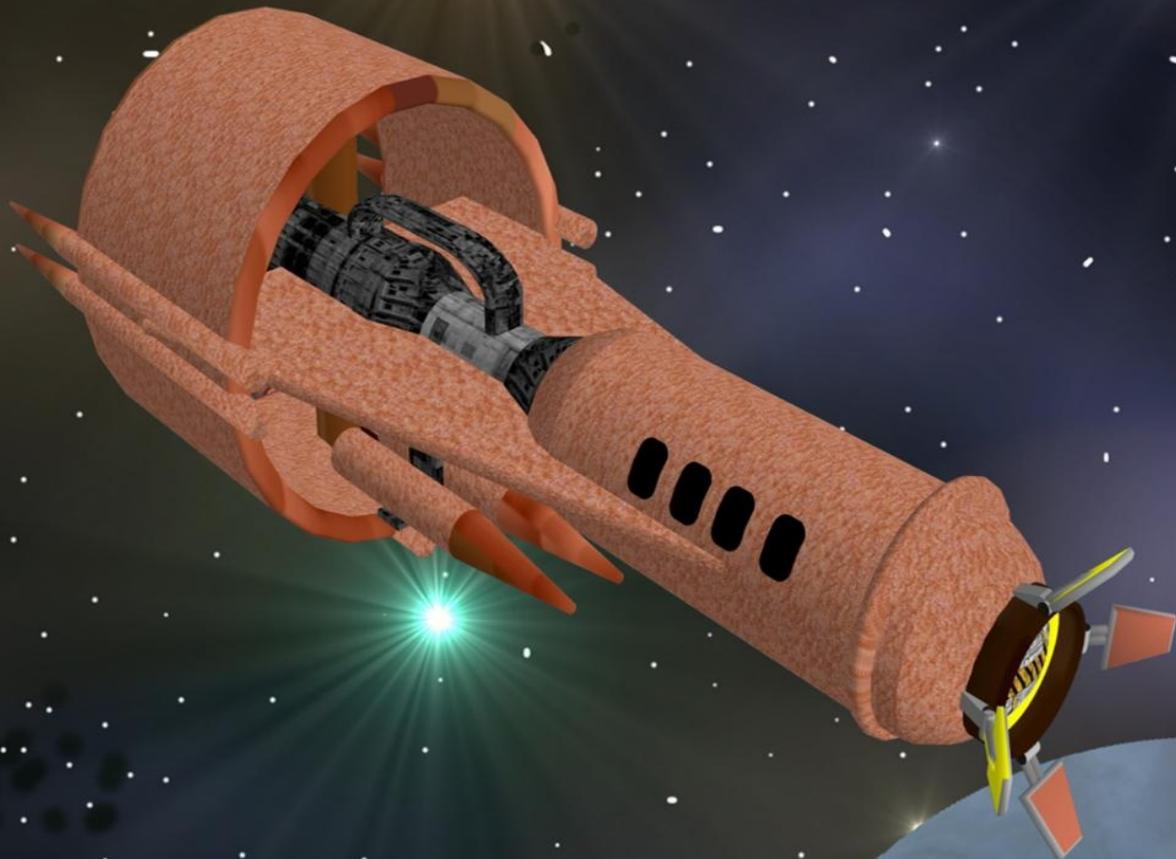


# Hard Choices

Novel 3 in the Gulliver Station Series



# Connie Cockrell

Author of *A New Start*

# Gulliver Station: Hard Choices

By Connie Cockrell

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## Dedication

To My husband

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## WEATHER IN THE BIOSPERE

"Come on Arthur, what your ma doesn't know won't hurt her."

Arthur knew his mother, Kathryn, didn't like her sister's husband. "Why Elizabeth married that criminal, Dillon Donahue, is beyond me. She was always one to like the bad boys," he heard her say many times before they had to go to a family gathering. He also knew she didn't like him to hang around with his cousin, Daly. He could hear his mother now, "Don't let Daly lead you astray. You're going to be Station, like your father and me. Don't go getting ideas in your head about quitting school like he did and running with his Pa."

Daly punched him in the arm, "Chicken. You're just a chicken."

Arthur didn't try to explain. Daly was always trying to get him to do something stupid, or dangerous, or illegal, or all three. He knew his mother was right, but Daly was the only cousin he had close to his age. He was twelve and Daly was fourteen. All the rest of his cousins were girls.

"Daly, we shouldn't be breaking into the BioSphere. We'll get in trouble."

"Don't be such a baby Arthur. They'll never know we were there. It's closed today. We'll have the whole place to ourselves."

Daly had led him to Level 5, sector D, ring 2000 where the BioSphere was. The pride of Gulliver Station, it was a tourist attraction. School children were given tours of it. Born on the station, the BioSphere was the only weather Arthur had ever experienced.

They were standing outside the employee entrance. Daly punched the access code into the door panel. It slid open.

"Where'd you get the code, Daly?" Arthur stood in the maintenance concourse, still reluctant to go in.

Daly had gone through the door. He turned and grabbed Arthur's arm. "Don't stand out there all day. You'll attract attention." He pulled Arthur in and hit the door button to close it.

They were in the staff area. Arthur saw lockers and showers. Daly pulled him to the left. They passed through a maze of equipment: pipes, pumps, and

things he couldn't identify. "Where are we going Daly?"

"To the beginning, ya want to start at the beginning don't ya?"

Arthur had misgivings about the whole adventure but he kept them to himself. He followed Daly until they reached the usual entrance for visitors. Arthur stood staring. The wall behind the empty ticket booth was clear. He could see lush growth on the other side. A tree grew near the wall and Arthur could see a bright red bird sitting on a branch, right next to the wall.

Daly ducked under the turnstile, "Come on Arthur. I can show ya around. I went here with my class when I was in your grade at school. I remember all about it."

That was another reason why Arthur's mother Kathryn didn't like him to hang around with Daly. He'd quit school at thirteen. "To be a criminal with his Father in the so called Family." She'd shake her finger at him. "There's family and then there's The Family. You just stay in school and stay away from them."

He sighed and went under the turnstile. Daly was holding open the first door. "We have to close this one before the one into the first sphere will open," he explained. He shut the door behind Arthur and they were in a small room that would hold twenty or thirty people. Daly opened the next door. As soon as he did a wall of scents that Arthur only smelled here hit him in the face. It startled him and he hesitated. Daly stopped. "Don't be afraid. It's the plants. That's how they smell. Come on."

Arthur edged into the sphere and Daly closed the door. "Isn't this great? We have the whole thing to ourselves."

Daly ran up the walkway. Plants hung over both sides and water dripped from the leaves splashing on the hard surface. Arthur followed, his head swiveling in every direction, taking in the vibrant greens, every shade of green he could imagine. He reached out to touch a flower, its brilliant pink impossible to believe. It was so soft.

"Hey," Daly yelled. Arthur jerked his hand back.

Daly laughed. "It's alright. They said we could touch things."

"What is this sphere?" Arthur asked.

"This one is in summer." Daly puffed his chest out. "They told us the spheres change season. In a few months this one will be autumn."

"It changes?" Arthur was having trouble grasping the concept. On the station the temperature never changed.

Daly punched him in the arm. "Of course stupid. They have seasons here and they make each sphere a different season. They change in order. This one is summer and the next sphere will be autumn and the next winter and the

next spring. Then this one will change to autumn, the next to winter, in order. That way each sphere gets a whole year of seasons. They said it's good for the plants and animals."

Arthur nodded. "It's nice in here, but it's hot and wet." He could feel himself sweat as though he'd been working out in the gym.

They walked around all of the paths. Birds flew overhead and butterflies fluttered from plant to plant. He didn't know where to look next. "What's this stuff we're walking on?" Arthur squatted down to touch it. It was the same temperature as the air, but rough and gritty."

"Stone, they told us," Daly squatted down beside him. "They said it's like the steel we build the station from but not as strong. It's a natural material that ancient people used to use to build with."

Arthur tried to visualize a station made from stone.

"Let's go to the next sphere. It's too hot in here." Daly stood up.

Arthur nodded. He didn't like being all sweaty.

They moved through two doors and entered the autumn sphere. It was cooler, and the trees were all different colors; gold and red and bronze. It was drier too. Arthur felt a little cold from his wet clothing. "Did they paint the trees, Daly?"

"Nah, they do that by themselves, something about the cold and decreasing light. Arthur liked this sphere. They ran through the leaves that had fallen on the ground, picking up big arms full of them to throw at each other. Because they were playing, they didn't notice temperature dropping. They stopped on top of a little grassy hill to catch their breath.

"I like this one better than the summer one," Arthur told his cousin as they flopped onto their backs on the grass. This sphere had an open space; the grassy hill was the center of it. As he studied the roof, he realized that it was clouding over. He pointed up. "What's that?"

Daly opened his eyes. "They told us those were clouds. It's how they make it rain in the sphere."

"Rain?"

"Yeah, water, falling out of the sky that waters all the plants."

Arthur sat up. "I don't want to get rained on, Daly. Let's go to the next sphere."

"Sure," and Daly got to his feet, a red leaf stuck in his hair. "It's getting cold in here anyway."

They found their way to the door to the next sphere but it wouldn't open. "What's wrong with the door?" Arthur was getting nervous. The clouds were turning dark and the air was moving faster.

Daly turned the handle the other way, pulling harder. "It won't open."

Arthur didn't like it. "What's with the air? Is something wrong with it? Is it leaking out?" He started to panic. Everyone knew a station breach would cause the air to blast out of the station.

His cousin didn't seem confident. "We can still breathe, Arthur. Let's try the door we came in."

They ran to the other side of the sphere. There was a lot of air movement now and fat drops of water started to fall. One hit Arthur on top of his head. It was cold and surprised him. Daly tried the door, turning the handle every direction it would go, pulling as hard as he could. "It won't open." His voice reflected his panic.

The drops fell faster and the air moved around them, fluttering their clothing. Leaves blew off of the trees and flew around them. Arthur glanced around. "Daly, where did the birds go?"

"What?" Daly looked around the sphere then back at his cousin. The rain came down harder. "I don't know. Let's get under a tree."

They ran to a large green tree. Its leaves were very short and pointy and grew along the little branches like spikes along a finger. They huddled at the base of the tree. It provided a little shelter from the rain.

"Why can't we get out, Daly? Is this supposed to happen?" Arthur shouted over the noise of the trees and the air moving through the branches.

Daly wrapped his arms around himself. "I don't know. Maybe something is broken. That's why the air is moving so fast."

Arthur wrapped his arms around himself and moved closer to Daly, their backs against the tree. The roughness hurt his back but Daly was warm against his side and that made him feel better. Arthur watched as the rain came down harder. The drops made craters in the soil around the tree. The air moved faster and they got more and more wet as the rain began to seep through the tree branches and fall on them. The branches of the plants in front of them waved wildly. Even scarier, they could feel the tree behind them move with the air.

A loud crack sounded above them and before they could react, a huge branch crashed out of their tree and fell to the ground in front of them. It sent the sharp little leaves flying in every direction, some stabbing Arthur and Daly.

"Ow!" Arthur rubbed his arms where the leaves stabbed him. They both jumped up. Arthur yelled over the sound of the trees and air. "Daly, there was a table out by the little hill. It will be better than this tree."

Daly nodded, shivering, the sharp leaves stuck in his hair. They ran to the picnic table and as they crawled under it, realized they were getting a little less wet. They huddled under the center of it, side by side, knees to chest and arms wrapped around their knees. The rain splashed up off of the ground but the table protected them from the rain falling on top of them.

The rain fell and the air howled around them. They saw several trees loose branches and all of the trees lost their colorful leaves. Both boys shivered continuously. Arthur was afraid. He was cold and wet and all he could think about was his mother's warnings not to hang around with Daly.

They sat there until the light began to fade, their arms and legs cramping with the constricted position and the cold. The air began to slow and the rain tapered off. They struggled to crawl out from under the table.

Arthur's teeth chattered. "Let's try the doors again, Daly."

Daly looked the way Arthur felt. His face was white and his hair was plastered to his head. "Yeah."

They hurried to the door into the summer sphere. Daly reached for the handle, glanced at Arthur, then twisted and pulled. It opened. The heat hit them like a blow. It felt so good. They ran into the chamber, closing the door quickly, then through the next door into the summer sphere. It was so hot after the cold in the last sphere Arthur thought he'd faint. He fell to his knees to catch his breath.

Daly fell beside him.

"Let's not do that again," Arthur said.

Daly nodded. "Good idea."

The End

## WANTED: BABY

"Boss, we have another Methane breather coming into dock." Glen Akin read the monitor for Methane ship communications. The Methane breather's series of hisses and clicks made it necessary for the computer to translate any communication between the aliens and the humans.

The methane breather's race was called the V'Heeme by the humans. Glen thought about how excited everyone was when the first ship appeared at a human station a hundred and fifty years ago. He wasn't excited. Sometimes communication broke down and trouble sprang up. They had different ideas

about trade than humans did. Everyone treated the V'Heeme with kid gloves.

Glen's boss, Kelly Mulgrew, checked the docking bay records. "Send them to Level 1 A3 docking port."

"Will do," Glen replied as he typed the information into the computer. He hit send. "Instructions and dock assignment sent, Kelly."

The V'Heeme came to the station infrequently but there was a contingent of the race on station. The Level 2, Quadrant A, Ring 1000 area was specially modified for methane breathers. They maintained that part of the station, supplied the dock workers, and maintained the atmosphere they needed.

Glen wondered what kind of recreational activities they engaged in, then snapped back to reality when a new message ping'ed his screen. "Seems like they're alright with the instructions, Kelly."

Kelly rubbed his ear. "Glad to hear it. Remember five years ago when the V'Heeme ship decided it wanted to dock at a human port. What a mess."

Glen nodded. "Yeah, the docking clamps didn't even match up. I didn't think we'd ever get them to understand where we wanted them to go."

Both men watched their monitors as the alien ship docked, breathing a sigh of relief when the screen showed the ship safely connected to the station umbilicals.

"Glad that's done," Glen said as he clicked his monitor to a new input.

#

Gulliver was a lively trading station. Sitting at the intersection of three jump points, the station had several ships at a time docked at either end of the station. Ships connected to the station received a wealth of information on what was available for sale or trade on the trading board. Every ship's captain had access to the computer database as part of their facility fee. As soon as the V'Heeme ship docked, their cargo went up on the board.

In the station trading office, Neil Parsons and Ryan Shevlin studied the new offerings.

"Ryan, look at that, the V'Heeme are trying to sell eight tons of erbium ore," Neil pointed at his screen.

"Wonder what they're buying?" Ryan tapped his keyboard and pulled up the list of the V'Heeme requests to buy. "This must be a mistake." He deleted and reloaded the page.

"What's that?" Neil asked.

"Pull up what they want to buy," Ryan said. "I don't believe it."

Neil pulled up the page. "They want to buy a baby? There must be an error

in the translation software."

Ryan, the senior person in the office, called Station Management, Sarah Caden. "Sarah, the V'Heeme just put out a request to buy a baby."

"Let me pull up the screen," she said. She'd been working the station's trading office and now station management for twenty seven years, so she'd seen just about everything show up on the lists. If this wasn't a mistake, it would be the first time for a baby to show up on it.

"I see it, Ryan. Let me call Communications." She clicked off then quickly rang up Communications.

When it was picked up she began, "Birgit, I think there's some sort of glitch in the translation software for V'Heeme. A new ship just docked and has posted that they want to buy a baby."

Birgit Young was the language specialist on the station. She spoke twelve Earth languages well and could puzzle out another eight. She'd trained in V'Heeme for years and if anyone could figure out the alien's language, she could.

"Hang on Sarah, what screen are you on?"

Sarah told her and Birgit brought it up on her monitor. She read out loud from the list. "Eighteen kilos of blue algae, a hundred kilos of protein gel, eight crates of whisky and one human baby, male or female, preferably under one year of age."

She tapped her stylus on the desk. "Well, that's what it says. What about the other items? Do those seem to be normal requests from the V'Heeme?"

Sarah sighed. "It appears normal enough. They ask for strange things most of the time, but never a baby."

Sarah could hear Birgit humming to herself. "Let me check the software, maybe there's a glitch, but since the other requests appear normal, it may not be a translation issue. You may have to try and communicate to them that we don't trade in babies."

Sarah groaned, "It's always dangerous to talk to them. Things get confused so easily. Can you assist?"

"I'll do what I can Sarah, but first, let me check the translator."

"Thanks Birgit. Call me as soon as you know anything."

"I will, Sarah, stay calm. It's probably some error."

"I hope so," and she cut the call. She began tapping her stylus on her desk, staring at the V'Heeme cargo request page. *The request is going to be all over the station soon, if it isn't already, she thought. Someone from the dispossessed population might even be desperate enough to sell them a baby, their own or someone else's.*

She punched the number for StaSec, Commander Cian Perrill.

"Commander Perrill," he answered.

"Cian, it's Sarah Caden, I think we have a problem."

"Must be pretty big for you to call me, Sarah, what's up?"

Sarah explained the V'Heeme post and her fears of a baby actually being sold to the aliens.

"You were right to call me. I'll get my team to monitor calls right now. If we pick up any chatter about baby selling or missing babies, we'll jump on it."

"Thanks Cian. We're working other options. Keep me posted will you?"

"As soon as we know anything, I'll call you."

The call ended. Sarah stood up and paced around the small office. She wondered about calling Lieutenant Campbell in the Space Force office then decided against it. He'd only do what she did, call on Birgit to help figure out if it was a language misunderstanding. Should I call the Station Manager? She decided against that too. Art Cavanaugh was only the Station Manager because his father and his father before him were the station managers. It had turned into a hereditary position and Art didn't have the skills for this kind of problem. He was great if you wanted a political speech made and he could talk the paint off the bulkheads but he would be no help with this.

She sat down; then began drafting a message to the V'Heeme. Maybe they didn't know it was against human cultural mores to sell babies. An hour later Birgit called Sarah. "There's nothing wrong with the translator. They really did put up that they want to buy a baby."

Sarah ran her hand through her short, gray hair. "I didn't think so. I've drafted a message to the V'Heeme. I'll send it over. Can you make sure it doesn't offend or miscommunicate? We need to have them remove that baby from their list. Or we need to talk to them about what they want with a baby. They may want something else entirely and it seemed to them that baby was the right word."

"Sure, Sarah, I'll take a gander. Oh, here it is. Let me run it through the translator and make sure it says what you want. I'll call you back."

"Later, then," and Sarah cut the call.

The comm unit beeped. "Sarah Caden, Station Management."

"Sarah, Cian Perrill here. We're picking up chatter about baby selling. Also, three babies have gone missing. We're on it; I just wanted to let you know."

"I appreciate the call, Cian, stay in touch."

"I will."

She cut the call, stood up and left her desk to pace around the room again.

How can people sell a baby? And to aliens? What if the V'Heeme really do want a baby? What do they want it for? She didn't have any answers, just a lot of questions. The comm unit beeped again.

"Sarah Caden," she spoke into the unit.

"Sarah, Birgit here. The translation of your message came out clean. Shall I send it to them?"

"Yes, with any luck we'll get a response right away."

"Right, here goes." Birgit was silent for a moment. "The message is sent. Cross your fingers."

The two women waited, hoping that the V'Heeme would respond right away. That didn't happen.

"They're not going to reply immediately, Sarah. We'll have to wait. I'll call you as soon as I get the reply."

Sarah realized she was clenching her teeth. She deliberately stretched her jaw to loosen the muscles. "Thanks, let me know." She tossed the comm unit onto the desk.

She picked up the hologram of her two children, Casey and Andrew, aged seven and ten at the time the picture was taken. They were at a picnic table in the BioSphere, red hair sparkling in the artificial sunlight, laughing. Her heart went out to the parents of the missing babies. She couldn't even imagine what they must be going through. She put the hologram back on the desk, gently, and drew a deep breath. This was getting her nowhere.

The comm unit rang. When she picked it up it was Art Cavanaugh. "Sarah, what in the name of the great creator are you doing? I'm hearing rumors of babies being sold to the V'Heeme!"

Sarah rubbed at her temple. "I'm doing what I can, Art. No babies have been sold to the V'Heeme."

"Well I want it stopped, right now!" he blustered into the comm. "People expect me to protect them. I won't have it."

"I understand, Art. We're doing everything we can."

"You're a good woman, Sarah, but sometimes, you let things go."

Sarah grit her teeth. "I appreciate the feedback, Art."

"Good. I expect to be notified immediately on this matter."

"I'll do that, Art, as soon as there's something to report."

He clicked off the comm. She ran her hands through her hair. Now he was involved it was going to be chaos. He'd have one of his boot lickers down here in a minute to follow her around, get in the way, offer increasingly idiotic suggestions and expect them to be implemented. She sighed.

The comm unit beeped. "Sarah Caden."

"Sarah, Birgit here. We have a response from the V'Heeme. They say, "Keep custom good. Long time need baby. One million credits."

Sarah stared at the floor of her office. "That makes no sense, Birgit. Did the message come through clearly?"

"It came in clean, no static or errors. I agree, the words could be read several ways. Hard to misinterpret a million credits though."

Sarah chewed on her lower lip. "Can you send a message back asking what they need the baby for?"

"Sure, I'll send it right away."

"Thanks Birgit." She cut the call and hit the number for Cian Perrill.

"Cian, Sarah here."

"I don't have anything new for you Sarah."

Sarah paced her office. "Can you cut off the methane docks so that no one can get in or out?"

The StaSec Chief was silent for a moment. "You want to prevent anyone from passing a baby into the methane zone. Yeah, we can do that. No cargo, nothing. Right away."

"Thanks, Cian."

Sarah gripped the comm unit in her hand. "What else can I do?"

#

The monitor in Sarah's office had the station newsfeed on. She was listening to the news reader report that there was a rash of baby kidnappings all over the station. Sarah ground her teeth at the gushing chicklet on the screen. Obviously chosen for her physical attributes over her brain power, the news reader bemoaned the children's loss. Sarah had received a call from Cian earlier. All of the kidnapped babies were recovered, but the news wasn't out yet.

The chicklet warned parents to keep their children home until the culprits could be caught and punished. Sarah nodded. *That might be the best thing, she thought to herself. But it won't help the babies whose parents are thinking of selling them to the V'Heeme.*

The comm unit beeped, she answered.

"Sarah, Birgit here. We have a response to your question on what they want the baby for."

"Read it Birgit." Sarah's heart pounded.

"It says; Baby brain. Communication. Teaching."

Sarah blinked. "Does it sound to you that they want a baby to teach it to

communicate with them?"

"That's how I read it too. What'll we do?"

Sarah felt like she'd fallen into a bad dream. "I don't know. Maybe it's time to bring in the Space Force."

"I agree, Sarah. The Space Force has more people trained in V'Heeme and I suspect, better translation computers. Ours may be inadequate to this particular task."

"Thanks Birgit. I'll call Lieutenant Campbell."

She clicked off and punched in the number for the Space Force office. Explaining who she was, she asked for the Lieutenant. "One moment please," the young man said, and transferred her call.

"Lieutenant Campbell."

"Lieutenant Campbell, this is Sarah Caden, Station Management."

"Hello, what can I do for Station Management today?"

She explained the situation. "Lieutenant, I need a better translation device. I have a great person in Comm, Birgit Young, but she believes our translator isn't up to the standard we need to communicate effectively with the V'Heeme."

"You need a military grade translator?"

"Yes. Can you help?"

"I'll call Birgit. We've worked together before. We'll take the original transmissions and run them through our translator and see what we get."

Sarah felt a huge weight lift from her chest. "I'd really appreciate it, Lieutenant."

"I'll let you know what we find."

When she cut the call, she felt better than she had all day. She puttered around with station reports, hardly remembering what she read or approved. After an hour, her comm unit beeped.

"Sarah Caden, here."

"Hi. I've tied Birgit into the call with me," Lieutenant Campbell said.

"Great, what did you find?" Her stomach clenched. She hoped it was better than the V'Heeme buying a baby to be a communication device.

"Our translator read the original signals. What they want is a computer, not an actual baby. They want a human computer, less than a year old. They want to learn about our technology."

Sarah heard both of them laughing and she laughed, hand over heart. "Thank you. We'll ask them to change the request from baby to computer; that should solve all the problems. I appreciate the use of your translator."

He was still chuckling. "No problem. We're happy to help."

"Birgit, can you send them a message asking them to change the word baby to computer?"

"Sure, Sarah, I'll send it right now."

They all laughed again and cut the call. Within half an hour, the request board changed. She turned off her monitor and turned out the office lights. She wanted to go home and hug her grand children.

The End

## THE CONVERSION

Sixteen year old Cassandra, Cassie to her friends, was at the club, Sparkle, with her friends, Ivy, Bentley and Bjorn.

"Cassie," Ivy shouted over the music in the club. "Let's go see Level 3!"

The boys, Bentley and Bjorn whooped. "Nova! Fantastic idea." Bjorn leaned over and wrapped an arm around Ivy. "Nova idea, Ivy. It's time we went down there."

Cassandra wasn't sure she wanted to go. It was a rite of passage at sixteen to brave the nether social regions of Gulliver Station, but it seemed kind of silly to her, dangerous even. "Oh, I don't know Ivy, I like it here."

The club was designed for the wealthiest of the station's offspring. Marketing discovered that the young ladies made the actual decision on where they and their friends would spend their time. Every effort was made to attract that young woman. Shades of purple, mostly in the lighter tones, decorated the walls and floor. The club did indeed sparkle. Tiny glitter fell in a continuous sparkling rain from the ceiling, dissolving away before it reached the heads of the customers. The music was the latest that could be purchased from the incoming freight ships. Nothing was too expensive to entertain the young of the richest people on the station.

Bentley reached over the table, taking Cassandra's hand. "Don't be a black hole, Cassie. Let's go see how the other end of the station lives."

Ivy, Bjorn and Bentley pushed away from the table. Ivy pouted, "Come on, Cassie, let's do it. All the rest of our group has gone. It's our turn."

Cassie sighed. She didn't want to spoil everyone else's fun. "Papa will be furious with me," she stalled.

Bentley grabbed her hand, pulling her out of the chair. "He won't even know we went. Let's go."

Bentley wasn't one to be denied. She'd seen him get mean when he didn't get his way. Resigning herself to the group decision, she got up. They left the club, the girls' dresses fluttering like gossamer butterfly wings. Ivy was dressed in a lilac gown with silver jewels, the full skirt flashing every time the gown moved. Cassie was in gold, the dress impregnated with an effect that sparked with each shift of the fabric. Boy's fashion differed, this year tending to black, a foil for the extravagance of their companion's costumes.

The elevators were a few store fronts to the left of the club. At 2330 at night, they met several of their friends out on the concourse, in a promenade to see and be seen. The four young people piled into the elevator, gossiping about their friends, laughing and taking up more than their fair share of space. An older couple was forced to the back of the elevator by the physical exuberance. They left the elevator on Level 5, glaring at the young people's lack of respect.

On Level 3 they spilled out of the elevator as though it was too small to hold their energy. "Let's go to the A Concourse," Bentley said.

Cassandra thought that a bad idea. "That's too far Bentley." She made an excuse. "My slippers aren't made for walking so far."

"Don't be silly," Ivy laughed. "It'll be Nova, let's go." She grabbed Bjorn's hand and started running along the cross corridor, toward the A Concourse.

Cassandra put on a smile and ran after Ivy, Bentley beside her. When they got to the A Concourse they slowed to a stroll. Of course, most stalls in the market were closed. They peeked through the shop windows and booth cages, exclaiming over the goods.

"What dreck," Ivy exclaimed at a shop window with women's clothing displayed. "No life or style or color at all! I wouldn't be caught dead wearing that."

A woman passing by the group glared at Ivy. She was wearing something similar to what was in the shop window. Ivy laughed. Cassandra smacked her friends' arm. "Ivy," she hissed. "Be polite."

The boys and Ivy laughed at Cassandra's blush. When they got to a concourse café, they went in, claimed the center table and ordered wine. Bentley admonished the waitress, "only your best, girl," and smacked the woman on the backside. Cassandra was horrified, but the others howled with laughter at the waitress' glare and the other patron's stares.

When the wine arrived, Bjorn made a great show of tasting it, declaring it adequate and allowing it to be poured for the rest. Cassandra sipped hers. She'd had wine at business dinners with her father but it wasn't her favorite beverage. She watched her friends finish the bottle.

"Let's get some more," Ivy shouted, her cheeks already glowing from the heat of the wine.

"No." Cassandra stood up. "This is dull. Let's go."

"Nova idea, Cassie." Bentley's eyes were glassy. "Let's find some other amusement."

The waitress came over. "Who's credit chip will you use?" the young woman asked.

"Do you know who we are?" Bjorn was also glassy eyed.

"I don't care." The waitress planted herself in his path. "Someone must pay for the wine."

"Out of my way," he said and he pushed her into the table next to her.

Cassandra gasped and rushed over to the waitress. "Are you alright?"

The waitress pushed herself off of the table. "Yes, miss, but the bill must be paid."

Cassandra whirled around; her dress skirt sending off sparks. "Bjorn, you will hand this woman your credit chip right now."

Bentley protested. "Cassie, don't be such a black hole."

She could feel her anger rise. "If you or Bjorn don't pay right now, I'll leave and go home by myself."

She watched as both boys began to go red in the face, but she didn't relent, right was right. Finally Bjorn lost the staring contest and pulled his credit chip from a pocket inside his form fitting, padded jacket. He handed it to the waitress. She scanned it and handed it back, turning to Cassandra. "Thank you, Miss."

"You're welcome. I apologize for our behavior," and gave a little bow.

She glared at her friends. "Let's go," and she marched out of the café.

Back on the concourse, Bentley began to berate Cassandra. "Seriously Cassie, you act like that woman was one of us. It was embarrassing."

"I," Ivy hiccupped. "I agree. Really Cassie, you have such strange ideas."

Bjorn pouted. "It wasn't even good wine, Cassie. I shouldn't have had to pay for such a poor product."

Cassandra glared at him. "Then you shouldn't have drunk the whole bottle."

The group passed three young men perched on the window ledge of a closed shop. They whistled at Ivy and Cassandra. "Hoo, lassies, you're looking lovely this evening," one of them called out.

Another called, "Don't walk on. We can show you a better time than those boyos you're with."

Bentley stopped and whirled around, fists clenched. "What are you

looking at?"

The young men laughed. The third one called out, "You and your girly tights." He began to mince around in a circle, one hand on a hip and the other hand in the air. His friends roared with laughter.

Cassandra saw Bentley's face go red.

"I'll give you girly." He stepped toward the boys but Cassandra grabbed his arm. "It's not worth our time Bentley, let's go."

The young tough's heard her. "Bentley. Bentley?" They raised their voices into falsettos, danced around, swishing their hips, repeating his name. "Bentley, Bentley."

"No!" Cassandra shouted but it was too late.

Bentley yelled, "You grubbers!" and charged the three.

Bjorn followed, "Get them, Bentley!"

Cassandra didn't know what to do. she stood in shock, hand over mouth. Then she saw Ivy charge the group. "Ivy, no!" She started toward her friend but it was too late. Ivy had flung her whole body onto one of the locals, clinging to his back. He spun around, trying to get her off, her dress sparkling in the melee.

Bjorn and Bentley were getting pummeled. Blood streamed from their noses. The two remaining locals circled the boys, reaching out, slapping, while the third finally pried Ivy off of his back, flinging her into Bentley and Bjorn.

That's when Cassandra heard a shout from behind her. "Blake, Darby, Emmet, stop that right now."

She turned. It was the same kind of voice her father used when he wanted to be obeyed immediately. It was a woman, somewhere in her forty's, lean, with short, dark hair beginning to gray. She was dressed in trousers and tunic, mostly gray with a bit of bright green decoration. She marched past Cassandra. "Stop it this instant."

Cassandra realized that the young men were between her and her friends. Bjorn, Bentley and Ivy took off, headed for the elevators. She didn't know what to do. She didn't want to try and press through the young men to reach her friends.

The woman was giving the young men an earful. "What's the matter with you? Do you know what kind of trouble you can get into, harassing the poshers? Their parents will call StaSec. Get home before you get into any more trouble." She stood there, hands on hips, while the young men hung their heads then shuffled away. She watched them until they disappeared into the now mostly closed market.

"Now you." She turned her wrath onto Cassandra. "What are you doing on Level 3? You and your friends thought it'd be, what's the slang this week, Nova? To come down here and see the grubbers?"

She glared at Cassandra, waiting for an answer. Cassie stammered, "I, I didn't really want to come, they made me."

The woman's eyes went wide. "What's your name?"

"My friends call me Cassie."

"Well, Cassie. Is it your custom to do things just because your friends tell you to?"

Cassie blushed. The woman's green eyes bored right through her. In a low voice she said, "No, Ma'am."

The woman tapped her foot. Cassie studied the deck. "My name is Rebecca. Rebecca Abram."

Cassie barely glanced up but held out her hand. "Nice to meet you, Miz Abram."

The woman huffed. "Rebecca will do, lass." She shook Cassie's hand.

Cassandra pushed a lock of hair out of her face. Rebecca went back to tapping her foot. "I can't leave you out here all alone. Those boys are all right, just itching for a few rounds with those who shouldn't be here. But others, well, they aren't so nice." She scratched her head. "Come with me."

She started walking toward Quadrant D. Cassandra hesitated. Why shouldn't she just head home? The elevators weren't that far, she'd be safe enough going through the market, even if it was mostly closed down. She turned to go back through the market when two men came out of a bar, three doors in front of her. They headed toward the market, weaving a little and singing at the top of their voices. She stopped and watched them. Then, deciding, turned around and ran to catch up with Rebecca.

"Good sense that." Rebecca said as Cassandra reached her side.

They walked along until they reached the cross concourse, turning right. "Where are we going?" Cassandra asked.

"My apartment. You can stay until morning then I'll walk you to the elevator."

Cassandra stuck close to Rebecca as they turned into the 4000 ring. She studied the door numbers. These were all apartments. She noticed whole families rested along the walls, between doors. Children slept under a blanket, little heads on shabby pillows. She looked away, embarrassed, when a father watched them as they passed by.

Rebecca reached a door, about mid-quadrant, and keyed it open. She waved Cassandra inside and shut and locked the door. Cassandra glanced

around. The whole apartment was smaller than her bedroom. They were standing in the kitchen. A small table and two chairs were against the wall. If she stood in front of the small sink, she could reach out both arms and touch the cabinets on either side. The living room wasn't much more than a space to walk through with a two person upholstered seat facing the wall with a monitor mounted on it. The bedroom door was on the same wall as the monitor. She didn't see a sanitary unit. It must be in the bedroom.

"Sit down." Rebecca said as she pulled out one of the kitchen chairs. "I'll make some tea."

Cassandra sat down. The chair and table were made of extruded plastic, worn and shabby. She watched Rebecca microwave a cup of water that was straight from the faucet, then add some leaves to it. She set it aside and made a second cup. Bringing them both to the table she asked, "So what are you doing on Level 3?"

Cassandra reached out to touch the cup. It was very hot. She put her hands back in her lap.

"We were just," she paused, "exploring." She was embarrassed by the real reason.

"Hmm, just exploring." Rebecca fussed a little with the handle on her cup. "We get a lot of exploring by chicklets like you and your friends. You're fifteen?"

"Sixteen." Cassandra quickly corrected her.

Rebecca raised her eyebrows. "Sixteen, yes. About the age the poshers think they can come down to this Level and have a little fun. Then go home, as though they'd just finished a trip to the zoo."

Cassandra kept her eyes on the table. Rebecca was right, that's exactly what they were doing. Hoping to change the subject, she asked, "Why were those people asleep in the concourse?"

Rebecca studied her. "Where else would they go, chicklet?"

Cassandra stammered in confusion. "To their homes, their apartments."

"They can't. They don't have apartments." Rebecca felt her cup then took a quick sip.

"I, I don't understand. Everyone has an apartment."

Rebecca stared at her. "No, they don't."

Cassandra really didn't understand. *If they didn't have apartments, where did they live?* "But, why?"

Rebecca smiled, drank some tea. "Good question, Cassie. Ask yourself why? Why don't those people have an apartment?"

Cassandra picked up her cup and sipped. It was still really hot but the

aroma was pleasant. "I don't know. Papa says some people are losers. They don't know how to take care of themselves."

Closing her eyes, Rebecca nodded, sighed. "Cassie, what does your father do?"

She felt as though she was on more solid ground now. "Papa is a shipper, Madison Shipping."

"Hmm, and your apartment Cassie, what's it like? Like this?" She waved around to indicate her space.

Cassie sipped her tea, stalling. "No, Ma'am. It's bigger."

"Have you studied the history of the station, Cassie?"

Cassandra glanced up from her cup. "It was built and populated about one hundred and twenty years ago. Primarily by people from Old Earth, Ireland."

"Did you know Cassie, that at that time, most apartments on this and most every level except Level 7 had about 140 to 190 square meters. As time went on, the wealthiest began buying up apartments on the seventh level, so the people who lived there, fairly well off themselves, began buying the apartments on Level 6. At each level they made their own apartments bigger, forcing the evicted families to move to the lower levels, eventually forcing these levels, 4 and 3, to reduce the size of their apartments. In most cases, there are four people living in an apartment this size, sometimes more."

"There's no space?" Cassandra could hardly grasp the concept. "The station is out of space?"

Rebecca shook her head. "There's plenty of space for the population the station has, it's just that there are people who take more than their share because they can."

Cassandra's cup was empty. She twirled it around and around on the worn plastic table top. "But why don't they just buy another apartment?"

"You said your father's a shipper?" Rebecca asked.

Cassandra nodded.

"Do you know how his business works?"

Cassandra thought for a moment. She remembered her father at the dinner table, complaining about the prices ship's captains wanted for goods, for machinery breaking down, for the workers who were always asking for more pay or benefits. But she never actually heard from him how the business worked. "Not really."

"When the station was founded, there was no crime, not like today. Anyone on the station who wanted one, had a job; station administration, dock workers, medical, even shop owners. Little by little, things changed. A few people demanded money from shop and restaurant owners. If they didn't pay,

their shops were vandalized until they paid protection to those demanding money. Big shippers began pressuring dock workers to take less pay, fewer benefits, more hours. The station began asking for more in living fees, more credits for water, air, living space. All the while the wealthy were buying up that very space, making everyone else settle for less.

Cassandra sat very still. She knew, in a vague way, that there was crime on the station but she'd never heard it spoken of so openly. "But, how did it get like this?"

"Because it happened gradually. We didn't notice until about fifty years ago. That's when the station noticed that more and more people were living in the margins, the maintenance corridors, the core, the main concourses late at night. They're called the Dispossessed. The big shippers pressured the dock workers until their unions broke. Now, only those people who are on organized crime's payroll get work on the docks. Only people with hereditary ties get station jobs. More and more people are out of work, struggling to put food in their mouths and to claim a spot on the deck for the night.

"That's awful!" Cassandra cried. "That's just awful."

"Indeed."

"I'm going to tell my papa. He'll fix it."

Rebecca's eyes filled with sorrow. "Chicklet, he won't fix it. He's one of the people who caused it to happen."

Cassandra stared at Rebecca. Business dinners, cocktail parties, holiday dinners, all of those conversations came back to her, now in a different context. She felt so stupid.

"What can we do?"

Smiling, Rebecca said, "good question Cassie. What can you do?"

Cassie didn't know. She had planned to stop her schooling next year. Father wanted her to go on to University. It had seemed so dull. Now quitting her schooling seemed even more important. "I can help. I'll be out of school next year. I can help."

Rebecca laughed. "What can you do, Cassie? Can you keep books? Organize and manage people? Cook?"

Cassie blushed and smacked her hand on the table. "I'm not stupid."

Rebecca reached across the table and patted Cassie's hand. "No, you're not stupid, but you're not trained either. Go to school. Learn all you can. See other stations and planets. Learn how things are done in other places. Then come back. Then you can make a difference."

Cassie grew quiet. She could do that. Papa always was talking about

sending her to University, to travel. She nodded.

"Let's make up the sofa for you. I'll get you home in the morning." Rebecca stood up. "Would you like to help?"

Cassandra looked at Rebecca. It was the first time she could ever remember that someone had asked her that question. She nodded and stood up. "Yes, I'd like to help."

The End

## HARD CHOICES

### Chapter 1

Jolene Harris, Jo, to her friends, sauntered along Gulliver Station, Deck Four Main Concourse. She reveled in the luxury of not having to be anywhere, report to anyone, or even compromise with companions on what to do next. The next twenty-three hours were hers to do with as she pleased.

She was enjoying the walk, being in a large, open space. They actually had real plants and trees planted in huge brightly colored pots along the walls and among the stalls. It was nice that she didn't know a single person she passed, so many more people here. She loved her old ship, a cruiser in the Space Force, The Atlantis, but face it, there weren't huge concourses like this to walk along. The corridor narrowed. There was no need for a large open space now that the market was behind her. The ceiling dropped and the concourse narrowed to only about ten meters wide. There was still a feeling of openness, at least for her, but for the station, it was easier to air condition. The sound was muted in the smaller space; it was so much quieter here.

She had come to the far end of the market section in Main Concourse B, Quadrant A, where the bars thinned out and the hotel accommodations began to get better.

Ahead, she could see the last few bars, one of which, The Black Hole, had been recommended to her by Sergeant Boyd. He'd taken her aside at the going away party they'd given her as they approached the station.

"Jo, be a good lass and stop into one of my old haunts, The Black Hole. They know how to take care of a spacer there and if you mention my name, they'll give you the first drink free."

The Captain had allowed a little liquor for the party. She toasted him.

"Thanks, Sergeant Boyd, that's very nice of you."

The next morning, directions to the bar were on her comm unit. An hour later, he was at the hatch to shake her hand goodbye.

"Don't forget now, The Black Hole," and he winked.

She laughed. "I won't forget, Sarge. I'll have one for you." She gave a final salute to her now former shipmate and headed down the ramp.

Outside the bar a dejected little man was holding out a tray of shiny objects. Hair thinning on top and wearing nondescript gray-brown station clothing, she wouldn't have given him a second glance except he was the only person standing in front of the bar. "Just the thing to brighten your day," he called out to passersby. Then he spotted her.

"Miss, here's just the thing for you, a trinket to set off the sparkle in your eyes." He held the tray out for her to see. "Better'n the stars in the sky. You can hold it in your hand!" He picked up a clear gem, about four centimeters across. "Please, take a closer look," and he held it up in front of her face.

She laughed. "What would I do with that onboard my ship?"

"Why, you'd be the envy of every female crew member on board, lass. At the next station, wind it into your hair. You'll be the spittin' image of a fairy princess."

He deftly moved between her and the door to the bar. "Just hold it a moment, let your imagination take hold."

She couldn't help herself. She let him hand her the jewel, setting her duffel down on the deck. It felt heavy and it caught every tiny beam of light, sending out flashes of radiance. Jo was tempted. She didn't have any jewelry to speak of and well, a girl liked to dress up once in awhile.

She tried to hand it back. "It's probably too expensive."

He held up his hands. "Oh no, very affordable miss, just 50 credits."

"Fifty credits!" Her eyebrows rose to exclamation points and she tried to drop it on his little tray. "I don't think so."

He danced aside so smoothly she was left holding the jewel. "No, miss, no, I misspoke, that one is only forty credits."

"It's probably not even a real diamond." She moved toward him again and again, he moved aside.

"Better, miss, better. Dug from one of the local asteroids, it was, a souvenir of your visit to our fine station. Thirty-five credits."

She laughed. "You're a liar; I'll give you ten credits."

He slapped his hand over his heart, his face crestfallen, "Miss, you're taking the bread right out of my children's mouths. Thirty credits."

Moving toward him again, hand outstretched with the jewel in it, she tried

to drop it on the tray. "I don't even want it. Take it back."

"Miss!" He spoke in such a woebegone voice that she laughed again. "I swear on my sainted mother's eyes. I couldn't take less than twenty-five credits."

She stopped moving toward the tray, tossed the jewel in her left hand then closed her fist around it, holding her hand to her shoulder. Jo glared.

"Twenty, and that's robbery."

"Miss, you're robbing my children of their supper but just for you, today only, I'll take the twenty credits." His open hand shot out toward her.

Shaking her head, she reached into her pocket. She'd gotten some credits at the market as change after she'd eaten a light lunch of crispy fried vegetables and flatbread at a stall with tables, surrounded by pots filled with tall plants the owner called palm trees. They didn't look anything like the palm trees on her planet but she'd have to take him at his word. Jo dropped the two plastic disks into the hawker's hand. She was fairly certain she was being ripped off.

He actually bowed to her. "Bless you, miss. May fair winds be ever at your back."

Just then, a man in an apron came out of the bar door. "You! Get lost. You're not supposed to be hawking your junk here." He came after the guy and her hawker dashed off, blowing the bartender a kiss on his way toward the market.

"Losers! Miss, was he bothering you? I can call StaSec."

Jo slid the jewel into her pocket, "No, not bothering me a bit." She didn't think she needed to share what happened with this fellow. Certainly no reason to get StaSec involved. On her home planet, Rodinia, officers of the law were trusted. They went through significant psychological screening to weed out any unstable or dishonest people. She'd since learned in her basic training for the Space Force that not all worlds or stations had law enforcement that could be trusted. It was hard for her to get her mind around how law enforcers could be corrupt but she accepted it as part of her training, even if she didn't have an emotional feel for it.

The man in the apron stared down the concourse after the jewel seller, then huffed, turned and went inside. She followed him in.

## Chapter 2

She paused as she stepped through the door. The light was much dimmer

here and she needed to let her eyes adjust. The place smelled slightly of alcohol. She could hear the bartender complaining to the men at the bar, "Right outside the door. They know they're supposed to stay in the market."

She stepped in, toward the bar, her duffel banging against her left knee. Spotting an empty table, she headed for it, dropped her duffel on one of the chairs and sat in the chair beside it. The bartender hurried over.

"I hope he wasn't keeping you miss. They're supposed to stay in the market."

"Really, it was no problem."

The bartender wiped his hands on his apron. "What can I get you miss?"

She was in the mood to explore this new place. The Atlantis only stopped here occasionally, never in the time she'd been on board, so she asked, "What's the specialty on this station?"

He broke into smiles. "I'm glad you asked. Most of the inhabitants are descended from colonists from Old Earth Ireland. They brought the secret of their whisky with them, miss. You'll not find better even on Old Earth." He bowed slightly. "I'm Shamus, owner, bartender, glass washer, floor sweeper, at your service."

She laughed. "Thank you, Shamus. I'm supposed to tell you that my old shipmate, Sergeant Boyd sent me."

His eyes lit up. "Cale Boyd! You crewed with Cale Boyd?"

"I did. I just left the ship and he insisted that I come here."

He slapped the table and turned to the bar. "Boys! You won't believe your ears. This lass just left Cale Boyd's ship!"

The men at the bar and several people at the tables raised a cheer. "Is he coming in for a drink, Lass?"

She hated to disappoint them. "No, sorry, they were here to refuel and let me off. I suspect they're gone already."

Groans were heard from around the room.

He slapped his hands together. "That's all right. We'll drink a toast to him together. I'll get you the good stuff, miss."

"I'm Jo," she said to his back.

He was back in a flash with a small carafe and two shot glasses. "This is the best whisky on the station," he told her as he poured a shot for her, then one for himself.

He picked it up, "Here's to Cale Boyd," and the room shouted back, "To Cale!"

Jo picked up the glass and with the others, downed the shot in a single gulp. It felt like fire going down her throat. While the others slammed their

glasses down on bar and table, she began coughing. Her eyes watered as she gasped for breath.

Shamus laughed, "That's all right lass, it takes a drink or two to get used to it. The carafe is on the house."

He went back to the bar to fill drink orders, leaving Jo at the table alone. That didn't last long. The few women in the place were with men. She was the only unattached female present. Soon, there was an unending succession of young and not so young men dropping by her table. She shared the carafe of whisky with each newcomer, pouring out shot after shot. When one carafe was empty, another appeared. She finally hit it off with Mike, talking for two hours about his life on the station, her life on a space cruiser, and her plans for the future.

She'd been pacing herself but the whisky was starting to catch up with her. She asked for water and Mike went to the bar to get a pitcher and a glass. She watched him from the table. He was almost spacer lean with a dark mop of black hair and the most startling blue eyes. She liked the way he moved. She watched him pour her a glass of water. His wrists were strong, the bones prominent and fine dark hairs were dusted over the skin.

She drank the water. "Thank you, Mike."

Watching him sit down she said, a little bashfully, "Um, I'm only on station for a few hours. I don't want to break any cultural taboos here."

He sat forward, arms crossed on the table and grinned. "Ask away, I promise not to be offended."

She blushed. She'd been on the Atlantis a year and regulations prohibited relationships. It's not that people didn't hook up, but she'd never found anyone worth risking trouble for. "Would you be interested in walking me to a hotel room?"

He tilted his head and wagged his eyebrows at her, nodding, "I think I could see my way to doing that."

She laughed. "All right. Let me pay up."

"Nonsense," he stood up. "Your bill is paid."

He waved at Shamus. Shamus waved back and shouted. "You're welcome here anytime lass."

Everyone in the bar laughed. She blushed again.

"Well, that was subtle." She picked up her duffel and they left the bar.

Once in the concourse she asked, "Which way?"

He reached for her duffel. "Here, let me carry that."

She was a little startled. After six years in the Space Forces and having been brought up on a matriarchal planet, it wasn't something she expected.

But he seemed so natural, she let it go. He put his arm around her and they walked along the concourse, away from the market area. They passed little restaurants and more hotels. After about a hundred and fifty meters and a pressure door, he turned into a door with the name of a hotel. He asked for a room and Jo paid for it. The clerk handed her a plastic card. Down the hall they found the room and the plastic key opened the door. Jo walked in, holding the door for Mike.

The room was about twice the size of her cabin on the Atlantis. It held a double bed, night stands on either side. A small table with two café chairs was in the corner, a small lamp in the middle. Opposite the bed, along the wall was a six drawer dresser. Near the room door was a small bathroom contained the usual facilities but it was shower only, no bathtub. Over the dresser was a monitor with the remote for it on the left hand night stand. Mike dropped her duffel on the dresser top.

"This is acceptable," she said from in front of the bathroom door. She felt a little light headed. "I shouldn't have had that last whisky."

Mike walked over to her and put his hands on her shoulders. He was nearly two meters tall and at her one point six meters he only had to lean forward to kiss her on the forehead. "You did fine for a lass new to it," he murmured.

She tilted her head up and he accepted the offer. They kissed, his hands sliding around to her back, pulling her into his chest. Between the kiss and the whisky, she felt the room spin and stepped back. "Whew!"

He laughed, as his hand slid down her arm and grasped her hand. He bent over it, and gave the back of it a long kiss. She'd never had her hand kissed before and she could feel her insides melting. He gazed into her face and waggled his eyebrows at her again, a crooked smile on his face. She could feel that kiss for long moments after he let it go.

She laughed, "You are the scoundrel my mother warned me about before I left home."

"Indeed I am," and he folded her in his arms again. It improved from there.

#

Two hours later, Jo complained. "Mike, I have to eat. Let's get cleaned up and go find a decent restaurant."

Mike rolled over and wrapped her in his arms. "No way, let's stay here." He tried to clinch the deal by nuzzling her neck behind her ear. Jo's stomach growled.

"Fine, I get the hint." He nuzzled once more and released her. "Share the shower?" he winked.

## Chapter 3

They left her duffel in the room and strolled hand in hand along the concourse toward the market.

"I promise," Mike squeezed her hand, "it's the best food on the station." Jo's stomach growled in response and he laughed.

She patted his hand and rested her head against his shoulder for a moment. Jo hadn't been this happy in a long time. The last time was before she left home for the Space Force. Actually, before she decided to join. Her secondary schooling was done and her Mom, Margaret, was pressuring Jo to go to University and study biology so she could join the family bio-engineering business. She headed the company and her sister, Jo's favorite Aunt Susan, Jo's co-mom Cindy, and her father, George, all worked there. Jo was on the path to entering the family business.

Jo was dating a guy she thought might be the right one for her. One night, he told Jo he'd fallen in love with a young woman he worked with. What was she supposed to do? She felt like she'd been kicked in the stomach. Aunt Susan did her best to help Jo through it. A month later Jo signed up in the Space Forces as a communications technician. She wanted to get as far away from home as possible, going as far as changing her scientific focus. The family was disappointed of course.

Now Jo felt better, healed, rested. She was eager for dinner. Jo was comfortable and enjoying Mike's hand in hers, so she was surprised when three men closed in around them.

One of them, small, lean and ugly, grabbed her wrist, "Give me everything you've got chicklet."

The other two guys focused on Mike. They had knives. "Credits, jewels, whatever you've got," a big hairy guy growled at Mike. Mike backed up a step.

Jo's heart was in her throat. She started to reach for her pouch when Mike delivered a kick to the third guy's wrist. The knife he'd been holding went flying. The lean and ugly guy was distracted so Jo kicked him in the knee, twisting her wrist free from the gnarly fist that had been holding her. She heard something in his knee crack and he screamed with pain, falling to the floor, holding the offended knee.

Mike, surrounded by Hairy guy and the third man, a red head with greasy hair, scanned back and forth between them. Hairy guy still had a knife. Jo spotted the loose knife against the corridor wall next to a plant pot. She darted across the concourse to get it. The red head that lost it was facing her and saw Jo run across the concourse. He yelled to Hairy guy and broke off from Mike to go after her.

Jo picked up the knife and whirled around, still in a crouch, using the plant pot as a partial shield. Everything she learned in the Academy flew out of her head. The lean guy had recovered enough to hobble in a circle around Mike blocking him from getting to Jo and the red headed guy. Hairy guy and Mike closed in on each other and the Red head was closing in on Jo. She dodged to her left and then back to her right. It wasn't much of a feint but the lummo fell for it. She had about a four step head start as she ran toward the big Hairy guy who was pounding Mike in the face.

She closed in thinking to stab the Hairy guy but Red head was too close. She darted around Mike hoping she might be able to get him the knife. She was no knife fighter, even with the Academy training. Better he have it. Red headed guy was gaining on her. There was a break in Mike's fight as Hairy guy fell to the floor. She called out to Mike and when he looked, Jo tossed him the knife. Just as he caught it, Hairy guy started to get back up. Red headed guy made a quick turn from Jo to Mike and before she could call out, knifed Mike in the back.

Everything seemed to stop. She wasn't even sure she was breathing. Hairy guy got up from the floor and kicked Mike in the stomach, for good measure she supposed, and then turned to regard her. Panic filled her and she knew she had to get out of there or she'd be next. Jo ran into the nearest restaurant, through the front of the house, leaving gasps of surprise and comments from customers trailing behind her and into the kitchens. All of these places had narrow back alleys where supplies were delivered; Jo just had to find the door. The chef wasn't pleased when she sent a busboy flying and dishes crashed all over the kitchen. He yelled in a language she didn't know, waving his big knife. Jo found the door and burst into the back alley.

Piles of crates and shipping boxes were out there. She shoved the door closed and pulled some crates in front of it. They weren't very heavy but anything to slow the bad guys down. Jo dodged to her left, cutting in and out behind crates whenever she could to stay out of the line of sight. She dashed into a door on the right side of the back concourse, into another kitchen, startling the dishwasher. Jo's back to the door, she put her finger to her lips, willing the wide-eyed teen-aged girl to silence. Jo just wanted a second to

catch her breath. Walking quickly but as calmly as possible, she went through the kitchen, into the dining room and out into a Main Concourse A. Jo went left again, checking behind her often, bumping into people every time she turned around to check behind her and hurrying across the first cross concourse. It was the dinner hour and a lot of people were strolling up and down looking into shop windows, chatting in little groups. *Good, Jo thought, lots of people make it harder for them to find me.*

Her breathing became less panicked and she moved a little more slowly. Jo caught a quick glance at her reflection in a bar window. Her hair was standing up in all directions and her eyes were big as plates. Jo moved on, finger combing her hair into some kind of order. There was nothing she could do about the panic in her eyes.

At the next cross concourse, two and a half clicks later, she turned left again. Jo was far enough in this direction that she was a long way past her hotel. She just needed to get around one more corner, get to the hotel and get her duffel. Jo panicked, hand shooting to her pocket, then sighed with some relief. The key card was still in her pocket. At Concourse B, she paused, peeking around the corner before taking that left turn.

It all seemed normal. No one was rushing around, no Station Security, no alarms. Jo rounded the corner, staying as close to the walls as possible. She made it back to the hotel, nodded at the clerk as she went by and went to her room. She was about to shove the card in the lock when it occurred to her that someone might be in there. Quietly, she tried the handle. It was locked. Jo hesitated. Could be nothing, it was supposed to be locked. She tried the card. She could hear the lock retract. Jo slid the door open slightly. No lights were on in the room, no sound. She slid the door all the way open and hit the light switch, ready to bolt. Nothing. Jo peeked around the door jam. No one was in there.

Jo slid inside and shut the door making sure the extra lock was engaged. She went into the bathroom and splashed water on her face. Her face stared back from the mirror. Yeah. The window didn't lie. Jo grabbed the few toiletries she'd taken out of her duffel and dumped them in her toiletry kit. Going into the room, she tossed the kit into the duffel and glanced around the room. She grabbed up her dirty clothes and shoved them into the bag. A last check showed there was nothing left.

Jo sank onto the unmade bed, a sudden wave of exhaustion washing over her. What now? A sudden wave of nausea hit and she ran back to the bathroom and vomited until there was nothing coming up but bile. She rose from the floor, weak kneed and hit the flush button. She'd never seen anyone

killed. Certainly not someone she liked. At the sink she rinsed her mouth and splashed her face again. As she dried her face and hands she went back to the room and sat beside her duffel on the bed.

She thought about Mike. He made her laugh and for a short while, brought her a measure of comfort she hadn't had since her boyfriend back on Rodinia dumped her. She sighed. A headache lodged itself behind her right eye. Mike was a nice guy, she really liked him but her plan was to leave him in a few hours, never looking back. It didn't feel right. *What kind of station is this where people get attacked walking along a concourse? Wait, what did they ask for? Credits and jewels. For credits and jewels? Not jewelry?* Jo launched off of the bed to stand over her duffel. She'd put the jewel in a bottom back pocket. It hadn't been sneaky. Jo just didn't want it falling out or getting caught in clothing and lost. It was still there. She pulled it out and it glittered in the room light.

Jo sat back down on the bed, turning the thing absently, watching it catch the light and spread it in sparkles around the walls. Jo contemplated the room. Nothing was disturbed any more than the way she and Mike had left it. *Jewels. Not jewelry. What does that mean? I'm just a crew member. Hell, I haven't even signed onto The Adirondack yet. What's with this jewel?* She held it up to the light. She frowned, she could see through it, sort of. The facets got in the way of seeing clearly. Jo put it in her pocket. She wanted it with her.

*What to do now? StaSec would notice a dead body and be checking the security recordings. They'd see I was there and escaped. They'd at the very least want to ask questions. I'd been briefed that StaSec here was corrupt, to stay out of trouble. Well, she snorted to herself, that didn't work out very well. What do I do now?* She could just check into a different hotel, lay low and check into her ship in the morning. She could call StaSec, turn herself in and try to explain what happened. Jo grunted to herself; she didn't like either of those ideas.

She pulled the jewel back out of her pocket and studied it. What is this that we were attacked for it? Killed for it? What Jo really wanted to do was find out about this jewel. She stood up and slipped it back into her pocket. That's what she'd do. She'd find the little guy that sold it to her and get an answer out of him.

Her stomach growled again. Right after she got something to eat.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Connie Cockrell began writing in response to a challenge from her daughter in October 2011 and has been hooked ever since. Her books run the gamut from SciFi to Contemporary to Halloween and Christmas stories. She's published three novels and three collections of short stories and has been included in three different anthologies. Connie continues to write about whatever comes into her head.

Enjoyed Hard Choices? Sign up to be notified of my next book [here](#).

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Her books are available in print at most online retailers.

Her final book in the series, Gulliver Station: Revolution, will be out near the end of July, 2014. See the excerpt below.

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### Excerpt from Gulliver Station: Revolution

Jolene Harris, Jo to her friends, flipped the final toggles on the ship's board in front of her. "Adirondack confirms station umbilicals attached."  
"Welcome to Gulliver Station, Adirondack. Station Control out."

She sighed as she relaxed back into her chair. She opened the comm link to the Captain, Talisa Vien. "Captain, we're docked."

"I'll be there in half an hour," Talisa yawned. "Go ahead and post our cargo and our shopping list. I'll grab a shower then be out to relieve you."

"Take your time, Captain. Everything is under control." Jo signed off then punched comms for the rest of the crew. "Ship's docked, people. Cargo is being posted to the station boards. Let's look lively."

Josh Woodhill, was to her left. Josh was lead comms tech for the Adirondack, a position he earned when Jo first signed onto the ship, when Talisa was promoted at the same time to First Officer. "Josh, go ahead and get something to eat. The rest of the crew will be in the galley soon and there won't be room enough in there to get a cup of coffee."

"Excellent idea, Jo." He transferred the boards to her and headed to the rear of the bridge where the galley was located. "Can I bring you something?"

"Cup of tea, please. Thanks."

He waved acknowledgement and left the bridge. Alone now, Jo punched in the code for the Space Forces office on Gulliver. Her handler was Lieutenant Berger Atwood. She met him three years ago when the Adirondack docked at Gulliver. The Space Forces officers didn't stay in one place long. Atwood was her, she counted on her fingers, 10th, no 11th, contact within the office.

"Lieutenant Atwood, please," she asked the young woman who answered. "First Officer Harris from The Adirondack."

Jolene waited for the call to get to the Lt. Has it been forty years already? She gave her head a tiny shake. That first encounter with Gulliver Station was a doozy. An experience she hoped never to repeat. What it made her was a contact for the Space Forces for both Gulliver Station's underground and one of its criminal factions.

"Lt. Atwood, here."

"Bergen, nice to hear you again." Jo got comfortable in her chair. "I've got your reports."

"Good to hear from you, Jo. No problems on the run in?"

"No, the jump points were all clear. I picked up packages for the Underground and for The Family. Usual drop? They're going to want those packages yesterday."

"I know, Jo. Drop them at the usual spot and I'll get the team to open them, make copies, and reseal them. Then get them back to you ASAP."

"Thanks, Bergen. I'll get off the ship soonest."

"Take care, Jo," he said.

"Will do, LT. Out." Jo cut the link. She moved up onto the edge of her chair and stretched. Josh picked that moment to bring her tea.

"Here you go, Jo. I'll be back in a few. The crew is filtering into the galley now."

She inhaled the fragrance of the tea. "I'm glad we're here. This tea is getting boring. I'm ready for something new."

He laughed. "Yeah, everything in the galley is getting boring. I'm ready to hit the restaurants and try something other than frozen prepacks."

"I'll get my sandwich and get back right away."

"Take your time. I've got the boards covered."

#

Sean Morrow was sitting in The Family's clubhouse, playing cards with the other lieutenants. "You have got to be kidding," he threw his cards down. "You won with a pair of three's?"

Flynn Irwin roared, "You fall for it every time, Sean. You've only yerself to blame." He pulled the pot to himself while the rest of the table laughed.

A young man, hardly out of his teens hurried up to the table. Sean waved him over. The boy whispered in his ear. Sean nodded and the boy hurried off.

"That's it for me, boyo's." He bowed to Dacey Garr. She was the lieutenant over The Family's prostitution racket on Gulliver Station. "Fair Dacey. I'm sorry but duty calls." He picked up her hand and kissed the back of it.

"Stop it, you rogue." She pulled her hand away. "You just want to leave because you're losing."

"True," he stood up. "But also true I have some business to take care of."

He left the table to the laughter of the players.

Once outside of the clubhouse, a space The Family had held on Level 2 since the station was founded, he hurried to the nearest Maglev and got on. It was a short ride to the elevators and up to Level 8 where his boss, Kenna Gillespie had her office.

Kenna's secretary, Kate Jamison, buzzed him through the locked office door. The Firm, their rival criminal syndicate, had a hit out on Kenna. The Firm had permanent hits out on all of The Family's leaders for generations. As soon as a new person took the reins of the operation, The Firm made sure word got out that a large reward awaited the man, woman or child who could kill them.

Sean opened the door and went in. The office was decorated in woodland motif. Pastel green walls, wooden decorations, and lots of plants. It seemed

like too many plants to Sean but it wasn't his office. "Kenna," he said as soon as he was through the door. "The Adirondack has docked."

She looked up from the pad on her desktop. "Have a seat, Sean." She waved him to the chairs in front of her glass topped desk. Kenna was younger than Sean by about 15 years but she was still attractive even in her mid-fifty's. She had her Grandmother Erin's blonde hair which she kept dyed, but unlike her grandmother, Kenna kept her hair cut short.

Eyes the color of sapphire's watched him take a seat. "Need a cup of coffee?"

"No, thanks," he said as he settled into the chair. Those eyes scared the daylights out of him when he first met her. It felt like lasers staring him down. She was a formidable woman, as tough as her father and grandmother combined. He was surprised she even knew about him. He was just the guy the Level 4 hawkers reported to.

"You're the man I need as a lieutenant, Sean," she told him at their first meeting. "I don't like bullies and too many of the men my father promoted have more brawn than brain."

He was flattered and flustered at the same time. She meant it. Men he'd grown up under were quietly replaced. The Family became both a politer world and more profitable. Kenna had a plan and worked it. He was glad. The rough stuff never appealed to him though he'd had to do some rough stuff to protect himself and The Family.

She got right to business. "When do you think Harris will deliver the package?"

"It always takes at least a day. She's the First Officer, it's not always easy for her to get away," Sean told her.

"Alright. Do we know what's in the package?"

Sean shrugged. "Like the message said, it's supposed to be plans for a new weapon. One that can be used within the Station but better than the stunners in use now. But who knows."

Kenna nodded. "It would be nice to be a step ahead of The Firm. Patrick McMahon takes too much after his grandfather James. Ruthless is another word for cruel and bully. Otherwise why keep up the charade of a hit on me all these years."

Sean nodded. "Rumor is that his son Colin is worse. And he's champing at the bit to take over for his father."

"Hmmm," Kenna responded. "How old is Colin now? Thirty?"

"Thirty-three. He's ready, or he thinks he is, to take over his old man's job."

Kenna sighed. "Worse and worse, that organization has become. I had to break up more illegal prostitution houses last week. He steals little kids from the Dispossessed and sells them to the highest bidder. Damn!" She slapped her hand on the table.

Sean nodded again. That was one of the things he liked about The Family. There were boundaries. He stood up. "I'll let you know when I get the package."

"Good. Make sure it's the plans and take it directly to the labs. I don't need to see it."

"What if it isn't the plans?"

"We'll figure that out when you open it up."

He nodded and left.

#

Colin answered his apartment doorbell.

"Ariel, how good of you to come." He slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her in close. They kissed, a deep, breath-taking kiss that demonstrated they'd been together for awhile.

Ariel broke away. "Your father will see."

Colin pulled her back. "He's in the kitchen," and kissed her again, then pulled her into the apartment. "Sit. Something to drink?"

"Whisky," she said as she walked into the living area behind him. "Father was being senile all afternoon."

Colin selected a crystal decanter from the collection on the sideboard and poured her two fingers into a matching crystal squat glass. "This should help take the taste out of your mouth."

Colin was handing it to her when his father, Patrick McMahon, came out of the kitchen carrying a small platter. "Oh, Ariel. I didn't hear the bell. Glad you could make it." He placed the platter, filled with a selection of hors d'oeuvres on the coffee table.

Ariel picked up a napkin and selected a puff pastry from the tray. She caught Colin's eye and while Patrick was helping himself to the bar, licked the pastry suggestively before biting it in half.

Colin mouthed the word, "Later," just before his father turned around.

"Let's get started, shall we," Patrick said as he moved to the sofa.

Colin selected the armchair at the end of the coffee table. "Why'd you arrange for us to meet, Dad?"

"I want to talk about where The Firm is headed, Colin, and I don't want

half of the organization to know what's going on before I say the words."

"So, we're meeting here?" Ariel asked.

"Exactly," Patrick said. He took one of the appetizers and ate it. He wiped his fingers on his napkin. "We're still evenly matched with The Family. One or the other of us pulls ahead for a little while then the other catches up. It's time we eliminated the competition."

Colin sat up from his relaxed position in the chair. "Why now, Dad?"

Patrick looked at his son. "I'm over seventy, son. Soon the organization will be yours. I mean to have it arranged that you receive the only syndicate on Gulliver Station."

Colin put on a modest demeanor. "Why, Dad, that's, I don't know what to say!"

Ariel kicked off her shoes and curled up in her chair. "And why am I here, Mr. McMahon?"

Patrick sipped from his glass of whisky. "Because I know that you two," he pointed at each of them with his glass as he settled back onto the sofa, "are a couple."

Colin shot a quick glance at Ariel.

"I know," Patrick continued. "You've kept it a secret but I have resources. I've known since you first started seeing each other."

Ariel shrugged, "So why am I here?"

"You make a good team. An alliance between you two will guarantee the success of The Firm."

Ariel sipped at her drink. "Only one problem with that, Mr. McMahon. My father is still the Station Master."

Patrick waved the comment away. "He won't be for long. The first thing we're going to do is get you appointed Station Manager."

That comment stopped her cold. She frowned. "My father has said repeatedly that he's not ready for retirement."

"Your father is seventy-five years old. He took over as Station Manager after his father, Art, died. Like his father, he's been a Family boot licker from the start. He needs to go."

Ariel smiled. "How shall we get that to happen?"

"All in good time." Patrick said. "The whole point is for The Family to be destroyed. With you as Station Manager and Colin as my heir, we'll control Gulliver Station. That goody two shoe, bitch, Kenna Gillespie, will be eliminated, along with her interference in our business."

Colin watched as his father grew red in the face. Colin knew what his father was referring to. The child brothels and child selling were unsavory to

his father but he considered them legitimate business.

Colin understood. But it annoyed him to no end that Kenna Gillespie took it upon herself to interfere. With her out of the way, he could do as he pleased.

Patrick took another sip of whisky to clear his throat. "It is my intention to wipe Kenna Gillespie and her entire organization off of the station." He looked at his son and Ariel. "And you two are going to help me do it."

Revolution is due out the end of July, 2014.