

Hathe

Prologue

The stars beckoned and man went, spreading out to populate the new worlds with new ideas and new ways. And shining among the new worlds was Hathe. It had peace, stability and wealth, all in sufficient abundance to bring forth a world in which there was a blossoming of the arts, the sciences and sheer curiosity.

Particularly, it had wealth.

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But that was before the Terrans came.

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Chapter 1

Voices, coming closer. Too close. Marthe asn Castre tapped urgently on the small, clear patch on her wrist. After four years of occupation, the secret code of the Hathian resistance was as familiar to her as her own Harmish tongue.

Terrans. Everyone out, now.

The reply to her warning message was instantaneous.

You too. Move it.

Marthe looked around the room. The voices were nearly on her, and footsteps sounded in the corridor outside. It was a plain room, filled with banks of com instruments and control panels, with a simple table and chairs placed at the centre. There, in the far corner, a space between the wall and equipment stack. She flattened herself back against the wall, eased herself into the shadows. It was tight, but there was just room in the hollow at the back of the instrument bank. For once her small stature was a blessing. She checked the shadows on the floor. Straight lines only. No tell tale, dark fingers of human shaped traces.

"Fives high. Ten point kitty."

The voices were outside the doorway, the ugly Terran Standards words her only warning. She froze. A small gap between the equipment banks gave her a view of the doorway and part of the room. One man walked in, then two more. A scrape of chairs and the clatter of men settling. They were sitting at the table in the centre of the room.

"Get ready to be fleeced, boys."

"Sure, Charlie. Like last time," came the sardonic reply.

A rattle, then the unmistakable jingle of chips hitting the table top.

Fives players. Just her luck. Officially banned by the Terran administration, the gambling game was rife among the rank and file occupation troops. And a game could last for hours. She peered through the slit towards the far bank of controls. This room was the heart of the Terran communication system controlling this sector of Hathe, her home world. And sitting in the input slot was a thin sliver. Her sliver, downloading all the essential data captured in this room. A minute more and she would have her treasure. If the Terrans didn't see it, and if they missed seeing her before their stupid game finished.

Marthe. Are you clear, said the rapid fire of tappings in her ear implant. She just had room to reach her wrist and tap a reply back.

Go ahead without me. I'm stuck here. Three Terran soldiers playing Fives.

The taps were clear cut this time. Jacquiel des Trurain, her oldest childhood friend Jaca, suddenly remembering he was the appointed leader on this mission.

Report, said the single coded tattoo.

She told him all, in the terse quick codes, and could imagine his face at the other end. Jaca would not be happy.

She looked out at the room. Her sliver was still safe, and still unseen. So far.

We're coming in to get you, threatened Jacquiel.  
No.

He had to give her time.

The tapping continued. Jacquiel was as stubborn as she. Don't expect me to leave you alone. Would Bendin?

How could even Jaca use her twin like that. Leave him out of this, she stabbed at her wrist. No, Bendin would not have left her here. But nor could he do anything to help her. No longer. The code she sent back was not in any official manual, but Jaca fully understood it. The silence in her ear lasted a long time.

It was hours later and still the Terrans played. Marthe blamed the first man who had walked into the room. Did he never know when he was beaten. She kept herself amused by totting up the phenomenal sums he was losing, and only wished it was Hathians benefiting from his obstinacy rather than the hated Terran soldiers. Mind you, maybe the winners would reward their Hathian servants - if she remembered rightly, her second cousin Jessamine had been assigned to this post, and was working as a general maid in the troop barracks. The look on the mens' faces if they ever learned that she was actually a highly trained, chemical engineer was another thought that helped pass the hours. From there, she moved on to dreaming of the day the Hathians took their home back, and formulating deliciously painful and embarrassing punishments for the Terran troops to pay them back for every single incident she and her fellow Hathians had endured since the Terrans seized their world.

It was a delicious pastime, but even such happy dreams couldn't take away the growing pain in her legs, wedged tightly under her. She dare not move for fear of making a sound that might attract her enemy's attentions. Despite the disguise of the enveloping hooded cloak of the so-called Hathian peasantry, she could not risk capture. There was no way to explain how a backward pleb could have bypassed the sophisticated alarms that protected these rooms. The Terrans must never learn the truth behind the mask of their Hathian serfs.

Finally. The loser flung down his chips, growled at his one time mates, and stomped out. Marthe peered hopefully through the crack at the winners. They leaned back in their chairs, grinned and clapped each other on the back.

"Down to the bar?" said one. A heavy jingle as they collected up their chips, "or winner take all?"

"You think I was born yesterday?" the other man said laughing. "Just hand over half that credit balance and let's go."

The first man looked about to argue. Marthe held her breath.  
Go, go, she urged.