

KILLSWITCH

ALSO BY JOEL SHEPHERD

Crossover

A Cassandra Kresnov Novel

Breakaway

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JOEL SHEPHERD
KILLSWITCH
A CASSANDRA KRESNOV NOVEL



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*To Stephanie,
for having faith*

CHAPTER



The day was turning out nothing like Sandy had planned. But she was getting used to that.

“What kind of sabotage?” She was seated in the command chair of a brand-spanking-new A-9 assault flyer. Past the pilot’s head, the bubble canopy afforded her a decent aerial view of gleaming, sunlit Tanusha. She listened to the reply over her headset with little surprise. “No, don’t bother Secretary Grey, I’ll have the President’s ear personally in a few minutes. Get me Captain Reichardt as soon as he’s available.”

She deactivated, and swivelled her command chair away from the bank of multiple screens to tap the pilot, Gabone, on the helmet.

“How are you finding the interface?” she asked him.

“It still makes me a little dizzy, Commander,” Gabone replied.

“Don’t push it, it takes a while to adjust, even for me.”

“I’ll be okay,” Gabone replied with confidence, casu-

ally flipping a few switches on the compact control panel, tipping them into a gentle starboard bank. “It’s worth anything to have this much firepower.”

Sandy gazed at the Presidential convoy, strung out before them in single file above the vast, sprawling cityscape of Tanusha. Gabone’s view, she knew, would be overlaid with target highlights and trajectory-prediction graphics, time-accelerated in the pilot and weapon officers’ brains by the fancy interface with the flyer’s computer systems. About her, the A-9’s cramped, streamlined hull packed enough precision weaponry to take out the entire convoy in several seconds, had its crew chosen to. Just two years ago, such weaponry had been unheard of in Tanushan skies. But two years in Tanusha had been a long time indeed.

Sandy monitored her screens, her own mental interface scanning across vast swathes of metropolitan info-network with much greater ease than Gabone, or any other regular human, could ever experience. The patterns she saw across Tanusha were familiar—the Callayan Defence Force sweepers flying in wide and forward defensive patterns, as always the case when the President or another similarly ranked foreign dignitary moved. The usual security walls about the approaching Parliament grounds, and the distant Gordon Spaceport. Several security hotspots where ongoing operations warranted extra cover. One such caught her eye, emanating from a particularly high volume of traffic. A further brief scan showed her several ambulances had been called. Velan Mall, a major shopping and entertainment centre . . . she zoomed further into the schematic within her internal vision. Sim Craze, the establishment was called. A further scan of the local established tac-net registered a lot of civilian com traffic, lots of alarmed voices. Evidently something had perturbed the locals.

She restrained a faint smile, dialing into the tac-net with her command signature fully visible, hardly surprised that *someone* had ended up in an ambulance, considering who was in charge. Her query got a familiar reply.

“Hi, smartarse, I hope you’re happy.” Vanessa’s voice sounded a little strange, muffled. Sandy frowned.

“Are you eating? You sound like you’re talking with your mouth full.”

“That’s ’cause my nose is busted!”

“You got hit?”

“What, that surprises you? They’re goddamn Fleet marines, you blonde bimbo. They didn’t want to leave quietly and we’re not all indestructible like you, in case you hadn’t noticed . . .”

“Ricey, I’m sorry.” She injected a note of winsome apology into her voice . . . oh, the little subtleties she’d learned in her short life as a civilian. “I sent you because you’re the best, and I thought they might have better manners than trying to flatten a cute little button like you.”

“Yeab, well their squad sergeant was a cute little button herself, so chivalry was out of the question.”

“What’s the score?”

“She’ll be okay once they wire her jaw back into place. Two of the others will need a leg reconstruction and a new left elbow respectively, young Chanderpaul got a little overexcited. I think a week on training sims will calm him down.”

“Never fault enthusiasm.”

“It was six against four, I wasn’t in a sporting mood. With those numbers it wasn’t called for.”

“Well, okay, nice work, get back to Medical and get your nose fixed.”

“Gee, where would I be without your sage advice? Thank you for royally ruining my day.”

“Oh go on, you’ve been itching to pick a fight with some Fleet knuckleheads for weeks.”

“When I want a busted nose, I’ll ask for one.”

The connection went blank. Sandy sighed, and wondered for the ten thousandth time if she’d ever have the quiet, peaceful life she’d once dreamed of.

The assault flyer followed the Presidential convoy down over the grassy green Parliament grounds, Alpha Team security aircars fanning out ahead as the main cluster came in toward the huge, red-brown structure of domes and arches. Sandy had flown this approach route many times in the past two years, but still it gave her a shiver of deadly memories. If she strained her vision toward the Rear Wing, she knew she would see a memorial garden where a service carpark used to be, colourful native plants and flowers in profusion about the shattered wreck of an Alpha Team aircar, the names of seventy-two dead inscribed into one red-brown Parliament wall. Sandy's uplinks locked into the Parliament tac-net, the entire regional airspace monitored and scanned by the millisecond, the full span clearly visible across her internal vision. The CDF assault flyer and the convoy vehicles broadcasted friendly frequencies clearly into that hair-triggered airspace, their electronic signature and careful human monitoring the only things preventing them from being instantly blasted from the sky by the weapon emplacements strategically located about the grounds.

Sandy began unhooking herself from the command connections and undoing the chair straps as the flyer came in behind the Alpha Team formation, the East Wing rooftop landing pads approaching ahead, small beside the looming central dome.

"I'm clear," she told Gabone, securing her ops headset and removing her rifle from rack storage behind the chair. "Wait for me at holding point five, you're too conspicuous up here."

"*Commander,*" came the weapon officer's voice from the front cockpit seat, "*we have a large group of journalists by the platform. That's not in accordance with . . .*"

"I know, I saw them. Don't get bored waiting, this isn't a drill."

The rear fuselage doors cracked open, bringing a rush of wind and light into the cramped flyer interior. Sandy one-armed the rifle and made her way along the aisle on past the empty trooper berths in the back. The rooftop pads appeared below as the doors flared fully out-

ward, and she stepped out before touchdown, taking the impact comfortably with a half-spin, slowing from a run to a walk as Gabone poured on the power with a roar of fan blades. The flyer lifted away from the Parliament roof, banking to avoid the huge central dome above Parliament's main chambers. Sandy walked in the dissipating rush of slipstream, rifle ready, aware that no few of the Alpha Team security were staring as she came.

There were six armoured black aircars down on the pads, gull doors open, and men in suits with weapons gathered strategically about. Beyond, in the cordoned section of the rooftop behind a series of leafy plant boxes, a cluster of perhaps twenty journalists were waiting—no cameras, Sandy saw, just voice recorders and other communication or computer gear, camera access, like most things, being highly restricted within Parliament grounds these days.

President Neiland, accompanied by several of her closest advisors amidst the immediate "body security," was walking toward the waiting media with an evident announcement on her mind. Sandy shook her head in exasperation, and spun a slow three-sixty as she walked, visually scanning the broad grounds, across the multiple wings to the giant Corinthian pillars of the Senate, allowing her subconscious to soak up the detail and seek possible clues. Nothing registered, and she strode firmly between the aircars and suited security toward the gathering cluster on the pad's edge. No one stopped her, and she put a hand on the President's shoulder just as she was about to start speaking.

"Ms. President, security has red-zoned all outdoor spaces for now, we really should get you inside."

"Just a moment, Sandy, this won't take long . . ."

"No, Ms. President. Now."

Neiland stared at her, anger flashing in steely blue eyes within a pale, handsome face. Her red hair was bound up with fashionable pins and a comb, Sandy noted. Evidently she'd been intending to make an

impressive appearance before the media, lack of cameras or otherwise. But it took more to intimidate a combat GI than angry eyes and a fancy title. Neiland covered the anger fast, all too aware of the audience. And, supremely professional politician that she was, turned it quickly into an exasperated smile and roll-of-the-eyes at the journalists.

“Very tenacious, isn’t she?” The journalists smiled.

And one of them took the opportunity to ask, “Commander, what’s the alarm this time?”

“No comment,” Sandy told him. And increased the pressure on Neiland’s shoulder by a fraction. Neiland got the message in a hurry—often the case, when Sandy started squeezing.

“Look, we can continue this inside . . . if that’s okay with you, Commander?” She said it with a smile, but Sandy wasn’t fooled.

“Sure.”

The contingent began to move, Sandy falling into place behind the President, where Alpha Chief Mitchel was walking. She took the opportunity to throw him a very dirty look. Further along, Vice-Chief Tan noticed, and gave a nod of agreement to her, with evident exasperation of his own, even as Mitchel tried to ignore her.

“I don’t care who started squeezing your balls,” she said to Mitchel later in the hall outside the room Neiland’s advisors had requisitioned for the impromptu press briefing. Mitchel evidently wanted to be elsewhere, but Sandy had his back to the wall and wasn’t about to lose the advantage. When the second-in-command of the Callayan Defence Force gave a lecture, even the head of the President’s personal security was obliged to stand and take it . . . unless, of course, he was itching to get “promoted” to training and recruitment. Sandy kept her expression hard, her eyes unblinking, her stare as direct as she could make it. She knew Mitchel was no pushover, either as a man or as a security operative, but still he looked a little nervous. “Where her security is in question, you take orders from no one. Your own fucking procedures

say that you must follow every red-zone precaution, no exceptions. Since when do you start getting picky?”

“It was a weak report, Commander,” Mitchel retorted, with all the stubbornness that his hard jaw and sharp eyes suggested he could muster. “It was one witness, some scant information, no corroboration . . .”

“You are *not* an Intelligence agent. We’ve got an entire division of specialists whose job it is to make those decisions. Your job is to do what you’re told, and to implement their recommendations. Do I make myself clear?”

“You,” Mitchel bit out in retort, “are not my superior.”

“No, I’m much worse. I’m the President’s *senior* security advisor. My next report, in that capacity, will be on the alarming spread of political influence upon the promotions and policies within Alpha Team and other specialist security agencies. You don’t bend the rules for *anyone*, not the Speaker, not the Majority Whip, not Ms. Red-haired God Almighty herself. Another breach, and I’ll see that you lose your job. It’s that simple.”

Vice-Chief Tan was standing nearby, well in earshot of Alpha-standard hearing enhancements. Sandy refrained from giving him an acknowledgement—dividing Alpha Team by setting second-in-command against the Chief would be very dangerous. She walked to a clear space of corridor instead and waited with weapon at cross-arms for the President’s media briefing to finish, completely annoyed at how politics interfered with *everything* in this environment. Especially those things where it least belonged.

One of the President’s key advisors, Sudasarno, intercepted her before she could devote full attention to her remote links.

“Sandy, what was the red-zone for?” Sandy barely raised an eyebrow at the nickname—she’d been in constant contact with the President and her personal staff for the last two years, and felt they’d earned the informality. Until the shit hit the electro-turbine, anyhow.

“Small matter of a missing rocket launcher,” Sandy replied with no small irony. “Self-guided, several kilometres range, just the kind of thing that might penetrate the defence grid and blow her and her little knot of favourite journalists into very small pieces.”

“From our own stockpile?” Sudasarno asked with a pained look.

“Production line, actually.”

“Shit . . .” The advisor’s Indonesian features were pained, necktie loosened, his dark hair uncharacteristically rumped. “We only started making that stuff since we started the CDF . . .”

“Plenty of weapons got in through the smuggling routes before . . . so these are indigenous, big deal.”

“It doesn’t look good.”

“That’s your problem, not mine,” she told him patiently. “I’ve told everyone what we need to keep our stockpiles safe, somehow the recommendations keep getting blocked in parts.”

“We’re suddenly an arms producer, Sandy. Callay’s never done that before, just two years ago we weren’t even allowed to have armed forces independent from the Fleet. We’re not good at all this stuff yet. Who stole the launcher?”

Sandy shook her head. “My source doesn’t know.”

Sudasarno gave her a wary, knowing look. “Yeah, well tell your *source* he’d better have some leads soon, because the press are going to be asking why you dragged the President away from an interview like that.”

“Because certain political influences interfered with her supposedly politically invulnerable security.” She fixed Sudasarno with a mild, firm stare. Sudasarno sighed, and stared momentarily off into space, in profound frustration.

“It never gets any easier around here, does it?”

Sandy restrained a faint smile. “Shit, you’re telling me?”

Alpha Team were moving past them then, the door opening behind and Neiland emerging, flanked by several other advisors.

“Sandy,” said the President, “with me, if you please.”

Sandy fell in beside the elegant, long-legged President, pondering not for the first time the contrast in styles they made, herself shorter and broad shouldered in khaki-green CDF fatigues. The President's heels clacked as they walked. Sandy's boots barely squeaked.

"Damn it, Sandy," the President said in a low voice, temper still plain in her voice, "*never* do that in front of the media. Do I make myself clear?"

"Ms. President, *never* put pressure on your Alpha Chief to break with protocol for your day-to-day convenience. Do I make *myself* clear?"

"Fuck it all," the President muttered, "I *knew* there had to be a downside to making you Commander." Sandy raised an eyebrow—the President's swear words were usually limited to the tamer variety. If the f-word was in use, things were bad.

"There's a rocket launcher missing," Sudasarno explained from the President's other side. Neiland sighed.

"Another one? I swear, Sandy, soon these crazies will be better armed than you are."

"Unlikely. What was so important about that rooftop that it couldn't wait a few minutes, anyway?"

"Sudie has evidence that some of my political opponents are misusing the building's info-net."

The lead Alphas turned a corner. The next hallway was wider with tiled patterns on the floor. Well-dressed Parliament staff made way as the Presidential procession passed by, a common enough sight in these corridors lately. Sandy frowned.

"Eavesdropping?" she asked, with a glance across at Sudasarno, who shrugged.

"Some information turned up in their possession that we don't see any other way for them to have," he explained. Them, of course, being the President's political enemies. Who these days were too numerous and varied to count. Sandy thought about it for a moment.

"Ms. President, talk to me. I'm not your enemy. Coordinate with

me in advance and we'll clear a location and keep it private so no one has advance warning, terrorists or Progress Party alike."

Neiland sighed, as if releasing stored tension. "Thank you, Sandy. I should have thought ahead, I've just . . . I've just been so damn busy. What else has been going on?"

"Another nine hospitalisations from fights with Fleet marines on leave from orbit . . ."

"Oh fuck," said the President, wearily. Sandy nearly smiled.

"I wish they would just fuck," she replied, "that's usually the main pastime of grunts on leave. But the populace is giving them a hard time, apparently."

"Damn it, we have a renegade mob of Fleet loyalists threatening to blockade our fucking stations, what do they expect?"

"We should have cancelled leave," said Sudasarno.

"Would have caused another stink," Sandy replied. "We've enough stinks with the Fleet already. The good news is that five of those hospitalisations are marines—one from a very angry kung fu blackbelt citizen, and the other four courtesy just now of Major Rice and some friends."

"Why am I not surprised?" said Neiland. "Anything else?"

"Someone sabotaged the *Mekong*, took out the regulator controls for the thruster injection."

Neiland actually stopped, and all Alpha Team stopped with her, plus Sandy, Sudasarno and the other advisors. The President stared at the CDF commander for a long moment.

"Seriously?" Sandy gave her a mock-reproachful tilt of the head. Neiland took a deep breath. "Damn. Captain Reichardt is not going to be happy."

"There's going to be a lot of captains leaning his way that will be unhappy."

"That's all we need," muttered the President. "A fucking civil war between competing Fleet factions in orbit."

“Ms. President, I’ve never heard you use such bad language so frequently.”

“Oh, stick it up your arse.”

The splendour of the Grand Congressional Hearings Chamber had not yet entirely worn off for Sandy. She sat in her usual place at the central bench, surveying the now-familiar line of faces that looked down on her from the two rows of grand benches opposite—the Union and Progress Party congressors. To her right, also as usual, sat Mahudmita Rafasan, in a typically elegant sari, scanning through various notes on her comp-slate at rapid speed. Audience members in their hundreds shuffled and murmured at the back of the chamber, the collective sound echoing off the chamber’s high, arching dome. Chandeliers gleamed within that vast mosque-style space and the dome’s tiled patterns and midlevel arches were marvellous to behold.

Chairman Khaled Hassan rang the little bell on the desk before him, and announced the proceedings open. Barely had he finished when Congressor Augustino, from the Union side of the benches, launched into action.

“Commander Kresnov, I believe your weapon is in contravention of the standing orders of this Chamber—section 142, I believe—stating that no weapons shall be allowed into the Chamber that are not in the possession of authorised security agents.”

Sandy leaned slightly forward to her desktop microphone, to make sure her voice carried upon the speakers throughout the Chamber. “I’m second-in-command of the Callayan Defence Force, Mr. Augustino. How much more authorised would you like me to get?”

There was a murmur of laughter through the audience behind, and noticeable smiles upon the faces of various Congressors. Sandy’s assault rifle, of course, lay upon the desk to her left hand—precisely where it belonged, in Sandy’s estimation. But Augustino, she knew, wasn’t the

slightest bit interested in the Chamber's standing orders. He had bigger fish to fry. Sandy-sized fish.

"Mr. Chairman," said the conservative Congressor, "I'd like to register my complaint at this latest breach from the Commander. In her various appearances within this Chamber she has never failed to treat the Chamber standing orders with anything less than contempt. I think we can see another clear instance of this attitude here today."

Khaled Hassan looked concerned, stroking his long white beard. And gave Sandy a patient look, inviting her to respond. Sandy smiled at him. She liked Hassan. Among politicians, it was a luxury she did not often allow herself to indulge in.

"Mr. Chairman, I'm a busy girl, I have a lot of official functions I'm trying to perform simultaneously. Foremost among them, I'm trying to get this novel experiment we call the Callayan Defence Force off the ground, in the face of some fairly stiff opposition from obvious sources. I also occasionally get out on official security duties, such as today, when I noticed the President's arrival time would be approximately that of my own, and in light of some recent security alerts I decided to provide the usual CDF escort personally. Thus the weapon, as I am here in dual capacities. Don't worry, the safety is on, and I am fairly well practised in its use."

That got another laugh from behind. Typically, when confronted by politicians in such a setting making clearly inflammatory, opportunistic attacks before the global media, a person would be advised to remain calm, straight-faced and professional—and so allow the attacker's unprofessionalism to backfire, in the eyes of those watching. Various political advisors and publicists, however, had decided that where she was concerned, too much professionalism was a bad thing.

They'd done polling, apparently. And had concluded that what scared people most about her, as a combat GI, was the image of a deadpan, unemotional, human-shaped killing machine. Smile, they'd told her. Be off-the-cuff. Keep it light, where ever possible. Oh, and

try to do that while still reassuring the population that you're perfectly well qualified to hold your present position. The two requests couldn't have been more contradictory—she couldn't be cheerful and caring while demonstrating her proficiency at managing the planet's most lethal combat force. But, as in all impossible political situations, she tried . . . because of course, there was no other choice.

“Before we move on to procedural matters regarding the CDF, Commander,” began Congressor Selvadurai, another Union Party rep, “I'd like to get your response to the recent violent incidents between members of the Federation Fleet and the Tanushan public. Do you think that your inflammatory remarks regarding the nature of the Fleet presence about Callay at this moment have anything to do with the bad blood that evidently exists here?”

Sandy gazed at the Union rep, calm and unblinking. “Which inflammatory remarks would they be, Congressor Selvadurai?”

“You remarked that the Fleet presence about Callay was in fact a de facto blockade intending to intimidate Callay and other Federation worlds into granting concessions to Fleet hardliners.”

“I did say that it was a de facto blockade,” Sandy replied, “and in doing so, I was merely echoing remarks made by many others in this building and beyond, including my own President. If you check my exact words, you'll find that I did not speculate as to the intent of the blockade. That is not my place.”

“But it is your place to provoke hostile feeling toward the Fleet within sections of the Callayan population by mischaracterising its actions in this manner?”

At Sandy's elbow, Mahudmita Rafasan gave a snort of exasperation. Sandy spoke before things got ugly.

“Look, Congressor, we have a situation in orbit right now, I'm sure we're all only too well aware of that. It is not my intention here today, nor at any other time, to make statements that may inflame the situation, or make things worse. But clearly the presence of leading ele-

ments of the Fifth Fleet at our various orbital facilities is unhelpful at best, and provocative at worst. The Fifth's actions are not sanctioned by Federation law, nor by Fleet operating procedure under any circumstances that I am aware of . . .”

“Fleet Admiral Duong of the Fifth has stated many times, Commander,” interrupted Congressor Selvadurai, “that the present state of political flux on Callay places us in a precarious situation vis-à-vis our security. The leaders of approximately a quarter of the entire Federation are presently here, negotiating with our own President Neiland plus Earth's senior representative in Secretary General Benale, to hammer out the new rules and workings of the Federation Grand Council now that it is just a year from being relocated permanently to our planet. We have indigenous and off-world extremist and other groups all focusing upon this world as the centre of their concerns. Our local security is improved but remains imperfect at best, and the degree of weaponry and sophisticated network technology available to these various sources of instability is truly alarming. Would you not say, Commander, that under these circumstances, Fleet Admiral Duong is perfectly correct to state that Callay's security is in question, and in need of assistance?”

“Congressor, as second-in-command of the CDF, I've stated many times that we'll take all the genuine help we can get. We've had many offers of assistance from friendly worlds who supported us in the referendum, who are staunch supporters of the relocation, and we truly welcome their contributions. We are strengthening our various security operations on the ground, Parliament and other dedicated security groups are vastly advanced on where they were two years ago, and the CDF gives us the extra punch we may need if faced with heavier weaponry than the police, the Callayan Security Agency or aligned security have the capability to handle. What we are *not* at risk from is an assault with warships from orbit. Or if we are, then I would suggest that (a) the Fleet should inform us immediately so we can make prepa-

rations, and (b) that they'd be an awful lot more effective defending us against that assault if they were to position themselves somewhere mid-system as is customary when defending against inbound attackers. They certainly won't do any good snuggled up to our space stations with their noses clamped in dock."

"Commander," cut in Congressor Augustino, "we are at serious risk of being flooded by waves of militants, terrorists, foreign agents and sophisticated weaponry from around the Federation and beyond . . ." That's right, Sandy thought, never miss a chance to raise the spectre of the League. ". . . and you don't think it's a good idea for our overworked station staff and customs to receive some help filtering all this inbound traffic?"

Sandy restrained an exasperated smile. "Sir, the Fleet are soldiers. Damn good ones, but soldiers nonetheless. They blow stuff up. Or they hold onto facilities to stop other people from blowing stuff up. They're not customs officers, they're not criminal investigators, they don't have access to files on wanted persons, have limited experience in counter-smuggling, and wouldn't know what the hell to do with any of this information if they received it. We have professionals up there in orbit right now, doing the jobs for which they are specifically equipped and trained, to the best of their considerable abilities.

"The one thing Callay is not yet particularly good at is security and the application of military or paramilitary force, although we are improving fast. The one thing we are *remarkably* good at is commerce. The customs requirements you are speaking of are a matter of bureaucratic commerce, Congressors—there have been plenty of restrictions on certain items of trade for a long time now, both for security, and commercial and legislative reasons. The commercial system has gotten pretty good at it, and now that the circumstances have changed to expand the number of prohibited items and persons, they've adapted marvellously. It's a job for civilian workers in overalls or suits and ties. It's *not*, and I'll stress this, *not* a job for grunts with guns in armour.

I've been a grunt myself, and by many measurements I still am. I recall that nothing irritated me more than being called upon to perform civilian tasks for which I and my people were neither equipped nor trained. Not only did I consider that unfair on us, I considered it unfair on the people we were attempting to serve.

"We didn't ask for Fleet help, and we don't need it. In fact, I'm having great difficulty getting a straight answer on exactly who *did* order the Fleet out here. And even more difficulty getting an answer on why there are also elements of the Third Fleet here as well, in the temporary command of Captain Reichardt of the warship *Mekong*, who are not participating in the activities of the Fifth, nor appear to be answerable to their leader in Admiral Duong. It's obvious to all of us that the Fleet are not united on the question of the relocation. From my perspective in the CDF, such divisions only make the local security environment more precarious, not less. I personally would much prefer that they held their private disagreements well away from Callay, and let us all get on with our jobs."

At Sandy's side, Mahudmita Rafasan gave her a slightly bewildered, worried look. The look she'd given on various occasions before, when the newly appointed CDF Commander had overstepped the official line, and said things that weren't polite. Well, screw it, she thought to herself, it was only one small faction that would be annoyed at her voicing such sentiments, anyhow. They happened to include the President . . . so that was a problem. But not rocking the boat was a part of any Presidential job description. There were many others, whom the President was presently resisting, who thought she should throw the book at Admiral Duong and his hardline captains. Federation law was on their side after all, whatever the increasingly isolated, alienated Earth majority thought about it . . .

"Commander Kresnov," Congressor Augustino said angrily. "The great and honourable Federation Fleet is far too great an institution to be so easily divided, as you and various media scaremongers have been

suggesting! It is only thanks to the heroic sacrifices made by the men and women of the Fleet that the war against the League was won, and all humanity saved from rampant techno-liberalism and political fragmentation and disintegration! I for one do not think that it is either right or fitting for a public figure in a position such as your own to be belittling that achievement, nor the honour and unity of the Fleet today!”

The only problem, Sandy continued her previous line of thought, was that the most outspokenly conservative wing of Callayan politics were all within the President’s own Union Party, like Augustino and Selvadurai. They were loud because they could afford to be. Praising the Fleet’s heroism was, she recalled Vanessa recently remarking, something of a motherhood statement—you praised it, and everyone nodded and applauded, and opponents could not possibly raise voices in protest because what politician could be against motherhood, and expect to win an election? The Fleet had until very recently been a sacred cow in Callayan politics. And she barely managed to restrain a smile at the memory of what her favourite media personality, Rami Rahim, had remarked just the other night on that subject—no longer a sacred cow, the Fleet was now more of a sacred goat. A mangy one with a limp, fleas and a bad case of flatulence. Any more incidents, and it might not be more than a sacred rat. Or one of those small winged insects that tried to bite beneath your collar at outdoor parties every summer . . .

“Congressors,” she said, in the calm and unhurried manner she assumed in the presence of people she didn’t respect, “since this part of my brief is to keep you all informed as to the ongoing security situation regarding the CDF, I think this could be a good time to overstep my bounds a little and relate to you the most recent news of all from orbit. Apparently the warship *Mekong*, commanded by Captain Reichardt of the Third Fleet, has been sabotaged.”

There was a deathly silence from the benches. Busy politicians simply weren’t in the loop for that kind of information . . . doubtless

this was the first they'd heard. From the audience seats behind the ornately carved partition, there came a shifting and murmuring. Particularly from that part of the seating reserved for media.

"It happened at dock," Sandy continued, "and was only reported to me half an hour ago. I have never been shipcrew, ships to me were just a means of transport when I was a grunt, so I don't claim to be an expert on the matter, but from what I do know, such sabotage had to be carried out by someone with considerable expertise."

"This was targeted sabotage?" asked Congressor Zhou, leaning forward on her bench with an expression of great concern. One of the Union Party right wing, and thus a staunch ally of Neiland's. Sandy nodded. "Targeted to do what?"

"To disable the engines, possibly to force *Mekong* to conduct an extensive overhaul. It could have taken them out of action for weeks . . . although thankfully the problem was detected in the last systems check by *Mekong's* engineers, preventing serious damage. Given the security of any warship at dock, during times of war or peace, it seems unlikely that the person responsible could have been anyone other than a member of the Fleet . . . particularly when you account for the expertise involved.

"My job in the CDF is to maintain Callay's security. This task will become exceedingly difficult if we have warring Fleet factions docked to our stations in a state of political stand-off, without any clear idea of lines of command. I am particularly concerned about this, considering the present disorganisation in the Grand Council. There appears to be no effective civilian oversight at present to direct the Fleet in its actions. Fleet HQ is running the show entirely on its own, except that Fleet HQ appears to be divided.

"Furthermore, since the Grand Council began downsizing the Fleet following the conclusion of the war three years ago, we've seen clear evidence of a kind of political stacking going on within certain parts of the Fleet structure—particularly within the Fifth Fleet. As ships from other units have been mothballed, their crews are broken up

and the most hardline, pro-Earth officers have been moved into the Fifth, filling gaps left by the departure of long-serving officers from other parts of the Federation who finally had a chance to go home. The Fleet has been warned of this development many times in the past, as has the Grand Council, but no action has been taken. And now we have Fifth Fleet marines on leave in Tanusha who seem more interested in picking fights with the local populace than they do with relaxing and having fun, as crews usually do during downtime.

“Ladies and gentlemen . . . I’m CDF. I have big guns and professional soldiers at my disposal. I can’t deal with civil disturbances. I can’t stop them blowing up into bigger political issues that inflame passions on all sides and only make the present state of negotiations far more precarious. These are political issues. Your issues. I can only sit here before you today, and ask that you recognise the increasing threat to Callayan security that these factors, in combination, create today.”

Ten minutes later, in response to an invitation, Sandy entered the waiting room to Senator Lautrec’s office. A man seated upon one of the stylish leather chairs, to the left of the Senator’s doors, caught her immediate attention. The man smiled as he saw her, and rose cordially to his feet, a hand extended in welcome, perfect white teeth flashing within a handsome African face.

“Commander.” His tone was deep, cultured, and very self-assured. Sandy stepped across and took the offered hand, eyeing Major Mustafa Ramoja up and down, warily. He looked good in his civvie suit. Although she’d often thought that attractive African men and women would look good in anything. No other race seemed to have that luxury. Not that Ramoja, a GI like herself, belonged to an actual race any more than she was the genuine, pale European she appeared to be. “Nice speech. How long until Krishnaswali chews your ear off for that one?”

“As soon as I step in his door,” Sandy replied, still warily. “They let you out of your cage. Why?”

Ramoja only smiled, well used to her casual provocations. “The Vice-Ambassador is inside. Senior Embassy staff are allowed to have GIs as bodyguards now. I appointed myself, naturally.”

“Naturally. I’m sure all your friends in the CSA were real thrilled to hear that.” Ramoja’s smile grew broader, and he nodded across the room. Sandy looked, and saw a man and a woman reading from comp-slates, trying to look inconspicuous. Groomed and clipped with athletic poise, and uplinked into some seriously encrypted network feeds, Sandy’s uplinks informed her, they weren’t about to fool anyone.

“I call them Number One, and Number Two,” Ramoja said smugly. “They vary, of course. Don’t worry, I shan’t hurt them. They’re very well behaved.” The two CSA agents could easily overhear, but remained expressionless.

Ramoja’s very existence had been a revelation to her, just two years before. A GI with a higher designation than her own. Until that moment, she had not been aware that there *were* such GIs in existence . . . although that assumption seemed fairly naive, in hindsight. He’d been commissioned by the League’s Internal Security Organisation, the ISO, based upon her own, somewhat controversial design, and the success it had attained. Well, before she’d proven a failure by defecting, anyway. Now, he was the ISO’s pointman on Callay, running out of the very heavily watched and defended League Embassy in downtown Tanusha. An enclave full of very capable League GIs, right in the heart of Tanusha, made no local officials happy. And in that particular piece of anti-GI xenophobia, Sandy was right there with them.

“Can I ask what business you have with Senator Lautrec?” Ramoja asked now, with a charming smile.

“You can,” said Sandy.

“More troubles with weapons procurement?”

“We’re having an affair,” Sandy said flatly.

“He’s one hundred and three.”

“Doesn’t look a day over seventy-five. The wrinkles grow on you.”

“That would be the only thing.”

“And what would the Vice-Ambassador’s visit be in aid of?” Sandy returned.

Ramoja made a vague gesture. “League Ambassadors are very popular these days. They get around.”

“So does herpes.”

“An amazingly resistant little virus.” Nothing, and no diversionary tactic, would ever leave Ramoja short of something to say. “Today’s strains would kill a pretechnology human rather quickly, I understand, so resistant they’ve become to everything we throw at them.”

Sandy made a face. “They have the galaxy’s most unstoppable delivery mechanism. STDs have always been the hardest bugs to kill. They spread so easily.”

Ramoja’s eyes flicked toward the office doors. “On top of centurian senators’ desks, one would believe.”

“The Afghan carpet, actually.” She shrugged. “It’s easier on his back.”

Ramoja smiled broadly. He’d been smiling quite a lot, lately, within the parameters of his usual clipped formality. As far as Sandy was aware, Tanusha was Ramoja’s first truly civilian posting. And it seemed to be working its spell on even him. There came voices from inside the Senator’s office, and the door handle turned—an aide emerging first, as the conversation wound up within. Sandy gave the major a bright smile.

“Well, it was entertaining as always,” she told him. “Until the next time.”

“Cassandra,” Ramoja intervened before she could move through the door. She looked at him, expectantly wary. “I have a request to make.”

“Yes?”

Ramoja looked slightly pained. Or perhaps bemused, it was often difficult to tell. “As a personal favour to me,” he said, “do you think you could please refrain from asking Rhian too many questions regarding Embassy scheduling and activities?”

And Sandy found that it was her turn to smile. "Okay. I'll only ask her about the Embassy's security posture then."

"It was a very gracious act from Ambassador Yao and the authorities back on Ryssa to allow Rhian to live with you." Very, very reasonably. As if the very thought of challenging such a reasonable assertion was unthinkable. "I do understand that the two of you have a very special relationship. I understand that her loyalties have become somewhat . . . conflicted. We do not begrudge her that. But please, do not make her situation any more difficult than it already is."

"Rhian's not having a difficult situation," Sandy told him. To her side, several aides had emerged from the Senator's doorway, and were awaiting the Vice-Ambassador. "She's having a ball. I've never seen her so happy and lively. And her social development's been amazing. I'm loving it, I've no intention of making her life difficult."

Ramoja's eyebrows were raised, and he rubbed at his clean-shaven jaw, thoughtfully. "She is becoming a remarkable young woman, I must admit. And we're all very grateful for everything you've done with her, and very pleased that she's been able to experience such personal growth. But she *is* under direct instruction to report if you ask her certain questions . . ."

"She's told me so," Sandy said frankly.

Ramoja nodded. "Then we're understood. It would be a great pity if certain authorities, above my head, began to get nervous, and decided that the present arrangements should cease." Now the Vice-Ambassador was emerging. Ramoja flashed her a truly dazzling smile. "It was a pleasure, Commander. Until next time."

And he swept off, to clear a path for his important charge. Sandy waited at the doorway as the Vice-Ambassador and his aides left, the two CSA agents close behind, no doubt transmitting furiously to others in the hallway outside. No damn way Ramoja was only here as a bodyguard, Sandy reflected darkly. It was an excuse to talk to people. To move in the corridors of power. Ramoja, like herself, was no ordi-

nary GI. Exactly what that meant, for her old friend Rhian Chu, she'd yet to properly decide.

And she walked into the office, and closed the door behind her. The grey-haired Senator Lautrec was standing behind his desk, his walls adorned with books and flags, awaiting her with a broad smile.

"Cassandra! Do come in, do come in. And how are you feeling today?"

Sandy exhaled a long breath she hadn't realised she'd been holding. "Like I've just gone five rounds with a homicidal laser scalpel."