

PROLOGUE

A bulky Earth Conglomerate prison ship, the Centaurus, floats peacefully in the coldness of space. The only interstellar body in the vicinity is a brown coloured gas giant that hangs amongst a sparkling starscape studded with glittering lights like jewels on black velvet.

A Magellan Class shuttle makes its way laboriously towards the prison barge, a mere bug compared to the size of the ship it approaches. The only passenger on board is Security Chief Salina Craddock, human, female, uncompromising, late 50's, career officer; considered one of the best interrogators and analysis' in ECSSA - Earth Conglomerate Space Security Agency. She sits quietly in the reclining leather seat attired in her immaculate light brown coloured uniform, skirt, tights, boots and gloves. The only insignia is an ECSSA badge above the right breast depicting two hands holding the planet Earth with an all-seeing eye above, and the inscription - *Freedom Through Vigilance* - inscribed at the bottom. An attractive woman with light brown skin, brown eyes and a fair complexion, only marred by two skin blemishes on her left cheek; her black collar length hair with several streaks of grey through it is trimmed neat and tidy. Being well groomed was a must for all ECSSA officers and agents, untidiness like tardiness wasn't tolerated, appearance was everything and first impressions mattered to ECSSA.

Her attention is riveted to the vid screen in the back of the seat in front of her; she has a sip of Teygetian Brandy on the rocks, the only vice she allows herself these days. The news is all about the rapidly escalating war that is quickly engulfing the Milky Way. The Earth Conglomerate and its allies have commenced striking into Draconian territory launching an assault on the Draxon shipyards in retaliation for the recent attack on Elysium, an Earth colony in the Coeleno System. But Salina knows that this is just the beginning as every race, empire, federation, and conglomerate is seemingly getting involved as alliances are made and broken on a whim. On whom can offer the best deal, the greatest advantage, the most currency, or helium-3, a commodity the conglomerates of Earth have had in abundance; a non-radioactive isotope that became one of the main energy sources of the galaxy.

Salina knows that some of the upper echelons weren't happy about the developing situation, but those voices of dissent were quickly silenced. The conglomerate and military were jumping in headfirst seeing it as an opportunity to extend their reach, power and control. They might not have started this conflict, but they were damn well going to participate. In fact, no one seems to really know how this war came about; it appears to have just steadily taken shape and form over the last several years, creeping up on the galaxy. Salina agrees that this war was stupid, but the bosses wanted it and so she totes the company line. ECSSA valued opinions, provided they were in line with their own, Salina learned early on to keep her dissimilar thoughts and counsel to herself.

A necessary evil is how Salina often describes herself, the first and in some cases the last line of defence for Earth, her adherence to duty and loyalty has never wavered over the years, but it has been tested. Her proclivity has always been to treat any suspect or prisoner in the proper and appropriate manner befitting the circumstances. Yet the line in the sand all too often becomes blurred as one seeks to get to the truth. Truth does not need a defender-only an investigator, is a common saying within ECSSA. Vigilance has its price but so too does freedom, and to keep it one must often mistreat it.

She has given most of her life over to the agency and the security of Earth, more than just blood, sweat and tears; the recent death of her son, killed in action, is still an open wound. A captain in the 105th Spaceborne Rangers, he lost his life in a skirmish with the Draconians on the outer rim of the Crab Nebula. Salina had been offered compassionate leave, but didn't take it, Michael's body was lost and so she didn't see the point of a ceremony. Besides, what was she to do afterwards; she had no real home, no family, her husband had divorced her years ago. Her son was her only family, and he was gone, a causality in yet another war.

All she had left in her life is her work; but even that seems less important now than it once was. The older one gets the more their outlook and beliefs change as the clichés and tropes you scoffed at when you were young and foolish begin to ring true.

"We're five minutes out from the Centaurus, Ma'am," the pilot's voice crackles over the intercom.

Getting back to business, Salina switches off the news and looks back down at the file in her lap. The report that scrolls on the screen of her paper-thin electronic vid-pad doesn't contain much information about the prisoner she has come to question, which means if they won't cooperate this could be a very long session, something Salina isn't looking forward to. But it's all part of the job and the Security Chief has always prided herself on how successful she has been in obtaining information. She has lost count of how many Johns and Jane Does and POW's she has interrogated over the years, or how many have lived or died on her say so alone.

And yet she felt uneasy.

Disquietude lurks at the back of her mind.

The leaders of ECSSA were watching.

Salina's last two assignments hadn't gone well, mistakes were made. People were hurt. She barely escaped being sanctioned but now she has a lot more attention upon her. Her every move and decision will be scrutinized with a fine-tooth comb. If she farts too loudly, she will be on the outer, pensioned off or worse, assigned to some outpost at the ass end of the galaxy. Her bosses awarded success but not failure, more so now since the start of the war.

This mission must be a success, there was no other option.

She again studies the file, but there was nothing about this prisoner, by all accounts they are a complete mystery. The only information in the report, other than the details of their capture, which sticks out, is the prisoner's origin, part human and part Vaillian. The Security Chief smirks, it's obviously a mistake, some moron with an overactive imagination. Vaillians are an extinct species and have been by all accounts for centuries and yet it is a curious notation to put into any report.

The shuttle cuts its engines as it comes into the docking bay and is taken under automatic control by the Centaurus C&C - Command and Control.

Commander Beckett stands nearby watching as the shuttle touches down upon the deck, landing thrusters shooting out steam and hissing loudly like some great beast exhaling. The Commander of the Centaurus stands rigid and uneasy; even after several years commanding this bucket he is still nervous when an ECSSA agent comes aboard. Something always goes wrong, and he didn't need any more reprimands on his record. Truth is told most military officers didn't like ECSSA operatives, there was no love lost between the two arms of the Earth Conglomerate: a thorn and a nuisance nothing more.

"Commander Beckett."

The voice quickly snaps Beckett out of his ponderings as he shoots out his hand in greeting, "Chief Craddock," he replies formally keeping as much of a neutral expression as possible, not wanting to give anything away; it was common knowledge that all ECSSA agents were experts in reading expressions and body language. "How was your journey?"

"Long and tiring," Salina responds in a no-nonsense manner, she doesn't suffer fools, and she always keeps people on their toes as it helps to give themselves away, especially when hiding something.

"Yes, well, if you'll follow me, I'll show you to your quarters, your baggage will be sent on."

Salina acknowledges with a nod of the head and the two make their way out of the busy landing bay. The silence grows between them as they walk down the corridor towards the lift. Salina lets the stillness drag out a little longer before finally asking Commander Beckett how things are going aboard the Centaurus.

"Ship shape, but we are flat out with all the new arrivals; we must rush many of the processing's as we're quickly running out of room. I've requested more resources and personnel, but none can be spared," he complains.

"We all have to operate under war time conditions Commander," Salina reminds him.

This statement irks Beckett to no end. "I realize that, but the Centaurus has the capacity of housing five thousand prisoners and yet we're currently at six thousand five hundred. The strain is immense."

"I see, well, I'll be sure to mention your concerns in my report."

"What? No, I can mention them in my own reports," he tells her defensively.

Salina remains impassive, smiling on the inside, slightly nodding her head. She was like a cat playing with a mouse. Commander Beckett quickly enters the lift followed by the Security Chief.

“Deck 27,” he says out loud. The doors close and the transit lift moves at a rapid pace arriving at the destination within seconds. The doors open and the two alight into the VIP quarters.

“This way,” Beckett indicates the way with a wave of the hand.

“And my prisoner?”

“They’re in the isolation wing.”

“Any trouble?”

“No, in fact they’ve been most compliant. I can tell you; I wish all inmates were so passive, but when you house the worse of the worse. Still the prisoner has a ...” Beckett’s words trail off.

“Yes, what do they have?”

“There’s just something about this prisoner, a quality that’s ...” Beckett again tries to find the words he is looking for, but they elude him. “You’ll see for yourself.”

“Has the prisoner spoken?” Salina inquires.

“As quiet as a church mouse.”

“Very well, I’ll freshen up and then I’ll see the prisoner. Thank you, Commander.” With that and a rigid nod of the head the Security Chief abruptly dismisses Beckett and enters her quarters leaving the man in charge staring at a closed door “You’re welcome,” he says tartly before turning on his heels and leaving.

To name the quarters VIP was a bit of an understatement to say the least. Though clean and comfortable there was little in the way of decoration, a medium size room with a small ensuite bathroom but at least there was a window with a view of the Centaurus’ hull. Salina has had a lot worse and a lot better and if she doesn’t do a bang-up job on this assignment, she would soon be getting use to quarters such as these.

The door buzzer chimes.

“Enter.”

The door slides open, and a dock worker enters carrying Salina’s luggage, that consists of one metallic silver coloured suitcase.

“Thank you.”

The dock worker leaves the suitcase and promptly exits. Salina picks up the baggage and places it on the bed. She opens it revealing an extra uniform, tights, underwear, toiletries, a framed photo of her son, a couple of electronic recording devices, a half-drunk bottle of Teygetian Brandy, a Halifax X22 pistol and four small shiny shivs; all neatly packed away, everything in its right place, nothing out of order, much the same as the Security Chief’s life.

She reaches down to pick up the photo of her son but stops herself mid reach; this wasn’t the time for sentimentality. First things first, she undresses placing her clothes on the bed grabs the toiletry bag and heads into the bathroom. She hops into the shower, turns it on letting the water run down over her body, warm and refreshing she begins to feel the stiffness leave her muscles and the tension and lassitude her body.

After attending to her ablutions, Salina makes herself a refreshing cup of English breakfast tea from the small barista. She slips on her extra clean uniform making sure that everything looks immaculate. She places one of the shivs inside the right boot into the specially made scabbard for it. Making one final check of her appearance and satisfied that everything is in its correct place, the Security Chief takes her electronic vid-pad and exits the room.

The prisoner dressed in an orange jumpsuit floats in a zero-gravity cell in the isolation wing. The room is small and ill lit with a floor and wall window that looks out into space designed to give one the feeling of freedom but always trapped. Many go mad only after a day or so in one of these cells but no matter how long they last in the end they always break. However, the prisoner in isolation cell B is different; they are a female of Vaillian and Human origin. The intermingling of the two humanoid species has produced a most astounding creation; slim, nimble and attractive, her pale coloured skin and deep green eyes along with her jet-black hair only serve to enhance her beauty. Yet for all her exquisiteness there is a deep-felt sorrow behind her eyes and deadliness to her nature.

“Are you the one in charge?”

"Yes," Salina answers.

"Then I've been waiting for you." The prisoner's voice sounds soft, angelic like, but as clear as a bell.

"Is that so?" Salina replies.

"Oh yes."

The prisoner turns and floats up to the window of a small viewing room off to the side of the cell coming face to face with Salina Craddock, who stands on the other side. The two lock eyes, staring at one another in silence. The ECSSA agent's face and body remains inexpressive, realizing that the prisoner is trying to get a read on her. Salina prides herself on her poker face but it is all she can do to keep herself in check as she gets the strangest sensation that this person is seeing right through her facade and down into her inner most feelings and even into her very soul. Salina quickly understands what Commander Beckett was trying to articulate earlier; there is something very abnormal about this person, about their nature.

"You'll do," the prisoner says without a qualm.

"I will?" the Security Chief questions.

"There's not a lot of time."

"Well, that's true enough, you don't have much." Salina agrees.

"And yet time changes things. It gives clarity...of thought, perspective" the prisoner speaks with intent.

"You do realize that you could be facing execution," Salina informs her in all seriousness. "My report will go a long way in deciding your fate."

"My fate was deemed a long time ago."

"Well, in my opinion," Salina says, "one shouldn't resign themselves to fate."

The prisoner gives her inquisitor a look of interest. "Why is that?"

"Because the resignation might be accepted."

The prisoner smiles brightly, the melancholy within her eyes dissipating, if only momentarily. "Do they teach philosophy in the organization that you work for?"

"No, ECSSA is not about such things, it's..." Salina halts herself, realizing that she is about to begin talking about the inner workings of ECSSA. She looks away to clear her head and regather her thoughts. The prisoner is manipulative, cunning, and yet even now, Salina, feels compelled to open up and to tell her everything she knows about herself, about the agency. For some unknown reason she suddenly finds herself having flashbacks of her mother and the long talks they use to have when she was a little girl living in Crater City on the moon; and more importantly the love she felt. The love of a mother for her child and instantly Salina feels the same love for her lost son. A flood of emotions begins to rise from deep inside her gut. She fights them, not wanting to give in, if she does, she will break and so she brutally forces them back down, not daring to let them out. She abruptly turns back to face the window and the prisoner, floating gently in front of her like a reed beneath the water, undulating with the movement of the tide. The Security Chief remains quiet wondering whether this person can read her thoughts or perhaps be an empath of some kind - maybe. But she doesn't sense such things about this person; it's just their aura, for lack of a better word. But whatever it is it can be intoxicating and that is a dangerous thing in Salina Craddock's line of work.

"Who are you?"

"You said we shouldn't embrace our fate, in that you're correct and incorrect. When fate throws a knife at you, there are two ways of catching it - either by the blade or the handle."

"And which way do you choose?"

"The only way I can." She answers cryptically.

"That tells me nothing." Salina snaps, instantly regretting letting her emotions get the better of her. Be professional, she chides herself.

"You're right, it doesn't." The prisoner falls silent and contemplative; her mind recalling all that has come before; places and people, events and situations. "I've travelled far," the prisoner speaks, "to dozens of worlds, undiscovered, undreamt of, dark, light, paradises and infernos. I've climbed the Ruby Peaks of Doona and danced around Orion's Belt. I've swum naked in the cool moon pools of Tregata. I've seen battleships burn around the rings of Solos. But above all I've loved. I've also killed professionally seven times and another six as judge, jury and executioner."

Silence again fills the space between the two women.

Salina digests what she has just been told. It is abundantly clear this is not what she expected to hear. Now how to respond?

“What army are you a member of? What faction?”

“No army.”

“You were caught on the Earth dreadnaught Invictus during battle. Again, I must inform you that under code 72i of the espionage act you are facing the real possibility of execution,” Salina tells her in earnest.

“So, you say,” the prisoner responds, completely unphased by the grim prospect of death.

“It’s the law,” Salina continues, “these are very serious charges you’re facing.”

“Well, then, before I die. I intend to take another life. The one who found me. The one who created me.”

“You may find that a little difficult considering your current predicament,” she says in an unsympathetic tone. “The only person who will be eliminated will be yourself and no one else.”

“One more life,” the prisoner iterates, “either his or mine.”

The Security Chief thinks about her next move carefully. It’s obvious the prisoner is unafraid of the prospect of being executed, their calmness, in fact, is remarkable. Yet Salina senses that the prisoner has more to say, much more.

“Do you have anything else to say?” Salina asks.

“Like what?”

“Your name to begin with.”

“What’s in a name?”

“I need to know what to call you.”

“Call me what you like.”

Salina keeps her frustration in check. “And what should that be?”

“I was once called Jarmia. A word meaning light to my people or so my mother told me.”

“Your people, Vaillians no longer exist,” Salina questions.

“The universe is a big place, obviously a strain of my kind managed to live on.”

“But you’re only half Vaillian and the other half is human.”

“Yes, but my mother was pure Vaillian, and I can confirm unequivocally that the Vaillian blood that runs through these veins is all that’s left.” The prisoner holds up her hands in front of her face to give emphasis to her words. “But tell me something, ECSSA agent, what is your name?”

She is hesitant to divulge such information early on, but her experience has proven that a little give and take goes a long way in getting answers. “Security Chief Salina Craddock,” she proffers.

“Salina.” The prisoner speaks the name as if they were talking about a lover.

Salina continues pushing for answers. “You said you were once called Jarmia, but not anymore. Who are you now?”

The prisoner drifts over to the viewing room and puts her face up against the window. Salina holds the prisoner’s intense gaze. And yet even through the glass the Security Chief can feel and sense some life force emanating outward from her captive. “Nobody of importance,” the prisoner responds.

“No importance, so you don’t have anything to confess?”

“Like what?”

“Like what you were doing in a war zone, to begin with and like whom you’re spying for?”

“I’m no spy.”

“Not a spy,” disbelief fills Salina’s words. “You were caught in a war zone upon an Earth dreadnaught with a dead Draconian at your feet. That evidence is damning, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I was an assassin.”

The words hang in the air like an uninvited guest.

Salina shakes her head trying to comprehend this revelation. “An assassin?”

“But now I’m justice,” the prisoner adds.

Salina’s frustration breaks through. “I’ve got no time for these games.”

“This is not a game. The wars that are beginning to tear the stars apart out there I had a hand in.”

“Really.”

“Yes, though I did not know it at first. I was blind and a fool. Deceived by a masterful magician and manipulator.”

Salina senses the sincerity in her words. "All I require from you is the truth."

"Then you shall have it Security Chief Salina Craddock."

About time, Salina thinks, realizing that this is going to be some tale. She just hopes that it's the truth.

"I must leave an account of the events that have shaped me and brought me here before you. That led to my recruitment by The Black Order. Will you hear my story?"

"I'm listening," Salina replies.

The prisoner is silent for several moments as she sorts out her thoughts. Her sojourn has been long and hard and her travails many. The universe is an amazing place with many mysteries and the former assassin now justice turned prisoner but once known as Jarmia has many secrets to spill.

She begins. "You'll hear the terrible crimes I've committed. I accept my guilt. But you'll also hear above all else my redemption and the divine light that saved me." A single tear forms in the corner of her eye and floats away in the zero gravity. In immense inner pain she closes her eyes. "I'll begin with my genesis."