

‘As you are aware, Officer Solara, I have taken an interest in your career. I was close to your grandmother before she died in the Za’Naja war. After the death of your grandfather, and I will make myself plain here, I had hoped to take his place in her heart. I believe I would have, had she not made the ultimate sacrifice for her planet. Perhaps if that had happened as I had desired, you would stand before me today seeing not seeing me as mentor but, rather, more of a grandfather figure...?’

Jojoba turned from the spectacular spaceport view in his office and checked her expression. Although, to consider the majestic space as a mere office was to do the architecture a disservice. You could see the whole of the main spaceport docks from here; central, elevated, looking down – and way out past and over all the ships; probably fifty major ships at a quick count. Jojoba’s ‘office’ was more a private observation deck really, a separate crescent of the station’s top floor that extended into the dock itself, from which he managed his affairs, and to a broader extent, the future of Earth Interstellar.

Astra Solara masked her expression as the Admiral met her eyes, and held the mask, airtight. She really didn’t know what to make of Jojoba. She wanted to say; I do see you as a grandfather figure. The statement would not have been entirely true or false, but she knew better than to express that kind of statement to a superior. She was sure that many graduates saw him this way; perhaps he had known all of their grandmothers, or grandfathers, or whoever. But her training also suggested something deeper; that he knew what she thought of him, even if she herself did not. Somebody who knew you better than you knew yourself was to be engaged with extreme caution or not at all, especially when they were a superior who took an interest in you. In these cases it was better to mask; do not pretend or the superior will know, and likewise do not feign equality or reach for unearned familiarity. Masks represented fear, she had been taught, in all its many forms. A mask could represent the fear of one who does not want to be known, or exposed, or it could represent the need for oneself to be seen as weaker; unthreatening and if necessarily vulnerable. A blank mask conveyed a failure of response; in this case, a respectful fear of looking foolish in the face of the superior, a surrender to the formal assumption that they wanted the best for you, that your superior

always knew better. It was the proper, formal response and she would not breach etiquette.

Jojoba nodded.

'You are right not to know what to make of me. But you will, in time. But I am an ally, you must never doubt it.'

'Thank you, Admiral Jojoba.' Then she suddenly thought of a way of maintaining the connection, an earnest but useful fact that could be expressed with the requisite formality. 'I know that my grandmother thought very highly of you, and with affection.'

She gulped, hoping that she had not gone too far, become too informal.

Jojoba smiled tightly; a smile that was just right, which told her that her response had also been – just right. Accordingly, he proceeded on a semi-personal level.

'You resemble her of course, Astra. As does your mother, and your great-grandmother. But your grandmother remains the best of you; not only by dying in an act of heroism at the peak of her glorious legacy, but also – simply as herself. As she was. However, you alone are young enough, with potential enough, to perhaps one day live up to her legacy. Your Ex-En scores are near-perfect, well-above expectations. I was initially against placing you immediately into the propaganda programme –'

Astra flinched. Jojoba's smile tightened again. He only smiled sometimes with his eyes, and almost never with his full face. These were also things she had been taught to recognise, basic things. However, she was also aware that these observations meant very little with a man like Jojoba, who knew how to project and disguise. Very little, but still; present. Very little on the surface level.

Very little was what she had to seem to know.

'Of course you are not so naïve to realise that you have been used for propaganda purposes, you and your mother, no matter what title they give the department. But your time on Amazon Seven with your mother was a great success. It serves us very well. Your family has established relationships that we may one day ask you to reignite and –'

I shall be honest, to exploit. In favour of Earth Interstellar. That will prove no problem for you....?’

That had not been a question, even though his vocal inflection has couched it as one. She was still being tested; she remained silent.

They will never stop testing us...

He nodded, one, sharply and almost imperceptibly. ‘Lieutenant Solara, I have a favour so ask. I believe we have a problem here. It is only a suspicion, but it is a strong one. Do you see the SEADR out there?’

She could see three, but she assumed he meant the largest one, docked closest to them. They looked like a cross between an orca and an echidna, these ships; Search Explore Assess Determine Return. (Although she had heard the real acronym was something like: Seek Exploitation Access, Danger and Returns.) Whichever, the ‘Sedars’ were massive; well-stocked for extended, long-range missions with an elite USAUCKANZ crew of up to one thousand. Some of them didn’t come back for years; one or two had even been assigned to Indie Commanders, on daring long range reconnaissance missions from which they, it was always rumoured, were only ever fifty percent expected to return. This Sedar was particularly large, well-armed, and not hiding the fact that it had been completely refitted and upgraded. She’d seen it as she’d come in but had been too distracted about meeting her mentor to properly process its uniqueness. Jojoba did not call her up to EA Prime, personally, to meet, in-person, very often. Only twice before, and they had both been for promotions.

‘That is the *Barrier Reef*. It has a secret mission, obviously somewhere very dangerous, that is going to be sabotaged before she can launch. Do you know what they call you now?’

‘Me?’

‘Huh. Yes, well I suppose they have a specific name for you.’

Astra wondered which specific *they*, they were.

'No, I mean...' He looked to the side, out to the *Barrier Reef*. '...I suppose it was inevitable once the graduate Ex-En programme was colloquialized to Aladdin-X. They call you Djinn. They mean that you are very strong, almost elemental forces, you children, who can be found and made to do the will of those who know your secrets.'

Astra knew what djinn were. She feigned disinterest.

'Isn't that something to do with genies, Admiral? From... Old Iranian? Something like that? My retention of woo was never very dense.'

He would like that; woo. Men like him liked that word.

Jojoba nodded. 'Yes, something. In the old stories, djinn were neither good nor bad; they were powerful and had their own personalities and yet they are susceptible to sorcery; to the use of magic by humans that binds and controls them.' He gave an almost friendly little huff. 'Jaffle. Is that not the common parlance? A mangled slang from the root acronym; JALF; Just Another Life Form.'

He looked back from the *Barrier Reef*, into her eyes again.

'You've no-doubt encountered the grunts, the working classes; even the middle ranges of the great human expansion, out there, fractured and niched as they are; these are the people you will be dealing with for some time to come. Mostly your inferiors, but you must always be on the lookout for those with potential, who can be cultivated and elevated and...'

An intensity fell from his gaze. He seemed, all of a sudden, to see her face rather than address it. She knew that he was seeing her grandmother.

'But of course, Astra, you are a graduate of our most prestigious elite programme. You were lost out there and found your way back to us. You are well-aware of the kinds of humans, the levels of the minds, that see the staggering wonder of our speedy expansion into the galaxy as simply another mission; another inconvenience that takes them away from their total immersion within interactive warfare and pornography; the kind of mind that would create a term such as 'Just Another Life Form' and condense it into an excretion such as *jaffle*.' Jojoba's lip curled. 'It is perhaps a good thing that you

do not remember so much of what happened to you, out there, when you were lost to us.'

She nodded. 'Admiral.'

He nodded back, and returned his gaze to the *Barrier Reef*. 'It is suggested, in one of the old holy books, that a mighty sacred temple for their god was built with the aid of the djinn. Yet, conversely, an amiable djinn, one assumes, can be bound and made to do evil; malevolent djinn likewise made to do good.' He scoffed. 'They see you Ex-En graduates as 'supernatural space-marines', one supposes...'

A light, spluttering laugh, totally mocking, ensued.

She had been thinking the same.

But Jojoba was no fool. She and her fellow graduates had been sourced from puberty and created as marines with elite potential. Like everyone wealthy or backed by Earth Interstellar these days, they had been enhanced. Astra believed that she had since proved that the potential had been more than promise; that she had become something, that her potential had manifested as talent, with aptitude and –

'Somebody is going to sabotage the *Barrier Reef*. Out of launch, before she drops into grack-drive. I want you to stop them.'

Her buttocks clenched and she stood a little stiffer. 'Of course, Admiral.'

He tapped out a few commands on his fingertips then pointed to her, streaming the relevant data in an instant. An icon appeared within her field of vision; front and centre on her array.

'The password Astra is available for three seconds; the files are permanent but retina-coded. Your personal proof of endorsement.'

She ran her private scans over the autos and saw to the best of her ability that the request, the private mission, she supposed, was on the level.

'As you see, this is not a formal USAU mission, but it is a formal Earth Interstellar Mission, need-to-know and all that palaver. The bottom line is that I have solid

information, which for complicated reasons I am unable to share, that supports your investigation; this is where you begin to create your most important relationship, the one your great-grandmother foresaw.'

And still sees, is still pushing.

'Of course, Admiral Jojoba.' She smiled, tightly but with a slight edge of warmth. 'Any mission of yours is a mission of mine.'

He loved that. Loved it instantly. She sensed the sliver of sexual attraction toward her, buttoned-down by decades of professional military formality. It was to be expected; she had been in many ways bred to exploit that, and he had been bred to resist. It was start of an even apprenticeship, there was that, at least.