

about 29,161 words

FATAL CONTAINMENT

by

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Chapter 1

Cheryl walked into her cabin on deck seven aft with a fierce grin on her face. She knew that her vengeance was going to be sweet and savory tonight. It had been a long shift filling in for ensign Patterson in the Biogenics lab in addition to her own shift, but she had still managed to collect and assemble all of the components for her “special” project and put it in place just an hour ago. In fact, Lt. Commander Hanson should be getting his surprise any minute now.

It didn't help that Trevor Hanson was one of the cutest officers aboard the ship. His short, perfectly wavy auburn hair and those roguish good looks were enough to get any girl's heart beating quickly. His manly voice and immeasurable charm kept her thinking about him more than he deserved. She tried hard to ignore her feelings for him. After all, he was also a department head and strictly speaking, should be considered off limits. But her feelings bade otherwise, especially since he was the one that had attacked first.

Cheryl walked over to her dresser and looked herself in the mirror. Her uniform had a slight smudge from a chemical stain where she spilled a portion of the genetic precursor from Patterson's biology experiment, but she knew she wouldn't have time to change. So instead, she picked up a brush and quickly

gave her sandy curls a few brisk strokes before tying her usual green ribbon on them. Just enough time for one last glance to make sure there were no dark circles before she got the call that she knew was coming.

She couldn't help but admire Hanson's own cabin prank on her. Somehow, he had managed to connect her bathroom controls to the red alert klaxon, so that it would sound when she turned on her shower—but *only* in her cabin. The effect was brilliant, as she had quickly rinsed the soap from her hair, thrown on her uniform, and run to her duty station only to find out that there was no *actual* emergency.

But cabin pranks, as they were called by the initiated, had apparently been going on aboard the *Dominion* for as long as there had been officers aboard. It was common knowledge aboard the ship that when a new officer came aboard, they had better keep a sharp eye out, because you never knew when yours would be sprung on you.

“Lieutenant Kinson,” the terse voice uttered from the intercom on the nearest wall. “Report to main engineering immediately.” The voice coming from the intercom sounded rather annoyed which was to be expected.

“Kinson, acknowledged,” she said as she jabbed the intercom button and ran into the hallway at a brisk trot. Tiny lines at the corner of her mouth tilted into a slight smile against her will. If only she had a winter parka, that would complete the effect.

After all, it wasn't that hard to create the atmospheric conditions necessary to make it snow. She just couldn't get the effect to work in Hanson's cabin—at least not without re-plumbing half the ship's environmental systems to do it. So she had done the next best thing.

As she jogged briskly toward the end of the passageway, she played out in her mind how the exchange would take place. He would appear angry, but would begrudgingly accept that he had been beaten. She would say something witty and he would laugh and fix her with those big, beautiful brown eyes. Silent communication would pass between them as an unspoken promise that they would keep their behavior professional, but would secretly desire each other.

As Cheryl slid merrily down the maintenance ladder leading to deck one, she dodged a crewman working on a plumbing manifold and rounded the corner into the compartment marked MAIN ENGINEERING. The scenery was even better than she had hoped for.

There was almost an inch of accumulation on the floor and the artificial clouds she had made form were hovering gently, just below the ceiling, dumping a considerable amount of snow all about the compartment. She struggled very hard not to giggle. But that was before she heard the unexpected bellow of the ship's first officer, Lt. Commander Connor Leary, call her to attention.

“Lieutenant Kinson,” he began. He hadn't even shouted, but her body involuntarily jumped with the shock of surprise. She stood stiffly at attention and didn't dare look him directly in the eye. “Are you responsible for this disaster?”

“Yes, sir,” she squeaked. She hated it when her voice betrayed her nervousness. It had been doing that since the academy.

Connor waved his arm in a slow horizontal arc meant to take in a panoramic view of a compartment of the ship that should not normally be supporting a minor blizzard. He had his gaze fixed on Ms. Kinson in a stare that left no room for ambiguity concerning his level of anger at what he had walked in to moments before. It was just dumb luck that the second-in-command of the boat had picked this late hour to visit engineering and he was very likely to tear a few stripes from the back of this freshly minted lieutenant to ensure this *never* happened again.

Everyone in the compartment scrambled for something to do, which primarily meant disconnecting the spray nozzles that were generating near frozen mist or disconnecting the rigged vent ports that had channeled the heat in the compartment directly out to space through the same system used to put out fires.

Connor’s breath could be seen as he enunciated the words. “Are you aware, Ms. Kinson, that this ship, and this compartment, may be called upon at any given moment to go into battle, perform emergency maneuvers, enable faster than light acceleration, or perform nearly any other movement or function that its captain may require from it?”

Cheryl continued to fix her stare straight ahead and answered meekly in the affirmative. Connor slowly circled the frightened lieutenant; his anger draining away, as he thought about how brilliantly she had hidden the components needed

to pull off her bold retaliation on the ship's senior engineering officer. He came to a stop directly behind her and silently counted to five for full effect.

Lowering his voice to a menacing growl, he rendered his verdict.

“You will assist Mr. Hanson in getting this mess cleaned up and back to full and spotless readiness. Furthermore, you will *never* construct such an apparatus at any time in the future. Move.”

To her credit, Cheryl replied with a crisp “Aye, sir,” and immediately began giving instructions to the technicians removing a piece of thermal conduit that had been used to rapidly drop the compartment temperature from a comfortable twenty-two degrees Celsius to a frigid twelve degrees below the zero line.

Connor knew it would take her the better part of several hours, even with help, in spite of the fact that she had just come off of a double shift. He stood observing her for several seconds as Trevor Hanson, the ship's chief engineering officer walked over to join him.

“She did a real number on your section, Trevor,” Connor said as he surveyed the slowly melting slush that had moments ago been real snow.

“Yes, sir, she did indeed,” he said shaking his head to hide his grin.

“Somehow she managed to rig the fire suppression system to not only fail to signal the status board, but she was also able to drop the humidity in the compartment to the right ratio to form the ice crystals. See that port over there?”

he said pointing to a thermal exhaust vent on the far side of the room.

Connor nodded.

“It’s the reactor thermal exhaust vent. She rigged it to drop the vent clamp when the temperature reached the cold she needed by knowing exactly how it would thermally contract against its seals. That’s how she created the warm air blast she needed to make the clouds.”

As the compartment temperature returned to normal, the frosty mist began to vanish as it drizzled down on the people and equipment in the compartment.

“I’ll adjust the duty roster to keep her extra busy for the next several days to help her better use her free time,” Connor said, as he folded his arms against the chill remaining in the cold air. “But I have to admit, she planned and executed her attack quite well. She wasn’t even here to make the temperature drop.”

“Yes, sir. She’s a clever one that’s for sure,” Trevor shook his head and smiled. “It’s just too bad she’s not an engineering rating.”

Connor allowed a slight chuckle to escape his otherwise stoic composure. “You must’ve really put a bee in her hat to get this kind of premeditated retaliation.”

“Oh, come on. Everyone learns about cabin-pranks when they come aboard; it’s a rite of passage,” said Trevor. “I understand yours was legendary.”

Connor shot him a withering look. “And it will remain a closed subject.”

Trevor hid his grin, but *everyone* aboard knew about his ingenious prank. Connor just didn’t want to hear about it just now.

He turned to go. “As soon as the lieutenant has returned your engineering bay to ship shape, you can release her back to her quarters. We have a briefing at 0600 tomorrow.”

* * *

Early the next morning, it was a very tired looking Cheryl Kinson that was the first officer in attendance for the briefing. She focused on her data pad as the other officers filed in. No-one mentioned the state of the engineering bay.

Captain Owen Cantrell took his usual seat at the head of the conference table. Connor called re-tasked the monitor which had been showing the stars outside the ship. The star field vanished being replaced with the pictures of four members of a science team.

“We’ve been diverted from our usual position in task force thirty-six to pick up Doctor Maxim van Helm’s biogenetics team along with some resupply items for the fleet,” Connor stated.

Captain Cantrell surveyed his officers before speaking. “Doctor van Helm’s team is part of a classified imperial communication effort known as Project Containment. In essence, van Helm’s team may have discovered a way to tap latent telepathy in humans and use it to amplify and project messages across the galaxy. If he is successful, it would provide us with a means to instantly coordinate our forces across the galaxy using a technology that is virtually

undetectable and impossible to intercept. Our job is to transport van Helm and his team to a secure base in the Mutaura system so he can complete his work without alerting certain rebel elements who might wish to capture and exploit his technology for use against the empire.”

He nodded to Trevor. He had delivered the executive summary and now left it to his engineer who smoothly picked up the conversation and began giving the technical details.

“Doctor van Helm is the team’s biologist and a leader in the field of cerebral neuroscience.” Trevor pointed to the next person in the slide. “Beside him is Tyrell Sanders, their nano-sciences expert.”

Everyone looked either at the images on the screen or at the same image repeated on the screens of their data viewers. Sanders tall frame, boyish face, and unruly red hair gave him a distinctive towering presence among the team. Maxim van Helm was no less commanding with his jet black hair and wizardly scowl.

“To his left,” Trevor continued indicating the tall brunette “is Candice Picoult. She’s the odd one of the group in that she’s reportedly one of the empire’s only living precogs.”

“She’s a what?” Connor’s confusion plainly on his face.

“Precognition is a special case within parapsychology where the subject can either see or influence future events,” Cheryl said before Trevor could answer.

“In the case of doctor Picoult, she is reported to have,” Cheryl paused for a heartbeat to isolate the right wording, “*visions* of future events before they

happen. But it should be noted that not all of her colleagues believe in her abilities.”

Conner was impressed. Not only had Cheryl somehow managed to catch a few hours sleep before the briefing, she had also taken the time to familiarize herself with the background reports on van Helm’s team.

Trevor continued with only the slightest hint of irritation at having been interrupted. “That’s Correct. And finally, we have Sandy Dovell, an accomplished quantum physicist. According to our data, she has been lending her expertise on ultra-long distance quantum entanglement.”

“So what is *Project Containment* in laymen’s terms?” Connor asked.

“Well sir, it is effectively a specialized neural implant that allows someone in one corner of the galaxy to talk to someone else in a different corner of the galaxy—in real time.”

Connor whistled as he stole a glance at Cheryl. Her eyelids were drooping slightly which told him that she hadn’t gotten all that much sleep, if any. He suspected they would have no more engineering pranks from her, at least for a while.

“So you can all see why the Emperor wants to make sure their discovery stays under control of Imperial security. Lieutenant, I will be assigning you to be their liaison since they fall under your department,” Connor said turning to Cheryl. She snapped her head up as she heard her name.

But before she could voice any concerns, the comm. chime sounded. Captain Cantrell pressed the receive switch and his gruff voice answered, “Cantrell here.”

“Captain, we have an urgent message from Commodore Brenton.”

“Very well, ensign. Put her on speaker.”

The communication officer’s voice was replaced with the soft alto of their task force commander.

“Captain, I’m sorry to have to give you a secondary mission considering the personnel you are about to pick up, but we’ve got an emergency that has arisen on Mirak six. Apparently, there has been a breakout of Gregor’s disease that they are unable to contain. Since your current assignment will take you within a parsec of Altair, I’m instructing you to pick up the necessary medicines from our medical facility there.”

Cantrell turned to his chief medical officer, Madison Spinoza. Madison was a wirey framed, petite woman with keen eyes and unruly red hair that she kept pulled tightly behind her head.

“Commodore, I assume we will be picking up Thedrozine to treat the outbreak?”

“My ship’s doctor, Madison Spinoza,” Cantrell provided by way of introduction.

“That is correct doctor. Do you have some aboard the *Dominion*?” Brenton asked.

“In limited quantity,” she continued, “but not nearly enough to combat a plague.”

Brenton went on. “Mirak colony has over seven thousand inhabitants and over sixty cases have been reported so far. It spreads quickly and they anticipate that it could infect half the colony before you arrive. Without sufficient quantities of Thedrozine, they’ll be dead within a week. Unfortunately, Altair only has a limited quantity of processed Thedrozine on hand, but they have a natural supply of Byrozium which you will take aboard and distill. I’m told you have the facilities aboard to use it to synthesize the necessary quantities of Thedrozine you will need.”

“Yes ma’am, we can do that,” Spinoza said confidently.

“In that case, do not linger once your science team is aboard. You are ordered to make best speed to Mirak six in order to rescue and treat as many of the colonists as possible. We’ll be diverting ships from task group forty-one to lend you medical personnel to assist, but they’ll be four days behind you and won’t have the vaccine. It’s up to you, Captain.”

“*Dominion* won’t let you down, ma’am,” Cantrell said smoothly.

“Contact me once you arrive at Mirak. Commodore Brenton out.”

The channel went silent as Captain Cantrell considered his options.

Very well. Commander Leary, please see to the accommodations for our science team. Commander Hanson will see to the cargo needs for the medical

supplies. Doctor, let me know if there is anything you will require to begin the synthesis.”

“I’ll work with Trevor to set up logistics from the cargo bay to our synthetics lab and we’ll set up round the clock synthesis of the Thedrozine.”

“What about me, sir,” Cheryl asked. Connor leaned closer to the table and smiled.

“Your responsibility will be Doctor van Helm’s science team. Make sure they get settled in and provide them whatever they need so they may continue their work.”

Connor smiled knowing that Tracy’s job would likely be the most difficult of all the staff. Scientists often have egos that are hard to fit into the ships confines. And Cheryl would need to run interference to keep them out of the way of the normal operation of the ship. Well, that should be punishment enough for her little engineering prank and provide her with good experience managing civilians aboard a military vessel.

Chapter 2

Cheryl fell into her bunk with an exhaustion she hadn't felt since the academy. She had gotten the science team aboard, but they wanted immediate access to everything. She had to get them access to the lab facilities and help them get their materials aboard that they would need for their work. And everything had been expedited due to the plague outbreak and the Captain's orders to hastily leave orbit.

She quickly found out that the science team lacked the kind of cohesion one found in the military discipline aboard a star ship. Although Maxim van Helm was in charge of the project, it seemed that the other members of the team all had their own ideas about which direction the project should be going. Tyrell was the most outspoken and was constantly having heated discussions with van Helm. Cheryl was glad when they finally were given enough access that she could turn in for the night.

The first thing the captain had asked for was a demonstration of their technology to date. From what Cheryl could gather, Tyrell's specialized nano-robots were programmed to be injected into the host subject where they would attach themselves to the host's brain. Only Maxim seemed to understand exactly how. But that ended the physical connection. Somehow Candice had developed the psyche linkage allowing the host to pass their thoughts to the little devices. From there, they supposedly transmitted these thoughts (in some kind of coherent manner) to a transmission system developed by Sandy. That part still confused Cheryl, but had something to do with quantum entanglement. She needed to find

out more before the demonstration, but her body simply could not move any longer without sleep.

* * *

Cheryl snapped her eyes open at 0500 hours to the annoying sound of some randomly chosen video game theme music blaring from her headboard. She pulled herself together, dressed, and went immediately to the lab.

The microbiology lab was a large set of bays with sterile white walls and excellent lighting. There were computer terminals just about everywhere and certain sections were separated by force fields, or in some cases, thick atmospheric containment doors. White steel tables were positioned at various parts of the spacious laboratory, but at the moment, there were boxes and crates littered everywhere giving the impression of a very untidy area. That would be the first thing to get cleaned up, Cheryl thought.

“Good morning, ma’am,” Ensign Willow Kearney said cheerily. Her dark skin and bright eyes were always a pleasant sight, even if it was this early in the morning.

“How are our guests,” Cheryl asked as she noticed two of the scientists busy tearing open another crate of gear.

Willow wrinkled her nose and frowned. “These two have been here all night unpacking and fiddling with their toys,” she said. “And they have been very particular about everything.”

“Typical science types,” Cheryl said as she poured herself coffee from the wall dispenser. Ship’s coffee wasn’t as great as what the captain had laid in, but it was passable once you got used to it. Then again, Cheryl assumed sulfuric acid was too if you built up enough of immunity to it.

“Take that one for example,” Willow said, pointing at Tyrell. “He wants to have access to more powerful computing resources so he can play with his little micro robots, or whatever they are. I informed him that he has been given level II access to our central computer core, but he wants even more. For a smart person, he doesn’t seem to understand that *we* have to have some compute power to run the ship.”

Cheryl stared at Tyrell and wondered what it was about him that seemed familiar. Just looking at his musculature and skin tone, he was clearly not from the core Terran worlds.

“And the other one just wants to argue with everyone. Every time I assign her space to put her science project together, she moves it and then claims someone else did it. Seriously, I think I may lose my mind.”

Cheryl smiled at that. “We only have them for a few days and then they are sector command’s problem. For now, let’s just make the best of it.”

“Whatever you say, lieutenant,” Willow said.

“Oh, and thank you for your help with the snow maker,” Cheryl said.

Now it was Willow’s turn to chuckle. “I understand you got in a lot of trouble for what you did to Hanson’s engineering deck.”

“Yeah,” Cheryl said with a dreamy look. “But it was worth it! You should have seen the shock on their faces. By the time I got there, they had about 6 centimeters of accumulation.”

Both women giggled briefly as Tyrell walked out of the lab.

“Are you in charge here?” he asked testily.

“I am lieutenant Kinson. What do you need?”

“What do I need?” he asked, starting to get spun up. “For starters, I need some decent computing hardware. I was told our project had the highest Imperial priority and now we discover that we’ve been given this toy ship for transport. The computers on this vessel are antiquated in the most glorious sense and I’m still waiting for access to the primary compute core.”

Cheryl’s smile faded to a thin line and her neck began to heat. “Well for starters, the primary core is off limits to civilian personnel, regardless of their priority. Otherwise, the ship would just sit here while our orbit decayed.”

She stepped forward and pinned the taller man with her iron stare, infused with a serious lack of sleep that even the ship’s brew was unable to fully rout.

“Second, I’m sure we can scrounge up a few more workstations that you can tie in for a little more boost, starting with the one in your cabin.”

“What? You want to take my personal computing hardware and tie it in to that?” he gawked at the terminal in the computronics bay.

“I am given to understand that you are a personage of some significant intellect. I’m sure you can work within the environment that we have provided you on this ship.”

“This is intolerable,” he huffed. “I demand to speak to your commanding officer and have additional equipment shuttled aboard.”

“That will not be possible as the ship has already left orbit.”

With that, Tyrell threw his hands up and marched back into the lab tossing various invectives about that began to tinge the paint on the walls. Cheryl watched him for a few minutes more as her own temper subsided and then noticed Candice standing beside her.

“He’s not that bad, really,” Candice said. “He just gets worked up over the importance of the project and the timeline we’ve all been given.”

“Yes, I understand. I’m lieutenant Kinson,” Cheryl said.

“Candice Picoult, parapsychology.”

“Is there anything we can provide for you that we have available aboard ship?”

“No,” Candice sighed. “But I wouldn’t get too close to this project if I were you. Someone is likely to get ... hurt.”

Candice turned and wandered back into the lab leaving Cheryl wondering if she were completely sane. She had heard that precogs were often quite unstable.

She turned to see Conner walking into the science compartment with a frown.

“Everything ship-shape in here lieutenant?” he asked. He glanced inside the biolab module where Tyrel was still swearing as he worked at a computer terminal.

“Of course, sir.” Cheryl said.

Conner looked at Cheryl and lowered his voice. “Lieutenant, I don’t need to remind you of the importance the Emperor places on the success of their research.”

Cheryl stood a little straighter and Connor saw a spark of defiance in her eyes. “Commander, I know exactly how important this is, but these are civilians and an eccentric batch at that. I’m not sure they would be satisfied if we gave them control of half the ship.”

Connor thought about that. He wanted to push Cheryl to find out what she was capable of, but he also needed to ensure she was successful. She had already done penance for the engineering prank, so he decided to remind her that she was part of the leadership team now.

“Understood, lieutenant,” Connor said. “Look, I know I’ve been rather hard on you—“

“Yes sir, I know. The engineering stunt wasn’t such a great idea—“ Cheryl began, looking down at the deck.

“Actually, it was brilliant,” Connor said, allowing himself a slight grin. “In fact, that is exactly the kind of ingenuity I expect from you, especially now that I know you have it in you. Just keep the brilliance to official tasks from now on.”

He saw Cheryl’s neck flush and knew he had made his point. He leaned his head to one side and raised his eyebrows. “So now lieutenant is there anything you need.”

“Not at the moment sir. I’ll see to it that they’re ready for the technology demonstration tomorrow morning.”

“Good. If there’s anything you need, be sure to let me know,” Connor said, turning to leave.

That is when they heard Sandy Ziegler scream.

Connor turned and ran through the hydroponics lab which was the quickest way to the source of the commotion. Cheryl raced through the biomed module and arrived in the high-vac lab a split second behind Connor. Sandy stood with her back to the wall as she stared into the large, high-vac chamber used for extremely low pressure experiments, her face contorted with fear.

“What happened in here?” Connor asked using his command voice. Cheryl followed Sandy’s gaze and took a closer look into the high-vac chamber. Cheryl gave a startled gasp and turned to look at the gauge on the wall which indicated a pressure approaching the vacuum of space.

Sandy was a gibbering mess caught between tears and terror. Willow moved to help Sandy slide to the floor where she collapsed into a heap of tears. Connor

moved over to see what Cheryl was looking at and saw the mangled remains of a human body inside.

“Sir, this is impossible. There are dozens of sensors and interlocks that would prevent someone from being injured in this chamber. They couldn’t even access the controls from the inside,” Cheryl said, shaking her head, her brow knitted in frustration.

“Which means someone put this person there,” Connor said. He moved to the wall and pressed the communications switch and the code for security section. “I need a security team to the high-vac lab on the double.”

Turning back to Cheryl, he motioned for Willow to take Sandy outside. As Willow spoke soothingly to Sandy, Connor took charge of the situation.

“Alright, let’s start with our security feeds. I want to know what happened in here over the last forty-eight hours. Ask Dr. Spinoza down here to take a look at the body.”

“But, sir,” Cheryl said. “This body died from decompression.”

“Not necessarily,” Connor said. “It may have been put there to make it look that way. Let’s get Trevor down here to go over the safety systems on this chamber. I want to know what happened.”

“Sir, one thing is certain,” Cheryl said. “Whoever this is inside the chamber, he or she didn’t do this to themselves.”

“I know,” he said. Connor looked Cheryl in the eye. “As the science section head, I need you to take the lead in the investigation. Start collecting any physical evidence you can find here. I’ll go and brief the captain.”

“Yes, sir.”

Chapter 3

“Come in, Mr. Connor,” Captain Cantrell said as the chime sounded in his day cabin. It wasn’t particularly spacious, but it served his needs. Connor knew the captain needed to spend some time away from the bridge so he could review reports, read communications, and approve rosters. Besides, from his command terminal the captain always had access to an executive summary of what the bridge saw. It wasn’t essential that he remain on the bridge while the ship was between stars; his officers took care of all of the routine matters and could summon him back at a moment’s notice.

Connor walked in with a frown on his face. He didn’t want to risk other personnel overhearing the news of the dead scientist before he told his captain. He waited for Cantrell to finish a report he was reviewing before the older man

waved him to the seat in front of his small work desk. Connor advanced, but did not sit down.

“Yes, Mr. Connor, what is it?” the captain said, not looking up from his terminal.

“Sir, we found Maxim van Helm dead in the high-vac lab moments ago.”

“What?” Cantrell exclaimed, coming around the desk to face Connor. “How did it happen?”

“We found him inside vacuum chamber number two in the lab. The chamber atmosphere had been evacuated. Security is posted and I have Lt. Kinson beginning the investigation.”

“I see. Stay on top of this, Connor. If the emperor finds out we let this team die without delivering the technology to Mutaura, he will have my scalp. Your first task is to secure the technology, using any means necessary.”

“Understood, sir,” Connor said. “Captain, we have reason to believe van Helm was murdered.”

“Murdered? What makes you think that?”

“We need Dr. Spinoza to confirm the cause of death, but he could not have put himself in the High-vac chamber and operated the controls,” Connor provided.

Cantrell seemed to think about that for a moment. “Let’s not rule out the possibility of human error until you have conclusive proof, Commander. In the

mean time, have the lieutenant continue with the investigation and report your findings directly to me.”

“Understood, sir. I’d also like to place security on alert condition two in the event one of the scientists killed van Helm.”

The Captain met his gaze levelly. “I think that is premature Mr. Leary. Keep me posted. That is all.”

With that, Owen Cantrell turned and resumed his position at his desk. Connor knew he had been dismissed, but he was concerned that the captain was not taking this matter seriously enough. It was one thing to keep this on a low profile to prevent spooking the crew, but to not take precautions bordered on incompetence.

Connor thought about the captain’s reaction a moment. Perhaps he was just too close to what had just happened. After all, he had security personnel in the science lab now. It was also possible that the Captain did not want to alert the killer that they were prepared to take aggressive action to find him. That could actually be a wise strategy.

“Yes, sir,” Connor managed as he turned to leave the cabin.

“Oh, and Mr. Connor,” the captain said, looking up. “Please do not take too much of Madison’s time. Her primary responsibility is to ensure we have enough Thedrozine converted by the time we reach Mirak.”

“Of course sir,” Connor said as Cantrell turned his monitor slightly and resumed his posture of reading reports.

* * *

Connor was acknowledged by the naval sentry as he walked into the biogenics lab. The lab anteroom was laid out in a spherical shape with the various bays jutting off its various spokes. Large monitors and viewports allowed the scientists to monitor various rooms as needed, but he noticed none of them provided a view into the High-vac lab. He walked to a viewport that gave him a view of the biogenics lab. It was pristine white as were most of the lab modules. Apparently someone thought white appeared more sterile which was supposed to be more endearing to people of science.

Inside, Candice was calmly working at a terminal wearing a strange headset that covered the top of her head and ears. It looked remotely like a high-tech version of a mountaineer's cap. He decided to start with her.

Candice had her eyes closed and did not hear Connor as he walked into the compartment. Nonetheless, she spoke up as he was preparing to announce himself.

"Hello Commander Connor," she said, her eyes still closed. Connor looked for any monitors that might have revealed his entrance to the lab but found none. He pulled up a chair next to the workstation Candice was using and tried to see what she was studying so intently.

"How did you know it was me?" he asked.

“I saw this conversation a few minutes ago,” she said cryptically. “I am a precog, you know.”

“So I’ve been briefed. Can you always see the future?”

Candice stretched her muscles which were probably sore from sitting in one place for so long. Then she opened her eyes and fixed her piercing gaze on Commander Connor. He was determined to meet that gaze unflinchingly.

“No, not always,” she remarked. “Sometimes I see other places, and sometimes I can see glimpses of the past. Control is something I’m still working on.”

“So how does it work? Were you born with the ability?”

Candice smiled at Connor. “First, you have to know what precognition really is. It’s not some hocus pocus that you burn people at the stake for. Its actual science.”

Connor was sure she could read the skeptical look on his face. He tried to smile so it wouldn’t be so blatant. Candice appeared to take that as a good gesture and seemed to relax, like a cat curling up for a nap. She took a deep breath and started what was sure to be a very strange lecture.

“We know from Einstein that space and time are related and that that space is curved because of its interaction with time and other forces. But we also know that gravitation is very weak compared to the other forces we can measure. One reason for that is that every quantum particle in the universe is tied to at least nine

other dimensions through strings. It is believed that gravity is much stronger in other dimensions, but only partially affects our own.”

“Yes, that much I know,” Connor said adjusting his posture to be more comfortable and to project the impression that he was interested. “It’s what allows us to use our interstellar grapples and pull ourselves between stars. The gravitational forces along the superstrings are much more powerful than we can account for between physical stellar bodies.”

“That is partially true,” she said. “But what you don’t realize is that time also exists in other dimensions and can be strongly bent by way of those same forces. Because of this, time tends to be compressed or elongated outside of our dimensional framework.”

He noted the casual way she spoke, almost hypnotically. He couldn’t help but feel comfortable around Candice. Connor determined that he did not trust her in the least.

“So how does that impact you?”

“Well, certain people are born with the ability to sense things. We’re discovering that what we’re actually sensing is eddies from time waves carried across these other dimensions. I can feel them the way a sailor might feel fog or mist on his skin when he’s at sea.”

Connor had a puzzled look on his face, so she frowned and tried another approach. She picked up a data tape and slowly slid it across the desk.

“Imagine you are a sailor in a lifeboat, adrift on the sea. You can no more control the direction of the boat than you can control the air around you, but you sense the overall mood of the sea.”

She made a show of lazily dragging the tape across the desk.

“Your passengers can’t distinguish the smells and sounds from one another like you can, because they aren’t sailors, merely passengers.”

Connor leaned forward a bit. “So you’re saying you can see these *time waves*?”

“Not directly,” she admitted, releasing the tape. “But I can feel them, like gentle nudges. It’s eerie really. And while I can’t control where they impinge on our reality, I can move my consciousness slightly to get a little closer to them, much the way the sailor can move about the boat to see the sea from a different viewpoint, even though he can’t move the boat at all.”

She moved her finger lazily around on the tape, but Connor kept his gaze level on her eyes. He considered whether or not he believed her explanation. Either way, she could somehow sense something and she was apparently practicing the art of strengthening her ability to read what she sensed. It struck him as very unscientific.

“So is that what this particular device does? Does it help you find these waves?”

Candice sighed with mild exasperation. “No, not find them exactly, they sort of find me. My mind is somewhat like a sink for these time waves. I’m just

training my mind to tune out other sensory input so I can focus on the images I see when they happen. It's difficult because they pass quickly and I never know what frame of reference I'll get: Past, present, or future."

"I see," said Connor. He wasn't completely sure he believed her, but she must have some ability or she would not have been selected for the project, he told himself.

"So what is your contribution to the messaging system being developed by your team?"

"Well," she said. "Based on what I've told you, we know that these time waves overlap our dimension quite regularly. Based on the work Dr. Sandy Dovall is doing, we're able to find ways to connect quantum particles across space-time. These particles carry our messages for us, but we first have to locate them. I'm able to do it without any direct machine connections, so Dr. van Helm felt that if we could find out makes my brain more sensitive to these other dimensions; we could find a way to harness, and possibly, duplicate it."

"Have you?" Connor asked.

Ensign Willow Kearney walked into the compartment to retrieve a few supplies from one of the tables. Candice was silent until she left.

"We've made initial contact—enough to allow me to send messages through this medium, but we haven't been able to isolate the process accurately yet. We're just now getting some experimental data to corroborate the theories as to how it all works."

Connor thought for a moment. If she was the only one that could perform this seemingly mystical feat, then she was, indeed, very important to the project. But he still didn't have any evidence or motive to link her to the murder of Dr. van Helm. He decided to pursue that angle and see where it led.

"You know that Dr. van Helm was killed sometime last night?"

He watched carefully, but her expression didn't change. Apparently, she wasn't surprised. "Yes, I heard the news when I came into the lab this morning."

"Did you have any precognition that he was going to die? I've heard that the universe takes death seriously; perhaps it tried to warn you."

Candice smirked at that. "Now, that is not very scientific, Commander. I didn't receive any messages from any Norse gods telling me he was going to die."

"No, I didn't mean that," Connor said. "I've just heard that precog's can sometimes—never mind. Let me ask you: did you know of anyone that might have wanted to see van Helm dead?"

"Are you saying that Maxim's death wasn't an accident?" she asked.

Connor was getting frustrated that she was so easily playing him.

"No, I'm not saying that. We are just trying to discover everything we can about what happened."

"Well, I can tell you that Maxim and Tyrell did not get along at all."

"What do you mean," Connor asked.

"Tyrell kept insisting that we could make more progress if we used nanite-fiber implants to speed up our connection to the messaging process. Maxim felt

that it would be too invasive if we built the neural interface before we understood what was going on in my brain that made it so different. He kept Tyrell on the sidelines which made him feel like a minor player. I think Tyrell felt he was going to be cut out of the final product.”

She sat very still for a moment and Connor watched her take in the implications of what it meant if Dr. van Helm had actually been murdered. She seemed to be struggling with something and finally came to a decision.

“I felt something very strange last night, almost like a de-ja vu moment.”

“You mean about this conversation?” Connor asked.

“No, about a conversation we are going to have.” She said. “It’s fragmentary in my mind, but I think we are going to talk about this again,” she said.

“When?” he asked.

“After the second murder.” She said and then she put her cap back on and tuned him out.

Chapter 4

Cheryl walked into the medical bay and found Sandy Dovell sitting up in bed sipping a cup of soup. She walked over and sat on the edge of her bed.

“Hi, I’m Cheryl Kinson. Mind if I ask how you’re feeling?”

Sandy was still somewhat pale after her experience, but looking mildly better. She lowered her cup of soup and looked at Cheryl.

“I’m feeling a little better,” she said and automatically turned her head to look into the autopsy theater at the far end of the bay.

Cheryl cut straight to the point. “Do you know of anyone that might have wanted to see Dr. van Helm dead?”

“Well, you’re very direct, aren’t you,” Sandy said. “I know Maxim and Tyrell don’t get along, but I don’t think he wanted to kill Maxim.”

“What is their disagreement about?” Cheryl asked.

“Maxim is... was a purist and has always wanted our research to harness the organic side of humanity as much as possible. That’s why Candice is on the team. If they can find a way to tap into the human potential to interact with other dimensions, then we can deliver our technology with practically no need for mechanical contrivances.”

“But Tyrell is a nanotech scientist,” Cheryl put forward.

“That’s right. He sees a faster path to success if we can use machines to bridge the gaps. With Candice unlocking the human receptors, all he needs do is provide the nanotechnology to connect the human mind to computer transmission and control systems.”

“But computer systems can possibly be monitored and hijacked,” Cheryl said, understanding dawning. “That’s why van Helm wants—wanted to favor a completely human solution. It’s practically unbreakable.”

“And it would give imperial forces a command and control superiority that couldn’t be intercepted.”

Cheryl considered for a moment. If the emperor had the capability to instantly send telepathic instructions to his troops stationed anywhere in the galaxy, he could direct them to military and civilian targets with nearly omnipresent intelligence. She suddenly found the prospect quite terrifying.

“So where does your research fit in?” Cheryl asked with peaked curiosity.

Sandy seemed to relax a little, being more comfortable in her own realm.

“Well, as a quantum physicist, I can demonstrate that subatomic particles are simply manifestations of quantum strings that span other dimensions. My research allows us to selectively target specific particle groups regardless of locality.”

Cheryl shook her head. “How can you possibly see a particle on the other side of the galaxy?” she asked.

“That’s the beauty of it. I don’t have to.” Sandy sat up in bed and rescued a small vegetable the size of a pea from her soup. She held it out so Cheryl could see it.

“Let’s consider that I want to give this pea to you, but I can’t see you because you aren’t close enough to reach my cup of soup. Let’s further pretend that I’m blind. I can’t even see you at all.”

“Okay,” Cheryl said. “If you can’t see me, how am I supposed to get the pea?”

“Even though you can’t get to my cup or spoon, and I can’t see you directly, I know that we’re connected through the fabric of another dimension. We call these fabrics, “branes.”

“Brains?” Cheryl asked. “Like some kind of hive mind?”

“No, branes, as in short for a membrane.”

“Oh, okay.” Cheryl said. “So there is a material connecting us together that we can’t see.

“Yes, that’s right,” Sandy said. “But, if I know how to navigate this particular material, I can locate you no matter where you are by finding another particle that is connected to the particle I have access to.”

With that, she moved her spoon slightly away from her and Cheryl, and without taking her eyes off of Cheryl, she turned the spoon over and dropped the pea on the bed. Because she had dropped it on a part of the bed higher than where Cheryl was sitting, it neatly rolled over to her. Cheryl reached down and picked it up.

“So, you’re saying that you can calculate where to drop the information in space-time such a way that it will “roll” to me?” Cheryl asked with surprise.

Sandy smiled. “Yes, something like that. The mathematics are gruesome, but I’ve almost resolved it down to a single equation. When that happens, locating entangled particles will be the easy part.”

Cheryl began putting the pieces together. “So what you are saying is that Dr. van Helm wanted to tap into Candice’s precog ability to sense other dimensions.

And with that, she could encode a message across space-time to any location you can map.”

“That’s right,” Sandy said. “Here, I’ll show you.”

She sat down her bowl of soup and risked another glance toward where Dr. Spinoza was finishing up her autopsy on the late Maxim van Heussan, or what was left of him.

She reached over and picked up a small, hand-held data tablet that fit neatly into her palm.

“This tablet is one of three that I use for demonstrations. It just happens to be quantum linked to a computer back in my office on Caros City. About how far away do you think we are?”

Cheryl thought about that a moment. “Well, since we left yesterday, I suppose we are nearly three parsecs along our current course.”

“So how long do you suppose the time lag would be for me to send a message back to my office terminal?”

“If you use the superstring ansibles, the lag should be only a few minutes at this range, assuming we’re close enough, in real space, to an ansible repeater. If we’re not, the lag could be oh, nearly an hour,” Cheryl finished and shrugged.

Cheryl knew that interstellar communication had always been a problem. Because electromagnetic waves couldn’t travel any faster than the speed of light, there was no way to send messages between star systems directly without them

taking years to arrive. Humanity's solution had been to utilize the very superstrings they used for travel between stars.

As Sandy had so precisely pointed out, mankind knew that there were other dimensions where gravitation was far greater than it presented itself in our dimension. It was precisely this increased gravitation that allowed mankind to build their grappler technology—a development that allowed them to attach to superstrings between stars, and move faster than light.

That, in and of itself, was a marvelous feat that allowed men to begin to colonize the stars. But they quickly found that having couriers to travel back and forth to deliver mail was their only means of communication between colonies.

Finally, someone discovered that messages could be modulated directly atop the interstellar cosmic strings. So communication ansibles were set up on string endpoints (or as close as they could get to them, since the endpoints terminate in the heart of a star). If a ship or planet were close enough, they could send the message via electromagnetic waves to the system ansibles. If they were farther away, the EM waves would just take longer to arrive at the ansible; there was no practical way to speed it up—until now.

“Today's technology relies too much on speed of light transmission, to and from the ansibles. So let's see if I'm still quantum-linked to Caros,” Sandy said.

Sandy tapped the screen lightly with her fingertips and then turned to show the screen to Cheryl. The datapad showed a screen with a few lines of text.

“This is Cowl, an experimental artificial lab assistant program running on my workstation back on Caros. Say hello, Cowl,”

The pad responded with a courteous “hello.”

Cheryl looked at Sandy and raised her eyebrows.

“Cowl, what is the current temperature on Caros?” Cheryl asked.

“I’m an assistant theoretical physicist, not a weatherman,” Cowl said with sour grace.

“I really would just like to know the current weather please,” Cheryl said in a stern voice. She had no patience for arrogant programs. She had seen the in-system weather reports before their arrival, giving her a point of reference.

There was a slight pause and a barely audible huff from the data pad.

“There is a high pressure system moving in over Caros City. Granth is currently clear and sunny with a mean temperature of negative eleven degrees centigrade. In the Urath Valley, the sky is partly cloudy,” Cowl responded curtly.

The tiny device would possibly have continued to spew a painfully detailed weather report covering the entire planet, so Cheryl interrupted it.

“Thank you, Cowl. What was Dr. Dovell’s mood when she left the planet?”

The device was silent for only a heartbeat before responding.

“She was mildly annoyed at having an interruption in her very important work. However, I did remind that through her discoveries in quantum teleportation, she can still communicate with me so that I can test hypotheses, run

tests, simulate qubit regression...” Cowl continued to expound upon his importance as an assistant, but Cheryl was already tuning him out.

She folded her arms and sat back. “He responds very quickly. So how do I know that your little friend isn’t running from that device in your hand?”

“You don’t of course; but were I to install the transmission protocols into a device of yours, you would be able to communicate with Cowl just as easily—and with the same transmission speed. Actually,” she said as a thought occurred to her, “...I have another one of these stored among my things in my quarters. Why don’t you hold onto this pad and check for yourself that there are no ‘hidden wires’.”

Sandy tapped the screen a few more times and showed a display of a patchy mist, concentrated in some areas of the screen, but missing in others. She sighed.

“The problem is that we’re currently targeting photon clouds which are somewhat predictable in duration, but more elusive in their inter-dimensional location. If this particular cloud were to dissipate, I would have to run considerable calculations to locate another one with the properties I need to connect across the branes back to Caros. Since I don’t actually have Cowl--and the vast computing power we had on Caros--here with me, I have to reconnect with him before I can communicate and assign him calculation tests to run; it’s sort of a catch-22 situation. It often takes me weeks with the best computers to reestablish the quantum entanglement. But fortunately, with Candice’s gifts, I can locate them far more quickly; If she weren’t available...”

Sandy sighed and looked down at her hands.

“That’s why it is so critical that I derive the master equation,” she said finally.

Chapter 5

Larson Toler was one of those science types that loved her job. She was a senior grade sensor technician and couldn't be happier. She had the only job in the fleet that allowed her as much time with the stars as she could get. Her primary job was to see what was outside the ship; asteroids, gasses, nebula and the like, but she also had the freedom to study the stars themselves. After all, the command staff wanted to know anything that could threaten the ship from outside. The sensor technician was the person that not only could see large objects that might get in the ship's path, but also had the freedom, and the obligation, to look beyond the obvious. After all, in contrast to the popular belief that space was mostly empty, space was literally filled with interesting things to look at if one knew where to look.

And Larson knew where to look. She sat at her console and turned the dials that narrowed the field of vision for one of the ship's many sensor dishes. Off to the port side was a newly formed diffuse nebula only 3 parsecs distant. Besides being some of the most beautiful objects in the galaxy, once they start to light up, Larson knew that she was potentially seeing the birth of new stars.

Larson technically reported to Cheryl as the chief science officer. But as a senior chief she also reported up to the XO for ship's operations. She didn't mind. Commander Leary wanted to know what was outside that could hurt the ship. But Cheryl gave her more leeway to study more interesting things. If one of Cheryl's projects related to stars or other heavenly phenomena, Larson threw

herself into her work. She loved to study anything in space. It was so fascinating to know that no matter how much of it you cataloged, there was always more and so much of it was new!

But with her discretionary time, she was allowed to study anything in space that was within range of the ship's sensors. As long as she didn't take away from the safe navigation of the vessel, she was allowed to task one or two sensor dishes toward nearly anything.

Chapter 6

Captain Cantrell walked onto the cargo deck with Madison Spinoza as the first freight transports began landing. They could feel the shuttles land on the deck above where they were lowered on large elevators down to the loading deck. As the first of the large twin doors slid open, his freight handling team moved in with gravity pallets and load lifters even as the first shuttle came sliding into the center of the track. Large overhead cranes also maneuvered into place to help.

He watched as the freight shuttle slid into the unloading position and its doors began to hiss as they opened. At the nose of the bulbous shuttle, a smaller door opened and the freight captain came out to meet with the ship's supply officer.

As they exchanged pleasantries, Cantrell strode up to meet with the freight captain.

"Welcome aboard the *Dominion*. I'm Captain Cantrell. Allow me to introduce my senior medical officer, Dr. Spinoza," Owen Canrell said.

"Yes, of course, Captain. I was told this shipment was especially hot and some of your goons from third fleet called me off of my normal runs to bring this stuff to you. Said you'd pay double the normal freight charges for getting it here in time to rendezvous with your ship," the freight captain said angrily. "That had better be true, because I've got a lot of angry customers back in my own sector," he finished pointing a wrinkled finger at the Captain.

“I can assure you, the Empire will compensate you for your expedited delivery. Our deck master will provide you with the necessary credit documents once we have satisfied ourselves that the shipment is in good order.”

“Hmff. In that case, you had better start offloading so I can get back on my way,” he said, his tone of annoyance softening somewhat.

“I’ll want to see the container diagnostics on each crate please,” Madison said. “I need to make sure that the Byrozium is still viable for what we need. I also need to verify the distilling hardware is in proper order before you go.”

“I can assure you everything is exactly as it was loaded on my tubs,” the man said, his gruff exterior ruffled once more.

“Shall we,” Owen said, pointing to where the crates were already being laid out on the cargo runs, even as the next massive shuttle was sliding into its berth.

Owen and Madison moved to inspect the first crate. At the top of each container was a small computer that gave precise readouts to the contents it contained. Atmospheric pressure and concentrations, temperature, humidity levels, electrostatic charge, and a host of other tell-tales were available for review. Although these were normally checked off by the supply master and his mates, Madison was taking no chances with something as volatile as Byrozium. It was an unstable yellow-grey compound in its raw form, and easily combustible. Once it was distilled into the more stable Thedrozine, it could be easily stored in the ship’s medical facilities.

Satisfied that the first two crates met with her approval, she looked at the third crate and her lips tightened as she read the dials.

“Captain, this crate has been tampered with,” she said. She held up her data pad and showed Owen the pressure curves expected for transporting raw Byrozium. Although the Captain didn’t see that much variance, he noticed that the expression on her face went from curiosity to alarm.

“There’s something very wrong here, Owen,” she said. She scanned another crate as Owen stepped back to observe the cargo workers. All of them were busy lifting or operating heavy machinery to move the crates from the cargo shuttles, but Owen noticed one of the men was watching him warily. Owen stepped casually over to the marine sergeant and nodded his head in the direction of the worker. The man had quickly resumed his strenuous labors with renewed vigor.

As the security man began to motion his team over to confront the worker, the man bolted and ran for the farthest shuttle that was just making its way onto the loading track.

As the marines men broke into a run, Owen acted out of instinct and lunged into the nearest crane loader and pushed the cargo mate aside. Taking the controls, he maneuvered the lifter arm into position above the suspected crate.

Madison’s own training kicked in and she scampered back out of the way as the supply officer bellowed, “All hands, hit the deck!”

Owen’s hands flew over the controls as the heavy overhead lifter scooped up the tainted container with its handling claw. He knew he had to get the crate as

far from the others as possible and then a flash of intuition took over. Taking a heartbeat to aim, he jammed the controls forward and slung the crate dozens of meters through the air to impact against the cargo lift the man was attempting to reach. The crate struck the bulkhead and exploded in a dazzling fireball that sent debris and equipment flying in all directions. Smoke billowed from the impact site and overturned carts and sleds were scattered across the far end of the compartment. The fleeing worker found himself pinned underneath the wheels of an upended lift truck as the security team closed in. As he worked frantically to free himself, he tried to wrestle a detonator from his pocket, but found that it had been damaged, ruining his chance to cause even more mayhem.

“You there, don’t move!” the marine sergeant said as he closed in. Alarms were blaring indicating that a loss of cargo bay pressure was imminent. The shuttles already inside the bay were being automatically locked in place by massive collars that secured their landing skids. The shuttle that was on its way into the large boat bay was being retracted and sealed back into its elevator shaft, also sealing off the saboteur’s only way out. He tore his coverall pant leg as he wrestled himself free and made a dash for the rapidly closing blast doors.

Crewmen laid out on the deck quickly began to scurry toward safety as the fleeing man reached a ladder that would take him to the second level. Nursing an injured leg, he scaled up the ladder as the first marine reached the bottom and started after him. As the saboteur reached the top of the ladder and ran along the gangway, the marine unholstered his firearm and yelled a final warning.

“Halt immediately!”

The fleeing man paid no heed as he banged into the access door between the cargo deck and the massive elevator service chamber and tried to undog the vacuum sealed hatch. The marine sighted along his pistol and fired a single charge. The shot took the man in the back of his thigh and he slammed against the door before slumping to the ground. He was quickly secured by the advancing marines.

Owen jumped down from the loader cockpit and marched over to the stunned freight captain. He stopped inches from the other man’s face.

“Repairs to my vessel will be coming from your fees,” he said angrily.

“How was I to know that man was going to go crazy like that,” the red faced merchant began as he made sputtering attempts excuse himself from fault. “I had to scrape up every able hand I could find to get here in time.”

“Chose more carefully in the future,” Owen barked.

He ignored what was sure to be a well thought out stream of excuses from the freight man and turned his attention to Madison who appeared to be shaken up.

“Are you alright, doctor?” he said, putting his arms on her shoulders.

“Yes, I’ll be fine as soon as the ringing stops. If we had stored all of those containers together in the hold...”

“We would have taken severe damage when the detonator blew,” Owen finished for her. “But, he did not succeed. I’m issuing orders for the marines to

restrain the man in sickbay under guard. See to his wounds, but I want him able to talk as soon as it's possible.”

“Yes, Captain,” she said, still clutching her ears as the ringing from the blast was lessening.

“Chief,” Owen said talking to the supply officer. “I want all of these crates checked. If there are additional traps embedded in the crates, I want them removed. See to it that all of these crates pass muster before they're stored.”

“Of course, Captain,” he said. Owen knew that chief petty officer Darron would not rest until every crate had been inspected, cleaned, polished, and contained no trace of any risk to the ship.

“In fact,” he amended, “See to it that they are stored in separate cargo bays just in case. My orders were that this medical mission was to be given the utmost priority.”

“My thoughts exactly sir. Whoever is behind this, they've made a big mistake.”

“Speaking of which, have our marines detain the freight captain as well. See to it he is made comfortable, but I insist he not be allowed to leave the ship until I have answers.”

Owen nodded and turned to follow Madison from the compartment. Now that the immediate danger was averted, he needed to consult with his senior staff.

* * *

Connor sat around the conference table with the other department heads. Madison Spinoza had just arrived, her uniform still disheveled, having worked with the medical team to transport and perform emergency surgery on the wounded terrorist's leg which was broken during his escape attempt. Cheryl, Markus, and Trevor were already in their seats around the table. Lt. Tommy Eigen of the embedded Marine Security detachment was also in attendance as was Lt. Macey Gifford, the ship's Master at Arms.

Aboard the *Dominion*, both men reported directly to Connor as the executive officer, although officially, the marines reported directly to the Captain. The ship's compliment of spacers and regular navy security officers manned the brig, provided limited ship's security, and were part of the Imperial Navy's normal chain of command. But situations did arise where the ship's mission profile might be called upon to enforce the Emperor's will upon a colony or to repel boarders, in which case major combat personnel operations were the responsibility of the marine detachment.

In practical terms, Captain Cantrell didn't have enough naval security personnel to guard everything, so he typically assigned Lt. Eigen's men to duties in which involved the most threat risk, such as securing the cargo bay or the ship's main reactor. They were trained for combat, and the captain believed they should be the first to respond. Their navy counterparts could serve in those

capacities as well, and would be called to do so if Cantrell found the need to send his marines planet side.

Everyone started to rise as the Captain made his way into the briefing compartment, but he waved them back to their seats. Taking his own, he turned to his Master at arms.

“Macey, what have you found out about our incident in cargo one?”

Macey was a shorter, stocky woman with his hair cropped close. She leaned forward as she spoke which added more authority to her deep, gravelly voice.

“Sir, Tommy and I finished questioning the freight captain and he checks out. I think his cocky attitude lost a lot of air once he saw this was coming back on him, so he was very forthcoming with details on all of his deck hands and cargo lists. It turns out his story is true; he was instructed by fleet command to make all haste to Altair to scrape up what Thedrozine they had on hand and to load the balance of Byroziium for our consumption and processing. He practically whipped his crew to make the deadline, but he didn’t have enough handlers to do the job.”

“And the saboteur?” asked Cantrell.

Macey turned to Tommy Eigen who sat ramrod straight in his chair. He had hawk-like eyes that seemed to laser focus on anyone he spoke to. Connor was glad he wasn’t part of the interrogation under this man.

“Sir, the man we apprehended was rendered unconscious during the foiled attack, but we’ve tracked down some information on where he comes from based

on the freighter's crew manifest. According to the freight captain and his documentation, he picked the man up from a firm in Altair that provides cheap, but supposedly reliable help. But we did find thermite devices on two more of the crates, which we rendered inert. It was fortunate that the man's detonator was damaged during the attack or we would have lost most of the shipment."

"I understand," the captain said. "Keep me posted. I'll want to question him immediately should he regain consciousness."

"Of course," Tommy nodded.

"If there is nothing else..." the Captain prompted.

"There is the matter of Doctor van Helm's murder, sir," Connor said. He carefully kept his tone neutral.

"You have proof then?" Owen said.

"We do now," Madison said, tucking a lock of her red hair behind her ear. "The cause of death was a phase blaster to the lower back, tearing through his kidneys and pancreas. It is conceivable he was still alive when he was placed into the high vacuum chamber."

Various grimaces manifested themselves on the assembled officers as they tried not to imagine exactly how much pain that man might have endured.

Connor hoped the doctor was unconscious when he was stored in the chamber.

"I see," Owen said, tapping his finger on the table while he thought. "Do you know the time of death?"

“Unfortunately no,” Madison said with disgust. “Because of the effects of severe decompression, the body won’t yield up the normal tell tale signs of when he died. Processes that decompose naturally are sped up when exposed to infinitesimal pressure environs.”

“Hmm. Thank you, Doctor,” Turning to Connor, he said, “Commander, please continue your investigation into the matter. Dismissed.”

As the officers stood and began to file out of the room, the Captain remained seated.

“Mr. Leary,” he said.

Connor stopped and turned back to see a face without expression looking back at him. “I’d like a word.”

“Of course, sir,” Connor said.

Owen fixed Connor with a gaze of stone. “I understand you want to get to the bottom of this mystery, Mr. Leary, as do I. But I need you to understand something.”

Owen stood and walked over to stand very close to Connor. Connor was taller by a few centimeters, but Owen’s intense presence made him feel smaller somehow.

Owen let out a sigh and walked over to the observation window. He gazed out at the stars for several moments before turning back to Connor.

“The empire must continue to expand, reclaiming colonies that should have remained under centralized rule instead of being allowed to independently form

their own governments. The galaxy is rife with star systems building defense fleets now—fleets that we will one day have to meet in battle. And we must overcome them. The empire must continue to expand until we control all known populations and bring them under our single rule. That is the purpose of this ship and its crew.”

“Yes sir,” Connor said. This much was obvious.

“These side missions,” Owen pinched his face in disgust,”—bringing medicines and transporting scientists—are not the primary mandate of our fleet. We do these things because of the importance of various colonies to the emperor and the raw materials they can provide to the war effort. But never forget: We are primarily a ship of *war*. Our duty is to find rebellious star systems and crush the life from them. And by doing this, we gain favor in the eyes of the emperor and are promoted to larger commands.”

“But, an important, but lesser known fact, is that by supporting the right fleet commanders, one can accelerate on the fast track. Officers that complete their missions successfully, under the watchful gaze of the fleet admiralty, can move from command of a single cruiser to command of a small squadron, escort group, or even a small fleet. And fleet commanders are given titles to planetary grants and governances, by which, a man can become wealthy and quite powerful in the empire. Do you understand what I am saying to you?”

Leary allowed his focus to remain on Captain Cantrell’s face. He understood quite well what the man was saying. Cantrell’s ambition was severe. He was not

content to be merely a starship captain, even though he was considered by many to be a very good one. He wanted power—the kind of power that came with commanding fleet operations—the kind that was given with the proper loyalties, and not necessarily to the emperor. Leary got the impression that Owen wanted even more than that. It was not unheard of in the empire, for men to possess large tracts of land on several planets—or even entire planets themselves—and command the fleets in the service of the quadrants that they governed. That was how the emperor rewarded loyalty. This was what Owen desperately wanted, but he was not fortunate enough to have been born into the right families. So he would have to earn his power in the time honored tradition of hard fought conquest and promotion through excellence. But even if he were able to complete all of his missions with the greatest of success, that kind of power was still exceedingly rare. But Connor now understood more about the man he served under and warnings flashed in his mind.

Of course, that kind of power would always be out of reach for Connor Leary. His own genetic heritage was tied to the very Kartian threat that they now faced. He had worked hard, of course, to dispel the notion that he was sympathetic to his own homeworld, or that he would give them an ounce of mercy in the battle he knew would soon come. But Connor had been over this ground many times before. He mentally shook himself out of his contempt for his heritage and back to the present. He knew Owen was waiting for his response.

“Yes, sir,” Leary agreed.

“Good. In that case, I want you to simply arrest whichever scientist you believe to be the most guilty, and confine the others to their quarters. Our mission is to bring them to Mutara II, along with their technology, and allow them to continue their work there. It is clear enough to me that one of them wants to delay or sabotage the emperor’s pet project for their own power grab. I intend to see them, and it, delivered to that base. I personally don’t care who killed who over it. Dismissed.”

Chapter 7

Connor was furious. He had never been one to control his temper well. In fact, his mistemper was quite well known about the ship. But he was going to take it out on someone, and may fate pity the man or woman that crosses his path.

He knew he would need a drink to take the edge off, so he headed to Hanson’s quarters where he knew there would be a stash of hard liquor. If it had been the end of his own shift, he would have just gone to the officer’s mess. But he was so angry at the captain; he didn’t trust himself to be around other people just yet.

As he threw open the hatch, he startled Trevor who was working at his bedside desk. Trevor started to say something, but he knew the mood his friend was in. He opted to stay quiet until Connor had downed the second shot of scotch.

“Wow, a two-fer,” Trevor commented with a hint of mirth. Connor whirled on him to rip some paint off of his hide when he saw what he was working on.

“What in the name of Loki’s get is that?” he demanded instead.

“This is called a galleon—or at least it will be when I finish assembling it and have it painted properly. It’s a model replica of an old earth sailing ship. They used wind power to drive the ship and then they used this little steering rudder under here to guide it.”

Connor looked at the little model sailing ship, but didn’t truly see it. He wanted to throw a chair on top of it and watch it explode into splinters. He was a volcano about to blow. The drinks had helped abate his anger slightly, but it was not going to be enough.

“Do you know what the blasted captain said to me just now? He doesn’t care about finding out who murdered Dr. van Helm. He just wants to shut everyone in the science team into their cabins and make the whole problem go away.”

Connor slammed his crystalline glass back onto the desk nearly hard enough to crack it.

Hanson leaned back and laced his fingers back behind his head. Somehow Hanson’s charm wasn’t limited to wooing the ladies. He also had a way with his friend when he was in one of his moods.

“Well, maybe the captain’s right on this one. I mean, consider it from his point of view. He knows one of them did it, but he doesn’t have the luxury of cruising around while we solve it. He has orders to deliver a medical cargo—one

that has already had its security compromised—to some backwater colony planet. If he screws that up, Brenton will have his hide and his career will stall. And we both know the captain would sell us both down the Neflheim if it would help him climb up the ranks.”

“But we don’t know for sure who it was. We only have circumstantial evidence!” Connor bellowed.

Hanson sighed, leaning forward to add the bowsprit to his model. “I know, but he just wants to leave the courtroom drama to someone better equipped to handle it, especially since they’re all civvies. We just collect enough evidence to lock up who we think it might be, and then dump the problem on the nearest base. It’s how things are done on his ship.”

“His ship,” Connor said slamming down the glass. Maybe that was what was bothering him. Cantrell thought so differently than he did. Connor wanted to narrow down who the proper suspect was and then fry him on the spot.

But he knew that was only one of the things that made him different than the captain. Connor was a reject, the descendent of Kartian blood. He’d been grafted into the Imperial Navy after his own colony was subdued. No matter how hard he worked or what he tried, he would never advance beyond his current rank. It was only by virtue of his brutally hard work, organizational skill, and quick thinking that had gotten him this far.

But that was the limit of how high he could climb and it ate at him like a disease. The Captain often enjoyed reminding him that he was half-Kartian and

would never truly be a Terran like him. It didn't even matter that his planet had been taken over almost a decade ago and he was a full Terran citizen!

But none of that would help him get any closer to finding out who had murdered Dr. van Helm. So why did he feel so compelled to find the killer if the captain didn't care five ways to Asgard? Could it be that he felt that somehow, in some corner of the universe, there should be some actual justice?

“What about the tampering with the security cameras or the fact that he was shot? Those just aren't adding up for me.”

“I know, but you know these guys are smart—I mean they're scientists, right? I'm thinking that one of them felt he was getting the shaft on this project and decided to get even. They might've been planning it for months.”

That made sense to Connor in a strange sort of way. Anyone could pull up the basic specs for how a heavy cruiser was laid out and know where the armory was located. With a little diligence, one could figure out how to disable a camera system.

“But Candice said there would be another murder. Shouldn't we take that seriously?” He regretted it as soon as he had said it. While there was evidence that certain people did possess the ability of precognition, it was sketchy at best.

Trevor smiled without looking up from his toy ship. “I'm sure she just wanted to sound spooky and mysterious and all that. She probably can't even read cards, much less tell you someone's fate. If it makes you feel better, lock

‘em both up. That way they’re out of your hair and the base commander can sort it out.”

Connor thought about that. Yeah, maybe he had let his imagination get the better of him. Spooky indeed. He grinned a little knowing that he had blown this whole thing completely out of proportion.

Trevor looked up at his friend. “Just get ‘em out of the way and it’ll make the captain happy. After that, the medical mission will be a piece of cake.”

Connor nodded. Trevor was right. This was a job for the Judge Advocate and the civilian courts. If Connor got any further entangled in this, he could overstep someone’s rights and that would come back on him. The captain wasn’t going to take any heat on this one. It was better if he didn’t either.

He was still upset, but the seething beast that threatened to eat little children and rip the sleeves off of his warrant officers was backing slowly into its cage, sullenly knowing that its chance to verbally maim and destroy would have to be another time.

“Thanks, Trev. You always know how to keep me in check.”

“Someone has to,” Trevor said with a wan smile. “The last time you vented on that poor spacer kid, he soiled his uniform and had to see the boats’s shrink for a month.”

* * *

Felling better after his talk with Trevor, Connor next went to see Cheryl. He found her in the communications room working with the ship's cryptologies officer. Connor caught her attention and called her over to speak in the hallway. He waited as a rating walked by and turned the corner.

"I'm ordering the investigation dropped, Lieutenant. I'm having Tyrell Sanders placed under arrest and taken the brig. I'm also going to have the other scientists sequestered in their cabins for the remainder of the trip. Captain wants this to take a back seat to the medical mission."

Cheryl stared at him in shock for several heartbeats as though he had sprouted horns.

"Are you out of your mind, sir?" she spat finally. Her hands were fisted at her sides.

"I know this is difficult for you to accept, Lieutenant. It was for me too, but the captain wants this put to bed now. That's an order."

"I understand orders," she said still seething. The fact that she kept her voice level was to her credit. "But we have a murderer aboard who could kill again. The ship's safety is at risk," she stated.

"All the more reason to lock up the most likely suspects. If the science team is isolated and secured, the ship's main mission can be completed. After that, we'll see that they're turned over to the Judge Advocate on the Mutaura base so this matter can be prosecuted properly."

“But if we don’t do our due diligence and gather the proper evidence, they will be tried on a sloppy case. At the very least, the Master at Arms should be involved in this. Where is she?”

“Leave Macey out of this. This comes down from the captain. I have my orders and now you have yours.”

“Then what about this transmission we intercepted? It talks about a payout for the technology.” Cheryl thrust the data pad at Connor who took it with a surprised look on his face.

“You think Orions are behind this,” Connor said.

“I’m not sure. This might not even be authentic, which is even stranger. Look, none of this adds up. Our cargo is attacked; someone is shot and stowed in a vacuum chamber. All I’m asking for is a chance to figure out how it all ties together.”

“And I’m ordering you to drop it. If that’s going to be a problem for you, I can have you reassigned,” Connor said finally.

Cheryl worked to get her anger under control. “That won’t be necessary sir. In fact, I’d like to escort the security detail to lock up Dr. Sanders if that’s okay.”

“That will be fine, lieutenant. But after that, please resume your station and let this drop.”

Her face fell. He knew exactly how she felt, but he had no choice. Orders were orders. Still, he wanted to make it up to her and he thought he just might know a way.

“By the way, I understand your shift rotation will put you in environmental and then propulsion; is that correct?”

“Yes sir,” she said. Her tone was distant, as though she was deep in thought.

“Well, speaking of disobeying orders... I didn’t tell you this, but if you were to wonder over to propulsion bay four, say about 1930 hours, you might find certain events entertaining.”

Cheryl looked up with a suspicious look on her face.

“Sir?” she asked tentatively.

“It’s an old and very guarded tradition aboard *Dominion*. The captain doesn’t allow brawling aboard ship—he doesn’t want any broken bones or any bloody messes, but he looks the other way for a monthly enlisted tradition called ‘the cage.’”

“I’m listening...,” Her interest was suddenly peaked.

“1930 hours. Don’t be late,” he suggested.

Chapter 8

When Cheryl arrived at the doors for propulsion four, she was surprised to find two marine sentries guarding the door which was marked off with caution tape and floor signs indicating construction was in progress. She walked up to them and asked them to stand aside.

“Begging the lieutenant’s pardon, but this bay is down for maintenance. It’s not safe to enter just yet, ma’am.”

She lifted an eyebrow and looked both ways before answering. “I’m here for the cage, gentlemen.”

The marines grinned at each other briefly and pointed to an access hatch that was on the upper portion of the deck. Cheryl climbed the scaling ladder and opened the hatch with a creak. As Cheryl stepped inside, she immediately noted that it was much darker than the bay would normally be. It grew even darker as the door closed behind her. In the center of the bay, a large area had been marked off with caution tape strung between four metal poles that had been hastily bolted to the floor plates. The poles were wrapped in insulating foam and their tops were crowned with construction helmets that were similarly covered in hard rubber. It was clearly designed to be a makeshift arena.

There were a large population of crew present for this event, whatever it was. Many were off duty, but a few duty personnel were there as well, including the supply officer and the TSO. Cheryl had no idea what to expect as she pushed her way forward to get a better look.

The room had a hazy tint to it from cigarette and cigar smoke mingled with the smell of burnt engine grease. She looked around and saw two men about to enter the ring.

The first man had a short, stout build that was foreboding for anyone stepping into the ring with him. He was distinctive in his marine sleeveless shirt and black shorts. Cheryl recognized him as marine sergeant Klaust. The other was a navy man, also dressed in his PT uniform which was grey with navy blue shorts.

Cheryl couldn't immediately place his name. Their shirts were both moisture wicking, but sweat stains were already beginning to appear on each.

Apparently, there was no one to announce or call the bout as both men yelled their own battle cry and lunged into each other, both seeking purchase against the other. Klaust was bigger, but the other man was built closer to the ground. Cheryl knew about the existing grudge between services, and perhaps this is where they were able to take it out. There was a cacophony of cheers, shouts, boos, and other testosterone filled noises as the two combatants struggled to bring the other into submission on the floor. A mat was certainly an afterthought although neither seemed to care.

The larger man finally got the grip he wanted and leaned back with a herculean effort bringing the sailor down hard on his back. Cheryl leaned in and saw that a layer of latex was stretched out over the floor, probably over crating material, to perhaps give the floor a little give.

But the smaller man wasn't out of the fight. He flexed his large thigh muscles and managed to roll to a position where he could get some leverage. In doing so, the huge marine lost his grip and the navy man exploded onto his back and wrenched him around, slamming his head into one of the pipes. Cheryl was certain that she heard the pipe ring like it had been struck with a large wrench.

Are they just going to continue until they kill each other? Is that what this is about?

But as Cheryl leaned forward to see what was going on, Trevor Hanson snuck up behind her and tapped her shoulder. Cheryl jumped as she turned, but he directed her to an area on the side with a slightly better view.

“Are they going to kill each other?” she yelled to be heard over the crowd as they moved to the side area.

“Nah, they just have a beef with each other and this is the best way to settle it: man-to-man. All the drills and talk of someone getting killed has the crew sort of tense. This helps all the men take the edge off. But these two, they’re just the opening act. Wait until you see what comes next,” Trevor pointed at the combatants with a smile.

Cheryl looked back and saw that Klaus had again come out on top and had pinned the smaller navy man beneath him. Suddenly a loud shop buzzer sounded and master sergeant Jones stepped into the ring and pulled them apart easily. Sergeant Klaus sported a huge grin as he flexed his guns for the crowd. The navy man looked as though he might attack from behind, but Jones spun him around and pushed him out of the ring. Their fight was over.

Cheryl saw money changing hands (which was also against regulations) and wondered why the captain allowed this kind of brutal behavior from his men.

Maybe this is like a pressure valve. Let off a little steam to keep the enlisted men from breaking under pressure. Bend, don't break.

As she thought about it a bit more, she found herself uncomfortable to be here. How many other regulations were going to be broken in “the cage?” It was like

being in an under city ghetto. No one seemed to even notice that there were officers present.

Trevor must have understood how she felt, because he clearly wasn't leaving her side.

The marine sergeant towed himself off as another man stepped into the ring. This man was wearing a simple sweat top and pants, but moved with a strange gait, like a tiger preparing to take down its meal.

"Who's that?" Cheryl asked, pointing at the newcomer.

"That's the main event," Trevor said. "That's warrant officer Kilkenny. He's supposed to have a black belt equivalent in Kung Fu. Don't know how they talked him into getting into the ring with Klaus, but this ought to be entertaining to say the least. My money's on Klaus, though." Trevor winked at her. She didn't know if he was serious or not.

She turned her attention back to the ring where Kilkenny was slowly moving toward Klaus. Klaus flashed him a smile from his towering height and then reached out with lightning speed to grapple. But in doing so, he had also committed his weight. Like a snake, Kilkenny moved into the attack, blunting its force, positioned his leg behind Klaus and then shifted his weight sending Klaus to the mat.

A very irritated marine scrambled to his feet as Kilkenny moved back. Not to be caught like that again, Klaus wrapped Kilkenny in his vice-like arms and began to apply enough force to snap his ribs. Kilkenny reached down to find a vital

organ to attack, but was lifted off of his feet and slammed down hard, his own arms pinned beneath him. Kilkenny writhed and tried to find purchase against the larger man, but the fight was over. Jones stepped in and separated them as the crowd of men cheered and howled.

Klaus was obviously feeling himself to be the strongest man on the boat and began to bellow challenges at the crowd. There appeared to be no takers.

Until Commander Leary stepped into the ring.

“Well, commander, I’m a little surprised,” Klaus taunted the smaller man.

“Yes, I am too,” Connor confessed. “But you look a little tired out, so I thought I would give you a go.”

“Alright by me,” Klaus boasted,” but per captain’s instructions, there’s no rank inside this ring.”

Cheryl wandered if she had heard him right. Captain’s instructions?

“Very well,” Connor said, and the fight was on.

Klaus moved a little slower as he began to back Connor into a corner of the ring. He wasn’t willing to risk being thrown again. But Connor kept one hand slightly out in front of him as he circled around the larger man. Klaus must have thought this an interesting opportunity, so he grabbed Connor’s wrist and pulled him into what would have been a spectacular overhead lift and subsequent pile driver blow to the floor. Except that Connor had shifted outside of Klaus’s grip and then applied his own weight into levering Klaus slightly off balance.

Suddenly making a sharp correction, Connor torqued Klaus's wrist back and the large man's feet left the floor as his back slammed into the floor.

The crowd noise died down to a muffled whisper as Connor moved and sharply applied pressure to the down man's wrist and elbow, forcing him into a severe arm-bar.

But Klaus wasn't out yet. He bellowed with rage and, arm-bar or not, he lifted himself and Connor off of the floor.

In the few seconds he had, Connor applied a special technique, called Nikyo, which forced Klaus's wrist into a position where the man had to choose. He must yield to the pain or risk having his wrist broken. Fortunately, the technique was applied so quickly, Klaus's own body betrayed him and he fell to his knees in agony. Connor shifted again and the marine was pinned face first against the floor with enough of Connor's weight on his back that he couldn't escape.

After several muffled curses and feeble attempts to displace the commander, Jones once again stepped in and separated the two men.

* * *

Connor arrived on the bridge for the start of his shift and checked in with the Captain. So far, everything had been rather quiet, which was a pleasant change.

After the events of the previous evening, which were not discussed by anyone who had any sense, He decided that the ship was finally getting back to normal.

Cheryl had seen to locking up Tyrel Sanders and even went to the extra length to have his cabin searched. He had to admire her dedication and drive. She found the missing hand weapon and was having it checked to see if it had been fired recently. Connor was sure that it had, seeing that it was the only weapon missing from the armory, making this an open and shut case. All the better so they could get back to normal fleet business.

Still, something twisted around inside the back of his mind. Even though he was told to let this go, he was struggling to do so. How had a scientist managed to get past security personnel, into a secured compartment to gain access to a hand weapon without being recorded? And who were these mysterious Orions willing to make a purchase for the emperor's technology.

The Orions were a strange group of colonies to begin with. Out at the rim of colonized space, they were eager enough to seek trade, but primarily wanted to be left alone. All gestures by the empire to allow military ships to provide pirate protection were rebuffed. Instead of joining the empire willingly, they opted instead to build their own defense ships. Since they were so far away, the emperor had his hands full with other matters. But they continued to grow bolder and at some point, they would need to be brought to heel. If they were behind these attacks, the emperor might decide their time had come.

Connor poured himself a cup of coffee and began to make his rounds, checking various status boards and speaking with each department head to ensure

the ship was functioning smoothly and properly. After a moment, he walked over to the science station to find an ensign taking sensor readings.

“Ensign, where is lieutenant Kinson?” he asked.

“She’s down in the astrophysics lab. She said there was an anomaly to our stern that she wanted to review.”

* * *

Lawson worked carefully, but quickly on the controls to the astrophysics lab sensor array. The array was designed to allow research as the ship passed nebulae and quasars, but Lawson was using it for a different purpose entirely.

She had first noticed the signal from her science station. A steady flickering of one of the stars directly astern of the ship. To the untrained eye, it would appear to be merely a star pattern, but Lawson knew better. The ship was being followed.

Of course, she should have reported it to the captain. But before she did that, she wanted to find out what they wanted. For Lawson knew that the ship behind them was Orion.

She worked the dials until she was able to detune the sensor dish enough to pick out a harmonic in the signal. It wasn’t the primary harmonic so it was buried in the noise. It required a very specific procedure to pick it up properly, and when

she did, she locked the sensor tracking dish onto the harmonic so she could receive the signal.

Lawson knew she didn't have much time. Procedures called for her to report the anomaly and then use the bridge scanner which had vastly superior range and bandwidth capabilities. But by using a lower powered sensor dish, it bought her a little time.

The message was merely a test pattern, and she knew this would be the case. Lawson was not just a great Terran officer, but she had also been trained by the Orions. She worked steadily to make sure she had a lock on the proper frequency and then she cut into the external probe drone controls. This part was tricky because she needed a system that would be visible, but also one that she could override from her science lab. Since the probes were normally launched to get closer readings on cosmic features of space, the controls could be operated from the astrophysics lab. Unfortunately, as soon as she opened the probe bay doors, it would signal the bridge.

Quickly, she opened and shut the probe doors exactly twice.

She waited for desperate moments as she watched the embedded blinking signal remain unchanged. She had hoped that whoever was sending the signal was watching closely for the prearranged response. If not, then she was going to have to risk opening the probe doors again.

Finally, after what seemed like hours (although it was actually only a few minutes), the signal changed. The information came in fast, but Lawson was

recording it now. The encoded message displayed on her portable terminal as she worked quickly to decode it. The message was in a trinary encoded signal based on the levels of light coming from the obscured star. Bright, dim, and off were transmitted at a very high rate, but the computer was keeping up and running a special subroutine Lawson had written, and now used.

The symbols that appeared on her monitor looked like gibberish to the untrained eye. They were a form of shorthand used to decrease the overall size of the message and to make sure that if the message itself were intercepted, it would take some time to decode it. Lawson worked frantically to decode the shorthand in her head. It was too risky to keep the recording. The first few lines were now decoded, then the next. She looked once again over her shoulder, but when she turned back, Conner was standing beside her.

Lawson jumped, spilling her coffee on the console.

“What are you doing lieutenant?” he asked.

“I found a signal,” she said. Her voice cracked briefly, but she worked hard to control it. “It doesn’t appear to be naturally occurring, so I wanted to pin it down.

“Using this gear?” he asked. His voice held no skepticism, only a hint of his view of her poor judgment.

“Yes sir. I was on my way to the bridge to get better readings and I got distracted trying to attenuate it here. I was afraid we might lose it.”

Connor looked down at the board. “Is there a reason the probe doors are open, lieutenant?”

Lawson looked over at the switch as though it had caught fire. She looked up at Connor. “Sorry sir, I think I accidentally bumped the switch.”

“Given that you’ve spilled coffee all over your workstation, I’m not surprised. Get this cleaned up and report to the bridge immediately.

“Sir, you should know that I also extracted what could be a message from the anomaly behind us.”

Lawson grabbed a towel and began to mop the contents of her spilled cup. As she did so, she moved between Connor and the monitor and toggled the screen back to the flashing indicator showing the frequency of the incoming signal.

“A message, what message.”

Lawson produced a message board with the second half of the decrypted message. The first half (which was not written down anywhere) was for her alone.

Connor studied the message and raised an eyebrow. “I’ll get this over to the cryptography team right away.”

Connor reached over and closed the probe doors, which was fortunately the signal back to the trailing ship indicating that the message was received.

“I expect more attention to detail from those that report to me, lieutenant. You should have notified me immediately. Make your way to the bridge and get a fix on this anomaly using the ship’s scanners right away.”

Lawson mumbled a “yes, sir” and disposed of the coffee stained towel on her way out the door.

Connor contacted the bridge.

“Bridge,” the captain acknowledged.

“Sir, lieutenant Lawson seems to have picked up an artificial anomaly coming from astern. She should be on the bridge in a few moments to run it down.”

“What kind of anomaly?” he asked.

“We don’t know yet. She thinks there may be an encoded message embedded in the signal.”

“Understood. Please join us on the bridge.”

“On my way, sir,” Connor said.

Chapter 9

Cheryl arrived on the bridge to find Ensign Mayan working the scanner. As soon as the call came in to the bridge, Mayan focused the scans and picked up the signal.

Owen silently watched her as she strode over and relieved Mayan. Minutes later, Connor came onto the bridge. Owen motioned him to a corner of the bridge room where they could confer privately.

“We have a shadow, commander,” Owen said quietly pointing to the display overhead. The aft display had been magnified using the ship’s powerful scanners and one quadrant had been resolved to its maximum focus.

Connor looked up at the display and saw a faint outline of what could have been a starship silhouetted against the star field astern of the ship. But then again, it could have been anything. The stars were still shining through the anomaly, except for one part of it where the stars behind it were blinking.

“It’s one thing to follow a Terran starship, commander. It’s quite another thing to send a signal that someone on this ship was intended to intercept.

Both men turned and looked at Cheryl who was working hard to lock onto the signal and analyze it.

“Sir, it’s definitely a signal. It has a repeatable pattern on one of the secondary harmonics,” Cheryl said from across the bridge. “I’ve isolated the message and it should be displaying now.”

“I think we should warn the fleet,” Connor said. “Our shadow could be relaying out our location to other ships.”

Owen shook his head. “Not necessary, commander. Have you heard of the Orion cloaking device?”

Connor shook his head. “Rumors really. I’ve heard stories that they may have some improved ECM capability, that’s all.”

“This goes beyond standard electronic counter measures. Navy intelligence suggests that they have a way to keep a ship hidden just as we’re seeing now. In fact, if the lieutenant hadn’t picked up the signal coming from our shadow, we might not have noticed it at all.”

“So you believe it’s an Orion ship, sir?” Connor stated. He wasn’t convinced, but wanted to confirm what the captain was thinking.

“Yes, I’m certain of it.”

“Does this alter our mission in any way, sir?” Connor offered.

“Not in the least. In fact, I want you to go through the damage control drills and add additional scenarios to the roster. We’ll begin battle drills in two hours to ensure that the crew is at full readiness to handle any hostile act that should occur.”

“Should we be concerned, sir?” Connor said.

“Concerned?” Owen said incredulously.

Owen smiled a shark’s grin and scratched the back of his head as he returned to his command chair. Connor was forced to follow him.

“First of all, commander, that ship,” he said pointing to the monitor, ”is very likely frigate sized or smaller in order to be able to conceal so much mass from our scanners. But no matter who that is back there, they’re no match for a Terran heavy cruiser.”

“Yes sir,” Connor concurred, although he was still mildly worried. It made sense that the ship was small, but that didn’t necessarily mean that it wasn’t a danger. Or alone.

“And second commander,” Owen said louder, as though he were speaking to a particularly dull child. He straightened his tunic as if to highlight the ribbons on his chest. “We are a Terran *warship*. We do not back down from battle, should

one be forthcoming. It could be a smuggler or a spy ship from one of the fringe colony systems. It may be a pleasure yacht, curious what we're doing out here so far from our main fleet."

Connor remained silent as the captain let the silence linger. Owen turned sharply and looked Connor directly in the eye.

"But most importantly, Mr. Leary, we are an *Imperial* warship. In the unlikely event that that ship should toss so much as a warning shot across our stern, we will turn and blast it into quarks without hesitation. It is only by virtue of our important medical mission that we are failing to do so even now.

Furthermore, the emperor himself would take it as a personal affront upon his honor if that ship were to provoke us in any way. In fact, should they do so, the emperor will not only send the full might of third fleet to hunt them down and destroy them, he will then hunt down the planet they came from and eradicate all life on it. Do I make myself clear, Commander?"

"Very clear, sir." Connor said in a stiff voice. He was peripherally aware of the eyes that were covertly watching his back. He knew this dramatic reading wasn't just for his benefit, but for his officers and crew as well. That was how Captain Cantrell ran his ship: with the iron fist of a full captain of the list in the emperor's service.

"Commander," he said in a more natural tone. "No one is stupid enough to shoot at an imperial capital ship. To do so would be to invite a swift and genocidal reprimand from the emperor himself."

Connor knew that the discussion was now closed. Somehow he felt that the captain wasn't taking this as seriously as he might. Was it merely bravado?

Chapter 10

Cheryl woke the next morning early as she always did. She had the uncanny ability to determine when she wanted to be awake and she never needed an alarm to wake her up. She simply woke at the proper time.

Showered and changed into a fresh uniform, she dropped by the officer's wardroom and talked one of the stewards out of a few fresh rolls and some coffee. The steward would have breakfast ready for the officers taking first watch in another hour, but Cheryl wanted to use the time before her shift to run down a lead.

* * *

Connor arrived on duty to find Ensign Mayan running the scanner once more. He walked over to her station.

"Ensign, where is lieutenant Kinson?" he asked quietly.

"She said something about speaking to Dr. Sanders, sir. I think she found a lead she was wanting to pursue related to the anomaly, sir."

“She’s what?” he said, raising his voice. The captain looked over at him, but said nothing. He lowered his voice and spoke to the ensign once more.

“Find someone to watch your station. Run, don’t walk, and find Lt. Kinson. Have her report here immediately. Is that understood, ensign?”

“Yes sir,” the ensign stammered and scampered off. Connor turned to find the captain standing beside him.

“Problem, Mr. Leary?” Owen asked.

“None that can’t be resolved, sir.”

“Very good. I will trust you to see that that is the case.”

And with that, Captain Cantrell had conveyed in those short words his disapproval of the extent of Connor’s ability to pass on a simple order, to manage those directly under his supervision, which meant that Cheryl Kinson was about to have a mountain of pain raining down upon her person, as soon as she was within striking distance. It was one thing to be tidy about carrying out an order. It was something else to disobey the order and conduct her own investigation. That was simple insubordination. And it would be stopped.

* * *

Cheryl walked in to the outer compartment for the holding cells. She spoke with the marine sentry there and then walked in to the cell where Tyrell was sitting on a small bunk. He had a blanket, a pillow, and a small toilet to call home

until they reached Mutaurea base. Cheryl pulled up a folding chair and sat down in front of a very tired and disheveled looking prisoner. She also set down a tray of sandwiches and fruit. It had to be better than the fare Tyrell was receiving down here.

Part of the message she had intercepted was some decoy text. The ship trailing them wanted to send a message that implied the Orions were behind the attempts on the medical shipment. But Cheryl that was merely a cover. Orions were more far reaching than that. They suspected that someone was attempting to buy the unfinished Project Containment discovery and had instructed Cheryl to find out who.

Without preamble, Cheryl laid out her evidence.

“I have here a communication from an Orion courier wanting to arrange for delivery of the new communications technology. It’s addressed to you. Would you care to explain it?”

Tyrell took the tablet and read the message. He also looked at the headers, just as Cheryl had done.

“This is a poor forgery for an Orion communication,” he said handing it back.

“And why would you say that,” she asked. Her demeanor suggested that she already knew the answer, but wanted to hear him say it.

“The Orion government would never offer payment for something that they can steal. Nor would they send a message in such an open format. Your message headers show that the level of encryption was of the lowest caliber. I’ve been

involved in Orion intelligence work, and this would never pass for an Orion message.”

Cheryl leaned back and folded her arms. “Petty Officer Larson came to the same conclusion,” she said. “He could tell by the sidebands that this is improperly formatted and encoded. He broke the encryption in just under twenty minutes (which was untrue—he had actually deciphered it in less than twenty seconds). But I happen to know that true Orion codes are much, much harder to crack.” She bluffed.

This peaked Tyrell’s interest. “And how would you know what an Orion coded transmission looks like, Lieutenant?”

Cheryl flushed, but recovered quickly. “Let’s just say that we are being followed by a ship that wants to make a buy.”

Tyrell leaned forward and glared at her. “I think there’s more that you are not telling, Lieutenant.”

Cheryl diverted his comment with a question. “There is a ship shadowing us that is undoubtedly Orion.” she left it unsaid how she knew that. “They have been sending out a communication signal which we intercepted. A signal that was intended for you. Why go to all that trouble if you’re not the intended audience?”

Tyrell looked at the message again, with more intensity. After a few moments he shrugged. “Okay, let’s say this isn’t an Orion communication. Who might want to buy this technology?”

Cheryl tilted her head in thought. “There are several belligerent colonies that might want to get their hands on it, but most are too small to have any use for it. That means, it needs to be one of the larger confederations.”

Cheryl stood up to think as Tyrell reached for a sandwich on the tray in front of him and took a large bite. She turned and faced Tyrell as he chewed.

“Orion is certainly one, but they tend to stay out of the empire’s way as a matter of self preservation. This looks more likely to be the work of the Jandites or the Kartian Confederates. Both have significant fleet elements that could seriously oppose the empire given this new technology. It would effectively shift the balance of power in the quadrant. Besides, if the Orions wanted this technology, they would wait until someone *else* took it and then simply steal it from them.”

Tyrell swallowed and took a sip water.

“Okay, suppose it is one of these other systems, or maybe even the Voart pirate cartel. Why am I being held? I didn’t do anything.”

“Our captain is holding you for a scapegoat,” Cheryl said. “We also found the murder weapon in your cabin, hidden on top of a bookshelf.”

Tyrell looked very angry and sat down his sandwich, his appetite apparently fled for the moment.

“Okay, so let’s suppose I am the killer. Why leave the weapon in my own cabin for you to find? I’m a nanotechnologist. There are dozens of more efficient ways to kill someone, none of which involve using a hand blaster. And even if I had, I would have disassembled the weapon and hidden it among every system aboard your ship. Or I would have had it dissolved. You would never have found it.”

Cheryl stared at him for a pair of heartbeats and continued. “I believe you, but you are still our chief suspect.”

“That may be true, but do you know the time of the murder?” he asked.

“We do now. It had to be between 2200 ship’s time and 0120 when Willow came on shift.”

“A rather small time window, wouldn’t you say?”

“I suppose.”

“And did you check the security recordings of the high vacuum room?”

Cheryl frowned. They had been over this before. “Of course we did. They showed nothing.”

“Because they had been deactivated, am I correct?”

“Yes,” she conceded, “by someone familiar with that type of technology.”

“And what of the security recordings of the other compartments, for example, the one where I was working on setting up my equipment?”

Cheryl hadn’t thought of that. If he had been there the entire time, the security feed would clear him.

“I’ll check that immediately,” she said.

“You can also check my computer logs. They’ll show you the complete listing of everything I did during that time. I’m the only one qualified to run those programs—they wouldn’t even be accessible to anyone else.”

“Alright, I’ll check that too.” Cheryl was beginning to feel uncomfortable about how thin their evidence for holding Tyrell really was.

“Anything else?”

Tyrell picked up a peach from the tray and studied it, apparently unsure if he wanted to resume eating or not.

“Yes. You might want to check to see if you have any security recording on Candice. I understand she retired early that night.”

“That is certainly easy enough to do. In the meantime, I want you to consider whether or not she or Sandy Doval would have any motive to have Dr. van Helm killed. I plan to question both of them.”

“You do that, lieutenant. And while you’re at it, you might think twice about your familiarity with Orion intelligence. You seem to know more than you should for being a freshly minted lieutenant.”

“As do you, ” she said. And with that, she stood up and left.

Chapter 11

Cheryl walked out of the brig compartment and ran right into Trevor Hanson. He looked very trim in his grey and black sweats with the navy emblem on the right breast. Nonetheless, he still smelled of sweat and cheap cologne.

“Hey lieutenant, why the long face?” he asked with his usual lopsided smile.

“Just checking on the prisoner,” she said.

“Uh Oh, you’re going to be in trouble when Conor finds you. I understand you’re supposed to be on the bridge sniffing out the anomaly you found. And you were ordered to drop the investigation.” He said, a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

“The commander never ordered me not to talk to Dr. Sanders,” she said defensively.

“Well, I suppose that could be true, if you were on your own time,” he said pointing to the wall chrono.

Cheryl swore under her breath. She had only intended to stop in for a few minutes, but she was already very late getting back to the bridge. She started to take off for the bridge on a run, but Trevor caught her by the arm.

“Hey, relax,” he said. “I’ll cover for you. But you need to do me a favor. There’s a compression jacket that’s leaking down in fusion room three. If you’ll help me with some of the refit mathematics, I’ll tell Connor that I called you down for a look. It’ll only take a few minutes...”

Cheryl knew she needed to be on the bridge, but an alibi would be useful. “Alright,” she said. “But only for a few minutes.”

“Great!” he said, checking his pulse and already starting to jog backwards down the hall. “I’ll get changed and meet you there in fifteen?”

“Okay, but hurry. I’m going to be in dutch as it is.”

“Hey, relax. I can handle Connor,” was all he said as he turned the corner and fled out of sight.

* * *

Cheryl came into fusion room three and saw an area around the fusion reactor marked off with caution tape. The replacement compression jacket had been taken out of its crate and was already assembled and waiting nearby. In order to replace it while the reactor was running, precise mathematical calculations were needed. The engineering team certainly had the equipment to do this, but Cheryl had always wanted to see one performed as it would mean keeping the plasma flow constant into the fusion chamber using a magnetic accelerator instead of the compression jacket.

According to regulations, the proper way to make the repair was to shut down the containment unit and power down the reactor, but this would have required the ship to slow to a much lower speed, which was problematic given the nature of the medical mission and the ship that was trailing behind them. Engineers had been learning how to make things work under tight schedules since the Navy had begun launching ships. Some clever ship’s engineer had figured out how to do

this (although Cheryl was sure they had been scalded for it), and it had somehow become an acceptable practice, in spite of what the official procedures called for.

Officially, this procedure she was about to learn came with considerable risk, but everyone knew that the Captain wasn't going to order the ship stopped simply to replace a fusion compression jacket. Besides, if the plasma flow got out of control, the engineer could order an emergency shut down and replace it then, taking heat from the captain in the process. Of course, failure was a matter of pride, and any engineer in the imperial service would rather risk the captain's displeasure rather than fail to do the procedure successfully.

Cheryl walked over the plasma flow control panel and called up the mathematics routines. She had heard that the procedure involved calculating the flow rate through the plasma emission coils and then ramping in enough magnetic flux to keep the flow constant while the resonator (also called a jacket, since it wrapped around the plasma intake valve) was slowly ramped down. Then, the new jacket would be bolted and sealed in place while the procedure was reversed.

The mathematics to perform this little trick weren't trivial. It was a three dimensional problem involving proportional, an integral, and a derivative value based on the amount of flow needed to maintain a constant surge of energy into the reactor. Slight miscalculations in any of the values would cause an uncontrolled oscillation and result in reactor runaway—a potentially disastrous condition that would cause the reactor to be shut down. That was why very sophisticated calculations were needed to make sure the flow remained precisely

constant. As a member of the science team, this could fall under her prevue, although it was something that she should have gotten clearance from the bridge to participate in. She hoped Hanson was correct about fixing this with the commander. Otherwise, she was going to be in very hot water.

While she waited, she keyed in her access code to the security subsystem and played back some of the video footage from this very compartment. She saw several workers near the plasma intake valve, uncrating and preparing the new jacket for insertion. She panned and scrolled the viewer to look at several scenes at once, and with different time signatures.

She couldn't help but wonder who could have disabled the security camera system. She didn't have the clearance to do it automatically, only Commander Leary and Captain Cantrell could do that.

But what about the security control circuits. She looked down at the locked panel. It would require a special key, also controlled by senior bridge staff, to access the panel. She looked at the adjacent panel.

I wonder if you can access it from another panel compartment. Maybe cut the adjoining frame out of the way to do it.

As soon as she considered the idea, she dismissed it. It would take time to do and would require cutting materials to do it. The kind of materials used in emergency damage control rigging, perhaps.

She returned her attention to the security feed and started to switch it off. That's when she noticed that all of the technicians had left the area before her

arrival. That was a little strange, since there should be at least one reactor technician monitoring the fusion reactor, even if it was one of the lower ranked personnel. Well, she reminded herself, she was here. She called up the log to see who was on reactor checks, when she noticed the surveillance system had begun an automatic diagnostic. She keyed in several commands which should have brought it back online, but it would not respond until the diagnostic was finished. She realized that this automated testing mode could have had the same effect as shutting it down momentarily.

She felt the hair on the back of her neck beginning to stand and her gut told her that this was not a coincidence. Panic threatened to set in and she knew she shouldn't be alone in here. She picked up a scrap piece of pipe and edged toward the door.

“Is someone there?” she called out, gripping the pipe tightly in her left hand.

And then she saw someone move, near the open crate. She walked over to the crate, but saw no one. Alarms began to go off in her mind.

Get out of here, Cheryl!

She turned and started to run from the compartment, but met a familiar face.

“You have been entirely too nosy, lieutenant. All you had to do was let it drop.”

“Just what do you think you're doing?” she asked. In retrospect, she should have saved her breath for running as that was also the last thing she said before everything went dark.

Chapter 12

“Commander,” the out of breath ensign said. “I’m sorry, sir. I can’t find Lieutenant Kinson anywhere sir.”

Connor grunted and moved to the nearest computer console and typed in a command that would instruct the computer to locate Cheryl. The computer checked logs, security scans matched to faces, and other stimuli to locate the last known location for the lieutenant. But it read that her present location was simply: UNKNOWN.

That in itself was alarming. Similar queries showed the exact present location of all other senior officers. Rather than upset the captain for what was likely to be a simple goose chase, he opted to go and find her himself. He decided to start with the brig. If she was there, he was going to tie her to the nearest wall and verbally paint her with a flame thrower. He valued her loyalty and ingenuity, but not disobedience to his direct instructions.

Captain Cantrell walked over to Connor.

“Commander, please commence an electrical fire drill on deck eight, in the water delivery pump room, please. Instruct the men that the pumps have been disabled and that there is standing water.”

The captain wore a small chronometer affixed above his right breast pocket which he gently tapped to begin timing the drill. Connor knew he should report Cheryl's absence, but he also knew that he should be the one to discipline her. If the captain discovered that she had disobeyed his express orders, he would take it out on them both. Connor wrenched his attention back to the present.

"Aye sir," he said and issued the necessary orders. The captain walked around the compartment as he monitored the progress of the drill.

Somewhere, down in deck eight, men were scurrying about to report, and then attempt to contain the electrical fire. Electrical fires were tricky business because they couldn't be combated effectively using the normal fire suppression systems. The source had to first be neutralized.

Connor found the ensign manning the bridge engineering console.

"Ensign, call up the pump room schematics," he said calmly. He stole a glance at Cantrell who was pacing and monitoring his timepiece.

"Got it, sir," Ensign Carter reported, her face intent on finding the proper circuit.

"Bridge, DAM-CON four," came the voice from the communication bay. "We show the pump room is powered from circuit fourteen alpha. Can you confirm?"

Ensign Carter confirmed the proper circuit and relayed the information to the damage control party. Moments later, they cut power to the water pumps that

supplied fresh water to all parts forward of amidships on the port side. Moments later the damage control officer reported the fire contained.

“Fire under control on deck eight, captain,” Leary responded.

Cantrell looked at his chrono and raised his eyes to give Leary a look of disapproval. “Entirely too slow,” he said.

The captain reset his chrono and walked to the helm station where he spoke quietly to the helmsman. He then said calmly, “Commander Leary, initiate a direct torpedo hit on deck eight, near the storage compartments. Please simulate loss of hull integrity and evacuate decks seven and eight.”

Connor moved to comply as the captain turned and quietly ordered the ship put into a hard port spin. Without the normal warning of the command being given and acknowledged, the rest of the bridge team was busy initiating the drill. The gravitational compensators surged momentarily as the ship pivoted hard on its axis. The bridge lighting flickered for a brief moment and Connor and the other bridge personnel not expecting the maneuver fell to the deck as the ship’s artificial gravity struggled to catch up with the sharp change in acceleration.

Everyone reached for something to hold onto as the ship’s gravitation normalized. Connor cursed himself silently for not expecting the move and reached up to wipe a smear of blood from his cheek where he had hit the console too hard during the ship’s turn.

“Everyone alright?” Connor called getting to his feet. Bridge personnel confirmed that they were shaken, but not seriously injured.

“Come on people, move it!” he shouted as they scrambled to their feet and put a more lively step into their work. After confirming that medical services were not immediately necessary, he began barking orders, adding his own irritation to emphasize that they needed to move faster. Cantrell worked his way back to his command chair as he studied his bridge team.

“Damage report.” Cantrell said.

Connor read the list of simulated damage to the captain and began to send teams to the affected area for atmosphere containment and personnel evacuation.

“Helmsman, begin evasive maneuvers. Pattern Beta Four,” the captain said. As the helmsman complied, the ship once again went into an erratic series of turns to simulate the motion during battle.

“Battle stations,” Connor called out. As the alarms began to sound across the ship, at least he knew everyone would be at their action stations and better prepared for the wild ride they were experiencing. The communications officer began to announce over the 1MC channel that this was a battle stations drill.

Although there was a certain amount of confusion, the crew had drilled this way before. During battle stations, every member of the crew would be prepared for the worst and would be working directly with their department heads. Those officers tuned into the bridge and order quickly resumed as each section reported readiness.

As the section heads reported in, the science section was conspicuous in that its senior officer had not mustered.

“Captain, lieutenant Kinson has not reported in.”

Cantrell picked up a copy of the roster and quietly studied it.

“List her as missing and have search and rescue dispatched.”

Connor acknowledged the order and passed on the command to the rescue teams already working on evacuating decks seven and eight. It was highly unusual for an officer to fail to report when at general action quarters and Connor began to become concerned.

“Captain, should we terminate the drill to find Kinson?” he tried to keep his voice level so as not to betray his concern. It was possible that she could have been more severely injured during the ship’s unexpected maneuvering. Connor looked at the damage control monitor to verify that there was no actual damage. All of the damage systems on the monitor showed that they were simulated damage only.

“No commander. She should find it convenient to be at her station or face the consequences. But in the event she is actually injured or missing, it is an excellent opportunity to allow the rescue teams to drill for missing crew,” Cantrell said, not looking up from the roster. Anticipating Connor’s objection he looked up and added, “I want them to look just as hard as if this were an actual emergency. They’ll section off the damaged area and begin their sweep. If she’s not located there, they will expand their search until she’s found.”

Connor felt as if his head would explode. He understood what the captain was saying, but it didn’t add up that Cheryl should not have reported in. Something

felt wrong and he knew the simulated damage in the hallways would slow down the search team.

As part of the torpedo damage simulation he and the engineering team had devised, half of the damage control teams were tasked with setting up smoke generators and “debris” to give the repair and search teams a more realistic “damage” environment. Lights were turned off in various compartments that were supposed to be vented into space and crates and certain other debris were “stacked” obtrusively in the hallways and near hatches. But Connor knew that these efforts would also slow the teams looking for *actual* missing personnel.

“Sir, I understand that, but I feel that the simulated environments will slow the crews—“

“That’s no excuse, commander. The crews need to learn to find personnel under a variety of conditions. Continue the drill.”

* * *

Cheryl woke to a very uncomfortable feeling her arms were pulled tightly behind her back and she couldn’t feel her hands. Cheryl squirmed to move where she could get a better position in which to free them, but quickly found that she was cramped into a fetal position reinforced by the very small confines in which she found herself. It was also dark and the air was stale and smelled of machine oil. She grunted with the effort to free her hands when she realized that she didn’t

know if she was upside down or right side up. Zero-gravity disorientation was normal and nothing to be feared, except when you were crammed into a tiny space and you didn't know how you got there. Tracy tried calling out a few times, but received no answer.

Okay, where were you last? She asked herself, her head still spinning with dizziness. She was in the brig questioning—no, that wasn't quite right. She was in fusion bay one working with Trevor on the plasma jacket, except that he never showed up. And then she was here. She struggled for a few more moments and then calmed herself once more. Her head felt dizzy and she was having trouble breathing. Then she remembered that she was looking at the security feeds and waiting for Trevor to come and show her how to do an insitu plasma jacket replacement.

I'm in the crate, she thought. She had to be. She had been facing her attacker with her back to the crate. What better place to store her where she would be out of the way.

Cheryl tapped the corners of the crate with her foot and confirmed in her mind that the dimensions were about right. She shifted uncomfortably for a moment trying to free her hands once more, but they were bound tightly behind her back. Whoever had stashed her in here knew that she would have trouble getting herself out without the use of her hands.

Cheryl knew she needed to stay calm to ensure that she didn't use up her oxygen supply too quickly. She again wondered why she couldn't tell which way

was up. That could mean the ship's gravity field had failed or that she was outside the ship. That thought threatened to send her into complete panic. It was one thing to be stuck inside a crate. It was something else entirely to have been ejected into space!

Her heart was pounding into her chest as she fought down her fear. She suddenly clung to a comforting thought that she could still breathe. The crate was originally hermetically sealed but once opened, it couldn't be sealed up again without special equipment. She hoped that her attacker hadn't thought of that. She didn't know how long she was out, but if she was in space, she should be dead. Whether by the air leaking out of the crate or by suffocating inside a sealed crate, the outcome would have been the same. At least that much was good news.

Taking a few deep breaths to calm herself, Cheryl twisted to look for gaps in the crate to see if any light might be leaking in. Unfortunately, she couldn't see light no matter how she strained or bent. That was certainly not very helpful and it meant that she was likely using up her available oxygen.

Suddenly, she felt the crate accelerate and seconds later, it slammed into something hard, a wall perhaps. The blow was so severe she almost blacked out again. But for a brief moment, she thought she could hear the sound of the ship's battle stations klaxons.

* * *

The drill continued for another half hour before the captain felt the drill was marginally successful and ordered it terminated. Connor conferred with the damage control team to ensure they were putting priority on sweeping the decks to locate Cheryl. He also instituted an extra-vehicular sweep to see if she had somehow gotten outside the ship. But the level one search turned up nothing.

Connor could feel his bile rising. He wanted Cantrell to put more energy into the search, but that wasn't the old man's style. He would wait until Connor has exhausted every bit of his own ingenuity before he took control of the situation. And Connor felt that they were running out of time.

He jogged down to deck seven and was on his way to the brig when he ran into damage control team six. Lieutenant Smiders stopped briefly to salute.

"Any word on the search and rescue Commander?" he asked Connor.

"No Tommy, nothing yet. Where's your team going?" Connor asked in passing.

"During the captain's rodeo bucking, we must've blown a seal on a vent valve for cargo bay one, sir."

"The bay with the Byrozium?" Connor asked.

"Yes, sir. That's the one."

"Alright, but keep your eyes peeled. Alpha platoon is riding saddle on that bay because we already had someone try to blow that cargo earlier in this trip. It would be a shame to come all this way and lose it now to hard vacuum.

“Well, it’s probably just a bad valve. We should have in repaired in a few hours. Besides, I checked the cargo manifest and there’s nothing in that bay that needs air anyway.”

As the damage control team proceeded to cargo one, Connor returned his focus back to finding Cheryl.

What could possibly have gotten into her? According to the duty officer, she was last seen in the brig talking to Tyrell, so Connor decided it was time to pay the man a visit to see if he knew where she might have gone. He entered the elevator and prepared to descend to deck seven when the wall comm. unit pinged.

“Connor here,” he said.

“Sir, this is Staff Sergeant Matthews outside of doctor Picoult’s stateroom. Sir, she’s extremely agitated and wants to speak to you immediately. She says it’s an emergency.”

“Alright, put her on.”

“Commander Leary, you have to help me. It’s happening. It’s happening right now!”

“Calm down, doctor. What’s happening?”

“Another murder!” the woman said, clearly upset. “I keep seeing it over and over in my mind. They’re going to kill her!”

“Who? Who are they going to kill?”

“I.. I don’t know. I only saw her hair and the blood! Please, you have to do something!”

Leary paused as the lift door opened to deck seven. Then he instructed the lift to reascend to deck five where he could talk to Candice directly.

“Alright, stay there. I’m on my way.”

He jogged out of the lift and found the marine sergeant clearly uncomfortable with the conversation he had witnessed. Connor motioned for him to open the door to her stateroom. The man retrieved his key from his uniform jacket and unlocked the cabin door.

Connor knocked on the door and Candice threw it open. She had a wild, frantic look in her eyes as if she had truly witnessed a murder. She appeared to be in a state of shock.

“Sergeant, get the medics down here right now.”

The Sergeant saluted and moved to the adjacent wall to use the comm. unit. Connor guided Candice over to her couch to try to get her to calm down. Tears were dried on her cheeks which were red from crying. Her hair was disheveled and her makeup was smeared.

“Shh. Now, there,” he said holding her gently in his arms as she helplessly wiped the tears from her eyes. She kept her gaze fixed on his face as though he were her anchor to reality.

Connor wasn’t exactly the most sensitive sort, but he had seen how Trevor handled girlfriends when they were upset. He did his best to emulate what he had seen Trevor do. He wished he had his friend here now.

“Try to tell me what happened.”

“I saw ... I saw ... a woman being hurt with a sharp object. But it was surreal. Somehow she was floating and there was blood. But the blood was floating too.”

Connor thought for a moment. “Floating like in outer space?”

Candice snapped her head around. “Yes, exactly. Like in space, but there were lights, search lights. And boxes.”

That didn’t really narrow it down for him, so he tried a different approach.

“Do you know who it was. Did you recognize the woman?”

“No, I couldn’t see her face. But she was slim, perhaps a little taller than me. But the vision was very crisp and it had a strange intensity, almost as if I had seen her before, but I couldn’t see her face.”

The marine returned to the room accompanied by two doctors. They took over and began to calm her down with a sedative.

“Sir, we have a problem,” the Matthews said. Connor noticed that corporal Tagg was with him.

He guided the marines back outside the stateroom to give the medical personnel room to work and to ensure that he didn’t introduce any additional stress to the poor woman.

“Yes, what is it?”

“Sir, during the commotion, I came to assist Matthews and try to calm down Doctor Picoult until you could arrive. But when I went back to my station, Dr. Doval wasn’t in her stateroom.”

“What? How is that possible. Did you confirm that it was locked?”

“Yes sir, it was. But somehow she got out and didn’t take time to even close her cabin door.”

Great. So now he had two missing women on his hands.

“Alright. I’ll alert the search and rescue teams to be on the lookout for Dr. Doval. She isn’t in uniform, so she should stick out like a bright red light bulb. Get with your department head and issue an intruder alert. Make sure Tyrell Sanders is still locked away. Then, I want Dr. Doval found and returned to her cabin. And this time,” he said standing closer to Corporal Tagg, “Make certain she stays there!”

Chapter 13

Cheryl was beginning to feel somewhat light headed as she struggled to wriggle her hands free from the straps that kept them pinned behind her back. There wasn’t enough room to try to slip her arms under her feet and besides, the bonds were too tight to try. She knew she was chaffing the skin from her wrists, but she had to get her hands free if she was going to survive. She felt something else bump her crate. She called out, but got no response. The air was getting desperately thin now and it was getting harder to draw it into her lungs.

Another bump, and then another. Finally something broke through the crate, a tool of some sort. Then Cheryl recognized it as one of the tools used by the damage control teams to break through compartments where the hatches didn't work.

Cheryl fought down another wave of panic as the air became even thinner. The hole in the crate should have let in the air from the room, but apparently, there wasn't any. In fact, what little air she had in the crate was now gone.

She felt herself fading into unconsciousness when she began to hear a hissing sound. She looked at the hole and saw an air hose protruding through. Someone was out there with a vac suit! She gasped in huge lung full's of air as the stars swam in her vision. The hose remained for a few more seconds and then it withdrew. She almost panicked again, but soon the hose returned and then she knew what was happening. Whoever was out there had only one suit and was trying to provide air to her and themselves.

After several cycles like that, Cheryl looked through the hole and saw a woman's face looking back at her through a suit visor.

"Who are you?" she called out. She saw the woman's lips moving, but couldn't hear her with no atmosphere to carry the sound. Cheryl was in an uncomfortable position trying to peer through the hole. Then the woman's face was gone and replaced by a tiny data pad screen. Words scrolled across the screen.

Its me, Sandy Doval, the screen said. Candice said you were in trouble.

Sandy took back the data pad and typed on it once more. When it returned to the crate, it held a different message.

I wasn't sure where you were, but Candice transmitted a mental image to me. It's a capability of the system we don't advertise because it takes a very strong image for it to work. What she gave me is an image of crates and labeled cargo-one. So I borrowed a suit and slipped in with the repair crew. They didn't notice an extra vac suit.

Cheryl stretched as far as she could and pushed her lips close to the hole.

“Why is there no air in here?” she screamed. She knew the amount of air in the crate was barely enough to carry any sound at all. But Sandy had thought of that. The little device had a sensitive microphone and it transcoded her speech into text on the screen for Sandy to read. Sandy turned the tablet around to read it and then typed another message.

I'm going to go and tell them I found you, the tablet read. I see one of them coming over now. I'll just lay the hose here so you can use it. Maybe I can share their hose.

Cheryl saw the air hose return to the crate and waited. She was very glad to be getting rescued. She didn't want to think what might have happened if Sandy hadn't figured out where she was. And how did she get out of her stateroom? Curiosity was getting the best of her. That was going to be her next question.

But the hose simply remained there just inside the hole. Cheryl wondered if Sandy was talking to one of the damage control team now. But instead of someone prying open the crate, there was a hard jolt against the crate and the hole went dark.

Cheryl saw the hose starting to slip back out of the hole, so she lunged forward and gripped it with her teeth. She pulled it back inside the crate and waited. She looked down and saw moisture dripping down from the crate's hole. She tried calling out, but the same problem existed. There was only enough air to breathe, but not enough to carry more than a faint echo of her loud cries. She began to get worried again, especially since Sandy hadn't returned for her own air supply. Had she been apprehended because she wasn't locked in her stateroom? How could Cheryl call out to let them know she was in the crate. She was afraid to try to rock the crate for fear of dislodging her air hose. And what happens when the air runs out?

As she sat contemplating what to do, the sound of the air hissing became louder. She also noticed that her breathing was less labored. She hadn't realized how much effort she was expending to draw the hose's air supply into her lungs until it became easier. They must have repaired the air ventilation to the cargo hold.

* * *

Connor was about to don his own vac suit when Tommy confirmed that the vent valve had been repaired. The marine sentries had reviewed the security feed until they found Sandy slipping into a vac suit, leaving the ship, and entering the cargo bay from the outside along with Tommy's repair team. Connor had ran to the suit lockers and grabbed his own suit. He was going in whether the valve had been repaired or not.

"It should be near normal atmosphere now sir," Tommy said. "Stand back though. The door might pop if the pressure isn't exactly equalized."

Tommy grabbed the door wheel and spun it with an effort. As promised, when the wheel latch had cleared away, the door let out a deafening clang and burst open, swinging wildly into the cargo bay, striking the interior wall with enough force to bend the wheel.

"Well boys, I guess we need another hatch fastener," he said with deadpan humor.

Connor and Tagg ran into the room, Tagg having drawn his sidearm. Connor looked around the mess in the room, crates and boxes that were not secured had been strewn about. But in the corner he saw a grizzly sight. Blood had been splattered against one of the walls where someone in a vac suit lay prostrate across a crate, a wall jack still impaling them there.

Connor and Tagg pulled the jack free and turned the woman over. Lifting her visor, they recognized Sandy Doval. She was dead, just as Candice had described.

“Hey, is someone out there?” said a voice from the crate.

Connor looked at Tagg, and both men began unfastening the locks on the crate. Once it was opened, they helped Cheryl out of the crate and freed her hands from the tying straps that bound them.

“Are you okay, lieutenant?”

“Yeah,” she said rubbing her chaffed wrists. But then she followed their stares and saw that it hadn’t been moisture that was seeping into her crate, but blood.

“What happened?” she said with a look of muffled horror.

“It looks like someone stabbed Dr. Doval,” Tagg said as they helped Cheryl to stand. She looked down and saw that the blood in the crate had stained her own uniform. She felt her gorge rising.

“Come on, let’s get you to medical,” Connor said. Turning back to Tagg, he said, “Get this taped off and have doctor Spinoza come and take a look. And call down your platoon squad. Keep your sidearm out and *do not* leave this area until I personally authorize it, is that clear?”

“Yes sir,” Tagg said. “You told me to watch Dr. Doval, so I guess that’s what I’m still doing.”

Connor frowned. He knew the young corporal was trying to diffuse the tension by making light humor. It wasn’t working. Connor was getting very angry again.

Cheryl staggered outside the cargo bay, despite Connor supporting her. Tommy set down his tools and rushed over to help, but Connor waved him away. Connor sat her down on a bench near where the damage control team was finishing up the repairs to the damaged hatch wheel.

“Did you see who did this to you?”

“No--or maybe--I’m not sure. It happened really fast and I don’t trust what I remember just yet. Cheryl turned to look back at the cargo bay hatch. “But she did. She had a tablet that had images on it; images of where I was. How did she know?”

“Tommy, go ask Tagg if he can find a tablet near the body. Handle it carefully, it could contain forensic evidence.”

“Yes sir,” Tommy said and he ran into the cargo bay to talk to Tagg.

“I didn’t see a tablet, but we’ll see if Tagg can find it. Can you walk?”

“Yes, sir. I can walk. I’m just a little tired from trying to breathe.”

“Lieutenant, are you alright?” asked Captain Cantrell as he marched into the cargo bay corridor accompanied by a squad of armed marines. He looked genuinely displeased.

“Yes, sir. I think so.”

“What the devil happened here,” Owen demanded, looking down at the marks on Cheryl’s wrists.

Connor stood and nodded over his shoulder. “Tommy was responding to a valve failure in cargo one when we got a panicked call from Dr. Picoult. She

adamantly believed someone was in danger and wanted us to find out who. We then discovered that Sandy Doval had apparently escaped from her locked stateroom. We instituted a level three search and found her in there,” he added his own implied criticism to the last word, “murdered.”

“I saw you had initiated the intruder alert, commander.” Owen said as he looked inside the cargo bay at the remains of Sandy Doval. “Why didn’t you notify me?”

“Time was of the essence, sir. I felt the need to act quickly. Although apparently, not quickly enough,” he said under his breath.

Owen squatted down next to Cheryl and put his hand on her shoulder. “Are you sure you’re going to be alright, Lieutenant?”

“Yes sir,” Cheryl said, massaging the marks on her wrists.

“Very well, lieutenant. Make your report to Mr. Leary and then immediately report to medical bay.” Then, looking up at Connor he said. “I assume you contacted Madison to have her come and have a look?”

“Yes sir. She should be here any moment,” Leary said.

“Very well. I’ll speak to her when she arrives. I also want to have a look for myself to verify that the Bynzium is still intact and undamaged.”

“Sir, this cargo bay was guarded by a marine platoon. How did someone get in here to murder Dr. Doval.”

Owen thought about it for a moment. “Presumably the same way Dr. Doval did, through the external cargo hatch. Do a search for any additional missing vacuum suits and check the security logs. Report your findings to me at once.”

“We need to expand our search for the killer, sir,” Connor breached the subject they were both dancing around.

“I think that premature. You said Dr. Picoult warned you that a murder was *going* to happen before it happened?”

“Yes sir, that’s what she told me.”

“Was she specific on who the murderer was?”

Connor thought back to her frenzied conversation. “No sir, she identified the victim to some degree, but not the assailant.”

“Is it possible, she’s covering for Tyrel Sanders?”

“I don’t see how, sir,” Connor said, coming close to losing his temper. “Tyrell is still locked in the brig and Dr. Picoult is in the medical bay pretty shaken.”

Owen thought for a moment. “It could be possible that they released her and she found a way to come down here to fulfill what she described to you. I find it hard to believe that as a precog, she would fail to describe the killer.”

Connor then lost it, slapping the bulkhead with his hand. “It’s also possible, sir, that there is someone else responsible. We know we’re being tracked by an Orion ship. They have an agent onboard even now. We need to secure this ship!”

Owen didn't respond by raising his voice, but merely looked thoughtful.

“Commander, I agree with you. But exactly how are we going to locate an Orion spy?”

Connor felt his anger drain away now that the Captain was finally seeing the events the same way he was. “Sir, we know that their target is either the Byzonium or the scientists and their technology. We need to increase the security teams on both.”

But before he could comment further, the red alert klaxons began to blare.

Owen reached for the nearest wall comm. unit.

“Cantrell. What in blazes is going on?”

“Sir, we're picking up a large ship inbound at high speed. It's refusing to respond to our hails. Scanners indicate that its weapons array is powered up.”

Cantrell looked at Connor. “So much for drills, Commander.”

Turning back to the communications panel he said, “We're on our way to the bridge. Cantrell out.”

Both men took off at a run for the lift but they failed to notice that Cheryl had neither joined them nor had she left for the medical ward. She simply walked briskly to the nearest deck ladder and descended to deck four where she could access the junction circuit for the port side fire control. Unlike Owen and Connor, she knew exactly who the ships were that were following them. And she was running out of time.

Chapter 14

Larson stopped on deck six where she paid a visit to the isothermics lab. She nodded to two technicians working there as she surreptitiously kept her wrists hidden so she would remain unremarkable. As the ~~chief science officer~~, she had unrestricted access to all of the ship's laboratories, including the medical labs, but she wanted her visit to be quickly forgotten.

She waited as patiently as she could, but she kept replaying the intercepted message through her mind.

BOARDING ATTEMPT IMMINENT. NEED SOFTENED DEFENSIVE RESPONSE ON PORT SIDE. ATTACK AT 2300 HOURS.

She had always struggled with her role in the Terran Imperial Navy. She had always excelled in her classes in the academy and her special mechanics scores were the highest for any cadet in academy history. But she had learned early on that she wasn't from Alpha Proxima as was stated on her birth record—well, her mother was, but her father was Orion.

Once she had found out, she was terrified. After all, the Orions were one of the most distant human star systems in colonized space. They were also among the most belligerent to the will of the empire. She knew it was only a matter of time before the emperor had dealt with closer threats in order to consolidate his grip on the heart worlds and then bring the might of all of those worlds onto the Orions. And they would not survive.

So she had rejected the truth that she was, in fact, Orion. After all, she was doing well enough in her military training. She could just continue the pretense that she was born into the heart-worlds, and therefore appear completely Terran.

But then she met her father and everything changed. She learned of her true heritage and also learned the ugly truth about the wicked emperor. After that, she knew she would never be truly “Terran” again.

Brining her mind back to the present, she pretended to check on several running experiments as she secretly pocketed a syringe.

When she was certain that the two technicians were focused elsewhere, she slipped into the supply closet and came away with a beaker of nitric acid wrapped in a thick cotton towel and tucked inside a medical pouch.

She knew the more difficult chore would be getting into the fire control center. So she decided to visit the power supply feed service room instead.

Carefully, but quickly making her way down the sub-level access tunnel, she waited until she was sure no-one was near the access bay to the huge power supplies. And even if someone had managed to see her, being an officer would have allowed her to have the access she needed.

She stopped just before the entry bay and carefully pulled the stopper from the acid beaker. Filling the syringe with the powerful acid, she put her arm through the bay doorway and squirted as much acid as she could up and to the right of the entryway. Taking a look around to ensure she was not being observed, she refilled the syringe and repeated to douse the fluid in the general direction of the

video security camera. She used a small mirror and peeked around the door jam to see that she had gotten close, but had missed the security cam she had been aiming at. She recalibrated her aim and put her arm through the doorway once more. This time her aim was true and the acid stream from the syringe ate its way quickly through the cable to the camera. The security feed was certainly being monitored and would electronically report the failure to the central security net. But it bought her the few minutes she needed to work uninterrupted. Given what was about to happen in the next hour, it wasn't really going to matter much anyway.

Besides, her superior officers suspected an Orion spy to be aboard, let them focus on that. They wouldn't know an Orion spy if she were running the ship.

She unwrapped the beaker and laid the towel on top of the power supply conduit feeding the port side fire control systems. The power amplifiers in the rack smoothly channeled up to eight hundred amps to the control room electronics that provided precisions guidance and the powerful actuator motors that aimed the forward weapons batteries on the port side of the ship.

She couldn't get to the power supplies directly without being seen, but the power cable conduits travelled throughout most of the ship. And an interruption in a power cable would work just as well.

Carefully pouring the contents of the beaker into the folds of the towel, she watched as the towel slowly smoldered, soaking up the powerful acid. Soon, the fluid would saturate the towel and then slowly eat its way through the top of the

conduit and down into the unprotected cables below. But Cheryl would have long since reported to sickbay where she would lose the medical pouch and receive a topical treatment for her abraded wrists.

* * *

Owen stepped from the lift and slid into his seat as Connor moved to man his own station. The ship on the monitor was easily as large in raw tonnage as the *Dominion*. That, in itself, was puzzling.

“Do we have an ID on the new bogie, chief?” Owen asked the crew chief of the watch.

“No sir, it’s not in any of the registries that we can tell. It appears to be a new design. And our rearward shadow has dropped its veil. It’s fully visible to our scanners now and coming hard about on our flank. CIC has is cataloged the trailing bandit as an Orion light cruiser.”

Connor looked over at Owen. “Intel suggests the Orions have only one or two light cruisers in their entire defense fleet with the bulk being frigate class or smaller. What’s it doing so far from home?”

Owen rubbed the stubble on his chin as he thought. “Why worry about a light cruiser if you’ve managed to build a heavy cruiser. Our latest intelligence report clearly indicates they don’t have the shipyards for it. So where are they building them?”

“They must have a hidden shipyard.”

“I would agree. But why reveal it now? Why not wait until they had a small flotilla instead? It makes no sense to attack a single Terran cruiser anyway. They have to know that we’ll retaliate with every ship we have. There won’t be enough atoms left of their collective star systems to build a dust mote when third fleet responds,” said Owen. Turning to look at the puzzled expression on Connor’s face, he finished with, “and believe me, third fleet will respond.”

“Okay, so if they have one of these new cruisers, could they have others waiting outside of scanner range?”

“Doubtful. I think they’re just testing their new cruiser to see how it’ll perform,” Owen remarked. He shook his head in aggravation. “But why here, and why now in this star system? It’s uninhabited for the most part and completely out of their sphere of influence. No, they want something we have,” he concluded, more to himself than to Connor and the other bridge officers.

“The Byzanium?”

“No, that’s not it. Byzanium isn’t all that rare and they could have traded for it. I think they somehow know about project containment and they’re trying to snatch our science team in transit before we can deliver them to a more secure location. I knew the admiralty should have dispatched more ships for this”

“But sir, that information is secret which is why we were sent alone. How could they possibly know our mission?”

“Apparently, it’s not a secret after all, which means someone is leaking information-conceivably from this very ship.”

Owen and Connor watched as the heavy cruiser closed the distance to one hundred twenty thousand kilometers. Well within their missile engagement envelope. Owen looked across the tank at the light cruiser coming up from astern. Apparently, he was meant to play the part of the beater. Light cruisers didn’t have the mass to handle the same amount of armament loaded into a heavy cruiser, but they were considerably more nimble. If Owen turned to engage the smaller ship, the light cruiser would simply twist out of the way with their superior turning radius while the larger Orion ship pounded *Dominion*’s weakest shielding from behind.

Owen also knew that if he took on both ships at once, he would most certainly lose. He needed to take one of them out of the equation.

He made up his mind. Every starship commander knew that there came a moment where the academics and tactical analysis of the situation only went so far. After that it was experience and pure gut instinct.

“Helm, bring us to flank speed on course seventy four degrees, negative fifteen off the plane. Guns, prepare full missile salvo, targeting package Alpha Two on the Orion heavy cruiser.”

The woman manning the helm acknowledged smartly and shifted the ship’s course. Instead of allowing the ships to hit him fore and aft, he was going to converge their courses and take them both on from the front. Connor watched in

fascination, even jubilation that they were going to see battle action. Owen's plan was a risky move, but Connor knew Owen needed to regain the initiative and make the Orions work for every tactical advantage. *Dominion* would appear to be running away right up until the moment they turned and attacked.

Connor watched as *Dominion* increased speed and sprinted across the star system, roughly perpendicular to each of the pursuing ships. The Orion pursuers would be forced to slowly converge their vectors if they wanted to continue to close the distance to the Terran warship. He also somehow knew deep down, it would be *Dominion* that fired the first salvo.

Connor watched the range increase as the two Orion ships adjusted their vectors in pursuit. He knew this maneuver well as it was one that they had drilled often. It was one of the simulator scenarios that all officers trained on: Single ship combat against multiple attackers, no terrain advantage.

Connor licked his lips in anticipation. He knew the order to turn was coming up. He was so caught up in the chase that he almost failed to notice Cheryl exit the lift onto the bridge. She casually walked to her science station and relieved Ensign Greta.

"Prepare to snap-turn on my mark; missile targeting package Bravo-Seven," Owen said casually. Connor found a rail to hold onto. He knew that this turn was going to be just as ugly as the one from the drills. Cheryl also found something to secure herself to.

When Owen gave the order, the ship spun about like an angry tiger looking to strike its pursuer hard and fast. In addition to the turn, its four missile launchers spat their seeking charges from their catapults that sped after the Orion heavy cruiser. The Orion heavy would be forced to immediately deal with the missile threat or turn aside to open the range and give itself more time to shoot them down.

The helmsman leveled out their turn and then called for maximum velocity toward the light cruiser. Connor knew that whatever the Orion heavy cruiser decided to do, he had better plan it well because the light cruiser was about to die.

Two missiles launched from the light cruiser as it started to turn and run. The *Dominion* was already firing its beam cannons at the incoming missiles. The chances of hitting them at this range was poor, but they would get one more volley as the ship turned, crossed the line of attack, and brought the port side weapons to bear as well. Connor looked at Owen as he leaned forward, watching the master plot to see how the Orion heavy would react.

Fortunately, the larger Orion cruiser had reacted exactly as they had drilled. He grabbed two of the missiles with his onboard tractor beams. This had the effect of holding them at range while he dealt with the other two. Tractor beams were always a risky move because the missile's detonation range was always an unknown. If they detonated at longer range, they would do far less damage. But the Terran missiles had been set with a close range targeting package which

meant as long as they were being held at arm's length, they wouldn't hurt the heavy cruiser. The Orion captain had made a lucky guess.

Defensive beam cannons fired from the Orion ship and both of the remaining free missiles died in fiery immolations. But the enemy ship had yet to fire his own missiles.

The Orion light cruiser was too slow off the mark and his own turn was too late. In addition, his tractor beams were now carrying two high velocity missiles that were adding unexpected momentum. He tried to accelerate into the turn to get inside *Dominion's* turn radius. If he could pull that off, he would be able to avoid *Dominion's* forward guns which would prove lethal to the smaller ship.

"Fire at will on the light cruiser!" Owen bellowed. The battle fever that Connor felt had also gripped Owen. They watched as cannon after cannon fired on the smaller ship, but its shields continued to hold--barely.

Four more missiles leapt out of their cradles and headed across the expanse toward the fleeing light cruiser.

"Sir, missile separation from the heavy cruiser. Four missiles impact in seventeen seconds."

"Noted," Owen said. "Continue fire."

By turning to run, the light cruiser gave up the ability to fire his own forward munitions and had to settle for aft firing solutions only. He had only three beam cannons that would face aft and they were smaller, anti-missile guns designed to shoot missiles, not starships. He also had only one missile tube that would fire

aft, which he promptly used. A single missile sped from the light cruiser's launcher.

Connor stood over the gunnery chief and watched as the man continued to prepare missiles for launch against the light cruiser. Only this set would have a targeting package that would detonate outside of tractor beam range. If they could take down its rear shielding and deliver enough damage, the tractor beams would fail and allow the trapped missiles to finish him off.

"Gunny, get us anti-missile firing solutions for those incoming missiles," he said. "Use as many in tractors as possible," Connor said.

"Belay that," yelled Owen. "Hold all tractor beams for use against the light cruiser. As soon as we're in range, I want to hold him fast while we deliver as many missiles as it takes to cripple him."

"Aye sir," the chief responded. Connor didn't look up. He knew that if they didn't respond properly to the incoming missiles, they were going to suffer some wicked damage of their own to their port side. Their shielding might not hold against all four missiles. Instead Connor reached over and diverted some of the auxiliary power to the port shielding.

By taking on the light cruiser, they had bought themselves a few precious seconds before the heavy cruiser's missiles could hit them. Their speed was too high for traditional anti-missile counter measures and their electronic signature was far too high. Fortunately, their port side cannons were not yet facing the light cruiser, so they could use them to shoot at the incoming missiles.

The light cruiser took the continued brutal punishment from *Dominion* and its rear shields finally collapsed as missile after missile crashed against them, exploding as they came within range. As its shields died, beam cannons lashed out and tore into its armor and hull, biting through decks of defenses, power systems, and people. Connor knew the casualty rate would be high aboard that ship.

“Port side cannons, take out those missiles!” Owen shouted.

The gunnery chief acknowledged and beams hurled themselves at the oncoming missiles. But in spite of their best effort, only one missile was destroyed.

“Sir, we have fire control loss on the port side!” gunny yelled. “All port side forward weapons are offline.”

“What?” Connor said, looking over at the same damage indicator reading. “But we haven’t been hit yet!”

As he said it, the ship bucked and lurched under the impact of the three arriving Orion missiles. Owen’s gambit was not paying off as well as they had hoped and he had counted on the port side defenses blunting more of the missile threat. They had managed to inflict enough punishing damage on the light cruiser to take him out of the fight, but not enough to slow it down and allow them to grab it with their tractor beams. And with the loss of the port side weapons array, it made them vulnerable on that side. The port side shielding array held against all four detonations, but only just.

“Sir, we should break off. We can’t take them both!” Connor said calmly.

“Nonsense. Continue fire on the light cruiser!”

The gunnery chief complied, but the light cruiser had now accelerated enough to be able to perform his own spin inside the *Dominion*’s turning radius. It would keep him just out of reach, no matter how fast Dominion tried to reach him. The light cruiser was safe for now.

Not so the *Dominion*. The Orion heavy came in with full cannons blazing and tore through what remained of the port side shielding. Connor knew Owen’s gambit had failed. He had hoped to disable the smaller ship and then fight the larger one on nearly equal terms. It was the right tactical move and would have come down to the skill of one captain against another. But that wasn’t going to happen now. Owen was going to lose and take them all down with him.

“Sir, he’s latched onto us with his tractor beams,” Connor yelled as damage alarms blared.

“Do we have port side fire control yet?” Owen said.

Connor looked at the readouts coming from the DAMCON center. They showed complete failure of the master power supply systems. It would take time to patch in the auxiliaries.

“No sir. Two minutes estimated to repair,” he said as a fresh wave of missiles slammed into the ship.

They could feel the damage *Dominion* was taking. The entire ship shuddered to its bones under the impacts with nothing but splintering hull and armor to

absorb the blows. The Orion missiles were clearly as potent as the Terran ones. For all Connor knew, they might even be stolen Terran missiles. He watched in horror as the litany of damaged systems scrolled onto his display.

“Helm, get us out of here,” Owen bellowed. “Come to course, one twenty four, seventy off the plane.”

The helmswoman tried to comply. Owen knew they had to get a fresh shield in between them and the Orions if they were going to get back into the fight. By turning the ship hard over, they should be able to bring the starboard side weapons into play and possibly have a chance. Besides, the damage report display showed that the Orion heavy had taken quite a beating on his own starboard side from Dominion’s early missile broadside.

“Sir, we have incoming shuttles!” Cheryl yelled to be heard over the sound of cannons firing.

“What?!” Owen bellowed. “They’re trying to board us?”

For a moment, no one moved. For Owen, it was unthinkable for anyone to try to board a Terran warship. It just wasn’t done.

“Marines, prepare to repel boarders,” Connor shouted at the marine major . If the Orion ship had been dispatched with a heavy troop load, they were not going to be able to stop them. His own marine contingent would be too light. But they had to try.

Another volley of weapons arrived from the Orion cruiser and this one was far more deadly. Main engineering took a hit which knocked out main power on

several decks. Fires were beginning to spread on the ship as damage control crews fought to prioritize disabled systems. Medical crews fought to save what lives they could. Trama teams worked to evacuate trapped and wounded crewman as the medical teams were dispatched to deal with the wounded.

Just as the ship was bringing the starboard weapons array to bear, another missile slammed into the Terran ship and exploded near deck two-forward which tore through the bulkhead separating mechanical services from the bridge. Pylons flashed brilliantly and then collapsed under the energy load sending huge shards of metal throughout the bridge like razors. Owen Cantrell was cut down by a deadly hull member that severed part of his left leg. He screamed in agony as he fell. The lighting failed and the smell of acrid smoke filled everyone on the bridge with fear.

But as soon as it happened, the ship completed its mad turn bringing the starboard shield up to protect *Dominion* for a few more seconds.

“Helm, get us moving. Full power. Use any reserves you need to break us free!” Connor said. He knew their only chance was to get some distance from the Orion ship. Unfortunately, they would have to break the tractor beam to do it.

Connor didn’t even notice that he had just taken command of the ship. He simply began issuing the necessary orders.

“Gunny, fire all cannons on their facing tractor beams. And get the medics up here to see to the captain.”

Connor looked down at Owen who had collapsed unconscious. It was a good thing too, because he was laying at a very strange angle with regards to his leg. Connor was sure he would not want to be awake for that.

“Cheryl, assume the tactical station,” he yelled. “Get me engineering!”

“Hanson here, what are you doing up there, Connor? Where’s the captain?” came the voice from main engineering.

“Trevor, you’ve got to give me some distance from that Orion cruiser. It has us in a tractor beam.”

“We took a main power buss hit down here, Connor. Give me a few seconds to get the power feed switched over and then I’ll give you a quick burst for two seconds. That should be enough if you can hit him hard enough to break at least one tractor hold!”

The idea exploded in Connors mind even as he thought of it. The Orion marines were only beginning to embark and hadn’t really had time to get deep into the ship yet. That meant the Orion cruiser had counted on the *Dominion* bringing their starboard shield up for protection. They were hoping the initial damage would be enough to get their troops aboard for a quick hit-and-run boarding action,

But hit what? All of the strategic targets were being held by their own marines. Connor struggled to think but Cheryl spoke into the smoke filled silence.

“They’re going to hit main engineering” she said as she pointed to the schematic she had put on the main monitor.

Connor looked up and saw it too. The shuttles had breached the outer hatchway nearest main engineering and it would be a matter of seconds before Trevor would have a fight on his hands. They must know that if they crippled the *Dominion*’s engine compartment, they could then take what time they needed to secure their *true* objective.

“Trevor,” Connor said leaning over the comm. unit. “The boarders are coming your way. I need that burst of power now!”

“Have you disabled their tractors yet?” Trevor yelled back from engineering. Connor had to guess what kind of sad state that area was in.

Connor looked up at Cheryl who shook her head. And then a flash of insight hit him squarely in the eyes. They didn’t need to break the tractor beam—they needed to use it to pull them closer!

“Cheryl, plot a shearing course across their engines,” he said. But Cheryl stared at him, her brows furrowed in confusion.

“Compute a near collision course in your head and lay it in. Do it, hurry!”

Cheryl darted to the helm, already performing the calculation. The vector was simple enough, but she also had to factor in the energy and mass of the tractorship. Connor knew she was the only one on the bridge that could do it without a calculating device.

In order for this to work, He knew they would need to stop fighting against the tractor beam and allow it to *pull them* closer to the Orion ship. He had one chance to use the burst of speed Trevor was going to give him and he needed to shear back against the Orion cruiser, so close in fact, that they were going to actually strike the ship's engine mounts with the back of their own ship. This would be like trying to rope a rhinoceros from a land rover, only to have him turn and ram the rover.

Trevor's voice came from the engineering deck. "Bridge, the power's there. It's now or never!"

"Now Cheryl!" Connor shouted.

Cheryl plotted the course and the helmswoman executed it on blind faith. Dominion lurched backwards and into the waiting Orion heavy cruiser. He had come in close to give his assault shuttles as short a track as he possibly could so they could effectively use the element of surprise. So Cheryl had plotted the course back and up, causing Dominion to rake its rear hull right across the engine struts of the Orion cruiser. Obviously, they didn't see *that* coming.

The rear struts and keel groaned and buckled. The impact was felt all over the ship. The bridge crew were thrown across the floor as the ship responded and tore chunks of metal and components from both ships. Had the impact been more substantial, the resulting explosions might have destroyed both vessels, but Cheryl's calculations had been spot on. As the two ships cleared each other, it was clear that the tractor beams no longer held.

Trevor used the resulting confusion to close the emergency blast doors and hold off the assault intended for the engineering section. Forced to give up their initial objective, the invading Orion troops had to settle for a fighting retreat back to their assault shuttles. Several boarders were killed by defending Terran marines, but most escaped and were cast off either in shuttles or through airlocks into space.