

CHAPTER ONE

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Okay umm, how is the camera doing? Just let me move this a little, that way. Uh? How is that? That is fine. Okay umm, now this case was one of those defining moments in my career, and in many ways, in my personal life too. It started out as just another job like all the rest, but even before I reached the location, things started to change. At first, some of these changes were exciting and meant I would be able to stretch myself a little, develop my skill base y'know? As time went on though, the changes that were taking place became less exciting and by the time it was all over, things had gone from change, to devastation and it took me a long time to recover. I am still not sure at what point during the job it became clear to me that not everything was all that it appeared to be; maybe it was a slow and gradual thing, I don't know, but there was a time when I was more than a little confused as to what was what. This often happens. The work I do cannot be choreographed, I have to think on my feet and sometimes I have to make it up as I go along. Ninety nine percent of the time, it all works out right in the end. That other one percent though, well those times are different. Very different. It was also one of those rare cases that affected me on a very personal level, and the emotional cost was so high that if I had known beforehand what was to happen, I would not have gone near the job. I seldom get personally touched by the cases I deal with; I'm able to retain some detachment and I think that's why I'm so good at what I do and why my boss gives me so much leeway. I am not made of stone though and on those rare occasions when I cannot avoid getting emotionally involved, I sometimes get knocked, and knocked hard. This was one such case and I still feel the effects of it today. I guess I always will and that is a good thing because there are aspects of the job I do not want to forget, despite the pain. Forgetting those things would seem like losing my humanity.

I had been through a bit of a dry spell work wise and had not been gainfully employed for three weeks or so when the job came in. I am one of those people who like to be doing something and I get bored easily with too much time on my hands. My contacts in the Law Enforcement Agency had told me to take a holiday, so as I hadn't had any real time off in a couple of years I accepted and went back home to Sigma Prime to catch up with some old friends and colleagues. I own an apartment in a nice high rise in a better part of Alimenika, the capital city of the easternmost continent and the location for the Law Enforcement Agency's Sigma headquarters. It is a nice part of town and as my job pays well, the location of my home was something I did not have to compromise on, especially as I am away from it for long periods. I called the cleaning woman I usually employ and let her know I'd be home for a couple of weeks, and as I closed my front door behind me, I could see she'd been in and done a great job on the place as always. Not only had she cleaned and aired the whole apartment, but she had filled my kitchen with food and even bought me a case of my favourite Kambino Beer. A note on the counter top informed me that she would take any laundry I wanted done, in the morning, and that there was home baked pie in the stasis unit I could reheat for dinner. I smiled as I thought of the dumpy middle-aged woman who looked after me as perfectly as any wife could and resolved to remind her how much she meant to me.

As has become my habit, I spent the first couple of days just doing nothing and enjoying sleeping in a comfortable bed again and eating proper food. I have all the facilities I need on board my own ship but they are basic, so whenever I get back home, I tend to spend a day or two just eating well and sleeping a lot. On the third day, I spent the morning at the hairdresser catching up with the cute redheaded woman from Earth who runs the place while she tidied up my hair and gave

me a few shots of Tricholox to thicken it up a little. I am not the vainest person you will ever meet but I do like my hair to look good and I do like regular dermal treatments to keep my skin looking its best. After spending a couple of hours in a dermal optimiser, I smiled at my reflection. I'd lost a couple of years and a whole lot of stress off my face, my hair looked great and as I turned sideways in her full length mirror, I was pleased to notice that I seemed to have lost a few pounds too.

When the Head of Law Enforcement here on Sigma, Tinnias Vaylo, called me up and asked me if I'd call in and see him as he had a proposition to put to me which would bring me a substantial pay check if I chose to accept, I happily agreed. My job pays well and I enjoy a good standard of living but a bonus is always welcome. After a couple of days to myself with good food and plenty of sleep in a comfortable bed, a dermal and a haircut and a night with the cute redhead, I felt relaxed and wouldn't mind if my holiday ended rather sooner than I'd expected it to. I am so used to working all the time that when I do find myself with extended periods of time on my hands, it does not take me long to get restless and bored. Doing the job I do means I cannot maintain a circle of friends like ordinary folks do so I have become, by necessity, a bit of a loner. I sometimes only get home to Sigma a couple of times a year and I'd be constantly letting people down so I tend to keep a little detachment from people, which helps me do the work I do without distractions but it doesn't help my social life when I get time off. That is why I do not tend to take much holiday time.

I am a Freelance Law Enforcer, a cop of sorts but not in the ordinary sense. I am more of an inter-galactic cop; my patch is not a few streets or blocks, it is the whole galaxy and I share it with loads of others like myself. I am given a specific job to do by the Law Enforcement Agency as and when they need me. I am what is known in the trade as a chase, catch and deliver guy, which means I am given a specific target to acquire, restrain and hand over to the relevant Law Enforcement authorities. I used to be a regular Law Enforcer behind a desk in the very building I was now heading towards. I worked as a detective in Alemenika and seldom left Sigma. I can remember many times giving jobs just like the ones I do now, to other freelancers and never guessed back then that the roles would be reversed one day. Back then, I had good pay and regular time off but the petty rules and regulations sometimes got in the way, and too many times I found myself with no choice but to let some asshole walk because of some damn technicality. Eventually there came a time when I knew I could not take it anymore and it was either give up or go freelance. I liked my job; it was just the regulations and petty rules that irritated me, so I handed in my notice, took possession of an official tag that identified me as an officially recognised freelancer and went shopping for my own ship. In all the years I have been doing this job, I have never regretted going freelance, and apart from the ever present threat from the many unregistered freelancers, universally known as Mercs, I love my job. I often spend months at a time living on board my ship so I did not skimp when I was looking for one to purchase. It had to serve as not just my transportation and place of work, but my temporary home as well. I spent a good part of my life savings on her and she has all the facilities I need; fully functioning wash cubicle with shower, deluxe model nutri vend and auto snack and a double wide bunk in the small but functional bedroom. A substantial hold in her belly has space for up to seven prisoners to be safely restrained and plenty of storage space. A top of the range covert stealth modulator ensures I am invisible to ninety percent of the radar and scanning systems most of the worlds I visit use. She was in great condition and I was only her third owner. I did not hesitate. I christened her SC257 and grinned from ear to ear the first day I picked her up and admired her new paint job.

Tinnias Vaylo smiled and shook my hand as I entered his permanently untidy office on the third floor of the Law Enforcement Headquarters. I readily accepted his offer of a drink and sat opposite him. Although he is officially my boss, I like him, and we spent a few minutes catching up. I

asked after his family and he invited me to dinner, which I was happy to accept as his wife is an amazing cook and his daughter is friendly and treats me like an older brother. It is the nearest thing to family I ever get to experience and I like the temporary closeness we share on these evenings. My parents both died years ago and I have no siblings and although I am used to my solitary status, it is nice to have that close feeling from time to time.

"Now Sam," he said as he tapped the screen on the digital console on his desk, "I have a job for you if you're interested. This is not like the usual jobs you do and will require you to blur the lines a little between your official resume as a straight chase, catch and deliver guy and a detective."

"Oh?" I replied in surprise. This was outside of my job description. My job is pretty straightforward; I am given a specific target to pursue, restrain and deliver to the authorities for trial or sentencing and my targets are usually escaped prisoners, criminals wanted for various misdeeds and all sorts of murderers and crazies. It's not my job to figure out who did what or why or how but just to catch person A, restrain them for a specific reason and deliver them to the relevant authorities at location B. Now here was Tinnias asking me to stretch my boundaries by being a detective. I was intrigued.

"I thought that would interest you."

"I'm not a detective Sir," I replied. "I'm a chase, catch and deliver guy as you know. Why the change now?"

"Well there are a couple of reasons. Firstly, there's talk of maybe giving all of our guys like yourself a bit more room to work out the why and how of the jobs you do. From the feedback you've all given us, we realise that many of you would like to be able to use more detective skills in your work. There have been many times, as you no doubt will agree, that your target has brought other aspects of his or her case to light that have a bearing on their eventual trial and often on the outcome of the whole case. Remember your experience with that Nembier guy?"

"Yeah, I remember," I nodded. Some time ago I'd been given the job of finding and catching this guy called Professor Nembier who was wanted for nine murders. As the whole thing worked itself out, I ended up having to be a detective in order that the real murderer be apprehended. Everything worked out fine in the end but only because I stepped beyond the boundaries of my job.

"If I hadn't done my own detective work on that case, an innocent man would have been executed by now."

"Quite," Tinnias nodded. "Lots of our other freelancers have had similar cases where they've been forced to do their own detective work, which isn't strictly their job, but in all but a couple of the cases, innocents have avoided incarceration and the real perpetrators have been caught. It makes sense to give you all a little more scope to do your own research and make your own decisions in the field."

"Okay, that makes sense," I replied. "I'm sure that will help in some cases."

"Good, I'm glad you're okay with the idea. You're one of my most experienced men Sam and you've proved yourself time and again so I'm not going to send you on a detective's course."

"Thanks Boss."

"The other reason is that this job is going to take a while to complete. We know where to send you and we know something weird is going on there, but we do not know who is behind everything, why it is happening or how. You'll have to dig in and become part of the scene, take the time necessary to get to know everyone so you can eventually answer those questions for us. When you know what's going on and who our guy is, you have the authority to then arrest him and bring him in. All the decisions will be yours, but of course you'll take any flak should you bring in the wrong guy. I trust you Sam. I've known you since you joined the Agency and you've never made hasty decisions."

"It sounds interesting. What is the job exactly?"

"We've been in regular contact with our colleagues on Deligon 2 for the past year. It seems there have been a number of mysterious disappearances; seven in all during the past fourteen months. The Head of Law Enforcement over there, Adlion Garmast, tells me that all seven worked at a scientific station that was set up to do research into a new disease that's affecting the trees on Deligon. The last victim was discovered having apparently fallen while rock climbing while on leave from work. It wasn't until her family, who aren't native to Deligon, insisted on taking her body back to their home world for a full autopsy, that they found she'd died a week earlier than the Deligon report. Her body had been stored and some chemical added to her blood stream to slow down decomposition to make it look like she died many days later than she actually died. The cryo stasis process used to transport her body home affected this chemical compound and made it easy for her own doctors to find. If she hadn't been sent home in cryo, this chemical wouldn't have been found and everyone would've carried on believing she fell while climbing."

"So it's obviously a cover up," I nodded.

"Obviously," Tinnias replied. "Now we need to ask why cover up an accidental death?"

"And does that now bring suspicion on the other six deaths?" I continued.

"Right."

"So you want me to emigrate to Deligon and sign up for work?"

"See how good a detective you are Sam?"

"How long do I have?"

"As long as it takes. You take all the time you need. Keep in touch by the secure Unicom channel I'll give you and keep us updated. Anything you need, you just ask and I'll personally see to it you get it. Do you want the job? It's double pay by the way and all your expenses of course and anytime you want out, just call and we'll get a team in to extricate you if necessary. You want to think about it for a day or two?"

"I'll take it. I've never been to Deligon before and have no contacts there so it will be a good opportunity to add to my eyes and ears."

"That's great, thank you Sam. I'll get all your papers together and you'll be going with a large wedge of galactic credits to last you until you secure yourself a job within the scientific station. You won't be short of money, I assure you, and anytime you need more, just call."

"Thank you Sir."

"No problem at all. You'll have an alias for this job by the way; we can't have your real identity as a Law Enforcer coming out and putting you in danger before you decide it's necessary to reveal your true agenda. Any idea what you want to be called?"

"Joss Gilden," I replied without hesitation.

"Okay," Tinnias replied as he jotted it down. "You've used the Gilden alias before haven't you?"

"Yes Sir, is that a problem?"

"No I don't think so. Weren't you Demilo Gilden last time, and Tico Gilden one other time?"

"Yeah."

"That won't be a problem then, there's loads of Gildens here on Sigma. It's a fairly common name. Can I ask why you always use Gilden?"

"It's umm, well Sir it's the name of someone I used to know." I tried not to show him that this question made me extremely uncomfortable, but at the same time, I wanted him to realise that I didn't intend to expand on my answer. There was no way I wanted to remind him about her.

"Okay, no problem Sam." He pressed the button on his communication panel and called to his Assistant. "Can you come in here please Maddy?" The plump but pretty woman entered and smiled

at me as she approached the desk. "Can you arrange for some papers for an alias undercover operation. Pilot's licence, intergalactic passport, DNA references and so on, the usual."

"Of course Sir," she replied. "What is the change of name?"

"From Samelan Sinclair to Joss Gilden."

"And the work history?"

"Ex-military, completed his statutory ten years then retired to start his own security business back home on Sigma Prime. Made some bad investments, lost his business and home and decided to start fresh somewhere else. Parents deceased, no siblings. That sound okay to you Sam?"

"Sounds fine to me Sir."

"And arrange for ten thousand galactic credits to be uploaded to Mr Joss Gilden's account would you?"

"Of course Sir," she nodded and left the room.

"Here's five hundred credits Sam," he said as he handed me a currency card. "Get yourself some new clothes, something a bit less umm,"

"A bit less what Sir?" I asked as I looked down at myself.

"Well, a bit less like an off duty law enforcer."

I laughed out loud but I had to admit that he was right. I'm no male model and my job hardly ever requires me to wear the latest fashions, so I tend to stick to what I know and all of it comfortable, sturdy and which enables me to do my work unhindered by trivialities. That does not mean I have no sense of style, far from it, but I seldom get the opportunity to look like I just stepped out of a clothes store.

"Don't be offended Sam," Tinnias grinned.

"I'm not Sir. You're right actually; my wardrobe could do with a bit of updating. When am I off?"

"Well, your papers should be ready in a day or two and I'll set up some accommodation for you on Deligon; that will take a day. How's your ship?"

"She's being refitted and serviced now. The guys said she'll be done by the end of the week."

"Okay then," Tinnias nodded. "Let's say five days from now then, provisionally."

"That's fine Sir."

"Thank you Sam. I know I won't regret putting my trust in you. You'll be an ambassador for this new change, if it should end up going ahead and your actions will be a benchmark for all our other freelancers. During this job you'll be setting the standard for them, so feel free to make it as high as you like."

"I will Sir and thank you for your trust. I appreciate it," I smiled as I stood and shook hands with him.

"Eight o'clock okay?"

"Huh?"

"For dinner tonight."

"Oh, sure. That'll be fine. Can I use some of this money to buy Ambella a gift?"

"You could buy her a vidicom movie if you want; she'd love that new one by that favourite actor of hers. Umm that Elloway guy from Earth. You know the guy with the dark hair and blue eyes, the big fella with the muscles."

"Oh yeah you mean Jake Elloway," I replied.

"That's the one," he nodded. "She's madly in love with him and makes me and her mother sit through every one of his movies hundreds of times over. She's been nagging us to get her his latest movie."

"Okay," I nodded. "I'm a bit of a fan of his too. I may just buy myself a copy."

"You're shitting me Sam," Tinnias exclaimed.

"No shit Sir."

Tinnias laughed loudly and I could still hear him laughing as I left his office and headed for the lift.

I left my new clothes in a bag, along with a note asking my cleaning woman to launder and press them for me as soon as possible and examined the clothes I already owned. Tinnias was right, I do look like a law enforcer even when off duty and I resolved to buy myself more clothes suitable for off work times. I realised I did not own a single garment suitable for a smart occasion and not too many smart casual things either. I picked out the best shirt I had, an understated black number with a slight sheen to the light fabric and the one pair of good pants I owned. After rooting around in the back of the closet I came across a black jacket I bought on Terramora Prime a few years back and grinned. I forgot all about this garment and the cute blonde with the enormous breasts who sold it to me and then kept me company in my hotel room for the following three nights. I brushed it off and sprayed it with some Launder Fresh before putting it on and looking at my reflection.

I looked okay I decided. Smart enough but still casual and not at all like an off duty law enforcer, at least not one I'd ever seen. I picked up the vidicom movie I'd bought and had gift wrapped for Tinnias' daughter Ambella and left. As the hover cab swept through the darkening streets of Alimenika towards the Vaylo home I thought of the evening to come and realised I felt excited and happy to be spending time with people who were the closest thing to family to me. The only slight cloud on the horizon was Ambella herself. At fourteen she was still something of a kid but I was also aware of her burgeoning womanhood, and the way she always greeted me with a hug and a kiss on the cheek and the way she snuggled up to me as we all sat and talked and laughed, hinted at her growing awareness of her femininity. She's a pretty girl with a happy disposition and she shows her affections freely and that's the problem. I was beginning to get the distinct impression that she had a crush on me and I talked it over with Tinnias after our last meeting, nearly a year before.

"Don't worry Sam," Tinnias had assured me, "you're not around nearly enough to encourage her to fall for you. I trust you completely and she has plenty of young men her own age that she hangs out with."

"I don't want to hurt her feelings Sir," I replied. "I don't want to lead her on or anything. Give her false hope you know?"

"I know and thank you for telling me. Be your usual friendly self with her. Remember she's only thirteen and as fast as this crush has come, it will be gone and replaced with another."

"I guess you're right."

Tinnias greeted me with a handshake and looked me up and down before nodding with approval.

"That's more like it Sam," he nodded. "You scrub up very well."

"Thanks."

"Sam, how lovely to see you again. Come on in." Grellina Vaylo embraced me and gave me a kiss on the cheek. "You look handsome tonight," she smiled as she too looked me up and down.

"Thank you Mrs Vaylo, it's always a pleasure to be here."

"Oh stop it, call me Grellina, please. We're family Sam."

Thudding footsteps reached my ears and I looked up to see Ambella running down the stairs. She grinned and flung herself into my arms and hugged me, making me all too aware of her growing breasts and slimming waistline. She was no longer a child and I would have to be careful with her feelings. She hadn't yet realised how innocently provocative she could be and I could so easily be

interested in her in a very non friendly way, but with her being so young and my Boss's daughter, there was no way I was going to allow her to give me an unscheduled hard on. In ten years' time maybe, but not tonight.

"Hi Sam. It's been ages."

"Hey there girl, wow look at you," I said as I held her at arm's length. "You're all grown up. You're a proper young woman now." She blushed and put her arm through mine and led me through to the sitting room where she plonked herself down beside me. I extricated my arm and took out the gift I'd bought for her. "I got you something, just in case I miss your next birthday."

Her eyes lit up and her full lips spread across her face in a smile that lit the room. "Oh Sam, thank you," she said as she took it and began to carefully unwrap it. When she saw the vidicom movie, she gasped.

"Oh wow," she exclaimed. "I've been wanting this for ages. Thank you so much. Oh Jake Elloway, he's so handsome." She leaned in and kissed my cheek.

"You're welcome hunny, I know you like the guy and a little bird told me you'd been asking for this new movie of his."

"You're the best Sam."

"That's another one her mother and I will get to know so intimately we'll both be able to play all the parts word perfect," Tinnias said and I laughed as Ambella made a face.

The dinner was delicious and the company friendly and I relaxed more during that evening than I could remember in ages. We talked and laughed for hours and it made me realise just how much I miss family life. I also realised that evening that the little Ambella whose cuddles I enjoyed so much was not little anymore and there could be no more innocent cuddles. I couldn't allow her to fall for me so for the first time, I didn't cuddle her back as she snuggled against my arm. I hoped she did not think I did not like her anymore and I made an effort to include her in conversation so she would know I still noticed her and valued her presence, but I had to begin the process of closing off the physical contact we had enjoyed during her childhood years as she ran headlong into womanhood. I thought back to all the times she'd sat on my lap and sang songs, fallen asleep in my arms with her thumb still in her mouth and forced me to play endless silly, wonderful games. The child was now a young woman and it felt almost like a death to me and I knew I would grieve for the innocent child with whom I had enjoyed so much comforting contact. In her place was a woman learning about emotions and having her first crush and my role in her life was now changed forever. As my Boss's daughter I couldn't afford to blur the lines between friendship and, something else. She didn't deserve that and I'm no cradle snatcher. As I said, in ten years' time maybe.

The evening was warm as we sat on their veranda and drank the rich green wine they save for special occasions. The Vaylo house looked down upon the city from the top of a hill where the most desirable residences are built. The city looked beautiful from up here and we could see for miles into the horizon, almost to the coastline. Ambella went to watch the new movie I'd bought her and left Tinnias, Grellina and I alone and Tinnias felt able to talk about the job he'd offered me. We discussed various scenarios and possible explanations for what might have taken place, played with a few ideas as to how I should approach my research and detective work to uncover the truth. He then told me I would be sharing an apartment with another guy who was also in the employ of the Law Enforcement Agency.

"He's a Damiklonian Sam, and he'll be helping you get to know your way around and will be a sort of assistant. He also works at the scientific station so use him in whatever way you feel he could be useful to you. He's prepared to do whatever you say. He knows you're the boss."

"A Damiklonian?" I said. "I've never met them before. What are they like?"

"They're nice people Sam. They look a bit different and they sound different too but they are honourable and trustworthy. I've worked with a couple of them in my time and wouldn't hesitate to trust them."

"That's good to know. What do you mean by different?"

"They have gills and can breathe underwater as well as in air and they have fangs."

"Fangs?" I replied in shock.

"Yeah," he nodded. "Really long ones too and their bite is venomous. Their fangs are retractable so you won't see them unless he wishes to use them or to show them to you. He also carries the only known antidote with him. It's galactic law that all Damiklonians carry the antidote when working away from their home world. He will make a point of showing it to you when you meet him so don't be fazed by it, he's just obeying the law."

"Okay thanks."

"His voice is a bit weird too," Tinnias continued. "Damiklonians talk differently to most other races and they have to be taught to speak in a way the rest of us will understand more easily when they leave Damiklon Prime to work."

"Right, thanks for the warning. I'll try not to offend him by being surprised."

"Don't worry, they're used to folks being surprised and so long as you're not openly rude or disrespectful, he'll be the best friend you could wish for."

"Thanks Boss," I nodded, little realising how pertinent those words were to become.

I took a hover cab back to the city, and Tinnias promised to call as soon as my papers were ready for me to collect. I stopped the cab at a local bar and after a few drinks, took home a delightful Sigma girl with long black hair and allowed her to take my mind off things. We spent the rest of the night and half the following morning having wonderfully wild and abandoned sex and after I saw her off in a hover cab, I showered and went for a walk. I ate lunch in a small cafe where an old friend was still the head chef and spent a happy hour and a half catching up with him. As I was leaving the cafe I felt someone bump into me and turned to see who it was, a ready apology for my lack of attention waiting upon my lips. The man turned and looked at me and the familiar dark spot fluttered within my heart. Our eyes locked for a moment, neither of us knowing what to say and both of us realising the weight of grief that would forever prevent any friendship between us.

"Hello Mr Gilden," I offered. "It's been a long time. How are you these days?"

"Sam. We're umm. Well, life goes on I guess. You look good, you haven't changed. It must be, what, over three years at least?"

"Yeah," I nodded. "I keep busy with work."

"Have you umm, been to visit?" he asked suddenly.

"No," I admitted guiltily. "I can't. I just can't."

"We do," he replied, "every week. We don't want to forget. We don't want her to think we don't love her."

"I'll never forget," I snapped back, "not ever. And she knows how I feel. Wherever she is, she'll know."

"Enjoy your life Sam," he replied as he turned and walked away. "How I wish she could too."

Damn that man. Why does he always manage to upset me whenever we meet? More importantly, why do I let him? I walked along the street, a rapidly growing knot of anger and guilt building in my gut. I strode along the city streets, teeth clenched, fists balled and the pain in my gut that ruined my mood. How the hell could he think I do not care? Surely he has not forgotten it was I that found her. Of all the people I had to bump into, it had to be Mr Gilden didn't it. The one person who can ruin a good mood just by being there and I have to run into him. Just my luck. At that

moment, I was suddenly eager to get on with this new job and get away for a while to Deligon where I could concentrate on the job at hand and forget Sigma, forget Mr Gildea and his accusations, forget her. No, I couldn't ever forget her but at least being far away might ease the pain of the memories I tried so hard to put away but never quite managed to; the awful scene that met my eyes that I yearned to forget but couldn't. This was another big reason I did not intend to allow Ambella Vaylo to fall for me. I could not allow myself to get involved in an emotional commitment to someone as innocent as Ambella, with her whole life ahead of her. I could not put her at risk. I could not lose another love.

[back to top](#)

CHAPTER TWO

I got the call from Tinnias that my paperwork was ready and promised I would call in the next day for a final briefing on the job before I was to set off. This meant I had one last free evening to do what I liked with and I decided to make the most of it, within reason. He warned me not to drink any alcohol as I would be making the journey to Deligon in cryo sleep and any alcohol in my system could put me at risk, so although my last night on Sigma was to be a dry one, it wasn't going to be totally devoid of fun.

I put on the same black shirt and semi smart pants I wore to dinner at the Vaylo home, checked out my hair in the mirror and left my apartment for the short walk to the home of my cleaning woman. She lived with her husband a half mile from my apartment block, in a small house with its own tiny garden at the rear. The weather was good and despite knowing I was leaving the next day, I was relaxed, my encounter with Mr Gildea now having faded into the background. No matter how long I spend away from Sigma, I love my home world and would not want to live anywhere else. I found the house and smiled as I knocked. A rather timid looking man opened the door.

"Yes?" he asked with a cautious smile.

"Oh hi," I replied. "You must be Raylen Cambly, Sondray's husband?"

"I am," he nodded.

"My name's Sinclair. She cleans for me."

"Ahh, yes," he replied and opened the door a little wider. "The law enforcement guy."

"That's me. Is she in?"

"Yes, she's in the kitchen. Come on in." He led the way through the small house to a kitchen that smelled wonderful. Sondray turned and smiled when she saw me.

"Hi Sam. What can I do for you? I thought you were leaving tomorrow."

"I am, but I just wanted to give you this," I said as I handed over a large box of her favourite indulgent delicacy. "To say thank you for looking after me so well."

"Oh my word," she exclaimed as she took the box. "Dried Lingmars. My favourite treat. Thank you so much." She gave me a peck on the cheek and offered me a drink.

"I'd love one, thank you but it'll have to be alcohol free I'm afraid. I've got cryo sleep tomorrow and I don't want to be ill."

"Where are you off to this time Mr Sinclair?" Raylen asked.

"Deligon 2," I replied. "It might turn out to be a long visit too, so I may not be back for a while. I'll call when I'm on my way home again."

"Are you allowed to tell us what you'll be doing?"

"I'm afraid not," I shook my head. "It's undercover this time. A little different from my usual chase, catch and deliver jobs. Sorry."

"Oh don't apologise," Raylen smiled. "We understand completely."

"And I'll air your apartment out every couple of weeks," Sondray said, "just as always. You just call me and let me know when you're due home and I'll get your supplies in as usual."

"Raylen," I said. "You're the luckiest man alive to have such a wonderful wife. I hope I find one as caring one day."

"Oh stop," Sondray blushed.

I left the Cambly home and strolled towards the centre of the city. Alimenika boasts a thriving nightlife, due in large part to Sigma's cosmopolitan inhabitants. Due to it being a big centre for trade