because Cromwell owned most of the news stations,



and they would never let it get published. She would have to do something when they were in session in court or something. She really didn't know what to do and it was driving her crazy. All this time she worked towards getting her name cleared and now she didn't know what to do about it.

The thing that was bothering her was that the only ideas she had would involve breaking the law. All this time, she had only broken the law in cases where, if she hadn't, she would have been killed. And of course, escaping in the first place. If she got a hostage, she could force them to read the proof and then release the hostage, but by doing that, she would be committing another crime. She wouldn't stand for that. How could she clear her name if by doing it she would tag another crime to herself?

Rachial relaxed in the pilot's chair; the only thing left for her to do was to wait. She reached under her seat and removed the book she had started and began to read.

\*\*\*

Kaleb was walking towards his ship thinking about what had just happened. The whole thing seemed a little strange still. The girl he had thought was a murderess was innocent and he had helped her. He laughed at himself. He didn't really help her; he just did the right thing for that moment. He felt good about his decision. But at the same time, he felt remorse about his previous actions. If he hadn't tried to stop her before, she would have made it to the planet a lot sooner and wouldn't have run into the Jahory. He could see the difference made by his choice this time, but there were so many other times where he had chosen the wrong thing. People had died before. It had never gotten to him before, but this time there was something about the girl that was different. He didn't know what it was, but it made him remember. He was no longer numb to his feelings. Seeing someone get hurt or even killed hadn't fazed him for years, but now it bothered him to think about killing. What was happening to him? He began to think about all the horrible things he had done. There was no way to repay what he had done.

He reached his ship and climbed aboard thinking of the many evils he had done. He sat down in his pilot's chair when he noticed a small weapon sitting off to the side. It was the gun he had gotten from the girl. Maybe he could make up for some of the things he had done. The least he could do was try. His long lost love would have wanted that. He should have listened to her. Revenge was what got him started down this path. The best place to start would be helping Rachial prove her innocence. Maybe it wasn't too late to make up for what he had done. He would work to help people; he could no longer be the bounty hunter.

Kaleb brought his ship up into the atmosphere as he readied the portal drive. He might not be a bounty hunter anymore, but he still knew the tricks of the trade. He would be able to make it back before her and start the process of getting her name cleared.

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"Mr. Lotus, I have the information you were waiting for," said a young man walking into the large office.

"Good, report."

DreamPhase

"We found the location of DreamPhase. A professor named Dr. Shaum is keeping it. We are not sure where its exact location is, but we know where he is and should be able to get the information from him."

"Does he know you have discovered him?"

"I don't see how he could, but I guess it is possible."

"You fool; you should have captured him as soon as you found him. He might know that we are after him now and run."

"I would have captured him, but I thought I should check with you first."

"You should have just captured him, he might have gotten away. I want you to go right now and bring him to me. If you don't, you will see the results of your poor choice."

"I will have him back within the hour," said the young man, leaving the room quickly.

Steve was sitting at his desk grading tests when his intercom activated.

"Dr. Shaum there is someone here to see you."

He pressed the button on the intercom. "Okay, just send them to my office." he then went back to grading the tests until there was a knock at his door. "Come in," the door opened and a man walked in holding a gun.

"Hello, Dr. Shaum, I heard that you had something called DreamPhase. Tell me where it is," the man raised his gun and pointed it at Steve's head.

"What are you talking about, and who do you think you are coming into my office and holding a gun to my head?"

"Who I am doesn't matter, what matters is, that if you don't tell me where you hid DreamPhase, I will kill you."

"I guess you better get started then, because I am never going to tell you where it is." The man snorted then reached out and grabbed Steven and pulled him out of his chair. Steven was dragged out of his office and pushed down the hallway towards the parking lot. He tried to struggle, but when he did, the cold, metal barrel of the gun was pressed against his neck. Once they were outside the building, a white van pulled up, and he was thrown into the back. The man climbed inside the van after him and put wire ties on his hands and feet. This wasn't good. Torturing was probably coming next. They would beat him until he told them where DreamPhase was. He hadn't been able to call for help and no one had seen him leave, so there wouldn't be any help coming. It was the weekend, too, so nobody would notice he was missing unless one of his students came in to ask him for help. He was starting to worry when he remembered the rubber band that was on his wrist. This was no ordinary rubber band, this one he

had received from Rachial; this was DreamPhase. He might be able to get out of this one after all. He would just need to fall asleep and then he could access the computers and send for help. He had only used DreamPhase a couple times, but he felt sure enough that as long as he didn't need to crack a security network, he would be able to do it.

An hour later he was taken out of the van and brought into one of the many buildings that belonged to Cromwell, Inc., and thrown into a small room without any windows. The floor was cold and there wasn't anything to sit on. He lay down on the floor and closed his eyes. If he could get to sleep, it wouldn't take long to get out of here. But his plans were foiled as the door opened and a large man walked in.

"They told me you weren't very talkative." He didn't say anything, he just laid there and tried to go to sleep, all the while knowing it wouldn't work. The man came over and lifted him to his feet by his shirt. Nope, his plan was not going to work like this.

\*\*\*

Kaleb's ship dropped out of portal transit right in front of a large space station. The station was shaped like a giant ring, called The Passive Space Station, it was a station owned by one of his friends. The term 'friend' was used loosely though, because they had had a few conflicts over the years they had known each other. His comm beeped and he opened a channel.

"Kaleb, is that you?"

"Yeah it's me, I was wondering if I could use your station to get to Earth."

"Sure, but I'll have to charge you for it, that is a long jump and will require a lot of energy."

"I am willing to pay."

"Well in that case, give me the money and I'll start up the wormhole."

Kaleb pressed a few buttons on his screen and transferred a large amount of money. "I transferred the money, start her up." Kaleb watched as an energy field formed in the center of the ring station.

"It is all ready, have a nice trip."

Kaleb moved his ship into the field and activated his portal drive. As his ship entered the energy field, he felt a tingly feeling through his body. The feeling was normal when traveling through the wormhole, but it still unnerved him every time. As the portal drive activated, the tingly feeling increased until it became almost unbearable.

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Rachial closed the book and put it back under the seat. She brushed her hair off her face and looked at the ship's display. She had reached *Ecasty* again. Her ship came out of the portal and a communication channel was opened.

"Galactica speed transport 1, you have been cleared for landing." The channel closed, the system was completely automated. She flew her ship down towards the surface of the planet. She was planning on stopping to see Al and tell him she had delivered the package and also ask him what he thought would be the best way to use the information she had retrieved. Rachial was flying her ship in between the massive skyscrapers when a warning light turned on. She looked at her screen. It was a missile warning. She sent her ship in a couple tight turns, but the missile still followed her. She could make a tight turn around one of the skyscrapers and the missile would hit the building, but there was no way of knowing if anybody would get hurt. She pushed the throttle forward and pulled back on the flight yoke.

She flew her ship above the buildings and the missile followed, slowly getting closer the higher she went. Once out in the open she would be able to maneuver better and get rid of the missile. She brought her ship to a quick stop and hovered there waiting for the missile. The missile was coming at her very fast. She would have to time this right. If she moved too soon, the missile would adjust and hit her and if she moved too late the missile would slam into her. She waited, the missile kept speeding towards her. Seconds before the missile slammed into her ship she gave her ship a full thrust and put her ship into a tight loop. Her ship came out of the loop right behind the missile and she squeezed the trigger, and watched as her bullets reached the missile; it burst into large ball of flames. She turned the ship around to face the direction the missile had come from. There were way too many ships on her sensors to pick out which one had shot the missile. She brought her ship back on course towards the hangar. Who had attacked, her and why did they stop? Where had they gone? She flew her ship to the hangar and requested docking clearance. The large hangar doors opened, allowing her to come in. She piloted her ship into the hangar and landed her ship in her normal spot. Once her ship had landed, she climbed out and headed towards Al's office. She would see what he had to say about presenting the information to the officials and tell him that she had delivered the package. After that, she would refuel her ship and leave for *Earth*.

Rachial knocked lightly on Al's doorframe. He looked up from the papers that were spread across his desk.

"Oh, Rachial, you're back," he motioned for her to have a seat. "How did it go?" Rachial walked into his office and plopped herself down on the chair across from him. "I got the information and I delivered the package."

"I am sure the people receiving it were happy, it would have taken three weeks to get to them if you hadn't done it."

"Yes, they seemed plenty happy."

"Good. So how about your part of the journey; did you get the proof you needed?"

"Yes I did, that is what I wanted to ask you about," said Rachial. "I was wondering if you had any idea how I should get this information out so the right people will read it?"

"Well, you could always bring it to the press, but if you try that approach, you will have to get someone else to deliver the information to the studios so they don't report you before they view the information."

"That might work, I know someone who might be able to give them the information."

"It would be better if you have someone with a reputation give them the information, that way, they would be more likely to broadcast it. You would also want it to look like a conspiracy; the press loves that kind of thing."

"I know a doctor who teaches at the school I went to. He is well known in the world of astrophysics. Is that well known enough?"

"It might be, but you won't know until he tries."

"Well thanks for your advice, I had better get going."

"Okay, take care of yourself." Rachial stood up and left his office.

She walked over to her ship and climbed inside. She flew her ship over to the fueling station and fueled it up. It was nice to fill up her ship without having to pay for the expensive fuel. That was just one of the perks she received working for Galactica. She finished filling up her ship then climbed aboard and got ready to leave again.

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His head hurt. They had thrown him in a small cell after beating him for a while. His lip was bleeding and he was bruised all over. Upon being thrown into the cell, he had collapsed onto the ground. He had laid there for a while before he even tried to move, and when he did, his pain returned full force. He ignored it long enough to climb onto the small cot that was mounted on the wall. At least they hadn't gotten the location of DreamPhase from him. He had almost broken, it was almost more pain than he could bear. But as their fists struck him, he had decided that he wasn't going to break until they were willing to do something to him that wasn't fixable or something that would never heal.

Steven closed his eyes and tried to fall asleep. He was asleep a moment later and experienced a short falling feeling and then he entered DreamPhase. He looked around and tried to find a connection to the internet. It didn't take him long, a few minutes later he had logged in to his email account and sent an email requesting help.

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Kaleb emerged from the wormhole ready to throw up. That was the downside to traveling through wormholes. If it wasn't for the speed they allowed you to travel, he would have never gone through one again. He emerged from the wormhole right above *Earth*. He was about to open a channel and request permission to enter the atmosphere, but decided to wait and pulled a

paper bag out from one of the storage bins next the pilot's seat. He felt his stomach exploding upwards and held the bag in front of his mouth.

After he had finished emptying his stomach, he requested permission to enter the atmosphere. He was given the green light a moment later and flew his ship down into one of the massive cities. Upon entering the city, he found one of the news channels' headquarters. He landed his ship in the area of the hangar reserved guests. Inside the building he found the desk and asked to meet with one of the reporters. He was told that someone would take him in a few minutes and to have a seat. He sat down in a chair across room the desk and formulated what he was going to say as he waited. He would tell them it was about a conspiracy, the press loved to sink its teeth into anything that had the word 'conspiracy' attached to it.

A few minutes later, a man in a suit walked up to him and extended his hand.

"Mr. Nickerson," he shook the man's hand. "I'm Charles Johnson, I was told that you had a story I might be interested in."

"I do, I have some information regarding a conspiracy."

"I see, would you care to tell me about it in my office?"

Kaleb stood up and followed the man into his office and began to tell him the story. After he had finished telling him the story, the news reporter asked him if he had any proof for his story. Kaleb was glad he had made a copy of the hard drive he had given to Rachial. He reached into his pocket and placed the drive on the man's desk. "All of the information is on this hard drive."

"This story sounds like it would make a great article, if this is all real, I will want to publish it in tomorrow's paper."

"That is fine with me, just don't back down when Cromwell, Inc. comes after you. Trust me they will."

"I believe you, I have written articles about them before."

"Thank you for your time, I need to get going. You can contact me at this number if you have any questions about the story," said Kaleb as he handed the man a piece of paper.

They both stood and the reporter shook his hand again. "Thank you for bringing the story to me." Kaleb left the office.

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Rachial landed her ship in the university parking lot and was walking towards one of the buildings when she heard the siren coming her way, she turned and saw two police cars flying through the air towards the building she was headed to. They weren't after her, because they were going too fast to slow down in time to get her. She watched as they flew over her head and landed in front of the building. Two officers stepped out of the vehicles and went into the

building. Rachial approached the building with caution, getting ready to run if the need arose. She opened the front door and walked in. The policemen were nowhere to be found. She walked over to the desk that was positioned across from the doors.

"Hello may I help you with something?" asked a man from behind the counter.

"Yes, I was wondering why the police were here?"

"Oh, you didn't hear? Dr. Shaum has gone missing. We waited a while before we called them thinking that something had just come up, but we didn't hear anything from him and when we tried to contact him, his phone wouldn't pick up."

"Okay, thank you."

*Well that wasn't good*, thought Rachial to herself. Had he disappeared because she had given him DreamPhase to take care of? She was going to have to find him. If her intuition was right, Cromwell, Inc. was behind his disappearance.

Rachial found one of the many lobbies inside the building and sat down in one of the seats. She removed the rubber band from her hair and placed it on her wrist. She was going to have to find another rubber band for her hair so she could keep DreamPhase on her wrist. On the other hand, using DreamPhase as a rubber band concealed it very well. Rachial closed her eyes and concentrated. She logged onto the school network and started hacking into the email system. Maybe she would be able to find a trace of where Steve was last. Just as she reached the mail sever she heard someone speaking to her.

"Hey, wake up, you shouldn't be sleeping here." The voice was friendly and not at all stern, if anything it held a teasing tone. Rachial opened her eyes to see a handsome-looking guy standing in front of her. "Don't you have a bed someplace where you could sleep?" he smiled.

"Yes I do, but I wasn't sleeping," she told him matter-of-factly. He sat down in one of the seats across from her.

"Then what were you doing? You don't have any books with you and I don't see a computer either, so you can't be studying. I don't see and music player, so you couldn't be listening to music." he smiled again, this time with a little bit of smugness on his face. Rachial continued to hack the email system as she sat there.

"Humm?" he prodded her. "You said it right there. A computer you can see." he gave her a confused look. "Riiight..." He opened his computer and typed something in.

Rachial made it into the email system, but before she started looking for any information on Steve, she looked up the email address for the guy who was sitting across from her. First she scanned the wireless signals in the room and found his computer. Then she looked up his computers MAC address in the campus's network and found his email. She found it quickly and sent him an email. *Just because you can't see something doesn't mean it's not there*. Rachial waited for him to receive the message. She could tell when he did by the look on his face.

"I guess not. How did you do that?" Rachial held up her wrist and showed him the rubber band.

"This is a computer that is controlled by thought."

"Cool," he said, looking slightly awestruck by the device.

"I'm Luke," he said extending his hand. She shook it, then said, "Nice to meet you." She didn't give him her name on purpose; she didn't want anybody telling the police about her being back. "Well, I need to go. Maybe I'll see you around," she said in a friendly manner; standing up and leaving the lobby.

"Wait, I didn't catch your name." he said with a hopeful look on his face.

Rachial turned to face him. She wasn't sure what it was about him, but she could tell he meant no harm to her. "Rachial Williams," she said, then turned and left. As she was leaving she heard him mutter.

"I'll talk to you later, Ms. Williams." She kept walking but sent him another email. *That's Dr. Williams to you. :) Rachial pulled DreamPhase off her wrist and put her hair back into a loose ponytail.*

As Rachial was sitting there, she had finished her search for information. Steve had sent an email to the school, telling them that he was being held hostage. He said he didn't know who it was, but guessed it was Cromwell, Inc. She was going to have to rescue him, because without proof the police wouldn't touch Cromwell. Rachial made her way back to her ship. Once she reached her ship, she would fly over to Cromwell's storage facilities. That was the most likely place for them to be keeping Dr. Shaum.

Rachial was walking towards her ship when something hit her from behind and sent her tumbling to the ground. She tried to get up, but hands pushed her roughly to the ground.

"I don't think so. You're coming with us."

She tried to struggle, but the hands pushing her down were too strong. Her hands were tied and a sack was placed over her head. She felt another set of arms grab her and they lifted her off the ground and started pushing her forward. She could get out of this, she would just have to use DreamPhase and fly her ship over here. That was when she remembered that she couldn't; DreamPhase was currently holding her hair in a ponytail. She was forced into some type of vehicle. She heard the engine start and felt the vehicle start moving. The vehicle made a sharp turn and she fell onto the floor. She made a small gasp as she hit the metal floor. Upon hitting the floor she heard laughter coming from her captives. From the different laughs she heard, she guessed that there were three men in the vehicle. They must be bounty hunters. She scolded herself; she had let her guard down. Hopefully she would get a chance to take DreamPhase out of her hair and put it on her wrist. If she could do that, she might be able to get control of her ship and get out of this mess.

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After Kaleb finished talking to the news reporter, he went to meet one of his old acquaintances. If you were looking for somebody who didn't want to be found, he was the man to turn to. The downside; he was very expensive. But Kaleb was ready for this. Being a bounty hunter, he did know a thing or two about hacking cash machines. He had withdrawn 10,000



credits from Cromwell's account. He normally wouldn't want to mess with a large company like that, but he was already going to be on their hit list in a few hours. He had transferred the money to the Spider's account.

Kaleb was sitting on a bench in the middle of Central Park. It was cold out and the wind was ripping away at his hands, drying out his skin and making it rough. He slipped his hand into his pockets and continued to wait. He pulled his arm out to check the time a moment later. The Spider was late. Of course it was normal for the man to be late. But before he could think of any examples of when he had been late before, he spotted him walking towards the bench he was sitting on. He walked over and sat down next to him. Kaleb didn't say anything, he just coughed loudly. The man looked at him, pulled out a tissue and handed it to him. The man then stood up and walked away. Kaleb looked at the tissue, but didn't see anything. He raised the tissue to his mouth and exhaled onto it. He pulled it away from his face so he could see it. Now there were words written on the tissue. The letters quickly faded from the cold wind. He had what he needed; the spider had done his job well.

Once he was back to his ship, he looked over the tissue again. It said that she was last seen at a college a few hundred miles away. The tissue also said that one of the professors there was her friend at one point. Kaleb put the tissue away and started his ship. It looked like he was going to pay the college a visit. His ship left the ground and he set his flight path. Hopefully she hadn't run into any other bounty hunters. She had been able to escape him, but here, bounty hunters worked in packs.

Kaleb landed his ship in the campus parking area and walked into the building that was indicated on the tissue and started looking for a Dr. Shaum's office. He walked around for a while without finding anything before he decided to ask for help. He was closer to the lobby than the front desk, so he decided to ask one of the students. There was a young guy sitting on one of the chairs working on his laptop. Kaleb walked over to him.

"Excuse me, I was wondering if you could tell me where I could find Dr. Shaum's office?"

"Yeah, but it won't do you much good if you're looking for him, because he disappeared. He has been missing for a few days.

"Okay, thanks. I don't suppose you would know where to find a young lady named Rachial Williams?" Kaleb turned to leave before the boy could answer. There was no way this guy could know her.

"Do you mean Dr. Williams?"

"Yes, do you know her?"

"I just met her earlier. Why are you looking for her?"

"I am a friend of hers; I was looking for her because she might be in trouble." The boy got a frown on his face.

"What kind of trouble are you talking about?"

"You mean you don't know?" asked Kaleb, a little bit of shock showing on his face.

"No, I don't. Should I?"

"Well you might have heard of her before, it was on the television. Rachial was framed for murder by Cromwell, Inc. She pleaded guilty on grounds of insanity because she wasn't able to get to the proof right away. She escaped from the ward where she was sent and retrieved the information needed to clear her name."

"I knew I recognized her from somewhere. I can show you where I saw her last, if you think that will help."

"It might," said Kaleb. The boy closed his laptop and got up from the chair. He walked over to the entryway to the lobby. "Last place I saw her was right here. She walked this direction, and I heard her walking away for about thirty seconds or so." They both walked down the hallway for about thirty seconds and stopped off. To their left was a door to a classroom and off to the right was door to the outside. Kaleb opened the door and stepped outside. The boy followed him out the door. Kaleb examined the ground and noticed tire tracks on the grass leading away from the door.

"It looks like someone captured her. Look at these tire tracks; I am pretty sure they don't match the campus service's vehicle tires."

The boy leaned down to get a better look. "You're right, they are different. Who do you think captured her, Cromwell?" asked the boy. Kaleb looked at him.

"Probably not, my guess would be bounty hunters. Cromwell has a large price tag on her head. I need to be going and see if I can track her down. Thank you for your help. Umm...?" He paused realizing he didn't know the guy's name.

"Luke," the boy supplied. "How do you plan on finding her?"

"Well, Luke, I really don't know," he sighed. Luke mirrored his expression of failure for a moment before his face perked up.

"What if you could contact her? She had a hidden computer earlier and she sent me an email. If she still has the computer, I could send her an email."

Kaleb's face lit up. "That just might work."

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Elsewhere, a man was sitting at a table with a computer on his lap.

"Mr. Hakan, I found the girl, but she was already captured by a group of bounty hunters."

"What do you mean?"

"I was tracking her, getting ready to capture her when another bounty hunter got to her first. They put her in a van and drove off. I was able to tag the van with a tracker, but I couldn't catch them."

"That's okay; I have a little surprise that should do the trick. Just give me the coordinates."

"I am transferring them now." The transmission ended. Mr. Hakan set the laptop on the table in front of him. He got up from his seat pulled a phone out of his pocket as he left the room. He walked down the hallway and stopped at one of the doors and entered a room. He spoke into the phone.

"I am going to need a pickup in five minutes," he put the phone back in his pocket and looked around the room. There were ten guys in the room; some of them were playing pool, others were watching TV. Two of them were dueling on one of the virtual fight games. When he entered the room they all stopped what they were doing and waited for him to get off the phone. He put the phone in his pocket and addressed them.

"The plan has changed a little bit. Another bounty hunter has already captured her. Right now they are holding her in a warehouse trying to find out where she hid DreamPhase. We are going to go and extract her. Go get geared up, we leave in five minutes." The men dropped what they were doing and left the room to go ready themselves.

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He felt a sharp prodding and slowly opened his eyes. "Get up." He started to sit, up, but he wasn't fast enough for the person trying to wake him. Two arms grabbed him and dragged him off the cot. He stood there in front of them and waited for his eyes to adjust to the light.

"I will ask you one more time. If you don't answer me, I will see how well your fiancé likes swimming in acid."

"You wouldn't do that," said Steve in partial disbelief. How could they have gotten her? She was still living on the space colony. *They couldn't have gotten her*, he told himself.

"I already told you, I am not going to tell you where it is."

The man laughed at him. "You don't believe we could do that to her?" The man tossed him a small electronic device. "Maybe now you will be a little more cooperative."

Steve turned the device over in his hand and looked at the screen. It was a video feed, it didn't say where it was coming from, but on the screen he could see Katie. She was hanging by a rope over a pool of green acid. There was a man standing next to a pool holding a frozen turkey.

"Drop it," the man standing next to Steve spoke into a radio he was holding. The man on the screen dropped the turkey into the pool of acid and smoke exploded out of the pool and the turkey bobbed on the top of the pool for a moment before it was absorbed by the acid.

"Tell me where you hid it, or we cut the rope," he didn't have a choice. As much as he wanted to help Rachial, he couldn't let them do this to Katie, he loved her too much to let any harm come to her. Maybe he wouldn't have to tell them everything.

"Alright, I'll tell you, but you have to promise to return her to where you found her, unharmed."

"A wise choice. We will set her free, after you tell us where to find DreamPhase."

"I'll tell you where DreamPhase is located, but it won't do you any good, the system is password-protected and will self-destruct, if you enter the wrong code. I will tell you the code, once Katie is safe." Steve then told them where he had hidden DreamPhase. After he told them, they put him back in the cell and left him with the data pad.

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The van had stopped and the doors opened. The men who had been guarding her in the van jumped out and closed the doors. Rachial waited a few moments, but none of them returned. Her hands and feet were still tied and the front of the van was separated from the back by a metal screen. She had been trying think of a way to get the ties off her hands, but there wasn't anything sharp inside the van. Maybe she could pull DreamPhase out of her hair and get it on her wrist while no one was watching. She reached her hands up to her head. She was able to touch it, but couldn't pull it out. She put her head back and tried again. She was able to pull it out and then put it on her wrist. Finally, she had made progress. She looked out the windows of the van, but didn't see anyone. She closed her eyes and tried to concentrate.

A moment later she was in the DreamPhase world. She had a new email and decided she could check it. She didn't know what else she was going to do. She didn't have anyone she could contact for help. The one person she could turn to had disappeared. The email was from Luke. Wow, he must have really liked her if he was trying to contact her so soon. Maybe she could get him to help her. She opened the email.

*"Hey, I was the guy you talked to earlier. I met this guy who says he knows you and thinks that you are in trouble. We found tire tracks from a van, but couldn't follow them very far. This guy said to tell you that if you can tell him where you are he can help you. He also said to let you know, that he is the one who gave you the hard drive. I don't know if you are in trouble, but if you are and you want help, just send me an email." -Luke*

This could be a good thing. She would have to trust the bounty hunter; after all, he had given her the drive and helped her escape from the Jahory. Rachial sent a reply email along with her IP address.

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Steve watched Katie intently on the little screen in his hand. He watched the men lower her down and untie her. The camera followed her as she was led outside of the warehouse. The camera stopped at the doorway and he watched as she walked away. He looked at the screen for a little

longer before placing it on the cot beside him. He didn't like knowing that they could just go and capture her again if his information was false. He would have to tell them how to use it.

Kaleb and Luke left Luke's vehicle and were walking down towards the van when they saw the guards. There were four guards standing outside the van. Luke pointed it out. "They have guards, how are we going to get past?"

"I'll take care of the guards while you get Rachial out of the van."

"Okay," they both moved in on the guards. Kaleb went first, kneeling down so as not to be seen. Once he was about 10 feet away from the men, he signaled for Luke to approach. Luke made his way to the other side of the van. He signaled that he was in position. Kaleb looked around on the ground for something to throw. He picked up a small rock and threw it towards the van. The rock struck the van windows and the window cracked. Two of the guards examined the windows, while the other two started looking for whoever threw the rock. Kaleb ran towards the two men who were examining the broken windows. He pulled out his gun and hit the first man over the head with the handle. The man collapsed onto the ground.

Kaleb turned to deal with his partner, but instead received a hefty punch to his right cheek. Unable to stabilize himself he fell to the ground. His attacker raised his gun and was about to fire when a large rock hit the man's head. Kaleb rolled out of the way so the falling rock wouldn't land on him. He looked up; it was Luke who had thrown the rock. Kaleb jumped to his feet and took a swing at the third guard and missed. Luke was busy fighting the fourth. He took another swing, but missed again. The man took a swing at him. He ducked to avoid the blow and the man hit the van. The man recoiled in pain. Kaleb took this chance and made a side swipe with his gun. The gun impacted the man's gut and he reeled in pain and collapsed on the ground. Kaleb turned to deal with the last man, but Luke had already knocked him out and was working on getting into the van. Kaleb picked up the large rock that had been thrown at the guard and threw it at the already-cracked window. The window shattered into thousands of tiny pieces. Kaleb reach in through the windows and unlocked the doors. He heard Luke open the back doors.

Rachial heard a loud *thunk* and then saw a rock smash into the front window. The window cracked but didn't shatter. Rachial looked out the window and could see people fighting, but couldn't tell who it was. It could be the bounty hunter and the guy from the school, or it could be another bounty hunter trying to take her so he could receive the bounty. She waited with anticipation as the fight continued. She didn't know who was attacking the guards, so she got as ready as she could. If she didn't know who they were, she would try and run. She moved next to the back door getting ready to jump on whoever opened it. The door opened slowly and Rachial was just about to jump when she recognized the person opening the door. She would jump the person then try and run. She doubted if she would be able to escape, but she wasn't just going to give up on what could be her last chance to escape.

**"You said you would tell us how to use DreamPhase, but so far, everything you told us was a lie. We haven't been able to enter DreamPhase at all."**

DreamPhase

"As I told you before, DreamPhase doesn't work for everyone. Of the 20 people I tried it on, only 10 could use it and of the 10 that could use it, only 7 of the people had any control over it. Even I have a very limited control over it."

The man pulled a watch-sized band off his wrist and handed it to Steve. "Are you sure there isn't anything wrong with this? We followed the instructions on the computer. Did you alter the instructions at all?"

Steve looked at the band. They hadn't been able to get it working yet. That meant there was still time to stop the process. "I didn't change anything. I told you why it won't work. Try testing it on someone else. If it doesn't work for you, it never will. There is nothing I can do to change that."

"You better be right, or we are going to chase your girlfriend down."  
Steve didn't respond, he knew that any attempt to please the man would be futile. Kaleb walked to the back of the van to find Luke untying Rachial's wrists and feet.

"We need to get out of here before more bounty hunters come back." The three started running back towards Luke's vehicle. Once they reached the vehicle, they climbed in and drove away.

"So, how did they capture you anyway?" asked Kaleb.

"I let my guard down and they caught me by surprise. I had just left the building at the university in search of Dr. Shaum when they jumped me."

"Since the bounty hunters were after you and Dr. Shaum is involved in this somehow, I am guessing that maybe the bounty hunters captured him too?"

"I don't think so. If Cromwell wanted him, they would capture him themselves," said Kaleb.

"So you think that Cromwell, Inc. is holding him somewhere?" asked Luke.

"Yes, and they are probably torturing him to get the location of DreamPhase," answered Rachial.

"Wait a minute, what is DreamPhase?" asked Luke.

"DreamPhase is a computer that can be controlled by your dreams, both dreams at night, and day dreams. It is the computer I used to send you the email back at the university."

"I see, so that is why they are after you. It must be worth a lot of money and that is why they framed you?"

"They offered me a lot of money, but DreamPhase is very powerful and a lot of evil could come from it if the technology is used wrong. That is why I wouldn't sell it to them. They

tried to take it by force, but I stopped them, so they framed me for murder and then planned to take it after I was locked away, but I was able to escape. I gave DreamPhase to Dr. Shaum for safekeeping and then left to go retrieve the information I needed to clear my name. When I got back, Dr. Shaum was missing. That is why I think he might be in trouble.

"So how are you planning to clear your name?" Luke asked.

"I don't know yet, I was thinking about going to one of the news centers and trying to get them to broadcast it. After that I would go back to the court where I stood trial and ask them for the case to be reopened with new evidence."

"I already did the first step for you. I made a copy of that hard drive and brought it in to one of the broadcasting companies earlier today. But I think you should wait to go to the court until we rescue Dr. Shaum, they might kill him if he doesn't tell them what they want to know," said Kaleb.

"Yeah, I agree, but how do we find him?" asked Rachial.

"Couldn't you hack into Cromwell's system like you did to the university's email sever?" suggested Luke.

"Yes, I should be able to, but it will take a while. Their system is a lot more advanced than the universities."

"What if you had a little help?" asked Kaleb.

"Then it should go faster. Why, do you know someone good at hacking?"

"I have done a little bit of it; I am just not very fast at it. What you did to the email system would have taken me a couple of hours."

"That should be enough, let's get started. We need to find a fast connection to the internet."

"The university has one. You would have to hack the system to allow for higher bandwidth, because they have a bandwidth limit," offered Luke.  
The three were soon heading towards the university.

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Finally, entering Mr. Lotus' office didn't sound scary to him. Right now it sounded acutely good. The reason for the change was because this time when he walked into the marble office, he would have good news to inform Mr. Lotus about. Maybe if Mr. Lotus was pleased, he could ask for a different position. He lifted his hand and knocked on the office door. He heard a voice call out, "Come in." He walked into the large room.

"Tell me some good news."

DreamPhase

He cleared his voice and started his report.

"We were able to capture Dr. Shaum and his fiancé. We convinced the doctor to tell us the location of DreamPhase schematics for the life of his fiancé. We constructed one of the DreamPhase devices and did some tests on it, but none of them worked. We were able to get some more information from the doctor about the technology, and were told it wasn't working because the device doesn't always work for everyone, and it takes lots of practice before they can do anything useful."

"This is good news. I want you to put all of our resources on this. I want this thing marketable within the next two weeks. Oh and I want one on my desk tomorrow with instructions on how to use it."

"I will get a team working on it right away."

"Good, you are dismissed." The assistant left the office and his mood changed. The only good part was that he had not gotten Mr. Lotus mad. He left the office and made his way back to the research center where he would give the scientists their new instructions. Hopefully they would be able to make it so anybody could use the technology, because if Mr. Lotus couldn't use it, he would blame it on him and his team.

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Rachial, Kaleb, and Luke reached the campus and got out of the vehicle. They split up, Rachial heading towards the server room with Kaleb, as Luke set out to make a trap. They had decided that something would need to be done to prevent the police from capturing them when Rachial connected to the server. Rachial knew that the second she connected to Cromwell's network, an alert would come up at the police station and a car would be dispatched. Rachial had told Luke to find something that would slow the police down so she and Kaleb could work.

Luke went in search of soap. He went to the kitchen area and started looking around, but before he had accomplished his mission, was soon found and told he didn't belong there. Luke had another idea; he looked around for a bag of some type. He found an empty garbage bag next to one of the trash cans. He took the bag and went to the nearest restroom. Inside the restroom, he went over to the soap dispenser and pulled the soap bags out. The bags started leaking as soon as he disconnected them from the dispenser. He dumped the soap into the garbage bag and left. Now he needed some water.

Luke brought the soap over to the server room where Rachial and Kaleb were working. He set the bag against the wall and walked over to the server rack they were sitting next to. "How is it going?" he asked.

Kaleb looked up from the computer he was working on, but Rachial didn't move at all; she kept her eyes closed, just sitting there.

"I am not sure, we reached Cromwell's server, but still haven't broken the password," Kaleb sighed then looked back at the computer he had been working on. "How is your booby-trap coming?"



"I have the soap; I just need to get some water. Do you think that the soap will be enough?"

"Soap plus grass equals very slippery. If you try to run on it, you will fall. It should get the police off our trail long enough for us to get to the vehicle."

"Okay, I will get it set up the rest of the way, what should I do after that?"

"If you could think of some way to get his gun away from him that would be nice."

"I have an idea. I'll be back in a little bit."

Luke left the room and Kaleb went back to his work on the computer.

Luke returned to the computer room 10 minutes later holding a large piece of equipment.

"What is that?" asked Kaleb getting up from his sitting position and stretching his arms. Luke set the device on the ground next to the door,

"This is an electro-magnet. I was thinking if I set it next it to the door and wait to turn it on until the police come in, I would pull their guns right out of their hands."

"Sounds like a good idea, but what about the servers in here? A magnet will wipe all the information off of their hard disks."

"I thought of that, but I would rather destroy everything on these servers than get shot."

"Me too. Here I can help you set it up. Rachial is already beyond the point where I could help her."

Kaleb ran a power cord over to the device and Luke went to work aligning the device with the door. They were done setting it up a few minutes later and stood back to look at their accomplishment. "Now what do we do?" asked Luke.

"We wait. There isn't anything else that we can do."

"Sounds like fun to me. I am going to go keep a lookout for any police." Luke opened the door and left the building.

Rachial was surrounded by a blue-tinted world once again, just this time the world was huge. There were endless columns of wall with paper attached to them. Rachial was running through the rows of papers, looking for anything that might give away the location of where they had taken Dr. Shaum. She had looked through most of the warehouse records, because she figured they were keeping him in one of the many warehouses they owned. She wouldn't have much time before the security system detected her and she was running out of places left to check. She was looking over one of the walls when she noticed a file marked *live webcam*. That would be perfect. She tapped the paper and could then see the inside of one of the warehouses. The building was full of crates, but there were no people to be seen. Rachial exited the webcam's view and went back over to the warehouses she had already checked. She looked

for more webcam interfaces. She found them quickly since she was looking this time. Rachial quickly started checking all the video feeds on the warehouses.

Kaleb was sitting on the floor leaning against one of the server racks, sleeping. He hadn't slept in a while and Luke was out watching for police, so he had nothing to worry about. He had been sleeping for a little while now, he wasn't exactly sure how long, when he was awoken from his slumber. He was light sleeper and sprang away when something tapped his shoulder. He looked up to see Rachial standing over him. She spoke to him. "Time to go, sleepyhead."

Kaleb opened his mouth and replied as he stood. "Right, Luke is waiting outside watching for the police."

Hearing the door, they both turned to see Luke walk inside. "There is a police car outside. We need to go."

"I just told him that," said Rachial pointing at Kaleb.

"You two get the car, I am going to activate the electro-magnet when he comes in here," said Luke, picking up a remote that was lying on top of the electro-magnet.

"Okay, we'll be right back."

Luke watched them leave then hid behind one of the server racks. He had just hidden himself when the police officer walked into the building. Luke pressed the button on the remote and the electro-magnet made a loud buzz. The officer was jerked to the side as his firearm was pulled to the magnet. Luke stood up and ran out the door. Outside the door he saw the vehicle coming towards him. Behind him, he could hear the officer unclipping his weapon. Luke popped the bag he had placed outside the back door earlier. The soap and water mixture spread out across the walkway and grass. Luke walked carefully across the soapy area and then started running towards the vehicle. The officer came out the door a little bit behind him and started to run after him. The officer slipped on the grass and fell flat on his back. Luke kept running and reached the vehicle just as the officer had picked himself up.

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Walking into the room full of men in long, white coats, he looked at each of the men's faces.

"Please tell me you have good news that I can bring to Mr. Lotus."

"Yes, we do. We were able to get DreamPhase to work on all of our test subjects, but the degree of usability varies. But the more our subjects use the device, the more control they get."

"This is very good news, Mr. Lotus will be pleased. Keep working on it, the sooner we get it ready for distribution, the better." He turned and left the room. Mr. Lotus would be very pleased with this news. Now if only he could tell Mr. Lotus that he wouldn't need to worry about the girl anymore. He got yelled at the last time he had brought news about her. She was very good at evading.

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Luke jumped into the vehicle and they drove off. "Did you find out where they are keeping Dr. Shaum?" asked Luke as he fastened his seat belt.

"Yes, I did. He is being held in one of their warehouses. We are heading there now."

"Good. Do you think the warehouse will be guarded?" asked Luke.

"When I looked at the security cameras I saw three guards inside the building. There are probably more outside, but it is nothing we can't handle."

"I would guess there are another five to ten guards outside. They will be armed with light weaponry. If we do it right, we might even be able to sneak past them," said Kaleb.

"But if they catch us, we are going to need a fast escape, because they will call for reinforcements."

"We should be able to do it; we will just need to be careful and quick."  
They spent the remainder of the ride planning their mission. Rachial pulled the stereo out of the dashboard and began working on it.

"What are you doing?" asked Luke as he watched her take the stereo apart.

"I am going to try and modify the radio so it will interfere with other radios." She opened the radio the rest of the way, exposing the insides. "And I am really not sure what I am doing," she said as she looked over the radio's circuit board.

They arrived outside of the warehouse a while later. Kaleb brought the vehicle to stop and they climbed out. Kaleb popped the hood and pulled the battery out. He handed the battery to Rachial. She took the battery and the radio she had modified and put them behind a pile of rubble that was positioned a little ways away from the main door.

Rachial went right to the front door where she waited. Kaleb went around to the back of the warehouse and positioned himself next to one of the windows. Luke positioned himself off to the right of the front door. After they were in position, Rachial knocked on the door. Luke waited, leaning back against the wall next to the door. He could hear the bolt on the door being pulled off to the side.

The door opened slowly and a man's head popped out. "What are you doing here?" he asked when he saw Rachial standing outside the door. Rachial just smiled as Luke hit him over the head. The man collapsed onto the ground. Luke peered around the corner. There were two more men walking towards the open door. The men were holding guns at the ready. Luke signaled to Rachial so she would know. They both turned and ran away from the door. They ran behind the pile of rubble where Rachial had put the radio earlier.

Rachial hooked the radio up to the battery and then turned to watch. "Do you think it will work?" asked Luke.

"I don't know, but we will see."

The two men came out the door with their guns raised. They looked and saw their comrade lying on the ground. "Thompson?" the first man asked kneeling down to examine the man lying on the ground. "He is just unconscious," he said, turning to the other man.

"Drag him inside, I'll radio the other," he said, pulling a radio out of his pocket. He pressed the button and spoke into the radio, but he only received static as a reply.

"Well, it worked," said Luke.

"Yeah, but we need to get the battery back in the car if we want to get out of here."

The man put the radio back in his pocket and helped drag the unconscious man inside the building. "I'll just have to tell him in person the radio is dead."

"Okay, I'll keep an eye on the door," one said, closing the door.

Rachial turned to Luke. "Take the battery and put it back in the car. I am going to go see if I can help Kaleb."

Luke didn't bother to argue even though he wanted to help with the guards. Instead he unhooked the battery from the radio and carried it off towards the car.

He watched as the two men went outside to check on the disturbance. As soon as they left the warehouse, he opened the window and climbed inside. The inside of the warehouse was filled with crates of boxes. All the boxes had identical markings on the sides. The markings read *Property of Cromwell, Inc.* At the far end of the warehouse there was a small enclosed area that appeared to be an office of sorts. Dr. Shaum was probably being held in there. Kaleb walked past the crates and had almost made it to the door when the two guards returned. He ducked behind the nearest crate and waited until they would not be able to see him and then ran over to the closed-off area. He opened the door slowly and looked inside. There was one guard in there, and at the moment he was busy saying something to the prisoner, who he assumed was Dr. Shaum.

Kaleb stepped into the room and closed the door as quietly as he could. The guard didn't notice, but the man inside the cell had. He said something to the guard to grab his attention. Kaleb took this chance and rushed the guard from behind taking him by surprise. The guard wasn't able to put up much of a fight before Kaleb rendered him unconscious.

"Thanks for the distraction. I am guessing you are Dr. Shaum?" Kaleb asked as he picked up the keys off of the guard's limp body.

"Yes I am. Are you here to help me, or capture me and hold me for ransom?"

"I am here with Rachial. She heard you had been captured and decided we had to rescue you," explained Kaleb as he finished unlocking the door.

"We have to find Katie, or they'll just use her," said Steve.

"First we need to get out of here. Rachial is waiting with a vehicle outside of the warehouse. There are two guards outside the door and if they get alerted, they will call for reinforcements."

"I can distract them for you if you think you can deal with them, but I don't know the first thing about fighting."

"I was thinking the same thing. Okay, you go out the door and when they see you turn around and come back in here. They should follow you. I'll be waiting in here for them."

Steve nodded, then opened the door and stepped through it. A moment later he came back through, followed by the guards. Kaleb threw a box at the first guard and jumped on the second. The guard fell to the ground, but wasn't out yet. The guard managed to punch Kaleb right in the gut. The blow sent Kaleb stumbling back, but he recovered quickly and was already making his

next move. Kaleb made a low kick at the guard's legs. The man fell backwards and hit his head on the ground. The guard started to pick himself back up, but stopped and collapsed onto the floor. "Let's get out of here." They both left the warehouse.

Their ride was waiting outside the door; they climbed in quickly and left.

"Rachial, I am glad you are okay and thank you for rescuing me!"

"Well I couldn't just leave you there. It was my fault that they were after you. If I hadn't given you DreamPhase, they would have left you alone."

"Yea, but it doesn't really matter now. I told them where to find the blueprints for DreamPhase. I didn't give them any of the devices but they have the computer," he held up his arm and there were three rubber bands hanging from his wrist. They told me if I didn't, they would kill my fiancée. I didn't tell them where DreamPhase was, but with the instructions, they have already started making their own version."

"It's okay. We'll get it back, but first we need to make sure Katie is safe."

"How did you know her name was Katie? I never even told you I was engaged."

"It is a long story, so let's just say we've met. Do you know where she might be?"

"I have a few ideas. But I don't know exactly where she is."

"We'll we better start looking, where is the first place we should check?"

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"What do you mean he escaped?! He is a college professor, not a military trained combatant, yet he beat three of my men and escaped the cell we had him in!"

"The men I had assigned to guard him had not reported in for the predetermined update, so I took some men to go check it out. When I got there he was gone and the guards were lying on the ground, unconscious. I woke them up and asked what happened and they told me he had someone helping him."

"That is still no excuse. You should have had more guards; you knew how important he was. What about his fiancée? We could use her to get him to come back."

The mercenary cringed as Mr. Lotus asked about her. He wouldn't be happy to find out both of them were missing.

"I already thought of that, but when I ordered for her to be brought to me, I was told that she went missing shortly after he escaped." The mercenary took a step back as Mr. Lotus's fist slammed onto his desk.

"That is unacceptable! I want them found and I don't care how you do it. Meanwhile I have an idea that might slow them down."

"I will start searching right away," said the mercenary and then turned to leave.

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Kaleb was driving the hover car down one of skyways when his phone rang. "Hello...sure, can you hang on a second?" He turned to the passengers and asked if one of them would take over for him. Luke volunteered and they switched positions. Kaleb took shotgun while Luke took the driver's seat. Rachial, Dr. Shaum, and Katie were sitting in the back. "Okay, go ahead."

"This is Charles Johnson; you talked to me earlier about a story."

"Yes, I know who you are."

"Well, it is about your story. I brought it to my boss and he told me to erase all the information and not to speak of it again. It turns out that Cromwell, Inc. just bought our company and has put a hold order on all of our news articles."

"That's not good. Is there any way you could still get the story out there?"

"That is what I why I was calling. I want to continue to pursue the story, but by law, I can't publish it through another company without your permission."

"You have it. The sooner the news is out, the better."

"Okay, thank you. I will get it out as soon as I can."

"Could you give me call and tell me when it is going to be aired?"

"Sure, no problem."

Kaleb closed his phone, ending the call. He put the phone back in his pocket and looked out at the buildings that were quickly moving out of view as they sped by.

"Who was that?" questioned Rachial from the back seat.

"That was the news reporter who was supposed to be publishing your story. He ran into a little snag. Cromwell bought out his company and told him not to publish anything. He was calling because he needed my permission before he could try publishing the story through another network."

"So is it going to get published?"

"Yes, he will get the story out as fast as he can."

"Good. I want this to be over."

Rachial leaned back in her seat. It was almost over, soon her name would be cleared and she could go on with her life. She planned on developing DreamPhase some more and then possibly marketing it. But before she could do that, she would have to find a way to make it safe,

so that people wouldn't abuse the technology. She looked around the car. It felt good to be around friends. While most of them hadn't been her friends long, she knew that they were the closest friends she had ever had. They had been so helpful. She knew there was no way for her to even begin to repay them for their help. Rachial wondered what they were planning on doing after this was over. She looked at each of them, trying to imagine what they would do.

Steve and Katie would get married. She could tell that they really did care about each other deeply. Steve would continue to teach, because he loved it so much. She wasn't sure what Katie would do, but Rachial knew whatever it was that it would coincide with what Steve was doing.

She looked at Luke. She really hadn't known him long enough to know what he would do. She really didn't know him very well at all, but he was here, helping her. She hoped that she would get a chance to know him better. He was a nice guy.

Then her look fell on Kaleb. She didn't know him very well either. At first he was the one who was after her, but now he was helping her. She wondered what he was planning on doing. He couldn't go back to being a bounty hunter now that he had broken one of his contracts. From what she had seen it didn't seem like he wanted to go back to being a bounty hunter. She leaned forward in her seat so she could talk to him.

"So, what are you planning on doing after this?"

Kaleb turned in his seat to face Rachial. "I really don't know. I know I can't go back to being a bounty hunter. Whatever it is, I want it to be something that involves helping people. It is something I should have been doing a long time ago. What about yourself, what are you going to do after your name is cleared?"

"I am planning on finishing DreamPhase. I need to install some safety features so that people can't abuse it. After that, I want to market it and then start working on something else."

"Well it shouldn't be long before it goes public. The court will want to do a retrial. The problem still remains: how do we get you into the court without them throwing you in jail?"

Luke heard this and spoke up. "I have been thinking about that. Even if your story gets out there, if you turn yourself in they will still throw you in jail. It will take them a long time before they schedule a retrial. You can't just turn yourself in."

"I have been thinking about this for a long time, and that is the only way that it will work," said Rachial.

"But what if they never schedule a retrial? Cromwell is very powerful, they might be able to stop any retrial," asked Kaleb.

"I don't know. I guess I would be in trouble."

DreamPhase

"What if you could get the entire planet to take your side, or at least a very large portion of it? Cromwell might be powerful, but if you have enough people, the court won't have any other choice," replied Luke.

"That would make a difference, but where would I get that kind of support? Nobody knows who I am."

Steve leaned forward and joined the conversation. "I know you didn't get close to any of your classmates when you were in school, but you did help a lot of other students with their homework. They know who you are and I had a lot of people asking me if you had really murdered somebody after the trial. I told every student that there was some kind of mistake. If you ask them, they will stand up for you."

"Still that would only be about 20-30 people, that wouldn't be enough."

Luke started taping the steering wheel. Kaleb looked over at him, clearly annoyed. Kaleb was about to ask him to stop when Luke spoke. "I have an idea. I play an online RPG and I know a lot of people on there. I thought of a way to get them all on your side. They are against anything that could harm their gaming and for anything that would improve it. If you tell them that you are planning on releasing a version of DreamPhase for gamers, they will want to make sure you don't get thrown in prison. Do you think you could make a version that would work with their game? I don't know very much about DreamPhase, but from what I have heard, it would revolutionize the way games are played."

Rachial leaned back in her seat thinking about it. She leaned forward again after a moment. "Yes, I could do that. I was going to do something like that anyway; I just wasn't planning on selling it to the gaming industry."

"Then we need to get to a computer and circulate the news. If you get the news out before the reporter does, then when they hear your story, they will listen," said Kaleb

"I have an idea. How much money do you have?" asked Luke.

"Why, what are you thinking?" asked Steve.

An hour later all three of them were standing outside of a huge dome. They all began walking towards the giant bubble-shaped building. "I still don't understand why it cost 1000 bucks to get in. I thought it was just a gaming convention," said Kaleb, looking at Luke.

"It is free to get in, but we are not just going in, we are setting up a booth."

"Why do we need a booth, are we trying to sell something?" asked Katie.

"Kind of, we are going to show off DreamPhase. We are going to let people try out the technology. Everyone will want to try it out and it will get the name out there. Then when people



hear the news report they will want a retrial, because if there isn't one they might never see the DreamPhase technology in any games for a long time."

"How are we going to let people try it out? Isn't there only one rubber band thing? What do you call that anyway?"

"We have four of them. I haven't really thought of a name for it yet."

They reached the entrance to the building and their conversation stopped. One of the security men walked over to their group. "Is this the DreamPhase group that just called an hour ago?"

Luke stepped forward. "Yes it is. Did the registration go through?"

The security man reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of lanyards. "Yes, it did. You can set your booth up in section C. Your nametags are waiting on the table over there," the man indicated a table next to the entrance. "You will need to keep your tags on at all times."

"Okay, thank you," Luke turned to the group. "Let's get the tags and get the booth set up." About a half hour later, Kaleb, Luke, and Katie finished setting up the booth. It surprised Luke how professional they had been able to make the booth look, especially since they hadn't been planning months in advance for the convention like many of the other companies that had their own booths set up. Rachial and Steve had been working on configuring DreamPhase so that it would work for anyone who tried to use it. They were also setting up a virtual world for people to use when trying it out. Rachial had suggested using the program that Steve had already written, so Steve was rewriting the program so people would only experience the part where they were in the air flying.

The dome was crowded, people were everywhere. Luke had already had about 10 people asking him about DreamPhase. He answered their questions and told them they would have a demo setup in a little while. Kaleb walked up to him. "Hey, I was walking around and I noticed that all of the booths were handing something out, like a sample, but we don't have anything. I was wondering if you could think of anything we could hand out."

"No, I can't think of anything, you could ask Katie about it. I am going to go check on Rachial and Steve and see how it is coming along."

"Okay."

Kaleb walked over to Katie. "Hey, I was walking around and I noticed that most of the booths are handing something out. We don't have anything so I was wondering if you had any ideas," Katie looked around at all the people.

"We could get T-shirts, if you can find a place that prints them out. All we would need is a fancy font that says *DreamPhase*."

"It sounds good to me. If you can design what goes on the shirt, I'll go find a place that will print it out."

Katie looked around for something to write on and found a sheet of paper. She drew it out a few times, before she found one that she liked. She handed the paper to Kaleb. "This one here."

"Okay, I'll be back in a little while."

Luke stepped inside the curtained-off area of their booth that the convention had been nice enough to provide. Rachial and Steve were sitting at a small table that was set up in the center of the small room.

"Hey, how's it going?" he said as he walked over to the table. They both looked up.

"I just finished writing the virtual world program. I was just helping Rachial configure the last DreamPhase band."

Rachial stood up and picked up the rest of the bands off the table. "I'm finished. We need to find something to attach them to our booth so people don't run off with them."

"I thought of that. I have some wires hooked up that you can attach them to. Oh, we'll have to stop using your real name for now and use the one on your tag so the police don't find you."

The three of them walked out to find Katie talking to a group of gamers dressed in Storm Trooper uniforms. When they stepped out of the room, she turned to look at them then looked back at the group. "Our demo is ready, as soon as they finish setting it up, you will be able to experience the most revolutionary game play since 3D games came out."

The gamers started talking amongst their group about what it would be like. From what Rachial could hear, they thought it was going to be a flop they were going to be in for a big surprise. They finished tying bands to the booth and then started explaining to people how they worked. In no time, a line of excited people was formed leading towards the booth.

Rachial, Luke, and Steve showed the people how to use the bands and Katie spoke to the crowd about the technology. As they continued to move the line along, Rachial would have people ask her questions. She would answer them and they would thank her, but when they did, they wouldn't use her real name. It felt weird to have people call her Nina when her name was Rachial. She wanted to correct them, but knew she couldn't risk it. She wondered why Luke had chosen the name, but hadn't had time to ask him. She would have to do it later.

An hour later, Kaleb came back with pallet boxes on a hover sled. Luke went to help him. They moved the pallet inside the curtain and came out with some of the boxes. They put the boxes under the table and Kaleb went back inside and came out with a rolled-up sheet of paper. He unrolled the paper and attached it to the curtain. The sign said:

***Try our product and get a free T-shirt!***

The length of the line increased after that. They had been at the convention for 5 hours now and they were all starting to get hungry. They decided to shut down their booth for a while and get something to eat. They all walked to the food court and started looking around. They

decided that the pizza place looked the most appetizing. They all ordered their food and were waiting for it to arrive when Kaleb's phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Hi, this is Charles; I was calling to let you know that the story is going to be aired in 2 hours on the evening news."

"Okay, Thanks for calling."

Kaleb ended the call and put his phone away. When he looked up, they were all looking at him.

"What?" he asked.

"Who were you talking to?" asked Steve.

"That was Charles Johnson, the reporter who is putting out Rachial's story. He was calling to tell me that her story will be aired in 2 hours."

"That's good news. We have 2 hours to eat and then get every person in that dome to learn about DreamPhase," said Katie.

"I have an idea; what if we had a drawing? Whoever wins would be sent a free DreamPhase band once you are done making them. How does that sound?" suggested Luke.

"I like it. People always get excited about free stuff. Who wants to do the drawing? I can't, it would draw too much attention to me."

"I'll do it. I have always wanted to do something like that and it was kind of my idea."

The waitress came to their table carrying the pizzas and placed them on the table. The group sat there a moment, not sure what to do, none of them knowing the rest of the group very well.

Finally Steve spoke. "Who would like say the blessing?" Both Luke and Rachial started to speak. "I will..." they both started. They looked at each other and blushed slightly. After a somewhat awkward pause, Luke started again. "I will." He then led them in a short prayer thanking God for the meal. After they had finished, everyone started eating.

The meal lasted a while and they talked about different things. There were moments of silence when someone had said something that put another person in an awkward spot, but for the most part, it went well. The pizza was almost gone when they decided that they were done. When the waitress placed the bill on the table everyone reached for it, but Luke was the quickest and paid for the meal.

They left the restaurant and headed back towards the dome. The closer they got to the dome, the busier it became. Outside the door, Rachial noticed Luke pull his nametag out of his pocket and place it around his neck. She hadn't noticed he had taken it off. He must not like nametags. She walked over to him. "Don't like nametags?" she asked.

"If I could go without wearing one and not be kicked out, I wouldn't be wearing one at all." They laughed.

"Well at least yours has your real name on it. Why did you pick Nina as fake name for me?"

"Well I knew I couldn't use your real name and I was on the phone so I didn't have a lot of time to think. I have always liked the name, so it was the first thing that came to mind. Why don't you like it?"

"I like my real name more, but I asked because I was curious, that's all."

They both stepped up to the door and were asked to display their name badges. They showed their tags to the security and were admitted into the dome. Inside they went to their booth. There was a line outside their booth. The line was longer than it had been before. It looked like the news about DreamPhase had spread around. They attached the bands back to the wire and started letting people try out the demo again. Luke started announcing the drawing. He made the people form a separate line to enter for the drawing.

People were crowding around the booth. Rachial looked around. It was one of the busiest booths. Steve was now busy in the middle of an interview with one of the major tech news sites. He was telling them a little about how it worked and telling them when it was going to be released.

Forty-five minutes had passed and there was still a large line of people waiting to try out DreamPhase. The box they had been using to put forms into for the drawing was overflowing so they had to put the names into a large garbage bag. Rachial talked to Luke and he said he would announce the winner in a couple minutes. She started telling people that they were closing the demo stations. People begged her to let them get a chance and she really wanted to, but told them that she couldn't because they had to leave.

"Hey, I was thinking. It would be better if we kept our booth going until the convention is over. People will get upset at us if they can't try out DreamPhase just because we are leaving early. I know you were planning on turning yourself over to the police before the news broadcast and you still can, but I think some of us should stay here and keep the people happy."

"You're right. I didn't even think about that. Would you be willing to do that and then take care of the DreamPhase bands?"

"Sure. I will be at the trial too. They wouldn't do it right away anyways."

"Thanks, I really appreciate it. Who should I ask to give me a ride?" asked Rachial.

"Well, don't ask Katie. I finally get to spend some time with her. And I think the crowd likes Luke the most, so you could ask Kaleb."

Rachial nodded then turned to look for Kaleb.

Kaleb was standing next to one of the demo units explaining how it worked to the next user. She walked over to him. "Hey, I need to get going to do the..." she paused not sure how to say it when there were all these people around. "...so I am on time for my meeting," she supplied.

Kaleb knew what she was talking about and stepped away from the display. There were instructions attached to the band, so he wasn't needed. The only reason he was there was so that it would get the people through the line faster.

"Okay, let's get going then."

They left the Dome and found their vehicle in the parking ramp. As they were driving down the street, they passed one of the police stations. "We just passed one of the stations, where are we going?" asked Rachial a little confused.

Kaleb looked at her and smiled. "I am taking you to a station that has weaker security. Just in case. That way if the trial goes bad, I can break you out and you can go to another planet like you did before."

"Ah," she said, showing she understood.

Kaleb parked the car at a police station about two miles further down the road. They both got out of the car and Rachial started walking towards the front door. Kaleb followed her. Rachial stopped and turned to face him. "I think it would be better if I went in alone. They might throw you in jail to just for being with me."

"Good idea. I'll see you later."

Kaleb turned and got back into the car and Rachial opened the door and walked into the police station.

Inside the police station it was very dead. There was only one person to be seen and he was standing behind the desk looking extremely bored. She walked up to his desk.

"Hello, is there something I can help you with?" he asked, slowly looking up from his desk as he took a sip from the coffee mug that had been sitting on the edge of his desk. He clearly didn't recognize her or he would have jumped up and raised his gun.

"Yes, there is. Don't be alarmed, I am not going to do anything. I am just here to turn myself in," she said, taking a seat in the chair on the other side of his desk.

"What do you mean 'turn yourself in'?"

"My name is Rachial Williams." The man was shocked. He went to reach for his gun, but she didn't even move.

"Oh," he paused for a minute. "You were serious about not running?" She nodded.

The policeman stood up from his desk and walked around to the side she was on. "I am going to have to put these on," he said, pulling out a pair of electro-cuffs.

"I know," she held her hands out for him to put them on.

"Why are you doing this... turning yourself in?" he asked as he finished putting the cuffs on and moved around the desk again.

"I didn't murder anyone, so I have no reason to run."

The man nodded, but didn't really believe her. He picked up the headset on his desk and entered a number. Rachial could hear the phone ringing

"What do you mean she left? Without saying goodbye or anything?" asked a frustrated Luke.

"Yes, she left. She didn't have time to wait and you were in the middle of the drawing so she couldn't say anything to you. Don't worry, we will see her again. If not at the trial, then afterwards when this is all over," Steve told him, trying to calm him down a little bit.

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"Spit it out already. I might not like hearing bad news, but I really don't like delays," the man started to speak in a wavering voice.

"Sorry," he tried to apologize, but from the look on Mr. Lotus's, face he stopped and told him the news. "We were tracking Dr. Shaum and found him, but he was at a convention and there were way too many people to try anything."

"A convention, what would he be doing at a convention?"

"He was there promoting DreamPhase. He had demos setup at his booth and there were lots of people in line trying them out. He also had some other guy running a drawing and it looked like most of the people at the convention had entered the drawing."

Mr. Lotus slammed his fist down onto his desk as hard as he could. The pen that had been lying under where his fist had hit was obliterated.

"That's not all. We were able to find the girl, but she turned herself over to the police. Shortly after that, a news channel aired a story about her and how she was framed by us. We haven't heard anything from the court yet, but I am sure it won't be long until we are called to the courtroom."

At this point Mr. Lotus exploded; he swung his arm and knocked the rest of the stuff that had been on his desk onto the floor. "Get me Mr. Hakan now!"

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The vehicle came to a stop and Steve, Katie, and Luke climbed out. The vehicle drove off and they walked up the steps of the courthouse. The whole area outside the courthouse was crowded with protesters. Most of them were gamers and most of them had signs that read something along the lines of: *Reopen the case, give Williams a fair trial*. When Steve, Katie, and Luke stepped out of the car, there was a loud cheer. Their plan had worked. But as they walked up the steps with the crowd cheering them, they all felt out of place. Rachial should have been with them to see the crowd.

The protestors had formed the day after the story was played on the news. Most of the protestors were gamers, but there were also a lot of people who weren't. The police had come to clean them out, but they told the police they weren't moving till the judge called for a retrial. The group got to the top of the steps and opened the door to the courthouse.

Inside the building was packed. They all found their seats and began to wait. They were 15 minutes early. A few minutes later, Kaleb walked into the building and joined them. Finally Rachial was brought into the room, along with Mr. Lotus. After they were seated, the judge walked into the room and took his place behind the podium. The case was read out loud to everyone, then the judge spoke.

"Miss Williams, I would like to say now that I am very impressed. I wasn't going to reopen the case, but with the thousands of protesters outside of this building, I didn't have much choice." The judge picked up his gavel and beat it on the podium. "This court is in session."

An hour and a half later, after reviewing the new evidence, the jury had reached a decision. Rachial was found Not Guilty. They also went on to say that Cromwell, Inc. was responsible for the murder, and that Mr. Lotus was directly responsible.

The judge would later go on to sentence Mr. Lotus to a double life sentence in prison. Just as the judge was about swing his gavel down and say 'court dismissed,' Kaleb stood up from his seat and jumped over the small railing and shoved Rachial onto the ground.

The security tackled Kaleb and pinned him to the floor. He didn't struggle at all. The audience was in shock and began to talk and get loud. The judge started beating his gavel. "Order in the court! Order in the court!" The people quieted and took their seats.

"Take him away," said the judge to the security officers.

"Wait," Rachial called out. The Judge slammed his gavel down again. "What is the meaning of this outburst?" he asked, looking at Rachial.

"He just saved my life. Look here on the ground," Rachial pointed out burn marks on the floor. It was from a laser. The judge ordered one of the officers to look at it.

"She is right. It is a laser mark. It came from up there," the officer pointed up to one of the windows towards the top of the room. "It came from outside and burned right through the window."

"Very well, release him," the judge grudgingly replied

The security officers let go of Kaleb and released the cuffs they had fastened on his wrists.

The judge spoke again. "We will have a police investigation on this, but this session is over. Court dismissed." He slammed his gavel down one last time before standing to leave.

Rachial watched as they dragged Mr. Lotus out of the courtroom. He gave her a nasty look and mouthed something at her, but she wasn't paying close enough attention to him to understand what he had said. She just smiled at him and this made him angrier. Rachial looked at the audience and could see her friends there. She smiled and started walking down the aisle towards the exit. It was finally over. All this time and she was finally free. She stepped out the door of the courtroom into the reception area and waited for her friends. She was so happy. They talked about what had had happened. As they talked, Luke's phone rang. He stepped back so as not to interrupt them and answered the phone.

He walked back over to them a minute later. "That was the gamer's convention. They wanted to know if we were going to be back there today. They said that they have had constant phone calls from gamers asking if we were going to be there. What do you think? You guys want to do it again today?"

"I'm game. I don't have anything better to do," said Kaleb.

"I should head back to the campus, but it isn't really a big deal. Right now I just want to spend some time with Katie, so if she wants to go, I will."

"Of course, I had a lot of fun yesterday," said Katie. They all turned to look at Rachial. She looked around at all of them.

"I was planning on releasing DreamPhase at some point. I guess the more publicity it gets, the better it will sell. Let's go to the convention," said Rachial.

The group walked out the door and into a crowd of people and news reporters. A loud cheer came up from the crowd as they came out of the courthouse. Rachial was instantly surrounded by news reporters. They were all asking her questions. She didn't want to answer



them now, so she told them she would only talk about it with Charles Johnson. She figured it was the least she could do for him. She forced her way through the crowd and they got into the vehicle and drove away.

The next few hours were spent instructing people on how to use the DreamPhase bands and answering questions. At one point during the day, Charles Johnson showed up and asked if he could do an interview. Rachial complied and did an interview for him. The convention continued until 10:00 pm. The people were told to leave and all the displays and booths were taken down. They packed up their booth and got ready to leave. All the t-shirts were gone, so they only had to carry out the empty boxes. The boxes were discarded and they left the dome.

The area outside the dome was now empty, unlike earlier when it was packed with people trying to get in. Once outside, they all stopped and looked back and forth at each other. "I guess this it for now. I am going to take Katie to her mom's, so I will see you all around some time," said Steve.

"Bye, I'll keep in touch," said Katie as they both walked away.

Kaleb turned to Rachial. "Well, I wanted to talk to you about something, but I need to go. I have a meeting with the government about a new job. I would like to say that it was an honor getting to know you. You have really changed my life and I must thank you for that. I don't know what it is that makes you so different, but someday I hope I can find out."

"I should be thanking you. You saved my life a couple of times," said Rachial.

"Then consider us even," Kaleb smiled. "I need to go, I'll see you around."

"I look forward to it. Then I will tell you what makes me so different," Rachial replied as Kaleb walked away towards the street and called for a taxi.

"I guess this is goodbye then?" Luke asked Rachial. "I have to get back to school and pray that I am able to convince my teachers not to flunk me for skipping so many classes."

"Yeah, I need to go back to *Ecasty*. I have to finish up the rest of the time on my contract." She told him.

"Do you think I will see you again?" asked Luke.

"Yes, I will be back here in two months. After I finish up the contract, I am going to start marketing DreamPhase and make all those crazy gamers happy."

"Hey, I am one of those crazy gamers, as you call them."

"It will make you happy too?" she laughed.

"It sure would, I guess I am a bit crazy at times." he said.

"Thank you so much for your help," she said, and gave him a quick hug. She stepped back, and gave him a smile.

"Don't mention it." he said, returning the smile. There was an awkward silence as they stood there not sure what to say, neither wanting to leave.

Finally Rachial spoke. "I need to get going, I should get back as soon as I can."

"Well, you are an awesome person and I'd like to get to know you better, so the next time you are around, give me a call and maybe we could get coffee or lunch"

"I'd like that. I'll see you later."

"Bye," Rachial and Luke both walked away, neither one of them really wanting to, but knowing they had things to do. Luke turned back around. "Rachial?" she turned around. "Do you want a ride over to your ship? It is cheaper than a taxi"

"Sure." She said turning around to join him.

The adventure continues, be sure to check the website for new releases: <http://dreamphase.net>

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