



EXCERPT: THE INTERSTELLAR JEWEL HEIST

Space Colony Journals – Book 4

When Lady Jayla finds the body of a retired shopkeeper on the beach, a series of mysterious events draw her into a web of passion, terror and murder. She must figure out who the killer is and what he wants before he can target her.

While this is complicating her life, she deals with a dysfunctional house-bot who thinks he's a sex-bot, Jake, her nosy boyfriend, her overprotective family, the interplanetary jewel thieves looking for their missing loot who keep breaking into her shop, and the local and interplanetary detectives who think *she* stole the jewels...

A SCI-FI COZY MYSTERY

Suspicion

THE SUN WAS just peeking over the horizon as Jayla ran with her usual long easy strides along the deserted beach. Jayla liked to jog along the shore next to the spaceport because despite the noise the shuttles made taking off and landing, the shore was usually deserted except for a few solitary runners like herself. She and Ghost, the creamy white Quirka clinging to her shoulder, enjoyed the fresh breeze and the freedom from demands on her time.

She brushed her short gold hair back out of her face. It seemed she had been running half her life. Jayla smiled to herself as she remembered how hard it had been when she began to run every morning.

Jayla wasn't native to Vensoog. Her Uncle Gideon had married Genevieve, the Laird of clan O'Teague and emigrated to Vensoog after Moodon, their home planet was burnt off in the last war with the Karamine Coalition. Jayla had just lost her parents and had resented being uprooted to a new world with strange customs where she knew no one. A headstrong, resentful teenager can find plenty of trouble to get into by herself and even more if she connects with unscrupulous adults who intend to take advantage of her rebellious feelings. She had made loads of mistakes that first year. She bitterly regretted having gotten involved with Gregor Ivanov, the much older man who had romanced her and planned to sell her for the child sex trade. While it had not been her fault when she and other girls from the clans were kidnapped by the Thieves Guild, she hated remembering how helpless she felt as a captive. She was rescued from both situations, but she vowed to learn to defend herself so nothing like that could happen again.

Two weeks after the clans had rescued the girls from the Jack ship, Wolf Larsen from her Uncle Zack's old Recon unit, showed up on Glass Isle to give her lessons in self-defense. She later learned Wolf had been specially requested as her teacher by Lord Jake Reynolds, her Cousin Luc's best friend.

"Stamina," Wolf's deep voice echoed in her mind, "is the essence of fighting. You can't fight if you are exhausted or out of breath." He had knocked on her door at dawn that first day to drag her out to run a mile. Wheezing, and with her legs feeling like jelly, Jayla had kept at it because she was tired of being pushed around. Seeing her determination, Wolf agreed to show up every day for the next two years to train her in self-defense.

After Wolf had returned to his other clan duties, she had kept up the training. The morning runs were not an indulgence even though they took time away from her shop. She ran, worked out in the Clan gym at Glass Manor, and practiced her marksmanship faithfully because she intended to never again be at the mercy of someone else.

Thanks to her parent's foresight in moving their accounts to Fenris as soon as the war with the Karamine Coalition started, Jayla had inherited a sizable nest egg when she came of age. Enough to buy the gift shop she had always wanted. When she had bought the shop with the apartment over it earlier in the year, Jake had promised to come by and see how she was getting along.

Her faithful companion Ghost was a Quirka. Quirka were native animals adopted as pets by the early Vensoog settlers because they were small, cute and avid hunters of the insects and other vermin infesting human dwellings. The Quirka adopted humans because they provided a mutually satisfying emotional bond and a ready source of food and hunting grounds.

Like all Quirka joined with a person, Ghost went everywhere with her chosen human and even seemed to enjoy the morning runs. Her pristine white coat sparkled in the morning sun, and her plume of a tail waved with the motion of Jayla's steps. The sturdy leather straps affixed to the shoulders of Jayla's running clothes allowed Ghost to cling to Jayla with her tiny, hand-like paws and feet. White Quirka like Ghost were rare. Ghost had never developed the ability to adapt her fur color to match her environment the way other Quirka did. The hollow rows of retractable venom quills along her backbone, which were Ghost's chief defense against predators, glistened as the sun hit them. If she felt threatened, her quills stood upright and filled with an acidic venom. Being stung by a Quirka was quite unpleasant, and in case of smaller predators, sometimes fatal. Ghost's bright blue eyes, also unusual for Quirka, matched Jayla's in color. She chirped in Jayla's ear now, her small upright ears pricked forward as she recognized the large rock where Jayla usually turned to make the return trip.

There appeared to be a bundle of rags and sticks lying next to the boulder. Jayla slowed as she approached, hoping it wasn't something nasty a picnicker had left there. If it were, she decided, she would report it instead of hauling it all the way back to the Spaceport buildings the way she ordinarily did.

Ghost hissed as they approached and her quills lifted, her sharply pointed nose wrinkled in distaste. The smell hit Jayla whose olfactory senses were less well developed than a Quirka, and she stopped several feet away. She had once come upon a goat on Glass Isle that had been dead for several days. It had smelled like this.

It took her a moment to realize what she was looking at. What she had taken for a bundle of sticks was wearing shoes. Swallowing nausea, she made herself walk closer to see if what was lying in the sand was human or humanoid. It was difficult to tell what species it was, because the body was in an advanced state of decomposition, but it had been some type of humanoid.

Glad she hadn't eaten before starting her run, she backed away and sat down on a driftwood log, trying not to throw up. Ghost, in the way of all Quirka, was more

concerned with Jayla than with the unknown body. She stroked her mistress's face and crooned soothingly to her projecting comfort. Jayla dropped a kiss in gratitude between the small pricked ears and took a deep breath before she tapped on her wrist com.

The com automatically dialed Clan security on the O'Teague compound instead of the emergency Port Recovery Security Patrol. Even though she was now living above her shop in Port Recovery, she had forgotten to re-program it. Her com was immediately answered by the Clan communication center.

"Jayla, I haven't heard from you in ages—what's wrong, honey?" Mira, who had often been assigned as her trainer, had sounded cheerful until she saw the girl's face.

Jayla turned her wrist so Mira could see the body through the com. "I need Port Recovery Security to come out here. It looks like Ghost and I found a dead body this morning. We're out at the end of the island behind the spaceport."

"Are you safe?" Mira demanded, instinct kicking in. Her regular job was O'Teague Clan Security but she was pulling desk duty because she was pregnant.

"Yes, we're safe," Jayla reassured her. "I think it's been here a while."

In the background, Jayla could hear her calling for Larry to grab a sled and get his ass out to the end of Port Recovery Island. "Jayla's found a body. I'm calling the Port Recovery Security but she's alone out there—"

"Jayla," Mira's voice was calm. "You stay where you are. I'm sending Larry out to you, and I'll call the Port Recovery Security. I want you to keep this com open, okay?"

"You don't have to tell me twice," Jayla assured her.

The trip from Glass Manor on O'Teague Isle to Port Recovery Isle took thirty minutes by boat, but a fast airsled could make it across the channel in ten. When the tall, dark skinned man dismounted from the sled, he smiled reassuringly at Jayla whom he still saw as the little girl she had been when he first met her. Larry Jorgensen, the O'Teague Clan Security Chief, was a former member of her Uncle Gideon's unit who had married into the clan.

"You okay, kid?" his deep voice rumbled.

She nodded, giving him a watery smile. "Yes, I'm fine Larry. It was a nasty surprise, but we're okay."

Jorgensen nodded at her and went to inspect the body, being careful not to touch it. He was examining something on the ground in front of the corpse when they heard the approaching whine of the Port Authority Security sleds. He came over to her side to wait with her.

Within a few short minutes the deserted shore was swarming with Patrol. The first to arrive were the uniformed officers who came to check out her story, then the medics, and finally, the detectives in charge, a man and a woman in civilian clothing.

Since she and Larry had been told to wait for the detectives, she leaned back against a boulder on shore, and sipped at the bottled water Larry provided for her and Ghost. Ghost, no longer perched protectively on her shoulder, was busy investigating a pile of seaweed a few feet from where Jayla sat. They had both missed breakfast, and presumably the Quirka was hoping to find a few insects to munch on until they could return home. Larry had offered Jayla an energy bar earlier, but her stomach had rebelled at thought of eating anything.

When the two detectives finally approached her, Larry moved in protectively.

"Lady Jayla?" the male detective asked. "I'm Jim Gorsling, and this is my partner, June Sipowitz. We have a few questions for you." Gorsling was short, with a square, bulldog face and dark hair in contrast to his partner, a tall, hazel-eyed woman with bronzed skin.

"You found the body?" Gorsling asked.

"Yes," she said.

"Why did you contact Clan O'Teague Security before you called us?" Sipowitz asked.

"Like all the Laird's immediate family, Lady Jayla's emergency signal is set for Glass Manor on O'Teague," Jorgensen interjected, obliquely reminding the two detectives they were dealing with a high-ranking clan member and to be careful how they treated her.

"Perhaps you could join me over here, sir," Gorsling suggested. "We have a few questions for you."

"I was dispatched here when Lady Jayla notified O'Teague clan she had found a body," Jorgensen said, not moving. "It's been requested I stay with her until she can leave. I'm to give her a ride back to her shop."

"Are you her legal representative?" Gorsling inquired. "Because unless you have some legal standing—"

Ghost, sensing discord, left off hunting for bugs and scrambled back to Jayla where she hopped up to her shoulder. She turned her bright blue eyes to the two detectives and hissed defensively, her quills lifting.

The detectives eyed the Quirka warily. Neither one wanted to chance getting stung by the Quirka's acid tipped barbs.

Sipowitz tried a different tactic. "Your Quirka is unusual. I don't think I've seen a white one before."

Jayla stroked Ghost's back and the quills lowered marginally. "Yes, she is different. Ghost was a gift."

"From me," announced a voice from behind them. "Why is it," Jake remarked as he dismounted his airsled, "that whenever I find you, you're either in trouble or causing it?"

"Jake!" Jayla cried, jumping up. "Where did you come from?"

Jake pulled off his helmet and hung it on the handlebars of the sled, revealing a shock of dark hair. The male detective gave Jake a sharp look of recognition. He saw, as she did, a slim man in his early twenties with an easy smile, and an air of assurance showing he was accustomed to being obeyed.

Ghost bounced in delight, and when he was close enough, leaped to his arms chirping happily. "Yes, I'm glad to see you too," he told her, petting her before moving her to his shoulder.

Sipowitz frowned. "And who might you be?"

Her partner answered her. "Cara, this is Lord Jake Reynolds, the Duc d'Orleans' nephew, L'Roux Clan. What brings you here Lord Reynolds?"

Jake gave them a little bow. "I've been requested by Clan O'Teague to assist Lady Jayla in her present difficulty. Ah—I *do* have legal standing."

Jorgensen relaxed his protective stance. "Good to see you kid. If you've got this, I'll head back to the manor. I was just coming off shift when I was notified about it."

"Sure," Jake said, "take off."

Jorgensen stepped away and spoke with Gorsling for a few minutes before mounting his sled and zipping off.

When Gorsling returned, he said, "Lord Reynolds, you said you had legal standing but—"

Smiling, Jake pulled a small crystal out of his pocket and handed it to the detective. "Here is my authority to act for Lady Jayla."

Frowning, Gorsling stuck the crystal into his porta-tab and showed it to his partner who rolled her eyes. All they needed was interference in their investigation by a high clan lord.

Jake looked over at Jayla. "So, you found a body, did you?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"This is a kind of deserted area to run in."

"I like to run out here," she said a little defensively. "Nobody bothers me."

He grunted. "Where's your weapon?"

She patted the pocket of her running shirt. "It's here. Mira got me a small one to fit in this pocket and I always carry it when I run."

Sipowitz looked up and held out her hand. "May I see, it Lady Jayla?"

Jayla slid her hand into her pocket and pulled out a pulsar gun about the size of her palm, which she held out butt first to the detective. Sipowitz took it and examined it. "Hasn't been fired," she said, handing it back.

"That's right," Jayla said.

Sipowitz studied her. "Had you ever seen the deceased before this?"

"I don't think so," Jayla replied. "I'm afraid the smell got to me so I didn't go any closer than I needed to make sure it was a person."

"Okay. Just as a matter of form, can you tell us where you've been over the last several days?"

"I've just moved into my new apartment in Port Recovery. I've been out on Glass Isle collecting the rest of my stuff."

"All right," the detective said. "That's all for now. We may have more questions later though so don't leave town."

"I believe it's time we let these officers get on with their investigation Jayla. If you have any further questions, Detectives, you can get in touch with Lady Jayla through Clan O'Teague," Jake said. He took Jayla by the arm and led her over to his sled.

"There's no place for Ghost," she objected.

"That's where you're wrong," Jake replied, opening a cache in the side. He took out a spare helmet for her and handed it to her. Then he brought out what looked like an upside-down helmet with a clear visor. He snapped it into place on the front control panel. "C'mon Ghost," he said patting it. Ghost hopped into the cavity and settled happily into the made-for-Quirka seat.

"I want one," Jayla declared. "Where did you get it?"

"It's a prototype. Friend of mine is marketing them. I'll tell him he's got a sale." He mounted the sled and waited for her to throw a leg over the seat behind him before they took off in a whirl of sand.

Gosling left the Coroner and returned to his partner as Jayla and Jake took off. "Coroner thinks it's a body dump," he told Sipowitz. "She figures the woman has been dead about two days."

"That means if Lady Jayla was out on Glass Isle she couldn't have done it."

"I suppose so, but she sure drew a lot of defensive firepower for someone who is innocent," Gorsling said.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I told you Lord Reynolds is the Duc d'Orleans's blood nephew. He's the clan troubleshooter. The Duc sends him out to solve problems. And the guy we found here with her? That is O'Teague's Head of Security here in the Port."

"Well even if her bracelet is marked as a member of the Laird's immediate family, I'm surprised to find the clan sent two people out to back her up though, unless—"

"Unless what?"

"I'll tell you after you run her Match List history and that of Lord Reynolds," she said.

"I'll do it on the way back to headquarters. What do you want it for?"

"Well, the Planting Festival is coming up and it occurred to me that Lord Reynolds coming to 'rescue' her from us might have nothing to do with this murder. Either the Laird or the Duc could be doing a little matchmaking. If that's the case, then O'Teague's local Security Head showing up might only mean Lady Jayla has an overprotective family."

"The O'Teagues do have that reputation," he admitted. "We've got an intern from that clan working down in the morgue this year, and from what I heard Lady Katherine practically microscanned the place for germs before she let the kid work there."

Unaware of the speculation they left behind them on the beach, Jake stopped the sled in the rear of Jayla's shop. Her apartment was on the second level. Although she had access from the store, the private entrance was upstairs in the back. She dismounted and pried a reluctant Ghost loose from her perch in the Quirka basket. "Thanks for coming to the rescue again," she told Jake.

"I was coming to see you anyway. Drusilla wanted me to invite you to have dinner with the three of us tonight here in the city," he said.

"I'd love to, but I've been invited to attend the Merchant Guild mixer tonight. It's my first one and I don't want to miss it."

Jake shrugged. "So, I'll escort you there, and then we'll meet Luc and Drusilla for dinner afterwards."

He waited while she and Ghost mounted the stairs to the owner's quarters. When the door had closed on Jayla and Ghost, he restarted the sled as he commed his uncle. L'Roux was head of security in Port Recovery this year and his uncle liked to be informed of anything touching the clan families.

Once inside her apartment, Jayla stripped and then she and Ghost got in the shower. She lifted Ghost to the specially made Quirka shelf, and turned on the water letting the hot spray wash away the morning. Ghost enjoyed playing in the water, turning and twisting to rinse her short, plush fur of the sand and salt that had accumulated on it during their stay at the beach.

Once they were both clean, Jayla wrapped a towel around herself while she patted Ghost dry. She set the Quirka down on the mat in front of the Quirka sized blower on her dresser, laughing as Ghost danced and whirled in the stream of warm air.

"May I assist you in dressing?" Jayla jumped as her house-bot spoke behind her.

Jayla gave a small shriek of surprise and scowled at it. The bot had been christened Daryl by the previous owner. It was one of the expensive bots that could fool the unwary into thinking he was human. When she first moved in, Jayla thought it was a plus that her apartment came furnished with a house-bot to cook and clean. However, Daryl had yet to cook or clean anything, and judging by his behavior, his previous owner had installed some unconventional programming, which Jayla had tried in vain to modify.

"No, you may not," she snapped. "Remove yourself from this room while I am dressing. Go in the kitchen and make a grocery shopping list."

"But Mistress," the Daryl protested. "I am versed in all forms of physical pleasure and I can assure you—"

"Out!" she shouted. Thank Goddess the maintenance people were due to come today to adjust his programming, she thought half hysterically. If she had to listen one more time to that bloody list of sexual acts he was programmed to perform, she would scream.

She was furious all over again when she listened to the messages on the house net and discovered that the Robo-Maintenance crew was *not* coming out today. They were sorry to hear she had canceled and wanted to reschedule the appointment.

Furious, Jayla got on the com with them and demanded to know who had canceled the prior arrangement.

"Your house-bot left us a message you were canceling the appointment," she was told.

"Well, I didn't," she snapped. "I expect to see you out here today at our scheduled time."

"I'm sorry, but that won't be possible," the receptionist said. "We've filled your time. We have an open slot two weeks from now if you want that."

Jayla made a growling noise. "Fine! please have it noted in the records that until he has been re-programed, you are *not* to accept messages from my house-bot! Is that clear?"

"As crystal," she was told snippily.

Jayla turned her glare on the house-bot. "You may no longer contact anyone without my express order."

"That is a waste of my talents," Daryl informed her. "I am well versed in communication protocols needed to efficiently run this house for you and—"

"Shut up!" she yelled.

Daryl hadn't stocked the robo-chef either so Jayla took Ghost down the street to a local eatery that served breakfast where she ordered Ghost the Quirka Special (diced raw meat, nuts and vegetables) and a large spicy omelet made from Ostamu eggs for herself. Ostamu were huge flightless birds bred by the settlers for their meat and eggs. Their multi-colored feathers were highly prized for clothing and decorations as well.

Since Jayla was a fellow business woman, Carol, the café owner, brought her order to her and sat down for a friendly chat.

"What's the matter, hon?" Carol asked, pouring them both a large Cafka. Carol was in her late forties with the comfortable shape of those who work in the food industry.

"Can they charge you for killing a droid?" Jayla demanded. "I just found out that clump of slag I inherited as a house-bot canceled the appointment I made to get him reprogrammed!"

Carol's eyes danced over the rim of her cup as she gave a gasp of laughter. "Oh, dear," she said inadequately. "Is he still offering you sexual favors?"

Jayla nodded over a bite of omelet. "This morning when we got out of the shower. I don't dare invite anyone over—I hate to think what might happen if he does it to a guest. Suppose my friends think I programed him for that stuff?"

Carol sputtered into her Cafka. "You never know—it might lead to some interesting encounters." She eyed her friend shrewdly. "That's not all that's bothering you, though is it?"

Jayla sighed. "No. I found a body on my morning run today. It was nasty."

"Oh, you poor thing. Who was it?"

"Well, to tell the truth the smell was so bad I didn't get close enough to find out. Just that it was human or humanoid."

"Icky," Carol sympathized. "I wonder who it could be? I don't know of anyone local who is missing—"

"I'd rather talk about something else if you don't mind though. Anything else."

"Sure," Carol said obligingly. "It's going to make the rounds though. You're likely to have customers asking about it all day. There's nothing like curiosity to drum up business."

Jayla made a face. "You're probably right. I'm not officially open, but I can't afford to turn away customers."

"The other shop owners will be dropping by too, you can bet," Carol told her.

The rest of the day was productive, even with the constant interruptions from her fellow shop owners and local customers who had heard about the body and wanted the latest gossip about it. When she went upstairs from the shop to dress for the evening events, she was conscious of a pleasant feeling of achievement.

The original shop owner, Sara Lipski had sold high-end imports, but Jayla intended to widen the sales base by featuring locally made arts and craft products. She already had several local artists and craftspeople bringing in new products, and hoped to pick up more at the Planting Festival.

She and Ghost were still dressing when she heard Daryl let Jake in. The apartment's walls were soundproofed so she couldn't hear the actual conversation, just the murmur of voices.

She looked at herself and Ghost in her mirror and nodded in satisfaction. She wanted to look professional, but classy tonight, so she had decided on loose black pants and a dark gray vest over a blue, dragon-nest silk blouse. The blue in the blouse, with its three-quarter inch sleeves and scooped neck matched her eyes, and the gray vest snuggled under her breast and drew attention to her slim waist. Ghost

wore a bracelet of glittering black and blue stones around her neck, and Jayla had fluffed her white coat until the hollow ends of her fur sparkled.

When she joined him in the sitting room, Jake was standing with his arms crossed frowning at Daryl, but he gave her a wide smile and a wolf whistle.

"You look great. Very classy," he said.

"Thanks. I want to look like a businesswoman at the mixer."

"You pulled it off," he said. "At least you will have if no one at the mixer ever meets Daryl here." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder at the house-bot as they shut the door and started down the stairs. "Seriously Jayla, you need to get that sucker re-programmed. Do you know what he asked me?"

She signed, "I can guess. The programmers were supposed to be out today, but Daryl called them and canceled. I was furious. He's driving me crazy. It seems Sara Lipski had some very irregular enhancements programmed into him. The house maintenance company told me it would be another two weeks before they could reschedule me. I've told them not to accept any more orders unless it comes from me in person, but I don't know if I can stand keeping him around for that long."

"You could turn him off."

She snorted. "I tried that. He's got a failsafe that resets itself if he's been off for over eight hours."

"Want me to check around for another House Maintenance company?"

"Thanks, but I'll do it. I just didn't want to deal with stuff like that today. I hid in the shop doing inventory."

She was pleased to see that Jake had brought a closed two-seater airsled for tonight. She had enjoyed the ride from the beach but tonight she didn't want to arrive at the mixer looking windblown.

The Merchant Guild Mixer was held at a meeting room in City Hall, one of the large domes lived in by the first settlers that the City had converted to civic use. Tonight, the Merchant Guild had scattered tables around the large room for seating, but a lot of the local shop owners were standing around in groups talking. When Jake and Jayla entered, they were met by Miles Standish, the current Elector of the Guild.

"So glad you came tonight, Jayla," Miles said, enthusiastically pumping her hand while his eyes ran over her admiringly. When he saw Jake, he frowned, but quickly smoothed out his expression. "And you brought a plus one, too. Nice to meet you. Are you a close friend of Jayla's Lord Reynolds?" he asked Jake, smiling owlishly.

Miles and Jake were of similar heights, but Miles mild blue eyes, snub nose and round face gave him the air of a friendly puppy.

Next to Miles, Jake appeared dark and dangerous and it was plain Miles wasn't exactly happy to see him despite his pleasant welcome. Jake did nothing Jayla could

object to; in fact, he was perfectly pleasant to the Elector, but Ghost muttered fretfully in her ear and Jayla could almost feel Jake going on alert as the men talked.

"That's right," Jake agreed. "Jayla and I go way back. He cousin Lucas introduced us."

"I see. I hope you will excuse us for a few minutes while I introduce Jayla to some of the other merchants. Ah, Carol," Miles said snagging Jayla's friend from the café, "Perhaps you can find Lord Jake here a drink and entertain him while Jayla and I make the rounds."

"Sure," Carol agreed, smiling. "I'm always up for a drink with a good-looking man."

She signaled a waiter-bot who brought over a tray of drinks. "What's your poison, Jake?"

"Cafka," he told the server. "No alcohol for me thanks; Jayla and I are meeting friends for dinner after this, and I don't like depending on the auto pilot on my two-seater. It's been a little wonky lately."

"Miles always likes to give special attention to the new women merchants," she told him.

Jake gave her a considering look. "Especially if they are young and beautiful?"

Carol grinned at him. "Somehow I don't think he was expecting competition like you." She slipped her arm through his. "C'mon, I'll introduce you to some people I think you'll enjoy talking to."

Jayla enjoyed meeting the other store owners, some of whom she could see becoming friends. After several minutes though, she became aware that a few of them seemed ill at ease. Everyone was friendly and polite, but she caught some odd expressions whenever Miles put a hand on her shoulder or her back, which he did a little too frequently. Whenever Miles touched her, Ghost stiffened on her shoulder and muttered unhappily. Jayla wondered what the Quirka sensed that she didn't.

When she was introduced to a young couple named Fred and Elsie Boyington, who owned a food supply store, she surprised a flicker of relief mixed with pity in Elsie's expression. It was even more puzzling to get almost the same response from a pair of sisters named Jan and Lin Sorency who ran a local clothing shop.

"Perhaps we can get together later this week for lunch, Jan suggested, directing a challenging look at Standish. "Miles always encourages us old timers to make you newbies welcome, don't you Miles?"

He hesitated briefly, and then said, "Of course. An excellent idea. Just don't frighten her away."

Jan bit her lip, but nodded. "Sure. No reason to scare a newcomer away."

"That sounds as if there is something to be afraid of. Don't worry—I don't scare easily," Jayla said lightly.

About halfway around the room, Miles stopped. He seemed to hesitate for a minute then he asked, "Do you mind a personal question?"

"I suppose it depends on the question," Jayla responded, looking at him curiously.

"That guy who came with you—is he boyfriend or guard?"

Jayla stiffened. "Jake is a good friend of mine and of Clan O'Teague," she said somewhat haughtily. The *'it's none of your business'* remained unspoken.

Miles looked self-conscious. "I'm sorry, it's just—well I got a copy of my Match List today and you're on it, and I find you very attractive, so I was wondering—"

Jayla's anger softened. "I'm sure you didn't mean to be offensive," she said. "Look Miles, I like you, and you seem like a nice man, but I will be too busy getting my shop up and running to think about Match Lists."

Deciding it was time to put an end to this type of overture, she caught Jake's eye and he moved casually toward her.

As soon as he was within speaking distance, Jake asked, "Everything Okay here, Jayla?" Jayla turned to him with relief.

"I'm fine, Jake," she said. "I guess this morning took a little more out of me than I thought. I'm sorry Miles, Carol, but I think we need to get going to meet our friends for dinner. Thank you for inviting me. I had a lovely time and I do want to meet more of my compatriots later."

"Of course," Miles said. "I'll drop by with the application for joining the Guild sometime this week."

"Thank you and good night," Jayla told him

Jake was silent as he put her into the airsled. He gave the order to proceed to the restaurant, a new one overlooking the water, and turned to face her.

"Okay, what did I interrupt?" he asked.

Jayla made a frustrated noise. "Did anyone ever tell you what a nosy boots you are?"

Yes," he said calmly. "You, many times. Give."

"You're worse than Ghost at a vermin hole," she complained. "He wanted to tell me I was on his Match List. There, are you satisfied?"

He studied her face. "You didn't look overjoyed at the news. Is he on yours?"

She looked at him blankly. "I don't know. I didn't download mine when it came in this morning. I was too busy dealing with the house programmer fiasco and then I went down to work in the shop."

"So look now," he said. "I've got mine."

When she hesitated, he said, "I'll make you a deal. You download yours, and I'll call mine up and we'll swap. That way neither of us will have any surprises."

She looked at him suspiciously. "Why would you be willing to do that? You always guarded your list like it was pirate gold before."

He grinned at her. "And you always found out who was on it anyway. What are you afraid of?"

Jayla tapped her com unit and scrolled down through the list until she found the message from the Makers, conscious of Jake doing the same. When she called it up her Match List, she stared at it in shock. Miles Standish was on it all right, but so was Jake. Before she could wipe it clear, Jake had started the data swap. She looked at his list. She was on his list.

"You knew I was on your list this time," she accused him. "That's why you wanted to swap."

"Well, I was curious," he admitted. "Now we both know and we don't have to worry who else is on it. All we have to do is decide what we're going to do." He patted her hand. "You think about it."

Truthfully, she didn't know what to think or feel. Her first girlish hero worship of Jake, began when he had defended her from Gregor at the trial and intensified when he rescued her from the Jack ship, had never quite gone away. However, over the years she had accustomed herself to thinking he regarded her like a little sister, and that he was just a friend. Now he was hinting at something different and she wasn't sure how she felt about it.

The two-seater stopped at the door of the restaurant and the valet came to open the doors. Jayla exited the car with mixed emotions.

Burglary

THE RESTAURANT where they were meeting Drusilla and Lucas was one of the newer establishments in Port Recovery. The Spinning Mollusk had been created by a couple matched in the first wave of Handfasting immigrants. The restaurant had become famous for its exotic seafood. It boasted retractable terraces with views of the city, the spaceport and the wharf. The terraces had to be retractable because if they weren't, they would be torn off during the fierce yearly storms Vensoog was blessed (or plagued) with.

When Jake gave the hostess Luc's name, she told them "Your party is waiting in the bar as the table isn't ready, yet."

Jayla gave her cousin and his wife a hug before allowing Jake to help her onto one of the high stools next to the polished, rainbowwood bar. Toula, Drusilla's Quirka, and Ghost touched noses in greeting and then shared the serving of shelled nuts the bartender had set out for them.

A news feed vid from Aphrodite, one of the water worlds, was talking about a jewelry heist. Thieves had stolen the ruling families Crown Jewels and the entire planet was in an uproar. The criminals were suspected of escaping off planet.

"That was a real security screw up," Luc remarked, eying the vid. "I bet it cost somebody their job. I wonder where the thieves actually went?"

Jake grimaced. "Uncle Max thinks the thieves will come here to pass the jewels to a fence. With the Planting Festival drawing so many off-worlders, he says the thieves might be hoping to slip in with the crowds."

Jayla glanced briefly at the vid feed, and then turned to Drusilla.

"How are you feeling?" She asked the heavily pregnant woman. Drusilla was a Dragon Talker, and a powerful empath who could communicate with and control the wildlife native to Vensoog. Drusilla didn't brag about it, but the family knew she was one of the few Dragon Talkers powerful enough to control humans as well. Just now she was about eight months pregnant. With a Dragon Talker, there was always the chance the emotional upheaval caused by the pregnancy hormone changes could cause chaos around her, but Drusilla seemed to be weathering the changes easily.

The tiny redhead touched her belly ruefully. "I'm doing okay, but I look like a fat water dragon. My three Sand Dragon trainees have been a big help though."

"Oh, that's right, you've got Violet, Ceri and Simon interning with you this season," Jayla said, speaking of the two girls and the boy who had adopted orphan Sand Dragon Calves. Sand Dragons were cousins to the enormous Water Dragons Vensoog was famous for. Despite their name, both species were warm-blooded mammals. Like several species of animals on Vensoog, the Sand Dragons were empathic. Unlike their feral cousins, the three owned by the children were accustomed to being treated as pets and behaved more like over large dogs. They would grow much larger than any dog of course. At maturity, they might top out at between four and six hundred pounds. Hard skin plates resembling dragon scales except for the head and underbelly protected their body. Like Quirka, Sand Dragons could adapt their coloring to conditions around them. A necessary protection for attacks from the air by the huge flying Dactyls who preyed on the Water Dragons.

"However, did you get Katherine to release Violet to you? I thought she refused to send any of her kids off for training," Jayla asked Drusilla. Violet was an extremely powerful empath but she was still a child, and Jayla knew Lady Katherine hovered over her like a mamma Water Dragon.

Drusilla shrugged. "Well, she had already agreed to allow Lucinda to intern with Patrol Security here in the city, and Violet wanted to come to me, so she let her. Still, if it was anyone but me doing the teaching, I'm not sure my over-protective sister would have agreed. I think Katherine is having a hard time with her children growing up. Not to change the subject, but how is your shop going? Are you open for business yet?"

"Next week, I think. I'm planning to continue the booth Lipski optioned during the festival as well and that's taken a lot of planning."

"How will you handle both the shop and the booth?" her cousin Lucas asked curiously.

"Well, I can leave Wayne, my sales-bot on duty in the shop during the day and handle the Festival booth myself. If it turns out I need him to help me in the booth, I can close Whimsical for a few days. A lot of the other shopkeepers are planning to do that."

"That's a clever name," Drusilla said. "Did you choose it?"

"No, that's the name the shop came with. To keep the customer base, I kept the name. I am changing some of the merchandise I will carry though."

"What kind of changes?" Jake asked.

Jayla shrugged. "Well, Sara Lipski carried a lot of stuff imported from off-planet. I will still carry some of that in the shop, but I want to stock more bits and pieces from Vensoog Artists and craftspeople."

Just then, three young men about Jake's age walked into the bar.

"Hey, Jake's here!" one of them exclaimed and the three came over to them. Jayla recognized two of them, although it had been many years since she had seen them. Jorge Carmody out of Clan Caldwell, a tall guy with orangey hair recognized her and nodded in greeting. Silas Crawford was from Clan Ivanov, a blocky round-faced young man whose merry smile hadn't changed as he bowed to the two women.

"Are you in town for the festival?" Silas asked.

"Yes," Lucas answered. "Drusilla and I came in to pick up her three interns so we decided we might as well stay for the festival and see who gets Matched this season."

Jorge groaned. "Don't talk about the Lists. I got a new one this year, and my family is pushing hard for me to make a permanent choice this time."

"Mine too," the third young man said. "Since these two louts don't seem to have the manners to introduce us, I will present myself. I am Nels Ridenhour out of Clan Yang. Lord Lucas, I know the Bard of Lewellyn by reputation, but may I meet these lovely ladies?" He bowed to both Drusilla and Jayla.

"This is my wife, Lady Drusilla, Reverend Mother to the Dragon Talkers, and my cousin Lady Jayla, Warlord Gideon's niece," Lucas said.

"It's so nice to meet you, Lady Drusilla. Congratulations on your coming child," Nels said. He then turned to Jayla and gave her a big smile. "Lady Jayla, if *you* are on my new match list, I can see obeying my clan this year won't be a hardship."

"Thank you," Jayla said, conscious of Jake stiffening beside her. Since Drusilla was a married woman whose husband was well-known for his possessive attitude, she was drawing most of the young men's attention. She caught her cousin's eyes, noticing his unholy grin of amusement when he saw Jake take a possessive step closer to her.

Hastily, she said, "I haven't gone through my list yet, so I don't know everyone who is on it. Are you going to be attending any of the events?"

Silas snorted. "I was told that I'd better be at a few of the official ones or my name would be mud, so I suppose I will."

"The Makers events are boring," Jorge agreed, "but I know of some off the mark places. How about it, Lady Jayla, want to see stuff we don't show the tourists?"

"For Voids sake, Carmody," Jake exploded. "You aren't taking Jayla to some of those dives you frequent. I won't have it."

"What business is it of yours Reynolds?" Jorge demanded. "Last I heard she was a free agent, and she's sure not underage anymore." The two young men glared at each other.

Both Ghost and Toula twittered in distress at the negative energy in the atmosphere, and Drusilla, the empath, said, "Whoa boys, let's not start a brawl in here, shall we?"

Even Jayla felt the calming *push* the other woman was sending.

Fortunately, just then, the hostess appeared and said, "Your table is ready Lord Lewellyn."

Drusilla slid down off the bar stool with difficulty. "I think I need to make a trip to the lady's room before we sit down."

Jayla got up too. "Here, let me help you." She cast an admonishing look over her shoulder at Jake as she followed her cousin's wife. "I'm hungry so try not to get us thrown out of here before we eat, okay?"

Watching the women leave, Lucas laughed out loud. "Don't worry, I'll keep them in line," he promised. He nodded to the three young men. "Nice to have met you, gentlemen; I hope you enjoy your dinner. Come on Jake, let's wait for our ladies at our table, shall we?"

Jake scowled as Lucas chuckled all the way to the table. Once seated, Lucas looked at his friend with a grin. "So, it's Jayla, is it? Oh, Man, I'm going to enjoy watching this. Especially after the hard time you gave me when I was courting Drusilla four years ago. What was it you compared me to? A Saharan Snap Dragon looking for a fight?"

Jake gave his best friend a sour look. "Oh, you're hilarious Lewellyn." His normal good humor reasserted itself and he shook his head ruefully. "I guess it serves me right; I did give you a hard time when you were courting your wife. It's just—I'm not sure what I'm feeling right now. When we met, she was so young I kept telling myself being around her was like getting my sister Karen back for a while. I convinced myself I felt like a big brother."

"That was four years ago," Luc pointed out. "She isn't a kid anymore and neither are you. Besides, didn't you end up on each other's Match List this time?"

"Yes, we did, but how did you know?"

Lucas shrugged. "Drusilla's sister Katherine watches the family Lists like a hunting Dactyl. I think she must have a back door into the Maker's computer or something, because she always seems to know what they're up to."

Jake looked thoughtful. "Wasn't it Lady Katherine who developed the program used to create the original matches that brought all of us here?"

"It sure was." Lucas laughed. "I remember her husband Zack telling me once that when she wrote that program, she had corrected some 'oversights' she found in the original program the Makers had been using for years. He thought it was funny because she didn't ask their permission. If you are serious about courting Jayla, you better learn the O'Teague women are very prone to independent action. Jayla is no different."

In the meantime, Jayla and Drusilla were making their slow way back to where the men waited. "I can see you will have a lot of fun with this year's Match List," Drusilla said. "I'm glad I'll be here to watch the fun. I heard you and Jake are on each other's this year."

Jayla looked troubled. "Yes," she acknowledged. "I'm not sure what Jake thinks about that. He's always considered me a sort of replacement for the little sister who was killed in the war you know."

"Humm," Drusilla said. "Maybe, but earlier in the bar I sure wasn't picking up big brother feelings from him. It felt like jealousy. Do you want him?"

"Four years ago, I would have said yes. I had the most awful crush on him when I was fourteen," Jayla admitted. "He was the first non-family guy I met after Gregor who was decent. Then he defended me at the trial and helped rescue me from the Jacks—I sort of saw him as this knight in shining armor, but he always treated me like a kid."

"Perfectly normal for you to feel that way," Drusilla said. "You know he *had* to treat you like a kid because that's what you were. Besides, even if he saw you as a sister then, I don't think he does anymore. If no one told you, you've grown into quite a beautiful girl."

Jayla shrugged. "That's surface stuff. It means nothing."

By this time, they had arrived back at the table and both women dropped the subject. After some discussion, the four of them shared a large baked shellfish, imported from the water world Oceana. It was lightly seasoned, baked in a rich wine sauce and served with creamed orange roots called tapiala and a large pea-like vegetable, fried crispy in its own pods. Bowls of uncooked, diced fish and vegetables were set out for Toul and Ghost, along with the small water bowls the Quirka would use to wash their paws and muzzles after dinner. Visitors to Vensoog were always surprised to find the natives shared meals with their pets.

Because of her pregnancy, Drusilla ordered fizzy water so by the time dinner was over she was the only one not feeling some effects from the wine served with the meal. When Jake took Jayla home that night, she was feeling quite relaxed from the two bottles wine the three of them had shared. When they arrived in the alley behind her shop, Jake insisted on walking her up to her door.

"What, do you think I'm too wobbly to make it up my own stairs?" she demanded. The comment might have had more force if she hadn't tripped on the steps when she said it. Ghost, hung on gamely as she rocked on her perch on Jayla's shoulder.

Jake caught Jayla's elbow before she went all the way down. "Oh, no," he retorted, guiding her up the stairs, "I can see you're as steady as a rock—"

He cut off abruptly, staring at the open door. "Wait. That shouldn't be open. I saw you lock it."

"Huh?" she stared owlily at the door for a second. "I did too lock it."

"That's what I said." Unlike Jayla, he had imbibed very little of the wine. He pushed her up against the wall, drawing his gun. "You stay here. I'm going to check it out."

Ghost trilled, and hopped from Jayla's shoulder to his, her quills lifting. "All right," he told her, "you can come but you stay out of trouble."

Jayla pushed away from the wall. "I'm coming in too," she announced. "I'm not staying out here by myself."

Jake hesitated. "Okay, you can come, but stay behind me and do what I tell you."

Standing sideways to the door, he pushed it open, taking a quick look into the darkened kitchen. Gripping Jayla's hand, he ducked into the room, pulling her with him out of the doorway. "Lights," he told the house program, and the room lights came on.

It was a mess. Drawers were pulled out, and the contents spilled on the floor. The robo-chef had been broken into and what little food Daryl had shopped for was strewn around and ground underfoot.

The sitting room was worse. Cushions on the couch and chairs were ripped open, and the stuffing pulled out. Art was pulled off the walls, the frames broken, and the canvas slashed. Shelves of old-fashioned books were pulled out and the books themselves ripped apart.

"This is awful!" Jayla gasped. "Why would someone do this?"

"Looking for something, I'll bet," Jake responded. There was a tinkle of glass breaking from downstairs. He shoved her down behind the overturned couch with a curt, "Stay there," and headed for the stairs to the shop.

"Don't!" she exclaimed. "What if whoever it is has a gun?"

"So do I," he reminded her as he vanished through the doorway. She hesitated for a second and then stood up and went to her bedroom. This was *her* apartment, *her* shop, dammit. She would *not* hide up here and play the damsel in distress.

The bedroom had been treated similarly as the sitting room, but they hadn't found the wall safe. She keyed in the combination and a portion of the wall panel slid back. Jayla reached inside and pulled out her pulse gun. Checking to make sure it was loaded, she started down the stairs to the shop. The shop and the living quarters were separated on the bottom with a locked door, but that had been forced open. The shock of the break-in had sobered her enough so she could hold her gun steady and traverse the stairs without tripping.

The shop was never completely dark because low wattage security lights were always on. Gritting her teeth, she called for more lights in the shop, relieved not to see much damage. Suddenly there was a yell of fury, pulsar fire flashed, she heard glass shattering and then running feet. Jayla whirled around, but her reflexes were slower than normal. A big man in dark clothes with a hood and mask was firing back over his shoulder and charging toward her. Hot on his heels, Jake dodged the wild shots being fired at him. He raised his gun, but checked when he saw her in the doorway.

"Jayla get down!" Jake yelled, unable to return fire without taking the chance of hitting her.

She dodged, but it was too late. The intruder hit her full force, knocking her down. Her head smacked into the doorframe behind her and she blacked out. When she came to, she was sitting on the floor. Jake had one arm around her while he wiped her face with a wet cloth. The cloth smelled vaguely of disinfectant and dusting oil. Irritably, she pushed it away.

"Can you stand?" he asked her.

"Yes," she said. He pulled her to her feet, steadying her with an arm around her when she swayed. Ghost twittered anxiously from his shoulder.

"I'm all right Ghost," she managed. "What happened?"

"You didn't stay upstairs like I told you to," he informed her. "I almost caught him when he tried to open the front door, but he took off running toward the back, and I couldn't shoot him with you in the line of fire. Then he barreled into you and got away up the stairs. Didn't I tell you to stay behind the couch?"

Under other circumstances, Jayla would have been furious at his calm assumption of authority; just now, she felt too dizzy and her head hurt too badly for her to care.

Despite his rough words, his hands were gentle as he guided her back up the stairs. He righted the least damaged of the chairs and sat her down in it.

"Sit here while I get you some water," he instructed, dropping a worried Ghost in her lap. The Quirka climbed up her shoulder and sniffed anxiously at her head. Absently, she stroked the small creature, accepting the love and concern Ghost was projecting at her and sending reassurance back. In the kitchen, she could hear Jake's voice talking to the Patrol as he ran water into a glass. His next call was to Glass Manor, informing them she'd had a break-in at her place.

Three hours later, she was sitting sleepily in the same chair, Ghost pillowed on her lap while Jake talked to the two detectives who had investigated the body on the beach. Jorgensen, O'Teague's local head of security stood by listening. Crime scene techs were busy with their instruments recording everything.

The one bright spot in an otherwise hideous ending to their date, was Daryl being found hanging upside down in his utility closet, stripped to his android skin. That the intruder had turned him off was evidenced by the open flap on his back. His dermal tissue was pockmarked with slashes and holes; evidently, the thief had been looking for hidden pouches on his body.

Looking annoyed, Jake left the two detectives and came over to her. He tilted her chin up and examined the cut the medic had bandaged. "Are you feeling up to answering questions from those two?" he asked jerking his head at the two detectives.

"Sure, why not?" she leaned her head back against the damaged chair.

He sat down on the arm and nodded curtly to the two detectives who had followed him over. Larry Jorgensen took up a position on the other side of her chair.

Sipowitz frowned at the two men. "Alone if you don't mind Lord Reynolds."

"No," Jake said simply. "You can do this with us here, or later at your headquarters when she has Jess Braydon with her."

"We could take her downtown now," Gorsling responded.

"The only thing that will get you is Lady Jayla says nothing until Braydon gets there, and Braydon rakes you over the coals for attempting to talk to her client when she has a head injury."

"Never mind," Sipowitz, the senior partner, said. "I'm surprised you told us you didn't recognize the body on the beach, My Lady."

"I told you I didn't get close to it," Jayla reminded them. "I only got near enough to be sure it was humanoid. Who was it?"

"Sara Lipski," Gorsling said, watching Jayla with hard eyes.

"Oh no! That makes it seem worse somehow. I bought this shop from her. She told me she planned to retire to Sand Castle Cove on DeMedici. I only met her once, and that was the day we signed the papers for the sale," Jayla said. "Do you know how she died?"

"The coroner is ruling it a homicide," Sipowitz responded. "That's what makes your little home invasion so interesting. Did they take anything?"

Jayla fumbled for Jake's hand, which was resting on her shoulder.

"I don't think so, but I haven't looked yet."

Just then, the head of the repair crew from O'Teague came over to tell Jorgensen that the material to repair Jayla's broken doors had arrived.

"Okay to start the repair work?" Jorgensen asked the detectives.

Sipowitz hesitated, glancing at the head crime scene tech. "We're done with the doors," she said. "They can fix them if they want to, and we've finished our scans. We'll be out of here as soon as we finish processing the house-bot."

Sipowitz nodded, and Jayla winced as the repair crew banged on the back door as they removed the broken one to replace it. Ghost stirred in her lap at the noise. Sipowitz turned back to Jayla.

"What do you think whoever did this was looking for?"

Jayla's shoulders lifted. "I suppose it must be something Lipski had or they think she had, but I don't know what it could be. There wasn't anything but furniture in the apartment and sales goods in the shop when I moved in. Nothing anyone would want badly enough to do this."

"He had a go at Daryl," Jake remarked. "Maybe he knows something. Didn't you say Lipski had added some unusual enhancements in his programming?"

Gorsling got up and went into the other room where the techs were working on Daryl.

Sipowitz nodded again. "Okay, we will be out of here as soon as they finish in there. You must come down to the station to give a statement tomorrow. Where are you going to be staying?"

"I'm taking her out to Glass Manor on O'Teague for the night," Jake told them. "Do you want any clothes or anything Jayla?"

She shuddered; remembering the tangled mess of her clothes strewn out all over the ruined bed and the floor. "No. Everything will have to be cleaned before I can wear it. They'll find me something for tonight and tomorrow at the manor."

He reached down for the sleeping Ghost, scooping her up in one hand as he helped Jayla rise. "We'll see you out at the compound, Larry. You can give her the keys tomorrow. She will need replacement furniture too."

Jorgensen nodded. "There's stuff in stores she can have."

Jayla made a face. "I think I'll just buy new. I have enough capital left from my parent's legacy. I didn't like this furniture anyway."

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