

The Chronicles of the Hunters – The Wesley

I Christie

Prolog

Under the bright scorching summer sun Santo Rio Cabal was a colorless shanty desert 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 enclosed 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. It was a celebration for the Week of the Dead. To keep visitors from too closely seeing the town's real face, the bridge, the only structure that weathered well, was painted the brightest and gaudiest of all the newly repaired and painted structures.

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 a galaxy of 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 a victim may turn into mob justice where their death would fit into the celebration. Though the majority of visitors were there for entertainment with a heavy emphasis on cultish overtones, there were those that came in memory of someone who had died.

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 were also the trash and discarded items left behind that were treasures for those that had 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 death. Der Jägers (the Hunters) they called themselves, made a yearly pilgrimage to honor a highly regarded member who died mysteriously in Santo Rio Cabal. 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.

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 glowing in the darkness 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 some relief for those that did not have air-cooled clothing or water bottles. 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 was 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 fag 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 under breath.

"Yeah, so you are," the smoker drawled in a hoarse sarcastic voice. The breath was heavy with the sickly smell of disease.

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, they tossed brightly colored scented wreaths into the filthy river. The dancers then led their followers to bars, street vendors and sex shops on the other side of the bridge. The crowd followed example, throwing their purchased wreaths into the water and began the chant their leaders yelled as they 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 contaminants in the river. It helped, though not for long. The offending polluters up the river continued their habits of dumping their waste into a river that affected a neighborhood that had no political clout, so the desert people of the town would have to wait another year for their river to be cleaned up.

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 brave soldier who will never receive his just due.

Chapter 1

Five 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 wouldn't have this nice ship 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."

"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."

"Baby," she mocked. "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 so 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 insufferable at the most inopportune times, like right now.

"I made my mind up last night," she returned sounding distracted. She didn't expect a grateful or even courteous thank you.

"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.

Ati manipulated his controls, by passing their target ship's security and tapping into their internal communications.

"Alright," she whispered as if they may overhear her. "Make the offer, Ati. Just don't sell my body or soul or you're going to be a very sad person."

Ati rolled his eyes dramatically and sent a hail to their target ship. Diana 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 spaceship was easy stuff.

Diana chuckled 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 assigning to that position. 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.

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 enunciated 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 she asked. She asked it every time. She had a hard time believing he went through any of the Merchant Marine Officer's Academies.

Her jaw stretched into a joint cracking yawn. Sighing, she sat up to prevent herself from falling back to sleep. Her pillow was too inviting. The lights came up to another level, revealing an atypical captain's sleeping compartment. It had space for a reclining chair that could be recessed into the wall, and what couldn't be seen, a private library inaccessible from anywhere else on the ship. 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 Executive Officers and Lieutenant Commanders were sent advertisements from companies doing interior designs with the expectation that should that person make Captain; they would want their quarters redesigned. It usually came with the promotion. Her employer, Queen Osmona was free with her credits in that respect, sweetening the deal for her to take over running her flag ship of freighters.

At present, the one reading 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.

What was taking him so long with the information? He could ask the blasted computer, 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 should not 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. She shook her head in amusement. Nope. 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 places on a whim. That was before she assumed command of her first ship.

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 we 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 cleaning bot parts she had neatly laid out. At the kitchen kiosk she selected warm water with a twist of lemon and 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 a 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 was the cause of the damaged freight so his concern for making it up somewhere made sense...however, he forgot he had cut fares on the freighter. Why was she still hopeful that the deadhead is actually going to think beyond himself? She really should rethink this change of heart stuff. It was so much easier to drop deadbeats off at the next stop to let them find their own way home, or for the serious offenders, dumping them out portals without space suits so they didn't get another chance at injuring others. Nowadays it was a lot more complicated, and she was giving some three chances to straighten up while with the outlaws, handing them over to local law enforcement. It behooved her to give men and women who were monsters in one space sector a chance to be monsters in another by turning them over to people that just may release them for the right bribe. And that brought her thoughts back to LeMarks.

He was not just a dishonor to anyone that bore the title of officer but a mistake. She gave a silent sigh, wondering how many chances she would give him to stop using outside favors to be promoted to inertia. Well, his duties were nearly that now. He had been with her for two years starting at second lieutenant and her file on him and recordings of his incompetence were larger than anyone 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.

"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 small cabins, set her up in the owner's stateroom," she said with finality.

Only one other time had she rented out the owner's stateroom and that was to a sheik's family whose ship had become crippled under pirate attack. 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. Cmdr. LeMarks objected, his tone suddenly changing to alarm. "I'm moving..."

She laughed aloud, her tone 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. Cmdr. LeMarks," she interrupted.

The scuttlebutt that she heard from below decks was the crew was tired of giving up their quarters for undercut prices. If the fare didn't provide a profit margin, then a bonus wouldn't be awarded the crewmember displaced by a passenger. What LeMarks game was, was anyone's guess, but the repercussion, low crew morale, was enough that O'Rourke had removed his authority to allow passengers aboard. 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 and crew.

"Cabins on deck 2 not..."

"Stealing from your own peers isn't healthy practice. 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 are what you were charging. In case you've forgotten, you took on extra passengers at half-price and gave them each their own cabins at the expense of others."

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 five times, you're financially and physically responsible for all the PPs *you* bring aboard. I am going on record for the sixth time, Lt. Cmdr. LeMarks in notifying you that you don't have the authority to change the price for anything on board the *Wesley*. Our service charges have been set by me, the captain and monitored by Logistics, which these days will be our purser, Warrant Bue. Each disciplinary action I've taken to help you understand this rule hasn't sunk in. We will take care of this problem later."

The purser, a master of procurement in supplies 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 and his official bank account, Warrant Bue had another account to charge. It would be the third charge to that secret account. O'Rourke wondered

when LeMarks would say something to her about the depletion of his hidden credits. 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 panicked whisper.

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

"Don't tell me where I can put PPs you incompetent deadhead," she said irritated. "We're not putting passengers on deck 2 on the other side of the U, out of sight out of mind. Idiot. He has no sense of security."

O'Rourke accessed her console and reviewed what access rights LeMarks had left. He had the equivalent to a child passenger. On the bridge, the other officers had normal authorization for their duties while LeMarks could only view what was going on. She doubted he understood what was appearing on his screen.

"You are being so cynical, Captain," she said unrepentantly. Since they didn't have any armaments, it wasn't like they were a military vessel that could do anyone damage. LeMarks was second in command in HQs mind only.

Weekly reviews from all the department heads were in. She reviewed what was written about LeMarks since she was irritated with him. After ten minutes, she 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. Everything she had on LeMarks, and her decision was dumped in a packet to be sent to the Merchant Marine Offices. Let them worry about his lack of competence. It occurred to her that she could order him to take a certification test. She had every right to.

Pleased with herself, she signed off her terminal and rose from her seat. Her eyes rested on the dismembered cleaning bot that had gone awry. 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.

Disgusted, 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. Then she would go see who this Diana Rue was.

I really don't know what LeMarks is thinking. Where was he planning on putting her? What was I thinking? I should have asked him. What's his payoff in this sudden taking on PPs? Smuggling? No contraband has been found. Maybe it's just a power trip. Not with his account being charged. What is his game? There has to be a greater reward than what is being deducted from his account.

Standing on the workout mat she stared at herself in the mirror. She had a very long face with furrows for brows. This was not how to start the day.

"Alright, O'Rourke. Give it a rest. You have thirty minutes. Make the best of your time."

With the exercise facility locked up against any intrusions, she began her session. Focused within, she moved slowly, choosing the soothing T'ai Chi rather than a more vigorous kata. When finished and feeling more alert she headed to the shower where she always began her day under hot water arranging her to do list.

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 small 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 once on duty and out of uniform. Once caught was enough. He slumped further into the command chair that didn't comfortably adjust to someone his size.

When he was still a lowly lieutenant, he thought working alone gave him leeway in his attire. He found out the hard way that officers didn't have permission to remove a tunic or unbutton a collar while on duty. His assignment was boring. He was to just sit and watch a scope with several others watching the same thing on the bridge.

As punishment he was detailed to trap duty with a repair-bot that wouldn't let him take breaks. For weeks he couldn't 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 indulgent 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, the OD. 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 the captain's chair. Lt. Emert, who he relieved, sat in *the* chair.

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 offload 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 were not 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, Lt. Commander," Lt. Mack offered, keeping his lips from curling up into a smile at the XO's discomfort with his tight clothing and probably not understanding the abbreviated terms.

Lt. Commander LeMarks gave the lieutenant his best glare to prevent him from pointing 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 didn't admit that he believed she would carry out her threat, the weakness of his knees and upset stomach attested to how 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 the new passenger. What if Evangeline Meso, the notorious femme fatale pirate was on board disguised as a passenger? he reasoned. 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. He thought no one knew of his obsession with her.

A flash on his console went unnoticed.

"Sir, ship and PP passed security."

LeMarks glowered at *his* lieutenant for interrupting his thoughts a second time. Then he remembered that he had a passenger to bring aboard, except he couldn't leave the bridge. Who was going to escort her to her quarters? His eyes still on his lieutenant slitted as he realized who it logically would be. 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 more lithe and fit body that made 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 opened up another channel. "Lt. Commander Jade." It startled him that that was who he asked for. He would have taken it back if he could.

"Yes, Lt. Commander LeMarks."

His brain shut down as if waiting to recover from who he had called. Why had he called her?

"PP arriving in repair bay seven," Lt. Mack reminded.

"Ehh, PPinseven," he mumbled quickly. 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," Lt. Commander Jade interpreted correctly. "I gather this has been cleared by the captain?"

"Captain's orders," he blurted as an intimidated schoolboy would. Realizing his clumsy handling of the interaction he cut the channel. Sulkily he sank lower in his chair, crossing his arms over his prominent 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 awakened and had made good time to their posts. They were standing in their protective bubble overlooking the ships' 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. Three bridge officers, not counting LeMarks, ten crewmen from maintenance and engineering working the ship, six security members always roving, and her 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 ship was snug in their energy sling. Lights along the deck signaled docking maneuvers were completed.

Docking lights brightened the messenger ship, throwing interesting shadows on the draped shapes along the bulkhead and behind LCDR Jade. Her gaze swept the dark shapes looking for any movement that should not be there then returning her attention back to the ship. Before the locks were confirmed the smaller ship'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. Unless this person had a bomb, though it was not likely, taking over the *Wesley* was more profitable than blowing it up.

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 were used. 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 around 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." LCDR 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 just inches from the cuff of the long-sleeved coat. The PP was not wearing a dark shirt 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. 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 smaller ship was out of *Wesley's* wake the freighter would increase 3gs above cruise speed to make up for the slowdown.

"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 to not ask 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 unless asked.

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, and damaged freight.

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 the girls stepped into the lift. This proved to Jade that her choice 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 practical to hibernate, but it gave her some satisfaction thinking about it. They obviously were finding a way to bypass the security bots. How they were doing it was going to be moved up higher on her priority list of things to do.

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

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 hair at the back of Jade's neck stand up. She glanced at the teens and then the PP.

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 N.O.W., 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 her thoughts moved on to more important things.

"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. Section A is forward and around that is C. An assortment of officers, NCOs and a dozen reserved guest suites are in A and C. Not nearly as nice as the Q, but better than the lower decks."

Jade nearly snickered in amusement at calling them guest suites. Due to staff restructuring and redeployment originating 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. These were the salesmen that sold products that required a 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 mix bag of species, remained behind at the last stop since their trainees were not picking up their instructions as easily as their front office thought they would. But the rooms were technically 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 to one of the crews' cabins. If that got out in dock scuttlebutt, they would have a legal issue on their hands with the company that paid a lot of credits for the cabin space. What was he thinking? He wasn't that stupid. Even a lowly grunge on the *Wesley* 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 loiter. On this deck, they're active and

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 woman 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 as some species wore. Her hair was damp but not wet and there was perspiration along the hairline. Since her room was only a few steps away Diana wondered what she was doing before she changed into a fresh uniform, not taking the time to allow the hairdryer to finish its job. Working out at this hour?

Diana gave a mental review of the captain's file, but files left out things like why a well decorated rear admiral in the UPT galaxy fleet to be promoted to vice admiral chose to 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 lucky 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 or lucky pieces, though she found them as unreliable as people.

Diana's eyes tracked to the captains. Silverish brown eyes were studying her as intensely as hers were the captains. 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 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 them all, why should she care?

Curiosity, another part of her answered.

Captain O'Rourke stood in front of the owner's cabin wondering what Vicky 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 as if 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 a clue to her species, 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, Diana Rue."

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

"You're going to 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 the released prisoners, minerals and dropped off new prison workers. The mines supplied raw material for three corporations that purchased 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 insurance for the civilian population was high whereas prisoners had none. On the station a five-person crew monitored the planet below, serviced the barges, and gave the few guards below respite on weekly rotations. 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 all this?"

"Just 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 aren't 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 two hours. Who had she met besides Jade...LeMarks? But he hadn't left the bridge nor spoken to the passenger. The transaction was handled by the pilot of the messenger vessel. 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. LeMarks will be occupied with other duties."

"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 ship. 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 a 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."

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

"Would you like to join me for dinner tonight?" O'Rourke asked.

"I don't want to take you from your duties," Diana politely replied, hiding her surprise. The captain was not shy about finding more about a curiosity aboard her ship.

A nice get-acquainted dinner 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.

"Alright. Dinner with captain is on my schedule. Time and place?" Diana asked, trying to translate the glint in the captain's eyes along with the other body signals.

"My quarters, if you don't mind. 1700."

"Aye, then. Place and time are 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 host a party at the next three larger 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. So far O'Rourke has had an understanding with most, but it didn't mean polite refusals would always work.

The owner of the ship, 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.

Chapter 2

From experience Diana knew that would be the last official visit. Clothing came off, pockets emptied and draped 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 sidetracked, 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, entertained, or taken on potty breaks.

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 on 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 closet.

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 shower, 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. Diana was seldom studied and was invisible to many. That was why she adopted her name. The mythical 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 sight.

Her colorful thighs disappeared under the bubbling surface and then her tattooed shoulders. All that was above the water was her head, devoid of any markings. Unlike

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, Lt. Cmdr Jade stood outside her door. "Just don't stand there, Vicky. 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 this run 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 was drinking. "Not what you're having. Too strong for me." 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 slid out beneath her feet. "So, what did you find?"

"Thank you for not saying *my* security bots. We're lucky we weren't boarded by pirates when LeMarks ran security."

O'Rourke hummed her agreement.

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 passengers," O'Rourke said.

"I found each deck's security logmsgs 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 accesses was made. I dropped it off with the Geek to check out," Jade said.

"Just what kind of chip is it?" O'Rourke asked.

"I've never seen that design before. 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. "Aren't we a clever pair."

"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 anymore. 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 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?"

"I suggest discretion when they go into programs the Geek can access. I don't know how sensitive he is about his territory or what he considers his territory. If my crew's dysfunction wasn't such a big distraction, I would have outlined everyone's duties clearly, but even then, I've been pushing cross-training to compensate for the slackers."

"It's a captain's challenge that makes a ship's security officer shudder. I don't agree with some of the personal 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 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."

"I don't know if it's them or our attitude or just a lack of separation of management and worker," Jade said.

"Military and merchant marine?" O'Rourke asked thoughtfully. "No. Both require discipline and professionalism. That's what they're missing. It will come when they become more proficient in their work. HQ has been undermining my crew by transferring competent workers off my ship. They've reached their quota and no longer have a say in my crew, so these last two weeks of dropping off the worthless and picking up new listings is getting us good returns."

Jade snorted in her hot chocolate and there was silence for a moment as they both went over the travesty of officers HQ had been dumping on O'Rourke.

The listed were hired from ports, terminals, or just about any stop a spaceship made. If anyone wanted to work on a freighter, they need only apply where there was a Merchant Listing, take a test to see what their skills were, hand over whatever certificates they have to verify what they claimed in their application, and be put on a waiting list. HQ had been playing a revolving game with O'Rourke, removing qualified listed and dumping poorly qualified on her. However, O'Rourke was keeping up, though, both women were getting weary of wondering if some were too good to be true or too bad to believe. The length of time it took to find out what the true worth of an enlistee or officer was 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, Vicky."

"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's take when bringing on passengers to augment their usual business."

"It shouldn't and wouldn't be a problem if the security bots were doing their programmed job. What I want *now* is an end to this scattering the passengers about the ship wherever a crew member wants to earn a bonus by offering up their bunk. That leaves us too vulnerable. At the next port stop, all passengers move to deck four. Two passengers at the most 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 aware of it, 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 to isolate them back to three?" Jade asked.

"Deck 4 has a large entertainment center to keep them occupied. Deck 3 is too close to Deck 2. In the future, we won't be offering corporation suites in our spare officers' cabins. I want all those quarters, with the exception of the Q, filled with Officers to NCOs. All cabin consoles on 4 will be isolated from ships systems and..." She caught Vickie's expression. "Alright, so you know the drill."

"Aye, aye Captain," Jade said.

"I've also decided that only two people will be booking passengers...you and I," O'Rourke said. "I'm removing Sousa because she has too much on her plate now. She's requested promotions for six of her people. That means certifications and moving crew around. 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 up and haunt them."

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

"For a while there it was the Scorpion and Frog. It's morphed to the Farmer and Viper. We now have the 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 quoted.

"What did the inspection of deck 8 show?" O'Rourke asked, ignoring her jibe.

"I dispatched Ensigns Gloin and Burlin to check it out. They didn't see anything more than the security system is disabled. A short, they said. 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."

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

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

"They wouldn't last long," they said at once.

"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 running 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?"

O'Rourke caught her smirk. "You think I'm not up to an old-fashioned inspection, hey?" She set her glass 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 and there stamped on the side was the manufacturers reject stamp. LeMarks bought cheap and pocketed what he marked on the purser's manifest. I hope that was the worst damage he did."

"The purser repacked that crate and sent it to LeMarks address that he gives as home. WO Bue found out he has a second account he's not declaring and it's brimming with credits so all losses he causes me are being charged to that account. I don't think he knows yet."

"People with hidden accounts are people worth keeping an eye out for. Thanks for the heads up. Keep it between the three of us. There's a leak somewhere and the less people know about that account, the easier it will be to find out whose nosing in our files.

"Don't forget the Geek. He knows everything."

"No. He doesn't," O'Rourke said. She tapped the code in for the private entrance to the workout area. Both stepped in and looked around the area before going in any further. With the security bots malfunctioning, nothing was taken for granted.

"I know you don't like me saying this, but Henison really has been getting some great deals on supplies that I know would make any supply chief drool," Jade said.

"Now why would I not like to hear that?" O'Rourke asked.

"Well." Jade frantically thought of something neutral to say and wasn't able to think what.

"That's one of his jobs. Like all the other jobs he does, and he's good at them all. Lucky us. Leave it at that. He's balanced out what brainless twits HQ's been dumping on me," O'Rourke said.

"I've been meaning to ask but didn't want to overstep my position..." Jade said.

"Ask." O'Rourke walked to the lockers and turned to face her friend, daring her to say what she really meant. She hated it when those she most trusted couldn't be honest with her. She wasn't a sensitive person so taking offense to another's personal opinion on how she ran her life wasn't likely to happen.

Jade took a breath and her eyes showed she decided not to ask.

"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 recommendations, you have a good case to take them before the Merchant Marine Board, Freighter Alliance, and just about all the other orgs that protect a Captain from unfair practices and sue them for the *Wesley*. Why haven't you?"

O'Rourke decided to let her get away with changing the subject. It would come up again, she was sure.

"There are rules on all merchant ships no matter what the company that in order to file a complaint, I need comprehensive reports from my department heads to substantiate my claims. About a year ago, files began to disappear on the very people I was objecting to on HQs computer, or so they say, so all the detailed reports were gone. The Geek hasn't been able to explain that phenomena. It sounds to me like the names have a code embedded that erase the file given a certain period of time."

"HQ has got a game going 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 involved anymore. She's out of this space sector."

O'Rourke stepped through the first security door with Jade following. The next scan would take longer.

"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. We cover our own territory though we serve different types of customers. *Wesley* is the only one that covers a wider stretch of territory due to our trolling for ships that need repair."

"But we have a planned route."

"Yes. But haven't you noticed we arc around certain ports?"

"Like I've had time to take in navigation."

"I'm sorry about hiring you on for a position that was...hijacked," O'Rourke said.

"It's not like LeMarks is going to last long. It's given me time to brush up on duties I never got around to when I was in the fleet. I should have impressive credentials on my record when I do step up to XO. I never thought I would be serving on a merchant freighter."

"She used to be a military freighter, if that gives you some comfort about not going too far from what you're used to."

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

"Maybe they want the *Wesley*," O'Rourke said.

"Another captain? I know that won't happen. If they choose to permanently dry dock her, who would they replace the *Wesley* with? We're the best at what we do. Our

Why *Wesley* didn't have the most up to date working security was also a curiosity. Captain O'Rourke's reputation alone should have most troublemakers 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, mostly having to do with her had no competition in one of her services - small 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 waste credits and time in another galaxy?

She rolled out of the large bed with the need to move. Her choice of clothing was *tempra* that changed color to blend in with the environment. She carefully selected what she would take with her, tools that would gather information her senses couldn't. It was not 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.

Pushing on the panel in the ensuite, it opened to a small closet; giving 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 became transparent.

She glanced behind her 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 closet where there were neatly racked weights at the far end of the room and 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 were nearly nil to the captain's ears.

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

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 activate anything that would alert anyone of her presence she armed her NPD, No Presence Detected. 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 days, nor were there working monitors or bots.

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 weren't any 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 incase one of the warned species didn't read. Cautiously, she stepped into the wider section of the tunnel that allowed 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 idle curiosity about the ship moved to a more active interest.

The ship didn't feel right to her, and this feeling was only from less than an hour of looking. A mediocre trip just 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, that is a short person that is, and Diana was not that small, so it was a squeeze for her.

She dropped down the grav-tube, her hand sliding along the drop bar which with a squeeze stopped her fall just above junction 8. Verifying no one was present she then swung onto the deck. From her previous study of the ship's diagrams the corridor she was now in would take her past the ammunition depot, supposedly one of the most protected parts of a ship, a scattering of crew quarters and four cargo bays. 8A was where the damaged and returned goods of the ship's various customers were stored. That meant, deck 8 should be the most scrutinized deck next to the captains, Diana reasoned.

Returned goods were a hot commodity for the crew, and she was sure the once weapons storage was now a very large safe deposit box for things not trusted in the cargo bays. 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. The return fees would have been in bad business taste, since everyone knew it didn't have to be returned. Every captain had her, his, or its 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.

Diana was curious about what items were held back that the Carrion would be interested in or maybe it was something else on deck 8.

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 wouldn't be noticed unless looked for, and then they would not be able to identify it because it was too distorted.

She sniffed the air, picking out the faint scent of Carrion. The maintenance hatch was what she was heading for. It wasn't that she disliked going down the corridor and through the front hatch entrance but rather because 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 above average. So why was access to other places lax?

Quietly she moved, mindful that sounds echoed. At the vent opening she aimed her surveillance device toward the stacked cargo scanning for bioforms. 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 a hatch lock releasing was loud in the cargo bay. Suddenly 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 smelled like dead flowers.

Captain O'Rourke and her chief of security, Lt. Cmdr Jade, stepped into the cargo bay, dressed in light armor as if expecting trouble. Now O'Rourke was showing the quality of gear she 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 toward the two officers.

Surely, they wouldn't attack the captain on her ship and if 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 for a moment, recalling all the gossip she had heard on her travel through various ports and ships. There was nothing about the Carrion Nation going to war. Carrions were interested in challenging hunts for relics. The more elusive the better. They looked for treasures that others thought were merely cultural tales. If they found anything they were mum about it, but because they continued this practice from generation to generation, Diana suspected it was now part of their cultural heritage, a practice well worth each generation's effort.

It wasn't the type of hunt Diana was interested in. Once a treasure was found there were no more surprises to it, except perhaps your competitors. Diana was a solitary hunter and didn't like to be interfered with in her business, especially if it would bring the material death of another. Death required ritual to facilitate an honorable passage to the beyond the mundane.

The colors on her device indicated a Carrion was ready to drop on it's 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 online. 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. In a corner she blended in with the hull. Pressed against the bulkhead 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 over their own movement. Now she could see what they were doing. They were bringing the security system back online. 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.

Diana's fingers moved slowly so as not to attract attention from the three moving around the room in a search pattern. Then they changed to 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 it fascinated. The stories are true. They have an aversion to smoke not matter the species they altered into.

The moment they opened the vent grate three guard bots came actively from their alcoves. Depending on the type of alarm, hatches and exits would lock down with only security people able to bypass the locks. How the ship's crew handled the alarm would tell her how important 8A was. 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 lieutenant commander.

Diana decided to wait for 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 Lt. Cmdr 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 were absent from 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 orders to sit tight while another group searched the decks. Each elevator or deck access would have its own team. Either the chief of security and the captain quizzed the deck security officer, or they were the deck security. Did that make this access more important than the others? That was something to ponder over while restudying the ships schematics.

Pausing at deck 3 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 or for variety. 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.

Puzzled Diana shook her head. She stepped back into the tube and pulled herself back into motion to deck 2.

Between deck 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 through the

corridor she studied the names on the doors. Seven officers beside the captain and owner's suite shared deck 2. The rest were empty.

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 up after two hours of sleep. It was all the respite her body needed every eight hours. Sitting before her terminal she checked on the search progress. Thirty minutes later she was distrustful of any monitoring equipment and knew she needed to do something 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.

Lt. Cmdr. 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 his bots. It would go onto his record and at the next port he would be dropped off as incompetent. At the next port she knew the port master well. She would ask him if he knew of a merchant seaman that would hire on at the low pay scale HQ was paying plus a bonus the crew made when they made a good haul.

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

"Captain," he drew out slowly as he trawled around for a ready excuse, "I'm going to have to make some time for that." He took a deep and dramatic sigh, "I already have a repair table scattered with parts putting together the diagbot. It went and dumped its core memory..."

This was exactly why she didn't send her cleaning bot to his shop for repair. No telling what program it would be returned with or when.

"I want the logs in thirty minutes PO Comam. Continuation of your service on *Wesley* is under review. Dismissed."

For a very brief moment the impulse to give the captain a glare came up but PO Comam wasn't suicidal. The scuttle butt from below decks was that when Captain O'Rourke laid down a line it was best you didn't cross over it. The consequences were immediate. Those that didn't believe it in the beginning and challenged her had not seen any of them again. Not even on leaves to the usual spacer bars. It was scary to think some of those characters, as tough as they were, could disappear, and no one knew where. His

contract was up for renewal, he was very aware of that and was thinking about maybe looking for another ship, however, Captain O'Rourke was good at sharing bonuses with her crew, and not just with the officers.

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 forth coming in providing her with what they needed. 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 the extra credits with.

"Drats," she muttered. "They'll have to wait for that part." She quickly tapped a response to Lt. Cmdr. Sousa, her head engineer, and sent a copy over to Lt. Cmdr. Jade, whom she was still grooming for the second position, XO. 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 one.

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 in front of 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. Being 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 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 suite's food kiosk for menu choices.

Wesley's hydroponics grew sweet lemons, oranges, and four different species of luscious apples, a valuable commodity to trade for other fruits and vegetables on some of the stations that had their specialties. She had slices of fresh fruit for desert.

The ding sounded.

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

"Good evening," Diana greeted.

"It is. You're punctual. A trait captains like. 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 grape 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 in the front room 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 Mess Hall one on deck 4 and decided it was not my cup of java. A little *too* wild. 6 was more to my liking."

"Bored passengers are dangerous. So, what did you find interesting on deck 6?"

"Crew gave me the location of a gambling game," Diana admitted with a grin.

"On deck 8 at 20 bells. I hope it's allowed?" After Lt. Cmdr. 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 the gesture.

"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 and direct intervention, and if it got out of hand, it would be Jade that stepped in. She already had one of her agents keeping an eye on the activities.

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 fine and expensive liquor."

O'Rourke's eyes slitted for a moment and then she relaxed. "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 put off with the defensive response. The captain's face was flushed from drink. Diana knew she normally didn't drink, which had her wondering why she broke out such an expensive drink to share with a stranger. The questions all night from the captain were polite inquiries into what she was about so *her* comment and hitting the mark probably annoyed the captain to no end. But then, she knew most of the answers.

"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.

"Ooh. Not even a player," Diana teased.

"What about you? Are you a player?"

"If the person is interesting, 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 chair and showed her guest to the door. "I'll walk you to your suite."

Diana smiled. "I can find my way. Good night, Captain, and thank you for this evening. Your choice of food 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 her 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. No passengers.

Someone in downtime, she thought. A captain like O'Rourke would not allow personal scents to be worn while they were on the job. 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 smell didn't linger.

Cooking. Now that wasn't in her file.

After Diana left, O'Rourke sat back in her chair and mentally sifted through what little she had gotten out about Diana Rue. 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 Vicky what she found out about her.

Her door chimed.

It had to be Vicky who would be asking questions she didn't have answers to. She was going 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 an 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's 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 were alright," he told her seriously.

"I'm fine so leave on the next crew rotation," she told him impatiently.

"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?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "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 was 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 modern, now five years old. It was date stamped with the name of a city, Santo Rio Cabal 220022. 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 told him 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 nutty people go to, to celebrate craziness," 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 just recently broken 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 glass 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. It had been a point he had asked her a long time ago. 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 their own bunk 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 apples?"

"Not apples. 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. Lt. 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 deck 4 during certain hours from anyone trying to leave or enter it without the Chief of Security 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 sidestep 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 couldn'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?"

her own sweep of the suite confirmed her scans that there was no new monitoring devices placed in the suite while she was gone. She deactivated the screamer, not wanting to waste a good guard dog 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 section C would be busier, being closer to the enlisted crew's quarters. It was an official rule on all ships both civilian and military that upper deck and lower deck, that's officers and noncoms do not mix during social off hours on the ship. In the military it was carried on even off base, so she was not worried about running into any of the officers, namely LeMarks or Jade. Her knowledge of the crew gave her an idea of who would show 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 she was a challenge. They would let the less skilled play the first few games before stepping in.

Four merchant crew members were setting up the area. Pillows for those that like to smoke the drug biloz in a reclining position were scattered about. It was a favorite on the docks since it was not addictive in itself. 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 nearby. 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.

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 young 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 Comatian it was emoting rather than Common Speech, CS.

"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 she was really 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 bosses' 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 get 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."

"He won everything she had," Hedoc explained to Diana. "I think there was something she liked in that stack." Hedoc nodded to the pin Friz was wearing. "She wasn't expecting to lose it. Her group leader was upset too."

"I kind of like it too. I'm not throwing it into the pot."

"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 sounding pleased with himself. 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."

"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 on the same route. Meeting different people in different situations is a stimulus. It's a big universe with more dimensions and rules than I ever thought could be." She smiled widely at the two. "But I enjoy it."

"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 where 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. Hedoc likes river rafting. Some of us tag along and get our adventure fix for that bit of time off."

"It's a rush," Hedoc agreed.

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 heightened 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 palmed 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 out others above him, thus availing him a slot to move in. LeMarks was a good example of what having someone in HQ in your pocket could do for you. They all hoped they would not be promoted into jobs they knew nothing about. It was embarrassing when you had a good CO.

The hatch swished opened and LeMarks looked up ready to start his rehearsed speech to 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. Two birds with one stone, he thought triumphantly.

"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 of tossing 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 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, deck five."

"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, through rationally she knew he wouldn't know that that was her normal time 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 shouted.

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 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 the 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, to be investigated immediately.

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 left and to Lt. Commander LeMarks, Ma'am, each time they happened," she informed her looking uncomfortable.

"And?"

"Lt. Commander Hudson said he reported it to the head of security and that was Lt. LeMarks, Captain. Now that LeMarks is my CO, 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 Chief of Security ..." 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. Hudson was a relief to dump in the hands of the port police. She always worried about her back with him.

Now she had what she needed to kick LeMarks out of the merchant marine. He broke the number one security rule and endangered the crew. 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.

"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 OD. 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. Cmdr Jade ASAP, but she was in a hurry and..."

"So, you had contacted her to meet you on deck five?"

"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 deck 5 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 deck 2. You don't need to share with two others. Ship Computer Facilities, on. This is Captain, O'Rourke."

"Captain identified," the ship replied.

"Move Ensign Henly's belongings to Deck2C."

"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 2C9 for Ensign Henly's occupation immediately."

"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 officer's 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 break following her completion of today's report. Notify the proper department heads. End update. Thank you, Ensign."

"Thank you, Captain."

There was no need to double bunk or in her case triple bunk Ensigns and NCOs because of the downsizing of her staff. She needed to bring that up to the department

heads, or better yet just put it in the computer and let it do the sorting out. Whose personality fit with whose was usually done by the computer anyway, with a personnel director overseeing it; however, that was one of the officers that went with the downsizing. She really hated HQ. Next lease agreement she would hire a consultant to protect her rights on her ship.

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. "No."

"No, Captain is the proper address, Lt. Commander LeMarks. Officers don't glare without a reason. It's bad for morale. 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. 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..."

The hatch cover closed out whatever he had to say. She keyed in her code to keep him in the room until she let him out.

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 to be finished?" she asked.

"When do you want it?"

"Tomorrow."

He nodded.

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

"Lt. Cmdr. 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 deck 5. No living organisms *normally* are 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. Cmdr. 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. Cmdr. Jade."

"No."

"Okay." O'Rourke left him, intending to stop at sickbay and speak with Lt. Cmdr. 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. It was not a very large fiefdom. It consisted of four medbeds and sixteen medbots, and of the sixteen, six were down with repairs according to the last update she received on his department's operation. 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. Cmdr. 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, that's Lundie, mark 220027." As much as she detested the man, she couldn't 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 Tarish, tearing the bed down out of boredom?" she asked lightly.

Ensign Tarish considered Lt. Cmdr. Jud Trap his boss and not the captain since he was assigned to the medical bay. 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 Lt. Cmdr. Jude 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 audit department 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.

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 well-being and efficiency of her ship.

In the beginning she felt sorry for Lt. Cmdr. 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, and the lucky ones had either sought help or resigned.

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 Happenburgs

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 street kids who knew the rough and tumble world and had the courage to face adversaries that seemed to know the battle plan and could adapt quickly to the 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 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, HQ 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 HQ 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 the capital of Creon, where the military headquarters 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 capital of Creon, 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 changed into her uniform hoping that it 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 Happendburg, was the new Secretary of War - Darc Happendburg's protégé, her father.

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 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. 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. Imagine her surprise when 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 to this day. 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 Helen O'Rourke. Through Henison she learned Ridgemon had a grudge against her personally for being the first child of his father. It should not have made any difference since she had no connections to either parent's side of the family.

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 so many ships and personnel to a suicidal encounter 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 popular thought.

Ridgemon Happendburg 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 list. 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 warlord's 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 months later, when 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 in 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 setup 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 then her new employer, Osmona, was leaving for her new job, running her new family's business. She knew she had got the job because she was an O'Rourke and Osmona had faith that the blood of generations of traders on land and in space was strong in her. Maybe it was.

Probably because O'Rourke was still feeling the bitterness of the war, the moment she returned to her quarters she didn't wait any longer to send her challenges against LeMarks qualifications to the Merchant Marine's Court. Waiting for his official records from the MMA in another sector was no longer necessary. She ran a scan on the staff meeting room and found he was conversing with someone. She dampened and isolated the room, cutting off any communication to the outside world.

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.

O'Rourke caught a quick flash of a flower in the corner of her screen. It was a sign from Jade. It was a code they had once set up in case the ship was boarded by pirates. It meant she was sulking 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.

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 Lt. Cmdr. Sousa."

"Go ahead, Sousa."

"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 bioscanners engaged. How long until we hit the first marker?"

"Ten-ten."

"Well, then, let's use a geek toy and see where and who is sending the message."

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

O'Rourke put a hand over her mouth to keep her laugh from being too loud. It was not Ensign Ja 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 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*."

"So..." 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. 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."

There was a moment of surprised silence and then, "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 to claim that we were spreading a rumor. This smells of a legal cluster bomb."

"Aye aye, Capt. That it does."

Chapter 5

Their arrival at Port Sal was uneventful. Harbormaster Bruner was surprised when O'Rourke asked to see him privately. His secretary showed her 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.

"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.

"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 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 beamed 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 presume you have everything recorded? Good. I enjoy doing business with you 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 relationships." He glared at the three who looked like they were caught doing something illegal. 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 to 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 ten 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 diagnostics on ships to verify what refitters or others had told private yachts owners they needed done. Diagnostics weren't expensive on their part, since they gave them plenty of repair jobs.

Mack was left OOD, Officer On Deck, while O'Rourke went to dinner with Harbormaster Bruner to gather information on the local politics. That was always useful, and 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 white lightning. It occurred to her as she stored the bottles in her quarter's cooler, that maybe Diana would like to try it.

Dropping her coat on her couch, she watched her repaired butlerbot 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." Turning to her terminal she dropped into the chair next to it. "Terminal on. Give me a visual of LeMarks," she ordered. A small flower appeared in the corner of her screen and then disappeared as a visual of LeMarks appeared. Jade was still skulking about.

"That must be uncomfortable," she said, looking at LeMarks with his head pillowed on his crossed arms, hunched over the table, snoring loudly. "How can he sleep with all that noise? At least he's neutralized. Time to relieve COB. Terminal off."

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 Exec Officer, a second in command on the *Wesley*, she had studied the personnel files both legal and illegally 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.

It was not until Osmona turned over the operational side of business by 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 ship. It was a rather odd thing for a retired battleship 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.

She tapped her comm. 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 of. His status as a Merchant Marine Officer was revoked immediately. 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 LeMarks quarters. His status is civilian. Pack his stuff in crates for disembarkment. Get the service bots in those quarters scrubbed and reprogrammed."

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

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. If Captain Alad was involved and it could be proved, he would be listed as undesirable and not be able to get docking space on any legitimate space station. If he was involved and it could not be proved legally, he would not be given any legitimate business in this part of the galaxy with anyone legitimate, and it would mean no one would give him docking rights even if he needed to stop.

It seemed a gauntlet had been thrown down, and she was just ripe to take them on.

Her thoughts moved on to Diana Rue. Her inquiry 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, Ma'am."

"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 she signed over her freight business to Tipp's Conglomerate in exchange for a business she had eyes on in the 6th Sector. 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*?"

"Good question and I don't have the answer. As soon as it was made official this morning out pops a mole in our office that's been working for Tipp's as an insider for the last three years. She swears that's not the case, but no one believes her. That's when Osmona said she and Tips began negotiations. It also explains why you've been getting real losers for crew and why I wasn't able to prevent the transfers. Captain Alad of the *Harrodidu* wants your clients."

"Not 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 service. 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," Killian said.

"They won't make it in any legitimate business."

Killian shook her head. "It's just a feeling. I'm not sure how long I'm going to be working here. As you can see, it hasn't even been announced officially yet and they're already moving their crap in."

"We'll keep in touch," O'Rourke assured her. "If you need a job, I have openings." O'Rourke grinned, thinking of Killian who swore off space travel to make a go at family and marriage.

"I got more bad news for you...or your crew. They want to notify your staff and crew of the change of ownership themselves, and they will have a head doctor there to take notes. They'll be sending packets along with tests that your crew must take to prove competencies for their jobs. 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. You can legally challenge them on that. Any crew replacement is at your discretion; however, they'll pay the lowest wage they can get away with to discourage you from hiring anyone worthwhile. I read Osmona's contract with her captains. I'm going to send you a copy and anything else you can use to stay profitable until your contract expires. You'll need ammunition. I think their intention was to crew your ship with losers so when this test packet came, you would lose too much to fulfill your contracts."

"Not likely. I still run a tight ship and cross train."

"Another thing...Don't let them tell you that with new ownership you have to renegotiate your lease. Osmona said all contracts will be honored to their fullest until they run out. That's also your five-year agreement to acquire ownership of the *Wesley*.

"What do they plan on doing with the *Wesley* meantime? Decommission her?"

"Could be the plan. I noticed some paper passing between the new HQ board chairman and the spy. One of them had the title of sale for the *Wesley*. I'm not invited to the meetings, you know. Though in name I'm a board member they have a guard that politely lets me know I haven't been invited."

"Three years they've been working on this?"

"Looks like it. Could have been more than that, but I don't think so. Osmona was full tilt on building up her freight business with the *Wesley* as her flag ship, so to speak, up until she got involved with that DiRlin family, three years ago. Gods but did she have to fall in love?"

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

"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 and influence in that family to bring back their business edge and she's doing it."

"I didn'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. My warning - if they break contract, the *Wesley* is yours, per agreement with Osmona's lawyer and Tipps. If Tipps is caught undermining any of her freighters, their ownership is null. Also, their

purchase of Osmona's freighters doesn't null the contracts of her freighter captains with their customers. I have to go. Stay tuned, gal."

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 her new owner, except O'Rourke picked up something in his voice that gave her the impression he was not being exactly truthful. What was he hedging about? And 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 Tipps gave her more than suspicion that for three years she was being set up...but for what? A takeover of her customers? The galaxy was bigger than Tipps, though the idea of running away was not what she wanted to be accused of.

It took over an hour for GroLomotn, the new chairman that oversaw the freighters Tipps bought, to outline 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 due to they wanted to review if the need was there. When he finally paused, looking too smug for his own good, she began, thanking Killian for the heads up.

"GroLomotn, let me be perfectly frank with you. Number one, you can't change the contracts *I've* signed nor have any say in my business. You interfere with my business; the *Wesley* becomes mine. Number two, the shipyard visit is not only paid for but mandatory with an inspector's letter which I'm sure you have, as it goes with the purchase of the *Wesley*. If you cancel the shipyard overhaul of the *Wesley*, you will be interfering with the *Wesley's* legal and contractual business, therefore, *Wesley* becomes mine. Number three, you cannot change the *Wesley's* homeport because it's breaking a contract I have where I am, which again, should you interfere with my business, the *Wesley* is mine. This communication is being recorded and will be used against you. I will add to this official communication that I am fully aware that Rieland is heavy with pirate activity and my freighter is not an armed armada to defend itself much less rescue ships needing repair. That's what the space patrol forces are for. All in all, my lease agreement with Osoma doesn't change with change of owner. It was and still is, the intention of Osoma and me that I become owner of the *Wesley* at the end of my contract."

"Think you're smart, do you? I've heard all about you, O'Rourkes. 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 with the unpredictable in space and unreliable crew? Think well on that," 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, GroLomotr. If in ten years your band of pirates haven't been able to wow anyone away from Osmona's freighter business, buying her out and getting rid of her fleet service still will not get you the business. Your heavy-handed interfering with the leased ships will bring your owner up in front of the space court. Are you ready for that battle?"

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

"My suggestion is to give it a rest and wait the year and a half out when my contract is up and make a profit on my legal business."

Whatever he wanted to say didn't 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." She shook her head at that thought. "No. They would add something debilitating and while we recover, wipe out everything else. They're not the type that has patience, though they've been working this for three years." She rubbed her chin. "Where the heck are you, Vicky?" she asked softly.

Leaning forward she made a call to her financial manager. 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 dirty 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. 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 and get in a week of camping out in a tent. Not too roughing it out."

"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."

"I'll keep in touch. Nice hearing from you. I gotta get. I have the kids today so we're all out gardening. I don't want them to dig pits when a small hole would do fine. Write more often!"

"Right."

O'Rourke closed her link and began reviewing her messages from her department heads...that is with the exception of her missing security chief. She checked again on LeMarks. He had not finished the first test and was sitting partially undressed in his chair. Security showed no more outside communications. Whoever his friend was had not

figured out how to get him out or was not interested. That meant whoever was messing with her ship and crew, would step up their operation. They were too deep to back out.

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 had done a stint 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 for 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 Mack, she nodded to the new yacht in the repair bay. "What does that remind you of, Lt. Mack?"

"Looks like skunk burns."

"Uh huh." 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 we've been bought out 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?"

"Yes. But that should not affect our contracts and lease of the *Wesley*. 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 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 number 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. Port Sal was going to have to start replacing their sixteen plants because they outlived 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 refurbished the part as much as they could.

PO Colo glanced at her and gestured to the part and then gave the thumbs down. It could no longer be fixed. O'Rourke nodded, she understood. *Wesley's* store's 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 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 for 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 unless they had been putting the credits aside when she first warned them.

O'Rourke turned her attention back to her passenger. "We plan on staying another two hours."

"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."

"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 aboard a ship that is targeted by a pirate crew. I like the one-on-one type of encounters, if it were to come to that."

"Well, what we have in armaments, thanks to our previous owner who was not military minded, is not enough to stop a boarding party... but we'll get by."

Diana smiled at what was left unsaid, like since the previous owner left, what the military minded captain did add, since the ship would become hers at the end of a contracted time, was a good start at arming her security teams.

"So, you plan on doing anything else for excitement?" the captain asked.

"After 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 Lt. Cmdr. Jade to see if it was alright if I disembark, but I did reach a lieutenant in security," she mentioned.

"I did approve your name on the disembarking list," O'Rourke said.

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

Chapter 6

"Captain, Port Y greets us and notes that though we're early, they have a slot opened for us," 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."

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 good practice since schedules are important, so the harbormaster must be dying for any gossip from Port Sal, hoping to hear something new. It meant, in all probability, that their new owners were known.

"Ensign Crele. Notify Lt. Cmdr. Sousa when we're safely tucked in, she's cleared to begin her operations," she directed her tactical and astronomic officer. Ensign Crele was promoted by her from a NCO. 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 Urales 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 the 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 -- long life iffy at best.

An hour later after her short exchange of information with Harbormaster Ofensa, neither woman mincing words about the pirate 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 the teenage vixens leave 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 bosom hailed her as she stepped off the elevator.

"Yes, bosom."

"I have a message from the harbormaster's guardsman, Captain."

She took the message. "Thank you bosom. Did you see anyone nosing around our lines?"

"No, Captain. Lt. Cmdr. Sousa gave me, and the others orders, that no one is to be allowed to hang around and if they don't heed our warn off, summon assistance."

"Good. As you were, bosom."

"Aye, aye, Captain."

In her ready room she opened up the communiqué. It was the official letter from Port Y notifying her that they didn't have the resources to keep LeMarks in restraint until an official from the Maritime Office came to collect him. They also didn't have the authority to grant papers to someone whose identity was being questioned; therefore, she had to take him with her. O'Rourke glared at the harbormaster's message while waiting for security to escort LeMarks to her ready room. Port Y was locking down their security 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 refused your disembarkment. I don't want to waste ship resources guarding you, so my vote is a sleep pod. Security, take this civilian and put him in a pod and lock it down. He's under arrest."

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, deck four, 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, if they step out of line, they will end up in a sleep pod for the rest of the trip. We don't have time for their mischief. Can you impress that on them Ensign?"

She grinned. "I sure can, Captain."

"You're shaping into a good Busar, Ensign Corrie. Charge them the common fare and escort them to their quarters with no side trips. If they complain about the change in price, they can send a complaint to HQ. If they send, let me know. I would like to point out who is legally responsible for LeMarks's price scam. I hope they sue the scrap metal off them."

"Yes, Captain."

Captain O'Rourke looked after her, wondering why she found that a delightful task. Before the elevator closed behind her, she called, "Don't forget to be accompanied by 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.

On Port Y she went looking for an old friend who had her finger to the pulse of most of Port Y, her visitors, and gossip on docks. Queenie Kamacu was what many called *the* Queen of the Hive. She ran a tight house of pleasure that neither employees nor customers wanted to cross, 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 healthy, clean, didn't do drugs, nor gambled. She wanted them to be cognizant of who they were working for, and it wasn't their drug dealer. If they needed drugs to do their chosen jobs, then they needed to work elsewhere. Drug dealers and customers knew not to bring any substance onto her premises or to deal with what she considered her family.

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 schoolgirls before getting down to some serious talk, which was all 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 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. 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 now 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

"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. Cmdr. 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 them because his previous COs didn't believe him. When he came aboard *Wesley*, transferred as a deadbeat, Lt. Cmdr. Jade took him under her wing, seeing something others couldn'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 the 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 not to 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. What experience teaches you is that your instruments only see and measure the known. That leaves a lot of unexplained and unnoticed."

"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 Lt. Cmdr. Jade know."

"I'll do it myself."

"Alright. Give me another thirty minutes...maybe less."

"O'Rourke!" the 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 ship to shore 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 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 Otoo's Re and meet up with *Raptor Cinq*. They're reporting trouble and need a fix. Think you can fit them in?"

"What kind of trouble, do they say?" she asked cautiously.

"You notice 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 say's 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 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.

Lt. Cmdr. Sousa rolled her eyes and offered, "A virus it is 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.

"So, what can we do differently to track it to a source?" 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 her in sight in two minutes. Captain, we haven't picked up anything in this area that shows anyone's been by."

"Send out Geek sensors on all sides."

"Aye, Captain."

"Be vigilant, Ensign Hale." Only the bridge crew was supposed to know the code word for trouble, but she was sure everyone knew she was expecting trouble. Listening to the scuttlebutt on the docks and seeing the burn marks on the hulls they were repairing was enough for everyone to be on the alert, even without being asked.

"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 in the yard. You'll be sharing quarters with the same people as in *Wesley*. If you want to make other arrangements, start thinking about it. The cost has been prepaid by Osmona, her last good deed before turning us over to Tipps." She didn't add that Osmona had given 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 happen to like being captain 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 blacklisted 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 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 crew as permanent, unless he wanted to move on.

"My contract to own *Wesley* in a year and a half is as it stands. All the contracts I've signed with customers are good. It doesn't matter who purchased the *Wesley* for a year and half just so they can have a percentage of our business, I'm still captain. From this moment on, any addition to our crew is by my choice alone and who goes by is my choice. All promotions are at my discretion and what you are now is what will go into your personnel file to our new HQ today. You already know what I expect if you're still uncertain after the certification tests, 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.

"You've already have been notified by the new owner's that they want to verify everyone's qualifications for your ratings and jobs, claiming the previous management wasn't concerned with certifying people they assigned to *Wesley*. They have challenged credibility with the entire crew's qualifications, including mine."

She grinned at that revelation, knowing her lawyer was going to challenge them and maybe she would have *Wesley* sooner than a year and a half.

"I believe, with the pushing we've been doing with the training and cross-training, that those worth keeping will be the ones that rose to the training challenges and learned their trade and more. Some of you I've promoted without HQ's knowledge, because I didn't feel it was their business, but your promotions are registered with the Merchant Marine Registry. If anyone you're managing needs help in preparing for their tests, the heads of your departments do their best to help. If you are having problems, ask someone else who may help. It will develop your skills and give you a better chance at promotion in the future. 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've been weeding out the deadbeats and we'll continue."

"Captain, *Obermans'* 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 wanted *Oberman* and his idea was to form a partnership with his crew to buy it. There's only one captain of the *Wesley*...me. There will be only one owner of *Wesley*, me. You all have a lot of work to do. This meeting is over."

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 Iond Sector. She expected warning beacons along the perimeter that would warn them they were too close to the unexplored area. A military patrol usually was nearby to warn or remind ships crossing beyond the boundary of the Iond Sector that it was an unexplored sector, and no one was known to return. There was talk on some docks that it wasn't the military that kept people from crossing but the people themselves.

Wesley was too vulnerable to be traipsing around in unfamiliar space.

"Bridge, this is the captain. Status?"

"Couldn't locate our target, Captain. I've sent every sensor I could out there. Per your direction, we've terminated the search and have turned around. We've hit the highest gs we can safely travel out of the area. Our present location is one hour outside of the first marker to Port Y."

"Very good."

She stared at the star chart looking to see how their path had altered due to their search. "Resume our normal headings at 6gs until we get to where we should be if we hadn't been waylaid, then resume normal speed."

"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 people 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?" Diana asked.

"No. It's too far off our normal route."

"It's scuttlebutt along the outer military space posts. I'm a Knockabout, we 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 outer boundaries.

"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 in front of 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 martyred death 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 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 2nd, and the captain was unconcerned. Supposedly they were close friends but not intimately close.

"Well, don't expect Klinga to be joining us. 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.

"I like to see how long it takes to reel in a shark," Diana said.

"Catch anything yet?"

"Oh, yeah. Only I keep throwing them back in. Too little. I'm waiting for the big one."

O'Rourke sat at the table near the door 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 regulars. Others hop in when they step out."

"So, who is the big shark?"

"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 leader'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. He likes to break hearts."

"Meaning, he only likes to gamble with what another considers too valuable to lose," O'Rourke said.

"Yes. He then sells it to someone that can hurt the loser with it," Diana said.

"Why?" Her startled question had Diana lifting a quizzical eyebrow. "I mean, I've met a lot of people that kill because they like to see the last spark of life leave someone's eyes, or people that torture because they like to see someone lose their dignity..." O'Rourke stopped, realizing she was sharing more than she wanted to.

"People without conscience need something to let them know they're present. For people that give pain to others, they're so removed from feeling that they need others to scream and cry the pain for them. When they have no feelings for themselves or others it's because their pleasure center in the brain didn't develop."

"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 tell 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. After all that is said and done," she grinned ruefully, "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 about 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 with 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 amongst your crew. So, you lay down hard consequences to anyone that works with the enemy. The ones to worry about are the plants among your crew, posing as someone that will watch your back or become your friend or someone closer. There the consequence of betrayal is immediate death, or you lose ships and crew. So, you need to know for sure that who you're killing is the traitor 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 was intended. Here, life and death isn't with a lot of canons and ships going up in flames, smoke and belching bodies."

"It's all about survival, no matter what 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. Legally he can't," O'Rourke said.

Diana grinned. "I'm glad you have that covered."

O'Rourke raised an eyebrow but didn't ask for further elaboration.

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 entered her quarters and they were silent. But, then again, she never trusted anything completely when it came to her life, and that gave more weight to what had awakened her.

Sounds and movement of the ship, though barely discernable to most, were acutely noticed 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 themselves 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 slowly. 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 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 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 bone 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 shortcomings 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 retraced fast enough and Diana grabbed it and twisted it while lifting him off balance. He tried to make 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, dying himself.

A drugged-hyped soldier wearing a computerized suit of armor; single minded and focused so that even near death he was dangerous. She jumped, kicked him with both feet to the chest when he said die, knocking him to his back and jarring his suit's circuits. Her follow up kick broke his neck. He should have read the warning label on 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 the 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, kid." 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 caught her attention. She removed it to study later.

"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 the heart. The pattern and what emblems he chose would be a clue to where

the solder 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 biobed to freeze him until he was in a real medical facility.

..*.*

O'Rourke tapped the comm on her monitor. She had fallen asleep going over the last log Vicky had compiled. "Captain O'Rourke, here." She cracked her neck to relieve the pressure.

"Captain O'Rourke, this is Diana. I think you should come over. I've had uninvited visitors, and one will need immediate medical treatment ."

Diana's hair was tussled looking and her eyes were dark. O'Rourke glanced at her clock. It was 0400, early morning.

"Okay. Do I need to dress special for this?" she asked cautiously.

"Armor, if you have it handy."

"I'll be right there." She cut off the comm and entered the locker area. Over her sleepwear she dropped the new armor. She shoved her feet in her boots feeling the autolock engagement while selecting two hand weapons. Automatically the charge was checked while her thoughts were on what to expect when she stepped out into the corridor. A rush of adrenalin hyped up her senses. She stepped out of the locker area back into her room, focusing on what was outside her door. In a crouched position she waited for the door to slide open. The corridor was deserted. The odor of stringers fire was heavy in the air. Her eyes moved to the alarms that protected her quarters. Why was she not notified? They were engaged. At least she wasn't the target. Should she feel slighted? 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, she 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.

"Captain, we're in the bathing room," Diana's voice called.

She looked up and could see Diana crouching next to someone. She had a weapon in one hand. The medbot from the owner's quarters had a light on its side indicating it had called for a medical stretcher.

"Be right there," she answered. 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 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.

"Who's that?" the captain demanded. Carefully, she stepped over another body that she knew was dead. His head was at an unnatural angle. And there were weapons in a pile.

"A messenger. Did you pick up some new recruits?"

"No. Anyone you know?" Staring at the bodies she wondered what she was going to do with them. They were evidence for an investigation.

"Never saw any of these people before. I thought maybe you were transporting a green group of pirates."

"Deck 4 is for passengers and none of these faces I recognize nor have what it takes to morph into soldiers. What happened out there?" She gestured back to the front room.

"I guess they thought this was their reserved suite and had strong objections to my being here. This is the type of wake-up 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. If it was worth the effort she would rouse LeMarks from his hybersleep and ask him.

She studied the collection of weapons that were on the tiled bathing room deck. All stringers. Silent but deadly to living tissue, but most importantly, they didn't damage ship's hulls.

"I guess the ship builders made the owner's cabin a mite more soundproof than is called for," Diana commented.

"You said he'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, I'm guessing."

"Maybe. We'll have to see when one shows up. Medical has been sent for."

Captain O'Rourke tapped her comm link to Susa. "Commander Susa, GP Q."

"Be right there Captain," a tired voice responded.

"Hopefully, no one is waiting to take her out. 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 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 some business in 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?"

"Probably stashed in biobeds 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 biobeds 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.

"Where is Commander Sousa?"

O'Rourke ran a hand through her hair. When she went to battle these two were not who she would want watching her back. With Henison, it was not because she didn't trust him with her life, only that whatever he did would be unpredictable and it left her grabbing for a life raft. She was the captain and should be in control. As for Diana Rue, what was she doing with...?

"Reading the ship's info were ya?" Henison asked Diana.

"I like to know if an emergency occurs just where everything is. Never can tell when a pirate is going to board."

"Pirates? You keep bringing up pirates. Are you a spy for...?"

"O'Rourke, don't be asking for more trouble," Henison told her.

"No," Diana assured her at the same time.

O'Rourke didn't know what to believe but something was not feeling right about these two. She watched them as she touched her comm link. "Captain O'Rourke to Lt. Commander Susa."

The two quietly were sizing each other up. If O'Rourke was not concerned about the whereabouts of Susa, she would have been interrogating them. She had a good feeling that her intuition about them knowing each other was right on the mark.

"Computer, locate Lt. Commander Susa."

"Lt. Commander Susa's locator has been deactivated," the computer informed her.

"O'Rourke, I think you should put the ship in lockdown," Henison suggested.

"Too late," Diana nodded to the bodies.

"They're in light armor and not carrying serious weapons," O'Rourke commented. "That means they weren't expecting resistance. We need to find out where their main unit is."

"We could..." Diana started.

O'Rourke waved her to silence. "Computer, lock the ship down at my command, Captain Helen O'Rourke. Rubecube red rocker."

"The ship is locked down by your command Captain Helen O'Rourke," a different voice announced. A medical gurney floated in with the medical bot unfurling. From the

information the medbot in the Q had gathered the medbot only had to prepare the injured stranger for medical induced coma until they could get him to a better equipped medical facility.

"Locate all crew and passengers," O'Rourke ordered.

The medical gurney left the Q, unconstrained by the shutdown.

"Don't you think you should get a gurney to pick up these bodies?" Henison worried.

O'Rourke rolled her eyes. He hated being around dead bodies. She had never met a soldier that hated being around the dead more than him.

"Send the coroner's bot to the owner's suite. Thirteen to pick up," she ordered.

"Anything else, Henison?" she demanded.

"Got a plan?"

"Yeah," she told him crabbily, taking satisfaction in not telling him what it was, except she was going to have to once she knew what was happening on her ship.

"You two sound like a married couple. You know that?" Diana asked.

O'Rourke sputtered and Henison smirked.

"Ah," Diana commented.

"We're not married!" O'Rourke informed her.

"Location scans completed," the computer announced.

O'Rourke turned to go into the front room to see the location of her crew. She left the two in the bathing room sorting through the weapons, feeling better once she was out of the small room. She was sure it was Henison's vibes. He always irritated her.

O'Rourke's curses brought the two to her side to see what the monitor was displaying.

"Looks like someone's deactivated everyone's location devices," Henison remarked.

"You think?" O'Rourke crossly demanded.

"Or maybe the scan's been disabled," Diana volunteered.

"Well," Henison continued. "You have a point there because O'Rourke's and mine aren't reading either."

"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.

"Don't know. 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 loudly.

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 thing, 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..." she started.

"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. Take the top..." she frowned at the thought of the twelve juveniles on deck four and then the other passengers. "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. She paused to pick up weapons from the bathing room and ammunition from the corpse.

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.

"I need to change clothes," she told them, gesturing to her light clothing.

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 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.

"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. No one was on the bridge.

"What the Hades happened to my bridge crew?" demanded O'Rourke, straightening up. Cautiously both moved onto the bridge looking for anything to tell them why the bridge was vacant.

"Anything?" 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. Whoever it was, and it could be LeMarks, restored his profile with a lot more authority than I ever gave him. They 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? Though, he's not conscious most of the time so I'm not sure when he would do anything."

"Maybe he's been faking it. 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 informed him.

"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 was over do for maintenance.

"I take it you're already tried to take helm back," he asked as the lights on the bridge went out and only the screens for the nonexistent crew gave off light.

"We have to get off this deck. The life support is shutting down in five minutes."

"So, what now... hey!" Henison yelled as he was pulled off balance by the captain's grip on his shoulder. He hated it when she did that. She was taller than him and always gave the appearance of looming over him.

"We're not going down an elevator. I don't trust whatever has control of this ship," O'Rourke said.

"Well did you at least see where we're heading?"

"Somewhere near Elton's star. There's a small light blinking on it."

"That's a galaxy over and there's a war in that part of space."

"Yeah. And we're not exactly armed."

She grabbed the handles on the maintenance panel and pulled them 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 anyone entering it disorientated and grateful it was intended for bots and not them.

Chapter 9

Diana started on the first deck. According to the ship's logs, no crew members were on this deck. The strange energy gave her the reason why the crew didn't like to be on this deck. All the available space was for storage. Moving her sensor around she 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 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 the 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 bioreading 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 short 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 may be interested in?"

"Yeah," he drawled, checking her out.

"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. The sounds of more than one Carrion could be heard banging on the closet hatch.

Rutherford the IV started to climb 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 reliable.

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 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 a doomed ship?" she demanded.

"Not your ship," he informed her confidently.

"That's the point. It's not my ship right now," she informed him dryly. "Somebody or thing has it tip to stern." She looked at Diana, "We got to the bridge and noticed someone had activated pods on the 6th deck but there aren't any active. We went to engineering on the same deck and found no one on duty and all systems on auto. Henison wasn't able to hack into the secondary controls in engineering, so I thought to give it a try here."

Diana was watching the screen quickly change as whatever O'Rourke sent it to study was scrolling the results.

"Doesn't look too good with life support being shut down in various sections," she remarked, pointing at one red line that remained consistent on six decks.

Henison was about to say something when a glare from O'Rourke had him closing his mouth tightly.

Rutherford the IV plopped down on the couch, making himself comfortable. "Did you two ever..."

"No!" shouted an enraged O'Rourke while a more amused Henison gave a dramatic shrug of his shoulders. Henison and Rutherford the IV laughed at O'Rourke's glare.

Diana was impatient with the reunion. "We have the entire forth deck gone," she informed the captain, to bring her back to a more important problem. "The only person I found was your friend here."

"They all sleepwalked right into the elevator," Rutherford the IV informed them. "Maybe it's not such a good idea to put them all on one deck," Henison mentioned to O'Rourke.

"It's mute. 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 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."

"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 pheromones driven females," O'Rourke said. "How many followed you?"

"Sounded like two." She turned to Rutherford. "Did any of them get taken by that subliminal call?"

"One. The others became distressed. They went hunting," 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 nosey 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 him 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.

"You should consider that whatever subliminal is running will be affecting you too..." she 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, 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.

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. Henison was looking at his wrist puzzled. Neither was wearing a disrupter, but why should they? 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."

"Blazes but I bet that's why we didn't see anything. 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...bring them to 26A in the medical bay. I want a full medical run on them. Meanwhile, let's go over the decks again and see what we may have missed."

* * *

Diana chose to take the grav-tube again. Something about being able to see above and below her and not worry about someone taking over the elevator was a better gamble over the grav-tube shutting down. What bothered her was if the ship's occupants were influenced would she also be, and why did only one Carrion follow the call? 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.

Pulling herself onto the platform on the first deck. Diana took time to get a sense of what was before her. Sniffing the air, she picked nothing. Nothing 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. Peering out the viewer Diana wondered how to check if anyone was hiding out there. 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 everyone needed natural foods mixed with their chemical creations. Each storage room she looked in had a contents list with destination. 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 freight 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.

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 rookies.

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 moment of blackout. When each came up, they would require either her or Commander Jade to acquire them. She could do that from Q. The sleep pods, not enough to store her crew were all empty and still sealed as new or refurbished. Once finished with deck 6 she dropped to deck 8 anxious to see what was 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 what the species. The temperature had risen considerably as her breath took in warm moist air, but 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 quicker glance around her and then stepped in, dropping immediately to her knee and fired one shot. A soldier dressed in full 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. 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 to any other movement. Curious, she took a peek into the 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 him. *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. 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.

Why send all these unregistered people to Hell's Gate?

She was faced with two questions; one was who were these people and two how did they get here?

I need to get to the control board and change the time of their release.

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 to do?"

"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 rolled towards him and kicked him, 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 engaged.

"Where did they come from? Vicky and I had searched this section 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...system okay."

O'Rourke's objections were held back as physical evidence that somehow a fast one had been pulled on 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 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 then again where were 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."

"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."

"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?"

"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.

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 an armory. She hung the space suit up and gestured for Diana to follow suit. "That was to make them think we're planning on outside work."

"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 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 cube. "You know how to dress up?"

Diana paused, "Why don't you show me?"

O'Rourke didn't waste time with banter but stripped off her light armor, leaving her in her undertunic. She 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. She 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. Diana poured the armor over her light 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 what she could to the belt she buckled on, 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.

Loaded up, both hopped in place to settle everything, then O'Rourke led her through the closet into the owner's stateroom.

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 was 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 for 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 gates," she whispered. "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.

O'Rourke looked up. "These suits will protect you from anything short of a nuclear blast."

"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 incase 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 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. What a joke. They expected us to catch these fellows and take it back into the saferoom to let it harmlessly blowout the owner's quarters. Not going to happen

to you dirt pounders. There's something about me and following the game plan that doesn't make me a cooperative team player.

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 grinning back. "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 the 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 by 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 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 one's, 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, man!" Rutherford told him impatiently.

"Please," O'Rourke said.

"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 these people."

"Why would the UTA not let them in?"

"They would like to have a good number of present members for dinner," 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."

"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 ones 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 they 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 out 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 looks while others keep an eye out. I don't believe an entire crew can be hidden 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. If the captain caught them involved in illegal activities, they were as good as disappeared.

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 ringleader 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 on every deck is shutting down," muttered O'Rourke as she tried to override the shut down. "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 Diana and 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 hustled back 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. It was isolated from the ship's systems so if there was any sabotage of the *Wesley* it would not affect her shuttle that held the key recovery data. No one knew of the backup plan but Vicky. Considering all the safeties on her shuttle it was worrisome that someone was still able to access it. With all the surprises she was finding out 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.

"It's not as roomy 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. "This is okay 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."

Diana looked over at Henison who suddenly looked busy at his console. Diana peered over his shoulder and could see him poking at system inquiries and getting beeps. Not authorized kept coming up on the screen.

"What special delivery? 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," 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 does so well."

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 from the outside tampering business.

"Hey, I found out who has your shuttles," 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. "Like I 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 in!" O'Rourke began reading the information the ship was finally letting her see. "They're in 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 online before I get 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 Numba 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. Numba said. "And that is what is puzzling. All the others went into the sleep pods but she went to a shuttle."

"Do you know who these people are?" Henison whispered softly to O'Rourke. She shook her head.

"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. The temptation to scratch was over-powering.

"Maybe we're supposed to be down there too," Rutherford interjected.

"You have to be kidding. An artifact is responsible for all this?" Diana shook her head. "Henison, this is really over the edge."

"It's a tool, Diana. I've seen it happen thousands of times."

"Are you trying to tell me I need to send someone over there to give her guard support? 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.

"Take the *Nebula Star*. Maintenance did a full system overhaul yesterday. You can test it out," she added. It was to irk Henison who was looking so happy to be given groundside duty. Though he denied that their closeness affected him, she suspected he was not immune.

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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 excitedly.

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 Numba," Diana repeated thoughtfully. "She seemed 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. Numba 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 the care of 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 you're escape routes." Rutherford added.

"There's the 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, with more intent on studying everything around them. Sniffing the air, he found even that he did not register as familiar. He might as well be in a space suit with filtered air.

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 at 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'."

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 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 Vicky 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 tapping. Leaning forward she strained to hear what sounded like an echo of her tapping. Experimentally she tapped a code.

"Vicky!"

Vicky 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. Vicky tapped the code that had her remembering.

By the time O'Rourke typed out all that was going on and Vicky giving her her appraisal and suspicions O'Rourke's fingers were tired. They both took a break to think out a strategy.

Vicky 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. Vicky had dropped off the system to trace LeMarks and the Geek. Vicky 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, she stepped out of the shuttle.

From the arms cabinet she removed weapons Henison and Vicky had hidden for such an occasion. She would meet Vicky in the medical lab and take back control of her ship. The Ruger she would leave for Henison and his group.

Chapter 12

"Just grab the rope!" Diana told the two at the bottom of the pit impatiently, jiggling to emphasize her command. *Such bickering and whining from people their age! And Henison of all people.*

Nothing was happening. Not daring to lean too close to the edge, Diana strained to hear what was going on. There was no sound. Their arguing had ceased. She jiggled the rope again. "Hey," she called near the edge. 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 dropped down the pit, noticing it got darker as she descended, but what she was able to see were sharp spikes randomly placed on the sides of the pit. Her boots were impervious to most sharp objects, but this was not 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 sharp spikes cutting the rope. As the space above her head became smaller, Diana was thinking how much further down she had to go. Pausing, Diana's lamp searched 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, it must have dragged those two into it's hole.

Gauging the distance, Diana decided by jumping up she would be able to reach the rope if she let go. After assuring herself she would not be landing on anything alive or dead, she pushed off from the wall and dropped down.

Pock, pock, pock, pock, pock, pock.

The noise started Diana until she realized it was from her shifting weight, though slight. Slowly, she moved into the shadow of the cave's entrance and the noise ceased.

Diana dampened her light and peered in the hole. There was no light coming back at her. She switched her lamp to thermal imaging, realizing not all unfriendly species would register. Turning the light to ultraviolet she studied the ceiling, ground and sides. The ceiling was low, requiring her to crawl to get in. 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. Shining 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 bioscanner to see just what was wrong with him. The scanner came up with nothing. Shaking his arm, she jumped back to avoid his swing 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 was not 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. He looked around him but saw nothing. "Hey, shine your light over there."

"Oh, gods! 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 Diana.

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 was a dream, she decided.

Chapter 13

O'Rourke paused at the corner to engineering; sure, that she had heard something. Slowly, she peered around the corner. According to her scanner it was LeMarks. He was a wholly changed man. The Geek was trying to open up the engineering hatch through the access panel on the outside bulkhead. 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 was more dangerous. He wouldn't be waking soon, regardless of how potent a stimulus the medbot could administer without killing him. LeMarks lifted his weapon and put a hole in the bulkhead where O'Rourke had been standing.

O'Rourke was already moving back to an emergency grav tube, hoping to draw LeMarks from engineering. Silently she cursed LeMarks for damaging her ship. "Vickie, 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."

"He's shooting a weapon in engineering. The ship will recognize him as the enemy," Vickie 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. Running down the deserted corridor she thought about LeMarks' clever disguise. O'Rourke turned to 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 Vicki. 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.

As she dropped to the next deck, she looked down at 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. Vicki signaled her from 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 whom to," Vicki 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 our ships 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?" Vicki 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?"

"Vicki, now is a good time to find out where their loyalties lie. When this ship becomes mine, I want 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," Vicki mocked.

"We'll release the ones we can trust first and go through the process of elimination."

The ship shuddered from an explosion.

Vicki 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 Vicki. "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 while we're loose," Vicki 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," Vicki 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. These 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

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?" Vicki asked.

"I want to locate my crew."

Vicki 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 ones 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 activated the wakeup to release them. Since they hadn't been in sleep mode for long, it shouldn't take hours to wake them, she thought. 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 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. An 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 monitors identified the body as Commander Jade.

"Vicki!"

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 buried."

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. Where were the ship safeties?

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. Numba, 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. Once the challenge has been met, with the teams assembled, however long it takes to get the intended task done, we're here for."

"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. Hunters have a nose for artifacts."

"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. Numba. "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. You're probably asking, 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 create a world and all the ecosystems needed to balance it within a short breath of time. On a smaller scale, everyone 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 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."

"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. Namba 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 would be blasted with energy that would annihilate them."

"I believe the same," Lt. Namba said.

"Why did the Princess take off on her own?" Henison asked.

"She believes she is the one chosen to wield the wand to create a planet," Lt. Namba 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. Namba 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. Namba 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 together as a team," Lt. Namba said.

"So, what are you intending to do?" Diana asked Lt. Namba.

"Make sure other hunters don't harm her."

"Not take the artifact for yourself?"

"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. Namba 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 first and I'll anchor a rope around me, so we won't lose anyone." Henison quickly pulled out a rope coil 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. Namba 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."

"With the slippery riverbed 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. Namba 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 was sure it was leverage Namba would use wisely in the future.

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. Namba who was walking alongside her.

"Why?"

"Don't hunters leave traps to prevent others from following?"

"Yes."

"With all the chatter going on they'll hear us anyway," Rutherford the IV said irritably.

"Silence," Lt. Namba signed to the girls.

Diana hadn't heard any conversation but she and Lt. Namba 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. Namba 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 headfirst 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!" Vickie shouted.

"Vickie! O'Rourke shouted relieved, "Will you just get up here and stop complaining."

Vickie ran up the side of the tube.

"We're going to have a lot to repair," Vickie said. "It'll make our visit to the shipyard worth it."

"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 Vickie halted abruptly. "Hear that?" O'Rourke said. The sound of feet running came through a hole one of LeMarks shots made.

"Yes. Friend or foe?" Vickie asked.

"I activated some 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 Vickie, 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.

"You're the right person for the job," O'Rourke said grumpily. "There's not going to be any more outsiders promoting anyone on my ship without my saying so. Did he sound put out?"

"His hand was shaking so much he missed his shot. Good thing for me is 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?"

"A year or so."

"You have all the privileges the captain of the *Wesley* should have. You'll have to do some changing of personnel, 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," Vickie 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, start with 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'll wake Lt. Commander Susa and let her pick her crew," Vickie 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 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 medbot was attending 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 are Hunters. 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?"

"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 she sat in his raft along with a Dwarf. Once on the other side of the river, it was deflated and returned to its pack.

O'Rourke looked up at 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 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 either because of a ship malfunction or passing through an anomaly. But she had never landed on one.

"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 grazing 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 it.

"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 he pointed to a clearing where those with the same token as his would form up.

"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 and 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 makers alone."

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 its 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, is this the case of exchanging places?"

"It could be."

"For the time you've spent there, 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."

"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 nonliving 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 into 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 onto 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 along side 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 laid down to sleep.

Chapter 16

Princess Amiee continued down the path. She didn't worry about who followed her. The Wand was her guide, and she assumed her real 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 the dominant thought.

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.

Steadier 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 down 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 your Wand?"

"Arni..."

"Ah, shut your face. So, what do we do now?" he directed at 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 such thing as separate, the Princess thought.

Do not interrupt, was the thought that flashed before her.

Other images, people making decisions. 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 did she have 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 in outcomes.

Lt. Namba looked 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. Namba and Diana said.

"You do have sensitive ears to some wave lengths. 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.

"The noise maybe from the planet beneath the surface. The sky maybe reflecting something that's radiating from the planet. I'll bet everyone is either there or heading there," Rutherford IV said.

"I think we should camp here for the night," Lt. Namba 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 backpack." 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. Namba 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 which caused Diana to shout a warning. The rock moved around the cleared area as if it were alive.

"Let it out!" Lt. Namba ordered. 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. Namba 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. Namba ordered. When they quieted Lt. Namba 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 over hanging 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. Namba 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 Honorable One'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.

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 puzzlers 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 at 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 worse case scenario where they all turned on each other; however, that wouldn't achieve anything, and hunters were profit motivated.

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 hue's 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 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 into the black forest. Bobocar's 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. Away from where the tracks were was where she headed.

It was hours later of seeing nothing, nothing as in landscape or points of reference, a dot of dark matter steadily grew before her. Before her it was as if she were

looking out from one reality to another. Each with 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 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 and knew their code of ethics.

"I'm declaring you as a nonhunter. That means you don't belong here."

"You can't be talking to me about non 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. 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 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 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 life 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 Hunter on a quest. He was a dead man no matter what he did, but threatening the holder of the Wand would mean immediate death, if it were a true Hunt.

Arni continued 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 vitalizes 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 hunting group of their own is a change, and that your father lets 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."

"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 principedoms 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. They are like 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 hunting, 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?"

"I dreamed of 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?"

"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 does it 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."

"The taking over of the *Wesley's* is the situation. The will is getting the Ruger to its destination."

"You mean to here?"

Princess Amiee was going to agree, but she hesitated. "Something has just changed. Something has changed." 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."

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 him. "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 shinny in the dirt. Leaning down he stared at it but didn't touch it. 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 at 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, then speak. 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 stuck in the ground with an interesting woven pattern at the top. Nut shells of various shapes and sizes were within the pattern.

"This is a map but not of this area," she said more to herself than anyone around her.

"The nuts represent islands and the way the patterns of this weave are here, shows the current. Different currents for either seasons or planet movement," 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. Namba frowned. They were in pursuit of someone not of the artifact, so they didn't have the same guidance or protection as the others seemed to have. 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 weren'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 was 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 gear on," Lt. Namba told everyone. "We'll pack up now."

"But Lt. Namba, 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 in circles, readings of their environment appeared in the lower right of 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 ones 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, nearly bouncing on his toes.

"Something doesn't feel right," Lt. Nambia said.

The girls were hurriedly packing their tents and pulling out energy bars. They were expecting to eat and hike.

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.

"All stop," *Gypsum's* voice said, "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 there any danger from *Wesley* to damage *Gypsum*?"

"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 passenger 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 a weakness 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.

The ding of battery pack charge had him leaping up and quickly inserting the battery. On the scan one spot looked different than the others though not any weaker. Back out in space he blasted his way to where he wanted to test. 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. He fired a shot at the spot, and the immediate feedback knocked him back in a wild tumbling shot. Frantically his thumb searched for the stabilizer, wondering why it didn't activate the moment he went into a fast spin. His movement was stopped so suddenly 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 his stability. He ceased all wasteful movement and looked around him slowly, so as not to create any counter movement in his drift. He was moving back to the bubble around *Wesley*. He kept trying 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 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 it's protective envelope. He kept drifting into the inside of the U where he had previously docked his ship to drop Diana off. It was eerie to see 14 decks with no lights. 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 the best would be 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 one planet on foot. She called it tramping.

But a map on a ship would be helpful, he thought. He spotted a terminal in a corner where workers no doubt over saw whatever went on on the darkened deck. His helmet lit up the area. The terminal looked offline. He tapped it a few times on the screen. A light indicated it was enabled. From the menu he pulled up the ship's schematics. A lot of it was marked off limits for non crew members.

The bridge was one place of interest. So were the medical bay and engineering. The only one that would allow him as a noncrew 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 for him 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, and the sound of his suit working.

Peering out of the elevator before committing, he noticed there was a light halfway up the corridor. To get there he had a dark corridor to walk in. 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 with ships wasn't as good as his familiarity with docks and where the best game was. 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.

As he walked through the dark part of the corridor he could feel an energy of some kind vibrating against his suit. His species were 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? What were so many people doing 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. Details were important.

His boots clamped onto the hull. The hatch cover opened, and he floated into the recycler. As he waited, he went over the schematics of the freighter 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."

"Medical bay? Was that your first pick?"

"It was the only place I could go as a noncrew member. The ship is locked 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 know 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 good plan."

"You're not concerned about me finding you?"

"I'm a hologram."

"Yeah. Programmed by Diana to say it like it is." 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.

His adopted family was used to his Telcous ways and adjusted since they all had differences. A positive side was once the novelty of the item wore off; it was returned to where it was found.

He suspected that because he was a Telcous becoming a mortleige would be unlikely, but Diana wouldn't string him along, or would she? He didn't see what the problem would be. Everyone took souvenirs.

Feeling better about it, 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 suit, 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. He imagined what it would like on Deck 4 but it was only imaging. He normally didn't go on ships because if someone didn't like him being, tossed out in space without a suit was not what he wanted to chance.

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 made him nervous. It was too good to be true.

He passed through the yellow barrier without any trouble. This time he aimed for Deck 4. Nothing stopped him. No security, so far. 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 locked 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. They didn't work all the time.

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 bosewiggeled. 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 or maybe return 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, 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 knocked on the door that 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 of interest to see.

No longer interested, he moved 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. The yellow bubble didn't let any of the scans *Gypsum* sent to it pass through its membrane. The tests continued with the results continuously being logged and 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 locked down by order of Captain O'Rourke." The message kept repeating and orange lights outside the biobed 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 biobed. She pulled herself out of the bed and nearly fell on deck from shaky legs except 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 the others. Lt. Commander Jade was the only one that looked like she had no ill effects.

It was difficult to believe she dreamt of all that happened to her since she boarded *Wesley*. If Henison was here, then it was something important. Why was he involved in a relic he hadn't had a chance to tell her about? If it was causing all these strange happenings then it was more than a relic. What happened to release them from their dream state? Only two things could have happened...either it completed its task or changed hands.

Holding onto the edge of the biobed 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.

The ship's lockdown warning was blaring. Of course, now she remembered giving the lockdown order. It was comforting that that part wasn't a dream.

"This is Captain O'Rourke, Lid4Rdr, report status," she demanded. Finally, the lid was completely up, and she swung her legs over the lip of the biobed enclosure, holding onto the sides. She took a deep breath to test her lungs and head. No headache and no lightheaded feeling. So far, so good.

"Security has identified ships that maybe 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 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 in sleep pods all personnel that have not passed their certifications. Leave all passengers in sleep pods until you have my order or Lt. Commander Jade's to release them. Unlock and activate all gun turrets. Fire if the *Wesley* is attacked with weapons. 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 willpower 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 stash."

"I 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 up the corridor.

"How did you get queued to wake up?" Jade asked.

"I'm not even going to try and explain anything that's been happening," O'Rourke said. The three arrived at a deserted bridge but all consoles were active, and the computer was already making automatic adjustments. The moment they stepped onto the bridge dim 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," Jade said. "They're not pirates...in some peoples' opinion."

"What are they exactly?"

"Hunters," Henison said from the elevator. "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 onto the security console. Ensign Crele, you're at the helm. Prepare to maneuver us out of here."

"The crew that's been passed to wake are still getting out of their sleep pods, Captain," Jade said.

"Security 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."

"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."

"We've got deck 1 and 7 cleared, 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 could all 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, were in our tunnel and at the speed we're going, we'll be at our exit point in fifteen minutes," Ensign Crele said.

"I'm getting warning communication blasts about that part of space we'll be exiting at, 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 for another exit point four hours in the tunnel and where they would be in familiar space.

"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." By the ship's clock - time was moving backward. She was going to have to check her mail and see just 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? She locked the pods down and put them on a security watch.

"Captain, we have an energy cloud following us," Ensign Henly said.

"How long until it overtakes us, astro?"

"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 Wand. There must be something that's connected to the *Wesley* that whoever has the Wand 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 rebalance our power thrusters."

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 Wand and the *Wesley*. What if he had possession of the Wand? 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 Wand 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 all 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 tentatively.

“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’re 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 omniverse 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 sister-in-law. “The owner of the *Wesley* probably thought you and her 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 the omniverse 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 marital ties.

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 ran an inventory on her ship for anything that was crucial including customers’ orders, then sent a message to have the inventory verified it was still there. The bots immediately activated, according to her screen. This was just how it was supposed to be. Her irritation that she was set up to have her systems fail gradually and the Geek 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 Wand 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 Amice's group awake?" Diana asked.

"Why?" O'Rourke asked.

"Being official Hunters, they can talk to the Hunters on Cubri to see where the Wand 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 still interested in something that belongs on the *Wesley* and it connected to the Wand, we are all bound up in the Wand's energy," Henison reiterated. "Those Hunters are probably all down at Santo Rio Cabal."

"Bridge to Captain O'Rourke."

"Yes Bridge."

"We've got requests for ship repair from a dozen ships around Cubri, Captain."

"Conference in 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." O'Rourke looked at Henison. "Why is this drama around that artifact continuing?"

"I don't know. 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 powerful 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."

"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 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 Numba and have a security bot escort her to my quarters."

"Lieutenant? Numba 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 were 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. Numba'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 the Geeks and LeMarks' pod. The medical staff can stay asleep. The medbots will do fine."

"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.

"I added my lock to LeMarks sleep pod. If he's that 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," 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."

“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 a month 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 Numba of the Royal Guard of the United Municipalities of Colmus guardian to Princess Amiee,” a voice answered promptly.

“Admit.”

Lt. Numba 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. Numba quickly changed species.

“Don’t mind if I do,” Lt. Numba said in a species more able 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. Numba asked.

“Yes,” O’Rourke said.

Lt. Numba 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. 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. Numba cocked her head to one side. “There is more than a dozen species that can do that. Which one is he?”

“Telcous.”

“One of the most tenacious if the object is still new,” Lt. Numba 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. Numba said. “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, the Wand, and he has come here. I don’t understand the reasoning,” Lt. Numba said. “This is not the season to visit the planet on this side. Nothing living 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 about it, but I don’t recommend her becoming any more involved in it. She’s not stable after letting it go and she may go after the new holder. When something consumes your life for years then you disconnect the vacuum it creates can be unbearable,” Lt. Numba 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.”

“Very few people can afford a bunker that can withstand earthquakes, flash floods, and windstorms. How the homeless survive in Santo Rio Cabal is a mystery to the government. Since those citizens have been coping with survival for centuries the government 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, but this may not be the solution. There are so many other reasons why your ship is here,” Lt. Numba said.

“Such as?” O’Rourke asked.

“Programming. I do recall you were having a lot of glitches when we came aboard.”

“Those have cleared,” Henison said.

“Are we still dreaming?” Lt. Numba asked. “I would think I would know if I were dreaming but this is so unusual for an artifact to be so manipulative with so many things at one time.”

“Where is Ati? Let’s locate him, visit him and then leave.” 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. Numba asked.

“Nothing,” Diana said. “There is no clothing that can drop anyone safely in that weather. Maybe in the city 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 collapsed. I don’t have contacts here nor do I know anyone.”

“The desert people, do they look different from the city people?”

“I don’t know. The desert people hide during the carnival, and the city people haven’t been here for ten seasons. Before I visit, I like to do a recon to see what the culture and disbeliefs are. Santo Rio Cabal 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 use their credits to take care of the poor and homeless. To them it’s no one’s business but their own and since foreigners have made a big deal about it, they refuse to acknowledge foreigners and whatever flaws they have in their community that relates to their poor or homeless. Homelessness is punishable by exposure to life outside of the wall.”

“Reactionaries. There are species that are like that.”

“Low cast,” Henison said. “Where is Rutherford the IV? He should be able to figure a way down there.”

“Why? We have enough trouble going on without adding more to the mix,” Diana said humorously.

“We need to get this moving along. I want to get back to space that 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.”

“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. Namba. 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.

“The ship and crew are priority. I’ll remember that,” Diana said smiling.

Chapter 23

The species that lived in the city of Mosqu were three feet at their average height. They dressed in clothing that concealed their appearance and if you ever thought of arguing with them, it would be to empty space. Any conflict was dealt with by their leaving the situation. Since foreigners were allowed to enter their city nor were able to force their way into it, little else was known about them.

Henison, Lt. Namba and Diana entered the city via the Hunters tunnel Lt. Mack directed them to. One of the ships that was being repaired gave them the code to the tunnel since they were considered part of the Wand’s business, therefore part of Hunters business.

Out of the tunnel Lt. Namba stepped out, followed closely by Diana.

"Where's everybody?" Lt. Namba asked softly.

"Where's the city?" Diana whispered.

It was like being in an environmental city shell before the living modules were set up. Looking up they could see the transparent domed cover with an artificial sky colored as if it were either sunset or sunrise. There wasn't any visible sun or location where the light was coming from. Logically, they both knew outside the wind was blowing gray sand over anything on the planet's surface, yet not even the sound of the outside blowing sand could be heard. Their voices didn't echo as if they were in empty space. They just weren't seeing physical shapes that were out there.

"Has the wand been active here?" Diana asked. She turned to look at Henison and didn't see him. She walked back to the tunnel. Henison was kneeling a few feet within the tunnel working at something Diana couldn't see.

"Need some help?" Diana asked.

Henison kept working, not acknowledging her.

"Henison?" Still not getting a response she started to reenter the tunnel when she felt someone nearing her. She turned quickly and knocked Lt. Nambia's hand away.

"I was going to stop you. You can't reenter the tunnel without the code to exit. The library will have the code. You will kill yourself if not hurt yourself."

"What about Henison?"

"For whatever reason, he's been caught in the tunnel's security. We must keep going to find the Telcous."

"Ati is his name. There is nothing here. 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, 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 Wand'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 wand, as we call it, might be something else entirely. There's the entrance."

Before them appeared a doorway with a sign identifying it as a library.

"Is this a dream?" Diana asked.

"No." Lt. Namba 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," Lt. Namba 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 there was a desk and on both sides were listening booths. A Promothean waved them forward. He pointed at translator devices near his desk. Lt. Namba put one on.

"Greetings, Keeper of Knowledge. We are looking for information on the Wand of Acer."

"Hunter. Greetings. You and everyone else are looking. One user has signed off. A port is available. Booth 4, Hunter."

Lt. Namba 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. Being locked in a small booth she hadn't inspected and was on unknown territory was not something she was willing to gamble on. Hunters had their own set of rules and Lt. Namba 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.

Lt. Namba 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 Lt. Namba then turned and left the library. Diana went after him and Lt. Namba close on her heels.

"Did you find anything we can use?" Diana asked.

"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 setting the Wand here."

"He would?"

"Yes."

"They would 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 Deads' citizens to...what?" Diana asked.

"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 Lt. Namba. Her tone of voice indicated she wasn't serious about what she was saying.

"O'Rourke said the princess didn't want to make life decisions for others - isn't that what the holder of the 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."

"Hmm."

The two continued down the tunnel in silence. It was a Hunter's tunnel and when it left the protection of the city wall the tunnel sloped down.

"It's happening!" Lt. Namba said suddenly. She pulled at Diana's arm and began running up the tunnel back to where they had entered the passage into the Hunter's HQ.

Henison was waiting for them. "We gotta get back to the ship! All the ships are leaving. O'Rourke is preparing for departure."

Back on the *Wesley* it was a different atmosphere.

Diana found herself heading back to her quarters in the Q. Her thoughts were focused on her visit to Hebron.

Chapter 24

Diana watched as the guards moved off the shuttle from the mining planet. She didn't have to identify herself; the guard 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 Loucustas, though not many cared for space travel. His antenna twitched but it may have been more from the noise in the small space station.

Hebron was originally a waystation morphed into barracks for two shifts of guards for the mining planet's workers, prisoners who worked for early release.

While *Wesley's* repair team helped remove broken machines from the shuttle's 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 my business."

"Is that all you want to know?" he asked.

"Why did you go to him?"

"I was curious why he wanted to see me, then I heard the scuttlebutt among the Hunters. The Ruger was on the move."

"What made you connect the two?"

"He was one of the soldiers that was assigned to guard it to its destination. Some of the guards were paid to see that it reached another destination. He and another hid it with the agreement that they would let the person they were to deliver it to know where they hid it because it was too dangerous for either to be caught with it."

"That was only five years ago that he died."

"For ten years he hid. The original buyer was assassinated. His estate was challenged due to the artifact. No one knew where it was, but it was part of the estate. A grandson inherited it. He saw it as a liability and refused to acknowledge it. He didn't

want to pay the taxes nor insurance, which required hiring security, which quickly outstripped the cash he inherited."

"So, what was he going to do?"

"He was already dying from lung fungus that he picked up in the Arck Wars, so he decided to offer it to the Hunters as a finders keepers."

"He never touched it."

"No. He might have been saved if he had, but when a mortliege is contracted to take his life...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 necessarily mean death. It could have been just to locate him. She didn't know personally what the contract was about. He was just a soldier doing his job and stumbled into something bigger than he could handle alone.

"I don't think its ended..." she said thoughtfully.

"No. The newsies a week ago were talking about the Hunters gathering in mass on Hermanee and it wasn't for their yearly celebration."

"Why are you hiding out here?"

"That's my business."

"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."

The noise he made was louder now. It was difficult to understand what it meant since there were so few of his species that she met.

"It's yours," Diana said.

"Yes. It is what is given to one who is about to cross over into the Land of the Dead."

Diana turned and left the guard holding his used talisman.

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 quickly. They say people who take that type of job has 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 ship's Watchman that she had returned. She headed to her suite to think about what she was going to do next.

On the Q's console was a message flashing. "Captain O'Rourke sent an invitation for dinner." She read the names of the others that would be attending. It was a 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.

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Before O'Rourke Lt. Mack was standing before her silent and uncomfortable. He failed his certification for navigation. He should have told her he couldn't read hexmacils.

"Lt. Mack, you need to figure out how to pass this test by the time we reach our docking for repairs, or you'll be spending that entire down time studying."

"I've always had problems. 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."

"How many gobbles equal a hexmacil?"

"Two xons."

"Then, figure it out in gobbles and translate it to hexmacil."

"Oh. Right. Can I do that?"

"Try the test again with that approach."

"Yes, Captain."

Lt. Commander Jade looked at O'Rourke and then sighed. "What are we going to do about the lost time?"

"I don't know."

"The crew says they were asleep and suddenly woke up in their cabins."

"The bots returned them to their quarters. The bots are working better than they ever had. My suspicion is that someone contaminated the program Geek laid down."

"Maybe the Geek. I'm just thankful I was able to find the original program. When we hit our next big port, we have some reports to be explaining. Have you an idea on how you're going to explain it?"

"I'm going to say there was an artifact on board, and everything went weird until it was removed. Diana thinks it was Ati, the pilot that gave her a ride here."

"Why would he be following us?"

"I don't know. I'm throwing a ship wide party for your promotion and anyone else that the Merchant Marine Board has certified. It's a heck of a lot better to go through them for certification than HQ."

"Politics are on our side. I told you the Merchant Marine Board is not going to let a company they know is owned by a pirate have any say in crew assignments on any of the ships in this sector. I think the fallout is going to spread further."

"He shouldn't have put out the quarantine message or skunked those yachts. I'm expecting them to hit us with something before we get to the shipyard."

"What about all the bodies we have in the life pods?"

"I've attributed to LeMark. I've got a pile of records on his mismanagement since he had been assigned to my ship. I've already received an acknowledgement from MMB that I have nothing to worry about and while the *Wesley* is in the shipyard for maintenance, I can get a clearance on both my ownership of *Wesley* and get my arrangements for business once *Wesley* is back in business."

"Do you remember much about what went on?" Vickie asked.

"No and I don't really need to. So, shall we get on with preparations for our next stop where we unload all passengers and deliveries and get ready for our much-awaited shipyard visit?"

The End of this Adventure of the *Wesley*.

