

From the Chronicles of the Relic Hunters – The Wesley

I Christie

Prolog



Under the bright scorching summer sun Santo Rio Cabal on the planet Estazs was a colorless shanty town, and at first glimpse a traveler would think it was deserted. Fierce winter winds reduced to shambles most upright walls, leaving few buildings with a roof and adequate shelter. However, once a year the town was overrun by a group of people determined to change its appearance for the duration of twelve days by Estazs' time. It was a celebration for the Week of the Dead. To keep eyes from too close a study of the town's real face, the bridge, the only structure that weathered well due to its off-world metal, was painted the brightest and gaudiest of all.

Shuttles from tourists parked on one side of the bridge and across the bridge a desolate landscape was transformed into a carney town. Structures with fake fronts only meant to hide the tricks, games and illusions, vied with each other for attention. It was the annual celebration that brought from innumerable galaxies visitors, starting with the vendors and carneys, and then the celebrants for the twelve days to honor death in its perverse and natural trappings. Lavish costumes, parades, impromptu flash mob treasure

hunts, and nonstop parties were held in makeshift streets and any available space. A scattering of assassinations and suicides were part of the cultish atmosphere. The less reckless thieves held off doing business for fear that their victims may turn into mob justice where their death would fit into the celebration. Though most visitors were there for entertainment with a heavy emphasis on cultish overtones, there were those that came in memory of someone who had left the denser dimension, through mysterious circumstances. Many believed through a relic's power their honoree was transformed to a ghostly presence, where calling upon its name, may give them guidance in their hunting.

The Santo Rio Cabal residents didn't choose to be *the* city for the Week of the Dead Celebration, but they didn't reject it either. The strangers left them with temporary shelters until the winter winds dismantled them with loud howling along with the stinging sand that whipped anything that was above the dirt into featureless mounds. There was also the trash and discarded items left behind that were treasures for those that had so little.

How did such a desolate spot in the wastelands become so important to host this yearly event?

There are too many stories to recount in one sitting, but most involved a stranger, a secret, and an unexplained disappearance. Der Jägers (the Hunters) they called themselves, made a yearly pilgrimage to honor a highly-regarded member who disappeared mysteriously in Santo Rio Cabal, and was elevated to guardian of the Der Jägers. To mask their gathering, the carnival was created. Santo Rio Cabal became their get-together to exchange news, tips, check out the competition and prepare for a new year of hunting. Meetings and deals were made amongst the hunters, their contacts and snitches. It was also when paybacks and IOUs were collected, sometimes with a life, and not all by the Der Jägers.

Treasure hunters came in all shapes and sizes as befit their species, and likewise those interested in the mundane as well as the unseen world. Those new to the game were spellbound with tales from the others, with some so outright daft it was believable.





It was the third night of revelry and Santo Rio Cabal's revelers were going strong with their body lights shining and carnie stalls trying to outdo the swaying celebrants' lights with their neon flashing signs.

One visitor caught in the center of a flash mob looked around with interest as the boisterous milling crowd shouted possible answers to a clue that would take them to the next spot. The heat of the day had finally dissipated with a strong breeze giving a bit of relief for those that didn't come with air cooled clothing or a strengthening liquid befit their species. It also gave some relief to the stifling smells from so many different species. Not all bathed and not all were pleasant smelling even in their cleaned state.

The snapping from the flags on the bridge brought the visitor's eyes back to the edge of the bridge. A small light flashed as a Lucifer was lit. It could have been just another light among others. A bud of heat expanded exposing an old craggily lined face and then the Lucifer was put out. The tip of a smoke stick brightened for a moment as the smoker sucked on the rolled herb stick. The visitor headed for the smoker, keeping alert for anyone that may interrupt their meeting.

A push from behind by a group hurrying to get a closer view of the dancers as they snaked through the street had the stranger nose to nose with the smoker.

"So sorry," the visitor muttered in common speech.

"Yeah, so you are," the smoker drawled in a hoarse sarcastic voice. The breath was heavy with the sickly smell of disease, intermixed with the strong painkilling herb's stick fragrance.

Neither appeared to be interested in the other but rather in the colorful dancers. Celebrants pressed on all sides, wanting to get behind the dancers as soon as they passed. The closeness made it easier to pass information, as well as easier for an assassin to complete a contract.

“I’ve been followed. The chip tells it all.” With that the smoker joined the celebrants as they fell like a wave behind the dancers who became more animated as they thumped a rhythm on the bridge, shaking it to its very foundations.

After ten minutes of furious pounding of feet the leaders tossed brightly colored scented wreaths into the filthy river, chanting in various languages, “Wreaths of blessed essences spread your sacred energy into the river to heal it.” The dancing leaders then led their followers to bars, street vendors and stimulating shops on the other side of the bridge. The crowd followed example, throwing their purchased wreaths into the water and chanted, “Wreath of blessed essences spread your sacred energy into the river to heal it!” as their leaders yelled, then joyously entered the carney town: Five times a day they danced across the bridge and tossed flowers. Five times throughout the night. Five times before the sun rose. An ecology minded activist group supplied the flower wreaths which were chemically treated to neutralize most of the toxic contaminants in the river. It helped, though not for long as the offending polluters up the river continued their habit of dumping their waste into a river that ran through a neighborhood that had no political influence.

The visitor moved into the flow of people, gradually working away from the main push, and then morphing into a brightly dressed reveler with the flick of material.

There was plenty of time to review the chip. What was more important was to make sure the messenger died quietly and without anyone disrupting his choice of dying before the ravages of his illness turned him into a hollow body kept alive by unnatural means for another’s selfish reasons. It was the least one could do for a person whose role, vital to a mission, would not be forgotten.



Chapter 1

Fifteen Years Later

“Enough, Ati! Take a vacation. If I need you, I’ll call.”

“Oh, yeah,” he returned sarcastically. “You’ll call me at the last minute and expect me to be there that instant,” he returned just as heated.

“Ati, don’t make me regret bringing you,” she warned.

“Bring *me*? It’s my ship.”

“You’re only the pilot and wouldn’t have this nice ship at your disposal if it hadn’t been for *me*, so stop whining.”

“You lost my other ship.”

Diana snorted in disgust. “Fresh out of the repair yard you said, yet the engine plant was seriously flawed. If you had to suddenly depart from one of your gambling expeditions that went bad, you would have been left drifting. I saved you a lot of trouble, from the authorities and that lot of unsavory characters.”

“You didn’t save me from all those people wanting to know where she was docked. Some of them didn’t ask nicely, you know.”

“Expecting me to do it all for you? Ungrateful,” she mocked, knowing Ati’s partner had rescued him before any physical harm was done to him. If the two gambling partners hadn’t tried to make a deal with a species they were unfamiliar with, Ati wouldn’t have been in that situation. However, that point was mute now since he learned his lesson.

“Do you want to be mentored by me or not?” she demanded.

“*Now* you tell me you’re mentoring me. Yesterday it was ‘I’m still thinking about it,’” he mimicked.

If she wasn’t annoyed with him she would have been amused at his close approximation in imitating her, but then again, she didn’t want to encourage him because he could be bothersome when she needed to stay focused, like now.

“I made my mind up last night,” she returned distracted. She didn’t expect a grateful or even courteous thank you from him.

“It’s been two years, Diana.”

She had already tuned him out and was intent on reading the console readouts. “There’s our return mole. We’re in,” she announced. She tapped her monitor to accept the message while pushing in her earpiece for a firmer set.

“I got it, I got it,” he muttered.

She watched as Ati manipulated his controls, bypassing their target ship's security and tapping into their internal communications.

"All right," she whispered as if the ship's communication bridge officer may overhear her. "Make the offer, Ati. Just don't sell my body or soul or you're going to be very sorry."

Ati rolled his eyes dramatically and sent a hail to their target, a space freighter.

She didn't take chances when she didn't have to, and in this case, tapping into another ship's communication system so she could manipulate a hitch on a space freighter was easy stuff, though she let Ati think it was his skills. After all, he did pilot her here on the family's borrowed yacht.

Diana pursed her lips at the conversation between captain and commander, amused at the frustration the captain must be feeling at having such an incompetent second in command that she had no decision in appointing.

Assured of her ride she removed the earpiece and left the bridge. Ati would handle the rest. She stopped in her quarters, went through her kit to be sure it had just the basic necessities, and then made one last careful look at her appearance. Nodding at her image, she proceeded to the exit hatch.

Ati joined her.

"Shouldn't someone be up front steering this thing?" Diana asked.

"I really don't think this is a good idea for you to go alone," he argued. "It doesn't feel right."

She tightened her lips into a thin line as she waited to disembark. Why he kept repeating the same argument had her suspicious he thought he could wear her down. It wasn't going to happen. Diana pushed past him to stand in front of the hatch that was about to open. "Go up front and make sure we don't cut them in half."



"We're in their energy tow. If we crash into them, it's their own fault. Then they would have to repair my ship and I'll..."

“Then wish me a great vacation and I’ll see you when I see you,” she interrupted, glaring at him to discard that idea.

“Diana, when you say that I know you’re going to get into trouble.” His eyes gleamed at the word trouble.

“Ati, let’s get an understanding here,” she said crossly, “You’re the rookie and I’m the expert in this business. When I get back if you still don’t share that idea you can find another person to mentor you.”

“I don’t trust anyone else,” he said.

Without waiting for a response, she was out the hatch the moment there was enough room for her to pass through, jumping onto the extending ramp from the *Wesley*.



The hatch slid shut the moment it was cleared, leaving Ati staring at a bulkhead. Ati turned and returned to the bridge. Mumbling with aggravation he plopped down heavily into the pilot seat. He sent a message to the military freighter the *Loyalist*, or the now civilian owned freighter *Wesley*, letting them know he delivered his package and was ready to depart.

“So, she thinks I need a vacation of my own, huh? Well, have no fear, sister dear, two can play this ‘I’ve got a secret’ game. Just a friendly chit chat with an old acquaintance, you say. You have an important message to someone that you don’t want anyone to know about. Like I can’t be trusted, is it?”



“Lt. Commander LeMarks, XO on the bridge to...O’Rourke.”

Eyes blinked open promptly. It took milliseconds to determine where she was, if the ship was in danger, and the identity of the caller and his tone.

Ship’s moving. No alarms. He sounds impertinent, but he needs a favor. Gods but he has his signals mixed up, she thought. If he wants a favor, he should be making nice.

Captain Helen O'Rourke stretched her lanky frame into wakefulness and untangled her arms from her bed covers. As she moved, the lights in her cabin came up to second level, showing shadowy outlines of her sleeping quarters.

"It had better be a good reason to wake me or he's going to find himself inspecting the waste processors with a sewer-bot as his babysitter," she muttered to herself. "Go ahead, bridge." Mentally, she slapped herself on the side of the head for her giving into the game playing and not addressing him by his new rank. But it wasn't her idea to promote an incompetent on *her* ship to XO and if he's not going to learn protocol in addressing *his* CO then he's going to have to accept her not acknowledging him.

"We're getting a hail from The Gypsum. They have a PP that needs a hitch going our way."

For a quick second her thoughts stuttered over the announcement. Was he in full possession of his brain? Where does he intend on putting this passenger up?

"GR with DC?" she asked anyway. The clearing of a throat had her translating her request with impatience. "What's the going rate picking up a passenger in this part of space with destination calculated?" she demanded in a voice still hoarse with sleep.

It's been two months and he hasn't got the BL learned, she griped, and he still isn't prepared with the information before I ask. I ask it every time. I don't believe he went through any Merchant Marine Officer's Academy. I'm done waiting for a reply on my inquiries about his qualifications.

Her thoughts trickled off as the same vision she imagined for months faded to a happy conclusion of dumping LeMarks somewhere off the beaten path that would cost HQ a lot of credits to retrieve their employee.

Her jaw stretched into a joint cracking yawn, happy at the thought of getting rid of one more useless body on her ship. A good thing to start her day off with. Sighing, she sat up to prevent herself from falling back to sleep. Her pillow was too inviting. The lights came up another level, revealing a typical captain's sleeping compartment – sleeping cot, door to an ensuite, closet and reading niche. The reading niche was her private library that recessed into the bulkhead, keeping her prized possessions safe from port authority's security sweeps, should she have any. Few knew of its existence or

location. Rather than doing as Admiral Ri in Hibri Sector had done, turning an officer's cabin into her private library aboard her battle cruiser, *Amari*, O'Rourke chose to have hers hidden in her sleeping compartment where everything was retractable, including the bed, so if she wanted to be surrounded by her books while reading, she could.

Every captain with influence had her or his quarters remodeled and decorated with the latest security gadgets. All XO's and Lt. Commanders were sent advertisements from businesses doing interior designs with the expectation that should that person make captain, they would want their quarters redesigned, which usually came with the promotion. Her employer, Queen Osmona was free with her credits, sweetening the deal for her to take over running her flag ship of freighters. O'Rourke was unemployed all of two days, following her resignation as Rear Admiral with the United Planets of the Twelve Space Fleet. On the second day of her release from the UPTR she registered with the Merchant Marine in another galaxy for a captain's position and was promptly handed an interview slip from Osmona's Freight Business. News traveled fast on the space docks.

At present, the one chair was buried under a discarded uniform with boots under it where she would not trip over them. It seemed like she had only a few hours of sleep. Glancing at her clock she noted it was 0-four hundred. Six hours. That was an improvement. That meant the four-hour bridge shift turn-over went without a hitch – until now.

What was taking him so long with the information? He could ask the blasted ship's computer or someone on the bridge, she grouched. She shouldn't be complaining, since he now was asking before bringing passengers aboard. It must have been the threat to toss him overboard, she sniggered. He shouldn't be so nervous about it. She would have let him wear a spacesuit. Someone would pick up his beacon sooner or later.

Perhaps that was being too severe.

Nope. She shook her head in amusement. Some people needed to be dumped into deep space.

She really needed to get out of this mood. From experience, she knew it cut the flow of creative ideas. That got a soft grunt from her. The memory of who had told her

that and the circumstances they were in put her in a better frame of mind. Those were days when she was fool hearty and took vacations to unfamiliar places on a whim. That was before she assumed command of her first ship with the UPTR's space fleet in the Borik Sector.

Dropping her feet to the deck she pushed herself up. Her fingers curled around her soft robe, pulling it off its hook near the bed. Her waking thoughts were leaning to the introspective sort and it was too early for that. Boredom did that to her. Her nose wrinkled with that observation.

"I think I'm going through another midlife crisis," she said softly to herself. "Just how many do I get per life?"

Stepping into her front room she remembered she had left a mess on the deck that could trip her up.

"Lights up four," she directed.

Lights came up to a soft glow; six being daylight for her. She avoided stepping on the dismantled butler-bot parts she had neatly laid out. At the kitchen kiosk, she selected warm water with a twist of lemon and spearmint, then turned back to the bot, frowning as her thoughts returned to why *she* had dismantled it instead of sending it to the repair shop.

"Captain, as of yesterday fifty-five crowns."

The nervous clearing of his throat had her preparing herself for anything; like maybe it would suddenly occur to him that they had no more available spare bunks without a major moving of supplies from an empty officer's cabin they had morphed into a storage room.

"That'll cut the loss on the damaged freight," he added in a deeper voice, giving a poor try at nonchalance.

He had been with her for two years starting at second lieutenant and her file on him and recordings of his incompetence was larger than anyone she knew that had been in service for twenty years. HQ was making it impossible for her to drop his contract since they kept promoting him and she had to start all over again recording his incompetence, per their rules in protecting their employees from unfair practices by

Captains leasing their ships. As the leaser, they were permitted to have a say in one third of her crew members. It was originally to make sure a captain leasing a ship didn't scuttle the ship and claim losses.

"Log it," she finally said, "and verify the PP's ID. Who is it? Another sailor hitching back home?" she thought to ask.

"*Hmm, uhh, didn't say,*" he admitted, and then added in a rush to cover up his lapse, "*I'll begin the pickup as soon as the credits are cleared.*"

He still hadn't told her where he planned to bunk the PP so she decided to take care of two problems with one move. "Good. Since he's paying..."

"*She,*" he interjected quickly. "*Diana Rue.*"

Captain O'Rourke gave a soft snort. Females didn't even have to wave a cloth of pheromones under his nose; just being female was enough to get him sniffing. Well, she had a surprise for him. He was going to pay for the difference on this one too. "Since there are no more bunks in the cabins, set her up in the owner's stateroom," she said with finality.

It sounded like LeMarks gasped. It was true, the stateroom was only used in emergencies. Like when it was rented out to a sheik's family whose ship had become crippled under pirate attack. The family didn't want to remain on their luxury liner while it was being repaired. While her crew repaired as much damage as possible to get the ship moving to the nearest major port O'Rourke had the displeasure of hosting the privileged family.

"*She's not paying that much,*" Lt. Commander LeMarks objected, his tone changing to alarm. "*I'm moving...*"

She laughed loudly, stopping LeMarks in mid-sentence. "You'll move? *You'll* give up your quarters? That's thoughtful of you. But it'll take too long for you to move out *and* make your quarters livable."

"*My quarters? We have crew...*"

"There are no vacancies in the cheap seats, Lt. Commander LeMarks," she interrupted. "If you looked at the availability board you would have seen that."

The scuttlebutt that she heard from below decks was the crew was tired of giving up their quarters for undercut prices, so they ceased putting their names up for the opportunity of earning extra credits. Her freighter had 24 available bunks for passengers on Deck 3. If a crewmember wanted to earn a bonus, they and their cabin-mate would give up their cabin and share with other crew members. To be able to earn her fair share, and enough for four crewmembers to split the bonus, the fare had to be more than the 23 credits LeMarks charged. He had made the arrangements the day he made XO and before she had a chance to nullify his new authority HQ gave him, and on *her* ship. For the last two years she had steadily been canceling any authority his unwarranted promotions from HQ gave him. She was master of the ship and lawfully HQ couldn't usurp her authority for making decisions regarding the safety of ship, her business and crew.

There was a long silence. Had he forgotten to sign off?

"Well, no," he said slowly, and then lowered his voice further, *"I was thinking of the cabins on Deck 2 we're using for storage."*

"She gets what I deem available and while we're on the subject, in all fairness, she will also get half price of a regular bunk. Twenty-three credits is what you charged at the beginning of this tour. In case you've forgotten, you took on extra passengers at half-price and gave them each their own cabins at the expense of your fellow crewmates that are doubling up and won't be receiving any credits for it."

He lowered his voice considerably, as if no one on the bridge would hear. *"You can't hold me financially responsible for every passenger we take on this trip. I will complain to HQ."*

"You've been officially notified now five times, you're responsible for all the PPs you bring aboard. This was your last chance to redeem yourself on making such decisions. Rule of thumb, Lt. Commander LeMarks, when you change the price for one PP at the beginning of a cruise, it goes for all PPs on that tour. Word of mouth is where we get the majority of our business and word does spread fast on the docks on who is cutting prices which is why we are overbooked." She wanted to go on about how the consequences of undercutting the other freighters would bring the cold shoulder between crews and probably a lot of other small sleights, but she doubted he could take that much

information in. Her method of curtailing his unauthorized bringing on passengers and thinking to stick the ship's purser with the loss was to charge his payroll the difference. His momentary lapse of memory cost him again. The purser, a master of procurement and keeping of ships records, discovered LeMarks second account that had more credits than an honest merchant seaman would have...but then, there weren't that many honest ones, she was finding out. So, when his payroll zeroed out, Warrant Bue had another account to charge. It would be the third charge to the account. O'Rourke wondered when LeMarks would say something to her about the depletion of his hidden account. It brought a smile to her face.

"You can't put her up in that cabin...it's...it's...just... not right!" he said in a hoarse whisper.

Maybe he did know his hidden bank account was being charged. That made this an extra nice transaction. "Be about your business, Lt. Commander LeMarks." O'Rourke disconnected the com link.

"Don't tell me where I can put PPs, you incompetent deadhead," she said irritated.

O'Rourke accessed her console and decided LeMarks ran out of lucky breaks. At the next port, she would issue him his exit papers. He should be happy it wasn't out an exit hatch while they were in space or a remote space station where the next flight out wasn't guaranteed to be cheap. Everything she had on LeMarks and why she made the decision to release him, was dumped in a packet to be sent to the Merchant Marine Offices where she had previously filled an inquiry on his background with questions about his qualifications. A copy to her lawyer, Busaw was also sent. Two years of unwarranted promotions should also be enough to bring suit against HQ. Perhaps that's what she would do too.

"Double encrypt message: Send to lawyer to take action on the notice of intention to bring suit against HQ for breach of good-faith partnership. End message with normal salutations."

Pleased with herself, she signed off her terminal and rose from her seat. Her eyes rested on the dismembered bot. It was annoying that it barked at her for every scrap of clothing it picked up and whined when it was asked to do something. That's the problem

with buying demo specialty bots cheap. You never knew what the maker programmed in their demos for the fluid market of gadget hungry buyers. This particular one had no interested buyers at the big galaxy technological gadget show so rather than pay for it to be shipped back the salesman sold a pair to *Wesley* at a great discount.

She tossed her nightwear on her bed and moved into her workout room. She had a feeling if she wanted a workout today, now would be the only chance she would get, even if it was to be a short one. Then she would go see who *Diana Rue* was.



Lt. Commander LeMarks's puffy face was still crimson when the two ships came abreast. The uniform collar pressed tightly around his neck. Automatically he gave an irritated tug to pull the tunic down. The jerk on the fabric gave a ripping sound. Quickly his hands smoothed the taught fabric not able to see over his rounded belly if there was a noticeable tear. Overall, he had the appearance of a dab of meat stuffed in a puffed-up pastry shell. His hand moved up to undo the top button of his tunic until he remembered what had happened when the captain found him on duty and out of uniform. Once caught was enough. He slumped further into the command chair that didn't comfortably adjust to his size.

When he was still a lowly 2nd lieutenant he thought working on the late shift gave him leeway in his attire. It was a boring job to watch a scope with several others watching the same thing on the bridge. He found officers, especially on the bridge, didn't have permission to remove a tunic or unbutton a collar while on duty. As punishment, he was detailed to trap duty with a repair-bot that would not let him take breaks. For weeks, he could not get the stink out of his nostrils. He didn't feel the infraction deserved that harsh of mistreatment. No one died or suffered any physical injuries. Well, take that back. He squeezed his hand into a fist and squinted to see the faint scar on his hand so it would reignite fresh feelings of outraged indignation. When he had complained to HQ he was told the captain made and enforced ship rules. Not even his contact in HQ would intervene in disciplinary actions aboard ship.

He closed his eyes and tried to think of more pleasant things, but the uniform was tighter than usual. He had eaten a large meal before starting his shift, but it was no larger than usual, he mentally whined. His eyes moved to another chair, which was roomier and more comfortable, but because the captain was not on the bridge he was in command and should be able to sit in *the* command chair. His peevish thoughts relentlessly noted that her chair was designed for her figure rather than his. It was rather offensive of her to make it almost impossible for him to fit when he was given night bridge duty and therefore should be sitting in *that* chair comfortably. Lt. Emert who he relieved sat in *the* chair comfortably and he was a large person.

Impatiently he drummed his fingers on his thigh. It was taking too long for the ship to pass security scans. If it were up to him, he would let the ship into the bay to off load the passenger and they would all be on their way. What could a tiny ship do to them? Take a shot at them while in the U? He sniggered at the idea. Suicidal. And it was up to security to make sure the passengers disembarking weren't armed. He smirked at the thought of security being responsible for anything that went wrong with any pesky passenger.

"Lt. Commander, are you going to do the MnG to the Q?" Ensign Henly asked, intruding into his thoughts.

"I can escort her to her quarters, XO," Lt. Mack offered.

Lt. Commander LeMarks glared at Lt. Mack. *He's taunting me. I can see he's laughing at me. They're all laughing behind those smug looks. They know I don't understand the bridge lingo they use. They're doing it on purpose.*

Lt. Commander LeMarks' eyes slitted as he glared, daring Lt. Mack to point out that he was restricted to the bridge during his watch unless relieved by the captain's explicit and direct order. The captain made it clear she would dump *him* - Wesley's second in command - in space for desertion of post should he disobey her orders. Even if he wouldn't admit that he believed she would carry out her threat, the weakness of his knees and upset stomach attested to how serious he interpreted the threat. Nervously he glanced at the security bot that would see that he obeyed his orders. Every deck had

security bots to protect the ship against takeovers and sudden emergencies, but the fact that this one had specific orders about him was mortifying.

Petulantly, he glowered at the bot and then rested his face in his palm. As second in command he should be making sure there was nothing dangerous about new passengers. What if Evangeline Meso, the notorious femme fatale pirate was on board disguised as a passenger? She loved to dress as a rich woman and setup the ship for her pirates to board.

LeMarks, an ardent fan of hers, kept a wanted poster of her in his quarters with a fresh flower on the table below the poster. It was his secret passion.

A flash on his console went unnoticed.

“Sir, the yacht passed security.”

LeMarks glowered at *his* lieutenant for interrupting his thoughts a second time. Then he remembered that he had a passenger to bring on board, except he couldn't leave the bridge. Who was going to escort her to her quarters? A spasm of jealousy twisted in his gut. The lieutenant was not handsome by a long shot, LeMarks thought disdainfully. But his eyes didn't allow him to ignore the lieutenant's youthful and slim appearance in his uniform while his own belly showed prominently over his uniform waistband. It was a painful reminder of his other grotesque features, namely a puffy face that matched his belly. Somewhere, buried deep was the memory of a lithe and fit body that did him proud. These shadowy dreams only created more anxiety in his waking life.

“Lt. Commander, holding up a passing taxi is not good for picking up PPs in the future,” Lt. Mack reminded him in an undertone.

Crossly, LeMarks punched another channel without looking.

“*Yes, Lt. Commander LeMarks.*”

“Lt. Commander Jade,” he stuttered. His brain shut down as if waiting to recover from the voice that responded.

“PP arriving in repair bay seven,” Lt. Mack reminded.

“Ehh, PPinseven,” he mumbled. He took a deep breath and released it noisily, realizing he may have not made sense. “Escort her to the Q,” he said clearer. He was feeling off balance. So many errors in such a short span of time.

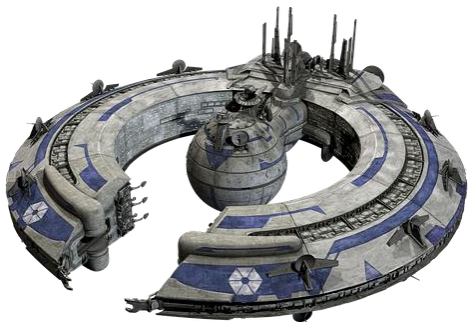
“We’re taking on another passenger,” she interpreted correctly. “I gather this has been cleared by the captain?”

“Captain’s orders,” he blurted as an intimidated school boy would. Realizing his clumsy handling of the interaction he cut the channel. Sulkily he sank lower in the captain’s chair, crossing his arms over his belly. He could feel the fabric tighten and cut into sensitive places, but it gave him a sense of pleasure in punishing his imperfect self.



With hands on hips Lt. Commander Jade Chief of the *Wesley’s* security watched with an experienced eye the docking of the small messenger ship enclosed in the freighter’s energy tow. Her eyes moved to the security tower and then to the energy containment field looking for any evidence of failure. The docking engineer and his assistant had been wakened and had made good time to their posts. They were standing in their protective bubble overlooking the yacht’s arrival. Had this been a ship that was in for maintenance the buffering six level U-structure would have been extended and bots would already be hovering around it running diagnostics and scanning for anything that needed repair.

LCDR Jade had already been on her way to see who the PP was before the XO, LeMarks, assigned the job to her. He probably had thought she would be sleeping at this time, and normally she would have been, but Lt. Mack, a security officer and under her command, notified her as was his duty. If LeMarks followed protocol, Lt. Mack would be pulling the escort duty, but LeMarks, thankfully, didn’t know protocol so the senior officer that was there to keep an eye on LeMarks, remained where he was most needed.



The arrival time of the PP, so late in shift, could have been just coincidence but her job was not to take things at face value. In space, time and shifts aboard various species ships were up to the captain’s discretion to set. For their freighter, that was once a military ship repair, now a civilian spaceship repair, emergencies could happen

anytime. What they couldn't fully repair, they did their best and sent them to the nearest port or towed them. That was the *Wesley's* purpose.

Three bridge officers, not counting LeMarks, ten crewmen from maintenance and engineering working the freighter, six security members always roving, and she, were the only people up...and probably the captain. She glanced back at the docking engineer and gave a hand signal. A wave was returned that verified the capture was clean. The small yacht was snug in their energy sling. Lights along the deck signaled docking maneuvers were completed.

Docking lights brightened, giving her a better view of the small yacht, earning extra credits as a taxi. The added illumination threw interesting shadows on the draped shapes along the bulkhead and around her. Her gaze swept the dark shapes looking for any movement that should not be there then returned her attention back to the yacht.

Before the locks were confirmed the yacht's aft hatch slid open. Someone either wanted off the ship fast or the pilot was in a hurry to get back on course. Everyone had a schedule to meet and it was all tied to credits, she mused.

Her gaze flickered for a moment at the security turret where security officer CPO Reve was on duty. She looked alert and from the flickering of reflected light on her face, she was running scans on the ship and its occupants.

A thump reminded her of her present job. A ramp locked in place.

Her attention returned to the PP. Their new passenger had jumped onto the partially extended walkway before it locked in place. Not pausing as scans ran over her she moved through the first security bubble with no alarms going off. She was nondescript at first study. She carried a small grip that people who were not in one place for very long traveled with. Her clothing was ordinary and comfortable for long flights. There were no worn spots in any of the pockets indicating favorite items absent, nor were they bulging with packed items, but they did look like something was in them. Her shoes were common spacer style but were cared for more than most people who seemed to think scuffed work boots were stylish. She was not military or law enforcement, she was sure of that but there was a wariness about her that reminded Jade of someone that spent a lot of time being aware of her surroundings and not easily taken by surprise.

“Welcome aboard the *Wesley*, Dama Rue.” Jade extended her hand to assist her up onto the platform.

The ramp the PP had to climb was there intentionally to entrap a visitor should the first security scan find something that needed deeper investigation. An energy field strong enough to contain a level 2 explosion would surround the visitor and render those in the containment envelope unconscious.

Jade’s eyes moved to the hand that returned the clasp. The angle of the grip gave her a flash view of a shadow inches above the cuff of the long-sleeved coat. The PP was not wearing dark clothing under her coat to justify the shadow.

“Lt. Commander Jade,” a soft voice greeted. “No Dama, just Diana Rue.”

Jade’s grip didn’t falter, at being identified. Of course, she was going to know her name. She was wearing a name tag. Another passenger that needed to be watched, her cautious nature warned. This tour was taking on the trappings of the scorpion and frog game, she thought.

The unclamping of the locks had both women turning to watch the small vessel drop back as the freighter continued at cruise speed. Once the yacht was out of *Wesley*’s wake the freighter would increase 3gs above cruise speed to make up for the slow down.

“Diana Rue.” Jade turned to the PP, breaking the silence, “Will you follow me, please?” She moved toward the lift.

“You have a full load of passengers, hey?” the passenger said.

Jade’s mouth tightened in disapproval. The PP must have gotten that information from LeMarks. One day he was going to sell them out to a pretty pirate with a nasty band of cut throats at her disposal, if he had not already, Jade thought.

“We have a popular route.” Jade’s eyes studied the shorter woman a moment, trying to place the accent. “Hitching far with us?”

“No.”

Jade had hoped the woman would say something in a longer string of words so she could hear the accent again. It served her right for not asking the right questions. Any more she asked and it would be stepping beyond courtesy and into security. No need to alert the passenger that she was suspected of being more than a hitchhiker.

As they stepped into the elevator it beeped it had another call. Normally the crew didn't use this elevator no matter what time because it was the elevator the captain would use, should she call for it. Though the captain was not unduly harsh with the crew, there was the normal aversion of deckhands to be seen riding with the captain.

Annoyed but curious she allowed the elevator to move to its new destination, Deck 8. Deck 8 had a scattering of crew quarters and H-pods, but was mainly storage for large items, like shuttles, machine parts, damaged freight, and gambling in a cleared storage area.

The lift stopped and the door slid open. Jade's eyes hardened when six of the twelve teenage vixens stepped into the elevator.

Unconcerned at being caught where they had been informed was off limits at this late hour the girls stepped into the lift. This proved to Jade that her version of hauling PPs in hibernation pods until they reached their destination was a better idea than letting them wander without supervision. Realistically, for the short hops, it wasn't practicable to hibernate but it gave her some satisfaction thinking it. They obviously were finding a way to bypass the security bots. That problem was going to be moved up higher on her list of things to do.

"This is not a passenger liner, girls. There is no roaming at this hour. Deck four," she ordered the lift.

Small purple eyes stared at her, showing neither defiance nor interest in what was said. Once she finished speaking the bright eyes moved to the new passenger, scrutinizing her with a great deal of interest.

The energy in the lift made the hairs at the nape of Jade's neck stand up. She glanced at the teens and then the PP who showed only casual interest in the teen passengers.

The door slid open at deck four. The corridor was vacant and the lights were dimmed to a low level indicating it was dead-time. The security bot was shut down. Rather than key in a security override that they may be able to record, Jade decided to let security reactivate it from the main console.

When the door slid closed behind the teens Lt. Commander Jade mentally cursed LeMarks. “Lt. Commander Jade to security,” she called softly in her wrist comm.

“Security here, Chief.”

“Reactivate deck 4 security bot and find out how it’s being deactivated.”

There was a moment of silence and then, *“Chief, it shows it’s activated.”*

“I was just there. It isn’t. Scramble up help if you need to but do it, PO.”

“Aye, Chief.”

The elevator stopped on deck two and Jade stepped out quickly, nearly forgetting her passenger. Turning slightly toward the PP after she was five strides down the corridor, she noted with approval that Diana Rue was not hanging back. The urge to get this escort duty done as speedily as possible had her impatient as there were more important things to get done.

“You’re on deck two, section B along with the captain. There is also an exercise room between your quarters and the captains. If you have a need to use it see the captain. Deck two is a mixture of officers and guest suites.”

Jade nearly snickered in amusement at calling them guest suites. Due to staff restructuring and redeployments originated from HQ there were considerably less officers per listed. What had previously been officers’ cabins were converted by name only into quarters for passengers that wanted to pay extra for the slightly larger space and storage for specialized parts ordered. The passengers in the expensive suites were the salesmen that sold products that required an onsite technical team to accompany the installation and training of the buyer, and naturally the *Wesley* was transporting their equipment. The quarters were empty at the moment. The sales group, a dozen of them and from a mixed bag of species, remained behind at the last stop since their trainees were not picking up their training as easily as their front office thought they would. But the rooms were technically still reserved, and if they caught a ride from a fast taxi they would want them back. When she received the message that LeMarks was taking on another PP she worried he was going to do something unethical and sublet one of the cabins. If that got out in dock scuttlebutt they would have a legal issue on their hands with the businesses that paid a lot of credits for the cabin spaces. What was he thinking? Even a lowly scrub,

the lowest rank in the Merchant Marines, understood the business concept of no overbooking.

“You can roam the corridors on deck 2 but don’t be surprised to be challenged by a security bot if you should be too curious and or loiter. On this deck, they’re active and armed.” Jade was relieved that they were visible and that the one above the captain’s quarters showed her quarters locked and secured.

The door to the owner’s stateroom swished open.

“No one has business in this cabin outside of you so if anyone appears without the captain or me notifying you beforehand, let one of us know by voice comm. Speak our name and give your name and you will be linked to either of us.” Jade waved the PP before her and then followed. “Normally the security bots will take care of intruders, but nothing is guaranteed.”

That got a chuckle from the PP, which earned a rueful smile from her.

“The crew often refers to these quarters as Q for the Queen’s Suites rather than the owner’s suites. If you need a guide about ship, there’s a schematic of the ship in the computer as well as rules and guidelines for your ride aboard the *Wesley* with what’s *off limits*. I trust you’ll follow the guidelines.”

“Aye. Don’t want anyone confining me to quarters, hey?” Diana dropped her kit on a comfortable looking couch while looking around the spacious and luxurious stateroom. Her eyes moved back to the security officer.

“I’ll give you now, access to the suite’s computer and access to the instructions on the amenities of your quarters,” Jade said. Jade quickly logged onto the suite’s computer and assigned Diana full access to the suite and to programs guests had access to.



After the officer left Diana stood in the center of the living area that was a combination of dining and sitting room. Diana was aware it served a dual function of entertaining present or potential customers onboard. Right now, the living room had a couch that formed a crescent shape around a center table, a working desk with computer in one corner and chairs set to the side for reading. The dining room had a small table that

could be expanded, a kitchenette, should someone want to actually cook food, and a kiosk should she choose to order her nourishment already formed in something recognizable.

Shifting her sight to be able to pick up another level of wavelengths, she scanned the two rooms for monitoring equipment. Done with her visual inspections, she pulled a small instrument from one of her pockets and made certain each monitor she found already deactivated would not become activated by an outside source. She then searched the room for what she could not spot visually. Finished, a box was removed from another pocket and around the room her devices were placed. Fifty percent of passengers that could afford it bought jamming devices to thwart invasion of their privacy which was protected by Galactic Travelers Laws. Diana figured if someone aboard *Wesley* should try to activate any devices in the room that were not under her control they shouldn't be too surprised they were unable to.

Hidden entrances were looked for and one was found in the ensuite. Later she would see where it led to; until then, she placed an alarm to warn her when the door opened. Glancing at her timer, she noted it was about the time to expect a visit from the captain. Passengers assigned the owner's stateroom warranted a visit from the captain even if it was to tell her she is not so special; they just had nothing else available.

A chime announced a visitor. Whoever it was, they were punctual to the Royal Rules of Courtesy, one hour after arrival, not Military Standard which was minutes after arrival. She doubted it would be Lt. Commander LeMarks. Taking a quick glance around her quarters she moved to the couch and fluffed up one pillow that had the imprint of her leg on it when she was placing one of her monitors behind the couch.

“Enter.”

The door swished open.

A tall auburn haired humanoid female dressed in a dark turtleneck sweater with captain epaulettes on her shoulders stood at attention before her. Diana's first impression was that she wore her uniform well. Her hair was swept back, indicating she was not shy about showing her face; no makeup, most probably a carry-over from her military days.

Diana gave a mental review of the captain's file but files left out things like why a well decorated rear admiral in the UPTR galaxy fleet to be promoted to vice admiral chose to resign and become captain on a civilian freighter...and there laid the tickle. Was it because of family politics? Or, was she on the list for assassination because of her fleet's successful campaign to root out pirates in the Borik Sector? In the few moments of study, Diana was sure it wasn't just one reason.

She speculated on whether the captain was the type to wear patches of luck charms sewn on her under tunic, then decided not, since there was nothing but the captain under the sweater. Some people tattooed them on their bodies. Diana had enough experience to know not to insult another's charms and lucky pieces, though she found them as unreliable as people.

Diana's eyes tracked to the captain's. Silver brown eyes were studying her as intensely as she was the captain. She decided the captain's eyes were where her strength laid if it were to be a face to face confrontation. One could grow cold from a dark look from her. She had the personal energy as well as species advantage to pull off that type of intimidation.

She wondered why the captain was letting the Carrion disguised as teenage Comatians roam. Maybe she believed she had the upper hand. And the biggest question of all was – why should she care?

Curiosity, another part of her answered.



Captain O'Rourke stood before the owner's cabin wondering what Jade meant by 'you're going to love this one', which she had interpreted to mean more trouble. Her shoulder twitched under the itchy fabric. For this anticipated quick visit, she didn't put on an undergarment and already she was regretting it.

This was going to be a quick visit to lay out the rules and make sure LeMarks didn't bring a pirate on board.

O'Rourke moved her face into a polite smile. The door swished open. The passenger stood in the middle of the room waiting for her.

Diana Rue was 5 feet 5 inches, dressed in common loose fitting travel overalls that off-duty paramilitary types favored. Her eye coloring was unclear in the low lighting. Her pale curly hair was too short to get in her eyes but long enough to cover her ears; not giving away the shape, and further clues to her species, only that she was humanoid, though she was sure it matched her ID file. She had not bothered to read it since fake IDs with altered facial and body marks were easily acquired which made having a good security chief a necessity. She wore no visible jewelry or body adornment; no makeup, nor was her hair in any particular style. In fact, she was quite ordinary looking.

O'Rourke's eyes moved to the couch where the passenger had dropped her grip. It had a small clip on it that the wary would know not to touch unless they had a death wish. It was called the *Enforcer* by the manufacturer and so far the crime element had not been able to disable it. If she wasn't law enforcement or military than she was someone else that *could* be trouble. But then again, maybe she was on a vacation or just returning to her home base.

"I'm Captain O'Rourke of the *Wesley*. May I come in?" O'Rourke had the distinct impression that she had just been categorized and fit into some nice neat peg hole. O'Rourke loved those types because she never fit neatly in peg holes and watching the face of someone that misjudged her was a small pleasure she enjoyed.

"It's your ship."

"And you're paying for this cabin space, Ma'am."

"Not Ma'am, just Diana Rue."

"Diana Rue, then. Is there a particular reason why you hooked up with my ship?"

"You're stopping at Hebron."

"The prison mining waystation? You have a job or permit for business there?"

There it was, that twitch of her passenger's lips, though whether it was from amusement or a frown she had no way of knowing. They were the *only* civilian ship that serviced Hebron.

What stopped at the Hebron waystation were mineral barges that needed minor repair from the prison mines below, prisoners released dead or alive and the mineral freighters that picked up released prisoners, minerals and dropped off new prison workers. The mines supplied raw material for three corporations that purchased the prison workers from various galactic prisons. Supposedly, the operation was monitored closely by a neutral party that made sure safety standards were followed to the galactic law and the prisoners only stayed one year for the sake of their health. Was she an investigator?

The prison workers had volunteered to work in the mines to reduce their sentences considerably since the mines were dangerous work even with all the advancement in robotics and engineering feats. The health coverage for the civilian population was high whereas prisoners had none. On the station five prison guards made up the crew that monitored the planet below, serviced the barges, and rotated with two guards on the planet weekly. The *Wesley* brought parts and repaired what the staff couldn't on all the equipment including the station. They also supplied new games for the inhabitants.

"Is there a reason why you need to know this?" Diana asked.

"Just so after we finish with our deliveries and maintenance we don't leave you behind by accident. Six hours is our slated time but sometimes we finish sooner."

"I'll remember that," Diana said.

"This is a working ship not a cruise liner so my crew has their daily duties which doesn't cover catering to passengers."

"You'll have more trouble with your other passengers than me," Diana said.

That was *not* reassuring to O'Rourke. What did she mean by that? She had been on board for less than an hour. Who had she met besides Jade...LeMarks? Maybe Jade was right and this passenger did bare closer scrutiny.

"If you should need anything," she paused slightly, "call for Lt. Commander Jade or me."

"Will you shoot me if I take a walk now and then?"

“Shoot you?” O’Rourke gave a short laugh. “Check the cabin console there.” She gestured to the computer. “Lt. Commander Jade downloaded the rules of passage. Not much different than any other working freighter. You will get *netted* if you step aboard the bridge or any other off limits area without my express permission,” she stated firmly and then added, “So, should an unwise officer offer you an unauthorized tour, keep that in mind.”

She waited for Diana Rue to nod she understood and then continued. “This is a late shift. Early morning by ship time. If you want to grab some sleep before morning mess you have three hours. Four dings over the PA announces breakfast if you want to eat fresh food with the other passengers...forth deck to the left of elevator B. It’s marked ‘Chow Hall.’ Otherwise,” she nodded to the kitchen kiosk’s auto-food dispenser that produced anything ordered in a healthy chemical compound shaped into something recognizable, “you’ve got everything you need here. We’ll be in Hebron in three weeks with other service stops until then.”

Captain O’Rourke realized it was time for her to go.

“Would you care to join me for supper after five bells?” O’Rourke asked.

“I don’t want to take you from your duties,” Diana politely replied, with barely a twitch of her eyebrows showing her surprise.

A nice get-acquainted meal with enough drink to loosen the tongue was a simultaneous thought with the two women.

“You’ll be a relief in my humdrum schedule, believe me,” the captain assured her dryly. Her eyes silvered for a moment.

“All right. Supper with captain is on my schedule. Time and place?” Diana asked.

“My quarters, if you don’t mind. 1700 by standard time. Five bells by ship time.”

“Aye, then. Place, time and company is fine by me,” Diana agreed.

O’Rourke nodded and turned to leave but not before giving one more glance around. She was rather pleased LeMarks over-booked because now she had a legitimate reason why not to host a party at the next three ports. There were some harbormasters that seemed to think every freighter captain owed them lavish parties aboard their ships to continue business, and the smaller ports tried to mimic this privilege by demanding to

come aboard with each stop. So far O'Rourke had an understanding with most, but it didn't mean polite refusals would always work.

The owner of the freighter, Osmona, purchased the freighter from military surplus. She was a very large woman that liked space around her and had grand ideas of doing business. Osmona's nickname Queen Osmona was due to her ability to carry off a regal aura for her size and when she decided who earned a private party and who didn't, there were no arguments. O'Rourke could only imagine just what type of parties were held on the *Wesley* before she captained it. Since Osmona's marriage she had moved onto bigger businesses and the owner's cabin became solely used for entertaining port officials, owners, managers of way stations, or ship's captains whose vessel they were repairing in space, and only at her discretion.



Chapter 2

From experience Diana knew that would be the last official visit. Clothing came off, pockets emptied, and hung in the cleaning cabinet. She also made sure she would not be getting any surprise visits. A screamer was placed in the living room. It was better than a family guard dog as it could not be influenced or side tracked, and it had a deadly aim on all known species should a visit turn into something more dangerous. Its primary defense was to warn, then immobilize and or neutralize any threat, using deadly force as a last resort. The best part was it didn't need to be exercised, recharged, entertained, or taken on potty breaks.

In the bathing room, she programmed what she wanted to soak and relax in and while the bathtub filled she reviewed the cabin's amenities from the stateroom's workstation. Owners' cabins had many luxuries and secrets not always listed in the ship's computer. From her prior study, she knew the ex-military ship had been remodeled with two minor officers' quarters and two supply cubbies being morphed into the traditional owner's stateroom. She hoped she would get a chance to experience a good portion of the amenities before she left. Her lips curled up into a smirk at her cleverness of planning this

hitch down to the exact time Ati was directed to cross paths with the *Wesley*; half-way into twelfth watch when not the most reliable Officer on Deck was in charge. Her cabin was more than a bargain, considering her quarters were better than the captains and at half the price of a small two crew cubby hole.

As auntie used to say, she thought, “Riches are like natural bio-waste which stink in a heap, but spread around makes the ground fruitful.” She would be sure to leave good words about traveling on the freighter at the docks, the best place to have a rumor spread.

After a visit to the head and a cleansing stall, her bath was ready. Peering at the selection of herbal salts in the cabinet she skipped that. Wearing anything that had perfume or a scent was best left for seductions. Perhaps for another time, she mused.

Pausing to stare at her reflection in the mirror, her lips moved into a sneer. It changed her appearance to someone not to be meddled with. This was no vain observation for many had parted out of her way in fear if not respect when she wore that expression. For another moment, she took pleasure in studying her body tats that were scenes from a mythical story of Diana, the hunter goddess. Every mortleige had her or his patron tattooed on their body. It reflected the wearers’ prowess in the business. The Huntress was seldom studied and was invisible to many. That was why she picked her and adopted her name. Diana loved the hunt. Not all hunters could find their mark if their prey was determined to remove all links to their present location, but Diana was exceptional in that all her contracts were fulfilled within a reasonable time. No one had yet to disappear from her.

Her colorful thighs disappeared under the bubbling surface and then her tattooed shoulders. All that was above the liquid was her head, devoid of any markings. Unlike some mortleiges she didn’t want to be recognized immediately since she liked the advantage of surprise and invisibility.

Sighing in bliss she kept her thoughts on her relaxing soak. Thirty minutes later a soft ding roused her. Rising she made quick drying herself off then changed into sleep attire that could be morphed into public wear if need be. Onto the large bed she dropped herself, feeling the spring as it gently cradled her. It was larger than she was used to. She laughed as she bounced some more on the mattress. It had a lot more spring than what

she was used to. She turned to the console and keyed in a different mattress hardness. If she were not so tired she would have moved to sleep on the couch for the sake of familiarity.



Captain O'Rourke returned to her quarters and fixed a strong beverage, as strong as she dared this early in the morning. She didn't like running on wired nerves for the day but something to clear her thoughts would be nice. Thoughtfully, she took a sip of her drink, grimacing when it hit her empty stomach. The stimulant would soon have her buzzing with energy. In her mind, she went over what could bring a *mortleige* to her ship. Was she just hitching a ride and used Hebron's destination to throw her?

O'Rourke stared at her drink for a long moment, then went to change into her duty uniform. While changing she continued thinking of her newest passenger.

How did she know Diana Rue was a mortleige? It's not like she knew any personally. And why was that, she thought sardonically. She certainly got to know people that didn't blink an eye at performing acts as brutal as the groups they were infiltrating.

For a few moments, she let a bit of her past remind her that falling in love didn't protect her from being sucked up in the callousness for life, losing her inner balance of right and wrong. She was blinded, swinging a two-edged sword before her, believing the adage that the gods would separate out the good and bad, and her job was to make sure there was no chance of the enemy getting away. She fell in love with an extremist, carried away in her lover's passion which spilled out in every interest she pursued, and she got burned in the flames. Those that did survive the brief leadership of quicksilver Commodore Second Class Alecson, got over the emotional connection he had with his flag ships out of the necessity to stay alive. War didn't give participants time to assess emotional losses, grieve, and gracefully move on.

Saddened, O'Rourke's eyes wandered to the picture on her bulkhead of a ship as it battled its way out of an ambush. She needed to get out of the past. She had an assassin on board, or maybe not. Her brows furrowed as if that would help to refocus.

Who aboard her ship would warrant a contract on them? None were worth anything as expensive as a mortleige. The *Wesley's* crew were just an insignificant group in the bigger picture. Maybe she was reading too much into Jade's warning. Maybe she was reading too much from this Diana Rue. She was someone of importance because she walked the walk and it wasn't from swagger or putting on a tough act.

O'Rourke believed in her instincts of self-preservation that Diana Rue wasn't here for her. She returned to her front room and ordered another drink that would replenish what chemicals her body would need to stay healthy. She sank onto her couch, sipping her drink thoughtfully. After more minutes ticked away she decided with finality that *if* Diana Rue was an assassin, it was not for any on board her freighter.

She shook her head ruefully, snorting softly at the warning her more cautious side gave her. Getting involved in other people's business had its consequences, especially when not invited. So as long as Diana's business didn't interfere with the running of her ship, she was on her own.

Ding.

"Admit." As she suspected, Jade stood outside her door. "Just don't stand there, Jade. Come in." O'Rourke remained seated.

"Cranky already? Someone bothering you, O'Rourke? Can it be one of our passengers?" Jade taunted her friend.

"All of them. Too many passengers on this tour, and too many that like to wander in places marked off-limits. If the security bots were working properly we wouldn't be discussing this subject. Have a drink?"

Jade sniffed the air that was filled with the aroma of the warm beverage O'Rourke had earlier. "Not something too strong." Jade dropped into the chair next to the couch the captain had taken over. Normally the chair was across from the couch but parts from a butler robot were neatly lain out in that spot. Her face split into a grin at the sight of the bot torn apart.

"The butler's out of commission. You know where everything is. Help yourself," O'Rourke said.

“You waited for me to sit down purposely, O’Rourke,” she said. Getting up she made her way to the kiosk, careful not to step on a part that had become separated from the others. She leaned down to pick it up.

“Leave it,” O’Rourke told her. “That’s a problem piece.” Extending her legs, a hassock automatically slid out for her feet to rest on. “So, what did you find?”

“Thank you for not saying *my* security bots. We’re lucky we weren’t boarded by pirates when LeMarks was in security.”

O’Rourke hummed her agreement. “Fear not. I gave him no real authorization. What he did request was passed through my work queue and I cancelled everything, including redecorating his quarters, though, I did assign him the other butler bot that had the same peculiarities as this one.

Jade laughed with her.

Jade turned from the kiosk where her hot chocolate was being whipped into a cup. “You want an early report?”

“Why else are you here?”

Jade gave her a wry look. “It could be because I want to compare notes on our most recent passenger.”

“My ship first, crew next and then pesky passengers,” O’Rourke said.

“I found each deck’s security log messages had unexplained anomalies and it wasn’t reported on any of the crew’s daily logs. If I didn’t have this thing about cross checking I wouldn’t have found the differences.”

“When did the anomalies start?” O’Rourke asked.

“Still checking. In my search for a physical explanation I found an unexplained chip in the security kiosk system board on deck 3C where one of the unauthorized accesses was made. I dropped it off with the Geek to check it out,” Jade said.

“Just what kind of chip is it?” O’Rourke asked.

“I’ve ran it though the security database and didn’t get a hit. It was big enough to fit on the tip of my little finger. It didn’t come alive on any of the signals I sent to it,” Jade said.

“Sometimes the obvious is there to hide something else,” O’Rourke said.

“I thought of that myself,” Jade said mockingly.

They both laughed.

“Do you have an idea when it could have been planted?” O’Rourke asked.

“No. My security team doesn’t do the physical security checks of the kiosks, only the programming. Is there a reason for the decision to leave it with Sousa’s group?” Jade asked.

“Not any more. I didn’t want to assign all the security duties to you at once,” O’Rourke said. “I didn’t know how much damage to security you had to undo from LeMarks’ short stint as security chief.”

“I had thought it would be extensive but maybe because he didn’t know anything it was minimal. Juno and Lelands transferred over from Sousa’s engineering and are savvy with boards. I’ll start cross-training the others once those two are running strong. Right now, they’re spending a lot of time repairing security bots,” Jade said. “Crema, Oblo and Gerish are interested in work we normally go to the Geek for. Would you mind if they look into the security side of the Geek’s work?”

“You are Chief of Security, so all jobs regarding security are under your supervision. I suggest discretion when they go into programs the Geek can access. I want security to remain a separate entity from any of the other system checks so we can cross check the validity of another without fearing a contamination. I don’t know how sensitive he is about his territory or what he considers is his territory, but with all these strange goings on, we need a lot of cross checking.”

“Speaking of which, I don’t agree with some of the personnel records. Six of the security personnel I vetted were considered slackers by their previous COs but I haven’t found them slackers at all. Overly picky was the criticism but I call it detail orientated. Personnel not appreciated eventually show it in their work. With the proper support and redirection, they’re forming up nicely. They’re just the type of personality I want on my security team.”

“I haven’t received all the crew reviews yet. No matter how easy the forms have been made, it’s amazing how some heads of departments find it difficult to review their staff.”

“Don’t you remember how you put off doing reviews when you were head of a department? Remember that many of them have been promoted above their fellow crewmembers and recently, so they may still be adjusting to their new duties. It may be difficult for them to get into the ‘them and us’ attitude,” Jade said.

“Them and us? As in HQ and me?”

Jade snorted over her hot chocolate and there was silence for a moment as they both mentally went over the travesty of officers’ HQ had been dumping on O’Rourke. Since she leased the ship from HQ they furnished one third of the crew. They had been playing a revolving game with O’Rourke, removing qualified listed and dumping poorly qualified on her. The length of time it took to find out what the true worth of an enlistee or officer could cost them quality work.

“I’ve added a note to my staff that they’re to keep daily diaries and copy to their shift reports what is out of the ordinary or what the next shift should know about.” She didn’t add that that was what they should have been doing all along.

“So, this new passenger, why are you flagging her?” O’Rourke asked.

“Not the usual passenger we pick up. Female and traveling alone, though I don’t think she has much to worry about,” Jade said.

“Nothing really solid there, Jade.”

“But you don’t disagree with my suspicion that she bears watching,” Jade said.

“We have fifty-six passengers that bear watching because I don’t like the idea that while my crew is working, civilians can roam the ship at will,” O’Rourke said.

“It’s a gamble freighter captain’s take when bringing on passengers to augment their usual business.”

“It shouldn’t and wouldn’t be a risky gamble if the security bots were doing their programmed job. At the next port stop, move all passengers to deck four with the exception of those on Deck 2. There’s four bunks and two bunks in those cabins. See if you can get two passengers at the least per cabin. How are you doing in finding the reason for the security bots not securing decks?”

“We’ve been working on it since I became Chief of Security, but as soon as we rule a cause out, something pops up that makes the previous work worthless. About the

passengers, you don't want them on three? More quarters to spread them out on," Jade asked.

"Deck 4 has a mess hall and entertainment center to keep them occupied. Deck 3 will allow us to spread out the crew who have been doubling up. Before we reach dry docks, I want to know what is workable for bunking at the most 64 passengers on Deck 4, and how to isolate them during the late shift or should we have a ship wide emergency."

"I don't think any of the other working ships have one deck dedicated to passengers," Jade said.

"I'm sure it has occurred to others, especially those that sail through iffy corridors of space."

"Aye, aye Captain," Jade said.

"Sousa has requested promotions for six of her people. That means if they pass their certifications we'll have more crew moving around. In addition, three of those six have their contracts coming up for renewal. I need deeper background checks on them. Considering where we picked up their listing, they've kept their noses clean but I want to know what may come from their pasts and haunt them and me."

Jade's face broke into a big grin. "You have to trust someone," she said.

"I trust you, otherwise I wouldn't have made you the offer of XO, which still stands." She paused wondering if she should tell her now about her plan on dumping LeMarks at the next port or wait for her lawyer's verification that all was in order. "Before you arrived I thought it was like the game the Scorpion and Frog. These days it's morphed into the Farmer and Viper. Let's hope someone doesn't try to kill it and cut off our assets."

"Why do you mourn over loss of that which gave none, yet tried to destroy that which gave all?" Jade mocked with a quote.

"What did the inspection of Deck 8 show?" O'Rourke asked, nodding her acknowledgement of her Security Chiefs dig.

"I dispatched Ensigns Gloin and Burlin to check it out. They didn't see anything more than the security system is disabled. A quirk, they said. I would have boxed their ears had they been serious. I put an order in for the repair team but Sousa's team is busy

on Deck 1 where she believes the source of the chronic alarm failures are originating. No one can work very long on deck 1.”

“Deck 1 is the least favorite deck for the crew. It would be an ideal place for a saboteur or stowaway to be, except...”

“They would be too spaced out to do anything.”

Both grinned. The energy from the buffer that holds ships secure while they serviced them and the buffer around the ship to prevent any space debris from crashing into their hull created a strange energy that many species found unnerving. For that reason, Deck 1 was used to store supplies, just as it had when it was a military vessel.

“Do you think the anomalies and security robotic lapses have anything to do with our overdue shipyard maintenance?” Jade asked.

“No,” O’Rourke said. “I’m keeping a report that lists mechanical failures and separates them by crew mistakes and hardware failures and gives the names of who was involved, and I don’t mean signed off on the repair but did the actual repair. We have some bullies that are sliding by on someone else’s merits.”

“It’s incredible how a few can make it miserable for others. I’ll take a look at Deck 8 before I retire. I trust my team but I don’t trust what’s happening after they leave.” She studied O’Rourke for a moment before asking, “Want to join me?”

“You think I’m not up to an old-fashioned inspection, hey?” She set her empty beverage cup down and got up. “Let’s do it. Henison picked up two new armor designs at our last stop. He said you asked him to keep his eyes open since our security staff has outdated equipment. We’ll give them a try and see if they’re worth refitting the crew with.”

“I’m not going to get fried hair or something, am I? The last suit was so defective no one in their right mind would have purchased a dozen of them. I found the carton in the cargo bay and stamped on the side was the reject stamp. I found LeMarks’ purchase slip to the carton and checked with the purser’s manifest. LeMarks paid near nothing for them and charged the purser market price as if they were working. I hope that was the worst damage he did,” Jade said.

“The purser notified me and the charge was refused. I’m surprised LeMarks hasn’t mentioned that to anyone. At our last port stop, the crate was sent to LeMarks address that he gives as home. By the way, WO Bue found out he has a second account he’s not declaring and it’s brimming with credits so all losses he causes for this cruise are charged to that account. I haven’t heard a word from him on that either so maybe he doesn’t know about it yet,” O’Rourke said.

“People with hidden accounts are people worth keeping an eye on. Thanks for the heads up. If it is a secret account, then he won’t be keeping an eye on it closely to avoid it being traced.”

O’Rourke tapped the code in for the private entrance to the workout area. Both stepped in and looked around before going in any further. With the security bots malfunctioning, neither took their safety for granted.

“Henison really has been getting some great deals on supplies that I know would make any purser drool,” Jade said.

“Like all the other jobs he does, he’s good. Lucky us. He’s balanced out what brainless twits HQ’s been dumping on me,” O’Rourke said.

“Now that I’m head of security among other things, and I understand the protocol of new hires...looking over HQs list of crew members they’ve assigned over your objection and detailed reasons why, you have a good case to take them before the Merchant Marine Board, the Freighter Alliance, and just about all the other organizations that protect a Captain from unfair practices in leasing ships and sue them for the *Wesley*. Why haven’t you?”

“I have it covered, Jade.”

“That makes me feel better already,” she said sarcastically. “HQ has got a game going on here, O’Rourke. All the possibilities aren’t nice. Have you thought of talking to that Queen woman that willed you this ship?”

“She’s not mentally involved anymore. Physically, she’s out of this space sector in a faraway galaxy.”

O’Rourke stepped through the first security door with Jade following.

“What about the rest of the freighters she owns?”

“What about them?” O’Rourke said.

“Have you spoken to any of the captains to see if they’re having the same problem? I can’t say I’m familiar with your benefactor’s freight business.”

O’Rourke laughed. “You won’t see any of the other freighters in our area of space. She hired me to see that each of her freighters were running where they were best suited, and needed less of her attention. So now, we cover our own territory and we serve different types of customers.”

“So, what do you think HQ is after?” Jade asked.

“I’m thinking they want *Wesley* dry docked permanently.” O’Rourke tapped her nose. “Something is happening in this part of space and it’s not peace and happiness. I checked to see if any of the dry ship repair facilities resented our business and there’s nothing in the scuttlebutt saying there is. But there is something that’s causing uneasiness on the docks.”

“I’ll send some of my people to the docks to listen up on the scuttlebutt. If something is off that’s where we’ll hear about it. By the way, what’s Henison doing up here so much?”

“Fixing the EP. He says someone keeps changing the settings. Another unexplained anomaly.”

O’Rourke lifted a new suit from its rack. She handed it to Jade.

“A Rith. This *is* nice.” Jade quickly stripped out of her uniform and from her own locker pulled out a cleaned undertunic. “If this is stolen I don’t even want to hear about it.”

“I told him I don’t want to buy stolen goods. If he is I’m sticking him in the brig.”

“Come on, O’Rourke, where else would he be getting this top of line stuff for a good price?”

“Trust me when I say, there are other ways to get quality equipment at a low price without it being illegal.”

“If you say so,” Jade teased. Jade hummed with approval at the perfect fit.

“Security is going to like these. Rith is one of the best. Nothing like the Turtle.”

O'Rourke grimaced. "I can't see why people still buy them. They're too susceptible to malfunction."

"Because dressed up in that shell you look scary, it has a lot of gimmicks, even if they don't always work, and beginners don't know better," Jade said. She snapped the boot catch and stomped to make sure her boot would clamp to the deck then released it.

"So, now that we're dressed. Let's rumble through the corridors and cause trouble." O'Rourke slapped Jade's armored shoulder.

"Right."



After an hour in dream time Diana awoke from the unfamiliar rhythms of the freighter. Staring at the ceiling for five minutes with no inclination to sleep she decided it was a waste of time to try when her mind was wondering on too many issues about the *Wesley*, its passengers, and crew.

What were six Carrion masquerading as adolescent Comatian up to? There was no mistaking a Carrion. No matter what they used to hide their species her hyped senses could see, smell and hear around disguises, but so would an up-to-date security scan.

Why *Wesley* didn't have the most up to date working security had her also curious. Captain O'Rourke's reputation alone should have most trouble makers fearful to trifle with *Wesley's* business, but there was always someone that would see that as a challenge. The *Wesley* was profitable under Captain O'Rourke, but then, she had no competition in her primary service, ship repair in space. So, whoever was undermining O'Rourke was doing it for personal reasons. Was it O'Rourke's father's family, the Happensburgs? Why would they waste credits and time in another galaxy? However, as she witnessed repeatedly, family grudges can be carried across galaxies and through many life times. So, was it the Happensburgs? If it was, scuttlebutt on the docks would have picked up on it. The Happensburgs had many enemies among the various levels of classes and their illegal activities weren't secret, just difficult to prove in order to take to

the Planetary Courts. But this was another galaxy, too far for their name and credits to be of influence.

Maybe it was some pirate's relative or a cartel that held a grudge about O'Rourke's successes in the Borik space sector that she patrolled. She was involved in many bloody battles as her fleet began finding the home bases of pirate groups and destroying them. Now that held a better promise of identifying who would go through a lot of trouble to ruin O'Rourke's new career. Pirate cartels held grudges and didn't let distances prevent them from taking revenge.

She rolled out of the large bed with the need to move. Her choice of clothing was tempra that changed color, blending in with the environment. She carefully selected what she would take with her – tools that would gather information her senses didn't. It wasn't as if she was doing something illegal or unexpected. What passenger would not want to take a look around the ship they were going to be spending some time on? A quick look at Deck 8 while she was at it was foremost in her mind. She wanted to know what the Carrion were interested in.

In the ensuite, where she found the false bulkhead on her earlier inspection, she pushed on the panel in various places and used an energy reader to see what went active, and finally was rewarded with the silent moving of the panel that opened to a small closet. It gave her the impression the owner, a very large person, was not the one intended to use this entrance. When the door closed the four walls went transparent.

Diana glanced back into the owner's ensuite and made a mental note to remember how much area can be seen. The second exit was to the outside corridor. The third exit was to a large room with lockers lined up against the nearby walls. It was the exercise room the security team and captain used. Since the ship didn't have that many officers after the last staff cut she was sure complaints at giving up a private workout room was nothing the captain bothered about.

The exercise room separated the captain's quarters from the owner's.

The third exit was to a maintenance tunnel. Pushing gently on a button the panel slid smoothly aside. Diana paused. Ship smells of lubricants, metals, and warmed sealant were identified. There were no lights on and not wanting to trigger anything that would

alert anyone of her presence she activated her NPD device. No Presence Detected, was a handy device to have, with security companys staying up on the latest to provide continued updated security to their customers; however, they also were the one's creating both devices. It paid to be up on the latest. Stepping forward she held her sensor in front of her looking for bio-forms, bots, or active monitors. Nothing living had been in the tunnel for six shift rotations.

The tunnel looked like any other maintenance tunnel: cabling running along the sides with junction boxes spaced at regular intervals. Above were monitors, fire and chemical squelchers and an invader immobilizer. There were no interesting entrances similar to the one in the owner's suite along the tunnel.

She took a grav-tube down to the next level.

This was where the majority of the hydroponics plants were located, though not all. Still using the maintenance tunnel as passage, she found the monitoring equipment here inactive as on the second deck. She paused at the entrance into the hydroponics area with the usual species warnings posted near the entry pad and the bio-scan just in case one of the warned species didn't read. Cautiously, she stepped into the wider section of the tunnel that allowed for heavy gear from the phonics area to be dismantled and worked on without having to carry the parts for long distances. Her eyes verified what her device detected; the security monitors for this area were deactivated also. She studied the coverage and wondered what happened around here that warranted secrecy and by whom.

This was not like the Captain Helen O'Rourke she studied. Was she baiting someone?

Her curiosity about the ship moved to active interest. The ship didn't feel right to her, and this feeling was only from less than an hour of snooping. Her mediocre trip to Hebron may be something more. She continued on with her recon mission, letting her instruments and body gather information which she would review later. The tunnel abruptly became smaller, designed more for repair-bots but enough room should a living mechanic need to travel along, a short one that is, and Diana was not little so it was a squeeze for her.

She dropped down the grav-tube, her hand sliding along the drop bar which with a squeeze slowed her fall to a stop just above junction 8. Verifying no one was present she swung onto the deck. At the far end of the corridor was a scattering of crew quarters and additional cargo bays. The first hatch opening was to the largest storage area on the once military vessel, the ammunitions depot, supposedly one of the most protected parts of this ship. Now it was used to store damaged and returned goods, high value commodities on the free market. That meant, Deck 8 should be the most scrutinized deck next to the captains, Diana reasoned.

At the various space stops people looking for cheap deals would bargain for the damaged goods, either to resell or for their own use. Some of the most expensive articles like weapons, toys, vehicles, or yachts could be repaired by a clever person. They were not worth the cost of hauling it back to the dealer to be fixed. Ideally, the freight company's owners encouraged their captains to sell the goods for their customers so they would not incur the cost of the return. The customer wrote it off as a loss or if a captain wished to garner favorable mention to other potential customers, they would sell the damaged goods with the customer getting the credits for the cost of producing the item and the captain would get the rest. The customer's customer would have a delay in their item, unless they purchased the item on the free market and canceled the delivery with the original seller. It all washed out where no one lost, and the captain gained on many levels.

Every captain had their own way of figuring out what was the lowest price to charge and it was not unheard of for captains to be silent business partners of some of the bidders. It was unlawful for the ship's crew to fix or repair any of the goods before reselling it, since it would then appear that they had damaged the freight to collect the sale price, so O'Rourke had her crew repair the damaged freight off ship, sell at the Free Market that every port had, and return her home port with satisfied customers, ship's purser and captain. A happy captain on the *Wesley* meant bonuses for the crew at the end of every tour.

Diana was curious what items were held back that the Carrion would be interested in or maybe it was something else on Deck 8. She passed the stored returned cargo and headed to the cargo bays at the end of the corridor.

Leaning against the bulkhead Diana's eyes studied the corridor. Getting by the security bots, even if they were engaged, was not something she worried about. An energy wave displaced her image and as long as she stuck close to the bulkhead or dark spaces even the slight ripple from her presence would not be noticed unless looked for, and then they would not be able to identify her because the image was too distorted.

She sniffed the air, picking out the faint scent of Carrion. The maintenance hatch was what she was heading for. It was not that she disliked going down the corridor and through the front hatch entrance, just that she was too used to skulking about. The maintenance tunnel was where she suspected all the action would be if there was anything illegal going on. It took six minutes for her to get past the lock to the maintenance tunnel. This was something she did for a living, and by the amount of time it took for her to get in, she rated the ship's security on this particular vulnerability above average.

Quietly she moved, mindful that sounds echoed. At the vent opening she aimed her surveillance device toward the stacked cargo scanning for bio-forms. The device located three huddled Carrion near one large crate. Peering out the vent slats she identified the large crate under a security blanket to prevent anyone from tampering or stealing the contents of the crate.

The click of the main hatch lock releasing was loud in the cargo bay. Sudden rustling and slithering started and then stopped as soon as the hatch was opened. The unexpected opening sent a draft of air into the vent. Diana sniffed. It was Carrion alright. It was like smelling dead flowers.

Stepping into the cargo bay, dressed in light armor as if expecting trouble, was Captain O'Rourke and Commander Jade. Now O'Rourke was showing the quality of gear Diana expected of her. Rith armor was a serious investment in security equipment. The two moved to the far end of the bay, out of her sight. Her scanner tracked the Carrion on the ceiling, moving slowly in the direction the two officers.

Surely they wouldn't attack the captain on her ship and she were wearing armor that would likely end their attack before they were within striking distance. Not even rogue Carrion would act that bad...unless they were at war. She thought a moment, recalling all the gossip she had heard on her travels through various ports and ships. There was nothing about the Carrion Nation going to war. Carrions were interested only in relic hunts and she was sure there was no relic on the *Wesley*. They looked for treasures that others thought were merely cultural tales. If they found anything they were mum about it, but because they continued from generation to generation to hunt relics, Diana suspected the practice well worth each generation's participation.

It wasn't the type of hunt Diana was interested in for herself. Once a treasure was found there were no more surprises to it, except perhaps the competitors. Diana was a solitary hunter. Her hunts involved ritual and honor and sometimes death which was probably what most relic hunters also practiced. She dismissed the comparison to be returned to at a later time, perhaps in a bar where such discussions were carried on.

The colors on her device indicated a Carrion was ready to drop on its prey but then suddenly it quieted. Carrion didn't move in a blur or fast enough that it would be difficult to shoot them. Their success rate in dropping on their prey depended on if the victim was sleeping or remained still which was why they stayed out of the ground war business.

An alarm from her sensor indicated the security equipment in the maintenance tunnel was coming on line. With quick efficiency Diana misted the space behind her, neutralizing the air from any trace of her biochemistry, and swung the old-fashioned vent cover open. The vent opened noisily which had Diana swiftly moving away from it. Pressing against the hull she blended in. Diana watched one Carrion shadow move to investigate the noise while the other two continued to follow the two women. They had not heard the vent opening with their attention focused on their own business. Now she could see what they were doing. They were bringing the security system back on line. Each unit was reset, and checked. It took close to an hour. She suspected they were setting the bots on a random encryption code so they would not be as easily disabled with a remote authentication logon.

Then they began searching the cargo containers, comparing what was logged in the manifest with what their sensors showed. Before leaving the bay, the captain opened a panel near the hatch cover and by the beep, something else was reset. After they left the Carrion scurried around the bay.

Her fingers moved slowly so as not to attract attention from the three moving around the room in a search pattern. Then they changed to the species Loki.

The sensors for detecting smoke didn't go off when the small thin canister the size of her small finger began to discharge smoke, but the Carrion panicked. They morphed to thin dark flat shadows with rustling and slithering sounds, heading to an exit in a rush. Diana watched fascinated. The stories are true. They have an aversion to smoke.

The moment they opened the vent grate three guard bots came active from their alcoves. Depending on the type of alarm, hatches and exits would lock down with only security personnel able to bypass the locks. How the ship's crew handled the alarm would tell her how important D8A was. Dianna was moving to the main hatch the moment the Carrion opened the vent to escape. Stepping into the corridor Diana paused. The corridor was awash in a yellow light. The thudding of feet from around the corner had her moving into another hatch arch. She pressed against the hatch door. Four people ran by her, two of them the captain and commander.

Diana decided to wait out the yellow alarm. The hatch she was in front of was the ammunitions depot from *Wesley's* military days.

The yellow lights switched off, replaced by brighter lights. It was not as easy to blend into the background. Taking the grav-tube Diana stopped at each deck, taking care to duck out of sight when Commander Jade and Captain O'Rourke stepped in. It became a game for her. They had the same idea as her only they made a more thorough inspection of each deck. All decks Diana peered out from the junctions were absent of anyone, except security bots. It meant that during a security alarm, or depending on the color code, crew members had their areas to search or sit tight while another group searched the decks. Each elevator or deck access would have its own team. Pausing at D3 where the majority of the hydroponics domes were, Diana had the thought of a fresh apple. It was a prized fruit for many species. From her location, she could see rows of fruit trees,

bushes, vegetables, and other things she didn't recognize. Labels were over each hydroponics bed. There was a good exchange market for selling fresh produce with seeds to the waystations that didn't grow everything the residents liked. She was about to step out and see where the apple orchard was when a security bot hovered into view.

A question was posed to her.

Diana shook her head. She stepped back into the tube and pulled herself back into motion to D2.

Between Decks 3 and 2 an annoying sound caught her by surprise and by the time she halted her upward movement it stopped.

"What was that?" she muttered.

Glancing down she saw a shadow. Diana quickly exited. Her exit was in section C. How did she get on the other side of the ship's U-shape? As she walked the corridor she studied the names on the doors. Seven officers beside the captain and owner's suite shared D2. However, she nearly ran into a bot that was moving supplies out of one of the C suites and loading it on a supply gurney. Peering inside of the quarters she noticed another bot cleaning the interior.

She's expecting to take on more passengers?

She watched as the supply gurney moved to the freight elevator and as it disappeared the cleaning bot moved to the next cabin. A name appeared outside of the room just cleared. It appeared some crew members were being upgraded. D2 in C section was going to become busy.

Back in her cabin she checked for messages and found none. All her sentinels were quiet. As much as she wanted to go over her excursion she wanted her recorder to break it down first so she could compare her own observations with its summation. Tired, she fell asleep on the couch waiting for the sensor to complete its assessment.



Chapter 3

Jade woke after two hours of sleep. It was all the respite her body needed every eight hours. Sitting before her terminal she checked on the results of her various inquiries. An hour later she was distrustful of any monitoring equipment and crew members, realizing what she knew, she had to take action now.



“I don’t care if *you* don’t have a clue about why the security systems on Deck 8 were disabled or even who set them off after they were reengaged. I want the bot logs which will give *me* that information,” Captain O’Rourke informed PO Comam who was looking at her with his usual flustered look at why the bots were not functioning up to their specs, and why a high-level security clearance could not access the alarm logs. Humming and hawing was his usual ploy when he was trying to wheedle out of something.

Commander Jade had already downloaded the information from a small kiosk and had a recovery program going over it while she slept so O’Rourke wasn’t worried about losing the information. She was curious how long Comam would put her off until he admitted he didn’t know how to perform a job he was principally responsible for – retrieving lost data from ship bots. It would go in his record and at the next port he would be dropped off as failing in his contracted agreement. The next port she knew the harbormaster well. Besides dumping LeMarks she would pick up a merchant seaman that would hire on at a low pay scale but he had the opportunity to get a smaller percentage of the bonus the crew made at the end of a tour should they turn a good profit.

Her eyes slivered as she could see Comam was just getting his second wind.

“Captain,” he drew out slowly as he trawled around for a ready excuse. His whistles, hoots and chirping translated to: “I’m going to have to make some time for that.” He took a deep and dramatic sigh, which was a long whistle, then continued starting with an irritating hoot. She translated it to; “I already have a repair table scattered with parts putting together the diag-bot. It went and dumped its core memory...”

“I want the logs in thirty minutes PO Comam. Continuation of your contractual service on *Wesley* is under review. Should you decide to intentionally damage anything that belongs to me...it will be noted on your official record with the Merchant Marines. Dismissed.”

O’Rourke knew for a very brief moment he thought to give her a glare, but PO Comam wasn’t suicidal. The scuttlebutt below decks was that when she laid down a line it was best not to cross it. She was consistent with her rules and her consequences were immediate. Those that didn’t believe it in the beginning and challenged her weren’t seen again, not even at the usual spacer bars. She wanted them to think about the consequences and considering the ones that disappeared were tough and bragged about being untouchable, it did serve as a warning. They didn’t need to know that those that disappeared were taken into custody and shipped back to the planet where they had a warrant for their arrest. And the others, they were given a one-way ticket to another space sector, grateful they were still alive. She only dumped two out into space that were too dangerous to allow to go free. Serial killers deserved Captain’s Justice.

Comam gave a military brace, and turned unsteadily, bumping into the bulkhead to escape her.

When the hatch closed behind him, O’Rourke went to the next headache... balancing her budget. Every department needed something and HQ lately had not been forthcoming in providing them what they needed as they were required to do under their lease agreement. It was disquieting since to O’Rourke it indicated something was coming down the pipe. The *Wesley* was a profitable ship for the company she leased it from and for the crew that she shared some of the credits with, so undermining her operation was probably personal. But who in the office? Her office contact so far had been unable to find the reason.

“Drats,” she muttered. “They’ll have to wait for that part.” She quickly tapped a response to Commander Sousa, her chief engineer, and sent a copy over to Commander Jade, whom she was still grooming for her second. She was about to send it when she added an addendum.

If you can procure the part for fewer than 200 credits, get it. O'Rourke smiled thinking of Sousa sending Henison out to scour each port they docked at to look for the parts she needed.

Noon passed quickly for O'Rourke as she moved to her next job, visiting the bridge to see how 2nd Lieutenant Crow was doing. She was pleased that Crow was settling in well as OOD, Officer On Deck.



Diana stood before the mirror critically studying the casual wear the cabin clothing bot created for her. Tools she never left home without were hidden from view. Even if the evening turned out to be something more than an information gathering meeting, nothing would seem more than adornment or part of her clothing. Be prepared for anything was her motto. Noticing the smirk reflected back at her, she decided she had better go before wiping it off her face would become too difficult.



O'Rourke's method of relaxing was to cook. The steady chopping and grinding helped her think about damaging people without actually hurting them. It was a skill one of her commanders had taught her before he retired. He had also attempted to teach her to forgive herself for her mistakes, but at the time she wasn't ready. She needed an additional ten years of relentless pursuit, capture, and destruction of the enemy to end the self-flagellation.

O'Rourke stared at the dining table, looking for anything she may have forgotten. Anything that suggested intimacy that didn't exist was not in evidence. Napkins were wrapped around the eating utensils and laid across the plates; glasses for water and wine were at the top of the plates.

Water with a twist of lemon, she remembered. This was a fact-finding evening with casual overtones and nothing more, she reminded herself as she dropped the curled lemon slices into the water pitcher.

The food she chose was what Diana had programmed in her suites food kiosk for menu choices.

Wesley's hydroponics grew various fruits and vegetables that suited many species, an important commodity to trade for on some of the stations that had their own specialties. She sliced fresh fruit for dessert.

The ding sounded.

“Admit,” she ordered, hoping it was Diana and not ship business that would divide her attention.

“Good evening,” Diana greeted.

“Right on time. Please come in,” O’Rourke said.

“It’s rather difficult to be late when we’re neighbors.” Diana sniffed the air appreciatively. “Hmm.”

“Would you like something to drink with your meal?”

“What are you drinking?”

“White wine from Ironoa.”

“I’ll have the same.”

Dinner was peppered with casual questions from O’Rourke around what Diana did and how she liked traveling. Diana answered with few words and sometimes only with a smile.

After the meal, O’Rourke and Diana sat on the couch sharing a drink that would curl the toes of someone not used to the liquor content.

“So, did you find something to entertain yourself with for the day?” O’Rourke asked.

“I caught up on sleep then went sightseeing.”

O’Rourke studied her over her cognac. “Traveling can tire you out.”

“Yes.” Diana’s legs were stretched in front of her with her heels resting comfortably on a hassock. She found the captain’s couch comfortable like it was broken in properly, meaning it had been slept on as much as sat on.

“I understand you visited mess hall on Deck 6,” O’Rourke mentioned.

“I took a peek in the one on Deck 4 and decided it was a little *too* wild. Six is more to my liking.”

“Bored passengers are dangerous. So, what did you find interesting on Deck 6?”

“Exercise mats and physical sport matches. The crew also gave me the location of a legal gambling game,” Diana admitted with a grin. “On Deck 8 at 20 bells. I hope it’s allowed?” After Commander Jade’s reaction to the Carrion being on Deck 8, it surprised her that the crew gathered for a game there.

“Yes, at your own risk. You look like you can take care of yourself so I won’t bother to warn you that there are predators amongst that group.”

Diana’s answering grin earned her a salute from O’Rourke. Their glasses clinked together as Diana returned it.

“I don’t think you’ll be getting much from them though. One of the passengers has been cleaning them out. You’ll probably meet her there yourself.”

“Do tell,” Diana said.

O’Rourke’s eyes darkened as she thought about joining the game just to watch Diana but it was crossing a line she knew should exist for ship morale reasons. She had to leave some activities on the ship free from her unofficial visits.

She swirled her cognac, letting the aroma tickle her nostrils with its richness. It was one of seven rare bottles of liquor that her ex gave her as a peace offering. Firmly she pushed that irritating reminder from the present.

“Not enjoying your drink?” a quiet voice asked.

O’Rourke looked up startled. “Just thinking,” she allowed.

A grin appeared on Diana’s face. “Let me guess. It has to do with who gave you the bottle of cognac.”

O'Rourke's eyes slitted for a moment and then she relaxed. She knew she wasn't leaking her thoughts for a telepathic reader. She knew how to keep her thoughts on a deeper level. "What makes you think that?"

"You were focused on the drink. This brand is considered very hard to get, and beyond a freighter captain's pay to share with a stranger. You also mentioned down time which along with the aroma brought you to...how you acquired your bottle."

"Do you entertain all your hosts with a display of your deduction abilities regarding their personal lives?"

Diana shook her head in amusement, not appearing to be put off with O'Rourke's defensive response.

O'Rourke could feel her face flushed from drink. Normally she didn't drink which had her wondering why she broke out such an expensive drink to share with a stranger. It certainly didn't give her the answers she was looking for. All her questions were either met with a smile or a nod, telling her nothing. However, Diana did make a comment or two that hit the mark on *her* personal life. What was she, a telepathic reader that could read thoughts on the deeper thought levels? She had always avoided them and there were some pretty freaky looking ones on some of the ports of call she visited in her career. So, was she mortleige or a telepathic reader? She would mention that to Jade, just to rattle her.

"Some."

"And what does it get you?" O'Rourke asked.

"An interesting night."

O'Rourke gave a short laugh. "I must really be out of the game because I've never heard of that pick-up line."

"Have you been to any bars lately?"

"Not the kind to meet someone I intended on having a lengthy relationship with."

"Spacer bars," Diana said. "What do you consider lengthy?"

"More than a night," O'Rourke answered.

"Not even a player," Diana teased.

"What about you? Are you a player?"

“If the person is interesting and I don’t have appointments to keep, I’ll stay around for more than a few days,” she said.

O’Rourke snorted. “So, is *Wesley* your bar?” O’Rourke shook her head. “I said that wrong.”

“You’re tired and you’ve had enough of the relaxing drink to lighten up with,” Diana said. “I’ll leave so you can get back to work. If I meet up with any worthwhile predators tonight, I’ll let you know.”

“We’ll compare notes.” O’Rourke got up from her seat and showed her guest to the door.

Diana smiled. “Good night, Captain, and thank you for this evening. Your choice of foods was outstanding and so was your cooking. I’d almost think you had a profile on me.” She gave a wave to the captain and turned to her quarters.



An amused smile was on Diana’s face as she walked along the corridor. Sniffing, she picked up scents from others that had passed. One in particular caught her attention. It was the new scent on the market for Erudites. There were 45 Erudite crew members. Someone on downtime, she thought. A captain like O’Rourke would not allow personal scents worn while they were on duty. She had noted that the captain didn’t use any products that scented her even on her down time, or maybe she felt she was always on duty. Her quarters were air cleaned with the basic no nonsense air freshener that left no pleasant reminders of a favorite dirt-side holiday spot. Even the cooking smells didn’t linger.

Cooking. Now that wasn’t in her file.



After Diana left, O'Rourke sat back on the couch and mentally sifted through what little she had gotten out about Diana Rue. She had to admit to herself that Diana made astute observations of her than she of Diana. Did Diana have a profile on her?

She took another sip of her drink. The woman wore long sleeves so if she had the trademark tats of a mortleige they were concealed well. She admitted to traveling a lot and that she would occasionally stay in one place for a few days. That made her a player, but a player of what game? She would ask Jade what she found out about her. And maybe she would admit to Jade that Diana made better observations that hit the mark about her than she was able to about Diana.

Her door chimed.

It had to be Jade who would be asking questions she did not have answers to. She was going to have to admit she fell short of her goal in filling in a better profile on this passenger.

"Admit," she resignedly called.

She sat up when she saw who it was. "What do you want?"

"May I come in, Captain?"

"And start rumors? Oh, no," she told him firmly, standing up.

"Standing out here will start rumors."

"Then by all means come in. But don't bother to sit because this won't be long," she warned. "So, what do you want?"

"We used to be friends and even got married," he said, wearing a smile that could get him shot.

"Henison," she growled warningly, "this is not a reunion. We had a business deal. It's over. So, drop it."

He shook his head at the force behind the 'drop it' message. "I understand why you've been avoiding conversations about old times with me on this ship...a captain and a NCO don't have conversations, but we're alone now so you can tell me why you're ticked off at me."

"Because you drop in and out of my life leaving me holding a bag of toxic trouble. I know you purposely deployed on this freighter for a reason and it's not from

friendship. What business does special ops to do with my ship in another galaxy?” she demanded.

“I trust you’ve debugged your quarters,” he murmured, looking around. He turned his palm up, revealing a small device used to block anything used to pick up sound or visual images. “I wanted to make sure you’re alright,” he told her sounding serious.

“I’m fine so leave on the next crew rotation,” she told him impatiently, feeling uneasy at his tone.

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

“Because there’s trouble,” he admitted. “And I think it’s because of what I asked you to hide.”

She was quiet for a while as she studied the older looking soldier that had offered her an out to a difficult situation years ago. It had been a short-term marriage agreement, but after that he kept popping up in her life with trouble close behind. “I know what you gave me. I checked it out. Now it’s hidden away and I don’t know where.”

“It doesn’t matter to these people. Your checking it out is probably what alerted someone and now there’s a rumor that the captain on the *Wesley* has a puzzle piece to a treasure map. I came to make sure...”

“What treasure map?” she interrupted.

“A map to the whereabouts of the *Ruger*.”

“*Ruger*? What’s that?”

“An artifact, a religious icon, a prayer, or maybe just a stone. Whatever it is, it was stolen over two hundred centuries ago from the Museum of Tustin on Curio. Since then it’s left behind a trail of dead people.”

O’Rourke put her hands on her hips and stared at him disbelieving. There were millions of wild stories about lost artifacts that had mystical qualities about them and all had the dire attachments of imminent death to the undeserving that took possession of it. She snorted in derision at the idea that he would get involved in something that esoteric and that she would even care.

“*If* it was in a museum there would be a description along with its story. So just what did you give me that reminds you of *the* Ruger because what you gave me was not an artifact? It’s only a couple of years old. It was date stamped and with the name of a city, Santo Rio Cabal 220022 on the planet Estaz. What does that tell you?”

“That someone left a clue to its whereabouts in a statue.”

“You aren’t serious.”

“This is serious,” he insisted. “Any mention of a treasure sets off a chain reaction that becomes a force of nature that if caught up in it you can only hold on and ride it out.”

“Right, right,” she said mockingly. “It’s a bunch of space waste, Henison. What you gave me was a copy of a statue of Dome, the Auzeme’s god of death.”

“It’s what’s inside of Dome. I tell you O’Rourke, *this* hunt is for real. You need to take it seriously.”

She snorted and reached over to pour herself another drink.

“It had a date stamp and the name of that city people with too many credits and time on their hands go to, to celebrate foolishness,” she reiterated. “So, this is about another religion. I guess at your age you need something to believe in. You’ve just about run out of all your own luck, eh?” she mocked.

Henison’s eyes narrowed as he noted the seal was lying on the table and one third of the bottle was emptied. O’Rourke caught his gaze and smiled at his misconception.

“I had company. We liked your cognac, and if I was a cordial host I would offer you a drink but I’m not, so go on with this tale of yours.”

“It’s just one of those things the mystics like to label as Keys to the Divine,” he said.

O’Rourke burst out laughing. “Oh, gads but you have it bad. Treasure fever. Not religious fervor at all. Well, in its own sense it does have the same brainless drive. Really, Henison, you have got to get interested in something else,” she said.

“*You* don’t have to believe it has any kind of power, O’Rourke. The people interested in it do. How come you never changed your name when we got married,” he abruptly shifted direction.

O'Rourke raised her eyebrows. Why should she change it? Few people did then as now and besides, it was not a real marriage. Her eyes turned a slate gray and her mouth tightened into a thin line. A distraction tactic, she guessed. It was not going to work.

"Okay, okay," he quickly back tracked. "Listen. I heard a rumor that this new passenger is law enforcement. Is that true? Or maybe a treasure hunter?"

O'Rourke snorted. "That's LeMarks latest gossip, and he heard it from someone else that thought it funny to say that to him so he wouldn't go panting after her. He thought those teenage nymphs were prostitutes. He gave them each their own cabin so he could visit each without interruption. I think one of them gave him a scare because now he won't go anywhere they may be. If you take LeMarks seriously, you'll be the only one on this ship."

Henison's forehead furrowed. "They need watching. I caught them more times than my own crew hanging out in the hydroponics area, and that's restricted even for the crew."

"Stealing fruit?"

"No. I haven't been able to figure out what it is they're interested in there. I have someone checking the area now for contaminants every two hours. Commanders Jade and Sousa have authorized four extra bots to hydroponics to help with the monitoring. That's a drain on resources, O'Rourke. Twice last night the security system went down and took an hour to recover."

"I read the reports," she replied. "I'm stopping up the holes in resources, people, and anomalies as fast as I can identify them. I've already sealed off D4 during certain hours from anyone trying to leave or enter it without Commander Jade's or my clearance. Tonight, will be the first night our nocturnal passengers will be kept to their own deck. Let's see how well our security holds."

He nodded relieved. "So, what do you think of this new passenger?" He tipped his head to the side to see if she would side step the issue again.

"You think she's one of the spies looking for your treasure?" O'Rourke tried not to burst out laughing in his face. "She's more of the type to hunt people than an artifact."

His eyebrows rose. “Just your type,” he responded slowly as if digesting this bit of information.

“What’s happening with your problem of last week?” O’Rourke asked to change the subject.

He shrugged his shoulders, knowing his CO, Lt. Commander Sousa, had sent her a shortened version of his report and comments. “The deck temperatures are still being reset to tropical. Instead of occasionally it’s now occurring every week, still at random times, and not in connection with the security failures as far as we can tell.”

“What do you think is going on?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve torn every subroutine down and went line by line and can’t find where the change is that’s causing such a ship wide manipulation. I asked your geek tech to check, and he’s stumped. Not a good sign, O’Rourke.”

“Did you give him some time to look into it?”

His glare told her he had demanded an immediate response. The Geek would never give an immediate reply. He checked his work several times because he liked to be right the first time.

“Well, there you go. He’ll find it. Give him time. Do you think this has anything to do with the reason you’re here?” She watched him carefully, not believing him about the artifact as the reason why he was on her ship.

“I don’t know. This ship doesn’t feel right, some of the passengers don’t feel right, and you have some really strange crew members. O’Rourke, you should take another look at some of them,” he warned her.

“HQ likes to dump their trash on me. I can’t figure out if they want me to wash them out of the Merchant Marines or have them arrested. And then there’s the ‘why me’ question.”

There was a stretch of silence between them.

“So, is this all you have to say to me in private?” she asked warily.

“I just wanted to let you know I’m here to help.”

That part she believed. What was supposed to happen on her ship that needed a special operations officer from another galaxy to be on board? Was it having to do with her new passenger? Why was he interested in her?

“You can’t even figure out your own section, Henison. How are you going to help with the blasted anomalies that are occurring on all decks?” she demanded.

“Just thought you’d be interested in knowing why I hitched up with your ship,” he retorted defensively. Then he grinned. “Hey, just like your Ma’s family, huh?”

“Henison! Just when I think I can bear your presence you go and make it not worth the effort.”

“You need some work on your family issues,” he told her seriously. “I can understand your father’s side because they wanted you dead, but not your mothers. They’re space merchants and traders. That’s probably why you don’t want to settle down with someone.”

“There’s nothing going on between *us*, Henison,” she blew up.

“Did I say there was? I know I’m not your type, O’Rourke. Geeze!” Then unable to resist, he added, “But everyone has to have someone. Everyone that wants to be great that is.”

“Well maybe I don’t want to be great.”

Henison made a sound of amusement.

“Get out Henison. You gave your speech, which I don’t believe one bit.”



Diana selected a new outfit from the clothing bot, taking advantage of the convenience of being in a luxury suite. The outfit was dark blue and long enough to cover her tats but short enough to show she wasn’t hiding anything up her sleeves. Another reason why she had her tats start higher up her forearms rather than to her wrists.

She preferred keeping her boots but did change the color. There were too many advantages to keeping them. Checking herself out in the triple mirrors she looked for any indication of what was beneath her clothing. To give herself time to study the people

coming in, and confirm what she knew about each member, and their habits, she was arriving early. Before leaving her suite, she took a careful look around it. The cleaning bots had already done their job and her own sweep of the rooms confirmed her scans that there were no new monitoring devices placed in the suite while she was gone. She deactivated the screamer, not wanting to waste a good guard device protecting an empty room. Her walk to the lift was silent. As she passed the workout room she noted a light over it showed it was occupied.

On her ride down she didn't meet anyone, nor did she expect to. The lifts in B and C section would be busier, being further from the captain's favorite elevator. Her knowledge of the crew gave her an idea of who would show for the game, especially if the members she met in the crew's mess hall that steered her to the game let everyone know that she would be in attendance. She was a new mark and an unknown. She was the ship's entertainment. For the predators, this was a challenge. They would let the less skilled play the first few games before stepping in.

Four crew members were setting up the area. Pillows for those that like to chew biloz in a reclining position were scattered about. It was a favorite on the docks since it was not addictive in itself and relaxed the species that favored it. Boxes were placed for sitting and refreshments were on the outside for those watching. In the center was the main table. Six seats were set around the table with no beverages or food near. These were serious players. One of the Carrion still disguised as a young Comatian was directing the setup, making sure there was a lot of space between the players and the audience. No whispers of help or hand signals to a partner would be tolerated. There was a game bot hovering over the area to keep the players in line with the rules.

This was not a friendly game of cards. It had the makings of a serious high stake rivalry. She wondered where they would fit her in.

"Diana. You made it." A PO 3rd Class came swaggering over. PO 3rd Class M'Bla grew up on the water which was where the swagger was from, but her pride in her skill of navigating on water and in space exaggerated the walk.

M'Bla turned to the Carrion who was watching her with intent eyes. Diana was not sure just why she caught their attention in the lift but decided to leave any opinions aside until one of them spoke to her.

“She sat at the Dobby Table in Monte Rio for only two rounds but that’s more than any of us will ever see, Klinga.”

The Carrion whistled at Diana, using the language of the Cromatian it was emoting rather than CS, Common Speech.

“I don’t know until I see how you all play,” Diana answered in CS. “I didn’t know Comatians gambled.” She shrugged her shoulders unconcerned. “But you’re the first I’ve met. Nice to practice languages *you’ve* studied.” She waited to see how the teen would take her inflection.

The teen sniffed, and returned her attention to setting up the area. She turned back to Diana and pointed to the chair at the bow of the ship. It was where the beginner sat. For a teen among adults, she was bossy.

It seemed it was going to be a square off between her and Klinga. M'Bla was the dealer. Her hands were a blur as she shuffled but slowed down when passing out the cards just as the rules specified.

No betting pegs were on the table so Diana took this to be her way of earning a seat at the table. Diana had no idea how a Cromatian would gamble but she did hear about how Carrion gambled.

One of her past jobs was to protect a crook, Lortions until she could testify against her pirate boss. While hiding out, they played a lot of games, and one was card games which gave her a giant leap into the serious gambling world. Lortions had a profound understanding of many species that her boss entertained as well as gambled with, and willingly shared it with Diana, probably to keep from being bored. Though Lortions was not permitted to join in the games with her boss’s partners, or visitors, it didn’t mean she didn’t know how to play. Her skill was a secret her boss thought to keep to himself, using her to keep his own skills honed. At the end of her protection contract, Diana could understand why this double agent was dangerous.

Her lips curled up at the corners as she studied Klinga. She kept her eyes on Klinga and peripherally on her cards. By the fifth hand Klinga had only won one hand and the point difference was low.

At the end of the fifth hand the others decided Diana proved her worth and clamored to get on with a real game. The banker, Diana noticed, had two guards on either side. People interested in participating traded various belongings for gambling pegs.

It didn't take much concentration on her part to stay even. Since she had three weeks, she didn't want to clean everyone out, including Klinga. At the end of each hand those watching chattered and exchanged bets on their favorites. It seemed time went by swiftly when M'Bla dinged a bell to end their game. Diana looked at the timer set on the table. Three hours had passed.

Everyone promptly began to clean the area. Diana helped, but only because she wanted to study Klinga. She was standing in a corner speaking in earnest with a crewman.

Bronot, Diana remembered. Engineering. Just transferred from the *Rollins*. Not exactly the type of guy she wanted to look after her ship's engines. Klinga left with him. Diana was wishing she could hear their conversation but there was too much noise around her.

"Diana, I don't think fuzzie likes you," Merchant Seaman Friz reflected. He plopped down on the barrel he had put back in place. He pulled out a smoking stick and sniffed it. His long gray fingers were as thin as the rolled herb stick. Smoking was not permitted in the cargo bay so he contented himself with weaving it between his fingers.

"Stop calling her that, Friz or one day you're going to find her taking everything you own," M'Bla warned.

"She already had," he returned, not seeming to mind. "But I got even. I think you, Diana should be careful where you wander," he continued undaunted. "Her and her group gets pretty uptight about losing."

"Ever meet anyone that isn't upset about losing?" Diana asked amused.

"Those fuzzies have claws that are sharper than my buddy knife," Hedoc replied.

"Hedoc," M'Bla warned.

“Relax PO. They call us worse,” Friz said.

“When?” M’Bla asked.

“You heard that high whistle the other day? That was no come hither call. That was a curse on us,” Friz said.

“He won everything she had,” Hedoc explained to Diana. “I think there was something she liked in that stack of winnings.” Hedoc nodded to the pin Friz was wearing. “She wasn’t expecting on losing it. Her group leader was upset too.”

“I kinda like it too. I’m not throwing it into the pot,” Fritz said.

“You’re doing that to tick her off,” M’Bla told him flatly.

“So, what if I am? I told her I would trade her the pin for that charm Cuzon lost but she won’t do it, or that other one that bosses them around, Belle something or other. Soooo...”

Diana lifted her eyebrows.

“Cuzon’s not a gambler,” M’Bla explained to Diana, “and he got suckered into a game with those girls. Friz over here is his bunkmate and feels it’s his duty to get the charm back.”

“Cuzon should never have bet something he couldn’t afford to lose, just like Klinga. To me, it’s all part of gambling,” Diana said.

“Think so?” Friz drawled. He polished the broach that didn’t need polishing.

“You look silly wearing it,” Hedoc said.

“I don’t trust it out of my sight,” Friz said. “While I’m working one of them could come into my quarters and steal it. Doesn’t matter if they’re now locked up on their deck after midnight bells. They’ll find a way just like...” suddenly he stopped. “I have to get back to work.”

M’Bla shook her head at the departing Friz. “Come on, Hedoc, we’re going up to the second deck just to be sure Diana’s not jumped.”

Hedoc grinned at Diana. “Do you like the Q?”

“Very plush and easy on the senses.”

“You seem to know a lot about ships,” Hedoc mentioned.

“I’m a Knockabout. I’ve done more jobs on a ship than a Pelconte has digits,” she grinned at the two.

“That explains a lot,” Hedoc nodded his head. “You gamble like a dock rat.”

“I learned from dock rats. It’s the only way to survive.” She stopped short of explaining that besides learning who is hiring, or which ship has better working conditions, you also learn what’s going on in all sections of space. That was an understood fact.

“I always wondered if a person could travel around the galaxy on jobs wherever you can get them,” M’Bla admitted wistfully.

“It’s not for everyone. I’ve been in some scary situations I didn’t think I would survive but I have. Being a knockabout is like a virus that runs in your blood. It’s a need to travel but not get stuck in the same route. Meeting different people in different situations is a stimulus. It’s a big multiverse with more dimensions and rules than I ever thought could be.” She smiled widely at the two. “But I love it. Have you heard the quote from the Earthling, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. That a mind that is stretched by a new experience can never go back to it’s old dimensions? That’s me.”

“So, where are you headed now?”

“I just finished one job and have enough credits to float around for a while. I thought I would visit places that most people don’t. That’s what I like to do. How about you two? You ever take vacations to places you have no idea what the rules are?”

“That’s not my idea of a vacation,” M’Bla admitted. “So, I guess I’ll stick to my job here. Now, Hedoc likes river rafting. Some of us tag along and get our adventure fix for that bit of time off.”

“She just likes to see how many of us gets tossed in the river. M’Bla sticks to her raft like glue.” Hedoc grinned at M’Bla who giggled.

They stopped on the second deck without any unpleasant interruptions.

“See you at the next game. Two days from now. Same place,” M’Bla told her.

“Sleep deep, dream well and wake refreshed,” the two crewmembers chimed.

“Likewise,” Diana waved. As she walked back to her quarters her senses picked up all that had changed since she had last been here, including smells. A grin crossed her face as she caught the scent of the captain.



Chapter 4

“Where is she?” LeMarks demanded irritably for the umpteenth time, though with less energy. He was seated at the head of the table in the captain’s chair, looking like a pretender who was worried about being discovered. His fleshy hands were palm down on the table with his fingers drumming out his nervousness. Everyone knew he was getting ready for a dramatic push to his feet where he then would start pontificating on rules until midway in the first sentence forget the rest but push on, saying whatever came to mind. It was nonsense and not even entertaining for those stuck in the meeting.

LeMarks thought once he was elevated to second in command all his answers would come from some sort of invisible pipeline linked to a library of knowledge. When he was a lowly lieutenant he believed, the noncoms should know their jobs well enough that he didn’t have to do anything, and for a while he did slide by. What he did when he was an ensign was anyone’s guess. He was a lieutenant commander for only a few months until HQ transferred off ship others above him, thus availing him a slot HQ could promote him to. LeMarks was a good example of what having someone in HQ in your pocket could do for you. The crew all hoped they would not be promoted into jobs they knew nothing about. It was embarrassing when you had a tough CO.

The hatch swished opened and LeMarks looked up ready to start his rehearsed speech to Lt. Commander Jade. He had been practicing it in front of his mirror for a month in anticipation of fulfilling his fantasy of embarrassing someone that intimidated him. However, Captain O’Rourke stepped in looking aggravated, and she was more than what he felt he could tackle head on. However, the opportunity to make a public complaint against someone he knew the captain wanted as her second instead of him was too tempting to pass up.

“Captain O’Rourke,” he chirped. He pushed himself to his feet, catching his belly on the table lip, and sitting back in the seat with a loud plop. “I would like,” he paused as he struggled back to his feet, “to make a formal complaint about Lieutenant Commander Jade’s,” he paused to take a deep breath, “distain for being on time to *my* shift briefings.”

His face froze when her eyes turned his way. His legs shook at the silvered look she gave him, reminding him of her threat to toss him out in space with his suit on. At that moment, he thought she would do it, and to his knowledge, there were no spacesuits available that fit him. It was up to him to buy one since the original one he was fitted with was still in working order...it just didn’t fit any more. He always thought he would lose the weight.

“I would take you seriously, *Meister* LeMarks if you followed protocol in reporting a fellow officer, and didn’t whine in front of staff.” The captain gave a gesture for him to be seated.

His jaw clamped down hard to prevent the quiver in his jowls to give his fear away.

“Ensign Henly, when and where did you see Commander Jade last?” she asked.

“Captain.” She stood awkwardly, embarrassed to be singled out. This was one of those times she wished the security cameras were up. “At 0404, D5.”

“And which way was she heading?”

“B lift,” she answered promptly, and then added, “She was in a hurry.”

She stole a worried look at LeMarks hoping he wouldn’t grill her on what she was doing up at that time, though rationally she knew he wouldn’t know that that was normally when she slept.

“LeMarks, you and your crew should be relieving second shift. Be about your business. Ensign Henly, remain. Lt. Ham cover for Ensign Henly.”

“Yes, Captain,” everyone chorused.

The group hurriedly departed with LeMarks hesitating, looking as if he would mention to the captain that as her second in command, and as Ensign Henly’s immediate CO he should remain. However, the security bot that accompanied the captain buzzed him, and then herded him out. LeMarks lumbered down the corridor, struggling not to

display his anger. The bot would neutralize him and deposit him in the brig until the captain released him if he disobeyed her order. It was humiliating that he had to experience such a degrading show in front of *his* crew.

Security bots around a captain were set to protect the captain at all costs, and the rules for emotional outburst or threats against a captain's life were standard on all ships. It further behooved him that he didn't have such a bot assigned to him. There were a few crew members he would like to neutralize.

When the hatch closed behind him Captain O'Rourke asked Ensign Henly, "Why were you up so late?"

"I just finished checking on the communication regulators on each deck, Ma'am."

"Why?"

"I've been getting some strange breaks in my transmission signals for the last month, Ma'am," she explained.

"I didn't see any indication of any abnormalities in your shift reports."

"I had mentioned it to Lt. Commander Hudson before he shipped out, and to Lt. Commander LeMarks, Ma'am, each time they happened," she informed her, looking uncomfortable.

Lt. Commander Hudson was a relief to dump in the hands of the port police who would deport him to a planet that had a reward for his capture and return. She always worried about her back with him. She also looked up his charges, just so she wasn't turning over an innocent on a fabricated charge. Political powers were so fluid, one never knew who to trust.

"And?"

"Lt. Commander Hudson said he reported it to the head of security and that was Lt. LeMarks, Captain. Now that LeMarks is Lt. Commander, he said that it isn't worth putting on a shift report since I haven't been able to locate or reproduce the breaks. So, I mentioned it to Lt. Commander Jade at one of the meetings, being that she's the new Security Officer..." Her features darkened and her hairs flattened giving her a cornered feline appearance. "It was before the commander arrived at one of the shift briefings. She

authorized me to run scans on each deck, since I knew what to look for and bring the results to her. I...ah...she made me part of her security backup team.”

Captain O’Rourke held her temper in check but her eyes silvered. If this was the military she would have thrown LeMarks in the brig, court marshaled him, and tossed him out of the corps at the next port. If it was during war time, he would have been tossed out into space as a suspected spy. LeMarks broke the number one security rule and endangered everyone on board. They were not a heavily armed ship and their only real defense against pirates was keeping vigilant. Anything strange was reportable so the next shift could be aware. Maybe she should relive him of duty now rather than waiting for the next port stop.

“You followed protocol in both cases, Ensign Henly. Thank you for your persistence. Communication on,” she ordered.

“Communication is on.”

“LeMarks, report to the command ready room. Lt. Mack you’re OOD.”

“Communication off. So, Ensign, what did you find?”

“I...the glitch is from our systems, Ma’am.” Her face turned darker. “I, umm, I was going to tell Lt. Commander Jade but she was in a hurry and...”

“So, you had contacted her to meet you on D5?”

“No, Captain! I wouldn’t wake her up. I was going back to my quarters for a few hours of sleep before my shift. I...umm...was moved to D5 with Ensigns Linden and Coran to make room for a passenger.”

“Okay. Write up your report. I want past, present and an educated guess at what you think you found. Include a reference to your report on the shift turnover. Did you get eight hours of sleep? Then after you’ve finished your report take a day off. We have empty quarters on Deck2. Ship Computer Facilities, on. This is Captain, O’Rourke.”

“Captain identified,” the ship replied.

“Move Ensign Henly’s belongings to Deck2C. What cabins are available?”

“Available quarters are 2C5, 2C9, 2C17. All are cleaned and ready for occupation,” the computer reported.

“Ensign, what’s your choice?”

“2C9, Captain.” Her lips curled up into a happy smile.

“Prepare D2C9 for Ensign Henly’s occupation.”

“The move has been noted and all files have been updated. Are bots required?”

the computer asked.

“Ensign, do you need assistance to move your belongings?” The ensign hesitated. It was unusual that a lowly ensign got assistance for anything but with her officers’ staff reduced even the NCOs were experiencing privileges usually reserved for Officers. Why not? she thought. Something good had to come out of having a lean staff.

“Yes, Captain, since you’re offering. I have my kit in lockers until I get my quarters back.”

“Assign a bot to assist Ensign Henly with her moving. Update the terminal in her quarters. Ensign Henly is on a full shift rotation following her completion of today’s report. Notify the proper department heads. End update.”

“Update completed.”

“Thank you, Ensign.”

“Thank *you*, Captain.”

It was gratifying that her intentions of rearranging her crew into quarters that once were officer’s quarters but doubled up for storing special packages when her crew was downsized was taken care of by Jade so promptly. Hiring ex-military had more advantages than hiring civilians. Since the computer sorted out who best fit bunking with another she was puzzled why LeMarks did so bad in rearranging the crew in three to four per cabin. He was successfully undermining her crews’ morale and under the auspices of her command.

As Ensign Henly left LeMarks entered. She caught his glare at the ensign.

“What was that for, Lt. Commander LeMarks?”

“What?” he asked startled.

“Do you have a reason to be glaring at the Ensign?”

His face colored. “She’s late to her post, that’s all.”

“You have poor memory. She’s here by my request therefore she isn’t late to her post. You were here when I gave her orders to remain behind. Sit. You’ll be here for a

while.” She pressed the table in front of LeMarks and a screen popped up. From the menu she brought up rules, regulations, and guidelines dealing with bridge command.

“There are three tests you’re going to take. As an XO, you should already know the answers. One is the typical officer’s test on the basics of a freighter, and information a merchant marine officer *has* to know. The second is on ship security that everyone on this ship should be practicing, and as a bridge officer you should be enforcing. The third is protocol. When you’re done, we’ll both know whether you’ll be keeping your job. And LeMarks, it’s normally a four-hour test. It’s the same one an ensign takes to pass muster. Get on with it.”

“But...but...it’s not... HQ will hear about this!”

“I hope so,” she muttered as the hatch cover closed out whatever else he had to say. She keyed in her code to keep him in the room until she let him out. *You should be thankful I’m locking you in a comfortable room rather than the brig.*

Ensign Sing’s quarters and lab was her next stop. She took the grav-tube and dropped down to sixth level, and then turned a corner into the area that Sing claimed as his own. It was a storage area that was turned into an electronics and repair center with a cot set out of the way for when Sing did sleep. O’Rourke didn’t think he left his area except when a personal visit to some of the sites they visited required more attention. Everything that the first and second level of electronics and software crew and bots couldn’t repair were sent to the Geek. His ten arms could operate independently, as well as work on delicate parts simultaneously. He was a prize to find but it meant giving him what he needed, a space of his own.

Before stepping into his domain, she organized what she wanted him to do. Sing was in his usual position, seated surrounded by many of the projects he was working on. If he heard her he made no move to acknowledge it. O’Rourke understood he would stop when he reached a place he could pause.

Sing leaned back, stretched his back and rotated his many shoulders then flicked his hands to shake out the tension. He gave her a glance and a nod, and then went back to his work. It was five minutes later that he swung around and regarded the captain.

Sing was a person of few words and greeting anyone was not in his sparse word collection.

“I need a passive BBP to cover this ship for anyone that leaves or approaches the *Wesley*. Set up *toties* to be able to clam up the ship should it come to that.”

Sing nodded not looking surprised or curious why she was asking it. That was another reason why she liked Sing.

“When can I expect it finished?” she asked.

“When do you want it?”

“Tomorrow.”

He nodded.

“Are you working on any priority items now?” she thought to ask.

“Lt. Commander Jade asked me to see why hard coded systems are changing,” he responded.

“Ah. When did you last see her?”

He shrugged. O’Rourke remembered belatedly he didn’t relate to clock time.

“She left something for you.” He rose from his seat and moved to a table in the corner. He pointed to one of the monitors.

It took a few moments for O’Rourke to recognize the image as a section of an electronics panel. The parts on the panel moved as if they were animated. Since the parts were not moveable it seemed like she was seeing different panels appearing with the parts enlarging and moving barely noticeable from left to right or up and down. The picture speeded up and now she picked up a rhythm in the movement.

“It almost looks like the parts are breathing,” she told him hesitantly. “Are these bio-cells?”

“No. It’s from the communications and navigation panel on D5. Living organisms *normally* aren’t there.” The screen went blank and he pulled out a small chip, enclosed it in a case and handed it to her.

O’Rourke took it and slipped it in a pocket. She didn’t feel the need to ask him to run tests because she could see on his desk he was already studying it.

“Have you seen Lt. Commander Jade?” The tone it was asked in was not so much a question as a demand.

“What?” O’Rourke asked the seated Sing who had moved back to his work. Already six hands were back at their work.

Ensign Sing looked up at her and waited.

“Did you say something?” O’Rourke asked.

“No.”

“I thought you said something about Lt. Commander Jade.”

“No.”

“Okay.” O’Rourke left him, intending to stop at sickbay and speak with Lt. Commander Jud Trap. He was one of those people that should have either taken a medical leave of absence or resigned years ago. Unfortunately, he did neither. Entrenched in his domain composed of sickbay and the equipment and personnel that came with it, he felt secure and protected by his employer, HQ. It was not a very large fiefdom. It consisted of four medbeds and their two medical assistant bots, sixteen medbots, and of the sixteen, six were down with repairs according to the last update she received on his department. He had one tech that specifically worked on the bots, Ensign Tarish.

O’Rourke had removed from the medical department the responsibility of the biobeds for medvac or deep sleep. That went to another level of techs headed by WO Miles. The warrant officer had enough civilian experience to have given him management of a department but he hated the politics of that level of business and chose to work on civilian ships where WO is as high as he chose to go.

O’Rourke found Trap where she expected him, asleep on his office couch. She suspected he was passed out from a drug infusion.

Rather than approaching too close, she ordered a glass of water from the food dispenser and tossed the cold liquid over him. His heavy breathing continued unchanged as cleaning bots became activated and moved about, sucking up the watery mess and drying him off.

“Communication on. Lt. Commander Jud Trap, when you wake up I want a full inventory of sickbay and everything you are responsible for. I expect the report by 1700

today.” As much as she detested the man, she could not leave him in the dark why she was putting in a personal appearance in his domain. “HQ’s bookkeeper is asking for a full audit of the ship. Com off.” Turning around she went to look for Ensign Tarish. She found him under one of the medbeds.

“Ensign, tearing the bed down out of boredom?” she asked lightly.

Ensign Tarish considered Commander Jud Trap his boss and not the captain since he was assigned to the medical bay and both were HQ’s men. Someone in HQ had given him the ranking of Ensign and there he remained as he was transferred from ship to ship as a technician specializing in medical ship facilities. He glanced at her boots and returned to his tinkering. “No, Captain. Bed’s acting up,” his voice returned, sounding just short of insubordination.

“You and the doc have until 1700 today to have a full report of all working and nonworking bots, biobeds, and all other equipment otherwise known as inventory assigned to sickbay. Since the commander is out of it it’s in your lap to comply.”

“Right,” he answered disinterested.

“You should take an active interest, Ensign Tarish,” she told in a conversational tone of voice. “A department without stats to a financial officer means zero existence, therefore, no need to pay salary to whoever is listed under its staff or to allocate supplies. That’s called cost cutting for efficiency, which is followed by reassignment. That looks good with the stockholders.” Her lips curled up in a smile, recognizing the dropped tool to mean panic. “No telling where HQ will assign you next.”

Message delivered with the intended effect O’Rourke turned and left. She was looking forward to dumping two more from the crew’s roster that were worthless to the efficiency of her ship.

In the beginning, she felt sorry for Commander Trap, but in a week’s time she realized how her pity was condoning his condition. He was part of the DitMy Eradication Program. He was drafted right out of the university from the grasp of an established and politically influential hospital chain. It must have been an official rebuke to someone in the school and or hospital organization. It hurt him and his family since the job was to lift them out of their poor neighborhood. Instead, he received a low paying thankless job in

the military that did little to provide for family members. However, he was not the only one suffering from being part of military operations that were horrific to have participated in.

O'Rourke considered herself lucky that she was stationed on the other side of the sector during the war years by default. Her mother's family composed primarily of traders and merchants, whose name she grew up with, was not among those the ruling party trusted to be part of their war. Her estranged father and his family, the Happensburgs Cartel, would have nothing to do with whatever his brief marriage to a social worker produced; including letting any of their off-spring carry the Happensburgs name. O'Rourke's way out of the hard life that claimed her mother's was to join the military as soon as she could. Through her own efforts, she collected the necessary sponsorships needed to enroll into a fleet officer's academy.

She was sent to a new academy on a remote planet called Delta Alpha that absorbed promising recruits from the lower classes. Those that graduated from DA were trained to lead by example, discipline, and skill, without family prestige overshadowing training and accomplishments. Many of the graduates went to frontline assignments, though some thought for reasons of fodder than leadership. In reality, those already at the warfront wanted officers they could depend on in knowledge, duty, and courage even if it was knowledge without the depth of actual combat. These were officers who knew the rough and tumble world, and could adapt quickly to a situation. To Delta Alpha's pride their graduates had a better survival and promotion rate than any of the other academies.

In O'Rourke's part of the galaxy, Borik Sector, her group was led by a trio of top ranking officers from planets that were not backing the corporate war and refused to allow any of their people to be slaughtered for a war they found to be morally wrong. For eleven years she managed to be mentored by captains and admirals that saw to it that she learned what honor it was to serve in a military that protected trade routes against marauders. Out of the eye of politics and its darker side, O'Rourke was able to rise in the ranks quietly while earning a solid reputation along with the members of the fleet that kept Borik Sector safe. They were called the Exterminators by their grateful charges.

With only one misguided fleet battle that others took the responsibility for, she was able to establish a strong command presence in her area of patrol.

After eleven years of doing well in Borik Sector, and with the loss of seasoned fleet officers on the battlefield, the war office began to look at the officers once thought too lowly for their consideration for promotions, but not affiliated with any of the planets that refused to commit their own officers. Rear Admiral O'Rourke received her orders to report directly to the war office for promotion to Vice Admiral. It was months after President of the Third Ring, Dearth Gunner's death, who had been the one to declare the war for his backers, the thirteen Doubl Cartel families, of which the Happensburgs belonged.

There were no military ships she could catch to her destination. They all seemed to be going everywhere but Creon. Dressed as a civilian she caught rides whenever she could to Creon, where the military war office for United Planets of the Twelve Radiants was located. While waiting for a freighter or any type of ship going her way, she listened to the dock workers gossip on Dearth Gunner's death and the state of affairs at the UPTR High Counsel in Creon. It worried her that talk of riots against anything government was so openly discussed. They also spoke of another war going on. In the city she was heading for a two week bloody civil war was being waged between the cartels to see who would pick their next puppet.

Though forewarned, Rear Admiral O'Rourke had her orders to appear before the Clerk of the Admiral of War for her promotion and reassignment. To not appear was treason...a death sentence in a time of war. Once in the city she had donned her uniform hoping that would protect her; however, her uniform was not decorated with a colored armband of one of the cartels so she was solicited, cajoled, and threatened if she didn't join any of them. What she found the most distressing was that her half-brother, Ridgemon Happsburg, was the new Secretary of War – her father, Darc Happsburg's protégé.

O'Rourke reported to the Clerk of the Admiral of War as was requested and handed in her resignation. It was accepted by a clerk to the Clerk of the Admiral of War, and Commander Altair Henison approved it quickly, almost furtively. Before she left the

building Commander Henison suggested she leave the city now and find a safe place until the cartel wars ended because things would get worse before better. He also recommended she remove her uniform before leaving the building. Wearing a uniform was suicidal he explained.

Getting out of the city was not as easy as getting in. Walking the streets with no destination was looking to be swept up in mob killings if not doused in toxic chemicals. Those that were still in the city had gone mad. RCPs, Remote Controlled Planes, were flying overhead, not even hiding the fact that they were leaving chemical trails that drifted to the streets below. She was standing in a sheltered doorway when Commander Henison, looking considerably different dressed in civilian clothing, appeared next to her. Image her surprise that he found her. He was just as compelled to leave as she. Henison's behavior smacked of covert operations, but whose side he was on was a mystery at the time. He knew all the right things to get both of them out of the war zone without detection.

It must have irked the heck out of Ridgemon Happendburg that he failed grabbing the well decorated Rear Admiral Helen O'Rourke. Through Henison she learned Ridgemon had a grudge against her personally for being the first child of his father, and high in the military ranks, that were rightly earned. It should not have made any difference since she had no connections to either parents' side of the family, but if she challenged by blood rite to lead the Happendburg cartel, she would win, provided she lived long enough.

Commander Henison, if that was who he really was, told her the admirals in charge of seeing her half-brother Ridgemon's battle plan put into practice threatened to quit with their staff rather than commit any more ships and personnel to suicidal encounters for an energy company that already had record profits and acquisitions.

Civilians running military operations and making any such decisions that had no real experience should be banned against such practices, and when engaged in war, should only be there for suggestions or to remind the military that war casualties should not be wasted fodder, was her popular thought.

A day later they heard that Ridgemon Hapenburg issued orders to fire all the military's top brass all the way down to ensign level, not trusting anyone, with her name on the top of the list, though she was no longer an officer of the UPTR. It was taken literally, just as it was meant. But before it was passed on he too was assassinated by the military staff he oversaw, and Henison was fearful of the war lords backlash against anyone in a uniform. O'Rourke heard no trace of the city was left. All she and Henison saw was a flash of brilliant white light as the small ship Henison commandeered sped away.

It was a week later in another space sector where she was being interviewed as taking over captaining the *Wesley* that she heard that whatever hold the cartel had on the ruling members of the UPTR their planet's citizens demonstrated in global masses against the hardships the greedy corporations had on their lives.

Sweeping changes were made with laws and rules regarding those elected to sit on the UPTR passed. It was called Pitman's Rules of Order. It also covered just how much control any group can have over an individual. Chip implantation was outlawed and electronics to neutralize them were everywhere.

Was this a more perfect galaxy of politics? O'Rourke didn't believe so. She saw the same families that once were called cartels that engineered the ten-year war still in places of power to influence information and commerce. She saw this only as a reprieve. She knew those once in power were planning on how to get it back and keep it for a longer period of time. But just as determined they were to take over again there were others just as determined to see that they didn't.

Meanwhile, ordinary lives went on through determination to handle what they could. She had taken a job as captain of a freighter that hauled cargo, repaired ships in space, and carried passengers at a cheaper rate than most transports. She had one month to learn her job and review the freighter fleet of her new employer and make suggestions how to improve her business. It was six months later that her employer, Osmona, left *Westley* to her new job, running a business in another space sector. The next thing O'Rourke heard from Osmona was she was married and she assigned her fleet to be managed by a lease company.



O'Rourke ran a scan on the staff meeting room and found LeMark was conversing with someone. She dampened and isolated the room.

Curious, she traced his call and found it was from a security kiosk. She tapped into the camera but no one was there and according to the logs, no one had been there since an engineer had checked it for a short the previous day. Someone was using something to hide their image from security cameras.

O'Rourke caught a quick flash of a flower in the corner of her screen. Jade. It was a code they had set up in case the ship was boarded by pirates. It meant she was skulking about. It was a relief on many levels, yet disturbing that her head of security found something that important to go undercover rather than assigning it to someone on her staff or telling her directly.

O'Rourke sent a note for Lt. Gerald who was second to Jade in security to check out 1st Seaman Ment, the last person to service the kiosk.

"Bridge to Captain. This is Commander Sousa."

"Go ahead, commander."

"We're approaching Port Sal and there's a broadcast going out. They have an epidemic. We're being warned off."

"Did you confirm it?"

"I'm not getting any replies."

O'Rourke pursed her lips in thought.

"Continue on with all bio-scanners engaged. How long until we hit the first marker?"

"Ten-ten."

"Well, then, let's use a geek toy."

"As ordered, Captain. Ensign, release Geekazoid One."

O'Rourke put a hand over her mouth to keep her laugh from being too loud. It wasn't Ensign Sing's wish to have anything named after him because he was paranoid

about his name finding its way into a person of interest with pirates or other outlaws. This was his first invention and was held off using until LeMarks no longer was involved with security. Only a handful of officers were aware of what it did so O'Rourke felt she was a step ahead of anyone that had infiltrated her ship's crew...provided the Geek was above bribery.

"Released and...readings have a contact, Captain. It's picking up a ship off to our port, just outside of normal scans."

"Pirate or civilian?"

"A friend of yours," she answered dryly. *"It's the Harrodidu."*

O'Rourke thought a moment. It would serve the *Harrodidu's* Captain Alad well if she didn't make it to her stops on time. "The warning could be a hoax or not. Continue on course but be vigilant. Call first shift to assist. Bring up a few of your engineers to check all decks for anything out of place. I've relieved LeMarks of duty and he will be handed over to the port authorities when we dock. I've isolated him to the meeting room until we've reached Port Sal. No one is to speak to him without my direct approval."

"I read you loud and clear. Anything else, Captain?"

"Stay alert. With the *Harrodidu* out there anything can happen. When we're within normal hailing distance, give them a courtesy hail and see if anything interesting comes up. Don't volunteer anything. I don't want them claiming we were spreading a rumor. This smells of a legal stink bomb."

"Aye aye, Capt. That it does."



Chapter 5

Their arrival into Port Sal was uneventful. Harbormaster Bruner was surprised when O'Rourke asked to see him privately. His secretary showed her in where there were three people already in attendance. From the tension in the room O'Rourke worried that there *was* something amiss on Port Sal. The *Wesley's* crew and passengers were being

held aboard until she confirmed with port authorities that there was no virus running amuck.

“Captain O’Rourke, I thought your derision to visiting with harbormasters and their political entourage would keep you well away from personal visits to my office until contract time,” he joked.

“Harbormaster Bruner, one day someone’s going to overhear that and think I really do dislike your office décor.” She glanced around her pointedly waiting for an introduction. She didn’t recognize any of the three from her previous visits.

“These are the new political appointees,” he introduced off-hand. Since Bruner didn’t give names it meant he was not happy with them and wasn’t going to dignify them with introductions, however, he also didn’t ask them to leave. “I take it your visit is official,” he continued. “We heard your owner sold out.”

“Ahh, news does travel fast. But no, that’s not the why of my visit. At Port Sals first beacon we received a broadcast message...a pandemic warn-off. Since we had not been able to get a confirmation we suspected it was not legitimate.”

“What are you trying to imply?” demanded one of the men.

“I’m here to get a confirmation that your port is clear of any infectious disease. I have passengers and a crew whose health I’m responsible for.”

“Well it sounds to me you’re trying to spread a rumor, and we’ll see that you lose your license to fly ever again!”

O’Rourke’s eyes opened wide in the strength of the return and accusation, though it was serious to falsely proclaim such a warning.

“We have a copy of what was beacons to us, we also spotted another ship, the *Harrodidu* within hailing distance. They didn’t respond to our transmission as to whether the beacon was legitimate...”

“How dare you accuse the honorable Captain Alad of...”

“Be silent!” Bruner boomed. He looked at O’Rourke, “Calling that pirate honorable is really stretching credibility,” he said. “It seems,” he said in a louder voice so everyone would not miss what he was saying, “these three are here to besmirch your name and I found it a coincidence that you should want to speak with me on your

arrival.” He turned his back on the three and walked to his desk, sitting with a grunt. “Have your bridge send the recording to my security staff. I enjoy doing business with you Captain O’Rourke, and so do those that have contracts with *you* on this space port. I will see that this riff raft does not cause any further embarrassment to our business relationship.” He glared at the three. She wondered just what they had been saying about her.

O’Rourke nodded to Bruner feeling confident in their relationship and his past handling of port dealings. Before she had met him, she heard from others that the twenty-three years Bruner and before him his boss Kliner, the space station was run with equanimity and even handedness. Under their combined leadership, Port Sal had the lowest crime rate in and around its area of interest.

At the bottom of the stairs she signaled Sousa that all was well so her crew and the passengers could go about their business.

It appeared that Captain Alad and his pirate friends were making grand moves. They had been trying for years to move into this sector with little progress to show, so what changed? A shakeup in the pirates’ leadership? Usually such news made its way around the docks quickly.

While her crew was busy servicing their usual contracts, Sousa filled in as second and went drumming up more repair business by visiting the local dock pubs with a few of her seasoned crew. Being an engineer gave her an advantage of knowing what they could do and what needed to be directed elsewhere. They also ran free diagnostics on ships to verify what refitters or others had told private yachts owners they needed done. Running diagnostics wasn’t expensive since the return was plenty of repair jobs.

Lt. Mack was left OOD, while O’Rourke went to dinner with Harbormaster Bruner to gather information on the local politics and to turn over her arrest of LeMarks for impersonating a Merchant Marine officer. With the recording she gave him he felt he owed her.

Three hours later she was back at the *Wesley*, grateful she resisted Harbormaster Bruner’s temptation to taste more than a glass of his special selection of wine. He insisted

on giving her two bottles of the white lightning. It occurred to her as she stored the bottles in her quarters cooler, that maybe Diana would like to try it.

Dropping her coat on her couch, she watched her repaired butler-bot pick up her coat and hang it in the cleaning closet and all without any comment on her personal habits.

“That’s more like it. Time to relieve COB.”

Rather than her usual route to the bridge she chose the tube. Being too unpredictable would upset the running of the ship but a few changes would be good for her safety. She glanced over her shoulder to assure herself that her personal bodyguard was on duty.

“Captain on deck,” CPO Keen announced.

“Lt. Mack, I have the watch.”

Lt. Mack rolled off the captain’s chair, his retractable arms extending just enough for his fingers to reach his waist.

“Captain O’Rourke, you have the watch.”

The chair resized to O’Rourke when she sat. Not waiting to get comfortable she called up shift reports and extrapolated information an experienced officer would be able to piece together to know what was happening on all decks. Since O’Rourke never had a reliable XO, Exec Officer on the *Wesley*, she had studied the personnel files both legal and in depth gathered on her crew with fierce concentration. Merchant Marines were not like the military in all ways, but an outsider to both was easily hung out to dry if the rules were not quickly learned. Thinking of the merchant marines she wondered what was taking them so long in collecting LeMarks. She didn’t want to pester the authorities since they were in port with not exact time of departure. All the little things, if not taken care of properly could pile up and cause a headache so she had to be patient.

It was not until Osmona turned over the operational side of business leasing the *Wesley* to a management corporation that O’Rourke began to find herself getting her more skilled labor transferred off her ship by the front office than others that they managed. It took two years to learn the ins and outs of how to lessen the sting of being undermined without her quitting. The *Wesley* was to be hers, if she hung on for five

years. That was the arrangement she had with Osmona. It was not like Osmona to be the originator of the trouble, but people change. Whatever the cause, she was not going to quit. She wanted the *Wesley* the moment she saw the freighter. It was a rather odd thing for a retired battleship Rear Admiral to admit, but not for an O'Rourke. This was the closest she would come to admitting a kinship with her mother's family.

"Incoming message for you, Captain. Marked private."

"You have the bridge, Lt. Mi."

She almost laughed at the first lieutenant's expression. For both their sakes she hoped nothing would happen while she was in her ready room. But they were docked so all she had to worry about was monitoring who came aboard and who disembarked.

She tapped her com. An official notice from the Office of Merchant Marines Legal Department informed her they received her packet and they had reviewed it. They confirmed LeMarks was not a graduate of any Merchant Marine Academy or any officer academy they had records to. His status as a Merchant Marine Officer was revoked immediately with an investigation of the company that hired him as qualified. Since HQ had sponsored him it was up to them to verify his training. O'Rourke grinned. This was the break she was looking for.

"Ship Facilities, this is the Captain."

"Ship facilities here, Captain. Lt. Reca speaking."

"Lt. Reca, I have a job for you. I want you to oversee the clearing of the civilian LeMarks' quarters. Pack his stuff in crates for unloading. Chief of Purser will change his account for the mailing of his belongings to his home. Get the service bots in those quarters scrubbed and reprogrammed."

"Aye, Captain. I'm on it."

She sent a notification of these findings to the office of the port authorities and Merchant Marine office at Port Sals. She was looking forward to getting rid of him.

With that done she went back to her question on why would Captain Alad of the *Harrodidu* risk losing his sailing status in this neck of the galaxy with a stunt like that. Port Sal was a major space station and always had events going on with people from all over the galaxy visiting. Whether it was proved or not that Captain Alad was involved his

reputation as a pirate preceded him and it meant no one would give him docking rights. It seemed a gauntlet had been thrown down and he lost. He would take the fight into space and she was ripe enough to take him on. What was his gain in such a bad move? She didn't know much about Alad. She sent out an inquiry on him.

Her thoughts moved on to Diana Rue. Her query on her had not pulled up anything other than identifying her as a Knock-About, exactly as her ID showed. Rising from her feet she was about to return to the bridge when her com dinged.

"Incoming message from MFC HQ, Captain. Another private message."

"Well it's about time HQ answered some of my requests. Maybe they got word about LeMarks. Blemish on them," she muttered as the logo began to materialize. Startled when it was not Mapril Freight Company she was about to check her connection when a familiar face appeared.

"Greetings, Captain O'Rourke. Surprised at our new..." Killian waved at the background behind her, *"owner's logo?"*

"When did this happen?" O'Rourke demanded dismayed.

Killian held up her six hands giving a pained look. *"It was a surprise to us all. Osmona notified me late last night that the leasing company she signed over her freight business to manage sold out to Tipp's Conglomerate. You know Tipp's has been trying to establish a business in your sector for over ten years and all they have are crumbs."*

"Well, that explains why the Harrodidu has been up to no good." O'Rourke paused wondering if she should say anything more. "So, where does that leave the Wesley?"

"Your contract with Osmona and the rest of her freighter captains doesn't change. It seems the son of the owner of the company Osmona made arrangements to manage her leases has been in silent negotiations with Tipps for years. It explains why you've been getting real losers for crew and why I wasn't able to prevent the transfers. WhoHo, the son, has been taking bribes from Tipps. His old man turned over the full operation of his leasing business to his eldest two days ago and next day, the sale was made. WhoHo said Captain Alad of the Harrodidu wants your clients."

“Not if he continues to captain with the *Harrodidu* and I know he’s not going to give up his ship and crew. He can’t come close to replicating our services. He can’t even transport other people’s goods without pilfering it or over charging.”

“I don’t think they’re going to be doing small ship repairs. Maybe the other way around,” Killian said.

“They won’t make it in any legitimate business. Anything they’re involved in will immediately be suspected as illegal and galaxy agents will be assigned to investigate. Gods, I hope I don’t have nosey agents in my business. All those stupid questions and delays.”

Killian shook her head amused. *“You should know, you once were at the other end of all that. As you can see, it hasn’t even been announced officially yet and they’re already taking over everything and locking out most of the old group.”*

“We’ll keep in touch,” O’Rourke assured her. “Don’t forget to send me your new address.”

“Have no worries about me. I already have another job lined up. I’ve got more bad news for you...or your crew. Tipps management has dispatched members of their staff to one of your ports with test packets to administer to your crew to prove their incompetency for their jobs. Which the only thing you can be happy about is they can’t transfer any more new crew members your way because according to your contract, the quota was reached four replacements ago and your assessment of all their replacements and tests given to them show them as below acceptable skills for a merchant marine. I have been filing your reports and was asked to turn them over, all of them, to the new staff. I have passed your findings to the Merchant Marine Office and to your lawyer. From the moment WhoHo overstepped the partnership he broke your lease agreement. That means WhoHo has no right to include Wesley’s lease in his sell of his father’s company. Something for your lawyer to act on now so I sent all the information from a public kiosk so it won’t be flagged by Tipps right after Osmona spoke with me. I think their intention was to crew your ship with losers so when these test packet came, you would lose too many crew members to legally fly and to fulfill your contracts.”

“I run a tight ship and cross train. They obviously haven’t been in touch with the Merchant Marine Office which has been keeping up with my crew’s certification test results and since the tests have been done by their staff, there should be no question as to their authenticity. I have my crew studying and testing to qualify for their rating at every port we stop at that has a Merchant Marine Office. The only one that has slipped past all those tests is LeMarks, which I just received confirmation that he is not a legal holder of the title Merchant Marine Officer.”

“Whoa! You are keeping on top of things. I guess they haven’t been keeping track of your crew. Is that because you haven’t been updating them in your reports?”

They both laughed.

“Another thing...Don’t let them tell you that with new ownership of the leasing company you have to renegotiate the lease. Osmona still owns half interest of all the freighters and lawfully all contracts will be honored to their fullest until they run out. She would intervene but she’s too far away to have any influence.”

“What do they plan on doing with the Wesley meantime? Decommission her?”

“Could be the plan. I noticed some information passing between the new HQ board chairman and WhoHo. WhoHo had the title of sale for the Wesley which I’m not sure how he got that. WhoHo and I don’t see eye-to-eye so I’m no longer invited to meetings, you know.”

“Two years they’ve been working on this?”

“Could have been more than that. WhoHo knew his father was getting ready to retire soon. Osmona was full tilt on building up her freight business with the Wesley as her flag ship, which is why she hired you to help her tighten up her fleet business. Then she got involved with that DiRlin family. Gods, but did she have to fall in love?”

O’Rourke’s expression got a laugh from Killian.

“Well, okay. She’s not stupidly in love with the lazy husband of hers. She’s in love with the new avenues of business that have opened up to her with this marriage in all new territory. They needed new blood in that family to bring back their business edge and she’s bringing it.”

“I don’t think she would sell us out,” O’Rourke remarked softly. “I mean sell the *Wesley* out from under me? The *Wesley* is built for this business. We take in more business than any other freighter and have more potential than any of the other ships out here!”

“You don’t have to sell me, Helen. Just watch yourself. They broke contract so until your lawyer tells you what’s what, watch yourself. I’m not a lawyer but from my view here, the Wesley is yours, per agreement with Osmona. I have to go. Stay sharp, Captain.”

The background logo filled the screen until O’Rourke angrily jabbed the off button.

She was about to make a call when a ding from communications came on.

“Captain, you have an official call from...HQ but...”

“Pass it through,” she responded. This news was going to spread through the entire ship and docks in no time.

An unfamiliar face appeared with the new logo. He introduced himself as GroLomotn and began a long-winded story of how Tipps Consortium was the new owner of her lease. Why the heavy-handed attitude? Her cautious side didn’t want to grab the first easy answer, but her past history with pirates and one being related to the Tipps clan gave her more than suspicion that she had been set up...but for what? A takeover of her customers?

It took over an hour for GroLomotn, the new chairman that oversaw the lease of freighters Tipps Consortium bought outlined her new schedule and the changes that were to be immediate. She let him go on about the change of the *Wesley*’s home port to one that was in a notoriously known bad section of space where any supplies they needed would doubtfully be delivered, and about someone else taking over her customer stops, and how her visit to the shipyard that was long overdue was denied because they wanted to review if the need was there. When he finally paused, looking too smug for his own good, she was thankful to Killian for the heads up.

“GroLomotn, let me be perfectly frank with you. Number one, you can’t change the contracts *I’ve* signed with *my* customers nor can you assume authority of the *Wesley*.

Number two, the shipyard visit is mandatory accompanied with an inspector's letter which I'm sure you have, as it goes with the lease contract of the *Wesley*. Number three, you are not changing our homeport to Rieland. All in all, my lease agreement with Osmona doesn't change with change of owner of a management company. You also can't release me of command without breaking contract, which means the *Wesley* becomes mine automatically. My lawyer will be contacting you."

"Think you're smart, do you? Some kind of hero you think you are. Well this is the real world and you think you can afford running a freighter that size alone? Think well on that, because you are alone out there in all that space," his voice rumbled in a lower octave as if that would change her mind.

O'Rourke laughed. "I'm a money maker GroLomotn. I have a crew that is good at what they do and they do quality work. You don't have any ship that can match the services *Wesley* provides and as long as those contracts are in effect the *Wesley* sails with me as captain."

"We have ships that can replicate what you offer," he sniffed.

"Name one. Be serious, GroLomotn. You want your ships to take over my route but your ships don't have the equipment nor what it takes to keep my customers happy and that's low cost and quality of service."

"You're a bit too arrogant, O'Rourke. You need a taking down a peg or two."

Whatever else he wanted to say did not get said as the transmission was cut with the logo fading.

She leaned back in her chair. "Well we both now know what the other has in mind. So maybe those anomalies are their doing." After a few moments of thinking she shook her head. "No. They would add something debilitating and while we recover, wipe out everything else. They're not the type that has patience." She rubbed her chin. "Where the heck are you, Jade?" she asked softly.

Leaning forward she made a call to her financial manager. Captain Arie had once been her captain. An injury during a battle had taken her out for too long. When the injuries had healed her interest in pursuing a career in the military was no longer there.

Arie started in the financial world as a helper to her own parents and soon found she liked the predictable world of numbers.

“Hey Captain, how are you doing these days?” O’Rourke smiled at the woman’s image. She had dirt streaks on her forehead and chin. No doubt she interrupted her dirt gardening.

“O’Rourke! I was just mentioning you to my niece a bit ago. How are the currents in your neck of space?”

“Rough but sailable. We have a change of management, pirates, can you believe, trying to break into legitimate businesses but we both know they won’t be able to not rip-offs their customers.”

“I heard. Your lawyer notified me early this morning. You’re covered financially and from what he said, the Wesley should be yours at the end of the month. It’s a slam bam deal.”

“I was thinking of taking a vacation to Meriod while the Wesley’s in for an overhaul. Since your daughter is a vacation planner, I thought she could see what she can schedule for me. I’d like to shoot the rapids on real water, and get in a week of camping out in a tent. Not too roughing it.”

“On land or in a space station? Ahhh. You want to try and see if a week on land will give you some peace of mind. A touch of nature with real rain, snow...what is it? The last time in the snow you nearly froze to death.”

They both laughed heartily.

“How about a surprise? Yes, that’s what you need. I’ll have my daughter look up what the rates are and make the arrangements. Just give me a date.”

“The Wesley’s scheduled next month for dry dock at the Somono Yard. Our date is hardcoded in their appointment calendar.”

“If things go as well as your lawyer says, you’ll be sole owner of the Wesley by then. Congratulations. I’ll keep in touch. Nice hearing from you. I gotta get. I have the grandkids today so we’re all out gardening. I don’t want them to dig pits when a small hole would do fine. Write!”

“Right.”

O'Rourke closed her link and began reviewing her messages from her department heads...that is with the exception of her missing security officer. She checked again on LeMarks. He hadn't been collected by the port authorities.

O'Rourke returned to her reports. Seventeen passengers disembarked. None of them asked for the difference in fares back and since she had no one to spare to interview each one to find out why they left she decided to rely on dock talk. That would have been something Jade would have been sent out to check up on.

"Lt. Mack, this is the captain, meet me in bay seven," she ordered. "Dressed for quiet shore duty," she added.

Mack was a charmer among other things, and he also worked in the security section. He would be ideal to scour the sailor bars and listen to talk. He would also know who to take with him that he could trust.

They had picked up six minor hull repairs to private ships, so the bay was bustling with bots and engineers to finish the work within a day's time. O'Rourke watched the work as she waited for Mack's arrival. A finished ship backed out and the next smoothly was moved in. Frowning for a moment she tried to interpret the burn marks on the hull of the next ship.

"Captain?"

Without turning to Lt. Mack, she nodded to the new ship sitting in their repair bay. "What does that remind you of, Lt. Mack?" she asked of the *Conqueror*.

"Looks like skunk burns."

"Yes. It certainly does." She turned to Mack who had two others with him. Though this was his off-shift he didn't look tired. O'Rourke acknowledged their respectful nods. "I want to know why we lost seventeen of our passengers."

The three looked embarrassed.

"Okay. Why?" she asked.

"Rumor among the crew is that our lease is held by pirates. The crew has been bad mouthing them and...well some of the passengers overheard. It's been canned, Captain, so we won't be losing any more...but is it true?"

“The ownership of the leasing company has changed hands. But that will not affect our contracts. I still want you to go down to the dock bars and see what’s being said. You have two hours. If you need more time, get back to me.”

“Yes, Captain.” Mack turned to the others and gave them a hand signal. They followed Mack to one of the shuttles.

“Problems?”

O’Rourke turned to Diana Rue. “Nothing short of a challenge. What’s life without them?”

“Tipps Consortium started out as a pirate organization, didn’t they?” Diana asked.

O’Rourke grinned. “I see you keep up with the scuttlebutt. In some sectors they still are.”

“Trying to legitimize, hey?”

“Trying.”

“You don’t think people can change?”

“People with a lot of effort, yes, organizations, no. Planning on going ashore?”

“Nope. Been there, done that. Just came back with your engineers.” She gestured to the freighter’s shuttle, the *Wave*.

The *Wesley’s* repair crew had a maintenance contract for a heating plant that Reuters, a small local company from the planet below DiAEeon’s used to rotate its engineers and maintenance workers to keep up. It was too expensive to keep the amount of highly trained engineers on site for everything, or so O’Rourke had reasoned with the manager of Reuters, so her crew won a contract to stop by on their run and give the place a thorough work-over including replacing any parts the aging plant needed. Bega’s Manufacturing of Port Sal was going to have to start replacing their sixteen plants because they out lived the manufactures warrantee and ceased making spare parts.

O’Rourke watched as the returning crew moved out parts that were no longer working with the grav-lifters. They hoisted them onto working frames where they would try to refurbish the part as much as they could.

PO Colo glanced at her and gestured to the part and then gave the thumb down. It could no longer be fixed. O’Rourke nodded she understood. *Wesley’s* stores chief would

have a talk with the customer's equipment manager and discuss the no longer repairable part and then start bartering for a new one. Always prepared, their chief purser had been looking for bargains in anticipation of this. It was not just replacing the plant, but the housing, ducts, and everything else that connected to it. They had stuck with the old model so long, that even adapters were no longer made. O'Rourke frowned at the cost her customer was going to have to incur. Someone's political career was going to take a dive.

O'Rourke turned her attention back to her passenger. "We plan on staying another two hours, so if you want to revisit the port, you can."

"It's not all that interesting to visit. Their shops are overpriced for visitors and they hold back the good stuff for the right buyer. I also noticed a heavy emphasis on security."

"Oh?" O'Rourke tried to appear as if it didn't mean anything, but maybe the harbormaster was expecting trouble after that false message. It was wise to prepare for it.

"If I were a spacer captain that is competition to Tipps, I would be mounting extra cannons and screening everyone on board, just so Tipps doesn't pull one of their mutinies – conquering from within."

"You seem to know a lot about pirates and their tactics."

"I travel a lot, see a lot, and hear a lot. I don't want to be on board a ship that is in the middle of a pirate war. I like the one-on-one type of encounters, if it were to come to that."

"No pirate is taking over *my* ship. So, you plan on doing anything else for excitement?" the captain asked.

"After a perusal of your ship and Port Sal, I find that I have just about everything I need in my quarters. I wasn't able to reach you or Commander Jade to see if it was alright if I disembarked, but I did reach a lieutenant in security," she mentioned.

"I approved your name on the debarking list," O'Rourke said.

"Of course, not much gets by you captain," Diana teased.

"We'll have to have lunch tomorrow and discuss what you feel has gotten by me," O'Rourke said.

Diana chuckled.

The captain returned to her quarters to find a message from Port Sal saying they didn't have the authority to arrest LeMarks or hold him for the Marine Police that were suddenly very busy patrolling their shipping lanes.

"They wouldn't be so darn busy if those pirates didn't show up," O'Rourke told her console.



Sometime late at night the ship was back in space, moving at higher gs to make up for the time they spent on extra jobs and information gathering. According to Lt. Mack and his group, dock workers were talking about a pirate cartel that was trying to muscle in on legitimate ship routes with more aggression than they had shown in the past. It didn't do well for the future business of any of the planets in that area, and O'Rourke knew her bit of information put fire under Port Sals' leaders to demand a heavier military presence to keep their part of space clear of pirates and smugglers.

It meant scams would increase. Pirates would be posing as military boarding crews, rumors would spread scaring businesses, and customers, and the political officials whose popularity was based on no problems that the public could hear about would take a beating. Then the pirates would buy up the businesses that went out of business cheap. It was already tried in Borik Sector but didn't get very far. The pirates in Borik Sector were scattered groups that mistrusted each other so it was easier to disrupt their plans. It also helped immensely that the planet members knew their military protectors and had them in high regards. However, it didn't mean that because it failed in one sector it wouldn't be tried again elsewhere with success. They had ten years to try various schemes and maybe they decided to go back to the old method of buying legitimate businesses up and then resume their scams under the name of what once were dependable businesses.

O'Rourke was sitting on the bridge watching her crew when the elevator's humming had her turning to see who it was. Her hand moved to her weapon that she had taken to carrying.

"Good evening, Captain," Lt. Ham reported. His crew behind him all nodded to O'Rourke, looking a lot less stressed at having Ham as their new CO. Until she could rearrange her officers a lot of the lower ranks would be filling slots normally reserved to

the more experienced. The moment she had dismissed LeMarks, she had promoted Jade as her Exec. She hoped Jade was keeping up with her messages, because she didn't want her to think someone else filled the slot.

"This is Captain O'Rourke, OOD, turning over watch to Lt. Ham OOD of the third watch."

"This is Lt. Ham of third watch, I am now OOD."

"Have a quiet shift, lieutenant. But don't hesitate to call me if anything you don't recognize turns up. Do you understand me?"

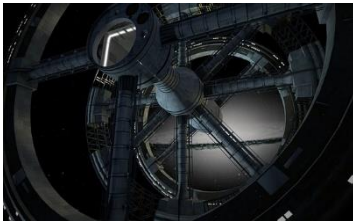
"Loud and clear, Captain. I caught up on the briefs, Captain. We'll all be looking sharp."

O'Rourke gave him one of her wide smiles. "I do believe we're in good hands. As you were."

She stepped into the elevator feeling for the first time in a long time, relieved that she didn't have to worry about LeMarks commanding her ship. Concentrating on who he took orders from was her next priority.



Chapter 6



"Captain, Port Y greets us and notes that though we're early, they have a slot available for us at no extra charge," Ensign Corey reported.

"Blast it. I was hoping we could just hang out here and see who all is about," Captain O'Rourke muttered to Lt. Mack.

"Looking for anything in particular, Captain?" he asked in the same undertone.

"Something unusual, like this. Signal the Harbormaster we'll take the slot. Lt. Mack, you and your team scour the bars for gossip. A job well done deserves another adventure."

Lt. Mack grinned, his pointed canines sparkling in the lighting as he no doubt intended them to.

To arrive at ports or waystations early was not a good practice since schedules are important, so the harbormaster must be dying for any gossip from Port Sal, hoping to hear something new.

“Ensign Crele. Notify Commander Sousa when we’re safely tucked in, she’s cleared to begin her operations,” she directed her tactical and astronomic officer. She promoted Ensign Crele from a NCO. He passed his tests and was certified by the Merchant Marine Board. He was another talented merchant marine whose previous COs had not understood his species particulars and discouraged his talents. HQ thought dumping him on the *Wesley* would further lower her crew’s rating but O’Rourke valued the Urales species in tactical and astronomic positions. So as not to alert HQ of his value, O’Rourke kept a separate file on people she promoted and cross trained, paying them out of her ship’s business account.

“Aye, Captain,” he responded.

Once the ship docked, Hale moved to the OOD and Captain O’Rourke headed to the harbormaster’s office. Harbormaster Ofensa was known to be one of the shrewdest in her family of harbormasters. She was also the only one to have gotten as old as she was. Being harbormaster, used to be as dangerous as being sheriff in a growing town – a long life iffy at best.



An hour later after her short exchange of information with Harbormaster Ofensa, neither woman mincing words about a pirate gang making a big move into their part of space, Captain O’Rourke stood in the glassed tower looking down at her ship. The elevator was taking her back down to the lower levels where *Wesley* was berthed. She watched with a great deal of satisfaction as the teenage vixens were disembarking with their baggage. This was their scheduled destination.

She heard that Diana had put a dent in everyone’s gambling purse including the vixen that was cleaning out her crew.

“Captain O’Rourke,” a bosun hailed her as she stepped off the elevator.

“Yes, bosun.”

“I have a message from the harbormaster’s guardsman, Captain.”

She took the message. “Thank you bosun. Did you see anyone nosing around our lines?”

“No, Captain. Commander Sousa gave me, and the others orders that no one is to hang around and if they don’t heed us and be off, summon assistance.”

“Good. As you were, bosun.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.”

In her ready room, she opened up the communiqué. It was the official letter from the merchant marine station at Port Y notifying her that they didn’t have the resources to keep LeMarks in restraint until an official from another Maritime Office came to collect him. They also hinted that Port Y didn’t have the authority to grant papers to someone whose identity was being questioned, therefore, she had to take him with her to a larger space station, like LoMace Space Station, who were the proper authorities to turn him over. O’Rourke glared at the message while waiting for security to escort LeMarks to her ready room. Port Y was locking down their security too and re inspecting all ships that docked. If their warning beacons were moved further out it wouldn’t surprise her.

A bell sounded for entrance.

“Enter.”

LeMarks was given a slight push to step into her presence. For a few moments the two studied each other. O’Rourke found he looked better in civilian clothing that could hide most of his bulk than his uniform. Other than that, he looked pale and worried.

“LeMarks, you have two choices of travel on the *Wesley*, sleep pod or the brig.”

“You have no right to fire me...”

“Muffle him, Security,” she ordered. She had no intention of going through this again. He had already ranted and railed at her when she announced charges were being brought against him for impersonating an officer, endangering her ship, and all business associated with it.

“Port Y has also refused your debarking. I don’t want to waste ships resources guarding you so my decision is a sleep pod. Security, take this civilian and put him in a pod and lock it down. He’s under arrest for impersonating an officer, which I might add is punishable by death in some space quadrants.”

Jade was right about some passengers being better off in the pods for the duration of their trip, she thought. Another bell sounded for entrance before she had a chance to sip her water. She was really feeling overworked.

“Enter.”

Ensign Corrie stepped in smartly and gave her a snappy salute. “Captain, *those* girls are requesting passage to LoMace Space Station.”

“Did they give a reason, Ensign?”

“Yes, Captain. Their uncle’s unable to meet them here. They have orders to meet him at the Metropolitan Port.”

“Two to a cabin, D4, read them the rules and if they don’t obey, they forfeit their fee and get booted off...” she pressed her fingers to her forehead. “Amend that. Alright, they end up in a sleep pod for misbehaving. We don’t have time for passengers breaking rules on a working freighter especially with pirates threatening the shipping lanes. Can you impress that on them Ensign?”

She grinned. “I sure can, Captain.”

“You’re shaping into a good Busar, Ensign Corrie. All passengers at this point are being charged the common fare, if anyone complains, tell them there is a pirate threat and we’ll be transporting them through that area, if they don’t accept, they can find another transport. Make sure you escort them to their quarters with no side trips.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Captain O’Rourke looked after her wondering why Ensign Corrie found that a delightful task. Before the elevator closed behind her she called, “Don’t forget to be accompanied with security.”

She heard a Yes, Captain before the elevator closed.

“Hm. She earns a mention in her records if she can keep them contained,” O’Rourke said, and made a notation to follow up on it.



Chapter 7

Diana unwound from her meditative pose. Between her dreams that were too cryptic, and the information her visit to Port Y had brought, her brain was going in circles with nothing that made sense so she meditated. Not much changed, and that was she felt more grounded and less light headed.

On Port Y she went looking for an old friend who had her finger to the pulse of Port Y, from visitors to dock gossip. Queenie Kamacu was what many called *the* Queen of the Hive. She ran a tight house of pleasure. Neither employees nor customers wanted to cross the Queen, not even the pirates that had the misfortune to find out what her past was about. She had the resources she needed to keep her rules in abeyance. Her stable of males, females and in betweens were talented in their skills, healthy, clean, didn't do drugs, nor gambled. Preparing favorite foods was at the top of the list of her space clients.

Queenie Kamacu didn't look any older than her ancient self and if you could translate her nonverbal replies you were rewarded with information others would pay a lot of credits for. Her species had wondrously thick and curly eyebrows that were like locks of hair to some people. The two giggled like school girls before getting down to some serious talk, which was mostly on Diana's side, but Queenie was a good friend and knew what Diana needed to know to stay safe.

Queenie's suggestion of finding another ship was met with a dour look from Diana who never ran from an adventure. Though Queenie wouldn't tell her just what it was that was coming *Wesley's* way, it wasn't something that the captain couldn't handle she assured Diana. If it were, Queenie would have been more insistent that she find another ship. Queenie in another life had been Diana's mentor in training in the higher levels of a mortleige.

Maybe she was hinting at a pirate boarding. Diana frowned as she thought about how that could come about. System failures were plaguing the *Wesley* so that could be a possibility. Passengers wandering on most decks had been curtailed so inside assistance would be limited to crew. Now that was a real possibility. There were a handful with shoddy backgrounds, though nothing on their records recently, and her intermingling with the crew didn't bring up any complaints about the captain that would hint at a mutiny, which pirate operatives implanted. So, what did she need to do to stay safe? That

question brought a wide grin to her face. Now she felt ready to tackle the questions she was coming up with. She got up and walked around to get her blood moving. She needed to take inventory, starting with the people aboard.

What did Friz almost say about the Carrion? "It doesn't matter if they're locked up on their deck after midnight bells. They'll find a way just like..." Was he implying that wherever they wanted to get to they did or was he implying someone else did and they would too? What's so important about the pin he won from them? What's so important about the charm the Carrion won from Cuzon that they don't want to give back even if it's an even trade?

She glanced at the kiosk and wondered if she wanted to look into the computer files of the ship. From ship scuttlebutt, they had a geek that was very good at spotting unauthorized access into his systems. Did she want to risk seeing just how good he was? If the captain was alerted, then any hope of getting on her good side from that moment on, should her assistance be needed, would take too much valuable time to get back in her good graces.

Diana went to her bag and pulled out a small chip from a case that held five. They were color coded. She opened up the console and inserted the chip in an empty bank. She logged on and waited for the chip to give her a logon screen.

Diana rubbed her hands at the anticipated screen and began her troll work. Quickly her program searched out key words. Reports were read, processed through a filter that identified problems, and then people were located. Once she had an idea of what may be going on she logged off. She removed her chip and sat down for further thought.

Okay, I think I have an inkling of what's going on. They have a program running in the background. I see it's been deleted numerous times and it reasserts itself. Instead of deleting it again, why not find out what its primary goal is? One of its tasks is to change the environment to a tropical temperature. Why? Preparing the ship's personnel for a weather change, or getting it ready for a species that needs to have a tropical temperature? I can't recall a pirate group that is tropical.

Second task is to neutralize ship inhabitants. I would have thought it meant to kill if there wasn't a tally of sleep pods given and with the number of people on board. How will this program get everyone into a sleep pod?

Third task is to awaken the disciples and send them on a mission.

What I need to do is figure out how to get into the programs subroutines and find out who the disciples are and what their mission is.

That's something Ati is good at. If Ati also didn't have a problem with getting sidetracked, he would be handy to reach out to.

The ship's geek has to know about this program so has he notified the captain?

I wonder if the captain would tell me. A bit of a slight of hand could get me that information...unless she's savvy to inductions.

So many questions and so little time.

She grinned. This was going to be an interesting respite from an-other-wise boring trip.



“Captain?” Ensign Corey’s voice roused her from her perusal of the ships logs she was studying while sitting watch.

“Yes, Ensign.”

“We have one of those strange anomalies again. On channel c.”

Quickly O’Rourke tapped into her console. “I don’t see it.”

“It’s here,” she assured her.

O’Rourke quickly moved to Corey’s workstation, staring at just what she was reporting. O’Rourke tapped her com. “Commander Sousa.”

“I got it Captain. It’s occurring on four workstations. I see the source too. Engineering. One of my workstations. We’ll take care of it,” she guaranteed.

“Keep me apprised,” O’Rourke reminded her. “Good eye, Ensign.”

“Captain,” she began hesitantly.

“Yes?”

“I...ah...we’ve all been seeing them, Captain.”

“Who’s we?”

“Comm and TAC.”

“You haven’t reported it?”

“We did, to Lt. Commander LeMarks. He said you didn’t want to hear what we couldn’t trace.”

Lt. Hoi nodded in agreement.

“Not a good excuse since you work the bridge with me. I’m captain, just in case you’ve forgotten.”

The two had the grace to look embarrassed. “We thought we were following protocol, Captain,” Hoi replied. “He was our CO.”

“This is a good lesson for us all then,” she returned. “I want all anomalies that occur on shifts documented. That’s standard protocol. It doesn’t have to be provable.”

The two looked at her alarmed.

“Even PO Drummon,” she informed them.

PO Drummon was known to see things that no one else could and he learned to not mention it because his previous COs didn’t believe him. When he came aboard *Wesley*, transferred as a deadbeat, Lt. Commander Jade took him under her wing, seeing something others didn’t. He blossomed but his past was difficult to leave behind with his crewmates. O’Rourke okayed him to work under Jade for whatever assignment she transferred him to. PO Drummon found his place in security, according to Jade. He must have been inspired because he passed his ratings tests.

PO Drummon was a hybrid mix species. Of what and how many species, only a chemical scan could tell. From what O’Rourke surmised was that either his mother’s side of the family were for a hundred generations prostitutes at one of the busy space ports or he came out of a science lab. Whatever he was, he was hard working and picked up skills quickly and just as quickly discarded them bored. Security work, according to Jade, suited him fine due to the many coats and hats it was necessary to wear. There were only three people that knew Drummon was their ‘sneaker’. At every port he disappeared, returning when the ship was due to leave.

Jade called them exercises to build up his skills. According to his reports, he was able to gather enough information on some pivotal people to influence them if it came to that, like when contract talks came due.

“He sees things, Captain,” an emboldened ensign informed her.

“Do you know them to not be there?”

The two snorted. “We don’t see them.”

“Have you two ever seen an apparition?”

“No, Captain,” they both answered.

“Do you believe in them?”

“Yes, Captain,” they answered.

“Well, it’s the same thing. Some people can see it and some don’t. But because you don’t doesn’t make it untrue. And because your instrumentation doesn’t register it doesn’t mean it’s not there.”

“*Captain O’Rourke of the freighter Wesley,*” a sneering voice hailed her.

“Pretend you didn’t hear, Ensign. O’Rourke to engineering.”

“*Engineering here, Captain.*”

“How long till we can launch?”

There was a long pause. “*We have one more ship to go. Captain, this one has the same marks along the outside hull as two others we’ve worked on. Nothing serious but...could have been.*”

“Pirates?”

“*It was something that was meant to scare,*” Susa responded. “*Their crew is under direction not to talk about it but their Captain headed to the harbormaster’s office the moment they docked.*”

“Get an idea what it is and let’s be prepared ourselves.”

“*We’re already working on it. I’ll let Commander Jade know.*”

“I’ll tell her myself.”

“*Alright. Give me another thirty minutes...maybe less.*”

“*O’Rourke!*” a voice demanded.

“Turn him off.”

She leaned back in her seat and watched her monitor that showed the *Harrodidu* waiting for a berth.

“Commander Claw to Captain O’Rourke of the Wesley,” a voice on port to ship channel hailed.

“Captain O’Rourke to Commander Claw. Greetings. What can I do for you?”

“You have a very upset Captain Alad of the Harrodidu wanting to speak with you. I wanted to warn you, the harbormaster authorized us giving you his berth so he may take it out on you. We have a legal right since he was a day late, but you know how it goes.”

“We’ll be done in about thirty minutes. Is that good with you?”

“Yes. He’s leaking something so we can have an inspection to take up that time. We received a transmitted request that you peel to Otoo’s Re and meet up with Raptor Cinq. They’re reporting trouble and need a fix. Think you can fit them in?”

“Did they say what kind of trouble?” she asked cautiously.

“Have you noticed anything interesting about the ships you’ve been repairing lately?”

“Burns across the side hull. Pirate activity heating up in this sector?” O’Rourke asked.

“Not really sure. More like bullies. Could be just a gang trying to move in or it could be pirates... Harbormaster Ofensa says Tipps is a pirate with a long memory. I hear you have a past with him.”

O’Rourke nearly laughed aloud. So, what she suspected was confirmed. Harbormaster Ofensa was a fast worker, or someone wanted her to know what this was all about.

It was a personal vendetta. That made it easier to plan against because it left Tipps deaf to his advisors that may tell him it was bad for business to be so obvious. Which meant he was spending a lot of credits and energy for the last three years. Private vendettas cost. Pirate leaders kept their leadership by knowing who to cut off and who to back. She wondered how he got backing for this venture since his family took heavy losses in Borik Sector when she was still commanding a fleet in one corner. Maybe things

had changed since she left, though she doubted it. Officers up and coming were talented and just as committed to keep that sector free of illegal activities.



O'Rourke looked around the meeting table. "So, what do you think is happening?" she asked her officer staff after they went over the reports everyone read from each shift as well as amended security reports. Officers and NCOs looked down at their notepads. No one seemed to be willing to stick their neck out.

Commander Sousa rolled her eyes and offered, "A virus it's not," she stated flatly. "Someone is remotely logging in but from within the ship. They've accessed the security kiosks, engineering, and spoofed the captain's chair...when you weren't there," she hastily added when O'Rourke glared at her.

"So, what can we do different to track it to a person?" O'Rourke asked her.

"The Geek has crashed the system twice and chased the remote logon but it just disappears to reappear elsewhere." What she said was what everyone was saying. They all tried and couldn't find the source.

O'Rourke tapped her com channel. "Bridge, this is the captain."

"Ensign Hale, Captain."

"How long until we intercept with the *Raptor*?"

"We should have had her in sight two minutes ago. Captain we haven't picked up anything in this area that shows anyone's been by."

"Send out sensors on all sides and abandon search."

"Aye, Captain."

"Be vigilant, Ensign Hale."

"Aye, Captain. Bridge Out."

When bridge signed off the others let out a sigh of relief. Perhaps they thought O'Rourke was going to talk about something else that was weighing heavily on their minds.

"Captain, are we going to still get our visit to the shipyard?" CPO Haywar asked.

"Yes. The first of next month. We have reservations for three to four weeks berth at the shipyard. We have rooms at the Hopsvar on Deck 6 at the yard. You'll be sharing

quarters with the same people as on the ship. If you want to make other arrangements, start thinking about it, but it is two to a room at the least. The cost has been prepaid by Osmona, her last good deed before turning us over to a management company.” She didn’t add that Osmona had given a blank credit for the crew’s stay. She could well afford it.

“Should we go looking for new jobs, Captain?” CPO Haywar asked, more emboldened when she answered his first question.

“I like being captain and of the *Wesley*. Do *you* like your job?” she asked him.

He looked embarrassed but his eyes were steady. O’Rourke held back a smile that would only make him turn bright green. He was another of her successes. He was black listed by his previous COs for pranks he indiscriminately played on officers and crew, and for slip-shod work. He had graduated with high expectations and he failed to develop into the promised merchant marine ship fitter. When he came aboard she offered him a choice of buckling down and taking classes to be certified as Ship Fitter and promoted, or continue his present behavior and get kicked off her ship in some remote ship port. Her reputation as a tough but fair captain served her well in his case and he put his energy into his studies. It was enough to get him a commendation. If he was steadfast by the time the *Wesley* was hers, she would add him to her permanent crew and at better wages.

“All the contracts I’ve signed with customers are good. It doesn’t matter who owns the lease on the *Wesley*, I’m still captain and it’s still my business. From this moment on, any addition to our crew is by my choice alone and who goes is my choice. All promotions are at my discretion and what you are now is what will go into your personnel file today. You already know what I expect, if you don’t, look it up under your rating and the certification requirements. I will go on offering you the chance to further educate yourselves and cross train. Everyone that wants to remain has to be productive and prove their worth, that’s a fact.” Her eyes moved around the table looking for nods.

“News from our new lease owner’s HQ, is that the entire crew must be certified at the rate recorded in personnel files within this week. HQ wishes to test all of you to verify your certificates are in order at LoMace Space Station. That’s our last stop before the shipyard. If anyone needs help in preparing for their tests, as heads of your

departments, do your best to help. It will develop your skills and give you a better chance at promotion. I have faith you all will pass, otherwise we wouldn't have so many return customers as well as referrals. Our teamwork got us here and is keeping us together. We weed out the deadbeats and further our skill sets."

"Captain, Oberman's Shipping, all of them had to put up credits of their own to be part of the Oberman's crew when it went public. Are you going to be doing the same?"

"Captain Henly's idea was to form a partnership with his crew to buy his shipping business and keep his customer list. There's only one captain of the *Wesley*...me. There will be only one owner of *Wesley*, me. I don't run my ship taking a consensus. You all have been executing your jobs well except some of you have been late with your staff reviews. Please keep up with them so it's not so painful when they're due. This meeting is over. You're dismissed."

When everyone left, she turned her chair to face the star chart behind her. It showed where they were as a blinking light. O'Rourke had never been this close to Jepsen Sector. She expected warning beacons along the perimeter that would warn them they were too close. A military patrol usually was nearby to warn or remind the ship crossing into Jepsen Sector that it was an unexplored sector and no one was known to return. *Wesley* was too vulnerable to be traipsing around in unfamiliar space.

"Bridge, this is the captain. Status?"

"Per your direction, we've turned around and at high gs back tracked to Port Y to pick up our normal route. Port Y's markers have been extended as you said they would be. In two minutes, we'll be back on our usual route."

O'Rourke stared at the star chart looking to see how their path had altered due to their search. "Very good, Bridge. Proceed with caution."

"Aye, aye, Captain."

She turned at the knock on the door. It was Diana Rue. She had forgotten that she had invited her to have lunch with her.

"Am I interrupting?" Diana stared at the star chart. "I hope you're not moving into that area of space."

"What area is that?"

“C48MC22. More ships have been reported missing there than in any pirate sector... only it’s not a pirate sector.”

“I’ve never heard of that.”

“Have you traveled through it?”

“No. It’s been off our normal route. I never heard of anyone traveling there either.”

“It’s dock scuttlebutt along the military space posts. As a Knockabout, I hear all sorts of things.”

“Over lunch, do you mind telling me about some of them?”

Diana nodded, her eyes drifted back to the chart to assure herself that they were moving away from the Jepsen Sector.



“You have a lot of new passengers. I noticed a group of them are nervous about those teenagers,” Diana mentioned to PO 3rd Class M’Bla who was next to her in the mess line.

That got a chuckle. “Those six nervous passengers are part of that new religion that’s been recruiting with too much fervor in Hansen’s Reach. The colonial government gave them the chance at martyrdom or get out and don’t come back.”

“Do they gamble?”

“If they do, Klinga will clean them out for sure.”

“I thought the last port was their destination?”

“Their uncle was delayed. They’re to meet him at the Metropolitan Space Station. It’s near LoMace Space Station where he’s undergoing minor ship repair,” PO 3rd Class M’Bla said.

Diana looked back at the captain. O’Rourke had fallen behind as she inspected each dish carefully.

“What do you think she’s looking for?” Diana asked M’Bla.

“Citir. Cook loves to add it to everything she cooks, and the captain absolutely hates it.”

“Ah. So,” she said to change the subject, “I guess our games will continue then.”

It was really a great place for picking up what was happening on the ship, like the fact that no one had seen Commander Jade, who had been promoted to XO and the captain was unconcerned. Supposedly they were close friends but not intimately close.

“Well, don’t expect Klinga to be joining us. Since pirate activity has increased on our travel route, the passengers are quartered on Deck 4 and are not permitted anywhere else which is probably why those NeoNicks are nervous.” She laughed heartily. “You really lucked out in getting the Q Diana, but I already know you have a lot of that.”

“It’s skill more than luck,” Diana said.

“Call it what you like. I’ll see you tomorrow night, same place. Good day, Captain.” She greeted O’Rourke who moved to Diana’s side.

“Back to gambling with my crew?” O’Rourke asked.

“Unless it’s not allowed. I like to see how long it takes to reel in a big predator,” Diana said.

“It’s allowed. Catch anything yet?”

“Oh, yeah. Only I keep throwing them back in. Too little. I’m waiting for the largest of them all.”

O’Rourke sat at the table nearest the door but in a corner. “Who’s that?”

“The one that’s waiting me out. He’s there every game and just watches. That’s the big one that won’t get away.”

“Who plays?”

“Well,” Diana took a bite of what was labeled stew. “Hmm. This is good.” She laid her fork down and thought about the people at the gaming table, and those standing to the side waiting for a chance to be invited in.

“There’s M’Bla, Friz, Hedoc, Cromam, who spends more time folding than playing, Klinga, the Cromatin adolescent – who plays like a pro and if looks could kill would have slain Cromam long ago, and Mahop. They’re the regulars. Others hop in when they step out.”

“So, who is the big one you’re hunting?”

“Bronot.”

O'Rourke chewed her food for a while. He was a transfer from the *Rollins*. When she contacted Captain Mul to get some additional information on him, she received a terse "He's not refundable. Your HQ picked up his contract cheap, and you get what you pay for." End of conversation. He was still on probation so maybe that's why he was keeping a low profile. Later she would see how he was doing with his certification and his lead's report on his attitude of doing work.

"A professional gambler?" she asked Diana.

"If it's the same person I heard about on Indi. He likes to suck his opponents bone dry. He preys on those with a gambling weakness."

"You run into many of those people?" O'Rourke asked.

"It's from self-preservation that I've learned to observe people, and separate out species, gender, and culture predisposition to know a psycho from the others. But there's a quicker way to tell."

"Please, don't keep me in this high suspense," O'Rourke said.

"What your senses tells you."

O'Rourke laughed and chewed her food for a few moments. "Well, that would be most of my crew and I think I've been proven wrong on half of that group."

Diana studied the captain for a long moment, wondering if it would be too forward to make another personal comment. How many was she allowed in a week?

"Just say it," O'Rourke told her without looking up from her food dish.

Diana's lips twitched into a partial smile. "Okay. I don't think you made a mistake. I think you lowered your expectations to make it work."

O'Rourke stared at her for a few moments and then nodded. "You're really good at this stuff. It's part of a captain's job to see that her crew is a cohesive and flexible team," she grinned ruefully, "After all that is said and done, I liked the military model better where there are rules and regulations that are adhered to unless you had a good reason not to. It didn't matter the personality clashes, when an order was given, it was obeyed, and as quickly as possible."

"And it doesn't work that way with civilians," Diana commented.

“These people are merchant marines with a slightly different code of work ethics having to do with loyalty.” She was quiet for a few moments as she chewed.

Diana waited patiently.

“I was different when I was in the military. The consequences I dealt out were harsh. When you’re at war with a group like pirates and cut-throat cartels, you know that there are going to be spies, assassins and saboteurs amongst your crew. So, you lay down hard consequences to anyone that works with the enemy. The ones to worry about are the ones posing as someone that will watch your back or becomes your friend or someone closer. In the middle of a war the consequence of betrayal is immediate death, so you don’t lose ships and crews. The other side of that sword is that you need to know for sure that who you’re killing is the traitor and not someone set up, and the decision in many cases needs to be made quickly. It changes you and the people around you. It can affect a pivotal moment in a battle as it is intended. Here, life and death isn’t with a lot of canons blazing and ships going up in fire and broken ships belching bodies.”

“It’s all about survival, no matter the theatre,” Diana said. “The scuttlebutt on Port Y is that Tipps is going to sell the *Wesley* out from under you.”

“It’s all noise and smoke to undermine my customer base. There is no legal way that will happen and no pirate hoard will be boarding my ship as long as I’m living,” O’Rourke said.

Diana grinned. “I’m glad you have that covered.”

Conversation for the rest of lunch was comparing musical tastes. O’Rourke had never heard of any of the artists Diana mentioned and Diana was wondering if O’Rourke made up some of the names she provided.

Lunch was pleasant.



Chapter 8

Diana blinked at the ceiling, wondering what had awakened her. She trusted her armed sentries to warn her if anyone or thing physically entered her quarters. But, then

again, she never trusted anything completely when it came to her life, and that gave more weight to what had wakened her.

Sounds and movement of the ship, though barely discernable to most, were acutely noticed by her along with the patterns and smells. Nothing out of place there. Focusing on her breathing, Diana slipped into an altered state, releasing her Sentinel.

Everyone had their own name for that part of their self that could wander at will through solids as well as space in a matter of seconds. It was the third deck her Sentinel moved through. Hovering near the ceiling she was astonished to see soldiers dressed in light armor raiding the hydroponics areas as if it didn't matter if their theft was noticed. They looked like they were on a break because their weapons were absent and so were helmets.

Sloppy.

Sentinel returned suddenly, leaving her breathless for a few important moments. The screamer was wailing and weapons fire from the front room had her rolling off the bed too slow. Falling to the deck on her hands and knees a body stumbled into her, falling over her and coming to rest on his back. Eyes barely discernable in the low lighting looked up at her surprised. He whispered a phrase softly.

Diana grabbed a handful of cloth from the fallen man's shoulder and dragged him into the bathing room, making the quick decision that if he was wounded he must have something important. Her intention was to leave out the back way with him. The screamer was doing its damage to whoever was trying to enter but there were always a few that knew how to get by.

A sound behind her had her letting go of the wounded stranger and whirling around. A soldier moved his weapon toward where she had been and fired. Her continued motion took her around with so much force, when she slammed his armored wrist, she could hear the sound of bones cracking. The force drove the soldier back, but a weapon in his other hand automatically loaded and searched for a target. Before he could fire, she knocked him off balance so the weapon clanged against the bulkhead. He bounced back, his uninjured arm swinging to find a reading on her with his weapon.

Grabbing his broken wrist, she stepped inside his reach and then shifted her weight, pulling him off balance. Knowing the weaknesses of the armor and where it overlapped or ended, she grounded him flat on his back.

To the ordinary eye, they were moving in a continuous blur.

From the ground he twisted and kicked her in the ribs. Diana moved away and some of the impact was lessened, but not the pain. The extended leg didn't get retracted fast enough and Diana grabbed it and twisted it while lifting him off balance. He tried to do the counter move to hers but she knew it as well and shifted so he would remain off balance. He grabbed her by the shoulder with his good hand, and only managed to pull her nightwear askew. Her tattooed shoulder was like a dark undergarment.

"Mortleige, is it," the voice muttered with contempt. "I kill you for sport." Blood from his mouth splattered on her. "You shall die," he wheezed.

This was a drugged-hyped soldier wearing a computerized suit of armor; single minded and focused so that even near death the person inside the suit was dangerous. She jumped kicked him with both feet to the chest when he said die, knocking him on his back and jarring his suit's circuits. Her follow up kick broke his neck. He should have read the warning label that came with the suit.

The sudden silence of the screamer had her scrambling over his body for the dead soldier's weapon. Grabbing the dead soldier's collar, she jerked the corpse into a sitting position. Using him as a shield, she wrapped her hand over his and started to fire at the soldiers that now began to enter the front room. It was awkward trying to get the feel for the weapon when using someone else's hand. The soldiers panicked when the shooting began again. She had the advantage of surprise and it served her well. They were afraid to shoot their leader even though he was shooting at them. That was something an experienced soldier and or mercenary would never let happen. When there were no more shots fired at her she peeked around the dead soldier and then let him drop to the ground.

There were bodies everywhere. Stepping into the room she surveyed the damage. No helmets on any of the bodies. None prepared for all scenarios. Ages varied as well as species. No females. Leaning down warily she pulled a weapon from one of the dead soldiers' fingers.

Stringers. At least they're concerned about blowing holes in the bulkhead. Beginners stuff. Who are these people? No insignia. Blister new boots, too.

“You’re all a bunch of new recruits. So, what’s this all about?” She leaned over another, palming a medallion that rested on his armored chest. “Didn’t they tell you no jewelry? It’s easy to get a read. Bang, you’re dead, soldier.” For a moment she studied the medallion, not recognizing it as belonging to any particular gang or group.

After removing all the weapons and securing them in the bathing room with only a medbot to watch over them, she surveyed the person she rescued.

He wasn’t wearing armor. A wrist band used to scramble negative vibrations caught her attention. She also wore one.

“This is just great. The captain isn’t going to be too appreciative that she has dead soldiers on board and unannounced passengers.” Leaning over the soldier whose neck she broke, she lifted an ID tag from inside the armor. “Standard issue in the Mogovian forces but they can be bought on the black market.” She removed his armor to see if he wore a uniform underneath. It was the usual tunic worn under armor, with luck charms sewed over vital organs. The pattern and what emblems he chose would be a clue to where the soldier came from, but a blood stain from a broken bone puncture covered it up. New recruits usually stuck to what they knew from their culture. Battle hardened soldiers developed their own. Some would go to a sorcerer to create one for them.

He had no pockets for personal mementos and no jewelry a sensor could pick up. She glanced at the medbot that was working on the wound of the first person. How had he gotten by her screamer?

“Light up one level,” she ordered. She sighed heavily when she was able to see the wound better. Not deadly if treated in a better equipped medical facility. He was going to need a medical bio-bed to freeze him until he was in a real medical facility.

“Captain O’Rourke, come in. This is Diana.”

After minutes the ship answered. “*Captain O’Rourke is unreachable.*”

“Unreachable? Wesley, where is your captain?”

“*Captain O’Rourke is in a bio-bed, being prepared for deep sleep.*”

“What deck, Wesley?”

“Deck 4”

Diana quickly went to her bag, dressed in light armor, and grabbed what weapons she thought she would need. Peering down the corridor she decided she would meet with less resistance using the grav-tube. On D4 she crept along the corridor and peered into the first storage room where there was some grunting. A group of four soldiers were pushing bio-beds without the use of bots into slots for their transport. None were dressed as if they expected trouble. When finished they left.

Moving cautiously, she checked each bed, looking for any that were still activated. The only one active was one at the bottom row. Hopefully, that was the one the captain was in.

A sound from behind her had her ducking behind the bio-bed. Whoever it was, was dressed in armor better than what the other soldiers were dressed in. The soldier checked the area and then left. Locking the room.

Diana began to move the bio-beds so that she could get to the one that was active. When she finally did reach it, she could see the settings were being changed remotely. Peering through the glass she could see it was O'Rourke with a large bruise on her forehead.

Pulling one of her gizmos out of a pocket she laid it on the control panel and took control of the bio-bed. She eased the control back to waking. Then she began to move the bio-beds stacked near hers to block the entrance in case someone returned. Glancing at the panel she found only twenty more minutes until she could safely remove the captain from the bed. Glancing around for another exit she spotted an emergency elevator but the bio-bed wouldn't fit. The captain would have to be on her own two feet for their escape.

It was a long twenty minutes until the bio-lid popped open. A hand grasped the edge before it was fully up.

“Captain,” she whispered. “You've got some serious problems, and it's not pirates.”

“Don't I know it?” she said hoarsely. “Do you have something for a headache?” she asked.

“Too soon after getting up from a bio-bed to be taking drugs. We need to find a safe place to regroup.”

“The Q.”

As they made their way back to D2, there was a lot of yelling and laughter.

“My quarters first. We need heavy armor and weapons.” O’Rourke touched her bruised forehead. “If I find out who hit me, they’re going out the tubes into space.”

Their progress was slow as soldiers, not dressed for any confrontation were wandering the corridors in twos.

O’Rourke took the grav-tube to the second level. They entered the captain’s private exercise room. O’Rourke stopped at a locker and unlocked it. It was a private armory.

“Not taking any chances, are you?” Diana drawled, peering at her collection of combat weapons. Most of the weapons Diana recognized. They were all specialized and not from one galaxy. Her eyes quickly found a PA, the Precie Armor tag on a cube. It was not from the usual travel corridors of the empire. She always wanted to try one on.

O’Rourke handed Diana a PA cube. “You know how to dress-up?”

Diana paused, “Why don’t you show me?”

O’Rourke didn’t waste time with banter but popped the lid from the cube and poured the silvery liquid over her head. Diana was impressed as it molded like liquid mercury over her body, including head and face, forming into a helmet. O’Rourke pressed a notch on the neck and the helmet receded. Once her entire body was covered, energy emanated from the suit. Diana’s senses had a brief blast from the energy as if something was tested on different levels.

“Now I feel so much better,” O’Rourke said.

Diana removed her own armor, then poured the liquid over her clothing. Whatever she experienced from O’Rourke’s donning of her armor didn’t happen when she put hers on. It seemed the wearer was protected from its own defenses. O’Rourke didn’t watch Diana but had continued arming herself, sliding weapons in a belt she had buckled on, and to her leg holster and arm holster. She turned to Diana and gestured into the locker. “See anything you like?”

“All very nice,” she commented. “I’ll take a couple of those, that, one of the whipwackers, nice brand, two of the knuckle rappers, three rings, four...”

“Just grab what you can carry,” O’Rourke told her dryly.

“Thank you. I will.”

Loaded up, both hopped in place to settle everything, then O’Rourke led her through the closet into the owner’s stateroom.

“Wesley, this is Captain O’Rourke. Give me status.”

“Ship is in lock down by your command. There have been attempts to countermand your orders. Do you stand by your command?”

“This is Captain O’Rourke, Wesley. Remain in lock down. Begin shutting down life support on each deck that non-authorized personnel are located.”

“Captain O’Rourke, Lt. Commander LeMarks has countered your command.”

“Wesley, Lt. Commander LeMarks has been relieved of command at my orders and the Merchant Marine Board. Access those files.”

“Captain O’Rourke, files accessed. There is no such person as Lt. Commander LeMarks in Merchant Marine rolls. All orders from such person are now considered hostile and illegal.”

“Wesley, we are under attack. Send out broadcast to military ships in the area.”

“There are no military patrols in this part of space. We are in an unknown sector.”

“We need to get to the Q so I can see what’s going on. It’s the backup bridge.”



The entrance to Q slid open when she was a few feet from it. Her ears hummed from the energy that was still charging the room. Leaning against the doorway, O’Rourke scanned the interior. The place was in shambles with a dozen bodies dressed in light armor looking very dead. They obviously were not expecting a fight. She stepped over a spent screamer, pausing just to note that it was not a household security model. It had teeth, and by the looks of the room, it lived up to its guarantee. No medbot amongst them verifying her judgment that they were all dead.

Cautiously she made her way around the armored bodies; stopping at each to make sure they were as dead as they looked, and there were no weapons. They all wore the ridiculous turtle armor, and had no helmets amongst them. The captain suspected Diana Rue stripped them of weapons rather than leave herself open to further attack. She studied the medallion one of them wore. It was something a raw recruit bought on his first posting.

In the ensuite, she carefully stepped over the body that she knew was dead. His head was at an unnatural angle. And there in a pile were weapons.

She recognized the injured as PO Drummon. “What’s going on?”

“A messenger that’s seriously wounded. Did you pick up some new recruits?” Diana asked.

“No. Anyone you know?”

“Never saw any of these people before. I think they thought this was their reserved suite and had strong objections to my being here. This is the type of wakeup call that makes me antisocial for the rest of the day.”

“I’ll bet. Thought this was empty, did they?” The captain remembered LeMarks becoming upset that she had rented out the Q’s stateroom. Her concern moved to PO Drummon who the medbot was working on. He was alive and that was important.

“Why do you say PO Drummon’s a messenger?”

“He asked for you, however, he won’t be talking to anyone for a while. This is not the typical industrial wound your bots are programmed for.”

“A medical gurney has been sent for.”

She studied the collection of weapons that were on the tiled bathing room deck. All strigners. Silent but deadly to living tissue, but most importantly they don’t damage ship’s hulls.

Captain O’Rourke tapped her comm link to Susa, hoping she was somewhere fighting the illegal boarding. “Commander Susa, GP Q.”

“I don’t want to scare you but there are more fighters from where these came from. They work in groups of ten yet...there are two dead squad leaders in the front room

and this one is a captain. That means you potentially have fifty more recruits somewhere on this ship and alive without their leaders.”

“You seem to know a lot about military recons.”

“My humble opinion is that these are untested recruits. They don’t belong to anyone, so they’re probably cheap fodder for someone’s mercenary army.”

“Why are *you* here?”

“I have business on Hebron, remember? You have a bigger headache than me.”

“You two okay?” a voice demanded.

The captain and Diana nearly jumped at the sudden appearance of CWO EPE Henison.

“What’s going on?” His stance in the bathing room doorway was so that he could keep an eye on the front door as well as the bathing room occupants. His eyes rested on Diana and had a most peculiar expression.

O’Rourke had a feeling he was not asking her that question but she couldn’t think of why he would be asking the passenger that.

“And what are you doing here?” she demanded of Henison.

“O’Rourke,” he warned. “Don’t go getting domestic on me. Where did they come from? What happened to the crew? I woke up with a rotten headache and all I got was a medibot to complain about it.”

“They probably were stashed in bio-beds so their life signs wouldn’t be picked up on regular scans,” Diana suggested.

“What?” O’Rourke turned to Diana, feeling off-balance with Henison’s remark and at the same time realizing that if what Diana said was true, then her careful scrutiny of all decks didn’t safeguard her and her crew from pirates or wherever these soldiers were from.

“This is a cargo carrier besides a repair ship, right? Don’t you have bio-beds for each crew member stashed in one of the cargo bays and replacements should any of the waystations need some?”

“Yes, but if they were activated I would have been notified,” O’Rourke objected. “Computer, locate Lt. Commander Susa.”

“Lt. Commander Susa’s locator has been deactivated,” the computer informed her.

“Got a plan, Captain?” Henison asked.

“Wesley, locate my crew.”

“Location scans incomplete. All locators have been deactivated,” the computer announced.

O’Rourke left the two in the bathing room sorting through the weapons, feeling better once she was out of the small room.

“Well O’Rourke it’s going to be mighty hard to locate any help with the scans unable to locate crew,” Henison said.

“Henison, sometimes you irritate the heck out of me when you state the obvious,” O’Rourke bristled. “Why don’t you contribute something I don’t know?”

Henison smiled. “Then it wouldn’t irritate you.”

“I think we need to find out just how many people you have armed and dangerous...” Diana stopped abruptly.

“We’re changing course,” the three said in unison.

“Computer, are we changing course?” O’Rourke demanded.

“Course remains as programmed,” was the response.

“What is the course?” three voices asked.

“Unknown,” was the reply.

“Unknown?” three voices demanded.

“Will you two let me handle this?” O’Rourke crossly demanded.

“What’s with her?” Diana asked Henison conversationally.

“Whenever I’m around it seems to put her into some sort of irritated state, if you know what I mean.”

“Hmm,” Diana hummed in understanding. “The vibes,” she whispered dramatically.

O’Rourke was tapping in commands on the terminal and half listening but agreed with Henison’s appraisal. Some species set her nerves on edge. With Henison it was the edge of a cliff and each time she willingly jumped. It was disgusting. There was no

sexual interest between them...or at least not on her part, but whenever he was around her, things happened. It was the adrenalin type of things, where wearing a suit of armor would be a good idea. That was good if she was bored and she grudgingly admitted to herself that she was. So maybe she shouldn't be complaining.

"I'm going to do a visual check on decks. Scanning is not showing me anything," she said.

"I'll take the lower decks," Henison quickly volunteered.

"I can take a few," Diana said.

"Alright. We need to find out where the rest of this armored group is, locate passengers and my missing crew."

"Your life pods are on deck eight, seven and six, right?" Diana asked.

"Yes. I'll check them. It'll require a captain's override to get into those areas. Diana, you take the first four decks. Just make sure everyone is secured on deck four, not join them. I'll take these," she pointed to the diagram of the ship and as her finger dragged across the outline it went yellow. "Henison, this area you take." Her finger drew a blue line over the lower decks and the Hydroponics Plants. "We'll meet back here in two hours." Captain O'Rourke looked at her time piece as the others. "I'm going to stop on the bridge."

"Why back here?" Henison looked at her quizzically.

"These quarters are independently maintained during a crisis. All systems including the computer can be accessed without the main system knowing its being monitored."

"Great," Henison began, "but..."

"No time for discussion, Henison. We have to get going." O'Rourke felt like she was getting a double dose of adrenalin standing so close to Henison. Not good for thinking strategy.

Henison had his own collection of captured weapons. One was a small energy disrupter that would give a good headache to anyone that walked in front of it. He waved O'Rourke through the doorway first but she was already through it. He turned to Diana who wasn't moving.

Henison nodded, giving her a wink, and followed O'Rourke out.

As the two headed for the elevator Henison glanced at O'Rourke. "So, what do you think of her?" he asked in a low voice.

"I'd like to know who she is. She wants to visit Hebron...what?" O'Rourke demanded of Henison when he started in surprise.

"Nothing, nothing. Hebron?" he asked to cover his surprise.

"There *is* something. You know who she is," she accused. "Bridge!" she snarled at the elevator computer.

"Well, now...O'Rourke."

"I know she's mortleige, Henison. What I don't know is why she's here."

"Because our ship was going in the right direction and at the right time?"

"Now I know you're full of..."

Both held onto the sides of the elevator as they took a sharp turn. For a ship *Wesley's* size, it wasn't something often felt when not in battle.

"Course change. What is going on?"

"I'm with you on the bridge," he informed her firmly.

"You wait here in the elevator. If something's going on I don't want you disappearing too."

"The exact reason why..." he stopped abruptly as the elevator stopped on the bridge.

Both were crouched low when the door opened. The bridge was dark. No one appeared to be on the bridge.

"What the Hades happened to my bridge crew?" demanded O'Rourke. Straightening up she cautiously moved onto the bridge looking for anything to tell them why the bridge was vacant.

"Find any clues?" Henison asked, meeting her back in the center of the bridge.

"Yeah," she snorted. "I got lucky. The last command was someone that signed on with LeMarks ID. I had deleted him from the system the other day and again a few minutes ago. Whoever it was, and it could be LeMarks, restored his profile with a lot more authority than I ever gave him. He released a lock on the medical pods we're

hauling for Jensen's Medical Equipment on deck 6. Jade and I both verified they were empty and unprogrammed. If that's where all these soldiers are coming from, then a group of people on this ship have pulled a fast one."

"Think maybe the doc is involved in this?"

"Maybe. The bots are programmed to check the pods and Jade and I've been running scans on all the decks for the last two weeks," O'Rourke said.

"I knew you would take my warning seriously...though, this isn't what I was..."

Both grabbed onto something secure as the ship made another abrupt course change.

"For a large ship to change course this abruptly, it puts a strain on its structure. Since the *Wesley* was a military vessel in its previous life, it was constructed with military maneuvers in mind, but still it's overdo for maintenance. I'm worried about not having maintenance bots and crew overseeing this wild flying," O'Rourke said.

"I take it you're already tried to take the helm back," he asked.

"We have to get off this deck. I ordered *Wesley* to shut life support down. At least you're wearing the right armor. Engage your helmet and let's go."

"So, what now... hey!" Henison yelled as he was pulled off balance by the captain's grip on his shoulder.

"We're not going down an elevator. I don't trust whatever has control of my ship," O'Rourke said.

"Did you see where we're heading?"

"Somewhere near Elton's star."

"That's a galaxy over and there's a war in that part of space," Henison said.

"And we're not exactly equipped for any space battle," O'Rourke said tersely.

She grabbed the handles on the maintenance panel and pulled it back. Ducking in she quickly moved to what the crew called the wormholes. They were actually grav-tubes behind the inner hull that moved through various levels behind the engine plants that the bots used. The energy that swirled in the tubes left most entering it disorientated and grateful it was intended for bots and not them.



Chapter 9



Diana started on the first deck. According to the ships logs, no crew members were on this deck. The strange energy it radiated was the reason why the crew didn't like to be on this deck. All the available space was for storage. Her sensor found no life signs. Deck two and three were the same as the others. No life signs and no signs of disturbance.

On deck four, Diana studied the long corridor before stepping out of the grav-tube. The damaged monitoring devices caught her immediate attention. Here was the difference from the other two decks. The damage was done with a small weapon and whoever had done it was a good shot and knew exactly where to shoot. No repair bots in sight. Sniffing the air, she recognized the smell of a mixture of species but nothing that would indicate any were fearful. Moving along the corridor she ran her scanner over each door looking for a life form in the interior.

Nothing.

She pushed open each door to inspect closer. The rooms were small and not meant for much more than sleeping in. Working on a freighter was composed of long hours with shifts overlapping. If anyone wanted to unwind it was in the mess hall where it doubled as a social hall. Deck 4 had the largest area for unwinding. Besides a mess hall it also had gaming cubicles.

At the end of the corridor Diana turned around and looked back the way she had come, trying to sense anything out of place besides the fact that no one was there.

Did the fifty missing soldiers move them? It seems they did...but how without panicking the passengers?

Her scanner was blinking as if it were digesting a reading. Looking down at it she could see a bio-reading being processed. It was behind one of the closets used for storage. Diana put the scanner in her pocket and moved to pull the closet open, however the door swished open before she was ready.

“Who are you?” a four foot Mercantile demanded.

Unlike some people that thought all Mercantiles were rude and too blunt to be tolerated, Diana liked most that she met.

“Diana Rue, and you?”

“Rutherford the IV,” he announced and stuck out his hand.

Diana took his slim hand with four fingers wrapping comfortably around her hand.

“So, did you find the others, Diana Rue?” he demanded.

“No. How come you’re still here?”

“I was over there,” he pointed to the waste hatch. “I didn’t particularly like being stuck on the same deck as those *other* people. Quite disgusting,” he informed her.

“So, did you see anything the captain will be interested in?”

“Yeah,” he drawled, checking her out from tip of her boots to the top of her head.

“Well, let’s go talk to her. Do you want to collect anything from your cabin?” she asked as they started back to the elevator.

“I’m a stowaway,” he announced proudly. “I don’t have anything but what I have on me.”

Suddenly it dawned on Diana who she was talking to.

“You’re not that ‘Never Say Can’t’ fellow, are you?”

He beamed up at her. “Well, that’s what the newsies call me. A lot of the cruise liners say I can’t stowaway on their ship because of their security and I like to prove them wrong.”

“So, what are you doing on this ship?”

He shrugged his shoulders. They both stepped into the elevator but jumped back out before the doors closed. Both could smell Carrion. Being trapped in the elevator would have been perfect for an ambush.

The Mercantile, though only four feet, was fleet of foot and was ahead of Diana by a yard. He reached his closet and held it open for Diana before slamming it shut with the two of them squeezed in. The sounds of more than one Carrion could be heard banging on the closet hatch.

Rutherford the IV climbed a ladder the moment he shut and locked the hatch. Diana followed just as quickly, deciding that if he *was* the famous stowaway, his survival skills were worth putting her trust in.

Rutherford the IV took her to the tunnel on deck two that led to the secret entrance to her present quarters. Of course, he would know about it. When they entered the Queens Quarters Captain O'Rourke was studying the monitor screen while Henison was fretting about something.

"Hey," Diana called to let them know that they were not alone.

Henison whirled around and spotting the Mercantile let out a barking laugh.

O'Rourke slapped her forehead in mock dismay. "Didn't I tell you that one of these days you were going to stowaway on the wrong ship?" she demanded.

"Not your ship," he informed her confidently.

"That's the point. It's not my ship right now," she said. "Somebody or thing has it tip to stern." She looked at Diana, "We got to the bridge and no one was there. We went to engineering and found no one on duty and all systems on auto. Henison wasn't able to hack into the controls in engineering so we're back here."

Diana was watching the screen quickly change as O'Rourke requested numerous scans and getting back a quick reply that the requested scan was disengaged.

"Just how did the soldiers get everyone to leave?" Diana asked Rutherford the IV.

"No soldiers. They all walked right into the elevator," Rutherford the IV said.

"Maybe not such a good idea to put them all on one deck," Henison mentioned to O'Rourke.

"What does that matter when there's no one on any of the decks? We're it." She turned back to Rutherford the IV. "Do you know where they were taken?"

"They weren't taken. They walked themselves to the sleep pods, programmed in their information, and 'beddie bye'. That was deck 8. Kinda scary when you think how powerful that type of mind control is," Rutherford the IV said.

"You followed them then...what about crew members? Any of them in that lot you saw?" O'Rourke asked.

"A lot of pods were already filled. I didn't see who was in any of them."

“You all wait here,” O’Rourke ordered.

“Where are you going?” Henison demanded.

“To take inventory,” O’Rourke said sharply.

“I’ll go with you,” he informed her.

“No, you aren’t...that’s an order,” she told him firmly.

“What about the Carrion that came after us?” Diana asked.

“What? Carrion! I knew it! It’s those teen-age pheromone driven females, I’ll stake my next pay on,” O’Rourke said. “How many followed you?”

“Sounded like more than two.” Diana turned to Rutherford. “Did any of them get taken by that subliminal call?”

“One of theirs disappeared, but that was before the march to sleepy land by the others. Her group became distressed when they realized she was gone and they went hunting, so I hid,” he nodded solemnly.

“Hunting, my eye. I’ll bet they’re hiding out in one of my hydro plants,” Henison guessed. “They’ve been too nose-y about them since they came aboard.”

“You knew Carrion were on board, Henison!” O’Rourke accused.

“If I said anything you would have given me that ‘Tell me what I don’t know’ attitude,” he argued.

“You two should get married,” Diana and Rutherford the IV said in unison.

“Will you two stop that? Have you ever thought it means something else like I’m the boss and not him? So, stop giving me orders,” she turned to Henison just as he was opening his mouth. “I’m going to check out the pods in bays on 6 and 8. You,” she pointed at Henison, “go check the hydroponic plants.”

“Captain,” Diana began. O’Rourke had already started out the door. “Captain!”

O’Rourke itching to get out of Henison’s proximity didn’t stop.

“Of the four of us here, you were the only one affected by whatever subliminal is running which leaves you open to further influence,” Diana reminded her.

O’Rourke turned around when she was out of the room and looked back at the three.

Rutherford the IV held up his wrist that was equipped with an energy disrupter, which like Diana, let her pass by monitors unseen. It would also cause subliminal messages to be broken down into meaningless energy waves. Henison held up his wrist with an energy disrupter.

O'Rourke pulled her sleeve up and pointed to her wrist.

"What's that mean?" Rutherford asked bewildered.

Diana shook her head, but she was already moving to the captain's side. Diana stood in front of O'Rourke. "When you look at your wrist, what do you see?"

For a brief moment, she thought the captain was going to hit her.

Henison let out an exasperated sigh from behind them. "This is serious, O'Rourke."

"Henison, will you shut up or find another phrase when you're upset," O'Rourke snapped as she stomped past him back into the room to the console. She tapped in commands and a ring went out. It was the sound of a bell and it rang three times, descending in tone until it was a low bong. She stared at her wrist until the last tone died out.

"There. Now I see nothing on my wrist. Well, let's get on with it. We'll do deck sweeps once more, and hopefully we'll not miss out on what we may have the first time. Every thirty minutes the bells will ring throughout the ship. It will disrupt the mesmerizing sounds including the ones that disrupters don't usually cover."

"Where do you want any bodies we find?" Henison asked.

"If they're in the pods, until I get my ship back, they're safer there. If you find any others and they're not in a pod, call for a medical dispatch for a sleep pod. Meanwhile, let's go over the decks again and see what may have been missed."



Diana chose to take the grav-tube again. She had witnessed many times how subliminal messages were used in public broadcasts, in visual art, as well as government indoctrination, not to mention that she had used it on occasion with great success on some of her assignments. She always had protection against such things from happening to her

and she had thought at least a dozen people on the ship, besides her would also be taking such precautions, especially since a pirate was interested in the *Wesley*. Though she believed her disrupter was updated to all wave lengths that could cause species not to register mentally what their senses were picking up, it wouldn't hurt to go over where she had already searched. What bothered her was if the ship's occupants were influenced, why did only one Carrion feel compelled to disappear before other members of the ship were affected? She didn't put it past the Carrion to have disrupters.

Stepping onto the platform on the first deck, Diana took time to get a sense of what was before her. Sniffing the air, she picked up nothing. Nothing appeared changed since her first perusal. Not even bots had passed by. She was at the juncture of section A and C. A fourth of section A was blocked off due to it was directly above the bridge. The rest of the area was used for storage. The arms that formed a u-shape to berth small ships they repaired had open bays to repair the exterior of the moored ship. She found nothing in the dark space. Not wanting to be an easy target herself she stepped back.

Her sensor shut down and a tickling sensation of energy ran over her body as she stepped into midsection of C. It was above the hydroponics plant. She heard of sensors not working around some of the older hydroponics plants, but that was ages ago before the *Wesley* was refitted. She thought the refitting would have covered one of the most important systems of the ship, considering most seasoned space travelers favored natural foods mixed with their chemical creations.

Each storage room she looked in had a contents list with destination and buyer. Turning around at the end of the corridor she began her walk back staring at the energy field she could now see. On the other side in section B she found the same setup. What could have been crew space was filled with parts for specific ships or small and fragile objects for people that special ordered. Diana knew a good freighter crew always kept their eyes open for something that a customer would be interested in and was able to sell it for an affordable price or a swap.

Nothing unusual. I wonder if the captain is going to need help counting all the bodies she finds in her life pods. Hopefully they aren't dead.

Diana stepped up to the grav-tube, looking down to where she was going. She quickly ducked back and out of sight.

Soldiers in heavy armor! They have slinged pulse repeaters. Those can either put a hole in a bulkhead or suck the wind out of someone's lungs. I'm going to guess it's for air extraction. They aren't carrying rooky weapons.

Quickly, she detached an eye from her sensor and had it peeking over the edge of the tube to see what was going on. The soldiers were on deck seven. When it was cleared of activity she dropped down, rapidly moving to deck eight where O'Rourke may be.



O'Rourke jogged along the corridor on deck 6, stopping at each security kiosk. Since she had no access, she reset each one using the captain's key, thus depriving anyone who did have access a lockout. When each kiosk came up it would require either her or Commander Jade to acquire them, putting them back online. She could do that from Q. The sleep pods, not enough to store her crew were all empty and still sealed with a label new or refurbished. Once finished with deck 6 she dropped to deck 8 anxious to see who were in the pods here.

Her weapon held at ready and fully armed for a confrontation moved as her eyes, sweeping over the ceiling, vents, bulkhead and anything that bore watching. The charge from her weapon wouldn't damage the ship's hull but it would disrupt ship equipment that was on the other side of the bulkhead if she weren't careful. It was meant to incapacitate an aggressor no matter the species and short out most computers that ran military armor. The temperature had risen considerably. As her breath took in warm moist air, the suit of armor kept her comfortable.

Again, she stopped at each security kiosk and reset them. Finally, she was before B8C where the emergency and hibernation pods were stored. She took one more glance around her and then stepped in, dropping immediately to her knee and fired one shot.

A soldier dressed in full turtle armor turned to see who entered but fell before he completed his turn.

Sloppy. You never turn your back to an entrance.

The rifle he was carrying slid under a cargo cover as he fell. A shot whined near her ear from another direction, burning her cheek. Her armor helmet automatically activated and locked in place.

Ducking around a pod she fired back. The howl let her know she hit someone.

Click...click, click. Click.

A stalker's code. She guessed there were four.

O'Rourke didn't bother to wait to be surrounded. A third soldier came around on her left but his shadow gave him away.

Amateurs!

O'Rourke rolled behind a pod, fired, and moved on before the soldier could get a fix on her.

For a few moments she listened for any other movement. Curious, she took a peek in the sleep pod she was crouching next to. It was an ancient face, too old to be a soldier and not someone she recognized from any newsies.

Old coot is probably the leader of a cult. Why else would someone put an old man too close to death to be worth the credits to haul around?

Quickly she turned and used her elbow to the throat of the soldier that came up behind her, then the rifle butt to one of the weak points in the joint on the armor, freezing it. A shot knocked her into a crate. Her armor protected her but the impact stunned her for a moment. A dark figure dropped in front of her to finish her off, and she shot. *I can't believe how easy this is. Was Diana right and these are untested recruits?*

Breathing heavily, she tried to calm her heart so she could hear if anyone was near. Minutes seemed to pass and there were no more attacks. Cautiously she moved along the row of pods studying their settings and the unfamiliar faces in them. They were all set to open in twenty-four hours. That would have put them at Hell's Gate, a small space station that space miners from the nearby mines on a meteorite visited. Entertainment of all sorts was what the station specialized in, and it was one of Wesley's most appreciative of customers. The Geek loved running maintenance on their games because they gave him four hours of free game time on any game he wanted to play and the station kept up on the newest games.

Why send all these armored people undocumented to Hell's Gate? Was it now a place where mercenaries were dropped off? Pirates were the new warlords, and from dock scuttlebutt, their ranks were diminishing for various reasons, mostly, she thought from disillusionment.

Perhaps she should be asking, who would be so bold to stash an army of mercenaries on her ship to take it over? And new recruits without proper training and sense to be equipped with the proper weapons? That was insulting.

A quick answer would be a certain pirate that she had a hand in diminishing his clan's business to nil in the Borik sector during her eleven years of service policing that area. While his prestige and ships diminished, she rose in the ranks Rear Admiral with her choice of ship.

O'Rourke took a deep breath and let it go along with the war memories. Enemies with long memories was inevitable, considering that some species lived a lot longer than her species usually did, and depending upon how much a long living species wanted to hold onto grudges, which would make for a miserable long life. She thought the next in line, a child or relative who had something to prove would be the next person on her list of who would be so bold; however, it still would be a pirate.

A noise to her left had her dropping to one knee, and bringing the smaller hand weapon around looking for a target. A kick at her wrist to dislodge the weapon banged the back of her hand against a container. She grabbed the extended leg and pushed her attacker off balance. A shot over her shoulder finished him off.

"Need help?" a voice whispered.

O'Rourke looked up startled.

Diana dropped next to her. She leaned down and pulled the soldier's weapon from him and disengaged it by removing a part. "What are you intending on doing?"

"There's a control room to the pods. I want to reset the release time."

Diana nodded. Both looked toward the control room where they now could hear voices arguing. O'Rourke pointed to herself and then gestured she would go to the right.

As O'Rourke neared the control room she could see someone was working frantically on the pod controls while another stood at the doorway with a weapon, angrily

urging the other to hurry it up. That was not always wise considering it took nearly a day for the life support to change the chemistry of its charges.

Diana did a tuck and roll towards the soldier with the weapon who was looking away from her, and kicked up knocking him out and firing at the one working on the console. He was flung back and bounced from the bulkhead and over the console. Diana stepped over him, checked his vitals and then looked down at what he had been doing.

O'Rourke looked around her and then joined her at the console. There were over one hundred sleep pods engaged.

"Where did they come from? Jade and I had searched this place and didn't find anyone here." *Were we under the influence of some mind control?*

"It's not all that difficult to put a fake board up so that whenever you're sending out inquiries you get what you hope to get...systems okay."

O'Rourke's objections were held back as the physical evidence that somehow a fast one had been pulled was before her. It had to be at one of the last two stops. LeMarks was locked up good and tight during that time and she had removed all his access. Her suspicion that LeMarks was just a decoy was stronger now.

"Most of those people are too old to contribute more than a nod to a conversation and more than a few look disagreeable about being in the pods," O'Rourke thought aloud. "I sure hope this is not some group of experimental specimens that the prisons gave up for the space and credits."

"That could be a possibility. However, there isn't that type of legal laboratory in this section of space and from what I saw of those in the pods, there isn't a known prison colony for two of those species."

O'Rourke nodded, but something was not right about the people she took a peek at and the mercenaries. And then again where was her crew and the passengers?

"Looks like we'll be at our destination in two days," Diana remarked to O'Rourke. She was looking at a star chart to check on their heading.

"We need to move the bodies we shot into pods to keep them out of action."

“Not into hoisting them into space, hey?” Diana asked as she followed O’Rourke out into the bay. Diana dragged out an empty pod from its space and tapped its control pad. “It’s not coming on.”

“You stand watch and I’ll take care of that. I’m not going to toss anyone out, even the dead until I find out what’s going on. Everyone and thing is evidence.”

“Well, then hurry up, I got a feeling we’ll have company soon, and it won’t be Carrion.”

O’Rourke nodded. She brought all the hibernation pods online and with them a pair of medical bots that monitored them. While the bots moved the bodies into the pods, O’Rourke changed the times on all the pods. No one was going to wake up until she overrode the command.

Diana was standing on top of a stack of supplies which gave her a better view of the bay. Her binocular vision telescoped in on one of the control panels on an occupied sleeping pod. “Doesn’t look like the times have changed,” Diana warned.

“Give it another five minutes when it recycles,” O’Rourke muttered as she continued her tapping. It was a few minutes later that both of them heard a whoosh and warbling. The two women looked at each other.

“Do you think it’s real?” Diana asked O’Rourke.

“Do you want to stick around to find out? I’m finished here.”

“Not unless you see a reason to,” Diana offered. She glanced worriedly at the doorway. Carrion posing as Azions or were they for real?

“We’ll take the back way out,” O’Rourke explained as she waved Diana to follow. Blood sucking Azions were not her favorite adversaries. A gang of them had jumped her and her guards at what was labeled a neutral port. She had hickies all over her exposed body parts. Her second in command had problems with not smirking during the entire shift. Since the medical bay was busy with more serious cases from the confrontation she couldn’t justify her with less than life threatening injuries occupying a medbot or a physician.

“Don’t you think that’s obvious?” Diana remarked when O’Rourke headed to the exit chute.

O'Rourke laughed and stopped at a locker. She tapped in a code and swung the door open. Inside were a rack of space suits. "Just take it," she ordered. Fastening the suit to hang over her shoulder, O'Rourke climbed up the locker and opened a vent behind it. She turned around and looked at Diana in askance, then entered.

Diana climbed after O'Rourke into an air tube. From the tube they moved into a maintenance tunnel and from there into the corridor. Diana kept glancing behind them, catching the sounds of pursuit. They headed back to the Q.

Henison and Rutherford had not arrived. O'Rourke went to the console and checked on the ship and the whereabouts of her crew and passengers. Still no bio-signs and what was annoying was she couldn't read anything from the life pods. Diana had been right. Someone interfered with the monitoring equipment. There was only one person that skilled and she was hoping it wasn't the Geek, but saw no other person able to do it. He was also the one that was supposed to be monitoring the systems.

Diana settled near the front door of the room, expecting unfriendly visitors. Mentally she ran a check of the placement of each weapon. The sensitivity of the armor increased her determination to get one for her arsenal. It was ideal in the small amount of room it took to store it. It fit in the palm of her hand.

Both women braced themselves as the ship took a sudden change of direction.

"Just why the changes in direction?" Diana wondered aloud.

"Travel gates," O'Rourke said. "It looks like whatever is driving my ship has preferences." She studied the choices on the star chart, committing them to memory.

"I thought the destination was already set?"

"It is. It hasn't changed." O'Rourke shook her head perplexed. "By the energy readings, these are old star-gates," she said. "Codes are needed to open them and this ship is sending them."

Diana glanced at her and then returned her attention to the front door. The hairs on the back of her neck were standing up. Somebody was aiming an energy disrupter at the door.

"These suits will protect you from anything short of a nuclear blast," O'Rourke said.

“Not that I want to test that belief out myself, but I did see a fellow wearing one that went down with an energy disrupter aimed at his feet,” Diana said. She didn’t explain that it was her that found the weak spot or that he was standing in a puddle of blood ready to step into an air car.

A boom sounded and the front door held.

“Ready?” O’Rourke asked.

“Ready,” Diana replied.

“I’ll take left,” O’Rourke informed her.

Both women engaged their helmets. The door slid open.

They began firing at anything that moved on the other side of the black whirling smoke that was sucked up into the vents from the corridor. It made sense to Diana that whoever built the owner’s suite intended it to be a safe room in case of hostile boarding. It certainly was taking a lot of weapons fire today and holding up well.

Deciding there was not enough return fire, Diana leaned against the bulkhead and caught O’Rourke’s eye. She jerked her head at where she wanted to go. O’Rourke nodded.

Moving with the rolling smoke she found herself face to face with an armored soldier. Her reflexes were automatic. She thumped his helmet retractor and then slammed him in the face. He fell like a sack of rocks. His partner knocked her against the bulkhead but O’Rourke’s shot took him out. Diana crawled over to the one she killed and investigated what he had in his fist.

Geeze! Are they nuts!? This kind of explosive will blast a hole to the outside! Two minutes we’ve got.

As her thoughts moved she was already searching for the trash dispenser. Usually there was an evac tube that would disperse the contents directly into space. Diana didn’t think the redesign would have removed the tube from the military ship or very far from the captain’s quarters.

And there it was well marked.

“Captain!” she hollered. She didn’t have time to figure out the code. Diana lifted her weapon to give cover to the captain who came to her side.

“Criminy!” O’Rourke grunted as she opened up the evac tube and let the canister Diana held fall.

Shots hit the bulkhead next to Diana knocking her against O’Rourke and both fell. They tried to get in a defensive position to face their attackers. O’Rourke took a hit that knocked her off Diana. Diana started to fire the moment her arm was freed. Without pausing she was on her feet and moving toward the shots. She was halfway to the corner of the corridor when the five fighters became frightened that their shots were not doing permanent damage.

Suddenly shots came from behind their attackers. Caught between two sources of fire they succumbed. Henison came trotting toward Diana looking smug. “Nice suit you got there, Diana,” he greeted in a low voice.

“I should have known your information on a great berth for cheap travel would mean I wouldn’t be bored,” she answered back grinning. “And you didn’t say you’d be on board.”

“Hey! Get me outta here.”

The two turned to the forgotten captain. The shot had knocked her into the kiosk where she was stuck.

“Some suit this is,” O’Rourke said, wiggling to get out of the kiosk frame.

Diana could hear the thudding of feet. She holstered her weapons and grabbed one of the captain’s armored arms, with Henison on the other, and both tugged. The sudden release had all three falling to the deck. Scrambling to her feet, Diana pulled her weapons out and took a defensive position at the doorway, waiting for Henison and the captain to get in. When the door closed, Diana moved to secure the rest of the suite while Henison helped the limping captain over to the couch.

Henison looked over at O’Rourke who was rubbing her head. “So, what do you think of your new armor?”

“It better hold up or you’re returning my money,” O’Rourke answered. Right now she was wishing for some meds to get rid of a headache. “I knew if you were around I would have trouble,” she growled. “This is a good ship Henison. If you set her up as bait I swear I’m going to toss you out the waste tube.”

“I’m surprised with you O’Rourke. I thought you liked being right dag smack in the middle of things.”

“Maybe I’ve matured and don’t need a hyped-up life to let me know I’m alive.”

“Don’t you two ever stop?” Rutherford the IV asked.

O’Rourke turned to Rutherford and two of her crew; neither having any unusual abilities to help her out to get her ship back.

“What’s your story?” Henison demanded of the two. Since they were under his supervision he had some rights to interrogate them.

Both looked embarrassed.

“Oh, just say it!” Rutherford the IV told them impatiently. When they were not forthcoming quickly enough, he went on. “They were…”

“Trolling,” O’Rourke and Henison interrupted dryly.

“This is one instance I won’t reprimand you,” O’Rourke informed them.

PO Langley looked uncomfortable but spoke up. “Captain, we went out to look at the outside hatch to the hydroponics and got locked out. We weren’t trolling on purpose. We’ve been trying to get back in but…from the outside, we’ve been seeing some really strange things and decided to stay out in the soft U until we thought it was safe to come in.”

His partner nodded guiltily giving everyone a guess that it was not the entire truth.

“So, what did you see that you were not comfortable with to return?”

“Aliens, Captain.”

Only Rutherford the IV didn’t stare at the two men as if they were crazy.

“He means real ones, Captain. Nothing we’ve ever seen before.”

“And we’ve seen a lot traveling with you, Ma’am, I mean Captain,” PO Langley gulped.

“Describe them, sailor!” Rutherford told him impatiently.

“Please,” O’Rourke said mockingly.

“I… I can draw them, Captain. But I can’t describe them. Too…”

“Different…” his shipmate helped.

O’Rourke went back to the terminal and cleared the screen. “There you go.”

“I don’t do so well on screens, Captain. I use pencil and pap...thank you,” PO Langley nodded toward Diana who produced what he needed.

While Langley settled on the couch and proceeded to make a quick sketch with his crewmate assisting, Henison and O’Rourke stood near his shoulder.

Diana turned to Rutherford the IV who was watching everything as if he already knew what the outcome was going to be. He had one arm wrapped around his belly and the other arm bent with his chin resting in the palm. It gave the small character a comical appearance.

“So, what’s your take on this?” Diana asked Rutherford conversationally.

“Well, since you asked me, it sounds like they’re from that new planet that the UTA is deciding as to whether to let them join the space traveling community. Butumabutu, they call themselves. If the UTA isn’t nice to them, they’ll travel anyway and scuttle anyone they can reach. Everyone knows the Blanstone Pirates recruit members from planets the Association refuses to acknowledge; only I think they’re going to be mighty surprised with this species.”

“Why would the UTA not let them in?”

“They would like to have for dinner a good number of present members,” he said.

“As in eat them?” Henison demanded.

“They hunt their food down and are looking forward to a rewarding chase with what is out in the galaxy. Their neighbors are clamoring for them to be locked down, and prevented from traveling through space, as well as protection.”

“Well, then they better lock them down now.”

“Too late, if what your crew is saying he saw some aboard.”

PO Langley held up his paper. Rutherford looked at the drawing and nodded.

“That’s them alright. I knew it when he said aliens.”

“They’re...”

“Revolting. That’s the idea. Scares you so you stop in your tracks.” Rutherford didn’t seem concerned.

“They’re on this ship?” O’Rourke demanded. “Are they the one’s controlling my ship?”

“We need to get control back,” Henison stated with conviction. He went back to the console and touched the screen but nothing was responding to his commands or inquiries.

“I happen to have it from a good source, they don’t like heat. Heat slows them down to near incubation,” Rutherford informed them.

“Where did you get all this information?” O’Rourke demanded.

“I can’t say...nor can I rightly remember. I...”

“You overheard someone’s conversation on one of the ships you hitched a ride on, aye?” Henison guessed.

Rutherford didn’t answer but he folded his arms around his small rounded stomach as if he would say no more.

“If what you say is true, this heat is a good thing, but then, who has control of my ship? Is it someone that knows these creatures are onboard and is using the heat to keep them from taking over the ship? What’s keeping these Butumabutu’s from blowing the *Wesley* into dust?”

“Where would these things most likely retreat to if it were to get hot for them?”

Diana asked Rutherford.

Rutherford looked thoughtful but only gave a shrug of his shoulders. “Somewhere that’s cold?” he asked.

“The U fold. How big are these things?” Henison asked PO Langley and Seaman Sealy.

“About R4s size,” PO Langley gestured to Rutherford the IV.

“R4!” Rutherford huffed. “I don’t insult you. I do have a full name. You want me to be calling you POL, as in Polltuck or Pol...”

“Alright, alright, Rutherford. Let’s stay on track,” O’Rourke interrupted, giving Langley a glare.

“I’m getting the feeling there’s more than two games going on here. We need to figure what the games are and then which to shut down first.” Diana looked at O’Rourke.

“I’m thinking we need to eyeball each deck and find out where everyone is,” O’Rourke told them. “No splitting up this time. Two look while others keep an eye out. I don’t believe an entire crew can be hiding without leaving a bio-trace.”

“Where can a small army hide away on a freighter?” Diana asked.

“Small army?” PO Langley and Seaman Sealy asked together.

O’Rourke stepped toward the two who gulped audibly. Diana glanced at the captain and noticed her eyes were eerily darkened. “What do you know about an army being on my ship,” she asked in a low voice.

“Spit it out before the captain tosses you out the tubes without a suit,” Henison growled.

“Peders Package,” Langley blurted out.

“That’s the haul for the medical bio-tubes for the hospital on Station Oa,” O’Rourke identified.

“Right, right. Lt. Commander LeMarks and Ensign Tarish had arranged to deliver some new military recruits to Bollto via the bio-tubes. They figured the bio-tubes freight expense was already paid for and they aren’t new tubes so why not make some extra credits by selling the space. It’s not too far from Oa. That’s all I heard.”

“Why didn’t you bring this to the Captain’s attention?” Henison demanded. “Withholding information like that is grounds for a Captain’s dismissal...that’s short for hoisting you out the tubes.”

Seaman Sealy turned pale. “Don’t we get some leeway in telling you now?”

“We were going to tell you but we got locked outside, Captain,” Langley quickly spoke up.

“When did you overhear the conversation?”

“The night we got locked out,” Langley spoke hastily.

“Do you think someone locked you out purposely?” O’Rourke asked.

“I don’t think they knew we were outside, Captain. As soon as PO overheard the conversation in the hydroponics bay he came over to me to ask what to do. It’s not like we have direct access to you. Honest, Captain. We were out there because we didn’t want anyone to overhear our conversation.”

They're spinning as they go. This is a waste of time. "That's not the complete truth," O'Rourke informed him too nicely.

"Captain?" the two asked in unison.

"You two are notorious for selling inside information as well as...telling tales for a bit of money on the side."

"Captain, I swear we only talked about it. We didn't do anything," Seaman Sealy swore. He gulped.

The two were sweating noticeably. For that matter, Diana noticed that Rutherford looked heated too.

"So, you were first going to try your hand at blackmail; however, when you discovered those 'aliens' on the *Wesley* that changed your game. And here you are with a new plan. So, what's your game now?" O'Rourke asked softly. Her eyes changed to silver as she studied the merchantman.

"Captain, it's not a mutiny," Langley blurted out.

"That would take a ring leader with more than the army we've seen," Henison said.

"I'm missing my crew. They're not on deck 8 and not on 6," O'Rourke said calmly to the two men. "Where are they?"

Frightened, the two men shook their heads vigorously that they didn't know.

"These soldiers, if they were being meant for delivery on Oa what had them coming out so soon?" she asked the two merchantmen.

One shook his head and the other gulped under the captain's change of temper.

"Notice it's getting hotter?" Diana asked.

"I need to locate the whereabouts of my crew and then do a deck by deck sweep for the Carrion and anyone else that's wandering about. And you two...are going to be stashed where you can't make trouble."

An alarm from the console had the three crowding around it to see what was happening.

"Life support shut down on decks with unauthorized personnel has been suspended," muttered O'Rourke as she tried to override the suspension. "We can take

shelter in one of the shuttles. They have their own life support. Henison, can I trust you to stash these two in a sleep pod?”

“Good idea. We can drop down the grav-tubes.”

“Oh, I don’t do grav-tubes,” Rutherford told the others. “I get sick looking down.”

“No time for that,” Henison said, grabbing his arm and hurrying him after O’Rourke.

The two crew members were hustled before Diana who made sure they stopped on deck 6 for Henison to escort them to the medical bays sleep pods. She waited in the grav-tube until Henison returned to the tube, giving her the okay signal that his job was complete.



Chapter 10

“Two shuttles missing.” Henison said. “Looks like the captain’s shuttle is one of them.”

“I can see that,” O’Rourke snapped.

Recently she had hidden the ship’s original emergency codes on the shuttle until she could figure out how the *Wesley*’s security system was being accessed by an unknown. Her shuttle was isolated from the ship’s systems so if there was any sabotage of the *Wesley* it would not affect her shuttle. No one knew of the backup plan but Jade. With all the surprises she was finding about her ship and crew, she was thinking of asking the shipyard to do a high-level security check on the systems as well as hardware. Since a blank credit was given to the maintenance, why not take advantage of Queen Osmona’s generosity?

“It’s not as nice as the Captain’s shuttle,” Rutherford informed them. He stepped on the shuttle ramp to *Brilliant Rays* sticking close to the captain. He plopped down in one of the seats behind the pilot’s seat, running his hands over the upholstery. “I’m impressed. This is quality stuff for a utility shuttle.”

“How do you know what the inside of the captain’s shuttle is like?” O’Rourke turned around in her seat.

“How do you think I got on your ship?” He beamed a big smile showing yellow points.

“That did not happen!” she disagreed.

“Well, not when you flew her,” he amended. “One of your crew flew her. He was picking up your special delivery packages.”

Diana looked over at Henison who suddenly looked busy at his console. Diana peered over his shoulder and could see him poking at system inquires and getting beeps. Not authorized kept coming up on the screen.

“What special delivery packages? If there’s any special deliveries in my name, I pick them up myself. Gods, my entire crew is sneaking around behind my back! And I’m not even finding out about it from my security. Was it someone in security?” she demanded.

“Just what was in the delivery?” Diana asked, intending on sidetracking the captain.

“Say, shouldn’t we be worrying about getting your ship back?” Henison asked. “I can help if you give me access.”

“Just boxes and boxes,” Rutherford stated in a sing-song voice.

O’Rourke glared at Henison. “Did you take my shuttle for one of your pickups, Henison?”

“I would never take your shuttle without permission, Captain.”

“I’m glad you noted that I’m the captain. Who gave you permission to take my shuttle and who said you can pick up unauthorized passengers.”

“You. Your wording was, Do what’s necessary short of illegal. And I didn’t know Rutherford the IV snuck aboard. That *is* what he is known for.”

While the captain and Henison went back and forth about using her shuttle, Diana was growing impatient. To refocus, she leaned back and closed her eyes. She needed to sort through what was happening. There were too many different people with their own agendas. That was causing the mix of energies on the ship so she could not separate the usual ship’s extraneous business to the outside tampering business.

“I found out who has your shuttle,” Henison announced.

“Like I don’t already know,” O’Rourke told him. “I’m tracking them. I don’t appreciate those Carrion stealing my shuttles.”

“It’s a tiny planet on the other side of M2R4,” Henison continued.

O’Rourke slapped the side of her console. “I don’t have time for this!”

“Anyone notice the ship is powering down?” Diana asked standing up.

“It’s orbiting around a moon,” Henison announced.

“Ha! I got into the Wesley’s systems!” O’Rourke began reading the information the ship was finally letting her see. “They’re in the life pods. Everyone is in the pods.” Her voice sounded relieved and by her expression, she was determined to free them. “I have to bring life support back on line before I bring my crew back.”

“What about the shuttles?”

“This is Captain O’Rourke to the occupants of *Destiny*, come in.”

“*Hello, Captain,*” a voice responded. “*Sorry about borrowing your shuttles without asking, but you were preoccupied with other matters.*”

“Why are you taking my shuttles and where?”

“*My name is Lieutenant Numbia from the Royal Guard of the United Municipalities of Colmus. Princess Amiee is my assignment and...*” there was a long hiss or sigh, “*she has disappeared, or not disappeared but took one of your shuttles and has landed on a small planet. I intend on bringing her back and your shuttles.*”

Rutherford looked at the captain and shook his head puzzled. “When I saw her walking, she was in a trance like all the others.”

“*She was in a trance, yes,*” Lt. Numbia said. “*And that is what is puzzling. All the others went into the sleep pods but she went to a shuttle. I’m preparing to land so I’ll talk to you later. Out.*”

“Do you know who these people are?” Henison asked.

“No. Do you?” O’Rourke asked annoyed.

“They’re Hunters. They must be on the scent of an artifact,” Henison said.

“The one you gave me?” O’Rourke asked.

“Maybe,” Henison hedged.

“Blasted gamers,” she hissed.

“It’s not a game, O’Rourke,” Henison said.

“Well, I have something more important to attend to right here on my ship,” O’Rourke said exasperated.

“I think it’s related,” Henison said.

“Oh, you do, do you?” O’Rourke said.

“Have you noticed everything has suddenly come to a halt? Everyone in sleep pods...”

“But us. Why is that?” O’Rourke demanded. The energy from Henison was causing her body to vibrate to the point of giving her an itch where she couldn’t reach.

“Maybe we’re supposed to be down there too,” Rutherford interjected.

“You have to be kidding. An artifact is responsible for all this?” O’Rourke shook her head. “Henison, this is really over the edge.”

“It’s a tool, O’Rourke. I’ve seen it happen thousands of times.”

“I have a ship that’s not under my control to get back,” O’Rourke said.

“I’ll go,” Diana answered.

“Me too,” Rutherford said.

“They’re under your protection as passengers....” began Henison.

“Don’t tell me my duty, Henison,” O’Rourke exploded. “Gods I hate being around you!”

Henison, Diana and Rutherford smiled. “It’s the energy,” they said in unison.

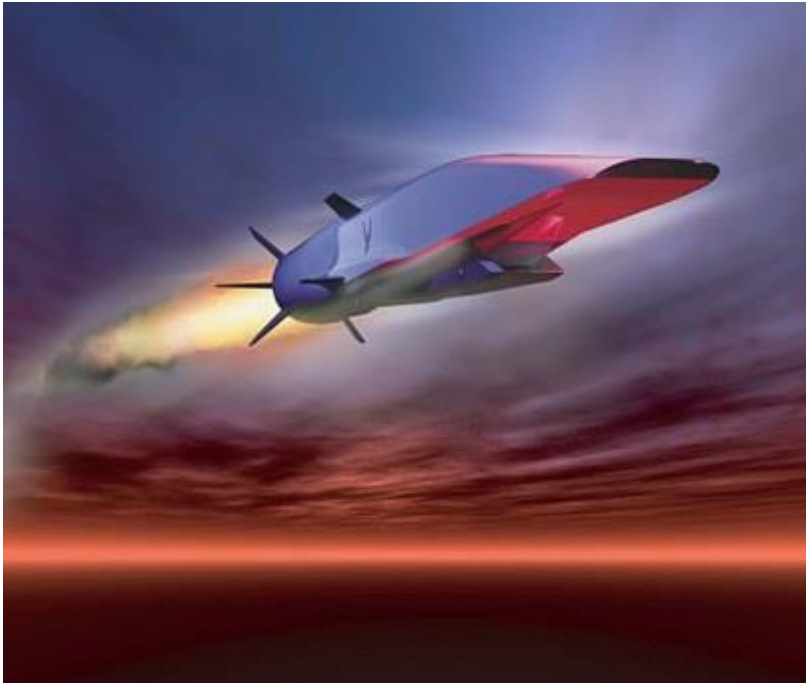
“Some species have that effect on others,” Rutherford added.

“You can’t use a shuttle without a crewmember. Henison, go with them and bring back my shuttles.”

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said emphatically. It was too close in the shuttle and if she didn’t know better, she would have sworn her hair was sticking up from his near energy. She had long ago stopped trying to figure out why when she was near some people, not necessarily species determined, she felt like she had inhaled a stimulant with all her nerves and hair fibers standing on end, to say nothing of the itch in unreachable places.

“Take the *Nebula Star*. Maintenance did a full system overhaul last week. You can test it out,” she added. It was to irk Henison who was looking too happy to be given groundside duty. Though he denied that their closeness affected him, she suspected he wasn’t immune.



Diana went over the planet’s readings again. “This is an odd reading. It shows

only one spot on the whole planet is safe for us to land.”

“Just like in the stories,” Rutherford nodded excited.

Henison hummed his agreement, too busy making a pilot controlled landing.

“I’ll check survival packs. We’ll need to be prepared for the

unexpected,” Diana said.

“Each shuttle carries a dozen. Did that bodyguard sound competent enough to have her crew grab one?” Henison asked.

“Lieutenant Numbia,” Diana repeated thoughtfully. “She sounded competent to me.” However, the name was familiar but from where she didn’t know and in her line of business, it meant something.

“Oh, I don’t think I could be carrying one of these. They’re heavy,” Rutherford objected. “How about just this?”

He had slipped a facemask over his face and made faces at the two.

“That will be our weapon,” Henison laughed. “Doesn’t this feel like old times?” he asked Diana.

“No. What’s with you Henison? You’re acting all...giddy.”

“Just excited...interested... I’m glad to be off the ship. I remember hearing there were twelve in Princess Amiee’s party.”

“No way are we going to be able to carry our packs and one for each of them, Henison. Lt. Numbia would have thought of that herself.”

“Get ready we’re breaking through the atmosphere.”

The landing was smooth with not even a bump. They landed between the other two shuttles.

“Looks like a popular parking lot,” Rutherford commented.

Diana ran up the ramp of one shuttle while Henison ran up the other to see if they were empty. Neither expected to find anyone. Both checked to see if any supplies were removed from the shuttles. The captain’s shuttle was the only one with all the emergency supplies intact. The lieutenant had seen to her charges as well as her princess.

“Let’s lock the shuttles up so they aren’t stolen while we’re looking for the group.” Henison pressed the device on his wrist and the ramps recessed.

“What happens if we’re chased off this planet?” Rutherford asked.

“Always make sure you have an escape route,” Diana mocked.

“Always know your escape routes.” Rutherford added.

“There’s a path. Shall we start?” Henison resettled his pack and started up the only path available to them.

As the forest surrounded them, they all noticed how quickly it became dark. It was eerie to look up and see no sky just tall trees yet still be able to make out the outline of the trees and path.

“How do you think we get light here if we can’t see the sky?” Rutherford asked as he trotted to keep up with the longer legged pair.

Henison grunted an answer, more intent on studying everything around them.

Diana was behind Rutherford so he would not get left behind. “Why ask?”

“Aren’t you curious?”

“I would guess that whatever made just one spot on this planet cleared for us to land, which we’ve passed the small area already, is giving us light.”

“Hold up,” Henison said, stopping abruptly. Unfortunately, Rutherford was barreling along to stay the pace and ran into Henison, pitching them both into a pit.



Chapter 11

O'Rourke watched the shuttle leave the bay, looking for any anomaly as they pushed past the normal energy buffer around her ship. There was no visual displacement and there should have been.

Leaning back in her seat to think of what she was going to do, she listened to the familiar sounds around her. It should have reassured her that everything was alright.

O'Rourke slapped her palm angrily on the console. It stung.

Rising from her seat she moved to go out of the shuttle without her spacesuit. The door refused to open.

“If this is a dream, I am in control now,” she stated firmly. Yet the door didn't open. Sitting back down in her seat she accessed the computer for information. “What did Henison call that artifact? Ruger. Computer, find information on Ruger. Artifact. Hunters.”

Information began to scroll across her screen. “Gods but he had to pick something that has more stories than a sailor has girlfriends.”

Dejectedly she scanned down the stories looking for something that would catch her eye. “Oh, this one is a real idiot's choice. Sail to unknown destination; perform set tasks; complete them as best as you can and wait for results. And this is what Hunters find so interesting?” Letting out a sigh of exasperation she continued through the stories. They were all like children's tales where the believer fulfills the tasks and a prize is awarded. What she wanted to know was what were the tasks and then let Henison take care of that while she took back control of her ship.

After for what seemed a long time she leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes.

“Blasted artifact. Take away the cause, and the effect must cease. That's what Jade would say.” It made a lot of sense. “Hades, but that means whatever business that

artifact is up to, it needs to be taken care of before I can get my ship back. Do I trust them to get it done quickly?”

The idea of leaving her ship went against her belief of a captain leaving her ship when it was in trouble. Her fingers tapped on the console as she stared at the bulkhead of the shuttle. Suddenly she stopped the tapping. Leaning forward she strained to hear what sounded like an echo of her tapping. Experimentally she tapped a code.

“Jade!”

Jade tapped her whereabouts, outside of *Wesley* in a pod attached to the bulkhead but independent of the ship. It was something they had come up with on one of their brain-storming ideas on how to prevent a complete pirate take-over. It had been necessary for her to have forgotten it so if she were questioned by pirates she would not have remembered. Jade tapped the code that had her remembering.

By the time O’Rourke typed out all that was going on and Jade giving her her appraisal and suspicions O’Rourke’s fingers were tired. They both took a break to think out a strategy.

Jade suspected the Geek was in on a scheme with LeMarks. That was frightening in itself. It meant that LeMarks was not as stupid as they thought. Jade had dropped off the system to trace LeMarks and the Geek. Jade was not aware of the hidden soldiers in the medical pods but was not surprised. Security under LeMarks was hinky. Dressed in an outer space suit, O’Rourke stepped out of the shuttle.

From the arms cabinet she removed weapons Henison and Jade had hidden for such an occasion. She would meet Jade in the medical lab and take back the control of her ship. The Ruger she would leave to Henison and his group.



Chapter 12

Diana was stretched out on the ground with one hand on the anchored rope. “Just grab the rope!” she yelled in exasperation at the two at the bottom of the pit, jiggling the

rope to emphasize her command. *Such bickering and whining from people their age! And Henison of all people.*

Nothing. Not daring to lean too far over the edge, Diana strained to hear what was going on. There wasn't anything. Their arguing had ceased. She jiggled the rope again. "Hey," she called. Diana looked at the tree the rope was wrapped around. How safe was it to climb down herself?

Sitting back on her heels she thought about priorities. If Henison, a very good tracker, fell into the pit then chances were the others had fallen in. Pits usually had thorns that were soaked in either a poison or a sleeping chemical.

Diana tied a second rope around another tree, thinking if there were a lot of people then the more ropes the faster they would get out of the pit...if she could wake them. As far as she was concerned, there was nothing deadly about this quest.

From her utility pack she pulled out a light and fastened it to her forehead. Slowly, she lowered herself down the pit, noticing sharp spikes randomly placed on the sides of the pit. Her boots were impervious to most sharp objects, but she had a feeling this wasn't the normal pit one would encounter in a stroll through the woods. Glancing back up at the rim of the pit, she worried about the spikes cutting the rope. As the space above her head became smaller, Diana was thinking how much further down she had to go. Diana scanned her lamp down, looking for the bottom of the pit. Movement from outside of the light beam had her swinging it to the other side of the pit. Something dark ducked back into a hole.

Whatever that was, must have dragged those two into that cave.

Gauging the distance, Diana decided by jumping up she would be able to reach the rope on her return trip or the taller Henison could easily grab it. After assuring herself she would not be landing on anything alive or dead, she pushed off from the wall and dropped down. It was a soft landing with a little bounce back.

Pock, pock, pock, pock, pock, pock.

The noise startled Diana until she realized it was from her shifting weight, though slight. As she moved into the cave the ground became firmer and the noise ceased.

Diana dampened her light and peered ahead of her. There wasn't any light coming back at her. She switched her lamp to thermal imaging, realizing not all unfriendly species would register. Turning the light to ultra violet she studied the ceiling, ground and sides. The ceiling was low, requiring her to crawl to go further. Her light came to rest on a dark form over two body lengths from the entrance, but distances could be deceiving in dim lighting. Switching back to lamplight she found the figure to be wearing the same clothing as Henison. On her hands and knees she crawled close enough for her fingers to reach for Henison's boot and only touched the tip.

Checking above her again for anything that would be a danger to her, she crawled in further. The entrance widened into a huge cavern. Shinning her light around the area she found lumps of bodies everywhere. She turned the lamp back to thermal imaging. Every lump was alive.

Turning back to Henison she brought out a bio-scanner to see just what was wrong with him. The scanner came up with nothing. Shaking his arm, she jumped back to avoid the swing of his arm.

"Hey, watch out," she whispered.

Strange echoes played all around her. Worriedly, she looked around her before looking back at Henison. He wasn't moving. Giving him a stimulant was tempting but this was not a normal situation. To give stimulants when it wasn't called for would confuse whatever was going on.

"Henison, if you don't wake up, you're going to be doing the cleanup," she said softly.

Mumbling came from him which was a good sign.

"Get up," she urged.

"I am up," he grunted and made to roll over but stopped with his pack in the way. "What did you hit me with," he asked.

"You fell down a pit. Get up, Henison. We have bodies all over the place and I know there's something down here with us. You do remember falling down a pit, don't you?"

"I didn't fall. I was pushed," he grumbled. "Hey, shine your light over there."

“What is that?”

“A guardian,” Henison said happily, now sounding wide awake.

“To what? We’re in a dark pit. Henison, that’s... It’s coming this way.”

A dark shape with no details or eyes that shined in Diana’s light moved toward them. It came to a stop in front of her.

You are the leader for the next journey.

And it disappeared.

A lot of moaning and groaning echoed throughout the cavern as the dark unconscious shapes came awake.

Diana put her hands over her ears to stop the noise. Just as suddenly, everyone’s groaning stopped. Her hands came away from her ears slowly, as if not trusting the sudden silence. It was as if she were deaf. Tapping her scanner, she listened for a sound.

Nothing.

Tapping again she thought she heard something from far away.

“Hello,” is what she believed she said, but there was no sound from that. In fact, she didn’t even feel the vibration in her throat.

This is a dream, she decided.



Chapter 13

O’Rourke paused at the corner to engineering, sure that she had heard something. Slowly, she edged her scanner eye around the corner. The bio-readings identified two figures. LeMarks and the Geek. Her eyes opened wide. LeMarks was a wholly changed person. The Geek was trying to open up the engineering hatch through the access panel on the corridor’s bulkhead.

There were no guards around and neither looked concerned at being found trying to access an area in lock-down. O’Rourke took aim and shot the Geek, whom she thought more dangerous of the two. He wouldn’t be waking soon, regardless of how potent a stimulus the medibot could administer without killing him. LeMarks was quick and shot a

hole in the bulkhead where O'Rourke had been standing. Silently she cursed LeMarks for damaging her ship.

O'Rourke was already moving back to an emergency grav-tube, hoping to draw LeMarks from engineering.

"Jade, this is O'Rourke. One down - the Geek. LeMarks is loose in the engineering section. I don't know if he's following me down the tube. He's lost weight and he moves faster. Be careful. He's putting holes in my ship."

"If he's shooting a weapon in engineering the ship will recognize him as the enemy," Jade said. *"I'm going to flood that area with noise. It's going to hurt so get out of there."*

"I'm down one deck," O'Rourke said, dropping with a thud on the said deck. Sprinting down the deserted corridor she thought about LeMarks' clever disguise. O'Rourke turned another corner expecting anything. Moving quickly, she scanned bulkhead, top and deck with her weapon's nozzle softly clicking that it found active deck mines. They had been activated by Jade. When passed by an unauthorized person they would blast a sound wave that knocks out most known species.

For LeMarks to have taken on an elaborate disguise for as long as he had, meant that maybe it was part of Tipps takeover. O'Rourke stopped at a kiosk to see if it was operational. Ship-wide lock down meant the kiosks were all off-line and disconnected completely from the main systems. Right now, she didn't want to restore anything in case LeMarks and the Geek had figured out how to duplicate her authorization on the kiosks.

As she dropped to the next deck, she looked down both ends of the corridor before heading to the medical center. Not trusting anything she slowed to a walk, looking over the bulkhead and emergency hatch covers for anything that didn't belong. Her walks through her entire ship at various shifts enabled her to be able to recognize people and changes.

Jade appeared at the other end of the corridor.

"We've got some real trouble heading our way. LeMarks activated a beacon. You're not going to believe to whom," Jade said, sounding more excited than worried.

“Evangeline Meso?” It was a wild guess, but everyone knew LeMarks had a large wanted poster of her in his quarters.

“You got it. You know she’s not a real person, right?”

“So, it could be any pirate group,” O’Rourke said.

“Yes. I can’t find any ship within the *Wesley’s* scan range. Whoever he’s calling, could be moments away or weeks. I don’t know if it’s to our advantage, but we’re not where we were supposed to be.”

“We need to wake up the crew.”

“Why?” Jade asked. “We can’t trust the majority of them. Their loyalty is as transient as a cloud of puff-seeds. Whichever way the wind blows is where they go. Do you want people like that to rely on?”

“Jade, now is a good time to find out where their loyalties lie. When this ship becomes mine, I want to keep those that proved their loyalty.”

“If you stay alive that long! Gods, spare me from captains that want their crew to go through fire for them,” Jade mocked.

“We’ll release the ones we can trust first and go through the process of elimination.”

The ship shuddered from an explosion.

Jade checked the device on her wrist. “Security Bots have been activated on all decks. Since *I* rebooted the system, security has been reinstalled in all the bots so we should get better assistance...provided the bots are operational.”

“Let’s start in the medlab where there’s a secured console I can access,” O’Rourke said.

The medical bay was dark; not even dimmers were on. All exit hatches had a glow around them. No security bots were around.

“No bots?” O’Rourke whispered.

“Under the UABP program, they wouldn’t be where they aren’t needed.”

O’Rourke glanced at Jade. “We don’t have an Unauthorized Boarding Program. We have a generalized hijacking plan that the crew hasn’t been exactly sterling on and the bots were unreliable.”

“Since the Geek was involved with the one we had during his tenure, I thought going back into Osmona’s security was a good idea. That woman was no slouch. Geek dumped her program because he couldn’t hack it. Osmona had you down as her captain so it was easy to enable it and run the UABP.”

“It’s hard to believe they’re trying to take over the *Wesley*.”

“Not going to happen while we’re loose,” Jade said.

“You’ve got that right. They’re a bunch of new recruits on their first drop. Geared up in Turtlittes, no less.”

They sniggered.

“I noticed they don’t have any officers in charge,” Jade said.

“Our mysterious guest, Diana Rue, took care of that. Four officers, two NCOs and a dozen newbies tried to force entry into Q’s quarters. They’re all stored in the morgue. Diana Rue had a Screamer protecting her quarters.”

“Sounds like she’s a veteran traveler to parts not so friendly. This lot of newbies have made a lot of mistakes a veteran soldier wouldn’t have made. If they were pirates, they wouldn’t have lasted this long. Their fellow pirates would have tossed them out into space.”

“Maybe they thought LeMarks and the Geek had everything under control.” The two looked at each other. When they served together, never trusting anything to chance or to the belief that someone else would take care of it was second nature. You owed that vigilance to your team if not just for yourself.

“So, what are we going to do here?” Jade asked.

“I want to locate my crew.”

Jade shook her head. “O’Rourke, if LeMarks was this good at keeping his real self disguised so well for as long as he had, there’s going to be other sleeper agents.”

“And we’re going to use this situation to find out who all that is, one by one.”

In the Medical Bay robots were moving pods on and off the service elevator.

“Looks like they’re switching sleep pods. You check who’s in the one’s they’re moving here and I’ll check the ones on the elevator and where they’re taking them,”

O'Rourke said. "Free who you think can lend us a hand to get the *Wesley* back under our control."

O'Rourke scooted onto the elevator with those being moved out. Inspection of each pod showed *Wesley* crew members that she wouldn't mind backing her up. She quickly tapped each emergency wakeup button to release them. Since they hadn't been in sleep mode for long, it shouldn't take hours to wake them, she thought. In five minutes, before the elevator reached its destination, she escaped through the emergency hatch, leaving the bots to deliver the pods to their destination.

In the elevator shaft she climbed back to the medical bay, listening at each grate for noise. At each deck's shaft opening she extended a spy-eye to see if the deck was clear. At one the alarm blinked on the spy-eye's neck.

A body was tossed down the shaft. O'Rourke barely had time to press herself close to the sides to avoid being hit. Her suit's monitor identified the body as Jade.

"Jade!"

The body fell past her too quickly for her to free one hand to stop her fall. The body bounced against the shafts walls before it was stopped by the safety buffer. Looking up she could see LeMarks pointing something at her. White light flashed near her shoulder, blasting a hole in her ship. The vacuum from the hole sucked her into it.

"How does it feel to see your ship under someone else's command?" he yelled down the shaft. Another shot hit between her feet as she was kicking away from the hole.

"I'm going to put holes everywhere. When this heap is dragged into the shipyards, she's going to be there a long time – maybe forgotten."

O'Rourke could hear his weapon clicking with nothing happening. The ship's self-preservation safeties finally kicked in.

A piece of equipment was pushed into the shaft, it's metal shrieking as it fell toward her. There was nowhere for her to escape to.



Chapter 14



Diana stood at the edge of the cave looking out at a breathtaking view of the mountain and valley, with the tip of the mountain in sparkling colorful snow, spilling down the sides of the mountain into a bouquet of blooms at the lower levels. A silver river snaked around the foot of the mountain, widening to a swift flowing course below their cave.

Henison stood next to her, ending a wide yawn as if he was facing nothing more than a leisurely morning hike.

A glance back in the cave showed her the others were beginning to stir. Everyone but Princess Amiee was accounted for. If she thought about it, she would have questioned how Lt. Numbia, and the other eleven Carrion that were accompanying the princess, ended up in the same cave as Rutherford the IV, Henison and her.

Oh, yeah. They fell in a hole.

“How much time has passed since we landed on this planet?” she asked Henison.

Rutherford the IV cleared his voice behind them. “I don’t think time is an equation here. However long it takes to get the intended task done.”

“Indefinite is not going to happen,” Diana said. “I don’t plan on spending the rest of my life on a hunt. And just what teams are you referring to?”

“We’re not the only ones here. Veteran hunters have a nose for artifacts of power.”

“Hunters are a hinky group. You never know when they’re with you and when they’re out for themselves,” Henison said.

Diana turned to Lt. Numbia. “Your species have been Hunters for eons now. What do you know of this artifact?”

“It came from a culture that was far more advanced than any I’ve seen today. It was intentionally left with an alien culture by a Traveler over 200 Carrion lifetimes ago. It was found by Relic Hunters who heard about its existence through the usual cultural tales and was tracked down like all artifacts. Since it was found, it’s been changing hands as each group steals it from another. What you’re asking is what makes it so special for all this stealing that’s been going on for so many years.”

She glanced around to be sure her group was listening, “According to the tale, on the grand scale, it was designed to balance all the ecosystems needed for a healthy planet within a short breath of time. The question you may ask is what is a healthy planet to this artifact. On a smaller scale, everyone, no matter the species, that handled the wand was healed of whatever ailment they had and it gave them youthful vigor. Like all relics of power, it has its quirks. It doesn’t stay with one person for long and once it leaves the person, unless they’ve changed their life endangering tendencies, their bad health returns and their age catches up with them. The story goes on to say, that the wand is made for a specific planet and for a specific person to activate it. I don’t understand why it has to have a specific person since it seems to be doing alright with getting itself transported to the right planet.”

“You believe that?” Diana asked.

“It brought the *Wesley* here, and I don’t think it was Captain O’Rourke’s intention to transport it here,” Lt. Nambia said.

“The artifact wasn’t on the *Wesley*,” Henison said.

Rutherford the IV snorted at that. “It certainly was. It was hidden in the captain’s shuttle. I’m not a Hunter, but I know a wand of power when I feel it.”

“How did it get there?” Henison asked.

“Who cares at the moment,” Diana said. “So, you and your group are hunting this thing like everyone else?”

“We were hunting it because Princess Amiee’s father, Prince Ahir thought it was something safe to train the Princess and her hunt group on,” Lt. Nambia said.

“I’m assuming a lot of energy will be needed to create a world as you described; therefore, anyone holding the wand or near it when it’s activated would be blasted with energy that would annihilate them,” Henison said excitedly.

“I believe the same,” Lt. Nambia said.

“Is that why the Princess took off on her own?” Henison asked.

“She believes she is the one chosen to wield the wand to create a planet,” Lt. Nambia said. “She’s been having dreams and visions about the artifact for ten years. It’s

her belief that powers were given to her that pertain to finding the wand and using it for what it was created for.” Lt. Nambia looked conflicted.

“Do you believe that?”

“Princess Amiee doesn’t lie,” hissed Klinga.

“It’s not something she would do to get her way,” Lt. Nambia said. “When she confided in me, as her mentor, it was my duty to assist her in completing her believed purpose. When a hunter feels they are meant to find a particular artifact, no other hunter questions it.”

“Is this their first hunt?” Henison asked.

“No!” eleven voices said in various tones of indignation.

“They’ve been going on hunts since they were children with other adults. This is their first as a team,” Lt. Nambia said.

“So, what are you intending on doing?” Diana asked.

“Make sure other hunters don’t harm her.”

“Not take the artifact for your own?”

“My primary job is to protect the Princess and teach her and her team about hunting down artifacts.”

“We should be going now,” Rutherford the IV broke in.

Below them they could see a large group of people swarming across the river.

“The princess is among them,” Lt. Nambia said. “I see her there.”

The others also spotted her and crowded around the mouth of the cave.

Diana found it strange that the Carrion didn’t take the shape of a creature that could swarm down the side of the hill they were on. Henison led the way down what could be called a path in that it was a way down with the least resistance of plants and boulders. By the time they were at the river’s edge the others were long gone as well as their noise. The ground was trampled, making it slippery to cross.

“Let me go across first and I’ll anchor a rope around me so we won’t lose anyone.” Henison quickly pulled out a coil of rope from his pack and tied it around his waist and handed an end to Diana.

“We can cross water without assistance,” Risa said.

“Speak for yourself,” Rutherford the IV said.

“We can’t safely cross this river,” Lt. Nambia said. “Haven’t you noticed that for all those people that crossed the river it’s not muddy? That means it has a strong current below the surface. Remember the rules, least you get lost.”

“With the slippery river bed and the strong current, you’ll be swept away and there’s no telling where you’ll end up,” Diana said crisply. “Let’s get a move on.”

Henison made it over but not without losing his feet several times and having to be dragged back with the rope tied around his waist. The girls were impressed with the strength of the current when they all had to hang onto the rope and pull him back.

Lt. Nambia was the last to come over. She had the rope tied to her waist and after watching the others to see where it was the least slippery; she made her way over without any mishap. It wasn’t missed by the girls.

Diana led the way, following the beaten path the others left for them to follow until they came to the forest.

“We’ll go this way, and stay out of the forest for now,” Diana told Lt. Nambia who was walking alongside of her.

“Why?”

“Don’t hunters leave traps to prevent others from following?”

“Yes.”

“With all their chatter going on they’ll hear us anyway,” Rutherford the IV said irritably.

Lt. Nambia signed to the girls.

Diana hadn’t heard any conversation but she and Lt. Nambia were yards ahead of them making sure there weren’t any surprises. Henison had taken the flank to make sure no one lingered behind and that they had no surprises catching up with them.

“Hold up,” Diana said softly.

Lt. Nambia held up her fist.

Everyone came to a halt. On the other side of the thick brush they could hear a conversation.

One of the voices was Captain O’Rourke’s and the other Princess Amiee’s.



Chapter 15

O'Rourke released a smoke cloud to prevent LeMarks from seeing her. He shot wildly down the shaft. Her armor deflected the shots, but not harmlessly into the sides of the tube. It was leaving gaping holes that were leaking energy from the system.

With her boot clamps engaged she ran up the sides of the tube and through the smoke reached for the hand that was firing blindly down the tube. With great satisfaction, she wrapped her gloved fingers around LeMarks arm and pulled. With a screech he tumbled head first down the tube, losing his weapon on the way down.

O'Rourke hoped the safeties wouldn't save him since he was identified as invader. His screams stopped abruptly just as a thump echoed up to her.

"O'Rourke! Blazes, woman. He nearly crushed me!" Jade shouted.

"Jade!" O'Rourke shouted relieved, "Will you just get up here and stop complaining."

Jade ran up the side of the tube.

"We're going to have a lot to repair," Jade said. "It'll make our visit to the shipyard a little longer, I'm thinking."

"If we can get the new gav-tubes installed...that would be a feat to accomplish. Blast LeMarks. He's intentionally damaging my ship."

O'Rourke and Jade halted abruptly. "Hear that?" O'Rourke said. The sound of feet running came through a hole in the bulkhead that one of LeMarks shots made.

"Yes. Friend or foe?" Jade asked.

"I activated six of the pods. How about you?"

"I got to two and LeMarks took issue. He chased me down the grav-tube. I'm going to give Henison a great big hug for these suits."

"They're keepers," O'Rourke said. "Okay, get ready." She got a nod from Jade she was ready. "This is Captain O'Rourke, show yourselves."

"Captain!" a voice shouted while another hushed him.

O'Rourke stepped around the corner and found a dozen of her crew appearing to be sick.

"We can't take the *Wesley* back with the lot of you looking like you're going to pass out," O'Rourke said.

"We were heading to the medical bay," WO Winn said.

"Let's all go," O'Rourke said. "Commander Jade will take the flank."

Jade nodded and let the crew file past her as they followed the captain. They had to stop numerous times as pod-sickness was affecting the group's ability to keep a steady pace.

"Commander Jade," O'Rourke whispered in her comm. "Anything behind you?"

"Nothing yet."

"Did LeMarks say anything to you?"

"Yeah. He said congratulations for my very short stint as your XO. Image that," Jade said.

"There's not going to be any more outsiders promoting anyone on my ship without my say so. Did he sound put out?"

"His hand was shaking so much he missed his shot. Good thing for me he was suffering from sleep pod shakes. I hope I get a chance to wear my new pips."

"We'll throw a party for you. Tell me what we can expect from the program you restarted?"

"How long did you work on the ship before the Geek came aboard?"

"Nearly two years."

"You have all the privileges the captain of the *Wesley* should have. You'll have to do some changing of personal, and then we're set. I trusted that guy with my life," Jade said.

O'Rourke shook her head, feeling the same disappointment of misreading him. "Until we hear his story, we'll have to label him as the enemy."

They arrived at the medical bay without running into any problems. O'Rourke was recognized by medical security and the hatch opened. Bots and beds came active

with diagnostic programs running. When O'Rourke was sure her crew was being taken care of she moved on to another urgent need.

"The ship's security is letting me in. Can I assume that I have my ship back?" O'Rourke signed on the work console and was identified by the old system security for accessing the crew's files. "Looking good so far." From there she promoted Jade to her second in command and Henison to warrant officer. Maybe the promotion will scare him away, though she knew he could be anything he wanted. Star Force Agents became what was needed to get a job done.

Commander Jade logged onto the terminal and it recognized her as second in command. She began to run the programs she needed to find out where they were.

"I have the bridge back," O'Rourke said. "I'm getting readings on every bio-bed and emergency pod...and there lies the rest of my crew."

"They aren't on the crew roster. I'll start moving them over," Jade said.

"How long will that take?"

"I don't know. It's not something I've done before in mass. Everyone I add to the system has a bio-scan done. I don't want to skip that part or we may get a stinker like LeMarks."

"Start with the people we want at our backs and once they're released from the pods, go to the others. While you're doing that, I'm going to the bridge. Stay here and make sure everyone that comes this way leaves in a healthy condition. I don't want someone with double vision firing a weapon."

"I've located Lt. Commander Susa. She can work on her crew," Jade said.

O'Rourke left the medical bay at a run. Something was feeling off about this and it was giving her flashbacks. She hadn't had flashbacks for years. O'Rourke ran up the shuttle's ramp and heard the hatch shut behind her. Quickly and efficiently, she brought it online and was out the bay before she had time to think about it. Staring at her hand she flexed it to see if the wound she hadn't noticed before would affect the use of her hand. A medibot was attending to it almost the same time she noticed it.

An alarm on her console let her know that she was approaching the planet's atmosphere. It didn't take long to find a parking space next to her other shuttles.

“Damn dreams,” she muttered as she jogged down a path. Her helmet light warned her of a pit right in the middle of the path. Past that she began to see the familiar signs on the path that were in a reoccurring dream. There were steps carved into the rock that led down to a river. The pictographs on the wall of the rock told a story which she could feel an understanding of. If this was a dream as well, it was at least getting easier to move through it.

A lone person was waiting.

“Princess Amiee,” O’Rourke greeted.

“Captain O’Rourke.”

“This has all been a dream,” she stated flatly.

“Most of it. It was for your crew’s protection.”

“Now what?”

“We wait for....”

Just then a swarm of people began to appear over the horizon.

“Who are they?” O’Rourke said.

“They are Hunters. They want to witness the Wand of Creation in action.”

“That figures. Are you going to sit here and wait for them?”

“Yes. They have a role to play in our arriving at the sacred site.”

“Why do they need you or I? They may just kill us.”

“They’re Hunters of Holy Relics. They’ve been dealing in omens, signs, and knowing the rules of acquisition longer than you and I have been around. You have the clues where the site is and I’m the only one that can activate the wand.”

“How do you know that?” O’Rourke demanded.

“Dreams. Just like you, I received my instructions in dreams.”

It was perturbing to O’Rourke that she was having this weird dream when her ship could very well be in danger, but the swarm was getting closer and she needed to focus on the immediate.

The hunters were made up of various species, shapes and sizes. They surrounded the two. A Bobocar, stepped forward.

“We are here to witness the Wand of Creation’s activation. Where is the next stop, Holder of the Wand?”

“We need to get to the other side of the river,” O’Rourke pointed to a faint path between two trees.

The Bobocar produced an inflatable raft from his pack as did the others. Princess Amiee and her sat in his raft along with a Dwarf. Once on the other side of the river, it was deflated and returned to his pack.

O’Rourke looked up the face of the cliffs from where they had come from and thought she saw Henison. What was he doing in this dream?

It was difficult to move through a forest with an army and not do damage to the environment. It gave O’Rourke, a spacer the majority of her life, an appreciation for the dirt-side military that had to move in mass undetected through natural fauna and other surfaces.

Princess Amiee walked a few paces behind O’Rourke. To O’Rourke, she may as well have been walking in her sleep, showing no emotion or interest in their surroundings. O’Rourke, not a land person, kept a constant eye sweep around them, not trusting the safety in numbers concept in protecting them from the unknown.

“Where are we?” she asked aloud.

“We’re in another dimension,” Princess Amiee said.

“Eiii,” the Bobocar agreed. “Not all hunters can cross into this place.”

O’Rourke nodded. Crossing into other dimensions was something one encountered often while traveling in space because of a ship malfunction or passing through an anomaly, or those who had that ability to do so at will. But she had never landed on a planet in another dimension.

“We stop here,” O’Rourke said.

The Bobocar held up his hand, replicated down the line. The army came to a halt.

The Bobocar and Princess Amiee, looking more alert, walked with O’Rourke to a tree that had a small shrine overgrown by the huge roots.

“This is the first test,” Princess Amiee said. Without fear she stuck her hand into the small opening between statue and root. She pulled her hand out and stepped back, not opening her hand to see what she had drawn.

O’Rourke remembered in her dream pulling something out that was not pleasing, but it didn’t kill her because the dream and her went on. Reaching in she could feel the dirt, root and roughness of the featureless statue graze her wrist. Her fingers touched something and she pinched it, then pulled her hand out.

The Bobocar reached in without hesitation and pulled something out. The Bobocar had a huge clawed hand, but he had no problem retrieving his token.

The three stepped back as each member of the group had their turn. Princess Amiee and O’Rourke compared what they had pulled. O’Rourke already knew she would be going the next route alone.

Mentally she blasted dreams and hunters, and her wish to be a hunter when she was too young to know what they were about. That’s what she attributed this misadventure to. Someone or thing had tapped into that buried memory and was using her.

“Your token is not the same as mine,” Princess Amiee said, sounding disappointed.

The Bobocar showed his. It didn’t match either of theirs. He gave a heavy sigh. “It is as it is. We travel on different paths.” He turned to those behind him and raised his token. There were still many to go. For those with a token like his, he pointed to a clearing for them to gather.

“I will find another clearing and wait for an hour, then will proceed to the next mark,” Princess Amiee said. She held up her token as she walked up the path.

Reluctantly, O’Rourke was about to hold hers up when the Bobocar halted her. “You are to travel alone. It is written in fable that the protector of the Wand is to travel to the first four markers alone to test her fitness and allow the Holder to face her own fears of her task.”

O’Rourke was going to ask him to tell her what the fable was but she already knew her part from her dreams. No sense in mixing up a fable with her dream

instructions. This had to be finished as soon as possible so she could get back to her ship. With all that was going on in her head, she didn't know what was true.

O'Rourke took a third trail that was so thin, only one person could walk it at a time or get pricked by the thorns that kept travelers to the trail. It was so convenient that it smacked of a dream that was going to have a happy ending, she taunted herself.

It didn't seem long when the first trap was before her. It was a cage and an animal was trapped in it. It wasn't a creature she had ever seen but it was bigger than her and by the blood on the bars of cage, it had been trying to chew it's way out.

For a long moment she and the animal stared at each other. This was not in her dreams. Her dreams were instructions on how to find the markers to a site where the wand that Princess Amiee had was to be placed. She didn't want to leave the animal in the cage to die.

"This is a test, right?" she said to the animal. "How did you get in there?"

"I walked in."

O'Rourke laughed. "Why?"

"There was something I wanted inside."

"Is there a way for me to let you out without me getting trapped in there?"

"Maybe."

"What was in here before you got in?"

A wide grin showing teeth, broken and bloody was displayed.

"Something edible?" O'Rourke asked.

"Just a morsel...but it could have been a tasty morsel."

"So, you didn't get to eat it?"

"It got away."

"So, this is the case of exchanging places?"

"It could be."

"For the time you've spent here, have you figured out an alternative?"

"I might have."

O'Rourke nodded. If this was going to be a dance of no answers, she would move on.

“On my return trip, if you’ve figured it out, let me know and I’ll let you out.”

“You’ll be sorry for leaving me here. I know the answers to the rest of the tests.”

“If you knew the answers, you wouldn’t be stuck on the first one.”

“How do you know this is the first?”

O’Rourke laughed and continued down the path. She had no problem with helping people, but they had to do some of the helping themselves, otherwise it was a waste of energy.

The second marker came whizzing by her head, barely missing her as she ducked and it hit the side of a tree. Embedded in the bark was the rune Uruz. It looked like a lopsided doorway.

A small creature came out of the tree making a lot of noise, then jumped right before her feet and started to attack her armored foot.

“Hey, stop that!”

“You burned out my home!”

“I did no such thing. I’m just passing by.”

“You owe me a new home!”

O’Rourke looked at the tree that was smoking. “Well, if you head up the trail, there’s a creature in a cage that would fit you better. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind exchanging places with you.”

“Hmph! That’s the one that tried to eat me.” O’Rourke thought the creature was looking rather pleased with itself. “I put that big brute in that cage.”

“How did *you* get stuck in it?”

“I wasn’t stuck! I was visiting a sick friend.”

“So, like the creature that’s in the cage now, you thought to take advantage of a situation at the cost of another.”

“If you know so much, why are you asking me anything?”

“If you want to set things right, you can figure out how to get him out of the cage.”

“The rule of the cage is someone has to replace whoever is in it,” the creature said. “I’m not going back there. It’s lonely.”

“Are you sure a living thing has to be in that cage?” O’Rourke asked.

“I’m not giving it back,” he said defiantly.

“So, you were visiting a sick friend and saw something in the cage that was a non-living thing?”

“I may have. It’s not your business!”

“On my way back, I’ll ask you again if you want to give back what you took.”

“No.” He turned around and walked back to the tree, looked up at smoking trunk and walked around the trunk and disappeared in the forest.

O’Rourke shook her head and was about to move on when she noticed something was sticking out of the burnt tree. Stepping closer she reached out to touch it when it occurred to her that this was not a place to touch anything that didn’t belong to her -- or that had nothing to do with her trip. That was the catch, her cautious self pointed out. If she were the type, she could argue that she wouldn’t know if the object was useful unless she looked at it closer.

Her hand reached out again to touch it but halted just inches from it. Looking around her she wondered who was keeping track of this. Sighing she stepped back on the trail. Shifting her pack on her back she turned left at the marked tree and continued her walk.

It wasn’t long before she came to the next marker. Three triangles within each other. They came apart when she was alongside of them. One fell over her proceeded by the other two when she paused. She was surrounded.

Turning around slowly O’Rourke looked for a way out. There were no seams or cracks. It was a solid wall that rose several feet above her. Tentatively she poked at the wall. It was springy. O’Rourke looked down at her boots. Jumping out was a possibility. But there had to be a reason she was here. Sitting down, she rummaged around in her pack and pulled out water and a snack. Leaning against the wall, she thoughtfully chewed her food while thinking of her situation. Looking above her startled, she realized it was fast becoming dark. Her last mouthful was done in pitch dark. Engaging her helmet, she was able to find an inflatable pad in her pack to sleep on. Tired, she went to sleep.



Chapter 16

Princess Amiee continued down the path. She didn't worry about who followed her. The Wand was her guide and protector. Why she needed to be accompanied by hunters was something she didn't understand. Self-reminders that it wasn't her concern became less as the dreams faded and the influence of the Wand became her dominant preoccupation.

The change was so sudden and abrupt that Princess Amiee would have fallen over the cliff and into the void if she had been walking faster. For a long moment she wavered as the energy driving her became confused as she struggled to keep her balance. Someone from behind her grabbed her and held her from falling into the darkness.

Once steadied she peered down into nothing. She wondered what she was to do. The energy was no longer clouding her thoughts or urging her into movement.

“What is that?” one of the Hunters that followed her asked in awe.

Kneeling, she stared into the darkness and let her thoughts relax.

“Shut up, Arni. We're here to observe only.”

“If that were so, I should have just let her fall into that dark hole,” he said sarcastically. “Where's the Wand?”

“Arni...”

“Ah, shut your face. So, what do we do now?” he demanded of Princess Amiee.

Princess Amiee saw armies of people roll across a plain from opposing directions. “Opposing directions” was what stuck in her mind at that observation. As the front lines merged and became a melee of fighting soldiers another scene appeared before her. Two siblings, two souls, two of everything flashed before her and then multiplied to duplicates then became quadruplets and so on. It went on into infinity but something was false about that image.

There is no separateness, the Princess thought.

Do not interrupt, was the thought that flashed before her.

Other images, people making decisions multiplied into all sorts of creatures making decisions, choices, and life moving on the many levels of consciousness.

“Hey! I’m talking to you,” Arni said.

Before her the past of her people and possible futures played out. That changed to her standing in a cave with choices. In her hand she held the Wand of Power. From the choices to be made, consequences of her decision were like threads leading out from the choice and the threads became infinitesimal with other people involved and their choices.

What was she to choose?

Princess Amiee looked over the choices and the consequences bewildered. What right had her to make a decision that would change so many people’s lives? For a long time, she stared, going over each choice and the outcomes.

Something fell past her into the darkness, and like a stone tossed into a pool of water, ripples rolled out from the point of its entry and the threads vibrated changes.



Lt. Nambia looked up startled as her connection to Princess Amiee disconnected. Her eyes turned dark as she focused on what was causing the connection to flip on and off.

“What is it,” Diana asked softly.

“Something, but not enough to locate her or to know if she’s in trouble.”

“She won’t be in trouble in the physical sense that you can protect her from”, Diana said, “Am I right Henison?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I’m not sure of anything right now. Are you hearing that high pitch squeal?”

“No,” Lt. Nambia and Diana said.

“You do have sensitive ears to some wave lengths I don’t have. Can you tell if that’s the case?” Diana asked.

Rutherford IV pointed at the sky. “Something’s going on over that way.”

The girls had stopped their walk and were watching the night sky in the direction of waves of various lights in the sky.

“I’ll bet everyone is either there or heading there,” Rutherford IV said.

“I think we should make camp here for the night,” Lt. Nambia said. “Traveling in the dark in unknown territory, unless it’s an emergency, should not be done.”

“I agree. We’ll clear a spot for us to sleep so we can make sure nothing crawls up on us,” Henison said.

“I’m not sleeping with the chance of something crawling up on me and biting me to death,” Rutherford said. “Did you bring anything to protect us?”

“Check your back pack.” Diana slung hers to the ground and pulled out a tool used to clear paths through jungles. While she and Henison cleared a space and then outlined their area with rocks, Lt. Nambia showed the girls how to fix something to eat from the packs.

Rutherford was leaning up against a rock he had pulled into the cleared circle and was sleeping.

Diana stared at the rock, not certain why it disturbed her. It was getting darker as the source of light faded out. “Aye!” Diana jumped toward Rutherford as the final bit of light disappeared, grabbing his arm and pulling him away from the rock.

Henison had a light flashing around the cleared area for what caused Diana to shout a warning. The rock moved around the cleared area as if it were alive.

“I’ll let it out!” Lt. Nambia said. She went to one of the rocks used to ring their cleared space and nudged it out so the circle was broken. The rock headed straight to the opening. Lt. Nambia jumped out of the way.

Everyone stood silent for moments then the girls started to demand to know what just happened. Henison and Diana inspected the space for anything else that may be alive and a danger to them.

“Quiet,” Lt. Nambia ordered. When they quieted Lt. Nambia watched Henison and Diana while they inspected the stones surrounding their encampment.

“This is a good lesson in securing your space for the night.” She pointed above them. “No overhanging trees where something can drop on you.” The girls laughed. “Make sure a rock is a rock,” she said, looking at Rutherford who was still catching his breath.

“I didn’t pick the rock. It picked me,” he said with indignation. That only caused the girls to giggle all the more.

“Diana and I will take the first watch,” Henison said.

Lt. Nambia nodded. “Klinga and Yori will be the second watch with me. The rest of you...your turns will come. So, find a place and settle for the night. We don’t know how long nights last here.”

“We’re not going to tell stories or talk for a while?” Kaya asked.

“We pack up and leave at first light,” Diana said.



Bobocar waited with his group on the path for the Holder of the Wand’s return. He was disappointed not to be chosen to follow her to the placement of the Wand of Creation, but his years of Hunting had taught him to obey the rules of powerful artifacts or he would die. Those that waited with him were all veterans of many hunts and knew as he did that it meant death if you didn’t handle an artifact of power correctly. It didn’t escape the veterans and that those that were passed to go with the holder were new at the trade and some not considered likely to live long at the game. Some artifacts required a living sacrifice but not all did. The Wand of Creation didn’t seem to be the type that warranted a blood sacrifice but one never really knew until the end came.

Rather than pace he organized those that remained behind to setup camp. When they finished he and some of the more seasoned hunters told teaching stories and recalled mental puzzles to train newbie hunters so they would be able to translate cryptic clues. It was the usual hunters' get-together. They usually were short lived truces to get prearranged business done on neutral ground. This was such an occasion.

Bobocar, sensitive to the many different species could feel the undercurrent of nervous energy that could erupt any moment. He wondered just what they would do since rushing into the woods after the Wands designated holder wouldn’t get them anything they would want. His lips puckered giving a sucking sound. There was the worst case scenario where they all turned on each other; however, that wouldn’t achieve anything,

and hunters were profit motivated on the whole, with the discovery of power objects a bonus.

Beanchair popped him in the ribs. “You’re driving me crazy with all that noise. What are you so worried about,” she demanded.

“How long do you think we’ll all stick around before hitting each other over the head?”

Beanchair lifted her snout to the air and waved it around. “Not long. I’ve got a lead on a hues statue in Goolon Dior. I don’t know why I ended up in this herd but I don’t want to stick around any longer.”

“You don’t think we’ll be needed for anything more?” Bobocar asked doubtful on the wisdom of Beanchair’s decision.

“I see our being here for no other purpose than cleanup. I paid my dues with years of cleanups. I’m heading out.” With that said, Beanchair moved her massive body toward the outer ring of people. Before Bobocar could think of something to say, Beanchair stopped abruptly at the edges of the camp clearing. Her snout lifted and she tested the air, this way and that. She backed up, with people hurriedly moving out of her way. Bobocar took a few feet in her direction and suddenly, Beanchair was gone.

Bobocar looked around, amazed that no one took notice, then he shrugged his shoulders and gazed at the crowd around the fire that started bursting into noise that was singing to whatever species was sounding off. Beanchair was forgotten by Bobocar.

As the night noise makers continued on it became raucous and riotous sounding and then groups broke off from the main group and headed into the black forest.

Bobocar feet became entangled with a tree trunk and he fell heavily onto the ground, unconscious.

A massive cloud of energy settled over the group. One by one they disappeared. It was going to take a long time considering how many hunters there were.



Chapter 17

When O'Rourke awakened, the protective walls were gone and it was light. From the tracks around where the wall would have been the area had been trampled with many types of feet. Looking around to get her bearings she slipped her pack on. She moved in a direction the tracks were not showing.

It was hours later of seeing nothing, nothing as in landscape or points of reference, that a dot of dark matter steadily grew before her. It was as if she were looking out from one reality into another. Each had its own rules of how matter was to appear. Stepping through the portal she had a view of a clearing below her. Hunters were milling around a figure that appeared to be sitting.

The figure lifted her head and stared directly at O'Rourke. It was Princess Amiee. O'Rourke made her way down the slope, then used her elbows to make her way to the Princess's side.

"What's going on?" she demanded.

"We want her to use the Wand. That's what we're here for, ain't it?" demanded one of the hunters.

The others were going to agree until O'Rourke's stare that she had perfected for keeping a mutinous crew in line, worked its wonder here too.

"You're new at this," O'Rourke told him. "And chances are this will be your last hunt with any hunter's group."

"Who the hades are you?" he demanded. He was larger than her and could hurt her, but she could do more damage to him by remaining calm. O'Rourke had done her homework on hunters of holy relics and knew their code of ethics.

"I'm declaring you as a non-hunter. That means you don't belong here," she stated loudly.

"You can't be talking to me about hunter stuff. You're nothing."

The others started to back away, probably remembering the oath they had recently had to take to join the ranks of Hunter of Holy Relics. Apparently, they wanted to continue in that capacity.

"The cause of the relic comes first. You put yourself first," O'Rourke said.

“He pushed Con into the darkness. He wanted to see what it would do,” one of the others said quietly.

“Con was a coward! He was taking up space. He would never have made it as a Relic Hunter,” he shouted at O’Rourke. O’Rourke was familiar with his species and understood the loudness and what could be interpreted as aggression. In his case, it was meant to intimidate.

“You have to leave, Arni,” one of the larger species told him softly. “You’re no longer a legitimate Relic Hunter.”

“Are you going to make me?” Arni demanded.

“There’s only one way to leave, at this stage,” Princess Amiee said. “You made your choice. What you all decide here and now, is the choice you make for your lives forward.”

Arni grinned and made to step into Princess Amiee’s space. O’Rourke stepped in front of him. If he continued, he would knock them both over. If he stepped aside, he would be making a statement...that he was only a bully and that he murdered a fellow Relic Hunter on a quest. He was a dead man no matter what he did, but threatening the life of the holder of the Wand would mean immediate death.

Arni moved toward O’Rourke and almost made it to her when a large figure was dropped on top of him. It wasn’t a splat but the popping of bones breaking was loud.

A long snout weaved in the air as she tried to find balance to get up. “No worries, no worries. Beanchair is here,” she said as she rolled to her feet. She looked at what she had crushed. “It was meant to be,” she stated then turned to the others. “So, this is where all the newbies ended up. Here I thought I was getting a free ride back to my ship. Well, well, what are we doing now?”

Everyone looked at O’Rourke then Princess Amiee who had gone back to staring in the darkness of the abyss.

“Well, I’m hungry and I didn’t bring enough to share,” Tei said. With that said, she wrapped her tail around her and began chewing what she had stored in her cheeks.

“That’s a relief,” Beanchair said. “I like chewing my own food.”

“What happened in the dark pool?” O’Rourke asked Amiee softly.

Princess Amiee looked up at O'Rourke, tears in her eyes. Her expression reminded her of people who had seen something that shocked their sensibilities.

"I don't think I'm the one for this," she said in a whisper.

"Why do you think that?"

"It will affect so many people. They won't have a chance to say yes or no. It'll just happen."

"What will happen?"

"Changes....changes in their lives."

"Change is what energizes life." O'Rourke studied the young girl's face. In her species she wasn't considered old enough to travel anywhere without a mentor/guardian, so it had surprised O'Rourke that the girls were in a Hunt group. And even more surprising that she was a Princess and in a Hunt group. That was a change. O'Rourke smiled.

"What? What are you thinking?" Princess Amiee demanded.

"I'm witnessing a change. In your culture to let girls in a hunt group of their own is a change, and that your father let you, a princess, out to wander among the stars and without a husband and his retainers, is an even bigger change."

"I'm not getting married," she said firmly. "I had told father and mother that and I had sworn to not marry any boy or man they present to me. They've all been pretenders and too old to be proper companions to me."

"Your decision was a change that rippled out and affected a whole society. For example, what of the man or boy that was slated to marry you and the prestige you denied him."

Princess Amiee giggled, unrepentant. "That would be Lord Drepe. He has four wives already. None of them live with him. They find him a bore. I went to the Temple of Sorach and made my wishes plain and simple. And I'm not the first. There are many men and women who do not wish to follow that tradition. Our last King had not married which is why the empire is without king and queen but rather has principdoms and not all ruled by men. The last king's cousins are princes and princesses and none of them have agreed on who to be the king because they all want it or don't want another on it. They

would lose too much influence if we had a king. One of the main events in the various fiefdoms is sending out teams of Hunters to see what interesting and powerful artifact they bring back. Some families sell artifacts they've held for a long time to finance their hunts. Important artifacts are credits gaining interest."

"Does an artifact that is recirculated get publicized?" O'Rourke asked.

"It would depend on the circumstances. Uncle Aran had a wand from the Krizo Era on the Lizard's planet. He offered it through a third person to one of the Lizard kings. The king insulted Uncle Aran's agent and then killed him when he returned with a second offer, so Uncle Aran put word out with the Hunters that it was being auctioned off. Hunters aren't collectors as much as they are in it for the hunt but they have more clients than there are planets. The Lizard king was disposed of by his family when they found he let their family's Wand of Kingship go to another group of Lizards who were willing to pay for it."

"Do you like hunting?" O'Rourke asked her.

"Yes! Besides learning about the story surrounding what is being hunted, the search across the omniverse for clues is exciting. At times we crash into cultures so foreign that in some cases we can't enter due to the strange atmosphere. Our Hunt Leader then decides how to go on with the search or leave that search until new information comes in. There are no limits to our omniverse and no limits to what can be learned."

O'Rourke wondered how long she would see excitement after running into violent cultures too many times or for that matter other Hunt groups that weren't scrupulous and used murder to get the treasure or clue.

"So, what got you interested in this artifact?" O'Rourke asked.

"I dreamed it. I knew where it was located and didn't need a map. One of the crew on the *Wesley* had a piece of it made into a pin. Can you imagine how insulting that is to a sacred object? The ardent Hunters would mistreat him for such discretion and torture him for information on its location."

"That's what you won in the card game?" O'Rourke asked.

“Klinga won it in a card game from one of the crew. He was quite silly to have something with that much power on a ship. The energy alone will undermine the running of a ship.”

“What do you mean?”

“It was the heart of the Ruger. It brings about the situation for the will of the Ruger to express itself.”

“Are...you mean... I don't know what you mean.” O'Rourke shook her head.

“The taking over of the *Wesley* is the *situation*. The *will* is getting the Ruger to it's destination.”

“You mean to here?”

Princess Amiee looked like she was going to agree, but hesitated. “Something has just changed. Something has changed,” she said alarmed. She rose to her feet looking around her then to where the abyss had been. It was gone.

O'Rourke looked around her. Everyone was fading. She grabbed Princess Amiee's arm. “We have to get out of here. Engage your suit.”

Princess Amiee was looking at her hands. “I... it's gone. The Wand is gone,” she wailed.



Chapter 18

While Rutherford watched with amusement, Lt. Nambia, Diana and Henison restrained the young girls from bursting through the brush to their Princess.

“Listen!” Lt. Nambia hissed at them. “Listen!” she said again.

Henison stepped back at the hissing, for it was so like the dragon serpent of Ong La Dog.

“If you rush through the brush, there isn't any suit that will protect you from the thorns of this bush,” Rutherford told Henison. “You will suffer delirium and some other nasty species specific headache. It's not wise to rush through things.” Though he kept speaking, he wasn't really paying attention to what the girls were interested in doing. He

found something shiny in the dirt. Leaning down he stared at it but didn't touch. He wasn't a careless traveler.

"I wouldn't touch anything on this planet that isn't yours already," Diana told him softly.

Rutherford nodded and straightened up.

The girls stopped their rush into the brush, but not their yells to the Princess.

"Oh, quiet, quiet," Rutherford said, folding his large ears flat against his head and putting his hands over them.

Diana shook her head and moved away just in case the girls hit the right note and opened something they were not prepared for.

"Silence girls! Listen! Follow orders," Lt. Nambia said as well.

Finally, they stopped shouting.

Rutherford IV unfolded his ears and listened as did everyone else. No more voices.

"If you had listened instead of shouting, we could have heard what they were talking about," Rutherford said angrily. "You will never be good hunters if you don't know when to be quiet."

"That is true," Lt. Nambia said to them crossly. "How are you going to make a good hunt team if you don't obey your leader? No! Do not say a word, Mahina. You all will only listen, unless your life is in danger. That is an order."

"In some mazes, by the way the walls are set up, a voice from outside of the maze or somewhere else, can be heard as if right next to you," Henison explained. "It's an energy pipeline with twists and turns that are independent of seen physical obstructions."

Diana nodded and looked at the girls to see if they were listening. Lt. Nambia seemed to have them in line now. Their tiny eyes were fixed on Henison.

"Images too can appear before you but they're not really there. It's a reflection from somewhere else. Once you're in the energy of an artifact or power object, take nothing for granted and always check to be sure what you sense, is immediate," Henison continued.

They resumed their walk, the young hunters in a different mood, watching their leaders with better attentiveness, and looking where they looked. Lt. Nambia, however, didn't relax her vigilance.

It was hours before they came to another bend in the river. They all crowded around the edge of the river, knowing they would soon have to make camp for the night. They were hoping they could see an open space where forest growth wasn't so close to the river's edge. No one wanted to be strangled while they were sleeping by vegetation that preyed on creatures that slept too close to its tendrils.

Diana stared at the marker. It was a stick stuck in the ground with a mat at the top woven in an interesting pattern. Nut shells of various shapes and sizes were within the pattern.

"This is a map but not of this area," Diana said more to herself than anyone around her.

"The nuts represent islands and the way the patterns of this weave are here, shows the currents," Lt. Nambia said.

"We don't have a boat." Rutherford the IV was looking along the river where there was a bend.

"Our packs have a small inflatable raft," Diana said. "Or they should if they're properly packed."

"Why would they put this here when there's only a river and not a lake with islands as this indicates?" Henison asked.

"By the signs along the tree trunk, this area floods. It must be dry season," Diana said. "Why? What are you picking up?"

Henison gave her a worried look.

"We're wasting time," Rutherford said. He was nearly jumping up and down with impatience.

"I don't like what's up ahead. Someone has set up camp," Henison said. "The smoke is too much."

"The noise is too much. Not good," Rutherford said. He was now pacing.

Lt. Nambia frowned. They were in pursuit of a person and not the artifact so they didn't have the same guidance or protection as the others seemed to have. All her self-preservation senses told her not to enter the forest.

Diana looked toward the faint animal trail that led back into the forest. It wasn't what she wanted to do because the forest didn't feel at all friendly. Like Rutherford said, the sounds coming from the camp ahead of them wasn't something she wanted to join.

"Let's make camp here for the night. No lights. In the morning, after we're rested, we'll see where the revelers are and we'll make plans then. Each pack has sentries. Put them around your tent. Two of you to a tent. If you should leave your tent take at least two others. Keep alert and again, let Henison, or Diana know you're up and stepping away. Henison, you have first watch. I'll be next. Diana, you can take the last. If you feel drowsy and can't stay awake, wake up your next shift. If there's any feeling of trouble, wake us all."

Tents were pulled out of their packs and set up. Food was chewed on quietly and then everyone but Henison went to bed exhausted.

It was only hours later when the light became so bright, none of them could sleep.

"It seems like we just went to bed," Tilda said. She shielded her eyes and squinted out of her tent.

"We need to leave," Henison said in an undertone to Diana.

"Put protective eye wear on," Lt. Nambia told everyone. "We'll pack up now."

"But Lt. Nambia, we've not slept," Sonya whined.

"I don't feel tired at all," Rutherford said. He hopped up and down as if to demonstrate how much energy he had.

Diana had her helmet visor engaged. As she moved around their camp she checked their environment with the sensor in her visor. The readings were not making any sense, but then this whole quest was nonsensical.

"Let's pack and get moving," Henison said louder to everyone.

"It seems obvious this bright light is a hint for us to move on," Diana said.

"How do you know it's for us?" Kaya asked, squinting as she looked around them.

“Because we’re the only one’s here,” Rutherford said matter factly. He was lucky the tents folded easily into themselves because he wasn’t much into camping. Once his tent collapsed, he stuffed it into his pack, not caring if he was squishing something else.

“We need to go, go,” he said, bouncing on his toes.

“Something doesn’t feel right,” Lt. Nambia said.

The girls hurriedly packed their tents with no more complaints.

Diana glanced at Henison who was looking around him anxiously. “I can feel it too.”



Chapter 19

Ati frowned at the freighter’s image as it grew larger on his screen. There was no warning hail to him or responses to his hails. He took another sensor sweep around *Gypsum*. No one appeared to be following him.



“Arrived at destination,” Gypsum’s voice said, “All stop or give alternate approach.”

“All stop,” Ati said. “Give me a reading of what is surrounding the *Wesley*.”

“Unable to determine.”

Ati leaned forward and squinted at the image. “Is this a safe distance?”

“*Insufficient data to provide an answer. Please be more specific,*” the computer said.

“Is *Gypsum* in danger from the *Wesley*?”

“*Insufficient data to provide an answer. Please be more specific.*”

Ati kept asking questions and received the same answer. What he wanted to do was get in a space suit and jet over to where the bubble was and see what it was made of.

“That’s just what Diana would do. Jump right in...” he hesitated. Would she? He did as much research as he could and was getting insufficient data answers.

He made up his mind to get a closer look. If the ship couldn’t get closer, he could. He rose to dress in a spacesuit.

He waited for the exit hatch to close behind him before he touched the controls of his spacesuit to move toward the *Wesley*. The *Wesley* was huge compared to his small 4 passengers private yacht. As he neared the boundaries of the bubble he noticed the stars began to distort behind the bubble. Did that mean the ship really wasn’t there? Now that was a thought. One of his older brothers who followed The Hunters had a lot of stories about things not being where they appeared to be.

He moved around the freighter’s bubble, looking for anything that may give him a way in. Nothing. His battery packs were low since he was going as fast as he could around the bubble.

Back on the *Gypsum* while the suit was recharging he had the computer run tests over the bubble looking for weaknesses or an irregularity. He should have done this first, he thought. Impatiently he watched the battery charge bar move slowly and then moved his eyes to the scan results. Both taking too long. His eyes grew tired as he searched for anything different.

The ding of battery pack charge had him leaping up out of a doze. Blinking to clear his eyes he focused on the results of the scan. There was a spot that looked different than the rest of the buffer. Not weaker, just different. Quickly he inserted the battery pack into the spacesuit and tapped in the coordinates.

Back out in space he blasted his way to where the scan showed a difference. He stopped just an arm's length from the bubble. Studying where he wanted to fire a shot, he backed up to where he thought it was safe enough. Raising his weapon, he aimed and fired and the immediate recoil knocked him back in a wild tumbling float. Frantically his thumb searched for the stabilizer, wondering why it didn't activate the moment he went into a fast spin.

He passed out.



Chapter 20

Ati woke with a start, waving his arms around in space. His movements released him from whatever was holding him from drifting off. Fighting his fear, he thought he heard a hiss then his fear subsided. Meds raced through his system to assist in stabilizing his bios.

He ceased all movement and looked around him moving slowly, so as not to create any counter movement in his drift. He was moving back to the bubble around *Wesley*. He tried to restart the jets on his suit. He was sideways and heading to the bubble. As he looked to see how far he was from running into the bubble, his body turned so he was facing *Gypsum*.

He recycled the starter and again hit the button to restart. Instead of meeting with any resistance, he passed through the buffer wall. His eyes opened wide as he realized he was on the other side of the bubble's membrane no longer able to see what was outside of its protective envelope. He kept drifting inside of the U where he had previously docked his ship to drop Diana off. It was eerie to be surrounded in complete darkness, with no expansive views of space. His helmet light swept over 14 decks with no lights of its own. He came in contact with deck 5's lip. He pulled himself up so he could lock his boots on deck. Looking around he tried to remember if anyone had told him what department would be the best to approach to see where everyone was. Sighing, he was thinking of what Diana would say. If there's a map, look it up. No that's what his other sister, Gena

would say. She was a dirt lover and was content to travel over a planet on foot with her food and housing packed on her back. She called it tramping.

But a map on a ship would be helpful, he thought. He spotted a terminal in a corner where workers oversaw whatever went on deck. The terminal looked off line. Testing it he tapped a few times on the screen. A light indicated it was enabled then a menu came up. From the menu, he pulled up the ships schematics. A lot of it was marked off limits for non-crew members.

The bridge was one place of interest. So was the medical bay and engineering. The only one that would allow him access as a non-crew member was the medical bay. He selected the medical bay Icon and to the right of him a hatch cover slid open. He didn't hesitate. As his boots clomped on the deck he kept looking around him for anything that would clue him in on what happened to everyone. There was no light to guide him but his memory of the deck and how to get there was easy to remember. The elevator ride to deck 6 was uneventful but not without worry. It was unnerving to ride in a small box with only the face plate of his space suit showing anything was happening.

Peering out of the elevator before committing, he noticed there was a light on half way up the corridor. To get there he had a dark corridor to walk. He wondered what was on this deck that the schematic wouldn't tell a nonmember of the crew. Normally he didn't travel on large ships so his familiarity of ships wasn't as good as his familiarity of docks where the best gambling game were. If someone lost a big bet on a ship, no telling where he would find himself, whereas on a dock, he would already have mapped places to escape should he have to. Some people didn't like losing to a stranger.

As he walked through the dark part of the corridor he could feel an energy of some kind vibrating against his suit. His species was sensitive to changes in energy. It didn't mean he was susceptible, only that he was aware of it.

Stepping into the medical bay he noted that everything was turned on as if someone was around. Studying one of the terminals he could see sleep pods being monitored.

“Gods, but the whole crew must be here.” The energy around him changed. It was annoying. Then it changed again. It was like an annoying alarm but it wasn’t something he could turn off.

He checked his life pac. He needed to get back to the *Gypsum* and refresh his life support. The freighter wasn’t going anywhere. He left a good luck piece on the terminal, just in case Diana came by. This was certainly something she would be involved in.

As he made his way back to the elevator he wondered if she was in one of the pods or wandering the ship. Why would she be wandering the ship? Why were so many people in the pods?

Nothing prevented him from kicking off from the deck out into the U shape. He engaged his boosters and maneuvered out of the bubble and toward his ship. He glanced at his air. He was within the guidelines. Diana always warned about unnecessary risks. Detail was important.

His boots clamped onto the *Gypsum*’s hull. The hatch cover opened and he floated into the recycler. As he waited he went over the schematics of the *Wesley* and remembered that Diana had all sorts of information on the freighter.

Sitting in front of the console he found unsurprising that her information was locked. “Now what is the password for this?” he asked aloud.

“Well, Ati, since you asked, I may tell you if you have a good reason,” Diana said.

Ati nearly jumped out of his seat. There was a holographic image of Diana.

“What, where... Diana, you scared the habes out of me.”

“Do you know what habes are?”

“Yeah. Bugs.”

“Then you should be happy I scared them out of you.”

“Just what do I have to pay for the password?” he asked.

“Tell me why you want it?”

“The *Wesley* is sitting there in space. Everyone’s in life pods. I want to know the schematics of the ship.”

The holograph glanced up at the screen that showed the ship. “Hm. Why are you bothering about a ship sitting in bubble wrap?”

“You’re on that ship, or have you forgotten?”

“I’m a holograph, not a physical entity. So, you plan on rescuing anyone?” she mocked.

“Ehh. Well, I was over there and no one’s about. I got as far as the medical bay and found everyone in life pods.”

“Everyone?”

“Well, a lot of people,” he said.

“Medical bay was your first pick?”

“It was the only place I could go as non-crew. The ship is in lock down.”

“How tempting to pilfer ships stores. Surely you can get the ship to believe you’re a crew member.”

“When a ship is in lockdown, only the captain can gain access. Captain O’Rourke has to be physically present to unlock it. Don’t think I didn’t give it a try.”

“So, you’re just going over and not knowing what’s going on, take a look around and see if you can make a small profit?”

“I would like to take a look at the information you have on the ship.”

“I can’t do that. It’s confidential.”

“Diana, how am I going to help if I don’t have more information?”

“I remember you telling me that all information is saleable.”

“Well, it is. You can’t tell me that you haven’t sold information that was confidential because I happen to know you have.”

“I have never sold anything that wasn’t mine to sell. What are you going to do about that ship in bubble wrap?”

He stared at it frowning. “Find the captain and release her.”

“That sounds like a plan.”

“You’re not concerned about me finding you?”

“I’m a hologram.”

He sat for a while thinking about how he hadn't thought of looking for anything to take while he was on the *Wesley*. He was a Telcous so he should have felt an urge to take something. Everything about that ship was weird. And so was Diana who put that holographic image of her to protect her data. Though he said the *Gypsum* was his, he had taken it from the family space dock. Either he won things through gambling or he took what was just lying around. If something was missing, Telcous were justifiably the first searched, though technically they didn't steal, they just removed things not physically tied down, and in most cases, returned them when their interest waned. Telcous traveled light.

His adopted family was used to his ways, and adjusted since they all had species idiosyncrasies. A positive side was once the novelty of the item wore off, he returned it to where it was found. Everyone took souvenirs. The difference was, he returned the items - eventually. He didn't see what the problem was, because the people whose items were returned valued them more on return.

For a moment, he had a feeling that because he was a Telcous, training to become a mortleige would be unlikely, then again Diana wouldn't string him along, or would she? She always told him the truth. He chuckled to himself. Of, course, it took a while for him to believe her 'no' really meant no, because when she was younger, he could wear her down. Maybe that was why she no longer told him where she was going. But, he was here now.

Feeling better, he decided what he needed was bots that could carry things. However, there were no bots on the *Gypsum* that would leave the ship. Checking his spacesuit, he found he needed more time for it to charge up. Impatiently he stared at the ship, picturing where he would look. Deck 4 was open to him.

When his suit was charged, he found a second pack to carry for replenishment and headed back to the *Wesley*. With excitement and trepidation, he neared the yellow bubble barrier. The thought of what he could find on *Wesley* with no one around had him nervous. It was too good to be true. Any words of wisdom that Diana had told him were left unsaid.

He passed through the yellow barrier without any trouble. This time he aimed for Deck 4. Nothing stopped him. His boots locked on the deck and without delay he hurried toward the hatch cover rather than the elevator...which opened as he passed by. He was focused on looking for claimable goods. If no one was around, then it was the rule of Finders Keepers. Each door he passed was locked. Not wanting to spend too much time on unlocking quarters he hurried to the next, looking for one that was unlocked. If he didn't find any he would look elsewhere. Breaking and entering was unlawful. Taking things that were out in the open and just left there was what he was about, he reminded himself.

It seemed he walked a long way, through the arch and down another long corridor. Stopping at the Rec Center he pressed his face against the transparent hull. His eyes couldn't penetrate the darkness, but he imagined what could be there. If only he could get in. There would be plenty of games to keep the crew occupied.

The next room the hatch cover opened at his push. Surprised and suspicious, he shined his helmet light inside. It was lined with robots.

"Well I'll be bosewigged. Looks like I hit the jackpot." He pulled one of the small bots off the shelf and studied it. He would be able to do something with this model and if not, he could sell it. He looked closer at the ID tag that identified it as belonging to the *Wesley*. He wouldn't be able to remove it from the *Wesley* unless he had the purser's wand. He put it back. He looked at others and found they had the same identifier. There was nothing else in the closet that interested him.

Nothing here to take, a voice echoed in his head.

Stepping out of the storage area he looked up and down the corridor, for a moment forgetting which direction he had come from. He turned left walking down the dark corridor testing the entrances to quarters. He didn't find another unlocked door, and he was at the other side of the U. There were no souvenirs.

The elevator on this side of the U opened for him. Deck 6, the medical bay was where he had originally been allowed in. He moved down the familiar corridor, knowing what he would see. Stepping in front of the automatic medical bay door his helmet faceplate hit the door when it didn't open.

Leaning against the translucent wall he peered in to see if anything was moving. He dimmed his helmet light and there in the low lighting something was moving. Robots were performing maintenance checks on equipment. He watched the bots for a while not really knowing what he hoped to see.

Nothing more to see.

No longer interested he moved on down the corridor. More storage bays that were locked down. He went around the U and reached the end not finding anything he could get into nor giving him any information on where everyone was. He retraced his steps. He passed the medical bay again, as if he were on a stroll. He came to the end of the corridor and turned around.

A small light was blinking on the bulkhead. It must have just come on because he didn't notice it previously. Curious, he went to inspect it. A life pod for a small person. Not expecting anything he touched the lid and it came open. He stuck his head in and could see that it was fully functional. It looked promising to take as a souvenir, after all, the freighter had many of them and there wasn't anyone around to claim it. Pulling himself in, he found it to be a comfortable fit, if he didn't move around a lot. He checked the controls and they responded to his touch. He would fly it over to the *Gypsum* and land it in the storage bay. It was something he could explore while he waited for Diana.



Chapter 21

The *Gypsum*'s pilot console was blinking as a program ran commands to access various systems and run tests on itself for someone to study later.

Hours later a life pod headed to the *Gypsum*. It recognized the occupant of the life pod and the cargo bay doors opened to receive it. Once the cargo was secured, *Gypsum* received commands to power up and proceed to new coordinates.



Chapter 22

Diana opened her eyes to a gray lid lifting slowly above her. The light outside her pod was softly muted, allowing her eyes to adjust to the sudden light. Her thoughts were sluggish and her body felt too heavy to move, even if it were to lift a finger.

A whooshing sound gradually changed to the solid sound of a warning message. “All hands, all hands. Ship is in lock down by order of Captain O’Rourke.” The message kept repeating and orange lights outside the bio-bed kept blinking, then all went purple then held at a steady red.

When her limbs no longer felt leaden Diana struggled to rise from her bio-bed. With her feet on the deck she shifted her weight and nearly collapsed from her shaky legs. A medbot was there to prevent her from injuring herself. She looked around and found that a dozen pods were opened with people in various stages of rising. Captain O’Rourke and Lt. Commander Jade were among them. Lt. Commander Jade was the only one that looked like she had no ill effects.

When did she end up in the sleep pod? If Henison was here, then it was something important. Why he was involved in a relic she would like to hear. If it was causing all these strange happenings, then it was more than a relic. Only two things could have happened to release them from this sleep...either it completed its task or changed hands.

Holding onto the edge of the bio-bed she wobbled over to a console where she intended to push off to the exit. Her eyes fell on a familiar object lying on the console. Ati or Henison? Picking it up she put it in her pocket to study later.



O’Rourke waited impatiently for the lid to finish its ascent and the drugs being pumped into her system to waken her fully. As Captain of the ship, she and a dozen of her crew would be the first to be awakened. It was wise not to rush the process. A headache and blurry vision could be avoided if she gave the drugs time to work their way through her system. For this she would be patient.

The ship’s lock down warning was blaring. Of course, now she remembered giving the lockdown order. It was comforting that that part wasn’t a dream.

Finally, the lid was up and she swung her legs over the lip of the bio-bed enclosure, holding onto the sides. She took deep breaths to test her lungs and head. No headache and no light-headed feeling. So far, so good.

“This is Captain O’Rourke, Lid4Rdr, report status,” she demanded.

“Security has identified ships that may be pirates at our aft. Defensive shield is up. All security personnel have been awakened on deck 8 and 6. All engineering has been awakened on deck 8 and 6. Medical staff is not authorized to be released. It requires a Captain’s authorization to release those two members. Captain, do you have any further orders?”

“Yes. Note that Lt. Commander Jade is my second, and Lieutenant Mack will head security. Activate the medical robots but not the medical personnel. Leave all passengers in sleep pods until you have my order or Lt. Commander Jade’s to release them. Repel all boarders.”

The medical bay doors were open and she wobbled out into the corridor. She didn’t concern herself with who was getting up, having faith that the computer was waking who was necessary. She needed to be on her bridge and it was taking a considerable amount of will power to get her limbs to obey.

“Responding to an emergency on my first day as XO isn’t my way of celebrating,” Lt. Commander Jade said.

“What did you want?” O’Rourke asked. She held onto the bulkhead for a moment to steady her legs.

“A party.”

“Give us a few days and we’ll give one to everyone that gets promoted. Since you’re special, you can share a drink with me from my private stash.”

“That does make me feel special.”

“This is not how I like waking up,” O’Rourke said, feeling her stomach give a turn. O’Rourke pushed off from the bulkhead and began her unsteady walk to the elevator.

“What happened?” Diana said as she caught up with the two.

“How did you get queued to wake up?” Jade asked.

“Charm?”

“I’m not even going to try and explain anything that’s been happening,” O’Rourke said. The three arrived to a deserted bridge but the lights were on all consoles and the computer was already making automatic adjustments. The moment they stepped onto the bridge dimmed lights went to brighter.

Two lieutenants and an ensign made it to the bridge behind them.

“What are your orders Captain?” Lt. Mack asked as he sat at the helm.

“By the looks of it, we’re being approached by what the computer has identified as pirates. Are their weapons hot?” O’Rourke asked.

“No, Captain,” Jade said. “They’re not pirates...in some peoples’ opinion.”

“What are they exactly?”

“Hunters,” Henison said from the elevator. He leaned in waiting to be invited to step onto the bridge. “May I approach the Captain? They’re probably wondering where the artifact they were following is.”

The hunter ships suddenly began to disappear into hyperspace.

“Get settled everyone. How’s the rest of the crew, XO? Lt. Mack, you’ve been promoted to Head of Security. Get up to the top tier and log yourself on the security console. Ensign Crele, you’re at the helm. Prepare to maneuver us out of here.” She pointedly ignored Henison.

“The crew that’s been passed to wake are still getting out of their sleep pods, Captain,” Jade said.

“*Wesley* is securing each deck, Captain,” Lt. Mack reported.

“What did you want to do with the passengers?” Jade asked.

“Leave them in the sleep pods until we can get back on our usual route.”

O’Rourke glanced over at Henison who was studying a monitor with Diana.

“Henison, see anything going on?”

Henison stepped down to speak with her privately. “All previous glitches and any hull damage is gone, as if it never happened.”

“We’ve been living with an illusion?”

“I don’t know of anything else to blame it on. Also, this place isn’t anywhere I recognize nor does Diana.”

“Do an independent security sweep, Henison. Make sure all the security bots are working and logging information.” She looked over at her navigator, “Ensign Henly, do you know where we are yet?”

“No, Captain.”

O’Rourke keyed in for a private conversation with her security chief. “Lt. Mack, CPO Henison will be doing an independent security check.”

“Read you, Captain.”

Henison left and Diana stayed where she was, watching the bridge crew and the monitor Henison had been at. Wherever they were it was not where they were safe. She could feel the energy around them that was not comfortable, and it wasn’t coming from the bridge crew. The omniverse was without boundaries and there were places in the boundless space where some species were not suited to visit. That meant their ships would not be able to handle the space either.

“Ensign Crele, how long until we’re able to leave?”

“Engines are up and waiting for a clear from Engineering, Captain.”

A yellow light began to blink.

“*Engineering to Bridge,*” Lt. Commander Susa said.

“Bridge, to engineering. Glad you made it, Lt. Commander Susa,” O’Rourke said.

“*I’ve got a lousy headache. What’s going on? Everything’s working.*”

“How fast can we get out of here?”

“*Now. You can hit high gs for thirty minutes. I hope there’s a jump gate there.*

Right now, our navigational readings put us in uncharted space. Can you see that energy wave that’s heading our way, Captain?”

“I see. Ensign Crele, do you have the readings of how we got here?” O’Rourke asked.

“Yes Captain.”

“Follow it back out. Engage now.”

“Route laid out and engaging now, Captain.”

They all could see on their screens an energy wave that was distorting everything in the space around it and it was coming toward them.

The freighter began to move, slowly, then it began to pick up speed, however they were being followed by the energy wave.

“Captain, at the speed we’re going, we’ll be at our exit point in fifteen minutes,” Ensign Crele said.

“I’m getting warning com blasts about that part of space, Captain,” Lt. Mack reported.

“Pirate warnings?” O’Rourke said.

“Yes, Captain.”

“Where’s the next...”

“Captain, if I may suggest another exit point,” Diana said.

“You may.”

“May I approach your chair?”

O’Rourke smiled. “No netting this time.”

Diana leaned close to her and gave her a code and exit point four hours in the tunnel they were in.

“How do you know this is correct?” O’Rourke asked.



“I’ve
inside
information.
Surely you
trust me
enough to get
us back to
friendly
space.”

“It’s the
where, in
friendly space
I’m concerned

about. Too far off our beaten path will get us far behind in our contracts...and our next stop, Hebron.”

Diana had a thoughtful expression on her face as she thought of what to share. “I don’t know your schedule, or for that matter what time it is.” She looked pointedly at the ship’s clock that was running backwards.

“Until we get out of this corridor, I have no idea what time it is either.” O’Rourke was thinking that she would have to check space newsies to see what had transpired. And where were LeMarks and the Geek? She keyed in a search and found both were in sleep pods. Could she trust that they were? The pods were already locked down and on a security watch.

“Captain, we have an energy cloud following us,” Ensign Henly said.

“How long until it overtakes us, Ensign?”

“Five minutes... ah maybe 2. It’s picked up speed, Captain.”

“We’re not bringing trouble to another part of the galaxy, are we?” Lt.

Commander Jade asked in an undertone to O’Rourke.

“I hope not,” O’Rourke said softly. “I can see the outer parts of the cloud are dissipating. Awake all crew members that aren’t troublesome, XO. I don’t want nightmares reoccurring.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” she answered.

“Engineering to Bridge.”

“Bridge.”

“We’re getting some interference with our power. You might want to think of exiting as soon as possible, otherwise we’ll be dead in this space.”

“Diana, have you ever been around here?” O’Rourke asked.

Diana was holding onto the railing near the Captain’s chair as the ship made direction changes. A quick glance at the captain’s screen gave her their location, as best as the ship could decipher. “Yes. If you get out now it’s neutral space.”

“Ensign Crele, exit now,” the captain ordered. “What else can we expect, Diana?”

“Very benign area. Once a year this part of space is busier than Solaris IV. Have you heard of the planet Cubri?”

“That’s where Santo Rio Cabal is?”

“None other.”

“Status, XO?”

“We’re not alone, Captain,” Jade said.

“Aren’t those the hunters that left before us?” O’Rourke asked. “What a coincidence - they are,” she answered her question. “Captain O’Rourke to CPO Henison.”

“Yes, Captain. I see them.”

“Do you know why we all are here? I don’t believe it’s a coincidence.”

“The relic. There must be something that’s connected to the Wesley that whoever has the relic has on him or her. Where are those hunters you had on board?”

“Engineering, can we jump back to our part of space?”

“Not right now. I need to run checks on the *Wesley’s* systems to see just what is working.”

While the captain was working out her ship's problem, Diana suddenly realized who may have the power to change everything. Ati. He obviously followed the *Wesley* after she told him to meet her elsewhere. Of course, she knew he would but she didn't expect all of these other happenings that would draw Ati to board the *Wesley*, but he would if he could. What if he removed something from the *Wesley* that was connected to the relic and the *Wesley*. What if he had possession of the relic? How did he do either?

"Diana, what is it?" O'Rourke asked.

"Ati was here." That she knew with certainty from the object she picked up in the medlab.

"Ati?"

"Tell, Henison and he'll let you know where to go from here."

"Henison? Who's Ati?" O'Rourke demanded.

There was silence over the com channel.

"Can we have a conference about this?" Henison asked.

"Do we need one?"

"The relic changed hands that's a given. If Ati's the one that has it we're going to need to talk before the Hunters get all riled up."

"XO, you have the Con."

"I have the con, Captain."

"Henison, meet me in the conference room."

"*Security Detail is using it for a command post. Is that where you want me to be?*" Henison asked.

"No. We'll meet in my quarters."

"*I'm on my way, Captain.*"

"Diana, is this something I'm going to be arming my crew about?"

"Do you know much about Henison's family?"

"He said his immediate family was larger than a clan of a hundred."

"Yes. His adopted parents pick up children left abandoned across the omniverse. They aren't concerned about species. They're concerned about life."

O'Rourke picked up a change of tone in Diana when she spoke of his adopted parents. "Are you one of them?" she asked.

"Yes."

O'Rourke's face didn't change but her eyes did, to a dark gray that Diana wasn't sure what the meaning was. "We *were* related by marriage?" O'Rourke asked slowly.

"In some cultures, once you're married it's for life. In that case, yes."

"You're a Mortliege."

Diana smiled. "Really, I'm the least of in-laws who you should be looking into. There are many of us and some on the legal side of various laws and some not so and then there are some that there is no neat catalog to fit into like Ati." O'Rourke's expression was not one that looked like she was happy to meet her ex-sister-in-law. "The owner of the *Wesley* probably thought you and she had a lot in common - marrying into a large family."

"To tell you the truth, Henison hadn't crossed my mind when I was signing on with Osmona," she said tersely. "Henison was an episode I had put behind me. A contract fulfilled." Actually, O'Rourke had thought Osmona hired her because she was an O'Rourke with a clan of thousands that traversed galaxies and planets, known and unknown. Mentally, she gave a shrug and decided that was the lesser of her present worries. In-laws that she considered were no longer hers, since to her she had legally severed ties with Henison, would be settled when she had time to revisit the issue.

In her quarters O'Rourke pulled out the bottle of alcohol that Henison had gifted her with to apologize for bringing trouble her way on another occasion.

"He has good taste, hey?" Diana asked.

"How do you know he got this for me?"

"Because it's Henison's favorite peace offering."

The door dinged.

"Security, if it's PO Henison, admit."

He grinned when he saw Diana drinking on the couch with O'Rourke. "I knew you two would hit it off." He held his palm at O'Rourke and added quickly, "Truce. If

Ati is involved, we may have some trouble and moving out of here fast won't be possible."

"Who is Ati?" O'Rourke asked.

"A Telcous."

"He was aboard my ship?" O'Rourke immediately got up and went to her console. She notified ship's purser to run an inventory on *Wesley* for anything that was crucial including customers' orders, and everyone's personal items. Bots activated immediately, according to her screen.

The promptness of bots activating at her command was just how it was supposed to be. Her irritation that she was set up to have her systems fail gradually and the Geek, Ensign Ja all too conveniently appearing and knowing so much to keep them a few steps behind the failures was something she was going to address once she had a moment to breathe. Another annoyance that wasn't bothering her now was the proximity of Henison. His energy wasn't irritating her. The implications she put aside to worry over later.

Henison looked over at Diana then O'Rourke.

"So, what caused Ati's name to be brought up, Captain?"

"Diana brought his name up."

"I found this on the console in the medical lab when we were getting out of our sleep pods," Diana said.

"I figured he had it." Henison reached to remove it from Diana's palm when O'Rourke snatched it up.

"Where did he get this?"

"From my kit," both Diana and Henison said.

"I found it in Ati's kit and removed it," Diana said. "I guess he wasn't finished with it and he took it back. That's a Telcous for you. It's theirs until they're finished with it. I'm not sure how much power the relic will have over a Telcous, but my guess is he's connected to it. They're an old species and there aren't that many left in this galaxy."

"Because they steal and people kill them because of it," O'Rourke said. "This is mine." She said emphatically to Henison. "I loaned it to you. Loaned, Henison."

"They don't steal," both Diana and Henison said.

“And you’ve got it back now.” Diana smiled.

“He returned it right to whom it belongs to, too,” Henison smiled.

“They return what they pick up...when they tire of it,” O’Rourke said. “I know. It’s stealing to a lot of species that don’t have patience for species particulars when it deals with the loss of something of theirs. Tell me what problem we have here.”

“Is Princess Amiee’s group awake?” Diana asked.

“Why?” O’Rourke asked.

“Being official Hunters, they can talk to the Hunters on Cubri to see where the relic is and Ati.”

“Without going into too much detail, what has all this to do with why my ship is here?”

“If a Telcous is still interested in an object even if you remove it and leave the galaxy they are in, the object and the Telcous will be together again.”

“So, as long as Ati is interested in something that belongs on the *Wesley* and the relic, we are all still involved in the relic’s energy,” Henison reiterated. “Those Hunters are probably all down at Santo Rio Cabal. Got it?”

“No.”

“Bridge to Captain O’Rourke.”

“Yes Bridge.”

“We’ve got requests for ship repair from a dozen ships around Cubri, Captain.”

“Contact Lt. Commander Sousa and see if it’s doable and how long, XO. We don’t want to be too far behind on our other schedules.”

“Yes, Captain. You know time is going backwards, don’t you?”

“Yeah. Out.” O’Rourke looked at Henison. “Why is this drama around that artifact continuing?”

“I don’t know. But we all know time is linear and with all the variety of known species, time isn’t a factor for many, except for the businesses that have schedules to keep. This artifact is old and I haven’t heard what its purpose is, but so far, things happen around people that carry it. It was originally thought to be a power object to start new life, but I have my doubts by our recent experience. I haven’t been tracking it for as long

as some of the older Hunters... And I'm not a Hunter, O'Rourke," he quickly said when O'Rourke gave him a sour look. "I can tell you some of the things I've personally witnessed about *this* artifact ...but it doesn't explain why we were suddenly moved from one part of the omniverse to another."

"Unless the Wand changed ownership," Diana said. "You were with the princess, what happened?" she asked O'Rourke.

O'Rourke sighed. "It wasn't where I wanted to be, holding someone's hand on what felt like their vision quest. Princess Aimee didn't feel she had the right to make life decisions for others without getting some feedback from them. Also, one of the Hunters that was with her, was pushed to his death by another who made a play to steal the wand."

"A sacrifice to the sacred. Her doubt is part of the process but not enough for the artifact to leave her. I'd like to know what happened to create this..." Henison waved his hand, "change."

"No one physically removed the wand from her hand...it just disappeared. Where do you learn all this if you're not a Hunter?" O'Rourke asked.

"I've been around," Henison said. "I think we need to wake up Princess Amiee's group or at least the Lieutenant and ask her to help us get Ati to give back whatever he has that's connected to your ship."

"I can't believe I'm involved in this business," O'Rourke glared at Henison then Diana. "Just what is the lieutenant going to do that I can't?"

"Be a Telcous and know what to say to get him to release something he may still be interested in," Diana said.

"XO, this is Captain O'Rourke. Wake up Lieutenant Numbia and have a security bot escort her to my quarters."

"Lieutenant? Numbia is a lieutenant of what?" Lt. Commander Jade asked.

"She's a Royal Guard of the United Municipalities of Colmus that was assigned to mentor Princess Amiee's Hunt Group. Those troublesome girls are Carrion. I'll fill you in with all that information later."

“Carrion? No wonder they were so much trouble. Security bot activated and is recording. It’s nice to see everything working as it should. I hope it’s not an illusion,” Lt. Commander Jade added. *“Lt. Numbia’s lid should be up now, Captain.”*

“What of the ship repair business?”

“Lt. Commander Susa is not commenting on how profitable it will be until she gets each ship in the cradle, their credits accepted, and inspects them up close. Our own repairs will take 28 hours. With all the robots online and working like they should, she said 28 hours is solid. Do you want anyone else awakened?”

“Awake only those we need. Keep me posted and keep an extra eye on Ensign Jin, the Geek and LeMarks’ pod. The medical staff can stay asleep. The medbots will do fine for the crew’s needs.”

“Marks is listed as civilian held for law enforcement collection. His sleep pod can only be unlocked with a LE key. Medical is locked down. Our passengers have your lock and mine on them so we’re safe enough,” Jade reported.

“If LeMark’s is important to someone, I’m sure they’ll send someone to rescue him. Carry on, XO.”

“Aye, aye Captain.”

“When we go planet side what can I expect?” O’Rourke said. She brought up a diagram of the planet below them.

“By this diagram’s atmospheric reading, it’s hot and windy topside,” Diana said. “You’ll need protective covering for all parts of your body. There isn’t anything that I know of that has that type of protection, with the exception of the off-world metals that make up their bridge that separates the wasteland on one side of the river to the other. There is a city that is protected by a bubble created by unknown ancient visitors about an hour’s travel time from the bridge.”

“The dust will suffocate you if it gets on any breathing orifice, which means skin. Eyes need to be covered or you’ll go blind,” Henison said. “The dust is silicon and when it comes in contact with liquid, like sweat, it hardens and seals what it covers with a nonporous surface.”

“And this place has a huge event once a year?” O’Rourke asked.

“Once a year the winds and heat abate for three months and the weather is tolerable for most without protective wear,” Diana said. “The event planners also have machines that surround the area to warn if the weather should change and will erect a protective shelter around the area for eight hours. Enough time to evacuate.”

“You’ve been here, either of you?” O’Rourke asked.

“Once,” Diana said.

“I heard about it from other visitors,” Henison said.

The door dinged.

“Security, identify,” O’Rourke ordered.

“Lieutenant Numiba of the Royal Guard of the United Municipalities of Colmus guardian to Princess Amiee,” a voice answered promptly.

“Admit.”

Lt. Numbia entered the room as a BlueTier. The species was not a friendly species so few people knew about them aside from the fact you didn’t approach one and hoped one didn’t approach you.

“We have a situation you may be able to help us with,” O’Rourke said. “Would you like to have a drink?” She held up the bottle of cognac.

Lt. Numbia quickly changed species.

“Don’t mind if I do,” Lt. Numbia as a species abler to savor the drink.

“You didn’t offer me a drink,” Henison said.

“No. I didn’t.” O’Rourke filled two glasses and handed one to the lieutenant and then Henison.

O’Rourke held her glass up to make a toast. “May we end this joint operation to mutual satisfaction.”

Everyone toasted to the official opening of a joint tactical operation with another organization or nation.

“Does this have to do with the artifact Princess Amiee released?” Lt. Numbia asked.

“Yes,” O’Rourke said.

Lt. Numbia nodded. "I had originally counseled her not to become the holder of the artifact. She lacks the depth for such a task. I am pleased she let it go before anyone died in our group, though a death did occur. It was an important lesson for her to learn."

"The person that holds it now, has drawn us all, ship and crew, into this perpetual chase of the artifact," O'Rourke said, "and until he loses interest in something that ties the *Wesley* to him my ship is at his back."

Lt. Numbia cocked her head to one side. "There are a dozen species that can do that. Which one is he?"

"Telcous."

"One of the most tenacious if the object is still new," Lt. Numbia said thoughtfully. "What do you want me to do about this?"

"Can you convince him to let the *Wesley* go?"

"Where is he?"

"Santo Rio Cabal on Cubri."

"Interesting place to be," Lt. Numbia said slowly. "Is there a reason?"

"I don't know. We're orbiting Cubri now. It's where we all have ended up, including Hunters."

"Why indeed. He has the artifact and he has come here. I don't understand the reasoning since he is not a Hunter," Lt. Numbia said. "This is not the season to visit the planet on this side. Nothing living that I know of will survive above surface at Santo Rio Cabal."

"If I leave what would be the consequences?" O'Rourke asked.

"I don't understand the dynamics of this artifact as a specialist would. Princess Aimee would be more knowledgeable on it but I don't recommend her becoming any more involved in it. She's not stable after letting it go and she may turn violent to the new holder. When something consumes your life for years then you disconnect the vacuum it creates can be unbearable," Lt. Numbia said.

"The Hunters have their headquarters here and store their Archives below Santo Rio Cabal, outside of the walls of Mosqu." Diana said. "The Hunters would have not only information on the artifact but the stories of other hunters that have experience with it."

“Below, as in bunker?” O’Rourke asked. “That’s showing some sense considering the weather is so extreme.”

“How the homeless survive in Santo Rio Cabal is a mystery to the local city government but it looks like the Hunters are the reason. Since those citizens have been coping with survival for centuries the city sees no need to add housing or safe shelters that will encourage more homeless to join them,” Diana said.

“I’ll give a try at helping with your Telcous,” Lt. Numbia said. “This is so unusual for an artifact to be so manipulative with so many things at one time.”

“Let’s get this done so I can leave. I have a business to run.” O’Rourke glanced at the time. It was still going backwards rather than forward.

“If you plan on dropping onto the planet surface in that weather, just what do you have to protect you from the dust?” Lt. Numbia asked.

“Nothing,” Diana said. “There is no clothing that can drop anyone safely in that weather. Maybe within the Great Dome we can find an underground tunnel that goes out of the city but their destination and structural integrity is questionable. They’re only used by the street people that the city doesn’t want to acknowledge and a population that stays hidden from the legitimate city citizens.”

“You’ve been there,” Lt. Numbia said.

“Yes. But the tunnel I had used was iffy then, so by now it may have collapsed. Santo Rio Cabal’s carnival is considered a foreign invasion that the City of Mosqu is pleased to not be a part of. They don’t like foreigners because they try to get them to take care of their poor and homeless. To them it’s no one’s business but their own.”

“We need to get this moving along. I want to get back to space where I belong in. Captain O’Rourke to Lt. Mack.”

“Lt. Mack, here, Captain.”

“Give me a detailed layout of the city Mosqu, underground as well as above ground. I’m looking for a place to land a small craft safely.”

“Yes, Captain.”

On her monitor a schematic of the city appeared and as the levels began to be scanned a 3-dimensional came up and then a holograph appeared above the monitor.

“Okay. Let’s look for someplace we can safely get down to and start our search for this character.”

“We?” Henison asked.

“Alright, you and Lt. Nambia. Don’t take forever and don’t get stuck.”

“I’ll go along, just to keep them out of trouble,” Diana said.

“If those two are back and you aren’t I’m not waiting around for you,” O’Rourke said.

“I’ll remember that,” Diana said. “Right there is where I had last landed. It looks like it’s been reinforced.”



Chapter 23

Henison, Nambia and Diana entered the city via the Hunters tunnel Lt. Mack directed them to. One of the ship’s that was being repaired gave them the code to the tunnel since they were considered there on relic’s business.

Nambia led the way with Diana close behind.

“We may as well be in an underground cavern.” Diana said to Nambia’s back. She turned to look at Henison and didn’t see him. She walked back to the tunnel where the shuttle was parked. Henison was sitting on a stump conversing with a Hunter.

“Henison?” She started to reenter the tunnel when she felt someone nearing her. She turned quickly and knocked Nambia’s hand away.

“I was going to stop you. You can’t reenter the tunnel without a code to exit. The library will have the code. You will kill yourself if not hurt yourself,” Nambia said.

“What about Henison?”

“For whatever reason, the Hunters are restraining him. He’s not being hurt. We must keep going to find the Telcous,” Nambia said.

“Ati is his name. Where to?”

“I take it you haven’t been on a Hunt before.”

“There isn’t any strange ceremony I have to go through is there?”

“No. But whatever is responsible for us seeing only this long corridor, will decide when to show us more. We walk until then.”

Diana looked around her doubtfully. “The last time it took the captain’s appearance to trigger the relic’s energy.”

“It required a number of objects to be in proximity for things to happen. The situation then needed her but now it might not. Who knows until it happens. This relic, as we call it, might be something else entirely and not a relic at all. There’s the entrance.”

Before them appeared a doorway with a sign identifying it as a library.

“Is this a dream?” Diana asked.

“No.” Nambia rested her hand on the glass security scan. “While I rest my palm here, concentrating on the scan, another security scan is activated that does a cellular scan against their database that started compiling a profile on us the moment we were within scan distance of this planet.”

“Of course. We’re in Hunter country. So…” Diana stood still and let the scan run over her without putting her palm down.

“It’s not going to hurt you to play the game,” Nambia said.

“You can change your biological profile. I can’t. The less bits of me that I leave the more comfortable I feel.”

A door opened silently. Before them was a desk and on both sides were listening booths. A Promothean waved them forward. He pointed to translator devices near his desk. Nambia put one on.

“Greetings, Keeper of Knowledge. We are looking for information on the relic that has brought us here.”

“Hunter. Greetings. You and everyone else is looking. One user has signed off. A port is available. Booth 4, Hunter.”

Nambia nodded and headed in the direction the Keeper waved.

There was only room for one of them so Diana waited outside the booth, which she would rather. Nambia was the Hunter, not her.

Diana saw Ati stepping out of a booth. “Ati.” He didn’t hear her. He was joined by a Posi that blocked him from view. Diana tapped on the booth then went to see Ati. The Posi turned to face Diana, drawing a short knife when she approached.

The library Keeper shouted something Diana couldn’t understand but the knife was quickly put away and a fist bigger than Diana’s head came at her.

Nambia was suddenly in front of Diana in the shape of a Coloboth. It was a wild animal with four front paws that had four long talons to fight with and three back legs that did more than balance the creature. It was a natural enemy of the Posi, with both fighting for the same hunting grounds for the last century.

The Posi said something to Nambia then turned and left the library. Diana went after him with Nambia close on her heels.

“Did you find anything we can use?” Diana asked as they hurried through another corridor.

“Ati was researching Santo Rio Cabal and why it was originally set up as the celebration of death.”

“By the gods,” Diana muttered. “I hope he’s not going to try something noble like activating the relic here.”

“He would?”

“Yes.”

“They deserve it. Their society is destitute and only resurrects once a year. I would think they would want more.”

“It would mean they have to change their entire cultural identity. From the City of the Dead to...what?” Diana asked. “I don’t think they would want to become a thriving city like their neighbors and what of them? It changes the entire planet not just a tiny part of it.”

“Nothing remains the same. Life is about reinventing one’s purpose as the situation warrants it. They’ve been frozen in a life stage where all their time is spent on survival, giving them no time to contemplate on meaningful questions that connect them with the omniverse.”

Diana glanced at Nambia. “O’Rourke said the princess didn’t want to make life decisions for others - isn’t that what the holder of the relic or wand will be doing for these people? Shouldn’t they have a say in a decision to change their way of life?” Diana asked.

“Does an earthquake ask those in its vicinity if it can quake? Does a storm ask for permission to be? All things are inescapably connected.”

“The power of the relic is for a planet that is devoid of life...”

“No such thing,” Nambia quickly interrupted.

“Okay, okay. You’re right. I’m like the princess, not sure about being the one to determine changing a whole ecosystem I don’t know anything about. And then there’s the planets surrounding and...who chooses the planet to use the relic on?”

“According to Princess Amiee, she imagined a planet that had been devastated through no fault of itself but rather from those living organisms that abused their stewardship. So, she probably sent the intent and the relic followed it through.”

The two continued down the corridor in silence. It sloped down to a stairway. Two sentinels were posted at the top of the stairs.

Diana nearly leaped in fear when they both came alive, morphing into large guardians that growled at them, shaking the walls of the tunnel.



Chapter 24

There were four council members standing with two submembers behind them and four behind them and so on. It was a huge chamber with the standing room only crowd at the back of the chamber and Diana and Nambia at the front, nearest the door, in fact, both women felt the wall at their backs.

“So, the relic has changed hands once more,” began one of the four.

“It is not a relic exactly,” one of the submembers corrected.

The four at the front nodded as well as others.

“Just what is it then?” asked Diana curious.

“It takes whatever shape the holder believes it to be,” another submember responded.

“Bredo, step forward please and tell us about this relic,” hummed one of the four.

An insect crept forward. “I am Bredo of Jubin. Hunter Historian of Nam.” It rubbed its front legs making a clicking noise. “Ruger is the name this energy has chosen to be known as in this space and time, if time as a measurement is accepted. It first made its existence known to our Founder,” here everyone bowed their heads for a moment, “in a dream. It revealed to Founder what it is, a restorer. It restores life from the tiniest cell to an entire planet’s eco-systems. It wanders through space using other life sources to transport it. Not all who carry it are aware what they are carrying as it shape-shifts to what the carrier wants to see it as. What some carriers have found is that it grants wishes making some wealthy and famous for as long as they have possession of Ruger. Ruger will leave without warning if another being with the right energy appears. Carriers have no say in Ruger’s length of stay and not all carriers have the ability to initiate Ruger to restore or create. Founder wrote that this relic of unknown origin could very well be the spirit of a powerful wizard.” Bredo looked at Diana and Nambia and made clicking sounds as it rubbed its front legs together. “But Hunters know that there are all sorts of stories that go with a relic to entice a following so that it can draw energy from the followers to continue existence.”

Others in the room rumbled with agreements.

“From my current studies of Ruger, it decides who its carrier will be and for those that can use its ability to restore, it also chooses. It knows the intent of the carrier it chooses before the carrier knows. With Princess Amiee, her dreams and profound compassion for planets that have moved from a living eco-system to what appears to be a non-living planet, was what Ruger was attracted with and chose her to communicate with. I have been tracking its movement and found that it has been moving toward her for six space standard years. Each carrier it has used brought it closer to where she was to meet it. Alas, Princess Amiee has found that she can’t bring herself to use the keys to the divine, and initiate the energy of Ruger to restore a planet in Elton’s Ring. Her fear and unwillingness to use Ruger lost her connection with it. Another connected at that

moment. Ati Le Jo Be Sedee Ro of the Lost Peoples was aboard the ship Ruger had used to transport to Elton's Ring. So, where we are now with Ruger is that Ati is planning on restoring the planet Estazs to what it was before the last war."

He bowed to his listeners and returned to stand behind the four.

"No one here is a scientist, but we all have seen pictures of what a planet looks like as it responds to a reseeded. It usually takes five years to be fully inhabitable but, none know how long Ruger will take to restore Estazs to its once land of wonder, something that many of us only heard of."

With that said, the room emptied as if the chamber were holograms, including the leaders.

Nambia didn't need to grab for Diana to get her to leave the room as both sprinted up the stairs as if their lives depended on it.

Henison was impatiently waiting in their shuttle, nervously tapping on the monitor that was changing readings rapidly.



Chapter 25

O'Rourke was going back over her report before their docking at Hebron. It seemed almost too good to be true, but she had great faith in her crew and what she had envisioned when she first took over captaining the *Wesley*, was nearly happening.

She had turned LeMarks over to the nearest space port that had a Merchant Marine Office. The Geek, Ensign Ja Sing was released from his contract with the *Wesley*. Ensign Ja Sing was being blackmailed and since he would not confide in Captain O'Rourke she let him go. After all the flying about, they missed one appointment which was for the better since Captain Alad on the *Harrodidu* was waiting for her, per the Harbormaster JuJa.

She glanced at the disembarking personnel showing on her screen. Diana was easy to spot. She disappeared into the small office.

Life was going to fall back into a humdrum business of running a freight business, only this time without all the malfunctions, she thought. Henison disappeared off her crew files. Diana said he was probably going to hang around to make sure whatever Ati was doing went smoothly.

Jade was enjoying her promotion by helping Sousa train her security team. She should have warned Sousa that Jade was head of her security on her last war ship. There wasn't anything that went on that Jade didn't know about.

She could feel the mood on the ship was much happier with everyone passing their listing tests. Those that moved into the nicer quarters were told they may have to give them up as she hired on more qualified crew members. There was some grumbling.

If this good mood with the crew could last until they made it to the shipyard, that would warrant a celebration at their docking, though she had warned them they will be also required to keep up with their listing requirements. They were a repair ship and new parts for new ships needed keeping up with.

However, with the pirates still out there anything could happen between now and docking in the shipyard.



Diana watched from the office as the guards moved off the shuttle from the mining planet. She didn't have to identify herself. One of the guards spotted her the moment he stepped onto the platform. He was very good at noticing potential trouble. The banding on his femur gave his age as eighty turns. Living in space doubled the life span of Loucistas, though not many cared for space travel. His antenna twitched but it may have been more from the noise in the small office on the space waystation.

Hebron was originally a waystation morphed into barracks for two shifts of guards for the mining planet's workers who were prisoners who worked for early release.

While *Wesley's* repair team helped remove broken machines from the shuttles storage bay, Diana and the guard moved off to a private corner, as private as small rooms offer.

“So, you found me,” he said without any fear.

“Did he die peacefully?” she asked without wasting time to see if they were discussing the same thing.

“He had no hard feelings for anyone...is that what you mean?”

“Yes.”

“He knew you were looking for him,” he said.

“I wasn’t hiding the fact.”

“Why were you looking for him?”

“That’s our business.”

“Is that all you want to know?” he asked.

“Why did you go to him if you knew he was in trouble?”

“I was curious why he wanted to see *me*. It’s not like we were friends. We shared a brief time in war and bread but that’s about all

“But you were curious?”

“I had nothing better to do at the time. He was a professional soldier that no longer belonged to any army. He was too sick. No one wanted to hire him unless it was a no return trip. I spotted him on a flight going to Santo Rio Cabal. I was going in another direction but he passed a note to me. Meet him on the bridge at Santo Rio Cabal. He had something for me. I was curious. When I saw him on the bridge, he looked like death caught up with him. It was that war on Brit where gasses and chemicals were used on the soldiers. I’m glad I missed that war. He handed me a chip, I read it and...quit being a soldier and took up this job, until I can think of something else.”

“Five standard years ago is a long time to think on.”

“There are a lot of greedy people that have been following it’s progress and killing those they suspect of having it. Some even charged for retrieving it for their buyer before they even had possession of it. By the information on that chip, no one owns what he was given to transport. It is an entity of some sort that disappears and reappears. I found it where I was told it was, I carried it to where I was instructed to take it.”

“He never touched it.”

“I don’t think so. He might have been saved if he had, but when a mortliege is on his trail maybe he figured not even the grace of the Ruger would help.”

Diana didn't bother to point out to him that a contract with a mortliege didn't necessary mean death. But that wasn't why she was here.

"I don't think Ruger's business has ended..." she said thoughtfully.

"No. The newsies a week ago were talking about Relic Hunters gathering in mass on Estazs and it wasn't for their yearly celebration, and then they scattered into space."

"Why are you hiding out here?"

"Someone said my name in connection with the Ruger. Relic Hunters aren't nice if you're not one of them."

"So you hid it on the *Wesley*?"

"Righty. Like I was told to."

"If I found you, maybe someone else will."

The noise he made could have been a laugh. "I've lived longer than anyone in my swarm. I could die any time now. I have no hard thoughts against anyone."

Diana pulled out a talisman. "I found this among his things in a locker. I understand you gave this to him. I was instructed to pass this note of credit to him but seeing as how you spent time with him, as it goes with soldiers that have no family, their belongings go to the person that waited with them for death."

He took the talisman and rubbed it. "Yes. It is what is given to one who is about to cross over into the Land of the Dead. I gave it to him as he crossed over."

Diana turned and left the guard holding his talisman and the note of credit that would make him wealthy.

WO Tos Reedly was taking the shuttle back to transport one of the larger machine parts to the *Wesley*. Diana got a lift back with him.

"Took care of your business pretty quick. They say people who take that type of job have something to hide," WO Reedly said.

"Maybe from a bill collector," Diana said.

"I wouldn't hide on a waystation," WO Reedly said. "Only one way out."

"Maybe they aren't hiding."

"Only one way out," WO Reedly repeated.

Diana notified the Watchman that she had returned. She headed to her suite to think about what she was going to do next. She was expecting her next assignment would be waiting for her in the mail queue. Though Hebron was her destination she had booked passage to the next space port and expected to be off to another galaxy. She had heard a small taxi had picked up Lt. Nambia and her group which freed up passenger cabins. Hopefully, the captain wouldn't downgrade her to one of those cabins.

The Q's hatch swished open as she neared it. That was a good sign. On the Q's console a message flashed.

"Captain O'Rourke has invited you for dinner." She read the names of the others that would be attending. It was congratulations to Lt. Commander Jade who passed her certifications to be XO. It was nice of the captain to include her.

She sent an acknowledgement. It was going to be interesting to see who was going to be at the party and who wasn't.



Before O'Rourke, Lt. Mack was standing before her silent and uncomfortable. He failed his certification for security. He should have told her he couldn't read hexmacil code.

"Lt. Mack, you need to figure out how to pass this test by the time we reach our docking repairs or you'll be spending that entire down time studying."

"I've always had problems with code. It's the only thing about command that makes no sense to me. If you had gobbles instead of hexmacils I'd be okay. I'm sorry Captain."

"Ask Lt. Commander Jade to help. Maybe she has some suggestions. She had the same problem."

"Yes, Captain." His voice sounded hopeful.

Lt. Commander Jade looked at O'Rourke and then sighed. "Another student? You keep giving me these problem officers. So, what are we going to do about that port we missed?"

“I don’t know at the moment. Listen, we’ve got a ship wide party for your promotion and everyone else that the Merchant Marine Board has certified, and you’re worrying about another day’s problem. I’m happy that with the MMB’s certification of my crew, HQ which no longer has a legal hold on the *Wesley*, will have to challenge MMB and not me.”

“What about all the bodies we have in the life pods?”

“We’ll deliver them to where they’re destined to and notify customs that we have unauthorized cargo inside our authorized cargo.”



End