

RED ANGEL

Book III: HIJACKERS

By

C. R. DAEMS

Red Angel: Book III Hijackers
Copyright © 2017 by C. R. Daems

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without the permission in writing from C. R. Daems.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

ISBN-10: 0-9983251-2-0
ISBN-13: 978-0-9983251-2-5



Check out all my novels at:
crdaems.com & talonnovels.com

| | |
|-------------------------------------|----------|
| CHAPTER ONE..... | 6 |
| <i>Oxax: Decision Time</i> | <i>6</i> |
| CHAPTER TWO | 9 |
| <i>Eastar: A New Beginning.....</i> | <i>9</i> |

**Peoples
Republic of
Stars**

**Free
Peoples
Union**

Shadows
Rest Westar
Safe Harbor Oasis
Black Water Truth Star Oxax Fire Rock
Holy Star Amend
Eastar New Zheng Zasp
Sutan
Stone Ring

**United
Alliance of
Stars**

CHAPTER ONE

Oxax: Decision Time

The sound of the front door opening jarred me back to the present, and I sat staring at my computer screen, which was currently cycling through my screen saver's selection of pictures. At the moment a picture of Adrian Shrader, Kristyn Sinclair, Richard Gannon, and me sitting at a dining table at Aughoes, celebrating having successfully concluded the Raiders Case, and Adrian, Kris, and my promotions to commander. Tears slid down my cheeks.

"What's wrong, Anna?" Alexa asked, as she walked around my desk and took my face in her hands. "Your eyes are red and puffy."

"The future," I mumbled, leaning against her and sobbing uncontrollably.

"What's wrong with the future, Daughter?"

"Everything!" I choked out. "They promoted us to commanders!"

"Most would consider that a good thing."

"Kris is being sent to Stone Ring and Adrian to Westar...and they want me to go to Eastar," I whined between sobs. Childish, but I didn't care. "How is a twenty-four-year-old going to command an NIA Office? I've never supervised anyone. And I'm not ready to leave home...you. You're my life."

"My poor daughter. You finally found a comfortable life and it appears to be crumbling—"

"It is!" My arms tightened around Alexa, feeling like I would fall into an abyss if I let go. She stood quietly stroking my head for a long while, and I think I fell asleep because her voice jerked me back to the present.

"Come, Daughter, dinner is getting cold and your mother's legs are beginning to ache." She had a warm smile when I looked up. "Wash, and I'll meet you downstairs."

During dinner Alexa did all the talking, recapping several of the trials she had resided over. For my part, I was content to ignore my problems and pretend nothing had happened, refusing to contemplate tomorrow. After dinner we retired to the living room and took up our usual positions on the couch, with Alexa at one end and me at the other. I stretched my legs out so our feet touched and sighed in contentment.

"Comfortable my *today*, Daughter?" She smiled and I nodded. "You can choose to avoid making any decisions by resigning your commission. You're the love of my life, and I would support you whether you chose to work or not."

Just then Red chose to make an entrance and wound himself around my neck, lying with his red head hanging downward. I stared at him for a long time, then began laughing. A minute later Alexa joined me.

"I think Red has developed a sense of humor," I said, shaking my head.

"Maybe he's reacting to your mood. Your relationship is symbiotic after all.

"True, but I've never known him to react to my moods. He maybe a snake but he has a personality of his own. He shows when he is bored, interested, or disinterested in things and people, and can be defensive, but not happy or sad or..." I lapsed into silence. I wasn't sure what Red was, but he definitely wasn't a normal red-headed krait. He appeared to have chosen me because I had the Coaca Virus—a symbiotic relationship since he lives off my blood and his venomous bite keeps the virus in check. But...

He had sought me out in the snow—snakes are normally inactive in the cold.

He killed a man who stole him from me—although the man also had the Coaca Virus. He appears to know friend from foe—since he has never bitten anyone close to me like my mother or Kris.

And I swear his presence makes me smarter and able to detect people's emotions. Conversely, he has never done anything I could interpret as communication.

"No, Mother. He may not communicate with me, but I can tell when he's disgusted with me because I can't find an answer to something he has already deduced, or interested in something I'm reading or, like right now, that he's acting the clown," I said, certain I was right, although it would sound ridiculous to anyone listening. But after ten years of constant presence, I would wager my life on it.

"Maybe he wants you to address the issues." Alexa held up a hand before I could object. "The final solution is your decision, and I will support you no matter what you decide. Pick a problem."

"Yes, Mother," I reluctantly agreed. If Alexa wanted me to discuss my fears I would, but only to please her. "The team is breaking up. Kris is like a sister to me, Adrian a dear friend, Rich is easy to work with, and Stauffer is a good boss who understands me."

"That is understandable but not uncommon in the military. People come and go as they get new assignments, promoted, or leave the service. For you it's more traumatic than normal because of Red and people's reaction to him and, by extension, to you. Even Kris was nervous when you joined the team. But you made good friends. Nothing prevents you from staying in touch. I'd wager Kris and Adrian will invite you to every major event in their lives: marriage, birth of a child, etcetera. And there is nothing to prevent you from visiting."

"Admiral Lulltrell wants me in Eastar. Not that it matters, since the Oxax office isn't one of the NIA offices on the list I have to choose from. That means I'd have to leave home regardless. Your adolescent daughter isn't ready. You're not only my mother but my best friend and...island of safety." A tear leaked out and slid down one cheek.

"Admiral Lulltrell does want you in Eastar. In fact, she called me today and we had a long talk. I explained to her the problems you had growing up and the ones you face everyday because of Red and your age. She was very understanding."

"How does that help?" I asked, feeling afraid and defensive.

"There is an opening on the Eastar Appellate Court. It's mine if I want it."

"You would move?" I blurted in surprise.

"With or without the job. I've told you before we would always work things out together. I have nothing holding me here that is nearly as important as you. So if you still want to leave home, I'm willing to move home to wherever you want it to be."

"But what about an adolescent running a NIA Office?" Fear gripped me and the thought had drops of sweat forming under my breasts and trickling down my stomach.

"Lulltrell wants you there not only because you have a keen mind but demonstrated excellent insight during the Smugglers and Raiders assignments. She knows you discovered many of the significant clues that led to breaking both cases...and only you had the nerve to invoke P1A on her to find Commander Wright's involvement."

"Are you sure she doesn't want me there to get even for having her investigated?" I asked, only partly in jest.

"She admits you were right and another reason she wants you at NIA Headquarters. She will provide you with whatever assistance you need until you feel comfortable with your duties."

"I hope whoever they are, they aren't planning on retiring anytime soon."

* * *

The next three weeks were a whirlwind of activity. Alexa communicated with a realtor in Eastar to identify potential properties for us to view when we arrived. We identified the furniture

and personal items we wanted to take, and arranged transportation on a Navy cruiser, which agreed to take my skimmer. On arrival at Eastar, we spent a week looking at properties.

"What do you think, Daughter?" Alexa asked after having arrived at a list of houses that potentially met our needs.

"Mother, this is worse than chasing Raiders: the basic cost of the house, the cost of repairs or upgrades, in some cases, and security modifications, transportation considerations, and monthly and yearly expenses," I said, shaking my head, which didn't help as it was already spinning with numbers and issues.

"Although we agreed not to sell the house on Oxax as a contingency, you and I have very good salaries, generous housing allowances, and a very adequate portfolio. But although our offices will be close to each other, we can't assume our hours will always permit us to ride together."

For the next two days, we slowly eliminated one house at a time until only two remained. In the end, security took precedence because of Red and his escalating value on the Black Market, which was reported to be as high as two hundred fifty thousand credits. Lulltrel agreed to pay for a Panic Room in lieu of providing security personnel for the house. We purchased a five-bedroom two-story house with a skimmer pad, in a moderately populated area only twenty minutes from our office buildings. Alexa arranged for on-demand limo service for when our schedules conflicted.

CHAPTER TWO

Eastar: A New Beginning

I entered the twenty-story Naval Headquarters building dressed in service blues, feeling nervous, and not knowing what to expect. I couldn't blame anyone from thinking I was a high school kid impersonating a Naval officer as a prank. Therefore I was pleasantly surprised to make it to the weapon detection unit without being stopped. However, one step into the unit and alarms blared, and two petty officers in Naval security uniforms came running with weapons drawn. Everyone in the lobby turned to look in my direction. I had been so nervous about my first day at work, I had forgotten I was wearing a multifunctional weapon. True to my concern, the younger guard, a petty officer third class, smiled after looking at my uniform. He looked to be about twenty, tall lean build, and short blond hair. The chief petty officer's weathered face wasn't smiling. He stood evaluating me as a potential threat wearing a poor disguise, and his multifunctional weapon pointed directly at my chest, whereas the corporal's weapon was held casually, pointing toward the floor.

"I'm sorry, Chief. It's my first day reporting for work and I forgot I carry a weapon," I said. Judging by how hot my face felt, my cheeks were probably scarlet.

"Ma'am, may I see some identification?" he asked, his tone was close to a growl and he didn't sound in a good mood. Unfortunately, Red decided to make his grand entrance, wrapping himself around my neck with his head pointed in the chief's direction. "Pets are not allowed in the building. Give it to Phillips," he demanded, while nodding in the direction of the other security guard. I ignored him while slowly reaching into my handbag and removing my NIA identification badge and handed it to him. He scanned it and me several times before waving for me to proceed to the right, avoiding the entrance lanes some twenty steps ahead, to a counter where a young sandy-haired Navy lieutenant and an older female senior chief petty officer stood watching us approach. He handed my ID to the lieutenant, whose face turned to a sneer after staring at my ribbons. Shaking his head, he passed it to the senior chief. She spent a minute tapping on her computer screen. When she looked up a smile lit her round pleasant face.

"Welcome aboard, ma'am." She straightened to attention and gave me a perfect salute, which I returned.

"Chief Nelson, Commander Paulus is the new NIA Station Chief and is authorized to carry a weapon...and her red-headed krait." Her smile broadened at the look on the three men's faces. She reached into a drawer and pulled out a badge on a blue silk cord and handed it to me. "Ma'am, your NIA section is located on the sixteenth floor but Admiral Lulltrell said she wanted you to report to her when you arrived. Her office is on the eighteenth floor. This will get you, and your krait, safely past the security checkpoints."

"Thank you, Senior Chief," I said and made for the closest entrance lane, with Nelson following me. At the gate he waved to the petty officer standing on the other side.

"Williams, the commander is cleared to carry the weapon and the snake." He pointed to my shoulder where Red lay. "Have a nice day, Commander," he said, but didn't look like he meant it.

I walked up to the gate, swiped my new identification card through the slot, and a green light appeared. When it did, the bar across the lane released for me to pass through. Red disappeared into my uniform as I made my way to the bank of elevators. I pretended I didn't notice everyone staring at me as I stepped inside the first one to open and continued to examine my new ID. It had the NIA Seal, Commander Anna Paulus, NIA Eastar Station Chief,

authorization to carry a gun, a medical exemption to carry a red-headed krait on my person, and Admiral Webb's name and signature. When the elevator opened on the eighteenth floor, I cautiously stepped out as if entering a minefield, and surveyed the area. I probably would have jumped back into the elevator if the doors hadn't closed behind me. Two Navy security men were staring at me and had their hands on their multifunctional weapons. They watched me like a potential terrorist as I took several cautious steps toward a master chief who sat several steps in front of me at a large mahogany desk.

"I'm here to see Admiral Lulltrel." I smiled at the confused look on his face. "I'm Commander Paulus," I said and handed him my new ID.

After a minute looking at his tablet, his frown turned to a smile. "Yes, Commander. If you wouldn't mind taking a seat in the waiting room." He pointed to a large area to his right with padded chairs, small tables, and a ceiling to floor window that ran the length of the room. "I'll let her know you're here."

"Thank you, Master Chief." I nodded and walked over to the window. The bird's-eye view of the city was spectacular. Thirty or more skyscrapers could be seen, and several skimmers were crisscrossing between the buildings.

"Ma'am, may I get you something to drink while you wait?" asked a young female petty officer.

"No thank you, Petty Officer. I'm fine for now," I said, noting she probably wasn't but a few years younger than me. I suppressed a laugh at the thought I'd feel more comfortable in her uniform than in mine. A lieutenant commander jerked me back to the present.

"Commander Paulus, I'm Lieutenant Commander Spalding, Admiral Lulltrel's aide. The Admiral will see you now." The smile on the soft round face was warm. He looked in his early thirties.

"I remember you, Commander. I put you and Admiral Lulltrel through an embarrassing...procedure.

"Justified and amusing in retrospect. And a gutsy call I doubt many officers would make in a similar position. I'm looking forward to working with you."

"Thank you, Commander Spalding."

He extended his hand, which I shook just as Red made an appearance.

"And my friend is Red."

Spalding laughed. "Come, Commander, we don't want to keep the admiral waiting. He led me down the hallway to the end where a gray-haired master chief sat at a mahogany desk, blocking the path to Lulltrel's office. When he saw me he rose, knocked on the door, opened it enough to peek in, and said something.

"Commander Paulus, the admiral will see you now," he said as he opened the door for me to enter. I entered, braced to attention, and saluted as I heard the door close behind me.

"Commander Paulus, reporting for duty, ma'am."

She returned my salute and smiled. "Get yourself something to drink from the sidebar and have a seat, Anna." She gave a snort. "That must have been an exciting entrance...carrying a weapon, ribbons one would expect on a retired admiral, and your young appearance."

"It was a little exciting when I set off the weapons alarm. But it was cleared up surprisingly quickly."

"You can thank Jerry, Commander Spalding, for getting your authorizations prepared beforehand and available at the check-in booth."

I mixed the half-milk and half-coffee concoction I had come to enjoy and sat in one of the dark blue padded chairs she had pointed at. To my surprise, she rose and sat in a chair opposite me.

"I've talked with Admiral Rawls, Commodore Stauffer, and your mother and understand your reluctance to move to Eastar. Your red-headed friend has made your life difficult and change something to be feared. And being a prodigy is never easy as it makes people uncomfortable. I wish I could say it was going to be easy being so young and in charge of the NIA Office, but I know it won't. However, it's the right place for you, Anna, and I'll do whatever I can to help."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Let's go to the conference room and introduce you to the rest of my staff." She rose and I followed her and Spalding down the hallway. Spalding waved me in, then shouted "Attention." Two men and a woman rose as Lulltrell entered.

"At ease and sit." She indicated for me to stay standing as she waited for the three commanders to sit. "I'd like to introduce the new Eastar NIA Station Chief, Commander Anna Paulus. And yes, she is as young as she looks. But don't be fooled. She has earned her rank, as her impressive array of medals will attest." Lulltrell stopped to take a sip of coffee her aide had placed on the table in front of her. "I would describe her as a cross between a bloodhound and a pit bull." That produced smiles and a few chuckles. "I've coerced her here to be the station chief because I believe it's where she can be the most use to the organization. Currently, the individual station chiefs each send me a monthly report. Since I neither have the time nor an interest in the details of the individual cases they are working, I have them prepare an executive summary which allows me to focus on any problems, while ignoring the details. I think that was a mistake. Consequently, Commander Paulus is going to assume that responsibility for me. Why? Because she has demonstrated a rare ability to see the bigger picture. That ability led to the destruction of the Smugglers' and Raiders' operations in the UAS. Without her insights, we would have imprisoned a large group of intermediates, but the Smugglers' and Raiders' organizations would have been back in business within months. I'm hoping giving her access to the station reports will enable her to alert us to potential UAS problems." She nodded for me to sit and looked to the woman on her left. "Why don't each of you introduce yourselves?"

"Hi, Anna. I'm Commander Hadley. You can call me Teresa." She was a tall slender woman in her early forties. Her angular face and black hair pulled back in a tail would have been intimidating except for the welcoming smile. "I'm responsible for NIA data collection, which includes the WavComs. You were using our technology to strip the WavComs and used our databases to obtain information on the merchants' activities." She turned to look at the slightly younger man next to her. He had a mustache, goatee, and curly brown hair which showed no signs of gray. He look to be Teresa's height and to be in good physical condition.

"I'm Commander Byrnes. You can call me Kelvin. I manage the NIA school, which is called the Academy. It's where we try to teach people to be as smart as you," he produced a huge grin, "but seldom succeed. We teach them how to use our equipment, use various investigative techniques, and work on old cases. I'd be very interested in reviewing the Smugglers' and Raiders' cases with you. They would be excellent case studies." He nodded to the man next to him.

"I'm Commander Leyva, Norman. I'm in charge of the NIA's Forensic Department. Ironically, if you hadn't been so good at puzzles, my department would have been assigned to work on them." He nodded, which I took as my turn.

"I'm Commander Paulus—Anna. You probably already know I have a red-headed krait as a constant companion." I stuck my hand into my jacket and Red wound himself around my arm. "I refer to him as Red. He has been my constant companion from the age of four. He's venomous but our relationship is symbiotic. He feeds off me and in turn injects me with a poison that keeps the Coaca Virus from becoming active. He never leaves my person so you will always know where he is. And he's lazy so you don't have to worry about being close to me, but I prefer

people don't grab or push me. I have the antivenin, but I understand recovery is painful." I paused for questions. When no one spoke I continued. "I carry a weapon because Red is worth in the neighborhood of two hundred and fifty thousand credits, and life to those with the virus." That provoked several whistles. "I'm a graduate of the Oxax Naval Academy. And I would appreciate any help or advice you may be willing to share with me."

* * *

"Well, Mother. How was your first day?" I asked as we sat down for our first dinner in our new home.

"Scary. The current six judges have been on the Eastar Appellate Court for years. I feel like a new lieutenant reporting for her first assignment. What about you?"

"Worse than I thought it would be. My day started by setting off the weapons detection equipment alarm. Then I was introduced to my peers. Unlike Kris and Adrian, who were less than ten years my senior, Lulltrell's staff have more time in service than I've been alive. Then Admiral Lulltrell informed me she wants me to monitor the activities at the other NIA station offices."

"That doesn't sound fair. After all, you're new to the job," Alexa said, sounding concerned.

"Admiral Lulltrell was better than I had a right to expect. She welcomed me in a private meeting in her office, then called a staff meeting to introduce me. And she is giving me her master chief to mentor me and manage the day-to-day administrative duties. And it's not over yet. Tomorrow I'm going to meet my staff, who probably have more time in service than me," I whined, feeling even younger than my age.

Alexa laughed. "But the day has ended well. We survived our first day on the job, the repairs on our home are finished, we have a full-time cook, and we are together."

"Yes, Mother. I hope I'm not too much of a burden, but I desperately need a place where I feel safe."

"You will never be a burden, Anna. Adopting you was the best decision I've ever made."

* * *

When I exited the elevator on the sixteenth floor, a master chief took a step toward me.

"Good morning, Commander Paulus. I'm Master Chief Stamm. I've been assigned as your assistant," he said, as he unobtrusively appraised me. "Ma'am, if you like, I'll show you to your office and we can discuss my duties."

I nodded, unsure what to say...assistant...office. And if I wasn't mistaken, Stamm was the same master chief who was at the desk in front of Lulltrell's office. He pointed to the left and I followed him down the hallway, past open areas with cubicles, conference rooms, and recessed areas with secretaries and offices.

"This is Commander Hadley's area. Commander Leyva is at the other end of the hallway, along with Commander Byrnes." Toward the end of the hallway he stopped and pointed to a recessed area containing a small waiting area with chairs and small tables. Ten steps into the room sat a large oak desk, and behind it a door. He proceeded to the door, opened it, and waited for me to enter. He smiled. My mouth hung open as I entered and saw the view out the floor-to-ceiling window that constituted the back wall. A mahogany desk sat a few steps in front of the window and several padded chairs sat to the right and left of the desk.

"Mine?" I stuttered as I heard the door shut behind me.

"Yes, ma'am. You're the Eastar NIA Station Chief and, according to the scuttlebutt, will be monitoring the other fourteen NIA offices."

"Master Chief—"

"Carl, ma'am."

"Carl, I'm not only young, but don't have a clue how to run an office or manage people..."

"That's why Admiral Lulltrel assigned me to you. I'm here to answer questions, take care of the administrative duties, run interference, and to help in any way you want."

"You don't consider this assignment..." I wasn't sure of the right word but a master chief as a secretary seemed...

"Below me?" He laughed. "Serving someone Admiral Lulltrel considers a cross between a bloodhound and a pit-bull, needs a permanent security detail, and has earned more awards than a grizzly Marine gunny sounds like an exciting assignment." He walked over to a small bar. "Coffee, ma'am?"

"Anna. Half milk and half coffee." I sat in one of the padded chairs and waved Carl to another. He sat two coffees on the table between us. Mine only slightly darker than milk.

Just then Red emerged and wrapped around my neck with his head facing Stamm.

"Carl, meet Red. Red, this is Master Chief Stamm."

"Hello, Red," Stamm said, leaning forward for a better look. "Judging by the rumors, that is a very expensive necklace."

"Red adopted me when I was four... I went on to explain our symbiotic relationship. I carry a weapon at all times because he's worth two hundred and fifty thousand credits. Thanks to my mother, ex-Captain Bellona, I know how to use it. I'm a graduate of the Oxax Navy Academy and qualified with all standard weapons." I stroked Red before looking directly at Stamm. "I'm terrified, Carl." I said just above a whisper.

"That's why Admiral Lulltrel assigned me, so you will have someone to lean on. Think of me as another weapon for you to use as necessary. Two pit-bulls should be enough to handle any trouble."

"Thank you, Carl." I gave a weak smile. "I think it's time I meet my staff," I said reluctantly, knowing I couldn't put it off any longer.

"First, let me give you the passwords and show you how to log into the NIA system. That will get you access to their personnel files. I'll schedule your staff meeting for after lunch to give you time to review their records. And I'll schedule a department meeting an hour after that." He stood, awaiting my approval. When I nodded, he left.

* * *

At noon Stamm took me to the building cafeteria, and I selected a light lunch I could carry back to the office and continue working. A few minutes before my scheduled staff meeting, he knocked and entered when I acknowledged. "Ma'am, if you're ready I'll accompany you to your conference room."

"Thank you, Carl. I have no idea where it is." I laughed. *One day at a time*, I chided myself, *I'll worry about tomorrow, tomorrow*. It turned out my conference room was the next room over. Inside were two men and a woman who stood when I entered.

"Sit, please. In case the Eastar NIA Office isn't tuned into the rumor mill, the new station chief is young for her rank, no experience at running an office, and has a venomous snake as a pet," I said as I sat. That elicited nodding heads and a variety of smiles. And wide-eye stares as Red emerged from my jacket and wound around my neck with his head on my shoulder. "Well, the rumors are true, except for Red," I pointed to Red, "he isn't a pet but rather a friend and medical dispenser... I went on to explain about Red and why I carried a gun, the fact I was an Oxax Naval Academy graduate, and my participation in the Smugglers and Raiders cases. "Your turn," I said, looking at the sandy-haired lieutenant commander sitting to my left. Ironically, at thirty-two he was young for his rank, although eight years older than I. He was wiry, built with an angular face, which was frowning.

"I'm Lieutenant Commander Newman. I manage one of the three eight-person teams that constitute the Eastar Station. In the past, the three of us decided who got each case, based on experience and availability. Commander Wright left the day-to-day assignments to us."

I had no idea about what my involvement should or shouldn't be. I nodded to the man sitting next to Newman. He didn't look to be as athletic and had a softer build and a round face, which looked amused. He reminded me of Wilbur, which gave me a lump in my throat.

"I'm Lieutenant Commander Atkins, Chuck. I think Frank," he nodded to Newman, "pretty well summed up the way the shop has been working. Each of us is responsible for assignments, evaluations, and administration of the people assigned to our groups." He nodded to the woman across from him.

"I'm Shirley Cooper. We met when you were working the Smugglers' case." She smiled, and her face was full of excitement and mischief. "You may be young, ma'am, but I doubt there are many officers of any rank that would have the nerve to invoke PIA authority on a vice admiral. I hope you can find us the next big case."

"Yes, the big cases are exciting and put you on the fast track. Commander Sinclair frequently called it the slippery slope. Wilbur, one of our original team members, was killed on the Smugglers' case and the rest of us had several attempts on our lives."

The department meeting was easier. I told them a little about myself, and Red and let each of them give me a short bio. By the end of the day I was mentally exhausted.

* * *

"Well, Daughter, you no longer appear to have the flexible hours you had on Oxax. You don't leave early and you always bring work home," Alexa said as we sat down for dinner.

"Ironically, it's more like what I had expected when I went to work for the NIA: go to work and sit at my desk all day working on problems. The monthly reports are beginning to arrive from the NIA station offices and being routed to me, including a copy of the executive summaries to Lulltrel. That's fourteen offices, plus I get one from each of my sections and have to write an executive summary of my own."

"That would cut into your flex time." She gave me a sad-face look. "Find anything interesting?"

"In a way. The executive summaries look like they contain all the items the station chiefs would like to be put in their yearly reviews. To their credit, they include everything in their detailed reports, but I think that's because they know the admiral doesn't read them."

"Anna, you are probably the only person in the Navy who isn't concerned about annual reviews."

"And look where it got me." I threw up my hands in exasperation. "I should still be a lieutenant under Stauffer's protective wing. Instead I'm a commander who has been given senior-level responsibilities when I'm still grappling with adult-speak."

Alexa laughed, which shocked me until she nodded toward my right shoulder. When I looked, Red's head was hanging limp rather than up and alert. I couldn't help laughing.

"All right, I'm finished whining. Obviously it isn't getting me any sympathy. How do you like the Appellate Court, Mother? Getting any interesting cases?"

"The process is interesting. The senior appellate judge, Laurence Appleton, reviews each petition and assigns it to a three-person committee composed of one person who generally has a liberal leaning and to another who is conservative. Right now I think he is evaluating me to determine which way I'll vote. If the committee has a unanimous opinion, the appeal is upheld or rejected. Otherwise the full court hears the case. I still haven't participated in a full court hearing, although one is scheduled for next month. That one should be interesting, as I was the one person in dissent."

"That should keep Judge Appleton up nights. You would think it would always be the liberal or the conservative who dissents." I laughed. She nodded while smiling.

"I think I caught snoop-paranoia from my daughter, *something didn't feel right*."

* * *

"Carl, can you get me the past twelve months of the NIA station office reports to Admiral Lulltrell?"

"You don't have enough work, ma'am?" Stamm asked with a look of concern. "Can I help?"

"Yes, you can. So I don't have to read them, ask Commander Hadley if she could scan the last twelve months for cases involving killings—whether accidental, self-defense, or murder—and print them for me."

"Find something?" he asked, eyes bright with excitement.

"I don't know, but... My old team had what many would consider an odd policy. If one of us wanted to do or see something, we did. Adrian, our team leader, said there were no bad leads, just ones that didn't work out. So I want to see last years' reports—"

"So the commander gets the last years' reports." He laughed, threw me a salute, and hustled out the door. I smiled. The first one in several days. Looking at the clock, it was time to pick up Alexa for our ride home. When I reached the lobby I didn't see my two security guards, which I thought strange. And stranger still when Chief Nelson stopped the line for the express exit lane for me to go ahead. He felt amused. As I exited into the lobby, two men dressed in Marine security uniforms approached me. When I saw one was carrying a cage for a snake, mental alarms began ringing, and Red appeared around my neck, hissing.

"Commander Paulus, Colonel Synder wants you at Marine Headquarters for questioning. If you would, put the snake in the box—" the older of the Marines with lieutenant insignia said. I drew my multifunctional weapon.

"Make any move and I'll shoot to kill," I said, stepping to the side to scan the lobby. Chief Nelson was holding people from exiting and had a smirk on his face. His hand rested on his weapon. "Nelson, draw that gun and I'll shoot to kill. You have no authority here and these men are fakes. And if they aren't, that's my problem and not your concern." I looked to the lieutenant behind the information counter. "Lieutenant, call Marine Headquarters and find out—" Red hissed and I dove to the side just in time to avoid a strike to my head from another Naval security guard who had approached from behind. I rolled to a kneeling position, took aim, and shot him in the knee. Cursing the Naval involvement, I looked to the Marines in time to see both drawing their weapons. One turned toward me while the other had turned toward the entrance. Taking no chances, I assumed both were wearing protective gear and shot the Marine, who was facing me with his weapon halfway out of his holster, in the head. Before I could target the retreating Marine, pellets hit the floor around me. Nelson was smiling as he took careful aim for another shot. I shot him in the right shoulder, which knocked him backward and dislodged his weapon. I turned in time to see two more security guards running toward me as the second Marine disappeared out the building. "Lieutenant," I screamed, "Call Marine Headquarters. Obviously these MPs are fakes. One just ran out the door. And you two, drop those weapons or I'll shoot to kill."

The guards looked at the MP on the floor with a hole in his head, the petty officer holding his knee and moaning, and Nelson lying immobile on the floor, and laid their weapons down and backed up a few steps.

"Commander Paulus, they say your security is supposed to be waiting for you," the lieutenant shouted. "I told them they never arrived. They said to stay put. They are sending Marines to investigate."

I looked down and saw my leg was bleeding. Nelson probably hadn't shot his weapon in years and had it set to a wide spread. So although he missed me, a few stray pellets hit my leg. I took out my Communication and Personal Computer, CPC, handheld device and called Alexa. She answered immediately.

"Going to be late?"

"Yes, Mother. There has been a shooting at the Naval Headquarters building—"

"Are you hurt?" Her voice rising with every word.

"Only a scratch, but I need your support. I'm tired, Mother." I continued to scan the lobby to ensure no one else wanted to shoot me. The petty officer on the ground was looking at his weapon lying only a few feet away from him while glaring at me. I was too tired to get up and kick the gun away, so I pointed my weapon at his head. That seemed to work and his attention went back to moaning and holding his knee. A medic came running into the lobby just as Alexa exploded through the entrance door. She looked around, located me, rushed over and grabbed me in a bear hug after a cursory examination of my leg wound.

"What happened, Anna?"

"Two men dressed as Marine police tried to snatch Red. If not, I'm in big trouble." I gave her a wry smile and melted into her arms and cried. Sometime later six Marines entered. The senior Marine, a woman captain, came over to Alexa and me.

"Is Commander Paulus all right?" she asked.

"She has a minor leg wound, but I think she is in shock. It looks like the Navy security guards attempted to aid the kidnapers and she had to defend herself against them."

"She tried to kill us," the petty officer shouted, pointing a finger at me.

The captain gave a snort. "Petty Officer, you will get to explain how you attempted to assist two men trying to kidnap Commander Paulus. Should be an interesting story."

A few minutes later I was put on a stretcher and loaded into an ambulance. When I woke it was late, judging by the darkness of the windows. Alexa was sitting next to the bed holding my hand, with her head lying next to mine. I sighed with contentment and drifted back to sleep.

* * *

"I'm sorry, Mother—" I said when I opened my eyes and saw Alexa, but then realized she was talking to a Marine captain and a doctor... "What are you doing here, Dr. Renata?" I blurted.

"I see our patient is awake and alert," she said, smiling. "The Eastar Naval Hospital offered me a position when they knew you were going to be the NIA Station Chief, because of my extensive experience with the Coaca Virus and red-headed kraits."

"Thank you, Renata. Without you doing my psychological evaluations, I'd have to retire or wind up in a mental institution."

"True. You would be an interesting case study, but I'm afraid they would all come to the conclusion you were repressing your true feelings. And you would be in treatment for the rest of your life." She squeezed my hand. "That would be a tragedy."

"I didn't think I had been badly wounded," I said, looking from Renata to Alexa.

"You weren't. A few pellets in your calf. I think you were suffering more from shock—"

"I didn't kill either of the security guards, did I? I shot for non-lethal areas... they were trying subdue me and the kidnapers would have... They were kidnapers weren't they?" I looked to the captain.

"Yes, Commander Paulus. They were kidnapers. They caught your security detail on the way to meet you. They are in the hospital but will recover. And that was good shooting with the security guards. They are also in the hospital, under guard." She laughed. "By the way, I'm Captain Hoffman, in charge of your security detail. I've had a long talk with Colonel Pannell. He's very fond of you. Without our chat, I'm not sure I would have believed you intentionally wounded those guards and you weren't just a bad shot."

"I'm sorry, Mother," I said looking up at her. "I didn't mean to frighten you but..."

"I don't blame you. When I arrived, those damn Navy security guards had their guns pointing at you." Alexa gave a wry smile. "I lost it. Only Captain Hoffman's calm presence got me to stop screaming at them."

"Your mother was quite mad." Hoffman laughed. "Like most good stories, it's more amusing after the fact."

"Admirals Lulltrel and Webb weren't happy either." Alexa gave a crooked smile and a choked laugh.

"I know," Hoffman said, shaking her head. "My ears are still ringing. Commander—"

"Anna," I interrupted.

"Lynda. Anna, your security has just tripled. I never want another call like that from Admiral Webb. I swear the whole floor heard him reading me my obituary."

"I'm sorry, Lynda. I'm afraid, Red." Red emerged just then and worked his way into my hair, with his red head showing. I reached up and felt his tongue against my finger. "Is worth enough money on the Black Market to justify considerable risk." I paused while worrying my lip. "You had better educate all the guards on my detail about the Coaca Virus. I wouldn't want anyone to contract the virus trying to save me. They can't infect me, so in that case it's better for me to deal with the individual."

"If you don't object, I'd like to get the detail together and let you explain the *dos and don'ts* of dealing with those with the virus," she said. I nodded agreement.

* * *

Admiral Lulltrel, at Webb's suggestion, had the captain of the building security and Captain Hoffman and their reports at a mandatory meeting with me to explain my unique situation, and what not to do in the event a person with the Coaca Virus attempted to enter the building. I included Dr. Renata to make it more official.

I had just walked to the front of the room when a lieutenant commander entered and shouted, "Attention!" As the room bolted upright, Admiral Webb entered.

"At ease. Let me keep this simple. Commander Paulus has a tendency to aggravate very aggressive criminals who then want her retired. Right now the ones we know about are either dead or in prison forever. But she has a red-headed krait that keeps her Coaca Virus in check and is worth over two hundred and fifty thousands credits on the Black Market. That makes the reward worth the risk and the expense of creative solutions, like the other day. So if you see her draw that weapon she is required to carry at all times, you are to support her and obey any orders she gives." He paused and looked around the room. "Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir!" The walls vibrated with the response.

"Good. I'll leave Commander Paulus and Dr. Renata to explain what to do and not do if you encounter someone with the Coaca Virus."

Not too surprisingly, the room was very attentive when Webb left. Renata explained how to identify someone who had the virus, how the virus could be transmitted, and to call her after an incident to ensure the area was decontaminated and people were treated. I gave a few examples of past creative attempts to snatch Red.

* * *

"Ma'am, Commander Hadley is here to see you," Stamm said through a partially opened door. I stood and waved for him to let her enter.

"Commander Hadley—"

"Teresa, please. I was curious about your request and interested to hear what you are looking for, if you don't mind satisfying my curiosity. And I wouldn't mind hearing about your shootout the other day."

"No, I don't mind. Help yourself to something to drink," I said, waving to the sidebar. After she poured herself some coffee and sat, I joined her with my own cup. "To be honest, I'm not sure what I'm looking for. After reading the most recent reports from the NIA offices, I noticed two similar incidents where our NIA offices were involved for a local killing but there didn't appear to be any Navy personnel involved. I'm curious, but before I inquire I thought I'd see if this is a common occurrence. In my experience, the local police don't like outside involvement. So, if Navy personnel were involved, why wasn't it reported? It may be nothing but..."

"That's why Lulltrel wants you here." She smiled and took a sip of coffee. "And I'm glad to chase anything that interests you. Frankly, the job is boring so I'm hoping you can find something exciting to break the monotony. The more you can share with me, the better information I can retrieve for you." She paused and her smile faded. "What happened in the lobby? I've heard too many rumors and too few facts: the security guards shot you, you went mad and killed several people in the lobby, Marines were called in to stop you, Admiral went ballistic except no one knows why..."

I spent an entertaining hour explaining what had happened and a few of the previous attempts to steal Red.

"Thank you, Anna. We have to do this more often. This has been the most enjoyable hour I've had in months. Being a commander has its perks but it can be really boring." She left smiling.

* * *

"I see two Marine shuttles are following us home," Alexa said in our skimmer that night.

"As you know, Captain Hoffman said Admiral Webb went nuclear when he heard I had been attacked in the lobby of the Naval Headquarters Building, and has been making sure everyone knows he's unhappy and that it won't happen again without his personal permission. He stopped in on my Marine and Naval security seminar on the Coaca Virus dos and don'ts. He was very clear that Naval security was there to protect me in the event there was a problem. Consequently, Hoffman has Webb's permission to increase her detail as she feels necessary. She said her ears are still burning from his talk with her and decided that includes security at our residence."

"What did Lulltrel say?"

"At her weekly staff meeting she warned everyone to carry a weapon if they were going out with me."

"You were the main topic at the Appeals Court. I've spent most of my time over the past two days explaining what happened."

That night after dinner I curled up on the couch with Alexa and began reviewing the information Hadley had retrieved for me. When I quit well after midnight, I had found three more killings where the police made inquiries of the local NIA office, making a total of five: one each on Eastar, Shadows Rest, Black Water, Stone Ring, and Westar. Only in one case, Eastar, was a Navy man killed, but the NIA offices were involved in all five cases. I didn't see the connection but I felt sure there was a common thread. And judging by Red's interest while I reviewed the reports, so was he.

I also found several confusing entries: requests by the local government to the NIA office to check on merchants who'd failed to arrive at their planned designation. The merchants were the Hercule, Easy Lady, Aladan, and the Deal Maker. If nothing else, they were interesting anomalies.