

## FINDERS KEEPERS OPENINGS CIRCA 1999

Trilby sat on her haunches amid the scrub brush and broken boulders and watched three silvered forms streak through the darkening sky. They were Ycsko fighters, of that she was sure now, seeing their distinctive cross-winged shapes patterning against the final flares of the setting twin suns.

A half-hour ago, when her ship's sensors had pick up the incoming craft, she had only known they were not UIC. That had been enough for her to activate Dukkara's cloaking device, in spite of the freighter's relatively well-concealed landing site in the side of the mountain.

And enough for her to grab and prime her laser rifle before climbing up to the ledge that jutted out over the heavily forested valley.

Which was where she sat now, rifle slung casually over her shoulder, grey eyes following the movements of the three ships as they darted in and out of the purpling clouds.

It was clear that two of the ships were in pursuit of the first, which always seemed just a hair's breadth in front of the others; dodging and diving, executing a near-impossible roll so close to the treetops that for a moment Trilby held her breath, waiting for the grating sound of impact.

But that was to come much later.

For now, there was only the sound of laser fire, whining through the quiet evening sky, illuminating the forest with horizontal bursts of lightning.

The ships faded out of her sight and Trilby wondered, after a while, if she would ever know the outcome of the chase. But just as she had given up on their return and was standing, ready to abandon the evening's entertainment, they were back, engines screaming as they sucked in Avenel's humid air.

She returned to her post. It had been over an hour since she'd first climbed onto the ledge and the night now wrapped around her like a damp and heavy cloak. The first of Avenel's three moons had risen, pale and sickly, so that the silvery skins of the fighters barely glistened in its wake.

She was sitting cross-legged now, rifle over her knees. She no longer felt the Ycsko were a threat, at least, not to her, not here.

Out in the trader's lanes, however, things would've been different.

When the crash, and subsequent explosion, came it wrenched her to her feet, rifle now in her right hand. She scanned the treetops, the acrid smoke she could smell invisible in the darkness.

But there. There was the first glimmer of orange flame. The crash site was closer than she thought; about three miles to the south.

It wasn't until she saw the pair of Ycsko move in an upward arc that she knew who now lay in the wreckage. They had gotten their quarry, one of their own, no doubt, who'd turned traitor.

It was not unheard of in the cut-throat world of the 'Sko.

Had they been Z'fharin fighters instead... she shook her head. No, in her ten years in the space lanes she'd never heard of Z'fharin

## FINDERS KEEPERS OPENING CIRCA 2003

The *Careless Venture's* intruder alarm erupted through the cavern with a harsh wail. Trilby Elliot shot to her feet, knocking over the makeshift repair table. Sonic welder and integrator cables clattered against the cavern floor.

She bolted for her freighter's rampway. Overhead, a nest of sleeping bloodbats burst out of the rocky crevices like small, leathery missiles. The panicked bats spiraled in front of her. Screeching, they fled through the wide mouth of the cavern into the lavender twilight.

She reached her rampway just as a silver object flashed across the sky behind them.

"Damn. Double damn." Another ship here meant big trouble. Even a little trouble was more than she could handle right now.

She sprinted through the airlock.

Coils of black conduit snaked down the freighter's corridor, humped over the hatch-tread into the bridge. She sidestepped the cables and reached for the alarm, slapping it into silence. A flick of her thumb activated intraship. She shouted the obvious. "Dezi, we got incoming! Take the bridge."

"On my way, captain." A reassuring reply came from three decks below in maintenance.

But then, Dezi couldn't see what she could.

Lights blinked in a crazed staccato on the scanner console. Data, ominous and irritatingly incomplete, spilled down the screen. The incoming ship was small but her malfunctioning equipment refused to pin down its origins. It could be a Conclave scout ship; it could be a pirate probe. It could also be the first of a squadron of fighters from the gods-only-knew-where.

She grabbed her binocs and laser rifle from the utility locker, tabbed the intercom back on. "Main scanner's still not cooperating. I'm going outside for a visual."

A second acknowledgment responded, calm as the first.

Good ol' Dezi.

A wave of late afternoon heat assailed her as she passed under the cavern's high arch. She crouched down between a nest of scrub palms and moss-covered boulders, scanned the sky with her binocs. The bright rays from the setting sun flared painfully into her eyes.

"Damnation!" She flicked her thumb against the auto-filter. Nothing happened. The filter was stuck, again. She smacked the binocs against her thigh, winced, and then brought them back up.

They hazed for a moment then adjusted. She panned the horizon, looking for movement, listening for something other than the jungle's thick silence and the pounding of her own heart. Five minutes passed. Sweat stained her drab-green t-shirt in dark, uneven patches.

Then a flicker, a metallic glint. She locked the binocs on it. The image came into focus and her sweat-dampened skin chilled as