

Tracker Chronicles: When The Music Stopped

2nd Edition

By

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Cover concept and design by Balayet

AI was NOT used to create the text of this book.

Characters:

Ev D'Ander – an instrumental musician. Ev has been performing publicly since she was eight years old with her mother and aunt. Currently she entertains with M.Jay-ahsht, the renowned Tomajian Throat singer

Business Manger T – T has been the manager for the entertaining portion of the D'Ander family. He is also a runner for Emperor Sa-sanada of the Tomajian Empire and Chancellor Amarna. T is a translucent Owlean.

M.Jay-ahsht (Jay) – the Tomajian Throat singer representing Emperor Sa-sanada

M.Deg-ahsht (Deg) – bond mate to Jay-ahsht. Deg is a physician.

Kurt D'Ander – Ev D'Ander's father/ a rancher on Senett, the Trackers' home world

Lieutenant Jason Roka – the military protection assigned to Ev

Pauls D'Ander – Ev's older brother who is currently waiting for the results of his last test and internship to become a physician

CJ D'Ander – Ev's oldest brother who runs the shipping part of the D'Ander business

Umbic – ranch foreman for the D'Ander ranch

Master Dizno – one of three Tracking masters

Tren – a mature purple swamp cat

Ing – a mature Tramillion Sky Hawk

Ju-a – a rope snake fresh from the egg

In the five years since they began their collaboration, Ev, Jay and Deg have been the back-channel couriers between Emperor Sa-sanada of the Tomajian Empire and Chancellor Amarna, head of the United Alliance of Planets (UAP). In the last year, Inno, a rogue fanatical faction set on disrupting the balance between the Empire and the UAP, has increased their activities to include stalking and hijacking the messages between Sa-sanada and Amarna. As the back channel is closed down, the trio is forced into new professional disciplines.

Opening Gambit

Even though the causeways and open markets were busy with soldiers out on 6th day release, people coming and going, weaving in and out, dashing out of floaters and into buildings, hawkers selling their wares on the curbs, Ev knew she was being followed. She couldn't explain how she knew; it was as though another presence was sensing the causeway around her. When she stopped to talk to a street vendor, she caught a glimpse of someone ducking back into the crowd. She wasn't too worried about it until she mentally followed the strange orange path that superimposed itself over the crowd, and she caught a second stalker across the causeway watching her a little too closely. The hair on the back of her neck tingled. Not good. What was even worse, she didn't know who was going to drop the package for her. As usual, that information was never

given to her to protect both her and the informant. Ev pushed sandy hair strands out of her sparkling blue-green eyes.

Stopping at a kwi stand to look for fresh fruit to eat before her concert, a small child wiggled his way through the crowd and stood admiring the cream-colored glove she'd idly set down. "Miss," he pulled on her sleeve, "Miss?"

Ev turned and eyed the dirty-faced street child and pulled her arm away before he could smear her light blue silk jacket further with his muddy hands. "Yes?"

"You dropped these," he said, holding open his hand to reveal what looked like three small seed pearls.

Ev looked at her glove and noticed all three of the seed pearls on the back were still in place. She instantly smiled, forgiving him the mud. "Thank you!" She plucked the pearls out of his hand. "How did you find them?"

The boy looked at his sandaled feet, "I just saw them fall."

"Can I buy you some fruit?" She snuggled the pearls into her pocket.

The small boy smiled back, "Kwi is my favorite!"

Ev laughed and picked up three bright orange bulbs, "Then these are for you!"

The boy eagerly took them from her, implanted a small rock into her hand as he shook it, then darted back into the crowded street.

As she finished paying for the fruit, a man stepped in close behind her, pushing her forward into the edge of the fruit cart. She felt a sharp point in her back and heard a raspy whisper demand, "Give me the pearls, lady."

The man's breath made her stomach lurch. She thought that if she was to be robbed, at least it could be done with more style. "I have no idea what
—"

The sharp point prodded her back. "Now."

"Ma'am? Are you alright?" The well-dressed stalker from across the street stood looking down at her.

The knife point in her back disappeared as knife voice slipped away into the crowd.

"Hm? I'm fine. Just got knocked into the stall, I'm fine."

He looked at her closely. Ev noticed he was almost six feet tall, with dark hair, dark glasses, dark suit. He smelled of Inno protection, the very officers she wanted to avoid. "I have a floater to catch. Thank you for asking."

He put a large hand on her shoulder, "I think you should come with me," he said firmly, "to keep you safe."

Ev smiled her brightest smile, "I'm sorry, I don't go anywhere with strangers." She widened her stance just a little and subtly lowered her weight into her feet. Even though she was just five feet one inch tall, she didn't budge when he pushed her toward the causeway.

"Miss D'Ander? Lady Ev D'Ander?" another voice floated into her space, this one loud and pushy.

"Yes?" Ev shifted her weight to face the newcomer. 'Great! I'm becoming a convention!' she thought to herself. The man in front of her was shorter than the stalker, dressed in military fatigues; a small medallion was pinned to his collar. His billed cap was pulled down to cover his eyes.

The stalker pushed her a little harder. Ev refused to move.

The soldier said, "I saw your concert last night, and I was just wondering if you'd sign this?" He palmed a small hand phaser.

Ev wondered if Jay could do the concert without her.

The soldier stepped in close, aimed the phaser just under her ribs at the officer and fired. As the Inno officer slumped forward, the soldier moved Ev

out of the way, caught him, and carefully leaned him against the vendor's stall. "Cort?"

The vendor smiled, "I'll take care of it."

"I don't think you want to be around when he wakes up," The soldier grabbed Ev's hand and led her away. Twenty feet down the causeway, he whistled for a floater, put her in it, and then disappeared back into the crowd.

"Where to, lady?" The float driver's nasal voice penetrated Ev's surprise.

"Antit Theater," she managed to say. The floater did a steep climb up over the incoming traffic.

Ev started to close her eyes, then noticed a small medallion on the floater controls. Smiling, she reached into her back pocket.

The driver shook his head ever so slightly.

It wasn't over. Ev dropped the three pearls into the crack in the back of her seat and closed her eyes until they reached the theater. A doorman, with a medallion pin on his lapel, paid the driver as two men in dark suits roughly pulled her out of the floater so they could get in. She discreetly dropped the rock into the gutter, thankful the ruse had worked.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

"Always glad to serve, Ma'am."

Chapter 1

"About time!" Jay rumbled in a deep bass voice.

Ev looked up and saw the large Tomajian throat singer standing in the entrance to the ornate old-style theater, his purple crest bouncing nervously

as she approached. "And it is good to see you too, Jay," she said as she sprang up the stairs.

Jay's eight-foot height towered over Ev. He lowered his short brown serpentine neck to look down his snout at his young friend with somber amber brown eyes. He took Ev into his arms and held her tight against his beige belly. "I should have done it," he whispered.

Ev giggled, "And they would have spotted you right away."

Jay sighed, "True, being large and purple is not hard to miss on this planet." He looked down at Ev, "Whereas being small and skinny can get you in and out, if I remember what you told me."

She laughed and patted Jay's snout, "Being big is helpful." She liked the feel of his smooth, light brown skin.

Ev and Jay stopped and looked out the window as a street sweeper swept up the gutter. With well-practiced movements, he quickly turned his sweeping cart into a gift stand. Sanitizing the swept-up trash, he picked various pieces and lashed them together into an ornate gutter bracelet. The rock was prominent in the last bracelet he hung from his broom handle turned to display rack.

Deg flowed down the stairs, tapped Ev on the head, lovingly stroked Jay's snout, and said, "Lunch is ready for you. Eat before you practice," she demanded. With that, she went on down the stairs, her blue medical crest flouncing gently with each step.

Through the window, Ev and Jay watched as Deg stopped at the stand that the gutter cleaner had made, selected the beautiful rock-dominant gutter bracelet, paid the man, and walked slowly back into the theatre. Jay snorted and then turned to go up the stairs, his short stubby tail swinging

back and forth as he urged her along. “Come, Little One, it came. We set it up before lunch!”

From the top of the aisle into the large auditorium, Ev could see the huge Tomajian castena, a huge self-contained wooden pipe organ with seven keyboards, three levels of foot pedals, and comtabs, sitting on stage left. Next to it was a smaller, more human-sized version with five keyboards and two levels of foot pedals. The comtabs that controlled the sound glowed in the semi-dark.

Ev raced down the aisle and hurried up the stairs, her blue-green eyes sparkling in anticipation. Breathless, she stopped in front of the small castena and lovingly stroked its keys.

“It was Deg’s idea,” Jay said gruffly from the pit in front of the stage.

“And you made it happen.” She turned and looked him in the eye, placed a hand lightly on the side of his snout. “Thank you, both of you,” she whispered.

“It doesn’t do all that mine does, but I think it will be easier for you to play.”

“I’ll still get my workout,” she said, “but the sound is worth it.” She reached over to key it on.

“After second meal, Ev,” a rich baritone voice said. Deg, Jay’s bond mate, strode onto the stage. The dim stage lights bounced off her smooth, white, and brown striped skin, making her appear ominous. She held one of Ev’s arms and clucked as her blue crest fluttered open. “You are losing mass, I noticed it this morning at breakfast. If this continues, you will not have the strength to play.”

Ev laughed. “You are such a mother, Deg. I wonder why you never had children.”

Deg tossed her snout toward Jay and then looked at Ev. “Because I already have two children,” she said smartly. “Lunch is ready.” She led the way to the backstage room where a buffet was set out. Jay followed.

T, Ev’s Owlean transparent business manager, sat at a table looking over the plans for the performance. Only his head was unprotected by his dark blue body suit. The blood flowing under his translucent skin gave him a ruddy complexion. “I think we can use the Lumdart Plan,” he said, referring to a previous concert Ev and Jay had given. “It will keep the lights out of your eyes and allow you the maneuverability you’ll need to go between the instruments.”

Jay nodded. “I had trouble getting on stage at Lumdart.”

Deg handed him a plate, “This is a bigger stage, pull Ev’s smaller keyboards onto the apron.” She smoothed back her blue medical crest.

Both Ev and Jay frowned in thought, then agreed.

T sat back and looked at them. “It was close, this morning,” he said quietly.

Ev frowned, then looked at the floor; her tawny brown hair covered her face. “It worked.”

“This time.” The warning was not lost on Ev. “Mistress Deg?”

“I have an appointment this afternoon with several of the Expat bond mates. It will be delivered.” She fingered the bracelet she’d bought from the stand.