



Prologue

"If I don't pay them, they'll kill me." Her sister's desperate voice echoed in Tyra Eteocles's mind like a silent phantom stalking her sanity while Tyra sat alone at her kitchen table.

And she had actually thought it'd been a joke. What with Chrysla's flair for exaggeration and her melodrama, as well as the number of times she'd cried her death was eminent, how was she to know that this time the cry for help had been real?

Tyra wanted to scream, to curse, to tear her house apart; to do something other than wait for the loaners who would return and finish off her sister, Chrysla, within the month.

How many more times would Chrysla barter with them for money to invest or gamble? And how many more times would Chrysla run to her for the money when the balance came due?

Tyra hung her head in her hands. Never once in the past had Chrysla been hurt. And she cursed herself that she hadn't been quicker this time with the money. She'd gathered as much as she could as fast as she could, but it hadn't been enough.

There never seemed to be enough. She sighed in disgust.

Why hadn't Chrysla come to her sooner? Maybe then she could have sold something and gathered the money to pay off Chrysla's latest debt.

Twelve hours just hadn't been enough time!

Hot tears rolled down her cheeks. Tyra gave a bitter laugh as she wiped the tears from her face. Sell what? She didn't own anything of real value. Not even her rusty, dilapidated fighter would bring enough money from an auction to pay half of what Chrysla owed.

If only their father hadn't been such a dreamer, maybe then he could have left them something more than a mountain of debts that she still, fifteen years later, hadn't paid the full balance.

If only Chrysla hadn't inherited their father's useless idealism. If only—

The telecom buzzed.



Tyra stared at it, her throat constricting until she couldn't breathe. It had to be the doctor. She'd been waiting half the night for this call and now she was too terrified to answer.

She should never have left the hospital, but after waiting alone for three hours, she couldn't stand it any longer. Too many memories of her mother's death had haunted her. Closing her eyes, she tried to blot out the image of the doctor covering her mother's lifeless body with a sheet. His dispassionate voice rang in her ears, "Too bad you didn't bring her in sooner. We might have saved her if we'd had more time."

Her father hadn't possessed the money to pay for a lengthy hospital stay. Poverty had crippled her mother, then killed her. Too many members of her family had died and she couldn't stand to lose Chrysla, too.

Please, Tyra begged silently. I'll do anything to get the money. Please, just let her live.

With a shaking hand, she opened the channel. The screen brightened to show her the doctor staring at her with dark, sympathetic eyes. Tyra's stomach twisted into a cold lump of fear and for a moment, she thought she'd be ill.

"Seax Eteocles," he said, addressing her with her professional title, "your sister is out of surgery and in recovery. She'll be fine in...time, but the voucher she used for the hospital cost was returned with a denial. I'm afraid without proper medical attention, your sister won't last for more than a few hours."

Tyra closed her eyes, relief washing over her. Chrysla would make it.

"Fria Eteocles, did you hear me?" he asked, reverting to the ordinary form of address for a woman. "We're going to have to turn her out unless we can get a valid voucher."

The knot in her stomach twisted even harder and she clenched her fists. Tyra was so tired of being poor, so tired of the people who demanded their money as if all she had to do was snap her fingers and it would appear. People who had no idea just how precious every dina, every breath, was. She opened her eyes and forced her anger and hatred aside.

"I heard you, Doctor," she said, amazed at the evenness of her voice. "I'll get the money for you in cash. If you'll give me three days."



His sympathetic stare turned to doubt. She'd seen that look too many times in her life and she despised it. Tyra added coldly, "I'll sign over the deed to my ship as collateral."

He nodded. "Very well. We'll keep her here for the duration." He cut the transmission.

Her feelings numb, Tyra stared at the blank screen. For the briefest instant, she considered asking her brother, Phelix, or sister, Pheobe, for the money, but she knew they didn't possess it anymore than she did. Phelix and Pheobe would have to borrow it and the type of people they ran with were even worse than the ones after Chrysla.

Family. It was all she'd ever had growing up an orphan. It was all anyone could ever depend on. She and her siblings had pulled together to survive. They protected each other; watched one another's backs. Now Chrysla needed her and nothing or no one would keep her from saving her sister's life.

No matter what, she couldn't afford to let Phelix know what had happened. He would go after those responsible and she couldn't stand the thought of him lying next to Chrysla in the hospital.

She was the oldest and it was her responsibility to settle this.

With a determined hand, she pulled her holstered blaster across the table, clutching it until her knuckles blanched. Maybe she didn't have the best occupation in the universe, but it kept her fed.

Her stomach rumbled a denial. As usual, Tyra ignored it.

Yielding a weary sigh, she stood and moved to her bedroom where she could change out of her only dress and into her work clothes. She pulled her tight, black jumpsuit on, the leather creaking as she fastened the front of the suit and collar.

Tyra stared at herself in the chipped, broken mirror. Her hollow, golden eyes were dull and ringed with dark circles from a night spent worrying over her sister.

Tyra touched her face, seeing so much of her mother on the outside, but knowing the similarity went no deeper. All she'd ever wanted was to be the same kind, loving, gentle woman her mother had been.

She wasn't.



Unlike her mother, she didn't believe in the innate goodness of others. Growing up as an orphan responsible for the welfare of three younger siblings had taught her early on the necessity of having a hard-edge.

Trisa, that's what Phelix, called her.

Plaiting her hair, Tyra agreed with him. She was just like the small, spiked animal that shot its poisoned quills at its enemies. Better to strike first than be victimized.

Besides, she refused to make apologies. She'd always done what she had to to keep her family together and safe. And no one, absolutely no one, would ever jeopardize what she'd struggled so hard to maintain!

Her soul charged by her conviction, Tyra pulled her small reserve blaster out of its box and checked the charge level before fastening it inside her right boot, then she strapped the other blaster to her right hip.

"You're the best at this," she told herself, bolstering her confidence; trying not to feel any emotion that could dislodge her courage.

She left her bedroom and returned to the kitchen where her computer terminal rested on her counter.

There were only two legal ways for an uneducated woman to get the kind of money she needed— prostitution or bounty hunting. She refused to sell her body, and at least as a free skip-tracer, she was able to uphold her oath as a Seax while she cleaned some of the filth from the cities. The same type of filth that fed off people like Chrysla; that had once fed off her.

With that thought in mind, she flipped on her vid monitor and typed in her tracer's code. The bounty sheets came up. Tyra flipped through them, looking for an appropriate target that could pay off most of what she owed.

Her heart stopped beating as she found it. She scanned the contract and her blood began to race.

"C.I. Syn wanted Dead or Alive by the Trioxon Government for the rape and murder of Eliza Kipelainen. Wanted Alive by the Trifarion Government for filching, treason and prison escape." The money being



offered for him by the Trifarions would pay off Chrysla's debts, the hospital bill, the lien on her ship, and she'd have a little left over to live on for awhile.

Tyra bit her lip in indecision. Syn's name was more than well known and more than well feared. He'd made his reputation as being the best computer file filch in the known universe. And before he'd left his mid-teens he'd been wanted by the Trifarion government.

Rumors of his cruelty circulated within the small group of tracers she associated with. To her knowledge, no other free-tracer had ever tried to bring him in, and bound-tracers who were sent in after him seldom returned. The ones lucky enough to return were never fully intact.

It didn't matter, she decided, pushing her fear and uncertainty away. She'd never failed a mission before. Chrysla's life depended on her success and she didn't intend to fail this time.

Signing her name to the plate below the screen, Tyra accepted the contract.