

CHAPTER 1

My Mother and Other Aliens

I saw the assassin before she saw me. She was eating noodles at one of the hawker bars, watching the university gates. I knew she was a killer because old Lenny Porchino had pointed her out to me at the Buzz Bar two nights ago.

‘Hey, take a look at that skinny kid with the frizzy hair,’ he’d said, nodding his head towards the doors behind me.

We were sitting in Lenny’s private booth, hidden from general view. I shifted in my seat until I could see her. Skinny, frizzy and mean.

‘What about her?’ I said, banging my harmonica against the flat of my hand. I had just finished jamming with the band and my harp was full of slag.

‘That’s Tori Suka. She’s a culler for the hyphen families. If she’s in town, someone’s gonna die.’

Tori Suka didn’t fit my idea of someone who would work for the big-money families. Too rough. She was wearing the same kind of student gear as I was: black long-wear jeans, matching jacket. Standard stuff you can get from any machine.

One of Lenny’s waiters came up to the table. He was all nerves.

‘Mr Porchino, there’s a guy in the crapper done too much smack. Looks like he’s croaking it.’

Lenny shook his head.

‘Don’t know why they still go for that antique screte,’ he said. He looked over at me. ‘Joss, don’t ever do any of that old-fashioned powder. Does you in and wrecks your looks.’ He turned to the waiter. ‘Get Cross and Lee to dump him outside St Vinnies.’

The waiter weaved through the crowd towards two bouncers lounging against the wall. Lenny watched until he saw Cross and Lee move towards the toilets.

‘Suka’s not the best gun around, but she gets the job done,’ he said. ‘I wonder who the mark is? And who’s hiring?’ He was pulling at the ends of his moustache. Lenny always made it his business to know who was putting out a contract.

I looked at the kid again. She was leaning against the bar, throwing nutmeats into her mouth. She chewed with her mouth open. How did she become an assassin? Did Careers tell her she was suited to murder?

Lenny’s son, Porchi, strutted over from the bar and slid next to me in the booth. He pressed his thigh against mine. I moved away from him. Porchi’s been trying to snork me since we met after I pulled his dad out of the river a year ago. Old Lenny had ‘fallen in’ the Yarra with a bit of help from some DeathHeads on a grand-final rampage. I happened to be cruising the area and grabbed Lenny out of the river before he was mulched by the cleaning system.

Later Porchi told me that half the DeathHeads were wiped out when their hangout was bio-bombed. Very ugly. Lenny believes in paying his debts: I saved his life, so now he looks out for me. I’ve even got a permanent bedroom upstairs at the Buzz Bar. I think Lenny’s got some fantasy about me and Porchi breeding little Porchinos and living happily ever after. Like I said, Porchi would be happy to get stuck into the breeding part of that scheme.

Lenny is the closest thing I’ve had to family this past year. I haven’t actually seen my mother for about eighteen months. She’s always in production or in a meeting. I end up talking to Lewis, her secretary, via CommNet. Reverse charges, of course.

‘I’m sorry, Joss, Ingrid is unavailable right now,’ he always says with his ferret smile.

‘Well, tell her I called. She does remember who I am, doesn’t she?’

‘I’m sure she has a vague memory. I’ll pass on the message.’

Then he signs off before I bash my head through the screen.

Let’s face it, Ingrid Aaronson is not going to win Mother of the Year

award. Not that she needs it. She's won nearly every other award that a news presenter and VR star can win. She's even won the Thinking Man's Lust-beast award which is funny when you know she didn't even snork anyone to make me. I'm a comp-kid. Straight from the petri dish to you. Lust factor: nil. Ease factor: ten.

Sometimes I wonder if the petri dishes got mixed up and I should be living in the mall-highrises with Mamasan and Papasan. You see, my mother is all gold hair, big blues eyes, maximum curves and honey skin (rejuvenated twice now, but who's counting?). I'm all black straight hair, brown cats' eyes, and pale, pale skin.

Once, I asked Ingrid how many people were used to make me. A comp-kid like me can have up to ten gene donors. The bio-engineers just split different genes and stick them together using viruses. It's like being glued together by the common cold. Ingrid swore she only used one male donor. Name unknown, of course. If that's the case, Ingrid's nordic heritage has been bashed into submission by my father's genes. She's positive I also inherited my attitude problem from him. She says being chucked out of twelve schools must be genetic. Sometimes I imagine he knows I'm his daughter and is keeping tabs on me, waiting for the right moment to show himself. Yeah, sure.

I swung my pack on to my shoulder and walked past the noodle bar towards the university gates. The assassin eyeballed me as I passed her. She was smiling. I was tempted to stop and ask her about career opportunities, but Tonio Bel Hussar-Rigdon suddenly grabbed me on the shoulder. He was in dress uniform.

'You're late,' he said. 'Camden-Stone's so mad he's ready to expel you on the spot.'

Professor Camden-Stone was always threatening to expel me. You'd have thought the acting-director of the Centre for Neo-Historical Studies would have better things to do than pick on a lowly student. Wrong again. Old stony-face was building a career out of making my life miserable. Tonio thinks Camden-Stone has the hots for me. If he has, I'd hate him to really love me. He'd probably put a laser through my head. Even Lenny has dropped a word of warning about the dear professor.

He told me Camden-Stone beat the scrote out of a girl a couple of years ago and had to pay a lot of money to keep it quiet. You've got to wonder how a creep like Camden-Stone wound up in charge of the world's only time travel training centre.

Tonio was shifting from foot to foot, eager to get back to the ceremony. According to the campus bookies, he was going to be my time-jumping partner.

Every year the top fifty foundation year students at the university can apply to study at the Centre. If you're interested, you have to take extra classes with Camden-Stone and go through tons of tests. There's only twelve first-year places at the Centre so it's ultra competitive. I just scraped in: number eleven. Tonio Bel Hussar-Rigdon was number eight.

Tonio wasn't bad for a hyphen kid, but he was so nervy it made me want to scream. At least he wasn't a wankman like all the other hyphens. Then again, it wouldn't have mattered if he was Mr Nice Guy of the universe. The last thing I wanted was a partner. Especially a partner who lived, studied and worked with me. Talk about cramp your style. There was no way I was going to survive six years living in the same quarters as Tonio. Or anyone, for that matter.

'Come on,' Tonio urged. 'You've got to get changed and down to the Donut. Partnering is about to start.'

I looked through the gates at the Donut. The huge circular hall was buzzing with vid-crews. There was even a small group of protesters standing behind a banner. Something was up. The ceremony to partner time-jumping students didn't normally rate channel time or demonstrators.

'I thought partnering was supposed to be tomorrow,' I said.

'No one could find you to tell you what's happened. How come you don't carry a screen?' He leaned closer, shifting into gossip mode. 'Listen to this. They've moved the ceremony for diplomatic reasons. A flaphead is coming into our time-jump class.'

Tonio stepped back, a smug grin all over his pointy little face. This was big news and he knew it. The university had finally accepted one of the Chorian aliens as a student. Not only had they accepted one, but they had shoved it in the middle of our time-jumping class.

‘But, that makes thirteen in our group,’ I said. ‘It won’t have a partner.’

‘Robbie’s been dropped,’ Tonio said softly. ‘He was number twelve on the list. I don’t think he’s been sober since Stony told him.’

Poor Robbie. He must be burning. I was lucky they weren’t letting two Chorians into the course. I would have been skidding on my cheeks, too.

‘Come on,’ Tonio said, pulling me towards the gates.

I let him pull me because I was in memory overdrive. Ever since I first saw the Chorians on the vid-news, I’ve been obsessed with them. I was ten and expected to see some kind of giant insect. Talk about chronic disappointment. Two arms, two legs and a head with two eyes, just like us. Then again not many humans have two noses, two mouths and two huge double-jointed ears that flap around.

The Chorians are really into this Noah deal; everything in twos. They even have two sexes in one, like slugs. When the anti-alien lobby got wind of that, they started calling the Chorians ‘sluggos’. The government PR people knocked themselves out trying to stop that one. The campaign posters were a scream; a big slug with a red cross through it. Really subtle. I suppose it worked. Now everyone calls them flapheads.

When I first heard the Chorians were hermaphrodites, I thought they could snork themselves. You know, the ultimate wank. That sounded too good to be true, so I did some fancy detective work on the Net. I found out that self-snorking was out. Instead, two adults fertilise each other then each of them produces one child to form a birth pair. So, every Chorian is a kind of twin. I’ve always thought it would be great to have a twin. Instant best friend.

A few years ago Ingrid made a documentary about the Chorians. She called it ‘Our new friends from the Dog Star’ which is a bad name for a bad documentary. The Chorians aren’t even from Sirius A, the Dog Star. They’re from a planet that has Sirius A as its sun and Sirius B as its white dwarf partner. Like everything else that has been written or made on the Chorians, Ingrid’s doco was pretty short on information. At least it showed the original recording of the first contact. It’s the funniest history vid I’ve ever seen.

Six or so years ago, the first delegation of Chorians appeared in Mall 26, just before it was joined to the Mall Network. The Chorians thought 26 was a centre of government and the concert stage was parliament. A traditional Disney pantomime was playing and it scared the hell out of them. Let's face it, an enormous mouse jumping around to tinny music isn't really the height of human culture. Of course, the panto audience went into panic mode and cleared out in about ten seconds. The only one left was poor old Mickey. So, the Chorians were left standing along in front of a stage with a big mouse cowering in the corner.

It took the government people exactly five and half minutes to arrive, shunt Mickey off into the arms of a therapist, and set up their probe equipment. Meanwhile, the Chorians were trying to say hi, mind to mind. They quickly worked out we're not telepathic, so they scanned the brain of one of the feds to learn our lingo. Now, Chorians speak by harmonising words using their two mouths. Imagine being confronted by a group of aliens who all dipped imaginary hats then sang,

'Howdy pilgrims, sure is nice to meet you.'

The fed was a John Wayne fan.

Later the PR people made 'howdy y'all' the most irritating phrase in the world. Whoever thought of setting it to lullaby music for the 'Don't Be Afraid' campaign should have been shot.

About a year ago I bought an underground code from one of Porchi's contacts. It's supposed to only access RAVE-REVIVAL boards for free, but with a bit of jiggling, it also got into the government's news boards. I found out why the Chorians were here. They've got some kind of time/space warp gizmo that lets them jump around the universe without a ship. Now they want to swap that technology for our time travel know-how. They need to learn how to manipulate time accurately. We want to learn how to get off Earth without expensive ships and space stations. So far none of these negotiations have appeared on the public vid-news channels. The PR people have been quiet, too. Although today, as Tonio pulled me past the 'official' vid-crews, it was obvious the government's policy of silence was about to change.

‘This’ll do,’ Tonio said, stopping in front of a reactor access hut. I opened the door. The faint thrumming of the reactor’s cooling system buzzed through my feet. Tonio let go of my arm.

‘I’d say you’ve got about thirty seconds to get changed and get back to the Donut. I’ll see you there.’ He ran towards the crowd.

Tonio was right. I had to change into my dress uniform. Too bad it was still hanging in Lenny’s office at the Buzz Bar. Turning out for a ceremony in jeans and a T-shirt, even if they were regulation, was not going to go down well. I was heading towards expulsion number thirteen, but this time I wasn’t happy about it. And Ingrid would really crack the kuso. She’d spend a lot of money buying me a place in the university. She’d even bought mega shares in the Centre. The half-finished admin building is already being called the Aaronson Administration Complex.

I dumped my pack on the floor of the hut. All I could do was clean up a bit and hope Camden-Stone was in a good mood. I pulled on a new T-shirt and used the chrome handrail as an emergency mirror. What had I forgotten? My harp! I slipped it into my jeans pocket for luck and shoved my pack under some piping. Joss Aaronson was ready to meet her fate.