

# JOYRIDE

Kathryn

**Kristine Kathryn Rusch inadvertently took a few months off writing for a move from the Oregon Coast to Las Vegas. She always seems to pick extremes—from a rainy coastal environment to a sunny desert. Kris is enjoying the sunshine more than she expected. Her recent publications include *Searching for the Fleet*, a Diving novel, that appeared in September. “Joyride” is part of an as-yet-untitled side novel set in the Diving universe, but without the regular characters. Kris tells us she often writes stories to explain things to herself. This time, she had to explain an entire world. For updates on her work, and a free short story every Monday, go to [www.kriswrites.com](http://www.kriswrites.com).**

They assembled in the Third Level Mess Hall, the one designed for first-years. The furniture was tiny, built for small bodies, and the walls had painted murals of cats and dogs, the comfort animals kept in the arboretum wing and not allowed on this level. Still, Nadim Crowe knew, a lot of tears got shed beneath those murals, hic-coughy tears, the kind that little kids couldn't hold back if they wanted to.

He thought the murals cruel, but then, he thought sending little kids to boarding school while their parents gallivanted across the Universe equally cruel. Last year, he'd volunteered down here until the sobs got to him. Then he'd requested a transfer, which had sent him to the medical wing, and that turned out to be infinitely worse.

Why he'd decided on the Third Level Mess as a meeting site for the two teams was beyond him. It went into that category of his existence that he filed under *It Seemed Like A Good Idea At The Time*.

Of course, he hadn't thought that through until tonight, while he was waiting for the others to arrive. Before that, he'd only thought about the competition. He had had a lot of prep to do, and that meant doing some of the prep here, in the Third Level Mess.

A week ago, he'd tampered with the Third Level Mess's security system, shutting down the audio and video tracking just to see if anyone noticed. He'd kept the environmental controls on and boosted the emergency warnings, just in case something bad happened here while the security system was off. The Mess was all about little kids, after all.

He had chosen the middle of Ship Night, when (in theory) no little kids would be using the Mess. He'd kept the system down for three hours just to see if anyone noticed.

They hadn't, which disturbed him and relieved him in equal measures. He didn't like that it was so easy to tamper with the security systems on the *Brazza Two*, but at the same time, it made this little dare easier.

And he knew that the systems in other parts of the ship, systems that monitored kids his age, were better designed. The adults didn't think that little-little kids would meddle with security systems, but the adults knew that teens did. He supposed if any of the little-littles had successfully screwed with a security system, they would have been moved to the gifted track immediately.

He had no idea how the gifted track worked for the littlest of kids. He hadn't been on the ship when he was really little. He had arrived at age nine. Unlike most kids, he'd actually requested his berth. He'd already been old enough to know that anywhere in the Universe was better than a landlocked life with his parents, so why not go to the best possible school that had the added bonus of being in space as well.

The fading bruises, two broken ribs, and evidence of other badly healed broken bones had convinced the Fleet's school administrators that Crowe had been right about his parents. His tests—off the charts when it came to mathematics, science, and technical aptitude—convinced the administrators to send him to the most prestigious school ship in the Fleet.

He never would have cried underneath these murals if he had arrived here when he was young enough to eat in the Third Level Mess Hall. He would have celebrated.

Tonight, he was the first to arrive in the Third Level Mess, and he was jittery. The Third Level Mess was mostly dark. Five dim overhead lights failed to properly illuminate the space. Four of the lights were in the mess's four corners, leaving pools of darkness over the tables and the back area.

The fifth light—the brightest light—was off to his right. It shone over the long rectangular counter designed for the adult staff to serve the little kids their food. When he'd volunteered here, he'd wondered why there was a serving station. In the other messes, the students were monitored by computer and actually informed when they took a food item that didn't fit into their regulation diet.

He'd asked his question and was told that computer diet controls caused most of the little-littles to melt down. Instead, it was better to have adult assistance, so when a child did break down, he did so with someone nearby who could soothe him.

Crowe had seen a lot of soothing here, much more than he had experienced at home. He'd also seen a lot of unhappy children. Because of that, he knew, most people on the *Brazza Two* avoided the Third Level Mess.

No one monitored this section of the ship after dinner either. He had double- and triple-checked that himself when he had come here in preparation for the competition. He had gotten the idea, and before he had even told Tessa about it, he had gone to the three main competition sites—the mess, and two different ship bays—to see if the competition was even possible.

It was—just barely. It would take some luck and a whole bunch of skill. That was what he loved about it, and that was why he was so very excited.

In the last fifteen minutes, his team had started to arrive. Ten of his friends, sliding in one at a time, some of them fist-bumping him as they passed, others just hovering near the bench beneath the mural, which provided the only truly comfortable seating. The bench was at adult height, probably because whoever built it had had some kind of brain fart and forgotten that this room was for little-littles.

As the team arrived, Crowe stood with his hands behind his back, deliberately mimicking Captain Mbue's favorite posture. She impressed him. She had been the captain since he'd started here. She was no-nonsense. When she gave her annual do-your-best speech to the various classes, she meant it. Some of the other teachers and staff on the ship treated the students with barely concealed condescension, but Captain Mbue seemed to believe each word she said.

When he became captain—a real captain, a captain of a DV-Class vessel—he

would treat his entire crew with respect, from the oldest to the youngest. He would do his best to be exactly like Captain Mbue.

And tonight, he was going to captain a ship. If he pulled this off, no one on the *Brazza Two* would be the wiser. Or if they found out, they would think him brazen but brilliant. He hoped for the first, but he would take the second.

The question was whether or not he would still run the mission if Tessa failed to show up.

Tessa Linley, the most gorgeous girl he had ever seen. She was luminescent, with dark brown eyes that perfectly matched her smooth unblemished skin. She wore her long hair in tiny braids that fell down her back most of the time, but when she was working hard on something delicate, she would wrap those braids around the top of her head like a crown.

He had no idea if she knew that half the competitions and challenges he had thrown at her had been because he wanted to see her marvelous brain at work and because he wanted to spend more time with her. He had yet to impress her, although he had won two of the past three challenges he had made to her.

None had been as elaborate as this one. They had come up with it together. They had found some redundant systems in the *Brazza Two's* security protocols. Thinking they had happened on something the more experienced engineers had missed, Tessa and Crowe had asked one of their instructors if they could begin the process of removing the redundant systems.

He had laughed, which surprised both of them. And then he had complimented them on their observations.

*But, he had said, those systems exist for a reason. This is a school ship with the best and brightest in the Fleet on board. We've learned over the years that no matter how hard we try to keep you students intellectually stimulated, you'll still venture out on your own. And one of the things you'll do is tamper with the systems. The redundancies make sure that the tampering and the damage from it are at a minimum.*

Crowe and Tessa said nothing to each other for days after that, but slowly they realized that they both had come to the same conclusion: they both decided to investigate the redundancies, to see what the "best and brightest" had tried before Crowe and Tessa had even thought of boarding the *Brazza Two*.

That, combined with the fact that the *Brazza Two* had followed a part of the Fleet to a nearby Scrapheap for some major learning opportunity for the officer candidates, had captured Crowe's imagination. Not only did he want to best the students who had come before him in the accelerated youth program, he also wanted to visit that Scrapheap, and he knew he wouldn't be allowed to.

Only the officer candidates, those in their twenties or older, with decades of schooling and experience behind them, were allowed to go. And they would be supervised every moment of the visit, which sounded like torture to Crowe. He loved working on his own. And that, combined with the other strictures, had given him an idea.

Tessa then refined it.

And like almost everything they came up with, they decided to turn it into a competition. Unlike their other competitions, though, this one required the help of others. Together, Tessa and Crowe recruited half of their class.

Tessa sidled up beside him. He knew she was there before he saw her. The scent of her jasmine soap always preceded her. She leaned against him, her soft skin warm against his, and he felt a jolt of lust.

He took one step away. He didn't want to be distracted by his body right now.

"Wasn't sure you were going to come," he said softly.

"And miss this? Are you kidding?" she asked. She stepped forward just a bit, probably so that she could see his face in the dim light.

He could see hers, bright and eager and shining with excitement.

"You do a head count?" she asked.

"Not yet," he said. "I was waiting for you."

She punched his arm lightly. "We don't have a lot of time. You should've been ahead of this."

"You're the one who's late," he said.

"I'm not late," she said. "You were early."

"Still want to do this?" he asked, deflecting. Or maybe just deflecting the thoughts from his brain.

Maybe that was why he didn't win every contest he had with Tessa. Part of his brain was always busy controlling his body so that she wouldn't know just how much she affected him. Another part of his brain monitored his every word so that he wouldn't say something stupid. That part of his brain usually failed, especially as he got deeper into the contest and focused on the task at hand instead of his mouth.

Fortunately, Tessa didn't insult easily.

She didn't forget, though, either, and she often brought those comments back up, usually in a teasing way, but still. He found his missteps horribly embarrassing.

"If I didn't want to do this," she said, "I wouldn't be here. What I'm not sure about is whether or not we can finish before everyone gets up. I don't want to come back to a welcoming committee."

He bit his lower lip. They had discussed this problem earlier, and then she had said it didn't bother her.

"It's a possibility," he said. "A good one. That's why I'm asking you if you want to back out."

She let out a half laugh, and her eyes sparkled. She was so beautiful when she was smiling that it took his breath away.

"Are you kidding?" she asked. "It's been ages since we've done anything remotely exciting. I've been looking forward to this for weeks."

"So have I," he said, feeling a spike of energy running through him. "So let's get to it."

She nodded, then started a head count, whispering the numbers under her breath. He counted with her, mentally making note of which team the people present were on.

His team had gathered together near the mural wall. Hers was scattered around the room, huddling together in twos and threes. That one simple fact buoyed him. It meant his team was more cohesive than hers.

"Looks like everyone's here," she said.

Not only were both teams in place, but each member was the correct member. Once, he'd initiated a competition with Tessa, and half the people he'd handpicked to participate had sent someone else in their place. It had been a last-minute competition, though, and he really hadn't prepped anyone.

This time, he'd been running virtual drills with his team. He'd designed a three-part program that simulated what he thought would happen. The first part got the team to the docking bay. The second part was stolen from the flight simulator that first-year pilot training instructors used, and the third part was sheer guesswork.

Tessa had warned him not to do anything like that—*you'll get caught and then what will you say?* she asked; *I'll say that I was using my imagination just like they encourage,* he replied. But he hadn't gotten caught. And not only had he maintained the interest of his team in the adventure, he'd also made sure they were as prepared as they could be.

"Okay." Tessa clapped her hands together to get everyone's attention. It was 10:30 P.M. ship time. They weren't even supposed to start until eleven.

But Crowe had no problem with starting early. The earlier they left, the sooner they would return. If they managed to get back before four A.M., they were less likely to be caught.

Tessa had probably impressed that on her team; he certainly had on his.

“This is your last chance if you want to back out,” Tessa was saying—to everyone, which kinda annoyed him. He didn’t want anyone to back out, and he didn’t want to remind them that backing out was an option.

Everyone was watching her. He could see faces half-illuminated in the dim light, all of them focused on her with great intensity, which also irritated him. She was his friend, not theirs—although that wasn’t true. Tessa somehow managed to be everyone’s friend, even though she was closest to him—or so he hoped.

“There’s a chance we could get caught,” she said. “A good chance, really. But as I told you, or rather, as I told my team, there’s safety in numbers. They might punish all of us, but not as severely as they’d punish one of us. So you’d be helping out in more ways than one if you stay. Besides, this’ll be fun!”

Her voice rose with that last bit, and it actually sounded like fun instead of something scary and dangerous.

A bunch of people closest to Crowe smiled. He couldn’t see the other faces clearly enough to know if they were smiling, too.

He needed to take this over, though, before she scared them all to death.

“Those of you who’ve been in competitions before with me and Tessa know the drill. We’re going to have the computer start a thirty-second countdown. As soon as it hits zero, it’ll say *Go!* and you go. You know where you’re supposed to be, so you run there.”

Or, he thought, his team knew where they were supposed to be. He had no idea if hers knew.

“You should have instructions from me or Tessa, so you should know what to do,” he said, not looking at her in case she’d failed at this for the first time ever. She used to be the most organized one of the two of them. She wasn’t any more—he learned that lesson soundly and had started to beat her at her own game.

“If you don’t know exactly,” Tessa said, lending credence to the idea that she hadn’t prepared as much as he had, “follow the other members of your team. My team is wearing a slash of lime green along one cheek tonight, so if you see someone with a slash across their face and you’re part of my team, follow that person. Someone will put you to work.”

He hadn’t thought about color-coding his team, but that was only necessary for this part of the competition anyway. He had hardly given the front part of this any thought at all, because that wasn’t the part that interested him.

The competition really didn’t start until the teams got on board their respective ships.

“Remember,” Tessa said, “the point of this is to have fun, and maybe learn something along the way.”

Crowe disagreed: he thought the point was to learn something and maybe have fun along the way, but he stayed quiet. Tessa was better at rousing the troops than he was.

“So, ready?” Tessa asked. “The countdown starts . . . *now!*”

Apparently that was her computer command, because the androgynous voice started counting backward from thirty.

Crowe moved slightly away from the door. He had instructed his team to let Tessa’s go first. A few competitions ago, some of the team members had gotten trampled in the opening stampede, and that had cost him precious time (not to mention a long and convoluted explanation in the medical wing).

Besides, he hadn’t just tampered with the security systems here; he’d also tampered with the door commands on the docking bay entrance his team was going to use.

The tampering wasn’t as extreme as the tampering here—ship security would definitely have noticed any major changes to the systems in the docking bay.

All he had done was prep the redundant systems to operate more efficiently if

given certain commands. He had figured, if he had gotten caught, that he would tell his teachers or security that he had been trying to improve the system. He'd been given permission to investigate the redundant systems, after all.

The computer countdown hit *three . . . two . . . one . . . Go!* and Tessa's team took off so fast that they nearly trampled each other.

"See ya, sucker!" Tessa said to him as she raced by. He just smiled. She should have seen that as a warning that he had done some prep, but she hadn't.

Or maybe she just didn't care.

She was on her way to the secondary docking bay. It was closer to the Third Level Mess than the docking bay he had chosen. She probably thought the proximity would give her team an advantage.

But there was a lot that could eat up that advantage, including getting in, working the ship, and getting the bay doors to open. His team had worked through all of the scenarios he could think of, and he still worried that those hadn't been enough.

The sound of her team's shoes slapping against the floor receded. There was no laughing and giggling and catcalls, like there had been on some previous competitions, so she had done some work with her team.

"Okay," he said when he could no longer hear Tessa's team. "Let's go."

His team gathered around him, and they walked to the docking bay. No running at all. They even took the Third Level elevator to the First Level. Nothing wrong with students touring the public area of the ship. He'd learned that long ago. And if they weren't acting like they were doing something wrong, then no one would think they were, either.

Two of his team members—Omar and Erika—already had their personal computer screens up, on clear holographic mode. They were the ones assigned with tricking the redundant systems so that the team could get into the docking bay undetected—at least for a few minutes. Long enough that they would be able to get to the ship he had chosen.

Two other team members—Igasho and Sera—were going to scrub the identities of the entire team, effectively removing them from the security system, the moment the group entered the docking bay. He'd learned that trick by studying what students had done before.

The system was set up to catch that little maneuver, but he'd tested it (like he had tested everything), not with his own profile, but with the profiles of some of the kids one year ahead of him. He'd set up the scrubbing to look like it was accidental—a glitch in the system. And he'd deliberately chosen candidates who had no real technical expertise. These were the kids who liked the arts, who focused on languages or ship culture or Fleet history, such as it was.

There was no way those kids had the ability to scrub their own profiles, and they didn't have the wherewithal to hire someone (or bribe someone) to do it for them. If ship security didn't look too deeply at the scrubbing, no one would figure out what had happened.

So far, no one had looked to see if the scrubbing was anything more than a system error.

And Crowe had learned how long it took the system to recognize it had been spoofed and to solve the problem.

The fastest the scrubbing had been repaired had been seven minutes. The fastest it had been reported to a human had been ten minutes—and that had been on the same student. It had been an outlier, but Crowe used that figure as his figure.

He'd tested the team in their simulation. They had to move fast to the ship, and get inside within six minutes. That way, when their profiles returned to the system, they wouldn't be in the middle of boarding a ship they had no right to be on.

They hadn't done it physically—they hadn't done any of this physically—but they knew what the stakes were, and at least according to some of his instructors, virtual drills created brain muscle memory as effectively as actual drills created actual muscle memory.

He was counting on that.

The elevator door opened on First Level, and the team headed en masse to the docking bay entrance. Once inside, they'd run to the ship. Out here, they laughed and joked like kids on a walk, except for Omar and Erika, who were in the middle of the circle, mostly protected from the security imagery—so that the system wouldn't flag their behavior (any of their behavior) as suspicious.

The corridor was wide enough to accommodate four across, the ceilings high, and the floor made of a material he'd always meant to look up, designed to help anyone who had not yet adjusted to the peculiarities of the *Brazza Two* to maintain balance and stability. This flooring vanished on the main levels, but was part of the entire area around the docking bay, something Crowe had noticed, but didn't yet understand.

They arrived at the fifth entrance into this docking bay. This particular entrance had the most minimal security because it was the furthest from any access point. It also led into the part of the docking bay reserved for the less frequently used ships. No outside ships ever docked here, and no small ship in active use docked here either.

Crowe had spent nearly a week looking up each small ship in this area, its specs, its foibles, and its capacity. He knew he had an inexperienced team, so he wanted something easy to pilot. He also knew that the ship had to be large enough to handle ten, and with portholes big enough that the team could see the Scrapheap with their own eyes.

He also wanted a ship that could handle the distance to the Scrapheap rapidly, with minimum fuss, and could handle the one maneuver he was most afraid of on its own.

Bringing the ship back to the *Brazza Two* and docking in the same spot required piloting skills beyond anyone in this group. While all of the small ships attached to the *Brazza Two* had an autopilot function, not all of the autopilots worked well.

Most of that was by design. The *Brazza Two* didn't just train gifted students in their early years of study and scholars who would eventually train aboard a specialty ship; it also trained pilots, engineers, and the entire officer corps. They all needed small ship experience, and not all of that experience could come from simulations.

Many of the small ships in this docking bay were training vessels with certain features disabled or removed. Crowe needed all of the features of a Fleet vessel to work well, just in case his little crew did get into trouble. He needed to be able to activate a part of the ship or give it over to the computer or contact someone on the *Brazza Two*, ask for help, and then be able to implement that help.

He hoped nothing would go that seriously wrong on this little adventure, but he also knew that hope wasn't something a commander could count on.

Captain Mbue had said that on more than one occasion. Speaking to his class, she had added, *Hope should give us the wings to pursue the experience that will then enable us to make the best decisions for that particular moment. Optimism and hope built the Fleet. Experience pilots it. Adventure keeps it moving, ever forward.*

She had never mentioned creativity in any of her speeches, but Crowe liked to think that creativity was part of the Fleet as well. Maybe one of the most valuable parts.

Certainly, his creativity had helped him catch the attention of every single one of his teachers. They always gave him assignments far beyond anything someone his age should do. And they praised his non-standard way of approaching each problem they gave him, telling him they had never met anyone who thought like he did.

He hoped they would have the same reaction to this adventure. If they caught him.

The fifth entrance into the docking bay was also the smallest—a single door. The eleven crowded around it and waited while Adil took point. He was slender and small, having not yet hit his full growth, which Crowe believed might make him even more valuable down the road.

Right now, Adil had to unlock the entrance. Crowe was suddenly breathing shallowly. He wanted to unlock the entrance. He had done every single thing in the simulation, so he knew what the crew would be up against, and some things he did better than others.

Like opening doors undetected.

Only his time had been fifteen seconds *slower* than Adil's time. And nothing Crowe could do in the simulation made his time faster than Adil's.

That was how Crowe had made the assignments anyway. The crewmembers who did the jobs the swiftest while being the most accurate were the ones who got the jobs.

That didn't stop him from shifting from foot to foot. Each passing second felt like an hour.

He hadn't thought about this, about the way it looked when eleven kids crowded around a door. If he had given that part thought, he would have had the scrubbing of their digital signatures begin sooner.

Adil finished in record time (even though it didn't feel that way), and the door slid to one side, just like it was supposed to. The crew walked in, with Igasho and Sera remaining just outside the door as they finished the scrubbing.

Or, at least, Crowe hoped they finished the scrubbing. Because this was one part of the plan that they had no way to check.

Igasho entered first. His black eyes met Crowe's, and Igasho nodded. Igasho believed it was done.

Then Sera stepped inside and shouted, "Go!" just like she was supposed to do.

The crew ran for the first time, everyone heading for the scout ship that Crowe had designated as theirs.

His stomach tightened, and he was still having trouble breathing. He'd checked and double-checked the manifest all day, just to make sure that the scout ship was still in place.

The ship had the uninspired name of *Br2 Scout3*. Apparently school ships lost scouts in training so often that the scouts' names were simple.

This scout had been in service for almost a hundred years and was on its last legs. It hadn't been used much at all, which was one reason why Crowe had targeted it. He knew no one was paying a lot of attention to it.

He'd run a diagnostic a few weeks ago, piggybacking on engineering's standard small ship diagnostic. So technically, *he* hadn't run the diagnostic at all. He had just added *Br2 Scout3* to the list, and the engineering department had run its usual check.

The ship came out clean. Although that did mean that someone paid attention to it and it might have vanished in the last few days, even though it remained on the manifest.

He scurried around some of the other smaller ships—a runabout, an orbiter, a few tiny ships that were little more than pods—following his team.

He was the one in charge of the scout ship, and he had to get there when everyone else did, but he had a stitch in his side from his uneven breathing.

He was a lot more nervous than he'd expected to be. This entire mission was a lot more real than he had ever imagined, and he was beginning to think they were in too deep.

If he hadn't made this into a contest with Tessa, he might have backed out right here.

But he had, and his pride was going to keep him moving forward.

The team arrived at the ship with two minutes to spare. They were all gathered around the back end of the scout. This ship had a cargo door, like many of the military vessels.

Usually small ships were coded to the pilots and bridge crew of the larger vessel they rode in, but not training ships. Training ships had entry codes for each class that was supposed to train inside.

Crowe had investigated which unit was using what type of training ship at the moment. None of them were actually training on scout ships in classes right now, but the classes on the scout ships would start up in a few weeks.

Fortunately for him, the instructors for that unit were already preparing—or maybe they had never changed the entry codes. He had dug into that part of the shipboard computer, using an instructor identification he had borrowed long ago. It wasn't the only instructor identification he had borrowed in his time here—he rotated through them when he needed to.

He'd actually burned three of them on this trip. If the team got caught, he wouldn't be able to use those identifications again.

His mouth was dry and his heart was pounding. He stepped up to the back control panel, hidden to the left of the door. Usually this part of a scout ship was opened in the ship's tiny bridge, but there were redundant systems in all of the Fleet's vessels.

Every type of ship had extra ways to enter. Ships that went off on their own without any back-up, like scout ships, had several redundant entry points, so that no one could get locked out in a strange environment.

He opened the control panel with shaking fingers, wishing he had more control over his body right now. He didn't want his team to know how nervous he was, although they could probably guess.

Maybe they would chalk it up to adrenaline. Or maybe they were just as nervous, and even more excited.

No one said anything. He could hear some ragged breathing, but that was about it.

The panel revealed a triple-coded entry, just like he'd expected. That calmed him. He had to type in a pattern with his fingertips. The ship would then identify him as a student in the *Brazza Two*. In the past, the ships had to confirm that someone was in the program that was going to use the ship, but so many records weren't kept up that the instructor corps abandoned that system and just put regular student records in place.

They figured there were other ways to prevent students who didn't belong from getting on the ships.

And those ways were the ones that Crowe had discovered, overridden, or planned for.

He had planned for this one. The ship asked him for the class code. He'd found that about a week ago. He swept his forefinger across the flat-screen pad four times, then placed his entire hand on the screen.

Nothing happened.

Was he going to fail at this, lose this competition, because he had underestimated the access code to the ship he needed? What would Tessa say about that? She rarely teased him about his failures, but this would be too rich to ignore. She would—

Metal against metal squealed, followed by a rumble and a series of small clicks. Five of his team members stepped backward. They had been too close to the back end of the scout ship—the end that was slowly opening like a cargo ship door.

Just like it was supposed to do.

He let out a half-laugh, catching it before it became an exclamation of joy. Still, he couldn't keep the smile off his face as he nodded to his team.

He gave a one-finger symbol—index finger up, and then pointed at the dark interior. He stepped into the darkness first, even though a captain never went first. But he wasn't a real captain (yet), so screw it.

He wanted to run, but he knew better than that. Instead, his boots caught on the ramp, making banging sounds as he walked up it.

Lights came on around him the deeper he went into the ship.

His team—his *crew*—flanked him. Once they were all inside, he nodded at Maida, who would be his second in command on this journey. She grinned at him, her round face and green eyes filled with joy. He had picked Maida for this one because her scores on all of the tests they had done in the simulation were the closest to his.

She was the only other person who had managed each test along the way. Everyone else had failed at least one.

She walked over to the interior control panel for the door and the environmental controls and pressed it, shutting the cargo door and making sure the environment was suited for the team. Proper oxygen mix, proper temperature, full gravity.

Still, they would grab environmental suits as they passed through the armory on their way to the tiny bridge. In a couple of the simulations, things had gone so badly awry that the fake crew needed environmental suits.

Even though those simulations were outliers, they happened. And Crowe was cautious enough to prepare for the worst, and hope that it would never come to pass.

He glanced at the crew. They were smiling at him, the nerves gone—so far as he could tell. Maybe they were all excited about this part of the mission.

In his estimation, this was the most dangerous part to them and their future careers with the Fleet. If they got caught at this moment, without having achieved their objectives, they'd join all the ignominious previous students who had tried to get a ship out of the docking bay.

Those students often lied about the reason they were leaving. Most of them were fleeing the school.

Crowe wasn't, and he figured he would have the simulations to back him up, but he still hated this part.

He led his crew out of the cargo area and into that narrow armory. The armory was empty; it wouldn't be stocked with weaponry unless the scout ship was going off on its own for real. But environmental suits had to remain with all ships at all times.

Still, he felt a thread of relief when he opened the uniform storage and found dozens of suits in various sizes hanging from pegs, just like they were supposed to be.

Apparently he hadn't entirely believed that the suits would be here.

Everyone grabbed a suit, then spent a few uncomfortable minutes sliding it on over their clothes. Crowe's suit was newer than the suit he had in his dorm room, and it took him a moment to figure out that the suit operated by touch-command. He left the hood down, and the gravity in his boots off.

He didn't wait for anyone else as he headed to the tiny bridge.

The *Br2 Scout3* was a mid-range scout ship—or so its specs said—designed for regional exploration. The *Br2 Scout3's* standard crew could expect to be on board for weeks, maybe months, as the exploration went on.

That meant there were two levels on the ship—operations and residential. He wasn't interested in residential; the crew wouldn't be onboard that long. But operations had to have a fully functional engineering section, weaponry and defensive capabilities, and a bridge big enough to handle a minimal crew that, Fleet regulations stated, was five people at one time.

The bridge was on the opposite side of the ship from the cargo bay. So he jogged in that direction, a little surprised at the time it took. The simulation had estimates that seemed to be wildly off.

Of course, the simulation didn't take into account the equipment left in corridors from the *Br2 Scout3's* last mission, or the way that the sharp angles of the *Br2 Scout3's* design slowed down anyone scurrying across the ship.

The *Br2 Scout3* was just barely small enough for a crew of ten to run it, although crew complement said that this ship needed a minimum of thirty, should the ship be gone for longer than a day or two.

He finally reached the bridge and was relieved to find the doors open. He had planned for four minutes of struggle with the control panel so that his crew could get into the bridge. He wouldn't need those four minutes, which was a good thing, since he had already wasted them and a few more getting there.

He wondered how Tessa was doing. He hadn't heard any sirens or notification of a lockdown, and he would have, since the *Br2 Scout3* was still on board the *Brazza Two*. So she hadn't been caught.

The others of his crew joined him, environmental hoods down, looking a little flustered and sweaty from their own jogs across the ship. Maida reached his side.

"Ready?" she asked in a tone that told him she thought he was having second thoughts. If one word could sound like a shove in the back, that *ready* was it.

"Yep," he said, and stepped inside the bridge.

He had expected something small, but not something this claustrophobic. The ceiling was low, the lights old and a bit grey, the way that lights from a century ago had been made. The bridge was designed like half a bowl, with everything leading to the lower level down front. That level included a wide variety of screens, which could be toggled together to form a holographic representation of space itself.

He had thought that sounded exciting when he'd first found out about the design of this type of scout ship. He'd thought the bridge would seem vast. But now it seemed a little cheap, and the downward dip just looked like a hazard rather than a design feature.

Maybe that was because of the equipment. The equipment had been updated, but it looked grafted on, like a bandage over a particularly ugly wound.

The consoles were too large, for one thing, all of them a little too square for the design. The captain's chair, standard in larger ships, had been removed here. In fact, in order to make room for the extra equipment, every single chair in the bridge was gone.

He felt a little dizzy and then realized he'd been holding his breath. Not that it mattered. He hadn't tested with modern up-to-date equipment. His simulation had been based on the older ship, the design that *Br2 Scout3* had been built to, not the one it had been upgraded to.

"Wow," Adil said from beside him. "This thing has an *anacapa* drive."

He was looking at the *anacapa* container, near the navigation controls.

Crowe cursed under his breath. He didn't want to be anywhere near an *anacapa* drive. He thought he had picked a ship without one.

He'd studied the drives enough to know they were unpredictable, and the last thing he wanted was one of his people messing with the drive and getting them all in trouble.

"We're not touching it," Crowe said. "In fact, we're not even opening the container. The first thing I'm going to do when I get to the controls is lock us out of the *anacapa*."

"No need," Maida said. "None of us want to touch it, right, gang?"

The entire crew chorused their unwillingness to touch the *anacapa* drive. He felt some of the tension leave.

This was why he had picked these ten people. They were like-minded. They believed in the same things he did. They had that risk-taking attitude that he liked. Only they weren't reckless in their risk-taking. They took *calculated* risks.

"All right," he said. "I'm holding you guys to that, mostly because we're behind schedule as it is. Stations, everyone."

They all had assigned places and tasks. Navigation, shields (should they be necessary), and, most importantly—at least to him—recording the mission, not just on the ship's system, but on separate systems.

The crew was heading out to see a Scrapheap for the first—and maybe only—time in their lives. They needed a record of the visit.

"Here we go," he said.

And they all descended on the bridge, ready for the challenge of a lifetime.

\* \* \*

Fortunately, the captain's station remained in the middle of the bridge, even though the equipment had been changed out. Not that it would have mattered if the captain's station was in the back or near the phalanx of screens at the bottom of the bowl.

Crowe had run the simulations so many times that he could picture the station in his sleep. He was glad it was in the same place. That, at least, felt like he had expected it to.

He called up the holographic command screen. The structure of its menu looked like he expected as well, which was a relief. He glanced around the bridge. His crew was in place, all ten in their positions.

Maida was at the very bottom of the bowl. She had all of the screens on, plus a holographic replica of the area around the ship that was, right now, the interior of the *Brazza Two's* docking bay.

Crowe's palms were sweating; he wiped them on the exterior of his environmental suit, not that it did any good. That material repelled liquid. It repelled everything.

He faced the biggest hurdle of all—leaving the *Brazza Two* without being detected.

Three days ago, he had found the automated exit controls for the docking ring. No one had to monitor exiting ships on most DV-Class vessels. But the *Brazza Two* monitored exits because of all the students on board.

But the default command/control inside the computer of a DV-Class vessel were automated exits from docking rings. All he had to do was reset the *Brazza Two's* command/control default, and he could leave easily.

Or so he had hoped when he reset that default.

He entered the command for decoupling from the *Brazza Two*. That system—like so many on board the *Br2 Scout3*—was automated.

In theory, the *Br2 Scout3* would contact the *Brazza Two*, and together, the two ships would execute the departure of the *Br2 Scout3* from the *Brazza Two*.

A list of procedures appeared on his holographic screen, which he hadn't expected. Some things had been reprogrammed in other ways to accommodate the school ship, apparently.

One by one, each item on the procedure list checked itself off. As they got close to the final two—which would culminate in exiting the ship—he said to Igasho, "Activate the travel program."

Igasho nodded and touched images on his holographic screen.

Crowe had decided a week ago to plot the coordinates of their trip alongside the Scrapheap. That way, he wouldn't be tempted to change the travel plans as they flew out—something he suspected he would do once he saw the Scrapheap.

He had plotted a trip that would take them along the edges of the Scrapheap, just far enough from its own protective barrier that the automated defense systems in the Scrapheap wouldn't notice his ship at all.

Technically, the Scrapheap was programmed not to worry about Fleet vessels, but Crowe had spent the last few months studying Scrapheaps—what little he could find. What he'd discovered was that most of them had been programmed when they

were built and weren't updated by any ships that came within range.

There was also a lot about Scrapheaps that wasn't in the easily accessible file, which meant there was a lot about Scrapheaps that was on a need-to-know basis, something that made them even more dangerous, at least in his opinion.

"Here we go," Maida said.

The door to the docking bay opened. It showed up on screen after screen and in the holographic recreation near her. The *Br2 Scout3* lurched forward, the way larger ships did when they had to leave some place at the lowest level of power.

His heart rate increased, but not with fear. With excitement. He was commanding his first ship. Yeah, this was an unofficial mission, and yeah, he wasn't really captain, but it felt real enough.

It felt like his future was waiting for him right outside the *Brazza Two*.

The crew seemed to hold its collective breath. They watched as the *Br2 Scout3* eased out of the docking bay.

"When do I open the portholes?" Sera asked. She was in charge of what Crowe had been calling the in-ship visuals. They had come to see the Scrapheap, and they were going to see the Scrapheap, not just on screens—which they could do from the *Brazza Two*—but up close and in person. Or as up close and in person as was possible without going inside the Scrapheap itself.

"Now, I guess," Crowe said, and instantly regretted the *I guess*. Captains didn't speak in *I guesses*. Captains actually knew what they wanted, even when they didn't. They sounded certain.

He wasn't sounding certain at all.

Sera tapped her screen, and then the bridge's ceiling opened, revealing the largest porthole Crowe had ever seen. He had been mentally braced for that, but being braced and actually seeing it were two different things.

Some of the documentation he'd seen on this type of scout ship had called the porthole over the bridge a design flaw, while others called it one of the most magnificent parts of the ship.

It was, he decided, both. Easy to attack and destroy (even with the protective layer provided by the ceiling), but it also provided one of the best views he'd ever seen on a starship.

The porthole curved downward and added extra width to the front of the bridge bowl. The porthole also curved along the sides of the bridge's walls. The only place the porthole didn't appear was behind him, where the door was. Bad design though it was, it was also a bit uplifting, and he found he didn't mind it one bit.

The *Br2 Scout3* eased out of the docking bay and into the space around the *Brazza Two*. The *Brazza Two* seemed impossibly huge next to the scout ship, dominating one entire side of the ship and towering over it as well, looming like a darkness over the porthole.

Crowe had picked this evening for the competition because, in the morning, the officer contingent would begin its investigation of the Scrapheap, which meant that the *Brazza Two* was as close to the Scrapheap as it was going to get. He had figured that the officer training might involve daylong or weeklong investigations of the Scrapheap, with other small ships hanging around the edges of the Scrapheap.

So he had calculated that this night was probably his best—his *only*—opportunity to see the Scrapheap up close.

The competition would keep him honest, and get him back to the *Brazza Two* long before anyone got up for breakfast.

He was glad he'd planned it that way, because the images on the screens before him took his breath away—and that was *before* he saw the Scrapheap with his own eyes.

He knew how big the Scrapheap was. He'd read the statistics. It was the size of a large moon. It wasn't perfectly spherical, because it was an amalgamation of retired Fleet vessels, sent to the Scrapheap while the Fleet figured out what to do with them.

This Scrapheap had been in existence for more than four hundred years, if not longer. It was protected by a forcefield and had some kind of internal monitoring mechanism in the very center of the Scrapheap.

From what he could find in the records, the Scrapheap had a way of communicating with the Fleet should something go horribly awry. Whatever that meant. He had no idea, but it made him wary of going into the Scrapheap.

The other thing that made him wary about going inside—besides the forcefield and the notification—was the way that ships became part of the Scrapheap. They were either brought by other ships or they were sent to the internal coordinates of the Scrapheap using an *anacapa* drive.

Sometimes, he guessed, ships just appeared inside of it, and if they hit another ship, well then, oh, well. He didn't want to get hit, even if it was extremely unlikely that that would happen.

"Wow," Erika said. She was looking up, so he did too.

Above him, the edge of the Scrapheap twinkled. That was all the confirmation he needed of a working forcefield. Then, beyond it, he could see the outline of an old DV-class ship, and parts of some other ships, seemingly motionless, and much too close to each other.

His mouth gaped open despite his best efforts to remain calm in the face of something magnificent.

The *Br2 Scout3* moved slowly, but it seemed much too close to the Scrapheap. He glanced down at his controls.

Nope. The *Br2 Scout3* was following the edge of the Scrapheap exactly as he had programmed it.

The Scrapheap was just so large that it seemed like the *Br2 Scout3* was closer than it actually was.

He looked at the screens, saw his own ship as a pinprick against the edge of the large Scrapheap nearby. The *Brazza Two* was farther from the *Br2 Scout3* than the Scrapheap was, but he had designed this maneuver that way deliberately, although now he was wondering what, exactly, he had been thinking when he had done so.

The Scrapheap scared him. Contrary to what he had expected, he had no desire to break through that forcefield, to visit the inside of the Scrapheap, to see what he was missing. He was close enough, maybe even too close.

The Scrapheap hovered near his little scout ship like some malevolent creature, about to absorb him.

He wiped his sweaty palms on his pants, then realized that captains didn't do that. Captains didn't do a lot of things. They didn't recklessly put their friends in danger on a mission that they weren't trained for.

He had thought the simulations and the research would be enough.

He was wrong.

He swallowed through his dry throat.

"Any sign of Tessa?" he asked his team.

"Seriously?" Omar asked before anyone could answer him. "We're touching distance from the Scrapheap, and you ask about Tessa?"

"Yeah." Crowe licked his bottom lip. It was chapped. He'd been tugging on it without even realizing it.

He wanted to declare the competition done. And if Tessa hadn't even gotten off the *Brazza Two*, then he could backtrack without fear of humiliation.

That thought barely crossed his mind when another followed. Screw humiliation.

He needed to get back to the ship.

“The other docking bay just opened,” Maida said. She touched something on her holographic controls and another screen rose.

A ship that Crowe didn’t recognize emerged from the docking bay. The design marked the ship as an Explorer class, one that was retired when the Scouts got bigger.

“Oh, crap,” he said, maybe out loud.

Tessa was doing what he had initially thought of doing. There were a handful of Explorer class ships on the *Brazza Two*, for reasons he could not divine, since no one had touched them in years. He wasn’t even sure their systems had been maintained.

That was the thought that had changed his mind about using one. He’d figured it would be hard enough for a group of teenage geniuses to pilot a ship larger than an orbiter when they hadn’t done it before, but he figured it would be even harder for them to handle a crisis if something went wrong.

They just didn’t have enough experience.

He had run the full simulations on the scout and realized there were a few crises that his young crew couldn’t solve, and that the automatic controls couldn’t handle either.

He called them *Kiss Your Ass Goodbye* scenarios, and fortunately, in all of the simulations he had run, the crew had only hit one of those once.

Once was worth the risk out of thousands of simulations.

He had no idea what kind of risk Tessa was taking, but it was a greater risk than he wanted to contemplate.

“Can you figure out how to hail them?” he asked Omar.

“Tessa’s ship?” Omar said. “It might take some time. I have no idea what that ship is or what it’s called or if they’ll even answer us.”

Crowe swallowed again, and it actually hurt. His throat was so dry that swallowing scraped. His heart was pounding.

This entire lark had gone awry, and not because of him.

“Figure out how.” Crowe moved his own command screen closer. He would try to figure this out too. He hadn’t looked at communications on board the *Br2 Scout3* because he figured he wouldn’t need them.

All he had imagined was someone—the *Brazza Two*—trying to contact him. Not him trying to contact someone else.

Through his clear holographic command screen, he could see the Explorer vessel. It was shaped like a stubby tube, and it rotated rapidly, something he had only seen a few Fleet ships do. He had no idea what the rotation meant. Rotation could be used for a variety of things, and he had no idea why it had been built into the design of the Explorer-class ships.

And then the ship vanished.

“Don’t get rid of the visuals,” he said to Maida.

“I didn’t,” she said.

He got cold. “What do you mean you didn’t?”

“I mean,” Maida said, sounding as panicked as he felt, “Tessa’s ship disappeared.”

He swore. Explorers had *anacapa* drives. Tessa wouldn’t be crazy enough to use one, would she? That took special training. Not even high-level officers could use *anacapa* drives without clearance—

“Look!” Adil said, pointing at the Scrapheap.

There it was, the Explorer Class vessel, butted up against the forcefield.

Crowe’s breath caught. “Tell me that’s not inside the Scrapheap,” he said, but no one did.

He used his own controls, but their readings were inconclusive. Or maybe he just couldn’t understand them.

"Hail her," he said to the crew in general. "Someone. Hail her *now*."

Three different people started pressing their fingers against their holographic consoles, searching for a way to contact Tessa.

Maida found it first—or rather, didn't find it.

"I think she's inside the Scrapheap," Maida said, answering his first question, "because I'm being told that the ship is outside of communications range, and that's just not true."

He put a hand on the top of his skull, wrapping his fingers in his hair. Why would Tessa do this? Why?

But he knew the answer. She did it so that she could beat him. And she had. How did he let her know that she had?

"I think I got through," Adil said. "See if you can talk to her."

"Tessa," Crowe said. "You win, okay? Now get out of there."

"Do I have that on record?" Tessa's voice came through the console loud and clear, as if she was beside him.

"You do. You win. We all attest to it. Now get out."

"You should see this, Crowe," she said. "You have no idea how many ships are here. It's so neat."

"Great," he said. "Maybe next time. Take great video. And, um, do you think you can get out without using the *anacapa* drive?"

"Why?" she asked. "That's how we got in."

"I know," he said, and then stopped himself. He didn't want to say the drives were dangerous, because he didn't want to scare her. But they were, and no one in their group knew how to use one.

"Stop worrying," she said. "We're going to take a few touristy vids and then we are out of here. I promise. You get on your little trajectory up and down the outside. I'll meet you back in the Third Floor Mess. And you better pay up, buddy."

She signed off. He wanted to clutch the air around him, grab onto her and her words and shake her.

"Pay up?" Erika asked, with a smile on her face. "What did you promise?"

He was about to answer her when something at the edge of the Scrapheap caught his eye.

"What's that brightness?" he asked Maida.

She saw it too, then augmented the screen and the holographic projection.

"I think it's an explosion," Omar said. He wasn't looking at the visuals. He was looking at the console in front of him. "And—shit—it's moving, like—I don't know—an infection."

It was moving, seemingly from ship to ship or piece to piece. It was far enough away from the Explorer Class Vessel that it hadn't hit them yet, but it would.

"Adil," Crowe said, "can you hail her again?"

"I'm trying." Adil sounded terrified.

Crowe swore again, every single oath he had ever heard and then some. He was jabbing at his holographic console, trying to see if there was something stronger than a grapppler on this ship.

The *Brazza Two* had a limited mechanism, a way of pulling nearby ships into the *Brazza Two* if need be. Most ships didn't have it—it was dangerous tech—but school ships did because they did so much training.

And maybe this scout ship did, but he couldn't find anything like that, and he had no idea how to get through the forcefield, even if he did.

At that moment, the forcefield shimmered right in front of the Explorer Class ship. The Explorer zoomed out of the Scrapheap, white and golden explosions lighting up the area behind it.

For a moment, the ship seemed to be free of the Scrapheap, and maybe everything would have worked out if the forcefield had closed behind the Explorer Class Vessel, but it didn't, and the light, looking almost like it was burning (not possible—there was no oxygen in space, not possible at all), traveled along lines straight for the Explorer Class Vessel.

"Put up your shields, put up your shields, put up your shields," Crowe said to Tessa, even though she couldn't hear him. And then he realized what he was saying. He found the controls for the *Br2 Scout3's* shields, and activated them on full.

The fire lines—or whatever the hell that was—reached the Explorer Class vessel, and outlined it for a half second. Crowe imagined he could see every deck and every person inside the vessel, the way that he had seen a human skeleton once, illuminated through someone's skin underneath some kind of irradiated light.

The Explorer Class Vessel seemed frozen—and then it exploded, bits of the ship flying everywhere.

"We need to get out of here," Sera said, reaching for her console. "That stuff is going to get us."

"I vote we try the *anacapa* drive," Maida said, sounding even more panicked than she had before. "I think we should—"

"No," Crowe said.

The explosions were continuing inside the Scrapheap, moving away from the forcefield deeper into the Scrapheap itself. The remaining parts of the forcefield were bowing from some kind of pressure, and Crowe thought he could see ships, stretching on into infinity.

"The *Brazza Two* is moving," Sera said.

He looked down at his controls. Sure enough, the *Brazza Two* was moving away from the Scrapheap at a rapid clip.

"Match their speed," he said to Igasho, who had been the one who tested best on the navigational controls. "Get us out of here."

"Really, Crowe," Maida said, "the *anacapa*."

"This is already a disaster," he snapped. "Let's not make it worse."

Although it was getting worse by the second. Through that opening in the forcefield, parts of ships were spiraling outward, some of them glowing just like the Explorer Class Vessel had glowed before it exploded.

And sure enough, one of the ships that had spun out the farthest just exploded, followed by another, and another.

Crowe changed the trajectory of his ship. He wasn't chasing the *Brazza Two* any longer. He'd plotted a course as far from the Scrapheap as he could possibly go.

"I got this now," he said to Igasho.

Crowe had just figured out it was easier to do things on his own than it was to give commands.

He needed the *Br2 Scout3* to go faster, as fast as it could. He revved up the speed, ignoring the ship's warnings that flashed all over his screen.

THIS SPEED IS NOT RECOMMENDED, it said right near the EXECUTE button.

"Screw you," he said to the screen, and punched EXECUTE with all of his strength.

The ship yanked forward so hard that he could feel it inside the bridge despite the attitude controls. Something squealed, probably the engines.

"Our shields are getting pelted," someone said. "I don't know if they'll hold."

Crowe glanced at the holographic three-dimensional image that Maida had created. Debris was flying out of the Scrapheap in all directions and at all kinds of speeds. The explosions were still traveling inward at what seemed like an even more rapid clip.

And the *Brazza Two* was getting slammed as well. Its shields looked fragile. The

entire ship seemed to be in the middle of the debris instead of getting away from it.

The *Br2 Scout3*, on the other hand, had moved away from the bulk of the debris, but a lot of it was still coming in their direction.

He wasn't going to be able to outrun this. They were all going to die. Everyone, all of his friends, dead because he decided to do something stupid. Tessa . . .

He wouldn't let himself think about her. He had to get a grip on himself, think of this as a simulation.

He called up the *Br2 Scout3's* weapons system. It wasn't online, but he knew how to get at least part of it to work.

"What're you doing?" Omar asked.

"Weapons," Crowe said.

"Got it," Adil said, as if that were a command.

"Can you bolster the shields?" Crowe asked Maida.

"I don't know, I—"

"Bolster them," he snapped. He hadn't expected her to be a panicker when he had given her the task of being his number one. She was great technically, but everything was a crisis for her—not that it wasn't a crisis, it was, but he didn't need her reacting like that.

"Yes, sir," she said, as if he were an actual captain. He wanted to look at her in surprise, but he didn't, because he didn't have time.

The weapons array appeared. *Targets?* It asked him.

Simulation, he reminded himself.

And then he programmed in all of the debris that was heading their way.

He didn't have the skill to run the weapons system himself, so he set it on automatic.

"Crowe," Erika said, "For God's sake, rule out the *Brazza Two*."

He hadn't even thought of that. Part of him wondered why she hadn't done it, and then he realized he hadn't given anyone else permission to run the weapons system—within the system itself.

He protected the *Brazza Two*, and the actual Scrapheap itself, and then entered his entire team into the command structure for the weapons system.

After he did that, he realized with a start that the system had already targeted and destroyed the bigger pieces of debris. The smaller bits of debris were hitting the shield and—at the moment—bouncing off.

The *Br2 Scout3* was getting farther and farther from the Scrapheap, but he kept monitoring it. The *Brazza Two* was moving parallel to the Scrapheap, for reasons he did not understand. It was taking a lot of damage.

One large piece was spiraling toward the *Brazza Two*, and it looked like it was going to directly hit an entire side of the ship. If it hit, then the whole ship might be opened to space, and then everyone would die, because he had wanted to stage a competition—

"Simulation," he whispered. "Simulation."

Maida was staring at everything, not moving, and in that moment, he realized he wasn't the only one having trouble with all the events around them.

"You guys!" he yelled. "This is just a damn simulation!"

Yes, he was lying, but they didn't know that.

"It looks real," Maida said.

"All simulations look real," he said. "Now get to work."

And miraculously, she did. She started using her skills to boost the shields. He went back to the weapons system, because he couldn't control whatever it was that the *Brazza Two* was doing.

The debris was thinning, although he didn't know if that was because his weapons kept targeting it, or because the *Br2 Scout3* had moved beyond much of it, or because

the explosions inside the Scrapheap were slowing down.

He couldn't do anything except continue to run. And as he had that thought, he paused for what seemed like forever but really only had to be a half-second.

Run. Because this was an unmitigated disaster.

Run. Because his life was over even if he went back to the *Brazza Two*.

Run—and never find out what caused this.

Run—and lose the only home he had ever known.

He wiped at his face—it was wet—and then made himself study the Scrapheap.

The explosions were continuing, but the forcefield was knitting itself back together.

It took him a moment to realize that something was being sent from the *Brazza Two* to the Scrapheap, some kind of beam or light or ray or something that seemed to be inspiring the Scrapheap forcefield rebuild.

And then he realized what that was.

The *Brazza Two* had taken the energy from its shields and was using the energy to encourage the forcefield on the Scrapheap to rebuild.

The *Brazza Two* was putting the entire ship in danger to stop whatever was cascading inside and around the Scrapheap.

The entire ship, from the officer cadets to the little-littles.

Who cried near the mural when they were sent away from home.

His breath hitched, and he programmed a hard about into the *Br2 Scout3*. The *Brazza Two* needed reinforcements, and they weren't going to come from any ship nearby.

He still had full shields.

"What are you doing?" Now Omar sounded panicked.

Crowe wasn't going to answer him. Crowe didn't dare answer him, because Crowe didn't want to get talked out of this.

"Maintain the speed," he said to Igasho, "no matter what."

The debris continued to zoom past, but the weapons seemed to catch most of it. Amazingly, the *Br2 Scout3* had very little damage—so far.

He programmed coordinates into the navigational system so that the *Br2 Scout3* would arrive on the far side of the *Brazza Two*, the opposite side from the Scrapheap.

"We can't go back to the *Brazza Two*," someone cried from the back. "Not now."

In his own head, Crowe deliberately did not identify the speaker. He didn't want to know who had given voice to his very thought from before. And who had realized this wasn't really a simulation. He would *not* get talked into running away.

Not now.

Not yet.

Maybe not ever.

"The engines are in really bad shape," Erika said. "They're not made to sustain this speed. The system wants me to use the *anacapa* drive."

"The system can screw itself," Crowe said, even though the system was the only thing keeping them alive right now.

He was keeping his eye on the *Brazza Two*. Maybe he was crazy, taking the *Br2 Scout3* to the *Brazza Two*—if the *Brazza Two* exploded, then everyone would die.

He had no idea what was causing the explosions nor did he know what was going on with the Scrapheap. Judging by the *Brazza Two's* reaction, someone on board there knew exactly what was going on and they had done a calculation—the lives of everyone on board (including the little-littles) were less important than keeping whatever was coming out of the Scrapheap contained.

That whole idea just made him shiver.

He wiped at his face again—dammit—and let out a small ragged sigh as the *Br2*

*Scout3* reached the *Brazza Two*.

"Get closer," he said to Maida. He needed to try something, and he couldn't be bothered with micromanuevering the *Br2 Scout3*.

"Closer to what?" she asked.

"Sera," he said, deciding to ignore Maida. "Get this ship as close as you can on *this* side of the *Brazza Two*. Keep us away from the Scrapheap."

"Got it." Sera sounded almost chirpy. He glanced at her. She wasn't quite smiling—more like a grimace—but she was concentrating *hard* on what she was doing.

Unlike Maida, who was still not focusing very well.

"Simulation, simulation, simulation," he whispered, thinking of the challenge before him as one that required accuracy in a short period of time.

He had no idea how to use all the permutations of these shields, but he was going to try. He had to assume they worked like standard shields on all of the Fleet's larger vessels.

If he was wrong, it probably wouldn't matter, since everyone was going to die anyway, but he had to give it a try.

"Need help?" Adil asked.

"No." Crowe sounded a bit curt, but he couldn't help it. He had to concentrate.

And—breakthrough—the shields were just like he expected. He took their power and moved it, just like the shield specs said he could. He poured that power at the *Brazza Two*, augmenting their shields.

For a moment, those shields grew stronger, repelling what he was doing. Then someone must have recognized it, because the *Brazza Two* started sucking shield power from the *Br2 Scout3*.

The *Br2 Scout3* command console warned him that the power output was too high, that it might have to pull from important systems.

He circumvented that. He guided the ship to pull from engines. Then he shut off the automated weapons response, and had the ship pull from that, too.

If something came at them now, they were completely undefended. The *Br2 Scout3* would get damaged at best, blown up at worst.

But he didn't tell the others. He didn't dare. He didn't want them to question what he was doing. They might try to reverse it.

The *Brazza Two* glowed orange as the energy moved from the *Br2 Scout3's* shields to that ray-beam-light whatever that was funneling power to the Scrapheap.

Crowe clenched one fist, watching. He could only monitor now; he didn't dare do anything else.

"This ship is shuddering," Erika said. "Is a ship this size supposed to shudder?"

No one answered her. They were all working on something or looking at the scene playing out on the screens.

Crowe was watching the *Brazza Two*. It looked different somehow, maybe just because he had never seen it from this vantage.

The explosions continued, worming their way deeper into the Scrapheap. He could see spots of color, but they were harder and harder to read as the forcefield closed up.

Then something in the very middle of the Scrapheap lit up the entire area around it. That something looked huge. It was rectangular, with actual right angles and corners, which led him to believe it was human-made, not some layout caused by various ships.

The power coming off the *Brazza Two* intensified.

The forcefield was nearly closed.

And then that rectangle exploded.

Ships spun out of it, bright red and orange and yellow, surrounded with that light that he had seen before.

The forcefield was nearly closed, but something small whipped its way out of the

remaining opening.

And then he realized that the something wasn't small. It was the size of a small ship, an orbiter or a runabout. And it was heading directly for the *Brazza Two*.

He couldn't do anything, and neither could the *Brazza Two*. Its entire power was being focused on that beam-ray-light that was closing the forcefield. It never wavered.

He wanted the beam-ray-light to shut off, weapons to appear, something to happen to that runabout-orbiter.

Instead, the small ship slammed into the side of the *Brazza Two*, sending it toward the *Br2 Scout3* at an amazing rate of speed.

"Stop linking us to them!" Maida shouted.

She was right. That would ease some of the pressure, give the *Br2 Scout3* some maneuverability, but she didn't realize that their futures were over anyway, and—

The *Brazza Two* grazed them, scraping over the top, damaging the stupid porthole that he had thought was so special.

He activated some emergency controls, or maybe they were already activating as the porthole cracked.

"Bring your hoods up," he said. "Activate your environmental suits."

Everyone did, just like they'd been trained to do in every single class they had ever taken. The hoods went up, the suits were sealed, the environment kicked in—cooler than the air on the bridge, and, at least in his case, staler.

This suit hadn't been worn in a long, long time.

The ceiling closed above them, but it wasn't going to matter. The ship was losing environment.

But only the bridge was populated. The rest of the ship was empty. And this ship was designed to preserve the environment everywhere.

He launched into the controls again, not giving instructions, because explaining was just so damn hard.

He isolated the bridge and rather than siphoning its environment to other parts of the ship, he directed theirs here. He established a protective bubble around the bridge itself, so even if the ceiling didn't protect them from the cracked porthole (and seriously, who designed that? Because it was pretty stupid. Maybe that's why this scout ship was being retired), then they would be able to survive until someone rescued them.

If someone rescued them.

He looked to see how the *Brazza Two* was doing, but all the screens that Maida had set up were gone, as was the holographic model. His own control screen was flickering.

The *Br2 Scout3* was running out of power.

He suddenly felt lighter.

It took a moment to understand that sensation. He hadn't felt it in years—the transition between full Earth gravity and zero gravity, happening slowly. He'd gone to zero gravity workouts, but there was no transition. He'd just go from one environment to the next. This one was changing bit by bit.

He activated the gravity in his boots, and they clamped onto the floor as if they were magnetized.

"Anyone see what's going on with the Scrapheap?" he asked.

"forcefield's closed," Omar said.

"The *Brazza Two* has shut off that thingy tying it to the forcefield," Sera said.

"Explosions are continuing inside the Scrapheap," Maida said, "but it doesn't look like anything else is getting out."

Crowe tried to make his screen work, but it didn't. There was a design flaw too. He needed to look at the command controls, and they weren't accessible to him.

He tried to walk to one of the wall consoles, but the gravity in his boots was holding him back. His legs actually hurt as he tried to walk.

He cursed.

"The *Brazza Two*," he said. "Is it holding together?"

"Seems to be," Sera said.

"But we're not," Adil said. "You getting these warnings?"

"No," Crowe said. "My console is down."

"We need to get out of here," Maida said, her voice rising with panic again.

He blinked, thought, wondered if the *Brazza Two* would even take a message from them.

He managed to get to the wall console, and slammed his fist against it with a bit more force than he expected. Fortunately, the slowly decreasing gravity mitigated the power of that blow. He didn't damage anything, and he would have if he had hit it that hard in full Earth gravity.

The console flared on. He saw a dozen different warning lights, and actually heard the voice of the ship, filtering into his hood, stating each and every one of those warnings with flat seriousness.

The *Br2 Scout3* was close to the *Brazza Two*, but he'd lost track of what part of the ship was closest to them. He called up a two-d image on the flat screen before him, the best he could do.

As far as he could tell, they weren't far from the bay door they had exited from.

Could they be that lucky?

"Adil," he said, "send the signal to the bay doors to open for us."

"I'm not sure we can maneuver in there," Adil said.

"Just see if the damn doors open," Crowe said.

He was investigating whether or not the engines had any thrust at all, and if the helm would respond to commands he gave.

The power was flickering. The *Br2 Scout3* was dying—or at least it thought it was dying—but it seemed like there might be just enough juice here to get them back on board the *Brazza Two*.

After that, he had no idea what would happen.

"Doors opening!" Adil sounded ecstatic. Had Crowe ever heard Adil sound ecstatic? Crowe had no idea.

"Okay," Crowe said. He rerouted the remaining power to the engines and helm, punching in the proper coordinates for docking—he didn't even want to try automation (not that he'd ever done anything as complicated as a docking maneuver), and then he hit EXECUTE.

The *Br2 Scout3* lurched again, which he hoped was a good sign. He focused on the two-d images on the screen before him, the small ship heading toward the larger one.

The *Brazza Two's* shields were down. The ship seemed to be rotating away from the *Br2 Scout3*. He hoped that wasn't the case.

But the littler ship headed toward the open bay doors. He slowed the *Br2 Scout3* as much as possible, hoping that it was slow enough. He gave the ship one last thrust and then shut off the engines entirely, hoping the ship would ease through the doors of its own accord.

It didn't veer off course. It headed directly for the *Brazza Two*, directly for those doors, and then into the docking bay. The bay was dark, and there was no power, and nothing was going to stop the *Br2 Scout3* from going through a wall if he wasn't careful.

He hit the inertial dampeners on the *Br2 Scout3*, demanding that they stop the ship as quickly as they possibly could.

For a minute he thought they weren't working either, but then they did. And the *Br2 Scout3* floated above the dock, just like it was meant to.

He didn't sigh with relief. He couldn't feel anything. He wasn't even sure he was breathing properly, but he had to be, because he had enough air to talk.

"Adil," Crowe said. "Shut the bay doors."

"Okay," Adil said.

And Crowe turned on the automatic pilot, instructing it to dock, hoping that would work.

Then he leaned against the console, and tried very very hard to stay calm.

He had no idea why that was important, but he knew it was.

\* \* \*

It took an hour for them to get off the *Br2 Scout3*, and another hour to get out of the docking bay. They kept their environmental suits on, hoods up, just in case everything inside the bay was compromised.

Crowe's suit wouldn't tell him what the environment around them was, but the bay itself was much darker than it should have been. He kept expecting security around every corner. He thought they might show up with their weapons drawn, might take everyone into custody, but no one seemed to be monitoring the docking bay at all, which really bothered him.

He discovered part of the problem as they tried to leave the bay. The doors were sealed. He and Adil checked the bay doors to make sure they had closed properly—and they had—so they both figured the sealed exits were part of some security protocol.

They didn't discuss overriding it; they just did. None of them wanted to stay in the dark and creepy docking bay.

It didn't take long to override the security protocol, which should have bothered Crowe, but it didn't. He wanted to get back inside the *Brazza Two*. He wanted to find his room and hide in it.

The exit doors slid open to reveal chaos. Bright red lights blinked everywhere. The floor was illuminated yellow so that they could find their way to a safe zone. The ship's automated voice, so different from the one on the *Br2 Scout3*, repeated that they were in an emergency and they needed to get to their designated shelter.

Designated shelter. He had forgotten about that. He'd always thought the drills stupid, and now, there was actual need for all of that practice.

He had no idea how to get to his shelter from here. And he wasn't going to go, either. He had a different destination in mind.

"Now what do we do?" Maida asked. She was shouting through the environmental suits' communications link, even though she didn't have to. Their voices came through clearly, even with all the noise.

Crowe looked around. There was some damage here—the walls had scorch marks (at least, that was what he thought he saw), and it was pretty clear that the Earth gravity had vanished, at least for a short period of time. There was too much debris on the floor, not just ship parts and wall parts, but casual items—tools and gloves and a few plastic dishes (from where he did not know).

That probably meant the environmental system had been shut down for that short period of time as well, and who knew what other systems had been offline. If he had to guess—and it would just be a guess at the moment—he would say that the power from all available systems went to the shields or to that beam-ray-light thing that the *Brazza Two* had used to link with the forcefield on the *Scrapheap*.

"Get to your designated shelter," he said to his crew, his team, his friends. "Don't say where you were or what you were doing. Just go. They may not know that we were the ones on the *Br2 Scout3*. They'll know about me—"

"How?" Omar asked. "If they don't know about us, they won't know about you."

"I did a lot of work ahead of this," Crowe said. "My presence will be hard to hide."

Besides, he wasn't sure he wanted to hide it. He would think about that when he left the group.

"I just don't want you guys to get into trouble because you listened to me," he said.

"Well, we did," Erika said. "We chose to come along. We should take our punishment, too. I mean, look at this."

She swept a hand toward the debris in the corridor before them. None of them had ever seen any part of the *Brazza Two* like this. It had always been pristine.

"We stole two ships," Crowe said flatly, "destroyed who knows how many in the Scrapheap, and damaged the *Brazza Two*."

And maybe killed Tessa and her team. Maybe. He refused to believe that yet. Because, after all, he had no proof they had been on that Explorer.

*(except that she had talked to him. She had told him. She—)*

He shook his head, trying to get the niggling thoughts out of it.

"This is really serious," Crowe said, "and they'll probably pull anyone involved out of the program."

Maybe put them in the brig or take them to one of the sector bases for some kind of justice.

Or send them back to their parents.

His stomach twisted, and bile rose in his throat. He swallowed the bile down, trying to ignore it. He was going to ignore everything if he could.

"So go," Crowe said. "You don't want to be involved in this."

"I'm not going to lie," Erika said.

"Then don't lie about yourself," Crowe said, "but don't implicate anyone else."

"You're going to lie?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"This is my fault," he said. "Every one of us knows this is all my fault."

\* \* \*

They left him after that. One by one, they walked down that corridor, until it curved to the right, and he couldn't see them any more.

No one stayed with him. He hadn't asked them to, and would have encouraged them not to, if someone had tried.

No one did.

He didn't blame them. They probably felt as numb and lost as he did.

He unhooked his environmental suit's hood and pushed it off his face. He figured he could bring it back up if there was no air, but there was, and he was glad—if he could actually feel something akin to gladness.

The air had an acrid odor that he couldn't entirely identify. Some of the stench was burnt plastic and rubber, but some of it smelled faintly like pepper, or ammonia or something that he didn't want to contemplate.

His eyes started watering immediately, and his brain told him to put the hood back on. But he wasn't going to. He deserved the watery eyes, the headache already building in his sinuses. He needed to smell this, and taste it, and feel the greasiness of the air.

He had caused this by being reckless and arrogant. What had he thought? Geniuses, on a joyride. They wouldn't get caught, or if they did, they'd get their wrists slapped and maybe be rewarded for their ingenuity.

God, how wrong could one kid be?

He had shut off the gravity in his boots long ago, but his feet still felt heavy. The muscles were sore from fighting that extra force. When he stepped over bits of debris, his knees ached.

His whole body ached.

The farther he went down the corridor, the blacker the walls were. It looked like

some of the controls had exploded outward. There was a bit of foam on the floor, and the walls and ceiling had a slick wet coating look to them as well. That peppery tang was stronger here, along with the stench of burning.

His eyes stung, but the tears had stopped. His throat ached, although he was no longer sure the worst of the ache was being caused by the smell.

He walked along the corridor, saw the footprints from his friends illuminated in the yellow light. Sirens whooped out here, but they sounded anemic. They weren't coming from overhead; they were echoing from other parts of the ship.

If the sirens weren't blaring here, they were either burned out or had never come on. But that annoying voice, a little more robotic than the one on the *B2 Scout3*—that was the difference, he had finally identified it—was still telling him (and anyone else who was in this corridor) to go to their designated shelter.

He hoped everyone had. He hoped the only losses were the two ships. He hoped that Tessa had been lying to him about what she saw.

Because she was good at winning these contests without following the rules. He always forgot to specify certain details.

He'd never said they had to be on the ships. He'd never said that. He'd never said they had to travel individually outside of the ship.

She could have sent that Explorer class vessel on its own mission, and recorded what it saw on her own equipment.

That was something Tessa would do.

That was something he *hoped* and prayed Tessa would do.

He walked to the ladder linking the docking bay to the other levels. He went inside the wide tube where the ladder was and slid inside. No soot here, no smell of pepper. But handprints—glove prints—on the rungs. Boot prints, too.

His people, probably. His team, his crew, his friends. Going up and away from here. To their shelters.

He hoped all ten of them had had the presence of mind to remove their environmental suits from the *B2 Scout3* before going into the shelter. He had forgotten to say anything.

He climbed the ladder, legs tired, his entire body feeling wobbly and stretchy from exhaustion. Mostly he had stood and worried when he was on the bridge of the *B2 Scout3*, but it felt like he had been running and hitting things for three solid days.

Maybe the oxygen was thinner here than he thought.

Maybe the exhaustion came from something else.

He shook that thought away as he reached the third level.

It didn't smell bad here at all, but the ship's voice still reminded him to go to his shelter. The yellow lights covered the floor and the red warning lights flashed.

Nothing looked damaged, though. He wondered how that happened—all the damage below, and nothing here. Although the damage below seemed to have come from systems being overloaded, and there were fewer essential systems here. Almost everything here had been designed for the little-littles.

He didn't see any of them. He hadn't seen anyone, not since his team had left him.

Everyone was probably still in shelters.

He staggered a bit on his way to the Third Level Mess. He wasn't sure what caused the stagger—those rubbery tired legs of his or the ship listing and the attitude controls not working or the floor buckling just a bit from whatever had happened below.

He would find out eventually, he supposed.

The doors to the Third Level Mess were open, just like he had left them. Or had he left them like that?

The very thought made his heart lift. Maybe he had been right in his assumptions; maybe Tessa had played him. Maybe she was waiting for him here—she certainly

wouldn't have gone to her designated shelter, not after everything that had happened.

He had declared her the winner, so he couldn't take that back.

He stepped through the doors, startled at the red lights blinking. This room was silent—something he'd learned when he worked here. No blanket announcements to panic the little-littles.

The dim lights in all the corners were still on. The light over the serving table was on as well.

But the floor was a minefield of utensils and dishes and toys. The toys made his heart clench. He looked around, terrified he'd see some injured or dead little kid crumpled against one of the chairs.

He switched on the knuckle lights on his glove, swept the entire mess once, twice, and then a third time, all without moving from the door.

Nothing.

He was alone.

Unless Tessa was hiding, wanting to surprise him. She wouldn't do that, would she? That wasn't quite like her.

He stepped inside, his jangled nerves and his pounding heart ahead of his brain.

He was alone here.

She hadn't come.

If she had been on the *Brazza Two*, she would have come here. She had said, *I'll meet you back in the Third Floor Mess. And you better pay up, buddy.*

She never let a challenge go unanswered. She never let him forget that he'd lost. She would be waiting for him, partly to see if he was okay, and partly to gloat that she had won, no matter what the cost.

Although the cost would have devastated her.

Instead, it destroyed her.

He shook his head, trying to get that last thought out of it. No. She was fine. He was fine. They were all fine.

He went deeper into the mess, smelled something sweet and sugary—spilled syrup?—and saw where the toys had come from. The box of extra toys for the distraught kids had toppled over. Or maybe it had risen in zero-G and then turned over. He didn't know, couldn't tell, didn't want to know.

He was just relieved as he walked that he didn't see anything else—anyone else.

Except Tessa.

"Please be here," he whispered. "Please."

But he knew he was talking to an empty room. He didn't just know it on a gut level. He knew it throughout his body.

That victorious trill in her voice, that moment of victory, followed by the weird bright light, and the lines of fiery light that trailed to her ship, and the explosion . . .

The explosion.

His knees buckled. He clutched at a nearby chair, missed because it was shorter than he expected (*Stupid. This is the Third Floor Mess. For little-littles.*), and nearly fell over. His hand caught the low table going down, and he stood there, bent in half, breathing hard, his entire body aching.

The explosion. Tessa. God. What had she been thinking? Why hadn't she simulated it out? Why had she tried something so risky?

Risky like stealing ships and going to the Scrapheap in the first place. As a lark. A trick to fool the teachers and to see something forbidden. To prove how smart he was.

He hiccupped—half a laugh at himself, half something else he didn't want to identify. His chest hurt, his throat was full, his eyes were watering again, and damn. Tessa.

He had no idea how long he stood there, shaking, unwilling to stand up, but eventually he did. Eventually, he had to. His back was giving out.

No one came for him. No one probably even knew he was here.

But the red lights had stopped blinking while he was bent over, and the floor was no longer yellow.

Someone would come to clean up this place.

If there was any reason to.

He should have started the cleaning process, but he couldn't bring himself to do so.

Instead, he made it to the mural and sat on the bench beneath it, wondering if those painted kittens and puppies had magical soothing powers.

Probably not.

He wasn't sure he believed in magic anyway. He used to like to say—to Tessa—that he was a man of science.

Tessa.

He closed his eyes and waited, hoping she would come back to him, and knowing she never ever would.

\* \* \*

It took nearly a week for someone in authority to talk to him, and that someone ended up being the captain.

Crowe had spent the entire week confined to quarters, but the quarters he was confined to weren't his. The dorm rooms on his level did not have kitchens and had a shared bathroom between four rooms, and someone—he had no idea who—had decided he was too dangerous to be with anyone else.

He concurred. He was dangerous.

He got bits and pieces of news in his luxurious prison. The brig had been completely demolished when some of the debris hit it, which was why he was housed in the two-room quarters. The quarters had a large porthole, but it had been sealed closed. He couldn't look out of it, even if he wanted to.

He no longer had computer privileges either, and everyone seemed to forget he had been a student, because no one gave him homework or study materials or anything to read. He could access only the first level of entertainment, which he kept playing on repeat. He just had it on as noise.

He couldn't access any other news, but someone different stopped by every day, and each time, he would ask what happened. He got different snippets from different people.

The death toll finally settled at fifty. They had initially thought it would go higher, but apparently the injured were recovering.

The damage to one entire section of the ship was catastrophic. Entire levels were closed off, but that was where most of the people had died—and they had died in ways he didn't want to think about, because their section had been ripped open and exposed to space, and while the ship could repair itself and put down a barrier to hold in the ship's environment, the barrier would go down wherever it was most likely to hold, and in that case, apparently, the barrier had sacrificed an entire wing of the ship.

Fortunately every nonessential person had already evacuated that area.

And no children had died.

Except, as a woman had told him tersely, just as she was leaving the room, the eleven teenagers on board that ship.

Seven days afterward, exactly, the captain summoned him.

Only Crowe hadn't been aware of the summons initially. Two guards got him, told him to join them *now*, and then marched him through darkened corridors that looked abandoned.

Halfway through the march, he wondered if someone was planning to hurt him physically for all he had done.

But by the time that he got to the ship's administrative level, he knew that no one

was going to hurt him or beat him up or discipline him in unsanctioned ways.

The guards had taken him through a deserted part of the ship so that no one would see him or talk to him or come at him.

They were, apparently, protecting him. And he wanted to tell them he was not worth their time.

But he didn't.

Because they led him into a suite of rooms he'd never been in before. The rooms were brightly lit and beautifully decorated—or had been until last week. Some of the decorations had been put back, like images stuck to the walls, only those images were frozen rather than rotating through a panorama of views. Most were frozen on some planetside image—a waterfall, some flowers, but one was of a little-little, laughing beneath the mural, and he had to look away.

The guards led him into a narrow room with too much light and a gigantic black desk that almost resembled half a wall. Behind it, the captain stood, her hands clasped behind her back—that posture he had mimicked before everything changed.

She turned around. Her face had new lines, and her eyes were sunken into their sockets from lack of sleep.

"Leave us," she said to the guards.

They did, the door closing behind them.

That was when Crowe realized the room had no chairs at all.

"I'm not going to ask you why you did it," she said. "We found all the materials you prepared, figured out what systems you breached, and talked to your friends. If I really cared why you did it, I suppose I'd be more thorough and ask you. But I don't care."

She sounded tired, too. That energy he had so admired from her was gone.

"I just want to tell you that you pose a hell of a dilemma." She raised her chin just a little, and with that movement, he realized that he was taller than she was. "You see, Mr. Crowe, we wouldn't be standing here without you."

"I know," he said miserably. "I've been thinking about it—"

"You did not let me get to my point," she said. "You saved every life on the *Brazza Two*. That maneuver of yours, sharing the energy from the scout ship with our ship, no one taught you that, right?"

He shook his head. Of course no one had taught him that. Who could have taught him that? He wasn't supposed to be on ships, let alone train on them.

"You had gotten your ship clear of the debris field. You could have left. You could have taken the ship far from us, and all of you could have escaped. Instead, you came back and made yet another risky maneuver, enabling us to close that forcefield. You saved lives."

He was still shaking his head. "I didn't though. People died."

"They did," she said, her tone flat. "And that's our dilemma. You were reckless, and your recklessness destroyed ships and cost fifty people their lives. And then you were brilliant, and you saved over four hundred of us. By rights, we should banish you from Fleet ships forever. But if we do, we'll lose one of the most brilliant thinkers we've encountered in generations."

She smiled, but the smile didn't reach her very tired eyes.

"See?" she said. "Dilemma."

"No," he said, since the head-shaking was doing no good. "It's not a dilemma. Send me away. It's all my fault. Everything. I coerced everyone else. I made them. It all happened because of me—"

"Actually," she said, "we both know that's not true. Tessa Linley made one fatal choice. She used her *anacapa* drive. No one is allowed to use that drive without nearly a decade of training, and somehow she managed to override all those systems."

"Tessa didn't do anything wrong," he said. "It was all me. It—"

"You discarded that very same idea," Captain Mbue said. "You even told the others

on your bridge crew that your friend Tessa had made a serious mistake.”

“She wouldn’t have made it if I hadn’t challenged her to race to the Scrapheap,” he said.

Captain Mbue’s gaze met his for a long moment. He stopped talking. He felt heat creep up his cheeks. She was shaming him into silence without telling him to shut up.

“The Explorer Tessa took hadn’t been touched in years. As far as we can tell, its *anacapa* drive was starting to decay.”

He opened his mouth to ask about that. The captain held up a finger, stopping him.

“They do that. It’s something you learn if you take the decades-long course in *anacapa* usage. The drives malfunction, and cause serious problems, which is why they get replaced more often than some believe necessary.”

The captain paused. She was studying him, but he wasn’t entirely sure why.

“The energy from that *anacapa* caused a reaction inside the Scrapheap,” she said. “It’s too technical to explain, and I’m not entirely sure I understand it, since *anacapa* drives are not my specialty, but that reaction caused the energy to change, which caused all of those explosions.”

“Then why didn’t her ship blow up first?” he blurted, then caught himself. He almost put his hands over his mouth, but he didn’t. He made himself stand perfectly still.

“Because *anacapa* drives can create a wave, and that wave moved outward from the point where she’d entered the Scrapheap. The wave found something else that caused the reaction, which threaded back through all the other ships until it found hers.” The captain looked like she was going to say something else, but she stopped.

She looked down, ran her fingers along that long desk, tapped it with the forefinger of her right hand, and then stopped, drawing a circle.

“You probably don’t know this,” she said, “since you’ve been in isolation, but the reaction continues inside the Scrapheap. There are continual explosions. That’s why we had to close that forcefield.”

“There are no other ships around,” he said. “Why didn’t you just leave? No one else would have gotten hurt.”

She raised her head, gave him a grim smile, and said, “If only I could tell you, Mr. Crowe. I cannot. I was following orders.”

“Everyone on this ship could have died,” he said.

“Yes,” she said. Simply. Flatly. She had known that, and had still done it. She had risked every child on this ship, every adult, every single little-little. “And they would have died without you.”

He studied her. He had no idea how she could be so cold about what happened, about what she had nearly done.

She tilted her head just a little, as if she were taking the measure of him.

“I’m not willing to sacrifice you, Mr. Crowe,” she said.

His stomach churned, just like it had when he’d first got back to the ship. This felt so wrong. He didn’t want her to defend him.

“You’re talented,” she said. “You’ve got a gift, a gift the Fleet needs.”

He shook his head again.

“And you’ve learned humility—I hope, anyway,” she said. “Have you?”

His gaze skittered away from hers. He wasn’t even sure what she meant.

She reached across that table and grabbed his arm. Her hand was cold.

“They’re going to punish you,” she said.

He nodded, not looking at her, despite the power of her grip.

“And then,” she said, shaking his arm, “you’re going to rehabilitate yourself. For me.”

He swung his head toward her. He hadn’t expected that.

She gave him a small smile. “I’m being demoted, Mr. Crowe. I should be. It’s—”

“It’s not your fault,” he said. “It’s mine. All of this—”

"Of course it's my fault," she said. "I'm the captain. I let you and your friends steal ships. You were planning this methodically for weeks, and no one under my command caught it. That's on me. These deaths are as much on me as they are on you, Mr. Crowe."

Her fingers were digging into his skin. He didn't pull away, though. He couldn't, not without breaking eye contact, and he couldn't do that either.

He finally realized that she wasn't being cold. She was being contained, more than anyone he had ever seen.

"You and me together," she said quietly, "we owe the Universe fifty lives."

He started. Her words made him catch his breath.

"It was our carelessness that lost those lives," she said. "I'm not going to diminish those lives by dividing them up—twenty-five for me, twenty-five for you. We each owe the Universe fifty lives, Mr. Crowe, and we are going to spend the rest of our days atoning for that."

He was having trouble breathing. He wasn't sure what, exactly, she meant.

"You can't atone if you go home to those parents of yours or get banished to some planet around an abandoned sector base. You can only atone by serving. Your talent has to be nurtured until one day, it saves at least fifty lives that couldn't have been saved otherwise. Am I clear, Mr. Crowe?"

He nodded. She was clear.

"I will be doing the same," she said, "from whatever post they assign me. But the last thing I'll do as captain is direct your punishment. You will spend three years in rehabilitation on a Fleet vessel. It won't be pleasant. And then you'll have to start your education all over again. Your scores here will be wiped off your record. You will learn everything you can, and you will do the best you can, and if you make even the smallest mistake, I will come after you. Is that clear, Mr. Crowe?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "It's clear."

"Good."

She let him go. Her fingers had left red marks on his skin, and an ache in his bones. She gave him a fierce look.

"I hope this is the last time I ever see you," she said. "Because if I do see you again, it means you've failed."

He nodded.

"You're dismissed, Mr. Crowe."

He nodded again, and pivoted, feeling heavier than he had felt before he entered the room. Then he had had no idea what his future was going to be, and in some ways, he still didn't.

But she had given him a direction, and it was one he agreed with.

Except . . .

Tessa. She had been so much more than he could ever have been. They'd competed, but only so that he could aspire to her greatness, her brilliance.

She had gotten an *anacapa* drive working. That should have been impossible. And others would say that it was reckless and stupid, but the feat itself, somehow working that drive, that was years beyond where she should have been.

He couldn't have done it. And now he wouldn't.

Because Captain Mbue was right; he needed to atone. And to do that, he had to learn a whole new way of being. A humbler, smarter, less risky way of being.

He stepped back into that ruined anteroom, filled with the stuck images. The guards flanked him as he walked back to his quarters.

He no longer had any idea who he would have been if he hadn't challenged Tessa to the competition.

He had no idea who he was now.

All he knew was who he had to be—a man who could carry fifty deaths on his

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shoulders, and somehow make sure nothing like that ever happened again.

He had no idea if he could do that.

But he knew he had to try.