

PHIL ROBERTS

CAPITAL:

Abbey's Saga

A COURSE FOR WAR

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BEFORE THE CALM BREAKS

CHAPTER I

THE TOP SIXTEEN STUDENTS OF RETROS ACADEMY that had tested highest in scholastic studies, won the most physical education competitions, and excelled all their classmates in Keeper exams sat together in one of the small amphitheaters located at the edge of the academy's campus grounds. Of the one hundred seats in the room, only those sixteen students that achieved Selection had been granted access as the academy's leading student representatives on the Junior Environmental Awareness Course.

All chairs in the auditorium faced a slightly raised stage at the head of the room, allowing each of those in the audience a clear view. Course Instructors Tam and Mari were on the stage before the sixteen students. Both wore their Ranger Environment Suits, recognizable by their dark-green armored bodies with red shoulder stripes. Even to the casual eye, these had more functionality than the minimalist Environment Suits the students would wear during the upcoming competition.

Tam, like all Rangers, was in excellent physical condition. He was also tall for a man of the Delgh race, the Delgh being short by average Phoe Federation standards. His features were sharp like those of the Sep'Talist race, and at first glance he could be mistaken for the fair skinned Sep'Talist, but on closer examination his thick black hair and heavy eyebrows revealed the truth of his lineage.

The Delgh race had the thickest eyebrows of any in the Federation. Their skin tones ranged from a light tan, similar to the people in the Casis race, to dark brown that could even surpass the dark skin tones of those from the Talist race.

Tam held up a slug rifle and displayed it to the students. "As a reminder, both Instructor Mari and I will have slug rifles and pistols during the Environmental Awareness Course." Tam nodded in Mari's direction,

she inclined her head indicating her agreement. "Hopefully we won't need to use them during the length of the Course. For every round fired, even if it is to save a life, an hour is added to the Retros Academy's time. And as you all also know, the Course is won by completing all the challenges as quickly, efficiently and safely as possible."

Mari pushed a lock of thick black hair from her face as she moved next to Tam. It was clear that Mari was of mixed ancestry, as she was tall as Tam. It was rare to find a Casis woman of Mari's height, but that was only one indication among a few. Mari had the normal light tan of the Casis race, but it was her deep blue eyes behind the natural slant of her eyelids, common among all Casis, that fully gave her mixed parentage away as all full blooded Casis had brown eyes.

Mari took a moment to look around the auditorium at the seated students before speaking. "Tam and I have been Course Instructors on the Environmental Awareness course before; this is our third Selection." She paused to let what she said settle over the room. "Retros Academy has a staff of two hundred Keeper Instructors for the seventy-five thousand students at this institution. Tam and I are as proud as you students to have been chosen as Course Instructors for the third time in a row."

"Everyone in this room knows that as your Course Instructors, our required tasks are to monitor and report on each student's personal conduct, interaction dynamics within the group, and how well you care for the land over which we will travel."

A voice rang out from the seated students, interrupting Mari's speech. "There is no worry about how we will care for the land. Almost everyone on the team is from planet Nearous and knows how to properly care for what's ours, unlike those backward Hevin herders from Amappu Academy on planet Lonsdale!"

Tam scanned the sixteen students and pointed at a light brown haired Sep'Talist boy sitting among the sixteen students in the audience. "Geric, Amappu Academy in the Gianwhal star system is one of the top academies in the Phoer Federation. Are you saying the education there is inferior to the one you're receiving here at Retros? Your father, Cedric Formet, is one of the leading politicians on the Grand Council for planet Nearous. Perhaps I should ask him to remove you from this year's course, if you feel over qualified to compete against the students from Amappu?"

Geric blanched at Tam's open threat. He knew that every student in the room had excelled in all of their chosen fields of study to gain their

selection to the Environmental Awareness course. The students that earned their way onto the Course received automatic advancement to Senior education and set themselves up for opportunities throughout the Phoer Federation. The thought of being removed from the Course was enough for him to hang his head. "No, Course Instructor."

Abey lifted her hand into the air, instantly attracting both instructors' attention.

"Yes Abey? What is your question?" Tam asked while turning to look at her, but clearly keeping one eye on Geric.

Abey stood from her seat and looked directly at the two instructors. It was clear that she shared a similar parentage as Course Instructor Mari, as she too appeared to be mixed between Sep'Talist and Casis. Her statuesque figure perfectly filled out her Academy uniform consisting of a dark blue blazer and skirt with green cuffs and accents. Her black hair, perfectly contrasted her yellowish-brown skin and clear green eyes. "Instructors Tam and Mari, we leave for the Environmental Course before dawn. Why didn't we receive weapons training? That is always mandatory for the Dalas Plains Wildlife Survival portion of the course."

Tam and Mari briefly looked at one another, but then Tam turned his attention back to Abey, followed by the rest of the room as he spoke.

"The Dalas Plains Wildlife Survival portion of the course has been eliminated this cycle."

The students erupted in confused anger at the announcement.

"That's not fair!"

"Wildlife Survival has been on the course for more than one hundred cycles!"

"How am I going to apply for Lead Warder without the Environmental Awareness Course Tracking and Hunting Certification?! The Course certificate is the best in the entire Federation!"

Mari held her hands up to silence the group. After a few moments the students calmed down to hear what she had to say.

"The Environmental Awareness Course Committee determined that Dalas Plains weapon certification was too complicated for this cycle's Course. It was decided to split the Course in two. All students that qualified for the Environmental Awareness Course have automatically qualified for the Dalas Plains Survival Course to be held next annual cycle. No matter where your team places this year, everyone will be invited back for the stand-alone Survival Weapons Course next cycle."

The students' excited chatter filled the auditorium. The thought of not having to qualify for a separate event in such a short span of time was almost more than any of them could have imagined.

Tam held his hands up to quiet them once more. "Before anyone asks, the Survival Weapons Course is scheduled to run for twenty day cycles."

The students were pleasantly shocked by this news. Tam and Mari both smiled at the students' reactions. Mari raised a hand and projected her voice to be heard over the excited chatter.

"Everyone, double check your travel kits. You know the departure time. Once we arrive at the Course site you will have to make do with what you've packed, or you will be forced to forage from the land."

Both Tam and Mari smiled broadly while they watched the excited students file out of the amphitheater.

Abey, Temp, and Regina walked away from the amphitheater along a tree lined path at the edge of the Retros campus. It was clear to see that the Academy was a small city, situated at one edge of the massive seventy square mark city of the Phoer Federations Government Seat City.

Abey bounced a Capital Stand Elimination ball with each step she took. She placed a spin on the ball, causing it to strike the ground and leap back into the downturned palm of her hand.

The sight of Government Seat City across from the grassy field that bordered Retros Academy always brought Abey a sense of calm. Seeing the distant Mass-Lift transports flying in predetermined paths around the tall buildings reminded her of a colony of flying insects moving in and around an enormous hive.

The Spire dominated the city's landscape by dwarfing all surrounding structures, making them seem as if they were little more than grass growing at the base of an enormous tree.

The Spire stood well over three marks into the sky, looking more like the trunk of a massive blue and silver tree than the building that housed all of the Federations Government institutions. Far off to the right of the Spire, very near the distant shoreline of the Laten inland sea, stood the Environmental Sciences Division building. The building was only one full mark high, but it was easy to spot as all of the other buildings around the sea were only allowed to stand eight floors high.

A quiet but audible tone from one of Regina's pockets caused her to stop. "Oh my, I almost forgot my appointment with the Academy's Physio chairman," Regina was of mixed blood, her father from the dark Talist

and her mother the yellow tanned Casis. She had the dark tanned yellow tinged skin and dark brown eyes from both of her parents. She waved at Abey and Tempi as she turned around and ran back toward the center of the Retros Academy campus.

Tempi, with her braided golden hair and sparkling blue eyes walked next to Abey, happily biting into the juicy flesh of the Red Chur fruit she held. "I can't believe it, Abey! I barely got accepted onto this cycle's Course, and now I get a longer Weapon Survival Course next annual cycle!" She drooled out around the piece of fruit she had bitten off, while wiping the fruit juice from her lips with the back of her jacket sleeve.

Between bounces of her ball, Abey reached out and pinched Tempi's arm, causing her to drop her snack. Before the Chur fruit had time to hit the ground, Abey's ball struck the pavement and leapt back into her hand.

Tempi held the place on her arm that had been pinched, looking angrily at Abey. "Ouch! What was that for?"

Abey looked at Tempi's Chur fruit on the ground while spinning her backpack around her shoulder and opening an outer pouch.

"It's not a dream. We'll be on the Course two annual cycles in a row!" Abey said while she extracted another Red Chur fruit from her backpack. "You don't have to eat dirt...yet. Sorry about that," she said with a smile, offering her own fruit to Tempi.

Tempi reluctantly smiled while accepting the fruit from Abey. "I'm glad we're both going. If you hadn't helped me with my studies I wouldn't be here," she said while retrieving her fallen fruit and discarding it in a nearby trash receptacle.

"Well you shouldn't be, Tempi! Everyone knows it," said a voice from behind the two girls, causing them both to turn in unison.

Sari, a light brown haired Sep'Talist girl with green eyes, nearly the same height as Abey, walked toward the pair with her friends Bekka and Ines, both of them golden haired Sep'Talist girls, following close behind. As the three girls reached Abey and Tempi, Sari struck a pose as if daring Abey or Tempi to dispute her words.

"Sari, you know that's not true. Tempi worked just as hard as any of us," Abey said to the golden haired Sep'Talist girl standing before her.

Sari folded her arms over her chest and gave Abey a dismissive grin. "Easy to say when you tutored her all last annual cycle. Did you think no one knew?"

Abey clenched her Capital Stand Elimination ball as she stared at Sari. "There are no rules against that. You're just upset that Bekka and Ines didn't make the cut."

Sari's companions both turned their faces as if looking for some lost item in the grass or trees surrounding them all at Abey's barb.

Sari took a step towards Abey while speaking, the threat in her voice clear. "Your interference—"

Another voice rang out, cutting off Sari's next words. "Abey! Hey, Abey!"

Sari stopped as the group of girls turned toward the sound of the excited voice.

Across the wide, well-manicured lawn, Carlo, a tall powerfully built brown haired Sep'Talist boy and his slightly shorter Delgh best friend Grego ran from the direction of the auditorium they had all just left. Carlo waved at Abey as he recognized that he had caught her attention.

Carlo and Grego came to a stop before Abey. Both boys had unbuttoned the jackets of their school uniforms exposing their white undershirts. Neither Carlo nor Grego noticed the tension between the girls, or the fact that several of the girls were openly admiring the way their undershirts conformed to the toned muscles beneath the cloth.

"Abey, I've been meaning to congratulate you on your victory in the Capital Stand competition last tournament!" Carlo said, barely out of breath after his run.

Abey blushed slightly at Carlo's compliment. "You played well also, Carlo. It was a shame about your shoulder though," she said in a rush.

Carlo smiled while rotating his left arm. "I wasn't paying attention. That curve Elimination Ball from Epsilou Academy's player seven crushed the bones in my shoulder."

Abey winced at Carlo's words.

Carlo noticed Abey's look and wiggled his shoulder a bit more. "Don't worry! The physio's took a few day-cycles to knit me up and now I'm good as new!" he said while rotating his shoulder a few more times to demonstrate that he had fully recovered.

Abey quickly looked away then directly back into Carlo's eyes. "I wasn't worried. I knew you'd be fine."

Carlo appeared emboldened by the look Abey had given him and smiled at her. "I thought I was going to win the Solo Player Academy tournament this season. I'm not surprised you took the grand prize."

Abey openly smiled at Carlo. The camaraderie of sport seemed to form a stronger bond between the two. "I wouldn't count you out for next season, Carlo."

Sari cleared her throat to remind Abey and Carlo that she was still there. "I wouldn't count any one of us out! I *did* come in fifth place this season."

Carlo didn't turn to acknowledge Sari as he spoke, his full attention exclusively reserved for Abey. "That's true, Sari. You did great."

Sari pouted openly at being virtually ignored by Carlo.

Carlo's face settled as he looked at Abey. "No, I mean it. After that Epsilou Academy player took my shoulder out with her throw, I knew it was all up to you. You didn't let Retros Academy down! Your final throw that curved around the goal side back pillar was galactic class! You took her off her feet!" Carlo imitated the motion of being hit by a projectile as he smiled and stared in awe at Abey.

"It was almost like watching Orim play again!" Carlo said with a look of admiration in his eyes.

Abey blushed even deeper at the comparison between her and her older brother Orim. "He taught me that throw," she said while looking away from Carlo's piercing green eyes.

Carlo grinned at Abey as he continued. "You and your older brother have to be two of the best Capital Stand players in the Cormak spiral arm!"

"I wouldn't go that far," Abey said with a smile at Carlo.

Carlo took a step toward Abey. "I'm glad we both made it to this cycle's Environmental Awareness Course."

Grego snorted derisively at Carlo's words. "I made it as well. Thanks for noticing."

Carlo winked at Grego. "I noticed, Grego. I'm glad you, Abey, Sari, and I all made it. I think we're the best in the academy. Oh, you too Temp!"

Sari stepped forward at Carlo's words. "I think so too, Carlo!"

Carlo nodded in agreement with Sari's words, without turning to look at her. Abey quickly looked into Sari's eyes and imperceptibly sneered at her open attempt at sucking up to Carlo.

Sari noticed Abey's look, causing her to frown at Abey, behind Carlo and Grego's back.

Carlo seemed to come to a quick decision and spoke in a rush. "Would you like to come with Grego and I for sausages and Fiz Wine, Abey?"

The entire group was momentarily stunned at Carlo's question. Abey's

eyes went slightly wide the moment she realized that Carlo had just asked her to go out with him.

"I – I – I've got something to do today, before my final course preparations tonight, I can't go," Abey stammered out to Carlo once her breath returned.

Carlo appeared disappointed by the answer yet pleased with himself for having gathered the courage to ask her out. "Hey, it's not a problem. All of us have packing and final checks before morning. I just thought it would be fun."

Abey gently smiled at Carlo. "I promised my sister and brother I would spend today working on their Capital Stand form before I leave tomorrow. They have a game in a few day-cycles, and it's my last chance to practice with them."

Carlo grinned at the mental image of Abey working out with her younger siblings on Capital Stand techniques. "That's great! Their older brother and sister are exceptional players, so I bet the twins are already amazing."

"They're coming along," Abey said while looking away wistfully.

Carlo continued smiling at Abey as he reached into his pocket and removed a small thin white card. He unfolded the card three times, causing it to expand well beyond its original size, and touched a corner causing the flimsy object to become a rigid Data Port.

Carlo tapped at the surface of the device, and a humming sound caused the small group to look up and see a personal flying Mass-Lift transport craft zip into view over their heads. It quickly descended onto an open patch of grass just off the walkway, away from the small group. Other Retros students in the area only gave casual notice to the craft that had just settled on the ground.

"You ready to go eat, Grego?" Carlo asked his friend pleasantly.

"Do you mind if I come with you?"

The request caused Carlo to turn and look into the innocent smiling face of Sari.

"Sausages and Fiz wine sound really good. You don't mind, do you?" Sari batted her eyelashes a few times, causing Carlo to turn slightly red, and clearly forget the next words that had been on his mind.

Grego smiled as he wrapped an arm around Carlo's shoulder. "It's no trouble! Right, Carlo?"

Carlo seemed caught off guard by Sari's request and Grego's acceptance of it. "Well, uh..." were the only words he was able to utter.

Sari quickly moved and placed her arm inside Carlo's, opposite Grego, and began guiding him away from Abey towards the transport craft. "That's great! Bekka, Ines, let's go!"

Bekka and Ines only smiled while looking at Abey. The two quickly followed Sari, who had finished guiding Carlo to his vehicle.

Abey watched from the distance as Sari looked up at Carlo and smiled sweetly at him. "Do you mind if we eat near the Government building's district? Bekka, Ines and I can walk to our fathers' offices in the Spire from that area when we're done."

Carlo looked over his shoulder at Abey, not fully understanding what had happened or how to handle the immediate situation.

"Sure, sure, that's fine. There are plenty of good restaurants there," he said while looking back at Abey once more in confusion. "See you tomorrow, Abey?"

Grego smiled as he opened the craft's back door for Bekka and Ines to enter. "Right this way."

Abey watched as both girls climbed into the rear section of the vehicle. Grego flashed an odd smile that Abey could not interpret as he began closing the door. "This is going to be fun!"

Carlo and Sari climbed into the front of the craft and closed the doors. Abey could see Carlo through the clear canopy as he pressed a few commands into the craft's Data Port.

As the Mass-Lift engines engaged, the craft rose from the grass. Sari turned and looked down at Abey with a grin of triumph. The craft silently turned in midair and sped off toward the tall Spire in the distance.

Abey and Tempa watched Carlo's craft until it merged with the rest of the air traffic and disappeared into the flowing jumble of vehicles.

CHAPTER 2

WATCHING THE BUSY AIR TRAFFIC IN THE DISTANCE brought a strange feeling to Abey's mind. She had struggled with the unknown sensation for the entire annual cycle. The closer to the start of the Course, the stronger it became.

Her best attempt to define the feeling formed into the thought "Life will never be the same again." Her fellow students at the Academy had begun to give her deference or simply watched her in an awe even more unfamiliar than the thoughts in her head.

She didn't feel any different, but her selection onto the Course had unquestioningly changed her status in the world around her. She glanced at Tempi and realized by the distant look on her best friend's face, while she continued watching the bustling air traffic, that she was having similar thoughts.

Finally, both girls turned and continued walking along the pathway in silence. Abey put her Capital Stand Elimination ball into a pouch in her backpack, for some reason she had lost interest in playing with the sphere. Their pathway joined another that was filled with academy students leaving the campus for the day, all walking toward the exit closest to the outskirts of the massive metropolis.

As the two neared the rows of Peddle Velocity Cycle stands, Tempi finished her Red Chur fruit and tossed the core into a trash receptacle. "He was asking you out, you know?"

Abey looked away from Tempi in feigned ignorance. "What are you talking about?"

Abey spotted her Peddle Velocity Cycle parked in a nearby stand and made her way through the crowd of students toward it.

"Abey, you are the smartest person I know...and also the dumbest," Tempi said with a condescending tone.

Abey turned and looked at Tempi in shock. "Excuse me?"

"Come on! Carlo flatters you with your Capital Stand play, and then asks you out for Fiz Wine and sausages? How dumb can you be?" Tempi's tone of voice made it clear that she was upset.

Abey unlatched her Peddle Velocity Cycle from its stand and activated its transformation. The Peddle Velocity Cycle began to extend from a single wheel with seat stand, into a dual-wheeled cycle.

Once the transformation was complete, Abey began pushing it through the crowd toward the nearby gate.

"I told my brother and sister we were going to practice Capital Stand throws today. I won't let them down." Abey said flatly, hoping that would end the conversation.

"So you turned down Carlo instead?" Tempi's question held a stinging tone that caused several students around them to turn and look at the two girls in confusion.

Abey's face clouded for a moment. "I didn't turn him down. I made a promise."

Tempi looked towards the sky while raising her hands in disbelief. "The most popular girl at the academy won't accept a date from the boy every girl at Retros would die to be with! What are you doing?"

Abey guided her Peddle Velocity Cycle through a thick patch of students and responded without looking at her friend. "You could have gone with them, Tempi."

Tempi's face contorted as if Abey had said something distasteful. "Do you think I would go anywhere with Grego? No way! And then have the chance to play back-up for that spoiled she beast, Sari?" Tempi placed her hand on Abey's Pedal Velocity Cycle, causing her to stop and forcing students attempting to leave the area to divert around the pair. "Sari is an opportunist. She saw the opening you left her, and she took it. That's why she's out with Carlo now, and you're not!"

Abey looked sharply at Tempi. "That's not-!"

Tempi returned Abey's look with a cold stare. "Yes, it is. Sari just took Carlo from you. Would you leave an opponent on their feet in Capital Stand if you had a clear elimination throw that would take them out of the match?"

Abey turned her head away from Tempi in denial. "You don't know what you're talking about, Tempi." She said while pushing her cycle through the crowd once more.

Abey and Tempí passed through the large exit gate of the academy. Abey brought her Peddle Velocity Cycle to a sudden halt. "Tempí, I don't want to talk about this. Carlo and I are just friends. He understands that I've got—"

Tempí looked directly into Abey's eyes as she interrupted her. "You've got nothing else to do, and you let Sari snatch him from underneath you. You better wake up or you're going to lose out to that Hevin drop."

Before Abey could respond she heard her name being called out through the crowd of academy students. "Abey! Hey, Abey! Over here!"

Both Abey and Tempí turned and scanned through the throng of students. Suddenly two young children with wavy brown hair were spotted pushing smaller versions of Abey's Peddle Velocity Cycle through the sea of bodies. Both children smiled and waved at the two young women.

Abey raised her arm and returned the wave to her younger brother and sister. Abey and Tempí pushed through the crowd to reach Jan and Silai. The twelve-annual-cycle-old twins held tightly onto their Peddle Velocity Cycles while the older Retros academy students streamed around them.

Abey could tell that they had peddled from the Apama Junior Academy to Retros. The fifteen-mark ride had slightly winded the twins, but the smiles on their faces told her that they had enjoyed the trip. The sparkling green eyes of the children looked up at their older sister in joy at having found her, despite the mass of bodies moving around them.

It was clear to the casual observer that Abey and the twins were related, though Abey's features expressed more of her mother's Casis heritage than theirs. The slight slant of the twins' eyelids revealed that side of their lineage. The twins' appearance favored their fathers Sep'Talist ancestry more than Abey or her older brother Orim and their sharp features lacked the normal, Casis light-yellowish tan in further contrast with their older siblings.

Tempí was first to greet them. "Hey, Chirpers!"

Silai frowned up at Tempí as she responded. "Hi, Tempí."

The flat disinterest in Silai's voice was impossible for Tempí to miss.

Jan did not acknowledge Tempí as his focus remained on Abey. "You ready to go?"

Abey nodded and smiled at her siblings. She then turned and gave Tempí a brief hug.

"Are the three of you riding the Student Transit Service?" Tempí asked while embracing her friend.

Abey released Tempi while looking toward the dozens of stationary Transit Service Mass-Lift carriages parked on the ground in the nearby distance.

"No. We're riding to the train depot outside of the Warehouse District."

Tempi looked at the three Peddle Velocity Cycles, and then nodded with a slight smile of understanding creasing her mouth. "Nothing's changed since we were students at Apama Junior Academy, when you used to race away to meet Orim here at Retros Academy. You sure this is worth missing Fiz Wine and sausages?" Tempi asked while motioning her hands toward the siblings Peddle Velocity Cycles and the grinning faces of the Abey's younger siblings.

Abey nodded at Tempi for finally understanding that she didn't turn down Carlo frivolously. "We've had this planned more than thirty day-cycles."

Tempi gave Abey a knowing nod in return, then looked down and ruffled Jan's hair, causing him to turn his head away from her in annoyance. "I'll take the student Transit Service to my apartment before I head home. My parents want me to spend the night with them. The three of you have a fun ride!"

Before Abey could say another word to her friend, Tempi turned and ran into the crowd of students all moving toward the Transit Service Mass-Lift carriages that would take them to various destinations around the Government Seat city.

Abey and her siblings watched a few carriages lift off from the ground and fly into the clear blue sky for a moment.

"You ready to ride?" Both twins turned and smiled at her, as they had been ready to be on their way, since the moment they had arrived.

"Sure, let's go!" The twins answered in unison.

The three siblings pushed their Peddle Velocity Cycles through the thinning patches of academy students to reach the road just outside of the Academy grounds.

Dozens of Retros students riding Peddle Velocity Cycles surrounded the three as they began riding along the road leading from the campus to the main street and the tree lined edge of Government Seat city.

At the main street, the three siblings waited for a cluster of wheeled delivery vehicles to pass before crossing the road walking the cycles. Once on the opposite side, all three again boarded their Peddle Velocity Cycles

and continued riding along the tree lined curving road that carried them away from Retros Academy.

The clear blue sky and slight breeze was perfect for riding. All three of them peddled their cycles as they sped along the well-maintained road. The trees lining the roadway provided sporadic shade from the star Nearous, hanging in the sky overhead.

Other students from Retros Academy zipped past in velocity mode, trying to get to their destinations as quickly as possible.

The tall, five-floor-high buildings of the Processing District were the first buildings the siblings passed. The wide loading docks at the face of the monstrous buildings had men and women moving large palates of goods onto flatbed transports, while others using hand signals guided large Mass-Lift transports to land in unused spaces.

Abey smiled at the sights and vehicles around her. Her thoughts reflected on four annual cycles past, when it had been her and Orim riding the same path instead of her and the twins. The joy she once felt while waiting at the Student Transportation Terminal for her older brother, after having ridden the fifteen marks from Apama Junior Academy, would never be felt again.

She watched as Silai and Jan peddled their cycles in front of her, weaving between the older Retros Academy students. Some occasionally yelled at them for their dangerous behavior. The thought that this was their tradition, her tradition, brought another smile to her face. Knowing that her hard work had paid off and gotten her into the select group of sixteen students on this cycle's Environmental Awareness Course, was beyond her wildest dreams.

Abey's father had put aside his Government Seat Select Councilman duties and tutored her for hours on the subjects of Politics and Trade. Her mother shut down her office at the Phoer Federation Planetary Environmental Sciences Division to spend more time with her during the Nearous summer on her more difficult science subjects. It wasn't that she needed more assistance than Orim, it was that he needed almost none. Everything seemed to come easily to her older brother, and that he was excelling with the Rangers only gave her more pride in his accomplishments.

Abey knew that she, Orim, and their parents would give their all for Silai and Jan when the time came for them to work toward earning selection to the Course, but this moment was hers. In the morning, she

would be on the induction grounds of the Course. Thoughts of being on the Environmental Awareness Course starting line were almost more than she could bear.

The last of the Retros students, riding near the three siblings, turned down a tree lined road into a housing district used predominantly by Senior Retros students, most of them twenty cycles or older.

The twins chatted with one another while they sped before Abey. Abey spotted their left turn coming up and quickly checked for oncoming ground vehicle traffic. She saw it was safe for them to turn and effortlessly peddled past the twins, leading them across the road to join a smaller street that would take them to the train terminal.

It was only a few warehouses distant from their turn when Abey saw the bridge over the road that the train used to reach the elevated terminal platform.

The three dismounted, collapsed their Peddle Velocity Cycles into the single wheel configuration, and carried their cycles up the stairs to the boarding platform overlooking the Warehouse Zone.

A small crowd of passengers waited on the platform as the train quickly arrived into the terminal. The Mass-Lift drives under each carriage operated in unison and smoothly decelerated the carriages, while lowering the series of cars gently to the magnetic guide path the train used to stay on its designated course.

The siblings pushed through the small crowd toward the entrance of one of the train's carriages, making sure not to bump their cycles into the other passengers. A Safety Conductor monitoring the sparse crowd on the platform spotted the siblings and nodded in their direction. Jan pleasantly waved back in acknowledgement. "Hi, Mr. Nickls!"

"Good day to you, Jan." Mr. Nickls said as he joined the three children. His uniform consisted of white pants, a red jacket and, a black cap, all neatly kept, as usual. "The three of you made it just in time. We'll be closing the doors and flying out in a few moments."

Mr. Nickls tipped his cap toward Abey, with a beaming smile upon his face. "Abey, I can't tell you how proud everyone here at the station is of you. We know you'll represent our district well at the Environmental Awareness Course."

Abey slightly blushed at his well wishes. "I'll do my best, Mr. Nickls."

"You're just like Orim. He said the same thing two Course cycles before, and look at how well he did. His team came in first place for Retros

Academy. Just give it your all, Abey!” Mr. Nickls said happily. “Well, you three hop on board, the train’s about to lift off.”

With one final tip of his cap toward Abey, Mr. Nickls returned to his Safety Conductor duties. He scanned both directions of the train platform for stray people or items. He noted that the three siblings had boarded their carriage and the door was closed firmly behind them. From his pocket he removed his Data Port and touched one corner causing the device to become rigid. He tapped on the activated device to inform the pilot the platform was clear and that the train could leave.

A warning horn blast indicated that the train was in operation mode. The platform workers took a few steps back as a low hum filled the boarding platform area emitted from the synchronized Mass-Lift drives underneath the body of the train’s carriages. The drives caused the train to lift above the magnetized guide path beneath it. A bit of dust and debris floated in the air from the electrical discharge coming from the drives before the train began moving forward along its guide path. After a moment the train quickly accelerated out of the station, pressing on toward its next destination.

CHAPTER 3

INSIDE THE CARRIAGE, ABEY, SILAI, AND JAN HAD taken their seats, settling back for the long ride home. From her window seat opposite the twins, Abey could quietly watch the wooded landscape rushing by in a blur.

Jan raised the personal user tray attached to the side of his seat. He placed his white Data Port atop the tray and activated the device, causing it to become rigid and its surface black displaying his personal icons indicating activation. After a few swipes of his finger over the flat screen, it went blank and began displaying its user interface as a projection positioned just above the now blank surface.

Silai, from her comfortable seat next to Jan, rudely pushed a finger into the projected interface. Without asking permission she tapped an area that caused a motion Stream to begin playing.

"I was going to play it, Sil!" Jan exclaimed as he canceled Silai's command and attempted to bring up a different projection.

"I don't want to watch you dissect your class work for the entire ride. Bring up the highlights from the Capital Stand tournament!" Silai said to Jan with a pout.

Jan looked at Silai in exasperation. "Alright! Just the highlights. The ride's not long enough for a full match."

Silai smiled triumphantly. "I know that."

Jan touched at a few areas on the display causing the projection to be replaced by a miniature Capital Stand court that projected over the area of the entire table surface, allowing both siblings to watch in comfort.

The court was made up of two sides with three rows of pillars separated by a white line that split the court in two. One side blinked red and the other green.

Silai impulsively tapped at the green color, causing Jan to give her an annoyed look. "It's going to display both teams. Can't you wait a moment?"

"I was studying last night so I couldn't follow the tournament."

"So was I! I would like to know the players on *both* sides!" Jan exclaimed in exasperation.

Silai tapped at the projection once more. Jan attempted to bat her hand away, but she was too fast.

The space over Jan's Data Port was suddenly filled with a lizard like face with feathers on its head instead of hair. The slight snout of the lizard face imperceptibly parted and a forked tongue quickly extended to sample the air.

Jan's face took on a look of distaste at the creature projected over the surface of the table. "Gamphose! I can't stand that guy!"

Silai smiled as she looked at the lizard head floating above the table. "He has to be one of the greatest professional Capital Stand players in the spiral arm."

Jan appeared disgusted by Silai's adoration. "He's a dirty cheater," Jan said to his sister with a sneer.

Silai rolled her eyes in disbelief at what her brother had said. "He's reptoid, so his sinew replaces quite a few of our bones. He has to compensate with his full body weight to approximate our throws. Does that make him a cheater?"

The projection then switched to a wide view showing two teams with five players on either side of the court. The players began throwing tiny plasma balls at sensors mounted at the top and bottom of the pillars causing them to vanish and exposing the players to elimination throws from both sides.

Players from both the red and green teams were quickly eliminated. Once struck, the players either exited the court by their own power or were quickly carried off by medical attendants. It was clear that the motion Stream had been edited to only show the most exciting plays.

Gamphose was the last active member of the green team, as all his teammates had been eliminated from play. On the opposite side of the court he faced three players from the red team that moved through the five pillars left on their side. They watched Gamphose for an opening to eliminate him and win the game. On Gamphose' side of the court, only three pillars remained for him to use as cover and his next move was a great surprise to the crowd.

Gamphose calmly walked away from the pillars providing him defensive cover and stopped near the white line that split the court in half. His move was so unexpected that the members of the red team momentarily halted their attack. The twins held their collective breaths waiting for the inevitable Elimination strikes on Gamphose' body that would end the match.

Suddenly Gamphose twisted his body so rapidly that he appeared to become a blur of motion. He was so smooth that Abey was forced to watch the Stream with her siblings. She realized that Gamphose had rapidly charged his Shaperat gloves and thrown two plasma balls that struck the opponents' pillar sensors, causing two of them to vanish from the court.

The red team retaliated with each member throwing an Elimination ball at Gamphose. Gamphose did not seek the shelter of his pillars, but instead dropped to the ground on his back while simultaneously catching two of the three balls passing where his torso had been just a moment before.

Abey watched as he rose and spun his body, launching an elimination ball with each rotation. His move had been so unexpected and sudden that the opposing team was caught off guard. He landed both elimination strikes, knocking the red players off their feet and launching them a good distance backward with the force of the blows.

Before Gamphose could settle his feet properly, the last red player launched a volley of two Elimination balls at the reptoid. Gamphose leapt horizontally causing the balls to fly over and below his airborne body. He landed on one knee with his side to the red player. Using his momentum, he spun on the knee and threw his last Elimination ball, the tips of his clawed hand nearly reaching the white line that separated the opposing sides and automatic elimination if one of his clawed fingers had crossed the barrier.

Gamphose's throw hit his opponent in the chest causing him to flip head over heels and land unconscious, face first.

The three-dimensional crowd erupted in exaltation at the spectacle. Jan stood from his seat pumping his fist in the air.

"Unbelievable! I've never seen that move before!"

"I told you so, Jan! He's one of the best players in the league!"

Jan retook his seat and gave Silai a sideways glance. "Okay, he didn't cheat...that time."

Silai snorted at Jan and looked away from him. "That time. Just admit that he's one of the best in the league."

“He’s good. Really good!” Jan said quietly between his teeth.

Silai laughed at Jan’s admission, knowing that was all she would get from him.

The highlights from the Capital Stand matches continued running on the projected display before the children. As Jan and Silai continued to argue over Gamphose’s veracity as a Stand player, Abey again became lost in her own thoughts, turning her head once more to watch the landscape fly past her window.

Suddenly Abey recognized that Silai and Jan had gone silent and were watching her intently. “What, Chirpers?”

Neither of the twins bristled at her calling them Chirpers. Chirpers were the echo birds that inhabited the quadrants of forests near the poles of planet Nearous. Both twins had grown used to the nickname as they usually finished one another’s sentences without realizing they were doing so.

Jan seemed to gather his courage faster and spoke first. “Will you ask mom to take us on her next visit to the deep space telescopic array? We know she has an equipment calibration scheduled soon.”

Abey looked at the twins for a moment then back out of the train’s window at the fields flashing past. “Do it yourselves,” she said dismissively.

Silai bristled at Abey’s tone. “We really want to see it, and other parts of the Federation.”

Abey stopped her contemplation of the sights outside the window and gave the twins her full attention.

“Mom is the head of Environmental Engineering and Star-systems Sciences for the entire Federation, but she’s still your mother. Both of you need to ask her yourselves, if you truly want to go. You don’t need me,” Abey said flatly.

Silai and Jan looked at one another a brief moment. “But Mom listens to you,” Jan openly stated to his older sister.

Abey considered Jan’s words for a moment while watching their faces. “Maybe she does. But I was the same age as the two of you when she agreed to take me, after I asked her myself!” Abey looked pointedly at the twins as she spoke.

Both twins looked away from Abey as they digested her words, knowing inside that she was correct.

The landscape of fields and alternating forests shot past the carriage window as the siblings fell to silence.

The train floated into the Governmental Quarters station. Abey, Silai,

and Jan disembarked, with their still collapsed Pedal Velocity Cycles, and looked down from the elevated train terminal at the nearly empty roads of the surrounding town.

The trio quickly carried their cycles down the stairs of the elevated terminal, where they transformed them and rode away from the station.

The small town called Government Quarters was dominated by two- and three-floored buildings. It was home to two thousand people and served as the residential area for those that worked the land on the Council Estates. The town was built in a circular pattern and allowed those that lived there to establish quadrants for differing types of businesses, shopping, and residential living. Abey always enjoyed riding through the lanes of the town. It reminded her of a different era on planet Nearous...the time of the Founders of the Federation. Thoughts of all the Founders had accomplished always gave her a sense of pride.

Abey and the twins rode through the large town square and past the fountain dedicated to the Nearous pioneers that settled the area after surviving the journey from the Dalas Plains as well as all the hardships they survived in that place.

The narrow roads of the square were clear of other traffic while everyone from the town was at work on one of the many Government Seat Residence Estates where Abey and her family lived.

"Can we switch to Velocity mode for the ride home?" Jan asked while observing for himself that the roads were clear of traffic.

Abey nodded in agreement at his question. The trip from the town to their family estate was twenty-five marks distant and all three of them were eager to get there as soon as possible.

She looked down at the cycle's speed gauge and tapped a single button. The pedal option disappeared, the right handle became a speed regulator, and her pedals folded down into stands to rest her feet upon.

The twins followed suit, and the three silently accelerated off toward the Government Seat Residence Estates.

Since most of the residents of the Government Quarters used Mass-Lift transports to fly to and from work, the trio were able to speed along the empty road unhindered by wheeled traffic.

On either side of the road were sweeping grassy plains with sporadic clumps of trees. Domesticated Hevin, with their large branching horns, grazed in herds in the fields about them.

The star Nearous hung in the sky overhead and Abey knew they

had two hours before night fall. This gave them plenty of time for their Capital Stand practice match. The silent motors on the Pedal Velocity Cycles allowed Abey to listen to the distant waves of the Laten Inland Sea crash on the rocky shore hidden behind the fields of grain they sped past.

After a time, the siblings spotted the tall wall that surrounded the Government Seat Residence Estates rapidly approaching them. To Abey, the sight of the wall was a reminder that she was home. Every student in the Federation learned in Phoer history that the wall was built by the citizens of the Federation in memory of the Federations Founders that had liberated them all from their bondage to the Upmanc Conglomerate, and as a sign that their descendants would always be protected.

"Last one through the gate is a rotten Hevin drop!" Jan yelled over his shoulder while increasing the speed of his cycle.

To Abey's eyes, Silai seemed to know Jan's intention and zipped past him before he could finish his sentence.

Jan was both surprised and annoyed by her so quickly over taking him. He lowered his body to reduce wind resistance and accelerated his cycle to ride in Silai's wake.

Abey laughed aloud as she watched the twins racing toward the Government Seat Residence Estates closed front gate. The gate slid apart long before the trio reached the wide opening, allowing the twins to speed past the two guards posted on either side of gate, neither twin pausing to acknowledge the security guards. As Abey rode through the fully open gate, the guards waved to her and she waved back with a smile.

Trees lined the main road of the Government Seat Residence Estates, providing privacy for the mansions hidden behind them. The marks of land that each mansion occupied allowed for a great deal of space between each residence.

The three raced along the empty main road until they arrived at a smaller, branching road that was the path to their home. Turning onto their property, the trio urged more speed from their cycles and raced over small hills and turns that Abey and the twins knew by heart.

Jan was the first to bring his cycle to a skidding halt. He turned to his twin sister and gave her a triumphant grin. "I always take you on the turn from the main road! Hevin drop!"

"You always cut me off at the turn, it's not fair! And stop calling me that!" Silai replied while all three siblings collapsed their Pedal Velocity

Cycles into single wheeled mode and parked them near the front double doors of their home.

The house was a two-floor mansion and large enough for fifteen people to live in comfortably. It sat in a small glade of trees, surrounded by grassy plains being tended by large-horned domesticated Hevin herds.

Abey paused for a moment to take in the sight of the clinging green vines covering both sides of the massive wooden doors of her home. She knew the sight of the doors would always be a reminder of returning to the place that she belonged.

Abey pushed one of the large doors open and entered her home's foyer. The walls of the foyer were painted a pale yellow with white trim and lined with projections of her ancestors, all of whom had been great leaders among the Founders. These legendary people helped liberate slaves who later became the Phoersian people. Both her father and mother's families directly participated in fighting the Upmanc Conglomerate and securing the three star-systems the Phoer Federation now called home.

A circular skylight over the center of the foyer was made from a multi-faceted crystal, exclusively mined on the small methane-atmosphere planet Poleer of the Clemged star system. It allowed a soothing light to fill the space and gave those who entered the home a profound sense of calm. Abey had once asked her father about the crystal and why it had been placed over the room. He replied that it helped set the tone for the house and everyone in it. She had not understood what he meant at the time, but over the cycles she had begun living part time in Retros Academy student housing, her understanding had changed. Every time she returned home a feeling of calm and tranquility washed over her when she stepped into the foyer. In those moments, his words made perfect sense.

Twin staircases on either side of the foyer ran to the second floor of the mansion, leading to a hallway that led out of sight on both the right and left side of the staircases.

Jan followed closely behind Abey and Silai was the last one to enter. She pushed the door closed behind them. "You promised we'd train in Capital Stand throws when we got home. Will you show us how to throw like Gamphose?" Jan asked excitedly.

Silai quickly moved to Abey's side and stared up at her, her green eyes shining with anticipation. "This is the last day before you leave! And our tournament takes place before the Course ends!"

Abey mussed the hair on both of their heads as she smiled at their

pleadings. "I said we'd work on your throws. Go get changed and meet me behind the house."

Both siblings grinned with joy, and immediately hugged Abey for agreeing to practice with them. They turned and sprinted up the right-side flight of stairs, backpacks bouncing on their arms as they ran. "Make sure you set the court up before I get there!" Abey yelled at the twins as they turned and disappeared down the second-floor hall.

Abey smiled to herself as she began walking through the foyer and turning down one of the first-floor halls of the mansion. Thoughts of herself having the same reaction as the twins towards her older brother Orim's Capital Stand tutoring rang loudly in her mind as she walked down the hall toward her mother's laboratory.

Abey paused at the door of the laboratory and knocked, not wanting to enter the lab without announcing herself first. After receiving no response, she slowly opened the door and peered around the edge to see if her mother was at work in the room.

Abey saw her mother Dara standing over a large Data Port table, her attention focused on a series of projections over the surface of the device.

Abey had been told many times that she favored her mother more than her younger sister Silai. Watching her mother move around the Data Port table, unaware of her presence, was like looking at an older version of herself.

Her mother was tall for a woman of Casis heritage. Abey shared the same coarse black hair as her mother, but she didn't have the same rounded face and delicate features common to the Casis as her mother did. When Abey was able to visit her mother at the Stellar and Planetary Environmental Sciences Division building, many of her mother's employees remarked on how well her features complemented both of her parents.

Above the table was displayed a projection of the Nearous star system. The seven planets were in motion and revolved several times faster than normal. Abey could tell that her mother was modeling some system phenomena as could be expected for the woman who headed the Environmental Sciences Division. Her mother's position gave her power second only to the Chancellor of the Phoer Federation, nearly independent from all political oversight or controls.

Abey stepped into the room while quietly closing the door, leaning against the wall to watch her mother work as she had done so many times in the past.

Only after she had fully settled against the wall did Abey realize that her mother was holding a streamed consultation with her personal assistant, Joram, who Abey could tell was streaming from their lab in Government Seat City. Occasionally, Joram would wave his projected hand though the Nearous star system model causing the seven planets to rotate counter to their normal motion at tremendous speed, indicating a dramatic reversal of time.

"Chief Dara, I've run the calculations several times. It appears that you were correct. The cause of our troubles began twenty cycles ago, at the earliest," Joram said as he looked down at his wrist mounted Data Port.

Dara waved her hand through the projection causing it to go even faster in the reverse.

"That's it. Why it took me so long to figure this out is unforgivable!" Dara said without taking her eyes from the star system model projected over her Data Port table.

Joram's projection continued looking down at his wrist as he presses a few commands onto his Data Port. "Chief Dara, it's no one's fault but the Upmanc Conglomerate. Building the deep space array, calibrating it, and learning the archaic science of stellar motion data interpretation was more than a task for one person, yet you still did it."

Dara placed both hands on her Data Port table while turning her face away from the animated model. "Your words are of no comfort, Joram. Thank you anyway."

Abey saw the pride in Joram's projected face at hearing her mother's acceptance of his consolation. His pride was immediately clouded when he finally caught sight of Abey leaning against the wall.

"Chief Dara, you have a visitor," Joram said as his projection pointed in Abey's direction.

Dara looked at Joram's projection in confusion, causing him to wordlessly nod toward the door of her laboratory.

Dara turned and saw that her oldest daughter leaned against the wall of her lab, patiently waiting for her to finish work. Dara turned back to Joram's streamed projection and gave him a nod. "That will be all for now. Run the figures we've just come up with and we'll go over them tomorrow at the Lab. I'll arrive at the Environmental Sciences Division after seeing my daughter and the other Retros Academy students off to the Course."

Joram's projection gave Dara a polite bow. "Good luck on the Course, Abey," he said just before his Stream winked out of sight.

Dara walked across her lab, filled with various instruments and devices, to Abey and took her in a motherly embrace. Abey enthusiastically responded, nestling her head on Dara's shoulder.

"Oh, my baby. I am so proud of you! Are you all packed?" Dara asked while kissing her daughter's cheek.

Abey responded while her mother pushed a few strands of hair from her face. "Yes. I've got the contents of my pack laid out and I'll do the final load tonight."

"Good, good." Dara said with a gentle smile. Abey could hear that something was bothering her mother but could not tell what it was.

Abey took a half step back from her mother's embrace. "What were you and Joram talking about? I heard you mention the Upmanc Conglomerate. What do they have to do with the Nearousian star system projected on your Data Port?" she said while her eyes locked onto the animated display.

Dara released Abey and walked to the Data Port and waved a hand through the projection, causing the device to shut down. "It's nothing, baby," she said as she turned to look at her daughter once more. "Don't let my work concern you. You have enough to think about with the Environmental Awareness Course starting in a few hours."

Abey looked away from her mother. The slight embarrassment on her face was clear enough for her mother to see. "Hey, hey, what's this? Abey, what's wrong?" Dara asked as she quickly crossed the room once more, taking her daughter by the shoulders in an attempt to get an answer.

Abey said nothing, keeping her face turned away from her mother. Dara gently reached for her chin and turned her head to face hers. "What is this? You stay in the Retros dorm and away from our home for longer than the course will last. Are you nervous about the Course?"

"That's not it," Abey said with a sigh. "It's just that everyone seems to have such high expectations for me and I haven't done anything special." Abey looked down and away from her mother as her words came out in a rush.

Lifting Abey's face toward hers once again, Dara smiled at her child with a warmth that nearly brought Abey to tears. "My silly, beautiful daughter, one of your greatest strengths is that you don't give yourself any credit."

Dara caressed Abey's cheek once again as she looked deeply into her child's eyes. "You attend the most rigorous school in the Phoer Federation,

having earned your way there by your own merit. You maintained your grades at the top of the most elite Academy in the entire three star-systems of the Federation, and *then* were selected for the Course. The odds of all that happening are nearly beyond calculation.” Dara used one thumb to wipe away a single tear rolling down Abey’s face. “And yet you still feel that you haven’t accomplished anything.”

Abey looked directly into her mother’s eyes as she responded. “It’s all I know, mother,” Abey lowered her head for a moment before continuing. “None of what you’ve said has been a challenge. It’s been a continual set of requirements. Those I can do easily. I’ve practiced for the past cycle for the challenges I will encounter on the Course, but at no point do I feel I deserve praise for what I’ve done. Isn’t everyone the same, just doing what they are supposed to do?”

Abey paused and thought for a moment before continuing. “What I haven’t been able to understand is the *why* of it?”

Dara took Abey’s face into both of her hands and stared intently into her daughter’s eyes. “The *why* of it, you ask? That is what we all must learn as we grow. I, your father, and the generations that built the Phoer Federation. We have done our job of providing you with the necessary tools. Give it time, my love. You will find what defines and gives *you* meaning.”

Abey stared perplexed at her mother, not quite understanding the meaning behind her words. Dara simply smiled at her daughter once more. “Don’t worry, my darling. You will find the understanding of your question one day.”

Her mother paused again, her hand still on Abey’s face. Dara’s eyes filled with concern as she embraced her daughter once more in a fierce hug that surprised Abey.

“It’s only going to be thirty day-cycles, mother,” Abey said, her voice muffled by her mother’s shoulder.

Dara pulled back and held her daughter at arm’s length, looking as if she was attempting to record Abey’s face, somehow solidifying the moment in her mind.

“I’ve got a bit more work to do before we eat. I’ll join everyone in a while,” Dara said as she turned away from Abey and returned to her Data Port table.

As Abey made her way back to the foyer and up the stairs to the family’s living area, she reflected on her mother’s words. After a brief moment,

she came to the conclusion that everything that had been said was just her concern for what was to come on the Environmental Awareness Course, and that her mother was more nervous about the Course than she.

While Abey walked down the hallway towards her room, Jan opened the door to his room without warning and leapt into the middle of the corridor wearing his Capital Stand body padding, player's boots and helmet with its opaque, brown face-shield already down over his eyes. Without realizing that Abey was in the hall, he dashed to the door adjacent his and began pounding loudly on it.

"Hurry up Sil! There's not much time until we eat!" He yelled at the closed door.

Silai opened the door to her room and stood in the threshold, her small hands clenched into fists resting upon her hips. She was dressed *exactly* like Jan in a padded Capital Stand uniform that made it nearly impossible to tell the twins apart.

Abey watched as both children smiled at one another, their eyes obscured by their darkened eye safety shields. Without hesitation both stepped nearly chest to chest and slammed their shielded heads together with a deafening crack.

Jan slapped at Silai's right shoulder with his open palm. "I'm ready! Are you?"

Silai punched Jan in his padded chest in response to his question. "We're taking her down today!"

"We sure are!" Jan yelled as he raised clenched fists exposing his padded forearms for Silai to slam her padded forearms into his.

In unison, the twins turned to leave the family quarters. They came to a sudden halt when they saw that Abey was in the hall behind them watching their antics.

"Taking me down? You two Hevin drops will need more than padding and a fighting spirit to get me," Abey said while looking down at the twins. Even though the helmet shields covered their eyes, Abey could still see the embarrassment on their faces.

The twins grimaced at the thought of the impending pain their older sister would deliver to them on the Capital Stand court.

Silai gathered her courage and stepped toward her older sister in a challenging manner. "Just teach us Gamphose's throw and you'll wish you were never born!"

Abey rapped her knuckles on both of the twins' helmets as she walked

between them toward her bedroom door. "Get outside, you Chirpers! I'll be there shortly."

The twins smiled brightly at Abey's words and turned to sprint down the hall toward the stairs leading to the foyer.

"Hurry up and get changed. We'll see whose best!" The twins yelled back in unison.

Abey waved for them to get out of her sight as she walked to the door of her room. With a familiar push, her door opened to a large sunlit chamber. Her windows faced the rear of the house, giving a clear view of the forest that grew along the shoreline of the Laten Inland Sea.

Abey looked at the trophies from various sports and academic competitions she had hanging on the walls of her room. Certificates of merit projected above all the trophies, signifying that she had excelled beyond the requirements for each award. "It's true." She thought to herself. "We are all the same." A projection of her entire family looked down at her from a wall over one of her clothes receptacles. "Why are we all striving to be the best in the Federation? Is there more than studying and playing Capital Stand in the Ajjan Galaxy?"

Abey turned from the portrait and looked at the Environmental Awareness Course equipment lying on top of the green colored coverings of her bed. She knew every item that would go into the gray backpack and its exact location for easy retrieval, as she had packed and repacked the contents more than she cared to remember. Her blue Environment Survival Suit, with red shoulder stripes and green accents, hadn't moved since the previous day when she had placed it with her blue and red striped expedition boots, waiting on the floor at the foot of the bed.

She had been prepared to start the Course for more than forty day-cycles. But now, in the quiet of her room, the first pangs of nervousness for what she was embarking upon settled in her mind.

Abey slowly realized that she was letting her own insecurities cloud her thoughts. With a quick shake, she brushed them aside.

She turned away from the equipment to look through her window at the blue-green water of the Laten Inland Sea, the white rolling swells pushing in toward the shoreline that lay hidden by the forest of trees that stretched from her backyard to the water.

Abey took hold of her thoughts, knowing that projecting into the next morning and the beginning of the Course would do her no good and being with her family right now was most important.

After changing into a loose top, exercise shorts, and sports shoes, Abey made her way from the second floor of her home. She walked through the foyer, past a large dining area, and finally outside through a set of large crystal glass doors onto the stone patio of the mansion's back yard.

Abey's father Jan, a tall Sep'Talist man with curly brown hair and deep bronze tan, stood over a smoking grill, cooking his family's evening meal. He rocked his body to some song playing over his personal sound system, plugged into his ears and streaming from a Data Port mounted on his wrist.

With a spatula twirling between his fingers, he was lost in the act of cooking and did not realize his daughter was standing behind him. It was only when Abey lightly tapped his shoulder, causing him to nearly drop the spatula that he turned around and faced her with his blue eyes wide in surprise. "Hey, sweetheart! Let me know you want my attention before interrupting me while I'm cooking!" Jan smiled at his daughter and leaned down to kiss her forehead, simultaneously removing the sound plugs from his ears and placing them in his shirt pocket.

"Father, you wouldn't have noticed a herd of wild Hevin stampeding past you while listening to your music."

Jan smiled while gently punching his daughter's shoulder. "I'm sure you're right." He reached for a glass full of yellow Grain Wine on a table next to the grill that also held several cooking utensils.

Jan took a large drink from his glass and exhaled with a satisfied burp. "Hand me those vegetables."

Abey looked off to the side and spotted the tray of vegetables he had already prepared.

"That smells like Pole Migrating Water Fowl? Where did you get that this time of season?" Abey asked in surprise as she took a closer look at the meat on the grill.

Jan took another, larger drink, from his Grain Wine, while looking at his daughter out of the corner of his eye. "This is a celebration! I now have two children that have qualified for the Course. That counts as something special to me! So I contacted a few friends in Government Seat city and they found us a few birds."

Abey looked at the grill before her and noted that what her father had called a few, was in fact, more than six, perfectly fat and prepared fowl.

Abey looked into the face of her father. She realized that he had been quietly watching her. Without another word Abey wrapped her arms around her father's waist in a hug of appreciation. Of course he knew that

he was preparing her favorite meal, but the volume of it and these Water Fowl being out of season only added to her appreciation for what he was doing.

Jan hugged his daughter back with the same level of love. His pride in her achievements was reflected through his arms to her.

Abey buried her face in her father's cooking apron, relishing the moment.

"Okay, that's enough of that," he said, while gently pushing her away. Abey looked into her father's face confused for a moment, causing him to smile and softly touch his daughter's cheek.

Jan turned his head to look past the patio onto the massive lawn below that stopped at the forest tree line. Abey turned her gaze to follow his. She immediately saw that he was looking at Silai and Jan setting up the Capital Stand court for their practice session.

"Take it easy on them, I don't want to have a Physio out here for one of them tonight," Jan said as he pushed his daughters shoulder, directing her toward her siblings.

Abey took a single step before turning back to her father. She rose onto her toes and kissed his cheek. Jan lowered himself and wrapped his arms tightly around Abey, lifting her from the ground in another warm embrace.

As he lowered her back down to the ground, Abey looked at him. It seemed to her as if his face was radiating the full power of the star Nearous. "Go," he said to her as he plugged his ears once more with the sound system and returned his attention to the grill, adding the vegetables onto the hot surface beside the smoking meat.

Abey hurried down the short flight of stone stairs to the massive lawn beneath the patio. As she walked across the neatly manicured grass toward the twins, it was impossible for her to miss Silai shouting instructions at her brother Jan. "That's off! You need to move it a few paces back!" Silai said as she stood next to a large brown box that held the Capital Stand equipment.

Jan disregarded her while continuing his efforts of pushing the final silver colored post into the soft surface of the lawn. "That's it," he said in triumph to no one.

Silai looked in frustration at the post Jan had just inserted into the ground and three others, spaced out to make a large rectangle on the lawn. "No, it's not. You're off, Jan!"

Jan finally turned too looked at Silai as if only just remembering she

was nearby, his face was confidently calm. "Check your Data Port, Sil. The court is perfect."

Silai snatched her Data Port from a small pocket on her body armor, all the while looking at Jan with an open sneer of disbelief on her face. She activated the device causing it to become rigid and tapped a few commands on its surface. Abruptly, she looked away from Jan in anger. "It's perfect."

Jan looked down his nose at Silai before he spoke. "Told you so!" His voice carried a note of gloating that was unmistakable. "One day you'll be able to put the court together without automated Data Port assistance." The look on his face was clearly dismissive. "But not today!"

Silai began to charge Jan, but she found herself unable to move forward as Abey had rested a restraining hand on her sister's shoulder pad. "He got it right, you should let it go," Abey spoke evenly to Silai, who turned in fury to look at her older sister. "Father's nearly done cooking, so there's not much time for practice."

Silai gave Abey a withering look, then conceded to her words. Playing Capital Stand with her sister was more important than hurting her brother. She glanced once more at Abey before turning to look at the Data Port in her hand and entered a few commands.

The Crate next to Silai and Abey automatically opened at the commands Silai had streamed from her Data Port, allowing twenty-eight small circular disks to rise from the crate and quickly float across the lawn to settle between the four posts set out by Jan.

Jan quickly got out of the way as Silai pressed another command on her Data Port. There was a flash of light and a full Capital Stand Arena appeared, forming from hardened air molecules and light between the four corners of the posts.

The twenty-eight pods completed their path inside the hard-light space and settled on the grass beneath the newly generated surface of the court. The top of the disk-shaped pods opened, ejecting smaller pods that shot directly above their base that had settled on the grass. Hard light circular columns, wider than Abey's body were instantly formed, completing the court in a matter of moments. At the top and bottom of each column flashed blinking red circles.

The series of opaque pillars generated by the disks were separated by a white line that evenly split the Capital Stand court. The playing area on both sides was gridded in reflection by a set of six, five, and three column rows. The columned rows were staggered to provide players on each side

of the court room to maneuver with an opportunity to attack the opposing side.

On the rear walls of each side of the court, high above the hard-light surface, sat the scoring goals. The goals were in the configuration of blue triangles set inside yellow circles, both shapes inset in perfect red squares.

Jan trotted to where Abey and Silai stood, barely able to contain his excitement at the approaching match. "Let's get started!"

Abey smiled down at Jan while reaching into the open crate to extract a pair of Shaperat gloves, and a pouch holding five hard Capital Stand Elimination balls inside. As she donned the gloves and attached the pouch around her waist, the twins did the same. To her surprise, both Jan and Silai removed two balls each from their pouches and placed them back in the crate.

"We're going with three Elimination balls per player," Jan announced to Abey.

Abey gave the twins a puzzled look before also removing two balls from her pouch and placing them inside the crate as well.

"Do you think limiting me to three balls will help you win?" Abey challenged the twins with a vicious stare.

"We've got twice your number of possible elimination strikes between the two of us. We will either take you out with a direct Elimination strike or we'll get your Goal with our Shaperat plasma spheres. The numbers are in our favor," Jan said to his older sister.

The twins smiled as they bashed their forearms together, self-confidence written on their faces.

Abey shrugged and walked toward the hard-light wall that made up one of the four sides of the arena. "The two of you have a lot to learn." She stepped onto the hard-light surface of the Capital Stand court generated just above the short grass and looked at the placement of the pillars and the walls. They were opaque yellow orange in color, indicating that the system was functioning properly. The twins also entered the playing court and moved to one side of the hard-light white line.

Jan prepared himself by removing an Elimination ball from his pouch, and pointing it in Abey's direction, intently glaring at her through his eye shield.

Suddenly, inside the hard-light enclosure, a warning claxon sounded, and the three players knew they were moments away from match start.

Both Jan and Silai turned from Abey and ran to the right side of the

court. They wove their way through the columns to reach the back wall on their side of the court with the triangle, circle, and square inscribed goal far above their heads.

Abey took one last look in the direction the twins had run, and slowly walked toward her side of the court. She knew the twins were still learning the intricacies of playing Capital Stand, but together they were an aggressive opponent that she knew could not be underestimated.

Abey stopped behind the middle right pillar of the six, front row defensive pillars on her side of the court. She closed her eyes and slowed her breathing in anticipation of the match beginning.

The claxon stopped, and after a moment a bright beeping light-sound told the three players that the match had begun.

Barely a moment had passed before Abey heard the unmistakable sound of the twins, nearly silent, running across the hard-light surface.

In her mind's eye she could see that they had split up at the second column of five pillars.

Their weights were almost identical, so judging the specific direction taken by either Jan or Silai was next to impossible. Abey could tell that one set of foot falls was indicative of eager anticipation to initiate the match. She guessed that it was Silai, coming in fast on Abey's left side.

Jan watched the opposite side of the court as he ran for the safety of the middle five pillars on his side of the court. His older sister had hidden behind one of her pillars, so he maintained his silence allowing Silai to lead their assault.

Abey could hear Silai approaching the front row of pillars and could tell that Jan had stopped at the middle row of five to observe her response to Silai's attack. She knew that he would not sacrifice Silai to his older sister, but he would allow her aggressive tactics to initiate their first assault. Abey had played with the twins often and Jan was the stronger tactician between the two of them. She knew he would analyze her moves and, should Silai survive the first pass, would regroup the pair and employ a newly-developed strategy against her.

Peering around the curvature of her defensive pillar, Abey realized her analysis had been correct and Silai would be the first of the twins to make a throw. She watched Silai aim at the upper support indicator on Abey's far left cover column. Based upon what she was seeing, Abey surmised that the twins would attempt to remove the entire front row of cover first and then work their way back toward her side's goal station.

Silai's first plasma ball Shaperat throw hit directly on the circular red indicator at the top of the column. A buzzer sounded, declaring that the Shaperat throw was successful. The top half of the column vanished instantly. Abey knew that if she attempted to use that column without crouching, her head would be completely exposed for an elimination strike by one of the twins.

Abey surmised that the twins' idea of removing her cover would eventually lead them to a point that would allow them to target her with Elimination Balls directly. There were no limits on the number of plasma balls a player could Shape and use during a match and with their superior numbers a goal would be the most logical path to winning the match.

The rules of Capital Stand allowed either eliminating a player with a direct Elimination Ball strike or hitting the goal at the rear of the court. This meant that the two of them against her would require a greater level of creativity on Abey's part. Court play at that level was something the twins had yet to experience.

Abey smiled to herself as Silai made three more successful Shaperat plasma ball strikes, completely eliminating two of her front row of six columns. With the last two columns on her left side gone, that area had become a hazard zone for a potential Elimination strike. Abey knew either of the twins would risk a counter strike from her for the chance to claim their first victory over her in a match.

Silai's confidence grew with her elimination of Abey's columns, all the while receiving no counter attacks.

Abey continued to watch her younger sister as she pulled her hand back for plasma ball formation in her right Shaperat glove.

The Shaperat glove design, when used in Capital Stand play, allowed the user to imagine the formation of a plasma ball. The crystals woven into the inner structure of the gloves generated a ball of energy and its intended gravitational weight from only the thought of the user as the initiating force.

In the span of time it took for Silai to position her arm for the throw at another one of Abey's column indicators, the plasma ball had already formed itself between her fingers, her eyes never leaving the two middle pillars on Abey's side of the court. Silai's only thought was to expose Abey's head, which would allow Jan to directly target her with an Elimination Ball. The thought of Abey's elimination excited her beyond her wildest imagination.

In the time it took Silai to prepare for the throw, her Shaperat glove formed the plasma ball to full charge and added the correct amount of micro gravity weight for the throw she wanted to make. It was clear that Silai's confidence was high and that she would make another successful throw taking out more of Abey's defensive position. She put all her weight behind the torquing throw that launched the plasma ball toward the column sensor she had been eyeing at a speed that caused the air around the energetic sphere to crackle in its wake.

To both of the twins' great surprise, Abey smoothly shifted her body around to the front middle pillar, with an already formed plasma ball in her left hand.

Abey's casual underhand toss placed her Shaperat plasma ball into the path of Silai's throw, perfectly intercepting the fast-moving plasma sphere and causing both to explode in a flash of light.

Silai was caught off guard by her older sister's counter move and was partially blinded by the explosion of light despite the helmet's eye shield. Silai's eyes watered as she attempted to readjust her eyesight to keep track of Abey's next move.

Abey charged a plasma ball in her right Shaperat glove as she ran from cover into the empty space where her defensive columns had once stood. She had competed against the best Capital Stand Academy teams in the Phoer Federation, so keeping her focus to make the strikes needed to win the match against the twin's required little effort.

Both twins were surprised that Abey had completely exposed herself, and in response Silai charged up her right hand Shaperat plasma ball. She positioned her arm to make a throw toward Abey's face to blind her, which would keep Abey from finishing whatever she was planning and create an opening for an elimination attack.

From the twins' perspective, it appeared as if Abey further increased her running pace while performing an underarm throw with her activated plasma ball. Her knuckles scraped the floor of the court as she twisted her body, achieving maximum power for the plasma ball's flight and launching the blue glowing sphere in an arching curve that bounced off the court surface between the front middle six columns on the twin's side of the court. After skipping off the surface, the ball of light hit the column second left of center, in the middle row of the twins five columns defensive line. To the twins' surprise, the plasma ball ricocheted back toward the rear side of the front row of six columns, and struck the rear facing sensor on the front row third column.

Abey's rear strike on the column caused both twins to pause in awe to see the outcome of Abey's move. The twins watched as the entire column vanished in a flash of light and the Court's sound indicator buzzed that a successful hit had been made. Since a rear strike was more difficult to achieve, the entire column was eliminated, unlike frontal strikes that only eliminated half an upper or lower section of column, depending upon which sensor was hit.

As the twins' column vanished, on Abey's side of the court the column nearest the outer boundary in her front row immediately reappeared.

Abey had effortlessly reduced the amount of cover available on the opposite side of the court while shoring up her own defense, and the twins knew immediately they would have to rethink their strategy.

Silai put the full weight of her body behind another plasma ball throw, hoping to strike Abey's face and break her concentration. She launched the plasma ball and dove for cover behind the nearest column, not waiting to see if the sphere struck its intended target.

Out of the corner of her eye, Abey spotted the oncoming projectile, and leapt from the floor of the court to avoid the blue pulsing plasma ball striking her in the face. The orb flew harmlessly underneath her, while she triggered her left Shaperat glove to form a plasma ball, all while rotating her body in midair. The hours of Capital Stand play had trained Abey to feel when her Shaperat had completed its task without looking at her hands.

In midair, Abey spun her upper body to hurl her newly formed plasma ball at full power, as if she had been standing on the surface of the court, however before the ball had time to clear her fingertips, Silai rounded the column that she had been using as cover and threw a completed Shaperat plasma ball at her older sister.

Jan watched as Abey's second plasma ball throw skipped off the court floor and bounced up at full speed, striking the second-row middle column and ricocheting upward to make a direct hit on the backside sensor of the Fourth column of the twins' first row of six pillars, now reduced to four.

As the court sensors registered the hit, he turned back to see Abey landing, her feet just touching the surface of the court as Silai's throw sped toward her face. Jan clearly saw his older sister shift her eyes toward the ball rapidly approaching her and the corner of her mouth shift into a slight smile. Suddenly, the fifth column on her side of the court reappeared, providing much needed cover from the attack. Silai's plasma ball ricocheted

off the barrier and bounced harmlessly around the court until it vanished in a flash of light.

Abey quickly rounded her reformed column and launched another arcing plasma ball at the twins' side of the court, near the front line of columns. She knew that reducing their front defensive line from six columns to three would force the pair to be more careful.

She watched as her throw was deflected off the court floor, hit the column to the right of the middle in the second row of five, and bounce up, striking the rear side indicator of the column two spaces right of those she already eliminated, leaving the twins two outside columns, and only one central defensive column for cover. With the third successful rear strike, Abey had permanently removed one defensive column from play, since there were no columns regenerated with her third column elimination.

The twins had now lost three full columns, while Abey had used her own counterstrikes to rebuild her side of the playing court. Her attacks had also forced the twins to seek shelter near their goal at the rear of court.

Jan nodded at Silai and sprinted toward their tattered defensive front line to launch two plasma balls at Abey's front columns. His aim was to eliminate one of her defensive columns and get them more cover.

Before Jan's plasma balls crossed the white boundary, separating the sides of the court, Abey stepped around the column she was using for cover and retaliated with two of her own charged plasma balls, intercepting Jan's in mid-flight, causing all four to burst in a flash of light.

Silai used the distraction to run through the columns on her side of the court and join up with her brother. "She's got two double strength columns now," Silai said, while looking across the court at the pillar she believed her older sister to be taking shelter behind.

Jan kept his eyes on Abey's side of the court while speaking to Silai. "It couldn't be helped. You did the right thing by trying to remove her cover. Ricochet back-column strikes...I've never seen her do those before!" The frustration in his voice was clear for Silai to hear. "You followed the plan perfectly, so now she's given us an idea of what she can do. But I have to say, she's clearly gotten better since we last played."

Silai pursed her lips at Jan's analysis of their sister capabilities. "She sure has...but so have we!"

Jan charged both of his Shaperat gloves, plasma balls forming in his hands, and dashed around the pillar that he and Silai used for cover,

launching both plasma balls toward the double strength pillar he last saw Abey using as cover.

Both plasma balls cleanly struck the bottom indicator of the pillar causing the lower half of the pillar to vanish. As Jan took cover near his sister once more, both could see that Abey was no longer behind the damaged column.

Jan looked at Abey's side of the court in frustration, unable to imagine how she had shifted cover without either he or Silai noticing. He turned his attention back to Silai and indicated for her to drop to one knee, so they could speak quietly.

"We have to keep her thinking we're focused on her. But that won't last long. You need to move back up to the front pillar, you're going to have no lateral cover so be careful! She's going to see you moving in. Once you're there, stay in position while I damage her middle defensive line of columns. I'll be striking the elimination sensors on columns three, then two."

Silai looked across the court at the columns he had indicated, then back at him in confusion. "Why? What's that going to do?"

Jan gave his twin sister a look of exasperation, while slowly explaining his plan. "You're the distraction. I must be quick, but I'm removing the pillars that block her goal. If I can get the pillars, one of us will have an opening to make a ricochet shot that will hit her goal and we'll win the game."

Silai looked across at their sister's side of the court for a brief moment, and then nodded in agreement with her brother's plan. "Okay, let's do it!"

In unison, they struck their forearms together and readied themselves for the attack.

Silai charged up both her right and left hand Shaperat before standing, while Jan charged up his left Shaperat. He then removed an Elimination Ball from the pouch hanging at his side.

The twins quickly nodded to one another and began their assault.

As Silai ran toward the remaining defensive column on their side of the court, Abey stepped from behind the third column on her front defensive line, boldly walking toward the white foul line that divided the sides of the court. It appeared as if she had no concern for the twins' intentions. She also had a pre-formed plasma ball in the palm of her right Shaperat glove, which she threw with full force, slightly away from Silai's running form.

Intent on reaching cover, Silai saw Abey's throw a moment too late. To Silai the throw appeared to be veering away and destined to impact

harmlessly on a second-row defensive column on her left, so she continued toward the remaining front-line column. Silai grinned while launching a high impact throw with her right Shaperat plasma ball, once again aimed directly at Abey's face, knowing that her sister was fully exposed at the foul line and there was no way her throw would miss.

An instant after the plasma ball had left her gloved hand, Silai suddenly realized she had completely misjudged Abey's throw, and the glowing ball of blue energy Abey had thrown arced in a sharp curve to hit Silai directly in the face, a step before she could reach the column's cover. Being instantly blinded and directionless she lost her concentration on the remaining charged plasma ball in her left hand, which immediately vanished.

Jan's reaction was immediate and fierce. With Abey still exposed at the foul line, he launched the Elimination ball in his right hand towards Abey's feet. The Elimination Ball struck the hard-light court surface and bounced up with a left curving motion towards Abey's chest.

Jan's eyes went wide in excitement. He took a single step from his column's cover, anticipating the elimination buzzer to sound as he watched Abey perform a backflip attempting to escape the curving path of the ball.

When Abey landed on her feet, Jan understood that he had also made a terrible mistake. His older sister had caught his Elimination Ball in midflight while performing the backward flip, which there was no way for him to see as her rotating legs and back had obscured his view of the spectacular catch. Using the momentum from the acrobatic move, she then spun her body around on one foot to launch the Elimination Ball back at him with even more force.

The strikes and counter strikes between both sides had been so rapid that Jan could only blink in disbelief at his older sister's prowess. Jan clumsily attempted to shift himself back behind his defensive cover in the second row of columns as he watched Abey's elimination ball arc in his direction at tremendous speed. His mind seemed to go blank as he realized there was no escape.

The Elimination ball struck his shoulder with enough force to launch him off his feet and spin down to the hard-light surface of the court floor with a bone rattling thud.

Silai struggled to fight through the disorientation from loss of sight caused by Abey's plasma ball hitting her in the faceplate. She knew Jan had just been eliminated, her ears being pierced by the sound of the court

sensors registered the moment of impact when he was knocked out of play. It was now up to her to salvage the match for both her and Jan.

Desperate to shake off the effects of Abey's previous attack and not be eliminated, Silai attempted to blindly leap behind the central column Abey's throw had stopped her from reaching.

Having played more Capital Stand than the twins, Abey well knew the stun effects of a plasma strike to the face and it would be several more moments before Silai had fully regained her sight. Watching Silai blindly grope for cover, she knew the end had arrived. Abey took two Elimination Balls from the pouch around her waist. With one in each hand, she quickly threw them both, first left, then right, at Silai who was less than a half step away from the safety of the column.

The first throw skipped off the court floor striking Silai's right leg just below the knee causing the leg to sweep backward, and her to fall forward off balance, arms flailing at the air.

Silai knew that she had just been eliminated from the game, but she still instinctively attempted to adjust herself before impacting with the surface of the court. Her eyesight returned just in time to see her sister's second elimination ball streak over her shoulder. Emotions of relief flooded her at not having to take another hit from her sister, but only for a moment.

The sound of the Elimination Ball striking a nearby column on the twins' second row of defensive columns signaled that Silai had yet again underestimated her older sister's skill level. The Elimination Ball slammed into the backside of Silai's helmet dropping her face first toward the court surface.

In the quiet of Silai's mind she knew she would forever remember the sight of the Capital Stand court surface rushing toward her, on the day Abey had reminded her of the power difference in their Elimination strikes.

Her final memory before being stunned by the faceplate of her helmet crashed into the floor, was how thankful she was that her older sister had chosen not to eliminate her with a full force throw, knowing full well a blow like that would require a Physio some time to repair all the internal damage she would suffer.

The game winning buzzer sounded, indicating that the twins had lost the match.

Abey watched as both Jan and Silai slowly pushed themselves up from

the court floor. She could see that their egos were clearly more bruised than their bodies.

Abey crossed the court to help them regain their feet. "You two need to be more patient. Other than that, your tactics were sound." Abey helped a dazed Silai remove her helmet, pausing long enough to look into her little sister's eyes to ensure that her skull had not been fractured. "Just because you have greater numbers, which happens all the time in Capital Stand, doesn't mean you rush."

Silai placed both hands on her head, testing for damage. "I've never seen that stun strike you used, then followed by a midair elimination ball capture!"

"You followed that with a double elimination throw!" Jan said while rubbing his shoulder. "That's good enough to compete in the spiral arm tournaments!"

Abey patted both her siblings' shoulders. "Enough. The court recorded our match. Load my moves into your Data Port's Atoma systems and practice. We'll play again, when I return from the Course."

Both children's faces beamed with surprise at her words. "Do you mean it?!" They asked in unison.

Abey smiled as she pushed them off the court onto the grassy lawn. "Of course, I mean it. Now put the court away and get cleaned up. Father should be done cooking, and I'm hungry."

A short while later after the twins had repacked and stored the Capital Stand equipment, the family sat around a small table with five places on the patio nearby the still lightly smoking grill. Soft lights around the patio illuminated the setting. The stars overhead provided a twinkling light to complete the tranquil moment.

After the family had finished eating the main course of water fowl and vegetables, Dara cleared the table, carrying the dishes inside her home through the open glass patio doors.

"Water fowl was the last thing I guessed we would have for dinner tonight," Abey said contentedly to her father.

Jan took a large drink from his glass of Grain Wine, his eyes twinkling while looking at his daughter over the vessel's rim. "Water fowl is your favorite dish. I had to make sure your last properly cooked meal was your most beloved."

Abey's smile broadened at his words. "Father, it's not like we won't be eating on the Course!" Abey openly chided him.

Jan took another deep draft from his glass. "You will get nothing like what we just ate for thirty or more day-cycles and it is always good luck to eat well before beginning the Course."

Abey presently laughed at her father's words. "We ate better than well, dad!" Abey replied to her father pleasantly.

"Anyone still have room for after meal treats?" Dara asked as she walked through the patio door with a tray balanced on the fingertips of her upturned hand, five clear crystal bowls filled with white and blue contents shimmered inside the vessels she carried.

"Frozen berry curds?!" Both twins exclaimed simultaneously.

Dara walked around the table placing the final dish before each member of her family.

The twins were the first to begin consuming the sweet dish. Their grunts of delight with each spoonfull of the confection caused Abey, Jan and Dara to laugh in enjoyment at the sight of the twins gobbling up the confections before them.

With spoon in hand, mouth smeared with berry juice, Jan paused and looked to his mother. "Can Silai and I go with you to the deep space telescope on your next trip?"

Silai stopped eating and looked at her mother over the rim of her bowl, mouth covered with berry juice, like her twin brother. "Can we?"

Dara slowly ate her confection, not bothering to look from the dish at the hopeful faces of her two youngest children. "We'll see."

"But you took Abey with you when she was our age!" Silai whined at her mother.

"I said, we'll see. Now eat your berries." The tone of Dara's voice let the children know that she would speak no more on the subject.

The twins' heads dropped, disappointment written on both their confection smeared faces. "Not fair," both muttered in unison.

Jan took another drink from his glass, while looking at his youngest children's reaction. "You'll learn, there are few things that could be considered fair in the Cormak arm of the Ajjan galaxy."

All three of Jan and Dara's children looked up quizzically at him, attempting to make sense of his words.

"Enough of that, I have a present for you, Abey," Jan announced abruptly.

Jan reached under his chair, and as his hand cleared the table once again, the members of his family saw he held a long, plain white, rectangular box.

Abey's surprise was clearly on her face. "What is it?" she asked, while taking the box from her father's hand.

"It's from your brother, Orim. He wanted you to have it before beginning the Environmental Awareness Course." Jan said simply, as he resumed drinking from his glass. The light in his eyes seemed to grow as Abey held the mysterious box in her hands.

As Abey slowly opened the box, her eyes brightened at the sight of a long hunting dagger in a finely crafted brown scabbard, lying on a bed of soft white cloth. "What's...?"

Something seemed different about the hilt of the dagger that caused her to stop speaking and reach for the weapon. She extracted the dagger from its scabbard. The sight of the silver metal blade caused her to smile for a moment, which turned into a confused frown as she looked from the blade to her father. "Is this a Shaperat survival knife?" Abey asked, while turning the weapon over in her hand once again, examining the blade and hilt in minute detail.

The twins forgot their berry confections and leaned across the table to view the gift. "Ignite it, Abey!" both twins shouted in unison.

Abey glanced at the twins with a barely suppressed grin, and with a quick flick of her wrist, Abey activated the Shaperat blade. The edge of the blade produced a discernible blue glow, and she knew the weapon would cut through any material she touched with its edge. She slowly moved the blade, checking its balance.

"It's perfect!" She exclaimed, in surprise at the gift in her hand. "There can't be more than ten Shaperat weapons on Nearous right now. Where did Orim get this?"

Jan quickly glanced at his wife. "We're not sure. But your brother is so proud of your achievement. He made me promise that you would get it tonight."

The twins quickly moved around the table to Abey's side. "Can I hold it?" they asked in unison.

"Just a moment, you two!" she said, unable to take her eyes from the blade.

Suddenly, the sound of an incoming Stream interrupted the children's commotion. It came from the Data Port Jan had removed from his wrist sometime before dinner and placed in his breast pocket.

Jan looked at his wife in puzzled confusion. On special occasions, which seeing one's child off to the Course certainly qualified as such, only

the most dire of circumstances would cause a Phoersian to interrupt such a moment. It was this fact that made the incoming Stream all the more puzzling.

Jan removed the Data Port from his pocket and triggered it with his thumb. His family could tell he was clearly surprised at the person he saw on the Stream before him. Without comment he stood from his chair and walked down the stairs of the patio to the lawn away from the table.

Dara silently watched her husband walk away, none of her three children recognizing the quiet concern on her face.

"Hello, Chancellor. What can I do for you?" Jan asked the image of Orthor Prequit, streaming onto his Data Port.

"I'm sorry for interrupting your evening, Select Councilman Doris." the projection of the Phoer Federation's Chancellor apologized evenly.

"My family and I had just finished eating. I'm sure you and your family are celebrating the selection of your daughter Sari, to the Environmental Awareness Course like we are."

The image of the Chancellor looked away a briefly. "Yes, we are."

"Her selection was as deserved as my daughter's. We should both be proud," Jan said, his tone guarded but even.

The streamed image of the Chancellor did not look at Jan. "Uh, yes...I am proud." The Chancellor paused a moment, then the streamed image looked directly into Jan's eyes. "The Upmanc have arrived."

The words of the Chancellor froze Jan in place, the exquisite meal suddenly spoiled in his stomach. "The Upmanc? They're three annual cycles early. Are you sure?"

"They've parked a Stellar class Battle Carrier with a large support fleet on the edge of the Nearous star system. I've sent the relevant information to your Data Port," the Chancellor said flatly.

Jan rubbed a hand over his mouth as he considered the words he had just heard. "Oh my...We're not ready."

The Chancellor's streamed image looked hard at Jan. "We were never going to be," the Chancellor said, before looking away from Jan once more. "I'm convening the Grand Council tomorrow. You need to be back at the Spire after the Retros' Course departure ceremony, so the Select Council can confer before we meet with the entire body of the Elected Members of the Government Seat."

"Yes. I'll be there," Jan said as he ended the Stream. He paused to look

at the Data Port in his hand before looking up to the stars overhead, and then back down to the grass beneath his feet.

Dara watched her husband from her chair for a moment before leaving the table to join him on the grassy lawn.

“Jan, what is it?” Dara inquired of her husband. Her concern was genuine, as she could clearly see the Stream had upset him.

Without looking at his wife Jan triggered his Data Port and projected a schematic of the star Nearous and the seven planets in its orbit. The Upmanc Battle Carrier icon blinked at the outer edge of the Nearousian star system, an unmistakable intruder.

Dara took the Data Port from her husband and stared in shock at the information projected on it. Her eyes darted back over her shoulder in fear for her children.

Jan gently placed a hand around Dara’s waist, resting his palm on her hip, while pulling her into a firm embrace. “Sweetheart, we’re out of time.” He choked through his lips, while pressing her body into his.

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