

## Chapter Five

Rumil absolutely hated waiting in lines even under normal circumstances. Under *these* circumstances, her loathing and impatience was magnified a hundred fold. Coupled with her continuous nervous glances and ragged expression, she probably resembled a hyperactive addict going through withdrawal to the casual observer. And there were many such casual observers, as a matter of fact; a good twenty of them were ahead of her in line.

Had her eyes been able to do so, they likely would have just spun in complete circles, trying to keep track of all her surroundings at once. With every movement that her eyes caught, she was certain she would spot one of those Erani Knights.

Hundreds of people fought and struggled through the small space between the ticket counters and the departure gates. And if the people weren't enough, the assembly of employees, machines, and robotic units also trying to navigate to do their duties turned the already small starport into a veritable pit of chaos.

It didn't help her nerves much that there was a fairly large Erani presence in the starport. That wasn't terribly unusual; after all, this city itself housed a Solarian theological center and a military base. Regardless, any time one of the pointed-eared beings came into immediate view, Rumil's heart started to race, and she was absolutely convinced that they must be out to get her.

To her left, three Arcadians in business suits rushed past at top speed, as if trying to beat each other to the departure ramp for the shuttle, which drew her attention to the shuttle ramps outside the building.

For the amount of activity going on inside the building, there was an almost disturbing lack of activity going on outside it. The paved runway, slanted upward at a gradually increasing curve until it went out of view, had not seen a shuttle accelerate on it for the last twenty ticks. Rumil concluded that there was some backup on the taxiing lanes, which bode very ill for her attempts to get off-planet quickly: the longer she lingered on this world, the worse her chances to get out in one piece became.

From the escalator leading down to the lower level of the starport she suddenly saw the top of a brown carbide helmet. Fortunately, the head of the Arcadian maintenance crewman became visible just before Rumil went into cardiac arrest.

During all that, the line went forward one person.

Shutting her eyes in an attempt to gather her rampant thoughts, Rumil tried to calm down. If she kept this up, people *were* going to start getting suspicious. Just then, a hand fell softly on her shoulder...

Rumil didn't bother to get the name of the attendant that was handing out ducha to the customers waiting in line, nor did the blonde hacker care. All Rumil knew was that the black-haired Demodian girl who had touched her was *wrong*. Eventually relenting long enough to help the poor girl pick up all the spilled paper cups, Rumil also apologized to the startled attendant and the rest of the customers for screaming like she had been skewered on a spit.

It didn't take long for the people in the starport to return to their normal business, whatever that may have been. Taking several long, deep breaths, Rumil tried to slow her rampant internal workings. She had *started* to succeed, when four starport security officers worked swiftly through the crowd, making the straightest line they could to her.

For several demiticks, Rumil's mind flip-flopped between standing her ground and fleeing, but by the time she made up her mind to try to elude them, they were right in front of her. The two in front were large specimens, and had they possessed somewhat blue skins, Rumil

figured they could have passed for Ubeks. They wore navy blue-brimmed caps matching their long-sleeved uniforms with double breast pockets, and neatly pressed black slacks. Small bronze badges were pinned to the right pockets, and at their waists were holstered large plasma pistols, apparently designed to maintain order by looking as aesthetically terrifying as possible.

Because of the hulking presence of the two security guards in front, she couldn't clearly see the pair behind them, except that they were red- and gray-haired. From what she could see, they wore the same uniform as their gigantic companions in the front.

"Are you all right, miss?" the first towering guard slightly to her right asked. "We heard a scream."

It was everything Rumil could do to keep from sighing in relief. "I'm quite well, thank you though. I'm just... a little stressed out, and one of your attendants surprised me."

"Are you sure?" the second giant Arcadian asked, "Is there anything we can do for you?"

"No... once again. I appreciate your concern however."

"Very well, then. Have a good day, madam." The two security personnel turned to their smaller companions, then proceeded to weave back through the crowd to their posts. Meanwhile, Rumil turned back to find out that the line moved one more person forward.

Rumil groaned softly. If the two Knights didn't kill her, the anxiety would.

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Timothy knew that Rumil was at the starport before he ever stepped inside. That tingle in the back of his mind was a dead-on indicator of the hacker's nearby presence. He refused to ponder the impossibility of the issue any further, however, until she was safely in custody.

Once he passed through the sliding doors, which might as well have been locked open because of the traffic, he discovered that he could see very little through the crowd inside. While he was tall for a Solarian, that didn't mean terribly much, and he was simply unable to get a clear view around him.

Thus, he had to rely on his extra sense, narrowing down Rumil's location by playing a hot and cold game with the tingle. The closer he got, the stronger the sensation was. Fortunately for him, when people saw his armor, they gave him as much room as they were able. Unfortunately for him, most of those same people probably figured he was absolutely gone in the head due to the way he constantly stopped and changed directions.

Taking great care not to trip on a Ruma that had suddenly appeared in front of him wielding a bare refreshment tray, Timothy finally found the spot where the power was strongest.

Only... the object of his search wasn't there.

Curiously, Timothy spun around slowly, trying to draw some clarity out of what his sense was telling him. This was where the presence was strongest, but it clearly wasn't her current position.

His eyes started scanning above and below him for any clue as to the reason for the psionic residue that he was feeling. That's when he spotted the escalator leading to the second floor through the massive crowd, and the left side of his lips twitched upward in a wry smirk.

Meanwhile, the party of ten in front of Rumil finally got all their business squared away and started to cut a nice long swath through the mass of "intelligent" life en route to their departure gate. Now she was suddenly the second person in line.

"Okay... better make sure my story is straight," Rumil muttered to herself, as she made certain that her eye contacts carrying forged retinal data, as well as the synthetic fingerprint and

genetic material on her fingertips, hadn't fallen out or slipped.

The last customer in front of her, a green-scaled Ruma, stood on its tiptoes in order to reach up onto the counter. The receptionist, a tiger-striped Ferian – likely female, judging by its large stature – had slid a ticket through the small slot in the thick, clear blast shield separating the counter workers from the general public. The salesperson offered some subtle assistance by slipping her whole hand through the small partition, and the Ruma finally acquired its ticket and stepped away from the ticket desk.

“I apologize for the delay, miss,” the Ferian salesperson said in a voice that Rumil almost mistook for an agitated growl... then again, she might not have. “We are experiencing some delays. If you wish to see which flights are delayed, the central display in the waiting area has a list updated every fifteen demiticks.” With a brief thought, the Ferian then added acidly, “And please don't scream about it... people are tense enough as it is.”

“Actually, I'm here to confirm passage for myself to Iomet, Altair,” Rumil said sweetly. “It should have been arranged last night.”

“How was travel purchased?” the Ferian asked, the large cat being's voice not gaining any cheer.

“My husband purchased it over GalNet at Faus Starport Network Sales,” Rumil continued. “It should be under the name Rama Foran.”

Nodding appreciatively after Rumil gave her all the information she needed, the Ferian turned to the console just to her left, and tapped in the required fields for confirmation. “Yes, you are all set to go; your travel was purchased and confirmed at 9.22 LT last night.” Looking back at Rumil, she asked, “Do you need a ticket printed?”

“Yes, I do.”

The Ferian then pointed to Rumil's right, towards an upright flat blue screen framed by light grey plastic, bolted to the desktop and tilted back slightly. “Please place your right fingertips on the screen for fingerprint identification.”

Rumil did as ordered, and a yellow band of light zipped from the top of the screen to the bottom twice. The Ferian then ordered, “Now look at the screen, bringing your forehead about one Tackem from the screen.”

Rumil once again followed the salesperson's instructions, and this time, the yellow light came in the form of two small beams that zapped right into the irises of her eyes. The beams weren't blinding, but did leave a nice retinal shadow when they disappeared.

“Very good, Miss Foran,” the Ferian said, passing a small slip through the slot beneath the blast shield. “Have a safe flight.” Rumil took the slip, her departure gate and scheduled time of departure printed on the top in red, and her destination and time on the bottom in blue.

“Oh, I don't know... I have a strange suspicion that ‘Miss Foran’ won't be making her shuttle...”

A pang shot down Rumil's spine, locking every muscle in her body into a tense, frozen position. She had only heard that cold, commanding voice once before, and once was all she needed. One thin hand, covered in carbide mesh, closed around her right bicep, and whirled her around.

Face to face with the Solarian Knight who had been hunting her like an animal since she arrived on Talos, Rumil decided that now was not the best time to resist. Maybe if she didn't put up much of a fight, the Solarian wouldn't hurt her... at least, not *too* badly.

“Will you just follow me, and not make a scene this time?” Timothy Honore asked softly, although his voice seemed to carry just as much power regardless of volume. “I really don't

want to have to resort to extreme measures.”

Rumil, at the moment, really didn't have the desire to test what Timothy deemed “extreme measures,” and managed to nod slowly in a defeated daze. The Knight then pushed her in front of him, and whispered, “Go into that empty departure gate. We can talk there.”

Without replying, Rumil began to walk, having to consciously tell herself to alternate her feet. She then looked down, and slightly behind her, noticing the carbide boots of the Solarian.

“Yes, Miss Bonamede, I am right behind you, so don't be getting any ideas,” Timothy reminded softly. “You have tested my patience far too long as it is.”

Timothy slipped in front of Rumil long enough to pull the elastic barricade out of the way, allowing them to both step into the long, glass-covered tunnel. The tunnel itself was bathed in royal blue carpeting, and extended almost a hundred Tacks until it ended with a pair of sliding clear doors, where a shuttle would normally be waiting for passengers to board.

“This is sufficient, stop right there,” Timothy stated simply, and Rumil quickly obeyed. Her best chance relied on Timothy letting his guard down at some point in the future. For now, it was in her best interests, not to mention her health, to cooperate.

Without prompting, she turned to the armored Knight, only to get pushed against the glass wall, his helmeted face getting threateningly close to hers. Timothy never rose his voice, but it still caused her to almost visibly cringe. “Okay, now that we can talk in peace and quiet, I want to know just who is running your little hacking operation.”

“Pardon?” Rumil asked nervously. Out of a *million* possible questions that Timothy Honore could have asked, she would have willingly answered any of them save one, and that last one was it. “I don't know what you're referring to.”

Timothy sighed. “You know... I don't need to be a psionic to see through that absolute lie for exactly what it is.” The Solarian took one step back and commented, “I shouldn't be surprised though. I've encountered enough crime syndicates and pirate organizations to figure out how they work. I'll just tell you this; whoever is ‘employing’ you is eventually going to decide you need to be removed, whether you help me or not. The way I see it, your *best* chance to live a full life span is by helping me and the proper authorities put them where they can't do more harm.”

*Sweet kid*, Rumil thought. *Just naive enough to think that he can change the universe, and bring every last criminal to justice.*

“I can only do so much, *that* is true, Miss Bonamede,” Timothy stated wryly, “But there are *many* like me.”

“What's the point in interrogating me if you can just rip whatever you want to know right out of my head?” Rumil hissed. From what she knew of Erani, reading a person's mind without permission was in *extremely* bad taste. Then again, this particular Solarian seemed to have little problem with casting away taboos that he felt impeded his progress.

“I really don't want to do that,” Timothy replied, “but I will if I eventually deem it necessary.”

Suddenly, Timothy's attention was jerked to his left, back towards the main ticket room. From the mass of life forms scurrying about, a blue-armored Erani emerged, hitting Timothy with a flying tackle. Then, grabbing Timothy by the collar of his carbide armor, Justin threw the Solarian against the wall. Glass shattered, sending the young Knight falling from the suspended departure tunnel.

As the Solarian Knight disappeared from view, Justin Feroz quipped, “Seems like I've learned your ‘first and last lesson’ pretty well...” then turned to the young hacker he had suffered

considerable pain and stress to locate. “Now, unlike your morally bankrupt friend down there, I have *no* problems getting the information I want from your pretty little head. So as long as you don’t fight me, I won’t have to *severely* hurt you.”

Rumil frowned. “Again with the threats... again with promising pain... I swear all you Erani are exactly alike.”

Justin appeared to snap back at the comment, when his attention suddenly whirled to where he had shown Timothy the exit, so to speak. Hovering just outside the suspended gate, defying the very nature of gravity with his psionic power, Timothy did not appear too happy. From inside the tinted visor, Rumil was almost certain she saw two white circles flicker for a bat of an eyelash, but it disappeared so quickly that Rumil managed to convince herself she was just seeing things.

Justin waited in an aggressive stance as Timothy stepped back inside the damaged tunnel. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised... you Solarians just don’t know when to quit.”

There was no reply from his Solarian counterpart, only a right hook that caught Justin on the side of his helmet, causing him to stagger. Rumil tiptoed back slightly as Timothy pressed his advantage, landing two fierce blows into Justin’s carbide breastplate. It didn’t take the Kiros Knight long to retaliate, and soon the pair were trading blows with vicious speed. Once again, the skirmish was almost awe-inspiring as the pair ducked, rolled, and attacked, each move inspiring a counter that was parried and countered in turn.

This time, however, Rumil didn’t allow herself to be entranced by their combat. She slowly slid backward towards the group of customers and security that had bunched up near the entrance of the departure gate, as if not terribly sure what to make of the scene in front of them. Rumil then stepped backward again, and finally was convinced that neither Knight was paying any attention to her. With a devious grin, she flipped her hand in farewell towards the oblivious combatants, and squeezed through the mass of spectators into the waiting area.

Rumil noticed with satisfaction that her fist had crumpled around the ticket for her departure, but it was still readable. Almost skipping towards the departure gate that the ticket indicated, she handed it to the steward waiting at the booth leading towards the tunnel that connected to her shuttle. He ripped off the top half, handed the bottom portion to her, and stepped aside for her to proceed. “What is going on over there?” the steward asked as Rumil passed, pointing towards the scene she had just emerged from.

Rumil shrugged. “Just a pair of intoxicated louts who decided to settle an issue from what I gathered,” then she proceeded into the covered tunnel. She had to quickly step around an elderly couple that wandered into her vision, then accelerated past them toward her destination. Handing the bottom portion of the ticket to verify her seat to the Arcadian stewardess waiting at the shuttle portway, Rumil turned left towards the front of the shuttle.

“Umm... miss?” the stewardess said sheepishly. “That’s the Preferential section, your seat is in Standard.”

“What?” Rumil snapped, looking back down at her ticket. With a sneer, she grumbled, “That little dunghill...” Displeased with the recent discovery, Rumil reluctantly turned right, and pushed aside the curtain that led to the Standard Seating section of the shuttle.

She frowned as she witnessed the cramped, beige-colored seats and walls already filled with passengers in varied levels of misery or discomfort. Looking down disdainfully at her ticket stub once more to confirm her seat assignment, Rumil huffed, and passed seven rows before finding her seat. Throwing her satchel into the compartment under her seat with barely veiled frustration, she slumped down into her seat with a scowl, waiting for the shuttle to begin

its launch procedure.

Stealing a glance to the seat next to her, she beheld the grimmest excuse for an Arcadian boy she had ever seen. He couldn't have been any older than ten staryears or so, his face splotched with dirt, and his clothes looking like he had pulled them out of the dirty pile rather than from anything that had been washed within a ten-cycle. In one hand, he held a small plastic spoon, and in the other, a plastic cup that must have contained some form of treat at first, but had since melted into a congealed mess of blue, red, and yellow streaks and smudges. Trying to take another bite of the cup's unidentifiable contents, part of the half-melted treat slipped out of the spoon held by his unsteady hand, and splattered onto Rumil's leg.

The child looked down at the site of the accident, then up at Rumil, before he smiled broadly, and said with a giggle, "Sorry, lady."

Rumil didn't reply, just turned her head forward, and brooded internally. *Someone* was going to pay for the outrage, and they were going to pay dearly...

Meanwhile, the two Erani Knights were still engaged in their impromptu duel. They had since moved to swords, swiping and lunging with attacks that could deceive the untrained eye with their quickness. Security had managed to form a loose semi-circle around the tunnel, but didn't intervene directly, for much the same reason one didn't try to break up a fight between two Ferian; you'd likely lose limbs you'd much rather keep.

The sound of the shuttle taking off broke Timothy and Justin out of their combat hazes. The white shuttle shot up the inclined ramp before the boosters kicked into full power, and launched vertically off into the sky, quickly disappearing from view. It took them both nary a demitick to realize that Rumil was no longer in the tunnel, and had once again slipped away. From there, it took only a demitick longer to look around the departure tunnel, now ravaged by their errant attacks. Panels of the glass archway had either fallen or cracked, the support beams were bent, warped or slashed, and the carpet beneath them was scratched and gouged.

Finally, they turned their attention to the security detail that was finally approaching now that the skirmish appeared to be concluded. Justin and Timothy glanced at each other dejectedly, realizing they both had some explaining to do.